



Eight Years Later (The Club Girl Diaries)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: Eight years ago, Kat left Tally behind, unsure of her place in his life.

But now she's back—scared and seeking the safety only he can provide.

Tally never expected to see Kat again, let alone just before Christmas.

The years haven't dulled his feelings for her, but the pain of her leaving still lingers.

With both danger and the holidays fast approaching, this Christmas might bring them the greatest gift of all—a new beginning.

This is a Club Girl Diaries Christmas Novella!

A short, spicy read to get you feeling in the festive season!

Total Pages (Source): 10

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:05 am

KAT

“You come here often?”

Steam swirled around me, and a thick fog filled the bathroom of my tiny apartment. I swiped at the misted glass and tried to keep the smile from my face when I spied Tally leaning back against the bathroom counter, one leg kicked over the other and his arms folded across his chest.

Watching me.

The smug grin on his face made me shake my head.

“I actually don’t remember the last time I came right here,” I teased, stepping back into the scorching hot water so the soap suds I’d just lathered across my skin trickled down over my breasts, stomach and legs before disappearing down the drain.

It felt absolutely divine after a long night on my feet. I’d dealt with a frat boy who couldn’t handle his liquor—he’d vomited on the stage while I was dancing—and a bachelor party who tried to pay me to fuck the groom-to-be.

Nothing I hadn’t seen during the three years I’d been stripping at X-Rated, but still not the most relaxing night I’d ever had.

The shower door suddenly swung open, and I gasped at the rush of cold air.

“Well, I think we should change that,” Tally said, his shirt already discarded and his

jeans quickly following. He kicked his clothes to the side and stepped into the square glass cubicle, pulling the door shut behind him. I pressed my back against the wall to make room for his large body. Tally's six-foot frame and broad shoulders took up the small space.

The water hit his chest, dripping down over a set of perfectly carved abs. I couldn't help but reach for them, tracing them with my fingertips as his fingers curled around the back of my neck and pulled me in a little closer. "How'd you get in here?" I whispered, his lips brushing over mine.

Torturing me.

"Soph let me in," he murmured as his other hand traced my waist, moving down over the curve of my hip.

My body tingled in anticipation, and my heart kicked into the next gear, pounding harder and faster. But it always did when Tally got close. "She really shouldn't do that."

Sophie was my roommate.

She worked from home and looked after my four-year-old, Dylan, when I did late shifts.

I worked for the Brothers by Blood MC in Huntsville, Alabama. Tally was a club member from a chapter a few hours away in Troy.

His hands curved around the underside of my ass, and he lifted me off the floor, pressing my back to the cold shower wall. I followed his lead and wrapped my legs around his waist and my hands around his neck. I twisted my fingers in the long bits of hair at the base of his head. "I think, at this point, you should probably just give me

a key,” he teased, not missing a damn beat. He lined up the head of his cock with my opening and pressed his hips forward.

I laid my head back, and my eyes fell closed as he filled me. “Dammit,” I cursed breathlessly, tightening my legs around him and forcing his length deep inside me. Water continued to rain down on us, and I knew I would have to turn it to cold soon because that addictive high was building in my gut.

He chuckled, leaning in and pressing a line of kisses under my ear and along my jaw line as he fucked me, the rhythm slow and steady but building with every thrust. He drove a little deeper, hitting the spot I fucking loved, and made me gasp.

“Oh yeah, there it fucking is.” He growled, burying his face in my neck. “Hold on fucking tight.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on for the ride as he pounded into me hard and fast.

“Oh! Yes,” I rasped, my orgasm hitting me like a damn freight train—out of nowhere. “Shit, Tally!”

“Fuck yeah. Your pussy is squeezing the life out of my dick,” he groaned, driving deep into me one last time and holding there, filling me with cum as I rode wave after wave of my orgasm, my body shaking.

The way he knew my body so damn well was infuriating at times.

Tally had a smart mouth, and he liked to run it. He drove me crazy with bad jokes and an attitude that bordered on confident and occasionally crossed into cocky. Maybe I was jealous of how he lived life by the seat of his pants while I was constantly trying to find my feet. When my life felt like utter chaos—Tally always seemed to find the

funny side of even the direst situations.

But the part that drove me the most insane was that he was also exactly what I needed during those times. He had become the person who could pull me out of those dark holes and put a smile on my face when all I wanted to do was bury it in the sand and forget about the world.

How was I supposed to keep things with him casual when he had become so fucking important?

He and I had been doing this dance for years.

We fucked whenever he was in town. I never really knew when he would stop by unless one of the boys from the club mentioned that Tally was in town. He'd do his business then come by X-Rated or my apartment to see me—like tonight.

He never slept over.

That was our rule—he had to be out by sunrise.

Dylan may have only been two when this started, but I wanted to make sure he wasn't confused by seeing someone else sleeping beside me when he came into my room at the ass crack of dawn. Especially because, at the time, I was sure it would never become anything serious.

And after more than a year, it still wasn't.

But there was one difference.

I wished it was.

“You okay?” he questioned after he’d finally helped me back to my feet and quickly rinsed himself off. He grabbed a towel and scrubbed his wet skin, his eyebrow raised. “You seem quiet.”

I turned away and continued to wash and clean away the traces of him.

Tell him.

Tell him about the letter.

I couldn’t.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said instead. “Just was a long ass night.”

The sounds of him pulling his clothes on twisted my gut even tighter. He would leave any minute, and I was standing in the damn shower fighting the urge to be honest with him in the hope that it would change things.

That maybe it would make him realize that he wants something more than we had.

“You know you can come to me for anything, right?” The joking was gone, his tone more serious than before and laced with concern.

Tell him!

“I—”

“Shit, Kit needs me at the clubhouse,” Tally cursed. A few seconds later, he pulled the shower door open again. “I gotta go, gorgeous. I’m heading home in the morning, so I’ll see you next time I’m up, probably in a few weeks.”

He pressed a kiss to my lips, not just a peck, but a kiss that I felt in my soul, his tongue swiped across my lips, seeking entrance. His hand cradled my jaw, and I leaned in, savoring every second before he finally pulled back, grinning. “See you later, gorgeous,” he said as he backed out of the bathroom.

Then he was gone.

The tears were instant—as if summoned by the click of the door as it closed behind him—and they didn’t stop when I shut the water off and wrapped my towel around me, water still dripping from my body as I stepped into my bedroom.

“You didn’t tell him.” Sophie sat in the middle of my bed, shaking her head and holding the letter in her hand—the acceptance letter to Jacksonville University in Florida.

I had planned to see Tally the next day and tell him I was starting my nursing career and the first step was moving to Jacksonville.

The second part of the plan had been to tell him that I’d fallen for him—hard—and hope he had fallen for me too. Or at least hope he would ask me to stay, start a real relationship, and see where things went between us. The plan had been easy to construct in theory. I’d convinced myself that a few hours together once every month or two was enough to build something on. But the way he’d come in and out that night, as if it were as easy as floating on a breeze, was the slap in the face I needed.

I let out an unsteady laugh, sending a new wave of tears streaking down my cheeks. “He was here for less than twenty minutes, Soph,” I told her, shaking my head. “He got his dick wet, and he left. That’s all this is.”

She threw her hands in the air. “You didn’t even give him the chance to consider anything more than that. Maybe knowing you’re leaving would be the thing that

made him realize he wanted more than just this.”

“Or maybe it’s better this way,” I countered, swiping at the tears and trying to find myself again. “Maybe it’s better that I don’t know how he would have reacted.”

Maybe wondering ‘what if’ would be easier than hearing ‘no.’

Or maybe, I’d regret this forever.

“Well, I guess we need a distraction,” Soph finally said, pulling me from my sad haze. She got up, walked to my wardrobe, and threw the doors open. “Let’s play ‘cleaning out the stripper’s closet because she’s about to become a respectable member of society.’ ”

I couldn’t help but laugh, even though my chest felt like it was being torn in two.

“First up, the crotchless chaps.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:05 am

TALLY

EIGHT YEARS LATER

“You nearly done?” I called to Tie, attempting to hold the ladder as he jiggled and shuffled around. “My balls are gonna freeze off if we’re out here much longer.”

We were on Christmas light duty because Harmony insisted that they needed to be up so things would start to feel more magical .

“Almost,” Tie yelled back, though I was already shivering.

I hated the cold.

It made it harder to do almost anything.

Talk.

Think.

Ride my motorcycle.

The distinct growl of a couple of Harleys pulling around the corner at the end of the block was a noise I would know anywhere.

And apparently, I wasn’t the only one who knew it.

“Daddy’s back!”

“Nya, don’t go out there.” Harmony’s call had me turning on my heel in time to see a tiny blonde-haired toddler shoot out of the clubhouse doors, heading for the front gates. “Nya!”

I abandoned the ladder, skidding on the cold ground as I started running. Thankfully, one of my footsteps was like five three-year-old steps, so I managed to cut the kid off before she got too close to the road. I grabbed her under the arms, the high-pitched giggles that left her tiny body instantly made me laugh as I tossed her into the air and caught her again.

“The escapee has been detained,” I announced, tucking her under my arm as she kicked and flailed.

“Let... me... go,” she protested, though the way it was broken up by laughter was a sure sign she was planning on making another run for it the second her feet hit the ground.

“Nya,” the troublemaker’s older brother, Layton, exclaimed. He stepped outside with Harmony beside him. Both had concerned frowns on their faces. “You have to wait until Dad stops before you come out here. Those are the rules.”

Layton was one of the most level-headed six-year-olds I’d ever met.

