

A sepia-toned photograph of a hammock strung between two trees in a forest. In the background, a group of people on motorcycles is gathered on a dirt path. The overall mood is nostalgic and outdoorsy.

*The Hawthornes*

# MICHAEL

AN ACES MC STORY

NICOLE JACQUELYN

**THE HAWTHORNES**

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BY NICOLE JACQUELYN

*Michael*

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# DEDICATION

To those who spend their adulthood healing from their  
childhood.

We see you.

You're enough.

You're doing great.

Keep going.

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## PROLOGUE

### MICHAEL

**“HEY, GORGEOUS,”** I murmured, a smile pulling at my lips as I opened my locker. Fuck, I was so ready to be done with lugging books around. If it wasn’t for my mother, who’d threatened dismemberment if I didn’t finish high school, I would’ve already dropped out.

Emilia’s hair fell into her face as she tipped her head down. “You’re impossible.”

“Not good at hidin’,” I agreed, grabbing the books I’d need that night. “Not sure why we are.”

“You know exactly why,” she replied, shutting the locker next to mine. “My parents would have multiple heart attacks if they thought there was anything going on between—”

“You mean I can’t tell your old man about the way you climbed on my lap and—”

“Michael,” she snapped, smacking my arm. “Don’t.”

“Fine,” I muttered with a sigh. Slinging my backpack over my shoulder, I gestured for her to walk. “After you.”

“Is your mom home today?” she asked, falling in beside me as we walked toward the front of the school. The halls were crowded, but like always, people made a path as we moved through them. We may not have made our relationship public, but everyone knew that Emilia belonged to the Hawthornes.

“Should be.” I glanced at her. Damn, she was pretty. She was smaller than most of the girls in our school, even the freshman, which made us kind of an odd couple since I was so

big, but somehow we worked. “Why, you hopin’ for a little time to ourselves?”

“My mom will probably call to check in,” she replied, wrinkling her nose. “It’ll be better if your mom is there.”

“I don’t know how the fuck your parents still think you’re tutorin’ me,” I said with a laugh, opening the door for her. The change from the hallway’s fluorescent lighting to the bright sun made me grimace, and I pulled on some sunglasses. “Seems like they would’ve caught on after almost a year.”

“I think they feel more comfortable assuming that you aren’t as smart as me.” She glanced at me apologetically. “Because if they’ve done everything they’re supposed to their entire lives—”

“Then how the hell could a kid that grew up playing in the gravel driveway of a motorcycle club be as smart as their precious daughter?”

“You know how they are.”

“Unfortunately, I do,” I muttered, shooting her a small smile so she knew we were still okay. Her parents’ views on the club, my family, and me specifically weren’t news. We’d been friends our entire lives, spent every year in the same class in school, and still, they saw my family as some white trash criminals.

It probably started when my mom dropped me off at kindergarten with a half shaved head, the rest of her hair a vivid blue, and a matching septum ring. She wasn’t exactly the picture of a PTA mom. Though, it could’ve started the first time my dad picked me up on the back of his bike. Either way, their opinion of me was set in stone.

“Can you guys hurry up?” my little brother Rumi called across the parking lot. He was sitting on the tailgate of my truck, his backpack on the ground by his feet. “It always takes you guys twice the time it takes everyone else to get the fuck out of there.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I called back as we got closer. “In a hurry to get home?”

“I’d rather not stay any longer than I have to,” he griped, pulling his long hair back into a ponytail.

“Bus left five minutes ago,” I reminded him, grabbing his bag as we reached the truck and tossing it in the bed with mine. “You coulda already been gone.”

“I’m not ridin’ the bus,” he grumbled, hopping down. “I’d rather walk.”

“No one’s stoppin’ ya.”

“Hey, Rumi,” Emilia said, interrupting our bickering with a grin.

“Hey, Emmy Lou Who,” he murmured, throwing his arm around her shoulders, pulling her in until her face smashed against his chest. He tugged the backpack off her shoulder. “How ya been, sprite?”

“Pretty good since you saw me at lunch,” she replied, laughing as she shoved him away.

“You’re the best part of my day,” Rumi announced dramatically, throwing his arms out wide, the backpack dangling from one hand.

