

If you ain't living
on the edge,
you're taking up
too much room.

THE BARE BONES



LAYLA WOLFE

THE BARE BONES

Book #1 in The Bare Bones
MC series



Quicksilver
Books

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To Donna Briody-Buccella. This bad boy (with no white tennies) is for you.

To Cookie Grimaldi VonBehren for all of your invaluable help with cuts, scoots, and anal bead headbands.

To Vella Day, Olivia Jaymes, Jenika Snow, Indigo Sin, and Kathryn Kelly—I seriously could never have completed this whole undertaking without your insightful assistance.

If you ain't living on the edge, you're taking up too much room.

The rose-colored illusion of Madison Shellmound's girlish crush on biker Ford Illuminati is stomped into smithereens by his crude, perverse father Cropper, Bare Bones club President. Fearing Ford will kill Cropper if he finds out, Madison flees town, becoming an upstanding cardiology nurse.

Madison and Ford have an ill-fated, star-crossed love that will last their lifetimes. Ford is a lifer in a different sort of enterprise, the gritty full-throttle club of guns, blood, and allegiance to his brothers.

Twelve years and several tours of SEAL duty later, Ford is thrust back into Madison's arms on the worst day of his life. Madison's prospect brother Speed has screwed up big-time and owes the club his life. She offers herself to Cropper as a sacrificial lamb to save Speed.

But how long until the fiery, full-on outlaw Ford discovers that the woman he loves was treated like a degraded slave by his own father? Well, meet the new boss. He's not the same as the old boss.

Publisher's Note: This is not your mother's contemporary romance.

Readers will encounter molestation, drugging, consensual bondage and discipline, violence, and a HEA. It's a full-length novel of 65,000 words. Recommended 18+ due to mature content.

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CHAPTER ONE

MADISON

We were steeped in sin, immorality, the aura of wrongdoing. What did they tell you about love? Love isn't meant to be all rosy. Love doesn't sprinkle gold dust over things and give it a warm golden glow, like a Hollywood sunset in one of those John Wayne westerns. Love doesn't fix your boo-boos, your bad haircuts, or your ugly glasses like Carol Brady's platitudes.

No. Love breaks your heart. It wrecks everything. It casts you into the lowest circle of hell and rattles you

around in the shitty oozing muck. Love isn't perfect because we aren't. Did you ever wonder where they get that phrase, "He's only human"? Rainbows are perfect. Dolphins are perfect. Babies are perfect before they open their eyes and see what a giant clusterfuck they've been born into.

But lovers? We are here to love exactly the wrong people. We are here to screw each other up, to mess with each other's heads. To lie and betray someone in the worst possible way, to kiss someone while turning the knife in their back *just because we can*. Humans are vile that way. As Ford's favorite writer says, "Once I thought that to be human was the highest aim a man could

have, but I see now that it was meant to destroy me. Today I'm proud to say that I am inhuman."

That's me. Inhuman. I have come a long-ass way to get to this point, and you wouldn't believe the offal I've had to wade through on my journey. It's been my trial by fire, and I've emerged the other side. I wouldn't say unscathed—I've been pretty fucking scathed, to tell the truth. I've made it, I'm here, and it was no accident that I came to be the warden of Ford Illuminati's beautiful, wracked, tortured soul. In fact, there's no way to tell his story without also telling mine. Our stories are intertwined.

You say to start at the beginning. My

beginning doesn't start with my birth and childhood in Cottonwood, Arizona. It was all fairly standard issue crap, maybe more *Modern Family* than *Brady Bunch*, but everything turned out all right at the end of the day. That is, until my father split when I was eight. My mother pretty much fell apart, refused to get a job, and more and more she stopped leaving the house altogether.

The three of us had to fend for ourselves. When you're that young, you know, you're not really able to pull back and look at things objectively. It's nice now that I'm twenty-nine I can look in the rearview mirror and finally realize that our mother had mental issues, and agoraphobia was probably the least of it.

But because she had no money—my father sent her a pittance that just covered the mortgage and some utilities—and no way of making any, we had to fend for ourselves.

A couple of teachers noticed that I always wore the same ratty jeans to school, that I had holes in the soles of my desert boots, that I clung to my threadbare bomber jacket with the Screaming Eagle patch on the sleeve because it had been my father's. They called me in a few times and asked why I never had a lunch to eat, but I covered for Ingrid. I covered because that's what children do. They don't know any better. For them to wrap their tiny little brains

around the idea that their parent is incapable, dysfunctional in some way, or unable to provide the sustenance they need, well...Their little heads would probably explode.

So God or whoever gave children the ability to compartmentalize, as though their brains had little walls with incredibly tiny doors that usually remain locked. Call it “in denial” or what you wish, but my sister, brother and I were able, with straight faces, to tell the teachers that we just liked hip-hop or grunge or whatever the flavor of the moment was. Everyone always seemed to buy it, maybe because we rarely had bruises.

Ingrid became more violent as the

years went on. Now maybe I'm the one in denial because I can't recall a single thing any of the fights were ever about—the usual childish crap, I'm sure. Our ceiling always leaked, we had buckets and plastic sheets covering our beds, and there was no water to wash clothes or ourselves. We had none of the gewgaws and accoutrements that teens want to show off to their peers.

For young women that's tantamount to hell, so I'm sure we yelled back at whatever Ingrid was dishing out. Luckily she was so weak we were able to outrun her, and by the time I turned twelve I was spending more time sleeping at my friend Sabrina's or, when her mother got

tired of my face, in the hills. My little sister June had friends who were more generous with their creature comforts and didn't mind having her around. My little brother Robert, he just kept to himself and retreated more and more into a withdrawn hoodlum place.

I'd sleep under the cottonwoods by a creek in Coyote Buttes. I felt safe being outdoors. I guess I became somewhat of a nature girl. Sometimes I'd venture up into the swirling sandstone buttes themselves, warming myself like a lizard in the sun, curled up in a rocky cradle, reading the books I'd stolen from the library. I ate the food we took from Sabrina's mother's fridge or the stuff we stole from the store.

Needless to say, I missed a lot of school this way. I was too young to drive—and couldn't have afforded a car anyway—so sometimes I'd hitchhike to school, catch a ride with Sabrina and her brother, or more likely, stay in the hills. I shudder to think how many potential serial killers passed me by when I stuck my thumb out to strangers.

I knew *something* was wrong. Something was missing from my adolescence. I must have known it wasn't normal, but I had no way of blaming Ingrid until later. A teenager can't blame her parents. They created you. They're flawless and blameless. A teen turns it inward and blames herself,

right? “Oh, I must be fucked. No wonder I’m unlovable. Look at me. I smell. Ingrid was right—I *am* stupid. I was faking all those straight *A*’s on my report card just to please her. I was just trying to get her to say one nice thing about me. I’m so dumb.”

Because the human psyche inevitably can’t accept *itself* as flawed, there’s really nowhere to turn, right? No one to blame. The frustration builds because you want *something* to blame, right? You know your family resembles *Modern Family* more than *The Brady Bunch*, but at the end of the day even those defective people always spout happy platitudes. They drink eggnog over a bowl of roses and unicorns. In my

family home, it was more like wooden coat hangers and three-day-old piss in the toilet because we couldn't afford to flush.

No wonder I preferred the wide azure sky and warm sandstone gullies of Coyote Buttes. I didn't know what my life would bring. I didn't think I deserved anything worthwhile. It had been hammered into my brain over and over how worthless, shitty, and wretched I was. Looking in the rearview now, I see that Ingrid had a lot of issues steeped in post-war German politics or *whatever*, and she sure was fond of taking it out on defenseless kids. Somewhere along the line I must've

figured if I really *was* that worthless, I might as well act like it.

So I grew armor, yeah. I did drugs and I became a little slutty because that garnered me attention. Not the negative attention of a mother—she didn't give a shit where I was or what I did. No, it was the positive attention of boys. Socializing, having people around me, made my loneliness less painful. Sabrina and her brother Chuck would bring a few thuggish boys up to my Coyote Buttes camp. They'd bring some sixers and weed and we'd build a campfire, that sort of teenaged thing. Blast some Green Day or White Stripes where no one could hear us.

Couples would break away to make

out and more, sort of a slutty version of “Seven Minutes in Heaven.” I was too petrified to actually go all the way because I had no birth control, but I did learn to give a pretty mean blowjob. More and more boys would pile into Chuck’s Toyota Echo once they heard of the joy that might be found up in Coyote Buttes.

I really relished the popularity, even though I knew it came from devaluing myself, my abundance of low self-esteem. At least I was popular. And some boys even took the time to *talk* to me. Some boys even brought me things, things they’d stolen from their sisters, so my wardrobe improved.

I had a few frightening run-ins when boys—men, more accurately, by that time—tried to beat me down, to force me into submission. Why are men so fucking determined to penetrate a girl? How is that any better than a kick-ass blowjob? So this, combined with my mad fight club skillz learned at the hands of my witchy mother, I could pretty much handle all potential comers. Once I had to cut a guy on the forearm with my Bowie knife. Most of my Coyote Buttes beaus were thugs of one type or another—homeless boys, thieves, boys who had been raised in Juvenile Hall or shuttled from one foster home to another. They smoked weed and they kicked ass, but no

one got too violent with me where I couldn't handle it.

When I was fifteen, during one of my trips home to raid the fridge, I noticed this thuggish boy sitting in the backyard reading a book. I had a radar for the bad boys.

Maybe it was the fact that I was unseen, but every tiny hair on my body stood up in excitement. I clung to the edge of the wall like Kilroy, only peeking my eyeballs around the corner. *Wow*. I was a connoisseur of boys, but this long-legged velvety stunner was a tall cool drink of water.

Slouching in a lawn chair with the reflection of the pool water under his strong chin, he was an immobile Roman

statue concentrating on his book. His aquiline nose, his slightly parted, full lips, and his thick, glossy black hair gave him the look of a tempting demon, an incubus incarnated to rip the souls from men.

Or women, more accurately. Something stirred deep in the pit of my stomach as I watched this rare beauty. He barely seemed to breathe as I devoured him with my eyes. His rich dark skin practically shimmered in the veiled sunlight. I was lucky he was shirtless, and my mouth watered at the coppery coins of his nipples. He was too young for much chest hair, maybe a couple years older than me, but the

beginnings of a nice oily pelt started between his well-formed pecs, leading the eye into a mouth-watering trail of dark hair down the center of his rippling abdomen, where it disappeared beneath his low-slung jeans.

Was he commando? His jeans were slung so low the expectation was to see the usual strip of male underwear. I blinked. Not possible. This man couldn't be sitting in a stranger's backyard, commando under his jeans. My practiced eye made out the arc of a well-hung cock reposing against his hip, but he obviously wasn't reading porn.

At that young age he'd already been working out, had a couple of tats, and one of the luscious pennies of his

nipples was pierced with a silver barbell. A scarred, abused life—just like mine. I felt an instant connection to Ford Illuminati.

Then, apropos of nothing at all because I know I hadn't even moved, much less breathed, he snapped his head up to stare *directly at me*.

I gasped. How could he see me? He was outdoors in the bright light. I was indoors, unlit. A boy had given me an SLR camera so I knew that this beauty must be able to see in the dark if he was seeing me.

The book slowly lowered until it rested on his thigh. My heart literally stopped beating. I was so still I could

feel my eyelids shivering.

Just the barest hint of a leonine grin
lifted one corner of his mouth.

And that, as you asked, is the *real*
beginning of my tale.



CHAPTER TWO

FORD

“I will go directly to her home, ring the bell, and walk in. Here I am, take me—or stab me to death. Stab the heart, stab the brains, stab the lungs, the kidneys, the viscera, the eyes, the ears. If only one organ be left alive you are doomed—doomed to be mine, forever, in this world and the next and all the worlds to come. I’m a desperado of love, a scalper, a slayer. I’m insatiable.” ~ Henry Miller

Ford Illuminati could always tell when he was being watched. It was one of the many talents he’d honed over the years. Growing up in the outlaw lifestyle, the youngest fully patched member of the

Bare Bones motorcycle club, Ford had developed all sorts of invaluable skills. He could shoot a smiley face pattern into a target with his nine millimeter Sig Sauer at thirty yards. He could squeeze a man larger than himself in a rear naked choke until he was unconscious. Once he'd dispatched a guy like that over a cliff with a boot to the ass.

He was a hustler who did what needed to be done. Already he was the club's go-to explosives expert, skilled at building IEDs of all nature. His father had indulged his love of blowing shit up and it had already come in handy on a few nighttime runs for the club. Ford's boiling Italian blood endowed him with the sort of quick-tempered but slow burn

that made him a nasty customer to deal with, even at the age of seventeen.

He already had the right to wear a “Filthy Few” patch on his cut.

Now, once he became aware he was being watched, within a split second he discerned it was a female peering from behind that living room wall. His dad had told him that Ingrid had a couple of teenage daughters. Ford could only pray they were tolerable girls who didn't blast 'N Sync or Britney Spears. Fifteen and thirteen, Cropper told him were their ages. Old enough to moon over Lance Bass, but too young to realize he was gay.

Ford crooked his finger at the girl

hiding in the living room. He could have some fun with this. If he could petrify the little teenyboppers with his bad boy biker persona, he might have a couple of instant slaves on his hands. Maybe his dad's attempt to lean right by moving into the suburbs with Ingrid wouldn't be such a bust, after all. He could have these girls worshiping the ground he walked on, cooking for him and washing his ride, just like the sweetbutts back at the clubhouse did.

She came over, eyes wide, face devoid of emotion, like a shy deer in the middle of the road just before you low-sided right into it.

His heart missed a beat.

This girl—no, *woman*—was

exquisite.

Her wide, frightened eyes were frozen, the effect of having seen too much in her short years. Her little pert button nose was just a tad crooked, as though it'd been broken once or twice. Her lips, parted in apprehension, could have as easily been parted in lust.

But it was her body that knocked Ford out. This *had* to be Madison, the fifteen-year-old, but she already rocked the curves of a twentysomething. Impertinent, chubby boobs sat up nice and high and tight, displayed seductively in a push-up bra under a wifebeater T-shirt. Her softly streaked auburn hair, parted on one side, provided a curtain

for her questioning eyes.

It was those titties that had Ford's dick lengthening and expanding in his pants. Even two layers of fabric didn't dull the insistent erection of her nipples, and they sat like bullets, demanding to be sucked. His horndog of a dad should've warned him what to expect. Now, for one of the first times in Ford's life, he was speechless.

Fuck. As though I needed another fantasy to jack off to.

"Who are you?" she asked, cautiously.

Find your tongue, you shitbird.
"Ford." *Did I just stutter? What a lame ass.* Standing, he extended a hand for her to shake. He was glad his tight boxer

briefs kept his hard-on in check tightly against his hip, although his wallet and its chain dragged down his jeans waistband to nearly pube level.

All ideas of forcing this chick into a life of servitude went out the window. That was good enough for the sweetbutts, the Bone Lickers of the Bum Steer Bar and Grill, but within seconds Ford knew he would never subject this woman to that treatment.

She finally smiled when she shook his hand, her hot palm lingering against his. “Ford Corvette? Ford Fiesta? Oh no, not Ford Explorer.” Her smile was crooked, like the slash on a keyboard.

He’d heard them all before.

“Actually, my road name’s Torino,” he admitted. “My brothers gave me that name when I went full-on outlaw. Because I’ve got style, they said.” It had never felt so embarrassing to admit that before. Usually, it was a bragging point.

When she stuck her fingers in her back cutoff pockets, her tits announced themselves even louder. She may as well not have been wearing a bra at all. Ford shifted uncomfortably in his boots. “What’s a road name? You don’t look like my mother’s usual customer.”

Customer? *Her mother’s a hooker?* Ingrid had struck Ford as being too old to be a hooker, and besides, why would Cropper shack up with a hooker? Ford had been under the impression that by

moving them into Ingrid's house in the suburbs of Cottonwood and away from the clubhouse in nearby Pure and Easy, they were giving the Bum Steer a certain legitimacy.

That normalcy didn't exist when unshaven men wearing patched leather cuts were roaring in and out of the side alley at all hours of the day, throwing darts at each other's heads, or twirling nunchuks like a bunch of fucking babies. Actually, just last week Ford had stumbled upon an enormous pair of adult diapers underneath the bar at the Bum Steer. No one had claimed them, but Ford knew that one brother—named Riker because he'd actually done time

there—enjoyed adult baby role playing. Thank God the diapers were unused, but that was probably the straw that had broken Cropper's back.

Cropper had told the rest of the brothers to find their own digs, too. “No more crashing at the Bum Steer. Or over at the fucking Triple Exposure,” he added, referring to the live sex streaming soundstage the club also owned. Cropper wanted to lend a la-de-da aura to that business, too. Cropper had some good directions for the club to go in. He was in the process of getting together a trucking company for which the good Italian name Illuminati was a natural. They called him Cropper because he was like a farmer—so fertile that every

venture he touched just grew and bloomed.

“Excuse me? Customer for...”

Madison nodded with understanding.

“For crystal.”

Ford could feel his very face falling at this crushing blow. He'd learned to loathe meth after seeing what it did to people. “She's a dealer? Just great.” But this was Madison's mother he was talking about, so Ford put a quick spin on it. “Must make for a lively atmosphere around here.”

“Oh, I'm hardly ever here. I live... elsewhere.”

Ford had heard that, although nobody had gone into much detail. Cropper had

said, “The thirteen-year-old, you keep your fucking hands off her. She’s got a twin brother who I rarely see. The fifteen-year-old barely comes around, so you can take her room.” He had noted at the time that Cropper hadn’t warned him to leave the fifteen-year-old alone. Maybe because she was never there, he reasoned.

“Yeah, about that.” Ford put one boot on a low wall and lit a cigarette. Smoke drifted into his eyes and he squinted at the young woman. “My father, I guess he’s claimed your mom. We’re moving in. No one told you?”

Madison held her hand out for his cigarette. She didn’t inhale very deeply, and she too squinted. “Whatever. That’s

typical. My mother can't live on her own. Physically or mentally."

"She handicapped? She seems okay to me."

Madison snorted cynically. "Yeah. Handicapped. More on the mental side than the physical side. She's afraid to leave the house, and we're of no use because we can't drive." Madison leaned in confidentially. Her look of secrecy was adorable. "Little does she know. I made it to school often enough to complete driver's training. Not that I have a car to drive, but I've got my permit anyway."

Ford stood up straight. It suddenly didn't seem to matter that there was a

noticeable bulge in his jeans. Her glance had flickered to it, but she seemed used to such sights. “Really? I’ll take you on a run. You can sit on my pussy pad. Then I’ll teach you to ride.”

“Motorcycle, I take it?”

“Yeah. Ninety-eight Harley Softail. Screaming Eagle upgrades. Custom T-bars.”

“Ape hangers?”

Ford grinned. She knew her stuff. Ape hangers were illegal in Arizona. “You know it.”

She sniffed. “I think those look ridiculous.”

The flood of mortification that swept through Ford surprised him. He normally didn’t care what anyone thought, and he

realized he'd been showing off for the little teenybopper. Besides, in his world, ape hanger handlebars were the bomb.

As was his habit, he swiftly covered up his shame with a show of swagger. He was already shirtless, a condition that hadn't failed to catch her eye, so now he undid his custom "Bare Bones" belt buckle. The weight of his wallet, the chain that held it and his dagger in its sheath all assisted the jeans to quickly drop to his boots, so he yanked those off too. "Go for a swim," he said coldly. He didn't even step on the cigarette that he'd tossed to the cement—he was *that* cool.

Her reaction was worth it. Her jaw

fell, her eyes went round as Girl Scout cookies, and she even staggered back a step when she viewed him in all his underwear model glory. His erection that was still at half-mast nestled under the tight knit briefs was impressive, too, he knew. *I'll bet she's an inexperienced virgin. She pretends to be a hardass, but I'll bet deep down she's just like every other teen. Scared and unsure.*

Turning to the pool to make an impressive dive, Ford was stopped by the harsh bark of his father—and President of their MC.

“Torino! I need you on a protection run down to Camp Verde.”

Damn, if Cropper hadn't chosen a more inappropriate time. He felt like

whining, *Aw, Dad, do I have to?* But of course he couldn't whine, so he faced his father squarely and nodded crisply, swiping his jeans from the ground.

That would've been the end of it, but Cropper sauntered forward, long gorilla arms swaying. Cropper *did* resemble an ape, so the ape hangers on his Super Glide were apropos. His greying hairline was so low he looked like he'd gotten into the stupid line twice. Ford didn't like to feel uncharitable toward his father—overall, he had vast respect for him—but he didn't appreciate Cropper ruining his attempt at a romantic moment.

Cropper stood inappropriately close

to Madison. Ford had seen Cropper mack on jailbait before plenty of times, but for some reason this particular one made him uncomfortable. Cropper made no bones about giving her the once-over, his eyeballs about to roll on the ground like some cartoon dog. “You’re the fifteen-year-old,” he surmised.

Already the poor girl cringed back from Cropper. She was learning. “I suppose so. I’m almost sixteen.”

Wrong thing to say, Ford felt like telling her.

This pleased Cropper. He actually eyed her rack over the top of his shades. “Very pleased to meet you. I told my son he could have your room, but he can sleep in the garage.”

“They claimed you’re never here,” Ford felt the need to explain.

She shrugged. With her fingers again in her rear pockets, the ensuing tit jiggle made Ford fear for her safety. “I don’t mind. You can have my room. Like I’m sure my mother said, I’m never here.”

“I’m not taking your room,” Ford protested. He noticed that he placed his body between Cropper and her—some instinctual protective move. “I can move back to the Bum Steer.”

She wrinkled her nose adorably. “What’s that? Some kind of slaughterhouse for old cows?”

Both Ford and Cropper threw their heads back and laughed uproariously.

Ford had never heard that one before. Everyone in Pure and Easy knew it was the Bare Bones' clubhouse, as well as actually serving a mean tri-tip.

Cropper clapped a hand on Ford's shoulder. "No, son, don't do that. We'll figure something out. Get the two of you bunk beds." Still laughing, the big ape man finally headed back to the house. He tossed over his shoulder, "Meet Turk by mile marker three-ten. Two box trucks full of Russian iron. Go plainclothes—we got heat from both ATF and Immigration."

Cropper—and the back of his glorious cut flying their colors proudly—vanished into the living room. Ford wondered briefly why Immigration

would give a fuck what they did. They had never fucked around near the border, and INS was too understaffed to care about anything else.

He sighed deeply and nobly, noting that Madison, too, was admiring Cropper's patches. Their club insignia was a sort of stylized Incan skull and ribcage, very tribal. "You love the man," Ford intoned importantly, "and you learn to love the club. If you can handle that, you can handle anything."

Usually women were all over intonations like that—usually got him laid, and good. Not this girl. She just frowned in that slashy way and picked up his book.

“What’re you reading? Henry Miller? Any good? I read a lot.”

Ford liked that she read a lot. So did he. It had never been an option to graduate high school—there was too much pressing club business for that—but he was actually studying for his GED. This book, however, had nothing to do with that. He just loved Henry Miller. The guy was brash, bold, and had a colorful, unfiltered way of speech. “Read any part. I dare you. It’s just fantastic.”

Madison read. “What I want is to open up. I want to know what’s inside me. I want everybody to open up. I’m like an imbecile with a can opener in his

hand, wondering where to begin—to open up the earth. I know that underneath the mess everything is marvelous.”” She gave Ford the most adorable, heartfelt grin then. Her eyes even looked glassy, as though the writing had made her tear up. “Wow. That’s great. Just great.”

“Isn’t it? You can borrow it if you want.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to deprive you of your favorite. I can steal one—I mean, borrow one from the library.”

“No, take it. I’ve got a million more where that came from. Oh, and don’t listen to my dad. Bunk beds, my ass. We’re not kids.”

“No,” she whispered. “We’re not kids.”

“And I don’t know where you’re staying, but shouldn’t you be with your mom?” Ford finally admitted the truth. “Hell, I’d like to see you around here, as long as I’m going to be stuck here.”

“I don’t agree about the mom part,” Madison said quietly. “But I think I’d like to be around here more, yeah.”

Just hearing that, Ford was on a high that lasted all day. Even though the chase driver sped so fast through the canyons, right up their asses, he and Turk nearly ate asphalt a few times. The douchebag seemed determined to get a Fast Riding Award, and Ford and Turk gave him a beatdown when they got to their destination.



CHAPTER THREE

MADISON

I was nothing before Ford. The first fifteen years of my life are meaningless. Not one breath I ever took, not one word I ever said, not a single thought of mine was important B.F., Before Ford. The air in my lungs was putrid like a meth addict's breath until Ford Illuminati appeared in my backyard, reading Henry Miller, his jeans slung low, draping where his giant cock was nestled.

I was just this shapeless formless blob, a smear of smegma or a puddle of ectoplasm that's spewed from a

psychic's mouth—meaningless, trivial, and ultimately bogus.

I never spent the night again at the Coyote Buttes camping spot. I went back there to gather my things. It was fucking typical that when I went to get my shampoo and makeup bags from beneath a Crucifixion Thorn plant, some condom breath had stolen my bag of Lancôme eye shadow and blush. As if. As if I was supposed to believe one of the stocking cap-wearing, bling jewelry-encrusted thugs who came up to Coyote Buttes would want my makeup? It pissed me off because Lancôme was expensive, and I had put my ass on the line stealing that stuff.

It was the final straw in a move that

had long been coming. It was time for me to grow the fuck up and stop living on a damned butte.

I had plans and goals. I wasn't about to become like the toothless, pizza-faced, scabby, grey-skinned losers, my mother's customers who looked like they had bad perms but really had been sleeping under an overpass. One thing my mother's neglect, although I didn't even recognize it as such until many years later, had *not* done to me was to drown me in self-pity. No, I was tough as nails, with a hardened box turtle's shell to the barbs of the outside world. No one can hurt you if you don't feel anything for them, right?

I had managed to maintain a good GPA by spending a lot of time in the library's computer lab, and I was determined to be a nurse. Yes, a nurse! Maybe I'd seen enough ailing people on their last legs when they came to Ingrid for the sort of "help" that would only kill them. Maybe that's where I got this urge to help people. Even my friend Sabrina thought I was aiming a bit high. I knew I had to do something to get out of Cottonwood. Waiting for some meth head to stab Ingrid with an ice pick wasn't the best option.

Ford moved into June's bedroom, since she spent most of her time shuttling between well-to-do friend's houses.

Being near him gave me an odd, forbidden thrill, the likes of which I'd never felt. I kept trying to analyze it. Why did my pulse quicken with excitement at the mere thought of him sleeping on the other side of the plywood wall? Why did the sight of his bare shoulder blade inked with the skull and bones of his club touch a tender spot in me? I didn't even know I *had* any tender spots, much less that the sight of a tattoo would touch them.

It wasn't the tattoo that affected me so deeply. It was the man behind the tat, the beautiful, proud Italian with the luxuriant mane of glossy black hair. Ford truly *was* a full-on outlaw with an aura of tempting allure. He didn't talk

specifics to me, but I knew the Bare Bones were involved with gun running at the very least which was why Cropper was putting together a trucking business, as a cover. Ford went on protection runs to move the arms from point A to B.

He also went to administer “outlaw justice,” to “reason with” people who’d attempted to trick the club in some way. He was an excellent fighter—I’d gone with him to a couple of these backyard fight clubs where the rules seemed nebulous at best and the goal seemed to be unconsciousness.

The Bare Bones had numerous other business concerns, all in various shades of legitimacy. When I began to turn green

with envy after Ford announced he was heading to the live sex streaming concern over the mountains in Pure and Easy, I knew I had a problem. When I caught myself reading Ford's books and mooning over Miller's fated, doomed romances, I knew I was a goner.

“She rises up out of a sea of faces and embraces me, embraces me passionately—a thousand eyes, noses, fingers, legs, bottles, windows, purses, saucers all glaring at us and we are in each other's arms oblivious.”

I'd highlight sentences like that, hoping Ford would see and at least discuss and agree with me. When I caught myself highlighting “All my life I have felt a great kinship with the

madman and the criminal,” I knew I needed help.

I was in love.

Searing, gut-wrenching, first time love.

The thing was, every move he made was of paramount importance to me. I planned my day around his. He started “scooting me” to school some mornings. Then it became most mornings. I felt like an addict when I perched on that pussy pad, pressing my tits to the warm patches on his leather-clad back. He emanated some chemical, some pheromone, that I needed like a lifeline. I clung to him with a desperation that wasn’t entirely safety-oriented. I had

fifteen minutes of heaven every morning, desperately inhaling every ion of his exhausty, musky scent, squeezing him even tighter when he took a corner and practically dragged pegs.

I loved it when that happened, because it gave me an excuse to hold on for dear life and bury my face against the back of his neck. He always gave me the brain bucket to wear which afforded me more chances to nuzzle his hot, bare neck.

Knowing my fingers were just inches from that giant slug of a cock just thrilled me to the core. It wasn't until Ford came on the scene that I realized I'd been severely lacking in normal hormonal urges. I fucked around with those

troubled boys because of a psychological need in me. They filled a desire for physical intimacy, a loneliness, a void, but I never got horny over anyone. It was much more an urge in my thalamus than my pussy. Now I suddenly understood why my sister June lusted over Justin Timberlake. It was a primal, rock-bottom *sexual drive*—the drive that has launched a thousand ships as well as a thousand tragedies.

I had never felt any lust for the boys I made out with. I had always just gone through the moves. I knew what was expected of young, hot chicks. I knew how to fake the arousal, how to pretend to have enthusiasm. Simply put, I knew

what boys wanted. Men are all massive egotists. They are all just mirror-gazing narcissists. They are so vain they give self-portraits as gifts. Believe you me, by the time I turned sixteen I was going through the motions to stroke their egos, and my heart wasn't even into it anymore. At sixteen I was a burnt-out wreck, like a poor used-up hooker.

Being near Ford, I was suddenly a new person, as though he'd stolen all my vitality, my cells, my brain matter, my essence and replaced everything with new organs and fluid. A sexual vampire, he sucked out the bad and revitalized me with his pure shimmering goodness.

Or maybe it was that just-turned-sixteen hormonal rampage coming on.

I discovered the victories and agonies of self-pleasure. I didn't want to risk being heard so I couldn't buy a battery-operated boyfriend like Sabrina claimed to have, but I finally learned what the detachable shower head was good for.

Explosive. Fucking. Ecstasy.

I tilted my head back, one foot up on the edge of the tub, and discovered the sweet spot that set me off almost instantly. *Now* I knew what they meant when they talked about female orgasm. I'd fantasize about Ford, naked, raw, sinewy, like an animal, really. My imagination was so intense I could even feel the silky cream of his shoulder

tattoo as I ran my tongue across it. Once I was envisioning being on my knees gulping down that heavy limb of a cock, my fingers digging into his beefy glutes. I came so suddenly, so intensely I banged my head against the tiled wall. I walked around seeing stars all day, smiling. Was it my imagination or did Ford look strangely sideways at me? As though he *knew*. Like those dreams you have where you're making out with a schoolmate and the next day you see them, and it's like... they *know*.

And you know what? Ford made me laugh. Here we were, one badass enforcer who pounded guys for a living, and a former teen troll who had grown up in a sandstone gorge.

I thought I was done with, ruined by age fifteen. I must've used up my allotted "fun" in life—whatever "fun" was—by the time I was eight. Suddenly I was giggling—*giggling, people!*—while riding two up on a chopper, back warmer to the most stunning bad boy in Arizona, absolutely alive in every sense of the word.

My mother could do nothing to stop me. I would not allow her to drag me down with her. My self-esteem began to soar for the first time in my life because I knew Ford liked me.

We suddenly had food, too. I was accustomed to eating a few small bags of Doritos and some Top Ramen every day,

but thanks to Ford we were suddenly eating grilled steaks, potato salad, and yes, even vegetables. In fact, that's what set off one of the only tiffs I had with Ingrid after Ford and Cropper moved in.

Ford had gone to the store to get some broccoli or something. He said a meal wasn't complete without vegetables and you couldn't just sit there eating carbs and protein. I was making the potato salad the way Ford had taught me to, chopping the red onions and sprinkling on the dill. Well, I knocked over my beer which spilled on the stupid fucking kitchen linoleum, and Ingrid went off.

“You fucking slob! You have no regard for anyone other than yourself!

You come into *my* house and eat *my* food and you go and ruin *my* kitchen floor!”

I was appalled at first that she'd even go ballistic over something that simple. Beer was easily cleaned off linoleum. In fact, I was down there with paper towels sopping it up with her standing over me shrieking like a banshee, like she had a black belt in Nag Fu. See, this was her game. This was how she was wired. Something in her childhood had turned her as crazy as a monkey on a tricycle, and for the first year or so I actually felt sorry for Cropper for somehow having hooked up with her.

The poor dogs were cowering, and I

slammed the sopping paper towels into the trash and yelled, “I hate you! Why the fuck would I purposefully ruin your kitchen floor? It’s called a *spill*, an *accident*!”

“Oh, yeah?” Ingrid raced to the open sliding glass door, as bug-eyed as a sprayed roach. She had one of my school books in her hand, and she ran to the gas grill and opened the lid. The grill had been warming up, and now she shoved my book over the flame and slammed the lid. “See how you like that, then! How does it feel having your property destroyed!”

“You insane bitch!” I ran for the grill, but Ingrid grabbed my shirt, tearing it. “What’s your fucking problem?” We

were, like, strangling each other, furious beyond all reason. It had come out of the blue like it always did and quickly escalated.

I don't know why, but my mother had always hated me.

I had my thumb against her windpipe, and now her eyes were as wild as those fish with two eyes on one side of their head. I seriously wanted to do harm to her. We hadn't asked to be born. I saw people like June's friends, normal, happy, average, everyday people. I knew they existed.

I saw her friend's parents praise their kids. This helped kids grow up with confidence and serenity. They

didn't turn into twisted, warped individuals who had to fear shadows lurking behind every dumpster. No, they were positive, happy, and sunny. They didn't thrash around with nightmares, or suck the cocks of strangers, or sleep in a dry gulley.

“What the fuck is this?”

Suddenly we were ripped apart by some powerful force. Ingrid stumbled backward and fell on her ass on the patio. Ford was fishing a flaming hardcover book on economics out of the grill, stomping on it with his steel toed boots.

I'd only seen him that irate during the bare-knuckle bouts he took part in, just pummeling some hapless dude into

mush. But that was competition. That was for show. Right now, Ford was as fast and furious as a raging bull. The chain at his waist swayed as he stomped on the book, and for the first time I was honestly afraid he'd whip out that Sig Sauer he kept shoved in his waistband at the small of his back and shoot someone. And it might not be Ingrid.

Used to standing up for myself with all barrels wide open, I cringed in fear of Ford's wrath. His eyes shined like bonfires as he stepped up to me, pointing a stiff finger at the ground.

“What the fuck's the meaning of this?”

He didn't give me a chance to

answer. He immediately turned on Ingrid, who was too feeble or high to get off the patio. “Why did you throw Maddy’s book onto the fire? Never mind, I don’t want to hear your worthless excuse. I know her, Ingrid, and I know she could *never* have done anything that deserved such fucking treatment.”

Ingrid looked up at him towering over her, and she looked how I felt. Terrified. As Ford yelled, the terror oozed from me. It was replaced with confidence and serenity because for the first time in my life, *someone was protecting me.*

“Listen to me good, you old witch. I never want to see you harm, hurt, or

insult the tiniest hair on Maddy's head *ever fucking again*. If I see or hear of anything like this ever again, *I will bury you*, old lady. Do you feel me?"

Ingrid just whimpered, so Ford stomped his boot, hard, against the cement. "*Do you feel me*, I said. Answer me."

She nodded.

Quick as a whip, Ford took me by the arm and dragged me into the living room. Still holding me tight, he fell into the couch's depths with me on his lap, my arms locked around his neck. The entire past two minutes had been a whirlwind, and I exhaled in a whoosh as we hit the couch.

He nuzzled his beautiful face in the crook of my neck. Delicious tiny shivers feathered my entire spine and erected my nipples, as though a thousand precious butterflies flapped their tiny wings against me.

I felt him part his lips, as though he was about to take a bite from my neck. I speared my fingers through his luxurious, thick mane of hair, practically purring with happiness.

Someone had stood up for me.

Ford had protected me against that evil bane of my existence, and now his bulging biceps were sheltering me from anything slightly hurtful.

My pussy clenched. I rotated my hips

a little bit, just an automatic reaction of gratitude to a savior, but my cunt was clamped down over his swelling cockhead. His prick expanded and twitched against my innermost core.

“Maddy,” he whispered. “Don’t ever change for anyone. You’re perfect the way you are. Don’t listen to that twisted old bat.”

His words whispered along my neck where that bitch had been pressing, and I wanted to sob with thankfulness.

There was one serious down side to falling in love with Ford.

Now that I felt something for someone else, I knew I could be hurt.

“Thank you, Ford,” I whispered against his smooth forehead. “Thank you

for being on my side.”

Then Cropper stomped inside the house or something like that. Something interrupted us, I don't recall what, and I had to jump off Ford's lap, leaving him with a big old tent in his lap. He had to slide his hand down the front of his pants to adjust his big old erection.

And I was smiling for the rest of the day.

Hey, you said this would be cathartic for me. It really is. Thanks. It's good for my soul. It's nice to remember these pleasant things from my past.

Maybe because they didn't last too much longer.



CHAPTER FOUR

FORD

“The monstrous thing is not that men have created roses out of this dung heap, but that they should want roses. For some reason or other man looks for the miracle, and to accomplish it he will wade through blood. He will debauch himself with ideas, he will reduce himself to a shadow if for only one second of his life he can close his eyes to the hideousness of reality.” ~ Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*

“**O**kay, you go.”

“No, you go.”

“No, *you* go.”

Ford and Madison stood on the

eaves of the Cottonwood house roof, urging each other to do a cannonball into the swimming pool below. They'd done it often, but the teasing was a ritual they liked to go through. It was babyish, Ford knew, but he liked the way he and Maddy played together. It was lighthearted, free and easy, unlike the way he played with the sweetbutts at the clubhouse.

His attitude toward the tattooed sweetbutts was earnest and dead serious—to get the job done. Fuck them and throw them out on their ass.

Maybe because his relationship to Maddy was sisterly, it ran a lot deeper than that. They played around and kidded each other. He even slapped her on the

ass, quite often if the truth came out, but only when no one, especially not when that horndog Cropper, was looking.

Right now was no different. Maddy was clad in her underwire bra and clingy panties that were practically see-through when wet, and Ford slapped her on her round, jiggly ass.

Impulsively, a month ago they'd run over to Knoxie's in Pure and Easy and gotten inked together. She wanted a tramp stamp, and Ford's prick was hard as a ramrod watching Knoxie tug her panties down until her ass crack showed as she lay on her stomach. Ford had never been as green with envy as when Knoxie rubbed her tailbone down with

alcohol. She now had a tramp stamp that approximated the Bare Bones skull and ribs, only stylized and tribal. And Ford had more or less a permanent hard-on.

Her eyes shining, Maddy hugged herself and jerked away from Ford. He wondered if she knew that when she did this, her nearly-naked tits jutted out more prominently. “Stop slapping me! It hurts when my butt’s wet.”

“Oh yeah? I’ll give you more than a wet butt if you don’t go over the edge.” He slapped her again anyway. Ford had learned by embarrassing trial and error, and he now wore a tight jock under his boxers. It kept his horse-like erection under wraps.

She allowed him to yank her around

so the globes of her luscious ass were pressed against his wet crotch. They'd already been swimming for half an hour, but major shrinkage was never a problem for Ford. God, how he wanted to just slide his palm down her flat belly and inside those damp panties. He'd just pinch her pussy lips together and rub until he brought her off in his hand. If he slipped his palm under her tight bra, her fat tittie would fill his hand.

Instead, Ford shoved her off the roof.

