



My Knight (Iron Fiends #8)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: She was never supposed to be part of the story.

But once she stepped into his world, there was no going back.

When Treads brings Saylor into the orbit of the Iron Fiends Motorcycle Club, she expects chaos—but not the kind that lands her in danger... or in Pirate's bed.

When the club's enemies set their sights on her, Pirate makes one thing clear: She's his to protect.

And he'll do whatever it takes to keep her safe.

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Pirate

“We gotta go.”

I looked up from my beer and frowned. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Dice held up his phone, but he was across the common room.

“Like I can fucking read that,” I growled.

Yarder was sprawled out on the couch with Poppy snuggled up to him. Aero and Sloane were sharing the recliner, and they looked way too comfortable. The rest of the guys were holed up in their rooms with their ol’ ladies.

And Stretch was still missing.

“Is it Stretch?” Yarder asked, his voice sharp with concern.

Dice shook his head. “Nah, it’s the police scanner app I have on my phone. Cops were just called out to the camera crew’s tiny houses.”

I leaned back, unimpressed. “Is that really our problem?” We were done with that damn camera crew. Whatever trouble they were getting into, they could handle it on their own as far as I was concerned.

“You and Dice go check it out.”

“What?” I demanded and sat up straighter.

“Just go and make sure they are okay.” Yarder flicked his hand at Dice. “Does it say what the call is for?”

“It’s probably a smoke alarm or some shit,” I muttered.

Dice shook his head. “Doesn’t say.”

Yarder looked back at me, unimpressed by my resistance. “Get your ass up and go check it out. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

I stood with a huff and pulled my keys out of my pocket. “I know it’s nothing, and you’re just having us waste our time. Hell, Mac can handle whatever it is.” Mac and Saylor, the new producers Don had sent over, seemed more than capable of handling themselves. They also had Mark and Drew hanging around.

“Just go,” Yarder ordered.

I rolled my eyes but stalked toward the door. “Fucking bullshit,” I mumbled under my breath, knowing Dice could hear me as he followed me outside.

The night air was cooler than earlier, and I was not in the mood to be running errands for people who weren’t our concern.

“I’m sure it’s nothing, brother,” Dice called over the rumble of our steps.

“You shouldn’t have said a damn thing,” I shot back and swung my leg over my bike.

Dice shrugged. “I was surprised to see the address.”

“Surprised my ass,” I grumbled and started my bike. I motioned for him to follow, then tore out of the lot.

The roads were quiet, and the night air whipped against my face as we rode. It was a straight shot to the tiny houses, barely ten minutes away, but with every passing streetlamp, a nagging feeling crawled up my spine. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was more bullshit we didn’t need to be involved in. Either way, we were about to find out.

By the time we got close, the red and blue flashing lights were already cutting through the night. My grip tightened on the handlebars as I slowed, and Dice pulled up beside me.

“So much for it being nothing,” Dice called over the rumble of our engines.

I grunted, and my eyes scanned the scene as I pulled to the curb. Four police cars and an ambulance took up the tiny driveway in front of the houses.

I killed the engine and swung my leg over the bike as my boots hit the pavement with a dull thud.

I didn’t know what the hell was going on, but we were about to find out.

Dice and I moved across the cracked pavement. Our boots crunched against loose gravel as we headed toward the pulsing red and blue lights that painted the street in chaos. The tiny houses sat against the strobe of flashing lights like some kind of stage in a fucked-up play. Six cops stood scattered across the yard and sidewalk, radios squawking at their hips, their hands on belts, and shoulders stiff like they were waiting for something worse to happen.

Dice had that look in his eyes—sharp, alert. I kept my face blank, as usual. I didn’t

show much, and tonight wasn't going to be the night I started. We moved past the first cruiser when one of the uniforms peeled away from the rest and stepped straight into our path.

"We're gonna need you to stop right there, fellas," he barked.

I didn't flinch. Instead, I hitched my chin toward the open front door where shadows danced behind the weak porch light. "We're friends with who lives here. What's going on?" My voice was calm, but it cut through the air like a blade.

The cop gave me a slow once-over like he was trying to figure out what kind of trouble I brought with me. He didn't have to look long. I was used to this—judgment, suspicion, all of it. I'd lived with it for so long that it barely registered anymore. Let them look. I didn't give a fuck.

Mac appeared in the doorway. She stepped outside quickly as her eyes scanned the scene.

"Mac!" Dice called.

Her head snapped in our direction. Relief flashed in her eyes as she rushed toward us.

"You know these guys?" the cop asked, glancing sidelong at her.

Mac nodded. "They're the reason why we're here in town." She stopped in front of us, her face pale and her breathing uneven. "How did you guys know to come?" she asked.

"Scanner app," Dice said simply.

"What the hell happened?" I asked, my voice lower this time.

Mac looked back toward the house like she wasn't ready to say it out loud. "I don't really know. Saylor was supposed to come over so we could go over the footage. She came over, but she was all bloody and could barely talk."

I reared back a little. "What did she say?"

Mac's eyes flicked toward the cop, who had folded his arms across his chest and watched us like we were suspects in a lineup.

"She said she thought she killed someone," the cop answered, his voice flat and unimpressed.

"That is what she said," Mac agreed quickly, "but she was also attacked by whoever she thinks she might have killed." She leaned slightly toward the cop. "Self-defense."

That hit like a punch to the gut. I'd expected something—maybe a bad fall, maybe she'd been mugged. But this? This was something else entirely.

"McCall," someone called from the side of the house. "We need you over here."

The cop grunted and pointed a thick finger at Dice and me. "You go farther than right here, and we'll have a problem."

We both nodded, but let's be real—he wasn't gonna be the one telling us what to do if things went sideways.

As he walked away, I turned back to Mac. "Now tell us what the hell is going on."

She took a breath and glanced around again. "That's what happened. But... she told me more."

I leaned in, hearing the edge in her voice.

“She told me whoever attacked her called her one of the Iron Fiends’ bitches. Said this was for the asshole who keeps sniffing around.” Her eyes darted from me to Dice and back. “Saylor and I aren’t stupid, Pirate. We know you guys have some bad shit happening, even if we don’t know the details. And it looks like that bad shit found Saylor tonight.”

“But she’s not connected to us,” Dice muttered, voice hard.

“You and I know that,” Mac said, “but whoever is after you guys doesn’t.”

“Did they find the guy who attacked her? A body?” I asked.

Mac shook her head. “No body, but you can tell where they fought each other. Saylor said she managed to get her hands on a rock and smashed the guy’s head. She hit him so hard he went down, and she took off.”

Before I could respond, voices rose behind us—shouted commands and hurried steps. I turned just in time to see the paramedics emerge from the house. Three paramedics maneuvered a stretcher down the steps and across the uneven yard.

My breath caught.

Saylor lay strapped to the stretcher. Her black jeans were torn at the knee and one boot was missing. Her shirt was smeared with grime and blood, and the fabric clung to her like it had been through hell. Her face... someone had wiped the blood off, but it was still streaked. Her hands were limp by her sides, and her fingers were stained and scraped.

Something twisted in my gut—hard. I didn’t expect it. It was like anger and

protectiveness hit me at the same damn time. Seeing her like that punched through the numb wall I kept up around me. I hadn't really paid much attention to her before. She was just another person the TV show had sent to make our lives hell. But seeing her like that, broken and bleeding?

The indifference was gone. Gone and buried.

"I'm coming with her," Mac said, already moving toward the stretcher.

"No," I cut in sharply. "I'll go."

She froze. "I mean... why?"

I handed my bike keys to Dice without looking away from Saylor. "Because we're the reason why she's on that stretcher."

Dice didn't argue. Mac just blinked at me, surprised. I didn't explain further. I didn't need to.

I followed behind the stretcher as the paramedics wheeled her toward the waiting ambulance. The sound of her bootless foot bounced against the side of the gurney and echoed in my ears. "Think you could be a little gentler with her?" I called. "I think she's already been through enough."

One of the medics pulled open the back doors, and they lifted her in with practiced and gentle ease. I climbed in after her and settled onto the bench on one side as the third medic jumped in and shut the doors with a loud slam.

I reached for her hand—dirty, scraped, and smeared with dried blood. Her fingers twitched slightly when I touched her. And then her eyes fluttered open.

“Pirate?” she whispered, her voice cracked and faint. Just one word, but it was enough.

“Shh, baby. Just try to relax.” I wrapped my fingers around hers gently. I’d ridden in the back of an ambulance before—I knew this wouldn’t be smooth. Every bump would rattle her. Every second would feel longer than the last.

Her eyes drifted shut again.

The paramedic across from me started checking her vitals, his face focused and unreadable. I glanced at him. “Is she going to be okay?”

He looked at me. He was calm but not exactly reassuring. “We’re doing everything we can for her here. I’ll keep an eye on her vitals on the drive to the hospital. You can talk to the doctor once she’s examined.”

Not good enough. “But she’s going to be okay, right?”

“She’s got injuries we can see—she should be fine from those. But we don’t know what’s going on inside. She obviously has a concussion. We’re doing everything we can for her right now.”

I stared at him for a second with my jaw clenched. “Then let’s fucking go.”

The driver must’ve heard me because a second later, the engine roared, and the ambulance jerked into motion with sirens screaming.

I kept my eyes on her. On the faint rise and fall of her chest. On the blood smeared along her jawline. I didn’t know what she’d been through tonight, but I could see it was hell. And I knew it was because of us.

Because of me.

Another innocent person was dragged into the shadows we tried to keep buried.

I wasn't going to let it end badly for Saylor.

Not for her.

I didn't know what was changing in me, but something was. That fire in my chest, the heat that came with looking down at her bruised face—it was more than guilt. It was rage. It was purpose.

She was going to be fine. She had to be. And when she was, when I was sure of it, I was going to end this bullshit once and for all.

One way or another.

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Saylor

All I felt was the weight. Not on my body, but in my head—like someone had stuffed it full of cotton and then wrapped it in fog. Thick. Slow. Heavy. Everything inside me felt like it was trying to float to the surface but couldn't quite make it. I knew I was trying to wake up, but my body wasn't on the same page.

I drifted in and out for what felt like forever. Time didn't mean anything. I didn't know if it had been minutes, hours, or days. But slowly, painfully, the fog started to lift.

My eyes cracked open, and light filtered in—too bright and too white. The kind of light that could only mean one place. Hospital.

I didn't know how I got here at first. My brain was still lagging behind, clawing its way through the haze. But then—

I remembered.

All of it hit me at once, like a brick wall.

I had only stepped a few feet out the back door of my tiny house. I'd been heading toward Mac's tiny house. I didn't even hear him coming. One second, I glanced up at the night sky; the next—I was on the ground.

Something—no, someone—slammed into me from behind.

I hit the dirt hard, and my shoulder took the brunt of it. Before I could scream, he was on me.

Panic had surged through me like a shot of adrenaline. I bucked and thrashed, and my fingernails clawed at anything I could get to. I kicked my feet, flailed my arms, twisted my body like my life depended on it—because it did.

He was a big guy—heavy, built like a truck. I couldn't make out much in the dark, but I could smell him—sweat, booze, and something sharp, like blood.

He grabbed the front of my shirt and yanked it, ripping it halfway down the middle.

I screamed.

I kicked.

I caught him in the thigh, maybe the stomach. Didn't matter. He didn't let go.

He grabbed a handful of my hair and yanked my head back so hard I saw stars. Then he slammed my face into the ground. Pain exploded behind my eyes. My cheekbone scraped against the patio, and I felt it rip open. I tasted dirt and blood.

I was going to die.

But something in me didn't give up.

The second he shifted his weight—just slightly—I wrenched myself sideways and scrambled forward. I dragged my body through the flowerbed like a goddamn animal.

My hand landed on something solid. Rough. A stone about the size of a softball.

I grabbed it.

He lunged.

I swung.

Missed.

He cursed and grabbed for me again.

I swung again—this time, I connected. Hard. Right into his shoulder.

He howled but didn't stop.

He came at me again.

I screamed and brought the rock around one more time with every ounce of strength I had left.

This time it hit his head.

He fell back. Stunned. Blood on his temple.

I didn't wait.

I lunged at him and hit him again. Same spot. I heard a sickening sound—bone, maybe—and he let out a low moan before his eyes rolled back, and he crumpled.

I didn't check if he was dead. I didn't care.

I ran. Bloody, broken, beaten—I ran.

I remembered all of it now. The fear. The fight. The taste of iron in my mouth. The stone in my hand. I remembered making it to Mac's house. Knocking. Collapsing. Then everything went black.

"Saylor," a voice cut through the memory, low and steady, male.

My heart jolted.

My eyes fluttered open again, this time with more effort and more purpose. The room was still a little hazy, but the voice had anchored me.

"Pirate?" I rasped.

Even just saying that one word took everything I had.

I remembered him being there when the paramedics loaded me up. His face was blurry above me. I didn't know why he was there, but I remembered the relief I felt when I saw him.

My mouth felt like it had been stuffed with cotton balls. Dry and disgusting. I smacked my lips and tried to wet them, but it didn't help.

"Water," I croaked.

"I got you, baby," Pirate said, and I heard him move.

I blinked slowly and tried to clear the fuzz from my vision. Bit by bit, the room came into focus. The sterile walls. The sound of a machine beeping nearby. The smell of antiseptic.

And him.

Pirate stood by the counter and grabbed a plastic cup of water. He stuck a straw into it, then turned and walked back toward me. He looked so out of place in this room—like something wild and dangerous had stepped into a world that didn't know what to do with it.

He leaned down beside the bed and held the straw to my lips.

I took a small sip. It was cold, and it tasted like heaven.

But even as I drank, I couldn't help the thought that crept into my mind.

Why is he here?

The guys from the club never paid attention to Mac and me. We were just background noise—girls with cameras and microphones, poking into business they didn't want us in. At best, we were tolerated. At worst? Ignored.

But here he was. Pirate. Sitting at my bedside like I mattered. And he called me baby. What in the world?

I pulled my lips from the straw, and he moved the cup away to set it on the little table beside the bed.

I looked up at him.

His face was unreadable, but there was something in his eyes—concern, maybe even guilt. It felt strange. Too intimate.

Pirate was handsome. I'd have had to be blind not to notice that.

He had dark hair, short on the sides but longer on top, styled just right to look like he

didn't try too hard. The longer strands swooped across his forehead in a way that made him look effortless and rugged at the same time. His jaw was covered in scruff—just enough to make him look dangerous, like a man who didn't care for shaving but still somehow made it look good.

His eyes were deep brown, almost black in the low light, and they held something unreadable—like he was carrying the weight of things he never talked about.

Tattoos curled down both his arms, some thick-lined and bold, others more intricate, swirling in designs I couldn't quite see from my angle. His knuckles were bruised and scarred. His shoulders were wide. The black T-shirt he wore stretched tight across his chest, and I had the sudden thought that he could probably break someone in half if he wanted to.

And yet, here he was, holding water to my lips and watching me like I might fall apart if he looked away.

“What are you doing here?” I asked softly. My voice was rough and scratchy, like sandpaper against my throat.

Pirate didn't answer right away. He just looked at me. Those dark brown eyes unreadable and intense, like he was trying to see straight through me. Finally, he said, “You should be resting.”

I furrowed my brow and winced as the movement made my head throb harder. “And you should tell me why you're here,” I repeated a little firmer this time.

How had he even known to come to the house, let alone the hospital? I didn't remember much after making it to Mac's place. Maybe she'd called the club? But that didn't really make sense. She and I had both agreed—we kept our distance from the club. We knew the club had its secrets. Dangerous ones. We just wanted to do our

job and get the hell out of Dodge before something else exploded.

And now... here I was, laid up in a hospital bed with my head pounding and my body aching. So much for leaving before something bad happened.

Pirate finally answered and shifted his weight like he wasn't entirely comfortable. "Dice heard the call to your house, so we decided to come check on you guys."

"Why?"

His brows pulled together like I'd just asked the world's dumbest question. "What do you mean why?"

I tilted my head slightly and ignored the flare of pain that came with it. "You hate me." My voice was flat. Not accusing, just... tired. True.

I didn't have the strength to sugarcoat things, not that I ever really did. And besides, we both knew it. Mac and I had been background noise to them at best and intrusions at worst. They tolerated us only because the cameras we carried gave their club the end of their contract. Did anyone really want a camera in their face all the time? No, not really.

Pirate sat down in the chair next to the bed. He stretched his long legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankles. He looked like he had no intention of going anywhere.

"I don't," he said quietly. "I hate your job, but I don't hate you."

I blinked slowly. That... was not what I expected to hear.

I closed my eyes and let my head sink back into the pillow. The scratchy hospital

linen was somehow still better than concrete and blood. “Makes perfect sense,” I whispered. Not.

He didn’t argue with me. Just let the silence settle between us like a blanket. For some reason, it didn’t feel uncomfortable.

“Just rest,” he said, softer this time.

Not like I had a choice. The small burst of energy I’d conjured to ask him those questions was already gone. It was drained out of me like someone had pulled the plug. My body felt heavy, as if gravity had doubled. Every breath I took seemed to require more effort than the last.

I wanted to ask him more. A dozen questions hovered in the back of my mind—about the club, about who attacked me, about why the hell Pirate, of all people, had shown up and climbed into the back of that ambulance with me like he actually gave a damn.

But none of them made it to my mouth.

The world was starting to blur again, and my eyelids were too heavy to keep open. My fingers twitched weakly at my sides, still feeling the ghost of the stone I’d used to defend myself. I didn’t even know if the man had lived or died. I didn’t care. All I knew was I’d survived. Somehow.

My breathing slowed, and the sounds around me faded into a soft hum. The monitors beeped steadily, and my heartbeat echoed from the machines nearby. Pirate didn’t move. He was still there beside me, a quiet and steady presence that shouldn’t have felt as comforting as it did.

And just before I let the darkness pull me under again, I heard his voice.

Low. Gentle.

“Sleep, Saylor,” he whispered. “You’re safe with me.”

Then everything went quiet.

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Pirate

“Are you going to let me in there?”

I folded my arms over my chest and planted my boots a little firmer into the hospital tile like I was holding a door to a fortress. “She’s resting.”

Mac raised an unimpressed brow at me. “You think I’m gonna walk in there playing the trombone? Got some cymbals strapped to my ass that’ll clang every step?”

I didn’t blink. “When she wakes up, you can see her.”

Mac stared up at me like she was trying to see into my soul—or maybe just planning the most efficient way to kick me in the balls. “What the hell is going on here, Jack Sparrow?” she asked, her voice suspicious as hell. “Let me in to see my friend.”

Before I could respond, I heard the familiar sound of heavy boots and lighter footsteps behind her.

“Jack Sparrow?” Poppy’s voice chimed in with a grin as she and Yarder appeared a few feet away. “Your name isn’t really Jack Sparrow, is it?” she asked, eyes wide and amused.

“It’s because his road name is Pirate, babe,” Yarder explained, and his lips twitched with amusement.

Poppy smiled wide and rolled her eyes. “I know, Yarder. I was trying to be funny.”

Mac wasn't laughing. She looked at Yarder and Poppy. "Why don't you two hang out with the door troll here? I'm gonna go sit with Saylor."

She tried to step around me, but I didn't budge. "She's resting," I said again, my voice flat but not aggressive. Just... final.

Mac stopped toe to toe with me, folded her arms across her chest, and mirrored my stance. She had fire in her eyes. I admired that about her, even if she was damn annoying for not listening to me. "Do you even know her last name?" she demanded.

"Murphy," I grunted without hesitation.

Her eyes narrowed and studied me like I'd just pulled a rabbit out of a hat. "You saw that on her chart, probably."

I had. But I'd remembered it. That had to count for something.

"Saylor Murphy," Poppy said dreamily. "I like it. It has a nice ring to it."

Yarder's eyes scanned the hallway, then landed back on me. "What's going on with her?"

"Doc said nothing's broken. Just bruises, cuts, and a concussion. He said she could probably go home tomorrow if she stays stable." I flicked a glance at Mac. "He also said rest was best for her."

Mac glared up at me like she was seconds away from setting me on fire. "Did he also knight you as her protector while he was at it?" she snapped.

"Aw, you're like her knight in shining armor," Poppy sighed with a grin. She gave me a slow once-over. "Maybe her knight in worn leather on a Harley."

Mac turned toward Yarder like she was bringing in reinforcements. “You’re the boss. Tell him to get out of my way so I can go see my friend.”

“You just want to get in there so you can figure out when you can start filming again.”

Mac glared at me. “I’ve talked to Don. He knows what happened. Shooting is paused for two weeks. He’s going to go over all of the footage and see if we really need anything more. I’m worried about my friend right now, not the damn TV show.”

That was surprising.

Yarder grunted and looked at me like I was barking up the wrong tree with Mac. I’m sure he was glad to hear that filming was suspended.

“She needs to rest,” I repeated.

“I promise not to blow my trombone,” Mac sassed with a smirk.

Yarder gave her a look like she’d completely lost it. “I would hope not.” Then he nodded at me. “Let her in. She can sit with her while we talk.”

Mac turned to me with a shit-eating grin lighting up her face. “Sidestep it, Jackie boy, you heard bossman.”

I growled under my breath, but I stepped to the side.

Mac didn’t hesitate. She slipped past me and into the room like she belonged there—like I hadn’t just spent ten minutes trying to keep her out. The door clicked shut behind her.

“You really had to give her the okay to go in there?” I muttered.

Poppy chuckled. “You’re acting like you’re guarding a room full of gold, Pirate.”

“Yeah,” Yarder said and stepped closer. “What the hell’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing’s gotten into me,” I said, a little too quick and a little too defensive. “Saylor needs to rest, and she can’t do that with Mac staring at her.”

Poppy grinned. “But she can rest with you staring at her?”

I grunted, not dignifying that with a response.

“The cops come by at all?” Yarder asked, as his tone shifted to something more serious.

Poppy smirked. “As if he would let them talk to Saylor.”

“No one’s been by except you guys and Mac,” I said. “Are the cops looking to talk to her again?”

Yarder nodded. “Yeah. She told them what happened already, but I guess they have more questions. The guy who attacked her took off, but she managed to get some hits in. They found his blood on the rock she used. Won’t have results for a few weeks, though.”

Jesus.

“You heard what the guy said to her, right?” I asked.

Yarder nodded again. “Dice let me know everything. Said the guy called her one of

the ‘Iron Fiends’ bitches’ and claimed it was ‘for the asshole who keeps sniffing around.’” Yarder’s eyes darkened. “That shit’s too specific to be random.”

It didn’t make any sense. Saylor didn’t have ties to us. Not really. She worked on the show with Mac. That was it. She wasn’t patched in. She wasn’t dating anyone. Hell, she barely spoke to any of us.