“Could you stop flirting with my girlfriend?” I complained, grabbing Emilia’s hand so I could tow her toward the driver’s side door.

“Can’t,” Rumi said, stashing the bag with ours. “She’s too good for you, Mick. I’m gonna steal her.”

I scoffed as Emilia laughed. It was a familiar argument that none of us took seriously. The chance of my brother trying to make a move on my girl was about as likely as being killed by a falling meteor.

“So, no practice today?” Rumi asked as we headed home. My brother was annoying, but I actually liked when he rode



with us because it meant that Emilia would sit in the middle seat, pressed against me from shoulder to thigh.

“It’s a rare break,” she replied, leaning her head against my arm. “Only a week, though.”

“Damn, girl,” Rumi said, rolling down his window. “You work too hard.”

“Don’t light up in here, man,” I ordered as he reached toward his pocket. “She can’t go home smelling like weed.”

“I rolled the window down!”

“You’re sittin’ right next to her, dipshit.”

“Fine.”

“We’re almost home anyway,” I said, pulling onto our driveway. “Go out back and smoke.”

“Mom’s got a nose like a bloodhound,” Rumi grumbled, using both hands to smooth his hair away from his face. “She’s caught me like seven times.”

“Maybe you should stop smoking?” Emilia asked sarcastically.

“Never,” he shot back. He hopped out of the truck the minute I’d rolled to a stop.

“He’s such a pain in the ass.”

“He’s adorable,” Emilia replied, elbowing me lightly in the side. “He’s like a golden retriever.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked, putting the truck in park. “What am I?”

She tilted her head to the side and stared at me. “A bulldog,” she said finally, her lips twitching.

“Ouch!” I hit the buckles on our seat belts and reached for her, jabbing my fingers into her ribs the way I knew would have her jumping out of her skin.

“Michael,” she screeched, pushing at my hands. Her whole body shook with laughter. “It wasn’t a burn!”

“I am *offended*.” I chased her across the seat as she struggled to escape.

“You’re muscular,” she yelled. “Your shoulders are massive!”

“Well,” I said, pausing. “I like where this is going.” I made a face at her, pushing my bottom jaw forward so it looked like I had a severe underbite.

“Oh, my god,” she said, wheezing. “Quit it.”

“Why?” I asked, spitting a little as I held my jaw forward. “I’m a bulldog.”

“You’re a lunatic,” she argued, scrunching her nose. “But I love you anyway.”

“Good,” I said, smiling down at her. “Cause I’m crazy for you.”

“Or maybe just crazy?”

“Nah, it’s all for you, sugar.”

“Michael Asa Hawthorne,” my mom said, knocking on the window behind me. “Stop molesting that girl in the driveway and come help me with the groceries.”

“Hi, Mrs. Hawthorne,” Emilia said, leaning around me so she could smile at my mom.

“Emmy, if you don’t call me Heather, I’m going to start making you do chores,” my mom replied. “Looking good, sweetheart. Love the hair.”

“Yeah?” Emilia said, reaching up to fix the bangs she’d just cut the night before. “I wasn’t sure—”

“No, it suits your face. Very cute.”

“Thanks,” Emilia said happily.

I sat up and pulled Emilia with me as my mom opened up my door.

“Not sure you should be takin’ hair advice from someone who regularly cuts hers into a mohawk,” I said jokingly,

dodging my mom as she tried to pinch me.

“Yeah, right,” Emilia said as she climbed out behind me. “Your mom always looks awesome.”

“I like her,” my mom said to me. “Make sure you don’t fuck it up.”

Emilia laughed.

“Why would *I* fuck it up?” I asked as I followed them toward my mom’s van. “Maybe it’ll be *Emmy*.”

“Ha!” my mom said, wrapping her arm around Emilia’s waist. “Emmy’s an angel.”

Emilia looked at me over her shoulder and stuck her tongue out.

I grumbled as I grabbed bags of groceries out of the back of the van, but I wasn’t really mad. I actually pretty much loved that Emilia got along with my family so well. It wasn’t a surprise, she got along with everyone and had always been pretty universally liked, but there was something different about how my family treated her. They loved her. It wasn’t conditional on whether or not we were together, we’d had a couple break ups, especially in the beginning before we’d started the whole “tutoring” thing and weren’t able to hang out very much—but they’d treated her the same whether we were off or on.