Instead of an elegant cannonball, Madison went in a flailing mass of limbs. She hit the water's surface in what looked like a painful, giant slap. She frothed around awhile like a fish on

a hook, and then Ford launched himself in a compact ball into the deep end of the pool.

They splashed and swam, and then Maddy hauled herself onto the edge where she leaned back on her palms, feet dangling in the pool. Ford executed what he knew was an impressive push-up, twisting his torso to exhibit its naked beauty to his best advantage. Ford was no moron. He knew what ladies wanted.

He wasn't sure if Maddy wanted him in that way, and it would be wrong to make a move on her. She was practically his sister. But damn if every time she warmed his back on the way to her school, he didn't wind up sporting a massive erection. He always wound up

driving the twenty miles to Pure and Easy just to dip his wick into an uncomplaining sweetbutt.

“When you move to Flagstaff,” he said, “are you going to come down and visit?”

Madison shrugged. Doing so made her boobs undulate like plastic bags full of Jell-O. Chlorinated water dripped from the tips of her hair and into her cleavage. “I don’t know if I’ll have a vehicle. I’ll spend all my salary on tuition and books.”

Madison had been accepted into the nursing program at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. She only had to stick around this dump for another six

months. Ford was bursting with pride for her. It hadn't been easy raising herself with her mother's fucking awful tutelage. The old witch Ingrid just breathed up perfectly good air and Ford failed to see what Cropper saw in her. He knew that Cropper wanted a "citizen wife" to maintain a good image in the community, someone who wasn't a pass-around or a used-up sweetbutt. Someone unconnected with the MC world, not even an old lady.

Well, Ingrid certainly was that—unconnected to their lifestyle in Pure and Easy.

That was about it. Ford didn't see what glowing citizen's aura she cast over their dirty lives. She probably put

out decently—Ford didn't really want to ponder on that. The writing was on the wall and Ingrid's time was limited, he knew. Cropper didn't like the way she mistreated her children. Poor young Robert had taken to sleeping in the canyons of Coyote Buttes where Ford knew Madison used to sleep. Shit, being raised within the smoke- and booze-infused walls of the Bum Steer would've been better for the boy than that. Ford had even talked to Cropper about patching Robert in as a Prospect. Ford had an old white Dyna that Robert could go on a putt with.

No, Ford was fit to bust with pride at Madison's achievements. She was

getting out. He was only sad he wouldn't see her much anymore, if at all. Flagstaff was only an hour north of Pure and Easy with some nice canyon carving in between, but what would Ford do, bring his thuggish element into her orderly nurse's life? She'd be dating a bunch of guys named Brandon and Tyler, a bunch of doctoral candidates. How could he measure up to that?

“What will you do?” Madison asked.

Ford had to pause. He'd never really thought about that. “Life goes on, I guess. I'm eighteen and I don't want to live with my daddy anymore. So I guess when you split I'll split too.”

Madison shoved him affectionately. “Yeah, but split *where*?”

Ford shoved her back. “Well, who’s going to run the new trucking company?” There was an old army airfield out of Pure and Easy up toward Mescal Mountain. The flat mesa, the hangars, and the seclusion made it ideal for Illuminati Trucking. They were also going to rent out excavators, flatbeds, and loaders to heavy construction companies to take the attention off their trucking activity.

Madison raised her eyebrows. “*You* are? How awesome for you, Ford! You’re totally going to lean right?”

“Well, not absolutely, of course.” One of the many things Ford loved about Madison Shellmound was that she didn’t

frown upon the lifestyle.

He'd only taken Madison by the Bum Steer once, though. She had unfortunately been wearing her Dr. Martens boots, jean cut-offs, and that infernal push-up bra under a practically transparent wifebeater T-shirt. Riker had staggered out of the back rooms with his fly open, a clear plastic enlarging pump hanging from his dick.

Riker's eyes had practically turned to giant whirlpools, steam had almost come out his ears, and he may as well have been saying "a-ooga!" when he got an eyeful of Madison. Ford had whisked her out of there quicker than you could say "cock and ball torture." For the first time in his life he'd actually been a bit

ashamed of his club, and he could have kicked himself for that. Madison never said anything against it. It was all his own shame.

“Of course,” Madison agreed now. “I can’t see you absolutely getting out of the lifestyle. It’s *you*, Ford. Like you always say. You love the man, you learn to love the club.”

What? Why was Madison saying that? Ford was confused. She couldn’t possibly be saying she loved *him*. She must be talking about Cropper and Ingrid, although their relationship was more skulls and daggers than hearts and flowers.

So he did what he usually did when

confused. He treated it as a joke.

He kicked up water and even leaned forward to scoop up handfuls to toss at Madison. He wanted to soak her bra again so he could see the outline of her areoles through the white cotton.

“You asshole!” she shrieked, and splashed him back.

Madison wound up leaping back into the water to get away from him. She furiously did the crawl to the deep end of the pool, but Ford followed. He was by far more athletic than her and he’d caught up to her by the time she was attempting to climb out, fisting both rails of the ladder.

It happened spontaneously, and it was something he’d never regret.

Without forethought, he covered her back with his torso. He pinned her squirming body to the steps with the force of his pelvis. He got a toehold in the cement and fully rubbed the length of his erection against her pliant ass.

There was no mistaking what he was doing. There was no joking, no getting out of it now.

To Ford's surprise, she submitted. She was such a tough-as-nails hard chick, in his wildest imaginings he'd never thought she would just submit to him.

But she did.

She clung to the rail, barely daring to look at him over her shoulder.

While he dry-humped her nicely rounded ass under the water, Ford snaked a palm up her ribcage. He thought he'd shoot inside his jock when he slipped his middle finger under her bra's underwire and finally, after all these months of longing, swept it along the pert, creamy orb of her fat tit.

“Woman,” he breathed into her ear, “you drive me crazy. I’m about to go out of my fucking mind and lose control the way you flaunt your stuff around me.”

She even wiggled her ass now, making Ford gasp. Was it his imagination, or did she arch her back like a teasing pole dancer? “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

That was it. That last little “I’m sorry” just sent Ford over the edge, and he took a big bite from the side of her neck.

She lolled her head back on her shoulder like the slinky, sexy feline that she was, giving him more room to bite, suck, and lick.

He yanked up her bra to completely bare her juicy tits to the gauzy spring sun. Leaning totally around her like a madman, he lifted a boob to his mouth, slathering his tongue all around the erect nipple. Now she uttered feminine little moans, little kitty cat gasps for air as she squeezed a handful of his hair. His thighs locked around hers, and he felt if he just

thrust once or twice more against her ass, he might come.

Ford was in the process of flipping her around to face him so he could get one mouthful and one handful of tittie when a stern growl came from the house's back door.

“Get the fuck over here. Now.”

Conditioned to obey Cropper, Ford's spine snapped to attention. His mouth left Maddy's nipple with a popping sound, and he swiveled his head around to view Cropper in the doorway, frowning a fierce Cro-Magnon frown. Was that guy always lurking around, just waiting to pounce on the best moments of Ford's life?

“Oh,” panted Madison, trembling in

Ford's hands.

Cropper pointed at the ground.

"Now."

Ford didn't have a fucking choice. As long as he continued working for his father he'd never be out from under his thumb. As the Prez of the Bare Bones, Cropper's word was law.

Now it was Ford's turn to apologize. "I'm sorry, sugar," he meant to say as he helped Madison cover her boobs with the wet elastic of the bra. But it came out like, "I'm sorry, sugar cookie," maybe because he wanted to put some more fucking emphasis on how strongly he felt.

"It's okay," she said breathlessly.

“You’ve got to obey your dad.” Her face was beautifully flushed and she had that same innocent, stunned deer look he’d seen on her so long ago, the day they’d met. She swam away from him like a quick polliwog.

The word “obey” rubbed Ford the wrong way, and he resentfully hauled himself up the pool ladder. He didn’t care if Cropper got a good gander at the swollen cock that bulged in his jock. Brothers were always going hard at it in front of each other. Hell, he’d even done a few father and son tag teams with Cropper. Why the fuck not? Pass-arounds loved the forbidden aspect of doing a father and son at the same time. It was a sure and easy lay.

Ford hitched his thumbs under his waistband and tossed his wet mop of hair from his eyes. “Whassup.”

That wasn’t the right thing. Cropper reached out and snatched Ford by the arm like a venomous snake striking. If Ford had worn shoes, they would have been left behind on the cement as Cropper hauled him into the living room like a fucking little kid.

Like a fucking little kid.

Cropper whipped Ford around in a half-circle until his back slammed up against the living room wall, knocking the breath from his lungs. In one long stride, Cropper was completely in Ford’s face, breathing Jack Daniels and

cigarettes all over him.

What. The. Fuck. Cropper had only given him a beatdown once in his life—when he'd gotten drunk and blabbed to some cartel beaner about a shipment of AKs, which the beaner had proceeded to intercept.

He had deserved that. He didn't deserve this, when he'd just been putting the moves on a smoking hot woman.

Cropper even stuck his fat index finger in Ford's face as he growled, "You listen to me, and listen good, sonny. Hands off that fucking used-up cunt. You're in for a world of hurt if you keep hitting on her. I don't care what sort of a fucking fighter you are. You are riding for one seriously hard takedown."

Suddenly it was as though he was in the ring. Ford's instinctual survival instincts kicked in, and his hand shot up to wrench Cropper's finger so completely he heard it crack. At the same time he kneed Cropper in the gut. The air was expressed from Cropper with a big "ooph" that was extremely satisfying.

With Cropper doubled over airless, it was sorely tempting to deliver a double-fisted blow to the back of the neck, but Ford settled for throwing him. Cropper splayed on his back like an old man, actually surprising Ford with how easy it had been to get the best of him. Now it was Ford's turn to loom over the

fallen warrior and make some pronouncements.

“Never *ever* stick your finger in my face again. And unless you come up with a damned good reason why I can’t continue playing with Madison, I’m gonna keep doing it.”

Cropper reached a hand up as if to ask for Ford’s help. Ford was suspicious but couldn’t deny an assist. Sure enough, when he reached down to help Cropper, Cropper threw him too. It wasn’t vicious—it was almost as though all the energy had been sucked from Cropper, and Ford languidly rolled with the punches. They both lay side by side panting like drunk cowboys looking at the stars.

“Give me your reason,” growled Ford. “And don’t say ‘she’s your sister’ because she’s not.”

“She’s Ingrid’s daughter.”

“So? We’ve tag teamed girls before.”

“She’s going away soon.”

“So? It’s not like I’m going to make her my old lady.”

“I just don’t like it. Stick to the sweetbutts, boy.”

Like a striking death adder, suddenly Cropper was straddling him. All Ford later remembered was a giant fist coming right for his jaw, then a different kind of starry night that sucked up all memory and sensation, like a black hole.

Cropper's voice came distantly as though from the end of a long tunnel. "Get your ass down to Mesa. Ruben Ochoa's moving some serious iron today, so see him in his Superstition Springs mall store. Take little Bobby with you. And don't you ever grab my finger, son."

Different hands helped him up. Ford was too dazed to resist. It was Robert Shellmound, June's twin brother, and he guffawed in admiration as he led Ford to the couch.

"Wow, that was some badass fight," marveled Robert. Robert was a goofy, gangly boy, but his saving grace was his enthusiasm for the lifestyle of the Bare

Bones. He took off his shirt so Ford could mop up the blood on his face with it. “He wants me to come to Mesa with you. Awesome!”

“Okay, first rule,” said Ford. “Don’t say ‘awesome.’”

“Cool, dudes.”

“No ‘dudes’ either. We’re brothers now.”

Robert’s eyes opened as wide as the sea. “Are you saying...”

“I’m saying nothing. Just saying if you keep your nose to the grindstone and do right by us, we *might* let you prospect for us. Now get ready. You can take my Glock. No one goes unarmed. You can take my old Dyna. We’ll have to pick it up at the Bum Steer.”

“*Awesome*—I mean, seriously badass, Torino.”

Ford imparted a last lesson before he went to the bathroom to wash up. “There’s no ‘badass’ either, Bobby. You know why? Because when you’re a Boner you’re much too cool to be amazed by anything.”

One weird thing stuck in Ford’s brain as he strode down the hallway. When Cropper had flung him back against the wall, he’d had a hard-on.

As though he’d been getting off looking at Madison’s rack.



CHAPTER FIVE

MADISON

After Ford kissed me, things got strange between us.

Even though Cropper had pulled him away to go on a run, I held out huge hopes that we'd continue down that sexual path.

I was constantly wet. My pussy literally trembled with desire almost every waking moment. It made it very difficult to focus on my studies when I was trying to read six feet away from Ford. His long legs would be stretched out as he read his books—he almost

always preferred reading to watching TV—and if he wasn't wearing his cut he was shirtless, or worse, lifting weights.

He lifted a lot more weights after we kissed. I took a lot more quick showers, to the point where Ingrid had the nerve to yell about the water bill. I wondered if Ford was working out some frustration too. If he saw me watching as he did bench presses in the backyard, it seemed as if he worked even harder. I knew it was just a matter of time before we brushed up against each other in the hallway and Ford pressed another big, wet, open-mouthed kiss on me. A kiss full of love, with his juicy, fat dick humping up against my pussy mound.

Two weeks passed and Ford didn't

bring up the kiss. He couldn't possibly know how worked up he'd gotten me. It was better than my craziest imaginings when he humped that long, fat cock against my ass. I lifted my ass to him because I wanted nothing more than for him to spear me with that dick. I wanted him to take me like an animal from behind, I wanted to feel his dick spurt cum deep inside me—jism, his beloved Miller always called it.

I wanted to be the receptacle for all his bodily fluids. I wanted every tease of my hips, every clutch of my inner pussy to bring him joy and more joy. I quite literally wanted to feel his manhood, corny as it sounds, buried deep up

against my womb, wanted to feel his thickness pulse, hear him cry out in ecstasy.

I wanted to watch him fucking me in the mirror.

Ford was carved like a turkey, his body a sublimely sculpted work of art. I wanted to watch his glutes contract as he swiveled his hips into me. His tattoos would undulate with each pump of his pelvis.

I was a virgin and had never wanted that before, but now I wanted it as though it were life itself. “Either you believe in miracles or you stand still like the hummingbird.” I took this to mean that if I gave up on Ford, all would be lost. The human psyche *needs* to

believe in something, or depression grabs ahold of you.

After two weeks I started slamming dishes and books around, just irritated beyond belief, on a hormonal rampage. It was one of the last days of school and Ford was dropping me off in the morning at our usual spot. The usual kids started crowding around—I had suddenly become popular when I'd gained a brother who was in a motorcycle club.

This time, though, I just suddenly adjusted my backpack, not meeting Ford's gaze as he tried to say goodbye. I tromped off, my lower lip sticking out, desperately wanting Ford to follow me. Luckily, he did, brushing off all the

hang-arounds who drooled over him and his bike.

“Madison.”

He didn’t even call me Maddy anymore since the pool kissing incident.

I twirled to face him, wondering what dumbass thing he wanted now, like “what’s for dinner?”

“Hey. You’ve been so quiet. Everything all right?”

Already, tears stung my eyes! I prided myself on being so cool, remote, and unfeeling. I’m telling you, though, being forced to look at those sensuous, bowed, Roman lips was enough to set any girl off on a crying jag. I found myself saying, “No, Ford, everything is *not* okay. You kiss me one day and

ignore me the next. What am I supposed to think?" I felt like such a petulant schoolgirl. I should've stamped my little foot for emphasis. Really, at least I was standing up for myself instead of expecting him to read my mind.

"I know," he admitted all in a whoosh. "I know. I'm so sorry about that. It won't happen again."

"Won't happen again?" I was falling, falling. I couldn't wrap my head around what he was trying to say. "Why not? I *liked* it, Ford, in case you didn't notice."

"I know. I liked it too. But Cropper...he doesn't like it."

I screwed up my face. "What? Who gives a flying fuck what Cropper does or

doesn't like? Aren't you over eighteen? Aren't you your own man?"

"Maybe after I move to the new yard to run Illuminati Trucking," Ford said weakly. "I've got to get out from under Cropper's roof, Madison."

"What the fuck, Ford?" I seethed. "You know that yard's not going to be ready for another few months with all your permits and all, and I'll be in Flagstaff by then. Why don't you *really* tell me why you don't want a repeat performance? You don't like me that way. Is that it?"

Ford smeared his hand over his beautiful face. He was so handsome I loathed him. I hated him, hated him! Why the fuck had I moved back into Ingrid's

broken-down house if I wasn't going to be close to him? "That's not it at all, Madison. You know I want you. I swear it's Cropper. Listen. He's got a... perversion."

"Perversion? What else is new?"

"No, listen. He likes to *watch*."

"Watch? Like he's a voyeur? So?"

"Yes, like he's a voyeur. You wouldn't believe how many times he's watched me getting up on sweetbutts. There are even holes drilled in the walls at the Bum Steer."

"So what?" I had heard of worse, more warped things in my short life. Ingrid once had a customer who, she told me after he split, liked to dress up as a

pony and be ridden, harnessed, and fed like a horse.

“So I just don’t feel comfortable subjecting you to that. You’re better than that, Madison.”

I calmed down a little. It wasn’t me—it was Cropper getting in between us. I sidled up to him and crossed my arms so my tits spilled over my neckline. “Well, then. There are plenty of other places we can go. Didn’t Cropper tell your brothers to get their own crash pads? Or a hotel.”

“No. That won’t help, Madison. Trust me. Cropper wants a taste of you, and I don’t want to give him even the slightest idea in that direction. If we can make it until you leave for school, then

we're home clear. I'll be living at the airfield in that hangar, and it's a fucking big hangar."

It all sounded like a bunch of fucking excuses to me. Ford didn't want me. If men want you, they go and take you, no questions asked. They don't let stupid, weird things like "my father wants a taste of you" get in their way.

"I see." I hoped to hell those hot, burning tears didn't overflow down my face. I'd run if that happened. I had to face him squarely with unfeeling pride now. "I get the picture, Ford. You just can't wait until you live in that hangar so you can fuck all the sweetbutts you want."

I did have to run away then, because the fucking bell was ringing, but Ford yelled after me,

“And why don’t you wear shirts that cover you up better? Everyone can see half your tits!”

That’s right, just *yell* that, why don’t you? About a hundred kids had heard *that* one and my tits jiggled furiously as I tried to storm with pride up the front school steps.

I would damn well continue wearing wifebeaters. I had a summer job at a sandwich shop, so I’d go and fucking buy an even *better* push-up bra with my income!

So I spent more nights at Sabrina’s,

since her mother wasn't sick to death of me anymore. I could alternate between Sabrina and the homes of a few other girls who had come to drool over Ford dropping me off at school. All I had to do was give a hint that he might come by to pick me up at their house in the morning, and the invitations to sleep over came flooding in.

I know it sounds passive-aggressive of me, but sometimes P-A things just plain old *work*. I was hoping that Ford would, out of curiosity and pity, at least *ask me* where I'd been. But no, nothing. To test it out, I spent a few nights at home. He barely talked to me. He seemed lost in his own little world, discussing club issues with Cropper, and

training Robert to be what they called a “Prospect.” Ford was building something that looked like an IED in the garage, but I knew better than to stick my nose into club matters.

Some brothers of his even stopped by a few times. I knew some of them from visits to Pure and Easy. I’d only been to the Bum Steer once, but the Bare Bones had concerns all over the place. They had a brothel, the sex streaming place called the Triple Exposure, and an army surplus store run by a brother named Turk.

Turk seemed to be Ford’s best friend, and he was arguably even more beautiful than Ford. Ford actually looked

more Turkish, with his swarthy café au lait skin, his aquiline nose, and his full sensual lips. Maybe Turk was called Turk because he kept his gorgeous flowing long hair in a man bun, with just a few wisps framing the face so exquisite any woman would kill for it. He was a fully patched member too, although he didn't seem much older than Ford.

He was stunning. I remember Ford telling me once, before he knew that I cared, that people were constantly running up to Turk to ask him if he wanted to be in their TV commercials, that's how perfect he was.

So when these brothers came by to discuss business, I put on that new push-

up bra, tugged down my wifebeater, and pinched my nipples so they'd poke through both layers of fabric. I appeared in the doorway and "innocently" asked if anyone wanted anything to drink. We had Bud and Amstel Light for those guys watching their figures. Suddenly everyone was all over that, clamoring to put in their drink orders. I reveled in the look of simmering consternation on Ford's face, especially when I "had" to lean so far over Turk's shoulder that my boobs rested on his shoulder.

I made sure that didn't happen when I served Riker. The one and only time I'd gone to the Bum Steer, that guy had come staggering out with some kind of

hard plastic cylinder stuck to his johnson. It looked painful, but he was so drunk he didn't seem to notice—that, or the fact that he wore a giant bib and a big, flouncy kind of hat that looked like a baby bonnet.

I was no innocent, but that was some deep-seated shit, and disturbing to the nth in a grizzled, flabby biker, so I stayed away from that shit.

I heard them talk about me, though.

“You tapped that pussy?” asked a guy named Tuzigoot. I don't know if he was Native or Central American or what, but he *did* look like the kind of ancient Aztec god that would be furiously emerging from a jungle swamp to smite you down with a heavy solid

gold idol. His face was severely pockmarked, and I'm sure no one had ever dared make fun of his waist-length hair. "That's that fender fluff you've been riding around with."

"Yeah, you didn't stay long at the Steer when you brought her," Riker said obliviously.

"Don't go there," said Ford darkly.

I swelled with pride at this. Ford wanted to protect me from the long horny arms of his brothers. Then, naturally, all the guys started saying shit like "ooo, someone likes her," "Ford's been pushing up on that ass," and "she's got a balcony you could do Shakespeare from." You know, normal mature guy

remarks.

“Don’t. Just don’t, you hear?” was all Ford would say on the matter. “Now, Duji, how abso-fucking-lutely sure are you about this Cutlass storehouse out by Mormon Lake?”

“Three hundred and ten fucking percent,” said Duji.

“That’s mathematically absurd,” said my brother, who’d been invited in on the meet.

Apparently potential prospects weren’t supposed to speak up, though, for a few brothers bodily lifted Robert and took him into the backyard to toss him in the pool. After taking off the black leather cut with barely any patches on it, of course.

I tried flirting some more with Turk, but apparently his brother's word was gold, for he barely looked at me again. Later that night, it struck me that maybe Ford was simply following *Cropper's* rules when he warned his brothers away from me. Cropper wasn't there, so maybe Ford was just echoing the same confusing thing he'd told me at the high school.

So instead of feeling proud, I became angry and confused again. So *what* If Cropper liked to watch? I liked to watch, too!



CHAPTER SIX

MADISON

I had had a few of the watery Budweisers by that time and had dared to break into Ingrid's schnapps. The clear liqueur was too sticky sweet for me, but I wanted to get a little trashed. I was messaging Sabrina on my laptop—of course she knew about my whole crush, the kiss in the swimming pool, everything.

MADISON SHELLM: Now he's just out in the garage playing with his electronics.

SABRINA McMURTRY: I'm confused. Why can't you and him just go to a hotel like everyone else?

MADISON SHELLM: Exactly, my dear. Why the fuck not?

SABRINA McMURTRY: Yo're hot and he should be glad you want him. He needs to learn a lesson.

MADISON SHELLM: What sort of lesson?

SABRINA McMURTRY: That's you're not gonna wait forever.

MADISON SHELLM: I just really want to get fucked.

Sabrina was right! She was damned right. The booze had given me liquid courage, and I was already at my bedroom door by the time Sabrina typed:

SABRINA McMURTRY: It's not like Flagstff is that far from Pure and Easy, anyway. He can always visit

I didn't want to go through the dining room where Ingrid was conducting business with some toothless wonders, so I went out front and around the side of the house where there was a separate entrance to the garage. I knew from the bikes parked out front that only Ford and Cropper were here—looked like even

the “grunt” Robert had taken his white Dyna on an errand.

I was going to confront Ford. I was going to interrogate him until he either admitted he wanted me—which he’d done at the school—or told me to get lost. If he wanted me, he was taking me to a motel to fuck the stuffing out of me. No ifs, ands, or buts. Cropper didn’t even have to know.

Instead, I was about to encounter the most stupendous, life-changing sight of my life.

The door was ajar so I just shoved it open. I immediately stopped short, sucking in air.

There, by the feeble sixty-watt light of a clip-on work lamp, Ford sat back

astride a work bench, sensuously jacking off.

I went utterly numb. It was a scene I'd only dared to imagine in my most insane, most frenzied masturbating sessions.

What. The. Fuck.

It was *better* than my fantasies. Shirtless, he leaned back on one palm, bringing the glorious muscles of his chest into sharp relief. Because the garage had no air conditioning, his pecs were slicked with sweat. That infuriating, softly oily line of hair that defined the centerline between his molded abs, well, I was finally able to see where it joined the shiny bush of his

pubic mound. He leaned casually back, his hips thrust forward, the shiny, greasy limb of his cock in his fist.

I admit it—I went weak in the knees. I had to cling to the doorjamb. Luckily an iPod in the garage was playing some Led Zeppelin tune—“When The Levee Breaks,” if I recall correctly—and it had muffled my footsteps.

Ford was taking his time. Whatever lubricant he'd used made the bulbous cockhead shine like an enormous, taut mushroom he choked in his grip. He took his time easing his fist back down his pole. When his hand met with the root of his cock, he smeared his palm over his mound to take a handful of his balls. His hips twitched and his head rolled back,

displaying the fine silhouette of his powerful throat, his Adam's apple bobbing as he tried to swallow.

It was an art form, as though he were making love to himself. It turned me on so mightily I felt the lips of my pussy bloom and fill with blood. Tiny bubbles swam before my eyes. I had to remember to breathe—I was about to pass out from lack of oxygen. I took tiny, unobtrusive breaths, deathly afraid to interrupt the scene playing out before my eyes.

Then he moved to pleasure himself with an overhand stroke. He slithered the massive length of veined prick between his fingers, snaking his fingers around the shiny glans. He massaged his

own cock as though intending to torture me with the most erotic sight of my life.

The Saint Christopher's medal shivered in the pit of his throat. He was choking back his own gasps.

I should have run over there and inhaled that beautiful cock down my throat.

I should have burst into the garage and mounted him. My pussy was slimy enough by now, steaming up my little panties, that I could have mounted him and impaled my virginal cunt on his big fat tool.

I waited a few split seconds too long.

My hesitation, my fear of grabbing the gusto by the horns or whatever they

say, that's always been my downfall.

Maybe if I would have jumped on Ford, the end result would have been worse. No one will ever know.

I can't help think, if I just would've rushed Ford, we could have made our stand together.

Instead, hot putrid breath on the back of my neck chilled me to the bone.

"You get off watching, don't you, little girl?"

I twirled around, but Cropper only held two clammy fingers to my lips. Instinctively I grabbed his wrist to yank his hand away, but he pulled me away from the door. His entire ape's body pressed me against the outer garage

wall. It nauseated me to feel his hard-on poking against my groin, and at least I was able to twist my lower body so it wasn't facing him.

He had me pinned by the upper arms to the wall and he was grinding that annoying stiffy against my hipbone. His breath seemed to make a halo of smoke and alcohol fumes against my cheek. "You get off watching my not-so-little boy jacking his dick?"

"He'll hear you, Cropper," was all I could think to say. I stomped on one of his boots, but with my feeble sandals against his steel toes, it was probably like a fly. "Be quiet."

"Right. You don't want him to know you're out here, spying on him invoking

the Oscar Meyer love spell.”

As funny as that would normally be, with Cropper’s little johnson poking insistently at my hipbone, ah, no...it wasn’t.

“Listen,” I seethed, “I just came here to ask him a question. Why would I want to interrupt a scene like that? Listen, Cropper, just let me go, and no one has to be any wiser.”

“But *I’m* wiser.” I didn’t know what that meant, but to Cropper it meant he now pinned me to the wall with his entire body, leaving his hands free to roam up my ribcage. “You’ve been teasing me with these bouncy melons and now I want to get a feel myself. *Ooo*. I’m

gonna come in my pants once I get this delicious hooter in my paw. I've had to look at these babies bouncing and jiggling for a year now, you cunt, and now I've got you right where I want you. *Ooo*, nice big hard nips—just like bullets.”

He had yanked the neckline of my wifebeater so my tit was nearly exposed, and now he squeezed it like a giant zit. When he bent to take a bite or something, I squirmed aside and bashed his skull with my forearm. I'd had to fend off insistent losers when sleeping up at Coyote Buttes, so this was nothing new.

I wasn't free, though. My punch had as much impact as a piece of tissue against his thick skull. It only enraged

him. Now he yanked my neckline with both hands, and both tits obediently popped out like champagne corks. I cursed the day I'd ever thought of the genius idea to tease Ford with a sexy bra. It was all coming back on me now.

He smacked my boobs, once, twice, three times. He backhanded them and they just bounced as if pleased!

“You like it rough, eh? I should know. Torino isn't rough enough for a slut like you.”

My mouth was too dry to spit at him, so I kept trying to knee him in the crotch. It's amazing how much stronger most men are than most women. We couldn't get the best of them if we lifted weights

all day, just by sheer virtue of their muscle mass. Cropper kept side-stepping my knees, and finally he just backhanded me across the cheekbone.

He didn't do it nicely, either. A trail of warmth trickled into the corner of my mouth, and he hit me again. It didn't really sink in that he meant to harm me until I tasted the metallic ooze on my tongue. I saw slick carmine splashes on his knuckles. "Cunt," he kept growling. "You don't turn down the President of the Bare Bones and live to tell the tale."

When I was good and stupefied, he flipped me around to face the wall. With a handful of my hair in his hand, he dragged my face along the splintery wood while growling in my ear.

“You like to watch, eh? I’ll give you a show. Here. This is what you came here for, isn’t it?”

I didn’t know what he meant. I was never truly afraid until he mashed my face up against that hole in the wall.

Yes, there was a one-inch hole drilled in the garage wall. It took several moments for me to figure out what was going on. Cropper kept mashing my skull this way and that. But at length I had a clear view of Ford’s workbench through this sick little peephole.

Jism flowed over his hand and his head was thrown back in a blissful sigh. The edges of his mouth curled up with satisfaction as he choked his beautiful

dick, and a sob finally wrenched from me. The irony wasn't lost on me that I could only peek at perfection, like some twisted pervert, but my life itself would only be a warped joke.

“That’s what you wanted, right? Watch him jerk that giant hambone... watch the spunk squirting from his big meat...” I don’t know how long Cropper had been jerking himself against my ass. Robert Plant kept wailing about the levee breaking, weeping and moaning, and having no place to go. I didn’t know whether to be happy or angry that it was a very long song.

As the blurry image of Ford got up to grab a rag and wipe off his long, purple cock, I suddenly felt this jiggling against

my ass. The dry pumping of skin against skin was totally familiar to me from my childish romps up at Coyote Buttes.

Even weirder, Cropper was growling, “Your lily-white Torino isn’t such a goddamned fucking saint either, Missy Mammaries. His skin ain’t so lily-white, and you don’t even want to face that he’s building a fucking bomb that might blow some white boy testicles off a few Cutlasses.”

None of this really sank in at the moment. Without a free hand, Cropper couldn’t yank down my cutoffs, so he had to hump his hose against my jeans-clad butt. I squeezed my eyes shut tight so I wouldn’t have to look in the strange

perversed hole in the wall, and Cropper continued to grunt.

“You want that young, thick pecker, don’t you, you cunt? You’re just a whore like your mother. All you can think about is his long, thick, pretty tool, and sucking it down your cum freak throat. I know what you think about when you’re in the shower caressing your plump, juicy titties. Well, guess what, slut? You’re never going to lick my son’s tasty dick, because you’re all mine. All...mine. You serve only me from now...on.”

He grunted those last couple words, and he even relaxed the hand that smashed my face to the wall as he milked his lizard on my butt. I didn’t know and I didn’t care. I just elbowed

him in the solar plexus to give myself a few inches of room to escape. I ran up the path, toward the back yard.

The music finally ended with a long resonant feedback note. As I rounded the corner by the pool, I heard Ford emerge onto the side path. “Oh, hey, dad. Didn’t know you were there. You wanna take a look at my device? I’m putting it in this soda can and I think I’ve got the right mix down.”

The twisted sicko still probably had his jingle bone in his hand while talking to his son. Even sadder, Ford probably didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary about it.

My head was swimming like an

action movie with images, thoughts, and God forbid, feelings. As I yanked open the sliding glass door to the kitchen, of all the stupid things that could've possibly happened, I ran right into my brother Robert.

“Dude!” Robert cried, grabbing me by the upper arms. “You’ve got blood on your face!”

“I know—I’m just going to wash it off, listen, Bobby.” I drew him back inside the kitchen, next to the sink so Ingrid and her cronies couldn’t hear. It was my turn to rattle Bobby now. “I want you to fucking promise me. *Never ever* join that fucking Bare Bones gang or club or whatever they call it. *Never ever*, you hear?”

Bobby, of course, was confused. He thought I liked the club. I had thought that, too. “But *why*, Maddy? Wait—did that fucker Torino do something to you? Is that why your face is bloody?”

“No, it wasn’t Torino, and you’ve got to *promise* me, Bobby. Don’t *ever ever* prospect in to that fucking stupid club, no matter what happens.”

“But—what else am I supposed to do? I’m going on a run with Torino tonight to Mormon Lake. It’s not like I’ve got any mad skills in any other department. I’m kind of useless, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“*Don’t go on that run*, Bobby. Don’t go. Listen to me. You’ve got to believe

me. And you're not fucking *useless*."

"Why—is something bad going to happen? Tell me, Maddy. Tell me. I deserve to know. Where are you going?"

I ran directly to the bathroom. Slamming the door shut behind me and locking it, I frantically crawled up and down the walls like a kid with a magnifying glass. On one side of the room was Ford's bedroom, on the other side, Ingrid's walk-in closet.

There. About a foot above the shower head and six inches over, on Ingrid's side of the wall, was the peephole.

I pounded the fucking butter-yellow wall with my fist. I screamed like King Kong, figuring Ingrid and her customers

wouldn't care.

Fuck it. *I* didn't care.

Sabrina was right. Ford needed to learn that I wasn't going to wait forever.



CHAPTER SEVEN

FORD, 30 years old

“It is with the soul that we grasp the essence of another person, not with the mind, not even with the heart.” ~ Henry Miller

He was too old for this shit.

Ford Illuminati felt about a hundred years old as the nurses wheeled the gurney away.

They had made her look so natural, as though she were sleeping. The nurses took out all the tubes, turned off all monitors, even brushed her hair.

There was no one else to look at her. Just Ford.

He didn't know what to do next. He couldn't just rush out of the hospital, looking like a selfish asshole, even if he was only trying to run from the specter of death. He knew there was a chapel somewhere in the hospital where he could pray. Like a good Catholic boy, that's where he headed now. As he followed the arrows down various hallways, he dialed his old lady, Corinne. He hadn't talked to her in the thirty-six hours he'd been sitting vigil in ICU. She claimed she had an aversion to hospitals.

Ford exhaled deeply when Corinne answered. "It's over."

There was a brief silence. Then,

“Well, that was quick, anyway. You must be relieved.”

Relieved? That was a strange choice of words. But then, Corinne had been acting strangely all week. “I wouldn’t say relieved. I’m heading to the chapel to pray.”

“That’s good. You pray. What was the official cause of death?”

“Multiple organ failure. Just one thing after the other, all right in a line.”

“I’m very sorry. Listen. Before you go, I wanted to tell you something.”

Ford punched the elevator button with his forefinger. He didn’t need any more burdens at the moment. Corinne was very high-maintenance, but the sort of trophy old lady who had gotten him

places he wouldn't ordinarily have gone. She was highly connected in Pure and Easy society and liked to organize the club's charity poker runs, for one. Cropper had shoved Corinne on him, and she was hot, so Ford had gone along. It was good for the club's image.

"Yes." She probably just wanted more money for clothes.

"I can't be with you anymore."

That wasn't entirely a surprise, either. Corinne wasn't like the other old ladies. She'd never really fit in. This last week, those differences had stood out like a fire hydrant at a poodle convention. While many brothers and their old ladies, having heard about

Ford's vigil at the hospital, had paid their respects in person, Corinne had stayed away. She'd always been in downtown Flagstaff, shopping. The other old ladies had hung around the germ-riddled hospital hallways getting Ford coffee and snacks he hadn't eaten.

Right now Turk, Riker, and their old ladies were down at the hotel suites they'd rented, getting some rest. Tuzigoot, Faux Pas and Duji had been by, but had gone back to Pure and Easy on business. No one had expected Rebekah Quail to die so quickly, if at all. Nobody seemed more relieved than Corinne.

Ford got into the elevator where three or so people were already

standing. He didn't care what they overheard. "You know you're going to have to move out of the house. I'll give you some alimony for a few months, but it's not going to last forever. Your dad will have to take care of you again."

Everyone in the elevator stared at him as though he were speaking in the Crimean Gothic tongue. Ford didn't give a shit. It wasn't nearly as callous as it sounded. He wasn't married to Corinne. Their relationship had been mostly for sex and appearances. Ford was sole owner of the contemporary Southwest McMansion up on Mescal Mountain with views of the red rocks that surrounded P&E, Pure and Easy. Why

would he leave, and Corinne stay?

Corinne was surprisingly easy about it. “I know. Listen, I just want you to know. You’re a really fantastic man. I don’t approve of lots of the things you and your guys do, but that’s not really my business. You’re banging hot as all get-out, I mean you’re just a smoking piece of man candy, Torino.”

“I get that,” he said tersely, giving an old lady the stink eye.

“But you know what the breaking point was for me? That whole Tay-Sachs thing you just dropped in my lap. I’m twenty-six, Torino. I need to have children. I can’t have it hanging over my head that one of my kids might wind up a retard in a wheelchair.”

Ford squeezed his eyes tight with patience. “If it’s any consolation, if you’re not a carrier, which you probably aren’t, our children would not be retards.”

At least two elevator riders gasped loudly at this.

“Whatever, Ford. I really can’t take that risk, if you know what I mean. I need ultra-healthy kids who are going to be football stars and homecoming queens. I hope there are no hard feelings between us. I will always think of you fondly. Oh, and can I have that bronze cowboy statue in the front entry hall?”

Ford had barely been holding it together, and now he exploded. “You

can have the fucking Remington statue when I beat an impression of his spurs against your fucking skull, woman!”

The doors opened, and those inhabitants couldn't scurry fast enough away from Ford. Not many of them probably heard him add, “My fucking mother just died, you self-centered bitch! I've got more important things to worry about.” Ford pressed the END button so violently he nearly broke his thumb.

He was glaring angrily at the phone when he stepped off the elevator and smashed face-on into someone.

“Excuse me,” he said automatically, and stepped to one side.

She stepped to the same side.

They repeated this dance once more

until the woman cried out, “Ford!”

He finally looked at her, and it took a few seconds for it to sink in.

Holy shit.

Madison Shellmound.

She grabbed the front of his black leather cut and squeezed it in her sweet little fists. Normally that would be grounds for a beatdown, but in this case it only encouraged Ford to wrap her in his arms.

They hugged the living daylights out of each other. They had not parted on good terms.

Madison had succeeded in convincing her brother Bobby not to prospect in to the Bare Bones. Ford had

no idea why she seemed to have suddenly turned on the club. Was she really *that* mortified he had kissed her? True, the run to Mormon Lake had gone sideways. Ford's IED performed exactly as planned, and ATF would trace the nails back to an Ace Hardware receipt and empty box of nails he had slyly planted in the Cutlass' clubhouse.

But Bobby had failed in his job as a lookout. The only warning they'd gotten that a couple of Cutlasses were coming was the gunshot of a forty-five. Luckily Bobby fainted when he saw the men, so his head wasn't in the bullet's path, but the Bare Bones brothers had barely gotten out of there with their skins.

Madison had vanished the next day.

