



# Under the Mistletoe (Satan's Fury MC Second Generation #6)

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**Category:** Action&Adventure

**Description:** After seven years, Rebecca is back in the world of Fury, and she has her four-year-old daughter in tow. With Christmas just around the corner, they settle into the life she left behind, and the magic of the season quickly starts to work its charm.

Torch has never forgotten her—or the sparks that flew between them.

Under the twinkling lights and mistletoe, he is determined to show Rebecca that coming home is the best decision she ever made.

And this time, hes not letting her go.

**Total Pages (Source):** 15

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:25 am*

I was eleven years old when I first discovered the power of the mistletoe.

It was a day I would never forget.

I was sitting beside the Christmas tree, watching as our family and friends came through the front door. There was an odd little ball of green and red ribbon hanging from the ceiling, and every time a couple stepped under it, the guy would kiss the girl. Sometimes, it was just a little peck, while others were deep and passionate.

I spent the better part of the night watching the different couples sharing a magical moment together, and I found myself wondering what it would be like to be kissed like that. And just as that thought crossed my mind, Thomas walked into the kitchen. He was several years older than me and always treated me as such, but that didn't stop me from thinking that he was my one and only.

If there was anyone I wanted to kiss under the mistletoe, it was him.

The wheels started turning in my head, and before I knew it, I was standing under the mistletoe. My hands were fisted by my side, and I was practically giddy as I stood there waiting for him to notice me. My heart was pounding so hard I was positive everyone around me could hear it.

When Thomas finally spotted me, his lips curled into a smile, and I just knew my dream was about to come true. I just knew it. Every nerve in my body hummed as he started towards me.

I ran my tongue over my lips, preparing for the big moment, and just as I was about

to pop with excitement, I felt something brush up against my arm. I glanced up and found Casey standing next to me, and my heart sank. I quickly looked back at Thomas, and he was still coming in our direction.

I was tempted to shove Casey out of the way, but it was too late.

He was already standing right in front of her.

A knot formed in my throat as I watched him lean down and kiss her on the cheek. She laughed, and the sound echoed around me, making the knot in my throat even tighter. I might've just been a silly kid, but I knew it just wasn't a kiss under the mistletoe.

He'd chosen her—just like he'd always done.

Disappointment sank its teeth in deep, but I refused to let the hurt show. I simply stepped away, blending back into the crowd, and pretended that the mistletoe had never meant anything.

But it did.

And it always would.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:25 am*

Torch

I was still shaking off the last bits of sleep as I made my way up the front steps. The sun was just starting to come up. Usually, I'd still be out cold, but I couldn't sleep, and I was craving one of Dad's famous bacon and egg biscuits.

I knew he'd be up. Hell, he was always up at the crack-ass of dawn, so I thought nothing of it as I pushed open the back door and headed inside. I stopped dead in my tracks when I found Mom sitting on the counter with her legs wrapped around Dad's waist and her arms around his neck. They were locking lips like a couple of teenagers, and neither of them had a clue that I'd just walked in.

I cleared my throat using all the dramatics I could muster, then grumbled, "Really?"

"Don't you know how to knock?"

"Wouldn't have to knock if you'd do that shit in the bedroom." I got a kick out of giving them a hard time, but I leaned against the stove as I added, "Aren't you guys too old for that anyway?"

"Not when you have a smokin' hot wife like mine."

"Aw, damn. That's Mom you're talking about."

"Doesn't make it any less true." Dad cocked his brow. "How do you think she became your mom?"

“Well, you best watch it, or you’ll end up with a broken hip or better yet, another me.”

“I’d rather have a broken hip.”

Mom swatted him on the shoulder and said, “Okay, you two. That’s enough.”

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” Dad slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her over to him. “I wasn’t done with you.”

I’ve heard all the stories of when Mom and Dad met. They were an unlikely pair. Dad was a hard ass with a chip on his shoulder, and Mom was a complete goof with a knack for pulling pranks. Apparently, she gave him a hell of a time, but she got under his skin, and they have been driving each other crazy ever since.

“Logan.” Mom looked up at him with nothing but love in her eyes and teased, “Not in front of the child.”

“Ah, come on.”

“Later.” Mom eased up on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek, then turned her attention to me. “So, what brings you by at this hour?”

“I was hoping to grab one of Dad’s biscuits, but it looks like that isn’t gonna happen.”

“Oh, he can still make you some.” Mom turned to Dad as she asked, “Isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dad walked over to the fridge and started gathering the eggs and bacon. “Give me a minute.”

“It’s alright. You don’t gotta...”

“I was gonna make ‘em anyway.”

“How about some coffee?” Mom offered. “I just made a fresh pot.”

“Yeah, coffee would be good.” I sat down at the table as I asked, “You got any of that girly creamer stuff you and Sis use?”

“Sure do.” Mom stepped over to the fridge and pulled out a bottle. “You want some?”

“Hell, yeah, and some sugar.”

“You got it, sweetheart.”

“Don’t know how you drink that shit,” Dad groaned. “Gives me a belly ache just looking at it.”

“Well, your bitter-assed coffee gives me a belly ache, so...”

“So, what are you boys up to today?” Mom asked, trying to derail another potential quarrel.

“Got a busy one,” Dad answered. “Probably won’t be home until late.”

“That didn’t really answer my question, but okay.”

Dad had been a member of Fury since he was old enough to patch in. Years later, he became the sergeant-at-arms and was now president. He knew the rules better than anyone, and at the top of the list was never discuss club business with anyone—and that included ol’ ladies. It wasn’t always easy, but Mom and Dad had found a way to

make it work.

“You and Cass still going into the city?”

“That’s the plan.” Mom brought my coffee over and sat down next to me. “I’m thinking I might put the tree up when we get back.”

“Already?” Dad glanced over his shoulder with a scowl. “We just had Halloween.”

“Oh, please. Halloween was two weeks ago, and you know how long it takes me to get everything out.”

“It wouldn’t take so long if you didn’t have so much of it. You’d think we were outfitting Times Square or something.”

“You are so dramatic.”

“Says the woman that dresses like an elf for an entire week before Christmas.”

“The kids love it, and you do too, you ol’ Grinch.”

“Well, you can ride this ol’ Grinch later tonight and make his heart grow two sizes.”

“Well, great. Now, my appetite is shot to shit,” I groaned. “Thanks a lot.”

“Ah, hell. You’ve heard worse than that when you were still in diapers.”

“Diapers?” I shook my head. “Ah, hell. I need to get outta here.”

“You keep your ass put. Breakfast will be ready in five.”

The words had barely left his mouth when Stitch stepped into the kitchen and asked, “Did somebody say breakfast?”

“Hey, brother. I didn’t know you were coming by.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.” Stitch sat down across from me and ran his hand through his salt and pepper hair. “But I had to get out of the house before I lost it.”

“Lost it?” Dad turned and looked at him with concern. “Why? What’s going on?”

“Mia’s gonna have a baby.”

“She’s like seven months pregnant. That’s not exactly new information.”

“Actually, she’s eight months, but this is my Mia we’re talking about.” Stitch leaned back with a sigh. “How the hell did this happen?”

Unable to miss an opportunity, I chuckled and said, “We could call Wrath over and he could explain it to ya.”

“Ah, don’t get me started on his ass,” Stitch growled. “If he wasn’t so good to her and didn’t love her like he does, I’d put him six feet under.”

“Kind of hard to knock off your own son-in-law.”

“I know. I know. I’m telling ya, this whole thing is messing with my damn head. It was just a blink ago that she was put in my arms for the first time. I ‘bout didn’t make it through that, and now, she’s about to have a kid of her own.”

“I don’t get what you’re worried about,” Dad replied. “Way I remember it, you did damn good when Mia was born. Hell, you never skipped a beat. You just did what



you needed to do, just like you always do.”

“But this is different. I’m about to be a grandfather , and that’s not something I’m ready for.”

“You’re gonna be fine,” Mom assured him.

“You aren’t getting me.” He looked between the three of us, searching for the words. “Last night, I was watching TV, and this diaper commercial came on. Just a stupid, regular commercial. And next thing I know, I was getting a knot in my fucking throat. What the hell was that?”

“It’s fatherhood part two.” Dad chuckled, crossing his arms. “But you don’t gotta worry. This is gonna be a breeze. You don’t have to worry about all the late-night feedings or changing diapers at four a.m. You get to leave all the parenting BS to Wrath and Mia and sit back and enjoy.”

“Not sure I know how to do that.”

“You just gotta lean in, brother.” Dad chuckled as he told him, “It won’t be any time before this kid has you wrapped around his finger, just like Mia did. Just wait and see.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that.” Stitch groaned, then glanced up, eyes fierce. “So, what about that breakfast.”

“Coming right up.”

Dad walked over to the stove, and five minutes later, I had one of his biscuits in my hand and my day was made. As soon as we finished eating, we said our goodbyes to Mom and headed over to the clubhouse. Dad wasn’t exaggerating when he said we

were going to have a busy one. Hell, we were all over the place.

One minute, we were making plans for the upcoming holidays, and then, there was the big meet with Maltese. He worked for Cardelli—a leader of one the most notorious Italian mafias, and he was coming to discuss a possible business opportunity. Dad called us all into church, and we'd just started to sit down when Bones turned to Stitch and asked, "Are we really considering this?"

Bones was Stitch's son, and he'd taken Big's place as the club's hacker. Understanding his concern, Stitch gave him a stern look and said, "Prez wouldn't have called a meet if we weren't."

"But now?" Bones narrowed. "Hell, the timing couldn't be worse."

"You worried you won't get your turkey time," Grim teased.

"That's the least of my worries." He turned to his father as he urged, "Do you know the kind of stuff Cardelli pulls?"

Stitch leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his broad chest, his expression hardening. "I know all about Cardelli and the shit he pulls, son. That's one of the many reasons why we're having this conversation."

"But why waste our time?" Bones shook his head and grumbled, "Cardelli has no code. He takes out anyone who stands in his way, and that includes women and children. You really think we should trust someone like that?"

The air became thick with the weight of the decision in front of us. Prez remained silent. His gaze was calculating as he tapped his fingers lightly on the table's edge. His voice was low but commanding as he replied, "We know very well who Cardelli is and what he's capable of, and he knows the same about us."

“And this is just an opportunity.” Savage was Cotton’s son and the club’s new VP. He had a good head on his shoulders, so I trusted that he knew what he was talking about when he said, “It doesn’t mean we have to accept. But if we turn him away without hearing him out, we’ve put a target on our backs.”

“Exactly.” Prez sounded irritated as he continued, “We’ve met with Maltese before. He’s never crossed any lines, so we owe him the respect to at least hear him out.”

I could feel the tension in the room escalating, and I was over it. I wanted to know what we were getting into, so I leaned forward and asked, “What exactly is this ‘opportunity’ we’re talking about?”

Dad held my gaze for a long moment before answering. “Cardelli wants distribution. He’s looking for partners outside his own territory to expand into ours. Maltese is here to propose a partnership. We give him channels for his... products, and in return, we get a cut. A big one .”

Savage and Wrath shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Bones clenched his fists as he asked the question we were all thinking—“What’s he wanting us to distribute? Because if it has to do with any kind of trafficking, I’m out.”

“None of that.” Dad’s eyes darkened. “He claims it’s about rare goods—art, antiques, and shit like that. He wants to move them quietly.”

“Yeah, right.” Wrath grumbled under his breath. He was the club’s enforcer, and it was his job to be wary of anyone outside of the club. “Whatever’s in those crates, it’s worth enough for him to cross borders and risk meeting here. No way this shit isn’t dirty.”

“Which is why we decide together. Maltese arrives in an hour. We meet, we listen, and then we choose. But make no mistake—we make the choice. Not him.”

A subtle twitch of his jaw represented a warning that the discussion was over. We all exchanged looks, each of us weighing our concern, but we all remained silent.

An hour later, we were gathered in the bar when Rooster walked in with Maltese. Just like the times before, he was dressed in a jet-black business suit and exuded an aura of confidence as he scanned the room. He didn't look the least bit rattled as he started walking over to us.

His back was straight, his chin was out, and his expression was blank as he came over to Prez and gave him a slight nod. "Maverick."

"Maltese."

"I appreciate you agreeing to meet with me."

"Why don't you tell us why you're here." Dad cocked his brow. "And don't give us any bullshit about moving fucking antiques."

"About that." He crossed his arms. "There's a bit more to it than that."

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:25 am*

Beck

“Hey, we’re here.”

“Are you excited?”

“Yeah, and a little nervous.”

With my phone still in hand, I glanced up at my rearview mirror, and my heart swelled at the sight of my precious daughter. Her reddish-blond hair was pulled back and looked more like a bird’s nest than a ponytail, and her lips were bright red from the juice she drank at our last pitstop. Her wide, curious eyes were taking in everything around her.

My mother’s voice pulled me from my thoughts when she asked, “Nervous about what?”

“Ava... What if she doesn’t like it?”

“Ava is four. She’s going to love it because you love it.”

“I guess we will see soon enough.”

“You certainly will. Now, you two go on in and check things out. Your father and I’ll be over in a minute.”

“It’s just you guys, right? You’re not bringing anyone to help.”

“Nope. It’s just us.”

“Okay, good. I’ll see you in a few.”

I ended the call, then turned to Ava and asked, “You ready to go see our new house?”

“Hm-hmm.”

She really had no idea what I was talking about. We’d lived in an apartment over four hours away from here, and it was the only home she’d ever really known. It was my fault. I just couldn’t bring myself to come home to visit, but that had all changed. I was done running from my past and wanted to give my precious daughter the home she deserved.

As soon as I got out of the car, I walked over and opened the back door. I unbuckled Ava from her car seat and lifted her into my arms. Her eyes were wide with wonder as we made our way up to the front steps. I still couldn’t believe it. It took five years of working and going to school part-time for me to scrape up enough money for a down payment.

My parents helped a great deal. They came up to visit and begged me numerous times to just come home, but I always refused. I was studying to be a radiologist, and I was already going to the college closest to home. So, I got a job on campus and used the money I made to pay for on-campus daycare. It took some time and a lot of patience—for both me and my parents, but we got through it.

I could’ve just let Dad do what Dad does and let him take care of all the finances, but I couldn’t accept. Call it being stubborn or just plain prideful, but I needed to do it on my own. I pulled out my new key and unlocked the door, then lowered Ava’s feet to the floor and said, “Go check it out.”

She took off like a bolt of lightning, running to check out every room. It wasn't anything fancy, but it had two bedrooms with a fully updated kitchen and a cozy living room. It also had a nice backyard with a fence and a wraparound porch that was to die for. I absolutely loved it, and I hoped Ava would love it, too.

After a few minutes, Ava came rushing back into the kitchen and asked, "Dis' really our house?"

"Yup," I replied with a smile. "It's all ours."

"But what 'bout my room?"

"I already explained that." I knelt in front of her and took her hand in mine. "We moved here so we could be closer to GiGi and Pop."

She nodded, and after taking a moment to let it all sink in, the questions started rolling in. "Do we have a swing?"

"No, but we can get one."

"With a slide?"

"Maybe."

She blinked, not seeming to mind either way. "Can we get a dog?"

"Let's work on unpacking first," I said, already imagining the chaos Ava and a dog could bring together.

"Can we..."

Before she could finish her thought, Dad honked his horn, signaling their arrival. Ava and I rushed over to the front door and waited as Mom and Dad got out of the U-Haul. Dad looked exhausted from the long drive, but Mom, on the other hand, looked raring to go. Her hair was pulled up in a high ponytail, and she was wearing a pair of jeans with a white T-shirt tucked in tight.

And if that wasn't enough, she was carrying a clipboard in her hand like she was some kind of project manager. "Hey, guys."

"Hey there, you two."

Dad started toward us, and Ava charged over to him. He scooped her up and gave her a bear hug before nodding toward the house. "You like the new house?"

Ava nodded. "We gettin' a dog!"

"Sounds good to me." Dad chuckled. "How 'bout a pony, too?"

Ava's eyes went wide, and I shot him a look. "Hooo, wait a minute. We have no place for a pony, and I never said we were getting a dog."

"Might be good to have the extra security."

"I think the security system you will put in will be plenty."

Dad had a knack for all things technical, and that included security systems. Mom wasn't too shabby with it either, but her focus wasn't on our security. "Oh, honey. It's just darling. I love everything about it... Are you still thinking about painting or changing the color of the siding?"

"Maybe. I thought I would move in and get settled first."



“Well, your father and I picked up a few samples for you to look over.”

“Easy, Mom. I haven’t even moved in yet.”

“Oh, hush. You know I’m just excited for you.”

“I’m excited, too. I would be even more excited if all that furniture in that truck would miraculously move itself into the house.”

“Only one way that’s going to happen.” Dad lowered Ava to the ground. “Let’s get to it.”

I nodded, then followed him over to the truck. He slid open the back hatch, and when I saw all the boxes and furniture, I let out a groan. “I wish Davis was here.”

“You know he’d be here if he could.”

“I know.”

My dear brother had acquired my parents’ giftedness with computers and technology, and he’d been offered an unbelievable opportunity to work with the Navy and the nuclear program. He loved what he was doing, but he couldn’t come home very often. “I just hope we’ll get to see him over the holidays.”

“He’s working on it.”

Dad handed me the first box, and the rest of the afternoon became a blur of unloading. Dad took charge of the ‘heavy lifting’ while Mom and I brought in the boxes. Ava discovered the joy of bubble wrap, and by the time we unloaded the truck, she was wearing most of it like a suit of armor, popping her way through the house.