“She really doesn’t have a connection to us other than the TV crew,” Yarder added, confirming what I was already thinking.

But that didn’t stop the guy from attacking her.

Yarder eyed me carefully. “What’s the deal with you sticking with Saylor?” he asked. “You got something going on with her?”

I shook my head. “No.”

He waited and gave me that look like he wasn’t buying it.

Poppy didn’t wait. “Then why the heck are you being her watchdog?” she demanded.

I looked at both of them, but I didn’t really have an answer that made sense. All I knew was I had to be here. That when I saw her on that stretcher, something had shifted. I wasn’t going to leave her side. Not until I knew she was safe.

“It’s our fault this happened to her,” I finally said.

Yarder shook his head. “This is Boone and Gibbs’ fault, not fucking ours. They’re the psychos that won’t leave us alone.”

“That’s true,” I admitted. “But I still feel a fuck-ton of guilt. If it wasn’t for us, she’d

still be walking around without bruises on her face.”

Yarder frowned, but he didn’t argue.

“I’m not letting her out of my sight until this shit is over. Who’s to say the guy who attacked her won’t come back and finish the job? Someone has to make sure she’s safe.”

“And you decided that someone is you,” Yarder said flatly.

I nodded.

Poppy raised an eyebrow. “And Saylor’s okay with that? I don’t think I ever saw you speak a word to her before.”

“I didn’t ask,” I admitted. “But I’m sure she’d rather be safe than not have me around.”

Yarder rubbed his jaw, thinking it over. “If she’s anything like the other ol’ ladies, I’m sure she’s got a twisted opinion about you keeping her safe.”

Poppy immediately smacked Yarder’s arm. “What the heck is that supposed to mean?”

Yarder laughed and pulled her into his side with a grin. “It means sometimes you don’t see the danger staring you straight in the eye, and we need to be the ones who keep you safe even when you think you don’t need it.”

Poppy wrinkled her nose. “That’s not true.”

I scoffed under my breath, and Yarder chuckled again. They were a mess, but they

worked. The way he protected her, teased her, held her close—it was the kind of thing I never thought much about. Not until now. Not until I found myself sitting in a hospital room like a damn watchdog, guarding someone who wasn't mine.

But maybe that's what made it worse.

Because I didn't know what this was—why I felt the need to stay, to protect, to make sure she was okay—but I wasn't walking away from it either.

Not yet.

“So what now?” Poppy asked.

That seemed to be the question we were always asking.

What now?

Shit had happened. The kind that left people bleeding and bruised. The kind that made your gut twist and your knuckles itch for a fight. And now, once again, we were standing in the aftermath trying to figure out how to stop it from getting worse.

The problem? We hadn't been able to stop it. Not really. Boone and Gibbs were always a few goddamn steps ahead of us. Always slithering through the cracks before we could crush them.

I shifted against the wall outside Saylor's hospital room with my arms crossed, jaw tight. “We need to find someone who doesn't like Boone and Gibbs. Someone with dirt on them. Someone who wants to take them down as much as we do.”

“We've looked, man,” Yarder said with a shake of his head. “I can find people who don't like Boone and Gibbs. Hell, I could fill a damn room. But none of them are

willing to go up against them. Not out loud.”

He wasn’t wrong. Everyone had something to lose, and Boone and Gibbs knew how to collect debts and twist arms. Fear was their currency, and business was always booming.

“Maybe once we get the DNA results back from the guy who attacked Saylor, it can point us to someone who’d flip on them,” Poppy offered.

There was a chance—a small one. But the problem was that the DNA test was going to take weeks, and we needed answers yesterday.

“We need to tell Boone and Gibbs we don’t give a fuck about them and to leave us the hell alone,” I said.

“If only that would happen,” Yarder muttered and rubbed the back of his neck. He tipped his head toward Saylor’s closed door. “Just stay with her while she’s here. When she gets discharged, bring her back to the clubhouse. Mac, Mark, and Drew are gonna be staying there too.”

“Shouldn’t you just send them home?” Poppy asked. Her voice was hesitant, but she was thinking the obvious thing—get the civilians out of the blast zone.

I shook my head. “So they can go back to California and have Boone and Gibbs go after them there?” I asked. “They’d be sitting ducks. Seems like just being around the club makes them a target. We can’t just send the crew away to be slaughtered.”

Poppy winced. “Jesus. I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

Yarder wrapped an arm around her and pulled her into his side. “It’s okay, babe. As much as I’d love to just put them on a plane and forget this happened, we can’t.

They're wrapped up in it now. Whether they like it or not."

He was right. Every one of them had unknowingly stepped into a war zone when they showed up to film our lives. They wanted drama for their show, and now they had it—just not the kind anyone wanted to air.

"I'll keep you up to date on what's going on here until Saylor gets released," I said. "I'm sure the police will be by today to talk to her again."

I didn't want them near her. Every instinct in me said to keep them out, to keep everyone out. But I knew better. Getting in the way of the cops would only bring more heat. More attention. We couldn't afford that right now.

Yarder nodded. "I'll have a car brought up for you. We got your bike back to the clubhouse already."

I nodded in return.

Yarder clapped a firm hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze—steady and strong. "We'll figure this out," he said.

Poppy stepped forward and gave me a quick hug—light but sincere. "I would say I want to see Saylor before we leave," she said with a small smirk, "but I don't think you're gonna let that happen."

"You can see her tomorrow at the clubhouse," I grunted.

She laughed, kissed Yarder on the cheek, and together, they turned and walked down the hall. Yarder's arm stayed around her shoulders as their voices were low as they disappeared around the corner.

Once they were gone, the silence returned.

Just me. Just the hallway. Just the soft beeping from Saylor's room and the low murmur of nurses down the hall.

I stayed there for a moment.

Then I took a deep breath.

I didn't know what the hell this was—what this thing inside me was doing. I didn't understand why I felt so goddamn tethered to her all of a sudden. It didn't make sense.

But I wasn't walking away.

Not from her.

Something about seeing her on that stretcher, broken and bleeding, had flipped a switch in me I didn't know existed. I couldn't undo it. Didn't want to.

I was going to keep Saylor safe, no matter what it took.

And we were going to put an end to Boone and Gibbs—once and for all.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:24 am

Saylor

I felt like I'd been run over by fifty dump trucks, then backed over for good measure. Every inch of my body ached like I'd gone twelve rounds in a bar fight—and lost. My shoulders throbbed, my ribs felt like they were held together with twine, and there were bruises on top of bruises, layered like a damn lasagna of pain. Even breathing felt like too much effort.

I dropped a sock on the floor and, without thinking, bent over to grab it.

Big mistake.

Pain shot up my spine and flared in every joint like firecrackers. I gasped and froze halfway down, paralyzed by the searing ache that flared across my back and shoulders.

“Baby,” Pirate scolded gently from behind me. “Let me get that.”

I slowly sat back up like I was made of rusted metal. My eyes followed him as he bent down without a wince and retrieved the sock like it was nothing.

Must be nice to have a body that wasn't trying to retire from existence.

He knelt in front of me and held the sock. “Give me your foot.”

“You're crazy,” I breathed and tried to laugh but only managed a pained wheeze.

Pirate looked up at me. His dark eyes soft but serious. “You almost passed out from bending over. I’ll put your socks and shoes on.”

I stared at him like he was speaking another language. I knew he was trying to help, but my pride was hanging on by a thread. Still, yesterday after Mac had come by, she went back to my tiny house and packed a bag for me. I saw what she grabbed —my favorite vintage Nirvana tee, black jeans, black socks, and my scuffed black Chucks. My normal armor. My normal vibe. Something that looked like me, unlike this drafty hospital gown.

“You can’t put my shoes on,” I sighed and pushed the sweaty strands of hair out of my face.

“Why not?” he asked without missing a beat.

“Because I don’t have pants on, Pirate. I don’t think I should be walking around with just a shirt and shoes on.”

A slow smile crept onto his lips. “Yeah, you might be right about that one.”

He managed to slide my socks on gently and was careful not to touch a bruise or put pressure anywhere that would make me wince. Then he stood and held my jeans.

“Let’s get these pants on, baby.”

“I doubt you’ve ever said those words before,” I mumbled and snatched the jeans from him. “I can get them. You can wait in the hallway.”

He shook his head. “Not happening. You couldn’t bend over to grab your sock. You’re not going to be able to stand and get dressed.”

He reached for the jeans again, but I clutched them to my chest.

“I’m fine.”

He met my eyes, and his voice was calm but firm. “You’re not fine. You had the shit beat out of you not even forty-eight hours ago. You haven’t even felt the rock bottom yet. I’m helping you.”

“I can do it myself,” I insisted.

“Stand,” he challenged. “If you can stand for one minute without stumbling or falling over, you can dress yourself.”

I rolled my eyes. “It doesn’t take me a minute to put on pants.”

“Then stand for a minute, and I’ll know you’re good.”

I wanted to scream. Not at him, really—just in general. I was so tired, sore, and humiliated. If I didn’t just try to do this, he was going to keep hovering like an overprotective hawk. And as much as I kind of liked it, I really wanted him to give me a few seconds of space so I could at least dress myself with a shred of dignity.

“Fine,” I grumbled.

I pushed off the bed and stood. Pain flared across my thighs and hips, and my legs trembled like a baby deer. I swayed slightly, and my arms flailed for balance. My entire body screamed at me to sit back down, but I fought through it. Got my balance and took a shaky breath.

“See?” I said and held out my arms for dramatic effect. “Totally—”

I lost my balance. My knee gave out. The room tilted.

Shit.

Pirate moved fast and wrapped his arms around me just as I started to fall. One arm around my shoulders and one around my waist. I crashed against his chest, and his warmth was immediate. His scent—leather and soap and something undeniably him—washed over me. My face ended up just inches from his, and our eyes locked.

I was embarrassed... but also? A little breathless for a completely different reason.

“Maybe I’m not the most steady,” I whispered.

Pirate chuckled, and his chest vibrated against mine. “I think you need to rest some more, baby. Let’s get you dressed and back to the clubhouse.”

“Clubhouse?” I asked and frowned as he gently steadied me. “What do you mean?”

Pirate kept his arm around me as he took the pants from my hand. “Until we get things settled, everyone’s staying at the clubhouse.”

“Settled? What does that mean?” I asked, my heart skipping.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said simply.

“I think that’s impossible to do.” I had been worried before I had been attacked, and now I was whatever was worse than worrying.

He knelt in front of me again with my pants in hand. “Let’s get your pants on, baby.”

I gave him a warning look. He stayed in front of me but didn’t back down and

crouched to guide my feet into the legs of the jeans one at a time. Then he lifted the hem of my hospital gown slightly to pull them up.

“Why does your knee say ‘It’s Brit Bitch’?” he asked suddenly.

“Oh Jesus,” I muttered and covered my face with my hands. I peeked down at him between my fingers.

He tipped his head back and looked up at me, amused.

“It’s Brit-KNEE, bitch,” I corrected, my voice muffled through my fingers. “Brit. Knee. As in Britney Spears.”

Pirate raised an eyebrow. “I’m guessing that’s from a song?”

“Yeah,” I said weakly. I had no idea if Pirate even knew who Britney Spears was. He seemed more like an AC/DC kind of guy. I had much more eclectic tastes. My playlist ranged from Britney Spears to Papa Roach and everything in between.

“It’s from a song... never mind.”

He laughed softly. “Okay. Not sure I get it, but as long as you like it.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Maybe a stick of butter with wings is more your style.”

He blinked, confused. “You have a stick of butter with wings tattooed on your body?”

Maybe I should’ve stopped while I was ahead.

“Yes,” I said like he was the one being weird. “It’s a Butter-Fly.”

He actually laughed, full and unguarded. I liked that sound more than I wanted to admit.

Pirate pulled my pants up the rest of the way, and his fingers brushed against the skin at my hips. The light touch sent a flicker of warmth through me, and I fought the urge to blush. Then he fastened the button, zipped the fly, and looked up at me.

“You’ll have to give me a tattoo tour.”

My stomach flipped. His voice was low and gravelly, and that little smirk of his was dangerous.

“Sure,” I whispered.

His gaze held mine. It was intense and unreadable. My breath caught in my throat.

“You need help with your shirt?” he asked.

“Um, I think I should be able to handle that,” I whispered and finally looked away.

He nodded. “I’ll pack up your toothbrush and stuff in the bathroom while you do that.”

I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. As sweet and gentle as Pirate was being, there were some things I really wanted to do without an audience—like wrestle a hospital gown off my aching body and try not to pass out in the process.

Once he disappeared into the bathroom, I slowly peeled off the gown and tossed it to the foot of the bed. Thank God they hadn’t taken my bra off. That would’ve been a whole new level of awkward. I was going to have to figure out how to take it off later, but I could deal with that in the future.

Grunting softly, I grabbed the Nirvana shirt and started pulling the gown off. Every movement was an effort. The gown thankfully slipped off with some ease. Now it was time for the shirt.

My shoulders screamed. My ribs protested. I groaned and winced my way through it, but eventually, I got the shirt on and slumped forward, exhausted.

“Got it?” Pirate called from the bathroom.

“Got it,” I panted.

A moment later, he stepped out of the bathroom and took one look at me.

“Looks like you need a good ten-hour nap,” he chuckled.

“Make it twelve,” I muttered and leaned back on my hands.

He dropped to his knees again in front of me and grabbed my Chucks. He slid them on with practiced ease and laced them up. When he was done, he sat back on his heels and smiled up at me.

“Let’s get you home and in bed, baby.”

That didn’t sound like a bad idea at all.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:24 am

Pirate

“This is your room,” I said, pushed open the door, and stepped aside to let her in first.

I shrugged off my cut and hung it on the back of the chair like always. Comfortable. Familiar. My space.

“Okay,” she said simply. Saylor didn’t move more than a few steps in. Her eyes scanned the room like it was a puzzle she had to solve. “Why am I in your room?” she asked and turned to me.

“Because this is where you’re going to be staying.”

She blinked, clearly not a fan of that answer. She stood near the bed and did a slow turn, taking it all in. It wasn’t anything fancy—just a king bed, a dresser, a flat screen mounted on the wall, a chair in the corner. Clean but lived in. My home inside the clubhouse.

“Why am I staying here? Why can’t I stay with Mac? That makes more sense than me staying here.”

“Mac, Mark, and Drew are sleeping on air mattresses in the interview room,” I said, already knowing her next argument.

She crossed her arms, stubborn as hell. “Am I supposed to see a problem with that? I can sleep on an air mattress.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think you’re up for sleeping on an air mattress that slowly deflates every night until you’re practically on the floor.” I nodded to the bed. “You’ll sleep there.”

She pointed at the mattress like it was cursed. “And where are you going to sleep?”

I nodded again. “Right there with you, baby. I’ll stay on top of the covers if that makes you more comfortable.”

Her jaw tightened. “Or Mac could come sleep in here with me, and then you could go out there with the guys.”

I let out a flat laugh. “Yeah, that shit isn’t going to happen. The cameras have made my life hell for months. I’m not about to give up my bed.”

“You’re giving it up to me.”

I shook my head, smirking. “Nope. Just adding you to it. Lay down and rest. I can see how exhausted you are.”

“I can’t sleep all day,” she muttered, arms still crossed.

“I’m not blind, Saylor. Anyone could see you’re tired—and I don’t blame you. You’ve been through hell.”

She glared at me like she wanted to argue, but her body betrayed her. She was swaying on her feet. Her arms dropped to her sides.

“I don’t want to sleep.”

“Whatever. Don’t sleep. But at least sit down. I can put a movie on or something.”

With a sigh of exaggerated annoyance, she sat on the edge of the bed. “Maybe you can tell me why you’re stuck to me like glue.”

I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. The screen flickered to life. “What do you like to watch?”

“Anything but reality TV.”

I glanced at her, amused. “You don’t watch the type of TV you help make?”

“Find a movie,” she deadpanned.

I didn’t turn back to the TV right away. “Avoiding my question?”

“Just like you avoided mine,” she shot back.

I opened Netflix and started flipping through movies. “What question did you ask?”

“Why are you stuck to me like glue?”

I’d heard her the first time. I just didn’t have a real answer.

“Thirsty?” I asked instead.

She laughed, even if she was trying not to. “You’re making me feel like I’m crazy, Pirate. Am I really talking?”

“I hear you, baby. I just don’t know the answer to your question. I’m here because this is where it feels right. That enough?”

She gave me a look, her lips quirking up like she didn’t buy it but wasn’t going to

push. “Not really. But I’m pretty sure you’re not going to give me anything else. And I just learned you’re good at avoiding me when you don’t want to hear me.”

She yawned and tried to hide it behind her hand.

“The movie’s starting. Why don’t you lay down? I’ll get you something to drink.”

“I’m not sleeping,” she insisted.

I held up my hands. “Never said you should sleep. I just want you to rest.”

“Horizontally,” she muttered.

Still, she scooted backward on the bed, easing herself down slowly. When her head hit the pillows, she let out a soft sigh.

“This what you want?” she asked.

“That’ll do. I’ll be right back.”

I set the remote down on the nightstand and headed for the door. Before leaving, I flicked off the overhead light so only the glow of the TV lit the room. I stepped into the hallway and pulled the door closed behind me.

The clubhouse was quiet, the steady hum of voices down the hall and the smell of food cooking the only signs of life.

I followed the scent to the kitchen.

Adalee stood at the stove, stirring something in a huge pot. She glanced over when I walked in.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Just getting some water.” I opened the fridge and grabbed two bottles.

“Think she’ll be up for dinner? I’m making sausage, potato, and kale soup.”

I curled my lip. “I’m sure it tastes better than it sounds.” I didn’t even know what kale was—some kind of lettuce?

Adalee laughed. “I promise it’s good.” She pointed toward the oven. “I’ve also got a carrot cake in there.”

“Good. I’ll have three slices of that.”

She rolled her eyes. “I bet you’ll have two bowls of soup too.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that. What time’s dinner?”

“Should be ready by six. Want me to bring some to your room?”

I shook my head. “I’ll come out and get it. Thanks, Adalee.”

She smiled and went back to stirring.

“Pirate,” Yarder called from the bar, beer in hand.

I stepped over. “Yeah?”

“How’s it going?”

“Going. Just getting her settled in.”

Yarder nodded. “Good. Church in the morning.”

“Something happen?”

He shook his head. “Just be there.”

“Will do.”

I made my way back to my room, the cold water bottles sweating in my hands. The hallway was dim, quiet except for the occasional creak of the wood under my boots.

Back at my door, I pushed it open gently and stepped inside.

Saylor was curled on her side, already asleep, the TV screen casting a faint blue light over her. Her hair spilled across the pillow, her breathing soft and steady—and she was snoring. Not loud. Just a faint, rhythmic little sound.

“So much for not sleeping, baby,” I whispered.

I set the bottles on the nightstand and sat on the edge of the bed. I untied my boots and slipped them off, setting them neatly beside the chair. Then I eased myself onto the bed next to her, careful not to jostle her or touch her. She needed the rest more than anything.

She looked fragile in sleep, her usual edge softened. A fresh bruise bloomed along her cheekbone, and a shallow cut marked her forehead. Seeing it all laid out like that in the dim light—yeah. She’d been through hell.

But even with the bruises, she was beautiful.

Her black hair had that shine to it, falling in a messy halo. A silver ring pierced her

nose, and her ears were studded with piercings that glinted in the TV's glow. Her tattoos snaked down her arms—some small and funny, others bold and dark. She had a look that most people didn't understand. Goth, yeah. But there was softness there, too. Something delicate in the way she held herself, even when she was trying to look like she didn't give a damn.

I laid on my back and closed my eyes. I'd gotten some sleep the night before, but it had been choppy—nurses coming in and out of the hospital room, strange sounds pulling me out of what little rest I got. I hadn't let myself sleep too deeply, not while she was hooked up to machines and looking like a shadow of herself.

But here?

We were safe in the clubhouse. She was next to me. And for the first time in days, I let myself breathe easy.

Sleep came quick.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:24 am

Saylor

I woke slowly, and my mind was like fog on a windshield. My head felt clearer than before, but that wasn't saying much. It was quiet—too quiet for a clubhouse full of rowdy bikers—and the room was dark except for a narrow sliver of light that spilled out from beneath the bathroom door.

Water ran on the other side.

A shower sounded amazing right now. My body ached in places I didn't even remember getting hit, and I felt the grime of the last forty-eight hours cling to me like a second skin. But the thought of walking in there—of seeing Pirate in the shower—gave me pause.

Did I want to shower with Pirate?

The thought surprised me. Caught me totally off guard. Ever since he'd been there when they loaded me into the ambulance, something had shifted. I'd been seeing him differently. Not just as the brooding biker who was always around. No, now I saw him as the man who'd held my hand when everything hurt, who didn't leave even when I told him I'd be fine.

Crazy. Completely, undeniably crazy.

I pushed myself up slowly, and every muscle groaned in protest. I sat on the edge of the bed and planted my feet on the floor. I wiggled my toes against the cool wood. With a sigh, I ran my fingers through my tangled hair and tried to make sense of

everything that had led me here.

To Pirate's bed.

What the hell had the last two days even been?

Before I could spiral too far into my own thoughts, the bathroom door creaked open. I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the soft golden light spilling into the room. And there he was.

Pirate.

Backlit by the bathroom light, with water still glistening on his chest and a towel slung low on his hips. His hair dripped onto his shoulders as he rubbed a towel over his head.

Oh. My. God.

My brain short-circuited. Muscles, tattoos, that stupidly smug expression—it was like someone had conjured the perfect image of temptation and dropped it right in front of me.

“You’re up,” he said. His voice was rough and low, with a slow drawl that made my already-fuzzy thoughts even worse. He kept drying his hair with the towel and was completely unbothered by the way my jaw might’ve been unhinged.

I blinked and shook my head to try to force my eyes up to his face instead of... everywhere else. “Uh, yeah. I guess I’ve finally slept enough.”

He chuckled and stepped farther into the room, switching on the lamp on the dresser. The softer light was easier on my eyes, but it didn’t make him any less distracting.

“Adalee and Fallon brought dinner a little bit ago,” he said, and nodded toward the dresser. A tray sat there, loaded with two big bowls of something delicious-looking and a half loaf of crusty bread. “Hopefully it’s still warm. Hungry?”

As if on cue, my stomach growled loud enough for both of us to hear. I gave a sheepish smile. “Uh, I could eat.”

“I’ll bring it to you.” He grabbed the tray with one hand and set it gently on the bed next to me.

The steam rising from the bowls smelled amazing—rich, savory, and comforting in a way that made my chest ache just a little. “This looks amazing,” I said and reached for one of the bowls.