Honestly, you couldn’t get two more different kids.

While Layton took the world a little too seriously sometimes, always cautious and extremely protective, Nya saw everything and anything as a new opportunity to cause absolute chaos. She was a toddler-sized tornado, and I was not looking forward to when she got to her teens.

Kit and Harmony were lucky they had Layton to hopefully keep an eye on her and try to steer her straight.

But I was already taking bets on how much hair Kit would lose before Nya even turned sixteen.

Kit and Wreck finally pulled in the front gates and eased their rides into the open garage where the rest were parked, just in case we were hit with any snow or ice. It wasn't likely, but stranger things had happened at Christmas.

Like Harmony said, it was fucking magical.

“Uncyy Tally... down now, please!”

I held her out in front of me while I waited for the engines to switch off, her legs already kicking.

The instant the deafening rumble stopped, I placed her on the ground, and she was off like lightning.

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!”

When he stepped out a few seconds later with her on his hip and her arms wrapped tight around his neck, you could see that she thought my best friend was the most incredible thing in the entire world. Harmony grinned, watching as the two of them bent their heads together and whispered while Layton leaned into his mom, content to simply be with her.

To think these two kids might have never existed was such a crazy reality to imagine.

Kit and Harmony were born to be parents, but the universe didn't make it fucking

easy for them.

When they found Kaci to be their surrogate, everything changed. She gave them two beautiful babies and became part of our big crazy family.

In more ways than one.

“Tie! Your son is playing kickball with my bladder again!” Kaci groaned, joining us outside with her nose screwed up and a hand on her tiny round belly. She spotted him at the top of the ladder and shook her head. “If you die before this baby is born, I’m going to have to kill you.”

“Shit!” I rushed over and grabbed the ladder firmly in my hands. “He’s fine, safe and sound.”

He glanced down. “Yeah. I’m fine, Tally’s holding it steady,” he told her with a wave of his hand, having not noticed that I’d been at least ten feet away for the previous few minutes.

“Super steady,” I agreed, smiling wide at Kaci who wasn’t as amused.

“How was Op?” I asked Kit, stepping back when Tie made his way down. I made sure his feet were firmly back on the ground before I followed Kit inside.

Kit chuckled. “You know, I always think this place is crazy until I go up there. They have three fucking teen daughters in that clubhouse.”

“Now that’s a special version of hell I’m not really into.”

Kit placed Nya on the floor, and she was gone in seconds. Now she’d had her daddy time and was ready for a new adventure. We both took a seat at the nearest table, and

the hard, pointed look he aimed across at me had me rolling my eyes. “You need to start riding up there with me again.”

“Is that a request or an order?” I challenged. The way his eyes narrowed in response quickly made me feel like absolute fucking shit though.

“Does it fucking matter?” he threw back.

“Brother—”

“No. Honestly, I get it was hard when she moved, and you stopped wanting to spend time there...”

I gritted my teeth. Even years later, there was still a sharp pain. It wasn’t as bad as before, but I didn’t know if it would ever actually leave.

“...but fuck man, I’d really like my best friend riding beside me again.”

Kit had a huge supplier of quality weed, so good that Optimus—the president in Huntsville—had asked to be introduced. The deal was that we transported the product upstate, and he gave us a small cut from his profits for us taking the risk of getting caught.

For a long time, I spent almost a weekend a month up in Huntsville, nowadays, I only made the trip a handful of times during the year, and that was only when Kit really needed me.

It wasn’t that going up there was heartbreaking or devastating.

It was just a habit I had formed to get through something hard.

Only, I was starting to think that instead of worrying that going back there would bring back old memories, it was about time I started to create new ones.

“Next time,” I told him, holding out my fist. “I’ll start riding up there with you more often.”

He bumped his fist to mine and leaned back in his seat, rolling his shoulders before looking around. “Fucking hell, it looks like Santa puked in my clubhouse.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:05 am

KAT

“That is the last thing I’m buying this kid, I swear,” I muttered to myself as I finished wrapping another present. I carried it over to our tree, shaking my head as I fought to find a place for it underneath.

There were only the two of us.

And other than the tiny present I’d been given by a patient at work—which I knew was a box of chocolates—every single gift was for my twelve-year-old son, Dylan.

My nurse’s salary wasn’t exactly conducive to me becoming a billionaire, so a lot of the gifts were inexpensive items like candy, socks, and deodorant—because teenage boy. But there were also a few I’d been saving for since last Christmas, and I honestly couldn’t wait to see his face when he opened them.

Hopefully it would make this year feel a little more like Christmas.

It was usually just my mom and us. We used to drive eight hours to be with her for a week or so, but two years earlier, she’d uprooted everything and moved a few minutes down the road.

I thought it was because she’d been offered a new job, or maybe she had a new man she wouldn’t talk about. But in January that year, she’d told us it was because she wanted to spend as much time with us as possible before the cancer really got a foothold.

By April she was gone.

And this Christmas was going to feel that little bit lonelier without her.

A cold chill began to swirl around me and I knew I needed to get rid of it before it settled into my bones, so I grabbed my bag and headed down the hall to my bedroom. My bag had everything in it, from my phone and charger to gym clothes and keys, and I needed to make sure that everything was charged and sweaty clothes were washed before my shift the next day.

But first, I was going to have a long hot shower.

I tossed the bag onto my bed and headed straight for my bathroom, pulling my shirt up over my head and tossing it onto the vanity.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

For a second I wondered if I was hearing things and paused, holding my breath.

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

This time the knocks were harder and definitely coming from my front door.

“Dammit,” I cursed, glancing longingly at the shower before letting out a heavy sigh and reaching for my shirt again, pulling it back over my head. I hurried back down the hall to the living room, catching the clock out of the corner of my eye as I passed by.

It was after nine at night.

Not a common time for me to get visitors.

The thought made me pause at the door, my hand hovering above the lock. “Who is it?” I called, trying to sound confident and keep my voice from wavering.

“Kat, it’s Eve,” a soft but shaky voice called back. “Please, I need help.”

Eve lived across the street, and she and I had gotten reasonably close since we’d moved in a little over a year ago. The panic in her voice had me quickly flicking over the lock and reaching for the door handle, yanking it open. Only, instead of just her standing on the other, there was a man with his arm draped around her shoulders, her tiny body obviously struggling to hold him up.

“What the...”

“Please, help. I can’t hold him,” she pleaded, looking up at me, her eyes sparkling with tears.

I almost tripped over the entranceway as I hurried to get out. I lifted the man’s arm over my shoulder so I could take some of his weight as we maneuvered him through the doorway and into my living room. We managed to get him onto my couch, where I saw the problem the second he was laid out on his back.

“Oh my God,” I exclaimed, snatching a cloth from the counter and pressing it hard against what looked like a stab wound in his stomach. I looked up at Eve, my eyes wide. “What the hell? Who is this?”

I wasn’t sure she’d heard me, though.

She merely stood there, holding her trembling hands out in front of her, staring at the blood that coated them.

“Eve!” I yelled, finally drawing her attention.

“He’s uh...” She stumbled over her words, shock taking over. “He’s my brother, Karl. He hangs out with this street gang. Showed up a few minutes ago, freaking out, bleeding.”

“He needs a hospital. Hold this. I’ll run and get my phone.”

Her head moved up and down like a bobblehead on a car dashboard, and she dropped to her knees beside me, taking the already-drenched cloth and pressing hard against the wound. Karl groaned, but so far, he was still alive and breathing. I wondered whether he’d actually gotten fucking lucky, and whatever he’d been stabbed with hadn’t hit anything vital.

I leaped to my feet and rushed down the hall into my bedroom, where I dug through my purse and pulled out my cell. I’d been working as a nurse for over four years, yet, my hands shook as I dialed 911. I guess this was a little different. A hospital was made to save people who were bleeding, suffering, and dying. That was its purpose, and that alone gave me confidence, as I knew I had everything at my fingertips to keep that person alive.

My house didn’t have those things.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“Hi, I need—”

“Ah, Karl,” a male voice boomed, and I knew it was in my house. “I figured you’d run to your little sister.” The voice taunted.

“Get out!” Eve screamed. “Look what you did. He might die.”

“Maybe he shouldn’t have stolen from me then.”

“Hello? Ma’am?” The lady on the phone questioned, but I was too scared to make a sound. Dylan’s room was straight across the hall, and with the light from the hallway, I could see him sitting up in his bed, his eyes wide and hands gripping the blankets.

Absolutely petrified.

That was when the momma bear instincts kicked in. Nothing else mattered. Not the guy bleeding on my couch or even the neighbor with whom I had formed a close friendship. In that moment, all I could think about was getting my son the hell out of there and getting us somewhere safe.

I grabbed my purse off the bed and tucked my phone into my pocket, holding my breath as I stuck my head out into the hall, looking back at the living room to make sure no one could see me. Noting that it was clear, I tiptoed quickly across to Dylan’s room and waved him toward me as I hurried over to the window.

My body was tingling, the result of my heart pumping blood to important body parts because it was aware the fight or flight response was about to kick in.

And while ‘flight’ was in full effect, I needed to be prepared to ‘fight’ because every little movement or noise I made felt amplified. Thankfully, so far, whoever the man standing in my living room was, he was too busy ranting and raving about what happened when people messed with him. His booming voice covered the sound of me pushing the curtain to the side and unlatching the window.

“Mom...”

“Shh.” I pushed the window open, gritting my teeth, knowing every sound could alert them to our presence. “Quick. Climb out.” I gave Dylan a boost, helping him out of the window and onto the grass outside.