Emilia’s house wasn’t like ours. Her parents loved her and I didn’t think they’d ever neglected her or hurt her or anything like that... they just expected a lot. When they didn’t get what they wanted or she disappointed them, they iced her out. I always knew when it happened. She’d show up at school quieter than normal or she’d snap at me for something she’d thought was funny the day before, or like this morning, she’d show up with a new hairstyle she’d done herself. I could always tell, though. It was impossible for her to hide anything from me, we knew each other so well.

“Otto was home with a headache today,” my mom said as we headed into the house. “So heads up, he’s in the family

room.”

“Poor guy,” Emilia said quietly. “We’ll keep it down.”

“He’s just watching TV, honey,” Mom said, putting her bags on the counter. “You don’t have to be quiet.”

“He has a hard time sleepin’,” I explained, looking around. “Where the hell is Rumi? Why isn’t he helpin’?”

“I didn’t see him, so I thought he rode the bus?” my mom said in confusion.

“He rode with us,” I replied.

“That little shit,” my mom said, narrowing her eyes. “I bet he’s out back.”

She raced for the back door and I followed her, holding the door open as she tried to close it in my face.

“Mom’s coming, Rum,” I yelled, laughing as she backhanded me in the belly. “The fish flies at midnight! Abort mission! Abort!”

I was still laughing as I shut the door and turned to face Emilia.

“The fish flies at midnight?” she asked in amusement.

“It was one of our code phrases when we were little,” I explained, unpacking and storing shit in the pantry. “There was also, ‘*the blue moon shines in the morning and the archer shoots in darkness.*’”

“You guys were weird,” she said, tossing me a box of cereal.

“You already knew that,” I said with a shrug. “You still want to jump me.”

“All the time,” she said, copying my shrug as she threw another box my way.

“You wanna leave a little early tonight?” I asked, lowering my voice so Otto wouldn’t hear me in the family room.

“If we keep parking at the back of the property at your dad’s club, they’re going to know we’re out there doing stuff,” she said, widening her eyes at me.

She looked so cute and embarrassed that I didn’t have the heart to tell her that everyone knew exactly what we were doing when we went and parked on club property. We had to check in at the fucking gate when we got there, they knew exactly when we came and left. There’d been no shortage of advice, ribbing, and warnings shot my way.

“We could always go down by the river,” I said, grabbing a few more things to put away. “But we’re more likely to see people there.”

“Can I think about it?” she asked, biting the inside of her cheek.

“Sure,” I said, stopping to kiss her. “We don’t have to.”

“I mean, I always *want* to,” she said, smiling up at me. “But one of us has to use a little caution.”

“You know what I like to do with caution?” I asked, my hands sliding down her sides to her ass. “Throw it to the wind.”

“Yeah, I know,” she said with a chuckle.

“Stop playing grab ass,” Rumi said, bursting through the door out of breath. “And thanks for the heads up.”

“Where’s Mom?”

“She chased me through the yard and I locked her in the garage.”

“You did *what?*” Emilia asked in alarm.

“She can get out,” Rumi said with a grin as he hurried through the kitchen. “But by the time she does, I’ll have hidden my stash somewhere she can’t find it.”

“She’s going to murder him,” Emilia said as we watched him run down the hallway.

“Absolutely,” I agreed, letting my hands fall away from her ass. “Come on, we can hang outside once I finish this.”

“You’re a good son,” Emilia said as she helped me. “In here unpacking groceries while one of your brothers lays on the couch and the other hides his drugs from your parents.”

I smiled. “I don’t mind pitchin’ in when I can,” I said, opening up the fridge. “Rumi’s an asshole, but Otto’s probably exhausted. He gets insomnia real bad and sometimes he doesn’t sleep all night. That’s what causes the headaches. He ends up sleepin’ all day.”

“Oh.” Emilia frowned. “Why didn’t I know that?”

“He doesn’t like it when we make a big deal about it, so we don’t,” I said, leaning into the fridge to try to organize the million random containers of leftovers, hot sauce, and food. “Doctors said he’ll probably grow out of it.”