Pirate handed it to me without hesitation, and his fingers brushed mine for a second. I got a whiff of him—clean, fresh, warm. Like soap and steam and something undeniably male. It was a scent that would ruin me if I wasn’t careful.

He tore off a chunk of bread and placed it carefully on the edge of the tray. “You good here? I can bring in a table if you want it.”

I shook my head and tried not to inhale his scent too deeply again. “I’m good right here. Is the movie over?”

He laughed as he walked back toward the bathroom. “Yeah, baby. We both passed out not even ten minutes in.”

I smiled as I dipped a piece of bread into the soup, and the broth soaked into the crust. I heard him moving around in the bathroom.

A few moments later, he walked back out. Jeans slung low on his hips, a plain white

T-shirt clinging to his damp chest, and his feet bare. Casual and devastating.

He grabbed his bowl and dropped onto the couch. “Is it good?” he asked.

“I haven’t taken a bite yet. What time is it?” I asked.

“Almost seven.”

I scooped up a spoonful of soup and brought it to my lips. The warmth, the flavor—it was like a hug from the inside. “Oh, wow. That is amazing.”

He nodded. “Everything Adalee makes turns out amazing.”

“I can see why she’s opening a bakery.” I ripped off another hunk of bread and dunked it in. “I’m assuming she made the bread, too.”

“Yup. She’s always got something baking in the oven, it seems.”

We ate in comfortable silence with just the soft clink of silverware and the occasional slurp of soup breaking the stillness.

Pirate glanced over. “How are you feeling?”

I gave a dry laugh. “Like I was hit by forty dump trucks.”

He winced. “So not good.”

“Well, this morning it felt like fifty dump trucks, so I guess it’s a little better.” I smiled and tipped the bowl to drink the last of the broth.

“Hopefully it stays that way, baby. Though from my experience, the third day is

always the worst.”

I glared over the rim of my bowl. “Don’t put that juju on me, Pirate.”

He chuckled. “Hopefully it’ll be different for you. If not, Sloane and Aero went and got your prescription filled after dinner.”

“Hopefully I can make it through with just Tylenol.”

He gave a small shrug. “Maybe.”

I finished my bowl and set it back on the tray. Pirate collected his and stacked the empty dishes.

“I can help with cleanup,” I offered, and shifted to get up.

“Nope,” he said quickly. “You’re resting. That’s the deal.”

“Bossy.”

“Damn right.”

He disappeared out the door and left it open. When he returned, he grabbed the remote and flopped back onto the bed.

“Want to watch another movie?”

I laughed softly. “You think we’ll make it past the first ten minutes this time?”

He grinned. “Only one way to find out. What’re you in the mood to watch?”

I leaned back and slowly stretched out until I was lying on my side, with my head propped on my hand. “Anything’s good.”

He flipped through the movies before settling on Top Gun. “Classic,” he said and turned off the lamp. The room fell into a cozy darkness, with the TV casting a soft blue glow over everything.

My heart did a weird flutter at how normal this all felt.

Comfortable. Familiar. Dangerous.

“Good?” he asked.

As good as I could be, beat to hell and now curled up in bed with a hot biker who smelled like heaven and looked like sin.

“All good,” I said quickly.

“Let me know if you need anything, baby. I know you know your way around the clubhouse, but I’m here.”

Oh, I knew. I was very aware that he was here. His presence filled every inch of the room and every breath I took.

We watched the movie for a bit with the volume low. I did nothing today besides eat, but I felt myself being dragged back under again. The exhaustion was like a blanket pulling me down.

And somewhere between Maverick and Goose buzzing the flight tower, my eyes drifted closed.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:24 am

Saylor

I felt the bed shift beneath me and was jostled gently, like someone had plopped down too close. It had to be Pirate.

I blinked my eyes open and expected his rugged face and messy hair. Instead, I found myself nose-to-nose with Dove, who was grinning like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” she said brightly.

“Um... hello?” I croaked, my voice rough like gravel.

“I’m not Pirate,” she added helpfully, as if that wasn’t already screamingly obvious.

A burst of laughter rang out from somewhere else in the room.

“I don’t think she hit her head hard enough to mistake you for Pirate, Dove,” Poppy giggled.

I blinked again and tried to figure out what was going on.

Okay. This... was not what I was expecting to wake up to.

“Do you need to be medicated?” a voice called out—Olive, maybe? I’d been around these girls enough to recognize some voices, but not all of them without faces.

“Why don’t you let the girl move before you offer to medicate her?” Mac’s voice cut

through the chatter. That one, I knew instantly.

I rolled over onto my back with a groan and lifted my head to get a better view. Yep. I was surrounded. Mac was near the foot of the bed, with her arms crossed with a smirk on her face. Dove was still next to me. Sloane, Olive, Poppy, Fallon, Dani, and Adalee filled the rest of the room, like a damn biker girl slumber party exploded in here.

“Uh... hello?” I muttered again.

“I know we’re not as exciting to wake up to as Pirate,” Dani said with a wink, “but he had to go to church.”

“So we volunteered to hang out with you until he’s done,” Adalee added, rolling her eyes. “God knows he’s not going to let you out of his sight for any reason other than club stuff.”

I managed to sit up, and my body protested every inch of the way. I pushed my hair out of my face and tried not to cringe too obviously.

“How do you feel?” Fallon asked gently.

I closed my eyes for a second and did a quick body scan. “Better than I thought I would, but I’m still really sore.” I didn’t want to jinx it, but Pirate had warned me the third day would be the worst. So far, I could deal with this. “I think I need to get up and move.”

“Good idea,” Mac called from near the dresser. “The longer you lay around, the longer it’ll take to feel better.”

“Yes, mother,” I said with a tired smile. Mac was only thirteen years older than me,

but in my world, she was a solid mother figure—blunt, loyal, fiercely protective, and not afraid to boss me around.

“Shower or food first?” Olive asked.

I squinted and wrinkled my nose. “I need to shower. I feel like I’ve got three inches of dirt stuck to me. I’m sure I reek.”

How Pirate had managed to sleep next to me without passing out from the stench was a mystery.

I scooted to the edge of the bed and prepared to stand. The moment I shifted my weight forward, the girls leaned in like synchronized swimmers anticipating disaster.

I paused and glanced around. “Um... what are you guys doing?”

“We’re making sure you don’t eat floor,” Poppy said.

Dove nodded. “Pirate was more than a little nervous leaving you with us. We’re just making sure the man isn’t proved right.”

“Yeah,” Mac added dryly. “I’m not into proving men right.”

“Okay,” I drawled, amused. I stood slowly. My legs were wobbly but held steady. “I’m sure I can make it to the bathroom.”

“We’ll be close,” Dove assured me.

I took a slow step forward. Sloane and Olive flanked me like bodyguards while Mac trailed behind us. It was overkill, but I didn’t say anything. Honestly? It was kind of nice.

“Can one of you grab me some clothes?” I asked.

“On it,” Mac said and veered off toward a black duffle bag sitting near the dresser. She crouched beside it and started digging through it like she knew what she was looking for.

Meanwhile, I continued toward the bathroom.

“I’m fine,” I told Dani over my shoulder. “Honestly.” I was sore—not broken.

When I reached the bathroom, I turned just as Mac handed over the bundle of clothes.

“I think I can take it from here.”

Mac, Sloane, and Olive exchanged glances like I had just said I was going to bungee jump.

“Get,” I said with a smirk. “I’m sore, not dead.”

Sloane and Olive backed away, but Mac lingered at the door.

“Don’t lock it,” she instructed. “And just holler if you need anything, okay? We’ll be right outside.”

I gave her a grateful nod. “Got it. Now go before I flash you.”

Mac grinned and finally backed out of the doorway. I closed the door behind her and left it unlocked like she asked.

I exhaled.

It was quiet. For the first time in what felt like days, I was alone.

I took a quick pee, flushed, and walked over to the mirror. Time to face the damage.

I stripped off my clothes, which took more effort than I expected. Every movement came with a wince or a hiss. I finally peeled off the last piece and looked at myself in the mirror.

Damn.

A dark bruise covered my lower stomach from where that bastard had kicked me. Three purple-and-blue splotches painted my left thigh—likely from when he tackled me. I turned a little and saw another bruise blooming across the curve of my butt. That must’ve happened when I hit the ground.

My arms, tattooed in bright, colorful ink, were still vibrant—but now had splotchy bruises weaved between the lines like some twisted mosaic. The cut on my forehead wasn’t huge—maybe three inches—but it was deep enough to leave a scar.

“Maybe bangs are in your future,” I muttered to my reflection.

There were a few other cuts on my cheek and chin that were all already starting to scab. At least the swelling was going down.

I turned on the water and waited for it to get hot. Steam filled the small bathroom quickly and curled around me like a cocoon.

When it was ready, I stepped in.

Hot water hit my skin, and I almost moaned. The heat soaked into my muscles and loosened the tight ache that had settled deep. I moved slowly and cautiously. Every

bend and twist reminded me I wasn't anywhere close to one hundred percent.

I carefully washed my hair, then my body, and moved over bruises like I was handling fine china. The shampoo smelled like Pirate.

I stood under the water long after I was clean, letting it wash over me and relaxing parts of me I didn't even realize were tense. When the warmth started to fade into lukewarm, I finally shut off the water.

I stepped out and reached for the towel. I patted myself dry and moved back to the mirror. I brushed my wet hair slowly, and my eyes studied myself again.

It was still me. Beaten, bruised, tired—but still me.

The last seventy-two hours had been a blur of chaos, pain, and Pirate. Getting jumped, the ambulance, the clubhouse, the steady presence of his hand in mine—God, it was all so much. My emotions hadn't even caught up yet.

A knock sounded on the door.

“You good?” Mac called.

I rolled my eyes but smiled. “I'm just counting all the bruises. I should be done in about a year.”

Mac's laugh echoed through the door. “I think you should just say you're one big bruise and call it a day.”

That... was accurate.

I pulled on the clothes she'd given me: black cotton shorts with a stretchy waistband

(bless her) and a dark blue Fleetwood Mac shirt that hung off one shoulder. I didn't even attempt a bra. That would've been a losing battle.

I cracked the door open and stepped out. Mac was right there, leaning against the wall like a guard. The others were all still here scattered around the room.

Sloane, Olive, and Dove were lounging on the bed—which they had made before claiming it. Poppy, Adalee, Fallon, and Dani were crammed together on the couch, and looked entirely too comfortable.

I took it all in, and felt like I had walked into some kind of sleepover-turned-intervention.

“Why does this feel like I've walked into an intervention?” I asked and raised a brow as I took in the room full of women sprawled out like it was their weekend retreat.

“It's not,” Fallon said with a smirk. “Promise.”

“We just wanted to hang out with you,” Adalee added and lifted a mug of coffee from the couch like she was toasting me.

“You're the guest of honor,” Poppy grinned. “This is practically a slumber party. We just forgot the snacks and wine.”

“Dani dropped the ball on that one since wine is her specialty,” Olive said and stretched her legs across the end of the bed.

Dani gasped. “Rude! I had no idea we were going to do this. I can always call Stan and ask him to bring some over.”

I laughed and lowered myself slowly to the bed beside Dove, who immediately

fluffed the pillow behind me like I was made of glass. “You guys are ridiculous.”

“Maybe,” Sloane said, “but you’ll get used to it since you’ll be staying here. So now you’re stuck with us.”

“You say that like it’s a punishment,” I muttered with a smile.

It wasn’t. Not even a little. I liked all of the girls. I had been able to observe them the past two weeks or so since Mac and I had gotten here. I would willingly hang out with each of them if it wasn’t my job.

Mac leaned against the wall and sipped from a bottle of water. “Pirate didn’t want to leave you alone, but I told him we had it handled. He looked like he wanted to fight me.”

“That man is feral when it comes to you,” Poppy chimed in, and tucked her legs beneath her. “He’s gone mega-protective.”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s just looking out for me.” I tipped my head to the side. “Not like I know why, but he has.”

Fallon shot me a knowing look. “That man wants to do more than look, and you know it.”

“As if,” I said and shook my head. “I am not that man’s type.” All of the ol’ ladies had the same type of look to them, and I did not fit into that at all.

That earned a wave of laughter and a few raised eyebrows. I didn’t have the energy to explain what I hadn’t even figured out myself yet.

“Anyway,” Mac said, drawing the focus back, “since you’re awake and moving, you

eating or what?”

“I probably should,” I admitted. “But I just showered, and I don’t want to move again unless I’m being bribed.”

“I could be persuaded to bring you a muffin,” Adalee offered with a grin.

Dove’s head perked up. “Wait, which kind?”

“I still have some of the lemon-poppy seed ones,” Adalee said, and already slid off the bed. “And I might have one of Dove’s favorite chocolate chip banana ones, too.”

“You’re holding out on me,” Dove gasped. “You said they were all gone.”

“I accept bribes in all forms,” I called as Adalee vanished out the door.

When she returned a minute later with a plate stacked with muffins and a bottle of water, she set it on my lap like I was royalty. I bit into the banana muffin with an audible moan.

“Oh my god,” I said with my mouth full. “Marry me.” I got to see all of the goodies that Adalee made, but I never tasted any of them before.

“I don’t think Pirate or Fade would like that,” Dove said, sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed.

“Fade knows he has to share me,” Adalee laughed. “Though I’m pretty sure he’d rather not.”

“Men,” Sloane laughed. “What would we do without them?”

“I’m doing just fine without one,” Mac called. “I had one for a few years, had a kid, and then he took off.” She smiled wide. “The man, not the kid.”

“You have a kid? How old?” Fallon asked.

“Twenty. She’s in her third year of college in Wisconsin.”

“What’s her name?” Poppy asked.

“Now this feels like an interrogation,” Mac laughed. “Her name is Star.”

“Pretty,” Adalee smiled.

“So,” Dani said, her tone more playful than probing, “you and Pirate...”

“Oh, no,” I groaned. “There is no Pirate and me.”

Sloane looked around. “Um, I hate to break it to you, girl, but we are in Pirate’s room, which has now become your room. I think there is more than nothing going on with you two.”

“I honestly have no clue why Pirate is doing... any of this.” I truly didn’t. Did I like it? Yes. But I was clueless at what had changed. “I know the Fiends are part of something bad, but he hasn’t told me what.”

Poppy held up her hands. “You’re going to have to ask Pirate that question. Yarder told me to keep my mouth shut about club business.”

All the girls nodded.

I guess I was going to have to get my courage up and ask Pirate just what was going

on with the club. It had to have been bad for me to get beat up and the whole club to be on lockdown.

“I know why Pirate is wanting to protect you.”

We all stared at Mac.

“And why is that?” Dani asked.

“Something in him changed when he saw you on that stretcher, Saylor. I saw it happen.” Mac shook her head. “I don’t know if he saw you differently or if he finally saw you. Whatever it is, I can tell that boy is gone for you, Saylor.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, sure, Mac. I’m the one who hit my head, not you.”

Mac held up her hands. “I’m just telling you what I saw, and the way he is sticking to you like glue just proves I saw it.”

“I believe it,” Sloane said. “There is something about these bikers. It’s like they’re just living their lives, and then suddenly,” she clapped her hands together, “BAM! They’re in love.” She pointed around the room. “You all know what I am talking about.”

“Pirate is not in love with me,” I insisted. “We don’t even know each other.”

“Sharing a room together for the foreseeable future will fix that,” Dani laughed. “Smoke and I are still getting to know each other, and it’s been lots of fun.” She winked and couldn’t hold back her smile.

I covered my face with the empty plate. “You guys, no. You’re all crazy.”

“Just wait and see, girl. I don’t think you’ll be calling us crazy for very long.” Dove bumped me gently. “Just let it happen.”

I shook my head. “Enough, enough. How about I say I’m tired and need to rest?”

“Okay, okay,” Mac said and tried not to smile. “We’ll behave.”

“Temporarily,” Poppy added.

I leaned back and rested against the pillows. “You guys are chaotic and crazy.”

“That’s going to be one of the things you love about us,” Dani said and grabbed the remote. “Now, what movie are we going to watch? Pirate said that was all we could do with you.”

“What? We can’t go skydiving?” I joked.

“Next week,” Olive said with a wink. “I think you need to recover a bit more.”

I nodded and smiled. “I think I’m good with that.”

This didn’t feel like recovery. It didn’t feel like being broken or bruised or stuck in Pirate’s bed.

It felt like belonging and gaining seven new friends.

And that? That was the best medicine I could’ve asked for.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:25 am

Pirate

Yarder sat at the head of the table with his posture straight, and his expression was carved and cold as stone. The gavel hadn't hit yet, but silence had already blanketed the room.

I was seated to his left, between Dice and Smoke. Dice was drumming his fingers against the wood like he couldn't sit still, and Smoke had a toothpick dangling from his mouth with his arms crossed as he leaned back in his chair.

I kept my hands clasped in front of me, jaw tight, and my thoughts split between what was happening here and the fact that I'd left Saylor with all the ol' ladies. God knew what I was going to walk back into.

She was safe, though.

I repeated it in my head like a chant. She was safe. She was with Mac and the girls. She was in the compound. She was safe.

But that didn't stop the twitch in my knee.

"Let's get right to it," Yarder said, his tone clipped and heavy with intent.

Good. No small talk. No bullshit. Just business.

"I hope the next words outta your mouth are we're killing Boone and Gibbs," Aero said. His voice was sharp and full of fire. I wasn't the only one ready for all of this to

be over.

“Or you’ve got a better lead on how to find Russ,” Throttle added from the other side of the table, arms folded and eyes locked on Yarder.

Yarder didn’t answer right away. He shifted slightly in his seat and gave Compass a quick glance.

“Or the cops know who attacked Saylor,” I threw in.

Any of those things would’ve been nice. Would’ve saved us some time. We knew Boone and Gibbs were behind what happened to her—she didn’t get jumped by accident. They didn’t do it themselves, but they’d orchestrated it. Cowards always worked from the shadows.

If we found who actually laid their hands on her, they’d lead us back to Boone and Gibbs.

Or, hell, maybe we’d just work our way down the ladder and eliminate them all.

“Or,” Dice cut in, “how about this—you found Stretch.”

I didn’t look at him, but I could feel the grin in his voice. He’d been half-joking, but the tension in the room said we were all hoping one of those names—Boone, Gibbs, Russ, Stretch—was about to be laid out like meat on a table.

Yarder nodded toward Compass.

Compass opened the thick leather notebook in front of him and flipped through a few pages before pulling out a loose sheet of paper.

“I’ve been digging,” he said, and held the paper up between two fingers. “Trying to run down anyone who’s got beef with Boone or Gibbs—friends, enemies, anyone with a reason to talk. Or someone who wants to just help.” He slid the paper onto the center of the table. “This is Brynn Maranga. Now Banachi.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Did you just say Maranga?” Fade asked and leaned forward. “As in Guy Maranga?”

Compass nodded once.

Fade let out a low whistle. “Are you saying we’re getting connected to the Maranga? That’s not just any name—they’re like the fucking mafia.” He looked around the table, eyebrows raised. “Everyone in the world knows that name.”

And he wasn’t wrong.

Every guy here gave some sort of nod, grunt, or eyebrow raise of agreement. Even Dice, who joked about everything, looked dead serious.

“How?” I asked and leaned forward slightly. “You’re not telling me we’ve got some kind of secret handshake with the Maranga. What’s the connection?”

Compass smirked slightly like he’d been waiting for someone to ask that. “Alice,” he said.

There was a collective blink around the table.

“Wrecker’s ol’ lady?” Dice asked with his brow furrowed.

“The chick who talks about cows?” Throttle added and tilted his head.

Yarder chuckled. “The one and only.”

“Wait, wait,” Dice said, holding up a hand. “Are you telling me the woman who proudly claims to wear cowprint onesies is our connection to the Maranga?”

“Basically,” Compass said. “She’s friends with Meg. Meg is the ol’ lady of the prez of the Devil’s Knights.”

Everyone nodded.

“Well,” Compass continued, “a member of the Devil’s Knights’ ol’ lady is the sister of Leo Banachi. Leo married Brynn Maranga. Brynn was married to Guy Maranga before he passed, and after his death, she took over.”

My brain did a double-take.

That was a damn twisted line of connection, but it was perfect for us.

“So, let me get this straight,” Smoke said. “Through Alice... who’s friends with Meg... whose man is in the Knights... who one of the other member’s ol’ lady is Banachi... who is the sister of Leo Banachi, who married Brynn Maranga—we now have a path to Maranga?”

“Yep,” Compass said. “And Brynn and Leo are going to be the ones to help us.”

I leaned back slightly and absorbed everything.

Brynn Maranga was now Brynn Banachi, and she ran the show. We weren’t talking about biker clubs anymore. We were talking power. Deep, generational, fear-in-your-gut kind of power.

I didn't care how we got to Maranga.

I cared that we could.

"Leo and Brynn will be here next Thursday," Yarder said, his voice steady. "They're meeting with us as a favor to the Devil's Knights."

Smoke leaned forward. "So we're going to be in debt to the Devil's Knights?"

Yarder nodded once. "But I think that's a small price to pay to get Boone and Gibbs off our asses."

I didn't know much about the Devil's Knights. The name carried weight, but not in a way that had ever affected us directly. I squinted at Yarder. "They're cool?"

Yarder shrugged casually like we weren't talking about inviting a whole new kind of heat into our business. "From what I know. I'm not worried about what they're gonna ask of us."

That was good enough for me. If Yarder wasn't worried, I wouldn't be either. He didn't bet blind.

"What about Stretch?" Dice asked, breaking the momentary silence.

Yarder exhaled and leaned back in his chair. "Hopefully, with the Maranga stepping in, he'll come to his fuckin' senses and get his ass back here before Boone and Gibbs get to him. He's obviously sniffing around them, but if he's not careful, he won't be for long."

"I'm not worried about Stretch," Compass said with a shrug, like he was shaking off a mosquito. "He was dumb enough to take off on his own to try and fix shit, so he can

take care of himself as far as I'm concerned." He paused and looked around like he knew what he was about to say would sting. "I know that makes me a dick, but him taking off could be making shit worse for us."

Dice, who had been close with Stretch since they both patched in, let out a low growl. "That's fucking bullshit, Compass. You can't be mad at him for trying everything he can to find the end to all of this."

Compass jerked his chin in my direction. "That end include Saylor getting the shit beat out of her? Pretty sure Pirate ain't too happy about that. That might've never happened if Stretch hadn't gone after Boone and Gibbs. We all saw the note."

The room went still.

"Screw you," Dice spat and slammed his palm against the table.

