

EXCERPT:
REAPER'S LEGACY

By Joanna Wylde
www.joannawylde.com

PROLOGUE

EIGHT YEARS AGO
COEUR D'ALENE, IDAHO
SOPHIE

“I’m gonna stick it in now.”

Zach’s voice was rough and full of urgent need.

I smelled him all around me, sweaty and hungry and so beautiful I could die. After tonight he’d be mine for real. His hand reached down between us, guiding the round, rubbery head of his penis as it nudged my opening. It felt weird. He pushed at me and I guess he missed, because it hit me too high and—

“Ouch! Shit, Zach, that hurts. I think you’re doing it wrong.”

He stopped immediately and grinned down at me, the gap between his front teeth teasing. Holy crap, I loved that grin. I’d had the biggest crush on Zach since we were freshmen, but he never noticed me, not until a couple of months ago. My folks didn’t let me out much, but I’d managed to get permission to stay with Lyssa for a night and we’d snuck out to a party in July. Zach had honed in and we’d been a couple ever since.

I’d gotten really good at sneaking out.

“Sorry, babe,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss me. I softened immediately, loving the feel of his lips ghosting across mine. He adjusted himself and started sliding into me again, slow and steady. This time he didn’t miss, and I stiffened as he stretched me open wide.

Then he hit a barrier and paused.

I opened my eyes and looked up at him. He looked back down at me and I knew right then and there I'd never love anyone half so much as I loved Zachary Barrett.

"Ready?" he whispered. I nodded.

He shoved into me and I squealed, pain ripping between my legs. Zach kept me pinned with his hips as I gasped, shocked. Then he pulled out and I tried to catch my breath. Before I could, though, he'd thrust back into me. Hard. *Ouch*.

"Holy shit, you're tight," he muttered. He pushed himself up on his hands, throwing his head back as he pumped into my body, over and over, eyes closed and face straining with hunger.

I don't know what I'd expected.

I mean, I wasn't stupid. I knew it wouldn't be perfect the first time, no matter what the romance books said. And it didn't hurt *that* much. But it sure as shit didn't feel good, either.

Zach moved faster, and I turned my head on the couch to look across the small apartment. His brother's, apparently. We had it for the night—it was supposed to be our special, perfect time together. I'd expected flowers or soft music and wine or something. Stupid. Zach had pizza and some beer from his brother's fridge.

"Ouch," I muttered again as he paused, face twisting.

"Shit, I'm gonna come," he gasped. I felt his penis throb deep inside, almost twitching. It was weird. Really weird. And nothing like I'd seen in movies—not even a little bit.

Was that it?

Huh . . .

"Oh, *fuck* that's good."

The apartment door opened as Zach collapsed between my legs, oblivious to the world. I couldn't do anything but watch in horror as a man walked in.

I didn't know him, but he couldn't have been Zach's brother. He didn't look anything like Zach, who was taller than me, but not by a whole lot. This guy was *really* tall, and muscular in the way men who work with their hands get from heavy lifting on the job.

He wore a black leather vest with patches over a ratty T-shirt and jeans that had streaks of dark motor oil or grease or something. A half rack of beer dangled from one hand. His hair was short and dark. Almost military. His lip was pierced and he wore a two rings in his left ear and one in his right, like a pirate. Eyebrow was pierced, too. His features were bluntly handsome, but nobody would ever call him pretty. Big black boots covered his feet, and the chain from his wallet hung low across his hip. One of his arms had a full-sleeve tattoo. The other had a skull with crossed blades behind it.

He stopped in the doorway and looked us over, slowly shaking his head.

"I told you what I'd do if you broke into my place again," he said quietly. Zach popped up and his face went white. His entire body—with one notable exception—stiffened. I felt that exception slither out of me, along with some fluid, and realized we hadn't even bothered to put a towel down or anything.

Ewww.

But how was I supposed to know we'd need a towel?

"Shit," Zach said, his voice a tight squeak. "Ruger, I can explain—"

"Don't fuckin' explain," Ruger said, pushing forward into the room. He slammed the door shut behind him and walked over to the couch. I tried to hide my head in Zach's chest, more ashamed and embarrassed than I'd ever been in my life.

Flowers. Were flowers too much to ask?

"Jesus Christ, what is she? Twelve?" Ruger asked, giving the couch a kick. It shuddered under me, and Zach sat up, pulling away from my body. I shrieked and pushed my hands down between us, trying to cover myself from his brother's gaze.

Shit. SHIT.

Then it got worse.

The brother—*Rooger?* whatever the hell kind of name *that* was—looked right at me as he leaned across my body, grabbing a folded blanket from the back of the couch.

He tossed it over my crotch.

I moaned and died a little inside. My legs were still spread wide, my skirt up high around my waist. He'd seen everything. *Everything*. This was supposed to be the most romantic night of my life and now I just wanted to go home and cry.

"I'm takin' a shower and by the time I'm done, you need to be gone," Ruger said, getting in Zach's face. My boyfriend flinched. "And stay the fuck outta my apartment."

With that, he walked down the hall to the bathroom, banging the door shut. Seconds later I heard the shower come on. Zach jumped up, muttering.

"Asshole. He's such a goddamn asshole."

"Was that your brother?"

"Yeah. He's a prick."

I sat up and straightened my shirt. Thank God I hadn't taken it off. Zach loved to touch my breasts, but we'd actually moved pretty fast once we got started. I managed to get to my feet, holding the blanket in front of me while I pulled down my skirt. I had no idea where my panties had gone, but a quick look around didn't reveal them. I leaned over the couch, digging in the pillows, hunting. No luck, but I managed to stick my hand in the disgusting wet spot we'd left behind.

I felt like such a whore.

"Fuck!" Zach yelled behind me. My head jerked up—how could things possibly get any worse? "Holy fuck, I cannot fucking believe this!"

"What's wrong?"

"The condom broke," he said, eyes wide. "*The fucking condom broke*. This has got to be the worst night of my life. You better not be pregnant."

The air froze in my lungs. Apparently things *could* get worse.

Zach held the broken rubber out toward me. I stared down at the nasty thing, not quite believing my bad luck.

“Did you do it wrong?” I whispered. He shrugged, not answering.

“It’s probably okay,” I said after another long pause. “I mean, my period just ended. You can’t get pregnant that soon after your period, right?”

“Um, yeah, probably,” he said, flushing and looking away. “I didn’t really pay attention to that shit in class. I mean, I always use a condom. Always. They never break, not even—”

My breath caught and I felt hot tears well up in my eyes.

