Alexander "Tig" Trager paused for just a moment, turning back to the sleeping form in the bed. After the slightest hesitation, where he contemplated the possibility of not being the asshole he usually was, he knelt down next to the mattress, elbows on the edge. Peering into her face, half-hidden by her dark hair spilling over her cheek, he knew it was too late to avoid being an asshole.

This was, by far, one of the worst things he'd ever done. And he'd done some fucked-up shit, to be sure. But this ... this even gave him a bad taste in his mouth.

An asshole. He was such an asshole.

He reached out with one hand to carefully slide her hair back around her neck, uncovering that face, so sweet and vulnerable in sleep.

He didn't do sweet. He didn't like sweet. He owed it to sweet to just leave it alone and walk away.

But he hadn't. God knew he fucking tried, but ... the asshole that he was could not be denied.

"I'm sorry," he whispered quietly, flinching that she might actually wake and hear it. The he stood, slunk from her room and silently shut the door behind him.
Chapter 1

One year earlier - May

Tig scowled at the bright display in front of him. "Go get me gum," Gemma had said.

"What kind?"

"Just … gum. Doesn't matter."

He shook his head. There's a wall of gum. What the fuck did he know from gum? He was going to ask the broad standing next to him, leading her kid down the aisle looking at the opposite side of shelves. But she looked like regular people. In the TM neighbourhood especially he tried not to hassle the regular people.

He reached for a peppermint flavour and a fruity bullshit one too, just to cover the bases. As he did, he felt a tug on his wallet chain. He looked down under his outstretched arm. The kid wasn't paying attention to his mom; he was reading a book and absently reaching out, looking for her arm or pocket or purse or something.

"You trying to jack my wallet there, Charlie?" he said, loud enough to make the kid jump. Which he did. The kid's glasses nearly fell off as he jerked his hand back, leapt about two feet vertical, then just stared up at Tig as he pushed his goggles back up his nose. His mouth hung open like a goldfish, and Tig spared a moment to feel bad for scaring him.

"It's okay kid," he assured him, stepping back and bringing his arm down again. "I'm just messing with 'ya."

"Calvin, what are you doing?" the broad pushed past behind Tig to take the kid by the arm. "Try and keep up with me, Peanut. I'm so sorry -" she began, casting a look Tig's way with a smile before her words and face froze.

Tig was used to this reaction. Most regular people were scared of him, the broads in particular. Especially the ones with glossy, walnut-brown hair, sharp chin and giant blue-green eyes, who looked like they showered every day and never woke up a place they hadn't intended.

Not that he was noticing.

"S'okay," he assured her. "He tried to take my wallet, that's all."

"Calvin!" she admonished, disproportionately shocked.

"No I didn't," the kid was whining.
Tig cracked up, bringing her head around his way again. "I'm kidding. He didn't try to do anything. He thought he was grabbing your purse, I'm sure." Now that he was looking, it was a black one with a chain strap. Honest mistake.

She set her jaw, and something in the way her eyes flashed made his cock twitch, just a bit. "Is that what we do for fun? Scare little kids?"

A regular broad with a bitchy mouth. He felt himself smile. "I was playing around, baby. That's it."

She pulled the kid past him. "Play with someone your own size next time," she muttered, heading for the cash register, the kid staring up at Tig as he was dragged past.

"Later, 'ya little klepto," Tig called out, chuckling as the kid pulled his eyes away and double-timed it to get ahead of his mom.

He lined up behind them, not even trying to ignore her legs under those shorts, and the curve of her ass and hips. Nice tan. Nice legs. Great ass. Her waist sunk in above it, the lines of her back showing under the tightness of her T-shirt. His hand was itching to grab that hair too but he held back, noticing that the kid was peering around her hip to stare up at him again.

Tig smiled at the kid, who darted back into the comfort of mommy's stomach. Tig hoped she was putting him in karate or some shit, otherwise that kid was going getting his clock cleaned every day at school.

When she'd paid for her stuff and hustled the rugrat to the door Tig was blatant about watching her the whole way. Those hips swayed like she knew how to use them, and he was pretty damn sure she didn't know how much she was telling with that walk.

He felt the clerk staring at him, but he just tossed the gum on the counter, an eye on the door. He could still see her walking with the kid through the parking lot. Tig sniffed, cracking his neck when a tingle flared up along his jaw and back to his spine. It was the tingle he always got when he had a whiff of sweet, and he always fought against it. Always. He didn't need that kind of …
"Bullshit," Jamie Taylor muttered, looking over her final pay check from the Charming Town Office. It wasn't quite what she'd hoped for. It was a good thing she'd sold her house and moved into this cheap rental. But that final check being so small was really going to impair how she and Calvin could live these next few months. Hopefully it was only a few months. Then she'd have to start looking for a job again.

She chewed her nail, running her totals for the umpteenth time. She was going to cancel cable, make Calvin start getting all his books at the library, and there was to be absolutely no eating out.

Which stunk. Calvin was eight. He was living without any perks, and that sucked so much for a kid who was already incredibly socially awkward. Every time she told him they'd have to cut back on something he'd just adjust his glasses and shrug.

And this wasn't his fault, it was totally hers.

Jamie had expected being laid off when she told them about her impending medical treatments. She'd have to keep paying off her medical insurance for this reason, which was a lot of money. And if they didn't cover her she was so beyond screwed.

She looked through the dining room window, smiling at the sight of her nephew on a patio lounger, nose buried in a book. He was reading the Hobbit. Again. He was beyond the rest of his grade in reading, comprehension, and mathematics. So smart, in spite of his genes.

Jamie's sister Jaclyn had been smart in school, but none of it transferred into life skills. She'd travelled after high school, which was common. Then she wanted to model. Then she was going to act. But first, and foremost, she had to be high 24-7. Jaclyn also had no idea who Calvin's father was. She'd been on a week-long bender, was pretty sure there were about three guys for sure she'd been with, but she wasn't certain. So whatever disgusting milkshake she'd created managed to produce a healthy, adorable son. She'd gone straight for about a year and a half after he was born. The she was off and wild again.

Jamie's parents worried about Calvin as much as she did. They had started a trust fund for him he would inherit at eighteen, and it would pay for college, maybe even a down payment on a house when he was ready for that. It was a relief to know it was there.

When her parents died in a car accident three years ago, Jamie hadn't waited. She adopted Calvin immediately. With Jaclyn's drug habit racking up five-digit numbers she didn't want to risk his mother taking away his college fund. And as long as Jamie was Calvin's legal guardian she couldn't.
That had sucked up all her savings and a lot of her inheritance. Jaclyn tried to fight for custody in court, and Jamie knew she had her eye on that cash. It's what made her fight back.

She won custody, and life would all be fine if she didn't get sick.

Jamie covered her mouth, feeling a sob working its way up her throat. She didn't want to cry, she didn't want Calvin to know how scared she was. He knew she was ill. He knew he'd be staying with Crazy Great-Aunt Thelma while Jamie had to go to the hospital for an operation. And he knew after a while Aunt Jamie was going to get sick ... very, very sick.

Stage two breast cancer. Yeah, scary fucking word. Cancer. Small masses that had come back from the biopsy as cancer. So a lumpectomy was booked for the week after school was done so Calvin could go stay with Jamie's aunt, Thelma. Aunt Thelma was the cool aunt when Jaime and Jaclyn were growing up. She never got married, never had kids, lived in the country with an ever-changing menagerie of dogs, cats, ducks, chickens, she'd even had goats at one point.

She made folk art, grew organic vegetables, made money at the farmer's market with homemade preservatives and played the guitar. Aunt Thelma was awesome, yet Jamie had the suspicion Calvin might be scared of her. But he'd never argue if this was Jamie's decision, and there were no other options.

She pushed the papers to the side, her mind now distracted with hoping again that she recovered from the surgery fast and could get through chemo before the bank account ran dry. She just had to stay relaxed, calm, and let Aunt Thelma take care of the both of them.

Jamie started as she realized Calvin wasn't on the lounger anymore. She crossed to the sliding glass patio door, scanning the yard. She still couldn't see him, but something was making a lot of noise in front of the house. A low but loud rumbling that shook the glasses in the kitchen cabinets. She crossed the crowded living room, still piled high with boxes from the move, and pushed the screen door open.

Calvin was next to the driveway, leaning on the short fence that separated her driveway from the neighbour's. He was trying to sneak a peek at the source of the noise; motorcycles. Two of them, in the neighbour's driveway. A man was sitting on the one that was running, smiling at Calvin, shouting, "How you doing, little man?"

The other bike was just parked on the driveway, waiting for its rider. She winced. When she'd toured this property, and in the past five days they'd lived there, she'd never seen the neighbour. She didn't want to live next to someone with a loud bike. And this man in front of them right now wasn't a weekend biker who worked at the bank during the day, either. He had the leather vest on with patches on the front that didn't read anything as generic as "Harley Davidson."

Shit. This was bad. No wonder the rent was so agreeable.

"Calvin," she called, her voice sounding strained to her own ears. He turned to look at her, then looked back to the bike.
Jaime didn't want to grab him and pull him away, show fear and over react. So she tried again. "Calvin, could you come inside please?"

He kept staring. He'd been terrified of the one at the corner store. This one, while not looking quite as scary at first glance, was apparently fascinating to an eight-year-old. On the opposite side of a fence.

"You should listen to your mom," the stranger suggested.

"She's not my mom," Calvin declared, clear as a bell.

Jamie's mouth fell open as the biker laughed. "She's not, hey?"

Feeling like she had to do something now, Jaime stalked down the stoop towards her nephew, trying to keep her back straight and her head high.

She felt the stranger's eyes on her. She ignored him. "Calvin, I asked you to come inside."

"Relax, sweetheart. I'm staying on my side of the fence, swear."

She looked at him then, and up close he was infinitely more scary. He had a bit of scruff on his jaw. She couldn't guess his age, and with the helmet on all she really knew was he had olive skin that had seen some sun, dark eyes that cut deep, but his smile seemed too genuine. She didn't trust it.

"I don't like it when he ignores what I'm asking," she explained.

"I'm sorry Aunt Jamie," Calvin said immediately, making her feel like a supreme bitch.

"You don't have to be sorry honey," she said, more gentle. "You just have to mind what I'm asking you. Okay?" He nodded, and she pulled on his arm. "Now come back into the house, don't bother the neighbours."

"No bother, honey. Promise."

She caught the man on the bike winking at her. She looked away too quickly, sped up too obviously but didn't care. She was looking for a new place to live immediately.

"The fuck ..?"

At the sound of this voice she turned, willing herself to wake up from the nightmare. There was no way. There was absolutely No. Fucking. Way.

The asshole from the corner store was on the house stoop, stopped while sliding on sunglasses. Looking a lot like he lived there.
As in, next door to her and Calvin.

"Aunt Jamie!" Calvin exclaimed. "It's the man from the store!"

She didn't respond. She met his gaze, feeling that same terrifying chill run down her back as his eyes met hers momentarily before he slid his shades on completely. She hustled Calvin up the steps, and for once Calvin recognized the concept of body language and he hurried along with her.

Yes, definitely living somewhere else. Anywhere else but here.
"What you thinkin', Tigger?" Hap asked on a laugh. "Don't tell me you're tapping the neighbour. I call bullshit on that … unless you show up Tased and pepper-sprayed."

"Nah man," he said absently, swinging his leg over his bike. "I just didn't know the old neighbours moved."

That wasn't true. He'd seen them throwing their flea market furniture in a pick-up in the dead of night and figured they were ducking out on the rent. The guy that owned that place was a known slum lord. Not that it made a lick of difference to him, he just wondered why a broad that put together was renting such a shit hole.

"Tig? The fuck, man?"

Tig kicked the bike to life. "What?" he snapped at Hap.

Bastard just shook his head. "That's the kind you gotta stay away from, Tigger."

"You don't think I know that?"

"Then quit with the lovey-eyes and let's go, man. Pussy won't fuck itself."

"Yeah yeah," he replied, backing the bike out of the drive. He hit the neighbour's house with a last glance over the shoulder and saw that weird little kid peering out the front window at him. Not thinking about it at all, he raised two fingers to the brim of his lid in a half-assed salute. The kid waved back.

SAMCRO's clubhouse was already loud and crawling, and the sun hadn't even gone down yet. Whenever the Nomads were in town they made themselves at home like they were their own hospitality committee or something. Bikes clogged the parking lot, people were all over, and as he killed the bike and climbed off he could already smell the grass and booze. Yep, it was definitely Friday night.

Tig and Hap wordlessly sauntered to the clubhouse doors, thirst driving them through throngs of familiar faces and willing bodies. The prospect at the bar saw them coming and wisely set up whiskey shots without having to be asked. First one went back smooth, second one even better. Third one down and that annoying twitch in Tig's neck lessened. Then he and Hap surveyed the evening's distractions.

"How's that blonde, man?" Hap asked.

Tig knew which one he meant – she was newer, meaning she was the only one Killer hadn't hit yet. He shrugged. "Nice tits. Bit of a stiff ass. Mouth is better than anything else."
"Good enough," Hap grunted, heaving away from the bar and making his way to the blonde in question.

Tig kept his recon going, looking for a particular girl to start the night off. There was lingering sweet tingling along his jaw, and he had to get rid of it before he lost his damn mind.

The black-haired bitch he wanted was occupied with a Nomad at the moment. The rules of hospitality dictated they had first crack as out of town guests.

He raised his eyebrows with disappointment, head tilted in defeat there and continued his search. When the door opened he felt himself stand up straighter, instantly hard behind his fly.

New meat, right off the fucking bus by the looks of her. Her skirt was short and denim, ripped at the bottom. Her tank top was tight, ripped a bit at the neck to show off her decent cleavage. It was her hair he noticed as she swept sunglasses off her face. Shit, her hair was chestnut brown, glossy as hell and almost to her ass. Just like the sweet piece he had living next to him.

He downed one more shot and headed right to her. Gemma tried to deflect him, seeing the look on his face.

"Tigger, take a breath. We don't know who that is."

"Does it matter?"

Gemma raised an eyebrow. "Use your brain, honey. Only head cases walk in here on a Friday night alone."

Tig was still staring. No one else had caught a whiff of her yet. "Fuck Gem, give me a break. I won't kill her, and who better than me to show her the error of her ways? She'll learn. Tomorrow."

Gemma huffed. "Your funeral, Tigger. Just make sure she's out by morning."

"You got it, doll."

His obstacle gone he strode to her fast, eyes starting at her feet and riding up when she caught sight of him. She tossed her hair back, smiling at him with only half of that mouth. "Hey," she said breathily, not even intimidated by him. "Buy a girl a drink?"

He ran a hand over his mouth and down his chin, eyes on her chest. "I think I can do that. What you drinking, beautiful?"

She moved a half-step closer. "Whatever you're having is fine."

She may be fresh meat to Charming but she certainly wasn't a stranger to this. He gave her another scan and jerked his head to the room. "Then come on in."
She trailed behind him through the crowd to the bar. He held up two fingers to the prospect who quickly grabbed another shot glass. Tig leaned on the bar facing the girl, and she mirrored his posture, close enough that their knees were touching.

"What are you doing here on a Friday night, sweetheart?" Tig asked, downing the whiskey and propping his head on his hand like he was dying to hear the answer. As he hoped she laughed and her chest shook with it.

"I was feeling … kinda sorry for myself," she said, setting her empty glass on the bar. "I've been trying to be a good girl lately."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah."

"That sucks."

"It does," she agreed, copying his overly familiar tone.

His dick kicked again as he realized she had ocean-blue eyes like his neighbour, just not quite as big and round. "You're terrible at the whole good-girl thing," he noted playfully.

"No, I'm not."

"Brutal."

She leaned closer, stepping into him. Half his brain wondered what the hell she was on, because she didn't look drunk yet. The other half of his brain was fixated on the additional skin he could see between her breasts. "It's not my fault. I keep running into people who are bad for me."

"You do, sweetheart," he said, done with the cutesy shit. He grabbed her wrist before she could set her hand on his chest. "You have any idea where you are right now?"

She smiled, not missing a beat despite his no bullshit face and cold tone. "I'm in your clubhouse," she said slowly. "We're having a drink. And then you're going to fuck me."

He worked his jaw, staring down the stranger and remembering Gemma's words for no reason. "We've got girls here that don't give us any trouble. Are you going to be trouble?"

She leaned closer to his ear, her breasts pressing against his arm, and he felt his eyes close. Fuck, they were real. "I'm only as much trouble as you want me to be."

Tig guessed she was about two levels away from rock bottom. Sure she looked halfway put together, but clearly she was spiralling down. Like he gave a shit; these were the girls you could basically do whatever you'd like with.
"Let's go," he said, and her smile widened.

"Right behind you."

Like a good girl she followed him down the hall to the dorms, knowing her way around an MC clubhouse apparently. It should have made him nervous but it didn't.

In his room he flicked on the lights and locked them inside. When he turned to her he realized she was carrying a bottle of Jack. "Where the fuck did you get that?"

She took a swig, wide-eyed, and nodded to the door. "At the bar. It's almost empty, don't worry."

He tried to grab it from her but she playfully held it behind her back. She was being cute, but something in her face went hard when he was this close.

Tig grabbed her by the back of her head. "Hand it the fuck over," he barked.

She flushed. He saw her cheeks actually get pink, and her lips parted so she could breathe. All right then; it was going to be this kind of evening.

He yanked the bottle from her hand, took a mouthful, then sank to the edge of the bed. "Take off your clothes," he instructed roughly.

No hesitation; she swept the tank top off, unbuttoned the skirt and let it hit the floor at her ankles. "All of it," he prompted, and she unhooked her bra, which fell straight to her feet as well. When she started pulling the panties off she turned around, giving him the ass view as she bent to work them all the way down, stepping out of them, giving him a flash of the view with parted legs.

He took another drink. Her legs were a little skinny for his taste, but the ass was plenty nice. Unfortunately from this angle he could see the track marks on the backs of her knees.

When she turned around she became stock-still, awaiting his next instruction.

"Come here," he said before taking another drink, leaning back on his elbows.

She approached him, completely confident in her nudity, reaching for his belt buckle.

"On your knees," he snapped, and she complied, dropping to the floor between his feet before unbuttoning the leather at his waist. From here he figured she didn't needing any more help from him. She bit her lip while working his pants open, reaching inside and finding him hard and ready.

"Wow," she whispered. "That's impressive."
"Not what I want your mouth doing," he instructed, and without another word her head dropped down as she wrapped those lips around his erection. He took another drink, eyebrows high as he realized she knew what she was doing. No problem with the deep-throating and the girl's tongue had skills, too.

Another drink and his eyes were closed, feeling the build-up. Her hand was working his balls, the suction just right. "Fuck," he muttered, "that's perfect." He came hard, back jerking, grunting, and opening his eyes with a laugh. "Damn," he was saying, then stopped when he noticed the room was swaying around him. "Wait. What the hell?"

"Something wrong, baby?" she was cooing, but he couldn't focus on her. He shook his head, blinked his eyes, and tried to see straight.

"What the fuck?" Even sluggish like this his brain had one moment of clarity. He looked at the bottle. "What the fuck did you do, bitch?"

She was still between his knees, wiping her bottom lip. She just grinned as his head got too heavy and hit the mattress, the world slowly fading to black.
Chapter 4

Jamie was woken rudely by loud pounding on her front door. She figured it was a drunk local and waited for them to realize they were at the wrong house. Then she considered Calvin being startled awake this late and she got to her feet groggily, reaching under her bed for her Louisville Slugger and half-stumbling to the front door to see what the hell was going on.

She flicked the porch light into action, grabbing the cordless phone off the entertainment centre at the same time in case she had to call the cops. Then she peered out the peep hole.

And immediately considered going back to bed.

"Jamie? Fuck you, Jamie. I know you're in there, you turned the light on."

Shit. She groaned, fighting back the urge to drop to the floor and kick her feet in a tantrum. That's what she felt like doing, and being considerably older than six didn't make her feel any different about her sister showing up in the middle of the night with what was likely to be a tsunami of drama trailing after her.

How the hell did she know they even moved?

Jamie took a deep breath, set the phone back on its charger, and flipped the dead bolts over, figuring it wouldn't do to wake the local wildlife and draw any attention to herself. Jaclyn thrust herself against the door, apparently Jamie was taking too long, and swung around, locking the door behind herself.

"Thanks, sis," Jaclyn whispered.

"Oh, now you remember the eight year old in the house?" Jamie whispered back. She flicked the foyer light on, wanting to make sure Jaclyn wasn't entirely f**ked up.

She seemed steady, but she still dressed like a slut. Her skirt was short enough to show ass cheek, and her shirt was ripped down the front so far Jaime could see the mole she had right between her breasts.

"Jaclyn, what do you want?"

"I took a cab to your old place. Some guy told me where you'd moved to."

Jamie sighed. Small town. She already knew how it happened; Jaclyn showed up at the old condo just as politely as she had here, woken up some poor resident who had informed her where she could find her sister.

"Then you took a cab here? Do you need cab fare? Because we're kinda tight for cash Jaclyn -"
"I know, I know. Don't worry little sister." Her sister's eyes were too wide and bright as she dug in her bag, breathless with excitement. "I'm here to help. Look."

She pulled out a black, well-creased wallet and flipped it open. "I hit the mother load. Look at this." Jamie felt her stomach sink as Jaclyn pulled out a heavy wad of bills. "Look at this! How much do you think this is? Looks like about two grand to me!"

Jamie watched her sister lick her lips as she regarded the handful of money. She was so excited her pupils were wide … too wide.

"Shit Jaclyn, what are you on?"

Her head jerked up, contrite. "What? What do you mean?"

"Your eyes, Jackie. You're spun right out. What did you spend some of that money on?"

Jaclyn licked her lips again. "Just a little something. I needed it. I was on a fucking bus all day!"

"What did you take?"

Jaclyn sighed. "It was just a bit of cocaine. Nothing too serious."

"*Pot* isn't too serious. Cocaine is fucking serious, Jackie."

Jaclyn gave her a wide-eyed look of regret. This was the thing about her little sister; she wasn't just a horrible bitch when she was messed up. She was easily agreeable, self-deprecating and apologetic to a fault. Jamie knew it was an act, part of her manipulative personality, but right then Jamie was too tired to stay strong. She was *always* tired these days.

"Look, just … tell me whoever you stole this wallet from is far, far away."

"Oh, don't worry. When he wakes up it'll take hours before he knows it's gone."

Jamie rubbed her face. "Shit. Tell me you stole it while he was in the bathroom?"

Jaclyn looked at her feet. "Just a little Dramamine in some Jack Daniels."

Jamie groaned. "Fuck! I hope this was just some regular guy you conned into a motel room tryst, Jackie. If this was someone scary like last time -"

Jaclyn shook her head. "No, I swear it. This guy sold … fucking, hot tubs. I can't remember. He wouldn't shut up about them."

Jaclyn was a terrible liar but Jamie didn't have energy for an argument. "Extra blankets and pillows should be in one of these boxes somewhere. Sleep on the couch, and keep it down. Calvin will be up early for cartoons, so … expect to be a sad sack in the morning."
"Okay." Jaclyn grabbed her in a big, warm, booze-smelling hug. "Thank you, Jamie!"

"Just go to sleep." With that she left her sister in the living room and stumbled back to the waiting comfort of her bed.

…

"Auntie Jamie?" the voice was cautiously polite. "Auntie Jamie? It's nine o'clock."

She opened one eye, smiling at the sight of Calvin in his pyjamas, standing next to the bed, hands resting on the mattress as he looked at her with curiosity. "What's up, Peanut?"

"You better come. Mom's making breakfast."

Jamie sighed, closing her eyes and willing herself to just pass out for a week. She'd managed to forget about her sister while sleeping. It had been glorious.

"Okay," she grumbled. "I'm getting up. Go watch TV."

She'd always lectured on the dangers of Calvin using the stove without supervision. The truth was she'd trust him to operate the gas range before Jaclyn.

At least she couldn't smell any burning as she yawned and stumbled to the living room. Calvin was nestled in some blankets on the couch, immersed in cartoons. She pattered into the kitchen, taking note of the mess all over the countertops. She hadn't unpacked all the kitchen wares yet, so boxes were partially unpacked, anything Jaclyn didn't need were discarded wherever it fell or was set down.

"What are you making?" she asked, setting herself down in a chair at the kitchen table, yawning yet again.

Jaclyn smiled at her brightly, flour on her cheek. "Pancakes. I found your pyjama pants in a box while I was looking for pillows. Hope it's okay."

Jamie hadn't even noticed that Jaclyn's denim skank skirt was gone. "It's better," she assured her sister, "Calvin doesn't need the birds and the bees talk early just because he got an eyeful of where he came from."

Jaclyn just laughed, flipping the pancakes she had in the skillet.

"Did you actually sleep?"

Her sister didn't look at her as she shrugged one shoulder. "I guess. A little."

Jamie shook her head, crossing her arms on the table and letting her head fall forward onto them. "Christ, I'm so exhausted."
"I know Jamie. That's why I'm here! I'm helping."

Jamie had to admit that breakfast smelled awesome. She dragged her sad ass off the chair and set the table, getting the butter and syrup, dishes and flatware while Jaclyn prattled on about all the fantastic things she'd seen and where she'd been the last three months.

Breakfast was served at the kitchen table, with Jaclyn asking Calvin all the polite questions an aunt would ask when visiting. It was a strange demographic, but it worked for them for whatever reason.

Calvin helped load the dishwasher, and Jaclyn sat staring at him while Jaime brought two mugs of coffee to the table for them. Jaclyn was shaking her head as she took a sip. "He's so awesome, Jamie. He's so smart!"

Calvin could hear her of course, but he just sniffed and pushed his glasses up his nose, his ears turning a bit red.

"He is smart," Jamie confirmed. "Teachers all say he's the brightest in the class. Right, Peanut?"

"Yes, Aunt Jamie."

"I'm so sorry you're sick, Jamie." Jaclyn said quietly. "It … it should be me getting sick."

Part of the manipulative personality again, but Jamie wasn't playing into that. "We have no say over this stuff," she said. "I just wish I didn't lose all of mom and dad's money fighting for custody," she said it quiet, but Calvin was smart enough to know what they were talking about.

Jaclyn set her coffee down. "I wouldn't take his money, Jamie."

Jamie just scoffed.

"I wouldn't," Jaclyn hissed through clenched teeth.

"You'll steal it from strangers but not your son? That does makes you a good person."

Jaclyn fell silent, her lower jaw thrust to the side to show she was pissed. Now we were getting to the ugly truth; the fact that Jaclyn was still half gone and the addiction was very much in control.

"You know what?" the ugly side finally spat out. "You win. Sit here and feel fucking sorry for yourself. Play mommy martyr and collect all those fucking sainthood points. But don't you ever imply I don't care."

"You don't," Jamie said back.

"Fuck you, Jamie."
Jamie got to her feet. "Get out."

Jaclyn looked shocked. "What?"

"Get out of this house."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean -" 

"You never mean anything. You show up here at three in the morning, wake up your son, show a handful of stolen money at me and expect it to make anything better? You're not welcome here until you're straight, Jackie. I can't have you in here with ... stolen property and controlled substances. You need to leave." She saw tired, and overly cranky, but she meant every word. This was as close to an intervention as her sister was going to get.

Jaclyn's eyes teared up, ready to play for the sympathy. Jaime had seen it too many times. "I'm sorry, Jamie," she whispered, standing slowly like she'd just been beaten. "I'll go."

Calvin had quietly slipped out of the room to watch TV, and Jaclyn left much the same way. Jamie's heart was pounding hard and her blood was roaring; but it never lasted long. She felt the exhaustion again and had to sit down, calming herself with even breaths. She didn't have energy to waste this way, not in the morning anyway.

When Jaclyn returned with her bag she put a pile of money on the table. "At least take this, okay? Put it in an emergency fund or something."

Jamie eyed up the money. It was all different denominations, crumpled. She didn't want to know who Jaclyn got it from. And she certainly didn't want it on the table she ate her meals on.

"I don't want it, Jackie. I mean it."

Jaclyn sighed. "Won't it help though?"

Yeah, it would. Of course it would. "I don't want it. It's stolen. And that's not what Calvin needs to see, Jackie."

Her sister gathered the cash, head down, and shoved it back into the wallet. As she did so, one panel flopped open, the window displaying a California driver's license.

Jamie froze. "Shit," she whispered, snatching the leather back from Jaclyn.

"What?"

Jamie stared at the photo ID, her stomach twisting. "Fuck, Jaclyn. Is this who you robbed?"

"Why?"
She flipped the wallet over to show her sister the photo. "This guy? Did you happen to notice the street address on this ID?"

Jaclyn frowned. "No. Why?" She leaned forward, then her eyebrows shot up. "Oh, fuck me."

"Nice work, Jaclyn. You said he was a hot tub salesman! Why can't you rob people that aren't armed?" she was shouting, heart rate flying to catch up with her anger.

Jamie shoved the wallet at her sister again, grabbing the phone. "I'm calling you a cab. And you're going right to the bus station and getting out of town. But first you're going next door and putting that wallet in his mailbox."

Jaclyn looked at her like she was insane. "What? No I'm not."

Jamie carried the cordless to the window off the dining room that overlooked her driveway and the neighbour's. The bike wasn't there. Thank Christ.

She whirled on Jaclyn, who had followed her. "You have to give it back, Jackie. Those guys are dangerous, you know that, right? And this guy scares the shit out of me."

Jaclyn huffed. "Can I keep some of the money?"

"Are you insane? Jackie, I … aren't you scared of people? Ever?" That's when the cab dispatch answered the phone, and Jaime ordered a car to her address. She was told it would be there in ten minutes. She hung up the phone, shaking her head. "Christ, I hope he's not back soon."

"He'll sleep until noon, trust me."

Jamie took a deep breath. "You can't come back here until I find another place. If he sees you -"

"Don't worry, Jamie."

"Don't tell me not to worry. Do you have death wish or are you just this fucking stupid?" She felt bad saying it, but her only recourse was to lock herself in the bathroom and run some cold water to splash on her face while praying the cab got there before her neighbour returned home.

When she was calm, again, she dried her face and returned to the living room. Jaclyn had the same zoned-out expression as Calvin while she watched the TV, and Jamie felt her heart break. Jaclyn got to be his biological mom, and once Jamie was through chemo she'd be unable to have kids.

That was the most unfair fucking thing about all of it.

She went to the kitchen for more coffee, and when she returned to the living room she caught sight of a car pulling up to the curb. "Cab's here," Jamie snapped, and Jaclyn automatically got to
her feet, grabbed her bag off the floor and made for the door. Calvin got up and followed to see their guest "out," because he was having manners bred into him at the moment.

They stood on the stoop, Calvin in front of her, and Jamie held his shoulders while Jaclyn sauntered down the walkway. Then she had a thought and turned around. "I want to come back for Calvin's birthday, though!"

Jamie sighed. "Jackie, you can't. If I were you'd I'd stay the hell out of Charming!" As she said it she heard the bikes, and her heart probably stopped at that moment.

Jaclyn turned towards the sound. Jamie wanted to scream at her to get in the cab and get gone, but the bikes were there fast. Too late Jaclyn's survival instinct kicked in and she started for the car.

Three bikes stopped in front of her neighbour's house, and one pulled into the driveway. That bike's rider ripped his helmet off fast, stood, and Jamie felt cold, crippling fear. It was her neighbour, the one whose photo was in that stolen wallet. And he was pissed.

"You," he shouted. "Stop right the fuck there and don't think of moving."

Jaclyn was scurrying though. Jamie was frozen in place, like she was watching a lion about to pounce on an antelope.

He moved fast for someone so large, and he caught up with Jaclyn by grabbing her ponytail and pulling up on it, making her shriek and nearly lose her footing in the stupid heels she had on.

"Go inside," Jamie told Calvin, reaching in the door and grabbing the cordless phone off the entertainment centre.

"Honey, you dial that phone and I'm going to break it," a voice said, and Jaime jumped. She found the man who spoke, a mountain-sized biker with long hair and an impressive beard, who was standing at the foot of her driveway, hand held up.

She just stared, and his eyes got big.

"Put the phone down," he instructed. She brought it down to her side and started to head inside and he tutted, bringing her back around. "You stay where I can see you. Not gonna hurt you sweetheart but I don't want you calling the cops, either."

Jamie had never been this scared in her entire life, and she wasn't even the one being tossed around. Her hands were sweaty and shaking, and she could only stand there while her neighbour grabbed her sister by the shoulders and slammed her against the cab.

Comments and reviews, as always, much appreciated and welcomed.
Tig thought he was dreaming when he rolled up on his place and saw the bitch from the night before heading for a cab right on the street he lived on. Being robbed had him pissed enough, but the headache from whatever the fuck she'd slipped him made him extra miserable.

No one had seen the bitch leave. Gemma had been distracted by a cat fight and this little pick-pocket had waltzed right out, totally undetected. It had been two hours before anyone realized he was even missing. Talk about fucking humiliation. And having Gem be the one to find him, passed out with his dick hanging out was the fucking icing on the cake.

Tig caught up with the bitch quicker than he would have thought, and when he had her by the shoulders he couldn't help but shove her up against the side of the cab hard. "Where's my wallet, bitch?" was all he said. His voice was cold and calm, totally at odds with how anger had his head buzzing.

Her eyes were wide, terrified. That made it a bit better, but not much. He pulled her away and slammed her back again. "Where's my wallet? You think you can come to my town on the back of a brother's bike, steal my roll and get away with it? There's no fucking way. Where's my wallet? Or we're all gonna take it out of your ass, sweetheart."

She swallowed hard. "It's in my bag. All the cash is there, I swear."

He yanked the bag off her arm, handing it behind him. He didn't know who took it, but someone started going through it. Not only was he robbed but he was also fucking humiliated with an audience.

"Got it man," Quinn said, dropping the bag to the ground. He heard it, didn't see it.

Tig gave her one more shove. As he did it, he heard a little voice, clear as a bell, crying out, "Stop it!"

He turned, ready to tell someone off, when he saw the neighbour on her front stoop catch that kid by the arm before he could launch himself down the stairs. He looked scared but he also looked angry enough to take a piece out of Tig.

His own reaction was beyond peculiar. For the first time in … who knew how long, he felt absolutely ashamed. He looked at the kid's blue eyes, big and worried behind those glasses, and then turned to the woman he had cowering in front of him.

"Don't touch him," she begged, mistaking his blank look. Apparently she thought he was going to hurt the kid. She sputtered, hands fluttering around until they rested on his chest, pushing under his kutte. "Please. I can make it up to you. Just … leave them out of it. Please."
Tig grabbed her wrists and shoved her hands away while his brain processed through this fog of rage. That kid called his neighbour his aunt. And this bitch kinda looked like the neighbour; it was what made him take her to his room the night before.

"That's your sister and your kid?" he guessed.

She licked her lips, trying to step into him again. He shoved her off. Keeping his madness at bay, because he knew that was a hell of a lot scarier, he extended one finger, almost touching the end of her nose. "You're fucking lucky." She winced as he brought his face closer. "I see you in this town again, your sister here gets all the trouble intended for you."

"Please -" she whispered on a sob, but he wasn't in the mood for listening.

"Get the fuck out," he instructed, cold and calm again. She nodded, opened the cab door. He turned back to Quinn, grabbed the bag off the lawn and tossed it in after her then slammed the door, just missing her fucking ankles.

The cab sped away faster than he'd ever seen a cab move.

Quinn was holding out his wallet. Tig yanked it away, opened it and thumbed through the bills. "Fuck," he muttered.

"How much did she get?"

"About four hundred." He shoved the wallet back in his jeans pocket.

"Should we go after her?" Quinn offered.

"Nah. Fuck it. My own fault, right?"

"Not entirely," Quinn quipped. He turned to a guilty-looking Nomad, still sitting on his bike next to Hap. "No more travelling pussy, right Bowie?" The bastard had the sense to look just as embarrassed as Tig was.

Tig had no idea how Bowie convinced Quinn to let him bring the bitch along to Charming. But it didn't matter. He was stupid for not listening to Gemma.

"What about them?" Quinn asked quietly, jerking his head the direction of the neighbour.

Tig sniffed. "She's terrified of me."

"And?" Quinn raised his eyebrows. "What if she calls the cops?"

Tig narrowed his eyes over the Nomad president's shoulder, catching sight of the neighbour pushing the kid back in the house. "I'll talk to her."
He pushed passed the huge Nomad prez, stalking across the grass to the stoop. Somehow the neighbour heard him, and she shut the screen door, whirling back around and holding her arms to the sides like she was blocking the door, protecting the kid.

The shame flared up again. Christ, he'd never hurt a kid, but clearly she didn't think so.

"Your sister's a real fucking problem," he observed.

She shook her head, her breathing making that chest rise and fall. It was nicer than her sister's, he could just tell. "She doesn't live here. She's a drifter."

"She the kid's mom?"

"Yeah. But I have custody."

"He's pretty fucking lucky then, isn't he?"

"She doesn't live here," the woman repeated, still scared. "She just shows up every year or two."

Tig felt his shoulders relax, just slightly. He was still pissed, but this woman with her big eyes had him keeping himself in check. "Relax, babe. I'm not going to hurt you or the kid. But she can't show her face here again."

"She just shows up. I never ask her to."

He watched the way she calmed herself down, impressed with that self-control. Most women didn't have that. But he also couldn't stop looking at her tits; she had some thin-strapped shirt on with matching pyjama bottoms, so he knew very damn well there was no bra underneath. His palms were itching to feel them.

"What'd she give me? Do you know? Am I going to start looking for a vein in an hour?"

She took a deep breath. "She said it was Dramamine. It's an anti-nausea medication, makes people tired. Shouldn't be mixed with alcohol."

"Well that explains why I'm not sick then," he muttered, rubbing his aching head. Then he stopped. The anger was gone. He felt calm again. His hands weren't even shaking anymore. Tig cast a wary eye to his neighbour, and it made her slink back from him further. "How'd you do that?" It was a surprise to him that he said it out loud.

She frowned. "What?"

"Tig, you ready to go or should we leave you two alone for a while?"

Tig felt his lip curl as Quinn shouted but he was right. He had to get out of there; this woman was making him antsy. Without another word he crossed the lawn to Quinn.
"Wanna go beat up some Nazi shitheads?" Quinn asked with a big grin.

Tig nodded, heading for his bike. "Let's do it."

"You sure? She's got a nice rack."

"Forget it man, just … leave her alone."

The request was strange enough that Quinn knew enough to not say another word; just climbed on his bike. As Tig turned the engine over he looked back at the neighbour's house, but she was gone.
Chapter 6

Late June

"Thank you so much for helping with this," Gwen Davidson said amiably, pulling out her wallet. "Last minute house guests, you know how it is."

In an effort to put more cash in the bank before treatments Jamie had started cleaning houses. It was exhausting work, but she could pick the hours and be home by the time Calvin was done school. Plus the extra money was needed for house reasons: the main bathroom of her rental was constantly growing mould on the ceiling. There had to be an air leak in the wall somewhere, carrying humidity to the back of the drywall. There was no bathroom fan, either. When she confronted her landlord he'd told her, in a rant laced with plenty of four-letter words, that he'd only pay for the materials. She'd have to hire the labour. In other words, the more expensive part. She wasn't in a position to argue. Other properties for rent were even worse, and anything "in between" this rent and the kind of rent she couldn't keep up with without a full-time job just didn't exist. She was stuck in that damn house, stuck cleaning other people's houses, and that damn bathroom was going to cut into her savings no matter what.

Which brought her to this point. The Davidsons were the first to take her on, and their gorgeous home in Charming Heights was super-easy to clean. Minimalist, no knick-knacks, and Gwen Davidson tipped handsomely because it was always an on-call basis. This particular day Jamie had just finished cleaning a small one-bedroom wartime house inhabited by an elderly lady who couldn't see all that well when she got the call. The Davidsons were expecting company on the weekend, so she'd appreciate it if Jamie could stop by that afternoon.

Of course she took it, but now she kept checking her wristwatch. Calvin was likely home ten minutes ago. She knew he'd just wait in the backyard and read, but that biker next door still made her plenty nervous.

Being in the Davidson's house made her nervous, too. It wasn't because of Gwen; the woman was wonderful, she just didn't like cleaning and had married a rich guy. It was her husband that gave Jamie the creeps. The one time he'd been there while she worked she felt the need to take a shower. She preferred to be gone before he came home.

Gwen tipped her fifty dollars this time. Jamie was glad for it, smiled her sincere thanks for the unexpected hundred-fifty dollars that came her way that day, and then hurried to her car.

She pulled into the driveway about half an hour late. The neighbour's bike was in his driveway, and she swallowed the lump in her throat at the sight of it. His garage door was open too, but she kept her eyes averted.
She and Calvin had avoided him the past five weeks, and he'd kept to his side of the fence since the day Jaclyn flew the coop. Just as well; Jamie still didn't believe him that he meant them no harm. Now, knowing he was home, it sent her into a tailspin of panic and she rushed into the backyard, calling Calvin's name. He didn't answer.

Jamie climbed the four steps to the patio, seeing his backpack on a deck chair. He'd been here. She checked the back door, it was locked. She circled to the front door and it was still locked, too. Shit.

Jamie was reminding herself not to think the worst. Maybe he'd gone for a walk around the block. Or a friend had come by. She unlocked the front door and checked the answering machine. If a friend had invited him over, that friend's parents would make sure she knew where he was. Right?

No messages on the machine. She held a hand over the centre of her chest; the panic was rising. She rushed the front door, purposeful steps taking her down the driveway, around the end of the fence and up to her neighbour's garage. It was open, but it was empty. A bike frame was resting in the middle of a pile of tools on the floor, but other than that it was really empty.

She left the garage, forced enough courage on herself to stride past the dead-plant flowerbeds up the steps to the front door, and knocked on the storm door when she couldn't find a doorbell. As she waited she wrapped her arms around her waist, torn between hoping like hell he wasn't inside and begging fate to put him there with an idea of where Calvin was.

The house was silent. But his bike was in front and the garage left wide open; he couldn't have gone far.

Jamie returned to her house, walking through again, and seeing no signs that Calvin had made it inside. The only indication he'd been home was that backpack on the patio.

She wanted to go looking. But she also wanted to be here in case he came home while she was out. Fuck, this was frustrating. And the scariest part was that she only had her frightening neighbour to turn to for help.

Arms still tight around her middle she sat on the stoop, willing her pulse to slow down. She couldn't get stressed; her body wasn't doing well with stress lately. After the drama with Jaclyn she'd needed the next two days to get her energy back.

Calvin just went for a walk, she told herself. Out of character, absolutely. But she just had to wait for him. She couldn't panic yet.
Chapter 7

Tig watched the weird little kid from next door agonize over which soda to pick from the cooler at the corner store. Christ, you'd think he was picking a weapon to go into battle with.

"What's the problem, Charlie? Spoiled for choice or what?"

The kid pushed his glasses up his nose and looked up at him. "My name's Calvin."

"Calvin huh?"

"Yeah. But you keep calling me Charlie."

Tig couldn't help but smile. "Sorry, kid. You just look like a Charlie to me. Get the lead out and pick your drink, man."

"I don't know what I want."

"Why not?"

"I don't get to drink pop too much."

Tig raised his eyebrows. What the hell kind of upbringing was this kid having? "You ever tried root beer?"

Calvin shook his head.

"Try it. Your mind will be blown," he muttered wryly. Calvin looked at him, chewed it over, and grabbed a plastic bottle of Hires. "Good choice. Let's go."

Tig had been in his garage when the kid walked home from school, slowing down while crossing Tig's driveway, staring inside and not watching where he was going in that totally absorbed way that only kids had. Then he'd watched the little bastard walk down to the street every five minutes looking both ways and waiting a minute before going back up to his aunt's house.

Clearly she wasn't home yet and the kid was locked out. After about five of these sad little excursions Tig finally dropped his tools and asked the kid if he wanted to get a soda or something. He was going to drive Tig nuts if the aunt didn't show up soon.

He didn't know if Calvin had never had the "strangers" talk or what, but the kid just shrugged and said "Okay" so agreeably Tig was taken aback. So here they were, buying soda and walking back down the street to their houses. Tig cracked open his Coke, trying to remember the last time he'd had this shit without booze in it, swallowed a mouthful and struggled to find something to
say. He was shit with kids; he had two daughters he had no idea what to do with. And this one was an odd one. So damn quiet. Weren't they supposed to be loud and as annoying as fuck?

Turns out he had no reason to worry. Couple gulps of root beer and the kid opened right up. "Are you building a motorcycle?"

Tig nodded. "I am. An old one."

"Why? You already have a motorcycle."

"I do," he replied. "But I like them. Why have one when you can have two?"

Calvin looked up at him, dead serious. "But you can only ride one at a time."

Fuck. Outwitted on logic by a kid. "You got me there, Calvin. I never thought of that."

The kid shrugged. "I guess a back-up is smart."

"Yeah, a back-up."

"Can you show me how they work?"

Now he was really surprised. "What?"

"Motorcycles. I already know how combustion engines work. I like how you can see all the parts on a motorcycle, too. In a car they're hidden. But you can see the guts of a motorcycle. It's cool."

"You know how engines work, hey?"

"Yeah. I learned on the internet. But if I help you I can see how it all works together. If you'll show me," the last part was added shyly because Tig had stopped walking and was staring at the kid, wondering what the hell was happening. "You don't have to," Calvin said, starting to walk again.

"Hey, hey, kid. Why you running? It's okay. You can help me. I'll show you how to put a bike together, sure." He felt ridiculous, intimidated by fifty pounds of awkward child. "If your aunt says it's okay," he added with a finger jab in the kid's shoulder.

The kid puckered his face. "She'll say no."

"That kind always says no," Tig muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. Come on, let's keep walking. Maybe your aunt's home by now."
Calvin did as told, downing a good portion of root beer before letting go with an impressive belch. He covered his mouth and giggled, the most kid-like thing Tig had ever seen him do.

"Nice one, Charlie. Calvin," he drawled when the kid opened his mouth to correct him. Shit, the kid was actually making him laugh.

The aunt was home, all right. Sitting on the porch, clenched in a ball of stress and worry. She darted to her feet and descended on the kid like a dark-haired, long-limbed momma bear as soon as she saw him. "Calvin, thank God. Where have you been?"

"We went to the store," the kid said, letting himself be hugged and petted and fawned over. Clearly he was used to it.

"I was worried sick," she said, crouching in front of him. "I told you, if you get home before I do read on the patio and wait for me. Right?"

He nodded, then burped again. It made Tig laugh and the aunt grabbed the nearly-empty bottle. "I told you about soda, Calvin."

"Yes, Aunt Jamie."

"The door's open. Now go inside and I'll talk to … our neighbour."

"His name's Tig," Calvin said, scooting around her and heading for the door. "Thanks for the soda, Tig!" He called out before flying through the front door.

Blue-green eyes hit him like a shot to the gut; she was so pissed he felt the look. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Tig took a step back, reminding himself that getting in the face of a civilian didn't help anything. "He was waiting, pacing up and down the driveway looking for you. It was driving me nuts. We just walked down to the store. Unclench, sweetheart."

Her jaw set and her eyes flashed. "Excuse me? You don't take people's kids and walk them to the store. Plus he can't have pop because he'll be up all night!"

"He's a kid, it's not a school night. So what?"

The blood was rising in her face and she was getting plenty worked up. The abstract part of his brain found it pretty fucking hot, actually. "I am not taking parenting advice from you. But if you must know, if he can't sleep I can't sleep and I have work to do in the morning. I need him agreeable and rested when he comes with me, okay?"

Tig shrugged. "What are you telling me for then? I thought I'd keep him entertained, that's it. Who doesn't let their kid drink fucking soda? How was I supposed to know that?" Okay, Calvin
sort of told him that. But whatever. "Thought I was helping. Don't worry, you won't get another favour from me again. I promise, babe. Okay?"

She turned and stomped away, and he of course noticed her ass in the workout pants she had on. Her ass looked great when the rest of her was mad.
Chapter 8

Jamie loaded the bucket full of cleaners into her trunk, sighing. Cleaning other people's houses on a Saturday really didn't make her want to rush home and clean her own. One small house and a one-bedroom condo done and she was wiped.

Calvin had been perfectly well-behaved. He finished two books that day. It was a good thing she took him by the library before they started work. Jamie was a bit worried at his choices though. One was a text book from a technical college about automotive engines, another was about the history of motorcycles in America, and he even grabbed Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values.

She had picked up the last one at the check-out desk, turning it over. "Peanut, I don't think this is what you think it is."

He just shrugged and insisted on getting it. She wasn't entirely sure if he'd grasp the concept, but she wasn't going to stunt him. As for the other books, mechanical knowledge could be handy; what did she know? She couldn't even change an air filter in her car.

Jamie scrubbed, dusted, vacuumed, polished and buffed all day. Calvin found a quiet place out of the way to read. It worked a treat, really, thankfully. She couldn't afford daycare. If she had to pay for that too she'd just stay home and hope the money would last.

Calvin helped carry her stuff to the car without complaint. When they climbed in to drive home he finally spoke. "Ummm, Aunt Jamie?"

"Yeah, Peanut?"

"Would it be okay if Tig showed me how to put together his motorcycle?"

She was about to put the car in gear, but she froze first. "What?" She had to look at him to confirm she wasn't imagining it.

"I want to see how to put a motorcycle together, and he's building one."

"Why the sudden interest in motorcycles, Peanut?" Jamie hoped she sounded curious and not horrified.

"They're cool. And you can see all the parts to them. In cars and stuff it's all tucked away inside. But you can see it all on a motorcycle."

He eagerly pulled open one of his books. "I know how engines work. I know what all the parts are for. I just want to see how they all go together."
She looked at his sandy-haired head, bent over the pages, flipping through to what he wanted to show her. She was so fucking torn. Her only hope was that this neighbour would be horrified at the thought of teaching an eight-year-old how motorcycles work.

"See? This is a 1954 Harley Davidson Super Glide. That's the bike that Tig's putting together. Isn't it cool, Aunt Jamie?" His eyes were wide and she had never in her life seen him excited about anything.

"I don't know, Peanut," she said, pushing his hair off his forehead. "I doubt Tig wants an eight-year-old hanging out with him."

Calvin shook his head. "He said I could help, but only if it was okay with you."

Ouch. Double, no, triple -ouch. And yet, it showed respect at the same time.

Jamie bit her lip. "You really want to fix a dirty old motorcycle?"

Calvin shook his head so emphatically it moved the car. "Yes, Aunt Jamie. I do, I really do. Can I? Please?"

She exhaled slowly, those big blue eyes actually lit with excitement. "I have to talk to him first, okay?"

Calvin huffed, unimpressed. "He said you were the kind that always said no."

She frowned. "What?"

He pushed his glasses up and faced forward. "He said people like you always said no."

She closed her eyes, shaking her head and venturing a guess as to what the biker next door had actually been implying. "I just need to set rules, Peanut. If he can't promise me he'll take care of you I don't want you over there. Okay?"

Calvin's eyes were big again as he turned them on her. "Really?"

Jamie couldn't help but smile. "I've never seen you eager to do anything before, Peanut. It kind of makes me happy."

Calvin grinned. "I just think motorcycles are cool."

"I know, they are. But they're a responsibility, too. You have to be careful when riding them. But … if you know how they work, maybe when you're old enough you'll have a lot of respect for them."

Calvin nodded. "I really want to do this this summer, Aunt Jamie."
She smiled down at him. "Don't forget, you'll also be visiting Great Aunt Thelma."

"I know. But that's only a week, or less, right? Then we're back here?"

Jamie nodded, then turned back to the steering wheel. "You bet, Peanut."

As soon as they were back at the house, pulling into the driveway, she noted that Tig's garage door was up again. Calvin noticed, too.

"See Aunt Jamie? He's working on the bike!"

"Okay, Peanut. Just calm down a bit, okay? I have to talk to him first, remember?"

"Okay. But Aunt Jamie, I really really want to do this." He was begging her not to mess it up. She had hoped that wouldn't kick in until he was sixteen.

"I know, Peanut. But there's gotta be rules. You get that, right?"

Calvin nodded and opened the car door. Because he never got excited she'd also never seen him disappointed before. It stung. Calvin had never asked her for anything. He didn't expect much, actually. He was as far from spoiled as most kids in this part of town.

"Unload all the stuff for me, okay? I'll go talk to …" she took a deep breath. "Tig."

"Thank you Aunt Jamie!" he squealed, hugging her around the waist before taking her keys to open the back door.

As she made her way up the neighbour's driveway rock 'n' roll music of a decidedly older decade greeted her, and she heard the metallic clang of a dropped tool. As the door she heard his voice cut through a Clapton guitar solo.

"… come on, you bitch. Don't be that way." She heard him snarling from where he was crouched on the far side of a hunk of metal.

"Ummm … hello?"

Another tool was dropped as he scooted to his feet as though startled. Not that it really showed on his face. He just took her in during the course of one long, meandering body scan that made her skin crawl. Honestly, those eyes were so piercing she felt like they could see right through her clothes.

"Yeah?" he asked, unaffected.

"Calvin wants to help you build a motorcycle."

With the ease of a cat he braced his hands on the frame to lean over a bit. "Yeah."
"Do you really want his help?"

He blinked once. "Why not?"

"If you just said it off-hand, tell me now. If in a week you're going to be tired of him hanging around, tell me now. Because he's the most excited I've ever seen him. He got three books about motors at the library today – well, two books about motors. And if you decide you don't want him around it's going to absolutely crush him. So if you can't see yourself hanging out with that boy this summer you have to let me know right now. Before he's any more invested in this idea than he already is."

He cranked his lower jaw hard to one side. "I said he could help. He's quiet. He's not a punk."

She took a step closer. "Like I said, if you brush him off it will kill him. You've got to be serious about this because Calvin takes everything seriously."

He nodded. "I get you, Aunt Jamie. Sometimes I might have to leave town for a few days without warning, but if I'm not working or on the road I'm putting this bitch together. If he's here to help, great."

She felt her back get straighter. "Good. But I have a few rules."

He rubbed his forehead roughly. "Of course you do."

Jamie ignored that. "I know it's hard not to curse. But let's not get too creative or specific, okay? Can you try and stick to the basics?"

He raised an eyebrow. "The basics?"

"He's heard the usual words before, knows not to use them. I'm more worried about the words he might not know yet that ... men like to use for slang."

One side of Tig's mouth curled in a smile. "Man slang, hey?"

"Yeah. Second, I don't want him in your house. For any reason. It's nothing personal, I just don't know what's in there. Backyard and garage are fine, but ... no going in the house."

He sniffed, still half-smiling. "Okay."

"And just remember that he's eight. Well, soon he'll be nine, but he's impressionable. He thinks motorcycles are cool, he probably thinks you and your friends are cool, just ... take it seriously when you talk to him, okay? He's social circle is small, which means now you're a big part of it."

The smile was gone by the time she finished. He was nodding, studying the floor. Then he looked up at her. "I've been around kids a few times before. It's not magic to me, sweetheart. Tell him he can come over whenever he wants, as long as it's okay with you."
She nodded, turned to leave, then faced him again. "Calvin said you told him he could only help if he had my permission."

He nodded.

"Thank you for that, by the way." Then she was off down the driveway again, not feeling too much better about the situation but at least confident that her scary neighbour maybe actually liked Calvin. Even just a little bit.
Chapter 09

"Sorry this part is so boring, Charlie," Tig muttered, the last bolt finally easing up on the bitch act and letting go. "But we've got to get all this shit off the bike before the frame can be sandblasted."

"I know," Calvin said agreeably, perched on a milk crate with a paperback in his hand. Jesus, this kid was ridiculously easy-going. Made him wonder if his own daughters weren't seriously messed up with how they used to drive him nuts at this age.

"What you reading?"

"I thought it was about motorcycle maintenance. But it's not."

"What is it?"

"Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance," came the casual reply.

"What?"

"Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. It's written by," he flipped the cover over, "Robert Persig."

"Not sure how zen factors into motorcycles, kid."

"It's more of a manifesto, I think."

"A what?"

But the kid was reading to him now, and Tig stopped, hands on hips to listen. "The place to improve the world is first in one's own heart and head and hands, and then work outward from there. Calvin looked up at him, sliding glasses back up his nose. "You're a mechanic, you work with your hands?"

Tig was still trying to figure out what kind of fucking eight-year-old tossed around a word like manifesto. "Yeah, kid. I'm a mechanic."

Calvin nodded as though this pleased him, then went back to reading.

Tig felt his eyebrows rise, then he shook his head. "So, what else do you do for fun, kid? You play any sports or anything?"

"No," Calvin didn't seem sad about this. "I always get picked last in school. And that stuff is really expensive. I don't want to worry Aunt Jamie."
Tig couldn't help himself, and the kid started it, so … "What's your Aunt Jamie do?"

"She's cleaning houses so she can get the bathroom fixed."

Just like a kid to explain everything without really saying anything.

"She seems kinda … smart to be cleaning houses. What's up with that?"

"She's sick."

Tig waited for more detail, but nothing was being added. The kid was immersed in that book. "Sick how? Like, a flu?"

"Cancer."

Tig felt the ground actually move under his feet. "She's got cancer?"

"Yeah. They fired her from her job because she was going to have to leave anyway, to be sick. But she has to have the mould removed from the bathroom."

"No she doesn't," Tig quipped. "It's not her house. Her landlord has to deal with that shit."

Calvin shook his head, looking up again and sniffing. "He said she had to pay the people. He was buying the supplies."

Tig felt his vision go red for just a second. He knew that landlord was a piece of shit slumlord. And he was making this broad pay labour on his fucking property.

"That ain't right," he muttered, turning back to the frame, frowning.

"She's not going to make enough before she has to go to the hospital for an operation," Calvin shared. "She thinks it'll be about five grand. She's only saved enough for us to live on while she gets better. So she has to have more than she does. But it won't be enough."

"Fuck," he muttered, wrench banging against a support for no reason other than the fact he was pissed. He looked back at the kid, perched on that crate with his scrawny legs crossed, chewing his lip as he read. Shit, he didn't care, Tig told himself. You don't care, there's no reason to give a shit. And it was a lie. "When's her surgery?"

"Next week. I have to go stay with Aunt Thelma." His tone told Tig exactly what he thought of this particular family member.

"What's wrong with Aunt Thelma?"

"She's weird. And loud."
Tig laughed. "Charlie, you're sitting in the company of weird and loud right now."

"It's loud at her farm," Calvin complained, returning to his book. "She has seven roosters."

Tig snorted at that. "That would be annoying. But you know Aunt Jamie just wants you somewhere safe so she can get better."

"I know," the kid was resigned to the fact. "I never said anything to Aunt Jamie. I don't want her to worry about me. Stress is not good for recovery from surgery."

Tig studied the kid again, chewing his own lip now, too. Shit, this kid was smart and kind of funny and life was likely really going to suck for him. That was too bad.

"Listen, kid," he said, not sure how to word this or why he felt the need to even say it. "I know it likely scared you when you saw me giving your mom shit. And I'm sorry about that."

Calvin studied him thoughtfully before answering. "She stole from you. She does that. I thought you might hurt her, which made me mad. But I also hoped it might scare her enough to stop being how she is."

Tig had never felt so young and yet old at the same time. The kid was some kind of walking sage. "Read me another one," Tig asked, turning back to his project.

Calvin cleared his throat. "In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming." Curious eyes came back to him again, and Tig was struck not only by the words but also by the kids' earnest expression. Fuck, had he ever been this innocent?

"What's up, kid?" he asked, not sure what this face meant.

"Safety is an illusion," the kid said. "You think you're safer in a car compared to a motorcycle. But the truth is you're blinding yourself to what's really out there. So when you feel safe, you're actually just … numb. Placated. Like a farm animal. On a bike you're actually there, not just watching from a safe distance."

Tig blinked a few times. "Calvin, you're freaking me out, dude."
Chapter 10

Jamie was fighting to keep herself calm as she drove home. Her heart was racing, her cheekbone stung from being punched, and her lip was bleeding from the slap. Mostly, she was so shocked and upset she felt like she might hyperventilate.

Gwen Davidson's house guests were gone, so she'd called for the post-reunion clean up today. Glad to have the work and the tip Jamie had raced right over, even though it would mean she was late getting home. The fact that her nephew could stay at Tig Trager's when she was late getting home was a relief. And the fact that it was a relief made her uneasy.

Gwen Davidson wasn't there. Her husband Clark let Jamie in, his leering eyes and smarmy comments making her squeamish. But she set to cleaning the guests' quarters, kitchen and living area right away.

Clark Davidson followed her. Clark Davidson asked her if she did yoga since her yoga pants fit her so well. Clark Davidson tried to grab her ass and Jamie shoved him off, telling him it was inappropriate in her most diplomatic tone while choking on the urge to call him a dick and run away.

He'd grabbed her by the upper arms, and she struggled, ripping one of the straps of her tank top. She told him firmly to let her go, fighting free of his hands. This earned her the slap.

She'd been shocked. Her hand covered the sting he'd left her with, and he mistook her pause for some kind of permission. He grabbed her again, she scratched at him and pulled away. Then he'd punched her.

Closed fist. To the cheekbone. It brought stars to her eyes, and she fell to the ground as the front door of the house opened. She left her supplies, only grabbed her bag, and ran to her car past the very startled and concerned Gwen Davidson.

Now, through a haze of appalled shock, she found herself at home, not sure how she made it there and hoping she hadn't caused any accidents on the drive. She parked in the front of her driveway, staring up at the house, realizing she'd left her shit behind, and lamenting that it would cost about two hundred dollars to replace all of it.

Jamie let her forehead hit the steering wheel as she tried to steady her nerves. She didn't want Calvin to see her like this. Her hands were even shaking.

There was a knock on her window. She raised her head, not sure what she was expecting, but it wasn't Tig Trager. Startled, she wiped her eyes, pulling her keys from the ignition and unbuckling her seatbelt. He pulled her door open, and she shied away from him, heart starting to race again.
"What the fuck happened to your face?" His tone was cold and angry.

She cringing, holding up a hand. "Please step back and give me some room to get out of my car."

He did, pulling the door the rest of the way open. She moved to keep her right cheek away from him, but the split lip was leaking down her chin and denying it was there wasn't an option.

"Jamie," he demanded again. "The fuck happened to your face?"

She closed her eyes, feeling that now familiar exhaustion rising. She just wanted a bath, but... fuck. That bathroom was all fucked up and she was scared to use it. The last thing she and Calvin needed was toxic mould.

"Jamie? You're bleeding, sweetheart. Who did this?" He also grabbed the ripped strap on her shirt.

She avoided his gaze, not sure how to answer nor why the hell he should care.

"Aunt Jamie? Are you okay?"

She turned her head to the back side of the car, realizing Calvin was there, watching. That's when Tig hissed, bringing her attention back to him, knowing he saw her cheek.

He grabbed her chin, surprisingly gentle, turning her head back the way it had been. "Jesus Christ, who did this?"

She pulled free of his grasp. "A client. And it doesn't matter because I'm sure I'm fired now."

"Give me his name," he snapped.

"No," Jamie answered emphatically, slamming her car door closed, finding her backbone again. "Back to your side of the fence, Mister Trager."

"Aunt Jamie..."

She held her hand out to Calvin, shushing him with the motion but feeling bad because he was only scared. For her. "It's fine, Calvin. You have nothing to worry about." Her eyes went back up to Tig's, those icy blues sending a chill through her. "Go home," she asked. "This has nothing to do with you." He set his lower jaw to the side, an angry expression that made her re-examine her voice when she spoke again. "Please, I don't want trouble. I'm not going back."

"Then tell the cops," he said, following her to her front door.

"Come on, Calvin. Inside." She held her hand out to her nephew, shaking it. "Right now."

Tig followed her. "Call the cops, Jamie. That shit ain't right."
Jamie pushed the door open, ushering Calvin inside, shutting the screen door and whirling on the scary man standing on the bottom step of her stoop. "Listen to me," she hissed. "This is none of your business, okay? I'm not going back. She paid me for this visit, I'll happily take the one hundred dollar tip, and I won't go back because her husband's an asshole. But that's how I'm handling it, it's my call, and you have no say. You're my neighbour. You're nice enough to let my nephew hang out when I'm running late, and I appreciate it. But this is mine, not yours."

"Men don't hit women," he snarled.

"I remember you handling my sister with such tender care right in front of my house," she snapped back. "Do not hand me that kind of hypocrisy."

"I never hit her. I gave her shit, I manhandled her, but I never did that," he returned with a gesture to her face. "I never tried to pull her clothes off, either. Was that what this was about? He wanted in your pants?"

"Just stay out of it," she whispered desperately, cut off when he pulled her purse off her shoulder. "Hey!"

Tig avoided her hands easily, turning away and going through her stuff.

"Stop that," she hissed, following him down the steps. It was futile; he was big and scary. Her fight was sad, really.

"Clark and Gwendolyn Davidson. Fucking Charming Heights, yet." He turned, holding up the cheque. "This is them, right?"

Jamie clasped her hands, pleading. "Give me back my stuff."

He shook his head. "Nah. I don't think so."

"Tig -" she was cut off as her purse was shoved back into her stomach.

"Don't worry, babe," he muttered, tucking the cheque into his pocket. "I'll make sure you get what you're owed. I promise."

The look in his eyes made her blood stop in her veins, her heart freezing mid-beat. Abstractly she was glad he wasn't pissed off at her, and at the same time she didn't want anyone else getting hurt.

"Ice, on your cheek. Do it. That bitch is gonna swell up," was the last thing he said over his shoulder as she stalked down her driveway and then back up on his own, on a mission.

She didn't wait to watch. She hustled back inside, cringing when his bike began to rumble. She peeked out the side window, only catching a glimpse of Tig Trager flying off down their street.
"Are you okay Aunt Jamie?"

She looked down on Calvin, who was staring up at her with obvious and grave concern. She dropped to her knees, wincing as his eyes noticed her ripped shirt, split lip and cheek. "Sweetie, I'm fine," she assured him. "I'm sorry if all that scared you."

"You're bleeding though," he insisted, close to tears.

She pulled him into her chest, cheek on top of his head. "Baby, I'm fine. I promise. There was a bad man, I got away from him, and he's never coming here."

"Is Tig gonna hurt him?"

Jamie wanted to strangle that bastard right then. "I don't know," she admitted, knowing it was no use lying to him. "I don't know."

His response all but cut her. "I hope he does."
Chapter 12: Chapter 11

The wind whipping across his face did nothing to cool Tig's anger as his Dyna roared through the neighbourhood he still didn't entirely think of as home. All he could see was that split lip he wanted to taste. That bruised cheek he would have loved to have touched. He couldn't do any of that, but he could make the asshole hurt that put his hands on her.

The wartime rentals and shanties he could relate to eventually gave way to newer stucco houses, condos and housing developments. The address that matched the fucker's check was a huge, white, two-level monstrosity. He pulled the bike to a stop at the curb, popped his lid off and studied the area. Other than his bike, the noisiest things on the street were all the lawn mowers being operated by Mexican illegals hired cheap by landscaping companies.

Still astride his Harley he pulled out his lighter and a cigarette, lit it and cast a look of disdain at the house he'd been after. There was an Audi SUV and a squat little BMW sports car in the driveway. If he'd been the melodramatic sort, he'd say the place made him want to throw up.

It was hot. Fuck, it was hot. But he had a fleece on over his kutte. This wasn't club business, this was personal. So the colours had to stay hidden.

Couple drags down on the smoke, he swung his leg off the bike and a cigarette, lit it and cast a look of disdain at the house he'd been after. There was an Audi SUV and a squat little BMW sports car in the driveway. If he'd been the melodramatic sort, he'd say the place made him want to throw up.

"Can I help you?" Still had a few fucking manners, apparently.

"Clark Davidson." It wasn't meant to sound like a question, so it didn't.

"Yes?"

"Can I talk to you a second?" he asked for no good reason. He was already pushing the guy into his own house, hand right in the middle of his chest, slamming the door behind him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Tig didn't answer, casting his eyes around the ultra-white and bright, two-storey entry way with a huge staircase curling up the left side. He gave a low whistle, his boot heels echoing on the stone floor. Might have been marble. What the fuck did he know from flooring?
"What do you want?"

Tig answered with his own question. "You know Jamie Taylor?"

The first response were a few quick blinks. Then he found his mouth again. "Yeah."

"You put your hands on her?"

The prick's eyes darted to a big arched doorway to his right, and Tig didn't need a PhD to figure out that the guy's wife was home. "What?" Ass Clown asked, voice noticeably lower.

"You hit her?" Tig took no such precaution with his volume.

The guy fish-mouthed, then finally found more words. "Look, I don't want any trouble, it just got a little out of hand -"

"Stop talking," Tig advised.

"Look, whatever you want. I don't want any trouble. I'm sure we can reach an agreement."

Tig raised his eyebrows as a new thought came to him. "Five grand."

Clark was surprised. "What?"

"Five thousand dollars. Or she tells your wife."

"I can't just give away five grand, my wife would notice that."

"Hell, maybe your wife would like a ride on my bike. She'd be glad to be shot of your weak ass I bet." More blinking, still not the answer Tig wanted. "Ten then," Tig suggested as though he was being agreeable.

Clark blinked exactly five times. "I don't have that kind of money just sitting around!"

"What do you do?"

"I-I'm an investment broker."

"And your wife?"

"She doesn't work."

"You got kids?"

"No."
Tig titled his head. "No kids. No job. She has to suck your dick? That's her job? She hires people to clean this fucking house?"

"Please keep your voice down."

"Listen, you shit heel peckerwood. Jamie needs the money. I don't care what you say, you're in a position to give it to her. So you will, and your wife won't find out. Got it?"

"I need time to put together that much cash."

"Get on it quick then, asshole. And you'll need to find another maid, because she ain't coming back here."

The guy was nodding, ridiculously agreeable. "Okay, okay. I'll get it. But how do I get it to you?"

"Don't give it to me, give it to her."

"What?"

"I know, that sounds bad. Look, just give it to her. And don't take your time, either."

The guy was resigned but pissed off. "All right."

"Oh, and one more thing."

"What's that?"

Tig's right hook broke Clark Davidson's nose. His right jab caught his cheekbone, the rings giving it a little extra sting. The next right he made sure caught the guy's lip as he was about to fall, and he felt the silver on his fingers hit the guy's teeth.

What a fucking great sound.

Clark Davidson hit the floor on his back, legs and arms pin-wheeling but failing to catch his weight very well. The blood hit his shirt instantly. Tig saw his eyes well up from the nose shot, and he covered his face with one hand while trying to get back up from a three-point stance, spitting blood out on the floor.

A floor Jamie likely just finished cleaning.

"Come on man, you wanted a fist fight. I'll let you get in a shot here and there. Have at 'er." Tig pointed at his own chin.

Clark stared up at him like he was insane. "I don't want a fist fight," he snarled, angry now.
"You hit someone, you want a fight, asshole. If it's not the person you're hitting, it's someone on their behalf. If you don't want a fight, don't fucking hit people. Especially the ones way out of your league."

He let Clark stand up, but the bastard was laughing. "The maid? Jamie? Out of my league?"

The nose was gushing good. The lip was going to hurt a lot. He was going to have at least one black eye. Fuck it, they might as well match. Another good shot rocked him to the side but he didn't go down, just grunted. *Explain that all to the wife.*

"So far out of your league you don't get to say her name," he said very low and cold, calm. That was his scary voice and he knew it was effective one hundred percent of the time.

Clark Davidson finally got wise and buttoned his lip.

"Ten grand. You don't have to see me again."

There was an angry stare-down, then a woman's voice cut through all the heavy breathing in the entry. "Is Jamie okay?"

Tig's head came up to take in the tanned, yoga-toned blonde leaning against the entry, arms crossed, not even looking at her husband. Yeah, she heard all of it.

"She will be," he assured her, sensing the woman liked Jamie. That bode well for her.

She nodded, then Tig turned for the door, shouting out "142 Parkdale Road," as he left, making sure that door slammed behind him.

As he pulled back into his drive the neighbour was on her stoop, curled up with her arms wrapped around her knees, the kid nowhere to be seen. As he swung off the bike she got to her feet and strode towards him, keeping the fence at arms' length between them.

"What did you do?" she nearly whispered. She still hadn't even changed her shirt; that ripped strap was fucking gutting him. At least the lip had stopped bleeding.

"Don't worry about it. He'll think twice before touching anyone ever again."

"I didn't ask you to do anything. Did you hit him?"

Tig set his jaw, looking down at his helmet in his hands. That was when he noticed his knuckles were a bit scuffed up. He hadn't even felt it. "Yeah. I fucking hit him. And I'd do it again."

When he looked up at those blue-green eyes he couldn't tell what she was thinking about him. Then she really shocked his shit before heading back into her house.

"Thank you," she said softly as she turned away.
Chapter 12

July

Jamie stored the Rocky Road ice cream at the back of the freezer and carried the birthday cake down into the basement. She meant to hide it in the small fridge that was only holding a few bottles of beer at the moment. Luckily Calvin was scared of the basement so she knew he wouldn't find the cake she picked up as a surprise for his birthday the following day.

It was going to be way too much cake. None of the classmates invited to his birthday party were coming.

Talk about a whammy of mortification. Sure, it was summer break and usually the parents who could take their kids somewhere for R&R planned to leave as soon as the report cards were handed out. By now most of those families were out of town.

But not all of them, and that really pissed Jamie off. Then, with even deeper sadness, she remembered that Calvin never brought home a single birthday party invitation. She didn't know if he wasn't invited or if he didn't bring them home just because he didn't want to go.

Still. Turning nine with Aunt Jamie and Aunt Thelma as the only guests at your party was pretty sad.

At least she'd managed to find a motorcycle cake. She was sure he was going to love it.

She climbed the stairs to the kitchen again, noticing how out of breath she was from the effort. Jamie took a moment to sit a spell, knowing this exhaustion was another symptom. Two more days until surgery. Luckily she had this birthday supper to distract her from the approaching event that had her scared stupid.

Calvin was reading outside again. Their frightening neighbour was gone so he was bored, had been for a few days now. Jamie felt relief every day that passed without that bike returning to the driveway but Calvin was clearly missing him.

Her cheekbone had swelled. It was still yellowed from the burst blood vessels. But her lip was healed now. And she was still pissed off about what happened.

Not at Tig attacking Clark Davidson. She was pissed that she hadn't been able to do it herself.

When she'd confronted him on the driveway she's noticed his hands. He wore a lot of rings, and they would certainly hurt. But his knuckles had also been cut and bleeding, and she hoped it was because Clark Davidson had lost a few teeth.
As much as the thought pleased her, it still made her nervous that Tig had gone off on the guy like a guard dog. She didn't know what that meant. She didn't know the guy. Defending Calvin would have made sense. They were becoming bestest buddies, after all. But her? She couldn't get rid of the fear she'd owe him one somewhere down the line. And owing Tig Trager something made her uneasy.

Jamie had only seen him twice since that day. The first time was the day after that incident. Calvin had been "helping" Tig that afternoon, and he had knocked on her screen door, didn't try to enter the house, just asked through the open screen if it would be "cool if Calvin had a root beer."

The second time was when he left on whatever excursion he was currently on. She was helping Calvin carry his library books to the car the day after school finished to turn them in for new ones, and Tig was packing the bags on his bike.

The strangest thing happened. She watched Calvin interact with a friend.

"Where you headed buddy?" came Tig's call.

Calvin smiled, bounding to the fence. "To the library."

"Yeah? They got Playboy there?"

Jamie cringed. Calvin tilted his head. "What's that?"

"Jesus Christ, Charlie. Sure you're a boy?"

"Yeah."

Tig had laughed at that, standing next to his bike, hands on his hips. "Read me another one, buddy."

Calvin flipped open the paperback on top of his pile of library books and read aloud from a page. "The test of the machine is the satisfaction it gives you. There isn't any other test. If the machine produces tranquility it's right. If it disturbs you it's wrong until either the machine or your mind is changed."

Jamie had been watching Trager's face while Calvin read to him. He got very still, his smile faded a little bit, and Jamie would swear on a stack of bibles that he was not only listening but absorbing. Then he held out a fist. "Right on, little man."

Calvin bumped fists with him. "Where are you going?"

"Business trip. Gone a few days."

"Bring me back a birthday present?"
"Calvin -" Jamie was about to intervene but Tig was answering.

"Oh shit, you got a birthday coming up?" His tone indicated he was pretending to have forgotten.

Calvin tilted his head. "I only told you a hundred times."

"Sorry man, I'm getting old. My memory's pretty bad."

"Tig -" Calvin's exasperation actually cracked him up and Trager mussed Calvin's hair over the fence.

"I'm on it, Calvin. Don't worry."

"Be careful, Tig."

"I will, little man," Tig promised with a dying chuckle. "Thanks." Then his head came up and she assumed Tig was looking at her, it was hard to tell behind the sunglasses. "See you later, Aunt Jamie."

She gave an uncomfortable wave. "Bye."

Jamie wasn't sure what the hell was in her head, but seeing Calvin interacting with an arguably adult male was … nice. Jamie completely forgot that he'd manhandled her sister and scared the crap out of her on more than one occasion. It didn't bother her that he swore a lot and was most likely involved in criminal activity. Or that his reaction to someone hurting her was to go back and hurt them worse. None of it mattered because … he was nice to Calvin.

And she really liked that.

Shaking herself back to the present, Jamie finished putting away the rest of the birthday groceries, hoping Calvin appreciated hot dogs and tater tots for many more years. He was such a cheap kid to please.

She was so proud of the present she and Aunt Thelma had both put in to get him, too. In light of his sudden love of motorcycles, Jamie had found a motorized bicycle built for kids. He could still ride it like a regular bike but it also had a small motor, a "junior bike" if you would. There was no way she could afford a dirt bike, nor would she want him riding one. This was a happy compromise, and with Thelma's help it was safely hidden out at the farm for the time being.

He was going to love it, she just knew it. She couldn't wait to see his face.

That night as she was preparing chicken and potatoes for supper Calvin was watching TV, quietly entertaining himself as was his way. At the sound of a motorcycle pulling into the drive one house over he leapt to his feet and was out the front door before she could say, "Calvin – supper's almost ready!"
She shook her head, straining the potatoes, head back to avoid the steam, transferred them to a bowl, then plopped a dollop of butter on top. As she was turning to set them on the table she jumped.

She hadn't heard Calvin come back inside, pulling Tig by his hand. For his part, Tig looked reluctant to follow, but he did anyway. It wouldn't be hard for him to get out of Calvin's grip.

"Aunt Jamie?"

"Yes, Calvin?" She tried to sound comfortable with the man in her house, giving Tig what she hoped was a friendly smile.

"Is it okay if Tig comes over for my birthday supper?"

Jamie started, and Tig's head cranked down quick to look at the kid holding his hand. "Wait, Calvin, buddy -"

"You said I could invite friends from school," Calvin reminded her, cutting Tig off. "I don't have any friends from school. Tig's my only friend."

Holy shit. Jamie and Tig exchanged a very grown-up what the hell do we do about this look, and she was honestly at a loss.

Maybe he wouldn't want to come to a nine-year-old's birthday. If he didn't, that would totally gut Calvin. And she did feel sorry for the kid that two old ladies were the only people attending.

Tig read her mind, and at that moment again she felt a warm whoosh of affection for the guy who was bringing out an awful lot of these whooshes strictly through how incredibly awesome he was with her nephew.

"I'd love to come your birthday supper, Charlie. If Aunt Jamie's okay with it."

There was, of course, only one answer for that. "Sure. Tig, you're welcome to join us."

He nodded once, then dropped those eyes back down on Calvin. "There you go, buddy. I wish you'd told me it was your birthday, though. I barely have any time to get you anything," he was scolding, heading for the door with Calvin following.

"I did tell you," Calvin was insisting, and was almost out the door before Jamie called him back.

"Calvin," she said, laughing. "Supper. You can go get dirty later."

"Oh yeah." Calvin ran back to the table, and Tig cast a smile across the room at her.

"You're welcome to stay tonight, too. For supper … if you want," she said lamely, knowing it was rude to stand there with a table covered in food and let someone just leave.
"Nah, thanks Aunt Jamie. I'm still technically on the clock here. But thanks. I'll see 'ya tomorrow."

He left then, and the kitchen got bigger and brighter. She exhaled, then caught Calvin staring up at her. "What?" she asked, taking her seat.

"You look weird."

"Calvin, that's not very nice."

"Not in a bad way. Your smile looked different." She didn't even know she'd been smiling. "Are you warm?"

"Why?"

"Do you feel sick?"

"Calvin, what's with the twenty questions?"

He shrugged and picked up his fork. "Your cheeks are all pink."

She put a hand to the side of her face not healing from being punched. It did feel warm. Actually, she was warm, and she hadn't been until Calvin dragged Tig into her house. Or maybe this was another symptom. It could be.

Yeah, definitely a symptom.
Chapter 13

"Where are you, Tigger?" the blonde asked breathlessly, tossing waves of curls over her shoulder and staring down at him with a flushed face and heaving chest.

He had a bottled blonde with huge fake tits riding him, and he was completely, absolutely distracted by other things that were nowhere near his dorm room at the clubhouse. Things that looked fantastic in cut-off shorts and an old 49ers T-shirt, her hair pulled to a ponytail at the side of her neck. Things that smelled great and still cooked fucking chicken with potatoes for supper.

That house had smelled like her. He hadn't been expecting that, but it was all over the place. And it smelled good.

Tig shot a look up at the blonde. "I'm right here, baby. Who told you to take a break?"

She smiled, rolling her hips again. He was pretty sure she'd really come just then. If not, it was a hell of a fake. Well, good for her. But it wouldn't be a win unless she got him there, too.

Tig tried to keep his head out of his head, eyes trolling up her tanned skin, over her breasts which were close to the best money could buy, her tight stomach, and her long-nailed fingers playing with her own nipples, throwing her head around and arching so far she looked about ready to break her own back.

He closed his eyes. Her show wasn't doing much for him. But closing his eyes just meant he was seeing Jamie the fucking neighbour again in her shorts and bare feet, one tanned leg bent towards the one holding her weight like she was nervous to have him in her house. He couldn't blame her for that. But then she'd smiled at him and … damn. It was all he could do to get his ass on his bike and head to the clubhouse immediately.

Which, of course, brought him here.

"Fuck, Tigger. You feel so good."

He grit his teeth, sat up, wrapped an arm around her lower back and tossed her to the side onto the mattress. He flipped her over by the hips, pulled her up onto all fours and sunk deep into her roughly on one thrust. She gasped. He did it again and she whimpered. He did it again and something changed.

"Fuck, Tig. That hurts."

He did it again.

"Tig, ease up. That hurts."
That was all it took. He planted deep, came hard, mousey neighbour Jamie nowhere in his mind, all because suddenly this girl wasn't into putting on a show for him.

"Christ Tig," she was muttered as he pulled out, flopping next to her on his bed with his arm over his eyes. "You're not really packing a small calibre weapon there. You gotta ease up."

"Shut the fuck up and leave," he answered with indifference, ignoring the berating comments she dished out as she pulled on her miniscule outfit. It was all noise.

Once she was gone, he wished she'd taken the stink of her perfume with her. The smell of the neighbour's house was completely gone from his head now, and that was too bad, even if he had come here to get rid of it.

Fuck … that sweet. It wasn't just tingling his jaw anymore. It was sparking on his skin and messing with his fucking head.

He liked that kid. A lot. Being away for a few days with the guys made him realize what a tragedy the loss of innocence could be. One day he's listening to a kid give his take on motorcycle philosophy, and the next day he's doubling up on a whore with Happy during a quick pit stop at a roadhouse on the side of some nondescript highway.

It wasn't that he was getting too old for this shit. It was that he was getting old enough to see how stupid it could all be.

He scrubbed his hands across his face then got to his feet. He yanked the condom off, tossed it, washed his hands in the bathroom, then dressed again. No more pussy tonight, but maybe enough tequila to knock him right the fuck out.

It wasn't hard to be a hero to a nine-year-old living in that neighbourhood. But that didn't mean Tig wasn't scared shiitless at what that kid had said while clutching his hand in that kitchen.

*I don't have any friends from school. Tig's my only friend.*

*Sure. Tig, you're welcome to join us.*

At her words he'd been a fucking teenager again. It was all he could do to fight down a grin and leave. The invite for supper that very night? Nearly killed him to say no.

Out in the clubhouse he scanned the room, headed for the bar, and demanded tequila. The prospect put the bottle and a shot glass on the beaten and shined up wood. Tig ignored the glass, tossed the cap at the prospect and carried the bottle with him over to the sofa where Gemma held court, legs and arms crossed, watching the evening's proceedings and debauchery.

Tig plopped next to her, sprawling out to lean into her shoulder, legs out straight in front of him, ankles crossed over each other. He took a deep pull on the tequila, relishing that harsh burn. That knocked the *sweet* right out of him.
"I give Tigger," Gemma said wryly.

"What?"

"What's up with you?"

He made a face. "What are you talking about?"

She smiled slowly but didn't push. "Still got your wallet, babe?"

He had to laugh, a short bark that he honestly meant. "Very funny."

"Hap tells me you punched a guy out last week."

He made another face as the second swig of tequila went down. "That's all he has time for or what? Gossiping with the women?" Hap had seen his hands the next day, knew he'd clocked someone good and it wasn't club business. Fucking mouth on that guy -

"What was that for?"

He shook his head. "Not important, Gem."

"We didn't tell Clay," Gemma assured him. "So you're going to tell me what that was about and I'll have your back, baby."

Tig sighed, squeezing his eyes shut and pinching the bridge of his nose. "It really didn't matter, honey."

"Tell me or I tell Clay about your non-commissioned fisticuffs."

Gemma was only nice for so long before resorting to blackmail. "My neighbour cleaned the guy's house. He got handsy. She said no, he hit her. At least twice. Her cheek was bruised, her lip was split."

Gemma put her arm behind him on the sofa, angling towards him and running her hand through his hair just like a mother would. "Is this neighbour the one Hap said is so hot?"

"For fuck's sake."

"Easy, Tigger. I'm just looking out for you. I watch out for my boys, you know that."

"I know," he admitted, leaning into her more, letting his eyes close.

"She's a civvie, right?"

"Yeah. A lot."
Gemma chuckled, the movement of shaking her head rocking him a bit. "You never do anything the easy way, do you?"

Tig grinned up at her over his shoulder. "I'm not doing anything, Gem. Don't worry."

"You're beating up strangers for her," Gemma pointed out.

"She's got a nephew she takes care of. He's decided I'm … cool, I don't know. He wants to hang out with me. Help me with my bike." He shrugged. "That's it."

"How old's this little prospect?"

"Eight. Smart kid, Gem. He's already five times smarter than me. But I'm able to teach him things. And that kinda … makes me proud. That I know something this eight-year-old doesn't. Bikes."

She kept playing with his hair and he let his eyes close again, taking another oversized shot of tequila. "So, you like the kid or you like her?" Gemma asked gently.

He shrugged. "I don't know. I like the kid, that's it. But I wanted to hit that fucker that hurt her. I didn't expect that."

"Just be careful, baby. A bitch that takes your wallet's one thing. A bitch that takes your heart is much more trouble."

"I know," he said, patting her leg. "You remember how it was with Colleen, right?"

Gemma gave a short burst of laughter. "How could I forget?"

"I made her miserable, Gem."

"I'd say it was an equal effort on both sides. You did a good job making each other miserable."

He stewed on that, but not for too long. He craned his neck back to look at her again. "Why didn't I just marry you, huh?"

Gemma smiled and squeezed his face with one hand. "Baby, you couldn't handle this."

He grinned back. "You're right."

"Go get some sleep, Tigger. And before you decide anything with that hottie neighbour, I want to meet her."

"Gem -"
"I mean it. You're not as tough as you think, babe. Trust me. If she's going to cause you pain I'm not letting that happen."

"You take such good care of me."

"Of course I do. I take care of all my boys." She concluded their chat by kissing his temple then pushing him upright again. "My old man's giving you the eye, Tigger. I better go over there and calm him down."

"Be good, Gemma."

"He hasn't complained yet," she replied immediately, eyes on Clay as she stood on her spiked-heel boots and worked that tight denim-clad ass across the floor. As soon as she was in grabbing distance SAMCRO's president had her in his arms, laying a possessive kiss on her that everyone in the room could read loud and clear.

Tig was smiling. He loved the shit out of Gemma. She was a mother to the group and a kick-ass one at that. And the true love she had for Clay was something to be admired. Envied.

He cringed, taking another deep pull on the bottle. He didn't want an old lady. Been there, tried it, got the fucking scars to prove it. No thank you. Put a crow on a piece of ass and she owned you. He was not interested in that.

Not to say he wasn't interested in taking a taste of Aunt Jamie. She was attractive, not what he was used to. Exotic, really. Not around solely for sexual service to the Sons.

That was scary, now that he thought of it. Shit. He might have to actually try with her.

Clay still had his old lady in his arms. They had their foreheads resting against each other, Clay was talking and Gemma was grinning at him, her hands slowly circling his shoulders. Damn. A woman that into her man ... it must be really nice.
Chapter 14

The morning of his birthday Calvin woke Jamie up by jumping on her bed. "Auntie Jamie! It's my birthday!"

His excitement made her grin. Calvin never got this animated. He was acting like a kid, and she loved it.

"I know, Peanut," she groaned, sitting up and grabbing him around the ribs, tickling him. "What does the nine-year-old want for breakfast?"

"Bacon."

"And?"

"Eggs."

"And?"

"Toast."

"And?"

"Please?" he concluded, giggling as she tickled him. He could have gotten away, he just didn't want to.

"Okay. Go watch TV, I'll be right out."

"Okay!" he bounded out of her room, and she took a moment to catch her breath. She felt really tired this morning. But a fancy breakfast was absolutely imperative, especially for a birthday.

It was ten o'clock, which meant he waited to wake her up. He had likely been reading in bed since about six am. It gave her a little pang to realize he was worried about her. He was so courteous.

Calvin even tried to help with breakfast dishes, but she reminded him that birthday boys didn't do dishes. So he happily parked in front of the TV to watch MythBusters while she cleaned up.

By noon they were both showered, dressed, and she was taking Calvin to the afternoon matinee of some classic science-fiction movie he wanted to see. She was tucking her wallet into her purse when there was a knock on the door, and Calvin answered for her as she slid her feet into flip flop sandals.

"Ummm, Auntie Jamie?"
She looked up at Calvin's careful question, and her heart leapt up into her throat.

Clark Davidson was standing on her stoop, that was the first cause for panic. Then she took a moment to realize he was *fucked up*. Both eyes were healing from bruises, blood pooling in his orbital sockets. His nose looked ... *different*, as well. It had been broken, most definitely. She just stared, mouth hanging open, suddenly and guiltily admitting to herself she definitely owed her neighbour a supper. And hot dogs seemed like not quite enough.

"What are you doing here?" she snapped to hide her surprise.

Clark's eyes darted downward to Calvin then back to her. They looked enough alike that he probably assumed Calvin was hers. "I came over to apologize."

She waited, but that's all there was. "Okay," she returned slowly. "Not accepted."

Calvin looked up at her over his shoulder. "Is this the guy that hit you?"

Jamie was startled by the question, but her nephew was too smart not to have realized what happened, and who had done the damage in front of them. She ignored Calvin and looked back at Clark, waiting.

"Fair enough," he said, reaching into his back pocket.

Jamie tensed and yanked Calvin out of sight from the door, shoving him against the wall. It was an overreaction but she couldn't help it.

Clark froze, hand out. "No, no. I'm not here to ... I brought you this." He found what he wanted from his back pocket and held it out towards her. It was a fat envelope.

She frowned, not reaching for it. "What is it?"

"Please. Just take it. Okay?"

"What is it?"

Clark tensed his jaw and looked irritated, lowering his chin to stay calm. "It's the ten grand, okay? Just take it."

"I don't want your money," she hissed, almost a whisper. "Are you insane? You think that makes it okay?"

Now Clark was a mixture of scared *and* confused. "Look, take it and make sure to tell your friend I gave it to you."

Jamie shook her head. "My friend? What the hell are you talking about?"
Clark bit his lip, then fought to keep his tone calm. "Don't fucking jerk me around, Jamie. Take this money and tell your friend to stay the fuck away from me."

It dawned on her so slowly she felt like smacking herself. Her friend who had done a little plastic surgery, that's what he meant.

Wait, Tig told Clark to give her money?

"I don't know what he told you but I'm not taking payment for getting hit."

"Take the fucking money and call him off, dammit!" Clark roared. There was the rage she'd seen when he hit her, and it made her shrink back despite her anger.

"Easy, asshole." The voice was calm, odd, and she wouldn't have believed the effect it had on Clark Davidson if she hadn't seen it for herself.

The madman in her doorway turned to face the madman on her lawn. Tig was calmly smoking a cigarette, his eyes were focused on her visitor in a way that she never wanted to see directed at her.

"Look, I brought her the cash -"

"Good. Took you long enough," Tig cut him off, pinching his cigarette in the corner of his mouth and holding a hand out. "Let me see it."

At Tig's voice Calvin moved to stand in front of her, and she clutched his shoulders to keep him inside the house. What the fuck was this maniac doing?

Clark descended her four concrete steps with the enthusiasm of a man walking the plank and slapped his apparent payment into Tig's hand.

Tig was smiling, cigarette still hanging out, eyes on Clark as he opened the envelope. He only looked down to thumb through the contents. Apparently he liked what he saw. He nodded, taking the cigarette out from between his lips to say, "Good job, Clark."

"We're done here," Clark wanted verified. He looked over his shoulder at Jamie "Right?"

"Eyes on me, asshole," Tig snapped. Clark did as told. The envelope was poked into his chest. "Remember me when you think it's okay to hit anyone. 'Cause you pick the wrong person and you're gonna get it back worse. You got no game, Clark. You're gonna get your ass kicked every time."

Jamie could only watch as Clark Davidson straightened his back, clearly taking offence to that, but he was smart enough, or hurt enough, to just walk around the man dressed all in black with a serious-looking leather vest and not turn around. He climbed in his Audi and pulled away, eyes ahead the whole time.
Jamie couldn't piece this together. Had Tig used her attack to blackmail Clark Davidson? Holy shit, that was all kinds of wrong. Her anger was piqued but she still bit her tongue as he sauntered up the steps to her open doorway.

"Here you go sweetheart," he said gently, envelope out. She could see, now that it was open, that it was stuffed with bills.

"What is that?"

He took a breath, looking at the envelope first then back up at her. "It's damages, sweetheart."

"I don't want his money. I don't want to be *paid* for what he did."

"It ain't payment. It's *fair*."

Words totally escaped her. "It's *wrong*," she insisted lamely.

He tilted his head, lowering the envelope. "Think of it this way. You stop cleaning people's houses, you take care of yourself, and get your fucking bathroom fixed. Okay?"

He shoved the envelope at her again and let go so abruptly she caught it strictly as a reflex. Then Tig turned and trotted down her stoop, leaving a waft of cigarette smoke behind him, shouting a "See you at supper," as he made his way down her driveway.

*Now* she was really speechless. Keeping calm, she turned Calvin around to face her. "Calvin?" she said evenly, reminding herself it was his birthday.

"Yes?" He was intuitive, so he said it cautiously.

"What do you talk about over at Tig's?"

He furrowed his brow and bit his lip, looking totally busted.

"Did you tell him I was sick? Did you tell him about the bathroom? Did you tell him I needed money?"

He dropped his eyes when he nodded.

Jamie closed her eyes and squeezed the envelope of hundred-dollar bills. "Calvin, that stuff is private."

"I know."

He sounded so upset about it she made herself exhale quietly and crouch in front of him, taking him by the arms and making him face her. "Peanut, I love you to death. I'm not mad at you. I'm
glad you've got a new … friend and everything. But it embarrasses me that he thinks I can't take care of you."

Calvin's worried eyes met hers. "I'm sorry. He asked why you were cleaning houses, said you seemed too smart for that. I guess that's why I mentioned the bathroom, how you needed money to fix it because you had to save up for when you couldn't work. Because you were sick."

Jamie blinked a couple times. Well, explained *that* way it all made sense. Because when you ask an eight year old a question, they will give you the absolute truth if they have nothing to hide.

Tig thought she was too *smart* to clean houses?

"Do you guys talk about *me* a lot?" She hoped like hell she didn't sound angry.

"He asks about you."

That was a confusing revelation. She didn't know if she liked that or not. No, she didn't. She certainly *didn't* like that. "Why?" she blurted out, to herself mostly.

Calvin shrugged.

She shook her head and stood, tossing the scary envelope of money onto her entertainment centre before ushering him out the door ahead of her. "Okay, buddy. We're going to miss that movie if we don't get a move on."

"Aunt Jamie?" he said softly while she locked the front door.

"Yeah, Peanut?"

"I'm sorry."

"Hey," she said playfully, taking his hand. "Birthday boys don't have to be sorry. Don't worry about it. Let's go watch a movie. It'll be fun."
Chapter 15

His hair was wet from the shower, dripping water onto his back, and he was staring at the sad offerings of his closet wondering when in hell he got so stupid.

A nine-year-old's birthday party. And he was worried about what to wear for fuck's sake.

Tig yanked a dark-blue button down off a hanger, shrugging it on as he stalked down the hallway to his bathroom to run a towel over his hair again. He'd shaved. He'd put on fucking aftershave. Deodorant even, like this was the prom.

Thank God he had a house of his own. Going through this at the clubhouse would really set the brother's bitch-tongues wagging.

In the kitchen he paused by the bright red toolbox he had sitting on the scarred veneer table top, snagging one of those wrapping bows from beside it. Frowning, he unpeeled the paper from the back and fixed the sticky side to the top of the box. That was as much gift wrapping as the kid was getting.

Inside the tool box was a standard mechanics' wrench set. Nothing fancy, but it wasn't the Craftsman standard DIY shit either. They were heavy, chrome-plated like they meant it, mechanic-issue, and they weren't snapped in place in a plastic box. They came in a roll-up satchel. It was the real deal.

He hoped the kid liked them.

Tig pulled at his shirt front again, seriously wondering if it was okay to wear over to the neighbour's for supper, then checked himself with no one else around to hear him. "Seriously. What the fuck, man?"

His own voice made him feel better. *Just go over there, eat a fucking hot dog and leave.* Christ, he didn't have to write an exam.

Tool box in hand, he left the familiarity of his own house, strode down his driveway and started back up the neighbour's when a group across the street caught his eye. He counted five of them, all dressed in baggy jeans and undershirts. Tattoos showed on their arms but he wasn't close enough to see any detail. As he stopped to watch them a car pulled to the curb, stopped while one leaned on the passenger window, handshakes were exchanged, then the car sped off again.

Tig cranked his jaw down, wondering how the hell to play that shit out. He wasn't in his colours, didn't know who those assholes worked for, and would be outnumbered if he decided to explain why dealing on his street was a really fucking stupid idea.

Plus, he was on his way to a birthday party.
Wincing at how ridiculous that seemed, he pulled out his phone, flipped it open and set down the toolbox to send Clay a text. He needed to use both hands.

**Who's dealing in my hood? Handoff just went down in front of my place.**

He closed the phone, shoved it back in his pocket and picked the toolbox up off the ground again, surveying over his shoulder as he continued on his way towards the neighbour's place.

One guy saw him watching. Clearly new to the area. He gave a chin salute, then made a gun with his thumb and pointer, directing it Tig’s way.

*Motherfucker* –

Tig was tensed and about to head across the street, numbers be damned, when a voice brought him back.

"Tig? You came!"

He shot a wry smile at Calvin through the screen, climbing the steps and letting the kid open the door for him. "Of course, man. You think I'd miss your bar mitzvah?"

"Tig, it's my birthday." The kid knew he was teasing, but he was still impulsive enough to react like Tig meant it.

"Oh, right. Well I hope this gift still makes sense then," he muttered, holding the toolbox out to Calvin.

The kid's eyes got huge behind his glasses. "That's for me?"

"Well I thought it was your birthday."

"It is!" he exclaimed, grabbing it away and spinning away with it through the living room. "Aunt Jamie! Tig got me a present! It's heavy!"

"Be careful with it," Tig heard Aunt Jamie answer as he followed the wake of nine-year-old-birthday-excitement through a small cramped living room and into an incredibly bright, overheated and great-smelling kitchen. The neighbour was at the counter, cutting a hot dog bun open over a butcher block board before adding it to a piled-high stack on a plate. He had a moment to appreciate her legs in cut-off shorts again as she crossed to the fridge, grabbing a tub of mayo, bent over so her pert ass was on display, cheeks bottoms showing just a bit. She had no idea how high those shorts were riding up, he'd bet good money on it.

Jamie turned her face his way, and he caught something flicker across her expression before she gave him a plastered-on smile. "Hi, Tig," she said, like she was uncomfortable with his name.
She didn't like him, it was obvious. That's what had crossed her beautiful face right then. And after seeing the proof he'd beaten that asshole into giving her money he can't say he completely blamed her. Still, he could play nice.

"Aunt Jamie," he returned, sugar-sweet. "You need help?"

She shook her head, crossing back to the counter. "No, I've got everything almost ready. If you want to find a seat on the deck I'll be bringing everything out soon."

He nodded, passing through the kitchen and heading out the back door. Calvin was at the patio table, the tool box still not opened but he was staring at it and turning it around in front of him, trying to figure out what was inside. Clearly he wasn't allowed to open gifts until after dinner.

"How's your birthday so far, bud?" he asked, plopping down into a seat as he realized there was someone else out there with them; an older broad, long hair that was black and silver, rolling dogs on the grill. At the sound of his voice she had turned, giving him an honest smile.

He stood, good manners coming back from some long-forgotten part of his past, returning the smile and offering his hand. "I'm Tig. I live next door."

The woman took a few steps to shake his hand and was about to reply but Calvin was talking now. "Tig's putting together a 1954 Harley Davidson Super Glide and he's showing me how they work."

The woman's eyes got wide as she smiled wider at Calvin then turned that smile on Tig full-force, too. "That's awfully nice of him," she told Calvin as she took Tig's hand. "I'm Thelma. I'm Jamie's aunt."

Tig gave his best incredulous look. "Nah, I call bullshit on that."

Her smile slipped. "I'm sorry?"

"Sisters, maybe. Not an aunt. No fucking way."

She realized the con and gave a knowing smile, shaking a finger. "Very good, sir. I nearly believed it."

He barked a laugh and sat down as the returned to the barbecue. He set his elbow on the table, leaning forward towards Calvin. "What'd you do today, man?"

"Aunt Jamie made fancy breakfast for me and we went to a movie and then we had ice cream."

"Really? What's fancy breakfast?"

"Not oatmeal or cereal," Calvin answered logically. "We had bacon and eggs and toast. It was really good."
"What movie did you see?"

Calvin was explaining the ludicrous plot when Aunt Jamie carried a plate of buns and a bottle of ketchup out onto the deck. The manners were still coursing through him apparently, because he jumped up to take it all from her and set it down on the table. She didn't thank him, she just headed back inside to get more. He watched her leave while Calvin kept talking, rubbing his chin and once again appreciating those shorts.

Aunt Thelma noticed him, though. The bird was shrewd and he caught her giving him a surveying glance, her eyes darting from where Jamie had vanished before turning back to the grill.

Tig would have to be a little more wary eyeing up the neighbour with Aunt Thelma in town, apparently.

Hot dogs made a great meal in his opinion. The potato salad and potato tots or whatever the fuck they were called were all pretty good, too. Calvin was so excited to have people paying this much attention to him he wouldn't stop talking, but it was fine because the kid was so easy to razz he made it fun.

Aunt Thelma was a fucking riot, too. Quick, sassy, and just as willing to tease Jamie as she was to tease Calvin.

"Did your Aunt Jamie ever tell you about the first time she saw ET?" Thelma asked Calvin as Jamie cleared the table. Tig had offered to help, she declined.

"Aunt Thelma," Jamie warned with a sharp look.

"She was ten. And she was so scared she wouldn't go to sleep without the bedroom light on."

Calvin shot Aunt Jamie a disbelieving look. "Really Aunt Jamie?"

"ET was scary," Jamie insisted. "I hated that thing. Why'd they have to make him so ugly?" As Calvin and Thelma collapsed into giggles Jamie put a hand on her hip, exasperated. "I was ten, remember?"

"I'm nine Aunt Jamie, and ET isn't scary."

Tig was covering his mouth, not laughing out loud, and Aunt Jamie shot him a look. "Well maybe you aren't scared of anything but creepy, ugly little slimy alien guys tend to give me nightmares."

Calvin lost it, and Aunt Thelma put a hand on Jamie's elbow. "Oh sweetie, we're not picking on you."
Jamie's feathers got ruffled. "I know that, Aunt Thelma. Jeez," then she stalked off with the rest of the plates, and Tig tried not to watch the way her butt twitched under her shorts when she was ticked off. Luckily he had good peripheral vision.

"Tig, are you scared of anything?" Calvin asked seriously, hands politely folded on the glass tabletop in front of him.

Tig raised his eyebrows. "Of course, Charlie."

"Like what?"

He leaned closer. "Aunt Jamie kinda scares me."

"Tig, she's a girl," Calvin reminded him.

"Exactly. Girls are scary."

The cake was brought out, a sugary sweet store-bought one shaped like a motorcycle, which was kind of a kick. They had it with Rocky Road ice cream, which seemed quite appropriate given the cake. All washed down with root beer, Calvin's favourite soft drink.

Once those festivities were done, Aunt Thelma sent Calvin to the shed to get his gift from her and Aunt Jamie. The motorized bike was a hit, Calvin totally over the moon at the sight of it, asking Tig how cool it was.

"Very cool buddy," he assured him. "Very bad ass."

Calvin beamed and Tig couldn't help but smile back.

Then Calvin tore into the toolbox, pulling out the satchel and unrolling it loudly on the glass patio table. "Be careful, Charlie," he said. "Don't break the table."

"Cool!" the kid was shouting. "Aunt Jamie, look! Tig gave me tools! Like the ones he uses!"

Aunt Jamie's eyes were startled when they came up to his. "Tig – those are expensive, aren't they?"

Tig shrugged. "Not really. And there's no point getting tools unless they're the good ones, right Charlie?"

The kid beamed, picking up a wrench and making a surprised face. "They're so heavy."

"That's the real shit, buddy. You'll need them for that new ride of yours, right?"

"That's too much, Tig."
He cast his eyes up at Jamie, easing up on the smile. "Really, it wasn't much, Aunt Jamie. Glad he likes them, that's all."

Jamie was fighting with it, then Aunt Thelma put a hand on her elbow. "It's a great gift, Tig. Very kind."

Tig nodded, eyes going back to Jamie.

She found her manners under Aunt Thelma's gaze, looking so much like Calvin right then it nearly made him smile. "Yeah. That's very generous, Tig."
Chapter 16

Jamie had never been more uneasy in her life.

After supper Calvin wanted to play Trivial Pursuit. It was an old edition, the year of release was 1982. But Calvin loved the game, and Aunt Thelma and Aunt Jamie had stopped letting him win two years ago. Jamie suspected he had a photographic memory, and it wasn't so much understanding that had him kicking their ass every time but more that he remembered the answers from the first time he heard the questions.

Tig agreed to stay and play with them.

Jamie was surprised by that. He nearly won, too, not even opting to let the nine-year-old birthday boy win.

Then Calvin decided he wanted to watch GhostBusters. He loved old cheesy comedies from the 80s, so they dusted off the VCR and put the old VHS tape in the player to watch.

Tig agreed to stay for that, too.