“Ava, be careful,” I warned.

“Oh, she’s fine.” Mom opened another box and started pulling out all the kitchen stuff she’d bought. “I got you a few things.”

“I see that.”

“It’s nothing much.” She held up some new Tupperware and a fancy charcuterie board. “Just a few things I thought you might’ve forgotten.”

“When am I ever going to use a charcuterie board?”

She winked at Ava. “You’ll need it once you start hosting.”

“What’s ho-sing?” Ava asked, sounding confused.

“Something you and Mommy aren’t going to be doing any time soon,” I muttered. “I think we’ll stick to mac and cheese for now.”

“I want some mac and cheese.”

“I’ll fix some in a bit. For now, why don’t you go to your room and take your toys out of the boxes.”

“Ah, man.”

“Go on and do what your momma said,” Mom pushed. “I’ll be in there in a few minutes to help.”

Ava did as she was asked and went to her room to unbox her things while Mom and I continued unpacking the dishes. The sound of clattering plates almost drowned out

the muffled conversation coming from the front yard. I recognized Dad's deep rumble, but it was the other voice that stopped me cold. It was low, smooth, and unmistakably familiar. I froze, and a shiver slipped up my spine.

I'd spent years training myself not to think about that voice, and now, it was at my front door.

I knew I would eventually see him.

I just wasn't expecting it to be so soon.

"Hey, Beck!" Dad shouted, jolting me from my spiraling thoughts. "We're bringing in the sofa."

The words had barely left his mouth when they appeared. Dad was carrying one end of my worn-out sofa, and Torch was carrying the other. The sight of him brought a lump to my throat.

Torch adjusted his grip, eyes locking on mine for the briefest second. "Hey, Torch."

He gave me a nod—just a nod, like I hadn't spent my entire adolescence mooning over him and he hadn't broken my heart when he completely blew me off.

"Thanks for helping." It came out strangled and barely audible, so I forced myself to say, "I really appreciate it."

"No problem." His lips curved slightly—a flicker of something that might have been amusement or indifference, but I couldn't tell which. "I could tell the ol' man was struggling."

"Just a bit," Dad chuckled.

I hadn't laid eyes on Torch since I left for college, and he was even more handsome than I remember. He was taller with broad shoulders, and he still had those piercing green eyes that always seemed to see right through you—or, in my case, not at all.

His hair was still dark but longer, falling just past his ears, and there was a scruff along his jawline that hadn't been there before. The boy I once knew was gone, and a strong, confident, beautiful man had taken his place.

I leaned back against the counter, trying to steady my breath as Dad huffed his way through the doorway.

Concerned, Mom called out, "Oh, Mike! Be careful."

"I got it. I got it." Dad shook his head, and his voice was strained as he said, "We need to get you some better furniture, Kiddo."

"My furniture is fine."

I kept my eyes trained on Torch. I tried to look away, but I just couldn't stop staring at him. It had been so long. I thought I'd moved on and put all the childhood theatrics behind me, but seeing him now made me realize how wrong I'd been.

They centered it against the main wall in the living room, then Torch lowered his end of the sofa and brushed his hands off on his jeans. He straightened once the sofa was in place, then glanced around at the half-unpacked boxes and bubble wrap. "Nice place."

I swallowed hard, forcing a nod. "Thanks."

"It's been a while."

“Yeah, it has.”

“Didn’t realize you were moving back.”

“It was a last-minute kind of thing.”

He gave me a nod, and then he turned back to Dad. They spoke for a minute, then Dad slapped him on the back, laughing about something he’d said. I, on the other hand, didn’t laugh. Instead, I stood there, feeling like that teenage girl all over again—helplessly, hopelessly invisible.

I just wanted him to go.

I wanted to forget that I’d even seen his stupid, handsome face, and I thought I was going to get my wish until Ava came barreling down the hall. She ran straight to Dad and screeched, “D’eres a spider in my room!”

“A spider! Oh, man!” Dad reached down and lifted her into his arms. “Need me to come take care of it?”

Ava nodded, and Dad immediately turned to Torch. “Duty calls.”

Dad carried Ava down the hall, and the second they disappeared into her room, Torch turned to me and asked, “Who was that?”

“That was Ava.” I cleared my throat. “My daughter.”

“Your what?”

“My daughter.” I stiffened my back and took a step towards him. “I had her while I was away.”

“You had a kid?” I could see the wheels turning in his head as he added, “Big has a granddaughter?”

“Yes.”

“And her father?”

“He’s not in the picture.” I shrugged. “It’s a long story.”

“I’m sure it is.” His eyes narrowed. “How come none of us have heard it?”

“I asked my folks not to say anything.” I shrugged. “He didn’t like it, but Dad only told those he thought should know and no one else.”

“So, you bust out of here and go off to college, cut us all off, and never even think to tell us that...” He threw his hands up and groaned. “Ah, forget it.”

Without saying anything more, Torch turned and stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him. “Well, that went well.”

“I don’t know what you expected.” There was no missing the annoyance on Mom’s face as she added, “You kept something very important from the people who loved you most. And just so you know, it was very hard for your father and me to keep Ava a secret from the brothers. He’s so proud of her and wanted to share that with them.”

“Well, he didn’t keep it a secret from everyone. You told Stitch and Wren. And Cotton and Cass, and Maverick and Henley. I’m sure there are others,” I argued. “Regardless, this was something that happened to me, and I’m sorry if I didn’t want everyone to know about it.”

“I understand that, but...”

Before she could say anything more, Dad called out, “Hey, Josie! We need you back here!”

“Coming!” Mom started past me but stopped long enough to say, “There are going to be a lot of hurt feelings over this, Beck. You might as well get prepared for it.”

I wanted to ask her about my feelings and why they didn’t seem to matter. But I already knew the answer. Dad was a member of Satan’s Fury, and his brothers and the club reigned supreme. For the most part, it wasn’t that bad. In fact, it was nice. We had a family who always looked out for one another,

But when you grow up with a massive crush on Dad’s best friend’s son, and he doesn’t even know you are alive, it tends to make you feel insecure and guarded. The whole thing was humiliating. I didn’t want him or anyone else to know that he’d broken my heart, so I feigned a smile and pretended all was right in the world. No one seemed to notice that it was all a ruse.

Not my parents.

Not my friends.

No one.

So, when I got the opportunity to get out, I did.

I went off to college and made a new life for myself. All was going well until I discovered I was pregnant. It was a time when I should’ve wanted to turn to my family and friends, but that was the last thing I wanted to do. I didn’t want them to know anything about me.

But once Ava started to get older, she started to ask questions about her family and

why none of them lived nearby. That's when I realized that my past heartbreaks didn't have to be her heartbreaks, and I decided to move back home. I felt good about my decision until Torch walked in.

Our little exchange made me realize just how hard this whole thing was going to be, and I wasn't sure I was prepared for it. I wasn't sure my folks were either, so I went down the hall to ask them their thoughts. But when I got to Ava's room, Dad was on the floor with his legs in the air, and Ava was propped up on his feet, zooming through the air like an airplane.

"You're going to throw your back out doing that."

"I'm fine," Dad argued. "Besides, she's light as a feather."

"If you say so." I walked over and sat on the edge of the bed with Mom. "Did you take care of the spider?"

"We sure did, and it was a good thing I was here." Ava giggled as Dad lifted her up even higher. "He was a nasty little booger."

I laughed as I told him, "I don't know what we would've done without you."

"Me either. It's a good thing Torch lives so close." Dad lowered Ava to the floor and pulled himself up. "Something like that comes up and I'm not around, you can just get him to give you a hand."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, looking back and forth between him and Mom.

"He lives right next door."



“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I gasped. “ Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I just did.” He and Mom took hold of Ava’s hands and led her towards the door.

“Sucks when people don’t tell you stuff, huh?”

Mom gave me a knowing look as they walked out of the room. Feeling as if the rug had just been ripped from under my feet, I sat back on the bed with a sigh. Damn. Karma can be a real pain in the ass.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:25 am*

Torch

“What’s up with the truck?”

“Alternator is flaking. Figured I’d swap it out before it gave out on me.”

“You need a hand?”

“No, I got it.”

The clang of metal on metal echoed through the driveway as I tightened the bolts under the hood of my SUV. It was freezing out, and my fingertips were growing numb. I wasn’t paying attention, and the wrench slipped, skinning my knuckles. I clenched my jaw at the sting and grumbled, “Dammit.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself.” Savage leaned back on his heels and smirked. “You gonna tell me what’s crawled up your ass today, or do I have to keep guessing?”

I ignored him, going back to work on the bolts.

I kept twisting, but my grip was too tight, and I nearly stripped the damn thing. “Not in the mood, Savage.”

“Yeah, no kidding. You’ve been beating on this damn thing like there’s no tomorrow.”

He wasn't wrong. I'd been at this all day, trying to outrun thoughts that had been running through my head, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop thinking about Beck. She resembled the girl I knew seven years ago. She had the same dark hair and light freckles dappled across the bridge of her nose, but now, she was all woman with an hour-glass figure and lips that begged to be kissed.

I was just as attracted to her now as I was back then, and it pissed me the hell off. I tossed the wrench onto the ground as I snapped, "Everything's just fine."

"Clearly."

Savage crossed his arms and gave me that look—the one that said he wasn't buying a damn word of it. I leaned against the front end of my truck and sighed, trying my best to shake off the tension that was crawling up my spine. Didn't matter how many times I tried; I just couldn't shake it.

Savage took a pull from his cigarette as he gave me the once over and waited for me to spill. It took a minute, but I eventually asked, "Did you know she was moving back?"

"Who?"

"Beck."

"Yeah, I heard Dad mention it, but I got the feeling it would be after the holidays." He cocked his brow. "I take it that's not the case."

"Nope. She's back and get this..." I motioned my head over to the little white house next door. "She's my new neighbor."

"No shit?"

“Nooo shit.” I glanced down at his cigarette as I asked, “Got a spare?”

Without a word, he grabbed the pack from his cut and pulled one out, offering it to me. I lit it, then took a long drag, letting the nicotine work through the knot in my chest.

“Have you talked to her?”

“Not exactly. I helped Big move in her sofa, but neither of us had much to say.”

Beck and I grew up together. We all did—Savage, Lexie, Darby, Susana, Mia, and Chance were all part of the crew. Beck and Lexie were younger, but they did their best to keep up.

Beck managed a bit better than Lex. She was a bit of a tomboy and didn’t let anything slow her down. I liked that about her. There was a lot I liked about her. She was beautiful and smart, and she had something to say about everything.

But as we grew older, Beck started looking and acting less and less like a tomboy and more like my next girlfriend—only that couldn’t happen. She was too young for me, so I kept my interest in her to myself and waited for her to grow up a bit. And then, she went off to college and never came back.

Savage was one of the few who knew how everything had gone down, so it was no surprise when he pushed, “So, what are you going to do?”

“Hell, if I know.”

“There are things that need to be said.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Then, go talk to her.”

The words had barely left his mouth when our attention was drawn over to Beck’s house. The front door had swung open, and Ava came tearing outside. Her little legs were moving like there was no tomorrow, and her curls were bouncing with every step. She made a beeline for the mailbox and yanked the door open.

She eased up on her tiptoes and reached inside. Her small hand rifled around for a bit, and disappointment marked her face when there was no mail to be found. She closed the door, and when she started back up to the house, she spotted us watching her. A soft smile crossed her face as she lifted her hand and waved, then darted back inside the house, slamming the door behind her. I looked back over to Savage and scoffed, “Oh, and did I mention that she’s got a kid?”

“Whoa, wait... That was her kid?”

“Yep. Apparently, her name is Ava.”

“You gotta be shittin’ me.” Savage’s eyes darkened. “How the hell did we not know that?”

“No clue. She and Big kept it from all of us, I guess.”

“But this is Fury. We don’t keep secrets, and Big knows that better than anyone.”

“Big had his reasons for keeping quiet—just like she did.” I dragged a hand over my face, frustration burning through me. “I just don’t have any idea what those reasons could be.”

“Only one way you’re gonna find out.”

“Yeah, I know.” I crushed the cigarette beneath my boot. “I just gotta figure out what I’m gonna say to her. Hell, maybe it’s best that I don’t say anything at all.”

“Nah, man. You two need to have a conversation. Besides, something tells me you aren’t going to be the only one who’s gonna be wondering what was going on with her.”

“True, and you’re right. We do need to have a conversation, but right now, my focus needs to be on the club and this whole diamond thing with Maltese.”

“Speaking of which, I gotta get going. Maverick and Wrath are expecting me.”

“Alright. I’ll see you over at the clubhouse.” As he started towards his bike, he shouted, “Best hurry with that alternator. You’ve only got two hours until church!”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll get it.”

Once he was gone, I got back to work on the alternator. I tried to keep my focus, but I couldn’t stop thinking about our earlier meet with Maltese. A sense of dread washed over me when I thought about the tone of his voice as he spoke. It was cold and calculated, and he had an air about him—like he thought he was better than us. And I didn’t like it.

I didn’t like it one fucking bit.

In fact, I didn’t like any part of that fucking meet, including when he said, “Those antiques I mentioned before aren’t just antiques.”

“Yeah, we gathered. So, what’s the deal?”

“They’re moving diamonds. And not just any diamonds. These are precut and worth

millions, and we want them. And we want your help getting them.”

The room went dead silent.

This was no longer about petty smuggling or territorial disputes.

We were talking about something that could get a lot of people killed, including us. Normally, we wouldn’t have a conversation like this in the bar. It didn’t have the security that the conference room had, but Big and Bones made sure the entire place was locked down like a fucking vault. No one could see or hear anything we didn’t want them to.

With that in mind, I looked to Dad as I snapped, “Holy shit. Is this guy serious?”

“Oh, I couldn’t be more serious.”

Dad leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. “So, you want us to put our necks on the line while you sit back and reap the reward? You’ve got the wrong fucking club, because that shit’s not gonna happen.”

“No, you don’t understand... This would be a joint venture.”

Dad glanced over at Cotton, and suspicion was etched into every line of his face. Cotton had led the club for years and had recently taken on an entirely new role as Bruton’s successor—a once influential tradesman with powerful connections who found himself at the wrong end of a shotgun barrel.

His death opened an opportunity, and Cotton took it. Since then, he’d crossed paths with some very treacherous people—including the cartel. He knew there was something off with all this. We all did.

Dad turned back to Maltese as he asked, "A joint venture, huh?"

"Of course. We wouldn't expect you boys to take this on alone. We would combine our resources and find the best way to get our hands on the goods."

"And if we manage to get the goods?"

Maltese kept his voice low and steady as he answered, "You'll get a significant cut—one that would make your troubles worthwhile."

I could see the wheels turning in Prez's head. He was weighing the risks and rewards, and things weren't balancing out. I could tell that he was about to tell Maltese to fuck off, and he saw it, too. Noting the look of doubt in Prez's eyes, Maltese added, "We both stand to gain a lot from this venture."

Trust was a rare commodity in our line of work, and while Maltese said all the right things, he worked for the cartel. That alone made him untrustworthy. Prez knew that. We all knew that, and we were all waiting for him to tell him to fuck off. Instead, he said, "We'll think it over and get back to you."

Maltese nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I look forward to hearing from you."

After Maltese left, Dad ordered us all to go home while he and the other officers mulled things over with Cotton.

The time had come for us to see what they'd decided.

When I pulled up at the clubhouse, Savage and several of the others had already started gathering in the conference room, and they all looked pretty tense. I felt the same. Swiping diamonds from another cartel was risky, even for us. There were too



many moving pieces—too many ways for it to go wrong.

I didn't like it, and I had a feeling Dad wasn't thrilled either, but we had to hear him out. Business demanded it. I took my seat at the table, and the silence in the room was deafening. I glanced around the room and caught a few wary eyes. Seemed there were several who were just as concerned as me. Curious to know what he was thinking, I leaned over to Rooster and asked, "Whatcha thinking?"

"That this guy should go smoke a dog-turd in hell," he scoffed. "I don't wanna get tied up with these guys. I just hope your father agrees."

"Me too."

Dad had only been president for a few months, but he'd proven himself as sergeant-at-arms—and even before, when he was just a brother. The brothers knew that he could follow in Cotton's footsteps with little struggle, and he had. In just a short time, he'd made some tough calls that left us standing even stronger, and I had no doubt that today would be no different.

His face was set in stone as he entered the room. He walked straight to the head of the table and stood there for several moments, weighing his thoughts before speaking. When he met my eyes, I felt the weight of everything he carried—the club, the men, our lives, and our futures.

He looked over to Savage and Wrath, then back to us before announcing, "We're passing on the offer."

His voice was hard and final, leaving no room for questions, and I couldn't have been more relieved. And I wasn't the only one. Stitch leaned back in his seat and sighed, "Well, Merry Christmas to me."

“Ah, come on, brother.” Wrath smirked. “You didn’t really think we were going for it, did you?”

“You guys were pretty convincing.” We could all hear the pride in Stitch’s voice as he added, “But I know why you did what you did, and it was a smart move. Last thing we need is some smug cartel thinking we snubbed our noses at ‘em.”

“Exactly.” Dad cleared his throat before saying, “Besides, Cotton has some possible opportunities for us to discuss after the holidays.”

A few nods and murmurs of agreement circled the table. Maltese wasn’t going to be happy, but the decision wasn’t up for debate. It was the only call that made sense. Dad collected his things and announced, “Meeting adjourned.”

We all stood, and one by one, we started to filter out of the room. As we started for the parking lot, Rooster let out a breath. “He had me worried there for a minute.”

“You and me both.”

