



Unveiled Wishes

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Mc

Description: Emily wasn't interested in reliving the heartache of the past. How could she trust his words again, when they once shattered the future she had imagined?

Emily

Falling for my brother's best friend wasn't in the plan. I only meant to write him, but with every reply, I saw the man behind the words. We were building a future until his last letter demolished the illusion. He accused me of living a little girl's fantasy, killing any hope I had that it was real. I moved on, or tried to, but when I visit my brother for Christmas, Zook is determined to make amends. This time, words won't be enough. He'll have to prove it.

Zook

I crushed her heart with my last letter. I wasn't worthy, convinced she deserved someone who could offer her more. Telling myself she'd move on was the only way to let her go. Now she's walked into the clubhouse, and I can't deny it anymore. It was never over. She'd always been the one for me, and I was determined to make her see that we belonged together.

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Chapter 1

An Unexpected Guest

Sabre

I stretched as I walked out of our bedroom and crossed the landing to head into the nursery. Ever since we'd brought JR home, I had had this intense need to make sure that he was alright. I knew it wasn't the normal first parent jitters; this went beyond anything I could have imagined. Matt was no longer a factor, but the cartel was out there. A part of me knew they would never give until we eliminated them.

I heard Grace humming in the kitchen as she moved around, sliding open the drawers before closing them again. I relished the sounds, knowing that my woman was happy. Looking up, I said a quick thanks to my dad for building this home and promised him we would fill it with warm memories. I forced myself to continue to the nursery and opened the door quietly.

We had spent five weeks in the NICU, and some of the older brothers had taken it upon themselves to finish the house. They had painted most of the walls white, figuring that I could repaint after Grace chose a color scheme. After the hospital, I hated white walls, but they'd been right. Grace would bring home new colors to her specifications. The white was disappearing.

I wasn't sure whose bright idea it had been, but the brothers had decided that JR should have a motorcycle-themed room. They had painted the walls black, but when they'd finished, Bear had talked some sense into them. Grace would hate it, and they

didn't want their Flo angry. They'd painted the walls blue again, and someone had drawn large jungle animals.

Once JR had settled into his new room, the rumor mill ran rampant. Bear had told the other Old Ladies the story one day, purposely not revealing the guilty brothers. Grace had then come home and told me what had happened. All I did was laugh, and in the next church, I had thanked everyone for stepping up while I was trying to bring my family home. The animals looked better than anything I could have drawn, so we left it alone.

I shut the door quietly behind me before walking straight to the crib. Leaning over, I stood and stared at JR as he slept peacefully on his back. He'd been born in the middle of a crisis, and yet, he was perfect. If I could help it, he'd never find out how close I'd been to losing both of them. The nightmares still woke me in the middle of the night.

I watched him sleep, lost in my world. Even at almost six months, JR was showing some of Matt's traits, including his brown hair. It didn't matter. I focused more on the features he had inherited from Grace. I imagined his light brown eyes behind his eyelids. His little button nose was rounded, just like the women in her family. He was still too little to tell, but I pretended his cheeks dimpled like hers when she smiled or laughed.

I kissed two of my fingers and grazed them across his forehead. "I love you," I whispered as I turned away and walked out his nursery door, leaving it open a crack. He was sleeping better through the night, but I only had a half an hour, if I was lucky, to love on his mama.

I took the stairs two at a time, heading into the kitchen. Turning the corner, I found her looking at something on the counter with her back to me. I didn't know how we had spent time apart, with only weekend visits. We were magnets, instantly attached

when in the same room.

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I kissed the crevice of her neck. “Morning, mama.”

“Morning, Sabre.” She rocked backwards, closing the distance in between us. Wrapping her hands around my biceps, she tilted her head to the side, giving more access to her neck.

“I just checked on him. He’s sound asleep, dreaming happy baby dreams. We have time.”

She sniggered. “That’s what you said the other day. I distinctly remember getting naked, only to be interrupted.”

“You got yours,” I reminded her. She’d been in the middle of an orgasm when JR had whimpered through the baby monitor. I hadn’t stopped, hoping that he would fall back to sleep, but it had been a pipe dream. No sooner had she come down from her high than he’d cried his displeasure. I had been fucking out of luck.

She laughed again. “I didn’t say it wasn’t a good time.”

I went from nibbling on her neck to sucking her earlobe. “I could’ve had all the important stuff connected already.” There was a small cry from the baby monitor that Grace had in the kitchen. We both froze. I whispered in her ear, “Pray he goes back to sleep, mama.” I pulled her tighter against me so she could feel how hard I was.

Turning in my arms, she wrapped hers around my neck. “You should have joined me in the shower. He’ll be awake in a few minutes.”

“Yeah, next time, I’ll just think with my dick.” I grabbed a quick kiss from her lips.

“Sounds like a better plan.” She smiled up at me, the dimples in her cheeks popping. “Do we have a Christmas budget?” she asked, changing the subject.

“For us? Not really, but we could save money by showering together.” I’d talk her into getting one of the club girls to watch the baby this afternoon. There was no way I was going to survive all day without her.

“No. For the MC.” Her smile dimmed, and her forehead puckered.

“I don’t know. We haven’t celebrated Christmas as a club in a long time. Chef makes dinner, and that’s usually it.” Grace had already decorated the clubhouse with multiple trees and garland. It surprised me that no one had complained. They were probably feeling as nostalgic as I was.

“I...ah,” she started. I didn’t like it. It wasn’t very often that Grace lost her confidence. “I was thinking about ordering stockings and stuffers for each member.” She reached behind her and picked up a few sheets of paper that had been on the counter. “I made a list of everyone, and if I keep it under sixty dollars a person, I can do it and include one larger gift.”

“Why are you nervous?” I asked her, pulling her closer to me and locking my fingers behind her back.

“I am afraid. We barely made it through one storm, and I feel like another is on the way.” She put the papers back on the counter.

“You let me worry about that.” I kissed her like there was no guarantee of tomorrow. She raised her leg to my hip, and I picked her up, setting her on the counter. Running my fingers through her hair, I tilted her head the way I wanted her. If I couldn’t be balls deep, then tongue deep would have to do for now.

“It’s too quiet in here. Are you fucking?”

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I nipped Grace's bottom lip as I pulled away from her. Resting my forehead on her sternum, I breathed her in. My brother wouldn't know how to be quiet if it bit him on the ass and called him Shirley.

He slammed the front door, and there was an instant wail. The sound had rudely awakened JR, and any chances I had of sexy time went up in smoke. I could hear my brother's boots bound up the stairs. "Don't worry! Uncle's here." If he ever had kids, I was going to make a fuck ton of noise.

Standing straight, I pulled my wallet out of my back pocket. I grabbed some cash and handed it to Grace. "Start with this, and if it's not enough, tell me."

She kissed me and tightened her legs around my waist. "I know," she said. "He's going to die, so don't buy him anything."

How

I groaned, rolling onto my back, trying to figure out where I was. The last thing I remembered was drinking out in the yard with Zook. Something was going on with him, and splitting a bottle of Jack hadn't loosened his lips. I rubbed my knuckles against my eyelids, but my eyes wouldn't open. How much had I drunk last night?

"Too much. I turned you down because you were too drunk to consent by club rules."

Fuck, I must have said that out loud. I turned my head and looked into a pair of blue

eyes. Her dyed red hair flowed around her shoulders. Picking my head up, I looked underneath the covers. “Pebbles, why am I naked, laying in your bed?”

She laughed and propped her head up in her hand. “You opened my door while I was with Chef and demanded that he leave. How, you literally stripped down, climbed into my bed, and passed out. It was easier to just leave you here, so Chef left for the night, and I took myself off the rotation. Nothing happened.”

“Fuck! I am going to owe him. If he doesn’t beat my ass beforehand. If I was him, I would,” I rasped.

“Nah, I smoothed it over. You should be okay, but I wouldn’t bring it up if I were you.”

I was going to have to hide from Chef for a while.

“As long as you’re here, want to see if you can still get it up?” Pebbles kicked the blanket off the bottom of the bed and sat up on her knees. She wore a small pink spaghetti-strap tank top and a pair of pink panties.

“You always go commando,” I said to her. “What’s changed?”

She said nothing as she bent over and took me to the back of her mouth. I was going to Hell. I should have stopped her, but Pebbles gave the best blowjobs. She sucked in her cheeks and took me down her throat. I didn’t know how she did it, but she always remembered what I liked. Lots of friction, no tongue.

I closed my eyes and lay against the pillows, relishing in the heat, my hips slowly pumping in time with her motion. “That’s it,” I praised her. It came naturally to me, but this was also Pebbles. She was the easiest to please because she never asked for anything in return. It should have been a red flag, but she was a club girl. None of the

brothers looked beyond the surface.

My lower back tingled, and my hips picked up their pace. “Keep going,” I begged her. I didn’t know how she did it, but she sucked my soul out of my dick. Right before I came, she pulled away from me and quickly lifted the tank top over her head. Using her hand to milk me, she pointed my dick at her chest and let me shoot my load all over her.

“There ya go,” she said gently. Letting me go, she rubbed my come into her skin. It was hot, but I felt guilty. This should have been Chef, and I’d booted him from her bed. I didn’t have long to think about it because as I was about to repay her, my phone rang in my pants pocket.

“Sorry, darling,” I said to her, grabbing my clothes and walking out of her room. “Hello?” I answered my phone.

“Hey, Eric. I wasn’t sure if now was a good time.”

“Em, what’s up?” I should have checked the phone before answering blindly. Emily was my little sister and another source of my guilt. We’d been born to New York City High Society parents, but money didn’t bring happiness. They expected you to have the right friends, make the best connections, and look down on anything beneath you.

It wasn’t for me, and I had rebelled every step of the way. If they wanted me to hang out with the other rich people’s kids, then I picked the poor ones who were homeless or close to it. Not that they didn’t know their lot in life sucked, but they accepted it and actually worked to better their station. Most of the time, they were just more fun to be around. My parents didn’t know what it was like to scrimp and scrape. One time, they had complained about being served caviar at a party instead of white truffles. As if that was the only problem in the world. I had rolled my eyes when I heard the story the next morning.

At eighteen, I had had enough of it all and enlisted in the Marine Corps. I had walked into the recruiter's office on a Thursday and asked for the paperwork. If I had stayed any longer, I would have gone crazy. My parents had wanted me to attend college and then law school, so I could graduate and have a fancy office on the fortieth floor in the family business that none of us had built. No, thanks.

It had been the best decision of my life. I'd graduated boot camp and met Zook during my first rotation. We had earned our road names in the military because we enjoyed firing big guns. The bigger, the better, but where I'd gained Zook, I'd lost Em. At sixteen, she hadn't had the luxury to run like I had. She never said that she'd resented what had happened, but it had put a slight damper on our relationship over the years.

I walked down the hallway to my room, naked and holding my clothes in one hand while I had the phone in the other. "You alright?" I asked her.

"Yes, I am fine. You?"

"I am good." No sooner had I said that than I heard the catcalls following me.

"What's going on there? Oh, wait, I don't want to know," Emily chuckled. "Someone just said you have a nice ass, though. I wonder if I do, too."

"I don't want to think about your ass."

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“It is peach shaped, or so I think. I can’t really tell when I look in the mirror. I bet we look the same from the back, but you probably have more muscles.”

“This is weird. I am sure your ass looks fine. Doesn’t Christopher tell you?” Slate, one of the older brothers, smacked my ass on his way downstairs to breakfast, his hand making a cracking sound against the globes. “If you’re going to slap it, at least give it a pickle tickle first,” I said to him. He didn’t turn around as he flicked me off.

“Was that what I think it was? Anyway, Christopher is part of the reason I called. Mom and Dad are taking the yacht to Greece for Christmas, and I don’t want to attend the Nelson’s annual Christmas party. I am not feeling up to dealing with Christopher and his parents, so I was thinking about coming to visit you. If that’s alright?”

She never rushed her sentences like that. There was more to this story, but I wouldn’t get the answers over the phone. “Yeah, Em. I’d love to have you for Christmas.”

“Great, I’ll call you later to book my flight and let you know when I’m coming. I am looking forward to it.” She hung up, and I stood in the hallway, looking at my phone. I owed it to my sister to figure out what the fuck was going on.

Chapter 2

Making Dreams Out Of Nothing

Emily

“Did you tell your brother that you called off our engagement?” Christopher leaned against the doorframe of my office.

“No, I didn’t,” I said, shifting a few files on my desk to look busy. I didn’t want to engage in this conversation. If I pretended not to be interested, he might go away quicker.

“Embarrassed that you’ve made the worst mistake of your life?” I wouldn’t be so lucky. Christopher didn’t know when to quit, which was one reason I’d called off the wedding.

“Eric wouldn’t care, even if I told him.” I shrugged, telling Christopher the truth. My brother had never conformed to the high society ideals. In fact, he had actively rejected the mold my parents had created for him. I hadn’t been so lucky there either.

“It’s not too late. The announcement hasn’t gone out, and we could just say that this was pre-wedding jitters, Emily. Our families are expecting the companies to unite under our marriage, and you’re throwing years away on some fancynotion.” Christopher crossed his arms over his chest. “The biker has been gone for years. He’s not going to suddenly show.”

I knew that, but it stung to hear someone else say it. He’d had made it clear in his last letter that he was moving on. I had allowed myself a month to grieve the loss, and I had done the same. It had been easier than I expected, which had made me think it wasn't meant to be.

“No, I made the correct decision for me, and instead of accepting it, you’re standing there looking like a tool who can’t take no for an answer. I am not marrying you, and the companies can find another way to merge. It’s not that hard, and you would know that after years of Harvard Law.” I finally looked up at him, my hands properly folded on my desk.

He scoffed, standing straight in the doorway but didn't unfold his arms. "You're going to regret this, Em. Keep telling yourself you're visiting your brother for Christmas. We both know who you're really going to see," he said, letting his voice trail off. "I may not take you back, so think carefully." He smacked the doorframe with his hand, turned on his dress heel, and walked off.

"Good riddance," I mumbled.

I turned my computer on and pulled up my calendar for the day. My first meeting wasn't for another hour, which was good. I needed the time to calm down.

I wasn't Eric. I had been the dutiful daughter until recently. He had made his own way in life, and I had obediently followed the meticulously laid out plan. Prep School. Ivy League college. Harvard Law. Every time I checked another box, I hoped it was the one that would force my parents to pay attention to me. It never was, but I didn't stop.

I closed my eyes and laid my head back against my office chair, letting my mind replay the past.

Seven Years Ago

The Hamptons

It was the last days of summer, and I was taking advantage of the peace. My parents had dressed for some charity function, but I had begged off. I told them I wasn't feeling well, and that I wasn't sure I could act accordingly. I rarely used that excuse, preferring to just grin and bear it, but they had believed me. Walking out the door, they told me to go back to bed, and they would see me later. I'd be lucky if I saw

them before I went back to school in a week.

Once they were gone, I put my swimsuit on, grabbed my latest romance novel, and headed to the pool in the backyard. Adjusting the beach chair to my liking, I was ready to lose myself in my book and not come back up for a few hours.

I wasn't sure how long I had been out there, but the side gate opened, and Eric and Tyler walked through in swim trunks. At the beginning of summer, my brother had called and asked if he could come home for rest and relaxation. After spending most of the year deployed, Eric had some time off before his next assignment. I had been excited to see him, but I hadn't known he was bringing his best friend with him.

Tyler Mitchell stood out in the Hamptons like a sore thumb. He didn't dress in designer clothes. He was happy doing mundane things, and even though he wasn't disrespectful towards my parents, he didn't attend any of the parties they wanted him to. My parents were eager to show off my military brother and his friend. They thought it would earn them patriotic points, whatever they considered that to be worth.

"Hey, Em. What are you doing here?" Eric asked me as they dropped towels onto the other chairs.

"What do you mean?" I asked, slightly confused.

"Weren't you supposed to go to the hospital charity function? Mom brought it up this morning, and she was making a big deal about us attending in our uniforms. Instead, I made sure we were out all day, so that she wouldn't call." Eric stood at the foot of my chair, blocking the sun. I raised my hand to shield my eyes, hoping to bring his features into focus.

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“I told them I didn’t feel well, and they bought the excuse.”

“Already using the loopholes,” Tyler commented drily. “Whatever you do, Emily, don’t be one of those asshole lawyers.” He was the quiet one out of the pair, but it was obvious he had more life experience than my brother.

“No, I want to fight for the people who don’t have a loud enough voice.” I honestly believed that.

“Sounds like a dreamer’s plan. You know you’ll get roped into working at the Nelsons’ practice until they marry you off to Christopher.” Eric was still smiling, but I didn’t know why he found it funny. It was actually pretty pathetic.

“Christopher? The fucker at the bar this afternoon?” Tyler asked Eric.

“Yeah. The one and only. My parents have this idea that they’re going to marry Em off to him and merge our import business with their department store.”

“That’s fucked up,” Tyler growled. “She should be free to do whatever the fuck she wants.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t leave like I did.”

It wasn’t a lie, but it also wasn’t the complete truth. I hadn’t found an opportunity to run. “Can you two stop talking about me like I am not sitting here?” I was getting angry at them for reminding me I was a pushover. I had wanted a few hours to myself, and these two idiots were ruining it.

“Sorry, Em,” Eric said, turning around and diving into the pool.

“I’ve seen How’s letters that you send him. He either lets me read the funny ones or quotes anything he thinks I might like. If I left you my address, would you write to me? I don’t have a family that gives a fuck. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to.” Tyler ran his hand through his hair and across his face. He seemed almost embarrassed.

It took me a minute to realize what he was asking for. “Of course. I don’t mind, but I am not sure how much you want to know about school. It can be pretty boring.” I smiled.

“Nah, I want to know it all.” He stood from the chair, and as he took a few steps towards the pool, he turned back to look at me. “Don’t marry that fucker. You’re too good for him.” He shifted and looked down at the decking. “If you can’t get out of it, come find me, and I’ll marry you first.” He jumped into the pool.

We never talked about it again. I also never saw him again.

Grace

“You sure you’re going to be alright?” Sabre asked me, placing JR in his car seat. He kissed his forehead and stood to look at me. “I can ride out with you or send a prospect.”

“No, I think it will be okay. We’re just going to Aunt E’s appointment. Do you want me to text you when we head to lunch?” I wrapped my arms around his waist and laid my head against his chest, soaking in his strength.

“I’ll come if you want me to, but if you think you’ll be okay, I’d rather stay here. Count and I are working on the end-of-the-year reports. It all fucking sucks, but it has to be done. If Chef doesn’t make lunch, I’ll make a sandwich or something.” He tightened his arms around me. “I love you.”

I stood up and let him go, reaching up for a quick peck. “I love you, too.” Turning towards the driver’s side door, I waited until Sabre opened it before sitting down and starting the car. “You ready, Aunt E?” I said to her.

“Let’s...over with,” Aunt Elizabeth said from the passenger seat.

“Yes, let’s get this over with.” I smiled, holding in my tears until I was in private. I thanked God every day that my aunt and Meredith had survived the attempted abduction, but it had left too many scars on both of them.

They weren’t sure about the extent of my aunt’s traumatic brain injury, but she could no longer process a full thought. She was still the poised woman I had grown up with, but we would often catch her drifting off into her own world. There was always a pause, and we just waited it out. We were taking her to therapy sessions to see if they could stimulate her mind and put her body back together. She was one big cast, and yet she maneuvered pretty well. When she was tired, the older brothers often helped her to her room.

Meredith was a different story. Where my aunt was still emotionally stable, Meredith was not. She hardly spoke, and if she did, it was full of snark. Her smile was gone, and she wore the same sweatshirt and pair of leggings every day. Sabre had told me that Grizz was having to force Meredith to shower and dress. He even had to bribe her just to get her to sit in the main room. If he left her alone, she wouldn’t leave their room, preferring to sleep the day away.

“If you need anything, call me. I’ll be here.” Sabre closed my door and tapped the

roof. Walking back to the porch, he watched as I pulled up to the gates and left the clubhouse. I turned the music up and sang along with the radio as we drove down the road towards the appointment. My aunt chimed in every other lyric, and I reached over and placed my hand on her knee. She reached down and squeezed my fingers. It was moments like this that I had to hold on to. Otherwise, the dark would swallow me whole.

We were halfway there when a road sign appeared on the shoulder for the Old McMillan Place. I was taking quick peeks at the sign, but we were going to pass it before I could read the whole thing.

“Honey. It’s ah...it’s for sale,” my aunt said to me, as we passed the sign. “Back. Go.” My aunt was pointing out the window. “We have... Go.” She patted my arm.

“It was for sale?” I asked her, not sure I had heard her correctly.

“Go,” my aunt insisted, her eyes wide as she kept pointing out the window.

I made a U-turn and headed back in the opposite direction until we approached the driveway. I turned in and parked so that we could read the sign. The Old McMillan Place. Banquet and Ballroom.

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“You could...” My aunt pointed to the sign.

“You think I should buy it?” I asked her. It had been one of my dreams to own a place like this. I doubted if I had enough time to dedicate to operating it. It looked like it needed a lot of work.

“You’re going to...fly.” She smiled at me.

I chuckled, and her smile became bigger. “You know, we can do this,” I said to her. “With Meredith’s help, we could get this place up and running.”

“Deal.” She slowly raised her hand, and I shook it gently. I didn’t want her to hurt any more than the therapy would. I grabbed my phone and took a quick picture of the sign to research while she was with the therapist. As we drove off, we discussed the parties, the weddings, and everything we could use the center for. I didn’t want to believe that this dream could be a reality, but I couldn’t stop the hope that flooded my veins.

Chapter 3

Faking It

Meredith

“Hey, Mer. It’s noon, baby. Time to get up.” Grizz shook my leg.

“I am up,” I whined at him. “If I wanted to be bitched at, I’d go find Sabre.”

“I’ll call him and make your dreams come true.” He placed his hand on my leg again and shook me.

“I am up.” I pulled the covers over my head. “Just leave me alone. I am fine.”

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you’re talking to. Get up, or I’ll make you,” Grizz sighed. We were each tired of our situation, but for different reasons. I didn’t know how to let him in, and no matter what he did, it was never right. We were at a standstill, when we should have been newlyweds, which brought its own set of headaches.

“I don’t know if I can,” I said, the sound muffled beneath the blanket. I didn’t have the strength to have a full-blown conversation with him. “Life is too hard, and I am drowning.”

“How about we start with a shower? I’ll lay out your clothes.” His voice gentled immediately. I’d never heard him speak like that, and it broke a piece of me deep within my heart. Who were these people? How did we get back to normal?

“Are you going to force me?” I asked.

“No, but I think you’ll feel better.” He pulled the covers off of me and laid them at the bottom of the bed. “You gotta help me, Meredith. I try to be forceful, and you fight me every step of the way. If I am gentle, you look at me like I am crazy, kind of like you’re doing right now,” he sighed. “I am not gentle, but I am trying for you because I can’t be without you anymore.”

“I don’t know how to be me.” I sat straight up in bed and placed my hands in my lap. “Which makes everyone else walk on eggshells.”

“I promised you therapy, and I tried to make some calls the other day. I was going to

take you myself, but they asked too many questions and told me to bring your medical records. Scrub buried the reports that show you were in an accident when they found the mass. I had visions of them asking about Pulse, and I am so afraid of losing you.”

“I may never be her again.” I didn’t want to look at him. It was easier to maintain the mile-wide distance between us if I didn’t make eye contact. I would just see his pain, and it would merge with mine.

He placed his hands under my knees and lifted me into his arms. Kissing my forehead, he whispered, “We’ll get through this.”

“Whatever you do, don’t tell me it’s a speed bump.” I made a face and stuck my tongue out at him as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“That’s not our thing. We prefer knock-down drag-outs with hot makeup sex.” He kissed my forehead again, laughing as he carried me into the ensuite. He sat me on the counter and turned the shower on. Checking to make sure the water was warm enough, he walked over to me and stood between my knees. “Arms up,” he said, grabbing the edges of the oversized t-shirt I wore.

“No.” I was defiant. This was one issue that we constantly argued about. There wasn’t a magic remedy to erase the scars on the left side of my body. The surgical lines looked like a patchwork quilt, as if the doctors had taken skin from where they could and meshed it together. They hadn’t even paid attention to sewing straight lines.

The last time I had looked, the lines were white against the lobster red skin. It was hot to the touch, and the only thing that cooled it down was the lotion that the hospital had sent home with me. I was supposed to keep the skin hydrated, but they couldn’t tell me how long this would take. I had a feeling they didn’t want to tell me I’d be

stuck with this routine and the moisturizing sleeves forever. They could at least have had pretty colors. The black sleeves stood out against my pale skin. Another reminder that I was going to be disfigured for life.

“I’ve been all up in you. It was a religious experience, and you know I am not a praying man.” He jiggled his eyebrows. “Will you get in the shower if I turn my back?”

“No.” I didn’t want Grizz to see them, even though I was pretty sure he had already. I didn’t want to even acknowledge they were there, and it was my body.

“What’s it going to take, baby?” He trapped me on the counter, placing his hands on either sides of my hips and leaning forward with his entire weight.

I said nothing. I didn’t want to negotiate. He just needed to leave so that I could get this over with.

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you. I just want you, Mer. The rest of this doesn’t matter,” he said in frustration. His brow furrowed, forming deep lines across his forehead.

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We were back to square one. He didn't care as long as I was alive, and I wasn't living.

"I'll shower and get dressed, but you can't be here. When I am done, I'll come sit in the main room, but I don't feel like talking to anyone." It would kill me, but I would do it for him. This was my best for today, and I didn't want to argue.

"I can live with that." He pecked my lips and walked out the door.

I jumped down from the sink and took off my shirt. Dropping it near the door, I made quick work of the rest. If I wasn't downstairs in thirty minutes, Grizz would come back. I couldn't risk it.

Finishing the shower in under ten minutes, I kept my head down as I wrapped the towel around myself. I didn't want to catch my reflection in the mirror. The scars ran down my left side, from my shoulder all the way to right above my knee. In my mind, they were just as ugly as my soul. Somewhere along the way, I'd accepted that as fact.

Grizz had left a change of clothes on the counter, clean medical sleeves sitting on the top of the pile. Sighing again, I opened the cabinet underneath the sink and braced for the impact that I knew would come. I stared at the white bottle with the pharmacy label longer than I should have. It wasn't until I got dizzy that I grabbed it and raised my head. Big mistake.

I set the bottle on the counter, but my eyes didn't leave the mirror. This was déjà vu. I raised my left hand to see if the scars were real. Rotating my shoulder so that I could

experience the full effect of the painted canvas, the woman in the mirror did the same. I fell to my knees on the bathroom tile floor. Too much had happened in too short a time.

Grizz

Meredith had stuck to her word. I watched out of the corner of my eye as she descended the staircase into the main room, my oversized hoodie hanging past her knees. She tucked her hands into the front pockets, and though I wouldn't ask anything more of her, it gave me a little hope.

She silently walked into the main room and quickly surveyed the scene. I was playing darts with Wreck. There were a few other brothers playing pool, but DeadZone was watching TV. Meredith walked around the tables and approached the couch, curling herself onto the other side and staring at the program.