I passed him my purse, climbed up onto the ledge, and folded my body through the tight space. The stones in the garden below the window clinked and scraped, but I wasted no time, grabbing Dylan's hand and then leaned down to his level. "We're gonna run to the car," I whispered, trying not to get distracted by the pure fear shining back at me.

My kid was strong. Last year, he broke his arm while he was skateboarding, and he didn't shed a single tear or complain.

But this was different.

It was the unpredictability that was scary.

We didn't know who those people were or what they were capable of.

"Okay," he said quietly, standing a little straighter and nodding his head.

The car was parked in front of the garage, and we were on the opposite side of the house, so we had to run past the front door to get there. I had no idea whether the front door was still open or if someone was watching.

"We get in the car, we lock the doors, and we get out of here," I explained, holding out my hand.

He slipped his into mine, and I squeezed it tightly.

"One. Two. Three. Go!"

We ran, rounding the side of the house and across the front lawn. Neither of us wore shoes, and the dew that had settled on the grass almost made me lose my footing. Light beamed out across the lawn, letting me know the front door was still open, but I

didn't dare glance inside.

I simply needed to focus on getting us the hell out of there.

I grabbed the driver's door handle, and Dylan reached for the rear door. We both pulled at the same time.

Footsteps pounded against the concrete path behind me. "Hey, bitch! Where do you think you're going."

Don't stop.

I threw myself into the car and reached for the door. A hand slipped into the crack before I could completely shut the door.

But that didn't stop me.

I pulled hard and smashed the fingers between the door and the frame.

The person connected to them roared loudly and withdrew far enough for me to close the door and flick the auto lock, locking all the car doors. I fumbled with the keys as Dylan climbed through the center and into the front seat.

"Mom, we need to go," he urged.

"I know, I know." I finally managed to jam the key into the ignition and turned it. The engine came to life. "Put your belt on."

"Fucking whore," the man roared, pounding his fist on the window and making me jump. "Get out, bitch."

I turned to look.

Just a glance.

He had shaggy black hair that whipped around his face as he screamed at me through the glass. I could see tattoos, a lot of them. Across his eyebrow and cheek, on his temple, and almost completely covering his arms, disappearing up under his short-sleeved Rolling Stones T-shirt.

I finally got the car into reverse and pressed hard against the accelerator, jolting both Dylan and my bodies as we sped backward. One of my tires bumped over the curb as we flew out onto the street, and we barely paused so I could put it into drive.

The man chased after us, still screaming, as we sped off down the street. “I’ll be fucking waiting, bitch. You’ve gotta come back sometime.”

I looked into the rearview mirror and saw him standing in the middle of our usually quiet suburban street, under one of the street lights. I turned the corner at the intersection and kept driving. Another corner, then another.

Even when we got a few miles away and passed several police cars, lights and sirens screaming, I still kept driving.

“Where are we going?” Dylan asked as he watched them speed by. “To the police station?”

It was a pretty good suggestion.

And we probably would have been safe there, with cops all around us.

Until we had to go home.

I'll be fucking waiting, bitch.

You've gotta come back sometime.

The words played over in my mind.

If the police didn't catch him, or he got out on bail—what would we do then?

“No,” I answered finally, pulling out onto the interstate and trying not to look at my hands as they gripped the wheel. I didn't want to think about the blood still smeared on my hands and up my arms. “We're going to go ask a friend for help.”

Someone had once promised me that no matter what happened between us, he would always have my back. I had no doubt he would protect Dylan and me using whatever means necessary.

And even though I knew it would probably be hard to see him again after eight years, my hurt feelings were far less important than my son's safety.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:05 am

TALLY

Bang!

My bedroom door swung open hard, hitting the wall behind it. I reached for the gun stashed between my bed and the nightstand, and my fingers wrapped around it as Kit's voice broke through my sleepy haze. "Get up and get outside," he ordered. "You're gonna wanna see this."

With the threat gone, I slumped back onto my pillow and took a breath, trying to slow my racing heart. "What the actual fuck, Kit?" I mumbled to myself a few seconds later, tossing back the blankets and getting to my feet. I pulled on my jeans, followed by my hoodie—and caught sight of the digital clock on my side table.

2:09 a.m.

What the hell was going on?

My cut was the last thing I shrugged on as I made my way down the hall to the main area, rubbing at my eyes when I spotted bright lights through the open door. Two silhouettes were outlined in the headlights of a car—one was Kit, but I didn't recognize the other.

It was a woman.

I stepped outside, blinking a few times as I got closer to where they were speaking in hushed tones. "... doctor?"

The woman shook her head, holding her hands up. “It’s not mine, I’m fine.”

The voice.

I knew that fucking voice.

“Kat?”

“Hey Tally,” Sophie greeted, almost sadly, as I stood outside the apartment door. “She’s not here.”

I frowned, looking past her to the clock on the wall. “She usually finishes at eleven on a Thursday. She change shifts?” We rode into town later than expected and still had to get the goods unloaded and shit at the clubhouse. But it was almost twelve now and X-Rated was closed when I went by on my way here.

“She moved.”

I paused, shaking my head as though it was going to stop those two words going into my ears. “To another apartment?”

Soph swallowed hard. “To another state.”

I braced my hands against the door frame, leaning into it to keep myself steady while it felt like someone was pulling the floor out from under my feet. “What the fuc—”

“She was meant to tell you last time she saw you. She got accepted to college. She’s gonna start nursing, follow her dream.” The emotion in Sophie’s voice was thick, she was obviously missing her friend. “I told her to tell you.”

“But she fucking didn’t,” I snapped. The new information transformed my feeling of

sadness into one of anger. “She knew she wasn’t going to be here next time I was in town and just decided the best option was to disappear without a trace.”

Why would she do that?

Sure, shit between us wasn’t perfect, the long-distance thing, the way she didn’t want me around Dylan. I figured we’d grow past that eventually as we took things further. As she got to trust me and see the effort I was making to be around.

I tried to get up here once a month, even if it was only for the night. I rode over three hours each way so I could be with her for maybe a couple of hours, sometimes even less. I couldn’t be here all the time because I had commitments to the club and my brothers in Troy.

But I had been trying in the best way I knew how.

Obviously, she didn’t see it that way.

Or maybe she didn’t give a flying fuck about us at all.

Why the hell else would she just up and leave?

“You don’t get it. Her feelings—”

“Her feelings? What about mine!” I shoved away from the door and took a couple of steps back. “Fucking hell, I’m out of here.”

“Tally!” Sophie called after me. “Call her. Tell her how you feel.”

Maybe I should have.

But instead of fighting for her, I decided to fight the feelings instead.

I numbed the ache with alcohol and hard work until I couldn't feel it anymore.

And yet, seeing her standing in front of me felt like I was right back there, standing in that doorway, trying to figure out where the fuck I had gone wrong and whether everything I'd felt between us had just been a lie.

“What the hell are you—” I caught a glimpse of the color of her hands as she tucked them around her body. “Is that blood?” I demanded.

I reached out and grabbed Kat's arm, pulling her toward me. I swept my hands through her disheveled hair, pushing it back from her face and scanning it for injuries. She was just like I remembered, maybe a little older, but still beautiful as hell, even with the more pronounced smile lines pinching at the corner of her eyes.

“Yeah. It's a long story,” Kat murmured when our eyes finally met for the first time in eight years. I tightened my hold on her just a little when I saw the fear in her eyes. Kat was one of the strongest women I knew. Fear was not an emotion I saw commonly, and it instantly made me want to drive my fist through the face of whoever had put it there. “I didn't know where else to go. Everything in me told me to drive to you.”

Because I would never not look after her.

Even after everything that had happened.

And the angry fire that had been burning a minute ago was now ready to destroy whoever the hell had caused her fear, which was a sure sign that, even after all this time, the feelings I'd had for her were still very much alive and kicking.

“Come on,” I urged, pressing my hand to her back. “Let’s go inside, and you can tell us what the hell is going on.”

She pushed back against me and looked back over her shoulder to the car. “Can I get Dylan into bed so he can rest first?”

The car door creaked open.

I was sure I would see a four-year-old climb out, but as the kid unfolded his body from the front seat and stood, I realized he was just a few inches shorter than me.

“Geez, kid,” Kit said with a laugh, trying to keep things light. “I don’t wanna sound like an old guy, but you were like knee-high when I saw you last.”

Dylan forced a smile, his eyes shifting to where my hand was pressed to Kat’s back before he met my gaze and narrowed.

“Dylan,” Kat warned. “It’s okay. You can relax now.”

“Come on,” I urged, nodding toward the clubhouse. “We’ll get you set up in a room, then we can chat before you guys get some sleep.”

They were both exhausted, Dylan practically passing out the second we got them into one of the spare rooms. I waited in the doorway, unable to take my eyes off her while she sat with him, stroking his head and whispering quietly as he drifted off.

It was like I was scared to look away.

That if I did, she’d be gone again.

There was going to come a time when we would have to talk about that. When I

would ask my questions and let her know how the choice she made affected me. How it had left this dull ache in my chest that, for a long time, drove me fucking crazy.

This was not that time, though.

Right now, I simply needed to make sure she was okay and, if she wasn't, find a way to fix it.

Because no matter how badly it hurt when she left, it still didn't compare to how much I still damn well cared.

"Okay," she whispered, finally meeting me at the door.

"We don't have to do this tonight," I told her, when I noticed the way her eyes were drooping. It was getting close to three in the morning. "You can rest. We can talk about it tomorrow."