"Knock it off!" Yarder snapped loud enough that even Compass flinched. "We're not gonna start going after each other. Stretch shouldn't have taken off, but I'm not putting the blame on him for what happened to Saylor. That probably would've happened either way. Boone and Gibbs are ruthless. We know this." He looked at each of us in turn. "We get the Maranga involved, and all of this'll be over."

Dice's jaw ticked, and eyes still locked on Compass, but he didn't say anything more.

"We just lay low until Leo and Brynn get here. We'll keep looking for Stretch, but don't stir up anything more," Yarder ordered.

Dice stood abruptly, and his chair screeched across the floor. "We done then?"

Yarder gave him a short nod.

Dice stormed out, as his heavy boots pounded against the floor. The door slammed behind him hard enough to rattle the walls. Loyalty ran deep with Dice.

Yarder turned his gaze to Compass. “You had to go there?”

Compass just shrugged. “You know we all feel the same way. Stretch went rogue, and now we’re paying for it.”

He wasn’t wrong. Not really. But I got why Stretch did what he did. We were all sick of the endless back-and-forth with Boone and Gibbs. Stretch just snapped first.

Yarder looked at me. “Saylor doing okay?”

I gave a quick nod. “She’s just pretty beat up. Should be fine.”

“You clue her into all this?”

I shook my head. “Not yet. She hasn’t really asked.”

Aero chuckled from across the table. “I’m sure the girls took care of filling her in.”

Yarder sighed, rubbing a hand down his face. “If they did, Poppy and I are gonna have a word. I told her not to say anything to Saylor about this.”

I raised a brow. “So you want me to tell her?”

Yarder nodded. “You’ll give her the facts. No fluff. No emotional mess like the girls would. And hopefully, that’ll all be over soon and just be a story to tell our kids one day.”

My chest did a weird thing at that—like a muscle I hadn’t used before clenched tight.

Compass clapped Yarder on the shoulder. “Can’t fucking wait for that, brother.”

Everyone else around the table started nodding, murmurs of agreement and tired chuckles rippling out. Smoke stood first, followed by Throttle and Aero. Chairs scraped back, everyone stood, and for a moment, it felt like we were all letting out the same breath.

Church was over.

But nothing felt done.

I stood and couldn’t stop the drift of my thoughts back to her—Saylor. I hadn’t been able to get her out of my head since the moment I saw her on the stretcher. Every bruise, every flinch, every goddamn moan had carved itself into me like a brand.

And now... now I had a glimmer of hope that this would all be over.

Once Boone and Gibbs were dealt with, once Stretch was found or came back with answers, once the dust settled—I could figure out what the hell this was between me and her.

Whatever it was, it wasn’t going away.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:25 am

Saylor

Later that night, after dinner and hanging out with the girls most of the day, I was absolutely wrecked. My body was sore, my head was fuzzy from all the conversations, and my stomach was blissfully full.

What surprised me most wasn't how tired I was—but the fact that Pirate hadn't kicked everyone out of the room after church. I'd expected him to come back in, throw a nod toward the girls, and start rounding them up like cattle. But instead, he'd just... joined us. Like it was normal. Like a dozen people piling into his room wasn't anything new.

And then the guys started showing up in waves. Not all at once but in little rotations. Smoke came in with Dice and stayed long enough to tell a ridiculous story that had Poppy crying from laughter. Fade brought in beers, though I stuck with water. Even Drew and Mark, who didn't usually hang around, stopped in to say hi and watch some TV before disappearing again.

Adalee had outdone herself on dinner. Pork chops, mashed potatoes, green beans with bacon, and a lemon meringue pie that tasted like it came from a five-star bakery.

By the time everyone finally filtered out, I was camped out on the couch with a blanket over my legs and a pillow jammed behind my back. Pirate was lying on the bed with his hands tucked behind his head, one leg stretched long, the other bent. The TV was on, but I wasn't even paying attention to what we were watching. It was just noise in the background. Something to fill the quiet.

“I don’t think I’ve watched this much TV in years,” I sighed, rubbing my eyes.

Pirate glanced over at me with the faintest smirk on his face. “That’s probably because you watch it happen in real-time, baby.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, probably. That’s for sure why I don’t want to watch reality TV.” I shook my head slowly. “No, thank you.”

He chuckled low. “You think our show’s gonna do well?”

I tilted my head and quirked my lips. “I mean... you guys have some good things in your favor.” I wasn’t an expert or anything, but I had a decent grasp on what drew attention. And these guys? They weren’t exactly forgettable.

“What things?” he asked and glanced at me again with a curious look.

I held up a finger. “One, everyone is good-looking. That’s going to get people watching from the start. A pretty face always sells.” I grinned. “Some of you guys are going to have a serious fan base.”

“Yeah?” Pirate asked, clearly amused.

“Yarder for sure,” I said. “Though that probably has more to do with him being president. But his looks won’t hurt.” I tipped my head to the side and pretended to study him. “Honestly, all of you guys are going to be eye candy. I’ve seen some of the promos Don’s putting together, and trust me—he’s leaning hard into everyone’s looks.”

Pirate turned his gaze back to the TV, but I saw the small twitch of his lips. “That’s good.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if they want to do another season,” I admitted and adjusted the blanket over my lap. “The club might’ve been a pain to work around sometimes, but Don’s got a ton of good footage.”

Pirate scoffed, his voice lower now. “I wouldn’t be too sure that’s gonna happen. It seemed like shit hit the fan the second filming started. None of us want to go through this shit again.”

That got my attention. My eyes narrowed slightly as I sat up a little straighter.

This was the opening I’d been waiting for.

“What shit was that?” I asked casually, though the air between us shifted. It felt heavier now. Real.

He turned his head to look at me, and his dark eyes studied my face like he was trying to decide how much I could handle. How much I should know?

“I asked Poppy to tell me,” I added and hoped that would push him just a little further, “and she said I needed to ask you.”

Pirate laughed, short and surprised. “Now that is surprising. Yarder will be glad to know she didn’t spill the beans to you.”

“But you can spill the beans?”

He nodded, and his expression softened. “Yeah. I can give you the condensed version of what’s going on. It’s the least you deserve after what happened to you.”

Ten minutes later, my jaw was practically on the floor, and I didn’t think I’d ever recover from the sheer shock of what Pirate had just laid on me.

“You guys have the Texas State Attorney General and the U.S. Attorney General on your asses? And they’re trying to kill everyone around you?”

Pirate nodded, calm as you please. Like he hadn’t just casually dropped a nuclear bomb on my understanding of reality.

“Yeah, baby. Dove’s dad got us messed up in all of this. He thought it’d just land us in prison for a few years. Something we’d ride out. But this shit was bigger than him. Way bigger. He’s on the run now, too. The last we heard from him was when the bakery space we were looking to rent got blown up.”

I blinked. “Holy cow,” I breathed. “No wonder you were trying to keep this away from the cameras. It’s insane. It’s crazy that Boone and Gibbs are doing this to you.”

“Yeah,” Pirate said and let out a humorless laugh. “No one would believe it.”

“Don just has it looking like you guys are having beef with a rival club.” I shook my head, stunned. “That’s all the producers see. That’s all the audience will see.”

Pirate chuckled. “That’s good, honestly. The less anyone outside knows, the better.”

I nodded slowly as my thoughts spun faster than I could track. “Why did they go after me, though? I mean, sure, I’m at the clubhouse a lot filming, but I had zero other connection to you guys. It’s almost like Boone and Gibbs don’t have as much information as they think they do.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “It doesn’t make sense either. I mean—not that I’m trying to give them advice—but if they were gonna go after someone close to the club, Dani would’ve made more sense. Smoke’s all over her. It was obvious.”

I swallowed hard, still trying to process everything. Multiple explosions. Mysterious

notes. Missing club members. Dead people connected to the club. And now me being attacked.

I was sure there were other things he wasn't telling me, but even just the little I knew now was mind-blowing.

"So what are you guys going to do?" I asked.

Going to the police felt like the logical thing. But Pirate had already made it clear—that wasn't an option. Boone and Gibbs were too embedded. Too protected. No cop was going to take the word of a motorcycle club over a pair of clean-cut sociopaths in suits.

"Our solution should be here next Thursday," he said, voice low. "We managed to find a connection to some heavy hitters. The kind of people who can blow Boone and Gibbs out of the water."

I didn't know if I wanted to ask who those heavy hitters were. Something told me that the more I knew, the deeper I got. And I wasn't sure I'd ever climb out of it.

"And then this is all over?" I asked instead.

He nodded. "That's the plan, baby. And I have to say—it's the best one we've had yet. Stretch going off on his own didn't help anything. He thought he could fix it, but he's only made things messier."

"Do you know where he is?"

Pirate shook his head and rubbed his hands over his thighs. "No clue. He's gotta be close to Boone and Gibbs, though. They know he's digging around. Which means he's making waves—but that also means he's in danger."

I exhaled slowly. “This all feels like some movie plot.”

“Yeah,” Pirate said with a wry smile. “It’s pretty insane. But it’s going to be over soon.”

“And then you guys go back to normal?”

He shrugged. “Not so sure about normal. But at least we won’t have to look over our shoulders every time we leave the clubhouse.”

I nodded, my eyes suddenly stinging. Not with tears, just fatigue. Everything he’d told me, everything I’d learned—it was exhausting to even think about. I let out a slow yawn and lifted my hand to cover it.

Pirate glanced over at me and raised a brow. “Alright, that’s your cue. Come to bed, baby.”

I wanted to protest. I wanted to pretend I could stay up and keep processing it all. But I couldn’t. I was worn out.

I stood up and stretched carefully as sore muscles pulled and ached. “I’m just gonna change.”

I walked into the bathroom and closed the door behind me. It was quiet in there except for the white noise of the small fan humming above. I peeled out of my clothes and pulled on a pair of black sleep shorts and a fitted black tank top. I brushed my teeth slowly and watched myself in the mirror. I looked... tired. But a little lighter, somehow. Knowing the truth, even if it was terrifying, gave me some kind of strange peace.

I ran the brush through my hair, then turned off the light and padded back into the

bedroom.

The lights were out. The TV was off. Pirate was under the covers.

“No movie?” I asked and paused near the edge of the mattress.

“Nah,” he said, his voice thick with sleep. “Sick of hearing it.”

I smiled, even though he couldn’t see it. “Fair.”

I slid under the covers and sighed. The sheets were warm. The room was quiet.

“This is nice,” I whispered once I was settled.

I was on my side, facing him. He was lying flat on his back, and his breathing was steady. The faintest glow from outside the window filtered into the room, just enough for me to see the outline of his chest. I could make out pieces of the tattoos that inked across his skin.

“Sometimes peace and quiet is all you need,” he murmured.

My eyelids were heavy. I shut my eyes and exhaled slowly. “I have to agree. It was nice having everyone in the room today, but I was glad when they all left.”

Pirate chuckled softly. The low rumble of it was like thunder far off in the distance.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself, baby.”

I smiled into the dark and let the sound of his breathing lull me.

In. Out. In. Out.

Soft and even.

Warm and steady.

The room faded, and I let the quiet wrap around me like a blanket.

Pirate

I woke up to quiet.

Not the soft kind, not the peaceful kind. The kind that makes every nerve sit up and pay attention.

Something wasn't right.

My hand moved instinctively, reaching for warmth beside me—but all I felt were tangled sheets and the cool dip of an empty mattress. I jackknifed up, and my chest tightened before my brain could fully catch up.

Saylor wasn't in bed.

The blanket was still messy next to me, sheets twisted, her pillow slightly indented where her head had rested. She hadn't been gone long, but she was gone.

My eyes darted to the bathroom. The door was open. The light was off.

"Shit," I muttered, and threw the covers off.

I swung my legs out of bed and pulled on the nearest pair of jeans, and didn't bother with a shirt or even shoes. My heart was beating too fast.

I left the room and jogged down the hallway. My bare feet slapped against the old hardwood floors. My stomach twisted the closer I got to the common room. It was

early, barely dawn from the look of the pale blue light stretching across the floor. I didn't see anyone at first, and that only made it worse.

Yarder stood by the back door with a steaming mug of coffee in his hand and one brow already raised before I could get a word out. "Chill," he called casually like he hadn't just seen me come charging in like my world was ending.

"She's gone," I said, breathless, and scanned the room like maybe she'd just be curled up on the couch or perched on the counter.

Yarder jerked his chin toward the back door. "No, she's out back. Playing with Harley and Davidson."

I didn't respond. I moved to the door.

Saylor sat in the dewy grass in one of my old hoodies, bare-legged, with Harley draped across her lap like a spoiled lapdog despite being seventy pounds of pure muscle. She tossed a faded red ball across the yard, and Davidson took off like a rocket with his tail wagging and tongue hanging out the side of his mouth.

He brought it back to her, and she laughed—soft and sweet. She scratched his ears and told him he was a good boy like it was the best part of her morning. Maybe it was.

I didn't move. Didn't speak. I just watched her and let the fear drain out of me with every wag of those damn dogs' tails.

She was safe.

Yarder moved beside me. The steam from his coffee rose in lazy swirls and curled around his face as he took a sip.

“You good now?” he asked with a small grin playing on his lips.

I exhaled and nodded. “I thought something happened to her.”

He nodded and took another slow sip of his coffee. “Been there, man. The feeling sucks. I barely knew Poppy when the garage fucking blew up, but even then... I knew. I knew I’d do anything to keep her safe.”

I looked out at Saylor again. Her fingers were buried in Harley’s fur now, and Davidson was curled up next to her like he didn’t have a care in the world. She glanced toward the clubhouse for a moment, but she hadn’t seen me yet. Her face was soft. Relaxed. Beautiful.

“I really don’t know her,” I said, my voice low. “Not really. But it’s like...” I trailed off, unsure how to say it.

Yarder didn’t press me.

“It’s like you’re gonna die if something happens to her,” he finished for me.

I didn’t even hesitate. “Yeah.”

“But...” I rubbed the back of my neck. “I don’t know her. We’ve barely touched. Haven’t even kissed. We’re just starting, but... I’ve got this feeling like she’s mine. Like I’ve already claimed her and the rest is just catching up.”

Yarder looked over at me, his expression solemn now. “Just don’t question it, man. No point in trying to talk yourself out of it when it’s already happened.”

I nodded slowly and watched Saylor toss the ball again, but neither dog got up to chase it. They were content just laying with her.

“But what happened?” I asked. “When did it happen?”

He tipped his head toward the yard. “You found your world, man.”

And damn if that didn’t feel exactly right.

Saylor

Davidson was sprawled out beside me in the grass like a sunbathing prince with his big head resting on my leg. Harley was in my lap, half-curled up and his eyes blinking sleepily every few seconds as I ran my fingers behind his ears. He let out a soft huff of air and shifted closer, practically melting into me.

I smiled as I looked down at them.

I’d always wanted a dog growing up. I used to beg my parents for one every birthday and Christmas. I left pictures of golden retrievers and German shepherds on the fridge like some kids left notes for Santa. But the answer had always been the same: no. Too much work. Too much mess. Too much responsibility.

Then I’d grown up. Moved out. Had my own apartment. My own life.

But I was never home. I worked long hours, traveled for shoots, and edited late into the night. It wouldn’t have been fair to leave a dog waiting, bored and alone, just so I could say I had one. So I didn’t. I loved them from a distance. Pet every dog I passed on the street. Volunteered at shelters when I had time.

And now, sitting out here in the crisp morning air with Harley and Davidson like a pair of oversized, lazy toddlers?

It felt... nice.

Needed.

I chuckled softly to myself. Only a motorcycle club would name their dogs Harley and Davidson. It was too on the nose, and somehow still perfect.

I had woken up a while ago with the sunlight just beginning to peek through the curtains. Pirate had been out cold beside me with one arm tossed above his head and the slow rise and fall of his chest keeping time. I hadn't wanted to wake him, so I just laid there for a while and stared at the ceiling. I listened to him breathe and tried to wrap my head around the fact that I was here. With him.

Crazy.

Eventually, I slid out of bed and moved slowly and carefully so I didn't make any noise. I grabbed one of his sweatshirts from the closet and tiptoed to the door. I eased it open and nearly walked face-first into Yarder.

I froze, mid-step, and expected a scolding or a barked order to get my butt back in bed.

Instead, he just gave me a tired smirk and said, "I was on my way to let the boys out. Want some coffee?"

I blinked at him, then nodded. "Uh... yeah. That sounds great."

"Cool. Head on out. I'll bring it to you."

So I came out, let the boys loose, and settled in the grass with them. That had been a while ago. Yarder still hadn't returned with that coffee.

"I think your dad doesn't know how to work the coffee maker," I murmured to

Harley and Davidson.

Harley snorted in response—maybe at the sound of my voice, maybe at the insult to his owner. I scratched behind his ears in apology.

The back door creaked open behind me.

I turned, expecting to see Yarder, but it wasn't him.

Pirate stepped out barefoot with two cups of coffee in his hands.

No shirt. Just a pair of jeans slung low on his hips.

Goddamn.

The man was a walking sin.

His chest was a canvas of ink—tattoos layered and detailed, some bright colors, some just black, but all perfectly Pirate. His arms were the same—sleeved and strong, muscles flexing just from the way he held the mugs. His hair was messy, falling around his face like he'd run his fingers through it half a dozen times, and his eyes were still heavy with sleep.

He walked over, quiet and unhurried like there was no reason to rush.

“Hello,” I called softly.

“Coffee?” he offered, voice rough from sleep.

I nodded quickly. “That would be great. I think I've worn out Harley and Davidson enough that they won't knock it out of my hand.”

He passed me one of the mugs. I wrapped both hands around it and soaked in the warmth.

“You okay?” he asked and watched me as he settled into the chair closest to me.

I nodded. “Better than yesterday. I might need a crane to get me off the ground, but otherwise I’m good.”

He chuckled and stretched his legs out, crossing them at the ankle. “I didn’t even hear you get up. I was worried something happened to you.”

“That’s because I didn’t want to wake you. I think I’ve reached my limit on sleep. If I lie down any more, I’m going to turn into a vegetable.”

That earned another laugh from him, low and easy.

“Maybe we can do something today?” I suggested, careful not to sound too eager. I didn’t want to lie around all day again, but I wasn’t exactly looking to go bungee jumping either.

Pirate winced slightly, like he’d been expecting the ask. “Not sure that’s a good idea, baby. With Boone and Gibbs still out there, staying at the clubhouse is the best thing.”

I figured he’d say that.

I glanced around the yard. “Well, I mean, that’s okay. This place is big enough. Surely there’s something we could do here.”

He took a sip of his coffee and looked over at me. His lips tugged into a slow, mischievous grin. “I’m sure I’m gonna regret this.”

“Regret what?” I laughed.

“Let’s see what the ol’ ladies can cook up.”

Saylor

“I think I ate more icing than we put on the cupcakes,” Dani groaned dramatically as she leaned against the counter and rubbed her stomach like she was halfway into a sugar coma. “Who let me do that?”

Sloane cackled from where she was rinsing the mixing bowls in the sink. “Girl, I tried to take the spatula away from you, but when you growled at me, I didn’t think it was worth losing a hand.”

I chuckled under my breath and wiped down the counter where Dani had left a war zone of sprinkles and frosting. I had already wiped down the top of the fridge, where we had somehow managed to get flour and sugar. I wasn’t even asking how that had happened.

I was in the kitchen with Adalee, Sloane, and Dani, helping to clean up after we’d spent the last three hours turning the entire room into a cupcake factory. Dozens of the little cupcakes were cooling on trays across every flat surface—vanilla, chocolate, red velvet, even some bright green thing that was pistachio.

All Pirate had said, “Saylor wants to do something around the clubhouse,” when the girls had woken up.

That was it.

Eight words.

And those eight words set off a chain reaction that had steamrolled the whole compound.

The ol' ladies swarmed. It was like lighting a fire under them. Suddenly, there were to-do lists, someone found craft paper, Olive was sketching something on a clipboard like she was building a battle plan, and Dove had a whistle. I didn't know where the hell she got it, and I sure as shit didn't ask.

And now—now we had something scheduled for tomorrow that Mac, Olive, Dove, Poppy, and Fallon were calling the Iron Fiends Cup.

Nobody but them knew what the hell it actually was. The rest of us had been flat-out banned from the backyard. That included the guys.

I'd tried to peek and caught Fallon standing guard with a broom like it was a broadsword. She didn't say anything—just raised her brow and tapped the broom on her shoulder like she dared me to take another step.

I backed up real quick.

Well, the dogs were still allowed back there. Apparently, Davidson and Harley were above suspicion. Lucky bastards.

"I wonder what's going on in the backyard," Adalee mused aloud as she placed the last batch of cupcakes onto a tray.

"God knows," Sloane said and shook her head as she passed her a clean dishtowel. "I'm sure whatever it is, it's gonna be fun."

"Fun," Dani said weakly, still clutching her stomach. "Unless it involves running. If there's running, I'm out."

“Same,” I muttered and scraped the last bit of icing off the edge of the counter, tossing the rag in the laundry bin by the door. “If they start yelling ‘obstacle course,’ I’m faking a sprained ankle.”

Sloane snorted.

The girls laughed, and I couldn’t help the small smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. The kitchen was still a mess—bright smears of icing, empty flour bags, bowls and measuring cups piled up—but there was something real about the chaos. It was loud, happy, domestic in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time.

The guys had been near the new garage for most of the day, finishing up some install work and preparing to move things in to get back to business. A few of them had drifted in and out to snag cupcakes or grab a sandwich, but it had mostly been the girls holding court inside.

Adalee, as always, had cooked lunch—grilled cheese and tomato soup—but somehow it tasted like a five-star meal. I didn’t know what she did to a damn sandwich, but the grilled cheese I’d eaten had borderline changed my life.

If I wasn’t careful, I was going to gain fifty pounds just hanging around the clubhouse. Between Adalee’s lunches and all of the test bakes she did to get ready for the bakery, I didn’t stand a chance.

And honestly?

I didn’t care.

It felt good to be moving. To be upright. To not be stuck in bed wincing and groaning every time I moved.

I felt better this morning. Still stiff, still bruised, but my color was back, and I had energy. And for the first time since all this shit started, I truly smiled without it looking forced.

It almost felt like things were normal, and there weren't two psychopaths out there trying to hurt the Iron Fiends. It was like we weren't tucked away safely in the clubhouse.

A second before the front door swung open, the sound of boots and loud voices sounded. The guys were back from the garage.

"God damn, it smells good in here," Throttle groaned as he made a beeline for the bar.

Dice wasn't far behind him and vaulted over the bar like he couldn't wait another second without a beer. "I call dibs on being at the bakery to help with shit," he announced.

Adalee laughed and shook her head as she pulled a fresh towel from the drawer. "I don't know if having scary-looking bikers serve cupcakes and cakes is the best business model. We'll have to keep you in the back."

