



The Hawthornes

OTTO

A N A C E S M C S T O R Y



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THE HAWTHORNES:

OTTO

AN ACES MC STORY

BY NICOLE JACQUELYN

Otto

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DEDICATION

Thanks to you,
for falling down the Aces rabbit hole with me again.
Buckle up.

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PROLOGUE

OTTO

“**I**N AND OUT,” my dad murmured, checking to make sure that the pistol he’d pulled out of the safe was loaded before handing it to me. “You’re just there to keep watch, yeah? Make sure there ain’t any surprises.”

“Got it,” I replied, checking it myself before sliding it into the holster hanging against my ribs.

“Got three chances to find those guns,” he muttered to himself. “Me and your uncle are takin’ you boys and Brody with us to the cabin. Casper’s takin’ another group to the warehouse downtown. Gramps and Dragon are checkin’ out the church down by the stadium.”

“We check out all three at once, they won’t have a chance to move ’em,” I replied in understanding. “Where do you think they are?”

“Honestly,” he said with a grimace. “No fuckin’ clue. My bet would be on the cabin. It’s isolated, yeah? Makes sense. But who knows with these fuckin’ weirdos.”

I let out a soft chuckle and loaded an extra magazine, running my fingers through the box of loose bullets my pops kept on a shelf next to the safe. “Can’t say our family’s any better,” I pointed out dryly. “We worship the wind in our faces and the open road as much as they worship their lord and savior.”

Dad scoffed. “Wouldn’t exactly call what we do a religion,” he mused. “But if I did, at least ours doesn’t discriminate, yeah? Plus, I doubt thinkin’ about their god gives ’em a tingle in the balls the way firin’ up my Harley does.”

“Pagan,” I said, laughing.

“Nah, man.” Dad reached up and scratched the back of his neck before turning toward the safe again. “I think there’s someone up there, keepin’ an eye on shit.”

“You do?” I asked in surprise.

“Have you *seen* your mother?” I could hear the smile in his voice. “There must be a god.”

My lips twitched. Leave it to my dad to bring the conversation around to my mom. Typical.

“You know, I watched her give birth to Myla on a mattress on our bedroom floor,” he said, his tone growing more serious. “No meds, no hospital, just sheer determination and grit. That was what sealed it for me. If I’d had any doubts that someone was watchin’ out for us, that woulda made me damn sure.”

“Fair enough.”

“You don’t think there’s a god?” he asked curiously, glancing at me over his shoulder.

“Is this seriously what you two are discussin’?” my brother Rumi asked, poking his head into the closet. “Should I be worried?”

“You should always be worried, Rum,” my dad said, tossing a bullet at his head.

“I believe in God,” Rumi replied defensively, dodging the projectile. “Have you *seen* Nova?”

I choked as my dad started to laugh.

“You’re turnin’ into Dad,” I said, shaking my head at Rumi as I ignored the nausea pooling in my belly. “You know that, right?”

“Whatever, I’m way more like Mom.”

“I’d say you’re a good mix of us both,” my dad said, not bothering to look at us.

“Yeah, you somehow inherited the worst traits from both of them.”

“I’m tellin’ Mom you said that,” Rumi threatened as he checked his watch. “We about ready to go? Cuttin’ it close.”

“Here,” my dad said, turning back toward me with a shotgun dangling from his fist.

“You serious?”

“Stop bitchin’,” he said, forcing me to take it. “Put some of these in your pockets.”

“You expect me to carry a shotgun?” I asked flatly as he handed me a fist full of shells.

“Shotguns are perfect,” Rumi said, grinning. “You don’t even have to aim in close quarters.”

“I’m a better shot than you.”

“Bullshit.”

“Jesus Christ, both of you shut up,” my dad muttered, sliding his pistols into the holsters at his back and ribs. “Take the shotgun in case you need it. Doubt you will. We’re doin’ this shit quick and quiet, remember? No one’s gonna be shootin’.”

“I got a rifle,” Rumi whispered as I followed my dad out of the closet. “Like a big boy.”

“You’re such a fuckin’ asshole,” I muttered, shoving him away from me.

Rumi may have gotten a big boy rifle, but he’d been smaller than me since I was eleven years old.

“Sticks and stones, baby brother,” he shot back, kicking at the back of my knee to make it buckle.

“Dad’s gonna kill you,” Mick announced, stepping out of the bathroom as we walked single file down my parents’ hallway. “Get your shit together.”

“Got my game face on,” Rumi replied with mock seriousness. “You got any idea where we’re goin’?”

“Cabin’s about forty-five minutes south,” Mick replied as he grabbed his cut off the back of the couch and slung it on.

“Should take a little over an hour since we won’t be takin’ the quickest route.” He glanced between the two of us. “You two gonna be able to make it without killin’ each other?”

“We’ll be fine,” Rumi said, dramatically wrapping his arms around my waist and laying his head against my chest. “I made us a road trip playlist!”

“Get off of me,” I muttered, holding my arms out at my sides. “Why are you so fuckin’ annoyin’ all the time?”

“It’s a gift,” Rumi said, moving away as his expression changed. “You all set?”

“I’m good,” I replied.

It was the first time that I’d been really involved in club business and I wasn’t about to fuck it up. After a year as a prospect, taking the shittiest jobs at the garage and being the members’ bitch twenty-four hours a day, I’d finally gotten my patch. I was a full member of the Aces and Eights Motorcycle Club. I had the least seniority and I’d been called green more times than I could count, but my spot was secure. I had to just forget all the other shit swirling in my mind and focus on the job at hand.

“You’ll be good,” Mick said with a nod.

We took off, Mick and my dad on bikes with me and Rumi following behind in his truck. As we made our way through town, my uncle Will and cousin Brody pulled out of a parking lot behind us.

“Uncle Mack’s not comin’?” I asked Rumi, stretching my legs out in front of me. “He seemed like he was doin’ alright last night.”

“He’s sittin’ this one out,” Rumi replied, glancing at me. “Went up to the hospital this mornin’.”

“Probably better that way,” I muttered with a laugh. “Give his old ass a couple of days to recover.”

“Shit, he could still outride both of us,” Rumi said, glancing in the rearview mirror.

“Maybe you, not *me*,” I joked. Fuck, I was so jittery my hands were practically shaking. I glanced at Rumi, wondering if I should tell him but immediately decided against it.

“Yeah, right.” He snickered.

“You know it’s true.”

“What do you think the odds are of this thing goin’ off without a hitch like Dad seems to believe?”

“Fuck,” I sighed. “Fifty-fifty?”

“Yeah right.” Rumi laughed. “More like thirty-seventy. Something to remember, baby brother? Shit always goes sideways.”

After that little nugget of wisdom we lapsed into silence. Rumi *had* made us a road trip playlist, the psycho, and it wasn’t half bad. I tried to stay focused as we drove, but I found my mind wandering more than once. Normally, I would’ve fallen asleep in the car—I always did—but I was too keyed up. Instead, different shit ran through my head, like the fact that I needed to replace the kitchen sink in my old farmhouse, that my boots needed to be replaced before they completely fell apart, that I’d left laundry in the washing machine again and it was going to smell like ass, that I needed a haircut soon or I was going to look like Micky’s more attractive twin. I wished I was driving, Rumi was following too closely behind the bikes, and a million other bullshit thoughts. I let them come, one after another, refusing to let my mind stray to the one thing that was making me nuts.

By the time we turned onto the old gravel road in the mountains, my knees were stiff and my heart started thumping hard. It wasn’t racing, but I was hyperaware of its presence in my chest. I reached out to turn down Rumi’s music and he glanced at me, grinning.

“Rookie.”

“Shut up.”

“Look lively, boys,” Rumi murmured to the bikes ahead of us.

I grimaced as they carefully rode around potholes the size of kiddie pools, slowing to a crawl.

“Eyes sharp,” Rumi said a little louder, leaning forward to look around.

We were surrounded by old growth, the trees so tall that you couldn’t even see the tops, and it made me feel a little claustrophobic. They didn’t feel like they were closing in on us, but the brush was so dense at the base that anything could’ve been hiding in the trees and we wouldn’t see it until it was too late.

“Aren’t you glad we brought my truck?” Rumi asked as we ran over a particularly nasty hole in the road. “Your baby never woulda made it.”

“Good point,” I muttered, my eyes darting from tree to tree. It was the middle of the day, but everything was so shaded it could’ve been dusk.

“There she is.” Rumi jerked his chin toward the windshield and I looked forward to see an old as fuck cabin at the end of the road. The gravel, or what was left of it, went all the way to the front steps.

“Where the fuck would they hide anything?” I asked dubiously. The cabin was tiny, it couldn’t be more than one room. If they had stored the truck full of stolen guns here, they had to have filled the cabin all the way to the roof.

“Oh ye of little faith,” Rumi said, carefully pulling to the side so he could back up and park facing the exit. “You’d be surprised how crafty thieves can be.”

I followed him out of the truck and stood by my door as Uncle Will turned his SUV around and parked on the other side of the tiny clearing.

“Whistle if you see anything,” my dad said to me quietly as we all met at the bikes.

Rumi tossed me his keys and I stuffed them in my pocket.

I’d just turned toward the road, my eyes sweeping over the blackberry bushes and trees when the hair stood up on the

back of my neck. I didn't even question the feeling, just dropped to one knee as all hell broke loose behind me.

"Drop it," my uncle Will ordered.

"What the fuck?" my dad hissed.

"Whoa."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Who the heck are *you*?" a familiar woman's voice shot back.

I jerked in surprise as I turned, the shotgun in my hand forgotten.

She was standing there, her hair in a scraggly ponytail, wearing a dress that looked like it came from *Little House on the Prairie* and holding a pistol older than my gramps in both hands.

"Esther?" I croaked, staring. Memory after memory flashed vividly through my mind. *Fuck*.

Her wide eyes met mine and her hands—not altogether steady to begin with—began to shake alarmingly, considering the fact that the gun she was holding now pointed at my chest.

"Otto? What are you doing here?" she asked in confusion.

"Honey, you wanna drop that?" my dad interrupted, taking a step toward her.

"Whoa," Micky barked as her gun swung toward our dad.

"A little help here?" Rumi bellowed at me.

"Esther," I said, trying to keep my voice calm even though I was freaking the fuck out. "Could you stop pointin' that at my dad, sugar?"

"Your dad?" she said faintly. She shook her head as if to clear it and lowered her arms.

I strode toward the foot of the stairs but felt like I'd had the wind knocked out of me when she moved, letting go of the pistol with one hand to unconsciously slide her hand down the

front of her dress, outlining the suddenly visible swell of her belly.

“Oh, Christ,” Rumi muttered under his breath. “Shit *always* goes sideways. I fuckin’ *told you.*”

CHAPTER 1

ESTHER

“**N**O WAY,” I blurted, staring out the front windshield of my cousin’s car. “My parents will kill me. Your parents will ground you, mine will actually commit murder.”

“They will not,” my cousin Becka snorted. “They’ll never find out.”

“See, that’s the difference,” I argued, pointing at her. “My parents always find out. You can just do what you want willy-nilly—”

“Willy-nilly?” she murmured incredulously. I ignored her.

“—and your parents never find out. But mine have a radar or something. It’s like they can smell it on me when I do something wrong.”

“You’re nineteen years old! There’s nothing wrong with stopping by a little party. It’s not like anyone’s going to force you to drink.”

“They have alcohol?” I hissed, looking back out the windshield where small groups of people were illuminated around a large bonfire.

“Oh, my god,” Becka muttered, slamming her head dramatically against the headrest. “Just twenty minutes. Okay? I said we’d stop by.”

“Why would you say that? I told you I’d go for *ice cream*.” My voice was flat. “Do they have ice cream here? Because I highly doubt it.”

Becka’s lips twitched as she fought a smile. “They might.”

I glared while she looked at me imploringly. It was the same old story. Becka had been getting me into trouble since we could walk. Even though I was the older of us by two

months, she had always been the more adventurous. My aunt said Becka had a little bit of the devil in her, and no matter how she and my uncle had punished their youngest child over the years the devil had stuck around.

“Fine,” I ground out through my teeth. “Fifteen minutes.”

“Yes! You’re the best, you know that?”

“I hope it’s worth it,” I grumbled as she grabbed her purse and chatted excitedly.

“It’s going to be fun,” she assured me. “Matt said that everyone was going to be here—”

“We’re meeting boys,” I said under my breath as I climbed out of the car. “Of course we are. Drinking and boys. Might as well make the punishment worth it.”

We met at the front of the car and I let Becka wrap her arm through mine and tow me toward the bonfire. There were cars parked all over, but I didn’t recognize any of them. They were just big indistinguishable shapes that created a barrier between the clearing where everyone had congregated and the dark woods beyond.

“Do we know any of these people?” I asked, pulling Becka tighter against me as a couple of boys drunkenly grappled, stumbling toward us.

“We know a bunch of them,” she reassured me. “Most of the senior class is supposed to be here.”

“Becks,” a familiar and frankly unwelcome voice called from a place in the shadows.

“Matty!” My cousin tugged her arm away and skipped toward her on- again, off- again boyfriend, leaving me standing in a sea of unfamiliar faces.

They kissed while I averted my eyes. Matt was okay as a classmate, he wasn’t mean or anything, but I didn’t like him for my cousin. He was one of those kids that was handed everything, I didn’t think that he’d ever gone without—and that made him assume that he deserved whatever he wanted, including my beautiful cousin.

“Who’d you bring with you?” he asked cheerfully once they’d disengaged. He leaned toward me and his eyes widened. “Esther? You brought *Esther*?”

Yeah, no kidding.

“She’s my cousin,” Becka said, laughing a little. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Matt gaped like a fish for a few moments before abruptly snapping his mouth shut. “No reason.” His eyes scanned down my body and I had to fight the urge not to tug on my button-down or smooth the seams of my long denim skirt.

“We’re finally done with school,” Becka said, leaning against Matt as she looked at me. “And she’s never been to a party. I wanted her to experience at least one.”

“Having a spectacular time so far,” I replied dryly. “I can’t believe it’s taken me so long to attend.”

Becka rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

“The more, the merrier,” Matt said, smiling down at my cousin.

Gag me.

“Come on.” He gestured, tugging Becka with him. “Let’s get you guys some drinks.”

I followed behind them as they rounded the bonfire, keeping my eyes just unfocused enough that I didn’t have to make eye contact with anyone. While I didn’t have problems with anyone we’d gone to school with, they also weren’t people that I was anxious to spend time with. I’d made it through all thirteen years of school without being seriously bullied even though I was a full year older than most of them. There had always been a bit of distance between me and the rest of my classmates, though, because they thought I was weird. I dressed different, I wasn’t allowed to play any sports, and back when I’d been invited to birthday parties I’d never attended a single one.

Becka couldn’t do any of those things either, but she’d managed to somehow find her place among them. Probably

because she was fun, bubbly, outgoing. Everything I wasn't.

"Back for more?" another familiar voice called out as we reached the cluster of people surrounding some kind of metal barrel.

"Hey Travis," Becka sang.

"Becks!" Travis yelled excitedly. "You made it!"

"I told you we'd be here."

"Who's we?"

"Hi Travis," I said, stepping out from behind Becka.

"Esther?" he gaped in disbelief.

"You guys are so dumb," Becka said with a huff, stomping toward the barrel. "Stop staring at my cousin and get me a drink, yeah?"

"Good to see you?" Travis greeted doubtfully, his eyes still on me.

"Yeah, you too," I replied.

We'd been there for less than five minutes and I was already waiting to leave. As I looked around the crowd, I recognized at least half of the faces peering back at me as people we'd graduated with a few months before. There were a few underclassmen that really shouldn't have been at a party where people were drinking, but that was none of my business.

I couldn't believe what some of the girls were wearing. While I was used to the short skirts and the barely-there tank tops, I couldn't understand why they'd be wearing them when it was so chilly. It was still warm during the day but by the time the sun went down it had definitely started feeling like fall.

"You want a cup?" Travis held out a red plastic cup in my direction.

"What is it?" I asked stupidly, making a couple people laugh.

Travis looked down at the barrel and then back at me, like that answered my question. When I still hadn't responded his brows pulled together in confusion.

"Beer," he said slowly. "From the keg."

"No, thank you," I said quickly, taking a step backward.

So, that's what a keg looked like. I'd heard people talking about them more than once but I'd never actually seen one. Huh. Wait, that meant that Becka was drinking beer and she was supposed to drive me home in ten minutes. I turned to tell her to stop drinking, but she and Matt had blended back into the crowd and I couldn't see them anywhere.

My stomach sank as I searched. If she wanted to be an idiot, I couldn't really stop her, but I *had* to get home before my parents noticed that we'd been gone too long for a trip to the ice cream shop.

"Travis," I called. I wasn't crazy about the guy but at least I knew him. I was suddenly feeling very nervous surrounded by the rowdy crowd. "Do you have any water?"

"What?" he asked, turning away from the person he'd been talking to.

"Water," I repeated, leaning forward a little. "Do you have any water?"

"Uh." He stared at me for a moment like he hadn't understood. "No, I don't have any water. Sorry."

He turned away again and I sighed. I was stuck in the middle of nowhere with a bunch of drunk people I didn't even particularly like. I knew I could go look for Becka and Matt but I had a feeling I wouldn't like what I'd find. I had absolutely zero intention of ever seeing my cousin have sex with anyone.

"I've got water," a deep voice called, from somewhere on my right.

I turned, my eyes locking on a large torso covered in a light gray flannel. *Well, at least this guy didn't feel the need to dress like it was still summer.* I looked up and froze.

I'd never really felt attracted to anyone in real life. There were men on television that I'd thought were handsome and a couple of singers that had a particular pull, but it wasn't until that moment that I understood why the girls I'd grown up with went crazy over boys.

He was incredibly tall and his shoulders were massive. Short hair, stubble-covered jaw, and intense blue eyes that I couldn't seem to look away from. Holy crap.

"I've got some water," he repeated, jerking his head toward the row of cars. "It's in my car."

"Oh," I muttered, still unable to look away. "Um, thanks but—"

"Bottles," he said, cutting me off. "Still sealed and everything."

"Oh, no," I shook my head. "I didn't think you were trying to drug me." I laughed and looked down, gesturing at myself.

The man's lips twitched. "Relieved to hear it," he muttered quietly.

"What?" I was still staring. I knew it and I couldn't seem to stop. He was gorgeous. His face was perfectly symmetrical, I realized. Maybe that was why he was so beautiful. It looked like his nose had been broken at some point, but his jaw was chiseled and his lips were full. There was a hardness about him, an intensity that made me nervous but also seemed to pull me in. I was clearly losing it.

"You want to stay here and I'll go get it?" he asked, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Water," I blurted, finally catching the thread of the conversation. I glanced behind me at Travis, who was trying to get a couple of guys to hold his legs while he climbed on top of the keg. "I'll come with you," I told the stranger impulsively.

"Alright," he said, shrugging. "I'm parked right over there."

We walked side by side toward the line of cars and as the bonfire's light grew fainter I wondered belatedly if I'd just made a very bad decision.

"I'm Otto," he said, looking down at me.

"Esther," I replied.

"Pretty name."

"It's an old lady name," I argued easily.

He jerked a little in surprise, then relaxed again as if it hadn't happened.

"I don't know any old ladies named Esther," he said in amusement. "Do you?"

"Well, no," I conceded. "Except from the Bible."

"Oh," he joked. "So *really* old ladies."

"You could say that."

"I like it." He shrugged. "Don't meet a lot of Esthers."

"I've never met another Otto."

"My parents have a sense of humor," he muttered.

"No, I think it's cool," I argued, my cheeks heating with embarrassment. "I like unique names."

"So do my parents," he said dryly as we reached his car. "Give me a second, I think they're in the back seat."

"You carry water bottles around in your car?" I asked, stopping at the hood while he walked toward the driver's side.

"You don't?" he asked, ducking into the car.

"I don't have a car," I replied, raising my voice so he could hear me.

"You drive?" he asked, his big body straightening as he lifted two bottles in one hand.

"I can," I replied. "But I don't have a car. I just borrow my parents' car for work and stuff."

“Oh, yeah? Where do you work?” He strode back over and handed me a water as he leaned back and rested his butt against the hood of the car.

“My family has a nursery,” I replied. “Thanks.” The water was a little warm from sitting in the car, but I’d broken the seal on the top so I figured it was okay.

“You just graduated with the rest of those bozos, right?” he asked.

I choked on the water in my mouth.

“Yes,” I wheezed. “With my cousin, Becka.”

There was no sign of recognition on his face.

“Pretty? Blonde? Goes out with Matt Shepherd?”

“Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Oh.” I looked away and twisted the cap back on my water. I wasn’t really sure what to say. Everyone knew Becka. Considering the way we’d been raised, it was incredible really, but she was one of the most popular girls in our class.

“I didn’t spend much time with underclassmen,” he said easily. “I graduated year before last.”

“You went to school with us?” I asked in surprise, looking at him again. “No you didn’t. I definitely would have remembered you.”

He laughed and it felt like my entire belly and chest filled with hot lava. The smile changed his entire face. His eyes crinkled at the corners and his teeth were perfectly white and straight and oh, god, I was *staring* again.

“I remember you,” he replied, elbowing me lightly.

“No you don’t.”

He laughed again. “Swear.”

“Why?” I asked dubiously. “It’s the skirts, right? Anyone else can wear a skirt but just because I do I’m weird.”

“It wasn’t the skirts,” he said, his laughter fading. “Did kind of wonder about that, though.”

“My parents think females should wear skirts,” I answered simply. There were far more detailed reasons, but I wasn’t willing to get into them when I had this beautiful man’s full attention.

“Got it,” he replied, nodding. “Well, it wasn’t the skirts anyway. It was the hair.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” I demanded, reaching for the bun at the back of my head. Everyone wore buns in their hair, it was cool! The other girls wore them messier than I wore mine, but they were basically the same hairstyle.

“Nothin’ wrong with it,” he said, watching as I smoothed my hand over it. “I just always wondered what it looked like down.”

“Oh.” I dropped my hand. Okay, that wasn’t so bad.

For the first time in my entire life, I *cared* that this guy didn’t think I was a freak.

“It’s so thick,” he murmured, shrugging. He opened his water and took a drink. “It’s long, huh?”

“Pretty long, yeah.”

“I bet it’s heavy.”

“It gives me a headache sometimes,” I agreed, ruefully.

“You ever wear it down?” he asked, his voice quiet.

“Only at home.”

We were quiet for a few minutes, watching as the crowd around the bonfire grew louder and rowdier. The two of us weren’t that far away from the group, but our little place in the darkness still felt isolated somehow. Separate.

“So, Esther,” he said, glancing down at me with a smile. “I’m guessin’ this isn’t really your scene.”

I let out a choked laugh at the amusement in his words and shook my head.

“Not really,” I replied. His smile was contagious.

“What would you rather be doin’ right now?” he asked, relaxing against the hood of the car.

“Reading,” I replied immediately. “Or knitting.”

“Party animal,” he teased. “My mom knits.”

“I can make *clothing* from *strings*,” I said loftily, lifting my hands and wiggling my fingers. “Don’t knock it.”

“You make any of that?” he asked, waving his hand toward my clothes.

I held back a snort. “No, these were bought from a store,” I replied dryly. “Probably the same one you shop at.”

“Doubt that,” he chuckled.

“What do you like to do for fun?”

“Hang out with my brothers,” he said after a moment. “Work on my house—”

“You have your own house?” I couldn’t keep the surprise out of my voice.

“I do.” He nodded. “It’s a pile, so I’m always workin’ on shit, but it’s mine.”

“That’s so cool.”

He grinned and my stomach flipped over. “You’ll have to come by sometime. I’ll show you around.”

I smiled back but couldn’t hold his gaze. We both knew that I’d never in a million years see his house. The chance of us ever speaking again was practically non-existent.

I was playing with fire. I *knew* I should say thank you for the drink and walk away. I didn’t know him from Adam, and I’d probably never see him again. I should say goodbye and go find Becka and get the heck out of there before my parents noticed that we weren’t where we’d said we’d be.

But I couldn’t make myself go. I wanted to soak in the moment just a little longer. He was so perfect. Nice and huge and handsome.

Someday soon, my parents would find a man that they thought was a good match, and we'd court for a while, fully chaperoned, and then we'd eventually get married and have kids and my entire world would consist of housework and weekly trips to the grocery store and I was *fine* with that. Mostly. It was what I'd been raised to expect. I honestly couldn't imagine anything different.

But I'd also probably never feel the nervous butterflies in my stomach again, and that felt like such a tragedy. I told myself I'd stay just a few more minutes and then I'd go find Becka.

"I'm kind of obsessed with your hair," he blurted out of nowhere.

"You're *what*?" I asked incredulously, looking back at him. He was scrubbing a hand over his face sheepishly, his eyes crinkled at the corners.

"There's so damn much of it," he mumbled in embarrassment.

"I'm pretty sure I have a normal amount of hair."

"You don't," he replied, shaking his head. "Have you ever cut it?"

"Of course I've cut it." I rolled my eyes. The conversation was getting really weird, but I couldn't help but be intrigued. He was staring at me. *Me*.

Invisible Esther.

I was sure that I'd never held anyone's attention before. It was a heady sensation, to say the least.

"Bullshit," he said, his lips twitching.

"I've trimmed it," I clarified, crossing my arms over my chest. "If I didn't, it would get all stringy at the ends."

"Can't have that," he replied in amusement.

"You want to see it down?" I asked, sighing like it was a huge pain to even offer. In reality, my stomach was somersaulting like I'd swallowed a hive of bees. He watched

me like I was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen, and in that moment I would've done anything to hold his gaze.

"Seriously?" he asked, straightening.

"Yeah."

"Fuck yeah," he said quickly. He laughed a little at himself. "I mean yes. I've been dyin' to see it."

"Seems like a weird thing to be *dying to see*," I replied as I reached for my hair.

"Maybe to you," he said, his eyes on my hands. "You've seen it."

"It's really nothing special," I warned, handing him a bobby pin. I searched around, finding them easily. I could do my hair in my sleep, I'd been wearing it the same way for so long. I'd handed him five pins when my hair started to droop in the back, and I slid my fingers into the hair tie and pulled it out. "Brown and mostly straight."

"Holy hell," he murmured as my hair fell down my back.

I laughed self-consciously as I ran my fingers through it and turned away from him. "See? It's just hair."

I froze as his fingers touched the back of my neck and slid down, following the strands of hair until they ended right above my butt. I wanted to turn, so I could see his face, but as his fingers started again at my neck I felt almost hypnotized.

"Why the hell would you wear this up all the time?" he murmured, both hands running through my hair.

"It's kind of like the skirt thing," I replied, looking at him over my shoulder.

"Your parents have rules about your *hair*?"

"Yep." They had rules about everything, and I was breaking them one by one.

His hand wrapped lightly around the back of my neck and for some reason, I didn't feel nervous as he turned me to face him.

“Is it everything you hoped for?” I teased uncomfortably as his hand tightened in the hair at my nape.

“I get it now,” he replied, staring at me. “You wear this down and your parents would be puttin’ bars on the windows to keep the guys away.”

I rolled my eyes. It was just hair. It was long and annoying and took forever to wash. I was still *me* when it was down and I’d never had a single boy show any kind of interest.

“I’m not jokin’,” he breathed. “Jesus Christ.”

“I doubt he cares what my hair looks like,” I said lightly.

“You’re fuckin’ gorgeous,” he said incredulously.

“Uh, thank you?” I wasn’t sure it was a compliment considering his tone.

He didn’t reply as he pulled my hair forward, smoothing it down over my shoulders.

“Can I put it back up now?” I asked, tilting my head in question.

“Not yet, yeah?” he murmured, shaking his head. “I’m gonna kiss you.”

“Wait, what?” I asked, jerking back. For some reason, I had not anticipated where this entire scenario was heading.

“You don’t want me to?”

I gaped at him like a fish. Did I want him to? Yes. A thousand times yes. He was the most attractive man I’d ever seen and he was staring at me like he was starving. What I couldn’t understand is why he’d *want* to.

“No worries,” he said easily, his hands untangling from my hair.

“I do,” I stuttered quickly. “I do want you to kiss me.”

“You sure?” he asked calmly.

Was I? No.

“I’m sure.”

“Alright.” His hands tunneled into the hair behind my ears as he tilted my face toward him, and I held my breath as he leaned closer.

It wasn't anything like I'd imagined it would be. His lips didn't even make contact at first. As his nose slid along the side of mine, nuzzling me, I let out the shaky breath I'd been holding. His thumbs rubbed my cheeks gently as he paused just centimeters away, and then his lips were on mine and I short-circuited completely.

He moved slowly, his lips barely touching mine, nipping gently and rubbing his tongue along the seam and I felt it everywhere, from my scalp to my toes. As I relaxed into the kiss, reaching out to rest my hands on his stomach, he tilted my head, his tongue slipping into my mouth.

I was stunned. *This* was what kissing was like? I'd known the logistics of kissing since seventh grade, but I'd never been tempted to let someone put their tongue anywhere near me. It was probably a good thing that I hadn't known what I was missing.

As his hands left my head and smoothed over my back and down over my butt, I shivered, but I didn't even consider stopping him. Every move, every touch, was a revelation. I hadn't had any idea what the big deal was. Sex was clearly fun, lots of people did it even when they weren't trying to have kids, but I'd just never felt the urge to try it. I was feeling that urge now and I didn't pause to question it.

He lifted me onto the hood of his car, shoving my skirt up so he could step in between my knees, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, worried that he would stop kissing me and it would all be over. I wasn't ready to go back to real life, not when he was touching me and making every inch of my skin tingle with awareness.

Maybe it was because I was the middle child in a family that lived by the rule that children were seen and not heard, or maybe it was because I'd spent thirteen years of my life walking school hallways like a ghost—overlooked by everyone, or maybe it was just the fact that I was nineteen and

I'd lived a sheltered life and now suddenly the world felt like it had broken wide open... but at no point did I think that we should stop. For once in my life, consequences felt as distant as the moon.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, running his mouth down my neck, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. "Can I—"

When he started unbuttoning my shirt, I must have completely lost all sense of reality, because I helped him. There was skin under my shirt and I needed his mouth on it.

I didn't think about what would happen when it was all over. I didn't worry about the fact that my parents were definitely looking for me by then or that I was getting in way over my head. This insanely attractive man was solely focused on me and I never wanted it to end. Every step of the process happened so gradually that I was dying for the next step and by the time it happened I was ready.

I was completely topless by the time he laid me down across the front seat of his car, my feet dangling out of the open door. As he sucked on my nipples and his hands swept my skirt to my waist I felt drunk on him, drunk on the feeling of his body pressing against mine and his mouth on my skin. My mom had warned me that the first time was terrible, but this was the opposite. My skin was on fire. My heart was racing.

I didn't even flinch when his fingers trailed up my legs and began to slide delicately over the slippery skin between my thighs. I was so frantic for him by then, stopping was the very last thing on my mind.

I should've been nervous. Scared, even.

I wasn't. For once, I wasn't afraid of anything. I felt invincible. Beautiful. *Wanted*.

"Otto," I breathed, pulling on his shirt.

He leaned back and whipped it over his head and I stared at the muscular chest above me, dimly lit by the bonfire outside. I hadn't known that people were actually built like that in real life. His muscles had muscles.

I slid my hands down his torso, marveling at the definition and he shuddered as I reached his waistband.

“You sure?” he asked, his hands covering mine.

It was dark, he’d turned off the overhead light when he’d opened the door so we wouldn’t be illuminated for everyone to see, but I could still just barely make out the bulge in the front of his jeans.

I didn’t want to stop. It was the only chance I would ever have and I knew it. What we were doing, the desperation and the need and the overwhelming sensations would never come again. I wanted to see him. I wanted to feel him. I wanted him to be as vulnerable as I was.

“I’m sure,” I said, fumbling with the button on his jeans.

Leaning up as far as I could, I wrapped my hand around him, marveling at the way he shuddered and arched toward me. I felt powerful in that moment, a novelty for someone who’d grown up the way I had.

Then he was reaching into his pocket and pulling out a condom and I was blissfully watching him roll it on, fascinated by the way his forearm tightened as he stroked himself. By the time he leaned down over me and wrapped my legs around his back, I was practically shuddering with need.

Reality hit me like a crushing wave as he thrust forward. He wasn’t abrupt by any means, but he didn’t go slowly either and before I could open my mouth to say a word, he’d broken my hymen and was lodged completely inside me.

“You good?” he whispered in my ear. “This okay?”

What was I supposed to say? No? That it hurt? That I was pretty sure he’d broken something? I didn’t want it to be over, even though I knew that for me the magic of the moment had passed. He was still gently running his fingers over my skin and through my hair that had pooled around my head. His body was still vibrating with desperation.

“I’m good,” I whispered back, kissing his jawline.

I wasn't ready to lose his attention. I wasn't ready for reality.

I stared at the roof of the car, refusing to let the tears in my eyes fall. He was being so gentle, so sweet, whispering how beautiful I was and how good I felt, and all I could think about was how badly it burned every time he moved.

I tightened my legs around his waist as he shuddered and his thrusts became irregular and awkward, holding him tight as he climaxed with a groan.

He pulled out of me and I stifled a moan of relief, lifting my face so he could kiss me softly, his fingers brushing the hair away from my face.

"You okay?" he asked, searching my face.

"I'm good," I replied, trying to smile. "Why?"

"You didn't come."

I stared at him for a moment and then forced out a laugh. "You didn't notice?"

"You came?"

"Uh, yeah," I lied, laying my hand on his cheek. "You must not have been paying attention."

"Not sure how I didn't notice," he said, a small smile playing on his lips. "Considerin' all I can fuckin' see is you."

I smiled, not sure what to say. I wanted him to get off me. The knowledge that we'd been missing for a very long time and at any moment my cousin could find us naked in the front seat of his car made my skin break out in a cold sweat. I shivered.

"You cold?" he asked, kissing me once more before pushing up and away from me.

"Yeah," I said softly, scooting out of the car. I shoved my skirt down over my hips and reached down for my underwear as something dripped down the inside of my thigh. Mortification made my cheeks burn as I hurriedly pulled the underwear on and shuffled them up under my skirt.

“Here, baby,” Otto murmured, reaching out to snag my bra and shirt off the hood of his car. Oh, god, had he already forgotten my name?

I put them on without a word, my hands flying frantically over the buttons. As soon as I was dressed, I reached up and quickly pulled my hair back into a ponytail. “Do you have my bobby pins?” I asked, glancing back at Otto.

He was leisurely buttoning up the flannel he’d been wearing over his T-shirt. I couldn’t even remember when he’d taken it off.

“Oh, shit.” He grimaced, looking toward the front of the car. “I think I dropped them.”

My stomach clenched with anxiety as I hurried toward where we’d been standing, kneeling down so I could run my fingers over the grass and pine needles. Every fear and anxiety that had disappeared while we were doing... all of the things we’d been doing, were back in full force. My panic was so thick it felt like it was choking me.

He lit the ground with a flashlight and I found two of the bobby pins, stuffing them into my hair. That was how Becka and Matt found us.

“What in the world are you doing?” Becka asked, startling me so badly that I yelped.

“I lost a couple bobby pins,” I replied, deciding to stick as close as I could to the truth without actually telling her the truth.

“Why did you take them out in the first place?” she asked, crouching down next to me.

“They were giving me a headache,” I muttered. “I took them out to fix them and he bumped into me and I dropped them.”

I had never been so thankful for the dark in my life. My face felt so hot that I knew my cheeks were beet red.

“Who bumped into you?” Becka looked over at Otto and made a noise in the back of her throat. “*Otto Hawthorne?*”

“Hey,” Otto said, his voice flat. I glanced at him to see if he was angry that I’d lied, but there was no expression on his face.

“I haven’t seen you in forever,” Becka said, leaning back on her heels. “How have you been?”

“No complaints,” Otto replied.

“You two know each other?” I asked, the bobby pins forgotten.

“Yeah,” Becka said easily. “We hung out a couple times last year.” She glanced over at Matt. “Before me and Matty got together.”

Mortification and betrayal burned in my gut. He’d said he didn’t know her. That he didn’t even recognize her *name*. Of course he’d been lying. Everyone knew Becka. She was pretty and smart and outgoing and willing to face any consequence as long as she was having fun. But why had he lied?

“Esther,” Otto said quietly, trying to get my attention.

I couldn’t even look at him. He’d seen every part of me. He’d been *inside* of me. Oh, god. How could I have been so stupid? The full ramifications of what I’d done in the darkness of the forest slammed into me. *I didn’t even know him*.

“You know my cousin?” Becka asked him in confusion.

“Let’s go, Becka,” I ordered, getting to my feet.

“Esther,” Otto said again, his voice nearly a growl.

“What the hell is going on?” Becka asked.

Matt started to laugh. “No fucking way,” he said, looking back and forth between us. His eyes widened as he sniffed the air. “No fucking way! You fucked the—”

Whatever he’d been about to call me was cut off abruptly when Otto’s fist hit his jaw with a loud thunk and he flew, landing on his back in the dirt.

Becka squeaked in fear.

“Let’s go,” I said, tugging on her arm.

“You got somethin’ to say?” Otto asked, standing over my cousin’s idiot boyfriend.

“No,” Matt mumbled, his voice shaking.

“What the heck is happening?” Becka shook her head in confusion.

“Let’s go,” I repeated, jerking her away. “Come on, we’re already so late.”

“Matt?”

“Go, Becks,” Matt said quietly as he sat up. “You’re gonna get in trouble.”

“Are you okay?”

“Go,” he snapped.

He was embarrassed and being an ass, but I didn’t care. I was just happy that he was telling my cousin to leave. I was on the verge of tears and I wanted to get as far from Otto as possible. Even the fear of facing my parents felt small when compared to having to look him in the face again.

“Fine,” Becka said, taking a step backward. She grabbed my hand and stomped toward her car.

“Can you drive?” I asked, hurrying to keep up with her.

“I had half a beer, I’m fine,” she replied, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye. “You know you’re going to have to tell me what the hell you were doing with Otto Hawthorne, right?”

“He liked my hair,” I said faintly as we reached her car.

I slid into the passenger seat and carefully buckled my seat belt. My hands were shaking.

“And?” Becka asked impatiently as she climbed in beside me.

“He kissed me,” I replied with a shrug.

Becka whooped so loud that a couple of heads by the fire turned to stare.

“My cousin got her first kiss and it was *Otto Freaking Hawthorne!*” she exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear as she poked me in the side. “Dang, girl, go big or go home.”

Becka was still shaking her head and smiling proudly as she drove us down the mountain. She didn't even notice the way my entire body shook with leftover nerves or that my hands were clenched so tightly in my lap that by the time I got home my nails had left little bloody half-circles on my palms.

CHAPTER 2

OTTO

I WAS SWAYING. I knew it. I felt it. But I couldn't seem to hold myself steady.

"You better go puke," my cousin Brody advised me cheerfully, throwing his hand around my shoulders. "If you pass out you'll never hear the end of it."

"It's my party," I replied, leaning heavily against him. "I can pass out if I want to."

Brody laughed and shoved me away a little so he could grip me by the shoulders and look closely at my face. "You'll do. How's the back?"

"Burns like the worst sunburn I've ever had," I mumbled.

He grinned. "Give it a couple days and you'll forget it's there."

"I highly fuckin' doubt that," I scoffed. The massive tattoo that covered me from ass crack to the base of my neck was one of the reasons why I'd gotten so hammered. It hadn't hurt badly while it was being done, I'd had worse scratches given to me during sex, but a few hours after I was done the soreness had begun to grate on my nerves. I couldn't make even the slightest movement without feeling the scratch of my T-shirt rubbing against it.

"Quit bitchin'," my brother Rumi ordered loudly as he strode toward us. "We've all got one."

"Pretty sure you whined for a month," Nova pointed out, wrapping her arm around his waist. "*Nova, can you rub this ointment on my back please? It stings.*"

"Sugar, I just wanted your hands on me," he replied with a chuckle. "By the third day you can barely feel it."

Nova scowled.

“You just need to find a woman who’ll grease you up,” Rumi told me.

“No women,” I said, shaking my head. Oh, shit, I’d better not do that again or I was going to end up on my ass. My head was already beginning to throb.

“There’s a few around here,” Brody joked, looking around the room. “Want me to find you one?”

“Make sure none of us are related to her or fucked her already,” Rumi joked.

“Who else have you fucked?” Nova spat incredulously. Then she was looking around the room, too.

“No one, baby,” Rumi murmured. “But Brody gets around.”

“I’m not fuckin’ anyone,” I said, raising my voice to be heard above their bickering. “*Mom* is here. Jesus.”

“You’re the *third* son to get patched in. Mom has mastered the art of turning a blind eye,” Rumi joked. “She’ll probably leave soon so she doesn’t have to see the debauchery.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” my mom called from halfway across the room.

“How the fuck did you hear that?” Rumi called back.

“If you were trying to be quiet, you failed, son.”

“We’re just tryin’ to get poor Otto laid, Ma,” Rumi said innocently.

“You leave my baby boy alone,” she said with a laugh. “He doesn’t need you corrupting him.”

“Ah yes,” Rumi said snarkily. “He is clearly as pure as the driven snow.”

Eventually my brother and Nova walked away and Brody got called into an argument so I was left alone again to wander around the room. Everyone was celebrating and I was the main attraction. It reminded me of the birthday parties we’d have as

kids when all eyes were on me, asking if I was having fun, singling me out, getting me whatever I wanted. Growing up in a family of five kids, I'd fucking loved my birthday. I wasn't as interested in the attention as an adult.

"Who woulda guessed the little bruiser who broke every toy he was given would grow up to be one of my best mechanics and join the club," our president Dragon joked as I stepped up next to him at the bar. "How ya doin', kid? Havin' fun?"

"Glad I won't be bartendin' or cleanin' the bathrooms tonight," I replied, laughing as he gave me a shove.

"You'll do what's asked of you and shut your trap," he said gruffly, but he was almost smiling. "Bein' a prospect sucks, but there's a point to it. Gotta know if you're willin' to take the jobs no one else wants. Follow orders. Put the club before yourself."

"I'll do all that," I confirmed.

"Never doubted it." Dragon picked up his whiskey and turned to face the crowd. "You boys, you're all born into it. You know what's expected of you before your first day—the others, not so much."

"Wanker's a good guy," I said, following his gaze toward a prospect who was getting fucked with across the room. My dad and a couple other guys were clearly giving him shit about something, but the guy was holding his own.

"Seems to be," Dragon confirmed. "We'll see."

"He was stoked that he wasn't goin' to be on the gate tonight," I said, laughing as my dad stuck his foot out to trip Wanker. "He's probably regrettin' that now."

"I can't for the life of me remember that kid's real name," Dragon muttered, watching Wanker like he was an insect under a microscope.

"It's Cian," I replied.

"Cian," Dragon repeated. His lips tipped upward a little. "The accent is enough for me to keep him straight from the

other two, but fuck if I can remember their names.”

“His parents were Irish,” I said helpfully.

“I’m aware,” he said dryly. “The accent is familiar.”

I coughed in embarrassment. Yeah, obviously he recognized the accent. The old vice president—and his father-in-law—never lost his Irish accent even after a lifetime in America.

“Look around the room,” Dragon said after a few moments. “Most of these people were your family before, but they’re all family now. You were one of the protected before.” He looked at me. “Now you do the protectin’.”

“Understood.”

“Though, you’ve been doin’ that a while, yeah?”

I nodded in understanding. A few years before, I’d killed a man who’d threatened my sister-in-law Emilia. I hadn’t meant to kill him, just knock him out before he could shoot her, but he’d died anyway. It was something that I knew no one outside the club would ever know about, a secret that I could be confident would never see the light of day.

“It’s a hard life,” Dragon said, watching as his wife laughed at something my aunt Farrah said. “But a damn good one.”

I cleared my throat.

“Got shit we need to go over on Monday,” he said, looking back at me. “But it can wait. Grab another drink and go find a woman.”

“I’ll get the drink,” I said, turning toward the bar. Dragon huffed and slapped me on the back, making the breath go out of me in a whoosh. By the time I’d inhaled again, my hands were clenched into fists and he’d walked away.

“How you doin’, baby brother?” Micky asked, grimacing as he made his way toward me. “Brace yourself for more of that shit. Swear to God I got my back slapped no less than twenty times the night I was patched in.”

“Motherfucker,” I breathed. The thought of it made me queasy.

“You’ll live,” he said, grinning at the look on my face. “Feelin’ any different with that member patch on your chest?”

“A bit,” I replied. “Glad the probation is finally over at least.”

“Yeah, I hear that.”

“Where’s Emilia?”

“She left early,” Micky replied. “Rhett’s got an ear infection so she didn’t want to leave him with Myla too long.”

“Myla was pissed she couldn’t come tonight.”

“Oh, I know.” He chuckled. “She called me and Rumi both, tryin’ to get us to sneak her in.”

“Like no one would notice a fifteen-year-old girl in this shit?” I asked, looking around the room. The music was loud and people were everywhere. There was a woman I didn’t recognize completely topless in the corner, dancing by herself. Rumi and a few of our cousins were having a loud argument by the pool tables about something that probably didn’t matter in the slightest. There was a fine film of residue on one of the coffee tables where someone had been snorting lines. I wrinkled my nose in distaste. I’d tried coke and didn’t enjoy the experience in the slightest.

“You okay?” Micky asked, lowering his voice when I reached up to push my fingertips against my forehead.

“Fine,” I assured him, dropping my hand back down.

“You know, this is pretty tame for a patch party.”

“Yeah?”

“I got Rumi strippers,” he said with a shrug. “Seemed appropriate for the little horndog.”

“Fuck, I bet he loved that.”

“He sure did.”

“Thanks for not gettin’ me strippers,” I mumbled.

“You’re not the type,” Micky replied, smiling. “You’re pretty reserved on a good day—even more so the last few months.”

I nodded. I wasn’t really sure what the response for that was. I’d never been the life of the party.

“You ever find that girl you slept with?”

I jerked in surprise and looked over at my brother. I’d mentioned to my sister-in-law Emilia that I’d slept with someone and couldn’t remember who it was but I hadn’t realized she’d talked to Micky about it.

“Can’t remember shit,” I lied, shaking my head slowly.

“You go to the clinic?”

“I’m not an idiot,” I replied with a scoff. “I went, and I’m clean.”

“Well, there’s that.”

“I wore a condom,” I muttered. “I found it in the Mustang—it’s the only reason I knew I’d fucked someone.”

“How do you *not* remember fuckin’ someone?” Micky asked dubiously. “Seems like it would be on the highlight reel.”

“You remember every woman you’ve fucked?” I asked defensively, then immediately snapped my mouth shut with realization.

“Yep,” Micky said in amusement. “But, you know, I’m livin’ with her. Kinda hard to forget.”

“You realize how fuckin’ weird that is, right?”

“When you’ve had the best,” he said with a shrug, his words trailing off. “Why bother lookin’ for anythin’ else?”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Once you find her, you’ll get it.”

“Probably,” I conceded, thinking of Esther. “Haven’t found her yet.”

“Maybe you have,” he replied, lips twitching with humor. “And you were too drunk to remember it.”

“Fuck you,” I grumbled, laughing.

“I mean, I doubt you were *her* best,” he continued, laughter in his voice. “Considerin’ you were so drunk you can’t remember it.”

“Fuck off.”

“Can’t imagine you were all that coordinated,” he mused. “Or hard.”

“I can stay hard when I’m drunk,” I snapped. “You got an issue with that? You need to talk about it, brother? Let’s unpack.”

By that point Micky was laughing so hard he was barely making any noise. “Nah, I’m good, bud. No problems there.”

“You sure? They got little pills for that, you know?”

“Little pills for what?” my baby sister asked from behind me. I jerked in surprise and turned.

“How the fuck did you get here?” I asked, looking over her head for my parents.

“I paid Titus forty bucks,” she replied smugly.

“Fuck, Titus is here too?” Micky barked.

“Nope,” she said happily. “He just dropped me off. He didn’t want to get in trouble.”

“Why the fuck did they even let you through the gate?”

Myla laughed and rolled her eyes. “Like they’d tell me I couldn’t get onto the property.”

“You’re leavin’.”

“I am not,” she said, taking a hasty step backward. “It cost me forty bucks!”

“Not my problem,” I growled. I finally caught sight of my mom across the room. “Ma!”

“Myla Rose,” my mom yelled, her voice cutting through the noise in the room.

“I hate you,” Myla hissed, kicking me in the leg.

“Come on, short stack,” Micky said, dodging her swinging arms as he threw her over his shoulder. “Time to go.”

“I just got here,” Myla bellowed, wiggling like a worm on a hook. “Dammit, Micky!”

“You’re in so much trouble,” my dad barked. He was trying to keep his face straight, but I could see the laughter in his eyes. While he definitely didn’t want Myla in the middle of a club party, I could tell that he admired the balls it had taken for her to sneak her way in.

“How the hell did you get here?” my mom asked. She turned on my dad. “Did you know about this?”

“I’m fifteen,” Myla said in exasperation, still slung over Micky’s shoulder. She let her body go limp and was hanging there like a sack of potatoes. “I’m old enough to go to parties.”

“No you’re not,” Mick snapped. He looked at my parents. “I’m gonna take her ass home.”

“Thanks, baby,” my mom said with a sigh, rolling her eyes. “Happy Myla? Now your brother has to leave to take you home. We’re supposed to be celebrating Otto.”

“Or I could just *stay*.”

“Not happenin’,” I replied, reaching out to yank her hair.

“It’s not even that crazy in here! Is this because of the chick in the corner?” she asked, whipping her head up to look at me. “I’ve seen boobs before, Otto. I *have* some.”