“He thinks I won’t find it,” my mom said, coming in calmly through the kitchen door. “He thinks I’ll forget. But what do I always say, Mick?”

“You’ll remember far longer than we do.”

“That’s right,” she said darkly, looking over at Emilia. “I always remember.”

“What time are Titus and Myla getting home?” I asked her, trying to distract her. “Are you picking them up?”

“They’re riding the bus today,” Mom replied. “And hallelujah for that. I’ve been driving all day.”

“What did you have to do?” I asked as she started helping us unload the groceries.

“I had a doctor’s appointment—and no, you can’t ask for what, some things can be private, thank you very much—and then I had to get the oil changed in my van.”

“Did you take it to the club?” I asked, glancing at her.

“Of course not,” she said with a huff. “I only have a few ways to annoy your dad anymore, and that’s one of them. I

went to one of those drive thru places.”

“He’s going to shit.”

“That’s the point,” she said, grinning like the Joker. “After that, I had to go get some plants for the yard, bring them back here because they filled up the back of the van and then I had to grocery shop. I only beat you guys home by a few minutes.”

“Damn, long day.”

“Watch your mouth around Emmy,” my mom said easily, like she didn’t swear like a sailor herself. “And you haven’t distracted me. Rumi is still going to feel my wrath.”

“Well, at least tell him I tried,” I replied.

“I’m sorry, Emmy,” my mom said, pausing to face Emilia. “I know you probably think we’re lunatics.”

“I think you’re awesome, actually,” Emilia replied sunnily. “Plus, it’s not like I haven’t seen your crazy before.”

Mom laughed. “Amen to that. We can’t keep it a secret around here, that’s for sure.”

“Me and Emilia are going to hang outside,” I said, reaching for her hand.

“Cool,” my mom replied. “Thanks for the help, bud. Could you take the sodas to the outside fridge on your way?”

“No problem.” I dropped Emilia’s hand again so I could grab the boxes of soda. She strode ahead of me and opened the door.

“Oh, I hung up the hammock for you!”

“Sweet,” I said with relish. “Thanks, Ma.”

“I don’t understand why you love the hammock so much,” Emilia said as I put the soda away.

“What’s not to love?” I asked, leading her to the back of the yard. “It’s comfortable and it rocks from side to side. Plus, when you’re in it with me, you have to practically lie on top of me.”

“If I didn’t, you’d squish me to death,” she said reasonably.

“That’s fair,” I said with a huff. “You’re pretty small.”

The sun was behind us, making our shadows stretch out in front. Emilia’s looked like a kid’s.

“Being short is good for gymnastics,” she said, staring at our shadows. “But I’m not going to lie, I’d take a few more inches.”

“That’s what she said.”

“Oh,” she said in mock disgust. “That’s just wrong.”

“What’s wrong, Emilia?” I asked, walking forward to sit down in the hammock that was stretched between two trees. “Wouldn’t you like a couple more inches?”

“Michael,” she hissed like she was scandalized, but her eyes were filled with humor. “A couple more inches would be seriously uncomfortable.”

“You’re good for my ego,” I said, pulling her down with me so we could get situated without flipping the whole thing over.

“I think we fit pretty well, don’t you?” she asked as we settled, her body pressed against the length of mine, her head on my chest.

“In the hammock or in the bed of my truck?” I asked jokingly.

“Well, both I guess.”

“I think we fit in every way possible, sugar,” I said with a sigh, closing my eyes.

“Good, me too.”

We were quiet for a while. It wasn’t getting hot outside yet. Spring was pretty cool in Oregon, but it was a nice day anyway. Between our sweatshirts, body heat, and the sun shining down, it was nice and warm in our little cocoon.



“I’m excited for next year,” Emilia said, tracing patterns on my chest with her finger. “College is going to be so different.”

“You nervous at all?”

“I’m a little nervous about joining the tumbling team. I feel like I need to really earn the scholarship they gave me or they’re going to take it back.”

“You’re goin’ to kick ass.”

“I hope so. I wish you were going with me, though.”

“You know college isn’t really my thing,” I said, running my fingers through her hair. “I like workin’ on bikes and I’m good at it.”