“You told me you’d only done it once before,” I said softly. He winced.

“I’ve never done it with anyone I loved before,” he said, dropping the broken rubber and grabbing for my hand. I tried to tug away. The mess on his fingers grossed me out, but when he pulled me in tight and wrapped his arms around me, I caved.

“Hey, it’s gonna be okay,” he muttered, rubbing my back as I snuffled against his shirt. “It’ll be fine. We’re fine. And I’m sorry I wasn’t honest with you. I was afraid you wouldn’t stick with me if you knew I’d been stupid before. I don’t care about any other girls and I never will. I just want to be with you.”

“Okay,” I said, pulling myself together. He shouldn’t have lied, but at least he owned up to it. Mature couples worked through hard stuff all the time, right? “Um, we should probably get out of here. Your brother looked pretty pissed. I thought he gave you a key?”

“My stepmom has an emergency key,” he said, shrugging. “I took it. He was supposed to be out of town. Grab the pizza.”

“Should we leave some for your brother?”

“Screw him. And he’s my stepbrother. We’re not even really related.”

Ookay.

I found my shoes and slipped them on, then got my purse and the pizza. I still didn't know where my panties were, but just then I heard the shower stop.

We needed to get *out*.

Zach glanced over at the bathroom, then winked at me as he grabbed the half rack off the counter.

"C'mon," he said, taking my hand and pulling me toward the door.

"You're stealing his beer?" I asked, feeling a little sick. "Seriously?"

"Fuck him," Zach said, narrowing his eyes at me. "He's a total dick, thinks he's better than everyone else. Him and his stupid fucking motorcycle club. They're all assholes and criminals, and he is, too. Probably stole it in the first place. And he can buy more any time he wants, not like us. We'll take it to Kimber's. Her parents are in Mexico."

We jogged down the apartment complex stairs, then crossed the parking lot to his truck. It was kind of old, but at least the full-sized Ford's king cab had plenty of room. We'd take it out sometimes, just the two of us, and spend hours lying in the bed under the stars, kissing and laughing. Other times we packed three or four couples in, all sitting on each other's laps.

Zach hadn't done such a great job tonight, but that wasn't his fault. Sometimes life just didn't follow the plan. I was still crazy about him, though.

"Hey," I said, stopping him as he opened the driver's side door.

I turned him around and popped up onto my toes, kissing him long and slow. "I love you."

"I love you, too, babe," Zach said, smoothing my hair back behind my ear. I melted when he did that—made me feel all safe and protected. "Now let's go kill some of those beers. Shit, fuckin' crazy night. My brother is such a dick."

I rolled my eyes and laughed as I hauled ass around the truck.

So losing my virginity hadn't been perfect and beautiful and all that. But at least it was over and Zach loved me.

Too bad about the panties, though.

I'd bought them special and everything.

EIGHT MONTHS LATER

RUGER

"Fuck, it's my mom. I gotta grab that," Ruger yelled across the table at Mary Jo, holding up his cell. The band hadn't started yet, but the place was still packed, and he couldn't hear a damned thing. He didn't get out much since he'd started prospecting the Reapers. Earning a place in the club was a full-time job by itself, and he pulled shifts at the pawnshop, too.

Ma knew that, and she wouldn't have called if it wasn't important.

"Hey, lemme get outside," he said loudly into the phone, walking toward the door with long strides. People got the fuck out of his way, and he bit back a smile. He'd always been a big guy, but now that he wore an MC cut?

Fuckers practically dove under the tables when they saw the club patches on his vest.

"Kay, I'm outside," he said, moving away from the crowd in front of the Ironhorse.

"Jesse, Sophie needs you," his mom said.

"What do you mean?" he asked, peering at his bike, parked down the street. Was that guy getting close to it? *Oh, not gonna happen . . .*

"So are you going?" she said. Shit. She'd been talking.

"Fuck, sorry, ma. Missed what you said."

"I just got a panicked phone call from Sophie," his mom repeated. "Stupid kids. She went to a kegger with your brother and now she thinks she might be in labor. He's too drunk to drive her and she's having contractions, so she can't drive herself. I'm gonna kill him. I can't believe he'd take her somewhere like that, especially now."

"Are you fuckin' kidding me?"

“Jesse, don’t use that language with me,” she snapped. “Can you help her or not? I’m in Spokane and it’ll take at least an hour to get there. I’ll start making more phone calls if you can’t do it.”

“Wait, isn’t it too early?”

“A little too early, yes,” she replied, her voice tense. “I wanted to call an ambulance but she insists it’s just Braxton Hicks. Ambulance rides cost a fortune, you know, and she’s scared of the bills. She wants to go home but I think she might need the hospital. Can you get her or not? I can meet you there as soon as I hit town. I’ve got a real bad feeling about this, Jess. Didn’t sound like Braxton Hicks to me.”

“Yeah, of course,” he replied, wondering what the hell “Braxton Hicks” were. He saw Mary Jo come out of the bar, smiling at him ruefully. She knew all about sudden phone calls and changes in plans. “Where are they?”

He got the information, then hung up, walking over to his date and shrugging his shoulders. This sucked. He wanted to get laid, and not at the clubhouse. Some fuckin’ privacy would be nice for once, and Mary Jo was wild as they got.

“Club business?” she asked lightly. Thank fuck she wasn’t a drama queen.

“Nope, family,” he replied. “My asshole stepbrother knocked up his girlfriend and now she’s going into labor. Needs a ride to the hospital. I’m gonna go get her.”

Mary Jo’s eyes widened.

“You should leave,” she said quickly. “I’ll take a cab home. Shit, that sucks . . . How old is she?”

“Just turned seventeen.”

“Damn,” she said, shivering with genuine horror. “I can’t imagine having a kid that young. Call me later, okay?”

He gave her a fast but hard kiss. She reached down and offered his cock a quick squeeze. Ruger groaned, feeling himself stiffen. He *really* needed to get laid . . .

Instead, he pulled away and walked over to his bike.

The party was halfway to Athol, off in some field that he vaguely remembered visiting when he was in high school. He found Zach's truck easy enough. Sophie stood next to it, looking scared in the summer twilight. Then her face tightened and she hunched over her giant belly, groaning. Now she looked terrified.