“Jesus Christ,” Micky muttered in disgust. “Shut up.”

“Boobs,” Myla yelled. “Tits! Boobies! Breasts! Titties! Nipples!”

“She gets that from you,” my dad muttered as Micky strode quickly toward the door.

“Yeah, right,” my mom replied dryly.

“Pretty sure it’s from both of you,” my grandpa Grease joked as he joined the group. “How the hell did she get here?”

“Titus drove her,” I said, watching Micky wrestle Myla out the front door.

“He’s dead,” my dad muttered.

“She paid him forty bucks.” I choked back a laugh. It was probably the easiest forty dollars Titus had ever made.

“And got caught less than five minutes after he’d dropped her off,” my mom said in amusement. “Poor Myla.”

“Poor Myla, my ass,” I scoffed. “I told her she couldn’t come. Micky told her. Even Rumi told her.”

“I would’ve guessed that Rumi snuck her in,” Gramps said thoughtfully.

“Nova’s mellowed him out some,” my mom replied. “She’s good for him.”

All of us looked across the room to where Rumi was dancing on the top of a table, his hips grinding on some invisible partner. As we watched, he tore off his shirt and Nova whistled, leaning forward to tuck a dollar bill in the waistband of his jeans.

“Oh, yeah,” Gramps said dryly. “She’s really calmed him down.”

The rest of the night had no more surprises and went by in a blur of back slaps, congratulations, and drinking. I’d slowed down quite a bit because I didn’t want to have big black spots in my memory, but I still drank way more than I should’ve. When I woke up on a couch the next morning, my head felt like it was going to explode and even the dim light coming through the windows felt like knives stabbing into my eyes.

I stumbled to the bathroom and when I came out a few minutes later, my sister-in-law was waiting for me.

“I brought you coffee,” Emilia called softly. “And a breakfast sandwich from Charlie’s shop.”

“Bacon?”

“Of course.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, sitting down beside her. “I feel like shit.”

“I figured you would,” she replied with a smile, handing me the coffee cup and sandwich. “You always do after you drink.”

“The price of vice,” I joked.

“Do you still get migraines?” she asked thoughtfully as I unwrapped my sandwich.

“Not very often.” God, my stomach was churning but the food still smelled so fucking good. “Once a month, maybe?”

“And any time you drink, right?” She kicked off her shoes and curled her legs up under her.

“Yep. Can’t escape the hangovers.”

“Micky barely gets them.” She dug in her purse and pulled out a small bottle, handing me a couple of Tylenol.

“Oh, yeah?” I wasn’t really interested in Micky’s hangovers or lack thereof. I nodded my thanks for the painkiller and swallowed them dry before taking a tentative sip of the scalding coffee.

“Rumi has to drink a lot to feel sick the next day.”

“They’re the lucky ones, I guess,” I muttered around a bite of food.

“Did you have a good party?” she asked, wisely changing the subject.

“It was fun,” I confirmed. “How’s Rhett? His ears any better?”

“He’s whiny.” Emilia rolled her eyes. “But he’s been on medicine a few days, so I think he’s just soaking up the attention at this point.”

“Smart kid.”

“I left him and Micky in front of the TV watching cartoons.”

“You didn’t have to bring me breakfast.”

“I know, but I felt bad that I had to leave last night.”

I waved her off. “No big deal.”

“Are you excited that you got your patch?”

“Listen to you, spoutin’ off the lingo.”

“I’m learning,” she said with a laugh.

“Not excited.” I shrugged. “Relieved, maybe? Settled, mostly.”

“You feel settled?” she asked dubiously.

“You know, just glad. I’m here for good.”

“Was that ever in question?”

“Nope.” I took another bite, thinking. “I’m betting it’s like gettin’ married. You know you’re gonna do it, and once it’s done, you’re relieved and...content, I guess.”

“That’s a really weird analogy, but okay.”

“I know,” I said dryly. “And not a very good one—you can get out of a marriage.”

“And the Aces are for life,” she said softly.

“Right.”

Emilia sighed and leaned back on the couch before wrinkling her nose and sitting forward again. “This thing stinks.”

“It’s been in the middle of the clubhouse for the last twenty years,” I replied dryly. “Who the fuck knows what’s on it.”

“Gross,” she cried, hopping up.

“I haven’t caught anything from it yet,” I said, stuffing the last of my sandwich in my mouth. “I think you’re safe.”

“The next time you see I’m about to sit down, remind me of this conversation.” She glanced around at the other dilapidated couches.

“No way,” I joked. “I’ll remind you once you’ve been there a while.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” I took another sip of my coffee, and finding it cool enough to drink, slammed it back while Emilia watched in amusement.

“Feel better?” she asked as I got up to throw away my garbage.

“Yeah.”

We walked companionably outside, and I fumbled for the sunglasses that I’d stuck in the neck of my T-shirt. It was an overcast day and was clearly going to rain again any minute, but it was still too bright for comfort.

“Thanks again for bringing me breakfast,” I said, knocking my arm into hers as we headed toward the forecourt where we’d parked.

“Welcome.” She grinned at me. “It gave me an excuse to get out of the house and get my own coffee.”

I laughed and waved as she headed toward her car. Me and Emilia had always gotten along, but I’d had a serious chip on my shoulder when she’d taken off for parts unknown and left Micky without a word. When she’d come back, I’d been pissed. The *audacity*.

Then, while I’d been watching out for her and Rhett, her old boss had somehow snuck into Micky’s house. Seeing her at the business end of some asshole’s pistol had put things into perspective, to say the least. After that whole situation, we’d gotten a lot closer. Putting it mildly, she mothered me, and I allowed it. She’d never had siblings and it kind of felt like she was making up for lost time with us.

I rode home, letting the wind blow away the cobwebs left over from the shitty rest I’d gotten on the couch.

As always, the sight of my house brightened me up a bit. My dad had given each of the adult kids the opportunity to buy one of his project houses if we wanted to. I was pretty sure he

wouldn't have even thought of it except for the fact that he'd had to buy Emilia's old house for Mick after my brother had trashed it. The situation had actually worked out well, so Dad had offered the same deal to Rumi a couple years later. I'd seen the writing on the wall and by the time he'd made the offer to me, I'd known exactly which house I wanted.

He'd had the old farmhouse for a couple of years by then because it hadn't been like his usual fix-and-sell properties. For one thing, it actually *had* property and all of the other flip houses were in neighborhoods. The house sat on ten acres of forest overgrown with blackberries that needed to be cleared. For another, it was smaller than he usually messed with and he'd known that in order for it to make the kind of money he'd wanted, there would have to be some major fucking work done.

I'd had the place for almost a year and it was nearly unrecognizable from the house it had been before. After spending a solid month of summer nights and weekends on my uncle's tractor, there wasn't a blackberry in sight. There was new gravel on the driveway, I'd replaced the siding and painted the outside of the house and detached garage a pale yellow, and just in time for the rain, I'd fixed the roof.

"Still need a garage door opener," I mumbled to myself as I hopped off my bike and went to roll up the garage door. The inside was dark as I pulled in and I reached out to pat the cover on my Mustang. "You stay out of the rain."

I laughed at myself as I jogged toward the back door of the house. I needed to get a dog or something before I started talking to all the inanimate objects in my place and not just the car.

The back door didn't have an overhang and the rain started pouring as I fumbled to unlock the door. By the time I got inside, I was soaking wet.

Cursing, I toed off my boots in the doorway and padded into the kitchen in my socks, stripping off my jacket as I went. I kept the house pretty cool when I wasn't there, but it felt a whole lot colder than it should've been.

“Fuck,” I barked, knocking on the old thermostat with my knuckles. It was stuck at seventy degrees and I knew it sure as hell wasn’t that warm inside.

I fucking loved my house. I did. But I sometimes wondered if I’d bitten off more than I could chew when I’d picked it. Some day it was going to be awesome and I knew it, but so far the siding had started peeling away from the walls and once that was fixed the roof had begun to leak. Then a pipe to the septic tank had gotten clogged and backed up nasty ass water into my bathroom tub—I’d almost sold the place then because *fuck that shit*—then the kitchen faucet had needed to be replaced. I’d spent two months trying to get rid of mice in the walls after I’d fucked with their habitat by clearing the property and they’d swarmed inside looking for shelter.

Cursing, I put my boots back on and headed down to the basement to see if I could figure out what was wrong with the furnace. As I passed the back wall of the kitchen, I reached out and unconsciously touched the bottom of one of the picture frames hanging there. Inside was a photo of my grandparents when they were young. Grandma was holding a newborn—my dad—and sitting on Grandpa’s lap. When Gram had seen the photo, she’d looked at it for a moment and then turned to me. *I like your house. This’ll be a good place for a family.*

I couldn’t really imagine having a family or even a steady girlfriend at that point, but I’d still felt a little something in my gut when she’d said it. It *did* feel like a place you’d put down roots. Not once since I’d bought the place from my dad had it felt like a starter home or something I’d ever actually sell—even if it *was* a major pain in the ass most of the time.

“Okay,” I said, pulling on the little cord hanging from the ceiling to turn on the single light bulb that lit the room. I looked at the furnace. “What the fuck is your problem, now?”

Kneeling down to pull off the little door on the side, something in the way the light hit my back and tossed my shadow across the floor made me freeze.

For a second, I was standing at the hood of the Mustang, firelight at my back, while beautiful brown eyes stared up at

me in the dark.

I fell back on my heels as a sharp pain shot through the base of my skull. I'd been dealing with migraines my entire life and I was usually able to stop them before they knocked me out, but between the hangover and the memory of the way Esther had looked at me before she'd realized I was an asshole—it was game over.

I barely made it up the stairs and out the back door before puking up everything Emilia had brought me for breakfast.

CHAPTER 3

ESTHER

UNSURPRISINGLY, A PERSON can get used to almost anything given enough time. Even a cabin with no electricity or running water in the middle of nowhere.

The first night was the worst. I'd panicked once I realized that I had no light, my heart racing, too scared to leave the couch, afraid that if I got up I'd somehow get lost in the tiny room. As the night grew colder, I'd stayed on the couch, pulling clothes out of my suitcase to layer on top of what I was wearing. I'd stared out the window, watching the trees sway in the wind and listening for sounds of wild animals or serial killers.

The next day hadn't gone much better. That was when I'd finally looked into the bathroom to find that it was nothing but a minuscule room built on to the back of the cabin, a crude wooden seat open to a hole in the ground. There was no sink or shower, for obvious reasons, and the thought of never being able to clean myself somehow seemed worse than spending another night in the dark.

The cabin was situated with an old couch facing a small fireplace and I spent my second morning trying to get a fire started with napkins and a lighter I'd found in the kitchen, praying that the chimney worked and I wasn't going to burn the entire building down around me. I ignored the intrusive thought that if I burned the place down it would constitute an emergency and I'd be able to call my parents to pick me up. Instead, I focused on the fact that if I got the fire started during the day I wouldn't have to try and figure it out in the dark. The heat it would put out was just an extra bonus, I was initially just hoping for a little light.

The kitchen was stocked with large, blue, hard plastic barrels of water, random cans of vegetables and soup, and

more dehydrated food than I'd ever seen in one place. There was a propane camp stove inside one of the cupboards that I was afraid to use in case I accidentally blew myself up, but after a few days of eating room temperature cans of soup I figured it out. It made things a little easier.

I spent the first two weeks waiting for my parents to change their minds and come get me. They couldn't really leave me out there for an extended period of time since they knew I was pregnant and eventually I'd have to see a doctor, so I treated the situation like an extended camping trip. I assumed that it wouldn't take long for them to cool down and realize that my pregnancy wasn't the end of the world.

But as time went on and I had no company or contact with anyone, my perspective began to shift. Help wasn't coming. My parents weren't going to come to their senses.

One day I realized that I was going through the large stack of firewood against the house faster than I'd thought possible, so I started painstakingly splitting the rounds that were scattered around the yard. At home, we'd used a gas-powered splitter to process wood, but all of us had been taught to use an axe anyway. It was back breaking work and slow going because I had to stop so often. Eventually, though, the muscles in my arms and back began to firm up and it didn't seem so difficult anymore, even though it still took forever to accomplish.

I began bathing at night, washing myself using a small bucket of water, dish soap, and one of the few towels I'd found in a cupboard. I was hyper aware of the supplies I had available and how quickly I went through them, so I only actually warmed the water with the propane stove once a week, using the leftover water to wash my hair and clothes at the same time. I emptied the bins that held all the non-perishable food and set them out to collect rainwater just in case I ran out of the barrels of water inside.

There's a difference in how you survive when you're waiting for rescue and when you realize that rescue isn't coming. You begin to figure things out. You push the worry to the back of your mind to take out in the quiet of the dark and

mull over before shoving it away again so you can focus on living.

Instead of leaving the old sleeping bag I'd found on the couch all the time, I started rolling it back up every morning when I got up. I structured my days around meals, carefully picking out what I'd eat for breakfast, lunch and dinner. After breakfast, I worked on the wood outside until lunch, knowing that I'd need much more than I had if I was going to be stranded there all winter. I prayed that someone would pick me up before then, but considering the fact that a month had passed without any contact, I assumed the worst.

I'd sit down for lunch midday, usually reading while I ate for some kind of company. The books I'd brought with me were old favorites, the characters both familiar and comforting. After lunch, I'd count my supplies, obsessively going over how much food and water I had and how long I could go before I ran out. In the afternoon, I explored outside.

There wasn't much to see around the cabin, just a bunch of trees, but it still felt nice to get a little fresh air and hear the birds calling to each other. It felt like I was at the edge of the world, making a little place for myself. Some days it wasn't so bad and I daydreamed about the child growing beneath my heart, feeling more connected to it. On other days it was a struggle not to start screaming for help or walking toward town even though I knew no one would hear me and the chance of even seeing a car was slim.

I thought about Otto Hawthorne. The memory of him coming to see me a few days after the disaster out in the woods played over and over in my mind.

"What are you doing here?" I hissed, glancing toward the cash register where my dad was helping someone check out.

"You took off the other night," he said quietly.

"I had to get home," I replied shortly, not looking at him as I arranged bags of potting soil.

"Listen, is there somewhere we could talk?"

"There's nothing to talk about."

“I’m guessin’ that was your first time,” he said, so softly I almost didn’t hear him.

My stomach lurched. “You’re going to get me in trouble.” I glanced at the front of the store again. “Please, just go.”

“Can you meet me after work?”

I couldn’t see my dad at the front of the store anymore and my heart started thumping in a familiar staccato. Any moment he’d show up beside us and I’d be in more trouble than I’d ever been in my entire life.

“Fine,” I said, looking around Otto to make sure no one was listening.

“How about the high school parking lot?” he asked, leaning down a little so I’d meet his eyes.

“Okay.”

I hadn’t gone to meet him. For weeks afterward I’d been on edge, waiting for him to show up at the garden center looking for me, but he hadn’t come again. It wasn’t until later that I regretted the fact that I’d blown him off. By the time I’d realized I was pregnant, I hadn’t had any idea how to get ahold of him and the fact that he’d pretended like he didn’t know Becka seemed trivial and unimportant.

I daydreamed about the look in his eyes when I’d let my hair down, the sweet way he’d brushed it away from my face when we were in the car, the way he’d teased me, and the sight of his muscular chest above me. Sometimes, if I thought about him for too long, I’d find myself staring at the phone in the cabin, wishing that I had his phone number. Then I’d recall that messing with Otto Hawthorne was the reason I was in that cabin in the first place and I’d snap out of the fantasy. No matter how much I wished Otto Hawthorne would ride in on his white horse and save me, it wasn’t going to happen. I was on my own.

I was stir crazy and cabin fever took on a whole new meaning. Sometimes I talked out loud just to hear my own voice. The isolation was excruciating. Some days it was only the fear that my dad would see that I’d used the phone he’d

left for emergencies and get to the cabin before the police that kept me from calling 911. I had zero doubt that he was monitoring the account.

Where would I go, anyway? My parents wouldn't let me live with them. I had no friends beyond Becka and my uncle would never let me stay with them if it went against my dad's wishes. Even throwing myself on the mercy of the other members of our church wouldn't work. They'd never come between a man and his family, and my dad had made his position very clear.

I always closed myself back inside the cabin by the time my stomach started growling for dinner. The thought of getting caught outside in the dark terrified me. After slowly eating dinner, drawing it out for as long as I could, I'd wash up and unroll my sleeping bag again, climbing inside to stare at the fire until I fell asleep.

The days and nights were monotonous, but they weren't terrible beyond using the filthy outhouse. I was thankful that someone had been thoughtful enough to leave toilet paper but the feeling of being suspended over a hole filled with excrement never got any easier to endure. It was so bad that I'd picked a spot between two cedar trees and during the day, I started popping a squat outside. It wasn't as if anyone would see me.

I talked to the baby. It was stupid and I thought it probably couldn't hear me, but it made me feel less alone. As I went around, carrying wood into the cabin or counting the cans of soup I had left, I kept a running commentary going. I told him or her what the weather was like, how many days of food we had left, how many rounds of wood I'd split, how callused my hands were from the axe handle, how badly I missed hot showers. I described Becka and how much I missed her. Wondered aloud how my brother and sister were doing with me gone. I even told him or her about Otto, describing what he looked like and how sweet he'd been. I didn't know much about him beyond the fact that he'd both made me feel safe and completely out of control at the same time.

I compartmentalized all of my thoughts so well that I could focus on just one thing at a time, one chore at a time, one meal at a time, surviving one day at a time. Incredibly, I settled in, accepting the new life that I'd been thrust into.

Then, suddenly, on day fifty-four at the cabin, the crunch of gravel outside made me race to the door, throwing it open so fast that it slammed into the wall.

Outside, my uncle Hank had just climbed out of his car, leaving it running. His expression was grim, his lips pressed tightly together, but as his eyes lifted and caught sight of me, his expression morphed into shock.

“Holy God,” he whispered.

I pushed a piece of hair behind my ear, embarrassed by how lank and greasy it was. I wasn't due for another full bath for two more days and since I couldn't actually see myself beyond my reflection in the windows, I hadn't thought about my appearance in weeks.

“Uncle Hank?” I took a tentative step forward. “Are you here to pick me up?”

He got control of his expression and shook his head. “Yes,” he said, contradicting the movement. “Just for a few hours. Grab what you need.”

I glanced back into the cabin. “What I need? Where am I going?”

“Put some shoes on,” he replied firmly, ignoring my question. “Let's go.”

I hurriedly slid my feet into my rain boots and grabbed the cleanest sweater I had out of my bag, trying to smooth my hair at the same time. Barely taking enough time to add a couple of logs to the fire so it wouldn't go out before I got back, I rushed outside and down the steps to the car.

When I reached it, I stopped short at the sight of my aunt in the front seat. Because of the way the light had been shining on the windshield I hadn't been able to see her from the cabin. She was crying.

“Get in,” Uncle Hank called from the driver’s seat.

“Aunt Lacy?” I asked, getting into the back seat.

She turned without a word and pulled me toward her, the seat back awkwardly blocking us from any real contact. Her hand ran down the back of my head and smoothed over my shoulder.

“Enough,” Uncle Hank said gruffly as she sniffled. “Put your seat belts on.”

I felt almost dazed as I sat back in my seat and watched out the window while he turned the car around and left the cabin behind us. The car was silent long after we’d reached the road and I was dying to talk to them, but I didn’t know what to say. It was the first time I’d seen them since I’d told my parents I was pregnant. Were they angry with me? Was there any chance that I could convince them to let me stay with them? My dad was the eldest and the head of the family which meant that Uncle Hank deferred to him on most things, but he’d looked so shocked when he saw me. Maybe he hadn’t known where I was. Maybe he was upset enough that he’d finally stick up to my dad and do something about the ludicrous situation.

“Hank,” Aunt Lacy said quietly, her voice hoarse.

He ignored her.

“She’s skin and bones, Hank.”

My eyes widened in surprise and I looked down at my arm, pushing up the sleeve of my sweater. It looked the same to me.

“You good on supplies?” my uncle asked, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

“I’m getting short,” I replied, almost shocked at the question. Beyond the fact that it was a stark reminder of where I’d been, I realized then that Uncle Hank and Aunt Lacy showing up at the cabin was proof that they’d known where I was the whole time. He’d probably been the one who’d stocked the cabin with supplies.

My dad hadn't been the only one to abandon me. He hadn't lied about where I'd gone. Everyone knew that I was stranded in a place with no running water or electricity and they hadn't come to rescue me. The knowledge was a blow I hadn't been prepared for.

After so long without any contact, I struggled to make sense of what was happening. The car was too loud, the seat belt too tight, the vibration of the road almost too much for my senses.

"We'll stock you up before we bring you back," he said quietly.

My fists knotted in my lap.

"We can't—"

"Quiet, Lace," Uncle Hank scolded, his voice not unkind but firm.

It was a while before anyone spoke again.

"We'll have to stop by the house," Aunt Lacy murmured, reaching out to put her hand on Uncle Hank's arm. "We can't take her in public like this."

I looked down at myself for a second time, taking in the limp dress I was wearing and the tights that had a couple of holes in the knee from where I'd snagged them on a stump outside. I put my hand on my knee, covering the holes, ashamed for some reason.

"Yeah, okay," he replied. "Just a shower, or we'll be late."

The familiar sights of Eugene were like a balm to my soul. I kept my gaze out the window as we passed my elementary school, the grocery store, the park that Becka and I used to race to in the summer. People were walking their dogs and driving their cars and generally going about life like everything was normal and I soaked it all in. There was still life outside the little cabin. The world was still turning.

I let Aunt Lacy lead me into their guest bathroom and turn on the shower, but when I opened my mouth to speak, she stopped me with a jerk of her head.

“You know where everything is,” she said, handing me a towel. “I’ll just grab you something to wear, okay?”

I nodded and watched wide-eyed as she left the room and closed the door behind her.

I wished I could’ve appreciated the shower more. The hot water and actual shampoo were such a luxury that I really should’ve been marveling, but I wasn’t. I was too afraid of what was going to happen next. What did she mean when she’d mentioned taking me in public? Who was I going to see? Why had Uncle Hank picked me up and not my mom and dad? Did my mom even know that I was back in town? If she did, would I get to see her? Tears pricked my eyes as I thought of her. I missed my mom. She was weak, I knew that. She should’ve stood up for me when my dad told me to pack my things. She should’ve done something. But she was still my *mom*.

Before I was ready, Aunt Lacy was back in the bathroom, calling for me to hurry and get dressed. She was gone by the time I climbed out of the shower but she’d left clean clothes on the closed toilet seat. I recognized the dress. It was one that she wore all the time when she was running errands. I lifted the fabric to my nose and inhaled the familiar scent of their laundry detergent.

I let out a small sigh of relief. I’d wondered in my most paranoid moments if my dad had hidden me away until he could find a man willing to marry me. It wasn’t beyond reason, but I couldn’t think of anyone we knew who would take on another man’s baby. Aunt Lacy hadn’t given me anything especially nice to wear, though, so I was pretty sure I wasn’t about to be taken to the church for my wedding.

I pulled on the pair of underwear and bra that she’d left me, far beyond caring where they’d come from. They were clean and soft and it occurred to me just how stiff my own underclothes were from washing and hanging them to dry by the fireplace. As I carefully dried my hair I stepped in front of the mirror and finally got a good look at my face.

I understood why Aunt Lacy had been startled by my appearance. I didn't think I looked sick or anything like that, but my face had changed dramatically. My cheekbones stood out in stark relief and my chin was more pointed than it had ever been. I'd lost the round cheeks I'd had all my life. My whole face looked... sharp.

I stared at myself as I pulled my hair back into a bun, pulling a hair tie and bobby pins from the drawer to the left of the sink, going through the motions without thought. The hairstyle made my features seem even more severe and the hair felt heavy, but I didn't even consider leaving it in a braid down my back like I'd been wearing it at the cabin. Unconsciously, I fell back into the patterns I'd lived by my entire life.

After I was dressed, I picked up my dirty clothes from the floor and folded them neatly. Handling the ripped tights was a stark reminder that in a few hours I'd probably be right back in the cabin. Quietly, I pulled open the drawer again and stole a few more hair ties, stuffing them in the pocket of my dirty dress.

I left the bathroom and followed Aunt Lacy back out of the house with a sense of unreality that I couldn't shake. As we climbed back in the car my heart began to race. Where in the world were they taking me?

"Just going to make sure everything's going the way it should," Aunt Lacy said, turning to look at me as we pulled into a small parking lot.

"You're taking me to the doctor?" I asked in confusion, staring at the sign on the building.

"Just a quick check up," she replied.

I followed her into the building, leaving Uncle Hank waiting in the car, and a thousand thoughts ran through my head. Should I say something to the doctor? Tell them that I needed help? What would happen after that? Would they even believe me? Would Uncle Hank and Aunt Lacy get into trouble? I wasn't sure that anyone had actually done anything

illegal. I could've called 911 any day since I'd been left at the cabin. I wasn't a minor so it couldn't be considered neglect.

Swirling around the thoughts of escape and what it would mean for me going forward were thoughts of the baby. What if they found something wrong with it? Had I screwed up by not going to the doctor before I'd told my parents? I couldn't have anticipated that I'd be whisked away so soon afterward. I'd imagined that my mom would help me set up that first appointment. I'd known they'd be angry, but I could've never foreseen that they'd banish me into the freaking wilderness.

We checked me in and only waited for a few minutes before I was called back. At first I was surprised when Aunt Lacy got up with me, intending to follow me into the appointment. Then I realized that she was there to make sure I didn't say anything I wasn't supposed to.

I wasn't sure if I *would* say anything. It wasn't as if I had anywhere to go if I escaped my family, but knowing that I could was a heady feeling. I had the opportunity. I could tell the doctor's office that I was in trouble, that I needed help, that I needed to get away from them. I *could*.

A nurse asked when my last period was, took my blood pressure and weighed me—I'd actually lost weight and I was pretty sure that wasn't normal—and then made me pee in a cup. It was all startlingly normal, and I began to feel a little hope as I spoke to her. There were normal people on the outside. Maybe I should say something. I could figure out whatever came next. I was smart. I had skills. Surely, I could figure out a way to live.

When the doctor finally came inside to see me, my stomach sank so fast that I nearly groaned.

I knew him. He was a deacon at our church.

"Sister Lacy," he greeted as he walked briskly into the room.

"Hello," she murmured back.

"Esther," he boomed, looking at me. "Let's see what kind of trouble you've gotten yourself into."

The next twenty minutes were the stuff of nightmares. I thought I'd die of mortification when he told me to change into a gown and didn't bother leaving the room, but it got so much worse after that. As I lay there on the table and he stuck my feet into little metal arms that held my knees wide and my entire pelvic area completely exposed, I sort of just floated away. He was talking casually to Aunt Lacy as he put something inside me and tears ran down my face as I struggled to stay in that floating place. I pretended that it wasn't really happening, that I was back at the cabin, which suddenly felt like a haven instead of a prison.

When he was done I was allowed to pull my feet back down. I clenched my thighs together as I stared at the ceiling, ignoring the stickiness between my legs as he pressed hard on my belly and measured it with a paper measuring tape.

"Seventeen weeks," he told my aunt, pulling out a little machine.

I clenched my hands as he put goop on the end of it and pressed it just below my navel, but it didn't hurt. Seconds later a little whoosh-whoosh sound filled the room and my breath caught.

"Strong heart beat. 156 beats per minute," he said to himself.

"So everything is okay?" Aunt Lacy asked quietly.

"It seems so," he said brusquely. "She should've come in months ago."

"We just found out," Aunt Lacy replied, looking at me.

I'd never heard my aunt lie before.

"Surely, *you* knew?" the doctor said, glaring at me. "Do you care nothing for the precious life you're carrying?"

I just looked at him. What could I say? It hadn't exactly been my choice.

"Come back in a month," he ordered with a sigh. "We'll do an ultrasound then—the technician is only here once a week.

Then come every month until the thirty-sixth week. Then it'll be weekly until the birth."

"Okay," I rasped, since he was clearly waiting for a reply that time and was actually talking to *me*.

My hands shook as I got dressed again. I couldn't even look at Aunt Lacy after the doctor had gone. She hadn't warned me or reassured me. She'd just sat there while he poked and prodded, his face a foot away from a place that only one other person had even gotten close to. I felt like I was going to throw up or scream.

I ignored everyone as we walked back outside, my clothes didn't feel like enough protection from the eyes that followed us. I wanted my big jacket, the one I'd left in the cabin. I was freezing.

"All set?" Uncle Hank asked as soon as we'd climbed back into the car.

"Yes," Aunt Lacy replied. "Everything is fine."

"Good," he replied. "Good."

Everything was not fine. None of it was fine. I wanted to yell. Scream. Reach forward and start swinging. I didn't care which of them I hit, either would do.

"We'll stop and get you more supplies on our way out of town," Uncle Hank said, glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

I ignored him, clenching my hands together in my lap. I just wanted to get as far from the two of them as possible. I didn't care if I was going to the cabin or the moon as long as they'd leave me alone.

I wasn't allowed out of the car as Uncle Hank stocked up on supplies at the store, but it didn't matter. I didn't want to see anyone anyway. I was dying to get back to my little place in the woods. The world that had felt comforting just a couple hours before now felt loud and intrusive.

The ride back went by quickly as I dozed in the back seat, surrounded by paper grocery bags and jugs of water. If I'd had any doubt that I would be at the cabin for a while that was

long gone. I'd seen the amount of food and small containers of propane Uncle Hank had filled the trunk and back seat with. Well, I knew I wouldn't starve. That was something at least.

We carried everything inside in silence. Aunt Lacy was ordered to stay in the car, probably so she wouldn't see the inside of the cabin. And then, as quickly as they'd shown up, they were gone and I was alone again.

I went straight to my wash bucket and went about setting up a bath. Even though my hair felt clean and soft and the rest of me smelled like Becka's body wash, I felt dirtier than I'd been when I left the cabin that morning.

Standing naked, my skin pink from scrubbing, I suddenly froze and glanced around the cabin. I couldn't pinpoint what it was, everything was how I'd left it, but something was *off*. Someone had been there.

I glanced at the door to make sure that it was bolted shut and slowly spun in a circle, cataloging everything. The sleeping bag was still neatly rolled at the end of the couch, the food in the kitchen still stacked how I'd left it, the floor littered with the new bags I hadn't unloaded yet. My suitcase still sat closed against the wall. I stopped, my eyes on the wood stacked next to the fireplace. The top two pieces were missing. I remembered them because when I'd stacked them that morning they had rolled off the top of the stack because each had a knot in the center that had made them hard as heck to split and made them weirdly shaped. I looked at the fire, which was still burning and shouldn't have been.

Quickly, I started for my suitcase, and my foot caught on a little lip in the floor that I'd never tripped on before. I'd paced that cabin a thousand times in my stocking feet, and I'd never once snagged my foot. Cautiously, I knelt down, shivering, and ran my fingers along the floorboards.

It was a trap door that I would've never noticed in a million years, except whoever had been in the cabin hadn't closed it properly.

I got dressed quickly, putting on boots and a coat in case I needed to run, and grabbed the pistol my dad had left me. It

had seemed strange when he'd set it down on the kitchen counter before he left—why in the world would I need a pistol—but the weight of it in my hand felt suddenly comforting.

Then I threw open the trap door with one hand.

I shouldn't have bothered—with the clothes or the pistol—because there was no one inside the little room under the floor. My jaw dropped open as I looked around the space and the stacks and stacks of crates, some open and some closed. The open ones were filled with rifles, not the kind my dad used for hunting, the kind that looked like something out of the future.

I dropped to my butt, stunned, as I stared down into the room. Where in God's name had they come from and why were they there?

CHAPTER 4

OTTO

IT HAD TAKEN me a couple of days to remember exactly who I'd fucked on the front seat of my Mustang, and if I was being honest with myself that was probably because a couple months later I still couldn't quite believe it. Esther Allen was a good girl and the absolute last person on earth I would've ever thought would get down with me, especially in a public place. The only thing that made me feel a little better about the whole situation was the memory that she'd been stone cold sober.

Once I'd realized exactly what I'd done—I'd gone to find her. She'd been pissed when she left the party that night so I hadn't expected a warm reception, but fuck, I hadn't anticipated how freaked out she'd been when I showed up at her work. She'd been so panicked by my appearance that I'd asked her to meet me later.

It had been almost four months since my dumb ass had sat at the high school for hours before realizing that Esther wasn't coming, and with each passing week, the thought of just forgetting about Esther became harder to stomach.

I wasn't sure if I should try to reach out again. The thought of just never speaking to her again made my guts twist, but I also knew that her family was seriously strict and I didn't want to cause any trouble for her. It wouldn't matter that she was legally an adult—if she was still living at home, they still controlled everything she did. There was a whole group of the ultra-religious families that I'd gone to school with. Some were more strict than others, but everyone knew that Ephraim, Esther and their little sister were from one of the stricter families. She never wore anything but skirts, for fuck's sake—even during PE in high school.

How Esther had gone to the party without her family knowing was a goddamn miracle, but what I couldn't figure

out was why she'd hooked up with me. We'd never even spoken before that night.

It was driving me fucking crazy.

I wasn't current on the views of their little fundamentalist church, but I would've bet my house and my bike that they believed virginity was still a requirement before marriage. So why the hell would she jeopardize all that for an hour in the front of my Mustang? I could still see her eyes when I closed mine, and she'd been clear-headed. She hadn't even wanted a beer that night—the entire reason we'd walked over to the car was to get her a water bottle from my back seat.

After turning it over and over in my brain, I finally caved and looked for a second opinion.

“You slept with *who*?” my little brother Titus asked, staring at me from across the kitchen.

“Esther.”

“Esther *Allen*?” he asked, his eyes still so wide they looked like they were going to pop out of his head.

“Do you know any other Esthers?” I barked, guilt riding me hard as he gaped like a fish. I knew I was an asshole. I didn't need him acting like I was the devil himself.

“What?” he asked faintly. “When? How? *Why*?”

“What do you mean, why?”

“She's just not your usual type,” Titus said defensively. “With the skirts, and the—” He gestured toward his chest and head. “She doesn't even wear makeup!”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“I'm pretty sure she's not even allowed to *talk* to guys,” he snapped incredulously.

“She talked to me.”

“Obviously,” he muttered nastily. “Jesus, Otto. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I was drunk.”

“In the words of our mother, *drinking is never an excuse to behave like a dickhead.*”

“She was as into it as I was.”

“Was she drinking?” he ground out accusingly through his teeth.

“No! Fuck no.”

“That’s good at least.” He scrubbed his hands over his face.

We stood there staring at each other.

“Oh fuck,” he said with a little laugh, looking down at the floor. “I get it.”

“Get what?”

“It was her fuckin’ *hair* wasn’t it?”

I glared.

“Was it down? I’ve seen that bun. It has to reach her waist at least.”

“Her ass, actually,” I murmured.

“Yeah, that tracks.” He rubbed his hands over his face. “God, you’re a freak.”

“Shut up.”

“So what now, Otto?” he asked, ignoring my question. “You want my advice or somethin’? Cause I gotta say, I have no fuckin’ clue what you should do. Ignore her for the rest of time, probably.”

“And you say *I’m* the dickhead?” I asked incredulously.

“What’s the other option? Go talk to her?”

“I tried that,” I confessed, heat burning up my neck. “She blew me off.”

“Well, there you go,” he shot back. “Leave it.”

“I just wanna make sure everythin’ is good with her,” I said with a sigh. “The way we left it was—” I shook my head,

not sure how to explain it. Something felt really off and I couldn't put my finger on why that was.

“Yeah, her family's gonna be real excited about you comin' around. Why not just add fuel to the fire? Good thinkin'.”

“You think they know?”

“They will if you show up at her house.”

“You know where she lives?” I asked, jerking my head up to look at him.

Titus glared at me. “In no universe would you showing up at her house be a good fuckin' idea.”

“I didn't say I was goin' to.” The words came out more defensively than intended.

“Fuck,” he said under his breath, shaking his head. “Jesus.”

“Would you fuckin' stop?”

“You realize how bad this could be for her if they find out?” He pointed at me accusingly. “Like apocalyptically bad. That family is fuckin' nuts man.”

“Yeah, I know, they're strict Christians,” I replied slowly.

“No. No. Not the kind you're thinkin' of. They might say they're Christians, but this is a group that's so far outside the normal religion I'm not even sure why they say they're the same thing. Christians believe in Jesus. These people—” He shook his head. “It's a fuckin' cult, no matter how you look at it. Calgary Church.” He scoffed. “Surprising that they even let their kids go to public school, honestly.”

“Fuck.” My stomach sank. Did I know that Esther's family was weird? Yes. But by Titus's tone, they were more than that.

“Yeah, fuck.”

“Well, what should I do?” I asked, a small starburst of panic lighting in my chest. “What if they find out?”

The thought of her getting into trouble because she'd slept with me made my stomach gurgle alarmingly. Esther was so sweet. I'd thought so even before we'd seen each other at the bonfire. We'd never interacted, but I'd been in her vicinity enough to know what kind of person she was. Soft spoken. Kind. She'd never say a bad word about anyone.

"Her family owns a nursery," Titus said after a minute. "Maybe you could try and go there. See if maybe she's workin'. Make sure she's okay."

"I already did that," I pointed out. "She was freaked the fuck out."

"Then I'll advise you again to leave her the fuck alone," Titus replied emotionlessly.

"I gotta make sure everythin' is okay," I argued. I couldn't explain the nagging feeling in my belly that something was wrong, but I knew better than to ignore it.

"Whatever you do," Titus said, shaking his head. "Don't fuckin' ask for her."

"I'm not a fuckin' moron."

"Recent events prove otherwise."

"What if she's not workin'?"

"Then go back later, or I'll go. That would be better."

We planned out what I would say if I talked to anyone at the nursery and how I could get Esther alone long enough to make sure she was alright. The next day I called in to work saying I was going to be late, and drove the Mustang over to the Allen nursery, my stomach in knots.

What the hell would I do if Esther *wasn't* fine? Tell her to come with me? That wouldn't go over well. We barely knew each other. I could maybe convince her to go to my parents' place. I knew without a doubt that my mom would step in to help. She'd never seen a person she wasn't willing to jump in front of a bus for and she had a soft spot for kids with shitty parents.

The nursery was pretty quiet when I got there, only a few cars in the lot, and I slipped off my cut before getting out of the car. While the sight of the Aces leather wasn't any kind of novelty in our area, I still figured it would be best not to advertise who I was. Wiping my hands on the thighs of my jeans, I headed toward the front gate area.

The nursery wasn't huge and there wasn't a lot of stuff to choose from, probably because it was winter—but the place looked like it had pretty steady business still. The gravel-covered aisles were tidy and the shelves were covered even if they were lacking in variety.

“Can I help you?”

I turned to face the speaker and was relieved to see Esther's brother, Ephraim. He'd always been quiet and a little strange, but he was nice enough.

“Ephraim?” I said, putting my hand out. “Hey, man. Haven't seen you since school.”

“Hey, Otto,” he replied, shaking my hand. “Yeah, it's been a while.”

“This your place?”

“My family's,” he said, confirming what I already knew. “You looking for anything in particular?”

“Flower beds at my house are lookin' pretty pitiful,” I replied, following the script that Titus and I had planned out. “Not sure what to get, though.”

“We can help with that,” Ephraim said, nodding.

“Is there anyone that could help me choose some stuff?” I laughed and threw up my hands. “I'm terrible with this kind of thing.”

Ephraim laughed too. “Just me and my wife here today.”

“You're married?” I asked in surprise, my hopes sinking at the knowledge that Esther wasn't there.

“For almost a year now,” he confirmed proudly.

I couldn't imagine it. He'd been married for almost a year? The guy who barely spoke? He wasn't a bad-looking dude, but he was goofy as fuck. How the hell had he gotten someone to marry him at what—twenty years old?

“Hey Caity?” he called, looking over his shoulder. “You in here?”

“Yeah,” a voice called back from a few rows away. Seconds later, a tall woman came around the corner and I understood.

She was wearing the same type of long skirt and loose long sleeved shirt that I'd seen Esther wearing at school, her hair pulled back in the same hairstyle. The only difference that I could see was the puffy vest she wore over it all, sort of trendy but clearly worn in deference to the weather and not as a fashion statement.

“Can you help Otto here pick out some plants for his flower beds?” Ephraim asked, smiling at his wife. “We need a woman's touch.”

His wife—Caity—laughed and looked at me. “We'll find you something. There aren't really any flowers blooming at this time of year. Were you hoping for some shrubs, maybe?”

“I—whatever you think,” I said, shaking my head. “I have no idea.”

“I've got some ideas,” she said, smiling. She looked over at Ephraim and at his nod waved at me to follow her.

As we moved through the rows of greenery, I couldn't help thinking about that look. It was as if she'd been asking for permission to show me around—which didn't make any sense since he'd called her over to do just that. It gave me a sour taste in my mouth that only intensified when I realized that Ephraim had followed us at a distance and camped out one row over while Caity asked how big my garden beds were and showed me what she thought would look nice.

“You went to school with Ephraim?” his wife asked casually as we stood at the little register near the front door a few minutes later.

“With Ephraim and Esther,” I confirmed with a nod.

Her gaze sharpened. “You know Esther, too?”

I laughed lightly and shrugged, my stomach clenching for a reason I couldn’t pinpoint as she watched me closely. “About as well as I know Ephraim. I didn’t really hang out with either of them, but it’s not a big school.”

She smiled back at me as she nodded, but her eyes were wary.

“You guys all finished?” Ephraim asked, wiping off his hands as he walked toward us. As if he hadn’t been watching us the whole damn time like a psycho.

By the time I left, I had six bushes in pots on a drop cloth on my back seat and my skin was crawling. On the outside, they seemed like any other couple. No sense of tension or anything like that, but when you watched them a little something just felt wrong about it. Maybe it was because I’d grown up with women who had no problem saying what they wanted and doing what they wanted and generally taking no shit from anyone, not even their husbands. There wasn’t anything that I could say that definitively bothered me about Ephraim and his wife, it’s not like he’d beat her in front of me or something, but the way she’d looked to him like she was gauging his opinion of what she said and how she acted...felt gross.

I also hadn’t learned anything about Esther. I hadn’t even had the chance to ask about her in a way that wouldn’t have become suspicious pretty quickly. Even mentioning her name had them looking at me like a hawk. I figured that wasn’t a good thing.

Pulling out my phone, I called Titus.

“You go to the garden center?” he asked, the sound of a bunch of teenagers talking over each other in the background.

“It was just her older brother and sister-in-law,” I said, glancing back at the stupid plants in my back seat. “No sign of her.”

“Maybe she doesn’t work today,” Titus said, the background noise getting a little quieter. “You didn’t ask about her, right?”

“No. I mentioned that I’d gone to school with her and Ephraim and the wife picked right up on it and asked if I knew Esther.”

“Huh.”

“The way she asked was weird, man. Like the answer was important.”

“What did you say?”

“That I knew her as well as Ephraim because it was such a small school. It felt *off*.”

“I told you they were fuckin’ strange. Didn’t I tell you—”

“Yeah, you told me.” I sighed. “Not sure how I’m gonna talk to her. It’s not like I could randomly run into her somewhere. I haven’t before now.”

“I think the women keep pretty close to home.”

“How the fuck do you know all this?” I asked in exasperation. “You’re the prince of not payin’ attention to what’s goin’ on around you.”

“I pay attention to some shit,” he countered. “Listen, bell just rang and I need to get back to class. I have an idea though. I’ll call you after school.”

He hung up before I could tell him not to *do* anything. The little shit.

I probably shouldn’t have pulled him into my bullshit, but he was the only one who actually knew who Esther was. If I’d tried to explain the situation to anyone else, they wouldn’t have been able to understand what I was dealing with. Hell, I didn’t fully understand what I was dealing with—but ironically, Titus seemed to have a good grasp on it.

After dropping the plants off in my front yard and putting the Mustang away, I got my Harley out of the garage and headed into work. Thankfully, everyone was pretty easy going

about people taking days off or coming in late or early. As long as you weren't being a dirtbag and still hit your forty hours, they didn't really give a shit when you were there.

Almost everyone in the club worked at the garage at one point or another, but the old timers came in pretty sporadically, so it was a surprise to see the forecourt filled with bikes so early on a Tuesday.

"Where you been?" my older brother Micky called as I parked my bike.

I waited until I'd pulled my helmet off to answer him. "What are you, my mother?"

"Cute," he muttered. "Shit's goin' down and you're bein' cute."

"What shit?" I asked, climbing off the bike.

"Not sure yet."

We walked side by side into the clubhouse. It was pretty full of members loitering around, but there were a few missing which meant the big guns were closed up behind the bar talking about shit I wasn't allowed to hear.

"You know what this is all about?" I asked Micky quietly as we headed toward Rumi.

"Somethin' about a shipment that never made it," he replied just as quietly. "I was standin' next to Dad when he got the call."

"That's not good."

"Understatement," Micky muttered as we reached Rumi. "You heard anythin'?"

"Not a peep," Rumi said easily, leaning back in his chair. "I'm sure they'll be done jerkin' each other off soon and then the rest of us will get a tug."

"Jesus Christ," I mumbled, glancing around to make sure no one else had heard him. I knew he was joking, but saying shit like that could and *would* get his ass handed to him.

“Stop bein’ an idiot,” Micky said, grabbing a chair for himself.

“Does *anyone* know what happened?” I asked, glancing between my brothers.

Micky just looked at me.

“That’s what we’re waitin’ to find out, Tiny Tim,” Rumi said, grinning at me.

“You’re such an asshole.”

“You know as much as we do,” Micky said, shooting Rumi a glare. “When they figure shit out, they’ll let us know.”

I looked over at the closed door, wondering what they were talking about in there. How had a shipment gone missing? Our trucks were usually driven by a younger member or sometimes a prospect—I’d had my turn at it a few weeks before—because most of us didn’t have records yet, with two veteran outriders for protection. Had anyone been hurt?

Who were the outriders that morning? I couldn’t remember and I hadn’t seen them at the club that morning because I was so fucking late. I grimaced. What a perfect fucking day to be chasing after some girl.

Micky and Rumi made small talk while we waited and our cousin Brody came and sat with us, but I was distracted. I was worried about what was happening around me and who had gone on the run that morning, but thoughts of Esther kept creeping back in.

How would I ever make sure she was alright if I couldn’t even ask about her? I couldn’t keep going to the garden center and I honestly didn’t even want to.

There wasn’t a single excuse I could use to stop by her house. I didn’t know where she shopped or hung out. It felt like I’d run head first into a brick wall. I thought about her cousin and immediately rejected any idea of asking for her help. That girl was all drama.

“Heads up,” Rumi murmured, jerking his head toward the bar as he let his chair tip forward onto four legs again.

I watched the group file out of church. It was impossible to read their expressions.

My grandpa put his fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly, making the entire room fall silent.

“At about nine thirty this mornin’,” our president Dragon announced, not bothering to raise his voice. “Coupla vans ran Mack and Leo off the road.”

“What the fuck,” Micky breathed.

“Both of ’em are fine,” Dragon said, raising his hand to quiet the chatter that had started up at his news. “Homer was drivin’. They got him stopped somehow and beat the holy hell outta him.”

“At least they didn’t kill him,” Rumi said quietly.

“At least they didn’t kill him,” my dad said loudly from his place near the bar.

I was sure it was what we were all thinking, but it was pretty telling that my dad and Rumi had said the exact same thing. Two fucking peas in a pod.

“Casper’s already left to pick up the boys and get ’em back here,” Dragon continued. “But Homer’s gonna be a while, so Brenna’s gonna work out shifts for who’s at the hospital. Moose, Hulk, and the girls are headed up there now. There *will* be at least one member at the hospital with Homer until he’s released.”

The group nodded, almost as one. It went without saying. I couldn’t remember a single time when we’d had a member or someone’s family in the hospital without at least a couple Aces in the waiting room standing vigil.

“That said,” my grandpa chimed in gruffly. “We ain’t sittin’ around waitin’ for him to wake up and start talkin’. Someone had the balls to hijack one of our shipments and we need to find out who it was *yesterday*. You got any ideas, you come to me, and we’ll check it out. Put your ears to the ground, check in with your contacts, rack your brains.”

“Any questions?” my dad asked, looking around the group. No one spoke up. “Good.” He started to walk away and then paused. “Be a good idea for you to call your women. No need to get them riled up, but tell ’em to keep their eyes open. Doors locked. No unnecessary trips into town. You know the drill.”

He strode toward us, scowling, and I sat up straighter in my seat.

“The fuck?” Rumi asked as he reached us.

“Got no fuckin’ clue,” Dad replied tiredly, snatching a chair from the table next to us and spinning it around so he could sit on it backward. “Whoever did this shit has nuts the size of cantaloupes.”

“You think we’ll find out who it was?”

Dad smiled at me and reached out to scrub his hand over the top of my head like I was ten years old. “Just a matter of time, bud.”

“Hopefully not too much time, or those guns will be gone,” Mick muttered.

“Can’t sell ’em,” Brody mused, tapping his knuckles against the table. “There’s no way they could do it quietly enough that we wouldn’t find out—not around here anyway.”

“And takin’ them across state lines would be a definite fuckin’ gamble,” Rumi said, nodding.

“So why would they take ’em?” Micky asked.

“For themselves?” I said, feeling oddly nervous to put in my two cents. I’d been a patched-in member for a minute, but it still felt weird to offer an opinion on anything. I was always waiting for them to tell me to shut the fuck up and go clean the bathroom or something.

“That’s somethin’ to think about,” my dad replied. “Who’s got balls that big and would be willin’ to fuck with us in order to get a shipment—”

“And who wouldn’t have the cash to just fuckin’ buy it from us and would risk stealin’ it,” Rumi added.