“Where you headed?”

“Back to the house,” I answered. “I’ve gotta finish some work on my truck. What about you?”

“Meeting Maggie and the kids for dinner. Hoping I can talk ‘em into going for burgers instead of pizza. I love Dano’s, but it seems like it’s all we eat anymore.”

“I get it, but I gotta say, it’s hard to beat Dano’s, brother.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s what they keep saying.” He chuckled, then kicked his leg over the seat of his bike. “Catch ya later.”

I continued over to my bike and followed him out the front gate. With the Maltese situation out of the way, I was ready to get home and settle in for the night. I eased out onto the main drag, and it wasn't long before I was engulfed in darkness.

I always loved a night ride. It was one of the best ways to clear my head, but tonight, it barely made a dent. No matter how fast I drove or how many hard curves I leaned into, my mind kept drifting back to Beck. She'd been gone for so long, and I was still finding it hard to believe she was back.

I could still remember the day she left. It was mid-August—a time when the days were long and hot, and the nights were cool and filled with endless possibilities. She came by the clubhouse to tell everyone goodbye. Her bags were loaded up in the back of her little SUV, and she looked happy—really happy.

We hugged, and I told her to make us proud, never revealing how much I wanted her to stay. I stood there in the parking lot and watched as she drove away, all the while thinking that it wouldn't be long before she would be back.

But I was wrong.

Years passed, and life took us in different directions.

I heard bits about her here and there, but those bits became less and less frequent. I kept expecting her to come back home, but she never did—not until now. I didn't know what had taken her so long to find her way back home, but I had every intention of finding out.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:25 am*

Beck

“It’s really cold out, Ava. You need to put your coat and gloves back on.”

“What ‘bout you?”

“I’m working and got hot.”

“I got hot, too.”

“Ava, put on your coat,” I fussed.

I could tell by the look on her face that she wanted to protest, but I gave her a stern look, and she complied. And then, she was back to running circles around the yard. I was trying my damndest to put together her new playset, but I was struggling. I had bolts scattered around me, and I had no idea where they went. The instructions might as well have been written in Chinese, but I was determined to get it done.

"What’s this?" Ava asked, pointing to one of the metal bars.

"That’s one of the legs, baby." I kept working as I explained, "We’re gonna use it to keep the swing from tipping over."

“Okay.” She held her arms out and started running as if she was soaring through the clouds. "I’m gonna swing high! Like a birdie!"

I chuckled, tightening another bolt. "Okay, sweetie. I need you to come over here and

help me hold this part steady.”

She raced back over, little hands gripping the edge of a beam with all her might. I pretended to struggle a bit more than necessary just to see her eyes light up when I said, "Wow, you're strong!"

“I’m a good helper.”

“Yes, you are! I appreciate it very much.”

And just like that, she was off again, darting through the yard with endless energy. I sat back and watched her for a moment and seeing her so happy made my heart swell. She was so sweet and wonderful, and I couldn’t imagine my life without her. The thought had my mind drifting back to the night I told her father I was pregnant.

I was standing in the kitchen, and my hands were literally trembling as I handed him the pregnancy test. His eyes narrowed, and his voice was full of anger as he roared, “You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

“Afraid not.”

“But we were careful.”

“We weren’t careful enough.”

I was nineteen when I first started dating Trevor. We’d met in college, and we’d been dating for just over a year. He was handsome and smart, and he had an outgoing personality that drew people in. While he hadn’t completely stolen my heart, I cared a great deal about him and thought we had a pretty good thing.

I didn’t realize that I was completely wrong about him until the night I showed him

the pregnancy test I'd taken. He saw those two little red lines, then looked at me and said the words that broke my heart. "You gotta get rid of it."

"What?"

"Get rid of it, Beck."

"You can't be serious."

"Of course I am," he clipped. "We've got no way to support a kid. Neither of us have jobs or money coming in. Hell, I haven't even graduated yet. There's no way I'm gonna get tied down to some kid."

"It's not some kid. It's our kid."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Don't make this into something it's not, Beck." He glanced down at my abdomen, then repeated, "Just get rid of it, and let's forget this ever happened."

"And if I don't?"

"Then, we're done." His dark eyes grew even more intense. "I love you, Beck. You know that, but I'm not gonna piss my life away because we made some stupid mistake."

"I don't think this is a mistake. I think it's anything but."

"What? You're actually considering having it?"

"Yes, actually I am." I could feel my anger rising inside of me. "I know the timing isn't great, but that doesn't mean that..."

“You’re such an idiot.” He shook his head. “You’ve got no idea what it’s like to live in the real world.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“I mean it, Beck. I want no part of this.”

“Understood.”

He rolled his eyes and started out of the room. “Good luck. You’re gonna need it.”

He walked out, and that was it.

He came back for his things, but he stayed true to his word. He didn’t go to any of the prenatal appointments or help buy a single outfit, bottle, or bootie. But I didn’t expect anything less.

I was on my own , and I was okay with that. I had Ava, and that was all I needed. And I couldn’t help but smile when she ran over to me with wide, hopeful eyes and asked, “Are you almost done?”

“Not even close, sweetie. But it would go a little faster if you would help.”

“Okay.”

Ava dropped her doll and rushed over to me. I was struggling to secure one of the metal brackets, so I told her, “I just need you to hold this until I get the screw in place. You think you can do that?”

“Um-hmm.”

She nodded as she held it with determination. I started turning the screw, and it popped out and fell to the grass. I reached down and grabbed it, trying once more, but once again, it wouldn't go in. I was on the verge of giving up when I heard a familiar voice behind me. "Need a hand with that?"

I turned, and my stomach took a nosedive when I saw that it was Torch.

He'd always been handsome— very handsome , but now, he wasn't just a boy that I had a crush on. He was a man with big, broad shoulders, thick biceps, and the most beautiful green eyes I'd ever seen. He had this short, rugged beard and full, kissable lips, and his hair was tousled in this sexy way that made him look like he'd been out riding. And while it was impossible not to be attracted to him, I hadn't forgotten all those times he'd broken my heart as a kid.

It was that hurt that brought anger to my tone as I answered, "I've got it."

The words had barely left my mouth when I dropped that damn screw for the umpteenth time and couldn't help but mutter, " Dammit."

" You sure about that?"

"I said I've got it."

"Oh, come on, Beck." He stepped closer and pushed, "Stop being a stubborn ass and let me help."

"Fine."

He took the screwdriver from my hand, and without the slightest bit of trouble, he was able to get the screw to go in the bracket. Ava beamed up at him like he was a superhero while I wanted to punch him right in the gut.



He stepped back and looked at the part of the swing I'd managed to put together. He made a little grunt before looking down at all the pieces I'd laid out on the grass. "Got a lot to tackle here."

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Well, let's see if we can get this wrapped up." He gave Ava a wink. "'Cause I've got a feeling someone's ready to see how high they can swing."

"I am!"

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Torch reached down and picked up the next piece as he said, "Remember those old tire swings Stitch put up at the clubhouse?"

"Yeah, I remember them." I rolled my eyes. "I also remember you swinging with everyone but me."

"I swang with you."

"No, you didn't," I argued. "You wouldn't even push me."

"Seriously?" He shook his head. "I don't remember that."

"Well, I do, but it's not a big deal. I got used to it."

"Used to what?"

"You and the girls ignoring me and treating me like a dumb kid."

"You were six years younger than us."

“Oh, I know.” I held a piece in place as he screwed it in. “I was reminded of it all the time, especially when we got older.”

“I had my reasons for keeping my distance.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Okay, then why don’t you explain it to me?”

He studied me for a moment, then shook his head and grumbled, “Damn. You always were bullheaded.”

“How would you know?”

“Oh, I know. I’ve always known.”

He held my gaze for a moment, then got back to work on the swing. In no time, it went from looking like a pile of rubble to an actual swing set. As we worked, I couldn’t help but steal glances at him. It was hard to be so close to him. It brought back so many memories, but something felt different.

He felt different.

I stole another glance and noted the faint lines of concentration on his face. His hands were rough and calloused, and he worked with a steady precision that felt almost considerate.

It was unnerving.

This was the same man who'd broken my heart and made me swear I'd never look back. Yet here he was, crouched down beside me, guiding the final bolt into place.

When he caught me watching, he didn't smirk or throw some careless remark like he did back when we were kids. Instead, his eyes met mine—steady and kind, and he smiled as he said, “Almost done.”

“Yeah,” I murmured, looking away before he could see too much.

After a few more minutes, he had it all pieced together and took a step back to admire our work. “Not half bad.”

Ava sat down on one of the swings, and Torch gave her a little push. Her laugh was infectious as he pushed her higher and higher, and it wasn't long before Torch and I were laughing right along with her. “She's a cute kid.”

“Yeah, she is.”

“How old is she? Three? Four?”

“Four. Almost five.”

“Hmmm. So, you had her your junior year.”

“Yeah, that's about right.”

“And her dad?”

“I already told you.” I shrugged. “He's not in the picture.”

“But why? The guy fall off the planet or what?”

“He didn’t want to be tied down to a kid and chose to walk away.”

“So, you’ve been raising her all on your own?”

“I’ve had some help, but yeah. Pretty much.”

“I don’t get it.” His eyes narrowed. “Why didn’t you just come home?”

“I still had school.”

“And?”

Realizing that the conversation was going to a place I wasn’t ready to go, I nodded and said, “It’s getting cold. I should get her inside.”

“It’s been cold, and she doesn’t seem to mind.”

“I wanna swing, Momma.”

“I know you do, sweetie, but it’s getting late, and we need to get ready for dinner.”

“But Momma...”

“Best mind your momma. I wouldn’t want her to get mad at us.” Disappointment washed over Ava’s face when Torch stopped the swing and helped her down. He leaned over to me as he whispered, “Or she might not speak to us for the next six or seven years.”

“Torch.”

“I’ll leave you ladies to it.”

He turned and started for the back gate, but he didn't get far before Ava shouted, "Bye, Torch!"

"Bye, kiddo."

My heart felt heavy as I watched him disappear from our backyard and head over to his. I took hold of Ava's hand and led her back into the house. I'd hoped that she would get to swing again later, but the weather turned, and it started to snow. And then, it snowed some more. As much as I hated it for Ava, it gave me an opportunity to get some unpacking done.

I'd been at it for hours when I heard a knock at the door. When I glanced out the window, I was surprised to find my mother standing on the front porch. Over the years, I'd had friends from school and the occasional neighbor drop by unannounced, but never my mother. Ava was napping upstairs, so I cracked the door quietly.

"Hey, Mom." I forced a smile and stepped aside to let her in. "I didn't know you were coming by."

"I wasn't really planning on it, but I thought I'd swing by and see how my girls were doing." She took a quick glance around the living room and smiled. "Wow. You've been busy."

"I've still got a lot to do." I motioned my hand over at the boxes I still hadn't gotten around to unpacking. "But I have a week or so before I start my new job, so I should be able to get it all done."

She nodded, but the small talk faded fast. "So, you know Thanksgiving is in a couple of days."

"I'm aware."

I felt the old nerves rise—the ones that came whenever conversations turned back to the club, back to what I'd left behind. “Well, your father and I are hoping that you and Ava will join us for lunch over at the clubhouse.”

“I don't know, Mom. I'm not sure I'm ready for all that.”

“I know it won't be easy, but it would mean a lot to your father.” Her voice grew softer as she added, “You remember how much fun we used to have. Everyone would gather around, and there was always so much food. They had everything you could imagine... Turkey and stuffing, sweet potato casserole?—”

“—and Torch and Savage stealing all the pie before we'd even finished eating,” I added, surprising myself with a laugh. I'd tried to forget those years, but there were times when the good had a way of shining through the cracks.

“Exactly.” Mom giggled. “I know it's been a long time, but it would mean a lot to have you and Ava there with us.”

“I don't know, Mom.”

“It's time, Beck,” Mom pressed. “You're a part of this family, and you always will be. That's not going to change.”

Her words struck something deep in me that I'd buried a long time ago. I tried to forget the club and everyone in it, but they hadn't gone anywhere. They were still there, and they were still my family. And they were Ava's, too. She wanted to know them—needed to know them, and I didn't want to take that from her.

At the same time, I wasn't sure I was ready to face the past.

“Think about it,” she said softly. “Just think about it.”

She leaned in to kiss my cheek, then left as quickly as she'd come.

While she had certainly given me something to think about, I still wasn't sure I was ready for what Thanksgiving might bring with it.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:25 am*

Torch

“I can’t believe I burned the cranberry sauce.”

“It’s fine.” Dad walked over and kissed Mom on the cheek. “Everyone likes the canned stuff better.”

“They do not!”

“Yeah, babe. They do. They just don’t want to hurt your feelings.” Dad gave her arm a quick squeeze, then stepped back as he added, “Same goes for the pumpkin pie and roasted asparagus.”

“What!”

“I’m not gonna lie. The asparagus thing is a little gross.” Dad grimaced. “It’s a little slimy, and once it gets cold, it’s just ugh... nasty. And then, you try to reheat it, and it all goes downhill from there.”

“Logan!”

“Hey.” He held up his hands in surrender. “It’s not like you’re a bad cook. You’re phenomenal—even better than Cass, and that’s saying something. Hell, nobody can touch your corn pudding or your potato casserole. But your asparagus is a hard no.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve been taking it for years, and everyone loves it.”



Dad glanced over at me, and I knew he was about to throw me under the bus. “Are you gonna tell her or am I?”

“Oh, no. I’m not telling her shit. If you wanna go there, it’s all on you.”

“Pansy-ass.” Dad shook his head, then looked back to Mom and said, “We toss it every year.”

“What do you mean, you toss it?”

“We didn’t want you to get your feelings hurt.”

“I can’t believe this.” Mom turned to me with a mix of hurt and rage in her eyes. “And you were a part of this?” She brought her hand up to her chest. “My sweet, precious son. The son I carried and loved with all my heart and soul.” Her eyes narrowed, and her tone became hostile as she continued, “A child that was six days late and weighed over ten pounds with a head the size of a bowling ball! You were a part of this!”

“Ah, Ma. Come on, now. You know it wasn’t like that. We were just looking out for you.”

“Well, don’t do me any favors.” She grabbed the aluminum foil and started wrapping her asparagus. “I’m taking this today, and you two keep your mitts off it. You’ll see. By the end of the night, this dish will be gone. Just wait and see.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“I’ll never bring it again.”

“Deal.” Dad glanced up at the clock, then said, “It’s about that time. We should get

going.”

“Who’s all coming today?” I asked.

“Mostly just the brothers and the ol’ ladies. Most of the kids are off doing their own thing.”

“Like what?”

“Well, your sister is with Casey and Addie on their ski trip, and Darby and Susana are spending the holiday with their new boyfriends,” Mom answered. “But Lauren and Flynn are coming, and I’m pretty sure Beck and Ava are coming.”

“Beck and Ava, huh?” I watched as my mother braced herself when I asked, “How come you don’t sound at all surprised that she’s coming or that she has a daughter?”

“Because we aren’t surprised,” Dad answered. “We’ve always known.”

“And you didn’t think to mention it to me?”

“It wasn’t our place to tell. Besides, I didn’t think you’d care.”

“Didn’t think I’d care?” I roared louder than I’d intended. “Why wouldn’t I care?”

“Because you two have never been all that close. I didn’t figure you had any interest in her.”

“I knew you liked her,” Mom admitted. “It wasn’t until she was about to leave for college, but I saw the way you looked at her. I just never understood why you didn’t tell her.”

“Because she was too young.”

“That’s no excuse. You knew how that poor girl felt about you, and you just let her leave without saying a word.”

“What was I supposed to say? Don’t go. I think I have feelings for you.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“No. You were right to leave it alone,” Dad disagreed. “You both were young and had a lot of growing up to do. You’ve done that. Now, you can see if there was something really there or if it was just kids being kids.”

“He’s right.” Mom stepped over to me and placed her hand on my shoulder. “This could be a good thing.”

“Maybe, but I still can’t believe you didn’t say anything. It’s not like I didn’t ask about her.”

“I know, but Big and Josie asked us not to say anything.”

“But why?”

“Because Beck didn’t want anyone to know.” Dad shrugged. “If you want to know any more than that, you’ll have to ask her.”

Dad gave me a pat on the back, then grabbed Mom’s dishes and headed out the door. Mom and I followed him outside, and I followed them over to the clubhouse. When we pulled in, Rooster and Maggie were unloading all the food they’d brought, and Samantha and Nathan were helping them carry it inside.

I got off my bike and started over to them as I said, “Damn, brother. You feedin’ an army with all that.”

“Just trying to cover all my bases with all these picky eaters.”

“Understood.”

I held the door open and waited as they all streamed inside. Mom, Dad, and I followed them down to the family room. When we walked in, we were all amazed by all the hard work the women had done to the clubhouse. It was usually rugged with little to no décor, but the ladies had gone all out and had every inch of the place decorated for our Thanksgiving meal.

Dad turned to Mom and smiled, “You did good.”

“It wasn’t just me. Everyone helped.”

“Well, you outdid yourselves.”

He was right. It was really something. There were flowers on every table and twinkling lights strung from wall to wall. And the tables were overloaded with food. There was an enormous turkey, a honey ham and a country ham, endless casseroles, and countless pies. They had every dish you could imagine and then some.

Dad and I stood in the doorway and watched as Mom walked over and added her dishes to the table. She glanced over at us as she placed her asparagus in the center of the vegetables. Dad smiled, and as soon as she looked away, he leaned over to me and whispered, “You know we’re still gonna have to toss it, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“That’s my boy.” He lingered for a moment, then sighed, “About the Beck thing...”