She shook her head, then lifted her chin like a real fucking soldier. "I'd just rather get it off my chest and hear what you and Kit have to say."

"Fair enough, let's do it." I once again lay my hand on the small of her back. Maybe it was me trying to let her know I had her back. Or maybe it was a reminder to me that she was actually here. In the flesh. Maybe even a little of both. I wasn't entirely sure. I simply knew I couldn't help it.

We joined Kit at one of the tables in the main room.

Kat placed her hands on the table for a second before her eyes caught sight of them, and she quickly hid them in her lap, shaking her head. "My neighbor Eve showed up with her brother. He'd been stabbed, and she wanted me to help."

Because she was a nurse now.

And I bet a damn good one.

“That’s where the blood is from,” Kit stated.

Kat nodded. “Honestly, everything else happened so fast. I went down the hall to get supplies, then suddenly, there were other voices in the house. A man. The way Eve was yelling at him, it was obvious he was the one who had stabbed her brother.” I gritted my teeth a little harder with each word. “I freaked out. I didn’t know what he was going to do, so I grabbed Dylan, and we climbed out the window. We got to the car, then this guy came out, he started banging on the window, saying that we had to come back sometime and he’d be there waiting.”

Kit’s fists were clenched on top of the table as we listened to what had happened. “You have any idea who this guy was? Why he’d stabbed your neighbor’s brother?”

“No. I know nothing.” Her shoulders slumped, and I reached over and placed my hand on her thigh, squeezing it gently.

She looked up at me. “What about what he looked like?” I questioned, seeking any little detail that could help us possibly figure out what we were dealing with.

Kat scrunched up her nose. “Like Post Malone, but if he was on crack. Tall and really slim, with tattoos smattered everywhere... on his face too. He was scary looking, and the way he said he’d be there waiting for us when we came home...” A full-body shudder moved through her, every part of her shook for a moment.

“Okay good,” Kit said with a nod. “Why don’t you go and get some rest. We’ll figure out a plan tomorrow.”

“You’re gonna help?”

Kit’s brow knotted between his eyes. “You think we wouldn’t?” Her eyes flicked to me before returning to Kit, who shook his head when she opened her mouth to speak. “I think the hand on your leg right now is all that needs to be said. Though I’m sure my brother here will correct me if I’m wrong.”

He wasn’t.

And he knew it—the smug look on his face as he got to his feet told me exactly that.

Kat and I stayed there as Kit stepped out of the room, neither of us made a move to leave the table.

“Tally...”

I held my hand up. “There will be plenty of time later. After we fix this shit so you and Dylan can feel safe again. Now, let’s get you a hot shower and wash off all the bullshit you’ve just endured.”

I held out my hand, and she placed hers in it, letting me help her to her feet.

At some point, we would talk about the past.

And maybe when that time came, we would also talk about the future.

Because letting her go hurt enough the first time.

And I needed to decide if I was willing to do it again.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:05 am

KAT

Tally had let me use his bathroom so Dylan could finally get some sleep in our room, without being kept awake by me showering and trying to wind down. Although the scorching hot shower I'd taken had done nothing to calm my pounding heart.

It hadn't stopped racing since we'd left home, and there were times during the trip here I'd had to pull over, wondering if I should actually drive myself to the hospital to get it checked. I was pretty sure I'd had a full-blown panic attack.

Something that, for most people, would be completely debilitating.

But they say adrenaline can give people superhuman powers, and I was pretty sure that it had given me the power of just not break the fuck down or lose my shit that night.

I wrapped the fluffy black towel around me.

Of course the clubhouse had black towels because who the hell wants to try and clean blood and grease from a white one? I caught sight of something red as I tucked the edge of the towel under my arm and quickly whipped both hands out, holding them in front of me.

I'd scrubbed them to the point of pain.

They were practically sparkling, and yet, I swear I could still see the blood on them, even though I'd only seconds ago watched it swirl down the shower drain.

It wasn't as if I hadn't had blood on my hands before.

Working as a nurse meant having a comfortable relationship with bodily fluids. Blood, urine, vomit—you had to be able to hold your shit together when covered with any of the three. This was different, though.

This person hadn't been in a hospital bed.

They'd been in my living room.

Stabbed and possibly bleeding out on my sofa.

And I'd run away.

"Hey." I looked up into the mirror. Tally was standing behind me in the doorway, his eyes meeting mine. Eyes that I hadn't seen for eight damn years and yet still had the same effect on me. "I just checked on Dylan. He's sleeping."

Up until that point, I'd been in control.

On the five-hour drive here, Dylan had slept a little, but, for the most part, we'd talked about anything to keep our minds occupied. I didn't want to think about the person I'd left dying on my sofa or the man who had chased after us, making it clear he didn't want to let us simply get away.

I'd ignored it all.

Just to get here.

And we'd made it.

My entire body shook with the sob that left me as the weight of the night's events hit me suddenly. Two arms enveloped me, wrapped me up tightly from behind and held me as I struggled to breathe through the tears. We sank to the floor together, his back to the wall and me curled into a ball in his arms. I held tight to his leather, buried my face in his neck and let the tears flow.

Not because I was still scared.

But because I finally felt safe again.

Even after eight years, that energy still surrounded him, and with his body wrapped around mine, I could feel it protecting me. He was protecting me.

Tally may have driven me absolutely crazy at times, but if there was one thing I knew for sure about him, it was that he looked after the people he loved. He fought for them. I'd seen it myself, not only with his brothers' old ladies when threats were made or kids at the club when they were in trouble, but with anyone he considered family.

Including me.

It was one of the reasons I fell so hard.

And also one of the reasons I walked away.

Because the idea of rejection and not being a part of that any more was too much to bear.

At least when I left, I could still imagine he felt that way.

"It's okay," he murmured, gently rocking back and forth like you would a small

child. “I’ve got you.”

We stayed like that for a while, until my ass was numb from the cold tile floor, but I could finally inhale a long deep breath instead of the short, sharp ones my tears forced upon me. I still wasn’t ready to move, though. I’d forgotten how much I loved the smell of his leather and the way I felt dwarfed by his broad shoulders and muscular upper body.

I cleared my throat finally, loosening my grip on him a little. “Sorry. I wasn’t expecting the complete and utter breakdown.”

His quiet laughter jostled me a little. “That makes two of us.”

“I used to be a lot stronger,” I admitted with a smile. “When there were fights at X-Rated, I always tried to step in, break it up while fists were flying. I’m not sure when I became a runner instead of a fighter.”

“I also remember having to pull you out of those fights because those fuckers were the size of semitrucks, and you were five-foot-ten on a good day... in heels,” he teased, pinching softly at my side. A smile grew on my face, and I let out a short laugh. “Maybe you’ve just gotten a little better at picking your battles.”

I had.

Things became a lot quieter after I left X-Rated and started school. My life was a little more laid back, and my priorities had changed. I had to learn things like a good bedside manner and how to comfort people—although, sometimes, when I worked weekend night shifts, I tapped into that take-no-shit version of myself to deal with the drunks.

I glanced out the open bathroom door into Tally’s bedroom.

The bed was a mess, but when I'd walked by before, it looked like only one side had been slept in, though I still couldn't help but ask. "Should I be worried about getting my ass beat by an old lady if they walk in and see this?"

"Possibly," he answered, and my stomach twisted. I quickly tried to pull away, but he held me even tighter, his deep laughter vibrating through me. "I mean, Harmony was really upset when you left."

I shook my head.

This damn man.

I pulled back just enough to see his face. "Funny," I deadpanned. "But I meant yours, butthead."

"Never took one," he admitted, though he couldn't stop smiling. That was normal. It wasn't like I'd been the most serious person in the world, but it was obvious he got a kick out of driving me absolutely freaking crazy. I guessed that hadn't changed. "Not a lot of women out there who want to put up with my shit on a regular basis. What about you? There a boyfriend who's gonna show up tomorrow and throw fists at me?"

"There's not." I scoffed. "Between being a single mom to a temperamental preteen and trying to get my career started, there's really no time to try and build a relationship with someone."

That was kind of a lie.

New relationships do take time. You have to learn about each other, go out on dates, and invite them into the small bubble you've already created and hope that they help it grow bigger rather than just popping it. But the truth was, there's always time if

you want to make the time.

And all I'd made over the previous few years were excuses.

Mostly because being hurt again was scary.

But there was a little part that avoided seeing anyone else because I was hopeful that I'd be right here one day, back in Tally's arms. I didn't imagine it being so bloody or traumatic, but there was something about being back in Alabama that honestly felt right.

"All right, now that my ass is completely numb and we've established no one is getting beaten up..." Tally helped me up before getting to his feet, "... you need to get some sleep."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to close my eyes and not see the road I've been staring at for five hours."

He brushed my hair back from my face and grinned. "You should really try because when Harmony finds out you're in the clubhouse, she is not going to wait until you get out of bed. She's going to come looking for you, and those kids wake her at 6:00a.m. without fail."

My heart sang at the sound of those kids .

Sophie kept me updated on the club, so I knew Harmony had kids, but it would still be surreal to see Harmony and Kit as parents.

I bet they were amazing, and they really did deserve it.

"I can't wait to meet them," I whispered, allowing Tally to guide me across the hall to

the room Dylan was sleeping in.

As I reached for the handle, he grabbed my wrist and gently turned me to face him. “If it wasn’t for the fact that I don’t want Dylan to wake up in a strange place alone, I’d be dragging you back in there.” He pointed back to his room while holding my gaze. “Just so you know.” He leaned in, pressed a kiss to the top of my head, and finally stepped back.