Dice rubbed the scruff on his jaw with exaggerated pride. "I'm not scary-looking. That's called rugged, thank you very much."

"Oh yeah," Sloane said, completely serious. "Rugged is the right word. I bet we'd have a line out the door of women trying to get a cupcake from you."

Dice pointed at her like she'd just solved world hunger. "Thank you. Have I told you that you're my favorite ol' lady?"

Aero stepped around the bar and slapped the back of Dice's head without missing a beat. "Get your own ol' lady, man."

Dice scrunched his nose and rubbed the back of his head. "I'll pass. I'll just use your guys for things I need."

"You will not be using my woman for anything," Aero said and gave him a look that could cut steel.

"Damn," Sloane sighed and dramatically fanned herself with her hand. "I'm going to have to tell Winter about this. She'll love it."

"Winter?" I asked and glanced at her with curiosity.

"Her writer best friend," Compass supplied and walked past us with a plate full of cupcakes. "That's how Sloane and Aero met."

That perked my interest. I knew next to nothing about how they'd gotten together, and I tipped my head, about to ask more when Sloane beat me to it.

"Dove and I went to Motorcycles, Mobsters, and Mayhem in Houston. A book signing that is only MC, mafia, or mayhem authors," she said with a grin. "All I wanted to do was meet my favorite authors. Instead, I met the love of my life."

"Yuck," Dice called as he filled a glass with beer.

Sloane rolled her eyes and wiped her hands on a towel before walking over and getting right in Dice's face. She raised her middle finger with a flourish. "Bite me. You wouldn't be eating delicious meals and living in a spotless clubhouse if it wasn't for Aero and me getting together."

“I was doing just fine before you guys showed up,” Dice said with a shrug, then took a long swig of his beer.

“I’d like the record to show,” Aero said loudly, “that those are Dice’s opinions and Dice’s opinions only.”

Laughter echoed through the kitchen.

The front door opened again, and this time—it was him.

Pirate stepped inside, and like clockwork, my heart did this slow, uncontrollable flip. I didn’t even try to stop it. His eyes scanned the room once—just once—and landed right on me.

Another stomach flip.

God.

He didn’t look tired, though I knew he’d been working all day. His jeans were dusty, his boots scuffed, and his hair was a tousled mess, but none of it mattered. Not when he looked at me like I was the only thing he could see.

He walked straight toward me, his pace easy but his focus sharp. Like every step was deliberate. Like nothing in the room existed but me.

When he stopped in front of me, he didn’t touch—just close enough that I could feel the heat coming off his skin. Just far enough that I had to resist the urge to lean into him.

“Um, hi,” I whispered, my voice suddenly catching in my throat.

“You good, baby?” he asked as his eyes swept over me like he was checking for any new bruises.

I nodded. “Yup. I helped Adalee bake cupcakes. Nothing too strenuous.”

He nodded back, slow and approving, but his gaze lingered on my face like he didn’t quite believe I was okay until he saw it for himself.

“Miss me?” he asked, voice lower now, just for me.

My breath caught. I had missed him. But did I want him to know that?

“Uh...”

Before I could finish the awkward stumble of a reply, Adalee’s voice rang out from across the kitchen.

“Boy, get out of my kitchen unless you’re gonna help with these dishes.”

Pirate smirked but was still looking at me. “I’m just trying to check on my girl.”

Adalee didn’t miss a beat. She snapped a dish towel at him with practiced precision. “You’ve had her for the past five days. You can share her with us.”

Meanwhile, I was trying to calm my racing heart after he said my girl.

Pirate lifted his hands like he was surrendering and backed up a step. “All right, all right. I’ll get my time with her later.”

He turned to head toward the fridge, but not before glancing over his shoulder and giving me a look.

That look.

The one that made my skin heat up, my stomach twist, and every thought in my head short-circuit at the same time.

I swallowed hard and turned back toward the cupcakes like they were the most interesting things in the world.

God help me.

Today had been good. Really good. It felt amazing to do something normal—to laugh, to joke, to move around instead of lying in bed feeling helpless.

But as much as I'd loved every second of being surrounded by everyone, of baking and storytelling and a kitchen full of chaos...

I was really looking forward to tonight.

Just me and Pirate.

Our room.

No distractions.

Pirate

The room was dark, lit only by the soft glow of the hallway light bleeding in through the crack under the door. The TV was off. The night was quiet.

Except for the snoring.

Saylor was tucked under the covers beside me, her body curled toward mine with one arm flung across my stomach like she was claiming me in her sleep. And she was snoring.

Loudly.

Like, impressively loud.

I stared up at the ceiling and fought a grin that wouldn't quit. It was the kind of snore that was somehow both adorable and obnoxious at the same time—like a tiny chainsaw with lungs. She snorted once, shifted, and then went right back to it with her lips parted. A little line of drool started to form at the corner of her mouth.

“Damn, baby,” I murmured under my breath. “You could scare off a bear.”

But I didn't move. She didn't either.

Didn't push her off or shake her awake or roll over.

Instead, I just stared at her.

She looked peaceful. Comfortable. Soft in a way I didn't think I'd seen before. There were still faint bruises on her cheek. And yet she looked untouched in this moment. Like nothing bad had ever happened to her.

We'd come back to the room right after dinner. Everyone had been in a good mood—high on cupcakes, sugar, and whatever madness was being planned for tomorrow. Saylor was happy. And seeing her like that made something settle deep in my chest.

When we came back here, I thought maybe tonight would be the night we could take things to the next level.

There was a tension between us now that hadn't been there before—soft glances, that spark in her eyes when she caught me watching her. I wanted to know what she tasted like.

After everything that had happened, there didn't seem to be a point in waiting anymore. I'd spent too long pretending like there'd always be time.

But instead of that spark turning into a flame... she passed out two minutes after her shower.

One second we were watching the first episode of NCIS, and the next she was using my chest as a pillow and drooling like it was her full-time job.

I looked down at her again and took in her messy hair fanned out on my chest.

I sighed.

“I guess one more day's okay.”

I wasn't going anywhere.

And neither was she.

Saylor

“All right!” Dove called, her voice clear and commanding. “First up—we’re playing Sharks and Minnows!”

I tilted my head to the side. “I have no idea what that is.”

“You say that like we know what it means,” Sloane laughed beside me.

Dove grinned and planted her hands on her hips. “Allow me to explain.” She marched to the center of the yard and spun in a slow circle. “On this side”—she pointed to the left—“will be the sharks.” Then to the right, “And on this side will be the minnows.”

Simple enough so far.

“Each round,” she continued, “the minnows will have to get to the other side of the yard without a shark catching them.”

“I’m a shark,” Dice immediately called out.

“Nope,” Dove said and shook her head, her smile downright evil. “Your ass—and the rest of the guys—are the minnows.”

The girls collectively burst out laughing.

“Bullshit,” Throttle groaned. “The minnows are gonna annihilate the sharks.”

Dove shrugged innocently. “I guess we’ll just have to see about that.”

Pirate leaned in close to me, a mischievous smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “You up for this?” he asked, and nodded toward the yard like it wasn’t about to become an all-out war zone.

I gave him a lopsided smile. “Uh, sure. I mean... I am a shark after all. I’ll just swim in the shadows and let the girls do all the work until we pick off the minnows one by one.”

He chuckled, eyes warm. “Good thinking.”

The men shuffled to the right side of the yard—Dice, Aero, Throttle, Yarder, Compass, Cue Ball, Pirate, Fade, Rocky, and even Drew and Mark. The girls spread out on the left—me, Sloane, Olive, Fallon, Poppy, Mac, Adalee, Dani, and Dove, who looked far too smug to be trusted.

Harley and Davidson were darting back and forth between both sides while barking and panting. Their tails wagged at full throttle. They didn’t care about teams—they were just thrilled everyone was outside and moving.

“Do we tackle them?” Adalee asked and rubbed her palms together.

“Just touch them,” Dove laughed. “Tag counts. But if you want to tackle...”

“I’m tackling Fade’s ass,” Adalee grinned.

“No plotting over there!” Yarder called across the yard.

“We’re not plotting,” Poppy said sweetly. Then she leaned closer to the group and whispered, “I’m tackling Yarder. His ass is grass.”

We all cracked up.

“Ready?” Dove shouted.

The guys whooped and hollered in response.

Dove raised her hands in the air like she was starting a race. “Ready, set... GO!”

We took off running toward the guys, shrieking and laughing as we charged full-speed.

But the guys didn’t move.

Halfway across the yard, we stopped, confused.

“What are you doing?” Olive called out.

“Just waiting, Mom,” Rocky called back innocently.

We all looked at each other.

“Waiting for what?” Dani asked.

The guys exchanged a quick look—then took off, sprinting straight at us.

“Oh shit!” I squealed and pivoted fast.

“THE MINNOW REVOLT!” Dice yelled, with his hands in the air as he barreled across the grass.

So much for sharks chasing minnows.

Now the sharks were screaming and fleeing in every direction as the guys charged like linebackers.

Olive and Fallon teamed up. They circled Cue Ball like a pair of tactical ninjas. He tried to double back, but Fallon lunged low while Olive swatted his back.

“TO THE SHARK SIDE!” Olive screamed and pushed Cue Ball toward the girls’ side while Compass started chasing them down.

I fell back to the original shark line and just watched for a moment, breathless with laughter. This was insanity. Absolute, unhinged chaos.

Watching a group of women chase a pack of grown-ass bikers around the yard was prime entertainment.

Compass zeroed in on Fallon, but she stopped short, turned fast, and slapped her hand across his cheek. “Got you!” she screamed, triumphant.

“God damn, woman!” Compass laughed, scooping her up and slinging her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “You almost took my head off.”

“To the shark line!” she squealed as he tickled her ribs.

“You’re a minnow! You can’t carry her to the line!” Sloane yelled and darted past with Aero hot on her heels.

“This is the minnow revolt, babe!” Aero called, clearly loving every second. He managed to corner her by the back fence, grabbed her around the waist, and lifted her with a growl. “You’re coming to the minnow side!”

“Nooo!” Sloane shrieked through her laughter and kicked her legs.

One by one, the girls got picked off.

Even Mac was cornered by Drew and Mark, laughing too hard to escape.

Eventually, it was just me, Rocky, and Pirate left standing.

Dove held her hands up. “We’ve got one left!” she announced like a referee. “Saylor! Resist!”

I looked around like, Really? Me?

I was still sore. My bruises ached. And I wasn’t about to outrun a teenager and a very agile, very determined Pirate.

“You wouldn’t capture a hurt shark, would you?” I said sweetly, and turned to Rocky and gave him my best wounded Bambi eyes. “You wouldn’t want to be responsible for taking me out, would you?”

Rocky hesitated—just a little—but glanced toward Pirate.

“Don’t fall for it, Rocky,” Pirate warned. “This one’s for the minnows.”

“What?!” I gasped. “Maybe we can talk about this. Come to an understanding?”

Rocky shook his head slowly, and a wicked little grin pulled at his lips.

Oh no.

“Now!” Pirate shouted.

They both charged.

I turned to run, but I didn't get two steps before Pirate's arm was around my waist.

"Got you!" Rocky crowed, and ran in a circle around us like he'd just won a prize.

Pirate pulled me back against his chest, and his arm was snug around me. His mouth was right by my ear, his voice low and rough. "Got you, baby."

I turned just enough to catch his face, and a huge smile spread across mine. "You don't play fair."

"Not when it's something I really want," he whispered.

His words sent a delicious shiver down my spine. My stomach flipped, and heat bloomed low and slow.

"That's it!" Dove yelled. "Now it's boys against girls for the rest of the day!"

"Oh boy," I giggled, turned fully in Pirate's arms, and placed my hands on his shoulders. "You pissed off Dove."

He looked down at me, and everything around us—dogs barking, people shouting, footsteps stomping across the grass—blurred. The way he looked at me like I was the only thing in the world he gave a damn about, like he saw me and nothing else... it nearly stole my breath.

And just like that, I didn't care about the game.

Didn't care about anything else but him.

Pirate

It all came down to this.

The guys had won three games. The girls had won three games. And now, after a day of chaos, shouting, and more competitive smack-talk than an entire season of football. It was all down to the final event of the Iron Fiends Cup.

The Egg Walk.

Dove and Olive were in the middle of the yard, setting up what could only be described as a haphazard obstacle course—four old tires, a scattered pile of two-by-fours, seven buckets lined up in a zigzag, and a sprinkler going wild at the far end of the yard.

I narrowed my eyes. “I’m surprised we didn’t do a sack race.”

Dice, standing next to me with a cupcake in one hand and a water bottle in the other, snorted. “Don’t give her any ideas.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“I actually had fun,” he added after a beat, like it was some big confession.

I had too. Pretty sure we all did. Even Yarder, though he kept pretending he wasn’t grinning the whole damn time.

“I’m going to get dinner ready,” Adalee called from the patio.

“No!” Dove said instantly and threw a hand in the air. “It’s not fair if you miss the final round.”

Adalee shielded her eyes from the sun. “Fine—then Fade has to come help me. That

will even it out.”

“Anyone want to tell her it hasn’t been fair all day?” I muttered under my breath.

The girls had Mac, which gave them ten, but we still had two extra with having Drew and Mark on our team. Not that we’d complained.

“No,” Dove repeated. “You guys can just go first.”

She motioned toward the starting point, and the rest of us wandered over. From where we stood, it looked like someone had just dumped random crap in the yard and called it a challenge. Tires, wood, buckets. Absolute chaos.

“Uh, what exactly are we supposed to do?” Adalee asked, with her hands on her hips.

“Come on,” Dove said, way too cheerfully. “It’s easy.”

We all looked at her like she’d lost her mind.

“First,” she pointed to the tires, “you do a figure eight through these. Then zigzag through the buckets. Then climb over the first pile of wood, then figure eight through the second set of tires, climb the second pile of wood, run through the sprinkler, and turn around and do it all again back to this line.”

She smiled. Like it was reasonable. “Easy peasy.”

“Doesn’t sound easy,” Fade muttered.

“The first one to do it the fastest wins for their team,” Dove added.

Everyone stared at the course in silence.

“I don’t think I could do this without an egg,” Saylor whispered behind me.

I looked at the wood piles again. “How about we just go around the piles of two-by-fours twice?” I offered. “No one wants to break their ass today.”

“Agreed,” Yarder said immediately. “Prez call. No climbing the wood.”

Dove pouted but crossed her arms. “Fine. Whatever. Fade and Adalee, you’re up first. That way, you can still get dinner ready.”

“Jesus,” Adalee whispered as she stepped forward.

We all backed up to give them space. Dove handed them each a spoon and placed an egg delicately in the dip. “Hold it straight out in front of you,” she instructed. “No touching the egg with your hand.”

They took their places at the starting line. Dove threw her hands in the air. “Ready... set... GO!” Her arms dropped, and they were off.

Adalee was focused with her tongue poking out slightly, and the spoon trembled in her hand. Fade had a steady lead, as he moved fast but careful. The figure eight, the buckets—he was golden.

Until he hit the second wood pile.

His boot slid in the grass. And then—down he went.

The egg went flying and spun through the air like a doomed little comet before it splattered in the grass with a dramatic splat.

“No!” Fade yelled. He sat up and stared at the ruined egg as if it had personally

betrayed him.

“Oh yes!” Dove cackled. “Just finish the course, Adalee. No dropping the egg!”

Adalee was right behind him. “I’m so sorry!” she called as she carefully passed him.

Fade lunged for her ankle, but she skipped sideways with a surprised squeal.

“No roughing your opponent!” Saylor called out, with her hands on her hips like she was the ref of the damn Super Bowl.

I watched her—face lit up, laughing, having the time of her life. She looked healthy. Happy.

Adalee made it to the finish without a single crack in her egg.

“One minute, fifty-seven seconds,” Dove announced. “And you—” she pointed to Fade—“are disqualified.”

Fade stood up and brushed grass off his jeans. “You put soap in the grass.”

Dove grinned. “It was the water. Did exactly what I wanted it to do.”

Fade grumbled but pressed a kiss to Adalee’s cheek. “Good job, babe.”

“Let us know who wins,” Adalee said, and they headed inside to start dinner.

The rest of the match-ups were pure chaos.

Sloane nearly tripped Aero on purpose. Cue Ball somehow got tangled in Olive’s hair (don’t ask). Dove and Throttle accused each other of cheating before they even

started. Mac raced Rocky like her life depended on it. Poppy threatened Yarder with a wooden spoon if he beat her. Fallon and Compass turned it into a literal dance-off mid-course as they showed off how well they could balance their eggs. Dani somehow got Smoke to carry her and the egg halfway through, which caused another disqualification and a lot of laughter.

And then it was down to me and Saylor.

Final round.

Final two.

She smiled at me like she already knew how this was going to go.

We took our spoons. Dove set the eggs.

“Ready...” she called. “Set... GO!”

We were off.

I stayed steady. Careful. Focused.

Saylor was just a step behind and laughed the entire way.

I hit the sprinkler, and I was confident I had this made.

My boot caught on wet grass, and suddenly, I was airborne. SHIT.

I landed right on my ass—and on the egg.

“SHIT,” I called.

There was egg everywhere. In my jeans. On my jeans. That thing had exploded like a damn grenade.

“Oh no,” Saylor laughed as she ran past me. “You fell.” As if I didn’t know it.

“You’re disqualified, Pirate!” Dove called.

I sat up and watched as Saylor headed back down the obstacle course. All she had to do was not drop the egg, but she was flying. She crossed the finish line a few seconds later, victorious with her egg intact and a smile on her face.

“Fastest time of the day!” Dove shouted. “Girls win the first-ever Iron Fiends Cup!”

The girls screamed and jumped and high-fived like they’d just won the World Series. The guys groaned and muttered—but it was all good-natured. Mostly.

Fade and Adalee reappeared with trays of burgers and hot dogs. The guys moved to help man the grill while Adalee and Fallon brought out sides—pasta salad, baked beans, chips, and corn on the cob.

Everyone else sprawled across chairs and blankets in the grass and soaked in the sun.

I dropped onto a chair, still damp from the egg, and pulled Saylor down into my lap. She went willingly, soft and warm against me.

“You doing okay?” I asked and brushed her hair back from her cheek.

She leaned against me with a content sigh. “Way better than your egg is doing.”

I groaned. “Yeah, well, I never said I was an athlete, babe.”

She laughed softly and wiggled a little as she settled deeper into my chest.

I wrapped my arms around her, and held her tight.

“I like this,” she said, her voice lower now. “Not just today. I mean... I do love the girls. But I was talking about this. You and me.”

Her words hit me square in the chest.

I wasn't surprised by the feeling—I'd been dealing with that. But hearing her say it, out loud, with no hesitation?

Yeah, that surprised me.

In the best way.

She leaned her head against my shoulder again, completely at ease.

“I like it too, baby,” I murmured and held her close.

I liked it a fuck ton.

And I wasn't about to let it go.

Saylor

The soreness hit me the second I tried to stretch. My body protested in all directions—arms, thighs, even my ribs. Muscles I didn't know I had screamed at me. I groaned and flopped back onto the pillow like a starfish.

“Remind me,” I mumbled into the ceiling, “never to challenge a group of bikers to the Iron Fiends Cup again.”

Pirate chuckled beside me. He was already up and sitting on the edge of the bed. He tugged on a T-shirt, and I watched the muscles in his back stretch under the ink. I couldn't help but take a moment to appreciate the view. It was a very nice show. Sunlight from the crack in the curtains danced across his skin, and my eyes traced the lines of his tattoos.

“You won, though,” he said as he glanced back at me.

I rolled to my side and groaned again. “Barely. I think my body has officially entered retirement.”

Pirate smirked and tossed a look over his shoulder. “I'm sure it was worth it. Dove would definitely think so.”

I laughed softly and buried my face in the pillow for a second before peeking back up at him. “She's probably already out there planning next year's Cup. I'm going to have to fake an injury.”

Pirate stood and stretched in a slow, cat-like way. “So what do you want to do today, champ? See if you can beat your egg time blindfolded?”

I let out a dramatic sigh and pulled the pillow over my face. “I think one day of biker Olympics was enough to last me a year.”

Pirate laughed. “Noted.”

He walked over to my side of the bed and gently tugged the pillow off. He just stared at me.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He nodded. “The bruises on your face are changing colors. How are you feeling?”

“Sore, Pirate.” I took a second to take stock of my body. “But better. It doesn’t hurt to breathe anymore. Progress,” I laughed.

“Good, baby. I was worried yesterday was going to be too much for you.”

I smiled at him. “I’m sure it wasn’t the best idea to run around, but you only live once. Today, we can take it easier.”

“What do you feel like doing? You call the shots, baby.”

I blinked up at him and thought. I didn’t want to lie in bed all day again. It was a lazy morning, sure, but I was done being on bed rest. Still, anything more than moderate movement was... not happening.

“Something low effort,” I finally said. “But not... nothing. I don’t want to be horizontal all day.” My eyes bugged out, realizing what I had just said.

He brushed a strand of hair away from my face with the back of his knuckles. The small gesture made my chest squeeze a little. “We’ll save the horizontal for tonight.”

My body was heated at his words. “I mean, do we have to wait for tonight?” I asked before I could hold the words back.

A slow smile spread across his lips. “Tonight, baby. Otherwise, we won’t leave this room.”

Again, not something I was against.

He stepped back and grabbed his cut. He shrugged it on and held his hand out to me. “Why don’t we go see what Adalee has going on for breakfast and then maybe spend the day outside? Just hang out. We could throw the ball for Harley and Davidson, maybe sit on the porch, soak up the sun. A lazy Sunday.”

A smile tugged at the corner of my lips. “And then later...?” I trailed off.

He grinned. “Later, you are all mine.”

Pirate

We'd barely gotten the door shut behind us when Saylor kicked off her shoes with a dramatic sigh. She ran her fingers through her hair and shook it loose from the ponytail she'd had in all day.

"I think I need to eat a salad tomorrow," she laughed and glanced over at me. "I swear I've gained ten pounds just from breathing near Adalee's food."

I leaned back against the door and watched her move around the room. "I'm sure Adalee can make you a salad," I said as I shrugged off my cut and tossed it over the back of the chair. "But you look good from where I'm standing, baby. I'm not complaining one bit."

Saylor rolled her eyes and let out a little scoff, but the pink rising in her cheeks told me she'd heard me loud and clear.

"Right," she muttered, but her lips twitched like she was fighting a smile.

There was something thick in the air. That kind of energy that hums under your skin and makes the back of your neck prickle. All day, we'd been close—her hand brushed mine when we passed each other a drink, my fingers grazed her lower back as we stood around laughing with the others. But it was all just foreplay.