A twinge of jealousy pinged within my chest, but I kept my cool. She was my wife. Mine. No one in this club would take her away from me. However, she would only get physically close to DeadZone, and if I asked why, she couldn't explain.

Wreck took his turn. "Dead doesn't want your bitch, so you're safe."

I took a deep breath so that I wouldn't beat him to a bloody pulp. It wouldn't matter, and he'd just end up saying something else about Meredith. They all did behind my back. "She's mywife." I tried to shrug it off as I stepped up to the throw line. "Hey, Wreck?" I called out, catching his attention. "No one wants to tap your bitch's ass because he's too mouthy." I threw the dart, watching it sail through the air.

"I am not mouthy. I am a fucking ball of sunshine," Pretty said. eating potato chips

out of the bag. He'd pulled up one of the bar stools and sat watching the game.

"If you don't quit eating, your ass is going to be huge," I retorted. "Wreck won't be able to miss it."

"Then they'll be more of it to tap." He ate another chip, and I wanted to grab the bag from his hands and strangle him with it.

It was Wreck's turn, and I was leaning against the wall next to Pretty when the kitchen door opened. I stood straight up and made a move to help Aunt E. She searched the room, and when she honed in on Meredith, she hobbled right to her.

"This won't end well today," I whispered to Pretty. Meredith tried not to be harsh with her aunt or Grace, but sometimes they'd push just enough that she snapped. I knew of one instance where Grace had had to pull Sabre away to calm him down. Meredith had said that if Grace had wanted to know what it was like to lose a child, then she should have handed JR over to the cartel. He was my best friend, but we'd almost come to blows, even though both of them had been in the wrong.

"It's going to be like Fourth of July." Pretty whistled. "Boom."

Aunt E made sure she was standing in front of Meredith before she tried to get her attention. "Mer! Mer! Wake." She went to go shake Meredith's shoulder, but she almost tumbled over and gave up on the idea. "We need...you."

"You're not asleep," Deadzone said, looking over at Meredith. He must have shaken her leg or foot because I watched her wiggle against the couch cushions.

"You're the only one..." Aunt E paused. "We need you."

I didn't know if I was going to have to step in or not when I saw Meredith's head turn

towards DeadZone's. I was about to take a step forward when Pretty grabbed me by the arm. He nonchalantly made a swiping motion toward the room. Everyone was watching this scene as closely as I was.

"Don't look at me like that. I am not your Old Man. He's too lenient because he's afraid of losing you. I couldn't care less if you walk out those doors. You're not living, and you take it out on the people who give a shit. Don't be disrespectful to your aunt." Dead let Meredith have it.

I was afraid to move. I didn't want an argument with one of my brothers, but if he made my situation worse, I'd beat his ass. Who was I kidding? It couldn't be any worse than it already was.

"Okay, what do you need, Aunt E?" I heard her say.

Was Meredith actually going to get up?

"You. Come help...us." Aunt E held out her good hand, and Meredith stood from the couch and grabbed it. I watched as they made their way to the kitchen door.

"Next time you want to get physical, girly pop, kicking me is not the way to do it," Dead called after them.

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Meredith held the swinging door open for Aunt E, who shuffled past. As soon as Aunt E was through, Meredith turned and flicked her middle finger at the back of Dead's head. There was still some life in her.

I had to fix this so when word got around, this would all be a funny story. Meredith had too many people counting her out, and I didn't need my patch at risk.

I sat next to Dead, but I didn't know how to start this. He wasn't making it easier on me by watching what was on the TV. "I..."

"Save it, brother."

The hairs on my neck immediately stood up. "What the fuck? I am still your VP." Maybe I was going to have to throw some punches.

"It's easy to see why you go to bat for her," he said, not bothering to look at me. "She's a spicy version of Flo, and if she wasn't so consumed in her own head, it'd be a healthy relationship. Killing Pulse wasn't on her, but until she comes to terms with it, the rest of the bullshit won't heal. Put your pride away and ask for the club's help." He stood from the couch and walked away.

No sooner was Dead gone than Pretty sat next to me.

"Don't fuck with me, dude," I warned him. I could barely handle him every day. Today wasn't a good day.

"While you were heart-to-hearting, I snuck into the kitchen." He ate a chip and

crunched it loudly. “Figured you would want to know what’s going on.”

“Yeah, what’s up?” I asked, leaning my head back against the top cushion of the couch.

“Aunt E had a therapy appointment today, and Grace drove by that hall. You know the one? Scrub and I used to sneak into the back and pretend to be waiters to grab snacks.”

I let a dry chuckle escape my lips. “Yeah, and they called your dad one night and tried to charge him for the missing food.”

“That’s the place. He told them to fuck off because the four of us were in church, and how dare they accuse God’s angels of stealing.” Pretty smiled.

“The punishment was definitely not worth the crime. He dumped cold water on our heads and made us wash the brother’s bikes with toothbrushes.”

“Good times,” Pretty said. “Yeah, it’s for sale, and it looks like Grace did some basic research. They roped Meredith into helping them. She’s drawing out potential layouts that the venue could hold. I didn’t know she was an interior designer. She’s really in her element, and her face is doing weird things.”

“Is she alright? Do I need to go in there?” I was panicking. My palms were clammy, but I couldn’t feel my hands. They were numb as I sat forward, cupping my knees. I could feel the sweat dripping from my forehead, but I was hot. At least Pretty was sitting next to me in case I passed the fuck out.

“She’s smiling.”

“She’s smiling?” I asked, unsure if he was pulling my leg.

“Yeah, I saw some teeth. There’s still some snark, but Grace and Aunt E are overlooking it. They’re just glad to have her.”

Pretty wasn’t a brother that I would normally be vulnerable with, but I had to know if I was holding onto false hope.

“Do you think I am a fool?” I asked him, watching as his face went completely serious.

“I think Dead has some good points. You need to reach out for help within the club. However, this is Sabre’s first Christmas with his family. If I were you, I wouldn’t make any big decisions until the beginning of the year.” He smacked my shoulder. “Maybe I’ll go share my chips with her. She’s lost a lot of weight, and her ass needs fattening up.” He laughed and hurried away.

Maybe he was right. I’d just have to fake it through Christmas.

Chapter 4

Heart Shapes Beat As One

Zook

“That’s it for the club’s businesses. Count and I have started the year-end paperwork, so if managers get a call, you’re not in trouble.” Sabre addressed the room. There was a light chuckle that floated around the table. “Just bring your books and come to the principal’s office. Count?”

“I got nothing. Like you said, we’re working on the year-end books, so once I know more about the numbers, I’ll bring them to church. I am pretty sure there’s going to be an extra payment for each brother, but I have no clue how much it is. We also need

more businesses, if anyone has any ideas. I am running out of places to put the money.” Count’s spikes shook with excitement. Money made the dude hard, which was why no one questioned him as treasurer.

He had said the magic words, and the brothers were speculating how much that extra payment could be, but I didn’t join in. I liked money as much as the next person, but I hadn’t grown up with any. My father had been a steel mill worker. His way of relaxing after work had been to get blackout drunk everynight, leaving us to fend for ourselves. My mother had done the best she could with what she stole from his wallet. It had been little, and I had tried to help as much as I could. When I had joined the Marines, I had hoarded everything that I earned and made sure that I was never in that position again. I lived in the clubhouse for free. I ate whatever Chef made for dinner. There wasn’t much need for money, except gas for my bike.

“Any club business before we move on?” Sabre brought the meeting back to order.

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“Hey, Prez?” How raised his hand and waited to speak.

I was curious what How was going to say. He hadn’t mentioned to me he was bringing anything up at church.

“Yeah, How?” Sabre said.

“My sister, Emily, asked if she could come visit for Christmas. I haven’t seen her in a few years, and I wanted to ask if it was alright before she booked her ticket.”

I sucked in a breath and tried not to draw attention to myself as I choked. We were supposed to be best friends, and the fucker hadn’t mentioned that Em wanted to visit. I didn’t know if I was going to be able to hold my shit in until I reached my room. On the outside, I tried to look cool, but my heart pumped in my ears and my hands shook underneath the table.

“I don’t have a problem with it, if no one objects,” Sabre said, as he shifted forward in his chair. “If you want her to stay here, tell Grace. She’ll have to make sure the room next to Aunt E is ready, since they are the furthest from the club girls.” Sabre cracked his knuckles and placed his hands over his stomach.

“Has Aunt E complained yet about the noise?” Pretty asked, trying to hide his smirk.

“I asked her if she wanted to move in with us, but she said no.” Sabre shook his head. “Said that she likes the noise after so many years of living alone, but even she has to hear bumps in the middle of the night.”

The room exploded with laughter. No one had really known what to expect when Aunt E had moved into the clubhouse. Over the last couple of months, she'd wormed her way into our hearts.

"Cyph, do you need her info for a background check?" How asked.

"Nope. She was admitted to the New York Bar Association. They've already done the basics, so I won't find anything that will rule her out from coming. Now, if you need me to dig, all non-club information comes with a price." Cyph wiggled his eyebrows.

"More like extortion," Grizz mumbled.

"I need Christmas present money." Cyph placed his hands behind his head and smirked.

"Anyone else thinking of inviting someone for Christmas? I know Gerry will be here." Sabre shifted forward again, crossing his arms and resting his elbows on the table in front of him.

"Do we have to be nice to him?" Twig asked. I didn't blame him. When Gerry had been a prisoner here, he'd given Twig the run around a few times. He was hungry. He was cold. Twig should arrange a meeting so that he could see his grandson. It had been one thing after another, and Twig had celebrated when Sabre told Gerry it was time to go. He could stay in town or go home, but he couldn't stay in the clubhouse anymore. None of us were sure if Flo knew, but we didn't ask questions. She was Sabre's problem.

"I don't care, as long as Grace doesn't hear you." Sabre looked at Grizz. "What do you think?"

“Agreed. I don’t care either.” Grizz flexed his fist as it sat on the table.

“We know the cartel is still out there. They’re watching us, and we’ve caught the SUVs a few times. As long as they don’t rear their ugly heads, let’s try to enjoy Christmas. We’ve had a rough year, but we love harder to get through it. Now is the time to remember why we prospected for the Iron Shield.”

Various forms of “Yes, Prez” floated around the room, but I just wanted out. I had other important things to deal with, like Emily coming for Christmas. I waited until the fuckers in front of me walked out of church, breakfast smells leading them by their stomachs to the main room. Crossing the door’s threshold, I took off running towards my room.

“Where are you going, Zook?” How called after me. He’d been two brothers behind me because our seats were on opposite sides of the table.

“Not hungry,” I yelled over my shoulder. Breakfast was the furthest thing from my mind, and I wasn’t sure that I’d be able to choke it down. The quicker I made it to my room, the better off I would be. I skidded as I took the last right, my arms ready to brace my fall, but I righted myself at the last minute. I wanted to keep my secrets at all costs.

I didn’t slam my door, but I made sure the lock was in place. Taking off my boots, I opened my closet and stood in front of it, staring at the shoebox on the top shelf. It had been awhile since Emily’s letter had called to me this strongly. Grabbing it, I laid the box on the bed and fluffed the pillows to get comfortable as I sat. I looked at the door again, checking the lock. I didn’t want any interruptions.

I opened the shoebox and pulled the first letter out. Raising it to my nose, I still could smell the hints of her perfume on the stationery.

Sometimes, Eric complains when he gets teased over my letters, so I spritz them just to be irritating. What are little sisters for? You asked for this, so I didn't want to disappoint.

She hadn't said much during the first couple of letters, but every time I had written back, she had opened up a little more. Emily had been in college during those years, and I had enjoyed listening to her detail her classes, her friends, and even the charity events her parents had forced her to attend. Each letter was another piece of her soul, and I had wanted to claim all of them for myself.

I flipped through the letters until I reached the one I wanted. I'd read it so many times that I didn't have to remove the pink sheets from the envelope. Flipping it over and over in my hands, I went over the words in my mind.

Dear Tyler,

Happy Valentine's Day! I sent you something, and I know you'll laugh when you get it. I can't wait, even though I won't be able to see your reaction.

School's good. Classes are boring, and I am ready for a break. The groundhog saw its shadow, so there will be six more weeks of winter. How are you supposed to enjoy spring break when there will still be snow on the ground? I don't know either, but I know if you were here, you'd tell me to suck it up, buttercup. I prefer to think you'd whisk me away on some warm, tropical vacation. Hint Hint. Ha. I am going to hold you to a promise you never made.

My parents are gone again. They were here for Christmas, but then they decided New York was too cold and took off. See a theme here? I haven't heard from them, but as long as they're alright, that's all I can ask for.

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Do you remember Christopher? You met him at a bar that Eric took you to the last time you were here. He's been trying to schedule a get-together. I am not sure if it's supposed to be a date, but I am not interested. He's not even interested in me, and I keep sending him to voicemail. It'll be easier to avoid him at school. We don't have the same classes, and our social circles are not the same. If he wanted to, he would, but he won't. I am worth more than a half-assed effort.

Anyway, try to get Eric to get a picture of you when you get my surprise. He sends me pictures all the time, and you never do. How am I supposed to imagine what you look like now? I am teasing. Maybe. Maybe not. Get a picture.

Love, E

From the start, I fucked up, but like a dumbass, I thought a few letters would fix everything. They only intensified my cravings for her. She was my best friend's little sister, and as soon as I saw "love," I should have stopped this fantasy. I should have ghosted her, or at least written back to tell her to stop. Instead, I waited for the next one.

I tried not to think about her words, but the next day, the mailroom called and told me to pick up my package. I had often seen the packages that Emily sent How. She'd ask if he needed anything, and he'd make her a list. Em was an angel, and she'd often include things for me.

"Why do you want to send Em a picture of a box?" How asked.

"No, I want to send a picture of me holding the box," I said. I hadn't lied, but I hadn't

told him the truth, either. I wanted Em to see that I appreciated her, and that I had listened to her requests. However, a huge part of me wished she was mine, and this meant more than what was on the surface.

“Why?” How raised his eyebrow and looked down his nose at me. “She’s my sister. Why do you want to send her a picture of your ugly mug?”

“I just do. I want to say thank you. It’s my first care package from home. Can’t you just take the fucking picture?” I was getting aggravated at him. He sent her pictures, so why couldn’t I?

“Calm the fuck down. Is your underwear in a wad or something?” How grabbed the camera that we passed around the team. Someone’s wife had sent one, and when the film was low, we asked whomever was getting the next package for more film. I’d been in pictures, but I’d never asked for one to be taken before.

“Smile, asshole,” How said, holding up the camera.

I lifted my sleeve and ran it against my teeth, making sure I didn’t have any lunch particles stuck.

“Seriously? It’s just Em.”

“Okay, I am ready.” I shifted the box in front of me and smiled.

He took the picture and then pushed me to open the box. “I’ll take another picture of you looking inside. She’ll get a kick out of that.”

Putting the box on the ground, I slid my knife through the packing tape. I couldn’t help my excitement, and I could feel my smile still in place as I raised the flaps of the box to look inside. My smile slowly slid into a frown when I realized what she had

done. Emily was too much, and I lowered my head over the box so that How wouldn't see the tears I was desperately trying to hide. He still took my picture.

"I can't send her that one. Take another one," I said to him.

"Why not? It's good. I'll title it, 'A Soldier and His Package.'"

"Look at this. She's sent me all of my favorite snacks. Since it's Valentine's Day, they're heart-shaped. On this side of the box, she labeled stuff for the single men on our team, so that they would get something, too. How did she ever come from your parents?" I had meant that honestly. How was like a brother to me, but he didn't hold a candle to his sister. She was a saint in a world of snakes.

"Probably the same way every other kid does. At some point, they had to have fucked." He had handed me the two pictures. "Here, just send her these." He walked off.

That night, I had sat down and written her.

Hey Em,

I received the box today. No one's ever sent me anything like that. I passed out the rest of the treats to the single men. They wanted to write you to thank you, but I told them no. Actually, I told them I'd beat their asses if they even thought about it. They'd try to win you over to the dark side, and you should always be in the light.

I wanted to thank you for including them. Sometimes it's rough when you don't have anyone who gives a shit. You probably took pity on me when I asked you to write, but I am grateful. I made How take pictures. I don't think they're very good, but he said you would get a kick out of them. He would know better than I would.

You can hold me to my promise. I'll take you on a tropical vacation. Where do you want to go? I don't know if you know this, but I was born and raised in Indiana. I am well-aware that winter sucks. It's like experiencing all four seasons in one day. That's probably why I didn't wait to be recruited. I was glad to get thefuckout. Sorry, I crossed that out. You shouldn't see those kinds of words. You're a lady.

I can't send you anything, but I am hoping these work.

Happy Valentine's Day, Emily.

Tyler

I had drawn heart-shaped balloons at the corners of the notebook paper and sent it to her.

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Now, Em was coming to visit for Christmas. I wouldn't be able to avoid her, and How would ask too many questions if I wasn't here. Any chance of volunteering for a run was out. Sabrewouldn't have any assignments away from the clubhouse, and then he'd ask questions I wasn't ready for.

I was going to have to grin and bear it. I could for a week. It was a lie that I kept telling myself.

Chapter 5

Two Peas in a Pod

Emily

"You're no help, Eric." My brother was driving me crazy. He had called to tell me it was okay to book the ticket, but he wasn't working with me on dates and times.

"I told you I didn't care. Just pick a date, Em. Email me the confirmation, and I'll think about picking you up at the airport." He blew out a breath, like he was over having this conversation. If he had just been helpful, I could have booked already.

"I don't find you funny right now," I exhaled into the phone. "This is our first Christmas together in a long time, and you're not making me feel welcome."

"If you're not on that plane when you're supposed to be, I am coming to New York and dragging you here myself."

“Better. I’ll take that.” Eric had been a Marine for six years and a biker for not much longer than that. The Park Avenue Prince no longer spoke like he had a hot poker up his ass. “There’s an early morning flight on the twentieth. That’s the last weekend before Christmas vacation. Will that work?”

“Em,” Eric sighed. “Book it, and email me the confirmation.”

I made a few more clicks, paid for the flight, and that was it. I was officially heading to my brother’s for Christmas. “Eric, I’ve never met the club, and I want to make a good first impression. Who should I bring a present for to say thank you?”

“What do you mean?” His tone showed that he had better things to do.

“I don’t want to show up empty-handed. That’s just rude,” I said to him. When he didn’t answer me, I asked again, “Who should I bring a Christmas present for? Like a ‘thanks for having me, and putting up with my dumb brother’ gift.”

“I am not dumb.” He pulled the phone away from his ear. “Hey, Zook! Em said I was a dumbass,” I heard him yell.

Zook. Tyler Mitchell. My heart rate tripled, and if I passed out, I wouldn’t be able to explain why.

“She’s right. You’re a dumbass. Always have been.” His voice hadn’t changed in all these years.

“Whose fucking side are you on? Bros before hos.”

I gasped. How could my brother say something like that?

“Your sister isn’t a ho, and you better take that back before I bend you into a pretzel

so that you can find your own dumb ass.” It wasn’t the prettiest thing that had ever been said to defend my honor, but it was the best.

“Since you two want to gang up on me, here, talk to Em.”

Had Eric passed the phone to Tyler?

“Em?” He had. I was going to kill my brother when I saw him.

“Tyler,” I said, hoping I sounded like the sophisticated woman I was. His last letter had accused me of being a little kid who had made something out of nothing.

“Hey, Em. I wasn’t sure if your brother was fuc... messing with me or not.” He always measured his words when he was speaking to me. I wasn’t sure if it was because he was afraid of what he might say, or if he just didn’t want to offend me. He didn’t do it with anyone else in my family.

“No, I was trying to get Eric to commit to a date so that I could book my flight. He just told me to do it, and he’d make it work.”

“He always says that and then bitches about what you decide, but if you try to include him, he doesn’t want to be bothered. Seven is too early, ten is too late. Fuc...crybaby.” I could hear the eyeroll in his voice.

“Hey!” I heard in the background.

“Yeah, it went something like that, until I finally just booked a ticket.” I tried to infuse a smile into my voice. I wanted Tyler to think everything was fine, but I was really shitting bricks to be talking to him. There were too many unanswered questions, and now wasn’t the time to dig. I wasn’t sure there was ever going to be a moment, and I had to make sure I was alright with that. I was visiting my brother, not

interrogating his best friend.

“When are you coming?” he asked.

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“The twentieth. There’s a flight that leaves here at six in the morning. I figured even if I am delayed, I’ll still make it in time.” A blizzard would not stop me from getting out of New York.

“Okay, I’ll make sure he picks you up, or I’ll do it myself.”

“Thank you.” I wasn’t sure how to hold a genuine conversation with him, but I knew he wouldn’t disappoint me. “Hey, Tyler?”

“Yeah,” he answered.

“I asked Eric, but he didn’t have an answer for me. I’ve never visited the club, and I don’t want to come empty-handed. Is there anyone I should bring a Christmas present for? Kind of like, ‘Thanks for having me.’”

“Why would you do that?” My brother had grown up with the best of everything, while I knew Tyler had come from beggar beginnings. However, I swore they had the same neanderthal characteristics.

“Eric said that he had to ask permission for me to come. It was nice to be included so that I don’t have to spend the holiday alone, and I want to make a good first impression.”

“You sounded like Flo for a second with that bullshit.” He laughed.

Flo. My brother had never mentioned Tyler having a woman in his life. Was this a girlfriend? Did she mean anything to him? I didn’t want to ask.

“We call our president’s woman Flo. When he first brought her to meet the club, she said something similar, that’s all. It must be a thing.”

I breathed a metaphorical sigh of relief. “So...come on. Help a girl out.”

“You’re not a girl.” He paused. “Sabre and Flo have a baby boy. He’s going to be six months old. Just bring a present for him and your brother, and you should be good.”

“What about you?” I pushed. “What should I bring you?”

“I am alright. You coming is present enough. Do you still need How?”

“No, I’ll talk to him later.” The phone went silent in my hand. Had that been real?

Grace

JR’s whimpers were the only sound as we sat on the bed in the spare bedroom.

“I know. Mama messed this up.” I tickled his feet, trying to soothe him as I looked around the room. Shipping boxes filled every corner. I had told the prospects to toss them in the spare bedroom each time something arrived. They had taken me at my word, and now the boxes took up every available space. I’d had a hard time opening the bedroom door.

I couldn’t blame them. I’d done the same with the bags of presents I had bought. Piles of bags sat where I had dumped them, and I had quickly left the room to avoid seeing the mess. How’s sister would be here in two days, and I could no longer turn a blind eye. I had to get everything wrapped before we hung the stockings, and the room needed to be clear.

JR fussed. “I know, baby,” I said, running my hand through my hair, dislodging the ponytail I had put up that morning. “I promised your daddy that I wouldn’t get crazy. It’s a good thing he hasn’t seen this nightmare.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” I called.

Kelly opened the door but stopped before stepping inside. “Oh, Mylanta,” she whispered, taking in the disaster I had created. I watched as her eyes went wide, bouncing from one area to the next. Her lips parted into an O shape. “Do I want to know?” she asked me.

“I promised Sabre it would all be fine. I told him I had it under control, but look at this. It’s not fine.” I held my hands out in front of me and spread them to incorporate the rest of the room. “How am I ever going to get this done?” JR was crying beside me. “I feel the same way.” I picked him up, cradling him against my shoulder, as I pushed a few stray pieces of hair back.

“Where’s Aunt E and Meredith?” Kelly asked, and I appreciated her optimism that reinforcements would arrive. I tried to smile at her, but I was sure it was more of a grimace.

“Pebbles is with my aunt, making sure that she can shower and get dressed. I am not sure if Meredith will be available.” Aunt E would do her best to help, but her lack of mobility really prohibited her movements. Meredith was having a bad day, and it would be easier if we just left her alone.

Shutting the door, she leaned against it. “I am not sure where to start, but what if I help you wrap the women’s presents? There are fewer women in the club, and if we can get them finished, I’ll help you stack the stuff in the main room.”

“You sure? How’s sister is coming to visit, and this room has to be cleaned out in two days.” I usually had things under control, but now I was on the verge of tears, unable to see a way out of this mess.

“I have nothing planned for today, so I can stay and help. As long as we finish those by tonight, you can get the club girls to help with the men’s presents tomorrow. Just threaten them to get them not to tell, and it should be alright.” Kelly didn’t move from her spot by the door.

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JR was crying, and her kindness was too much in this moment. I cried, the tears running down my cheeks. “What would I do without you?” I asked her, not really expecting an answer.

She laughed as she made her way around the bags in the doorway. Sitting on the bed next to me, Kelly wrapped her arms around us. “You went a little overboard.” She pinched her thumb and forefinger and showed me.

I looked at her and smiled. There was a pause before we laughed like hyenas. JR didn’t like the noise and cried even louder, which only made us laugh harder.

Chapter 6

The Ayes Had It

Sabre

“Remind me again what the fuck we’re doing here?” Pretty asked.

I didn’t want to be here, and dragging my brother around was making it worse. He’d offered to ride with me, and when I had agreed, I hadn’t thought it through.

“I need stocking stuffers and presents from JR and me for Grace. I will not be one of those deadbeats that forgets,” I answered him as I browsed the jewelry cases.

“Ah, so you saw those videos too, huh?”

“You sent them to me, fucker.” I looked over at Pretty, and he was sitting on one of the display couches with his feet on the coffee table in front of it. His hands were clasped behind his head, and as I watched, he wiggled his ass further into the seat.

“Don’t you need something for Wreck?” They weren’t hiding whatever their relationship was, but I didn’t want to open Pandora’s box for fear that I was wrong.

He shot me a nasty look. “No. Why would I?”

“You know I don’t care. You’re my brother, and I just want to see you happy.” I stood, feet shoulder width apart and hands on my hips.

“Yeah, well. We’re just friends.” He rolled his eyes. I wasn’t sure what he was doing, but he shifted to one side of the couch cushion, wiggled his ass into it, and then moved to the next spot.

“Friends still exchange gifts.” I was safe here. If he tried to hit me in the middle of the department store, they would call security, and neither one of us would want to tell that story.

“Not this friend.” He pointed his thumb into his chest. “Not when he’s busy fucking the club girls,” Pretty said, effectively shutting down the conversation.

Shaking my head, I turned back to look at the jewelry. As Grace had felt more comfortable at the clubhouse, the fancy clothes and pearls had disappeared to the back of the closet. She wore t-shirts and shorts most days unless we went out. Buying an engagement ring was out. When I proposed, it would be because it felt right, not because it was a holiday, and I didn’t have any other options.

An older woman approached me from the other side of the counter. She was too old to still be working, but probably needed the cash.

“May I help you, sir?” she said, standing in front of me.

Before I could respond, my brother spouted off from the couch. “He’s screwed.”

I shook my head at the situation. “We’re not related,” I told her as I pointed to me and then over my shoulder. “Never met him in my life.”

She smiled and smoothed a piece of hair that had escaped her bun. “I understand. I have two boys who are the same way.”

“Unfortunately, he skipped puberty and never grew up.”