“It’s fine. I get it.”

“Not sure that you do.” He gave me one of his looks. “Big isn’t one to ask favors, but he asked me to keep the thing with Beck between us. I owed it to him to keep it under wraps.”

“I would’ve done the same.”

He gave me a nod, and it wasn’t long before the guys started to gather around the table. Dad gave me a nudge and said, “You better grab a plate before all the good stuff gets gone.”

“I will in a minute.”

I watched as he walked over and stood next to Mom, and they both took their place in line. The room became filled with a mix of laughter, clinking glasses, and stories being told for the hundredth time. I’d heard them all before, so I stayed put and waited for the line to die down. I took a quick glance around the room, and my chest tightened when I spotted Beck in the back corner.

She was talking with Lauren, Mia, and London, and her head was thrown back, laughing at something one of them had said. For a second, it was like nothing had changed—like it hadn’t been seven damn years since she’d stepped foot in here. I felt a knot form in my throat, tight and unyielding.

I’d told myself I wouldn’t let this whole thing get to me but seeing her like that—her guard down and her eyes so bright—hit harder than I expected. I couldn’t seem to tear my eyes away from her or Ava. She was perched on the edge of her mother’s chair, soaking in everything the girls were saying. She had her mother’s spark, and

seeing her smiling and hanging onto their every word made something twist in my chest.

Beck leaned in and whispered something that made the other women burst into laughter. They were all still giggling when she caught me watching her from across the room. She held my gaze, and for a beat, everything else faded. There was a questioning look in her eye, maybe even a little wary—but then she smiled. It was small, but it was enough to make the knot in my throat tighten even more.

I took a long swig of my beer, trying to swallow the emotion building inside me. Seven years was a long time, but for a moment, it felt like no time at all. It felt like something I'd been waiting for, and now, it was finally here.

I was lost in my world of thoughts until I felt a pat on my shoulder, and Rooster said, "You better get to it, brother. The good stuff is about gone."

"On it."

I headed over and made myself a plate, then made my way over to the table and sat down next to Dad and Stitch. I took a bite of mashed potatoes, and they were incredible. That's all it took for me to dive in. I finished my plate and went back for another. I filled my plate high before heading back to the table.

Once I finished it off, I leaned back in my chair and let out a satisfied sigh. I couldn't remember when I'd been so full, but I wasn't quite done. I still needed to decide on a dessert. I was trying to decide between Cass's pecan pie and Wren's banana pudding when I noticed that Beck was no longer in the room. She had been sitting a few chairs down from me, and Ava was tucked in right beside her.

But now, Ava was coloring over at the kids table, and there was no sign of Beck. I glanced around the room, making sure I hadn't missed her, but she was nowhere in

sight.

I gave it a minute, then leaned over to Dad and asked, “You seen Beck?”

“She was here a minute ago.”

“Yeah, I know. Just wondering if something’s up.”

“Probably nothing.”

I nodded, then took another glance around the room, searching for any sign of her. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong, so I eased my chair back and made my way out of the dining area. I started down the hall, and it wasn’t long before I spotted her leaning against the wall with her arms crossed tightly over her chest and her head bent low. Her shoulders shook, and I realized she was crying.

“Hey?” I whispered softly, not wanting to startle her. “You okay?”

She flinched anyway, quickly wiping at her cheeks and turning toward me. “Oh, hey. I didn’t hear you coming.”

“I didn’t figure you did.” I stepped closer, keeping my voice low. “Something wrong?”

“No, everything’s great,” she said quickly, but her red-rimmed eyes told a different story. “I just needed a minute.”

I didn’t respond.

I just gave her a look, letting her know that I wasn’t buying that nothing was wrong. After a few seconds, she let out a long sigh and admitted, “It’s just a lot. I thought

things would be different... I thought everyone would treat me like an outsider or like I was just a joke and wasn't wanted, but it hasn't been that way at all. Everyone's been wonderful."

"I don't get why you'd think they wouldn't be."

"I don't know. I just got it in my head that..." She glanced up at me for a split second, then immediately looked away. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

"It does matter," I pushed. "Tell me."

"Everyone always saw me as the dumb kid who drooled over you like a love-sick puppy, and they couldn't have cared less about me or what I was doing. I looked like a fool. Then, I go off to college to prove myself but end up getting pregnant by the absolute worst jerk-face on the planet. It was humiliating. I didn't want anyone to know, so I stayed gone and didn't tell anyone what had happened. And I honestly didn't think anyone would notice one way or another."

"That's a lot to unpack there."

"Yeah, I know." Her back stiffened as she wiped the last of her tears away. "I was wrong about them... It makes me wonder what else I've been wrong about."



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:25 am*

Beck

“I know of at least one thing you were wrong about.”

“Well, add it to the list.”

“I’m serious, Beck.”

“Okay, then what else have I been wrong about?”

“Feeling the need to prove yourself, for one. We all knew how smart and determined you were. There was no doubt that you were going to go off and do big things.”

“I don’t know about all that.”

“Well, I do. You’re amazing. You always have been.”

There was something about Torch’s expression that made me think that he was being completely sincere, and I had no idea how to take it. I could only stand there and listen as he continued, “And as far as the whole getting pregnant goes, it brought you Ava, and there is no reason to ever be embarrassed about her. She’s an amazing kid.”

“Yes, she is, and I never meant to imply otherwise. She’s my whole world. It was just a lot to take on back then, and I just didn’t want...” The lump in my throat started to choke me up as I tried to say, “I just didn’t want everyone to think I’d messed up again and chose the wrong guy again.”

“So, you let your pride get in the way.”

"Maybe." I looked up at him and shrugged. "Yes. Yes, I did."

“You were wrong about something else, you know?”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“I did care. I cared a hell of a lot. Still do.”

The seriousness of his tone and that longing look in his eyes caught me off-guard. I’d never thought he’d even noticed me, much less cared about me or what I was doing. The realization brought butterflies to my stomach, and they were doing a real number on me.

I needed to respond. I needed to say something, but I couldn’t think. I couldn’t speak. I just stood there, locked in my own prison of thoughts, as I stared at his mouth—which took my mind to a place it had no business going.

It took me a moment, but I finally managed to say, “I had no idea.”

“Didn’t figure you did.” He held my gaze as he said, “I just need to know one thing.”

“Okay? What?”

“Do you still feel the same?”

“What?”

“It’s a simple question, Beck. Do you or don’t you?”

I had no idea how to answer him, so I said, “It’s been seven years, Thomas.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“Yes, you do. Now, say it.”

“Fine, my feelings for you have never changed.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard.”

He stepped closer and reached for my waist, gently pulling me towards him. He held me tightly against his chest, the warmth of his body surrounding me, and I found myself longing for more. He brought the palm of his hand to the side of my face, gently brushing his thumb across my cheek. “I should’ve told you. I thought I was doing the right thing, but now... I’m not going to make that same mistake again.”

He slowly lowered his lips to mine, kissing me tenderly. At first, his touch was soft and gentle, but it quickly changed to something more. A deep growl vibrated through his chest while his fingers tangled tightly in the back of my hair, pulling me closer as he took complete control of the kiss.

His tongue brushed against mine, and the world around us melted away as we got lost in each other’s arms. There was no doubt that we had chemistry. I could feel it pulsing through me as he kissed me long and hard, and his possessive hold on me had me eager for more. Without warning, he pulled back, looking at me with an expression I didn’t quite understand.

“Momma,” Ava called out, and we both froze.

And just like that, it felt like a bucket of cold water had been poured over me as I turned and spotted her at the end of the hall. Her little cheeks were red, and her eyes were puffy like she'd been crying. Thomas took a step back, giving me room to rush over to her. "Hey, sweetie. What's wrong?"

"My tummy hurts," she whined.

"Did you eat too much?"

She shook her head no, then buried her face in my chest and whimpered. Torch stepped closer, his expression softening in a way I didn't see often. "She okay?"

"I don't know." I shook my head, worry tightening my chest. "She was fine earlier."

"Maybe it's something she ate."

"Maybe."

Torch placed his palm on her forehead and grimaced. "She's burning up."

"Oh, man. I should get her home."

"I'll drive." Torch said firmly, already holding his hand out for my keys.

"You don't have to do that."

"It's not like it's out of my way, Beck." He gave me a look that shut down any argument. "Now, give me the keys."

With Ava whimpering in my arms, I didn't have the energy to argue. I reached into my back pocket and grabbed my key fob, then handed it over to Torch. I followed

him out to the car, and he opened the back door for me. Ava was still clinging to me as I secured her into her car seat. I slid in next to her while Torch climbed into the driver's seat.

I sent a quick text to Mom and Dad, letting them know that Ava wasn't feeling well, and we were heading home. By the time I was done, Torch had adjusted the driver's seat and had started the engine.

The ride was quiet except for Ava's soft sniffles and whines, and my whispered reassurances. Torch glanced at us in the rearview mirror, and his brows furrowed in concern. "You two okay back there?"

"Yeah." I brushed the hair from Ava's eyes and couldn't help but notice that she looked a little pale. "But I'm not sure for how long."

"Okay. We're almost there."

When we got to my place, Torch parked and was out of the car before I could even reach for the door handle. He helped me out, then reached down and scooped Ava up like she weighed nothing. As he started for the door, he looked down at me and asked, "Where do you want her?"

"Let's try the sofa," I answered softly, watching how carefully he carried her inside.

He nodded, and once I'd unlocked the door, he carried her straight to the living room, setting her down gently on the sofa. I followed right behind him, grabbing her favorite blanket and tucking it around her. She blinked up at me, and she was on the brink of tears as she muttered, "I don't feel good."

"I know, baby." I knelt beside her as I said, "I'm going to go grab a few things to help you feel better, okay?"

Ava nodded, and I stood and started for the kitchen. I grabbed a washcloth from the cabinet and wet it before taking a large bowl from the cabinet. I carried everything into the living room, and I was getting Ava situated when Torch asked, “Need me to do anything?”

“Could you grab the child’s Pepto and Tylenol from the medicine cabinet in the bathroom?”

“You got it.” He darted off to the bathroom and returned a few seconds later with the medicine and a spoon. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

“This should make you feel better.” I gave Ava the medicine before placing the cold rag on her head. “There you go, sweetie.”

Ava curled into her blanket and closed her eyes as I ran my fingers through her hair. Torch stood in the doorway a moment, watching us before he asked, “Can I get you anything else?”

“No, I think we’re good.”

I thought some ginger ale might help settle her stomach, so I started back towards the kitchen. When I walked past him, Torch caught my arm gently and asked, “You sure?”

The genuine concern in his voice caught me off guard, and for a second, I didn’t know what to say. “Yeah, I’m sure. Thank you. I really appreciate you cutting your Thanksgiving short and bringing us home.”

He nodded and stepped back, letting me continue towards the kitchen. By the time I

got back, Ava was sound asleep, and there was no sign of Torch. I was a little disappointed that he'd left without saying goodbye. I was careful not to wake Ava as I made my way over to the other end of the sofa and sat down. It was the first moment I'd had to really think about my conversation with Torch or the kiss we'd shared.

I had waited for that kiss for almost half my life, and it did not disappoint. I brought my hand up and brushed my fingertips against my lips as I replayed the kiss in my mind. It was everything I'd ever imagined—soft but commanding, tender but full of heat—and it left me positively breathless. I'd tried so many times, but Torch had always been the one I couldn't quite shake. He was the one I measured every other man against, and none of them had ever brought butterflies to my stomach the way he did.

And now, after all these years, he'd finally kissed me.

I couldn't help but smile, even as a knot of uncertainty twisted in my stomach. I had no idea what that kiss had meant. It could've just been something he'd done on a whim, or it could've been something more. My mind was a battlefield of doubts and questions, but I couldn't stop my heart from clinging to the hope that this could be the start of something between us.

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, and a smile crossed my face as I dozed off. I hadn't been sleeping long when the sound of my front door creaking open woke me. My chest tightened as I looked up and found Torch standing in the doorway. He was carrying a container full of leftovers in one hand and a bottle of ginger ale in the other. His voice was soft as he said, "Didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't," I lied. "I was just resting."

He nodded, his gaze flicking over to Ava before settling back on me. "I brought you a

couple of desserts. I know how you love Cass's apple pie."

"You didn't have to do that," I murmured, the simple gesture making my chest ache.

"I know." His eyes held mine, and for a moment, the air between us felt heavy with unspoken words. "I wanted to."

He carried the food into the kitchen, and I could hear him open the fridge door and place them inside. Seconds later, he returned to the living room, and his eyes immediately fell on Ava. He looked concerned, so I told him, "She's been asleep since you left."

"I talked to Doc. He said to give him a call if you want him to come by."

"Oh, that would be great."

"Talked to your folks, too."

"Oh, man. I forgot to check back in with them."

"It's okay. I explained the situation, and your mom said she'd stop by later and check on you guys."

"Okay, good."

"Anything else I can do before I go?"

"You've already done plenty."

"Alright then. I guess I'll leave you to it." He motioned his head towards the kitchen as he said, "I left my number on the counter. If you need anything, give me a call."



“Okay. Thanks.” I motioned my head toward the kitchen. “And thanks for the desserts. It was really sweet of you.”

He nodded, then started for the door. I wanted to call out to him and ask him to stay, but I knew it wasn’t a good idea. I had no way of knowing just how sick Ava really was, and I didn’t want to take a chance on him getting sick, too—especially after how sweet he’d been to us both.

He’d barely stepped outside when Ava sat up and muttered, “Momma.”

I could tell by her expression that she was about to get sick, so I jumped up and grabbed the bowl. I started towards her, but I was too late. After she was finished, I took the blanket and soiled clothes and put them in the washer. Before I could get her changed, she got sick again, making another huge mess.

That became the trend over the remainder of the night, and by the following morning, I was exhausted. Thankfully, her tummy finally settled, and she spent the better part of the day curled up on the sofa watching her favorite movies. I thought we were on the uptrend until the following morning when I woke up feeling like I’d been hit by a freight train.

It started as a dull ache in my back.

I chalked it up to all the bending over while taking care of Ava and just kept going. But as the hours passed, that dull ache started to spread to my joints, and then the fever and chills started.

I was about to start dinner when a wave of nausea hit me so hard, I thought it was going to take me out. My skin felt clammy, my head pounding, and when I touched my forehead, it was burning up.

The timing couldn't have been worse.

I was supposed to start my new job in two days, and I just wanted to hide in my covers and die a slow, miserable death. I was considering doing just that when there was a knock at my door, and that's when my bad morning took an immediate turn.

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*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:25 am*

Torch

“Beck!”

I’d already knocked twice, but Beck hadn’t yet to answer.

I would’ve just left, but her car was in the driveway, and I hadn’t seen heads or tails of her since Ava got sick. Beck hadn’t called, but something about the silence didn’t sit right with me—especially after our conversation and that kiss.

It was all I could think about. I wasn’t sure if it was the kiss itself or the way she’d looked at me afterward, but I finally felt like I’d done something right. I wanted a chance to talk to her or, at the very least, see her, but she’d gone radio silent on me.

Concerned something might be wrong, I knocked a third time.

“Hey, Beck! You home?”

A few seconds passed before the door creaked open, and there she was—all wrapped in a blanket that looked about two sizes too big for her. Her hair was a wild mess, and she had a crumpled Kleenex pressed to her nose. Her cheeks were flushed, and not in a good way. The poor thing looked like she was having a time of it.

She cleared her throat with a grimace before muttering, “Hey.”

"Jesus, Beck. You look like hell."

“Gee, thanks,” she croaked. “Just the compliment I needed today.”

I ignored her sarcasm and reached out to brush a hand against her forehead. She tried to bat me away, but she was too slow. I placed my palm on her head and immediately felt the heat radiating off her skin. “You’re burning up.”

“I’m fine,” she lied, leaning heavily against the doorframe. “I just got a touch of what Ava had, and I...”

“Need to go to bed,” I cut her off, pushing past her into the house. “Where’s Ava?”

“She’s in her room,” Beck said, her voice softening as she pulled the blanket tighter around her. “She’s pretty much over it, but ...”

Beck’s face grew pale, and her eyes grew wide with panic. Before I could ask what was wrong, she turned and darted towards the bathroom. Seconds later, I heard her retching and then, the commode flush. I eased the door open, and when I found her hunched over the commode, I stepped over and pulled her hair back. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“Please go away...”

“Not happening.”

“I don’t want you seeing me like this,” she groaned—her words echoing in the commode.

“Too late for that.” I used my free hand to grab a clean washcloth and ran it under cold water. “I would’ve come sooner if I’d known you were sick.”

“Oh, God.” Her breathing became ragged, and it looked like she was on death’s door

as I placed the cold cloth against her forehead. “This is awful.”

“I know. Just give it a minute and see if it passes.”

“I can’t be sick.”

“Clearly, you can.”

“No... That’s not what I meant,” she groaned. “My job is about to start. I don’t have a tree yet, and all my decorations are piled up in the garage. I just don’t have time for this.”

“I hate to break it to you, but you don’t really have a choice in the matter. Now, stop your whining and just breathe for a bit.”

She let out a defeated sigh as she continued to hug the toilet. We stayed there a good while longer, and when the nausea seemed to pass, I asked her, “You think you could make it to the sofa?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

I helped her to her feet, and after she’d rinsed her mouth out, I led her down the hall to the living room. Once she was settled on the sofa, I pulled a another blanket over her. “Hold tight. I’m gonna go grab a few things.”

“It’s okay. I can call Mom and...”