We both knew it.

Neither of us had said anything, but it had been building—slow and steady.

Now the sun was down, the clubhouse had quieted, and we were alone.

And I could feel it.

So could she.

Saylor looked at the bed, then at me. “Uh... you want to watch a movie or something?” she asked, her voice a little too high to be casual.

I nodded slowly, my gaze dragging down her body and back up again. “We can do whatever you want, baby.”

Her cheeks turned a shade darker. She swallowed, and her lips parted just slightly.

“I—movie,” she squeaked.

I smirked. She wasn’t fooling either of us.

We both moved at the same time and reached for the remote that was sitting on the edge of the bed. She lunged a little faster, and I reached to grab it just as she bent forward. We collided—not hard, but enough that she lost her balance.

I caught her instantly.

My arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her into my chest to keep her from falling. Her hands landed on my shoulders, and for a second, we just froze there—pressed together, breath mingling, and heat spiked between us like we’d stepped into fire.

Her eyes locked onto mine. “Pirate...” she whispered.

The way she said my name—breathless, soft, wanting—almost wrecked me.

I licked my lips. “I’m gonna kiss you, baby.”

Her eyes darkened with desire. Her fingers curled into my shirt.

“Okay.”

That was all I needed.

I dipped my head and caught her mouth with mine in a kiss that felt like the last puzzle piece sliding into place. There was nothing hesitant about it. Nothing slow. There was heat and need and the kind of longing that had been burning low between us.

Her lips parted under mine, and I didn’t hold back.

I finally tasted her—sweet, soft, and something that instantly felt addictive.

I groaned into her mouth and tightened my grip around her waist. I let myself sink into the kiss. Her body molded to mine, and her curves fit perfectly against me. It was like she belonged right there in my arms.

Saylor pulled back just enough to breathe. I took in her swollen lips, eyes heavy-lidded and blazing with want. She slid her hands under the hem of my shirt. She looked up at me, breathless. “Off.”

I pulled the shirt over my head and tossed it to the floor. Her hands immediately returned to my chest and glided over the ink.

“You’re unreal,” she whispered. Her voice was low and growly.

Her touch wasn't rushed—it was curious, like she was learning and memorizing my body. And I let her. Let her explore and get to know me. Every place she touched, I lit up. I didn't even try to hide how much I wanted her.

I dropped my forehead to hers and closed my eyes for a second to get a grip. “Baby, I don't think you know what you are doing to me.”

She didn't answer with words. Instead, she leaned in and kissed me again—deeper this time. Her body pressed tighter to mine as her hands dragged down my sides and back up to grip my shoulders. “I think it's the same thing you are doing to me.”

I stepped us back toward the bed and sat down. I pulled her into my lap. She straddled me without hesitation, wrapping her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck.

“Still good?” I asked, my voice rough.

She nodded, and her lips brushed mine. “So good.”

My hands slid under her shirt, inched it up until I could pull it off, and tossed it aside. Her skin was warm and soft. I trailed kisses along her collarbone, down her chest, across the swell of her breasts, and savored every inch of her. She gasped and arched into me as I reached behind her and took off her bra. Her fingers threaded through my hair to keep me close.

Everything about her—the way she moved, the way she kissed, the way she moaned my name—drove me insane in the best way.

And I couldn't hold back anymore.

Not tonight.

Saylor's breath caught as I kissed her, and her fingers gripped the back of my neck tighter, like she needed something to hold onto. I took my time and let my mouth explore her. Tasted every soft inch of skin.

She wasn't shy—not with me. Her body responded to every kiss, every touch, like she'd been waiting for it. I was what she wanted. That knowledge—it lit something up inside me. A hunger, but also something heavier. Deeper.

She shifted in my lap and let out the smallest whimper when her hips rocked against mine. That sound—fuck—it was damn near enough to undo me. I leaned back just enough to look at her. Her lips were parted, pupils blown wide, and her cheeks flushed. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

“You okay?” I asked, as my hands rested on her hips. My thumbs brushed the bare skin just above her shorts.

She nodded. “I'm better than okay.”

“Can I take these off?”

Her answer was a whispered, “Yes,” followed by her lifting up just enough for me to slide her shorts down her thighs.

I kissed her again as I leaned forward, twisted, and shifted us both until she was under me on the bed. She moved like she already knew how we'd fit together—effortless, fluid, like we'd done this a hundred times in another life.

Her legs parted to welcome me between them, and her hands ran down my back. Her nails scratched lightly at my spine and made me groan low in my throat.

Having her underneath me, I knew this wasn't just lust.

It was way more than that.

“You’re perfect,” I murmured, and let my gaze roam over every inch of her as I moved back. “Every single part of you.”

She reached up and pulled me back down to her, and I went willingly.

There was nothing rushed about the way we moved. It wasn’t about proving anything. It wasn’t even just about the heat—even though there was plenty of that. It was about her. About being with her the way I’d wanted to be since the moment she first looked at me like I wasn’t just some biker in the background.

I kissed my way down her neck, her shoulder, the curve of her breast, and further still. I worshipped her with my mouth until she was gasping and writhing, her fingers tangled in the sheets.

She came undone in my hands, and it was the most beautiful fucking thing I’d ever seen.

When I moved back up her body, she pulled me in with both arms.

She shifted beneath me, wrapping her legs around my waist, pulling me in with a need that matched my own.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice soft but certain. “I want all of you.”

My breath caught. Her words hit me hard—cut through every layer of restraint I had left. I kissed her slowly and rested my forehead against hers.

“I’ve got you, baby,” I murmured. “Every damn piece of me.”

I lined myself up and eased forward, careful and slow. I watched her—watched every change in her expression, every breath, every flicker of pleasure in her eyes. Her mouth parted as I filled her inch by inch. Her hands tightened on me, and her body welcomed me like we were made for this.

She gasped my name, and her back arched slightly.

I nearly lost it right then.

“God, Saylor...” I groaned, barely holding on. “You feel so fucking good.”

When I was fully inside her, I paused and let us both adjust. I let the moment settle in deep. She ran her hands down my back, and her lips brushed my ear.

“You can move,” she whispered.

I did.

It was slow at first. It was a deep, steady rhythm that let us feel everything—every inch, every pulse, every tremble. The world disappeared around us. There was only the sound of our breathing and the soft slide of skin against skin. The quiet moans that passed between us were like a secret language.

She met every thrust with equal need, her fingers buried in my hair and her legs pulled me closer. I kissed her—again and again—because I had to. I needed every part of her.

I couldn't get enough. Because this wasn't just a release—it was something else entirely.

It was us.

Connected in a way I'd never known before.

She felt too good. Too warm, too tight, too perfect.

Each roll of my hips pulled a breathy moan from her lips, and every time she said my name, I had to fight the urge to lose it right then and there.

“Pirate,” she gasped and arched into me. Her nails dragged down my back and left fire in their wake.

I gritted my teeth and tried to hold on. Tried to make this last, but fuck—she was killing me in the best way.

Her body moved with mine like we were made for each other. Her hips rocked to meet every thrust, and I could feel her tightening around me—her body chasing the edge.

I slid my hand between us and found the spot I knew would push her over. She cried out, and her whole body trembled under me as I circled my fingers around her clit. Slow at first, then I matched the rhythm of our bodies.

“Oh my god—” she choked out as her head fell back into the pillow as her thighs trembled.

I felt it hit her—the way her body clenched around me, and the way she gasped my name like it was the only thing she knew. She shattered in my arms as her climax crashed through her in waves. It pulled me right over the edge with her.

“Fuck—Saylor—” I groaned and buried myself deep inside her as my own release tore through me.

Every muscle in my body tensed. My vision blurred. All I could feel was her—tight, wet, trembling, and wrapped around me like she never wanted to let go.

We came together. Tangled and breathless, like something out of a fever dream.

And when it was done—when the shaking eased and the air finally returned to my lungs—I didn't move. I didn't want to.

She was still under me, still wrapped around me, still mine.

All mine.

I brushed my lips against her jaw, then her cheek, then finally her mouth. A slow, lingering kiss that said everything I couldn't put into words.

She was quiet as her fingers traced circles on my skin.

I pulled her closer and held her there, still inside her, still connected.

I didn't care about anything else.

Just this.

Just her.

Just us.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:25 am

Saylor

The smell of coffee was almost enough to make me forget how sore I was.

Almost.

I'd woken up tangled in Pirate's sheets with the warmth of his body beside me and the fading memory of his hands on my skin. We'd ended the night wrapped around each other, and somewhere between midnight and sunrise, we'd ended up enjoying each other three times.

Worth it?

Absolutely.

But my body wasn't too pleased about it this morning.

He was in the shower now, and I was left limping a little toward the kitchen like I'd just finished a triathlon. I'd debated joining him in the shower—I really had—but after last night? I needed to regroup. Hydrate. Maybe stretch.

And coffee. Lots of coffee.

I grabbed two mugs and was just pouring the second one when soft footsteps padded into the kitchen.

"Hey, girl," Dani said through a yawn as she rubbed her eyes. Her long hair was

pulled up into a messy bun, and she looked as exhausted as I felt. “You’re up early.”

I glanced at the clock. “It’s half past eight.”

She groaned. “I guess I’ve adapted to biker life sooner than I thought I would. Not going to Wine and Cheese Me every day has completely screwed up my sense of time.” She tipped her head to the side and squinted. “It’s Monday, right?”

I smiled. “Yes.”

“Good,” she said, already moving toward the coffee pot. “Only three more days until our saviors roll into town. As much as I love living at the clubhouse, I miss my house and the shop.”

I froze.

Three more days.

It hit me then—harder than I expected. Once Boone and Gibbs were dealt with, everything would go back to how it was before.

Before the attack.

Before the clubhouse.

Before Pirate.

“You good?” Dani asked and raised an eyebrow as she poured herself a cup.

I blinked out of it and grabbed the two mugs I’d filled. “Uh, just thinking about things going back to the way they were.”

“Sounds great to me,” she laughed.

I forced a smile and turned toward the hallway. It didn’t sound great to me at all. Because the way things were before didn’t include me and Pirate being together.

And now that I’d had him—really had him—I wasn’t sure I could go back to a life without him in it.

I didn’t get far before the door to Pirate’s room opened in front of me.

Pirate stood there—shirtless, barefoot, hair still wet and curling around his face. The top button of his jeans wasn’t even done, and for a moment, I just stared at him dumbly.

“What are you doing?” I laughed. “You haven’t even dried your hair.”

He stepped forward with a look in his eyes that stopped me cold. “I called for you, and you didn’t answer.”

I held up the mugs. “I was just getting us some caffeine.”

He didn’t look satisfied with that answer. His jaw was tight, and his brows were drawn low.

“Whoa, easy there,” I said with a nervous laugh as he reached for me, slid an arm around my waist, and tugged me into the room.

The door shut behind us with a soft click.

“Is there something wr—?”

He took the mugs from my hands, set them down on the dresser with more control than I expected, and then pulled me against him.

Tight.

His arms wrapped around me like he thought I might disappear. His body was still warm from the shower, bare chest against my cheek, and strong arms caged me in like I was something fragile.

“Are you okay?” I asked, slightly muffled by his skin.

“I thought you left.”

I blinked. “I mean, I did leave... but I came back. I can’t live without my morning coffee, Pirate. You know this.”

“No,” he said, his voice low and rough. “I mean gone, Saylor. I thought something happened to you. Again.”

Oh.

That hit different.

The knot of emotion in my chest twisted tighter. I was still dealing with what had happened to me, but Pirate—he was dealing with it in his own way, too. This wasn’t just about fear. It was about us. About him not wanting to lose something he finally had. I didn’t want that either.

“I’m okay,” I whispered and wrapped my arms around him. “I’m right here.”

He pulled back just enough to look down at me, his blue eyes stormy with something

deeper than fear. “You can’t leave me, Saylor.”

I opened my mouth, but the words tangled in my throat.

This—this—was what I’d been thinking about in the kitchen. What I’d been worrying over when Dani reminded me that everything was about to go back to normal. I had a job. A life before all this. And as much as I didn’t want that life anymore, I wasn’t sure what Pirate wanted when the threat was gone.

I searched his face, and my heart thudded in my chest. “But what happens after Boone and Gibbs are gone?”

He brushed a piece of hair behind my ear. His touch was softer than I expected.

“Once they’re gone,” he said, “we can leave the clubhouse. Not worry about being hunted. Not worry about being killed. We’re free then, baby.”

“And you want to be free with me?”

His lips curved into the gentlest smile. “You and I... stay you and I.”

The words sank into me slowly. I felt their weight settle deep and anchor something I hadn’t let myself hope for yet.

I let out a shaky breath. “My job...”

“What about your job?”

“I have to travel for it. I have to go where they need me. It’s not always glamorous. Sometimes it’s months away.”

Pirate's hands slid down my back and settled at my waist.

“We'll figure it out, baby. I'm not gonna make you quit something you love just to be with me. Yarder and the club—they're flexible. I can come and go if I need to. You tell me where you're at, and I'll meet you there. Simple.”

It wasn't actually simple. But the way he said it, like it was already decided, made me want to believe it.

“Really?” I asked.

His grin turned wicked. “You're not getting rid of me that easy, baby.”

I smiled, still stunned by how easy he made it sound.

“So... you and I...”

His arms tightened around me as he leaned in and kissed me—slow and sure.

“Baby,” he said against my lips, “it's gonna be you and me for forever.”

And I believed him.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:25 am

Pirate

The sun beat down on our shoulders, warming the dry patch of land behind the garage we'd been using as a makeshift shooting range for the past half hour. Dust kicked up with every step, and the smell of gunpowder hung in the air—sharp, familiar, and oddly comforting.

Yarder raised his Glock, lined up the sights, and squeezed off a single shot.

Crack.

The beer can on the top of the old fence post exploded backward and flipped through the air before landing in the dirt with a metallic clatter.

“Bullseye,” Smoke called and nodded in appreciation.

Yarder lowered his gun and exhaled slowly. “Now if only that was Boone’s face and not a beer can.”

“A-fucking-men to that,” I muttered and ran a hand over my jaw.

There was a murmur of agreement from the rest of the guys—Compass, Aero, Throttle, and Smoke. Cue Ball, Fade, and Dice had stayed back at the clubhouse to hang with the ol’ ladies, which was fine. The rest of us needed to blow off some steam.

Compass reloaded, his movements fluid and automatic. “Soon,” he said. “We meet

with Leo and Brynn tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Aero added and loaded a fresh mag into his gun. “But you really think they’re going to take care of it instantly? They’re just coming to get all the details. I know the Maranga are powerful, but I don’t think they’re fucking magic.”

He wasn’t wrong.

I raised my pistol and took a shot at a half-smashed can still wobbling on its side. Got it.

“Yeah, but at least we know something is going to happen,” I said.

Yarder nodded as he moved to reload. “Yup. We just need to hold tight, and soon all of this’ll be behind us.”

His voice was calm, but I could hear the grit beneath it. Yarder hated asking for help. We all knew that. And reaching out to the Maranga family, even through connections, had been a last resort. But this situation had gone so far past club-level shit it wasn’t even funny.

“I wish we could’ve handled it on our own, though,” he added.

Throttle grunted. “Yeah, well, if we’d tried, we’d probably all be six feet under right now.”

“Facts,” Compass muttered.

Smoke cracked his neck. “Anyone know what’s going on with the TV show?”

Yarder glanced over his shoulder at us and shook his head. “Right now, filming’s

suspended. Don was pretty upset about Saylor being hurt.”

“But he didn’t give a shit about us being hurt or dying,” Compass said with a sharp laugh. “Typical.”

“That’s Hollywood for you,” Yarder muttered.

“Saylor said the footage they have is pretty good,” I offered. “Said Don’s been going through all of it, and they might not even need to shoot more.”

Yarder raised his Glock again and knocked down the last beer can. “Now that’s some good fuckin’ news. We get rid of Boone and Gibbs, and maybe also the cameras. Life back to normal.”

Aero shot me a look and cocked a brow. “That means Saylor leaves?”

I adjusted the strap of my cut and shrugged. “Yeah, I guess... as long as she wants to keep working for the production company.”

“Does she?” he asked.

“I think so,” I said and already felt the way my chest tightened at the thought.

“You good with that?”

I nodded. “Yeah.” Then I smiled. “I’ve never been to Hollywood before.”

Yarder chuckled. “You leaving us, Pirate?”

I shook my head. “Just for a bit. I’m not gonna make Saylor give up her life for me. We can mesh them together.”

Yarder studied me for a second, then nodded slowly. “Sounds like you two already talked about this.”

“We did.”

“You work fast,” he said, amused. “Last we talked, you didn’t even know what the hell you were feeling.”

I tipped my head back and stared at the sky for a beat before I answered. “Yeah. I got that shit figured out.”

“And what’s that?” Aero asked.

I took a breath and felt the truth settle in my bones. “Saylor is mine.”

Saylor

I stood just inside the shower with the hot and steamy water pouring down on me. It was the night before Leo and Brynn were supposed to come, and I was just ready for them to be here.

After dinner, I was ready to just shower and sleep.

And then Pirate stepped into the shower.

There was nothing casual about the way his eyes swept over me—wet hair clung to my shoulders, and water cascaded down my body. He looked like a man walking into something he already knew he'd get addicted to.

“Hi,” I said, breathless already.

He stepped under the spray, and his hands immediately landed on my hips. “Hi,” he murmured, low and rough in a way that went straight to my core.

His mouth found my shoulder, and his lips were hot against my wet skin. I leaned into him without even thinking. His hands slid around to my stomach and drew me back into him until I could feel every inch of his body pressed against mine.

“Still sore?” he asked as his mouth brushed just behind my ear.

“Little bit,” I whispered. “But not enough to stop this.”

That was all he needed.

He turned me to face him and backed me against the wall. His hands gripped my thighs, and in one fluid motion, lifted me. My back hit the tile with a slick thud, and I wrapped my legs around his waist like it was second nature.

The heat of the water was nothing compared to the heat of him.

His mouth found mine. There was no slow build-up or hesitation. This wasn't about soft kisses or tentative hands. This was all tension and need. The kind of aching urgency that burned beneath your skin and refused to be ignored.

I moaned into his mouth as he rolled his hips against me. He was hard and ready. My hands tangled in his wet hair, and my nails scraped down his neck and shoulders.

“Please,” I breathed against his lips. “Now.”

He didn't make me ask again.

One hand slid between us, and he guided himself in with one perfect, deep thrust.

I gasped, and my head fell back against the tile as he filled me completely.

“Fuck, Saylor,” he groaned. “You feel so good.”

My entire body clenched around him, overwhelmed by the sensation of him so deep. The position, the heat, the water, the pressure of him pinning me to the wall—it was all too much and not enough at the same time.

He thrust into me with strong, fluid strokes. The rhythm was steady and deliberate. Each one sent a jolt through me, and pleasure rolled up my spine.

The ragged sound of our breathing filled the shower like a song we couldn't stop singing.

My hands gripped his shoulders as he drove into me again and again, every movement controlled but wild. His mouth was everywhere—my neck, my collarbone, my jaw—each kiss fed the fire building inside me.

“Look at me,” he growled, and I forced my eyes open.

He looked like sin. Water was dripping from his hair, his chest was slick, and his eyes locked on mine like I was the only thing in the world. Like he belonged to me.

“You're mine,” he said, each word punctuated with a thrust.

I nodded, but it wasn't enough.

“Say it,” he growled.

“I'm yours,” I gasped. “I'm—fuck—yours, Pirate.”

That did something to him.

His thrusts grew rougher and deeper. One arm locked tighter around my waist as he took me higher and higher with every stroke, pulling me closer to the edge. I could feel myself unraveling, and my body tightened with the pleasure coiling in my gut so tight it was hard to breathe.

“I'm so close,” I whispered.

“Come with me,” he panted against my mouth. “I want to feel you fall apart.”

And I did.

My whole body clenched around him as the orgasm crashed through me, sharp and hot. I cried out his name and trembled as wave after wave hit me.

He followed with a guttural groan, and his body shuddered as he thrust into me one last time to find his own release. He held me tight, pressed flush against the wall, and his breathing was ragged against my neck.

We stayed like that—his forehead resting against mine, our bodies still locked together with water cascading down over us like the world had faded away.

There were no words, just the sound of our breathing, and our hearts pounded in sync.

He finally pulled back just enough to meet my eyes.

“You okay?” he asked and brushed a wet strand of hair from my face.

I smiled, utterly wrecked in the best way. “I’ve never been better.”

Pirate

“Are you nervous?”

I looked over at Saylor, where she sat on the edge of the bed, slipping on one of her boots. Her brows were raised, and she looked way too calm for someone who’d just asked that question.

I shook my head. “No.”

She scoffed and tugged on her other boot. “You’re crazy. I’m not even going to be in the meeting, and I’m nervous as hell.”

I chuckled and slipped my arms into my cut. “Then it’s a good thing I’ll be there, and you can just hang out with the girls.”

She stood and crossed the room. Her fingers lightly brushed my stomach before sliding around my back. “I am more than good with that.” She tilted her head up to look at me. “You can give me the rundown when it’s over. Just don’t forget any details.”

I wrapped my arms around her and leaned down to press a slow kiss to her lips. She melted into me with that soft little sigh I was starting to crave every morning.

“Let’s get some coffee in you,” I murmured against her lips.

She grinned. “Now that sounds like a plan.”

We stepped out into the hallway, and I could already hear voices and clinking dishes from the common room. The clubhouse was awake—fully awake.

We'd been waiting for this day for months.

And for the first time in a long time, there was hope in the air.

Everyone was in the common room, either milling around or eating.

Adalee was doing the dishes by the kitchen window when Fallon moved past her with a bowl of scrambled eggs and set it gently on the counter next to the French toast, sausage patties, eggs, and blueberry muffins.

Saylor glanced up at me. "You want coffee or food first?"

"Coffee," I said immediately. I had told her I wasn't nervous, but as the minutes ticked by, the more my nerves were on edge.

"Coming right up."

She slipped toward the kitchen, and I watched her go. My hand lingered in the air where hers had been. She didn't move like she was nervous, but I could see it in the way she kept touching her hair, her necklace, and rubbing her thumb across her palm as she waited for the coffee maker to be done with the next pot.

Everyone was feeling it.

I stepped toward Yarder. "How long?" As if I didn't know.

He checked his watch. "It's just after nine. They'll be here by eleven. Maybe sooner. They said they'd text when they hit the county line."

I nodded.

“You ready?” he asked.

I didn’t even hesitate. “Yeah.”

He gave me a short, satisfied nod. “Good. Because once this meeting starts, there’s no walking anything back. This is the last play we’ve got.”

I knew that.