“I know,” she said with a sigh. “Do you think you’ll buy one? A motorcycle?”

I laughed at the hope in her voice. “The minute I turn eighteen,” I confirmed. “Can’t be a prospect without one.”

“You’re going to join for sure?” she asked, looking up at me.

I stared at her for a moment in surprise. “Yeah, sugar,” I said finally. “That’s always been the plan.”

“I guess I just thought we’d have more time.”

“More time for what?” I asked curiously.

“More time to just be us,” she said quietly.

“I’m still gonna be me.” I ran my fingers through her hair. “Just with some more responsibilities and shit.”

“Yeah.” She laid her head back down. “I just wish you were going to school with me. You know, be kids a little longer.”

“I’d be gettin’ into debt for school that isn’t even goin’ to help me at my job,” I countered. I wasn’t sure if I was trying to convince her or myself. I didn’t even want to go to college, and I had other plans to make a living, a good living, but it still

felt weird that she was going to be doing it without me. She was right. Once we graduated, I'd be jumping into my adult life with both feet. For the first time since we'd met, I wouldn't get to see her throughout the day.

"You'll be doing real adult stuff and I'll still be carrying math books around," she joked lightly, mirroring my thoughts.

"You know the best part about that?" I asked.

"What?" She leaned up to look at me resting her chin on my sternum.

"I'm gonna have my own place." I wiggled my eyebrows up and down. "And you can come stay whenever you want."

"You're right," she said with a smile. "As a consolation prize, that one's not so bad."

"It's gonna be good, sugar," I murmured, kissing the top of her head as she lay back down. "You'll be goin' to school so you can get a job and be my sugar mama—"

Emilia giggled.

"And I'll be workin' so we can afford to have a place where we can have sex in an actual bed."

"I wonder what that's like," she muttered dryly.

"I'll show you," I said, the idea of her naked in my bed making me instantly hard. No interruptions. No worries about being caught. Space for activities. I couldn't fucking wait.

"How are you gonna show me?" she asked suspiciously. "How would you know?"

The noise I made was involuntary, half snort half scoff. "You know I ain't been with anyone but you," I said, slapping her ass.

"You better keep it that way."

"I was plannin' on it."

"Good."

"Good."

She was quiet for a moment, but her body was tense and I knew she still had something on her mind. It didn't take long to find out what it was.

“Do you think you'll ever get bored of me?”

I jerked in surprise. “Say what?”

“You know, only being with me. Do you think you'll get bored?”

“Are you bored?” I asked, looking down at her head. Where the hell was this coming from?

“Of course not,” she said, lifting her head to look at me. “Why would you think that?”

“Then why are you asking if I'm gonna get bored?”

“Cause it's different for guys,” she replied, the words almost a whisper. “Like, what if you want someone that looks different or something? Or like, bigger boobs. Maybe you'll want to see what's out there.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“You don't know that,” she replied.

“Yeah, I do,” I said, curling my arm under my head as I stared at the sky. “Why would I want anyone but you? I love you. You get me. Plus, you're hot as fuck and you can put your legs behind your head.”

“You're not being serious,” she replied flatly, dropping her head back down against my chest.

“I am, though,” I said, giving her ass a squeeze. “I can't imagine wantin' to be with anyone but you, sugar. That's the honest truth. Don't need anythin' else, don't want anythin' else.”

“High school relationships never last,” she said quietly.

“Sometimes they do,” I replied. “We'll be the exception, yeah?”

“I hope so.”

“I know so.”

“How are you so—” She paused and huffed. “So calm about it?”

“I don’t see why you’re so worried about it.” I tipped my head back down. “You’re goin’ to school right down the road. We’ve known each other forever. You know my family and I’ve, uh, *seen* yours.”

She laughed a little.

“We’re solid.”

“People change a lot before they’re twenty-five,” she argued. “What if we’re completely different people?”

“Then I guess I’ll have to love whoever you are when you’re twenty-five,” I said with a chuckle. “You’re overthinkin’ it. We’ll be together, we’ll change together, it’ll all be good, alright?”

“Alright.”

“Emmy!” a high voice yelled from across the yard. “You’re here!”