I swallowed past the nervous lump in my throat and the butterflies creating a tornado in my stomach, nodding to let him know I heard him.

The feelings, the emotions, the connection between us—they were still there.

Even after all these years.

And maybe that was a sign, and something I shouldn’t ignore.

Not this time.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:05 am

KAT

“Holy crap it’s good to see you,” Harmony exclaimed, throwing her arms around me.

I laughed softly, holding her tight.

“Holy cwap!” a little voice sang behind me, and Harmony suddenly pulled away, her eyes wide. “Holy cwap!” The tiny blonde human sang again as she danced around us, repeating the curse over and over again.

I tried to hide my smile with my hand, but the laughter that bubbled up completely outted me.

Harmony pinched the bridge of her nose before taking a deep breath and reaching for the child, lifting her up onto her hip. “Nya, this is Kat,” Harmony introduced us with a wide smile. “And that’s Layton,” she added, pointing to a young boy sitting on a couch in the corner, focused intently on the Nintendo in his hands.

“It is so nice to meet you, Nya,” I cooed at her and reached out to tug at the little puffy sleeves of her dress. It was green and red and had little matching shoes that curled up at the toes. “This is so pretty. Are you one of Santa’s elves?”

“I am,” she announced loudly, her tiny little head bobbling. “I am an elf!”

Kit and Tally stepped in from outside, both with their teeth chattering. “They think it might fucking snow,” Kit announced with a smile, glancing back at his best friend.

“I hate the cold,” Tally grumbled, scrunching up his nose at the thought of ice falling from the sky.

“That would be awesome,” Layton crowed from the corner of the room, suddenly a lot less interested in his game. Instead, he rushed over to the window that overlooked the side yard. There was nothing floating out there yet, but judging from the small breeze I’d caught when the men had come in, it sure felt cold enough. “Mom, can I go out and kick my soccer ball around?”

Harmony nodded. “Go get your coat,” she told him, quickly adding, “Maybe you could ask Dylan if he’d like to kick the ball with you? He’s in the room opposite Tally’s.”

“Sure!” He rushed off down the hall, excited by the idea of having a friend to play with.

“Down,” Nya demanded, taking off after her big brother the second her feet touched the floor. “Holy cwap!”

Kit’s eyes shot wide, and he looked over at Harmony while Tally and I tried not to let our laughter loose. “I have no idea where she got that from,” Harmony insisted, holding her hands up.

“Uh-huh.” Kit scoffed, then bellowed, “Church!”

He and Tally both disappeared into a room with large double doors, and more men appeared from all over—doors, hallways, inside, and outside—until the double doors finally closed behind them.

“Come on. Let’s sit,” Harmony said, taking my hand and leading me to the bar, where we each pulled up a barstool.

“Hopefully, Dylan decides to take Layton up on that offer. He loves soccer,” I said with a heavy sigh. “He doesn’t want to come out of the bedroom. I’m not sure if he’s still scared or what’s going on. I just hope he doesn’t shut down.”

“It’s a lot to digest for someone so young,” Harmony said, placing her hand over mine and squeezing. “Remember, it only happened last night. Give him time.”

She was right.

We’d literally driven through the clubhouse gates less than twelve hours earlier.

But this place felt so much like home to me that it seemed like we’d been there forever.

Or maybe it wasn’t the place exactly.

But the people.

Or one person in particular.

“Oh, Kaci,” Harmony called, waving over a young woman with dark hair. “I want you to meet Kat.”

Kaci rounded the bar, standing on the other side with a bright smile that I couldn’t help but mirror. “It’s nice to meet you,” Kaci greeted happily. “Tie was telling me about what happened. I hope you’re okay?”

It instantly warmed me to hear her genuine concern.

It was a reminder of what the club was like. Whether it was here or in Huntsville, there was nothing quite like the brotherhood and family in this club. The boys were

rough around the edges and intimidating as hell to people looking in from the outside. But when you were in, everyone wrapped around you, and the way they supported you was like nothing I'd ever experienced elsewhere.

It was something I sometimes missed.

"Kaci had our babies, and now she's pregnant with Tie's."

I blinked a couple of times, and the girls held straight faces for a second before bursting into laughter.

"Is there an explanation that goes with that bombshell?"

"Kaci was our surrogate," Harmony explained, though she was still giggling in amusement. "She fell for Tie's charms when she was pregnant with Layton. And thankfully, she had Nya before she and Tie decided to have one of their own."

As if on cue, Kaci grinned and lifted her shirt to reveal a small bump.

"Wow!" I gushed. "That is the most beautiful story I've ever heard. It makes me wish I had been around to see it all."

Harmony's smile faltered a little. "I wish you were too."

"I—"

She shook her head. "You don't need to explain to me. I know you felt like that was the right choice for you, and I'm not going to try and make you feel bad about that by telling you how much I missed you, and how Tally moped around for weeks, or how he still avoids trips up to Huntsville."

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed. “Definitely not trying to make me feel bad, right?”

Her words hit the intended emotion.

I felt guilty.

And while I had questioned my choice many times over the years—wondering if I did the right thing—I reminded myself that at that time, I saw it as the best option for me and nothing I could do or say would take us back there.

I had to look at the future.

And now that Tally was suddenly in my life again, the future was already starting to look a lot different than I’d imagined even a few days earlier.

One thing she said caught my attention, though.

And I couldn’t help myself.

I cleared my throat, tilting my head to the side as I looked between Harmony and Kaci. “There was moping?”

Harmony’s eyes brightened. “Let’s make coffee, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:05 am

TALLY

“Tally, you’ve got the floor.”

My brothers all looked at me. Fourteen of us surrounded the table, men who I’d trust my life with a million times over. The Brothers by Blood MC had been my family since well before I patched in. My dad, Loose, was the Vice President for Kit’s dad, Oz, and then for Kit until two years earlier when he finally decided to pull back on his duties.

He still came into the club a couple of times a week.

It wasn’t unusual to find him and Oz sitting at the bar or playing pool while Oz’s old lady, Bright Eyes, and my mom played with the kids and caught up over coffee.

Kit’s brother, Tie, took over as Vice President when Loose stepped down.

He was young, but every member of this club knew that was the position Tie was meant to have. He’d fucking earned it, and our brotherhood was already strong, but with me on one side of Kit and Tie on the other, our family was practically impenetrable.

I leaned back in my chair, explaining to my brothers about Kat and what she’d told us.

A lot of them already knew how important she was to me.

Some didn't, but I was sure they could feel it.

"I'm proposing that a few of us to head to Jacksonville and let this guy know in whatever way necessary that fucking with Kat and Dylan would be a really bad idea."

"You think there will be any pushback on that suggestion ?" Pac questioned from down the table.

I shrugged. "To be honest, I'm not really sure."

"I asked around," Kit cut in, strumming his fingers on the table. "Not a single person I talked to in that area knew who he was, which means he's probably a little nobody trying to be a somebody."

"So, does us doing this mean you're taking Kat as your old lady?" Tie questioned with his eyebrow raised and a smirk on his face.

Is that what this was?

She'd shown up last night, but it was like no time had passed.

Seeing her at first had instantly brought back that pain in my chest I'd felt when I found out she'd left without an explanation or a goodbye. But the moment I knew she was in trouble, it'd all changed and become so damn clear that I cared about her right then, just as much as I had eight years earlier.

And I was still figuring out exactly what the hell that meant.

But I didn't want to be left once again wondering why.

Or regretting not saying something before it was too late.

“At this point, I’m still trying to figure that shit out, brother,” I answered honestly. “I just know she was really fucking important to me a long time ago, and my gut is telling me not to make the same mistakes now as I did back then.”

“All right then. Any objections to the club stepping in on this?” Kit questioned, and the room stayed silent. “All in agreement?”

A resounding “aye” filled the room.

It felt good to know my brothers had my back on this.

Even though I never doubted that they would.

Just hearing the support made me sit a little taller.

“Tie, Wreck, Tally, and I will make the trip down to Jacksonville tomorrow. Get things sorted and come back the day after because my body is no longer fucking made for riding ten hours in a single day.” Kit and I were getting older, but I swear, since he’d had kids, he had aged about ten years more than me. I’m not sure if it was the constant worry, or just how Nya ran circles around him, but I’m sure he felt it was worth it.

“Weston?”

Weston leaned in. He was one of the older club members and one of Loose’s close friends. “Prez?”

“I’m leaving you in charge,” Kit announced. “Please don’t let my old lady put up any more Christmas decorations. With that and the forecast of snow, I’m starting to feel like I’m in the fucking north pole.”

The room filled with rolling laughter, and we dispersed.

I passed Kat, Harmony, Kaci, and another old lady, Del sitting around a table, cackling with laughter. It was good to see Kat slip back into the group so easily. Because Harmony used to live up in Huntsville, she and Kat had been close for a long time, and it didn't just play on my mind when she left without a trace.

A lot of members and club girls up there were confused and sad to not have her bright smile around.

As much as I wanted to steal her away, I left them to it. The girls needed their time with Kat too. Instead, I headed down the hall to my room, intending to find a thicker damn hoodie to put on so I could go out to the garage and make sure my ride was good to go for the trip the next day.

I glanced into the room Kat and Dylan had slept in, pausing when I saw the kid sitting at the edge of the bed, staring at the wall.

"Hey, man," I started, walking over and stepping inside. "You doing okay?"

He shrugged but didn't look at me. "I guess."