Pretty took that exact moment to pop back up from the couch. “He needs presents for his wife.”

She wasn’t officially my wife, but it was easier than trying to explain. The saleswoman led me around the counters, pointing out baubles and trinkets, but nothing really looked like Grace. This was our first Christmas together, and I wanted her to always remember it fondly.

Pretty

This was painful to watch, and if I didn’t jump in and help him, it would be excruciating. It wasn’t like I had anything better to do. Reaching for my phone, I opened up the group chat and sent a picture of Sabre being led around the jewelry cases.

Cyph

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Sabre's going to kill you for that.

Pretty

First rule of group chat - we don't tell Sabre.

How would that be any different from any other day?

Grizz

Is he buying an engagement ring?

Please say no.

Lover Boy

Afraid you might have to buy a wedding ring?

Pretty

No, he's just trying to find presents.

It's sad watching the saleswoman lead him around by his dick.

Lover Boy

He might be better off with an engagement ring.

Grizz

Why would he do that?

She's his Old Lady.

Lover Boy

You bought the cow.

How's the milk?

Grizz

Fuck off, Wreck.

At least I openly claim what's mine.

I rubbed my eyes, trying to soothe the sting. Grizz had hit below the belt with that one.

I wasn't the only one who felt uncomfortable with that blow. There was no new message in the group chat for over a minute.

DeadZone

What about the Old McMillan place?

How

She's not hiding how much she wants it.

Zook

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Why wouldn't he buy it?

Isn't she some sort of genius at that stuff?

He'd make a shit ton of money and make her happy.

Count

We need new business, so I don't see why not.

Chef

We have all the suppliers in place already.

We'd just have to make the introductions.

Thunder

Couldn't we offer catering too?

Chef

I could help her with the food, and that keeps the profit inside.

It also lowers my labor cost at the diner.

Buffet catering doesn't require servers.

Grizz

It needs a fuckton of work.

My cow has been drawing up renovation plans.

Cyph

If she catches wind that you called her a cow, you're going to be sleeping on the sofa.

Grizz

At least I'll be sleeping then.

Pretty

Aww fuck.

He just made another trip around the jewelry.

She doesn't even wear this stuff anymore.

Cyph

I just looked.

It's listed at a million.

That's why he's not jumping to buy it.

Count

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We could.

It would take me a minute to find the funds.

Grease

We don't really need a new garage.

I can make the one we have work.

How

Suck up.

Cyph

I wonder if we could offer \$200K.

The owner is an older woman who inherited the place from her husband.

She shut it down and barely maintains it.

Count

Why would anyone want \$200K when they could get a million from one of those investment firms?

Cyph

If they don't, the government will take the property.

That's why.

Count

Why didn't you fucking lead with that?

Scrub

What the fuck's going on?

You guys are blowing up my phone, and I am on shift.

Pretty

Are you in if we spend money?

Scrub

If Count says yes.

Pretty

Good boy.

Grizz

Isn't that what Wreck says to you?

Pretty

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No, but I'll make sure Meredith buys you a collar that says "My Bitch".

We have to stop this before she leads him around the counter for the third fucking time.

If Sabre buys the place, is everyone in to help pay for the renovations?

I need a group vote.

The "ayes" had it.

Sabre

"Why don't you buy her what she really wants?" Pretty popped up at my elbow. "The Old McMillan Place. She wants to turn it into one of those fancy event centers."

"How do you know that's what she wants?" Grace wasn't stealthy. She had been working on the business plan in the mornings and leaving the pages on the kitchen counter. Did she want me to see them?

"How do you know?" he parroted me.

I turned to look at him, and the saleswoman stopped to listen in. "If I bought that place, I could cover the cost of the building. However, it needs a lot of work. Where am I going to get the money for her to start a business?"

“You know where. We’ll go rob some banks, and it’ll all be gravy,” Pretty said as he patted my forearm. The saleswoman nearly choked on her own breath. Pretty shot her his womanizing smile, and it seemed to work. She looked like robbing a bank was the best idea, and she’d drive the getaway car. “The club’s willing to partner on the business aspect.” He smiled at me.

“You can’t say shit like that without a vote.” I fully turned towards Pretty. He had better not be fucking around.

“I asked them while you were being a douche canoe, looking at the cases.” He turned back towards the saleswoman. “I am sure you have a lot of pretty stuff.” She preened at him. Turning back towards me, he said, “The consensus was that if she ran it, it would be a gold mine. The brothers will take that bet. If you put it up to a vote, they’ll approve the spending. A few even said they would chip in to help fix it.”

“How did you talk to all of them?” I was skeptical. Pretty was well-liked, but he wasn’t one to work quickly.

“Group chat.” He beamed at me.

“Show me.”

“Uh, no. First rule about group chat: you don’t talk about it with the president. That’s you. Now, grab one of those charm bracelet thingies, and let’s get the fuck out of here. My work is done.”

Chapter 7

Christmas Threw Up

Thunder

I heard the commotion in the main room as I walked out of the kitchen with a soda in my hand. Stopping to watch, I couldn't help my amusement.

"It's not straight." Flo was standing in the middle of the room looking at the fireplace where Meredith was pinning a Christmas stocking.

"Do you want to hang them?" Meredith snapped over her shoulder.

"Not really, but if you're going to do it, make them straight," Flo chuckled.

"I am making them straight," Meredith reiterated, placing one hand on her hip and flipping Flo off with her middle finger behind her back. I didn't appreciate the gesture toward Flo, but I'd cause more drama if I said something.

Drama was the last thing on my mind when I noticed the back of Liz's head as she sat at a table, facing the girls. She had been watching them with JR in his bouncer on the other side of her. Making sure that Slate was nowhere near, I pretended like it wasn't a big deal as I sat in the empty chair next to her.

"Were they always like this?" I asked her, but she didn't respond. I had noticed that her mind was slipping, but I had tried anyway. If I wanted to have an actual conversation with her, I'd have to wait until she was lucid again. Instead, I placed my soda on the table and bent over so that I could see JR. "Hey, buddy. You watching the drama?" I asked him. "Who you going to bet on?"

"We can hear you," Meredith said over her shoulder. "The whole clubhouse can hear you."

I didn't pay any attention to her as I stood up from my chair and picked JR up from his bouncer. The motion caught Liz's attention, and I watched out of my peripheral view as her eyes refocused on the world around her. When she'd first arrived from

the hospital, it would take her hours to be aware of her surroundings, but she wouldn't remember any of the conversation. They said she was getting better and could make a full recovery, but it still took her a few minutes on a good day.

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“Thunder, I...you,” she said to me, with a slight smile.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, settling JR against my shoulder and taking my chair again. Pointing at her nieces, I asked again, “Were they always like this?”

“Can still hear you,” Flo said, but she smiled and there wasn’t any heat behind her words. She had walked over to Meredith, and they were standing side-by-side.

“No,” Liz laughed. “Only fighting...Gerry...encouraged...younger. They work...well.” Her gaze shifted first to Grace and then to Meredith.

“We can hear you,” they both said as they turned with their hands on their hips to face us.

“Good.” She laughed at them and waved her good hand to encourage them to get back to work.

“Alright, enough of this. How many stockings are there?” Meredith asked Flo.

“Fifty-ish.”

“How did you order fifty-ish? There had to be a set number.” They had turned to face each other, but they were standing so close, it made me nervous. Meredith wasn’t stable, and even though I didn’t think they would fight, I wasn’t taking any chances. I shifted with JR towards the front of my seat, in case I had to put him back into his bouncer and break them up.

“Well, there was, but I had to add a few at the end, and I lost count.” Flo shrugged, like it was not a big deal.

Meredith rubbed her hand across her face. “You’re killing me. How wide are the stockings across the top?”

“I don’t know. I thought they were cute and didn’t bother to measure. Plus, some of the longer names fit easier, so I didn’t have to worry about it.” Flo shrugged again. I was watching them closely, and I was pretty sure Flo was acting clueless. It was a plight to keep Meredith functioning. It could also have been a sister thing that I would never understand.

“Did you do this on purpose?” Meredith rolled her eyes as Flo approached her aunt.

“Aunt E, make her stop.” Flo moved JR’s bouncer out of the way and flopped down on the other side of Liz, placing her cheek on Liz’s shoulder. Liz brought her good hand up to pat it.

“No.” Liz nodded in Meredith’s direction with a smile on her face.

Meredith wasn’t paying us any attention. She’d whipped her phone out and was trying to figure out the placement for the stockings. It was good to see her taking part, even though tomorrow might be another day. She stopped typing and then opened the box on the other table. Looking inside, Meredith placed her head in her hands. “Of course you did,” she aimed at Flo.

“They were cute.” Flo smiled at Liz, and when she returned it, it was easy to tell which side of the family the girls took after.

“Do you need help?” Slate said from behind Liz, his hands on either side of her shoulders. I had been so engrossed with the girls that I had missed Slate walking into

the room. I wanted to tell him to get the fuck away from Liz, but she wouldn't understand why I was territorial about her. Slate would just laugh at me, and then we'd have to settle this outside. As we were two of the oldest in the club, the rest of the brothers would never let us live it down.

She turned around, and that was when the light went out from her eyes.

"You okay, Liz?" he asked her.

"Let her be. Next time, don't sneak up on anyone," I said.

"I didn't sneak up on her. She saw me enter the room when she turned towards Flo." Slate made sure his hands grazed her shoulders. She was in such a mental state that she shook. Her mind couldn't process that she was safe. All she knew was that she was being touched.

"It's alright, Aunt E. Why don't you come sit closer to me?" Flo stepped in, shooting a look at Slate over Liz's head. "It's okay, no one will hurt you. I'll make sure of it." Liz couldn't process anything that was being said, but Flo's tone would soothe her until the light shined back in her eyes.

JR whimpered in my arms, sensing my tension. Before he wailed, I handed him back to Flo, so that I could get away from Slate. If we hurt anyone over our stupidity, Sabre would dish out punishment and not even ask twice. I didn't blame him. I would have done the same thing to protect my family.

I stood from my chair and rolled my sleeves up, preparing to hang stockings with Meredith. "Would you like some help?" I asked her as I grabbed the stocking she'd placed on the table. Doing a double take, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was a white fluffy cuff with Sabre's name sequined at the top. The actual stocking was red with Santa riding a motorcycle. I didn't know what to say, and I was sure my face

was stuck in shock.

“I told you she was insane. There’s one for every person.” Meredith pointed at the stocking I held up. “There are even a few with reindeers on bikes.”

“They were cute,” Flo piped up, still watching Liz. Slate had moved on to the bar, but he was sitting on a stool facing the room.

“It’s going to look like Christmas threw up in here,” Meredith complained, pulling off Grizz’s hoodie she always wore.

“It’s JR’s first Christmas, and the club hasn’t celebrated a holiday in a really long time.” Bouncing JR in her arms, Flo brought him closer to her so that his feet could bounce on her leg. “We’re going to help Aunt Meredith find her Christmas spirit.”

“I am hanging your stockings. What more do you want?”

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“I don’t see any hung by the fire with care,” Flo pushed. I hid my smile so that I wouldn’t get caught in the middle.

“Oh my God, fucking shit. Would you leave me alone?” Meredith screeched towards Flo. She couldn’t have timed that perfectly. No sooner had the words left her lips than Liz became lucid.

“What did I miss?” she asked.

It was the right thing to say because it diffused the frustration in the room. Saying nothing, Meredith grabbed the level and went to work. I waited until she got about ten stockings ahead of me before I joined in, pinning them to the wall.

I was almost done when I felt a hand on my elbow. Looking over, I saw Flo standing next to me with JR in her arms.

“Say nothing. Just nod if you agree. I need a Santa. If I get the outfit, would you do it?” she whispered.

I shook my head. When Sabre and the others were little, one of the wise men would dress up as Santa for the kids. I’d been a newly patched brother then, and I didn’t want to think about how many years had passed.

“Please, Thunder. The kids will love it.”

I still shook my head. I wanted no part in this.

“I’ll have pictures with Santa for JR.” The little traitor cooed as she said his name.

I would do anything for that kid, but I didn’t want to play Santa. My eyes narrowed at her as she went in for the kill.

“My aunt might even smile at you for doing such a nice thing for her nephew.”

“Fuck.” I’d just agreed.

Sabre

We pulled into the parking lot of the Old McMillan Place. Grizz was to my right, and Cyph and Count rode behind us. The two of them had worked together to figure out the best way to buy this place for Grace.

When Pretty had told me that the brothers would help with the renovations, I didn’t know what to think. My first thought had been that they’d trusted Grace’s skills to make it profitable. My second was that she’d been able to fit in. I couldn’t be without her. She was my other half, and I didn’t know what I would have done if they hadn’t accepted her. When I’d asked for the official vote, it had been unanimous.

We parked the bikes and pulled off our helmets. “You two ready?” I asked.

“Yeah, should be easy,” Cyph said. “I already greased the wheels, and Count just has to close it.”

“The deal should already be done. You just have to decide if you want to go through with it.” Count ran his hand over the top of his spikes.

I looked up at the building, but all I saw was a money pit. There was nothing to confirm my feeling, but as I stood there, everything seemed old. “Do you think we’ll have to redo the whole thing?” I asked Grizz.

“Not sure. We’ll have to hire out for an inspection and then go from there.” He smiled. “My ass isn’t getting up on that roof unless I have to.”

“Meredith would probably climb up after and tell you how to do it.” Cyph snorted.

“Nah, she would push me off if she thought it would get her home quicker,” Grizz snickered. “Actually, she’s pretty knowledgeable, so it wouldn’t surprise me if she helped. Her ass isn’t going up on that roof, though.”

I had every confidence in Grace, but I also didn’t want the club to accuse me of thinking with my dick if things went sour. They had approved the renovation spending, but I couldn’t help the dread that crept into my stomach. What if we sank more money into this place than it was worth? It had clearly seen better days. “Last chance,” I asked. “Should we walk away from this?”

Cyph laughed. “Do you even know your Old Lady?”

I couldn’t catch the growl that escaped my lips. I pivoted towards him with my hands planted on my hips, feet shoulder width apart. The frown on my face was so prominent that I could feel it sinking into my skin.

He backtracked quickly. “Her little marketing agency generates at least a million for her smallest client, which is a mom-and-pop bakery. When she works for El Sombra Roja, you’re looking at twenty million on the low end. Let’s not forget, she did this all the while playing trophy wife from her kitchentable. I think you’re good.” He laughed some more as he took off running towards the front door with Count.

“I’ve seen Meredith’s designs. I am not sure whose ideas they are, but there were sketches for weddings, corporate events, and holiday parties. They’re not thinking small, Sabre,” Grizz said.

“If it was just me taking the risk, I wouldn’t care. As much as I believe in Grace, I can’t let the club suffer. I needed a Christmas present, and this is what she wanted.” I could be honest with Grizz. He was the only one who would understand.

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“I get it, but maybe have a little faith in her. She put a lot of faith in you when she brought JR home to the club.” He shifted his feet and looked at the ground for a second, gathering his thoughts. “I don’t think she would have gone to this much trouble if she didn’t think she could turn it around. It might even be our best business once she gets it up and running. It won’t be overnight, but you shouldn’t be worried about letting her do her thing.”

We smiled and chuckled as I slapped him on the shoulder. Walking towards the front door, we prepared ourselves for the inside. There were no lights on, and I wasn’t sure if they even had electricity on in the building. A distinctive musty smell invaded my nose. The place must have been closed up for a while. I closed my eyes and tried to calm my nerves without breathing in too deep.

“Here,” Grizz said to me, holding out a piece of paper. “I grabbed one of Meredith’s designs so that you could see what they’re thinking. She doesn’t know I have it.”

There was a generic bride and groom standing underneath a wooden altar. This place sat on a hill, but the windows faced the water. Meredith had drawn an open concept room, using the windows as the focal point. However, a small drawing showed the windows on a track that could slide open and closed. “A beach wedding without the beach,” I mumbled.

“Yeah, and I know where we can get those. They’re not actually as expensive as you would think they are.” Pointing his finger, he continued, “She put curtains in the rafters, probably with twinkle lights or some shit like that. As long as the roof is good, we can open the room, and it’ll make it look bigger than what it is.”

“Do they only have the one room?” I asked him. We were alone, and I had no clue where the other two were in the building.

“No, there’s three total. This one, and each side has a small room on the wing.”

“How do you know so much about this?” I was getting suspicious about Grizz’s motivations. He seemed to have an answer for everything.

“It makes my woman smile.” He shrugged. “She won’t want to be a part of it, but she’ll help Grace come up with the concepts and designs. That’s what they’re already doing now. If it gets Meredith out of bed, I’ll help Grace as a thank you.”

I changed the subject quickly, not wanting to drag him down when he was trying to help me. “How much do you think renovations are going to be?” I was still staring at the paper. They had thought of everything, and I wondered if I wasn’t putting enough trust in it. This was what Grizz had been trying to tell me. It was a business. There would always be things to worry about.

“It’s the roof and any structure damage that will cost, and you know that depends on how bad it really is.” He pointed towards the drawing. “All of this cosmetic stuff I can do, like the arch. Most places rent them out, and it’ll be easy money for Grace.”

“Do you agree with this?” I asked him, needing to confirm I had been overthinking it.

“As long as we stay within budget, we can always sell the place later.” He smacked me on the shoulder.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Cyph and Count walked back into the main room with a short, balding man between them.

“Prez, this is Ezekiel Jones. He’s the real estate agent for the property,” Count introduced.

“Mr. Hudson, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Mr. Jones held out his hand, sweat dripping off of it. I took one look at the water drops landing on the floor and didn’t bother to offer my hand. I wasn’t touching any of that. “Yes, well, I was told you were interested in purchasing it today. We’ve had the property evaluated and priced accordingly at one million. Mrs. Richardson isn’t willing to negotiate.”

I might have been president, but this was Count’s show as our treasurer, and I knew to keep my mouth shut.

“Have you talked to Mrs. Richardson today?” he asked, squinting at the man.

“No, I haven’t.” Mr. Jones’s bald spot started to sweat and pour down his face.

“You need to call her.” Count’s spikes rattled as he shook his head and rubbed at his forehead. I’d seen these types of situations in the past. Count was going to wipe the floor with him, and Mr. Jones wouldn’t see it coming until it was over.

Mr. Jones rubbed his hand over his balding head, getting sweat everywhere. We all took a step back. No one wanted to be near the man.

“I don’t like to be kept waiting, so either you’re going to call her, or I am. You don’t want me to tell her about this incompetence. I could easily offer to run her portfolio with half the time you bill.” Count wasn’t lying. He probably could if he wanted the job.

“Yes, sir.” Mr. Jones took off running.

“Told you,” Count said to Cyph.

“Yeah, I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

“What just happened?” Grizz asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I had Cyph trace who actually owned this place. It’s a Mrs. Betty Richardson, and she inherited it from her late husband.”

“Then why is it called McMillan?” Grizz asked, interested.

“Her late husband named it after his mother’s family. From what I can tell, the mother didn’t approve of her son’s marriage, and they never got along.” Count wrapped his arms around his middle. “Mrs. Richardson couldn’t care less about this place, and she didn’t want to put any money into it. I told her if she took our offer, it’d be our problem. She agreed, and you were supposed to sign the paperwork, Prez.”

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“How much am I spending for this?” I was going to take Grizz’s advice and let it play out.

“A hundred and fifty thousand. A hundred thousand to wipe away the taxes, and fifty thousand for her troubles. You could cut me the other fifty thousand for my troubles. You’re welcome.” Count smiled.

Mr. Jones came running over with a stack of papers. “I found these on the fax machine.”

Cyph couldn’t hold his laughter in at the old technology and walked away.

Count looked at the documents. “Tell her I’ll have them to her by the end of the day.”

With that, we walked out. The deal was done.

Chapter 8

Make it Right

Grace

I was making sure that the spare room was ready for How’s sister before breakfast. Tucking in the last corner of the blanket, I heard a knock on the door.

“You rang?” Pretty instantly stuck his head in the door’s crack.

“Come in.” I hurried to the door, trying to get him to move quicker. I didn’t want anyone to see him in the hallway. This was innocent, but the brothers would hound us for details. It was already going to be hard enough to get Pretty to agree to my mischievousness.

“If this is going to get kinky, I am not that kind of brother-in-law.” He paused a minute, and his eyes went to the ceiling like he was thinking it over. “Oh shit, maybe I am.”

I rolled my eyes at him as I opened the door. Grabbing his arm, I pulled him over the threshold, glanced down the hallway to make sure no one had seen him, and then closed the door.

“Damn, woman. You know I am fragile.” He rubbed at the imaginary red spot on his arm.

“Are you done being dramatic?”

He gave me a few more seconds of the wounded face, and then I watched as his regular smile appeared.

“Yeah, what’s up?” he asked.

“Do you remember when you were a kid, and the older brothers would dress up like Santa with his elves for Christmas?” I was trying to appeal to happier times, hoping that it would work to win him over.

“Yeah, Bear would get the elves drunk so that they wouldn’t bitch too loudly when they had to put the costumes on. If they made a kid cry, they were on punishment duty.” He paused, and his eyes narrowed at me. “How do you know? Is this from when Sabre and the brothers were discussing Christmases past?”

“Who’s my favorite brother-in-law?” I asked with a wide, cheesy smile.

“You’re not married to my brother.” He pointed at me, making a circle with his finger.

“Small technicality, but I need a favor, and you’re the only one who can do it.” I made the same motion with my pointer finger, mirroring him.

“What did you do? You know, everyone’s been trying to figure out what’s in the stockings.” He crossed his arms over his chest, his fingers tapping against his bicep.

“I got Thunder to play Santa,” I rushed. “I just need you to be an elf and get the enforcers to play along.”

“No.” He vehemently shook his head.

“Why not?” Pretty was normally the first one to volunteer for silly shenanigans. I almost wanted to cry and beg because I needed him to play along.

“It’s tights!” He waved his hands at me, like I would easily agree that this was absurd.

“It’ll make your butt look good.” I appealed to his vanity instead. He couldn’t dig his heels in when I needed to make this happen.

His hands instantly stopped midair. “You were checking out my ass?”

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“No, but it seemed like a good thing to say.” Of course, he would question my motives.

“I am going to tell Sabre you’ve been checking out my ass.” He went back to making the pointing motion, and I wanted to rip off his finger. No wonder Sabre threatened to kill him daily.

“No, you won’t. He’ll really kill you then, and I won’t be able to walk straight for three days.” If Pretty even insinuated that I was looking at his ass, Sabre’s jealousy streak would kick in. We were solid, but he would restate his claim. I didn’t want to find out if the man could have a three-day sex marathon. As the thought crossed my mind, my legs shook with excitement. It’d be worth it, even if my body gave out.

“That sounds like a you problem.” Pretty had noticed my legs trembling.

“Please, Pretty. This is important.” When I had heard the brothers talking in the kitchen, I knew I wanted to make this happen for them. They needed a reminder that they had a family here, and there was no better time than the holidays.

“How important?” His lips quirked to one side, like he was thinking it over.

“Potato salad important.”

“I need enough so I can rub it all over.” He wagged his eyebrows in exaggeration.

“That’s gross, but if it will get you to say yes...” All that mattered was that he agreed.

“Nah, but that would be fun, though. Make me a pan, and I’ll wear the tights.”

I hugged him. “Thank you. I really appreciate this.”

“Yeah, you know I was going to do it. I just had to put up a fight.” He shrugged.

“Well, now you have to rope in Twig, Pint, and Berry. I have costumes for them, too.” I’d purposely picked Pretty because he was the most comfortable in his sexuality. The other three were the biggest men in the club. This would go down in infamy.

“Fuck me.”

Zook

The holidays were rapidly approaching, and there wasn’t much going on. Chef had prepared breakfast, and the brothers had rearranged the tables so that we could all eat together. I would have normally enjoyed it, but How was going to have to leave soon to pick up Em, and I was nervous. I wanted nothing to ruin their visit, but I wasn’t sure I was ready to relive the past.

“What time are you leaving?” I asked How, trying to swallow a bite of eggs.

“In an hour. I have to wait for Grease to bring my bike keys back,” he answered, shoving bacon into his mouth.

I was confused. I had made sure that How had borrowed one of the club cars from Grease. He wasn’t taking his bike, so why did he need his keys? I panicked, and my thoughts were rapidly firing questions. He wouldn’t put her on the back of his bike,

would he? I had to know for my peace of mind. “You’re not taking your bike, are you? You don’t have a helmet. Plus, where are you going to put her suitcase?”

His eyes narrowed at me over another piece of bacon. “I am not. Grease dropped off one of the club’s extra cars and took my bike for an oil change early this morning.”

My stomach sank with worry. How was going to find out why I had broken Emily’s heart, and I didn’t know what his reaction would be. I couldn’t lose How as my best friend. It was a pickle that I had considered when I’d sent that last letter.

“What’s going on?” He ate another piece of bacon, snapping it in half with his teeth.

I didn’t respond, looking down at my plate and grabbing another fork full of eggs.

“I know something’s going on. You’re acting weirder than normal.” He ate the other half of the bacon, leaning forward towards me.

My head popped up at that one. “I am not weird.” The eggs that had been on my fork fell into my lap. No one laughed, as they were more invested in our conversation. I grabbed my napkin and tried to pick up the pieces from my jeans.

“When Em called, I got the vibe that something’s up with her and Christopher. Suddenly, she’s coming when she’s never been to the club, and you’re acting peculiar. Makes me think her visit has nothing to do with me.” He slid his plate in front of him and put down his fork to stare into my soul.

“You’ve already decided that you know everything.” I rolled my eyes. Em wasn’t coming to see me, but I was here, and she wouldn’t be able to avoid me unless I hid in the shadows.

No one was talking around the table. They were too busy eating breakfast and

listening to us.

“You going to tell me what I am missing, or are we taking this outside? I got about forty-five minutes.” How hooked a finger over his shoulder. He didn’t have a problem pushing me into a fight, knowing full well I’d never take a swing at him. We were too close for that bullshit.

“I won’t fight you.”

He leaned in even further. “I guess you’re going to have to tell me then.”

How wasn’t giving me an out, so I started with the truth. He already knew this part. “Do you remember when we had R&R, and I came with you to the Hamptons?” I tried to take another bite of eggs, but they tasted like sawdust. Giving up, I laid my fork on my plate and pushed it towards the middle of the table.

“Yeah, so?” He narrowed his eyes at me, remembering the trip. I knew he was analyzing it for anything that was amiss.

“I asked her to write to me.” I needed him to conclude on his own, so that I wouldn’t have to spell it out.

“Yeah, I remember. What the fuck does that mean?”

“He caught feelings over the letters,” one brother explained. It must have been someone with military experience. I wouldn’t know who it was because I was staring at How, and he was staring at me.

“You caught feelings over Emily’s letters?” His eyes narrowed at me.

I lowered my eyes, not sure if he was going to leap over the table and hit me.

“You caught feelings,” he stated. “How long did it last?”

“I ended it when I got my official release papers during the last deployment.” I had been so excited to tell her my service was almost over.