“Myla!” Emilia yelled back, popping her head out of the hammock to see my little sister. “I am!”

“Ooh, I love your hair!”

“Thanks! I like your braids!”

“Your shirt is pretty.”

“So is yours.”

“Jesus,” I muttered. “Wrap it up, Compliment Cathys.”

“I made a huge mural at school about the Revolutionary War and I had to bring it home on the *bus*,” Myla announced as she reached us, grabbing a hold of the side of the hammock. “It’s so cool. I did all of the big battles on like, a timeline I couldn’t put all the small skirmishes because I didn’t have room, plus who knows how many there actually *were*.” She

was talking so fast that she had to pause to take in an audible gulp of air. “*And* I drew pictures. Can I sit with you guys?”

“Hell no,” I replied instantly.

Emilia’s elbow dug into my side. “I don’t think you’ll fit,” she said apologetically.

“Want to come see my mural? I’m going to hang it up in the dining room. You can help if you want? My mom said she’d help but she hangs everything crooked.”

Emilia looked at me, trying to hold back her laughter. My sister was a lot on a good day, and today she was going for the gold.

“Go. Hang with my baby sister.” I shifted so she could slide out of the hammock. “We’ve got plenty of hammock time coming up.”

“Summer,” Emilia said happily.

“Only a couple more weeks and then we’re gonna spend all day in this thing.”

“Maybe not *all* day,” she replied as she stood up.

“*All* day,” I countered, grabbing her wrist before she could walk away. She leaned down to kiss me while Myla made vomit noises.

“I’ll be right back,” Emilia said apologetically against my lips.

“I’ll be here,” I replied. “No worries, sugar, you got the rest of your life to hang with me in the hammock.”

“Promise?”

“One hundred percent,” I replied, letting her go.

# CHAPTER 1

## EMILIA

“DON’T KICK THE seat,” I warned as my two-year-old son fussed in the back seat.

It was nearly midnight and we’d been on the road since we finished dinner. We were both so sick of the car that I wished I could throw a fit, too. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the luxury. After driving all over the western states, we were finally close to our final destination. Only an hour until we got into town and I could find a hotel for the night.

Relief at the thought of finally stopping somewhere warred with the feeling of dread and anxiety in my belly. After nearly three years away, I was finally going home to Eugene. I was looking forward to showing Rhett the place where I grew up, the parks I played at, and the house we’d lived in with the tire swing in the backyard. With every mile that brought us closer to our destination, the sense of *home* grew.

“I want out,” Rhett yelled, kicking the back of the seat. “Out!”

“Rhett,” I called, glancing at him in the rearview mirror. “Stop kicking the seat, bud. We’re almost there.”

“Out.”

“We’ll be there soon.”

He stopped kicking the seat, but his scowl was clear in the mirror.

“Thank you.”

“All done,” he grumbled, pressing against his shoulder straps like he was going to Hulk out of the seat.

“Sorry, bud,” I said with a grimace. “I know you are. Where’s your toys?”

“Don’t know.”

He was silent for a few minutes, pouting, but eventually he must’ve found a toy because he quietly started making car noises.

The signs grew more familiar the closer we got to town. I remembered each of the exits off the freeway and where they went, but I wondered what I’d find if I took them. How much had changed in six years? I wished that I could’ve explored for a while before I went home, but with Rhett in the back seat and my checking account quickly dwindling, I didn’t have the luxury.

By the time we pulled into a motel right off the freeway, Rhett had fallen asleep in the back seat and my shoulders were so tense it felt like they were permanently stuck up next to my ears. I parked and grabbed Rhett’s limp frame out of his car seat and lugged him into the main lobby. He was getting so big that it was a struggle to carry him anymore if he wasn’t clinging like a monkey, but I didn’t mind.

“Looks like you got your hands full,” the lady at the front desk said, smiling.

I let out a breath of relief. I’d met quite a few creepers when checking in to discount motels. After dark seemed to be the worst time for it. Men saw a woman and a baby and automatically thought we were easy prey or that I was looking for some kind of savior.

“We just need a room for the night,” I said, shifting Rhett to one arm so I could get into my purse. “Your vacancy sign is lit.”