Why would a botched job make her leave town without a word? Ford had looked high and low for her, pestering her friends, Robert, June. It took months for Bobby to report that he'd found his sister living in Flagstaff with a guy named Moe.

Who the fuck was Moe? Ford beat on Bobby until he got an address out of him, and he even got a Fast Riding Award burning rubber up to Flagstaff. But what could he do? Aside from appearing stalkery, all Ford accomplished was discovering that Moe was indeed, as his name suggested, a mild-mannered guy who ran a Starbucks, and if Madison wanted to fuck him, she

had every right. His brothers offered to bury Moe, but Ford resisted their efforts. Putting Moe down would have upset Madison.

“Oh, my God,” Madison gushed, pulling Ford aside so people could get on the elevator. “Was it even possible for you to get handsomer? Yes, it was possible. Damn, Ford. You just got handsomer. Whoever married you is one lucky woman.”

“Married?” Ford pulled Madison even farther from the elevator, into a corner by a potted plant. He doubted he was handsomer with his burned, scarred face. Plastic surgery had done a good job but it still looked like he had a layer of Saran wrap over his jaw. “Who the

fuck said I was married? Fact, I just broke up with my old lady, ah...” He looked at his phone. “Thirty seconds ago.”

Madison dropped the smile. “Oh, God. I’m so sorry.”

Ford grinned wryly. “I’m not. She was more of a citizen wife, you know, the type for show. Cropper thinks that now I’m V.P. of the club I should act like an upstanding citizen like him, go golfing and join the Lions or something.”

Cropper had left Ingrid shortly after Madison had vanished. That was no shocker, but the hangar on Mescal Mountain wasn’t ready, their trucking company wasn’t together yet, so at

eighteen Ford had joined the Navy. Since Robert didn't patch in to the Bare Bones, Ford hadn't had any connection to Madison for a long, empty time.

"It'll be good for you, boy," Cropper had said, clapping Ford on the back heartily. "They'll probably want you in the SEALs. Just think—no one'll ask how you know so much about blowing shit up."

"Oh yeah, I can completely see you golfing in your leathers. How long have you been out of the Navy? I heard you were some rough and tough SEAL in Afghanistan or Iraq."

"Both those places, yeah. Special Ops go everywhere. But as you can see, fate caught up with me. I tripped an IED

and got burned and discharged ‘cause I can’t hear shit out of this ear. Fact, let me stand over here so I can hear you. How did you know I was a SEAL?”

Madison looked coy. She was always adorable when looking coy—adorable when looking *any* way, actually. She had blossomed and matured into a ripe and tasty treat of a woman. Looking official in her flowered nurse’s smock and the lanyard around her neck with her ID card covered in plastic only made Ford hotter for her.

Not one day had gone by in the past twelve years that he hadn’t thought of Madison Shellmound. Her picture was still on the wall behind the bar at the

Bum Steer, although they'd long since stopped using that as a clubhouse. So the same picture—of her in her trademark push-up bra, white wifebeater, and microscopic cut-offs—was now on the wall of his Veep's office at the Citadel on Mescal Mountain. Except a youthful Ford himself was in that photo, shirtless except for his cut, with his arm around her. He'd never forgotten how warm her shoulder had been against the sensitive skin of his inner arm.

“Oh, I've got my spies.”

“Speed.” Ford used her brother Bobby's road name. He'd popped back up a year or so ago, sick of being an army grunt, sick of being a car mechanic grunt, wanting to be a biker club grunt.

Ford had instantly sponsored his prospect status. Speed had been doing well, knowing he had to commit or roll over like a bitch.

“Is that the idiot’s new name?” Madison sounded amused now, hugging her little clipboard. So she wasn’t down on the club any longer. “Yes. He told me you’ve got quite the spread up there on the mountain.”

“The hangar? Yeah, it’s a sweet setup. Game room, chapel, offices, even a dining room and kitchen. It’s all self-contained. We theoretically never have to go anywhere.”

“Except your house in P&E. Bobby said it looks like an entire pueblo from

the outside, with the exposed beams and watch towers and all. Well, I admit I looked on Trulia because I didn't believe him. Very impressive, Ford. I like what you did with the kitchen countertops. I should say what you had *Speed* do with the countertops."

Ford was proud. He knew that Madison's opinion shouldn't mean that much to him, but it did. He was proud of what he'd achieved since the bitch had vanished, leaving him seriously in the lurch. The VP patch meant that everything even halfway important came down on him. He'd been out of the service for a good four years running the club's operations out of the Citadel.

"Yeah, I basically run things—

Illuminati Trucking, the streaming studio, the brothels. We've even got a marijuana dispensary but of course Turk runs that. There's an indoor archery range, if you can believe that. We host Boy Scouts there. Cropper's got a new citizen wife who's very big on the country club scene, so he's barely ever at The Citadel anymore."

"Seriously? I thought you were kidding about that. So now Cropper wears the plaid pants?"

Ford chuckled. "Not hardly. Listen, I was just on my way to the chapel. Do you want to join me? I hope you don't have something urgent you're rushing to do."

“No, I’m on lunch. Yes, that should’ve been my first question. Why are you here? Something to do with your service injuries? There’s a quiet room down the hall connected to the chapel. Let’s see if no one’s using it.”

Ford was thrilled beyond all reason when Madison took his arm to steer him in the right direction.

He was crestfallen beyond all reason when she stopped touching his arm. That was how he knew that he was still in love with Madison Shellmound.



CHAPTER EIGHT

MADISON, 28 years old

I was reluctant to let go of Ford's arm.

I never wanted to let go of him again.

I was overjoyed to hear he'd just split with that cunt, as Bobby—Speed—had described her. Corinne was a gorgeous cunt who treated everyone with disdain, as though she'd just discovered them stuck to the bottom of her Louboutins. She wasn't trashy like so many sweetbutts and even old ladies were. I would never forget the sweetbutt who soaked her tampons in alcohol. It bypassed the liver that way and got her

drunk. Of course she was one of Riker's favorites.

According to Speed, Corinne literally held her nose high, especially when around Riker. I couldn't blame her for that, but jealousy burned a hole in my heart when Speed told me Corinne had moved into that pueblo mansion that was so big it actually contained three separate suites.

I wondered who else lived there. I wondered whether the cunt would be moving out.

Why do I care? Am I still in love with him? I'd been carefully protecting some old prints of him for over a decade now, moving them from house to house whenever I moved. I tried to avoid

looking at them because it wrenched my heart too badly. Ford Illuminati would forever be “the one who got away” to me, proof that I wasn’t good enough to nab him for myself.

“Why am I here? Shit, you asked a mouthful, Maddy.”

My heart literally flip-flopped when he called me Maddy. Walking next to him—having had his arms squeezing me tight again—was like turning the clock back twelve years ago to the week before I’d split my mother’s house. The carefree, happy days when we’d swum in the pool, gotten inked together, riding two up on his Softail...passionately made out in the pool.

We had reached the quiet room, and as luck would have it, it was empty. There was a lovely view here of snow-dusted Humphrey's Peak and the Coconino forest, the slopes blanketed with ponderosa pines in the frigid February weather. When I sat next to Ford I wanted to take his hands in mine, but I knew it was wrong.

I had abandoned him. I knew from Speed that Ford had been violently upset about my disappearance. He had beaten my address out of Speed, and I'd even seen him sitting astride his bike across the street from the condo I shared with my old buddy Moe. But I'd hidden from him.

I couldn't tell him *why* I had left, because that would have defeated the purpose.

Telling him about his father's disgusting molestation of me would have resulted in Ford taking out Cropper. As much as I loathed the disgusting man, I didn't wish him dead. At seventeen, Ford had done time in juvenile hall and already had the "Filthy Few" patch on his cut that meant he'd killed at least one man. I didn't want to be responsible for the fratricide that would give Ford another patch, or whatever patch they gave serial killers.

I had been about to move anyway come the fall. I didn't necessarily want

my old friend Moe to be the one to deflower me, but the price of rent was right—free. I knew what it took to get ahead. I wouldn't hesitate to use my attributes and skills to succeed in life—to get away from Cropper and my equally loathsome mother.

“Why am I here? God, it's rough.” Ford rested his forearms on his thighs and looked at a spot on the floor between his boots. The scarring from the IED burn wasn't as bad as I'd been led to believe. He was so devastatingly handsome anyway. It would just lend a tougher aura to an already tough-as-steel visage. It was his traumatic brain injury that worried me. That could be tough to deal with.

“Well, my mother just died a couple hours ago. That’s basically why I’m here. She’d been ill for a month in intensive care with multiple organ failure, and she finally died just two hours ago. I was holding her hand when it happened. Just like they show on TV. The monitor flatlined and made that beeping sound and the nurses came rushing in and...”

I did grab his hands now. I sat on the edge of my chair and brushed my cool, dry hand against his pitted jaw—he had haphazardly tried to cover up the burned skin with a sort of permanent heavy stubble and goatee that made him look even more handsome. Yes, such a thing

was possible. “Your mother? I thought she was some...” I tried to be tactful, as I’d learned after years of nursing. I was going to say “club old lady who went down the wrong path” or some such crap, but Ford beat me to it.

“Fucked-up drug addict, yeah, you can say it, Maddy. I found out a lot more about her. Some brother in our Flagstaff chapter alerted me to her situation. Well, you know she vanished when I was like three so I barely remembered her.”

“Right.” I knew from the ICU nurse’s chatter that Rebekah Quail was in a terminal condition. She had no insurance but because she was of the White Mountain Apache tribe, she was being taken care of by the Indian Health

Service. She seemed to have no one visiting her aside from a handsome son who had the nurses all atwitter. I had been longing to cast eyes on this devastating charmer. Now I knew why.

But I hadn't known Ford was part Apache.

Apparently he hadn't known that, either.

“Well, it wasn't her drug addiction that made Cropper kick her to the curb. You've seen my brothers, Maddy. They're no strangers to substance abuse, that's for sure. I was only spared from addiction because I'm so allergic to most of the substances. And you've seen the sweetbutts who give my brothers

wine enemas. No, I don't think drug addiction broke up my parents."

I could be frank with Ford. "Was it...the fact that she was Apache?"

Ford looked at me grimly. "You noticed that? Are you an ICU nurse?"

"No, I'm attached to Cardiology. But I know the ICU nurses."

"Yeah, that might've been part of it. I didn't always accept that I was so dark-skinned due to Cropper's Italian heritage. You know how most club members frown upon the 'browns.' Come to find out I'm one-fourth brown myself. But that's not all."

What could be worse? I knew the club wasn't too amenable toward people of color. It was just the way of biker

clubs. They'd had a brother, Russ Gollywow, who they mostly just called Gollywow. He was undoubtedly white but he had a fascination with the Philly Soul group, The Stylistics. He often went on the road performing as a backup singer for a Stylistics-type group, wearing various shades of powdery suits and spinning in sync with the actual backup singers he worked with. Gollywow earned no end of disrespect for this hobby, even though he was quite good. I had seen him once performing in Mesa. He would mercilessly beat the shit out of anyone who heckled him, waiting until after the show because he was a professional.

“Last week my mother told me something. The reason Cropper kicked her to the curb is she hadn’t told him she’s a carrier of the Tay-Sachs gene. He must be, too. I turned out okay, although I might be a carrier.” He took a deep breath and couldn’t look at me anymore. He looked back at the floor. “But she had another kid after me, a son. He was affected. That’s when Cropper booted her with nothing, no money, no nothing.”

“You have...a brother?”

“Had. He died when he was four, living in some shithole over at Fort Apache. Was in a wheelchair, blind and deaf, could barely move. It was a

blessing that he kicked, according to my sainted mother. She knew she had the gene, just didn't know Cropper had it, too, so she kept popping them out until she got a lemon."

Tears flooded my eyes. Being a nurse, you see a lot. I've had to deal with irate shrieking relatives who either want to kill the patient, say for leaving them out of a will, or for some deathbed confession. You get people storming down the hallways with machetes, lamp bases, hammers, I mean, you wouldn't believe. Nurses do so much more than give people drugs. There's the entire tolerating-a-buttload-of-shit that most people don't think about when they think "nurses."

I've seen many people just ripped apart when someone they love has died. Dealing with death is a whole facet of nursing unto itself. Truth is, we get kind of blasé about it. I was only twenty-eight and I felt I'd seen it all.

Until now. This week had been hell on Ford, the man I loved, the man I was falling in love with all over again. I slid my cool fingers around the back of his hot neck, stimulated to feel his thick, silken hair again. I scooted as close to him as was possible, our thighs pressed together. Not only had he discovered who and where his birth mother was, she had just died, and he already had a dead brother. Oh, and he may be a carrier of

the Tay-Sachs gene. And his girlfriend had just left him. He was in dire need of some serious loving. I sat so close, the shelf of my boobs pressed against his upper arm. It was in the forties outside, and he wore a hoodie under his cut—the same cut that was now emblazoned with a “V. PRESIDENT” patch over his right pec.

“I can’t begin to know what you’re going through,” I started off lamely. It was always a lie to pretend you could commiserate with some of the most massive clusterfucks people had to deal with in hospitals. I really couldn’t commiserate. I’d never had anyone close to me die before. “You can be tested, find out if you’re a carrier. It’s a simple

blood test.”

I stroked his stubbled jaw with my other hand. I had a full view of his magnificent profile—that stupendous aquiline nose, those full, cherubic lips, like a Roman statue come to life.

I had never been able to hold out against him. And when he turned his face to mine, I just lost it. His beautiful rich root beer eyes were shimmering with unshed tears, too. My great big tough guy needed someone. My giant brawny, rugged love of my life needed comfort.

“I need you, Maddy,” he said quietly.

I kissed him.

What was supposed to be a sweet,

tender kiss immediately turned into a no-holds-barred mackfest. The second I parted my mouth over his juicy lower lip, Ford grabbed me and vaulted me into his lap. He slammed me down over his fat, erect penis, and I instantly began gyrating like a pole dancer. We went at it like maniacs, twelve endless years of pent-up lust just gripping us in a massive clinch.

Within seconds my pussy had soaked through to my scrub pants, and I could smell myself. I knew the scent would probably set Ford off on some primordial, basic level—pheromones driving him over the edge.

He twisted a handful of my carefully coiffed bun in one hand. The other big,

wide hand held me up by my ribcage as he licked my lips, my tongue, the roof of my mouth. My pussy quivered with arousal, fluttering and clenching like it had a mind of its own, wanting cock.

I had been fucked a lot in the past twelve years. I let Moe do it every night just for letting me stay with him while I finished nursing school. Then when I got my first nursing job I got my own condo, but I still had that emptiness that needed filling. It was still more of an existential loneliness that made me seek out other nurses, interns, doctors.

Men in the medical field were some of the most twisted bastards on the planet. I fucked an oncologist for a few

months once who would only screw if I had inserted a urethral sound into his penis. His favorite was a “trailer hitch” with a ball that went up his ass, the pointy silver part up his urethra. Whatever worked, but I was ready for something a bit more vanilla. Dr. Dubois and I currently only engaged in a bit of mild BDSM, a little spanking here and there.

Sucking on Ford’s swollen lower lip, my sighs brought out the beast in him. He gave a couple of little hops and unfolded my legs so I straddled him completely. My sopping pussy was now plastered directly over his throbbing dick, and with both feet on the ground I could gyrate in any direction I wanted,

bringing the most sensual growls from deep within his chest.

He pressed down on my shoulder to leverage my pussy against his erection. My two layers of flimsy cotton were so soaked I could actually feel the corona's ridge of his fat cock against my slick lips. I released his lower lip so I could moan.

“Ford. I can’t.”

“Yes you can.” He slanted his mouth against mine and nibbled, effectively shutting me up.

“No, I mean...” I wrenched myself from his lap and staggered like a juiced football player on a bender.

“Maddy, don’t.” It was a cross

between a plea and an order.

I don't know how much sterner he would've gotten, but he saw I was only locking the door. People could do that if they wanted utter solitude, although security cameras ensured they weren't doing anything untoward, like with dead bodies.

I didn't care. I stumbled back to where Ford sat low in the chair, one long muscular arm swinging at his side, his knuckles brushing the floor. Over his jeans, his other hand squeezed what looked like the thickest prick I'd ever had the pleasure to deal with, almost like another limb. I fell to my knees between his thighs, my fingers making quick work of his Bare Bones belt

buckle.

He pressed a palm against my forehead. "No."

No? Why no? What sort of man didn't want a blowjob? What sort of man didn't want a hundred blowjobs?

Sliding his hands under my arms, Ford picked me up as though I were a kitten and placed me in the chair I'd been sitting in. *What the fuck? Am I not good enough?*

Encircling my thighs in his hands, Ford pinned me down with his fiery eyes. "I don't want you to think of me like every other guy. I've never *been* every other guy, Maddy. Wearing this VP's cut, everyone knows who I am. I

stand out, just like I stood out in my SEAL gear. Different uniform, but still a uniform. And it gives me *pride*, Maddy. Pride. You talked Speed out of patching into Bare Bones, like we were some kind of scumsucking douches.”

“No!” I cried. “I didn’t want him to patch in because I didn’t want him to be...” I had to stop there.

Ford didn’t wait for me. His words tumbled out of him in an avalanche. “I’ve loved you since I first laid eyes on you, Maddy. When I kissed you in that pool I wanted just to throw you down and fuck you till jism seeped out your eyeballs. That’s how hot I was for you. I used to jack off in that garage thinking of licking your perfect, juicy tits. And it

hasn't gone away over the years. I still jack off thinking about you, no matter how many whores are in my house, if you can fucking believe that. And I want to do it right, not like every other asshole doctor who demands a fucking blowjob in some supply room."

How did Ford know about Dr. Kinsey? Had I accidentally told Speed?

Now *he* got onto his knees in front of me. For a split second I was afraid he was going to ask me to marry him. Then I laughed at myself for such a whacked idea. As he talked so earnestly, he untied the bowtie beneath my belly button and urgently yanked my scrubs down. "Madison Shellmound. I've dreamed of

tasting you for over a decade now. Give me the honor of burying my fucking face in your sweet trim. I will lick your delicious box until you cry for fucking mercy.”

Any one of those words—tasting, face, trim, mercy, hell, even decade—was enough to bring me off. Ford hadn’t even touched my cunt yet and it was fluttering in a mini-orgasm. The entire walls of my inner pussy, up to and including my womb and ovaries, were clutching at an invisible cock. I speared my fingers through his glossy hair. He’d let it grow longer since the military and the lovely curls and waves just spilled over my fingers in shiny locks.

I fiddled with his hoodie zipper,

wanting desperately to see his beautiful chest again, but he'd yanked my pants and panties below my knees. He just dove in open-mouthed, his deep groans resonating so far into my innards I actually felt my uterus shudder.

Crying out as though it hurt, I squeezed a handful of his hair. I lifted one bare leg and brought it over Ford's shoulder. *Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.* He was a cunnilingus expert—an unexpected talent in an unbreakable, tough-as-nails biker. One simply didn't go down on whores, and nobody cared about pleasuring sweetbutts. Where in hell had he learned this skill?

I couldn't tell him his talent was

being wasted. I was frigid.

Incapable of orgasming with another man.

That was probably why I gave so many blowjobs. Men *never* turned down a blowjob, and it took the focus off my own dysfunction.

So few men tried that I hadn't even noticed I was incapable of it until several years ago, maybe when I was twenty-four. I had a boyfriend who tried and tried, bless his heart, and nothing happened. I could still accomplish the feat alone, in the shower, or with my BOB—battery-operated boyfriend.

I was simply incapable of letting loose and allowing another man to get me off.

I didn't want to tire Ford out, piss him off by allowing him to go on and on. But he was *so* damned talented, his tongue a fat, rapid blur against my stiff clit. I just *watching* him, his exquisite face planted between my thighs, knowing he was tasting me, breathing in the scent of me, that *that* stunning aquiline nose was buried against my pubic mound, well, I got higher than I ever had before.

I even felt myself squirt, that little gush of female juice that usually warns of a full-on orgasm. Ford didn't seem repelled by any of it. His moans continued jacking me higher as he enthusiastically lapped away, his broad shoulders hiking up my thighs until it

seemed my mound wanted to kiss the ceiling.

Then something happened. It was like Ford's greedy tongue just hit the exact right spot.

I went off like a rocket.

It was so unexpected that I practically shrieked. The shockwave of intense ecstasy that tore through my pussy and innards had me bucking back in the chair, banging my head against the wall, practically ripping locks from Ford's skull.

But he persevered. He knew he'd hit the sweet spot, and he lapped away doggedly, snorting hot breaths against my slit. He thrust a couple of fingers in and out of my slit, unafraid of the

snuffling, groaning animal sounds he made. He was a pig for my pussy and he made no bones about it.

The orgasm washed over me. My entire body from the roots of my hair to my curling toes was one orgasmic roller coaster. My uterus clenched so violently I was afraid something would break.

I had studied the anatomy of an orgasm in my efforts to figure out what was wrong with me. There was no such thing as a vaginal versus clitoral orgasm. They were all one and the same. There was a whole mass of internal clitoral erectile tissue, “crura” that became aroused, and wrapped its sexy little arms around the vaginal canal.

So an orgasm didn't just involve the clitoral button. There were powerful unseen forces at work, and they were all in full swing now, sending wave after wave of sheer bliss rocketing through my pelvis. My chest flushed hot red, and I squirted again against poor Ford's mouth.

I found myself jerking my pelvis rhythmically against his face, like some kind of roaring twenties dancer. Now that he'd set me off, I absolutely could not stop. One contraction after the other, it seemed to go on for five minutes, breaking even my solo shower record. I held my breath and tossed my head back and prayed silently to the sky that this

hellish ecstasy either stop or end my life.

Eventually Ford slowed his lapping. He was probably wondering, too, when he was going to injure me.

“*Ahhhh*,” he groaned, giving my twitching clit one last long swipe with his tongue.

I still gasped and jumped as he kneeled tall between my thighs. He wiped his beautiful face off with his forearm and I almost laughed at the absurd sight.

I was still twitching and jerking like a beached fish. A flood of tingling shivers raced up and down my body, made me want to slap my own face and chest to get it to stop. It wasn't unpleasant but I wasn't used to it, and

my clit was so sensitive that when that sly bastard blew lightly on it, I nearly reacted by smacking *him*.

It was his turn to laugh. I'd never seen Ford so relaxed and fully masculine, as though *he* were the one who'd just had an orgasm to blow away all other orgasms. "Wow," he said, wiping his face again. "I've never seen a gal come that long."

I struggled to pull up my scrubs. "I've *never* come that long, Ford. I've actually..." I didn't know how to explain it to him without explaining the reasoning behind it. I decided to keep it to myself. If I confessed that a psychologist thought my frigidity—or

“anorgasmia” as they more clinically termed it these days—was a direct result of Cropper’s disgusting molestation of me, the whole story would spill out. Ford would go bury Cropper, the club would fall apart, and Ford would possibly wind up in jail.

Maybe I was giving myself too much credit for deeply affecting Ford. I’d seen him toss beefy bruisers around a boxing ring like they were made of foam rubber, and I’d seen him pull his Sig Sauer on a guy who cut him off in traffic. Cropper had been right about a few things. Ford was no angelic saint, and he *was* more dark-skinned than anyone knew.

“What?” said Ford slyly, fishing for a compliment.

I made a bowtie with my drawstring. “I’ve actually never had that huge of an orgasm. Damn. I always suspected you’d be one hugely talented guy in bed.”

This was enough to make Ford embrace me and plant an enormous smooch on me. At first it was kind of disgusting, seeing as how he’d just had his face buried between my legs. But he’d wiped his face off and I could only vaguely taste it. I figured these Bare Bones men had put their faces in far worse things before.

A strange thing happened. *Love* surged through me. It was as though the orgasm opened up the floodgates and it all came pouring out. Such a powerful,

frightening deluge of pure love that was so strong my chest literally wrenched with the vitality of it.

It terrified me.

If you never love anyone, you can never be hurt, right?

I didn't love Dr. Dubois in the same way I'd always loved Ford. My feelings for Jake were safer, more conventional, more shallow. Jake was certainly handsome, a good provider, popular in social circles. He was moody but knew to never cross any lines, to never get too intense.

That's what I wanted. Love makes you crazy. Love reaches its fist down your throat and wrenches your organs from you. Love consumes you, so you

have no room in your soul to think of anyone else.

I couldn't get involved with the Bare Bones, much less the Veep who controlled everything. It would upset my life. It would take everything and turn it upside-down and shake it until the nuts and bolts and all the embarrassing little broken things fell out.

“Ah,” Ford sighed with contentment against my mouth. “My Maddy. My little Cookie. I’m staking my claim. You’re mine. Mine and only mine. You’re my property, my sweet Cookie.”

I was blown away that he'd remember what he slipped up and called me that fateful day we kissed in the pool.

He'd called me sugar cookie and now he was doing it again, in a purposeful and cruel attempt to reel me in.

I was relieved when someone knocked on the door. Ford being here in the hospital to begin with was a gigantic shock, in and of itself. Him muff diving in a locked hospital room was enough to scar me for life.

I wanted nothing more than to make out with him forever, feel his velvety lips against mine, to take his enormous cock in my hand and satisfy him. But I was a registered nurse, accustomed to forcing myself to do unpleasant tasks. The unpleasant thing right now was to stop being self-indulgent and get back to reality.

“Oh!” I cried, sitting up straight.

Ford’s dopey smile never left his face, and I remembered he could only hear out of one ear. The pressure of the IED blast wave had probably ruptured his eardrum and slammed his brain against the inside of his skull.

I pointed at the door, my eyebrows raised. “Someone’s there.”

“Madison?” It was a muffled male voice.

What the fuck? How did anyone know it was *me*? I shot Ford a fearful look. “Yes?”

“This is Security. Just wanted to know if you were okay in there.”

Standing, I adjusted my uniform and

gestured at Ford to do the same. When he stood, his belt buckle I had undone dangled heavily between his legs, and I motioned for him to fix it.

Weren't they always going hard at it in the hospital on *Grey's Anatomy*? I'd screwed often enough before in supply rooms and on-call rooms. But never had anyone magically known it was *me* behind the door.

I clung to the locked door. "Yes. Why wouldn't I be?"

The guy paused, and I could feel his discomfort through the door. "I received a call that you might be in trouble in here. Just needed to check it out."

It was then that I remembered the security camera. Idiotically, I looked up

straight at it. Ford's gaze followed mine, but he was laughing. I couldn't take it so lightly, as it involved my job, so I glared at him.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” I shouted at the door. I finally opened it so the guy could see I was fine. He left, but Ford was practically busting with laughter.

“Oh, man! That's a good one,” he said mirthfully. “Pearl diving in the quiet room next to the chapel.”

I started sputtering with the giggles too, but knew I had to sober up. This was serious business. I could get written up for this. Other times, it had been staff members I'd been with. Now I had been caught on film sitting on a biker's face,

and what if Dr. Dubois heard about it?

I grabbed the edges of Ford's cut and tugged. "Listen. I've got to go. My lunch is over."

His look was incredibly gentle and mild. "I know. I can't claim you. You've got a good life going here, and I'm just a scumbag criminal. But let me see you again, tomorrow, before I go back to P&E."

I breathed in his scent of mountain air and exhaust fumes. "I can't, Ford. I live with someone, and I don't do cheating."

Ford tipped my chin up so I was forced to look at him. "I get it. You're an honest woman with integrity, unlike the chicks we hang with. But you know you

can always get a job in P&E or Prescott. Or have no job at all. You know if you're my property you never need to work again."

"But I *like* to work, Ford. Being responsible is what got me out of that shithole at Ingrid's."

He shrugged. "Then work. Doesn't hurt my whopping ego."

I had to know. "Your father. Does he still...come around the clubhouse much? You said he spends a lot of time with his citizen wife."

Ford frowned. I could tell he wondered why I had changed the subject to his father. "He's still the Prez, if that's what you want to know. Why?"

“So he still has a say in what the club does?”

“Of course. Why does it matter?”

I had to squeeze my eyes shut then. Looking at his gorgeous Italian face with his superlative eyes all limpid like that, I was a goner.

I knew our lives could never fit together. He was right. He *was* a scumbag criminal, and I was an upstanding member of society. We had an ill-fated, star-crossed love that would last our lifetimes, but Ford was a lifer in a different sort of enterprise. One that had been founded by his scumbag father.

“I can’t, Ford,” I whispered.

He drew back from me. I had to look

at him then. An entirely new personality had overtaken him. I'd seen this in him time and again—like when he'd almost shot the rude driver, or when Riker trimmed his moustache over Ford's toothbrush.

Except this time the transformation was more severe. Obviously seeing overseas combat had twisted him in undesirable ways. A hard cast swept over his face. His eyes flashed with anger, and his lush lips firmed with disgust. "Why not? Because I'm a criminal?"

What other excuse could I use? If I had to drive him away with loathing and hatred, then that's what I had to do. We were from two different worlds that

could never collide. “Yes, that’s it,” I whispered.

He stood tall and proud. It made me love him even more. “So I’m not good enough for you? Then fuck you, Maddy.”

He was the one to stride out with dignity. I watched him go down the hall, his boots sounding hollowly on the linoleum, his spine erect.

His self-respect made me feel even smaller. How I wanted to race after him, grab his cut, and force him to face me! I knew even as it happened that it was probably the biggest mistake of my life, but that’s an indication of how much I abhorred Cropper.

That night I told Jake I couldn’t fuck

because I had my period. He probably kept track of it, but was nice enough to pretend to believe me.



CHAPTER NINE

FORD

“Once I thought that to be human was the highest aim a man could have, but now I see that it was meant to destroy me. Today I am proud to say that I am inhuman, that I belong not to men and governments, that I have nothing to do with creeds and principles. I have nothing to do with the creaking machinery of humanity—I belong to the earth!” ~ Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*

On his way to church, Ford had to pause on the stairwell landing to finish buckling his belt.

His cock was raw from fucking, and he wondered if that sweetbutt had the

clap. Riker hadn't mentioned anything about it when he'd used her, but then, Riker wouldn't. Everyone was using that cunt because they knew the Prospect was hot for her. It was Speed's rite of passage. He had to know how to take it before he could dish it out himself.

Cropper passed him, jogging down the stairs. He slapped Ford chummily on the back, nearly sending him onto his face. "Getting a little of that Irish box, eh? Good for you."

"Irish?"

Cropper turned around, amused. "Yeah, didn't you know? That cunt used to service the Hellions out of Phoenix."

"No shit? All the more reason to bang the stuffing out of her. Why'd she

leave the Hellions?”

“I think she was kicked out for being too slutty. Police found her on some street with a beer bottle up her ass.”

“Too slutty? Wow.”

Wondering how it was possible to be too slutty, Ford followed his father into the airplane hangar itself where they stored equipment that wasn't being used on a job. They walked past a few gleaming loaders with the Illuminati logo on the doors.

“What we voting on today?” asked Ford.

Cropper had a look of glee that didn't bode well. “We're finally going to decide whether to sub out for

government contracts.”

They had been arguing back and forth over whether to apply for the certification to bid on government contracts. The added scrutiny in working for the Department of Transportation probably wasn't worth it, Ford thought they'd decided. “That's it? That's not why you're all jacked.”

“I think we're going to vote on how to hit those Cutlasses who've been running through our backyard. Riker saw them running through Merry-go-Round Canyon last week.”

So what? They were always hitting Cutlasses. That feud had been going on for decades. “And...?”

“Oh, and?” Cropper's wide grin was

so legendary it was about to split his face in two. “We’re finally gonna decide on the Prospect’s trial by fire.”

S o *that* was it. Speed was finally ready to go full patch and get his top rocker. For weeks now, they’d been arguing over what they should force him to do to test his dedication. Cropper was being especially hard on Speed. It made Ford wonder if Madison had anything to do with it. Maybe Cropper knew Madison had broken Ford’s heart, not once but twice now.

Ford, too, had been harder than usual on Speed, even though he was his sponsor. Ford *knew* it had something to do with Madison. He couldn’t even

fucking *look* at Speed and his dorky cauliflower explosion of hair without thinking of Madison. Madison's plump, juicy tits. Madison's sweet, delicious pussy. Madison's callous, cold-hearted spirit.

Ford had bared his fucking soul to that cunt at the hospital in Flagstaff. She knew he had a vicious crush on her. Speed wasn't known for playing things close to the vest, one of his downfalls as a prospect. She must have known Ford had come this close to putting down Speed just for refusing to tell him where she was when she'd first vanished.

He hadn't exactly been at the top of his game that day. As a nurse, Madison should have at least respected that. He'd

just lost his fucking mother. He'd just found and lost a brother in one day—in the same fucking *minute*. It didn't matter that he hadn't loved Corinne. He'd lost her that day too. Madison had allowed him to do a French job on her in the fucking quiet room, pumping his hopes high, knowing the whole time she was going to cut him off like a bartender.

He'd dosed Speed with Jack and a couple of Biker Coffees laced with meth, then buttered him up with some sweetbutts, some Bone Lickers. This way he'd learned that Madison was living with that fucking Belgian cardiologist.

Ford didn't want to think anything

bad about his precious Maddy, but he really had no choice. No matter which way he looked at their encounter that horrible fucking day in the hospital, she came out looking like a selfish bitch. He had begged her to allow him to give her head, and how did she repay him? By dumping him like a turd in a gift-wrapped box.

He was done with her. Madison Shellmound was in the rearview. From now on it was Bone Lickers for him all the way. He didn't even want an old lady, not even a pretentious one like Corinne. His image could go right into the toilet as far as he was concerned. He was a worker, a fighter, and above all, a brother.

Speed knew that something had gone down in Flagstaff at the hospital. He must've known the entire time that Madison worked at the same facility where Ford's Apache mother was dying. Speed must be shaking in his boots at the retribution Ford was plotting for him.

Cropper hadn't said a word about the time Ford had spent in Flagstaff. Ford hadn't confronted his father about Rebekah Quail, either. It wasn't the sort of thing they discussed, except maybe after a case of Buds, a fifth of Jack, and several rounds of pool. Even then, they never really "talked," per se. Someone usually bashed someone on the head with a pool cue. That was the Illuminati

way of “talking.”

Ford just filed the incident away in the back recesses of his brain. His rage over the whole mother thing would just add fuel to the next fight he picked with Cropper. Ford fought much more savagely when royally pissed off.

In the chapel, brothers were already discussing the upcoming fish fry they were holding here at the Citadel in a couple of weeks. As usual, Tuzigoot would handle the deep frying itself. Ziggy Fulton was going to make side dishes, but there was a heated argument over whether they should go macaroni or potato. Riker thought potato salad was gross, and Duji thought macaroni was too starchy. The vote was unanimous on

everyone loathing okra.

The vote was split on applying for DOT certification.

“If we were a woman-owned business,” said Ford, “we’d go to the top of the heap on those contracts. Cropper, have you brought it up again to Tonya?”

Ford could tell by Cropper’s downcast face that he had brought it up to his old lady. “Yeah. It’s a no fly zone. She doesn’t want her name on any Illuminati business. Now what about applying as a service-disabled veteran-owned small business?”

Ford cringed at that. He was a veteran, and he supposed he was

disabled by the brain injury and partial deafness, but it just rubbed him the wrong way. “No. I’ve seen guys injured way worse than me and I don’t want to play the system like that.”

“You’re far too noble,” Cropper said.

“Yeah,” said Riker. Riker had been made Sergeant-at-Arms a few years back, much to the anger of Turk, who had expected the appointment. Turk had been working long and hard for that rank. Ford agreed with Turk, but there was nothing he could do. Cropper had chosen his own close brother since the short pants days. Riker was unreliable through and through, but he did have the balls to be Sergeant-at-Arms. Turk was

stuck as Secretary, taking the fucking meeting minutes. “The system played *you*, brother. Payback’s a bitch.”

Even Ford’s best friend agreed. “I second that,” said Turk. “Get all the benefits you can from the hell you went through. It’s just another veteran’s benefit, like medical or home loans.”

Ford dismissed the idea out of hand. “I don’t need it. Leave it for the guys who are really hurting. What’s next on the agenda? I don’t think we have time to hit those Cutlasses who were riding through—”

“But what if *we* need it, brother?” Riker’s flinty voice cut through like a diamond. He was tenacious, Ford had to

hand that to him. He had also been a Marine. “These DOT contracts are fucking lucrative. You can lump sum it out and pad it with all sorts of shit. They don’t care. No one looks.”

“Yeah,” several brothers echoed.

Unusually, Turk backed up Riker. “You were on the task force that personally hunted down al-Zarqawi. You were all over al-Qaeda!”

Ford was firm, too. He and Riker often locked horns in the running of their business. As Sergeant-at-Arms, Riker wasn’t even supposed to have any say in business. He was security, period. His ideas were boneheaded. He almost always chose the option where people got to kick the most ass, no matter the

potentially disastrous outcome. “Forget it, *brother*. If you want to get certified as a woman-owned business then finish your sex change, but leave me out of it.”

Riker’s pupils were like smoking bullets as he narrowed his eyes at Ford, but Cropper said calmly, “He’s got his scruples. We can’t argue with that. Next.”

They discussed the Cutlasses for a while, but everyone was bored with that topic. Ford could tell they couldn’t wait to discuss Speed’s patching in ordeal.

“We can make him wrestle with Ford,” Turk said. “Except they can use objects, like fluorescent light bulbs and weed whackers.”

“Too dangerous. For me,” Ford added. He didn’t give two shits about Madison’s brother anymore. “If the bulbs break, I could inhale the mercury vapor. I say we make him sneak into the Cutlass’ clubhouse and steal a pair of Doug Zelov’s skivvies. Off his sleeping body.”

Cropper guffawed. “That’s cruel and unusual punishment, even for Speed. I say we turn his favorite Bone Licker into our personal barmaid.”

Everyone liked that idea, but Gollywow pointed out that it didn’t involve any great sacrifice or act of valor on Speed’s part. They would do it anyway, but not as the main event.

Faux Pas said, “We could tie him up, blindfold him, and force feed him vodka, chocolate powder, and strawberry syrup.” Everyone made gagging sounds, and Faux Pas added, “That’s how they hazed me when I was a college freshman.”

“We can make him play Russian roulette,” suggested Riker.

Everyone stared blankly at him.

Finally Ford said, “Uh, doofus? Then he’d be dead?”

Riker shrugged, like “So?”

Several other ideas were floated, like perform fellatio on a baboon, give him the extreme piercing known as “The Chainus,” and tattoo him with Chinese

symbols that mean “douchebag.” On his forehead. They were about to settle on Ford’s idea when Turk came up with an even better one, and they spent another hour honing the details of the plan.

Even better, they would give Speed his initial instructions during the fish fry rally. Hundreds of people, hopefully including Madison Shellmound, would see Speed blaze off into the desert on his mission into the vortex.

Everyone was in a good mood when Cropper finally banged the gavel and adjourned the meeting. Ford found himself walking next to Turk, who had to get back to his marijuana dispensary in P&E.

“That vortex thing is going to slay

him,” chuckled Turk. “Speed’s a true believer.”

A lot of “woo woo” people thought that P&E was surrounded with energy vortexes, spirals of pure spiritual healing. Seekers conglomerated at these vortexes to chant, pray, and meditate. It was a healing energy, it was said.

Ford was actually on the fence about it. In one way, it was a fascinating concept. In another way, it was embarrassing bullshit. There had been a giant “Harmonic Convergence” here in 1987 with Shirley MacLaine that had just annoyed the crap out of the Bare Bones, among others. The earth was going to slip of its axis unless Shirley

and thousands of other pilgrims got together and chanted. It must have worked, because the earth hadn't hurtled into space.

The location of the Citadel on Mescal Mountain was alleged to be a vortex location, and once in a while some goof on peyote would be discovered meditating behind the mechanic's shed. It was eerie. Sometimes you'd be eating dinner in the dining room and a cloud of patchouli incense would drift in the window. The Bare Bones didn't own the air, but sometimes Ford was already in a foul enough mood that he'd stomp down there and bang some cosmic heads together.