Now she was sitting on one end of the sofa, Calvin tucked under her arm, Tig on the opposite end of the sofa, legs out straight in front of him, crossed at the ankle. Aunt Thelma was dozing off in an armchair.

She was staring at the climax of this ridiculous movie: the GhostBusters riding the Statue of Liberty through New York and doing battle with the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. She was tense, jittery, all because of the man sitting as far as possible away from her on the sofa. So the movie was getting a ridiculous amount of her attention.

She didn't like how mushy her insides got when Calvin opened his gift from Tig. She didn't like the whoosh in her gut to see Tig and Calvin laughing and talking like good friends, teasing each other over Trivial Pursuit of all things.

And she didn't like feeling comfortable with his big, scary and friendly body in her living room.

So she forced herself to stare forward at the TV like nothing was disturbing her. That is, until –

"Jamie," Tig whispered, and she started, turning her attention to him physically. He nodded down to Calvin.

She dipped her head down to her shoulder. Calvin had crashed from the sugar high, and he was so completely out his mouth was hanging open. She had to smile, shifting her arms to scoop him up.
"Can I help?" Tig whispered, and she shook her head.

"Nah. I've done this before."

Calvin was a skinny kid. She carried him like a toddler, his arms over her shoulders, legs to each side of her hips, holding him by his bony butt.

She set him in his bed after pulling the blankets out of the way, took off his socks, then covered him up, turning the light off while shutting the door behind herself.

Aunt Thelma was still sleeping on the chair. Tig was gone.

Covering a yawn she stumbled into the kitchen, cringing at the thought of washing dishes but –

Surprised, she stopped in the entryway. Tig Trager was at her sink, dishtowel over his shoulder, running water and squirting dish soap into the stream.

"What are you doing?"

He turned to her, smiled, then turned back to the sink. "Seems pretty obvious, Aunt Jamie."

"You don't have to clean up, Tig. I'm happy to do it."

"Nah, go watch the rest of the movie. You should rest."

She set her teeth. "Tig, I know Calvin told you about my, well -"

"Cancer," Tig said, casting her another shot of those blue eyes at her over his shoulder. "Yeah, he did. He's worried about you. And I'm worried about him. So take a load off, Aunt Jamie."

She sighed, taking the towel off his shoulder and standing beside the second sink. "I'll dry," she insisted, knowing she likely wouldn't win this argument.

He just grinned into the sudsy water, wiping at the cutlery first. "Stubborn," he muttered.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing, sweetheart."

She took the first handful of cutlery from him and dried it all off before storing it away in the right drawer. It felt domestic and familiar but she refused to let it be comfortable.

"So where is it?" he asked casually, handing her the next bundle of clean but wet forks.

"What?"
"The cancer. Where is it?"

She met his eyes, surprised. "Oh. Ummm, well …"

"Sorry, that's a private question."

"No, no. It's fine. You get sick and you get used to people wanting to know intimate details about you pretty quick," she admitted, putting away the dry forks.

"You don't have to tell me."

"It's breast cancer," she said softly, returning to his side at the sink.

His head came up quickly, and she didn't miss the way his eyes sank down to her chest.

"Really?" she said, voice sharp with annoyance, bringing his attention back up to her face.

"Sorry, sorry. That's just … that's a damn shame." He did look like he was in mourning and his eyes went down to her cleavage again.

"Jesus Christ," she muttered, taking the plate he just finished washing.

"Sorry," he repeated, not hiding a laugh.

"It's not funny."

"Of course it's not," he agreed, eyes back on the sink, nodding in agreement. "Trust me honey, it pains me to think of anything happening to them."

"Wow."

"What?"

"You're a pig."

He shrugged. "I'm fucking honest, honey. You tell any straight guy that those babies are about to be altered in any way and he's thinking the exact same fucking thing. You know I'm right." He looked at her sideways as she put the plate back in the cupboard. "Every guy who's seen you has clocked them, trust me. It's true that we all like breasts, but honey you've got an impressive set and I've only seen them under your clothes."

She didn't even get mad. She felt her cheeks flame as she took the next plate. She hoped like hell it wasn't showing how much he flustered her.

"And Calvin said you're having surgery," he said next, handing over the next plate.
"Day after tomorrow. I have to fast for 24 hours ahead of time so, it worked out well for Calvin's birthday."

The next few dessert plates were cleaned and dried wordlessly. Gradually she was standing close enough that their arms brushed against each other, and that stupid whoosh ran through her each time.

"Listen, I can't offer much in the way of comfort, I know," he finally said, voice surprisingly low. "But if I can help with anything, you get in a bind where you need someone to watch the kid for a few hours or you need me to take in your fucking mail or whatever, let me know."

He held up a dessert plate. She grabbed it, but he didn't let go.

Jamie slid her eyes over to his blue gaze, swallowing. "I don't think that will be -"

"I want to help, Jamie. And if you're suspicious of my motivation, don't be. I like that kid. He's funny, kinda weird, but that just reminds me of me."

She smiled at that.

"I can tell you come from good people. And what's happening here is the shits. Good people should have help when they need it. So, I'm offering you my help. Whatever you think I can handle."

It was a good speech. A fucking great speech, actually. And she believed every word, even though she wasn't sure how the read the expression on his face or in his eyes.

"Okay, Tig," she whispered, and he let go of the plate so she could dry it.

He nodded, satisfied, then began washing the nastier dishes to wrap up the cleaning. The rest of the work passed wordlessly, and Jamie concentrated on getting her heart to stop flopping over.

*Good people should have help when they need it. So, I'm offering you my help.*

She liked that he wanted to help, especially since she didn't have to ask for it. That was … really nice actually. She wasn't used to that.

Jamie was watching his hands as he washed, the tattoos that ran up his forearms, the heavy silver rings he hadn't bothered to take off first. She liked looking at his hands. They moved deliberatley, deceptively slow in appearance. But she'd seen what they could do. The evidence had been on Clark Davidson's face.

The thought of how he'd done that, for her, had a very different effect on her as they stood side by side, almost joined at the hip, doing something as mundane as washing dishes. All of that done without her asking. And how do you pay someone back for that?
"I'm keeping the money," she said softly. "I won't deposit it, I'll put it in my safety deposit box."

He nodded, attention on the suds in the sink. "That's good. You shouldn't be scared of your own fucking bathroom. Are you getting it fixed?"

She shrugged. "I will. I'll have to start calling around after the surgery."

"Forget it. I'll do that."

Her mouth flopped open, and she shook her head while she tried to put the words together. "What? No, that's fine. You've done too much for us already. I'm sure I'll be able to handle it."

"Babe, let me make the calls. I'll make sure the work's good and that they won't jerk you around on the price or the timeline. Right?"

His eyes met hers again, blue and calming, which couldn't be right. He was dangerous, his eyes should not have a calming effect on her. Especially when he was offering her a favour.

"Are you a criminal?" she blurted, and if the question was a shock he hid it very well.

He actually laughed. "Have I been in jail?" She nodded but he didn't look up to see it. "Yeah, I've been in jail. A few times for different things."

"This group you're with, the motorcycle gang -"

"It's a club, honey. Not a gang."

She swallowed. "Sure. This club, is that ... your job? How you make your money?"

He was grinning wide as he finally broke eye contact. "I'm a mechanic, sweetheart. I fix vehicles. I got the tax forms to prove it."

Then his eyes stayed on her until she nodded. Suddenly he pulled the plug on the sink, making her jump a bit.

"Thank you," she stammered, offering him the dishtowel to dry his hands. He did so while she held the end, which was odd. She'd expected him to just take it from her.

This meant she was looking up at him, and he was looking at her, too. She was fidgety as she realized it, not sure if letting go meant she was intimidated. Or wondering why she was over-analyzing everything so much.

"Thank you for letting me come over," he replied, and she had to remember the last thing she'd said.
"Oh," she said stupidly, nervous. "No problem. It's … it's nice to see Calvin with an adult male influence. I'm terrified I'll make him a hen-pecked mess."

"And I'm the opposite of that."

She had to laugh. "Yes. I'd say you are." He was done drying his hands, so she set the towel on the counter. "Well, good night Tig," she said, not sure what was supposed to happen next.

He tilted his head a bit, almost like he was curious, then took a step closer. Like an idiot, she didn't back away. His eyes ran over her face, and that blue stare was unsettling but not because it was scary.

She felt herself inhale deeply. His hand went to her cheek, then to the side of her jaw, tilting her chin up a bit. His hands were rough, very warm from the water. They felt over-sized on her skin.

Jamie might have stopped breathing. She wasn't sure, she had other things to worry about. Like how his eyes tracked the motion of her tongue licking her lower lip. Why'd she do that?

Without knowing how, she found her hands on his sides. Maybe she meant to push him away. Well, she failed.

He was too close. He was warm. He smelled … really good, actually. And that shirt on him was incredibly flattering; she'd noticed how it brought out his eyes right when he arrived.

When his face softened the deep lines at his brow and the sides of his mouth lightened a bit, but she could still see them. They were nice. They gave him a lot of character. He was freshly shaved, maybe that was what she smelled, aftershave. His hair was curled and looked a little wild, but it suited his eyes and laugh and smile and presence perfectly.

He lived, smelled, looked and felt unlike anything she'd ever known in her narrow existence. Being this close to all that unbridled life was … exciting, as it turned out.

One of his hands was on her shoulder blade, and it ran downward, pulling her in. She didn't resist; his eyes were on hers and it was like her skin was being peeled raw. Sensitive. His shirt against her bare arm was like a touch.

"Umm," she tried to say something intelligent, but that was where it ended.

The hand still on her jaw slid to the back of her neck, reeling her against him, and just as her body collided into his she found her mouth swallowed up by his lips.

There was a lot happening at once. His chest against hers was hard and warm, his arm looping around her lower back strong and tight. A possessive gesture, almost. More aggressive than she was used to.
But she didn't worry about that. Because his mouth, his lips, oh good God that was the best part of it all. Jesus ...
Chapter 17

Christ.

Aunt Jamie was a sensory experience he never anticipated. Tig had kissed plenty of women before who were happy to be getting it on with a Son.

None of them were cute girl-next-door types who blushed when they realized he was checking out their rack; a blush than ran down their neck and onto the skin in question. Who became breathy and flustered just with eye contact.

Who would lick their bottom lip and have no clue how that action could drive a guy insane.

Of course he was aware that her hands were on his waist. He was waiting for her to push him off. She didn't, and when he eased her closer her hands fisted the fabric of his shirt, and he knew she didn't realize she had done it.

She was staring at him. It was making him warm. Making him hard, actually. But he wasn't going to focus on that. He could see her bottom lip was still wet from where she'd licked it, and he pulled her right to him, the mouth that met his sweeter than that store-bought birthday cake.

Something kept him in check, and for some reason nibbling at her like soft-serve ice cream was more than he thought he deserved. The repetitive motion of brushing his lips on hers, the way she would catch his lower lip between hers, all of it was an amazing give and take. Sure he had her crushed to him, immobilized in his grip, but she had him ensnared.

He parted his mouth from hers reluctantly, to say the least, and gazed down on her. Her face was slack, pink, and she had to blink her eyes a few times to see straight. That was a hell of an ego boost.

Tig waited for her to tell him what to do. Whether it was to tell him to fuck off, kiss her again, carry her to bed, or kiss her feet he was going to do it.

But with those flushed cheeks, breathy voice and fucking cute face Jamie didn't tell him what to do. She just whispered, "Tig," which made him take her mouth again, moaning to finally have his hand in that fucking gorgeous hair, barely believing how warm and alive it was.

To further shock the hell out of him, her tongue swept along his lip, making his arm around her back tighten. Enthusiastically his tongue slid along hers, and her mouth opened to allow him access.

Tig didn't even know a woman could do this with just a kiss. With her hands clutching him, her chest soft against his, her tongue giving as good as it was getting, he would do anything she wanted. Anything. Just to keep her kissing him like this.
He wanted this taste in his mouth for all time. He wanted her smell in his nose always. He wanted the feel of her breasts and arms and stomach available to his senses whenever he felt like it. He wanted to own every part of her he could.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Excuse me."

Jamie flew from his grip like a magic trick, turning towards the sink as Aunt Thelma padded on the linoleum to the fridge. "I'll just get my glass of milk and go to bed."

It was painfully awkward to stand there with a raging hard on and racing heart while Aunt Thelma poured some milk, gave them both a smile, then shuffled back to the other room.

He waited a beat, then said quietly, "Jamie -"

"You should go," she suggested, not turning around. "I'm sorry, that's rude but … you should go."

He nodded, hands on his hips. "Right."

"Tig -"

"No, you're right. You've got a lot on your mind."

She turned then, and he wasn't unhappy to see her cheeks were still rosy and her eyes shone bright. "I … I liked that. I did."

He knew she did, he was there for it.

"But things are about to get weird for me."

Tig nodded. "I can't imagine, sweetheart."

"You said you'd help any way you could."

"And I will." Jesus, was that really him, desperate to be told he's a good boy?

"I need you to be a shoulder for Calvin. He won't tell me when something's bothering him, he doesn't want to worry me. But he'll tell you, I know he will. I love that he's coming out of his shell with you. I really like how … you are with him. So can you be that for him?"

Tig nodded, rubbing his chin. "Of course. I was already going to be there for him, Jamie. We'll build the bike, he'll still have some fun kid stuff this summer. And if his aunt needs anything," he said low, stalking to her slowly, noticing how her chest rose with her deep inhale as he did it. "I'll be here for that, too. Okay?"
She was arching back over the counter to keep distance between them, but it was thrusting her chest towards him. He kept his eyes on her face; it was a struggle but he toughed it out.

"Okay," she whispered, nodding.

"I liked that too," he admitted after a pause, letting his eyes take in her eyes, cheeks, mouth, all of it. "I'm going to want to do that again. But not until you're ready, sweetheart. Because it probably won't stop there. I got a little taste of you just now, and I'm going to be remembering that for a long time to come."

She inhaled sharply again, and his resolve was gone. His eyes scanned her chest, which made her inhale again. "I don't know what you're about to go through," his mouth was saying, his mind trying to imagine what her breasts would look like loose and in his hands. "But when you're through it, I'd like the chance to give you something really nice."

His meaning was clear. Her cheeks and neck got pinker and her eyes dropped from his as, swear to Christ, she licked her damn lips again.

He tilted her chin up with one crooked finger, brushing his lips upwards across hers, his skin sparking from that lingering touch.

She didn't open her eyes before he did, and he felt himself smile. She was so right there with him.

"Good night," he said quietly.

"Good night Tig," she whispered, suddenly blinking rapidly.

And to go against what he'd thought of himself up until that point, he did the right and smart thing and got the hell away from Aunt Jamie.

As he was unlocking his front door he felt his phone vibrate in his back pocket. He pulled it out, shoved his front door open, and flipped the phone open. Clay didn't text, Clay preferred to talk.

"What's up?" he asked as soon as he had the call answered, shutting his door behind him.

"Dealing in your neighbourhood?"

Tig nodded as he answered. "Yeah. Skinny white kids. One of them did the finger-gun shooting motion at me. I wasn't wearing my kutte and he didn't know who I was."

"Out of town talent," Clay surmised. "Heard from Unser they're finding a lot of shitty meth on the streets. Two ODs in the last month, one kid almost died."

"Who would send dealers out into Charming without warning about SAMCRO?"
Clay just laughed. "You get three guesses."

"Darby."

"Bingo. Skinny white kids? I'm more than convinced now. Get to church in half an hour."

Tig snapped his phone shut, that pissed off vibe returning from before he'd set foot in Jamie and Calvin's cozy little world. He stared out the side window off his darkened kitchen, perfectly in line with where Jamie was still at the kitchen sink, he guessed wiping down the counters or some shit based on how she was moving. As he watched she stopped, eyes gazing off into the distance, a small smile on her mouth as she touched her lips with one hand.

Tig exhaled loud. The tingle of sweet hadn't kicked in this time, only because he'd been so fucking horny just looking at her. The thought of any asshole dealing drugs around Calvin made him see red. Knowing what other shit came with having dealers in your neighbour, having that anywhere near Calvin or Jamie made him homicidal.

He allowed a small smile that Sons of Anarchy didn't like drug dealers in Charming. This might be kinda fucking fun.
Chapter 18

Jamie swallowed, and it was like trying to pass a cotton ball down her throat. She almost panicked, then remembered what had happened.

Blinking carefully against stark-white surroundings, she licked her lips, her mouth pasty and fuzzy-feeling. She took a deep breath and it felt like someone had parked a piano on her chest.

She lived through surgery. Thumbs up all around.

Her environment slid into focus slowly. The first thing she saw was Calvin, already hovering close, like he'd noticed she was waking up. She gave a smile, lifting a hand to muss his hair. It took a lot of effort but she had to do it.

"Hey Peanut," she croaked, coughing.

Calvin was on it. He snatched a glass of water off a table she couldn't see, holding it with the straw pointed at her. It made her heart hurt even as she smiled, taking a sip and nodding to show it was enough. He made the cup disappear, drawing even closer.

"Are you okay Aunt Jamie?"

"Yeah, I'm good. How are you? You miss me?"

"Yes," he answered automatically, making her chuckle.

Then there was a sniffle. Jamie turned her head to the other side of the bed, and Aunt Thelma was leaning against the wall, tears in her eyes and her cheeks wet. Jamie was too zoned out to wonder what could be wrong. "Aunt Thelma?"

"Oh sweetie. Honey." That was all she got before Aunt Thelma covered her face with both hands.

What the hell?

"Aunt Thelma, you're scaring her," Calvin said softly, which made the older woman nod with a laugh.

"I know. You're right, Calvin. I'm sorry, Jamie."

Jamie's frown deepened. "What's going on?"

Thelma stared at her, then her grey-blue eyes went to Calvin. "Honey, go wait outside for me, okay? They'll kick us out of here soon and I need to talk to Aunt Jamie real quick."
Calvin did as asked without question, sauntering while still showing some reluctance. When the door snicked shut, Jamie gave Aunt Thelma her whole attention.

"What is it?" Jamie asked, feeling her heart give out a little bit.

Thelma half-sat on the bed, taking Jamie's hand. "The doctors got the tumour out of the right breast."

"Okay."

"When they got to the left … well, there was more there than they first saw in the mammogram. So they … they had to take the whole left breast."

Jamie's heart sunk further. "What?"

"I'm sorry honey."

"They said lumpectomy. Can they just do that?"

Aunt Thelma shrugged helplessly. "They did, honey. I'm so sorry."

Jamie's eyes squeezed shut. "Why wouldn't they ask first?"

Aunt Thelma tightened her hold on her hand. "Insurance, maybe? Or maybe it couldn't wait, honey. The good news is, the tumours are gone."

She shook her head. "Fuck."

"Jamie, we'll see what's possible after your treatments. Reconstruction. It's possible."

"Possible and expensive," she snapped bitterly. "Who's got money for that?"

"Jamie -"

"I'd almost rather they took them both."

"No, sweetie. This is what we've got to deal with. So we will, okay?"

Jamie took a deep breath, not wanting to look down. Not wanting the physical evidence to confirm what Aunt Thelma was saying.

Everything felt normal at the minute, that was the trippy part. She didn't feel like she was missing parts. She brought both hands up, lowering them onto her chest. It hurt, but she was concentrating on her hands. The one on the right came in contact with her breast, and it hurt but it was there. Her left hand kept lowering, settling on bandages, nowhere near level with her right hand.
She sobbed out loud suddenly, hands quickly covering her face. Aunt Thelma was there, kissing her forehead and trying to pull her hands away but she wasn't winning; Jamie wanted to be alone. She didn't want to worry about anyone else, she was going to be selfish and feel sorry for herself for a little while.

"Jamie," Thelma was whispering, kissing her forehead. "My girl, my beautiful girl. Talk to me, honey."

"I can't," she wailed. "I just can't. I just … I need to be alone."

"Jamie -"

"I'm sorry, I know that sounds horrible but I really do want to be left alone. Just … give me a day." She lowered her hands, begging Aunt Thelma. "Please. I can't … I can't deal with this yet. I need some time."

Aunt Thelma was biting her lip, shrewd eyes passing her over. Then she nodded. "Okay, honey. You rest. I'll take Calvin home with me. You take care of you, I'll look out for him. Okay?"

She nodded, thanking God for Thelma. "Thank you, Aunt Thelma. Just tell him I'm really tired and hurting."

"You got it, honey." Then Aunt Thelma put a hand to the side of her neck. "My girl, you are beautiful. You are special. You are a saint. I love you to death. It will take more than this to make you less of a person, believe me."

Jamie felt her face crumple again, but she nodded and grabbed Thelma's wrist. "Thank you."

Thelma kissed her cheek this time then left Jamie on her own, the room very quiet. Heavy. Oppressive.

Jamie wiped her cheeks. Controlled her breathing. Tried to take stock of what all this would actually mean for her.

She wasn't having kids anyway. Half-capacity breast feeding was not going to be a worry. And as far as men … well, the most attention she'd received on them was from her scary neighbour the other night. She didn't believe what he said about anyone else noticing them. Except maybe Clark Davidson, and that was hardly a loss.

She pushed the blanket to her waist, wincing from the effort. It hurt the wall of her chest. Then she saw it and had to stifle another sob. The line where her breasts would normally tent the hospital gown forward was wonky, higher on one side than the other. She was incomplete now.

She pulled the blankets back up, dreading having to see it without the bandages. She didn't want to see the scars. She didn't want to know how ugly this was going to be.
And she still had radiation and chemo to look forward to.

The door opened again, and when her surgeon entered the room she wanted to pull her pillow over her face and just stop breathing. When she'd first met Doctor Foster she'd been horrified. He was about five years younger than her, totally adorable and nice to boot. Seeing him now she just wanted to crawl into a corner and die.

"Miss Taylor," he greeted her softly, kindly.

She picked at the top of the hospital blanket, trying to stop the nervous fidgeting but unsuccessful. "Doctor Foster."

"I can tell your aunt gave you the bad news. I am so sorry, but once we started removing the tumours in your left breast, we found they were dense and tightly connected. They had attached themselves almost all the lobules in the breast, and we had to remove all of the tissue to be sure nothing was left behind. I am so sorry that you had to wake up to this reality."

She nodded. The only thing worse than an attractive man looking at your breasts while you're on his examining table and remarking, "This is unfortunate" was having that man describe your breast as tissue.

Tig was wrong. They weren't nice. They were tissue that was killing her.

"I just thought if that was the decision, I would have the option of saying no," Jamie said, sounding younger than Calvin. Even though she'd fold them to get rid of anything that was going to kill her. This was just a huge fucking shock.

Doctor Foster sat on a stool that was tucked under the side table next to her bed. "I wish I could have done that. Another appointment, another surgery booked, more money on your insurance. I didn't want to risk giving you any trouble with the insurance company. Or another surgery for you, pushing the rest of your treatment further back."

Well, that was considerate and logical in a totally masculine way, she supposed. Just not very comforting.

"There are many options available as far as lingerie and prosthesis. I'd be happy to give you a few names. There's no reason for you to feel any less comfortable with your body. We've got a long way to go yet, Jamie. I want you to know that a positive outlook is going to help you come out the other side of this just as healthy and lovely as you were the first time I met you."

She blinked a few tears away, laughing dryly. "Is that part of med school? The bedside manner?"

He smiled and got to his feet, leaning over her slightly. "It's part of med school, but I happen to mean it right now. You're a beautiful woman, Jamie. We're going to make you better. Okay?"

She blinked a couple times. "Okay."
When Doctor Foster was gone Jamie was a little more bewildered than upset.
Chapter 19

Tig watched the blood swirl down the drain, his now-clean hands resting on the basin's edge. That had been real good. Making headway on the drugs coming into Charming, getting high up the ladder to see where the bankroll was coming from.

This cook house had been the latest bit of intel from a kid he and Clay and Bobby had grabbed the day before. The tweaker had squealed immediately, pissing himself to give all the goods he had, including the address of a meth lab. *Inside* Charming town limits.

Clay had been pissed. The balls to do it was insulting, and also gave them *all* the feeling those neo-Nazi douchebag Nords weren't in on this. They were usually smart enough to set up shop *outside* of town limits. The kid they'd grabbed had the iron cross tat on his arm and a swastika on his chest, but he wasn't hard in any way that indicated someone as shrewd as Darby would trust him.

Someone new, someone stupid. That could still be a dangerous threat to the protection SAMCRO offered Charming.

This ramshackle, tar-papered meth house had three people inside. They could assume the two cooks were smart enough to maybe have some kind of information worth easing out. Instead, both those bastards had clammed up tighter than a nun at a condom factory. Since they couldn't leave witnesses those two were dead and floating face-down in the nasty shit they'd been making.

The third one had *maybe* been there to keep guard on the cook, but he was a junkie. Scratchy and itchy and fidgety. He'd been willing to try and bargain for his life, the problem was he didn't know anything worthwhile.

He'd only started spilling when Tig pulled out a fingernail. He gave up the name "Tiny." Tiny had hired this guy, told him to bring a piece and make sure the cook went down without any trouble. Tiny paid well and had the cooks scared enough not to talk.

But the guard was an addict, and they had no trouble spilling.

When he'd passed out from pain Clay finished him with a bullet through the skull - one they found in the house, serial number filed off, gloves on of course.

Tiny had to have street connections, that was the good news. The bad news was he apparently was one scary ass mother fucker.

"You all right?"

Tig raised his eyes to his president's in the mirror over the sink. "Yeah. You kidding?"
Clay smiled slow. "Call it a night, Tig. Go dip your wick."

He smiled back, shaking the water from his hands. "Thanks boss."

Once he was on his bike, however, he headed for his house instead of the compound. The day before last Jamie had gone into the hospital. He hadn't seen her or Calvin since the kid's birthday, and he felt like it was his responsibility to watch over the house while they were gone. With those dealers in the area he wanted to make sure their place was okay.

Fucking. Lame.

The street lights were coming on as he eased the bike into his drive, killing the engine and swinging a leg over as a car pulled up in front of the neighbour's place. He unfastened his helmet, frowning at the cab that was idling at the curb. The interior lights were on, but he couldn't make out who was inside. So he waited.

The driver got out of his side, circling the vehicle to open the passenger door. He reached in to help someone stand up on the curb, and Tig felt his inner possessive caveman go into overdrive.

It was Jamie. And she couldn't stand up on her own. And the fucking cab driver was touching her.

Knowing it was irrational, he stalked down the driveway and grabbed the cab driver by the shoulder, shoving him away. The guy was about to lip him off, took a quick gander at his face and held both hands up. "I was just helping her, man."

Jamie was staring at him like he was out of his mind, and he was once again ashamed of his intuitive reaction. He ignored the driver, keeping his tone calm. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, sighing and giving the driver an It's okay, he's a moron but I got this head nod. "I'm fine, Tig. I'm just exhausted and I wanted my own bed."

He nodded, taking her elbow. "I'll help you." She shied from his touch, but he didn't let go. "Jamie, just let me help you, babe."

She swallowed, then nodded and looked down at her feet. She was baggy flannel pants and an oversized sweatshirt. Seeing her basically ready for bed was … comforting. Close. "Get your keys ready, babe."

She dug in the pocket of a duffel bag she was holding, then handed her keys to him with no hesitation. Tig gave the cab driver a nod, and held Jamie's arm as she walked. When he saw her wince he let go. "Everything okay?"

She took a breath. "Yeah. You were cranking my arm up a little high. It was pulling."
"Sorry honey. I'll get the door for you." He took her bag, scooted up the stairs ahead of her and had the door open as reached the threshold. Instinctively he found a light switch next to the door that flooded the living room with light.

"You crashing on the couch?" he asked, setting her keys on a hanger inside the door.

"No, the bedroom is closer to the bathroom. The one that's not full of mould."

Tig nodded, then headed down the hallway ahead of her, knowing where her room was because this house was the reversed version of his own.

"Tig," she protested weakly behind him, but he was already flicking the light on and setting her bag down on the bed.

"You got painkillers?"

She nodded, entering the bedroom slowly and stiffly. "Painkillers and antibiotics."

"Good." He left her to climb into bed, heading to the kitchen. He poured her a large glass of water and carried it back to the bedroom, setting it down on the night stand nearest the side of the bed she clearly slept on. The other side was shoved against the wall.

Jamie was sitting on the edge, staring down at her hands, and when he said her name she jumped, then laughed nervously.

He crouched down on his heels, taking her hands in his. "Everything okay, babe?"

She nodded, rewarding him with full-on eye contact. "Just … really hurts right now."

He nodded, standing again. "I'll leave you alone. Get some sleep. Where's the kid?"

"Aunt Thelma's. I'll call tomorrow and tell them I was released early."

"Sounds good. Goodnight, Jamie."

She smiled at him, a pained and pinched one but a smile all the same. "Goodnight, Tig."

On his way out he checked all her windows and the back door, making sure everything was safe and secure. Tightened the knob on the kitchen sink since it was dripping. And after the slightest hesitation, he snagged her keys and locked the front door behind him.
Chapter 20

Jamie rolled to her side, half asleep, only to have the searing pain in her chest jolt her completely conscious quite rudely. She gasped, rolled onto her back again, then waited for the hurt to stop.

Jesus, it felt like she'd never be okay.

As sleep started to fade away to a distant memory, she became aware of a really great smell. It made her stomach actually *gurgle*. She put her hand over her abdomen, surprised to be hungry for the first time in three days.

Then she heard a voice, low, not very familiar and not loud enough so she could discern what was being said. Her bedroom door was closed, muffling the sound.

Instead of being scared, Jamie sat up, already guessing who it was but still waiting to be wrong. She pulled the door open and made her careful way down the hall, the voice getting louder and confirming her fears. It hadn't been a hallucination from really good painkillers. Tig Trager had put her to bed the night before, and now he was in her kitchen apparently making eggs and bacon, going by her nose.

Jamie irrationally wanted him menacing and distant again. That was a hell of a lot less scary than this.

"Tig?" she asked, as though the sound of her voice would make the apparition poof out of existence and she'd be alone in her house.

He turned around, cell phone to his ear, then wordlessly pointed to the table. She then noticed that it was set for two, plates and cutlery, orange juice and coffee mugs.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, but whoever he was talking to on the phone had apparently paused to let *him* talk.

"Nah, nah. I'll go. I'll tell Oswald exactly what's up. Just ask him to give me a half hour to finish breakfast."

This was all said while Jamie sat on one of her chairs, feeling like maybe this *wasn't* her house. The orange juice looked really good, so she curled her hand around the glass and was about to drink when he spoke again, loud and jolting.

"Fuck you, Clay," he exclaimed with a laugh. "We don't all have old ladies to cook for us, you know."

Okay, *that* seemed a lot more like him.
"Later, man." She heard the beep of his call disconnecting, then a hot pan was set on a pot holder in front of her. Bacon, fantastic, curled-up almost close to burnt, bacon.

She looked up at him, still feeling uncoordinated. "What are you doing here?" she repeated stupidly.

He smiled. "Eat breakfast. I could hear your stomach from the doorway."

Her cheeks warmed at that, and she had to drop her eyes back to the bacon as he put a bowl of scrambled eggs on the table too, then pulled two plates hot from the oven, putting one in front of her.

He heated the plates?

"Aunt Thelma called," he shared cordially, sitting down across from her. "She was freaking out because she called the hospital and they’d said you were released."

Thelma already called the hospital? Jesus, Jamie had no idea what time it was. The clock on the oven said 11:30, but that couldn't be right. Right?

"Wait – what? You answered my phone?"

"Didn't want it to wake you up."

She blinked twice as he pushed the eggs towards her. Her stomach growled again but she spoke over it. "What are you doing here?"

He set his elbows on the table, levelling his freakishly blue eyes at her, and tilted his head like he was talking to a puppy. "Babe, I just made you breakfast. You had a good nights' sleep, right?"

She blinked three times. "Umm ... yeah. I did."

"I thought you should enjoy your rest at home, but you gotta eat. I was checking on 'ya and thought you were never waking up so I started cooking."

She rubbed her forehead as he shrugged and served himself some eggs. "You were checking on me? How long have you been here?"

He shrugged again, chewing a mouthful and taking a sip of juice. "I don't know. Nine-thirty? Ten?"

"You've been in my house the last two hours and I just slept through it?"

He nodded. "Pain killers. Must be the good shit, babe."
Her stomach growled again, and it made him break into such a wide and honest grin she nearly smiled back. Maybe she did let it slip a little.

"Just eat, Jamie. Relax. But don't get your hopes up for supper, unless you want this again. This is the only thing I can make."

She watched him pile more eggs on his plate, set the bowl close to her, then spear a few strips of bacon with his fork. Another gurgle in her belly made up her mind for her.

Jamie spooned a small serving of eggs on her plate, grabbed a couple pieces of bacon, the whole while waiting to wake up from this seriously bizarre dream.

First bite of the eggs told her she was awake. "Oh my God," she moaned, "these are amazing!"

He chuckled, head down as though he was trying to pass for bashful. He failed at it miserably. "Wanna know my secret?"

She swallowed while nodding.

"Too fucking bad. You want these eggs again I have to come over and make them for you."

She brought her eyes to his, startled, but he was smiling again. It made her laugh, catching herself unaware.

"There she is," Tig muttered. "Mellow Aunt Jamie. I like her a lot."

She looked away on that, her fork playing over her plate. Uncomfortable. But not in a bad way. Uncomfortable because he was in her kitchen again, helping her, taking care of her. Just steps from where he'd kissed her.

Why'd she let him do that? And more to the point, why'd she stop him?

Now, more than ever before in the past few days, she was acutely aware of what had been taken from her. The way Tig had kissed her, held her, everything he said promised more closeness, intimacy, all something she'd wanted when she sent him away. Now that was nothing she'd be willing to participate in ever again. He couldn't see her now. Jesus, the way he'd gone on about her chest … that was all there was to his attraction. Well, it was mangled and half-gone, nothing he'd want, he just didn't know it yet.

And why the hell should it matter? He scared her.

She picked up a piece of bacon, eating it bite by bite, watching Tig as he cleaned the eggs off his plate, knife and fork politely working together for every last morsel. More than his table manners, she liked his hands. His silver rings were interesting because there was nothing metrosexual about him despite the jewellery. His hands were actually beautiful, now that she was
really looking. And she remembered how he'd held her, how strong those hands had been. She felt a lump in her throat.

She should have slept with him. That could have been her last fling. She might have really liked it if she'd known that was the final chance, just let herself go with it.

What an insane thought. Clearly, she was still under the influence of pain killers.

Knowing her cheeks were likely bright red now, she finished the strips of bacon and polished off all the eggs quickly. She declined the offer of toast but let him pour her a mug of coffee.

"Aunt Thelma and Calvin will be here shortly after noon," he informed her, carrying her plate to the sink. "Go have a shower, I got the dishes." Then he pointed at her meaningfully. "Did you take your pills?"

"No, not yet."

"Go take them while you got food in your stomach."

She frowned. "Tig, why are you doing all this?"

"What?"

She waved her arm carefully across the kitchen, getting to her feet. "Breakfast. Putting me to bed. Arranging Calvin's drop-off with my aunt. What … what are you doing?"

In two long strides he was in front of her. He tried to pull her against him but she resisted, not wanting him to notice anything strange about her build. He seemed okay with holding both her hands instead. "I'm in a position to help you. I'm gonna help you. You took on Calvin. You didn't have to but you did. And from what I can see, your Aunt Thelma's the only one helping you and she lives an hour away."

Jamie took a deep breath. "My sister robbed you."

"Yeah, she did."

"Did you sleep with her?" She wasn't sure what made her ask that. It just occurred to her that Jaclyn had been with him and probably kissed him. And Jaclyn wasn't chopped up. She was still whole and beautiful.

"Not exactly," was his frustrating answer. That had to mean yes.

Jamie covered her face with both hands. She was having a nervous breakdown, that had to be what was going on. She'd only ever been jealous of Jaclyn because of Calvin, up until now.
"Hey, you want honesty, I'll be honest. I saw your sister naked. She gave me a blow job. That was it. The only reason I took her to my room was because she reminded me of you. And the whole time my thought was that she wasn't nearly as perfect."

Jamie pushed at his chest, and he wisely stepped back. "I think you should leave," she instructed.

"Jamie, what is it?" He caught her hands again, stooping his neck to look her in the eye. The caring expression was enough to sting. "Should I have told you I met your sister and played Monopoly with her?"

"Of course not."

"Then what, babe? The last time I saw you before you went in the hospital you were in my arms, soft and sweet as hell, enough to kill me. I finally had my hands in this gorgeous hair and I was sure I was in heaven. Is it just the pain right now? You want me out of here to give you peace or what? I'll fuck off, just tell me why."

Maybe she could use the practice explaining what was wrong with her.

"You know these breasts you were so in love with?" He just blinked. "Well, they had to remove one. So you'll forgive me if I'm not in the mood to play house right now."

He took a deep breath, and to his credit he kept his eyes on hers. "Jesus, babe. I'm sorry. What can I do for you?"

She was incredulous. "Nothing," she snapped. "There's nothing you can do for me. You like my body? You like my hair? Well guess what. My body was just butchered and my hair's going to fall out, too. So I'm down to absolutely nothing on the pro side, all cons."

He tilted his head, lips tight. "Jamie, babe -"

"Don't," she said, pushing his hands away from hers and escaping his arms by sidestepping him. "Thank you for breakfast. Thank you for your help last night. Once Calvin and Thelma are here I'll be fine."

His hands were on his hips, face blank, but his eyes were … pitying. That was the worst part. She felt tears in her eyes as she begged, "Please, don't. Just … go."

He crossed the kitchen to leave but paused beside her, eyes on the floor and hands on his hips. When he spoke it was back to that cold, indifferent tone she'd forgotten that made ice slide down her back. But it was a good tone, until she absorbed what he said before leaving.

"You really think the physical is the best part of you, you've got your head wedged so bad it's a wonder you can breathe, sweetheart."
Chapter 21

He'd been pissed off and miserable for over a week. Okay, maybe Tig was usually pissed off and miserable. But now he had a reason and he didn't like the reason.

Concern. Worry. For a woman.

It was a weakness he'd hated in other men, and now he was suffering from the same stupidity.

To prove he was a complete sap, he was meeting with Oswald again to find out what the guy had learned the past week.

Oswald's office was nice, the kind of place where he wasn't sure he should sit on anything. So he stayed standing, and Oswald did the same.

"The house is owned by a landlord," Oswald told him something he already knew. "The landlord should be paying for necessary upkeep."

"I know, but he's a slumlord. And an asshole. And she's taking care of a kid and she's sick besides, man. She's got some cash to get the work done, that's not a worry. If it's not enough, which would surprise the shit out me, I'll cover the rest."

Oswald looked at him like he thought Tig was losing his mind, too.

"All right. So I have a mould remediation guy lined up. She has to be out of the house for that. Once everything is all stirred up it gets dangerous. Then I'm on the waiting list for a smaller crew I've worked with before, they do renos more than new construction. I trust them, they do good work."

Tig nodded, taking the two business cards. "So the mould guys are booked?"

"Day after tomorrow. When they're done call this contractor, he's got her name on a list right now. Tell them the house is ready for them, they can give you an idea when that will be. The important thing is to get rid of the mould. If it's dangerous, they need it gone soon."

"Right," Tig nodded, tucking the cards into an inside pocket of his kutte. "Thanks Oswald, I owe you one."

Maybe it was because he said that, but the guy must have felt some kind of buddy vibe. "Who is this woman? A family member or ..?"

Tig wordlessly kept his eyes on Oswald's and eventually the well-dressed man that matched this office looked away. Their relationship was through SAMCRO handing him the man that had raped his young daughter, nothing else.
"Thanks again." Then Tig left the office, striding past the receptionist who visibly stiffened in her chair behind the desk, shrinking down to hide or something.

This visit to Oswald didn't erase the marker SAMCRO held over him. Tig asked for some names of people who could do a bathroom reno, Oswald took it from there. He didn't have to, but with the way buildings were going up around Charming it was hard to get on a list without an inside contact. And Oswald had his fingers in a few real estate development deals.

If Oswald was confused by this request, Tig was downright fucked up over it. He never went to bat for a woman like this outside of one of his brother's old ladies. The club would move heaven and earth for their women.

Jamie wasn't his. She'd made it very clear she had no interest in being anything with him.

He could see through her bullshit; all she had was that kid. And if being around women like Gemma Morrow taught him anything, it was that motherhood was nice but it couldn't be the end-all of a woman to have a kid and raise him. If that had been true Gemma would have become half the woman she was when her son Thomas died, and that wasn't what happened. At all. She may love her son and her grandson Abel, but that lady ran on a whole lot more than Mother's Day cards.

Jamie was no different, he could tell. He could accept it if she said he scared her or disgusted her. But she didn't say that, and he knew it wasn't the case. He was there after Calvin's birthday supper, he knew very well she was still a living, breathing woman.

So why all this shit then?

He yanked his helmet on forcefully, fastening the chin strap. It was one thing to be able to knock the snot out of a guy that made her bleed, or entertain her nephew with more than textbook learning. It was being close to her, that's what he wanted. Probably because she kept pushing him away.

Gemma was right. He never did anything the easy way.

His neighbour was a fucking mess of complications. A kid. A sickness. A fucked-up self-image he would never come close to understanding. He didn't have tits. But he supposed breasts must be important to the female identity or some shit. Women paid to add plastic to them, perk them up, and bought whatever clothes made them look good. He had no fucking idea what a removed breast looked like. He'd never known anyone who went through chemo, either.

Point was he didn't care. He was hell-bent on his own mission to show her she was wrong not to let him in. There was something appealing about really, really having her all to himself. Nothing his brothers had already had a taste of. Nothing they ever would have a taste of because she wasn't like that.

It wasn't a scary thought; for Tig Trager, scary was better than a double-dog-dare.
He headed right home from Oswald's office, eyes scanning Jamie's place. Nothing was moving inside, her car was in the drive. From what he could tell through unabashed spying Aunt Thelma had stayed until the night before, leaving that very morning and not bringing Calvin with her. So the kid was home, Jamie was recuperating, and well enough for Thelma to cut out.

This was good news.

He parked his bike, yanked his keys from the ignition and started up to his front door when a sniffle caught him off guard. Calvin was on his stoop, his shirt ripped at the collar, dirtied up, blood at his nose and broken glasses clenched in his hands.

Tig had to blink for a moment, affirm that was what he was seeing, then take in the kid's face. He'd been crying, you could see the tracks down his cheeks. His hands were clenched tight, and he looked … fucking furious, actually.

Tig paused, scanning the area for a moment, but it was just the two of them. Calvin looked up at him and his lower lip quivered.

"Calvin, man. What happened?" He asked gently, not wanting to push or make the kid uncomfortable. He plopped his weight on a stair next to him, elbows on knees.

Calvin didn't answer.

"Are you hurt?"

Still silence.

Tig sighed, scratching his head. "At least tell me if I'm getting warmer or colder, buddy. How bad are you hurt?"

"Not bad," Calvin finally whimpered.

"Who did this?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know as you didn't recognize him or you don't know because you didn't see him?"

"I didn't recognize them."

Tig's jaw cracked he bit down so hard. "Them?"

"These guys were across the street. Three of them."

Tig's hands tightened into fists. "What'd they look like?"
"They weren't as old as you or Aunt Jamie, but they were older than me. They were all in jeans and T-shirts. They had tattoos on their arms. I was just sitting here waiting for you."

Tig's vision flashed red and he rubbed his eyes to calm down. "Where's Aunt Jamie?"

"She's been sleeping. I didn't want to wake her up. Or scare her."

"Buddy, I'm so sorry. You sure you're not hurt?"

"They broke my glasses. On purpose. These are expensive, Tig."

Tig put his hand on the kid's narrow back, rubbing back and forth. "Hey, you don't have to worry about that kind of thing. We'll get you new glasses. As long as you're okay."

"No one's ever hit me in the face before."

Tig pulled his face around to him by the chin, and Calvin struggled a bit like he didn't want Tig to see him upset. Yet, he'd waited here for him.

"Calvin?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you good at remembering phone numbers?"

"Yeah."

Tig believed that. The kid was a breathing sponge. "I'm going to give you my cell number, okay? The next time you see these fucks, you head inside, head to the backyard, wherever you think you'll be safe, and call me. All right?"

Calvin nodded. "I didn't want them to know where I really lived. I'm sorry, Tig." His little face crumpled up first, then his body did the same thing and somehow he ended up tucked into Tig's side, under his arm, in a ball of knobby knees and skinny arms. Tig froze for a split second, then decided fuck it. He wrapped his arm around Calvin's shoulder, giving him a tight squeeze.

"You did the right thing, man. You did good."

"I'm scared to tell Aunt Jamie."

"I know, buddy. But she has to know. You know how much she loves you."

Calvin nodded. "She's going to be so worried. She won't let me out of the house."

Tig snorted at that. "You're probably right. Just make sure I'm here if you're out front, yeah?"
"Okay, Tig."

"Let's go tell Aunt Jamie. I'll stand right next to you, okay?"

After a slight hesitation Calvin nodded, getting to his feet. Tig did the same with a groan, and to his surprise Calvin took his hand as they walked down his driveway and up to Jamie's stoop.

Calvin opened the screen as Jamie swung the inner door open. "Calvin, why'd you let me sleep so long?"

Tig was struck mute for a second, mostly because he hadn't seen her in a week. And he'd fucking missed her. Her hair was in a dishevelled ponytail, pillow creases on her cheeks, still in flannel pants and a sweatshirt and she looked absolutely … cuddly.

Then Jamie saw Calvin's face. "Oh my God, what happened?"

Calvin's mouth, eyes and cheeks scrunched up again, so Tig played interpreter. "I came home and he was at my door. Said three kids roughed him up. He's mostly upset his glasses got broke, I don't think he's too terribly hurt."

Jamie heard his words but she knelt in front of Calvin, taking his face in her hands. "Peanut, why didn't you come tell me?"

Calvin swallowed, tears in his eyes. "They weren't just bullies, Aunt Jamie. They were bad guys. I didn't want them to know where you and I lived."

Jamie took a deep breath and hugged her nephew tight, eyes going up to Tig's. She was scared, seconds away from panicking.

"I told him to call me if he sees them again. He's gonna memorize my cell number."

She frowned. "I don't want trouble, Tig. I should be calling the police."

"Don't do that, sweetheart. Trust me, that will bring trouble."

"Tig -"

"Look, I'm already onto these guys. Have been for almost two weeks. Roughing up a kid is the least they could do. Honey, where you're living now, the cops only come to one out of three calls. We have a way of dealing with this kind of thing."

Her eyes never left his face, and when he was done talking he had to force himself to swallow. Christ, he'd actually missed her and been worried about her even more than he thought.

"Okay," she surprised him with. "Were these kids that did this?"
"No," Calvin whispered.

Before she could go off again Tig was talking. "They're about twenty, I'd say. Saw them the other night, knew what they were up to, and the club's looking into it."

"What are they up to?" she asked pointedly.

"I think they're dealing."

"And beating up nine-year-olds."

Tig had no answer, but he felt the anger rise again. "I'll make them pay for that."

Jamie held his eyes, and he realized he absolutely loved the way they flashed when she was pissed. "Make them hurt for this."
Chapter 22

Jamie stood staring at her reflection in the mirror of her en suite bathroom, just out of the shower. Her hair was stuck to her skin, wet and dripping. She shoved it back over her left shoulder, making herself stare at the scar.

She'd done this every morning the past three days, once she'd felt like taking a shower wasn't going to do her any damage. She still wasn't up for shampooing her hair, she basically let it get wet, tied it up in a towel then knotted it on the back of her head once it was half-dry. She was making herself face the scars and get used to not doing her hair all at the same time.

The right breast had one tumour removed, and currently sported a small cut that needed only three stitches, on the outside swell. When she pressed her hand over it she could feel that something had been taken out, something was missing, but maybe over time the pocket left behind would fill.

The left was the horror show. She knew it looked awful right now, it was healing and red but the swelling had gone down. She had no signs of infection. But her chest was half-gone. Taking a deep breath she covered the sliced and stitched skin with one hand, looking herself in the eye. She was tearing up.

They'd give you pain killers, antibiotics and tell you to keep the site clean. But no one told you what to do when you were freaking out about losing a piece of your body.

She squeezed both eyes shut, reminding herself it had been just over a week now. She wasn't ready to accept it yet, but that didn't have to mean she wouldn't eventually.

And who knew? Maybe some rich bastard would fall in love with her, marry her and buy her a new boob. Why not?

There was a timid knock at the door, and she flicked the bathroom fan off to hear. "Yeah?" she asked, knowing it was Calvin.

"Aunt Jamie? Can you come out for a minute?"

"How come?" She cringed to think he might have spilled something terribly messy. She didn't have the energy to be cross.

"Ummm … Tig's here. He wants to talk to you."

"Fuck," she whispered, but shouted back, "Okay Peanut. Give me a minute."
She did the hair turban towel thing, dried off, dressed in a sweatshirt and flannel pants and decided that putting in an effort was going to send him the wrong idea. Better to see the reality and break his interest in her, assuming it even still existed.

She just hoped her edict for Tig to hurt the guys that pushed Calvin around didn't come across as a request of her friendship, but from Calvin's instead.

Tig was in her hallway, the condemned bathroom door open, light on, staring up at the ceiling while nodding. "Yeah, man. I see it. This is disgusting. We gotta take care of this. Go pack a bag for a few nights away from home, 'kay buddy?" Calvin was in the hall next to him, staring up at Tig and adjusting his taped-together glasses.

"What?" she asked, thinking she'd heard that wrong.

Tig brought his eyes down from the bathroom ceiling to her, and she wondered again at how impossibly blue they were. Then she reminded herself his eye colour mattered very little in the grand scheme of her life. "Mould remediation guys are here tomorrow, they'll tear all this shit out. Make sure it's done safe, so it doesn't get that shit all over the house."

Jamie's anger climbed slightly. "I didn't call a mould remedial – whatever you just said team."

"No, I had a friend do it. He builds houses, knows the right people. They're fitting your project in as a favour to him. Which is a favour to me, I guess."

"Which means somehow now I owe you for this," she finished.

He grinned. "I guess it does, babe. What a fucking shame."

"I can't leave the house. I can't afford to be in a hotel for a week while this gets done."

"More like three days. But don't worry about it. You and Calvin are staying at my house."

She sucked in a surprised breath. "We certainly are not."

He had the nerve to laugh at her. "Relax, babe. I'm not going to be there anyway. Tomorrow night I gotta do an overnight run, they'll likely be done by the time I get back. I'll stay at the clubhouse in the meantime. You won't even see me."

All logical, kind, and practical solutions. Dammit.

He could tell she was struggling to find an argument. "Don't worry. I hid the guns, knives, bodies, even the sex swing. The kid'll never find them."

She shot a panicked look to Calvin but he was gone, already packing, apparently.

"Listen, this is an incredibly generous offer, but -"
Tig stood very close to her, dropping his voice low enough for only her to hear. "If this shit growing in the walls is poison, that's kinda scary. The only reason I'm offering my place is so that this all feels like no big deal to Calvin. He's still in this area, my house is almost exactly the same, the only thing it's missing is Aunt Jamie. And you're close enough to see what's going on over there without having to pack him up in a car and drive over here."

Tingles and a colossal belly-whoosh on that. Great.

"I … I don't know what to say."

"You say 'Thank you Tig, you're a gentleman and a kind soul. I wish more men were made like you. Also, you're a hell of a kisser and so fucking handsome I don't know how I'll live next to you without throwing myself at you every day.'"

He was laughing and she shoved his chest, breaking into a smile despite her need to keep distance from him. "Stop that," she muttered.

"What?"

"Being almost … charming."

"Honestly babe, I don't know how to turn it off."

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

"Come take a look at the house. If it freaks you out, stay anywhere you want. I just think this is easier."

"Okay," she agreed.

"And just keep an open mind about the sex swing, that's all I ask."

"Stop it," she repeated.

"Come on, take a look with me." He was staring at her so casually, his posture so relaxed she wasn't looking at the leather or the patches for once. She just saw the nice guy living next door.

"Okay," she relented, fighting the need to laugh anyway. "Lead the way."

Down her driveway, up his, hair still in a towel and her pyjamas on display but he didn't even seem to notice she was a walking slob. She'd been as far as his front door before, now he was opening it and ushering her in ahead of him.

It was the same as her place, just with a reversed layout. Whereas her living room was to the right of the entry, his veered left with the kitchen beyond. Bedrooms down the hall on the right. Even the flooring appeared to be the same, but his was … better cared for, actually.
Jamie didn't know what she'd been expecting, but it wasn't this. Sure, the furniture had been well-loved. There was no kind of decoration anywhere, which smacked of bachelor pad, but it was ... clean. Tidy. Not a lot of stuff crammed into shelves or corners. Mail, newspapers, photos; nothing that gave any insight into the man standing behind her.

"So, this is the ... sitting room." He shrugged. "Whatever the fuck you call it. Kitchen is at the back. My bathroom is not growing toxic shit, so you can take a bath if you prefer."

Jamie nearly cried at that. She did want to take a bath. Very much so.

He caught whatever her face did right then. "Hey, I know girls like their baths." He said it like it was ludicrous, which made her laugh and not cry. "I swear this place is clean, nothing crazy happens here. This really is the place I go when I want quiet, babe. And I've never had an overnight guest here, either." He raised his eyebrows so Jamie would catch his meaning.

She did. Loud and clear.

"Okay," she replied quickly, not needing him to spell it out.

"Two bedrooms. Just like your place. Spare room is just a fold-out sofa but the kid's young enough it won't break his back."

"I can't pay you back for this."

His face got serious, very serious in a way she didn't think she'd seen before. "Who said you had to, Jamie?"

She took a shuddering breath, not sure what his angle was, what he wanted or expected. And she knew he wouldn't say it now. It would come later. She knew this would cost her something. But she just nodded. "Okay. It's not like I have a lot of options."

"Don't give me that shit. I'm doing something nice. See it for what it is. Say thank you."

"Thank you," she whispered, surprised to be ashamed by her reaction. And the fact he just spoke to her like that. And he was right.

"Pack the stuff you want to bring here. I'll carry it over for you. If you want food in the fridge, let me know and I'll -"

"No, no," she cut him off. "Thelma stocked us up before she left."

"Okay." Head tilt in the general direction of her place. "Calvin can help me bring it over here."

He was still standing close. Still looking down on her like he had been this whole time, but when he wasn't talking it made her squirm. He had a limited concept of "personal space."
"How are you doing?" he asked eventually, voice close and comfortable. Concerned.

"I'm ... I'm okay. It doesn't hurt as much anymore."

"And how are you doing, Jamie? I know it's only been a week but ... you were pretty upset."

An angry snap-back was on the tip of her tongue, but the soft expression on his face and all the ways he'd been helping her made her stop. "I'm going to be okay. I need to get used to it. I didn't know it was going to be so drastic. They made that decision in the operating room. I only found out when I woke up."

He reared back a bit on a softly hissed "Jesus." It made tears spring up in her eyes again. "Jamie, I'm sorry."

Initially she'd hoped the revelation of her surgery would be too much information, too fast, making him back off. But he was invested, for whatever reason, and now she was the one that didn't know how the hell to handle it.

"Hey," he whispered as her face crumpled, pulling her against his chest and into his arms. "It's all right, babe. You get through this, you're gonna have a beautiful life, I know it."

Tig's words, however sweet they might have been, barely registered because she was crying so hard. His hands rubbed her back in comforting circles, so much so it wasn't even unpleasant to have her face mashed against his leather.

"Ahem. Maybe I should ... come back another time?"

She felt Tig's entire body stiffen, and she took the chance to pull away, wiping her eyes and looking up at him. His face had gone slightly arctic, and she stepped out of his embrace at the sight of it. Sniffling, she turned to face whoever was standing at the open front door.

It was no one she recognized, but the leather vest he wore was certainly familiar. He wasn't tall but seemed imposing anyway, maybe it was his solid, stocky build. Maybe the steely gaze he had on her. Maybe it was because he was grinning at her like he was considering eating her for lunch. It wasn't a happy grin, it was a slightly terrifying grin. Then he turned that grin on Tig.

"Well introduce me, Tigger."

Tig cast his eyes her way, looking indifferent again. "Clay, this is my neighbour Jamie. Jamie, this is Clay. He's president of the Sons of Anarchy MC."

"Oh," she said, manners kicking her voice into a false-friendly gear. "Nice to meet you."

Clay came forward at that, frowning almost comically. "I know that's a lie. But it's sweet of you to say."
His hand mauled hers when he shook it, and his touch seemed wrong. She didn't know what it was but he instantly had her uneasy. Not realizing it, she edged away from him, closer to Tig. Clay's beady eyes caught the movement, and something shifted in his face and his gaze swung up to Tig.

"I can see why you're keeping this piece secret."

"Ain't like that, Clay. She's my neighbour."

"This the neighbour you punched out a civilian for?"

Jamie held her breath because something in the way he asked it implied a threat somehow. Jamie guessed Clay didn't like Tig punching people randomly.

"Don't deny it," Clay went on. "I heard about it. You think you can keep that kind of shit from me?" His eyes came back to Jamie. "Don't worry. I ain't mad. I feel you, brother."

Jamie held the eye contact until Clay slid his sunglasses on.

"We're leaving soon. Get ready."

"Give me twenty minutes," Tig requested.

"Twenty huh?" Clay looked her up and down. "Doesn't seem like long enough."

Tig laughed, moving in front of Jamie now. "I told you it ain't like that."

"All right, all right. Twenty minutes and then we're rolling."

"I'll be there."

Not a word was said as he left, but Tig turned back to her. "Sorry about that. He wants to make sure you're not … well, the kind of broad that steals my wallet."

Jamie nodded. "I understand. I guess."

"Go get your stuff packed, Calvin and I will load up the kitchen. Then I'll bring your shit here. Yeah?"

"Okay." She caught him by the elbow. "Are you in trouble? For hitting Clark?"

Tig gave her that wild smile then kissed her forehead, catching her totally off guard. "Nah, babe. Takes more than that to get me in trouble."
Chapter 23

Tig waited for Clay to razz him about Jamie in front of the guys, but the prez said *nothing*.

That was the first thing that made him nervous.

The second thing that made him nervous? No one seemed to know who Tiny was.

The guy was a complete ghost - he'd avoided everyone's radar. Clay arranged to meet with Darby and the Nords at first, thinking it was them, only to find out for certain it *wasn't*. Darby was pissed he had someone on his turf putting his customers in the hospital. Clay tersely reminded the fucker that it *wasn't* his turf, so of course they agreed to disagree on that for the time being.

Now SAMCRO was hitting the highway for Oakland, hoping LaRoy and the One-Niners had any information to shed on the problem.

Clay had called in Nomad back-up again, since they were stepping out of SAMCRO's own territory for a spell. Quinn had set them up with Happy, Donut, and Bowie. As Clay, Tig, Bobby and Chibs had pulled up at the planned meeting spot; another shit-hole roadhouse, they saw their brother's bikes already in the lot.

"Shit," Bobby muttered. "They're not going to want to leave. I bet they're already balls deep."

"I don't have a problem with staying for some hospitality," Clay drawled, unfastening his helmet. "Anyone else have any reason to play it celibate tonight?" He turned his fucking smart eyes on Tig. "Tigger? You got somewhere else you'd rather be?"

Tig didn't know what was up his president's ass, and it wasn't in his nature to worry about it. As long as he did what he was told he knew his place in the club and the function he served. "Me?" he scoffed, hanging his helmet off his handlebars. "Are you kidding?"

At Clay's question all of the SAMCRO members on this run had paused to look at him. Tig felt his skin shrink just a bit. "What?" he snapped.

"Heard you gave a lass your high school ring," Chibs quipped, the Scot's smart-ass tone chaffing Tig as much as his smirk. "You got to third base there yet, Tiggy? Can I smell your fingers?"

As the crowd cut up around him his shook his head and got off the bike. "Fuck all of you," he said, smiling right along with them but kind of wanting to punch the prick all the same.

A roadhouse like this one was basically an MC clubhouse without a club in residence. The same shit went here as it was in any clubhouse, except here you had to pay for your booze. Feeling Clay still eyeing him up, Tig's eyes trolled the room for offered distractions. Just to shut everyone up.
"Red," he snapped, catching a tall, dark-skinned fake redhead as she was passing by. She turned on a platform heel, hand on her hip which was jutted to the side.

"Something I can do for you, handsome?"

Getting close, he cast his eyes down her lean shape, then back up to her face. She was pretty, he decided. She'd do. "You lonely?"

She tilted her head with a smile. "I am a little lonely, tonight."

"You working?"

"Nah, sweetheart. I'm here for my own recreation."

He nodded, taking her hand. "You ain't lonely anymore."

All day he'd only been thinking about Jamie, crying her heart out and letting him hug her while she did it. He had been trying not to focus on how she physically felt, but he had noticed something missing. It didn't freak him out; his only worry was that she would change her mind about having him that close.

But for that moment she'd just stayed there, letting him wrap his arms around her like that. She was all warm from her shower, smelling great. He'd love to see her that way every fucking possible morning, if he could. No make-up, hair in a towel as evidence she'd just been naked in the shower. Nothing done to impress or attract attention, only beautiful because she was beautiful without extra effort.

Not like the woman bent over the sink in front of him. Her hair was nice, not authentic. Her nails felt good when she scratched them under his shirt across his chest, but they were plastic. Her face was pretty but under the lights of the bathroom he could tell it was the effect of many layers of make-up. Even her eyelashes were after-market.

He didn't even bother with the breasts. She hiked her skirt up, assumed the position against the sink after a quick clinch, and he was barely aware how he ended up inside her.

All because he'd done this a million fucking times and it was all the same. He didn't want the same. He wanted Jamie.

The woman he was with was making sounds, and as he realized he'd been thinking about his neighbour he felt her body clench around him, holding him inside while she trembled. It was real enough to take him with her, and he grunted once, hard, one hand tight in her hair, the other on her lower back. Her eyes were all soft and happy as she caught his reflection in the mirror, and he cursed himself out.

Even thinking about Jamie he'd gotten all Casanova on his roadhouse slut. And apparently it was quite effective.
"Sugar," she moaned. "I don't know who you were thinking about just then, but she's a lucky woman."

It was like a fist to the gut, to be found out that easily by some slut who'd known him for all of ten minutes. And more than frightening that he was *that* fucking transparent around his brothers.

No wonder Clay'd been giving him the sideways-eye all day.

He couldn't even get angry with this piece. He just pulled out, slapped her hip with a "Thanks doll," and set to cleaning himself up while she shimmied her skirt back over her hips and left the washroom.

It hadn't been great for him, just a release he hadn't even wanted in the first place. May as well have just jerked off in the sink.

He found his brothers at a table. He fell into a chair next to Clay, exhaling loudly. His prez turned to him and gave him a long hard look. Tig frowned. "The fuck, man?"

"Making sure you're okay. Don't tell the old lady about that bathroom tryst, yeah? They don't like that."

"A lot," Bobby testified further. "Like, skateboard-to-a-bitch's face, not a lot."

That made the crew laugh, a reminder how Gemma handled the sight of one of Clay's sidepieces coming to Charming.

Tig just squinted back at his prez, not joining in the quorum. "That's funny. You calling anyone pussy-whipped."

The silence was tight and sharp at the table. He knew that was uncalled for. He loved Gemma to death first and foremost, and there was no way implying your president and long-time friend was pussy-whipped fell under the "good idea" category. But it would also get everyone off his fucking back.

He was going to kill Happy for the trouble his big fucking mouth was causing.

"Easy Tigger," Chibs called from across the table.

Clay's eyes were pinned on his own, but Tig never looking away first. His own hard-headed stupidity was far more powerful than his common sense, and he wouldn't let these assholes think Jamie was … what? Less than she was? Worthy of their lowly talk and subsequent dismissal?

As in, a woman he'd actually *deserve*?

Whatever. *This* was exactly the reason he hadn't wanted his brothers to know about her.
"You bringing my old lady into this discussion?" Clay wanted it clarified.

"Never," he answered evenly, not blinking. Message sent.

Clay nodded once, his jaw set hard. Message delivered.

Tig ignored the raised eyebrows around the table, but he did catch Happy's crazy fucking grin before he downed the shot in front of him. Tig was going to make that bastard sorry.
Chapter 24

Mid-August

"Now Jamie, I want you to just relax. Make sure you're comfortable."

"Does it hurt?" Jamie whimpered, and she hated sounding so scared but it was just her and Doctor Foster at the moment.

"No. It's not going to hurt. It might feel warm. You'll likely feel tired after. Your skin could get red, and if you get nauseous don't worry, that can happen, too. Just take some Gravol and you should be fine."

She nodded, hands twisting at her hospital gown. "Why is this scarier than the surgery?"

Doctor Foster smiled down at her, his hand beside her head. She felt his thumb stroke her temple. "I'm right here with you, Jamie. Don't worry, okay?"

Jamie felt her heart trip just a little bit. She didn't know if any of this was appropriate, but she wasn't uncomfortable.

She was very comfortable with it, actually.

"Am I going to glow in the dark?"

"Maybe," he said in all seriousness.

She felt herself grin. "That'll make it hard to sleep."

"I'll get you one of those masks for your eyes. You'll be fine."

She appreciated him wanting to make her laugh. "Sounds good."

"All right. Let's get this over with, yeah?"

She nodded, forced her hands to stop fidgeting. Doctor Foster had been so careful in explaining everything to her during her lead-up visits to the radiation therapy. When he decided she was healthy enough he eased her into the next step, told her how it was going to happen and how it all worked.

Jamie was still terrified. They were aiming a beam of radiation at her good breast and her lymph nodes. That was scary. That was so, so scary.

The machinery was loud. And it didn't matter where Doctor Foster was. She was alone inside it.
Jamie kept her eyes closed, willing her body to keep still. She could hear the noises around her, the instructions to hold her arm this way and then keep still. She was on a "robotic" setting, her brain done for the time being.

This was medicine. This was going to make her better.

When the treatment was done Jamie was left alone to get dressed again. With growing acceptance she picked up the specialty brassiere that Aunt Thelma helped her pick out. One side was a regular bra cup, the other completely padded to match the size of the regular cup. She was comfortable wearing more form-fitting clothes with it, like the T-shirt she'd paired up with denim shorts that day. She was still extra nervous that the padded cup could slide up and go wonky, but it hadn't happened yet.

As she was buttoning up her shorts Aunt Thelma was knocking on the door. "Come in," Jamie called out, sitting back on the vinyl-covered bench to catch her breath.

Aunt Thelma looked nervous. She was giving her "everything's going to be all right" smile but Jamie was … too exhausted for that.

"Hey honey. How'd it go?"

Jamie shrugged as she shoved her feet into her flip flops. "I don't know. No point of reference, really. I kind of feel like I've been put through the microwave for a while. I feel warm, in a weird way. Tired, but that's nothing new."

Aunt Thelma nodded, trying to be of comfort but knowing that anything she said likely wouldn't help too much.

Jamie had the overwhelming urge to assure Aunt Thelma that everything was okay, which was kind of a crazy concept. She was the sick one. Why did she need to make anyone else feel better?

"Did you want to go for lunch, or would you rather just go home?"

Jamie was already shaking her head. "I need to sleep. You and Calvin go for lunch without me."

"Okay, honey. Let's get you home."

Jamie was silent on the drive, and as she got out of the vehicle in the driveway she heard the back door of the car open, too. Calvin was going to ride shotgun with Aunt Thelma, but before he climbed back in he wrapped both arms around Jamie's waist and hugged her tight.

Jamie bit her lip, put her hands on his head, and kissed his hair, tears stinging her eyes. "Oh Peanut," she whispered. "I love you, honey."

"I love you too," he replied, muffled by her stomach. She hated herself right then for holding a one-person pity party. She was lucky, after all. She had Calvin.
"We're gonna be fine," she assured him, ruffling his hair.

"Okay," he muttered back, then darted into the passenger seat, wiping his eyes.

She was scaring Calvin. That wasn't good. Jamie should have known he'd pick up on the nuances of her moods. She was cranky, tired all the time, her temper was getting shorter. He was spending more and more time with Tig. He probably blamed himself for her shitty attitude.

When she turned to her house and started up the stoop her eyes went to the neighbour's place, now dark and silent. The three days they'd spent there while her bathroom was demolished had passed without incident. As promised, they never saw him during their stay. The bathroom was removed over the course of three days, everything barricaded with heavy plastic and carried out in equally sturdy trash bags. The tests on the mould itself had come back as non-toxic, but they were assured that any mould was not good for people to be around.

Staying in the Tig museum hadn't even seemed weird – there was nothing in the place that was him. Not a trace of his personality or interests could be found. Not that she was actively snooping. She left the vanity in the bathroom off the master closed. Ditto for the nightstands and the basement. And the hall closet. They did have to go back home for dishes and cutlery (Jamie had been shocked to find just three dessert saucers and four dinner plates all on their own in his kitchen cupboard) but other than that it was a lot like being at home.

Once it was all-clear to move back they did. The bathroom was down to subfloor and wall studs, roughed-in plumbing and a capped sewer line. Even if the bathroom never got replaced she felt better for having that shit gone.

Tig showed up later that same day and Jamie gave him his keys back. She explained she'd cleaned both bathrooms, the bedding and the towels but he wasn't too worried, just asked Calvin if he was ready to put a motor together. Calvin had spent every possible hour with Tig since then. Jamie was starting to feel … left out, actually.

Calvin had been her buddy at one time.

Jamie sleepily made her way down the hall to the bedroom, about to take off her bra and shorts and crawl into bed when her doorbell rang.

She blew out a breath of annoyance, the walk back to the entrance seeming three times as long now. She pulled the door open slowly, only easing it all the way when she saw it was a woman.

A woman she didn't know. A woman who seemed even taller than she was naturally, not because of the spiked heels on her boots but because of the way she held herself. Shoulders back, chin up, arms crossed under her breasts, hip jutting out to the side. Dressed in perfectly fitting jeans and a tank top that stretched tight across the killer chest that her arms were propping up, a scar visible between her breasts despite the necklaces she had hanging there.
Her body was incredible, and Jamie was only starting to notice that about other women because she was so conscious of her own suddenly.

Jamie felt her posture weaken, her shoulders rolling in just from the sight of this woman who basically had "biker bitch" tattooed on her forehead. Everything about her screamed self-assurance.

"Can I help you?" Jamie asked, on the verge of yawning.

The woman had been ready to verbally respond but that stopped and she paused, mid-thought, eyeing Jamie up and down. Something seemed to surprise her. Then she shook her head. "Sorry, I just realized I don't even know your name."

Now Jamie was a bit off guard. "Well, I haven't given it to you yet."

That got her a raised eyebrow. "I'm Gemma."

"Hi Gemma. I'm Jamie."

Gemma nodded, then thrust a hand at her. Jamie shook it, still unsure what the hell was going on here.

"You're not what I was expecting," Gemma mused, giving her some more surveillance.

"I'm sorry, should I know you?"

Gemma shook her impressive mane of hair back over her shoulders. "No, not at all. I'm a friend of Tig's."

Jamie felt a peculiar tremor in her chest. Of course this woman would be a friend of Tig's. She looked the type that could not only get a man like that, but keep him enthralled for ages to come. Jamie felt even uglier, and again more confused than ever.

"Okay," Jamie filled the silence. What was this woman doing here?

"Can I come in?" Gemma's face and tone implied she thought Jamie might be a bit slow.

Jamie was really taken aback now. "I'm sorry, I don't know you -"

"Look, I'm a good friend of Tig's. I look out for him. And when there's some piece of tail getting him all tied up in knots, I need to look that bitch in the eye and determine what she wants from him. So. Can. I. Come. In?"

Jamie felt her jealousy and self-deprecation fade. "I'm not in the habit of letting strange, rude people in my house. So ... no, you can't."
Gemma dropped her arms, mouth open, head still to the side. Then she gave just a ghost of a smile. "Well. Pussy's got a bit of claw after all."

"What?"

"You wanna fuck him, have at 'im honey. But don't play games with him, and know that the fucking is all you're going to get."

The anger was the biggest emotion, but horror, mortification and embarrassment all rushed up to join in, too. Her face flushed, her heart started hammering faster, and she got … Sick.

Jamie felt the heave shake her torso, then she became very still to see if that was the end of it. Gemma's head jerked back like she knew something distressing was going on, holding up a hand carefully. "Are you -"

But Jamie turned on her heel and raced down the hall to the en suite washroom, getting the toilet seat up just in time to completely empty her stomach of the oatmeal she'd had that morning. Her back bowed with it, and even when she was empty it was like she couldn't stop retching. It kept going until her ribs got too tired to keep it up.

She closed the lid, put her hand up to flush, and rested her forehead on the closed seat, taking a deep breath.

Jamie jumped two feet when a hand was placed between her shoulder blades. "Sweetheart, you okay?"

She looked up, confused as to how this woman thought it was okay to follow her into her house and watch her throw up. She didn't have the energy to yell at her, though. She just started crying instead.

There was a long awkward pause, then this Gemma woman squatted next to her. "Honey, you got anything for nausea?"

She nodded. "Gravol. In the medicine cabinet."

They were chewable ginger tablets. Gemma held out the bubble packing, popping two into Jamie's waiting hand. She chewed it, the taste not mixing well with what was in her mouth, but she got it down and closed her eyes to wait for her stomach to stop rolling.

"What is this from?" Gemma asked, voice soft, concerned and downright motherly. "Is it just the flu or … something else? You knocked up honey?"

That gave her a reason to laugh. "Radiation therapy," Jamie croaked. "I'm being treated for breast cancer."
Another pause. "Did they get it in time?"

Jamie shook her head. "I've had a lumpectomy on my right breast, mastectomy on the left."

Gemma inhaled with a "Jesus Christ" that wasn't for Jamie, she'd bet on it. "Are you the same neighbour that was cleaning houses?"

Jamie's brain wondered how she knew this, why Tig would tell her that, yet the rest of her was too tired to care. "Yeah, I had to earn extra money to take time off work."

"Well shit," Gemma went on as though she was disappointed about something. "Come on honey, let's get you somewhere more comfortable."

Jamie let herself be helped up, and she leaned on Gemma while the taller woman led her to her bed. As Jamie rolled onto her side she caught how Gemma was looking at all the pill bottles on her nightstand. The woman placed the package of Gravol closest to Jamie, smiling down on her.

"We got off on the wrong foot." Jamie suspected that was as close as Gemma came to an apology.

Jamie had to half-chuckle. "You think?"

"Tig can be too trusting. People can take advantage of that."

Jamie couldn't imagine anyone daring to trick the man that lived next door; not because he was so clever, just because you'd be in for so much hurt once he figured out what you did. But she kept that to herself.

"He's been keeping quiet about the two of you."

"Gemma," Jamie stopped her there. "There is no me and Tig. He's my neighbour. Yes, he's been very kind to me. I have no idea why." Gemma scoffed but Jamie kept talking. "He's taken a shine to my nephew for some reason. And he'd doing Calvin a world of good, for which I am indebted to him. So if you're worried I'm out to get him in some way … don't worry. I'd rather amputate my foot than take advantage of him."

Gemma brushed her hair off her forehead in a comforting gesture. "That's a real good answer, sweetheart. But as far as they're being no you and Tig, you might want to re-examine that."

Then the woman turned and left, a cloud of confusion and exhaustion in her wake.
Chapter 25

Two days of riding, still no idea who Tiny was, and Tig just wanted his shower and his bed.

Yep, he was definitely getting older.

Leaving church he was half asleep on his feet heading for his Dyna when Gemma's voice came to him. "Tigger!"

He half-turned, digging a cigarette out his pocket. She was standing outside the TM office, waving him over. He lit a smoke and then answered her call, same as anyone else would if they wanted to keep their knee caps in working order.

"Gemma," he greeted her cordially. "Looking good today, doll."

She gave him her no bullshit face and snapped, "Inside. Now."

Eyebrows high, he followed her into the office, shutting the door. He was turning around with a smart-ass comment on his lips but she hit him in the arm before he could get it out.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snapped, clearly pissed off.

"Can you fill me in on what the hell you're talking about?"

She took a deep breath, hands on hips. "Oswald's office called, saying your bathroom is on the list for next week. Asked me to give you the message, then they confirmed your address. But it wasn't your address, it was the address for your pop-tart neighbour." Then she wound up and pounded his bicep one more time.

Tig rubbed his upper arm, confused. "Why are you hitting me, Gem?"

"I went by her house."

Tig felt his stomach drop like he'd been caught in a lie. But he hadn't done anything wrong … that he could think of, anyway.

"Tig, she's sick," Gemma's voice got soft, and her eyes had a strange compassion in them. "You never said she had cancer."

"How is that anyone's business?" he replied, and she had the grace to look a bit embarrassed.
"What are you doing with her, Tig?"

He straightened his back. "Nothing, Gemma. She made it clear she's not interested like *that.*"

"Then why are contractors calling *you* about her bathroom?"

He took a deep breath. "She needs help. She's sick. No one's helping her and I can."

Gemma gave him a soft look, shaking her head. "Oh, Tigger."

He had to shake his head, close his eyes. He was busted. "Yeah, I like her. You saw her, she's beautiful Gem. And she … I don't know. I like how it feels to be around her. I can help her."

"You like that she needs you," Gemma filled in.

Tig lowered his head.

"She's too tough to *need* you, honey."

Now he frowned.

Gemma smiled in reply. "A woman should *want* you, Tig. The needy ones are trouble."

"You gonna bust my balls about this?"

"Not at all, honey. I went over there to see if the bitch had alternate motives to getting her claws in you. I was pretty sure something *untoward* was going on. Then I met her. And got pissed on behalf of the sisterhood because I thought *you* were taking advantage of her."

Tig snorted. "How? You think I got a kink for surgery scars?"

Gemma put her hands to each side of his face. "This is one you've gotta handle with care, babe."

"I know that. But I can't … I can't ignore her. I try. I can't."

"She's going through a lot."

"I can't even imagine it."

"Just … make her feel pretty, Tig. Make her laugh. I know you can do that."

"She's got a lot of walls up."

"Be sweet and watch those walls come down."
Tig had to smile, remembering her reaction to him making her breakfast. "Did you see the kid while you were there?"

"No, he wasn't there. Good thing, too."

"Why? What'd you do Gemma?"

She was smiling indulgently. "Nothing, Tig. But she's had radiation treatments, and she got pretty sick. I left her in bed with Gravol."

"She was sick? From that?"

Gemma shrugged. "I guess. I don't know anyone who's had radiation."

"Shit." Full-on panic hit, and he didn't even take a moment to keep it in check. In front of Gemma yet. Yeah, he must be pretty fucking tired.

"Okay, settle down. She's fine. She needs rest. And she doesn't want you to see her like this, babe."

"Then I gotta be there when Calvin gets home."

Gemma was still smiling, furrowing her brow. "Shit. You're so far gone for the both of them, aren't you?"

He shrugged and backed away, forcing a laugh he didn't feel. "Come on, Gemma."

"Tig, honey, take this seriously and don't shrug it off, not with me. That little chippie lets you in, that's a big deal. And you can't just hit and run her, you know that."

"I know, Gem. I know."

"You haven't even slept with her, have you?"

He just clenched his jaw.

"I'm sorry, Tig. I didn't know this was serious. Clay said he caught you hugging her and -"

"And that's it. It was hug. The best I got so far is a kiss, Gem."

Gemma pressed her lips together, still looking worried about him. Tig was starting to feel like a caged animal. He loved Gem, but the chick-chat was starting to make him itchy.

"I know you're worried, Gem. And thank you. But I don't want this to be a big deal. I don't want any of these assholes knowing because they might scare her off. She's not … she's not in the life, Gem."
"But you want her in yours, Tiggy."

"That's why I'm going gentle."

Gemma went up on her toes to kiss his forehead. "Don't want you to get hurt, Tig."

"Thanks doll," he said instead of arguing. "I gotta get home and shower. I've got the engine put together and the kid's pretty excited to get it running."

"Okay. Go get some rest, too."

"I will." Tig kissed her cheek and left her in the office, jogging across the compound to his bike. He made his own personal best time getting back to his driveway, yanking the garage open before heading for his front door. As he did he heard squealing tires across the street again, and he stopped to watch the same three fucking punks make another fucking deal on his street.

Phone out again, he sent a text to Clay. Dealers are back and they're here right now.

Then Tig waited. It was a hell of an accomplishment, especially as he was reminding himself that these were the pricks that likely roughed up a nine-year-old.

His phone chirped and he checked the screen. On our way. Stand down. He snapped the phone shut and shoved it in his pocket, opening his front door and heading for the kitchen to grab a beer. He barely had the cap off when there was a banging on the screen door.

Smiling, he knew it had to be Calvin. He tipped the bottle back and made for the door, grin broadening as the kid saw him and smiled back.

"How was your trip?" The kid's manners were absolutely impeccable.

"It was a productive and uneventful outing, thank you," he found himself replying, pushing the door open. "But the best part is, that engine's ready to hum, buddy."

"Is it?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely. You ready?"

"Yes!" Calvin tore down the steps and careened into the garage, stopping short at the doorway.

Tig was right behind him, but seeing the scrawny prick standing in his garage wiped the smile right off his face.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Tig snapped, not missing how Calvin edged into his side when he spoke.

"Is this a '56?"
"54," Tig corrected. "We caught up now? Good. Get the fuck off my property."

The kid had the gall to laugh. "Dude, I'm just appreciating the bike."

"Get out," Tig repeated, still not sounding all too terribly angry. Inside he was a rolling rage but for now he'd let the pipsqueak wonder what exactly he was capable of.

"You might have noticed us across from your house," the kid said, leaning on the standing tool chest Tig had as the only real flat surface in the entire garage.

"I noticed that. Good of your to bring it up. I think that should probably stop before you get hurt."

The kid laughed, eyes going down to Calvin. "You're bodyguard's a pussy, dude. Cried like a girl."

Tig stalked forward, tossing the beer bottle to the corner of the garage. It smashed. The fucker jumped. Tig smiled.

"I can see you're a bit slow, so I'll use an educational aide this one time," Tig muttered, picking up his crescent wrench from the tool box next to the kids' elbow. "This town does not belong to ass-wipe shitheads that get off on beating up little kids." Tig said amiably. "Calvin," he added calmly, "go next door, okay?"

The kid took off running down the driveway around the fence, then back up his own without another glance. Not that Tig let his gaze leave the shithead in front of him; they were in a lock-down glare.

"I'll give you one warning," Tig offered, then swung the wrench and caught the kid's temple with it. He fell to the side, and Tig circled around, shrugging off his kutte and setting it on the tool chest.

"Here's a chance to get up and walk away, take those pricks out there with you," Tig offered. The kid tried to get up and charge him, which got him another crack to the cheekbone. Fuck, if the kid didn't smarten up this could very well get him killed.

Too late. Footsteps were rushing up his driveway, and Tig brought his head up just in time to face the guy's two friends, one holding a tire iron and the other clutching a bike chain.

Jesus Christ, kids needed to watch less TV these days.

"We don't let dealers in Charming," Tig informed the late guests to the party. "Be smart. Keep breathing. And get the fuck out of town."

Before he could reach into his waistband for his piece, the other two rushed him. Little fuckers were fast, and as he went down to one knee with a couple punches.
On a swing he saw coming just in time, Tig caught the bike chain with his hand, pulling it away from the kid's grip, knowing it probably tore his hand up even more the initial flash of pain he felt, but it was a fight and it wouldn't really hurt until later. As the kid stumbled Tig connected with a right hook, the bike chain now basically an accidental brass knuckle. That prick went down.

Tig got to his feet, the third guy still standing in attach posture with the crowbar in hand. He looked a bit tougher, granted. But Tig could hear approaching Harley pipes, so he knew he was minutes away from having back up.

The prick swung, and Tig raised his arm, the crowbar glancing off his forearm. It hurt like a bitch but better that than his head.

The guy looked at the crowbar, then back to the man in black who was now advancing with a smile lighting up his face. Tig knew he looked nuts, it was enough to make the guy second-guess his next move.

Long enough for Tig to notice Jamie standing in the driveway, just before she brought her arms up and clocked the third skinhead across the back of the skull with a wooden bat.
Chapter 26

The sound of an ash wood bat hitting a human skull was … sickening, to say the least.

Jamie dropped the bat, arms still ringing from the vibration of that contact, her hands suddenly shaking. She looked up at Tig, standing at the mouth of his garage with a wrench in one hand and a chain wrapped around the other one. He was bleeding from his lip and a cut eyebrow. The eyebrow was really bleeding, actually.

"You're … bleeding," she blurted stupidly, heart starting to calm down, adrenalin beginning to ebb away. She was tired again, realizing she’d been asleep when Calvin jumped on her bed, freaking out about Tig getting beat up by three guys in his garage.

She didn't call the police. She told Calvin to hide and crept up on them with a bat. Was she absolutely fucking insane?

The guy behind Tig started getting up, and with one shot from the chain-wrapped hand Tig dropped him back to the concrete. Then he looked at her again, seemed to wake up and held his hands out to the side.

"Jamie? What the hell were you thinking?"

She shook her head. "I wasn't. Calvin said you needed help, you said to never call the police. I only have a bat in the house."

He sighed, dropped the chain, showing that hand to also be bleeding. He set the wrench on his toolbox as the sound of bikes grew deafening behind her. Turning, she saw five Harleys pull into the driveway.

She turned back to Tig, panicking now. "Shit, what have I done?" she whispered.

Tig approached her, hands up, palms facing her. "Don't worry, sweetheart. You did real good." He crouched down, picked up the bat, handed it to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Go back to your place, Jamie. Rest up, okay?"

She nodded, bat clutched tightly with both hands. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

"Don't be sorry. Nothing to be sorry for. You did good. Go home and get some rest, okay? I'll check on you in a bit."

She nodded, finding it odd that he escorted her down the drive to the point where that ineffectual fence ended, past his … friends? Colleagues? Like he was protecting her from them.
Every one of these five men were wearing vests like Tig's, but their expressions were all varied. Jamie recognized the man who'd caught her in Tig’s arms in his living room. He was still sitting on his bike, grinning at her unnervingly. The one with the dark eyes and unreadable smile she'd first seen the day she discovered Tig was her neighbour was *also* staring at her, sliding his sunglasses off and not making any effort to hide his surveillance. One older fellow with a grizzled beard was just stroking his facial hair, studying her like a science experiment. A very young, baby-faced guy looked minutes away from laughing, eyebrows high from surprise, but it seemed he was more amused by Tig than her. The fifth kept his sunglasses on, chewing the inside of his lips, making scars on each cheek very evident. His look was the most blank and indifferent.

Behind her, she vaguely caught Tig instructing his friends to "Get those assholes out of sight in the garage."

Jamie cast her eyes away as the scary biker bad asses all seemed to dismount their bikes at once. She allowed Tig to lead her up the stoop to her own house, hand warm on the centre of her back. She wasn't an invalid for Pete's sake, but that touch was incredibly reassuring anyway.

Wait, she *was* an invalid. Her body reminded her of that, and why she had been napping in the first place. Her stomach rolled, and as soon as she kicked her shoes off at the door she had to run for the washroom, getting to the toilet just in time to let the remaining bile from her stomach evacuate.

It hurt. She had nothing to throw up.

"Aunt Jamie?"

She closed her eyes, resting her head on her arm. "I'm okay, Peanut. Please don't worry. The radiation made me sick, honey."

"Are you sure?" his tiny, concerned tone cut her.

She was opening her mouth to reply when another voice cut in, her humiliation reaching new levels of awareness.

"She's gonna be fine, Charlie. Do me a favour and give me a minute with Aunt Jamie?"

"Okay Tig," Calvin agreed as though that made him feel better. Then he vanished from the doorway of the en suite washroom. Jamie flushed the toilet immediately, getting to her feet and heading for the sink to rinse her mouth and splash water on her face.

Christ, he'd been right outside the room while she was puking? Wow, she was such a fucking catch.

He partially closed the door so the enclosed space was that much smaller. Hands on his hips, head hanging lower than usual he asked casually, "How you doing?"
She laughed at that. He was bleeding down the side of his face, dripping off his jaw, and he was asking how she was. "I'm fine," she said softly. "Are … are you okay?"

He frowned. "Me?"

She pointed to his head. "You're bleeding," she informed him for the second time.

He moved closer to her, checking out his reflection, crowding her without even touching her. That's when he noticed how chewed up his hand was, for the first time apparently. He seemed surprised by it. She could smell him again, leather and dust and heat from sunshine. Sweat. And the metallic tang of blood.

She was pinned between him, the vanity and the toilet. She stayed small, watching him inspect his eyebrow. "Shit," he was muttering, looking around and noticing this wasn't his washroom.

"Here," she said, opening the cabinet behind the mirror. She grabbed the cotton balls, rubbing alcohol and bandages. "You should wash your hands, too."

"No, Jamie. Go to bed. I'll fix this at my place."

"Wash your hands," she instructed. His eyes tracked the set of her jaw and the one eyebrow she had cocked, then he nodded. He soaped up his hands, hissing as the cuts from the bike chain were rinsed out, then took the hand towel from her and froze with it.

"I'll get blood on it."

"It's white. I can bleach the hell out of it."

He dutifully dried off, then moved to leave the bathroom. "Sit," she snapped, and something must have shown in her face because he did as asked, lowering the lid on the toilet and parking it. She wiped up the blood with the alcohol and cotton balls, then put a small adhesive bandage on the cut that split his eyebrow. "How's that?" she asked, realizing he had been absolutely silent the entire time.

Jamie cast her eyes down to his, and if the room had been big enough she would have taken a few steps back. She didn't know what his expression meant; it wasn't blank. It was the opposite. She couldn't tell if the set of his jaw meant he was angry or determined. The way his eyes lit off could either mean he wanted to hit her or … kiss her.

She did move away, suddenly. She was sick. She just threw up. She did not want to remember how incredibly wonderful he was at kissing. Or just plain touching her.

"Jamie," he said softly, catching her hand. "How are you? Really?"

"I'm fine," she replied, trying to pull her hand free. He gripped it tighter.
"Jamie," he baited her. "Gemma told me she came by. You're getting sick from this?"

"I'm being treated with radiation. It makes people sick."

He stood quickly, startling her, and she was almost out of room to back away. Just as quickly he picked her up in both arms, toed the bathroom door open and carried her back to her bedroom. He set her back on her bed, then threw the blanket over her again.

Jamie was stunned, unable to talk, almost unsure how she even ended up here again. He crouched on his heels next to the bed, reaching out and smoothing her hair back. It had the unsettling effect of being sweet, comforting, thrilling and a bit scary all at once.

"Get some rest. You need anything send Calvin over to see me, or have him call me."

"Okay," she agreed, already knowing she couldn't argue with him.

"I'll need him not at my place for a while," Tig went on ambiguously. "We need to take care of a few things. I'd feel better if he was inside the house."

Jamie closed her eyes, guessing what all that meant. She should probably be grateful she wasn't one of those three idiots that decided to pick a fight with her neighbour.

"Okay," she repeated, snuggling into her pillow. She watched his face as she did it, the lines between his eyebrows almost disappearing. He held her gaze, and she felt herself relax right then.

"You trust me to keep you safe?"

Her heart tripped over itself when he asked that. On a soft breath she answered without even thinking. "Yes, I do."

When he smiled it warmed his whole face, even those blue eyes.

"These are the guys that broke Calvin's glasses," he said softly. "I'll make them hurt, babe."
Chapter 27

"Oy, Tig. You all right?"

Tig was sitting on the edge of the open double-doors at the back of the van, hands throbbing. He looked up at Chibs, nodding. "Yeah. I'm good."

"Give him a moment to enjoy taking out the trash," Happy piped up.

"Thanks to the help of your absolutely lovely neighbour," Chibs added, lighting a cigarette while watching the prospect fill in the grave they'd just made in the California desert.

"Like the feisty ones," Happy threw out there, faking a big full-body shiver. "Give her something a little more effective than a bat though, man."

"She did just fine with that bat," Tig reminded him. Then he looked at his hands, his knuckles shredded. They felt warm and swollen. But overall it felt fucking fantastic to get a few licks in on the guys that roughed up Calvin.

"Might want to be careful with that one," Bobby advised. "Looks like she's kinda rough with wood."

Happy and Chibs laughed. He didn't. He was remembering teeth breaking off at the root and the spray of warm blood hitting his face. And the whole time he'd just kept seeing Calvin's quivering lip and ripped shirt.

"Were they talking shit about her?" Chibs asked quietly, crouched next to him in the back of the van. " Haven't seen you that pissed off in a while."

"Nah. They roughed up the kid a few days ago. Broke his glasses, scared him pretty good."

"Fucking assholes," Happy declared, turning to watch the prospect toss the last shovelful.

"I'd take a few hits to the head too if she was playing nurse with me," Bobby admitted, kicking at Tig's boot to get his attention. "Shouldn't keep that kind of thing a secret."

Tig shook his head. "Fuck off," he muttered, heart not really in it.

"All right," Chibs broke in, tossing his cigarette butt. "Let's get out of here. It's getting cold and there's something a whole lot warmer I'd rather be enjoying right now."

There was a grumble of agreement, but when the guys piled out of the van at the compound Tig headed for his bike instead of the clubhouse. He wanted to be at home, just to make sure Jamie and Calvin were okay.
"Okay, buddy. You know where to pour the gasoline, right?"

"Yeah."

"Go for it, then," Tig declared loudly.

Standing on a milk crate, Calvin poured gasoline from a plastic cup into the tank. His tongue was sticking out the side of his mouth as he did it, and when it was empty he looked up expectantly, pushing his glasses up.

"Good job buddy." It bothered Tig still that the kid's glasses were held together with electrical tape, but Aunt Jamie wasn't letting him help get Calvin new ones. She was protecting that nest egg, and until the renovations were done on her bathroom she wasn't taking a breath.

Still bugged him, though.

"What's next?" Calvin asked, stepping off the crate.

"We see if it runs," he said, handing Calvin a rag. "Remember, we gotta wash your hands good." He was pretty sure Jamie would kick his ass if Calvin came home smelling like flammable liquids.

"I know," Calvin said agreeably.

Tig set the key in the ignition, then paused. "Maybe we should wait until tomorrow."

"Tig!"

He chuckled. "I'm just saying, we might be pushing our luck."

Calvin rolled his head back, swinging his arms dramatically. "Come on, Tig! Let's just get to it already!"

"Impatient little bastard," Tig mumbled, swung his leg over, primed the starter a couple times, flicked into neutral, then stopped and dismounted. "Climb on, Charlie."

Calvin's eyes widened comically. "Really?"

"Why the hell not?"

No hesitation; he scrambled onto the ratty seat, settling upright and grinning up at Tig.

"Now get your foot up here, and put your other foot on the peg there. Good. Now you're gonna kick start this bad boy. You think you can do it?" Tig grabbed the throttle.
"I'll try."

"That's all we can do, buddy. But we gotta be in sync. One mind. Know what I mean?"

Calvin just frowned.

"Now, on four. You ready?" Calvin nodded, eyes on his face. "One. Two. Three -"

Of course it didn't work on the first go. Calvin underestimated his weight and strength, couldn't drop the starter all the way, and he looked up to Tig all panicked and worried.

"Don't worry Charlie. Half the time I can't start a bike myself. Again. One, two, three -"

Throttle caught just as ignition fired, and the bike coughed, wheezed, then started rumbling. Calvin's eyes got bigger than Tig had ever seen them, and he plopped his butt on the seat laughing hysterically.

Tig found himself laughing, too. "Wait – what are we laughing at?" he shouted over the noise.

Calvin shook his head. "I didn't think it would start."

"Why? You put sugar in my tank or something?"

"N-no!" He could barely talk from giggling.

"Then spit it out, Chuckles."

Calvin couldn't.

Tig shook his head. "That's your new name. You're no longer Charlie – you're Chuckles from here on out. Yeah?"

Calvin's giggles rang out over the rumble of the motor, and Tig gestured for him to scoot out of the way while he fiddled with the choke.

"You guys thirsty?"

Tig cast a look over his shoulder, grinning at the sight of Aunt Jamie in her short shorts and another well-worn T-shirt holding two bottles of root beer. "I am now," he drawled with a quick up and down he completely intended for her to see. It earned him a sharp look and a blush.

Calvin took one of the bottles, and she presented Tig with the second one. "I heard the engine. Thought a celebratory beer was in order," she shouted, smiling and ruffling Calvin's hair. He stepped away from her hand.

"It works Aunt Jamie! It runs!"
"So I hear."

"Whaddya say, babe. Wanna take a spin?" Tig raised his eyebrows and revved the motor in time.

She laughed and looked at her feet, those cheeks tinged pinker. Fuck, he loved it when that happened. "No, thanks. I'm eluding death quite nicely from where I am."

They stared at each other for just a second, and Tig remembered what he made his brothers swear to a week ago.

*She can't know she killed that guy. She can never know.*

It was a good hit to the head. But from the way that skinhead went down Tig knew it wasn't just a concussion, it was the kind of injury that led to death without immediate medical attention. Sure they got rid of the body but Tig would die himself before Jamie found out she'd killed someone.

All for nothing, yet again. No information other than the name "Tiny" and the location of a cook site that had been packed up rapidly before he and his brothers got there. The smell of meth in progress was still lingering. It was like chasing the fucking wind.

"Can I go for a ride then?" Calvin squeaked, high as a kite on the fact the bike worked.

"No."

Jamie answered just as Tig was saying, "Sure Chuckles, climb on."

Jamie tilted her head and crossed her arms. "No, he's not riding."

"Down the street and back?" Tig was pleading like a nine-year-old himself.

Her head tilted further and her eyes got wider. "No."

Maybe he shouldn't be so agreeable with her. She was more fucking adorable the madder she got. "Please Aunt Jamie?"

"Yeah, please Aunt Jamie?" Calvin was squirming like he had to piss.

"You jerks," Jamie muttered as capitulation.

"Yes!" Calvin hissed.

"Okay Chuckles, climb on. It won't be as fun as Aunt Jamie, though," Tig winked as he said it.

Jamie shook her head and ran her hand over her forehead. She was so easy to fluster.
Calvin tried to climb on behind him, making Tig shake his head and laugh. "Chuckles, up front dude. I need to make sure you won't fly off."

Tig slid back from the handlebars, letting Calving swing a leg over the seat. Tig got close enough to the handlebars, feeling the excitement radiating out of the kid in front of him. It cracked him up.

"Down the street and back. And go slow," Jamie put in her orders.

"Yes Aunt Jamie," Tig promised, using his best Calvin voice. "Ready Chuckles?"

"Ready Tig!"

The grin stayed put as he rolled down the driveway, hitting the pavement and really opening her up. Calvin was quivering like a puppy dog he was so excited, his hands clutching the outside seams of Tig's jeans. He took the Super Glide for a ride around the block, waiting until the house was out of sight before hitting forty miles per hour.

By the time he pulled back into the garage Calvin's grin had gone from happy to all-out psyched, and Tig was just for a second jealous of everything that Calvin was going to be doing for the first time, and this was one of the starting points.

Tig had been the one to give him his first ride on a motorcycle. That was cool as shit.

Jamie had waited for them, getting up from the rolling garage stool and giving Tig a not-so-impressed look. "That sounded pretty fast."

"Nah," Tig dismissed her suspicion. "It's just a loud bike."

"Aunt Jamie, you should go too!" Calvin was chattering. "It was so much fun! The bike is loud and it rumbles and the world is flying by but you're still outside in it and it was sooo cool!"

Jamie grinned down on the nine-year-old enthusiasm. "I bet it was, Peanut."

"Don't worry Chuckles, Aunt Jamie will get her ride eventually." His innuendo talents were not really subtle, but as long as it made Aunt Jamie blush, which it did, it was a successful jibe. Tig was grinning again. He lived to make her twitchy.

He watched both Jamie and Calvin turn to the street and he did the same, just in time to see a large, black Cadillac pull up to the curb between their driveways, effectively blocking both of them. Tig knew that ride. He dropped the kickstand, frowning.

Gemma Morrow appeared at the rear, smoothing her shirt out over her hips. Tig shot a look to Jamie, saw her swallow and pull Calvin close. Shit, Gemma had scared her.
Tig swung off the bike, approaching his president's old lady. "Gem," he said, trying to be friendly and cautionary all at the same time. "Whatcha doing here?"

"Relax Tig, I'm here to make nice."

That brought his eyebrows up. "You?"

She threw her bitch face back at him. "Trust me, Tiggy. I have it in me."

"What are you doing here?" he repeated.

Her hand went to her waist and she tossed her hair over her shoulder with the other one. "Believe it or not, this has very little to do with you, Tigger. That girl is sick, and I want to help her."

"Help her?"

Gemma widened her eyes and crossed her arms. "That's right. Now you gonna let me talk to her or not?"

Tig tilted his head in a warning angle. "Gem -"

"I want to help, baby. It's a sisterhood thing."

"Why does this sisterhood thing make me nervous?"

Gemma just smiled.

"Go easy on her. She's shy, keeps to herself."

"Opposites attract, Tigger," Gemma reminded him, circling around him and trotting up his driveway on heels towards his neighbour.
Chapter 28

When Jamie saw the woman with the amazing jeans and heeled boots, impressively streaked hair, looking like a million bucks she swallowed, instantly feeling dowdy. For some reason this woman made her want to dress up.

"Jamie," Gemma greeted her nice enough, eyes shooting down to Calvin with a warm grin. "This the prospect I keep hearing about?"

Calvin tilted his head. "What's a prospect?"

The woman laughed easily, obviously charmed. "Someone that wants a spot in the club, honey. They have to kind of … apprentice before they can be in the Sons of Anarchy."

That was it. Jamie was locking Calvin in his room until it was time to go to college.

"Who said I was a prospect?"

Gemma's eyebrows went up. "Tig mentioned how good you were with motorcycles, little man."

Calvin was grinning. "He said that?"

Jamie felt the whoosh again because Tig was telling his friends what a cool kid Calvin was.

"He sure did." Gemma held out a manicured hand. "I'm Gemma Morrow. You can call me Gemma."

"I'm Calvin Taylor," Calvin said cordially, shaking her hand with a grin.

"Remember when I said girls can be scary?" Tig asked, standing behind Gemma. "This is the one that invented it."

Gemma shot an unimpressed look over her shoulder. "I'll let that go only because you called me a girl."

Jamie felt herself smile at that, but it faded as she watched Tig and Gemma exchange grins as well. It reminded her that Gemma was the type of woman for Tig, and her wonderings and ponderings were ridiculously futile. Sad. Pathetic.

Gemma turned a smile to Jamie, breaking her out of her self-deprecation. "Okay honey, get your purse. I got somewhere I want to take you."

Jamie felt irrational fear. "What?"
"Gem -" Tig was saying cautiously.

"It's just shopping," Gemma snapped at him over his shoulder. Her face and tone were friendlier as she said to Jamie, "It'll be fun. No obligation, no pressure."

Jamie gave a Tig that she knew looked like she wanted guidance. Reassurance it would be okay. He saw the look, interpreted it, and gave her that crooked half-smile that could mean anything. No help there.

Gemma's hip was out, hand sitting on it like she couldn't be swayed. A force of female nature, and … Jamie felt like she might need a bit of that.

"Okay. Let me go get changed."

"Only if you're tucking those legs in jeans and wearing something that makes your chest look less impressive than mine. That kind of outfit change I'd appreciate, actually."

Tig cracked up. Calvin frowned. And Jamie was utterly confused.

"Oh please, honey. You can play sweet all you want but you've got plenty of attributes I'm too old to pretend I'm not jealous of. Unless you're covering all that up, I'd say you're ready to go."

"Ummm … maybe jeans," Jamie muttered, starting down the driveway to go around the fence and head back to her place. To her surprise, Gemma followed.

"I'll hang with Calvin," Tig was shouting as the screen door shut and Jamie was alone in her house again with Gemma Morrow.

"Umm, so you want a drink or anything?" Jamie asked, feeling awkward to leave her standing in the entry while she changed.

Gemma gave a patient smile. "No, I'm fine, really. Don't worry about me, just go get ready."

Jamie quickly darted to her room, pulled on a pair of jeans and pulled her hair into an over-the-shoulder ponytail. She exited the room just as quickly, finding Gemma still at her door, arms crossed, clearly respecting Jamie's space. It made Jamie like her just that little bit more.

Gemma gave her an up and down. "I don't need to see the ass, I know you likely still look fantastic. Let's go, you hot little bitch."

Jamie was taken aback, but as Gemma slid on her sunglasses and pushed through the screen door she felt herself smile anyway, probably blushing, too. She snagged her purse and followed as ordered.

Tig and Calvin were in the driveway, waiting to bid her farewell. She gave Calvin a kiss goodbye, and Tig assured her they'd be just fine. No more bike rides, which she knew damn well
was a lie because Tig was grinning and his eyes were twinkling in a way that was downright attractive.

"And don’t worry about us," Gemma assured Calvin by mussing his hair, which he didn't seem to mind and that was surprising to Jamie. When she did it he usually groaned and tried to get away. "I'll take good care of Aunt Jamie."

"You better," Tig warned, leaning over and giving Gemma a kiss on the cheek. It seemed casual, like they did it all the time, but Jamie felt a bizarre twinge of jealousy. Then he head-jerked in Jamie's direction. "That's my girl."

Jamie bristled. In no way did she feel like Tig's girl, a ridiculous reaction considering she just got jealous of him kissing Gemma on the damn cheek, but Gemma smiled. "I know honey. I'll get her home safe and sound."

Jamie waved goodbye to the boys, then climbed up into the passenger seat of Gemma's impressive black Escalade.

As they drove, Gemma broke out the spiel and Jamie surprisingly couldn't feel angry as she spoke. "I'll lay it out for you, Jamie," Gemma started. "I was ready to hate you when I showed up here, I thought you were playing Tig for a fool. And he's not easily tricked by a slip of gash. Okay, sometimes he is. But I was sure you were scary-dangerous. Then I met you."

Jamie blinked. "Oh?"

"I have no idea what's going on. And it's a rare instance where I'm admitting it's not my business. One thing I can tell you is he might be confusing, but what you see is what you get. He doesn't have it in him to pretend to be anything he's not. He can get laid anytime he wants; as long as he's not picky he's never chased tail. He's chasing you, which makes you not tail. And Tig doesn't play games. If he … says something, he means it."

Jamie nodded. "Okay."

"As you can tell, I don't mince words and I don't play games, either. Tig is important to me. We've been friends for a long time and I got a lotta love for him. But this trip today is about more than me making nice to the girl next door."

"I'm not sure -"

"I want to do something nice for you," Gemma blurted, darting a look at Jamie before returning eyes to the road. It almost seemed as though she was nervous, just a little bit. "And it's not just because of what you're going through, although that should be reason enough for anyone. I want to do something nice for you because it'll make Tig happy, too. And it'll make meeting the rest of the club easier."

Jamie frowned. "I'm not sure I follow."
"You're an outsider, I get that. And I need you to pay attention. Tig has decided you're important to him. Which means, by default, you're important to all of us because of our love and respect for him. That's the Coles notes of what you need to know. So because I love him to death, I'm doing something nice for you, and I need you to just let me do it and not fight me on it. Do I have your agreement?"

"Without knowing what I'm agreeing to?"

Gemma smirked. "You're quick. That's good. Now just agree. Being nice isn't exactly in my genetics, so just say 'Okay' before I break out in a rash."

"Okay," she said on a laugh, still leery trusting her but willing to go with the flow for the moment.