“I’m already here. I’ve got it covered. Just give me a minute.”

To my surprise, she didn’t argue. Hell, she didn’t have the energy to. All she could do was just lay there and try not to pass out. I went into the kitchen and grabbed all the

things she'd used to help Ava, then carried them to her in the living room. When I placed the clean bowl on the coffee table, she cracked open one eye and muttered, "You need to go."

"You can stop with that. I'm not going anywhere." I placed the ginger ale and Pepto on the coffee table as I scolded, "You should've let someone know you were sick."

"I didn't want to be a bother."

"Don't give me that bullshit. You need me, then call. End of discussion."

"Hm-hmm."

"That's more like it. Now, get some rest. I'm gonna go check on Ava."

"Wait." She eased up on the sofa as she fussed, "No, I can?—"

"Beck," I cut her off, my voice firm. "You're not winning this one."

For a second, I thought she'd argue, but then she eased back on her pillow and let out a tired sigh. "Okay. But if she asks for me?—"

"I'll let you know," I said, softening my tone. "Now get some sleep."

I left the living room and went to find Ava. When I got to the end of the hall, I found her in her room, sitting on the floor. She looked up at me with narrowed eyes and asked, "Where's my momma?"

"She's not feeling good and went to lie down for a bit."

"Oh."

“I’m just checking to make sure you’re good.” She just sat there looking at me like I had three heads, so I asked, “Can I get you something?”

“I’m hungry.”

“Okay. I can scrounge you up something to eat. How about some eggs or some toast?”

Her nose crinkled with disapproval as she shook her head no.

“How about some cereal?”

Another shake of the head.

“A grilled cheese?”

With that, her eyes lit up, and she nodded with excitement.

“Okay. A grilled cheese it is.” I started to back out of the room but stopped when I thought back to how sick her mother had just been. “Are you sure you feel up for that with your tummy and all?”

“Hm-hmm. I want ‘em.”

“Okay, you got it.”

Ava followed me into the kitchen and climbed up on one of the kitchen stools. Her tiny legs swung back and forth as she watched me walk over and start searching through the cabinets. I sounded like a bull in a china shop as I fumbled through the pots and pans. I finally found the skillet and placed it on the stove before going over to the fridge for the cheese and butter.

I was about to turn on the stove when I realized I'd forgotten the bread. I stepped over to the pantry and grabbed a loaf from the second shelf before returning to the stove. I was about to get started when Ava muttered, "That's not right."

"What?"

She pointed to the loaf of bread and said, "That's not it."

"What do you mean?" I picked it up and looked at it. "Looks like bread to me."

"It has seeds."

"Seeds?" I had no idea what she was talking about, so I argued, "Kid, bread is bread."

"No." She shook her head like she was already over my incompetence. "In the fridge."

"The fridge? Why would bread be in the—never mind." I opened the door, and sure enough, there it was. I was starting to regret volunteering for this mission as I grumbled, "All right, we're back on track."

I started buttering the bread like a pro. The sizzle of butter hitting the hot surface felt like victory—until Ava wrinkled her nose and said, "You're supposed to use the green one."

"The green one? What's wrong with this one?"

"It's for pancakes."

She said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world, and I was a jackass for not knowing better. She reminded me of her mother back in the day—full of sass and



determination. I sighed and swapped out spatulas because arguing with a four-year-old wasn't a battle I cared to win. As I flipped the sandwich, she leaned her chin on her hands and gave me a serious look. "You think Santa will come?"

Surprised by the sudden shift in conversation, I looked over at her and asked, "Why wouldn't he?"

"We moved."

"And?"

"What if he can't find us?"

"Hey now," I said, crouching down to meet her eyes. "Santa can always find you. He's got magic powers and can find anyone—even you and your momma."

"Really?"

"Yep." I tapped her nose. "Santa will be here. Don't you worry about that."

The sandwich was done by then, and I slid it onto a plate, cutting it diagonally like Beck always did. Ava gave me an approving nod as I set it in front of her. She picked it up and took bite. After a few chews, she smiled, and it was like hitting the lottery. "You like it?"

"Hm-hmm."

"Good deal." I turned off the stove and put the skillet in the sink. "I'm going to go see about your momma. I'll be right back."

I walked into the living room and was surprised to find that Beck was no longer lying

on the sofa. Thinking that she might have gotten sick again, I went to check the bathroom. When I walked by her room, I was relieved to find that she was curled up in bed. Damn. I don't know how long I stood there staring at her, marveling at how beautiful she was.

Fighting the urge to crawl in next to her, I covered her up with the comforter and walked out of the room. I hated seeing her so sick and felt compelled to do something to make her feel better. And then it hit me.

There was something I could do, but it was risky. She'd either love it or absolutely hate it. There was only one way to find out.

It was time for me to call in a few favors...

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:25 am*

Beck

I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so bad. All I could do was lay in bed—half-awake/ half-asleep and cover my eyes with my arm, protecting my eyes from the light. I hated it. I wanted to get up and check on Ava, but the dull ache in my stomach and my pounding head kept me bound to the mattress.

I groaned as I rolled to my side, and I was trying to get comfortable when I heard a loud crash. It was immediately followed by a loud thud and then endless giggles. I could hear Torch's deep voice, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. There was more movement, rustling, and then Ava's excited squeals. I wanted to get up to see what was going on, but just lifting my head off the pillow felt like a monumental task.

Ava sounded happy, and that was all that mattered. Knowing Torch and hopefully my mother would keep an eye on her, I let out a sigh and let my head sink back into the pillow.

The sounds continued—laughter, shuffling, and what I swore was the unmistakable thunk thunk thunk of a hammer. I couldn't imagine what they were doing. I wanted to yell out and demand answers, but my throat was dry, and my body refused to cooperate.

So, I did the only thing I could.

I closed my eyes and prayed that my house would still be standing when I woke up.

The next morning, I felt a little less like death warmed over and more like myself. The house was quiet now, and that alone made me suspicious. I eased myself out of bed and wrapped myself in my comforter before shuffling down the hall.

I rounded the corner into the living room and stopped dead in my tracks when I finally saw what Torch and Ava had been up to.

There was a real Christmas tree in the corner with twinkling white lights adorned on every branch, and fresh pine garland was on the mantle with our stockings hanging beneath. They'd even put out the Christmas village I'd inherited from my grandmother.

Torch was on the couch with one arm slung over the back and one under Ava, who was curled up next to him. They were both fast asleep, and I couldn't help but smile as I stood there, taking it all in. It wasn't perfect—the tree was leaning a little, and some of my village was missing—but it was beautiful.

I was on the verge of tears when Torch opened his eyes and spotted me standing in the doorway. He sat up, rubbing the back of his neck like he'd slept wrong, and smiled. "Hey, what are you doing up?"

"What... what is all this?" I croaked, gesturing to the tree.

A sheepish grin spread across his face as he answered, "You said you needed to get your tree up, so... Ava picked it out herself. She also told me where to put everything."

"That sounds about right."

"Yeah, she's bossy like her mom, but she did good, don't you think?"

“Yes, she did great. You both did.” Tears filled my eyes as I whispered, “Torch, you really didn’t have to?—”

“I wanted to.” He nodded over to Ava. “She did, too.”

“Well, thank you,” I looked back at the tree and the messy, wonderful magic they’d created, and for the first time in days, I felt like all was right in the world. “It’s perfect.”

“Glad you think so.” Being careful not to wake Ava, he slipped his arm from beneath her and stood. “Why don’t you go take a hot shower, and I’ll scrounge us up some coffee.”

“Coffee sounds wonderful. Thanks.”

I turned and headed down the hall to the bathroom. I walked over and turned on the water, letting it warm while I got undressed. I took a quick glance in the mirror and cringed when I saw the dark circles under my eyes. This stomach bug had done a real number on me, but I hoped that I was over the worst of it. I stepped under the hot water, and my aching muscles felt an immediate relief.

I closed my eyes and thought back to seeing Ava nestled up next to Torch. She was clearly taken with him, and I couldn’t blame her. I was pretty taken with him myself. It was hard to believe that the man who’d spent so many years ignoring me was now so attentive and thoughtful. It made me wonder what had brought on the dramatic change.

It had taken a bit more effort than I expected to wash my hair and bathe, and I quickly became exhausted. I turned off the water and stepped into the cold air. I stood there a moment, hoping it might help shake the cobwebs, but no such luck.

I wrapped myself in a towel and shuffled to my dresser, grabbing the first pair of sweats I could find. Combing through my wet hair felt like a workout, so I gave up halfway and left it to dry however it wanted. I sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to catch my breath before heading to the kitchen.

The faint smell of coffee drew me in like a lifeline, and I couldn't wait to take that first sip. When I walked into the kitchen, Torch was leaning against the counter with his mug in hand, and he looked far too handsome for a man who'd spent his night sleeping on the sofa.

He watched as I entered the kitchen, and it didn't take long for his brows to furrow and for him to demand, "Sit. I'll get your coffee."

"I'm fine."

"Sit."

I considered arguing, but he was already on his way over to the coffee pot. I walked over to the counter and sat down on one of the stools. "Where's Ava?"

"Still sleeping on the sofa."

"I'm not surprised. You two had a long night."

"Yes, we did." He poured the coffee as he asked, "Sugar and cream?"

"Yes, please." I motioned my head towards the fridge. "The creamer is in the side door."

"Got it."

He added the sugar and creamer, then brought the cup over to me. I took it from his hand and immediately took a sip. "Perfect."

"You up for eating a bite?"

"No. Not just yet." I placed my palm on my stomach. "I'm still a little queasy."

"Yeah, I can tell," he chuckled. "You're still a little green around the edges."

"Gee, thanks. I'll remember that the next time you catch the flu."

Before he could fire back, the front door creaked open, and my mom's voice rang out.

"Beck? "

"In the kitchen."

Seconds later, I heard my mother gasp, and then silence. She must've spotted Ava sleeping on the sofa and didn't want to wake her. After a few moments, she appeared in the kitchen with wide eyes and a confused expression. "How in the world?"

"Torch." I glanced at Torch, who just shrugged like it was no big deal. "He and Ava spent most of the night putting everything up."

"Is that right?" Her eyes narrowed slightly as she looked at Torch, then back at me.

"Well, it looks beautiful."

"Yes, it does," I said, cutting her off before she could launch into a critique of everything they'd done. "So, what are you doing here?"

"I came to check on you, of course." She waved a hand dismissively. "You sounded awful last night, and you still look like you don't feel well."

“That’s because I don’t.”

“Then, get back in bed.”

“I will in a...,” I started, but she gave me a look —the one that could wither you into submission with a single raised eyebrow.

“Bed,” she said firmly. Then she turned to Torch. “And you—thank you for everything you’ve done. It was really sweet of you to take care of my girls.”

“No problem.” Torch stood, and his lips twitched with amusement as he glanced over at me. “Looks like you're finally getting rid of me.”

“You don’t have to go.”

“I do, but I’ll be back later to see how you’re doing.” He gave me a wink, then said, “See you ladies later.”

With that, he was out the door, leaving me alone with Mom’s no-nonsense glare. “What was that all about?”

“I have no idea.”

“I’ve always known that boy had a thing for you.”

“What?”

“It’s true.” She walked over and poured herself some coffee. “He was crazy about you, and it was rough on him when you left.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”



“I tried, but you wouldn’t listen. You would just say it was all in my head.”

She was right. She had tried to tell me, but I never believed her—now, I wasn’t so sure. “You really think...”

“I do, but that’s a conversation for later. You need to get some rest.”

“But...”

“Bed, Rebecca,” she fussed. “You’ve got a busy week coming up, and you need to be at your best.”

“Okay. Okay.” I sighed, pushing myself out of the chair. “Ava needs a bath and some breakfast.”

“I’ve got it covered,” she said, giving me a small, satisfied smile before shooing me toward my room. “Now, go get some rest.”

I did as my mother insisted and crawled back into bed, but I didn’t rest. I couldn’t. I was too busy thinking about Torch and everything he’d done over the past few days. And I couldn’t help but wonder if my mother was right. Maybe he really did have feelings for me. It was a thought that had me smiling as I drifted off to sleep.

The next day, I woke up feeling more like myself. I’d finally shaken off the lingering fatigue and made it to my first day of work. It was mostly training and paperwork, but it felt good to be back to my old self. I’d even managed to make dinner. It wasn’t anything fancy, just spaghetti and garlic bread, but it was progress.

I’d just started to clean up when I heard the familiar rumble of Torch’s bike pulling up. Butterflies erupted in the pit of my stomach as I wiped my hands and stepped out onto the porch. The crisp evening air nipped at my skin, but I barely noticed as I

watched him climb off his bike and make his way toward me.

His eyes caught mine, and I couldn't help but smile when he stepped up to the porch.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Looks like you're feeling better."

"I am."

His eyes skirted down to my purple scrubs as he said, "How was the first day?"

"Pretty good, actually."

"Good. Glad to hear it."

"I wanted to thank you again for the last couple of days. I really appreciate everything you did."

"You don't have to keep thanking me, Beck. I wanted to do it." His eyes grew intense as he admitted, "Besides, it gave me an excuse to spend some time with you."

"Didn't realize you needed an excuse."

I glanced up at him, seeing the longing look in his eyes, and my pulse pounded harder, roaring in my ears as I waited for him to take that last step.

And then it happened.

He was standing in front of me, so close I could feel the heat of his breath against my

flesh. My eyes drifted down to his perfect, round lips. Unable to stop myself, I leaned into him and pressed my mouth against his. His arms immediately wrapped around my waist, pulling me closer to him.

A light moan vibrated through my chest as his tongue gently ran across my bottom lip. I couldn't hide my attraction to him any longer, not from him, not from myself. His hands slowly reached up to the sides of my face as I opened my mouth to him.

The kiss became demanding, sending an involuntary shudder down my spine. This man had consumed my thoughts, my dreams, my very existence for weeks, and now, in this moment, he was consuming my heart.

His scent, his touch, the heat of his body next to mine. I wanted all of him. My hands roamed across his broad chest, feeling his muscles tighten as he continued to claim me with his mouth. I wanted to remember everything about this moment.

The feel of his hands against my body. The taste of him against my tongue. Every minuscule detail about this moment would be locked away forever in my memory. Without me even realizing it, Thomas had claimed my heart, and I couldn't help but wonder what he would do with it.

With my back pressed against the wall, he pulled back, releasing me from our embrace, and said, "I'm taking you out on a date."

"What?"

"A date. Something I should've done a lifetime ago," he repeated, taking a step back. "Call your mom and see if they can keep an eye on Ava."

"Okay."

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow at seven.”

With that, he flashed me a quick smile and left, leaving me wondering what he had planned with this date of ours. Because I had plans of my own.

Torch

“Woah.” Q took a step back and grinned. “Where you runnin’ off to?”

“Nowhere.”

“Come on, now.” Savage gave me the once over, checking out my freshly ironed shirt and new jeans before saying, “We both know that’s not true.”

“I’m going to pick up Beck.”

“No shit?” A smirk crossed his face as he teased, “You two going on a hot date?”

“You could say that.”

“Seriously.” His smirk widened as he called out to Wrath. “You hear that? Our boy’s got himself a hot date.”

“With Beck?”

“The one and only.”

“Well, it’s about damn time.” Q crossed his arms. “You two have been a long time coming.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Rooster chuckled as he said, “He’s finally gonna take a walk down her winter wonderland.”

“Oh, God.”

It was clear Rooster was just getting warmed up when he goaded, “Yep, he’s gonna tangle her tinsel.”

They all roared in laughter. I, on the other hand, just stood there, glaring at them. Rooster gave me a nudge as he teased, “You gonna eat her milk and cookies.”

“That’s enough,” I warned.

“Hold on.” Rooster could barely contain himself as he said, “I got one more.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yeah. you best leave it.” Wrath’s smile faded as he asked, “Big know about you two?”

“Not unless Beck told him. I planned to talk to him, but I haven’t gotten around to it.”

“He’s out in the garage.”

I gave him a nod, then left the bar and made my way out to the garage. When I walked in, I found Big wiping down his bike. He had his usual focused expression as he worked with the chrome until it gleamed. The man was a tank, both in size and presence, and even though I’d known him my entire life, I was feeling a little uneasy as I made my way over to him. But my respect for him outweighed any apprehension I was feeling.

This had to be done, and it had to be done right.

“Big.”

“Torch.” He didn’t look up. He just kept wiping down the handlebars. “What’s up?”

“You got a minute?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I need to talk to you about something.”

That got his attention.

He stood up, and his eyes narrowed slightly as he turned to face me. “This about club business?”

“No, sir.”

His expression didn’t change, but his brow lifted just enough to let me know I had about five seconds to spit it out. “I want to take Beck out on a date.”

“You asking or telling?”

“Both.”

For a moment, he didn’t say anything. He just stared at me, and his expression was completely unreadable. “So, you put her swing together, helped her out with Ava when she got sick, then took care of Beck when she was sick, and while you were at it, you went and put up her Christmas tree. And now, you want to take her on a date?”

“Yes, sir. I do.”

Finally, his lips twitched into what could only be described as a knowing smirk. “Well, I’d say it’s about damn time.”

“You think so, huh?”

“I do.” His smirk grew into a full-blown grin. “I watched you dance around her for most of her junior and senior year of high school. I expected you to come to me back then.”

“I would have, but the whole age thing....”

“I get it. I would’ve done the same.”

“I wish you’d told me about everything. If I’d known...”

“I know, son, but it wasn’t my story to tell.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. “So... you’re good with me starting something up with her?”