But Speed was a true believer. He

was terrified of the vortexes, and took routes to avoid them, even if it meant more mileage on his run. “He’s going to be shitting his pants when we send him out there,” Ford agreed. He knew it was evil to take his romantic frustrations out on Madison’s brother. It was a cold, cruel world. Being Veep of a biker club meant he had to become even colder and crueller than the next guy.

Outside in the sun now, Turk touched Ford’s arm. They stopped walking. A transport trailer hauling a couple of mini excavators rolled into the hangar. “I wanted to ask you something. Hope I’m not out of line. When you were in Flag, did you see Madison?”

Fury nearly obliterated Ford's vision. Anytime anyone brought up Madison—which wasn't often if they wanted to keep their skin—Ford literally saw red. Now he had to remind himself this was his best friend. He and Turk had held up their first ice cream truck together. So he steeled himself and admitted, "Yeah. Why?"

"Just wondering. You've been kind of...surlier than normal since you got back. Course, that could be because of your moms and all. But that wouldn't explain why you've been so rough with Speed when you're his sponsor."

Turk was sharp, Ford had to give him credit for that. And it was best not to

lie to a brother. Ford exhaled deeply, deflated. “No, you’re right. We had a... an encounter.”

“I take it congratulations aren’t in order.” Turk knew a lot about Ford’s history with Madison. A man had to blow off steam sometimes, and Ford had needed many outings over the years with Turk, many brothel crawls, some trips to Vegas, just to blot Madison from his mind.

“No. She let me give her a skull job in some fucking quiet room, then she booted my ass back to P&E.”

Even Turk looked surprised. He was a romantic asshole who had always wanted the best for Ford. And Turk thought Madison was the best. He

worshipped her almost as much as Ford did. “That’s harsh. What were her reasons? Is she really against the club?”

Ford felt a screen close over his eyes as all emotion drained from him. He was like one of those double-lidded lizards who could shut off all feelings at will, and the person he’d be talking to would *know*. His face turned *that* bitter and mean. The psychologist said it was due to his combat experience, his traumatic brain injury. Ford knew he’d been that way forever. Life hadn’t been kind to him. “No. As it turns out, she’s only against *me*.”

Turk tried his luck, and pushed it. “Then why’d she let you go for a

moustache ride? That's rough."

"I think she wanted to rub it in even more. I think she wanted to kick me when I was down, trip me up, and shove my face into broken glass."

"Broken glass being her pussy." Turk was being a good friend, and hating the people his brother hated.

"Exactly. Hey, Speed!"

The prospect was strolling by with a socket wrench in his hand. He was a pretty damned good mechanic. Speed paused respectfully, not daring to utter a word yet.

Ford continued, confronting Speed with a swagger. "You going to invite that sister of yours to our rally?"

A direct question demanded an

answer. “I...wasn’t planning on it, no.” Speed looked properly mystified.

Turk was even looking sideways at Ford. *Good. Let them wonder what the fuck I’m up to.* “Why don’t you? I’m sure she’d like to see some of the old club again.”

Ford was gratified that Speed was so taken aback. His knees literally sagged, and he had to take a step back. “Wow! I mean, sure! I’ll call her right now. I’ll tell her that you specifically invited her.”

Ford held out his hands. “No, no, wait, don’t do that. Make it a surprise. Tell her that *you’re* the one inviting her.”

This seemed to please the nozzlehead even more. He whipped his phone from his pocket and was already speed dialing his sister. “Thanks, Torino! I’m sure she’ll be here with bells on!”

The two friends continued walking to Turk’s bike. A couple of sweetbutts were washing Riker’s ride. It was always immaculate, but he liked to make them eternally wash it on principal.

The marijuana salesman narrowed his eyes at Ford. “Now, are you gonna clue me in exactly what devil’s work you’re up to?”

Ford smiled slyly. “You gonna invite that Dayton Navarro?”

Dayton Navarro was a brother from their Flagstaff chapter. It hadn't dawned on Ford until the past year or so, but suddenly there were clues everywhere. Turk Blackburn was probably at least bisexual, if not flamingly gay. Turk became highly giggly whenever around Dayton, it had slowly dawned on Ford. Being a piccolo player wasn't the most popular image among biker brothers, to say the least. If Turk planned on becoming an uphill gardener, he'd best hoe his row extremely carefully.

Turk's face darkened. Apparently he wasn't ready to spill his innermost secrets to Ford. Ford had found a good conversation killer whenever Turk

insisted on discussing something Ford didn't want to. "You're a crude, lowdown bastard, Ford Illuminati."

Ford grinned cruelly. "Ain't I, though?"

Turk jammed his brain bucket onto his skull while Ford turned on his heel and walked back to the hangar, practically whistling a happy tune.



CHAPTER TEN

MADISON

“So he shows up at the Bum Steer rocking this glow-in-the-dark cut that makes him look like a fucking Iron Man villain.”

It was wonderful to be back around the Bare Bones brothers. Cropper had cast a few glances at me but hadn't tried to talk to me. I wasn't nearly as traumatized by seeing Cropper and his ugly Cro-Magnon mug again as I had imagined I'd be. He was standing outside the hangar with a crowd of men flying colors proclaiming them to be

Baal's Minions.

His steely glance just flickered over me, doing a classic double take when he first caught sight of me. Then he forced himself to laugh at something his brothers said. He was much greyer now. I guess there were so many people around—about two thousand, someone said—that I could pretty much ignore Cropper. Maybe he was too old to bother girls anymore.

His lack of effect on me made me wonder. *Maybe I can visit Speed here sometimes. Maybe I can even stand seeing Ford...with other women...*

Apparently this “rally” involved brother clubs from all over the southwest. A live band was playing

Lynryd Skynyrd covers, and a sea of choppers was parked on a nearby butte on an old runway, shining so painfully in the sun you needed shades to look. Old ladies with rainbow-colored hair wore see-through shirts and black hobnailed boots, and there were enough rhinestones to be seen from outer space.

They had lined up all the Illuminati equipment parade style to showcase a corral area where grown men rode old rice rockets and clunkers in a sort of demolition derby.

Pass-arounds and club whores wore black leather chaps and little else. It was threatening to my womanhood, actually, to be nearing thirty and unable to hold a

candle to these pumped-up, plastic, Botoxed girls. I knew this was the sort of raunchy chick Ford and his brothers liked. I just had never been hit over the head by so many of them at once. One gal standing in my group had a painted-on fishnet bra. Another draped over Turk's arm had a Wonder Woman bikini that was barely hanging on by her nipples.

I was dressed as conservatively as I dared without risking looking dowdy. As much as Ford terrified me, I could never risk being seen looking drab or plain around him. Around these free-living women, I was way overdressed in my simple khaki sleeveless shift dress and strappy but sensible high-heeled sandals.

I had endlessly debated how to dress. I was still in love with Ford. I had never stopped being in love with Ford. Of course I wanted to impress him, attract him, make him long for me.

But I'd blown it more than once. A man could only tolerate rejection so many times before he turned hard and heartless to a woman's machinations. So many times? Men like Ford could tolerate it *never*. Now I'd turned my back on him twice.

I still had that womanly need to be attractive, so under my simple dress that buttoned up the front I wore a barely-there pushup bra and a pair of boy shorts I knew showed off the curve of my butt.

It was twisted and perverse of me, I know. But nobody could see it. Maybe, just maybe I had a fantasy of finding Ford and bending over to take a can of Bud from a bucket of ice, or whatever. He'd get a good eyeful of my tasty muff that he'd seemed to love so much at the hospital.

And then he'd take me like a rampaging, virile bull.

Right. I know. Stupid. And selfish and immature as all hell, because Ford wasn't for me. He needed to get a new old lady—one of these loud, brassy women who could shove ten hot dogs at once in their mouths or support a stars and stripes bikini top with their implants. There were nipple tassels

made of chain mail, suede fringes, and simple flower pasties. True, there was a plethora of sagging boobs, too, on the old ladies who'd been around the block. I probably rated somewhere in the middle, my only ink a tramp stamp of bones on my butt crack that no one could see.

I kept telling myself I didn't care. I was here to have fun, to show support for Bobby—Speed. Ford Illuminati was simply the hottest thing on two legs and my pussy had never stopped craving him. I had to remember. He wasn't for me. He would always be the “one who got away.” Life just wasn't that good to me. I didn't deserve Ford.

You know what? I admitted to my deepest darkest most password-protected diary—and you—that the incident in the quiet room had been the most erotic, sensual, and passionate memory of my life.

How could it not be? Ford Illuminati was the most smoking piece of man meat to walk the face of the earth, and his face had been between my legs.

Making me come.

For the first time in my life, with another human being.

It hadn't happened since.

I was more the type for Dr. Jacob Dubois. He had nearly thrown me out on my ass after he'd found out through the

hospital grapevine about my quiet room escapade. I'd only admit it was one of my mother's friends from the old days and we were carried away reminiscing. Jake wouldn't talk to me for a week and then things returned to normal. Just that alone raised my suspicions. Did that mean he was cheating himself? He was from Belgium. All European men cheated.

Turk now said, "I can't stand it when they show up in public looking like they're wearing their old lady's bedazzled vest. Rags should be simple, streamlined, not cluttered up with a bunch of fucking patches or beads."

All the men around us agreed heatedly.

“I’m old school,” said Duji, a New York Italian who had aged well, like Al Pacino. “I don’t want to see no fluorescent cuts. You go black or jeans material all the way. And this thing about pink and baby blue undershirts? Leave that for the Bee Gees, brother!”

Luckily, Russ Gollywow was there to sing in falsetto. “Well you can tell by the way that I use my walk...” He’d been known to rock a powder blue sequined suit or two in his time, and to my surprise Speed jumped right in there with him, snapping his fingers and high-stepping like a disco king.

“I’m a woman’s man...”

Speed didn’t have the pipes of

Gollywow, but he'd always been a superb dancer. Sometimes when Ford was out on a run, Speed and I used to drink schnapps or Bud and put on some old seventies tunes. Ingrid had a turntable, actually, so we grew up knowing a lot of the same groups Gollywow impersonated now.

I even started swaying and snapping my fingers a little bit, I admit. The sweetbutts didn't know what the fuck we were singing, but even Turk must've been listening to oldies radio. He stepped right in sync with me singing the backup portion of the song.

It was kind of funny, these muscular, inked, shirtless guys wearing only cuts and leathers singing an old Bee Gees

tune. Especially with the lead singer onstage wailing about how he was born to be bad.

Then I saw him.

He didn't look surprised to see me as he strolled by with his arm slung over some whore or other—I don't know, I didn't look at the girl.

His eyes were dark, cynical, despairing. I knew that underlying flash of deeply ingrained sorrow. He had looked like that the day at the high school when he'd told me that Cropper had a perversion. *He likes to look...he wants a taste of you.* More and more it was starting to seem like I should have laid the blame for everything squarely at

Cropper's feet. *If we can make it until you leave for school, then we're home clear.*

I sort of stumbled in my dance, and when I ran into Turk he steadied me by holding both my upper arms. Turk smiled down at me protectively. Of course by then, all I wanted to know was whether Ford had seen Turk touch me.

Yes, Ford was looking at us over his shoulder. But when he saw me looking at him, his eyes snapped back to the front and he continued on with the slut.

I was crushed. But what was I expecting? After I'd given him the heave-ho at the hospital on what was probably the worst day of his life, what the fuck did I expect? Flowers and

chocolates?

“Ugh, too much watery beer,” I told Turk. “Did you notice where the port-a-potties are?”

I knew for such a large crowd they wouldn't be letting people indoors. In fact, I saw a couple of burly nomads with folded arms guarding the stairs that led to the top floor of the hangar, probably offices. I stumbled on blindly, thinking how I had probably blown it.

Fear—and immaturity—had prevented me from seeing that Ford actually *did* want me back when I was seventeen. He had a serious, legitimate gripe about Cropper's perversion and he didn't want to add fuel to the fire.

I wound up inside the hangar walking past lots of big trucks. A flash of something flitting about moved in my peripheral vision.

I hesitated. A dog? A coyote?

I plowed ahead. And who should step out from behind a big truck but Cropper.

It was too good to be true, thinking he was out of my hair.

I tried to plow on by him, but he grabbed my upper arms just as Turk had a few minutes ago. Only this wasn't nearly as protective. Unaccustomed to wearing three inch heels, I wobbled, nearly falling. Mortifyingly, I had to grab onto *his* forearms for support.

Fuck all.

“Cropper.” I tried to be polite, as though we’d just bumped into each other at a cocktail party while holding martini glasses. “Nice to see you again.” I yanked my hands off his odious flesh and stepped back.

He didn’t remove his hands. He steered me toward the dispatcher’s office, pressing me against the corrugated metal.

“Good to see *you*, Maddy. You’re looking mighty tempting with your titties as big as ever.”

I tried to squirm away. “I’m not a teenager anymore, Cropper. Don’t you have younger girls to molest?”

“Not when I’ve got *you*. Didn’t anyone tell you? At a rally you shouldn’t be going to the john alone.”

“Then I should’ve taken someone with me? A guard?”

“Another old lady.”

“I’m not an old lady, Cropper.”

“No. You’re an extremely hot and juicy young lady. You’ve ripened into the sort of lady I love to get up on.”

“Sorry. I’m spoken for. And I’m not a hang-around either, Cropper. I’m just Speed’s sister. I want to be able to come around here without being afraid for my...” I couldn’t think of what I was afraid of.

Cropper noticed this hesitation, and

he laughed in my face. “Of your virginity? That’s long gone by now. And I believe Ford’s moved on from his childish crush on you.”

That remark hurt me more than any of his predatory comments. I was old and callous enough to handle his gross, drunken leches. I broke free from his grip, elbowing his arm aside to stalk vigorously to where the toilet trailer was parked inside the hangar.

Eyew. I guess some things never change. Why don’t men just go for women who actually want them?

I felt so dirty. Three or four old ladies were in the trailer washing up and gossiping, fixing their Cleopatra eyeliner, but of course I didn’t know

them. Hurriedly I washed my hands and clanged down the metal steps, heading for the wide-open back hangar doors. Brothers were climbing on and admiring the construction equipment parked inside, so I pointed my compass in the direction of the music stage.

I wasn't going to let Cropper ruin my time. I'd take some sweetbutts with me next time I went to the can. *Thanks, Cropper, for the good advice.*

I was just about to round the corner of the sliding hangar doors, though, when a hand grabbed my bicep and yanked me back inside. The whole ceiling flew by my vision as I was jerked around the corner and slammed against the metal

wall.

Cropper again? No, three different leering guys. I blinked, and saw they were Baal's Minions, whoever they were. The lead guy who had grabbed me had sort of a Gregg Allman look. He had the sunburned look of the white boy who had been riding awhile wearing shades, like a negative raccoon.

"Who you claimed by?" he asked. This one was breathing Jack Daniels on me.

"Claimed?" At first it didn't make any sense to me. Just as I got it, Gregg clarified,

"Property of. Who you property of?"

"Well, no one. Why do I need to be property of if I'm just attending a rally?"

Gregg smoothed my face with the back of his hand and tipped my chin. He looked at me every which way, as though buying a slave at a market. “A little old, but trainable. What do you think, Slit?”

Oh great. Not Slash or Grunt, but Slit. I was going to have to fight my way out of this one.

“Trainable,” echoed Slit.

Incredibly, Gregg’s fingers were all over his belt buckle now.

What the fuck? What planet were these guys from? Any woman not wearing a “Property Of” patch was an automatic target, as though she had implied her consent by not being spoken

for?

“You’re kidding me, right?” I tried to keep my tone light, but just as I started to make a dash for the open hangar door, I noticed the glint of metal in Slit’s hand. *A knife.*

Slit said smoothly, “I think it’d be in your best interest to let Mack train you.”

“Be a good little girl,” goofed the third guy, who I hadn’t even looked at yet.

Breathing deeply, I prepared myself for a good long wait. I could think about other things. I could think about my job, of coronary artery bypass grafting, about laser revascularization, of making channels through the heart muscles and chambers. *Yes.* This would work, and

then it'd be over, and then I never had to come to the Citadel again.

“Ooh, yeah, chickie,” gushed Mack, grabbing one of my boobs full-on. “I think you’ll be trainable into a—”

He never got the chance to finish, though, because suddenly he was flying through the air.

At first, in the dim light of the echoing hangar, I thought it was Cropper who beat on Mack.

The assailant was pummeling away on the fallen warrior, just mercilessly pounding his face, gut, chest with strikes that were blurry, they were so fast.

Slit took off like a shot, and I started inching toward the door, hoping no one

saw me.

“*Motherfucker*,” seethed the assailant. It seemed like I could see droplets of sweat flying off his forehead as he pounded, but I realized it was droplets of blood I saw glinting in the thread-like rays of sunshine that came through cracks in the walls.

“Dude! Dude!” Mack kept crying. His only protest was to stomp his feet and slap his hands against the cement floor, and his face was increasingly beginning to look like a piece of raspberry pie.

“Ford!”

With my instinctual nurse’s training, I leaped on top of Ford and pulled with all my might. I couldn’t stop the

pounding machine he'd become. He just kept punching the guy, snarling "motherfucker."

"Ford! It's me, Madison! Stop it right this instant! Do you fucking want to kill the guy? Do you want his blood on your hands?"

This was laughable, because the guy's blood was *already* on Ford's hands.

But it seemed to work. Ford wrenched himself to his feet and stood with bloody hand at his side, snarling down on the fallen Allman Brother. When he whipped his head around to look at me, the snarl fell from his mouth, and his fist unclenched.

“You’re coming with me,” he said mildly, as though it were only a suggestion.

Taking me by the hand, it was Ford’s turn now to jerk me through the hangar.

“That guy!” I protested. “I’m a nurse, Ford. I can’t just let him lie there in a pool of his own blood.”

He glanced from side to side as though expecting an ambush. His beautiful brown eyes flashed with emotion. His nostrils flared with the exertion of having pummeled Gregg into a pulp. “No worries. There are always tons of brothers around to help the fallen.” He stopped by the dispatcher’s door, his hand on the knob. “In here,

woman.”

I would have gladly gone—in fact, had no choice, with Ford yanking me toward the office—but the sight we both saw when Ford shoved the door inward had us pausing, stunned.

Turk Blackburn was pressed up against the wall, furiously making out with another man. They ground their hips together lustfully, no holds barred.

I was so shocked I’m sure I just stood there gaping, and Ford’s hand in mine froze absolutely solid.

I don’t know how severely Ford was shocked because I sure as hell didn’t look at his face.

I was too busy looking at this abso-fucking-lutely *stunning* man in the throes

of lust, the back of his cut blurring the dry-erase list on the board behind him.

Biceps clashed with biceps, erections ground together, muscular jaws working, mouths clashing.

I was simply stunned speechless. It was Ford who slammed the door shut on the two groping men, so as far as I know, they didn't even notice us.

"This way," he said simply. "Let's go somewhere more private."

He was hauling me back toward the toilet trailer, clattering up the front steps.

"I don't call this more private," I said, but Ford had already yanked the women's door open.

He bellowed into the fluorescent

interior, “All right, ladies! Clear out! Need this room. Shake it, shake it!”

Their chattering stopped abruptly, as though someone had hit the pause button on a party sound effects CD. Hushed, they hustled themselves out the door with their combs and lipsticks. Ford slammed and locked the only door of the windowless trailer. It was actually a smart idea.

Turning to me, he rushed me.

Every inch of my skin tingled with anticipation of what Ford might do. Was he going to make love to me, or hit me?

The answer turned out to be neither.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

FORD

“The worst is not death but being blind, blind to the fact that everything about life is in the nature of being miraculous. The language of society is conformity; the language of the creative individual is freedom. Life will continue to be a hell as long as people shut their eyes to reality.” ~ Henry Miller, *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird*

Ford crushed Maddy in his arms as though he wanted to break her bones.

She felt like a little bird in his big, punishing arms. He hadn't even bothered to wash that guy's blood and teeth off his

hand before lifting her ass onto the rickety sink and grabbing a fistful of her hair.

He was still breathing heavily from the beatdown he'd administered to that jackoff in the hangar. It always riled all of his senses to the utmost to take his anger out physically on someone. He got a strange high, probably of adrenaline and testosterone, that was almost better than anything.

And he probably panted a little from the shock of seeing his best friend making out with another man.

But all that stuff was peripheral right now.

Right now, Ford pressed his forehead against Maddy's while tearing

off his cut. Normally he liked to fuck with it on. It gave a sense of authority and edge to his fucking. Today, he wanted to feel her skin against his as he ruthlessly assaulted her.

Throwing the cut into another sink, he said, “Maddy. You’re mine. I fucking mean it. You belong to me. No more of this fucking around, this back and forth.”

Her eyes were big and pleading, like those paintings of the large-eyed kids that were supposed to be haunting but were just plain creepy. “I know,” she cried, flinging her arms around his neck.

The day was just full of surprises.

Already she had one high heel lodged in his back jean pocket and she

was peppering his face with tiny sucking kisses.

She knows? When did she make this one eighty?

Maybe she didn't really know. Ford stripped off his black T-shirt while telling her, "It means you can't fuck anyone else, Maddy. It means your fucking heart belongs to me and no one else."

As much as he loved showing off his carved torso—he saw her finally admiring the pictograph of the Apache hunter he'd had inked under his nipple after he'd said goodbye to his mother—he had to grab Maddy forcibly by the jaw to get her to see reason.

He wasn't going to play this back

and forth game anymore. Either she agreed with him, or she didn't. If she didn't, he'd just have to force himself on her, because he was going to finally, seriously mount her anyway.

"I mean it, Maddy. Do you understand what this fucking means? It means you're my property, part of my tribe." He'd been calling his club a "tribe" lately, too.

"Yes," she cried breathlessly. "I want to be yours, Ford. I can't tell you why I left Cottonwood twelve years ago, I really can't. You have to trust me it was nothing you did wrong. I love the man, and I can learn to love the club."

She loved him. That was good

enough for Ford, and he slid his tongue down her throat while tearing her dress asunder at the collar. He was consumed by a wild combination of lust and anger—anger at her for having left twelve years ago and having told him no two months ago. His pride wouldn't let him forget that, so he mauled her with urgency and more than a little bad temper.

He just wanted to ram it inside her and shoot his load. He lapped away at the bottom of her tongue, at last able to slide his hands inside the big cups of that teasing push-up bra. The way she mewled when he tweaked her bullet-like nipples riled him even higher. Her little hands scrabbled at his Bare Bones

buckle. She gave up and just wrapped her arms around his naked back, pressing him to her. The barbell that pierced his nipple twisted, sending erotic arrows straight into his groin, and he practically tore his sturdy leather belt ripping it open.

They came up for air, panting against each other's mouths as Ford unsheathed his throbbing dick. His low-slung jeans immediately dropped to his boots. He'd been waiting for this pussy for so long and had tasted it in so many daydreams and nightmares, it was incredible that he was finally mashing her big, fat tittie in his hand, was scouring his bulging cockhead against her slick pussy lips. It

was never an option to don a rubber, although of course he had one in his back pocket.

“I mean it, Maddy. This cunt is mine. These lips are mine. These tits are mine. No one else’s.” To punctuate his point, Ford pulled back slightly and slapped her tit. Her eyes popped open with surprise, but she didn’t protest, and he slapped her tittie again. She gave little jumps, little arches of her back like a cat on an electric fence, every time he slapped her, so he kept doing it.

She shook her head tauntingly, probably knowing her hair would bounce around her shoulders, accentuating her uplifted boobs. “All yours, Ford. No kidding. I want your big

dick inside of me.”

“And this pussy? All mine.” Ford drew back even farther so his erection stood out at a right angle to his body, knowing how impressive it was. He slapped her cunt and it made a satisfying, wet sound. “This pussy belongs to me.”

Again, she jumped and twitched every time he slapped her trim. She was arched erotically, her titties jutting out as though posing for an X-rated sign. His slapping seemed to be arousing her, so he kept it up, a pattering of wet smacks, each one making her jump and climb the wall a bit higher. Her eyes became bigger, moister, more pleading with each

slap, until she gasped.

“Please, Ford! Just do me! You know what I want. I’ve been waiting longer than you have.”

Ford locked eyes with her as he impaled her on his hungry cock.

He sank far into her with a low, beastly groan while the vocalist onstage wailed about iron hooves and steel horns. Already, bitches were pounding on the flimsy bathroom door, and Ford had to holler like an unholy guardian of Hell.

“Keep your fucking pants on, bitches!”

They heard his voice, and shut the fuck up.

When he turned back to Madison her

eyeballs had rolled up into her head. She seemed to be praying as her tight pussy clenched his cock. One of her arms was flung above her head, gripping the sink faucet. The faucet wobbled so loosely he thought she might tear it out.

A sudden fury overcame him when he saw his blood-caked hand slapping her undulating boob. He started fucking her so furiously that with each stroke her head banged against the wall. He wanted to pound his frustrations away inside of her. Each precision swivel of his hips, each stab of his pulsating dick inside the clenching maw of her cunt, each angry thrust brought him closer to some sort of absolution.

He needed to forgive her. He couldn't love freely while holding a grudge for past wrongs.

He stopped slapping her and she started moaning. She made long, drawn-out caterwauls like a midnight tomcat on the prowl. She unfurled her spine and wrenched the faucet, and the more the cold water spilled over the jiggling mounds of her tits and down the valley in between, the harder Ford fucked her. The coldness swirled around the root of his dick and cooled his balls, and he fucked her so desperately his stabs sent water splashing onto his face.

“Fuck me, Ford,” she gritted out between clenched teeth. “I want to feel

your big cock exploding deep inside me. I want to feel you as close to me as possible. I want to feel your long, thick penis ejaculate up against my womb.”

That really got to him, her saying “penis” and “womb.” It sounded dirtier, in a way, than any cocks or pricks. He just didn’t hear talk like that around the Citadel.

It made him pause, panting down on her. She looked so vulnerable lying there with one arm twined around the running faucet. The stream of water chilled his sac, which had retracted close to his body in preparation for a monumental orgasm.

Ford was into orgasm denial, usually for the woman. His prick twitched with

a thousand electric shocks as he held it still inside Madison's searing heat. Usually the longer he held it, the more exquisite the orgasm. But if he held it too long, that perfect moment would pass.

He heard himself say roughly, "'At the bottom of every frozen heart there is a drop or two of love—just enough to feed the birds.'"

Recognition washed over her face. Maybe she'd read the words of his favorite writer way back when, and actually remembered them. He supposed he was trying to express his love for her without actually *saying* it.

She had no such compunctions. Smiling, she ran her palm over his

steamy chest. "I love you, Ford."

He went off instantly, just as she'd requested. Surge after surge wrenched his balls as he spurted deep against her womb. He didn't know it was possible but each spasm seemed more blissful than the last, and he had to hold his breath and squeeze his eyes shut to contain it all.

When he finally came to and his eyes popped open, Madison had raised her torso off the sink. Water harmlessly splashed down her arm, dripping off her elbow and into the basin. The lap of her khaki dress was hopelessly drenched in a much darker shade. But her face was bright and perky, as though she'd just been out in a spring rainstorm.

“Oh my God,” she panted, as though seeing him for the first time. She wrapped her hand around the back of his neck and pulled him into a kiss.

She deepened the kiss, putting her all into it. With her heels still wrapped around the back of his bare ass, she squeezed his pulsating cock with her strong inner pussy muscles. It reminded Ford how strongly she had come when he'd given her that skull job in the hospital. That in turn reminded him of the hole Cropper had drilled in the wall of the Cottonwood bathroom. How nauseated he'd been to discover that, and not until Madison had already vanished from the house. He had

wondered if discovery of the peephole had anything to do with her leaving. He couldn't bring it up to her, though, without mentioning the hole's existence.

There was a commotion outside, a few women rapping against the metal side of the trailer. "Come on!" one yelled. "We don't want to use the men's!"

"Yeah!" yelled another. "The men's is too gross!"

Ford smiled against Madison's mouth and stood up. He helped Madison to stand, turning his back when she went into a stall. He washed his bloody hand finally, almost sorry to see the signs of his victory swirl down the sink.

He was the knight in shining armor,

saving Madison from those motherfuckers.

He slipped his cut back on over his bare skin, sticking the black T-shirt in his back pocket. The top buttons of Madison's dress were hopelessly strewn over the filthy flood, but Ford gallantly picked them up and pocketed them. He was proud of her fat, jutting tits that burst from the gap in her dress, but he wanted a way to mark her as his.

He arranged her dress as though preparing a kid for school. "Come on. Let's get some fish. Tuzigoot cooked up some mean catfish and cod." He knew she loved fish.

When Ford finally unlocked the

trailer door and threw it open, he was surprised by the crowd of women. At least fifty were waiting, although he knew there were some port-a-potties to one side of the stage. The women burst into cheers and catcalls but didn't rush the steps as Ford waved like a prize fighter, holding Madison's hand up high.

He shouted at his old lady, "Now *that's* a way to mark you as my property."

"Good going!" women said to Madison as Ford helped her down the steps.

"He's a wild one," said another.

"Train him good."

"Think you can get him to keep it in his pants?"

Damn, he didn't need that last one.

The crowd parted like the Red Sea as they walked through the hangar.

"You're a champion," Madison told him.

They wound their way across the hot tarmac where planes used to be parked. Now it was just a milling sea of black leather and boobs. The vocalist was howling about bein' a ramblin' man as Ford greeted a lot of brothers who were much more interested in Madison's titties than him.

It was all right. They got their fish and ran into a group that included Maddy's brother Speed. Ford remembered. Today Speed was

supposed to receive his instructions for his trial by fire. Ford and his brothers had thought up a particularly grueling and hilarious ordeal for Speed, and Ford now sappily wished he hadn't been so hard on the young mechanic. Speed, having no family aside from Madison and occasionally June, desperately wanted to be part of the Bare Bones brotherhood.

Speed seemed surprised to see the two together, but that didn't stop him from asking Madison, "So when you going back to Flag? Isn't Jake looking for you?"

Ford shoved the idiot. He bumped into Duji, who shoved him back at Ford. This went on for a while until Ford

noticed Duji's black lab sitting patiently at his side. Ford put the last few bites of fish on the paper plate onto the ground in front of the dog, and removed its collar. It was just a simple black leather job with spikes, perfect for his intentions.

“Madison,” he said loudly, in front of several brothers, “I am claiming you in front of God and my brothers.”

She had never looked more adorable, and after Ford collared her, he dipped her low so he could nuzzle her cleavage. He wanted his boys to be envious. When he stood Madison back on her feet, he saw the approval in his brothers' faces, but there was a new face that nauseated him.

“What’s this?” Cropper wanted to know.

It was none of Cropper’s fucking business, and Ford didn’t report to him. So Ford cast Cropper a dark look and changed the subject. “Speed, buddy. You received any texts lately?”

“Yeah!” agreed everyone heartily. “Check your phone, man.”

Even Cropper had to get in on it, holding Speed still while Riker fished around in his cut’s pockets for his phone.

“My, my,” said Riker, holding the phone out for all to see. “What do we have here? A text.”

Ford got a kick out of how still Speed became then. It was obvious he

was finally realizing this was “the call” he’d been waiting for.

“Let him read it himself,” said Cropper, letting Speed go.

Speed read it over the top of his shades, his lower lip hanging slack. Everyone in the circle around him quieted down, and Ford could hear Speed whisper,

“Oh, no. Coordinates!”

Cropper’s barking laughter broke the hush. “Goin’ somewhere, Prospect?”

Everyone guffawed except Madison, who couldn’t possibly know what they had up their sleeve.

“Your ride’s right over there.” Cropper pointed next to the stage. Someone had moved Speed’s white

Dyna from its safe parking spot inside the hangar, and it now awaited him.

“Holy shit,” said Speed. “Can I take my backpack?”

“You can take nothing,” ordered Cropper. “It’s a Vision Quest, like the woo-woos do when they come to visit vortexes. It’s a time for being one with nature. Leave your cut, too.”

Riker added, “Find an understanding of your life’s purpose.”

Ford said, “You’ll *really* see vortexes after three days and nights with no food or shelter.”

Each step they took toward the bike gained them more cheering, clapping spectators. By the time poor Speed

reached his ride he was probably shaking like a half jerked-off dog.

“I don’t suppose you can tell me what you’re making him do,” Madison shouted in Ford’s ear.

“If I tell you, I have to kill you,” he said.

Folding his arms in front of his chest, Ford had never been prouder. Speed must have been shitting razor blades as he sat in his saddle blipping the throttle nervously. As Speed’s sponsor, Ford posed beside the shaking, skinny blonde prospect while a dozen people took photos.

Then Speed roared off wobbly in the direction of the road that led down Mescal Mountain. Two hundred people

were cheering by that time. It was one of the most stirring things Ford had ever participated in.

“What’s a vision quest?” Madison asked.

“Let’s hope he makes it through,” said Duji.



CHAPTER TWELVE

MADISON

The next two days were the happiest of my life, as they say.

It was such a whirlwind. I wasn't even certain what had happened between Ford and me.

He had claimed me as his property, I knew that much, but did he love me? He had uttered something about birds and love, a Henry Miller quote no doubt. Miller was supposed to be some misogynistic bastard who treated women like objects, so maybe that's why Ford liked him. But as far as I'd seen when

I'd read him as a teen, he really revered women. He just liked to fuck them. Was that treating them like objects?

We fucked a lot in the next two days. Twelve years I'd been craving that fat, juicy cock inside of me, and now I couldn't get enough of it. Ford Illuminati was hung like a racehorse and he knew how to use it, too. My hands were all over that. I had thought I was attracted to Jake but that paled in comparison to the intensity with which I wanted to devour Ford.

Riding one up behind him like in the old high school days, there was a world of difference now. We were free of all restraints for that glorious forty-eight hours, and Ford took me to see a couple

of the vortexes. We had been on a tour of these several times when we were kids. This time no one brought any weed, and I wanted to suck on that horse cock inside the middle of a vortex.

We had been separated for so long it was like meeting a new man. The thrill, the illicit excitement of canyon carving through the rusty layers of sandstone, like red velvet cake tall on either side of us, it was all new to me again. Now I could thrust my hand along Ford's pec and toy with the little barbell that pierced his nipple, proud of myself when my other hand felt his cock stiffening. I knew he pretended this irritated him, and he'd reach around,

slap my ass, and shake it.

“You’re throwing me off-balance.”

“Your giant erection is throwing you off-balance.”

I wanted to amplify our energies, so we’d climb around awhile until we felt the highest, most intense amplification of all, and that’s where we’d fuck or give each other head. Ford had learned a lot of tricks in the past decade. Lapping me into a mindless clusterfuck of an orgasm with his talented tongue was apparently one of them. I was still amazed that he could do that.

I finally had to admit I’d never come with a man before. “Just, you know, with a vibrator.” I didn’t want to mention the shower head in Cottonwood. The

horrific memory of that bathroom wall was probably the *reason* I couldn't come with another man.

Ford was humble. "Maybe no one ever tried properly." He lay stretched out on the sandstone, propped up on one forearm, looking like he was posing for fucking *GQ*. I loved it when he wore his cut next to his bare skin, like now. I loved to flick that damned infernal barbell that pierced his nipple with my tongue. It never failed to make him hiss in air and clutch the back of my skull. His new Apache tattoo was fascinating. He seemed to be embracing his Native American heritage instead of shunning it, as most bikers would do.

He had replaced the grimy dog collar around my neck with a fur-lined leather job that still had a *D*-ring where a leash could be attached. He had gotten into some kink that was right up my alley. Right now we were having a little picnic we'd brought, just wine and some salami and cheese and crackers, but he'd left the short leash attached to my collar. It wasn't safe to ride with it for fear of pulling an Isadora Duncan, but he liked the submissive way it made me look.

And act. "That's not true though, Ford. It's not polite to mention, but *plenty* of men have tried."

"Yeah." He snorted. "Plenty of dickhead doctors."

Was he referring to Jake? That subject hadn't come up, so I ignored it. There was plenty of time for strife later, I knew. There always was. "No, I mean experienced guys, men who were willing to try for ten minutes or more. I always wound up worrying that they were wearing out their tongue muscles. I'm not kidding, Ford. It got to the point where I didn't want anyone to even bother *trying*. Then you come along and blow them all out of the water."

"Literally." I could tell he was proud by the shy way he looked down at the cracker box. He shrugged innocently. "I don't know what to say."

"'Thank you' is a good starter."

“Thank you.”

I had the feeling that now that dickhead doctors were in his mind, it would attach itself to his train of thought and not let go. I sliced some more jack cheese with Ford’s hunting knife and handed it to him, but soon he was asking,

“What you gonna do about that asshole you’re living with? You’re moving out, pronto.”

I didn’t think Jake would be overly upset to lose me. “It’s just a question of what kind of crappy apartment I can afford on my nurse’s salary.”

Ford snapped, “What apartment? You’re moving in with me.”

I hadn’t been to his fabled

McMansion yet. Apparently Corinne and possibly a few other girls were still hiding in the walk-in closets there, but I had to let Ford move at his own pace. I tried to sound casual. "I don't think I'd like it if anyone else lived there, too. I mean, Speed would be fine. He's not too big of a slob. But those other women..." I shrugged. I wasn't one to demand a lot of a man.

Right now, Speed lived in a crappy apartment in a questionable area of P&E. I'd spent the night before the rally there, and people were slamming doors making their late-night drug drops. He was making less as a mechanic for Illuminati than he had as a union mechanic, although his salary was bound

to go up once he patched in.

“They’re leaving soon,” said Ford, confirming that indeed, the chicks existed.

I waited a few seconds before asking, “Where does Cropper live?” Luckily, I hadn’t seen him at all since the rally. It had taken another entire day for everyone to clear out, but Cropper hadn’t been among those helping break stuff down or clean up. Thank God.

“He lives with Tonya on the other side of P&E, in Hellcat Canyon.” Ford stopped chewing but didn’t swallow. He narrowed his eyes at me. “Why you always asking about Cropper? You got something against him?”

My heart sped up. Maybe if I could just convey in a vague manner that Cropper just sort of grossed me out, Ford would know to keep me at arm's length. "Oh, you know. Nothing specific. Just when he lived with us in Cottonwood, he used to walk around with his bathrobe wide open. Just general stuff that can't be unseen."

Ford chuckled and finished chewing his jack. "Oh God, that's Cropper for you. Sort of an exhibitionist. He only does that now when he's staying at the Citadel in one of the rooms. You know, with sweetbutts."

Ugh. So Cropper did sleep at the Citadel sometimes. "You told me in

Cottonwood that he was also sort of a voyeur. So which one is it?"

"Both. He likes being watched, but I think sometimes his equipment don't work so good. When that happens, he likes to watch." He stopped laughing as though something had just occurred to him. "Does he bother you? I mean, has he ever *done* anything to you?"

His hand shot out and grabbed the chain of my leash. He jerked my neck back so my head snapped as he pinned me to the sand. Faster than a barefoot jackrabbit he leaped over the crackers and cheese and was on top of me, the tip of his nose to mine. "*What did Cropper do.*"

"Nothing!" I cried. "What makes you

think he did something?" I held my breath, petrified at what he might do next.

He slowly unwound himself. I saw the rage seep from his eyes and his face softened as he slid halfway off me. Propped on one elbow now, he released the leash enough for me to sit on my elbows too. I stuck a few fingers under my collar to loosen it.

He didn't apologize, but explained. Ford Illuminati did nothing to be sorry for. "I've just known him to gross out even some of the most hardened sweetbutts, that's all."

"Yes," I said meekly. "He just...sort of scares me." I was thinking how I

might be able to easily avoid Cropper. If he rarely went to the Citadel and *I* rarely went there, we might possibly never run into each other. “Do you mind if I still work?”

Ford frowned, perplexed. “Mind? No, why would I? But do you really want to drive an hour each way to work every day?”

“I can work four tens. Besides, aren’t you gone on...runs a lot?”