Ruger parked his bike and realized he'd have to leave it in the field—no way she could ride with him. Fucking great. Asshat little shits would probably run over it or something. Sophie's face was white with strain, though. No room to fuck around. She needed to go in the truck, and clearly she needed to go *now*. Ruger shook his head, glancing around for his brother.

He still couldn't figure out why a smart, beautiful girl like her would pick Zach, of all people. Sophie had long, reddish-brown hair, beautiful green eyes, and a way about her that screamed feminine softness—a softness he'd spent more than one night imagining with his dick in his hand. Even pregnant in the middle of a field party, she was still gorgeous.

Way the fuck too young, though.

She saw him and winced, reaching around to put one hand against her back, stretching as the contraction ended. Ruger knew she didn't like him, and he didn't blame her. They hadn't met under the best of circumstances, and things between him and Zach went further to shit every day. Ruger hated the way he treated their mom and hated the way he lived his life. More than anything else, he hated the way the little fuck was already running around on Sophie behind her back.

Cocksucker didn't deserve a girl like her, and their kid sure as hell hadn't won the lottery when it came to his future daddy.

"How you doing?" he asked, coming up to Sophie and hunkering down so he could see her face. Her eyes were full of panic.

"My water broke," she said, her voice a hoarse whisper. "The contractions are coming really fast. Way too fast. It's supposed to be slow with your first baby, it never happens this fast. I need to get to the hospital, Ruger. I shouldn't have come here."

“Oh, fuck me,” he muttered. “You got the keys?”

She shook her head.

“Zach does. He’s over by the bonfire. Maybe we should call an ambulance? Oh . . .” she groaned, leaning over.

“Hang in there,” he said. “I’ll get Zach. I can drive you to the hospital faster than an ambulance at this point.”

She groaned again and leaned back against the truck. Ruger took off toward the bonfire, finding Zach half passed out on the ground.

“On your feet, asshole,” Ruger demanded, grabbing him by the shirt and dragging him upright. “Keys. Now.”

Zach looked at him blankly. Was that barf on his shirt? High school kids stood around watching them, eyes wide as they clutched their big red Solo cups of cheap beer.

“Fuck me,” Ruger muttered again, digging down into his brother’s pants pocket, hoping like hell he hadn’t lost them. This was closer to Zach’s dick than he ever needed his hand to be. He pulled out the keys, dropping Zach back into the dirt.

“You wanna see your kid gettin’ born, get your ass in the truck now,” Ruger told him. “I’m not waiting for you.”

With that he took off toward the Ford, wrenching open the door and lifting Sophie into the backseat. He heard a thudding noise and saw Zach climb into the truck bed out of the corner of his eye.

Little prick.

Ruger turned on the engine and popped it into gear, ready to go. Then he slammed it back into park, jumped out, and ran over to his bike. He had a little first aid kit in there. Nothing fancy, but at this rate they might need it. He climbed back in the truck, pulled out of the field and started toward the highway, watching Sophie anxiously in the rearview mirror. She was panting hard and then she screamed.

Every hair on the back of his neck stood up.

“Holy shit, I feel like I need to push,” she cried. “Oh, God, it hurts. It hurts so bad. I’ve never felt anything like this, drive faster. We need to get there fast . . .”

Her voice trailed off as she groaned again. Ruger drove faster, wondering if Zach had something to hold on to. He couldn’t see him back there. Maybe he’d passed out in the bed.

Hell, maybe he’d bounced out. Ruger didn’t care either way.

They’d almost made it to the highway when Sophie started shouting.

“Stop! Stop the truck.”

Ruger stopped, hoping to hell that didn’t mean what he thought it did. He threw on the parking brake and turned to see her, eyes closed, face almost purple and full of agony. She was crouching forward, moaning.

“Ambulance,” he said, his voice grim. She nodded tightly. He made the call, giving the operator the details of their situation. Afterward, he put the phone on speaker, dropping it to the seat. Then he got out and opened the back door, leaning in.

“I’m here with you, Sophie,” the 911 operator told them. “Hold on. The paramedics only have to come up from Hayden. You’ll see them soon.”

Sophie groaned through another contraction.

“I have to push.”

“The ambulance is ten minutes out,” the operator said. “Can you hold on until they reach you? They have everything they need to help you with this.”

“FUCK!” Sophie screamed, squeezing Ruger’s hands so hard his fingers went numb.

“All right. It’s unlikely the baby will be born before they arrive, but I want you to get ready, Ruger,” the operator said, her voice so calm she sounded stoned. How did she do that? He felt about thirty seconds away from a heart attack. “Sophie needs you now. The good news is that childbirth is natural and her body knows what to do. A baby born this fast usually means a very smooth delivery. Do you have a way to wash your hands?”

“Yeah,” Ruger muttered. “You gotta let go for a sec, Sophie.”

She shook her head, but he pried his hands free. He ripped into the first aid kit, pulling out a couple of ridiculously small sanitary wipe packets. Then he attacked his hands and tried to go after hers.

She screamed and punched his face.

Holy shit, girl had some power behind her. Ruger shook his head, then pulled it together, cheekbone throbbing.

Another contraction.

“It’s too early,” Sophie gasped. “I can’t stop it. I have to push *now*.”

“When is she due?” the operator asked as Sophie moaned long and low.

“About a month,” Ruger told her. “It’s too early.”

“All right. The most important thing is to make sure the baby is breathing. Don’t let it fall on the ground if it’s born before the EMTs arrive. You’ll have to catch it. Now don’t panic—it can take hours to push out a baby, especially the first one. But just as a precaution, I want you to find something warm to wrap around the child if Sophie delivers. You’ll check the baby’s breathing. If it’s good, you’ll lay him on the mother’s bare chest, face down, skin to skin. Then put whatever you have over him. Don’t tug on the cord, cut it, tie it off, or anything. Keep your hands away from the birth canal. If the afterbirth comes out, wrap it with the child.”

That’s when it hit him.

Sophie was going to have her baby right here on the side of the road. His nephew.

Right now.

Holy shit, she needed to get her pants off first.

She wore leggings and he tried to pull them down with her still inside the cab. It didn’t work, and she couldn’t seem to find a comfortable position, either.

“We have to get you out of here,” he said. She shook her head, teeth gritted, but he picked her up and set her feet on the ground anyway. Then he pulled down her sopping

wet leggings and panties in one smooth move, lifting one foot and then the other to free her legs from the clinging fabric.

Now what?

Sophie cried out again, face tight as she bore down next to him, falling into a squat beside the truck.