“Plenty of rooms available,” she said, looking at her computer as she nodded. “One bed okay?”

“That’s perfect.”

“Okay, good,” she said, winking at me. “The single beds are cheaper. Oh, and I see you’re a road rewards member! Good news, that gives you a discount.”

I had no clue what a road rewards member was, but I wasn’t going to argue if it was going to save me money. Hell, I’d tap dance on the desk if she told me it would save me a few bucks.

I watched her for a few moments. “Do you think I could pay in cash?” I asked, biting the inside of my cheek. Usually, the hotels didn’t let you pay in cash. They had to have a credit card on file in case you trashed the room—but that was the thing—I didn’t want any digital record of my stay. Not this close to home.

“You okay, hun?” she asked, glancing behind me at the door.

“I’d just rather not use a credit card,” I said, smiling weakly.

She looked at me and then down at Rhett. “Okay,” she said with a firm nod. “Now don’t be tellin’ anyone, but for you, we’ll make an exception—just this once.”

“Thank you so much,” I said, trying and failing to hide my relief.

After signing in and giving her the cash, she hurried around the desk to open the front door for me. “Now, your room’s just a couple doors down from the lobby, hun,” she said, pointing. “So you don’t have to go carrying that boy through the dark parking lot.”

“Thank you so much,” I said, the words catching a little in my throat. When was the last time a person had done something kind for me? I couldn’t remember.

The lady just smiled. “Check out is at eleven, so you make sure you’re all cleared out, alright? If you’re not, they’ll charge you for a whole ’nother day.”

“I’ll be out before eleven,” I agreed.



Using what was left of my energy, I grabbed our overnight bag from the car and locked it up. Desk lady was right, our room was only two doors down from the lobby, and I quickly carried Rhett inside, closing and locking the door behind us. I dropped onto the bed and slumped with exhaustion, Rhett's head lolling against my shoulder.

God, I was so fucking tired. At least, I knew, when we arrived tomorrow, I'd have a minute to take a breath. We'd been on the road for so long that the days had started to blend together. Even when I slept, I seemed to be somewhat conscious, aware of every sound in our rooms and the parking lots beyond. I couldn't turn it off, not yet. I had to keep an eye on everything. I was in charge. It was all up to me.

"All done?" Rhett asked groggily.

"Just got to our room, baby boy," I said, kissing his forehead. "You ready to brush your teeth and get in jammies?"

"No," he whined, his fists gripping my shirt.

I debated internally for only a moment before answering.

"We can do them in the morning. Do you need to go potty?" I asked, getting to my feet.

He shook his head and burrowed further into me. I debated waking him fully just to be sure, but decided against it almost immediately. Potty training was practically impossible when you were on the road, and what little progress we'd made before we left had pretty much disappeared. I was too tired to deal with it.

By the time I'd pulled down the bedding and set him in the sheets he was already fully asleep again. I didn't even bother with the pajamas, just stripped him down to his pull up and a t-shirt and tucked him in with his blanket.

That stupid blanket. I'd forgotten it in a hotel in Utah and we'd had to backtrack three hours to go back and pick it up. It was pink and ratty and frayed and had holes all around the edges, but he loved it. When he was a toddler, I'd tried to switch it out to something newer, but it was no use—he

wanted the same blanket that I'd had on my bed through my entire childhood.

As soon as Rhett was settled, I went into the bathroom, leaving the door open so I could take a quick shower and brush my own teeth. I just knew that the next morning my little bundle of energy would be bouncing off the walls and I wouldn't have a moment to myself to pee, much less shower and blow-dry my hair. I was dead on my feet as I finally shuffled to the bed and climbed in beside Rhett. It only took seconds for me to fall into the half-conscious sleep that I was getting used to.

The next morning I woke up to Rhett's face just inches from mine.

"Mama, wake up?" he whispered, eyes wide.

"Yeah, Mama's awake," I murmured, groaning as I stretched.

"More," he said, his face still inches from mine. "Rhett hungry."

"You're hungry?" I replied in mock surprise as I sat up. "No way."

"Yes way," Rhett countered, his tone an almost perfect match to mine.

"Why don't we get dressed?" I pulled him onto my lap. "And then when we get in the car, I'll find you a breakfast bar."