They volleyed ideas back and forth, thinking of groups and discarding them as suspects for one reason or another. An hour later, they'd come to the conclusion that it was either a group of survivalists that had a compound down near Sutherlin or a religious group closer to home.

I clenched my jaw as they spoke, thinking it *couldn't* be the same church that Esther belonged to. It was too fucking coincidental.

"I've had a couple of run-ins with them," Brody said, shaking his head. "Pompous fucks. The guys I met would shit their pants and look you straight in the eye and tell you God told them to do it." He laughed. "They'd believe it, too. Drinking the motherfuckin' Kool-Aid around there."

"I haven't met any of 'em," Mick said. "Except for the ones we'd see around school." He looked at Rumi. "What was that kid's name? Brown hair. Tall and skinny. Eric?"

"Nah, that wasn't it," Rumi said. "Somethin' biblical. They're all named after somethin' biblical."

"Ephraim?" I asked, my throat tight.

"That's it," Rumi replied, pointing at me. "It was Ephraim."

Fuck. Me.

"That kid seemed alright," Mick mused. "Quiet though. Like he couldn't be bothered to make any friends or interact with anyone outside their little church group."

"Their parents ruled with an iron fist," Rumi added. "Remember that time we saw his pop reach back in their car and slug him in the face?"

My guts twisted.

"Not easy to forget," Mick replied dryly. "Never really saw his mom, though."

"Not surprising. The girls at school practically faded into the paint on the walls. Mousy as shit. I doubt they're allowed to have an opinion on anythin'."

I almost said something, then. Mousy, *my ass*. Esther wasn't mousy. Esther was fucking gorgeous and she didn't need all the make up and shit that most girls wore.

“Call themselves the Sons of Calgary,” Rumi said, snapping his fingers happily. “Calgary Church down by the highway.”

“I'll take it back to Dragon,” my dad said, cutting off their conversation. “Could be either group, but I think we've got somethin' here. Good call realizin' that they wouldn't be able to sell shit without us knowin'.” His lips twitched. “My pops said the same thing about an hour and a half ago.”

Rumi sputtered. “You tellin' us that we just spent an hour spitballin' and came up with shit you'd already realized?”

Dad laughed. “Hey, I didn't know you knew any of 'em from school,” he said jokingly. “And we hadn't narrowed it down yet.”

“You're welcome,” Rumi grumbled.

“Get back to work,” Dad ordered. “Still got rigs to fix and a business to run.”

Slowly but surely, the crowd thinned as everyone migrated out of the clubhouse and back to the garage. I was working on changing the radiator of an old Ford pickup when Rumi came up behind me, jabbing me in the side with his thumb.

“Knock it off, asshole,” I barked, jerking sideways, my hands covered in grease. “What the fuck do you want?”

“Mom wants all of us at their place for dinner,” he informed me importantly. “Right after work.”

“Mom wants me to come over, she can call me herself,” I replied, turning back to the truck.

“She asked me to tell you and Micky, twerp.”

“Fine.”

He didn't speak for a minute, but I could feel him behind me. Watching me. It made the spot between my shoulder blades itch.

“You got somethin’ on your mind?” he asked finally, all joking gone from his voice.

“No, why?”

“You got awfully quiet inside.”

“Didn’t have anythin’ to add.”

“A little pale, too.”

“I’m not fuckin’ pale.”

“You know those kids from the church?”

“Went to school with them, just like you and Mick and Brody,” I replied, forcing myself to keep my hands busy.

“You’re sure that’s all?”

“What are you askin’?” I turned to look at him.

“I’m not sure,” he said slowly, his eyes on my face.

“Well, when you figure it out, let me know.” I turned away again. “And tell Mom that I’ll be there when you talk to her again in ten minutes.”

“I don’t talk to her that much,” he argued as he walked away.

“Fuckin’ mama’s boy,” I muttered.

“I heard that,” he called back. “And I’m tellin’ Mom you said it.”

“Like it’s somethin’ she doesn’t already know!”

The rest of the day passed by quickly and I was able to finish up the truck by the end of the day. After letting the office know that the owner could come pick it up, I cleaned my hands as best I could and headed out to my bike. I would’ve rather gone home so I could spend some time alone figuring out the clusterfuck I seemed to have stepped right into.

The fact that I’d slept with Esther wouldn’t mean anything to the club. They couldn’t give less shits about where we dipped our wicks—as my dad would say—but the fact that I was looking for her and that I’d stopped by their fucking

nursery that morning would definitely be questioned. My best bet would be to let it go and steer clear until we'd figured out who had taken our shipment of guns—but I wasn't sure I could do that.

Not knowing if there had been any fallout to Esther and I hooking up was like an itch I couldn't scratch. Even the thought of ignoring it made me feel like ants were crawling under my skin. Maybe she'd just blown me off... but Esther didn't seem like the type to say she'd meet you and then not show—unless there was a reason. I *had* to know she was okay. Once I did that, I'd let my dad know that I had a connection to her. No need to drag her into the middle of shit unless I had to.

Everyone was already at my parents' house when I got there and I barely escaped getting head-butted in the nuts when my nephew ran at me the minute I walked through the door.

“Hey, Racing Rhett.” I lifted him off the floor and flipped him upside down, making him squeal. “What are you doin' here?”

“Havin' dinner!” he replied through his giggles.

“Nah, Grandma made this dinner just for me,” I argued, walking through the house while I dangled him above the floor by his ankles. “What are you gonna eat?”

“She made dinner for me!”

“No way, man.” I lifted him and got one arm wrapped around his chest so I could flip him right side up again, knocking into one of the picture frames on the wall in the process. “Whoops.”

“I'm tellin',” he said, laughing as I slung him over my shoulder. “No dinner for you!”

“Snitches get stitches,” I replied, straightening the frame.

“Please don't teach my son that,” Emilia said in exasperation, scooting around me. “I'm trying to keep him from being a hooligan like the rest of you.”

“Think you’re too late,” I said, chuckling as Rhett tried to get me back by punching me in the lower back.

“Rhett Hawthorne,” Emilia scolded. “Knock it off.”

“Uncle started it,” he whined, kicking his legs a little so I’d let him down.

“I’m ending it,” Emilia said firmly as I put Rhett back on his feet. “Go wash your hands.”

“They’re clean!”

“Go.” She gave him the mom stare and he hurried toward the bathroom.

“You’re such a *mom*,” I joked, bumping into her deliberately as I passed her.

“You’re such an uncle,” she replied, shoving me a little from behind.

“Emilia Hawthorne,” I scolded in the exact same tone she’d used on Rhett. “Hands to ourselves, please.”

She laughed. “*Ass*.”

As we got to the kitchen, I saw Titus across the room. He must’ve been waiting for me because he was looking right at us. Emilia moved toward the cupboards to help my mom set the table and Titus jerked his chin toward the back door so I’d follow him. I said my hellos to everyone and then acted like I was going outside to grab a beer out of the fridge on the porch.

“Smooth,” I said dryly as I closed the door behind me.

“Fuck off.” He watched as I grabbed myself a beer. Might as well get one while I was out there. “So, I talked to Esther’s little sister today.”

“You what?” I barked, spinning to face him.

“Do you want everyone to know you fucked Esther Allen?” he hissed, looking at the door behind me. “Jesus!”

“Why the fuck would you think it was a good idea to talk to her sister?” I ground out. Visions of Titus getting caught up in the bullshit if we found out that Esther’s church had stolen

the guns made me feel like I was going to have a heart attack. He was kept out of club business and had absolutely no idea what was going on. I'd been his age when I'd killed Emilia's attacker and not only would I not wish that on any seventeen-year-old, but Titus was a younger seventeen than I'd been. He was practically a goddamn baby.

"We're friends."

"You're friends?" I asked incredulously. "With Esther's sister?"

"Okay, maybe not friends," he conceded. "But we talk sometimes. We're both in the same woodshop class and we were partners on a project."

"Jesus Christ," I muttered, looking up at the roof.

"She said her sister got into trouble and was sent away," Titus said in one breath, the words practically tumbling over each other.

"You asked about Esther?" My voice was flat. Fuck, he was such an idiot.

"I wasn't obvious about it." He glared at me. "Did you hear what I said? Esther was sent away."

"Yeah, I heard you. What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. She just said that one day she was there and then the day after Thanksgiving she left."

"The day after Thanksgiving?" Shit. It was already *January*. She'd been gone for months. Why the fuck hadn't I followed up with her sooner?

"Noel was pretty upset about it. Once she started talking about it she didn't stop for like five minutes."

"Well, what else did she say?" I snapped, keeping my voice down.

"Nothing really." Titus shrugged. "That she missed her and she wasn't sure when she was coming back. She said her parents won't even talk about it."

“Fuck,” I breathed.

“Do you think—” He swallowed hard. “Do you think it’s because of you and her?”

My heart was beating like a fucking drum in my chest but I shook my head. “We hooked up in September. Your friend said she didn’t even get in trouble until two months later. It must’ve been something else.”

“What the hell else could it be?” Titus replied, frowning. “I mean, it’s *Esther*.”

“Maybe I wasn’t the only guy she hooked up with,” I said, knowing in my gut that it wasn’t true. “Maybe she got caught doin’ something else later.”

“Yeah, right,” Titus muttered.

The door opened behind me and I turned to see my mom poking her head out.

“Grab me a beer, Otto-mobile,” she ordered. “And then get your ass inside, dinner’s ready.”

As soon as I walked back into the kitchen, I knew something was up.

“No time for dinner,” Mick said to me over his shoulder before leaning down to give Emilia a kiss. “Gotta head back to the club.”

I looked around and Rumi was also getting up from the table, shoving his hand jokingly against Nova’s little brother’s head before kissing Nova goodbye.

“Sorry, ma,” I said, handing her the beers I’d carried inside.

“No worries, baby,” she said with a shrug. “Nothing new.”

I followed my brothers out of the house, still struggling to catch up to what was happening. My dad was already outside on his bike.

“Got some new information,” he said, lifting his helmet. “Those fuckin’ Bible thumpers have ’em. Go straight to the club, shit’s gonna get messy.”

We climbed on our bikes and followed him back to the clubhouse. The entire ride there I just kept thinking, thank fuck they'd sent Esther away and she wasn't going to be in the middle of the shitstorm we were about to unleash.

CHAPTER 5

ESTHER

I NO LONGER woke up and wondered where I was. The warm green sleeping bag and brown plaid couch had become as familiar to me as my childhood bed ever was. The little kitchen with my freeze-dried meals, and the fireplace, and even the outhouse bathroom had become my normal.

So, it was frustrating to realize that I was jumpy again. I thought I'd finally gotten past my fear of the dark and things that went bump in the night, but after a night of restless sleep, waking up covered in sweat from bad dreams, I knew that wasn't the case. Every little noise startled me. Finally, just after dawn, I decided to get out of bed. The fire needed more wood anyway.

I hated waking up early. I'd never been an early riser to begin with, but living in the cabin had made it even worse. The earlier I got up, the longer the already long days were. As I rolled up my sleeping bag, I eyed the trap door.

Since I wasn't even supposed to know it was there, I tried to forget the little room beneath my feet. For a few minutes at a time, it actually worked. Then, I'd remember with a shudder that I was living on top of some kind of arsenal and hadn't even known it.

Had the guns already been there when I'd moved in? There was no way to know. I told myself that they'd been there the whole time without me knowing, so it shouldn't be such a big deal now that I *knew* they were there. Unfortunately, that didn't help my peace of mind. The cabin just *felt* different now. Someone had been in my space.

I got dressed and in a small show of defiance, rolled the dress and tights Aunt Lacy had given me into the fireplace. The thought of ever putting them on again, even if I was

freezing, made me feel sick. I wanted to forget the day before had ever happened.

Shoving my boots on, I trudged outside. It was cold and getting colder but oddly, we hadn't had any snow yet. I dreaded the thought of it, not knowing if the roads would be passable if the weather got worse. Pulling up the hood on my jacket, I ignored the rain and made three trips outside to gather more firewood. The thought of staying inside all day with those guns right beneath my feet sounded horrible, but going outside every few hours for more wood sounded worse.

I'd just brought in the last load, pulling the door closed behind me when I thought I caught the sound of a vehicle on the gravel outside. Every once in a while, if things were very quiet, I could catch the sound of cars on the road—but this was different. It was closer. Slower.

Fighting the urge to panic, I dropped the firewood and took off my jacket before walking over to the window. The rain was letting up but I still couldn't see anyone. The sound seemed to be getting louder though. As I watched, two motorcycles came around the curve and everything inside me froze.

Then, a truck came into view and an SUV after that.

My hands shook as I strode toward the kitchen, wondering for a split second what to do. The phone and pistol were both sitting on the table.

How would a phone help you, Esther? Whoever those people are, they're already here.

With a deep breath, I picked the pistol up from the table and checked the cylinder. Fully loaded. I'd never been so grateful for the one time my dad had paid attention to me, years ago showing me the different parts of the new revolver he'd bought, explaining how everything worked. Cocking the hammer back, I carried it with me as I threw open the door.

There were so many of them that I wasn't sure where to point the pistol. A couple of men my dad's age seemed to be leading the group so I pointed it at the one closest to me.

"Drop it," the other older man ordered.

“What the fuck?” The man I was aiming at yelled, raising his hands in the air.

“Whoa,” one of the younger guys further away said in surprise, coming into view from the side of the cabin.

“Who the hell are you?” a huge guy only a few years older than me barked. He looked kind of familiar.

“Who the heck are you?” I snapped back, my bravado completely obliterated by the way my voice shook. My stomach was churning with fear. There were too many of them. Even if I shot one, I wouldn’t have time to shoot again before they reached me. They were all carrying guns. There was a good chance that if I started shooting, they would too. I couldn’t take the chance.

“*Esther?*”

For a split second, I thought I was seeing things as a man in the driveway rose to his feet and turned toward me, his familiar face coming into view. As soon as he’d said my name, though, my entire body started to shake.

I stared at him, wide-eyed. What in the world was happening?

The gun was surprisingly heavy, and my arms wobbled.

“Otto?” I croaked. “What are you doing here?”

“Honey, you wanna drop that?” the man closest to me said, startling me. I swung the pistol in his direction.

The big guy that looked familiar yelled, “Whoa!”

“A little help here?” someone else bellowed, making me jerk in fear. God, I wished they’d all just stop *talking*.

“Esther,” Otto called, getting my attention again. “Could you stop pointin’ that at my dad, sugar?”

“Your dad?” I asked in confusion, looking at the man closest to me. There was no way that guy was his dad. Otto was practically twice his size.

In a split second, I realized that I’d been beaten. There was no way I’d be able to protect myself from so many of them

and once I realized that, my only option became perfectly clear. I gingerly lowered the gun back down as I shoved the hammer forward again.

My heart was racing as Otto strode toward me and without thought, I put one hand on my stomach, instinctively making sure the person in there was okay.

Someone said something to Otto, but I didn't pay attention because he was still moving toward me and I couldn't believe he was actually there.

"Did you come to get me?" I asked in disbelief, the words hoarse and broken. How had he found me? My throat tightened. *Finally.*

"What are you doin' here?" he asked at the same time, coming to a stop on the first stair.

My question had been answered before I finished it. I swallowed hard. "I live here."

"You live *here*?"

I nodded, raising my chin proudly even though everything inside me shriveled with embarrassment. I'd never been so grateful to have washed my hair.

"You two obviously know each other," Otto's dad said, taking a couple steps forward. He glanced at my belly. "Pretty well?"

"This is Esther," Otto replied, his eyes still on me. "Yeah, we know each other."

"This is all very entertaining," the younger guy said. "But we've got some other shit goin' on."

"Shut the fuck up, Rumi," Otto snapped, making me flinch.

The older man that wasn't Rumi's dad came closer. "We're lookin' for somethin', darlin'," he said, his voice not unkind. "You got anythin' in there that we might be searchin' for?"

I stared at him blankly for a moment before I remembered the guns. Instinctively, I took a step backward, reaching out to

grip the door.

“Hey, it’s okay, sugar,” Otto murmured, following me. “No one’s gonna hurt you.”

“Why are you here?” I asked, the words echoing hollowly in my ears. *I knew*. I didn’t know how it came to be, or why in the world they’d be looking for those crates under my floorboard, but I knew with deep certainty they were there for the guns. What in the world was Otto involved in?

Otto stared at me for a moment before looking over at his dad. Then his eyes came back to mine. “Shipment of wooden crates got stolen yesterday mornin’,” he said, searching my face. “You know anythin’ about that?”

I wanted to tell him no. Disappointment and disillusionment and some kind of odd loyalty to my family made my head spin. If I told him they weren’t there, would he believe me? Would any of the other men who were getting closer and closer to the cabin believe me? I looked around the sea of faces.

No. Even if I told them the guns weren’t there, the men would still search. Maybe they wouldn’t find them. It was a possibility. I hadn’t even known about the trap door for months. But if they did find them and I’d pretended not to know what they were talking about? I had a feeling things would turn ugly really fast.

“They’re inside,” I replied finally, stepping back into the cabin. “Come in.”

Otto’s eyes widened in disbelief as he followed me inside.

The cabin had become normal for me, but by the looks on the men’s faces, it was far from normal to them. They were scowling, staring, wide-eyed, frowning. For the first time, it felt like there wasn’t enough room inside my little haven. Shame burned through me. Why hadn’t I put the supplies away? There were still bags of things all over the floor and it made the space look messy. I brushed the hair out of my face as I strode toward the kitchen area, putting the revolver down on the table. It wasn’t as if I would use it anyway.

“Where?” Otto’s dad asked, looking around.

“Could you take a step back?” I asked one of the men who was standing right on top of the trap door.

“Uh, sure,” he mumbled. He shuffled back, still scanning the room with his gaze.

Trying not to die of shame and embarrassment, I knelt down on the floor and ran my fingers along the board that I was pretty sure was the edge of the door. When my fingers finally felt the catch, I dug them in and jerked upward, pulling the door open.

“Holy fuck,” the man named Rumi muttered. “We would’ve never found it.”

I didn’t have time to feel guilty that I’d given away the hiding place for no reason, because the older man was coming forward, his eyes on me.

“Booby-trapped?” he asked calmly.

“What?”

“Is it booby-trapped?”

“I—” I looked down at the hole. “I don’t know. I don’t think so?”

“You live here?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you should know.”

“I didn’t even know they were there,” I said, my voice barely audible. What the heck was going on?

“You just showed us where they were,” he countered.

“I came home yesterday,” I said faintly, gesturing at the hole. My mind was racing. Was it booby-trapped? I lived right on top of it. What if I’d climbed down there the night before? “And someone had been in here. They put wood on the fire.”

“Okay?”

“I noticed that there was a lip in the floor that wasn’t there before.” I looked at him. “So I opened it. I don’t think I was

supposed to know they were there.”

“Where were you yesterday?” Otto’s dad asked.

“The doctor.” I looked at Otto and then quickly away.

“No car outside. How’d you get there?”

“My uncle and aunt picked me up.” I crossed my arms over my chest, uncomfortable with the interrogation. He was asking questions so fast that I was having a hard time following.

“Not your parents?”

“No.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know.”

“How long you been livin’ here?”

“Fifty-five days,” I replied, making him frown.

“Since the day after Thanksgiving,” Otto murmured, running his hand through his short hair.

“Good guess.” I looked at him in surprise.

“Let me take a look,” one of the younger guys said, pushing his way to the edge of the hole and laying down on his belly at the edge of it. “Can you turn on the lights?”

I opened my mouth, closed it again, my cheeks heating. “There are no lights.”

“What?” the big younger guy asked.

“There’s no lights,” I repeated. “There’s no electricity.”

“You’ve been livin’ here for two months with no electricity... in the middle of winter?” the older guy asked incredulously.

“There’s a fireplace,” I said, gesturing toward it with fake nonchalance. “It keeps things warm in here. Plus, it puts off light at night.”

Otto cursed and spun away, walking toward the small kitchen area.

“It’s really not a big deal,” I said, knowing even as I said it that these men were looking at me like I was a complete freak. “I’ve got everything I need.”

“Well, I still need a goddamn light,” the man lying on the floor growled, his voice vibrating with anger.

“Here,” someone else said, handing him a phone with the flashlight turned on.

It was quiet in the cabin for a few moments.

“We’ve got wires down here,” the man on the floor said grimly. “A fuckin’ spiderweb of ’em.”

“Get her out of here,” Otto’s dad barked, gesturing toward me.

“What?” I stuttered as hands pushed me gently away from the hole in the floor.

“You got anythin’ you need in here?” Otto asked, coming up beside me.

“Everything,” I said faintly, looking around the room.

“Not carryin’ out the couch,” he replied dryly. “Could you be more specific?”

“My suitcase.” It was behind one of the men, and I would’ve gone to get it, but before I could move, Otto had his hand on my shoulder, stopping me from moving any further into the room.

He strode over to it and made sure it was zipped before lifting it carefully off the floor with one hand.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing my coat off the couch. “You can put this on outside.”

I followed him numbly, shoving my boots on by the door as we went. Once we were outside, he helped me into my coat and led me to the passenger seat of the truck.

“What’s going on?” I asked quietly, looking out at my cabin. It was unnerving by being so close to him. I’d imagined him so often that it was startling to actually have him there.

“Those guns are wired,” he replied angrily through his teeth, helping me with my jacket.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means they’re rigged to explosives.” He stared at me, willing me to understand. “Bombs, Esther. You were livin’ in a place with no electricity and fuckin’ bombs under your livin’ room.”

I wanted to tell him that of course I knew what the word *explosives* meant, but I couldn’t quite grasp what he was saying. Of course there weren’t explosives under the floor. Why in the world would someone put explosives under the floor? I was pretty sure it had been my dad that put those guns there, because I wasn’t even sure who else knew about the cabin, but even though I wasn’t sure *why* he’d put them there, I knew he wouldn’t put a bomb in the house where his daughter was living. That was *absurd*. He was strict, yes, but he wasn’t *crazy*.

My dad wouldn’t even know where to get explosives. He owned a nursery for goodness’ sake.

Our attention was diverted when the men poured back outside, coming down the steps and toward the vehicles. A couple of them walked a little toward the woods, watching the ground as they pulled phones out of their pockets.

Otto’s dad and the big guy walked toward us. As I watched them, I realized why the big one looked familiar—he looked like a slightly older version of Otto.

“That’s my brother Micky,” Otto said as I continued to watch them. “The loudmouth one is my brother Rumi.”

“Rumi looks like your dad,” I mumbled dumbly. “You don’t.”

“Got his eyes. Not the color—the shape,” Otto replied distractedly as they reached us.

“Callin’ in reinforcements,” Otto’s dad said. He looked at me and held out his hand. “I’m Tommy.”

“Esther,” I replied automatically, shaking his hand. Politeness had been ingrained in me since I was born.

“Nice to meet you, sweetheart.” He smiled, and I realized that Otto had also gotten that from his dad. “Sorry we’re meetin’ like this.”

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” I said honestly. The older man somehow put me at ease while his son—whom I’d actually been wishing for—didn’t.

“Well,” Tommy said with a sigh. “Those crates are wired so that if we tried to get down there or take any of ’em, they’d blow the fuck up.”

“Are you sure?” I asked dubiously.

“Pretty fuckin’ sure,” Otto’s brother Micky mumbled.

“We’ve got someone comin’ out that has some experience with this shit,” Tommy said with a nod. “He’ll take care of it.”

I stared at the cabin. “And then it’ll be safe to go back inside?” I asked, thinking of all the food I had inside. The stacks of firewood I’d brought in that morning. The phone that I’d left on the table like an idiot.

“Should be,” Tommy confirmed.

“Okay, good.” I murmured, not really sure what to say. “It’s cold out here.”

“I’ll turn on the truck,” Otto replied quickly, walking away so he could climb in the driver’s side.

“Can’t believe you’ve been livin’ in there,” Mick said, looking over at me.

“You get used to it,” I replied with a shrug, my cheeks burning. “It’s really not so bad. Whoever built it did a good job.”

“You—”

Whatever he’d been about to say was cut off as the other older guy came stomping toward us.

“Mouth and one of his guys are on the way.”

“Fuck,” Tommy said, shaking his head. “I thought he and Ceecee had headed south already.”

“Tomorrow,” the older man replied.

“Good timin’.”

“I’m Will,” the older guy said to me. “That bozo’s uncle.”

I looked between Tommy and Will suddenly understanding the weird genetics they had going on in their family. Will was as big as Micky and Otto, while his dad and brother Rumi were a bit shorter and about half as wide. Very strange.

“He took all the food when we were kids,” Tommy joked, correctly interpreting my look.

“Fuck you,” Will replied with a chuckle.

I’d gone to public school and had probably heard every swear word there was, but their casual use of them was a little disconcerting. I ignored it. The truck was running with the heater going full blast, but it was still a little chilly with my door open. Zipping the front of my jacket all the way to my chin, I pulled the hood up, too.

“Someone’s been out here, choppin’ wood,” Otto’s brother Rumi said with a scowl, walking toward us.

Timidly, I raised my hand. “Uh, that was me.”

Rumi did a double take. “Say what?”

“I chopped the wood,” I clarified, nodding toward the side of the cabin. “Well, most of it. There’s about three rows at the bottom that were here when I moved in.”

“That stack is as tall as I am,” he replied flatly.

I shrugged. “I’ve been here a while.”

“Bullshit.”

“There’s not a lot to do.”

“You’re tellin’ me that you chopped all that wood?”

“That’s what I said.”

“By yourself?”

“Do you see anyone else here?” I was starting to get a little irritated by that point. My mind was hopping from one thing to another. I was sitting in some random truck, the father of my child that I’d only talked to *twice* was sitting behind me, there was some kind of *bomb* in my cabin, and he was questioning me about *firewood*?

“Think we should keep an eye out for whoever else is living here,” Rumi said, dismissing me as he looked at his dad. “They gotta come home at some point.”

“Are you joking?” I asked under my breath.

“Enough, Rumi,” Otto barked.

“Look, man, I know she’s your...whatever. But facts are facts.”

Otto was out of the truck in less than a second, rounding the hood in long strides. “What facts?”

“There’s freshly cut wood next to the cabin,” Rumi said slowly, like Otto couldn’t understand him. “A fire goin’ in the fireplace, guns and explosives in the floor... and oblivious Esther *livin’* here in the middle of it all with no electricity? I don’t buy it.” He paused to pull the hood of his sweatshirt up as it started to rain. “Somethin’ stinks. I’m guessin’ Esther here was the lookout. Good chance she already called someone.”

Ignoring their argument, I slid down from the truck and through the group of men who moved out of my way. There was a lot I couldn’t explain, and I was having a really hard time wrapping my head around what the heck was going on, but there was one thing I could clear up pretty easily.

Without a word, I walked over to the stump I used for splitting and pulled it away from the side of the cabin, just in case there really was a bomb inside. I looked around for a round that was reasonably dry and found one leaning against a tree a few feet away. It was easy enough to perch it on the stump. I could feel their eyes on my back as I stripped my coat off and draped it carefully so it wouldn’t get wet inside. Then,

grabbing the axe, I lifted it over my shoulder and swung it as hard as I could, splitting it halfway through.

“Esther,” Otto called, coming toward me.

I waved him away silently and lifted the axe again, splitting the round completely through the center.

“Esther,” he called again, his voice sounding closer and exasperated.

“Just a minute,” I grunted, re-settling the half-round on the stump. With two more whacks, I’d split it into small enough pieces for the fireplace.

Turning around, I looked and found Rumi still standing next to the truck. “*I split the wood.*”

“Clearly,” Otto’s uncle Will said in amusement.

“Come away from the goddamn cabin,” Otto snapped, grabbing the axe from my hands as he shoved me toward my coat. “Jesus Christ.”

“I was just showing him—”

“I know what you were doin’,” he said as he tugged me back toward the truck. “Ignore him.”

“I should call my dad,” I said, my mind finally clearing a little as I pulled Otto to a stop. “I’ll ask him if he knows anything about the crates.”

Otto stared at me like I had two heads.

“Sugar, you realize why we’re here, right?” he said gently, leaning down to look closely into my eyes.

“You think those crates are yours, right?” I said, glancing toward the cabin. “And someone stole them and hid them in the floor.”

“Right.”

“Well, why don’t I just call my dad and see if he knows anything about them?” I said. It sounded rational to me. “It seems like it’ll save you guys a lot of trouble and then if that stuff is yours, you can just take it, and I can go back inside.”

“What?” he asked in disbelief.

“Why don’t I—”

“No, I heard you,” Otto said, carefully ushering me the rest of the way to the truck. “You’re not callin’ your dad.”

“But—”

“And you’re not steppin’ foot back in that cabin.”

“That’s where I *live*.”

“Not anymore,” Otto replied grimly.

“She okay?” Micky asked.

“Shock maybe?” Otto replied out of the side of his mouth.

“I’m not in shock,” I argued.

“She’s not really graspin’ the situation,” Tommy said softly.

“Please stop talking about me like I’m not here,” I snapped.

“Sorry, sweetheart,” Tommy replied.

“Can you guys please just leave? Or wait out here until you figure out whatever you need to figure out?” I asked tiredly, finally losing my patience. “I want to go back inside. I’m cold and I’m hungry, and I’ve got a perfectly good fire and breakfast waiting for me.”

“Can I have a word?” Tommy asked Otto, putting his hand on Otto’s shoulder.

As they walked away, the ringing in my ears that I’d been able to ignore since I opened the cabin door got just a little bit louder. I clenched my hands in my lap as I tried to keep my breathing slow and regular. I could tell that Otto’s brothers and uncle were watching me and I didn’t want them to see how scared I was.

By that point, I no longer feared the men. They seemed like they were nice enough and if they were going to hurt me they would’ve already—plus, I didn’t think Otto would let them. I was more afraid of what was going to happen next,

once they took the guns. I didn't know why my dad had them, it must've been some mistake. My dad co-owned a nursery. He went to church every Sunday and Wednesday. He was a deacon for Pete's sake. What would he do with a bunch of rifles? But part of me, deep down, knew that if he'd taken so much care to hide them he would be really angry they were gone.

I'd screwed up big time. This was probably the type of emergency that constituted using that phone I'd left inside. Now, they would never let me come home.

CHAPTER 6

OTTO

“I WANT YOU to take Esther back to town,” my dad said, stopping me by the tailgate of Rumi’s truck. “Don’t take her to your house. Go to the clubhouse. I’ll call ahead and let them know you’re comin’.”

“Why?”

“She doesn’t need to be here for this part,” he replied calmly, glancing at the back of Esther’s head in the back window. “She seems real confused, bud.”

“She’s gonna freak if I try to make her leave.”

Dad looked at me for a long moment. “You get a good look at that cabin, son?”

“Not really,” I replied. I’d glanced around, but most of my attention had been on Esther and her round belly.

“There’s no electricity,” Dad said. He paused. “I also didn’t see a generator anywhere, Otto. So, no runnin’ water either.”

I don’t know how I hadn’t put it together. I guess I was just as fucking shell-shocked as Esther seemed to be. I’d been surprised and furious that she was living in the middle of nowhere with no electricity but I hadn’t even thought about the water situation. I was from the country, I *knew* that you needed electricity for a well to pump water inside. I’d just been too distracted to really see the situation for what it was. No well meant no toilet. No sink. No shower. She couldn’t even wash her fucking hands.

Rage pulsed through me.

“You think they left her out here to guard the shipment?” I asked, glancing at the cab of the truck.

“Unlikely,” my dad replied with a sigh. “All we had to do was ask nicely and she showed us where the damn things were.”

“This is a fuckin’ nightmare,” I muttered. “What the fuck is even happening right now?”

“Did you know she was pregnant?” he asked flatly. “The way you’re lookin’ at her, I’m assumin’ it could be yours.”

I jerked my head up to look at him. “I had no fuckin’ clue. I used a condom.”

“Well that’s somethin’ at least.” He watched me closely. “You think it’s yours?”

My laughter was hoarse and painful. “She hasn’t slept with anyone else.”

“You sure about that?”

“Did you see her?” I asked dubiously. “That dress is a little more extreme than what she usually wears, but not much. She’s a church girl. I’m not even sure how *I* fuckin’ slept with her.”

“We’ll talk about this later,” Dad said ominously as Uncle Will strode toward us.

“Mouth’s bringin’ Forrest out with him.”

“That’s good,” Dad replied. “He’ll figure that shit out.”

“We shoulda recruited that motherfucker when we met him,” Uncle Will said, shaking his head. “Coulda used his expertise the last twenty years.”

“Tried to.” Dad huffed. “He wasn’t interested.”

“Shame.” Uncle Will looked at me. “So, congratulations in order?”

“What?” I looked at him blankly.

“That girl’s either got the worst growth I’ve ever seen or she’s gonna have a baby,” he said dryly. “Yours?”

“Mine,” I confirmed, trying to wrap my head around it.

Shit like that didn't happen. I'd been having sex for years and I'd always been careful. I didn't get women pregnant. I was careful. Never went without a condom. Ever.

"That complicates shit," Uncle Will mused.

"Told him to take her back to the clubhouse," my dad said. "She doesn't need to be sittin' here in the cold while we figure this shit out."

"She shouldn't be out here at all," Uncle Will countered. "How the fuck did she end up here? She tell you?"

"She hasn't said much," I replied. "Beyond askin' me to call her dad so we could *clear everything up* and she could go back inside."

"You're shittin' me."

"Nope."

"Hell, Molly isn't even that naïve."

"I don't think she's got any idea what's goin' on," I said with a sigh. "She barely seems rattled. It's like she thinks it's some big misunderstandin'."

"Christ," my dad muttered.

"Woods are fuckin' wired," my brother Rumi called out incredulously, jogging toward us.

"Say what?" I barked.

"No shit, man," he said as he reached us. "About fifty feet in. These are some paranoid motherfuckers."

"Get her out of here, Otto," my dad said, his voice vibrating with anger. "Go now."

"They wired the woods and she's been out here choppin' wood?" Uncle Will said in disbelief as I strode toward Esther's side of the truck.

My hands were shaking as the implication of that settled in my gut. The idea of Esther walking into the trees looking for wood to split and being blown to pieces ran like a reel over and over again. I was livid that we'd known where to look the

night before but we'd waited until morning to come searching and she'd spent all that time oblivious to the danger around her.

"Careful drivin' outta here," my dad called. I waved my hand in acknowledgment.

Esther was sitting sideways in the truck seat, her rubber rain boots perched on the edge of the floorboard with her skirt tucked tightly around her legs.

"What's going on?" she asked as I reached her.

"We're leavin'," I replied, gesturing at her to pull her feet inside.

"What?" She glanced at the cabin. "No, I can't. My dad said—"

"I don't give a flyin' fuck what your dad said," I barked, making her jump. Instantly, I lowered my voice. I didn't want to fucking scare her, but every second we were there made me more nervous. It was one thing to know that there were explosives under the cabin, it was something else knowing we were surrounded by them. "I'm goin' to take you into town until we get this all sorted."

"He'll be really angry," she said, her voice strained. "I don't think I should leave."

I paused and took a deep breath and lied straight to her face. "Look, let me take you for somethin' to eat, yeah? When we get all this taken care of, if you want to come back I'll bring you back."

There was no fucking way I was ever letting her step foot back inside that shitty cabin.

She stared at me and I had the really uncomfortable feeling that she could see right through me and knew that I was lying, but she slowly turned anyway, pulling her legs into the truck.

The drive back down the gravel driveway made me jumpy as fuck. Every pothole and bump made me tense even further until my knuckles were white around the steering wheel. I'd

never been so happy to see pavement as when we pulled out onto the road.

I hated leaving everyone behind when I should've been there helping, but I couldn't imagine sending Esther off with anyone else and she sure as fuck couldn't stay there. I glanced at her as we headed back toward Eugene. She'd fisted her hands together in her lap and was sitting as still as a statue. I couldn't stop the pulse of *mine, mine, mine* pounding in the back of my mind.

It was silent in the cab of the truck for at least thirty minutes before she spoke.

"I don't understand any of this," she said quietly. "None of it makes any sense."

"Yesterday," I replied, wondering exactly how much I should tell her. "We were movin' a shipment when someone forced a couple of our people off the road and stole it."

"But how did they end up in my cabin?" she replied in exasperation, her words running together as she spoke faster and faster. "Why were you shipping guns like that? Why would you think my dad took them? How did you even know about the cabin? My dad's a deacon in our church. He's not going around stealing *guns*. He's the most straight-laced person I've ever met. None of this makes sense."

"Our crates were there," I pointed out reasonably. "You saw them."

"But maybe my dad had nothing to do with it," she said, turning to look at me. "That's what I'm saying. You should let me call him."

"You think that some stranger..." I paused for emphasis. "Somehow knew that there was a cabin out in the middle of fuckin' nowhere, with a hidden trap door in the floor, and also knew that you'd be conveniently gone for a few hours yesterday?"

Esther was silent.

"I'm sorry," I said gently. "I know all this is confusin' as fuck."

“How did you know they were there, though?” she asked quietly. “How did you know where to look?”

“Narrowed it down,” I replied, leaving out the fact that Aces had also gone to her church and the warehouse that I doubted she even knew existed. Someone had texted them the minute we’d found the guns and some of the boys were already headed to the cabin. It was only a matter of time before we passed them on the road.

Half of me was still back at that cabin in the woods, but we’d ignored the elephant in the truck for as long as I could stand.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were pregnant?” I asked after it had been quiet for a few minutes. “I came to see if you were alright and you didn’t say a fuckin’ word.”

Her hand went unconsciously to her belly.

“I didn’t know then.”

“You knew at some point.”

“I didn’t think—” She paused. “We barely know each other.”

“So?”

“I would’ve told you eventually.”

“After you’d had it?” I asked flatly.

“Once I knew how to find you,” she murmured, looking out the window. “But I was more worried about telling my parents.”

“I’m sure that went over well.” I could only imagine how badly they’d reacted.

“Not really,” she replied seriously. “The next day my dad brought me out to the cabin.”

“The day after Thanksgiving,” I said knowingly.

“How did you know that?”

“My brother asked your sister.”

“Noel?” her head turned toward me sharply. “How is she? Is she okay?”

“Far as I know, she’s fine,” I replied quickly. “Missin’ you, though.”

“I miss her, too,” she said, leaning back tiredly against the seat. “I thought that I’d be excited when I finally didn’t have to share a room with her anymore, but I really miss her.”

I nodded and watched out the windshield as five bikes came into view headed toward us. Lifting my fingers off the steering wheel, I waved at them as they passed.

“Are those your friends?” she asked, looking at them through the back window.

“Brothers, yeah.”

“Brothers?”

“In the MC.”

“Oh, right,” she looked at my cut and shook her head. “I forgot your family was part of all that.”

“Not sure how,” I said with a chuckle. “Ain’t exactly hidin’ it.”

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the clubhouse,” I replied, glancing at her. “We’ll grab some food first, though. Anythin’ sound good?”

She rattled off a fast food place so quickly that I smiled.

“I’m hungry,” she said ruefully. “Which is weird because my stomach is one big knot.”

“Baby’s hungry,” I replied. The words felt weird coming out of my mouth and I cleared my throat.

“I guess so.”

“You—” My voice cracked and I felt my ears heat in embarrassment. “Uh, you know what you’re havin’ yet?”

Esther shook her head. “No, but I heard the heartbeat yesterday.”

There was something in her voice that made me tense. I wasn't sure what it was, just that it wasn't good.

"Everything's good, though?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding. She didn't look at me. "I think so."

"That's good."

We were mostly silent for the rest of the drive. Esther became more fidgety the closer we got to town and by the time we'd pulled into the drive-thru she was visibly nervous. Her eyes darted from one place to the next, wide and worried, and she didn't calm down until we were on the highway headed back to the clubhouse.

"I'm not used to all the noise anymore," she said around a bite of her breakfast sandwich.

"You've been at the cabin all that time?" I asked, trying to sound like the answer didn't matter.

"Until yesterday," she replied, nodding. "We came into town for the doctor's appointment."

"That's right."

"Oh, I've seen this before," she said, leaning forward as we pulled up to the club's gate. "I didn't know this was where the motorcycle club is." She looked at the sign. "It says it's a mechanic shop."

"Got one of those, too," I said, rolling down my window. "It's where I work."

"Hey, man, I'll get the gate," the prospect called, coming out of the little shed behind the fence.

"Is he a guard?" she asked curiously. The prospect in question had so many piercings on his face that she was staring at him wide-eyed.

"He's a prospect," I clarified, jerking my chin in thanks as we rolled through the gate. "Wants to be a member, but he's gotta go through a probation period first."

"Oh," she replied.

“Not sure who’s here,” I warned her as we drove up the driveway. “But there shouldn’t be that many people. You’re with me, so they’ll be cool.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?” she asked, looking over at me.

I forced a smile, but didn’t answer her.

I couldn’t understand how Esther still hadn’t fully grasped the situation we were in. She was protected because of her connection to me and the child she carried, but that was as far as her protection went. We’d found her *with* the goddamn stolen guns. No one was going to think that she’d orchestrated anything because they weren’t stupid, but her proximity to the people who had put her in a precarious fucking position.

I swallowed hard when we pulled into the forecourt and recognized the bikes that were lined up outside. Any chance of quietly ushering her into my parents’ room and keeping her there until we figured out what the fuck to do was gone. When my uncle Casper stepped outside to watch me park, I realized I had no time to even prepare her for what happened next.

If I was interpreting the group assembled correctly, she was going to have to run the gauntlet the minute we walked inside.

“Just tell the truth,” I said as I opened her door and helped her to the ground. “No bullshit.”

“About what?” she said in exasperation, throwing up her hands. “I don’t even know what the heck is going on.”

“Esther,” I growled, squeezing her hand. There was no fear in her eyes and that made me more nervous than anything, the fact that she seemed completely unbothered. “I get that you’re confused, alright? But this shit is serious as fuck. You know more than you’re sayin’.”

Her lips clamped shut and she frowned at me.

“Just tell the truth,” I said, a little more gently, reaching out to brush her hair away from her face. “It’ll be alright.”

I led her to the front door, still holding her hand. I figured that would tell the boys inside more than anything else exactly

what they were dealing with. She was a part of this, unwilling or not, but for what it was worth I wanted everyone to know she had my protection.

“Otto,” Uncle Casper said with a nod, opening the door wide.

“This is Esther,” I said as I passed him.

“Hello,” Esther said quietly from behind me.

Jesus, she sounded so fucking sweet. As much as it drove me crazy how goddamn naïve she was, I also loved it. There weren't any games with Esther. What you saw was exactly what you got. I remembered that about her from school and when I'd met her again later. She had a glass face. You always knew exactly what she was thinking.

“Otto,” Dragon greeted as we walked further into the room. “Take a seat.”

They were all sitting around a table, and a person who didn't know them might've thought they were relaxed, but they weren't. Dragon, my gramps, Leo, Uncle Mack, and Cam watched as I towed Esther to the table and sat down next to her.

“This is Esther,” I repeated. Fuck, my hands were clammy.

“Hello, Esther,” Gramps said, not unkindly. “Grease.”

“My grandfather,” I clarified. He shot me a look that I couldn't interpret.

“This is Dragon, Mack, Leo, Cam,” Gramps continued. “And Casper.”

“Nice to meet you,” Esther said, smiling nervously. “Your name's Dragon?”

“Nickname,” he replied flatly.

“Oh,” she breathed.

“Our boys said they found our missin' shipment at your house,” Dragon said. “That true?”

“It’s really more of a cabin,” Esther replied shakily. I nearly groaned.

“Cabin, then,” Dragon said, inclining his head. Then he just watched her.

“They were under the floorboards,” Esther said. Stronger men than her had spilled their guts when Dragon looked at them like that, I was actually surprised by the few seconds she’d sat there in silence. “There was a trap door in the floor.”

“Who put them there?” Gramps asked.

“I don’t know,” Esther replied, lifting her hands and dropping them again. “I’ve been at the cabin since Thanksgiving and I never even noticed that there *was* a trap door in the floor. Yesterday my uncle and aunt picked me up and took me to the doctor.” She paused and took a breath. “Which was actually pretty surprising because I hadn’t seen or heard from anyone since I moved in. Anyway, they took me to the doctor and we stopped for more supplies,” she said, looking around at the men. “You know, food and water and more propane for the stove. Then we drove back to the cabin and that’s when I noticed the door.”

She stopped talking suddenly like she’d finally realized that she’d been rambling on.

“You open it?” Dragon asked.

“Well, yeah.”

“So you saw what was inside.”

“One of the crates was open.”

“You weren’t surprised? Didn’t think to call someone and ask them why there were guns underneath your floor?”

Esther stared at him, nonplussed. “My dad said I could only use the phone for emergencies. I didn’t think it was an emergency.”

“You didn’t think it was an emergency that there were a bunch of rifles in your house that you didn’t put there?” He held up his hand to stop her from replying. “Cabin,” he clarified.

She looked at each of the men in turn, gauging their facial expressions, and I knew the moment she realized exactly how things looked and how serious her situation was. It was as if the rosy sheen she saw the world through was suddenly gone.

Her neck muscles tightened as she swallowed.

“He said only emergencies,” she replied quietly. “And since I wasn’t hurt and the cabin wasn’t on fire, I didn’t think it qualified.”

“You didn’t call anyone on that phone since Thanksgiving?” Cam asked, his voice nearly as quiet as hers. “From what I hear, you were livin’ pretty rough.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head once. “No one.” Her voice was hoarse when she spoke again. “He said that he’d be watching the account, and if I called anyone, he’d take it back.” Her hand went to her belly under the shelter of the table. “I didn’t want to take the chance and be out there without a phone.”

That motherfucker. The thought of her stranded in the middle of nowhere with no way to reach anyone made my stomach clench. Instinctively I reached over and put my hand on her back. The movement wasn’t lost on anyone at the table.

“What I can’t understand is why you were livin’ out there in the first place,” Leo said.

“I—” She glanced at me. “I—uh.”

I rubbed my thumb lightly between her shoulder blades, ignoring the little zap of attraction at the firm muscle under my fingertips.

“They sent me there when I told them I was pregnant,” she said finally. “They said I could come home after I’d had the baby.”

Leo stared at her in confusion.

“Fuckin’ assholes,” my gramps muttered.

“I knew they’d be mad,” Esther said, her voice soft.

“Did you tell them who the father was?” Uncle Casper asked, watching Esther intently.

She met his gaze, wide-eyed. “They never asked.”

CHAPTER 7

ESTHER

EVERYTHING HAD FELT a little hazy and unfocused that morning and I'd had a really hard time following along with what the men at the cabin had been talking about. The situation still felt completely absurd—but facing the six men in front of me, their faces wreathed in suspicion, made things come into clear focus very quickly.

“They never even asked who it was,” I repeated, looking at Otto apologetically. I wasn't sure why I felt bad that my family hadn't cared who I'd slept with. I guess I didn't want him to feel unimportant.

“Was there anyone who knew?” Grease asked.

I started to shake my head and then stopped, realization dawning.

“Becka,” Otto said gruffly, his hand growing heavier on my back.

“My cousin,” I clarified to the men. “She knew that I'd spent time with Otto.”

“She know you fucked him?” Dragon practically barked at me. I flinched.

“I told her he kissed me,” I mumbled, embarrassed.

“Kissin' doesn't make babies, honey,” Casper said dryly.

“She didn't know I was pregnant,” I shot back, embarrassed. I might not know anything about guns and whatever else they were into—probably nothing good—but I did know where babies came from.

“And if someone told her you were pregnant?” Dragon asked.

I nodded. “It could only be Otto,” I said softly.

His hand moved upward, wrapping comfortably around the back of my neck. “I, uh, stopped by her family’s garden center a couple times,” he muttered uncomfortably. “A few days after Esther and I hooked up and then again, uh, yesterday morning.”

“You did?” my gaze shot to his. He’d come looking for me even after I’d stood him up. Something inside me warmed.

“Fuck,” his grandpa muttered.

“You know they wired that cabin with explosives?” Dragon asked, pulling my attention back to the angry men.

“That’s what one of the guys said—”

“Brody,” Otto chimed in.

“But my dad wouldn’t do that,” I continued. “Not with me living there. He’d never put me in danger. I’m his *daughter*.”

I just couldn’t comprehend it. Sure, for a split second when he’d brought me to the cabin, I’d imagined him killing me, but I hadn’t actually *believed* he’d do it. If he was going to kill me, he would’ve done it the night before when he’d lost his temper and beat the crap out of me, not in the cold light of day. My dad was surly and it wasn’t like we’d ever been close, but I’d never believe that he’d put a bomb in my house. He had a temper but he loved his family even if he wasn’t good at showing it.

“If you let me call him, I think we can get things straightened out,” I told the men firmly. “Maybe he didn’t even know about your guns.”

“Your dad owns the cabin,” Casper said flatly.

“Really?” I replied. I’d figured it belonged to someone else in the church—someone who would be involved with stealing guns. There were a few men that I’d always thought seemed kind of shifty. A couple that had looked at me in a way that made my skin crawl.

“Still,” I said stubbornly. “There could be other people who knew about it. I doubt it was a secret.”

“Ones that knew you’d be out of there yesterday?” the guy named Mack asked. He was wearing a T-shirt and one of his forearms was covered from wrist to elbow in a thick white bandage.

“The doctor I saw yesterday is part of our church,” I said, desperately finding a thread that would pull my version of events along. “He would’ve known I had an appointment and wouldn’t be home.”

“That’s reachin’ a bit,” Otto’s grandpa said dubiously, pulling his phone out of the chest pocket of his T-shirt. “Give me a minute,” he mumbled to the group, standing and walking away to take the call.

“I really have to use the bathroom,” I said quietly to Otto, knotting my hands together in my lap and regretting the soda I’d drank with breakfast.