Fuck, he needed something to keep the baby warm.

Ruger glanced around frantically, finding exactly nothing, so he pulled off his cut and tossed it into the truck. Then he ripped his T-shirt over his head. It wasn't the best, but it was relatively clean. He'd showered and put on a fresh one before meeting Mary Jo.

Sophie pushed for an eternity, crouched down and digging her fingers deep into his shoulders. He'd have bruises there in the morning. Probably cuts from her nails, too. Whatever. The 911 operator's calm voice encouraged them, saying the ambulance was only five minutes out. Sophie ignored her, lost in her own world of pain and urgency, giving loud, low groans with every contraction.

"Can you see the baby's head?" the operator asked. Ruger froze. "You want me to look?"

"Yes."

He was pretty damned sure he didn't want to look. Fuck. Sophie needed him, though. The kid needed him, too. Ruger dropped down to peer between her legs.

That's when he saw it.

A tiny head, coming out of her body, covered with dark black hair. Holy crap.

Sophie sucked in a deep breath and gripped his shoulders even harder. She let out one loud, long moan as she pushed again.

Then it happened.

Ruger reached down—almost in a trance—as the world's most perfect little human slid right out of her and into his hands. Sophie started crying with relief as blood streaked her thighs.

“What’s happening?” the operator asked. He heard a siren in the distance.

“The baby just came out,” Ruger muttered, awed. He’d seen a calf born, but that had nothing on this. “I’m holding it.”

“Is it breathing?”

He watched as the newborn opened its little eyes for the first time and looked right at him. They were blue and round and confused and fucking gorgeous. They closed again as the baby screwed up its tiny mouth, sucked in a deep breath and let out a piercing wail.

“Yeah. Fuck. The kid is fine.”

Ruger looked up at Sophie as he raised the baby between them. She smiled hesitantly and reached for her child. Her exhausted, tear-streaked-yet-radiant face was the second most beautiful thing he’d ever seen in his life.

Right after those tiny blue eyes.

“You did good, babe,” he whispered to Sophie.

“Yeah,” she whispered back. “I did, didn’t I?”

She kissed the boy’s head softly.

“Hey Noah . . . It’s mommy,” she said. “I’m gonna take such good care of you. I promise. Always.”

CHAPTER ONE

SEVEN YEARS LATER

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

SOPHIE

Our last night in Seattle didn't go so great.

My babysitter, my emergency backup sitter, and my second emergency backup sitter all had the flu. I'd have been screwed if one of my new neighbors hadn't volunteered to keep an eye on Noah. I didn't really know her, but we'd been living next to each other for a month and no red flags. Not the best, I know.

You do what you have to when you're a single mom.

Then Dick yelled at me for coming in late for my shift.

I didn't tell him I'd nearly missed work altogether because of Noah. And no, I'm not just calling him Dick because he's actually a dick (although he is). It's his real name.

That night I truly understood why he was in such a bad mood, because of the six girls who were supposed to be on, only two showed. Two had the flu (genuine—half the city had it) and two had dates. Or I'm assuming they had dates. Their official stories were a dead grandmother (her fifth) and an infected tattoo.

Apparently none of the drug stores in her neighborhood carried Bacitracin.

Either way, things fell to shit fast. We had a band, which put the customers in a good mood, but the live music and drunken dancing made it even harder to keep up with my tables. Also made us busier than usual. We would've been stretched even with a full staff. To make things perfect, it was a local band and most of their fans were college students, which meant crappy tips.

By eleven I was already tired and needed to pee in a bad way, so I ducked into the bathroom. Out of toilet paper already (of course), and I knew damned well nobody had time to restock. I pulled out my phone, doing a quick check for messages, and saw two.

One from Miranda, my babysitter, and a second from Ruger, the world's scariest almost-in-law.

Shit.

Miranda first. I held it to my ear and listened, hoping to hell everything was all right. No way Dick would let me off early, even for an emergency. Ruger could wait.

"Mom, I'm scared," Noah said.

I froze.

"I took Miranda's phone and I'm hiding in the closet," he continued. "There's a bad guy here and he's smoking inside and he wanted me to smoke, too, and they kept laughing at me. He tried to tickle me and make me sit on his lap. Now they're watching a movie that has naked people in it and I don't like it. I don't want to be here and I want to go home. I want *you* to come home. I really need you. *Right now.*"

I heard his breath hitch, like he was crying but didn't want me to know, and then the message cut out.

I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to control my surge of adrenaline. I checked the time on the message—almost forty-five minutes ago. My stomach twisted and for a second I thought I might puke. Then I pulled it together and left the bathroom. I managed to walk back into the bar and had Brett, the bartender, unlock the drawer where we kept our purses.

"I need to get home, my kid's in trouble. Tell Dick."

With that I headed toward the door, pushing through drunken frat boys. I was almost out when someone grabbed my arm, spinning me around. My boss stood there, glaring.

"Where the hell do you think you're going, Williams?"

"There's an emergency," I told him. "I need to go home."

"You leave me now with a crowd like this, don't come back,"

Dick growled. I leaned forward and stared him down, which was pretty easy considering the guy was hardly more than five feet tall. On good days I thought of him as a hobbit.

Tonight he was just a troll.

“I need to take care of my son,” I said coldly, using my deadliest troll-killing voice. “Let go of my arm. Now. I’m leaving.”

Driving home took at least a year.

I kept trying to call Miranda, but nobody answered. When I reached our ancient apartment building, I tore up the wooden stairs to the top floor, shaking with a weird mixture of rage and fear. Miranda’s place was right across from my little studio, and while my thighs and calves hated the climb, I loved how we were the only residents up here. Until now.

Tonight it felt remote and scary.

I heard music and grunting as I pounded on the door. No answer. I pounded harder and wondered if I’d have to break in. Then the door flew open. A tall guy with unbuttoned pants and no shirt blocked the entry. He had the start of a gut and bloodshot eyes. I smelled pot and booze.

“Yeah?” he asked, swaying. I tried looking around him, but he blocked me.

“My son, Noah, is here,” I said, struggling to stay calm and focus on what really counted. I could kill this asshole later. “I’m here to pick him up.”

“Oh, yeah. Forgot about him. C’mon in.”