I took another step a little closer. "You wanna talk about it?" He watched me out of the corner of his eye for a brief second before looking away again. "You don't know me, right? Why would you want to tell me all your problems?"

I eased myself onto the edge of the bed, making sure I still gave him plenty of space. He didn't exactly welcome me, but he also didn't tell me to fuck off. Though I could see that changing dramatically if I tried to come in too hard and fast.

Dylan was two or three when I was hanging out with Kat, and she made it clear she

didn't want him to be confused about our relationship by finding us in bed or anything like that. I respected her decision, where Dylan was concerned. I wanted to make sure we moved at whatever pace she was comfortable with because she was the one who had another person in her equation.

That didn't mean I hadn't spent time with Dylan, though. She'd brought him to the clubhouse, to club events. Hell, I'd given him his first motorcycle ride.

We'd been good friends.

He wouldn't remember any of that, but I still hoped there might be something deep in his brain that at least told him that he could trust me.

"What happened was scary, huh?" His hands gripped the blankets at the edge of the bed, and he clenched his jaw. "You know it's okay to say it was damn scary. You know what scares me? Spiders."

I finally managed to pull his entire focus.

He turned slightly to look at me, a soft frown on his face that let me know he thought I was a little crazy. Or weird. Or both.

Nothing new.

When he still didn't respond, I continued, "Yeah, they're scary as hell. Eight legs. What kind of demon has eight le—"

"We just ran."

I paused. Holding my tongue while he cleared his throat. Given his bloodshot eyes, it was clear he was trying to keep me from seeing how upset he was. "Yeah. You did.

You guys ran. You got out of there. You got somewhere safe.”

He shook his head. “Mom tried to make it like no big deal, but... I should have done something. Told that guy that banged on the window to back off.”

Ah.

There it was.

He was the man in his mom’s life, and he felt like he hadn’t done enough to protect her. He ran— he didn’t stand and fight.

“Dylan, there was a guy on your couch who had been stabbed by this asshole,” I said seriously. “There are times when you have to know when to run into battle and when to retreat, regroup, and come up with a winning plan of attack.”

“Have you ever...”

“Retreated?” I laughed. “More times than I could count.”

It wasn’t a lie.

There were times when being the big man could have meant being the big dead man had I not walked or if one of my brothers hadn’t dragged me away.

Self-preservation kept you alive.

“I just want to make her proud,” he murmured, turning to face me a little more.

Opening up.

Letting me in.

“Young man, there will be plenty more opportunities for you to stand up for your mom, trust me.” He scoffed, obviously not convinced. “There’s gonna be coaches of your sports teams who will roll their eyes at your mom cheering like a crazy woman on the sidelines, and they’ll make stupid comments like, ‘hey, check this lady out’ to the dads.”

He was trying not to smile, but it was like a switch had turned on behind his eyes, making them a little brighter. “And what should I do if that happens?” he was humoring me, but I didn’t mind because it seemed like he was slowly sliding out of his shell.

“I think, in that instance, a stray ball off the side of the foot,” I explained, and got to my feet to demonstrate.

A gentle laugh from the doorway had me pause mid-kick.

“Are you teaching my kid how to take out his soccer coach?” Kat asked with a smirk.

I pressed my hand to my chest, gasping dramatically. “You really think I’d do something like that?”

“I do.”

“He did,” Dylan added, letting out a loud laugh when I hit him with a look of total betrayal. “I mean... do you think Layton’s still out kicking the ball around?”

Kat stood a little taller. “Yeah. I think I saw him out there still.”

He jumped up off the bed but looked down at his feet. “Uhh...”

We'd managed to pull together some clothes that fit him, but he was still only wearing a pair of socks.

Kat pointed back down the hall. "Del's at the bar. She said she'd pulled some runners out of a cupboard that would fit you and are basically new."

"Okay," he said. He rushed over and wrapped his arms around Kat before ducking out the door.

Kat grinned and shook her head. "I really have no idea how you do it."

I closed the distance between us, wrapping my hand around the curve of her jaw. "My charm is a gift. There really isn't an explanation," I teased. "But honestly, I think he needed someone to tell him that he hadn't failed you by not standing up and fighting."

She reached for my cut, grasping it tightly as her head shook back and forth. "Did you guys talk about what happened in church?"

"Yeah. We're gonna drive to your place tomorrow and sort it out."

Her eyes widened a little, as if it shocked her to know we were gonna go all the way down there to sort this shit out. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet," I answered with a shrug. "Find this guy. Have a chat with him about proper etiquette when you're in someone else's house."

She shoved my shoulder, but I barely moved. "Tally. Seriously."

"Gorgeous, I'm as serious as a heart attack," I told her, pressing my forehead to hers for a second. "The boys and I are gonna make sure you and Dylan don't have to be

scared. Whatever I have to do to make that happen, I'll do."

She leaned in, taking a deep breath and pressing her head to my chest. She was letting me hold her up, and I knew that was big.

"There is something kind of amazing about you," she murmured, looking up at me through her eyelashes.

I was two seconds away from dragging her into a bedroom and letting her know in more ways than one that I felt the fucking same about her.

"Hey, Mom." Dylan's call had us both stepping back, though I fucking hated it. Dylan didn't remember me from when he was little. I was a stranger to him and wanted to build a relationship with him, not have him see me with my hands all over his mother in the hallway. "Harmony said I should probably see if Tally has a jacket 'cause it's really cold."

"Yeah, I got you," I answered, brushing past Kat with a smile. "Come in, let's see what we can find."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:05 am

TALLY

“Nice place,” Wreck commented after he, Kit, Tie, and I pulled up to the curb outside Kat’s house and turned off our engines.

Curtains fluttered in the windows of surrounding houses, some with faces peeking through the cracks. The suburban street was obviously not accustomed to having four rumbling Harleys invade their quiet little neighborhood. There was no doubt in my mind that someone had their finger hovering over their phone, waiting for us to even breathe wrong so they could call the cops.

Kit removed his helmet and sat it on his handlebars, studying Kat’s house. “The police tape really gives it a little something extra.”

“Yeah, something like ‘no one is home, so please steal everything inside.’ ” I climbed off my ride and walked up the path to the front door of Kat’s house, tearing away the single strip of yellow Do Not Cross tape stuck to the front door. It should have never been left there, like a damn beacon to every criminal in the area. I tried the handle, but it was locked, so I shifted to the window a few feet away, and cupped my hands around my face to see inside.

It was a fucking mess.

The television on the wall was completely shattered, and from what I could see of the kitchen, every single cupboard was open, and their contents coated the floor. Broken jars and glasses, food that was probably starting to fucking smell.

Then there was the large blood stain coating the gray sofa. But what had me clenching my fists was the Christmas tree lying across the floor. There was torn wrapping paper tossed about, but from what I could see, not one fucking present remained.

They'd taken those too.

Tie stepped up beside me, squinting to see through the glass and scanning the damage. "Well, that tells you everything doesn't it," he fumed, shaking his head.

I stepped back, looking at him with a raised brow. "What do you mean?"

He tapped on the glass. "These guys aren't from a dangerous crime syndicate or something like that. They're petty crims. The kind who don't make a lot of money doing whatever they do and need to steal Christmas presents to sell or trade."

A twelve-year-old's Christmas presents.

And I knew Kat.

I would guarantee she'd been saving and working her ass off for whatever had been wrapped up under that tree. That was what she did. She was independent, strong, and determined to reach her goals, no matter how many mountains she had to climb.

And she'd climb them all for Dylan.

"Are you Tally?"

Tie and I turned back to the street and saw a young woman walking up the driveway, Wreck, and Kit was right behind her.

I nodded. “I am. You must be Eve.” Kat had called ahead, letting her neighbor know we’d be coming by and that we needed to talk to her about what had happened. Though, mainly I wanted to know who had done it and where I could find them. “You want to let me know the details?”

She pulled her sleeves down over her hands and wrapped them around herself. She wasn’t young, but the way she pulled into herself and kept her distance from us screamed abuse. Not to mention the glaring bruise across her cheek, a reminder that we were doing the right thing by coming to let this asshole know who he should not fuck with.

“Milo Granger,” she said with absolute disdain. “He’s the leader of this little street gang called the Sixth Street Sinners. My brother Karl got caught up with them for a little bit, but he’d just moved in with me and got a good job, so he went to tell Milo he wanted out. Milo accused Karl of stealing drugs and money from him, saying he couldn’t leave until he’d paid him back.”

I scoffed loudly. “He didn’t like that he was losing a man.”

Her head bobbed up and down. “When Karl said no, Milo stabbed him with a pocket knife. Karl managed to drive to my place, but he was bleeding. I didn’t know what else to do, so I brought him over to Kat.”

Kat didn’t blame her for what happened—she’d been clear about that.

Eve was doing what she had to for her family, and that was something I knew damn well.

“Your brother make it?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Barely. After Milo watched Kat and Dylan drive away, he and

his buddies trashed the place, grabbed what they could, and ran. Cops showed up not long after.”

I was ready to be done with this asshole and head back home to Alabama. “We want to have a few words with Milo. You know where we can find him?”

She scrunched up her nose. “Yeah. He lives downtown in this old condemned place. Hold on, I’ll find the address.” She pulled her phone from her pocket. “Just do one thing for me?”

I looked to Kit, who shrugged.

We weren’t exactly in the business of making promises, but I would still hear her out. “What’s that?”

She pushed her shoulders back, lifting her chin despite the tears in her eyes that sparkled in the sunlight. “Those few words you have with him, could you make sure they hurt?”