“Come on,” he said, getting to his feet. No one stopped him as he led me through an archway and into a hallway that stretched along the back wall of the building.

“Thanks,” I said, sliding past him as he swung open the door to a small bathroom.

I did my business quickly, hoping that he wasn’t standing right outside the door listening to me pee. Looking in the mirror as I washed my hands, I tried to see myself as the men outside did. My hair was still clean from the shower I’d had the day before, but it was messy. I hadn’t bothered brushing it when I’d woken up that morning and hadn’t thought to do it since. Using my wet hands, I smoothed the little wispy hairs away from my face and fixed my ponytail, wrapping the hair around and around and tucking the end into the elastic so that it resembled the bun I usually wore in public.

I couldn’t do anything about the dress I was wearing. It was warm inside the building and I would’ve liked to take my coat off, but there was a large stain running all along the front of it. Washing clothes by hand with dish soap left a lot to be desired in the stain-fighting department.

“Esther?” Otto called as I zipped my coat back up. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I called back, reaching for the door. I opened it to find him just inches away.

“You were quiet.”

“I was fixing my hair,” I replied, moving past him.

I really didn’t want to go back to be interrogated again, but standing with him in the dim hallway brought up all sorts of memories that I was trying to ignore. He smelled the same. Spicy, almost, with something that was just specifically Otto. It would be way too easy to lean in, just for a moment, and rest against him.

He followed me back toward the main room and as we walked back through the archway I felt a little tug on my hair and my bun unraveled, falling down my back.

I looked back at him and he smiled unapologetically, shrugging. Butterflies took flight in my belly until I forced them into submission. I wasn’t there to ogle Otto Hawthorne.

“Come sit,” Dragon ordered when he saw us.

My heart, not nearly as calm as I’d like to pretend, started thumping hard at the look on his face. He’d been expressionless before, a blank slate, but he wasn’t hiding anything anymore. In fact, all the men around the table were visibly angry.

“Got the explosives at the cabin taken care of,” Dragon began, his eyes on me. “Looks like only half of the crates were there.”

“Half are still missing?” Otto asked in disbelief.

Dragon nodded but was still looking at me. “You said your dad gave you that phone for emergencies?”

I was afraid to answer, and I cleared my throat to procrastinate, even for a second. “Yeah. When he dropped me off.”

“The one in the cabin, yeah?”

“I left it on the kitchen table,” I confirmed, nodding.

Otto’s grandpa scrubbed a hand over his face and the man named Leo cursed under his breath.

“What?” I asked, looking around. While they’d all been watching me intently before, now only Dragon would meet my eyes.

“There weren’t any trip wires,” he said quietly. “They were rigged to go off when someone tried to use that phone.”

“What?” I asked in confusion as Otto jerked to his feet beside me, the chair he’d been sitting on crashing to the floor.

“Those explosives in your cabin,” Dragon explained, his stare almost sympathetic. “They weren’t connected to any trip wires, that was all for show. The minute you tried to call out on that phone, they would’ve detonated.”

I could hear the words coming out of his mouth and I understood them logically, but I was still having trouble following what he was trying to tell me. I was a quiet girl from a normal family. I didn’t go out, I didn’t drink or do drugs, I’d never been in trouble, I’d never even driven higher than the speed limit. All the talk of explosives and trip wires and shipments of rifles was so completely out of my experience that I’d kind of just gone along with it, not really letting any of it sink in because it didn’t make any *sense* to me. I figured they’d get everything worked out and there would be an explanation for the last twenty-four hours and I’d be able to go back to my little cabin until my parents came for me.

I *did* understand emotion, though. I could read expressions and body language. I knew when people were suspicious or curious or angry. My grasp on interpersonal communication was just fine, and all of a sudden the fact that Dragon, clearly the leader of the group, was looking at me like he felt sorry for me made everything come into sharp focus.

They were either very good actors or everything I’d thought I knew about my life was a lie.

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to do,” I said softly, clenching my hands together in my lap. “But, I think I’m done

talking now.”

“*Esther*,” Otto chided.

“Leave it,” Dragon ordered him, still watching me. “Let’s give her a minute.”

The men got up from their seats and left us, moving across the room to the bar. Their conversation was hushed, like a low hum, and I couldn’t make out the words.

“You okay?” Otto asked, his hand leaving my back so he could brush my cheek with his thumb. “It’s a lot to take in, yeah? You look a little out of it.”

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, my eyes on the scarred wood tabletop.

“Doin’ what, sugar?”

“This.” I gestured at the room. “All of this. What the heck is going on? Why—why would you say that my dad was trying to kill me? How does that help you? I don’t understand.”

I turned my head just in time to see Otto’s mouth drop open in surprise.

“I would’ve told you about the baby,” I continued. “Eventually. And I’m sorry that people stole from you but why are you dragging my family into it? I’ve already told you everything I know.”

“You think we’re lyin’ to you?”

“You said that the phone my dad left for emergencies was actually the detonator to a bomb under the floorboard of my cabin,” I replied tonelessly. “In what reality do you think that would actually happen?”

Otto let out a huff of humorless laughter and reached up to scrub his hands over his face in frustration.

“My dad doesn’t know how to build a *bomb*,” I said incredulously. “I don’t know what kind of life you guys live —” I glanced around the room. “But we’re not like that. We go to church and go to work and watch television and our family

vacations are in Seattle where the regional meetings are. My dad has two guns, an old vintage revolver and a rifle that he uses for hunting. He never even served in the military. Where the *heck* would he learn how to build a *bomb* and why would you ever think that he'd put one anywhere near *me*?"

I just flat-out couldn't understand what their goal was. They said that the guns in my cabin were theirs and I'd believed them and given them back—so why was I in their little clubhouse being interrogated? I obviously hadn't stolen anything from them. Rationally, I knew they were telling the truth, but I still couldn't make myself believe it.

Maybe the guns hadn't been theirs at all. Maybe they had belonged to someone in the church and Otto's club was stealing them now. Could that be why they were trying to convince me that my dad had tried to hurt me? So I wouldn't tell him who'd stolen the rifles? Eventually, I'd have to go home, though, and explain where exactly they'd gone. It's not like crates of weapons would just disappear.

Though, I could play completely clueless if my dad asked about them. I wasn't even supposed to know that they were under the floorboards and it was only bad luck that I did.

Because of the absolute unreality of the morning, I hadn't really had time to take in that it was *Otto* who had shown up at the cabin. The man I'd been thinking about for months. I hadn't fully processed that he was finally in my orbit, that he knew we were having a baby after that insane encounter in the front seat of his car, that he was still as handsome and magnetic as that night at the bonfire and he still made my skin tingle whenever he brushed against me. But more important than all the rest, I hadn't quite realized how absolutely *safe* he made me feel.

All of it hit me, though, when he leaned forward and cupped my face in his hands. From the moment he'd turned around in the driveway of the cabin and I'd seen his face, deep in my gut, I'd known that everything was going to be alright.

"Calm down, baby," he said soothingly. I hadn't even realized that I was breathing like I'd just run a marathon. "It's

alright. Look at me. It's all gonna be fine."

"I prayed you'd come get me," I blurted, my eyes on his. He was so close I could smell the mint gum on his breath. "When I first got to the cabin."

"I looked for you," he replied. "If I'd known, I woulda come."

"I don't understand any of this."

"I know you don't," he replied grimly.

"Are you going to call my dad?"

"Why would we do that?" he asked, his thumbs brushing along my cheekbones.

"To find out why those guns were in the cabin."

"Don't think he's gonna give us any straight answers, sugar."

"You're just not going to say anything?" I asked dubiously. "Don't you think he'll notice? He'll have to come back eventually. It's not like he won't notice that they're missing. Or that I'm missing. At some point they'll come out to check on me again." At least I hoped that was their intention.

"We got time to figure all that out," Otto murmured.

"If you've got all your stuff back," I said softly, grasping at straws. "Can't you just bring me back home? I won't use the phone."

I was tired and uncomfortable and I needed some familiarity around me to try and work things out in my head. The cabin wasn't my first choice in a home, but it *was* my home and I felt a little desperate to get back there to my fireplace and my plaid couch and the wood I still needed to split and the wonderfully consistent meal schedule. Once I was there, I could hopefully make sense of what was happening.

Otto's eyes darkened as he scowled. "You're not goin' back there."

"But you guys said that everything was taken care of—"

“You’re not steppin’ foot back in that place, Esther,” he snapped, his hands dropping away from my face. “It was fuckin’ *wired to blow*.”

My cheeks felt cold once his hands were gone.

“Why are you angry at me?” I asked, the strain of the morning finally showing in my voice. I’d been pleasant and accommodating and everything I’d been raised to be, especially in regard to men. I’d answered their questions and helped them and let Otto drag me into town. I’d kept my voice even and my tone easy.

But this was infuriating.

“That cabin doesn’t have electricity,” Otto barked, his voice growing louder.

“Lots of people don’t have electricity,” I pointed out, widening my eyes at him. “You get used to it.”

“Like hell you do.”

“That’s where I live, Otto. It’s my home!” He stood up and I followed him, jumping to my feet. I hadn’t raised my voice, but I could feel it quivering with disbelief and anger. “You don’t get to just—”

“I sure as fuck do.”

“Don’t talk to me like that,” I hissed, glancing over at the men who were watching us from across the room.

“You’re not goin’ back to that piece of shit cabin, Esther,” he said flatly, glaring at me. “End of story.”

“No, not end of story,” I argued.

I was frustrated and angry and so overwhelmed, but a small part inside of me reveled in the fact that I was sticking up for myself. It felt *good*. Another part, one I wouldn’t even acknowledge, was so relieved that I wouldn’t be going back to that place in the woods, that I could’ve cried.

“You like shittin’ in a hole in the ground?” he roared, flinging aside the chair between us. “That fun for you?”

My cheeks burned in embarrassment and that small bubble of *good* disappeared but I refused to look at our audience again.

“Do you like making other people feel bad about themselves?” I said quietly, my eyes burning. “That fun for *you*?”

“Esther,” he murmured apologetically, his shoulders immediately slumping in regret.

“It might not be the best place to live,” I admitted quietly. “But I made do. I made it work. I made a home for myself.”

“I know you did,” he replied, nodding. “I saw that.”

All of a sudden I felt so incredibly tired. I dropped back down into my seat.

“I’ve got a place,” he said, crouching down in front of me so we were eye to eye. “It’s not anythin’ fancy, yeah? But it’s better than where you were. You can stay with me.”

“I can’t live with you.” The idea of it was so outside the realm of reality that I shouldn’t have been surprised after the morning I’d had, but it still shocked me. “I barely know you.”

“We’re havin’ a baby.”

I opened my mouth to ask what that had to do with anything when I was distracted by a couple of women, loudly and unapologetically coming in the front door like they owned the place.

“Shit,” Otto mumbled under his breath.

“Otto,” the younger woman said breezily as she strode toward us. “Introduce me, honey.”

“Mom,” he replied cautiously, rising to his full height. “What are you doin’ here?”

“Your dad called me, obviously,” she said, smiling down at me. “Hi, sweetheart.”

“Hello,” I murmured.

She was amazing. Her makeup was flawless, black liner coming to sharp points at the corners of her eyes, and her hair was a vivid purple that somehow didn't seem too young for her. She was wearing a baggy hoodie with some kind of skull emblem and a pair of wide-legged jeans, but somehow didn't look sloppy. What was most striking about her was the way she held herself, head up, eyes blazing in a dare to anyone who messed with her. I'd never seen anyone like her—not close up, at least.

“Mom, this is Esther,” Otto said with a sigh. “Esther, my mom, Heather.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said politely, getting to my feet.

“Oh,” she sighed, her eyes lighting up as she reached out a hand, almost touching my belly, but not quite. “Congratulations.”

My nose stung at the heartfelt word. It was the first time someone other than me had looked at my belly and felt joy at the sight. I hadn't even realized that the lack had bothered me, I'd just expected the condemnation.

“Thank you,” I said, clearing my throat.

“Why the hell is she still sitting in the clubhouse?” Heather said, glaring at Otto. “*You* should've called me.”

“We had some questions,” Otto's grandpa said, coming toward us. “What the hell are you doin' here?”

“Grandbaby,” Heather said, pointing at my belly. “Trumps —” She waved her hand in the air. “Whatever the hell you guys are doing.”

“Wrong,” he snapped.

Heather just raised her eyebrows. “Did she answer your questions?”

“She did.”

“Then she's done here.”

“We'll say when she's done.”

My head swung back and forth like I was watching a tennis match, but Otto just stood there looking bored.

“You know, Asa—” Heather said, her entire tone changing.

He lifted a hand to stop her. “Not sure she’s safe to go anywhere else,” he said, cutting her off. “We were havin’ that discussion when you interrupted.”

“Why wouldn’t I be safe?” I asked, staring at the older man.

“Were you not listenin’ to a word we said?” Otto asked me in disbelief.

“I heard everything you said.” Not that I believed all of it, but I’d heard them.

“I’m takin’ her back to Tommy’s room,” Heather said, her tone brooking no argument. “When you’re finished with whatever it is you’re *discussing*, let us know.” She turned to me. “Come on, honey.”

I followed her across the room and through the archway without argument, glancing at Otto as we passed him. He gave me a small nod and I was a little irritated with myself when I realized I’d been looking for his permission to leave.

“Sounds like you’ve had a hell of a day,” his mom said over her shoulder. She raised her voice. “You coming, ma?”

“I’ll be right there,” the older woman called back.

“That’s Otto’s grandma, Callie,” Heather told me. “I figured I might need reinforcements with this group.”

I didn’t reply. I wasn’t sure what to say. She confidently led me to a room down the hall and sauntered through the door. The entire clubhouse had a bit of a worn-down look to it, but the bedroom she’d led me into was bright and cheerful—loud even. There were tapestries on the walls and a bright quilt on the bed and everything was very clean but clearly lived in.

“Do you live here?” I asked in surprise, looking around the room.

“Hell no,” she said with a laugh. “Go ahead and sit on the bed. I’ve been meaning to put a nice recliner in here but I keep putting it off.”

I sat down gingerly on the edge of the bed while she leaned against a dresser along the opposite wall.

“This is better, huh?” she said with a smile. “Quieter at least. Don’t worry about the men. They’re all bark.”

I looked at her doubtfully.

“They bite, but they wouldn’t bite *you*,” she clarified. “I mean, look at you. I doubt you’ve even stolen a candy bar from the grocery store.”

My smile felt more like a grimace.

“So, you and my son, huh?” she said, her mouth twitching. “I wouldn’t have guessed it.”

I swallowed hard and looked down at my faded dress flaring out from underneath my coat. It had actually started out as a church dress and was a really pretty aquamarine color, but I’d worn it so often working outside that it barely resembled the dress I’d been so excited about the year before. I smoothed it down anyway.

“He doesn’t exactly seem your type,” she clarified, surprising me.

“I think he’s probably everyone’s type,” I replied ruefully, making her laugh. My cheeks burned.

“Something about those Hawthorne men, am I right?” she asked, grinning at me. “Even the grumpy ones could charm the pants off a choir girl.”

“Well, they want us to stay put for a bit,” Otto’s grandma announced, coming through the door. “Until they figure out what’s what.”

She turned to me and smiled and I was startled by the resemblance to her grandson. She was clearly Tommy’s mom even though Heather had called her Ma. Same smile.

“Hello, honey,” she said, walking toward me. “I’m Callie. You can just call me Gram, if you’d like. Everyone does.”

“Hi, I’m Esther,” I replied, getting to my feet. Greeting her from the bed seemed disrespectful somehow.

“Beautiful name,” she murmured, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she reached for my hands. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You, too.”

“Don’t you worry, they’ll get everything straightened out.” She squeezed my hands. “How far along are you?”

“Seventeen weeks,” I replied, remembering what the doctor had said. Was it only yesterday that I’d been there? So many things had happened in the last twenty-four hours that it seemed like weeks ago.

“Lots of time to get things ready, then,” she said encouragingly. She let go of my hands and sat down on the bed, patting the place beside her. “Do you know what you’re having?”

I shook my head as I lowered myself back down.

It felt like I was in the twilight zone. We’d watched a couple episodes in my creative writing class in school and I’d always thought the storylines were really farfetched, but I was beginning to rethink my position. I’d found a cache of weapons under my floorboards, been invaded by a motorcycle club, taken from my home and interrogated, told that my dad had planned to blow me up if I called him for help, and now a sweet old lady was asking me excitedly about the baby my family had sent me away to hide.

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “At my doctor’s appointment they only listened to the heartbeat.”

“Appointment?” Heather said slowly. “Just one?”

“Just one,” I confirmed, shame burning quietly in my gut. “I’ve been living kind of far away from everything.”

“I try not to be *that* mother-in-law,” Heather said, pausing like she was trying to find the right words to say. She looked at Callie and then back to me. “I have a good one, so I’ve tried to

follow her lead and not overstep. I'm not always successful, but I *try*."

I nodded, unsure where she was leading the conversation.

"I have to ask, honey," she said kindly. "Do you think we need to make you an appointment just to make sure everything's okay?"

My knee-jerk reaction was to say no. Heck no. The thought of having another doctor poking and prodding at me, the invasion of it, made my stomach roll with nausea. But directly after that was a sense of intense relief. I needed to know that everything was okay. I needed someone to tell me if I was doing anything wrong. I wanted to know that the little person was safe in there. That I hadn't hurt it by chopping wood or eating freeze-dried meals constantly or holding my poop in until I couldn't stand it anymore and used the outhouse at the cabin.

I hadn't been able to ask any questions when I'd gone the day before. I hadn't even felt able to speak.

"Yes, please," I whispered after a moment.

The look of understanding and kindness and pure maternal worry made my breath freeze in my throat, and then unexpectedly I was crying, big racking sobs shaking my entire body. Otto's grandma wrapped her arms tightly around me.

"It's going to be okay, sweetheart," she murmured into my hair. "You're safe. We'll get this all figured out. Everything is going to be just fine."

"I'm not sure who, yet," I vaguely heard Otto's mom mutter angrily. "But I'm going to kill someone."

"Get in line," Otto's voice responded from the doorway.

CHAPTER 8

OTTO

MY ENTIRE BODY jerked forward, and I barely kept myself from stumbling. I hadn't anticipated the hard slap to the back of my head, but I should've. I braced for the second one.

"The fuck were you thinkin'?" my gramps snapped the moment Esther disappeared into the back hallway.

"Forget the fact that you defiled that sweet girl," Uncle Casper added quietly. "God knows how you fuckin' managed *that*. You also didn't think it was pertinent to disclose your connection to the Brothers of fuckin' Calgary?"

"She was gone," I replied defensively, knowing in my gut it was no excuse. "I tried lookin' for her but they'd already stashed her in that cabin."

"You think you're talkin' your way out," Dragon said, her voice completely devoid of any emotion. "It's fascinatin' to watch you dig the hole deeper."

"I fucked up," I blurted, looking between the men who were staring at me with varying degrees of disgust.

"Understatement," someone murmured under their breath.

"I'll fix it," I promised, swallowing hard.

"You'll marry her," Uncle Casper replied firmly. "As soon as fuckin' possible."

"What?"

My stomach lurched as I stared at him in horror. I'd barely even spent any time with Esther, for fuck's sake. I didn't know her, and she definitely didn't know shit about me.

"That girl is—" Uncle Casper started.

"Naïve," Cam finished.

“Scared,” Dragon added through his teeth.

“And goddamn pregnant,” Gramps barked.

“That doesn’t mean I should marry her,” I replied dubiously. “She can live with me, obviously.”

“Oh, obviously,” Leo muttered dryly.

“We don’t have to be fuckin’ married,” I blurted, my heart pounding. “It’s not the 1950s.”

“You a member of this club?” Dragon asked softly. His voice may have been low, but there was a thread of steel in it that made me stiffen.

“Yes.” I fisted my hands at my side.

“You give your word to this club?”

I ground my teeth. “Yes.”

“You agreed to give your life to this club?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll do what you’re fuckin’ told.” His voice rose with every word until I was staring at him in shock. I didn’t think I’d ever heard him raise his voice in my entire life.

“Of course I will,” I replied automatically, everything inside me clenching. I looked around the table.

“She’s loyal,” Casper said after a moment of silence, glancing over his shoulder toward where the women had gone. “To the point of stupidity, maybe.”

I beat back the urge to fly across the table. Esther wasn’t stupid.

Uncle Casper must’ve interpreted the look on my face, because his lips twitched with understanding. “You’re protective of her? That’s good.”

“Decent marriages have started from less,” Mack said quietly, the first comment he’d made in a while.

I gaped at them. All of them had seemed to come to some kind of consensus without saying a word to me. I couldn’t figure it out.

Gramps huffed and shook his head. “She’s loyal, Otto,” he said, speaking slowly like I wouldn’t be able to understand him. “She was raised in a highly religious family—”

Leo scoffed.

“—with the father as the head,” Gramps continued. “He’s the be-all and end-all, yeah? But who d’you think her loyalty will lie with once she’s married?”

“Her husband,” I rasped, finally realizing what they’d all been thinking.

“That’s right,” Gramps replied. “Her husband.”

“Fuck,” I breathed.

“He was gonna kill her,” Mack said, his eyes on me. “For the sake of a few crates of rifles.” He paused. “And nothin’ we say is gonna convince her of that truth.”

“And once we’re married, I can protect her,” I murmured, taking a deep breath.

“Not only that,” Uncle Casper replied. “You’ll be protectin’ the club, too. She goes back to them, they know exactly what happened today.”

“No question,” Dragon confirmed.

“Won’t they already—” I stopped speaking the moment Uncle Casper started grinning.

“You blew up the fuckin’ cabin.” My eyes widened in realization.

“It’s not checkers, son,” Gramps said. “It’s chess.”

“They’ll think she’s dead.”

“Long enough for you to get a ring on her finger at least,” Uncle Casper confirmed.

“And long enough for us to figure out where the rest of that fuckin’ shipment is,” Leo added. “And what the fuck they plan on doin’ with ’em before they even realize we know they have ’em.”

“She’s not gonna marry me,” I said flatly, looking around the table. “She doesn’t even know me.”

Leo laughed humorlessly. “She grew up in Calgary Church,” he muttered. “She’ll marry the father of her child.”

“So we’re just bankin’ on the fact that she’s been brainwashed so she’ll marry me without argument?” I asked, glaring. “Because I don’t know about you but that kind of makes me want to hit somethin’.”

“You gonna beat her?” Uncle Casper asked. “Control her? Treat her like shit?”

“Of course not.”

“Then I’m bettin’ you’re better than any alternative her parents woulda given her.”

“That’s not the point,” I ground out.

“Point is,” Dragon said, clearly done with the entire conversation. “You thought you could keep your connection a secret and you got found out.”

“That wasn’t—”

“Shut it.” He glowered at me. “Now you’re gonna do right by that girl. You help out the club, so much the better.”

“Do right by her,” I muttered under my breath. “Jesus.”

“You talk to her,” Gramps said, glancing at Dragon briefly. “She tells you no flat out, we’ll revisit. She agrees to marry you, you’ll lock that shit down.”

“Understood,” I replied through my teeth.

“She ain’t gonna say no,” Mack said, watching me closely. “You’re her port in a seriously fucked up storm, man. She’s been livin’ in the middle of nowhere, no electricity, no water, no contact with the outside world—all because she got pregnant. The people who were supposed to *protect* her did that. Even if she doesn’t believe that her pops was all set to blow her ass up, I’m guessin’ you askin’ will be a relief.”

I sat there at the table, staring at my hands, while the rest of the men dispersed, going to make calls and strategize on

next steps. I'd made one decision, one *mistake*, and my entire life was going to change. I didn't know how to be a goddamn husband or a father. I'd never even had a steady girlfriend let alone taken care of a baby.

I could feel the beginning of a migraine starting at the base of my skull and willed it to go away. There was no possible way that I could afford to be out of commission for the next twelve hours, and migraines always knocked me flat on my ass.

I had to ask Esther to marry me and I had absolutely zero idea how to even broach the subject with her.

Nearly groaning as my head started to ache, I got to my feet and followed my mom and Esther back into my pop's room. Jesus, I didn't even have a room at the club. If something happened and we went on lockdown, Esther would be sleeping out on a sleeping bag in the main room of the clubhouse. I swallowed hard. If we were going to be married, she'd usually be sleeping in my bed. With me. Every night. Every single fucking night.

When I reached the open door to my parents' room, all thoughts of sleeping arrangements disappeared in an instant. Esther was crying and it wasn't just some stray tears, it was full-out-body-shaking sobs.

"I'm not sure who, yet, but I'm going to kill someone," my mom snapped when she saw me.

"Get in line," I muttered, starting forward. "What the fuck happened?"

"Hormones," my gram said, shooting me a small smile over Esther's head. "And an overwhelming day."

She patted Esther's back and eased her into my arms.

"I'm going to make her a doctor's appointment," my mom said as Esther sniffled against my chest. "Or maybe a midwife would be better."

"A woman," Esther ordered softly, her voice thick. "I want a woman doctor."

“Consider it done,” my mom replied instantly. “No dicks.”

Esther made a choked noise but didn’t reply.

“We’ll give you two a few minutes,” Gram said, squeezing my shoulder as she stood.

Be good, my mom mouthed as she walked out the door, using her index and middle finger to point at her eyes and then at me.

I barely held back from rolling my eyes. What was I going to do? Make her cry? She was already doing that. Get her pregnant on my parents’ bed? That ship had motherfucking *sailed*.

“I’m sorry,” Esther mumbled, straightening away from me. “Your mom’s just so *nice*.”

“My mom?” I joked incredulously. My mom was the kindest person I’d ever met, but if you asked anyone they would’ve said the opposite. She hid that part of herself very well.

“She’s awesome,” Esther argued in disbelief. Scowling at me. “She’s *excited* about the baby and she doesn’t even know me.”

“I was kidding.” I watched her face as she tried to get her emotions under control. It was kind of startling to see her so upset because she’d been so calm all morning. She’d barely batted an eye once she’d put the old pistol down, just gone along with us—with me—like it was the most normal thing in the world.

“What are the men, you know, your club or whatever, what are they going to do?” she asked, lacing her fingers tightly in her lap. “Did they call my dad?”

“Honey, why do you think they’d call your dad?” The conversation was getting a little repetitious by that point. She couldn’t still believe that he hadn’t had anything to do with the stolen shipment, right? I mean, a person would have to be pretty fucking delusional to still believe that.

“To come get me,” she replied, her lips barely moving. She wasn’t looking at me anymore.

“Esther.” I shook my head. How the fuck was I supposed to explain that if I had breath in my body she’d never go near that fucking sociopath again?

“They can’t just keep me here, right?” she said, looking around. “That’s—that’s like *kidnapping*.”

“You’re not safe with your parents, sugar,” I replied as gently as I could. I wasn’t going to touch the mention of kidnapping. The club had done far worse than hold someone to keep them safe.

“You don’t know that. You don’t even know them. My parents *love* me, Otto.”

“I know that the phone you were supposed to use for emergencies—say, when a group of men showed up at your cabin lookin’ for their missin’ guns—was wired to blow that entire cabin to kingdom come the minute you tried to call out.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” she shot back, her jaw clenched. “I’m telling you—my dad wouldn’t hurt me. He’s mad at me. He’s disappointed. That doesn’t mean he’s a murderer.”

“You know the guy that was drivin’ our truck was beat within an inch of his life?” I asked, willing her to take this shit seriously. “He’s still in the ICU with his brain bleedin’.”

“You don’t even know that was my dad!”

I just looked at her as it finally sunk in. She was trying so hard to maintain that the life she’d led, with the white picket fence and strict parents, was the only truth, that she was refusing to see what was right in front of her. It wasn’t that she was naïve, or stupid, or in shock. She just couldn’t reconcile what she’d always known with the hard truth that had been presented to her.

“Let’s table all that for a minute,” I said tiredly.

“Table it,” she replied dubiously.

“You’re havin’ my baby,” I said quietly, reaching out to put my hand on her belly. I half expected her to push my hand away, but she didn’t. She sat frozen in place while I spread my fingers wide, my palm pressed against the roundness.

“I would’ve told you,” she said, looking down at my hand. “When I could. I would’ve told you.”

“Yeah?” I was barely paying attention.

There was a little *person* in there. *My* person. How the fuck had that happened?

“I didn’t have your phone number,” she mumbled sheepishly. “But once I was back in town, I would’ve found a way to contact you.”

“I went to the garden center,” I blurted, taking my eyes off her belly but leaving my hand where it was. “Saw your brother.”

“You saw Ephraim? What did he say?”

“I was lookin’ for you,” I clarified in case she hadn’t realized. “But I didn’t ask for you because I didn’t want to get you in trouble.”

She let out a hoarse laugh and her belly jerked under my hand.

“I don’t think you could’ve gotten me in any more trouble than I was already in,” she said wryly.

“About that—”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I used a condom.”

We were speaking over each other and both came to an abrupt halt.

“I remember,” she replied simply.

“I didn’t want you to think that I wasn’t careful—” I continued on. Suddenly it was really important that she knew. “—that I didn’t try to protect you. I did.”

“I know.” She shrugged. “I guess God had different plans.”

“God, huh?” I asked, reluctantly pulling my hand away.

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe we’re going to have a kid.”

“Give it a couple days to sink in,” she advised seriously. “It took at least a month for me to absorb it.”

“A month?”

“Well, we’d only done it once,” she said in exasperation, widening her eyes.

“It only takes once.”

“Clearly.”

“And you didn’t even come,” I blurted, the memory popping up like a jack-in-the-box in my mind. I scowled. “And then you lied about it!”

Esther’s face turned about five different shades of red. It was fascinating.

“It was embarrassing.”

I jerked back in surprise. “Why the hell would *you* be embarrassed?”

“Well, because you clearly thought that I should’ve and I hadn’t, so—”

“You didn’t come because I’m a fuckin’ moron,” I said with a humorless laugh.

“I thought maybe—”

“Nope.” I put my hand up to cut her off. “If a woman doesn’t come, then you adjust. You take more time. You pay attention. You work together to make it happen. If you don’t do that, you’re selfish or lazy.”

Esther sat silently for a few moments before replying. “Which one were you?”

I choked and laughed as a little smile played at the corners of her mouth.

“I was drunk,” I replied sheepishly, reaching up to rub the back of my neck where the migraine was still threatening to ruin my day. “And an idiot.”

“I didn’t realize that,” she said softly.

“Whatever you’re thinkin’,” I barked, watching emotions race across her face. “Quit it. I knew exactly what I was doin’.

I was just clearly too drunk to do it right.”

“But *I* was sober,” she pointed out.

“Thank Christ,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Listen, I’m sorry for how it all went down. All of it. You deserved better than gettin’ railed in the front seat of my Mustang.”

“Railed?” she said faintly.

“Poor choice of words,” I muttered. “You deserved better than losing your virginity at a party, alright? You deserved better than findin’ out you were pregnant and not knowin’ how to get ahold of me. You sure as shit deserved better than bein’ shipped out to some cabin in the woods with no electricity.”

“I wasn’t exactly a spectator during all of that,” she reminded me, grimacing. “I was the one who started it by showing off my hair. I told you I wanted you to kiss me, remember?”

I laughed silently and shook my head. “If my family heard you say that about your hair, I’d never hear the end of it.”

“What? Why?”

“I knew what I was doin’,” I continued, ignoring the questions. “You didn’t. I knew where it was headed and you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did,” she argued.

“Bullshit.”

“I did. I knew that we were going to do it.”

“Do it?”

“Have sex. *Rail each other.*”

I damn near choked on my tongue. “Uh, you’re usin’ that phrase wrong.”

Esther glared. “I’m not stupid,” she said stubbornly. “I knew what we were doing.”

“Sure,” I said, nodding. I was trying to agree with her because of course I didn’t think she was stupid, but it must have come across as condescending because Esther actually growled.

“I’m not a child,” she hissed, getting to her feet. “I may not know all the slang words for having sex, but that doesn’t mean *I’m* an idiot.”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot.”

“No, just naïve, right? Innocent? Immature?”

“I didn’t say—”

“I’m an adult,” she said through gritted teeth. “I chose to have sex with you because it felt good and it was exciting and —” She threw her hands in the air. By that time she was practically ranting and I settled in to watch the show. “You’re beautiful!”

“Say what?” I yelped. She ignored me.

“And I knew that I wasn’t going to have that chance again, okay? So, stop treating me like poor little naïve Esther who didn’t know what she was doing.” She was breathing heavy, her hands on her hips and her eyes sparking. “I knew what I was doing. I just didn’t anticipate these particular consequences.”

“You’re sayin’ you want me to take off the gloves?”

“I’m not super clear on that reference,” she muttered, her shoulders sagging. “But, yeah. Pretty much.”

I stared at her. At some point during her tirade she’d gotten warm enough to unzip her jacket and the dress underneath was stained and worn. She was wearing rubber boots that almost reached her knees, and her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She looked like a waif. A sad little orphan girl. Until I looked at her face. The stubborn set of her jaw and the way

she looked at me like she was daring me to say something gentle and calming was pretty shocking. I had never seen Esther look anything but sweet and accommodating. Fucking *pleasant*.

No, that wasn't true. I'd gotten a glimpse of that stubbornness when she'd chopped wood to prove Rumi wrong. My palms grew clammy as I thought of her striding around the cabin, not knowing that she was one spark away from being blown to pieces. That was what finally made my decision for me.

"Alright, here's how it's gonna go," I said firmly, getting to my feet. I'd let her have the high ground and talk down to me when she'd clearly needed it, but if she wanted bare knuckles, then that's what I'd give her. "You're not goin' back to your parents."

"But—"

"You had your turn to talk," I said, cutting her off. "Now it's my turn."

Her mouth snapped shut.

"You're movin' in with me, and we're gettin' married. We're havin' a baby and we're gonna be livin' in the same house. I'm bettin' you don't wanna do that without a ring on your finger. Alright with me. I'll get you one."

"What?" she breathed, staring at me like I'd grown two heads.

"You got someone else you were hopin' for?" I asked, the question burned through me but I had to ask. "You have a boyfriend?"

Esther scoffed and planted her hands back on her hips. "If I had a boyfriend do you really think we would've railed?"

"Sugar, that is *not* how you use *railed* in a sentence."

"I don't care!"

"You wanna wear a white dress?" I asked, still bulldozing forward.

She plopped back onto the bed and stared wide-eyed at me. “Where is this coming from?”

“You’re already halfway through the pregnancy,” I said, lowering my voice a little. “You really wanna wait?”

“We don’t even know each other.”

“We’ll get to know each other.”

“*After* we’re married?”

Now it felt weird to be looming over her so I sat down beside her instead. Reaching out, I pulled her hand away from her lap and laced her fingers with mine.

“Is that any different from what you would’ve gotten before?” I asked softly.

She jerked as if I’d slapped her.

“I’m not tryin’ to hurt your feelings, sugar,” I said, tightening my hand around hers when she tried to pull away. “I’m just sayin’ that those marriages work for the people you know, right? I’d say we have a better reason than most for gettin’ married. I won’t ever hit you. I won’t control what you’re doin’ or make you do anythin’ you don’t wanna do.”

“Why would you even suggest this?” she asked, her eyes filling with tears. “Why would you want to get married?”

I debated telling her I loved her, but I knew she’d laugh in my face. I thought about using the baby, saying that it deserved to be born to married parents—but I couldn’t quite choke that out.

In the end, I just told her the truth—or as much truth as I was willing to admit.

“Marriage is the best way I can protect you and our baby,” I said simply.

CHAPTER 9

ESTHER

“**P**ROTECT ME FROM what?” I asked gently. Otto’s jaw was clenched and every muscle from the neck down was tense.

“From your fucked-up family,” he replied flatly, staring into my eyes.

When I opened my mouth to counter him, his eyes narrowed and I swallowed back the words.

“Leavin’ out the fact that your pop set you up to be collateral damage like it was nothin’,” he said, waving his hand. “They fuckin’ left you out in the middle of nowhere as what? Punishment? Anythin’ coulda happened out there. You were livin’ like a homeless person with no power.”

“I had a home.”

“Semantics,” he shot back. “You know I’m right. Why are you arguin’ with me?”

Because I couldn’t seem to help myself. I’d spent so long telling myself that it wasn’t really as bad as it seemed and I couldn’t stop. If I stopped that meant that my family had tucked me away like a dirty secret and forgotten me.

“Marry me,” he ordered, his eyes moving from my hair to my eyes to my lips. “We’ll make our own family and yours can fuck off.”

I let out a startled and completely inappropriate giggle.

“Plus, you can have my mom. You like her. She’s nice, right? There you go.” He smiled encouragingly.

I looked down at my lap. Everything was happening so fast. Was it only the day before that I’d woken up in my little cabin completely unaware that anything was going to change?

How in the world was I sitting in Eugene with Otto Hawthorne discussing marriage? My head felt like it was spinning.

It was hard to admit, even to myself, that it was exactly what I'd prayed for. That Otto would swoop in and save me. That he'd be the answer to everything and once he'd shown up I wouldn't have to be scared anymore. That I wouldn't have to worry that I was going to go into labor with no one to help me. That he'd take care of us and I wouldn't have to give our baby to strangers the way my parents planned.

In my fantasy world, we'd get married and go see my parents and they'd be reticent at first, but they'd be so glad that I had a ring on my finger that they'd bend a little. Maybe they wouldn't have us to dinner, but at least I'd get to see Noel again.

Instead, he was trying to protect me from my family. There wouldn't be any stopping by their house. There wouldn't be any relief in my mom's eyes or a quietly presented blanket for the baby that she'd secretly crocheted when my dad wasn't home. If I married Otto, I had a feeling that I'd never get to see my family again unless we crossed paths at the grocery store.

What did my dad always say? God answered prayers but that didn't mean you always got the answer you wanted.

"Marriage is forever," I said, my voice cracking as I looked at him. "I don't—I don't want to get divorced. We *can't* just get married because you feel guilty for something that wasn't your fault or because—"

Otto put his hand over my mouth in exasperation. "Not even married yet and you're already talkin' about divorce."

"I'm just trying to tell you that I don't believe in temporary marriages," I mumbled, his palm still gently covering my mouth.

"Well, lucky for you, when I make a promise I keep it," he replied, dropping his hand. "Got no plans to leave you."

"You can't know that," I said reasonably. "For all you know I snore and—and poop my pants."

“Snoring and pooping your pants are the worst things you can think of?” he asked in amusement.

“Maybe I’m a terrible cook,” I continued, ignoring when his smile made my stomach flutter. “Maybe I watch really terrible shows and I’m rude. Maybe I’m a really mean, rude, awful person.”

“Or maybe I am?” he said, tilting his head questioningly.

“If you were a terrible person you wouldn’t be trying to get me to marry you,” I grumbled.

Otto let out a little laugh and reached out to cup my face in his hands. “If you were a terrible person, I wouldn’t be tryin’.”

“I think it’s probably a really bad idea.”

“Don’t know until you do it.”

“I *do* know.”

“You gonna marry me anyway?” he asked, leaning close.

What if they were wrong about my dad? What if it all turned out to be a misunderstanding and we didn’t find out until after I was already married?

No.

With a sinking feeling, I knew that no matter what they found out about that stash of guns in the cabin—I’d never be able to go back to my parents’ house. Not if I kept the baby. Could I marry Otto to keep him or her? Because that was really what it came down to. I could choose to tie my life to his, this man who was offering everything, and be able to live, not just live but possibly thrive—or I could try and make my way alone with a little retail experience and only a suitcase of worn out clothes to my name.

When I considered it that way, the answer was so clear that it may as well have been flashing like a neon sign.

“Okay,” I replied, finally. “I’ll marry you.”

I wasn’t surprised by the press of his lips, but I’d forgotten how the feel of them made every nerve in my body come to

life. I reached out to grip his forearms as he tilted my head and ran his tongue along my lower lip.

“Next time, you’re gonna come,” he muttered against my mouth. “Swear to God, at least twice.”

I huffed out a breath at his words, wondering why he cared so much, but within seconds the only thing I could focus on were our points of contact. His hand on the side of my neck, my hair wrapped around his other fist, his heart racing beneath my palms, his tongue sliding against mine.

“Ahem,” an amused voice said from the doorway a few minutes later. “Looks like you’re feeling a bit more chipper.”

“Fuck,” Otto breathed, resting his forehead against mine. He raised his voice a little in annoyance. “Give us a minute?”

“On my bed?” his mom asked with a snort. “Not on your life, bud.”

I wanted to sink through the floor. I didn’t care where I ended up as long as it was anywhere else.

“Esther and I are gettin’ married,” Otto announced, pulling away.

There was a shocked silence from the doorway, but I couldn’t make myself look at her. She probably thought we were nuts, or worse, that I was taking extreme advantage of the situation—which I was.

“Well, congratulations...again.”

“Thanks, Ma.”

I had to look up as Otto pulled me to my feet, but by then Heather had hidden any shock or horror from her expression. She was smiling.

“When?” she asked, glancing between us.

“Tonight,” Otto replied.

“What?” I knew my jaw was hanging open, but I couldn’t seem to close my mouth.

“Nice try,” his mom said wryly.

“Tomorrow then,” Otto said stubbornly.

“You have to get a license,” she said, leaning against the doorway. “*And* wait three days.”

“Fine,” Otto said, towing me toward the door. “Three days then.”

“Otto,” I hissed, pulling at his hold.

“Your bride doesn’t seem super excited,” Heather mused, blocking the doorway.

“I just—” I looked between them, my voice faint. “Three days?”

“Why wait?” Otto asked, lifting my hand to kiss the back of it. I thought he was laying it on a bit thick, but the gesture still made my stomach swoop.

“We can pull something together in three days,” Heather said with a shrug.

“Cool, thanks,” Otto said offhandedly as he tugged me toward the door.

His mom snorted, putting her hand up to stop him. “I think Esther may want a hand in planning *her wedding*,” she said wryly.

“You wanna pick decorations and shit out?” Otto asked me, like he already knew the answer.

“Yeah,” I replied softly, glancing at his mom.

I hadn’t been kidding. I didn’t plan to get married more than once. If this was the only chance I had, then I was going to at least make it something I could tell the baby about.

“Alright,” he replied almost instantly. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. In a few quick movements he was laying a pile of hundred dollar bills onto my hand.

“Holy crap,” I breathed in disbelief. Why the heck did he carry so much cash?

“Jesus, Otto,” his mom muttered.

“Emergency stash,” he said with a shrug. “Buy what you need.”

When I hesitated, still staring at the money, he leaned down to catch my eye. “You need more? You can take my debit card.”

“No,” I practically shouted, grabbing for his hand before he could open his wallet again. “No, this is plenty.”

“You sure?” he asked, looking over at his mom.

“I’ll pay for any extras,” she said, grinning. “*Moneybags.*”

“Whoa,” his grandpa muttered, catching sight of us from the hallway. “You carry that much cash *on* you?”

“It’s my emergency stash,” Otto said again in exasperation.

“We got an emergency?” Grease asked.

“Mom and Esther are gonna get shit for the wedding.”

“Wait,” I breathed, gripping Otto’s hand. “We’re going right now? You’re not coming with us?”

“I’m happy with goin’ to the courthouse,” he replied easily. “You wanna do the fancy shit, my mom’ll help you.”

I tried not to scowl as he turned back to his grandpa. It was his wedding, too. Didn’t he care? For all he knew, I’d buy him a bright purple suit. I looked over his hoodie, leather vest, jeans and work boots. Never mind. I’d never get him to wear a suit.

Of course he didn’t want to go wedding shopping. Why was I letting it bother me? He was about to take care of all the problems I’d been afraid of for the past four months. I should be grateful. My stomach still sank as he let go of my hand and took a step forward to follow his grandpa.

Heather’s foot came out and Otto tripped over it, making him stumble.

“The hell?” he barked, glaring at his mom.

Heather glared right back, and this went on for a long moment.

Suddenly Otto turned back to me and leaned down to drop a quick kiss on my lips. “I’ll make sure you guys are set to go. Back in a minute.”

Heather shook her head as he hurried to catch up to his grandpa. “He’s a good boy,” she said, watching him go. “But you have to train them to be husbands. They’re clueless in the beginning.”

“Oh, okay,” I said softly, gripping the cash in my hand.

Heather scoffed. “Come on,” she ordered. “You have a purse?”

I shook my head. The wallet I carried was in my suitcase out in the truck.

“You can borrow one of mine,” Heather said easily. “Let’s see if I have an extra in here somewhere.”

I stood in the middle of the room as she rifled through her dresser and a shelving unit, looking for something to carry the money in.

“I can just put it in my pocket,” I told her as she cursed under her breath.

“Nah, you need a purse.” She grinned at me over her shoulder. “You’re a grownup now, kid.”

“Does he really want to get married in three days?” I asked, watching her scour the room. “He was just joking, right?”

“He definitely wasn’t joking,” she replied. “Aha! I knew I had one.” She lifted a black leather purse over her shoulder in triumph, the fringe on it whipping wildly from side to side.

“Um, thank you.”

My hands were shaking a little and growing damp around the money. What in the heck was I *doing*? Was I really going to marry Otto Hawthorne? Suddenly, and with a ferocity that surprised me, I wanted to be back in my quiet little cabin. It was all too much. Everything was too much.

I dropped the money on Heather’s bed like it was on fire.

“Whoa,” she muttered gently, her hands out in front of her like she was trying to tame a wild animal. “It’s okay, honey. It’s okay. Just breathe.”

I gasped, wrapping my shaking arms around my waist.

“My son’s a moron,” she murmured, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. “Men usually are.”

“I’m having a baby,” I breathed incredulously.

“You absolutely are,” she replied, nodding.

“And I’m getting married.”

“That looked like that was the plan when I walked in,” she confirmed dryly.

“I don’t think—” Before the words were out of my mouth, reality snapped things back into focus.

I didn’t have any other choice. My cabin was all but lost to me and it hadn’t been a long-term plan, anyway. At some point I was going to have to enter the world again somehow. I could do it with Otto, or I could do it alone.

I knew what the better option was.

“Sorry,” I mumbled shakily. “Of course I’m getting married.”

“No *of course* about it,” Heather replied seriously. “You don’t want to marry Otto, you don’t have to. You know that, right?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Yeah, I know. I think my hormones are just going crazy.”

“Well, that’s pretty normal.” She squeezed my shoulders and frowned. “Sweetheart, you must be sweating like a pig in that jacket.”

“I am,” I confessed with a little laugh. “But—” I unzipped it, showing the large stain down the front of my dress.

“Ah,” she mused knowingly. “Well, did you bring anything that you could change into?”

“My suitcase is in Otto’s truck.”

“Otto’s?” Heather asked in confusion. “Oh, it’s probably Rumi’s.”

I felt embarrassment heat my cheeks. “Right,” I said like I’d known all along that it wasn’t Otto’s truck we’d used.

Heather poked her head out of the bedroom door and yelled at someone down the hallway, and just a few minutes later my suitcase magically appeared in the doorway.

“I’ll let you get ready,” Heather said kindly, setting my suitcase on the bed. “And I’ll go see what the hold up is. I think they’ll probably send a guard with us into town, but it’s no big deal. You won’t even notice them. Use whatever you need in the bathroom—” She pointed to the closed door across the room. “Except the toothbrushes, because that’s nasty.”

She was gone, the door shut behind her, before I could reply.

Opening the suitcase quickly, I took inventory. I didn’t have much. Even the dresses that fit loose were getting snug. Pulling out a gray sweater dress that I’d barely worn at the cabin, I looked it over. No stains or pulls. I grabbed a pair of underwear and set it on the dress. None of my bras fit well anymore, so the sports bra I was wearing would have to do.

Not sure how much time I had, I moved quickly, pulling off my dress and rolling it into a ball. The underwear was next, but that took a little more time. I kicked them off and hastily pulled on the new pair. I’d just situated them over my butt when the door opened up behind me. I yelped in surprise and whipped my head around.

“Damn,” Otto said appreciatively.

“I’m getting dressed,” I hissed, my hands frantically trying to cover everything at once.

“I can see that,” he mused, sliding into the room and closing the door behind him.

“What are you doing?” He didn’t seem to notice my glare.

“Were you this ripped before?” he asked, moving toward me. His hand reached out and traced a line over my shoulders.

“You’ve got more definition than Rumi.”

“It’s from chopping wood,” I mumbled, snatching my dress off the bed to hold against my front.

“Look at those guns,” Otto said with a grin, squeezing my bicep.

“Yes, I’m very muscular,” I gritted sarcastically through my teeth. “Stop poking me.”

His eyes met mine in surprise. “Listen to you,” he said softly to himself. “The sweet church girl’s got *teeth*.”

“Did you need something?” I asked desperately. Embarrassment at being caught half-dressed was quickly morphing into a familiar burn that was reflected in Otto’s eyes.

“You’re too thin, though,” he said quietly, ignoring my question as he brushed my hair over my shoulder. “We’ll fix that.”

I scoffed, trying valiantly not to lean toward him. What was it about this man that made all other thoughts disappear? I’d already thrown caution to the wind once with him, I wasn’t about to do it again. We weren’t married yet.

“All of my dresses are too snug, actually,” I replied, swallowing hard as I shuffled backward.

“Why you hidin’?” he asked, tilting his head in question as he reached for the dress still clutched to my chest.

“Because we’re not married yet,” I blurted, taking another step backward.

His lips pulled inward like he was trying not to laugh.

“It’s not funny,” I snapped.

“Baby, I’ve already seen everythin’ there is to see.”

“And look where that got us,” I shot back.

He jerked his head back in surprise. “Point taken,” he breathed.

“I’m sorry—” Oh, god. What was I thinking? I started to lower the dress.