Gemma pulled the Escalade to a stop in front of a beauty salon, put the vehicle in park and turned to Jamie with her elbow on the wheel.

"Are we … getting our hair done?" Jamie guessed, very confused.

"You're going in for chemo, honey," Gemma said carefully, reaching out and pulling her ponytail gently. "This mane of yours is amazing. It's gonna fall out." She nodded to the salon. "There's a lady here that makes wigs from real hair. I think you should prepare to lose that hair and turn it into something really amazing before it's too late."

Jamie likely went pale, suddenly feeling tricked, trapped and absolutely horrified at the same time.

And Gemma knew it. "Relax, honey. There's no need to be embarrassed. I stick my nose where it doesn't belong from time to time, but I always do it with good intentions. I know how important the hair is, honey. You don't keep a mop like that without realizing you're lucky to have it."

Jamie did like to keep her hair long, that was true. It was nearly to her ass and that's how she always had it. Maybe it was vanity, but it stayed healthy, shiny and not frizzy with absolutely no effort.

Jamie knew she was lucky to have the hair she did.

"Now with all that length, I'm told they can do a really nice shoulder-length wig, and then when you lose that hair you'll still, technically, have it." Gemma played with her ponytail again, looking sad. "You shouldn't lose it completely. That would be a shame. Especially if we can avoid it."

"Gemma, this is an expensive thing -"

"Don't worry about that. You already agreed to accept my gift, remember?"
"That feels like a trap."

"It is," Gemma admitted, smirk back in place. "I may be nosy, but I'm smart, too."
Chapter 29

"You don't paint the bikes yourself?"

Tig nodded. "That's right, buddy. Always know your limitations and accept them. The painting thing?" He shook his head. "Nah. That takes more patience than I have."

"What colour will the bike be?"

"I don't know. I kinda like just a classic black, everything else chrome. Can't beat a classic look, Chuckles."

"Why not yellow?"

Tig's eyebrows went high. "I don't know about that. Not really my colour. Washes me out."

"Purple?"

Tig cackled now. "You got something against black?"

"No. But the bike you have is black." Calvin took the wrench he was holding out and put it in in the right drawer of the tool chest. "You should be more original."

"Maybe. Let me think about it."

Calvin sighed, took a breath like he'd been waiting to say something, then just blurted. "I want to paint my bike pink."

Tig cocked an eyebrow but he kept any smartass comments at bay. "Pink, huh? How come?"

"For Aunt Jamie," he said softly, adjusting his glasses.

Tig felt quiet wash through the garage, his chest getting tight. He coughed to pass the moment. "That's a good idea," he agreed. "I think I can help with that, buddy."

Calvin grinned. "Cool!"

Gemma's Escalade pulling up to the curb cut the moment, and Tig held a finger out to the kid. "Remember, Aunt Jamie doesn't need to know about that ride to the store. Or the root beer, right?"

"Right, Tig." Calvin nodded emphatically, hopping off the stool and running towards the Escalade while Tig scrubbed the grease from his hands and followed.
Jamie climbed down from the SUV and Tig stopped, hands frozen, knowing he was likely staring.

"Aunt Jamie!" Calvin was shouting. "You look so different!"

Jamie smiled down on the kid and hugged him to her stomach. "I know. But do you like it?"

"You look pretty," Calvin said, not at all sounding rehearsed.

"Thanks Peanut," she laughed, then her head came up and Tig caught her eye.

Shit, she was beautiful. It hadn't been the hair, because now it was cropped short, curling in a dark wave just under her ears, out of the way of her face, no longer distracting from it.

It was just her. She was absolutely fucking gorgeous, and he felt himself swallow like he was seeing her for the first time.

Gemma circled around the back of the Caddy just in time to catch him doing the fish-mouth thing. She gave him her knowing smile and he turned back to the tool chest, wiping the last of the black shit off his hands, tossing the grease rag down and turning back, his so-called composure returning.

Jamie was letting Calvin swing her arms back and forth, prattling on, so he let himself keep staring at her. Tig didn't even care that Gemma was scrutinizing his look while she strode his way.

"Where the hell did you two go?" Tig asked, digging in his pocket for his cigarettes.

"Took her to a salon. I heard the lady there made wigs out of real hair. So she's making one for Jamie with her own supply. Had to get it before she started chemo. That bitch has some great hair."

Tig hadn't been shocked twice in a row like this in a long time. Something felt off, and he swallowed a lump before saying, "Thanks, Gem. That was … nice."

She smacked his arm. "I can be nice." Then her face got serious and she tilted her chin down. Tig knew Gemma Body Language, and this was where she got heavy. "I wasn't sure the babe in the woods routine was real, but now I know it is. And in spite of that, I like that girl. So if you fuck things up with her, I am going to be so pissed at you Tigger. You have to be nice to this one."

Tig smiled, taking Gemma by the shoulder. "Gem, who do you think you're talking to?"

"Yeah yeah," she muttered back, turning away from his hand and giving a wave. "Thanks for the shopping date, Jamie."
Jamie smiled at Gemma, and Tig felt his breath catch. Fuck, there it was. A smile she didn't try to hold back on, and it wasn't delivered just to be polite. The way she smiled at Calvin and her aunt, Thelma.

"Thank you, Gemma," Jamie replied, her eyes darting sideways to Tig. The smile didn't falter, and getting it full-force could have killed him.

Gemma kissed his cheek before climbing back into the Escalade and pulling away. Tig watched while Calvin explained that Tig wasn't going to paint his new bike black in excited kid-speak while Jamie listened, wide-eyed and still grinning.

Jesus, he liked seeing her smile this much.

Declaring he had to go to the bathroom with a loud and rude belch, Calvin spun around and ran for the house, causing Aunt Jamie to give Tig a sideways glance.

"You took him for a root beer," she accused with the slightest bit of humour.

"Who? Me? Nah, that's not allowed."

She shook her head. "And I bet you didn't walk there either."

Tig had to grin, busted. "He's so excited about that bike."

"Yeah, I noticed."

Long pause, ending with her studying her feet. Tig realized he could say something else here. "How are you feeling?"

She sniffed, raising her head and shrugging. "Tomorrow's the final radiation treatment. Then I've got a week until chemo starts. I'm not as sick from the radiation anymore, but … that likely just prepares me for chemo."

Tig nodded. Not sure what the hell was working in him, he reached out and tucked her hair behind her ear, taking longer than necessary and making sure his fingers really ran through it as he did so. Damn, her hair was so soft. Her smile faded a little, but she kept eye contact.

"The hair looks good," he said quietly.

Her eyes snapped back to his quickly. "Thanks."

He left his hand behind her ear. He didn't know why, and he only realized it then. He let his fingers slide upwards against the fall of her chestnut-coloured hair, tilting her head just a bit.

"Is anything wrong?" she whispered.
He shook his head. "No. I just … I thought I'd miss the hair. But you're even prettier without it."

"Tig -"

"Sorry," he cut her off. "I'm blurring things out as they come to me."

"It's fine," she assured him. She wasn't pulling away or shoving his arm, either. "What … umm," she cleared her throat and blinked a couple times. "What happened to those guys that were here last week?"

He dropped his hand. "They won't be coming back here, don't worry."

She inhaled. "Does that mean they're in the hospital?"

He let himself smile. "No."

That actually relieved her, and he felt like an ass. He couldn't say they were in the hospital because the truth was they were four feet under the sand of the desert, and their deaths had been as frustrating as the others.

If Tig had anything to do with it, Jamie was never going to know any of that.

"I better go get supper ready," she said, and he realized he'd fallen silent and stared at her like a freak for almost a straight minute.

"Sorry. Yeah," he said, shaking his head and rubbing his brow, trying to get back on his regular track.

"We likely have enough for one more, if you like," she said, so calmly but quietly he wasn't sure if it meant she wanted him there or not.

"Ummm, nah. I wouldn't want to be a pain in the ass."

She shook her head. "You wouldn't be. You've been so good to Calvin this summer. To both of us, really. I'd like you to come over."

Tig had never done a handspring, but he might have been capable of it. He knew he was grinning, and for the life of them he couldn't care less if he looked like a complete schmuck.

"What time?"

She smiled, and it did nothing to calm his shit down. "Umm, around six?"

"I'm there. Thanks Aunt Jamie."
Chapter 31: Chapter 30

Jamie was pretty sure she'd lost her mind that day.

She cut her hair off. She let the very nice lady at Gemma's salon take scissors to her hair and ... chop it. It was shocking. So short and light. She felt naked. And yet, at the same time, knowing she'd get her hair back once it legitimately fell out, she was okay with that.

Clearly meaning she was now insane.

She did like how the woman had cut it though, once she got over nearly-fainting as the stylist brushed her hair into a ponytail then just cut it off. Shorter, her hair now had some wave to it. And it did feel good, but it would take getting used to.

She wasn't completely okay with it until Tig said he liked it. It seemed stupid, silly, but after the big deal he made about her hair before ... well, she felt really good. Let's just leave it at that.

Then she invited him to supper. Again. In her house. Insane.

At least Aunt Thelma was going to be there. That was good. It was Calvin's last week of summer break, they'd go to her radiation treatments tomorrow then head right to the farm for a week. Jamie was looking forward to it. It was so peaceful there. Her favourite thing to do was curl up on the porch with a book. And Aunt Thelma was going to let her get away with ducking out of the work, she knew it.

And another adult was absolutely, completely necessary if Tig Trager was in her house again.

She headed back inside with a shy, sixth-grade-date-awkward wave to Tig, honed in on the relative comfort of her kitchen.

"Calvin," she shouted when she heard the bathroom door open in her bedroom. "What do want with the pork chops?"

"Can we have the tater tot special again?"

Jamie winced. They'd had it for his birthday, and it was delicious. But it was also tater tots, butter, cheese and bacon. Although, she wasn't too worried about weight gain at this point in time.

"Okay," she relented. "Is it okay if Tig comes for supper too?"

His grin tripled in size. "Yeah!"

"Okay, good. Go see if he needs any more help today."
"Thanks Aunt Jamie!" He completely ignored her open arms, which usually meant *hug me*, and raced for the front door, throwing open the screen and tearing off down the stoop.

She got everything ready for the tater tot … *casserole*? Was that a good term for it? Aunt Thelma used to make it for her and Jaclyn using hashbrown patties when they were growing up. It was both disgusting and delicious.

She decided to also roast a few potatoes, for the adults. Okay, for her and Thelma.

Jamie was slaughtering a block of marble cheese with her shredder when Thelma arrived, putting a bag on the table with a "How's everyone doing?" before she gasped and rushed at Jamie.

Jamie was turning around just as Thelma grabbed her face. "Your hair! What happened?!" She wasn't upset, she seemed to really love it.

Jamie grinned. "A friend took me to a salon today. They're making my hair into a wig."

Aunt Thelma had been fluffing her hair up a bit, then she froze. "Really?"

Jamie nodded. "She's a … friend of Tig's, actually. She took me there. She … bought me a wig."

Thelma's entire face softened. "Oh, honey. That's … that's so wonderful."

Jamie felt tears. Again. "Yeah, I thought it was pretty cool, too."

Thelma hugged her then pulled back and gave a thoughtful smile. "Jamie, honey. I haven't asked you about your neighbour but -"

"Aunt Thelma -"

"No, no. I get to say something, I'm older than you."

Jamie took a deep breath, but made her "carry on" motion anyway.

Thelma sat in at the kitchen table sideways, arm on the tabletop, the other on the back of the chair. "Is anything going on?"

Jamie turned away to the cheese and tater tots to answer. "No."

"Jamie," Thelma chastised.

"I don't know," she said over her shoulder. "I'm not in a good place. I can't even … *consider* that."

"Jesus, sweetheart. I'm not saying *marry* him."
That made Jamie turn around. "What?"

Thelma titled her head. "I may never have married, but that doesn't mean I'm going to my grave as pure as the day I was born."

Jamie had to blink a couple times. "Aunt Thelma!"

"What? You're not a child anymore, Jamie. You can handle hearing this."

Jamie rubbed her eyes, trying to position the woman talking to her right then as the aunt she'd known since birth.

"And if that was living next door to me it'd take a lot more than cancer to keep me out of his bed."

"Aunt Thelma!" Jamie knew it was silly, and she was too old to think of adults the same way she did when she was sixteen, but … what?

"I know what I walked in on on Calvin's birthday, Jamie. I've been sitting around, patiently waiting for you to wake up, but it's not happening. Calvin just informed me Tig's coming over for supper tonight? So you invited him just because?"

"It's to celebrate my last round of radiation, Aunt Thelma. He's been nearly babysitting Calvin this entire time." She heard how her voice went into teenager mode but that's how it was with Aunt Thelma.

Thelma chewed her lip. "I can't decide if he's attractive. Is he?"

Jamie blinked. "I … I don't know. I don't think it's how he looks, I think it's … being around him."

"Charm," Thelma guessed. "Yes, he's charming. How old do you think he is?"

Jamie shrugged. "I couldn't even guess. I'm sure he's older than I am but I have no idea how much older."

"I'm going to tell you a story. Can you handle it?"

"Can I reserve the right to stop you if you freak me out?"

Thelma waved a hand at the chair across from her, and Jamie sat with one leg bent underneath her, in case she felt the intense need to escape.

"Back when I first bought my farm, there was this man who I would hire every fall when he rolled through. He was just looking for a bit of work, a real rolling stone." Aunt Thelma smiled, suddenly looking very young. "He rode a motorcycle, too. He wasn't in a club or anything, but he
spent every spring, summer and fall riding across the country. I was so envious of that. And the way he filled out a pair of Levis? I tell you, sweetheart, it should have been a crime."

That made Jamie grin. And squirm.

"He was fifteen years younger than me. The first time he kissed me I didn't know if I should kiss him back or take him over my knee for Christ's sake." Thelma's eyes got twinkly, just a little. "Some of the best nights of my life were spent letting that boy kiss me. I knew it wouldn't last past autumn. I knew he wasn't going to be all mine. But … I'd never give up those three autumns, even knowing what I know now."

"Thelma -"

"You took on Calvin, honey. Someone else's mistake, but you made it your responsibility. You've always been a little grown-up in one way or another. That whole oldest sibling thing." Now Thelma looked sad. "You should have seen how you looked right after he kissed you, honey. Ten years younger. A thousand pounds of responsibility lighter. So beautiful. He took everything away for a second."

Jamie's nose tingled. Her eyes felt wet. "Thelma -"

"Your mother would kill me for saying this, but … if he makes you feel that good, then let him. Enjoy being young like this while you can. Like I did. There's no shame in being happy, Jamie. And that man? The way he held you? And was touching you?" Thelma shook her head. "You deserve that right now. You deserve something that makes you feel good."

Jamie knew cheeks were pink. "I … I don't know what to say to that."

"Don't say anything. Just consider it. Because, although I don't know him from a hole in the ground, I'd say you can trust him to be kind to you." They shared a moment of eye contact, then Thelma clapped her hands together. "Okay, I brought my cookie dough. Let's get these in the oven!"
Chapter 31

"What is this?" Tig asked, pointing at the baggies Clay had just thrown down on the table in front of them.

He'd gotten a call from the president late afternoon to come to church right away. Impromptu meeting. Now there were four small baggies of white crystals on the table, and even though he'd asked he knew what it was.

"That's the new ice on the streets. Gemma just found it on Trixie."

"Who the fuck's Trixie?" Tig snapped.

"Dark-haired one with the snatch like a steel trap," Chibs answered.

"Oh." Yeah, he knew which one that was. "Shit. She's an ice-head?"

Clay nodded. "I guess so. Smoking, not shooting. It's harder to tell. Gem brought this to me right after she threw her out."

"She say where she was getting it?" Bobby asked, stroking his beard.

"Skinny white kid outside the gas station on Elm. She bought it today."

"Recruited some more dealers," Chibs pointed out the obvious.

"Or sent some in. I'm getting really fucking tired of this Tiny guy," Clay muttered, rubbing his forehead. "Chibs, you and Bobby go take a look into this guy at the gas station. See if he's there. Tig, you wanna tag along?"

Tig rubbed his hands on his jeans. He was dying to take out more of these dealers, but he had supper at Jamie's. And he didn't want to be late for it.

So how could he share that without sounding totally pussy-whipped?

"I got something tonight, can't do," he answered ambiguously.

Chibs raised his eyebrows. "Really? Book club is it?"

"Nah, tonight's the night he calls bingo at the Senior's Centre," Piney croaked from the far end of the table. That cut all those pricks up.

Tig just nodded, biting his lip hard. "That's right, fuckers. Laugh it up."
"Is it a date?" Clay asked, bringing the room to utter silence.

Tig didn't look up from his hands. "No, not a date."

"Shit," Chibs muttered. "It's that piece next door to 'ya, isn't it?"

Tig just kept staring at his hands.

"She looks like she smells good," Bobby chuckled.

They'd all seen her the day she knocked down that dealer in his driveway, wearing a tank top and her short shorts and looking absolutely fuckable like she always did. And Bobby's comment made him crank his hands into fists.

"What was that?" Tig asked, head tilted.

"Enough of this," the VP Jax Teller snapped, bringing everyone's head around. "None of us should want to know anything about where Tig sticks it."

"Unless he's planning on sharing," Chibs amended with a grin. "I'd take seconds on that."

Tig wasn't sure what happened. One second he was sitting next to his brother, and the next he had the bastard up against the wall by the neck of his shirt, plowing his fist into Chibs' cheekbone.

Two more of his brothers were pulling him back, and the room was a mess of raised voices and curse words. Chibs, for his part, looked completely shocked by Tig's reaction, which was the only reason Tig didn't get a retaliatory belt in his beak.

Clay was the one to toss Tig off the Scotsman, Tig ending up half sitting on the redwood table. " Fucking hell," Clay roared. "Chibs, take Bobby and get the hell out of here. Now. Everyone else out." He pointed a finger at Tig. "You. Stay."

Everyone cleared out, and Tig took the moment to straighten his kutte, not looking any of his brothers in the eye. Once the doors were shut again he brought his face up to Clay's.

"You gotta sort your shit out," Clay snapped. "What the fuck is that about?"

Tig sighed, running his hand through his hair. "Nothing. I'm on edge."

"About what? The broad next door? Honest to Christ, I can't have you falling apart on account of pussy, man. My VP is all twisted up in knots with his old flame coming back to town and his old lady nearly killing their kid. Now my go-to right hand is losing his fucking mind? I can't have that, Tig."
"I know, Clay. I'm sorry. I just … I don't like them talking about Jamie like that. She ain't another crow eater."

"And you know the guys will bust your balls for it. Because she's not another crow eater. And they likely don't think you really mean it. The places your dick has been don't show you to be picky, Tig."

"I just don't want them talking that way about her," he repeated.

"Well, point made, I think. If you're into her, whatever. Stake that claim and move the fuck on, man. If not, just move on. And don't keep hiding her or lying about it. And no more fistfights over gash in fucking church, got it?"

Tig nodded, chastised and cracking his knuckles in nervousness. "Got it." Clay raised his eyebrows, obviously not believing it. "I got it!"

Clay nodded, heading back for the gavel, then turned back. "Did Gemma actually take her shopping today?"

"Yeah. She's going to lose her hair during chemo. They cut it off today, and Gemma's got this lady making her a wig I guess."

Clay blinked a couple times. "Fuck Tig, you are such a pain in my ass."

"Yeah, I know." He didn't know where that accusation came from, but it was usually true so he agreed without hesitation.

"If Gemma likes her, you cannot fuck this girl over. Gemma will tear your dick off with her bare hands."

"I know."

"Probably feed it to her fucking bird."

"I know."

"And then I'll be hearing about it, too."

Tig just nodded.

"Go ahead. Play house with the cutie-pie next door. But you know what these assholes are like when they think you're keeping a secret. You're not going to be able to hide it. You're a shitty liar."

Tig grinned. "Yeah, I know."
"And if she's willing to be with a miserable prick like you, you need to bring her out. Introduce her. Having her part of you when none of us know her is going to make the guys nervous. You know that, too. No matter how much she and Gemma might become best friends."

"I know. But she's shy. I don't want them scaring her off."

"She's gotta be tougher than that to be part of this club, Tigger," Clay said quietly. "The women gotta prove themselves just as much as we do."

Tig nodded.

"She clocked that guy that was going to beat the holy hell out of you. That bodes well for her. But if you want them respecting her, you got show her the respect of letting her get to know your family, man."

Tig looked at his feet, knowing every word Clay said was true. The scariest part was that he was thinking this way about a broad.

"Now go have dinner with your neighbour. Bring her a bottle of wine or something. And get fucking laid before your frustration ends up killing any of my guys, got it?"

Tig shook his head, but knew not to argue. "Later," was all he said as he made for his bike.

And he did stop for a bottle of white wine on his way back to his house. And like Calvin's birthday, he showered and put a clean shirt on before heading over.

Calvin let him in the door with a big "Hi Tig!" Then the kid bounded through the living room into the kitchen shouting "Tig's here!"

Aunt Thelma stepped out of the kitchen entryway, grinning broadly. "Tig, nice to see you again."

"Aunt Thelma," he greeted, surprising her by winding his arm around her back and kissing her cheek. "You're looking plenty saucy tonight."

"Oh, you flirt," she mumbled, shoving him off but giggling all the same.

"Damn, losing my touch," he mumbled back, grinning across the kitchen at Jamie and holding out the bottle of wine the broad at the store had recommended. "For dinner," he declared proudly.

"Thanks," Jamie said, taking the bottle and putting it in the fridge. Dammit, her ass looked great in jeans, too. He had to avert his eyes with Aunt Thelma in the room.

"Can I help with anything?" He wiped his hands on his shirt front like that cleared him for kitchen duty.
"Can you open this jar of pickles?" Thelma asked, handing it over, still a little red-faced. "Damn arthritis."

"Love to, doll."

As the seal of the jar popped and he handed it back, Tig admitted to himself Clay was right. This woman let her in his house, sat him down to eat with her aunt and nephew; the only people she really had in the whole world. Hell, he'd even met her shit show of a sister. In return, he was trying to shove her in a corner and keep her away from the people that mattered to him. Clay met her by accident and Gemma had forced her own introduction on Jamie. What an asshole he was.

And the thought of showing her off made him grin for some reason.

"We're eating outside," Jamie brought him back with her voice while handing him an opened bottle of beer. "You can go take a seat."

"You sure you don't need help?"

"Everything's taken care of. Go ahead."

With a nod and a wink at Aunt Thelma he joined Calvin at the patio table, setting his beer down next to the kid's bottle of root beer.

"Isn't that your third one today?"

"Yes."

"You sure you can handle that, Chuckles?"

Calvin laughed as an answer.

"Okay, buddy. Your bike. What kind of pink were you thinking about?"
Chapter 32

"No, no," Aunt Thelma chastised while slapping Jamie's hand away from the pile of plates. "Calvin and I can handle the dishes. It's almost his bedtime anyway."

Jamie gave her a very pointed look but Thelma was already through the patio door, Calvin dragging his feet behind her like he'd rather be in gym class.

Jamie shook her head to herself, taking a swig of wine while Tig cleared his throat and squinted at her over the patio table.

"So, last radiation treatment tomorrow?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Then a week's rest at Aunt Thelma's before chemo. I'm looking forward to this week, actually. I always sleep really well when I'm there. Must be the country air or something."

He grinned. "Yeah, this smoggy metropolis of Charming can sure keep you up, and that's not even counting the traffic and loud parties."

She laughed at that, setting her glass down. "Hey, this is urban compared to the farm."

"Then the chemo starts, hey?"

She nodded, feeling the smile fade. "Yeah. Really, the surgery should have been the scariest part but … the chemo has me terrified."

Tig cleared his throat again and shifted in his chair. "The contractor I lined up can start day after tomorrow. So that works out pretty well. He can do the bathroom while you're gone."

She winced. "I'm not sure I want anyone here when I'm gone."

"Would you trust me to watch over the work?"

Jamie blinked a couple times, liking how he phrased that as much as she liked the offer. "I wouldn't want to bother you - -"

"No bother," he cut in. "I'm right next door. I'm not going anywhere the next few days. Plus, if I scare them enough, I can make sure they're not stealing the knick knacks or panting over your photos up on the walls."

She made a face. "Tig!"

He laughed at that. "Hey, if I noticed them …" he let that trail off.
"Oh my God," she mumbled, reaching for the wine again.

The evening was already getting dark since they'd all lingered outside chatting and talking for hours. It was pleasant and comfortable, but with Aunt Thelma and Calvin no longer there Jamie felt on guard again.

"How are you holding up?" he finally asked quietly, those blue eyes focused on hers with alarming intensity and his voice showing concern. It made her uncomfortable in a very … warm way.

"Me?" She shrugged. "I don't know. I guess … I'm fine. Just doing one thing at a time, really."

He leaned forward, sideways to the table, elbows on his knees so he was almost close enough to touch. "I mean how are you holding up? After your surgery you were … upset."

She swallowed. "I'm sorry about that, I wasn't -"

"Don't be sorry. Not a lot of people trust me enough to really show me what they're thinking. Or feeling. I … kind of felt honoured."

She frowned. "By a weeping mess?"

He grinned. "You were never a mess, Jamie. I've been worried about you."

Another gulp of wine. Dammit, and damn Aunt Thelma for sharing her dusty ranch-hand Harlequin story.

"And I'm still thinking about the night of Calvin's birthday," he continued, eyes on the deck boards now. "And when I might be able to do that again."

Jamie inhaled, trying her best to not remember. Fighting back the sensory memory of his hands, his mouth, the smell and feel of him … but it was in her. And she couldn't pretend it wasn't.

"Tig, listen -"

"I'll never push you. But I think it's fair that you know this. I like you." His eyes came up again and she was pinned in place. "A lot. And not just a roll-in-the-hay kind of like, that ain't it at all. It'd be easier if it was, I'm more used to that. But that's not what's going on here. And quite frankly Jamie, you can do a hell of a lot better than me. I know that. It doesn't mean I accept it. I kissed you. And I think you liked it as much as I did."

She couldn't interject, couldn't stop him from sharing. Who the hell talked like that? Just put it all out there as he was thinking it? Who did that?

"Tig -"
"So you have to tell me to fuck off. Or let it lie. Or give you time. Or ask me to do it again. Because I need to know if I'm banging my head on this wall for a reason. So Jamie ... what's it going to be?"

"We need to plan this out?"

That brought on a crazy grin. "Not plan it. But I've laid it out there. And you have not. You have a lot going on, I get that, too. But without guidance, I'm going to just do what I want to do. And you're shy, you're quiet. I want to give you a chance to tell me to back off."

Shit. It made her uncomfortable but she had to admit she liked that he laid it out like that.

Jamie set her wine down, opened her mouth to speak, closed it, leaned forward, and tried again. She wasn't as direct. She couldn't do this. She couldn't just say what she wanted.

"I'm not made like that," she said, frowning at how stupid it sounded.

He nodded. "Okay." Then he got to his feet, took her arm and pulled her up with him. "Your aunt and Calvin will be out here soon. Tell me before they get out here or I'm kissing you right now."

Her chest and cheeks warmed instantly, heart fluttering to be standing so close while remembering how he kissed. "Ummm ..."

He laughed. "You're not that well-spoken."

"No, I'm not."

"That's okay," he whispered, hand along her waist, sliding around her back, pulling her close in the process. His widened his eyes, almost a threat. "I'm gonna do it, Jamie. I mean it."

"I don't ... I need time to think."

"No, you don't," he assured her. "You've had plenty of time to think of a lot of things. You're leaving for a week, you'll have time to think then, too." His other hand slid along the side of her neck. "Right now, in this moment, what do you want?"

She blinked. Breathed. Licked her lips. Shit.

Tig kissed her. Same as before, but it still shocked her how softly he could do it, and she again stopped breathing at first, her eyes closing right at the moment of contact. And then she licked his bottom lip.

She might not have been able to say it, but apparently that said plenty. He ... growled, was the only way to put it, hand spearing into her hair at the back of her head while his arm clenched around her back, tight enough that it wrapped all the way around her waist. And his tongue in her
mouth was just as aggressive, just as consuming, bringing more heat to her face. Then she had to breathe so she gasped into his mouth but it came across more like a whimper.

Her heart was hammering almost painfully. And the thought of what she may be lacking was gone, he held her tight and kissed her exactly in the way he likely wanted her. And she liked it, holy shit she really liked it.

"Don't kiss her!"

Tig let her mouth go, but he was still holding her. She blinked to get her bearings back, turning her head to the doorway. Calvin was standing on the porch, his hands clenched tight, his face twisted with anger.

"Calvin!" she scolded, and that's when Tig stepped back, letting go of her. Her body didn't like that much, but she'd never seen Calvin so angry.

"Don't kiss her. Don't touch her!"

She made eye contact with Tig, and he was looking just as alarmed as she was. She took a breath then approached her nephew, hand out to put on his shoulder. "Calvin -" she began gently, but he backed out from under her hand.

"No, and you stay away from me, too!" Then he was gone, back through the door in a flurry of stomping feet.

She turned back to Tig, eyes wide. "I have no idea what just happened."

Tig's jaw was set, hands on hips. "I got it," he said low, pushing past her into the house.
Chapter 33

Tig got his breathing and pulse back to normal before knocking on the kid's door with his knuckle. More than being absolutely ramped up about Aunt Jamie, he was pretty much gutted by the look on Calvin's face on the patio.

There was no answer to his knock. "Can I come in, Chuckles?"

"Go away."

Guilty and a bit pissed off, that's where Calvin's answer got him to. "Nah man, you give someone an order like that you better be able to explain yourself. You can't just disappear and pout."

"Tig!" Jamie hissed from the mouth of the hallway. "Just leave him be for a while."

Tig shook his head. "Nah, I'm finding out what the hell that was all about. He's a kid, Jamie. He has to answer for shit."

"Let him be," she repeated.

Tig felt his eyebrows go up. "What he just said felt like an accusation, of what, I have no idea. And he doesn't get to talk to you that way, either. He's in your house, it's your rules. You get respect. That's bullshit."

She swallowed and bit her lip. He hated to think she might be a bit afraid of him, but at least she didn't appear worried he was going to take his belt to Calvin's butt or anything.

"Calvin," he called out, turning back to the door. "I'm coming in, buddy."

He waited, got no answer, then pushed the door inwards. Calvin was on his side on his bed, curled up in a ball with his face to the opposite wall.

Tig stepped into the room, hands on hips, waiting. Still no response.

"Calvin," he said, intentionally softening his voice. "What was that all about?"

Silence again. Tig inhaled, putting his patience to the limit, eyes scanning the room and its diagrams of solar systems and pictures of stars and shit. New to the mix: a beauty shot of a Harley Davidson Softail Classic. He guessed it was a 2003. There was also a shelf stuffed full of well-loved books, more than Tig had probably ever held in his lifetime, never mind read. On top sat that damn Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.

Tig picked it up, grinning at how pages were dog eared, even though it was a library book. "How many times have you checked this book out, Chuckles?"
No answer, just a sniffle.

Tig lowered himself to his ass with a groan, leaning against the wall next to the door. He flipped through the marked sections, eyebrows high as he realized this book was a bit better than he had originally thought.

"Other people can talk about how to expand the destiny of mankind. I just want to talk about how to fix a motorcycle. I think that what I have to say has more lasting value," Tig muttered to himself. He didn't like reading out loud, he was nowhere near as smooth with it as Calvin was. He flipped pages again, casting a look up at the lump on the bed. Nothing.

He cleared his throat, found another marked page. "You look at where you're going and where you are and it never makes sense, but then you look back at where you've been and a pattern seems to emerge." That one registered. Man, that one really registered. Flipped pages again.

Still, Calvin didn't stir.

Tig tried another one. "The truth knocks on the door and you say, 'Go away, I'm looking for the truth,' and so it goes away. Puzzling."

Calvin sat up, that little face still screwed up with how pissed was, eyes red, and he slid his glasses back in place.

Fuck it. Tig was taking him to get new glasses, that pissed him off.

"What's going on, man?" Tig asked gently. "You gotta tell me why you went off on me like that."

Calvin's lower lip shook when he talked. "It was just because you liked her. You're not my friend at all."

Well shit. If Tig ever thought a kid this small and skinny couldn't possibly hurt him, he was dead wrong. That was a sucker punch to the gut.

"Why would you say that?"

"Why else would you pretend to be my friend?"

"Calvin, trust me, I'm a real shitty liar. I wasn't pretending anything." Fuck, this was complicated. Tig set the book down, rubbing his eyes. "Why would I be here asking you to talk to me?"

"So Aunt Jamie doesn't get mad at you. Because you like her."

"I don't want you mad at me, Calvin." Maybe it was because he used the kid's real name, but he finally got eye contact. "Come on, man. We hang out, isn't that fun?"
Calvin nodded.

"Am I mean to you when your Aunt Jamie's not around?"

Pause, then Calvin shook his head.

Tig saw it, plain as day. "Were guys nice to you just to get close to your mom?"

Biting his lip, Calvin nodded.

"Then they left when they didn't want her around anymore?"

Again, a nod.

Tig got to his knees, bracing his elbows on the side of the bed. "Calvin, you're smarter than me. You're gonna be a better person than me. You won't do as much stupid shit as me. Technically, you shouldn't want me as friend."

Calvin looked panicked. "But I thought you were -"

"I am," he assured him. "And I'm the lucky one, buddy. Trust me. I like you, Chuckles. And yeah, I like your aunt Jamie. I mean, she's really pretty. Don't you think she's pretty?"

Calvin made a face.

"Hey, come on now. You know she is," Tig said with a laugh, giving the kid's shoulder a knock.

"I guess," he admitted. Reluctantly.

"Dude, you can get as mad at me as you want. Call me names. Tell me I'm doing something dumb. But give me the chance to explain myself. 'Cause we're friends, and that's how it is with friends. I can do the same thing to you." He lowered his face and raised his eyebrows to show how serious he was now. "But I never want to hear you be mean to Aunt Jamie ever again. got it? Get mad at me all you want, but not her. She doesn't deserve that. Right?"

Calvin's eyes watered up again. "I know."

"Don't cry," he was saying, but before he knew it this skin-and-bones nine year old was throwing himself into Tig, hugging him.

Tig froze, not sure about the decorum on hugging kids. Kids that weren't his. Fuck it. He hugged Calvin, patting his narrow little back. "You got a problem with me, you tell me, buddy," Tig said. "I ain't a mind reader. You gotta have the balls to say it or just put up with it. Yeah?"

"Yeah," Calvin agreed, backing off him and perching on the bed. "I'm sorry Tig."
"Don't sweat it, Chuckles," Tig replied, messing up his hair. "You just want to protect Aunt Jamie, too. That's good. That makes me proud of you."

Tig had to grin at how Calvin sat up straighter, his little chest puffing out all proud. Tig held up his fist. "We good?"

Calvin bumped it. "We're good."

"All right. Can I go kiss Aunt Jamie again now?"

Calvin made a face. "She's a girl!"

"I don't like kissing guys. That's my business, not yours," Tig muttered, standing up. "Now go to bed. And stop cramping my style. I'm supposed to be a badass."

"You're not," Calvin informed him with great wisdom.

Tig had to smile. "Go to sleep. You're still growing."
Chapter 34

Jamie downed the last mouthful from the bottle of wine Tig had bought for supper just as he returned to the kitchen. Thelma was watching TV, volume quite loud, and Jamie got to her feet from the kitchen table, worried.

"What happened?" she asked desperately.

"He thought I was only being nice to him to get in your pants," Tig said bluntly. "I'm thinking your sweetheart of a sister had quite a few guys taking that angle with him. It really hurt him."

Jamie's eyebrows went up. "He told you all that?"

Tig shook his head. "Believe it or not, I figured it out all for myself. That's what he was so pissed about. Getting mad at you, that was just the left over."

Jamie felt that one right in the heart. "Oh my God, that poor kid."

"He's fine, we're buds again. Forgiven and understood."

She sighed. "Thank you. Should I go talk to him?"

"Absolutely not," he said in a tone that startled her, made her look up into those unbelievably blue eyes while her heart skipped a bit.

"What? Why?"

He played with the hair behind her right ear, smiling now, just a bit. "Because I told him I was coming out here to kiss you again. I told him to go to bed."

Jamie's cheeks got warm. "Tig, why'd you tell him that?"

"Why should I lie? That's the worst thing that kid's gonna see in his life? Me kissing his aunt?"

Well stop talking about it and do it was her stupid response, thankfully a silent one. Trying to figure out what to say, she absently licked her lips.

She had to be more careful with that, apparently.

Tig growled and kissed her again, lifting her up to her tiptoes with his hands on her waist, making her feel small and petite.

She pushed away, taking a deep breath. "Tig -" she whispered.
"Swear to Christ Jamie," he muttered, hand pressing to her jaw, his thumb running down from her lip to her chin roughly. "We do that again without anyone else around and it's ending up in bed."

Full-body quiver that made her close her eyes. She might have stopped breathing.

Then he let her go with another quick kiss on the cheek. "Spare keys? For the contractors?"

"Key holder by the front door," she answered almost robotically. "Kermit the Frog key chain."

He nodded and left her kitchen, the room feeling bright and airy again once he was clear of it. She had to close her eyes and cover her mouth, trying to fight what her body was wanting.

"Jamie."

She turned, seeing Aunt Thelma wide-eyed in the curved archway between the kitchen and living room. "What?"

"Go after him."

She frowned. "What?"

"Go after him. See what happens. You're going to be so sick in a week, and ... it would be nice to have a good moment to think about? Wouldn't it?"

Jamie was incredulous. "Are you insane?"

"Go after him," Thelma repeated. "Or by Christ, I will myself."

Jamie blinked, then had to grin. "Oh, Aunt Thelma."

"Go," she insisted, grabbing Jamie's arm and pulling her though the living room. "Let me just live vicariously for once and go do something maybe stupid but certainly tempting. Go." She pulled the door open and waited.

"Aunt Thelma."

"Honey, go feel good. Even if it's just for a little while. Please."

Jamie's cheeks were blazing red, the wine in her blood making her feel a little too impulsive suddenly.

"I can't."

"Trust me Jamie, you can."
That was how she found herself striding up his walkway, to the stoop, and opening the screen door without knocking, wondering if she was drunk or crazy.

"What are you doing here?" Tig sounded like he felt her confusion as well, having just flicked on the kitchen light, turning to his door when he heard her open it.

"I just …" she lost the words. Her heart was hammering, now that she'd done the really stupid part and followed him over here, set foot in his house alone. That's pretty much where her plan ended.

"Is everything okay?"

She took a deep breath, shaking her head. "I just …" Yep, second time she'd said that.

He came forward, hand going to the side of her face gently. "Jamie? Are you okay?"

She closed her eyes. Shit, that just figured. She was turned on, he was all about friendly concern and worry. This was a stupid idea.

Jamie opened her eyes, about to excuse herself and her odd behaviour, blaming it on copious amounts of wine, but he was still too close and dark and intimidating and exciting. She sighed, looking up at those eyes, deciding right then and there that they were gorgeous. Not scary; she'd never had them look at her in anger or intimidation. They were gorgeous and they almost hurt.

She leaned in and kissed him. He was surprised, easing back like he was worried she didn't realize what she'd done. But instead of letting him back away, she followed, pressing into his chest, sliding her arms around his shoulders.

Joy and triumph didn't quite cover what she felt when he wrapped both arms around her back. He deepened the kiss immediately, making a meal of her lips and taking control of her mouth. Her hands found his hair, his want to hers as well, holding her head in place firmly.

"I told you what would happen," he growled against her mouth.

"I know," she panted back, almost hating how desperate it sounded and how warm he'd already made her.

His hands shot down to the bottom of both ass cheeks, and on cue she popped up to his waist, letting him hold her weight as she squeezed her thighs to his hips. He held her there for a moment, kissing her more until she moaned, catching herself completely by surprise.

That was when he moved, carrying her through his darkened living room to the hall, through a doorway, kicking it closed behind him. How he found the bed she didn't know, didn't care.

Tig lowered her to the edge of the mattress carefully, dropping to his knees in front of her, then gathering her up to his chest again, popping her backside off the bed and landing her in his lap.
like he changed his mind. His hands pushed under her shirt to slide over her lower back warm, rough, and fantastic. His mouth absolutely divine, the rest of her body aching to get the same treatment her lips and tongue were enjoying.

"I gotta to see you," he whispered, mouth still on hers. "I gotta turn the light on. Please. I've been dying to know."

His words made her shudder, but what he was asking made her think, which froze her.

He felt it, felt her withdraw. His hands slid up her neck to cup her face in front of his, his breath smelling of beer, hot on her skin. It wasn't disgusting, it was perfectly him and it tasted like he did and she was loving it. "Please Jamie, let me watch you. You're so fucking beautiful. I've got to see."

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath, letting his words wash over her. He thought she was beautiful, he wanted to see her. This man who could have "easy" without much trouble, was desperate for her. And the entire time all she could think was how her body had been mangled. How he'd undoubtedly be disgusted, and that would kill her.

"Please," he whispered again. "I could never see you as anything but perfect."

Tears stung her eyes, but before she could go back to that dark and ugly place she was replying, "Okay."

He lifted her from his lap easily, depositing her on the edge of the bed again. He leaned across her to flick on the light on the nightstand, and the room lit up warm and golden.

When Jamie had stayed here she liked the light of that lamp, it had been great for reading. For some reason it reminded her of her parent's cottage in Washington state. There was a lamp there that had been an old seventies relic delegated to cottage duty with a fringed orange shade, but the light it gave was so particular to how safe and cosy she'd always felt there. Tig's lamp had the same glow.

But now the glow held him, in front of her, still on his knees. Her hands were on his chest, pushing into the neck of his shirt. The way his eyes were running over her made his words more believable. Well, if he wanted to see her she wanted to see him, too.

She undid the top button of his shirt, and he was quick to help, undoing the next four quickly in the time it took her to get her hands to function well enough to do the top one. Impatient, he pulled the shirt off over his head, cupping her face in his hands again and pulling her mouth to his.

Jamie's hands ran over his chest. He wasn't ripped, but he felt strong. His chest was covered in a carpet of hair, which she half-expected. This was a man's man, they always had chest hair. She scratched her fingernails through it before he caught her wrists, chuckling – again, another trait that was so male she felt something deep behind her bellybutton quiver a little.
"Easy, sweetheart," he murmured, kissing her softly. "I'm ticklish."

She smiled against his lips, that bit of personal information thrilling in its own way. He eased upward, forcing her back, squirming on elbows and ass until they were both reclined on the bed, his weight held off her with both elbows, chest on hers, his hips next to her on the mattress. His eyes were downright shining as he studied her, hand smoothing over her cropped hair, licking his lips at the sight of her. Or so it seemed.

"Aunt Jamie," he said absently. "Finally in my bed with me."

She smiled, wanting to cry again for some insane reason. "Tig -"

"You'll let me give you what I promised?"

"What?"

"I promised you something nice, remember?"

Her skin lit off like wildfire. She could feel how her cheeks were blazing. "I remember." She was embarrassed that her voice shook, embarrassed that he heard it and embarrassed that it still made her all bothered to remember it.

"Good," he whispered and kissed her again before she could humiliate herself more. The kiss was slow but intense, to the point where she was winding her leg around his hip, turning her body into his to have as much of him as she could as close as possible. His hands slid under her shirt, fingers making lazy circles on her skin in such a concentrated pattern she was feeling it in other more private and sensitive places. That feeling and her own surprising passion meant she let herself get lost in the kiss, holding on for dear life and letting him sweep her away. From everything.

His hand slid up to her breast, the real one, hand cupping her along the swell of the bottom and side, pulling back from her kiss as her eyes slid closed, breathing fast. "I won't touch anything you don't want me to, okay?"

She didn't even have the ability pout and contemplate her bad luck of not being whole, all because his hand on her right breast was careful, attentive, and when he ran his thumb over her nipple her entire body jolted and she moaned, eyes flying open, her own response surprising her.

He was smiling down on her, eyes on her face. He'd been watching her react to that touch, and she knew her blush had probably increased three shades. But his thumb was still moving, and it made her scissor her legs against him.

She licked her lips, swallowing hard, eyes locked on his face. She was nervous and anticipating what he was going to do next, but it wasn't in her to request anything.
His hand slid into the cup of her bra to hold her breast in his palm, now rolling her nipple between a finger and his thumb very gently. Her lips parted so breathing would be easier, but the sharp thrill of what he was doing shot straight to the spot between her legs, making her writhe them more. His lips came to the side of her neck, the scruff on his chin rubbing her in a way that was definitely male.

Jamie found the courage to move her hands, one going to his shoulder, holding it tight, the other resting on his head. She was surprised at how soft his hair actually was, and she was spearing her fingers into it without thinking about it.

His hand left her breast, leaving it noticeably colder, sliding down her ribs to rest on her hip, his thumb moving back and forth along the front of her hip bone. He raised his head again, eyes hooded and heated at the same time, locking eyes before crushing his mouth on her again.

Jamie's hand tightened in his hair, her head tilting so when she parted her lips his tongue could dive in fully, stroking her mouth and lips like he was memorizing the taste of her. The motion of his tongue heated the same parts of her his hand on her breast had, and she whimpered. The need was going to make her crazy and she was dying for him to touch her where it really counted. She rolled her hips involuntarily, and he caught on.

She was suddenly on her back, his weight on her, one of his legs between her thighs. She could feel his erection pressing into her leg, and it made her jerk her hips again. He groaned low and long, moving that length against her.

"Fuck, Jamie," he growled into her mouth. "I've wanted you … I've wanted this for so long."

She gasped as he pinched her nipple harder, the tension in her lower belly now torturous. But still she couldn't ask. She didn't have the words or the nerve.

"Can I take this off?" he asked, hands sliding around to her back where her bra was clasped.

She had a moment of reluctance, then he ran his tongue along her collar bone, making her whisper, "Yes."

It was undone immediately, and she wriggled under him to get her arms out of the straps. He didn't push to get her shirt off, but he wanted to touch her and she was going to let him.

Once she had one shoulder strap off his hand grasped her breast, kneading it, still teasing her nipple but taking the weight of it against his palm. She knew he liked it; his hips bucked against her again.
The arm keeping most of his weight off her was wound under her shoulders, his hand cupping the back of her head, turning her to kiss him deeper. Her chin was rubbed raw from his in a way she really liked, so much that she didn't really notice his hand release her breast and skim along her stomach to the fly of her jeans. He ran a finger inside the waistband, his knuckle sliding back and forth across her lower belly close to an area that felt hot and swollen.

She opened her eyes to see his staring down on hers. He didn't say anything, but when he had eye contact he started unbuttoning her jeans, then pulling the zipper downwards. His eyes were on her face, waiting for her to say stop.

She licked her lips.

He did the same as her zipper was open all the way. Then his hand was inside her pants, cupping her through her panties. She gasped, and he closed his eyes as his fingers pressed close. Jamie could feel how wet she was then, which undoubtedly made her face go even further into the red. He slid two fingers down then up, her underwear in the way, creating friction.

Her hand left his shoulder to dig into the arm that had her panting. When his eyes opened again it looked as though he expected her to say stop. She took a deep breath, giving him the eye contact he wanted, then moved against his hand.

He rose up higher on his arm, half-rolling off her, then pulled his hand away. She tightened her grip which made him smile. "Jamie, I ain't leaving it like that. Don't worry," he murmured with a chuckle and her face grew warmer yet.

He tucked that hand in under her panties, and she moved her hips and widened her thighs, breathing heavier before his hand was even where she wanted it.

When those fingers did slide down between heated folds she gave a gasp, head going back. His mouth fell on her throat with a groan, kissing and sucking along her skin. But she didn't feel it because the rough pads of his fingers were moving across her clit, slick with her own wetness, and she felt the agony of an orgasmic build-up.

She was whimpering in rhythm with him, and when he slid two fingers inside she felt herself come apart, her feet rising off the mattress, toes curling, back arching, biting her lip to not holler out. She trembled and shook after, her breathing sounding ragged. Her eyes flickered open, taking in his face as he gazed down on her so sweetly she wouldn't have believed it possible. How incredibly …
Chapter 35

... perfect.

Tig felt like he came when she did. With his fingers still buried inside her she turned her face toward his, looking soft and content.

His lowered his mouth to hers gently and she responded hungrily, hand sliding up along the back of his neck to keep him close, that fucking sweet mouth on his like candy.

"I gotta taste you," he moaned, shocking himself because he certainly didn't mean to say it out loud.

Her eyes got bright, and her cheeks reddened, which was so fucking adorable he nearly forgot his hand was still inside her. He removed his fingers, watching her eyes close and her breath hitch as he did it. He sat back on his heels between her legs, pulling down on her jeans and panties, taking them both off at once. She covered the juncture of her thighs with one hand, legs slamming shut as soon as her pants were off her ankles.

It made him chuckle again, and he took in how her skin goose pimpled when he did it. "Are you cold?"

"No," she whispered, then repeated louder. "No. I'm fine."

He stretched up over her, elbow next to her head, hand resting along her neck. "Is it okay if I do this?"

"What … what are you doing?"

He ran his nose along hers, keeping his tone low and private, just like hers, right where he wanted her. "I'm going to go down on you, Jamie. Like I just said, I gotta taste you."

"You want to do that?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm starving for it, Jamie."

Her eyes were fevered on his, scanning his face before nodding.

He kissed her mouth, teasing at her tongue again, careful to keep his hand on her right breast, pulling at her nipple to make her cry out softly. Then he dropped his head to her belly, kissing that warm soft skin all the way down, stopping to pull her knees apart, getting down on his elbows in front of her, running his eyes along her private skin, looking up to see her watching him. He gave her a smile.
"You're so fucking beautiful," he whispered before striking out with his tongue softly once to see if she was with him.

One foot jerked up next to him then dropped. She panted. Yeah, she was so with him.

He closed his mouth over her clit, letting his tongue work in circles slow and soft. Her hips were moving with him. He didn't suck, didn't speed up, he just added his fingers and was rewarded with a very female, very satisfied moan.

He refused to roughen up his treatment. As heated as he was, as much as he wanted to get rid of his own jeans and plunge into her deep, he was still remarkably in control of himself. He wanted to feel her come like this, with his fingers inside and his mouth tasting her gently. The combination was like a leash on him.

The orgasm surprised them both. Her hips bucked but he was already holding her in place, her legs writhing along his arms. She was mewing, the sounds matching the contractions he felt along his fingers. He softened his tongue's attentions, only stopping when she was quiet and still.

He kissed her stomach. Her chest over the T-shirt. Her neck. She turned her head in time to meet his lips, both her hands fisting in his hair. Her legs wrapped around his waist and he knew then she was his.

He could take her.

To come to this after so long dancing around each other, pretending they didn't want each other. Culminating right now, with her in his bed, willing and warm. She wanted this before chemo, he knew that. She wanted this before she got sick and lost her hair and a lot of weight …

He pulled his head back, hand on her stomach. There was panic in his chest, and he didn't like it. He didn't want her to get that sick. He didn't want her to go through all that shit.

Fuck, she could die. He could lose her completely.

"Tig," her voice was still thick with want. "What's wrong?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but he was locked on her eyes, how bright they were. Alive and gorgeous and vibrant. Fuck, he didn't want to lose any of her, actually.

"Tig?" Her tone told him she was sensing something amiss.

Fuck, how did he stop now? How could he stop without absolutely embarrassing her? Shit, he couldn't do this.

"Jamie," he mumbled, lowering his forehead down to hers and closing his eyes.

"Is something wrong?" Christ, she was worried about him.
He was a fucking asshole.

"Shit, Jamie. I … we can't do this."

The pause felt like she struck him before she asked, "What?"

"I shouldn't do this. I … I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" she hissed, scrambling out from under him flying off the bed and grabbing at her clothes. "Hurt me," she repeated, annoyed, still breathless but now plenty angry, clumsily pulling on her jeans. "Don't fucking look at me," she snapped, doing up her fly.

"Jamie, it's not because you're -"

"Incomplete? Of course not. You'll fuck anything with a hole, but that isn't about this," she spat back while slapping her chest.

"I care about you, babe -"

"Don't do that. Don't fucking do that. Don't call me babe as you lie to me." She was struggling to get her bra on under her shirt.

He stared at the bedspread, heart feeling like about ten thousand pounds of concrete. "I care about you, Jamie. You … you shouldn't be with someone like me."

She got the bra done up and was headed for the door in the meantime. But before she got there she spun around. "It's not me, it's you? Give me a break, Tig. I just wanted to get laid. To have something fun happen to me before I go off to the world of chemotherapy. That's all. You think I'm here falling in love with you? Don't fucking flatter yourself."

Then she was gone. The anger she left behind stung, it cut to the quick and she might not believe it but he felt each word.

That was good, though. If she was pissed, she'd stay away. And now he was only half-worried that he'd find ways to hurt her worse once she was even deeper under his skin. He'd take that pain gladly to keep it from her.

He was just too fucking scared to let her matter more than she already did, and that was the brutal truth.

He got to his feet like a broken man, pushed his way into the bathroom and turned the tap on the sink. He washed his hands thoroughly to get rid of her, then scrubbed at his face with both hands as well. When the smell and taste of her was gone, only the tingle of sweet along his jaw and up the back of his neck, he returned to the bedroom, picked up his shirt, grabbed his keys and locked up his house.
He climbed on the Dyna, not wanting to ride the bike that Calvin helped him build now, kicking it to life loudly and taking off down the street headed for the clubhouse.

Such a fucking asshole. He knew very damn well that girl deserved better than him. But he was a selfish prick, and he knew how to be nice to a woman just enough to get her curious and interested. He'd pulled that on Jamie and she didn't fucking deserve it.

It looked as though most of the club was assembled for the evening. He parked in line with the other SAMCRO bikes, climbed off and headed for the clubhouse door. Chibs was smoking on a patio table outside, bottle of beer dangling between his knees. As Tig approached he heard the Scot chuckling.

"Bedtime for that sweet little neighbour of yours come and gone then?" he quipped.

"Fuck you," Tig muttered as he stalked past.

"Don't be so sensitive, Tiggy. I think this slip of gash is making you irritable."

Like before, the anger struck like a black out and before he knew it his fist was stinging like a bitch and Chibs was on his back on the ground, cradling his jaw with one hand. He'd dropped the smoke but managed to keep his beer upright and unbroken.

The Scot set the bottle on the seat he'd been sitting on and stood slowly, cranking his jaw to the side and looking up at Tig under his lowered brow. Tig knew that look, it was as pissed-off-looking at the bastard got.

"You want a fight then?"

"You don't hit someone if you don't want a fight," Tig replied hollowly.

"I owe you for earlier, too," the asshole reminded him.

Tig just set his jaw and waited.

Chibs gave him a moment, looked him up and down, then shrugged one shoulder. "All right then," he conceded before connecting a left hook with Tig's jaw.

He may have been getting a touch slower in his old age, like Tig was, but Chibs still packed a hell of a punch. Stars lit off in Tig's head, and he righted himself with some difficulty, shaking his dome and bringing his hands up. "Not bad," he admitted.

*It's not me, it's you? Give me a break, Tig.*

Another hook, but Tig answered with a jab to Chibs' gut that he was ready for, his stomach tightened before Tig got there.
I just wanted to get laid.

Another hook he didn't even try to evade, white lights fading the world again momentarily.

You'll fuck anything with a hole, but that isn't about this.

He stood stock still for the fourth hit, a bitch of a jab that caught his cheekbone.

You think I'm here falling in love with you? Don't fucking flatter yourself.

Tig hit the ground on one knee, hearing Chibs' heavy breathing as he circled away muttering " Fucking hell," to himself.

"Thanks," Tig muttered, his voice sounding thick. He spat, and it was bloody.

"Fuck you," Chibs said, but with affection. He crouched in front of Tig, hand on his shoulder. "What the hell's wrong?"

"I think I'm fucking broken."

"Broken how?"

"I fucked it up with Jamie."

Chibs sighed. "What'd you do?"

He shook his head. "God, I wanted her. I wanted her so fucking bad."

"You didn't hurt her?"

He couldn't be mad at Chibs for asking. "No, I did worse. I … left." His raised his eyes to Chibs'. "She was saying yes and I … said no."

Chibs' weight eased back onto his heels and he exhaled. "Ah, Tiggy," he said, and that was it.

"I know." Tig got to his feet so Chibs did too, but Tig rolled his shoulders back, trying to reassert some man into his spine. "She won't forgive me. It took a lot to get close and …"

Chibs regarded him silently, tongue working in his cheek as he was thinking something over. "I can't help with this," Chibs finally said. "You need to talk to something with a vagina."

Tig blew out a breath. "I need to get drunk," he corrected. "Completely mindlessly drunk so I don't even get up tomorrow."

Chibs nodded, slapping his shoulder. "All right, that I can help with."
Chapter 36

"Jamie? Honey, open the door. Please sweetheart, tell me what happened."

Jamie could only shake her head, curled up in a ball in the corner of her tiny bathroom, trying not to make any noise with her sobbing. It hurt. It made it harder to stay quiet.

Aunt Thelma sounded ready to form a lynch mob. "What did he do? Jamie, answer the door. I'm sorry I told you to go over there. Just tell me what happened."

She was embarrassed. Humiliated. Mortified. And still really turned on. Jamie squeezed her eyes shut, dug her nails into her palms and forced herself to pull it together. Racing into the house in tears and refusing to speak was hardly a constructive activity. She had to grow the fuck up.

She stood, made sure her clothes were properly arranged, then pulled the door open. "It's nothing," she whispered, the emotion in her voice totally betraying her.

"What did he do?" Aunt Thelma did look ready for battle.

"Nothing. He didn't do anything wrong. That's the fucking problem," she whimpered as her face crumbled up.

"What happened, honey?"

"He wanted me. I really thought he did."

"So why are you over here?"

"He said … we shouldn't do it."

Aunt Thelma's eyes widened. "Oh dear."

" Tried to tell me it wasn't because of the surgery but … he wanted me, Aunt Thelma. I could … I could tell," she said, not so ambiguously that Thelma wouldn't get her meaning.

"But he's worried about you," Thelma finished.

"That's what he said."

"Oh dear," she said for the second time. "It's more serious than I thought."

"What?"
"He cares about you, Jamie. It's not just about a fun roll in the hay. I'm sorry, that's what I thought was going on with you two. I mean, usually you don't get kissed like that if it's more than attraction but I guess … not all men are created equal."

She covered her face. "Aunt Thelma!"

"What? I'm sorry. I really thought that was it. But he cares, Jamie. That's something else entirely." Her face softened when she pulled Jamie's hands away. "Honey, that's a good thing, too. It's nice to know someone cares about my niece, other than just me. I think he could take good care of you."

"Are you insane? I'm … sick."

"And getting better."

"Thelma, I'm … dying."

Thelma looked like Jamie had struck her.

"I am," Jamie kept going, the dam broken and all kinds of shit flooding out. "There's no getting involved with someone that's going to die. That's insane."

"Jamie, you're going to get through -"

"I'm not going to kick this because I'm not strong enough. I'm not special enough to have that happen for me. And everyone hoping that I get better is … going to be horribly disappointed, even if it is only two people in the whole world."

Thelma shut the door, turned around just in time to see Jamie retreat to the corner to curl up in a ball and wait to die. "Listen to me," Thelma whispered. "I don't know what you're going through. You know that. Calvin doesn't know what you're going through. That man next door certainly doesn't know. But don't make the rest of us feel guilty for that."

"Why do I have to make everyone else feel better?"

"You don't, Jamie. You have to count on us for support and know that we're here for you."

She just covered her face.

"And you're not allowed to make us feel bad for caring about you. That is one thing you do not get to do."

Jamie dropped her hands, so shocked she had no idea what to say. She even stopped crying.
"You keep this up and it's going to piss me off, but I can deal with it. I'm an adult. You will scare the shit out of Calvin with it, though. And that I will not let happen. You're tougher than this, so just ... straighten the fuck up, Jamie."

That stung. That really stung.

"I'm so sorry we're worried about you. I'm so sorry we want what's best for you. I'm so sorry there's a man next door that really cares about you. You're right. You've got it rough." Then she spun, yanked the door open and left, not closing it behind her.

She'd never seen Thelma so angry. Fuck, that really made her feel like shit.

Jamie got up, washed her face, brushed her teeth, and wished she could lock herself in her room. But she couldn't. Because the only functioning bathroom in the house was off of her bedroom.

She really wanted to throw things. But instead, she got her pyjamas on, crawled into bed, and didn't sleep a wink.

...

"So, that was it for radiation," Doctor Foster pleasantly reminded her as he entered his office where she was already waiting, dressed and ready to head to Thelma's for the week.

"Yeah," she nodded, hands fidgeting in her lap. "Too bad. I think I was finally getting used to it."

He just grinned, taking his seat behind the desk. "Now, your chemotherapy treatments are done in another wing of the hospital. Doctor Greg is taking over your file for that portion of your care, but he and I will be talking regularly."

She nodded while he opened a file.

"The chemotherapy will have side effects, and I know you are likely familiar with what they are."

"Yeah," she mumbled. "Google told me all about it."

"It's imperative that you keep food down, Jamie. Your body will need the strength to fight. So I'm going to ask you now, do you want a prescription for medical marijuana?"

Her eyes popped wide, she knew it.

"Not everyone wants it, but I have to say it has done wonders for my past patients. You can bake it into things, add it to recipes, and it will keep the nausea away."

"I'm going to try toughing it out first," she said, dropping her eyes to her hands in her lap. "I don't ... I don't know if I want that in my house. There's a nine-year-old boy living with me, after all."
"Oh, your son?"

Jamie frowned. She was sure she'd told Doctor Foster about Calvin. "No, my nephew."

"Oh, that's right. I'm sorry. Charlie?"

Jamie almost laughed at that, but then felt a bit of hurt. "No. Calvin."

"Right, Calvin. No, I understand. But if you change your mind, I do recommend it."

"Thank you," she replied awkwardly.

"I encourage you to get lots of rest this next week. Be strong for the next step, and I think you're going to do fine."

Jamie smiled, getting to her feet. "Thank you again, Doctor Foster."

He stood and circled the desk, making for the door. She followed. Before he got there he turned, smiled at her, then offered her a hug. Half confused, half embarrassed Jamie let him hug her, keeping her shoulders scrunched forward to put room between them.

"You're going to be fine, Jamie," he said warmly, then held her at arms' length. "You're such a beautiful woman."

Jamie felt her blood get a bit cold. This felt really wrong.

"You're going to come through this fine," he assured her, then moved to kiss her.

She was stunned. Stuck in one place. Knowing this was inappropriate.

And yet she should like this. He was cute, and a doctor besides? Good lord, it was like hitting the jackpot. But all Jamie could think about was the fact that his hands were far too polite as they held her upper arms, and his lips were too baby-soft. He smelled like soap and tasted like toothpaste. Far too ... clean.

She backed away, covering her mouth and looking at the ground in a stupefied pause.

"Shit," he whispered. At least he seemed mortified over what he had done. "Jamie, please forgive me. That was ... that was uncalled for. And unprofessional. I am so sorry."

"I have to go," she mumbled, reaching for the door.

"Jamie, I'm so sorry."

She waved a hand and walked past Doctor Foster's waiting room, head down, not watching where she was going. She made it all the way to the sliding doors without incident, but as she got
there they opened and she was careening into someone who caught her and kept her upright by
the arm.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, knowing she was turning pink.

"Jamie?"

She brought her head up, stomach sinking. "Gemma."

Her new shopping pal tilted her head but didn't let her arm go. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine. Last radiation treatment. We're … heading to my Aunt's farm for a week."

Gemma nodded. "Sounds … nice."

"Yeah," she said after an incredibly weird pause.

Gemma's eyes narrowed. "What's wrong?"

_Shit, you want that alphabetical or chronologically?_ Jamie thought, but what she said was,
"What do you mean?"

"You're freaking out. What happened?"

She inhaled slowly. "My doctor just made a pass at me," she blurted. "I … walked away."

Gemma's face darkened. "What?"

"It was fine, he kissed me but knew right away it was a mistake … he didn't force me or hurt me
or anything. It's … fine."

The other woman crossed her arms. "You going to tell Tig about this?"

Jamie shook her head. "Trust me Gemma, Tig doesn't care. Now, I have to get going. I'm sorry,
really, but if I'm late they'll worry about me …" she side-stepped the woman and made for her
car, wishing she could find a way to muzzle herself. When did she start spilling her guts out?
That wasn't like her at all.

She had to go back to just keeping her private shit _private_.

_
Chapter 37

"Get the hell up or I swear to Christ I'm breaking that thing off."

Tig cracked one eye open, his head pounding like a drum line and Gemma staring down at him, arms crossed, looking like one incredibly pissed off bitch. He groaned, rubbing his forehead. "Gem? What time is it?"

"It's about the time I kick your ass. You're talking to me now. And get rid of her, too."

Tig's head went to the right, a blonde crow eater just waking up and even more scared of Gemma than he was. "What the hell?" he sputtered. "Get out."

"You passed out, I just slept here," she whimpered.

"Get out," he repeated in unison with Gemma.

"I'm naked."


The piece climbed out of bed, scooping her clothes off the floor. It gave the perfect view of her round, firm ass and he groaned again.

Right, now he remembered that Scottish bastard pouring tequila shots down his throat in rapid succession and not stopping him bringing this bitch back to his dorm room.

Shit. Tig was pretty sure he was going to be sick.

The blonde gone, Gemma slammed the door. It made him wince, rubbing his head again. "Gemma, take it easy. I'm fucking hung over."

"You're an idiot is what you are."

He happened to agree, but wasn't sure what she had as proof this time.

Gemma pointed at the door. "Why is there some skank in your bed when that little sweetheart is living right next door to you and ready to feel better about herself?"

"What?" Shit, she was really going to have to slow down so he could jump on track here.
"I went to the hospital to see Abel today. Ran into Jamie. She was all done up, wearing make-up, hair looking all cute as hell. Great outfit. Looking like a million bucks. And you're here? With that?"

Tig frowned. "She looked good, huh?"

"Yeah, she looked fantastic. Good enough that her doctor put the moves on her."

That made him sit up with a growl. "What?"

Gemma smirked. "So you do give a shit after all."

He was busted so he ignored that. "Gemma, she's too ... good. And I'm not."

"I asked if she was going to tell you about the doctor and she assured me that you would not care. Why'd she say that?"

"I pissed her off." He scrubbed his face with both hands. "I pissed her off to push her away and it … it likely hurt her."

"What happened?"

"Gem -"

"Tig," she threw his tone back at him.

He sighed, eyes closed. "Coulda slept with her. I told her it was a bad idea. Fuck, I really wanted to though."

Gemma's presence got quieter and Tig dared to open his eyes. Her face still said she was angry, but her eyes were softer. "Oh Tiggy, you didn't."

"I had her there, willing. Fucking perfect. And I sent her away."

Gemma's inhale was regretful. "Baby, girls don't like to feel that they're not pretty enough."

"That's not what it was about."

"But that's our vulnerability. So when the guy puts on the brakes, we assume the imperfections we see every day are the reason for it. And you know what she sees when she looks in the mirror."

"She was so angry," he conceded, voice hollow, staring at the wall.

Gemma sat on the bed next to him and he double-checked to make sure his business centre was all covered up. It was, thank God. Otherwise it was in immediate danger.
"I like her, baby. And you know I don't like anyone. And I happen to think you're a better man when you've got someone you care about." Gemma shook her head. "Shit."

"It's better for her, Gem."

"Except she likes you. Otherwise she wouldn't be so upset."

"She'll find someone better."

Gemma stood, hitching the strap of her purse up. "Why are men such idiots?" she mumbled and made for the door, leaving him wondering the same thing.

…

"Pink? I don't even have pink paint."

Tig sighed. "I understand, man. Just get some. It's a surprise for the kid. He wants a pink bike."

"Who is this kid?" Rash asked, eyebrow raised. Tig knew what his next question was going to be.

"Hey – don't even start that. His aunt has breast cancer, okay? He wants it pink for her."


"Think classic car, candy pink," Tig said. "Just … make it nice, you know?"

Road Rash sighed, then offered his hand. "You got it. I'll call when I get the paint in."

"Thanks man," Tig returned, shaking the offered mitt.

"I got one more coat of black on your bike, and the chrome will be back by the end of the week."

"Perfect."

"And the pink bike. I'll only charge for the paint. My mom had breast cancer. Tell the kid … he's a pretty tough little fucker. Willing to ride a pink bike around."

Tig grinned. "Okay. Thanks man."

"Take care, Tig."

"You too, man."
Road Rash was so named because of a terrible bike accident he'd had at twenty-three. He never stopped riding, even though he had about five wipe-outs. All he ever got was horrible scarring, not a single broken bone. So he wore the nickname Road Rash proudly.

He was also a fucking wicked paint guy.

Before he could swing a leg over his Dyna his cell rang. He pulled it out, flipped it open.
"Yeah?"

"We found the dealer that sold to Trixie," a Scottish voice told him without greeting.
"Yeah? Where?"

"We're in that shithole apartment building over on Shepherd. But … ah, shite. I think you better come over."

Tig smirked. "Having trouble with one skinny white kid?"

"Just get here 'ya bastard."

"On my way."

Black bikes were lined up outside the building so he knew he was at the right one. He cast a look both ways along the sidewalk at the front, but it was remarkably quiet. Which was nerve-racking considering this was a block off of Main and one of the busier streets in Charming.

Half-Sack was watching the front door, giving Tig a silent nod and holding it open for him. "They're on the third floor," he muttered. Tig wondered why the kid was so quiet; usually he wouldn't shut up.

Tig took the stairs two at a time, pushed through the third floor fire doors and found two SAMCRO kuttes in the hallway. Bobby nodded his head into the room, and Happy gave him a couple of raised eyebrows. "You ain't gonna believe this, man."

Tig frowned, making his way into the fleabag apartment, finding himself in a small, cramped kitchen with sticky linoleum floor and a three-bulb fixture only putting out one-third of its potential. It stunk, Christ it stunk in here. The smell was acrid, like cleaning solutions set on fire.

He passed through the grim kitchen, stepping onto faded carpet that felt like gravel under his boots it was so matted up. A sagging couch took up most of the room, and standing in front of it smoking a cigarette was Chibs. He pulled the smoke from his lips, exhaled, and nodded his head to the hallway. "Confirm what's in that bedroom."

Fuck, what was with all the cloak-and-dagger theatrics? When did everyone stop telling him shit straight?
Getting supremely pissed off, he headed down the hallway and next saw Jax in the doorway of a room that had the windows well-sealed, the only light from a bare bulb overhead.

A man had his hands tied behind his back against the wall, a sock shoved in his mouth. He was covered in scabs and bruises, and it didn't take doctor to peg him as a tweaker. Tig didn't recognize him, but he was scrawny, white, and had a black swastika on the side of his neck. Wearing only white boxers, he looked like he might top the scales at ninety-five pounds.

Jax tilted his head to the only "furniture" in the room, a mattress shoved against the old-school radiator. A woman was handcuffed to it, arms over her head, which was resting on its side on the bare mattress, a small pool of thin vomit next to her face.

Not shocking on its own, until he recognized her. "Fuck," he muttered. "That's Jamie's sister."
Chapter 38

Jamie woke to the sound of two roosters crowing at different tempos, wincing. Right, she'd forgotten about Thelma's roosters.

It was two days after her final radiation treatment. Three full nights of restless sleep since her awful humiliation at Tig's house and subsequent melt down in front of Aunt Thelma. Jamie honestly had no idea how she would go back to Charming now, even if she had no choice.

She had to admit to herself at the very least that she was not okay. She could smile, joke with Calvin and help Aunt Thelma pickle beets all she wanted. Inside, deep down, she was not okay, and only she could fix it. She just had no idea how.

Jamie also owed Tig an apology, but that was as appealing a thought as a quick dip in a vat of fire ants. She cringed to remember the things she'd said to him. God, she'd been terrible. And Aunt Thelma was right; it wasn't that he didn't care. It was because he did, and she'd really been a bitch about it. All because she couldn't deal.

She had no right to be so furious he stopped either; what he had given her had been absolutely amazing all on its own. And God knows he couldn't have been using her, he'd gotten nothing out of it. And it had truly been better than any other similar experience of her entire life. Yes, she'd been with men before, had orgasms before. But to be so overwhelmed by desire while trusting the person she was with without question? She had never been able to let herself go like that. Tig made it okay, didn't make her feel ashamed of it. He just wanted anything else they did to be as special.

It brought tears to her eyes, to be honest. Remembering it right then, warm from sleep and even warmer from what she'd just been dreaming about, she nearly cried. Every night since then she'd been dreaming about him. And she didn't believe he want anything to do with her now, not with that dreadful hissy fit she threw.

Groaning at her embarrassing femaleness, she threw her covers off her legs and sat up, stretching out the stiffness of sleep and trying to push the thoughts of her neighbour from her head. She had five more days to sort herself out and plan an apology. And rest; she really needed to get her rest.

"Feeling better?" Thelma greeted her in the kitchen. It was misleading. She was still kinda short with Jamie over their standoff in the bathroom. Jamie was trying to make amends but Aunt Thelma was tough.

"I'm fine. You need help with anything today?"

"Nope, get your rest dear," she sang out before the patio door banged shut behind her.

Jamie winced. Thelma still wasn't talking to her. Great.
The house was completely silent. She knew Calvin was likely hard at work feeding chickens or something. Or shelling peas. All the stuff that used to get delegated to her and Jaclyn when they were little.

It was funny, but coming here had her thinking of Jaclyn a lot. The room she was staying in was the room she and Jaclyn had always shared. Aunt Thelma hadn't changed a piece of furniture since then, so it was like a time capsule of sorts. This place swam with so many memories of her parents and her sister that it was honestly hard to breathe at times.

Jamie had barely taken a moment to worry about Jaclyn since she'd last vanished. Jamie was used to the disappearing act by now. The first few dozen times it happened she'd lost sleep wondering what that crazy woman had gotten herself into. Now she just … waited for her to show up out of nowhere or a stranger to call saying she was dead.

And now, instead of worrying, here she was remembering the time they snuck out when Thelma was sleeping to chase glowbugs. They took Mason jars with them and headed out at something like one in the morning. Thelma had gotten up for a drink of water, found them gone and called the Sherriff's department. They'd had dogs tracking them and everything. Two little girls in nightgowns, showing up in a clearing, faced with barking dogs, clutching glowing jars and nearly pissing themselves because they were in so much trouble.

That had been Jamie's idea, not Jaclyn's.

She smiled at the memory, then covered her mouth and gave a sob.

Oh God, she had no idea where her little sister was. Where her thoughts of Jaclyn were coming from she had no idea, but her heart froze in its place and she had to gasp to breathe, tears in her eyes. So when the phone rang she sobbed, covering her face with both hands and she knew. She just knew.

It rang three times before she got there. Her hand was trembling, and when she picked up the receiver she had to close her eyes for composure. "Hello?"

"Is this Thelma Reece?"

"No, she's out in the yard. Can …" she swallowed. "Can I give her a message?"

"Is she related to a Jaclyn Mackenzie Taylor?"

Her knees gave, and luckily the phone was mounted on the wall next to a vinyl padded kitchen chair, because she just barely made it to the edge. "Yes," Jamie said. "I'm … I'm Jaclyn's sister."

"Your sister was just rushed to the emergency room at St. Thomas Hospital in Charming."

She was already sobbing so it couldn't get worse for the person on the other end to understand her. "Is … is she going to be okay?"
There was a pause. "She's been admitted, she's in intensive care."

"Okay." Jamie mumbled, wiping her eyes and sitting up straighter. "Thank you. We're on our way."

She hung up the phone, waited a moment to stop crying, then stood and headed out through the screen door into the rear yard, eyes scanning for a sign of where Thelma might have gone. She caught sight of her in her long red skirt and bright yellow blouse, carrying a bucket towards the chicken coop.

Jamie started her way, arms wrapped around her stomach, her heart hammering like she was all-out sprinting to catch her. When she was half-way to the chickens she started shouting for her, and even if she was weaker than usual her tone carried far enough to alert Thelma something was wrong.

Thelma set the bucket down and headed her way, terse expression and annoyance now gone.

"Jamie? Honey? What in the world is wrong?"

That's when Jamie realized she'd started crying again. "The hospital in Charming just called," she blubbered, taking a gasping breath between words. "Jaclyn's there. She's in ICU. We have to go."

Thelma was a rock for her right then. "Okay honey, you go back to the house, get ready. I'll go get Calvin."

Jamie was nodding and heading back to the house, trotting slightly until she didn't have the breath for it and walking rapidly the rest of the way. She headed upstairs, pulling on jeans and keeping her sweatshirt on, adding her bra for comfort's sake. She grabbed her purse, tossing her pills inside in case they were there for the night, then heading to the room Jamie and Jaclyn's parents shared when they'd visit Thelma. She went through the nightstand for Calvin's inhaler, couldn't find it, decided he likely had it on him, and grabbed the book he'd been reading, shoving it in her purse in case he got bored.

By then she heard Thelma coming up the stairs. "Jamie honey? You ready to go?"

"Yes," she responded, meeting her aunt in the landing.

"Okay. Come on, honey. She's going to be fine. Let's go."

...

On the trip to Charming Calvin was upsettingly quiet, watching the world pass by the truck windows as Thelma drove. Jamie kept him tucked into her side, under her arm, her cheek resting on the top of his head. She told herself repeatedly there was no point worrying until they knew for certain what had happened. It was a hard sell, but it was keeping her calm.
The hour stretched terribly long, but as soon as they hit Charming town limits the truck was at the hospital in an instant. Thelma dropped them at the doors, Calvin and Jamie heading in while she searched for a parking spot.

They found ICU with the help of a nurse and directions on the walls. Passing through a set of double doors it struck Jamie that now they were in the very quiet part of the hospital, which meant this was serious. No visiting families hanging around, no TVs in the rooms.

At the desk a nurse told them where Jackie was, pointing with a pen. They followed the stark white corridor, turning a corner. Jamie halted when she noticed someone standing outside a door, completely at odds with the clean, sterile white walls and floor. Dressed in black, a crazed shock of black hair on his head and stubble on his face. Tig's face turned their way just as she realized who it was.

Her sister was in intensive care, who knew what for. And in spite of all that she still had a momentary thrill seeing him, which immediately faded to humiliation. The last time she'd seen him she'd said ugly things right after he'd … well … It was amazing how embarrassment and shame can overshadow what was really important.

"Tig!" Calvin cried, pulling away from her hand on his shoulder and rushing at their neighbour, nearly climbing him with dexterity she didn't realize he had.

"Hey buddy," Tig said, terribly quiet, hands on Calvin's back, letting him hang off of him and hugging him in return. "Missed you, pal."

Calvin was crying. It was silent, but Jamie could tell by how he was shaking. Tig rubbed his narrow, bony back, giving him a squeeze and finally making eye contact with her.

She held her breath. After a moment he nodded, which she mirrored back. She made her way towards them at a regular pace, arms around her middle again.

"Hi," she said, voice small and unsure.

"She OD'd," Tig said, and Jamie was wishing he hadn't said that in front of Calvin but … Calvin would know eventually. "We found her in a dealer's apartment."

Jamie nodded, surprised that he had been somehow involved again with her sister's stupidity. She stood there as he held her nephew, able to comfort him better than she could. At least with this drama it was only about eighty-percent as awkward seeing him as it normally might be.

"We've been watching the room," Tig continued. "These aren't good people. And she owes them a lot of money, Jamie."

Her stomach sank. It wasn't bad enough her sister was unconscious, she was also in danger from outside forces? Then she absorbed that he'd been watching the room, protecting Jaclyn when he certainly didn't have to.
"Come on buddy," Tig said, tone much more friendly with Calvin. "Let's find the doctor, see if she'll let you see your mom. Yeah?"

"Okay," Calvin sputtered, wiping his eyes as Tig set him back on his feet. Calvin's face was red, likely from embarrassment for crying in front of their neighbour. Tig didn't seem to care, he just held a hand out which Calvin grabbed onto. Then they set off together, in the opposite direction than she'd just come from.

Feeling strangely out of place, Jamie leaned against the wall, listening to the soft beeping and hissing of life-support equipment.
Chapter 39

The kid's grip on his hand was almost painful, not that Tig would admit it. Tig was hurting in a different way; all because of Aunt Jamie. *Again.*

He really didn't want her away from him. No matter what he said or how he behaved, he didn't want her anywhere other than right by him so he could look out for her. And not just to fuck her, which was the real kick in the head. If that had been the case he wouldn't have thrown her out of bed the other night for *anything.*

Which had to mean he'd missed her.

Not to mention she looked great, too. When she saw him she blushed, likely on account of what happened the last time they'd been alone together. He knew *he* was absolutely remembering the smell of that soft skin deep in his head, the sound of her whimpering his name, the way she trusted him enough to get into his bed. The feel of everything she let him touch.

He shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose at the onset of a headache. The kind of headache that you get because of an urge to beat your head against a brick wall just to reset your circuits.

The doctor that had been checking on Calvin's mom saw them coming, finished talking to a nurse and set her on her way before facing him.

"Mister Trager," she said, instantly on edge from his constant pestering. "I can't tell you anything. You know this. I can only release medical information to a family member."

"I don't want details," he nearly cut her off. "This is her kid. He wants to see her."

The doctor blinked a couple times, eyes sliding down to Calvin, who pushed his broken glasses up his nose to look back at her, holding Tig’s hand right close to his body.

"Oh," the doctor said, taken by surprise.

"And her sister is here now, too. You can fill her in on what's going on."

The doctor nodded business-like. "All right. Let's go. Ummm … I'm Doctor Cleary," she said brightly, hands on her knees as she stooped down eye-level with the kid. "What's your name?"

"I'm Calvin," he said with a sniffle, and Tig squeezed his hand to let him know it was all okay. The doctor saw it as she straightened up. Something in her face got a bit softer, but Tig wasn't in a mood to stew on that.
They followed the doc down the corridor to Calvin's mom's room, and now Aunt Jamie was standing next to Thelma, who was quite surprised to see Tig.

"Okay," Doctor Cleary said, getting into bedside manner mode. "Who would like to see her first?"

"Calvin," Tig said, pushing his way into the role of authority figure. With the way that little hand was gripping his he'd be damned if the kid was waiting a single second to see his mom. He looked down to Calvin's up-turned face. "You want Aunt Jamie or Aunt Thelma with you, buddy?"

"You," Calvin said pathetically, clutching his hand tighter again.

"Nah man, they're family -"

"You," he repeated sternly, his tone sounding a lot like Aunt Jamie when she way laying down the law.

Tig checked with Thelma and Jamie silently. Jamie's eyes were watering up, but Thelma was nodding. "Go ahead, Tig. We'll wait right out here."

Tig was cool with the idea right up until that door closed behind them. One look at the form on the bed and he had a really bad feeling. A machine was breathing for her. That was never a good sign. A monitor was beeping along with her heart, and a huge tube was taped to her mouth, shoved down her throat to force air into her lungs. Wires were running into the hospital gown all over. And it was quiet in that room. There were no chairs. The only thing the family could really do in this situation was say a few words and leave, because there wasn't a lot going on with the person taking up the space.

Tig had been hanging outside the room on and off the past day and a bit. Calvin's mom only got here because Jax called in an anonymous 911 on her, the rest of SAMCRO taking the dealer shit stain with them. Then Tig started hanging out, wondering if this Tiny bastard was the kind to kill to collect on a debt.

He heard the doctors; he knew she was pretty fucked up. They were worried about brain function. And like he'd noticed, she wasn't breathing on her own. To Tig it seemed like they were basically keeping her around to ask the family if they should yank the power cord.

Tig wasn't going to say that, though.

Calvin let go of his hand and approached the bed, on the side his mom's face was sort of tilted towards. He was taking careful steps and made no noise, he just stood against the rails, hands resting on them lightly, chewing his lip.
"Mom?" the kid whispered, and Tig had to turn around. He pressed his finger and thumb into the corner of his eyes, fighting down the sting that had suddenly kicked in. What was *this* now? Christ. He should check a calendar and see if he was getting his period or something.

"It's okay. I know you love me. I love you, too. But I'm going to be okay."

Nope, jamming up his eyes didn't help. Tig's nose pricked, and he felt water squeeze around his fingers despite his attempt to stop it. He took a few steadying breaths, jumping a bit when he felt Calvin take his hand again. He wiped his eyes and sniffed a couple times, swiping at his nose, too.

"You all right, kid?" Tig asked, like he wasn't the one springing leaks all over.

Calvin nodded, his lip trembling. "I feel bad," he shared on a whisper. "I wasn't even worried about where she was."

Tig crouched down to his heels, turning Calvin to face him. "Listen Charlie, I don't know what to do here. I don't know what to tell you. All I know is, you're right. You're going to be fine. You got two ladies outside who'll tear down walls to keep you safe. They care about you so much."

"And you?" the kid whispered next.

Fuck, the fucking waterworks again. Tig didn't hide them this time because the kid was crying now, too. "Of course, little man. I'm absolutely, hundred percent here for you. I know, sometimes the girls can be tough to be around."

Calvin nodded. "This is going to be bad for Aunt Jamie."

Tig put his hand on the kid's head, giving his hair some rough treatment. "You know what though? Aunt Jamie's a grown up, so you don't worry for her too much, okay? She's tough. And the thing about being a kid is the adults that care about you are worrying about you. That's our job, okay? You don't have to worry about us, buddy."

Calvin nodded and pushed his glasses up. Again Tig was pissed they were still broken.

"You need to talk you come see me, okay?" Tig said, reinforcing what he'd been telling Calvin all along.

"I will," Calvin promised, taking his hand again. Tig figured he was okay and stood, letting the kid lead the way to the door. He wasn't going to force him out.

When the door opened Tig realized Calvin wasn't the one he really had to worry about. The look on Jamie's face struck him deep; she was not going to be okay. At all.
Chapter 40

October

Cyclophosphamide. Kills T-cells. Also causes nausea, vomiting, bone marrow suppression, diarrhea, darkening of the nails and skin, hair loss and lethargy.

Doxorubicin is an anthracycline antibiotic, also known to cause heart damage.

Fluorouracil causes cancer cells to commit suicide. It can also fuck up your liver.

Jamie knew the names of the poisons making up the cocktail being drip-fed into her arm. Somehow none of it mattered, because somewhere in this hospital her little sister was in a coma, maybe even a vegetable. And Jamie couldn't make it better.

Jamie had wept to see the state Jaclyn was in; skin and bone, bruises all over. Tig told her Jackie was handcuffed to a radiator on a mattress in a nasty apartment. She owed drug dealers money, and she'd OD'd on heroin.

No one could confirm if Jaclyn had been raped. Apparently there was bruising, but no way to know for sure until she opened her eyes and said the words. Jamie was nearly sick at the thought of her little sister being hurt that way.

It all came back to the little sister part. Jamie was supposed to take care of Jaclyn. And she hadn't.

Undergoing her sixth visit to the chemo room, Jamie was struck by how depressing the place was. They tried to make it nice. There were flowering potted plants everywhere, the drugs were administered while you sat in big, comfortable recliners. Contemporary soft rock was playing on the speakers. But it was all room spray over a big stink. Everyone here was dying.

Thelma and Calvin were up in Jaclyn's room "visiting." Thelma would talk to her for their "drop-in," Calvin would silently hold Jaclyn's limp hand. Everyone was on standby, waiting to happen, paused like they'd been dipped in concrete and were now stuck this way.

It made Jamie insane. At first, yes she'd been distraught but now she was pissed off.

This was Jaclyn. This was so Jaclyn it almost made Jamie laugh. But she couldn't, because she was sick all the time and exhausted and basically resigned to the fact that all this chemical torture was actually going to kill her.

And the two people who still cared about her were almost unreachable now. Calvin shut down because Jamie was sick and Aunt Thelma was beside herself with worry for Jaclyn. Jamie felt she had no right to make them look at her and demand that they feel sorry for her.
And Jamie wanted Tig.

She closed her eyes, feeling tears well up. The neighbour was still Calvin's best friend, and as the women in his life fell apart Calvin basically lived at Tig's. The "no going inside the house" rule was completely dissolved by this point, and many times the two of them just spent an evening watching TV. Jamie trusted that they weren't watching anything past a PG-13 rating, but ... what the hell did she know? The only time she saw her neighbour was when he'd carry a fully-asleep Calvin back to her house, tuck him in bed then leave with just a quiet and indifferent "Goodnight."

Tig didn't come over and say hi. He didn't tell her she was beautiful anymore. He never leered at her or gave her those blatant physical appraisals. He was a polite and cordial man living next door, and it hurt her.

Jamie could all but see the walls going up around herself. She'd done a great job cutting everyone out of her life. And a big part of her was waiting, or hoping, that Tig was going to just tell her she was being a self-pitying idiot and needed to smarten up. But he wasn't around. Not around her anyway. She missed him; with an ache she missed seeing him, garnering his attention.

Thankfully Jamie had these dates every two to three days to look forward to. Just her and her IV drip. Good times. At least this was the end of a course and she'd have a couple of weeks to recover now.

When she was done and ready to curl up in a ball and mope for a good ten hours, Jamie wandered to ICU and found Thelma and Calvin. Thelma gave her shit for not waiting, but Jamie was willing to bet her aunt didn't even know how much time she'd spent there hoping for a sign that Jackie was home and the lights might be coming back on.

Thelma took them both back to Jamie's house, then decided Calvin needed a treat. Ice cream. So Jamie headed straight to bed, pulling on flannel pants and a T-shirt, curling up in a ball and waiting to get sick. It happened every time.

She could tell by the way her clothes fit she was losing weight alarmingly fast. Even her elastic-waist flannel pyjama bottoms slid down her hips. When she stood in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at herself and forcing herself to accept the missing breast, she noticed that her ribs were showing. Even her shoulders looked bony. It had started during radiation and hadn't stopped. She was shrinking.

That very morning when she'd been washing her hair it was the first time she noticed the clumps coming away from her scalp on her hands. She'd stared at the proof as the shower washed her hair away, tears filling her eyes.

That was it. The beginning of a very quick slope downward.
She couldn't even muster the energy to get worked up over it. Half the time she felt bad she was taking up manpower and materials at the chemo ward, wishing she could donate them to someone with no coverage who actually wanted to live. Not that Jaime was wishing for death: she just wasn't so attached to life most days.

She never told a soul about this. For a day after treatment Thelma and Calvin would just give her a wide berth out of respect for her side effects, then she'd make herself smile and carry on the best she could.

Jamie heard cars outside, and she wished for the first time in a while that she was back at Thelma's. Even midday was incredibly peaceful on the farm. But once Jaclyn was found and admitted to the hospital they'd packed up and came back to Charming. They'd lived around the construction workers who got the bathroom completed in admirable time, and Jamie wished she was more excited to have a bathtub again. Since then she'd started the chemical treatments and life kept flying by without her. In her more piteous moments she would sulk and think to herself that Thelma was more worried about the comatose drug addict than Jamie, but that was ridiculous. She was just being selfish.

Jamie squeezed her eyes shut and breathed evenly, hoping if she was very still she might just be able to sleep and maybe not get sick on this one. Like the radiation; she got used to that over time. Maybe chemo would be the same.

Shouting voices could be heard through the single-pane windows of the house. When they didn't stop, she got up with quite a bit of annoyance and stomped, sort of, down the hallway to the living room. Through the picture window she saw a car pulled up haphazardly to the curb in front of her house. She recognized the "uniform" of the four guys out front – white tank tops, saggy jeans and a lot of tattoos – as what the guy she'd hit with the baseball bat was wearing.

Her stomach clenched up when she realized the four men were clustered around an older man on the sidewalk, his arm still holding onto the car door that had obviously been wrenched open to pull him out of the vehicle. The four men were taking turns kicking him. In the ribs, in the chest, and when she saw a kick connect with his face she cried out, then covered her mouth.

Of course they didn't hear it, but she bit her lip anyway as she dove for the cordless phone. She was about to call 911 when her fingers froze.

_Honey, where you're living now, the cops only come to one out of three calls. We have a way of dealing with this kind of thing._

Tig's words came back to her. So instead of dialling 911 she grabbed the phone directory and flipped pages, thankful Calvin was so inquisitive about Tig's life. She found the number for Teller-Morrow, an automotive repair shop, and dialled. It rang four times and she was losing hope before she heard a familiar voice.

"Teller-Morrow."
Jamie frowned. "Is this … Gemma?"

"Who is this?"

Jamie shot a look outside. The man was on the ground, not moving to defend himself. "It's Jamie. There are drug dealers in front of my house beating a guy up."

There was a beat, then Gemma answered. "Shit. I'm sending a couple guys over right now."

"Is …" she sighed, hating how this sounded. "Is Tig there?"

"No, honey. He's not. Some of the guys are headed in today but they haven't got here yet. Don't worry, I'll send help. Just stay inside, okay?"

"Okay."

"Stay on the phone. Just a minute."

Jamie heard the thunk of Gemma setting the receiver down, and she waited. After a long moment Gemma came back. "Jamie?"

"Yeah?"

"How many are there?"

"Four, and the guy they're beating up."

"Shit. Okay. I'm sending my boys, and you don't have to be scared of them, okay?"

"Okay."

Gemma's voiced sounded far off so Jamie knew she was talking to someone else wherever she was. "There's four of them. Take the prospect just in case. And be careful." Then she was back full volume. "You want to stay on the phone with me until they get there?"

Jamie chewed her lip. "No, it's okay. I know you're not that far away, it shouldn't take too long."

"Stay in inside, sweetheart, and wait for the boys."

"I will. And … Gemma?"

"Yeah?"

She shook her head, chickening out. "Nevermind."

"When Tig gets here I'll send him over."
Her hand tightened on the phone and she could have cried. "Thank you Gemma."

"No problem. And Jamie?"

"Yeah?"

"You did the right thing, honey. Now sit tight. Help is coming."

Jamie disconnected the call, set the phone back on its cradle and curled up on the sofa to wait. She let her eyes close for a moment, only to be wrenched out of dozing by the loud approach of Harleys. She couldn't help it, she got to her feet and watched out the front window as four bikes roared up Tig's driveway and parked. The dealers abandoned the poor wretch on the sidewalk to meet the bikers head on.

Jamie wrapped her arms around her middle as one of the skin-head looking twerps stepped nose-to-nose with a large man in that same vest Tig always wore - that they were all wearing. He also donned a black knitted cap on his head with an impressive beard clinging to his chin. Jamie thought the dealer must be nuts – the biker was three times his size easily. And the two at his back were nothing to sneeze at. The fourth was considerably smaller but still looked wiry enough to hold his own.

A young blonde man pushed the bearded one back, stepping in front of the dealer and words were exchanged. Even from where Jamie stood it looked tense.

Without warning the blonde cracked the dealer's nose with a quick punch, so quick Jamie barely saw him move. The dealer went down hard, and the blonde wasted no time feeding toes into his mouth a couple times. Each man's friends grabbed a companion and there was an all-out brawl in her front yard.

"Jesus Christ," she muttered.

It didn't last long. The dealers seemed to lack the drive the bikers had, and before long they were running off down her block, all of them limping or holding some part of their bodies that had been injured. Among the bikers she saw one split lip and one bleeding nose, but none of them seemed very hurt.

One guy was getting on his bike to follow the dealers, two other bikers were checking on the poor guy lying on the sidewalk. To her surprise, the blonde made his way up her walkway. She froze, not sure what he could possibly want, and she certainly didn't want anyone to see her looking like she did. But they'd come because she called.

He knocked on her door, and she pulled it open tentatively.

Gosh, he looked really young. Young like Doctor Foster. His blue eyes were lovely, a scruff of beard on his chin an attempt to maybe look tougher because, really, he was quite pretty. He had
the expression of a bored teenager when she opened the door, and when he saw her he seemed … *surprised.* "Hey," he said amiably, covering it well with a friendly smile.

"Hi," she returned, unsure and not willing to open the door more than six inches.

"I wouldn't expect them back," he said after another short pause. Then he gave a short laugh and shook his head. "Sorry, I didn't know what to expect coming here. I mean … you're Tig's girl."

She frowned. "I'm his neighbour."

He nodded and his smile grew. "Right. Well, if those assholes do come back I want you to call my cell direct, okay? Can you program it in your phone?"

She grabbed the cordless off the entertainment centre just inside the front door, and he made no move to enter her house. It made her slightly more comfortable. He gave her the numbers and she punched them in, asking, "And, I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"It's Jax," he replied, still smiling and looking her up and down. "Oh, and call an ambulance for the guy out front or he might really be in trouble."

That startled Jamie. "Oh, okay."

"All that guy did was stiff them twenty bucks," Jax told her, and it sounded like a warning. "So if you see them, you *really* need to call me."

"I will," she answered with a nod. "And … thank you for coming."

He nodded, replied with a charming "Thank you for calling," then bounded down the front steps.

Jamie shut the door, punched 911 in the cordless and watched out the front window as the four bikers roared off as loudly as they'd arrived. The poor man on the sidewalk lay bleeding and unmoving.

"911, what's your emergency?"

That jarred her. "Umm, a man is laying on the sidewalk in front of my house. He's unconscious. I think he needs an ambulance."
"Come on, Tigger. Coupla shots then a dance in the ring."

Tig grinned across his handlebars at Happy Lowman. "You really can't wait for me to knock the living shit out of you?"

"It'll never happen," Happy promised.

"Don't get me wrong. I feel bad, knowing how small that dick is. I'd likely run my mouth to compensate, too." Happy flipped him off, making Tig cackle as he lit a cigarette. "Tell you what. You want a fight? Ask a crow eater. At least that's a fair fight."

"Don't be a pussy. What, the girlie next door want to have portraits taken together? Can't get a black eye or swollen lip?"

Tig swung a leg off his bike. "That actually is something I'd like to hit you for."

"What?"

"Running your mouth like a little bitch. When do you find the time? Between knitting and fucking Coronation Street?"

"The fuck's Coronation Street?"

Tig shook his head, dead serious. "You're an embarrassment to all little old ladies."

"Shut it and get in the ring."

Holding his cigarette in the corner of his mouth, Tig shrugged out of his kutte and Happy climbed off his bike, too. Now that Tig was thinking about it, he did owe Hap for this. And it didn't matter if Jamie hated him now, it still pissed him off that the guy brought the club's attention down on her in the first place.

"That's what it takes?" Happy quipped, his kutte draping the handlebars of his Harley. "I gotta bring that sweet little snatch into it?"

Tig bit down his reply, ducking under the ropes of the ring and bouncing on the boards under the canvas in his riding boots. He pulled the cigarette out of his mouth long enough to reply with, "Not a lot I wouldn't do for snatch, Hap."

"Yeah, we know." Happy rolled his shoulders, fists in front of him as he approached Tig. "Question is, if she's so fucking important, why the hell are you two-fisting the roadside whores?"
Tig's jaw cranked down hard and he tossed the cigarette free of the boxing ring, tapping his knuckles to Happy's. Something must have changed in his face because Happy grinned back. "Something got through that thick skull, huh?"

Tig hit him once. It brought blood to Happy's lip and the fucker grinned. "I think I hit a nerve." Tig hit him again and that's when Happy let him have it back.

A few blows were exchanged, then he was aware of Gemma shouting from the side of the ring. Tig stopped, shoving Hap off of him, turning to her as the bastard caught him with a surprise hook to the jaw when he wasn't paying attention. It brought him down to one knee, just as Gemma went full gale-force on them. "For fuck's sake you two! Am I talking?"

Tig shook his head before standing up and heading for Happy but Gemma stopped him mid-stride. "Jamie called here today. There were dealers in front of her house beating someone up."

Tig turned on his heel, hands dropping to the top rope. "Is she okay?"

"I sent Jax, Opie, Bobby and the prospect over. They just got back. The guy that got beat up is going to the hospital. She's fine," Gemma assured him gently. "But she asked for you."

Fuck him, he had to fight to keep from grinning. "She did?"

"She sounded tired."

Tig nodded. "She's a few rounds into chemo. Calvin said she's been getting weak."

"Go check on her," Gemma advised pointedly. "It'll be better for you than pounding the shit out of the out of town guests."

Tig checked to see what smart ass comment Happy had to add, but he was nodding. "Go on, man. But wipe the blood off your face. It's an embarrassment."

Tig left the ring, not convinced Happy wouldn't rush him and knock him on his ass. But Killer stayed where he was, arms slung over the top rope. "And check my kutte. I got a coupla joints in there."

"Nah, I'm good," he returned, heading for the clubhouse.

"Not for you, dipshit. The neighbour."

Tig stopped. "What?"

"Nausea. Bowie's mom was going through chemo few years back. The only way she could eat anything and keep it down."
Gemma nodded. "It's true. Plus it makes people hungry, gives them an appetite. I doubt she's asked the doctor for it."

Tig nodded absently. "I'm gonna clean up first."

In his dorm he ran water in the sink, splashing the blood, sweat and road dust off his face then scrubbing his hands. That's when he noticed they were shaking.

Shit, not this again.

Every night since seeing Calvin and Jamie's reaction to Jaclyn being in the hospital he'd been ripped from sleep with horrible, panic-riddled nightmares, all of them about Jamie dying. Not from cancer but other horrible, bloody ways that were his fault. A different scenario every time. And for hours after he'd shake like he had palsy.

Since their one and only intimate moment he'd been successful in avoiding spending time alone with Jamie. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable, and he was still convincing himself it was for the best. But he missed her. Christ, he missed her so much.

Calvin was clinging to him at an almost unhealthy level but Tig didn't care. He could sense that the kid just needed a place that felt stable, and if being Tig's friend made him feel safe well, that was fine. He hoped it gave Jamie less worry, too.

He may be gone but he wasn't over her. Not by a long shot.

Her vehicle was the only one in her driveway when he got to his place, so Aunt Thelma was with Calvin to give her time to sleep. He parked his bike in his drive, wincing at how much quieter the street was once he killed the motor.

Next door a car was being towed from the front sidewalk. A few locals were hanging around, gawking and chatting at whatever drama had gone down. He headed inside to at least change his shirt. He likely stunk like rotting carcass and was pretty sure that wouldn't help with nausea.

Leaving the kutte in his room, he paused in the kitchen to half-finish a bottle of beer before buttoning a clean shirt all the way up and heading back to the driveway. He knocked on her screen door with one knuckle, hoping she wasn't asleep.

After a pause the inside door was pulled open, and she blinked up at him, looking a little glassy-eyed. "Tig?"

He swallowed his initial reaction, which was to throw the screen open and ask her how the hell she'd lost so much weight in such a short span of time, toss her back in bed and force-feed her until she looked fucking healthy again.

"Jamie, you okay?"
She nodded, rubbing one eye with a fist. "I just got up."

"I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No, no. Sorry, come in."

She moved away from the entrance so he pushed the screen door open and stepped inside. It was stuffy in here, but that just came with a closed house on a warm day.

"You want me to open some windows?" he offered.

"Does it stink in here?" she asked, half-turning on her way to the kitchen. She was in flannel shorts and her legs seemed so scrawny they instantly reminded him of her sister's.

"No, it smells fine. Just stuffy. You want some fresh air?"

She blinked, covered a yawn then nodded.

This was exactly what he didn't want to see. Her being so sick she wouldn't say a single word to him or challenge him in any way. This was what had him freaking out and sending her away even though he'd wanted her so badly.

He moved to the smaller window over the sofa, sliding the pane open. Then he passed her on his way to the kitchen and opened both windows in there. When he turned from the second one she was opening the fridge and pulling out a jug of juice.

"You feeling all right?" he asked after a pause. Fuck, this was so awkward.

She shrugged one shoulder while filling a glass. "Chemo this morning. Then a fight broke out in my front yard. Then I called a bunch of bikers to break it up. Then one of them told me I was your girl. Then I was sick for two hours straight and slept for one hour. I feel exactly how you'd expect."

"Who said you were my girl?" he asked, like that was the most important fact she'd just shared.

She shrugged. "I can't remember. The pretty blonde one."

Tig frowned. "Who?"

She screwed up her face while returning the juice to the fridge. "Oh, Jax. Does that sound right?"

His hackles rose a bit. "You think Jax is pretty, huh?"

That indifferent shrug again, and it was starting to piss him off. "Why not? I apparently have a thing for blue eyes."
Her behaviour was all kinds of fucked up to him. "Jamie, what's going on?"

She set the glass down after one gulp. "Why didn't I call the police, Tig? Why did I call the garage where you work?"

"I told you, we take care of this kind of shit."

She was biting her lip. "When he said I was your girl …" While she paused he took a deep breath. He didn't think he wanted to hear the rest of this. "I found myself wishing it was true. I mean, when I called there I asked for you, Tig."

Lightness and air, filling up his chest, making it fucking hurt. But in a good way. "Gemma told me that," he replied, not sure what was expected of him.

"I wanted you here to make sure we were okay. You were the first person I thought of."

Tig swallowed hard. "I'm sorry Jamie -"

"You made me feel like a fool," she said, closing her eyes. "I'm an adult. I don't need people deciding what's good for me and what's not."

"I know."

"I just think it might have been good. And I'll likely never know for sure."

Tig was stuck. He had no idea what to do, what to say. "Hey," he cut in, trying for humour. "I thought you said you weren't good at saying what you were thinking."

She shook her head. "When you feel like shit, you just tend to say things bluntly. You stop caring what people think."

He hadn't been at the point where he cared what people thought for years. Until it came to her, of course. Then the whole *I'll likely never know for sure* comment struck him on a major delay.

"What do you mean 'you'll never know if we could be good together'? What does that mean?"

Jamie waved a hand to dismiss him. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Just … keep taking good care of Calvin."

Tig caught her upper arm as gently as he could and made her face him. "Jamie? Babe? You're scaring me here."

She shook her head. "You picked a fight with three drug dealers at once. You punched Clark Davidson in his own home. You're not scared of anything."

"You're scaring me," he corrected her.
"No. Gemma scares you."

Tig was reeling from confusion now. Safest to just play along. "Gemma would scare Genghis Kahn."

She blinked. "You just pulled out a Genghis Kahn reference?"

Tig grinned. "I paid attention in school occasionally, babe."

Jamie blinked a couple times, they swayed. "I don't feel well."

"You gonna be sick?"

She shook her head, touching her forehead. "I'm so lightheaded. And cold."

That was all she said before crumpling into him.
Chapter 42

"Jamie? Jamie, can you open your eyes for me?"

The voice was soft, light, and professional-sounding. Jamie worked to swallow, her mouth so incredibly dry it hurt. She had to fight to get her eyelids apart, and when she did everything was fuzzy.

"There you go. Here, I've got some water."

A cool hand was under the back of her neck, propping her head up and a plastic cup was pressed to her lips. When she felt the water she opened her mouth, gulping eagerly, almost sighing from relief.

When she was done her head was lowered again, and now her eyes had time to focus. A woman was kneeling next to her on the floor. Jamie herself appeared to be stretched out on her sofa. She fought to put together what just happened and how she got here, but she couldn't.

The stranger tucked a lock of her brunette hair behind one ear and offered a friendly smile. "You fainted. Your temperature is high, but not high enough to rush you to the hospital. Has this happened before?"

Jamie shook her head, taking in the fact this attractive, friendly person had a white coat on over scrubs. A doctor at her house?

The woman craned her neck back to look over her shoulder at someone standing behind her. "She's going to be fine. But if her temperature gets to 101 or higher take her to the hospital." Then her warm, brown eyes came back to Jamie. "Try to eat something. You need that more than you think right now."

Jamie nodded, then looked up to the other person in the room and fought down a wave of panic. Tig was there.