“As long as you do right by her.” His eyes narrowed. “You screw up, and you’ll answer to me. And trust me, brother, you don’t want that.”

“Understood.”

Big gave me a hard clap on the shoulder, the kind that almost knocked me off balance. “Good. Now go take her out and make it worth her time. She deserves it.”

“Yes, sir.”

We spoke for a moment longer, and then I headed out to my truck. I couldn’t help but chuckle to myself as I thought about my conversation with Big. He might’ve been a brick wall of intimidation, but underneath it all, he was just a father who wanted the best for his daughter. And I planned to be just that.



Feeling a bit anxious, I gave myself a quick once over before getting in the truck. I had on my cut with a button-up and jeans and a pair of newer boots that weren't scuffed all to hell. I didn't usually go to the trouble of dressing up for women, but Beck wasn't a hang around or some chick I'd met at a bar. She meant something to me, and I wanted our first date to be something she'd remember.

I'd waited a long time for this.

We both had, so I'd made reservations at a nice spot in the city. Something a little fancier than my norm, but I wanted to make our night special. And I couldn't deny that I was looking forward to seeing her all dolled up. It was a thought that had me pressing my foot against the accelerator and racing through the outskirts of town.

When I got to her house, I parked and wasted no time heading up to her front porch. I knocked, and it felt like an eternity before I heard her shout, "Coming!"

Seconds later, the door opened, and the sight of her took my breath. Her long, brown hair was curled and down around her shoulders, and she was wearing a pair of black jeans that hugged her curves in all the right places and an oversized white sweater that brought out the brown in her eyes. She looked incredible. "Hey."

"Hey." I let my eyes drift over her as I said, "You look beautiful."

"Thanks." Her beautiful, pouty lips slowly curved into a sexy smile as her dark brown eyes met with mine. "You look good, too. Really good."

"Glad you think so," I chuckled. "You ready?"

"So, where are we headed?"

"I made us reservations in the city."

“Oh, okay.”

Something about her tone led me to say, “Unless you’d rather do something else?”

“No, that’s fine.”

“Not looking for fine, babe. I wanted to do something special for you.”

“But I don’t need special. I just need to be with you, and we don’t have to drive an hour to the city to do that.”

“So, what are you thinking?”

“We could go to Danvers for a burger, or we could go to your place and order take out.”

I blinked, surprised but not entirely against the idea. “You sure?”

“I’m sure.” Her cheeks flushed, and damn if it didn’t make her even more stunning.

“I just want to spend time with you. Doesn’t really matter where.”

While she was grown up now and absolutely beautiful, deep down, she was still the same Beck. She still had that same fire in her eyes, and I couldn’t get enough of her. Unable to resist, I slipped my arm around her and pulled her over to me, claiming her mouth.

The kiss instantly became heated, intensifying my need for her. I took several steps forward until Beck’s back was pressed against her front door. My hands slid down to her ass, lifting her off the ground. Her legs instinctively made their way around my waist, and the heat of her body set me on fire.

An overwhelming need to extinguish the burn had me struggling to contain my craving for her. I'd never wanted anyone as much as I wanted her in that moment. My lips left her mouth and slowly traveled down her long, slender neck. Beck moaned with pleasure as her fingers raked through my hair and down the back of my neck. Her hips rocked against me, making my cock grow harder, prying against the zipper of my jeans.

We hadn't even made it out to the truck, and we were already losing control. I lowered her to the floor and took a step back, breaking our embrace. I looked down at her with a smile and said, "You're something else, you know that?"

She gave me a playful shrug as she asked, "So, is that a yes?"

"Oh, yeah. It's definitely a yes." I chuckled, already reaching for my phone to cancel the reservation. "The question is... pizza or Chinese?"

She grinned. "Pizza sounds great."

I leaned in, brushing a quick kiss to her lips before reaching for her hand. I led her across the yard and into my house. Beck had never been there before, so she took a few minutes to look around. I watched her take in my sparse décor and worn furniture, along with the various bookshelves stacked with books and random odds and ends. A soft smile crossed her face when she spotted my old guitar leaning in the corner. "I remember when you used to play at the clubhouse."

"I haven't touched it in years."

"That's a shame. You used to play so well."

"I might have to pick it up again."

“You should,” she said softly, and I couldn’t help but smile back. “I love your house. It’s so nice and cozy. It reminds me of you.”

“Not sure what to think about that, but thanks. It’s a work in progress.” I led her into the living room as I asked, “You hungry?”

“Sure.”

I placed the order, and then we kicked off our shoes and Beck curled up on the couch beside me. She rested her head on my shoulder as we searched for the perfect movie. For the first time in a long while, I felt like everything was right in the world—and it was about to get even better.

We didn’t eat much of the pizza. We had other things on our mind. You could feel the sexual tension crackling in the air around us. I don’t know how long we’d been sitting there when Beck looked over at me. I could see the hesitation in her eyes as she finally said, “I’ve been thinking about you.”

I cocked my brow and smirked, “Is that so?”

“Um-hmm.”

“Well, don’t hold out on me. Tell me what you’ve been thinking.”

Her cheeks flushed, and damn if it wasn’t the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. Her voice was barely a whisper as she admitted, “Just that you’re so different now.”

“Different good or different bad?” I asked, moving just a little closer.

“Good.” Her lips curved into a shy smile. “Definitely good.”

That was all it took.

I couldn't hold back a second longer.

I reached up and cupped her face in my hands, brushing my thumb across her cheek. Her skin was soft and warm, and as I looked into her eyes, I knew she was the only one for me. The way she looked at me like I was something more than I ever thought I could be, had my cock stirring to life.

I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers, kissing her—soft and slow at first, savoring the moment. Her scent wrapped around me. It was a mix of something sweet and familiar. I couldn't resist her if I tried.

Hell, I didn't want to.

The second her hands rested on my chest, everything changed. The kiss deepened, and hunger and heat took over as I claimed her mouth with mine. My fingers slid to her hips, pulling her closer, and the soft sound she made against my lips set me on fire.

She tilted her head, giving me full access to delve deeper. There's no way to describe how much I wanted her, and if all her little whimpers and moans were any indications, she wanted me just as much.

She eased back, breaking our embrace, and stood. I thought I'd read things wrong until she reached down and took hold of my hand, leading me down the hall to my bedroom. When we reached the foot of the bed, she reached up and tugged at my vest.

I didn't stop her. I shrugged it off and draped it over the back of the chair before turning my attention back to her. This woman had a way of pulling me apart and

putting me back together in ways I didn't even know I needed. I looked down at her and was about to kiss her again when she whispered, "I don't know how you do it."

"Do what, baby?"

Her hands slowly drifted lower, and when she reached the hem of my shirt, she looked at me with need in her eyes. "Make me feel like you and I are the only two people on earth?"

"That's you, babe. All you."

I leaned in and pressed my mouth to hers, kissing her long and hard. A light moan vibrated through her chest when my tongue slid across her bottom lip with a lazy glide. When my hand gripped the back of her neck for better access, I delved deeper into her mouth. My tongue tangled with hers as she hooked a leg over mine, arching her hips towards me.

With her eyes locked on mine, I pulled my t-shirt over my head and tossed it to the floor. Before I'd had a chance to reach for her sweater, she already removing it and pitched it onto the floor next to mine. Her eyes met mine as she whispered, "I've waited so long for this."

"I've waited right along with you."

"I'm done with all that. I want this, Thomas. I want you."

As soon as the words slipped from Beck's lips, the dam broke, and any resistance slipped away. I lowered her onto the mattress and laid down next to her. My hand dove into her hair, and I brought her mouth to mine, then kissed her hard, our tongues twisting and tasting each other with nothing but passion and desire. Her mouth was warm and soft, and each swirl of her tongue made the blood rush to my cock.

I lowered my mouth to her neck and ran my lips softly down the curve of her jaw to her shoulder and whispered, “You’re so damn perfect. I never could’ve imagined how damn perfect.”

“Thomas ,” she rasped.

There was something about hearing her call out my name that made me ease back and demanded, “Say it again.”

“Thomas.”

I growled as I began trailing kisses down her chest. Her head fell back, giving me better access as I slipped my hands behind her and unclasped her bra. Her fingers raked through my hair as I continued kissing down to her breast.

Heavy breaths and low moans filled the room as I brushed my tongue against her nipple. Goosebumps prickled across her skin as my fingers trailed down her abdomen. I quickly unbuttoned her jeans and lowered the zipper, and as she arched her back, I slid them along with her panties down her long, slender legs. A little whimper escaped her throat as I eased my hand between her legs, slightly grazing her center.

“So much wasted time.”

My touch was feather-like, just enough to drive her wild, and when she could no longer contain herself, she bucked her hips forward, begging for my touch. I slid my fingertips inside her and had just begun to stroke her as she moaned, “Oh God, Thomas, don’t stop.”

I brushed my thumb against her clit and felt her body start to tremble. Knowing she was close, I ran the rough pads of my fingers across her G-spot. When I increased the

pressure, her breath quickened, and her head dropped forward as her entire body tensed with her release.

I couldn't wait a minute longer.

I had to have her.

"I'm not wasting another second."

She was still recovering from her orgasm when I stood and quickly removed my jeans. I turned towards her, and just as I was about to settle on top of her, she placed the palms of her hands on my chest and coaxed me to lay back on the mattress.

I wanted to be in control—I wanted to show her exactly what she was doing to me, but I did as she requested and laid back. Her eyes met mine as she sat up on the bed and straddled me with her knees at my sides. I reached for her hips, lifting her as I settled her on top of me.

She raked her warm, wet center across my throbbing erection as she leaned forward and kissed me hungrily. I loved the feeling of her mouth on mine, but I wanted to be inside her. Hell, I thought I'd lose my mind if I had to wait another second.

Feeling the same need burning inside of her, she raised up and asked, "Do you have a condom?"

"Side table. Bottom drawer." Beck reached into the drawer and handed me the small square package, and as soon as I slid it on, she was back on top of me. While she leaned over me, the heat of our breaths mingled between us until the anticipation became too much. Her hand lowered between our bodies as she slowly stroked me.

Inching herself down over my cock, a fevered hiss slipped through her lips as she



took me deep inside. Fuck . She felt so fucking tight, so warm and wet, and I wanted to savor every second, feel every sensation, but the building need became too much. I was doing my best to keep it together.

Her pace quickened, and even though it felt incredible, I needed more. Unable to control myself, I brought my hands up to her hips, guiding her back and forth. Her nails dug into my chest as her hips bucked against mine, meeting every thrust with more force, more intensity. “That’s it, baby. Don’t stop.”

“Oh my God, Thomas!” she said, and I could feel her muscles contracting all around me as my body became tense while I struggled to hold back my own release.

“Damn. I’ll never get enough of you.” Her hips rocked against mine, faster and faster in a feverish rhythm, until, finally, she let out a tortured groan. With one last deep thrust, her body became tense, and her breath stilled as her head fell back. She clamped down around me, making it impossible to hold back as I came deep inside her. “Fuck.”

I held on to her hips, holding her in place as I caught my breath. Her body trembled above me, still shuddering from her release. She lowered herself onto my chest and lay with her heart next to mine, neither of us moving as our breaths started to slow.

I ran my fingers through her hair as I whispered, “I meant what I said... I’ll never get enough of you. Not if I have you every minute of every day. It’ll never be enough.”

Beck

“Ava,” I called from the kitchen. “Come on! We need to go!”

I slipped my tumbler of coffee into my bag and fumbled for my keys. Our mornings were always a scramble, but this one felt especially chaotic. When I didn’t hear her coming down the hall, I sighed and went to find her. “Ava, what are you doing?”

When I got to her bedroom, I found her sitting on the floor, stuffing her toys into her backpack. Her brows were furrowed as she tried to decide between her stuffed giraffe and the battered plastic dinosaur, and it was like a losing battle. “Ava.”

“I’m coming.”

“You can’t take them all.”

“But Momma...” She looked up at me with those big, brown eyes and pouted. “I need them.”

“You already have plenty,” I said, crouching down beside her. “And you have tons of toys at Grandma and Grandpa’s house.”

“But not these.”

“Okay, then, pick one more and let’s go.”

She clutched her giraffe to her chest. “But they will miss me.”

“Yes, I’m sure they will, but they’ll be okay for one day.” I bit back my smile and tried to stay firm as I told her, “Besides, you won’t have time for all these toys. You’ll be busy playing with Grandma.”

Her little face scrunched up as she thought about it.

Then, reluctantly, she started putting some of the toys back in her toy box. “Okay. I’m ready.”

“Great, now let’s grab your coat and get in the car.”

Ava zipped up her backpack and dragged it behind her as we rushed down the hall to the kitchen. I helped her put on her coat, and after I grabbed my bag, we rushed out the door. I put Ava in her car seat, and as I closed her door, I found myself glancing over at Thomas’s house.

My mind immediately drifted to the night we’d shared together. My cheeks warmed at the memory of his touch and how he kissed me like he had all the time in the world. He was rough and tender all at once.

I smiled when I thought back to the low rumble of his laugh as we whispered in the dark, and the way he whispered my name made me feel like I really meant something to him—just like he meant something to me. I had no idea where things would go from here, but the thought of seeing him again left me with a big smile on my face.

I drove Ava to my parents’ place, and I’d barely parked before Dad rushed out the front door and made a beeline for her side of the car. I got out and watched as he unbuckled her from her seat and lifted her into his arms, settling her on his hip.

Like his one and only daughter wasn’t standing right in front of him, he looked down at Ava with a big smile and said, “Hey there, squirt. You ready for some bacon and

eggs?”

“Um-hmm,” Ava nodded excitedly.

“I thought so. Let’s go grab you a plate before Grandma eats them all.”

“Good morning, Dad,” I grumbled. “Nice to see you, too.”

“Morning, kiddo.” He started towards the house. “We’ve got our girl covered. Have a good day at work.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

I shook my head as I got back in the car and started out of the drive. I was about to pull out onto the road when Mom stepped out the front door and waved at me.

“Have a great day, sweetheart,” she called out as I smiled and waved back, then continued my drive to the hospital. As soon as I got there, I parked and headed upstairs. It was my second week there, and I’d had more training than I would ever need, but I was still feeling a little out of place.

I didn’t know many people, and I was struggling to figure out my way around. Thankfully, it was a busy Monday, and nobody seemed to notice that I had no clue where I was going. I just kept walking down one hall after the next, hoping that I’d eventually figure it all out.

I didn’t mind that I was lost. It gave me a chance to daydream about my night with Thomas. It was everything I’d hoped it would be and more. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so alive and excited for what was to come. It was that feeling that had me smiling ear to ear as I made my way down the hall.

I'd finally found my station and was on my way to see my first patient when Gloria, one of the nurses, said, "Good morning, Rebecca."

"Good morning, Gloria."

She had a warm smile and quick wit, and she had an uncanny ability to read people better than anyone I'd ever met. So, I wasn't surprised when she said, "You seem to be in a mighty good mood this morning."

"I guess."

"Um-hmm." Her lips curled into a mischievous smirk. "Spill it. Who's the fella that put that smile on your face?"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." She cocked her brow. "You're walking around here like you have a secret."

"Oh, no. It's nothing like that." Heat crept up my cheeks as I started shuffling through the papers on my clipboard. "I'm just having a good morning."

"Um-hmm." She leaned closer, lowering her voice. "You're not fooling me. Some fella has done put that smile on your face."

I tried to play it cool, but my growing smile was betraying me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Honey, you might be new here, but I've been around long enough to recognize that look." Her laughter echoed softly. "You're smitten and smitten bad."

“Maybe a little.”

“I thought so.” She smiled. “Alright, now. You can go on and do your thing. But don’t think this conversation is over.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I continued down the hall. I tended to my patient and took the necessary scans, and in a blink, I had seen six more and was about to go on my lunch break. I’d just made it to my office when my cell phone chimed with a text. I took it from my scrub’s pocket and smiled when I looked down at the screen and saw it was a message from Thomas.

Thomas:

Hey.

How’s it going?

Me:

Not too bad. Just a busy Monday.

But I’m officially on my lunch break, so halfway over.

How about you?

Thomas:

Definitely a Monday.

Getting ready for our run mid-week, and nothing is going as

planned.

Me:

That doesn't sound good.

Thomas:

It's all good. We'll get it. We always do.

You and Ava wanna have dinner with me over at Rooster's place?

Maggie is making dinner and bought hot cocoa and the Polar Express for the kids.

Me:

That sounds great.

Thomas:

Good deal.

I'll pick you up at six.

Me:

Great. See you then.

Hey-

Thomas:

Yeah?

Me:

I really enjoyed last night.

Thomas:

That's good cause there's more to come.

Lots more.

Me:

Looking forward to it.

That night, Thomas picked Ava and me up, and we all spent a wonderful night together. And over the next couple of weeks, Thomas and I spent more nights together than we did apart. Thomas took me to the clubhouse, where we enjoyed the company of the brothers and several of their old ladies. I had such a great time being back with everyone.

Even more so, I loved watching Thomas in his element. I loved seeing him laughing and having a good time with his brothers, but most of all, I loved how he made me feel like I was the most important person in the room.

It was always like that when we were together. When we went sledding with Rooster and Maggie's kids, he helped Ava down the hill time and time again, but it was me that he doted on and kissed when no one was watching. He raced Rooster down the hill more times than I could count, but his eyes always found their way back to me.



And when we took Ava to the movies, he bought her popcorn and treats, but it was my hand that he held in his lap. He took such good care of Ava, making sure that she was comfortable and having a good time, and she loved every minute of it. That meant more to me than anything else.