“No,” he said, reaching out to stop me. “You wanna wait, we’ll wait.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizin’,” he ordered, reaching up to run his finger along my jawline. “You got an escort and things are all set when you’re ready to go shoppin’.”

Without another word, he was gone.

My stomach was in knots as I finished getting dressed and tidied my hair. I’d never been very concerned with what I looked like—I was used to being the weird kid—but I was hyper aware of how...odd I’d look next to Otto’s mother. She was so trendy with her clothes and makeup. Staring in the mirror I bit at my lips, trying to make them a little pinker. I was going to stand out like a sore thumb.

When I made my way back into the main room of the building carrying my suitcase and jacket with Heather’s purse slung over my shoulder, there were several more people waiting. Only a couple of the men I’d spoken to earlier were still milling around, but a whole group of women had shown up at some point and turned to face me as I came through the archway.

“I’ll take that,” Otto announced, striding over to get my suitcase. “You look pretty.”

“Thank you,” I replied in surprise. I was extremely self-conscious. My sweater dress that had once fit loose and flowing now clung to my belly, outlining the roundness there. My cheeks heated, and I lowered my voice to a whisper. “You don’t think my dress is too tight?”

Otto frowned and leaned back to look me over. “Not at all.” His hand ran briefly over my belly. “It looks great.”

“Alright,” Heather called. “Hands to ourselves, or we’ll never get out of here.”

I was pretty sure my face was turning purple.

“Jesus, Ma,” Otto barked angrily when he saw my embarrassment.

“It’s fine,” I assured him, putting my hand on his chest. I moved around him and walked toward the group of women.

“Look at that,” one of them said in amusement. “She tamed the beast with a couple of words.”

“Pretty sure it was the hand on the chest,” another one countered. “That move works on Michael, too.”

“Esther,” Heather said, raising her voice above the others. “Meet the rest of our dysfunctional family.”

She was grinning as she said it, so I assumed she was joking.

“This is Otto’s aunt Rose.” She pointed to the woman who’d spoken first and then the other one. “My son Micky’s wife, Emilia.”

“Hi,” I said with an awkward little wave.

“Then Nova, Rumi’s wife.”

“I’m his *fiancée*,” Nova clarified, smiling at me.

“Might as well be married,” Heather said with a shrug. She pointed. “That’s Charlie and Kara—both cousins—and you’ve met Callie.”

“*Gram*,” Callie corrected.

“Nice to meet you,” I said faintly. There was no way I was going to keep them straight.

“My youngest might meet up with us later, but she’s still at school,” Heather told me, looking me over. “And I’m sure you’ll meet everyone else at some point today. They won’t be able to resist coming to see you.”

“Everyone else?”

“This isn’t gonna work,” Otto’s aunt announced, coming closer. “She’ll be too noticeable. I’m sorry, honey, I think you look real nice, but—”

“No, you’re right,” Heather replied, still looking at me. She met my eyes. “There’s safety in numbers, yeah?”

I nodded.

“But if someone sees us escortin’ a *daughter* of Calgary around town, it’ll be noticed.”

I didn’t understand why she’d called me a daughter of Calgary, but I nodded anyway, glancing down at my dress. “I don’t have anything else,” I whispered apologetically.

“Here, wear this,” one of the cousins said, pulling off her jean jacket.

“I can’t take your coat,” I replied, lifting my hands to ward her off.

“It’s fine,” she said, putting it in my hands. “I’ve got another coat in my Jeep.”

Heather helped me slip on the jean jacket and they stood around me, looking me over some more.

“Hair,” one of the women said, nodding.

“My hair?” I reached up to touch the bun at the back of my head.

“It’s really long,” Heather said, shaking her head. “If she wears it down, we might as well be waving a fucking flag.”

I choked on my own spit.

“We’ll braid it,” Otto’s gram said, winking at me. She walked around me and gently pulled the pins and ponytail out, letting my hair fall down my back.

“Holy shit,” the taller of Otto’s sisters-in-law said.

“Told you,” the shorter one murmured.

“It makes so much sense now.”

“Mmhmm.”

Gram’s fingers ran through my hair, and the breath caught in my throat. It had been so long since anyone but me had touched my hair. Memories of my mom, and later Noel, brushing my hair for me hit with the force of a hurricane.

“We’ll pull it forward,” Gram said, gently positioning my hair loosely over my shoulder. “Then we’ll just do a loose

braid.” Her hands worked quickly and efficiently, and seconds later, she was putting the ponytail around the end of my hair.

“Better,” Otto’s aunt announced.

“What about the boots?” one of the cousins asked.

They stared at my rain boots. I’d never been so thankful that I was wearing a pair of tights that didn’t have any runs in them.

“What size do you wear?” Otto’s other cousin asked.

“Six and a half?” Were they going to change my shoes, too? Everyone wore rain boots!

“That’s Mom’s size,” his cousin said, spinning on her heel. “I’ll see what she has.”

“I can just wear these,” I said to Heather quietly, my voice strained.

“Not with the rest of it,” she replied almost apologetically. “Just trust us, yeah?”

“Cowboy boots,” the cousin announced, striding quickly back toward us a minute later. She lifted a battered pair of brown boots up.

I wanted to argue, but with all their eyes on me, I lost my courage. Quickly, before I could change my mind, I stepped out of my boots and into the cowboy boots. They pinched a little, and the bottoms seemed kind of slippery, but they fit.

“Good,” Otto’s aunt said with a nod.

“Makeup?” one of the cousins asked.

“No makeup,” I said quickly, shaking my head. I’d let them change my clothes and hair even though wearing my hair down made me feel like I was going out in my pajamas and I was pretty sure I was going to trip wearing the cowboy boots, but I was *not* wearing makeup.

“What the hell did you do?” Otto snapped, walking into the room from wherever he’d been.

“Does it look bad?” I asked worriedly before anyone else could speak.

“No,” he replied quickly, still scowling. “Are those Aunt Farrah’s boots?”

“Mind your business,” his aunt shot back.

“We’re heading out,” Heather announced, ignoring Otto’s scowl. “I’ll see you back at the house for dinner.”

“Be careful,” Otto ordered.

“You know we will,” one of his sisters-in-law said soothingly, patting his back as they started to file out of the room.

“I’ll see you later, yeah?” Otto said quietly, moving in close.

“Do I look ridiculous?”

“You look beautiful,” he replied. “Just different.”

“Different bad?” I hadn’t been able to look in a mirror and by his response to the changes his family had made, I was seriously concerned that I looked even stranger than normal.

“Just different,” he countered. He leaned down and kissed me.

Good grief, would I ever get used to that?

“I’ll see you tonight.”

“Okay,” I breathed, staring at him like an idiot.

“Alright, lovebirds,” his mom interrupted. “Let’s go.”

I took a step back from Otto and turned to follow her toward the door.

“Get a dress, yeah? A white one,” Otto called out as we left.

CHAPTER 10

OTTO

“**I** THOUGHT THEY were on their way back,” I muttered, looking up at the clock.

We’d been sitting in my parents’ kitchen, drinking beer and killing time for the last hour. Thankfully, all of us boys knew how to cook and dinner was warming on the stove, because the women were a lot later than they said they’d be.

“Talked to Bishop not fifteen minutes ago, and he said they’re fine,” my dad replied easily. “Don’t get your panties in a twist.”

“Not sure why we didn’t send a member with them,” I muttered. “Bishop’s a fuckin’ civilian.”

“Bishop’s family,” my dad countered, flicking his beer cap at me. “And we didn’t want a member out with them, callin’ attention to the group.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“You’re such a worrywart,” Rumi joked, leaning back in his chair. “They’re fine.”

I’d understood why they’d chosen to go shopping immediately. They were trying to distract my bride from all the shit that was happening behind the scenes, with the added bonus of getting to know her and delicately getting information from her without her realizing it. That didn’t mean that I was stoked they’d been gone all fucking day.

“Esther’s probably fuckin’ exhausted,” I argued. “She’s had a hell of a day.”

“Understatement,” my dad murmured. “Poor thing.”

“You’re really gonna marry her, huh?” Rumi asked seriously.

“I’m really gonna marry her,” I confirmed.

“Why?”

The question hit me right in the solar plexus and it was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I’d been ordered to, but I couldn’t get the words out. Sometime between when I’d been kicked in the balls with the order to marry Esther and sitting down at my parents’ table, something had changed.

It wasn’t like I had some burning desire to marry Esther, far from it. But I also didn’t want people to think that I was being forced into it. She didn’t deserve that. When she’d stood surrounded by women that morning but looked at me for reassurance, I’d suddenly realized that it was *me and her* now. Somehow, we’d become a team.

I could think of worse things.

“We’re havin’ a baby,” I replied blandly.

“You don’t have to get married just because you’re havin’ a kid.”

“You’ve met Esther.” I shrugged. She wasn’t the type to shack up with someone without being married.

“Still—”

“Your brother’s made his decision,” my dad interrupted. He knew about the order. “Leave it alone.”

“She won’t fuck you again unless you’re married,” Rumi said, pointing at me. “That’s it, right?”

I was out of my chair before I even realized that I was moving.

“Rumi,” my dad roared, his hand slapping against my chest.

“Sorry,” Rumi muttered, his hands held up in surrender as he stared wide-eyed. “I was jokin’.”

“You want me jokin’ about Nova?” I asked through gritted teeth. My dad’s hand was still pressed against my chest like he wasn’t sure if he was going to have to hold me back or not. “I

mean, didn't she start hookin' up with you because you were both drunk?"

Rumi's expression darkened, but he stayed in his seat. "Point taken."

"Is the coast clear?" my brother Micky asked, poking his head in the back door. "We started comin' in the front but I heard you yellin' so we came around back to give you a minute."

"Yeah," I waved him in as I sat back down. "All clear."

"Cool," he replied, opening the door wider so Rhett could come inside.

"Grandpa was yelling," Rhett announced as he strode toward the table. "Rumi!"

"Grandpa's always yelling at Rumi," Myla said wryly as she came in behind him. "Why the heck did Micky pick me up today?"

"Because I asked him to." Dad looked past her. "Where's Titus?"

"He said he was goin' to a friend's house," Micky replied warily. "Didn't he clear it with you first?"

Dad shook his head.

"That little fuck," Micky muttered, pulling out his phone.

"We're home," my mom called from the front of the house. "Come help us carry shit inside!"

I was on my feet and headed toward the living room before anyone else. Rumi had been giving me shit calling me a worrywart, but that was exactly what I'd felt like all day. I knew that Esther was fine with my mom, but I'd still felt anxious while she was out of my sight, especially knowing they'd detonated the cabin. The Sons of Calgary were going to be looking for answers and we were the first place they'd look. Allowing the women to go all over town hadn't been a good idea, and I should've said something, but I'd been too concerned about Esther's feelings. She deserved a real wedding, with decorations and a dress and all that shit.

She was standing inside the doorway, her hands full of bags, and she reminded me of a wilted flower.

“Hey,” she greeted with a small smile, little wisps of hair tickling her cheeks. “I spent all the money you gave me.”

“Good. That’s why I gave it to you,” I mumbled, taking the bags from her hands and setting them on the couch.

God, she was pretty. The braid in her hair seemed to make her look softer or something more approachable. If I was being honest, so did her little round belly. I’d always found Esther attractive, in a purely aesthetic way, but once I’d seen her naked with her hair pooled beneath her, that attraction had grown into something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. It was electric.

And now that I knew I’d be seeing her naked again in a few days, the attraction was getting hard to control.

“Did you have a good day?” I asked, ushering her a little away from the door as my family moved in and out carrying bags in from the car.

“Yeah, it was nice,” she replied, smiling softly. “I think we went to every store in Eugene.”

“Did you find everything you needed?” Her hair was soft against my fingers as I cupped her cheeks. Jesus, why the hell did it feel like I hadn’t seen her in months rather than just a few hours? I was clearly fucking losing it.

“I think so?” She frowned. “We got dark blue decorations. Is that okay? Your mom couldn’t remember your favorite color.”

“I like blue,” I assured her.

“Oh, good.” She sighed and crossed her eyes as her shoulders slumped. I let out a startled chuckle. “I’m so tired.”

“I bet.” I kissed her forehead. “You hungry?”

“Really hungry,” she confirmed sheepishly. Her eyes grew glassy. “But my feet hurt so bad I don’t think I can even walk to the kitchen. That’s why I didn’t help unload the car.”

“Christ,” I muttered, dropping down to one knee. “Lift your foot.”

“I’m not used to cowboy boots,” she said apologetically, bracing one hand on my shoulder as she let me pull the boot off. I rubbed the arch of her foot with my thumbs before setting it on the floor and reaching for the other boot. “The heels are higher than I’m used to.”

As soon as the boots were off, she sighed with relief and I smiled to myself, looking down at her feet. She needed to start wearing socks with some cushion, the tights she had on were so thin it must’ve felt like wearing nothing. Maybe I’d stop by the store and get her some. I wondered if she’d think that was weird.

“Oh.” The word was so quiet that I nearly didn’t hear it, but the tone was enough for me to snap my head back to look at her face.

“What?” I barked. I couldn’t see anything wrong, but her face had paled and her eyes were as wide as saucers, the pupils dilated with pain.

“Cramp,” she breathed, her lips barely moving. She was barely even breathing. “My legs.”

“Which part?” I barked again, reaching for her. I knew before she’d even replied. Both of her calves were as hard as rocks. “You need to stretch them.”

I looked over my shoulder and yelled for my mom. She must’ve heard my panic because she came running.

“What’s wrong?”

“Both of Esther’s legs are cramping.”

“Jesus, Otto,” she said in exasperation. “I thought we were being attacked.”

“Help her,” I ordered, trying to flex Esther’s foot forward as she whimpered.

“I know it hurts like a bitch,” my mom said soothingly as she rubbed Esther’s back. “I got them with all my pregnancies at one point or another. Let Otto stretch them out.”

Five minutes later, Esther was standing normally, her hands in my hair, and I was sweating like I'd run a goddamn marathon.

"Come in when you're ready to eat," my mom said before walking away.

"Thank you," Esther said after she was gone, her hands falling away. "I can't believe how bad that hurt."

"Fuck me," I muttered, leaning my forehead against her belly.

"They're better now." She tentatively slid her fingers through my hair again.

"Give me a minute," I grumbled, gripping her hips.

"I didn't mean to freak you out," she said ruefully, letting go of my hair as I leaned back on my heels.

"You need to eat more bananas," I replied gruffly, getting to my feet. "And drink more water."

"I'll remember that." Her expression was serious, but her eyes were shining.

"I'm serious."

"I know," she murmured, smiling a little.

"Come on, let's grab some food." I grabbed her hand and led her toward the noisy kitchen. "I'm glad you had a good day."

"Your mom can *shop*," she mused. "She made me write out a list in the car, and I think we found everything on it."

"You get a dress?" I asked, glancing at her over my shoulder.

"Yep." Her cheeks grew pink. "But you can't see it."

"I'm gonna see it eventually."

"In three days, apparently."

"Actually, four," I mumbled. "We need to go and get the license tomorrow morning."

“Get a plate,” my mom ordered as we entered the busy kitchen. “The boys made tacos.”

“You cook?” Esther asked in surprise as I tugged her toward the kitchen counter where the different toppings were laid out.

“Tacos are easy.” I handed her a plate. “You just have to cook the meat, really. Everything else is just cut up.”

“*I can cook,*” she said, quietly proud. “I’m actually really good at it.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep.”

“We can take turns, then.”

I turned to her when she seemed to freeze in place. “What?”

“You want to cook?”

“Sometimes.” I shrugged and handed her a couple of warm tortillas. “If it’s somethin’ specific.”

“Oh,” she breathed.

She followed me through the kitchen and eventually to the table where my family had kindly left us a couple of seats. I pulled her chair out for her and she’d barely sat down before she started to pop back up again.

“We forgot drinks,” she murmured apologetically.

I set my hand on her shoulder to stop her. “I’ll get ’em. You want some ice water?”

“Yes, please.”

“You all set for the big day?” my dad asked her as I walked back to the fridge.

“I think so,” Esther replied hesitantly.

“We’re set,” my mom confirmed. “Now we just need to deal with the food. We’ll pick up flowers the night before.”

“Oh yeah? From where?”

“That little stand down the road,” my mom replied proudly. “We talked to Brandon and he said he has everything we’ll need. We can just go over and he’ll cut it right then and we can assemble the bouquets.”

“He was surprisingly nice about it,” Emilia said dryly. “Considering Heather knocked on his front door out of nowhere.”

“Well, I’d rather pay him for it than some big store,” Mom said defensively. “He was happy for the business.”

“Here you go,” I said quietly, setting down Esther’s glass of water before dropping into my seat. I dug in, glancing to make sure that Esther was eating, too. I wasn’t sure what kind of food she liked, but she must not have minded the tacos because she was slowly making her way through it.

“Myla, Esther’s going to stay in the extra bedroom, so after dinner, I want you to remake the bed with clean sheets,” my mom ordered, pointing at her.

“Say what?” I mumbled around the food in my mouth.

“Esther’s staying here until the wedding.”

“The hell she is,” I argued.

“Otto,” Esther chided softly.

“You wanna stay here?” I asked in confusion.

I’d been counting down the minutes in the back of my head until I could get her alone. We had about a thousand things to talk about and she hadn’t even seen where we’d be living. How the hell were we going to be ready to get married if she was staying with my parents? How were we supposed to get to know each other when we were constantly surrounded by my family, for fucks sake?

“Just until we’re married.”

“You’re kiddin’, right?” I asked, staring at her.

“We shouldn’t be staying together before we’re married,” she replied stubbornly.

“I think it’s probably a little late for that worry, don’t you?” I barked, looking down at her stomach.

“Otto,” my dad growled. “Knock it off.”

Esther set her taco carefully onto her plate and dropped her hands onto her lap, her face bright red. She didn’t say a word.

“No,” I announced, going back to my food. “You’re stayin’ with me.”

Everyone stared at us, and the table was abnormally quiet while everyone finished their meal. The tension was so high that even Rhett sat quietly.

“I’m home,” Titus called from the front door, slamming it behind him. “Where is everyone?”

“Kitchen,” my dad yelled back. “Where the hell you been? I called you twice.”

“My phone died,” he said, his eyes widening as he noticed all of us at the table. “Did I miss the memo?” His mouth dropped open in shock when he saw Esther. “What the fuck?”

“Language,” I barked.

Rumi laughed, and Nova elbowed him in the side, hissing at him to be quiet.

“You know Esther from school, right?” my mom said dryly. “Her and Otto are getting married.”

“What?” His eyes looked like they were about to bulge out of his head.

“Hi Titus,” Esther said calmly. “It’s nice to see you again.”

He just stood there, dumbly staring at Esther.

“For fuck’s sake,” my dad grumbled, getting up from his seat. He walked over to my little brother and shoved him toward the kitchen. “Get some food.”

The last half of dinner passed quickly. The tension from Esther and I arguing forgotten, and before long, the women were clearing the table and doing the dishes while the rest of us made our way into the living room.

“How the hell is she here?” Titus hissed, glancing over his shoulder. “What the fuck is going on?”

“You seem to care an awful lot about your brother’s fiancée,” my dad commented easily, staring at Titus.

“I just spent the last hour with her little sister cryin’ on my shoulder because she thought Esther had died in a car accident this morning,” Titus blurted incredulously.

“So that’s the story they’re usin’?” Micky muttered, shaking his head. “Why am I not surprised?”

“How do you know her sister?” Rumi asked, leaning back on the couch with his feet crossed. He looked amused.

“We’re friends,” Titus replied defensively.

“You’re *friends*?” My dad was *not* amused.

“She’s younger than me, but we had a class together,” Titus mumbled, scrubbing his hands over his face. “They think Esther is dead. Noel’s going to lose it when she finds out Esther’s okay.”

I grit my teeth and inhaled slowly through my nose.

“You can’t tell her.” I reached out and squeezed Titus’ shoulder. “Not a word.”

“What?” His eyes widened in shock as he looked at each of us. “Why the hell not? That’s her *sister*!”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dad replied. “You keep your mouth shut.”

“No fuckin’ way!”

Dad’s hand shot out like a python and gripped Titus’s chin, jerking his face up. “This is nonnegotiable, Titus. You fuckin’ say anythin’ to her sister, you’ll be drinkin’ your cheeseburgers through a straw, got me?”

Titus made a noise in his throat, angrily staring at my dad, but after a moment gave a short nod. When my dad let go of his face, he took a step backward and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Do I get to know what the hell is goin’ on?” he muttered angrily.

I met my dad’s gaze and nodded. While we didn’t usually clue Titus in on club shit, this time we needed to make a bit of an exception. He was clearly connected to what was going on, even if it was a loose connection, and if we were going to ask him to keep his mouth shut, he needed a reason. By the look on his face, Titus was contemplating if telling Noel that her sister was alive might be worth the broken jaw my dad had threatened.

“Esther’s pop is in the Sons of Calgary,” Dad said, watching Titus’s face for any sign of recognition.

“What, the church they go to?” Titus asked, relaxing fractionally.

“Connected to it,” I confirmed. “But the members—”

“The men,” Rumi clarified.

“It’s not just a church, yeah?” I said, nodding at Rumi. “They’re a fuckin’ militia group.”

“No fuckin’ way,” Titus muttered.

“Long story short,” I said, ignoring him. “They stole some shit from the club. Followed some leads and found it out in a cabin in the middle of nowhere.”

“That doesn’t explain,” Titus said, jerking his head toward the kitchen where Esther was helping the women.

“Esther was there. At the cabin.”

“Okay,” he said, drawing out the word.

“They rigged the shit so when she called for help, the entire cabin would explode,” my dad spat.

Titus choked and jerked his head back in horror.

“So,” I continued. “We’re gonna let them think that their little plan worked. For now.”

Titus was quiet for a long moment, letting the revelations sink in. Then he opened his mouth, closed it again, and finally

spoke. “That doesn’t explain why you’re marrying her.”

Esther chose that moment to walk into the living room looking for me.

“Oh,” Titus said in understanding, his eyes on her waistline.

“Am I interrupting?” Esther asked, pausing.

“Not at all,” I assured her. “What’s up, sugar?”

Rumi snorted quietly. I ignored him.

“I thought you might want to see what we bought today?” she murmured shyly with a shrug.

“The dress?” I teased, heading toward her. My dad could deal with Titus.

“I told you,” she said as I led her toward the spare bedroom. “You can see that on our wedding day.”

“It’s awful, huh?” I joked. “Afraid I’ll change my mind once I see what you picked out?”

Esther huffed and looked at me over her shoulder, rolling her eyes. “Nice try.”

I shrugged.

“It’s really pretty,” she assured me as we reached the guest room. “A little more revealing than I’m used to.”

“Ooh,” I murmured, closing the door behind us as I imagined Esther in a cleavage-baring dress. I immediately shot that image down. I doubted she meant something *that* revealing. She’d spend our entire wedding blushing the color of a tomato.

My parents had gotten rid of our old bunk bed and replaced it with a queen, and the entire bed was covered in bags.

“We got tablecloths,” Esther said, reaching into a bag. “But they’re just rentals—did you know you could rent tablecloths?”

“I didn’t,” I replied in amusement.

“We got napkins, too. Your mom said that the club has plenty of dishes and silverware and all of that stuff.”

“They do,” I confirmed, leaning back against the door.

She’d been nervous when they left that morning. Scared, even. But the day with my mom and the girls seemed to have settled her. I thought it might be a stretch to say that she was excited, but she seemed calmer at least.

“We’re going to put these in the middle of the tables,” she said, pulling a little glass vase out of one of the bags and dropping a tiny candle into it. “Pretty, right?”

“Very.”

She stopped, the vase in her hand, and looked at me. “You don’t care about any of this, do you?”

I laughed. “Not really.”

Her shoulders slumped.

“If you like it, I like it,” I assured her, stepping further into the room. “You like it?”

“Your mom’s really good at making things look pretty,” she replied, gesturing at the room around us. “I think it’s going to look really nice.”

“As long as you’re there, I doubt I’ll notice any of it,” I confessed, reaching out to pull her toward me. The vase dropped onto the bed with a quiet thunk. “How are you doin’?”

“I don’t know,” she said, leaning against me, her head tilted back to look at my face. “It feels like we’re in some alternate universe.”

“It’s fast,” I agreed. “That’s why I want you comin’ home with me tonight. Give us a couple of days to get used to each other, yeah?”

“No.” She shook her head, her chin jutting out stubbornly. “Not until we’re married.”

“You don’t want to fuck until we’re married,” I said, reasonably, I thought. “We won’t.”

She scowled and pushed out of my arms.

“What?”

“We’ve already—” She threw her arms out in frustration. “I don’t want to live with you before we’re married, too.”

“It’s four days.”

“Exactly.” She crossed her arms and glared. “We can wait four days.”

“That doesn’t make any fuckin’ sense.”

“Could you stop swearing at me, please?”

“I’m not swearing *at* you.”

Esther let out a small screech, barely a sound, and my eyes widened. I waited for her to stomp her foot like a little kid and was surprised when she just glared at me.

“We’ve already done this completely backward,” she said through clenched teeth. “And we’re getting married in four days, and I barely know you and—I just—I just want the rest of it to be *right*, okay?”

“Okay,” I said softly as her eyes grew glassy. “Alright. Stay here.”

“Thank you.” Her shoulders slumped.

“But I’m pickin’ you up in the mornin’,” I said firmly. “And we’re gonna go over to the house so you can at least get familiar with shit over there.”

“I’m sure it’s fine.”

“It’s fuckin’ awesome,” I replied, making her smile faintly. “But you’re gonna be livin’ there. I want you to see it before you move in.”

“You can still change your mind. We can bring this stuff back and get a refund,” she said as I reached out to pull her into my arms again.

“You’re not bringin’ anythin’ back,” I replied. Once the decision had been made, I’d spent the entire day coming to terms with it, and now I couldn’t imagine *not* marrying Esther.

It was going to be like living in the twilight zone for a while and I was sure that shit was going to come up that neither of us was prepared for—but I wanted her with me.

“Even if I poop my pants?” she asked with mock seriousness.

“Please don’t.”

Esther laughed and dropped her head against my chest. After a moment, she popped back up again. “What *is* your favorite color?”

“Blue.”

“I got it right,” she said happily, letting out a sigh.

“So smart,” I murmured, leaning down to kiss her.

CHAPTER 11

ESTHER

THE BED IN Heather and Tommy's guest room was soft and comfortable, but I spent the night tossing and turning anyway. After the house had quieted and Otto had left for the night, anxiety had settled around my shoulders like a cloak. While his mom and the rest of the ladies had taken me all over town, it had been impossible to focus on anything but shopping for wedding supplies, but once the day was over all of my fears had come back to the surface.

I was willing to marry Otto. I even cautiously looked forward to it. But I couldn't help but remember my mom once mentioning that she'd married my dad because she wanted a home of her own. Was I doing the same thing? Probably. No, not probably. I was. I was using Otto, and we both knew it. He was my chance at security for me and the baby.

He'd been so sweet about it, though. I couldn't understand. He didn't have to marry me. A lot of men wouldn't have. Just because we were having a baby didn't mean that he had to tie himself to me for life.

I stuffed bobby pins into my hair and stared at myself in the Hawthorne's bathroom mirror.

I hadn't shown Otto everything we'd bought the day before. While we'd spent a lot of our time shopping for wedding supplies, the women had also been insistent on getting me some new clothes. That was actually where most of Otto's cash had gone because his mom had insisted on paying for most of the wedding supplies, including my dress.

I'd balked at the idea of spending Otto's money on clothes for myself, but the expressions on my companions' faces had quickly changed my mind. It hadn't been quite embarrassment or pity, but fit somewhere between the two emotions. After deciding that I really didn't want Otto to look at me that way,

the ladies had been like an invading army in the stores, dividing and conquering the different racks to pick out things for me to try on. I'd ended up hiding some of the things they'd picked at the bottom of the piles of clothes they brought to the fitting rooms—I wasn't comfortable wearing jeans, no matter how loose they fit—but they'd also grabbed a lot of things they knew I'd be comfortable in.

I was currently wearing one of those things, a plum-colored sweater dress that hit just below my knees. It was snuggler around the bodice than I was used to, but it flowed softly over my belly which I liked. Heather had found some maternity tights in one of the small shops we'd stopped in and they were so comfortable that I could've cried. No more waistband digging in, they pulled all the way up over my small belly.

I'd put my foot down, literally and figuratively when we'd made our way to the shoe section and only come home with three new pairs—short brown ankle boots, black flats, and short-heeled white pumps with a pointy toe for the wedding that Otto's cousin Charlie had described as *vintage looking* and *very cool*.

“Esther!” Heather called from somewhere in the house. “Otto's here!”

Taking a deep breath, I opened the bathroom door and headed toward the entryway. Spending the day with Otto made me nervous and jittery even though I'd seen him less than twelve hours before as he'd kissed me goodnight. There was something about him that made every electrical impulse in my body fire up like lightning in a storm. I'd felt it that night in the woods, and again, to a lesser degree when he'd shown up at the cabin and while we were at the clubhouse, but it seemed to grow even stronger the longer I was in his presence.

Chemistry. That indefinable thing that I'd never really understood before. We had it. I just hoped it would be enough to get us to the next part. The *real* marriage part.

“Damn,” Otto murmured, smiling as I came into the room. “New dress?”

“I used the cash you gave me,” I blurted, smoothing the dress down for the thousandth time since I’d put it on.

“Money well spent.” He looked me up and down. “You ready to head out?”

“I put your purse on the table by the door,” Heather called from the kitchen. “Have fun, kids!”

“I’m ready,” I replied, fumbling for the purse.

“You got a coat?”

I paused, the purse strap halfway up my shoulder. It was the one thing none of us had thought to buy the day before, and I hated the idea of putting my old ratty jacket over my beautiful new dress.

“No worries,” Otto said with a flick of his hand. He opened up the closet near the door and pulled out a brown canvas coat.

“That’s not mine,” I argued, even as I stepped forward.

“It’s Myla’s,” he replied with a shrug, holding it out so I could slip my arms into it. “She won’t care if you borrow it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

He held my hand as he walked me outside, and I barely kept myself from stumbling when I caught sight of his car. *The* car. The place where the whole mess started.

“I don’t mind ridin’ in the rain,” he said, opening the door for me. “But I figured you’d appreciate the roof more.”

I climbed inside, smiling awkwardly. Once the door was shut, the familiar smell of the space made a hundred memories flash through my mind, and not surprisingly, a tingle of arousal hit my midsection.

Like one of Pavlov’s dogs, I snorted quietly and watched as he climbed in beside me.

“Where are we going?”

“First,” he said, turning on the engine. “To get our marriage license. You got your ID?”

I nodded, patting the purse on my lap.

“Good. Then I thought we’d grab some lunch and head back to the house,” he continued, turning around in the driveway. “Sound good?”

“Sure.”

“The enthusiasm is overwhelming,” he teased, but there was an underlying thread of seriousness in it.

Guilt hit me hard. He hadn’t planned for any of this any more than I had. We were in the same boat, Otto and I, trying to figure out how we were supposed to navigate this new normal. He’d been trying, really trying, to put me at ease and I hadn’t done any reciprocating.

“I’m nervous,” I confessed. I thought about reaching out to touch him but couldn’t make myself do it.

“Me too,” he replied, glancing at me as we pulled out onto the road.

“Really?”

“Really,” he confirmed. “Haven’t ever been married before.” He shot me a look. “And I don’t think either of us planned on rushin’ to the altar with someone we barely knew.”

“Actually,” I replied, settling more comfortably into my seat. “I hadn’t really planned on knowing my future husband very well before I got married.”

Otto’s chuckle broke off when he glanced at me and realized I was serious.

“For real?” he asked incredulously.

I shrugged. “That’s not really how it works for us,” I explained carefully. “My dad—” I choked a little on the word and cleared my throat. “My dad would’ve chosen someone for me. We would’ve spent some time together beforehand, but not a lot.”

“That’s wild,” Otto replied, shaking his head. “At least know I *like* you.”

“You barely know me,” I countered.

“I’ve seen you around,” he said, glancing at me. “I know that you don’t like milk.” My mouth dropped open in surprise. “And you do this little shimmy thing with your shoulders when you’re excited about somethin’, but only when you’re comfortable with the person you’re talkin’ to. And I know that you’re always nice to everyone, even when they’re assholes. You’re smart—I bet you got good grades in school. And you suck at volleyball.”

“How in the world?” I breathed, staring at him.

“I noticed you in school,” he said easily, shrugging one shoulder.

“I don’t know why.”

“Because you’re pretty.” A smile played on his lips. “And I was dyin’ to see your hair down.”

I coughed hard at the reminder, and he laughed.

“I don’t remember you from school,” I replied apologetically.

He brushed that off with a wave of his fingers on the steering wheel.

“I know that you’re kind,” I said tentatively after a moment, making him look at me sharply. “I know that you love your parents and your family. You’re protective of them. You’re handsome—probably too handsome.”

“Can you be too handsome?”

“Yes,” I replied firmly, making him huff out a laugh. “You’re a hard worker. You like riding motorcycles?”

“Love it,” he confirmed.

“You’ll be a good dad.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You’re a good uncle,” I replied, remembering the way he’d lifted his nephew over his head again and again the night before so Rhett could touch the ceiling. He hadn’t once gotten annoyed or brushed off the little boy’s cries to *do it again*.

“And we have chemistry,” I added before I could talk myself out of it.

Otto grinned at me. “That’s like saying that a wildfire puts off a bit of heat.”

I blushed.

“I won’t ever hurt you,” he said, holding out his hand between us so I’d grasp it. “I won’t lie to you. Won’t cheat on you. I’ve got no idea how to be a husband, but promise I’ll do my best.”

I smiled at him and laced my fingers with his. It was a start.

Getting our license turned out to be just filling out some paperwork, and we were done within fifteen minutes. We were beginning to feel easier with each other, and beyond the fact that Otto seemed to be continuously looking over his shoulder, it went as well as could’ve been expected. It was wild seeing his name next to mine on the forms, and I had to fight the feeling of unreality that had been dogging my steps for the past day. It was real. We were getting married. God help us.

Afterward, he was true to his word, and we stopped by a restaurant to grab some food to go—a hamburger and fries for him and a BLT and salad for me. As we drove out to his house, not far from his parents’ place, I noticed happily, my nerves started humming again.

I braced myself for some bachelor pad with barely any furniture and an empty fridge, promising myself that I wouldn’t react badly no matter what we found. He hadn’t been planning for a wife. It wasn’t as if he would’ve had time to spruce the place up for me. When we pulled down the driveway, though, I was pleasantly surprised.

He lived in a farmhouse out in the woods. The property was clean, the paint looked new, and there were bushes

planted outside on each side of the front steps.

“Home sweet home,” he said, glancing at me as he put the car in park.

“It’s beautiful,” I replied, looking out the windshield. The porch out front was wide and deep, and I could imagine a porch swing out there someday, with a couple of pillows and a few potted plants.

I didn’t wait for Otto to get my door, even though he’d been opening it for me all morning, but I was too busy admiring his house to pay attention to his scowl. The garage was a separate building painted to match the house, and the gravel that crunched under our feet was thick, like it hadn’t been there long enough to spread out.

“I don’t wear shoes in the house,” he explained, opening the front door. He was carrying our bag of food in one hand but held up the other to stop me before I’d stepped inside. “Wait here.”

I froze just outside, thankful for the roof of the porch that kept me from getting soaked by the rain. A few seconds later, he was back, his hands empty and his shoes off.

“Tradition,” he explained, reaching for me. I let out a startled *woop* and struggled to keep our drinks level as he picked me up off my feet and carried me inside.

“I thought that was after you got married,” I said as he set me back down inside.

“I’ll do it again, then,” he replied easily, taking the drinks so I could slide my boots off.

His house wasn’t anything like I’d imagined. There weren’t any tchotchkes or extra décor, but the place felt warm and inviting anyway. The couch was soft brown leather and a dark-green worn but clean recliner sat perpendicular to it, both facing a television that was mounted on the wall above what looked like a working fireplace.

“Livin’ room,” Otto said, opening his arms out wide. He walked backward, his eyes on mine as I followed him. “Kitchen.”

I looked around the room. The appliances weren't new, nothing in the kitchen was—but the bare countertops were immaculately clean. The front of the fridge had a couple of photos held up by magnets, one that I recognized of Rhett—but before I could move closer, Otto was setting down our drinks on an old dining room table and throwing open a door.

“Basement,” he announced. He shook his head when I stepped forward. “You don't wanna go down there. It's empty except for the furnace and some shelves built in. I think that's where they stored most of their canned food—there's no pantry up here.”

“I'm good at canning,” I said, looking briefly over his shoulder into the darkness.

“I haven't ever bought enough that it didn't fit in the cupboards up here,” he said, jerking his head toward the rest of the kitchen. “But if you wanna fill the basement, have at it. I'll make sure the shelves are sound first.”

“Sounds good.” I smiled and looked at the photos on the wall. They were a mixture of different people, candid shots mostly, and I recognized Otto in a couple of them.

I walked slowly around the kitchen, running my hand over the counter, looking at the big white sink, glancing out the window at the trees behind the house. It was better than I had imagined. I would've lived anywhere with him. That's what I was signing up for, after all. A trailer in a park, an apartment, a room in his parents' house—any place. But I could actually picture myself in that kitchen, making dinner as Otto got home from work, frying eggs for breakfast while little legs swung back and forth from one of the dining room chairs, canning jam on a summer afternoon while the sun came through the window, lighting the entire room.

“You're quiet,” Otto said, coming up behind me. His hand slid around my waist and settled on my belly.

“I love your house,” I replied honestly.

“Yeah?”

“It’s like—” I shook my head and laughed. “A painting,” I finished dumbly. I wasn’t sure how to describe what I saw around us.

“My gram said it’s a place to raise a family in,” he mused, leaning down to kiss the side of my neck.

I shivered.

“Come on,” he said, leaning back up. “Let me show you the rest of the house, and then I’ll feed you.”

“There’s more?” I joked happily, making him smile.

“Bedrooms,” he replied with mock excitement. “Three of them.”

“Holy cow!” I followed him, playing into the joke. “Three whole bedrooms?”

“And two bathrooms,” he said, tugging me up the stairs. “One down there—” He pointed to a door that was literally under the stairs, and I briefly wondered how he didn’t hit his head when he used it. “And another one up here.”

“It’s nothin’ special,” he said as he opened the bathroom door. The inside was worn, just like the kitchen, but it was also spotless. A couple of mismatched towels were folded and hung neatly on the rack. A pale-blue shower curtain was pushed aside and the olive-green tub was visible. Muttering something under his breath, Otto swung it closed. “The showerhead is new and the pressure’s great,” he said, almost apologetically. “It’s just ugly.”

“Does a shower have to be pretty?” I asked, smiling at him.

“Well, if you want to soak in the tub or somethin’.” He waved at the room. “It’s not fancy.”

“I don’t need fancy.”

“Sink and toilet work,” he said quickly, shutting the door to the bathroom. “And these are the bedrooms.”

The first room had various boxes and miscellaneous junk in it, which surprised me after seeing the rest of the clean

house. I must've made some kind of face because Otto laughed a little under his breath.

"I need to go through it," he said, waving his hand at the room before closing the door again.

I silently chastised myself and focused on hiding my reactions. His house was beautiful and I didn't want him to think I was disappointed with anything.

The second bedroom was smaller and completely empty. I walked into it, my tights sliding slightly on the hardwood floors.

"The hall and the stairs have a runner already," Otto said, walking in behind me. "Micky said somethin' about puttin' carpet in here, but I was thinkin' a huge wool rug would look cooler."

I turned to face him and he had an expression on his face that I couldn't interpret.

"I know babies are wobbly as fuck," he continued, his words coming out kind of fast. "But we could put a thick pad under the rug so it'll pretty much bounce if it falls. I know carpet would probably be better, but I really like these hardwood floors. I'm pretty sure they're the original floors and ___"

"This'll be the baby's room?" I asked quietly, cutting him off.

"It's closest to the master," he replied. "I know the other room is bigger, but this one's closer. They don't need a lot of room anyway, right? Just a crib and a dresser? Maybe a rocking chair? Rocking chairs work way better on hardwood, just sayin'."

"It's perfect," I breathed, spinning in a slow circle. Otto was right, it was a small room, but there were two tall windows that faced the front of the house making the room seem airy and bright. There was no closet, and the ceiling fan and light fixture had seen better days, but I could easily envision it as a finished nursery.

"You like it," he said in relief. "Alright."

“The floors are gorgeous,” I said, sliding over to him. “No carpet.”

“Thank fuck,” he muttered. “I mean, I woulda done what you wanted, but I really didn’t want to fuck up my floors.”

“I could even make a rug,” I said, glancing back as he towed me out of the room. I’d do it in a rainbow of colors. I could already picture it.

“Or we can *buy* one,” he said doubtfully.

I shrugged.

“This is our room,” he announced, opening the door to the last room. He pulled me inside and backed up a little so I could look around.

The bed was made—no surprise there. What was surprising was the massive and clearly hand-sewn quilt that covered it. It was a mixture of colors done in a wedding ring pattern—I ignored the irony of that—and it fit perfectly with the rest of the house. The king-size bed was brass and gorgeous and the long dark wood dresser along the wall had matching knobs.

The walls were a pale yellow, almost white, a few shades lighter than the paint on the outside of the house.

“I think your favorite color is yellow,” I said, half-jokingly as I turned to Otto.

He was watching me intently, waiting for a reaction, and I realized belatedly that he was nervous I wouldn’t like it. The whole house would belong to our family, and he wanted me to like it—but this room would be purely *ours*. It was more important.

“It’s not my favorite,” he said after a moment, looking around the room. “It just seemed like it fit the house.”

“It does,” I confirmed, walking forward to run my hand along the quilt. It must’ve taken months to stitch it together.

“My great-great-gram made that,” Otto said quietly.

“Really?”

“Or maybe my great-great-aunt. My parents got a few of them passed down and they gave it to me as a housewarming gift.”

“What a sweet gift,” I murmured.

“Most of the quilts I’ve seen—everybody has at least one—are smaller. Queen and twin sizes mostly—but there were only a couple of king-size made.”

“And you got one of them,” I said, looking up at him. “Lucky.”

Otto smiled. “Feelin’ luckier by the minute.”

I raised my eyebrows as he moved toward me. I wasn’t surprised when he reached behind me and tugged at my hair, making it fall like a rope down my back.

I’d known in the back of my mind that being alone at his house wasn’t a good idea, and the beat of arousal under my skin was the exact reason. If we were going to get married, I was determined to do things correctly, but I was under no illusion that I had any willpower whatsoever when it came to Otto Hawthorne.

Without the buffer of other people around us, I felt like the wick of a firecracker waiting for a spark.

“You like the house,” Otto murmured, pulling the ponytail out of my hair. It wasn’t a question, but I answered anyway, trying to keep my wits about me.

“I love the house.”

“You look incredible in the house,” he said, smiling as he leaned down toward me. “Like you fit.”

“It’s probably the dress,” I muttered desperately, my body swaying toward his even as I gripped tightly to my control with what felt like the very tips of my fingers. “Old fashioned girl, old fashioned house.”

Otto chuckled and leaned closer, brushing his lips lightly against mine, his hands tangling in my hair.

“Our food is probably cold,” I mumbled against his lips. “I mean, mine’s already cold but yours is going to get cold.”

He let out a sound between a snort and a scoff and leaned back. “Three more days.”

“Yes.”

“Just—” He shook his head once and then pulled the ends of my hair forward until they hung down in front of me.

I yelped as he cupped my breasts in his hands, my heart racing.

“Fuck,” he muttered, dropping his arms. “Let’s go.”

“Are you mad?” I asked, hurrying behind him as he tugged me out of the bedroom and back down the stairs. I slid a little on the top stair and he stopped abruptly, turning to face me.

“Not mad, baby,” he said, reaching up to run a finger along my jaw. “Impatient as hell. Careful on the stairs, yeah?”

He moved slower then, like a snail, honestly, as we made our way down the rest of the stairs and into the kitchen.

“You need some thicker socks,” he announced, unpacking our lunches.

“What?” I stared at him in confusion.

“Those tights,” he replied, gesturing toward my feet. “No cushion.”

“Shoes have cushion,” I pointed out.

“You buy some socks yesterday?”

I shook my head. Were we really discussing socks?

“I’m gettin’ you some socks.”

“You’re really thinking about socks right now?” I asked as we sat down at the dining room table.

“I’m thinkin’ about socks,” he confirmed, opening up his lunch. “If I wasn’t thinkin’ about socks, I’d be thinkin’ about stripping you out of that dress and layin’ you out on this table.” He took a big bite of his hamburger.

I stared at him open-mouthed.

He nodded. “So, socks,” he muttered around the food in his mouth.

We spent the next hour deliberately not talking about anything sexual, much to my relief. He described what it was like growing up in his family and in the shadow of the club he belonged to—the Aces and Eights Motorcycle Club. I explained further about what would’ve happened if my dad had chosen my husband and what my life would’ve looked like. We debated whether Noel or Rumi were more annoying and he told me about going to my family’s garden center and seeing Ephraim and Caitlyn.

“She seemed nice,” Otto said, leaning back in his chair. “Real concerned about Ephraim’s opinion, though.”

I nodded. That wasn’t anything unusual. “Don’t most wives care what their husbands think?” I asked easily.

Otto laughed. “My mom couldn’t give a rat’s ass what my dad thinks.”

“That’s not true,” I argued.

“Okay, not completely,” he conceded. “She wouldn’t cause major problems on purpose, but she sure as hell says what she wants when she wants.”

“Your dad can’t be happy about that.”

“Hell, I think that’s what he likes about her,” Otto mused.

“My parents were the opposite,” I replied, putting my feet up on the chair next to me. “My mom would never say something that she thought would bother my dad.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. His word is law.” I swallowed against the lump in my throat. “She wouldn’t go against him.”

“My mom would,” Otto murmured, watching me closely. “She thought he was doin’ some shit that she didn’t agree with—she’d never let it fly.”

“Is that what you want?” I asked lightly. “Someone that disagrees with you all the time?”

“Hell no,” Otto said with a laugh. “But sugar, I wouldn’t want a doormat either. I’m doin’ somethin’ that bothers you, I’d sure as shit *want* you to speak up, alright?”

“You say that now,” I joked.

“I’m not kiddin’.” Otto leaned forward in his seat. “I’m not in charge of you, Esther. You’re an adult. You make your own choices. We’re married, we’re working as a team—yeah? I got a problem with somethin’ you’re doin’, I’ll say so. I expect you to do the same.”

“Okay,” I replied, hoping that I’d be able to hold up my end of the bargain.

I’d done an okay job standing my ground when it came to not anticipating our wedding more than we already had, but once we were already married? It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that I’d be fighting nineteen years of conditioning in order to argue with Otto about anything.

“We’ll figure it out,” he said gently, reaching out to tug playfully on the end of my hair. “This shit ain’t easy.”

“Do you feel robbed?” I asked quietly. “Not marrying someone that you chose?”

He watched me for a long moment before slowly shaking his head. “I chose you that night in the woods,” he said with a small smile. “Just didn’t realize it at the time.”

CHAPTER 12

OTTO

I'D THOUGHT THAT the few days before the wedding were going to drag, considering the blue balls I was sporting, but surprisingly, they flew by. My gramps had told me not to bother coming into work, so Esther and I had spent the past few days together, getting to know each other and unfortunately keeping our hands to ourselves.

We'd gone to dinner at my grandparents' house so Esther could meet the rest of the family, and she'd done pretty well with the onslaught. There were so many of us that there was no chance of keeping everyone straight, but she'd done her best and by the end of the night had been comfortable enough to be herself and had charmed everyone from my gramps to my cousin's newborn baby. There was a sweetness to Esther that you didn't encounter very often, and I was glad that the people that were most important to me recognized it.

"Lookin' good," Micky called out from the doorway.

"Esther's probably thinkin' I'm gonna be wearin' a suit," I replied, smoothing my hair back from my face. It was longer than I usually wore it, but when I'd considered getting it cut before the wedding, the memory of Esther's fingers running through it had made me reconsider.

"I have a feelin' she won't be surprised," he joked, gesturing at my clothes.

I was wearing a white button-down and the only pair of pants I owned that weren't jeans, but she was stuck with the work boots and leather. I didn't have any other shoes, and I wasn't getting married without my cut.

"They on their way?" I asked, glancing at the door behind him. The clubhouse was bustling with people and more were

showing up every few minutes, but I hadn't seen any of the women that were helping Esther get ready.

"Emilia said they'd be headed over soon," he confirmed, glancing around. "Looks nice in here."

"They rented the tablecloths," I murmured, distracted. "So don't spill anything."

Micky laughed. "Nervous, huh?"

"I'm not nervous."

"Bullshit. You're talkin' to me about tablecloths," he said dryly. "Either you're nervous or havin' some kind of stroke."

"They're here," I blurted, forgetting Micky entirely as I strode toward the door.

"I won't spill anythin'," he called out behind me, laughing.

"Well, don't you look nice?" my little sister Myla greeted, setting down a large wrapped box on the bar.

"Who'd you ride with?" I asked, looking over her shoulder.

"Emilia and Rhett." She laced her arm through mine and tugged me away from the door. "Mom and Dad are bringing Esther in a few minutes. There was some problem with her flowers."

"What was wrong with her flowers?"

Myla waved off the question. "You ready to get married?" she asked me cheekily, bumping me with her hip. "I like Esther. She could've done way better."

"You're funny," I replied flatly. "Ha. Ha."

"Wait 'till you see her," she said happily as Rhett and Emilia came through the door. "She looks gorgeous."

"She always looks gorgeous."