“If you’re going to be man enough for my sister, then you look at me when I’m talking to you.” He shifted back in his chair and crossed his arms so that his elbows rested on the table.

“You’re awfully pushy about something that’s over.” I crossed my arms and sat back in my chair.

“Is it really over?” he asked.

“Yeah, I haven’t talked to her since I sent my last letter breaking it off.” I’d regretted that last letter, but it had been necessary. She wouldn’t accept that it was over, unless I broke her heart, and I had tried to do it as gently as I could.

“Why did you break it off?”

I took a deep breath and raised my eyes to the ceiling for a minute. I relived the past, and when I was ready, I looked back at him. “You know how you keep your release quiet until the paperwork actually comes in so that they don’t talk you into more?”

“Fuckers almost got me for another four years that way,” I heard from somewhere down the table.

How nodded his head and made a hand motion for me to continue. The rest of the table was just as enthralled.

“My paperwork came in, so I told her, not thinking too much about it. She had just started her last semester of college and was applying to law schools.” I rubbed my hands over my face. “Her last letter told me to pick somewhere to live. She didn’t

care if I wanted to stay near the base or go somewhere new. Em told me to pick, and she'd make the arrangements."

I didn't want to continue, but one look at How, and I knew I had to. He needed to understand why I had called it off. "I didn't want her to use your parents' money to set us up, so I went to check to see how much I could send her. That's when I knew I wasn't good enough. I didn't have enough to support her, and I wasn't making the money we do now. I told her she was living out a little girl's dream, and that I was sorry I had led her on."

His jaw shifted, processing what I had told him. "You broke her heart by letter, stayed near the base until I discharged, and then we drove cross-country."

"Something like that."

"She's going to be here in a few hours. What were you planning on doing?" How asked.

"Hide in the background. I don't want to ruin your visit when I know it's been a few years since you've seen her."

"Nope." He grinned. "You're going to make this right."

Chapter 9

Don't Picture the Future

How

Emily had just texted that she was off the plane and heading towards the baggage claim where I waited for her.

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I'd spent the drive to the airport thinking about this morning. I had seen none of this coming, and it made me wonder: had I missed it all those years ago, or had I just put blinders on because I didn't want to question it? Either way, it didn't matter. I could see it all clearly now.

My best friend wanted my sister, and surprisingly, I was okay with that. If it had been any other brother, my fists might have clenched just at the thought. My loyalty ran through my blood, and I didn't have a problem laying down my life for any of them. However, I could name at least four brothers who were complete assholes. I wouldn't want that for Em. Zook would take care of her, and that was all I could ask for. If I was wrong, and he mistreated her, I'd step in and beat his ass.

My lips smirked as I thought about ways I could play matchmaker. My sister wouldn't rock the boat. She kept saying that she was here to visit me for Christmas, but I didn't think she was being honest with herself. Zook wouldn't make a move because he didn't want to be the reason that her visit didn't go well. Christmas was the season of miracles. If that didn't work, I could always use the mistletoe that was hanging on the kitchen door to my advantage.

I was watching the escalator when I saw her at the top. Emily. My kid sister was no longer a kid. She wore a navy-blue blazer with a cream blouse underneath, and jeans with at least four-inch heels. The gold chain with the blue star I had bought her for her eighteenth birthday hung from her neck.

She was on her way down when she caught sight of me. Shifting her winter coat to her other arm, she waved. "Eric!"

I couldn't help but smile, glad that she was here. Zook's discharge had come first, and I had made him promise to stick around the base so that I could find him. The day I had officially completed my military service, I had walked out of the base with my duffle bag slung over my shoulder. Zook had been sitting on his bike on the side of the road.

"I heard they were letting the riff-raff out today," he'd said.

"Yeah, even the military lets go of the scoundrels," I had replied, smiling as I walked over to him.

I'd climbed on the back of his bike and told him to take me to the dealership. I had bought a bike with cash, and we had hit the road. We hadn't had any plans, letting the open road decide where we were heading. I could have pulled money from my trust fund, but I had worked odd jobs alongside Zook. It had been the best thing to do as we adjusted to civilian life. We had been working on a construction crew when we heard about the Iron Shield, and the rest was history.

"Em!" I waved back at her, waiting for her to step off the escalator. She walked towards me, wheeling her suitcase, still waving her arm around. I had kept in touch with the occasional phone call or text, but I hadn't been to New York to see her. Reaching me, she dropped everything to wrap her arms around my back, and I held her close to me. "I missed you, Em. I am so glad you're here," I whispered into her ear.

"I am glad I am here, too. It's been too long," she said.

"Let's get out of here. You hungry?" I reached for her suitcase, and she let me grasp the handle as we walked towards the parking garage.

"I could eat," she said, walking next to me.

I took her to the club's diner, making small talk on the way there. She told me about the latest New York gossip, and I interjected every now and again. We'd finished cheeseburgers and fries, and now we were relaxing in the booth. I was trying to build up my courage to ask her what I wanted to know.

Finally, I couldn't hold it in anymore. "Hey Em? What's going on with Christopher and the Nelsons?"

"Why do you want to know?" she replied, taking a sip of her soda.

"I thought it was suspicious when you called out of the blue and asked to visit. Don't get me wrong, I love having you here, but I have to know that you're alright." I leaned forward in the booth, trying to invade her space so that she'd talk to me.

"Do you feel guilty that I am still on the path that was set out for me?" Her eyes avoided mine, focusing instead on the way her finger twirled around the top of the plastic glass.

"Yes. No. Maybe. I am not really sure, but I know that something doesn't feel right, and if I can help, I am going to stick my nose in it." Suddenly, my mouth was dry. I took a sip of my soda.

"Did you see the article the Nelsons had published in the newspaper about our engagement and the merger?" she asked, raising her head.

"Yeah. Cyph keeps track of any information that pertains to the brothers. He got a hit on the article because of the company." I took another sip, letting her lead the conversation.

"He never asked me to marry him. Christopher assumed it was time, and the parental units weren't in town. The Nelsons put that piece out, which is why it didn't have a

picture. I went with it because I wasn't sure what to do, but I called it off after Thanksgiving. He's been pressuring me ever since." She shifted in the booth.

"I wish I would have been there to beat his ass." Christopher wouldn't have stood a chance. The only violence he'd ever seen was when that water polo ball had broken his nose in high school.

"No," she said. "It would have only made it worse, and I took care of it. I told him no, and if Mom and Dad wanted the merger to go through, there were plenty of legal ways to complete the mission." She took a deep breath. "I didn't want to put a happy face on for their holiday party, so I called you." Her lips quirked into a smile at the edges, and I felt mine doing the same thing. As her smile widened, so did mine. If she didn't want Zook, I'd try to talk her into at least moving here so that I could see her regularly.

"There's something else I have to know," I said to her. "What's going on between you and Zook?"

Her smile disappeared. "I don't know what you're talking about." Emily tilted her chin in defiance.

"You don't have to protect him. I knew you wrote him letters and sent care packages, but he never told me he caught feelings over the words. It came out this morning over breakfast, and I didn't see that coming." I wiped my lips with my napkin for something to do.

"What are you doing right now?" She wrapped her arms around herself.

"I want to know what happened."

"Nothing happened. He asked if I would write to him, and I did. When the two of you

left the military, the letters stopped.” She raised her chin again, trying to protect herself.

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“That’s not the story I heard, but I won’t push you. I just want you to know that if you want to be with Zook, I’ll support it.” She looked at me like I was crazy. “Seriously, Em. If you want to be with Zook, I’ll give my blessing.” I sat back in the booth.

“I came to visit you, not him.” Her forehead puckered.

“I know, and I am going to talk you into staying for my selfish reasons.” Taking one last sip of my soda, I said, “I am just saying, hear him out if he gets his head out of his ass.”

Zook

“You going to sit out on the porch and wait for them?” Op asked me, grabbing a beer even though it was midmorning.

“Nah, I might go to my room.” I had been honest with How when I had said that I would stay out of the way. Emily was here to visit him, not me, and I wouldn’t do anything to ruin that.

“That won’t look suspicious.” The prospect tending the bar flipped the cap on the beer bottle, setting it in front of Op.

“Don’t care.” I shrugged.

“He gave you permission to claim her. Why aren’t you jumping up and down for joy? Fuck, if I was in your situation, I’d whisk her to my room and not come out until I made amends.”

“I am not you, Op. I broke her heart, and I can’t expect her to walk through those doors and take me back right away, no matter what How thinks. What’s the word for what you do when you fucked up?” I asked him, sitting on the stool facing the bar.

“Beg?” he supplied, taking another sip of his beer.

“Nah, that’s not it. Grovel, maybe?” I paused. “Whatever it is, I can’t do it right now. It’s Christmas, and I refuse to make her trip about our past.”

“Pussy.”

I balled my fist and slugged him in the arm, almost knocking Op off the stool. “Don’t call me a pussy.”

“If she walked through the front door right now, what would you say to her?” Op signaled to the prospect for another beer. Sabre had closed all the club businesses to give the brothers a break. There were also no runs available, so we were all sitting around, twiddling our thumbs.

“I’d apologize profusely. Tell her that the life she painted in her last letter sounded too good to be true, and it scared me shitless. I panicked, and like a dumbfuck, ruined it because all I’ve ever known is chaos and destruction.” I knocked my knuckles against the bar.

“Great. You have your chance to do that now.” He tilted his head towards the front door and slapped me on the shoulder. How had just walked in, wheeling a suitcase. Behind him, all I could hear was a pair of heels clicking on the floor. Emily was here.

Fuck.

“If you pass out and fall off the stool, I am not saving you. In fact, I might just claim your girl for myself.” Op was watching me for a reaction.

“Touch her, and I’ll fucking kill you with my bare hands, brother or not.”

I slid off my chair, his laughter following me as I made my way over. There weren’t many brothers in the main room, and How was making introductions.

I circled from behind as he was introducing Emily to DeadZone. I couldn’t have explained it even if I tried, but I was three or four steps behind her when she turned in my direction. It was as if she knew I was there, even though I had been as stealthy as possible.

“Tyler.” My name on her lips was the best sound I’d ever heard. I took a minute to glance at her and that was a mistake. She was stunning, confident, and I could tell she wouldn’t take my shit.

“Em. Welcome to the Iron Shield,” I said, rubbing at the back of my neck sheepishly.

“Thank you. It’s nice to be here. Are my feet supposed to stick to the floor?” She smiled at me.

How bent over, Dead was howling, and I stood there staring at her, dumbfounded. I picked up my foot and then placed it back on the ground. It made a squeaky sound underneath my boot. I tried a few more times, and each pass was louder than the one before.

“Fuck, this is going to be fun.” Dead slapped his leg, walking away from us.

Flo walked through the kitchen door with JR and made her way over to us. Placing her hand on my arm, she said, “I am sorry. The brothers have nothing better to be doing, so I didn’t want to scrub the floors until closer to Christmas.”

“It’s actually kind of fun and reminds me of the movie theatre. You must be Flo?” Emily stuck out her hand to shake, but Flo reached out to hug her as best as she could.

“I am, and this is JR.” She wrapped her pinkie in his little hand and gently made him wave to Em.

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“He’s adorable,” Emily cooed.

My imagination raced, trying to picture what my kid with Em would look like. I must not have hidden my thoughts very well because How made faces at me behind Emily’s back. I looked at him as if he was crazy, not getting the message. It wasn’t until Flo squeezed my bicep that the slight twinge brought me back to reality.

“Thank you. He has his uncles wrapped around his little pinkie.” Flo patted my arm again before she let go. “There’s nothing going on until dinner, so I figured you might want a nap this afternoon. How can show you to your room. It’s all ready for you.” Flo smiled.

“Thank you. That sounds nice. It snowed last night, and I left a few hours early to make sure I made it to the airport. They weren’t leaving without me.”

“Come on, princess.” How grabbed the handle of her suitcase and led Em to the spare rooms.

Flo waited until they had reached the hallway before she laughed at me. “If you’re going to win her back, you need to work on your conversation skills. You stood there staring at her, rubbing your foot on the floor.”

I didn’t know why I asked. It came out before she could walk back into the kitchen. “Will you help me?” I asked her. “I don’t know what I am doing.”

“Relax and figure out what you want, and then go from there.” She turned and walked away from me. I went to call out to her again, but she turned around at the

kitchen door and watched me. “Sabre didn’t have a choice. He had to decide if he was going to be in JR’s life. You’re the type of man who needs to live in the moment. Don’t think about the future because it’s just going to overwhelm you.” She left, walking through the kitchen door.

Chapter 10

Actions Speak Louder

Emily

I knew why my brother, and Tyler to some extent, had patched in with the Iron Shield. There was noise and chaos everywhere, and for my brother, it differed from what we had grown up in. My parents had hardly been home, instead choosing to leave us with nannies and staff. The penthouse halls had been silent, but the club filled their home with laughter. It was addictive.

There was this charge in the atmosphere. I didn’t know what it was, but I wanted to gather some of it and take it with me back to New York. The city was a lonely place, and I was collecting as many memories as possible.

It was a good thing that Eric and I had discussed the past. Anytime Tyler and I were in the same room, the brothers targeted him mercilessly. They didn’t direct the comments at me, so I didn’t feel uncomfortable. However, I had secondhand embarrassment for Tyler. If one brother started in on him, it wouldn’t take long for a few more to keep the conversation going. My brother never joined in, but he’d diffuse the situation if necessary.

I was grabbing a seat across from Eric at breakfast when, a little further down the table, Op pulled out the chair next to him. He patted the seat and called out to me, “Hey, Emily. Why don’t you come sit next to me? I need some answers about your

man over here.” He pointed to Tyler, who was sitting across from him.

“I’m single.” I sat my plate down on the table and pulled out my seat.

“See, Zook? Even better,” Op said, pointing his fork at him. “Emily, your man said he had to make amends, but I haven’t heard him speak two words since you got here.”

“You know, Op. It’s not really words that matter. Actions speak louder.” I didn’t want to put Tyler on the spot. If he wanted to get into my good graces, then he had to be the one to make the effort, and not just because one of his brothers pushed him into it.

“Seriously, Op. Leave them alone,” Eric stepped in. “Just because you love ’em and leave ’em, doesn’t mean everyone else does.”

“What about you? I don’t see you bringing anyone home to meet the family.” Op turned to my brother.

“If I was, you’d be the last person I’d introduce them to. ‘This is Op. He’s the creepy uncle, so make sure you’re not alone with him.’” My brother winked at me and then swallowed a forkful of egg.

“I accept that.” Op went back to eating breakfast, but it wasn’t long before he tried again. “So, Em, do you have any prospects in New York?”

“Why? You thinking about moving to the city?” I asked, not taking him seriously at all.

“Nah, it’s too fucking cold.” He pondered that thought for a minute. “If I found myself a rich cougar, I could play kept husband.” Op stroked his chin, as if it was a

real possibility.

I looked at my brother, and he raised his head to look at me. We both smiled at the same time and said, “Mrs. Porter.”

“Is she still on the prowl?” Eric asked me.

“Her latest boy toy just aged out of her system. Once they hit twenty-five, she’s done with them. I haven’t heard that she’s looking for a replacement, but it’s probably only a matter of time. Op might be a little old.” I loaded my fork with a piece of watermelon.

“I’m not old. This is Grade A choice beef.” Op stood from his chair. Raising the bottom hem of his shirt, he displayed his six-pack stomach and one side of his adonis belt.

“Don’t ruin my breakfast. No one wants to see that shit,” Tyler spoke up. I could appreciate a well-built man, but Op would never be Tyler.

“Eleven words. That’s progress.”

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“How about two more? Fuck off.” Tyler flipped Op the middle finger and then grabbed his coffee mug.

“That’s technically six more.” Op had his finger in the air, like he was counting the words to make sure he was accurate.

“It’s a good day for the beach. If you want to kill each other, you can do it in the sand,” Sabre said from the head of the table, eating his breakfast.

Eric had told me that the brothers were off until the new year. I could tell that they weren’t used to having so much downtime, and it was causing problems. They acted like caged animals, and eventually, one of them would snap, causing a melee. I didn’t know if Sabre could feel the same energy swirling around, but it made sense to get them into fresh air.

“I’ll get you a helmet, and you can ride with me,” Eric said.

“Sounds good. I’ve never seen the Pacific.” I nodded. Heading to the beach sounded like a good plan for today.

Breakfast was a quiet affair from then on. They didn’t shovel the food in, but there was no need to talk to each other. Instead, each person took over a role to make sure that we could leave quicker. I had tried to help, but I was more of a nuisance than anything else. I grabbed the pan of eggs to lug it into the kitchen, when Chef met me at the door to take it from me.

“Hey, Zook! Your girl is under the mistletoe with Chef.”

I closed my eyes, praying that the ground would swallow me whole. I wanted to be anywhere else. My cheeks flamed at my embarrassment. “I am sorry, I was just trying to help,” I whispered to Chef, opening my eyes.

“Let’s get this over with. The beach is calling.” He shifted the pan underneath his arm and ran his thumb from my hairline to the apple of my cheek. Leaning forward, he laid the gentlest kiss on my lips. It did nothing for me.

“That’s not how you’re supposed to do it. Zook! He needs a demonstration.”

“Go to your room and wait until it’s time to go. Otherwise, these animals won’t stop bothering him.” Chef turned to head back to the sink with the pan.

I wouldn’t lower my head to anyone. It was a kiss under the mistletoe, and I was a grown woman. Chef hadn’t stuck his tongue down my throat and bent me backwards like I had seen some of the other brothers do.

As I turned, I met Tyler’s eyes. We stared at each other, and I wasn’t sure if he knew I was silently apologizing. His eyes held such pain.

Zook

I didn’t want to admit that I was angry, so I kept telling myself that it was innocent. She’d only been trying to help clean up breakfast. It was just an awkward situation and meant nothing. Yet, I wanted to grab her, stick her under the mistletoe and show her what an actual kiss was. If I was lucky, I’d take her back to my room, and show her a few other things. It wouldn’t happen, but I could dream.

“You okay?” How asked, folding the table legs, so that we could stick it back into the

supply closet.

“Yeah.” I kept it simple. I didn’t want to discuss how I wanted to rage in the middle of the main room and tell every motherfucker in here that she was mine.

“What can I do to help?” he pushed.

“Nothing. I am the one who fucked up, and I have to be the one to fix it.” Em had made a point of saying that actions meant more than pretty words. I knew exactly what she’d meant. It wouldn’t matter what I said to her, because I had already had that chance. If I wanted her, I was going to have to make the move.

“No one’s going to take her from you.”

“She’s here to visit you for Christmas.” I didn’t want to overthink this, which was more my style.

“I know my sister. She might have thought she was coming here to visit me, but she’s waiting to see if there’s still something there. She won’t put herself out again, so if you want her, you’re going to have to put in the work.” He looped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me into his body. “It’s the beach.” When I didn’t understand, he followed it up with, “Skin, dude.”

I brought my arm up, wrapped it around his neck and held him in a headlock. “That’s weird. Don’t talk about her like that.” I rubbed my knuckles across the top of his head and then let him go, a smile slowly creeping onto my face.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and we’d just had lunch. Someone had packed coolers full of hodgepodge, and we’d dived in after a few hours at the beach.

I was laying on my side, finishing a sandwich, when I noticed Cyph was drawing brackets on a piece of paper.

“Is that for beach volleyball?” I asked.

“Yeah, you want in?” He didn’t bother to look up as he continued to draw.

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“Yeah, Em’s my partner.” I sat up and clapped my hands, getting rid of the bread crumbs.

“Does she know that?” Cyph snorted.

“I am staking my claim before anyone else does.” I turned my hat backwards, getting ready to tell my partner what I had done.

“That’s the way it’s done, lover boy.”

“What would you know about it? You’ve brought no one home to meet the family.” I laughed, using Op’s words from earlier. Thinking about it, I couldn’t even pinpoint a rumor that involved Cyph.

“Strippers are one step up from club girls. You don’t bring them home.”

“You could. No one would say anything.” It was common knowledge that Cyph liked when the strippers came to party at the club.

“Nah, I am good. I prefer to watch other people crash and burn.” He raised his eyes to look at me over his glasses.

“Hear you loud and clear.” I stood and walked over to where Em and How were laying in the sun. “Don’t tell me you tan, How.” I kicked his bare foot with mine, jiggling him.

“I just had lunch. Don’t shake me,” he groaned, shielding his eyes with his arm.

“Cyph is drawing the brackets for volleyball.” I waited for my words to sink in.

How sat straight up, turned his hat around, and told Em that they had to win.

“Got to be quicker than that. I already signed us up. Em’s my partner.” She wasn’t looking, so I gave How a toothy grin. His eyes shifted over to her. Making sure she wasn’t paying attention, he gave me a thumbs up.

“I need a partner,” he yelled, running over to the rest of the group.

I sat down on his towel and waited.

“I am not good at volleyball, so you picked the wrong person,” she said.

“No, I picked the right partner for me.” I turned so that I faced her. “I also didn’t want to go through this morning again. Actions speak louder than words, Em, but you’re mine. I don’t share.” Standing from How’s towel, I walked away from her with a smile dancing on my lips. I had just laid the foundation for getting Emily back.

We ended up winning our first two matches and were waiting to play the winner of Prez and Flo versus Pretty and Wreck. I was standing next to Em and a few of the other teams, listening to Pretty run his mouth.

“Come on. I know you can hit harder than that. You left a red mark the other day,” he said, grinning from ear to ear.

Flo’s head did a swivel to look at him. “I didn’t leave a mark, and if you hadn’t been moving so slowly, I wouldn’t have had to grab your arm.”

“You grabbed him?” Prez spoke up, holding the ball in the middle of his serve.

“It was nothing,” she brushed him off.

Prez went to serve the ball again, but I could see the displeasure furrowing in his brow at the conversation.

“It was something, alright,” Pretty chimed in, causing the serve to sail straight into the net. Prez wasn’t happy.

Pretty grabbed the ball from the net, handing it to Wreck to serve. “This is like that movie, but we didn’t play any montage music. I’d be the hot one.” He looked at Flo across the net. “Don’t you think I’d be the hot one since you checked out my ass?”

Prez’s head instantly snapped to look at Pretty, but Wreck had already served the ball to him. It hit him in the forehead.

“Ouch, that’s going to leave a mark,” Pretty said.

“I will deal with you later,” Prez pointed his finger at Flo. “You,” he said to Pretty. “You better fucking run.”

Pretty took off, as Prez followed him down the beach, until they ended up in the sand in a mixture of limbs. No one paid attention as they beat the hell out of each other. They’d be fine.

Wreck went underneath the net to stand next to Flo. “My new partner,” he said to Cyph. “Those two won’t be able to play after that.”

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“I don’t know how you put up with him,” Flo said to Wreck. Yelling at Pretty, she said, “No potato salad for you.”

“Hang on,” Cyph called, changing the brackets. “The two of you will play Emily and Zook.”

“You ready, partner?” I’d been calling her partner ever since I’d signed us up. I wanted her as a partner for life, and I hoped that the word was sticking.

“Yup, let’s do this.” She adjusted the hat she’d stolen from How in our first game.

We were pretty evenly matched, but Wreck and I were trying to not use full strength towards the women. This was supposed to be a friendly competition, and even though Prez and Pretty were still beating each other down the beach, no one else wanted to get hurt.

Wreck hit a ball down the middle of the court, and I moved to return it to him. I miscalculated where I was in the sand because as I went to hit the ball, a smaller set of arms did the same thing. We returned the ball together, but we were on top of each other, and our feet tangled as we pulled away. Falling into the sand, I made sure that most of my weight wouldn’t end up on Emily. As we hit the sand, I looked down into her upturned face and claimed the kiss that I should have gotten under the mistletoe, not even hearing the catcalls.

Chapter 11

Reliving the Past

Grizz

I helped the club pack for the beach.

“Are you going to be alright staying here?” Sabre asked me, before heading to his bike.

“I am a big boy. I can stay home by myself.” It was bitchy, but I was getting tired. Everyone looked at me as if I was cracking, and maybe I was, but I didn’t want to hear about it all the time. I didn’t want to see the pity on their faces. Meredith and I would get through this. I wouldn’t believe anything else.

Sabre threw his hands up and walked out the front door, and I headed upstairs to my bride. A smirk settled on my lips. She had been up when I had headed downstairs for breakfast. Choosing not to eat with everyone else, she’d made a plate and headed back to bed. I had an idea, and I hoped it worked.

Opening the door to my room, I quickly scanned her. She was sitting up in bed, watching TV. The breakfast plate was next to her, completely empty. It gave me hope that today was going to be a good day. I shut the bedroom door out of habit and launched myself onto the bed. She rewarded me with a small giggle.

“Hey, the club went to the beach, and I didn’t think you would want to go,” I started with. She said nothing as she slid further down into the bed, laying on the pillow so that we were eye-to-eye. “I have an idea. If you don’t like it, we’ll try something else.” I stared at her, memorizing her features as they were in this moment, in case things went south. “Get your shoes on.”

“Okay.” She rolled to the other side of the bed and sat on the edge. It took her a minute to stand, and I didn’t want to ask if she was in pain. I was afraid that the atmosphere would change. Meredith tied the laces and then stood up to face me.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yeah, let’s do this.”

I didn’t know if it was because the clubhouse was empty, but Meredith seemed to be relaxed. I led her through the kitchen, not paying attention to the mistletoe hanging above the door. We went out the back door and walked across the yard to the garage. I wanted to hold her hand or wrap my arm around her, but I kept telling myself to relax.

I slid the door open to the garage and led her towards the back. “Welcome to my office,” I told her, waiting to see her reaction.

Meredith moved around me and went straight for the wall where the broken furniture was. “Where did this stuff come from?”

“Garage sales. The church in town has a rummage sale. Some are just broken pieces from the trash.”

“What are you doing with all of it?” she asked, paying particular attention to a rolltop desk.

“I fix them, and when they’re done, Cyph sells them for me online. We split the money.” I watched her closely as she ran her hand across the top of the desk. It wasn’t in awful shape, but it needed some TLC.

She turned around to face me, waiting.

“I figured we could work on a piece. You pick?” I often tinkered in here until the early hours of the morning. It relaxed me, and I hoped it would do the same for Meredith. I had said nothing for fear she’d stop, but I had noticed that she’d been

drawing more lately. It wasn't just the banquet hall that was on her mind. I'd seen renderings for restaurants, bookstores, and even a new clubhouse.

She nodded. "The desk."

"Sounds good." I stripped off my club cut and hung it from the hook on the wall. As I went to pull back, my elbow brushed Meredith's shoulder. She'd taken off my sweatshirt that she used for emotional support and hung it on the hook next to my cut. They looked good together, and I took a mental picture to remember this moment.

"Do you have gloves?" she asked.

"Yeah, why?" I was still thinking about the clothes next to each other.

"I am not sanding that desk without gloves." She held up her palms towards me. "Do these hands look like they do manual labor? There are too many delicate curves to pull the pieces apart and run a sander over them."

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“How do you know that?” I asked her, trying to keep this light.