I didn’t even have to think.

The words fell straight from my mouth.

“Count on it.”

The roar of our Harleys as we pulled onto the street Eve had shown us was anything but subtle. Their rumble shook houses and made windows rattle as we rode by. The vibrations themselves were intimidating enough. Add in the fact that I’m sure I looked like I was ready to rip someone’s head off, and we probably made a fairly

scary sight. So imagine my surprise when we pulled up to this run-down shack masquerading as a house, and the damn prick I was looking for stepped out onto the porch.

Kat's description of him had been on point.

Post Malone, but on crack.

I kicked out my stand and steadied my ride before ripping off my helmet and storming toward him.

"Tally, be smart," Kit warned as I reached the stairs and took two at a time.

"Who the hell are y—" I drove my helmet straight into his stomach, sending him flying back through the open doorway. I followed with my brothers right on my heels.

There were a handful of people inside, mostly young, impressionable boys who looked no older than maybe eighteen. Most of them were too stunned to move. The one who had the balls to reach for the gun on the broken coffee table in front of him was too slow—Tie already had a 9mil pressed to the kid's temple.

I handed my helmet to Kit and bent down. I grabbed a fist full of Milo's shirt and lifted him off the floor before driving my fist into his face and dropping him back down. "You wanna threaten someone I care about? This is going to be your one and only warning," I snapped, stepping back as he fought to pull himself to his feet, huffing and puffing like a bull preparing to charge.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," Milo protested before swiping at his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing blood across his face. "But you're making a big fucking mistake—?"

I swung again, and my fist connected with the cocky bastard's jaw.

He jolted back, hitting the wall behind him with a hard thump and crumpling to the floor. He was right at home there, just another piece of trash to add to the atmosphere of the run-down crack den he called home. The décor included broken furniture, plates of food growing their own ecosystems, and the subtle smell of urine lingered in the air, indicating that the yellowish color of the carpet was not a design choice.

Just breathing the air in that shit hole made my skin crawl, but I had a message to send, and I was going to make sure that message was incredibly fucking clear. Shards of glass from the broken windows crunched under my shitkickers as I took another step toward Milo and placed my boot across his fucking neck.

His eyes grew wide, and he clawed at the carpet, struggling and squirming like a cockroach as I placed more and more pressure on his airway. "The house you invaded a couple of nights ago while chasing Karl," I explained as calmly as possible. My patience for this skeezy back-alley addict was wearing thinner by the second. "You threatened to go after the woman and child who managed to get the hell out of there."

I leaned down, fighting the urge to simply snap his neck with my boot.

"He's not gonna be able to hear you if he passes out," Tie noted from behind me. I looked back at him, and he chuckled lightly, shaking his head and holding his hands up. "Just saying."

Tie was handy to have as a voice of reason when shit like this was going down—no matter how much I hated him for being right at that moment.

Just as Milo's eyes began to bulge from his skull, I let out a heavy sigh and pulled back a couple of steps. Milo rolled onto his stomach, gagging and coughing, spitting blood everywhere.

Just another bodily fluid to add to the décor.

The only reason I didn't simply put a bullet in this asshole's head and be done with it was that the cops were still looking for his dumb ass. And it would result in the kind of attention I didn't want or need if they showed up here and found him dead.

"See, Milo, I'm just here to let you know if you ever go back to that house, drive down that street, or even sneeze close to that neighborhood, I will find your ass." Kit chuckled behind me. He wasn't only my president—he'd also been my best friend since high school. It wasn't that he'd never seen me ready to kill some crackhead who hadn't directly done something to the club.

But he'd never seen me this way over a woman.

She wasn't just any woman, though.

She was Kat.

Kat was a piece of my past that I had regretted for fucking years. I didn't give her what she wanted or needed, so she walked away, and honestly, I didn't blame her.

I fucked up, and this was me making it right.

But also, when I got back to Alabama, she was going to know that I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

I crouched down next to Milo, slamming my hand against his back. "Are we clear? Because if you're really struggling to understand, maybe I should just end—"

"No!" he choked, his entire body convulsing. "It's clear... all clear."

“Fucking excellent,” I exclaimed, getting to my feet.

As we backed out, none of the other young gang members moved to help their leader. They watched him cry and puke all over the floor like the pathetic piece of shit he was, making it perfectly clear that there would probably be a change of leadership soon.

“Milo didn’t strike me as the brightest crayon in the box,” Kit stated as we sauntered down the uneven concrete path to where our motorcycles sat, gleaming in the sunlight.

I grabbed my handlebars and steadied the large chrome monster before throwing my leg over and sitting back.

“You really think it will be safe for Kat and Dylan to come back here?” Kit questioned.

The plan was to give the cops a heads-up, and make sure Milo got locked up for a long fucking time.

But my faith in law enforcement wasn’t all that high.

I couldn’t say for sure that there wouldn’t be more issues.

“Not really,” I answered honestly, rolling my shoulders back. “Which is why I’m going to convince them to stay in Troy.”

Wreck snorted. “And how do you think you’re gonna pull that off?”

There was only one answer.

“Christmas.”

KAT

“Hey, gorgeous.”

I spun around and grinned when I spotted Tally in the doorway. “You’re back.”

He stepped into the room Dylan and I were sharing. “Dylan here?”

I shook my head. “Harmony took the kids out to get ice cream.” He pushed the door shut behind him and held my gaze as he walked across the room, making my heart flutter a little. I licked my lips, curiosity winning out over excitement. “How’d it go?”

“Turned out crackhead Post Malone was just the head guy in some stupid street gang. He folded pretty easily,” Tally explained with a shrug. “And while I’m not usually one to involve the cops, we stopped by your local station on our way out of town. Turns out he had about five warrants out for petty shit like bail jumping and not appearing on theft charges. So we let them know he was probably not doing so shit hot and where they could definitely find him.”

I stood tall, feeling like a weight was being lifted from my shoulders. “So when we go home, he won’t bother us?”

Tally’s face changed.

It was instant.

“Yeah. You’ll be fine.” He turned away, but I grabbed his arm.

“Tally—”

He pulled it away, shaking his head as he faced me again. “If that’s what you want, to be in Jacksonville, then just go. Maybe this time it won’t hurt so fucking much.” He stormed toward the door, but I couldn’t let him walk out.

“You think it didn’t hurt me?” He paused, his hand on the door handle. “You think it didn’t kill me to pack up my shit and walk away?”

He slowly turned around, scrubbing his hand over his face. “Then why, Kat? Because one day you were there, things between us were so fucking good, and the next day you were gone. No warning. No goodbye. I just showed up at your damn door, and Sophie had to tell me.”

“Because I was falling in love with you, and I didn’t think you would love me back,” I yelled, stumbling back and hitting the wall.

It was out there.

Off my chest.

The feelings that I don’t think I’d ever even admitted to myself floating in the air between us.

I swear, if I’d blinked, I wouldn’t have seen him cross the room toward me.

He moved so fast that I was suddenly wrapped in his arms and being carried to the bed. My back hit the mattress, and he climbed on top of me, pinning me to the bed as he hovered over me. “For a long time, I wished you’d given me a chance to fight for us. To fight for you. To show you I gave a damn.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, feeling a single tear drip down the side of my face.

I felt guilty and sad about the choice I’d made.

But I owned it.

“We really had no idea what we were doing then,” he said with a soft laugh. “Things were growing between us, and we were both trying to fight it and ignore it like it wasn’t happening.”

We had.

He had called me one day and told me everyone was commenting about us dancing together and Tally being around me more often. I think we both freaked out a little at that. Neither of us had been prepared for what we had to turn into—something more than just sex and good times.

But it had.

It happened fast.

And it seemed that neither of us was prepared for the feelings that came along with it or knew how to express them to each other.

“But I don’t want to make the same mistake twice,” he finally admitted, and the butterflies in my stomach were once again alive and fluttering. He lowered his mouth, his lips grazing my jaw, following the line until he found my mouth. My skin prickled with goose bumps as he hovered, his breath tickling over my skin. “And I’m not going to just let you leave again without a fight.”

The statement scared the crap out of me and filled my heart with so much joy.

Being back in the clubhouse had me questioning everything.

What I wanted for my future.

And how badly I wanted it.

Where we'd been didn't matter anymore.

I'd made those choices.

I had lived with the consequences for eight years.

And now I was at a fork in the road.

It was time to make a new decision, and one that would possibly dictate the next eight years.

I grabbed the front of Tally's shirt and yanked hard, pulling his mouth down to meet mine. The kiss was divine. It was intense and frenzied but filled with a passion that was only found between two people with a special connection.

He sat back suddenly, his hands working at my jeans. I couldn't help but laugh as he unbuttoned them and grabbed the hem around both ankles, jerking and tugging them, lifting me off the bed as he frantically stripped them from my legs.

My panties were next, practically torn away and tossed across the room.

He didn't waste a second spreading my thighs and ducking his head between them. I gasped as he kissed his way up my inner thigh, his stubble tickling the sensitive skin. I swore he covered every inch, torturing me until he reached my center.

One long swipe of his tongue through my pussy had me grabbing fistfuls of his hair and lifting my hips toward his mouth, seeking more.

He licked and sucked at my clit, his tongue circling the tiny bud before pulling it into his mouth like his favorite candy. The fuse was lit, and with each swipe of his tongue I was burning, getting closer and closer to detonation. "Tally, oh God," I whispered, tossing my head back and grinding my hips against his face, searching for that final spark that would send me to the damn moon. "Oh yes!"