Right, she'd been spilling her guts out before taking an involuntary nap. Shit.

The doctor stood after giving Jamie's hand some pressure. She watched while the woman then gave Tig's elbow a squeeze as well and she left through the front door. Tig's eyes on were on Jamie the whole time.

"Who was that?" she asked softly.

"You need to eat."

"Who was that?" she repeated.
"Jax's girlfriend."

Jamie was surprised. "His girlfriend is a doctor?"

Tig perched on the edge of the sofa, pressing against her side and leaning over her, one hand on the back of the sofa and the other on his knee. "You need to eat. I can tell you aren't taking care of yourself Jamie, you're wasting away."

She shook her head. "I can't. Throwing up is worse than this."

"Babe, look at me." When she didn't his hand left his knee to grasp her chin and force her face towards him. "Jamie. Cut the shit. You giving up?"

Her breath caught and her eyes stung. "No," she whimpered.

"Yeah, you fucking are. And that's so weak. I'm disappointed, Jamie."

She squeezed her eyes shut, heart breaking. She knew she'd wanted him to tell her to straighten her shit out, but now that it was here it hurt more than she thought.

"You can't do this. I mean fuck, Jamie. What happens to Calvin?"

She sobbed, and he let go of her chin.

"I know you want to make it through this. I know you're capable of being every bit the woman you were before all this went down. I want you to get better. For you."

She just shook her head, and didn't even fight as he sat on the sofa, gathered her up and pulled her into his lap. Actually she curled up in a ball and leaned into his chest. He tucked her head into the crook of his neck, leaning back into the couch and holding her tight.

"I'm sorry," she choked out through her tears, but she couldn't stop.

"Don't be sorry. I don't know what you're going through. I'm a selfish asshole and I don't like you being different from how you were."

Jamie closed her eyes. "I am, aren't I?"

"Yeah," he told her, his hand rubbing along the outside of her thigh. "I miss smart-ass Aunt Jamie."

She felt herself smile, just a bit. "I thought you liked mellow Aunt Jamie."

"Yeah, I like her, too. And laughing Aunt Jamie is pretty good. Giving-me-shit Aunt Jamie is pretty hot, actually."
She was chuckling. "That can't be true."

"You don't see the pattern here?"

"What pattern?"

"I like Aunt Jamie, babe. I've told you that before." He pushed her hair off her forehead before pressing a soft kiss to it. "And you like this isn't Aunt Jamie at all. It's this thing you've got getting the better of you."

"You're right," she whispered, playing with a button on his shirt. "I just get so tired."

"I know. But if you start taking better care of yourself, the rest should follow, right?"

She nodded, then stiffened. "Where is Calvin?"

"What?"

"What time is it? Where are Calvin and Aunt Thelma?"

"Relax, babe. Thelma took Calvin to the farm for the weekend. Give you a rest."

She frowned. "Really?"

"I told Thelma I'd take care of you."

She sat up straight. "What? No, you're busy, you can't -"

"I can and I am. So deal with it," he suggested with a grin.

"They were here? How long was I out for?"

"A while. I think you really needed the rest more than anything. When you weren't waking up it got Tara worried."

"Tara?"

"The doctor that was here. Aunt Thelma and Calvin left just before you woke up."

She didn't know what to say. She had no way to thank him for what he was offering.

"Okay," he grunted, standing up while keeping her in his arms. "Let's get some air on the deck. And I think we should try something to help you eat."
Jamie was docile as Tig carried her through the kitchen and out the back door. He set her in a chair, then straightened and reached into his pocket. "I got this from a friend, and I really recommend you try it."

He set a baggie on the patio table, and she frowned. "Are those joints?"

"Yep."

"No, Tig I can't -"

"How much do you weigh right now?"

She stopped. "I … I don't know."

"When I picked you up just now I noticed the difference, Jamie. You're so fucking light now. I can see how knobby those knees are and it freaks me out. If this helps you get healthy, it's worth it."

"But Tig -"

He crouched in front of her. "You will never be like your sister."

She blinked. "What?"

"Is that what you're worried about?"

She had no answer.

"You're too strong, not nearly selfish enough. You don't have it in you to be an addict, honey." He reached for the bag and opened it. "I don't want to get you blitzed, just hungry."

"I've never smoked pot," she admitted, embarrassed for some strange reason.

"That's okay. I'll be here to make sure you're okay. But I only cook eggs, and I'm not sure pot-eggs are even worth the effort. So for now, we'll have to smoke it."

She licked her lips. "What's it feel like?"

He cocked his head to the side, pulling a hand-rolled joint out of the bag. "It'll make you feel light-headed. Maybe a little giggly, which might be fun." His eyes twinkled at that. "My face always feels a bit numb when I do it. And you'll get hungry, no nausea." He held the joint out.

She clasped her hands in her lap. "Show me what to do."

He dropped to his knees, sitting on his heels while digging a lighter out of his jeans pocket. "Okay. You breathe deep, and you have to really inhale. So you have to breathe it right down
into your lungs, not just hold it at the back of your throat. You get me?" She shook her head 'no' and he grinned again. "You really are that sweet, huh?"

Jamie bristled. "I'm not a child for Pete's sake."

He was chuckling. "I know, believe me. I know."

That made her blush, but then she was watching him light the end of the joint which was pinched between his lips. He inhaled as the paper caught, and the end blazed. He pulled it away from his mouth and said, not breathing, "You hold it, then ..." he exhaled, and the smell hit her.

She wrinkled her nose. "It stinks."

"Yeah, it does. Here. Breathe it when I exhale it." He drew on the joint again, the end flaring red, held it, and moved close to her.

Jamie leaned into him, and when he blew out the smoke she inhaled it like he had from the joint, catching it and feeling it flow back into her throat. She breathed deep, like she used to do back in band when she played the trumpet, the air filling her diaphragm. It burned, and she tried to hold it but she sputtered, coughing hoarsely, tears coming to her eyes.

He was smiling, hand on her shoulder. "You okay?"

"That's awful," she said, feeling a weird, hot wetness in her chest. "I'm not sure I did it right."

"That was perfect," he assured her.

"It hurts."

"It can," he admitted, taking another hit, leaning into her and his lips just skimming hers as he exhaled. She remembered to inhale just in the nick of time, and while she held it, not choking this time, he kissed her very softly.

Jamie pulled away and exhaled smoothly. Tig's eyes were locked on hers, and warmth was spreading through her chest. It wasn't the pot. It was him.

"What should I feel now?" she croaked, throat still rough from her hacking cough.

"Just wait. It'll come." He stood up. "I'll go take care of supper, okay?"

"You making me eggs?"

He laughed. "No, but I also order a mean pizza. Trust me, you'll be thanking me."

Tig disappeared inside, and Jamie rested her head on the back of the chair. She didn't feel anything, but it was likely having an effect. How the hell would she know?
"Jamie?"

She started, realizing she'd fallen asleep. Tig was handing her a glass of water. "Here, for your throat. Did you fall asleep?"

She nodded, taking the water. "I guess I'm … relaxed."

He studied her face, then he broke into a grin. "Yeah, you're high."

"What?"

"Your eyes are glazed."

"But I don't feel anything!"

He leaned over her, running a finger along her jawline. Normally it would feel nice. But right then it tingled, and it may as well have been a nipple for all the reaction she had to it. Her eyes closed and she had to breathe through her mouth. "Yeah," he whispered. "You're high."

Her cheeks warmed, and she pulled away from his hand. She blinked, her view of the yard seeming to focus slower than she was used to. The she scrunched up her face and realized she couldn't feel her nose.

"Holy shit," she mumbled, touching the bridge of her nose and looking up at him. "I can't feel my nose."

He laughed, dropping into the chair across the table from her. "High Aunt Jamie might be fun, too."

She took another gulp of water, and when her stomach grumbled it startled her. She put a hand to her gut, surprised. It had been loud, even Tig heard it and gave her a told you so look. Rather than be embarrassed it made her giggle. And then her giggle made her laugh, and laughing felt pretty damn good so she didn't stop, until she got herself under control. Then she had one question. "Where's the pizza?"
Chapter 43

When Jamie couldn't keep her eyes open any more Tig picked her up off the sofa, carried her down the hallway to the bedroom and tucked her in for the night. She barely woke, just long enough to murmur "'Night" before nestling into her pillows.

He pushed her hair behind her ear and kissed her forehead without a thought. He left the bedroom door open and returned to the living room to flick the TV off.

Tig was in trouble here. So much fucking trouble it felt like he might suffocate. He sat on the sofa, dead centre, running his hands up and down his thighs, trying to calm his shit down.

This couldn't be happening, not to him. He never felt this strongly, this deep. But the panic of Jamie fainting after basically telling him she was into him … well, it stirred shit up. He knew he didn't want to just fuck her, he wanted her around for a good long time. His brain didn't clue him into what that was called until that moment.

No, uh uh. Fuck that. He was not in love. He wasn't programmed for this shit. He could care about people, have a platonic love like he had for Gemma and his brothers. That was one thing. This … felt stronger, yet more fragile all at the same time.

That woman in the other room was fucking kryptonite.

He let his head fall back, eyes sliding closed. When he'd watched her almost inhale half of an extra-large pepperoni and mushroom pizza the word first came to him. I could love this one, he found himself thinking. Then when they'd settled into the sofa to numb their brains further on primetime television she curled up under his arm, resting against his chest and it felt … perfect. Beyond amazing. Comfortable. Something he wanted in his life every damn day. In a word: sweet.

So sweet it took everything he had not to crawl into bed with her and sleep next to her. Not so he could nail her when she woke up, either. Just to be near her. How the hell had she done that to him?

Tig had felt this once before, a complete lifetime ago. Before the club, before his service. Young love that was torn right out of his arms leaving him a weeping, screaming, cursing and self-destructive mess. She'd been the reason people weren't allowed to get close without coming through hell with him first. It hadn't been difficult to shut himself off from that part of his life. Fill the voids with violence, danger, anonymous sex and alcohol. All things that human nature thrived on and desired. He stopped thinking his reactions through, he just acted.

Now he was thinking. And remembering everything he'd already done that tied him to Jamie and Calvin. And he realized then even his base human instincts had been driving him towards her. He
wanted to care for her, support her, protect her. His operating system had turned on him in the end.

Fuck. He was falling for Jamie.

The sound of Harley pipes grew louder outside, and he heard the bike pull into his driveway. He stood from the sofa and left through the front door, turning on the outside light.

Happy was halfway up Tig's walkway when Tig called out to him. "Hap!"

Killer turned, switched directions and headed towards him. They met at the fence. Happy was all business. "Okay. They grabbed the girl in Oakland. She was trying to get away with a grand in ice, stolen from guess who?"

Tig was really starting to hate this name. "Tiny?"

Happy nodded. "Word went out that she not only stole a grand in product from the guy, she owes him almost forty grand. Loans, ice, crank. She's a mess and she sucks as a thief. Well, she sucks at getting away with it anyway."

"How'd she end up here?"

Happy licked his lips and his face found a new level of stone-cold. "That dealer paid Tiny ten grand for her. He liked her."

Tig felt his blood temperature rise. "Was she hooking?"

Happy shook his head, expression unchanged. "Nah. Tiny shot her up with heroin and handed her over, easy as you please."

Tig's whole face twitched. "Motherfucker."

"You can bet she was heavily sedated and used like a teenage boy's tube sock for at least a week before we found her. The dealer likely rented her out, too."

"Who told you this?"

"Quinn and Lorca found a dealer in Bakersfield selling next to Quinn's niece's school. They didn't like that too much. Did a little questioning on who Tiny was, and this guy said he'd only seen Tiny once, back when this prick handed over ten large for an ice head bitch."

Tig felt the prickle of hope at that. "He actually saw Tiny?"

Happy nodded, cold smile just starting to creep up. "Oh yeah. Gave a great description, too."

Tig felt some relief at that. But damn ..."Shit. This'll kill Jamie."
Killer's face softened a bit. "How's she doing?"

Tig waited for the jibe, but it didn't come. "She's lost a lot of weight. It's fucking terrifying, actually."

Happy was studying him, and Tig couldn't remember seeing this expression on Killer's face ever. It looked a lot like concern. "You know, you may not want her to know what you do during your days and nights, but you're doing right by her, man. And that counts for a lot."

Tig felt itchy just from that.

"And you should bring her out to meet the guys," he added, turning back for his bike. "If you ever need one of us to look out for her, it'd help if she'd met us before trusting us to take care of her or that kid."

Tig nodded. "Yeah, I know," he replied, running his hand over his head and down the back of his neck.

Without a word Killer backed down the driveway and took off the way he'd come, his sage advice ringing in Tig's dome.

He did need to make a claim on Jamie, it was only fair. She'd told him as much right before she fainted. When he said I was your girl... I found myself wishing it was true.

Tig took a deep breath and made himself choose right then and there. Jamie as his, or Jamie not at all.

He chose to make her his. The other option seemed ludicrous.

...

"Tig?"

He heard the voice from far away, thinking he was dreaming again. He rolled away from where it was coming from, content to stay sleeping for the moment.

"Tig?" Now his name was combined with a soft, female laugh. "Come on. Don't make me eat all these pancakes by myself."

Frowning, he cracked one eye open, aware he was on a sofa. The fabric he didn't recognize right away, so he wasn't at his place or the clubhouse. He yawned and swivelled his head to look over his shoulder. Then he couldn't help it, he smiled. "Hey babe."

Jamie's smile was sweet, and she looked away when he called her 'babe.' "Are you hungry?" she asked, tucking her hair behind her ear.
"I'm still stuffed with pizza," he joked. "Aren't you?"

She shook her head. "No." Then she grinned and he noticed her eyes.

"Are you high again?"

"I slept so good last night, and I think it's because I finally ate a whole meal. I like … being full," she shared like it was a great epiphany she'd had. He had to laugh.

"You're high," he accused, sitting up. "I created a monster."

"Come on," she said, getting to her feet and pulling on his hands. "I made pancakes."

Tig had to blink a few times, then rub his eyes. When that didn't help he stood and followed. The change from the day before to now was shocking. "You made pancakes?"

Stupid question; he could smell them, and as soon as he did his stomach growled a bit. He stood next to the table, watching her pull a plate of pancakes from the stove where they'd been keeping warm. The table was set already, and she put hot plates at the two place settings as well.

"You did all this and I slept through it?"

She grinned. "I think the noise was competing with your snoring."

"Shit, was I snoring? Sorry."

"Don't be. It's not like you woke me up or anything." She crossed to the coffee maker and was pulling two mugs out of the cupboard. Without thinking, he crossed the room to stand behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders. She set the mugs on the counter and stilled, head half-turning enough to bring her ear closer to him, not enough for her to see him.

He squeezed her shoulders, and she inhaled. He rested his head against the back of hers, closing his eyes and letting the smell and warmth of her seep into him.

"Tig?"

"Jamie," he started, not sure what the hell he wanted to say here. "Jax was right. You are my girl, honey." Her shoulders stiffened under his hands, and he rubbed them, pressing a kiss to the side of her neck and leaving his face there, her skin almost feeling as good as home. "I'm going to do better, I swear. I'll do anything I can to deserve this."

She was frozen in place, and he could almost hear her mind whirling. He didn't know what to make of the silence. So he just waited, wrapping her up tight to his chest, linking his arms around her stomach. After a long, gut-rolling moment she put her hands over his and relaxed back into him. Something in his chest released, and he felt himself smile as he kissed her neck again.
"I must be crazy," she whispered.

He turned her around, backing her up to the counter and holding her face between his hands. "Yeah. But I really like crazy, honey."

She looked worried for a moment. "What if I don't get better?"

"And what if you do?" he replied. "I'm taking the chance of losing you either way. Because I can tell you … I don't want to let you go. But I'll risk you leaving me."

Her hands gripped his wrists tightly. "Why do you want me? I don't see how -"

"Are you kidding me? We're going back to this?" he teased, and to his relief she smiled.

Her eyes rose to meet his, the colour of the ocean, and it struck him how no matter what about her changed, those eyes stayed absolutely stunning. And right now they were warm, heated, and not because she was pissed off. He pressed his lips to her cheek, then turned her head so her lips lined up with his. He didn't have to do anything else. She kissed him, winding her arms around his shoulders and pressing her sweet little self into his embrace. His hands slid down to span her back, and it struck him again how thin she'd gotten. He could feel her ribs and spine.

His concern for her well-being dissolved a bit when her tongue lapped at his bottom lip, and on pure instinct he opened his mouth, pushing her tongue back with his, which caused her to rise up to her toes. Her hips pressed into his, and even without that he knew he was hard already. Having her rub against him was a fantastic although painful confirmation.

She ended the kiss, easing away from him, the heavy lip lock ebbing away into soft touches. "We, uh," she breathed, lowering her heels again. "We should eat breakfast."

He certainly would have preferred her on the table, but he nodded. "Okay. Let's have pancakes, babe."
Chapter 44

The water reached the perfect temperature. Jamie stepped into the shower, the stream hitting her in the chest, and she closed her eyes, moving up to let it run over her face. She was stuffed with pancakes, and she hadn't been this full in... it felt like years. The warm hazy effect of the pot was like a cozy brain-inhibitor. She was just... happy.

*I'm going to do better, I swear. I'll do anything I can to deserve this.*

Jamie covered her mouth as Tig's words came back to her, her heart clenching tight. She had no idea why in the world he would think he didn't deserve her, but that oath had given her the first moment of true peace she'd had in a very long time.

She was his girl. Something about that felt so... right.

They'd eaten pancakes until they were too full to handle another bite then washed the dishes together quietly and comfortably like it happened every day. She said she was going for a shower, he said he'd go out and mow the lawn for her.

She reached for the shampoo but found herself glaring at the bottle. She knew what would happen once she started lathering up her hair. It would come out in clumps, sticking to her hands and running down the tub to get stuck in the drain. She put the bottle back, washed the rest of her body quickly, then turned the water off, towelled dry and did her standard stare-at-herself-in-the-mirror routine.

She ignored the scars on her chest, instead focusing on what was left of her hair. There were no visible bald spots yet, but... it was going to happen.

Who knew how long she stood there, memorizing this last glimpse. She hadn't done this when they chopped her hair at the salon. She never got to say goodbye to a lot of parts of her.

She choked on that, hands covering her face as tears sprung to her eyes. *Don't, she commanded herself. Don't do this again. Don't go back into that self-pitying spiral.*

Jamie wrapped a towel around her chest, left the bathroom and went to the kitchen to get her scissors. As she was heading down the hallway the front door open and she turned, startled. It was Tig, and he looked a bit surprised to see her, too.

"I was, uh, getting a drink of water," he stuttered, eyes trailing up and then down her body. It was like she wasn't even wearing a towel. "What – what are you doing?"

"I'm cutting off all my hair," she answered hollowly, holding the towel closed and hopefully camouflaging the missing breast.
"Really?" He didn't sound as surprised by that as she was.

"It started falling out."

He inhaled, eyebrows raised. "I'm sorry, Jamie."

"No need to be sorry. It was going to happen."

"You're sure you're okay?" He didn't sound convinced and she couldn't blame him.

"Yeah." She started to the bathroom, then turned back. "Actually, could you help me?"

"Me?" He pointed at his own chest.

"I can't reach the back. I can't see it."

"Are you cutting it short?"

She shook her head. "No, I want it all gone."

He rubbed his chin. "Okay. Let me run next door for a second."

She nodded, then headed for the bathroom again. She spread an older towel on the floor, a second one over the sink and vanity. Without hesitation she grabbed a hunk at the front of her head and cut it, about a half inch from her scalp. She grabbed another chunk and did the same. She was halfway back over her head by the time Tig found her, and he set a straight razor and can of shaving foam on the vanity. Jamie wanted to cry. He wasn't talking her out of it, he was helping. And she appreciated it.

Jamie paid close attention to his face, but he gave nothing away. He just said, "You got clippers?"

"Main bathroom, under the sink."

He vanished again and she kept butchering away as much as she could. Tig appeared with the clippers, set them down, and took the scissors from her. With a light touch he cut away everything she couldn't see, then plugged in the clippers. "Sit on the tub," he suggested.

They moved the towel from the floor closer to the bath, and she stepped into the tub and sat on the edge facing the tiled wall. The clippers buzzed and she closed her eyes as his hand rested on top of her head. After a pause the clippers scraped over her scalp. She could feel the hair as it fell, tickling her shoulders, and she made herself breathe.

"How you doing?" Tig suddenly asked, and she opened her eyes.

"I'm fine," she assured him.
He squeezed her shoulder and she closed her eyes again. When he turned the clippers off she ran her hands over her head, feeling the fuzz.

"Oh my God," she whispered, breath hitching. But not from panic, oddly enough.

"You sure you want it all gone?"

"Yes," she replied immediately. "This way it's my choice."

Tig's big, warm hand closed around the back of her neck and pulled her back a bit. She tilted her head backward and he kissed her softly, his eyes so warm she had to catch her breath. He smiled. "You're so beautiful, Jamie."

"Really?" she whispered, searching his face for the punch line.

"Honey, you have no idea, do you?"

"About what?"

He kissed her again, then tilted her head upright.

She sat still while he lathered up her head, then concentrated extra hard on staying still as he set a towel on her shoulder and said, "Here goes."

His hands were quick and light, and if she hadn't known what he was doing she'd likely find it incredibly relaxing. Not a single nick or cut, and a mere ten minutes later he was done, wiping her off with a warm, damp towel.

"Ready to see?" he asked.

She stood up and he held her hand, helping her step out of the bath. Her eyes were on the ground until she stood in front of the mirror. With a deep breath Jamie braced her hands and stared down into the sink, steeling her nerves.

Tig's thumb came under her chin and he titled her head up, and when Jamie saw herself she stopped breathing, staring at herself.

She was silent, stunned. Tig seemed worried. "Honey, say something."

Jamie didn't know what to say. She didn't know how round her head was. She had no idea her eyes were that big. Suddenly she could really see her cheekbones. On their own her hands were up and running over her head, hooking on the back of her neck.

"That's what I really look like," she said, absently.

"Yeah," he agreed. "That's how beautiful you are, Jamie."
Her eyes skipped over to his reflection, and his face was soft, open, honest.

Jamie's hands clutched where the towel was tucked closed. She felt the tears, noticed her lip quiver. "I am?"

"How many times I gotta say it, babe?" The humour was back in his voice, and it made her smile. "I'm starting to think you just like hearing it."

She shook her head, hand to her cheek. He closed a hand around her neck and pulled her to him to kiss her head. "You want me to clean this up?"

"No, I can. Thanks."

He kissed her cheek next, gave her a squeeze around the waist, then left her there with her reflection and the last of her armour on the floor. She was pulling the vacuum out of the closet when the phone rang. Jamie snagged the extension in the bedroom. "Hello?"

"Jamie Taylor?"

"Yes?"

"This is Doctor Cleary. I'm calling with good news."

Her grip tightened on the receiver. "You are?"

"Jaclyn's woken up. She's alert, responsive, and it appears her brain function has not been affected."

Jamie couldn't say anything.

"Jamie?"

"Sorry, I'm just … I'm relieved."

"We're moving her to a regular observation room for a few days, but I think she'll be ready to go home very soon."

"Really?"

"She's malnourished, detoxing as we speak. But I think the worst of it passed while she was in her coma. She's … she's quite desperate to see you."

Jamie's guilt returned, her big-sister-throwing-little-sister-out guilt. "Ummm … can I come today?"

"Absolutely. Visiting hours are until five."
She took a deep breath. "Thank you so much."

"My pleasure, Jamie. She'll be so excited to see you."
Chapter 45

Tig tilted his head. "Listen, Jamie. I told you. You're my girl."

She scratched her scalp under the scarf she'd tied around her head. It was blue, like her eyes, and he still couldn't believe she was this gorgeous without her hair.

"Tig, I'm … scared."

"You think I'm going to let you get hurt?"

She shook her head. "Tig -"

He slid his hand around her waist, pulling her against him. "Come on. Take a ride with me."

"I've never been on a motorcycle."

He couldn't help himself. "Let me be your first, babe," he said low, kissing the side of her neck, loving the sound of her giggling, embarrassed.

"You have to go slow."

"Slow and gentle, I promise."

She rolled her eyes. "Cut it out."

He gave her a look of shock. "I'm talking about the bike, what are you thinking about?"

She closed her eyes then covered her face. "Fine," she relented. "Just don't get me hurt."

He plopped a helmet on her head and fastened the chin strap. He knew he was grinning but he didn't care. "Hold onto me, and don't fight me. If you think you're capable of that."

She gave him a saucy look and he had to check himself from going complete sap on her. Fun Jamie likely was his favourite.

Tig pulled his helmet on, then swung a leg over his Dyna. "Behind me, babe."

When he sat she climbed on, holding onto his shoulders then settling into his back, wrapping her arms tight around him and linking her hands on his stomach.

"You ready?"
"Sure," she replied, somewhat tense, and he was grinning as he kicked the bike alive. He walked them down the drive, then once they were on the street he gave her right knee a squeeze and took off, making sure the tires squealed. When they did, so did Jamie.

As fun as this was, he was nervous about her seeing her sister. Jaclyn had some bad stories, and he was going to let her tell Jamie what happened. And if she lied, God help her, he was going to make her tell the truth.

St. Thomas Hospital was a five minute ride from their neighbourhood, and Tig was wishing it was longer. There was something about riding with his woman holding onto him, trusting him. It was fucking fantastic. He never just let any broad ride on his bike but Jamie felt right.

He parked and let her dismount first, watching as she unfastened the chin strap. He couldn't miss the colour in her face and the brightness of her eyes. "So, how was that?"

Her grin was breathtaking. "That was fun."

"See? I told you."

"I want to learn to ride."

Tig's eyebrows went up. "No."

"What? Why not?"

He pulled his helmet off. "Same reason I'm not telling you how I make scrambled eggs. If you're on a bike, it's mine."

She handed over the helmet when he reached for it. "What? Why?"

"I told you. You're mine, Jamie."

She sighed. "That seems unfair."

"Honey, anytime you want to ride on this bike you just ask. That's the deal."

All that got him was another sassy look. He stowed the helmets away and found himself taking her hand with a grin as they crossed the parking lot. She let him, grasping his palm to hers as they found the visitor's desk and then rode the elevator to the third floor. The doctor he'd pestered for a full day when the sister was first admitted stood at the nurse's station, and when she turned and saw them she wasn't smooth enough to hide her surprise, looking right at their joined hands.

"Jamie," the doctor greeted her warmly. "You're looking fantastic, I have to say."

Jamie grinned as her cheeks turned pink. "Thank you."
"She's in room two-twelve. Go right on in."

They went down the hall the doc indicated, room two-twelve only a couple doors in. He stopped short, turning Jamie around. "Have a good visit," he said, dropping her hand to take her by the shoulders.

"Thanks," she whispered, biting her lip. "Why am I nervous to see her?"

Tig shrugged.

"Okay," she breathed, blinking rapidly. "Here I go."

He kissed her forehead and stepped away, hands dropping to his sides. She headed for the door, squared her shoulders and passed through. Tig parked himself on a vinyl-covered bench in the hall to wait. Just as he found a comfortable position his cell phone rang.

He dug it out of his back pocket, flipped it open and brought it to his ear. "Yeah?"

"Where are you?" It was Clay.

"The hospital. Jamie's sister woke up."

"That's good. We might be able to use her."

Tig frowned.

"Tiny is sort of a travelling salesman, as it turns out. He's all over So-Cal, and he's headed this way to enforce his distribution in Charming."

Tig rubbed his forehead. "I've been waiting for that. I was wondering how long it would take before we pissed him off."

"Hap told you about the dealer Quinn's found in Bakersfield?"

"Yeah, he filled me in last night."

"Quinn's got him answering calls from Tiny."

"How's he doing that?"

"I expect it's under physical duress. But the guy's cooperating for now. Tiny's scheduled to be here tomorrow, asked Quinn's dealer to meet him. We're showing up instead."

Tig's hand tightened on the phone so hard he heard the plastic crack. "Happy told me how the girl ended up here. I hate that kind of shit, Clay."
"I know, Tig. But remember; we took care of the dealer that brought her here. If I remember correctly, you and Happy made your feelings known."

Somehow remembering the feel of nose cartilage snapping under his fist wasn't enough to quell the sick anger in his gut. "Don't get me wrong," he said carefully. "The girl wasn't anything special to me, you know that."

"I know Tig."

"But she's important to Jamie."

"And that's why none of this feels better until Tiny's been neutralized. We all want this prick and his asshole friends out of town. And if they're dealing in front of your girl's house, beating people up on her lawn, we need to get him gone. I need you for that Tig."

"You got me, Clay. You know that."

"Church tonight, okay?"

"When?"

"Seven. Gemma's doing supper before that."

"How come?"

"It's been a while. Maybe … maybe you should bring that girl."

Tig nearly laughed. Clay was as good at "pretending" as Tig was. "Is this so the guys can meet her?"

"What do you think?"

Tig just shook his head. "We'll be there for supper."

"Good. That gets rid of one headache anyway."

"Later," Tig replied and flipped his phone shut. After a few more moments of chilling his heels the door in front of him opened and Jamie stepped out. Her face was splotchy, eyes were red, but she gave him a smile anyway. Tig got to his feet, reaching for her on instinct. "You okay?"

"Yeah. She's up, tired, but … I think she's going to be okay."

Tig narrowed his eyes. "What did she tell you?"

"Not a lot. The usual stuff about how sorry she was. I didn't want to push."
Tig felt his lip curl. "She didn't tell you how she got to Charming?"

Jamie looked startled. "No. Why?"

Tig reached around her and pushed the door open, striding past her into the room like he had every right to be there.

The sister looked up, frowned like she was trying to place him, then her eyes got wide and she held up both hands, palms out, pleading. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to come back here. It's not my fault, I swear!"

At least she remembered that.

"Tig, what are you doing?" Jamie was hissing at him, grabbing his arm. "Don't scare her."

"She ain't that scared of me," he assured her, not letting his eyes leave the sad sack in the hospital bed.

"I'm sorry," the sister repeated, looking like she was about to start crying.

As he stared her down he realized how much she and Jamie now looked alike. Thin, too thin, eyes looking much bigger than they really were. The biggest difference was that Jamie once again was bright-eyed and vibrant. The woman in the bed still looked … wretched.

"Did you tell Jamie why you're here?"

Now the girl just looked confused.

"Tig," Jamie cautioned.

"Don't you think it's fair to warn her what you got yourself into?"

Now Jamie's eyes went to her sister. "What's he talking about?"

The bitch looked confused, too. "I don't know," she said weakly.

"Tell her about Tiny," Tig advised, and he watched her face get even paler, if it was possible.

"Who's Tiny?" Jamie asked, not to him, to her. Fuck, he couldn't even remember the sister's name.

"I … I can't …"

"Tell me, Jackie. Are we in danger?"

Tig felt relief at that. Jamie was still capable of self-preservation.
The sister's face crumpled and she covered it with both hands. "I'm so sorry Jamie!"

Now Jamie turned a panicked look on him. "I wanted her to say it," he explained gently. "Those guys that have been dealing? The ones that beat up that guy in front of your house, roughed up Calvin? They all work for a really bad dude we're trying to find. He's a network meth dealer, he's got little operations all over Southern Cali. He's bad news, Jamie."

Her eyes darted to Jackie, but there was no real help there.

"Your sister owes him a lot of money. Then she tried to steal from him. So he sold her to a dealer he'd set up here."

Jamie frowned. "Sold her?"

"She was into him for forty grand. He felt he owned her. So he sold her and the dealer kept her for his own entertainment. He might have also pimped her out. But I don't know that for sure."

There it was; sweet Jamie, who'd made pancakes and cried while he cut her hair that morning, finding out her sister was basically trafficked back to Charming because she owed a drug dealer less than houses are worth.

He felt like he'd just thrown filth all over her.

She blinked. A lot. Then shook her head. "No," she whispered. "No, oh my God."

Tig risked a look back at the sister. She was watching Jamie, biting her nails, tears running down her face, full-body sobbing.

"We don't like drug dealers here," Tig said, mostly for Jackie. "We're going to get this Tiny guy to ignore Charming in his grand plans. And if he won't we'll make Tiny disappear. But if we need your help, I plan on getting it without any hassle."

Jackie looked terrified. Still. "He'll kill me."

"He'll kill you either way," Tig informed her levelly. "At least with us someone else is on the same side as you. So, are you going to help us?"

There was no answer.

Jamie broke the silence. "Jackie? These people? Do they know where I live? Where Calvin lives?"

That made the bitch drop her hands. "They took my stuff. You're in my address book. Since you moved I had to put you in there."
Jamie took a shuddering breath, and Tig reeled her in close to his chest before she could freak out. "Not going to touch you, babe. I swear to God I'll die before I let them get near you or Calvin."

Jackie watched them, her tears drying up, something coming over her face. Tig didn't bother trying to interpret it, he just held Jamie close and let her hang onto him until she felt better. When Jamie did pull away from him, she wiped her eyes and said, sounding incredibly angry, "Trust me, she's helping you. Because if she doesn't I'm never talking to her again."
Chapter 46

All the relief of Jaclyn waking up dissolved. Of course. Because nothing could ever be great with her around, shit had to fall apart and she had to leave the world in ruins.

What happened to Jackie had been worse than what Jamie had expected. And while it pissed her off that Jaclyn hadn't intended to tell her how much trouble she was in, Jamie also couldn't pretend to be surprised. All Jaclyn had to do to survive was lie and evade. Like a cockroach. Somehow she always survived.

She still cared though, a lot. That was her little sister.

At least the numbness of shock was alleviated by the ride home. Jamie had to admit she loved riding on the bike with Tig. She'd always thought they looked so dangerous, but behind him she felt absolutely safe. Plus something about how he was able to easily handle that loud, grumbling beast of a machine was incredibly attractive.

Tig pulled the bike into her driveway, killed the engine and waited while she climbed off before doing the same. "I'm sorry," he blurted suddenly as she was removing his helmet from her head.

"What?"

He shrugged. "I'm sorry I didn't just tell you the trouble your sister was in. I guess I thought she'd tell you the whole story."

Jamie shook her head and handed over the helmet. "That's not her style. It's not your fault."

"And I meant it when I said I'll protect you."

She felt warmth bubble up in her chest and she was surprised to feel herself smile. "I know."

His eyes ran over her, she knew him well enough by now to recognize that he was worried about her. Not drug-dealer-out-to-kill-you worried, more worried about her health. "What are you doing now?" he asked.

"I think I need a nap. But first I should call Aunt Thelma and tell her Jaclyn's awake."

"Okay." He took her hand. "Listen, Gemma's having a get-together tonight. For dinner. We're invited. You want to go?"

She was perplexed by that. "Really?"

He grinned, and she couldn't believe it but he actually looked sheepish. "I think Gemma wants the guys to meet you. And ... I want them to meet you, too."
"How come?"

"I've met your aunt. Your sister. And I certainly know Calvin. I haven't introduced you to my family. And that's my fault. I might need them to look out for you, and you should meet them."

"These are the members of your club?"

"Yeah. They're my family. They've got my back and if you're with me … they've got yours, too."

She took a deep breath, remembering the crew she'd seen the day she hit that drug dealer with her baseball bat. "Are they dangerous … or are they like you?"

He blinked a couple times, face blank, then threw his head back and laughed. She felt a bit annoyed.

"What? Why is that so funny?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. You don't think I'm dangerous. I don't remember the last time someone told me that."

She was perplexed.

He titled his head, trying to be kind. "Remember what you told me? I beat up three drug dealers? Punched that prick out in his own house? And you still don't think I'm dangerous?"

Jamie bit her lip. "I just meant, dangerous in general. Not just to people who probably deserve it."

"We protect what's important to us," he admitted, running his thumb along her cheek. "And yes, that's when we're dangerous."

"So the bike thing … isn't a hobby. It's … for real."

Tig's face got serious. "Yeah. None of us are accountants or pharmacists Monday to Friday."

"And some of the things you've done for the club put you in jail?"

"Yeah."

Jamie studied his face, how it stayed firm and decided on what he was telling her. If there was anything he'd lie to her about, it would be this. And he wasn't lying. He wasn't hiding it.

She nodded. "Okay. What time is supper at?"

…
"Jamie, babe? It's four o'clock."

She sniffled, rolling to her side and looking over her shoulder at the intrusion on her naptime. Check that, *sleep*. There was no 'nap' to it, she had been right *out*. Tig was sitting next to her hip on the edge of the bed, and when she rolled over he squeezed her shoulder. "You okay?"

She blinked and rubbed her eyes, nodding. "Yeah. I really conked out."

"Would you rather stay home?"

She groaned, rolling onto her back. "No, I want to go. I just need to wake up."

He grinned quite suddenly and she found herself grinning back. "You're fucking cute when you're sleeping," he shared, leaning over to kiss her cheek. And that, of course, made her blush.

"I guess I should get ready," she said through a yawn, covering her mouth.

"Okay. I'll be right out in the living room." The bed shifted when he stood again, and she stretched before getting to her feet, too.

Jamie was rubbing her face as she made her way into the en suite, flipping the light on. Her own reflection surprised her; she'd gone to bed with the scarf on, but it came off somewhere. She'd forgotten about shaving her head.

She ran her hands over her scalp, wondering how the hell one accessorized with no hair. Jamie splashed water on her face, put on a bit of eye make-up and mascara, lip gloss after a second consideration of her appearance. Then back to her bedroom to find something to wear.

Jamie had never been one to agonize over "fitting in." Then again, she was so obviously *normal* and *bland* and *average* that it just sort of happened. Tig and his friends operated in circles well outside of what was considered *average*. So would they even care if she blatantly *didn't* fit in?

She pulled on dark wash jeans, which used to fit like a second skin and now required a belt. That was alarming; relegating herself to pyjamas had made it easy to ignore the severity of her weight loss, apparently.

She pulled on a button-down blouse with a black and gray plaid pattern to it off a hangar. Thelma had generously brought over a bunch of her dress scarves months back and from the pile Jamie selected a black one with silver thread in it. She tied it around her head, knotting the ends over her shoulder like a ponytail. She rolled up the sleeves of the shirt and put on a silver bracelet she found in her jewellery box she'd forgotten about.

Something about trying to put together an outfit on purpose made her feel … better. More like herself. She found Tig in the kitchen, flipping his phone shut and turning when he heard her. His smile was wide and real. "Damn, you take no time at all to clean up."
She blushed, again, and let him kiss her cheek. "No hair to worry about," she reminded him.

"You're going to be okay to eat? Still riding the high of that morning blunt?"

She punched his shoulder.

"Hey, oww." It was amusing that he would play wounded. "Let's get my girl all sorted, then you'll be ready to meet the guys."

... 

Jamie didn't know what dinner at Gemma's would be like. The men standing around the Morrow's house and yard were absolutely what she imagined seeing, but that's where her expectations ended.

No matter how little they looked alike, there was a uniform to them that went beyond their leather. They all had ruler-straight spines, walked and moved with a deceptive casualness that you just knew meant they were anything but 'at ease,' and had the same edge to them that marked them as being outside of society that Tig had. Underneath that, their characters were completely different.

The man that had terrified her when she first met him all those months ago was, honest to God, called Happy. And he had a snake tattooed on his head, which was intriguing. Happy gave her the same up-and-down he had the first time she saw him, but he shook her hand and nodded with a very gruff, "How you doing?" that didn't seem to need a response.

The one that the dealers had been so quick to stare down the day before was called Opie. Up close he was young, like Jax, and the beard was likely to camouflage his baby face. He was large but his hand shake was light, and he just gave her a smile and a head bob, then with an alarmingly soft voice introduced his wife, Donna and their kids, Ellie and Kenny. And speaking of unexpected, Donna Winston was as normal and average as Jamie was.

Bobby was the one with the crazy snarl of gray hair that matched an equally grizzled beard. He just shook her hand with a muttered and slightly sarcastic "Charmed," before returning to his conversation with the one called Chibs.

She knew that couldn't really be his name, but that's how he was introduced. He was the one with the startling scars on both cheeks, like someone had cut his mouth wider. His greying hair had an unwashed appearance, but he took her hand and to her surprise kissed the back of it while saying, "Lovely to meet you," with a thick, Scottish accent.

Tig pulled her hand out of his grasp, stepping in front of her while saying sarcastically, "Yeah yeah, so fucking debonair. Asshole. Hands off."

It made the Scot laugh, giving her a wink before replying to Bobby's recent comment.
Another young-looking one pumped her hand enthusiastically as he was introduced to her as Juice. This one had a strange, humming energy to him, like he might have been cranked up on something. When he smiled it nearly knocked her on her butt it was so bright, cracking his face in half to show ultra-white teeth and dimples. His head was shaved in a very short Mohawk, with two tribal tattoos on his skull as well. He was easy to like, immediately.

Piney was Opie's father, and he was wedged in the sofa with an oxygen machine. He didn't move to shake her hand; just nodded and took a long drink from his highball glass. She didn't take it personally.

Gemma greeted her with a half-hug while rushing around her warm, crowded and bustling kitchen. Jax was leaning on the counter, not helping his mother, but he offered Jamie a smile and a nod when he saw her, then pulled the woman next to him away from the island to face her while he made introductions that weren't really necessary. It was the doctor, Tara, and the woman's smile was genuine and warm which made Jamie blush. She was embarrassed that this woman had seen her passed out. Why that should bother her she had no idea.

"Can I help with anything?" Jamie offered before anyone could tell her how good she was looking or how glad they were to see her up and around.

"Nope," Gemma quipped. "In true Tig fashion, you both arrived in time to eat."

"Damn, she's on to me," Tig sounded like a foiled villain but without looking she knew he was grinning.

The outside door next to the kitchen opened, and Clay Morrow entered. Jamie felt her guard go up again as he shot a glance her way, then smiled at Tig. "You got the girl to come, good for you."

"Jamie, you remember Clay?"

She nodded before Tig finished. "Yes. Good to see you again."

Clay slid an arm around his wife's waist to kiss her neck before letting her go to work on the meal. "She's so polite, isn't she?" he said to Gemma, who just smiled at Jamie.

"Her Momma raised her right," was all Gemma said then held out a bowl of salad. "Can you put this on the table honey? We're ready to eat."
Chapter 47

Jamie was next to him on the sofa, tucked under his arm cradling a cup of tea close to her chest, entertained by whatever bullshit Juice and Chibs were trading back and forth, but all Tig could hear was her laugh. It lit up her whole face and had easily charmed his brothers; every single one of them. Even that miserable bastard Piney was smiling.

Opie's daughter Ellie had really taken a shine to her, and was wedged between Donna and Jamie, hands playing with the ends of the scarf Jamie had wrapped around her head. She seemed fascinated that Jamie appeared to have no hair but good manners prevented her from asking questions.

Jax appeared in the entryway from the kitchen, tapping his watch. Tig caught it and nodded, giving Jamie's shoulders a squeeze. "Time to go," he said close to her ear. "I'll drop you at home, then I gotta head to church."

As soon as he said it Tig knew how she'd take it and he almost laughed at how surprised she was. "Church?"

He allowed a grin. "Club business."

"Oh. Okay."

The way she accepted that as a reason for anything made him feel a bit like a prick. She let Ellie take her mug and carry it to the kitchen with a formal, "Thank you, Ellie," and held his hand as they left the house under an avalanche of farewells to Jamie, then headed for his bike.

Tig handed over a helmet and absently asked what he was dying to know without really asking. "So? That's my family."

"Really?" He faked confusion. "Because I'm pretty sure they hated you."

"Really?" She didn't believe him, she was still smiling.

"Yeah. Couldn't you tell?"

"No."

He swung a leg over his bike, then stopped her from doing the same by putting a hand on her hip. "They're crazy about you. I knew they would be."
She dropped her eyes and fucking blushed at that. He knew his grin got bigger and he leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Let's get you home, babe."

He hated the feeling of her heat leaving his back as she got off the bike in her driveway. She unfastened the helmet and was handing it to him and he surprised even himself by saying, "Might as well take it inside with you."

Her grip tightened on it. "Oh. Okay."

Even without knowing his world she seemed to realize he was saying she was the only one he expected to have on his bike with him. And she knew that was a big deal.

"When you're done, will you come back here?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I'll go home after."

"No, I mean …" her cheeks got pinker and he realized what she was asking. "Can you come here after?"

His back straightened, his chest feeling bigger. "Yeah, if you want."

She nodded. "I would like that."

Tig felt lightheaded, he had to roll his shoulders to keep from jumping up and down. "Okay. I'll see you later then."

She nodded, paused, then leaned over, hand on his thigh for balance, and kissed his cheek. Without meeting his gaze she turned and headed for the front steps of her place. He waited until she was inside, returned the small wave she gave right before she shut the front door, and let himself grin then.

There were few moments that had him feeling like a teenager again. His life was a long list of been there done that by this point, but Jamie Taylor made him feel like a kid.

He was last to arrive at the clubhouse, nodding at the few Nomads holding court outside before passing through the door to SAMCRO's hallowed halls. His brothers were already seated around the Redwood table, and as Tig took his seat at Clay's right he caught them all staring.

"What?" he snapped.

There was quiet as they exchanged looks, and Tig got the suffocating feeling they'd been talking about him.

There was some shared chuckling among them that he didn't get, and it was that Scot bastard that spoke for the group. "We're in love," Chibs shared, "with your lass."
That made everyone crack up, and Tig felt like he was a little too on display right then.

"Fuck, Tig. You got major dirt on her or what?" Bobby asked. "No way that girl should ever have anything to do with the likes of you."

He shook his head as his brothers yucked it up, feeling himself grin, too.

"Okay, enough," Clay eventually snapped. "I can feel myself growing breasts from this cuddly talk. Can we get started?"

There was a mumble of agreement.

"Quinn brought his dealer in. Tiny's scheduled to be here tomorrow. We're waiting for the call for the meeting, should come in around eight or nine tonight."

"Where's the dealer?" Tig asked.

"Garage. Quinn's got an eye on him, don't worry. Now, the dealer confirmed that the junkie gave up her sister as someone who might pay back her debt."

Tig's jaw cranked down.

"They have her name and her address. I'm suggesting that as of tomorrow, at every given moment one of us is on Miss Jamie's ass until we know for a fact Tiny is gone – either moved on or six feet under. Yeah?" Clay cast his gaze around the table.

There was another chorus of grumbled accord. Tig nodded, feeling how his brothers were ready to rally for Jamie in the air of the room itself. "Thanks guys," he said quietly, feeling Chibs knock his shoulder.

"Me, Tig, Quinn and Jax will wait with the dealer for Tiny's call. The rest of you are cut loose for the night. But keep your phones on and stay close while we figure out how to handle Tiny," Clay decided, rapping the gavel down once. Then he jerked his head in Tig's direction. "Care to meet our guest?" he asked sarcastically.

Tig felt himself grin. "Hell yeah."

They had the dealer tied to a stacking chair in the centre of a service bay. The guy's face was pretty swollen, but not so much he couldn't talk.

The dealer saw the new members walk in and started scrambling his feet on the concrete like that would get rid of all the zip ties binding his hands to the chair and miraculously set him free. "Jesus, man," he sputtered at Quinn. "I don't know anything else, I swear it!"

Quinn chuckled and tossed his cigarette butt to the ground, grinding it dead with his boot heel. "Relax, asshole. We're just waiting for that phone call."
Everyone except the dealer assumed a posture of relaxation, leaning against walls or tool chests, lighting cigarettes and breaking off into small conversations. Tig opted to stand right in front of the bastard, thumbs hooked on his belt as he studied this piece of shit.

The asshole was tall, white and scrawny. Just like the rest of them. Even under the swelling and bruising Tig could tell Stretch wasn't a user, he was strictly in distribution. And he was okay with dealing on the same block as an elementary school.

Of course that just brought Calvin to mind.

Tig was freaking out the string bean, but he didn't care, he just kept eyeing him up and chewing the inside of his lip, thinking of the best way to end the fucker once he'd served his purpose.

When the cell rang it was like the lights coming on in a roach motel. Everyone scrambled upright, Clay the only one outwardly calm as he pressed talk on the cell and held it to the dealer's ear and mouth.

"Hello?"

Clay nodded, letting the dealer know he sounded good. There was a pause while everyone collectively held their breath.

"Quaker Pond Road? What am I looking for?"

More silence. Tig clenched and unclenched his right hand, knuckles cracking softly. It wasn't a nervous gesture, it was anticipatory.

"How the fuck do I know what a dairy farm looks like?" Stretch had his eyes on Clay, who was still nodding. "What's a silo?"

Clay and Tig shared a look and Tig nodded. They knew the spot.

"Green roofed house. That's all you gotta say, man. I can find that."

"The sister? Yeah, I saw her."

Clay nodded, letting the dealer know he sounded good. There was a pause while everyone collectively held their breath.

"The sister? Fuck yeah, she's hot. Looks like Jackie but a lot fucking hotter, I can tell you that."

The only thing keeping his teeth in his head was the fact he almost sounded like he was calling Tiny off of Jamie as far as cash went.
"Yeah, you could likely make a few grand off her pussy, man." The guy's voice cracked. "More than you would with Jackie."

Tig felt an arm go across his chest and didn't even realize he'd stepped towards the prick until he heard Chibs mutter close to his ear, "Easy there, Tigger."

Tig knew his face was likely dark and stormy, Stretch couldn't look away from him. Likely why his voice cracked when he said, "You got it. Tomorrow at two. I'm there." There was a hesitation, then the guy nodded at Clay, who ended the call.

As soon as Tig heard that beep all he saw was red. He didn't black out on this one. He was completely lucid as his fist connected with the asshole's jaw. It snapped his head to the side in a way that would likely cause some damage, and there was also the satisfying sound of his rings hitting teeth.

Stretch didn't even straighten up. He remained slouched to the side, facing down at the floor, blood and saliva dripping from his lower lip as he caught his breath.

"Feeling better?" Clay asked.

"No," was the easy answer. This Tiny prick so much as knowing Jackie had a sister was more information than Tig was comfortable with.

"Get to her now and don't leave her side unless someone else is there to watch her," Clay advised, grabbing Tig's upper arm. "If we hear Tiny's here early, we'll call. You feel like something's off, call for back up. Yeah?"

Tig nodded. "Got it. But what about him?" Clay knew he meant the dealer.

Clay gave a cold grin. "Sorry Tig. If Tiny calls back we want him around to answer."

Tig nodded, backing away. "Okay. Gotcha."

"Later," Clay promised, too low for the dealer to hear. But it was all Tig needed.

Without a backwards glance he was at his bike, pulling on his helmet, and pointing the Dyna towards Jamie's house. He still had her key on the Kermit the Frog keychain and he dug it out of his pocket, wondering if it was weird that he'd attached it to his own house keys.

Her place was dark and he was disappointed. He'd hoped to find her dozing off in front of the TV, maybe in a T-shirt and her underwear. Or just her underwear. But no such luck.

He shut the door silently, then moved through the darkened front rooms to make sure all windows were closed and locked, even the bathroom. Jamie's bedroom door was shut, and he paused right outside. There was no light coming around the edges and it was as silent as the rest of the place. Then he returned to the living room, shrugged out of his kutte and unbuttoned his
shirt, setting them over the back of the armchair. He wedged a cushion against the armrest of the sofa, sat down and pulled his boots off. Then, in his jeans and a T-shirt he leaned against the pillow, heels on the opposite sofa arm, listening to the sounds of the street and the house.

He heard the creak in the hallway, but didn't move. Too much to hope that Jamie was coming to get him. When he heard her voice ask, "Tig" he jackknifed upright.

"Jamie? Everything okay?"

He could just make her out at the mouth of the hall. The T-shirt she wore only came down mid-thigh, and he forced his eyes off her chest because he was pretty sure she was braless, even with her arms crossed and covering her breast.

"Yeah. What are you doing?"

"Don't want you left alone with that dealer out there, babe. I'll be watching out for you, okay?"

She did that cute thing where she pressed the toes of one foot onto the top of her other foot. It was the marking of a shy girl, and he fucking loved it from her.

"Do you have to be out here to watch out for me?"

He had to swallow. Tell his dick to behave. "Uh, no. Why? You want me to leave?" He wasn't sure if he was giving her an out or making her say it to satisfy his own ego.

"Tig," she said, laughing almost huskily with it. "I'm asking you to sleep next to me. I wouldn't mind. I think … I'd like that."

She was too sweet to be fucking with him, right?

"Are you sure?"

There was a pause, then she turned to head back to her room saying, "Sorry, you don't have to."

Shit. Asshole - get off your ass.

"Jamie, I'd like that. Sorry, just …" he got up, heading her way as she stopped and turned to him. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable."

"I'm the one asking, Tig," she pointed out, then headed to her open bedroom door.

He had to force himself to let her lead the way. Then he felt that same nervous pause while she climbed in under the covers, barely visible through the moonlight flooding the room. He heard her yawn while she did it, sliding close to the wall and getting comfortable.
She's too tired for what you're thinking about, he scolded himself, unbuckling his belt and undoing his jeans. He somewhat folded them, set them out of the way and slid into bed in T-shirt and shorts. He could do this. He could totally sleep here without anything else happening.

Tig was almost proud of himself and he pulled the covers up, then his cockiness was gone. Shit. He was completely enveloped in her scent; sweet and flowers and whatever else that made up the smell that was Jamie. It wafted from under the blankets and surrounded his head via the pillow it was resting on. He was drowning in it, and like the animal he was his body reacted, hardening despite his mental coaching.

Shit.

Jamie flopped over his way, and before he could prepare she tucked herself into his side. Like he cuddled a woman every night his arm lowered on reflex, cradling her head in the dip between his arm and chest, bicep like a pillow. Her leg wound around his, low enough she wouldn't catch on to what the throbbing, mind of its own part of him was doing. He dropped his hand to her shoulder, feeling her inhale and nestle close. Out of the pure reflex of having her wrapped around him Tig kissed the top of her head, wrapped her in his arms and closed his eyes.
Chapter 48

Jamie woke wrapped in a warm, breathing cocoon. Her face was resting on a T-shirt clad chest, her arm stretched around a cuddly mid-section.

And its owner was snoring.

Jamie had to smile. It wasn't a loud, buzz-saw snore. Just a bit of snuffling. It was actually … cute.

Cute. To describe anything about Tig Trager. She must be getting soft in the head.

She craned her neck back, looking upward to his face. Moonlight flooding through the uncovered window was almost as bright as day. It cast him in a grey-blue glow. That face was completely relaxed in sleep, mouth open. Seeing him this way was so private. She couldn't even be sure it was really happening. She might still be asleep herself.

Unaware, she raised her hand, letting one finger touch his lower lip. All she could do was think of those lips, that mouth, remembering what he was capable of when he combined them with his tongue and teeth. She grew warm and felt a ghost of a smile.

She was sleeping with Tig Trager.

He jolted quite suddenly, his hand grabbing her wrist quick enough to startle her into emitting a small cry. His eyes searched the room for a threat, and finally saw only her.

Jamie froze, on her side, wrapped around him with the exception of the arm he was holding in place. "Are you okay?" he whispered.

She nodded. "You were snoring."

"Sorry," he whispered back, squeezing his eyes shut and opening them again with a head shake. "I usually only snore in my own room when I'm alone. I know; I wake myself up."

Jamie smiled. "It wasn't that loud."

"But it woke you up," he pointed out, running his other hand over his face.

"It's fine," she insisted, and he tilted his head down towards her, giving a small smile. She liked his smile, how it just barely curled his lips and only reached his eyes when he really meant it. He meant this one.

"You feel good like this," he shared quietly.
Jamie's smile faded a bit. She was wearing a saggy, sad T-shirt and white cotton panties. Her head was completely bald. She should not feel sexy right now. But from that smile and his words, she did.

Something changed in the room. A cosy, comfortable cocoon became something more heated and … exciting.

She wasn't the only one to feel it. As she held her breath he rolled her onto her back slowly, his leg sliding between her thighs, eyes not straying from hers for anything. One of those warm, rough hands cupped the side of her throat, and she swallowed nervously, holding eye contact. She almost couldn't take it.

His blue eyes ran over her face with anything but coldness. She could taste that he wanted her, and it lit her skin off with heat. Her hands slid around his shoulders, one wrapping all the way around and the other getting lost in his hair.

"Jamie," he whispered, quite hoarsely.

"Tig," she answered, then he was kissing her. His tongue was in her mouth, his lips were holding hers hostage. His hand was at the small of her back, searching for skin under the hem of her T-shirt. She arched her back, pressing her incomplete chest into his, thrilling at the moan he gave.

She let her hand free of his hair, running it down his chest and under his shirt, up across his stomach and the hair of his chest, smiling as he hissed in a breath with that masculine chuckle.

Ticklish. She remembered.

She yanked up on his T-shirt. He left her for a moment to pull it off over his head. She reached down to do the same, felt herself pause, but he was right there with her.

He lifted up on the fabric and she sat up silently, hands over her head, heart hammering for a different reason. He was the first to be naked with her as she was now, other than a doctor.

Jamie decided then and there she wasn't scared, not of him.

She let the T-shirt come off over her head, dropping her arms and fighting the urge to cover herself up. Not making a big deal of it, he leaned into her, coaxing her back to the mattress again, eyes back on hers, cradling her head with one hand while the other cupped her right breast, squeezing it gently before his thumb passed over her nipple.

"Tig," she gasped at the touch, her back arching, filling that hand completely. He groaned, which felt fantastic, then he was trailing those long, dragging-lip-touches out along her neck as she slid her legs up along his hips. When she realized he was wearing boxers it was because her crotch came in contact with his erection.
"Jamie," he groaned back, pushing against her, and it made her laugh deep in her throat. He was a teenager in some ways, mostly this way. It was all wild instinct and want with him; he had no interest in impressing her. He just wanted her. Plain and simple. Didn't care to dress it up with teasing.

"Tell me you want this, please," he whispered, pulling at her nipple, making her bite her lip.

"I want this," she gasped back immediately, bringing her eyes to his. His look was pleading, hungry. God, that alone would have been enough to turn her on.

His fingers looped into the edges of her panties, pushing downward. She lifted her hips, letting him pull them over her bottom, missing his weight and heat as he rose up to pull them off her legs. Then he got off the bed; she could tell because the mattress sprung back up from his weight leaving it. She heard the rustling of fabric, and when he crawled back under the sheet next to her he was naked.

Completely naked. And she didn't know what she wanted to touch first.

So she touched all of it. His stomach was tightened as she let her hands go lower, finding his erection incredibly hard, straining. He groaned as she closed her palm around it, freezing on his hands and knees over her, eyes falling shut.

Jamie let her own eyes close. Jesus. She'd only had access to so many in her lifetime. This had to be exceptional, there was no way other men were made like this. Her palm and fingers were the only form of measurement she had, and unless treatment was shrinking her hands he was … blessed.

She slid that soft skin upward, feeling a heat uncurl in her belly as he groaned, really used his gut to do it and didn't hold back, trying to appear cool.

No, there was no show here. He was as wanting of her as she was of him.

That felt good. That felt so damn good it almost made her stop.

She kept stroking him like that, his hips moving in a countermotion, his breath hitching. He moaned her name, moaned things like "Perfect," "fuck, Jamie," and "Oh Christ." She loved hearing it, her own heart rate increased as his arousal did.

"Wait," it came as a hoarse plea, his hand grasping her wrist. She stopped the motion, but he didn't pull her hand away right away. "Jamie," he whispered, and she brought her eyes up to his, feeling herself smile at the heat she saw in that gaze. "Fuck, that smile," he mumbled, dropping his hand from her wrist and closing it softly around her throat, kissing her deep, hard.

She stroked at him more, but he let go of her to pull her hand away, still kissing her, his weight and warmth falling into the cradle of her arms and legs, hand returning to her neck. She couldn't move away from that kiss if she wanted to. She flung her legs around his waist, the heat of his
arousal on her belly, the warmth of his kiss growing the ache between her legs, the need to have him fill her was urgent.

"Tig," she pleaded on a whisper against his lips. "Make love to me, please."

He chuckled, the sound again causing a quiver in deep, dark places, answering with "That's what I'm doing, babe."

Her heart set off at that, racing and floating while he brought those kisses down her neck, across her collarbone, and down to the scar tissue of her left breast. Part of her brain panicked, but her skin was incredibly sensitive as his stubble scraped along the smooth planes of her chest, his lips causing slight trembles with each kiss. If anyone had told Jamie her scar tissue would be an erogenous zone she would have told them they were insane. But as Tig kissed, caressed and worshipped every ridge and valley Jamie could have wept for how beautiful it made her feel. Her hands were in his hair, keeping him in place, and he obliged with great eagerness.

His other hand went to her whole breast, rolling her nipple, and Jamie gasped at the combination. She moved her hips against him without knowing what she was doing, she was lost to sensation.

Jamie's skin was blazing, her head felt light, and her desperation was painful. As though he knew when she was at the point of agony, he dropped kisses further down her stomach, parted her legs further, then closed his mouth on her clit. In exquisite relief Jamie groaned, and it was loud, but she covered her mouth as her back bowed, the orgasm over almost before it began. But it was spectacular, all she saw was white light.

"Oh God," she gasped, panting hard. "Oh my God."

Tig was easing his way back over her, his chuckle completely negating the relief she'd just experienced. "Babe, you are so good for my ego. Honest to Christ."

She didn't need jokes. She grasped his face, pulling him closer to kiss, trying to manoeuvre his hips into hers. "Wait, babe," he whispered gently. "Just a second."

"No -"

"Jamie, I swear. I'm making love to you tonight, I just need to get something." His tone was overly-gentle. They were both remembering the last time they'd tried this.

"Okay," she whispered back, the bed springing up as he was once again gone to the shadows. She heard a foil package tear and felt almost embarrassed. Thank God one of them was thinking straight.

The break did nothing to curb her desires. The second he was back in reaching distance Jamie had her arms around Tig's shoulders, pulling him onto her and kissing him with all she had; lips, tongue, teeth, all of it. For his part, talking was done. He kissed her back, winding one arm around her lower back. Jamie's thighs gripped his ribs in anticipation.
He brought his face up, making her open her eyes, worried something else was going to get in the way now. But he was just looking at her, head tilted in thought, lips parted as though he would say something if the moment struck him. His thumb passed down her cheek, eyes trailing down her face then back up to her eyes again.

"Can't think of a single damn thing I've wanted this much," he muttered absently.

She had no answer for that. "Tig -"

"Christ you're beautiful. I don't think I deserve this."

She smiled. "Please," it came out as a plea.

"Good thing I'm selfish," he said, his lips curving in his full, honest smile that made his eyes crinkle. She felt it in her toes and everywhere north of them. The smile faltered, just a bit, as his eyes met hers again. "You're under my skin babe," he said almost wistfully.

Now when she whispered "Tig" it was completely different, she had no idea how to properly reply to that, something so raw and revealing. She knew he didn't throw sentiment around, he didn't have to. "You're under mine," she whispered back. It was the truth.

His mouth crushed hers, the heat of this kiss lustful yes, but there was something else in it, too. Something that made her heart swell as his hips moved forward, joining them completely on one merciless thrust, causing her nails to dig into his shoulders as she cried out, the sound swallowed by his mouth.

She was smaller than him, weaker than him, but she felt anything but helpless; as she held him inside it was 

him

that trembled, not her.
Jesus.

Tig had to pause, hold his breath, force himself to stay still for a minute. Christ, this was Jamie and he's just slammed it into her like she was any other crow eater. Her whimper made him feel like an ass.

He'd expected her to be tight. He hadn't expected absolutely fucking perfection. And not just the part he was buried in, all of her. Her soft stomach and chest under him, her legs wrapped around him, her arms on his shoulders. Her mouth breathing against his, hot and sweet and almost lethal.

"Are you okay?" He had to ask it. If he hurt her he swore he'd hurt himself worse.

"Yes," she whispered, and the desperation in her voice had to be his wishful thinking.

"You sure?"

"Tig," she gasped, legs opening more, giving him room to sink in another half an inch.

"I'm not stopping. It would take a lot to stop me, babe. I just need a minute."

"You do?"

He brought his hand to her throat again. "Jesus, Jamie. You feel so good."

"You do, too," she returned after a pause, and this awkward moment was so not how he imagined this going the many times he daydreamed about it.

He caught her eyes again. In the dim but stark moonlight they flashed, and he rolled his hips away then back into her, catching how her jaw opened, not relaxed, just an honest reaction. Her body had stopped tightening against him, and he moved again.

"Tig," she gasped, eyes closing.

He knew he couldn't just pound into her until he got off. And he cursed himself out for spending so much time doing just that with the others. He had to go back to wanting to please the woman he was with. He knew how it was done, he just had to revisit the steps.
When her back arched, he brought his hand to her breast, teasing at her nipple. Her body quivered under and around him and he stroked into her again, rewarded with a moan. She turned her head towards him and he kissed her. That got another moan.

Christ, for someone who didn't know how to ask for what she wanted, she was telling him exactly what to do with her body. With just the slightest increase to his range of movement she bit her lip and groaned but it was soft. He wondered why she was trying to be quiet.

"We're alone," he reminded her, kissing her lips, then her jaw. "Let it out, Jamie."

He rolled his hips again, nearly pulling out all the way before easing back inside. This time she cried out, back arching into him. He didn't wait before doing it again, and her legs twitched along his sides. Jesus, she couldn't possibly be close already. There was no way.

He continued that deliberate pace, and she met his every push with a gasp or his name. When she started tilting her hips against him he nearly lost it, sliding his hands under her back and gripping both of her shoulders to keep her in place while he fell back in love with the feel of her on every thrust.

Each time he did it he hit the end of her, and she liked it. She moaned, whimpered, dug her nails into his lower back, urging him deeper, all the while still kissing him and sucking his tongue from his mouth when he got distracted by the feeling of her small, thin body completely controlling his. The realization she'd come completely undone hit him like electricity. She was enjoying it. She was really, really enjoying it. Out-of-her-mind enjoying it. She likely had no idea she was making these sounds. He was only going to be able to keep this up a little while longer; she had him far too amped.

Time to get serious.

He rose up on his arms, and without hesitation Jamie dropped her legs and hitched her feet around his knees. The angle was perfect. It made him grunt as he slid into her, looking down on her face and how her lovely neck was arched back. She was panting, eyes on him, waiting.

Tig wrapped a hand over her throat gently. It wasn't to squeeze, he just liked feeling how her pulse was racing.

With minimal effort he thrust into her, watching her body writhe and fall under him. He did it again and she met the movement. With a grunt he gave over, pushing against her, pace increased, her body open and unable to keep him out.

It took all of twenty seconds. Her back arched sharply and she made the most lovely, enthusiastic sound of female release he'd ever heard in his life. All he could concentrate on was her face; her eyes pinned to his, her mouth open as she cried out then fought for breath, the ease and relaxation in her expression telling him exactly how good it had felt. Her entire body trembled in the wake of it, and when the quivering ebbed away he realized he was done, too.
He'd barely been aware he'd finished right along with her. He didn't care.

Tig pressed a kiss to her lips roughly, dropping his weight back onto her, entire body overjoyed as she wound her arms and legs back around him.

"Tig," she whispered to his lips. "Oh my … God."

He felt himself smile, easing his head back to take in her face. "That doesn't even cover it, babe." Her hands ran up his arms, and it was not missed on him that they were trembling.

"I have never in my life felt this good."

It froze him, but before he could freak her out he nuzzled her neck. "Jamie," it was all he could think to say.

"Sorry. I'm not cool in this situation."

"No, you're not. You're fucking hot, babe."

She laughed at that, covering her face. The laugh had an interesting effect on his dwindling erection, and he eased out of her reluctantly. Her nails gripped his arms suddenly, and she whimpered just from that.

"Christ Jamie," he muttered, flopping to his back next to her. "I'm not sure I can handle you."

She rolled to her side, her hand running to the centre of his chest. "Liar," she mumbled.

He caught her hand, kissing the backs of her fingers. "I mean that, sweetheart. Jesus. I'm out of words."

When she was silent he risked a look her way. She was studying him, biting her lip. All mindless passion was gone, and she was thinking, and he could tell, somehow, they weren't happy thoughts.

He rolled up to his elbow, running a hand under her jaw. "What's that face for?" he asked softly.

"What do you mean?"

He shook his head. "I think your mind is going dark places, and I don't want that."

She closed her eyes.

"Jamie, babe?"

She shook her head.
"Nah nah, break away from wherever you just went. I want soft and sweet Jamie back. I want sexy, hot Jamie back."

She opened her eyes on a shuddering breath. "I don't think that Jamie is real."

He raised his eyebrows, easing closer to her. "Oh, she's very real. I've been after her for months. She was just here."

She smiled at that. His chest eased open a bit. "I'm not usually like that," she said, voice very small and he'd bet she was blushing.

He rolled to his back and pulled her with him, tucking her into his side. "And I'm not usually like this," he shared. "But like I said. You're under my skin. I can't help it. With you I'm … naked."

"I like that," she admitted, kissing his chest.

It made him grin up at the ceiling.

"Tig?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't … don't break my heart, okay?"

He squeezed her into him tighter, kissing her head and biting back on the hurt that caused. "Honey, I'd rather cut off my own leg. You gonna promise me the same thing?"

"What?"

He ran his hand around the back of her neck, and she raised her face to gaze down on him, those big eyes so fucking honest. "You gotta promise not to break my heart, Jamie."

She smiled slowly, then looked away from him again.

"Hey," he croaked, pulling her around to face him again. "You gotta promise, Jamie."

"Oh, Tig."

"No Oh Tig. That requires an equal response," he wanted her to laugh. He was getting louder, wanting her to at least smile.

She bit her lip, then propped her chin on his chest. "Aren't you too tough to get your heart broken?"

"If I'm giving it to you, it you that's gotta look after it, babe." Yeah, he said that. Blurted it out, cheesy as fuck. He wished he could inhale and take it back while she blinked once, twice.
Without warning she surged forward, pressing her lips against his, her upper body resting on him and causing him to slide his hands around her back as a reflex. He felt her ribs and spine again, but mostly he knew only her kiss and how urgent it was as she slid that sweet tongue past his lips, into his mouth, into his fucking soul.

He gripped her, likely too tight, but he couldn't help it. This wasn't the kind of kiss that was meant to invite a man to your bed, this was the kind of kiss that was the bearing of her heart and he felt that sweet tingle return to his neck and jaw as she parted, the kiss melting into softer pecks on his lips.

"I'll take care of your heart," she whispered, and he heard something thick in her voice.

He caught a tear with his thumb before it got too far down her cheek. "Hey, no tears here. This is good Jamie. It's so fucking good I'm not even questioning it."

"Okay," she answered, which wasn't an answer.

"Honey, I can't even being to tell you how fucked up you got me." Not smooth, but it was the best he had at the moment. "If you knew, you wouldn't be crying. You'd be laughing your ass off."

That got a better response. Jamie grinned then nestled into his side again.

"I'm in trouble," he muttered, arm behind his head as his eyes closed. "So much sweet-tasting trouble."
Chapter 50

Tig dropped off to sleep but Jamie just couldn't. Her heart was still racing, her body still lit up, and her face wouldn't cut the smile.

All because this biker from next door made it safe for her to drop all walls and enjoy herself. That thought on its own nearly made her tear up again.

It had been wonderful, yes, but scary as well because she wasn't just hot for him. If that had been the case she would have shut him out months ago from blind fear.

He snuck in on her, just a bit at a time. Letting her know he thought she was attractive, blatantly. She didn't know men actually did that, but from him she loved the attention. And being great with Calvin was the final nail in the coffin of her resolve. Hell or high water she was ending up in his arms, she just hadn't realized it until right then. And with everything else she had going on … he could give a shit. He just wanted her. So she let it happen, no thoughts of whether or not what she was doing was right. Or weird. Or wrong. She just trusted him, and was so glad she had.

Amazing.

Astounding.

The kind of sex where your body would never be the same again. The kind where she was now completely ruined for other men because they couldn't possibly compare. The kind of sex that only existed in books, or so she thought. The kind of experience everyone was searching for.

The kind of sex that meant she didn't open her eyes until eleven twenty-two the next morning.

She frowned at the alarm clock, not wanting to move because she might wake the man currently serving as her pillow. But no amount of blinking changed the time.

Then she heard the front door open.

"Shit," she whispered, sitting straight up and feeling around the covers for her T-shirt. Where the hell had it gone?

"Morning babe," came a rough, warm, low and terribly sexy greeting, but she was too much in full freak-out to really appreciate it.

"Thelma and Calvin are back," she hissed, brain torn between figuring out where her clothes ended up and how to explain away the fact that Tig was there.
"So?" he mumbled, pulling her back down into the covers with him, winding an arm around her waist and actually *cuddling* her.

"I have to get up," she returned, pushing at his hand and trying to sit up.

"What are you more worried about? Thelma knowing I'm here or Calvin knowing I'm here?"

She sighed, eyes scanning the floor. She saw the T-shirt she'd been wearing as pyjamas and leaned over him to snag them up, making him chuckle in the process. He shoved the covers off the both of them and she jerked away, grabbing for the sheet to pull it up to her chin.

He sat up, completely naked and just as comfortable that way as she'd ever seen him. "Should I scurry through the window? The bike's in your driveway and I've got my shirt and cut in the living room, babe."

She didn't know what a *cut* was but it sounded bad. She hoped it wasn't a weapon. "Shit."

"Jamie, you're a grown woman. Thelma knows that. And Calvin's …" he waved his hand. "Nine."

"He knows where babies come from. I've had that talk with him."

"Oh."

Jamie tried to keep herself covered while sliding the T-shirt up her arms. Tig pulled the sheet away, and just as she was about to give him shit he completely floored her. "Don't cover up, babe. Not from me. I've worked too hard to get this close to you."

Her arms flopped into her lap, T-shirt half on, and she stared at him, the kindness in those blue eyes enough to take her breath away. "Tig …" was all she had to respond with.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, hand running up over her head to the back of her neck, where he reeled her closer before kissing her.

*Shit.* She had to remember to not kiss Tig Trager in bed when she was supposed to be *hurrying.* And certainly not when she was naked. And he was naked. And he said she was beautiful. And his hands were warm and his lips tasted amazing …

She pushed him back. "Tig, that door doesn't lock. It's broken."

His grin was slow and … dammit, far too sexy. "Really?"

She sighed. "Please put some clothes on."

"You sure?" he brought his nose to her jawline, voice low and rougher when he spoke quietly.
"Please?"

He nipped her ear lobe and her eyes closed. "Damn Jamie, you always smell this good, don't you?"

"Okay," she hissed, pulling away and yanking the T-shirt down. "Clothes, please Tig."

She got to her feet on the mattress and stepped over him, trying to avoid his hands as they successfully made a bid to grab her bare ass under the T-shirt. She likely flashed the whole show but in panic mode she couldn't care. She found her panties next, wiggling into them and turning back to find Tig still lounged out fully naked on her bed. Naked and *excited*, and she couldn't be held responsible for where her eyes went.

She'd only felt it the night before, she hadn't seen it.

"Jesus Christ," she whispered, then shook her head and forced her eyes away. To his face, and the too-proud-and-masculine-to-be-acceptable look he had. Which on him was completely acceptable … and attractive.

*Shit.*

"Get up and get dressed, please."

"Okay babe." He finally sat up, reaching to the floor for his shorts. She tossed the jeans and T-shirt to him next then headed to her dresser to dig out her bra. You know, for *decency's* sake.

She wrangled the thing on under the T-shirt, thankful the shirt was so large, just in time to hear her bedroom door open. She thought someone was coming in without knocking, but felt her stomach drop as she watched Tig walk out of the bedroom sorting out his T-shirt before pulling it on.

Walking into the hallway and the living room shirtless.

"Shit," she said it out loud this time, closing her eyes and waiting for the fallout. She pulled jeans from a drawer and yanked them on, zipper just done up as she hit the hallway herself.

"Oh, good morning Tig," she heard Thelma saying as she rounded the corner to the living room. "*Jamie.*" Her name was added on with a big shit-eating grin, and Jamie tried to make eyes telling Thelma to play it cooler than that.

"Tig? What are you doing here?" Calvin asked, plopping onto the couch, remote in his hand forgotten. His eyes flicked to Jamie then got wider. He was about to ask something else then Tig started talking.

"I'm here to make you breakfast, Chuckles." He pulled his shirt on, then pointed to Calvin with meaning. "*Fancy* breakfast."
Jamie melted just a little. How'd he know about fancy breakfast?

Calvin frowned. "Is it your birthday?"

"No. Sometimes you just deserve fancy breakfast." He shot a wink at Jamie. "Like when you get lucky the night before."

"Jesus Christ," Jamie muttered.

Aunt Thelma grinned wider.

Calvin frowned deeper. "Did you go to the casino?"

Tig cracked up and Jamie covered her face with both hands. "Yeah Chuckles. You got it. Hit the fucking jackpot, too."

She lowered her hands to just cover her mouth, feeling her cheeks warm. Tig was smiling at her and the warmth sunk further down her neck and chest.

Aunt Thelma was still grinning like the cat that got the cream.

"Let's go buddy, help me make Aunt Jamie breakfast. Okay?"

Calvin got to his feet and followed Tig without question. She shared another look with her aunt. It was probably too much to hope for that Aunt Thelma still wasn't talking to her, right?

"Aunt Thelma," Tig greeted her with great familiarity, lowering his head to kiss her cheek before passing by.

"Good to see you again, Tig," Thelma returned, clearly pleased as all shit.

When they were alone Jamie exhaled, flopping into the arm chair and covering her head with her arms. "Shit," she muttered.

"Jamie -"

"I'm sorry," she cut Thelma off. "He's been here the last two days. He's been wonderful to me. I … I couldn't help it."

There was no answer, so when she uncovered her head she was surprised that Thelma was sitting on the sofa across from her, hands on knees and still grinning.

"Jamie honey, where'd your hair go?"

Jamie frowned, then flattened both palms to her head. "Oh my God, that's right. I … I shaved it off yesterday."
"What does Tig think of it? Like I need to ask."

Jamie bit her lip. "He helped me do it."

Thelma bit her lip too, and her eyebrows rose in a way that meant she was tearing up. "You look beautiful, Jamie. I wish you always looked this … happy."

She must be nuts. "I'm embarrassed," Jamie admitted.

"For what? You're a consenting adult."

Jamie shook her head.

"You look great, honey. The colour in your cheeks is back. Your eyes are bright and lively again. He's almost as good for you as your treatments will be."

Jamie sniffed. "Aunt Thelma …" she paused. She didn't have that *girl talk* friend anymore. A few of the ladies at the Town Office might have been close enough for that but now that she wasn't working with them they were just … former co-workers. Aunt Thelma really was all she had. "I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"Him," she whispered back. "He's going to hurt me. He's going to break my heart, I know it."

Thelma got to her feet then knelt in front of her to hug her. "Jamie honey, sometimes I just *know* things too. And I know that a man asking a nine year old to help him make breakfast and build a motorcycle is not going to hurt you like that."

"Thelma -"

"A man that helps a girl shave her hair off isn't just hanging around to love her and leave her. A man who looks at you when you're at a low point and still decides to be there the next morning has more on his mind than getting his rocks off. And a man who wants to wait to make sure you're ready is ready to be more than just another night."

Jamie had to smile. "You're so wise, Aunt Thelma."

"And you're braver than you think." Thelma pinched her cheek. "Now. Let's hope you earned us all a really good fancy breakfast."

"Aunt Thelma!"
Chapter 51

The wind rustled leaves. Gravel crunched under his boots. Birds were making a ruckus on top of the grain silo to the east of a ramshackle two-story farmhouse with white clapboard siding that was sagging like the green-shingled roof just decided it was done and was slowly taking the rest of the house with it. Grass stood waist-high around the foundation and the shrubs were taking over the flower beds.

Tig, Bobby, Jax, Opie, Chibs and Clay were all cooling their heels out of the sun in an old stable that was almost scarier than the house it matched. Thank Christ it hadn't been used in decades – that stink in this heat would have been less than pleasant. The doors were closed but a missing board about five feet up afforded a view and a firing position.

Their bikes were hidden away with them in the stable, the van that Bobby drove parked around the back out of sight. Everyone was quiet, but Tig's head was humming loudly with the urge to cut this Tiny bastard off at the knees. Half his energy was being spent watching out for the dealer that was still tied to a chair right in the middle of the stretch of dirt and gravel between the house and stable. The other half of his energy was fighting off his biggest distraction at the moment.

Now that he was away from that house and Calvin and Jamie he was … worried. Fucking scared was more like it. The same elephant was sitting on his chest as the one that parked there the second Jamie fainted in front of him.

His own natural reaction to caring about someone.

Walking around dealing with the scum of the earth day-to-day wasn't a problem for him. It hadn't been, anyway. With someone to worry about, someone you want to have around, protect … it was already exhausting. And he couldn't shake the feeling that, somehow, he was going to end up letting her down.

And not only because of the scum factor, either. His eyes narrowed on that piece of shit dealer and knew this was one thing he could absolutely protect her from. He'd tear men limb from limb if they so much as sneezed around her. He couldn't protect her from him though, and he had a long history of being a fuck up.

Breaking him out of his own head, two black SUVs rolled up the dirt drive, and Tig just gave a short, "They're here."

He felt his brothers fall in next to him, and they watched three men get out of one vehicle and four out of the other. They may have been outnumbered but at least they had the element of surprise so far.

That is, until the dealer started squealing like a stuck pig and gesturing to the stable with his head.
"Eight counting the dealer," Chibs reminded them and Tig heard safeties release as he grabbed his own piece from his back. "Six of us."

"That's him," Jax pointed out, cold and level. "That fat fucker with the hat. That guy matches the dealer's description of Tiny."

He did, too. Heavy set, about six and a half feet tall, Mexican. Which was interesting since the neo-Nazi fucks were taking orders from him.

Without another word Tiny's hand came up, gun appearing almost out of nowhere, and plugged one into the dealer's head.

"Make that seven," Chibs, ever the smart ass, pointed out.

"Still doesn't feel fair," Tig chimed in.

Jax was grinning, so was Clay. It was Clay who shut everyone up. "You two can let them shoot you if it'll make you feel better about the odds."

The seven assholes started walking their way, and Tig frowned. "They're not even taking cover."

"What the hell was that dealer saying to them?" Jax whispered as they all, without argument, brought their weapons up shoulder-height.

"Do we take Tiny?" Opie asked.

Clay make a grunt of indecision. "I'm kinda in favour of just wiping the shit off my boot heel, you know? What's the point asking why it stinks and why it picked me?"

"He could be important to talk to, find out who he works for, make sure we're not stepping on any big bad steel-toes," Jax pointed out, none of them looking at each other, all focused on the posse headed their way.

"No dealers in Charming." Clay muttered back.

"Anyone see any blow back?" Jax asked.

"No," Tig answered immediately. He wanted him dead so bad he could taste it.

"This is the guy everyone's scared of," Chibs reminded them. "Which points to him being the top. Without him …" he left it at that.

Tig found himself nodding. Better to ice the fucker now. Get it done in a rain of bullets, then he can go back to Jamie's, look her in the eye and tell her Tiny was no longer an issue.

That thought made him grin.
"I don't think they know we're here," Opie said. "I have no idea what that asshole said."

"Shit," Jax muttered, and everyone shifted like the nerves had set in.

Suddenly Tig had a moment of clarity, knowing what was bugging Opie and Jax. How could this be the guy running this all-but-clandestine operation, approaching a closed building that he had, allegedly, been warned about. A big-time dealer wouldn't make this mistake.

This guy was ... too stupid, frankly.

Tig was about to answer, but Clay beat him to it. "Who the fuck cares?" the prez snapped quietly. "On three. One. Two."

The stable erupted in gunfire, the smell of used gunpowder a familiar sting in Tig's nose. The seven men out in the sunshine literally had no idea what hit them. They were completely shocked as their chests exploded, getting at least seven rounds per stooge before their bodies hit the dirt. When all were down the shooting stopped, leaving behind ringing ears. Tig winced, rubbing his temple. Fuck, that was a sign of getting too old.

"Everyone grab an end," Clay snapped, pushing the stable doors open. The fresh air felt good, even if it was hotter than hell outside. "Leave these pricks in the stable."

Tiny took five guys to move. The rest were two-person operations with Clay watching, sucking on the strong end of a cigar.

"You don't want 'em buried?" Tig asked for clarification while he and Opie hauled a member of Tiny's entourage past their president.

"Doesn't really send a message if they're not found," Clay pointed out.

When all the bodies were piled up like firewood Clay declared business "taken care of." Bobby climbed up into the van after retrieving the chair the dealer had been tied to (it was TM property after all) and they headed back to Charming town limits. Tig gave a wave to indicate he was peeling off the formation and headed for his own hood, parking his bike in his driveway. Two more Harleys were on the street outside of Jamie's place, blocking in Thelma's truck.

Half-Sack was sitting on her front stoop, smoking. He got to his feet as Tig approached, tossing the butt to the side. "They went to the hospital," the prospect informed him, hiking up his jeans. "Juice followed."

"Who else is here with you?"

"Happy's out back, eye on the yard."

"Good," he declared, then pointed. "And pick up that fucking cigarette butt. Where do you think you are right now?"
Half-Sack scrambled to retrieve it from under some kind of shrub and Tig circled the house to the back. Happy was on the deck, seated in a chair, watching the clouds go by. Looking bored out of his mind.

He nodded to Tig as he climbed the climbed stairs. "How'd it go?"

Tig shook his head. "I don't know. Too easy."

"You get him?"

"Yeah. He showed up with a few guys, we thought the dealer was telling him about the set up, but they started walking up to us like they didn't know we were there. Or who we were."

Happy frowned.

"Like shooting fish in a barrel," Tig continued. "That's this badass dealer everyone's so scared of? He's an idiot."

Happy shrugged.

"Or maybe the dealer was begging for mercy. But that makes no sense. He was tied to a chair and bleeding. They had to know it was a set up." Tig's head hurt from it, but something didn't feel quite right with all of that.

"Maybe the guy was an idiot."

Tig shook his head. "Nah. No one would tell us shit about Tiny, man. He wasn't an idiot. People aren't scared of idiots."

"What did Clay say?"

"Clay considers it done."

Happy nodded. "Well, there's your answer man. Hey – this broad got any beer?"

"I do at my place," Tig answered, still thinking. Then he grinned. "You know how to fix a door lock?"
"He, uh … put the needle in my arm. That's the last thing I really remember. He had two men hold me in place while he shot me up. I didn't even know for sure what it was. I remember flashes of what happened in between but …" Jackie shuddered. "I don't want to remember any better than that. I know why that guy wanted me. I know very well what he did."

Jamie was staring at the ground, chewing her thumb nail. Thelma was perched on the edge of the hospital bed, outright sobbing.

Calvin was outside on the bench. Thelma wanted to hear this, Jamie did not want Calvin to.

Jamie didn't want to hear it herself. When Tig explained it he may as well have switched over to a foreign language. This wasn't her world, at all. This didn't happen outside of movies; at least, that's how her life used to seem. Even knowing that Jackie was a user didn't make this any more believable.

"I remember him forcing himself on me the first time. I couldn't fight, I was too out of it. The next clear thing I remember is waking up here."

Thelma was shaking her head. "Oh honey," she whimpered. "You need to get out of all this."

Jackie nodded, then set her big blue eyes on Jamie. "Maybe Jamie's new friends will help me."

Jamie could have laughed if she wasn't so disturbed by Jackie's story. "They try to keep drug dealers out of town, so they were already after these guys. I'm not sure how much you will factor in what happens next. They only called an ambulance for you because they recognized you."

Thelma's head swivelled around. "Jamie, your tone."

Jamie shook her head. "This big bad dealer she's talking about selling her is going to come here. He knows where Calvin and I live. I just want to know if he'd come looking for me for a reason. Jackie?"

Jackie blinked a couple times. Jamie knew she was in danger of making Thelma angry again, but she kept her eyes on Jackie.

"I … I told him you had money, thinking he'd let me go so I could come and get it. Then I was going to disappear."

"How much money could this be?" Thelma asked to break the tension. "Maybe I could -"

"Forty grand," Jackie said sullenly, looking away from Jamie.
The pause was long. "Forty thousand dollars?" Thelma confirmed.

Jackie nodded.

"And he thinks I have that sitting around?" Jamie urged her on.

Again, Jackie nodded.

Jamie wanted to cry. She took a deep breath. "If I gave you ten grand, how much time would that get you?"

Thelma looked at her in surprise, but Jackie was shaking her head. "All or nothing. I tried to steal from him, too. He's pissed off."

Thelma was even further back in the whole Street Education factor of Jackie's life. She was just staring at Jackie like her entire world order had toppled over. Jamie could so relate.

"We can't buy her any forgiveness," Jamie assured Thelma. "Like always, she has to depend on others to clean up her messes."

"Jamie." Thelma's tone was warning and low, and that's when she knew she'd gone too far. "This is your sister. And after what she just told us?"

"I hate that it happened," Jamie threw back. "I'd never wish that for her. But now these people know where I live, Aunt Thelma. And Calvin, too. So my concern is kind of on our side right now."

"Once Jackie's out of the hospital you, Jackie and Calvin are coming to the farm," Thelma decided.

Jamie was already shaking her head. "I'm staying with Tig. So's Calvin."

"Jamie, honey..."

"No," Jamie cut in. "Trust me Thelma, this is the safest place for him."

"She's right," Jackie cut in. "The Sons of Anarchy will kill to keep what they care about safe."

Now Thelma was startled all over again. "Kill?"

Jamie was a bit surprised by that, too. But … thinking back, she should have suspected as much. Tig had never told her about killing anyone; beating people up, yes. She filed it away under the Discuss Later tab. For the moment she had to get out of the room. So she did.
In the hall she took a deep breath, smiling at Calvin to show him everything was fine. Juice had been sitting next to him, arms crossed on his chest, listening to Calvin read from that library book out loud. He was grinning, too.

Juice nodded to Jamie as she parked her ass on the other side of Calvin, putting her arm around him. "If your mind is truly, profoundly stuck, then it might be much better off than when it was loaded with ideas," Calvin was saying and Jamie had to smile.

"I must be really well off then," Jamie muttered, kissing the top of his head.

"Is everything okay?" Juice asked politely, eyes darting to the door.

Jamie had to get used to people knowing what was up with her shit, but it was proving difficult. "Yeah. She was just explaining to Aunt Thelma how bad everything had been."

Juice nodded.

"Juice," she said, trying to sound light and cheerfully curious.

"Yeah?"

"Can I talk to you?" she stood and jerked her head down the hallway. "Over here?"

He cast his brown eyes to Calvin, nodded, stood and followed her down the hallway a few yards. She turned, biting her thumb nail again.

"If I ask a question, will you promise to answer?"

Juice gave an amused smile, crossing his arms again. "I can try."

"In your … club, do you guys kill people?"

Juice's smile dropped off his face quicker than gravity would have allowed. "Ummm …"

"Jackie said you guys would likely kill anything that threatened who or what you care about, which I assume includes Charming."

Juice finally blinked and ran his hands over his shaved Mohawk. "You … really need to ask Tig these things."

Now Jamie was twisting her hands. "I know. I just … is that why Tig has you guys watching out for me and Calvin?"

Juice sighed. "If anything comes along that's a threat to you two, I'll … do what's necessary to make sure you both go home tonight untouched."
Jamie nodded. "I see."

"Honestly Jamie, you need to ask Tig this stuff. It's ... it's kind of up to him to let you in on these things. I don't want to step on his toes."

Jamie frowned. "Really? You can't answer questions about the club?"

"Ask Tig, Jamie," Juice almost sounded like he was pleading.

"Okay," she assured him. "I will. I'm sorry."

Juice nodded, satisfied, then returned to his spot next to Calvin. She took up recreational pacing, biting her nail again and going back to worrying.

Christ, she nearly got Clark Davidson killed.

She had to calm down. In all this, the idea that Tig might have killed people made her uneasy, yes. But she still didn't feel like she was in danger. Neither was Calvin. She knew she sounded like the victim in an after-school special, but Tig would never hurt them. He might bring bad things to the door, but so had Jackie. The difference was she trusted Tig to make things right. She could not say the same for her sister.

And yet there was also the nagging feeling that if she was smart, she'd pack up Calvin and run for the hills.

The hospital room door opened, and Thelma joined them while wiping tears from her eyes. She caught Jamie's eye and she couldn't help it; she hugged her aunt and whispered an apology at the same time.

"It's okay," Thelma assured her, patting her back and stepping away. "Now let's go get groceries. We have a house full of people to feed."
Chapter 53

Tig stepped out onto the front stoop of Jamie's place for a smoke just in time to see Rash and his flame-painted trailer pull up to the curb in front of his house. He started down the driveway, taking a pull on the cigarette and raising his hand in greeting.

"Tig," Rash rasped back at him, circling his truck and trailer to drop the back door. "Kid's bike is done. Wanna see?"

Tig felt himself grin. "Fuck yes. Show me."

As Rash rolled the motorized bike down the ramp, and Tig had to shake his head,

"Had to make it kickass, hey?" he mumbled, crouching down next to the bike and eyeing up the frame. It was only kind of pink, but it was better than what Tig had in mind. Along with the candy pink paint, Rash had added black metallic flecks. If Rash had told him about it ahead of time Tig would have said he was nuts. But seeing it ... he liked it. Rash even pin striped wicked black detailing on the fenders.

"So sparkly," Tig said absently, running his hand along the motor and battery compartment.

"Too funky?"

Tig shook his head. "He's gonna lose his mind."

Rash chuckled. "Good. I'll send you the bill."

Tig stood and offered his hand as Jamie's car pulled into her driveway. "Here he is now," he said, pointing with his cigarette as the door opened and Calvin came flying across the lawn towards them.

"Is that my bike?" Tig laughed as Calvin came to a screeching stop next to it. "Wow. That is so cool!"

"Calvin, this is Rash. He painted the bike for you. Rash, this is Calvin."

"Nice to meet you," Calvin said pleasantly.

"The pleasure's all mine," Rash returned with his usual gruffness, but he was smiling.

"Calvin? Is that your bike?"
They all turned to Jamie, striding down the sidewalk, Thelma right behind her. Tig felt his smile change, how his stomach went weird on him. Those damn shorts on Jamie again, an over-sized T-shirt, bright blue scarf and he was hard from it.

"Hot damn," Rash whispered. "That's not yours, is it?"

Tig smacked his stomach and approached her, tossing his butt onto his own lawn. "Hey babe," he drawled, pulling her close by her hips and pressing his lips against hers before she could answer him. He kissed her neck next, making her giggle and push him away a bit, hand on his chest.

"Tig," she scolded.

"Look Aunt Jamie! Aunt Thelma!" Calvin was almost squealing. "Look how cool the bike looks!"

Tig let Jamie go but kept a finger hooked on a belt loop of her jeans shorts, following her with a nod to Thelma who was smiling at him, but there was something guarded when her eyes met his.

Hmm.

"Calvin, a pink bike? How come?" Tig loved how it still sounded kind when Jamie asked.

"For you. For the breast cancer," Calvin said softly, peering up at her with the earnest honesty of a kid. Then he pushed his glasses up his nose.

Tig heard Jamie sob once, then she grabbed Calvin and pulled him against her stomach and chest to hug him tight. Her arms were wrapped around his head and she kissed his hair.

Tig noticed then that Rash had actually removed his ball cap when Jamie had approached. A gentleman after all.

"Ma'am?" The paint artiste said hesitantly. "I'm sorry for your troubles. My mother had the same condition. And I can tell you it made her stumble but it sure as shit did not take her down."

Tig frowned at that, but Jamie laughed. "Thank you very much. And you are ..?"

"His name is Rash and he painted the bike," Calvin piped up, all but buried by Jamie's affection.

"It's beautiful," Jamie said. "Thank you. Oh, and this is my Aunt Thelma."

Rash nodded cordially as Thelma added, "The bike is beautiful. Thank you."

"Don't thank me. It was the kid's idea and this worthless bastard paid for it." With that last charming statement Rash threw the ramp back up and locked his trailer before climbing into the truck cab.
"He's a … friend," Tig explained to Jamie's confused expression. "Socially retarded. But harmless."

"And thank you," she said to him softly, her eyes hitting his in that warm and soft way that got rid of his hard on and made his head swim instead.

He shook his head. Really, it hadn't been a big deal.

Tig caught sight of Aunt Thelma eyeing him up again and he wondered what was changing her view of him just as Jamie rose up on her toes, bringing her lips close to his ear.

"You're a softie," she accused.

He kissed her temple while pulling her closer. "Shhh," he said close to her ear. "Don't let that shit get out."

...  

"I'll put the burgers on the grill," Thelma offered and Jamie nodded.

"Okay. Salad's almost ready." She went back to cutting the carrots on the board in front of her.

Once they were alone he stepped into Jamie from behind, closing his hands around her hips and shoving his face close to her neck, breathing in deep. As always, she smelled fantastic.

Jamie stilled, and he felt her laugh silently. "Careful. I'm cutting something."

"I can see that," he told her. "I've been watching you handle those cucumbers and carrots for a while now."

She just shook her head in response, cutting off the root tip of a carrot. Tig made a grunt into the side of her neck. "Like that," he moaned. She made another cut and he groaned.

She pushed back at him with her ass. "Cut that out!" She was laughing as she said it. "Jesus. I'll never see carrots the same way again."

He was grinning as he kissed her neck then headed for the fridge, grabbing a beer. "So, how's your sister?"

Jamie shrugged. "Maybe, for the first time in her life, scared enough to straighten up. But I'm not holding my breath." She gave him a look over her shoulder. "I … I have to ask you things. And I'm a bit scared to."

That set off all kinds of warning bells. "Just ask, babe."
Her blue-green eyes checked the back door, and her voice was low as she asked, "Do you guys … kill people?"

Tig swallowed his mouthful of beer. "Why are you asking this?"

"Jackie said you'd kill to keep what you care about safe. Juice wouldn't answer me, told me to ask you."

Tig nodded. He should have said all this before sleeping with her. Dammit. But she'd been comfortable enough to ask him, so that was probably a good sign.

And that explained Aunt Thelma's change in temperature, too.

He came closer and Jamie didn't shy away. She set the knife down and turned to him, leaning back to the counter and letting him take her hands, which he used to pull her close. He set her hands on his back, she left them there.

"We're not the good guys," he confirmed, watching her face closely. She swallowed at that. "I've beaten people up. Hidden bodies. Made a few dead bodies myself. But none of them are good, regular people like you and Aunt Thelma. This all takes place under the level you live in, Jamie. This is gutter shit. And we keep the gutters clean in Charming so people like you don't so much as get your shoes dirty. That's the hope, anyway. Because the people we have to deal with don't give a shit if people like you get any of their shit on you."

She bit her lip, and it was cute. He wanted to kiss her, but this likely wasn't a good time. "Why do you do that? There's a police department here."

He nodded. "Yeah, there is. Unfortunately, bad guys don't tend to give a shit about the law, and bad guys don't have to follow the same rules of engagement as the police. The law is nothing but a poster for how civilized we're supposed to be, babe. The reality is we're still living in a jungle, and the real strength is in numbers and keeping an even score."

She frowned. "So … you guys can do what you do?"

"We do what we do to make a living. Other people want to take away our means of income. We defend it. And we also need a place to call home."

"So … Charming knows you're all criminals. They turn a blind eye if you keep the bad-guy drug dealers out."

"And we don't let the shit splash on the good people," he finished. "When it does, we go into major damage control and make sure the skulls responsible are cracked enough to think twice before doing it again. That includes bullshit like buying a broad and keeping her like a strung out blow-up doll while dealing meth that's not only meth, but lethally fucked up in its mix."
That frown came back, and he had to fight away the thought that the creases between her eyebrows were adorable. They were having an Important Conversation, after all.

"If you guys don't like drugs, how do you make your money?" she asked. "I know mechanics are hardly on minimum wage but -"

"You want to know?" he cut in. "You gotta decide that you want in on that side of the gate. You can't change it once I open it."

She nodded. "I want to know."

"Guns," he said, softly, frustrated that her face stayed blank. He didn't know what that meant. "We receive guns from a supplier overseas and sell them to enterprises that require untraceable, unregistered weapons."

Jamie bit her lip. "I was scared you were going to say prostitution."

He let a smile slip. "Are guns worse?"

She shrugged. "I can't decide."

"The main thing I want you to understand is this; you are the most important thing I've got right now." He didn't know where this was coming from, but he needed to get it out after dumping all this on her. "Even if you decide that you can't deal with this and don't want to have anything to do with me anymore, I'll lay down my life to keep any of this from touching you or Calvin or your Aunt Thelma. And I have never said this to a woman before."

She inhaled, eyes running over his face, still looking plenty concerned. "Okay," she said on the exhale. "This is a lot to process."

"I don't want lies," he went on, catching her eye with his. "You hearing about this from other places would bother me, and I don't want you thinking I'm hiding anything. If I think you can handle it, if I think it's something you need to know, I will always let you in on it. But if something comes up that doesn't affect you and I think it's going to cause you worry, I'll take that on so you don't have to."

She swallowed again.

He kissed her softly. "What I just told you means I trust you, babe. And if I do, so will the club. I just handed over a lot of damning information. Because I trust you with it. And like I said, I don't want lies."

She nodded at that. "Okay. I'm feeling kind of... blind-sided."

"I know. But anything you want to ask, just ask. Okay? I'm glad you did."
She nodded again.

"And there's always Gemma," he added. "In this world, she's everyone's mother. And she's decided she really likes you, which is not something that's handed out lightly, I have to tell you. She knows more about the women's side of this than I do. If you really want the honest, brutal truth, she'll give it to you."

"So this is you sugar-coating?" she asked wryly, and he tucked her head under his chin, kissing the scarf she had wrapped around her head.

"This is me talking carefully so I don't spook you away. Because I want you with me for my own selfish reasons."

Her hands tightened on his back. "I need you to protect me and Calvin."

"And I will. Swear it, Jamie."

"You're so kind to me. You're caring. I can't make that all fit."

"I love this town. I love my club. And I'm crazy about you and Calvin. I'm just not bothered with the concept of bloody retribution. That's the difference, babe."

"That doesn't seem like you," she repeated.

He just rubbed her back, knowing he didn't deserve her trust. All he wanted was a fair shot at earning it.
Chapter 54

Jamie was sound asleep on her side, facing the bedroom wall, only stirring when the bed moved behind her and someone slid into the sheets. It was surprising she'd fallen asleep; after her talk with Tig her head had been spinning with the implications of all he'd told her.

Jamie grasped that his club didn't exist just to kill people. But they were a criminal enterprise, existing on the profits of a world that scared her. Even if they only hurt other bad guys, there was always a chance that Tig's world's blowback could end up hitting her. And Calvin. Although, Jackie intentionally did just that. And Jackie would not go to the wall to fix it or protect her sister, or even Calvin.

Would Tig? Her brain swirled over that, her worry ending as it brought up the fact that he'd lost his mind over Clark Davidson and the assholes that roughed up Calvin. On both counts and many others she appreciated his efforts, no matter how rough and questionable they were.

Maybe Jamie wasn't as straight-laced as she told herself in her more righteous moments.

Thelma had gone home after spending a friendly dinner with Tig, Happy and the prospect in attendance. Thelma left when the dishes were cleaned and put away. Clearly, the new information on Tig gave her a reason to pause.

Happy and prospect left around the same time, and Jamie had joined Tig and Calvin for some prime time TV. Calvin went to bed on a high from his new bike makeover, giving Tig a big hug as more thanks which Jamie felt right in her gut.

Then Jamie had been disappointed shortly after that when she announced she was tired and Tig told her to go to sleep, explaining he wasn't ready for bed yet. That had been just over an hour ago.

Now all her worries about the gruff, scary neighbour were gone. Maybe because he caught her sleeping. Tig eased right into her back, and she realized he was naked. "Calvin's fast asleep," he whispered, kissing her neck and bringing up goose bumps immediately.

She had to smile. He was still worried about Calvin's reaction to all this.

"I was sleeping too," she reminded him, and he just grunted while rolling her to her back. "Tig -"

He found her mouth in the dark without any trouble, his lips caressing hers before his tongue ran along her bottom lip and into her mouth. Her entire body responded, arms wrapping around his shoulders, one knee riding up to hook around his hip as he was on his side, half covering her. His hand caught her knee, holding it in place, sliding up under the hem of her nightgown.
Yeah, she'd put an actual nightgown on. She had nothing sexy in her wardrobe, but it was a white cotton peasant-style nightie. And she'd decided against underwear.

He found that out when his hand slid all the way up the back of her thigh, reaching her butt and finding it bare. He groaned, fingers digging into that part of her body, lifting her hips up with it.

She liked that. Again, all raw reaction he didn't try to hide.

He rolled his entire weight onto her, sliding between her legs while his upper body pressed into her more. "I missed doing this again this morning," he lifted his mouth long enough to say. "Been thinking about it all day."

Warmth pooled between her legs. "You have?"

"I need to do it right this time," he continued, hand leaving her behind to slide around and between her legs. "Need to take my time with you."

"Tig -" she gasped, breath hitching as his hand began to move, teasing across that incredibly sensitive spot.

"Such a live wire," he taunted, she could hear the smile in his voice. "I knew you would be, the first time you told me off in that store."

His hand kept moving so she had nothing to say, but something trembled in her chest at that. Something not quite as sexy and urgent as what he was doing to her, but it felt nice all the same.

His lips and mouth moved across her neck and throat, hand taking her higher and higher at such a gentle pace the peak of it all nearly surprised her and she gasped, biting her lip, back arching. She'd wanted to make noise but she held it in, whimpering when the most intense tremors had passed.

Nope, no change in her response knowing he was dangerous. If anything, she found herself even more easily aroused. Jesus, she was actually a bit of a freak.

Tig's fingertips teased at her opening, proving to both of them she was ready. He groaned at that softly, kissing her mouth again. She felt her cheeks warm, but it was pitch black in the room so he couldn't see it.

"I want to taste you but I want inside more," he murmured, pushing the nightgown up to her waist.

Her face got warmer. She wasn't used to anyone talking to her like that.

His body fell into hers, her knees reflexively and eagerly pinned to his hips. He slid into her without preamble, and the thought that he climbed into her bed with a condom already on almost made her giggle; he knew very damn well she wouldn't say no. His mouth returned to hers, her
heart rate increased and her brain scrambled. She gasped against his lips, not from having forgotten how big he was but rather from forgetting how good it felt. Even though it hurt slightly; she might have been bruised the night before, but the more he moved the easier it was to forget about.

He dropped his head to the pillow next to her, his panting breath hot on her shoulder, hand rising to cup her breast over the nightgown. The thin slip of cotton didn't hinder the sensation of that hot palm on her hard nipple, his thumb sliding over it. She trembled, gasped, raising her head so her mouth was against his shoulder. She shocked herself by biting him, not hard, just lightly. Just to keep from making noises.

"Jesus, Jamie," he whispered, close to her ear. "I like that." She bit harder, and he chuckled. "Honey, I'm going to have so much fun with you."

Before she could reply to that he was rolling them both, her ending up on top. Instinctively she sat up, astride his hips, unable to muffle a moan as she realized how he filled her like this.

Then she froze, hands braced on his chest. Her own inexperience made her suddenly feel silly. She didn't have it in her to do this. She was going to make a fool of herself.

His hands slid from her thighs to her hips. "Jamie?"

She covered her face. "I don't know what I'm doing. I can't do this." That just made it worse. Jesus, she was ruining everything.

"Jamie, babe." He lifted her by the hips a bit, then pushed upwards while lowering her again. Jamie gasped, hands going to his, nails digging in. He did it again and they moaned in unison, then she covered her mouth.