"Not this gorgeous," Myla mumbled. "Just wait."

"Nova's right behind me," Emilia told Micky as he helped take Rhett's jacket off. "Have you seen Rumi? He's not answering his phone."

“He and Bird are around here somewhere,” Micky replied. “Everything good?”

“I think she got some news about her grandma,” Emilia murmured with a shrug. “But don’t say anything to him, I think she wanted to talk to him about it before she said anything to Bird.”

I ignored the rest of their conversation and distractedly greeted a couple of other people as they came through the door, forcing myself not to check the time again. Esther wasn’t late, but it felt like I’d been waiting a long ass time for her to show up.

“You’re acting like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs,” my gram greeted as she came through the door.

“Hey Gram,” I replied, leaning down to hug her as my gramps slapped my shoulder and strode past us.

“Your parents are right behind us,” she whispered conspiratorially. “And it’s starting to sprinkle outside. Why don’t you grab an umbrella and go meet them?”

“Good idea,” I replied, kissing her forehead as I moved around her.

There were quite a few dressed-up women in the building who hadn’t wanted to get rained on, so for once there were actually a few umbrellas stacked against the wall just inside the front door. I grabbed one as I passed them and hurried outside, just in time to see my parents park.

My stomach flipped as I jogged toward my mom’s SUV. My parents were in the front seats, so I knew Esther must be sitting in the back behind the tinted windows.

“Well, if it isn’t the groom,” my mom called out cheerfully as she threw open her door. “I’m guessing that umbrella isn’t for me. I’ll meet you in there!”

She held her purse over her head as she hurried into the building.

“Hey bud,” my dad said, rounding the hood. “You good?”

“I’m good,” I confirmed.

“Alright. We’ll see you inside.”

Then it was just me, standing next to the SUV, super fucking nervous to open the door. The anticipation surprised me. It was a marriage of necessity for fuck’s sake. Why the hell was I dying to see Esther in her wedding dress?

Only the knowledge that she was probably watching me stand outside the door like a fucking idiot made me step forward and open the back door.

Then, there she was. Not smiling. Wide-eyed and just as nervous as I was.

Her dress covered her from throat to ankles, but that was about all I could see before she stepped out of the SUV. I fumbled with the umbrella trying to open it, and then nearly swallowed my tongue.

The dress covered her, yeah, but the entire thing was made of lace and while I was sure that underneath the lace was flesh-colored fabric, it didn’t look that way. It looked like she was fucking naked underneath. I was going to kill my mother... or maybe thank her.

Jesus.

“You’re not saying anything,” she said quietly as I looked her over.

“Holy fuck,” I replied. They were the only words I could think of.

“It’s kind of racy,” she said, her hands fidgeting.

I looked up to meet her eyes, and that’s when I noticed that she was wearing her hair down. It was pulled back on one side with a fancy clip, but the rest of it hung in curls and waves to her waist.

“I might have a heart attack before we make it to the vows,” I told her honestly.

She giggled a little in relief and the nerves I’d been fighting since I’d woken up that morning were gone in an

instant.

“You ready to do this?” I asked, thrusting out my elbow so she could grip the arm holding the umbrella over us.

“Are you?” she countered. She turned and grabbed something out of the back seat. When she turned back, I could see that it was a large bouquet of yellow flowers. “I know you said your favorite color wasn’t yellow,” she said lightly. “But I thought—” She shrugged.

“Pretty,” I replied gruffly.

I led her toward the building as a few other cars pulled into the lot. I didn’t say anything about the way her hands were shaking, since mine weren’t exactly steady either.

“I know no one can actually see anything,” she whispered when we were close to the door. “But I’m starting to question how I let your mom talk me into this dress.”

“Probably because it looks fuckin’ phenomenal on you,” I replied, pausing before I reached for the door.

“Thank you,” she murmured, lifting the bouquet up so it covered most of her torso.

“Here—” I chuckled a little as I pulled her hair forward with my free hand, draping it over her shoulder. “That better?”

“Not really,” she said apologetically. “I don’t remember the last time I wore my hair down in public.”

I looked at her blankly for a moment. It took me a minute to understand what the problem was—she looked amazing. Then it dawned on me that this was *Esther*. The girl who had grown up wearing nothing but out-of-date baggy skirts and hid her hair in a bun ruthlessly slicked back from her face for as long as I’d known her. The past few days, I’d seen her in new clothes and her hair in a loose braid, but that was clearly as far as she’d felt comfortable straying from what she was used to.

“Baby, why didn’t you get somethin’ you were more comfortable in?” I asked quietly, leaning down to meet her eyes.

“For you,” she replied simply.

The words were a blow, both making me feel about ten feet tall and also like a fucking cockroach. There were people headed toward us, taking their time to give us a little space, but I knew we didn't have more than a minute before we needed to head inside.

"I woulda married you in that denim skirt you were wearin' the night we got to know each other," I said, reaching up to wrap my hand around the side of her neck so she couldn't look away from me. She blushed at the reminder of the night we'd hooked up but kept her eyes on mine. "But I seriously fuckin' love this dress and you know I got a thing for your hair. *Thank you.*"

I was winging it, but I'd clearly said the right thing because by the time I'd let go, Esther had straightened, her shoulders squared and her chin high. Her eyes still looked a bit like a deer in the headlights, but she'd dropped the bouquet back down by her side.

She jerked in surprise when we stepped inside and the crowd started cheering, but she kept her head high as people came to greet us, telling her how beautiful she looked and congratulating us.

I was proud as fuck when we finally got to the actual wedding part of the day. Uncle Casper officiated like it was his full-time job and he hadn't gotten ordained on some website, and Esther practically fucking glowed. She was so goddamn beautiful that I had a hard time focusing on anything else. The words of the ceremony were a blur. I curled my hands into fists at my sides so I wouldn't reach out and grab her and it was a goddamn relief when we were done and I could finally kiss her.

I hadn't realized before how hesitant our kisses had started out before, like with the first brush I'd always been asking for permission and Esther had been slow to give it. She *had* always leaned into the kiss after a moment's pause, but it had been almost tentative. The kiss after our wedding was different. From the moment I got my lips on hers, Esther was fully and enthusiastically participating. It made my head swim until I completely forgot where we were.

The sound of roaring laughter was the only thing that snapped me out of the fog and kept my hands from straying to some very interesting places.

“There are children present!” Myla yelled jokingly.

Esther pulled away and buried her face against my chest in embarrassment.

“Jesus,” someone said from behind me. “I think *I’m* pregnant after seeing that.”

“Esther would be too, if she wasn’t already,” someone else joked.

“Hey wife,” I murmured against her hair, ignoring everyone. “You ready to get some food and presents?”

“Actually, I’d like to stay right where I am,” she muttered ruefully, pressing her forehead harder against my sternum.

I laughed. Now that it was done, we were married, shit was settled, I felt lighter than I had since we’d found her in that cabin. There were no decisions left to make. We still had to deal with the Sons of Calgary and shit was probably going to get worse before it got better, but for the moment, I felt pretty fucking good with Esther in my arms and the security of the clubhouse around us.

“Congratulations,” Nova sang, hugging both of us at once.

“Can’t believe you’re married before I am,” Rumi joked, slapping me on the back.

“Not my fault Nova won’t marry you.” I shrugged, my lips twitching.

“Oh, she’s *gonna* marry me,” he shot back.

“Eventually,” Nova said easily, laughing when he made a grab for her. “I’m wearing your ring. Quit bitching!”

Esther’s head shot up as they walked away, arguing. “Do you like your ring?” she asked out of nowhere. “I wanted to get you a gold one but your mom said that one would be better.”

I looked down at the black silicone ring on my finger, rubbing my pinky against it to make it turn. It felt weird there, but not bad. “I like it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Gotta take it off to work, sugar,” I said, smoothing the hair away from her face. Jesus Christ, I loved her hair. “If I forget, though, this one’ll be easy enough to cut off if I get it caught on somethin’.”

“Oh,” she said, looking down at my hand. “That makes sense.”

“Plus if I lose it, it’ll be easy to replace.”

“It’s your wedding ring,” she replied, staring at me.

“Yeah.”

“You better not lose it.”

I grinned. “I’ll do my best,” I promised. “You like yours?”

Esther lifted her hand and spread her fingers, looking at her ring. It wasn’t big or fancy, but I’d thought it was pretty when my gram had pulled me aside at dinner, brought me into her room, opened her jewelry box and told me to choose one. I’d argued at first, but she’d made a good argument about not buying something new when we’d need money with a baby on the way.

“I love it,” Esther said finally.

“It was my gram’s,” I confessed awkwardly. Maybe it hadn’t been such a good idea to give her a secondhand ring. It wasn’t like I was hurting for money. I could’ve bought her something else, nothing too big, but new.

“Really?” Esther asked, her eyes lighting up as she looked back at the ring. “That’s awesome.”

“If you want somethin’ else—”

“No way,” she said, cutting me off as she closed her hand into a fist and clutched it to her chest. “This one’s mine.”

“Okay,” I conceded, lifting one hand in surrender. “Keep it.”

“I will,” she said firmly. She looked over her shoulder at the rowdy crowd, currently jostling for food and generally causing chaos. “Should we go mingle, husband?” The last word was tentative, like she was testing it out.

“Let’s do it.”

We made our way into the crowd and spent the next couple of hours visiting and eating and accepting congratulations from everyone we talked to. Not for the first time, I was grateful for my people. Not just family, but the entire club had shown up for my wedding, and every single one of them congratulated us. There were no sidelong looks at Esther’s belly or knowing looks at me reminding us that our wedding hadn’t exactly been planned. They were just stoked to be there and happy for us, no matter what the circumstances were—at least outwardly. I was thankful for that, especially when I realized that Esther had stopped trying to shield the front of her dress and was comfortable enough to spin slowly in a circle, arms loosely at her sides, showing it off to my gramps as he made noises of appreciation.

Even though my aunts and uncles and cousins and siblings kept her busy, I knew she felt the lack of her family being present. There were moments throughout the day when I’d catch her, almost frowning and staring at nothing, but they were gone almost as soon as I’d noticed them.

We’d filled ourselves to the brim with food and cake, listened to rowdy but surprisingly tame toasts—I figured my mother had words with most of the boys threatening some kind of dismemberment if they embarrassed Esther too badly—and the crowd was finally thinning when I cornered Esther near the end of the bar.

“You wanna get out of here?” I murmured, leaning down to kiss the side of her neck. Someone had turned on the sound system and the roar of chatter and laughter was drowned out by a song that had half the people booing and the others cheering.

“We can’t just leave,” she replied, her voice barely noticeable above the noise.

“The fuck we can’t,” I argued, pulling back to look at her. “Sugar, they won’t even notice we’re *gone*.”

Esther turned to look at the crowd, and I followed her gaze. Aunt Farrah and Uncle Casper were dancing. Well, Aunt Farrah was dancing while Uncle Casper stood still, watching her with amusement. Gramps was reclined back lazily on a couch, Gram beside him with her legs thrown over his thighs. Titus was sitting next to them, scowling. He’d made it clear on more than one occasion over the past few days that he wasn’t against me and Esther getting married, but he was pissed as hell he couldn’t tell Noel that her sister was fine. My dad had been watching him closely to make sure he kept his mouth shut.

Rumi and Nova were playing grab-ass over by the pool tables while Micky leaned over Rhett, helping him line up a shot. Kara and Charlie were arguing with Draco and Curtis about something, their arms flying around in irritation while Bishop watched, a small smile of amusement on his face. Uncle Will was slow dancing with my cousin Rebel. Aunt Rose was frowning at Jamison and then glaring at Uncle Mack. Brody and Olive were throwing back shots further down the bar while Meg wrinkled her nose at them and sipped her soda. There were kids running around everywhere. Needless to say, everyone in the room was doing their own thing and paying absolutely no attention to us.

I looked back at Esther and raised my eyebrows.

“Okay,” she conceded slowly. “Are you sure no one will mind?”

“I’m sure,” I replied, grabbing her hand and tugging her quickly toward the door. I didn’t think anyone would mind, but I had a feeling if they saw us trying to leave, there’d be a whole lot of teasing that she wouldn’t enjoy in the slightest.

Esther giggled as I pulled her outside and jogged toward the Mustang.

“What in the world?” she yelled as we rounded Rumi’s truck.

“Those motherfuckers,” I hissed under my breath.

The Mustang had a line of cans tied to the bumper, balloons hanging from the door handles, and shit written all over the windows. I’d know that handwriting anywhere.

“People still do this?” Esther asked, laughing. “I thought it was only in movies.”

“My asshole sister does,” I replied, letting go of her hand to untie the cans from my bumper.

“When did she do this?” she asked, going closer so she could look at the *Just Married* writing on the back window.

“Probably while we were eating,” I said with a huff, using my pocket knife to cut the rope. “That better be dry erase marker, or I’m going to kill her.”

She stuck a finger out and ran it over a little heart drawn on the corner of the window, showing the little red flecks to me when she finished.

“Good,” I grumbled. I ripped off the balloons and popped them with my knife, yanking open her door.

“You’re not really mad, are you?” she asked quietly, moving toward me.

“Irritated,” I clarified.

“It’s sweet.”

“The car’s a classic.”

Esther nodded, but she didn’t say anything else as she climbed inside.

I left the writing on the windows but popped the balloons on my side and dropped them on the ground before following her inside the car. Myla could pick up her own garbage when she came outside.

“My window says *lovebirds*,” Esther said as I backed out of the parking spot. “She even drew little birds.”

“You like it,” I murmured, glancing at her.

“I think it’s nice,” she confirmed quietly, pulling on her seat belt.

We didn’t say much as I drove toward the house. Our house. Halfway there, I felt her hand on my thigh and I let go of the steering wheel to put mine on top of hers.

“Thank you for today,” she said, breaking the silence as we pulled down the driveway. “It was great.”

“Hell, you did all of it,” I reminded her, shooting her a smile. “What are you thanking me for?”

“You agreed to it,” she countered, watching me. “I know you wanted to just go to the courthouse.”

“I’m an idiot.” I shook my head. “I woulda missed out on seein’ you in that dress.”

Esther laughed quietly as I pulled up to the garage and put the Mustang in park.

“Gimme a sec.” I reached for the door handle.

“Oh, wait!” she burst out, letting go of my leg so she could unbuckle her seat belt. She turned and got to her knees, hanging over the seat to go through a bag on the floor behind it.

“When the hell did you stash that?”

“Emilia was in charge of it,” she said distractedly. “Oh, here!”

She turned back and dropped onto her ass, breathless, and held out a little gray box.

“No fuckin’ way,” I murmured, pulling it from her fingers.

“Happy wedding day,” she said, almost shyly.

I pushed the button and watched the garage door slide upward.

“How the fuck did you manage this?” I huffed in surprise, grinning at the open garage.

“I asked Micky what he thought you would like,” she replied proudly. “He said you buy whatever you want usually, but that you’d been putting off buying a garage door opener.”

“When did—”

“They came out this morning and connected it all after you went to the clubhouse.” If it was any person but Esther, I would’ve called her tone smug.

I laughed, shaking my head. “Fuckin’ nailed it, baby,” I murmured, pulling the Mustang into the garage. As soon as I’d parked inside, I closed the door behind us.

“Thank goodness,” she mumbled as it grew dim inside. “I was pretty nervous you would think I was a lunatic.”

I reached for her, but she didn’t stop talking.

“It’s a pretty weird present. But since I’ve never been married before I wasn’t really sure *what* to get.”

I slid the seat back and maneuvered her onto my lap sideways. She was still babbling nervously.

“Plus, I had to use your money to get it, which seemed counterintuitive, but—”

She muttered the last couple of words against my mouth before stopping abruptly and leaning into the kiss.

After days of keeping my hands to myself and taking cold showers every night, my hands were practically shaking as I slid them over her. The dress was snug and hung all the way to her feet so there was no way I could get *under* it while we were still in the car, but I sure as hell could feel her *over* it, and I did. My hands roamed frantically, cupping her tits, gripping her thigh, tangling in her hair, wrapping lightly around her throat. I wasn’t sure how long we sat there in the car while I pawed at her and she wrapped one arm around my neck and laid the other hand against my cheek, but by the time I jerked away, cursing with impatience, the windows were completely fogged over.

“Come on,” I rasped, throwing open my door. I climbed out, not letting her go, and used my ass to shut the door as I

carried her through the garage. It wasn't raining much, and I didn't bother putting her down as I stomped from the garage to the house.

"All my stuff is still in the car," she murmured, gripping my neck with both arms.

"I'll grab it later," I huffed, readjusting my grip so I could unlock the back door.

"You *could* put me down," she said reasonably as I stepped inside the back door.

"It gets muddy through there," I replied, setting her gently on her feet. "I'll get some gravel set down so you're not dealin' with puddles."

"I think I can manage some puddles," she argued, a smile playing on her lips. She turned toward the table and paused.

Fuck.

I'd been so stoked about the garage door opener that I hadn't even thought about what I'd gotten *her* for our wedding. I hadn't even known that I was supposed to get her a present until my mom informed me the night before. I'd wrapped it up in blue paper and left a vase of flowers next to it—which now seemed fucking stupid because she'd been carrying a bouquet twice that size all fucking day.

"For me?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder at me.

"If I'd known what you were gettin' for me—" I started apologetically, following her. I seriously debated throwing the gift out the window before she could reach it. Goddamn it, I was such a fucking moron. "I woulda got you somethin' nicer."

"I'll love it," she assured me, reaching for the package. "I love the flowers."

It took everything inside me to keep from snatching the gift out of her hands as she unwrapped it and when she was finally holding it in her hands, completely still, my stomach churned with regret.

“So you don’t slip on the stairs when you’re wearin’ those tights you like,” I explained quickly. “And they’ll keep your feet warm, too, obviously.”

She still didn’t look up.

“I’ll get you somethin’ better,” I said finally, reaching for the slippers.

“You got me slippers,” she said thickly, jerking them toward her so I couldn’t reach. “So I wouldn’t slip on the stairs?”

I rubbed the back of my neck in embarrassment. “Well, when I was showin’ you the house, your foot slipped on the top stair and—”

“I *love* them,” she murmured, her eyes glassy.

CHAPTER 13

ESTHER

I LOVED THE slippers.

They weren't expensive. I could tell from the tag that he'd bought them at a local big box store. They weren't even that pretty. I ran my fingers over the sheepskin along the edge. They were soft, though, and they'd definitely be warm.

"You don't have to say that," Otto murmured with a huff. "I'm sorry. I feel like an asshole. You got me a whole electric garage door opener, and I bought you fuckin' *slippers*? Jesus."

"It was thoughtful," I argued, kicking off my shoes.

"I'm an asshole," he replied under his breath.

"Why?" I dropped the slippers to the floor and slid my feet into them. They fit a bit roomy, but I would bite off my own tongue before I said so. "I got you a gift I thought you'd like and you got me a gift you thought I'd like."

"Those are not equal gifts," he blurted, crossing his arms over his chest.

I couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled to the surface. "You're right," I said, trying to control my smile. "Considering I used *your* money to buy your gift."

He waved off my logic. "That doesn't matter."

"I love my present," I replied with absolute honesty.

He'd bought me something that he knew I needed because he wanted me to be warm and safe. As I'd watched the emotions flash across his face—panic, embarrassment, shame—I'd braced myself for some horrendous gift that I'd have to pretend to be thankful for.

But I didn't have to pretend. No matter what Otto believed, I thought the slippers were uncharacteristically sweet coming

from him.

Getting to know Otto as we lounged around on his parents' couch and visited with his family and went out to eat, I'd come to realize that he was protective. Smart. Kinder than people realized. Impatient and Funny. But I wouldn't have described him as sweet until I'd opened those slippers.

"Will you cut the tags off?" I asked, wiggling my feet.

He dropped to one knee and snipped the tags quickly with his pocket knife. "I'm gettin' you somethin' better," he grumbled as he stood back up and tossed the tags on the counter.

"They feel really good on my feet," I countered, grinning.

He stared, disbelief all over his face, but I didn't stop smiling until he chuckled a little under his breath.

"I tell you that you looked beautiful today?" he said, leaning against the counter.

"You may have said something like that," I mused.

"Good."

The house was silent around us.

"We're married now."

"We are," I murmured.

"You know what that means."

"What?" I asked innocently. The look in his eyes made my skin break out in goosebumps.

"No more keepin' my hands to myself."

"Oh that." I waved my hand nonchalantly.

"Yeah, that." He laughed, moving forward.

I had time to inhale one deep breath before his hand was in my hair and the other was sliding down my back and curving around my butt. As I tilted my head back to look at him all of the tension in my body melted away.

We were married. It hadn't been in a church, and my family hadn't witnessed it happen, but those things didn't make it any less true. Otto Hawthorne was my husband. The shame and anxiety that had surrounded our physical relationship was no longer a factor.

There wasn't anything shameful about being aroused by my husband. There wasn't anything to fear. *Marital relations were not only acceptable, but important.* The memory of my mom, grimacing as she'd said those words, hit me out of nowhere. I shoved it away.

"There's a fuckton of buttons on the back of this dress," Otto muttered against my mouth, nipping at my bottom lip.

"They're just for show," I said, squeaking as his hand tightened on my butt. "There's a zipper."

"Thank God."

I closed my eyes as he kissed me and his hands went to the nape of my neck, searching for the zipper tab. It took only seconds before he was sliding it slowly down my spine, careful not to catch my hair. I was focused on his lips and the way his tongue slid against mine, making my legs go weak, but I couldn't stop the sigh that left me as the pressure around my midsection lessened. The dress fit me, but it hadn't been made with pregnancy in mind, and had been just a smidge too tight around my belly.

Otto pulled away, and as he took a small step backward, he peeled the dress forward off my shoulders and down. Inch by inch.

I swallowed hard and watched his face, his eyes intent on every sliver of skin exposed.

"You're tryin' to kill me," he breathed when the dress dropped below my breasts. "You've been wearing that under all those church girl clothes?"

I huffed and glanced down at the lacy white bra. "No. It's new."

"Just for me, then," he said, his lips tipping up at the corners. "I approve."

He moved more quickly after that, pulling the dress down to my knees and helping me step out of it. He walked a few steps to the table and hung my dress over the back of a chair before turning to face me again.

“One of these things ain’t like the others,” he joked, looking me over.

I glanced down, taking in the lacy bra and underwear, thigh-high stockings, and fuzzy slippers. I shrugged. I wasn’t taking them off.

“You’re fuckin’ incredible,” he said, still standing halfway across the room. “Holy hell, Esther.”

I could hear my heartbeat in my ears as he took his time, his eyes slowly moving from one part of me to the next. Without a word and without taking his eyes off me, he slid the leather vest off his shoulders and laid it on top of my dress.

“You looked nice today,” I said hoarsely, more to fill the charged space than anything else.

“Thanks,” Otto murmured, unbuttoning his shirt.

As he peeled it off, I watched the muscles in his chest move and contract. My tongue felt stuck to the roof of my mouth.

I wasn’t sure what he was doing with this slow undressing. Everything between us up to that point had been frantic and fast, but I couldn’t dispute the way it made my entire body heat.

He kicked off his boots and raised an eyebrow at me, but I stubbornly left my slippers on, making him chuckle.

Then his pants were off and desire hit me so hard that I felt a little lightheaded as he bent down to pull off his socks.

“What’s on your back?” I breathed, catching a glimpse of something at the back of his neck.

“Oh, right,” he murmured, turning so I could see the whole tattoo. It was some kind of logo, and it was huge, but before I could see what it said, he’d turned to face me again.

“Club tattoo,” he informed me easily. “Didn’t have it when we hooked up.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Not too bad.” He smiled and my knees almost buckled.

Otto was *thick*. His arms and chest and thighs were all corded with muscle. I’d seen him mostly naked before, but there was a huge difference between catching glimpses of someone in the dark and watching them stride toward you under the bright lights of the kitchen in nothing but their underwear.

My heart raced, but I didn’t even realize how nervous I was until Otto reached me, leaning down to pull me into a surprisingly platonic hug.

I sagged against him.

I’d been pushing back every emotion I could, getting by the same way I had in the cabin by focusing on the next thing to be done. Instead of focusing on choosing meals and cutting firewood and exploring a new section of the woods, I’d been preparing for the next time I’d see Otto, keeping all of my things neatly packed in his parents’ guest room, trying to put my best foot forward with his family. I hadn’t allowed myself to wonder if my family noticed I was missing yet or how they would react to the fact that I’d married someone outside the church. I hadn’t let myself even consider the consequences once I’d agreed to marry Otto because I knew what they would be and there was nothing I could do to change them.

I’d recklessly and deliberately tied my life with his.

“You okay?” he whispered, pressing his lips against my temple.

“Yes,” I lied.

The choice had been made. I beat back the panic that flared in my chest. I’d gone through with it. This was *our* house. He was *my* husband. I wasn’t ever going back to the cabin and my family was lost to me.

“You sure?” he asked, leaning back to meet my eyes. I wasn’t sure what he saw there, but his brows furrowed in concern. “Come on,” he ordered softly.

I followed numbly as he pulled me out of the kitchen and up the stairs, my slippers squeaking a little on the floor. Guilt settled like a rock in my chest as we made our way down the hallway. He’d been happy and the kitchen had been charged with excitement until I’d ruined it.

“Of course,” he muttered with a huff as we reached his bedroom. The bed was covered in flower petals and there were unlit candles all over the dresser. I only had a few moments to wonder who’d done it—because Otto clearly hadn’t—before he was pulling a white T-shirt over my head.

I slid my arms into it as he strode toward the bed and threw the quilt back, making the petals fly all over the room.

“Climb in, baby.”

I looked at him in confusion, wondering why in the world he’d given me a T-shirt if we were getting into bed.

“Been a long day,” he said, gesturing.

I climbed onto the bed and lay down, still staring at him.

Otto laughed.

“Scoot over,” he ordered gruffly. “I sleep by the door.”

“Why do you get to be closer to the door?” I asked, inching back to the other side of the bed.

“Ah, she speaks,” he joked, climbing in next to me. “I wondered if you’d gone mute.”

“I get up to pee all the time,” I warned, ignoring him. “I should be closer to the door.”

He laughed and turned on his side to face me, curling one arm under his head. “I sleep closest to the door,” he replied firmly. “Someone comes through it, they get to me first.”

I jolted in surprise. Who did he think would be coming into our bedroom?

“You’ll just have to walk the three extra steps around the bed when you have to pee.”

“I’ll just climb over you,” I said easily, shrugging.

“Go ahead.” He grinned. “I’ll enjoy that.”

We lay there for a while, quiet.

“What’s goin’ on in your head?” he asked softly. “You checked out.”

“Nothing.”

“Come on, Esther,” he cajoled. “Where’s the woman that put her foot down about sleepin’ arrangements before we were married? Didn’t have a problem tellin’ me what was up then.”

“We’re married,” I blurted, widening my eyes.

Otto chuckled. “Yeah, we are.”

“My parents don’t even know.”

The smile left his face instantly. “I know, baby. I’m sorry they weren’t there today.”

I swallowed hard and gave him the truth. “Even if they’d known about it, they wouldn’t have come.”

“Doubt your dad would show his face around the clubhouse,” he agreed darkly.

“No,” I corrected, shaking my head. “Even if—” I searched for the right words. “Even if none of the other stuff was going on. The stuff about the guns, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“They still wouldn’t have come.”

“Well, that’s bullshit.”

“I didn’t marry in the church.”

“If you wanted a church weddin’, why didn’t you say somethin’?”

“No, not *a* church. *Our* church. I married someone who isn’t a member.”

“Ah,” he said with a sigh. “Can’t help that, sugar.”

“I know.”

“Havin’ regrets?”

Even though he was watching me, waiting for my answer, I thought about it for a moment.

“No,” I said finally, taking in the wide expanse of his chest, the bicep under his cheek, the eyes that mine in understanding. “There are a lot of things I wish were different, but not you. I’m glad it was you.”

“Coulda been worse,” he mused, reaching out to brush my hair off my cheek. “You coulda hooked up with Rumi.”

“Ew,” I blurted without thought.

Otto burst out laughing.

“I mean, your brother is *nice*,” I backpedaled. “I just don’t see him that way—”

Otto kept laughing. “It’s all good,” he said between chuckles. “I wouldn’t wish Rumi on anyone.”

“He’s with Nova. It’s not like he would’ve hooked up with someone else anyway,” I pointed out over his laughter.

“Poor Nova,” Otto said, grinning.

I shifted on the bed, trying to get more comfortable.

“Come here.” He leaned up on one elbow and reached under the sheet, his hand wrapping around the front of my thigh. “Let’s take these off.”

I widened my legs a little, my breath catching as he peeled the stocking down my leg. When the first one was off, his fingers traced over the tiny divots the elastic had made on my skin.

“Itchy?” he asked softly.

“Not really.”

“My socks leave marks on my ankles sometimes,” he murmured, smiling almost boyishly as he reached for the top

of my other thigh. “I end up scratchin’ like a maniac because they itch so bad.”

“They aren’t that tight,” I breathed as he gently pulled the other stocking down my leg.

“That’s good.” His eyes never left mine. “That feel better?”

“Yeah.”

“Bra too?”

I nodded.

Now that my panic had dulled again, the familiar sizzle of arousal was creeping back. It was a struggle to keep my eyes on Otto’s as his hand slid under the T-shirt and around to my back, unclipping my bra with a flick of his hand.

Sitting up a little, I pulled the bra straps out of the sleeves of the shirt and took it off with a sigh.

Otto took it out of my hand and threw it off the side of the bed.

“That’s new,” I scolded, leaning up to go get it.

“Leave it,” he ordered, reaching out to grip my hip. “We’ll grab it later.”

I huffed but laid back down.

“Fuck, you’re pretty,” he murmured, his thumb sliding softly along the leg band of my underwear.

“What about you?” I asked, pulling the clip out of the side of my hair. “Any regrets?”

“Right at this moment?” His lips curved up at the corners. “Not one.”

Feeling brave, I leaned forward and brushed my lips across his. I was grateful that he’d noticed that my head wasn’t in it and had casually tucked me into bed like we were going to sleep, but I’d been taught to start a marriage like you meant to go on, and I wasn’t sure spending the night of our wedding sleeping was the right choice. At least that was what I told

myself as I slid my hand over his chest, marveling at the hard muscle and the light dusting of hair. The idea that I just wanted to explore his incredible body still felt so foreign that I wasn't able to fully wrap my mind around it yet.

“Fuck,” Otto whispered under his breath, yanking me toward him.

We stayed on our sides as our hands roamed and the kiss went from soft and languid to hard and intense. I gasped as Otto yanked his lips away and tilted my head back with his hand, giving him access to my neck.

“You're so fuckin' sexy,” he said against my throat, sucking and licking his way toward my collarbone.

I was burning up, every inch of my skin more sensitive than it had ever been in my life. The memory of his hands on me in the back of his Mustang had seemed so incredible that I couldn't believe that it could be better than that, but it *was*. I didn't know if it was the fact that I didn't have to worry someone would see us, that we were married now, or that Otto was taking his time, but the sensations were so heightened that I couldn't catch my breath.

When I reached for the T-shirt I was wearing—anxious for more skin, more feeling, more *anything*—Otto shook his head.

“Leave it on,” he ordered, shoving the T-shirt up to my neck, baring everything anyway. “I like you in my shirt.”

My back arched involuntarily as his lips wrapped around my nipple, the sensation shooting straight between my legs. As he knelt up, his body on full display, my heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest.

I ran my hands over his shoulders and down his arms, my palms prickling as I reached for anything I could. His heart was beating as hard as mine when I pressed my hand there and the muscles of his stomach contracted as I slid my hands south. When I reached the waistband of his boxers I hesitated, but my new husband was having none of that. With a growl in the back of his throat that made his mouth vibrate around my nipple, he reached down and pressed my hand against him.

He was firm and large, and his erection jerked under my hand.

I wrapped my fingers around him as he moved back and forth between my nipples, running his tongue lightly over them before sucking them into his mouth. I didn't move my hand away as he leaned up and shoved his boxers down around his thighs.

"You shave?" I blurted incredulously, staring at the penis in my hand surrounded by very short hair.

Otto choked and looked down at himself.

"No, I just trim it," he replied, the words coming out hoarse and strangled.

"Oh," I said, tightening my hand. He made the choking sound again and reached for my underwear.

"Do you want *me* to shave?" I asked breathlessly as he tossed the underwear off the bed.

"If you want to," he replied distractedly.

"Would you—" My hips jolted as his fingers slipped lightly between my legs. "Would you like it better?"

It was Otto's turn to look at me incredulously. "Don't think I could like your pussy any better than I do now."

I let out a nervous laugh.

"You're a nut," he said, a smile playing around his lips.

"It was a fair question," I gasped as the pressure of his fingers increased.

Otto just shook his head as he reached down to pull my hand away from his penis. Before I could ask why, he was scooting down the bed, shoving the bedding with him. Within seconds, he was lying between my thighs, his hands spreading my legs wide as he pressed his mouth against me.

I knew it happened. I wasn't an idiot. I'd heard about it. I just hadn't ever imagined that I'd be *doing* it.

Otto's mouth on me was beyond anything I could have imagined. I jerked, my thighs shaking as his tongue swept up, finding the little bundle of nerves. Desperately, I reached for anything I could until one of my hands found his hair and the other gripped the sheet beneath me. At first, I struggled between anxiety that his face was *right there* and how incredible it felt, but it didn't take long before my hips were arching toward him, and I was fighting my way toward orgasm.

I climaxed with a scream, my entire body tightening before the waves rolled over me.

"That's one," Otto said, kissing my thigh as I stared blearily at the ceiling.

Oh my god. I couldn't even look at him.

"Now I *know* you were lyin' in the Mustang," he teased as he crawled up my body. "You're a screamer."

"Oh my god," I whispered.

"Call me Otto," he joked.

I stared at him.

"Feel good?" he asked, leaning closer to kiss me.

"That's a dumb question," I muttered against his mouth, making him chuckle.

"It's gonna feel better," he promised, moving his hips between my legs.

"I doubt that."

"Hold on tight, sugar," he said with a smile, pulling one of my legs over his hip.

He was right. As he slid inside me, this time with nothing hindering his movements and my body soft and pliant, I gasped. It didn't hurt. Nothing hurt. It felt *incredible*.

I didn't come twice like he'd promised the day he asked me to marry him.

I came three times.

“Sleep, sugar,” he murmured sometime later, whipping the T-shirt off my head before pulling me against him. His hand splayed over my bare back as I rested my head on his bicep. I was a little jealous that within moments, his breathing changed as he slept, while I stared at the unlit candles on the dresser, sure I’d never be able to sleep next to him, especially not naked as the day I was born. It made absolutely no sense that he’d taken the T-shirt off *after* we’d had sex.

I realized how wrong I was when I woke up in the middle of the night to Otto’s mouth at my nipple and his hand between my thighs. Sleeping naked was awesome.

CHAPTER 14

OTTO

IF I WAS honest, I wasn't sure how living with Esther was going to go. I liked her. She was funny, and she made me see stars when we were in bed, but beyond that I'd been a little skeptical. I'd never lived with a woman before and I figured there would probably be a ton of shit that came up while we were trying to get used to each other.

Turns out, there wasn't. Going from barely knowing each other to living together was surprisingly seamless. It was fucking weird.

We spent the week after the wedding just fucking around and having sex. A lot of sex. We explored the property, and I showed her all the shit I'd done and all the shit I wanted to do to make the place a showstopper. She searched through the kitchen cabinets and laughingly told me all of the stuff I was missing in order to actually cook a full meal. We watched movies. Ordered takeout and ate it at the kitchen table. Rearranged my dresser and closet so she had some room for her things.

We never ran out of shit to talk about. School, our families, memories of our childhoods, favorite foods, the baby, the house, it was getting to know someone in fast-forward and thank Christ, the more I knew about Esther, the better I liked her.

She'd grown up with an abusive dad and a doormat mom, a brother that her parents thought walked on water, and a little sister that was treated like a princess, and she never said it but I had a feeling that she'd gotten a little lost in the middle. Ironically, it may have been the thing that saved her from being completely indoctrinated into their way of life. She'd been able to skate past, quietly making her own decisions and coming to her own conclusions.

I really fucking liked her. So, I was imagining that it would be smooth sailing and I was patting myself on the back when I got to work the Monday after our honeymoon week.

“You’re late,” Rumi yelled as I strode in, practically strutting. Morning sex was a really nice benefit of living with someone.

“Nobody gives a fuck,” I countered, grabbing my coveralls.

“How’d the honeymoon go?” he asked, walking over. “Find out she’s got a tail or anything?”

“Think I woulda noticed a tail the first time around,” I muttered. He was such an ass.

“Come on, baby brother,” he joked, leaning against the car in my bay. “Speak. Was it everything you hoped for? Shit workin’ out?”

“It’s good.” I shrugged.

“That’s it?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“That married sex is fuckin’ incredible, that havin’ a wife is the best thing ever, that Esther cooks like a fuckin’ Michelin chef, I don’t know, man, *somethin’*.”

“Not talkin’ to you about our sex life,” I replied, lifting one finger. “I’ve been married for a week, if you want to talk about married life go ask literally anyone else.” I lifted a second finger and then a third. “And we’ve been gettin’ takeout.”

Rumi laughed. “You’re a fuckin’ joy to be around, you know that?”

“Don’t you have someone else to bother?”

“No one else that just got married,” he replied, pushing my shoulder. “Come on, how’s it been?”

I sighed. He wasn’t going to let up until I gave him something. Rumi was worse than the women when it came to gossiping.

“The sex is fantastic, which wasn’t surprising because it was good the first time.”

Rumi whooped, and I shook my head. He was such a fucking child.

“I like Esther,” he said, pointing at me. “She seems super fuckin’ nice and she doesn’t take your shit.”

“What shit?”

“This whole pissed-in-my-cereal attitude you’ve had since you were five. She doesn’t even seem to *notice* it.”

“I don’t have an attitude.”

“Boy, you’ve had an attitude since the womb,” my dad countered as he rounded the car. “How’s things?”

“All good.”

“We’ve been watchin’ the Sons of Calgary all week, and no one’s fuckin’ movin’,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Goin’ around actin’ like they don’t have thousands of dollars in stolen weapons stashed somewhere.”

“It’s been a real bore,” Rumi added, scratching absently at the side of his face.

“Esther hasn’t had any problems? Not tryin’ to call home or anythin’?”

“How would she?” I asked. “She’s been at the house this week. No phone, remember?”

“You still haven’t gotten her a phone?” Rumi asked in disbelief, standing up straight.

“What?” I looked at him and then my dad. “We didn’t even leave the house.”

“You’re here.” Dad was frowning.

“And?”

“You left her at your house in the boonies with no phone,” Rumi muttered.

“She’s fine. She’s at my place,” I shot back defensively.

“Son, she needs a phone.”

“I’ll get her one.”

“Today,” my dad ordered. “For fuck’s sake, she’s pregnant.”

“Yeah, I’m aware of that.” I’d explored the little curve of her belly more times than I could count in the last week.

“What the fuck’s she supposed to do in an emergency?” Rumi asked. His look of disbelief had morphed into a glare that made me even more defensive.

“She’s fine.”

“At least *this* cabin has electricity and runnin’ water,” he scoffed, shaking his head. “I’ll give you that.”

“Say what?” I barked, taking a step forward.

“She a fuckin’ prisoner or your wife?”

“Jesus Christ,” my dad muttered, shoving me back a step. “The two of you are on my last goddamn nerve. Knock it off.”

“I’m gonna get her a phone.”

“Right,” Rumi spit.

“We weren’t exactly thinkin’ about phones!”

My dad’s lips twitched. “Did you even leave the bed?” he asked knowingly.

“Yes.”

He laughed. “Get her a phone today, yeah? She needs one in case there’s an emergency or you know, if your mom wants to call her.”

“Why would Mom need to call her?” I asked suspiciously.

“You’re a fuckin’ idiot,” Rumi muttered, walking away.

I flipped him off.

“They can’t maintain this nothin’-to-see-here game forever,” my dad said, leaning his ass against the car where Rumi had been. “But I have a feelin’ that when shit starts

happenin' it's goin' to be a surprise, and it's gonna get ugly. You need a way to get ahold of your wife when that happens."

"She's not a fuckin' prisoner," I mumbled, feeling like an asshole. We really hadn't thought about getting her a new phone. She didn't have anyone to call, and it wasn't as if I'd spent the week with mine out. I'd put it on the kitchen counter when we got home from the wedding and I hadn't picked it up again until I'd left for work that morning.

"I know shit is up in the air right now," Dad said quietly. "But eventually you two are gonna have to start buildin' a life, yeah? She needs a phone. She's gonna need a car. You're gonna need to start gettin' ready for that baby."

"It's been a week."

"Pretty sure your mom already set up an appointment for her to see the doctor," Dad said. "And she's got no way to get ahold of Esther to make that happen."

"She can let me know—" I stopped talking when I saw the look on his face. "Yeah, I get it. I'll take care of the phone tonight."

"She's comin' from literally nothin', bud," he said kindly. "With a suitcase and a bunch of shitty fuckin' memories. I know it's all afterglow and novelty now, but the sooner you give her a little independence and start makin' an actual fuckin' life, the better off you'll both be."

"Yeah, I hear you."

I spent the rest of the day thinking about what my dad had said and avoiding Rumi. Fuck him. I wasn't trying to keep Esther a prisoner in my house and comparing me to her fuckwad father was a low blow.

I couldn't deny that on the surface, it looked bad, though. Dad was right. I'd left Esther in the house all morning with no way to call anyone if she needed to and no way to get anywhere since I'd forgotten to leave the Mustang key at home.

The day had started out so well but got worse by the hour, and by the time I got on my bike to head home, I was in a foul

mood. I not only felt like an absolute piece of shit for leaving Esther stranded all day, but I also just fucking missed her. Not talking to her at all after spending the whole week with her beside me felt seriously fucking wrong, and I was worried that she'd spent the day needing me with no way to get a hold of me.

Using the garage door opener so I could park my bike also reminded me that I hadn't even gotten her a decent wedding gift either and now it was a week late.

"You're home," Esther called happily as I stepped inside the kitchen and kicked my boots off. She rounded the corner and stood there, fully dressed and her hair pulled back into a tight bun, the slippers mocking me from her feet.

"I am," I confirmed, frozen in place as the anxiety I'd been fighting all day disappeared.

"It was quiet here today without your music going," she said, smiling. "How was work?"

"It was fine."

Her smile wobbled a little.

"Worked on a Honda, not my favorite but it's not exactly hard either," I continued, trying to get my wits about me. She was still there, and she was fine and she didn't even seem pissed that I'd left her while she was asleep that morning with no way to leave or contact anyone.

"I deep cleaned the bathrooms," she informed me as I took off my jacket and laid it on the counter. "They were pretty clean already, but I went over them again. I was going to make dinner, but we don't really, um, have anything."

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath, my stomach sinking. "Have you eaten anything?"

What the hell was wrong with me? I'd left my pregnant wife with no food in the house and no way to get any more. I wasn't just an asshole. I was a complete waste of space.

"I had some instant oatmeal," she replied easily, moving toward me. "And you had some soup in the cupboard, so I ate

that too. Oh, and some cheesy crackers.”

Her arms wrapped around my waist and her cheek hit my sternum and I felt like the worst person on the entire planet. Why wasn't she pissed? It was like she hadn't even noticed how badly I'd fucked up.

“I'm so sorry, sugar,” I murmured, kissing the top of her head. “Get some shoes on, yeah? I'll take you into town to get some groceries.”

“Right now?” she asked, tipping her head up to look at me.

“Right fuckin' now.”

“But you just got home,” she argued. “Don't you want to relax for a few minutes?”

“I'll relax when you've got a phone and enough groceries in the house to cook yourself a decent meal.”

“Oh, I'm getting a phone, too?” she asked teasingly.

“You need one.”

“Who am I going to call?” Her hands roamed over my back, sliding under my cut and my brain short circuited.

“Anyone you want—” I snapped my mouth shut. That wasn't exactly true. “Call me,” I corrected. “Or my mom, or my sisters, or whatever.”

“But I still can't call my parents,” she said, leaning against me.

“Not yet, baby. Give us a little more time, yeah?”

“We're married now,” she pointed out. “What would it hurt?”

“We might be married, but there's still a whole lot of shit goin' on. Just a little more time, alright?”

“Okay,” she replied, trying and failing to smile. “They probably think I'm still at the cabin anyway. It's not like they're missing me. I'll go grab my shoes.”

“And a coat,” I reminded her as she pulled away.

I tried not to focus on the fact that she thought her family still believed she was at the cabin or the fact that it hurt her knowing that they probably hadn't even noticed her missing. The thought of telling her that we'd blown up the cabin and her family thought she was dead made my guts twist. I was still getting to know Esther, and we were still feeling each other out, but I did know that if she had all of the information, she'd be on the phone with her family faster than I could stop her. She'd never let them believe she was dead, even if it kept her safe. I wasn't willing to risk it.

"All set," she announced, coming back into the kitchen a few moments later. She'd untwisted her hair so it fell in a long ponytail down her back. "I'm incognito."

"You're what now?" I asked in confusion.

"New clothes, new hair," she explained. "Hiding in plain sight until we're ready to let my parents know."

"Esther, no one who knows you would ever be fooled by a different hairstyle."

"Obviously," she said with a scoff. "But anyone who doesn't know me wouldn't think I'm a fundamentalist Christian who's run away from home, right?"

"There's a lot to unpack in that last sentence," I muttered, putting my boots back on. "But let's do that in the car."

"Aren't you going to wear a coat?"

"In the car?" I ushered her out the door and locked it behind us. "No. Only when I'm on the bike."

"You don't wear a coat unless you're riding the motorcycle?"

"I guess if it was snowin', I would."

"Why?"

"Don't need one."

"But it's cold."

"Not that cold."

“It’s the middle of winter.”

“And?”

“Fine,” she huffed as I opened her door. I held back a smile as I closed her into the car. “But I’m wearing a coat. I don’t like to be cold.” She continued as soon as my ass hit the driver’s seat.

“I wouldn’t let you leave the house without one,” I assured her.

“I thought you wanted me to do whatever I wanted?” she countered.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. I really fucking liked my wife. “Now, you’re just tryin’ to start shit.”

“I would never.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m amiable!”

“Vocabulary words have no currency in the Mustang,” I teased, glancing at her as I backed out of the garage.

“Amiable means agreeable and friendly.”

“I know what it means.”

“Okay,” she sang like she didn’t believe me.

“Let’s go get you a phone first,” I said as we headed toward town. “You have any idea what you want?”

“Something that makes phone calls,” she replied slowly.

“Do phones even make calls anymore?”

“Very funny.”

“We’ll get you a nice one.”

“I don’t need anything fancy,” she argued.

“Nice doesn’t mean *fancy*.”

“Nice means expensive. I don’t need anything expensive either.”

“You need somethin’ that takes good pictures,” I said, glancing at her. “Can we agree on that?”

“What the heck am I going to take pictures of?”

I didn’t even bother replying, just reached out and put my hand on her belly.

“Oh,” she said, snorting. “Right. Yeah, that would be good.”

We were quiet the rest of the way, but I shouldn’t have expected her complacency to last. The minute we parked in front of the phone store, she started shaking her head. “Why aren’t we just getting a phone from a mini-mart like normal people?”

“Baby, this is where I have my plan.”

“Phone plans are a waste of money.”

“Not they’re not.”

“They are. They have all of those extra secret add-on charges. I don’t need something like that.”

I started laughing. I couldn’t help it. And the angrier she got, the harder I laughed.

“Esther, they take my bill out of my bank account without me havin’ to remember or fuck with it. My phone always works. I have service every-fuckin’-where. Unlimited data so I can get online without thinkin’ about it. I’m not gettin’ you some track phone from a mini-mart. It ain’t happenin’.”

“Fine,” she grumbled.

“What’s that?” I was teasing, but she wasn’t in the mood for it.

“I said, fine. Okay. We can get an overpriced phone on an overpriced plan so you don’t have to actually physically pay your bill every month.”

“That’s what you took away from my comment?”

She just stared at me. It was so fucking cute that I leaned in and planted one on her. Fortunately, we seemed to catch fire

whenever we were touching and a few minutes later, the windows were beginning to fog up and Esther was in a much better mood.

“Let me get you a good one, yeah?” I asked, rubbing her cheek with my thumb. “We can buy generic shit at the grocery store to make up the difference.”

“Why in the world would you buy name brand at the grocery store?” she asked incredulously, unbuckling her seat belt. “Do you really think peas taste any different because they have a pretty logo?”

I chuckled as I got out and went around to open her door. “I don’t even like peas.”

“You’re exasperating.”

“It’s part of my charm.”

Buying a phone from an actual company store always takes forever. Swear to God, it’s like buying a car when you go in there. Even if you know what you want, the salespeople are still going to take an hour and a half fucking around with shit before you can actually pay them and get the hell out. By the time we were done, Esther was looking at me smugly and I was practically vibrating with impatience.

“I’m not going to say that I told you so,” she said conversationally as I put my hand on her back and led her toward the Mustang.

“Oh good.”

“Because we both know that I did, so it doesn’t need to be said.”

I shook my head. Sweet little Esther wasn’t quite the shy, passive woman I’d originally thought. I wasn’t mad about it.

“Thank you for my phone,” she said, looking up at me as I helped her into the car. “It’s very...shiny.”

“You’re kind of an asshole,” I said, barking out a laugh that I didn’t see coming.

“I am not!”

“Don’t worry, sugar,” I said, leaning down to give her a quick kiss. “I like it.”

The grocery store trip took even longer than we’d waited for her phone, but I liked it a hell of a lot better. I drove to the next town just to be sure that we wouldn’t run into anyone we knew, and I got to watch Esther in action.