“Not so much anymore. We have grunts and new recruits who do most of that, *mija*.” I loved it when he called me *mija*. Living in Arizona, a lot of business was conducted in Spanish and it was a nice term of endearment. “I just go when an expert’s needed. Though there’s talk

about me running a cage to Florence to pick up a transfer.”

“Oh, someone patching over from your Phoenix chapter?”

Ford smiled wryly. “No. More like picking up another club’s garbage. I’m not really sure why we want this guy, actually. He’s not even a brother, just a sort of cleaner. Things’ve been mayhem since the rally. Riker’s been in a haze for three days. Well, you saw him last night at the Citadel wearing those anal beads as a headband.”

I sighed. “Another sight that can never be unseen.”

“Look. Stick with Duji’s old lady, Dominique. You put her on your speed

dial. If you ever need to know anything, call Dominique. She's old school, been around awhile. She knows the ropes."

We went by the Citadel because it was on the way back into Speed's P&E apartment. We were going to sleep at Speed's to avoid Cropper, Riker, and various Bone Lickers. But we were hungry and of course Speed only had a fridge full of condiments, so we stopped by the Citadel's dining room where there was always a mess of food to be had.

I'll never forget frying some bacon, then sautéing some onions and garlic for a scramble. Ford got very affectionate.

Henry Miller wrote, "There is no salvation in becoming adapted to a world which is crazy." Amen to that,

brother. I've always said that in life you're only allowed one happy hour. This hour consists of a bunch of happy moments all strung together, but never more than a moment at a time. This is why you have to seize the moment and appreciate every tiny act of beauty.

I remember this trivial bacon and egg experience because it was the last happy moment I was allowed for a long time.

Ford stood behind me and kissed the top of my messed-up hair. "I can see you standing in my kitchen making me breakfast."

"Oh, really? Last I checked, you were a better cook than me. You were

the one bringing groceries into the house, forcing us to eat our vegetables. Don't you cook anymore?"

Ford leaned against the counter and plucked a piece of crisp bacon from the paper towel. "Not really. There's really no one to cook for. Not much sense in cooking for yourself."

"I know that feeling." I almost said, "My boyfriend is a vegan and he's hard to cook for" because I was so relaxed around Ford, so accustomed to being able to tell him anything. Thank God I stopped there and examined Ford munching the bacon.

Ford watched me watching him. His beautiful, limpid Italian eyes were so arresting you could get lost in them.

He'd filled out in his SEAL years. From the young colt he'd been as a teen he'd just gotten meatier, buffer, scarier. There were probably lots of long hours on a mission, or waiting for a mission, with nothing to do but lift weights. Ford was as frightening as a prison lifer, but he was a different sort of lifer.

He flashed me a grin then, and he wasn't so terrifying anymore. I couldn't resist taking a few steps to kiss him. I remember breathing in that fresh air and sweat essence of him, the way he smelled after riding. His phone in his cut pocket buzzed but he didn't rush to answer it. We kissed deeply, sensuously, like two lovers after a good fuck—

which I guess we were.

I finally had to break away to make sure the onions didn't burn, and that's when Ford got the news. "Yo. Mm-hmm. What? You're fucking kidding. Which hospital?"

That's when I turned off the burner. I knew we weren't going to get to eat the onions and garlic.

We didn't hear the whole story about Speed until we were actually at the hospital. That's one frustrating thing about riding—especially when you're so panicked you're about to get a Fast Riding Award. It's difficult to talk to each other. So before we got to the ER, all I knew was that Speed had freaked out about something in the desert while

on his vision quest. He'd been thrashing his old Dyna, trying to speed away from some scene, going full throttle.

Ford hurriedly explained a bit more as we tore ass into the ER waiting room. "Our GPS coordinates sent him to the most intense vortex out on Lost Mountain, you know that one?"

"Yeah," I panted, not really caring about any vortex at the moment. A vision quest meant you stumbled around freezing your ass off in the desert without any food until you saw your guardian animal. Well, no *wonder* people hallucinated foxes or eagles after three days with no sleeping bag or food.

Ford actually stopped to hold the

door open for me. “Well, one of the funny parts of the plan was to instruct him to look under a certain rock where we’d stashed some peyote.”

“Oh, no. Who stashed it?”

“We sent that prospect Wild Man, but I’m sure Riker was the one who made the package. Cropper! *Turk!*”

Speed had the cops first call Ford, but we were too busy fucking our brains out to answer the phone. His second choice had been Turk, who had been the one to call Ford while we were frying bacon. We’d been too stupid sending him off alone into the middle of the wilderness to put an emergency contact card in his wallet. I would’ve thought about it, being a nurse, if I’d been in on

the plan.

Cropper was grinning, but that was no indication of how things were going. He could be grinning because someone had stuck their face into a fan or been bitten by a Brazilian wandering spider.

Cropper was the first to speak. “I knew he couldn’t handle putting on a three-piece patch.”

I was ready to punch that baboon, I really was. “What the fuck happened?”

Cropper chuckled. “Guy started hallucinating.”

Thankfully Turk broke in. “I don’t think it was the peyote per se that caused the entire mess.”

Cropper added, “No peyote showed

up on the tox screen, not even the tiniest bit of alcohol.”

I said, “No one routinely screens for mescaline—peyote—unless it’s already suspected. And I’m sure no one told them he’d taken any.”

“Of course not,” said Turk. “Anyway, evidently with his empty stomach the peyote affected him more strongly than expected. He was wandering around in the middle of nowhere when he came upon this group of people dressed up as giant stuffed cartoon animals—”

“Furries.” Cropper nodded with authority.

Turk continued. “Right, Furries, only they were having an orgy around a

campfire.”

“Yiffing,” added Cropper.

“You’re kidding,” I said, genuinely pissed. “Typical, just typical! Leave it up to my brother.”

Turk said, “Yiffing, whatever. So our man Speed, I guess figuring they were a figment of his imagination, proceeded to ask to join in the fun. I guess because he wasn’t dressed up as a bear or one of My Little Ponies—”

“Bronies,” muttered Cropper.

“—they didn’t take too kindly to it. Speed told me he wound up being run off by a purple unicorn—”

Cropper could barely contain his mirth now, so I busted in. “How is he? I

mean, he crashed his bike, apparently, right?”

Cropper sneered. “That’s actually the most serious part.” I didn’t know what he meant by that—yet.

Turk said, “Right. He told me he was dragging pegs and fishtailing down that super-twisty part of Broken Arrow Canyon. He was sparking the pavement just thrashing it when he swerved to avoid some cager.”

I had to close my eyes. “Oh, God.”

Turk said, “Oh God is right. He did a high side over the bike, laid the bike down up a canyon, while the cager kept going, naturally.”

“Naturally,” echoed Ford. “So how’s Speed?”

“I’m more concerned about the bike,” said Cropper, a bit more forcefully.

Turk said, “Speed’ll be fine. They’re bandaging him up now. Mostly road rash, or rock rash from flying through that gully. I think one arm’s broken, maybe an ankle, and of course his face is scraped up. He was only wearing a T-shirt, no brain bucket or leathers. He might have a concussion.”

“When can we see him?”

“Any second now,” said Turk. “Nurse said she’d come back and tell us when Speed was ready.”

Cropper sparked a lewd grin. “Or should we call him...Bronyboy?”

Turk laughed. “Bronyboy, I like that!”

“Ponyboi,” suggested Ford, “since a unicorn ran him off.”

These moronic men were all laughing and goofing, and I guess I was relieved it hadn’t been worse. But the worst was actually yet to come.

I was suspicious why Cropper kept bringing up the bike. When the nurse came out and told us we could go in now, I held Cropper back. He was carrying some stupid fucking gym bag.

“Cropper.” I faced him for the first time since he’d accosted me in the hangar during the rally. He looked mildly at me, as though I’d just asked

him the time. “Why do you keep bringing up Speed’s bike? I know you. So he trashed his bike. So what? It’s his bike.”

Cropper looked whimsically at the ceiling. “Ah, not really, doll. See, in this club, a prospect can’t own anything. Everything of his belongs to the club. Plus, Torino loaned Speed that ride. It legally does belong to us.”

“So? Speed’s a great mechanic. Can’t he fix it back the way it was?”

“It’ll take some time and doing, according to the tow company. Might as well buy one new.”

I shrugged. “Okay. I’ll buy one for him, then. Sign the pink slip over to you. What else are you suggesting? How much can that bike have been worth?”

“Thirteen large, last I heard. It had a Big Bore engine upgrade, V&H exhaust, all chromed out. I could be wrong, but you don’t have thirteen grand lying around. Unless you’re the world’s best cocksucker and that doctor dirtbag of yours is paying you in Benjamins, nurses don’t have that kind of coin lying around.”

He was right. I didn’t. I had been living paycheck to paycheck as a cardiac nurse. “So take it out of Speed’s salary.”

Cropper set his gym bag down and unzipped it. He reached in, but didn’t show me what he was grabbing. I looked around. We were in the ER waiting room. About ten other people lounged

around, too. Surely he wouldn't pull a gun in there. He said meaningfully, "When you bump a prospect to a three-piece patch, there's no going back."

He chose this moment to reveal the cut they'd taken from Speed at the rally, before he'd scooted off on his vision quest. Cropper brandished it as though he was Vanna White, showing both front and back. True to his word, the three-piece patch had been added to the back, and the "Prospect" patch removed and replaced with two new patches, "Red Rocks" and "Original."

He was just holding it up for me to admire. "Now, I have no intention of bestowing this cut on that asshat loser until he's paid back his debt to the club.

And at his current salary, that'll take approximately, ah, let's see..." He pretended to think hard, stroking his beard. "Oh, yeah. *All year*. During which time that fucktard won't have a single bite of food to put in his stomach *and* he'll still be a prospect doing everyone's dirty work. And he'll be a guy without any cut at all because I'll be holding this in my home safe."

I didn't like where this was headed. "You can't withhold his cut, his colors. Speed's worked hard for that. Ask Ford. He's his sponsor. He's told me that Speed's the best mechanic you've ever had."

"Is that so? Then Torino's blowing

smoke like a newly elected Pope, ‘cause bikes that Speed works on are known for slipping gears and squishy brakes. That’s probably why he went pavement surfing, not seeing some damned unicorn.”

I doubted that very much, but I wanted to know what his game was. “So? What do you want me to do about it? I can buy you a new bike.” I was thinking at first I could ask Jake for the money. Then I remembered. I was supposed to be breaking up with Jake.

“No. I’ve got a better idea. With my idea, Speed can be back in this spanking new cut within *one week*. You come work for us at the Citadel.”

That was one I hadn’t foreseen.

“Work? What would I do? I’m a nurse.”

“Exactly. You stay there for a week, do some doctoring for the sweetbutts, maybe Riker. You’ve got the cure for clap, don’t you? Well, I want a full report on all those whores. They pretend to go to the clinic and I can’t force them, can I? But with you examining them, I’ll take your word. We want to ride them bareback without worrying about pissing pins and needles or crotch crickets. Oh, and you can do some cooking for us, cleaning up, old lady stuff like that.”

I was considering it. One week? I barely made that much in a year, much less one week. And to clear my brother’s debt to the club? I knew it was

too good to be true. “Can I work regular hours? Eight to five?”

“Oh, that’s the catch. You *live* there for the entire week. You’re not allowed to leave the hangar because you’re on call twenty-four-seven.”

I frowned. “Sounds like you thought this well out beforehand.”

Cropper looked modest. “Me and my Sergeant-at-Arms come up with some good ones when we put our heads together.”

I frowned even harder. “Okay. And at the end of the week Speed gets his cut back with the full three-piece patch?”

“He’ll be rocking his colors, dollface.”

“And won’t owe you a thing?”

“Debt-free, a hundred percent.”

“And you don’t touch me. You don’t manhandle me. You *or* Riker.”

Cropper held his hands up as though surrendering. “No lookie, no touchie. You’re too old for us anyway.”

“Damned straight I’m too old for you. All right, let’s shake on it. Not that I trust your word, but I have no choice.”

We shook, and that’s when Ford came back out of the swinging double doors. I was about to let go of Cropper’s hand but he pulled me even closer and said in a low growl, “And don’t tell Torino about our deal. Far as he knows, I’m waiting for Speed to go back to work to give him back his cut. Make a

big ceremony of it, you know?”

“But Torino—Ford—*works* at the Citadel. He’ll see me. He’ll wonder why I’m there.”

“Not when he’s off doing business for me. You’re my property for one week. You obey my every order. Hey, son. How’s the prospect doing?”

My stomach churned as I pasted on a fake smile and followed Ford back behind the double doors. What the fuck had I just agreed to? Well, as long as he adhered to his word to not touch me, I could handle any diseased lady parts he tossed at me. I had a strong stomach, obviously.

I was still naïve about the honor of men, or lack of it. I had succeeded in

running from Cropper several times now. His ego couldn't handle the fact that I wasn't dropping to my knees at the exalted fucking sight of him, like every other girl up until now had.

All I had in mind was saving my brother from a year of servitude. I had no idea I was in for a week of my own.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FORD

“You make me tremendously happy to hold me undivided—to let me be the artist, as it were, and yet not forgo the man, the animal, the hungry, insatiable lover. No woman has ever granted me all the privileges I need—and you, why you sing out so blithely, so boldly, with a laugh even—yes, you invite me to go ahead, be myself, venture anything. I adore you for that.

That is where you are truly regal, a woman extraordinary. What a woman you are! I laugh to myself now when I think of you. I have no fear of your femaleness.” ~ Henry Miller

Ford was in a pretty good mood until they got to New River. As the most

experienced rider, he was the tail gunner of the group chosen to make the Florence run. He rode behind the chase vehicle, a truck driven by the prospect Wild Man. Speed's broken arm would prohibit him from doing lots of things for a while to come.

They had loaded a ridiculous amount of Russian iron into the Illuminati box truck. Ford was uncomfortable with the reasons given him why this book cooker was so fucking valuable. What made Slushy McGill worth so many AKs and 62s? There were probably thirty guns back there. Ford had talked to Ruben Ochoa, cartel leader, guy they usually went through for arms. This time he wasn't giving them drugs in return for

the Russian ladies—he was giving them a *person*. That alone was strange.

How good of a bookkeeper could this guy possibly be? And why was this whole deal made without Ford's knowledge? Cropper claimed that he, Ford, had been too occupied mooning over Madison. Hardly. The deal went down the whole time after Ford's stay in Flagstaff and before the rally. He knew he was moody, tragic, and surly, but he was hardly preoccupied.

Any deal made behind his back was suspicious. He was glad he'd been invited to head up this run. Now he could get the 411 on the deal. Even the swap, the hand-off, was suspicious.

Ruben had told him to wait until they got to New River to call him again for further instructions. Until then, Ford didn't even know *where* the swap would take place. He knew that he wasn't picking up Mr. McGill from "Gladiator School," as the Florence state prison was known. Ruben would have that honor. Which made it even more dubious the poor guy would be useful to the Bare Bones afterward.

Ford felt free, proud, satisfied by the way things were going with Maddy. It was beyond his most lovelorn expectations that she had agreed to be collared by him. That was how he'd decided to mark her as his property until, or *if*, he could convince her to

wear a “property of” patch.

She had finally agreed to leave that moronic doctor. She was no doubt doing that today. Corinne had finally vacated his house on Mescal Mountain. Ford had made a clean sweep of the house just this morning to make sure no Bone Lickers remained, and he'd had a locksmith over to change the locks.

Ford wasn't taking any chances on offending Madison. He realized that for the first time in his life, he'd have to be monogamous. That was fine with him. It would be strange at first, but he knew he had only used sweetbutts as a way of blowing off steam. He knew he could never clear the Citadel hangar of them

because too many other brothers wanted them around, including Cropper. He was sure that once the Bone Lickers all knew Madison was his old lady, none of them would come on to him again. They usually followed orders.

So everyone pulled off to the side of the highway in New River, per Ford's orders. Ford talked to Ruben, who gave him the coordinates of a section of county road near Florence where Ruben would take possession of the iron.

“Do you have McGill, *ese*?” Ford was obliged to ask, point-blank, because it really didn't sound like Ruben did.

“Oh sure, I've got McGill all right,” was all Ruben would say.

Ford had done business with the

Ochoa cartel his entire life, so he really couldn't question the plan. Barely any of their plans had ever gone awry and they were a staunch ally of the Bare Bones.

So Ford agreed to it and hung up. He went to stand next to Turk, and the two men smoked cigarettes. Turk was riding point, so Ford handed him the coordinates he'd written down.

"This McGill guy did time on a RICO for money laundering for Ochoa," Ford told Turk. "I don't think he snitched for a deal, so I don't know why Ochoa wants to cut him loose. Seems like his skills would be a good thing to keep close to his backyard."

"Must be about twenty large of

information we know he's got, judging from the load we're carrying," said Turk. "Maybe we're just using him for that intel, then booting him too."

"Beats me. Wish I was kept more in the loop on this one."

"Faux Pas is not going to appreciate being booted for this guy to be Treasurer."

"Not gonna happen. We might use him as a sort of *consigliore*, but he's not patching in or anything. I've got the feeling he's a good citizen. I think he's a *lawyer*, actually."

Turk snorted. "Nothing wrong with that. Just make sure he doesn't get too close to club business. That way he's got plausible deniability."

“Yeah. He could actually be useful helping us set up shell companies, if he makes it through what Ochoa has in store for him today. There’s got to be a reason he’s getting rid of him.”

“And why we’re paying such a high price for someone else’s garbage. Hey, when’s Madison moving into your house?”

“As soon as she dumps that fucking doctor on his dead ass and drives some of her shit down here.” Ford wondered. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I just saw her this morning at the Citadel. She had a doctor’s sort of bag and was going into one of the rooms with Clara.”

Clara was the former Hellions sweetbutt. Ford wondered what the hell Madison was doing at the Citadel when she was supposed to be in Flag getting things in order. “What the fuck? Let me call her.”

Ford only got Madison’s voicemail. He left a message for her to call him. Ford had no choice but to continue on to Florence if he wanted to make the appointed meeting with Ruben. It was another hundred miles, but they had to maintain a steady pace so as not to get any Fast Riding Awards.

While the Mexicans took possession of the guns, Ford asked Ruben, “What’s so special about this guy? And if he’s

that great, why aren't you keeping him?"

"*No lo sé*, Torino, but I'll tell you one thing." Ruben wore the cholo hairnet and gold teeth of the bad motherfucker, although he was about a foot shorter than Ford. He'd kept his face ink-free, but Ford had seen a black handprint on his chest before. The guy smelled as though he never bathed, which was strange for such a major player. "Whatever intel he's got, he's not telling us. I apologize in advance for his condition, but you can understand our desire to find out what's so special about him."

Ford frowned. "Condition? Wait, no one said anything about—"

Ruben was already stalking off, raising his arm to signal the driver of the

black SUV.

“Wait one fuck, *ese!*” Ford yelled.

Not only did Ruben not wait one fuck, he jumped into the passenger seat before the driver opened the rear side door. The SUV rocked around, exactly as though someone were beating on someone in the back. The driver yanked what looked like a crash test dummy out and onto the ground.

“Fuckers,” growled Ford, and jogged off toward the SUV. He was able to at least pull the poor bookkeeper’s leg out of the way of the tire before the truck roared off. Ford saluted the truck with his middle finger. “Motherfuck! Now’s the time we could’ve used Madison,” he

told Turk, who had raced over to help.

“Agh,” moaned the poor lawyer. He was just an average freshly shaven Joe with a bad comb-over. That was good. He didn’t stand out. His nose was bloody and no doubt broken, but no other injuries were evident. “Am I in Mexico yet?”

Turk and Ford carried Slushy to the Illuminati truck. “I hate to tell you,” said Ford, “but you’re not going to Mexico. You belong to us now.”

“What the fuck?” Slushy sputtered, burbling through his mouthful of blood, and, no doubt, teeth. “I was supposed to go to Nuevo León! Ochoa gave me this burner phone and told me to expect a call. You’re not the guys taking me to

Léon? *Agh!*”

Wild Man helped pull Slushy up into the truck’s passenger seat. He flowed like a weak river into the seat and Ford saw he wasn’t cut out in any way, shape, or form for the lifestyle. If he was supposed to be their lawyer, he’d have to have an office at the Citadel next to Ford’s, so Ford could administer a beatdown to anyone who tried to get next to him. Maybe give him a quiet office adjacent to their archery range, something mild-mannered.

Ford took the burner from Slushy. “How long ago he’d give you this?”

“I don’t know...an hour ago? I can’t keep track of time well since they hit me

over the head repeatedly with a baseball bat since picking me up at Gladiator School.”

Turk nodded. “Concussion. Don’t go to sleep.”

Ford said, “No message on here yet, as far as I can see. What’s your deal with Ochoa? Why’d you do time?”

Slushy held his hands out. “Listen. I’m just a civilian. I’m not anybody’s lawyer anymore. From here on in, I’m Mr. Under the Radar, just another dickhead with a regular job and some heirloom tomatoes in my garden, you know? I just want to eat my hummus and read HuffPo and watch *Mad Men*. Fuck, guys! Ochoa told me I was going to manage a Cinnabon.”

“I appreciate your predicament,” Ford said patiently. He gestured to Wild Man, sitting in the driver’s seat, to hand the man the box of tissue. “But you have to understand ours. We just gave Ochoa enough Russian ladies to arm a small banana republic, all for the privilege of having your company and your valuable information. So you have to feel me, too.”

“You feeling us?” Turk asked.

“Ow!” whined Slushy, tentatively touching his skull with his fingertips. “I feel you guys, but I feel these bumps even worse. Where you from?” He squinted at them with the one eye that wasn’t swollen shut. “Bare Bones? Oh,

there were a few of you in the joint. Nice guys. Leastways, someone must've told them to be nice to me, 'cause they never offered to stroll with me down Bosco Boulevard or give me a baloney colonic. Jesus. You ever been in the joint?"

"No," said Ford. He'd been in Juvie as a kid which he knew didn't come close. He'd been there for murder, but still, it was Juvie, not the big house.

"Yes," said Turk. He'd served a year in Kingman on a weapons charge, a game-changer for a man as beautiful as him.

"Well, let me tell you. It's no late night guest spot. And I never narked about anything to anyone, even if it

meant someone was going to pop it in my toaster. No offense.”

Why was Slushy apologizing to Turk? Ford was distracted from further questions when the phone in his hand buzzed—a text. Ford read it, but it didn’t make any sense to him, so he showed it to Slushy. When understanding dawned on Slushy’s face, it wasn’t the good kind.

Slushy threw the phone back at Ford. He screwed up his one remaining good eye and whined. “God fucking dammit! What sort of karma am I paying back? Why, God, why? I knew I never should’ve played doctor with that neighbor girl, or stolen those Ding

Dongs from Raley's, or skimmed off the top of Ochoa's meth-making business!"

"Wait," said Ford calmly. "What was that?"

Slushy really did look like a giant baby. Someone had made a bow of the drawstring at the waist of his sweatpants, and had the sense of humor to give him a powder pink T-shirt. "Laura Groper! She wasn't really into it, so I know I forced myself on her! My father was a doctor so I stole his stethoscope and—"

"Not the playing doctor part." Ford was running out of patience. "That last bit, about skimming off Ochoa's meth profits." That could be the key to why Cropper wanted this guy so badly. He

could have a shitload of cash stashed somewhere.

“Oh, yeah, sure.” Slushy dabbed at his upper lip with the tissue. He was slumped over, utterly forlorn, his tennis shoes dangling out of the high truck cab. “I took some off the top. No one ever noticed, so I took some more. The feds didn’t even get me for *that* part. I was nabbed under RICO just for working for Ochoa. Nothing specific they nailed me on, which is why I only did six months.”

“What does the text mean?” Ford turned to Turk. “It says to go down to a place called Hardscrabble Ranch and get a key from a Soledad Jonas. Where’s this ranch, Slushy? Wild Man, get the

man a beer.”

They always kept a cooler for emergencies in the back, so Wild Man vanished out the driver’s door.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Slushy kicked his feet aimlessly. “It’s just a ranch, down south.”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” said Ford.

“It’s a ranch in Nogales. Guys, why can’t we just invest in laser tag? It’s the wave of the future. Look at all the up sides to it. Clean, simple, not much overhead, why, the profit potential is outstanding! You’ll need control stations and phaser packs—”

“We already have an archery range for that,” said Turk. “Why do we want to

get a key from this Jonas woman, Slushy?”

Slushy kicked his feet some more and gladly chugged half the beer Wild Man handed him. He wiped his mouth on his forearm. “Oh, I don’t know. A tunnel.”

Turk and Ford looked at each other openmouthed. Ford said, “A *tunnel*?” Nogales was on the Mexican border.

They looked back to Slushy. He was obviously not eagerly anticipating revisiting this Hardscrabble Ranch. He seemed as depressed as a sloth on speed, and Ford couldn’t blame him. He’d probably thought he was home free when he’d served his sentence. “Yeah, a

tunnel,” he said reluctantly.

“As in, a tunnel under the ground?”

“Yes. That sort.” Slushy chugged the rest of the beer.

Brightening up, Ford and Turk shared happier looks.

“Well, then,” said Turk, slapping Slushy on the arm. “Let’s go.”

Ford said, “Hey, look on the bright side. You’re out of the joint. You’re with us. Nothing will happen to you when you’re with us.”

Slushy was still sullen. His swollen lower lip made him look petulant. “Why do I doubt that very much, judging from the looks of you?”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MADISON

I was going to the worst and most glorious place in the world, and I didn't even know it yet.

You probably don't believe that I didn't see any deceit coming from a mile off. You must think I'm the biggest most gullible doofus on the planet to have agreed to Cropper's deal.

I needed to save my brother. A week of my own servitude seemed like a feeble price to pay for saving Speed from an entire year of it.

Cropper also appealed to my

professional integrity. Examining a bunch of sluts would be for the betterment of mankind.

For one, I didn't think they were going to take my phone and car keys away. I protested how was I going to get down to the lab, but Cropper solved that problem by having Ziggy chauffeur the blood and piss samples down with my authorization. Positive chlamydia results were rampant, making me worry about the state of Ford and therefore me, but that's a different story.

Getting the women to stop having sex for a week was another. I couldn't force the antibiotics on them, and I had to appeal to the men, especially as potential carriers, to refrain for a week.

That was probably the last nail in my coffin, telling the men to refrain. There was an enormous wave of protests that first day.

Riker protested the loudest. “Crop, why the hell’d you bring her in here if she’s just going to tell us to stop burying our bones?” Riker stopped suddenly and chuckled to himself. “Well, I *know* why you brought her here. But it’s the *principal*.”

What did Riker mean by that? The old WWII hangar was getting mighty claustrophobic by the end of the second day. There were two wings of offices on either side of the hangar proper, both accessed by flights of stairs. The views

of the red rocks out the plentiful windows were enough to make you weep with religious ecstasy.

The juxtaposition of the degradation and sloth going on inside the rooms against the backdrop of the confectionary layers of the red buttes was something to behold. One wing was for private—if you could call it that—activity, the other for business. So there'd be a couple of guys daisy chaining with a sweetbutt while smoking a hookah and in the background there's this blazingly brilliant Biblical sunset going on. I could see why artists came to P&E.

I mostly stayed in the private wing, with many trips across the hangar to give full reports to Cropper in his office,

seemed like every hour on the hour. It was during one of these trips the second day that I began to have misgivings about my decision.

I was about to leave when Cropper commanded, “Face me.” Standing, he came around the front of his desk, looking me up and down like he wanted to wear my legs as a scarf.

I’d purposefully worn a sweater dress with no buttons up the front. I’d realized too late that the only bras I possessed were the push-up ones I’d loved to taunt Ford with.

So what does Cropper do? “I don’t like this dress.” He whipped his knife from its scabbard and sliced a new

neckline in my dress! Of course the new neckline began just a few inches above my belly button and ended in the jagged tear of the knit fabric at my Adam's apple. My abundant tits spilled out, and Cropper beamed with pride at his work. Of course I shrank back and held the split halves of my bodice together.

“What’s wrong with you? We agreed no touching.”

“Am I touching?” Cropper’s smile never quit. “Is it wrong of me to want some better scenery while I work? You’ve got an amazing pair of jugs, Cookie.”

I didn’t like Cropper calling me Cookie. He’d overheard Ford call me that, our private joke on him accidentally

calling me “sugar cookie” that day in the pool. In Ford’s mouth it sounded divine. Coming from Cropper, as with everything else he said, it just sounded lewd and deviant.

Holding my own tits somehow wasn’t any less suggestive than just letting them jut out of my torn dress. “You promised me no perverted stuff.”

“Did I? I don’t think I promised anything like that. Why would I promise to alter my entire personality for a worthless slut?”

“If I’m such a worthless slut why are you always pursuing me?”

He smiled crookedly. “Isn’t that my favorite type?” The smile vanished

abruptly. “Listen. You’re going to have to follow my rules if you want to make it through this week. Otherwise your beloved brother is going to be lying in his apartment with no food or money and unable to go get any more ‘cause he smashed up his pretty ride. So listen good, bitch. Put your hands against that wall.”

“Why?”

“Did I tell you to ask questions? We don’t like it when sweetbutts ask questions, or have you not noticed that?”

“Maybe that’s why they don’t want to tell you when they’ve got cottage cheese oozing from their slits. You’re so uninterested in them, they know you don’t care. I hope you’re proud of

yourself.”

Cropper looked thoughtful. “Matter of fact, I *am*. And it’s not wise to argue with a man holding a buck knife. Now up against that wall.”

He was right. How could I argue with that knife? After all, what had I really expected of this bunch of depraved sinners? They took *pride* in their perversions, and it wasn’t really likely Cropper would let me just doctor a few sweetbutts to reinstate Speed in his rightful spot in their twisted hierarchy.

I had known it wasn’t going to be as easy as the TV Guide crossword puzzle. Cropper was an arrogant, willful ass

who always got his own way. He'd already told me not to tell Ford that I was spending a week here. Ford had gone to the prison in Florence to retrieve some lawyer who was going to work for the club, taking Turk and Wild Man, the only other two members with a bit of human emotion. Faux Pas was all right, some sort of French Canadian special effects man who created zombies and other gore-riddled creatures for film. He got his bloody ideas from real life experience, and he was such a horndog he seemed to have a permanent hard-on. There was talk it might be a medical condition.

As a nurse and a formerly abused child, I knew how to grit my teeth and

bear a lot of things. I had to call upon those talents now as Cropper, predictably, kicked my feet apart as I leaned on my hands against the wall. Predictably, he raised my dress salaciously over my ass and ran his hand over my glute.

“Perfect,” he sighed. “Juicy and slappable.”

I made one last feeble attempt. “You promised no touching.”

He had a ready answer. “Since when does the Bare Bones Prez keep his word? If I did that I’d be out of business.” *Slap. Slap. Slap.* “Mm. Might give even more resistance and make a louder sound if I did *this*.”

Squeezing my eyes shut, I didn't even breathe as he sliced through the flimsy panty material as though it were butter. A rush of air cooled my vagina, and his next few slaps hit me right on the sensitive outer labia.

“This'll show you,” he oozed, “how to deny me my God-given right to molest my son's old lady. You thought you'd stop me from feeling these plump, juicy titties? I know you never told Torino what happened between us, so I figured you were ashamed. Good. Be ashamed. You should be. Letting me watch you shower, knowing I was behind the wall watching you tickling your taco all those times? You should be ashamed of

yourself. Ah. Nice fat knobs.”

As you can tell, he was squeezing my bare tits by now, so he must’ve put down the knife. There wasn’t a damned thing I could do about it. He was so lost in his own arrogance, he had no clue that the only reason I’d never told Ford was to avoid a fresh murder. I knew Ford had committed murder as a teen and I knew it had something to do with Cropper, so it was likely he might do it again, if enraged enough. Ford wasn’t famous for controlling his temper. None of them were. Cropper had been smart to send Ford off on that errand that anyone else probably could’ve done. How hard was it to drive a lawyer back to P&E?

So I held my breath until all I saw

was the rosy glow of sheer anger. Cropper had broken my nose back in Cottonwood when he'd bashed my face against that garage wall. I'd seen him hit my mother a few times, although I did nothing to stop it, since she always hit me. Cropper wouldn't hesitate to use force again. He could always tell Ford I'd fallen down or whatever. Now I held my breath and tried to imagine something pleasant as Cropper slapped my vagina and mauled my breasts.

At first I automatically thought of Ford. I didn't want to associate him with this warped act, so I erased his image from my mind's eye and thought of surgeries instead. I was always calm,

almost sublime during surgeries, in complete control. That's why I liked it. I could control the outcome. From a chaotic childhood where absolutely nothing was guaranteed and disaster lurked around every corner, I went into a field where we controlled everything with our tiniest action.

So that day I thought about balloon angioplasties. I loved the godlike, life-or-death feeling of moving the coronary guide wire through the artery. What a superior, controlling feeling.

Cropper was muttering perverted stuff as he "punished" me for being such a slut back in the day. I found I could remove myself, take myself so out of the scene that I almost felt like I was

floating above it all, somewhere up near the ceiling. I felt as though I were looking down on the scene, watching Cropper alternately spank and then feel my white, now reddened, ass.

“That’s right...obey my every word...Makes you wet when I feel your boobs, doesn’t it?”

I saw more than felt his arm jerking rhythmically as his breaths grew hotter and more insistent on my neck. I “saw” with my new strange spirit eyes that he was jerking off against my ass. He gripped a tit as though it was a life preserver, and the closer he got to crisis, the faster he jerked and the less he tormented me.

I found that I could hover around the ceiling like one of those operating room patients who almost died. I was a light, disembodied spirit closer to the heavenly realm than the bodily one, and I was watching some grunt perform a routine, and gross, operation.

This had nothing to do with sex, with the beautiful, heavenly things Ford and I did with each other. What Cropper did to my body wasn't sex. It was low, twisted, depraved violence, an assault on my privacy and pride.

When it was over Cropper staggered back to his chair and fell into it like an ape man. I could cover my bare ass with my dress but couldn't do much about my

neckline.

“May I have my phone back?” I asked meekly. I was dizzy, coming down from that ceiling, being sucked back into my body.

Cropper chuckled lazily. Apparently abusing his son’s old lady was just one of the many items on his daily “to do” list. “Why? So you can cry to Torino how mean his daddy’s being? Not a chance. You need to experience the total slave package. Besides. Torino’s going to be spending a few more nights down there. His mission just, ah, became a little more complicated than he knew.”

My heart sank lower, if such a thing was possible.

Worse, Cropper radioed for one of

the sweetbutts to bring my suitcase. He rifled through it, removing all the panties, after smelling them, of course. “You’re going to walk around here commando, my little slut,” he decreed. “That means your cunt is open and free to me at any given moment. I look forward to putting my dick, hands, and face where my son’s dick, hands, and face were. It’s a family thing, you know.”

The worst, probably, was the way the sweetbutt looked at me when Cropper decided this. She *sneered*. All high and mighty, and sneering at low old me.

In front of her, Cropper unbuckled

my fur-lined leather collar. Everyone knew it was symbolic of Ford's ownership of me, and Cropper just tossed it like an old Christmas tree into his desk drawer. "For now, you belong to me, Cookie. You obey *me* and answer to *me* to repay your fucking brother's debt."

Then he cut the bodices of all my tops.

There would be no way to hide what a slut I was, especially not from Riker.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FORD

“I’ve lived out my melancholy youth. I don’t give a fuck anymore what’s behind me or what’s ahead of me. I’m healthy. Incurably healthy. No sorrows, no regrets. No past, no future. The present is enough for me.” ~ Henry Miller

Soledad Jonas turned out to be one badass *vaquera*, a Mexican who had married a rich Arizona cattle rancher. The owner of Hardscrabble had died, leaving Soledad with the land and its legacy—the tunnel underneath the border, the main source of his income after slowly selling off all his cattle.

Ford didn't get around to seeing Soledad for another couple of days. First, they had to lay low, let Slushy rest, and doctor him up. His arm was broken but they couldn't take him to the ER, so Ford used his best SEAL training to reset the bone and MacGiver up a sling. Slushy screamed such blue murder they may as *well* have told the cops he'd been beaten by the cartel. They gave him so much booze he slept for the next twenty-four hours.

Then they had to hang around Nogales in a Best Western for another night because the mysterious Soledad wouldn't see them until she got her lawyer. Ford had to keep an eye on

Slushy, too, due to the flight risk factor. Nothing prevented Slushy from making a run for it and selling his knowledge of the tunnel to the next highest bidder. However, Ford had gone through Slushy's pockets, and the most valuable thing he owned seemed to be a picture of a daughter and a safe deposit box key, both of which Ford took for insurance.

Slushy asked, "How do I know that once I introduce you, you're not going to cut and run?"

"You should be so lucky," said Ford, bench pressing a hundred seventy-five pounds in the hotel's gym. "Where you gonna go? With us you've got family."

Slushy snorted. "Some family. A bunch of hoods who beat each other up

over a toothless blowjob from some skank.”

“Hey. That was Ziggy and Tall Peril. Us longstanding charter members don’t fight amongst ourselves.”

“Right.” Turk stood over Ford, spotting him. “We just beat the shit out of rival clubs.”

“What’s the attraction?” asked Slushy. “Ford, you said your dad’s the President. But Turk? Why would you want to join? Something about never having had a family?”

“You got it,” grunted Turk. “Cropper and Ford *were* my family growing up. We all lived at the clubhouse, at the Bum Steer, until Cropper got a citizen wife—

Ingrid, Madison's mother. By then I was old enough to run the army surplus store alone, so I lived in the back until they built the Citadel. I imagine that's where you'll live. It's nice. An old army airfield on top of a gorgeous mesa."

"Madison," said Slushy. "She's someone's old lady? See, I know the lingo. Jesus. I was on my way to Belize and I wound up here."

Turk answered for Ford. "She's Ford's old lady. She's a nurse."

Slushy made a lip fart, caressing his injured arm. "Could've used her the past couple of days. How'd you wind up with a *nurse*, Capone? I guess opposites attract."

Ford finally gave the thin-haired

lawyer something. After all, the guy had a daughter somewhere. He was human. “It’s a fatal attraction that goes way back, Consigliore. We were meant to be.” Ford was frankly pissed off because he hadn’t heard from Maddy since he’d left P&E. He had only left one more message, not being the stalkery type. If a woman didn’t want to call him, he didn’t force himself on her.

Madison was supposed to be telling that dickhead doctor she was moving out. That alone had Ford’s nerves on edge. When he became edgy, he was more liable to explode, to prematurely react to something, to blow it, so to speak. He needed to be calm, cool,

collected for this meeting with Mrs. Jonas. Every excuse he could think of for why Maddy wasn't calling him was a bad, terrifying excuse. Something had gone wrong.

He had even called Faux Pas to get the lay of the land. "Oh yeah, I've seen her around the hangar," was all Faux Pas would say. "I think she's giving some medical exams to the whores."

What? Why would Madison be doing that, and not answering his calls? A very foreboding feeling was hanging over Ford's head. He was rarely wrong when this black cloud came hovering.

He said, "Listen, Slushy, what's your real name? And why Slushy?"

"Slushy was what pirates always

named their cook. The fat boiled out of meat was called slush. The cook guarded it with his life. The fatty slime that rose to the top was used as lubricant for ropes, rigging, almost everything.”

Turk chuckled. “So you’re named after slime?”

Ford said, “After a cook, asshat. Because he cooks the books.”

“Exactly,” said Slushy. “The slush was our first modern chapstick. I’m actually Aaron McGill, though you won’t have much use for that name. Ah, money laundering isn’t what it used to be. God, do I miss the nineties. Have you guys put any thought into zombies?”

Exhaling painfully, Ford replaced

the bar onto the rack and sat upright on the bench. “Zombies? I’ve thought about them. In which way?”