"You can totally do this," he assured her softly, something in his voice warming her body again. "Just find it, babe. Make it feel good."

Her breathing became ragged. She leaned back more, then rolled her hips. She did it a second time, he pushed into her and she closed her eyes, covering her mouth again, biting the flesh of her thumb so she wouldn't get loud. Holy shit, that felt fantastic.

She did it again, he moved against the roll of her hips, and the new surge of heat was more than thrilling. "Tig," she whispered, wanting to tell him to keep doing that, but she had no words in this situation.

"You got it, babe. Jesus, please don't stop now."

That was absolutely the best thing he could have said right then. She moved again, and he moaned. She did it again, he grunted, and she found that felt just as good.
Jamie's worries all fled. She swung her hips, hitting a rhythm she wanted, smiling when Tig's hands dug into her waist and he gave a long, low moan. She had him under her control completely; he was as undone as she was. There was something incredibly rewarding about that.

Before long her skin was slick with sweat, her breathing was the loudest thing in the room, and she was frustratingly close to finishing but for whatever reason she couldn't reach it. She didn't mind; the rest of felt fantastic, and if she brought the man with her to orgasm that would be satisfying, too.

Reading her mind, again, he let go of her hips, sliding his hand up her ribs under the nightgown slowly and with purpose, cupping her breast and rolling her nipple. She twitched, biting her lip as she rose the slightest bit closer. His other hand went lower, and it was dark so she didn't bother looking to see where it could be going. But when her rocking motion brought her clit in contact with something harder she knew it was his thumb, and it made her throw her head back, trembling now.

"Almost babe," he grunted. "Take it, Jamie."

She did. She took all of it, closing her eyes and letting it all feel good. The sensation of his hands all over her like this was almost overwhelming, but when she gave over to it everything felt amazing. This orgasm thundered through her, and she fought not to make noise because it would have been loud. Far too loud.

As it worked through her she collapsed to Tig's chest, gasping for air and her equilibrium because it was all gone. His hands traced lightly over her back, just his fingertips, cooling the heat of her skin under her nightgown, soothing the amazing sensations she'd just experienced.

"Jesus," he eventually whispered, one hand running along the back of her exposed neck.

"I think I just used you," she mumbled. "And I don't even care right now."

He chuckled at that, turning his head to kiss her forehead. "Sorry babe," he said. "It's not using if I liked it as much as you. Or, almost as much as you."

"You liked that?"

He cradled her head in his hands, pulling her head upright so he could kiss her. "Fuck, Jamie. I more than liked it. I want you to always do that."

"Really?"

"Anytime you want, babe." Then he rolled her to her back rapidly, catching her by surprise. He was still hard, buried inside her, and he started moving his hips. Her orgasm was almost immediately forgotten. She tightened her grip on him and he chuckled again, which was quickly becoming her favourite sound. "Live wire," he repeated, kissing her now.
Then he was thrusting into her with agonizing precision, and she just held on, let her mind go blank, and enjoyed it.
Chapter 55

"So … how'd you end up with Calvin?" Tig asked quietly. Jamie was playing with his hand, linking her fingers in his before tucking them both against her body.

"Jaclyn's an unfit parent."

"I get that. But … you went the legal route, right? You didn't want her to take him at all."

"Our parents died in an accident a while back. They'd started a trust fund for Calvin before that. I wanted to make sure she didn't smoke or inject his college money."

Tig nodded, in the dark, one hand behind his head, the other wrapped tight around the amazing little body next to him. He wasn't tired, wasn't horny right now. He just wanted to stay this way for a while, listening to her talk in the dark. "What about you? You went to school, right?"

"Book keeping," she answered, readjusting her head on his chest. It caused her scent to float up and he had to smile. "Math was easy for me."

"How come you never got married?"

She exhaled, not annoyed, but it sounded like she was thinking, not annoyed. "I don't know. No one asked?"

"That might have something to do with it, yeah."

"Were you ever married?" she asked, laughing softly.

"Yeah, once."

She got quiet.

He gave her a slight squeeze. "She got pregnant. We were good in bed. Thought that would be enough, and it wasn't."

"Disagreeable temperament?"

"That's a nice way of putting it."

"I meant you."

"Hey!" He squeezed her tighter again and kissed her head. She ran her nails over his chest, a sign of submission. He eased up. "She was a bitch, to tell you the truth. And she didn't get that way. I thought she'd loose that."
"And you had a baby with her?"

"I have two daughters. Twins. Dawn and Fawn."

"Dawn … and Fawn?"

"I didn't pick 'em. Wasn't even there when they were born."

There was a pause, and her "Oh" sounded so disappointed.

"Not gonna lie about it. I was a shit husband, a shit father. I didn't want either job, that was just what people did, you know? You got married and had kids. Can't regret it, though. I do love my girls. They were likely better off far away from me anyway."

She let go of his hand and slid her arm across his stomach to wrap herself damn near right around him. She was quiet again.

"I'm older and wiser now," he told her, unsure why.

"That's … good."

He let his free hand trace across her head, down her neck and back and up again. "I'm serious about you, Jamie. I don't think I've been this serious since … Marnie."

"Your wife? I thought that was a mistake."

"Nah. Colleen's my ex-wife. Marnie came before. That's the one I should have married."

"Why didn't you?"

"She's dead." It didn't hurt when he said it, but it always sounded so hollow to his own ears to hear it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and he realized she'd tightened her grip on him.

"It was an accident. A long time ago. But that one … that one I really loved."

"I'm so sorry, Tig. That's horrible."

Tig gave her another squeeze. "The past, babe."

She was still at that. "I've only ever cared about Calvin anywhere near …" she trailed off.

He waited. "Near what?"
She sighed. "Nearly as much as what I already feel ... for you. It's different, but it's ... the same amount."

His blood still at that, and his eyes closed. It was all to keep himself from hollering out with absolute fucking joy.

"I mean, I don't know what this is but -"

"Jamie," he cut in and she stilled, falling quiet. "I don't just want this. I told you that. I keep telling you that. Honey, I want it all."

"Tig -"

"Shhh," he whispered to her forehead, wrapping both arms around her in a hug. "Don't overanalyze. Don't try to find signs I'm making shit up. Just lay here with me, okay? This is good, right?"

"This is very good," she agreed and he was grinning again.

"Then let's keep it, okay?"

He felt her kiss his chest, then she whispered back. "Okay."

That was it until he heard her fall asleep. Once he knew she was out, he did the same.

…

Tig's one eye cracked open to survey the room. The sunshine was flooding in through the see-through curtains on the windows. But all he saw was Jamie, curled into his side, still sleeping, sweet face relaxed and content.

It made him smile, then he saw the purple marks on her shoulders where the neck of her nightgown was pulled to the side.

"What the fuck?"

Okay, that was likely too loud. She started, coming out of sleep quickly and with a whole lot of what the fuck on her face as well. "What?" she gasped, seeing him, blinking, and rubbing her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"What are these bruises?" he rolled up to his side, hand sliding across her shoulder to move the thin cotton out of the way. The marks were older, purple and blue in colour, and he had a sick feeling. "Jesus, did I do that to you?"
She rose up on an elbow too, and he saw the other side had the same mark. She twisted her neck to see what he was talking about, but all he saw were marks that looked a lot like a hand and his stomach rolled. "Maybe," was her innocent reply, eyes swinging back to his. "The other night?"

"Fuck," he muttered. "Jamie, I'm so fucking sorry."

"Tig, it's okay."

"No it's fucking not. Look at this. I hurt you."

"Tig, it doesn't hurt."

"Doesn't matter. Look what I did." Jesus, what a fucking lout he was. He felt like cutting off his hands just to prevent this from happening again. "Jamie, I'm so fucking sorry."

She sat up and grabbed his face with both hands. "Tig," she repeated, not sounding soft and sweet anymore. "Calm down. They don't hurt. It's the chemo. I bruise and bleed easily from it. You didn't hurt me."

As she spoke the calmness washed through him, and he tried to remember how many times she'd been able to talk him down when he was losing his mind.

He blinked and the blood stopped pounding in his ears. "Sorry Jamie, I just saw them and -"

"I know you'd never hurt me, Tig. I trust you."

He breathed deep, then sat up and cuddled her tight to his chest. This time he was just going to keep his fucking mouth shut and not say anything, but he was still cursing himself out for it. What the fuck was he doing? She was going through chemo for fuck's sake –

His train of thought derailed when he felt her kiss his shoulder. Then she kissed his neck, then his jaw, and by the time her mouth was up to his he was smiling, the train totally flipped over and certainly off the rails.

She brought her mouth to his softly, but it lingered until her tongue slid out against his lips. Then he met it with his own, pushing her to her back and half-covering her. One of her hands was in his hair, the other was sliding down his chest and stomach. When she took him in her hand he was already hard, and he caught himself before he could moan.

He pulled his head back to look down on her, and she kept working him with that sure, tight grip. "Fuck Jamie," he growled, kissing her again and letting his hand release her hip. He pulled back far enough to trace his finger along her lips, smiling when she licked at it. He slid his finger in her mouth and she closed her eyes, sucking and swirling her tongue around it.

Jesus.
He pulled his finger free and immediately sent it between her legs. She was opening wide for him and moaning, and he circled her clit softly, finger wet from her mouth. She liked it. She was gasping already, and her hand increased its pace on his cock.

He slid his finger lower, finding her drenched, his thumb taking over on the clit so he could slide inside. The heat, snug fit and wet nearly crossed his eyes. She felt so fucking good on his hand it completely blew his mind he'd even wanted more than this.

Her hips started moving with what his hand was doing, and her grip on him matched the motion of her hips. They were both breathing heavy when suddenly the bedroom door knob shook.

"Hey. The lock's fixed."

Jamie and Tig both froze, eyes on each other, before she burst out in a laugh, her face lit up with that gorgeous smile and he couldn't even be mad.

"You gotta be fucking kidding me," he muttered, sliding his fingers out of her, making her gasp during laughter.

"Who fixed the door?" she whispered, cheeks flushed and so beautiful it halted his heart for a second. Her eyes flashed again as he sucked her off his fingers, and she quivered under him.

"Me and Happy, yesterday," he returned, knowing he was smiling back because it was impossible not to grin at her like an idiot.

"Why's the door locked?" Calvin was still shaking the door knob.

She covered her mouth, giggling. He rested his head on her collarbone, trying to get himself back under some kind of control.

"Chuckles," Tig shouted. "What time is it?"

"It's seven-thirty. I have to go to school today."

"I have to make him breakfast," Jamie whispered.

"Shit," Tig whispered himself, rolling onto his back again. Like a slippery little fairy she slid across him and ran for the bathroom, only giving him time to appreciate her back end wiggling before she pulled on shorts that matched the cute night shirt she had on.

"Aunt Jamie?"

"I'm coming Calvin, sorry," she called back through the door, pushing the privacy lock button and pulling the door open.
Tig gave Calvin a wave, wondering what the kid's reaction was going to be to seeing him in Jamie's bed. Calvin grinned. "Are you having breakfast with us?"

Tig swallowed hard and smiled. "You bet, Chuckles. I'll be right out."
Chapter 56

"Kale? What the fuck is kale?"

Tig's tone mirrored her feelings exactly, but Jamie felt the need to not appear foolish. "I think it's a leafy vegetable."

"I doubt if anywhere in Charming has fucking kale."

She had to laugh. "We can look. What else do we have to do?"

Wrong thing to say. Such a terrible thing to say.

Tig backed her into a shelf of organic cereal, dropped his voice obscenely low and grabbed her around her waist. "We have lots we can do at home, babe." Then he kissed her. Not a cute, peck-on-the-mouth-because-we're-in-a-public-place kiss. A hard, open-mouth lip lock with plenty of tongue that she was able to resist for maybe a full second before melting into it. She was grasping the edge of his vest, letting him do what he wanted with his hands and mouth when a voice cleared beside them.

The woman standing next to them was a stranger, thank God. And apparently they were making out on the cereal she wanted. Jamie felt her face go red and she pushed Tig away. With a chuckle he backed off, hooking his arm around her neck and pulling her down the aisle with him.

She tugged the grocery list out of his hand, desperate to change the subject. "Okay. I'm pretty sure these are all meant to be fresh, so we need to go to the produce department." He wordlessly let her lead the way. "Can you go and find me broccoli and leeks?" she asked. "I'll find the kale."

"What the fuck is a leek?"

She sighed. "Broccoli?"

"Okay." He wandered off, looking so remarkably out of place in an organic produce department she had to stop and watch him. Dark jeans, dark shirt, leather vest with that frightening patch on the back, weaving between bins of tomatoes and apples holding a wire basket. He looked back over his shoulder at her, and he raised an eyebrow. "You checking me out?"

She shook her head, cheeks colouring, and headed for the lettuces. They did have kale. Then she found leeks and headed for the fruit bins.

The list in her hand was supplied by Juice. Apparently Tig's baby-faced friend was a bit of a health nut, and he'd come up with a few things Jamie had to eat every day to up her antioxidants and cancer-fighting juju. She had no idea if it would work, but who could go through life avoiding fruits and vegetables?
She was picking through the pears when she heard her name and turned, hand freezing and brain running out of operational capacity. So she just stared at Doctor Foster for a moment, blinking and trying to form some kind of greeting. "Doctor Foster," she stammered out eventually. "Hi." He smiled, and she dropped the pear in her hand in the paper bag she was holding.

"Jamie, it's good to see you again. Doing a bit of grocery shopping?"

"Uh, yeah," she replied, setting the few bags she held on the edge of the pear bin and turning to him. "You too, I see."

"Yeah." Doctor Foster, on the other hand, looked perfectly at ease in an organic produce selection in jeans, loafers, sports blazer and a V-neck T-shirt. He was nodding and smiling at her warmly, and Jamie found herself wishing that men would start ignoring her again.

"So …" she began, unsure where to go next, when an arm wrapped around her belly from behind and the familiar smell of leather hit her nose a moment before she was leaning against the body behind her.

"Jamie," Tig said from behind her. "Introduce me to your friend."

"Oh. Umm, Tig, this is Doctor Foster. He was overseeing my radiation treatments. Doctor Foster, this is Tig- "

It was amazing she kept talking, because as soon as she said "Doctor Foster" the first time Tig let her go, yanked her behind him and took a few very purposeful strides toward Doctor Foster, who seemed to shrink away. Jamie was stunned. Her mouth was open but she'd run out of words, apparently.

"This the Doctor that put his hands and mouth on you?"

She felt herself go cold, just a bit. How the hell –

Gemma. The only explanation.

"That, that was a mistake. I apologized."

Jamie was somewhat impressed the doctor was able to talk. Because although she couldn't see Tig's face, she knew by his tone it could likely be described as arctic. And Doctor Foster was staring at Tig like he was waiting to get hit.

"Tig-" she began, grabbing his arm.

"You're a fucking doctor. I may not be that smart, but I'm pretty sure making moves on a cancer patient is an especially shitty thing to do."

"Tig," she repeated, voice stern.
Doctor Foster just gaped.

"After all, you had your hands on her tits in a very professional manner, right? Did you think about her after? Imagine her letting you touch them and liking it?" The fact he could say such terrible things and make it sound like a normal conversation was likely one of the scariest things about him.

She darted around Tig, facing him and pushing back on his chest. "Tig, what are you doing?" She was pissed, and it was in her voice. His eyes lost their coldness somewhat when he looked down at her. "It happened. He stopped. I walked away. He didn't hurt me, he didn't hit me. I told him no and he listened. That's what a good person does."

Tig's eyes went back over her head to the Doctor. "She's forgiven it, but I won't. Because I know how guys think. You so much as see her you walk the other way."

Jamie was incredulous. "Tig, I am not someone that you need to police like that."

He still wasn't looking at her. She turned, saw Doctor Foster backing away and nodding, not turning until he'd cleared a safe distance. Then she spun on Tig, anger shaking her.

"I don't like that, Tig," she snapped. "That embarrasses me. Like I can't control myself or something. And I don't need you scaring other people into minding their manners."

His free hand cupped her jaw, and as mad as she was it felt nice. "That was me being polite, babe. I wanted to hit him. I thought that would be worse."

"Of course that would be worse. He never even scared me. It just happened and he knew it was wrong, too."

Tig's eyebrows went high. "He only stopped and apologized when he realized you weren't into it, babe. If you'd kissed him back he'd have fucked you right then and there."

She reared back. "Don't talk like that."

Now his arm looped around her back. "You may not think a guy has that in his mind, but he does. The difference between me and him is that I'm fucking honest. Christ Jamie, doesn't it bother you he did that? Is this the guy you went to when you found the lumps?"

"Yes."

"Is this the guy that felt them, confirmed that you needed tests?"

"Yes."

"He saw you naked."
She bit her lip, still scowling. "Yes."

"And that's because you trusted him as your doctor?"

Her breath whooshed out all at once. "Yes."

"And then he dared to put his mouth on you?"

She looked away, an uncomfortable stomach roll taking place right then.

"He wanted to have sex with you," Tig went on, censoring himself. "This isn't me going caveman on a guy that touched my woman. That's me reminding him that it's inappropriate, and losing his fucking job is the least that can happen to him. What if he's done it to someone else? Think about how vulnerable someone in your situation is, Jamie. That's bullshit. I'm sorry, but it is."

The whole time she was getting more and more upset, so that when she looked at him again her eyes were wet and her lip trembled; she knew, she could feel it. "Shit," she whispered, and he pulled her tight against his chest.

"You've got so much sweet in you," he mumbled. "Every time I open your eyes I feel like I'm telling you there's no Tooth Fairy."

She laughed, wiping at her eyes and pulling away. "You're right. But that still embarrassed me."

He shook his head. "No reason to be embarrassed. It's him, not you. I'll never know why girls think they have to just put up with that kind of shit."

Jamie closed her eyes. Crude, rough, scary, and yet so insightful it nearly cut her. The first time she'd ever seen Tig Trager she'd been terrified and dismissive. Now that all seemed ridiculous.

"Now let's see what else Doctor Juice prescribed for my girl," he eventually said, rubbing her back.

"Raspberries," she said reflexively, wiping her eyes and adding the stuff she'd found to the wire basket still in his hand.

He took her hand. "Raspberries. I know what those look like. C'mon."
"He actually thinks you throwing all this shit in a blender and drinking it is going to make you want to live?" Tig quipped. "Jesus Christ. Juice must be nuts."

Jamie was laughing, but he didn't worry that it was at him. She was making some kind of fruit and vegetable cocktail that he just knew was going to turn out to be the exact same colour as shit. And it likely wouldn't taste any different.

"The fruit makes it taste better," she replied, putting the top on the blender.

He just shook his head. "I don't know, babe. I'll clear a path to the bathroom in case it all comes up on you." She hit the button and the blender started doing its noisy thing. Sure enough, it quickly turned into shit-coloured liquid, and he shook his head. "You're not gonna drink that, are you?" he shouted over the noise.

She beamed at him, and he felt like a schmuck for it but he smiled back. She killed the appliance, popped the top and started pouring. "Speaking of my bathroom, I still haven't gotten a bill from those workers," she shared casually.

"Really?"

"Yeah." She set the blender top thing in the sink. "It's been a while. I'm still surprised they didn't ask for money up front."

Then she lifted the glass, and he started shaking his head again, probably wincing, too. "Jamie, you don't have to do this."

"It's good for me," she insisted, glass at her mouth. Then she took a mouthful.

Tig waited, somewhat horrified and yet terribly curious, too. She brought the glass down and immediately made a face, head jerking to the side. "Oh my God that's awful," she sputtered.

He couldn't help it; he cut up, bent over double. "I knew it would taste like shit," he cackled.

She fought to swallow, almost choking because she was laughing, too. "Oh Christ, it's like eating dirt out of the garden."

"Can't you taste the fruit in it?" he teased, reaching for the glass. She let him take it and he gave it a sniff, then pulled a face of his own. "Fuck Jamie, that even smells disgusting. I'm impressed you swallowed that." He couldn't help it, that last statement made him grin wider and waggle his eyebrows.

"Shut up," she muttered, still smiling, reaching for the shit milkshake.
"Just dump it," he recommended seriously.

"It's medicine," she insisted as he held the glass across to the other side of his body, hand on her stomach to keep her away from it. "I'll plug my nose and drink it fast."

"Don't torture yourself. Smoke a joint and I'll order you pizza instead."

"Later," she laughed, still trying to take back the drink playfully. Little bitch had him too figured out. She reached into his kutte, tickling his side. He shouted, and rather than drop the evil concoction in his hand he gave it back to her. "You just bought me two hundred dollars in organic groceries. I'm not dumping it down the drain."

He folded his arms, leaned on the counter and crossed one ankle over the other. "Go for it. This I gotta see."

She did exactly what she said she'd do; she plugged her nose, threw her head back and chugged that crap all at one go, eyes up to the ceiling, wincing the entire time.

Then she slammed the glass down and made so many faces of disgust he wished he had a fucking camera.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"No," she coughed, covering her mouth and closing her eyes.

"Gonna puke?"

She didn't answer right away, and he had a hand on her shoulder just in case it came back up on her. After a pause she opened her eyes again, shaking her head. "I'm fine. It's staying down."

She reached over to turn the taps on, and he stopped her hands. "You said you were tired."

"I am."

"Then go sleep. I'll clean this up."

"No, Tig, it's my mess -"

He cut her off by putting his hand to the front of her throat, making her look at him. "Jamie, babe. Go get your sleep."

Her eyes studied him, then she smiled and he felt that same pussied-out tremor again. "Okay. Thanks, Tig."

He gave her a quick kiss on the lips, then turned her to the hall and swatted her butt to send her on her way. That tremor came again as she giggled then rounded the corner out of sight.
Complete and total sap over that girl. Admitted, no shame about it.

He washed her dishes, left them drying in the rack then flipped his phone open, stepping out on the deck to place the call to Oswald. Maybe that bill for the reno got lost in the mail. He'd hate to think collections might be coming after them because the post office fucked up.

The assistant put him through to Oswald's office. No small talk needed. "Hey, it's Tig. My neighbour never got her bill for that reno work your guys did. Are they usually four weeks behind on paperwork?"

"Wow. Your ears must have been burning."

"What?"

"Her landlord. I sent him the bill directly, since it should be him paying for the work. It came back as undeliverable mail. The PO Box had been cancelled. So I did another search on the guy's name. He's in Lodi. I checked with land titles there and they've got him listed as the owner of five properties. One of them's an apartment building."

"Yeah? So what?"

"Well, Lodi is trying to find the guy. Turns out he lets his places fall into such disrepair that people report him to the housing authority. Does it on purpose."

"Why?"

Oswald exhaled. "If you're reported as a slumlord the bank can freeze your mortgage, forcing you to renovate and not requiring mortgage payments for that time period."

Tig frowned. "Again, why do that on purpose?"

"The rumour mill in Lodi is that this guy shuts down the building, evicts everyone and the place has the appearance of being under construction. But he's actually letting meth cooks use the space."

Tig's hand clenched on the phone. "What?"

"This is heresay from the lady at Lodi Land Titles. So I don't know for sure. But this guy's name is Elrich Constantine. I think the club might want to look into him."

Tig was already nodding along. "Hell yeah we will. Thanks, Oswald." He flipped the phone shut, headed back inside while dialling Clay. There was a knock on the front door before he finished dialling, and he opened the inside door to admit Gemma.
Carrying a round white box with a bright pink cord as a handle, she looked absolutely pleased with herself. "Tigger," she greeted him, and he kissed her on the offered cheek while letting her into the entry.

"What you got there Gem?"

"It's Jamie's wig. It's done. Is she here?"

Tig checked the hallway as he answered. "She just went in for a nap."

"Shit. I was dying to see it on her."

Tig held up a finger. "I'll go check. I'm sure she'll be excited to know it's done."

As soon as he eased the bedroom door open Jamie turned his way on the bed, rubbing her eyes. "Is that Gemma?" she mumbled.

He grinned. "Yeah, she's a bit loud."

Jamie sat up. "Is everything okay?"

"She's got a present for you, babe."

Jamie grinned. "A present?" she asked, all cute and adorable, fidgeting with the scarf on her head.

He knew he was going to get face cramps from smiling but he didn't care. "Yeah. Come see it. She's excited to show you." Tig moved to help her up out of bed, and she held his hand behind her as they made their way down the hall.

"Hi Gemma," Jamie greeted her, still futzing with the scarf with her free hand.

"Sorry to wake you up, honey," Gemma apologized, as sincerely as he'd ever heard her do.

Jamie shook her head. "No worries. I hadn't fallen asleep yet."

Gemma held the box up. "It's done."

Jamie took the box with both hands, biting her lip. Tig gave her shoulder a squeeze as she asked, "Will you wait here while I try it on?"

Gemma's smile was pleased as shit. "Of course."

As she passed Tig to head to the washroom she was grinning, and Tig had to give Gemma a hug once the door shut behind her. "You're making my girl smile, Gem."
Gem stepped back and grabbed her chin in her hand. "Pretty sure it's not just me, baby."
Chapter 58

This time staring at herself in the mirror Jamie wasn't wincing or forcing herself to accept anything. She was staring at herself looking the same and yet totally different.

She liked the wig. She really did.

It was cut to just brush her shoulders, with chunky layers that made it curl under nicely while still looking thick and ... real. The only difference was that the wigmaker had given her long bangs that wisped to one side. They followed the part of the wig, which sat exactly where Jamie used to part her hair. The lady remembered how she did it.

Jamie covered her mouth, not wanting to cry but unable to stop.

The kindness of this was overwhelming. She didn't know how to open up and let it in. And it wasn't just the wig. It was Juice making a shopping list and giving her a few recipes to follow. Gemma bringing the wig here and being just as excited about it as Jamie was.

She didn't know why she had been accepted so quickly and easily, but she felt herself softening to the idea that she was completely capable of having friends in this world. In Tig's world.

Opening her eyes, she made herself focus on the hair, head turning side-to-side, running her hand over the top and smiling in spite of her tears.

Jamie dried her eyes, pulled herself together within about ten minutes and left the bathroom, watching her feet as she walked slowly down the hall and into the living room. She came around the corner, immediately hearing Gemma gasp.

"Oh babe," the woman whispered, making Jamie look up. "That looks killer on you, honey."

Jamie felt her nose prickle again as Gemma wrapped her up in a hug, patting her back. "Thank you," she managed to sputter.

"No problem, honey. Glad to do it." Gemma held her at arms' length and smiled. "You're beaming, Jamie. You're giving a lot away."

Jamie ducked her head, knowing she was likely blushing now.

"Gem? I gotta head to the clubhouse, can you -" Tig only stopped speaking because Jamie turned around to look at him as he entered the living room, flipping his phone shut. He stopped mid-motion of shoving it in his pocket and seemed transfixed, moving to her with his eyes quite intent on her face. She didn't know what to make of that look until he grabbed her with both hands and laid a kiss on her that wasn't a good idea when she was standing up. Didn't matter though, he held her by the waist so tightly she wasn't slumping over.
"Jesus, Tigger. Let her breathe," came the sarcastic wit of Gemma, clearly not embarrassed by public displays of affection.

He let the kiss end but he kept her close, rested his forehead on hers and cupped the back of her head with one hand. "Babe," he whispered, and she felt her heart clench.

"Do you like it?" She hated how much she really needed him to answer that.

"It's hot, babe. No doubt about it. I'm just realizing you don't need hair to be gorgeous."

"Tig," she gasped back, not wanting to cry at that, especially with Gemma in the room.

He gave that uneven half-smile, pushing some hair behind her ear. "Gorgeous, babe. I'm going to go get you one in every colour I can find." Then he let the smile go plenty naughty and kissed her again before stepping back. "I gotta go to the clubhouse. I don't want to leave you alone, though."

"I'll stay," Gemma offered. "Until someone else gets here."

"You carrying, Gem?"

She gave an oh please look. "Always."

Jamie was startled by that.

"They're sending the prospect over. Make him stay outside. He's likely not housetrained," Tig advised with an affectionate kiss on her forehead.

"Okay," Jamie replied, watching him walk to the door. "Is everything okay?"

He turned back and grinned. "Don't worry honey, everything's good. I'll be back."

She nodded and he left her with Gemma, who was standing in the doorway, arms crossed and a wide grin on her face.

"What?" Jamie asked, suddenly self-conscious.

"Nothing. I'm just happy he finally fucked you. Now, go back to your nap and I'll wait for Half-Sack out here."

Jamie was going to sputter a denial, remembered she wasn't in high school anymore, then just turned on her heel to put the wig back in its box before going back to bed.

…

"Aunt Jamie?"
She rolled to her back at the sound of Calvin's voice, hushed and cautious from the doorway. Smiling, rubbing her eyes with one hand, Jamie held out the other one. "Hey Peanut," she mumbled sleepily, and he crossed the room to take her hand.

"Is everything okay?"

She yanked him into bed with her, curling him up and cuddling him like she used to about three years ago. He let her do it while whining "Aunt Jamie."

"What? Your aunt doesn't get hugs and cuddles anymore?"

He sighed. "Fine."

"How was school?" He just shrugged. She gave him a shake. "I asked how school was."

"It was fine."

Something was off in his voice, and she sat up so he did the same. "Calvin, is everything okay?"

He shrugged again, not looking her in the eye.

"Calvin, what happened, honey?"

He took a deep breath. "Missus Whitman is going to call you. But it wasn't my fault. Grady Bishop called me a nerd and other names. He was asking for it."

Jamie's blood stilled and she knew her eyes got wider. "He was asking for what?" A loud crash sounded from the kitchen along with a muffled exclamation. Jamie frowned. "Who's in the kitchen?"

Calvin was glad for the distraction. "Juice is here making you supper. He says you need to eat more fish in your diet."

Jamie shook her head. "Okay, sorry. Never mind that right now. What did you do to Grady Bishop?"

Calvin bit his lip.

"Calvin?"

Still no answer.

"Calvin Grayson Taylor, you tell me immediately what you did or you're grounded until you do."

"I punched him," Calvin said softly, still looking down while pushing his glasses back up. "I made his nose bleed."
She took his chin in her hand and made him look at her. "You punched a boy at school?"

"Yes."

"Calvin, why? Because he called you a nerd?"

"And other things," he snapped back, which he usually did when he knew he was in trouble.

"What other things?"

"Aunt Jamie -"

"What was so bad? Tell me why you felt justified in hitting that boy."

"He called me a nerd. And a … pussy. And a fag." He knew the last two were terrible words so he said them very quietly. "He said he could hurt me. He said he'd kill me."

Jamie's eyebrows went up. "He said that?"

Calvin sniffed and finally looked her in the eye. "Yes."

"I'm calling his mother," she insisted, pushing the covers off her legs.

"No, you can't. She's gone. He lives with his dad and his dad is … not a nice guy."

Jamie stilled. "Honey, his dad might not know he's raising a little asshole."

Calvin sighed. "Yes he does. Because he's just like his dad. He's proud of him. His dad was there."

"What?"

"It was after school. Grady pushed me, called me names then went to get in his dad's truck. I could hear his dad laughing. I knew he wouldn't get in trouble. So I pulled him back and punched him. But Miss Whitman was there, and she grabbed me and gave me heck."

Jamie could feel her blood boiling. "This kid's father thought that was funny?"

Calvin nodded, sniffing.

"What did Grady's dad do when you hit him?"

Calvin bit his lip. "He called me a pussy."

"Who called you that?"
They both looked up, and Tig was leaning on the door jamb looking dangerously curious. Jamie's stomach sank and she smoothed her hand over Calvin's hair, pulling him in for a hug. "Calvin got in a fight at school," Jamie said pointedly, hoping the look on her face indicated she did not need help from him. "I'll take care of it."

"You can't fight at school, Chuckles."

"I got this, Tig," she repeated. "I'll call the teacher, find out what happened."

"What's this kid's name?" Christ, it was like she wasn't talking.

Jamie was opening her mouth to answer but Calvin rushed ahead of her. "Grady Bishop. His dad's a jerk and he's a bully. They both called me that word."

Tig's brows came together. "The kid's dad said it, too?"

"Shit," Jamie breathed, knowing the situation was no longer under her control.

"Yeah," Calvin said overtop of her. "So I punched Grady."

Tig did the worst thing possible and laughed. "You punched the kid? He punch you back?"

"No, the teacher yanked me back onto the school grounds to give me heck."

Jamie was getting up during this and crossing her arms. "Tig, this isn't funny," she declared low and even. "He can't just hit people when they call him names."

Tig dropped the smile. "You're absolutely right. Chuckles, shame on you. I had higher expectations of you."

Jamie shook her head. "Don't make jokes about this."

He held his hands out. "No jokes, you're right. You shouldn't hit people. Unless they've really got it coming."

She put her hand over his mouth. "Stop talking. This is something I will handle, okay?"

Tig pulled her hand down by the wrist. "Only if you're talking to the teacher. If you need to talk to this little asshole's dad, I'm handling it."

She sighed. "Tig-"

"Nope," he cut her off genially. "No bartering on this. You talk to the teacher. If that doesn't work, let me know."

"But Tig -"
"Jamie, you can try to convince me all you want. I invite you to get as creative as possible. But you're not talking to that kid's dad. He's clearly a prick."

She felt her face redden at his 'creative' comment. It made him laugh.

"Come on. Juicy's almost got your supper done. You need to eat, remember? It smells good."

"Fine," she muttered, arms crossed, striding past him with a pissy look that made him grin more. Then she heard whispering and turned back in time to see Tig fist-bump Calvin, both of them grinning like idiots. Tig realized they were caught first. He lost the smile, straightened up, hooked his thumbs on his belt and shook his head.

"Disappointed in you, Chuckles."

Calvin was still grinning as he darted past her down the hallway.

"Please don't undermine me like that," she whispered as he approached, cracking a smile again that made her resolve slip just a little.

"You're right, I'm sorry. I'm shocked he hit someone. And he shouldn't. He's too small. He's gonna get his ass kicked."

"He shouldn't hit people because it's wrong," she corrected.

"Like when I hit Clark Davidson?"

She bit her lip.

"When you clocked that dealer with a baseball bat?"

"That was to protect you."

"Like us taking care of the guys that roughed up Calvin?" he added very softly. "Cavemen can't be reasoned with. If this guy's dad turns out to be a banker you can talk to him. But something tells me he's the senior asshole."

He was probably right. Dammit.

"Okay," she agreed. "You can talk to the dad if this teacher can't help."

"Thanks babe," he said, kissing her cheek. "Let's get you fed now. Give me shit later, okay? It's great foreplay."
Chapter 59

"So that wasn't Tiny?" Jax's voice was confused enough for the whole group.

Tig's head was spinning. For the second time that day the Sons were called back to the clubhouse for another meeting. Tig had left Jamie and Calvin watching a movie with Half-Sack to haul ass back to church on Clay's command.

Oswald's revelation about the slumlord set off a hell of an investigation that Juice was still conducting, having picked it up again after making supper for Jaime and getting a call from some young thing working at the town office that was sweet on him.

Elrich Constantine was described as a huge Mexican fucker. In Lodi they said he said he was a regular-looking white guy. And at land titles they said they talked to a midget. All answering to the name Elrich Constantine.

"This is such a pain in the ass," Clay grumbled.

"It's brilliant though," Chibs admitted. "Different fucker to each department, different towns. No corroborating witnesses if one gets pinched."

"They all gotta be in on it, though. They're not just the face of Tiny. He's giving them all a cut because they're fronting the properties," Jax reminded them.

"So we gotta find those properties," Clay concluded.

Juice was nodding, tossing down a pile of printed pages. "These are all the properties owned by Elrich Constantine. Some of them just have regular renters right now. But the five on top all are on an order to make improvements by local health boards. Three in Charming, two in Lodi."

"Disrupting their supply chain would make me happy," Clay quipped with a grin.

The guys chuckled their agreement.

"Tonight we hit the Charming properties," Clay went on. "Tomorrow night, the two in Lodi. All of us at once, I don't want to be caught outnumbered."

Everyone was nodding, including Tig. He felt a violent urge rising, and making a mess of a few meth cookers would likely feel pretty damn good.

"Not you Tig," Clay said over the noise in the room. "You stay home with your girl. Take care of her. Gemma seems to think you're good for her."

That brought out a lot of knowing laughs.
"Clay, come on -" he began but the president silenced him.

"You can protect her better than the prospect. You'll just be worrying about her the whole time anyway."

He didn't like it, but the prez had spoken.

"Never thought I'd see the day Tig didn't want to spend the evening in bed with a broad," Piney snarked.

"And tell her thanks for finally putting out. Made you a much more agreeable bastard," Chibs had to add his two cents.

"Fuck all of you," Tig muttered, scratching his eyebrow. He didn't like being left out. He really hated it.

"It's okay," Chibs assured him with a shot on the arm, voice serious now. "We'll take these cooks out. Flush out Tiny, whoever the fuck he may be, get your girl free and clear. Yeah?"

"I know," he answered as everyone else was getting to their feet. "I just want to be the one doing it."

"She'd rather have you with her," Chibs assured him, standing as well. "She needs her rest, and she'll rest better with you around. As long as you leave her alone long enough to sleep."

Yeah, like he needed more to feel guilty about.

"Clay," Tig said quietly, snagging his president by the arm as they left church. "I can come. This won't take long."

Clay levelled his eyes on Tig and spoke quietly. "I know, Tig. But this is about someone watching out for your girl. And you're the best one for it. If we didn't get Tiny that means he's out there. And he might know where she lives if that sister of hers can be believed."

Tig nodded. "Yeah. You're right. Okay."

Clay winked. "Part of being a man; taking care of your woman."

"I know, Dad," Tig drawled back, smiling. "Have fun with the meth labs. I'll be somewhere much sweeter."

Clay cackled and gave him a shot in the arm. "Get to it then, asshole."

He ignored most of the inappropriate comments that followed him out of the clubhouse and across the lot. Climbing on his bike he was still somewhat chafed to be left out, but as he rode
through the twilight on his way "home" he had to admit it he could be headed for places much worse.

He pulled into Jamie's driveway, parked and let himself in the front door. He sent Half-Sack on his way back to the clubhouse and opened the front door with what he was beginning to think of as *his* key. When two dark heads turned his way he felt a curse on the tip of his tongue.

The sister was here. Great.

"Hey," Jamie said warmly, getting up and heading to him. She wrapped him up in a hug and having her welcome him "home" was the best way to forget his annoyance about the junkie sister.

"Hey babe," he returned, breathing deep while giving her a tight squeeze. Yep, calmer just from *her*.

"They let Jackie out," she said. "She came here. Thelma's coming to get her tomorrow and she'll stay out there."

Tig nodded, rubbing circles on her back. "That's a good idea. These guys don't know about Thelma?"

Jackie was shaking her head. "No, not at all."

"Okay," he relented. Then his attention was all on his girl again. "How you feeling?"

Jamie smiled. "Sleepy. I was waiting for you to get here."

He grinned back, all warm and gushy in the span of thirty seconds. "Babe," was all he said and she gave him a soft peck on the lips.

"Calvin went to bed an hour ago. Jackie's got the couch."

"Where am I sleeping then?" he whispered into her ear directly, giving it a nip.

She laughed - a throaty, husky sound - took his hand and pulled him behind her. "Good night, Jackie," Jamie sang out softly.

Jackie turned up the volume on the TV one notch. "Good night guys."

Tig shut the bedroom door, eyes on Jamie as she turned on the lamp next to the bed and pulled the blinds shut over the window. He shrugged his kutte off, unbuttoned his shirt and set them both on her dresser. She sat on the edge of her bed watching him, face unreadable.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, sitting next to her and leaning over to pull off his boots.
"I don't know," she said, reaching up and sliding off the wig.

He liked the wig. He really did. That rock-girl cut was hot and suited her perfectly. She set it on the foam head, biting her lip and rubbing her scalp. Boots now off, he stared at the foam head for a split second before picking it up and carrying it to the bathroom, setting it on the counter and then shutting the bathroom door on it.

Jamie looked perplexed. He shrugged it off. "It was looking at me." He sat next to her, reached out and ran his arm around her shoulders.

"When's the last time you killed someone?" she asked out of nowhere.

That made him sit up straight and swallow. "What?"

"The last time you killed someone. I want to know."

He linked his hands in his lap. "Umm … the dealer that had Jackie. That's the last guy I killed. No, wait. The guys that were coming here to get her we shot down all at once. We killed a few guys then."

Her head swivelled to him rapidly. "What?"

"Yeah. The guy that bought your sister. Me and Hap made sure he was … done. And then the guys that were coming to town to get her we shot down all at once. She was battling something, he could see it in her face and her eyes. "What are you thinking, babe?" he asked softly, holding his breath along with her. Shit, he was way out in unchartered waters here.

"I'm surprised that it was so recent. But I'm glad that it was someone … so horrible."

"I'm not sorry. Especially for the guy that bought your sister. I hate that kind of shit. I mean, that's human trafficking in my book. I really hate that shit." Before he was done talking she was pulling him towards her by the arm, bring his face to hers and pressing her lips tight to his. He kept his hands to himself for all of ten seconds before cupping her face with both hands and teasing her tongue. Usually he was happy to plunder her mouth. This time he wanted to entice her to do it to him.

She did. Shy Jamie was gone, hot and sexy Jamie was on shift and climbing onto him, straddling his lap and holding him by the shoulders. He let his hands run up her back under her T-shirt, soft skin even more lovely than the last time he'd touched it.

"You killed the guy that did that to my sister," she whispered, hands running over his chest and upper back, lips hot as she kissed his neck and collarbone. "Why does that turn me on?"

He responded by kissing her hard when her mouth came close again, hands tightening on her hips. She ground down hard on the fly of his jeans and he had to chuckle. "Jesus babe," he muttered. "I'm happy to kill whoever you want if this is the result."
She kissed him back, and when he pulled her T-shirt off over her head he was aware of her pressing tight to him, not letting him see all of her. He pulled back from her kiss, making eye contact and holding it with meaning.

"Jamie, please let me look at you. I'm going to see you eventually, honey."

She trembled a bit, biting her lip. "It's so ugly."

He shook his head. "Impossible, babe. Nothing about you can be anything but perfect."

She shook her head now. "It's ugly."

"Let me see," he repeated softly, kissing her gently. He could ease back and just look down, but it had to be on her terms.

She took a deep breath, then leaned away from him, her weight shifting back to rest on his knees. He let his eyes run down her slender neck, down to her chest. He inhaled, he couldn't help it, eyes going up to her face. "Babe," he said, raising his hand to run over the scar tissue. He kept his touch light, and she gasped. His attention flew up to her face, and her eyes were closed. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

"When you touch it, it feels good," she whispered.

"Really?"

She nodded.

Tig looked down at the torn skin and stretched tissue, wincing inwardly. He'd never seen so much scarring in such a fragile place. It made him tighten his jaw, wishing this was something he could beat someone up for. But he couldn't agree that it was ugly. It was part of her, and nothing about her was ugly to him.

He looked back up and she was watching him closely, worried. Her lips were between her teeth, her brows pinched together. Watching her face he traced his fingertips over the scars lightly, and gradually her expression eased and her breath hitched. It made him smile. As he kept at it, she kissed him again, lips sweet on his. Slowly her arms slid around his shoulders, pressing her close to him. He wrapped his arms around her just as deliberately.

Quite suddenly she was gone, the heat of her away from his chest and lap, and she was kneeling on the floor in front of him. She reached for his belt buckle and he caught her hands. "Jamie," he said, thumbs running over the backs of her hands.

"Let me," she whispered back.

"You don't have to do this."
She rose up over his knees and kissed him again. "I haven't done this yet. And she has. I don't want my sister to have anything over me."

Tig frowned. "Babe, your sister's got nothing on you. I swear."

"Then let me because I want to."

As he tried to find reasons to stop her she unbuckled his belt, got his fly open and was freeing him of all clothing. His only thought then was why the hell he'd been trying to talk her out of it.

*Let it feel good,* he told himself as she lowered her head. *Don't hold out like she's some crow eater, making her work for it.*

Stupid pep talk. The second her lips slid around his head and her tongue slid over him he gripped the blankets on either side of him, eyes nearly rolling back. It wasn't technique, it was *Jamie* and he wouldn't have been able to hold back for anything.

"Shit babe," was the only thing he could say, closing his eyes as she licked and sucked, hand helping the sensations along until he was biting his lip to remind himself to be quiet. When he came it was painfully perfect, fast, intense enough that his neck cracked. Once his eyes could focus again he caught her head in his hands, her smile up at him too much to take. "Get on your back babe," he grumbled. "I'm going down on you until you pass out."

And he tried his best to do just that.
Chapter 60

There was no warning. No creaking floorboards, no turn of a door knob, no sense that something was maybe amiss.

Jamie was dead asleep, and the next thing she knew she was wide awake, heart pounding, blood-curdling screams coming from the living room that made it all happen as fast as a wink.

Tig was already up and moving, pulling on jeans and whispering "Stay here."

"What's happening?" she whispered stupidly, rubbing her eyes and trying to stand up.

"Jamie? Sweetheart?" Tig pushed her back to the side of the bed. Jackie was still screaming and it was freaking Jamie out.

"Take this. Use it on anyone coming through that door that isn't me, okay?"

Something cold and hard was pressed into her hand. When he turned the bedside lamp on she was staring at the strange artefact, and as it came into view she nearly dropped it.

A gun? A fucking gun?

"Jamie? Anyone who isn't me, yeah?"

"Jackie," she mumbled, eyes still on the instrument in her palm. "Calvin."

"I'm on it, babe. Stay here."

He had a fucking knife in his hand. She caught the glint of it as he headed to the door and opened it, closing it most of the way behind him.

Things were crashing and breaking in the living room. Jackie was still screaming, which was a good sign. When her door flew open she jumped, realizing the gun was nowhere near "in position." Which was lucky since it was Calvin. He flew to her, throwing himself on the bed and huddling under her arm.

"What's happening?"

"I don't know, Peanut," she was answering, just as there was a loud explosion in the front room.

Jackie shrieked louder, Jamie's blood went cold. She heard shouting and cursing. It was Tig, he sounded hurt.

"Stay here," she whispered to Calvin. He grabbed her arm when she stood. "Calvin, stay here."
"Jamie!" Jackie was screaming. "Jamie! Help!"

Down the hallway she could hear males grunting. She knew there was a fight going on. Gun pointed upward, Jamie eased into the hall, keeping the wall to her back. When the living room came into view she couldn't quite make out what was happening; it was too dark.

The front door was suddenly yanked open, and that's when she saw Jackie's outline, standing on the stoop screaming for someone to help them.

"Jackie!" Jamie suddenly snapped. "Shut up!"

While all this was happening a dark shape came towards her and she shrieked, jumping back and lowering the gun. It was knocked out of her hand, she had no idea where it went, and the body that landed on her took her to the ground.

A light came on in the living room, but she still couldn't see who was on her. She knew it was a man, but he had her face shoved to the side, holding her head down, arm going across her throat. She scratched and pushed at that arm but it wouldn't move, and breathing was becoming increasingly more difficult. She was scratching, kneeling, landing a few painful hits she was sure but he was stronger.

Just when the world was encased in golden halos and her eyes were having trouble staying open the body was suddenly lifted off her and she heard a pained grunt. She crab-walked back to give herself room and scrambled to her feet, using the wall and gasping for breath.

It was quiet. Jackie was no longer screaming. And the man that had tackled her was now leaning backwards awkwardly, his neck in Tig's grip, trying to pry himself free much like she had.

She watched in shock while the man was choked out, almost to the point of being unconscious. Then, without so much as a change in expression, Tig simply snapped the man's neck around. He dropped like a pile of laundry.

Jamie covered her mouth. She heard her bedroom door squeak, and Calvin's soft whisper. "What's going on?"

She turned quickly, ushering him back into the room. "Stay here," she whispered. "Everybody's okay. Just stay in my room, okay?" Then she closed the door without a pause and headed back to the living room just in time to see Tig collapse back on the sofa, wincing in pain.

"Are you okay?" she whispered, settling next to him on one bended leg.

"Fucker shot me," he muttered, hand on his arm. "Just grazed." His smile was slow and pained. "Not bad. I'm fine, babe." Then his expression grew worried. "Are you okay babe?"

She put a hand to her throat. "I think so."
Tig's bloody hand came to her neck, then he seemed to think better of touching her with it and pressed it back over his wound. Jesus, the blood -

Jackie shut the front door and locked it. "Holy shit," she was whispering, pacing back and forth. "Holy shit holy shit holy shit -"

"Who do we call?" Jamie asked.

Tig dug in his jeans' pocket with the hand belonging to the injured arm, then pulled out a flip phone. With a wince he pressed a number, held it to his ear and waited. Jamie was watching the blood slide between the fingers of his other hand, not staunching the flow at all.

She got up, went to the kitchen on a brain-numbing tea towel hunt. Back in the living room she was half aware of Tig's voice while she wrapped the towel, decorated in chickens and egg baskets, around his arm.

"Someone broke into Jamie's place. He must not've expected anyone else to be here 'cause he came alone. But he had a gun, man."

Pause while she tightened her grip over his wound.

His eyes came to hers. "Nah, I took care of him. But now we got clean up."

She had no problem keeping her eyes off of what was undoubtedly a dead body on the floor. She bit her lip and looked back to her makeshift bandage, the overwhelming need to cry suddenly coming over her. The chickens were drowning in blood.

"Holy shit holy shit holy shit -"

"Jackie!" Jamie snapped. "Sit down and shut the fuck up. Please."

Jackie did exactly as told, sitting on a chair in the kitchen to be as far away from the body as possible.

Tig flipped the phone shut. "Jamie? Babe? You okay?"

She brought her eyes back to his. "I don't know."

"The guys are coming to deal with this."

"What about your arm?"

"It's fine. Chibs has fixed worse than this."

Her lip trembled. She felt like she needed to be doing something. Anything. Just to get rid of this edge …
"You're cranked up on adrenalin," Tig told her. "Let it work its way out, babe."

"My hands are shaking."

He reached out and covered her hands with his free one. "Take your sister to your room, keep her there with Calvin, okay? Try and keep everyone calm."

She was nodding, agreeing with everything he was saying, but she wasn't moving.

"Jamie, go to your room. Take Jackie."

Then she caught on. "Okay."

"But first give me a kiss, babe."

She leaned over and kissed him quickly, then got to her feet and collected Jaclyn from the kitchen. Her sister was now quiet, almost catatonic which was even better, and led her around the body then down the hallway. Jamie stopped in the main washroom to rinse the blood off her hands, and as she did so Jackie just watched, face slack.

Calvin was cross-legged on her bed, hands clenched tight to his knees. His eyes were huge. "What going on?" he whispered. "Was that a gunshot? Is Tig okay?"

Jamie closed the bedroom door behind her, hearing distant motorcycles and for once feeling relieved at the sound. She scooted around Calvin, stretching out with her back to the wall and herding him into her arms. He cuddled her without question, and she closed her eyes, forcing her respiration to even out.

Jackie sat on the edge of the bed, Jamie felt the mattress move. Jamie opened one eye, saw her sister staring down at them biting her thumb nail just like Jamie did. Jamie held her hand out, and Jackie took it then scooted down into bed with them.

Voices could be heard out in the living room, but Jamie just held eye contact with Jackie. "Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

Jackie nodded. "Yeah. He grabbed me, I was asleep. He tried to pull me out of the house."

Jamie nodded.

"Did Tig get shot?" Jackie whispered, and Calvin stiffened in Jamie's arms.

"Scratched," Jamie answered, playing it down.

"Is he okay?" Calvin sounded so worried.

"Tig's fine, Peanut. He's tough, you know that."
Calvin relaxed, and Jamie watched him close his eyes. Like only a kid can do, he passed out into sleep as though excitement was a sleeping potion.

"How does he do that?" Jackie whispered with a small smile.

"I have no idea. But I'm jealous," Jamie replied, smoothing his hair back and slipping his glasses off. Jackie took them from her and set them on the nightstand.

They settled into sleeping positions, leaving the light on.

"Jamie?" Jackie whispered.

She opened her eyes. "Yeah?"

Jackie looked conflicted, but eventually she just said what was on her mind. "This guy, Jamie. I was worried but ... he really cares about you."

Jamie felt herself smile. "Yeah, he does."

Jackie smiled too. "Shit, Jamie. You light up just thinking about him."

She looked away, to the ceiling, knowing she was blushing. "I can't help it."

"That's awesome, Jamie."

Jamie nodded, sighing. "It kind of is."

"I wish I hadn't ... well ... that makes it awkward."

"Don't talk about that, please," Jamie pleaded. "He told me about it, and ..." she ran out of steam.

"I'm sorry, Jamie."

Jamie turned her head on the pillow to face Jackie. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I think ... I think I'm important to him. No matter what came before."

Jackie nodded. "You are. When you were upset at the hospital and he hugged you ... I don't know. I was really glad you had that, Jamie. Not because you need someone taking care of you, but because you deserve it."

Jamie smiled, and Jackie smiled back. "Thanks Jackie."

"Wasn't me, Jam-Jam."

She giggled and so did Jackie. "I want you around," she said out of nowhere. "I miss you, Jackie."
Jackie bit her lip and immediately blinked tears away. "I miss you, too. I'm going to do better."

"Good," Jamie whispered, and she grabbed her sister's hand before settling on her side to sleep.
Chapter 61

"We'll make him disappear," Juice declared quietly from Jamie's front door. Then he shut it behind him, leaving Tig in the living room with Clay, Jax and Chibs. The Scot was stitching Tig's arm, Jax was leaning against the kitchen archway, and Clay was sitting across from Tig in the armchair.

"Looks like no one called the cops," Clay observed.

Tig nodded. "Not that kind of neighbourhood."

"Gunshot's a gunshot," Clay joked, leaning back.

"Is she gonna be okay?" Jax asked.

Tig evaluated Jax's question and looked for anything other than concerned interest. He couldn't help it; Jamie said the little prince was pretty. "She'll be all right."

"You need to make sure those sisters keep their mouths shut," Clay reminded him. "We don't know who that guy was. If he was someone important -"

"I know, Clay."

"Do you? Because you killed the asshole."

Tig clenched his jaw. "He broke in. He jumped Jamie. What was I supposed to do?"

"Use your head. He ain't just a dealer, you can tell by what he was wearing. We might have been able to get information."

"It was dark. He was choking her, man."

"Enough," Jax cut in calmly. "We likely would have done the same thing."

Clay's eyes shot to Jax and Tig had a moment of disorientation. Jax defending him?

"We plead ignorance if someone comes looking. In the meantime, we're still trying to figure out who the fuck Tiny is. Right?" Jax was a bit more authoritative now, eyes going to Tig.

Tig couldn't help it, he nodded. He happened to agree.

"Talk to the girls and explain that if anyone comes around asking, no one was here. This never happened. And then they call one of us as soon as it's safe to. There's no need to be threatening anyone."
Final Wisdom ... A Fuzzy Peaches SOA Fanfiction

It was no secret in the club that Jax and Clay had very different visions for SAMCRO, and Tig had no idea which way to jump at the moment. Clay had been not only his president but his friend for years. Tig followed him blindly the whole time. But that was before he had someone he cared about enough to fight to keep safe.

Clay's eyes levelled back to Tig. "It's not your girl I'm worried about," Clay clarified. "It's the sister. Can't trust a junkie further than you can throw her."

"She's going to the aunt's place tomorrow," Tig said. "Should keep her on the straight and narrow for a while. It's in the middle of fucking nowhere and the aunt is tough as nails herself."

"Good," Clay said, standing up. "It's a lot easier to keep an eye on your girl. Housebound like she is."

Tig got to his feet, jerking away from Chibs who was uncharacteristically silent this whole time. "The fuck's the matter with you?" Tig asked softly, but it was a calm soft that meant he wasn't fucking around.

There wasn't a specific thing chafing him. But something about how Clay was talking about Jamie was really getting under his collar. Clay had said it; the words were well-intentioned but somehow it seemed like a threat on the woman he was starting to care about a whole hell of a lot.

Clay's eyes widened, mock innocence. "What do you mean?"

Tig held the prez's steely gaze for a long while before replying. "She's sick, Clay. Not *housebound."

Clay settled into a posture of deceptive ease, both feet firmly planted. "Tigger, you're getting a little sensitive."

"She matters, okay?"

Another long stare down that Jax broke up. "All right, we get it. Tig, watch over your girl. That's your assignment until we learn more. The sister's leaving town, that's good. I'm assuming she didn't tell these pricks about the aunt. And we know no one will get close enough to Jamie to talk her into giving up any intel. Tig trusts her, I trust her."

"We should take them all to the clubhouse, lock them down," Clay said. "Safer for all of them."

Tig shook his head. "Kid's got school in the morning. Let him sleep."

"Tomorrow then. This place is hot now, you know that. There's a fucking bullet hole in the wall in case you forget," Clay snapped, pushing his was past Tig, knocking his shoulder and heading right for the door then outside without another word.
Jax was sighing and following. He turned back at the doorway. "He might be right. We came the other day when those dealers were beating up that customer. Now a guy comes here and disappears. These guys won't think she's just a sweetheart cancer patient now. It's obvious she's connected, Tig."

"What about those houses? Meth cooks?"

Jax shook his head. "Nothing doing at any of them. We'll look into the Lodi properties tomorrow. While you keep your girl and her kid safe at the clubhouse," Jax reminded him.

Tig sighed. "Clubhouse ain't a great place for a kid."

Jax grinned. "What do you mean? I grew up there."

Tig cracked a smile. "Good point. Let me talk it over with her."

Jax nodded. "I'd still suggest that the sister go to the aunt's, though."

"Definitely. That's attention we don't want."

Jax left, Chibs followed and shut the door behind him with a salute. Tig made sure it was well locked, all the windows, too.

The asshole had picked the knob and the deadbolt. There was no security chain, which was the first thing Tig was fixing before the next night Jamie had to spend here. Whether it was tomorrow or the first night after all this shit was sorted out.

He crept down the hall quietly, opening Jamie's bedroom door. The light was on, and three bodies were huddled close in the bed. Jackie's back was to him, one leg over the covers. Calvin was sandwiched in the middle, Jamie facing the door. All three were dead asleep, looking quite happy. Like a pile of puppies or something.

He crossed to turn off the lamp on the night stand, but Calvin caught him next to the bed.

"Tig!" Calvin whispered, rising up on his elbow.

"Shhh," he hissed back with a chuckle. "Keep it down."

"Are you okay?"

"Are you kidding? I'm great."

"Did you get shot?"

Tig lifted the arm of the T-shirt to show his fresh stitches. "Check it out, Chuckles."
"Wow!" Calvin was squinting, but it didn't matter how well he could see it. "Did it hurt?"

"Yeah, it hurt a little bit. But I'm okay, buddy."

"Are you leaving?"

"Nah, I'm staying out in the living room. Make sure no one else comes in."

Calvin nodded and Tig switched off the lamp then headed for the door.

"Tig?"

"Yeah Chuckles?"

"Thanks for keeping us safe."

Warmth and air expanded his chest, and his damn eyes started stinging again. Thank fuck it was dark. "You got it, Chuckles," he replied. "Now shut up and go to sleep."

…

Jamie was watching Calvin head off down the driveway, waving until he was out of sight. Tig stood behind her, hands on her hips, watching the kid too. Then he wrapped her up in a hug, wondering how to broach this.

"Can I ask you to do something?" he started with.

She set her hands over his where they were linked on her stomach. "What?"

He kissed behind her ear before saying it. "I want to lock you in the clubhouse to keep you safe. I know it sounds extreme, but … I don't want to risk people coming here with back up next time."

She stilled in his arms and he knew she was absorbing all this. She was always so damn controlled, he had no idea how she did it. He certainly wasn't capable of keeping it together like that.

"We'll be safer there?"

"It's a building surrounded by a chain link fence, half the club lives there round the clock. No one would be dumb enough to walk in there gunning for you."

She took a deep breath. "Shit."

"I'm sorry, babe."

She shook her head. "It's not your fault."
Now it was his turn to inhale. "I killed that guy. That might have made this even worse."

She was already shaking her head. "He broke into my house. He was trying to drag Jackie out. If I could have, I would have just shot him. I couldn't see. That's the only reason you had to do that."

He waited a moment, resting his head on hers. "Think Calvin will mind?"

She laughed at that. "Are you kidding? He'll be over the moon."

"Really?"

Jamie turned in his hold, settling her arms around his neck. "I think he's fascinated by your … world. It's not something he's already read about in a book. He thinks you guys are cool."

Tig grinned. "Well, aren't we?"

"You're scary," she said instead. It made him stop smiling. "I have visions of being a woman sitting at home while her husband's in prison for life."

"You're thinking of marrying me?" he teased. "Wow. Chicks really got one thing and one thing only on their mind."

She shook her head and looked away. "I'm scared of being left behind like that. Alone. Especially if just knowing you puts me in even more danger than I already am."

"Babe." That brought her eyes back to him. "This is why I want you at the clubhouse. If you can put up with those assholes, that is."

She nodded, puffed out her breath. "Are you okay? After doing ... what you did?"

Shit, she was worried about his psyche after breaking that asshole's neck. "You're okay, Calvin's okay. That means I'm okay, babe."

One of her hands dropped down, tracing over his Sergeant at Arms patch. "You gotta keep me safe, Tig. Because last night I realized I want to live. I don't want to die." Her voice caught and before he knew what was happening she was outright sobbing.

"Jamie," he said stupidly, bundling her against his chest. "Babe. Where's this coming from?"

"I don't think I was all that worried about living. I'm so tired of being sick … and then that guy was choking me and I realized that I didn't want that to be all there was. I wanted to live."

Tig cupped her face in his hands. "Scares the shit out of me to hear you say that, babe."
She shook her head. "I thought it was just a funk that would pass. But it kept getting worse and worse, I was pushing you and Calvin and Thelma away. But that's not what I want. I don't want to be alone. I don't want to die."

His heart was hammering in his chest and he pressed her so close to him he was sure she could feel it. The panic was instant and fast, just like when she fainted. She was shaking, crying, the feel and sound of it doing its best to scrape the skin right off of him.

"I ain't going anywhere, Jamie," he promised. "I'm sticking with you to take care of you."

"But what do you get out of it?" she sputtered. "I can't be the only one that benefits. That's not fair."

He felt himself smiling despite the fact she was terrifying him. "I get you, Jamie. You get me. I'm the one that's better off. Trust me."
Chapter 62

Jamie paused in the doorway, eyes surveying the room. It had a slanted ceiling, double bed, beat up arm chair, two small tables and its own bathroom. A closed closet door was the only mystery. Like his house, Tig's 'dorm' room held no clues as to his likes or dislikes. No framed photos, no decoration. The only items that said anything about him were a couple nudie magazine photos he was currently unsticking from the ceiling.

"Not the best education for Calvin," he was muttering as he picked at the tape.

"I'm sure he's seen it before," she said, entering the room and setting her bag on the bed. Tig had already tossed Calvin's stuff on the armchair. The last thing she'd done before leaving the house was call Calvin's school and tell them that Tig Trager would be the one picking him up the rest of the week.

The lady on the other end of the phone not only knew who Tig Trager was, she sounded absolutely horrified. So Jamie was fully expecting a visit from child protective services at some point.

"Sheets are fresh," he told her, balling up the girlie image and tossing it in the trash can. "You can bet Gemma had the place scrubbed top to bottom."

"Don't you want to keep that?" she asked, pointing to the garbage.

He shook his head. "Nah. Why?"

She shrugged. "You had it up there for some reason."

His smile was sly. "Don't need it anymore for that." He tapped his head. "I got you up here now."

Jamie shook her head, face warm. "Tig, that's disgusting."

"No it's not."

She tilted her head. "I'm not having this conversation with you."

"You're not going to convince me that you never touch yourself, Jamie."

"Not having this conversation," she reminded him, even as he approached her with that smirk that made her heart trip and her tummy feel loose.

He pressed his lips to hers softly, hands sliding around her waist to her back. Of course she responded, hands on his chest, kissing him back as goosebumps rose along her arms.
"That's okay," he mumbled. "I'll touch you as much as you want."

"Tig -" he cut her off with a hard, wet and incredibly hot kiss, tongue in her mouth, hands on her ass and her entire body mashed into his.

"Oh, um. Sorry."

She pulled back but Tig didn't let her go. There was a girl in the open doorway in ripped and skin-tight jeans. Her tank top was snug, and the neckline was very low but laced up over the abundant cleavage she was lucky enough to have. Her hair was done up and out to the nines, make-up applied a little thick but the overall effect of it all was certainly sexy. Jamie felt herself shrink into her own skin, shoulders rolling forward, mourning her own missing bosom. She'd seen these women when they came in the clubhouse; there were at least a half dozen of them milling about and, apparently, cleaning and delivering towels.

This one's eyes were wide, she looked a bit uneasy interrupting them. Not so uneasy that she didn't give Jamie the obvious bitchy scan up and down, however.

"What?" Tig asked.

"Clean towels," she said, voice small. "Gemma asked me to bring them by."

"Bathroom," he instructed with a head jerk. She scurried off to do as told.

"Who's that?" He shrugged, dipping his head to kiss her. She avoided it. "Who is that?" she repeated low, but the girl was back and darting out the door, closing it behind her.

"I don't know her name," he said dismissively. "Why?"

She shrugged now. "I don't know. What are these women doing here?"

Tig stepped back and took a deep breath. Jamie had the impression she was about to get more education.

"They help Gemma keep this place in order. And they … they entertain the guys."

Jamie's stomach rolled and her neck felt like something was crawling up it. "Entertain?"

"I think you know what I mean."

She sighed. "They're here to have sex with."

He nodded. "Yeah."

"And … they've … all had sex with you?"
Tig sat on the bed, rubbing his brow. She knew the answer to that question.

"Shit," she whispered, hating that this made her want to cry. She shook her hands like something disgusting was stuck to them, and she paced towards the bathroom door.

"Jamie -"

"All those gorgeous, hot-to-trot tramps out there," she muttered. "You've slept with all of them, right?"

Tig's hands hung between his knees. "If that counts blowjobs -"

"Of course it counts blowjobs," she hissed.

"Then … yeah. I have."

Her stomach rolled again. "I'm going to be sick."

"Jamie -"

She was running for the toilet already. She yanked the lid open, dropped to her knees and waited. Nothing came up. She was just freaking out.

"Babe?"

She was crying. Again. Fuck, she was a mess.

"Jamie?" He came closer, crouching next to her. "Babe, that was all before you. Now it's only you."

She nodded, closing the lid and resting her head on her arm.

Tig picked her up, limp and embarrassed, carrying her back into the bedroom and setting her on the bed. He took off that vest, set it on the chair, then crawled onto the bed next to her, pinning her in place by laying half on her.

"Don't do that," he pleaded. Firmly. "Don't make me feel bad for shit that isn't personal against you."

"I'm surrounded by gorgeous women who have all either fucked or sucked you, Tig." She fought to look away from him, but he held her by the chin again.

"Hey. I know to you it seems like they mean something. But they don't, Jamie."

She sniffed.
"And it doesn't mean that what we do means nothing. With you it's completely different, babe. You gotta know that."

"I've been with four men in my entire life. Counting you."

Tig sighed. "Babe, I can't take it back."

"I know. But you understand why this bothers me," she said softly, wiping her eyes.

"I have chased and waited and taken my time with you, babe. I am … completely gone for you."

She was calming down, and she raised her hand to play with his hair. To distract herself. "Shit. I'm sorry. How can you put up with me? I'm a mess."

"Maybe I should have warned you about the crow eaters. That's a tough thing to explain."

"Crow eaters?" Jesus, that was what they called them?

"I'm going to spend a lot of time apologizing, Jamie. Don't make me apologize for shit in the past that doesn't matter anymore."

Of course, she knew very damn well he hadn't been a choirboy. He acted like a man that got whatever or whoever he wanted. It was the fact that they hung out here all done up, accessible and open for business that was bothering her.

"Those girls out there aren't gorgeous," he assured her, damn near reading her mind.

"What?"

"They've all got fake hair wound up in the real shit."

"My hair isn't real," she reminded him.

He raised his eyebrows, suddenly all don't get smart with me. "Even your wig is your real hair, Jamie."

He had her stumped there.

"Their faces come off in a strong rain. I can stare at yours all day and it's permanently there and beautiful every minute of the day."

"Tig -"

"Your smile is so gorgeous it brings me to my knees, babe. They can't do that with all the teeth whitening and no-smear lipstick in the world. Their fingernails ain't real, and they sure as hell
can't dig them in my back like you can with yours. Coloured contacts and half a pound of make-up and their eyes can't stop me dead in my track like yours can."

Her eyebrows came together and her nose gave that *I'm gonna cry* tingle again. "Tig, don't."

"When you kiss me, you're kissing *me*, babe. Not the club, not the patch, it's for *me*." He lowered his forehead to hers. "And when you come, I know it's real. You're not putting on a show, I know it's the real thing."

Again, her cheeks were flaming.

"So if you want to compare yourself to someone, I think you gotta aim higher than that. Those girls are here because they're lonely. And when *we're* lonely that's handy to have around." He kissed the tip of her nose. "I ain't lonely anymore. And I sure as shit can't go back to that after having all this sweet with you."

Jamie was stunned into complete silence. It wasn't because he had her pinned in bed, his fingers trailing along her neck and collarbone in a way that was incredibly erotic. It wasn't the heat of his body on hers. It wasn't even what he had said.

It was the fact that it was all true. She could see it on his face, deep in his eyes. He meant all that. And again, he didn't lie about those women and didn't hide anything from her. So it *all* had to be true.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You never have to be sorry with me, Jamie."

This time when he kissed her, something changed. It was back to that incredibly soft, lip-touch kiss that had seemed out of character for him, but now she knew it was absolutely authentic. And with a small thrill of victory she also knew that she was the only one getting this kiss from him.

When the kiss grew into something more heated other women were the last thing on her mind. He was helping her pull her shirt off over her head, his hands and mouth back to paying his own kind of worship to the cleavage she still had as well as her stomach, sides and hips when there was a knock on the door.

"Shit," he mumbled, resting his face in the centre of her chest. "If we're quiet maybe they'll go away."

She bit her lip not to laugh, but she was pretty frustrated by the interruption too.

The knock came again. "You in there, Tig? We're at the table in ten."

"Shit," he repeated, then raised his head and shouted "Okay – I'll be there. *Asshole.*"
There was a chuckle as someone walked away from the door.

"Oh my God," she muttered, covering her face. "Who was that?"

"Sounded like Bobby," he said, sounding plenty annoyed as he climbed off of her, looking very, very sorry.

She sat up and pulled her shirt back on. She watched him shrug that vest back on, rearranging his crotch not very subtly. Jamie shook her head.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked, heading for the door.

"Likely take a nap."

His grin was wicked and his eyes twinkled as he said, "Do me a favour and play with yourself. Just a little, in my bed. Make my day."

"Tig!"

"Later." He was chuckling as he shut the door behind himself.

She shucked her jeans, climbed in between the sheets, and then as she lay there, eyes wide open, heart still racing just a little, she couldn't help but do as she was told.
Chapter 63

"Got a call from Darby," Clay started the meeting by announcing this surprising bit of intel. "He's been contacted by Tiny. Tin'y trying to find his step-brother who came to Charming last night and now he ain't answering his phone."

"Fuck," Tig interjected.

"So I think we can safely say this asshole we offed last night was important to Tiny," Clay finished.

"But do we know who Tiny is yet?" Jax wanted to know.

"In Lodi the lady at the town office said Elrich Constantine was a regular-looking white guy. Looked like he coached fucking little league. But the lady at land titles said he was a midget."

"I don't think that's what they call them," Juice offered, earning him a look of annoyance from Clay at the interruption.

"Sorry, little person." Clay amended. "More to your P-C liking?"

Juice just looked at his hands like he wondered why he bothered. At least, that was what Tig was wondering.

"So what did Darby tell him?" Opie asked.

"That he'd look into it, but he wanted Tiny to back off selling in Charming since this is his territory. Of course, I have a problem with that but for now we'll agree to disagree." Clay said with a chuckle.

"Did Tiny agree to that?" Chibs asked with a wry grin.

Clay shook his head. "No. He said that sounded like a threat, and if his brother turns out to be dead he'll be all too happy to go to war with the Nords and SAMCRO."

"So he knows about us then? And he suspects us?" Opie guessed.

"Yeah. His step-brother came here for Jamie's sister. To return the property, as it were." Clay's eyes swung to Tig. "Jamie has to stay here, brother. That guy went right to her house."

Tig was already nodding in agreement. "She's fine with it. Her sister's at the aunt's place, and Jackie's pretty sure no one knows about the aunt. They have different last names. And apparently that farm is hard to find."
"The kid could be a soft spot," Clay noted. "At school he's likely fine, but coming to and from? We're transporting."

Tig grinned. "He's gonna fucking freak out."

They all shared a laugh at that, and Tig was actually excited to introduce the rest of them to Calvin. What the hell was happening with him?

"Darby asked to meet, just briefly, out in Charming Gardens. Friendly-like. We have a common enemy, and he has a few lily-skinned contacts that we don't. If he can give us information, I think we should take it." Clay said.

Jax was nodding, too. "Yeah, but what's in it for Darby? We ain't letting him sell that shit in Charming."

"Of course not. But you and I both know people will still drive to Lodi or even Bakersfield for a high. we take out Tiny's hold in Charming, they're going to Darby again. The difference is we have no dealers in Charming beating up people on front lawns. That's the shit we prevent." Clay jabbed the table with his finger to make his point.

They murmured their agreement all around the table.

"Now, I want Chibs, Jax, and Ope with me. And if you can tear yourself off your very special piece of ass Tigger, you too. If you can fit it in."

Tig grinned. "Yeah, I'm in."

"You sure?" Bobby asked. "Pretty sure I interrupted something to drag you here."

Tig shook his head. "Fuck off."

Bobby cracked up.

"We meet Darby in half an hour. Everyone stay sharp. I trust this prick as much as you all do. Everyone staying behind is on alert, too. If this is a trap it would be a good one." They all nodded in agreement with Clay, who declared the meeting over by saying, "Now get the fuck out of here. We leave in fifteen."

Tig followed the rest of the group out of church then made his way back to his room, opening his door quietly, hoping like hell he was interrupting something.

Jamie lay in the bed on her side, and at the sound of the door opening she rolled to look at him over her shoulder. She gave a slight smile, and when he realized her face was still flushed he was grinning like mad. "Jamie?"

"What?"
He shut the door behind him, crossed the room, sat on the bed next to her, leaning over her. "You get that homework done, baby?"

She turned redder and rolled away from him. "Tig -" 

He took her by the shoulder and rolled her back. "Why you all red, honey?"

"I'm not."

"Oh, okay. My mistake. We're heading out in a bit to meet up with someone that might know who that guy was that broke into your house. You all right here alone while I'm gone?"

She nodded. "Be careful, Tig."

The warmth in his chest would have to be ignored for a bit. "I will, bab. Give us a kiss."

She smiled as he lowered his head, pressing her lips to his eagerly, pushing her hands into his hair. Her tongue ran along his lip, and he moaned, lowering himself onto her just a little, arm finding its way under her lower back, then moving down to that ass, squeezing it.

"Tig," she gasped against his mouth.

"Can't help it," he muttered back, hand running from that cheek up the back of her thigh, then pushing it to the side, running down the inside to the juncture of her legs where she was so, so warm.

"Oh God," she whispered as his hand stroked at her over her panties.

"Babe," he growled. "How're you so wet? Did you do that?"

She was gasping with what his hand was doing, clutching his shoulders, and likely not listening at all. Jesus, she was so turned on. He'd bet good money she'd taken care of herself while he was in that meeting.

He shoved his face along the side of her neck, listening to the small sounds she made that he was beginning to love, knowing when she was close to finishing. That's when he tucked his hand inside her underwear, fingers sliding inside, thumb continuing that circling motion until her back bowed and she gave a soft gasp, so gentle compared to how she shook and trembled around his fingers and under his weight.

When she was still he pulled his hand free, her eyes bright and watching as he licked her off his fingers. Then he grabbed her right hand, licking her first two fingers off, too, smiling widely. "That's a good girl," he muttered, pleased as shit when she blushed again but didn't pull her hand away.
He kissed her forehead. "Stay here. If you want anything from the kitchen help yourself. I think Juice even keeps some of his organic shit in there if the mood hits you for some healthy vegan-torture shit."

"Okay," she whispered, and he was still pretty tickled she was breathless and pink.

"And if you get the urge to do that again," he mumbled, kissing her quickly, "you better wait for me. I wanna watch." She trembled, and he was grinning as he got up. "Later babe."

Leaving her shut in his room he sought out Juice, told her that Jamie was napping but that she might need another shit milkshake when she woke up.

"Shit milkshake?" Juice was understandably confused.

"That thing you told her to make in the blender. Tastes like crap? Is it really that good for her?"

Juice was nodding. "Of course. The antioxidants alone will help with -"

"Never mind explaining it, can you just get her one when she wakes up?"

"Sure"

"Thanks man. Appreciate it."

"You ready, Tigger?" Clay was barking from the clubhouse doorway.

"Absolutely," he replied, sliding on his shades and following his president into the sunshine flooding the TM parking lot.
Chapter 64

Jamie woke from her nap feeling … fantastic. After a long, thorough stretch she got dressed, donned the wig and left the presumed safety of Tig’s room. She meandered down a dim hallway, eyes on the photos and posters she walked past. In a raised alcove there was a motorcycle on display, an obvious fixture of memorial or honour. It was a surprising robin's egg blue, and she knew that had to be unusual. Not knowing anything about the workings of the Sons of Anarchy, she liked that bike a lot for some reason.

The hallway turned out to the main room from there, and she crossed her arms, inhaling deeply and waiting to see things she wasn’t going to like. But the room was empty, save for Piney sitting at the bar, drinking a beer and turning to look at her over his shoulder.

"Well there she is. Sleeping Beauty. How you doing, sweetheart?"

Jamie felt herself smile, striding across the room to climb onto the stool next to him. "I'm good thanks, Piney. How are you?"

"Drinking at 2 in the afternoon. That should say it all."

She laughed at that, covering a yawn.

"How much more of that chemo you got left?" he asked, his voice rolling out like a not-welcoming growl. But his expression was kind and concerned.

"I'm done the first course. One more to go, about two weeks' worth of treatments."

Piney nodded. "That's rough, sweetheart. I wish you well with that."

"Thank you," she said eventually, a little uncomfortable. Again, she wasn't used to everyone knowing her business.

"There she is," a loud, booming voice filling the room. Jamie turned on her stool and saw Bobby approaching with a small paper sandwich bag in one hand which he held up and shook. "I made you some of my famous low-fat bran muffins."

She frowned. "You make … muffins?"

He set them on the bar in front of her. "These are special just for you. So no sharing, and keep them away from that kid, too."

Jamie frowned.
"They're pot muffins. Half a muffin per serving, okay? My special ingredient makes them a bit pricey."

She blinked, mouth falling open. One, there was pot baked into the muffins in that bag. Two, he made them for her.

Three, she wasn't used to having people help her this much.

"Everything okay, blue eyes?"

She jumped, realizing she was staring at that bag without talking. Both Piney and Bobby were eyeing her up strangely, but it was Bobby who spoke.

"That's so nice of you," she said lamely, smiling. "Thank you, Bobby."

Now he looked uncomfortable. "Just hope you like 'em, honey. I'm heading out to the shop."

Piney raised his beer in farewell and Jamie opened the bag. They smelled amazing.

"What are you up to now?" Piney asked.

"I don't know. I was wondering if there was something out here I could help with."

Piney shook his head. "You're supposed to rest. I suggest you do that or Tig'll tie you to the bed. Unless, of course, you don't see that as a deterrent." Her cheeks were warm again and Piney coughed up a laugh. "So fun to have a blusher around this place."

She got to her feet. "Is … is there tea in the kitchen?"

"Sure is. Just past that walk-in freezer, there's a kettle and some dry goods on the shelf right above. Go ahead, make yourself at home."

She smiled her thanks, taking the bag with her through the front part of the kitchen, past a heavy door that sure looked like a walk-in freezer and found the kettle easily. On a shelf above were some tea bags, instant coffee, sugar and coffee creamer. She filled the kettle in a nearby sink, plugged it in, then tore a muffin in half and tried a bite.

It tasted really good. For a bran muffin there were a lot of flavours going on. She could taste cinnamon, nutmeg, apple, and … she could see the pot. She was done her recommended serving by the time the kettle squealed, then she hunted down a mug and poured the water over a green tea bag. As she dusted the crumbs off her hands and waited next to the counter for her tea to steep she heard voices in the front of the kitchen.

"What a weird fucking day," woman Number One was huffing, and Jamie heard dishes being loaded into the industrial dishwasher she'd walked past.
"Tell me about it. I don't get it." Woman Number Two sounded equally pouty.

Number One was rolling overtop her friend. "Jax is all over the moon for that doctor. Now Tig is locking it down?"

Number Two was still agreeing. "I really don't get that. Is it true she had cancer?"

"She's wearing a wig, dipshit. Why else would she do that?"

"Gemma said breast cancer. She had surgery." A third woman joined in.

"That's something I won't do to get his attention. I didn't even know he liked amputees that much," Number One tittered away.

"Don't be a bitch," Number Three said.

"Are you her best friend? Because old ladies tend to not like us very much," Number Two shot back.

"I think she's pretty." Number Three was easily Jamie's favourite.

"That's nice. She's pretty," Number One used a whiney voice to make fun of Number Three. "Isn't Tig one of your favourites?"

"God knows he can get it done," Number Two mumbled.

Jamie felt her stomach heave a bit, and she covered her mouth.

"I saw them before, in his room, kissing." Ah, Number Three was the towel girl.

"Did they ask you to join in?" Number One still thought she was terribly funny. Number Two agreed. "You know how he likes a full set of tits."

Jamie winced, hating this high school bullshit hurt she had bubbling up.

"No, he's not like that with her," Number Three still sounded convinced. "I mean, he was kissing her, and it looked … it looked like it was nice."

"You like watching now?" Number Two didn't have Number One's talent for forcing her friend to laugh at every joke.

"He was kissing her like he cared, you guys. She's not some morbid curiosity. He likes her. For real. So you're all just going to have to kiss Trager's big dick goodbye."
"Tig Trager kisses like a nasty motherfucker, if he kisses you at all. We all know that. You trying to make nice with some skank that just walks in here expecting us to respect her based on absolutely nothing?"

"How about the fact that it's not your place to treat her any differently?" *That* voice Jamie knew very well. Gemma.

Jamie grabbed the bag and her mug of tea, tea bag still soaking, and darted past everyone assembled at the front of the kitchen. One woman whispered "Oh shit," as she passed, but Jamie refused to look at anyone so she wasn't sure who it was. She rushed for the hallway, shutting herself in Tig's room and wiping at her eyes angrily when she realized she was crying.

"Don't," she sputtered to herself. "Don't let them do that. This isn't high school for fuck's sake."

A soft knock broke through her own sniffling misery, and she set all her stuff down on the dresser before trying to look *normal*. On a deep breath she yanked the door open. Of course, it was Gemma looking very concerned.

"Jamie?"

"They weren't being *mean*. They didn't know I was there. I shouldn't eavesdrop," she immediately started rambling.

"That doesn't matter," Gemma said gently, pushing her way into the room and shutting the door. "You don't run from them, honey. You walk around here head high knowing that you're no crow eater, you're someone that a Son cares about. They have to respect you. Which means you *make* them respect you."

Jamie exhaled, dropping to the edge of the bed. "I *just* found out what a crow eater is, Gemma. Today. After I got here. It's a lot to absorb."

Gemma sat next to her. "I know it is. You're from so far outside of all this I'm surprised you're here at all. But I'm *glad* you are."

Jamie smiled but doubted it reached her eyes. "Thanks."

"Crow eaters *hope* to catch a Son's eye. They all want to be old ladies, forgetting that the way to a man's heart is to not let him anywhere near the pussy until he's good and hooked." Gemma raised her eyebrows like she was sharing a good old-fashioned girl-talk truth.

Jamie just knew she was blushing again.

"Crow eaters think by impressing them in bed they'll end up with them. We all know men want pussy that they think they trained. As in, unplowed field." Again, trying to bridge a friendship that was miles from what Jamie knew what to do with.
Jamie got up and headed for her tea.

"Sorry. I'm making you uncomfortable. I'm being blunt because that's what it takes to deal with crow eaters. They need to know their place. And you do not want them trying to one-up you with Tig. They think they can get to you that easily, they will make it a sport, honey."

Jamie took a sip of her tea. It was still too hot.

"Believe me, babe," Gemma said, getting up and heading for the door, pausing with her hand on the knob. "Keep Tig happy and you'll have nothing to worry about there. From what I see you've got his dick wound around your little finger."

Gemma left at that, the room suddenly much more comfortable. Jamie took another sip of tea, then carried the mug with her to the bathroom. She shoved the plug in the drain and started running some water, squirting her body wash into the stream to make a bubble bath. Then she went back to make sure the door was locked.

She'd had plenty of learning for the day.
Chapter 65

"You really think we can trust this prick?" Chibs asked, squinting behind his shades across Charming Gardens.

Tig shrugged, eyes on the two body guards the Nords' president, Darby, brought along. "Can't trust him, no. But he's a business man. That shit on the streets killing people makes his business tank, too. No reason for him to fuck us over, really."

Chibs made a sound of derision. "Makes my skin crawl, getting in bed with that lot."

Tig ground out his cigarette, then picked it up and tossed it in a garbage can. There were in a nice place, after all. "I just want this Tiny prick gone."

Chibs laughed along with Tig at that. "That's a good one."

"You like that? I been waiting to use it."

"You should be very proud," Chibs assured him.

They both watched Darby and his guards continue to powwow with Clay, standing strong with Jax and Opie at his back.

"So ... you're taking things with this lass seriously then," Chibs broached casually, inhaling a deep draw on his smoke.

"Jesus Christ," Tig snarled. "What is with all the fucking chick talk lately?"

"Just curious."

"Do something constructive with your time and knit me a fucking scarf."

"Tig, you can't be surprised that we're all a bit gobsmacked that a girl has you all tied up in knots. A regular girl, a cute, beautiful, sweet as honey girl -"

"I know how great she is, cut that shit out."

Chibs laughed again. "Just hope she's still as mad for you when all her problems go away, that's all."

"What the fuck's that mean?"
Chibs made a face of indifference, shrugging. "You're doing a lot for her, Tig. You're proving you're a good man by being all things for her. Protecting her, taking care of her while she's sick. Helping with the kid. Straightening out shit with her sister."

"You have a point, right?"

"I'm just saying, once her sister's shit is sorted, she's out of harm's way and on the road to good health, going back to work …" he shrugged. "She still going to want you around?"

Tig felt a lump in the middle of his throat that sunk down to the centre of his chest.

"Hey, don't sweat it brother." Chibs slapped his shoulder. "She's a lovely girl, she truly is. I'm just saying that paying the power bill and school recitals are a poor substitute for someone making dead bodies out of the people who want to hurt you. That's all."

"Shit," Tig muttered, staring down at his feet, feeling sick.

"I'm sure I'm off base," Chibs offered, like that might help.

Tig gave him a sideways eyeball. "Yeah."

The convo across the park broke up, and Tig and Chibs were back as attention as Clay approached, lighting a half-used cigar.

"What's the word?" Tig asked. "They know the guy that broke in?"

"Oh yeah, that's Tiny's step-brother," Clay confirmed.

"Shit," Tig hissed.

"He and Tiny don't get along. Unfortunately his dad, Tiny's step-father, is quite fond of his son. He's also a trusted confidante of a known Mexican drug supplier, heavily connected to a drug cartel."

"Fuck me," Tig covered his face with both hands, digging his fingers deep into his eye sockets. Christ, he fucked this up.

"So what's the plan?" Chibs wanted to know.

"Darby's letting Tiny recruit two of his trusted guys as dealers. They report back on who Tiny actually fucking is, and we go from there."

"You trust him?" This from Chibs again.

"For the moment, yeah."
"Any help is welcome," Jax cut in. "I mean, what with all this Tiny shit, flack with the Mayans and the ATF starting to sniff around, if he can help I say thanks."

"So for the time being we watch Aunt Jamie and that kid like hawks. We're sure the aunt is off Tiny's radar?" Clay asked.

Tig nodded. "Jackie swore she didn't keep that address on her, was pretty sure she never even mentioned her aunt. Can't see why she would, it was Jamie she said could pay off her debt."

Clay shook his head. "Stupid bitch. All right, let's head back to the clubhouse. I want to do random patrols looking for dealers, too. Not to bust it up, just to keep track of how many there are and where they are, keeping an eye on their operations," Clay said, leading the way to their bikes.

At the clubhouse Tig headed right for his room, locking the door behind him. His bed was empty but he heard splashing from the bathroom and felt a grin. She was in the bath.

He left his kutte on the bed and knocked on the door with a knuckle, then pushed it open just as Jamie curled herself up, drawing her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around her legs. If it wasn't so humid she'd likely be blushing again.

"Hey," he said, closing the door behind him. "How you doing?"

"Good. After the nap I woke up and really wanted a bath."

He knelt next to the tub, elbows on the edge. "So this is why you smell so good."

She grinned. "Is that what you smell on me? My body wash?"

"Flowers and sweet, babe. That's what you smell like."

She looked away, resting her chin on her knees. "How was your … wherever you went?"

"Uneventful," he answered, wishing he could crawl in that tub with her. "Hey, everything okay?"

She shrugged. "Yeah. Just trying to absorb everything and … adapt."

He grabbed her around the back of the neck and leaned her towards him for a kiss. But with the taste of her and this smell so deep in his head he couldn't just give her a soft peck. He had to taste her completely, his tongue sliding into her mouth to tease her, bringing out the softest moan that made him hard instantly. He pulled back, then tilted the arm holding her neck to see his watch.

"Shit," he mumbled.

"What?"
"School's out in fifteen minutes. Not enough time."

She gave the shy and embarrassed smile as he stood, his eyes trying to see more of her in that murky water. "Damn," he was muttering as he left the bathroom and his dorm room.

He was almost through the clubhouse when Gemma's voice stopped him. "Hey Tig. How's Jamie?"

He frowned. "She's having a bath. Why?"

Gemma paused. "Did she say anything?"

He shook his head. "About what?"

"Nothing," Gemma said brightly.

He narrowed his eyes. "Gemma? What's going on?"

"Nothing, baby. I like that girl," he laughed. "I'm thinking ... the Dyna."

"Shit, Tigger. You better be careful."

"Always, babe."

... 

Tig watched the flood of little people evacuating Charming Elementary, finding Calvin in the group eventually. He was walking alone, hands holding the straps of his backpack. When he saw Tig his face lit up and he was grinning like mad, which made Tig crack up.

Then as he kept an eye out, a kid crossed Calvin's path and knocked him right down. Totally on purpose.

"Hey!" Tig shouted, already moving, hooking his sunglasses on his shirt and pointing. "I saw that."

Calvin picked himself up, dusting grass off his hands as Tig reached him.

"You okay, Charlie?" Tig had Calvin by the shoulder as the kid brushed grass off his knees.

The Brady kid was staring up at Tig, luckily looking absolutely terrified. "Did you do that on purpose?" Tig asked.

Brady was frozen in place and mute.

"Where's your dad?" Tig demanded.

The kid's eyes shot to the line of cars parked at the curb, and a man was already circling his pick up and looking their way. Tig cracked his knuckles.

"Hey!" The guy shouted. "You got something to say to my kid?"

He didn't see the kutte until he was close enough for Tig to clock his reaction to it. It made him falter in his quick stride, but he eventually recovered and stepped forward, grabbing his kid and raising his chin.

"Your kid needs to apologize to Calvin," Tig suggested. "He just shoved him down."

"That kid punched my son," the father shot back.

"That's true. He knows that was wrong. He's been punished and he ain't doing it again unless he's defending himself. Which I'll make sure he knows how to do," Tig added, voice low, grinning in a way he knew probably made him look nuts.

Asshole swallowed, Asshole Junior backed up another step.

"He also told me you both called him names. Now, it's been a long time since I've been around kids, so forgive me my ignorance, but," Tig put his hand on Asshole's shoulder, ignoring how the guy flinched. "Isn't it kind of a pussy move to call a little kid names? I mean, adult to adult. I hear about that kind of thing and I start to wonder what kind of fucking issues a guy has to have to run down a kid like that. Jesus, talk about Small Dick Complex, am I right?"

Asshole swallowed again. "That won't happen again."

Tig moved closer, hand still on Asshole's shoulder. "I know it won't. Because you're all but pissing yourself right now. If I hear that kid called him anything other than Calvin, or he comes home with a hair out of place, you and me got a date." Tig slapped his flannel-covered chest. "A demonstration on how men settle their shit. Yeah?"

Asshole was nodding and dragging his shit-stain kid back with him to their vehicle. Once they were inside the cab Tig checked that Calvin was okay to find him staring up at him in complete awe. He had to struggle not to laugh.
"Let's go get a root beer float," he suggested, hand on Calvin's shoulder as he led him to his bike. "Don't tell Aunt Jamie. About anything."
"I know it tastes disgusting, but it's really good for you and I think it'll help," Juice said apologetically, handing her a glass of another concoction that looked exactly like baby vomit.

"Why is this one yellow?"

He grinned, excited to have someone to tell this to, apparently. "Just read an article on turmeric. India's cancer rates are incredibly low, despite the pollution people live in day to day. They're doing studies into diet and the turmeric used to make curry yellow is a cancer-fighting super spice. Not that it's a spice. It doesn't taste like anything, actually."

She sniffed the glass. It smelled just like the one she'd made for herself. That wasn't comforting. "No offense Juice," she said. "But I'm downing this like Buckley's cough syrup."

That got her a laugh, but she was already chugging that evil brew with her thumb and finger pinching her nose tight. When it was gone, flooding down her throat like a downpour of mud, she handed the glass back and grabbed the glass of water on the counter. That made it better, and Juice was still smiling at her once the water was gone and she could hold a straight face again.

"You know I'm already dying, right?" she croaked out, pouring herself another glass of water.

Juice laughed. "It's good for you. Do you like pomegranate juice?" He held up a more appetizing-looking tumbler of purple liquid.

Jamie shrugged. "I have no idea. I live with a nine-year-old. I thought juice only came from oranges and apples."

"You better not be talking about Juice's juice," Tig made his presence known in the kitchen with a loud, caustic declaration before snagging her up in a tight hug, his face to her neck while inhaling deep.

She had to smile. He always smelled her when he hugged her, and that made her heart flutter every time. "Where's Calvin?" she asked his shoulder, since he apparently wasn't letting her go.

"Outside," he answered, bringing his head back to quickly touch lips to hers. "With Chibs."

"Why?"

He pushed her hair back over behind her ear, careful not to handle it too roughly since it wasn't really attached. "'He's going to teach him how to throw a punch. No big deal."

She felt like he'd just started speaking Latin; so incredibly confused. "What?"
'It's okay, Jamie. A kid *should* know how to throw a decent punch. There will always be bullies. He doesn't have to run around kicking the shit out of people. But I'd prefer it if he could defend himself if he had to."

"He's nine."

"Yeah, and he's already given a kid a black eye. A kid I saw today, along with his dad."

That gave her pause, torn between reading him the riot act and the soft gushiness she felt in her belly knowing that Tig had *dealt with* something for her and Calvin. Again.

"What happened?" she asked, hating that she was this curious while Calvin was learning how to go all Tyson on someone.

"The kid shoved him down on the school ground. I gave him shit, then gave the dad shit."

Jamie tilted her head and raised one eyebrow. "You gave them shit how?" she asked, suspicious.

Tig grinned at her. "You're so close to being mad at me, aren't you?"

"Tig, what did you do?"

"Go on, get mad. I deserve it."

"Tig."

"I deserve it and I like it."

She puffed out a breath, looking over at Juice who was pointedly ignoring them and washing the blender out. Head turned, she was open and defenseless and he tucked his face into her neck, kissing her and then nibbling her ear. Her hands tightened on his shoulders. To push him *away*. She'd swear she meant to push him away.

"Tig, what did you say to them? I need to know."

When he raised his head again he sighed. "I told him if I hear that his kid called Calvin names or hurt him again the dad was going to have to deal with *me*."

Jamie's stomach sank. "That's not okay, Tig. That's you bullying *him*."

"Only if I actually go out, hunt him down and beat him up. It's all intimidation. It's the one thing I got down *cold*."

"Tig -"
"Hey," he cut her off, but very gently. "Every kid should feel they've got an adult that would go to the wall for them. Even that little punk has that from his asshole of a father. I know you'd do it for Calvin, but sometimes … he needs the parent that isn't around, you know what I mean? I want him to know he's protected." He swallowed and something in his face switched from apologetic to pain. "A mother's love is forever. But sometimes that father-figure love feels like it has to be earned. And that isn't right. He should just have it."

And her stomach collapsed and ended up somewhere inside her knees. "Tig," she whispered, hand on his cheek.

He coughed and backed up, letting go of her, eyes darting to Juice who was avoiding looking at either of them and leaving the kitchen.

"Thank you for dealing with that. You're right, I likely would have been a big sissy in that situation," she said carefully. "But I don't want Calvin to think violence is a means to an end."

Tig was nodding. "He's too smart for that. The problem is he's smarter than everyone else and that scares little pricks like this Grady kid. I know; I used to be that kid. The smart kids were the easiest targets. They always walked away and you never had to prove how tough you were."

"Okay," she whispered. "I'll leave all this man stuff to you for now. But if he gets hurt, no more."

Tig grabbed her hand. "Come watch."

"What?"

"Come and see what Chibs is teaching him. He ain't looking to make him heavyweight champion of the world. I don't want that overactive brain of yours spinning crazy ideas."

Tig pulled her through the dim clubhouse into the bright, afternoon-sun flooded Teller-Morrow lot. There was a boxing ring set up under an overhang, and she'd found that curious when she first saw it. A punching bag was handing from the roof as well, and Jamie spotted Calvin immediately, his right hand between both of Chibs' hands, absorbing some kind of instruction.

They approached quietly, and eventually Chibs' voice was discernible. "… thumb in front of your knuckles like this. On top of the knuckles or inside the fist just means you're going to break your thumb and that hurts like a motherfucker."

Jamie winced, but Calvin seemed nonplussed by the language.

Chibs' dark eyes came up to see her, and he gave a head nod but otherwise it was like she wasn't even there. "Get used to your hand going into that fist, all right? Down at your sides, hands open."

Calvin slapped his palms to the outside of his legs, eyes on Chibs.
"Two fists, now."

Calvin brought them up, fingers curled in, thumbs across the fronts of his fingers as instructed.

"Good," Chibs assured him.

Tig moved behind Jamie, hugging her to his front, arms joined over her stomach. "You okay so far?" he asked.

Jamie sighed, head resting back on his chest. "I hate this. I don't want him to grow up."

"You kidding? He can grow up to be just like us. We'll patch him in, take care of him …"

She could hear the teasing tone, but it made her nervous and he sensed it.

"Hey, he ain't going to be anything like any of us. That's a good kid, Jamie. I just think he should be as well-rounded as he is well-read."

"I know," she said.

"Now, take that fist and plow it in the bag, lad. Let's see what we're working with." Chibs held the bag like he expected the swing back to be massive from Calvin's first punch.

"It's good for him to be around other male influences," she admitted.

"Even criminals?"

She smiled. "You know I don't think of you all that way."

"We have to plan our day better tomorrow," Tig mumbled close to her ear after they'd watched Calvin deliver a few jabs to the bag, with Chibs interrupting to show him how to hold his arm and how to square his shoulders.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you and Calvin are taking the bed tonight. I plan on being in it with you tomorrow as soon as I've dropped him off at school."

That brought along another flutter, but not in her heart.

"I might have plans tomorrow," she said, non-committed one way or the other. She felt him chuckle silently.

"Yeah, you do. You're gonna be calling out my name and working up a sweat."
She inhaled, face flaming, eyes darting around because it seemed like everyone had likely heard that. But no one was paying them any mind. "Tig," she admonished, to no effect.

"No, not hearing it. That's the plan for tomorrow. Got interrupted too many times today already."

She allowed a smile. "All right."

"Don't act like you're doing me a favour, babe." His hands tightened up, roughly, and her heart sped up along with it. "Pretty hard to fake those biological reactions. I know very well how much you like it, too."

She did. She really did.
Chapter 67

"Goodnight," Jamie whispered, kissing Tig softly outside the door of his dorm room.

"Sleep tight," he replied, hitching her to him by the hips and giving her a real kiss; tongue in her mouth, teasing at hers, forcing as much of her sweet little body against his as he could get. She sighed, melting into his hold, head falling to the perfect angle for him, her hands warm around the back of his neck. The smell of her brought to mind the sight of her sitting in his bathtub, and his dick was hurting like a bitch. "Maybe we could just have a quickie in the bathroom down the hall?" he rasped, voice thin with desperation. And pain.

She pulled away, licking her lips and turning pink while she wrinkled her nose. "I saw the inside of that bathroom. No thanks."

"Shit," he muttered, giving her a quick peck. "Then you better get inside. I'm in pain here, babe."


If she wasn't so wide-eyed and sweet he'd swear she was teasing him. "Not hurt that way, babe. Like a backed-up, frustrated pain."

She blinked twice, then she blushed more. "Oh no, I'm sorry."

He had to laugh. "Why? Why be sorry?"

"Well, this afternoon ... you ..." she was getting pinker. "You were ... very good to me. I didn't return the favour."

"This cute isn't helping matters. Makes me want inside you more." She took a deep breath, looking away, and he knew then he was approaching the top of her dirty talk tolerance. "Go get some sleep, babe."

She nodded and he kissed her again, loving how she always forgot her discomfort and pressed closer.

"I'll be outside, okay? If you need anything come get me. I'll sleep out in the clubhouse on the sofa."

"Are you sure? That's a big bed."

He shook his head. "Nah. Even I know it's weird to sleep in a bed with a kid that ain't mine."

She smiled. "Good point."
He opened the door for her and she disappeared inside quietly, not wanting to wake Calvin who'd gone to bed two hours before. When she had the door secured he wandered down the hall, through the clubhouse past the few Sons, hangers-ons and crow eaters that were tying one on for the night. It wasn't too rowdy at least. They all seemed to appreciate a kid was in the building.

Tig headed right out into the yard, claiming the picnic table and sitting on the table part, feet on the bench. He dug in his vest for his cigarettes and lighter, watching the gates. Tig was waiting for the crew that had ridden to Lodi that night, itching to know if Oswald's tip had actually resulted in anything.

When the clubhouse door opened and shut he didn't think anything of it; considering how many of his brothers were on the road the place was relatively hopping. The slender form that stepped in front of him, hip out to the side, arms crossed under her ample-although-fake bosom, was more of an annoyance than a treat.

He knew this one. Blonde, wavy hair that looked too good to be true. And it wasn't true; half of it felt like doll hair. He could remember grabbing it a few times around his hand, having it spill across his thighs when she was going down on him. Nothing particularly remarkable about her.

"How come you're all by yourself, handsome?"

Annoyance crept up the back of his neck. "Choose to be alone at the moment."

"That's a shame. You sure you don't need company tonight?" she stepped closer, then knelt on the picnic table seat between his knees, pushing his legs apart. "Might take your mind off things."

He laughed, looking away and pushing her hands off his knees. "I don't got much on my mind, doll. Go back inside," he suggested with a head jerk.

"Come on Tiggy. The girls miss you. You gotta know that."

"What'd I say?" he snapped, patience gone. "Get back inside. There's dick that wants to be sucked inside. It's your job to know which is which."

She stuck her bottom lip out, but he moved like he was going to stand and she scrambled to climb off the bench, teetering on heels as she hustled to the clubhouse door.

He shook his head, taking a draw on the cigarette as another set of heels were making their way towards him. This walk he recognized. He didn't even look, just greeted her with, "Hey Gem."

She joined him on the picnic table. "Did you know I was watching that?" she asked, reaching for his cigarette.

He shook his head while saying, "Nah."
"That makes me happy," she shared, taking a drag and sounding quite pleased.

"Yeah yeah." He took his smoke back. "I know, Jamie's your new best friend."

Gemma leaned her shoulder into him to jolt him. "That blonde bitch was talking about Jamie in the kitchen today, she accidentally overheard them."

His guard dog immediately went on duty. "What was she saying? Who was she talking to?"

Gemma shook her head like it didn't matter. "Just crow eaters squawking, honey. It's not like they knew she was there. But she was pretty upset about it."

Tig frowned. "Shit. She never said anything."

"She was upset but she didn't rat anyone out."

"She didn't go Gemma on them and break a few noses?" he joked with a cackle.

Gemma wasn't smiling, just gave him her unamused face. "She did let them see it, Tig. They knew they got under her skin. That blonde bitch just now was trying to undermine the little status Jamie has."

Tig was shaking his head. "Jesus, why do women make this so unnecessarily difficult?"

"Honey, she ain't an old lady. Not yet anyway. Did you tell her about the crow eaters?"

"Yeah, I did. She saw them."

"Well her self-esteem isn't quite up to this place yet. I wish she could have seen you turn that bitch down, though."

Tig sighed, rubbing his brow. "I'll do it again tomorrow. I'll smack a crow eater in the mouth. What'll it take?"

"Jesus Tig," Gemma muttered, getting to her feet. "Beating a woman up is a weird way to make your girl trust you."

"So what do I do?"

Gemma sighed, crossing her arms and looking confused. "I'm not sure, actually. Just keep your eyes on her. Don't give these bitches the time of day. And I'm making sure they know what their place is."

"Thanks Gemma," he said softly, holding his hand out. She took it and gave it a tight squeeze then headed back to the clubhouse.
The roar of bikes brought him to his feet, and he counted off the Harleys rolling into the lot, a prospect shutting the gate behind the black van bringing up the rear. They were a bike short.

"Shit," he mumbled, grinding his cigarette out on the table and tossing the butt in the coffee can on top. He headed to Clay's bike, nodding a greeting as the prez pulled his helmet off. "Who got hurt?"

Clay looked pissed. "Found a cook. Like Oswald said. Construction signs up, caution tape all over. Cooking that shit in the basement of the fucking place, running off generators. Cooks weren't there, but they were letting something set in that lab. There was a look-out with an AK. We burned it down but Hap got hit."

"Shit," Tig mumbled, watching the doors of the van swing open, Hap bounded out the back under his own steam. Well that was a relief, he was walking. "You all right, man?" Tig asked as he stalked past.

"Scratch on the ribs, plugged in the arm," Hap spat back, more annoyed that hurt apparently.

Clay and Tig shared a look and Tig let himself laugh. "Shit man, I thought someone died."

"You know him. He gets cranky when he bleeds." Clay shook his head. "I'll send a crew out to get his bike right away. That's likely what has him pissed. It took a few rounds too."

"That field trip should get Tiny's attention," Tig noted, and Clay nodded.

"How's your girl?" Clay asked, starting for the clubhouse.

Tig shrugged. "She's fine. Talk about tossing her in the deep end and telling her to swim, though. There's a lot for her to absorb here. I forgot how normal she is."

Clay chuckled. "She's with you, Tig. She ain't all that normal."

"Trust me, I know that. Gem's looking out for her, though."


Tig held the clubhouse door open for the prez, and as they entered Chibs was shoving Hap into a chair and pouring bottom-shelf vodka over his arm. "Fuck!" Hap shouted, cringing.

"Keep it down. You'll wake the kid," Tig snapped.

All eyes turned to him, and he met every single set of them.