He stepped aside and I ducked past him. Miranda’s place was a studio just like ours, so I should’ve seen Noah right away. Instead I spotted my useless neighbor on the couch, collapsed on her back with her eyes glazed and a dreamy smile on her face. Her clothes were rumpled, her long hippie skirt shoved up above her splayed knees. The phone lay on the coffee table in front of her, next to a bong made out of plastic pens, foil and a

Mountain Dew bottle. Empties surrounded it, because apparently weed wasn't enough to keep her entertained while she failed to babysit my seven-year-old child.

"Miranda, where's Noah?" I demanded. She looked at me blankly.

"How should I know?" she slurred.

"Maybe he went outside," the guy muttered, turning away from me as he reached into the fridge for another beer.

I caught my breath.

Across his back was a giant tattoo that looked kind of like Ruger's, only it said Devil's Jacks instead of Reapers. Motorcycle club. Bad news. *Always* bad, despite what Ruger insisted.

I'd think about that later. Focus. I needed to find Noah. "Mama?"

His voice was soft and trembling. I looked around frantically, then saw him climbing in through an open window facing the street. *Oh my God*. I moved toward him, forcing myself to approach oh-so-carefully. Four flights above the ground and my boy was clinging to a windowsill. If I wasn't damned careful, I'd knock him off the ledge.

I reached out and clamped my hands around his upper arms, pulling him in and clutching him close. He wrapped around me like a little monkey. I rubbed my hand up and down his back, whispering how much I loved him and promising never to leave him alone like that again.

"I don't get what you're so upset about," Miranda muttered, pulling herself up to make room for her asshole boyfriend. "There's a fire escape out there and it's not like it's cold. It's August. Kid was fine."

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and forced myself to stay calm. Then I opened them and looked past her.

That's when I saw the porn on the TV.

My eyes skittered away from the sight of a silicone woman screwing four guys simultaneously. Something terrible took fire in my heart.

Stupid bitch. Miranda would pay for this.

“What’s your problem, anyway?” she slurred.

I didn’t bother answering. I just needed to get my boy out of here and home safe. I’d deal with my neighbor tomorrow. Maybe by then I’d have calmed down enough not to end her miserable life.

I carried Noah out of the apartment and across the hallway to my own door. Somehow I managed to get it open without dropping him, fingers trembling from suppressed rage and a health dose of guilt.

I’d failed him.

My baby needed me, and instead of protecting him, I’d left him parked with a druggie who could’ve gotten him killed. Being a single mom sucked.

It took a warm bath, an hour of snuggles, and four books to get Noah to sleep.

Me? I wasn’t sure I’d ever sleep again.

The summer heat didn’t help—I swear, the place had zero airflow. After an hour of sweating in the darkness, watching his little chest rise and fall, I gave up. I popped a beer and sat down on our couch, a thousand plans running through my head. First, I’d kill Miranda. Then either I needed to find a new place to live or she did. I also pondered whether to call the cops.

I liked the idea of throwing her and her stoner boyfriend to the wolves. They deserved a friendly visit from the boys in blue.

But since her man was in a motorcycle club, calling the cops might not be the smartest move. Guys in MCs generally weren’t fond of the police, a perspective he and his club brothers might feel the need to share with me once he made bail. Not to mention Child Protective Services would get involved, which could also get pretty ugly.

I loved Noah and would do anything for him. I was a damned good mother. When other girls my age were out partying and having fun, I was taking him to the park and reading him stories. I spent my twenty-first birthday holding him while he puked from

stomach flu instead of hitting the bars. No matter how rough things got, I spent time with Noah every day and made sure he felt loved.

But I didn't look so good on paper.

Single mom. Dad out of the picture. No family around, crappy studio apartment. Probably unemployed after tonight . . . What would CPS make of that? Would they blame me for leaving him with Miranda in the first place?

I had no idea what to do. I took a long pull on the beer and then turned on my phone, where Ruger's message glowed at me accusingly. Crap. I hated calling him. No matter how much time he spent with us (and he made a point of seeing Noah regularly), I just couldn't relax around him. Ruger didn't like me and I knew it. I think he blamed me for destroying his relationship with Zach. God knows, I played my part. I pushed that memory away.

I *always* pushed that memory away.

If only I unnerved him, too, but apparently that was too much to ask. Instead he just looked right through me, hardly bothering to acknowledge my existence.

Even more frustrating? Ruger had to be the hottest guy I'd ever met. He was all danger and hard muscles, with his tattoos and piercings and that goddamned black Harley of his. When he walked into a room he owned it, because it only took one look to see he was a fucking badass, the type who takes what he wants and never says he's sorry.

I'd been nursing a hell of a crush on him for longer than I cared to acknowledge, something he'd failed to notice despite his apparent fascination with every other woman under the age of forty within five hundred miles. Well, failed to notice all but once, and that hadn't exactly ended well.

At least he never brought any of his club whores around (which I greatly appreciated), but that didn't change the fact that he was one of the biggest sluts in north Idaho.

So that's where we stood.

Presented with my nonthreatening charms, the panhandle's sexiest, most prolific man-whore still preferred hanging with my seven-year-old child during his visits.

I sighed and hit the play button.

“Sophie, answer your fucking phone,” he said, his voice cold and unyielding, like usual. “I just got a call from Noah. I talked to him for a while and tried to keep him calm, but then some bitch started yellin’ and took the phone away. Nobody answered when I called back. I don’t know what the fuck you’re thinking, but your kid needs you. Get off your ass and go get him. Now. I swear, if anything happens to him . . . You don’t wanna go there, Sophie. Just fucking call me when you find him. No excuses.”

I dropped the phone and leaned forward on my knees, rubbing my temples with the tips of my fingers.

In addition to everything else, now I had to deal with Mr. Being-A-Biker-Isn’t-A-Crime losing his shit on me. Which he would do, I had no doubt. Ruger was scary enough in a good mood. The one time I’d seen him truly enraged still gave me nightmares, and that’s not a figure of speech. Unfortunately, he had a point. When my son needed me, I hadn’t answered the phone. Thank God Ruger had been there for Noah. But still . . . I really didn’t want to deal with him right now, either.

I couldn’t leave him hanging, though, worried about Noah all night. He’d called me a bitch the last time I saw him, and maybe he had a point, but I wasn’t a big enough bitch to torture him like that. I hit the callback button.

“He all right?” Ruger demanded, not bothering with a hello.

“I’ve got him and he’s fine,” I said. “I couldn’t hear the phone ring at work, but I found his message and left about forty-five minutes later. He’s okay. We got lucky and nothing happened, not that I can tell.”

“You sure that asshole didn’t touch him?” Ruger asked.