“They’re hot. If you could find someone who could create a zombie video game, we could pay him with dirty money. Each copy bought would earn him forty dollars, right? Just make sure it’s someone you trust, of course. I’ve got a million ideas, some good smurfing plans. The zombie game doesn’t even have to be very good. You can just have those cheap-ass bendable buddy zombies that move like an old silent film, like three frames per second. They could be slow zombies that wouldn’t scare a 7-11 clerk. Doesn’t matter. Although, of course, if it *were* good, all

the better. You might make some legitimate cash.”

Turk said, “We actually do have a guy with zombie connections.”

Ford thought about it. No matter how hammered Faux Pas got, he always showed up to the film sets where he worked. He could be relied on to make a guy really look like half his face had been shot off. Since that was a good excuse to call Faux Pas again, Ford took his phone outside the gym and called him.

He only got Faux Pas’ voicemail, so he called Cropper. Cropper would know why the fuck Madison was hanging around the Citadel doctoring sweetbutts.

Cropper wanted to talk about the tunnel, whether or not it really existed. Ford assured him the tunnel was real, and they were set to see it with their own eyes tomorrow.

Cropper said, “Make sure a Mr. Lyle Bloodgood is included in the meeting. He’s Mrs. Jonas’ lawyer. He knows all the ins and outs of dealing with moving the product through the tunnel. Mrs. Jonas likes to have plausible deniability, which is understandable. Then you need to get a date from Mr. Bloodgood. That’s the date the first product will need to be picked up on the ranch. We can put Tall Peril in charge of that, so take him when you view the tunnel so he

knows where it is.”

That was all fine with Ford, and he was finally able to ask, “Hey, I’ve heard Madison’s been at the Citadel? What’s she doing there?”

“Who told you that?” was Cropper’s first response.

That raised Ford’s suspicions. Why shouldn’t anyone tell him that? What did it matter? “What difference does it make? Why’s she there?”

Cropper affected a casual tone. “Oh, she’s giving the sweetbutts exams. About time, right? We’ve never been able to force them to get examined at the clinic, and I’m tired of having pants rabbits and seam squirrels running around my jeans.”

That was an extremely good idea, actually, so Ford didn't question it. He was tired of the Neapolitan Bone Aches, too. "Well, she hasn't returned any of my calls. When you see her, tell her her phone is dead or something. We'll be back tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night? Now, don't rush this business, son. Take your time. Make sure this McGill is legit."

"If by 'legit,' you mean does he seriously know how to cook the books, then yeah, he's legit. I think he'll be valuable. Now I'm assuming that Ochoa didn't know about this tunnel or he wouldn't have cut Slushy loose."

"Slushy? That the lawyer? Right,

Ochoa had no clue. I don't think it's been used for quite a while, not since the lady rancher's husband died. So we have to make sure no one else has got their finger in this particular pot, you dig?"

Ford dug, but he wasn't very happy about it. He knew he was hopelessly in love with Madison by how surly he became without her. It was beyond strange that she was giving exams to sweetbutts and ostensibly sleeping in the hangar, yet she hadn't returned any of his calls.

Ford knew he had to see the tunnel with his own eyes. Make sure it was passable, make sure it was big enough for a person carrying a backpack full of

cocaine or weed. Ford had to ensure everything was watertight, security-wise. He had to make sure, as much as was possible, that this Soledad woman wouldn't crack under pressure, or wasn't dealing out of both sides of her ass.

Sometimes Ford hated this sort of business. It wasn't often he really got homesick. But now that he was together with Madison, he had a feeling that'd happen more often. He wanted to stick to Illuminati Trucking business from now on. Stay close to home.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MADISON

It was a degrading few days—a lot of slapping, inspecting, and stroking of my labia, like they'd never seen a cunt before. They treated me like a toy poodle with all their smacking and caressing. I think part of the thrill for them was knowing I was Ford's property. Maybe a lot of them had grudges against Ford. But knowing they were pulling and nibbling on my nipples, clamping on tassels they could pull at while smacking my bare ass, well, that seemed to be the height of eroticism for

them.

I fumed that the hangar was rife with sweetbutts who would have gladly done all of these things for them, and more. Cropper had singled me out because I had successfully escaped from him when I was seventeen. That was it, plain and simple. No one had ever escaped from him before. He was probably feeling old, and watching young studs like Ford, Turk, and Ziggy outperform and outscore him probably made him feel even older. Once the chlamydia results came back and they were on forced leave, almost all sweetbutts left for a while.

I kept telling myself that it was only a week. *Only a few more days and Speed can fly his colors.* Speed had

never had anything. No father and a mother who was worse than an absent one. In my eyes, if the Bare Bones were a good enough family for Ford, they'd be good enough for Speed. Speed needed a family. Cropper—and his lieutenant Riker—weren't indicative of the sort of guy who enlisted with the club. Most were hard-working only barely marginal outlaws.

The worst was the dining room, where they forced me to cook for them and serve them. I'm saying "them" now because Riker had joined Cropper's club. I was standing at the stove browning some ground beef when Riker came up behind me, opened my knees

with his knees, and inserted something thick and cold inside me.

I was getting accustomed to being manhandled. I knew how to take a deep breath and hold it. Thinning out my lips, narrowing my eyes, and just staring daggers at something helped.

Protesting physically would only get me walloped. Cropper usually had that buck knife he liked to threaten me with, and now was no different. He sure liked to sharpen it a lot, and now he leaned against the stove doing just that as Riker fucked me with whatever the object was.

“Goes in easy,” said Riker. “She’s all wet and ready.”

Saying anything, protesting or making sarcastic, stinging remarks only

seemed to amuse them even more. I'd been able to keep my mouth shut so far.

Scrape. Cropper methodically dragged the knife across the whetstone as he smirked. "She's *always* wet, brother. Why do you think Ford likes to bang her? She's been dying for my more experienced meat this whole time."

Riker dry humped my leg while fucking me with the object. His cigarette and whiskey infused breath practically coated my bare shoulder. "Oo, oo. She's just a regular little slut. Juicier than most sweetbutts."

When he reached in front and pinched my clitoris, I jumped and hissed in air. Of course Riker misinterpreted

this in his own ego-driven way. “See that? I’m making her hot. She’s just dying for it.” When he shoved the object into the hilt, I realized with a nauseating cringe that it was one of those old artillery shells I’d seen lying around the hangar.

Now my protest was wrenched from me. I’d had various and sundry objects shoved inside me in my time, but unexploded ordnance wasn’t one of them.

“You assmuncher!” I twirled around so violently the shell went clanging to the floor, and all three of us froze, gasping.

Only our eyes moved. Three pairs of giant bowling ball eyes fixed on the

shell, which rolled harmlessly toward the fridge.

Only, *I* didn't know how shells explode. Do vibrations in the air set them off? I stayed absolutely still, but Riker couldn't contain himself any longer.

“That’s fucking it!” Lunging at me, he gripped my upper arms and pinned me against the kitchen counter. The hamburger meat was burning, but no one moved to turn it off. The spatula I held in my hand sprayed tiny globules of fat onto Riker’s face. He was an inhuman monster, so he didn’t feel a thing.

“I’m taking this cunt right now. A man can only take so much fucking

teasing.”

Teasing? It was no use to ask what sort of twisted world Riker and Cropper lived in. The answer was unfathomable. Riker had ripped asunder his belt buckle before Cropper stepped in to tear him from my body.

“Hands off, you fucking mongoloid! No one gets to take this cunt but me!”

I lost it, too. “Take? No one’s taking me at *all*, Cropper! This wasn’t part of the fucking deal! You’ve already reneged about a thousand times on our original fucking agreement, and letting Riker maul me to death wasn’t on the table!”

A vein bulged on Riker’s forehead. I’d seen him in this manic state many

times, usually when carrying an extra large, realistic dildo in his hand. “Oh, fuck *this* fucking noise! We’ve never argued over a twat before, Cropper. Let’s not start now.”

And he hit me.

He *punched* me, straight in the face, with his fucking fist.

I don’t know what he was expecting would be the outcome, but I fell like a bag of bare bones.

“Fuck you, dirtbag!” I heard Cropper yell. “If anyone’s going to do her, it’s going to fucking be me.” He kicked me in the stomach.

I was doubled over into the fetal position like a snail. I knew that this was

too, too much. Even helping Speed regain his life and everything he'd worked for, that wasn't worth this. If Speed knew what I was doing for him, he'd go apeshit. It wouldn't be Ford I'd have to worry about killing Cropper, it'd be Speed. This was wrong. This wasn't what Speed wanted, in any way, shape, or form.

I was going to have to get out. Even without my own vehicle—one of the first things Cropper had done was take my car keys—I could escape the Citadel.

I could walk down the hill. No, wait, I'd be caught. They had security cameras on all access roads to the mesa. I could catch a ride with some unsuspecting teamster. Plenty of people who were not

Bare Bones brothers came to the hangar to rent equipment. I could ask the dispatcher who was going down the hill next.

I was going back on my promise to get Speed his justly deserved cut, because this wasn't worth it.

Even as the two guys above me started to brawl, all sorts of blowback entered my mind.

How would I explain to Ford what I'd been doing there and why I left? What if one of the sweetbutts told him I'd been walking around with my boobs showing? Would I be responsible for Speed's life now that I'd ruined it?

And, most importantly, *did I really*

care whether or not Ford killed Cropper?

As Cropper crashed into the picnic-style dining table in a flurry of paper plates and plastic dinnerware, I dragged myself to a sitting position and seriously wondered.

Do I seriously care if Ford kills Cropper?

It was bad and wrong to take a human life no matter how odious the victim was, I knew. If ever anyone deserved to be killed in the worst way possible, it was Cropper. He didn't do one shred of good in the world. He had even been making stupid business mistakes, Ford had told me. He'd been running some arms vehicles in the same

pack as contracted civilian trucks, basically sending AK-47s in the same convoy as a batch of office supplies or eggs. Cropper wanted the illegal trucks to blend in, but his exposure was unacceptable.

Then it hit me. *Ford would be in jail if he killed Cropper.*

Cropper regained his momentum and slammed Riker into the fridge. A box of Cheerios toppled over and spilled little round donuts of oats over Riker's head.

I saw my chance and took it.

There was a smartphone lying on one of the tables that was still standing. I made a sudden dash for it, snatching it up. As I sprinted for the door that led to

the inner hallway, I crashed into someone who was a solid pillar of cement.

Faux Pas took me by the arms. “What the fuck, Madison?”

I pointed with my free hand at the brawling men while shoving the flat phone into the underwire of my worthless bra. “Fighting! Can you stop them?”

Faux Pas let me go and grinned at the men. “Why? They’re doing just fine on their own.”

I watched as Riker picked up the frying pan full of browned meat and slammed Cropper over the head with it. Needless to say, meat went flying everywhere. Standing next to the

dominant, safe presence of Faux Pas somehow relaxed me. I almost laughed when Cropper's eyes seemed to turn into little Xs like in the cartoons, and he slithered to the ground like a snake without a skin.

“I'm more worried about *you*.” Faux Pas looked down at me with what seemed like concern in his eyes. I wasn't that familiar with concern, not having seen much of it in my life. As a kid, and now as a nurse, I was always the one concerned about others. “Why do you stay here without Ford and let that idiot kick you?”

He'd seen Cropper kick me. My first thought was, *this is going directly back*

to Ford. Another few days and I—and Speed—were home free. I couldn't let Faux Pas fuck that up now.

Later, I reflected. My version of “let him fuck things up” was, well, sort of fucked. Fuck up *what*? As though I had a real good thing going? See, my idea of what was normal, what was correct and righteous, was completely skewed back then. I'd never been treated decently, so I didn't know what to expect.

Jake was all right. He treated me just fine, I supposed. I had told him last week that I was breaking up with him and going back to Cottonwood. There was no need to tell him about Ford, that I was really moving to P&E. He'd been hearing about Ford for nine months and

already had seemed exasperated by my attachment to my former stepbrother. He had no idea Ford was the guy eating my pussy on the security tape, I don't think. That wasn't on a need to know basis.

All I could think to tell Faux Pas now was, "Please don't tell Ford." Before I ran off, I added, "It's for Speed. I'm doing this for Speed."

Faux Pas looked perplexed, but he seemed to shrug, and went back to observing the fight.

No one cared about much around there.

I sidestepped into the first room off the main hallway, which turned out to be Ford's office. I'd never had a reason to

go in here before, and lately I'd been afraid to.

My eyes went first to a framed photo on the credenza behind his desk. It's odd that I first noticed that photo, since it was only a five by seven or so, and faded with that sort of old suntanned shade. But it was *me*. Me! I was standing next to Ford out back by our old swimming pool. Ford was bare-chested under his cut and I smiled to see how little chest hair he had back then.

Then smiling hurt, so I stopped, but I lingered on the photo. Ford's smile was so innocent, so free of malice or plots. I could see now what I couldn't see then—that he was thrilled to have his arm around me, that it was the highlight of his

entire year, if not life.

I loved him more fully now, I realized. Our love encompassed so much more than just the shallow puppy love crush of our teens. We touched each other in so many aspects now, and we'd seen a lot more of each other's vulnerabilities, quirks, and kinks. But we still loved. Maybe even more so.

And why the hell was I calling Ford to come and save me? That would ruin all the work I'd done so far, all the work to redeem Speed, to spring him from his unjust prison cell.

I dialed Dominique.

She was Duji's old lady, and Duji was one of the hardened, questionable

Bare Bones charter members. Ford had told me to ring her, to rely on her for information and support.

She picked up.

“Yeah, Dominique? It’s Madison, Ford’s...old lady.” How weird that sounded, “old lady.” But what else was I?

She didn’t seem to recognize who I was, so I barreled on. “He told me to give you a call if I needed anything. That I could depend on you.”

Hearing me talk, maybe that’s what it took to trigger her memory. “Oh! Yes, Madison. Of course. Anything you need. What’s up?”

Those words were music to my ears.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN FORD

“**O**kay. So we’ll take possession of the *suministros* on May eleventh.”

“*Si*. You take possession May eleventh after you’ve left the money with me.” Mr. Lyle Bloodgood actually fit his name perfectly. He literally looked like a snake as he sat in his chair with his head coiled back, about to strike. His eyes were mere dashes in a doglike skull that was carried on a long neck, and his body seemed to move independently of

his head.

“What I want to ensure is,” said Slushy, making a tent out of his fingers, “I want to know that Mrs. Jonas’ land has been under absolutely no fucking surveillance whatsoever, not now, not ever.”

“I can’t guarantee that,” said Mr. Bloodgood thinly. “How can I guarantee something that’s completely metaphysically absurd? I don’t have eyes in the back of my head or eyes on top of Mrs. Jonas’ roof.”

Slushy struck his tent and held his one good hand up in surrender. “All right, that’s it, then. Sorry to have wasted your time, Mr. Bloodgood.”

He even started to stand, but Ford

grabbed the sling he'd made for Slushy and yanked him painfully back into his chair. "No. Wait. He's just being realistic, Slushy." To the lizard lawyer, Ford said, "I feel you. But we need some kind of honorable word that the ATF or Immigration doesn't have eyes on Hardscrabble Ranch."

Bloodgood nodded. "What I *can* guarantee you is that we're not on the ATF's radar. On no one's radar, as far as we know. As Mr. McGill here knows, this tunnel hasn't been used for over a year, since before Mr. Jonas passed. At that time we moved *suministros* into America with absolutely zero hindrance, zero surveillance. We did sweeps on the

area once a month or so.”

Ford said, “Then you won’t mind if I do my own sweeps.” Turk was their surveillance expert. Ford had his SEAL experience, but he was eager to get back to P&E. He would leave Turk down here to make sure the area was clean.

It was Bloodgood’s turn to tent his fingers. “Of course.”

And Ford’s turn to leap to his feet, holding out a hand for the lawyer to shake. “Good. Then we’re all set!”

“Stay vertical,” said Turk, by way of goodbye.

The three men filed out of the lawyer’s office in the Nogales shopping mall. Slushy was all for hitting up the Krispy Kreme right next door, maybe

longing for the Cinnabon franchise he hadn't been able to manage.

Ford wanted to know something. He steered the former cartel lawyer down the mall, away from the sugary delights. "Slushy. He said it's been over a year since you've used the tunnel. Can you remind me again exactly *who* used to run guns and drugs through there? You said Ochoa didn't know about it."

"No, Ochoa didn't, that's true." Slushy was looking here and there, everywhere but into Ford's eyes. "My main dealings were with a guy named Toreador. That's all I knew him by. I swear, that guy missed his fifth grade graduation because he had jury duty,

that's how big of a redneck he was. Why, he'd been married three times and still had the same in-laws."

Turk laughed. He liked redneck jokes, seeing as how he wasn't one, of course. "Did his Halloween pumpkin have more teeth than his wife?"

Slushy got into the spirit of it. "His stereo speakers used to belong to a drive-in movie."

Ford slapped Slushy's chest with the back of his hand. "Listen up. Was he a brother? Did he belong to an MC?" He knew a Toreador who fit that description, and it didn't bode well.

"If you mean motorcycle club, why, yes, I suppose he did. He had a leather vest—"

“Cut,” corrected Turk.

“—with a sort of death’s skull, you know, like the logo on your vest—”

“Cut,” said Ford.

“—and they had the usual scythe on the back of their vests—”

Ford shared a hostile look with Turk.

“—and, ah, let’s see, I think the word ‘Minion’ was on the back. Yeah, that was it, the Something Minions, and —”

“You’re fucking kidding me! You have *got* to be fucking kidding me, Slushy!”

Ford was so irate he had unintentionally backed the lawyer up

against a sign that advertised WingDings. He didn't notice he was poking Slushy in the chest until Slushy wrapped his good hand around the finger and removed it bodily. "What? What did I say?"

Turk helped out. "Baal's Minions? We do business with them, man!"

Huffing and puffing, Ford walked in tiny circles to blow off steam. "It's not just *that*, man!" He gesticulated wildly. "I just gave a beatdown to Mack Fucking Sansing at our rally for treating Madison like a pass-around gash!"

"A *beatdown*?" Slushy wanted to know. "A beatdown as defined as something *I* was subjected to the other day? Or just a, you know, run-of-the-mill

punching a few times until he gets the picture?”

Ford exhaled in a whoosh as he surveyed the horizon. “Like the one you had,” he said offhandedly. “Listen. Why did they stop using the tunnel?”

Slushy shrugged. “The old man died and Mrs. Jonas wouldn’t renew the contract. She was against it until her circumstances recently made it necessary for her to renew. She didn’t want to renew it with this Mr. Fucking Sansing guy. Probably for the same reasons you gave him a beatdown.”

Ford got riled again, throwing up his hands. “Great, just fucking great! That’s abso-fucking-lutely great, Slushy, do you

know that? So you don't think that Baal's Minions are lurking around just waiting to use the tunnel again?"

Slushy protested, "But they don't have the contract with Mrs. Jonas. You do! Listen, you think I want to be in on this crappy deal? I didn't want to see that tunnel again as long as I lived! I just wanted to be a regular sweater-wearing, Trader-Joe-buying, short-story-writing kinda guy! I support the troops but not the war, you know."

Turk said, "Slushy's right. As long as we stay off the Minion's radar, there's no reason we can't operate the tunnel. We haven't even sold them any AKs in a coon's age."

"Language!" warned Slushy.

Turk was confused. “What? I was talking about a raccoon.”

Slushy shuddered. “You weren’t just in the joint. It’s a highly PC place. So listen, Ford. Turk here’s going to install cameras tomorrow on the only access road to the tunnel. Unless the Minions are planning on piggybacking the *suministros* out of there one by one, unlikely seeing as how in a couple months Nogales will be hot enough to burn a polar bear’s butt, my professional opinion is that you’re perfectly fine. The Minions are over it now. Losing their contract was just collateral damage to Mr. Jonas’ death. What would they’ve done if Mrs. Jonas had sold the

property? Force the new owners to do business with them?"

Ford said, "Or carry on the business without the new owner's knowledge. Turk, you got everything you need to get those eyes on the access road?"

Turk nodded. "I've got the credit card. I'll just go to Radio Shack tomorrow morning."

"I'd like to head back to P&E tonight," said Ford.

Slushy said, "Okay if I head back in the truck with Wild Man? There's nothing in there but beer now, right? I mean, as a guy on probation from a federal money laundering stint, I can't be seen riding with any serious iron."

Ford sighed. "Let's go get a Krispy

Kreme. Sure, you can go in the truck. It's empty. But you bring up a good point. You're on probation. You've got fed eyes on you. Do we really want you staying at the Citadel?"

"Listen. I don't think I *want* to stay at the Citadel, from the sounds of things. You mentioned an archery range? That sounds about my speed. I mean, I was up the river for six months. I'm out of the loop. I don't even know what the big brouhaha is about kale."

"Yeah," laughed Turk. "Last I checked, it was some leafy green everyone was intent on avoiding. Suddenly it's trendy."

"Am I right? I just want to kick back

and drink my single malt scotch and complain about the death of print media.”

“Listen, don’t worry, Slushy,” said Ford, holding the Krispy Kreme’s door open for the lawyer. “We’ve got you covered. We didn’t trade all that iron for you for nothing. Laser tag doesn’t sound like a bad idea. Were you planning on riding a Vespa, too? We’ve got some scooters lying around you could have.”

“I’m more of a Prius man. Hey, you told Mr. Bloodgood to stay vertical. What does that mean?”

“It’s a biker thing,” Ford explained, perusing the donut menu on the wall. “You’ll get used to it. You’ll get used to all of it.”



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MADISON

“Well, I can’t say as I’m surprised.” Dominique stalked back and forth across the tiles of the little cell I’d been designated for a room. She did wear a “property of” patch on the back of her white leather jacket, of course hers saying “Duji.” She sported the leather halter top and low-slung jeans of the stereotypical old lady, but Dominique accented her outfit with a string of pearls and rings that must have been family heirlooms. So she didn’t come from trash. She’d been with Duji forever.

She lit a cigarette and went on. “They did a similar thing to me when I was about your age.”

“Cropper?”

“Cropper and Riker. This was before he went to Riker’s Island, by the way, so he wasn’t even as hardened.”

“I can’t imagine that.”

“Yeah, right?” Dominique squinted against her cig smoke as she gazed out the window at the red buttes. “Anyway, right when Duji started showing interest in me as an old lady, that’s when it started. It’s like they can’t stand seeing someone else nail a woman, claim her, make her his. The sweetbutts, the pass-arounds, of course they don’t matter. But

once a woman becomes elevated beyond that station, suddenly Cropper's got a bee up his ass. I'll wager a guess that it's even more intense because it's his son. He and Torino have got a massively oedipal competition thing going on."

"Is that so?" I sat on my knees, enraptured with her words. Plus, I'd never heard anyone actually use "oedipal" in a sentence before. Dominique seemed educated.

"Oh, yeah. It's always just been the two of them since Cropper gave the boot to Torino's mother. And since Torino grew into such a stunning and foxy little colt, Cropper's been green with envy. I'm sure you don't want to hear how Torino landed all the girls that Cropper

wished he could bed.”

“I don’t mind. I know he’s been around the block. So what did they do to you?”

Dominique shrugged, emitting a thin stream of smoke out the window. “They sent Duji off on some dangerous run, just to keep him away. They basically did the same thing to me as what they’re doing to you. Basically a rite of passage to see what I’d tell Duji when he got back. They cut the tits out of my T-shirt, made me wear a miniskirt with no panties on, and any member could play grab-ass with me.”

“But nothing was...forced on you?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “What

exactly do you mean? Rape? No, nothing that bad. It went on for about three days before Duji got back. I think the worst thing was Cropper forced me to give him a blowjob.”

“Ugh.” My stomach actually clenched at the fleeting thought, so I banished it from my mind. “So me making it through this has something to do with them accepting me into the club?”

“Well, you’re never ‘in’ the club. Only male members are. But yes, I think if you fail they would somehow let the member know their displeasure and you probably wouldn’t be an old lady for long.”

“So the others went through it?

Julie? Sapphire? Brunhilda?”

Again, Dominique shrugged and spit smoke out the window. “I don’t think *all* did. Maybe just you and me. You know what I think? I think it creates an even bigger challenge to wear your ‘property of’ patch with pride. Because you *have* to have self-esteem to wear the patch. You had a collar, am I right?”

“Yes. Ford gave me a collar, but Cropper took it. Temporarily only, I hope.”

“Right. Same basic thing as a ‘property of’ patch.”

“Only a bit more BDSM-y.”

Dominique smiled. “Right. But you can’t feel bad about yourself and defend

the patch, or the collar. Hell, I feel worse about what I weigh than about this patch that seems to irk so many women. This is why you *have* to think highly of yourself to ward off all the bad press you're going to get, all the shocked finger-pointing. Think how much tougher you'll be once you go through this trial by fire. Then you'll *really* deserve to wear Property. You'll never put your back against a wall when you're wearing Property."

I stuck out my lower lip. "Because I'll be property of *Ford*, that's why. I'm never getting in the same *building* as his creepy father again."

"You'll have to, honey. Think of all the fish fries, the rallies, the charity runs.

We're all going to do the Laughlin River Run next year. You can't really avoid him, realistically. He's going to be your father-in-law. He's going to visit your house, have dinner with you."

I held my stomach. "And every time I see him, I'll remember this awful week."

Dominique flicked her cig out the window. "No, you won't, honey. It'll fade in time. And think, you'll be more respected because once men see your patch they won't try to hit on you. They won't try to push up on you. You'll have no worries, you'll be carefree like I am, because the patch gives you freedom. Then you'll be part of a larger tribe who all take care of each other."

I snorted. “Do you think Cropper will really give Speed his cut once I pass this test?”

Dominique nodded soberly. “Oh, shit yeah. Shit yeah he will. He doesn’t and a whole lot of stink’ll be raised. That would be a new low even for Cropper. Listen. Next week come and talk to other properties. I’ll have a little tea for you at my house. You don’t need to mention what went on here with Cropper and Riker, just ‘cause, you know...”

“It’s tacky?”

“Tacky, exactly. We’ve all been through our trials, we all carry our burdens. No one’s going to agree on

everything, but we all support our club so you need to get to know them. I'm glad you came to me, honey. Now you'll get the real deal, straight from the horse's mouth."

"Yes, Ford told me to call you. I had no phone. That's why I had to steal Riker's."

Dominique smiled affectionately. "Listen. I'll do you a solid. I'll call Ford for you."

You wouldn't believe how my heart leapt at that! Just knowing that I was talking to a person who would soon talk to Ford meant the world to me. Was I already falling prey to Stockholm Syndrome? "Yes, yes! And let me know what he says! Find out when he's coming

back.”

“I’ll do that. Tomorrow, you think? Are you on The Pill?”

“Yes, but I thought you said that... wouldn’t happen. That I won’t need it.”

“Oh, I have no doubt of that, but you really never know. My recommendation? Just lie back and let them do what they want. Speed will get his cut, Ford will come back, no one will be the wiser, and you never have to deal with Cropper again face to face.”

I nodded sullenly. In fact, someone’s stupid boots were sounding authoritatively down the inner hallway now. No matter how free and independent Dominique claimed to be,

she stiffened visibly at the sound, and stood erect to face the door when Cropper came bursting in.

The sight of Dominique seemed to startle him, thank God. “Oh. Hey. Listen, sweetbutt.” He still liked to call me that, though he knew a thousand times over that I’d been claimed by Ford. “We need you in the billiards room, but not until Clara’s brought you your dinner.”

“Fine,” I said apathetically.

Dominique made a strained face while jerking her head in Cropper’s direction. He looked at her as though she were having a grand mal seizure. I think she was trying to tell me to be more polite to him.

I sighed deeply. “Sure. I’ll be there

soon.”

“Good.” He stormed out, his stupid boots clomping down the hall.

“You need to do better!”

“Oh, Dominique. I don’t feel well, can you blame me? That motherfucking asshole kicked me in the stomach today. I’m bleeding.”

“Bleeding...from your gash?”

That was an interesting word choice.
“Yes. My period’s overdue, that must be it.”

“Are you cramping?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ll bring you some tampons later on tonight, how does that sound? And a boatload of Ibuprofen. You can’t

rely on that shitty, slutty Clara for anything.”

Clara came in then with some Campbell’s soup she’d heated up, but only barely. She was extremely interested in me drinking the entire cup of 7-up. Of course, it’s only in hindsight that I became suspicious. She poured me a giant glass of Jack which I gladly drank, eager to blot out whatever might happen.



In trying to come to terms with what happened next, I’m really hampered because I was in such a foggy haze. I had felt like that only once before—when I’d

been under sedation for an abortion in my early twenties.

I was already groggy when Clara walked me down to the billiards room. My head felt so light it floated near the ceiling, and I immediately suspected the use of Rohypnol, or roofies. In a way, I was glad. It would mean I might even forget some of the events later on, after the fact. That would be nice.

“How many forget-me-now pills did you give me?” I was heavily slurring already, but could still detect Clara’s smirk under the bare fluorescent overhead bulbs.

“What are forget-me-now pills?”

“Roofies.”

She didn't answer immediately. "I don't know nothing about any roofies." She pulled open the door to the billiard room.

"How much booze did I drink?" I asked as Clara shoved me in and shut the door behind me.

"Here she is!" cried Cropper happily, as though I were a contestant who had just "come on down" from the audience. He took me by the wrist and displayed me to maybe three unknown men who wore cuts of a different club. I tried to laser their club's name onto my brain in case I needed the information later. That's how I know the club was Baal's Minions. I kept thinking of

“onion.”

Onion. The Onion. That hilarious online newspaper. Onion. Minion.

“Here’s my little slut.” Cropper twirled me around like a ballerina, which made me even dizzy. He slapped my boobs that protruded from the shelf of my underwire bra, stiffening the nipples, much to the delight of the onlookers, who fondled their own hard-ons. One “up” side was that Riker was absent. It was a sad day in hell when I was glad for that omission. People in desperate straits do desperate things.

“Like the boobies? Nice and plump, just full of fat. Fat in all the right places!”

“Take off the dress,” said one

Minion. He squeezed his hose so tightly I imagined I could see the outline of the corona through his jeans, and I laughed. *I laughed!* This seemed to confuse him, for he dropped his knob and looked around defensively.

In that second I realized it was the one and only Gregg Allman, the sunburned negative raccoon biker who had accosted me in this very hangar during the rally. *The one that Ford had beaten the shit out of.*

This guy had every reason to be pissed, to want payback. Abruptly I stopped laughing, and leaned back on the pool table for support, all melty like a boneless chicken. By now, though, both

the other men were chanting “Take it off, take it off,” and Cropper was making a big show out of taking each sleeve down over my shoulder while smearing some kind of oil all over my boobs, focusing on twiddling with my nipples, a hobby Cropper especially liked.

I knew by now he had some dysfunction in that area. I felt confident he wouldn’t try to violate me vaginally. I wasn’t so sure about the Minions.

Mack, the negative raccoon, stepped up to fill in for Cropper’s hands, smearing them all over my boobs as though admiring bowling balls. “Oo. Big giant knockers, my favorite kind.”

“Mack tried to hit that during the rally,” said Slit. “Then that son of yours

whooped his ass.”

“Hey!” yelled Mack, taking one hand off one boob. “Fuck you!”

It was odd how I could view all of this, detached. I’m sure the roofies helped. Dominique’s words kept circling around my head. *Think of how much tougher you’ll be once you go through this trial by fire.* I liked that she’d called it a “trial by fire.” It made it nobler, somehow, that I was submitting myself selflessly for the improvement of my brother’s life—of my own. It almost made me feel like a maiden, sacrificing herself for her fair knight.

Once I went through this, Cropper

would leave me alone. I would emerge tougher, stronger, and steelier than other old ladies. Viewing it this way was the only way to make it palatable to me, to make me endure.

I was feeling so groggy now my head lolled on my neck, and I prayed for sleep. Then I really wouldn't know what was happening. But Cropper kept slapping my tits, my ass, encouraging the others to do the same. I'd twitch a little at each slap. Soon they were slapping me so often I was jumping like a frog in a sock.

My laughter seemed to piss them off. There was a lot of growling and shouting. A metallic flash, and I thought I saw handcuffs materialize out of

nowhere. I laughed even as Cropper yanked my hands behind my back. They liked how this made my tits jut out, and someone upended a bottle of oil over my chest. Soon they were smearing their hands around like kids finger painting, and I couldn't tell the difference between the ceiling and the floor.

Was I upside down? My head banged against something, but I couldn't feel any pain. The phrase *cross-eyed and painless* kept going through my head. Men were fighting. I saw upside down items on the walls, like one of those beer signs where the waterfall moves. A six-foot leather sign, RED ROCKS ORIGINAL, was tacked to the

wall like a saddle. Someone grabbed one of my feet—I think they were trying to tie my ankle to one of the corner pockets of the pool table.

“You’re a perv, Cropper,” said someone, Slit I think. “You get off on fucking your daughter-in-law.”

“No fucking allowed, I told you that,” said Cropper. I wondered why not. He had done everything else. It must’ve been his sexual dysfunction. He couldn’t stand watching anyone else do what he couldn’t.

“I’m doing her anyway, Cropper,” said Mack, and that’s when I vomited.

The Jack mixed with the soup must’ve just not sat well in my stomach. I took about as much notice of it as a fly

on the wall, but these prissy clean freaks were sure grossed out by it.

“Eyew,” cried Slit. “I’m not gonna hit that.”

“Good,” said Cropper. “More for us. Fatboi, there’s a roll of paper towels over there.”

“Why do I always have to clean up the mess?” whined Fatboi. “Toreador always makes me do it at home, and I haven’t been a prospect for years.”

The last things I remembered were someone wiping vomit off my face and hair—not doing a very good job, as expected—then a whole blurry array of disgusting naked noodles being jacked off over me. An upside down Cropper

gripping his own johnson brought the bile back up in my throat. I remember thinking how unsafe it was to vomit while lying on your back. *That's the way Jimi Hendrix died.*

Little shocks of someone slapping my mound were the only thing keeping me awake. The only time I remember crying out was when the warmth of a bearded face scraped my inner thigh. Now I was disgusted that someone actually wanted to tongue fuck me when I was bleeding. My struggles only riled the gross pigs higher. They jacked their tools enthusiastically. Only when I saw all four of them standing over the pool table, their arms pistoning like a Datsun engine, did it strike me that someone

else had come into the billiard room. Whose face was between my legs, lapping away as though I were a soft cone machine? I could feel the pressure of the tongue and the bristle of facial hair, but the nerve endings that regulated pain or pleasure were dead.

When the first splash of prick juice hit my chest, I mercifully went out like a light. I just wanted to wake up at the other end of this horrifying, nauseating tunnel, safe and alive.

The last thing I later recalled was someone going, “Oh, nasty, Riker. You look like you’ve been having the Cuntino Filet with Red Sauce.”

Seriously doctor, I know I heard that.

And I'm almost entirely positive I felt the bearded man lap up puddles of spunk from my tits and stomach.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

FORD

“She rises up out of a sea of faces and embraces me passionately—a thousand eyes, noses, fingers, legs, bottles, windows, purses, saucers all glaring at us, and we in each other’s arms oblivious. I sit down beside her and she talks—a flood of talk. Wild consumptive notes of hysteria, perversion, leprosy. I hear not a word because she is beautiful and I love her and now I am happy and willing to die.” ~ Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*

Ford had never been so excited to return home.

Dominique had called him to tell him Madison’s phone had fallen into the

toilet or something. Madison had asked her to call him just to let him know she was fine. There was also going to be a party for Speed the following night, to celebrate him patching in, but Ford didn't really listen to that part.

“Did she finish doctoring the sweetbutts? Where's she staying?”

Dominique sounded tired. “She finished the job, but it was rough on her. All sorts of crotch crickets in that crowd you've got at the Citadel. She's resting up at my house. I'll take her back to get her car so she can go to the party tomorrow night.”

I have a family, he kept telling himself. *I've got a family.*

Never had an old lady felt so much

like his wife as Madison. They knew each other so well, but now were discovering each other all over again in a thousand different ways. They had removed all the obstacles in their way. All Madison had to do was obtain a job at a P&E hospital, but she said she had some good referrals and connections there.

His work done, all Ford had to do was set up the party tomorrow at his house. Russ Gollywow and his group of spinning, finger-snapping guys in matching suits would perform on the deck. Ford called the caterer he used all the time then chose from a menu selection online which dishes he wanted

the chef to prepare. He sent his housekeeper to get the beer keg. He usually sent a sweetbutt to do that, but eerily enough, there *were* no sweetbutts anymore. Entire suites were left empty, being vacuumed by the maid.

Ford was so happy he was even playing air guitar as he counted how many drinking glasses he had left that hadn't been broken at previous parties. Just one nagging thing prodded at the back of his brain. *Why hasn't Madison called me?*

He didn't get ahold of her until eleven o'clock. Her normal bedtime was ten, so that might've explained why she sounded so unbelievably exhausted. Still, the whole exchange gave him a

sad, suspicious feeling.

“Hi, Ford.” She sounded like a little girl in bed with her teddy bear.

“Hey, sugar cookie.” Why did he feel her tense just at that endearment? What had happened? He plowed ahead. “I haven’t talked to you all week. I feel like Samson without his hair. Or Green Lantern getting weak when he’s around wood.”

“Around wood...?”

“Never mind. I’m glad you don’t know. Anyway, I’m glad you called Dominique. She’ll take care of you. She said you’re coming to Speed’s party tomorrow. You’ve never seen my house.”

“I know. I can’t wait.”

However, she sounded as if she could totally wait, and wait a long time. Ford had to accept defeat, that she was just utterly exhausted. “Are you coming down with something? You sound more tired than usual. Did that doctor give you any trouble?”

At this, she became defensive. Ford could hear her sitting up in bed, leaning on her elbow to protest. “No, no! I’m not getting sick. I just...didn’t realize how draining it would be dealing with those sweetbutts and their fucking chlamydia, and then your father...”

“I know, sugar. My dad can be a righteous pain in the ass. But now

you've done it, and I'll find another nurse to do it next time, maybe in six months. I know you don't like interacting with my dad."

"Yes." That one word was so thin and reedy. It was as though she were falling asleep as she talked. "Please don't make me interact with your dad."

"You won't have to. He'll be at the party tomorrow of course, but you don't even have to talk to him."

"Good..."

"I'll let you get some sleep. I love you, *mija*."

She already seemed asleep. Instead of being the insecure, insistent lover demanding she say "I love you" in return, Ford just quietly hung up. *Let her*

sleep.

He headed for the shower. The master bath had windows on two walls that looked out over the crimson spires, layered like red velvet cake and cinnamon frosting. *This damned life sometimes. It's rough, but I guess I wouldn't trade it for anything.*



Gollywow and his pack of backup Dynamics were smoothly cooing about being stone in love when Madison arrived.

Ford was on the deck talking to a P&E owner of an electronics franchise.

They didn't tend to invite too many of the local business community to these functions, but there were a few stalwarts. These pillars of the town could be relied on for a good party or to come through for the club in small but important ways, and Bob Jackinsky was one of them.

“We're not in the business of telling other clubs what to do,” said Ford, “but we do police our territories to make sure our protocol and customs are being followed or at least respected.”

“Exactly,” said Bob. “When I hear of someone trying to do business between here and Prescott, I make sure to let you know.”

“I hear you,” said Cropper. “We're

just overseeing our own backyard, keeping people safe with our muscle.”

“You’re the Dominant club around here,” acknowledged Bob. “And likewise, if I see a fellow Chamber of Commerce member being harassed by some fucking punks, I come straight to you. You’ve got the best muscle in town, willing to go to the mat for us. Now, how is this new guy? Speed?”

Cropper looked skeptical. He made an “ah” after gulping his beer. “Speed’s got to know that putting on a three-piece rocker means he’s ready to die for this club. I doubt that he fully realizes that yet.”

Ford said, “He knows that, Cropper.

He knows he's coming into our world and leaving his world behind."

Cropper said thoughtfully, "I wonder if he knows how much has been sacrificed for him."

Bob frowned. "Sacrificed *for* him? Isn't it more the other way around? I heard something about his experience in the desert. That's why he's wearing his arm in a sling tonight."