I had no idea what the future held for us, but for the first time in a long time, I felt like I had something worth holding onto.

Christmas was just a few days away, and things couldn't have been better. I was starting to get the hang of things at work, and Ava and I were settling into our new routines with Thomas and the club. And one of those routines was our morning goodbyes with Thomas. I had just gathered my things when there was a familiar tap on the front door.

It eased open, and Thomas appeared with a coffee for me in one hand and a Santa cookie for Ava in the other. "You're going to have to stop spoiling us like this."

"Not gonna happen." He would slip in once Ava was in bed and slip out long before she got up, but he always returned with coffee and a special treat for Ava. He walked over and gave me a quick kiss. "I like spoiling my girls."

I loved it when he called us his girls. There was something about it that warmed my heart and made me want to wrap myself in his arms. I smiled as I told him, "Well, we like you spoiling us, but I don't want you to feel like you have to."

"I don't do things I don't want to do, babe."

"Point taken." I took a sip of my coffee before asking, "So, the run's still on for today, right?"

"Yeah, we'll be heading out in a bit."

“And you’ll be back tomorrow night?”

“Yeah, we should be back at the clubhouse around six... seven at the latest, so I should be back here no later than eight.”

“Great. I’ll fix us dinner. What would you like?”

“How ‘bout some chili or some of that chicken spaghetti you made a couple of weeks ago.”

“Sure, I can do that.” I slipped my arms around his neck and eased up on my tiptoes, kissing him briefly before saying, “Please be careful.”

“Always.”

He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine, kissing me soft and tender. There was something about his touch that had me aching for more, and that ache only grew stronger when he removed his mouth from mine and said, “I’ve gotta get going. I’ll text when I can.”

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

“Count on it.”

Thomas helped me get Ava to the car, and then we were all on our way. I dropped off Ava with my folks, then headed to work. I hadn’t been there long when I got a text from Mia asking if I’d like to go last-minute Christmas shopping with her and Londyn.

I was excited about the opportunity to spend some time with them, so I quickly accepted. I spent the rest of my day trying to think of all the things I needed to buy

while I was out. I had most of it figured out, except for what I was getting Thomas for Christmas.

I had no idea what I was going to get him.

I thought about it all day, and I was still thinking about it the following day when I met up with the girls.

We'd been shopping for hours and had stopped at a small coffee shop for a quick break. We'd all just gotten settled at the table when Mia leaned down at her feet and grimaced. "I've got the worst case of kankles today. This baby needs to hurry up and get here, or I'm going to need a walker to get around."

"When exactly are you due?"

"Next week, but I don't think I'm going to make it." Mia was Stitch's daughter and Wrath's ol' lady, and she was incredibly beautiful and expecting their first child. "This kid has to weigh at least twenty pounds already."

"I feel ya." Londyn was Savage's ol' lady, and she looked equally beautiful as she ran her hand over her very pregnant tummy. "This little stinker has been dancing on my bladder for the last three days, and I can barely breathe without needing to go to the bathroom."

"Oh, and if you sneeze," Mia scoffed. "You can forget it."

"Every time," Londyn snickered. "I just don't get it. What is it with these Fury men and their enormous children?"

"Must be in the genes," I giggled.

“Must be,” Mia groaned. “But I love him, and I can’t wait to meet our little guy. I just gotta make it through Christmas and New Year’s, and then, I’ll be set.”

“Same, girl. Same.” Londyn shook her head. “At least I’m almost done with my Christmas shopping.”

“Me too, but that’s only because Mom has done most of mine for me.” Mia leaned over to me as she asked, “So, how about you? Have you finished all your shopping?”

“I’m pretty close. I just need to figure out what to get Thomas.” I let out an exasperated sigh. “I don’t have any idea what to get him.”

“He hasn’t given you any hints?” Londyn asked.

“Nope, not a single one, and if I ask him, he says he already has everything he wants.”

“Don’t you hate when they do that?” Mia complained. “I can push and push, but Charlie never tells me anything. Last Christmas, I got him a pair of sunglasses and some new boots, but he’s never worn either of them. I have no idea what happened to them.”

“Malcomb does that, too!” Londyn groaned. “I bought him a couple of new shirts last Christmas, and they still have the tags on them.”

“I have to think of something, even if it’s something small,” I told them. “This is our first Christmas together, and it needs to be something memorable.”

“I wish I could help, but I suck at the whole gift-giving thing.” Jules was Q’s ol’ lady and had tagged along with us. While I didn’t know her very well, I was growing to like her more by the minute. “Quinton is always so thoughtful and buys the perfect

gifts for the boys and me, and I end up getting him something stupid like a keychain or a razor.”

“You could get him some new riding gloves or slippers,” Mia suggested.

“I don’t see Thomas wearing slippers, but gloves aren’t a bad idea. The ones he has are a little worn out.”

“Then, get him the gloves, and you could always try a little romantic getaway,” Londyn added. “Just you two at the coast or at a cabin in the mountains.”

“I thought about that, but I just started my new job, and I’d hate to ask for time off so soon. And there’s the whole Ava thing. I’d have to get Mom and Dad to watch her—not that they’d mind watching her.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you have to worry about that.” Mia smiled. “Sweet Ava has your daddy wrapped around her little finger.”

“You’re telling me,” I scoffed. “It’s like he’s completely forgotten he has a daughter.”

“Oh, he hasn’t forgotten,” Mia argued. “That man is just as crazy about you as my dad is about me. It’s the only-daughter thing. It can be a blessing and a curse.”

I don’t know how long we sat there talking about our crazy fathers and how much we loved them, but I could’ve spent all day there talking with them. They were the family I didn’t know I needed, and now, they were mine. We left there, and after spending another hour or so at the mall, we all headed home.

As soon as I got to the house, I took my gifts inside and hid them in my closet. I called Mom to see if she and Dad would keep Ava a little longer, and it was no

surprise when they offered to keep her for the entire night—giving me a chance to have a night alone with Thomas. Of course, I accepted and got busy making dinner.

In a blink, it was after eight, and then, it was eight-thirty. Nine came and went, but there was still no sign of Thomas. I tried to busy myself with reading, but I couldn't keep my focus. I was starting to worry that something was wrong, and it didn't help matters that he hadn't called or texted and neither his truck nor his bike was in his drive.

I was looking so forward to our quiet night alone, but now, dinner was cold, the wine was still untouched, and the candles I'd lit had flickered out. It wouldn't have been so bad if I just knew if he was okay or not. I hated the not knowing. It was the biggest downside of being an ol' lady.

I'd seen my mother go through it a thousand times.

Dad would be off with the brothers, doing whatever it was they did, and if he wasn't home exactly when he told her he'd be home, it would send her spiraling.

She would start to pace and send him message after message.

She'd try to track his location, but nothing eased the worry until he walked through that door.

I promised myself that I wasn't going to do that, but it was hard. I cared a great deal for Thomas—even more than I wanted to admit, and my heart ached at the thought of something happening to him. I was teetering on the edge of losing it when I heard the familiar rumble of Thomas's motorcycle.

I closed my eyes and let out the breath I'd been holding, and once I got it together, I went out to the kitchen and waited for him to come inside. As soon as he walked

through the door, I could tell that he'd had a long night. His jeans were dirty, and his hair was a mess, and he looked exhausted. "I'm sorry I'm late."

"Are you okay?" I didn't move. I wanted to, but I couldn't seem to make my feet move. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle."

"I was worried." I swallowed hard, trying my best to ease the knot forming in my throat. "I thought something might've happened."

"I would've called if I could..." A tear trickled from the corner of my eye, and I quickly wiped it away. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah," I lied with a nod. "I'm just glad you made it back."

"Come here."

Fearing I might cry, I didn't move.

I lowered my eyes to the floor as I told him, "I made dinner."

"Yeah, I'm sorry I missed that." I could feel his eyes on me as he repeated, "Come here."

This time, I obliged and started over to him. As soon as I got close, he slipped his arms around my waist and pulled me towards him. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"It's okay."

"It's not." He brought his hands up to my face, cupping my cheeks. "But I can't

promise that it won't happen again."

"I know."

"You gotta know, I would've been here if I could."

"I know."

It was hard to explain, but he made me feel complete in a way I never had before. When I was with him, it was like I'd found a piece of myself that I didn't even know was missing. He was the only man I had ever met who could touch my heart and ignite every nerve in my body with desire at the same time. I let out a grumbled sigh as I told him, "You've really done it, you know it?"

"Done what?"

"Made me fall for you even harder than I did when we were kids." I eased up on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his, kissing him briefly. "And that's saying something."

"You're not the only one who's fallen." His voice was low and filled with a hint of mischief. A thrill shot through me when he lowered his head and pressed his lips to mine, making me instantly forget that I'd ever been upset. "I've fallen right along with you."

His touch was tender yet demanding as he swept his tongue across my bottom lip, teasing, and I gasped, giving him the opportunity to delve deeper. I placed my palms flat against his chest, trying to steady myself from my shaky knees.

The feeling of his mouth on mine had me aching with need. Anticipation raged through me as Thomas's hands slid to the hem of my sweater. He eased it over my head, and when he started working on my bra, it was clear that a simple kiss wouldn't



be enough for him. As he looked down, an admiring grin spread across his face.  
“Mine. All mine.”

A flash of hunger blazed through his eyes as he lifted me into his arms and carried me into the bedroom where Thomas showed me time and time again that I truly was his and only his.

And I loved every second of it—just like I loved him.

Torch

It had been another long one, and it was late when I finally got to Beck's place. I kicked off my boots by the door and dropped my keys on the counter before heading down the hall to the bedroom. Just as I'd expected, Beck was already in bed and out like a light. I slipped out of my clothes, and being careful not to wake her, I crawled in next to her.

The bed creaked a little under my weight, but she didn't stir. I lay there for a moment, just watching her. After a few moments, I reached over and pulled her close, and that's when it hit me. The rough days didn't matter so much when they ended with her in my arms.

She had become my home, and there was no place I'd rather be.

I brushed a strand of hair from her face and kissed her temple, letting the quiet settle around us. I was home, and as far as I was concerned, there was no better feeling.

The next morning, I awoke with Beck trailing kisses along my neck. I smiled and said, "Good morning, beautiful."

"Morning," she whispered.

She continued to kiss me just below my ear, and the touch of her lips against my skin made my cock start to stir. "Beck."

"Mm-hmm," she purred.

“What are you doing?”

I glanced over, and her lust-filled eyes locked on mine as she answered, “If you have to ask, then I’m not doing a very good job.”

I nodded toward the tent I was pitching in the sheets. “No, darlin’. You’re doing great, but where’s Ava?”

“And that’s why I love you.” She continued kissing me as she whispered, “You’re always so thoughtful.”

It was just three little words but hearing them come from her lips made my world stop turning. I eased up on my elbow. “Say it again.”

When she looked up at me, I could feel it radiating off her, and I had no doubt she meant it when she repeated, “I love you.”

Unable to control myself, I leaned down, crashing my mouth against hers in a hungry kiss. I felt the sparks fly as soon as her lips touched mine. Her arms wrapped around me, and everything around us slowly disappeared, along with the past and doubts. When I was with her, nothing else mattered.

She turned my world upside down, making me want things I’d never thought I’d want. A family. Kids. A house with a white picket fence. I wanted it all, and I wanted it with her. A smoldering heat rushed deeply through me as her grip tightened, pressing her body to mine.

“You’re mine, Beck.”

She looked up at me with love in her eyes as she whispered, “Didn’t you know... Nothing’s changed. I’ve always been yours.”

She let out a heated moan as my fingers slipped between her legs. Her hand slid against my growing erection, and I groaned in response. With one simple move, she'd made me want her even more. Hell, there didn't seem to be any limits to my desire for her. She was everything I'd ever wanted and needed, and I was completely consumed by her. Her head fell back as I moved her panties to the side and slid my fingertips inside her. The blood rushed to my cock when I found she was already soaked. I'd just begun to stroke her when she moaned, "I'll always be yours, Thomas."

The sound of my name coming from her lips spurred me on, and I couldn't wait a moment longer to be inside her. Before she could protest, I withdrew my fingers and quickly lowered her panties down her long, lean legs. Once I'd removed my boxers, I grabbed a condom from my wallet and slipped it on.

A sense of contentment washed over me as I settled between her legs and drove deep inside. I drove into her again and again, fucking her deep and hard. A fevered moan vibrated through her as she started to grind against me, taking more of me with every shift of her hips.

Knowing what she needed, I slid my hand from her hip down between her legs, and her breath quickened when I reached her clit. Pleasured cries echoed through the room when I began to stroke her with a tormenting rhythm, and it wasn't long before I could feel her muscles contracting all around me as she pleaded, "Don't stop!"

She felt so damn good, so fucking perfect, and she was mine. Her body started to tremble around me, urging me on as I relentlessly drove inside, over and over, until she let out a tortured groan and clamped down around me. There was no better feeling in the world, and I felt my release building as the muscles in my abdomen and legs grew taut. With one final thrust, I pulled her to me and came deep inside her, growling with complete and utter gratification.

Neither of us moved. We just lay there nestled close together as our breaths started to slow. She reached for my hand and laced her fingers through mine as she asked, “When do you have to head to the clubhouse?”

“I should’ve left a half hour ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Nothing for you to be sorry about, babe.” I leaned over and kissed her on the temple.

“Late or not, there’s no better way to start the day.”

Beck giggled as she replied, “I can’t disagree with you there.”

“I better get going.”

I gave her a quick kiss, then stood and quickly tossed the condom in the trash before taking a shower. I got dressed and headed to the clubhouse. Wrath and I spent the day running errands. We had some stuff to do for Dad, and we both had our own lists to get done. Like me, Wrath had waited until the last minute to do his Christmas shopping, and it was after dark before we got it all done.

When I finally got back to the house, Beck was curled up on the sofa, reading one of her books. She looked up with a smile on her face. “You’re home.”

“I meant to be here sooner, but I got caught up with Mom.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, she was helping me out with something.”

“Okay. Good.”

I removed my cut and then sat down next to her. “Where’s Ava?”

“She crashed about an hour ago.” Beck pointed to the mantle as she smiled and said, “We made cookies for Santa, and the excitement got the best of her.”

“I bet she’ll be up bright and early tomorrow.”

“You can count on it.”

Beck’s eyes widened with excitement when I placed her Christmas gift in her lap. “Merry Christmas.”

“Wait. We’re doing this now?”

“We can wait until tomorrow...”

“No, that’s okay. We can do it now. Just give me a second!”

She jumped up off the sofa and raced over to the tree. She quickly grabbed the gifts she’d gotten me, then returned to her spot on the sofa. She looked like she was about to bust as she handed them to me and said, “Ava helped me pick them out.”

“You don’t want to open yours first?”

“No, you go ahead. I want to see what you think of it.”

“Okay, but if you bought it, I’m gonna like it.”

“Whatever,” she scoffed.

Beck watched impatiently as I began to unwrap the first present. I carefully opened it

and was pleased to see a new pair of black ROCKbrOS winter gloves. I started to slip them on as I said, “These are great, babe.”

“Are you sure? I have the receipt if...”

“Don’t need the receipt, babe. They’re just what I wanted.”

“Okay, good! Now, open the other one.”

I opened the gift and was surprised to find a photo album filled with various pictures. I flipped through the first couple of pages and chuckled when I saw several old images of Beck and me when we were kids. As I continued turning the pages, there were several that were more recent, and even a couple of me with Ava that I didn’t know about. “This is great, Beck.”

“I thought we could add to it over the next year or so.”

“We definitely can.” I glanced down at the small box on the table as I told her, “Your turn.”

She nodded, then picked it up and started tearing away at the paper.

Seconds later, her eyes grew wide, and a soft smile crossed her face as she pulled the ring from the box. It wasn’t an engagement ring—not just yet, but it was a ring that was full of just as much promise. I took it from her hand, and as I slipped it on her finger, I told her, “It was my grandmother’s.”

“Oh, Thomas, it’s beautiful.”

“You like it?”

“I love it.” She wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me. “It’s perfect.”

“Everything ready for tomorrow morning?”

“I think so.” Beck looked over at the gifts beneath the tree and sighed. “We basically bought out the store, so surely she’ll be happy with everything.”

“I’m sure she’ll love it.”

“We should probably get to bed. There’s no telling when she’ll get up.”

I nodded, then followed her down the hall to her bedroom. I waited for her to crawl into bed, then sat down next to her. “I should get going.”

“What? No.”

“It’s Christmas and...”

“And I want you to stay.” Beck reached over and placed her hand on mine. “She would want you to be here, too.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

I nodded, then eased out of my clothes and climbed into bed next to Beck. She snuggled up, and in a matter of minutes, we were both out. I felt like I’d barely closed my eyes when I felt little arms and legs crawling on top of me. Knowing it was Ava, I didn’t move. I just laid there until I felt her nudge her mother and say, “Momma... Momma, Santa came.”



“Hmmm,” Beck groaned.

Ava nudged her once more. “Santa came!”

“Okay, sweetie. I’m coming.” Beck sat up in bed and eased the covers back. “I’m going to need coffee. Lots and lots of coffee.”

“On it,” I muttered, still lying there with my eyes closed.

“Tom-Tom.” Ava gave my shoulder a push. “Get up! Santa came!”

“Yeah, yeah.” I opened my eyes, and I couldn’t help but smile when I saw the excited expression on her little face. “I’m coming.”

With that, she darted out of the room, and the rest of the morning was a blur. We had our coffee, and she tore through her presents like there was no tomorrow. Big and Josie stopped by, and Ava showed them everything Santa had brought. We hung out and watched her play for a bit, and then they helped us clean up, and we all headed to the clubhouse.