“Noah said he tried to tickle him and make him sit on his lap, but he ran away. They were completely cross-faded. I don’t think they even noticed when he took off. He was hiding outside on the fire escape.”

“Fuck . . .” Ruger said. He didn’t sound happy. “How high up was he?”

“Four stories,” I replied, closing my eyes in shame. “It’s a miracle he didn’t fall.”

“Okay, I’m driving. I’ll talk to you later. Don’t fucking leave him alone again, or you’ll answer to me. You got that?”

“Yeah,” I whispered. I hung up the phone and set it down on the table. The room felt stifling and I couldn’t get enough air, so I crept softly across the floor to the window. The splintery wooden sash slid up with a groan and I leaned out, looking down at the street, sucking in the cool breeze. The bars had just emptied and people laughed outside, walking along like everything was fine and dandy.

What if I hadn’t checked the voice mail? Would any of these happy drunks have looked up and seen a little boy clinging to the fire escape? What if he’d fallen asleep out there?

Noah could be dead on that pavement right now.

I finished my beer and grabbed a second one, then sat on my ratty couch and pounded it. The last time I checked the clock, it said three a.m.

A noise in the predawn darkness woke me. Noah?

A hand covered my mouth as a large body came down over mine, pinning me to the couch. Adrenaline poured through me too late—no matter how I struggled, bucking my entire body against his, my attacker held me trapped. All I could think about was Noah, sleeping right across the room. I needed to fight and survive for my son, but I couldn’t move and I couldn’t see a damned thing in the darkness.

“You scared?” a rough, dark voice whispered in my ear. “Wondering if you’ll live through the night? What about your kid? I could rape and kill you and then sell him to some sick pedophile fuck. You couldn’t do a goddamned thing to stop me, now could you? How you gonna protect him livin’ in a place like this, Sophie?”

Fuck. I knew that voice.

Ruger.

He wouldn’t hurt me. *Asshole.*

“I didn’t even have to break through the fuckin’ pathetic lock you have on this shithole,” he continued, shifting his hips over mine, emphasizing how little control I held. “Your window’s open and so is the window in the hallway. I just stepped out on the fire escape and walked right over, which means *anyone else could, too*. Including that sick fuck who messed with our boy earlier. That bastard still in the building? I want him, Sophie. Nod your head if you’ll stay quiet, and I’ll let you talk. Don’t scare Noah.”

I nodded my head as best I could, trying to calm the racing of my heart, torn between the remains of fear and my building anger.

How *dare* he judge me?

“You scream, you’ll pay.”

I jerked my head. He pulled his hand away, and I took several deep breaths, blinking rapidly, trying to decide if lunging at him with my teeth would be worth it. Probably not... Ruger was heavy and he covered my entire body, his legs clamping down across mine, my arms trapped deep in the couch. I couldn’t remember him ever voluntarily touching me before—not for four years, at least. That was a good thing, because something about Ruger turned off my brain in a bad way, leaving my body in charge.

I got knocked up the last time I left my body in charge.

I’d never regret my son, but that didn’t mean I should let my libido do the thinking for me again. After I finally got shot of Zach, I’d only gone out with very safe, very boring men. I’d had three lovers total in my life, and numbers two through three were nice and tame. I didn’t need a complication like my son’s biker uncle . . . But I’d caught his familiar scent now—gun oil and a hint of male sweat—which led to an annoyingly predictable response down below.

Even angry, I wanted Ruger.

In fact, I usually wanted him *more* when I was angry. This was unfortunate, because he had a gift for pissing me off. Life would be so much simpler if I could just hate him. The man was truly an asshole.

He just happened to be an asshole who loved the hell out of my kid.

So now he lay on top of me and I wanted to head-butt him or something, but I also felt embarrassing heat pool between my legs. He was big and hard and *right there* and I didn't know how to handle that. Ruger always kept his distance from me. I expected him to let me up now that he'd made his point in the least constructive way possible, but that didn't happen. Instead he shifted again, leaning up on his elbows on either side of me, holding me trapped.

His legs moved, one coming to rest between mine. Way too intimate. I tried to close my knees, but he narrowed his eyes and slid his hips into the cradle of my pelvis.

Wrong. So wrong . . . And unfair, too, because clenching him between my legs didn't exactly make my brain work better. I squirmed, needing him to be far away from me. Immediately. Yet I couldn't help wondering whether I could reach down between us and open his fly.

The man was like heroin—seductive, addictive, and a damned good way to wake up dead.

“Hold still,” he whispered, voice strained. “The fact that my dick’s in its happy place is probably saving your life. Trust me when I say I’m seriously considerin’ strangling you, Sophie. Thinking about fuckin’ you helps balance that out.”

I froze.

I couldn't believe he'd just said that. We had an agreement. We'd never discussed it, but we both followed it scrupulously. Sure enough, though, he pressed his hips into mine again and I felt his hard length growing against my stomach. My inner muscles clenched, sending a wave of need wrenching through me. This was cheating. The infatuation went one way—I lusted after him, he ignored me, and we pretended nothing had ever happened between us.

I licked my lips and his eyes followed the small movement, unfathomable in the dim light starting to filter through the windows. “You don't mean that,” I whispered. He narrowed his eyes, studying me like a lion scoping out the slowest gazelle. Wait, did lions eat gazelles? Was this really happening?

Think.

“This isn’t you, Ruger,” I told him. “Think about what you just said. Let me up and we’ll talk.”

“I fucking mean every word,” he replied, harsh and angry. “I hear my kid is in trouble and his mom’s nowhere to be found. I spend hours driving across the state, scared shitless that someone’s molesting or murdering our boy, and when I finally get here I find you in a total shithole with a broken lock on the downstairs door and easy access to your apartment through an open window. I crawl in and find you passed out on the couch half naked and smellin’ like beer.”

He dropped his head down, scenting me and twisting his hips into mine. Shit, that felt good. I actually ached between my legs, it felt so good.

“I could’ve taken him away from you, easy as fuck,” he continued, raising his head, eyes burning through me. “And if I could, so could anyone else, which is not fuckin’ okay. So you’ll just have to sit tight and wait for me to cool down a little because right now I’m not feeling particularly reasonable. Until then, I’d suggest you *not* tell me what I mean, you got that?”

I nodded my head, eyes wide. I believed every word he said. Ruger held my gaze as he shifted his legs again and then both were between mine and I felt every inch of his dick right up against my crotch. He surrounded me completely, overwhelming me with his strength, and I had a sudden, crazy flashback to that night I’d lost my virginity to Zach in his apartment.