She frowned at me. “When you’re the lead designer on the project, part of the job is to visit the construction site. You don’t want the crew to take liberties when the customer has already approved. I’ve learned a few things over the years. One being, always wear gloves.”

I hadn’t really kissed her since the morning Grace had disappeared. Meredith’s face was earnest, and I couldn’t help it. I swooped in and claimed her lips. To my surprise, she wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me back.

Deepening it, I wanted a taste so that the next time she was hurtling insults at everyone and everything, I could remember she was still in there somewhere. This was my Meredith, the fun-loving brat I enjoyed taming. I swiped my tongue against hers.

I didn’t know how long it lasted, but eventually, she pulled back, pretending like this was normal. “Gloves?” she asked me, raising her eyebrow with a small smile on her lips.

I laughed and went to the cabinet on the far wall. Pulling out a couple pairs of gloves and some sandpaper, I closed it, setting them on the counter. I turned towards Meredith, but she’d silently moved so that she was standing right next to me. Grabbing the gloves, she slipped them on and waited.

“I’ve never done this before.”

I wanted to make a wisecrack about how sanding wasn't the only thing I wanted to show her, but I refrained. We weren't in a place where she'd accept the words as a joke. Instead, I grabbed the supplies and reached for her hand. She didn't pull away from me as I laced our fingers together. Once we completed it, it would be hers.

"Here." I handed her a piece of sandpaper. "You want to sand with the grain of the wood, making small circular motions."

She looked at me and then looked at the paper in her hand. I watched as she made circles with the paper in the air, trying to figure out what the best way to follow my instructions was. She was cute, but I hid my smile and said nothing for fear she'd stop.

"Okay, I've got this." She walked to the front of the desk, laid the sandpaper down, and when it scraped the wood, she jumped back from the sound. Meredith looked lost, with a blank stare on her face.

"This is easy. You're going to ace it," I told her, wrapping an arm around her waist and taking a step forward towards the desk together. "You ready?" I asked her. I wanted to check in with her because if being too close to me was a problem, I'd take a step back to save her.

"Yes." She wiggled her whole body, mentally preparing for the task. When we were dating, I'd often seen her do a little booty shake. When I had asked her about it one day, she had explained it was her way of getting rid of bad juju. She wanted to nail this on the first try, and I was proud of her.

I held her close to me as I reached for her hand holding the paper. Together, we made small circles, sanding one of the wood slates of the rolltop. After a few minutes, I took my hand off of hers, but I didn't pull away. I didn't want to, but I knew this wouldn't last. I gave it a few more minutes, kissed the top of her head, and went to

the back of the desk. Laying on the dirt floor, I worked on the legs. The scraping of the sandpaper was the only noise in the room.

We worked contently for an hour before she asked me about my club history.

“I just realized I know so little about you,” she said, quietly. “We burned hot and forgot about the rest.”

I thought about that for a second. From the time I had seen her on the dance floor, I’d imagined being her groom. She was mine, and I had made sure that I reminded her every chance I got so that no one would take her away from me. However, it had been physical, not emotional. I doubted she knew much about me. Thinking about it, I only knew the basics about her.

“Some of this is ancient legend,” I started with. I sanded some more, collecting my thoughts. “My mother and father were high school sweethearts. They were born in a small town nearby and had never ventured beyond a fifteen-mile radius. They were too young when they got married and my dad couldn’t provide. He didn’t have any skills, and my mom didn’t want to lack for anything.”

“So, then, what happened?”

She was listening, and my heart raced. “Fake it until you make it. My dad decided he was going to be a carpenter, but he couldn’t complete projects accurately or on time.”

“He didn’t know how?” Her head popped up over the back of the desk. Meredith’s eyes were wide as she looked down at me. “Didn’t anyone complain?”

“Sure, they did, but my dad was a con artist. He could talk his way out of anything, so they would complain, and he’d sell them more of his shit.”

“He never got caught?” She was leaning over the top of the desk, invested in my story.

“Not really. He got beat up a few times, but that was more for his womanizing ways than his blatant lies. I like to eat, so when I was old enough to help, I learned as much as I could. The complaints slowed, and my dad was making his deadlines. No one realized it was me putting in the work.”

“What happened then?” she said, watching me, and I laid on my back so that I could look up at her.

“They had nothing when I came along. My dad knew of the club, and he told my mom that he was going to patch in. The club takes care of its own, and he thought the money would roll in. He didn’t realize that you actually have to live the lifestyle. Brotherhood. Loyalty and honesty.”

“What did your mom say?” Her eyes didn’t leave mine.

“My mom thought she was going to live this glamorous life, and the first time she came to the club for a party, she hated it.” I had been a baby, but I’d heard the story so many times that I could picture it.

Meredith’s head dropped back down, and the sanding sounds quickly picked up above me. I didn’t know if it had been too intimate, and she had gotten scared or something else. I went back to sanding, not asking as long we were still good. “If she hated the club, how did you get here?”

“When I was fifteen, my mom had had enough. She started dating a rich investor, and when he left, she went with him. My dad didn’t waste any time. He hung around the club every chance he got.”

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“Did he really patch in? He had to be in his thirties.”

“The way I heard it was that my dad was in the right place at the right time. The police thought that a few of the brothers had robbed a local liquor store. They hadn’t, but it was easy to pin things on the club then. The police arrested the brothers, and my dad talked their way out of it. How could they have done it when they had been at the clubhouse? He went on and on, and eventually the police let them go. He earned his patch that way, and we moved into the clubhouse. The club would find out later what a cheat he was.”

“Hey, Jon,” she whispered. “I am glad the club took you in. It can be lonely when you’re missing parents.”

“Yeah, Sabre is only a year older than I am, so we hung out all the time and eventually became friends. A lot of the brothers were tradespeople because they had to do everything themselves. When they needed extra hands, we volunteered, and they taught us the ins and outs. When I was seventeen, I graduated high school and completed a common core carpentry certification at the same time.”

“What happened to your dad?” she asked, the sandpaper stopping again.

“Disappeared on my eighteenth birthday.” I had been old enough to live in the club without my dad. It was more likely that the club had taken out the trash. “Mer? The next time we do this, I want to know about you.”

Zook

I laid in my bed staring at the ceiling, my hand rubbing my bottom lip. I could still taste her on my tongue, and I was savoring the flavor. Rolling over, I willed myself to fall asleep, and when that didn't happen, I rolled to the other side. Counting sheep, I was getting bored, not tired. Eventually, I didn't bother trying anymore and headed to the main room to see who else was up.

As I came down the stairs, I saw that the only light in the main room was coming from the fireplace someone had lit after dinner. Emily sat in the couch's corner, staring into the light. She remained lost in her own thoughts. Her head didn't even turn when the bottom stair creaked underneath my boot. I had a feeling she couldn't sleep either after this afternoon.

I snuck into the kitchen and made two mugs of hot chocolate. Carrying them into the main room, I handed one to Emily and sat down beside her on the couch.

"Couldn't sleep either?" she asked me, still staring into the flames as she wrapped her hands around the mug. "Thank you."

"I tried to count sheep, but since that didn't work, I gave up trying." I took a sip from my mug, letting the marshmallow fluff hit my mustache. It tickled, and I quickly swiped my hand across it.

She took a sip from her mug. "Why do you have a dove tattoo underneath your arm? I wasn't sure, but it looked like the feathers were E's."

I hadn't been expecting her to ask the heavy questions so early. I had honestly thought she'd try to deny the kiss in the sand. "Whatever little girl fantasies you've developed, let them go," I quoted from my last letter to her. "I didn't take my advice. I've thought about you more times than I care to admit."

“You’re avoiding the question. Why do you have a dove tattoo?” She took another sip from her mug, but her head turned towards me, her eyes searing into the side of my head, trying to extract the answers she wanted.

“Whenever a dove returns with an olive branch, it symbolizes peace and tranquility.” I wanted her to understand the meaning, but it wasn’t enough. “I secretly wanted to return to you, which is why the feathers are E’s.”

“It’s underneath your armpit.” She turned back towards the fireplace’s light. “I could make so many jokes about that.”

“It’s in a spot that I don’t have to look at constantly, but I can carry it with me.” I thought about how that would sound to her. “How much has How told you about me? From then and even now.” I crossed my boots at the ankle and placed them on the coffee table.

“I didn’t ask my brother about you.” She took another sip of her mug and mirrored my position.

“Why not?” I asked her, confused.

“I was living out my little girl fantasies. It was more romantic if I learned tidbits about you from you.”

I wasn’t paying attention when I took a sip of my mug. The hot chocolate burned my tongue and slid down my throat. I coughed, balling my fist and pounding on my chest. “Flo said something to me right after you arrived. I’ve been turning it over in my head since. She said that I am the type of man who has to live in the moment. I think she’s right because when I received your letter about setting up a life for us, I panicked.”

“You could have just told me you weren’t interested,” Emily huffed.

“I was interested, but I freaked out. When I first read those lines, I looked up into the sky and asked how I had been so lucky to win you. You’re a prize, Em. I wanted to call you mine and show you off to the world as your proud man.”

“Biker poetry.” She shook her head and finished the rest of her hot chocolate.

“Maybe, but for the first five minutes, I was the happiest man alive, until reality sunk in. I didn’t tell How, but I walked over to the comms tent to check my bank account. That’s when I realized I didn’t have any money to send you. I grew up poor, so I’d saved my pay, but it wasn’t enough.”

“I had money...” Her tone told me how exasperated she was.

I didn’t let her finish that statement. “You had a trust fund, and I wasn’t taking money from your parents to support you.” I’d have rather died than take money I hadn’t earned.

“Why didn’t you tell me? We could have figured it out.” She blew out a breath, and it bounced the hairs surrounding her face.

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“I only had a few thousand dollars to my name. It wasn’t enough to get started, and I didn’t want to ask the military for help. They move on their own time, and I didn’t want to hold you back. You needed to decide where you were heading for law school and get prepared. I walked out of the tent, and that’s when I foolishly broke it off.” I rubbed at my sternum, trying to ease the lingering pain.

“Now, what? We can’t go back.” She rubbed her socked foot against her ankle and held the empty mug in her lap.

“I want your forgiveness, but I don’t know how to earn it.” I was getting angry over our situation all over again. “However, I wanted to kill over some mistletoe. I might have gotten into skirmishes here and there, but I’ve never wanted to do violent harm to a brother. Today, Chef was almost a goner.”

“It was just a kiss. You kissed me on the sand. Same thing.”

“You’re mine, Em. No one should get to touch your lips but me.”

“I am no man’s possession, and I refuse to be placed on a shelf to be looked at.” She laid her mug on the coffee table, stood, and walked towards the hallway towards her room.

“Fuck!” I growled into the empty room, taking a sip of my lukewarm hot chocolate. I didn’t know if I had made any progress on winning her back. I might have been a patched brother of the Iron Shield, but I was still a kid trying to date his first girlfriend.

Chapter 12

Gaining An Ally

Emily

I paced in front of the bed, angry, my hands flailing around, not understanding any of the words that I was muttering. How dare he do this to me? The first time he had told me to move on, it had hurt. I had taken his words at face value and gone about my life as if those two years had never happened. I hadn't stopped to analyze that I might not be over him, and now it was going to explode in my face. Turning around at the edge of the bed, I trotted to the other side, still angry.

"Why wasn't he just honest with me?" I muttered to the empty room, raising my arms above my head. "What would you have even done?" I answered myself, officially losing it. I tried to remember everything all at once, but my head pounded. A low whine escaped into the silence of the room as I remembered my favorite letter of his.

My Emily,

I am done, Em.

They served my papers today, so it's official. They'll discharge me in six months, and then I'll be free. I am not sure how to feel about that. All I know is that I wanted to tell you immediately. I scribbled this as quickly as I could. Don't worry if you don't hear from me. They'll drill me harder until they kick me out to make sure they get their money's worth. Please get me through this because it will be the longest six months...ever.

-Tyler

I sat on the floor in front of the bed and pulled my knees up to my chest. I let my head rest against the edge of the bed with my eyes closed, trying to rub the migraine away. If Tyler had told me that our relationship had ended over money, I would have never believed him then. However, I could see it all falling apart clearly now, in a fiery blaze with nothing to save it. I was used to using my family's money then. I wouldn't make my own until I started working for Nelson's, but Tyler would never have accepted a handout.

I thought about Christopher, and my nose instantly crinkled. My parents were happy with each other. They just weren't necessarily happy being parents. If I had agreed to the marriage, Christopher would have taken everything from me. My money, my family's company, and even my soul, without so much as a thank you, just an expectation. A tear streamed down my face. Tyler had let me go and sacrificed himself. Could I forgive him?

As a few pieces of folded paper slid under the door, another tear streamed down my cheek. I jumped up from the floor and opened the door, but he was gone.

Picking up the sheets of paper, I flipped them around in my hand, not sure what I was looking at. There was a new piece of paper that was wrapped around several yellow pages. They looked like they were older, and the creases weren't crisp, as if they been read more than once.

My Emily,

Your light was still on, and I didn't want to disturb you, but I thought you should have these. They are the rough drafts of the original letter I sent you. I hope they tell you how angry I was to let you go. It wasn't the easiest decision, and I agonized over it for years. I might still when my mind quiets down. I thought you had moved on, which helped. It was a bandage on my soul.

I need you. I am not whole without you, and I think you need me, too. You can keep telling yourself you're here for Christmas, but I won't believe that's the complete truth.

-Tyler

Sitting back down on the floor in front of the bed, I opened the first draft. It was mostly the same story that he had told me on the couch, but I could read the happiness pouring from the words. He was trying for me.

I don't want to give you up, but I don't know of any bright outcomes.

The second draft was the same thing, except this time he had suggested I pick the school of my dreams, and he'd find work somewhere. As long as I rented out a reasonable accommodation, he'd work two or three jobs to support me.

It'll only be temporary until I can make enough. I don't know how I've fucked this up when I don't spend a dime.

The last letter was where I could feel his anger pouring off of the page.

Emily-

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I think I've given you the wrong impression about me and about us. There's no us, and there never was. I asked you to write to me to make the time go faster, but that's all it was. Whatever little girl fantasies you've developed, let them go. I'm not a prince who's going to ride my horse to the tallest tower and rescue you. Perfect men only exist within romance books. I'm the bad guy.

You should be spending your life with someone of equal status. Pick one of those wealthy Wall Street guys who will treat you the way you deserve. Not Christopher, but someone else with money. I'm not the man for you, and I'll never amount to anything. You'd be stuck living well below your means because I can't provide for you.

In a few weeks, you will have forgotten all about me. Honestly, that's the way it should be. Live your life the way you want, and not as the repressed girl who's following her family's plan.

Tyler

Somewhere around the third paragraph, I broke. The little girl, who had sent her soldier letters, had her heart officially broken. The tears streamed down my cheeks, as I curled up with them on the carpet.

Zook

"Was she alright today when you two went out?" I asked How, sitting across from

him on one couch in the main room. I didn't want to make her nervous after last night, but I had watched Emily as closely as I could without getting caught. She seemed to be her normal self, but there were a few times when her smile hadn't been as bright as it should have been. I didn't want her in pain, but I had to make her see she belonged to me.

"Yeah, she seemed to be okay. Maybe a little tired." He shrugged. "What did you do?"

"Why would you automatically assume I did something?" I had, but I wouldn't tell him. After laying out most of my cards, I was waiting for Emily to approach me, but I wasn't giving her very much space, either.

"We want her to stay, not lug her happy self back to New York."

"You want her to stay?" I asked him. I didn't want him pushing her towards me just to make her stay. If she wanted that on her own, I'd make it work, even though it would fucking kill me.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I?" He shrugged again, taking a sip from his beer.

"I am confused. Do you want her to stay for you or for me?" This was important.

"For us. Ugh, that sounds wrong." He wiped his face with his hand and took a gulp. "If she's going to live on her own in the city, she might as well live here. At least I could see her all the time."

"She wouldn't have to deal with winter anymore." I smiled, remembering my promise that I hadn't made to her.

"So, has she forgiven you yet?" How turned towards me, his eyes analyzing mine. I

knew he was looking for any detail he could exploit. It didn't have to be good or bad. How would use it to his advantage.

"I am not sure she should after last night. She was in the main room when I came back downstairs. Neither one of us could sleep and I sat next to her to explain. I am not sure if I made it better or worse, but she took off running to her room," I said, shifting in my cushion so that my ass cheeks wouldn't fall asleep.

"Have you actually apologized, or did you just tell her all the reasons you did what you did?"

"I didn't use the actual words." It was my turn to rub my hand over my face.

"I know you're trying to do the whole 'actions speak louder' bullshit, but you should apologize. It might be the missing piece you need to get her to see reason."

"It's not bullshit. What's going to happen when you actually find a woman?" How had never shown an interest in anyone, but with as much relationship advice as he was giving out, it made me wonder.

"That'll never happen. I am not tameable." He let his head fall back to the couch cushion and closed his eyes.

"Now, that's fucking bullshit." I laughed so hard that I ended up doubling over and holding my stomach.

"Nah, I'm not a good man, so there's no point in trying to be something I'm not."

I let it go, not feeling like arguing with him. Our circumstances had shaped us differently, but we came from the same mold. If he thought he was a dangerous man, then I didn't want to remind him I was, too. Most of the brothers were as well.

“You think they’re having a good time?” I changed the subject. The Old Ladies had decided they wanted a night out alone before Christmas. Since this was the last night that the bar would be open, Sabre had let them go. Flo had invited Emily, claiming there was too much testosterone in the club.

“They should be. Raven, Bear and Stands were supposed to meet them there.”

“Do you find it unusual they didn’t let anyone see what they were wearing?” I’d been sitting in the main room, hoping to get a peek at Em, when the women had walked around the clubhouse and slipped into Flo’s car undetected.

“I don’t want to think about it, but it was probably stuff they shouldn’t have. They’re living it up. Hell, it’s the club’s bar. If something’s wrong, they’ll call Prez.”

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“Maybe,” I said, trying to relax again.

Another hour went by, but my anxiety over the situation didn’t dissipate. It only increased as I tried to picture what Emily was wearing. I wasn’t the only one, as I watched Grizz and Sabre try to act normal, sitting at the bar. Sabre cradled JR in his arm, looking over the main room.

“We could go get them,” Grizz said, finally breaking the uncomfortable silence that had formed.

“I am not listening to the complaints about how we didn’t trust them to be on their own,” Sabre said, jiggling JR to make him giggle.

“We’re bored, and we can use that as an excuse.” Count lifted his head from the pool table before lining his shot back up.

Sabre bounced JR in his arms. “I am on daddy duty, so how is that going to work out?”

“You said doody.” Pretty laughed from his spot on the couch. More than one head shook at his antics.

“What if we drive by and someone sneaks in to check on them?” Scrub added. Dr. Matthews usually took the overnights, so it was a rare occasion that he was hanging out with us in the main room.

“That will not win you any favors,” How said, finishing his beer.

“How would you know? You weren’t even a brother when she walked out.”

“I’ve heard you pine enough to know what happened. Man up, dude.” How stood up from the couch, heading towards the bar to get a new beer.

“Who the fuck are you talking about? You’re trying to pass your sister off to your best friend.”

Was he really doing that? I’d wondered why he was suddenly okay with it.

“Don’t even fuck with me with that fucking shit.” How grabbed his beer from the prospect and raised it towards Scrub. “Zook gave her up because he thought he wasn’t good enough. You didn’t go to bat for your woman, and now you expect her to fall on her knees and thank her lucky stars.”

“Are you saying I’m selfish?” Scrub stood from the stool, where he’d been watching the pool game.

“Hey!” Sabre shouted at them. “Knock it off. We’re not having a brawl over stupidity in the middle of the clubhouse.” JR cooed at just the right minute, as if he agreed, causing all of us to laugh.

Cyph lined up his shot on the pool table. “If you really wanted to spy on them, I could tap into the security feed at the bar, but all non-club information comes with a price,” he said quietly.

“How much?” someone asked.

I didn’t care how much it was. If the rest of the brothers paid, I’d pay too. I told myself that it was to make sure Emily was safe, but it was a lie. I wanted to see her having fun with the other women. It would be another layer, beyond How and me,

that would make her want to stay.

“Two hundred for each brother that has an interest. That includes both Slate and Thunder.” Cyph said it so smoothly that most of us had to make sure that we’d heard him correctly.

“I am not paying two hundred,” Slate huffed from where he played poker with the older brothers.

“You’re sleeping with Bear. You pay.” Cyph took his turn at the pool table.

“He’s an extortionist, Slate. You won’t win this one.” Grizz turned to ask Sabre, “What are you doing?”

“Putting JR to bed. If we all paid, word would get back to them. Like I said, I am not starting that shit when I can just ask Grace when she gets back.” He stood from his chair, shifted JR in his arm, and went to walk upstairs. “Come on, kid. It’s bedtime. You don’t get to spy on Mama.”

“Does that mean we still can?” someone yelled towards the stairs.

Sabre pivoted and looked at the men in the main room. “Leave them alone. We won’t set a dangerous precedent when they could make our lives hell. Meredith already does.” He smiled, causing the room to laugh.

“That’s my wife.” Grizz puffed out his chest, proud as a peacock.

“Until she kills you in your sleep.” Pretty fell off the couch from laughing so hard. He hit the floor with a loud thump.

Time seemed to stand still for me as Grizz’s phone rang. My stomach clenched as he

reached for it in his back pocket. I didn't care what Meredith had gotten herself into now, but Emily was with her. The room went deadly silent as we waited, and even Sabre stopped at the top of the stairs.

"Hello?" Grizz said into the phone. He nodded his head a few times, like he was agreeing with whatever was being said. "Where are you?" He paused.

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I wanted to walk over and grab the phone from him, demanding to speak to Emily. I'd make sure that she was safe. Neither How nor I had given her a rundown of the club's run-ins with the cartel. We hadn't thought it was important at the time because she wasn't staying. I'd have to rectify that soon.

"Baby, hang on. I am going to put you on speaker." Grizz pulled the phone from his ear and turned the volume up. "Say that again."

"We're on our way back, but when Grace pulled out of the parking lot, an SUV followed us. We didn't notice it until we got on the highway."

"How close are they?" Sabre called from upstairs.

"Grace says about two car lengths. If she speeds up, they speed up but don't approach us. Same if she slows down. She said it reminded her of when they brought JR home."

"Baby, how far out are you?" Grizz looked up at Sabre, having a silent conversation that none of us were privy to.

"Less than two miles. Grace is about to exit the highway."

"They'll be gone before we can mount up and give chase," Sabre called to Grizz. "Have the prospect open the gates when he sees their lights on the hill. They should be able to pull directly into the yard."

Grizz took his phone off speaker and repeated the instructions. Wreck pulled his

phone out, probably to text the prospect out at the gate.

Pretty quickly stood from the floor and ran up the stairs. “Give him to me. I’ll put him to bed, and you make sure they’re alright.” They made the exchange at the top of the stairs.

“Alright, I’ll let him know, and we’ll meet you out there.” Grizz ended the call and stood from his bar stool. “They’re turning onto our road, and the SUV went straight. This seems almost protective.”

“I’ve had Cyph tracking down where these SUVs are coming from, but there has been nothing yet. I have a feeling this is protective as well. We might have earned an ally we didn’t know we had.” Sabre headed to the front door with the rest of us close on his heels.

We stood in a line as the headlights reflected off the open land. They crested the hill, and there was a collective sigh of relief as Grace’s SUV appeared. She pulled through the open gates and parked right in front of where we stood in a line. We moved before the car was even turned off. I didn’t pay attention to anyone else as I opened Emily’s door.

She startled as I held out my hand to help her from the car. Emily placed her hand in mine, stood, and then wrapped her arms around me. I didn’t hesitate to tighten mine around her. “You’re alright,” I said.

Emily murmured against my flannel, “I followed their lead. No fear.” She raised her head and pulled back enough to kiss me.

I thought it would be a light peck, considering everyone was still outside, but her hands coming up and burrowing into my hair took me aback. She locked my head in the place where she wanted me.

“I don’t want to be without you,” she whispered against my lips.

Chapter 13

Loved Openly, Loudly

Pretty

“Alright, Little Man. It’s you and me. Daddy has to make sure that your mama is safe.”

Meredith’s phone call had darkened the mood in the main room. She wouldn’t have reached out to Grizz for help unless the women were in serious trouble. It wasn’t in her nature, which had set the rest of the men on edge. Sabre couldn’t be in two places at once. His mind was on Grace, but the kid needed to go to bed, and while I cared about the women, I didn’t have any skin in this game. Wreck was sitting in the main room, safe. Instead, I bounded up the stairs to play JR’s favorite uncle, easing the weight off of Sabre. He’d be able to focus on the situation at hand.

I held JR against my shoulder and turned the door handle to Sabre’s room. As president, he had the largest room on the second floor. However, when we’d rolled a crib in, there hadn’t been enough space.

“There’s no room to walk,” Grace had said when she’d surveyed the setup.

“The crib touches the bed,” Sabre had chuckled, sliding his hands in his back pockets.

“Like I said, there’s no room,” Grace had retorted, rolling her eyes at him, clearly missing the point.

“He’s trying to tell you that if the bed is a-rockin’, JR’s going to get his first roller

coaster experience.” I had added a few hip thrusting motions and some groans to really sell it.

Grizz had been knocking on the far wall when he paused and asked, “Whose room is next door?”

“Jig, but he won’t be needing it. What are you thinking?” Sabre had shifted and thrown his arm around Grace’s shoulders, pulling her closer into his body.

Grizz had knocked on the wall again. “This isn’t a load-bearing wall. I should be able to cut into it so that JR can have his own space next door, but you’ll still be able to reach him through your room. If we seal the outside door into the hallway, it’ll only keep him safe.”

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JR had made a noise as if he agreed. The kid had impeccable timing, kind of like his uncle.

I headed straight to the rocking chair and gently sat down with JR nestled in the crook of my arm. He lay on his back, his tiny feet kicking in the air, and I used my other hand to rub his soft tummy. Sabre had already given him his last bottle for the night, so all I had to do was rock him until he drifted off to sleep. The room was quiet, save for the creak of the rocking chair, and I savored the peace.

I shifted slightly, pulling my phone from my back pocket and dimming the screen. Grace had placed a bookshelf in JR's room, but I wasn't interested in reading those stories. JR didn't need to hear about one fish, two fish. Instead, I pulled up the latest copy of *Bikers Anonymous*. I glanced at JR one last time and chuckled at his upturned face. His eyes were open, and his lips were parted, still searching for another bottle.

"Sorry, Little Man. You already had your bottle for the night." His little mouth kept making fish motions. "Yeah, I know. Uncle used to like to drink from the source too, but you're going to have to wait until you're older." His brow furrowed as if was scowling at me. "Don't worry. When you're eighteen, we'll take you to the tit show. Your mother would kill me if I took you now."

I rocked in the chair for a few more minutes before I went back to my phone. "Here we go," I said to him, reading from the biker magazine about timing chains. I was about halfway through the article when I heard the door to Sabre's room open. I had had a feeling he would show.

Wreck stuck his head into the room, and when he heard me, he sat on the floor,

leaning against the wall. I could feel his eyes watching me as I continued to read from my phone.