Happy laughed first. Then Chibs, Clay, Juice and Bobby joined in. Killer's dark eyes met his, and he was shaking his head. "Fuck, never thought I'd see it. But Papa Tig is alive and well."
Tig shook his head. "Shut up. Just … stop being a whiny bitch. And keep your fucking voice down."

"Can I have a glass of milk before bed?" Chibs asked, setting reading glasses on his nose.

"Can I stay up an extra half hour tonight?" Bobby joked with a choking laugh.

"Fuck all of you," Tig said, hands out. "If anyone needs me, I'll be in my room, looking out for my woman. All right?"

A few catcalls followed him down the hallway. Strangely, for Tig Trager anyway, it was quite rewarding to spend his night sitting up in the sagging armchair in his room, Beretta resting on his thigh just in case.
Chapter 68

"Good bye Aunt Jamie," she heard Calvin's whispered farewell in sleep, and had to pop one eye open to confirm it had even happened.

"You got ready for school on your own?" she croaked, throat dry.

He nodded, grinning down at her from beside the bed. "Tig made me breakfast and Diana packed my lunch."

"Who's Diana?"

"I gotta go – Tig's taking me to school on his bike!"

And he was gone, leaving a trail of just-woke-up-confusion and nine-year-old-boy excitement. Jamie rubbed her eyes and rose up to one elbow, someone else causing the mattress to sag as they added their weight to it behind her. "Do not move," Tig growled, kissing her neck, freezing her in place.

Even half asleep she was still capable of becoming aroused in less than three seconds. Good to know. "Who's Diana?" she repeated as hands rolled her to her back.

Tig grabbed both of her wrists gently, at odds with how rough his hands were, pulled them over her head and pinned them to her pillow as he kissed her good morning. "Don't leave this bed," he instructed, mouth moving to her neck. "Don't get dressed. Don't get up. Don't do anything unless the building is on fire."

"Did he say you're taking him to school on your bike?"

"Promise me."

"Promise you what?"

"You'll be right here when I get back."

Her eyes closed as he licked the skin behind her right earlobe. Christ. "I promise," she whispered, losing the train of thought she just had. He chuckled, low and private, and she shuddered.

"I'll be careful with him," Tig assured her, rubbing his nose along hers before letting go of her arms and standing up. "Stay here."

"I am," she replied, exasperated. He cracked that wild grin and leaned over to kiss her forehead, but she raised her chin to hit his lips, biting the bottom one.
It surprised him, and he just stared at her blankly for a moment, long enough for her to give herself shit for being a freak. Then the smile was back and he was climbing on the bed, covering her on the opposite side of the blankets, kissing her hard and deep.

"Tig! I'm gonna be late!"

Calvin was in the doorway, staring at them like this was something he regularly saw his Aunt Jamie do. Tig raised his head and said with male authority, "Charlie, you never interrupt this situation. Trust me. Someday you'll understand."

Calvin just huffed and stalked off down the hall, leaving Jamie giggling. "He's right. He'll be late. He hates being late for stuff."

Tig rolled off of her, standing up again. "You better be naked when I get back," he instructed, closing and locking the door behind him.

She rolled back onto her side, heart still running a bit quick to fall asleep, but she closed her eyes anyway, finding that warm and comfortable spot between being awake and unconscious. She had never expected to be comfortable here, but being surrounded by these maniacs actually gave her peace of mind.

Jamie fell asleep eventually, which she only knew because she came awake to the feeling of hands on her back, pushing her T-shirt up slowly and deliberately. Even as cotton-headed as she was she knew very damn well what was happening.

"What are you doing?" she groaned, rubbing her eyes with one hand.

"I thought I told you to be naked," a gruff voice answered, and in one quick swipe her shirt was gone. Asleep to fully turned on took less than five seconds.

"I was sleeping," she informed Tig, rolling to her stomach when his hands tried to get hold of her chest. He tried to roll her over by her hips but she squirmed to resist.

Tig's now familiar kisses were pressed to her back, right between her shoulder blades. "All right," he said, chin stubble scratching as he dragged those touches out down her back. "We can do it your way."

Hands suddenly gripped the edges of her underwear, which was startling because the kisses were really, really feeling good; so soft and gentle. She heard the sound of tearing and rose up on her elbows. The feeling of underwear was suddenly gone and in its place was the coldness of very naked, very private skin.

"Did you just tear off my underwear?" she gasped, looking back over her shoulder as his arm shot under hers, running up the centre of her chest and grasping her by the chin. He kissed her like that, over the shoulder, his weight coming down partially on her back.
Jamie's blood quickened further. He was naked, too. The covers were at the foot of the bed, and he had, indeed, torn her panties right off.

Okay. So that was *hot*.

He let her mouth go, which was good because she was breathing hard by this point. His lips pinched at her neck, the skin where it joined her shoulder, and his hand let go of her chin to cradle her neck. His knee pushed her legs apart. She was as helpless as she'd ever been in her life, no way she was getting away from that. No way she *wanted* to.

Yet as he kissed her shoulder, neck, and nipped at her ear he was staying put, waiting for something. She had no idea what, but the more his heat soaked into her and his kisses amped her up, the more she needed him to just *get to it* already.

Jamie arched her back, feeling where he was waiting, fully at attention, gasping only when he growled from the slightest of contact.

"Tig," she whispered, eyes falling closed, her need actually a *throbbing ache*.

"Say it," he moaned, his teeth nipping at the shell of her ear.

"Tig," this was more of a whimper, because she really liked him biting at her ear like that.

"Not until you say it, Jamie."

She loved how her name sounded right then, like she was maybe causing him the same kind of pain. She knew her face was flushed, but she was beyond embarrassment. He made her completely lose her mind just undressing her and kissing her skin. "Please, Tig …"

"Please what?"

She swallowed, which was difficult with his hand on her throat like it was. "Please … fuck me."

It was barely out of her mouth and she was gasping, eyes flying open, head going back as he filled her, pushing against her brutally with his hips. She stopped breathing, her back arcing more, giving him more to take from her, and he did.

He withdrew and pushed again, rocking them both forward on their elbows. She couldn't help it; she threw a hand up against the headboard to prevent hitting it and to give herself the leverage to push back against him as he thrust again. He growled, teeth in her shoulder, and it didn't hurt. She loved it.

Tig's hand that wasn't on her neck came up to curl around hers, both of them holding the same bar on the headboard. She turned her head to the side again and his mouth was there, but this was not a position for a deep kiss. This was the brushing of lips, an assurance that everything was very, *very* okay with her. She just wished he'd speed up.
This pace was slow, but still rough somehow. She tried to push against him more, rise up to her knees, but he kept her pinned in place and his control intact.

"Faster … please."

"No."

She made a sound of frustration which brought out a chuckle, which had a remarkably pleasant effect.

When he let go of her neck his arm looped around her abdomen, bringing her hips to a different angle. She felt each thrust against her cervix, a pleasant, dull sensation that made her moan and meet each movement eagerly, even if he wasn't speeding up. It made all the difference. She could feel it building, it was going to be spectacular.

"Jesus, Tig," she breathed, head still to the side.

"Tell me, babe."

"That feels so good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I wanna hear it, babe."

She gave a groan, not because of climax but because she liked that he talked to her this way.

"Jamie, I wanna hear it."

She wasn't saying anything because she was right on the edge, eyes fluttering shut, one more thrust to take her to the brink and another to push her over. Her head came up to a nearly-impossible angle, the sound she made unholy and loud, but she couldn't stop. It rolled through her violently, making every muscle tighten and quiver. When she had a sense of which way was up she let her face hit the pillow, taking a long shuddering breath.

Not that she was going to be allowed to rest and recover. Immediately he pulled out and away, rolled her to her back by her hips, body too limp to cooperate or struggle.

"So fucking sexy," he mumbled, raised up on both arms staring down at her face, eyes blazing a hot trail down her torso. "All along this was living next door to me and I could have only hoped."

She gave a weak laugh at that, and he rested back on his heels to pull her knees up, pushing them to her chest, parting her legs and holding them that way. She had enough time to just feel the
start of embarrassment at being so fully on display before he plunged back into her hard, wrenching a moan from her and forcing her head back into her pillow.

*Jesus. Christ.*

When she risked opening her eyes, he was looking right where she knew he'd be; where their bodies connected, watching as she accepted him inside, his face almost reverent. And hungry.

Suddenly it wasn't embarrassing, it was erotic and close and private and hot as hell.

"Tig," she whispered, and his eyes came back to her.

"Babe."

She smiled, then bit her lip, letting her hand trail down her chest, stopping to touch her nipple. His eyes got wider, his smile downright sexy. "*Babe,*" he repeated, voice straining in a way she really liked. She brought her other hand up and he ducked his head, reading her mind. He closed his mouth around her first two fingertips, licking and sucking at them. Then he pulled back, his grin getting naughtier, waiting.

Like he was daring her.

Jamie's hand went right between her own legs, circling her clit with those wet fingertips, her mouth dropping open like she was surprised to be touching herself. His eyes were on it, smile gone, growl sounding in the room.

Fuck, it felt so good. The way he was hitting her inside, the way she was pinned with her knees up at her shoulders, all of it. At the sound of that growl she had to close her eyes. For Jamie, this was the dirtiest, most fantastic sex she'd ever had. Nothing compared to the way he'd made love to her the first time, but this felt like another level of closeness.

"Jesus, Jamie," he moaned out of nowhere, opening her eyes again. His mouth was open, he was panting like she was, still refusing to speed up but she didn't need that anymore.

His eyes found hers and the heat in them made her shudder in spite of the fact she was already drowning in amazing sensations. "So fucking beautiful," he muttered.

It made her close her eyes again just as her orgasm surprised her, bowing her back, tightening her legs against the hold he had on them; a fight she didn't win. He didn't stop, it was then that he sped up, angling over her now. She kept her knees where they were. Now he was fast. And rough. And so much like her first impression of him it was almost overwhelming, but that was when she realized she still hadn't touched down from that orgasm and was already off and floating on another one.

This one was brutal, making her convulse like she had never done before, not *crying* but nearly *screaming* out with all her breath, shaking through it like it was a violent assault. She might have
shouted "Tiggy." She had no idea why she would change his name like that, but it was entirely possible she'd done it all the same.

Tig was buried in her deep, still, panting, and she thought he might have moaned while she was having her … attack. He rested his forehead on hers, his breath hot on her face. She dared to open her eyes, catching a vision of him smiling, face slack and relaxed, absolutely pleased with himself. Or maybe her.

As they held eye contact and shared exhausted, small smiles, she became aware of a cat call, a wolf whistle, and then clapping outside the door. Her eyes got wide as he turned his head away to shout, "Shut the fuck up."

She covered her face, the heat racing down her neck and to her chest almost negating the afterglow.

*Almost.*

"I have never been more embarrassed," she whispered.

"See, I have the exactly opposite feeling," he answered, kissing the side of her neck.

"How loud was I?"

"That was loud, babe."

"Oh my God."

"They're all just jealous."

"Oh my God," she repeated.

Tig slid off her to the side, bunching a pillow under his head and sighing, loud and happy. "Babe," he said, taking a deep breath and letting it out again with a chuckle and his hand fell to her belly. "We're grown-ups here. It's okay."

"I have never been this embarrassed," she whispered, yanking the pillow out from under her head and pressing it over her face.

He pulled it away, leaning over her on one arm. "Why be embarrassed?"

She turned her head to him. "I don't know how to handle this stuff," she whispered. "I walk around assuming people never have sex. I'm not even aware when men are attracted to me."

Tig brushed his hand down the side of her face. "You be exactly how you are, babe. I wouldn't want it any other way. But don't be embarrassed over this. It was too fucking fantastic to regret."
She felt a smile that she didn't volunteer. "It was," she agreed.

"You called me Tiggy," he teased.

"I did?" she hissed, mortified. "I did, didn't I?"

His smile was slow and sexy, but she was too exhausted to get all in a titter about it. "I liked it a lot."

"I liked all of it," she admitted, feeling her face grow warm again.

Tig kissed the end of her nose and rolled to his back, dragging her with him so she was plastered to his side and secured under his arm. "I liked all of it too, babe."
Chapter 69

Tig was woken when Jamie rolled away from him to her side, and he was struck with fear by the film of sweat she'd left along his ribs, the air highlighting it by rushing between them to fill the void, suddenly cold.

He rubbed his face down, rolled up to one elbow and put his hand on her shoulder. It was soaking wet; she was sweating like she'd just run a marathon. "Jamie?" he whispered, running his hand down her arm, alarmed now. "Honey, you okay?"

She mumbled something he couldn't make out and his heart froze. "Jamie," he repeated, firmer. "What's wrong, babe?"

No response.

Fuck.

He got up, pulled his jeans on and crouched next to the bed in front of her. He cupped her face in his hands. "Honey? What's wrong?"

Eventually she blinked, eyes focusing. "What?" she whispered, covering one of his hands with hers. "What's wrong?"

"Honey, you're sweating like crazy. And you're out of it."

She wiped her forehead. "It's probably a fever," she mumbled, closing her eyes. "It's one of the side effects."

Shit, what had he done to her?

"What do we do about it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. It goes away. I'm okay, Tig. I promise."

"You're scaring me babe," he whispered, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

She opened her eyes again, smiling. "Can you run me a slightly-warm bath?"

"Okay." He was immediately up and at it, flicking the bathroom light on and heading for the tub. He plugged the drain, turned the hot and cold on, feeling the temperature with his hand. It felt room temperature to him.

Then he returned to the bedroom just as Jamie sat up on the edge of the bed. He was struck then by her scars, the missing breast. When he made love to her he scarcely noticed it, but now he did.
A brutal reminder of why she was sick on the first place. And he couldn't just give her a day to sleep? That thought was further beaten home by the fresh bruises on her hip bones and arms.

Fucking. Idiot.

"Hey," he scolded her, leaning down to scoop her up in both arms. "Let me do that."

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck, resting her head on his shoulder. He had a moment to realize she probably was fine. She was letting him take care of her to calm him down, give him something to do.

Clever little minx.

He set her on her feet next to the tub. She stepped over the edge and he held her by the hips like she might fall. He hovered while she eased down into the water, hands on both sides of the tub, sighing as she settled into place.

"Is the temperature okay?" He was fretting like a fucking new parent.

"It's fine. Tig, please, relax." She held her hand out. "Sit down."

He did, kneeling next to the tub, taking her hand in his. "You want your soap?" he asked.

Jamie kept that kind smile on him. "Sure." Then she pointed. "The white bottle."

He popped the top and squirted the clear-pink crap into the stream from the tap, the smell hitting him and making him feel better. Once he'd put the bottle back Tig leaned back against the wall and settled on his ass, knees up in front of him to rest his arms on. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Panic felt exactly the same as his chest being crushed.

"Are you okay?" she asked, head tilted towards him.

He clasped his hands together. "I'm great, babe. Just worried about you."

She sat up and reached out to turn the taps off, then leaned back again. "I'm not that breakable, Tig. I thought I was, but as it turns out, I'm pretty fucking tough."

Her swearing was enough to make him take notice. He'd liked it during the dirty talk before, but like this he was somewhat surprised. Then he had to grin. "Yeah, you are pretty fucking tough."

"I'm sorry I scared you," she said softly.

He shook his head. "Don't worry about me." Groaning, he got to his feet. "Relax, okay? Don't get out unless I'm here. I'll be right back."
He shut her in the bathroom, door closed tight, pulled on a T-shirt and boots and left his dorm room to find out what the hell she should eat next. "Hey," he snapped at the bent-over form of a crow eater who was grabbing something out from under the bar. "Where's Juice?"

It was the blonde from the night before. She straightened and gave him her brightest grin. "Tig, if you're looking for a threesome I'm right here."

"Jesus, take an hour off," he mumbled. "Where's Juice?"

"I think he's in the garage. Can I help?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Go change my sheets. They're a mess and the kid's sleeping here again tonight."

She paled, staring after him as he made his way out to the lot. The service bay doors were open and he headed for them, squinting against the sun. "Juice!" he shouted, catching sight of that bald head.

"What?" the kid shouted back.

"Come here," he gestured with a hand, Juice meeting him on the concrete. "Jamie's not doing so well. She's got a fever. What do I give her?"

Juice blinked. "I'm not a doctor, Tig."

"I know that, smart ass. But what do you think I should give her?"

"I think you're supposed to starve a fever but she needs liquids, too. There's a ton of fruit in the kitchen. Blend a bunch of it together."

"Not gonna taste like shit, is it?"

Juice shook his head. "Not if it's all fruit."

"Thanks man."

"And maybe give her the rest of the day off," Juice added knowingly. "She needs her strength."

Tig was grinning, even though he spat out a reactionary "Fuck you" before heading into the clubhouse.

Before he was through the door he heard his name and turned, catching sight of Clay heading his way. "We gotta talk," Clay said, motioning with his hand for Tig to follow him.
So Tig did, following his prez into the clubhouse and finding a dark corner. Clay leaned an elbow on the bar, eyes skirting the room. Tig took up the same position, facing his president and rubbing his chin, waiting for the word.

"What's up?" he asked eventually.

"Darby's men want to know what Jamie's sister looks like so they can keep an eye out for her. Well, that what they say anyway."

Tig frowned. "What? Why else would they want to see her?"

Clay exhaled. "She owed Darby, too. Not a lot, just a few hundred, but she paid him in bunk bills when she was here. She told him her real goddamn name."

Tig sighed. "You gotta be kidding me."

"If she turns up in Charming, using again, I want them to let us know. For the sake of your girlie. Because if she is, we can't trust her. She'll rat you out to cover her own ass, you know that."

"I know, Clay," Tig assured him. "That's why Thelma took her out to the farm."

"Get a photo from Jamie, I'll pass it along to Darby. And I'll ask him to let her debt slide for the time being."

"Christ, if it's just a few hundred I'll cover it if it's up his ass that much."

Clay gave him a look of disbelief. "Don't you dare start paying that bitch's bills."

Tig looked away, not in the mood to argue.

"I mean it, Tig. Don't pull her bullshit into this club. We'll protect your girlie but that junkie is a disaster waiting to happen. Can't trust them, don't forget that."

"I know," he answered, meeting Clay's gaze straight on.

"If anything feels off to you, you let me know. It makes me nervous as shit that Jamie's sister knows as much as she does and is just out there in the wind."

Tig and Clay held eye contact, and something in that moment was unsettling. Tig's instincts were firing off like mad. Right then he knew that if shit went sour, Jackie was absolutely expendable. And if she betrayed them, she was dead.

Tig swallowed and nodded. "Okay. I'll get Jamie to check on her regularly, too. Maybe some guilt will keep her smarter."
Clay nodded. "Good. Darby's guys are meeting with one of Tiny's lieutenants tomorrow. They're going to find out where Tiny is right now, see what his next moves are. Or, at least as much as a street-level dealer is allowed to know."

"Thanks again for letting Jamie and the kid stay here," Tig added diplomatically. He wanted to buffer Jamie from Clay's opinion of Jackie as much as possible. "She doesn't know what all the dangers are. I have no idea what she can handle."

Clay bit the inside of his cheek, thinking. "I think she can handle more than you're giving her credit for. Make sure she tells you everything she knows, Tigger."

"She will."

"Not that I doubt your skills with the ladies, but sex doesn't forge trust."

"It does with her," Tig insisted. "But she'll tell me anyway. She has a limited tolerance for her sister, too. She's not an enabler."

Clay nodded again. "Good. She doing okay?"

"She's running a fever. Apparently it's a side effect. Scared the shit out of me."

"You need anything call Jax's woman, yeah?"

"Yeah, of course. Thanks, Clay."

He made his way back to the dorms, passing the blonde bitch on the way without sparing her a glance, re-entering his room and smiling that the bed was all done up again.

In the bathroom the water was draining and Jamie was standing in the tub, towel wrapped around her. She smiled at him, raising a leg to step over the side of the tub. He moved in immediately, scooping her up again in his arms.

"Tig," she said, exasperated. "I'm fine, I'm feeling better."

"I don't care," he replied, carrying her into his room.

"Who made the bed?"

"The hired help," he replied, setting her down. He yanked open the dresser drawers and was surprised to see he did have some clothes there. A folded T-shirt with SAMCRO was the first thing he saw, and he grabbed it, sniffed it, and turned back to Jamie as she was pulling the bedding back. He yanked the towel off of her, and she was spinning around to give him shit when he handed her the shirt. "Wear this," he asked, smiling.
She grabbed it out an obvious need to not be naked anymore. She pulled it on and it was huge on her, damn near hanging to her knees. The sleeves fell halfway between her elbows and wrists. Fuck, that shirt would likely be too big on him. He had no idea whose it was.

"It's really soft," she said, rubbing the sleeves with both hands.

_Sweet_, he thought to himself. She was the personification of sweet, standing there in the clubhouse in a SAMCRO shirt.

For the first time a twinge in his chest made him wonder what the hell he was doing. His nerves had him doubting his ability to do right by her.

Then Jamie smiled and climbed into his bed. He lost the thought immediately and went off to fix her some fruit juice.
"Aunt Jamie! Look!" Calvin shouted from the boxing ring, waving hands over his head that were encased in under-sized boxing gloves.

She had to laugh. "I see! Pretty cool. Where'd you find those?"

Chibs gave her a wink. "They're Tig's. Unfortunate about those tiny hands, yeah?"

She just shook her head, taking a sip of her tea and settling onto the picnic table bench to watch Calvin's PE class with the Scottish Son. She didn't have a moment to question why she was letting this happen; Calvin was so happy, so confident, and getting actual exercise. His homework had to be done before he could get in the ring, which was a joke because homework for him was about as challenging as it was for her to drink her tea.

A large black Caddy SUV pulled into the lot, and Jamie recognized Gemma's vehicle. The woman parked, then made her way over to where she sat on fantastic high-heel boots, slim fit jeans, a locked and loaded leather jacket and a warm smile.

Jamie returned the smile with a wave and Gemma took a seat right next to her, exhaling. "How you doing, honey?"

Jamie shrugged, holding the tea on her leg. "The fevers aren't quite over. Had one this afternoon. It freaked Tig out, bad."

Gemma smiled. "Those are normal, right?"

"Yeah. The chemo fucks with everything. I bruise easily, too. Tig thought he'd hurt me and that freaked him out."

Gemma gave a laugh. "Poor Tig. He's not used to giving a shit."

Jamie chuckled along with her.

"And your little man's learning to throw down?" Gemma gestured to the ring.

"I don't mind it, actually. There's a certain … gentleman-code to what he's learning."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. He's learning not to throw the first punch. If he ever needs to defend himself, I feel better knowing he can. And I trust him to always try walking away first. He's a smart kid. He knows why bullies bully."
"Where are our men?" Gemma asked after a moment of watching Calvin plow a few jabs into Chibs' hands.

"They're working in the garage," she answered, taking another sip of tea.

"Any word on your sister?"

Jamie shook her head. "No. Thelma's monitoring her phone calls to make sure nothing weird is happening. I'm just hoping this is the event that sobers her up."

Gemma opened her purse. "Speaking of substance abuse," she said wryly, "I brought you a bit more ganja to help with your appetite." She kept the bag below the edge of her bag, out of sight. "Might be good in a brownie."

Jamie looked around, like they might actually get busted here. "Oh. Thank you. Umm, Bobby brought me pot muffins, too. They're really good."

Gemma nodded and closed her purse again. "Good. Glad my boys are taking care of you."

"They really are. Everyone is."

"And don't worry about the bitches around here. You're a Son's woman, you don't have to deal with that shit. Remember that."

Jamie nodded. "Thanks, Gemma."

There was another pause while they watched a bit more sparring that damn near ended with Chibs singing soprano, making them both bust out laughing. "Aye boy, that's one place a sportsman never hits a man, understand?" she could hear the Scot saying through his own laughter.

"So," Jamie wasn't sure how to broach this, but all living arrangements considered this felt important. "I know that the club is ... an illegal organization. But, do the guys really condone ... murder?"

Gemma's head snapped around. "Where you getting that from, baby?"

Jamie inhaled. "Tig. Well, I heard it from my sister and Tig confirmed it. He also said that if I had any questions I should talk to you. You living this life for as long as you have." Well, that didn't come out right. "I mean -"

Gemma put a hand on her arm. "I understand what you meant, honey. Don't worry, it takes worse than that to really offend me. But as far as the club goes ..." she took a deep breath. "Everyone's looking for a place they belong. Maybe our parents were not great at the parenting thing. Maybe we were orphans. Maybe we were abandoned by both or one of our parents. Maybe we made one mistake and everyone, society included, turned their backs on us. This is a place where all us
misfits belong. It's a chance for the guys to have a home, family, jobs, money, and a place where they feel appreciated. When the good people turn their backs on you, there's not a lot a person can do to survive. We give them that life."

"And because that life sometimes skirts the edges of civilization extreme measures are needed?" she supplied.

Gemma nodded. "And you can't ignore the fact that some people just need more stimulation to be happy. Nine to five isn't for everyone, honey. And sometimes this life can be pretty damn fun." Gemma's eyes twinkled when she said it. "You like riding on the back of Tig's bike?"

Jamie smiled. "Yeah."

"You like how ferocious he can be to protect you?"

She nodded, feeling sheepish now. "Yeah."

Gemma leaned in closer. "He acts on basic instincts. It's primal. It's not all bogged down in good manners. Sterilized humanity. It's closer to how we're meant to be, honey."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Protect what's yours. No one has any right to tell anyone else how to live their lives. As long as you're not infringing on anyone else's freedoms, what right does anyone else have to tell you how to live? What's proper?"

Jamie blinked. "I see. That's the anarchy part."

"Damn right," Gemma replied. "And when those little compartments you convince yourself are meant to be your home start to feel cramped, someone has to come along and remind you how easy it is to breathe when you just … step outside."

Jamie pondered that. She's always had that feeling around Tig; wild, unbridled man and the urgent drive to live that was completely alien to her. And refreshing. The danger he posed was what she wanted to feel, too.

She was bogged down. She'd never regret it, but her life went on pause the exact moment Calvin was born. She knew she'd have to be back-up parent, even if Jackie did get her shit together. Even sober Jackie was flighty and scattered. Jackie would be the parent forgetting to pick up her kid from band practice.

Jamie was a serious person with a serious job who gravitated to added responsibilities. She wasn't a romantic. She was too practical for that.

Tig made her life wonderfully messy and unpredictable. She'd never do that on her own; just enjoy herself. He made it okay, he gave her permission to let go and have fun and laugh and even
have something as normal as sex with abandon. She didn't know how he did it, but he did. She knew it wasn't exactly romantic, but there was something in that that was intense and urgent and … well, close to romantic, anyway.

Plus, when she was really having trouble convincing herself the world was worth sticking around for, he convinced her it was.

"Uh oh," Gemma muttered, and Jamie realized the woman was grinning knowingly.

"What?" Jamie asked, her face growing warm.

"I know that look. I got that look at eighteen, the very first week I met Jax's father," Gemma recalled fondly. "So wild, could give a fuck what anyone thought. I mean, for an eighteen year old what's more dangerous than that?"

Jamie laughed. "I guess I'm a late bloomer."

Gemma's face grew serious. "Tig cares about you a hell of a lot. The way he's fallen into this relationship mode with you has shocked the shit out of me, to be perfectly honest. I like seeing him like this. He's got some focus, some purpose. I can tell he's happy."

Jamie was looking down at her hands, uncomfortable again with how in her business people could get. But if Gemma was right, this wasn't her man's friend poking her nose in. This was a caring sister making sure her brother was going to be well taken care of.

"Thanks Gemma. He's … he's really good to me. Not what I expected when I first met him."

Gemma's smile widened. "I bet."

"I just hope this crap with Tiny ends soon. I can't keep Calvin here for too long. It's not a place for people to really live in," she said carefully.

"They'll clean it up," Gemma assured her with a pat on her leg. "And when the hair grows back in, you should really consider keeping it like this." She nodded upward to Jamie's wig. "It's hot on you, honey."

Jamie grinned. "Thanks, Gemma."
Chapter 71

Early November

"Stay where Hap and Half-Sack can see you," Tig repeated for about the eighth time in three minutes. "You got the taser, right?"

Jamie, sighed, rolling her eyes and stopping on the front stoop. "Tig, yes. I do. And there's an RPG in the trunk of the car, too. And Calvin's packing."

He felt himself grin at that, leaning forward to touch his mouth to hers quickly. "Smart ass."

"You like it when I'm a smart ass," she quipped back, and he felt a thrill run right through his pleasure centre.

"Yeah I do," he admitted, reaching around her and pulling her closer by the ass with both hands.

"Tig, I have to go -"

"I know," he cut her off, leaning his head down for a real kiss, deep, wet, with tongue. As annoyed as she was with him she immediately softened her posture, fitting against his chest perfectly with a sigh. It made him grin against her lips.

"Damn you," she muttered when he lifted his head, and he gave both cheeks a squeeze.

"Just worried about you and Calvin, babe."

She nodded. "I know. But don't your badass sources say Tiny is back in LA?"

He nodded. "Tiny is. His asshole minions are everywhere else."

"We've got bodyguards," she reminded him softly, and it killed him that she was bothered by how much he worried about her. Like it was an inconvenience for him.

"Let one of them sleep on the couch tonight," he requested softly. This was the first night they were apart since he'd actually claimed her as his woman. "I'd suggest Half-Sack. He's only got one ball."

She frowned. "It's blood flow, not the testes, Tig."

He lowered his face again. "Are you talking dirty to me?"

She pulled her face away, turning pink.
"I wish I was coming," he admitted softly.

"You're busy," she reminded him, hands running up his shoulders. "And you freak Jackie out a bit."

There was a reason for that. Jamie's sister might be five weeks sober but only two of those were conscious and sober. Jamie was hopeful, so he didn't dare crush that but the junkie made him skittish, especially when she came to Charming to hang out and have lunch with his girl and Calvin. He didn't play polite to hide this. Every time the bitch was around he gave her a good dose of stink-eye to keep her good and twitchy.

"Call for anything, babe. I'll turn around and come right back."

"Okay," she gave him that, rising up on her toes to kiss him. "No skanks. Don't get hurt. Don't get caught."

He had to grin. Sweet Jamie was adapting to outlaw life a little better than he'd expected. He watched her bound down the steps to her car. Both her and Calvin waved goodbye and he lifted his hand as they pulled away, then kept an eye out as Hap and Half-Sack followed her on their bikes.

Jamie was heading back to chemo in a few days, and she wanted a nice afternoon out before that. It was just a lunch out and some shopping in Charming, and asking her to lock herself away seemed cruel after putting her through nearly a week of clubhouse life.

She didn't like it there, and he didn't blame her. The obvious function of the crow eaters and the complete lack of privacy wore on her, and as word came that Tiny seemed to be getting further and further away it was harder to justify putting her through it.

Calvin had loved it, though. The crow eaters fawned all over him, making sure he had snacks anytime he wanted, and his ring time with Chibs seemed to give him a lot of confidence, too. Being surrounded by the bikes and guys really agreed with him. It made Tig nearly get all weepy when he saw his brothers take the kid in like someone's little brother.

Opie and Jax had him helping with the bike Opie was putting together, and since he was older than Ellie and Kenny they idolized him. Piney took him for rides on the trike. He was even trying to show Gemma how to do paperwork on the new computer Gemma refused to touch, but that wasn't going over so well. Probably because Gemma resented any technology a nine-year-old could master before her. Still, even Gem was charmed by the kid. Calvin seemed to like being on SAMCRO. Although, Happy might have terrified him though one night when he dozed off on the sofa. Hap woke him by shaking his shoulder and telling him that falling asleep in the clubhouse meant he'd wake up tattooed.

Calvin's expression had been priceless.
The idea of this outing still gnawing, Tig watched the convoy as long as they were in sight, then locked Jamie's front door before heading down the walk to his bike.

Tig, Jax, Opie and Chibs were accompanying Clay on a trip to Oakland to meet the Laroy, president of the One-Niners. The street thugs were pissed about SAMCRO's apparent soft line on dealing in Charming in light of the momentary truce with Darby and the Nords, and why Clay felt the need to soothe his feathers Tig couldn't understand. They got a good deal on weapons from SAMCRO, it was a business partnership. Anything else the sons had going on was none of the 'Niners business as far as Tig was concerned.

On the way back they were stopping in Lodi to do more PR with the Mayans as well, assure the wetbacks that SAMCRO wasn't allowing narcotics in town without reason. It would be a late night, possibly spent passed out at one of SAMCRO's favourite roadhouses. Hence the additional security overnight for Jamie, in case Tig wasn't back.

Tig climbed on his Dyna and headed for the clubhouse, pulling into a spot as Chibs arrived as well. He pulled his helmet off as Chibs did the same. "Ready for a sleep over?" the Scot joked, raising his eyebrows. "Seems a long way to go for a pillow fight."

Tig snorted. "He was smart Laroy would just take the deal he gets and shut up. He gets good trade in Oakland, it's not like he's ever expressed interest in dealing in Charming."

Chibs shrugged. "Until he heard someone else was. He kept away from our marketplace out of respect. He's likely pissed."

That did sound logical.

"Who's staying with the lass?"

"Hap and the prospect," Tig replied falling into step as they crossed the lot to the clubhouse. "Kinda hoping we're back tonight. I think Hap makes her uncomfortable."

"I'm sure Mother will be over to visit," Chibs said. "They seem to be fast friends."

"Yeah. Which scares the shit out of me."

"Gemma's friendship will be important if she's going to be a part of all this," Chibs reminded him. "You don't get along with the Queen Bee -"

"You're out of the hive, yeah, I know."

Tig did appreciate Gemma taking Jamie under her wing. Anything Jamie was scared to ask him Gemma had likely already answered. But it also bothered him that Jamie might be censoring what she talks to him about.

Tig wanted to be the one that handled all the shit for her.
They waited a minute in the clubhouse doorway to allow their eyes to adjust to the darkness within, then headed for church where Clay, Opie and Jax were already assembled. A few last minute reminders were barked out, and Tig absorbed the tension between Jax and Clay.

Jax hated all the drug inroads this was creating. It wasn't a secret that Clay wasn't against the idea if the price was right, even if this was just a ploy at the moment to coax Tiny to Charming.

Tig would always back his president. They may vote, but SAMCRO wasn't exactly a democracy. Yet even Tig had to admit that drugs were an uncomfortable industry. It was competitive, expensive, and when you start bringing Mexican cartel-connected guys around a town like Charming, it wouldn't take much for the locals to start getting twitchy. And there goes the uneasy truce between SAMCRO and the civilians.

Clay saw the money, though, and made no bones about admitting it. The money would be nice. The thrill would be guaranteed.

Tig wondered if he wasn't getting too old for this. The thrill wasn't calling to him this time; his thrill was very different now. She had huge blue eyes, lips the softest he'd ever known, smelled of flowers, and always whispered his name when she came. That was the only thrill he was really interested in. And she was a hell of a lot safer to chase after, too.

That realization hit like a lightning strike, and it didn't make him feel claustrophobic. It damn near made him grin.

"No matter what you're feeling on this," Clay snarled, eyes scanning the brothers assembled to accompany him, "Laroy has to stay an ally. He's our biggest buyer. We can't lose him. So today the focus is on kissing some ghetto ass, and tomorrow we meet the Mayans and reinforce the fact that they are not welcome to peddle their shit in our town. If it seems like that one might go bad, I'll let Alvarez in on the real reason Tiny's men are being tolerated more than before."

Clay had spoken. They all exchanged glances, and Tig knew Opie and Jax were the main obstacles in this being a harmonious endeavour. Chibs looks reluctant, but like Tig he was resigned to the fact that they voted for president and this was their elected representative's decision.

Opie and Jax pushed between Tig and Chibs to leave, looking as happy as was expected. Chibs raised his eyebrows. "Lovely day for a road trip, isn't it?"
Chapter 72

"Oh God, Jamie. Cut the cute act and buy it. It's hot on you," Jackie exclaimed, exasperated.

Jamie's face turned pink, she felt it happen. "Jesus, Jackie," she muttered, trying to push her sister out of the changing room where she'd burst in on Jamie, since the "door" was just a curtain.

"Look at you, Jamie. You look sexy," Jackie insisted, turning Jamie bodily towards the mirror.

They were at a lingerie boutique, a fancy one that also offered prosthesis-friendly lingerie for survivors like Jamie. The shelf bra built into it was brilliant; it snugged her one breast up to be quite perky, and the prosthesis could fit into one side of the other to fill the front completely. The cutlet was exactly the same size as the breast she had, and the only thing missing was the fact that double-cleavage was impossible. But the scoop neck was too high for that to be obvious.

"Stop looking at your chest, check out your legs, Jamie. And your ass, God it's so fucking cute."

Jamie turned redder. "Keep your voice down."

Jackie was ignoring her, staring at her silhouette in the full-length mirror. "You have to buy this."

"It's two hundred-fifty dollars with the prosthesis," Jamie pointed out, running her hand over the turquoise satin. The lace trim was ivory. It covered her to mid-thigh with a generous slit up each hip. It came with matching white lace undies, barely enough fabric to count as real underwear. But it wasn't meant to be.

"So the fuck what? Make your man buy the next round of groceries. Trust me, he'll sign up to buy all your groceries and pay your bills if you're wearing this kind of thing to bed."

Jamie rolled her shoulders in, uncomfortable. "I don't want him paying my bills, that's not what we're about."

Jackie rolled her eyes; Jamie caught it in the mirror. "It's not like you're the type of person that'll make him buy you friggin' Louboutin shoes for Pete's sake. He eats his meals there, doesn't he?"

Jamie shrugged.

Jackie grinned. "He'll eat you up when he sees you wearing that."

Jamie was back to blushing.

"Or at least he'll eat you out."
"Jesus, Jackie," Jamie hissed, turning and smacking her arm.

Jackie was giggling. "You still fucking blush so easily. I kinda hope that never stops, Jam-Jam."

Jamie successfully pushed her sister out of the changing room, waited until the curtain fell back into place, and turned back to the mirror.

The colour was good on her, she had to admit. It made her skin look all glowy and sun-kissed, even though she hadn't sat out in the sun since before her treatments started. It really brought out her eyes, too. And it felt so nice on her skin. She imagined rough hands pawing at her with this on, almost rubbing it against her. The very thought of it made her warm, and she decided then and there she was buying it.

As a gift to Tig.

She changed back into her clothes, carried the prosthesis and the nightie out with her, and set the whole kit out on the counter. The lady at the register smiled, tucked it into a pretty pink paper bag, and handed it over. "It's taken care of," she said sunnily, and Jamie froze mid-way through taking the bag from her.

"What?"

"It's taken care of."

Jackie was leaning on the counter grinning. Jamie frowned. "How the hell did you afford that?"

"Not me, Jam-Jam. I told Thelma how hot you were in it."

Jamie's mouth fell open. "She can't afford that either!"

Jackie scoffed. "Yes she can, Jamie. She is not living large on the farm and you wouldn't believe what hippies will pay for free range eggs."

Jamie's mouth kept working. "Shit, she bought me lingerie?" The last word was whispered. It felt like they may as well go shopping for vibrators next.

Jackie rolled her eyes. "Grow up. She knows you're getting it regular now."

There went the blushing reflex. "Where are Thelma and Calvin?" she asked, smiling her embarrassed thanks to the shop lady and changing the subject.

"They went to grab us a table at the café," Jackie answered, holding the shop door for her and sliding on her shades.

"I'm actually hungry," Jamie realized, hand on her stomach.
"Excellent. I gotta say, last time I saw you you were pretty skinny. You look better with meat on your bones."

Jamie grinned. "Thanks, Jackie."

"Is there any news on Tiny?"

Jamie was waiting for this. "No," she said with real disappointment. "All we know is that he's not in Charming, he's still apparently in LA running the business there."

"How do your man and his friends know this?"

Jamie bit her lip. "I don't know how much I'm allowed to tell you."

Jackie gave a short laugh at that. "It's me he's after, Jam-Jam. I'd feel better knowing how concrete this information is."

They'd stopped to wait to cross the street. Jamie studied Jackie, but she didn't seem anxious or eager for information. "They know someone who's a White Power dealer. He's got a few of his guys dealing for Tiny."

Jackie nodded. "Sounds pretty reliable."

"Of course it is," Jamie agreed. "These guys don't really appreciate competition."

"And where's your man headed today? Didn't you say he had a road trip?"

Jamie frowned. "Overnight to Oakland. Why?"

Jackie shrugged as the light turned and she started to cross the street.

Jamie left it at that, hoping her intuition was out to lunch. She decided then and there not to tell Jackie anything else about the club. It made her feel like a bitch, but she had to trust her instincts.

Thelma and Calvin had claimed a patio table outside of the Charming Café. Thelma had coffee, Calvin was starting in on his root beer float. Jamie asked for something from their freshly-squeezed juice menu and Jackie asked for a tea. The tea made Jamie raise her eyebrows but she didn't say anything.

"Aunt Thelma," Jamie admonished when the waitress left to get their drinks. "You shouldn't have bought this for me."

Thelma shrugged. "It's a gift."

Jamie shook her head. "For what?"
Thelma smiled. "Tig's birthday."

Jamie felt her blood still. "Shit. When's his birthday?"

Thelma was shocked now. "You don't know when his birthday is?"

"When is it?" Jamie basically repeated.

"How do you not know when his birthday is?" Jackie asked.

"When is it?" She repeated, getting annoyed. "Did I already miss it?" Shit. Worst … girl friend? Lover? Worst old lady ever. Shit.

"It's on Tuesday," Calvin piped up. "I don't know what to get him."

Jamie's pulse went back to normal. "Oh thank God."

Aunt Thelma had heard Calvin. "Honey, maybe you could make him something."

Calvin made a face. "That's such a girl thing to do."

Jamie tweaked his ear. "Don't say that like it's a bad thing."

Calvin grinned at her.

"I'll take you shopping, Peanut," Jamie promised. "I have to find something, too."

"Don't buy him anything. Just wear that," Jackie advised.

Jamie covered Calvin's ears. "That's not a present. I hate to even tell you this but he can have me anytime he wants me. What does a nightie have to do with it?"

Jackie snorted. "Wear it and you'll see."

Jamie shook her head and uncovered Calvin's ears. "I have to figure something out."

"Just make him supper," Thelma advised. "Something special. Get some wine. I'll take Calvin for the night."

"That's a school night," Jamie reminded her.

"So what? He'll just have to get up earlier. No problem, right Peanut?"

Calvin shrugged. So easy going.

Her treatments started up again on Thursday. That was a really good idea, actually.
The waitress was coming back with their drinks when it happened. The nice family shopping day came to a grinding halt when the Charming PD police cruiser pulled up to the curb.

Like most people who weren't involved in criminal activity on a daily basis Jamie, Thelma and Calvin ignored them. But Jackie went on alert, body tight immediately. That's what caught Jamie's attention.

"Jaclyn Taylor?" The voice was authoritative and stern, so all four heads turned as though they were all named Jaclyn Taylor.

"Yes?" Jackie asked.

"Please stand and put your hands behind your back."

Thelma and Jamie stood with her, while the police officer held a hand out to placate them. "Ladies, please, return to your seats."

The officer was young with dark hair, strong jaw, and he smacked of law enforcement from his posture to his hair cut. They both sat, leaving Jackie on her feet, linking her hands behind her, looking as upset and contrite as Jamie had ever seen.

"What's happened?" Jamie asked, Jackie's lack of denial all she needed to see.

"You're under arrest for contempt of court, failure to appear."

"Jackie," Thelma whispered, sounding so disappointed.

The cop continued with the Miranda rights, leading Jackie through the tables to the sidewalk. Jamie stood and followed, listening the whole way. The cop stowed her little sister in the backseat, shut the door and came back to Jamie, hands on his belt. "She's also got warrants in Washington and Oregon, petty theft, possession, that kind of thing," he told Jamie. "I had to pick her up. We had a tip phoned in that she was down here."

"Who called you?"

He shrugged, scanning to where Happy and the prospect were standing on the sidewalk, their bikes parked where they'd left them when the cop had grabbed Jackie. "It was an anonymous tip," the cop assured her, eyes coming back to her. "Get hold of your man. Ask him to put you in touch with their lawyer. They've got one on retainer, maybe she can help."

Jamie was taken aback by that. "Oh." How the hell did he know about her "man?"

"Take my card," he added, reaching into his breast pocket and pulling out a rectangle of card stock. "I'm Deputy Hale. If you have any more questions, you can use that number."

Jamie was staring at the card, then she met his gaze again, nodding. "Thank you," she said.
Hale tilted his head, studying her for a moment. "You're kind of a surprise, Miss Turner," he said suddenly.

"I am?"

"Heard you were with Alexander Trager. You're not what I was expecting." With that weird statement he nodded his farewell and circled his cruiser.

Jamie waved at Jackie as the car pulled away, her sister returning it with a little finger roll that was pretty out of place.

"Shit," Jamie whispered, looking down at the card again.

"Everything all right?" a gruff voice asked behind her.

Jamie turned to Happy. "They arrested my sister. Deputy … Hale," she completed, reading it off the card, "told me to call the club's lawyer?"

Hap's jaw twitched as he nodded. "Call Tig, have him check that with Clay first."

"But she's going to jail -" and that's as far as she got.

"Call Tig first. She's just as safe in lock up as she would be here, trust me." With that Happy was pacing back to his perch on his bike, Half-Sack right behind him.

Jamie took her seat again numbly, meeting Thelma's gaze as she put her arm around Calvin. "She'll be okay," she assured her nephew with a kiss on top of his head.

Again, he just nodded.

"Will she?" Thelma asked.

Jamie shrugged. "She'll be locked up. Tiny can't get to her there, I'm sure."

Thelma sighed. "Good God, that child …" she let it go at that, shaking her head.

Jamie squeezed Calvin to her side again. The only thing that really nagged her right then was how the hell they knew where Jackie was. Her sister was in Charming for all of an hour and a half, and no one here knew who she was. How the hell had they found her?

Jamie's eyes cast over Calvin's head to see Hap and Half-Sack lounging on their bikes, and suddenly she had a really, really bad feeling.
Chapter 73

Tig's cheek twitched and his toe kept tapping on the concrete, his eyes on Laroy's boys who had their eyes on him and his brothers. Their respective presidents were having a chat about twenty yards off, backs to their crews.

This was annoyance, plain and simple. SAMCRO sold guns to the 'Niners. They paid for their guns. That was the extent of this relationship. All this ass-wiping was chafing him.

"Cut it out," Chibs muttered under his breath and Tig stopped the tapping. "It's hot, my back hurts, and that fucking noise is the last thing I need."

"Sorry," Tig mumbled back, standing up straight and crossing his arms, looking at his feet.

"She's fine," Chibs drawled for the eightieth time.

"Yeah, I know," he shot back, pacing now. "Just makes me nervous with that sister of hers around."

When Tig's cell rang they all jumped, even Laroy's boys were reaching for their waistbands. Jesus, talk about wound up.

"That's a cell phone," he assured them, reaching into his back pocket. "I don't have a gun that fucking rings when it goes off all by itself for fuck's sake," he mumbled. His heart seized when he saw it was Jamie's burner calling, and he wasted no time flipping it open. "Babe?"

"Hey – you okay?"

He had to smile. "I'm good, babe. You called me, remember?"

She gave a soft laugh. "I know, I just didn't want to launch directly into my family drama."

"What is it?" Heart clenched again.

"A Deputy Hale just picked up Jackie. She had outstanding warrants, also a failure to appear contempt of court or whatever they call it. They just took her away."

He frowned. "Shit. Really?"

"He told me to call you about your lawyer."

Tig sighed, rubbing his eyebrow. Fuck.

"I can call someone else -"
"No, no. I'll check with Clay."

"Okay," she answered, and he realized then how scared she was for her bitch of a sister who really didn't deserve her worry.

"Hey, you and Calvin okay?"

"We're fine. We were … we were just sitting down to lunch."

Yep, she was way too fucking normal for all this. "Sorry, Jamie. They'll hold her at the police station for a while, which means she's in a cell on her own. No inmate shanking, I can guarantee it."

"Okay," she repeated, sounding a narrow margin better about that. "That's what Happy said."

"If they set bail before I get back to you, let me know how much it is, okay? And don't go bail her out on your own."

"All right."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

She still sounded off. There was something else bugging her. "What else is wrong, babe?"

"Well … they knew who she was. They knew where we were. They pulled up right next to the café and just walked up to our table. How can that be? She's been gone for … weeks."

That was a good question.

"Sorry, I know you're busy. I'll just stay close to home until you're back."

He shook his head. "Stop apologizing for everything, babe. I'm glad you called. Clay's tied up right now, but as soon as I can I'll ask him about Lowen. Our lawyer. All right?"

"Okay," she replied eventually. "Tig … this isn't my world. I'm totally lost here."

He smiled. "Good thing I know how scumbags operate, babe."

She laughed. "Yeah."

"Go home. Stay safe. Keep Calvin close."

"Okay."
"You still got that wicked baseball bat?"

He heard another chuckle. "I do."

"Stay safe, and keep one of the guys in the house."

"I will."

"Take care, babe."

"You too, Tig."

He was grinning when he hung up, even through his concern. Chibs raised his eyebrow and let out a puff of cigarette smoke. "Was that phone sex? Sounded shite."

Tig shook his head and stowed the burner in his back pocket. "They picked up Jamie's junkie sister on warrants. She's freaked."

"Pulled over for speeding or what?"

Tig shrugged. "Nah. Hale knew where they were. Walked right up to them as they were about to have lunch."

Chibs' cigarette froze before he could inhale again. "Cops aren't that smart, Tig."

He nodded, squinting to where Clay and Laroy were still conversing. "I know. Someone turned her in."

Chibs brought his arm down, his nic-fit forgotten. "Shit. Who knew where they were going?"

Tig shrugged. "They didn't have an itinerary. Only Happy and Half-Sack are there."

"Someone's watching her," Chibs deducted. "Your girl."

Fuck, he didn't know if he wanted to be right or if he wanted Chibs to be right. Because Tig felt Happy or the prospect ratted Jackie out. To Clay.

Completely at a loss, Tig pulled out his phone again, flipped through the contacts and placed another call, crossing his arms across his chest and keeping his back to Clay and Laroy, scanning the parking lot they were waiting in while he waited for his call to be picked up.

"Yeah?"

"Gem?"

"Everything okay, honey?"
"I got a bad feeling. Can you do me a favour?"

Chibs chuckled and shook his head while Tig outlined the favour to Gemma, who seemed more than pleased to pay Jamie a visit.

"And Gem?" he added before she could disconnect.

"Yeah?"

"Keep this between the two of you. No need for Hap or the prospect to know why you're there."

There was a pause. "What's going on in that head of yours, Tigger?"

"How'd they know where she was, Gem? All the places in Charming those girls went today. No one knowing who Jamie is, much less her sister. And Charming PD rolls up because they see her sitting at a patio table? I didn't even know what her plan for today was."

Gemma exhaled. "I'll keep it quiet. But I gotta tell Clay once he gets home."

"I'm talking to him, too. Don't worry, beautiful."

"Stop calling me that. I said I'd do what you asked."

He laughed at that. "Thanks Gem."

"Take care, honey."

Chibs was studying him while he put his phone away. He shook his head with a tsk. "Not sure what all that implies, Tig."

Tig's eyes slid back to the two bosses, now shaking hands and heading back to their brothers.

"I mean it Tig," Chibs hissed, voice low. "You're implying one of us turned that girl in."

"I know that," Tig returned, shooting his brother a look. "Who else would do it?"

Chibs exhaled, angry, but Tig knew the Scot wouldn't rat him out. Not yet anyway.

Before reaching them Clay stopped, having pulled out his cell phone. He read something on the screen before shoving it back in his pocket. Tig's eyes narrowed, then he slid on his sunglasses to hide the fact that his poker face was fucking terrible. Clay stowed the phone away when he was done reading and made his way back to them.

"Just got a message from Hap," Clay shared, quiet and serious. "Jamie's sister got hauled in by Charming PD."
"I know, Jamie called me," Tig offered offhand.

Clay nodded. "Hap said they're back at Jamie's. At least she'll be locked up, one less headache."

Tig's head was spinning. He remembered Clay reading a text before the meet with Laroy, then excusing himself to make a call. It was right there, plain as day.

Tig watched Clay's face as he outlined how he wanted the meet with the Mayans to go. He was listening, but he was also trying to piece together why Clay would turn Jackie in. Just for safety? So he'd know where she really was at all times?

Or was she just bait?

Tig didn't like this suspicion; didn't like thinking of Clay this way. It made his stomach turn.

"Let's get the hell out of Oakland," Jax was suggesting when Tig rejoined the conversation. "When we hit Lodi we'll fill you guys in on what Laroy knows about Tiny."

The way the 'Niners were eyeing them up caused him to agree with that plan. Tig headed to his Dyna. Before he could swing a leg over Chibs grabbed his arm.

"Clay turned her in?" The Scot's voice was low and reasonable.

Tig knew Chibs saw it too, he didn't imagine it. "I think so."

"Why?"

Tig shrugged, fastening his chin strap. "Bait?"

"We weren't in on that," Chibs assured him. "I heard nothing about it."

Tig nodded. "Thanks man."

Chibs wordlessly headed to his own bike, and Tig wished the Scot had drawn a simpler, cleaner, and entirely different conclusion so he could get rid of this sick feeling in his stomach.
Chapter 74

Jamie answered the knock on the door while Calvin was in the backyard pulling his bike out of the shed. He was only allowed to ride up and down the street where their bodyguards could keep an eye on him. Surprisingly Happy seemed to really dig the pink bike.

As the front door revealed Gemma on the stoop Jamie had to smile. "Hi Gemma," she greeted her, pushing open the screen door.

Gemma caught it and stepped inside. "Hey sweetheart. How you feeling today?"

Jamie shrugged, leading the way into the kitchen. "Good, I guess. Fevers are further apart, nausea is long gone. How are you?"

"You know me. If I breathing I'm scheming." Gemma stepped into the kitchen, casting her eyes over the space. It made Jamie remember the spacious and gorgeous kitchen at the Teller-Morrow residence. Her little kitchen was cramped and worn but clean. "This is a cute house," Gemma mumbled, toeing a chair out to an angle then sitting, her purse on the chipped vinyl table top. "I've only really seen your entry. And your bathroom, come to think of it."

"Thanks," Jamie said wryly, remembering the woman helping her when she got sick. "It's the best I could afford." She reached into a cupboard, asking over her shoulder, "Coffee?"

"Sure, thanks."

Jamie poured out a cup from the carafe, the fresh pot started for Happy's caffeine fix. "You take anything in it?"

"Nope, unleaded works for me." Gemma took the cup with both hands and sipped while Jamie sat across from her.

"So, what can I help you with?" Jamie asked after a moment.

"I'm here to help you. Tig called and asked me to come by."

Jamie frowned, surprised at how quickly Tig had called Gemma and how rapidly the woman had jumped to. "Really?"

Gemma set her mug down, opened her huge purse and pulled something familiar out and set it down on the table.

It was a hand gun. A gray one with a black grip. That was all she knew about guns. Jamie imagined she'd stare at a severed limb or a unicorn or tarantula the exact same way. "What is that?"
Gemma smiled, pushing it closer, the muzzle pointed towards the sink, away from both of them. "It's a Colt Pony. 38-calibre. Magazine holds six rounds. It's peppy. Might look small but it's loud enough and kicks back pretty good."

Jamie was still open-mouthed, eyes locked on the foreign object. "I … what's it for?"

Gemma leaned forward on the table on both elbows. "Tig called me, babe. He told me about Jackie getting hauled in. He's worried you're being watched, thinking someone knew where you were today because you were followed. He's SAMCRO, he cares about his girl, he wants you armed."

Jamie got up, standing behind her chair now. "I can't have that in the house. I'm sorry, I know this is very generous but … I've never lived in a house with guns."

That took Gemma by surprise. "Where the hell are you from?"

Jamie pretended not to hear that. "There's a nine-year-old in this house. And I'd never touched one of those things until the night that guy broke in. And even then I was in shock and Tig had to shove it in my hand. I had no idea what I was doing."

Gemma frowned. "You never fired one of these before?"

Jamie just shook her head, holding one arm by the elbow, a defensive gesture not unlike tucking herself into a ball. She just happened to be standing.

Gemma took another sip of coffee and Jamie could tell her gears were spinning. "I got an idea," she finally said, putting the mug down with conviction. "Am I going to like this idea?"

"Hap!" Gemma shouted out the back door. "We're taking a road trip."

Jamie actually felt panic.

"Don't make that face. You know who my husband is," Gemma shouted to the yard, then let the screen door bang shut and turned back to Jamie with one hand on her hip. "Bring the kid. He should know this, too."

Now the panic went full-blown. "No, absolutely not. Calvin is not learning how to handle a gun."

Gemma's look softened. "Jamie, it's better he at least sees it in action. Imagine him finding one and not knowing anything about how they work."
Calvin likely understood the physics of a firearm better than anyone else in the house. The science of it, anyway. That wasn't the point, though. Jamie had been doing everything she could to make sure Calvin's remaining childhood years were as normal as possible.

Bikers hanging around wasn't normal. Seeing guns every day wasn't normal. Being roughed up by adults wasn't normal. Telling him he had to keep a break-in and a dead guy on the living room floor a secret certainly wasn't normal.

Control was lost, the airplane was crashing, and all Jamie could do was grip the armrests.

Gemma put her hand on Jamie's shoulder, bringing her back from her own hyperventilating-from-worry state of mind. "Hey, honey. I can tell your boy's not an idiot. He's not going to pull a gun to impress his friends. And he won't play with it because he doesn't recognize it. You tell him not to and he'll listen, I'm sure. But disclosure is how you really avoid accidents."

Jamie knew that was sound advice. The truth was she was scared of guns, scared to even learn how to hold them, and she didn't want Calvin to see how worried she was over anything. She wanted him to think life was fine. And life wasn't fine if Aunt Jamie was packing in her fucking handbag.

"Tig wants you to be safe. You already know what lengths he'll go to for you, honey," Gemma continued softly, pushing a lock of hair behind Jamie's ear. "You're his girl in as many ways as you can be already. And if he's your man, this is something you need to learn. I'm sorry this crap has soaked into your life sweetheart, but if you're going to reap the benefits of the club's protection you gotta have our backs, too."

Jamie frowned. "I haven't told anyone anything -"

"I'm talking about the ability to pitch in and make a few people disappear, honey. If this baddy is coming for you or any one of us, there's a lot of goodwill owed to someone who pulls the trigger and ends that threat." Gemma smiled. "I'm not threatening you, Jamie. This is how it works. Now let's go. I know a quiet place where we can pop that cherry and show you how to defend yourself and Calvin."

Jamie stepped back, taking a deep breath. "What do I have to do?"

Gemma's smile widened to a grin. "I know a place where we can have a little target practice, make sure you're comfortable handling it and loading it."

Jamie closed her eyes, questioning how she managed to get herself into this. "All right," she relented as the screen door to the patio swung open.

Hap followed Calvin into the kitchen. Calvin looked pissed; he'd clearly wanted to ride his bike today. "Where are we going?" he whined.

Jamie sighed, putting her hand on top of his head. "We're going on a little trip with Gemma."
"Gemma? What are you doing?" Happy asked dangerously.

"What'd I tell you about looking at me like that?" Gemma quipped back. "Tig called. Wants Jamie packing with nothing lacking. But she's a complete virgin to this, so we're taking her to a range and showing her how to use a gun."

Calvin's head shot up to look at Jamie. "We are?"

Jamie sighed. "Tig thinks it's a good idea, Peanut. And with some of the friends your mom has looking for her, he might be right."

Calvin's excitement faded. "Are we in danger?"

Shit. That was what she was worried about.

Jamie crouched in front of him, holding both his hands. "You're a smart kid, I can't lie to you Peanut. You know what happened here when that man tried to take your mom. Imagine if Tig hadn't been here."

Calvin bit his lip.

"Exactly. Now this worries me a lot, Peanut. But I'd feel better knowing I can keep you safe, all right?"


"Do I need to worry about you wanting to play with a gun when I'm not here? Take it for a bike ride and accidentally take out one of Happy's kneecaps when it falls out of your pocket?"

Calvin let a smile slip. "No," he answered, implying the question was stupid with his tone.

"You better not, kid," Hap snapped, and Jamie looked up in time to see the scariest biker of the bunch actually smiling.

Gemma crossed to her purse. "We're going out to Oswald's," she said, stowing the handgun back in her purse and swinging the bag over her shoulder. "You coming with us?"

Hap lost the smile and returned Gemma's glare. "I got a choice?"

Gemma smiled and shrugged. "Not really."

"I gotta tell Clay," Happy said, reaching for his phone.

"No," Gemma said, too sharply. It raised Happy's eyebrow and made Jamie balk, too.

"Why not?" Happy grumbled.
Gemma shrugged. "He doesn't want me going off firing weapons with all the heat around town. The dealers, this ATF bitch …" she waved a hand. "He'll just argue."

"He's my president."

Gemma tilted her head, clearly ready to take a hard line. "And I'm here right now, and I'd beat him to shoving my foot up your ass, Hap. So don't give me grief on this."

Hap sighed and crossed his arms. "I'm telling him eventually."

"Tell him when we're done," Gemma suggested.

There was a weird, tense standoff going on in her kitchen, and Jamie was confused. Gemma looked much stern, and Hap looked like he was wrestling with something mentally. That was also when Jamie realized Hap had been on that cell all day, obviously reporting to Clay where they were.

Her unease grew, and with another glance at Gemma she was hoping that the woman wasn't making trouble for anyone else. To break the stare-down Jamie stood and patted Calvin's shoulder, the tension thick and getting to her. "You have to use the bathroom before we go?"

"Yes," he answered and ran for the hallway.

When he was gone Jamie turned back to them. "If Happy has to tell anyone where we're going, I want to know why."

Gemma looked surprised, and Hap just gave her that dead-eyed stare.

"I mean," Jamie rushed ahead. "I understand you guys always wanting to know where Jackie is. But we know where she is. Where I am is irrelevant."

Gemma blinked at her once then let her eyes slide to Happy, who met the look.

"Clay said to report if Jamie left the house and where she goes," Hap said, clearly annoyed at having to put together such a long sentence. "I don't question why. I do it. Tig would lose his shit if anything happened to her."

Jamie nodded. "I understand that. Does Tig know about this?"

Happy bit down on the toothpick that was perpetually wedged in the side of his mouth. "I don't know. He wasn't there when Clay asked me to do this."

Jamie turned to Gemma. "Let Happy report it in. No one needs to get in trouble."

"Fuck it," Happy bit out, putting his phone away. "Let's just go."
There was another long pause that Gemma broke up. "You're doing the smart thing, baby," Gemma assured her and headed for the door. "I'll wait outside and have a cigarette. So no hurry."

Jamie stood staring at the archway connecting the kitchen to the living room, momentarily forgetting she wasn't alone. That changed when Happy cleared his throat. She jumped.

"Go get ready," he suggested, and it sounded harsh. But then again, that's how he always sounded. "She's right, you know. You have to know how to use one of these things, because those guys coming to get your sister know how to use them real good."

The shine in his eyes was scary. She swallowed hard. "Thanks, Happy. I'll keep that in mind."
Chapter 75

The roadhouse hunched close to the highway, just outside of Lodi. A no-tell-motel was right behind it, a strip of rooms facing the shared parking lot, one level. SAMCRO filled it, bikes parking in front of the rooms from one side to the other. The roadhouse manager was a friend, had been for years, always made sure SAMCRO had the best hospitality if they ever had to stop over this close to home.

Tig pushed open the door to his room, nose wrinkling at the stuffy smell. It was clean, it had just been closed up on a hot day with the blinds drawn. He flicked on the window AC unit, tossed his saddlebag on the bed and before he realized it he was dialling Jamie.

She picked up after three rings.

"Everything okay?" he barked after she greeted him.

"Yes, Tig. Everything's fine. Why?"

"Took you a while to answer." Right as he finished speaking he heard a pop, followed by a long echo. "Where the hell are you?"

"Um, we're behind a storage shed. On some guy name Oswald's land. Gemma's showing me how to use a gun." She said it simply, and he took a moment to absorb all that.

"Babe, you don't know how to shoot?"

She allowed a laugh as another gunshot sounded. "No, Tig. I'd never touched a gun until that one you shoved in my hand when that guy broke in."

He raised his eyebrows. "Shit sweetheart, you are an innocent, aren't you?"

"Plenty of people live without guns, Tig," she answered as another shot sounded.

"Who's shooting now?"

"Gemma," she answered. "She's pretty good."

"Somehow that's not a surprise," he mumbled with a smile. "You wearing what I left you in?"

"Yes."

He smiled wider, remembering the tank top and jeans she'd had on. Those jeans were amazing on her ass, now that there was some ass to be seen. "What gun'd she give you?"
"A Colt Pony?" It was a question, like she wasn't sure the strange terminology made sense.

Now he was really grinning. "Shit, babe. That's hot. I'm imagining that right now. I bet you look cute as fuck holding it, too."

"Tig, take me seriously. I'm going to be an ass kicker."

That made him laugh. "Yeah babe, you are. Don't stay out much longer. Get home and safe soon, okay?"

"Okay," she replied, so agreeable. "Are you behaving yourself?"

He hung his head, shoulders shaking with a silent chuckle. "I am, actually. As soon as we checked in I called you, babe."

"No skanks, Tig. I mean that."

Tig brought his head up again, catching his reflection in the mirror across the room. He was fucking beaming like a loon just from talking to her. "What I got to do to prove I'm all about you, babe?"

"Sleep alone tonight," was her immediate answer.

"You got it," he came back just as quick.

"I miss you," she added softly. "I know it's one night, and it hasn't been that long but … I miss you."

Again, Jamie Taylor made him feel like a teenager.

There was a knock on his door, and it was edged in slowly. Tig motioned Chibs to come on in, and the Scot did, waiting in the doorway with one hand on hip, the other on the door knob. "Listen babe, I gotta go. But you know I'm missing you too."

"You are?"

He looked away from Chibs and said softly, "Yeah babe. Listen, can I call you later?"

"Okay. Be careful, Tig."

"Always, babe. Bye." He snapped the phone shut and stood, choosing to ignore the smug grin on the bastard's face. "What's up?"

"Ronnie's got some intel on Tiny. Clay wants us all over at the roadhouse right away."
"'Kay." Tig shoved his phone back in his pocket and made for the door, letting the Scot lead the way.

"How's the lass? Lost? Wandering around aimlessly without you? Forgetting how to tie her shoes?"

"Shut up," Tig snapped back.

"Christ, a call from a girl and you're blushing like a cheerleader."

Fuck. He was so damn transparent. "Jealous?"

"Of that lass?" Chibs shrugged. "I know better than to answer that question."

That made Tig laugh, and they crossed the parking lot to the roadhouse's back door, walked down a side hall for employees only and into the empty bar room. The rest of his brothers were there, along with the proprietor of this fine establishment. A few women who served a familiar purpose were lounging on a sofa across from the bar where the men were, in waiting he guessed.

Ronnie clasped fists with Chibs in greeting, and then did the same to Tig with a shoulder grasp. But his eyes didn't come to Tig's and he let go of his hand fast, wiping his palms on his jeans and saying brightly, "What can I get my guests to take the edge off, hey?"

Ronnie had been a member of the Indian Hills Devil's Tribe chapter until he fucked up a sting the club had going on a pimp. He got drunk, passed out, didn't call for help. A brother died because of it and he lost his kutte and ink. He ran this roadhouse but managed to be about fifteen years sober at the same time. He was the most mellow cleaned-up drunk Tig knew, but right now he was humming from nerves.

Tig's eyes cut to Chibs, and he saw that the Scot picked up on the same thing he did. Tig brought his frown around to Clay to find that his prez had an eye on their host as well.

"Everything okay there Ronnie?" Clay asked, almost jokingly.

The guy laughed, putting a bottle of Jack Daniels on the bar next to some Patron. "Of course. So what's been new with you guys?"

Tig didn't sit, neither did Chibs. Actually, Chibs crossed to the side of the bar closest to the door and Tig drew closer to Clay, putting himself somewhere between the twitchy bartender and his friend.

"You know, just another day above ground," Clay said slowly. By now Jax and Opie had picked up on the vibe, and were getting to their feet. Jax went to the door of the kitchen and Opie was checking the front windows.
"You guys okay?" Ronnie asked, scratching his cheek and nose, very jittery. "You're making me nervous."

"I think you were already getting nervous when we walked in Ronnie," Clay was replying when they heard bikes.

"Who is it?" Chibs asked Opie.

"Mayans," Opie said, reaching for his piece immediately and they all did the same, Clay reaching across the bar to grab Ronnie by the back of the neck and slamming his head against the wood top, pressing the muzzle of his pistol to the guys' temple.

"What the fuck is this?" Clay asked like he was inquiring about a questionable addition to his restaurant bill.

"Nothing personal man, they asked me to let them know when you were here. That's it."

"In exchange for what?" Jax shouted.

"So they don't deal their shit here and they'll tell Tiny I'm sacred ground, man," Ronnie was sputtering. "That guy's dealers are fucking crazy, I can't have them around here. My daughter works here, man. Come on."

Clay and Tig shared a look, and Tig headed for the arrangement of ass on the sofa. "Okay ladies, you're dismissed early. Let's go."

Definitely pros. They didn't squawk or shriek, just headed for the kitchen door Jax was holding open for them in a single, orderly line.

Clay let Ronnie up, barking out, "You fix this you son of a bitch."

"How?"

Clay circled around the bar and grabbed Ronnie's shirtfront. "You go out there and tell them to fuck off."

"Are you nuts? They'll probably kill me."

"It'll give me time to figure out how to fix this fuck-up you created," Clay returned like he was agreeing with him. "And if they don't kill you, I might do it." With that he shoved the man out his own front door and shut him out, locking the dead bolt.

"What do we do?" Opie asked, shutting the last of the blinds on the front of the roadhouse.

Clay shook his head. "Alvarez reached out for this meet. Don't know if this is his trap or if Tiny caught wind later on."
Tig flicked his safety off. "Let 'em in, I say."

"Wait," Jax shouted, rushing forward. "If Alvarez is working with Tiny we can't do anything else to piss Tiny off. We should at least find out how Alvarez and Tiny are connected."

Clay's jaw was working, but he was stewing it over.

"At least talk to him," Jax added, calm.

Clay looked to Tig, and all he could do was shrug. "A chance to find out more about this fucking ghost, man," Tig said, agreeing with Jax. Again.

Clay finally nodded. "Okay. Tig, you're with me. Opie, you too."

Both of them nodded, Tig pulling the open door before raising his hands and stepping into the dying sunlight, gun in sight. He felt the tingle he always got when he was doing something stupid, something that was going to maybe get him killed. It was excitement.

The Mayans were just standing in a cluster, arms crossed, no weapons drawn. Alvarez was at the head of his crew, their numbers six to the Sons' five. Tig had a moment of confusion, then shouted over his shoulder, "Clay."

His president stepped out behind him then moved next to him, hands up as well. That's when Alvarez started walking forward. At the same time Opie took Clay's other side.

Tig knew Clay could handle Alvarez so he kept his eyes on the Mexicans still just standing there like they were at a fucking barbecue.

"So, how's it going, ese?" Clay asked with some sarcasm.

Alvarez shrugged. "I think we've got a common nuisance, Clay."

"How's that?"

Alvarez spared Tig and Opie a glance. "This dude called Tiny. He's ruthless but well connected. He wants to work with us. I'm entertaining the idea out of respect for his stepfather. I just want to know the Sons' view on him."

Clay raised both eyebrows. "Drug dealers ain't usually our friends."

Alvarez nodded. "Unless they're Darby's men?"

Clay sighed. "That's our business. We're trying to bring Tiny out. That's all."

Alvarez nodded more. "You don't know which one he is," he said with a slight smile.
Tig felt his skin prickle.

"Do you?" Clay asked.

Alvarez chewed the inside of his lip for a moment. "Yeah, I do."

Tig wanted to beat it out of him quite suddenly and it took effort to stay put.

"Midget or the soccer dad?" Clay asked.

Alvarez laughed. "Soccer dad? That's a new one."

"Who is it?" Clay repeated.

"We're both business men, Clay. What's in it for me if I tell you?"

Clay sighed. "I ain't letting you in Charming."

Alvarez shook his head. "We both want Tiny gone. He's reaching out to us for transport. But he knows about Darby's men in his crew."

That brought their attention around. "What?" Clay snapped.

"He knows he's got two rat dealers. After Ronnie called me this afternoon, I got another call from Tiny. He told me to surprise you here. He wants us to tear you up, I just want to know why."

"Do you want to work with Tiny?" Clay wanted it clarified.

"That guy's too fucking greedy and way too angry. Might work in big cities where the territory needs defending. But in our towns Clay, it's always a hostile takeover. Which means blood. And you and I both know that doesn't work."

Clay gave Tig and Opie a look. Tig shook his head, Opie shrugged.

"Tiny's looking for his step-brother. He was sent here to find a junkie who owed him over forty grand," Clay shared. "Now spill – which one's Tiny?"

"You kill the step-brother?" Alvarez asked.

"Never seen him," Clay answered immediately. "Who's Tiny?"

Alvarez grinned. "All right. Fair enough. Since we both want Tiny gone, it would be helpful to know who you're looking for. Elrich Constantine is a midget. A Mexican midget," he clarified with a nod, turning away and heading back to his crew.
Clay turned on his heel and headed back inside, Tig and Opie backing in and watching the Mayans climb on their bikes and fire up their engines.

"What the fuck was that?" Opie muttered as they headed back inside.

Tig shook his head. "I have no idea. But I think, for the moment, we got some Mayan friends. Sorta."
Chapter 76

"Calvin, can you help me with the dishes?" Jamie called to the living room.

Calvin returned to the kitchen, not thrilled to be helping but not complaining, either. She handed him the dishes to dry, then he stowed them away in the cupboards he could reach.

"So," she said, trying to keep her tone light and all this isn't a big deal. "That was a bit of a different day today, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," he agreed, drying a small group of forks before dropping them in the drawer. "But it was pretty cool. Happy's really good at shooting. And so is Miss Gemma."

Jamie had to grin. "Miss Gemma?"

"She said to call her Gemma. But that feels weird."

"How come?"

"She's an adult."

"What about Happy, Tig and Chibs?"

Calvin looked thoughtful. "Aren't those their nicknames though?"

"I guess so."

"Gemma's her real name. And she's … she's just different from those guys. She told me not to call her Missus Morrow or ma'am. But I don't want to make her mad."

Jamie had to laugh. "Well, I certainly understand that."

"Do you know what Tig's real name is?"

"His first name is Alexander," Jamie supplied.

"What about Chibs?"

"Fillip."

"Where's he from? His accent is hard to understand sometimes."

"He's Scottish, Peanut."
"What's Happy's first name?"

Jamie frowned, rinsing the suds from a plate and handing it to him. "I don't know, actually."

"Maybe it's Happy."

Jamie shrugged. "Maybe. But that'd be an ironic name."

Guess The First Name continued until the dishes were done, then Jamie had Calvin sit at the table with her for a moment.

"You're a smart kid," she started with. "That's the only reason I brought you with us today."

He nodded. "Okay."

"If I'm going to have a gun in this house I need you to promise that you will never under any circumstance touch it."

He nodded again, eyes a bit wider. "I won't, I promise."

"I would hate for you to get hurt, Peanut. I'm putting it in the drawer in my nightstand. I'm hiding the ammunition though. I want your word you're not going looking for it."

"I won't, Aunt Jamie. I promise."

She nodded, holding up her hand with her little finger crooked. "Pinky swear."

He linked his pinky in hers and shook. "Pinky swear."

"And like I said, I trust you. You're a smart kid. I don't like it, but there are some bad people after your mom and I want this gun to make us feel safer, not more in danger. But you have nothing to worry about," she hurried to tag on, internally giving herself shit. "We're all going to take good care of you, Peanut."

He nodded. "I know. And it's really cool that Tig takes me to school on his bike."

Jamie winced. "Yeah, that makes me a little nervous, actually."

"All the other kids think it's cool, too. And look!" He got up and went running for the living room, coming back with his backpack. He pulled out an envelope and opened it. "Next weekend is Dylan Green's birthday, and he invited me!"

With a growing smile, Jamie took the bright birthday invitation from him and opened it, fighting the urge to cry a little bit. He'd been invited to an actual birthday party. Only because this Dylan kid thought it was cool that he knew Tig, but still … a birthday party.
"Peanut, this is awesome," she agreed, opening it. "What do we get him for a present?"

Calvin shrugged. "He always listens to music. I thought an iTunes gift card would be good."

"Really?" She was pleasantly surprised. "That's a very thoughtful gift, Peanut."

He shrugged and pushed his glasses up.

Jamie frowned. "We're getting you new glasses. Well, we'll at least order them before I have to have more treatments."

"Okay," he said, standing up and reaching for the birthday card.

"Remind me to call the eye doctor on Monday, okay?"

"Can we afford it?"

Jamie gave her best attempt at a smile and reeled him in for a hug. "Don't worry about money, okay? That's my job. I'm sorry I made you worried about that."

While she smothered her nephew a loud rumble drew closer to the house and Calvin wiggled away. "Tig's back already?!" he shouted and ran for the door.

Jamie got to her feet. "Calvin, you don't know for sure who's out there."

"It's Tig – I know his bike."

Jamie frowned at that but followed, stopping Calvin from just opening the door and peering out the peep hole first. It was Tig. She could see him under the street lights, being greeted by … she guessed it was Happy.

She backed away and let Calvin yank the door open, flying down the stoop and crossing the lawn diagonally to greet Tig. "You're back early!" he shouted, coming to an abrupt halt in front of him.

Jamie put a hand to her heart as Tig grinned down at him. She thought Calvin would throw himself at him in a big hug, then it seemed he had a second thought. That wasn't cool, after all. And Happy was there. So Tig held a fist out, Calvin bumped it, and Tig mussed his hair. "Hey Charlie, how was your day?"

"Miss Gemma and Happy taught Aunt Jamie to use a gun!"

Tig gave Happy a nod, then the gravel-voiced Son headed for his bike. Tig grabbed Calvin's shoulder and gave it a good shake, then followed him up the walkway.
Jamie was watching this with a smile, still waiting for it to kick in that this was insane to let this much madness into their lives with such great acceptance. But it didn't come. She was happy Tig was here, that he wasn't spending the night anywhere other than next to her. She loved how he listened to Calvin prattle on with a smile, injecting and teasing him like Calvin was a long-time buddy.

And when he got to the bottom of the stairs and cast those blue eyes upward at her, she felt a thrill run through her and his smile widened. He dropped his bag at her feet, pulling her close by the hips and wrapping his arms around her, face in her neck to inhale deep as she immediately wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

Ten hours. He'd only been gone for ten hours and she was so relieved to have him back it was like a warm rush running through her.

"Babe," was all he said, muffled by her skin.

She grinned. "So silly how much I missed you."

He pulled back and rubbed his nose along hers. "I like that," he informed her with a quick peck on the lips. "Let's get inside, my back's killing me."

"Okay," she agreed, taking his hand and turning for the door.

Calvin grabbed Tig's bag and darted in ahead of them, tossing it on the floor next to the sofa and turning his attention back to the TV. Tig shrugged out of his cutte, a term she understood better now. He folded it and placed it on the back of the sofa then flopped down on the far side of the couch from Calvin. Without asking she headed to the fridge, grabbed a bottle of beer, popped the top and brought it to the living room, holding it out to the rough and less-scary-with-each-passing-day biker who was as immersed in the television program as the nine-year-old next to him.

He took the beer, caught her hand with his other one and yanked her down to his lap, kissing her cheek, taking a drink and turning back to the TV.

Jamie settled into him, sighing. It was contentment, honest happiness. A quiet night at home like a real family. Calvin had a, hopefully real, friend. She had new friends, who might be scary and possibly felons but they were still nice to her, and her head was resting on the shoulder of a man she was growing so fond of she couldn't stand him being gone for a few hours.

Perfect.

"Babe?"

She opened her eyes, surprised, to see Calvin and Tig both looking at her. "Sorry," she mumbled, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. "Did I fall asleep?"
Tig was smiling but he still looked concerned. "Time for bed, babe."

"Yeah, I didn't take a nap today."

Tig stood up with her in his arms now, making her squeak in surprise.

"You put yourself to bed at a decent time Charlie. I'll make sure Aunt Jamie gets tucked in."

Jamie's fatigue was gone and her heart jumped at that, making her bite her lip as Tig grinned at her and started down the hallway.

"I'll go to bed after this movie," Calvin promised, not looking away from the TV even as Tig nibbled the side of her neck and made her squeal.
Chapter 77

Jamie's head was thrown back, bottom lip between her teeth to keep quiet, and she ground herself all the way down onto him, her body shaking and trembling. His fingers bit into the flesh at her hips, holding her there so he could feel it work through her from the inside out. Tig had finished seconds before, perfectly happy to watch her now.

As was her new tradition, when she was more under control she collapsed forward onto his chest, whispering a soft and happy "Tiggy" before kissing him sweetly, her back easily accessible like this so he could run his hands all the way up to her neck. When they were alone she'd taken to crying out Tiggy loudly which was even better.

"My girl's a liar," he said quietly with a grin, lips brushing hers as he spoke.

"What are you talking about?"

He sat up and flipped her to her back, making her gasp then giggle. "You told me you were tired."

She grinned as he kissed her again, he could feel it against his lips. "I was tired," she insisted.

"But this negates tired."

He pressed a kiss to her throat then parted from her, headed into the attached bathroom to get rid of the glove and clean up, then returned to her room, pulling on his shorts. After the break-in he axed sleeping naked.

Jamie felt the same. When he came back to bed she'd pulled on that SAMCRO T-shirt she'd stolen from his dorm, curling up on her side with the blankets to her hip, wig stowed away where he couldn't see that fucking Styrofoam head, watching him with a smile. The second he settled on his back she was stretched out along his side, hand on his chest, head on his shoulder.

"Clay called Lowen for you," Tig said softly, reaching out to turn off the bedside lamp. "She'll go down to the station tomorrow to talk to Jackie. As far as anyone knows she'd been booked but no one knows what her bail was set at. So Lowen will let us know that, too."

"Okay," she whispered. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry that happened with you and Calvin there. That sucks."

She nodded.

"Babe, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."
"We think Tiny might know about the dealers that we got inside his network. Do you have any idea how they might know that?"

There was a pause. "No. Why would you ask me that?"

"Because no one else knows but you and SAMCRO, babe."

There was a long pause, then she exhaled. "I ... I told Jackie today."

His grip tightened on her, a subconscious reaction. "What?"

"I told Jackie Tiny hadn't been seen in a while, and she wanted to know how we could be so sure. I told her about the dealers."

Tig closed his eyes, took a deep breath. "When was this?"

"When we were walking to go for lunch. Just before she got picked up."

He counted to five. "All right. Thelma didn't know, right?"

"No, absolutely not. I don't think she wants to know more than she does."

Tig's mind was racing so much so that he didn't realize she'd stiffened in his arms until she spoke. "Shit, Tig? Did I fuck up?" Judging by her voice she sounded close to tears.

He flicked the lamp back on, and she rose up on an elbow, pulling away from him. He didn't like that; it was as though she was afraid of him now. He rolled to his side, too, and held her by the chin with one hand. "Babe, I'm more worried your sister fucked this up. Did she call once she was taken in?"

Jamie shook her head. "No, no calls and no missed calls while I was out."

He cursed under his breath and sat up, feet on the floor, reaching for his jeans.

"What are you going to do?"

"I have to call Clay. See if he can get Unser to confirm that she's still actually locked up." He wrestled his cell free of his jeans pocket and flipped it open.

"Will Clay hurt her?"

Tig turned sideways on the bed, meeting Jamie's searching glance head-on. "Babe, we ain't gonna hurt her. But if she did something stupid she'd in danger."

Jamie bit her lip and her brows came together as Clay answered the cell.
"Better be good," was the prez's greeting of choice this late at night.

"I might know how Tiny found out about our little Nord spies."

"How?"

"Jamie told her sister about them today, right before the arrest."

"Goddammit."

"Think Unser can find out if she's still locked up?"

"I'll try calling him. I told you that fucking junkie was more trouble than she was worth."

"Yeah, yeah. I know."

"Keep your phone close. If she's loose you're the one going looking for her. Your girl talked, you find the fucking sister." Then he hung up.

Tig's jaw clenched, then he snapped his phone shut.

Jamie spoke body language fluently. "I'm sorry. I got you in trouble, didn't I?"

Tig slid his hand around the back of her neck to pull her close for a quick kiss. "Nah, babe. If your sister talked, she's the one that got me in trouble."

"Shit," she hissed, nearing tears. "I fucked up."

"Jamie," he said firmly. "Don't worry. For all we know she's in lock-up and Darby's guys are loose-lipped. Right?" He didn't feel certain about this, but he didn't like her crying over this shit.

"I told her, then I immediately knew I shouldn't have. Shit. I'm so stupid."

He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her, which she didn't do in return. Her palms were covering her face while she cried, and he fought down a violent urge to wrap his arms around her sister's neck and squeeze.

Tig fully believed that junkie ratted out Darby's men. She was probably hoping to erase some of her debt with that intel. Then what? Tiny would send someone post her bond so she could go back to him? Then she'd owe him even more money? Then, knowing her, she'd run. And not in a clever way, either. She'd run in a sit at the bus station in full view all night waiting for the first bus to leave kind of way.

His cell rang, and as he reached for it Jamie pulled away, curled up with her legs to her chest and rested her forehead on her knees. He was rubbing her back when he answered.
"Clay?"

"She's fucking out. Released just before the cashier left for the day. Some guy in jeans and a sweatshirt, hat, nondescript. She's out there with intel and we have no fucking idea where she is."

Tig was nodding now, getting to his feet and reaching for his clothes. "Okay, okay. I'm going out looking for her. I'm starting at the bus station."

"You find her you call me and bring her to the clubhouse. She'll be locked down there so she can't pull any more stupid shit."

Tig inhaled, casting a concerned look at Jamie. "We don't know that she actually told anyone, Clay."

"Yeah? That makes me feel better. Thanks, Tig," he snapped before hanging up.

Tig closed his phone with a quiet "Shit," then pulled his shirt on and sat on the edge of the bed. Jamie was still in a protective ball.

"Babe?" he asked softly.

"Yeah?" she replied, not looking up.

"I'm going to find her before Tiny gets her, okay?"

"Okay."

"Babe?"

No answer this time.

"Jamie, you didn't mess up. We'll get Jackie and we'll make sure she's safe, okay?"

"Okay."

He stood up, leaned over to kiss the top of her head. "Hey," he whispered, making her look up at him. "None of this should touch you, remember? This is gutter shit, and you're one of the good people, babe."

"Am I?"

He brushed his lips on hers. "Absolutely." Then he headed down the hall, made sure Calvin was safely tucked in, and left the house as silently as he could.
Chapter 78

The soft sound of the television woke her gently, and immediately Jamie knew she was still alone. She turned her head to the side, where Tig usually slept, and sure enough, the bed was empty. She sat up stretching, looking at the clock. It was ten in the morning; she'd really slept in today.

Shoving the blankets off her legs before standing, Jamie covered a yawn with one hand and pulled on some flannel pyjama pants before heading down the hall to the living room. Calvin was spread out on the sofa, immersed in television. She frowned when she saw a very young Jack Nicholson and an incredibly young Dennis Hopper on the screen, then realized he was watching *Easy Rider*. No surprise there, at least it was edited for TV.

"Morning Peanut," she greeted him with a kiss on the head. "What should we have for breakfast?"

"Can we have pancakes?"

She smiled and ruffled up his hair. "You got it."

"Would you like me to help?"

"No sweetie, I got it. Thanks though."

She was storing the completed pancakes in the warm stove when her phone rang. She picked up the cordless, holding it between her cheek and shoulder as she pulled maple syrup out of the cupboard. "Hello?"

"Jamie? Have you heard from Jackie yet?"

Shit, Aunt Thelma. "Oh, Aunt Thelma," Jamie started, setting the syrup on the table and flopping into a chair. "I think Jackie did something stupid yesterday."

"What? What did she do?" There was an exhausted acceptance to this in Thelma's voice.

"Someone posted bail for her. She got out late last night and didn't call me, I'm guessing she's not with you either?"

"No, she's not. I called there today to ask how much her bail was and they said it had been posted by some young guy."

Jamie rubbed her forehead. "Tig had to tell the club last night. He's been out all night trying to find her before Tiny does."
"That girl … what are we going to do with her?"

Jamie swallowed. "I think I messed up, Aunt Thelma. I told her some club stuff just yesterday, and last night Tig said the bad guys know about it now and … shit, Thelma. That's all my fault. I told Jackie something and now the bad guys know about it."

Thelma sighed. "If Jackie told anyone anything, she's the one that fucked up. Trust me."

Jamie raised her eyebrows at the language on a Sunday morning. "That's what Tig said. But I think the club … well, I don't even know what I can tell you."

"Don't tell me anything unless you're asking me to take you and Calvin in. You're right, there's a lot going on I'd rather not know about, but if you two are in danger you need to come here. I mean it, honey. And if he cares about you, Tig will understand that."

Jamie knew that, too. She didn't know where the certainty came from, but Thelma was right. As always.

"If they find her, I'll call you," Jamie promised, switching tracks slightly. "And if we need to leave town, I'm coming to you. Absolutely." Thelma sighed and Jamie winced. "I'm sorry you're getting pulled into this."

"None of this is your fault Jamie."

"If I didn't have that bizarre but charismatic neighbour -"

"Jackie would still find a way to self-destruct," Thelma finished for her, cutting her off. "As much as Tig and his friends might make things trickier, this isn't their fault, either. I am, however, worried if Jackie's pissed them off on top of everything else."

Jamie bit her lip. "Tig said they won't hurt her."

Thelma sighed. Again. "Is he the president? What's the patch on his chest say?"

Jamie frowned. "Umm, he's the Sergeant at Arms. Whatever that means."

Thelma paused, for way too long.

"What? What does that mean?"

"That means he protects the president. He's the most loyal one in the group, according to the man in charge. He knows that Tig will always have his back. So if the president is unhappy with Jackie …"

Jamie felt a cold chill run up her spine. She knew who the president was, of course. He wore it on his chest, too. And Clay made her uneasy.
"He won't let Jackie get hurt."

Another sigh. "Jamie - "

"He won't," she insisted, stronger. "Not because he cares about her, but because it would hurt me and Calvin. He won't let that happen."

"All I'm saying honey," Thelma went on gently, "is that it won't be up to Tig."

Jamie let the calm coldness seep in at that statement. "So they'll kill her?"

"I don't know, honey. Jackie's the one that said they kill to protect what's theirs."

Jamie fiddled with the hem of the SAMCRO T-shirt she suddenly wanted to be out of. "Thelma, this is bad."

"Jamie, honey -"

"No, this is bad. I think … shit," she whispered, losing her nerve and pinching the bridge of her nose.

"What honey? Is there something else?"

"I think I'm falling in love with him."

Long pause on that one.

"When I realized what Jackie might have done, I wasn't worried about her, or me. I was worried I got him in trouble."

Thelma took a moment, and her tone stayed soft. "I know this might seem … exciting or -"

"No," Jamie interrupted. "It's not that. It's not that at all. I'm talking about having him here sitting on my couch and watching TV with me and Calvin. The way he laughs and jokes with him like a buddy. I'm talking about waking up to him calling me babe and kissing my shoulder. Having him make me a stupid fruit smoothie without complaining." She stopped because her eyes were wet and she didn't want to alarm Calvin, who'd stayed in the other room this entire time.

Thelma was silent again.

"I am, aren't I? I'm falling in love? That's why I'm so panicked that I might have got him in trouble? He's not mad at me about this but if this is bad, I mean really bad with Jackie, what if he hates me for it?"

"Honey, please calm down."
"That's what this is, right?" It was a hushed, horrified whisper. "This panic. This tightness around my heart?"

"Jamie, listen." Thelma almost sounded like she was smiling, but that was impossible. "On any given day I would be so happy for you over this. But you're smart to be worried, honey. If you decide to take it all the way with Tig, be his one-and-only-forever, you have to be all-in. Accepting of everything he is and not want him to change. He won't leave the club, Jamie. That will always be part of his life and yours if you share it with him. Not just until all this drug dealer nonsense is sorted. That club is forever, and I hate to be a pessimist but once this drama is over another one will be right behind it because that's his life, Jamie."

"I know," she whispered. "But I want him, Thelma. I want him so much."

Thelma sighed softly. "I will always worry about you and Calvin, but I can't stop you from doing anything, Jamie. You're an adult, and Calvin's your legal ward. I trust you to take good care of the both of you. And as much as I trust Tig to take care of you – and I really do honey, I mean that – it won't always be his call. You have to keep that in mind, too. You have to be true to him and that club."

Jamie frowned. "How do you know so much about this?"

Thelma allowed a slight laugh. "They call themselves a club, but they all follow the same gang mentality, honey. They replace the family that people never had."


"Like I said; you're an adult, you take care of yourself and there's nothing I can say or do about it. But I'd be lying if I said the thought of this life touching Calvin doesn't terrify me."

"Are you okay, Aunt Jamie?" The voice was soft, coming from the archway. Jamie looked up, almost feeling guilty.

"Hey Peanut," she said brightly, wiping her eyes and holding a hand out. He came forward, took her hand and let her hug him. "I'm talking to Aunt Thelma. You want to say hi?"

"Okay," he replied agreeably.

A chicken shit move - pawning her aunt off to the adorable nephew to avoid more tough talk - but that's all Jamie was capable of. She got up to finish setting the table for pancakes, mind churning and gut rolling the whole time.
Chapter 79

"Have you slept yet?" Jax asked, and Tig was a half-second slow turning to face the Vice President.

"Nah," he mumbled roughly, rubbing his forehead.

"Go get some sleep," Jax advised. "If we find her I'll call you."

Tig shook his head, downing the last dregs of a greasy-spoon diner cup of coffee. "Nah. Clay said this is on me."

Jax sighed, studying his mug. "If it's anyone's fault it's the junkie's."

"I know. But I told Jamie."

Jax shrugged. "She didn't go to the bad guys, either."

Tig shifted on the bench. "Doesn't matter, man. It's on me to contain this."

Jax was quiet again, thinking. The fucker was always thinking. "I don't know what Clay's going to do when we find her," Jax said.

Tig shrugged. "Me either."

"What if she's done for?"

Tig set his jaw and looked out the window at the Sunday-morning traffic. "Then she's done for," he answered, hoping it sounded indifferent.

Because he wasn't indifferent to that idea. He was scared shitless that Clay was going to kill Jackie on sight. He personally could give a shit, but he had no idea how he'd look Jamie in the eye again.

"You'll live with that?" Jax asked, looking like he didn't believe it.

"Clay's the president."

Jax checked for far-reaching ears, then leaned closer. "I'm having a problem with it Tig, and I know you do too. You're not okay with Clay killing her."

"So what then?" he said back, low and caustic. "We let her go on her happy, trip-the-light-fantastic way? Fucking up all over the place? She'll get herself done in anyway. We're saving someone else the headache."
Jax pursed his lips together and looked away, shaking his head. Tig hoped that convo was done.

Chibs rejoined them from his bathroom break. Tig had been riding all over Charming all night, then in the next morning Jax sent a text that he and the Scot would come help hunt down the junkie. They'd found nothing, and none of the motel desk clerks or nightlife bartenders had seen her.

"You look like shite," Chibs remarked, digging a pack of smokes from a pocket in his kutte. "You should sleep. Let me and Jax take over. I'm sure Bobby will help, too."

Jax nodded with a pointed look in Tig's direction.

"Clay said this was my job," Tig replied emotionlessly.

"And if you crash your bike because you fell asleep the rest of us get shit for letting you ride," Chibs replied smoothly, always with a smartass answer for everything.

"Go home, grab a few hours' shut eye, then call me to see where we're at," Jax recommended, moving his empty mug out of the way. "I'll make sure no one hurts her."

Tig didn't miss the way Chibs' eyes flicked to Jax in confusion. Still, it did sound like a good idea to go see Jamie. That always made him feel better.

"Okay. But call me in three hours, okay? I'll meet up with you guys wherever you are."

"Just make sure you sleep," Jax advised with his smart-ass grin.

"Tiggy!" Chibs said in a falsetto, eyes up towards Tig as he stood, stupid grin on his face.

"Tiggy!" Jax gasped out in similar fashion, the both of them outright laughing now.

It was a good thing Jamie didn't know how much these assholes gossip. She'd be mortified to come back to the clubhouse. Only a few had heard her loud enjoyment that one afternoon, but they all knew about it by now. Tig didn't know who spread that out, but the smart money was on Chibs.

He put his shades on, shaking his head and heading for the diner doors and his bike with their girly "Tiggy!" chorus following him all the way.

It was also a good thing he was heading to bed. His eyelids were heavy and wanted to stick together every time he blinked. Literally a road hazard; he pulled into the drive and wasn't sure how he even made it there. Half the route was a blur.

Tig let himself in the front door, the house quiet. He headed to the hallway, pausing in Calvin's doorway. The kid was on his bed reading, and he grinned at Tig as he paused in the doorway.
"Hey, Charlie. What you got for me?" he croaked quietly.

"Sometimes it's a little better to travel than to arrive," Calvin recited back, mindful of his volume so Tig knew Jamie was taking a nap.

He thought on that quote for a second. "I guess it depends on the destination, hey Charlie?"

"Yeah," Calvin agreed, flopping to his back and holding the book over his face to continue reading.

"I'm going to take a nap, that cool with you?"

"Sure. Have a good sleep, Tig."

Tig had to grin heading to Jamie's room. That kid was so mellow.

He pushed her door open and latched it behind him silently, the blinds drawn against the sun making the room dim as he pulled off the kutte and his shirt, dropping his jeans and kicking off the boots and socks. When he slid in next to her Jamie sighed, rolling to face him. She didn't even wake up, she just settled in close. He rested on his side, facing her in return, that smell that was uniquely Jamie making his eyes slide shut and his body fall into sleep within minutes.

…

"Tig? Aunt Jamie?" the voice was soft, whispered close to his face. Tig pulled away instinctively, frowning and opening one eye. Calvin was crouched close to the bed, biting his lip and looking concerned.

According to the alarm clock facing him he'd been asleep for about an hour and a half. He scrubbed his face with both hands and yawned. "What's up Charlie?" he asked quietly, feeling Jamie shift around behind him.

"Mom's here. She's at the back door. I didn't let her in. I didn't know what to do."

Tig frowned, arms falling to his chest. "What?"

"Mom's here. She wants to come in. She doesn't look good."

Tig blinked exactly four times then sat up. "Okay. Let me get my clothes on Charlie, I'll be right out."

Calvin darted into the hallway and Tig grabbed his jeans and pulled them on as Jamie sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Jackie's here," he told her as his shirt went on. "Stay here. She's at the back door, I think she scared Calvin."
"Shit," Jamie muttered, reaching for her pyjama pants.

"I'll decide if we let her in, okay babe?"

Her head came up. "Why wouldn't we let her in?"

Tig held her face between his hands. "She's wanted by bad people and she owes them big, babe. It could be a trap. Okay?"

Jamie nodded reluctantly. "Okay."

Her trust made his chest bigger. He kissed her forehead and grabbed his boots then made his way out the bedroom and to the hallway. He stopped to pull his boots on in the living room, making eye contact with Calvin where he sat on the couch.

"I got this buddy, yeah?"

Calvin nodded, eyes wide. Clearly his mother had freaked him right out.

Tig passed through the kitchen and yanked the interior door open, leaving the screen door between him and the woman he was really starting to dislike. Shit, she was a wreck. Her clothes were torn and filthy, her lip and eyebrow were both split, her hair was a rats' nest and she was crying. She was so upset she forgot to be scared of him.

"Please," she sobbed, hand hitting the screen door. "Please let me in. I didn't know where else to go."

Tig sighed, his head reeling. No way he wasn't calling Clay, but first he wanted to know what the hell she'd gotten herself into. So he unlocked the storm door, scanning the yard and deciding she was alone. So Tig yanked her into the kitchen by her arm.

"All right," he snarled, propelling her to the kitchen table and basically tossing her into a chair. " Fucking talk. And swear to Christ you tell me one more lie I'm tossing you back to whoever had you last. Because I'm done with you. Like, three weeks ago."
When she saw the state Jackie was in, Jamie's panic kicked in and she rushed to her, hugging her close. She'd clearly been beaten up, and her clothes were torn. She was already crying before Jamie got her arms around her.

"Jackie," she mumbled with concern. "What the hell happened?"

"Let her talk," Tig growled, and Jamie's head snapped up in surprise. She'd rarely heard this tone from him.

"Tig -" Jamie began but he cut her off.

"She has to talk, she has to tell us what she did so I can figure out the best way to deal with it," he answered her unasked question. His eyebrows went up like that might soften the blow of what he was about to say. It didn't. "Then I gotta hand her over to Clay and he'll lock her up at the clubhouse."

Jamie got to her feet. "No, Tig let's just take her to Thelma's -"

"You don't want her dragging her shit to Thelma's any more than you want it here, honey," Tig assured her. "Here's the thing. She doesn't owe people some money anymore." He indicated who he was talking about by jabbing his finger in Jackie's direction. "She stole from a very bad guy. Then she got arrested. Now, a smart person would stay in jail where guards are around to prevent themselves from getting dead. Your sister," another forceful pointing, "ran away, and we have no idea who the hell bailed her out. Now, she's only got one thing to barter with the guys she owes money to." His cold eyes slid to her sister. "She knows about the dealers we have informing to Darby, and somehow those assholes after her know about it, too. Hours after you told her and she got bailed out, another gang told us that Tiny's men knew about it, too."

"I didn't -"

"Not a word," the finger and the eyebrows came up again. "This girl also knows about the guy I killed here, and he wasn't a nobody, Jamie," Tig reminded her. "We're all a little jumpy about her being unaccounted for."

Jackie kept her mouth shut this time when Tig paused, and he drew closer, crouched down in front of Jackie, making her shrink away from him. Jamie couldn't see his face but she could guess what the expression might be. "Talk," Tig advised.

Still no sound.

"I'm trying to help you Jackie," Tig said calmly. "If I just hand you over to Clay saying you wouldn't cooperate … I'm not sure what'll happen."
"Tig!" Jamie was getting pissed, then she turned and realized Calvin was in the doorway.
"Calvin, go to your room for a bit, okay?"

Of course, he was agreeable to a fault so he nodded, pushing up his glasses and doing as he was told.

"Talk," Tig repeated once they'd all heard Calvin's door close.

"There's a guy in town I used to party with," Jackie said hollowly, staring at her hands in her lap. "He had money. He's married but she's a stick in the mud and we always had fun together. Usually we'd hook up at a hotel, do some blow, party all weekend."

Jamie's eyes closed.

"He's the one that introduced me to Tiny in the first place. He'd gone to Oakland for work, got hold of me because he knew sometimes I was out there. I met Tiny at a party."

Tig took a measured breath and Jamie pulled a chair out from the table to sit as well.

"What's Tiny look like?" Tig asked. "Is he a midget?"

Jackie was nodding. "Yeah, he is. I mean, I didn't get it. How people were so scared of him, but his stepfather had great connections and a bit of a soft spot for Tiny. That's what they said, anyway."

Tig was nodding with her now. "Okay, now we have two people saying that. Who bailed you out? How's he know Tiny?"

Jackie shrugged. "They were making money together. Some scam to set up cooks in Charming and Lodi. Tiny sent Clark in and Clark bought the properties, then when he was forced to renovate the meth cooks moved in. It was a sweet deal."

"The guy that bailed you out?" Tig said quickly, clearly excited now. "What's his name?"

"Clark … Davidson. Yeah, that's it. Clark Davidson."

Jamie felt her stomach drop, her blood slowed. "Holy shit," she whispered.

Tig frowned at her. "Clark Davidson … why does that name sound familiar?"

Jamie swallowed. "You beat him up for me, Tig. That's the guy that got handsy when I was cleaning his house."

Tig blinked twice, then it hit him and he said the weirdest thing. "Soccer dad. Son of a bitch."
He got to his feet, pulling out his phone and heading for the living room. Jackie reached across the table for Jamie's hand and she let her sister take it. "He bailed me out, but he was pissed, too. He thought I might have told the police about him. He beat me up, told me if the cops find out about him he'll know it was me that ratted."

Jamie squeezed her hand. "He should hope it's the police that come for him, Jackie."

"Don't let them hurt me," Jackie sputtered, eyes darting to the doorway, but Tig was still in the living room.

"They won't, Jackie. They want to keep you safe."

Jackie shook her head. "They don't trust me, either."

Jamie made a somewhat humoured noise. "How can they, Jackie? You keep running off and every time you do you make it worse."

Jackie nodded, lip quivering. "I know. I'm sorry, Jam-Jam."

"All right," Tig snapped from the doorway, phone being shoved back in his pocket. "Get up, Lindsay Lohan. I need you at SAMCRO right now."

"Why?" Jackie demanded, sounding terrified. Jamie stood and reached for Tig's arm.

To her surprise he let her lead him towards the archway, still close enough to keep an eye on Jackie. "Is she in danger?"

"If she's out on the street, yeah."

Jamie sighed, tilting her head. "I mean with the club, Tig. She's scared you guys might hurt her."

Tig sighed too, putting a hand on each of her arms and lowering his face to hers, speaking softly. "Babe, she needs to be locked up so she doesn't run, that's true. But I want her there to keep her safe because you care about her."

Jamie scanned his eyes and his expression, not finding any avoidance or falsity there. "Okay," she relented, not happy but agreeing for the moment.

"She needs to be smart. So you gotta keep her that way. She ain't be that way on her own, honey. You and me, we're the team that's going to make sure she doesn't get hurt. But I need you to help me with that. She loves you. She's gotta hear it from you."

Jamie felt each word almost like a cut, yet at the same time it made her stand up straighter. She nodded. "You're right," she said softly.
He smiled slightly, kissing her forehead. "That's my girl," he said sweetly, making her smile a bit.

Jamie turned back to her sister, who was still at the table, her leg bouncing, her heel tapping frantically on the linoleum. She was biting her thumbnail, staring into space. Jamie sighed and approached her, crouching down much like Tig had, but Jamie held her hands on Jackie's lap.

"Are you high right now?" she asked quietly.

Jackie's eyes came to her, and she didn't need to hear an answer. Her pupils were wide, crazed-looking. But at least she told the truth as she murmured, "Yeah."

"How much? Is it going to make you really sick tomorrow?"

Jackie shrugged, looking at her hands again. "Nah. I'll feel like shit, but it won't be like … DTs."

"Then you have to go with Tig to the clubhouse. Keep to yourself. Don't call anyone, don't make trouble. Just try to keep a low profile. Can you do that?"

Jackie was nodding, the tears building up again. "Yes."

"Good. Now you need to be smart and start trusting these guys, Jackie. Because I do. They've been good to me and Calvin. So please don't give them any more trouble, okay?"

Jackie stood, so Jamie did too, and they hugged each other tightly. Jackie was sobbing loudly, shaking the both of them. Jamie just felt … scared.
Chapter 81

Tig followed the van they sent for Jackie to the clubhouse. When they arrived Gemma was first to the vehicle, taking Jackie by the shoulder kindly and leading her down the hall somewhere to sleep it off. Jackie was wary but in no position to argue.