Ford didn't know what Cropper was talking about, either. "What's he sacrificed? He's *gained* everything, and lost nothing, as far as I can see."

"He's just not old school enough. He didn't grow up steeped in the club traditions, like you were. He'd better erase any ideas about women wearing a

diamond on their rags.”

Ford was confused. Did Speed have an idea that women could join the MC? Cropper must be referring to Madison. “I don’t think Speed harbors any notions like that. He knows Madison will never sit at our table. Is that what you mean?”

“Something like that,” Cropper said distantly, gazing at the far end of the deck where the men spun around and dialed invisible rotary phones in the air. “He needs to know we’re just about brotherhood, bikes, and riding.”

Ford followed his gaze. Madison had finally arrived. She stood in the open sliding door looking around tentatively. Ford knew it was

overwhelming at first, coming to one of their parties. Ford was glad his house sat on five acres. The farther from neighbors, the better. Madison might be afraid of a repeat of the rally events, but Ford had specified that no Baal's Minions were ever to be invited to club events again. Whatever gun running Cropper did with them he could do on his own time.

“Excuse me,” Ford said to Bob, and headed over.

He heard Cropper mutter, “Man, these guys,” meaning the Dynamics. “They’ve got as many costume changes as Cher.” Cropper had never approved of Russ’ musical hobby. He thought it looked sissy.

They'd only been apart six days but it felt like a lifetime, and Ford found himself squeezing the daylights out of Madison, lifting her feet off the floor, carrying her to the kitchen island.

"Ford," she whispered close to his ear as he set her on the island—right on a crudité tray, as it turned out.

He kissed her lightly over and over, on her lips, her cheek, the tip of her nose. Gollywow crooned about owning the first house on the moon. It was as though he cast romantic moon dust over Ford's love. He held Madison's skull between his palms to prevent her from avoiding him. At last he rested his forehead against hers, panting with what

suddenly seemed like a massive exertion.

He was literally dizzy with love.

“*Mija*. You’re coming to my bedroom.”

“No!” Stiffening, Maddy gripped Ford’s forearm to hold him away from her. Her wide eyes seemed frightened for some reason.

Ford tried to chuckle casually, lifting the curtain of hair that obscured her face. “Come on, *mija*. I want to make love to you with my mouth.”

“No!” Her protest was more strident this time, definitely tinged with fear.

“I get it. You’re nervous about the party. Don’t be. It’s just an average party. None of those other clubs are

here, just a few civilians from town.” He stroked her face with the back of his hand, overjoyed just to see her wide button eyes like a doll’s, her little pointed nose, her fur-lined collar.

“That’s it,” she said. “I’m nervous about Speed’s patching in. I mean, after all he’s done to earn it, I’m so worried it’ll be taken away from him. I saw Faux Pas out front rubbing red dirt on Speed’s new patch. At first I thought he was insulting him.”

Ford laughed. Everyone thought that. “Nope. We’re just welcoming him to the club, helping break in his brand spanking new patch. Don’t worry. No more tricks like the vision quest thing. He’s done

with that. He's a full-fledged Bare Bone now, Maddy. The only way he's getting out is to have the ink burned off his back. Listen. Let me at least give you a tour of the house."

So Madison allowed Ford to show her a couple of the suites. In one of them, though, Riker was banging some hoebag up against the wall while a maid stood idly by with towels draped over her arm, waiting to get into the bathroom. Worse, Riker was wearing nothing but his cut with the eight ball patch that told people he'd performed certain sex acts in front of witnesses.

Ford's automatic reaction was to laugh—although the New Ford who had an old lady named Maddy was sort of

inclined to view such activity with disdain.

Madison's reaction was extreme. She squeaked a high-pitched sound of anxiety and ran off down the hall. Literally ran.

Ford caught her by the stairs that led up to the main level. "*Mija*, what's wrong? Don't worry—the master suite isn't even *on* this level. You'll never have to stumble on *that* sight, that's for sure. I know Riker's hairy ass is enough to make you break out the eye bleach."

Madison chuckled too, but it sounded forced. "Yeah, that's it. My eyes, my eyes! I can never unsee that."

Ford lovingly backed her up against

the wall and kissed her forehead. He may have even angled his full crotch against her hip. "I'm sorry, *mija*. I know there are lots of things to get adjusted to. I never guaranteed I'd be anything like your doctor asshole."

She held her body stiffly against the wall. She even seemed to hold her breath. "I love how you can't say 'doctor' without adding 'asshole.'"

There was some of the old humor he knew and loved. Ford speared his fingers through her silky hair and pinned her to the wall. He could not wipe the smile that seemed permanently glued to his face. "That's what he is. I call 'em as I see 'em. I hope he didn't give you a very hard time. No, wait. I don't want to

know. You belong to me.”

“I know,” she whispered, clutching the edges of his cut.

“I don’t want that asshole, or any other asshole, ever coming between you and me again. Do you feel me, sugar?”

She nodded mechanically, like a little child pretending to agree. What was wrong with her today? “I feel you, Ford. I just want to take it a little...ah, slowly. Can you feel that? I don’t like jumping directly from one man to another. It seems kind of...I don’t know. Dirty.”

Ford had to guffaw as he looked up at the ceiling. His entire torso now pressed her into the wall, and his dick

throbbed against her. “Oh, no, we’re *never* dirty around here! Come on, sugar. Give me some sugar. It’s been a *long* fucking time.”

But Madison was stiff as a drink. If anything, she became stiffer as he spoke. “I, ah...I’ve got my period. I don’t want to. It’s messy. Give me some time. Look, your guests are going to miss you.” Squirming out from under him, Madison yanked Ford by the hand.

He had no choice but to follow her upstairs, back to the party, but he wondered.

She had just given him about eight different excuses not to make love to him. What had happened while he was fucking around in Nogales? Ford fixed

on Cropper as the logical suspect, and out on the deck he took him aside.

“What went on while I was gone? Maddy was working in the hangar doctoring sweetbutts. What happened?” As if he expected an honest answer. Cropper rarely gave that, unless the answer was something harmless, like “bubble gum.”

As expected, Cropper shrugged innocently. “Maybe Riker scared her.”

“That just happened five minutes ago. I can imagine how many times it happened if she worked in the hangar for two days.”

“Exactly. See my point? Hey, when’re the appetizers going to be set

out? People are drinking on empty stomachs here.”

Since when did Cropper care about drinking on an empty stomach? Ford went into the kitchen anyway to consult with the chef. While they were discussing cream cheese and mushrooms, Faux Pas wandered into Ford’s line of sight. Faux Pas was younger, more of Ford’s generation than Cropper’s crowd of Duji, Riker, and Tuzigoot. He had been around the Citadel last week. Ford accosted him in the great room.

“Listen.” Ford cut right to the chase. “Maddy is acting strangely. If anything went down last week while I was gone, you’d tell me, right?”

“Oh, indubitably.” English being Faux Pas’ second language, sometimes he chose odd words. “If it was within my rights to tell.”

That didn’t set right with Ford. “So something *did* happen, but you have no right to talk about it?”

“You could interpret it that way.”

“Who *might* have the right to discuss it? Cropper?”

“Yes. That sounds about right. Cropper.”

“And Riker, no doubt.”

“And Riker.”

If Faux Pas was under the ban of silence, there was nothing Ford could do about it other than beat it out of him.

Since he didn't know the nature of the offense, he wasn't sure how to proceed.

Just as he spied Madison popping a mushroom into her mouth and was about to head over, his dilemma was solved for him.

Solved for the end of time. In a way, he reflected later, he'd rather have been in the dark. Ignorance was bliss, most of the time.

He had a guard at the front door, but why would he keep out Tonya, Cropper's citizen wife? She rarely, if ever, came to Ford's house, preferring to keep to her country club set. Her bleached white hair with the dark roots was unmistakable, and she was the only woman wearing high heels and

stockings.

Cropper was just stepping in the sliding glass door from the deck when his wife spotted him. She whipped off her round bug-like shades and fully looked about to cry, “Aha!”

Normally it would’ve been funny the way Cropper froze solid like a fatal error screen when he saw Tonya. Narrowing her eyes, she stalked right up to Cropper. Ford had no idea of the nature of their relationship. He’d rarely seen them talk together. The few functions Tonya attended, well, she didn’t attend any Ford could recall. At straight citizen’s functions she seemed to chat mostly with other society wives.

Now she shrieked, “You fucking lowlife!”

Pretty much everyone in the room froze now, too. Out on the deck, Gollywow’s group continued to warble about that spark of magic being in someone’s eye, but inside the great room it was all about Tonya and whatever she was about to scream.

“Now, Tonya,” said Cropper, but his citizen wife would not be stopped.

“That’s it! I’ve fucking had it! God damned fucking crew screws going on at a place of business? Fucking *trains* being pulled on women? That’s *it*, Edward! I’ve put up with some ridiculous shenanigans but this tops the

fucking cake!”

Cropper grabbed Tonya by the wrists. “Now, let’s just go into this next room and discuss this calmly like adults.”

Tonya wrenched free. Everyone stared avidly at the train wreck they couldn’t turn away from. “Not a fucking chance, buddy! So what, so you can rape *me* too? I knew you were a bunch of fucking disgusting pigs but a fucking bukkake session on top of some poor innocent *drugged girl*?” Tonya actually spit on Cropper. She spit on him!

Normally this would be an occasion for celebration and great glee, but something was eating at Ford. *Who was Tonya talking about?* Madison stood

about eight feet away, a couple of people in between them. Whatever color she had in her face had drained completely away, and now she slunk backward, toward the foyer.

It was such a sickening thud of realization in the pit of Ford's stomach. His whole world went dark for a few seconds. He had enough presence of mind to realize he might be blacking out, so he reached for the back of a chair and took deep breaths. He could see Tonya again, and Cropper's face was as red as a baboon's ass as he tried to steer Tonya by the wrists into the back hallway.

“Fucking rapists!” Tonya continued shrieking.

Ford must have covered the ten steps in one, because suddenly he was with the struggling couple as they battled it out in the hallway. Ford, too, tried to grab Tonya's arm.

"Tonya!" he bellowed, his voice practically vibrating the very rafters. "Who are you talking about? *Who* did they bukkake on?"

Cropper growled between clenched teeth. "You tell my son, woman, you're as good as dead."

"I'm dead anyway, you disgusting pig! You roofied your own stepdaughter and let a bunch of disgusting, filthy douchebags pull a train on her. I saw the fucking pictures some scumbag sent to

my phone. You ought to be fucking arrested, not allowed into the country club!”

Cropper let go of Tonya in order to slug her, but she dodged his blow and he hit the wall instead. This gave Tonya enough leeway to scurry away, shrieking invectives down the hall. Ford, of course, held Cropper tightly enough so he couldn't go after Tonya, but Tonya's safety actually came second, after spilling his rage onto his father. That came first.

Tonya had to half-squat, she was screaming so loud. “I never want to see you again, you pig! Your membership in everything is revoked and the locks are being changed as we speak! You fucking

arrange a group grope of your own stepdaughter, that's where I get off the bus! You can't blame Riker for everything forever!"

Ford didn't stick around to watch Tonya stalk out with her pride intact. He exploded with a killer right hook followed up with a lightning left uppercut to Cropper's stupid fucking jaw. Blood splashed the wall, and as Cropper went down, Ford kneed him in the solar plexus.

"Whoa, whoa!" Of course it was Riker himself, coming to bail out his President. From a corner of his eye, Ford could see that Turk and Faux Pas were actually trying to restrain Riker

from getting in the middle of it.

Good. In a rage, Ford kicked and stomped Cropper's stomach and crotch. He was literally blinded with rage, not in control of what he was doing. Mere words couldn't suffice to express his rage, so he didn't say a thing. The crimson gash of Cropper's mouth only incited him more, and he fell to his knees to continue pummeling that face.

"Fucker. Fucker. Fucker." Someone was saying that over and over, and Ford realized it was him. He punched Cropper so violently he was spraying himself with blood.

Finally Turk came to hustle Ford away, allowing Riker to hustle Cropper. "Where's Madison?" Ford roared.

“Where’s Madison?”

“Never mind about that,” said Turk.
“Let’s just get you safe in here.”

Turk rushed Ford into a bathroom, where he slammed and locked the door. It was more for everyone else’s safety, not Ford’s.

“Where’s Faux Pas?” Ford roared.
“I’m not calming the fuck down until you get me Faux Pas!”



CHAPTER TWENTY

MADISON

I blindly jumped in my old Honda and tore down the freshly paved street.

I was beyond too mortified to cry or lash out in any way.

“Only” about twenty people had heard Tonya’s declarations, but it’d be a matter of minutes before those twenty went and told twenty more, who told twenty more, and...The shame that swept over me had weakened my knees. I had expected these tight-knit men to keep a lid on what had happened. Tonya was the loose cannon that blew that

whole plan to kingdom come.

I saw the fucking pictures, Tonya had shrieked. *What* pictures? I guessed someone had taken photos of me unconscious on the pool table, that was all I could figure.

I was completely out of P&E town limits before I even paused to notice my surroundings. I had no idea where I was going, but my foot kept pressing the gas, and of course I was headed north, back to Flagstaff. It wouldn't occur to me to cry to Ingrid for anything, and June was living in Kenya.

Did this mean Speed wouldn't get to keep his cut? He'd earned it, fair and square. *No*. Ford would see to it that Speed kept his cut, his patches, his

ranking.

I wondered what Ford had done to Cropper. How exactly angry would he be? Is this something that went on all the time in their club? Cropper must have roofied other old ladies of Ford's, although Dominique hadn't told me of any. She had admitted the entire oedipal complex thing, the competition between the men, the youth obsession Cropper had.

I was out of my mind with shame, terror of what Ford might do, fear of what might happen to Speed. I hadn't stuck around to listen, but Tonya no doubt screamed about the Baal's Minions, too. Everything I had feared

would see the light of day. The Minions would go to war with the Bare Bones, people would be beaten if not killed, and Ford would murder Cropper.

That last was the biggest. I could care less if Ford and Turk beat up on a few Minions. What kind of karma did I have with those two Illuminati men? I'd been trying to prevent Ford from burying Cropper for fourteen years now.

I tried to organize my brain as I headed north to Flagstaff.

I had thought it might blow up in everyone's faces. Just not *this* soon.

I hadn't expected the cold, jumpy way I was toward Ford at the party. I hadn't expected that side effect of Cropper's treatment. Surely Ford would

have figured it out sooner or later. Ford wasn't famous for his extreme patience. I hadn't counted on how it would affect the way I felt toward Ford, although he'd had *less* than anything to do with my mistreatment.

But it was only logical. Of *course* it would affect my psyche. I already had troubles reaching orgasm with another man. Ford was the first and only man to break that barrier, but I'd always known I could easily slip back into it again, given some psychological trauma. Rape victims—although they hadn't technically raped me, as far as I knew—maybe I should ask Tonya what the pictures showed—often withdrew into

themselves and developed warped sexual responses in harmless situations, like with mates.

How long could I have continued to pretend to be fine, while withdrawing from sexual contact with Ford?

“Oh my god!” I sobbed, clenching the steering wheel as though I wanted to tear it off the column. “What the fuck!” I didn’t want to start crying or I wouldn’t be able to see the road. The sun was setting and already I was driving into the dim desert.

Of course my phone was peeling and tinkling and making all kinds of announcements that Ford was calling me. Dominique called, too. The phone was muffled in my purse and I didn’t dare

reach for it. My eyesight had been getting progressively worse and I'd been on the verge of buying glasses when Ford had re-entered my life. Now I was too fucking vain for them, too worried about snagging and keeping Ford on the hook, especially with so many lithe and younger sweetbutts around.

I needed to know what Ford had done, how he'd reacted to Tonya's dramatic announcement. In a way, I was glad it had all blown up in Cropper's face. Now he really *couldn't* take Speed's cut away, no, not after all that I'd done to keep his precious cut intact.

It finally dawned on me. *Ford might hate me.* He might somehow find a way

to justify Cropper's actions and blame it all on me. I'd seen things like that happen before, in the hospital. Family members whose brains couldn't accept the fact that their loved ones had drunk or done drugs to the extent they'd wound up in a coma. In such cases people go through all kinds of mental calisthenics to let the loved ones off the hook, even to the point of blaming others. How many times had I heard people bellowing "You did it! You caused him to take those drugs and go into a coma!" In a way, it made it easier to accept.

Cropper was Ford's father. Would Ford jump through a million hoops to let Cropper off the hook?

"God! What the fuck have I done?" I

screamed.

I should never have agreed to hang around the Citadel without Ford there! Speed's cut wasn't *that* important! He had made a good living as a mechanic before, he could certainly do so without the fucking Bare Bones! Why the hell did I ever get involved with them?

I should've cut Ford loose! I never should've let him put his face between my legs at the hospital. That was the beginning of this entire mess. I had a fine life with Jake. Between Jake, my friends, and my job, what was I lacking?

Passion. I had my answer immediately even as I asked myself the rhetorical question. *Passion.* I was

passionately in love with Ford. I couldn't escape that fact. Our love would forever be tumultuous, full of turmoil, itches in hard to reach places, angst, and above all—mind-blowing, toe-curling sex.

Did I have that with Jake, or any other man for that matter? No I did not. There. Question answered.

There was no way to stay away from Ford.

But I could *force* myself. Put one foot in front of the other, right?

In Flagstaff, I pulled up in Sabrina's driveway, but sat in my car. I listened to my voicemails to get the lay of the land, to see which way the wind was blowing. Not back on me, I hoped.

First was Dominique. Ford was presumably still beating the living shit out of Cropper. Dominique even said so. “Honey, where’d you go? I know you must be embarrassed as hell, but don’t be, I swear. This is all on the men. They dug their own fucking graves, now they have to lie in them. Don’t run away. Ford loves you like life itself. Where’d you go? Now I’m worried.”

Then, of course, Ford himself. He was still panting from the exertion of whatever he’d done to Cropper. “Sugar!” he shouted. I couldn’t tell if it was anger or passion that colored his voice. “Where the fuck did you go? Ziggy told me you headed out the door.

Can't say as I blame you. Call me!"

Two more messages were increasingly frantic, but neither one gave any indication of what he'd done or his outlook for me.

All I knew was, I was way too ashamed to face him. Not now. Maybe not ever.

I'd seen those people in the hospital. I'd seen how the victim got blamed.

I could see how he might even say I brought it upon myself. He could claim that Speed would have gotten his cut back anyway, and Cropper was just using that excuse to manipulate me. He could say I was gullible in falling for Cropper's lies.

I'd even seen some whacked

relatives in the hospital try to claim that the victim “asked for it.” Anything. Abso-fucking-lutely *anything* to get out of assigning the blame to the perpetrator. “Maybe she secretly wanted it.” I’ve seen some warped shit, as I believe all nurses have. “She’s probably a secret whore. I don’t want her anyway.” Way stranger things have been known to happen, and in my freaked-out mindset, I was prepared for anything.

So I called back Dominique. I needed to find out what had happened after I’d left without getting involved in the entire drama of Ford.

“Madison! Where are you?”

I didn’t feel like answering.

“Dominique. What happened after I ran out? I’m so worried.”

“Well, Ford beat the crap out of Cropper, of course. Of *course* that’s what happened! What did you expect?”

Immediately I went on the defensive. “Shit, Dominique! That’s exactly why I always *refrained* from telling Ford anything that Cropper did to me! I never told you the disgusting things Cropper used to do to me as a teenager. I never told Ford about any of that, either. In fact, I *ran* because of that. Ford never knew why I left home. *Oh, God!*”

That last was a sob, and Dominique’s voice softened. “What the fuck? Yeah, I know, Cropper’s been into the young ones for a long-ass time.

Listen, though, you have to come back. Come back and face Ford. I know you probably feel embarrassed as all shit. But believe you me, it's not as bad as it probably seems to you right now."

"Dominique. Two hundred people heard what Cropper did to me! I mean, what exactly did those photos consist of?"

She snorted. "Apparently one of the Baal's Minions guys took photos with his cell which he blasted to some brothers, and somehow the pictures wound up in Tonya's hands. Those assholes. They can never resist bragging about their fucking exploits."

"But what did they show? Did you

get any idea?”

“Well, from what Tonya was screaming, it seems that Riker—typical, just fucking typical—was giving you a moustache ride while Cropper and a few Minions were bludgeoning their beefsteaks over your body. Sorry, but it needed to be said.”

“Oh, don’t be sorry! I wanted to know, so I asked. Nothing else, though? No actual, uh, penetration?”

“I don’t think so. I think you’re safe.”

“Well, you know the worst part? You remember I was bleeding. I think Cropper caused me to miscarry.”

Dominique was silent for a few seconds. Then, “Oh, God.”

“I know, right? I mean, it feels

different than a regular period.”

“Probably because the asshole kicked you. Sister, you need to run right out and get a pregnancy test. It’ll tell you how far along you were. Oh, wait. You’re a nurse. I keep forgetting.”

“So he beat the crap out of Cropper?” Sabrina had seen my car sitting in her driveway. She was standing in front of my hood gesticulating wildly. She’d moved to Flag about four years after I had, gotten all messed up on drinks and drugs, but had just discovered AA. Now she was waitressing and sharing a house with a few fellow AAers. Funny that the girl with the good background and stable

mother turned out to lose it so heavily.

“Yes. Don’t worry, he didn’t murder him. Yet. Riker came and shuttled Cropper out the door, no one knows where, but he’s safe for now.” Dominique sighed. “Then Turk took Ford into the bathroom and the party kind of broke up from there.”

“Okay.” I pressed the bridge of my nose between my fingers. “I just need some down time now. Do you feel me?”

“Oh, I feel you, all right. Give these guys a week to sort it out and everything’ll be back to normal. And do go get that pregnancy test.”

“I will.”

I exited my car, just now realizing I didn’t have a single change of clothing,

not even a toothbrush—how apropos. Sabrina was used to that, having housed me when I was a teenaged vagrant, basically.

“What’re you doing here? I didn’t hear a call from you.” She hugged me.

“Oh, it’s a long-ass story, Sabrina. But I think my fucking life is over.”

“All right. Why don’t you come inside and have a cup of coffee?”

I remembered she was clean and sober. It was the first time I had cursed that decision of hers.



CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE FORD

“When I realize that she is gone, perhaps forever, a great void opens up and I feel that I am falling, falling into deep, black space. And this is worse than tears, deeper than regret or pain or sorrow, it is the abyss into which Satan was plunged. There is no climbing back, no ray of light, no sound of human voice or human touch of hand.” ~ Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer*

She was doing it again.

Madison was a runner. She liked to run.

What the pictures had shown, from Ford's understanding, was so far from being her fault, yet she took it upon herself to feel responsible.

Ford knew the shit that went down in the clubhouse when old ladies were gone. He'd participated in most of it. Tag teaming, bukkaking harmless girls, and Cropper liked to roofie them first. Gave him more of a sense of power.

That's why Ford had wanted Madison to stay away from the Citadel. He didn't trust Cropper with her, not after seeing what Cropper did to young girls, the holes in the walls at the Bum Steer. Worst was probably what Faux Pas had told him after the brouhaha had

died down.

Ford had finally torn Turk away from the bathroom door. Faked him out, more like. He looked in the mirror, rubbed his face, sighed heavily, and when Turk was least suspecting it, Ford leaped for the door and ripped it open.

And yes, he punched Faux Pas around before he'd even said a word. No one knew what his beef was with Faux Pas so no one stepped in. If the beef was legitimate, if Faux Pas had somehow participated in the train or crew screw or whatever had occurred, then Ford had every right to beat the ever-loving shit out of him. Most people stood back at a safe distance, front row seats to the brawl.

But Faux Pas couldn't answer him well if he was bloodied and spitting out teeth, so Ford held back. Faux Pas may have been under the ban of silence but Cropper was gone now. Cropper had done a vile, unforgiveable thing, and now it was Faux Pas' duty to come clean. So Ford just bloodied his nose a little, and he probably didn't knock out any teeth.

"I'll *tell* you, all right?" Faux Pas' eyes flickered with anger. No doubt he didn't appreciate being whaled on just for having had some knowledge. "She was in the hangar last week like I told you."

"But you left out some important

parts, my brother.”

“I did. Listen, I don’t know what sort of agreement you’ve got with Cropper, and he’s the President. I don’t know what agreement you’ve got with Madison.”

“We can leave, bro,” said Turk. “You should confront Faux Pas in private.”

Ford turned on his best friend. “Don’t leave. Stay! I want every last one of you to hear this. Faux Pas. What. The fuck. Happened.”

“Well, I first saw Cropper kick her. In the stomach, while she was already down.”

Ford would have lost it at that, but he had to keep it together to hear the rest

of the story. His tone was murderous. “*What. The. Fuck, Faux Pas.* You don’t think that’s something you should’ve been telling me?”

Faux Pas threw up his hands. “Who the fuck knows these days, *savez vous?* Cropper’s been doing whatever he wants, however he wants it for a long fucking time!”

A lot of men mumbled in agreement. Faux Pas was right. Ford shouldn’t shoot the messenger. “What then?” he demanded.

“Well, then those two fuckheads—Cropper and Riker—proceeded to beat the crap out of each other. She begged me not to tell you—said she was doing it

all for Speed.”

“I knew it. I fucking knew it,” moaned Speed, clutching his head. “It’s all because I stacked the ride.”

“Then what?” Ford demanded.

“Then I didn’t see her again until... the incident Tonya talked about, with the pictures and all. Those Baal’s Minions were there, but from our club it was just Cropper and Riker, naturally. Anyway, the only part I glimpsed—are you sure you want to hear this, Torino?”

Ford narrowed his eyes so they were slits. “Indubitably.”

“I saw...” Faux Pas looked from side to side, shifting in his boots uncomfortably. He crapped out on owning up to what he’d seen, at first. “I

saw what Tonya said. Crew screw. Except no, you know, screwing part. They were just pulling their puddings. You know how Cropper does. And..."

Ford stepped closer to Faux Pas. Faux Pas was maybe one inch taller, but Ford easily faced him down with superior muscle power and rage. Faux Pas flinched. "And," he said, to postpone Ford's rage a split second. Then his words came all in a rush. "And she was bleeding. And Riker had his stupid fucking face between her legs."

"Oh God." Ford had to wander over to a window just to prevent himself from strangling Faux Pas.

Men murmured in agreement, in

disgust. Women were more vocal. “That’s just *wrong*.” “Riker needs to be stopped.” “He needs to be put on a fucking leash!”

Ford had wanted the club to hear because he wanted them to dislike Cropper and Riker as much as he did. He wanted them to know the full story so that when he went to kill Cropper, they would understand and back him up.

Cropper and Ford had never really gotten into it physically before. They’d thrown a few toasters and television sets at each other in their time, but never really given each other a beatdown. This time was different. This was the woman Ford loved with all his heart, and Cropper couldn’t even leave her alone.

While it was somewhat true to a certain extent that Speed would have to work off the price of the bike since the club owned it, in no one's book was it written that the Vice President's old lady would have to work off her brother's debt in sex.

Now that they had to vote about how to proceed, they needed to get away from the women. "Church in fifteen," Ford shouted to the room. He went to the master suite to get his Sig Sauer, sticking it in the usual spot, under his belt at the small of his back. Just in case he saw Cropper.

He was going to bury that motherfucker once and for all.

Riker could stay. Cropper was the engineer of this entire mindfuck. Riker was just a warped son of a bitch. Also a combat veteran, Riker probably had traumatic brain injury just like Ford, but he'd been hexed since birth by drug addict parents. Riker was just twisted, the sort of guy who'd think it was fun lapping blood from an unconscious woman's pussy.

Riker had excuses up the yin-yang for his behavior. Cropper had none. Ford knew that his Italian grandparents were old school squares, and he seriously doubted they'd done anything to corrupt or pervert their son. Cropper had just preferred a nomad, outlaw

lifestyle, and that's all his son knew.

It wasn't just the Madison events. For years Cropper had been mistreating women—Ford too, to a certain extent, because that was his only role model. Cropper had beaten Ingrid, and that was just the tip of the iceberg. Hell, Ford had done time in Juvie due to Cropper's profligate ways. Sure, he'd earned his "Filthy Few" patch at sixteen after killing the father of a girl who Cropper had molested. She'd been Ford's girlfriend, but Cropper just couldn't keep his hands off, and when her father came after Cropper with a piece, Cropper had ordered Ford to bury him. Of course he had. He was protecting his father.

Yes, he had a “Filthy Few” patch, and people were afraid of him, but at what expense? His childhood had gone, his youthful exuberance had been sucked from him, he’d become hard and bitter like the other junior thugs-in-training at the facility, while Cropper went scot free.

Cropper would not twist, pervert, and degrade Madison any longer.

The Citadel was only a ten-minute drive from Ford’s McMansion. Shivers raced up Ford’s spine as he strode the corridor to the chapel. He had to go past the game room where some of the incidents had taken place. Someone had cleaned up. Not one billiard ball was

out of place. He snorted with disgust.

The kitchen, too, had been tidied. Maybe some of the women, not wishing to rile Ford any further, had come to straighten up. Ford gave the guys some time to pee and figure out how they'd vote, and slipped into his office to call Madison again.

While the phone was, predictably, ringing and ringing, he noted a few drops of blood on the floor. He was sick of blood. Had Madison come in here for something right after Cropper had kicked her? Why was she bleeding? What had Cropper broken inside of her?

"Listen, babe," he told Maddy's voicemail. "I understand that you're freaked out right now. Faux Pas finally

came clean and told us the whole story. Sugar cookie, no one holds anything in the slightest against you. You were just trying to save your brother's hide. We could have worked something else out. That's not our tradition to use women to work off a brother's debt. But look, that's all water under the bridge. Faux Pas said you were bleeding too from Cropper kicking—listen, I can't even bring myself to say it. Kicking you." His voice was thin and pained. "We'll work it all out, *mija*. Everything will work out. Cropper's never going to bother you as long as you live. You can rest assured of that."

Turk stuck his head into the office to

indicate everyone was seated in church, so Ford cut it short.

“Listen. Wherever you are, know that I’m going to bat for you. I’m not going to operate a club where I have zero respect for the President. What was done to you never should’ve happened, and I will eternally be so, so sorry for all of it. Cropper’s a twisted degenerate and should be removed from office. Bye for now.”

He didn’t mention that his version of “removed from office” would involve murder, fratricide. There was no other way. They could remove him, burn off his backpack, and send him into the wilds of Borneo, but knowing he was out there and had ruined Ford’s honor,

that was too much to ask him to bear.

This wasn't the first time Cropper had done this, and it wouldn't be the last if no action was taken.

Ford wielded the gavel. It was Speed's first meeting as a fully patched member. Ford was compelled to comment on it.

"I'm sorry, Speed, that your first vote had to be this way." He gestured for Speed to speak. He had almost as much at stake in this mess as Ford did.

He looked like he'd been crying, or smoking weed. His eyes were rimmed with red, and he rubbed them again. "I just want to say I feel utterly responsible for this whole clusterfuck being brought

down on your head. If it wasn't for me ODing on peyote in the first fucking place, none of this would've happened."

Protests arose from the men around the table. No one wanted Speed to blame himself.

Ford said, "You know, there's a whole line of what ifs that go along with that, Speed. What if Riker wouldn't have forced you to OD on peyote in the first place?"

Duji said, "What if you wouldn't have seen those Furies yiffing?"

"Exactly," said Ford. "There's a whole raft of what ifs, and you were at home with your arm in a sling the whole time Cropper was pulling this shit. How were you to know? He lied to your sister

to manipulate her, to use her, and that's not in the slightest your fault. Now. What do we do about this?"

One by one, Ford looked at the men he'd grown up with. Duji, who was so dapper and suave when he was a kid, now resembled a beaten-up Al Pacino. Tuzigoot, with his waist-length flowing locks, was starting to look like an escapee from a Venezuelan prison. Speed was their newest, youngest blood. Ford had been thinking about this lately, so he said, "We have to hustle some of the bitter, nasty old poisonous blood out of this club, and I think it's obvious who needs to go. We need to start patching some of the newer more reliable

prospects in here, like Kneecap, Wild Man, and August.”

There was a murmur of approval.

“I’m making my move. This doesn’t need to involve any of you. This is strictly on me, my decision. But I’m not going to be Veep in a club where I have absolutely no respect for the President. Brothers don’t turn on each other, so this stays in the rearview. Not one more word about it.”

Turk cleared his throat. “Just to be sure about this. You’re going to take him out.”

Ford nodded. “I don’t want P&E becoming a war zone. We stole the tunnel from the Baal’s Minions so that’s payback from them. Riker’s just a crazy

motherfucker, so let him learn by Cropper's example. Cropper has to go. Let's put it up for a vote."

"I understand your anger," said Tuzigoot. "But Cropper and I go way back. I can't authorize this. We've been together since short pants days. We've got too much history. I know he betrayed you, Torino, but this is an extreme reaction."

Ford couldn't believe it. Tuzigoot was a "Filthy Few" as well and had never hesitated to bury anyone. "Ziggy?"

"I'm with you, Ford. This isn't the first time he's fucked over one of our old ladies. It's happened to me, to Duji, even to Tuzigoot. That guy's out of

control and needs to be put down like a rabid skunk. His business decisions lately haven't been the best, either."

Tuzigoot said, "But that's no reason to bury someone, Zig. Most CEOs wouldn't be in business if that was a good reason."

"That's hardly the *only* reason," Ford protested.

Tuzigoot held up a hand. "I know, I know. He's pretty much committed the most unforgiveable act. I just can't give the green light on this. I say we remove him in good standing. It's just time for him to step down."

The vote was divided. Ford, Turk, Ziggy, and Gollywow were all for burying Cropper, period. Tuzigoot, Duji,

Faux Pas and surprisingly Speed were all for removing him in good standing. Tuzigoot even wanted to use the word “retire” regarding Cropper.

Ford was so full of rage he couldn't see straight. He couldn't even listen to the traitor's justifications for why Cropper shouldn't be buried. He couldn't force his wishes upon the entire club. If it wasn't unanimous, nothing could be done.

Ford shouted, “He should at least be out bad. I'm not going to watch him walking about Pure and Easy flying his colors.”

“His life is ruined anyway, Torino,” Tuzigoot shouted back. “No club, no

Presidency, and now no old lady.”

Ford half-rose, he was so angry. He pointed at the table. “He still has his trucking business, the dispensary, the range, the army surplus. He’s hardly fucking ruined.”

Tuzigoot half-rose too. “Look at it this way, Torino. You remove him as President of the club, you’ve taken his entire life away from him. Take away his access to the chapel, game room, all the club facilities, just stick him in his office doing estimating and contracting. He might as well be retired.”

“But I still have to look at him,” seethed Ford. He was just livid. The club wasn’t going to let him wreak vengeance on the man who had mortally

insulted his old lady. Since when had the club become such a namby-pamby bunch of wusses? “I still have to look at his fucking ugly goonish face, and so does my old lady if she wants to come visit me at the Citadel.”

Duji said, “We’re not all on the same page. Retirement is the best way to go. Let’s just put the fucker out to pasture so this doesn’t happen again. Now there’s one more agenda item. Slushy has received a date from that Lyle Bloodgood lawyer in Nogales. The eleventh is when the *suministros* need to be picked up at that Hardscrabble Ranch. Turk, why don’t you go down, since you’ve already seen the setup.

Take Tall Peril with you as driver, since he knows the product. Ford? You want to go, to get your mind off things?"

Ford considered it, just because it had seemed as though Cropper didn't want him returning to Nogales. He'd do anything to spite that bastard. Ultimately, though, his passion for Madison won out. He needed to go find her, to make sure she was all right.

To make sure she still wanted him.



CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO MADISON

It started out being mortification that kept me away from Ford.

I was truly, thoroughly, utterly mortified by what had happened with his father. The Baal's Minions had threatened me, I recalled through the haze. They had threatened to send the pictures to my hospital administrator, to ruin my chances of getting a new job in Pure and Easy.

Once they knew I was affiliated with

an outlaw motorcycle club, no one would want me. That was probably true. Image was a lot of a nurse's career. Any hint of a drink or drug problem or any other personal strangeness, and people talked.

I quickly got over my mortification when I discovered I was pregnant. Present tense—was still pregnant. Cropper may have made me bleed, but I didn't lose the fetus.

Because Jake and I had always used rubbers like any good European, there was only one person who could possibly be the father.

I realized Cropper had maybe never penetrated me due to the Tay-Sachs gene he was obviously so paranoid of. Ford

and I both, however, had gotten carried away that time in the toilet trailer during the rally. We'd been good all the other times we'd banged each other—just not that first time. That was obviously the fateful time.

And by “fateful,” I mean fateful. Obviously I considered aborting it. Ford Illuminati wasn't the most stable or secure father-to-be in the world, and there was that pesky gene to think about. It wasn't fated to be.

It was actually Sabrina who convinced me not to terminate the pregnancy. I stayed with her for a week and we had many good talks. Her mother had been a good Christian woman who

worked for outreach organizations, so Sabrina had that upbeat, do-gooder attitude. Through our many talks, I realized I had alternatives.

“You love Ford.” Sabrina stated a flat fact. “You’ve loved him forever. The two of you are meant to be. I think you need to get over this Cropper thing.”

“It’s not that easy, Sabrina. Have you ever been molested? It stays with you, in your gut. Every time I look at Ford, I’m going to think about all the things Cropper did.”

“That’ll die down in time, Maddy. My mother worked with abused women, rape victims. True, it never really goes away completely. She said that sense of privacy, of being unviolated and safe, is

what's precious. But it does start to dull over time.”

“Yes. What do you mean ‘time’? Decades?”

“Maybe years.”

“Years. See, I don’t have years. The genetics of Tay-Sachs isn’t my field, but I talked to a few nurses I used to work with here in Flag who have studied it. My situation is extremely simplified if I do fetal DNA testing. His brother died of early-onset Tay-Sachs. Ford seems unaffected, but he could very well have late-onset. But to affect a child of ours, I have to be a carrier too. All I have to do is find out by doing both DNA and enzyme assays.”

“Then find out!” Sabrina cried, banging her fist on her table.

“I don’t want to run the tests at my hospital, that’s the problem. I already quit my job and I couldn’t afford COBRA so my insurance runs out soon. Anyway, I don’t want them knowing what’s going on with me. The test is about two hundred dollars.”

“Fucking hell!” cried Sabrina. “I’ll give you the fucking money if that’s what’s stopping you!”

It *was* stopping me. I hadn’t saved any money working as a nurse. Between paying my own condo rent and buying a new—now old—Honda, I had lived from paycheck to paycheck. So I took

Sabrina up on her generous offer and went through her GP.

That's how I found out that I was fine and our daughter was fine.

I was glad that Cropper hadn't ruined that, too.



CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE FORD

“For a hundred years or more the world, our world, has been dying. And not one man has been crazy enough to put a bomb up the asshole of creation and set it off.” ~ Henry Miller,
Tropic of Cancer

“The *suministros* are humans.”

Ford faced down Cropper like two gunmen in the middle of a dusty Wild West street, except they were on the same side of the battle.

Allegedly on the same side, but Ford

had wanted to take Cropper out since before Turk had called him with the news. Turk's security cam that covered the Hardscrabble Ranch tunnel had shown him that the *suministros*, which all along Ford had assumed would be marijuana or cocaine, were in fact human fucking beings.

Ford had been sitting in his saddle, looking daggers at that fucktard doctor's Flagstaff house, when Turk had called with the news of the human cargo.

“They’re fucking *people*, Ford, about thirty *human beings*. Mostly youngish women, a few able-bodied men. All I can figure is they’re trafficking in humans, maybe to use the women for whores or maids or whatever it is they

do. The guys, I don't even want to imagine."

That had been the only thing to tear Ford from his reverie. He'd already been inside the oncologist's house. He had busted his way through the front door when Dr. Jackoff had answered it. He had pummeled the idiot into oblivion in an attempt to find out where Madison was.