The article ended, and I caught Wreck's eye when he pointed at JR. The baby was asleep, his little fist in his mouth. I put my phone on the arm of the rocker. Making sure I didn't stop the motion of the chair, I stared at Wreck, and he stared right back at me.

"Do you want kids of your own?" he asked me.

I knew what he meant, but I played coy. "In what context?"

He nodded his head at JR. "To give him a cousin."

"That would require a woman," I said flippantly.

"So?" he asked. He slightly raised his eyebrows but narrowed his eyes at me. I didn't understand why he was confused. It wasn't like either of us could carry a baby.

"I am not interested in a woman. Not interested in sharing you with one, either." This was the closest I had ever come to laying it all out on the table for him.

Wreck said nothing as he leaned the back of his head against the wall, his eyes never leaving me as I rocked JR.

"Don't make me spell this out for you." I shook my head, not stopping the chair. I wanted to make sure JR was sound asleep before I placed him in his crib for the night.

"I guess you're going to have to."

“Why are you listening now, when you usually blow me off?”

“It’s more like suck you off,” he said. Waving his hands over his spot on the floor, he continued, “I’m sitting right here.”

“Are you actually paying attention?” Usually, I’d take the easy way out and crack some stupid joke, but I wasn’t sure I would ever get this chance again, and I was angry at him for not taking it seriously.

“What’s up with you?”

“I am tired, Wreck, and this conversation will go nowhere. You won’t or can’t claim me openly, even though everyone knows already. We’re the worst-kept secret in this place.” JR shifted against me, his hand coming up to rest on my heart. Even my nephew knew his uncle was falling apart over this man. I tucked the baby further into my arm and continued to rock.

“You wouldn’t understand even if I tried to explain,” he sputtered.

“I am sitting right here,” I pleaded, using his words. When there was silence again, I said, “I know my place in your world, and it’s not number one.”

Wreck opened his mouth to say something, but he didn’t make a sound. Nothing had changed. He refused to explain, and I had given up on trying to persuade him to let me in.

“Just stop. I want to be loved openly. Loudly.” I swiped at the corner of my eye. “If you can’t do that, leave me alone.”

I stood up with JR and kissed his forehead before placing him in his crib, covering him with his blanket. “Uncle loves you,” I whispered. As I pulled away from the crib,

the door to Sabre's room opened.

Grace walked in first. "You're still walking straight after wearing that?" I said to her, softly whistling. She had on a skin-tight black leather halter dress with lace up heels. "Can you even breathe in that thing?" I played around, trying to lighten the mood. I didn't need them asking questions, when I had no clue what the answers were.

"Barely, which is why you two are leaving," she laughed. Walking towards me, she kissed my cheek. "Thank you for watching over them." She nodded her head towards Sabre as he stood in the doorway. She then scanned JR from head to toe, confirming he was alright.

"It was nothing." I kissed the top of her head and headed to the door, making a hand motion to get Sabre to move. Wreck stood and followed me. Saying goodnight to them, we walked out their bedroom door. Wreck's room was opposite mine, but when I approached my door, I didn't invite him in. Leaning against the inside of my door, I slid to the floor and let my head fall back.

Wreck

I stood outside his door, leaning against the frame with my forehead against the grain. He had shut the door behind him, but I hadn't heard the lock turn in place. Not sure what to do, I just stood there, hoping he could feel my presence on the other side. I wanted him to cave, to let me in, but I understood why he wouldn't.

Every time I refused to answer his questions, I felt him slipping away a little more. I could see it in his eyes. I pushed him for more but offered nothing in return. Our relationship wasn't one-sided, but I couldn't fault him if he saw it that way. He wanted the truth from me, and it had been so long that I wasn't sure what the correct version was anymore.

I stood up straight and placed my hand against the door. "Come on, Luke," I whispered. "Open the door and let it be alright." I heard a soft noise on the other side. "Please don't make me explain," I tried again. "I can't."

I could have barged into his room, but I wasn't willing to take that route. We could easily smooth out this argument, but it wouldn't repair anything. The resentment would fester until the next time one of us brought up the future. I wasn't willing to give in.

"What's your story, son?" Titan had asked me when I had shown up at the gates to prospect.

"I want to prospect." I had done my homework, and I had known that loyalty and respect ran deep in the club, but I had wanted no one to know where I had come from.

“Everyone has a story. I won’t ask again, son.” Titan had been a formidable man. Blonde hair, blue eyes, he had occupied all the air in the office. “The last thing you want to do is fuck with me.”

“I don’t want to fuck with you, but you need fresh blood.” I hadn’t meant for that to slip.

“How do you know that?” His eyes had narrowed on me. Interlocking his fingers together, he had lain them on his desk, cracking the knuckles.

“You need to cut the trees down across the street, at least the ones that are near the road. I’ve been able to watch you. Your average member is between thirty and forty, and if you’re going to keep being a one percent club, you need fresh blood. Here I am.” I had stood up straight, puffing out my chest, trying to make myself appear bigger than I was.

Titan had looked as if he wanted to strangle me over my revelation. “You need to talk, son. Otherwise, you won’t leave here in one piece.” He had stood from his chair, towering over me.

“I’ve been sleeping in the trees across from your gate.” I had hoped that was enough because I wasn’t saying anything else.

Titan had stood there and scrutinized me. I had given him the basics, but he wasn’t stupid. He had known there was more to it. There had been a knock on his office door, effectively breaking the interrogation.

A blonde-haired man had stuck his head in the door’s crevice. He had taken one look at Titan, and his mouth had dropped open, but when he had caught sight of me, he smiled. “Hey, Dad. Sorry to interrupt, but Mom wants to know if you’re almost done. She wants you to run to the store with her.”

“Pretty, this is...” he had said.

“Wreck,” I had supplied. I had wrecked everything and left.

“Wreck, this is my son, Pretty. He has no filter. Don’t be like him.” He had rubbed at his temples. “Go to the bar and sit next to Jig. When he speaks to you, tell him you’re going to prospect, and he’ll get you set up.” He had turned towards Pretty. “You’re lucky you look like your mama, otherwise, you’d be dead three times a day. Tell her I’ll meet her outside in a few.”

I lightly wrapped my knuckles on Pretty’s door, and when it didn’t open, I walked down the hall. Taking the stairs to the main room, I headed straight for the club girls. The third door on the right opened, and Peaches stuck her head out.

“I thought I’d see you tonight,” she said, leaning out into the hallway.

“You know what to do.” It was still early enough to walk away, with no one knowing about it this time. I couldn’t explain it to myself even if I tried. I’d come to Peaches a few times before, only to feel like shit the minute it was over. As much as I thought I was free to do as I pleased, I wasn’t. I’d given my heart to the pretty blonde man upstairs. I’d just fucked up and never fully committed.

I stopped in the hallway, closed my eyes, and looked to the sky. His room was right above Peaches’, and I tried to tell him telepathically I was sorry for my indiscretions. I didn’t promise this would never happen again. I wouldn’t be able to keep it, so there was no point. Opening my eyes, I squared my shoulders and walked into the room. Peaches was naked, kneeling on the bed with her peach ass in the air.

Pretty wasn’t a small man, but I could comfortably wrap myself around him. In this position, Peaches felt just like Pretty, and as long as I didn’t call out the wrong name, I could pretend. I didn’t care if she knew or even suspected that was why I always

chose her. As long as she kept her mouth shut, everything would be fine.

I leaned against the desk and stared at Peaches' ass. Letting my mind wander, I remembered the last time I'd been with Pretty. He'd told the club that he was going on a bender after our hospital guarding duties, but in reality, he'd left his door open, and I'd spent every night in his bed.

I took a few steps towards Peaches and unbuckled my belt, making sure that the noise reached her ears. Unbuttoning my jeans, I pulled my zipper down and pushed everything to the floor. Once this was over, I could quickly dress and head back to my room.

Giving my dick a few pumps, I put the condom on and entered her pussy in one stroke. "Rise to your knees."

She knew better than to make a sound as she did as I instructed.

Grabbing her tits, I shoved her down on my dick as I pushed up into her. It wasn't the same. Not even close.

I didn't have it in me to take it slow. I wanted to just get this over with. She bounced on my dick as I pumped into her. I was hard, but I wasn't even close to coming. Shoving my face into her blonde hair, I committed the cardinal sin.

"Goddamn, you drive me crazy." It wasn't for her, and she didn't bother to respond. She was a club girl, and I had never shown an interest in her beyond a casual fuck. Besides, there were too many hurdles, even if I wanted to make her my Old Lady. There's not that many to claim Pretty. Sabre doesn't care.

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Up. Down. Up. Down.

Finally, I felt my balls pull up, and I emptied into the condom.

It was the worst fuck of my life.

Pulling out of her, I tied the condom and got dressed. Taking it with me, I threw it away in a trashcan that I knew was safe. I wouldn't give her a way to trap me.

My feet headed back to my room, but I turned towards Pretty's door, on the off chance that he would know I was in the hallway and open it. What would I even say to him when I smelled of a woman? He wasn't interested in sharing, and I couldn't figure out how to get my head straight. I was bi, and the only person I wanted to be with was a man.

"One day," I whispered and walked into my room, closing the door loudly so that he'd hear it through the walls.

Chapter 14

The Park Avenue Prince

Emily

"So?" my brother asked, his tone betraying his smile. Eric had been trying for over an hour to get me to tell them what had happened at the bar. He'd tried everything from sweet talking to bribery, but his game wouldn't work this time. The women had

welcomed me into their circle, and I would not betray their trust. Snitches got stitches, and I had a low pain tolerance.

“So?” I answered, using the same tone but smiling back at him. I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize my place in the circle of trust. I wasn’t the weak link, and my brother had another thing coming if he thought I would bend to his demands. If something had happened that they needed to know, I would have had no problem telling them. The two most important men in my life were just being nosey.

“Did you have fun?” Tyler asked me, kissing the top of my head. I sat on the couch, curled up at his side. There would be a conversation later about the future, but for right now, I felt like a princess. I didn’t mind that my prince wore leather and a clubcut. All the puzzle pieces were clicking into place, and it just felt like the right time to explore what could be.

“I did, thanks.” I didn’t care how good his kisses were, he still wouldn’t weasel any information out of me.

“Am I supposed to ask what this is?” Eric pointed between Tyler and me, sitting opposite us.

I didn’t know how to respond to Eric. I’d been skeptical when he’d first told me he was prospecting for a motorcycle club. He had made it sound like it was just a group of guys who liked to ride bikes and throw the occasional party. Naively, I’d accepted that explanation at face value. However, when the women had informed me about the club’s cartel problem, a chill had run down my back. The thought that I could lose both of them made my stomach turn. I’d rather uproot my whole life just to be closer to them.

“It’s the start of something, and we’ll leave it at that.” I yawned, laying my head on Tyler’s chest. “What did you two do while we were gone?”

“Bitched. Drank. Bitched some more.” My brother raised his beer bottle and took a swig, letting out a loud belch when he was done.

“That’s sexy,” Tyler said, raising his bottle in a mock toast before taking a drink.

“You would never know that he went to etiquette school,” I chimed in, snuggling closer to Tyler as his arm tightened around my shoulders.

“What the fuck is etiquette school?” someone asked from around the pool table.

“‘The Park Avenue Prince’ over there spent three years learning how to speak clearly and with influence when dealing with men of equal stature.” I grinned, but then it became a full smile as I set my brother up to be teased.

“How do you do that, How?” I couldn’t have been happier that my brother was about to be roasted.

I watched as the good humor fell from Eric’s face. His eyes were blazing at me, but all I did was smile even wider back at him. His expression didn’t faze me. I was his little sister, and if he had left me alone, I would have done the same. Besides, he sucked at interrogations.

“How about I beat your ass, and we’ll call it lesson number one?” Eric called over his shoulder.

“Sound like you have a hot poker up your butt,” I chimed in, causing most of the brothers on this side of the room to look at me. I demonstrated. “You know. Pahk the cah at Hahvahd Yahd.”

It took them a minute, and then the room filled with laughter.

“I am going to enjoy having you around, Little How.” Op flopped down onto the end of the sofa near my feet.

“I am not coming back if you call me Little How,” I shot back. “I know we look similar from behind, but no.” I’d spent too many years in my brother’s shadow, and while we had a good relationship, I wasn’t answering to that. Now, if he called me Mrs. Zook, I’d consider it.

“Law. Nah, that won’t work. I am not good at these games.” Op scratched his head as he ran through a few other nicknames, discarding each one.

“What games?” Tyler asked him, looking confused.

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“The naming ones.” Op looked at him like he was crazy.

“You’re trying to give her a road name?” my brother interjected into the conversation.

“He must have made amends somehow,” Op said to my brother, pointing at Tyler, then at me, and back again. “You better get used to it because somehow, she’s going to stay.”

Eric sighed, and his face crinkled like he was thinking about all the possibilities. “As long as I don’t have to see or hear anything, I am good.”

“Until he knocks her up, and you realize how that kid came into the world.” Op continued, pointing at Eric, “Every time you look at it, you’re going to wonder which position did the trick.”

“Fuck,” Eric said, finishing his beer and setting the bottle down on the table next to him.

“Yup, it’s bedtime.” Tyler sat me up gently so that he could stand. He offered me his hand.

“See? Bet you’re thinking about it now,” Op directed at Eric, still pointing.

“God, I am going to need bleach.” Eric rubbed at his eyes.

“Or a woman of your own,” Tyler directed at him, steering me towards the hallway.

Passing Aunt E's room, I could hear the TV on. She'd said goodnight to everyone earlier and headed straight to bed, claiming the evening had been too exciting for her. I liked Aunt E, and she'd taken me under her broken wing like one of her nieces.

"Sometimes, Thunder watches TV with her," I whispered to Tyler.

"I am not surprised," he replied with a knowing smile. "Can I watch TV with you?"

I pinched his side playfully, making him flinch and laugh. It probably hurt me more than it did him. "They're cute together."

"Don't encourage the matchmakers," Tyler said, shaking his head. "They already know, but they give Aunt E her space. If I was her, when she's fully healed, I'd still pretend not to listen to them."

"Sometimes, I hear her TV on in the middle of the night. It makes me want to go check on her, but I am not sure if she's watching it or just using it as background noise. I would hope she would call out if she needed something, but I just mostly mind my own business."

"Better safe than sorry." He opened the door to my room, letting me walk in first. I wasn't even a few steps into the room before he had me pinned against the closed door. "Worry about your own love life."

"Why? It's getting better by the second." I wrapped my hands around his waist and tucked them underneath his shirt. Letting my fingertips graze his bare skin, he leaned over me, his elbows against the door near my head.

"I am sorry, Em. I didn't see any other way to make it work, and I didn't want you stuck with me. Please forgive me. I only said those things because I knew they would hit hard, and I was livid at the situation. I was going to end up losing the one bright

spot in my life.” His stare burned into mine, the longing clear in his gaze.

“I read the rough drafts. They hurt more than the original letter, but I understand it all now. I wouldn’t have then, even if you’d tried.” I gently pulled him closer, pressing his forehead to mine. “We’re going to have to compromise because I don’t want to be without you. If there’s a chance I am going to lose you one day, then I want to live now. I don’t want to waste time over miscommunication.”

“Tomorrow.” He kissed me. “Tonight, I just want to be with you. The rest of it can wait.”

I pulled my hands from his shirt and ran them up the front of his chest to his shoulders. My hands glided over his biceps, down the muscles of his forearms, until I reached his wrists. I tugged gently until he lowered them to his sides, forcing him to stand straight. I traced my path over, never letting my eyes stray from his. Reaching again for his shoulders, I slid his club cut down his arms until I held it in my hand. There was a hook near the bedroom door, and I turned around to hang it there.

He wrapped his arms around my front and pulled me back against him, whispering in my ear, “You’re absolutely beautiful, and sometimes I have a hard time looking at you. It reminds me of what I lost, and now I want to hold on tight and never let go.” His fingers danced over my hip. “I don’t want to rush you, but all I’m hearing is that you’re mine. If this isn’t what you want, you need to tell me, and I’ll back off. It’ll be hard, but I’ll do it for you.”

“No,” I said simply.

“Last chance,” he whispered directly into my ear.

“I am yours,” I said, with conviction.

He said nothing as his beard tickled my neck. As he slid the strap of my blouse aside, I felt his tongue lick a path from behind my ear, down my neck, and over my shoulder.

“Your skin is soft,” he whispered, pushing the other strap off and licking the same path on the other side. “The zipper in the back is convenient. Something to think about when you buy new clothes.”

“Why? Are you going to rip them off of me?” This was one of my favorite shirts. If that was one of his kinks, I’d buy clothes I didn’t care about.

“Not this one. This is hot, but one day.” He sucked on the back of my neck and then licked the area, cooling it down.

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I tilted my head down so that he'd have more room to work, but when he'd had his fill, I felt his teeth scrape down my neck. I couldn't see him, but I heard the zipper slowly lower until it came apart at the bottom. Imagining that he'd used his teeth, I rubbed my legs together to relieve some of the pressure. The back of the blouse opened, and I felt his fingers flick it off of my shoulders, letting it hit the floor.

He held my hips as he went back to sucking on the skin between my neck and shoulders.

A low moan escaped my lips.

"I like that sound, Em. It does something to me." He pushed against my ass as his grip tightened on my hips, making sure that I could feel his hard outline. He ran his fingers underneath the leather pants I wore until they reached the snap and zipper. Undoing both, he peeled the pants down my legs until they reached my ankles. Lifting my feet, he took off my shoes and made me kick out of the pants. Both ended up in the pile with my blouse, as I stood in front of him in my undergarments. "How did I get so lucky?" he murmured against my calves as he ran his hands up the muscles to the globes of my ass. Sliding my panties to the side, I felt him bite my left ass cheek.

"Hey!" I squeaked, surprised.

"Just marking my territory," I heard from behind me.

I tried to turn around, but his hands were at my hips, forcing me to stay where I was.

“You ever been with a man, Em?” he asked, his cheek laying against the skin he’d just marked.

"Are you taking notes or curious about the competition?" I didn't know what to say to something like that. Should I tell him the truth? Will that make him stop?

I felt the heat of his breath against my skin, followed by a low, dark chuckle. "The only notes I'm taking are the ones your body's giving me. There's no competition when I'm the only man you'll ever crave and the last one you'll ever need."

I took a minute before answering him. "No," I sighed. "I wasn't interested enough." I hadn't been able to date like a regular teenager, and by the time I went to college, Tyler had consumed my life with his letters. The only man I knew now was Christopher, and I'd rather face death than let him touch me. "It just happened that way." I didn't want Tyler to think I'd been waiting all this time when it had really been a non-issue. The longer I went without a man, the more I simply forgot about it.

He let out a hissing sound. "I know you haven't been waiting for me, but I feel like this is right. I get to be the one to claim you, inside and out." He slid my panties to the floor and unsnapped the clasp of my bra, making sure that they landed in the pile of clothes.

I was completely bare to him.

He must have taken his shirt off because it sailed over my shoulder and landed on top of my stilettos. Wrapping his arms around my waist, he settled my back against his chest. "Relax, I'll take care of you." His hands roamed over my skin as his lips settled back at my neck.

I melted at his touch. I had imagined what it would feel like to be with him all those years ago. This was better than my imagination. It felt right, as I settled against the

solidness of his body, leaning against him so that I could remain on my feet, my hands grasping his forearms to ground me to this moment.

“Let me worship you,” he said against my neck. My feet left the ground as he picked me up bridal-style and laid me in the middle of the bed.

My hands instantly reached out for him as my eyes soaked up as much of his body as possible.

He unsnapped his jeans and inched the zipper down slowly. His movements captivated me as he revealed the skin underneath, right above his boxers. There were black lines tattooed into his pelvis, and I wasn't sure what the design was supposed to be.

Tyler followed my line of sight, realizing that I was looking at the tattoo. When he lowered the edge of his boxers, I saw it was a fire-breathing dragon. It wrapped around the back of his hip, laying perfectly along his adonis belt.

He snapped the edge of his boxers back into place and crawled over me, not stopping until his elbows cradled my head. “I sent the last letter, and then I was a moody asshole. It was just another day for my military team, but to me, I'd lost everything. We had a few days leave, and I found a tattoo shop. Dragons are supposed to represent beasts that hoard their treasure. I wanted to do the same thing with you.”

“Why is it there?” I asked, gripping his wrists in my palms.

“I had visions of you exploring it one day.” He leaned further down, so that his mouth was at my neck. “With your tongue.”

A groan escaped my lips.

“That’s it. Let me hear you,” he rasped against my skin. Tyler took his time memorizing my body. He sucked at my neck. Licking further down, his face nestled in the valley of my chest. His hands broke my hold on him, lightly grazing the areas he’d already adored until they cupped my breasts, squishing his face.

I reached for the back of his head, but he grabbed my wrists and pinned them to my side.

“Don’t move,” he said, his voice several octaves lower. “Don’t worry about me. I am having the time of my life.”

He went back to my breasts, massaging them as he tasted the valley in between.

I squirmed on the bed, trying to ground myself to anything I could hold onto, eventually grabbing fistfuls of the sheets, twisting them in my hands as I pushed my hips against him. I wasn’t gaining any traction, but I could rub my lower half against his pelvis. It worked to relieve some of the pressure that had been building, but I knew it was only because I didn’t have any experience.

Tyler released my breasts and moved further down until he lay between my legs, forcing them open and setting the backs of my knees on his shoulders. He plunged into my center with his tongue, and I shrieked from the sensation.

My eyes focused on the ceiling as my knees tried to push against him again. I wanted more, but I also wanted to pull away. It was too much and yet not enough. Sounds that I had never heard came from my lips. I lost myself to the sensations until my stomach tightened and my muscles spasmed. My mind was blissfully numb. This wasn’t my first orgasm, but I’d never known such ecstasy. Would I have felt this good with any man or just Tyler? It didn’t last very long, but before I could catch my breath, he was building me up to fall again.

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“Tyler,” I moaned, needing to remind myself this was real.

“That’s right. I am the only who’s ever going to make you feel this way.”

My back arched, and I gripped the sheets tighter, hearing a ripping sound. I felt too good to care. This time, I rocked my hips against his mouth. I’d plunge myself further on his tongue, and when it became too much, I’d rock my ass further back into the bed, away from him. It wouldn’t last long as he followed my movements until it all became a blur. Falling over the ledge, I didn’t know how I’d gone without for so long. My brain pounded one man’s name: Tyler. He was the only one who’d ever set my heart ablaze.

Tyler climbed off the bed, and I tried to close my legs, but I couldn’t move. He walked over to his jeans and removed his wallet, sliding a condom into the palm of his hand.

“Should I be worried that you have a condom in your wallet?” I didn’t recognize my voice. It was sex bomb meets two packs of cigarettes a day.

He chuckled and dropped his boxers onto the floor. “I don’t normally, but I was hoping your trip to the bar tonight would help.”

Tyler turned around, and my eyes widened as my jaw dropped. “Is that...?” I asked, not brave enough to finish the question.

“Yeah, it’s a Prince Albert piercing, but you’re warm and wet enough to take me without a problem. Watch out for the quiet ones, Em.”

I was speechless as I stared at him.

He climbed onto the bed, gathering me into his arms. “You alright?” he asked, watching me closely for any sign of distress.

I wasn’t sure what my face looked like. I wasn’t afraid of him. He would never hurt me, but this was a fresh experience, and I had to pick a man with a piercing for my first.

He placed his lips at my ear. “I am sorry, Em. I should have taken you out. Showed you off with wine and dinner, but I am a selfish bastard. You’re here, in this bed with me, and I am not letting go.” He turned my cheek so that he could kiss my lips. “Feeling good?”

I nodded my head. It was all I was capable of.

“Feel me,” he said with a dark chuckle. “All of me.” He rubbed the tip of his dick against my clit before sliding into me. “You’re gripping me. Your body knows who you belong to,” he growled low in my ear. “Me.”

Picking up the pace, he didn't stop whispering in my ear as he slid deep within me, hitting all the right places. I clung to him as my lifeline until I couldn't take it anymore. “You’re mine,” I whispered into the room.

He tilted his head back and roared his release. The sight was enough to send a shiver down my back as he collapsed against my chest.

Chapter 15

Replaced By Bikers

Wreck

I hadn't slept all night. The guilt was eating me alive, and my stomach was so upset I wanted to hurl. I was dirty, and no amount of scrubbing would clean up the mess I'd made.

It was mid-morning, and the club was quiet. I could still smell the lingering scent of bacon from breakfast, but I hadn't joined in today. I wasn't sure I could stomach the food, and I hadn't wanted to deal with any jokes about my appetite. If I gave the brothers an inch, they'd take a mile.

I wanted to get this done quickly and with the fewest eyes possible. I left my room, not bothering to knock on Pretty's door. There was nothing new to say, and I didn't want to stand there staring at each other. We each thought we were right, and no one would give. I'd been listening to Zook talk about his mistakes, and the one thing I had focused on was actions spoke louder than words. I was going to test his theory. Knocking on Aunt E's door, I waited. When I heard nothing, I knocked again, but this time, Thunder answered.

"What are you doing in here?" I asked, suspicion lacing my voice. Aunt E had always been nice to me, and if Thunder was messing around with her, we were going to have a serious issue.

He smirked at me and opened the door. I took a glimpse inside, and it appeared to be innocent. Aunt E was sitting on the bed in her pajamas, propped up against the pillows. There was a chessboard to the side of her with the pieces scattered all over. I didn't know enough about the game, but it looked legit.

"I play chess with her to help stimulate her mind. Nothing more, Wreck." Thunder chuckled, finding amusement at my expense. It might have appeared innocent, but Thunder had staked his claim. I knew the look better than anyone else. I'd done the

same thing in private.

“He even lets me...win some...times,” Aunt E chimed in, her voice soft and a little shaky. She tucked her hand between her knees, her gaze unfocused. “Wreck,” she said, her voice wavering. My heart clenched. Each relapse, no matter how small, was a sharp reminder of what she’d been through. She should have never been in that position to begin with.

“Aunt E, how are you feeling?” I wouldn’t be that rude bastard who asked for a favor without checking in with her first.

“I am...good,” she said. “Not winning.” She waved her hand over the game.

“Just smile at him, and I am sure he’ll forget how to play,” I said, well aware of what a well-timed smile could do.

“Friends,” she murmured, shifting to get more comfortable against the pillows.

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“Can I borrow you this afternoon?” I asked her. “Pretty opened his mouth, and now Flo won’t make him potato salad for Christmas. I was thinking I could do it, but I don’t know how, and I don’t want to ask Flo. She holds a grudge.”

“She does,” Aunt E laughed, but then her eyes lost focus again, and she drifted away.

“It’ll take her a few minutes. She’s getting better, but this still occurs a couple times an hour. They’re not sure if it will ever completely disappear,” Thunder explained.

“Will she remember we’re here? She had a hard time with my name,” I asked him.

“Yeah, I noticed that, but I am wondering if it’s because of the letters and not actually remembering your face. When we play Scrabble, she has a hard time with Ws.”