It felt like I was flying through the damn stars, a loud moan falling from my lips as pleasure rushed through my body.

One second, he was there, and the next, he was gone.

I was still flying high when I opened my eyes to see where he'd gone, only to see him kneeling, his jeans pulled down just enough to free his cock. It was in his hand, and he was watching me come apart while tugging it.

"So fucking pretty." He reached for me, grabbing my hips and rolling me onto my stomach before pulling me toward him so I was up on my knees but spread wide open. I kept my chest pressed to the bed, my arms stretched up over my head.

He lined up his cock, running it over my wet slit a couple of times, bumping my sensitive clit and sending more electric spasms through my body before finally driving his length so damn deep inside me. He grabbed my ass cheeks, pulling them apart so he could press forward as hard as possible.

"Dammit." I groaned into the bed, gripping the sheets and trying to keep from instantly coming again. Or maybe I was still riding that first wave. Either way, it was hard to think straight. I was overwhelmed by the sensation of him inside me again.

It was familiar, but at the same time, new.

We weren't the same people we were before, but our connection was as strong as ever.

Just when I was preparing for him to fuck me hard, he leaned over, wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me up off the bed. With his cock still deep inside me, he held me against his chest, his mouth dancing along the crook of my neck as he began thrusting in and out.

"You feel me deep in that tight little pussy?" He growled softly in my ear.

"Mmm," I hummed. That was all I was capable of at that moment, my other senses were overwhelmed and excited.

The angle was different.

It was so damn deep and hit all new places and buttons deep inside me.

I leaned my head back onto his shoulder and reached my hands to my breasts, twisting and plucking at my nipples. He reached around between my legs with his free hand, and I was done for the second he brushed my clit.

My entire body shuddered as my orgasm swept over me.

He let me go, and I fell forward onto my hands, trying to hold myself up as he pounded hard and fast inside me before finally stilling and letting out a loud groan. "Fucking hell."

I finally collapsed onto the bed, my body aching and damned satisfied.

Tally chuckled as he shuffled off the edge and onto his feet. I turned my head to the side, smiling as I watched him tuck himself into his jeans and zip them up.

My heart stopped when he turned away. “You’re leaving?”

He paused, hanging his head for a moment before he turned and walked back over to the bed, pressing a long, slow kiss against my lips. “I was just gonna get you a cloth so you can clean up.”

I was stupid.

A fucking idiot.

Then he did just that.

And when I found my panties, I pulled them back on and sat at the edge of the bed next to him, laying my head on his shoulder. “I just—”

“I know I walked out on you a lot,” he cut in. “It taught you to expect that I was just there for a fuck and then would tap out. But if we keep focusing on that shit like it will change anything, it’s gonna drive us crazy. I want to talk about now. I want to talk about you being here. About us giving this a second chance.”

“What do I do about our house? Dylan’s school. My job.” Even though I wasn’t sure why I was coming up with reasons to be in Jacksonville when I knew it wasn’t what I wanted.

It was just a house.

Just a school.

Just a job.

All things that didn't have to be in Jacksonville.

Things that could be here.

With Tally.

This wasn't like the first time I left. When I wasn't sure where we stood, and I was scared Tally wouldn't want the same things I did.

He'd made it clear.

And he'd left it up to me.

There was a gentle knock on the door, and it eased open just a crack. "Um... just a heads up," Harmony whispered through the gap. "We're back, and the boys are chatting with Dylan to keep him occupied, but if you're fucking, I'd finish that up about now. Cool. Bye."

"Tally, I—"

He shook his head. "Just think about it. I know you have a lot to consider, and you would be the one giving up things. But can I ask just one thing?"

"Mmm..."

"At least stay until Christmas. It's only like three days away, and it would be nice for you and Dylan to be here with the club."

With the club.

And with him.

“Yeah,” I agreed with a soft smile. After losing Mom, I knew Christmas this year would be one of the hardest. And being here with Tally and Harmony and the club sounded like the perfect way to get through something really hard. “I think we’d both like that.”

“Good.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me from the bed. “Then we better head out and do some shopping.”

Shopping.

Three days before Christmas.

God help us all.

TALLY

Christmas was something else.

It was a weird time of the year when people went a little crazy trying to find perfect gifts for the people they loved. Years ago, for the club, it was just a time of the year when we raised a glass, ate a lot of food, and partied.

But the clubhouse was evolving.

We were evolving.

Things that seemed important back then were not so important anymore. And the things we took for granted back then, we had learned to appreciate—even though the road to get there was rocky.

“I can’t believe that next year there will be another little terror in this place,” Harmony joked as she looked over at Kaci. “And the year after that, who knows how many there will be.”

I burst out laughing as the boys all looked at each other. The majority of the men in the clubhouse were completely single, so the concept of there being more children within a year or two actually petrified most of them.

It was already late in the morning, after nine.

Layton and Nya had opened their presents with Harmony and Kit at the ass crack of

dawn and had been suspiciously quiet in their rooms since. Dylan opened his second, the smile on his face worth the absolute hell Kat and I had been through trying to shop a couple of days before Christmas.

Thank God this was a one-time-a-year thing because it was not my idea of fun.

Everyone else had done their own presents in private, and now we had all the couches pulled up around the tree and were digesting breakfast to make room for the massive lunch coming later.

“Hey, Dylan,” I called, drawing his attention from the corner of the clubhouse where he was trying to flip his new skateboard. “Would you run to my room and grab the big green box from beside my bed?”

“Okay,” he answered, jogging off down the hall.

Kat had been happily tucked in under my arm, but suddenly she leaned back, eyeing me suspiciously. “Green box?”

I pressed my finger gently to the tip of her nose. “I got the kid a present, okay.”

It was as if the gesture warmed her so much it melted the suspicious look off her face. She wiggled herself back into a comfortable spot, her head resting on my shoulder again.

Dylan appeared a few moments later, holding out the box.

I shook my head. “It’s for you. Open it up.”

“Real?” He sunk to the floor, tearing at the wrapping I sure as hell had asked the girl at the store to do, even though it wasn’t something they offered. He lifted the lid and peered inside, his eyes growing wider as he made out what was inside. “Boxing

gloves?” he exclaimed, quickly pulling them out and holding them up to examine.

“We have a ring out in one of the sheds,” I explained as he pulled them on. “Kit said he’d teach you a few things. You know, just in case you need those skills sometime in the future.”

Just in case some bastard is rude to your mom again, and you need to take a stand for her.

When our eyes connected, I saw the understanding.

He got it.

Though, if there was a situation where some bastard decided to come at Kat for some reason, Dylan might just have to wait in line if I managed to get to them first.

Kat placed her hand on my thigh, giving it a gentle squeeze as she watched Dylan bounce around with his new gloves on. Kit helped him tighten them before giving him a few pointers from the opposite couch.

Kat got up suddenly and held her hand out.

I stared at it for a second before looking up at her with my brow raised. “But I’m so comfortable.”

“Come on.” She groaned, walking off and leaving me still sitting there. “I was gonna give it to you later, but I have a present for you, too.”

Curiosity won, and I got to my feet, catching her around the waist as we stepped into her and Dylan’s room. Her laughter practically lit up the small space as I buried my face in the crook of her neck. “All right, all right!” she chastised, pushing me away gently. “Sit.”

I fell back, sitting on the edge of the bed as she rummaged away in the closet. She almost disappeared before she finally escaped its clutches, stumbling backward and holding a box in her hand. “Found it!”

She hurried over and placed the present on my lap before climbing onto the bed beside me and staring at it intently, as if her gaze would rip the Santa-patterned wrapping paper away.

I pulled on it.

The paper tore straight down the center and I pushed the rest to the side.

The box underneath was plain brown, giving me no clues as to what I might find inside.

I looked at her again, and she threw her hands in the air. “Just open it.”

“So impatient,” I teased, finally unfolding the box’s flaps and reaching inside.

I frowned as I wrapped my hands around the contents and lifted them into the air, my eyes moving between the plain black, shiny plate and mug that seemed to match it.

“Scrambled. Milk and one sugar,” Kat explained simply. Confusion etched itself a little deeper into my skin, my brow really pinching between my eyes. She laughed softly and rolled her eyes. “We’ve never spent the entire night together, so I’m just letting you know how I like my eggs and coffee in the mornings for when we move up here.”

I tossed the items to the side before she’d finished her sentence, closing the space between us in seconds. I wrapped my arms around Kat’s body and lifted her into the air.

“Fuck yeah!”

“There are some details we need to talk about,” she said with a laugh when her feet finally touched the ground again.

“Done,” I answered with a grin.

She rolled her eyes again and reached up, wrapping her hand around my neck so she could twist her fingers in my hair. “Seriously, Tally.”

“Gorgeous, I am as serious about having you and Dylan in my life as I am about riding motorcycles,” I told her, holding her gaze. “Could I survive without it? Sure. But I just don’t fucking want to.”

And I didn’t intend to.

Later today, I’d take her for a ride to see the house I’d rented a few streets away.

A house for her and Dylan.

And for me too, if they decided they wanted me there more permanently. But I wasn’t going to rush it. I wanted to take my time, build on what we already had and create something stronger.

Something unbreakable.

“Guys,” Layton screamed down the hallway. “There’s snow falling.”

Something magical.

Kat tugged at my hand. “Snow!”

I pulled back, shaking my head. “Nope. Did I mention I hate the cold?”

“A few times,” she teased. “But it’s Christmas.”

It was.

And honestly, it was the best damn one yet.

THE END