I’d seen her sweet and soft-spoken, and I’d seen her riled, but watching her handle shit was a new experience. When we got to the store, she pulled out a piece of paper covered from top to bottom with a huge ass list. The thing was separated into sections—meat, produce, dairy, frozen, pantry—and each item had the quantity she needed written next to it. I followed her around the store, pushing the cart while she loaded it up, meekly taking direction and grabbing the shit she couldn’t reach. If I’d thought that Esther was cheap because she hadn’t wanted to spend a bunch of money on a phone, I was quickly disabused of that while we were getting groceries. She didn’t ask if we had enough money for the huge ass list, just moved from one section to the next, filling the cart until it literally couldn’t hold any more and she had to carry the paper towels in her arms.

“So, you made a list today,” I said, glancing down at her when we’d finally checked out and were headed to the car. I wasn’t even sure how we would fit all of that food into the Mustang.

“Was it too much?” she asked, way too late. I smiled.

“Nah, it’s fine.”

“It should last the next two weeks.”

“What?” my mouth dropped open.

“I planned meals for the next two weeks,” she replied easily.

“Why?”

“That’s how I’ve always done it,” she replied. Now she was looking at me with the expression I was pretty sure I was wearing. “Now I don’t have to go back to the store.”

“I don’t even know what I want to eat *tomorrow*.”

“Well, when you know, let me know.” She shrugged. “We have options now.”

“Guess we do.”

It started to rain while we were unloading the cart, so I convinced Esther to sit in the car while I finished, and by the time I was done, I was soaked and pissy. I hated being cold and wet. Something about the feeling of wet clothes sticking to me made my skin crawl.

“I could’ve helped,” she said the moment I’d closed my door. “I have a coat on.”

“It’s fine,” I snapped. “I got it done.”

“Are you mad?”

“I’m not mad.”

“You have to tell me,” she continued. “If I don’t know, then I can’t fix it.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Are you sure? Because you were fine in the store, but now you seem angry.”

“I’m not angry.” I could feel a water droplet rolling down the back of my neck, and I clenched my teeth together.

“You sound angry,” she pointed out.

“Can you fuckin’ stop?” I barked, slapping at the back of my neck.

It was like a gunshot had gone off in the car. Esther’s back snapped straight and she jerked away. Claspings her hands on her lap, she turned very carefully to face the front windshield.

I should’ve apologized, but in the moment, I was just glad that she wasn’t still harping on it because I wasn’t even mad. I was irritated that I was soaking wet and still had to drive all the way home, and I was tired after a full day of work and hours of getting the shit that we needed. I didn’t want to argue

about whether I was angry or not when I'd already said that I wasn't.

I sat in that space. Relieved for the quiet. Annoyed that my clothes were starting to heat and now they were warm and damp against my skin. Happy that we'd gotten the things we needed and were finally headed home so I could take my shoes off.

When we drove up the driveway, though, I realized that the ride home had been the longest Esther and I had gone without talking while we were together. Neither of us had made any small comments or jokes. We weren't touching. She was absolutely silent. As I hit the button to open the garage door, I suddenly wondered if marriage was just going to be a cycle of feeling good, fucking up, and feeling guilty over and over again. If so, I wasn't a fan.

Esther was still silent as I went around and opened her door. She didn't look pissed or anything, just...quiet. Pleasantly quiet. Unassumingly quiet. *Fuck.*

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay," she replied quickly. Too quickly, especially when I knew that I'd been an ass for snapping at her.

"I wasn't mad." I felt like a broken record. "I'm sorry I was bein' pissy."

"I should've helped you unload the cart."

"No." I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair. "Sugar, I told you to get in the car because I didn't *want* you to get soakin' wet. I wasn't real stoked to get wet either, obviously, since I pitched a bitch fit about it, but I would've been even more pissed if you had to ride home that way, too."

"But you wouldn't have been out in it so long if I'd helped you."

"Still woulda been soaked." I shrugged. "I'm glad you're not."

"If I'm doing something that bothers you, you have to tell me," she said quietly, not meeting my eyes.

Leaning down, I got close enough so that she couldn't look anywhere else. "Baby, I'll tell you if you're botherin' me, alright? I was in a shit mood 'cause I don't like gettin' soaked from the rain. Wasn't your fault and didn't have a damn thing to do with you."

"Okay." She didn't seem convinced.

"Kiss me."

"What?"

I didn't bother repeating myself. If she wasn't convinced that she hadn't done anything wrong, then I'd just have to do some convincing. My hands were warm from the heater, but she jolted in surprise when my cold lips made contact. I was tired and grumpy and I wanted to take a long, hot shower so fucking bad, but I forgot all of that the minute her tongue slid into my mouth. There wasn't anything on the planet that could've pulled me away from her then.

I could barely see her in the dim light of the garage, but I found the zipper to her jacket easily. Hell, I found every piece of her clothing easily, but I didn't take off anything but her panties before lifting her onto the trunk. It was cold as fuck in the garage and I didn't want her to get cold, but as her hands burrowed under the front of my hoodie and I pinched her nipple through the fabric of her dress, I knew there was no way we'd make it into the house.

My jeans stuck to my thighs and scraped at my skin as I shoved them down, but it was fucking worth it when her legs wrapped around my back and I slid inside. Heaven, but the angle wasn't right. I noticed pretty quickly that she was struggling to keep her balance. Pausing for only a moment, I pulled her hood up and carefully laid her back along the trunk. I hated losing her mouth, but it was worth the distance when her legs bent further and she braced her heels on the edge.

"Holy crap," she muttered, her hands scrambling along the slick surface.

Thankfully, she came just a few minutes later, her hands fisted in the front of her coat, because I was right behind her.

“What is it about this car?” she asked dazedly as I helped her climb down.

“Muscle cars,” I joked. “Enhancing libidos for the last eighty years.”

“Have you seen my underwear?”

“Leave ’em,” I ordered, zipping her coat back up. I couldn’t resist kissing her again. Fuck, what was it about her that made me so crazy? I pulled away before we ended up on the floor of the garage. “Let’s get the groceries inside. I’m ready for a shower and a beer.”

We made quick work carrying everything in even though she looked at me sideways when I insisted on leaving her inside to grab the bags from me at the door. By the time I carried in the last few bags, the groceries were mostly unloaded onto the kitchen table. I was pretty sure there hadn’t been that much food in my house since I’d started living there.

“You go take a shower,” Esther said, smiling as she brushed little flyaway hairs out of her face. “I’ll put this stuff away.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I argued, moving toward her. “I’ll help.”

“You unpacked the cart and the car.” She put both hands against my belly like she could physically stop me from getting any closer to the table. “I’ll do this part.”

I let her have her way, leaving her talking to herself as she decided where everything would go as I climbed the stairs. I couldn’t deny that I fucking loved having her there, not only because she seemed to want as much access to my body as I had to hers but also because it was just nice having someone at home when I got there. But a small part of me let out a huge breath of relief once I was alone in the bathroom with no one speaking to me.

Days at the garage were so fucking loud. Between the boys yelling to each other, laughing and joking and getting shit done, the tools that were so noisy you couldn’t hear yourself think, the phone ringing in the office, people dropping shit and

engines running and just general chaos—by the time I got home I *needed* the quiet. I'd always had it before and hadn't even realized it until I didn't have it anymore.

Of course, that realization made me feel like shit, so I rushed through my shower. Esther didn't need the quiet because she'd been at the house all day with no one to talk to and nothing to do except clean a mess that wasn't even hers.

The guilt was compounded when I got back downstairs and the kitchen was empty except for the ingredients for dinner on the counter beside her.

“Hey.” She turned her head to meet my eyes. “Feel better?”

“Much.” I moved in behind her and looked over her shoulder.

“I thought we could make pizzas tonight since they're so simple and fast.”

“Sounds good.” I wrapped my hand around her and rested it on her belly as I rolled my head around, trying to stretch out the tension in my neck.

“I'm not sure what you like on yours,” she continued. “I got pepperoni and cheese, but there's a ton of vegetables in the fridge, so just let me know if you like other toppings and I can slice them up really quick. It's no big deal. Super easy.”

“Esther,” I murmured, reaching out to put my hand on hers. “Pepperoni sounds good. I don't need fancy shit on my pizza.”

“Are you sure?” She turned to look at me, and I immediately knew something was off.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Something is.” I looked around the kitchen trying to figure out what had her so balled up, but nothing was out of place.

“I just wanted our first dinner to be really nice,” she said, so fast her words were running together. “But I’m so tired and everything I planned will take so long and then we’ll be eating at bedtime, so I thought we could just do homemade pizza but now it seems really stupid because we’ve been eating out every day and I should have made something home cooked like pot roast and I just really wanted to make our first dinner nice and—”

“Yeah, you mentioned that,” I said, cutting off the flow of words as her eyes started watering. “Sugar, this is nice.”

“No it’s not.”

“Homemade pizza is my favorite.”

“No, it’s not,” she argued, sniffing, but her lips tipped up at the corners.

“Sure as fuck is,” I insisted.

“Well, then I guess I picked the perfect first dinner.” She rolled her eyes.

I was just leaning down to kiss her when someone started knocking on the front door.

“Someone’s here.” Esther looked toward the front door.

“What the hell?” I murmured, leaning back up.

Quickly pulling my phone out of my pocket, I checked to make sure no one had called. I could only guess that there was some kind of emergency if someone was showing up unannounced at my house. On my way past the couch, I reached into the left side cushion and pulled out the pistol hidden there.

“What in the world?” Esther blurted out behind me. I probably should’ve told her it was there.

Holding the pistol in my right hand, I opened the door with my left.

“Titus?” My little brother had never looked so guilty.

“I’m sorry, Otto.”

I didn't even notice the little blonde girl until she started calling for my wife.

"Esther?"

"I'm so sorry," Titus repeated, grimacing.

"Noel?" Esther called from behind me.

"She's been so fuckin' upset," Titus said beseechingly, his jaw clenched. "I couldn't keep lying."

"Esther?" the little blonde girl called again as Esther pushed her way past me.

"I had to tell her Esther was okay," Titus finished dumbly as Esther and her sister collided in a tangle of clinging arms and sobs. "Dad's gonna murder me."

"He's not the only one," I replied grimly. *Shit.*

CHAPTER 15

ESTHER

I MET OTTO'S eyes in confusion while Noel sobbed against me. "What's going on? What are you doing here?"

"I thought you were dead," she gasped, her arms tightening around my back. "Why aren't you dead?"

"Why would I be dead?"

"Come on, let's take this inside," Otto ordered gruffly, ushering the two of us inside. "Titus, call Dad."

"But—"

"Now," Otto snapped, leaving him on the porch while I led a clinging Noel inside.

"I can't believe you're okay," Noel breathed, wiping her eyes with the sleeves of her sweater. All of a sudden her arms dropped down to her sides, and she stared at me wide-eyed. "You're *pregnant*?"

Right. She hadn't known. She'd left with Ephraim the morning after I'd told my parents about the baby and I hadn't seen her again before they'd brought me to the cabin.

"Mom and Dad didn't tell you?" I asked dubiously.

"They said that you'd gone to stay with some friends from another chapter," she replied slowly. "To hopefully find a husband."

Otto scoffed.

"And you believed that?"

"No," Noel muttered defensively. "But it's not like I could argue."

"Yeah, I know."

The weight of my parents' influence on their children was suffocating. If it hadn't been for Becka, I would've never had the courage to question the status quo. Noel didn't have that.

"I thought you must've gotten in trouble or something," Noel said quietly. "But no one talked about it."

"Well, you weren't wrong," I replied dryly. "I told them I was pregnant."

"How did you get pregnant?"

"Please tell me you know how babies are made," I blurted, staring at her in disbelief.

"Of course I know that," she snapped, her cheeks turning pink as she glanced at Otto. "With him?"

"Hi, I'm Otto," he said as he held out a hand for her to shake. "I'm Esther's husband."

"Your *what*?" she yelled, dropping his hand like it burned her.

"My husband."

Noel's expression shifted from disbelief to confusion to horror in the space of a heartbeat. I wasn't sure if it was the relief of finally seeing my sister again or the shock of having her standing in Otto's house, but I found myself fighting laughter. If someone would've told me a year before that I'd be married to Otto Hawthorne and pregnant with his baby, I was pretty sure I would've worn the same expressions.

"They didn't send you away?" she said slowly, taking a step backward as she glanced around the house. "You took off with *him* without telling me? You're disgusting!"

"Hey," Otto barked. "Watch it."

"That's not how it happened—"

"I thought you were *dead*." She huffed. "And all this time you were just living down the road with this—this *atheist*?"

"Mom and Dad did send me away." I took a step forward, hating the look of betrayal in her eyes.

“Never been called an atheist as an insult before,” Otto mused behind me. “Has a nice ring to it.”

“Oh, and they sent you to him,” Noel replied sarcastically. “Yeah, right.”

“Otto *found* me.”

“Esther,” Otto said, his voice full of warning.

“They took me out to a cabin and left me,” I continued, my voice wobbling. “In the middle of nowhere, Noel. It didn’t even have electricity.”

“Esther,” Otto said even louder, his hand coming down on my shoulder.

“Well you probably deserved it,” Noel retorted, gesturing at my belly. “Obviously.”

I staggered back against Otto. Noel was angry, and she was confused, and I knew that she was trying to make sense of everything she was learning, but her words still punctured a small part of me that I’d been protecting.

“Shut your fuckin’ mouth,” Otto growled, making Noel’s eyes widen in fear.

“What’s goin’ on?” Titus asked, bursting through the front door.

“Better get a handle on your girl,” Otto replied, his arm wrapping around my chest. “Or I’m gonna toss her out on her ass.”

“What did Noel do?” Titus asked, letting out a grunt as she threw herself into his arms.

“Talkin’ shit to Esther.”

“It’s fine,” I whispered, watching as Titus rubbed my sister’s back comfortingly. “She’s just upset.”

“Doesn’t mean she can be a bitch, sugar.”

“Don’t call her that,” I ordered.

“I won’t—if she stops actin’ like one.”

“Why don’t we all sit down?” Titus led Noel to the couch.

“Dad headed here?”

Titus nodded.

“Why is your dad coming here?” I asked dumbly, still watching my baby sister.

It had been so long since I’d seen her. Just like everything else I’d compartmentalized, I’d put away the ache of missing her into a small box in the back of my mind. Now that she was sitting just feet from me, that box was wide open. I couldn’t get enough of the sight of her. The long blonde hair, the slim shoulders, the wide brown eyes that tilted up a little in the corners, just like our mom’s. I could’ve stared at her all night.

“Why are you fighting with her?” Titus asked Noel quietly. “You missed her so much.”

“She lied,” Noel whispered back stiffly.

“I didn’t lie,” I interrupted, not bothering to pretend that I couldn’t hear them. “I never lied to you.”

“You left me!”

“Not by choice,” I shot back. “I didn’t have a choice!”

“You could’ve kept your clothes on.”

“You’re ridin’ the line, kid,” Otto growled.

“I’m not a kid,” Noel scoffed. “You’re like three years older than me. Shut up.”

“Knock it off, Noel,” I snapped, raising my voice a little. “Don’t talk to him like that.”

“Pretty sure I’m not hurting his feelings,” she mumbled.

“If I could’ve stayed, I would’ve.” I glanced at Otto. “No, that’s not true.”

Noel scoffed.

“If I could’ve told you that I was leaving, I would’ve,” I clarified, softening my voice. “I didn’t get a chance. You weren’t there when Mom made me pack a bag and they forced me to leave.”

“You could’ve left a note,” Noel argued. “Anything.”

Memories of that morning flashed through my mind. My dad standing in the doorway, telling us to hurry up. My mom pulling dresses out of the closet, neatly packing them into my suitcase. The dress I'd worn for Thanksgiving hanging over the back of my desk chair. Noel's bed, neatly made across the room from mine.

"I didn't have a chance," I said, my voice nearly a whisper. "It happened really fast."

"So, you just came here," she replied, shaking her head. "You could've come and seen me. You could've—"

"No, she couldn't," Otto said flatly, cutting her off.

"They sent me away," I continued, keeping my voice as level as I could. "Dad drove me out to a cabin in the woods with no electricity or running water. He left me there."

"He wouldn't do that," she argued stubbornly.

"It's true," Titus cut in. "She's telling the truth."

"You knew?" Noel spun to face him, glaring.

"Not until later." He looked up at Otto. "Not until Otto brought her back."

"When was that?" Noel looked at each of us. "When did you go get her?"

"Almost two weeks ago," Otto replied.

"No." Noel shook her head. She got to her feet, her hands fisted at her sides. "No. You've been gone since *Thanksgiving*. That doesn't make any sense."

I watched, my chest aching as my baby sister came to the same conclusions about my parents that had taken me weeks to come to terms with. Dad wasn't worth the title, and Mom, well, she would blindly follow his lead if he jumped off a cliff and told her to follow.

"Why would they *do* that?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"Because I didn't live up to the picture they wanted the church to see," I guessed. "Because I embarrassed them."

“Because they’re fuckin’ nut jobs,” Otto muttered under his breath.

“Where were you?” Noel asked accusingly. “You only went to get her two weeks ago. So, where were *you* that whole time?”

“Lookin’ for your sister,” Otto replied.

“How did you find her?”

“Coincidence,” Otto said flatly, shooting me a warning glance not to explain further.

“Mom and Dad still think I’m at the cabin,” I told Noel quietly. “We haven’t told them yet.”

“Mom and Dad think you’re dead,” Noel argued, glaring.

“No, they don’t.”

“They do.”

“Why would they think that?” I shook my head. That didn’t make any sense. Aunt Lacey and Uncle Hank had seen me the day before Otto found me. I glanced up at Otto in confusion and the breath caught in my throat at the guilt in his eyes.

“I’ll explain later.”

“You’ll explain now,” I replied hoarsely.

“Give us a minute,” Otto snapped at his brother. “Stay there.”

“We’re not goin’ anywhere,” Titus replied, raising his hands in surrender.

“Yeah, sorry if I don’t take you at your word.” He ushered me into the kitchen and stood there silently, using both hands to smooth his hair back from his forehead.

“Why do my parents think I’m dead?” I asked softly, watching his face. I knew the minute that he decided to tell the truth.

“We blew up the cabin.”

“You what?”

“Quiet,” he hissed, glancing toward the living room.

“Why would you do that?”

“Better if they thought that you used the phone and the guns were destroyed,” he explained, reaching for me. “Than them realizing that we’d found them and took you with us.”

“Better for who? My family thinks I’m *dead*. They—they must’ve been frantic.” My mind raced.

“Your parents are the ones that rigged that shit to blow,” Otto snapped. “Who gives a fuck if they think they got what they wanted?”

I jerked backward as if he’d slapped me.

“We needed the time, sugar,” Otto said, softening his tone. “We needed to make sure you were protected.”

“You needed to make sure we were *married*,” I replied, realization dawning.

“Protected, yes.”

I stared blankly at the dish rag I’d left hanging over the kitchen faucet. The instant wedding, not being able to call my parents, staying in the house all week, it all made sense. I’d been hidden away. Again.

“Did you get the guns out of the floorboard, at least?” I asked emotionlessly.

“Yes.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“Otto,” his dad called from the living room. “Where you at?”

“Go,” I ordered, waving my hand at him. “Good luck getting Noel to keep her mouth shut.”

“Esther,” Otto murmured, reaching for me.

“It’s not like you can cover up her disappearance,” I continued, taking a step backward. “They’d notice if *she* wasn’t there.”

“There you are,” Tommy grumbled from behind me. “This is a clusterfuck.”

“I’m aware,” Otto said in frustration.

“Your brother’s fuckin’ dead.”

“Did you really think he could keep his mouth shut?” Otto asked. “We were workin’ on borrowed time.”

“Got some news.” Tommy glanced at me. “We’ll discuss it after we figure this bullshit out.”

I followed them numbly back into the living room where Noel was quietly talking to Titus. They were holding hands.

“Hey, I’m Tommy, Titus’s pop,” Tommy said, reaching out to shake Noel’s hand. “Otto’s, too.”

“Noel,” she replied, glancing at me. “Esther’s sister.”

“I can see that.” He glanced between us. “Strong genes.”

“What’s going on here?” Noel asked, raising her chin. I was secretly impressed at her courage.

“Well, now, that’s complicated.”

My baby sister scoffed. Maybe she wasn’t as sheltered as I’d originally thought.

“Your parents stashed your sister out in a cabin about forty-five minutes from here, you knew that?” Tommy said, watching her closely.

“Well, I do *now*.”

“Right.” If I didn’t know better, I would’ve thought Tommy’s lips twitched in amusement. “Well, we went and got her. Nobody should be livin’ like that, especially not pregnant. She’s livin’ with Otto now. Married.”

“That doesn’t explain why my parents think she’s dead,” Noel replied flatly. “That they’ve thought she was dead for almost two weeks.”

“Can’t help you with that, sweetheart,” Tommy said, shrugging. “As you can see, she’s just fine. Livin’ with her husband and gettin’ ready for the baby.”

It was impressive how neatly he'd dodged and given just enough information for the situation to seem plausible.

"Why didn't you call them?" Noel asked, looking at me. "You haven't even told them you're married."

"I—" Clearing my throat, I glanced at Otto. "They left me, Noel. I didn't think they'd care."

The lie felt like dirt in my mouth, but I didn't want my little sister caught up in whatever Otto's club was doing. She didn't need to know any of the details, not when she was going to have to go right back to my parents.

"Where do they think you are?" I asked, my heart pounding. There was no way they knew she'd gone somewhere with Titus, and if they found out, she would be in so much trouble. The memory of my dad's fists made my stomach clench.

"The library." She checked her watch. "For another hour."

I let out the breath I'd been holding.

"We'd really appreciate—" Tommy began.

"No need," I murmured, cutting him off as realization hit. "There's no way she can tell them that I'm fine, because she was *never here*."

Noel swallowed and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm right," I said flatly.

She nodded. "You have to tell them, Esther," she said, her jaw clenched. "Mom was—you just have to tell them, okay?"

"I will."

"When?"

"Soon."

"We need to get you back to the library," Titus interrupted. "You don't want to be late."

Without a word, Noel shot toward me, wrapping her arms around my torso, her forehead pressed against my neck. "I'm so glad you're okay," she whispered.

“I missed you,” I replied, my eyes watering as I kissed her hair.

There was a good chance that I wouldn’t see her again for a very long time. Even after my parents found out I was still alive, there was no way they’d let her visit me, not when I was married to Otto. She was sixteen. She wouldn’t even be a legal adult for two more years and who knew if she’d be brave enough to try then.

“I’ll come back,” she whispered, reading my mind. “I promise. Titus will bring me.”

She seemed very sure of that and suddenly I was very sure that this wasn’t the first time she’d snuck off with Otto’s little brother.

“You need to be careful,” I warned, pulling away from her.

I’d been deliberately refusing to believe that my dad would try to blow me up. I couldn’t accept it. But as I stared at my little sister, the truth hit me in the face like a bucket of cold water. He *had* planted those explosives and if he’d done that to me, she wasn’t safe.

“Don’t do anything that’ll get you into trouble.”

Noel rolled her eyes.

“Promise, Noel,” I said sharply, my hands digging into her shoulders. “Promise.”

“I promise,” she gasped, yanking away from me.

I looked at Titus, rage simmering under my skin. “Stay away from her.”

Titus’s eyes widened.

“Get her back to the library, son,” Tommy ordered.

“I love you.” Noel threw her arms around me again and hugged tightly before letting go almost as quickly.

“I love you, too.”

“Name your baby after me, okay?” She grinned, even though her eyes were filling with tears.

“I will.”

“I love you,” she called again over her shoulder as she and Titus passed through the front door.

As soon as the door closed behind them a gut-wrenching sob escaped my mouth.

“Esther?” Otto called, stepping toward me.

“She’s alright, bud,” Tommy murmured, wrapping an arm around my shoulders as I gasped, struggling to control my breathing.

“Doesn’t look like it,” Otto shot back.

“She just had to send her sister back to that nest of vipers,” Tommy replied, rubbing my back. “And I think that’s sinkin’ in. Give her a minute.”

“They tried to blow me up,” I said, straightening as I glanced up at my father-in-law. “They actually tried to kill me.”

“Glad to see you’ve caught up.” Tommy grimaced. “Sorta.”

“It’s not safe for them to know you’re okay,” Otto said, sitting down with a sigh. “You get that now?”

“You think they’ll come after me?” Why? “I was just collateral damage, right? To make sure you couldn’t get your stuff back.”

“That’s what we’re thinkin’, yeah,” Tommy replied, giving me a little shove toward Otto, who was looking a bit worse for wear. “But better safe than sorry.”

“She won’t say anything,” I choked out, sitting next to Otto. His arm shot out instantly and jerked me against his side.

“Gonna have a word with Titus,” Tommy said gruffly. “Playin’ with fire is one thing, puttin’ your girl in that kind of danger is somethin’ else.”

“His girl? You think?”

“Titus wouldn’t have went against my dad for anythin’ less,” Otto explained, kissing the side of my head. “He knows better.”

Tommy was watching me like he was trying to decide something, and finally gave an almost undetectable nod. “We found the rest of the shipment,” he announced, sitting down in the recliner. “It’s at the warehouse. Didn’t find it the first time because the boys stopped lookin’ once they got our call.”

“What warehouse?” I shut my mouth at Tommy’s look.

“You’re not here, honey,” he informed me before looking back at Otto. “We can either try and go in and get ’em or wait longer until they try and move ’em and get ’em back then.”

“Let me know when and where,” Otto replied. “I’m there.”

“You got Esther a phone?”

I pulled it out of my pocket. “Fancy one,” I confirmed.

Tommy huffed out a laugh. “Good. You really think your sister will keep her mouth shut?”

“I don’t know how she could say anything without getting herself in trouble,” I confirmed. “And one thing you learn early in my family is to stay *out* of trouble.”

“*You* didn’t,” Tommy replied dryly.

“Extenuating circumstances,” I muttered, my cheeks heating.

“Well, we’ll deal with it if she talks,” he said with a sigh, getting to his feet. “I’m gonna head out so I can meet Titus at the house.”

“Smack him once for me,” Otto snapped, getting to his feet and pulling me with him.

“You’re going to hit him?” I blurted, glancing between them.

“I should,” Tommy said, moving toward the door. “Told him I *would*.” He smiled ruefully at me over his shoulder. “Heather would lose her mind if I did, though, so probably not.”

I let out a breath of relief after he'd left.

"Be better if Dad did it," Otto said, stomping toward the kitchen. "If I get my hands on him, he's gonna wish it was our dad."

"Because he told Noel that I was *alive*?" I asked dubiously, following him. "Don't you think she deserved to know? She doesn't have anything to do with any of this."

"Because he was told to keep his motherfuckin' mouth shut," Otto growled, his back to me as he tossed his keys across the room.

I jumped in surprise and stopped a few feet from him.

"She's a part of this now," he said, turning to face me. "You know that, right? Before, she was clueless. Now, she knows you're here. So, say she doesn't talk—but somewhere down the line, your parents find out she never said anything. Especially after we get those guns back?"

I inhaled sharply at the implications.

"Right," he spat, pushing his fingers against his forehead. "She does say somethin', what's to stop your psycho ass father from showin' up here tomorrow while I'm at work. What are you gonna do if that happens?"

"I won't answer the door."

"You think that's gonna stop him?"

"I think Titus loves her," I said, refusing to go down that hypothetical road with him. "How was he supposed to let her believe that her sister was dead when she isn't?"

"I love *you*. He's my brother, and he fucked you over," he snapped back, his voice rising with every word. "Lettin' Noel believe you were dead didn't put either of you in danger."

"You love me?" It was the only part of his sentence that fully registered. "When did you decide that?"

"Fuck," he hissed, digging his fingers into his eye sockets. "Now, I guess."

“Are you sure?” I asked quietly, watching as he braced one hand on the counter.

“The fact that I could’ve killed my little brother when he showed up tonight was a pretty clear indication,” he muttered. “Jesus, sorry.”

He hurried past me and less than a minute later, I could hear him getting sick in the bathroom under the stairs.

I didn’t have time to contemplate the fact that he’d just told me he loved me and then vomited because as I hurried toward the bathroom, I heard a loud thump. “Otto?” I knocked tentatively on the door. “Otto, are you okay?”

No answer. I knocked louder.

“Are you sick?” I called, raising my voice. “Otto?”

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I found Heather’s number in my contacts.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Heather—”

“Esther,” Heather said in realization. “Hey, honey. This your new number?”

“Otto was throwing up,” I said quickly, still trying to push the bathroom door. “And then he fell or something and I can’t get the door open.”

“Where is he?” Heather asked.

“In the bathroom.”

“Sit tight, I’ll be right there.”

My hands shook as I put the phone back in my pocket.

“Otto?” I called again, resting my head against the door. “Please answer me.”

CHAPTER 16

OTTO

“*F*UCK,” I GROANED. “Hold on.”

“Otto, you don’t answer me, I’m kickin’ in the door,” my brother Micky yelled.

“Don’t bust my door,” I yelled back, the pain in my head almost bringing me to my knees again.

“Open it,” he snapped.

Holding on to the counter, I reached out and unlocked the door, letting him swing it open.

“Fuck,” he said, getting a good look at me.

“Yeah, no shit,” I whispered, squinting against the light.

“Bad one?”

“Worst I’ve had in a while,” I muttered as he helped me out of the bathroom.

“Scared the shit outta Esther,” he said as he walked me toward the kitchen. He’d thankfully dimmed the lights.

“She okay?” I asked, panic tightening my chest. “How long was I out?”

“Long enough,” he murmured. “She’s fine.”

“Otto,” Esther said, coming out of the kitchen. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I whispered as her arms came around me, holding me tight. “Sorry I scared ya.”

“I didn’t know what happened.” She sounded like she was crying, but I couldn’t see her face and it was taking every ounce of willpower I had to stay on my feet. My head felt like it was going to explode. “I called your mom. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s fine,” I replied, looking up to see my mom and Myla at the table.

“You look like shit,” Myla announced sympathetically.

“Found your pills,” my mom said, coming toward me with a glass of water. “You wanna take them now or wait until you’re in bed?”

The events of the night came into clear focus, and if I was steady on my feet, I would’ve hit something. “Can’t take ’em,” I replied. I started to shake my head but stopped at the piercing pain in my skull. “They’ll knock me out.”

“Take them,” Esther ordered, pulling away. “You can barely stand up.”

“Titus,” I muttered, closing my eyes as Micky’s arm came back around me, holding me steady. “Esther’s sister. Can’t be down in case—”

“I don’t think you have a choice, son,” my mom said flatly. “You’re no good to anyone like this.”

“Shit.” My dad’s voice came from behind me. “How long’s he been like this?”

“Esther called me twenty minutes ago,” my mom answered. “He won’t take his pills.”

“Knock me out,” I mumbled again. Damn it, I just wanted to sit down. My stomach churned and I could feel sweat breaking out all over my body.

“I can’t stay,” Micky said apologetically. “Don’t wanna leave Emilia and Rhett home alone with everythin’ that’s goin’ on.”

“We’ll take ’em home with us,” my dad replied.

“Not ridin’ in a car,” I argued, opening my eyes. The only thing I could think of that would make the migraine worse would be sitting in a moving vehicle. I gagged.

“No choice,” my dad replied.

“This is a migraine?” Esther asked skeptically. “Are you sure we shouldn’t take him to the hospital?”

“He’s had them since he was little,” my mom replied, reaching out to rub her back. “All he needs are his pills and to sleep it off. Promise.”

“Can you go pack whatever you two will need for the night?” my dad asked her gently. “I’ll load him into Heather’s rig.”

“*You* will?” Micky asked jokingly as he started leading me to the front door. “I’d like to see you hold his huge ass up.”

“Shut it,” my dad shot back.

Esther reluctantly followed us to the door and then turned and hurried up the stairs.

“Perfect fuckin’ night for this to happen,” I muttered as the cool night air hit my face. “Jesus.”

“Could’ve picked a better one,” Dad agreed. “No worries, bud. You guys can stay with us tonight.”

“You talk to Titus?” I asked as Micky helped me into the front seat.

“Worry about that tomorrow.”

“They could show up here when I’m at work.” Closing my eyes, I leaned back against the seat.

“Here,” my mom said, shoving a plastic bag at me. “For when you puke.”

“Not pukin’ in the car.” That was all Esther needed after the night she’d had—watching me hurl my guts up while she was stuck in a small space with me.

“We’ll see,” my mom replied. “Open.”

I took the pills she shoved into my mouth without complaint. By that point, knowing Esther was safe, I was willing to do anything to stop the excruciating pain.

The car door shut, and I listened in a daze as they all talked outside the car. A few minutes later, Esther and Myla climbed in the back seat, and my mom got behind the wheel.

“Brace yourself,” she said sympathetically, patting my knee.

The car ride to my parents’ house was as miserable as I’d imagined. I puked twice, barely making it into the plastic bag the first time. My shirt was wet with sweat as Micky helped me back out of the SUV, and I couldn’t even look at Esther as he helped me into the house. We’d been married for a week and she was already seeing me at my worst. Fucking fantastic. I would’ve been really embarrassed if I’d been able to focus on anything except my head.

I lifted my arms like a child as Micky helped me strip to my underwear so I could climb into bed. The familiar smell of my parents’ house was soothing, and I relaxed as much as I could into the pillow.

“Sleep,” Esther whispered, kissing my shoulder.

Then I was down for the count.

I woke up the next morning with Esther curled up against my back and my mouth tasting so rancid that I could’ve puked again. Slowly sitting up, I gave myself a minute to make sure the headache was gone before stumbling to the bathroom. It always took at least twenty-four hours to get back to one hundred percent if I took my migraine medicine and it didn’t look like that day was going to be any different. After using the toilet, I stared at myself in the mirror. I really did look like shit. Brushing my teeth and washing my face helped, though, and a few minutes later, I was back in the bedroom.

Esther was already up and dressed when I got there.

“How are you feeling?” she asked quietly from the side of the bed.

“Better,” I rasped. My throat was sore after all the puking. Shit, I’d puked in the car. “Sorry about that.”

“Why are you apologizing? You can’t help it if you’re sick.”

“Still pretty fuckin’ gross,” I countered.

“Well,” she huffed, shrugging a little. “You love me, so I guess I can overlook it.”

I startled. That’s right, I told her I loved her. In the worst possible way. Fucking fantastic.

“Fucked that one up, didn’t I?” I asked, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Not sure how you could mess up telling someone you loved them,” she said, smiling.

“How *I* did it,” I clarified, moving into the room. “Should’ve bought you flowers or somethin’ first.”

“Well, I love you, too,” she said. “So I think it turned out okay.”

I froze. “When did you decide that?”

“Oh, sometime between when you collapsed in the bathroom and throwing your puke bag away last night,” she said conversationally, watching me closely.

“Jesus,” I muttered under my breath.

“There’s something about seeing someone vulnerable,” she continued quietly. “It really brings things into focus.”

“You love me because I passed out inside a locked bathroom like an asshole?”

“No.” She snickered. “I realized that I loved you when you passed out in a locked bathroom like a—a butthole.”

I smiled at her refusal to swear.

“I think I started loving you a little when you gave me my slippers after the wedding.”

“Those fucking slippers.” I shook my head. “You’re a weird woman.”

“They were thoughtful,” she argued, waving me off. “But I think what sealed it—” Her voice grew hoarse, and she swallowed hard. “I think I really started when you snapped at me last night after the grocery store and apologized for it as soon as we got home.”

“I was a dick.”

“You apologized,” she said softly, emphasizing the words. “You knew almost immediately that you’d been unkind and said you were sorry.”

“Hell, I’m unkind a lot.”

“Are you really arguing with me about whether I love you or not?”

“I was ordered to marry you,” I blurted, uncomfortable with the way she was looking at me.

“What?”

“Straight from the top,” I confirmed. “I was ordered to marry you.”

“Oh,” she breathed, looking away from me. “Do you regret it?”

“No,” I choked out. Why the fuck had I told her that? I was such a fucking idiot.

“I just have one more question. No, two.”

“Go ahead.” My heart beat in my ears. What the fuck had I just done?

“Do you always follow orders, no matter what?”

“Yes.” The word was practically torn from my throat.

Esther nodded before looking at me again. “If they’d told you to kill me, would you?”

“No!” I stared at her in horror.

“So, maybe you wouldn’t *always* follow orders,” she said softly, her eyes on mine.

“I’d never hurt you,” I continued as she got to her feet. “I’d kill anyone that tried. Period.”

“I know,” she said with a sigh, sliding her arms around my waist.

“I probably wouldn’t have married you right away, though,” I confessed, wrapping my arms around her. “But

eventually—”

“And I probably would’ve told you about the baby... eventually,” she countered in a whisper. “Or maybe my parents would’ve found me a husband and you would’ve never known.”

The truth of that statement hit me straight in the solar plexus. Neither of us had been in control of the situation, no matter how much we would’ve preferred it otherwise.

We were quiet for a while, and I assumed that, just like me, she was thinking about all the different things that had happened, leading us to that point. Decisions made by other people, circumstances beyond our control, but also the decisions *we’d* made.

“Some day,” I said, pressing my lips against the top of her head. “You’ll have to tell me why the hell you decided to hook up with me at that party.”

“When I figure it out, I’ll let you know,” she replied ruefully.

“Thank God you did.” I smiled.

“God, huh?”

“Shh,” I said, pressing her face back against my chest. “Just enjoy the moment.”

“You really scared me last night,” she replied, tipping her head back. “Do you get migraines a lot?”

“Not a lot.”

“Do you know why they happen?”

“There’s a few different reasons. I’m guessin’ last night was stress.”

“That makes sense.”

“You think your sister will tell your parents?” I asked her again.

“I doubt it.”

“Oh, good, you’re up,” my mom said from the doorway. “Hungry? I made pancakes.”

“I’m hungry,” Esther replied, leaning around me.

“Well, come on,” my mom ordered, walking away.

Esther pulled out a pair of sweatpants that I was pretty sure I’d never worn before and I pulled them on with a T-shirt before following her to the kitchen. Mom was the only one home since it was a fucking Tuesday and everyone else was either at school or work.

“Fuck, I need to get to the garage,” I muttered as I dropped onto a stool at the bar.

Mom laughed. “Yeah, right. You’ve got the day off, turbo.”

“Did someone grab my phone last night?”

“It’s in my purse,” Esther said, hurrying back out of the kitchen.

“Dad said to keep your eyes open,” Mom said quietly after Esther was out of earshot. “There’s been some movement this morning, and he thinks that whatever’s going to happen will happen soon.”

“Here you go,” Esther called as I nodded at mom.

“Thanks, sugar,” I said, grabbing the phone from her. No missed calls.

I drank coffee with breakfast like I’d never have it again, and about three cups later, I was feeling mostly human again. I needed to be on my game if the Sons of Calgary were going to be moving those guns. I also needed to figure out how I was going to keep Esther safe now that her sister knew she was alive and living with me. A plan formed as Esther and my mom talked quietly about the doctor appointment she’d set up.

“Hey, Ma.”

“Hey, Otto,” she replied jokingly.

“Can Esther hang here with you while I work?”

“You’re going to work?” Esther asked in surprise.

“Of course,” my mom answered at the same time. “I’d enjoy the company.”

“Thanks.” I turned to Esther. “I need to go in.”

“Can you run me home first?” she asked apologetically. “I packed clothes for you last night, but I forgot to get anything for me.”

I glanced at my phone. Still nothing. “Sure.”

We borrowed my mom’s SUV and agreed that Esther would drive it back over to my parents’ house after she’d changed and got ready for the day. I felt the tension leave my shoulders, knowing that she’d be safe over there while I went to the club and got an update on what was happening. I knew I could call, but I was pretty sure my dad would blow me off, knowing that I probably still wasn’t feeling great.

“It’ll only take me a few minutes,” Esther assured me as I parked in front of the house.

“All good, baby,” I replied, scanning the property as I followed her out of the car and up the porch steps. Nothing seemed out of place, but I didn’t like being exposed. I stood at Esther’s back as she keyed in the lock code and hurried her inside once the door was open.

As she took off her shoes and set down her purse, I hurried through the house. I didn’t have time to check the basement, so I locked the door instead before jogging up the stairs. The house was empty.

“What are you doing?” Esther asked curiously as I closed the nursery door.

“Just checkin’ to make sure there’s no surprises,” I replied easily. “Go ahead and get ready, baby. I’m gonna put on some real pants.”

“Those are real pants.”

“These are pajamas,” I countered, leading her into our bedroom.

“I wanted you to be comfortable.”

“Thank you. They’re very comfortable, but I’m gonna put on some jeans.”

Esther huffed out a laugh.

She left me to get ready in the bathroom, and I was sitting on the bed pulling on some clean socks when the hair at the back of my neck prickled. I couldn’t hear anything except Esther moving around in the bathroom, but I still got quietly to my feet and pulled the pistol out of my top dresser drawer, silently double-checking it was loaded.

I moved through the house slow and steady, checking each of the rooms again. None of them were disturbed, and I was almost positive that no one had been in our house. Then I remembered that I hadn’t checked the fucking basement.

I slid through the kitchen in my socks, trying not to make any noise. Unlocking the door, I threw it open and flipped on the light, grateful that I’d changed the bulb when Esther moved in. I couldn’t see anyone, but I hurried down the stairs anyway, just to make sure.

I was at the bottom of the stairs when the living room window shattered with a loud boom and Esther started yelling for me from upstairs.

I’ve never run so fast in my life.

I was out of the basement and through the kitchen in seconds.

Someone had thrown a pipe bomb through the window, and the fucking couch was on fire.

“Otto,” Esther yelled, panicked. “What was that?”

“Come here, baby,” I yelled back. “Be careful on the stairs, but hurry, yeah?”

I moved toward the windows, staying out of eyesight of anyone outside. She’d probably be safer upstairs, but I couldn’t leave her up there when the goddamn house was about to go up in flames.

I couldn’t see anyone out the window, but I could feel whoever it was out there. Waiting.

Pulling out my phone, I cursed as it rang.

“How you feelin’, son?” my dad answered on the third ring.

“Someone just threw a pipe bomb through my front window,” I said quietly, waving Esther toward me and shoving her behind my back. “Me and Esther are sittin’ ducks and my couch is on fire.”

“Jesus Christ,” he spat. “Hold tight. I’ll send anyone close.”

“Don’t have to tell you—”

“Five minutes at most,” he spit. “Even if I have to call the fuckin’ cops.”

“Otto,” Esther murmured, gripping the waistband of my jeans as she coughed. “We need to get out of here.”

“Down on the floor, sugar,” I ordered, pushing her back toward the bathroom.

She was shaking as I helped her sit down.

“What’s happening?” she rasped, clutching at me.

“Not sure yet.” I looked around the room. The smoke wasn’t bad yet, but any minute the couch was going to really start burning and then I’d have to get her the fuck out of there. Where the hell were the people my dad was sending?

Something hit the side of the house with a loud thump, and Esther jumped.

I couldn’t wait.

“Stay right here,” I ordered, kissing her hard. “Don’t move.”

“I won’t,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around her knees.

“I’ll be right back.”

I crouched, running toward the stairs, and quickly opened the door to the spare room. There was no way I could look out the front window without showing my face to whoever was

watching, but there was a good chance I could see them out the upstairs window.

Sure enough, I could see someone messing around in the front seat of a car that was parked just off the driveway near the trees. As he turned, I realized he was talking to someone just out of eyesight. Just two people? I couldn't be sure but there was no use waiting to find out. We were running out of time.

I found Esther where I'd left her, wide-eyed and rocking a little.

"Hey, we gotta move," I told her quietly, pulling her to her feet. "Stay low, okay?"

She nodded, and then we were hustling toward the kitchen. There was a big window in there but since they hadn't sent anything through that one, I figured they were staying at the front of the house for some reason. Probably so they could bail quickly if they needed to.

"We're goin' fast," I whispered to Esther at the back door, brushing the hair out of her face. "Straight to the garage door, yeah?"

"Okay," she replied shakily. "I'm scared."

"Remember what I said?" I asked gently. "I'll kill anyone that tries to hurt you."

The ten feet between the house and the garage were the longest and most gut-wrenching ten feet of my life. Every second, I was waiting for someone to take a shot at us, but miraculously, I got the door unlocked and Esther inside without incident.

I hurried to the new garage door opener and quickly disconnected it.

"Driver's side," I ordered, pushing Esther toward the Mustang. "You can drive a stick, right?"

"Of course," she said distractedly as she climbed in.

I reached in and moved the seat forward, crouching next to her.

“I’m gonna go over to the door,” I told her, putting the keys in her hand. “The minute I get there, I want you to start the car. The second the door is open, I want you to back out of here like the garage is on fire.”

“No—”

“You drive like hell,” I continued, ignoring the way she shook her head. “Don’t stop for anythin’, Esther. *Not a goddamn thing*. You go straight to my parents’ house. Someone gets in your way, you *run the motherfucker over*.”

“Where should I stop so you can get in?” she asked breathlessly.

“Don’t stop.”

“Otto—”

“I’ll take care of shit here, sugar. You go. Don’t stop.”

“I can’t just leave you here,” she argued.

I leaned forward and kissed her, setting my hand on her belly. We didn’t have time to argue.

“I’ll meet you at my parents’ place,” I told her, getting to my feet.

“Otto.” She scrambled toward me, trying to grab anything she could reach.

“I’ll be there soon,” I assured her, locking the door before I closed it in her face.

Straightening fully, I strode toward the door and made eye contact with her in the side mirror.

The Mustang fired up, and I bent down and threw the sliding door open.

I didn’t watch as she flew out of the garage, just stepped outside, my pistol up. Someone was standing close to the front door of the house and I fired at him, moving forward.

Gravel sprayed and I barely glanced toward the Mustang as it skidded backward. Esther hadn’t been lying when she

said she could drive a stick. She was in first before I could blink and was flying down the driveway.

The man by the house finally went down, and I spun, looking for the other one. He was running toward the Mustang. It clipped him as Esther flew right past.

Good girl.

I ran toward him, and I was almost there when the roar of Harley pipes filled the air.

CHAPTER 17

ESTHER

I TRIED REALLY hard to follow Otto's directions, even though everything inside me told me to wait for him, but as I turned out onto the road going way too fast, I saw the motorcycles coming toward me. They weren't in their lane.

Panicking, I swerved hard. Straight into the ditch.

I came to a jarring stop, biting my tongue in the process.

The motorcycles passed, turning into our driveway, and I let out a small sob of relief. They'd help Otto.

I nearly peed my pants when a gloved fist started pounding on my window.

"Hey, you okay?" the man yelled, yanking at the door.

He was wearing the same kind of vest that Otto wore. *Friend.*

"I'm okay," I called back, fumbling with my seat belt and reaching for the lock at the same time.

"You sure?" he asked, throwing open the door. The car was sitting at a weird angle, and he had to stand against the door to keep it from closing again. "You're bleedin'."

"I'm okay," I repeated, scrambling out of the car. I wiped at my forehead and cheeks, assuming I must've smacked my face and hadn't realized it. "You have to help Otto. He's at the house—" I stopped, my eyes widening in horror as I realized I'd sprayed the front of his vest and flannel with blood.

"Whoa," he murmured as I stumbled. "You're alright. Let me see your mouth."

"Otto," I repeated, pulling away. "You need to help Otto."

"He's got all the help he needs, sweetheart," the man replied. "Trust me on that. Now I need to know why you're

bleeding.”

I stared over his shoulder at our driveway as I opened my mouth wide so he could look inside.

“Damn,” he said, pulling a black bandana out of his pocket. “You cut the hell outta your tongue and lip. Here, put some pressure on it.”

I nodded and pressed the bandana against my mouth as I pushed past him. He stayed close to my side as we crossed the road and held me back until he was sure that it was safe for me to go closer. When the house came into sight, my breath caught in my throat. You could see the flames coming through the living room window.

“Shit,” the man muttered as we got closer.

A few of the men were dealing with the guys who’d attacked us, but the rest of them were running in and out of the house. Otto turned away from his uncle Will as I reached them, and cursed.

“What the hell are you doin’ here?” he asked gruffly. “Fuck, you’re bleedin’!”

“I bit my tongue,” I replied, hysterical laughter bubbling out of my mouth. “I wrecked your car.” My voice broke on the last word.

“And we’re glad you did,” Will said dryly. “Rather than plow into us like a bowling ball.”

“Shit, Esther,” Otto murmured, pulling me into his arms. “Is that it? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I sniffled. “I wasn’t going that fast.”

“You sure as shit were,” the man who’d helped me argued.

“You stopped for her?” Otto asked.

“Of course.”

“Thanks, Hulk.”

“No way his parents named him that,” I whispered to myself, making the men chuckle.

“It’s Cameron,” the man clarified. “Nice to meet you, Esther.”

I jerked as something crashed behind me and spun to face the house.

“We have to call the fire department,” I gasped, watching as Otto’s brother Micky used the garden hose to spray water through the window.

“Can’t,” Will said simply, glancing toward the attackers’ car.

Bile rose in my throat as I realized that a couple of the Aces were putting bodies into the trunk.

“We—I—” I stuttered to a stop.

“They were tryin’ to burn down our house while we were inside,” Otto reminded me, pulling me back against him. “Forget them.”

“I knew him,” I replied faintly, remembering the look on Japeth’s face as I’d raced past him. “He went to my church.”

“We know,” Will replied.

I didn’t turn around when someone drove the car off our property, just watched as Micky tried to fight what looked like a losing battle. It wasn’t until Rumi came stumbling around the side of the house that I realized he’d been fighting the fire from inside the house.

“Someone’s gonna have to switch with me,” he croaked, coughing. “I need a minute.”