“What are you doing, Thunder?” I should have minded my own business, but I didn’t want to see Aunt E hurt. She was too fragile to make relationship decisions.

“The same thing you are. Let it go.” We stared each other down.

“Let what...go?” Aunt E asked, returning to the present.

“Letting you out of this game. Think you’re up for making potato salad?” Thunder asked her, his tone gentle. My gaze shifted between them. How had this started? Was it really mutual?

“Do I have...to get...dressed?” She wiggled her fuzzy slippers at me.

“Not if you’re going to help me. I can deal with dog slippers.” I smirked at her as she smiled at me. She slid one slipper onto the floor and shifted until her feet dangled off the bed.

“You got it, Liz?” Thunder asked her, but she waved her good arm at him.

“I am fine.” She sat on the edge of the bed for a few minutes. When she was ready, she reached out and held onto the nightstand that was next to the bed. Thunder’s eyes never left her back.

“You’re so fucked,” I whispered to him. He just shot me a look that said I shouldn’t throw stones in glass houses.

She slid her ass to the edge of the bed and stood, rocking until she regained her balance.

“One day, you’ll be back to normal, and we’re all going to have to watch out.” I tried to joke with her as she hobbled towards me.

“I don’t know...normal is.” She lifted her good hand and gave me a sad wave.

Thunder and I let her walk out the door first, and while I was watching to make sure she didn’t fall, he was clearly checking her out.

She turned into the kitchen and was out of earshot when he said to me, “I am old, not dead.”

“Yeah, but she’s not well. You going to use the club girls?” I needed him to say yes to ease my guilt.

“Why?”

“You’ve been a biker for longer than I’ve been alive. You really think you can go without while she heals? There’s a chance she may never fulfill your needs.”

“Are you using the club girls?” Disappointment came over his face.

“You’re not my father.” I didn’t need a lecture. I already knew I had fucked up, and I was going to have to fix it or let him go.

“I know, but let me give you a little piece of advice. When you find the one you’re supposed to be with, nothing else compares. If all I get with her is hours of TV and board games, it’ll be enough. I know what a prize she is. If there ever comes a time when it’s not, I’ll use my hand or walk away from her. I won’t hurt her.” He patted me on the arm and walked away.

Gerry

I stood at my kitchen counter, drinking my morning cup of coffee. I was delaying the inevitable, but the more I tried to psych myself up, the more I thought about just staying home. My girls wouldn’t understand, but there was a lot of animosity floating in the air.

“Dad, I wanted to make sure you were coming for Christmas.” Grace had called two weeks ago. I had been feeling sorry for myself, so when her name came across my phone, I picked up, hopeful that she was leaving Sabre.

My heart had sunk at the invitation. “I don’t know, Grace. I am not really a welcomed guest at the clubhouse. Maybe you should bring the baby and spend Christmas here.”

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“I am sorry, but I don’t think I can this year. This is JR’s first Christmas, and I want it to be special. His family is here, and you’re the only one missing.” I had wanted to rail at her. She was my daughter, and I was their family. “Aunt E has a hard time in the car, and I am not sure she could sit the four hours. Plus, it’s hit or miss if Meredith will even get dressed to travel. It would be easier if you came to us.” Grace’s voice was gentle, but it felt like a dismissal.

“I’ll think about it and let you know.” It was the best I could do. I wouldn’t blow smoke up her ass over a holiday that felt more like an obligation and a kid that wasn’t even named after me.

“I hope you can come, Dad. Just let me know if your plans change, and I’ll get a room ready for you.” She had hung up, not bothering to call again to confirm my plans. I had texted her to let her know I would show, still simmering with anger that she wouldn’t attempt to see me unless I drove north.

I almost turned around when I drove past Liz’s home towards the highway. She hadn’t been there since the night the cartel had done the drive by, and it showed. There were bullet holes in the front and large pieces of turf blown to smithereens. If she didn’t clean it up soon, the Homeowner’s Association would send her a letter. This was an upscale neighborhood.

I pulled up to the clubhouse gates earlier than I had expected. If this had been a vacation, I would have been excited to make good time, but this felt like a death sentence. I was going to have to kiss a lot of hairy ass for a mistake that wasn’t even my own. It was Matt’s, and I didn’t even get to reap the rewards.

I'd lost almost everything. My girls barely spoke to me. Liz wasn't around the corner to take care of my every whim when I called. I'd lost the cartel as clients, and even the Guardian Knights had slowly stopped using my services. I couldn't be choosy with my clients anymore, so I had to take on dumb criminals to make sure I got paid.

The guard walked out of the shack and made a hand motion for me to roll down my window. "State your business," he growled at me.

I hated it here, but if I wanted to pretend to be a good father, I was going to have to spend Christmas with the Iron Shield. Joy.

"Don't you know who I am?" Sabre should have made sure that his guard dog knew I was coming today.

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking what your business is" The guard put his hands on his hips, but I could tell he was packing. If he felt like it, he'd slide his hand further, pulling out his little friend. Sabre would probably patch him in tomorrow if he ended my life.

"Call Sabre." I was done with this asshole. Staring out my windshield, I dismissed him.

"I am not bothering him. Either state your business or turn around and get the fuck out of here."

"Speaking to his father-in-law like that will not earn you your patch." I didn't know if that was true, but the guard wouldn't know. He also wouldn't ask Sabre for fear of being disrespectful. I could own this kid if I really wanted to, and the thought made me smirk.

"Acting like a fucking asshole will not win back your daughters. There's no way Flo

came from you.” He walked away with his cell phone in his hand. The gates were still closed.

I watched as he made a phone call from inside the office. Nodding a few times, he hit a button on the inside of the shack, and the gates opened. Thank God. The less I had to interact with these dumb motherfuckers, the better off I would be.

I pulled into the lot and parked my car but didn’t immediately get out. The last time I had been here, I had been a prisoner. They didn’t trust me, and I had no use for them.

I walked through the front door, but no one was in the main room. It was silent. I had told Grace I was coming today, and she should have been here to greet me. The light was on in the kitchen, and I headed that way.

“Ge..y.” Liz smiled at me from her spot on the kitchen island stool. She wore pajamas, and I was sure there were fuzzy slippers on her feet. What the fuck was this? Liz always dressed for the day, even when she wasn’t leaving her home.

“Liz,” I said, walking over to her.

“W..eck is making...my mother’s...potato salad,” she said to me, the trauma clear in her speech.. “I am sup..er...ing.”

I put my arm around her shoulders and hugged her tight into my body. I could fix all of this. She just needed to get dressed and do her makeup, and everything would be fine.

“You need to let her go before I remove that hand.”

I hadn’t noticed there was an older man, wearing the club cut, sitting next to Liz. I had just made a beeline for her.

“Or what?” I was feeling defensive already, and Liz was mine. No one was going to tell me what I could or couldn’t do.

“You’re scaring her. If you don’t remove your hand, I’ll make sure you never wipe your own ass again.” His lips curled into a snarl, his eyes fixed on where my hand rested on her shoulder.

I felt her shake underneath my arm. Perplexed by her fear, I swept my arm away from her and retreated a step. She laid her head against the older man’s arm, and he held her good hand until she returned to normal.

“He won’t hurt you, Liz.”

It was official. My girls had replaced me with bikers.

Chapter 16

Christmas Eve Church Vote

Sabre

I sat at the head of the table, waiting for the rest of the brothers to appear. This was going to be our last church until after the new year, and I wanted to make sure that we had let nothing slip through the cracks. It was also a good time to check in with them to make sure that no one was struggling.

Grizz was the first one to walk in. Setting his coffee cup on the table, he took his seat to my right. “Bitch has to go. If you don’t take him out, you’re going to find him buried in the back for Santa.”

I tilted my head back in my chair and laughed. “What did fuckface say now?” I didn’t have to ask who had pissed in Grizz’s coffee. Gerry had been going around stirring as much shit as he could. Miraculously, he made sure that Grace and I never heard him.

“He cornered Meredith first thing this morning in the kitchen.” Raising the pitch of his voice, Grizz launched into a tirade. “Don’t you speak anymore? You should be glad you’re not stuck with his kid. What happened to the rest of your clothes?”

I couldn’t believe he’d been that stupid to let Grizz overhear him. No one truly understood why Grizz stayed with Meredith, but no one wanted to go against him, either. Me included. At least the bickering had simmered down for a while. “That was shitty of him, but she wears the same thing every day.”

“It’s her emotional support hoodie.” Grizz’s eyebrows raised over the edge of his coffee cup as he took a healthy swig.

“It’s yours. How does that help her?” I was trying not to get involved, but I didn’t know how much longer the club could handle them. I’d have to step in, and neither one of them would be happy.

“I wash it each night and wear it for an hour so that it smells like me when she goes to bed. If Meredith didn’t need me, she wouldn’t have such a strong attachment to it. It’s her way of being close without having to take part. When she joins the living, she takes the hoodie off.”

I didn’t realize Grizz had been paying that close attention to Meredith’s habits. It made sense, but I was afraid he was going to lose himself in her turmoil. “If How’s sister gets voted in today as an Old Lady, you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, I figured it was going to come quick. I am good, and I’ll vote with the group. Meredith isn’t ready for a club vote, but I am warning you. I am not leaving her, so it’s the vote or my patch.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” I was serious, but the thought had crossed my mind that I might have to put down my best friend one day.

The door opened, cutting off our conversation.

“Prez, he has to go,” Thunder exploded, storming down the left side of the table towards his chair. “That fucker threw his arm around Liz and squeezed her bad side until she whimpered. Hewasn’t even paying attention and scared the living shit out of her. I had to threaten to cut off his hand before he removed it.”

“Now, you understand what I was talking about. All you motherfuckers told me he wasn’t that bad and to suck it up.” Twig sat down. “The man needs to go permanently.”

“You dig the plot, and I’ll make sure he shows up.” Grizz took another sip of his coffee. If I didn’t put a stop to this, Gerry was going to die in his sleep tonight. Merry Christmas.

“No one’s killing Gerry,” I stepped in.

“If we bury him alive, we won’t be killing him,” Thunder said under his breath. “I’ll help.”

The prospect closed the door precisely at nine. It was time to get this show on the road.

“Alright, rein it in. We all know Gerry’s a fucking piece of shit, but he’ll be gone soon. You all can survive until then.” I stared down each brother until I got an acknowledgement that they were going to follow my orders.

I didn’t believe that Gerry wouldn’t run back to the cartel or find himself in some other fucked up situation. It was only a matter of time. However, no one should be alone for Christmas, and his family was under the clubhouse’s roof.

“Do any of the managers have concerns over the club businesses? They should be alright since we shut them down last week.” I moved church along. I didn’t need the brothers focused on Gerry.

There were a few murmurs, but no one spoke up.

“I didn’t think so. Count and I finished up the year-end books, and everything looked good. Count?”

“We make a shit ton of money, and I am going to have to get creative. The end.” His blue spikes bounced as he raised his mug to his lips.

“Is there anything else you would like to say?” I prompted him. Count was brilliant, but sometimes he lacked common sense. He’d asked me if I thought Emily would take over the club’s legal business if she stayed. I’d told him to bring it up at church because I had wanted him to see this through.

“Oh, yeah.” He nodded, the spikes still moving. “Hey, Zook, what’s going on with your woman?”

I wouldn’t have phrased it like that, but Count got away with stupid shit because he was our treasurer. Zook had a way of making you forget how dangerous he could be. He was quiet, which people assumed made him weak. He wasn’t.

“What are you talking about?” he asked Count, shifting towards the front of his seat. If Count said anything bad about Emily, Zook was going to launch himself across the table and strangle the brother. That was assuming How didn’t move quicker.

“Is she staying?” Count tried again, not reading the room.

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“I think so.” Zook’s face showed his unhappiness at being questioned.

“How do you not know? Don’t answer that.” Count set the mug down on the table. “I talked to Prez about our legal situation, and we think we have something that will help sway her to stay. As long as you approve, it should be good.”

“What about me?” How spoke up. “She’s my sister.”

“Old Lady trumps sister. You know that,” I chimed in.

How slouched in his chair, folded his arms across his chest and shot daggers from his eyes at anyone who thought about saying anything.

“You’ve been holding out.” Count pointed at How, wagging his finger. “I knew your background, but I didn’t put it together. Emily is the lead counsel for Nelson’s. I had Cyph pull up their last couple of deals, since it’s all public record. She’s ruthless. I’m impressed.” He sat back in his chair and cracked his knuckles, laying them across his stomach.

“Why does this matter?” Zook got the conversation back on track.

“I spend a lot of money on legal fees to the fuckhead in town. Cyph and I actually figure out the strategy and get the paperwork together. All fuckhead does is stamp his signature and charge us his hourly rate. If Emily’s staying, Prez and I thought she might want the job. There’s no doubt she’s good at what she does. It’s also safer for us because she’ll be an Old Lady.”

“I have the paperwork ready to start her licensing. All she has to do is sign it.” Cyph grabbed his energy drink off the table and chugged it like it was a beer.

“Is this a full-time gig?” Zook asked.

Count raised his eyebrow at the question.

This was a good deal for her, and I didn’t understand why Zook was asking questions.

“If she wants to take over our legal, I won’t stand in the way. She’s mine, and I am not afraid anyone here is going to take her away from me. You all have your own issues.” He paused, rubbing his eyes for a minute before continuing. “Emily has always wanted to defend the people who don’t have a voice.”

“You remember that,” How said.

“Yeah,” Zook directed at How. “You know she doesn’t need the money, and I am in a better position to provide. I want her to do what makes her happy, and it’s not contracts.”

How shook his head, staring at Zook.

“I look at it this way: you know she’s going to be an undeniable force for the fuckheads in town, all the while killing them with a smile. If she establishes connections, it might also strengthen our relationship with the community. Let me speak to her first, and if she agrees, then we can figure out the next steps.” Zook sat back in his chair. “Hey, Count?”

“Yeah,” Count said behind his coffee mug.

“Will you help her if she does the charity thing?”

Count’s eyes rolled back into his head as the coffee hit his tongue, evaluating the options. “Actually, I can do that. If she’s doesn’t want the club’s support, I’ll still give her a hand to get going. However, we could be her silent partners and use the projects as tax shelters. I like this. It would give me more places to put the money.” He stroked the top of his spike, thinking. “Actually, that would work out better than planned.”

Zook nodded his head in agreement. “There’s one more thing.” This time, he turned towards me. “Can anyone build a house on club land, or does it need to be voted on?”

“Oh, now he’s thinking with his noggin,” someone said.

“Zook’s growing up,” someone else commented.

I was busy focusing on Zook. “What are you thinking?”

“If Emily stays, it would be alright to live in the clubhouse for a while, provided everyone agrees, but I don’t want to raise a family here. It’s not a conducive environment for that. If I buy her a house in town, it just seems far, and she’s going to want to be close to How.” He turned towards How with a chuckle. “I don’t see you moving out soon.”

“Nope, I am going to stay here forever.” How smiled widely, causing the rest of the room to laugh hysterically.

I hadn’t seen that coming. “I don’t know, Zook,” I said. “Personally, I see nothing wrong. However, Pretty is going to need to check the bylaws and the club history to make sure there wasn’t a previous vote. As long as there’s nothing stopping us, we’ll open it for discussion.”

“I got ya, big daddy.” Pretty wrote something down. The room went silent. “What?” he said, looking up from his notepad.

“I am going to need more bleach.” How closed his eyes and stuck his fingers in his ears.

“Is Em going to clear the vote?” Zook whispered.

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“She has my vote. That shit was hilarious the other night. Park Avenue Prince.” Op raised his hand.

Slowly, each brother raised their hands, until it was just How, Zook, Grizz, and me left.

“Don’t fuck this up,” How said to Zook, raising his hand.

“I am going to fuck up, but don’t fix my mistakes. I’ll correct them on my own because I know what it’s like to let her go. It won’t happen again.” Zook raised his hand as How nodded his approval.

Grizz raised his hand, and I raised mine.

The club had officially voted Emily in as Zook’s Old Lady.

Chapter 17

Always Meant To Be This Way

Emily

Flo washed the serving platters, and I stood next to her with a drying towel in my hand. The parties that my parents threw didn’t require us to help with cleanup. I was having fun being included in the chatter as the women switched from breakfast to the beginnings of Christmas Eve dinner.

“Are you alright?” she asked me quietly, washing the serving utensils.

“I am fine,” I said, waiting for her to hand them to me to dry.

“These men are intense, and I wanted to make sure you know you have my support, no matter what happens.”

She didn’t look up at me as she washed the fruit bowl, but her words poured over me like warm honey. Her concern was so genuine that it startled me. I couldn’t remember the last time someone, aside from Eric, had cared about me for who I was and not what I represented. I’d tried to make friends over the years, but I could sniff out hidden agendas like a basset hound. As soon as they learned I was from an elite family, their true motives became clear.

“I am alright, but my head is spinning faster than my heart. What if I make the wrong decision?” I hadn’t realized I’d been harboring some doubt until the words spilled from my lips. “What if I stay and it falls apart again? I’ll have my brother, but my heart will break knowing Zook’s so close and yet so far away.”

Flo snorted as she tried to hold in her laugh. “Are you listening to yourself?”

I replayed the conversation in my head, looking for anything that might have been amusing. “I sound like the little girl that he accused me of being.”

Flo raised an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at her lips. “No, you sound like a woman who’s waiting for her man to get his shit together.” She laughed again, handing me the fruit bowl to dry. “I will tell you this: most of these men have the same values. He’s always going to put you first. You’re going to have to be the one who reminds him to take time for himself. It’s just the way it works around here.”

I thought about her words as I dried the fruit bowl.

“Don’t look now, but you’re about to be whisked away,” Flo said to me.

“Hey, Flo.” Tyler’s voice sent a shiver down my spine, drowning out the noise in the kitchen. I didn’t dare turn around. If I did, the fruit bowl would crash to the floor, and I’d find myself in his arms before I could think twice.

“Are you stealing her?” Flo asked over her shoulder, continuing to scrub at one of the chafing dishes.

Tyler’s tone softened. “If you’re okay with it, I’d like to spend some time with her. I’m running out of days to convince her to stay with me.”

“I don’t think you’ll have a problem,” Flo said as Pebbles sauntered up to my other side.

“Don’t keep him guessing,” Pebbles giggled as she playfully snatched the dishcloth from my hands and set the bowl on the counter. Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “He’s one of the good ones around here, unlike some of these other assholes.”

“Are you sure?” I asked them. “I don’t want to leave you in the lurch.” If there was any hint that they needed an extra pair of hands, I was going to stay in the kitchen. My nerves kicked in, and my heart whispered that I’d have to take a leap of faith, hoping it wouldn’t end in a crash landing.

“Nope, we’re good.” They both smiled at me and made shooing hand motions.

Tyler extended his hand, and without hesitation, I slipped mine into it. With a blanket draped over his arm, he led me outside, guiding us down the back porch steps toward the tree line that bordered the property. Once we reached a secluded spot, he spread the blanket out and sat down beside me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and pulling me close. “We’re far enough out,” he murmured, his voice low. “No one’s

going to interrupt us here.”

“This morning, you were relaxed before your meeting. What’s changed?” The muscles in his arm felt tight against my shoulders as he curled a piece of my hair in between his fingertips.

“It’s Christmas Eve, and you’re leaving me soon. I don’t want to rush you, but have you thought more about staying?” He stared straight ahead, the arm muscles flexing against my neck. His other hand lay in his lap, but his fist clenched repeatedly.

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“With you?” I filled in, nervous all over. I couldn’t gauge the situation, and I wasn’t ready for it to head south quickly.

He sighed, pulling me closer. “You belong with me, but I don’t want to force you to stay. It should be your choice.”

“I am keeping track of all the times you tell me I am yours.” I tugged on his beard and made him face me. “This won’t work if we’re on opposite coasts. My return flight is in a few days, and I am thinking about using it to handle the essentials.” I tugged on his beard again and lowered his chin until I could kiss his lips. The warmth between us was undeniable, our lips dancing in a playful game of hide and seek, teasing and retreating with each soft touch.

“What are the essentials?” he whispered against my lips.

“I’ll have to resign, but I am not giving the Nelsons two weeks. They’ll be fine without me. Then I’ll have to deal with my apartment and pack my stuff. I own it, so either rent or sell.” I ran my tongue against the seam of his lips until he opened, stealing the kiss I wanted.

“About your job. Do you want to work?” he asked as I pulled back, settling against his side with my head in the crook of his shoulder.

“Is this about money?” I was concerned he thought he wasn’t enough again.

“Not really. You have a trust fund, and I am going to have to accept that you’ll always have more than I do. However, I am in a better position to provide for you,

and I will.” He kissed the top of my head and held my hand. “I am not sure of all the details. You’ll have to speak to Count, but he asked if you would take over the club’s contracts. I guess he pays the lawyer in town, but the guy isn’t really looking after our best interests.” He uncrossed his legs and wrapped his arm around my waist. “Ultimately, it’s your decision.” Drawing me in, he said, “I asked Count if he would help you with your plans to defend those without a voice. He agreed. Actually, his spikes were bouncing, so I know he was excited.” Tyler chuckled.

My heart swelled with the realization that this man was not just asking me to stay. It was like Flo had said: he was putting me first, and I would make sure he never wanted for anything.

He’d remembered. One conversation, over five years ago, and he had held onto it. In that moment, every doubt I’d harbored melted away. I was in love with him. Capturing his cheeks in my hands, I tilted his head until his eyes met mine, wanting him to see the truth. “I love you,” I whispered, the words carrying all the weight of my heart.

His hands came up and cupped my cheeks. “I’ve loved you for forever, Em.”

“No, you don’t understand, Tyler Mitchell. I first fell in love with your words. I checked the mail twice a day, waiting for a letter. It wasn’t healthy. This time, I’ve fallen in love with your actions. You’re making a future for us. Now, I love you with everything I have, and I can’t imagine my life without you. My love for you runs that deep.”

He gently guided me back, so that I laid on the blanket as he followed me forward. “I don’t think you understand, Em. I gave up the first time because I thought I was doing the right thing with you. Now, I don’t give a fuck. You’re mine, and I’m not letting you go. I’d rather move to New York than be without you.”

He unsnapped the button of my jeans, running his fingers underneath the denim. I wanted more. This wasn't enough. I dug my fingers into his back, trying to be as close as possible. I loved this man, and I wanted to save as many memories as possible for when I headed back. It would only be temporary, but the days would pass by slowly.

He lowered himself further, so that we were nose-to-nose. "I love you, Emily."

"I need you." Reaching for his jeans, I unsnapped the button and pulled down the zipper until I could weasel my hands against his bare skin. Sliding them to the back of his jeans, I wiggled enough room to grab his ass. I didn't want any space between us, and I could feel his dick hardening against me.

"This isn't how I imagined this," he whispered against my ear, nipping at the lobe.

I pushed up against him as I pulled him closer to me. "There are too many clothes between us."

"Greedy. What if I stop?" he chuckled in my ear, rubbing against me.

"It's Christmas Eve. You're supposed to be in the giving spirit." I dug my nails into the flesh of his ass. "Give it to me."

"So demanding. Push up," he said, pulling my jeans and panties down to my knees. "What am I going to do when you're gone?"

"It'll only be a few days. You'll survive." I searched for his wallet in his back pocket. Grabbing it, I used my other hand to push his jeans and boxers as far as I could get them without his help, whispering in his ear, "Birth control is going to be an essential."

He laughed and buried his face in my neck. “One day, Em. When you’re ready.” He grabbed the wallet from my hand and leaned on his elbow to balance. Finding the condom, he threw the wallet onto the blanket next to us and sheathed himself. “Practice makes perfect, and I am a bit of a slow learner.”

“Promise me it will always be like this.” I pushed up against him, trying to get him to enter me. I craved being connected. To know that he was with me, mind, body, and soul.

“No.” He slid his dick inside me with one stroke. “You hold me to the promises that I don’t make you, and we won’t change that.”

A low groan escaped my lips as I reached up and wrapped my arm around the back of his neck until his forehead rested against mine. “You’re mine, and I am yours.”

“Stay with me.” He pumped deep within me.

“Make me come,” I begged, gripping his biceps to gain more leverage.

“Stay with me,” he said again, moving slower than he had before.

“I need you,” I tried again, and then it clicked. “I am not leaving you when you’re mine.”

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He picked up the pace of his hips, slamming into me. Over and over, until I was screaming his name amongst the trees.

As I was coming down from my high, he whispered in my ear, “It was always meant to be this way, and I love you.”

Tilting my head back, I let one last moan loose.

He shivered as he came, and I wrapped my arms around him. Holding him tight to my chest, I knew I didn’t want to be without him for any length of time. “Come with me to New York. I have to pack.”

Chapter 18

Christmas Eve Dinner

Grace

I watched out the window with my hands still in the sink, covered in soap, as Zook led Emily to the trees. A lot of change was heading her way in a short amount of time. I understood that better than anyone. I liked Emily, and the last thing I wanted was to see her get overwhelmed.

“You think she’ll give him a shot?” Pebbles asked, her gaze fixed on the pair as they disappeared.

“Yes. I think she wants to, but there are a lot of ‘what ifs’ she’ll need answers to,” I

replied, my thoughts drifting back to my journey. There had come a time when I had to throw caution to the wind, and it had been terrifying. Emily would have to do the same eventually, and I wanted her to know she wasn't alone.

Pebbles threw the dish towel onto the counter with a small laugh. "She has options, and How won't let anything happen to her."

Two hands appeared on either side of my waist, grasping the edges of the sink. A hard chest pressed against my back, and a shiver ran down my spine as his breath ghosted over my ear. "Leave them alone, mama," Sabre murmured.

"We're just speculating. Not everything needs to be a bet," I teased, smiling as I heard Pebbles laugh beside me.

"Tell that to the rest of the brothers. They bet on when he'd convince her to stay. I picked right after breakfast, but Dead is winning. He said after breakfast but before dinner." Sabre's stubble rubbed against my cheek.

"You know, you only win bets when they're about us." It hadn't been easy. Sabre had had to hold out, but the last bet we'd won had been about how long it would take to get busy after my first ride on his bike.

"Yeah, but I thought I had a shot. How's the only one that didn't bet." He pressed further into my back.

"Of course, he wouldn't. Would you want to know when Pretty and Wreck finally get together? Down to the minute?" I pushed back against him, my hands still in the soapy water in the sink. "Those trees are going to shake."

"No." He kissed the back of my neck. "Are you done here? I need to know how you want to set up the tables for dinner."

“Oh, give me a sec.” I pulled the plug from the sink and grabbed one of the other towels to dry my hands. Heading towards the main room, I told him, “I figured we could put the square tables on the side for the food, and then use the round ones for families. There are a couple extra card tables...” I trailed off. “Are you listening?” I turned around, and Sabre wasn’t even behind me. No, he was leaning against the door in between the main room and the kitchen, directly underneath the mistletoe.

He was silent as he pointed to it. “Or do you need to check my ass out first?” he asked, causing the room to roar in laughter. His eyes twinkled. This wasn’t about the mistletoe. This was clearly about staking his claim in the main room.