Me sprawled on a couch, legs spread, watching my life fall to shit.

Full circle.

Adrenaline still raced through me, and he wasn’t the only one who needed to cool down a bit. He’d *scared* me, damn it, and now the bastard was turning me on, a sensation that mixed disturbingly well with the anger and fear already overwhelming my system. I really couldn’t move, either. Ruger dropped his head down next to mine and groaned, grinding his hips into me. A swirl of tingling, tightening, traitorous desire twisted up along my spine from my pelvis. I moaned as he pressed hard against my clit. This felt good. Too good.

My inner slut suggested a surefire way to burn off tension . . .

As if reading my mind, Ruger's breath caught. Then he pushed into me harder, rubbing his length back and forth against the thin layer of cotton covering my center. Neither of us said anything but I tilted my hips up to feel him better and he stiffened.

This is a bad idea, I thought, arching into him, closing my eyes. I'd wanted him for years. Every time I saw him, I secretly wondered what he'd feel like inside me.

Of course, if we did this, I'd still have to look at his smug, smirking face. He wouldn't even be embarrassed, the stupid jerk. We had to stop immediately. But he felt fucking incredible. His scent surrounded me, the hard strength of his body pinning and spreading me like a captured butterfly. His nose brushed the curve of my ear and then he dropped lower, giving my neck a slow, sucking kiss, lips dragging across my skin until I had to bite my own to stay quiet. I twisted underneath him and acknowledged the truth. I wanted him deep inside. Now.

I didn't care that captured butterflies die when they're pinned. "Mama?"

Shit.

I tried to speak but nothing came out. I cleared my throat and tried again, the heat of Ruger's breath playing across my cheek. My entire body throbbed, and he shifted, slowly dragging his hips across mine again, deliberately taunting me.

Bastard.

"Hey, baby," I called to Noah, my voice unsteady. "Um, give me a sec, okay? We have company."

"Is it Uncle Ruger?"

Ruger thrust against me one last time before jackknifing up. I sat up unsteadily, rubbing my hands up and down my arms. Noah's voice should've been cold water on my libido, but no such luck. I still felt Ruger's delicious hardness between my legs.

"I'm here, little man," Ruger said, standing and running his hands across his head. I studied him in the dim morning light, wishing with all my heart he looked more like my former boss, Dick. No such luck. Ruger was over six feet tall, roped with muscle and

annoyingly handsome in an I'm-probably-a-murderer-but-I've-got-dimples-and-a-tight-ass-so-you'll-still-lust-after-me kind of way. Sometimes he wore a mohawk, but the last few months he'd taken to wearing the same buzz cut he had when we first met, the slightly longer hair on top dark and thick.

Combined with his size, his piercings, his black leather club vest, and the tattooed sleeves on both arms, he belonged on a "Wanted" poster. Noah should've been terrified of him. But he didn't seem to notice how scary his uncle was. He never had.

"I promised I'd come get you, didn't I?" Ruger said softly. Noah crawled out of bed and stumbled over to Ruger, reaching his arms up for a hug. Ruger caught my boy and swung him high, meeting his gaze eye-to-eye, man-to-man. Ruger always did that—he took Noah seriously.

"You okay, bud?"

Noah nodded, wrapping his arms around his uncle's neck and clutching him close. He worshipped Ruger, and the feeling was mutual. The sight was heartbreaking.

I always thought Zach would be Noah's hero. Obviously, my instincts were shit.

"I'm proud of you, little man," Ruger told him. I stood, planning to join them, but Ruger turned away. So he wanted some privacy. I wasn't going to argue if it made Noah feel safe, but I still strained to hear the conversation as he carried my boy back to bed.

"You did good callin' for help," I heard him say faintly. "You ever get in a situation like that again, you call me. Call your mama. You can call the cops, too. You remember how to do that?"

"Nine one one," Noah muttered, his voice sleepy and thick. A giant yawn caught him off guard and he slumped against Ruger's shoulder. "But I'm only supposed to do that in an emergency and I wasn't sure if I'd get in trouble."

"A bad man touches you, that's an emergency," Ruger murmured. "But you did your best, you did what I said. You hid and that was real good, little man. I want you to lie down and go back to sleep, okay? In the morning I'm taking you to my house and you'll never have to see those people or this place again. But you can't come with me if you're too tired."

I caught my breath. What the hell?

I watched as he tucked Noah in, my mood far from mellow. Seconds later my kiddo was out again, clearly still exhausted. I pulled on a robe and waited for Ruger to come back, crossing my arms and bracing for battle.

He cocked a brow at me, deliberately checking me out. Was he trying to use sex to bully me? That might explain his little seduction-on-the-couch game . . .

“You forget the part about not pissin’ me off?”

“Why did you tell Noah he’s going to your house? You can’t make promises like that.”

“I’m taking him home to Coeur d’Alene with me,” Ruger replied, his voice matter-of-fact. He tilted his head to the side, waiting for the fight he had to know was coming. His neck was thick with muscles and his biceps flexed as he crossed his arms, matching my stance. It really wasn’t fair. A man this frustrating should be short and fat, with hairy ears or something. But it didn’t matter how sexy he was this time, I wouldn’t cave—he wasn’t Noah’s dad and he could step the fuck *off*. “I’m betting you’ll want to come with us, and that’s great. But he’s not stayin’ in this shithole another night.”

I shook my head slowly and deliberately. I felt the same way about our apartment—it didn’t feel safe anymore—but I wasn’t going to let him just swoop in and take over. I’d find us a new place. I wasn’t quite sure how, but I’d do it.

I’d spent the last seven years honing my survival skills.

“You don’t get to make that decision. He’s not your son, Ruger.”

“Decision’s made,” Ruger replied. “And he may not be my son, but he’s definitely my kid. I claimed him the minute he was born, and you damned well know it’s true. I didn’t like how you took him so far from me, but I respect why you did it. Things have changed now. Mom’s dead, Zach’s gone, and this”—he gestured around the ratty little studio—“this isn’t good enough. What the fuck do you need in your life that’s more important than giving Noah a safe place to live?”

I glared at him.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Keep it down,” Ruger told me, stepping forward into my space, pushing me back. It was a power play, pure physical intimidation. I’ll bet it usually worked for him, too, because when he loomed over me like that every survival instinct I had told me to roll over and follow his orders. Something quivered down below . . . Stupid body.