We all knew that.

Saylor came back with two mugs and handed me one with a soft smile. “Made it how you like it.”

“Black?” I chuckled and lifted my coffee to my lips.

Saylor gave me a smug little smile. “Exactly.”

Yarder went back to his plate of breakfast with a small smile on his lips.

I took another sip of coffee—bitter, hot, and strong enough to slap me in the face. Just how I liked it.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The entire room froze.

You could’ve heard a pin drop.

We all glanced at the clock.

9:15.

Almost two hours early.

Yarder had been clear—Leo and Brynn were going to call when they were near. No one was supposed to just show up unannounced. Not them. Not anyone.

Every single guy in the room went on alert.

Dice stood slowly from the stool he'd been perched on. Cue Ball's hand dropped to his side instinctively. Smoke rose from his seat like a shadow, silent and steady. Compass's entire stance shifted—like the gears in his head had already started spinning through backup plans. Throttle moved to the window and tilted the curtain just enough to peek out.

I didn't even need to speak—my body was already moving. One step in front of Saylor, just in case.

The knock hadn't come fast. It had been deliberate.

Confident.

That somehow made it worse.

Yarder set his fork down with a quiet clink, grabbed a napkin, and wiped his mouth. He didn't rush. He didn't speak. Just stood, pushed in his chair, and made his way toward the door.

Each step he took had the tension ratcheting up higher and higher. His boots thudded

against the hardwood like a countdown.

Saylor hadn't moved behind me, but I could feel her energy. She was smart enough to know this wasn't the time to mess around.

When Yarder reached the door, he didn't open it right away.

He placed his hand on the handle and turned to look at us—just once. His eyes moved across each of us, wordlessly asking: You ready?

We all were.

I could feel it in my spine.

Then Yarder turned back, twisted the knob, and opened the door.

Standing on the porch was an older man dressed like he was coming from a power lunch in downtown Manhattan—gray slacks, a crisp white button-down, and a bold red tie. His shoes gleamed. His silver hair was combed back neatly. Sharp eyes sat beneath heavy brows, calculating the room from the outside before even stepping in.

Next to him stood a woman in a red dress that fit her like it was made just for her. Her heels were black. Her sunglasses massive and hid most of her face. But her presence? That was impossible to hide. She was composed. Poised. She could've been walking into a gala or a battlefield, and you wouldn't know which one she preferred.

The man stepped forward and extended his hand to Yarder.

“Leo Banachi,” he said, his voice smooth but edged with steel. “Here to save your ass.”

Saylor

I heard the man's voice before I saw him.

I blinked and peeked around Pirate's shoulder.

Wowza.

I mean, wowza.

The man standing on the front porch looked like he walked straight out of an old-school mafia film—but better dressed. He wore gray slacks with sharp creases, a blindingly white button-down, and a red tie that somehow made him look more dangerous, not less. His silver hair was slicked back with precision, and not a strand out of place. And his expression?

Total confidence. Like he owned the building, the street, and the town beyond it.

And standing next to him?

Brynn.

I instantly forgot how to breathe.

That red dress? Silky. Perfectly fitted to her curves and hugged her like it was made from power itself. Her legs went on forever in black stilettos that screamed high fashion and high threat. Giant black sunglasses shielded her eyes, but I could feel her gaze behind them—cool, calm, calculated.

They looked like they were here to issue demands, hand out verdicts, or take over the damn world.

Yarder stepped forward and shook Leo's hand. "Good to meet you."

Brynn smacked Leo on the chest. "You've been hanging out with Slider and the guys too much."

Leo rubbed the spot with a scowl. "What did I do?"

She rolled her eyes and slid her sunglasses off, revealing sharp green eyes lined with confidence and zero patience. Then she turned and held her hand out to Yarder.

"I'm Brynn Maranga."

"Banachi," Leo growled under his breath.

Brynn smirked, "It is Banachi, but he pissed me off this morning, so I decided to piss him off with Maranga."

I blinked. Then grinned.

I liked her already.

Yarder chuckled, and the tension in his shoulders eased a little. "Well, it's nice to meet you. Come in."

Brynn and Leo stepped inside like they were walking into a boardroom they already owned. Two men followed behind them—both in black suits, earpieces in, eyes constantly scanning. Definitely bodyguards. They stood just inside the door, shoulder to shoulder, all quiet control and clean muscle.

Yarder shut the door behind them.

“Sorry we’re early,” Brynn said, looking around the room. “I told Leo to text you when we were close, but he got distracted.” She shot him a side-eye.

Leo shrugged. “Brynn was out of town all last week on business. I took advantage of the car ride to get reacquainted.”

Her eyes narrowed, but her cheeks flushed pink.

Interesting.

“Uh, do you guys need a drink or anything?” Yarder offered, suddenly looking a lot more like a nervous host than a club president.

“Water would be nice,” Brynn smiled sweetly.

“I’ve got water or tap!” Adalee called from the kitchen.

Brynn paused, and her brows pulled together.

“I mean bottled or tap,” Adalee corrected and laughed at herself.

Brynn laughed with her, and just like that, the air softened. “Bottled is more than fine,” she said.

Adalee was only a few seconds before she appeared and handed Brynn and Leo a bottle each. “I’m Adalee, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” Brynn replied.

Yarder cleared his throat and stepped into the center of the room. “Let me just give you a quick rundown of who’s here.”

He pointed out everyone and finally...

“Pirate and Saylor.”

Brynn tipped her head toward me. “The one who was just attacked?”

Pirate didn’t even hesitate. He reached down and threaded his fingers through mine.

“Uh, yup,” I said and tried to keep my voice light. “That’d be me.”

Brynn’s eyes dropped to our hands, and her brows lifted slightly. “I thought you didn’t have a connection to the Iron Fiends?”

Pirate cleared his throat. “Uh... she didn’t. At the time.”

I grinned and looked up at him. “He was my knight in worn leather.”

Brynn let out a warm laugh. “You bikers really do move fast.”

Leo didn’t miss a beat. “You only say that because it took you over twenty years to find your way back to me, love.” He scanned the room. “Pretty sure these guys are just like the Devil’s Knights.”

Brynn laughed again. “By the looks of all the ol’ ladies, I’d say you’re right.” She tilted her head. “I wonder which one of them is like Meg...”

“Is Meg like Alice?” Sloane asked curiously.

Both of the men in suits standing near the door said in unison, “Yes.”

That sent the girls into a round of laughter.

“Then that would be Sloane or Dove,” Poppy said confidently. “Though honestly, we all have a little Alice and Meg in us.”

Brynn gave a soft smile. “Meg’s my favorite. That’s definitely a good thing.”

Suddenly, Leo’s phone buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket, checked it, and his whole expression shifted. “Let’s get this meeting going,” he muttered, tucking it away.

Brynn’s brows drew together. “Everything okay?”

Leo nodded once, short and tight.

Yarder took the cue. “All right, let’s head to church. We’ll discuss everything there.”

The guys started filing down the hallway. Pirate turned to me and brushed a kiss across my lips. “Be good while I’m gone.”

“Always,” I promised.

He gave my hand one last squeeze, then headed down the hall with the others.

Brynn passed by me with a soft smile. “These bikers love fast,” she said quietly, “but from what I’ve seen—they’re never wrong.”

Leo and Brynn followed Yarder and disappeared down the hallway.

And then... silence.

Just the girls left in the common room.

We didn't say anything at first. Just stared at the hallway like it was going to explode.

Then—

“Did you see her dress?” Dove gasped.

“Her hair!” Fallon added.

“Those shoes...” Sloane practically moaned. “They were like badass royalty!”

“I believe,” Sloane said as she flopped dramatically onto the couch, “they are one hundred percent going to save us.”

“How could they not?” I laughed, still a little breathless. “It was like they stepped out of a movie.”

They really were incredible. I'd seen a lot working in television—executives, celebrities, people who thought they were powerful. But Leo and Brynn? That was a whole different level. They didn't have power. They were power.

Mac came up beside me and bumped my shoulder. “Didn't take long for that biker to claim you in front of everyone.”

“I mean...” I stammered.

She pulled me into a quick hug. “I'm so happy for you,” she whispered. “I knew you two were a thing, but for him to do that? In front of them? That's huge.”

I smiled and felt my cheeks warm. “It felt... real.”

“Because it is.”

“Okay,” Adalee called with her hands on her hips. “Everyone, come eat because I need to clear out the kitchen and start lunch.”

“It’s not even ten,” Dove laughed.

Adalee raised her brows. “You want breakfast or not?”

Dove held up her hands in surrender. “I’m coming,” she grinned.

We all filed into the kitchen, grabbed plates, and loaded up with whatever was left—French toast, sausage patties, scrambled eggs, and those perfect blueberry muffins.

Plates full, we headed back to the couches and camped out in front of the TV. Dove flipped to some movie none of us were actually watching.

But it didn’t matter.

Leo and Brynn were here.

And everything was about to change.

Pirate

Leo leaned into Brynn and spoke quietly against her ear. I couldn't hear much—just the low hum of his voice—but her response was clear enough.

“Are you sure?”

That I heard.

She didn't whisper it. She just said it low and even, as her fingers tapped on the table while Leo nodded at something only he knew.

Dice shifted beside me. “I got a bad feeling,” he muttered.

I glanced at him. “What do you mean?”

He shook his head slowly. “I don't know, man. I just got this feeling.”

I looked at him longer. Dice wasn't the type to throw feelings around lightly. If his gut was acting up, something was off. But from where I sat, all I felt was hope. Leo and Brynn—especially Brynn—exuded power and confidence. They were exactly what we needed to end this shit.

Still, the way she looked now? Sitting back in her chair with a pinched expression and annoyance twitching across her jawline?

Not a great sign.

Leo tapped his fingers on the table, rhythmic and steady, like a man trying to pace his thoughts before throwing them out into the world.

Yarder straightened at the head of the table. “Uh... is everything okay?”

Leo didn’t look at Yarder first. He looked at Brynn.

“Don’t look at me,” she said, annoyed. “The info you got is new to me.”

“Like I knew it before,” Leo grumbled.

“Then keep it to yourself until you know if it’s true,” she snapped, sharp enough that Leo actually hesitated.

Leo sighed and looked back at us. “Tell us what you know about Boone and Gibbs.”

Yarder sat back in his chair. “Not a whole hell of a lot, other than they want us dead because we didn’t fall in line with their power play. Russ came up with the plan to take us down to bolster his chances at getting elected. But Boone and Gibbs took it further. Now Russ is on the run, too.”

Brynn nodded. “When was the last time you talked to Russ?”

Compass leaned forward slightly. “Probably over a month. He disappeared right after the bakery building blew up.”

“Yeah,” Yarder added. “Radio silence since then.”

“And Stretch?” Leo asked next, eyes narrowing.

The name alone had the whole room stiffening.

“It’s been a couple weeks since any of us saw him,” Dice answered, his voice sharp, guarded.

Leo nodded. “And you’re sure he’s gone rogue and not dead?”

It was a fair question. One we all hated.

Yarder’s jaw clenched. “We can’t say for sure that he’s alive, but we know he was getting close to Boone and Gibbs. They told us to call him off. That’s the last contact we had.”

Leo and Brynn exchanged another look—quiet, fast, telling.

Dice leaned forward, and his shoulders were tense. “Are you going to be able to help us or not?”

“Dice,” Yarder barked. “Shut the hell up.”

Leo held up a hand, calm and casual. “It’s okay. Brynn and I are all over the board right now. The new info I got this morning threw us for a loop.”

“What kind of loop?” Compass asked. “Maybe we can help figure it out.”

Brynn sighed and sat forward again. “We’ve had eyes on Boone and Gibbs for the past week. We knew who they were before you called us, but we didn’t know what they were really doing or who they had with them.”

“Okay,” Yarder nodded slowly.

Leo picked up where she left off. “Our intel’s been boring, honestly. Same people, same routine. Their circle’s tight, doesn’t change.”

“At least it hadn’t changed,” Brynn interrupted and folded her arms across her chest.

“What was the change?” Aero asked from down the table.

Leo reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. A few quick swipes, and he passed it to Yarder.

The second Yarder looked at the screen, his whole body went stiff.

“Stretch,” he growled.

Every single head at the table snapped toward Yarder.

He turned the screen so Compass could see. Compass gave a slow nod. “That’s the numb nuts himself.”

Dice’s knuckles went white as he gripped the edge of the table. “Can someone clue the rest of us in on what the hell is going on?”

Leo tucked his phone back into his pocket. “My intel is telling me that Stretch has flipped.”

I blinked. “Flipped?” I echoed. “What the fuck do you mean?”

“He’s working with Boone and Gibbs,” Brynn said flatly.

The room imploded.

“What the fuck?” Dice shot to his feet. “There’s no fucking way.”

Yarder didn’t argue. He just shook his head and looked more pissed than surprised.

“The picture says differently. He’s standing next to Boone.”

Dice was shaking his head like he could undo the words. “Then he’s fooling him. That’s the only explanation. He wanted them dead as much as we all do.”

“I hear you, man,” Compass said gently. “But...”

“It’s a picture!” Dice shouted, furious. “You can’t convict someone on a picture!”

Leo held up a hand again. “I’ve got more information coming, but I want to be damn sure it’s accurate before we say anything else.”

“Before what?” I snapped. “Before you completely turn us against one of our brothers?” I didn’t want to believe it. Couldn’t.

Stretch wasn’t like that. He was unpredictable, yeah. But this? This would’ve been betrayal on a level that didn’t fit him.

“For Leo and me, this doesn’t change our support,” Brynn said. “We’re still taking care of Boone and Gibbs. That’s already decided.”

“But it will change things for you,” Leo added. “Because if Stretch has flipped, he’s now connected to them. And our ability to eliminate Boone and Gibbs without law enforcement interference means—”

“—taking out everyone connected to them,” Brynn finished.

Leo tipped his head. “Including your man.”

I closed my eyes. My stomach dropped.

Fucking hell.

Compass exhaled like the weight was already settling on his shoulders. “If he turned, then I say we get rid of them all.”

“Fuck you!” Dice snapped. “There is no way in hell Stretch flipped!”

“We can wait to go through with our plan until we confirm,” Leo offered. “We won’t move until we’re sure.”

“He hasn’t,” Dice said again, quieter now. But no less certain.

I looked to Brynn. “How long will it take to find out for sure?”

She tapped her manicured fingers on the table, thoughtful. “I’m not a fan of the source Leo’s using. I want confirmation from someone else. That’ll take a bit.”

“My source is good,” Leo muttered and crossed his arms.

Brynn turned her head slowly toward him. “If he was good, you wouldn’t have talked to me before mentioning it to them.”

For a minute, no one spoke. The air felt thick, as if we were all breathing tension.

Dice slumped back in his chair, hands in his hair. “It’s not real. It can’t be. Stretch wouldn’t do this.”

I didn’t know what to believe.

But I knew this much—whatever came next, it was going to change everything.

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Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:25 am

Saylor

Leo and Brynn walked into the common room with their two suited men flanking them like shadows.

We all froze.

They'd only been in church for maybe thirty minutes. That was either a very good sign—or a very bad one. Judging by the set of Leo's jaw and the unreadable expression on Brynn's face, I wasn't betting on good.

"Uh, hey," Adalee called out from the kitchen. Her voice way too chipper to be casual. "All done?"

Brynn nodded once. "We're done for today."

"Oh. Uh..." Adalee looked down at whatever she was chopping. "I was going to make lunch, but it's not ready yet."

Leo glanced at her. "We need to be going."

"Maybe next time," Brynn added with a polite smile.

Adalee shook her head, flustered. "No, no. You can't leave without eating." She grabbed a plate from the top of the microwave and started moving toward them. "At least take some blueberry muffins with you."

“Normally, I’d say no, but we missed breakfast,” Brynn said and stepped forward.

Adalee placed the plate in her hands.

“Thank you,” Brynn smiled.

“You have the world’s best muffins in your hands right now,” Sloane called from the couch. “Be prepared to have your socks blown off.”

Leo eyed the plate. “Be careful with those. If they’re as good as they say, Bristol’s going to quit.”

Brynn laughed. “I wouldn’t let her quit. If anything, we’ll just steal Adalee.”

Adalee’s jaw dropped. “I mean... well, that’s... very flattering, but... Who’s Bristol?”

“Our chef,” Leo replied. “She’s amazing.”

“Then you shouldn’t have to kidnap me...” Adalee trailed off.

Brynn laughed again, the sound smooth and rich. “Or you’ll just have to send us more.” She winked, then turned and handed the muffins to one of her men. “I know there are six there, Sig.”

The man—tall, dark, and deadly-looking—shrugged. “Two for you and Leo. The rest are for me and Murphy.”

Brynn rolled her eyes but didn’t argue. “We need to get back to Chicago.” She looked around the room and offered a softer smile. “It was nice meeting you all.”

We all murmured our goodbyes. Dove waved. Fallon gave a polite little bow. Sloane actually curtsied, which made Brynn laugh again. “I think you might be the Alice of the group,” she said.

And just like that, they were gone. Brynn and Leo walked out, their presence like a wave of authority that had swept through the room and left everything just slightly... off.

The door clicked shut behind them.

Silence stretched across the room.

We all looked at each other.

“I don’t think it’s a good sign the guys haven’t come out yet,” Olive finally said.

Yeah. I didn’t think so, either.

My stomach was in knots. Pirate hadn’t texted me or looked back when he went into church. Not because he was being cold—because he was focused. And now that Brynn and Leo were gone? He still wasn’t out here.

Something was wrong.

I leaned forward on the couch and rested my elbows on my knees. “Maybe they are just celebrating?”

“They just said they were done for today,” Fallon said. “That’s not code for everything’s fine.”

“They were too calm,” Poppy said and crossed her arms over her chest. “Especially

Brynn.”

“Maybe that’s just who she is,” Dove offered.

“They looked like they were walking away from a crime scene,” Mac said flatly.

We all snapped to attention when the church door finally creaked open.

One by one, the guys filed out—and none of them looked good. Pirate’s face was stone. Compass looked pissed. Aero was rubbing the back of his neck. Throttle had his fists clenched. And Dice...

Dice didn’t stop.

He stormed down the hallway with his boots hitting the hardwood like thunder, then shoved the front door open and tore outside.

“Dice—” Smoke moved to follow, but Yarder stepped in front of him.

“Let him go. He needs to blow off steam.”

Smoke growled low in his throat but didn’t push past.

Poppy’s eyes narrowed. “Yarder,” she said, using that tone only an ol’ lady could use on a club president. “You better tell us right now what the hell is going on.”

Yarder ran his hand down his face and looked more tired than I’d ever seen him. “Leo and Brynn found Stretch.”

Every single person in the room reacted at once.

“That’s great news,” I said, almost smiling.

Sloane nodded. “He’s okay then?”

But Yarder didn’t smile. He didn’t relax. His next words were quiet.

“There’s a pretty good chance he flipped.”

The words slammed into the room like a punch to the gut.

“Flipped?” Fallon asked.

“Flipped as in…” Sloane started.

“Working with Boone and Gibbs,” Yarder finished.

It was like the air left the room.

“No way,” Throttle muttered. “No fucking way.”

“Yarder,” Poppy said, blinking like she hadn’t heard him right. “You’re serious?”

Yarder nodded once. “Leo’s people have had eyes on Boone and Gibbs all week. This morning, Stretch showed up in the background of one of their intel photos. Right there with them.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Olive argued. “He could be undercover, trying to get closer to them.”

“I said the same thing,” Smoke added. “So did Dice.”

“Then why does everyone look like they’ve been kicked in the face?” Dove asked as she stood up.

“Because Leo thinks the intel means he’s really working with them,” Compass said, his voice heavy. “Not pretending. Not infiltrating.”

“That’s not Stretch,” Sloane said as she shook her head.

“We all thought that,” Aero said. “But Leo’s source says otherwise.”

“Who’s the source?” I asked.

“Someone Leo trusts,” Yarder answered. “But Brynn doesn’t. She wants to verify it before they move.”

That gave me a tiny sliver of hope.

“So they’re waiting?” Poppy asked.

Yarder nodded. “For now.”

“But if they confirm it...” Fallon trailed off.

“Then Stretch becomes collateral,” Compass said bluntly.

Poppy’s hand flew to her mouth.

“Leo said the only way they can take out Boone and Gibbs without repercussions is if everyone connected to them disappears with them,” Yarder said. “That includes Stretch.”

“No,” I said. It just flew out. “There has to be another way.”

“There always is,” Sloane said. “We just have to find it before Leo and Brynn pull the trigger.”

Silence fell again, heavier this time.

We all knew what this meant.

The war wasn't over.

Pirate

Saylor and I lay facing each other in the room, dim except for the soft light spilling from the bathroom doorway. Saylor's hair was spread across her pillow, her cheek cradled in her hand as she smiled at me like I was the most interesting thing in the world.

I pointed to the small tattoo on her forearm—a little pink pig tucked into a blanket. “Pig in a blanket?”

She grinned. “Yup. That one's pretty obvious.”

I moved my gaze to the tattoo on her wrist—a pack of cigarettes with a halo above it. I blinked, confused, then laughed out loud. “What the hell is that?”

Saylor laughed with me. “Holy smokes,” she said with pride.

I laughed harder. “Jesus Christ.”

She giggled and curled closer. “Come on, you can't tell me that's not genius.”

I shook my head, still grinning. “No, it's genius. Ridiculous, but genius.”

This. This was what I needed.

After the bomb Leo and Brynn had dropped earlier—after seeing Dice completely lose it hearing that Stretch might've betrayed us—it felt like the ground beneath us

was crumbling. We didn't know anything for sure. Not yet. Brynn had said she needed time to confirm it all.

And until then? We were in limbo.

We'd spent the rest of the day trying to shake the weight off our shoulders. Hanging around the clubhouse. Eating dinner together like it was a regular night. But everyone had been quiet. Eyes distant. Every joke forced.

Until Saylor looked at me and said, "Want a tour of my tattoos? Might distract you."

And just like that, I was laughing again.

So far, she'd shown me:

- A cherry pie slice with the word 'cutie' written under it. (Cutie pie.)
- A fork with a smirk that said, 'fork yeah.'
- A peppermint wielding a little spear. (Spearmint.)
- The pig in a blanket.
- And holy smokes.

And she was glowing with every reveal like it was a gift she was giving me.

"How about a fun fact?" she offered.

"Hit me with it, baby."

“My name is Saylor,” she put a hand to her chest, “and your name is Pirate.”

I blinked at her. “Okay.”

She tipped her head. “Saylor and Pirate.”

I let out a short laugh. “I didn’t even notice that.”

She nodded. “I did. And Mac pointed it out the other day. I think it’s funny.”