Otto left me with his uncle as he ran around the house to take Rumi’s place.

A few minutes later, Heather arrived.

“Jesus Christ,” she snapped, jogging toward me. “What happened to your face?”

“Guessin’ you saw the Mustang in the ditch?” Will asked with a grunt.

“You crashed the Mustang?”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t even pretend like I cared. Not when two men had come to hurt us and my husband of a week had killed them and now our house was burning down. After all that I’d been through in the last four months, I would’ve thought that I’d be ready for anything, but the sad reality was that I felt like I was drowning.

“How did you get here when your rig’s—” Will pointed to where Heather’s SUV had been moved into the grass.

“Titus drove me,” Heather replied.

That’s when I saw Otto’s little brother, hanging back from the group, absolutely devastated.

“Hey Titus,” I called. I wanted to smile at him, but I was pretty sure that it came out like more of a grimace. He walked toward me, his steps dragging through the gravel.

“This is my fault, isn’t it?” he rasped, close to tears. “I fucked up.”

“You didn’t throw a bomb through the window,” I pointed out reasonably as I grabbed his hand.

“I brought Noel here,” he replied, watching as smoke billowed out the front window.

“They could’ve found us a different way,” I argued, squeezing his hand.

“I don’t think so.” There was something in his voice that made my insides clench as if expecting a blow.

“Why?”

Titus looked at the ground like he couldn’t meet my eyes. “Noel didn’t come to school today,” he whispered.

“Fuck,” Will barked, making Titus and I jerk in surprise. “We gotta go!”

“No.” I looked around for Heather but she was already moving toward us.

“Fire’s almost out!” Micky yelled back. “Ten more minutes!”

“Can’t wait,” Will yelled back, jogging toward him. “Meet us back at the club. *Everyone*, understand? Full lockdown.”

The men who’d been moving around the house, running here and there helping where they could suddenly headed for their motorcycles.

“Mom,” Micky yelled.

“I’m calling Emilia now!” she yelled back, pulling out her phone as she reached us.

“I’ll have Nova pick Myla up when she goes to get Bird,” Rumi said from where he was sitting in the grass.

“What’s a lockdown?” I asked Titus quietly.

“Everyone goes to the club,” he explained. “Even the families.”

“But why?”

“To keep us safe.”

The motorcycles fired up, one by one, and within a few minutes, the only people left at the house were Otto’s mom and brothers.

“It’s out,” Otto rasped, shaking his head as he came out the front door. “Thank Christ.”

I dropped Titus’s hand and headed toward him, but he stopped me as I got to the edge of the porch steps.

“It’s a fuckin’ mess in there, sugar,” he warned. “Don’t want you walkin’ around, just in case.”

“Good chance you’ll end up in the basement,” Micky huffed.

“Don’t worry,” Otto said as he met me in the gravel. “We can fix it.”

“Bishop can fix it,” Rumi called tiredly. “But, same shit, really.”

I couldn’t even cry. There was still smoke everywhere, and it stunk, and I had no idea when we’d be able to live in our

house again, but I couldn't focus on any of it. I leaned against Otto and let him support my weight.

"How's your mouth?" he asked as we moved toward his family.

"It's fine."

"You've got a hell of a fat lip."

"Lockdown starts now," his mom announced when we reached them. "Everyone's heading straight for the club."

"You got any idea what's goin' on?" Otto asked.

"No clue," she replied dryly. "Could have something to do with your house nearly burning down?"

"You got a hold of Emilia?" Micky asked.

"She was grabbing their bags and headed over," Heather confirmed. "She'll probably beat us there."

"Let's go," Rumi said, pushing himself up with a groan. "Nova's on her way as soon as she grabs Myla and Bird."

Titus was quiet as he strode back toward his car and left. It was as if he was trying his hardest to stay out of Otto's eyeline.

"I'm gonna grab the bike outta the garage," Otto told me, tossing his mom her keys. "You ride with Mom, and we'll follow you guys over."

"What about the Mustang?" I asked apologetically.

"I'm guessin' Uncle Will already called a prospect to bring the tow truck over and get it. Don't worry about it."

He helped me into the passenger seat, kissed me, and closed the door between us.

"Jesus, you two can't catch a break, can you?" Heather asked sympathetically as she reversed onto the driveway.

"I'm really tired," I replied, watching in the side mirror as Otto came out of the garage on his motorcycle.

Heather chuckled. "I bet. I'm tired and I'm not even pregnant. How's my grandchild doing?"

“Fine, I think,” I murmured as we left the house behind. I reached down and put my hand on my belly. I couldn’t feel the baby moving yet, but nothing *felt* wrong. I winced as we drove past the wrecked Mustang. “It’s probably good I wasn’t wearing a seat belt.”

“Good grief,” Heather snapped, looking at the car. “You weren’t wearing a seat belt when you did that?”

“I was distracted,” I mumbled with a sigh. “I braced both feet on the floorboard and my arms were locked because I was so scared. My belly never even touched the steering wheel.”

“Well, thank God for small mercies,” she replied, reaching out to pat my hand.

The club was a hive of activity when we got there. We had to wait in line at the gate as each car was checked and let through. By the time we pulled up to the clubhouse, there was very little parking and there were people everywhere. Moms were unloading cars and directing kids carrying sleeping bags and backpacks, men were closing the big garage bays and directing traffic, a couple of older ladies were helping where they could, holding babies and ushering little ones through the front door, and behind us more vehicles were finding places to park.

“Before we go in,” Heather said as she put the SUV in park. “A couple of things. One, there are a hell of a lot of people in there and with that comes a lot of squabbles and bullshit. Ignore it. Stay close to us, and you won’t accidentally step in shit. Two, Otto doesn’t have his own room so someone might tell you to find a corner to put your stuff. If they do, tell them to fuck off, that you’re staying in Tommy’s room. Alright? No way is my pregnant daughter-in-law sleeping on the fucking floor.”

“I don’t have any stuff,” I replied quietly. I wasn’t going to tell anyone to *fuck off*. Ever.

“Honey, didn’t you see them pulling your stuff out of the house? You and Otto have a couple of bags of clothes and who knows what else in the back.” She pointed with her thumb to the back of the SUV. “I can’t guarantee they got what you

actually need, because they're men, but they did grab some clothes."

"Oh." I looked back but couldn't see anything.

"Can't guarantee they got anything that matches, but you won't be naked."

I followed her out of the car and both of us wrinkled our noses when Heather opened the back hatch.

"Don't worry," she said, reaching for a duffel bag. "We've got a couple of industrial washers and dryers in the back. We'll get the smoke smell out."

Otto reached us and grabbed my suitcase and another bag, ushering us toward the building. It was even more chaotic inside. I'd thought that everyone from the club had shown up for our wedding, but there were easily twice as many people there for the lockdown. Otto didn't even pause to say hello to anyone as he strode toward the back hallway, with Heather and I following behind like a couple of ducklings.

Tommy and Heather's room was as warm and inviting as the last time I'd been there, and without waiting for an invitation, I dropped onto the edge of the bed.

"You set?" Otto asked, putting his hand on my cheek. "I gotta go check in and see what's happening."

"We're fine," Heather said from across the room. "Go."

"I'm good," I confirmed.

With a kiss, he was gone.

"Oh, and number three," Heather said dryly, looking at me over her shoulder. "Lockdowns are mind-numbingly boring. That's probably why everyone starts sniping at each other."

"This is some bullshit," Otto's aunt Rose announced as she came through the door. "I had shit to do today."

"Well, Esther had a pipe bomb thrown through her front window," Heather said in amusement. "So."

"No shit?" Rose asked, looking at me. "You okay?"

“I’m fine.”

“She also crashed the Mustang.”

“Otto’s baby?” Rose’s eyes widened as she laughed.
“Okay, tell me everything.”

The door was wide open so women and children flowed in and out, visiting and making sure I was okay for the next half an hour. Most of them I’d met, but there was a surprising amount that I hadn’t. It didn’t matter. Every single one asked if we were alright and told me to let them know if they could help in any way.

“They’re a good group,” Heather said, sitting on the floor, her legs stretched out in front of her with her legs crossed at the ankles. Rhett was driving tiny motorcycles over her knees like they were ramps.

“None of them can actually do shit,” Otto’s cousin Charlie said wryly. “But we can. I’m sure Bishop has already talked to Otto about fixing the house. Don’t stress. He’ll make it a priority.”

“How’s business?” Heather asked.

“His or mine?” Charlie asked, smiling. “Both are phenomenal. People always need coffee and homes.”

I tuned them out and rubbed absentmindedly at my back. Now that I was relaxing on Heather’s bed, my muscles were beginning to protest from the little accident I’d been in. My lower back, shoulders, arms, and legs were all starting to ache.

While I was thankful for the warm welcome I’d gotten, I was really worried about Otto. There were many women and children inside the clubhouse, but I didn’t see any of the men. I had a very strong suspicion that staying safe inside the gates didn’t apply to everyone.

About forty minutes after Otto left, he was back with his dad and brothers. As the family crowded into the little room, each man went to their spouse.

“Headin’ out, baby,” he told me, cupping my face as he gently rubbed his thumb over my bottom lip. I slid my hands

beneath his leather, gripping his sweatshirt in both fists.

“Where are you going?”

“To make sure that from now on you and baby are safe.”

“All of you?” I asked quietly, looking at each of the men, their faces close as they spoke quietly to their women.

“There’ll be some that stay behind,” Otto assured me. “They’ll make sure you guys are covered here.”

“You’re going to find my dad?” I knew the answer before I spoke, but I still needed verification.

I could see the indecision in Otto’s eyes clearly and I wondered if he’d actually lie to me before he finally nodded.

“Please be careful.” I took in the soot on his cheeks that he’d missed when he cleaned up, the strong jaw, the lips that looked firm but were so soft when he kissed me. It had only been weeks since we’d found each other again, but I couldn’t imagine life without him anymore. How in the world had that happened?

“I’ll be home soon,” he promised. “Hang with my mom. Get somethin’ to eat. Take a nap. Maybe I’ll crawl in with you when I get back.”

He leaned forward and kissed me carefully, setting his hand on my belly for just a moment.

“I love you,” I murmured against his lips.

“I love you, too,” he whispered back, pressing his forehead against mine. “Be back soon.” He rose to his feet.

All the men were moving away from their families, and my stomach twisted with fear. No one else seemed scared. My sisters-in-law were stoic. Heather was already playing with Rhett again.

“Otto,” I called when he’d almost reached the door.

“What’s up?”

I knew it wasn’t fair. I knew that whatever he was doing was dangerous. I was embarrassed and ashamed, but I couldn’t

hold back the words. “Don’t kill my dad.”

Otto held my eyes for a moment before nodding.

Then they were gone, and I thought my heart would beat out of my chest as I focused on breathing. I held myself as still as possible, an old trick I used as a child to keep myself from crying. The memory of my dad’s voice asking if I wanted him to *give me something to cry about* ringing in my ears.

The room was quiet except for Rhett’s motorcycle noise, and that’s when I realized that Nova and Emilia weren’t as unbothered as I’d originally thought.

“No use running it over and over in your mind,” Heather announced, closing her eyes as she rested her head against the wall. “It doesn’t help. Just makes you crazy.”

“Does it ever get easier?” Emilia asked with a huff.

“No,” Nova and Heather responded at the same time.

“Oh, yeah,” Emilia said, looking at Nova. “You grew up in the club, didn’t you?”

Nova nodded and cleared her throat. “Yeah.”

“Samson was a good man for a lot of years,” Heather said, opening her eyes to smile softly at Nova. She closed them again. “Watched Tommy’s back more than a few times.”

There was a story there, but I’d never ask what it was. I wouldn’t ever be the person that made Nova look like she did then—like she’d swallowed glass.

“So, how about a little family history for Esther,” Heather said, blindly reaching out to run her hand over Rhett’s hair. “Emilia, you go first. Tell her how you and Micky got together.”

Emilia snorted.

“The PG version, please.”

“I think we should start even earlier,” Emilia argued. “How did you and Tommy get together?”

Heather grinned. “That’s easy. I was best friends with his baby brother.”

“The original Micky,” Emilia told me and Nova with a smile.

“The original,” Heather mused. “Let’s just call him the older one, yeah? My baby’s an original, too.”

“That’s how you two got together?” Nova asked, getting comfortable against a bag tucked into the corner of a room. “Because of Uncle Micky?”

“Well, actually,” Heather replied with a chuckle. “Tommy hated me after we lost Micky. It really started years later during a lockdown.”

I couldn’t help but grin as Nova and Emilia oohed and ahed.

“Hey, No,” Nova’s brother Bird interrupted, skidding to a stop in the doorway with Myla behind him. “Have you seen Titus? We can’t find him anywhere.”

Heather’s eyes popped open, and her head shot forward away from the wall.

“What do you mean?”

“We can’t find him,” Bird repeated.

“Is his car outside?” Heather asked, gently but quickly moving Rhett away so she could stand up.

“No,” Bird replied, looking at each of us. “We thought he rode with you or something.”

“*Fuck,*” Heather barked, hurrying out of the room as she pulled her phone out of her pocket.

“He was with you guys, right?” Emilia asked as she got to her feet and lifted Rhett into her arms.

“He was at the house,” I confirmed, standing.

“Come on, we’ll find him.” Nova ushered Bird into the hallway.

“He said Noel didn’t show up for school.”

“What?” Emilia asked, pausing on her way out the door.

“My little sister,” I clarified, my stomach sinking. “He was worried. He told me that she never showed up at school today.”

“Shit.” Emilia’s eyes closed as she took a deep breath. “Come on, we need to go tell Heather.”

CHAPTER 18

OTTO

“**E**VERYBODY CLEAR ON their parts?” Gramps asked, looking over the group.

We were lined up in row after row of bikes, waiting for the go-ahead to fire them up and head out. Micky was on my left and Rumi right in front of me, our dad closer to the front.

“Clear,” a couple of voices rang out.

I just nodded.

After Rumi had reminded me, yet again, that shit *always* went sideways, my guts were a gurgling mass of gross. I’d already been to the bathroom once, but I knew with absolute certainty that I’d hear about it for the rest of my life if I tried to go back. It was time to get our fucking shipment back.

The Sons of Calgary assumed by creating a distraction, no one would notice them loading crates into a rental truck at the warehouse. Knowing that they’d never be able to make it anywhere near the clubhouse, they’d gone to my house instead. Esther’s little sister had talked. Whether she’d done so under duress was anyone’s guess, but Titus had been pretty fucking worried when he’d spoken to my dad.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. There was no way I could stay sharp if I was worrying about Esther or her baby sister.

“Let’s go,” Gramps ordered, climbing his old ass onto his bike.

Rumi looked over his shoulder at us, grinning maniacally as he threw up devil horns and started his bike.

The Sons of Calgary had made a singular massive mistake. They’d been right in creating a distraction, and it almost worked. But they’d assumed that it would be all hands on deck

at my place and we rarely sent every single person out, even in an emergency. The prospect with his eyes on the warehouse didn't stray from his post. He called in, reporting the movement. Someone else followed the truck from the warehouse to a storage unit they used to switch trucks.

That detour had cost them. There could've been a chance that we didn't catch them before they stashed the crates again, but stopping had lost them valuable time. By the time we hit the pavement, they weren't far away, and we knew the route they were taking. The idiots were too worried about the cops to take the interstate, which was really good news for us because back roads were much better for our purpose.

When it came down the line that the two Sons of Calgary trucks were in sight, Leo and Draco were already in place. As we got closer, like a fucking ballet, they pulled onto the road from each side, blocking it entirely with the garage's tow truck and our unregistered box truck.

The next few minutes were filled with the grinding of gears, squealing tires, and yelling. If anyone had thought the militia group would go quietly, they were very wrong. Shots came from the cab of both trucks as we came to a stop behind them.

Rumi laughed like a lunatic as he jumped off his bike, throwing his helmet to the side.

“Let's go, motherfuckers!”

Micky chuckled beside me as we ran down and around the corner, pulling the barricades Leo had stashed.

“You need a high-vis vest,” he joked as we threw the barricades up and lit a couple of flares.

“I look good in neon orange,” I agreed.

His laughter was tinged with surprise. We hustled back toward the group and found that one of the trucks had been cleared, but sporadic gunfire was still coming from the other.

“Stop,” my dad ordered, grabbing me by the vest as I worked to get closer. He shook his head. “Esther's pop's in the passenger seat.”

I'd agreed when she'd asked me not to kill him. I'd understood where she was coming from and even Rumi hadn't said a word about it. There were a lot of things a relationship could survive, but none of us was sure that particular scenario was one of them.

None of that mattered, though, when I realized how close the man was. He'd kidnapped Esther and stashed her out in a house that was wired to blow. He'd sent his goons to kill us that morning.

"Fuck," my dad barked as I shoved him out of the way.

Someone had already shot out the side mirror on the truck. It was simple to run up alongside unseen. If I would've thought it through, I probably would have been a bit more strategic about the whole thing, but I wasn't exactly clear-headed at that point. Fueled by adrenaline and rage, I ripped open the passenger door and dragged his old ass out of the truck.

The rifle in his hand went flying, and the driver was distracted by the movement that someone had a chance to pull him out the other side. I didn't care about any of that.

My fist hit his face with the most satisfying noise I'd ever heard. He was strong, stronger than he looked, but I had at least forty pounds on him. It was far from an even fight.

"Stay away from my wife," I growled, hitting him again. I dodged the hands reaching for me and rose, kicking him in the ribs. As he tried to stand, I kicked him again in the jaw.

The idiot tried to get to his feet again.

"Otto," Micky called, his voice above the others. "Remember what she said."

No one stopped me as I kicked him back down, kneeling in the center of his back. His hair was slick with sweat as I gripped it and leaned down.

"I ever see you again, you're dead."

"Get off of me," he rasped. "Filth! You're going straight to hell with my whore daughter."

“You first,” I whispered, slamming his head against the pavement. When he was limp, I got to my feet.

“He’s alive,” I told Micky, spitting on the man at my feet. I lifted my hands and took a couple steps back. “Kept my promise.”

“You did,” he agreed as I moved toward him. “I’ll take care of—”

When his words cut off, I knew. Spinning, I pulled the gun out of my shoulder holster.

Before I could fire, shots rang out and Esther’s dad dropped back down to his knees, a pistol I hadn’t seen hanging limply from his hand.

Looking up from the trash, I met Rumi’s eyes at the other end of the truck.

“She can hate *me*,” he said simply. “I’ll sleep just fine.”

He walked away without another word.

“Jesus,” my dad muttered, rubbing his hands over his face.

Another shot rang out from the opposite side of the truck.

“Sounds like the driver didn’t feel like talkin’,” Micky said, slapping me on the back as he shoved me away from the body on the ground. “Come on. We’ve got shit to move.”

Only one of the trucks was actually carrying anything, and it was quick work getting the crates into the box truck we’d blocked the road with. Our work was far from over, though.

“Leo, drive through the night,” Dragon ordered his son. “Don’t stop until you get there.”

“Might stay a couple days,” he said with a nod.

“You hang out in Montana without Lily, she’s gonna kick your ass,” Cam joked, pointing at his brother-in-law.

“She’ll just have Rose spend the night so they can do girly shit,” Leo countered, laughing. “Happens every time.”

“Why do I gotta be punished with a cold ass bed every time you’re outta town?” Uncle Mack complained, grunting as

he and Draco heaved a body into the front seat of a truck. “Seems like they woulda grown outta that shit by now.”

“Yeah, that’ll never happen,” my uncle Will called out.

They were joking around and bitching as the adrenaline wore off, and I understood it but I stood there, in the center of the activity, frozen. I hadn’t killed him, but I was still going to have to go back and tell Esther her father was dead.

There was nothing funny about that.

No matter what he’d been like in his life, Esther still had good memories of him. She still loved him. No way around it, it was going to be a blow.

“Listen,” Rumi said quietly, coming up beside us. “Mom can’t find Titus.”

“What?” I looked at him, trying to focus.

“Titus never showed up at the clubhouse.”

“Shit,” Micky muttered. “Exactly what we fuckin’ need.”

“Esther said he was worried about her sister, that she didn’t show up to school.”

“He went to check on her.” It was what I would’ve done. “Fuck.”

“Could be nothin’,” Rumi continued. “But Mom’s about to lose her fuckin’ mind.”

“Heads up, boys,” Gramps called, his voice cutting through the noise making everyone quiet. “If you don’t got a job from this point forward, you’re comin’ with me. Titus is missin’. Long story short, there’s a good chance he’s caught up in this shit.”

“And we’ve got no one left to question,” Micky spat. “Fuck.”

“We’re headin’ back to town. Everyone knows what needs to be done here?”

“This ain’t our first rodeo,” someone called out.

“Come on,” my dad ordered. “Your mom sent me Esther’s parents’ address. We’ll check there first.”

“What was Titus thinkin’?” Rumi grumbled as we reached our bikes. “What a clusterfuck.”

“He was thinkin’ that Esther’s parents are fuckin’ psychotic and if the Calgary boys showed up at my house, they knew that Noel was with him last night,” I shot back. “You woulda rather he left her to the wolves?”

“I’d rather my seventeen-year-old brother wasn’t caught in shit that’s way above his pay grade,” he replied grimly. “Let’s just fuckin’ find him.”

Half of the group pulled off and stopped in a grocery store parking lot to wait while my brothers, dad, and gramps arrived in the small neighborhood where Esther had grown up. I clocked her house instantly. Titus’s car was parked right in front.

“What now?” Micky asked as we parked.

Gramps looked at him like he was an idiot. “Knock on the damn door.”

My dad chuckled as I climbed off my bike and left my helmet on the seat. If this was the only time I would ever see Esther’s house, I was going to take it.

I stood at the door for what felt like a hell of a long time, running my hand through my hair and fidgeting with my clothes before a woman opened it.

“Can I help you?” she asked, looking past me at the bikes.

“Hello, I was wondering if Noel is home?”

“Noel?”

“Your daughter?”

“Oh, no,” she said, shaking her head. “Noel lives across the street.” She pointed. “Blue house.”

“Crap,” I muttered. “Thanks.”

The look on her face was a bit concerning.

“That’s my brother’s car,” I said, shrugging and smiling in the way I’d seen Rumi use a million times on a million different women. “He skipped school today, and he’s not answering his phone.”

“He must be in trouble,” she said, smiling back. Bingo.

“You could say that,” I agreed ruefully. “Thanks for your help.”

“No problem.”

I strode back toward the boys and nodded across the street. “Blue house.”

“Did you just use the Rumi smile on her?” Micky asked, holding back laughter.

“Works every time.” Rumi grinned smugly.

When Esther’s mom answered the door, I would’ve known her anywhere. Both Esther and Noel looked just like her.

“Hey, I’m looking for my brother.”

“Sorry, I can’t help you,” she said, shaking her head.

I stuffed my toe in the jam, stopping the door before she closed it in my face.

“He’s friends with your daughter Noel,” I continued. “She here?”

“She’s at school.”

“We both know that’s not true.”

The sudden fear in her eyes killed me.

“Listen, I’m just lookin’ for Titus. Have you seen him today?”

“No,” she replied, pushing against the door. “Noel doesn’t spend time with—with boys.”

“You have any idea where they might be?”

“I told you. She’s at school. I don’t know where your brother is.”

“Otto, let’s go,” Gramps called from behind me.

Her eyes widened, and I nodded.

“I’m Esther’s husband. Nice to meet you.”

She didn’t respond in any way as I turned and jogged back down the driveway.

“Prospect called from the warehouse,” Gramps told me as I reached my bike. “Playin’ a game of telephone, so it took a damn minute to get to us, but he saw Titus and a girl in the back of a car. He was shittin’ his pants not knowin’ whether to follow them or not since none of us were pickin’ up our phones.”

“Please tell me he followed the car.”

“He did. They’re at the church. He’s been keepin’ an eye. They’re still there.”

“Don’t feel good about this,” my dad muttered, reaching for the ignition.

“Good news is the boys at the grocery store are closer, they’ll be there when we get there.”

I was trying like hell not to get distracted, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the way I’d laid into Titus the night before. He’d fucked up big time, but I also hadn’t given him any slack for being a fucking *kid*. The kind of kid that I wished him to be, oblivious to most of the shit we dealt with on the daily. He’d been so freaked out and guilty and I’d definitely made it worse. He wouldn’t even meet my eyes when he’d shown up at the house that morning.

The church was a small one, tucked away down a dead-end road. It was the perfect place for a militia group to hatch their plans and get up to whatever they wanted with the outward respectability of a house of God. The place made my skin crawl.

Gramps was right. The rest of the group had beaten us there.

“I’m not waitin’,” my dad said, climbing off his bike the minute we stopped. “Don’t give a shit who’s in there.”

“With you.” Micky climbed off his bike.

“Don’t leave me behind!” Rumi almost sang, following them.

“I’ll coordinate out here,” Gramps said, nodding to my dad as he walked to the others. “No one’ll come out without us knowin’.”

“Thanks, Gramps,” I said, following my dad toward the front doors.

The Calgary Church had the same maroon carpet and wood accents as every other older church I’d ever seen. It was spotless, not a speck of dust anywhere, but clearly run down. They hadn’t been using the collection plate money for upgrades, that was for damn sure.

The sanctuary and the first few rooms beyond it were empty. By the time we hit the fourth room with no luck, I was starting to wonder if we were on a wild goose chase. The fifth room was empty, too.

We hit pay dirt on the sixth.

Behind the door, we could hear Titus singing, well, rapping. Badly.

Dad swung the door open, his pistol at the ready, but the only people in the room were Noel and Titus.

“Dad,” Titus said, the relief in his voice making my throat tighten.

His face was black and blue, but otherwise he seemed fine.

“Who’s here?” my dad asked as he bent down to untie Titus.

“Hey, Noel,” I said gently. Counting on my brothers to watch our backs, I knelt down by Esther’s baby sister. She hadn’t come through their morning unscathed and was almost as black and blue as Titus.

“Otto,” she breathed, smiling painfully. “Happy to see you.”

“Hey, I was keeping you entertained,” Titus complained from behind me, his voice strained. “I had two more verses to

finish.”

“Let’s get you out of these,” I murmured, reaching for the ropes that tied her wrists to her ankles. “Jesus.”

“Thanks.”

“How long have you guys been in here?”

“I’m not sure,” she murmured, rubbing at her wrists once they were free. “About seven songs, I think.”

“Eight songs,” Titus corrected, dropping down beside me. “You must’ve forgotten *I’m a Little Teapot*.”

“I remembered that one,” she replied matter-of-factly as I helped her to her feet.

“Let’s get ’em outta here,” my dad ordered. No one stopped us as we walked the kids back down the hall and out the front doors.

“There’s no one in there,” Gramps informed us, glowering at the prospect in front of him.

“I’m tellin’ ya, man,” Cian said, his eyes widening. “That’s the car that brought ’em in!”

“It is,” Titus confirmed, reaching out to pull Noel against his side. “I think they left with someone. They got a call and bailed.”

“It’s not like they’re missing,” Noel pointed out quietly. “I know where both of them *live*.”

“Thatta girl,” Rumi praised, raising his hand for a high-five. She ignored him.

“Think it’s best we get you two both back to the club until we know what’s what,” my dad said tiredly.

Noel looked around until her eyes landed on me.

“Your sister’s already there,” I told her.

“You ever ridden a motorcycle before, sweetheart?” my dad asked her gently.

Noel shook her head.

“It’s not hard,” he continued, walking her toward the bikes.

“You’re not ridin’ with me,” Rumi announced, shoving Titus hard enough that he stumbled a few steps. “There aren’t many lines I’m unwillin’ to cross, but having my baby brother ride bitch on my bike is one of ’em.”

“The singin’,” Will groaned, throwing his arm over Titus’ shoulders. “So bad, kid. It was so bad.”

“I was tryin’ to keep her from freakin’ out.”

“It worked,” I replied. “Good job.”

“Mom’s gonna kill me, huh?”

“Probably.” I shrugged.

“When I got to her house, they’d locked her in her room ___”

“Save it,” Will muttered as we reached the bikes. “We can talk about it at the club.”

I helped Noel put my helmet on, buckling the strap under her chin. “Your sister’s gonna be real happy to see you.”

“My dad was really angry,” Noel whispered, looking over my shoulder to where Titus was climbing on the back of my dad’s bike.

“Don’t worry about that now,” I reassured her. “Let’s just get back to Esther, yeah?”

Beyond the fact that Noel had her arms so tight around my waist that I could barely move, the ride back to the clubhouse was pretty anticlimactic. I wasn’t sure what the hell the next steps were, but for once, I was thankful that I wasn’t going to be the one making the decisions. All I wanted was to get back to Esther, take a fucking shower, and crash for the next twelve hours.

It was a nice dream.

The minute we rolled down the driveway, there was a group of women hurrying out of the clubhouse, searching the group for each of their men. Esther hung back a little with my

mom, clearly trying to seem unaffected, but she wasn't hiding her relief very well.

I knew the moment she spotted me and her sister.

As soon as I parked the bike, Noel was scrambling off with absolutely no finesse whatsoever. I cursed under my breath, trying to keep it from going over and sighed when she was finally clear, putting down the kickstand so I could get off too.

“What are you doing here?” Esther asked, fumbling with the helmet strap. “Are you okay? Where's Titus?”

As people filed back into the clubhouse, my family gathered up so we could give them an abbreviated version of events—mostly the part where we found Noel and Titus tied up in the church.

“I wouldn't leave,” Titus explained. “I knew she was in trouble, so I just kept makin' a nuisance of myself until they let me see her.”

“I thought they were going to call the police,” Noel added.

“No chance of that,” Rumi muttered under his breath.

“After they finally let me in to talk to her, some dickwad punched me in the jaw.”

“I tried to stop them,” Noel cut in angrily.

“We'll talk about *that* later.” Titus glared. “Anyway, they beat the shit out of us and then threw us in the back of a car.”

“Where was Mom?” Esther asked like she was afraid of the answer.

“With Aunt Lacey,” Noel replied. “Dad took her over there after he locked me in our room. I didn't even know anyone was downstairs until I heard Titus talking to someone at the door.”

“They took us to the church and tied us up,” Titus finished. “Bailed right after, and eventually, you guys showed up.”

“How you doin'?” I murmured in Esther's ear, running my hand down her back.

“I’m okay,” she replied softly. “You?”

“We got some shit to talk about.”

“Is it bad?” She pulled away to look me in the eye.

“Pretty bad, yeah,” I whispered.

Her eyes closed, and she dropped her forehead against my shoulder.

“Come on, you two,” my mom said, shooing them toward the building. “Aunt Molly needs to look at your faces. You better hope I don’t have to bring you to the hospital, or there will be all sorts of questions.”

Esther and the women followed my mom inside and the rest of us headed toward the garage end of the building where a single bay was wide open.

“Titus good?” Dragon asked the minute we walked in.

“Roughed him up some,” Gramps answered. “He’ll be fine.”

“Good news,” Dragon replied.

“I’ve been workin’ on some things,” Uncle Casper announced as soon as we came to a stop.

“Oh, shit,” Rumi murmured, bumping me with his shoulder. “Watch the master work.”

“There are currently twenty-four members of the Sons of Calgary militia group. Four less, after today’s work. Two that took off after they kidnapped Titus and his little girlfriend. Those two, sad to say, had an accident on the way to their destination.”

“How the fuck does he do that?” Rumi muttered admiringly.

“Two of the members they lost today were the head, so it’s pretty safe to say we cut the head off that particular snake. From what I’m hearin’, they’re scramblin’ now. Got no idea what the fuck they’re gonna do with their lives now that daddy’s disappeared.”

“For the time bein’,” Dragon announced. “Sons of Calgary are no longer a threat to this club. At least until they pull their heads out and find a new leader.”

“The members of the militia were part of the congregation,” Casper continued. “But from what I’ve uncovered, they weren’t even a majority. Lookin’ at what’s left, we got a bunch of fuckin’ weirdos—but their particular brand of weird hasn’t got anythin’ to do with us. Bottom line, we got our property back and this chapter is closed.”

“Fun’s over, boys,” Micky joked sarcastically.

“Otto,” Dragon called as the men started scattering off to get their families and head home.

“Pres?” I waited as he and Gramps headed toward me.

“Gonna have to call that girl’s mama,” Gramps said sympathetically.

“Can’t be keepin’ an underage girl at the clubhouse or your parents’ house either. Not lookin’ for that kinda heat,” Dragon added.

“Their brother—”

“Not a part of shit,” Dragon replied. “I had Casper look into it. Heavy in the church, not sure he even knew anything about the militia.”

“There’s no way he didn’t know,” I argued.

“He’s clean as far as we can find.”

“So we just have to send her back there?”

“Nothin’ else you can do, son,” Gramps murmured. “She’s only got a couple of years left, yeah? You just make sure she knows she’s got somewhere to go when the time comes and she wants to get out.”

The conversation was pretty much over after that. I made my way back into the club, every step feeling heavier than the last. Not only did I have to tell Esther that her dad was gone, but I also had to tell her that we had to send her sister right back to the shit Esther had escaped from.

I found her in my dad's room, surprisingly alone.

"Hey," I said quietly. I didn't want to startle her. She turned and every event since we'd made our baby in the front seat of my Mustang was written on her face. Fear, sadness, hope, joy, somehow, it was all in her eyes at once. The sum of all our parts.

"He's dead, isn't he?" she replied just as quietly.

"Yeah, sugar, he is."

She swallowed and licked her lips. "But you're okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Did you do it?" she asked carefully, holding her breath.

"You asked me not to."

"Who did?"

"Does it matter?" It felt like a rock was sitting on my chest. If she had to know, I'd tell her. But even if Rumi was willing to take responsibility for saving my life, I didn't want him to bear the brunt of her hurt. He was my brother, and he drove me crazy most of the time—but I needed him and my wife to be able to lean on each other should something happen down the line. That's what family did. They took care of each other.

"No," she replied, finally. "It doesn't matter."

She rushed toward me, but my arms were already wide open, and I caught her easily, lifting her off the floor.

"I'm so glad you're okay," she murmured against my neck.

"It's been a fuckin' *day*," I replied. "I'm so tired I could sleep standin' up."

"Me too."

"Lockdown is over, sugar. So we can go—shit."

"Your mom already told me we can stay in the guest room," she mumbled, her face still pressed to my neck. "And Charlie said Bishop will make our house a priority."

"That's good news." I set her back on her feet.

“What about Noel?” she asked, biting the inside of her cheek.

“You know that she’s always welcome with us, right?” I asked, brushing little tendrils of hair away from her face.

“Yeah.”

“But we gotta call your mom, Esther. We need to tell her that Noel’s safe and she’s with us.”

“Okay.” Esther nodded.

I stared at her in confusion. “*Okay?* That’s it?”

“Otto, you said my dad’s gone.” She smiled sadly. “So there’s nothing scary waiting for her at home.”

It was a mass exodus from the club, with everyone getting in everyone else’s way, anxious to get home, but I couldn’t even be irritated about it. Esther had tucked herself under my armpit and was pressed against my side from the moment we left my dad’s room to the moment I helped her into my mom’s SUV. We’d decided to wait on calling her mom until after we got back to my parents’ house and drew the short straw, so Titus and Noel rode home with us.

“Where’s your car?” I asked him, glancing at him in the rearview mirror.

He and Noel had been keeping a little distance between themselves since we got back to the clubhouse, but in the darkness of the back seat were holding hands.

“Dad said a prospect was going to pick it up and bring it back to the club,” Titus replied glumly. “He said I’m not goin’ to be usin’ it for the next year, so he didn’t want it clutterin’ up the driveway.”

“You knew you were goin’ to be in deep shit,” I reminded him.

“I didn’t think they’d take my fuckin’ car,” he argued. “I paid for it.”

“They own you until you’re eighteen, bud. Suck it up.”

“It’s bullshit.”

“You coulda got a lotta people hurt, Titus,” I snapped, not willing to let him slide. “It worked out, but it coulda gone way worse.”

He didn’t answer.

“Oh, and my fuckin’ livin’ room is toast. Just to remind you.”

“I didn’t want to say anything,” Noel said apologetically. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Then why did you?” Esther asked, turning to look at her sister.

“Because Dad was waiting when Titus dropped me off at the library.” Her voice was so quiet that I almost didn’t hear her.

I waited to see if she would say anything else, but she didn’t. It must’ve been enough of an explanation for Esther, though. She just nodded and turned forward again.

The shadow of their fucked-up father loomed over the car for the rest of the ride, and no one said much. It was pretty telling that all Noel had to do was mention that her dad had caught her somewhere she wasn’t supposed to be for Esther to fully understand why Noel had spilled her guts. They’d lived inside his grip for so long that disobedience was unthinkable.

“Come on,” Titus said to Noel as soon as we rolled to a stop. “I’m gonna show you around before they call your mom.”

“Stay out of your bedroom,” I ordered as they threw open the doors.

Esther laughed quietly.

“They’re sixteen and seventeen,” I grumbled, watching as Titus pulled Noel toward the house. “He needs to keep it in his pants.”

“Otto,” Esther breathed, eyes wide as she turned to look at me.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“It moved,” she whispered, her eyes filling with tears as she yanked my hand across the console and pressed it against her belly.

“Do you feel it?” she asked.

My breath caught as she smiled at me in shock.

“It’s moving?” I asked, pressing a little harder on her belly. I wasn’t sure how much pressure was too much, but I really didn’t want to miss it.

“It just did it again,” she said excitedly. “Did you feel that one?”

She laughed, and it was so filled with joy that everything inside me just sort of settled into place. She was safe. We were together. The house could be fixed. The baby was moving.

We were okay.

“Yeah,” I lied. “I felt it!”

“Kiss me,” she ordered, still smiling as she leaned toward me.

“Look at you, bein’ all assertive,” I teased, meeting her halfway to give her what she wanted.

EPILOGUE

ESTHER

MY HANDS WERE clammy and my heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest as I pressed the phone to my ear and waited for my mom to pick up.

When she finally did, I grew strangely calm.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Mom.”

“Esther?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Oh, Esther,” she said softly. “Noel said you were okay. She said it, but I didn’t believe it.”

“I’m okay,” I confirmed. “And Noel is with me.”

“Praise God,” she replied, letting out a huge breath. “Ephraim? Noel’s okay. She’s with Esther.”

“You can come pick her up if you want,” I interrupted, ignoring my brother’s voice in the background. “We’re at Otto’s parents’ house.”

“That’s—that’s your husband?” she asked tentatively.

“He is.”

“Okay. Okay, we can do that.”

Somehow, in the months that I’d been apart from her, I’d forgotten how very timid my mother was. I wondered for a moment if she’d always been that way or if she’d adapted after a lifetime of living with my dad.

“Esther?” my brother Ephraim barked through the phone. “Give me the address.”

“I was talking to Mom,” I replied, sitting forward on the couch. “Give her back the phone.”

“Mom gave the phone to me,” he replied importantly. “What’s the address so I can come get Noel.”

I looked at the people across the room from me, who’d quietly moved away to give me some privacy to call my mom. My hand fisted in my lap. I loved my brother, but I also remembered every single time he was chosen over me. Every time I got in trouble for something that was his fault. Every time that he was put on some crappy pedestal just because he was a boy and every time I had to defer to him even though he was only a couple of years older. I didn’t have to submit to him anymore.

“*You’re* not doing anything,” I replied firmly. “Noel isn’t going anywhere with you. If *Mom* wants to pick her up, then *Mom* can come get her.”

“I’m already on my way,” he replied stubbornly. “What’s the address?”

I rattled off the address Heather had given me. “If you show up here without Mom, you’ll leave empty-handed,” I warned.

He hung up without responding.

“That seemed like it went well,” Otto said sarcastically from behind me.

“Ephraim’s trying to throw his weight around,” I replied, not even trying to hide my frustration.

“Sounded like you put your foot down.” He shrugged and gave my shoulders a squeeze. “It’s like you said. He shows up here without your mom, he’s outta luck.”

“Is Mom coming?” Noel asked listlessly, sitting down next to me.

“Hopefully.” I pulled her against me and squeezed. We’d decided not to tell Noel anything more than she already knew, and it was a very strange position to be in—sending her back home. I knew that my dad was gone and she would be safe,

but Noel didn't. The closer it came to when my mom would come get her, the more tense she became. "Ephraim got on the phone and started trying to boss me around."

"He's such a pain in the neck," she sighed, laying her head on my shoulder. "He's just like Dad."

"Hopefully Caity will soften him a little," I replied. Neither of us believed it, but she didn't argue.

We sat like that until headlights came through the front window.

"Esther," Otto called from the front door. "Looks like Noel's ride is here."

I hopped up and moved toward the door as Titus crouched down in front of Noel.

"Did he show up without her?"

"Look for yourself," Otto murmured, opening the door wider.

My mom stood at the edge of the porch, her hands nervously clenched together.

"Mom," I breathed.

I didn't consciously move toward her, but a few seconds later, we were only a couple of feet apart.

"Hi."

"Esther." She smiled. "You're blooming."

"Almost halfway there," I whispered, my hand going instinctively to my belly.

"Where's Noel?" Ephraim called obnoxiously, leaning against the car.

"Come meet my husband." I reached for her hand.

"We don't have all night," Ephraim added.

"I better not," my mom said quietly, squeezing my hand before letting it go.

I glared at my brother. "Otto, come meet my mom!"

He'd been giving us space but immediately strode down the steps, his shoulders straight. My chest filled with pride.

Ephraim had nothing to say.

"We've met," Otto said kindly, reaching out to shake my mom's hand. "It's nice to see you again."

"You found your brother," my mom said, putting her hand in his.

Tears stung my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. I wasn't going to miss a second.

"I did," Otto replied with a nod. His hand moved to my lower back. "Found Noel, too."

"Thank you," she whispered, glancing over her shoulder at Ephraim. "Is she coming out?"

"Yeah, Mom," I assured her. "She was just saying goodbye."

"You know how Ephraim is," she said apologetically. "Always in a hurry."

"Why didn't you drive?"

"Oh—" She waved me off. "You know I'm no good driving at night."

I didn't have a chance to contradict her because Noel and Heather came out the door behind us.

"Noel," my mom gasped, staring at my sister's battered face.

"She's alright," Otto reassured her. "Just a few bruises. She and Titus got jumped at the park. My aunt's a nurse, and she looked them over, though."

It was the story we'd all agreed to. There was no reason for my mom to know anything about what my dad had been into if she didn't already. After forming her life around him for so long, she was going to struggle when he never came home. If she knew it all, I was afraid it would send her into a tailspin she might never recover from, and Noel was going to need her.

Heather stepped forward and grabbed my mom's hand. "Hi, I'm Otto's mom, Heather."

"Nice to meet you," Mom replied. "I'm Savannah Allen."

I couldn't catch the rest of what they said when Noel pulled me into a hug.

"I'll come see you whenever I can," she whispered. "Promise."

"Good. Call me, and I'll pick you up."

Noel laughed, and I realized that she thought I was joking.

"Remember you said you'd name the baby after me."

"I will. Even if it's a boy."

"Okay, no need to go that far. Only if it's a girl."

"You're always welcome with us, okay? I'll have your room ready the day you turn eighteen."

"Deal," she whispered, sniffing.

"It's okay," I whispered, running my hand over the thick bun at the base of her neck. "I promise. It'll be okay."

"Love you."

"Love you, too."

Ephraim was quiet as long as Otto was outside, but his presence still loomed like a gargoyle. As soon as Noel pulled away, my mom started making noises to leave.

When I met Heather's apologetic gaze, I realized she'd come outside to stall for time, giving me and Noel a few more minutes.

"Bye, Mom," I murmured, moving in for a hug.

As she wrapped her arms around me, I soaked in the moment. Noel would be back at some point, but I wasn't sure if I'd ever have my mom so close again.

I didn't cry as they pulled away or when Heather and Otto carefully ushered me back inside. I held it in all night. But as soon as I crawled into bed next to Otto and he let out the little

huff of contentment that he'd made every night since we married, I let them fall.

He didn't try to shush me. He just wrapped his arms around me and let me cry.

When we met Bishop at our house the next day to go over all the things that needed to be fixed, I sat on the porch and let the cool air wash the last four months away. Seeing my mother was a stark reminder of the life that I'd never lead. How could I have woken up that morning with anything but gratitude for the life in front of me?

Otto and I were back in our house three weeks after the fire. He said that was one of the perks to being cousins with a guy that owned his own construction company but I thought Heather had probably secretly thrown her weight around. She tried so hard not to overstep her boundaries, but I think what she loved most about me was that I didn't mind when she leapfrogged them completely. Once she knew about my disastrous first doctor appointment, she went with me to every appointment that Otto couldn't and we usually spent the rest of the day shopping for baby things.

My dad was right about one thing: sometimes God doesn't answer your prayers the way you think he should—sometimes what you get is better than you could've imagined.

My life with Otto was everything. He was the storm cloud to my sunshine. The pragmatist while I dreamed big. We balanced each other perfectly, even when he was grouching his way to the shower after work for just *one minute of peace and quiet!* I loved him more than I'd ever thought possible.

Noel snuck away to see us three more times, and each time, she showed up with a grinning Titus behind her. It was easy to see that they found it exciting that they were getting away with something. I ignored the nervous way my heart fluttered when I saw that look in their eyes. I regretted it three months later when Titus showed up on our porch alone and devastated.

When the police notified my mom that my dad's body had been found, Ephraim became the head of the family. His first

decision was to move my mom and Noel to Seattle. They hadn't seen it coming. Titus found out where they'd gone by hacking into the high school's records system to find where they'd sent Noel's file.

I kept my promise and named our daughter after my baby sister. We also had Noel's bedroom ready on the day she turned eighteen. Titus spent the entire week with us, waiting, but she never came. Otto offered to go to Seattle to find her, but I wouldn't let him.

I had faith she'd find her way back to us eventually.

*Watch for the next story in the Hawthornes
saga,*

Titus

Spring 2023

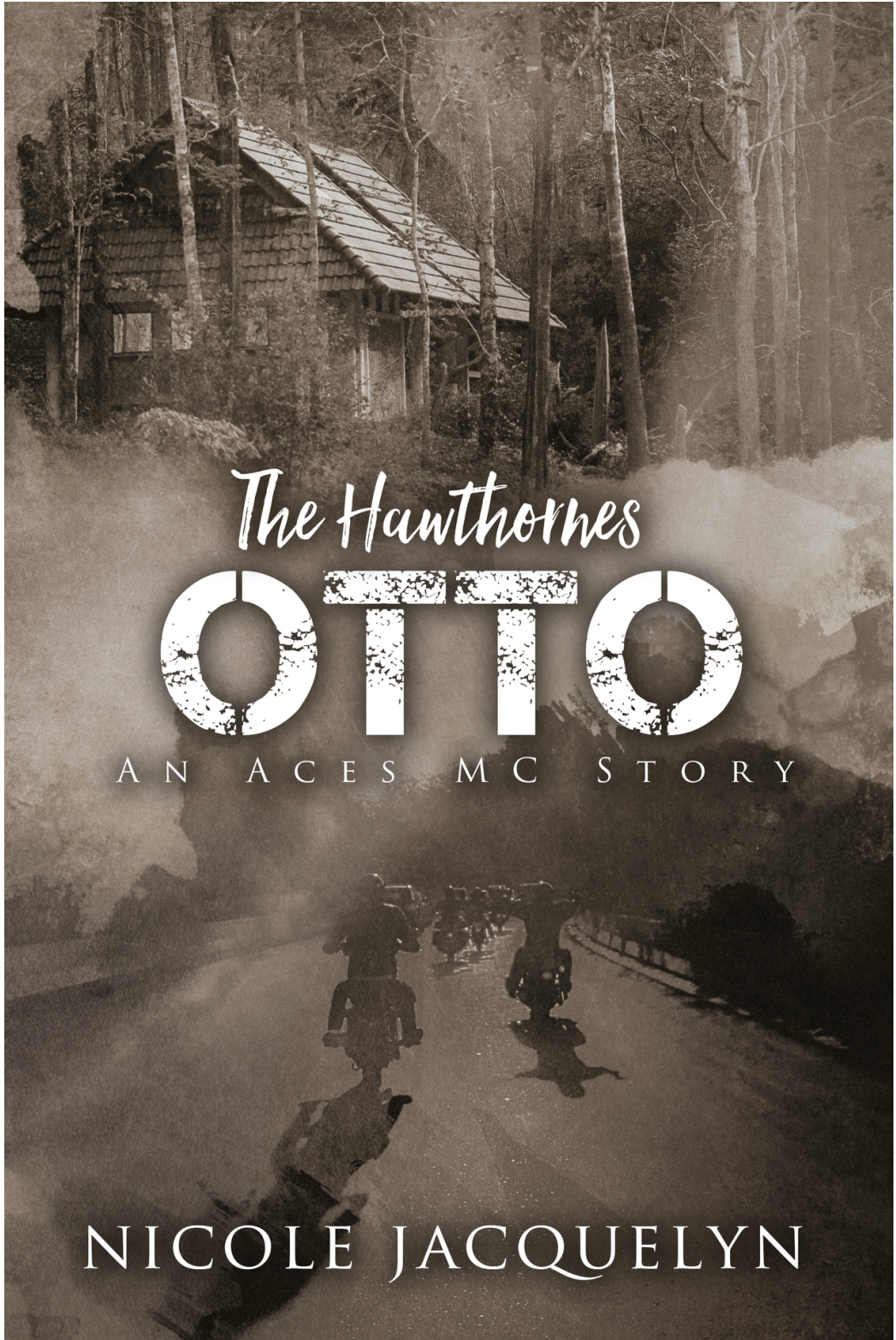
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The Hawthornes

OTTO

AN ACES MC STORY

NICOLE JACQUELYN