The holidays were always a big deal at the club, but this year was bigger than ever. We’d had a hell of a year. Cotton’s new role had taken the club in a new direction, and we were both feared and respected by everyone in the state. It was a good feeling—one worth celebrating, and it was clear we were in for one hell of a celebration.

The clubhouse was completely decked out. Strings of lights were hanging from the rafters and cast a warm glow over the entire room. There were garlands of pine and red ribbon framing the bar and doorways, and there was a massive Christmas tree in the corner. Every single branch was loaded down with ornaments and tinsel, and there was a bright gold star teetering on the top.

The tables were covered in red-and-green checkered cloths, and the ol' ladies had piled them high with food. There was a roasted turkey, ham, trays of deviled eggs, and so many sides you could barely see the table underneath. There were desserts, too—pies, cookies, even some peppermint bark that had already caught Ava's eye.

I chuckled as I lowered her to the floor and said, "Go get you some."

I didn't have to say it twice.

She took the opportunity and ran towards the treats. Once she'd gotten herself a handful, she darted over to Big and Josie, proudly showing them what she'd gotten. Beck gave me a big smile as she said, "I'm going to go over and say hi to the girls."

"Okay." I gave her a quick kiss as I said, "I'll catch up with you in a bit."

I watched as she walked over to the girls and gave them each a hug. I was still eyeing her when Savage stepped up next to me and said, "Merry Christmas, brother."

"Merry Christmas."

Seconds later, Wrath and Q came over, and we all just stood there and watched as Maggie's kids played swords with our pool sticks. Wrath shook his head as he muttered, "You know it's only a matter of time before one of them loses an eye, right?"

"Awe, they'll be alright," I snickered. "And if not, patches are cool."

"Yeah, you have a point." Rooster looked to Savage as I said, "I'm not sure Londyn will agree."

"You're probably right."

Savage handed Rooster his beer, then rushed after Dalton, taking his pool stick from his hand. He talked to him and the other kids for a moment, then sauntered back over to us. He took his beer back as he said, “That should be the end of that.”

“For the time being, anyway.” Rooster chuckled. “Give ‘em a minute. They’ll be into something else soon enough.”

Savage motioned his head over to the corner of the room where Grim was sitting. “He doesn’t look so good.”

“No, he doesn’t.” The usually fierce, unstoppable man was leaning back in his chair with his shoulders slouched and his eyes fixed on something in the distance. “He’s been there for hours, just tossing back one drink after the next.”

“It’s been a year since that shit went down with Beckett.” Rooster sighed. “You know it had to be bad if it’s still fucking with him now.”

“Yeah, the guilt is eatin’ him up.”

“But it’s not his guilt to carry.”

“Well, he’s carrying it all the same. Hell, he came all the way here just to try to escape it.”

“Doesn’t look like it’s working.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

It was tough seeing him like that, but I knew Jenna and her daughter were there. It was only a matter of time before they would come for him and get him sorted, so I left it alone and turned my attention over to the dartboard where Maggie’s kids were

playing. I was still watching them when I told Rooster, “Nathan seems to be doing good. Hell, it looks like he’s grown two feet since the last time I’ve seen him, and that was just a couple of weeks ago.”

“Yeah, they’re both growing fast. No doubt about that. They both seemed so young when Maggie and I started dating. It’s hard to believe that in a couple of years, Nathan will be trying for his permit.”

“How’d he like the bike you got him?”

“He’s a little unsure of it just yet. But he’ll come around.”

“What about his father?” I asked. “Is he cool with you gettin’ it for him?”

“Probably not, but so far, he’s been good about it.” He shrugged. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he ended up helping Nathan out with some of the parts.”

“That’d be good.” Savage glanced over at Maggie and Samantha. “And what about the girls?”

“Samantha’s been begging for these ugly, brown slipper things, and they’d been out of stock for weeks. But Maggie worked her magic and was able to find ‘em. And I got her that new claw foot tub she’s been hinting at for the past year. So, I’d say all is good. What about you two? Did your crew get everything they wanted?”

“Dalton got a house full of shit. Everything from games to an electric scooter, so he’s tickled. Londyn, on the other hand, is still very pregnant, so she didn’t get her Christmas wish,” Savage chuckled.

“Pretty sure Mia feels the same.”

I glanced over at Londyn and Mia, and they both looked pretty miserable as they sat on the sofa with their hands propped on their round bellies. “It looks like they’re about to pop.”

“That’s because they are,” Savage scoffed. “Londyn was due yesterday, and Mia’s due next week.”

The words had barely left his mouth when Prez stepped into the center of the room and announced, “It’s been brought to my attention that it’s time to open gifts. Torch and Q, why don’t you guys do the honors and start passing them out? I’m sure the kids will be glad to help.”

And just like that, chaos ensued.

Wrapping paper went flying—red, green, glittery gold—covering every inch of the floor like a bomb had gone off. Dad tried to keep some order and barked at Rooster to stop tossing gifts like a football and for me to stop tormenting the kids. It was tough. The kids were on a sugar high, and they were like little tornadoes as they ripped through their presents.

Even Ava got in on the action and pelted me with a wad of wrapping paper, but eventually, things started to settle, and the room grew quiet.

Everyone was sitting around talking, letting their food settle, and the kids were playing with their toys. I was sitting at the bar with the guys, watching Beck as she laughed with Mia and Josie. They were almost done helping Ava put together one of her new toys, and Ava was about to boil over with excitement when something caught my eye.

There was a small bundle of mistletoe hanging from one of the light fixtures. I watched as Stitch grabbed up Wren and pulled her beneath it, kissing her with a

smile. Seeing them brought back a memory that hit me hard—Beck couldn't have been more than ten at the time, and she was standing under that same mistletoe wide-eyed and hopeful.

She was staring right at me, but I just thought she was a silly kid and didn't understand the weight of what she was asking. I'd kissed Casey on the cheek instead, and I'd never forgotten the flash of disappointment on Beck's face.

I finally had my chance to make it right.

I got up and walked over to Beck. I reached down and took her hand in mine, leading her over to the mistletoe. She looked at me with confusion, but I didn't say a word. I simply tipped my chin toward the mistletoe. Her gaze followed, and a soft smile slipped across her lips.

"It's about time, don't you think?"

She didn't answer, but the way her lips parted, the way her breath caught—yeah, that was all the answer I needed. Her smile remained as I leaned in and pressed my lips against hers, kissing her softly.

This wasn't just a kiss.

It was twenty years of missed chances and the promise of everything still to come. When I pulled back, her eyes stayed on mine, and she smiled as she whispered, "Worth the wait."

"Merry Christmas, Beck."

"Merry Christmas, Thomas."

*Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 3:25 am*

TWO YEARS LATER

“Can you get me some pickles, too?”

“Yeah. How about some bananas and some peanut butter?”

“Yes to the peanut butter, but a hard no to the bananas. That’s just gross.”

“Says the woman who ate pepperonis and popcorn last night.”

“I can’t help it that this kid of yours has me craving all this crazy stuff.”

Beck was sitting on the couch with her feet propped up on a pillow, watching a movie while I was in the kitchen making her yet another crazy snack. I was just finishing up with the last apple when Ava plopped down beside her and pressed her hands against her mother’s very round belly.

She scrunched her nose as she asked, “When’s he coming out of there?”

“Not for a few more weeks, kiddo.”

“That’s too long,” Ava huffed. “He’s been in there long enough.”

“You’re telling me,” Beck scoffed. “I’m ready for him to come too, but he needs a little more time.”

“But your belly is sooo big.”

I couldn't help but laugh from across the room, earning myself a glare from Beck.  
"I'm very aware."

Ava ignored her and turned to me with one of her looks. "Sorry, kiddo. You're just gonna have to be patient, okay?"

Ava groaned dramatically, flopping back against the couch. "So stupid."

Beck grinned, her eyes twinkling as she looked at me. "She's got your patience."

"Yeah, well, she's got your flair for the dramatic."

Beck cocked her brow, then turned to Ava with a mischievous smile on her face.  
"You know, when we were kids, I used to have the biggest crush on your dad."

It had been months since I adopted Ava, but it still got to me when either of them called me Dad. So much so that I almost missed it when Beck said, "But he didn't even like me."

"He didn't?"

"Nope." Beck's eyes skirted over to me, and I could tell she was biting back her smile as she told our daughter, "He completely ignored me and acted like I didn't even exist."

"What?" Ava gasped. "Why would he do that?"

"Oh, here we go..."

"Oh, it was awful," Beck whined. "I followed him around like a lost puppy, and he wouldn't give me the time of day."



“That’s so mean!”

“Yeah, it was.” She pretended to wipe a tear from her eye. “He broke my heart.”

“Do not listen to your mother.” I carried the plate of food into the living room, and my chest tightened at the sight of my beautiful wife. I couldn’t imagine loving her more, but she was pulling a fast one, and I wasn’t going to let her get away with it. “She’s not giving you the full story.”

“What’s the full story?”

“Your beautiful mother is much younger than me, like six years younger, and back then, it would’ve been weird for me to go after her. It would be like Dalton and you.” Ava’s cheeks immediately blushed, and I had a suspicion that there was a story there. I considered calling her on it but left it alone and said, “And I wasn’t ignoring her. I was being smart.”

Beck raised an eyebrow. “Smart, huh?”

“Oh, yeah.” I plopped down next to Beck and snatched a slice of apple from her plate. “The last thing I needed was the brothers thinking I was some kind of pedo.”

“A pedo?” Ava’s face scrunched up in confusion. “What’s that?”

“Uh... it’s... someone who doesn’t follow the rules,” I said quickly, tugging on Ava’s pigtail to distract her. “And I always follow the rules, which is why I waited until your mom was all grown up and absolutely gorgeous before I made my move.”

“Nice save,” Beck scoffed.

“You know, it’s a good thing I love you like I do.” I cocked my brow. “Or I’d have to

take you over my knee.”

A spark of mischief flashed through her eyes as she whispered, “Oh, yeah?”

“You’re a mess.”

“But you love me.”

My chest tightened at the sight of the big smile on her gorgeous face. I leaned over and kissed her on the forehead as I whispered, “More than you could possibly know.”

“Hey,” Ava protested. “What about me?”

“Love you, too, kiddo.” I placed my hand on her mother’s belly. “Love him, too.”

Beck looked up at me with love in her eyes and whispered, “We got it good, don’t we?”

“Better than I could’ve ever imagined.”

~The End

### Prologue

“I don’t do this.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“No, I’m serious.” She motioned her hand between our hips. “I don’t do this. I’m a mom. I’ve got kids. Two of them.”

“You saying you don’t wanna do this?”

“No, no. I’m not saying that.” She raked her teeth over her bottom lip. “I just wanted you to know that I don’t do this sort of thing.”

The movie theater bathroom was a new one for me, too, but I didn’t see any need in telling her that. Besides, she was already feeling a bit leery, and the last thing I wanted to do was scare her off, especially when her hot little body was pressed against mine, and I had a raging hard-on. I gave her one of my most charming smiles and said, “Baby, I don’t care if you do or don’t. It’s not like we’re courtin’ here. We’re just f uu ...”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it.”

The crease in her brow faded, and I knew I had her when a smile swept across her face. She nodded, and that was that. I lowered my mouth to hers once again, drawing her closer as I kissed her with everything I had.

She didn't resist. Instead, she wound her arms around my neck and kissed me back. Need surged throughout me like a fucking wildfire as she eased her hips forward and started grinding against me. It was all I could do to keep from taking her right there in the hallway.

I was on the brink of losing control when she placed her hand on my chest and pulled away from me yet again. "I'm not a bad person for this, right? I mean, people do this kind of thing all the time, don't they?"

"Yeah, I guess, but that doesn't mean you gotta do it."

"I know, but I deserve this. I always take care of everybody else. This time, I'm going to treat myself." Her eyes skirted over me. "Instead of some chocolate, I'm having the hot guy I met at the movies."

"Ah, you think I'm hot?"

"Oh yeah." A wicked smile swept across her face. "You're way hot."

"Right back at ya, babe."

I pulled her closer and pressed my mouth to hers. This kiss was different. This kiss wasn't laced with doubt or any resistance at all. Instead, it was smoking hot and filled with a hunger that matched my own. Her body melted into me as her tongue brushed against mine, and then it was over. I'd taken all I could take.

I dropped my hands to her waist and started to unbuckle her jeans. "You sure you're good with this?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm definitely good."

The tip of her tongue slowly dragged across her bottom lip as she kicked off her boots, then lowered her jeans and panties to the floor. She stood there staring at me with a wanton look in her eyes as I grabbed a condom from my wallet before lowering my jeans and boxers.

From the moment we'd first kissed, she'd had me all tangled up. My cock pulsed against my fingers while I slipped on a condom. I gave it a hard squeeze, trying to relieve some of the throbbing pressure, but it did little to help. I needed her, and I needed her now.

Unable to resist a moment longer, I reached for her, pulling her close. Anticipation flashed through her eyes as my hands dropped to her hips and lifted her up, pressing her back against the wall. She bit her lip and wrapped her legs around me, making my cock grow even harder. My need for her was palpable, burning deep inside my gut.

Fuck .

I didn't know what it was about this woman, but she had me spiraling out of control. With one hard thrust, I buried myself deep inside her. A rush of air hissed through her teeth as I withdrew and drove into her again and again. With her arms wound tightly around my neck, I growled into her shoulder and started thrusting harder and deeper, building up to a relentless pace.

I'd been with many women in my time, but never had a woman made me feel so on edge. Needing more, I turned around and carried her over to the sink counter. Her legs widened, giving me better access as I lowered her onto the edge of the cold porcelain. She immediately leaned back and propped her hands on the sink's ledge.

I lowered my mouth to her neck, kissing her like a hungry animal as I drove deeper, harder. Her head reared back with a sated groan. That was it. That was exactly what I wanted to fucking hear. Her nails dug into my lower back as her hips rocked against

mine, meeting my every thrust with more intensity. I could feel the pressure building, forcing a growl from my chest.

“Fuck,” I groaned as she tightened around me. She panted wildly, and her thighs clamped down around my hips when I tried to increase my pace. I knew she was close, unable to stop the inevitable torment of her building release. I lowered my hand between her thighs, raking my thumb across her clit, and that was all it took. The muscles in her body grew taut as her orgasm took hold. I continued to drive into her; the sounds of my body pounding against hers echoed throughout the room until I finally came inside her. With a ragged breath, I panted, “Wow.”

“Yeah, that was pretty freaking incredible.” She gave me a warm smile as she glanced down at her boots. “Even better than I thought it would be.”

“You doubted me?”

“No, it was me that I doubted.”

“Got no reason to doubt yourself, babe.” I slowly withdrew, then quickly tossed the condom in the trash. “You’re amazing.”

As I was pulling up my boxer briefs and jeans, she hopped down from the countertop and started to get dressed. “Tell my ex that.”

And just like that, there was a shift in her mood. I couldn’t stand the thought of her thinking she was anything but incredible, so I told her, “Your ex is a fucking idiot.”

“Oh, yeah? What makes you say that?”

“He’d have to be to let you go.”

Her smile returned as she said, “Thanks, you didn’t have to say that.”

“Just tellin’ it like it is.” I stepped over to her and placed the tips of my fingers on her chin, forcing her to look up at me. “Why don’t you give me your number so I can remind you whenever you forget?”

“I would, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.” She stood up and fastened the last button of her jeans. “I’ve only been divorced a few months.”

“Okay, then give me your phone.”

“Hmm?”

“Your phone.” To my surprise, she grabbed her phone from her purse and handed it to me. I put my name and number in her contacts as I told her, “My name’s Ronin. If you change your mind or need something, just give me a call.”

“Okay, thanks.” She dropped her phone back in her purse, then eased up on her tiptoes and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for this. I really enjoyed it.”

“Yeah, me too.”

She studied me for a moment, and just as I thought she was going to say something, she turned and walked out the door. I wanted to believe that I hadn’t seen the last of the beautiful brunette, but with the way my luck had been lately, I wasn’t so sure. Regardless, she’d given me a night I wouldn’t soon forget, and I could only hope I’d done the same for her.

Rooster

“It’s gotta be a password, right?”

“Yeah, but to what? We checked the house and his office. There was nothing there.” Bones sounded frustrated as he added, “And I already have access to his laptop, emails, and bank accounts. What else could there be?”

“I don’t know, but there’s gotta be something. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have kept repeating that Sawyer 247 bullshit.”

“Could it be one of his kids or grandkids?”

“Nope,” Bones answered. “Already checked.”

“What about an employee? Or some woman he screwed around with?”

“Maybe.”

I’d been listening to my brothers go back and forth for over an hour, and I couldn’t help but notice how much had changed over the past couple of months. I’d patched in more than ten years ago, and back then, Cotton sat at the front of the table with Guardrail and Stitch at his side. They were a force to be reckoned with.

Now, Maverick sat in Cotton’s place, and Savage and Wrath were his right-hand men. They were just as fierce and determined, but unlike their older, wiser, more mellow predecessors, Savage and Wrath were still young and quick-tempered. Most



of the young ones were. I fell somewhere in between and considered myself to be a decent mix of the two.

Except when I was hungry or hung over.

And today, I just happened to be both, and I was teetering on the edge when Smokey asked, “When were we supposed to deliver the next load, or is that still on?”

“Next week, but we got no idea about the who or the where,” Prez answered. “We’ll figure it out, but you know Bruton. He only told us what he felt like we needed to know.”