I strutted towards him, but when I was close, I jumped into his arms and wrapped my arms around his neck. “I don’t need a reminder,” I said.

He held me underneath my ass and suffocated me with his body. His lips were on mine, taking all of my air as if he owned me. I didn’t know how much more I could survive. My lungs burned, and when he finally broke the kiss, I sucked in as much air as possible. I’d never complain, though, as I heard catcalls in the background.

“I love you,” he whispered against my lips. “I’m all you need.” He walked away, throwing orders around based on my table instructions. He’d been listening all along.

There was so much excitement in the air. Chef was outside smoking briskets while the kids were running around in the yard. I couldn’t keep the smile off my face. Christmas Eve dinner was turning out better than I had expected. Every brother was here with their family.

I had planned to make potato salad for Pretty, but when I had opened the refrigerator this morning, there was already a pan with his name on it. I wasn’t sure where it had

come from, but I didn't ask questions. Instead, I peeled the potatoes to mash.

"You're spoiling them," Dee told me, as she stood at the stove, her hair teased as high as ever. I'd stopped being scared that she'd burn herself or burn down the place. She'd told me more than once that her spot was stirring whatever was on the stove, and she wouldn't move just to make me happy. The club could afford to build a new clubhouse if she burned this one down.

"They need to be spoiled sometimes," Bear retorted. "Some of them have forgotten what family is all about. This is just a way to remind them."

"We really haven't celebrated Christmas as a club in so long," Raven joined the conversation. "I can remember past Christmases that were just like this."

Lost in my own thoughts, I didn't see Bear approach me. "You've brought new life into this club, honey," she said with a wink. "How's Meredith doing? I haven't seen her today."

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“Some days are better than others,” I said. It wasn’t a secret that Meredith was having a hard time, but I didn’t want to reveal anything that would set the club further against her. I was hoping today was a good day, and that she’d make an appearance.

Bear clasped my hand in support and went back to cutting the onions. The chatter went on as we worked as a team. Even though they were much older than me, I felt the camaraderie. They had accepted me as their own, and I had welcomed them into my life with open arms.

“Honey, when are you going to get yourself a man?” Dee called out. I turned to see who she was talking to. Kelly had entered the kitchen and was pulling JR from his pen. Kissing the top of his head, she replied, “Never.”

“That’s not what you used to say,” Raven chimed in. Once Kelly had begun to babysit JR, the Old Ladies had taken her under our wing. I thought it would help if they did the same with Meredith, but I wouldn’t push.

“They don’t want me, Dee. Why bother trying?” Kelly sighed as she bounced JR against her chest. “You’re the only man in my life,” she said to the baby.

“You shouldn’t have given away the milk for free.” Dee wouldn’t let up.

“Don’t listen to her. She was giving away more than the milk,” Bear said. She was the peacekeeper of our group. “Honey, when the right one comes along, you’ll know.”

“Like Slate? You let him hit it and quit it. Don’t tell me you think it’s going to go

somewhere?” Dee said, turning away from the stove to stare at Bear.

“When do you start school?” I asked Kelly, changing the subject. We’d all been proud when Kelly announced she’d gotten into the local college. I wasn’t supposed to know that Sabre was helping her with the funds. I thought he still felt guilty over how the brothers had treated her when she had been a hang-around.

“The second week of January.” She swayed with JR in her arms. He reached up and tried to grab for her hair.

“Did you get all your supplies?” I was trying to maintain the conversation so that Dee wouldn’t be able to tease her. She thought it was harmless, but the digs had been pretty deep.

“They’re supposed to send out the book list next week, so I’ve just been getting the other basics when I can,” Kelly answered me.

“You’ll have to tell me, and we’ll go shopping. Maybe make a day of it,” I told her.

“I’d like that.” She asked if there was anything we wanted her to do, but we were almost done.

“No. You can take him out to the main room, if you want,” I told her. Gossip flowed in the MC like water, and I’d heard a certain mohawk was interested in Kelly. When I’d turned towards her as we were talking about school, I had noticed a certain pair of spikes right outside the kitchen door. They had floated back and forth near the mistletoe.

“Hey, Kelly,” I called out to her, stalling. “If he needs changed, you’ll have to find Sabre. The diaper bag is in his office.”

“Oh, okay. Come on, Little Man.” As she turned to exit the kitchen, she bumped into a hard chest. I had to give Count credit. He played it off like it was no big deal.

“I am sorry. I didn’t see you,” she told him, trying to move to the side so that he could pass.

“You’re going to owe me,” he said, pointing at the mistletoe.

“Oh.” She kissed my baby on his head and tickled his tummy, making him giggle. Turning towards Count, she went to kiss him on the cheek. As she approached, he turned and kissed her full on.

When he pulled away, he tickled my baby’s tummy again. “Next time, I want mine rubbed, too.”

Bear whispered in my ear, “You’re bad.”

“Dinner’s good, but you know what would make it better?” Pretty asked. When no one responded, he answered his own question. “Potato salad.”

“I was going to make you some, but there’s a tray in the refrigerator with your name on it,” I said, spooning a bite of mashed potatoes.

“I thought you were still holding a grudge.” He sat his fork down and put his elbows on the table to cradle his face. He waited until I was paying attention to him before he batted his eyelashes.

“I was, but I figured it’s Christmas, and I should be nice to you. It has your name on it, so I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to serve it.” I shrugged.

“W...eck made it,” Aunt Liz chimed in. She tapped Thunder’s forearm with her good hand. “Tell...’m.”

My dad scowled. He wasn’t happy that my aunt had been paying Thunder more attention than him. I swore he even growled when she touched Thunder’s forearm. I thought that was only a biker trait, and my dad despised the men in the room.

“Wreck made it,” Thunder said, going back to the piece of brisket on his plate.

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“What do you mean, Wreck made it?” Pretty moved his plate towards the middle of the table and stared at the top of Thunder’s head until it became uncomfortable for the rest of us.

Thunder eventually felt the uneasiness floating around and explained. “Liz sat in the kitchen and supervised, and Wreck made it.” Thunder continued to eat the brisket, but I snuck a look at Pretty. He looked like he was going to hyperventilate. His forehead was shiny, and his chest looked like it was working double time.

Pretty stood from the table and ran. I watched as Wreck walked into the kitchen after him. I wanted to help fix whatever was going on, but it wasn’t my place.

Sabre’s hand wrapped around my thigh underneath the table. “Don’t meddle. It’s going to get worse before it ever gets better.”

Chapter 19

Christmas Eve Dinner, Part Deux

Grace

The dishes were done, and the main room’s atmosphere was festive as I walked back in. The jokes were flowing, and the kids were playing quietly on the floor. As I scanned the crowd, my eyes landed on Meredith. I did a double take, surprised to see her curled up beside Grizz, their heads close as they whispered to each other. My heart swelled with hope, making a quick Christmas wish it would last.

I moved on, scanning the room for Sabre. I found him sitting on one couch, cradling JR as he fed him his Christmas bottle. JR's eyelids were growing heavy, and it wouldn't be long before he drifted off to sleep, though I wasn't sure how long it would last with all the commotion in the main room.

"Thank you," Sabre murmured as I settled beside him. "This has been one of the better Christmases I can remember here."

I smiled warmly at him, opening my mouth to respond, but a loud, "Ho, ho, ho!" interrupted me. Everyone turned towards the back staircase. The adults weren't sure what was about to happen, but the kids jumped up and down with excitement. "Ho, ho, ho," the booming voice rang out again.

I flashed a smile at Sabre before turning to look at the back staircase with everyone else.

"Ho, ho, ho!" Santa walked out from one of the back rooms.

The kids were hysterical. "Santa! Santa!" they called out as they jumped around excitedly.

Thunder had been the perfect choice to ask. He walked around and spoke a few words to each child, asking them if they had made the nice list and how school was. When he approached Bear, he asked her if she'd been good this year. "You know I am always naughty," she retorted, and the room filled with laughter.

Thunder worked the room until he landed in front of my aunt. Slate was sitting at the bar behind her, and my father was right next to her.

"Have you been a good girl?" he asked her, getting down on one knee so that they were eye level.

“I think...so,” she said. I watched her closely, trying to gauge whether she was frightened or simply overwhelmed by the attention.

“Well, you should be a bad girl, and sit on Santa’s lap later.” He stood and moved on, leaving my aunt speechless. Thunder had just staked his claim in the middle of the main room. “I have some elves with me to pass out the gifts,” Santa boomed. Everyone’s heads instantly shot to look at the back staircase, waiting for the next surprise.

“You didn’t,” Sabre whispered in my ear. I had done this for him and the other brothers who had been around long enough to remember Christmas pasts.

“You know I did.” I leaned over and lightly pecked his lips.

“Santa’s little elves are here,” Pretty called out as he walked into the room, wiggling his feet so that the bells on the toes would jingle. He had on a green elf costume, complete with hat and tights.

“You’re not little,” one of the club girls called out.

“Thank you, thank you, I’ll be here every night,” he said like he was a comedian on stage. “Santa, you need to put her on the naughty list.” He paused. “On second thought, she might like that.”

There was a chuckle that floated through the room.

“I need help from my other elves,” he called behind him.

Berry, Pint, and Twig all walked out, dressed in the same costume, including the tights. The room exploded with laughter. The three of them were physically the biggest men in the club. As long as they hadn’t cared, I thought it would be hilarious

to see them dressed as elves. When Pretty had asked, they'd agreed instantly. I hadn't needed to bribe them.

"Come on, elves. We have to distribute the stockings. Right, Santa?" Pretty called out.

"Skip the naughty ones," Santa replied.

"That's the entire room," someone called out.

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Sabre handed me JR and then doubled over to catch his breath from laughing so hard. The image alone made all of this worth it.

Eventually, the room calmed down, and the elves distributed the presents. I had made sure that each stocking was similar. Each brother received a pair of riding gloves and a few gift cards. The women, frilly soaps and lotions. I had gone through and made a list of each member so that they received one larger personalized present from the club. Chef cried over the new pot I had picked out. Pebbles had to rub his back until he regained his composure.

My stocking was the only one different, and I knew why. Sabre had filled it with things he knew I liked: gift cards for department stores I shopped at, bubble bath and other luxuries, but in the stocking's bottom was the best gift. He'd wrapped a small box and put JR's name on the tag as the giver. It was a new charm bracelet, and the first two charms attached were Best Mama and a motorcycle. One for each of my men. I didn't need to be reminded why I loved him, but he always made sure I felt valued and never inferior.

The volume in the room had escalated over the presents, but once Santa disappeared, the brothers with families gathered their things, preparing to leave.

"I should say something," Sabre said to me, standing from the couch and moving towards the fireplace in the front of the room. He whistled between his fingers, and the room went completely silent. "Before some of you leave, I'd like to say a few things." He looked at his feet, gathering his thoughts. I could tell whatever he was about to say would be heartfelt.

The room waited for their president to continue.

“It’s been one hell of a year for the Iron Shield. We’ve lost family.” His eyes shifted towards the ceiling for a few seconds, and everyone followed suit. The room was eerily silent. “We’ve gained family,” he continued, circling the room and stopping on each new person. Kelly tried to hide behind Op, since he was the closest to her. Meredith buried her head in Grizz’s shoulder, not wanting to be acknowledged. Aunt E sat a little straighter, a hint of the woman she had once been. Emily linked her arm around How, who casually slung his over her shoulder, both of them sharing a quiet moment. The prospects shifted under his gaze. A few others caught his eye, and then he finally landed on me and JR. He winked and went back to addressing the room.

“My father was notorious for saying you can’t pick your blood, but you can choose your family. My mother would always add, ‘We’re stronger together.’ I never understood what they meant. In fact, I thought it was just something they said so that Pretty and I wouldn’t kill each other.” A snicker floated around the room. “This year’s taught me the importance of family. Godknows, if we could pick our blood, Pretty wouldn’t be my first choice.” He smirked, looking directly at Pretty.

“Love you too, big brother.” Pretty was unfazed as he jingled the bells on his shoes.

“I choose the Iron Shield, every brother, every family member, as my family. I choose to raise my son in this family. This Christmas has reminded me we’re stronger together. We’ve survived one chaos, and I am positive there’s more on the horizon, but we’ll get through it. As family.”

The brothers stomped their feet on the wooden floor in agreement.

Sabre held out his hand to me, but I had JR in my arms. Dee saw my dilemma and sat next to me to take JR into her arms, cooing him back to sleep. When I reached Sabre, I easily placed my hand in his.

“The Iron Shield hasn’t celebrated Christmas like this in a long time. Thank you, Grace, for reminding most of us what’s important.” The brothers stomped their boots on the floor again, and there was a chorus of thank yous.

When it quieted down again, Sabre continued. “There’s one more present for the night.” He looked around the room with a slight smile on his face. Watching him, I shifted to look at the brothers as well. Every one of them either had a smile on their lips or a full-blown smirk. It was clear they knew what was about to come. I didn’t know if I should be excited or scared.

Letting go of my hand, Sabre walked over to Count and took a wrapped present from him. Placing the box in my hands, he told me, “This is for you, Grace. Open it.”

Someone had wrapped a medium-sized box in gold paper with a pretty red bow on it. I sliced through the tape at the bottom of the box with my finger and pulled the wrapping paper off. Handing it to Sabre, I lifted the lid. Inside, there were two sets of keys, laying on gold tissue paper.

I looked back at Sabre, confusion written on my face. He’d already given me a key to our home. I had kept my car, and I had those keys. What did these keys go to?

He smiled. “Pick up the keys.”

I did as I was told, and underneath the paper was a picture of the Old McMillan Place. Shaking my head, I tried to focus on the picture, but my emotions were unraveling. Meredith, my aunt, and I had worked on designs and business plans for the place, but we’d decided it would be a money pit. I’d wanted it, but I wasn’t willing to allow Sabre or the club to be stuck with a poor decision.

“What’s this?” I asked. “I mean, I know what it is, but why is it in the box?”

“Keep going, Grace.”

I picked up the picture of the building, and underneath it was a set of documents. The first page was a bill of sale. I instantly turned back to him. “You didn’t, did you?” I asked. “This place needs a ton of work.”

“You know I did.” He smiled. “Let me explain,” Sabre whispered back to me and then pulled away. “The brothers already know, but let me fill the rest of you in. Grace is now the proud owner of the Old McMillan Place. I have it on good authority that she wants to turn it into a fancy as fuck event center.”

I couldn’t help the tears that were streaming down my face as I held the box to my chest. He bent over and licked one stream from my cheek, causing more ruckus.

“Grace, the club believes that you’ll make them a fuck ton of money, so they’re going to partner with you to fix the place as the newest club business.”

I turned towards the club. This was an unfamiliar experience and it couldn’t have come at a better time. No one had ever believed in me so completely, but now they were placing their trust in me. I wasn’t going to let them down.

I wrapped my free arm around Sabre’s neck. Kissing him, I whispered against his lips words of thanks and love.

“I told you that’s what she wanted,” I heard Pretty announce to the room, as there was laughter floating around.

Chapter 20

Two Hearts in The Big Apple

Zook

“How is this going to play out, once you get back?” How asked Emily, as he drove us to the airport.

“I should have known I was going to stay. I wrote my resignation letter the day that I called you and asked for an invitation. There’s nothing personal at my desk, so I don’t have to head into the office, and I can just email Mr. Nelson and HR. I might do that from the plane.”

“What about the apartment?” How asked again.

“I am thinking about taking what I want and renting it furnished. I can call the property management company that Mom and Dad use tomorrow. They should have a department where they handle that type of stuff. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

How seemed to be on a fishing expedition, but I wasn’t sure why. I looked over at him, but his face was blank, and I couldn’t get a read on the situation. However, I didn’t stop the line of questioning. When I’d asked Em these questions earlier, she hadn’t come up with a plan yet.

“Are you planning on hiring movers?”

He was pushing too hard. If I was a betting man, I’d risk it all. I’d never taken part in the club’s bets, but this was a guaranteed win. How had a hidden agenda buried somewhere in this questioning.

“I am not sure yet. I was thinking about sorting out the stuff I want to bring with me into the living room. We can see how much there is and maybe just ship it to you. The stuff that won’t make the trip but I’d like to keep, I was thinking about taking to Mom and Dad’s. I’ll throw it in my room, and they’ll never know nor care.”

“How long do you think it’s going to take to get this done?”

I heard Emily shift in the backseat, but I didn’t turn around to look at her. I was curious how long it would be before she figured out this wasn’t innocent. How wasn’t very good at interrogations, and his cards were showing.

I hadn’t wanted Emily to head back to New York by herself, but I also hadn’t wanted to be an overbearing asshole. It had worked out well when she hadn’t wanted to be parted from me, either. We’d spend a few days in New York and then head back to the clubhouse to start the rest of our lives. Together.

“I am hoping we can catch a morning flight on New Year’s Eve and be back in time for midnight,” Emily replied from the back seat.

“Why don’t you just wait until New Year’s Day?” How asked, shooting me a nasty look out of the corner of his eye. “Why rush it?”

The pieces clicked into place, and I smiled widely, knowing exactly what he was trying to do. He didn’t want Emily anywhere nearby for New Year’s Eve. The hang-arounds would advertise the club to their friends, and the clubhouse would look and sound more like an orgy than anything else. Something about being naughty before those resolutions kicked in.

“Why? I don’t have that much to do, and besides, it’s winter. Tyler and I are not fans of snow, ice, and all things cold.”

I could hear the confusion in her voice, and I was sure there was an indentation forming in between her eyebrows. It made me smile wider until my cheeks hurt. I was enjoying How's discomfort a little too much.

"You don't want to miss anything, so why rush? Do your thing, take him sight-seeing, and then come back." How was trying, but I waited. Emily was too smart, and she'd figure out that he was hiding something from her.

She sat forward in her seat and stuck her head over the center console. First looking at How, she then turned her head in my direction, and I could feel her analyzing my face. It wouldn't be much longer now. Kissing my cheek, she turned back towards How.

"What happens on New Year's Eve?" she asked, point blank.

"The start of a new year," he said, suddenly focused on the highway.

"Besides that. You're hiding something from me, and I don't like it." Her head was on a swivel. Em would first look at How, and when she couldn't get any information out of him, she'd move to me. I'd just smile at her, and she'd turn back to How.

"You tell her," How said to me. "I can't."

I laughed, holding my stomach. "Em, it's been quiet since it's Christmas, but most Friday nights there's a party where the hang-arounds get to come into the club." I turned in my seat and watched her face for any reaction to what I'd said.

"Okay, that's not that big of a deal. I have party clothes." Her nose crinkled, and the indentation was prominent. "I might have to learn how to dance. I doubt they waltz."

How chuckled, and I laughed. "I can't put this delicately," I said. "The only waltzing

that will happen is the horizontal hula.”

“That’s why you don’t want me in the clubhouse?” She directed all of her attention towards How. “You’re afraid I am going to see you with a woman?”

“Something like that.” How’s face turned a little green at the thought, and his forehead glistened.

“They’ll be new women. They use New Year’s as an excuse to get a little crazy, as most of them won’t return.” I tried to supply Em with enough details so she’d let it go. It didn’t matter. The only woman I was going to be with was her. How was single and could do whatever the fuck he wanted.

“Oh,” she said. I watched her as she thought this through. At first, her face held confusion as she chewed on her bottom lip. When she caught me watching her, she let go of her lip, and her mouth curved into a sly smile. “It doesn’t matter when we head back. I am going to be too busy with Tyler to worry about you. Wrap it up, and everything will be fine.” She leaned forward and patted How on the arm.

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I turned back in my seat and slid down, my fingers resting on the bridge of my nose as I tried to hold it in.

“I don’t like this,” he said, panic settling in. “I don’t like this at all. Thank God our rooms aren’t near each other. I am not old enough for this conversation.” He took one hand off the wheel and pointed at me. “Fix this.”

“I am not becoming celibate to appease you.” I couldn’t hold my laughter back, and I had to hold my stomach again before I could catch my breath.

“Oh God, you’re making it worse. Whose side are you on?” he asked me, still pointing and waving his finger around.

“Me neither. I don’t foresee celibacy in my future,” Em added from the back seat.

“Do they still make chastity belts?” How directed at her.

“Eric, just stop. You’re driving yourself crazy for no reason. I am an adult, and I can make my own sexual decisions. You’re an adult, acting like a teenager. Get it together.”

“How am I supposed to do that when those sexual decisions are with my best friend?” He side-eyed me, and that must have made it worse, because he quickly turned back towards the road. How’s face contorted as if he had smelled something foul, with his nose crinkling and his lips pushing back.

“I don’t know,” she said as he pulled up to the departure gate at the airport. “That’s

your problem. You said you approved, but you're not acting like it."

I stepped out of the car and held the back passenger door open for her. "Go easy on him. He'll be fine, eventually," I whispered to her.

She pecked my lips. "He's acting like a fool, and it's disrespectful to you. He should be grateful that I am happy."

"I heard you," How said, coming around the back of the car. Popping the trunk, he handed me the suitcase that she'd brought. We'd emptied her stuff into my room, and I'd packed a duffle that was now in her suitcase for this trip.

How hugged Emily tight. "You're right. I'll be better by the time you get back."

"If it's a big deal, we can come back after the new year, but I wanted to celebrate in my new home." She frowned, and her eyes were a little glassy.

"Nah, when you're done, just head back. I'll deal." He tightened his arm around her. "I am glad you're going to be close now."

"Me, too."

He pulled back from her as the meter maid yelled at him to move the car. He yelled back that he would only be a minute, so they needed to calm the fuck down. How reached over and pulled me into his chest. "I'm glad it's you."

"You know I'll let nothing happen to her."

"I know, because you've taken care of me all of these years." He pulled back and smacked me on the arm. "Tell me when you're heading back, and I'll pick you up." With a wave, he got back in the car, leaving us on the sidewalk staring after him.

Emily

I unlocked the front door of my apartment and took a deep breath. The rich scent of pinecones filled the entryway. I'd hired a decorating company to put up the Christmas trees and garland, but I hadn't really been in the mood to celebrate.

It was good to be back, and that was when I realized that my perspective had changed. This was just a place I owned. I'd visit it once in a while, but my life was no longer here. Looking around, I couldn't help but smile. My home was with Tyler.

He caught the look on my face as he wheeled the suitcase in. He didn't ask if anything was wrong, preferring to wait until I said something.

"I was just thinking that my home is with you." I hadn't asked where we would live, but I'd make it work as long as I had Tyler, and I knew Eric would be close by.

"Always, Em." He surveyed the surroundings. "This is really nice."

I snickered. "The trust fund bought this place my last year in law school. I could have gone back and lived with my parents, but I thought it would be too awkward. That's their home, even though they're never there." I removed my winter coat and hung it in the coat closet.

"It suits you," he said, handing me his coat and taking his boots off.

We were standing in the foyer, but a few steps further in, the apartment opened up into the living room with the kitchen at the very back, in the corner. I'd been told the place was perfect for social gatherings, but I'd never hosted. There was another hallway that led to the bedrooms.

“I liked the layout, and some actress had just finished her movie and wanted to get rid of the place. I got it for a steal.” Wrapping my arms around his waist, I laid my head on his chest. His arms wrapped around my back, pulling me close.

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“I was going to get you a place in town, but I thought it would be too far from the clubhouse. You’re going to want to be close to How after so many years apart.” He threaded his fingers through the back of my hair. “I don’t want to live in my room forever. I asked the club if anyone can build a home on the property. Pretty has to look into it, but it’s in the works.”

“A house? You mean like Sabre and Flo’s house?” I was firmly in the honeymoon phase, and I hadn’t thought about our living situation. He was right. I wouldn’t want to live in his room forever.

“Yeah. If the club votes, and we can develop the land, I want to build a house back there. You’ll be close to How and the other women. I’ll know you’re safe because you’ll be on club lands.” I felt him lay his chin on top of my head. “You’re going to give me a family, but they won’t grow up in the clubhouse. They’ll still be able to run and play outside, causing mischief, but they won’t have to grow up too soon.”

“When are you planning all of this?” I asked. It sounded amazing, but I didn’t want to rush our relationship. I wanted to enjoy our lives together and let things progress naturally.

“Not for a while.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “I want you all to myself right now.” His stomach rumbled, reverberating against my ear.

“My bed is really comfy. Why don’t we order food for delivery and lay like vegetables?” I offered.

“You had me at ‘food’ and ‘bed.’” He let go of me, but I grasped his hand. Leading

him to the kitchen, I opened the drawer that had all of my takeout menus.

He took one look at the drawer and collapsed against the counter, laughing.

“Just for that, I am ordering Chinese, and you’re going to like it.” I felt his arm wrap around my waist, and he pulled me to his side as I found the menu to the restaurant around the corner.

“I don’t care. I am not a picky eater, like your brother.” We looked at each other and laughed at the inside joke. Eric was the worst eater, and I thought he would’ve grown out of that. The man only ate chicken tenders and fries if he could get away with it.

I ordered the food and then wrapped my arm around Tyler’s back and steered him towards the bedroom. “Strip,” I whispered in his ear. “It’s the only way to lay like broccoli.” I let go of him and headed towards my walk-in closet to change. I didn’t think I was in there long, but when I walked back into the bedroom, Tyler was looking at the pictures that I had framed on my armoire, fully dressed.

“You saved them,” he said, picking up a brown frame that I’d had custom made.

“I did. They were priceless to me,” I replied, knowing exactly which set of pictures he was looking at.

“I asked How to take them because I wanted you to know that I had listened. The only problem was, I opened the box, and I had to take a moment. He took the picture anyway and told me to suck it up, that you’d get a kick out of it.”

“When I look at that picture, I see the emotion on your face as if I can feel it myself. I didn’t get a kick out of it. I didn’t have any pictures from when you spent the summer in the Hamptons, and I wanted to see you. That’s why I pushed so hard,” I said to his back. His shoulders were bulging underneath his cotton shirt.

“Are these cut-outs of the balloons I drew?” he asked, not turning around.

“Yes,” I whispered. “There’s a small shop down the street that engraves trophies. I traced the original balloons onto printer paper and asked if he could make the frame.”

He sat the frame down, turned around and stared at me. “I’ll always remember this Christmas, but Valentine’s Day is our holiday. A year from now, on Valentine’s Day, marry me, Em.”

“Why in a year? Why not this Valentine’s?” If he asked, I would say yes immediately.

“I want to prove to you I am not leaving. I am in this for the long haul, but I worry that you’re going to keep expecting me to check out when it’s hard because I’ve done that before. Give me a year to prove myself.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. I don’t want you looking over your shoulder, wondering if today’s the day I am going to leave because you didn’t prove yourself. That’ll be exhausting, and I would rather just be with you.”

“No, but this is important.” He took the few steps over to me and placed his hands on each of my cheeks. “I want to make sure that my actions match my words, so that you’ll never love me any less than you do now.”

I held his cheeks in between my hands, too. “You need to breathe, Tyler Mitchell. I would marry you tomorrow if you asked me. I am not leaving, but you need to believe in us.” Kissing him, I could feel the tears running down my cheeks. “One year. In that year, I am going to prove to you I love and accept you, just the way you are.”