For Jamie's sake Tig pressed that Jackie was high and needed to sleep. He didn't want Clay scaring the crap out of her just yet. They had another link to Tiny they could easily follow up on; Clark fucking Davidson.

The guy had seemed so straight-laced Tig still couldn't believe the guy partied with tramps and blow. Although, they did appear to have the same taste in women.

He found Clay at the bar immediately. "You ain't gonna believe it, man," Tig started with, shaking his head. "Second confirmation that the midget is Tiny, plus I know who the other stand-in for Elrich Constantine. And he's a Charming native."

Clay looked ready to give Tig shit for stowing the junkie away, then he blinked a few times. "What?"

"He's the one Jackie called for bail. He's how she met Tiny. And Jamie used to clean his house."

That earned Tig a couple of surprised blinks. "You gotta be shitting me."

"Months ago Jamie came home one day, shirt torn, lip split, upset. He got grabby, she said no and he hit her twice. I stopped by, evened the score and convinced him to make a financial donation to make it right."

"Shit, Tig."

Tig shook his head, hand already up. "I went civilian, no colours. Swear, Clay. But chances are he already knew who I was with, right? I mean, we live here."

"Who is this guy?"

"Clark Davidson. He said he was a financial advisor, lives in a pretty nice place. Jackie confirmed the eviction and reno scam, too. He told her about it."

Clay was stewing on all this, it was obvious. "Well shit. Tiny knows about Darby's men and we know who his other stand-in is."

"Should we tell Darby about that? Give him a chance to alert them, pull them out?"

Clay shook his head, meeting Tig's eye. "No need. Darby found his guys dead this morning."
Tig sucked in a breath. "Shit."

"He's pissed, but Jax had been calling him last night and he was MIA. Said his phone was out of range, and now he's seeing the missed calls so we're covered."

Tig nodded. "Good."

"You and I are gonna find this Davidson guy. If Darby continues to get pissed, we hand him over to them. Make the peace that way. I don't mind anyone taking out Tiny's guys."

"Me neither."

"You remember where he lives?"

Tig felt his lips twist into a grin. "Oh yeah. I remember."

"Good. Grab Chibs, let's head there right now," Clay decided, shoving away from the bar.

"You got it. Tig headed for the hallway, catching the Scot at the doorway. "We gotta go. Found one of the guys that was posing as Elrich Constantine,"

"Really?" Chibs was as surprised as Clay.

"Jackie told me where he is. He's how she met Tiny in the first place."

"What a small world it is," Chibs quipped with a grin.

Tig groaned, shoving the bastard ahead of him. "Jokes like that are beneath you, man."

This time when Tig rolled towards Clark Davidson's neighbourhood he wasn't alone and the kutte was uncovered. Clay and Chibs followed his lead. The ugly stuccoed eyesore of a house looked the same as he backed his bike into a diagonal park job, brother to each side of him.

Clay hung a helmet off his handlebars. "Jesus Christ. This is his place?"

Tig removed his sunglasses, hitching them in the neck of his button-down. "Yeah. I figured he was some kind of investment high-roll, but if there's a bit of drug money at work here, it all makes sense. Plus, I blackmailed ten grand from him."

"Is he married?" Chibs asked, eyeing the street on either side of the house.

"Yeah. Although, she might be gone. I got the impression she was kinda done with him." Tig ran a hand down his chin, the rush of adrenalin hitting him right then. "So we keep him here for the entire interrogation?"

"If the wife is gone, for sure," was Clay's fast answer.
"What if someone calls the cops?" Chibs said as they made their way up to the door. Even after all the noise they still stood out, and the skin on the back of Tig's neck was tingled. He always took that to mean someone was watching.

Clay shook his head. "These neighbourhoods? They know the folks that don't really belong. They can smell it like bloodhounds. They know this guy ain't level. I'd put money on it." Clay knocked with the brass door knocker. "I can only imagine some of the folks this guy has stopping by."

Tig sniffed. Clay might be right, but this neighbourhood made him nervous for the same reason Chibs was a bit jumpy. They shared a look and Chibs nodded. He got the same feeling Tig did.

The door was opened and Tig felt the phantom anger creep back. Out of the three men on the prick's stoop, Clark's eyes went to Tig first, and he looked about ready to piss himself even before Clay shoved him into his cold and empty marble foyer. Chibs got the door shut before Clark started sputtering.

"I haven't been anywhere near the maid," he was whining as Clay and Tig herded him back into some kind of living room. But there was no fucking TV in it. "I swear, I haven't seen her in months."

Tig put a hand on his chest and shoved him into his own sofa. "Sit," he barked, circling around the back of the sofa. Clay remained standing in front of him, staring down. The bastard didn't know which way to look.

"Anyone else here?" Chibs asked sharply.

Now Clark had a third distraction and he was flapping arms and legs, almost a mockery of how freaked out he was. "What?"

"Anyone else here?" Chibs repeated, slower.

Clark looked to Clay. "I can't understand him."

Clay cocked his head as Chibs snorted. "Really?" Clay said. "He's speaking English."

Tig leaned over the back of the sofa, hand on the cushions to both sides of Clark, bringing his head closer to Clark's right ear. "Where's the wife, asshole?"

Clark jumped and pulled away from him, eyes starting to roll and get wide. "No. No, she … she left me months ago."

"Oh yeah, that's right," Tig mused, grinning up at Clay. "I think she partied with us once. The blonde."

Clay grinned. "Yeah. Fuck, she was hot, too. Sucked cock like a Dyson."
"I don't know, she seemed kinda desperate," Chibs added with a shrug. "You can only hear how good you are in the sack so many times before it gets old."

"You're trying to make me angry," Clark was muttering, mostly to himself. "She hated fucking, drove me nuts."

"Her tight, wet cunt makes that a lie," Tig informed him, close to his ear, elbows on the back of that sofa. "Not to mention the nail marks in my back, asshole."

Clark was sputtering, hands up. "Look, guys, just tell me what you want. I really don't know why you're here."

Clay raised a finger. "That's a good question, Elrich."

Clark stilled for just a half-second, then he gave a nervous laugh. "I think you've got the wrong house."

Clay sat on the low coffee table in front of Clark, leaning forward, elbows on knees. "We know you proxy land claims for Tiny, you prick. Cut the shit."

Clark rubbed his hands on his thighs, looking from Clay to Chibs and back to Clay. "Look, I can't talk about him. He'll kill me."

Clay reached into the back of his waistband, pulled out his Glock and set it on the coffee table next to him. "And just what do you think I'm going to do?"

Clark swallowed. Tig didn't see it, he heard it.

"If we get word to Tiny that we've got someone that belongs to him, do we have your cooperation taking him out?"

Now it was Tig's turn to share a glance with Clay and Chibs. He should have known: keep Jackie around for bait. Get her locked up and keep her in Charming, because Clay wasn't about to go after Thelma.

Tig was mostly annoyed that he was left out of this whole plan.

"If you want, that I can do. Yes."

Tig met Clay's look again. Clay nodded, Tig returned the gesture.

"You're coming with us," Clay informed Clark as he stood.

"What?"
But Clay was already pulling out a cell phone and dialling. Clark made like he was going to stand and Tig held him down by the shoulders as Clay barked into the phone, "Hap? Bring a van to – what's the fucking address here?"

Clark said it hollowly. On some level he knew how completely he was fucked.

It was a tense wait for the van with Clay pacing, Clark hovering, unwilling to relax on the stiff sofa, Chibs leaning on the wall with his hands in his pockets and no one saying anything. It was almost a relief when Happy and the cage arrived.

They shoved Clark into the back. The bastard was so resigned to his fate they didn't bother restraining him in any way. As Chibs and Clay headed for their bikes, Tig grabbed Happy's arm for a quick convo as he was opening the driver's door.

"Hey," he said low. "Were you reporting in to Clay while you were watching the girls?"

Happy nodded, working the toothpick in the corner of his mouth. "Yeah. He asked me to send him a text every time they changed location."

Tig frowned. "Why?"

Happy shrugged. "I don't know. He was worried about them?"

Tig inhaled. "Okay," he said simply, walking away.

"You didn't know about it?" Happy asked, a little loud.

Tig turned back, motioning him to keep it down. "No, I didn't," he said quietly.

Hap's jaw froze. "Huh. I figured it was for you."

_Then why wasn't I the one getting the texts?_ Whatever. Tig shook his head. "Nah, man."

"Why you asking?"

Tig shrugged. "I don't know. Just trying to figure out how Hale knew where Jackie was, that's all." Tig turned and headed for his bike before he said anymore that might get him in trouble.
Chapter 82

It was Monday. Which meant Calvin was at school, so Jamie was on her own. Tig was tied up at the clubhouse, more than usual it seemed. But she didn't know what was usual when it came to his life.

Yesterday saw her spending her time cleaning the bathrooms and doing all the laundry in the house. Tig hadn't been back since he took Jackie off, and he wasn't answering her calls. After about five unanswered tries he'd finally called her back and said they were busy. He assured her Jackie was still okay, taken care of. Now it was noon and she'd cleaned the kitchen, vacuumed the whole house, and started a pot of stew already. Jamie was glad her energy was returning. Kinda sucked that she was heading back to chemo on Wednesday, though.

It was in this pacing, bored state of mind she realized that Jackie was still at the clubhouse and likely only had the clothes she'd been wearing when she showed up here, beaten and terrified. Maybe they'd found something else for her to wear, but she likely needed stuff. The clubhouse was an extended mancave, and even with Gemma there running things Jackie was likely missing the necessities and unwilling to ask for them.

So Jamie went through her closets, finding a few items she hadn't worn in a while, and tossed them in an overnight bag. Then she drove to the pharmacy (her bodyguard was Juice today) dutifully following her and holding the shopping basket for her. Juice was actually a great partner for this. Plus he was pointing out the suspected carcinogens in most drug-store grade shampoos and body products for her.

She didn't miss how Juice had texted the second they got to the pharmacy and then again as they were loading the bags into her trunk. Jamie was just going to accept that, until Tiny was sorted out, her life was not entirely her own. If it meant her and Calvin were safe that was fine with Jamie.

The TM lot was half-full of bikes and a quarter filled with vehicles waiting for repairs. She parked close to the office, then headed to the trunk to pull everything out. Juice was quick to her rescue, saying emphatically, "I got it, Jamie."

She backed off and let him grab everything, then shut the trunk as Gemma's voice made its way to her. "I was just about to call you."

Jamie turned and smiled, accepting Gemma's hug. "What about?"

Gemma's head jerked towards Juice. "I was going to ask if you had any clothes for her."

Jamie smiled. "Great minds think alike."
"How you doing?" Gemma asked, falling into step with her while also seeming to lead the way to the clubhouse. It was an impressive skill.

"Good. I hated seeing her like she was. I hate it when she's high anyway but … scared and messed up is worse."

Gemma nodded, then put an arm around Jamie's shoulders. "Listen. I know this is hard to get used to, and the constant monitoring seems weird I'm sure, but we mean well, honey. I talked to Clay, and he just wanted to know where your sister was the entire time she was in our town. He asked Hap to do that."

"I know," Jamie cut in. "I think I get it. I just wish I knew who told the cops where Jackie was."

Gemma nodded sympathetically. "I know. But this dealer's got people all over town helping him from behind the scenes. You won't believe who the guys picked up as an accomplice."

Jamie had a feeling she did know, but she kept her mouth shut on this one.

Inside the clubhouse Jamie removed her sunglasses and Gemma snapped her fingers at a crow eater that Jamie recognized as Towel Girl. Or Diana, as her name turned out to be. She was always the nicest to Calvin.

"Where's Jackie?" Gemma asked, all business.

"Chibs' room," Diana replied with a grin.

Jamie balked a bit and Gemma snorted. "There's a shock," the older woman muttered. It sounded like it really wasn't.

"Gemma," Jamie said, and something in her face gave away a bit of panic because Gemma was already smiling.

"No one's forcing her to do anything, honey. But from what I saw last night your sister might have been a bit charmed by our Scottish friend."

Jamie shook her head and resigned herself to following Gemma. "That sounds like my sister," she admitted. "Was she drinking?"

"She's stone sober right now. Well, when I saw her this morning she was."

Gemma knocked on a door in the hallway, waited for a quiet "Come in" then pushed her way inside. Jamie followed, finding herself in a room much like Tig's. Her sister was in the bed, sitting up and pushing her messy hair out of her face and rubbing her eyes. She had a big black T-shirt on.

"Are you okay?" Jamie asked, sitting next to her on the bed.
Jackie's eyes tracked Juice as he set everything down on the floor inside the room and left the three women, shutting the door on his way out.

"I'm fine," Jackie said, covering a yawn.

"Are they … are they taking good care of you?" Jamie was scared to hear the answer.

Jackie gave a small smile and squeezed Jamie's hand. "I'm fine, Jackie. They're leaving me alone, I feel like I'm in a fortress here."

"No one's … making you do things you don't want to?"

Jackie's smile got wider. "What are you talking about? Are you asking if they're assaulting me?"

Jamie shrugged. "I don't know. You're in Chibs' room, I just -"

Jackie's laugh cut her off. "I was bored. I didn't feel like being alone. The scary one's a bit intense for me but Chibs …" she shrugged. "I like his face. He's been nice to me. And he was a great lay."

Jamie's face immediately got warm and she realized Gemma was still there when the woman laughed. "Christ, are you two sure you're related?" Gemma sputtered.

Jamie shook her head, feeling a laugh escape as well.

"Don't worry Jam-Jam. I'm leaving your man alone, swear to God. But his friends are fair game."

Oh God, she used the plural friends. "Leave Juice alone," she mumbled. "He's one of my favourites."

Jackie laughed. "Too baby-faced, Jamie."

"All right, you two are on your own. Have a good visit," Gemma declared, heading for the door.

When they were alone again Jamie turned back to Jamie, who was lounging up on the headboard, clearly perfectly comfortable in this room.

"So what else, Jam-Jam? Where's Calvin?"

Jamie sighed. "It's Monday, Jackie. He's in school."

"Shit, that's right."

"I'm bringing him by after. He learns how to box with Chibs most days."

Jackie looked surprised, then grinned. "He does?"
Jamie nodded. "It's kinda sweet, actually. There was a bully at school and … Tig said he should know how to defend himself. And I don't think Calvin would run around starting fights so … I said it was okay."

Jackie was still smiling. "Wow. I really like that, Jackie."

"Me too," she replied. "Well, I bought some changes of clothes. I stopped at the pharmacy and picked up shampoo, a tooth brush, stuff like that."

"Thanks Jamie." Jackie said, throwing the overs off and getting up. "I was sick of this shirt."

"I even got some regular old Hanes underwear for you."

"And that's why you're the best sister ever." Jackie crouched next to the bags Juice had set down. "And deodorant! Thank God!"

Jamie's stomach was in knots over everything that had gone down and where they were and all the circumstances shaping her day-to-day life. Yet Jackie, who was in immediate danger, was stoked about toiletries.

This was life.

"I'm going to go look for Tig," Jamie said, standing. "Enjoy your shower."

Jackie grabbed her in a big hug, the smell of cigarette smoke wafting over them both. "You're the best, honey."

"Yeah, I know. Do you know where the guys went?"

Jackie shrugged, carrying a plastic bag to the bathroom. "Chibs is in the garage, I'm pretty sure. I haven't seen Tig."

Jamie nodded and left her sister to get cleaned up. Then she went looking for the man she'd really been missing the night before. She always slept better with Tig next to her.
Chapter 83

"Hey, shift's done, babe," Tig informed Gemma, passing her on her way across the lot to the TM office. "Gonna head home, see Jamie."

Gemma smiled, stopping in place. "She's here. Visiting her sister."

"She is?"

Gemma squinted across the lot to the garage bays. "Clay's still got the guys reporting in on her."

Tig nodded. "Yeah, I know. I mean, if I ever want to know where she is I guess I can ask him."

Gemma patted his cheek. "Tell me, honey. Should we be getting jealous of them?"

Tig laughed at that. "Nah, you kidding? My girl's got all this coming home to her every night, Momma."

Gemma smiled and accepted his kiss on the cheek as he passed. He looked back once he had the clubhouse door open, but she was still standing in the same spot, staring across to the bay where Clay was working on a RAM.

"You all right?" he called out.

She nodded, then gave him a smile over her shoulder. "Just my imagination, Tigger. Don't worry."

He nodded and watched her continue on her way, then headed inside. As soon as he saw Jamie round the corner from the hallway he felt himself grin. He loved it when she wore tank tops and those faded jeans. When she saw him she smiled, just a little.

That was even better.

"Hey babe," he greeted her, stepping close and sliding his hands up her back to reel her in. He lowered his mouth to hers but she just gave him a quick peck and moved to step away. He tightened his grip. "Hey, what's going on?"

She sighed. "My sister was in Chibs' room."

Tig frowned. "Yeah, I know. She was all over him last night. I saw it."

Jamie tilted her head and looked up at him, clearly upset. "She's really vulnerable, Tig."

He sighed. "And an adult, babe."
"Your friend took advantage of her."

Tig set his jaw and stepped back. "Hey, wait a minute there, Jamie. That's quite an accusation."

"Do you think she maybe felt obligated?" Jamie quipped back.

Tig scrubbed his face with both hands. "Look, babe, I don't know how to tell you this. You've got this memory of your little sister being an innocent, but honey, I mean this, she ain't. That girl wasn't even fucked up on anything and she was in his lap more than anywhere else in this place. She had a room to herself, she didn't have to be out here with us."

It was true, too. Tig stayed the night mostly to wait for the plan on how Clark Davidson was going to be of use to them. A few beers turned into tequila turned into him falling asleep on the sofa. He felt bad, but he also didn't want to call Jamie and let her know he wasn't coming home in case she was sleeping.

Shit. He should have called this morning, but he got distracted. Just more proof that he was shit and the club stuff when having a life of his own, and shit as the life-of-his-own stuff when involved in club business.

"And you were alone last night?" she asked, voice small like she was scared of the answer or the reaction to her question.

Tig set his hand on the bar, raising his eyebrows. "Jamie, you gotta stop worrying about that shit. There hasn't been anyone else since you, I swear to Christ."

"Sorry," she replied, looking at her feet, hands sliding into the back pockets of her jeans and forcing her chest outwards.

Fuck, focus man. "Don't be sorry. Just stop asking me that."

She took a step back. "I'm just on edge with all this surveillance. And everyone telling Clay my every move. I don't like that, Tig. If you want to know where I go and when I get home I'll happily call and tell you. I don't like this."

He nodded. "I know. And I didn't know about it."

"Did you ask Clay why he's doing it?"

Tig shook his head. "Nah. I asked Hap, and he was told to report to Clay where you girls went on Saturday. No explanation, and it's really not up to us to question things."

Jamie crossed her arms. "Can you ask him why?"

Tig met her eyes, his guilt hitting hard again. "Yeah," he said softly. "When I get a moment alone, I'll ask him. But until this Tiny stuff is done -"
"Is that when life comes off pause? This mythical date when a drug dealer I've never met finally fucks off?" she was getting shrill and it made him frown, then she was stalking to the door.

He caught up with her eventually, getting hold of her arm as gently as he could. "Hey, talk to me babe. What's going on?"

Jamie wiped at her eyes, and he was pissed off she wasn't talking to him but upset enough to actually cry.

"I can't read minds, babe."

She sniffed, looked up and finally went soft on him again, tucking her face into his chest and wrapping her arms around his waist. He hugged her back, kissing the top of her head and rubbing circles on her shoulder. "Jamie?"

"I'm pissed off. I wanted a few nice, quiet days before … before Wednesday."

His grip tightened a bit. "I know babe. I wanted this wrapped up weeks ago. You know that."

"It's not your fault." She let him hold her for a while, then asked, "Did you pick up Clark Davidson?"

"Yeah. He's tied up in the can."

"He's handcuffed to the pipes under the sink. He has to sit there while people piss or take a dump," Tig felt himself laughing. It was still fucking funny.

"That's disturbing."

"We can't have him in the garage or out here. That's the best place." He slid his palms down her arms to take her hands in his. "Wanna kick him or something?"

She shook her head, but her lips were twitching. "No."

"You sure? Might be fun."

"No thanks," she was laughing now, wiping away the wet on her cheeks. "I should head home."

He studied her for a moment, believing her next run of treatments had her worried. Hell, he was worried, too. He hated that she was going to get sick again. "Okay, babe. I'll get Calvin for you today."

She shook her head. "No, Calvin's got a project he wants me to help him with. It's a surprise."
Tig frowned. "What?"

She sighed and looked away. "I can't tell you. It's a surprise."

"For who?"

"For you."

"Why?"

She became exasperated, slapping both hands down on his chest. "For your birthday. Don't let me wreck it any more than I just did."

Tig had no answer. His hands were on her shoulders and he had to swallow, gather his thoughts. "Charlie's making me a surprise birthday thing?"

Jamie smiled, watching his face. That's when he knew he probably looked like a total sap. "Yeah. He's so excited. So … leave us until about six tonight?"

Tig's very guts went all mushy on him, and he felt himself smile and pull her in for a tight hug. "I'll stay away until after supper. I'll nap here for a bit."

"Okay. Sorry, but he wants to surprise you."

He nodded, giving her a quick kiss. "I get it. I love it."

"Jamie, good, you're still here," a voice declared behind them. They both turned, Tig keeping his arm around his girl as she said a quick hello to Gemma.

"Supper tonight, our place. Bring the munchkin. Opie's bike is done, he's gonna ride it over. I bet Calvin would love to see it," Gemma said, almost all in one breath before letting the clubhouse door bang shut again.

"I guess we'll have to hurry up on Calvin's surprise," Jamie said wryly, and Tig chuckled.

Yep, his girl was learning the life alright. Not arguing with Gemma was a survival instinct.

Jamie looked up at him, prompting him to kiss her again. The little tart snuck her tongue out, which made him clamp onto her tighter, meet her tongue and get her gasping again.

"Babe," he growled, walking her backwards away from the clubhouse door and towards the dorms.

"Tig," she giggled, still kissing him back. "I thought you needed a nap."
"This negates sleep," he threw back at her, stopping and ducking to grab her behind her knees and heft her over his shoulder.

"Tiggy!" she squealed, and since she usually did that when he was making her come he went from half to full-mast in a half second.

"You're asking for it, woman."
"Miss Gemma's house is nice."

Jamie reached out, rang the bell, and smiled down at Calvin. "You think so?"

"Yes."

She was laughing as the door opened, unexpectedly by Jax. "Hey Jamie," he said warmly, leaning over and kissing her cheek. This group was big on cheek-kissing, she realized.

"Hi Jax," Calvin piped up.

"Hey Calvin. You see Opie's bike out front?"

Calvin nodded emphatically as they entered the foyer. "Yeah. He's still gonna paint it, right?"

Jax laughed. "You're hard to impress, man."

Gemma appeared at the kitchen entry, grinning and reaching out for the bowl of oil and vinegar coleslaw Jamie brought along. "Thanks, doll," Gemma said with an arm squeeze. "And how's Calvin?"

"I'm fine Miss Gemma," Calvin said politely.

Gemma's eyebrows went high. "I can't scare the manners out of you, can I?"

Calvin shook his head.

"Everyone's at the kitchen table," Gemma started, and Jamie felt bad.

"Oh no, are we that late?"

"Nah. The guys had an impromptu meeting. They just haven't moved their asses yet." Gemma dropped her eyes to Calvin. "Can I trust you to help us at supper? Will you sit with Ellie and Kenny and make sure they behave?"

"Sure."

"They're in the living room, right over there," Gemma explained, and Calvin was off like a shot, making Jamie grin as she shut the inside door behind her.

"He likes to be the helper," she remarked.
Gemma nodded and led the way to the kitchen. "Thank God for kids like that."

"What can I help with?"

Gemma set down the 'slaw, then turned back with two bottles of wine. "Take these into the dining room. Time the meeting broke up. I'm fucking starving."

Jamie laughed and did as told, entering the dining room around the large louvered dividers that split the kitchen from the eating area. There was some masculine chuckling going on, Jax taking his seat again as she set the bottles down. There were a couple bottles of JD on the table and from the volume of things that meeting had been over for a little while.

"How lovely, Lady Jamie is here," Chibs slurred, and she found herself chuckling since he was clearly inebriated. She even forgot her discomfort from earlier that day learning about her sister spending time in his dorm room.

"Hello Chibs," she said agreeably as other, familiar hands took her by the waist and pulled her into a waiting lap. Before she could act outraged Tig had her face in his grip and gave her a hell of a kiss, holding her so tight she couldn't get away, even as she shoved at his arms and kicked her feet a little bit.

The table broke into cheers and catcalls, but Jamie was mostly aware that she was blushing again and that Tig tasted and smelled of bourbon. When he finally let her go he was grinning wickedly, rubbing his nose up along the side of hers. "I felt I owed you that for this afternoon," he said low enough for only her to hear, and she felt her face get warmer still.

"Tig," she snapped, pretending to be annoyed. But now she was remembering that afternoon as well, bringing back the throbbing but slight discomfort between her legs. He'd been enthusiastic with her, fast and rough, but she could not have minded that much if her three orgasms were any indication.

"All right, Jamie brought coleslaw. Jax, go get the chops off the grill. Juice honey, come help me get everything else?" Gemma rattled off standing next to Clay's chair before leaning over to give him a kiss. "You need a beer?"

Clay nodded, and as his blue eyes came down to rest on Jamie again she gulped. Every time that man looked at her she could swear he was reading her mind and found it amusing.

"Can I take my seat now?" she asked Tig, finally getting out of his grasp and standing up. "Next to me," he ordered, kicking out the seat next to him. As she sat he dragged the chair closer to his. That was fine with her. It felt better to have him between her and Clay.

…
"He had something wrong with his heart, right?" Jamie asked Tara softly as the woman sat next to her, holding Abel Teller who was passed right out.

"Arrhythmia," Tara confirmed. "He was also premature. His mother had OD'd on heroin, nearly killed him."

Jamie was taken aback. "Oh. I'm sorry, I thought you were his mom."

Tara smiled. "I dated Jax in high school, took off to go to college. I got a great offer here and came back just in time to meet this guy." Her voice got soft as she studied the little boy in her arms. "I operate on babies. Their hearts. It was a hell of a coincidence."

"So, Abel's mother …"

"Jax's ex-wife. They'd been working on reconciliation, almost ended up together again before she nearly killed him."

Jamie watched Abel's face, completely lax in sleep, and shook her head. "He's tough."

"Like his dad," Tara added on a whisper. Then she looked up. "Did you want to hold him?"

Jamie shook her head. "No, it's fine. He's sleeping, don't wake him."

"He's asleep, that's all it takes," Tara insisted, shifting around and raising her arms.

"No, no. Really. Babies don't always like me."

"That's silly. They probably just sense your nervousness."

Before she knew it that incredibly warm, curled up body was in the crook of her right arm, her left hand resting over his chest, and his only reaction was turning his head to her body and sighing. Jamie felt herself smile.

"See?" Tara said, kissing the top of Abel's head. "Already he loves you."

"Yeah."

"How long has Calvin been living with you?"

"On and off for about three years, but consistently for the last four."

"He's lucky."

Jamie shrugged. "I'm lucky. Especially now with the chemo. I mean, he's mine as much as he can be. The only way I can be a mother now."
Tara was studying her with concern. "You know, there have been cases where the reproductive system repairs itself enough to conceive."

Jamie shook her head. "I think getting Calvin was my biggest stroke of luck. I don't see myself getting lucky twice. Not in a way *that* big."

Tara smiled, not sympathetic, just warm. Jamie looked back down to Abel, putting the tip of her finger in his little hand. In sleep he tightened his grip around her digit, barely stirring.

Hair on the back of her neck tingled and rose, so when she surveyed the room she already knew who was likely watching her. Tig was sitting on an armchair, angled towards Clay, Jax standing between them with a beer, laughing. Tig's elbow was on the armrest, propping up his chin with his hand. He was smiling at her, and Jamie smiled back.

He tilted his head to the side and down, almost indicating he was actually looking at the baby. Jamie studied Abel's round and perfect little face again, feeling that amazement that everyone came from something so small. When she looked up Tig's smile had faded and he was just looking at her like he was contemplating something. Something to do with *her*, but what she had no idea. Suddenly he closed his eyes and puckered his lips, sort of blowing a kiss her way.

Jamie let a laugh escape, looking down at Abel as Tara laughed too. "I never would believe that if I didn't see it myself," she muttered absently.

"What?" Jamie asked, shaking Abel's hand which was still gripping her finger.

"Tig Trager. Smitten."

"Everyone is surprised," Jamie shared. "I don't know why. He's probably one of the sweetest people I've ever known." Tara's face indicated she thought Jamie was nuts, but Jamie shrugged. "He takes good care of me. He's amazing with Calvin. He takes everything in stride and just … makes me happy."

Tara squeezed her knee, "Good. I think you make him happy, too."

"I hope so."
Chapter 85

"Oh God, Tig -"

"Get it babe, Jesus."

Jamie leaned away from him slightly, angling her hips, resting her weight on her hands which she clamped on his thighs. He was sitting upright, holding her around the back with one arm, her breast in his hand, eyes on her face as her head lolled back, mouth open.

"Tig, that's it!"

"Don't tell me, babe. Show me."

One thing had to be said; when his girl let herself go she really rode him with abandon. He just held on, enjoying the show a hell of a lot, feeling the smile. She was so fucking beautiful. He didn’t want to say or do anything to ruin it.

"So good," she was whispering, and his eyes ran down her body, her shift in position giving him a great view of where they were joined. Even with her this undone and wild she was tight as fuck, forcing herself onto him in a way that was dangerous to his control.

"Fuck, Jamie."

"Tig!"

"Babe."

Then she got silent, still, and he felt the grin right before she brought her head forward, tucking her face into the side of his neck, sinking her teeth into him while she squealed.

He waited until her trembling stopped, then traced his fingertips up her back lightly. "You sore, babe?"

She leaned back. "Just a little. From this afternoon."

"We should stop then." He hated to think she was hurting, but he'd felt her cringe when they started up again.

"No," she said immediately, kissing him with everything she had.

"Jamie, I don't want you hurting, babe."

She fell still, taking his face between her hands. "This hurt I'll gladly take, honey."
He grinned. "I love it when you call me honey."

She kissed him at that, then pulled away and moved her hips again.

On a hiss he reminded her, "You're hurting."

"I want to enjoy this as much as I can," she whispered. "In a few days you won't even want to hug me, I'm sure."

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Once I'm sick, throwing up again. You don't want to be around that."

He brought his hand up to cup her jaw. "Sickness and in health, babe."

She inhaled, falling still. "Careful. That's a wedding vow, honey."

"I know." Her eyes locked on his, and he swallowed the lump in his throat. "For better for worse."

"Don't."

"Richer or poorer."

"Tig, please -"

"As long as I live, babe. I'll take care of you."

Her bottom lip quivered, so he kissed her softly, twisting his torso and rolling her to her back so he was on top of her, still connected. only moving again when she kissed him back, her hands clutching him tight. The need to fuck her mindless was gone. As he slid in then out he was slow, attentive, as much about the kissing and caressing as anything else.

They finished together, sweetly, not screaming-intense, but shuddering and whimpering into each other's mouths, not wanting the kiss to end. Something had been broached there, something deep that made him say that shit and not even freak out as he did it. Her admitting, somewhat, that she was scared. Not just of being sick, but losing him.

Him.

This woman thought there was anything better for him that the absolutely perfection she was. She was out of her goddamn mind.

Seeing her holding Abel at Clay and Gem's had done something to him. Fucked up his head, clearly. His thought had been how amazing it would be if she was holding his child, a little person they made together. Apparently her craziness was contagious.
"Wow," she whispered when he raised his head, her hand running from his shoulder, down his neck to his chest. She played with his chest hair. He hadn't been so happy to have chest hair until being with her. He suspected she liked it.

"Wow," he agreed, reluctantly parting from her and rolling to the side of the bed to clean up. When he came back she was asleep, curled on her side, still naked, tucked in a ball, wig still on.

Tig grinned, carefully raised her head and slid it off. He approached the wig form with that grin wavering, but he put the wig on it backwards so he couldn't see the face and slid into bed next to her, turning off the light.

He snuggled Jamie into his side, her breathing not hitching in sleep, and he knew she was out dead. So he felt absolutely safe as he said softly, "I love you, Jamie."

…

A clanging woke Tig from the dead of sleep and he jackknifed upright, taking Jamie with him and startling her awake, too.

"Shit, babe. I'm sorry," he muttered, rubbing his eyes as she rolled to her back and gazed up at him, looking sweet and sleepy and … yeah, fuckable. Like always.

"Happy birthday," she whispered, and his goopy reaction to that was something he'd rather ignore. Especially since she looked fuckable.

Letting that thought take over he ducked his head to kiss her shoulder. She giggled, then he lowered his mouth to her scars, teasing and tickling with tongue and lips, making her gasp. Then the loud noises sounded again from the kitchen and he raised his head. "What is going on out there?"

Jamie rested her hand on his head, smiling. "Calvin's making you breakfast."

He blinked a couple times, putting it together. "For me? Is that what you guys were preparing yesterday?" She nodded, and Tig felt a weird jolt run through his chest. He sniffed, looking away from her, his eyes burning for some weird reason. "Charlie's making me fancy birthday breakfast?"

Her hand kept playing with his hair. "He didn't know what to get you for your birthday. So he said he wanted to make you waffles."

"Shit, Charlie's making waffles? What if he burns himself?"

"We practiced some yesterday. I trust him. He's very responsible."

Tig turned his face away from her to swipe at his eyes, irritated. Fuck, what the hell was this?
"Tig, it's okay," she whispered. "Everyone deserves fancy breakfast on their birthday."

Tig moved quickly so she wouldn't see that he was tearing up, kissing her hard. She responded immediately, distracting him from this sudden flare of emotion. When he pulled away he suspected he was steady, but his voice still sounded shaky to him. "That kid," he mumbled, rolling away from her and sitting up. "Turning me into a sap."

She rose to her knees behind him, pressing into his back, hands running over his chest as she kissed his neck then propped her head on his shoulder. "You already were a sap, honey."

"I gotta go have breakfast right now so Charlie's not late for school," Tig growled.

"I know."

"You making me want to fuck you is gonna make him late for school."

She giggled and backed away. He made like he was lunging to grab her, making her squeal and hide under the blankets. Then he got up and pulled on his shorts and jeans, then a T-shirt. "I already know what else I want for my birthday," he shared, pulling his shirt over his head.

"What's that?"

He stopped in the doorway, looking back at her as she pulled on his SAMCRO T-shirt. "I want you and Calvin to move in with me. No need to pay rent if we're basically living together. I own that place. It won't feel like home without you guys there." Her face got all soft and weepy at that, and he opened the door. "Just... think about it. Okay?"

She nodded. "Okay."

The kid was cranking out waffles like a madman, a stack on a plate about ten high was being tucked into the warm stove, and the waffle iron was unplugged, ready to take a rest.

"Jesus Charlie," he muttered from the entryway. "You got a thing for waffles or what?"

"Happy birthday Tig!" he shouted, rushing through the room and throwing his arms around Tig's waist. Tig grunted, not a put-on, and ruffled the kid's hair.

"Thanks Calvin," he returned, hearing the thickness in his own voice as that damn eye-burn came on again.

"We have whipped cream, strawberries, mangoes, peaches, raspberries, blueberries and syrup."

Tig surveyed the table as his stomach gurgled. "Damn, you've been working hard, Charlie."

There were bowls of the mentioned fruits on the table as well as a huge bowl of fluffy whipped cream. Coffee was already set out, along with orange juice.
"Sit down," Calvin instructed, pulling him to the table where a chair was angled out, inviting.

Tig did as told, pulling his chair to the table and waiting with hands crossed in front of him as Calvin opened the stove and took out a warm plate, wearing an oven mitt, and carried the plate to the table. He set it down in front of Tig, then went back for the high rise of waffles and did the same. With a big grin he pulled off the mitt and just looked at Tig.

"What, I'm eating all these myself? Sit down, Charlie. Keep me company."

Calvin grinned, ran back and slammed the stove shut then scurried into the chair opposite. Tig grabbed a couple of the crispy creations before shoving the plate closer to Calvin, who did the same. Then the kid watched while Tig piled a bit of every kind of fruit on top of them, and he immediately did exactly the same thing. Tig paused with the whipped cream, grinning at the kid who was back to watching him again.

"What?" Calvin asked.

Having that kid copy his breakfast was … fucking weird. And Tig didn't know why it made his eyes all warm and watery again. He set down the whipped cream and waved the kid over. "Come here, Charlie."

"Why?" Calvin wanted to know, even as he did what he was told.

Tig grabbed him and hugged him, lifting him into his lap. "Thanks buddy," he said, giving the kid a tight squeeze then setting him back on his feet.

"You're welcome, Tig."

Warm hands slid around his chest from behind, and he immediately covered Jamie's hands with one of his. She kissed his neck and said close to his ear, "See? Complete sap. Just a big teddy bear."

Tig grinned and pretended to bite at her hand before she pulled it away, then dug into his fancy birthday breakfast.
Chapter 86

Fancy breakfast took most of Calvin's morning prep time, so Jamie was doing the dishes and smiling to herself, losing herself in her thoughts as though she wasn't starting another round of chemo the next day.

Sickness and in health, babe. For better for worse. Richer or poorer. As long as I live, babe. I'll take care of you.

As he had said those words the night before she realized she'd never had the girl moment where she felt she needed an answer to the big question: "Is this going anywhere?" She'd never wondered that. She hadn't had to ask, and before the thought was hers he gave the answer all on his own.

That was just … wow.

Tig had offered to help her with dishes when he got back from dropping Calvin off at school, but she reminded him that a person did not do dishes on their birthday.

She'd just dried and stored away the last plate when the phone rang. Still smiling, she answered the wall phone. "Hello?"

"Jamie?"

Jackie's panicked voice for one word and all her contentment fled. "Jackie? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. I … I'm getting out of Charming. I just wanted to say first I'm sorry, and I love you and Calvin and Thelma. And I'm so sorry."

Her hand tightened on the receiver. "Jackie? What have you done?"

"I have to get out of here. They'll hand me over and let Tiny kill me. I swear, they will."

"No, Jackie. Stay here and you'll be safe. You can trust them." She wasn't sure how true that was, but Jackie on her own was a guaranteed disaster. She was lunging for her purse on the counter as she spoke, fumbling to get the burner cell Tig gave her while keeping her sister on the line. "Where are you? I'll come get you."

"No, they'll just follow you here." Jackie must have been on a payphone, Jamie could hear traffic.

"Jackie, what's changed?"
"Clark Davidson showing up, that's what's changed. He can bring Tiny to them. I don't want to be here for it."

Jamie flicked through the phone book on the cell, finding Jax's number. Tig was taking Calvin to school which put him pretty far from the rest of the guys. Hopefully Jax was at the clubhouse or the garage.

It didn't even occur to her to call Clay instead.

"Jamie? I love you guys a lot. I gotta go. Bye."

The line went dead, but not before she heard air brakes. But was it a bus or a truck stop?

She slammed the phone down with a loud, "Fucking fuck!" just as Jax picked up.

"Yeah?" he asked after a pause, some laughter in his tone.

"It's Jamie."

"Hey Jamie -"

She cut him off. "Jackie got out. She just called me to wish us all well but she wants out of Charming. It sounded like she was at the bus station or a truck stop."

"Shit, she was in Chibs' room this morning."

"Again?" Jamie was surprised that Jackie picked favourites on anything.

"I'll call Clay and Tig. You got Half-Sack watching you right now, right?"

"Yeah," she replied, panicking.

"I'll leave him on you, but I'll see where everyone else is. And I guess I better check on Chibs. Your sister has a history with us."

Jamie cringed. "Yeah, I know. And I'm sorry."

"I'm at the garage, heading to the dorms right now. Don't worry Jamie. Stay put, I'll let you know when we find out anything worth knowing. Okay?"

"Okay," she whispered, nodding.

"Stay where you are. I know you're the smart one."

Jax had an excellent phone manner. Jamie was calmer when she hung up, standing in the middle of the kitchen.
She had no idea what to do now. So she called Thelma.

"Oh for fuck's sake," was Thelma's reaction to Jackie running again. "I know I said I'd pick up Calvin from school for the night. Do you want me to come in now?"

Jamie sighed, plopping onto a kitchen chair and leaning against the wall. "No, that's okay. I just … I wanted to tell you."

"Okay, well, thanks honey. How was fancy breakfast?"

Jamie laughed at Thelma's resilience. She envied that Teflon disposition. "Calvin makes excellent waffles."

"What did Tig think?"

Jamie's smile widened. "Oh Thelma, he cried."

"What?"

"He cried. He was so … touched."

"I can't even imagine that." Her burner cell went off, and Thelma heard it. "That's your cell?"

"Yes."

"I'll let you go. The second you hear anything let me know. Otherwise I'll just pick Calvin up and whisk him away as planned."

"All right. Thanks, Aunt Thelma." She hung up the wall phone and flipped open the burner again. "Hello?"

"Honey, I love you, but if I get my hands on your sister I'm going to kill her."

Jamie cringed, knowing that Gemma was perfectly capable of that. "Hey Gemma. I'm so sorry."

"Christ, there's no need to apologize. What'd she give Tig when he passed out?"

"Dramamine. Anti-nausea medication."

"Well, at least it's safe."

Jamie connected the dots. "Is Chibs okay?"

"He's waking up now. He's pissed."

Jamie had to nod. "Yeah, he's got a case for that."
"Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm … I'm getting to the point again where I just … want her to disappear again for a while. A terrible as that sounds."

"Can't pick our family, honey."

That was the truth. "Should I come there?"

"No offense, but Clay's so pissed I'm advise against anything that resembles Jackie being anywhere near here. I still can't figure out how she got out of the clubhouse without anyone noticing. Bitch even stole one of our loaners."

Jamie rubbed her brow, cringing. "Shit."

"Sorry honey, take it easy today. You start some worse shit than this tomorrow. We know that. Don't worry, we'll sort all this out."

"Okay. Thanks, Gemma. And tell Chibs I hope he feels better."

"Will do. What are you up to today?"

"I have to get a fancy supper put together for Tig's birthday."

There was a pause. "It's Tig's birthday?"

Jamie had to smile. "Things have been busy. He's not really one to run around telling everyone that his birthday is coming up."

The pause again, then "I don't think I ever knew when his birthday was."

"Really?" Jamie frowned, wondering what kind of world it was when your so-called family didn't know when your birthday was.

"Hell, sometimes Clay shows up with a gift and I'm wondering what it's for and he tells me it's my birthday."

Jamie shared a laugh with Gemma, but when she hung up she felt a little coldness run through the centre of her chest. It was … sadness, she supposed.

No wonder Calvin's gift made Tig water up. Who knows the last time someone even said "Happy Birthday" to him? For someone as dedicated as he was to that group … yeah, that made her sad.

She set about to preparing the potatoes and veggies for supper, wishing she'd thought of something to get him. But after seeing his reaction to waffles, she was pretty sure that steak night and the lingerie was going to be a home run.
She put Jackie out of her mind, prepped for supper, then decided it earned her a nap and padded off to bed, falling asleep on a pillow that smelled like Tig, ridiculously excited to give him his present. Probably even more giddy than Calvin had been.
Chapter 87

If blood was explosive, he'd be a fucking spray of crimson on the blacktop of Charming's one and only truck stop and diner. Tig parked his bike, ripped his helmet off, and damn near had an aneurism at the sight of Jackie, purse slung across her body and resting on her hip, hustling truckers and begging for a ride. She wasn't just a junkie who used her family until nothing was left.

She was a fucking idiot to boot.

He was crossing the lot before she caught sight of him, about fifty yards away when she turned and realized she was busted. She froze, then scanned both ways like the Road Runner, spun and ran.

In fucking flip flops yet.

He didn't check to see if Juice was behind him. Tig took off running, gaining on her easily because of her questionable footwear. Even when she lost one sandal and kept on going she was still easy to overtake. He grabbed an arm, hit the brakes and yanked back on her. He could give a shit if her shoulder dislocated. She'd be lucky if she lived another twelve hours.

And it wouldn't take Clay to do it, he was that pissed.

Tig's anger wasn't from the fact she was fucking over the club, either. It was how badly this was hurting Jamie. Jax had said on the phone Jamie had sounded freaked, but she did good and called it in immediately.

To protect this waste of skin.

Jackie yelped like he'd hurt her, and he could give a fuck. Juice caught up right then and didn't hesitate grabbing the other arm.

Tig just glared at the junkie, shaking his head. "You got a fucking nerve, bitch," he snarled, out of breath but mad enough to keep going. "You're going to do this to the woman raising your kid? Your own sister? She's worried about you 'ya fucking idiot."

Jackie's face crumpled. "I know. But he's going to kill me."

"Or he'll come after them. With all the stupid shit you pull you expect me to believe you don't have a death wish on some level?" Tig spun her around, nodding to Juice. Without a word he was pulling out his phone to call for the pick-up.

"I need my other shoe," she whimpered. Juice told someone where they were.
Tig marched her back to get the flip flop, not letting go of her arms. A few folks were watching them carefully, but Jackie wasn't pulling a shit fit and screaming so most good Samaritans seemed to believe this was the kind of thing that sorted itself out.

The truckers themselves barely gave them a glance. A few gave cordial chin lifts in greeting which Tig returned as Jackie slid her foot back onto her sandal.

Juice flipped the phone shut. "Happy and Clay are coming with the van."

Tig nodded. "Chibs okay?"

Juice allowed a half-smile. "He's fine. He's pissed way the fuck off but he's fine."

"I can relate." Tig shook Jackie. "How the hell are you not on every pharmacy's watch list by now?" Tig grabbed her purse, yanked it off over her head and dumped its contents on the ground.

"Hey," she snapped, ducking down to grab her stuff.

Tig yanked her back up standing and Juice grabbed her other arm, still on his phone. "You think I'm shoving my hand in a junkie's purse you're out of your mind." he growled, looking down and kicking her things around, looking inside the purse and realizing there were no pockets so that was all she was carrying. He stooped to pick out a bubble-pack of pills with big words written on the back, seeing that only two pills were left out of sixteen compartments. He shook it in her face.

"This the shit? What you used to knock me and my brother on our asses? Jamie was worried Chibs was taking advantage of you. Isn't that fucking hilarious?"

She didn't answer. The smartest thing she'd done all day. He let go of her so she could gather her shit and shove it back in her purse. He kept the Dramamine.

Juice helped Tig herd Jackie back to their bikes, and she didn't make a squeak of protest. Juice stood behind her, hands in his vest pockets, scanning the area, which was smart. Who knew how many people in this town were keeping an eye out for her on Tiny's behalf. Tig was fuming so he could only glare at her, one arm in his tight grasp. He wasn't giving her another chance to make him run. He was done with exercise for the day.

"You got a lot of nerve," he repeated.

She looked surprised. "What? I'm running to keep Jamie and Calvin safe!"

He shook his head. "She doesn't just forget about you when you're not around. She worries about you and wonders if you're okay. And she should be focused on getting better and taking care of your kid. You gotta be the most selfish bitch I've met."

"Hey, I don't need to listen to -"
"Yeah you do," he snapped, and she shut up. Then again, this was his *scary* tone. "Because your family likes you too much to tell you this, but they're better off without you around at all."

Her lip trembled, but he was too pissed to worry about her fucking *feelings*.

"You really wanna help them? Let Tiny take you. Get rid of you. You'd be doing us all a fucking favour." With that he turned away, letting her go with a shove. If he looked at her any longer he'd hurt her, and he'd rather not for Jamie's sake.

Tig caught sight of the black van heading their way, and he saw that Happy and Clay were in the front seat. He was clenching his hands into fists as they stopped. Clay climbed out of the passenger seat. Happy from the driver's side, and the sound of another bike brought everyone's attention around in time to see Jax pull up to their group as well.

No one spoke, which Jackie took for the sign of danger that it was. Happy grabbed her by both arms, and she struggled with a pathetic, "No!" Juice stepped up behind her and the two of them wrangled her in the back of the van.

Clay stopped next to Tig. "Oswald's land," he muttered. "We'll lock her in a shed. No way she's walking for help out there."

Tig nodded, heading for his bike with a nod to Jax. He knew the shed, a few people had been kept there for "interrogations." No windows, a cot, and a sink with running water. Tig and Juice got ride-ready and followed the van, Jax falling in behind them.

It was a gorgeous day; sunny, not too hot. There was a slight breeze keeping things airy. A great day for riding, actually.

But Tig was still fucking livid. He wished he could just beat some sense into this bitch. Honestly, the hurt she was causing his girl made him homicidal. His love for Jamie kept him from acting out on it. Jackie owed her sister even more than she realized.

Oswald's ranch had a dedicated spot with stables, and of course his living quarters. But there were other areas, like the one where they all stopped now, that were too far from all main roads to be visible or *heard from*. Tig, Juice and Jax parked in a row next to the black van. Happy yanked Jackie out by both arms, and her tears were streaking down her face. Her eyes were wild, scanning the group and landing on Tig.

Surprisingly, she broke Happy's hold and rushed him. "Don't let them kill me. Just tell them to let me go, please. I'll fuck off, I'll ghost and you'll never see me again."

Tig frowned. "Relax. You have a purpose here," he mumbled, tossing her back Happy's way. He got a tighter grip and yanked her back towards Clay.

"They're going to kill me!" she was shrieking. "They don't need me! They have Clark to bring Tiny here!"
Clay met Tig's eye. "Oh yeah. Thanks for reminding me of that. Clark's a lot quieter."

Tig would swear that time slowed down right then. Like a corny, cliché moment in a movie where you know shit is about to go very, very bad.

Happy moved away from Jackie, which was weird and brought Tig's attention to their president. Clay's hand came up with a Beretta at the ready. Tig shouted "No!" which meant Jackie was looking at him when the bullet went in one temple, ripped a hole through the opposite side, the light in her eyes went out and her body crumpled to the ground. All in slow, sick motion.

He heard Jax shout "Jesus Christ!" in a haze, like a radio with interference. There was a high-pitched whine in his head, maybe from the Beretta's discharge. He was rooted in place, staring at the pile of skin and bones on the ground with that long, dark hair spilling over her face.

Tig's heart went into an abnormal rhythm. She looked like Jamie. Shit, she looked a lot like Jamie, didn't she?

When Tig could meet Clay's gaze it was unreadable. He was studying Tig, gun down to his side now, like it was an experiment to see what Tig was gonna do.

Tig drew in a shuddering breath, finding that he'd also shoved both hands into his hair. "Fuck," he whispered. "Ah shit. What'd you do?"

"Fixed your girl's biggest problem," was Clay's indifferent answer.

"Fuck," Jax spat out, nearly as upset as Tig. "Is this how we do things now? Just take out a woman because she's an inconvenience?"

Tig had wanted to do this a few times, but he knew he couldn't. And now he realized why. She looked like Jamie, and there was no way he could end her. He could never look Jamie in the eye if he did that.

"You okay, man?"

Tig turned his head, and it was Juice with a hand on his elbow, concerned. "I'm fine," he said, distracted. "I'm not the one with a bullet in my head."

"Jamie doesn't have to know," Clay said as he wiped down the grip of the Beretta then handed it to Happy. Happy had gloves on and he tucked it into his waistband. "She got away on a bus. We couldn't find her, she vanishes and everyone assumes, correctly, that her shit life decisions caught up with her."

Tig looked down at Jackie's body again. He felt light-headed. A sharp pain was in the middle of his chest. This felt like a fucking heart attack.

"Hole's dug right over there already," Clay mumbled. "Happy?"
"I'm on it," Killer mumbled, and even his voice sounded perplexed. But in true, practical, Happy fashion he crouched down and scooped Jackie up over his shoulder easily. Yeah, she weighed nothing. A husk of a person. Simple. Small sack of trash.

"I might be sick," Tig shared, turning away and leaning over, hands on his knees. He closed his eyes, feeling a hand hit his back.

"You all right?" Jax asked low, sounding completely pissed. Tig appreciated that for some reason.

"Yeah," he answered, straightening up and rolling his shoulders.

Jax nodded, gave him his space. Just like Juice did. Clay came closer, his shoulder hitting Tig's arm. "I trust your girl to keep her mouth shut about Tiny's step brother," Clay said low. "Because if she doesn't …"

Tig's blood went cold in his veins and he studied his friend's face. "You kidding me?" he asked, voice strained. "You're going there?"

"Cartel, Tig. Remember that. And keep your girl in line."

Clay moved away to the van again, and Tig knew he was having a panic attack now. He wanted to burst into tears but it wouldn't come. Instead, that lump in his throat choked him.

His best friend was threatening to take the one thing he cared about more than his own sorry sack of skin.
Chapter 88

Jamie touched up her lip gloss, smiling at her reflection in the mirror. She futzed with her wig a bit again, studying her side profile in the dresser mirror. She hadn't worn this little black dress in ages, and it was a bit big on her. But she liked the way the skirt clung to her hips and butt, and the Breakfast-at-Tiffany's neckline was the kind of cut that made her more comfortable.

She had on her three-inch stiletto heeled shoes, too. With complete make up, the wig in place and a spritz of perfume she was feeling almost … pretty.

The potatoes were boiling a bit before she roasted them. Once they were softened she melted butter over them with some lemon pepper and put them on a sheet and slid them into the stove. Steaks were swimming in marinade and she'd put them on the grill once the birthday boy got home.

She set the table with two complete place settings, a champagne flute at each one. She didn't expect him to drink champagne, but she was sure going to. He could have beer. A salad was already set out. And she was wearing dessert under the dress already.

When the bike pulled into the drive Jamie's heart sped up. Yeah, she was giddy about this. And she didn't really care if it showed.

The storm door opened as she lit the two taper candles in silver holders on the table and shut off the overhead light. Then she retrieved a beer from the fridge and headed for the archway. She leaned against the wall as he opened the inside door.

Jamie felt a slight bit of concern flare up, such was the expression on his face. She worried about what else had happened now, but she pushed that away. It was his birthday, she'd take his mind off whatever it was. After all, he would have called if they found Jackie. Maybe that's why he looked like that; he felt he'd let her down.

"Hey honey," she said casually as he shut the door and his head came up. Whatever had been worrying him seemed to pause as he looked at her, his eyes tracking down and back up her form.

"Jamie. You're all … dressed up. What's going on?"

As she approached she allowed a small smile small and held up the bottle of beer. "I thought it was your birthday."

He blinked down on her, then allowed a trace of that wild smile she loved. "Babe," he said softly, taking the beer from her and pulling her close with his free hand. His face came to her neck and he breathed in deep.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "You okay?"
"Mmm," was his answer, pulling his head back. The smile still wasn't as big as she expected.

She moved her arms down to wrap around his ribs, under his arms. "Good. I hope you're hungry."

That worrying smile stayed in place. "Definitely," he said softly, playing with her hair. Even though it wasn't attached it still felt nice. "I can't believe you made me supper. You should be taking it easy."

She shrugged. "This isn't really hard work. And I wanted to do something for your birthday."

He kissed her forehead. "I better go clean up then. Try to at least be in the same zip code of hot as my girl is."

She giggled as he kissed her again, then he turned her and pushed her away with a swat on the ass. She started the grill, slapped the steaks down and took to watching them in the light of the bare bulb next to the patio door. When they were nearly done warm hands slid around her hips to clasp on her tummy, tugging her back into a warm and fantastic-smelling body. She could feel that the kutte was gone. It was just Tig with her, and that's what she liked best.

"Smells good babe," he said softly, close to her ear.

"Good," she answered, giggling as his hands began sliding over her, the dress shifting easily because of the satin underneath.

"What are you wearing under this?" he asked, lips on her neck.

"That's for later," she replied, smacking at his hands as they tried to pull up her skirt. "It's for later!" she chastised as a squeal when he didn't relent.

He stopped his roaming hands, giving her a tight hug. "Jamie," he whispered, and it almost sounded like a thank you. She stilled at that, wondering that he didn't seem entirely himself.

"Go inside. These are done. Go sit and have another beer."

"You got it, bossy."

Jamie turned off the grill, set the steaks on the plate she had waiting and carried them inside. She plated a steak and potatoes for each of them while he watched her from the table, leaning on his elbows and drinking his beer lazily. She felt his gaze and it was making her twitch in a good way.

She set a plate in front of him and he grabbed her wrist tight, pulling her down for a kiss. "Thank you, babe," he whispered hoarsely, and she thought he was going to cry again.
She perched on his knee, putting her hand to his cheek. "You deserve it and more," she assured him with another kiss. A shadow passed over his eyes, and she frowned as he shook his head and suddenly smiled.

"Like, whatever's under this dress," he said on a grin, running a hand up her thigh. She caught that hand on another giggle.

"I told you, that's for later."

"Do I get to unwrap it?"

"Of course."

After another long pause where Tig looked at her like he'd never seen her before, her kissed her again slowly and softly. Before he could get her all worked up she darted off his lap and returned to the seat next to him. She poured herself some champagne and they set to eating.

Tig was quiet, and Jamie wrote it off to emotions. She felt terrible that people didn't cook nice meals for him. That something so simple touched him like this. Like she needed that soft spot she harboured for Tig Trager to get any bigger.

He told her how good everything was. Kept thanking her repeatedly with long looks and half-smiles that weren't as wide as normal. For most of the meal he even held her hand while they ate.

Bliss. The best "date" she'd ever had. All because it was with Tig.

After the food was done, Tig started gathering up plates. She stopped him by putting a hand on his arm. "No dishes on your birthday, remember?"

"When then?" he asked, smile getting a bit bigger.

"Tomorrow," she said softly, standing next to him and pressing her front into him. "But I think it's bedtime, honey."

There he was. The Tig she knew. His gaze flared with heat, and his hands slid around the small of her back. Then he froze, holding her like that, his forehead resting on hers as he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Tig?" she whispered, really worried now.

"I'm sorry, baby."

Jamie didn't ask if anything was wrong. If it was club stuff she didn't need to know about he wouldn't tell her. If it was something she needed to know, he would. Clearly, this was club stuff bugging him. There was talk of ATF, another club called the Mayans, not to mention that damn Tiny and she knew the headaches her world caused were pretty small in comparison.
"I'm a lucky man," he finally mumbled, lowering his head to kiss her mouth.

Jamie ducked away from him, grabbing his hand and leading him down the hallway. She had the nightstand light on already, the room glowing golden. She dropped his hand and turned in the centre of the room to face him. His eyes were still running all over her, and she felt bolder and prettier than she ever had in her life. She twisted her fingers somewhat nervously as the silence continued.

"Are you going to take this off or should I?" she asked shyly.

"You do it," he answered roughly, rubbing his chin.

She reached back to the zipper, slid it down, pulled her arms out and let the dress fall to her feet, slipping easily along the satin. Then she watched his face. It was exactly what she wanted to see. He groaned first, then moved forward, licking his lips and his eyes continued on that hot trail all over her.

"Jesus babe," he growled, hesitating, then putting his hands on her hips.

The roughness of his hands snagged the material, so it couldn't slide. Instead his hands rubbed the satin on her skin, and she closed her eyes, smiling.

Yep, it felt amazing, like she knew it would. "Tig," she whispered as his lips touched her neck so softly she might have imagined it.

"What do you want me to do?"

"It's your birthday," she reminded him. "What do you want to do?"

His teeth pinched a bit. "I want you to boss me around some more."

She wrinkled up her face, his stubble tickling her. "That's what you want?"

"As long as you keep this on," he answered, hands sliding to her ass, squeezing. "And the wig."

"Mmm," she moaned as his tongue ran up the side of her neck. "I can do that."

He backed away, smiling broadly now but it still wasn't quite reaching his eyes. She had to take that worry away. "So, tell me what to do," he rasped quietly.

She bit her lip, her face warming a bit. But that could be the champagne. "Take off your clothes."
Chapter 89

The clothes came off easily, Jamie providing just the distraction he needed to feel … not better because his guilt would never be better. But this was something that was preferable to focus on.

Tell her, a foreign voice was scolding him. You just watched her sister get plugged, you have to tell her right now.

He couldn't. She couldn't know, just like she couldn't know about that dealer she iced back in the summer. Sure this was more personal, and she hadn't done the killing in this case. But instead of drug dealers now Clay could hurt her, and he was even closer than some street thug; a bigger threat, a more likely danger.

Tig had barely been able to eat, but she'd cooked for him. There was no way to measure how much that meant to him.

Nope, the silence was to protect her and the kid. Even if she found out one day and hated him, he'd still know this was the only option. Until Clay was out of the way, that is. Jax wanted it, hell, it could happen. Then he could tell Jamie.

Until then, he watched her like a hawk and tried not to let on anything was wrong. And the best distraction came when that dress hit the ground. This satin thingy she had on was … fucking fantastic. Underneath that fabric she felt even more amazing.

Right then his body was online, mind was shut down. There was just Jamie and her smell and hands and smile.

Jamie led him by both hands backwards to the bed, turned him and leaned over him so his back was against the pillows. He couldn't stop rubbing this nightie over her hips and stomach, and he could tell she felt sexy in it. It was in her posture, the way her eyes were lit up, her smile. Fantastic. All of it.

She reached up to the bedpost, pulling one of her scarfs towards her. A silky white one. She ran it through both hands as he kept petting this bit of negligee, then she grabbed his wrist and tied one end of the scarf to it.

Tig had to grin. "Babe, what are you doing?"

She pushed his arm up so that hand was on the pillow over his head, no resistance from him, then reached up to do something else with the scarf. She took his other hand off her hip, pressed it to the pillow as well and he felt the silk wrap around that wrist.

"Whatever I want," she finally answered quietly, kissing him hard, wet. Hot enough that he pulled at the ties.
When she parted their mouths he gave a chuckle. "Babe, I could rip this scarf in half or break your headboard."

She licked her bottom lip and stood up next to the bed again. "I guess you better be careful."

Then as he watched she lifted the satin revealing the scrap of lace underwear, pushed her fingers into the sides, slid them off her hips and down her thighs. She stepped out of them, straightened while balling them up in her hand then leaned over and shoved them in his mouth.

Holy. Shit. He felt his dick twitch at that, and he made a growling sound that had her licking her bottom lip again. She propped one knee on the mattress, swung her leg over his chest so she was astride it but facing his feet, then took his erection in her hand.

Tig grunted again, smiling around her cute little gag and staring up her back. That damn nightie was too long to see anything, but he could feel her against his chest and –

Jesus. Oh Christ. Oh God.

She leaned forward, and as all below was revealed to him he felt her tongue on his cock, teasing the tip and the ridge, her hand reaching down to cup his balls.

Shit, keep it together.

He could finish immediately. Everything he was feeling, seeing and smelling was enough to make him come. He fought as long as he could, closing his eyes but having to open them again because of what was there.

He couldn't reach far enough to get his mouth on her otherwise he'd spit out the panties and do it. This was reminding him why he didn't like being tied up. But for some reason Jamie doing it kept him from following through on his threat and wrecking her bed.

When she finally took him in her mouth entirely that was all he needed. He groaned loud, hips bucking as a warning, and the relief surged through him warm and intense. She didn't stop playing with her tongue until he wasn't shaking anymore. He was grunting her name but it was muffled. When she swung her leg over to kneel next to him again he finally got his eyes uncrossed enough to look at her.

Her cheeks were flushed, her smile was gorgeous, and she was biting her lip again. "You want me to ride you, Tig?" she asked innocently, because that was her way. It wasn't an act.

He nodded, eyes taking everything in as she was suddenly astride his hips. He frowned, eyes going to his half-erection.

"I think you need a few minutes to recover," she mumbled, scooting back over his thighs a bit and resting her weight back on her heels. He began nodding then froze as her hand slid down between her legs, vanished under the hem of that nightie and her eyes closed as she gasped.
"Fuck me," but all she heard was muffled grunts from him. His eyes were on that hand, then her other one as she dragged it upward, catching the nightie and pulling it up a fair bit, her hand stopping on her nipple to pinch and roll it with her thumb and finger. The nightie raised meant he could see both hands.

He could have wept. His entire body wanted in her; hands, tongue, his recovering dick. Her breathing increased and so did his. Not being able to put his hands on her was killing him.

"Tig," she whispered, eyes still closed. "I'm wet. I'm so turned on. Please, be ready soon."

_Fucking. Right._

He growled, making her open her eyes. She looked down where he was back on board, hard, throbbing and ready, then smiled. "Good," she breathed as she pulled the gag out of his mouth, replacing it with wet fingers.

He sucked them clean, moaning at the taste. Then she reached for the drawer of the nightstand and pulled out a condom. She rolled it on quickly, expertly. One second he was in her hand, then he was sliding inside her tightness, closing his eyes at the excitement all that anticipation had caused. Tig breathed himself through some semblance of control, watching his girl swing her hips, play with her nipple and throw her head back. He could talk now, make noise, but he didn't. He just enjoyed the show until her movements grew frantic, her noises desperate, and she slammed down onto him completely he grunted deep, fighting off the orgasm that was aching his balls something fierce. When the "Tiggy!" came he was grinning, feeling as relieved as if he'd let go with her.

She came down softly to him with more kisses, murmured endearments which he returned, then reached up to untie him. "What's my next assignment?" he asked, lazy and happy, grinning and not caring if he looked like a schmuck.

"Doggie," she answered immediately, and he felt the grin widen enough to crack his face wide open. As soon as he was free she was under him, hips up, chest to the mattress. He slid the satin up out of the way, pushing into her immediately and feeling the quiver of her body still recovering from that last orgasm.

"Tig, honey," she gasped.

"Right with you, Jamie. Jesus, you feel amazing." His hands were running over her ass cheeks, loving how they'd rounded out. He let his fingers trail inward, running the tip of one over that other opening he hadn't explored yet.

She froze, gasping his name, and he took his hand away. "I'm not going in, babe. I promise. This feels good too, though."

"It does?"
"Yeah. Just relax, let me show you."

There was a pause. "Not in, right?"

He grinned, then wondered how much that champagne had affected her. "Not in, baby. I promise." He left out the bit where she was welcome to do the same to him if the mood ever struck her.

"Okay," she gasped, and he didn't wait.

He kept up that rhythm, sliding in and out, his thumb easing to this new spot, noting she tensed but didn't pull away from him. As he continued with what she knew mixed with something different, he heard her agreement in the soft sounds she was making, her hips starting to move against him in her trust. He sped up with the thrusting, didn't push her comfort level with where his thumb was, smiling when she came undone, squeezing and shuddering around him.

"That does feel nice," she admitted as he pulled out, pushed her hip to the side and guided her to her back. Immediately her legs came up, he fell into her hold, gliding into her and kissing her with all he had until he couldn't hold back. Her heels were at his ass, digging in. Her nails sunk into his back. She smelled good, felt amazing, and she'd made him supper special just for his birthday.

He held her eyes with his, watching the sweet softness come over her face, her lips tilting up in a slight smile. That was what made him come this time. The sweet, lovely softness of Jamie and her trust.

"Fucking beautiful," he grunted, kissing her again as the rush left him.

When he came back from cleaning himself up he curled her into his side, naked now, wig put away. She rested her head on his shoulder, and he closed his eyes.

Having her here felt good. No doubt about it. His heart was at a normal pace again and it felt whole. He didn't feel like ripping anything apart with his bare hands anymore. Jamie was the calm spot in whatever storm he had raging. But his blood grew cold as he thought of Jackie again. As Jamie eased slowly into sleep next to him he vowed she'd never have his club so much as frighten her. He'd play it Clay's way and keep quiet. But in the meantime, he had to come up with a contingency plan. For the sake of the woman he loved.
Chapter 90

December

Chemotherapy still sucked ass, but not going through it alone was a lot less terrifying.

Jamie was in a vinyl recliner, arm extended with an IV feeding poison into her vein. Her opposite arm was also propped up on the recliner's other armrest, but Tig was sitting on that side, alternating between tracing his fingertips up and down her arm and just holding her hand.

So much better than being alone.

"Remember it's early dismissal today," she suddenly said out of nowhere.

"Mm hmm," was the easy response along with a hand squeeze.

Just like any other normal couple. Except her man was six feet of intimidation capped off with wild black hair and startling blue eyes that could take another man down to his knees with just a glare. But still … it was nice to have this closeness.

"How you doing?" he asked softly, and she turned her head to the side.

"Ready to climb Everest."

He grinned. "Yeah?"

"Absolutely."

"So tough," he teased, kissing her hand. "I'm going to get a coffee. You want some water?"

Jamie nodded. "That would be great. Thanks." He kissed her forehead before he left. He always did.

While Tig was gone the nurse came to remove the IV and put an adhesive bandage over her newest "track" mark. Jamie slid the recliner to an upright position since standing upright immediately seemed to be messing with her equilibrium this time around. Or maybe it was just the extreme nausea.

Tig returned with a take-out coffee cup and bottle of water. She leaned on him as they reached the elevator, he held her in a tight hug on the ride down to the main floor, and he was all but carrying her by the time they got outside. Usually the fresh air helped, but it was a bit warm at the moment. Incredibly sunny. Her stomach hitched but she knew she wasn't going to get sick yet. So she used the water to keep that gag reflex in check on the ride home.
Moving in with Tig had been a smooth transition. As expected, Calvin was on side with that plan as soon as Jamie asked the question. Aunt Thelma had taken more convincing. To Jamie's surprise Tig had taken the phone from her during that conversation and disappeared out onto the patio to chat. When he came back in and handed the phone over Thelma seemed convinced.

"It may be a scary situation," Thelma told her, "but in spite of all that, I trust him to take care of you guys."

Jamie still had no idea what Tig had said to change her aunt's mind. She decided to believe it was magic. Some things didn't need explaining.

Calvin's bed made the trip over, and so did Jamie's kitchen table. The rest of the furniture was in storage, to be sold or used somewhere else. Whatever would be would be, and that felt like a good decision, too.

By the time they'd pulled into Tig's driveway Jamie could feel the sick coming on. They had this down to an art by now; Tig would help her to the bathroom, then leave her be while her stomach emptied itself, trying to placate her confused body which was just trying to figure out where all these toxins were coming from.

While she was doing that he was drawing the blinds in the bedroom and running the air conditioner to cool the place down because she always had the sweats after being sick. He'd put ice water by the bed along with a pail for the next time she had to puke.

Once she was cleaned up she was a weak, shaking and miserable mess. He'd come into the bathroom, scoop her up in his arms and carry her to bed. The sheets would be wonderfully cool as he tucked her in, then he'd shut off the AC because the noise bothered her. He'd leave her alone, shutting the door behind him and getting out of the house so she had a few hours of quiet.

But not before kissing her forehead.

Then Tig would go get Calvin from school, take him by the clubhouse for boxing or mechanical training, then they'd go out for supper because the smell of food in the house made her ill. Jamie would have a fitful night, eventually her body would be convinced that her stomach was, in fact, empty and therefore not the cause of poisoning. The next morning before Calvin was up she'd make it to the kitchen for a pot muffin (bless Bobby for that) and then climb back into bed to let the weed work its magic. Then it would be one or two full days of some appetite before she had to start it all over again.

Three more treatments, she reminded herself once the house was silent around her and she couldn't hear Tig's bike anyone. Then it would be almost Christmas, she'd be tired but not puking every two hours. She couldn't wait.

Tig had even agreed to spend Christmas Eve at Thelma's with them. That was as close to a childhood home as Jamie got and she couldn't imagine Christmas anywhere else. And with Tig coming along it was like … well, Christmas.
Jamie couldn't wait to get out from under this oppressive *Charming* drama that Jackie had brought down on her. Christmas at Thelma's would take it away for a while and she couldn't wait.

She'd even found a gift for Tig. Aside from a red and black nightie, she also got him something she hoped he wouldn't find corny. It was just a heavier silver chain with a Native American-style feather pendant. She didn't know why, but the second she saw it online she thought of him. It was masculine, and there was something about the way he wore a button down that required a manly necklace. For his chest hair.

She might be turning a bit weird, or something about Tig made her accept her freak side.

She had helped Calvin order his present from Amazon. He'd ordered Tig his own copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Jamie thought it was perfect, and she wished she'd been healthier otherwise they could have shopped. Tig was Calvin's ride everywhere, he couldn't very well ask Tig to take him to get his own Christmas gift. Jamie just had to be sure to be the first one to collect the mail when it was delivered, that was the tricky part.

She heard the mailbox, made herself get up and head to the door. Sure enough, the package from Amazon was inside. She hid it under Calvin's mattress like they'd arranged and made her way back to her room and pulled out the box that had arrived two days ago, opening it and smiling at the feather pendant inside. Feeling some energy to get in the spirit of the season, she toddled to the kitchen and took the momentary surge of motivation to wrap the gift on the table.

Before she could store everything away another round of nausea hit. She managed to get the present hidden away in her underwear drawer before she had to get to the toilet *right now* and dry heave for about ten minutes.

Exhausted, she was just going to lie down for a moment then go clean up the kitchen. But of course, she conked right out.
Chapter 91

"Appreciate you helping, Charlie," Tig mumbled, pulling off his helmet and storing it away with the one the kid wore.

"No problem," Calvin replied, easy going.

Tig was nervous and in another world here. And it wasn't just the guilt of what had gone down with Jackie. It had been the realization of what was happening to him. How he was ... fuck. *Falling in love? Growing up?*

He'd been surprised when Thelma had agreed to help him with the emergency Jamie/Calvin Contingency Plan. That broad was tough as nails, and flat out told him he got Jamie or Calvin hurt she'd lay him low, not caring how she had to do it. He noted she'd left out Jackie, but that was probably an honest oversight.

Calvin shoved open the shop door, ringing the bells overhead and cueing a leggy brunette who appeared almost out of nowhere, smile fixed in place. She was working on commission, and he knew it the second her smile stayed in place even while looking at ... *him.*

"Can I help you gentlemen with anything?" she asked, hands on the lit up glass case in front of her.

Calvin already had his nose to the glass, pointing. "Ooh, that's a nice one, Tig."

Tig offered his friendliest smile to the shop girl, then looked downward to see what shiny object had caught Calvin's attention. He barked out a laugh and grabbed the kid's shoulder to pull him back just as the woman put her hands to her chest. "Oh, *congratulations,*" she breathed.

Tig pulled Calvin back from that case and shook his head to the employee. "Nah, sorry. Not here for a diamond ring."

"Aunt Jamie would love that one!" Calvin was insisting.

Tig leaned over, hands on both knees. "Diamond rings are for engagements. Like, asking a girl to marry you."

"So don't ask," Calvin returned. "Just give her something pretty."

"Jesus Charlie," he muttered, straightening up. "You're supposed to be helping me here."

"She'd probably say yes," Calvin offered, like that was helping anything.
"Can I ask what you did have in mind?" the girl behind the counter asked, her smile warm but still professional. And when she looked at Calvin she was downright affectionate.

Tig ran a hand over his hair. "Umm, I have no idea. This is a new world for me, honey. I was thinking a necklace."

"Okay. Does your lady have a favourite gemstone?"

Tig blinked.

"When's her birthday?"

Tig looked at Calvin. "March," Calvin stage-whispered.

"Fuck. That's why I brought you along," he said, rubbing Calvin's head.

"Aquamarine is her birthstone," Legs said immediately, pointing to a case off the far wall. Tig approached it while Calvin ran to it. "We have some beautiful settings in earrings, pendants, bracelets."

"It's really pretty," Calvin assured him. "Look at the colour! It's like the colour of her eyes!"

Tig scanned the case, feeling himself smile. "You're right, Charlie."

"The pendants are cut in all different shapes. We have tear drop, princess cut, marquis cut -"

"Can I see that one?" Tig cut her off, jabbing the top of the case.

Legs smiled warmly. "Good eye," she assured him, unlocking the back of the jewellery case. "These came in for Christmas. It's a journey pendant. Usually they just come with diamonds, but this year the gemstones became available as well."

He was half-listening. He didn't know why, but the second he saw those blue stones in their plantinum-looking S-curve he could immediately see it resting under the hollow at the base of Jamie's throat. When Legs set the velvet box down on the case he leaned over, Charlie in front of him.

"What do you think?"

"I think she's gonna cry."

Legs chuckled, clearly charmed. "It's a 24 karot white gold setting, with four separate aquamarine stones, sized small to large, as you can see. It's modern while still maintaining a classic look."
Tig was nodding, not even noticing anything else in the case. "Yeah, yeah. I think that's the one. Charlie?"

"It's perfect," he agreed, grinning up at Tig. Then he turned that smile to Legs. "How much are the earrings for it?"

The lady's smile didn't falter. "The drop earrings for this necklace are two-hundred fifteen dollars."

Tig felt Calvin deflate.

"What's up Charlie?" he asked, leaning over the kid again.

Calvin looked embarrassed. "If you got her the necklace I could get her earrings, that's what I thought. But I don't have enough."

The shop girl made a sound that indicated her heart was both breaking and enlarging because Calvin was so adorable.

"How about I get the necklace, and help you out with the earrings?"

"But -"

Tig grinned and cut him off. "Chores, Charlie. That's how you pay me back. Mow the lawn. Help Aunt Jamie with stuff around the house. Yeah?"

"Okay!" Calvin agreed with a big, goofy grin. Tig felt something in his heart constrict. "I have one hundred and seven dollars."

"Good work, Charlie," Tig mumbled and straightened to nod at Legs. "Necklace and the earrings. Can I get them wrapped separately?"

She was already nodding. "Absolutely!"

Tig ruffled Calvin's hair again. "Good job man, thanks for your help."

"Thank you," was Calvin's reply.

"And no more talk of engagement rings. You nearly gave me a heart attack, Charlie."

Calvin shrugged. "She loves you, and I think you love her. Isn't that what people do?"

Tig's mind and body fell very still. "What?"

Calvin blinked. "Isn't that what people do?"
"What? Before you said that."

"She loves you and I think you love -" 

"You think Aunt Jamie loves me?" He tried to sound casually interested. But really he was short circuiting.

"She told Thelma she does. I heard it."

Tig caught sight of the shop girl, but she was keeping busy with wrapping paper and ribbon. "She told Aunt Thelma that?"

"She was crying. She might be a bit scared. But maybe she doesn't realize you love her, too. Maybe that's why she's scared."

Tig swallowed, put his hands in his jeans pockets then pulled them out again. His heart was beating way too loud.

"You do love her, don't you Tig?" Calvin pushed his new glasses up his nose.

Tig felt the smile before he knew he'd made one. "Yeah Charlie, I think I do."

"Good," Calvin decided on a nod. "So just say it and get married."

Tig steered Calvin to the cash register with one hand on top of his head. "It ain't that easy."

Some of that familiar coldness slid into his chest, and the image of Jackie dead on the ground flashed through his mind again. Calvin's trusting gaze up at him made his head swim. He could try and tamp this down all he wanted, but that shit with Jackie was going to haunt him. And make him insane from the fear that Jamie and Calvin might find out.

"Grown-ups just have to make things harder," Calvin muttered, shaking his head like he was disappointed.

"Yeah we do," he agreed, digging his wallet out of his pocket. "If we go for root beer floats you gonna promise to keep Jamie's present a secret?"

Calvin nodded, eyes getting wide. "If we get French fries I might forget completely."

…

Tig opened the front door, the silence of the house confirming that Jamie was likely sleeping. Calvin flopped on the sofa, opening his backpack to get started on his homework. Tig hid both presents in the main bathroom under some towels in the small closet there. Jamie usually used the bathroom off their bedroom so he figured it would be safe for a while unless they suddenly
had a huge towel emergency. Then he headed for the fridge to grab a beer, stopping when he saw the mess of wrapping paper, ribbons, scissors and tape on the table.

Jamie never left messes out. Panic gripped him and he rushed down the hall, checked the bathroom then opened his bedroom door. To his immense relief Jamie was rolling over under the blankets to face him, rubbing her eyes and smiling.

He exhaled, pulled himself together and crossed the room to drop to the floor next to her and take her hand. "You worried me, babe."

She frowned, yawning. "What? How?"

He kissed her knuckles. "Thought you fainted or something, the kitchen was all messed up."

She gasped. "Sorry, I had to lie down. I'll go clean it up."

He laughed and pushed her shoulder back down to the mattress. "Are you kidding? I'm not mad about the kitchen. I was worried."

"I had to wrap Calvin's present before you guys got home," she said softly, reaching out and touching his cheek.

Tig nodded, kissing her hand again. "Keep sleeping. We already ate, Calvin's doing homework. Then it's just TV."

"Okay," she whispered, closing her eyes as he kissed her forehead.

"I'll bring you some more water, babe. Just rest."

"Thanks honey," she called weakly as he left the room. How thin her voice was cut him to the quick, and he found himself anxious to get her out of Charming for a while, away from treatments and all the shit he brought down on her.

Somewhere cosy and warm, somewhere that made her happy. He was really looking forward to Christmas at Thelma's.
Chapter 92

"You're what?" Jamie gasped, bringing the sounds and motions of dinner to a halt with two words. Okay, it wasn't the words, it was the likely too dramatic way she said them. But still, Thelma's decree over a baked ham with potatoes and biscuits caught her totally unaware.

Thelma smiled, closing her hand over Jamie's. "It's time, sweetie. This place is getting to be a bit big for me."

Jamie's mouth opened, she couldn't form an argument, so she snapped it shut again.

"This new place is gorgeous," Thelma went on. "Green, rolling foothills. The Rocky Mountains in the distance. And honey, snow at Christmas." Thelma sighed. "I really miss snow at this time of year."

Jamie cast a look to Tig, but he appeared more worried about her. So she went back to Thelma. "But, this is … this is the last childhood home I have Thelma!"

Thelma's mouth got tight. "Jamie, honey. We can't go back. You're not a child anymore, and you're making your own home for Calvin now. That's going to be home. And you can come see me whenever you like."

Jamie didn't miss the Talking To Children tone that Thelma gave her, and she knew she was behaving like a child. Hell, even Calvin looked kind of intrigued at the mention of snow. "How far away is it?" she couldn't help it, she sounded pathetic.

Thelma tilted her head with a smile. "It's just under four hours' drive, honey."

"Four hours?" she squealed. Now Tig's hand was on her back, making circles, but she wasn't that consolable.

"I've always wanted to live there," Thelma said, picking up her fork again. "And now I'll get to."

Jamie felt a rush of selfish brat flow through her and she looked back to her plate, too. Part of her was scared to be losing Thelma; she seemed so far away as it was. But Thelma seemed excited at the thought of something new.

"Well, that's good then," she mumbled, obviously not entirely meaning it.

"Sounds like a nice place Aunt Thelma," Tig offered, and Thelma smiled.

"And you're welcome to visit as well Tig," Thelma offered.

"Will you keep the chickens?" Calvin asked.
"I think so. I like having farm fresh eggs."

"The goats?"

Thelma shrugged. "Not sure about the goats. They're a lot of work and you only get so much from them."

As Calvin further investigated how much of Thelma's menagerie was making the move to Colorado Tig leaned in a kiss on Jamie's temple in a sweet, soothing way. She had to grin at him and give his knee a squeeze under the table. He was worried about how upset she was.

Once Christmas Eve dinner was gone and cleared away, Jamie and Tig offered to do the dishes, even though he was cranky with her being up and moving around. Tig wanted her resting but she was too worked up.

"I don't think you understand," she said softly. "This is the last of the family Calvin and I have. I feel like the … foundation of my life is being eroded away under my feet."

Tig sighed and pulled her into a hug. "Thelma's right. You're the adult now, not the kid. You're home for Calvin, so let's focus on that, babe. You get to make his home. That's pretty cool."

Her hands curled up the fabric of his shirt. "Yeah, I know. But … I feel like whining."

"You're very whiny when you're not feeling well," he noted. "Good thing you're cute or I'd get annoyed listening to it."

She knew he was half-kidding so she poked him in the ribs.

"Let's get the dishes cleared up. I think you need a few more tokes to mellow you out," he suggested.

She shook her head and grabbed the dish towel off the handle of the stove. "Controlled substances won't make me like this any more than I do right now. I have every right to be whiny."

"All right then," he muttered, and before she knew it he had her spun around, arm around her waist, hand at the back of her neck and his mouth pressed to hers. She didn't even have time to be startled, it felt too good.

They'd only fooled around a bit since her last round of treatments stopped. And there was no monkey business while she was undergoing chemo, that was for sure. Tig was terrified of pushing her too fast too soon, and as much as it might have embarrassed her she missed … it. Sex. With Tig. So when he kissed her like this her body's first reaction was to still, grow warm, and let herself melt. Which she did.
When he parted his lips from hers he was smiling. "There, that's better," he mumbled, kissing the end of her nose. "You done whining?"

Jamie inhaled sharply and found she had no interest in being pissed off. "Fine, I'm done whining," she admitted without much bite to it.

"You should be happy for your aunt, doing what she's always wanted," he scolded her, turning off the water rushing from the tap. "Not a lot of people have the guts to do that. Or the opportunity. And honestly, Jamie …" he took a deep breath, still not looking at her. "I like that she's making a safe place, somewhat far away, but still, a safe place. If you and Calvin ever need to get away, that's … that's pretty damn far."

Jamie's body stilled, not only at his tone but at what he was saying. "Did something happen? With Tiny? Are … are we in trouble?"

He shook his head, still not looking at her. "No, you're not in trouble. But when shit gets dangerous in my life I hate having you close to it."

Those words should have worried and terrified her, but she felt a warm rush at that too. Her stomach went soft and she had to smile.

She stepped into his back, wrapping her arms around his middle. "I like that you care about us."

Tig cupped her face with both hands. "I don't just like you, babe," he breathed.

Jamie felt her heart speed up. Something slid through his expression, something warm and content and completely foreign. A sweetness she hadn't seen before. "What?"

His brow furrowed a bit. "I'm saying that … I …" he licked his lips and looked away. "Fuck," he whispered.

Jamie pressed a kiss to his cheek which brought his eyes to hers again. "Don't say it then," she advised softly. "I know, but … don't say it yet."

There was a long pause and his hands tightened on her face, then his forehead touched hers. No one said anything, Jamie let the warmth of his body absorb into hers, her heart swelling with the realization that he was falling in love with her.

Because she was already there, for certain.

"Let's wash the dishes," she suggested softly with a smile. "Because you're going to make me cry."
With that he was kissing her again, and knowing now how big a part of him she was becoming the kiss was entirely different. Hot, certainly. But sweet, so sweet it made her heart almost ache. So sweet she couldn't not say it herself. "I'm falling in love with you, Tig," she whispered against his lips. "I just want you to know that."

His grip tightened, and he made her stop talking with his tongue. There were a few tears that she let spill, but the lightness in her chest kept her from bursting right into tears.

"Sorry," Thelma called, walking right into the kitchen and heading for the stove. "I'm feeling a chill and I need a cup of tea. You two want some?"

Jamie had dropped her face into Tig's chest at the interruption, and she could tell that he was laughing by how he shook. "Sure," she croaked, wiping at her eyes before stepping away from him. "Thank you, Thelma."

Thelma's face was strange. She looked content, smiling as she was. But there was a certain sadness in her eyes, and Jamie didn't know where it came from or what it was. She had likely heard every word, but she just turned back to the stove and grabbed the kettle. "You two ever get those dishes done we can watch a movie. So get on it."
Chapter 93

Tig pulled on a T-shirt with his jeans, rubbing a hand through his hair and covering a yawn. This old farm house might be called cozy by some, but when the wind blew the thing creaked and groaned like an old man trying to get up off a sofa. He hadn't slept a wink the night before, and that wasn't just because of the extracurricular activities he talked Jamie into once everyone was tucked in their beds. The house was loud. Every sound had him waking up and reaching for his Beretta, tucked between the mattresses.

It was absolutely, one hundred percent not because of the conversation he'd had with his girl in the kitchen while doing dishes. Because that hadn't freaked him out at all. And he'd swear to that.

He hit the foot of the stairs, coming into the quirky but cozy living room. The tree was in the rounded front bay window, lit up, presents at it base like it had dropped its drawers and Christmas fell out all over. Before he could really take in all this normal heart-warming, Rockwell moment something hit his gut and arms went around his waist. "Merry Christmas Tig!"

He chuckled, patting Calvin between the shoulders. "Merry Christmas, Charlie."

"Merry Christmas," another voice said, and before Calvin could move away Aunt Thelma was pulling him down slightly by the shoulder and kissing his cheek.

He smiled at her, knowing it might have shaken a bit. "Merry Christmas Thelma."

She patted his cheek and smiled, then moved away. "Take a seat. Do you want coffee?"

"Sure," he said, sitting on the sagging sofa she indicated. Calvin was sitting on an ottoman, eyeing up the bounty under the tree and grinning. Tig laughed. "Looks like Santa spoiled you."

Calvin nodded, and Tig looked up as Jamie padded into the room with two steaming mugs, looking sleepy and hot all at the same time. She had full flannel pyjamas on, a matching scarf around her head, and a sweet smile that was just for him as she handed a mug over and curled a leg under herself to sit next to him. He immediately wound an arm around her shoulders, kissing her cheek.

"Merry Christmas, babe," he muttered, and she eased her weight into his side.

"Merry Christmas Tig," she returned, sighing as they got cuddly.

Another planet, completely, where the air was scented with apples and cinnamon, holiday music was playing all scratchy and old-school from the record player, and he was … at ease. Not on guard, looking for threats, coiled as though ready to strike if danger reared its ugly head. The locals decided he was welcome even if he was an alien life form.
"Calvin," Thelma called as she entered the living room and plopped into the armchair in the corner. "Get presents for Tig and Jamie to open."

Calvin grinned and scooted around the tree, clearly having a game plan for the distribution. He came back with two wrapped gifts, dropping one into Tig's lap and the other on Jamie's. He had selected the gifts that were from him, and Tig had to smile. He couldn't wait to see Jamie's reaction to those earrings.

He picked the paper off of what felt like a paperback, and as the front cover of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was revealed he was stunned silent. No one had ever given him a book before, and he set his coffee down, holding an arm out. "Come here Chuckles," he instructed. Calvin did and Tig gave him a tight hug. "Thanks buddy," he mumbled, ignoring the prickle in his nose. "Go get your present from me."

Calvin found it right away. It was heavy, and he grunted as he plopped it down in front of him and began opening it.

Jamie gasped next to him, and he caught her face as she looked at the open jewellery box in her hand. Her lip shook as she looked up. "Calvin, how in the world did you -"

"They're your birthstone," Tig cut her off with, bringing her startled expression back to him. "Calvin even picked them out himself."

She smiled. "Calvin, sweetie. Thanks so much."

"No problem," Calvin returned, cool as shit as he got the last of the paper off his gift. It was a hardcover version of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* with a package of coloured highlighters. That kid studied that book like it was a textbook or something. May as well make it professional grade. "Thanks Tig!" he shouted, eyes big as he looked up. "This is a really nice version."

"Nothing but the best for you, buddy."

"Calvin," Jamie said. "Give Thelma one of her gifts."

It was the one from Calvin, of course. He was doing the handing out so he was getting the first crack at everyone loving their presents. Tig had helped Calvin shop, even though the kid knew on his own what he'd wanted to get for Thelma.

Aunt Thelma made a show of saying how nice the bathrobe was, saying she'd needed a new one. Calvin knew this, heard her say it all summer and remembered it. The matching slippers were an after-thought but Thelma loved those, too.

Next Calvin opened Thelma's gift to him, and it was pyjamas with socks. Standard family gift. Jamie got Thelma a cook book, as well as a gift bag full of jars of some shit called pesto,
antipasto, pickled things he'd never thought of that way like asparagus and onions, all kind of
gourmet foods he couldn't pronounce. Thelma loved all of it.

Thelma gave Tig a road hazard kit. It had jumper cables, road flares, reflective collapsible cones,
all in a zippered bag that would likely fit in his storage bin. He grinned, thanking her honestly.
There was another bag from her too; a nice twenty-six of bourbon he'd heard of but never seen,
brewed in California. He was impressed and offered to spike the coffee if anyone was interested.
Thelma said she would be on her second cup.

Calvin opened up more books and video games, and when he came to the other gift Tig had
found as an after-thought Tig leaned closer to Jamie. "Don't be mad," he whispered as Calvin
tore the paper off.

It was a bike calendar. All vintage-model Harleys, original advertising re-coloured from the year
the prints were made. Of course, the bikes all had pin-up girls posing with them.

Calvin's face went pink, but he was grinning. "Thanks Tig!"

"What the hell is that?" Jamie gasped, easing away to glare at him. "He's nine!"

"He likes the bikes. And none of the girls are nude, Jamie."

She shook her head. "Nine years old, Tig. Nine."

"Aunt Jamie! Look! This is Tig's bike! April!" Calvin was pointing to the back where the printer
had included a preview of the viewing material. "It's painted black here, too, Tig!"

"See? He barely sees the women."

Jamie's glare was adorable. But he was still in trouble. "Hey Charlie, I think there's a gift there
for Aunt Jamie from me," he called out, easing against the arm of the sofa as Jamie continued to
look pissed.

Diversion was absolutely necessary.

Calvin plopped a gift down on each of their laps, then settled down cross-legged to watch, a grin
on his face. Tig found that disconcerting, then looked down to realize he held a gift from Jamie.

He went full-out pussy right then, sniffing suddenly as his eyes threatened to water up yet again.
The sound of ripping wrapping paper brought him back to Jamie, smiling at the package she
held. "The wrapping paper is so nice on your gifts, guys," she said, now turning her smile to him.

She knew his gift came from the same store as Calvin's? Of course, matching wrapping paper.
Damn.
He was opening his gift but watching her, so he didn't miss how she froze with the open box in her hand. She inhaled sharply, hand going to her chest. He risked a look at her face and that damn heart-flip thing happened again.

"Oh my God," she whispered.

"Jamie, let's see it," Aunt Thelma coaxed.

His girl loved her gift so much she was frozen. He knew he was grinning like an idiot as he reached over to pluck the necklace out of its velvet holder, opening the clasp and bringing it up to her neck. She wrapped the ends of her scarf around one hand and turned so he could set the necklace in place, do up the clasp, then she leaned back on the sofa, staring down at it and touching it lightly.

"Oh, that's beautiful," Thelma murmured. "Tig, that's gorgeous."

"Charlie helped," he offered, winding an arm around Jamie's shoulders. "You like it?"

She bit her lip and looked at him. Her eyes were wet, and … shit. It was contagious because his were too. "I love it. It's beautiful."

Tig reached across her to grab the box with the earrings. "They match, see?" He undid one from the backing in the box and tilted her head, putting the earring in place then did the same with the other one. "Look at that Charlie, it's perfect."

"You look pretty Aunt Jamie,"

Jamie laughed at that, and the sound made him feel like the fucking king of the world. He'd have her dripping in jewellery if it made her this happy.

"Thank you Calvin," she said, then turned those eyes to him again. "Thank you, honey."

He kissed her quickly, smile still plastered in place, then opened the box he'd dropped in his lap. Now it was his turn to go rock-solid, not so much as blinking.

"I don't know why. I saw it and I thought of you."

He was still staring, processing.

"I'm sorry. It's probably not your thing."

He pulled the necklace from the box, then dropped it over his head. It had barely settled against him when he grabbed Jamie, not even caring that they had an audience, and kissed her with everything he had. She resisted slightly, probably because of Thelma and Calvin, but as always she eventually relaxed in his hold and kissed him back.
She saw this necklace and thought of him. *Thought of him*. So she bought it for him. He really
didn't know the last time anyone said anything like that to him.

"Thank you," he said gruffly when he finally ended the kiss. Her cheeks were pink, which also
pleased him.

"Thank you," she whispered back, blinking a few times quickly.

Thelma cleared her throat, but she was beaming and averting her eyes as Jamie settled back into
her spot next to him. Calvin was grinning at them both like mad. And Tig was getting used to his
heart feeling full, warm and happy.
Chapter 94

February

"You see this Jamie? This is the why of what I did," Thelma breathed, wrapping an arm around Jamie's shoulders and sighing.

Jamie smiled into the pink glow of the Colorado sunset, beaming down over the mountains. The grass of the yard was dead with patches of snow here and there but it was an absolutely breathtaking view. "It's a gorgeous spot, Aunt Thelma."

"You can taste that air, can't you? It's so clean. Not dusty and dry." The older woman inhaled deeply. "God, I love it here."

Jamie rested on the porch swing, and Thelma eased one leg up to perch on the railing. "So," Thelma said grinning. "You wear that necklace everywhere you go?"

Jamie smiled, touching the pendant at her neck. "Yeah, I do. The only reason I'm not wearing the earrings is they dangle and I didn't want to yank them out while we were moving your stuff."

"You seem to be doing better sweetheart," Thelma said.

"I really am. I almost feel like I'm back to my old self. Energy's coming back, I'm hungry now and it's been months since I've been hungry without ... well, you know." Thelma nodded.

"And things with Tig?"

Jamie knew her smile got bigger. "Everything with Tig is wonderful."

Thelma smiled back. "And still no word on Jackie or Tiny?"

Jamie shook her head. "No. No surprise that Jackie didn't call back or check in. But I was hoping Tiny would be handled by now."

"He definitely makes me nervous," Thelma agreed. "You're still protected?"

"Tig's nearly always with me, and when he can't be he sends over Juice or the prospect." She couldn't use the nickname Half Sack in front of Thelma. She didn't know why.

"So why do I have you two all to myself then?" Thelma nodded to Calvin, who was chasing her border collie around the front. "Not that I mind of course."

"We're four hours away," Jamie answered simply. "And I'm packing."
Thelma shuddered. "It freaks me out that you're carrying a gun around."

"I've been getting better at using it," Jamie informed her. And it was true; three times a week she was at the make-shift "range" with Gemma. The Oswald fellow that owned the land didn't seem to mind. She'd met him a couple of times and he was very polite, kind and friendly. "Besides," Jamie went on. "Tiny's territory doesn't extend into Colorado and he's really taking his time appearing in Charming. I don't know how intent he is on getting hold of anyone anymore."

Thelma shrugged. "Still makes me nervous."

"You have a shot gun," Jamie pointed out.

"And that's for killing coyotes that get too close to my chickens," Thelma quipped but her eyes were twinkling. "Don't throw that in my face, young lady."

Jamie watched Calvin tearing around the yard, laughing and chasing the dog which came with the house. That dog already freaking loved him, and Jamie knew the second they got home Calvin would be asking about getting a dog.

And she couldn't even scare him off with the "You have to take care of it" threat. He would totally do all the work and be responsible. They just didn't have the room. Jamie always thought big dogs, real dogs, deserved wide open spaces like this. Not chain-linked squares of hard packed grass.

"He really likes it here," Jamie mused. "He was so excited when we saw the snow." The white stuff had terrified Jamie, though. She hadn't driven in snow in a long time. Luckily it was warm and the roads were wet instead of icy.

"It's a good spot," Thelma agreed. "You know you can come and stay anytime you want or need to."

Jamie frowned, looking up into Thelma's open expression. Something strange was behind her eyes, and it gave her a slightly uneasy feeling. "Why ... why'd you say that?"

Thelma sighed. "Just worried about you two. That's my job, remember?"

Jamie stared at her hands in her lap. "I'm not leaving him, Thelma."

They'd gotten into this a few times in the past while, but since the new year started Thelma had been getting very pushy on the subject. Maybe it came from the guilt of moving so far away from them. Who knew. All Jamie wished was that she'd stop worrying.

Tig took good care of both of them. He'd keep them safe.

"I know honey. But if things get tense, you have to come and stay here. Okay?"
Jamie just nodded. She wasn't going to get into her worries about how serious everything seemed to be getting with the club. Tig wasn't telling her anything, but she knew he was bothered by outside influences when they were at home. He was impatient at times, irritable, and sullen which was even worse. But it always passed, and she was never scared of him when he got that way. She just worried.

No need for Thelma to know about that. She was concerned enough as it was.

"I think it's about time to head inside for me," Jamie changed the subject, covering a yawn.

"Time to call Tig?" Thelma guessed.

Jamie had to smile. "Yeah. I didn't call this afternoon, he might be worried."

Thelma shook her head as Jamie got up, gave her a kiss on the cheek then bounced up the stairs to "her" room. All the furniture had been moved and arranged very much like it had been at Thelma's, but the view was entirely different.

She picked up her phone, unplugged it from the charger and flipped through her contacts until she found Tig and dialled.

He answered on the third ring.

"There she is," he said by way of a hello. She could even hear his smile.

"Hey honey," she said, closing the bedroom door.

"How is it at Thelma's?"

Jamie shrugged, flopping onto the bed. "It's a bit smaller. Nice and cosy, though." She sat up, grinning as the light of the sunset hit her in the eyes. "You should see the view, honey. It's amazing."

"I bet. How's Charlie?"

"Playing with Thelma's dog. If he comes back wanting one I need you to be on my side, telling him the yard's too small and a dog is too much work."

"Charlie'd be awesome with a dog, what are you talking about?"

She closed her eyes, sighing. "Crap. You're not on my side."

"He's responsible enough."

"I know. But I hate seeing big dogs in little yards tied up all day."
Tig chuckled. "Dogs are the shit, babe. Better than a fucking cat."

Jamie rubbed her forehead.

"Doesn't have to be a big dog," he went on. "Medium-size would be good. Still small enough to bring inside, yard should be just right during the day. Good security, too, actually." Shit, now he was sounding really serious about it.

"Tig, not yet. Not a dog yet. Maybe ... maybe over summer break. So Calvin can be there to house train it all day, get it into a routine."

There was a pause, then he chuckled again. "You're convinced."

Jamie had to shake her head and flop back into the pillows. "Shit," she muttered and he outright laughed.

"You two heading home first thing tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Whenever I drag my ass out of bed."

"Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Jamie grinned up at the ceiling. "Nothing, honey. The air here makes me sleepy. Or maybe it's the altitude. I don't know. I ... I do like it here, Tig."

There was a pause, then he said softly. "I'm glad, babe."

She frowned at the tone, the seeming sadness of the statement. "Is everything okay there?"

"Got back late from that run, babe. Had to get up and work this morning. I'm pretty tired myself."

"Are you at the clubhouse?"

"Yeah. Just bullshitting with Piney."

"No skanks," she warned.

"Babe," was his was way of telling her he thought her worry was cute.

"I mean it. I'll make you sorry."

He laughed, then his voice dropped a bit lower. "Help me out then. What you got on right now?"

She shook her head. "Tig -"

"What you got on, babe?"
She bit her lip, her heart doing a little summersault. "Jeans. A sweatshirt. Not exactly hot, honey."

"What's underneath?"

Now she was grinning. "The green set. With the lace."

He growled, her body quivered. "Should have left that behind for me, babe."

"Why?"

"So I can touch it and think of it touching you."

Jamie's eyes slid closed all on their own. "You're so bad."

"And you wouldn't have it any other way, babe."

"I have a drawer full of underwear, honey. Do what you want."

"Do me a favour."

"What?"

"Reach inside those green panties for me."

"Tig."

"Do it."

"Who's there with you?"

"No one. I came to my room when I saw it was you calling. Do it babe, unzip those jeans and reach inside."

Jamie's eyes checked her door. It was locked …

She made sure he heard the zipper, which made him chuckle. "That's a girl."

Feeling silly she slid her hand down her stomach.

"You there yet, baby?"

"I feel stupid."

"Finger yourself, babe. I wanna listen."
"Tig -"

"I gotta wait another day before I get to see you babe, come on."

The elastic of her panties slid along the back of her hand as she followed instructions, her finger gliding over her clit lightly. She gasped it felt so good.

"Jamie," he growled, hearing it.

Her eyes closed. "I miss you."

"I'm right here, baby. Make those circles I know you like."

It helped, remembering him touching her like this. Her pulse sped up, breathing got harder.

"You're wet by now, babe. Two fingers, inside."

She followed every instruction, his voice as well as the recollection of him doing all this made her climax gradually and sweetly, gasping and sighing instead of crying out, but it was just as good. As she listened to her own breath in the phone she realized he hadn't said anything for a while.

"Tig?" she whispered.

"Fuck, babe. Get up early and get home."

She laughed at that, embarrassed even though she was alone. "Thank you honey," she said softly.

"Don't thank me for that, Jamie. Christ. I'm rock hard now."

"No skanks," she reminded him.

"Tell me then, what should I do?"

At that Jamie grinned and felt herself get just a bit braver. "Well, undo your jeans and put your hand in your shorts, honey."
Chapter 95

March

"Tig, you got a minute?"

Tig paused on his way out of church, letting the others file past. He shut the double doors behind them, turning back to Clay. "What's up?"

Clay waved him over. "Opie's been talking to the ATF."

Tig frowned. "What? No way."

"Hap saw him leaving the sheriff's the other day, and that bitch Stahl left right after him."

Tig shook his head. "Not really sure that means anything, Clay."

His prez hadn't moved from his seat, so Tig returned to his spot at Clay's right hand. "Listen," Clay said low. "This is touchy. I get that. But I'm going to need your help on this. I can't ask Jax."

Tig just nodded. "Yeah, no kidding."

Clay shook his head. "I hate this Stahl bitch. She's a pain in the fucking neck." With a head jerk Clay indicated he was dismissed. They got to their feet and cleared the room then, Tig remembering one annoying detail. "Davidson still checking in?"

Clay nodded. "Yeah, our little rat is texting me like clockwork. He ain't got fuck-all to tell me but he's plenty scared."

Tig nodded, relieved. Clark Davidson had spent a few days at the clubhouse, and once he was good and terrified they let him go with an instruction to text Clay every hour on the hour from 8am to 8pm with an update. It was always "Still no word," but the prick never deviated.

Clay clapped a heavy hand on Tig's shoulder. "What's the plan tonight?" he asked amiably.

Tig found it hard to keep playing nice, but in the past few months Clay had really eased up on the whole Jamie issue. "Jaime's birthday," he said. "Taking her and the kid out for supper. She cooked for me, and I ain't about to try it for her."

"You're going out on a date?" Clay found that funny for whatever reason.

"Supper with her and the kid. Calvin suggested it."
Clay just shook his head and headed for the bar. Tig nodded a farewell and headed out to his bike, allowing a bit of excitement to creep in at the thought of it being Jaime's birthday. Things may have gotten tense, and he may have been strung out with Clay’s threat to Jamie, but his girl had a way of calming him down he relied on every day. But today he wasn't tense at all. Today he got to spoil Jamie just a little, and he was looking forward to it.

Calvin had made her waffles this morning. That was his thing now. Tig's gift was another cop-out, more jewellery, but he knew she was going to love it. He'd also picked her up some little filmy, light blue number for later. Technically that was his gift but she seemed to like any indications of how she turned him on.

He pushed the concerns of Opie away because he actually didn't believe it for a second. Being prudent was still a good idea, but he honestly wasn't that concerned. Not until they had more to go on. God knows law enforcement found ways to pull any of them in for a "chat" based on pointless bullshit. They'd all been there at some point.

He was climbing on his bike when he heard his name. He twisted to look over his shoulder, nodding to Clay who was jogging his way, cell at his ear. "What is it?"

Clay grabbed his own helmet, pausing while listening to the phone. "Speak of the fucking devil. Davidson called. Tiny's in Charming. " Clay snapped his phone shut. "Prospect's not answering his phone."

Tig felt like he was instantly doused in ice water. Half-Sack was watching out for Jamie while Tig was at TM and Calvin was in school. He froze, looking at Clay for a sign of what he should do. Even his brain stalled out.

Clay read his expression and was climbing on his own bike. "Right behind you, man."

The ride to his house was too long and too slow, even though he knew he was speeding. Tig nearly forgot to drop his kickstand, his bike almost toppling him sideways after he killed the motor in his driveway.

The inside door was open. Why the fuck was it open?