I pressed a kiss to her lips. “Maybe it just means we were meant to be together.”

“Oh, oh,” she said, her eyes dancing. “I’ve got one more you’re going to die over.” She kicked the covers off and wiggled out from under them. I blinked as she pulled her sock off and shoved her barefoot in my face.

“Is that a camel?” I squinted at the black blob on top of her big toe.

“Yup.” She grinned proudly. “That’s my camel toe.”

I groaned and fell back into the pillow. “God, Saylor.”

She dropped her leg and was absolutely beaming. “I think I’m doing a great job at distracting you.”

I turned back toward her. “Distracting me from the fact that one of my brothers might’ve betrayed the club?” I sighed and rubbed my hand over my chest. “Yeah, baby. You’re doing damn good.”

It was still there. The pit in my stomach. The uncertainty. But it was quiet right now—pushed to the back of my head by her laughter, her smile, and the warmth of

her skin next to mine.

She scooted up then climbed on top of me. Her legs straddled my waist as she settled against me. Her palms pressed flat to my chest with her fingers spread wide.

Her hair fell forward like a curtain and shielded us from the rest of the world.

“Do you think he did it?” she whispered.

I didn’t answer right away.

But my head was already shaking. “No.”

She searched my face for a long moment. “Then he didn’t.”

Just like that.

“I know Brynn is going to figure out what’s really going on,” she added, more certain than I was.

“You met Brynn for, like, two minutes today, baby.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, so? I can read people. And I can tell she’s a badass who’s going to help us.”

I stared at her, amused. “What about Leo?”

She shrugged again. “I think he’s good, too. He just needs to weed through his info better.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

“You’re seriously sitting here critiquing Leo Banachi.”

“Hey, he’s married to Brynn, right? So obviously he has good judgment.”

“Because he married Brynn?” I chuckled.

She leaned down and kissed me, soft and slow. “Yup. You can tell a lot about a man from the woman he chooses.”

My smile faded into something warmer. “Yeah?”

She nodded. “All the guys in the club are good because their ol’ ladies are amazing.”

I thought about that. Poppy. Sloane. Adalee. Dani. Olive. Fallon. Dove.

She wasn’t wrong.

“So what does it say about me that I chose you?” I asked.

She smiled softly and leaned down again. “It means you’ve got a thing for goth girls with quirky tattoos.”

I brushed her hair back from her face and let my fingertips drift along her jaw. “And what else does it say about me, baby?”

She met my eyes. “That you have impeccable taste.”

We both laughed—full and honest, the sound bouncing off the walls.

I wrapped my arms around her and rolled her gently onto her back to settle over her. I braced myself above her, one arm on either side, and caged her in without pressing

too much of my weight against her.

Her hands slid up my sides.

“I think I know one more thing it means,” I said and watched the way her pupils widened when I spoke.

She traced her finger along my cheek. “Oh yeah? And what’s that?”

I let the words settle on my tongue for just a second before I said them. “It means I love you.”

Saylor blinked.

Then she stared up at me like I’d just unraveled the universe at her feet.

“You...” she said.

“I love you,” I said again, firmer this time. “I didn’t expect it. I didn’t see it coming. But I’m not fighting it, baby.”

She blinked again, and then her eyes glossed just the slightest bit.

“I love you, too,” she whispered.

I lowered myself enough to kiss her—slow and deep, like it was the first kiss all over again. And maybe it was. Maybe it meant more now.

Because despite everything going on—the war with Boone and Gibbs, the betrayal we couldn’t confirm, the uncertainty waiting for the second Brynn called again—this moment was ours.

And I knew no matter what the hell came next...

She was mine.

And I was hers.

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:25 am

Dice

I punched in the number I had memorized, and my thumb hovered over the final digit for just a second before I hit send.

The dial tone rang once. Twice. Three times.

I held my breath.

Then the line clicked.

“Hello?”

My heart slammed into my ribs.

I knew that voice.

“Stretch?”

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:25 am

Check out the first chapter of Secret Southern Promises

Dolly

I stood in the produce section, my fingers moving absentmindedly over the bananas as I stocked them on the shelf. The routine was second nature by now—lifting the yellow bunches, placing them neatly in rows, making sure none were bruised. My mind wasn't on the task, though. It rarely was when I was doing something so monotonous.

Magnolia Mart had been in my family for four generations, and I was the latest to take over. My great-grandfather had started the store, and it had passed down through the years to my grandfather, then my father, and now me. It was a point of pride, really—having something like this stay in the family for so long. But it also meant I spent a lot of time doing things like stocking bananas.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, pulling me from my trance-like state. I wiped my hands on my apron and fished it out. A small smile already tugged at my lips when I saw who the message was from.

Can I go to James' house after school?

Oh, Nash.

I quickly typed my response. Do you have any homework? You know the deal.

Not five seconds later, my phone buzzed again.

I just have to read a chapter for English. I can do that after dinner.

I smiled, shaking my head. Fine, but you better be home by six. I typed back, feeling a warmth spread through me as I thought about how easy it was to be Nash's mom. He wasn't perfect, but he didn't give me much trouble. At fourteen, that was saying something.

Thanks, Mom!

I tucked my phone back into my pocket and chuckled softly to myself. Nash always said thanks, too. That boy had his manners nailed down.

I turned back to the bananas and grabbed the two empty boxes from the floor. I stood up just in time to hear the bell above the front door jingle. That sound was a constant in my life—people coming in and out, living their lives, needing groceries, catching up on gossip. It was small-town life at its finest.

Magnolia Grove was the epitome of Southern charm. Oak trees lined the streets, their branches hanging low like they were welcoming every passerby. The churches were historical, each with a story older than most of the town's residents. And the people? Friendly as all get out. Everyone knew everyone's business, which could be both a blessing and a curse, depending on the day.

But Magnolia Grove was home. It always had been. I'd been born and raised here, went to the same high school Nash was in now, and Magnolia Mart had been part of my life for as long as I could remember. I couldn't picture myself anywhere else. This place was my life.

"Afternoon, Dolly!" a voice called from the front.

I turned to see Mrs. Linda, one of the town's unofficial gossip queens, and she was

making her way toward me with her cart. She was pushing it with the same authority she pushed her opinions on everyone.

“Afternoon, Mrs. Linda. How are you?” I asked, stepping around the display to greet her properly.

“Oh, just fine, honey,” she said, pausing to peer into her cart. “I was just pickin’ up a few things for dinner. I saw you had cinnamon buns on sale. I had to grab some even though my hips don’t need them. You know how it is,” she said with a wink.

I did know. I had a pan in the back that was missing two rolls from my breakfast this morning.

“You been keepin’ busy with store?” she asked, her eyes glinting with a curiosity that never dimmed, no matter how old she got.

“Always,” I replied with a smile. “There’s always something to do here.”

Mrs. Linda leaned in slightly, lowering her voice like she was sharing a state secret, though we were the only two in the store. “Did you hear about Olivia and Landon?”

I nodded with a small smile. “I certainly did.” I was a bit surprised, but I liked it. Landon could use someone like Olivia to shake things up in his life. He’d always been a bit rough around the edges, and from what I’d heard, Olivia was nothing but sweet. A good match if you asked me.

Mrs. Linda tsked, pushing her cart further into the produce section. “Not too sure how I feel about it, but they seem to be very much in love. He’s got that look in his eye, you know, the one that means he’s a goner.”

I chuckled softly. “Love’ll do that to you.”

The truth was, I didn't know Olivia all that well. She'd only recently moved back to Magnolia Grove, and I hadn't spent any time around Landon since high school. He and I ran in different circles—always had. But it wasn't just that. I tended to keep to myself, especially in a town where everyone knew your business.

Sure, Nash was in school, and I did all the usual parent things—sports practices, school events, and the like—but I was always on the fringes and never dove too deep into the social side of things. I preferred it that way. The less I put myself out there, the less likely people were to ask questions or, worse, talk about me.

Because heaven knew I'd had my fair share of gossip back when I was pregnant with Nash. Fourteen years ago, the whole town had buzzed with whispers about me and who the father was. It wasn't something I ever wanted to relive.

"Are the nectarines ripe?" Mrs. Linda asked, cutting into my thoughts.

I nodded, gesturing to the bin. "Yep, they're good to go."

Just as I spoke, the bell above the door jingled again. I glanced at the clock—getting close to four o'clock. The after-school rush was about to start, and the store usually picked up around this time.

"Welcome to Magnolia Mart," I called, though I didn't bother looking up. I had banana boxes to drop off, so I headed to the back room. With the empty boxes out of the way, I made my way to the register, knowing I'd have to get ready for the small crowd that was bound to trickle in.

As predicted, a few more people wandered into the store. I smiled and greeted them out of habit, though I stayed behind the counter. I grabbed the latest issue of People magazine from the stack we kept up front and began flipping through it. One of the perks of running Magnolia Mart was staying up to date on all the celebrity gossip

without having to pay for it.

I thumbed through the pages, half-reading the headlines. Some movie star had gotten divorced. Again. Someone else was caught in a scandal. Typical Hollywood drama. I chuckled softly to myself, thinking how different the problems in that world were from what we dealt with in Magnolia Grove.

Here, scandal was more about who was dating whom and whether or not someone had stepped out of line at Sunday service. It was simpler, though, it didn't always feel that way when you were the center of the gossip.

The bell jingled again, and I glanced up just in time to see two kids I recognized from Nash's school walk in. I gave them a polite nod, but they didn't seem too interested in chatting, which was fine by me.

I returned to my magazine, letting myself get lost in the celebrity drama for a while. It was a nice escape, even if it was just for a few minutes. There was something comforting about knowing that no matter how messy things got in my own life, someone out there in California was probably having a worse day than me.

The door chimed again, and I quickly tucked the magazine under the counter, putting on my practiced smile as I sensed someone approaching the register.

My heart skipped a beat, and I felt the blood drain from my face. It was like staring at a ghost—one I never thought I'd see again, not here. Not in Magnolia Grove.

He didn't belong in this town anymore. He'd left years ago to become a famous bull rider. And now, here he was, looking older but just as rugged, his dark hair a little longer, his beard a shadow on his face. His eyes, though, were the same—sharp, intense, the kind of eyes that could pull you in and leave you wondering what the hell you were doing.

Boone West stood at the register and placed a case of beer and a loaf of bread on the conveyor belt.

Boone-freaking-West.

Meg

How did just stopping quickly to get dog food and shampoo turn into an overflowing basket and a surplus pack of paper towels?

“Put the paper towels down and back away slowly,” I mumbled to myself as I walked past a display of air fresheners and wondered if I needed any.

“Oh dear. Oh, my. I ... Ah ... Oh, my.”

I tore my thoughts away from air fresheners and looked down the aisle to an elderly woman who was leaning against the shelf, fanning herself. “Are you ok, ma’am?”

“Oh dear. I just ... I just got a little ... dizzy. ” I looked at the woman and saw her hands shaking as she brushed her white hair out of her face. The woman had on denim capris, a white button-down short-sleeve shirt, and, surprisingly, three-inch wedge heels.

“Ok, well, why don’t we try to find you a place to sit down until you get your bearings?” I shifted the basket and paper towels under one arm to help her to the bench that I had seen by the shoe rack two aisles over. “Are you here with anyone?” I asked as I guided her down the aisle.

“Oh no. I’m here by myself. I just needed a few things.”

“I only needed two things, and now my basket is overflowing, and I still haven’t gotten the things I came in for.”

The woman plopped down on the bench, chuckling, shaking her head. “Tell me about it. Happens to me every time too.”

“Is there something I can do for you? Has this happened to you before?” She really was looking rather pale.

“Unfortunately, yes. I ran out of the house today without eating breakfast. I’m diabetic. I should know by now that I can’t do that.” My mom was also diabetic, so I knew exactly what the woman was talking about. Luckily, I also knew what to do to help.

“Just sit right here, and I’ll be right back. Is there someone you want to call to give you a ride home? Driving right now probably isn’t the best idea.” I set the basket and towels on the floor, keeping my wallet in my hand.

“I suppose I should call my son. He should be able to give me a ride,” the woman said as she dug her phone out of her purse.

I left the woman to her phone call and headed to the candy aisle that I had been trying to ignore. I grabbed a bag of licorice, chips, and a diet soda and went to the checkout. The dollar store didn’t actually offer a healthy selection, but this would do in a pinch. The woman just needed to get her blood sugars back up.

I grabbed my things after paying and headed back to the bench. I ripped open the bag and handed it to the woman. “Oh dear, you didn’t have to buy that. I could have given you money.”

“Don’t worry about it. I hope if this happened to my mom there would be someone to help her if I wasn’t around.”

“Well, that’s awfully nice of you. My names Ethel Birch by the way.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Ethel. I’m Meg Grain. I also got you some chips and soda.” I popped opened the soda and handed it to Ethel.

“Oh thank you, honey. My son is on the way here, should be only five minutes. You can get going if you want to, you don’t need to sit with an old woman,” Ethel said as she ate a piece of candy and took a slug of soda.

“No problem. The only plans I had today was to take a nap before work tonight. Delaying my plans by ten minutes won’t be a problem.”

“Well, in that case, you can help me eat this licorice. It’s my favorite, but I shouldn’t eat this all by myself. Where do you work at?” Ethel asked as she offered the bag to me.

“The factory right outside of town. I work in the warehouse, second shift.” I grabbed a piece and sat down on the floor. If I was going to wait for Ethel’s son to show up, might as well be comfortable while I waited for him.

“Really? Never would have thought that. Figured you would have said a nurse or something like that. Seems like you would have to be tough to work in a warehouse, sounds like a man’s job.”

I laughed. “Honestly, Ethel that is not the first time I have heard that, and it probably won’t be the last. You definitely need a certain attitude to deal with those truckers walking through the door. I have an awesome co-worker, so he helps out when truckers have a problem with a woman loading their truck.”

“Sounds like you give them hell. My Tim was a trucker before he passed. I know exactly what you are talking about.” Ethel took another drink of her soda and set it on the bench next to her.

“Feeling better?”

“Surprisingly, yes. It’s a wonder what a little candy can do. How much do I owe you?” Ethel asked as she reached for her purse by her feet.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad that I was here to help.”

“Mom! Where are you?” Someone yelled from the front of the store.

“Oh good, Lo’s here. You’ll have to meet him.” Ethel cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled to him she was in the back.

I started getting up off the floor and remembered I wasn’t exactly as flexible as I use to be while struggling to get up.

“Ma, you ok?” I was halfway to standing with my butt in the air when his voice made me pause.

It sounded like the man was gurgling broken glass when he spoke. Raspy and so sexy. Those three words he spoke sent shocks to my core. Lord knows the last time I felt anything in my core.

“Yes, I’m fine. I forgot to eat breakfast this morning and started to get dizzy when Meg here was nice enough to help me out until you could get here.” Ethel turned to me. “Lo, this is Meg, Meg this is Lo.”

Oh lord.

I couldn’t talk. The man standing in front of me was ... oh, lord. I couldn’t even think of a word to describe him.

I looked him up and down, and I'm sure my mouth was hanging wide open. I took in his scuffed up motorcycle boots and faded, stained ripped jeans that hugged his thighs and made me want to ask the man to spin so I could see what those jeans were doing for his ass. I moved my eyes up to his t-shirt that was tight around his shoulders and chest and showed he worked out.

I couldn't remember the last time I worked out. Did walking to the mailbox count as exercise? Of course, I only remembered to get the mail about twice a week, so that probably didn't count.

His arms were covered in tattoos. I could see them peeking out from the collar of his shirt and could only imagine what he looked like with his shirt off. Tattoos were my ultimate addiction on a man. Even one tattoo added at least 10 points to a man's hotness. This guy was off the fucking charts.

My eyes locked with his after my fantastic voyage up his body, and I stopped breathing.

"Hey, Meg. See something you like, darlin'?" Lo rumbled at me with a smirk on his face.

Busted. I sucked air back into my lungs and tried to remember how to breathe.

Lo's eyes were the color of fresh cut grass, bright green. His hair was jet black and cut close to his head with a pair of kick ass aviators sitting on top of his head. He was golden tan and gorgeous. The man was sex on a stick. Plain and simple.

"Uh, hey," I choked out.

Lo's lips curved up into a grin, and I looked down to see if my panties fell off. The man had a panty-dropping smile, and he wasn't even smiling that big. I would have to

take cover or risk fainting if he smiled any bigger.

“Thanks for looking after my ma for me. I’m glad I was in town today and not out on a run,” Lo said.

Ok. Get it together Meg. You are a 36-year-old woman, and this man has rendered you speechless like a sixteen-year-old girl. I needed to say something.

“Say something,” I blurted out. Good Lord did I really just say that. Lo quirked his eyebrow, and his smirk returned.

“Ugh, I mean no problem. I didn’t really do that much. No problem.” I looked at Ethel while Lo was smirking at me; Ethel had a full-blown smile on her face and was beaming at me.

“You were a life saver, Meg! I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t here.” Ethel looked at Lo and grinned even bigger. “You should have seen her, Lo. She knew just what to do to help me. I could have sworn she was a nurse the way she took charge. She’s not, though, just has a good head on her shoulders and decided to help this old lady out.”

“That’s good, Ma. You got all your shit you need so we can get going? I got some stuff going on at the garage that I dropped to get over here fast.”

I took that as my cue to leave and ripped my eyes off Lo and bent over to get my basket and paper towels.

“Yes son, that’s my stuff right here. I just want to get Meg’s number before she leaves.”

“Why do you need my number?” I asked as I juggled my basket and towels.

Ethel grabbed her purse off the ground and started digging through it again. “Well, you won’t let me pay you back for the snacks you got for me so I figured I could pay you back by inviting you over for dinner sometime. So what’s your number, sweetheart?”

“I don’t eat dinner,” I blurted out. I was really going to have to have a talk with my brain and mouth when I got home. They needed to get their shit together and start working in unison so I wouldn’t sound like such an idiot.

“You don’t eat dinner? Please don’t tell me you’re on a diet.” Lo said as he looked me up and down.

“No,” I said. Lord knew I should be.

Lo and Ethel just stared at me.

“So, no, you don’t eat dinner?” Lo asked again.

“Yes. I mean no, I’m not on a diet. Yes, I eat dinner. I just work at night, so I meant that I wouldn’t be able to come to dinner.” I looked at Lo and blushed about ten shades of red. “Why is this so hard?”

“What’s hard, sweetheart? Can’t remember your phone number? I can barely remember mine too. Don’t worry about not being able to make it to dinner; I can have you over for lunch. You eat lunch right?” Ethel asked with a smirk on her face. Lo had a full-blown smile on his face, even his eyes were smiling at me. That smile ought to be illegal.

I could see where Lo got his looks from. With Lo and Ethel standing next to each other, I could totally see the resemblance. Especially when they were both smirking.

I had to get out of here. I'm normally the one with the one-liners and making everyone laugh, now I couldn't even put two words together.

"Lunch would be good." I rattled off my number, and Ethel jotted it down.

"Ok, sweetheart, I'll let you get your nap. I'll give you a call later, and we can figure out a day we can get together." Ethel shoved the pen and paper back in her bag and leaned into me for a hug.

I awkwardly hugged her back and patted her on the shoulder. "Sounds good. Have a good day Ethel. Uh, it was nice meeting you, Lo," I mumbled as my gaze wandered over Lo again.

"You too Meg. See you around," Lo replied.

I gave them both a jaunty wave and booked it to the checkout. Thankfully there wasn't a line, and I quickly made my escape to my car. I threw my things in the trunk and hopped in. I grabbed my phone out of my pocket, plugged it into the radio, and turned on my chill playlist, the soothing sounds of Fleetwood Mac filled the car.

Music was the one thing in my life that had gotten me through so much shit. Good or bad, there was always a song that I could play, and it would make everything better. Right now I just needed to unscramble my brain and get my bearings. Fleetwood Mac singing "Landslide" was helping.

I pulled out of the parking lot and headed home. All I needed was to forget about today. If Ethel called for lunch, I would say yes because she did remind me so much of mom, but I wasn't going to let Lo enter my thoughts anymore. A woman like me definitely did not register on his radar, he was better just forgotten.

When I was halfway home, I realized I forgot dog food and shampoo.

Shit.

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I helped mom finish her shopping and loaded all her crap into the truck. I looked around the parking lot for Meg, hoping she hadn't left yet so I could get another look at her. As soon as I saw her ass waving in the air as she struggled to stand up, I knew I had to be inside her.

It took all my willpower to not get a hard-on as her eyes ran over my body. Fucking chick was smoking' hot and didn't even know it.

"Thanks for coming to get me, Lo," Ma said as she interrupted my thoughts about Meg.

"No problem, Ma. I'll get one of the guys to bring your car to you later. Make sure it's locked." Ma dug her keys out of her huge ass purse and beeped the locks. We both got into the shop truck, and I started it up.

"Sure was nice of that Meg to help out. I don't know what I would have done without her."

"Yup, definitely nice of her." I shifted the truck into drive, keeping my foot on the brake, knowing exactly where mom was headed with this.

"You should ask her out." All I could do was shake my head and laugh.

"Straight to the point huh, Ma?"

"I'm old, I can say what I want. Meg is just the thing you need."

“I didn’t know I needed anything.” I pulled out of the parking lot and headed to Ma’s house.

“You need someone in your life besides that club.” My mom grabbed her phone out of her purse and started fiddling with it.

“We’ll see, ma. Meg didn’t seem too thrilled with me.” She definitely liked what she saw, but it was like she couldn’t get away from me quick enough when she saw that Ma was going to be ok.

“Well, you are pretty intimidating, Lo. Thank goodness you didn’t wear your cut.”

My leather vest with my club rockers and patches was a part of me. “What the hell is wrong with my cut? If some bitch can’t handle me in my cut, she sure as shit doesn’t belong with me,” I growled.

“Not what I meant Lo. That girl has been hurt, you can see it in her eyes. You’ll have to be gentle with her.”

My phone dinged. I dug it out of my pocket and saw my mom had texted me. “You texted me her number, ma?”

“Use it, Logan, fix her,” she insisted.

I sighed and pulled into mom’s driveway. “Maybe she doesn’t want to be fixed, ma. Maybe she has a boyfriend.”

“She doesn’t. Call her, or I’ll do it for you,” she ordered.

I knew my mom’s threat wasn’t idle. She totally would call Meg and ask her out for me. Fuck. “I’ll help you get your shit inside ma.”

“I’ll make you lunch, and then you can call Meg,” Ma said, as she jumped out of the truck and grabbed some bags.

I watched her walk into her house and looked at the message she had sent me. I saved Meg’s number to my phone and grabbed the rest of Ma’s shit and headed into the house.

Looked like I was calling Meg.

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