He'd come away empty-handed. More and more, as he sat on his ride fuming, looking at Madison's old house, Ford was slowly facing facts.

Dr. Jackoff didn't know where Madison was.

He'd only whaled on one guy, and

already he was out of other options.

Once again, Maddy didn't want to be found.

Surely, she had listened to his voicemails by now. She knew that he didn't blame her in the slightest for the stories Tonya and Faux Pas had related. It was nothing new that Cropper was prone to that sort of shit. Ford could easily fix it so that Maddy never had to lay eyes on Cropper again. If Ford had his way, *he* would never have to look at the baboon, either.

"Where are the beaners now?" Ford asked.

"Bloodgood's driver took them off the ranch property. I watched on the security feed as he herded them into their

truck like fucking cows. I wouldn't want to leave them lying around Mrs. Jonas' place, anyway. What the fuck should I do, Ford? I mean, what the fuck? Bloodgood's driver is supposed to transfer the *suministros* to our Illuminati truck in the loading dock of the Patagonia mall just as we discussed. Only one detail was left out, Ford. The *suministros* need air, food, water, and to take a serious bath. *What the fuck, man?* We're not set up to deal with this."

"It'll take me five hours to get down there." What the fuck would Ford even *do* once he got there? The beaners were a deal cut between Cropper and Bloodgood. No one had copped to

seeing a hide nor hair of Cropper since Ford had whaled on him at Speed's patch party. Of course, Riker hadn't been seen either. "Turk, you're going to have to track down Bloodgood within the next five hours. Tell him we don't fucking traffic in human cargo. The fucking Baal's Minions can have the contract back if Mrs. Jonas will accept them, but we don't want anything to do with it. I won't have time to stop off at the archery range and kill Slushy for not telling us."

"Yeah. I've already left two messages with Bloodgood. Nothing, of course."

Ford knew what Turk was thinking, so he might as well say it. "And did you

leave a message with Cropper?”

“Yeah,” Turk admitted. “I was up against a wall, Ford. I mean, I’ve got a truckload of *human cargo* I’ve got to transfer in two hours.”

“Listen. Change the meeting spot with Bloodgood’s driver. I’ll text you some new coordinates that’re off Gas Line Road, off eighty-two in the boondocks. We can’t take those fucking people in the truck Wild Man’s got. I’ve got a feeling the ‘provisions’ might have to be returned to sender and there might be a scene. If Cropper wants to take them off our hands, fine, but we’re not touching them.”

Ford was planning on making Turk

his Veep the next time the Bare Bones had church. Everyone knew it, and everyone would vote in favor of it, because Turk was well-liked. He was probably the most polite patch holder the Bare Bones had ever seen. But this new business with Slushy omitting to tell them what their cargo consisted of—well, Slushy just might get demoted to managing a Cinnabon, watching Anthony Bourdain, and having ugly sweater parties, just like he wanted.

That was how Ford came to have a Mexican standoff with Cropper in the middle of the Sonoran desert. He rode exactly four miles above the speed limit the entire way. He turned off onto Gas Line Road, the twisties smoothly hugging

the rounded undulating rises of desert. The sun had dipped behind the horizon and the land was a prickly silhouette of ocotillo, yucca, and the long arms of saguaros.

He had stopped once to call Turk. Turk hadn't raised Bloodgood or Cropper, although he'd texted Cropper the new coordinates. That was an hour ago, and now Ford thought it best if he just kept riding.

He was already uneasy, of course. This entire human trafficking deal was exactly something Baal's Minions would do—and exactly what the Bare Bones had stayed away from all these years. He could only see about fifty yards until the

next little rise. He became much more uneasy when, cresting one of these ridges, he saw the flash of tailpipes. Another biker, riding the same direction he was.

Turk and Tall Peril should've been there already, hours ago. The fishtails he'd just seen could've only been Cropper or Riker, or both.

Ford hit the throttle to catch whoever it was before they got to the trucks. Fucking Cropper taking control of the beaners was the only possible outcome of this clusterfuck. The moment Ford crested the last rise, everything seemed to happen simultaneously.

The Bloodgood truck parked off to the side in the dry wash absolutely

detonated. Ford couldn't tell what sort of IED it was from here—and he'd seen some doozies in his time—but it had been remotely fired, that was for sure. Stunned so heavily his heart nearly stopped, Ford pulled to a stop next to Cropper, hardly caring that he wanted to bury the guy anymore. Both men watched with their jaws hanging loose.

He had seen Tall Peril, a short and stocky former fireman from the Sierras, heading for the Bloodgood truck to open the latch, probably to give the beaners some water or air. Tall Peril was immediately vaporized, along with the entire box truck. Within seconds, the force of the explosion started to clear,

revealing the flaming hulk of the truck, and the realization that not one person could have survived that blast.

As pieces of twisted metal and hunks of gore rained down around them, Ford turned a stony face to Cropper. “What. The. Fuck.”

“Don’t look at fucking me.” Cropper sounded angry too, holding up a leather-clad arm against the downpour. “That was some valuable cargo.” His apelike jaw set with anger, Cropper sped down the hill, zigzagging to avoid flaming pieces of bodies.

Now that Tall Peril was history, Ford’s next concern was Turk. He followed Cropper’s trail downhill through waves of diesel fuel and burning

flesh stench. He didn't bother picking his way around most of the body parts. He just rode over them in a straight beeline to reach the Illuminati truck, where he hoped to fuck Turk had been secreted during the explosion.

Turk emerged from around the back side of the Illuminati truck, safe and sound, peering around as though he'd never seen it rain limbs. Ford motioned Turk to stay put when he came to a stop next to Cropper. The fiery hulk of Bloodgood's trailer was already burning out, having nothing much in the way of flammable material to burn. The cab had been sheared off by the force of the blast and Ford could see through it to the

opposite rise, where two new bikes appeared.

Mack and Slit.

It was those two bastards who had tried to manhandle Maddy at the rally. *Two of the motherfuckers who had been involved in the crew screw last week.*

The riders must have been following the Bloodgood truck since the *suministros* pickup at the tunnel's end. No doubt they were highly angry at losing the contract and at Cropper's betrayal in stealing it from them. The explosion was just their way of pissing in the Bare Bones' mouth, and now they were here to revel in their glory.

Without forethought, Ford dismounted his bike and whipped his Sig

Sauer from his waistband. He was easily accurate at twenty yards, and his rage powered him. He squeezed the trigger and popped off one of the riders—Mack, he thought. Mack went down like a turd in a punch bowl, his bike toppling on him like a slo-mo low-side. The other asswipe hung a sudden U-ie in an effort to do the James Brown out of there, so Ford's round just hit him in the shoulder. He recoiled and the bike tweaked, but he kept sashaying out of sight down the other side of the hill.

Suddenly not caring about the Minions, Ford turned his full fury on his father. "The club talked me out of burying you when it came out what you

did to Maddy.”

Cropper's expression was exceedingly calm for someone with Mexican entrails stuck to his front tire. This seemed to be a sign of his increasingly erratic behavior over the years. In his youth, Ford had been blind to so many things. People usually ignored strange things their own parents did. But when he returned from overseas it had been much more crystal clear, as though he viewed Cropper through a powerful scope.

Maybe being detached physically from his father for so long had given him this remote viewing ability. Now, having worked closely with him again for so many years, it had just been becoming

more and more evident. Cropper was seriously whacked, like a crazy old survivalist stockpiling insane shit like Frisbees and Nintendo games.

It had never been more obvious than now. Cropper didn't care that a reliable old patch holder had just been ground into asphalt tacos before his very eyes. He didn't even congratulate his son for putting a hated old friend or enemy—whichever Mack was—into the ground.

No. Cropper said mildly, "Of course the club stands behind me. The club never turns against its brothers."

Ford rattled the Sig Sauer in his hand as though testing its heft. Cropper had his own Glock in his hand, and he did

the same. “So there’s nothing from you. No apology. No excuse for why you had us trading in human lives.”

Cropper shrugged. “You’ve got to get a little dirty to feed the treasury.”

The blood was rising in Ford’s vision. “No ‘sorry, son, that I raped your old lady.’ Seriously. Nothing.”

“Hey. Respect the man who has seen the dark side of riding and lived.”

Turk stood behind Cropper, wide-eyed and white as a sheet. He slunk off to one side so as not to be in the line of fire.

“Why’d you never tell me that I had a brother who died at age four? Blind, deaf, unable to walk?”

“What good would it have done? Put

it all in the rearview, son. That's what I did with Rebekah and whatever the kid's name was. Never do less than forty miles before breakfast, that's what I say. You need to put the whole Madison thing in your rearview too, son. So it happened. We had a few laughs. I don't apologize for a fucking thing. Never have, never will. Madison's a delicious cunt. You inherited your good taste in women from your father."

Ford seethed, "Live free or die, motherfucker." He shot Cropper in the forehead.

It was just like that time he'd shot the father who was coming after Cropper for molesting his daughter. The body

dropped before the eyes could even roll up into the skull. Only this time, Ford was getting rid of an actual pervert instead of an innocent man.

Ford took three steps up to the body and loomed over it. He was the powerful victor now. Turk, too, stepped up, but he was only waving his hands in a warning.

“Ford, Ford. We’ve got to get the fuck out of here.”

In the distance a siren whined.

Ford stuck his piece back into his waistband and exhaled. It felt as though he’d been holding his breath for a long, long-ass time. He almost felt like smiling when he finally looked full-on at his best friend.

“You’re right about that, bro. Let’s get trucking away from that siren. Leave these two wastes of human life to cancel out each other.”



EPILOGUE

MADISON

“And the time came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” ~ Anaïs Nin

It was May Day, and without a doubt the best day of my life, in retrospect.

Dr. Petrie, I know you're going to say I was happier when I was away from Ford. I'm saying I needed that break to sort out my head, to mature so that I could finally resolve most of my issues.

Everything was finally starting to come together for me. I had never suffered through a New York winter

before, but that day the thermometer outside my friend Anna's window actually hit seventy. It was so blissfully warm I even ventured out into her greenhouse to mess around. She owned an old farmhouse in this bucolic village up the Hudson River. Anna used to actually babysit Bobby—excuse me, Speed—in Cottonwood, that's how I knew her. She somehow wound up living this idyllic life, also as a registered nurse, but on the opposite side of the country.

And talk about an opposite life. Anna had married some university professor whose specialty seemed to be sitting around being a moody jerk and writing poetry reviews. What a different

world than the one I'd been attached to for so long. I had wanted to move out and get my own place, of course, but then Anna had become pregnant. She wanted me to help babysit and I didn't exactly have enough money to rent anything other than a parking attendant's shed in the Hudson Valley, so I'd just stayed on, lingering.

And boy, was it bucolic. Anna must've had ten acres with an actual *rock fence*. I mean a fence made out of old Mohawk rocks or something, and a graveyard with headstones dating back to the 18th century. She had chickens and a cornfield and the greenhouse that looked like something Emily Dickinson

would hang out in. What a sea change from my world of bikes, leather cuts, and people behaving badly. I still didn't feel that I fit in, but I figured the new, prissy, orderly world just needed to rub off on me.

It was *me* who needed to change to adapt to the new world.

“So Marcus comes home and immediately goes and makes himself a martini,” Sabrina was saying over the phone. I had taken the phone into the greenhouse with me to finish our conversation. We always had long talks. She was my BFF, as they say. “Only it was about ninety-eight percent vodka, and two percent vermouth.”

Sabrina had met her boyfriend

Marcus at an AA meeting. Only thing was. She'd stayed sober. Marcus hadn't. She seemed to love this wild, disgusting, unpredictable guy. I knew the feeling, so I never criticized Marcus. I just laughed. "Sounds like a lot of guys I used to know. Marcus has a good heart, though."

"Oh, yeah," Sabrina agreed cheerfully. "His heart's in the right place. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

There was an awkward pause then. Maybe Sabrina realized that she had just accidentally *not* described Ford Illuminati.

We rarely discussed him anymore. What was the point when I was doing my best to stay hidden? I started out being

afraid to face him. Not after what I'd been through. I couldn't. It had just steamrolled from there. Maybe it was my self-preservation coming to the forefront, but I put one foot in front of the other, and soon I found myself licensed in the state of New York to practice nursing.

I was lonely. Yes, I was. My job filled most of my waking hours, Fidelia the rest. It wasn't as though I was ever, *ever* bored. But I was deeply lonely on an existential level.

I pined for Ford. I knew I was probably always going to pine for Ford. Ryan Gosling could come by, sweep me off my feet, and take me to his castle in the south of France, and I'd still pine for

Ford. Ford was in my blood, in my chemistry, in my very cells.

But I figured that the less Ford's name came up, the less he would haunt me. It did seem to be working. I could go an entire hour now without a spectral image of his stunning aquiline nose, his glossy black hair, or his creamy skin popping into my head. An entire hour.

Now Sabrina had ruined that track record again.

"Speaking of not hurting a fly," Sabrina barreled ahead. "Speed called again the other night."

"Oh." If I told Speed where I was, he'd be obligated to tell Ford. The end result would be one of two disasters. A,

Ford would come and find me. Violence would ensue, and I couldn't have that in my life again. Or B, Ford would *not* come and find me, in which case I'd be insulted, offended, and lonelier than ever. No. I hadn't told Speed where I was. We talked once in a blue moon, but I had a new Arizona cell number. Even if he was tech-savvy, like I knew Ford and Turk were, he'd need my actual phone to put any sort of GPS tracker on it.

I sighed deeply. "I was thinking of telling Speed where I am."

Sabrina gasped. "*Seriously?* Oh my God, Maddy. I think that would be the best thing in the world."

I hurried to say, "You know what

that means, though.” Just the merest thought of it was making my heart race. I was trying to dump out a dead plant from a flowerpot with one hand, banging it against the edge of a potting sink. “It means he’s going to be obligated to tell Ford.”

“Not necessarily. If Ford doesn’t know that he knows, it would never occur to Ford to ask. I know what you’re afraid of, Maddy. Your worst nightmare is that Ford doesn’t *care* enough to even *look* for you.”

“Yes,” I admitted tersely, and picked up another pot to bang against the sink. It turned out there were bulbs buried deep inside the pot, so I’d just killed them.

They just hadn't been watered inside the greenhouse all winter. They lay in the sink like stale marshmallows. "That *is* my worst fear. But I do miss feeling close to my brother, being able to be honest with him, telling him about my life here in New York. If he could know where I was, I could share with him details about my life."

"Fidelia," Sabrina pointed out. "You could tell him about Fidelia."

"Well, let's not get carried away. We could maybe reminisce about the babysitting days when he used to watch Anna change her shirt, even though Anna's still flat as a board."

Instead of laughing, Sabrina sighed, as though she pitied me. Her voice was

now tinged with the shadow of her mother's pedantic counseling tone. "Maddy. Fidelia is Speed's *niece*. She's his *family*. He's going to kill you when he eventually finds out he's got a niece and you never bothered telling him."

We'd been over this a thousand times. "If I tell Speed about Fidelia, he's *really* going to be obligated to tell Ford. And then Ford really *will* come rampaging out here." Or not, as the case may be.

Or not, because he could care less about me. Or the child he might fear has Tay-Sachs Disease.

I could tell Sabrina was pursing her lips now. "It's *his* child, Maddy. He has

every right to know.”

I was sort of glad that Anna’s pale-skinned form was coming from the side kitchen door now. She was pointing frantically in the direction of the street. Sometimes I envied her petite ballerina’s body. I’d never be confused with a ballerina. I was chunky, big boned, “curvy” if you had to use a euphemism.

“Oh, Anna wants something. She’s coming from the house.”

“Nice way of not addressing the issue.” Sabrina changed gears then. “Well, as usual, it’s up to you, Maddy. But that’s a good sign that you want to tell Speed where you’re living.”

“Don’t tell him I said that, though.

Let me do it at my own speed.”

“Own Speed.” Sabrina giggled.
“Good one.”

I rolled my eyes as Anna stuck her head into the greenhouse door. “Hey, sorry to bother you,” Anna said politely.

“No problem. What’s up?”

Anna waved her arm. “Well, there’s a guy down there on the street. He’s been there about an hour, and it’s starting to bug me.”

I frowned. “Is he reading the meter or something?”

“I doubt it, because he’s leaning on a motorcycle. He’s got his arms crossed and he’s just staring intently at my house and garden. Like, it’s starting to make

me uncomfortable. Bill's not here, or I'd send him over to ask what's up."

I highly doubted that the effete little old lady Bill would confront any biker, but I was starting to get a creeping feeling, too. I tried peering through the dirty greenhouse windows, but the sprouting leaves of a willow got in the way, and I could see absolutely nothing. "What does he look like?"

"What's going on?" asked Sabrina.

Anna crossed the threshold of the greenhouse in order to lower her voice, as though the guy could hear from that far away. "He's handsome, Maddy. He looks like that picture you've got of Fidelia's father."

"Oh, crap," I said automatically. I

actually felt the blood drain from my face, and a wave of light-headedness overcame me.

Sabrina's tinny voice came from the phone in my hand as I dropped it weakly to my side. "What's she talking about, Maddy? Why is she talking about Fidelia's father?"

Shoving past Anna, I jogged to a bare spot on the hill. I stood like a scarecrow losing its stuffing, almost too weak to stand. My blood pressure spiked, my heart raced, and all sense of reason evaporated from my head.

There was Ford, just as Anna had said, leaning against his Softail with his boots and arms tightly crossed. As she'd

said, he was staring intently, unblinking, at the house, the garden.

And stupid, stupid me. My very first semi-rational thought was how nicely his biceps bulged under the black T-shirt. How nicely his package bulged between his muscular thighs.

I swear. Sometimes. I guess since all the blood had drained from my head, I was left with only hormones.

Then “fight or flight” took over. Before another hormonal thought could distract me, my feet were flying down the hill. Over cement steps, across flower beds that were just beginning to bloom, even between two thorny rose bushes. I flew.

I will never forget his face when he

caught sight of me. It's one of those images that are burned forever onto the backs of a person's eyelids.

His jaw dropped. A fire lit up his beautiful root beer eyes. He half-rose from his leaning position. As it sunk in to him that I was really running downhill at breakneck speed, he started to step into the street that ran between us. He held up a hand against oncoming traffic without taking his eyes from me.

He actually just stepped right onto a street where people routinely went forty miles an hour, just to stop fucking traffic for me.

I wasn't about to stop my panicked flight just for some car. Luckily, I see

now in retrospect, there happened to be none coming at the moment. I made a beeline right into his arms.

He squeezed the ever-loving out of me. He squeezed me so hard he picked me right up off the asphalt. My face was squished against the side of his neck. He did smell ripe, as though he'd been riding for days, a combination of sweat, exhaust fumes, and fresh air.

I wrapped one tennis shoe around the back of his butt and held on for dear life. Most bikers don't like *anyone* touching their cut, but Ford had never uttered a word of complaint whenever I had clutched his. No one said a thing for a long time until I whispered,

“You found me.”

He gave me a little shake. “Did you fucking think you could keep me away?”

My heart was literally being wrenched. I needed to breathe. The entire azure bowl of sky above me was spinning. I didn’t want to stop pressing my face into his mane of warm, glossy hair. I clutched the back of his skull, holding him to me, and one hot tear squeezed from the corner of my eye.

How did Ford know I was crying? He drew back a bit and licked the tear from my cheek. “Sugar cookie,” he murmured. “I love you so fucking much.”

I put both feet on the ground and touched the tip of his nose with mine. “How’d you find me? Speed doesn’t

even know where I am.”

“Nurse’s board.” His sly little smile killed me.

The fucking nurse’s board! That asshole! I had to laugh, too. All my extreme efforts to remain undiscovered had all been pretty half-assed, once it occurred to Ford he could find me through the Board of Registered Nursing. *Damn*, he was good.

Carried away by the moment, I squeezed his hand. “Put your ride in the driveway by that bush. Don’t take that space, or Bill will kill you. Bill is Anna’s husband and a pretty big jerk.”

I ran halfway up the hill while Ford moved his bike into Anna’s driveway. She stood next to me while I waited on

pins and needles.

“I take it you’re happy to see him?”

“Yes, I’m relieved,” I admitted. “I guess him not loving me is out of the equation now, and that’s a giant load off my shoulders. I think I’m ready to face his love.”

“Is it really that awful?”

“Oh, good Lord, you don’t know the half of it, Anna. His love hurts so bad, it’s good.”

“But he doesn’t know about Fidelia?”

“No. Can you take care of her for a few minutes? I’ll get around to it.”

Ford was now bounding up the hill looking like some fucking Roman god—

the god of sex, beauty, and seduction. I could see him fresh now through Anna's eyes. His forearms, corded with muscle, how he moved fluidly like a lion. His dark flashing eyes, quick with intelligence. Dr. Petrie, I know you think I'm some kind of masochist for loving Ford, but don't you agree some things are just in your blood, in your heart, and you can't stop or prevent them?

Besides, he's Fidelia's father. Oh, why am I justifying anything to you? This is *my* story!

Ford politely shook hands with Anna, and she politely asked him how far he'd just come.

"We were all on the Laughlin River Run," he explained.

I'd heard of it. It was a giant annual biker rally where folks rode up and down the Colorado River, sometimes going into Lake Havasu City. "You told me you were going to do that this year." I told Anna, "They've got motorcycle vendors, concerts, poker runs—"

"Right. So we were riding out to Kingman, but I just kept going. Something told me to keep riding, so I did. Around Amarillo something told me to take out my phone and google your name. Came up with the New York Nursing Board."

Naturally, Anna looked a bit concerned. "And it showed you this address?"

Ford was the most adorable thing ever when he admitted, “Nope. That was a bit of trickery on Turk’s part. He’s a computer whiz.”

I no longer cared about any of the details. Just holding his hand close between my breasts wasn’t good enough, and I jerked him uphill, toward the greenhouse.

“I’ll go inside,” Anna called, waving.

In the greenhouse, I pushed Ford back against the potting table. Mounting his leather-clad knee, I put my forehead against his. “You big giant fucking goon,” I said, half-sad, half-ecstatic. “No one’s ever done anything like this

for me, rode hellaway cross-country just to get to me.”

“I’d ride hellaway to the end of the planet to get to you, sugar cookie. And you’re making no excuses this time. You’re coming back with me. You’re taking that nursing job in P&E and you’re living in my house with me, and no one else.”

I didn’t answer, thinking about Fidelia. Instead, I drew back and slid his cut off his torso. He didn’t take his eyes off me as I placed it on top of a tray of irises, then yanked his tight black T-shirt over his head. I nearly swooned when his buff chest was revealed. He always knew the effect this had on me—and all women, no doubt—and usually he

kicked back and waited, happy to be admired.

This time, though, I gave him no chance. I fell on him like a bitch in heat, snarling and gnawing at his flesh. I chewed his jawbone where the IED's flash had burned his skin, his Adam's apple, the luscious pit of his throat. I ran my hungry tongue across his silky clavicle, luxuriating in swirling the tip in the lovely pelt of hair that covered his well-developed pecs. I chewed on his nipple, flicking the barbell that pierced it.

“Ah, God, Maddy,” he cried in a strangled voice. He sank his fingers deep into my hair and guided me lower.

“You always know exactly what to do to drive me over the fucking edge.”

I chewed on the silken line of hair that arrowed down the center of those abs. My fingers were suddenly nimble beyond belief as they flew to unbuckle that Bare Bones buckle, the same one he'd had forever, changing it to different belts as they wore out. I left the chaps buckled, liking the tough, down-and-dirty look of them with his beautiful, fat cock jutting out. The shiny mushroom head was deeply purple, needing release, and I fell on it with a vengeance, not waiting to admire it.

A low, resonant growl came from the pit of his stomach as I sank his dick down my throat. I had never sucked a

cock so voraciously, and as a teen I was very good at pretending. No, I suckled Ford's long, pulsating prick as though my life depended on it. I lapped away at the bottom, worrying the sensitive underside until it throbbed with urgency. I laved the shiny, squeaky glans that was so tight it felt about to burst. Ford's groans morphed into staccato grunts. I knew one tiny little trick and he'd explode in exquisite bliss.

Detaching my mouth for one brief second, I slathered spit all over my middle finger. Ford missed my mouth enough to grunt like a caveman and smash my face back into his crotch. I obliged, gulping down that beautiful

limb of a cock while sliding my slimy finger up his asshole.

I went right for the jugular—or the prostate, I should say. That little nubbin of untold delights could be tickled in just the right spot to send men directly into the arms of Cloud Nine.

Indeed, Ford cried out as though a thousand thorns pierced his body. *How delicious. I've hit the jackpot right away. He's never going to forget me now.*

I was shocked as hell when Ford tore me from him.

My mouth detached from his erection with a loud pop, and he drew me up to face him. He was lopsided, deranged with lust, just the way I loved him. “No,”

he declared forcefully. “I’m not letting you get away with that, Maddy. I’m bending you over this fucking table and doing you the right way.”

And with that he tore my little sweater apart, right down the middle, and dove face-first into my cleavage.

I no longer wore the sexy push-up bras. I was actually wearing one of those nursing bras, but they were so cute nowadays, and Ford so frenzied, he didn’t seem to notice. He made short work of the clasp in front and my boobs popped out—larger, more pendulous than he’d last seen. He lapped up a nipple, masticating it between his incisors while I crawled up his thigh.

“Woman,” he snarled in between bites, “you drive me abso-fucking-lutely out of my mind.” He snarled and bit some more, then took a little break to pant against my breastbone, as though afraid he’d spontaneously come. “We need fucking protection. I didn’t bring any to Laughlin.”

“Don’t need it.” I panted too, squeezing his beautiful thigh between mine, my fist wrapped around his long, fat dick. “I tested myself. I’m not a Tay-Sachs carrier.”

Of course, I was assuming that was his only fear. It was hugely arrogant to assume he wasn’t more fearful of any pregnancy at all, period. But I’d played

my cards right. He drew back from me, regarding me with eyes of wonder. His beautiful nostrils flared and his chest rose and fell with his panting, and he fixed me with those puppy dog eyes.

“That’s...that’s amazing, Maddy. That’s...excellent.”

I said pertly, “You might not even be a carrier. Just because both your parents were doesn’t mean you are. We can test you, too.”

We just stared stupidly at each other, lovestruck, with my hand around his throbbing cock. Then, just as suddenly as we’d stop, we leaped into action again.

Standing, Ford twirled me around like a clumsy ballerina. My palms slapped against the table, which was

more of a rickety potting shelf that held trowels and stakes. He yanked my flimsy panties down to one tennis shoe, and I spread my feet apart to demonstrate my acceptance of his authority, his prowess, his virility. My pussy clenched in anticipation of his entrance, and he didn't disappoint. He speared me smoothly, easily, uttering a groan of the utmost satisfaction that must have shaken him to his toes, his balls.

Arching my back, I felt around behind my head for him. "I'm wide open," I assured him.

He pinched my clit between his fingertips, making me gasp as he seated himself deep inside me. "Ah God,

Maddy. When you talk like that my balls ache for you.”

“Make me come, you asshole. I want you to feel me coming around your plump, juicy cock.” I wiggled my hips in that pole dancer’s way men are suckers for.

His fingers set to diddling my clit in earnest. I was so hot, so wide open for my big hunk of a man, within a minute I was teetering on the verge of climax. I hadn’t toyed with any BOB or shower head in recent months. Giving birth had put a kibosh on any self-love, and having a bedroom on the same floor as that odious Bill critic jerk put a kibosh on practically everything else.

So no, it didn’t take long, between

Ford's prick knocking at my womb and filling me completely, and his dexterous fingers tickling my clit like a butterfly's wings. Sighing ever faster like the wind through a clipper's sails, I toppled off that cliff and sank into the most gut-wrenching orgasm of my entire fucking life.

I mean, my internal clitoral arms *wrenched* the orgasm from my womb. I had not been torn like this since childbirth, and I had to hold my breath as my toes curled upward. A giant clenching fist seemed ready to break one of my internal organs. It was so intense I couldn't even revel in the pleasure of Ford's own orgasm, his prick jerking

inside me as he splashed load after load of jism against my cervix.

I came *forever*. He didn't let up with his diddling, holding his erupting cock up inside me with the power of his hips. We were locked together in one long silent spasm, our mouths frozen into *O*s.

Eventually, I guess, we had to breathe. Gasping for air like a beached fish, my torso flopped onto the table. My boobs were mashed into a pile of soil and some sharp objects like plant tags. My pussy clenched around Ford's prick, milking it for the last drops of delicious semen. Those tiny clear bubbles floated before my eyes, I was so starved for air.

Ford's cock still twitched. He hissed in air with every little twinge, as though

he was being murdered. Slowly, like a man crawling onto a desert island, I dragged myself to a standing position with little zip ties and dirt raining from my tits. Ford was still almost fully erect inside of me, and nobody was in any rush to disengage.

Except maybe Bill. We both jumped when he pounded idiotically on the closed glass greenhouse door. “Get the fuck off my property, you god damned thug!” Of course Bill had heard a little bit about Ford over the past months. His name was brought up less and less, but apparently Bill had a memory like a steel trap. “I want that fucking heap of nuts and bolts out of my damned

driveway too, or I'm calling the cops on you for trespassing!"

I looked over my shoulder at Ford. His face was frozen in surprise, but we both burst out laughing at the same time.

"No problem, fucktard," Ford yelled back. "Just let me get my things together and I'm out of here."

Meanwhile, Anna was pulling on Bill's arm, her little feminine voice entreating him. "Leave them alone, Bill! Just let them talk."

Bill stopped pounding on the door, but he yelled at Anna, "They're not talking, that's the god damned problem! I don't want his filth all over my Venus flytraps!"

We giggled even harder, and Ford's

dick finally slipped out of me, releasing a gusher of warm jism down my inner thigh. Turning to face him, I clutched his biceps and planted a wet, warm one on his beautifully shaped lips. We noshed for a long time, during which Bill could still be heard rampaging down by the kitchen.

When we pulled apart, I licked his lower lip. “I love you, Ford Illuminati. Always have. Always will.”

“Oh God, Maddy.” Ford buried his face in my hair. He whispered, “You’re coming with me. I can see if you don’t want to ride one up all the fucking way back to P&E, but I’m putting you on a plane. No fucking excuses.” Reaching

for his cut, he fished around in one of the pockets with two fingers. “I didn’t suppose you still had your collar—”

“I *do*.”

“—so I brought you this.” Ford unfolded the PROPERTY OF patch and sheepishly handed it to me. “Better than a ring, though I could get you one of those, too, if you marry me.”

I had imagined in my wildest dreams Ford Illuminati asking me to marry him, but I never imagined that I’d cry. Yes, *cry*. Tears sprang into my eyes, stinging them, as I looked blurrily at the PROPERTY OF patch. His cock was still hanging out at half-mast, my panties were still down by my shoe, but we clung together like we were on a life raft

and this PROPERTY OF patch was our golden ticket out of there.

It finally occurred to me I hadn't responded to him. "Of course I'll marry you, Ford. You've always been the only one for me."

"Good. I'll have you know, your family just got bigger, Maddy. Everyone's waiting for you back in P&E. I've got the gavel now. Cropper's gone."

I knew that. I didn't quite know how to acknowledge the unspoken truth that Ford had buried Cropper. "Yeah, I read a news article how he was found in the desert near Nogales. Poor Tall Peril." It was an indication of the loathing and

scorn I felt for Cropper that I acknowledged Tall Peril's death and not his own. I'd barely said two words to Tall Peril.

"I can't ride with you to P&E but not for the reason you think. Give me a few days to organize shit here, Ford. Come inside the house and you'll see why."

With that sublime look of bafflement on his face, Ford stuffed his cock back into his jeans and adjusted his chaps. I straightened myself and thought I looked fine, aside from a missing button between my tits.

"I don't think your friend's husband wants me inside his house, *mija*."

"No big loss, Ford. I won't be looking at him in the rearview. How is

Turk, anyway?”

We gossiped a little as we left the greenhouse. Ford told me that Wild Man had patched in now, too, and they were looking at a few hang-arounds to become new prospects.

“You’ll be married to the Bare Bones President, but without Cropper all I do is run the equipment company.”

Anna was standing in the kitchen doorway waiting for us. She was being a good friend by not holding little Fidelia in her arms, because it wasn’t her place to drop the bomb on Ford. I could tell by his demeanor nothing had leaked through the internet that he had a daughter, and I was still worried about his reaction. We

had never discussed children.

“I’m sorry about Bill,” said Anna. “He can be such a dirtbag. I’m so sorry, Ford. You’re obviously not a trespasser, and this is my house, not Bill’s.”

“It’s all right, Anna,” said Ford. “I’ve got to get back home anyway, but I hate to say I’m taking Maddy here with me. She doesn’t want to ride on my bike, so could you make sure she gets safely to the airport?”

Anna looked at me wide-eyed. I nodded. “He’s right, Anna. I’m going.” I linked my arm through Ford’s and snuggled up to him. “You know he’s always been my one true love.”

“Oh, that’s evident to anyone with eyes in their head,” said Anna. “Your

love is so dramatic and tragic, like Romeo and Juliet. Would you like to step inside? Use the facilities or something?”

“Facilities would be nice,” said Ford. “I don’t hear any screaming at the moment.”

“Adult screaming, that is,” I said, as Fidelia began to scream in the kitchen. I brushed past Anna and went to stand by Fidelia’s little cradle swing on the counter. Protectively, I stood between her and Ford and she stopped crying, just soaking in my presence.

Ford was stepping tentatively into the kitchen, maybe not wanting to startle what he thought was Anna’s baby. Good

thing I was missing that sweater button, for I now undid a couple more of them again. Disbelief flooded his handsome face. Whether he was appalled I was undressing in Anna's kitchen or suddenly realized I needed to nurse, I'm not sure, so I unsnapped the bra cup and picked up the little girl. She looked as amazed as her father.

Anna was six months pregnant, so it was kind of unlikely it was her baby. I held Ford's gaze as I put Fidelia to the nipple, and I said softly, "Yours. A perfectly healthy girl. I named her Fidelia to ensure she never leaves me. Also, your name begins with an *F*."

Anna probably wasn't even breathing by this point. She didn't keep a

gun in the house—we'd already discussed doing that, months ago, but she was too afraid of them—a decision she probably regretted around about now.

Ford pointed at the little girl with the full head of black hair and the root beer eyes. "Mine. Healthy?"

"Yes. And yes. No Tay-Sachs. Like I told you, I'm not a carrier. You need two carriers, and I'm not one. You might not be, either. We'll find out. But I think you're safe."

Ford didn't say anything, but I soon realized it was because he was so stunned. Anna actually had to take a few long steps to grab a chair and place it behind him, or he might've collapsed on

the floor from shock.

That was a good sign that at least he wasn't going to run screaming out the door.

I ventured to say, "I hope you're not mad. I didn't want you thinking I just wanted child support money from you, since I don't need any." That was sort of a lie, but whatever—just a white lie. "And I didn't want the only reason you were with me to be a baby. I didn't want you feeling obligated to pretend to want to be with me. Now I see that you really *do* want to be with me, well, you've got to know about her."

"Fidelia," Ford repeated stupidly.

"Fidelia." I took the chair next to him. Fidelia looked at Ford sideways as

she suckled. “That’s your daddy,” I told her. “He’s big and bad. Well, not *so* bad. Wait, so bad. Yes. He’s bad.”

“Wow,” Ford breathed at last. “I’m...”

“In shock? Yes. I’m sorry. I just didn’t expect you to ride up on your Softail into my driveway in New York state.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “And I can see why you can’t ride back on my pussy pad.”

I finally laughed, and all of the tension eased. Anna must have even felt safe enough to leave the room. “You got that right. Where would we put her?”

Ford was relaxing, too. “I’ve got the

perfect room for her in our house. On the first level facing that rock spire that looks like a castle.”

There it was. There was my dream castle.

“I wouldn’t know,” I said mildly. “I never got to see much of your house.”

“Our house.”

“Our house.”

So you see, Dr. Petrie. You told me that writing my story would be cathartic. You were right. I’m much more ready now to move into my future with Ford, a future that doesn’t involve past recriminations or twisted deviance. We’re pure and easy now, just regular folks, businesspeople who go to fish fries and charity runs, who love our

brothers and sisters as if they were our own.

Now I'm moving into the A.F. phase, After Ford. As he often said. *You love the man, you learn to love the club.* I'm still trying to achieve that second part, but one baby step at a time, right?

Stay vertical, Dr. Petrie. I don't think I'll be needing your services anymore.



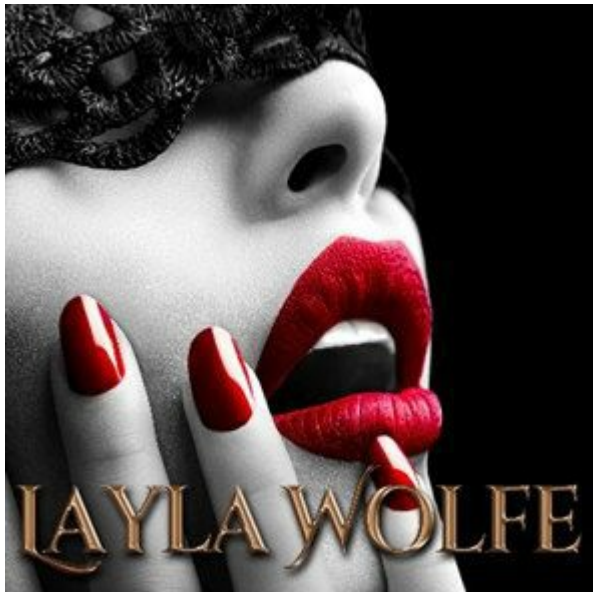


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About The Author

Layla Wolfe is a wannabe biker's old lady who is satisfied with a leather jacket, one bad-ass pink camo compound bow, and a vicarious outlaw lifestyle.



Layla Wolfe is the pen name of multi-published erotic romance author Karen Mercury.

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Erotic Consensual BDSM Cowboy
Ménage a Trois Romance, M/M/F, with
M/M elements, paddling, knife play, sex
toys, HEA

Autumn Chamberlain is falling in love with Noel Butler all over again after fourteen years—or was she ever out of love with the world-famous heartthrob rocker? Now they're both back in Hell's Delight, Autumn taking care of her father suffering from Alzheimer's, and Noel

with a secret from Autumn...and from his audience, the world.

Ewan Nash thought he'd hide away, running the Hardscrabble Ranch cattle operation after his son was kidnapped. But when Noel returned to his hometown to write songs, Ewan came out of his tragic shell. It's more than a one-night hookup for the two men, but the successful, curvy attorney, Autumn, seems hell-bent to dash Ewan's love onto the rocks.

The three unlikely lovers unite when a criminal Autumn has prosecuted comes out of the woodwork, murdering army veterans. The plot thickens when Autumn

falls equally as hard for the cowboy, Ewan, but the solution might be right in front of her eyes.

The Substantial Gift

<http://amzn.to/1kXZ2hx>

Erotic Consensual BDSM Cowboy
Menage a Trois Romance, M/M/F, with
M/M elements, voyeurism, forced-
seduction role play, HEA

He walked in and her life began again. Two worlds collide when adventurous ranching heiress Violet Stinson clashes with dark and complicated rodeo champion Harper Davies. Both on the run from tragic pasts, Violet numbs her

pain with food, Harper with anonymous, rough sex with other men at The Racquet Club. They share in common their lust for playboy jet-setter Sinclair Nieman.

The unlikely trio bonds over a stolen menu from an old bordello. When Violet has a particular nostalgia for reenacting the Doctor's Orders menu item, Harper knows it's time to surrender to a woman again. After a long, destructive marriage, Violet has been ignorant about love. It is a difficult, soul-searching, substantial gift for her to express love to her two younger men.

When her past catches up with her in the form of a greaseball stalker, Harper and

Sinclair are there to prove themselves worthy of her ultimate gift.

Questions? Comments?

Email suggestions to

laylawolfeauthor@gmail.com