Tig yanked the storm door completely out of the way, almost tearing it off the hinges. The first thing he caught was the smell; blood, used gunpowder. In front of the sofa he found one explanation – a body. A big fucker, on his back with a bloody wound in the centre of a crisp white dress shirt.

"Holy shit," Clay mumbled behind him, the first time Tig realized his president had been keeping pace with him. Tig was stepping over the corpse, following a trail of dripping blood. His vision didn't narrow, his heartbeat didn’t drown out all sound. Instead, everything was sharper, crisper, almost happening faster than normal.

"Please, please," he kept repeating, panting it like it was how he had to breathe.
Calvin's room was empty. The main bathroom, ditto. The bedroom door was open, a huge blood smear on the wall next to the jamb. The sight of that made his heart stop, but his hearing and sight remained needle-fine. Tig tripped over a form at the doorway, not paying attention to what did it. He only saw Jamie, slumped on the floor in her robe, scarf askew on her head. She was out, he saw blood around her head, too, pooling around her temple.

He rushed to her side, dropping to his knees. He put a hand to her neck, wrapping his hand around her throat. He could feel her pulse; she was fine, just knocked out.

Tig sighed in relief, leaning close to her face, not wanting to jostle her. "Honey, can you hear me? Jamie? Babe?"

"She all right?"

Tig didn't look to Clay. "She's breathing. There's a pulse. She must have knocked herself out." Tig cast his eyes around, noting the pistol in her hand. "Holy shit. She killed him."

"Both of them," Clay corrected, and that's when Tig looked back to the doorway, eyes dropping from Clay to the slumped person on the ground. Not a big guy, likely a … midget.

"Holy shit," he repeated, returning his attention to his girl. He put a hand to her cheek, seeing now her split lip. Swelling eye.

They'd fucking hit her. His vision ran red. His hand not touching her curled into a fist, and the urge to do violence was a living part of him.

Until she moaned. Relief coursed through him, he could have wept. He held her face with both hands as she rolled to her back. He made sure the robe stayed closed, his hands actually shaking to see she was okay.

"Babe, I'm here. It's me."

Those eyes had never been more stunning as she focused on his face. She cringed, hand to her head, leaving the gun behind. "I hit my head," she mumbled, then she squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't feel good."

"You have a concussion." He knew that immediately. "Don't move, honey." He turned to Clay. "Cops and ambulance or Tara?"

Clay surveyed the bedroom. "Cops," he said. "It was probably loud. She's hurt. She's marked up. Get it all on record and they can help look out for her. If she's on their radar that's better for her, yeah?"

Tig was nodding, then helping Jamie sit up when he realized she was moving. "Babe, you should stay put."
Jamie leaned against the dresser, breathing evenly and closing her eyes again. "I'm dizzy."

Tig gathered her up in his arms and carried her to the bed as he heard Clay start speaking into his cell again. "I'd like to report a break in. A woman's hurt and two men are dead."

When Jamie was in bed she seemed more comfortable. She sighed, rolling to her side. He sat on the edge next to her. "Babe," he said softly, kissing her temple. "What happened?" He was checking her head, and there was a nasty slice in her scalp that explained the blood on the ground.

It was cute how her brow puckered, but he was too worried to dwell on it. "I was just finishing my shower. Came out to start a cup of tea, and they were in the living room."

The red tinged his sight again at the fact they got in while she was so incredibly vulnerable. "Did they touch you, babe?"

"No," she assured him weakly, hand taking his and squeezing. "I ran for the bedroom, got the gun. The big guy came in here first, he hit me. I got him in the chest but he walked out. I heard him fall down, I hoped he was dead."

"He is," Tig assured her.

"Then the other guy came in yelling at me. He was calling me a killer, waving his bloody hand at me. He was nuts. He rushed me. I missed him with my third shot. He tackled me. I got him in the stomach I think. I hit my head on the edge of the dresser." She frowned. "It really hurt. But the gun went off again. I don't even know how but I got him in the head."

Tig realized Clay was still in the doorway. They shared a look of … shock, really. "I'll go find Half-Sack," Clay muttered and left.

Tig grabbed the scarf from the ground, wrapping it around her head, making a type of bandage with it. Then he had his entire focus back on Jamie. "Cops are coming," he told her, running a hand over the scarf lightly. It made her smile a bit, which eased him slightly. "They're gonna wanna know what happened."

"Okay," she said, agreeable.

"That gun, is it the one Gemma gave you?"

"Yes."

He leaned in further. "You gotta tell them you got that gun away from them."

"What?"

"They had that gun, okay babe?" He tried to convey his meaning with his eyes.
"Why?"

"It ain't registered, no serial numbers. It's illegal."

Realization came slowly. "Oh. Okay."

He licked his lips, took a deep breath. Fuck, she was okay. That's all he wanted. "Jamie?"

"Yeah babe?"

He tried to smile. "Happy birthday."
Chapter 96

Jamie was cuddled sideways on the sofa into Tig's side, his hand running up and down her arm as they laughed at some stupid Will Ferrell movie. The refuse of Chinese take-out was on the coffee table, her, Tig and Calvin were full of greasy cuisine, and her headache was finally going away.

They'd been nice at the hospital, stitching up the gash in her head before the sheriff's department stepped in to question her. The details of what happened were fuzzy, and she wasn't being intentionally vague. She honestly could only recall flashes and moments. It had been over so fast, and it had been so terrifying, she remembered more her own escalated heartbeat and panic.

She's been in the shower. She dried off, pulled on her robe and tied the scarf around her head. Then she wanted some green tea, and completely oblivious she walked down the hallway to the kitchen. The tall one had been standing in the middle of the living room, the shorter man was sitting on the sofa. The big one had a gun.

She froze. She'd never forget that momentary confusion that made all her muscles seize up. Or the way her stomach dropped like she was on a speeding elevator. And she hadn't even wigged out immediately. The calm that came over her was cold, intense. Her heart was hammering, yes, but all she could focus on was the loaded Colt in the nightstand.

Jamie had turned on her heel, running for the bedroom. The door was half-shut and she remembered flinging it so hard it hit the wall and didn't bounce back. It was because she'd embedded the knob in the drywall. She yanked the drawer almost all the way out and had the Colt in her hand, safety released as the big one flew through the doorway. He had a gun, he came right at her. Jamie hesitated, giving him time to backhand her. It hurt, she went down to a knee, but she kept her grip on the gun. When she heard him come closer she came up on both feet with the Colt at the ready, firing and catching him by surprise.

It was almost comical. It plowed right into the centre of his chest, and he looked down, completely shocked. He dropped the pistol, put a hand over the wound, then stumbled back out her door.

Jamie yanked the knob free of the wall and shut the bedroom door as she heard a man hollering in anger. She was assuming it was the short one. Something along the lines of "What have you done, bitch?"

She locked the door, knowing it wasn't much protection, and then cursed the fact that there was no phone in the bedroom. Her cell was in the kitchen where she left it.

The door was kicked in. She yelped, bringing the Colt back around to her new visitor, and he rushed her. One shot went wide and then he was on her, taking her to the ground but not before the side of her head hit the top corner of the wooden dresser. She saw stars, cried out,
immediately felt sick, but with his body on her she fired the Colt. It had been stupid, she wasn't
tirecertain which way it was pointed what with her panic and the hit to her head. He jerked
back with a squeal, then she got him once more in the forehead. That was when he hit the
ground.

She couldn't get up. The world was spinning like she'd had too much to drink, so she closed her
eyes to wait for it to pass.

The next thing she knew Tig was putting her in their bed, and Clay was there, too. Then the
hospital, the interrogation by Sheriff Unser, and back home. Chibs had picked up Calvin from
school for them, toom him to the clubhouse like everything was normal then Tig went to collect
him once she was free of her legal obligations.

Half-Sack had been in the back-yard. They must have hit him over the head, too. He was out
cold on the patio when Clay found him.

She hated elluding to the fact that the big one might have intended to assault her in the bedroom;
it was a lie, and lying about that being done to you was one of the worst things a woman could
do in Jamie's opinion. But it helped them believe that's why the big guy put the gun down and
how she got her hands on it so fortuitously.

Lying about the gun had been easy. They believed her, she was obviously distraught, and she
fully admitted to firing the weapon. Both men had been wearing gloves so fingerprints weren't a
worry. Unless someone thought to test prints on the bullets, but Tig assured her Unser wouldn't
push for that. That's when she saw first-hand the relationshop that law enforcement had with the
Sons, that she still wasn't sure how she felt about that.

When they got back to the house the bodies had been removed. Thank God. Someone had even
cleaned the walls and carpet. There were still a couple holes in the wall that Jamie put there, but
Calvin hadn't noticed. Or said anything if he did see them. He knew someone broke in and hit
Jamie, it was the only way to explain her split lip and goose egg. She assured him she was okay,
and he didn't need to know anything else. He probably assumed Tig had been here to help her,
and all the police excitement meant the bad guy was going to jail.

No one had to tell Jamie it was Tiny and his bodyguard in their home.

Now she was resting. The doctors at St. Thomas confirmed she had a concussion, but not a
serious one. The bleeding made it look more horrific than it really was. Remembering the events,
she could break it down in hazy slow-motion, realizing how easily she could have been the one
on the floor, not moving while strangers took pictures and made notes.

Jamie was probably still in shock. If she thought on it too long she had a suffocating need to
breathe harder. But she didn't let the worry linger. She just snugged further in to Tig, and his arm
around her tightened as though he knew she needed reassurance that she wasn't alone now; he
was here and he'd look after her.
Calvin kissed Jamie good night at his bedtime and gave Tig a hug, which was a first. Jamie knew that meant he thought Tig had protected her that afternoon, and that was fine with her. Whatever made him sleep better, as far as she was concerned.

The adults stayed right where they were on the couch, but Tig turned the volume on the TV down low. Then he turned more towards her so she could rest right on his chest, wrapping her arms around his sides. She closed her eyes, breathing deep and letting the feeling of being safe run through her.

"I had a much better birthday than you did," he said without much humour.

She smiled at the feeling of him kissing her forehead, then the smile melted. "That was so scary, Tig."

He tightened his arms around her back. "That kills me, babe. I shoulda been here."

She somewhat shrugged. "How long have we been waiting for him? I mean, it had been months and he hadn't turned up."

"Waiting for us to let our guard down," Tig agreed with her.

"Was he looking for Jackie you think?"

"Yeah babe, pretty sure of it. She owes him a lot of cash."

"I'm glad she wasn't here then," Jamie said softly, closing her eyes. He kissed her head again and just held her, which was absolutely fantastic. Then he chuckled, and it rumbled under her cheek, making her grin. "What's so funny?"

"I haven't given you your present yet."

She planted her elbows beside him on the cushions and rose up to look down on him. "Well, what is it?"

His smile was slow, sexy, as he slid a hand to each side of her neck. "You sure you want it now?"

She tilted her head. "Of course I do. Give me my present." She even climbed off of him to let him up, so he did just that, stooping to kiss her quickly before heading down the hallway. Jamie couldn't stop smiling while he was gone, and it got wider as he returned with a tissue-sprouting gift bag.

Jamie raised an eyebrow. "You're getting fancy with the gift wrapping."
Tig shook his head and set the bag right in her lap then sunk into the sofa next to her, fitting his arm around her lower back and snuggling her close to him. "Well open it," he instructed, chin on her shoulder.

Jamie pulled out the tissue stuffing, finding a wrapped box inside and something light blue and gauzy underneath. Her cheeks got warm, of course, and she pulled the fabric out first. It was blue gauze alright, completely sheer from strap to hem, and even *that* would only reach to her upper thigh. It was white lace along the top and bottom, matching panties attached to the tag.

"Tig, I can't wear my prosthetic with this," she whispered, dropping it into her lap and trying to look into his eyes.

"You don't need to. You put that on, show it to me and in exactly three seconds you're naked anyway," he promised, kissing the side of her neck in a pleasant way that made her shiver.

"Tig," she breathed, hand on his cheek.

"Open the box," he urged.

Jamie pulled out the box wrapped in beautiful white and silver paper, already knowing it had to be jewellery. She was beaming by the time the paper was off. It was a smaller, almost cube-like box, and when she opened it her heart stopped.

"Tig," she gasped at the sight of it, and he chuckled again.

"You like it, babe?"

She just nodded, unable to look away. In the white velvet lining sat a ring that matched her pendant. Not just a ring, though. It would stretch almost from knuckle to knuckle in a web of white gold curlicues, the end of each sporting a glinting aquamarine gemstone. At the designs centre was a bigger oval-shaped aquamarine, cut to catch as much light as it could.

"Tig, honey." She had nothing better to say than that. He took the box, pulled the ring free and then slid it onto her first finger of her right hand. It fit perfect, and she finally looked up at him.

"It's so pretty."

He shrugged. "It's not bad," he admitted. "Prettier on you, though."

She shook her head. "Oh, Tig."

He kissed her then, soft and sweetly, the best kind of kiss he had. When they parted mouths he rested his forehead on hers. "I was hoping to see you in both parts of my present," he told her with that wicked grin he had. "But you had to go and scramble your brains."

She laughed, realizing she was close to crying. "Do you mean to tell me I'm not going to get lucky on my birthday?"
"You should take it easy."

She bit her lip and ran her hand around the back of his neck. "It's my birthday Tig. I don't intend on doing all the work."
April

Tig was staring at the door that belonged to Jamie's oncologist. She was inside, getting results from the latest series of tests to see how her body was coping. His knee was bouncing, and when he managed to get it stopped the other one would start up within seconds. A damn nervous wreck, worse than Jamie had been. She kept squeezing his knee and telling him it was going to be okay.

He couldn't relax until she came out, looked him in the eye and told him she was okay. It may as well have been his own results he was waiting on. He felt that tied to her now.

This was true helplessness. Jamie had been quiet all morning, but insisted they should take his bike to the hospital. He liked that she enjoyed riding but now he was cautious with her behind him, even more than he normally would have been.

This shit just reminded him how fragile she was, no matter how tough his little sweetheart appeared to be.

He'd been watching her closely since the incident with Tiny. He was worried about her for more than one reason now; she'd knowingly killed two people. She was calm, accepting of it. Once she broke down and cried, and he held her while she did it, assuring her she'd had no choice. She'd done the right thing. She'd agreed, but it hadn't stopped the crying either. So she let it out, he absorbed it so she could be rid of it. They'd talked the next day and her cold statement of "It was them or me" had sent a shiver down his back, even if she was right.

The knob turned and Jamie stepped into the hospital corridor, head down. He shot to his feet immediately, taking her by both shoulders. "Babe?" he mumbled.

She looked up at him and her eyes were rimmed in red, wet, and her face crumpled as she started crying. His heart was dashed to about a thousand pieces, the ache between his lungs immediate.

"Jamie, it's okay. I'm here for you honey," he rambled, pulling her into a hug.

After a moment he realized she was laughing. He pulled back to look into her face, now directed up at him. "Tig," she said on a snifflle. "I'm okay. The doctor said everything's perfect. My blood work looks good and healthy. It'll still be a while before they declare me cancer-free but -"

He cut her off with a kiss, the relief almost as satisfying as sex. She wrapped her arms around his waist, squeezing him back, returning the kiss with a flick of that tongue.

"Babe," he growled. "Don't fucking scare me like that."
She smiled. "I'm sorry, I was just so relieved. I broke down in there and then I thought I was okay, saw you and I just lost it again."

He closed his eyes and hugged her tighter. "I think this requires a celebration. " He felt her nod. "Let's go get Calvin. Supper out together, yeah?"

"Are you taking me on a date?"

"I don't date," he reminded her for what felt like the thousandth time. "It's to celebrate and Calvin's coming, too."

"I wonder what a date with you would be like."

He grinned. "You'll never know."

"That stinks."

"Well, how about this. I'll keep you and Calvin safe, rip apart anything dangerous with my bare hands if I have to, and make you come hard at least twice every time you're in the mood." His smile went full-grin as she blushed. "That's what I thought," he gloated with a kiss.

"Let's go," she grumbled, winding her arm around his waist and walking with him to the elevator banks. She was adorably embarrassed. "Although, we have an hour and a half before school's out."

He lowered his mouth to her ear. "So a celebration for us first?"

She smiled as they waited for an elevator. "Doesn't that sound good?"

Tig nodded, pushing her head ahead of him as the doors for a car opened. "You don't have to talk me into that, babe."

Another thing he liked about Jamie feeling better; she was energetic. *All of the time.* Paired up with fact she was approaching her mid-thirties and already at her peak, he was a happy bastard in many, *many* ways.

She attacked him as soon as they got home. She unbuttoned his shirt, yanking it off of him with his kutte in one violent motion. Before he could give a surprised laugh she was kissing him, wrapping herself around him with arms and legs. He popped her hips off of his and set her feet back on the ground, making her give a sound of frustration. Tig backed her into the hallway wall by her waist, unbuttoning her jeans. She smiled and tried to kiss him again but he avoided her mouth, instead dropping to his knees and pulling her jeans right down to her ankles as he backed her against the wall. She stepped out of them immediately, hands on his shoulders. He loved how she was panting.
Her little pink panties were the next to go, but he didn't wreck them because he liked them. With both hands he pushed her thighs apart and she immediately rolled her hips away from the wall. With a grunt he popped one knee up over his shoulder, leaning into her, his tongue sliding over her clit. Her hands tightened in his hair and she gasped, body jerking.

He had to cool her down before they got right down to it. He was glad she was okay too, but he wanted to savour it. Knowing his girl, this should help.

It was close when she started moaning, he knew that. The leg over his shoulder tensed then hitched over his back tighter. He even got a "Tiggy!" out of it.

With a satisfied smile he stood, taking the hem of her shirt with him. She raised her arms, letting him drag it off over her head. The bra matched the panties and he slid his hands up her back to unclasp it. That's when he kissed her, tongue sliding over her lower lip to be met with her own. Then Jamie let him lead her backwards down the hall to their room, dropping to the mattress under him.

It had worked; she was more patient, letting him touch and trail his hands all over her. He didn't know he'd expected her to still be sick until she told him things looked good health-wise. His own relief was a stunner. If it killed him she was going to know every minute of every day how much she meant to him.

It was when he was moving inside of her she rocked his world. Their eyes were locked, breath on each other's faces, and she whispered it. "I love you, honey."

He fell still, his heart tripping. "Babe," he said, an ache starting that felt a lot like regret. And he didn't want that between them, here in bed after she just told him that.

"You don't have to say it back," she assured him with a soft kiss. "But I'm not falling anymore. I'm there, Tig."

Tig eyes closed and his forehead rested on hers. He wanted to say it because he felt it, but it also felt like a fraud. He was lying, keeping important things from her.

Tig Trager never resented the club, his president, until that moment. Even when it cost him a marriage, his kids, his freedom. He'd always been all in. Right then? He actually wished he didn't have that ink on him. A regular person would not have kept her sister's death from her. He wouldn't have that obstacle. He would just look at her, how perfect and beautiful she was, and say it right back.

Tig would say it as soon as he could. Hand to God, he'd open up and let it all out once he knew Clay could do her no harm. Saying it before then would be cruel, especially if he had to let her go.

His breath caught and his eyes stung. To hide it he kissed her hard, and she responded in her sweet, soft way; allowing his tongue in her mouth, giving a moan and urging him on with her
hips. He took the invite, loving the feeling and sound of her pleasure mounting until it broke, taking him with it.
They picked up Calvin and took him to TM for his boxing lesson with Chibs before supper. Calvin was ecstatic over Jamie's clean bill of health, and she had to keep herself from crying as he wrapped his arms tight around her stomach and squeezed for a good four minutes or so. She just stroked his hair and stooped to kiss the top of his head.

After they all piled into her car for the ride to the shop, Tig insisting still that he's the one that drives even if it was a "cage," Jamie was sitting on the picnic table, cup of tea in hand, watching the boxing lessons and grinning like an idiot. She couldn't stop smiling, actually.

It all felt wonderful. Too good to be true. She was healthy, she was getting better, she could go back to work soon, and of all the unlikely scenarios; she found herself in love.

"I hear congratulations are in order!" The voice even *sounded* like it was smiling. Jamie grinned at Juice and got to her feet, accepting his warm hug with more nose-prickles.

"I have to thank you for your help," she said, meaning it. He let her go and stepped back, still grinning.

"Just glad you're okay. That's a tough battle you went through," he said seriously.

She ducked her head, still uncomfortable with praises. All she did was *not give-up completely*. She didn't feel she deserved the accolades, but she could sure grow to appreciate them.

"Honey, Tig just told me," another louder voice declared. Jamie had to laugh as Gemma came at her next, arms extended. "So glad to hear it. Such good news, sweetheart."

Jamie's eyes watered as Gemma patted her back, holding her tight. "Thank you," was all she was able to say in return.

There was a whole train of people waiting to tell her how happy they were for her. Opie's hug was big and tight, and it confirmed that he actually was the human version of a teddy bear. Jax gave her a side-hug and a kiss on the cheek. Bobby also gave her a tight hug, and Piney shocked her by wrapping his arms around her, too.

"Such good news sweetheart," he grumbled with a kiss on her forehead.

And with *that* she was outright crying. Gemma gave her a tissue, which Jamie thanked her for with an embarrassed laugh.

"Okay, we'll leave you be now," Gemma promised with another hug. "Everyone, back to work!"

Chapter 98
Jamie turned away to pull herself together, looking up into the ring. Calvin and Chibs were both watching with giant smiles on their faces. At her gaze Chibs blew her a kiss with his boxing glove, then barked something at Calvin she couldn't understand. Calvin responded by coming away from the ropes with a swing that Chibs easily side-stepped.

She sat back down at the table, dabbing at her eyes and getting control over herself when another body sat next to her. She looked up, and her temperature dropped just a fraction of a degree because it was Clay.

He was smiling, but she'd always found that smile more chilling than charming. "Glad to hear you're okay," he said, sounding for all the world like he meant it.

"Thank you," she returned with a nod. "It's a relief."

"I bet. And I want to thank you for how you handled the situation with Tiny. You were solid, all the way through. And with everything else, actually. It's good to know we can count on you, Jamie."

Something uncurled the distrust in her gut just a touch. His eyes, when they met hers, were honest. And she got it now. She was so much an outsider she couldn't even imagine what it could do to a club like this if someone undependable got a glimpse at the All Powerful Oz behind the curtain. It wasn't personal, they had to be careful who they trusted.

She got it. She saw it in his eyes and heard it in that simple statement.

"Of course," she assured him, even attempting a smile. "You guys have helped me and Calvin so much. Without you guys I would be dead, especially after Tiny and his … goon. I owe you guys everything."

Clay's smile widened and he patted her knee. "Good to hear, honey." Then he leaned in. "Though, we shouldn't be surprised, right?"

"What?" She laughed. "Why?"

"We shouldn't be surprised you were so dependable. You killed a drug dealer just last summer to protect Tig. And luckily that won't even bite you back since you iced Tiny."

Jamie frowned. "Who?"

Clay tilted his head. "That dealer. You hit with the bat. You remember. He was dead when he hit the ground I'm sure. Tig told me about how hard you cracked him. Impressive. Must have got him just in the right spot."

Her stomach flipped, then she tried to remember Tig telling her she'd killed that guy. But he didn't. He'd never told her that. He said they took care of the guys, which she assumed meant they were … run out of town?
No, bullshit. She knew that meant they were dead, but at that time she was still kinda naïve. Tig never said she'd killed one of them.

Jamie killed two men in her home in self-defense. And even if she was defending herself she had still half-expected to be … marked by it. But it hadn't come. It was just another part of her surviving.

Now her heart sped up. Now she felt like she needed more room to breathe. Jamie blinked rapidly, looking around the lot for Tig. She just had to know; maybe she was remembering it wrong. Maybe he told her that.

*Three* people killed by her. Two were going to kill her. One was going to hurt Tig.

But why didn't he tell her?

"You okay doll?" Clay asked, hand on her shoulder, sounding totally concerned.

She jerked away from him, getting to her feet. Her heart was racing, breathing was heavy, and it was all making her feel light-headed. "I'm fine," she assured him, attempting a smile. "I just … I don't think I knew that drug dealer died."

Clay frowned, then his face indicated he was remembering something. "Oh shit."

"What?"

"Nothing. I forgot something."

"What?"

He looked away. "Doesn't matter, honey."

The distrust was back ten-fold and she loathed the fact he had put her at ease at all. "Tell me," she clipped out, moments away from losing her mind.

"I forgot. Tig asked us not to tell you about the guy you took out with the bat. Didn't think you could handle it, what with treatments at all." He put a hand to his chest, wide-eyed. "My fault, Jamie. I didn't mean to upset you."

Her nails dug into her palms, and frantically she was trying to find Tig.

"Just remember that we know where all these bodies went, and who made them dead." He just kept fucking *talking*. "So we need to look out for each other, right?" Clay whispered, and she hated him. Hated him to her very core. She didn't want this to be true, but why drag something out that was so easy to ask Tig about and have him confirm it or deny it.
It was true. Every terrible, horrible word. Tig was keeping secrets, and not just club secrets. Which meant he was lying.

And Jamie loved him. She'd just told him so an hour ago.

"And Jamie, babe?" In full-blown panic she brought her eyes back to Clay. She wanted to tell him to shut the fuck up but her voice deserted her. "Know that I mean this from the bottom of my heart. I'm so, so sorry about your sister."

She could have fallen over. He was still talking, and on some level she was listening but it wasn't registering.

Clay's words could only mean one thing, so her throat caught when she cut him off. "Jackie? Is she … is she dead?"

Again with that wide-eyed, innocent bullshit. "Shit. You didn't know?"
"Supper, my place, tonight," Gemma declared, standing over Tig where he was helping Opie with an engine block.

Tig laughed. "I'm taking Jamie and the kid for supper."

"Well, I want to celebrate her diagnosis."

"Me too," he returned, wiping his hands on a rag and nodding to Opie when he thanked him on a grunt. "Just not tonight. She's mine and Calvin's tonight."

Gemma huffed and crossed her arms. "Fine. Tomorrow. And you better deliver."

Tig cackled. "Fine, Gem. I promise."

He'd barely seen Jamie approach but suddenly she was next to Gemma, face pale, eyes huge, breathing in a frantic, alarming pattern. He set the rag down and reached for her, concern instant.

Gemma put a hand out too but Jamie backed away from both of them.

What the hell –

"Is Jackie dead?" she whispered.

Gemma's eyes snapped to Tig, and he felt the world literally blow to shit in all directions.

"Tig," Gemma called him back, and he just blinked. "Where's Jackie?" Gem didn't know either. Clay had kept that quiet from his old lady.

"Is. Jackie. Dead?" Jamie panted it, her entire body telegraphing shock, disbelief and panic.

Tig's eyes went to the yard, and Clay was standing mere yards from the service bays, hands on his hips, watching the mess he coordinated with no expression whatsoever.

"Tig," Gemma snapped. Even she didn't believe it. "Tell Jamie where her sister is for Christ's sake."

Tig had to look her in the eye and it was a thousand needles to the heart. "Yeah, she's dead."

Jamie didn't stagger or register that. "Why didn't you tell me?"

_Fuck._ Son of a bitch, asshole of all assholes.
"All you had to do was say Tiny killed her," Jamie breathed, the hurt creeping in. "Why … why would you keep that from me?"

Now Tig was confused. "What?"

"Tiny killed Jackie? When?" Gemma was confused and not helping anything.

Tig looked to Clay again, but the prick was turning and walking away. So he tried staying close to the truth. "I was worried about you getting better -"

"Keeping things from me is the same as lying. Maybe I understand you hiding it from me that I killed that dealer in the summer, but … my sister, Tig?"

His head was going to explode. Fuck, even if Clay was an asshole for orchestrating all this, Tig was still an asshole for keeping anything from her. Then he saw it, start to finish. Jamie was better, her sister was gone and dealt with, she owed the club nothing and vice versa. And she wasn't on the inside. She was still an outsider, always would be. She had to go.

Heart break would be better than this. It wasn't his guilt or horror that she was seeing most of what he was, it was the pain on her face. Jesus, if it was hurting him this much he'd be crippled by what she was feeling.

"Jamie," he started again, trying to touch her arm.

She pulled back violently with a loud "No!"

It brought attention. Heads turned, even Calvin heard it as he was letting Chibs untie his boxing gloves.

"Please," he heard the desperation on his voice.

"No," she repeated, softer. "I can't … I can't be around you right now. You should have told me. And to have him be the one that said it?" She let out a sob. "I trusted you. I trusted you with everything." She turned and started for Calvin.

Tig followed. He was in full panic, desperate to contain the situation. "Please," he begged. "Talk to me. Please."

"I need time," she said, spinning on him, the look on her face making him stop. "I think I need you to leave me alone for … four hours."

They were staring at each other. He was killing her, he could see it. It hurt her to be around him.

Tig nodded. "Okay," he relented, voice catching. "Four hours. You got it."
Oblivious to the tension, someone shouted her name from the clubhouse and came running. Tig didn't look, he was memorizing Jamie's face.

"I just heard," the brunette croweater, he thought her name was Diana. She was in love with Calvin, spoiled him rotten. She approached Jamie, breathless. "I am so glad to hear you're all better!" The girl squealed, going in for a hug.

Jamie shoved her off. Diana looked stunned, curling her arms around herself. "Jamie, I'm sorry I ..."

Tig's heart skipped as Jamie spun on her heel, heading for the boxing ring. She grabbed Calvin's arm and pulled him behind her, heading for the car.

Tig couldn't move. He was terrified, absolutely terrified that she was leaving him. That's she'd take away his calm, his peace. He couldn't go back to drifting from comfort to comfort. He didn't want that anymore.

When someone touched his arm he jumped, then realized it was Gemma. "Honey," she said carefully. "Are you all right?"

He clenched his jaw. "No," Tig answered honestly, stalking back to the tool chest and picking up a heavy crescent wrench before heading out into the lot.

Jamie's car sped away with squealing tires, but he didn't, couldn't watch it. Instead he headed for the clubhouse, searching out the person that was ripping his heart away from him.

Vaguely he heard Gemma shouting for Jax, Opie asking where he was going. He didn't react to any of it.

Clay was at the bar, turned when the door was opened. He had been talking to Bobby and Piney, who both turned with him. He saw the wrench and absorbed Tig's face before tossing his cigar into the ashtray. "Shit," he mumbled.

Tig brought the wrench up but everyone was shouting and Bobby yanked it out of his hand. That didn't matter. Tig tackled Clay, both of them spilling to the floor. No one said anything, no accusations had to be traded and no one had to ask what the hell was wrong with him.

Other than Bobby, that was, because he was shouting it, trying to pull Tig off when he righted himself and dropped a shot to Clay's jaw that made his whole arm ignite with pain. But it was good. So he did it again. When he raised his arm a third time someone grabbed it and hauled him back. While he was tied up Clay got him back with a good one to the nose.

"Son of a bitch," Tig was snarling, throwing Bobby off and charging Clay again, this time linking his arm around the man's waist and driving his back into the bar. Clay tried elbowing him in the kidneys, but it didn't register.
His vision had gone white-hot, his entire body numb from it. He hadn't lost it to fury in a very, very long time.

Who knew how long the grappled for. Every hit he took felt as good as every hit he delivered, because he deserved some pain along with Clay. Really, going along with everything Clay planned made him just as shitty. They'd been friends a long time, and they had both been able to tell each other when someone was being an asshole.

This was the best way to point it out to Clay.

"Jesus fucking Christ, cut it out!"

Someone got between them eventually, strong enough to work Tig away from Clay. Tig saw that Jax was bear-hugging Clay, moving him in the opposite way.

"Easy, Tigger," a gruff voice was warning him. It was Happy. Tig tried to shove him off but Hap stuck to his back like a barnacle. "Don't make me put you on your ass, man."

The fury faded. It had been intense but the intense stuff always burns out. Now he was back to hyperventilating, like he needed a paper bag to breathe into.

"What the fuck is going on?" Jax snapped, shoving Clay against the wall where Bobby and Juice made sure he stayed.

"Tig's lost his goddamn mind," Clay spat out.

"Fuck you," Tig gave back, with that cold calm he reserved for the serious assholes in his life.

"What's it about? I want answers." No one appeased Jax. So the blonde prince turned to Tig, shaking his head. "What is this about, Tig?" His tone was calm but just barely.

"I didn't tell Jamie about the dealer she killed," he said, and it sounded ridiculous now. "I didn't want to worry her. And Clay asked me to keep Jackie's death under wraps, but then he went and fucking told her just now. About all of it."

Jax frowned. "She didn't know about Jackie?"

"I couldn't tell her." Tig moaned. "How could I tell her Clay killed her?"

Jax saw his point, blatantly, at that moment. "Why'd you tell her?" he asked, spinning on Clay.

"She's better. It's best she moves on."

"She's been tight on everything she's had to put up with," Jax pointed out. "She proved she could be trusted."
Clay's eyes levelled on his stepson. "She's so civilian she never would have cut it for long. Not once her shit got sorted. When she wasn't in danger anymore, that smart little cunt would have started questioning what she was mixed up in. Before she knows even more than she does, she has to go."

It hurt hearing the exact words Chibs had fed him months ago coming from Clay. And now he could see that it was a good concern to have but he was still too pissed to care. Tig tried to get at Clay again but Hap tightened his grip. "Easy," Killer repeated. "Doesn't fix anything."

"Might make me feel better."

"Doubt it."

"You take a moment and calm the fuck down," Clay advised Tig. "I'm protecting you and the club, Tig. She would have left you eventually."

Tig looked away, he had to. Otherwise he might have taken off Happy's head just to give Clay another jab.

Bobby and Juice let Clay go, and Hap slowly and carefully eased out of Tig's grasp, hand to the centre of his chest like he could feel the residual anger still simmering.

"If anyone needs me, I'll be in my dorm," Tig said hollowly, not meeting anyone's eye as he zombie-walked down the hallway. He opened the door, trying to remember the last night he'd actually spent here. It had been months.

She wanted four hours to sort her head. That wasn't too much to ask for, not at all. He'd wait. Try to keep himself under control, then go to her, ready to beg and plead for her to stay with him.
Chapter 100

Jamie shouldn't have been driving she was such a mess. But there was no alternative.

At the house she told Calvin to pack. He'd been asking what had happened, what was wrong, why she was mad at Tig, but Jamie couldn't answer. She was distracted by the need to handle her emotional crisis.

Jamie told Calvin to fill an entire suitcase with his clothes and bring whatever schoolwork he had. She packed up all her toiletries and filled two suitcases herself.

Now it was late evening, she was driving on the highway to Thelma's, and she hadn't stopped sobbing since they left the TM lot.

She couldn't even judge the Sons for the terrible things they had done. She was no better. She'd killed three men.

Her. Jamie Taylor. Killed three men. Just ended them. She didn't know what made Tig scared to tell her about the guy she'd whacked with the baseball bat, and that still pissed her off, but that wasn't the worst of it.

Jackie was dead. And they knew. All of them likely knew, and no one said anything.

That wasn't family. That wasn't the behaviour of people you could trust. Those were the actions of manipulators. Jamie had experience with manipulators after all her years dealing with Jackie.

At the thought of her little sister dying alone at the hands of Tiny Jamie started a whole new round of tears. She had to pull it together. Calvin didn't even know yet, she hadn't been able to speak. She'd tell him with Thelma, together.

When Thelma's yard light came into view it was a relief. She pulled to a stop next to her aunt's truck, threw her door open and circled her car to the trunk. She was wiping tears away while handing Calvin his suitcase. Reading her mood he remained as silent as he had been the last three hours. He just lowered his head and headed for the porch.

Jamie threw the strap of the toiletry case over her shoulder, hefting both of her suitcases out of the trunk. She set one down to slam it shut and that's when she heard Thelma. "Jamie? What on earth?"

She lost it, again. She dropped the other suitcase, covering her face, and started a fresh round of tears. It actually hurt to cry now.

Jamie felt Thelma at her side, taking her hand. Without looking up she picked up the suitcase at her left, let Thelma guide her by the hand up the stairs to the porch and into the house.
"Calvin honey, go start a pot of tea, okay?" Thelma suggested softly as she shut the door. Then she took the bags from Jamie. "What's happened, sweetheart?"

Jamie opened her mouth, but then her face crumpled and those ugly, gut-wrenching whole-body sobs started. Thelma hugged her, and that was nice but it didn't make anything hurt less.

"Her and Tig had a fight," Calvin said carefully from behind her. "But I don't know what about."

His little voice reminded her she wasn't the child here. Just like at Christmas when Thelma pointed out that Calvin was the kid in the room. She inhaled deep, straightened and swiped at her eyes angrily. "You're right," she whispered, knowing it didn't make sense but she said it anyway. "We need to go sit in the living room."

Thelma sat on one side, Calvin on the other, both of them close enough to be touching. She took one of their hands in each of hers. "Jackie's dead. She's not coming home."

Thelma gasped. Calvin stared at her, stunned.

Jamie bundled him up, bringing him into her lap and holding him tight. "I'm sorry," she whispered into his hair. "I'm so sorry Peanut."

"How do we know this?" Thelma asked, voice sounding thin.

"Clay told me," Jaime said. "Apparently months ago some other club, the Mayans, found her. Tiny had killed her. They buried her, called Clay to tell him."

"Months ago?"

"Exactly," Jamie snapped. "No one said anything. And this entire time they knew. They all knew and said nothing about it."

"Why?"

Jamie shook her head. "Tig said - " her throat caught on his name. "He said he was worried about me getting better, going through treatments. I ... I don't know why they did it. But Clay being the one to tell me I ... I don't know. That made it even worse. I don't trust him. I never felt comfortable around him."

Thelma was huddled close, wrapping an arm around Jamie's shoulders. "Tig must have had other reasons."

Jamie shook her head. "I don't care. He should have told me, Thelma. That's my baby sister."

And there she went again, shaking and squeezing Calvin so hard it probably hurt. But he didn't complain. He was sniffling, cuddling close to her, so she knew he understood what had happened.
"I moved out of my house," Jamie mumbled, feeling so stupid. "I can't go back. I don't want to go back to that town at all. Why would they do this to me?"

Thelma rested her head on Jamie's shoulder, sniffing herself. "You stay as long as you want, honey. But if Tig comes back you have to promise to listen to him, okay?"

Jamie shook her head. "What can he tell me that would make this better?"

"I don't know. But you have to hear him out."

"Why?"

Thelma raised her head, smiling sadly and tucking some of her hair behind her ear, such a motherly gesture Jamie relished it. "Because you love him, Jamie."

Jamie shook her head. "I don't even know how she died. I didn't wait around for that detail, if they even bothered finding out."

"You love him, Jamie," Thelma repeated, stubbornly not following the other direction she was trying to take. "And honey, he loves you, too. He had to have had a reason."

Jamie picked up Calvin and slid him over to Thelma's lap in one motion. "I have to go have a bath."

"Jamie -"

"I was … with him this afternoon. I need to wash his hands off me."

Thelma let her go at that. She climbed the stairs to the bathroom and turned the hot tap on full, watching the water pool over the tub plug. Then she stood, turned to the mirror and pulled her shirt then bra off.

She ran a hand over her scars. It had been a long time since she really stared at them. It had been ages since she hated them.

Shit. What did she expect? She knew what she was getting in bed with, living with. How could she be surprised? Who else would sign up for … this? Not a nice guy. Not a good person.

Even thinking that stung. She was being an idiot again. Hurtful. Tig had always been good to her. Even if he was being an asshole by keeping her in the dark why would he put up with the rest of her? The sickness, her bad moods, the fact that she came as a matched pair with Calvin. If he was just an asshole he wouldn't have stayed past the first night.

She squeezed her eyes shut as another tear crept out. That was why this hurt. She was absolutely crazy about him, and he wasn't quite at her level yet. Because she never would have kept something like this from him. And then came the realization he'd never be completely hers.
It would always be the club first. Thelma said it, Jamie didn't want to believe it.

She climbed into the scalding water, easing back against the slope of the claw foot tub. She tried to remember the last thing she'd said to Jackie, and she couldn't. She remembered the phone call, Jackie saying she was skipping town. But what were her actual last words to her sister?

She couldn't remember.

All she knew next was that Tig was telling her they couldn't find her, but they found the TM loaner at a truck stop. Jackie was long gone.

Despite the steam and hot water a chill ran up Jamie's back. The thoughts coming to her now were not good ones. But dishonesty had a way of breeding mistrust, and she couldn't shake the feeling that people weren't done lying to her.

_Had_ Jackie made it out of town? Was Tiny responsible for killing her?

Or was it much, _much_ worse?
Chapter 101

Tig already knew. When Gem pulled up in front of the house it was dark and Jamie's car was gone. He held no hope that it was in the garage.

Jamie was gone.

With a numb, clumsy hand he opened the passenger door and stepped out onto the sidewalk unsteadily. It wasn't just a devastated heart. It was from the 26 of whiskey he murdered almost all by himself. Chibs helped a bit but mostly he'd done the pouring. Tig appreciated the company; no one giving advice, no one saying the understood. Everyone honestly seemed as stunned as he was. That's why Gemma drove him home.

"Give me the keys," Gemma instructed quietly, hand out.

Tig handed them over, then followed her like a kid up the stoop, holding the storm door while she fit the key into the deadbolt of the inner door. She pushed into the front room and he followed her there, too.

The house was silent. Dark. It even smelled different.

He already knew, but he had to check. He went to their bedroom, pushed the door open. Half the drawers in the dresser were partially pulled out, and they were empty. The closet doors were flung wide open, and the hangers were empty except for his clothes. Her suitcases used to sit on the closet floor and they were all gone now.

What killed him was on top of the dresser. Two jewellery boxes, left out for him. He opened the bigger one, saw Jamie's necklace, and then promptly lost his goddamn mind.

He threw it at the wall. It hit, not nearly loud enough to be satisfying, and bounced to the ground.

Gem was in the doorway and she jumped, but before she could say a word he pushed past her to Calvin's room.

The same state of disarray. Drawers empty, closet open and raided.

"Goddamnit!" He plowed his fist into the drywall. The plaster gave, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt. Which pissed him off more. So he tossed the bookshelf. Then the kid's desk.

Gem was in the doorway and she jumped, but before she could say a word he pushed past her to Calvin's room.

The same state of disarray. Drawers empty, closet open and raided.

Next he went to the living room. The corner cabinet held photos that Jamie had dragged out and put in frames for him. Shots of Dawn and Fawn as kids, some of him in his younger days. A few of Jamie and Calvin. He threw them all, made sure the glass shattered and the frames broke in at least two pieces. Then he kicked over the coffee table.
Then their bathroom, off their bedroom. It was all gone, everything that was hers. She left him a
goddamn tube of toothpaste and took everything that smelled like her.

Tig tried to calm down, he really did. He braced his hands on the edge of the sink, listening to
how his breathing was ragged, too fast, scary-sounding. He brought his head up, catching his
reflection.

He looked like a madman. He looked exactly like a man who just let everything that meant a
single fucking thing slip away from him. Four hours to collect her thoughts? Bullshit. Four hours
to be on the road, putting almost three hours of distance between them.

He barely knew what he was doing. He was staring at his face, hating every fucking thing about
himself because without her there was nothing good in him at all. He already felt like anything
decent about him was fading.

He really could have turned her into someone like him. Jesus, this should be a relief. That was
his thought when he bulldozed the mirror with his forehead. It cracked. The blood gushed
immediately. He saw stars for a minute but it didn't hurt. He couldn't feel the little pains, like the
fingers he probably broke punching the wall or this bleeding head wound he just gave himself.

"Tig – Jesus Christ!" Gemma was there. She rushed to him just as he crumpled to the floor, back
against the bathtub, legs splaying out in front of him. Crouched next to him, she took his chin in
her hands. "Tig, you gotta settle baby. You're scaring me."

He was already shut down. She grabbed a towel and pressed it to his forehead, talking but he
heard none of it for a good, long while. All he could think was that being without her was going
to kill him. Gem tilted his head back, tending to all the blood, petting his hair and talking
soothingly. For what?

Tig had never deserved anyone like Jamie. Shit, to go back in time, leave her alone and just hang
out with Calvin. That probably would have been good, too.

"I swear Tig, I could kill her for this."

That cut through the anguish. He turned his eyes to Gemma, and that seemed to be when she
realized he was listening after all. "Don't put this on her," he said, pleading. "This is the smartest
thing she's done since she met me."

"She's breaking your heart, baby."

"It's for the best," he corrected. "Clay would use her to keep me in line. Make sure I side with
him over Jax. He already threatened her once after he killed Jackie."

Gemma's hand froze on its way to dab at his forehead. "Clay killed Jackie?"
"He pretty much told me if Jamie couldn't be trusted to keep quiet she'd get it the same. If she's gone, I'm here towing the line with the club ... then she's safe. And Clay doesn't have to worry about her anymore. He did it to drive her away." It was all said with a tremendous disconnect. But he couldn't bring himself to get worked up. Clay won. It played out exactly the way he wanted it to.

Gemma looked stricken, and he wondered if he should have told her any of this. Then he decided he didn't care if Clay hated him for good. As long as it kept the bastard's attention off Jamie he'd keep playing along.

Somehow Gemma convinced him to go to bed. The only thing that helped him sleep was the smell of Jamie still on his pillow.
Chapter 102

Jamie woke with a throbbing head, which was usually the case after crying herself to sleep. The responsible part of her wanted to pull herself together, work out this situation and get herself sorted. The bigger part of her didn't want to get out of bed. That part was also fixated on Jackie.

The hurt of being kept in the dark was fading because the hurt that her sister was gone was much bigger, more intense. Jamie felt like she lost half of her life up to this point, and in a way she had.

They were only fourteen months apart in age, so they may as well have been twins. One grade apart throughout school, and they shared a circle of friends made up of kids from both age groups. Up until high school, of course. Once Jamie was in high school she couldn't fraternize with someone from the eighth grade.

She still cringed when she realized how mean that was, how important those years were in the stages of them growing up and becoming women instead of girls. She'd hurt Jackie with that, she knew it. She could remember and see it plain as day. That's when Jackie withdrew a bit, got quiet, started wearing all black. Then when she did hit high school they never got back that level of close sisterhood. Jackie hung out with different people, people that even Jamie knew weren't good for her. Her parents fought with Jackie over her associates, how she'd stay out all night without word, how they'd worry themselves almost sick that she was losing her way.

Jackie had needed her in those years, but Jamie hadn't seen it. She'd been a teenager, trying to make her own life, and she certainly didn't want to associate herself with the friends Jackie had made in the meantime.

They say not to blame yourself when dealing with an addict; guilt was a tool in any addict's arsenal and they'd use it to get their way. But now Jamie felt all those years of trying to not feel guilty wash over her, and it all hit her at once.

If it hadn't been for her turning her back on her little sister, because even without a huge gap that's what Jackie was, Jackie might be okay. She might not have gone down the road she did. And if she had veered that way, maybe she would have been happy enough to straighten herself out once something significant and wonderful as Calvin had happened to her.

Jamie had completely left her behind when she'd always been the one to make sure Jackie was included.

Thelma heard her sobbing. She came into Jamie's room quietly in her robe, climbing into bed wordlessly and pulling Jamie into her arms.

"I miss Jackie," Jamie wept, and Thelma smoothed hand over her scalp.
"Me too, honey. She was a vivacious one, wasn't she?"

Jamie nodded. There was a quiet moment while Jamie sobbed quietly, and Thelma stroked her head soothingly.

Then Thelma said "Remember the time we caught her in the barn with the Holiday's youngest son?"

Jamie snorted through a hiccup, her smile involuntary. "Well, he was cute."

"He was fourteen and she was sixteen," Thelma reminded her, making Jamie outright laugh.

"Remember the purple hair?"

"Oh Jesus, of course," Thelma replied with a laugh of her own. "The work it took to get it blond and then that ridiculous purple. What was she thinking?"

"She had to be different."

"She looked pretty good as a blonde, actually. I was always hoping she'd just leave it like that. But no, it would be purple. Or green. Or blue."

"I kinda liked the electric pink."

Thelma gave her a squeeze. "Me too."

"I really thought the pregnancy would straighten her out."

Thelma nodded, Jamie felt it. "She didn't even get morning sickness, remember that?"

Jamie laughed. "I know. Mom was pissed off, saying it wasn't fair."

"Your mom got so sick with both of you. She had every right to be mad."

"She looked beautiful pregnant," Jamie's tone went wistful and she couldn't help it. "Remember how good she looked? Even when she was so big?"

"She was a glower, all right. And she had a little extra weight on, but mostly it was that belly."

Jamie bit her lip, more tears coming up. "She used to sing to him when she was carrying him."

"What was the song I always got wrong?"

Jamie smiled at the memory. "Glycerine, by Bush."

"She sang it so pretty."
"She felt it," Jamie thought out loud. "Those words meant a lot to her." Jamie had actually forgotten that song in particular, but Jackie had sung it all the time.

"How did it go again, Jamie?"

Jamie shook her head. "I can't."

"I liked it. I don't think I heard the original. How did it go?"

Jamie was crying again, so singing wasn't really possible. But she tried to recite it with the same melody. "It must be your skin … I'm sinking in." She sniffled. "It must be for real … 'cause now I can feel. And I didn't mind. It's not my kind. It's not my time to wonder why …" She had never got the words. Until then.
Two Weeks Later

His gut was burning. Vision doubled. The clubhouse was quiet but Tig's head was being bombarded by terrible sounds. First, automatic gunfire. Then the sound of Opie sobbing while holding his dead wife.

Tig had never heard sounds like that before. He might have made them when he lost his first big love, but he'd never heard them. Especially with the knowledge that he'd caused the agony that was inspiring such wailing.

To go back in time ... tell Clay to shove it, tell Opie to get the hell out of town and take his family somewhere safe. But he hadn't So damn anxious to play along with Clay for his own reasons ... Last week he'd had a chance to take out Opie, keep him from ratting. But the SOB went and saved Tig's life. That's when Tig should have stopped this, told Jax what Clay had planned and ended it right then and there. Taking out a member without a club vote was bad, against bylaws. Clay would have lost his kutte.

Then Tig could just walk out of town and head for Thelma's, because that's where he assumed Jamie was. Apologize. Beg her to forgive him and take him back. But two weeks without a word, and he was becoming pretty certain that he wouldn't be welcome.

So he stays and perpetrates this … fucking debacle. He couldn't stand to look Opie in the eye and take away Donna's husband, their kids' father. So he had to shoot him in the back of the head. But he fucked that up too and now Donna was gone and Ellie and Kenny were motherless and his brother, who had people he trusted plotting to kill him all this time, was mourning his wife.

Tig downed another shot of tequila. He knew he was damn near alone in the clubhouse. No one felt like whooping it up. Gemma and Clay had gone home. Even Clay was disturbed by this fuck up. Jax was with Opie, trying to calm him down. Anyone who had homes had gone there, and the rest were at the clubhouse but turned in early, with women or without.

Of course he was trying to drown his guilt and not think about Jamie, but it was impossible. At least she was safe. At least he couldn't put her or Calvin in this kind of danger if she was all the way in Colorado. Tig didn't know for sure if she even was. She'd left her burner cell at his house. He knew Thelma's number but was pretty sure an attempt at contact would not be appreciated.

So it was tequila until he passed out. Even if he did it here at the bar it would be fine.

A body moved through his line of sight, hazy and unnoted, carrying empty beer bottles and putting them on the bar to be packed up the next day. It was that crow eater, Diana. She'd always been nice to Jamie. And she had spoiled Calvin rotten. She wasn't Jamie, but she'd been kind to both of the people he loved and lost.
He just wanted someone *kind*. He caught her wrist, wincing that he was even touching a female. "Hey," he grunted.

She paused, head titled. "Everything okay, Tig?"

Tig shook his head. "No."

She pressed her hand over his. "You miss her, don't you?"

For a second he thought she meant Donna, but then he realized she likely didn't even know about the death of Opie's old lady. Crow eaters weren't really told a whole hell of a lot. But no, she had to be talking about Jamie.

His heart tightened up and he felt the face crumple. Fuck, he really shouldn't be crying in front of bitches like this. But he *did* miss Jamie, and he really needed to hold her, kiss her, and breathe her in to stop this torture. Even if it was just for five seconds.

"Maybe you should go to sleep," Diana suggested softly.

Tig caught her hazel eyes, and they were appropriately concerned. "Can … can you sleep next to me? Just *sleep*, okay? I don't want anything else."

Diana paused, inhaled wide-eyed, and nodded. "Okay. If that's what you want."

He nodded and spun the stool to stand up. She didn't try putting her arm around him, she just followed him silently. In his dorm he let the kutte slide off his arms before he tossed it onto the armchair. He toed off his boots while she kicked off the heels she'd been wearing. He shut off the light and crawled under the comforter fully clothed. It was a crow eater's duty to know where the bed was, so he didn't worry about her bumping into furniture. She slid in next to him, lying on her side facing away from him.

He knew this because he slid closer, pulling her back to his front, arm over her hip. When he breathed he could smell her hair, a mixture of perfume and cigarette smoke. Nothing like Jamie, but at least she was warm.
Chapter 104

Calvin was registered in school by mid-morning. He'd start the very next day.

Jamie explained to the principal about how his mother had passed away, and she agreed that he could start the following Monday and take the rest of the week to be with family. Then Jamie took her newspaper to Main Street.

It was a small town, and her hopes of full-time work were not likely going to happen quickly. So while her energy was returning and she was feeling good, when not taking a broken heart into consideration, she started scanning the want ads and realized many of the small businesses in town wanted book keepers.

It was a perfect idea. She could take a few hours each week to update their financials, get a little money in return, and get herself back into the work force. She also needed something else to concentrate on. Getting lost in math and numbers took mental energy, so maybe she could even go to bed at night and just fall asleep without tossing and turning for hours.

Jamie hadn't done up a resume in a while so it took some doing. Calling the Town Office in Charming to ask for a reference was difficult, but her old boss was so happy to hear from her and so worried about her health that Jamie actually felt good by the time she hung up the phone. Now she was dropping off resumes to see how her help would be received.

The floral shopkeeper hired her on the spot, barely glancing at the resume. She was a loud, large, and friendly as hell woman named Gwen who was immediately likeable. She declared she had no patience for bean counting and just want to play with flowers. Keeping receipts in a box was about as much as she was willing to do.

A gift shop slash knick knack slash home décor shop was next, and they took her resume with great interest. They were a retired but married couple who just kept the shop for bill paying and hired their daughter to work there so they could take holidays. Other than that they had no other staff so their finances were likely the easiest to handle. They promised to get back to her by week's end.

A diner was next. She asked for an owner or manager from the waitress, and was told "Just a minute. Sit down, I'll go get him."

Jamie did, planting it on the bright red vinyl bench at a four-person booth and setting the resumes in front of her. It was a cheerful place, done up like a fifties malt shop. While it wasn't too original, they were committed to the theme and the waitresses even wore white aprons over uniform dresses with white trim at the neck and arms.

A cup of coffee was set in front of her and when she raised her head to tell the server she was here to meet the manager she was greeted by a hand being thrust at her. Stunned, she took it, and
that's when she realized the man standing there in dress pants, dress shirt and tie wasn't her waitress.

"I'm Dale," he said warmly, shaking her hand and releasing it before sitting down across from her.

"Hi, I'm Jamie," she replied with her best job-interview smile.

"The owner is my friend but he's usually not here. I'm the manager, so I can take your resume."

She nodded, sliding it across the table. "The only reference I have is from my last job, all the others were so long ago I couldn't track anyone down who's actually worked with me."

He nodded, eyes on the paper. "I can understand that." Then he smiled up at her, a smile that came with two dimples and twinkling eyes.

She felt her professional smile slip into a real one. He was handsome, that was likely why. And he didn't make her uncomfortable.

"Well, there aren't a lot of book keepers in this town, but don't let that diminish what I'm going to say next. I think you're the best candidate I've seen. I have to run it by my friend but he usually leaves the hiring up to me."

Jamie nodded. "That sounds great. Just call and let me know, we can set up a schedule if I'm the lucky applicant."

He laughed at that, letting her resume fall closed. "You have almost a year here from your last date of employment. Can I ask what that was due to?"

Jamie swallowed. "Umm, sure. I had a medical leave for cancer treatments."

His smile slid away and he instantly wore almost friend-like concern. "I'm so sorry. That's personal and -"

She shook her head. "No, it's fine. It's a medical fact. If you're going to be my employer you should know. I ended treatments in December and last month I was told I was well on my way to being cancer-free."

His smile came back absolutely beautiful. "That's great to hear, Jamie. I'm glad you're okay."

His brown eyes on hers were unassuming and kind. There was a pause, but it was a very comfortable one. She realized she was returning his smile without speaking. Then she cleared her throat.

"Right," he suddenly said, patting her resume. "I'll call my partner tonight. Get his blessing, and confirm it with you tomorrow."
"Thank you Dale," she said, offering her hand.

He nodded to the mug in front of her. "You haven't had your coffee yet. We have some time. Tell me more about you."
Chapter 105

Two Weeks Later

Tig waited while Diana climbed into his bed. He didn't know why he kept asking her to do this, but it was the only way he could fall asleep.

They'd put Donna in the ground, the ATF was still causing trouble, and the Mayans were their own headache. He was tense, irritable, and unable to calm himself down without Jamie.

He knew how he used to do it. It would be easy to fuck away the tension, the pressure. It was amazing how one second of release could get rid of layer upon layer of bullshit. Even if it didn't last, it was one second where the brain couldn't even interrupt.

Diana waited for him to spoon her, but his skin was crawling. If he was going to touch her he had to fuck her, too. He was waking up hard and not acting on it was hurting. Not just physical pain. It was a return to the old Tig, "before Jamie" Tig. He could just fuck something willing and the world would right itself. Sex with this crow eater wasn't fixing what was wrong with him, but the little stuff cluttering up his life might seem a bit clearer.

And maybe it would start tearing Jamie out of his heart, just a little. Because she was pulling so hard from so far away the ache might kill him.

He sat up, pulled off his T-shirt, then laid on his back again and undid his jeans. At the sound of the zipper Diana rolled over.

The room was dark. He couldn't see her and she couldn't see him, but that sound was likely a call to duty. He didn't have to say a word.

The bed moved as she got out, then he heard her undressing. He shoved his jeans off, kicked them off the foot of the bed. The mattress moved again as she climbed into bed, moving closer to him. Her skin hit his side, warm and soft. Her hair tickled as she leaned over to kiss his chest.

She knew not to kiss him on the mouth. Most of the crow eaters did.

Her hair dragged along his skin until he felt her hand on his dick. He was hard. There was a naked female next to him, he was always hard when that happened. She stroked his erection and he closed his eyes, just waiting for it to be over.

She swung a leg over his waist to straddle him. He wanted to tell her to just suck him off, but he didn't want to talk either. Talking in this situation was too intimate.

She played with him for a bit, got the condom on him, the slid him inside on one, committed motion. He grunted, squeezing his eyes shut tightly.
There was no lovely Jamie gasp. Diana moaned, loud.

"Shut up," he snapped, the only instruction he was going to give her.

She rode him, hard, fast and fluid so it didn't take long. His hands bit into her thighs as it hit, he gave a grunt, and she kept moving to pull him all the way through. When it was over he shoved her off by the hips. She fell into bed as he got up to get rid of the condom.

"Should I leave?" she asked as he moved through the dark.

"Nah," he answered before closing the bathroom door. "Just stay there."
"But honestly, that was the worst night of my life. Your prom date should never throw up in your car and then sleep with your brother."

Jamie burst into giggles, which would have been rude if Dale wasn't laughing, too. His story of his senior prom was certainly the worst she'd ever heard. "That's terrible," she said, trying to sound sympathetic. "I'm so sorry."

He waved a hand, elbows on the table in front of him. "Long time ago. She'd been my girlfriend for a week. I think we only started dating so we'd both have prom dates."

Jamie played with the handle on her coffee cup in the lull following that story. Technically, he wasn't her boss. Doing books for his diner was a contract position. So it could not be said she was dating her boss.

When he'd asked her out to dinner she'd been taken by surprise. He was kind, had a great smile which he used on her a lot, and maybe it shouldn't have been unexpected. Jamie was learning the swinging singles scene for her age group in this town was … nonexistent. Dale was about five years older than her, incredibly handsome. In good shape. Friendly, polite, and divorced.

Jamie hadn't had time to feel lonely yet, but she suspected Dale was. And his interest in her was flattering. It felt nice. It made her feel like there wasn't anything wrong with her. And yet knowing that just a month ago she was telling someone else she loved them … well, she still didn't feel very good about this situation. But it was normal. He was regular people and it was doubtful aspects of his life would require her handling a firearm.

The waiter brought their cheque, and Jamie reached for it but Dale slid it away from her. "I asked for dinner, I'll pay," he assured her when she gave him a startled look.

"At least let me pay for my own."

"Nope," he answered cheerfully. "Not gonna hear it."

She shook her head. "Well ..." she couldn't believe she was saying this. "If I ask you to the movies, can I pay for that?"

His grin went as wide as she'd ever seen it. Between that and the dimples she had a slightly thought of Juice, which hurt a little bit. But she pushed it away. "Yeah. If you ask me to the movies, you can pay."

Her own smile widened. "Can I take you to the movies?"

"I'll have to check my schedule."
They both laughed at that. Once the bill was paid and the waiter generously tipped Dale walked Jamie to her car. They'd driven separately since Thelma's acreage was thirty minutes' from town.

"Thank you for dinner," she said, and it didn't feel contrite or corny. She'd really enjoyed herself.

"Thank you for coming," was his reply.

The smile was shared for just a moment before he steeped close, hand going to her elbow. Her heart fluttered a bit, nerves she supposed, and his eyes went to her lips as he leaned in.

Jamie closed her eyes as his lips touched hers. It was a soft, gentle contact, no pressure felt to continue. She could move away if she wanted. It was warm, nice if not a bit controlled. But Dale was polite. She expected a kiss from him would be exactly like this.

It wasn't a bad kiss. At all. It even kind of sped up her heart and make her face warm a couple degrees. When he stepped back his smile was warm and ... happy. "I hope that was okay," he said, rushed.

"It was nice," she assured him with a nervous laugh. Nice, but all she could think of was the man she told she loved him a month ago. A man who would kiss her and take the world away just from that contact, rendering everything else unimportant compared to the intensity of a mouth closing on hers hard, unable to hold back on how much he liked the taste of her.

In other words, it made her miss Tig even more.

He nodded. "Good. Umm, good night Jamie."

Jamie smiled, nodding in return, distracted by her own turmoil. "Good night Dale."

He waited while she unlocked the car door, then held the door while she climbed in and shut it for her. He waved as she drove off, but her smile didn't make it all the way to the highway.
Chapter 107

One Week Later

Tig was going to swear that he was drunk. He'd blame this on alcohol if anyone dared to speak of it.

And she better not.

Diana was under him, soft and complacent, and he was … actually making love to her. As in, doing the work, holding off on release until she enjoyed herself. At least once.

It was building. He could feel it in her. After a week of just fucking her to get off and having her fake it to help him out he sensed the difference.

"Tig, oh my God," she was gasping. He didn't bother telling her to keep quiet. He knew she wasn't Jamie, he couldn't fool himself into thinking otherwise. She felt different, sounded different, everything was different.

He squeezed his eyes shut, face tucked to the side of her neck, not liking the perfume she wore but also beyond giving a fuck. She hit climax, crying out, and he had a moment of wondering why the fuck he was doing this.

Any of it.

He pulled out, rolled her to her stomach, then jerked her up to her knees and slammed in hard. She gasped, burying her face in the pillow, apparently remembering that he preferred her to be silent. He slammed into her rough, not worried he was hurting her. Technically, he wanted that. That was more like him.

Eventually she confirmed it. She whimpered, letting out a pained "Tig, that hurts." That's when he came, hard. Like an asshole.

"Get back to work," he snapped with a grunt when it was done. Then he disconnected, got off the bed and headed for the bathroom. A shower. He really needed a shower.

He'd just fucked her in his bed. The bed he had shared with Jamie. He could, literally, be sick at the thought.

Standing in the tub he rinsed off, using more soap on his crotch than he had in a long time, and towelled off like he was trying to remove a layer of skin. Dressed again, he left the bedroom, wandered down the hall and gave a nod to the croweater packing Jamie's dishes and cutlery into boxes. "How's it coming?" he asked.
Diana smiled. "Good. Almost done. One more box after this." How she could smile and still be nice was a fucking wonder. She must have been developmentally slow.

"The kid's room is emptied?"

"Yep. Half-Sack just finished moving the furniture into the trailer this morning."

Tig nodded. "Good."

He was terrified to take all of Jamie's stuff out to Thelma's. He half hoped no one was there, he could dump the trailer and leave. It would be his notice that it wasn't safe to come back to Charming and that Jamie and Chuckles should stay in Colorado with Thelma.

Jamie might not even be hurt by that. It might be a relief to her.

Tig didn't let himself think about her anymore. It caused too much shit for him. He shut off, let his emotions take over in other ways, like rage. Anger. The psychotic need to hurt people. Luckily that was all appreciated talent in his line of work. He was on auto pilot again, the old Tig was alive and well.

In all ways, apparently.

He watched Diana for a minute, noting her haircut. It was a lot like Jamie's wig, she'd just done that the past few days. He might think it looked good on her if he hadn't seen how good it looked on Jamie.

Tig went out to the trailer, pulling the doors open. At the sight of Charlie's bike he stilled, the panic of possibly running into them both gone. He climbed onto the deck and crouched next to it like he had when Rash first rolled it off his rig. He felt a smile, recalling how stoked Calvin had been about his fucking pink bike.

His hand tightened on the seat. Yeah, he was terrified to see them. That was what all that bullshit with Diana was about. Another wedge to drive between what he had with Jamie. Another obstacle to remind him he was a prick.

In truth, Tig was hoping they would all cursed him out and threw him off the property as soon as he got out of the truck. Because if they were nice, if Jamie went sweet on him and let him apologize he'd be sucked back into all that sweetness. He'd only had it for a few months, but her sweet was easy to get used to. Because it was what he wanted more than anything.

And he couldn't go there again until all his bad got stowed away.
Chapter 108

"How's the homework coming?" Jamie asked, stopping behind Calvin's chair at the kitchen table.

He smiled up at her. "Good. I like my language arts teacher. She gives us good books to read."

"That's good, honey."

Jamie's guilt about switching Calvin to a new school this late in the year vanished. That school was fantastic. A small student body meant everyone became friends faster, the teachers were incredibly attentive, and there was a real community flare to everything they did from their bake sales to basketball tournaments. Calvin was finally being challenged and befriended in school, and he was flourishing in the three weeks he'd been there.

Despite all that, even after more than a month of trying this out, Jamie still worried about her snap decision to move in with Thelma. It was so rash. Permanent.

Final.

But her heart was telling her this was for the best. She already slept better here, felt safer, all the ugliness she'd seen and taken part in felt like it happened to someone else a long time ago.

And she loved, loved living in the mountains.

Even though it was moving slowly, she liked where things were at with Dale. It wasn't a consuming, burning, all-engulfing need like it had been with Tig. But he was nice and wasn't worried about her reluctance to move on to the next step. And though she hadn't introduced him to Calvin yet she wasn't scared of the thought. She just didn't want to be alone. If that was the definition of a "rebound" so be it. It was like a dose of reality; being around people who don't kill other people or carry around guns all the time.

And part of her was still hoping beyond hope that Tig was coming after her. The only time life didn't feel alright was when she was trying to fall asleep. She was terribly aware of how alone she was, and she hated it. She would remember Tig with an ache, and her sleep was restless. Despite all the ... shit, she missed him. She really, really did.

Of course, she was still angry and hurt. And confused. She could have called him, let him talk and try to explain. But she never made an attempt and neither did he. When she was feeling particularly hopeful she took it to mean he wasn't ready to be done with her. That he might still come for her, leave it all behind and just pick her and Calvin over the club.

Jamie remembered the look on his face when she'd yelled at him. He'd been sorry, so pained and torn up and regretful. But she was too pissed off to see it or acknowledge that none of it had been
his call. Like Thelma said, Clay was the one in charge, and Tig had to march to his orders. But he still should have told her about Jackie.

The one thing she could appreciate was that they knew where Jackie was now. No wondering and worrying. She was gone. Wouldn't come back. No burial, no good bye, but the three of them held a type of memorial which helped start the healing. For that she could be grateful.

Jamie grabbed her paperback from the kitchen island and moved to the front room, taking a cup of tea with her. She turned on the floor lamp as the light was dwindling and cozied into the sofa to relax for the next couple hours. Thelma was sewing something, curtains probably. She liked to make her own. They always matched her furniture that way. She was at the kitchen table with her sewing machine, straight pins clamped between her lips.

As Jamie sunk into her book time ran away from her for a bit. It had grown almost fully dark out when Calvin came to kiss her goodnight before putting himself to bed. She was hugging him back when headlights skimmed across the front windows, and they both turned to see who was at the house.

"Little late for company," Thelma noted.

Calvin bounded right up to the glass. "It's Tig!" he squealed, spinning for the door and tearing out onto the porch so fast Jamie barely had time to decide how she felt about this. She shared a look to Thelma, who was spitting out the pins and standing up. Her face was unreadable.

Jamie's heart sped up. She didn't know how to handle it. She didn't know if he was here to apologize, beg her to come back or kill them all. And that last one should have seemed like a long shot to most people, but for her it wasn't. And that was scary.

Thelma was suddenly next to her, taking her elbow. "You okay honey?"

She turned to Thelma, flustered. "I don't know. How do I look?" Ugh. That was so stupid.

Thelma laughed, like Jamie had surprised her. "Honey, you're beautiful. Like always. Do you want me to come out with you?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I want."

"Jamie, go to him and talk to him. At the very least let him explain now that you're both a little less emotional."

Jamie nodded, but her hands started shaking. "Jesus, I'm scared."

Thelma steered her to the door. "Just listen to him, honey."

Jamie pushed through the screen door and made her way down the three wooden steps to the ground. Calvin was in Tig's arms, having climbed him and wrapped his arms around Tig's neck
and his legs around his waist. Tig had one arm around Calvin's back, the other along his spine, cradling Calvin's head. He had his face right in Calvin's shoulder, and he was holding him tight, she could tell.

That stung her eyes. She sniffed, covered her mouth and that's when Tig looked up at her. That's when her heart cracked wide open. She couldn't remember seeing anguish in a person's eyes before. He looked ruined.

Tig set Calvin down with a pat on his head then came at her. She stayed right where she was, letting him scoop her up in his arms. She crushed into his chest, breathing deep and realizing she'd never forget that smell. She didn't want to lose it. His face nuzzled the side of her neck and he inhaled, deep. Before she could let out a surprised laugh about that he made a horrific sound and she realized he was crying. Hard.

Jamie's arms tightened around his neck, and she nestled her face against his chest, closing her eyes. This shouldn't have felt as good as it did. It should feel awkward and horrible. Even if he was bigger, it felt like she was holding him. He shook, trembled, mumbled "I'm sorry" and tried to catch his breath. When he pulled back he slid one hand up to her neck, running his thumb along her jaw.

"Fuck, Jamie. I'm so sorry."

She nodded, biting her lip. "I know," she eventually said. "I'm sorry for just leaving without letting you explain."

He was shaking his head before she was done. "It was the right thing to do. Look what my shit did to us, babe. That life around you or Calvin … it kills me to think what it'd do to you."

She kissed him quickly. "You were good for me, Tig."

He sighed, then swallowed like it hurt. "No."

"You, Tig. You were good for me. Not the club. All I wanted was you, honey."

Tig let his hand run down to her lower back, pulling her closer. "Jesus, I missed you. I knew I missed you, I just had no idea it was this bad."

"Me too."

Tig shook his head. "I've been a prick, babe. I haven't been alone. I … I need you around to keep me straight. I do. You're my calm and peace, babe."

Jamie absorbed all this, closing her eyes. It stung, but it wasn't a surprise either. She knew what they had wasn't the same thing as whatever else he'd been doing. "Don't worry about that," she whispered, meaning it.
His hands tightened on her. "I love you, Jamie."

Her intake of air was like a gasp. Then she had a whole new source of tears, running down her face. She made no attempt to stop them. She'd been dying to hear that since Christmas. "I love you too, Tig."

When he kissed her it was like coming home. The touch of his mouth was soft, his lips brushing against hers gently while his grip remained tight.

She didn't know where Calvin and Thelma went. When the kiss ended they were alone in the front yard. Tig was running his hands up and down her arms, head resting against hers. "Babe," he whispered.

"We need to talk about what happened." There, some logical thought. Good for her. Because otherwise she'd be overwhelmed by his physical comfort and her attraction to him and they'd make a terrible mistake.

"We do," he agreed, sounding like he completely agreed.

She breathed deep and the smell of him talked her into other things. "We'll talk tomorrow. Let's go upstairs."

"Babe, you don't want -"

"I do," she assured him, holding his face with both hands. "Please, Tig. I hate how I left things. I've missed you. Just … stay with me tonight. Let's talk tomorrow."

His hands squeezed her waist. "Okay."
Chapter 109

Tig was undeserving, but wanting as well. Locked in Jamie's room they embraced again, kissing softly until it grew into an urge to devour each other. Yet they still undressed each other slowly, and it was like opening his favourite gift all over again.

Naked in bed he took his time reacquainting himself with her, and she did the same with him. He had to treasure every part of her, since he was leaving her.

Nothing had ever been as perfect as Jamie Taylor, before or since.

Tig made sure she was whimpering and panting before gliding into her, forceful but not fast. He just wanted that sound, that Jamie gasp she always gave when their bodies joined. That felt almost as good as holding her, smelling her, having that sense of Jamie wash through his soul.

He shouldn't sleep with her. He shouldn't be doing this since he was there to drop off their stuff and bolt. But touching her had been too good, too sweet. The second he was drunk on her it was not possible to walk away without this. The good had its grip on him and he wanted to stay there.

She rode out every motion like they hadn't been apart for a month. They were back to a perfect dance, and as her body tensed she kissed him hard so the "Tiggy!" was muffled by his mouth. A few more thrusts while her tremors faded and he came undone too, kissing her neck, loving her hands in his hair and her sweetness cocooning him again. He savoured it, loved it, tried his best to memorize it. Knowing this could be their last night together helped him focus.

After, the lights off, the blankets bundled around them, he held her to his side, arm around her shoulders. Her hand traced through his chest hair, playing with the pendant he hadn't taken off since Christmas Day. "I panicked," she whispered, sounding close to tears again. "I was so hurt you'd kept that from me."

"I know. I shouldn't have. But … Clay didn't want you to know."

Pause. "Why?"

At least this was mostly true. "To keep you indebted, babe. To make sure you still needed us."

"That's cruel. You know that, right?"

"Yes," he admitted, "All I was worried about was you, babe. I was going to do whatever Clay wanted so he wouldn't use you against me."

"Would he?" Her voice was so small and scared.

Tig closed his eyes, playing his hand over her wig. "Yeah, he would."
She kissed his chest. "Then, thank you for looking out for us."

Tig shook his head. He was an asshole. No way this was okay. Any of it. "Don't thank me, babe. None of this would have happened if it wasn't for me."

She rose up on her elbow. "It would have happened, Tig. My sister is what brought Tiny to Charming. Sure you guys wanted his dealers out but … she didn't exactly help matters. Other than that guy you killed that broke into my house, you guys had nothing to do with any of it. Jackie … she might have ended up dead anyway. Tiny or not."

He pulled her back down next to him. "Don't deserve your defense, babe."

"I'm not going back to Charming," she said softly. "Calvin likes his school. I found some work in town. And I like it here."

Tig's chest opened up a bit. He was leaving her somewhere where she was happy. That was good. "I'm glad. I want that for you."

She inhaled deeply. Like she was bracing. "If … if you want to live here, I just want you to know I'd like that."

Now he wrapped her up with both arms. "Jesus, babe."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't deserve you."

"You could if you worked at it."

That made him smile. And he considered it. Towing Clay's line until he wasn't a factor anymore. And while icing his best friend's wife didn't put Tig in Jax's good graces, because Clay would absolutely play it out that way to serve his own purposes, waiting out Jax's take over and coming back here sounded good. Turning in his kutte and blacking out his ink. He could do that.

For the first time in his life that sounded real good.

"I sort out Clay and … we'll see," he promised.

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

Not another word was said. He stroked the arm that was resting on his chest, feeling her drift off to sleep.
Nah, he wasn't done with her. And she wasn't done with him. This was bigger than a spat and lies and possible time spent apart in hell. He loved his girl, she loved him.

Get rid of Clay, that was his new mission. Keep Jamie off Clay's radar in the meantime, then get the hell out of town. Be with his girl.

But to keep Clay's mind on other things he had to be in Charming. He had to keep watch and make sure that when the king was dethroned, it wouldn't come back on him in any way and that Clay still trusted him like a kicked stray.

Plus, he wanted to see Clay off the throne, crown gone, and if he could help it happen he'd take the chance. Absolutely.

But first he had to leave, like he intended in the first place. He shouldn't have come to her room. Jesus, he was such an idiot.

It was very early when he snuck out with his whispered apology. A complete fucking coward; slinking away while she slept. But if she turned those eyes on him and tried to draw him back to her embrace he'd never leave and Clay would be wide open to come and get him. And not to drag him back. He'd likely just kill him, and if Tig was here, he'd kill the witnesses too.

She was happy. They were going to be okay. She didn't hate him, she might forgive him for anything. That felt good. And if she never forgave him for leaving right now he'd know he did right by her at least once in his life.

It would still be worth it.

Tig managed to avoid most of the floor creaks on the way downstairs and through the living room. He found his hoodie, pulled out the envelopes and two other objects that had been in the front pocket and dropped them on the kitchen table. He was opening the front door when the voice stopped him.

"Tig? You're leaving?"

He turned, the milky light of the kitchen hitting Calvin where he stood at the foot of the stairs. Shit. He swallowed hard. "Yeah Charlie. I gotta head out."

"Why?"

He fought to find the right words, his eyes watering up. "I … I gotta take care of things in Charming. I gotta make sure no one there gets it in their head to hurt you or Aunt Jamie." No point lying.

"You could protect us here," he pointed out.
"They might come here for me, buddy. I don't want them to know where you guys are. I don't want them mad at me enough to hurt you, too."

Calvin came forward a bit, rubbing his eyes and looking younger. "I'd rather have you here."

Tig crouched in front of him. "Me too, Charlie."

"Aunt Jamie's gonna cry."

"Maybe. But you make sure to cheer her up, okay? She loves you so much."

"She loves you, too." Calvin's lip quivered.

Fuck. He was done. He covered his mouth, eyes filling up, studying this wise child and wondering how he was capable of leaving them. "Until I get my shit dealt with, I can't be here. It's not … " he searched for a word that was a smart word, a Calvin word. "It's not logical, Charlie."

Charlie tilted his head, eyes wet and red. "Logic is not final wisdom, Tig."

Tig frowned. "What?"

"Robert Pirsig. Logic presumes a separation of subject from object; therefore logic is not final wisdom."

"This isn't a book, Charlie. I have to do this."

"Logic isn't final wisdom."

Tig stood and turned, thought better of it and scooped Calvin up in a tight hug. "I'll come back as soon as I can," he promised.

"Please don't go," Calvin sobbed, and he couldn't take it anymore. Tig set the kid down and turned, pushed through the front doors and headed for the truck. He disconnected the trailer. It was bought outright so he could leave it. He removed the lock and took it with him.

He'd hoped for closure for the drive back to Charming. It didn't come. It felt like he was doing the right thing; in other words, it all felt like shit.
Chapter 110

One Year After The "Incident" At The Corner Store

Jamie awoke softly, gently, without heartache. It was nice. She was alone in bed. So she got up, dressed in pyjamas and her robe, and headed for the main level. Halfway down the stairs she realized something was wrong.

The house was dead silent. Calvin wasn't watching TV. Thelma wasn't making breakfast or sewing. And where was Tig? He was never silent. Ever.

In the kitchen she found Thelma, clutching a paper in both hands, resting her elbow on the table. Her eyes were shut and she was breathing deep. Jamie realized she'd been crying. "Thelma, what's going on?"

Her aunt's eyes flew open, and the pity on her face gave Jamie a sick feeling. She had to look away, and that was when she noticed two velvet boxes on the table that were very familiar. And very foreign to Thelma's kitchen.

"Where's Tig?" Jamie asked.

Thelma shook her head. "He's gone, honey."

Jamie felt her knees weaken, but hopefully she sat down without looking like she was losing it completely. "What?"

"He wrote us letters. You know, for a big scary biker … he has a way with words. Although, his penmanship is atrocious."

Jamie realized that there was an envelope under the two little jewellery boxes on the table. She pushed them aside and opened the flap, pulling out the paper inside. She didn't want to read it, but she didn't want to guess at what the hell he was thinking, either.

Jamie,

Clay killed Jackie. He said if you ratted out the club he would kill you, too. I also took that to mean that if I were to go against his wishes he'd probably kill the both of us.

I know you're building a life there with Thelma. You deserve to be happy and not have to look over your shoulder at every minute, waiting for something to hurt you. Don't come back to Charming. If I saw you there again I would keep you, promise you the world to not lose you. And it would be selfish because you are too good for what I can give you.
Trust me to handle Clay. When I know he can’t hurt you, I’ll come back. But in the meantime, don’t wait for me. If you find someone that makes you happy, he deserves you more than I do. If I come back and see that you’re happy with someone else it’ll put my mind at ease. It’s all I want for you and Calvin.

Honest to Christ you are the most amazing gift I’ve ever received, and if this was all the time we were meant to have I’ll cherish it always. More than my bike. More than the club. More than life itself.

I love you, babe. ’Til death.

It wasn’t signed. She set the paper down, turned sideways from the table and leaned back against the wall. Stunned was the best way to describe her feelings.

"What does your letter say?" Jamie asked numbly.

Thelma sniffled and unfolded her paper. "His friend killed your sister. He's sorry for that. He's sorry to cause this. He's thankful I'm here to look out for you and Calvin. If we need anything he wants me to call him."

"Where's Calvin?"

"On the porch. He's … he's not doing so well."

"Did he get a letter?"

"Yes, and he was down here when Tig left this morning. He's upset."

Jamie sighed, her head clouded, torn between wanting to cry and break something. Instead, she decided to check on Calvin. She pushed to her feet and padded through the living room to the front door. Her nephew was on the porch swing, sitting sideways, glaring out at the yard. There was a pile of shredded paper on the ground under the swing.

Jamie sat next to his feet, but he wouldn’t look at her. She sighed, easing into the swing and crossing her arms. No one said anything for a good minute or so until Jamie spoke. "Are you okay, Peanut?"

Calvin’s mouth twitched like he wanted to say something, but he stayed quiet.

"I'm sorry Calvin," she whispered, the damn waterworks starting up again. There is was. Numbness was gone. Now she just felt stupid for thinking Tig was going to stay with them. "I got us in this mess."

"No you didn't," Calvin argued. "He's the one running away and leaving us. He's the asshole."

"Calvin -"
"He is," Calvin cut her off. "He pretended he wasn't like Mom's boyfriends, and maybe he wasn't for a while but he still left us."

"Did he tell you what happened to your mom?"

"You mean how they lied to us twice? Yeah. He said his friend killed her."

Jesus, he sounded as mad as she'd ever heard him. It made him seem older. "We're going to be okay, Calvin. It hurts now but … we'll be okay."

Calvin finally looked at her. "He's hurt you. A lot, Aunt Jamie."

Her heart skipped and she covered her mouth for a moment, then reached for him. He scrambled across the swing, straddling her lap and hugging her as tightly and closely as humanly possible.

"Peanut," she whispered, face crumpling. "No matter what you've got me, okay? You don't need to worry about me, Calvin. I get to take care of you, that's what's important. Okay?"

"You love him."

She nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"It isn't right. What he did."

"Maybe not," she agreed. "But he's pretty sure he's doing the right thing."

Calvin just sat there, arms around her neck, and she kept hers tight around his back. The front door opened and Thelma joined them, easing into the opposite end of the swing, one hand rubbing Calvin's back.

"I remember when your mom was small, that's how she'd fall asleep on her dad," Thelma told Calvin.

Calvin raised his head, sitting back on Jamie's lap a bit. "She did?" he sniffled, taking off his glasses to wipe his eyes.

"Yeah. All he had to do was hold her like that, rub her back, and she'd be out within minutes. No matter how much she whined at bedtime about wanting to stay up."

Calvin grinned weakly. "She just wanted him to hold her."

Thelma burst into laughter. "You're probably right."

"He brought back our stuff," Calvin said quietly, putting his glasses back on and looking to the front yard. That's when Jamie realized a trailer was parked there, an object that didn't belong.

"Our stuff?" she didn't quite understand.
"All the things we put in storage and left at the house. He moved us out."

Jamie turned back to Calvin, holding his face between her hands. "His loss then, right?"

Calvin grinned. "Right."

And he must have been very tired because he let her give him a big, wet and loud kiss on the cheek before Thelma decided they needed a fancy breakfast.
Chapter 111

Four Years Later

Watching Clay Morrow bleed out on the floor probably should have been a relief. It was the stress of four years of dutifully playing his part vanishing like a magic trick. Should have felt fucking fantastic.

Tig could only stare without much feeling. Here it was; his end game.

When Jax took over, let him avenge Dawn's death and put Clay away for a good long while that should have been when he walked away. Or even when the gavel was taken away from Clay and his ink was blacked out. That would have been a great time to get out. Or when Clay finally got sent inside, he could have left then.

Or when Jax handed Tig over to August Marks. Thankfully Marks hadn't really wanted to kill Tig; Marks was testing to see if Jax was trustworthy. Jax passed Marks' test.

But he fucking failed Tig's.

Now all that delaying getting out of Charming had him rolling, planning. The mechanics of his exit strategy were squealing from the rust. A lot of time had passed. Too much, probably.

But he had no reasons to stay here. The new president hated him, rightfully so. He killed Donna, and was technically the reason Opie died, too. Shit, he'd fucked up more stuff than he'd ever made right. But Clay being dead was final enough to convince Tig it was time to ghost.

Another charter of SAMCRO? Nah. He knew where he'd be happiest, if he was even welcome. It was too much to hope for. Like the prisoner of war that can't imagine clean sheets and a pillow; that's how his brain clouded when he tried to remember what it was like to be with the woman that loved him.

He couldn't remember having that sweet in his life anymore. It was a dream that had happened to someone else entirely.

The night Clay died, Tig returned to his house and realized there was precious little he actually wanted to keep. The kutte he'd worn for decades he draped over a chair at the kitchen table. He left the Dyna in the garage, loading the 1954 Harley Davidson Super Glide into the small trailer instead. His ratted copy of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance was stowed in the pickup with him, and with a whistle a white American bulldog jumped into the passenger seat. He hadn't named her yet; called her Dog for the time being.

As he fired up the truck in the driveway, the kid from next door stood up from where he'd been sitting on the stoop. Tig caught the motion, and felt an authentic smile hit his face for the first
time in about ... yeah, four years. The family was Mexican or something, so he looked nothing like Calvin, but the expression was pretty familiar.

The kid was grinning. He'd always liked Tig's bikes, always said hi to Tig when he saw him.

Tig gave a tap to his temple as a farewell salute before roaring off down the street, mentally giving everything a Goodbye and fuck you as it flew past.

In Oakland he randomly picked a tattoo parlour to black out the reaper on his left upper arm. He kept the Donna memorial tattoo on his chest; that seemed important. He hadn't gone in for a lot of reaper ink when he joined SAMCRO, and as the kid with all the rings in his face made hamburger of Tig's skin he was grateful.

Wrapped up and ready again he and Dog hit the road headed for Colorado, well past midnight. He'd made a promise, and as much as he'd hardened these past four years the thought of seeing Jamie, Calvin and Thelma again had him terrified. He didn't want them to hate him. And he didn't want them to have moved on. He wanted them to be right as they were when he left, as stupid as that sounded.

But the separation that had been growing between him and SAMCRO since Clay threatened to take Jamie away meant he was leaving no matter what. So he at least had to stop by and make sure they were okay.

Four years and no contact. He didn't know anything that had happened in his absence. For all he knew he'd knock on the door and Jamie's husband would answer.

That thought made him furious, incidentally.

Tig should have been exhausted by the time he crossed the Colorado border, dawn lightening up the horizon. He'd taken part in a prison break, seen his former best friend die, packed up his shit and walked away from life as he'd known it for, what, thirty years? It had been a busy day. But he was too intent on getting to his final destination to stop now.

It was hot in Colorado, he was realizing as he recognized the grid that Thelma's acreage was located on. It was just mid-morning but he had to park, take off the hoodie and let Dog empty her bladder. Sweat was rolling down his back as he shook his arms out and stretched his legs a bit.

In the distance he heard dirt bikes, and he had to grin. There were gearheads out here, and he hoped Calvin had become one of them.

Tig climbed back behind the wheel with a whistle to Dog, then continued down the country lane that seemed familiar. All he really remembered was Aunt Thelma's bright red barn-shaped mailbox. When he saw it his heart leapt. It had been freshly painted so it stood out like a flood light. He stopped across from the turn, breathing, trying to decide what he should do.
He could keep going, maybe find work in Denver or Boulder. Someplace big where he could just disappear. While he debated he found himself pulling into the yard, killing the motor. He sat still, too long for Dog. She looked at him and snorted.

"Okay," he nodded at her. "Here goes nothing."

The yard looked the same. There was a newer-looking Ford Escape parked in front of the house. Next to it, two dirt bikes about the size Calvin would ride. It made him grin, even as nervous as he was. He let Dog jump down, her nose twitching in the wind. There must have been another dog that lived here; she was sticking close to him rather than bounding off to explore.

A kid walked around the corner of the house, and it couldn't have been Calvin. He was nearly as tall as Tig, lanky and thin. A good-looking kid really, and he wasn't wearing glasses. He had dirt bike gear on – the pads, the gloves, and he was carrying his helmet. He saw Tig and froze.

Holy shit. It was Calvin. Tig saw it in his eyes, his mouth, the way he held his head. Jesus, he was nearly all grown up. He could only be thirteen years old.

Tig was taken aback, staring as this man-Calvin strode up to him. Tig didn't know what to do, how to say Hi, nothing seemed like a good idea coming out of his mouth.

He didn't need to worry. The kid stopped in front of him, eyeing him up with distrust. Tig deserved it. He especially deserved the shot to the gut. It totally caught him by surprise, and while he was doubled over Calvin caught him in the nose with a damn good right hook.

In a burst of stars Tig was down on one knee, watching blood drip into the dirt from his nose. It wasn't broken but it was severely compromised. He cupped his face with one hand, then looked down at the blood in his other palm.

Dog was barking like a maniac but not actually attacking so Tig eventually just told her to shut it. Calvin was still standing over him, his breathing hard but even. He let Tig stand up, and he found himself nodding. "All right Charlie," he drawled. "I deserved that and more."

"What are you doing here?" Calvin snapped, and even his voice had changed.

Tig shook his head, still staring at the blood on his hand. "Wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Well, we weren't," Calvin spat out. "But we're fine now. So you can get the fuck out."

Dog growled at Calvin's tone and Tig met his glare. "I don't expect to be welcome, don't worry."

"You aren't. Because you haven't been here. Are don't to tell me this was all to protect us. Fuck you. Where was your protection when Thelma had a stroke?"

Tig's heart bucked a bit. "Shit, Charlie I -"
"Don't think about apologizing for that. It was three years ago. We got through that. And was your protection when the cancer came back?"

At that his stomach sunk right to his feet. "Ahh, shit. Not … not that."

"Yeah. You weren't here to take care of her. So I was the one doing that. All by myself. And she was even worse this time because you broke her heart."

Tig exhaled, closing his eyes. Shit. This had been a big mistake.

"They had to take her other breast too, so you may as well leave. I doubt she'll want to see you. And you sure as shit aren't fucking her and then taking off again. Not if I have anything to say about it." His voice had dropped low and ominous, and Tig had to blink a couple times. He knew very well where Calvin had learned that from.

"Calvin!"

They both turned to the porch at that horrified exclamation. Tig felt absolutely ashamed, and Calvin looked slightly embarrassed too. His "Sorry Aunt Jamie" confirmed it.

"I never want to hear that language from you."

"Sorry," he repeated, eyes on his feet.

Tig could have smiled. He was a good kid. A great fucking kid. And the licking he'd just laid on Tig actually made Tig's heart swell with pride because he did it in Jamie's defence.

"What happened to your nose?"

Tig looked up the stairs again, trying not to sigh like a pansy. It was Jamie, head to toe, and fuck but he'd missed her. He let it seep in, after four years of arms' length remembrance and day dreams. He let himself get all soft and gushy just from the sight of her.

"Tig?" She called him back to earth.

He shook himself into awareness. "Calvin had a point to make," he said, turning his gaze to the kid, who was looking at him again. "It was a good point. He was right."

"Calvin, aren't you meeting Brice and Greg?"

"Yeah," he replied.

"Go ahead. Don't be late for supper."

"Okay."
"And be careful."

"I will be, Aunt Jamie." It was said with such affection and respect. "See you later."

Calvin turned for the bikes, but Tig called him back for a moment. "Hey, Charlie?"

The kid turned, still not won over by the Trager charm. "What?"

"You were right. Logic isn't final wisdom."

Calvin stared at him, long enough to blink three times, then made for his bike.

Tig turned his attention to the porch again, wiping at his nose which still hadn't stopped bleeding. Once the sound of the dirt bike faded out he tried speaking. "Glad he took those boxing lessons," he said stupidly, attempting to smile at her.

She stared at him, so he took the chance to study her, put his heart to rights. She looked good, despite what Calvin told him of the hard run they'd had. She was wearing a knee-length summer dress with a blue and white pattern, thin straps on her soft shoulders. Her hair just skimmed those shoulders, and he could tell by looking that was her real hair, not a wig. She was barefoot on the porch boards.

She got sick again and he wasn't here for her. He didn't deserve to be here now.

"Are you okay?" she asked, arms crossed.

He nodded. "Yeah. Just a hit to the head. Nothing I'm using." What was with all the fucking jokes? Christ, he was so nervous -

"Why are you here, Tig?"

He looked up again, wiping his blood on his jeans. "I wanted to tell you that … Clay's dead. So he's not going to be … looking for you."

It sounded lame. Really lame. With all the stuff she'd put up with the last four years or more, Clay Morrow didn't seem all that scary. Tig could only imagine how little she cared.

"Took him long enough," she quipped back, and he had to laugh.

"Assholes die hard. Look at me."

"I am," she replied softly, and he looked up again, frowning. "I can't believe it," she added, "but I am."

"I'm … I'm so sorry, Jamie. It took so long and so much happened …"
"I know," she cut him off. "We've had our own stuff, too."

He nodded. "Calvin told me. I'm ... sorry about Thelma."

She nodded. "That was tough. It came as a surprise."

"And I hate that you got sick again. I should have checked in, asked how you were but -"

"It had been too long by then, Tig," she assured him.

"Calvin had to take care of you, though."

Jamie smiled sadly. "He had some help, Tig."

"Really? Well, that's good." Tig tried to not ask it, but he couldn't. "... Who helped?"

"Dale Tatham."

"Who's that?"

Jamie shrugged. "We dated for a couple years."

Tig's hands tightened into fists but he tried to nod loosely. "Yeah? Well, that's good. I'm glad he's taking care of you."

She came down one step. "He asked me to marry him, actually."

Flash of red, but he fought it down. "Wow. That's ... that's great. I'm happy for you, Jamie."

Now Jamie was right in front of him and she put her hands on his shoulders. He tried to ignore the jolt that gave him. "I said no," she went on softly.

His eyebrows went up. "Really?"

She nodded, and as the breeze kicked up a bit he caught the smell of her. Jesus, she smelled exactly the same. How was that even possible?

"Why'd you say no?" At his question she stepped closer, putting her arms around his waist. He was confused and befuddled. "Why'd you say no, Jamie?"

"I wasn't in love with him. I couldn't even say it to him."

Jamie was staring up at him, so wide-eyed and perfect and just like he remembered his current events were getting confused with history. "If he was a nice guy -"

"Are you going to hug me or discuss Dale?" she cut him off.
"Jamie, I got blood on my hands."

She went up on her toes, pressing her mouth to his quickly before pulling back. It took a while before he could open his eyes again. She had his blood above her lips. It didn't seem to bother her. He exhaled, putting his forehead to hers and closing his eyes. "Babe," he whispered, meaning it to sound like an apology.

"I hated you for a long time," she assured him. That actually helped. "Then I lived without you. But I still missed you, all the good things. I was hoping you'd keep your promise to come back."

"I'm sorry it took so long."

"It must have been hard to come here," she said softly. "But you did."

"I wanted to make sure you were okay. But you weren't. I let you down."

"We're fine, Tig. Life happens, right?"

He nodded, licking his lips.

"What's with this though?" she asked, raising one hand and scratching her nails on his chin. "Your grooming standards slipped?"

He dared to smile at that. "You don't like the goat? I thought it looked dapper."

Her fingers trailed over the moustache he'd also let grow, careful of where he might still be bleeding. A bemused smile was teasing her lips. She was so close, so soft and warm. Her hand dropped from his face and rested on the centre of his chest, like she was activating his heart again. He forgot about his hands, pulling her close by her lower back. And because he'd been missing it the most of all, he shoved his bloody face into the crook of her neck and shoulder and inhaled.

_Jesus_, there it was. Peace. Calm. Home.

And it might have been his imagination but he'd swear she had two breasts. Both smaller than the one he remembered but … whatever. He was able to hold his tongue and not ask. A miracle for him, really.

Her hands stroked his hair, and she kissed the side of his neck. "Tiggy, would you like to stay for supper?"

Tig grinned as he pulled back, cupping her face with his hands. "Aunt Jamie, I'd love to."
Chapter 112

Two Weeks Later

Jamie flopped to her back, hand on her pillow over her head. It wasn't the heat of the house, which still didn't have AC because she couldn't afford it. It was restlessness.

Two weeks of Tig Trager in her house, staying in the spare room like a guest, unwilling to believe her that she'd forgiven him as much as she had.

Maybe it meant she was weak. Or stupid. Of all the people to see in her driveway, she expected Paul McCartney to show before Tig. That wild hair, those blue eyes and the smile she'd nearly forgotten were enough to wash away lingering bitterness and anger. She knew she'd missed him. She had always known that if he were to show up she couldn't stay mad. She'd take him back in a heartbeat.

But it was all strained. Calvin was still furious with him. That very day he'd been tinkering with the new dirt bike he'd just bought (using money he earned off of fixing his friends' bikes) and something with how the motor was running sounded off. Even Jamie could tell from where she was shelling peas for supper on the porch. Tig had been working on his bike, the one Calvin had helped him put together. Though he tried to hide it, when Calvin saw that bike roll out of its trailer he had stopped to stare, a look crossing his face that Jamie hadn't seen for a long time.

That wonderment of the summer he spent helping Tig was back, but it lasted a millisecond and he was off to his own tasks.

Jamie watched Calvin fiddle with something on his dirt bike, then noted Tig surveying Calvin as well, grease rag in hand, hands on hips. He was debating on offering advice, and Jamie had to bite her lip to see that caution. He wanted Calvin back as much as Jamie wanted Tig back.

He shouted something to Calvin, who looked up, frowned, then went back to fiddling like Tig hadn't spoken. Jamie debated saying something, then decided her menfolk could sort out their own shit.

Tig was pissed to be ignored, especially on a subject where he knew what he was talking about. He stalked over to the dirt bike, yanked on something himself and the engine noise regulated, growing a bit quieter so Jamie heard him say, "Hate me all you want but don't take it out on the damn motor."

She hid her smile, dropping her face to the task at hand. When she looked up again they were both at work on their respective machines, like nothing had happened.

She still saw it as progress made.
Tig had even got a job that day. It had been difficult to watch him swallow that anger and pride, going into an interview with a criminal record an obstacle rather than a rite of passage. His temperament didn't really allow him to completely swallow pride, so it would certainly take a specific personality to take a chance on him. But that day he found it in a questionable small motor repair shop located off the highway, halfway between the acreage and town. His pride at telling her this was something that tugged at her heart. They'd celebrated with steak and tater-tot casserole.

Now she couldn't sleep, didn't want to. She knew what she wanted. So she turned on her lamp, got up and pulled off her oversized T-shirt she slept in and moved to the closet. There was a blue negligee at the back of her closet, one she hadn't worn since receiving it as a birthday gift nearly five years before. She pulled it on and looked at her reflection in the mirror over her dresser.

Her second surgery hadn't needed to be as drastic as it was. But when they told her she had another small cluster of tumours she told them to completely take everything out that they could, and that left it open for reconstructive surgery on that breast. It was smaller than what she lost, but the bit of extra skin was used to smooth out her chest over the second breast they gave back to her. Now she had two A-cups. One still showed signs of scarring underneath, but where a neckline might plunge to tease at her cleavage one could only see smooth skin. No nipple, but a breast was there anyway and it had made a world of difference for her.

Dale Tatham had seen her through all of it. And when she was healthy he proposed and she said no. She felt like shit about that still. But even as he was taking care of her she tried to tell him he didn't have to do all that work. Jamie had grown to realize he was always far more into her than she was into him, and when she broke it off she made sure it hurt so he didn't harbour hope.

"I'm not in love with you, Dale. I'm sorry."

She pulled a robe on over the negligee and, as an afterthought, pulled the aquamarine-pendant necklace from her jewellery box and added it to her seduction arsenal. It hit her skin cold, but she still smiled to see it resting just below the base of her throat. Then she flicked off the lamp and padded towards the stairs and across the living room to the guest room.

The door creaked as she opened it and she heard a shuffle from the bed. "Jamie?" came Tig's voice, slightly groggy like he'd been sleeping.

She closed the door behind her, and as she turned back to the bed the lamp next to the bed came on, lighting up the room, warm and golden. Just like the lamp in his room in Charming. Like any light next to any bed Tig Trager was sleeping in, apparently.

She faltered in her confidence. Her hands went to the neck of her robe, and his eyes tracked the motion. Then his confused expression softened as he saw the necklace. His head titled and he half-smiled. "You're wearing the necklace."

Jamie untied the belt on her robe and let the terry cloth hit the floor. His eyes grew wide, and his "Jamie," seemed careful, like he was about to ask her what she was doing. But his eyes gave
more away than his voice could, and as they ran over her it seemed her blood quickened in her veins. "Jesus," he muttered, running his hand over his chin and sitting upright. "You haven't changed."

Tears filled her eyes at that, because she felt so much more complete now. But the tears didn't come because he didn't notice. It was because he'd always seen her as beautiful, complete chest or not. She crossed the room quickly, pulling up the covers and sliding between the sheets next to him. He helped by shifting over and hoisting the covers more. His eyes were hot on her as she settled on her side, facing him. Then his eyes went to her chest. "Jamie, how -"

"Clark Davidson bought them for me," she answered breathily, knowing her cheeks had to be flushed. "This is your … blackmail money."

His eyes found hers again, that caustic smile in place. "You're kidding."

She shook her head. "Thelma passing away was hard, but she had insurance on the mortgage for this place. She had some savings. We're doing pretty well, actually."

He eased closer, eyes on her face. "Jamie -" he began but she cut him off.

"I've missed you. I still love you and I've missed you so much." Her hand went out to touch the heavy black mass of ink on his upper arm, and when it did he inhaled which made her pulse speed up further. "I'm glad to see this gone. If Calvin and I mean more than that did -"

Now he cut her off. "You do. I wouldn't have done this if you didn't."

That's when she leaned forward, hand on his neck, and kissed him. He stilled, letting her do it. Her lips brushed over his, bottom one catching his top lip as it moved up. She did it a few times before his hand rounded her hip, pulling her into his warmth, then sliding down her lower back, finding its warm way under the negligee and sliding up between her shoulder blades over bare skin.

Five years suddenly vanished. She wound her arm around his shoulders like they had never been parted. He had her heart after all, and as he pressed her to his chest she could feel it come back online, slowly and sweetly.

It was the work of a few hurried tugs and shifts in position for them both to be naked. Without any shyness or apology he rolled her under him, then his hands went to her breasts. Her nipple seemed to remember how he used to taste it, like only he had ever done. Jamie bit her lip and squirmed from it, immediately hot from head to toe. His hands kneaded, squeezed, stroked and caressed her as she did the same to him.

She'd missed his weight, the width of his chest over her, making her feel precious. She'd missed the scrape of his facial hair on her skin, even the tickle of his chest hair. The way he completely took over, pulling strings and pushing buttons that she'd forgotten she had. Her entire body rejoiced to have him back, taking care of her this way.
She was wet within minutes, and she knew his ability to wait was strained when he mumbled, "Condoms?"

Jamie's face went redder. "Your nightstand."

His head came up, brow furrowed. "What?"

She licked her lips, not missing the way his expression intensified when she did so. "I put some in there before we all went to bed tonight."

There was a pause while she waited for it, and his slow grin made her so happy she had done something so bold. "Live wire," he mumbled, reaching out for the drawer and yanking it open. It squeaked and she shushed while he chuckled, his chest shaking with it. Her body loved that sound. It made the hair on her arms stand up. The back of her neck tingled.

"Hurry," she whispered, raising her lips and flicking her tongue out along his neck.

He growled, and her legs writhed along his at the sound. This hadn't changed in the least. He was raw want, and the speed with which he rolled the condom on and positioned himself over her had her heart racing so fast she was nearly light headed.

Tig's warm hand closed over her throat, his opposite elbow taking his weight on the mattress. His eyes ran over her face, and when he slid inside she moaned, keeping her eyes on his, knowing her mouth dropped open and her eyes got wider. He still seemed overwhelming, as though she'd adapted to lesser men somehow. Which was ridiculous. It just felt so good it was unlike anything she'd ever known before or since.

Finally. He was truly home.

Tig watched her lose then gain him again, his face almost reverent. He liked the effect he had on her. It was in the heat in his eyes and the cadence of his breath through his open mouth. He was moving frustratingly slow, but she'd take it any way he gave it. It was worth savoring.

Still, that hand kept her head immobilized, unable to kiss him or move. That was fine. Until a whimper came, from her, and his mouth crushed down to hers fiercely, their lips mashing, catching between their teeth and not even hurting. Then he released her throat and reached down to cup her hip again, his weight on her chest crushing. She didn't care, she wrapped her legs around his back and hooked her ankles, leaving herself wide open.

He took it, roughly, aggressively, and fast. Wonderfully thorough. The orgasm, when it broke, had been built so perfectly losing it was still a work of art. While she was coming down his mouth was at her ear, muttering wonderful, lovely and naughty things that made her mouth smile and her skin tingle.

He hadn't finished with her. She knew this when he went up to both hands, pushing into her rough again. His eyes on her were almost as good the rest of it, and she rode it out again, letting
him watch how good it was for her. She touched herself. Bit her lip. Whispered his name. And when he was close and his pace increased with almost punishing force she came hard, muttering a "Tiggy!" while he grunted, planted deep and stayed there.

With lowered eye lids Jamie watched him part their bodies, rolling off her and sitting on the side of the bed while getting rid of the protection. When it was discarded in the trash can he joined her back under the covers while she turned the lamp off.

He was sweaty against her back, breathing hard. She was the same, and his arm closing across her stomach in a claiming gesture made her smile into the dark.

"Still the best," he whispered with a kiss on her neck. "Still perfect."

...

Tig fell asleep with his girl at his chest, her smell deep inside, his heart and head both at absolute peace for the first time in decades. And so it was the next night, and the night after that, and so on.

**The End**