“It means exactly what it sounds like,” he continued. “What the fuck are you spending your child support on? Because it sure as shit isn’t this hellhole. And why the fuck did you move out of your other place? It wasn’t great, but it was okay, and it had that little park and playground. When you told me you were moving, I thought that meant you found something nicer.”

“I’m here because I got evicted for not paying my rent.”

His jaw tightened convulsively. His expression darkened, something impossible to read filling his eyes.

“You wanna tell me why—exactly—I’m just hearin’ about this situation?”

“No,” I replied honestly. “I don’t want to tell you anything. It’s none of your business.”

He stilled, taking a series of deep breaths. Long seconds passed, and I realized he was consciously forcing himself to calm down. I thought he’d been angry before, but the cold fury that came off of him now was a whole new level . . . I shivered. That was one of the many problems with Ruger. Sometimes he scared me. And the guys in his club?

Ruger was poison to a woman in my situation, no matter how sweet he was to Noah or how badly my body craved his touch.

“Noah is my business,” he finally said, each word slow and deliberate. “*Everything that touches him is my business.* You don’t get it, that’s your problem, but it ends tonight. I’m taking him home where it’s safe so I won’t ever get another fucking phone call like that one again. Jesus, you haven’t even done the basics to secure this place. Don’t you ever listen to me? I told you to get some of those little alarms for the windows until I could come over and wire the place up right.”

I steeled my spine and held fast.

“One, you don’t get to take him anywhere,” I said, trying very hard not to flinch or let my voice tremble. I couldn’t afford to show any weakness, despite the fact that I was perilously close to peeing myself. “And two, your asshole brother hasn’t paid me any child support for nearly a year now. Health and Welfare can’t find a trace of him, either. I did my best, but I couldn’t keep up the rent on the other place. I can afford the rent here, so we moved. You have no right to judge me—I’d like to see you raise a child on what I earn. They don’t just give out those window alarms for free, Ruger.”

His jaw twitched.

“Zach’s working the oil fields in North Dakota,” he said slowly. “Makin’ damned good money. I talked to him two months ago, about Mom’s estate. He said everything was okay between you two.”

“He *lied*,” I said forcefully. “That’s what he *does*, Ruger. This isn’t news. Are you really surprised?”

I felt suddenly tired—thinking about Zach always made me tired, but sleep wasn’t the answer. He waited for me in my dreams, too. I always woke up screaming.

Ruger turned and walked over to the window, leaning on the sill and looking outside thoughtfully. Thank God, he seemed to be calming down. If he didn’t look so deceptively attractive silhouetted in my window, my world would make sense again.

“I guess I shouldn’t be,” he said after a long pause. “We both know he’s a fuckin’ loser. But you should’ve told me. I wouldn’t have let this happen.”

“It wasn’t your problem,” I replied softly. “We were doing fine, at least until tonight. My regular sitters all have that flu that’s going around. I made a mistake. I won’t make it again.”

“No, you won’t,” Ruger said, turning to face me. He tilted his head to the side, eyes boring through me. He looked a little different, I realized. He’d lost a bunch of his piercings. Too bad it hadn’t softened him up even a little bit, because his expression was pure steel. “I won’t let you. It’s time to admit you can’t do it all on your own. Club’s full

of women who love kids. They'll help out. We're a family, and family doesn't stand by when someone's in trouble."

I'd opened my mouth to argue when I heard a light knock on the door. Ruger pushed off the window and strode over to open it.

A giant of a man walked in, taller even than Ruger, which was saying something. He wore faded jeans, a dark shirt and a black leather vest covered with patches, just like Ruger's, including his name and a little red diamond with a 1% symbol on it.

All the Reapers had them, and my old friend Kimber had told me it meant they were outlaws—*that* I had no trouble believing.

This new guy had shoulder-length, darkish hair and a face so perfectly handsome he could've been a movie star. Under one arm he held a stack of broken-down cardboard boxes, tied together with what looked like baling wire.

In the other he held an aluminum baseball bat and a roll of duct tape.

I swallowed and nearly fainted. My hands actually started sweating, because I'm cliché like that. My nemesis hadn't just come to rescue us, he'd brought along one of his accomplices. That was the biggest problem with Ruger—he was a package deal. You bought one Reaper, you bought them all.

Well, all of them who weren't currently serving time.

"This is one of my brothers, Horse," Ruger said, closing the door behind him. "He's gonna help us move your shit. Stay quiet, but start packing whatever you want to bring. You'll be staying in the basement at my place. Don't think you've seen my new property," he added pointedly, which I knew was a dig at me for refusing his offer of a room at the beginning of the summer when we visited Coeur d'Alene. "But it's got a daylight basement with a kitchen and everything, and you'll have your own little patio. There's tons of space for Noah to run around, too. It's furnished, so only bring what you really care about. The rest of this shit can stay."

He glanced around the room, judging my furniture. I saw his point. Most of it had been scrounged off curbs next to dumpsters. The finer pieces came from thrift stores.

“How’s the kid?” Horse asked softly, setting the boxes down and leaning them against the wall. Then he hefted the bat, giving it a little toss and catching it with his other hand. I couldn’t help but notice how thick his arms were. Apparently club life wasn’t all drinking and whoring, because Ruger and his friend obviously did some serious weight lifting. “Did the bastard touch him? What’re we dealing with?”

“Noah’s fine,” I said quickly. I eyed the tape, which Horse had failed to deposit next to the folded boxes. “He was scared, but it’s over now. And we really don’t need your help, because we aren’t going back to Coeur d’Alene.”

Horse ignored me, glancing toward Ruger.

“The guy still here?”

“Dunno yet,” Ruger replied. He looked to me. “Sophie, show us which apartment they’re in.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked, glancing between them. Their faces were completely blank. “You can’t actually kill him. You know that, right?”

“We don’t kill people,” Ruger said, his voice calm and almost soothing. “But sometimes assholes like him have accidents when they aren’t careful. Can’t control that—it’s a fact of life. Show us where he is.”

I looked at Horse’s big, strong hands holding his baseball bat and the roll of duct tape, one thumb caressing the silver surface. Then I thought about Noah clinging to a fire escape, four stories high, hiding from a “bad man” who wanted him to sit on his lap so he could tickle him.

I thought about the booze and the pot and the porn.

Then I walked to the door, opened it and pointed across the hall toward Miranda’s studio.

“They’re in there.”