"Hungry."

"Yes, I know," I mused, setting him on his feet. "You want to try and go potty? Your pull up is still dry."

"No," he replied easily, wandering off to check out the hotel room.

"You ready to see where me and Grandpa and Grandma used to live?" I asked, getting to my feet.

“Grandma,” he murmured, pulling at the nightstand drawer.

“Yup.” I got ready quickly while Rhett was occupied, and when I came out of the bathroom he was standing by the door.

“Ready,” he announced.

“Let’s get some pants on first, yeah?” I said with a laugh. “You’ll be cold if you don’t put some clothes on.”

“Ready,” he replied stubbornly, staying by the door.

“Come on, buddy,” I said, ignoring the mutinous look on his face. “We’ll hurry.”

He sighed heavily, making my mouth twitch in amusement, and stomped toward me. “Clothes on.”

“You want to wear your car shirt?” I asked, letting him pull it out of my hand while I searched for some pants. “That one’s your favorite, huh?”

“Car shirt,” he said, hugging it. I’d had to ration the amount he wore it because I was so afraid that he’d wear it out before he was ready to give it up. Kind of like his blanket.

“Rhett, grab your blanket right now and bring it to Mama, okay?”

“Okay,” he said immediately. He wasn’t taking any chances that we’d leave it behind again.

Fifteen minutes later, we were stepping out of our motel room and into the cool spring sunshine.

“Cold, Mama,” Rhett said in confusion, looking up at the sun through his sunglasses.

“It doesn’t get hot here until the summer, buddy,” I replied, resettling him on my hip. Even after almost two weeks of no problems, my eyes still scanned the parking lot, watching for anything out of place.

“Brr.”

“Right now it’s spring,” I said as I unlocked the car and threw our bag on the back seat. “And spring is cold in Oregon.”

I kept up a running conversation as I buckled him into his seat and grabbed him a breakfast bar and a water bottle. I’d done it since he was a baby, discussing things that were way outside of his understanding, describing what we were doing, pointing out things I thought would interest him. I wasn’t sure why I did it, maybe because I’d never really had anyone else to talk to. As he got older, he replied to most things I said, even if he wasn’t sure what I was talking about. I liked to think that was why his vocabulary was so good, because I never shut up.

“Thank you,” he said as I finally finished describing the Oregon weather.

“You’re welcome,” I said, brushing his hair away from his face. “You know, you’re my best friend.”

“My best friend,” he replied happily, smiling with breakfast bar in his teeth.

“Just another short drive, and we’ll be there.”

I closed his door and hurried around the car, checking on him in the mirror as soon as I’d sat down again.

“Little bites, Rhett,” I reminded him. “Chew it up good, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Um, no,” I said, pausing to watch him as he took a huge bite. “Small bites.”

“’mall bites,” he agreed.

“Try again.”

The bite he took was so small, I doubted he could even taste it.

“Thank you.” I backed out of my parking spot and drove out of the lot, my eyes half on the road and half on Rhett. I

knew I shouldn't be letting him eat in the car, but I'd had to relax on some of my own rules while we were traveling. If we'd stopped for him every time he had to eat, we'd still be somewhere in California.

"All done," Rhett said with a sigh as he looked out his window.

"We won't be in the car that long, bud," I assured him, getting onto the freeway.

"No car, please," he whined. He'd finished his breakfast bar already and was no longer distracted.

I grimaced. "Just look out the windows, bud," I said. "There's all sorts of stuff to see."

"Rhett *all done*," he complained. Then, blessed silence filled the car.

I glanced at him to make sure he was okay, then smiled a little to myself as I found a familiar radio station. There was something about the stations of your childhood that just stuck with you. No matter where I lived, I always remembered the stations we had in Eugene. It was going to be a long day, but the nostalgia of the familiar music was a balm.

"That's it," I said about ten minutes later, parked in front of my childhood home. It looked smaller than I remembered.

"Grandma's house?" Rhett asked, straining toward his window.

"Yeah, that was my house when I was little like you," I replied. "I lived there with Grandma and Grandpa."

"Go," he wheedled, pulling on his shoulder straps. "Me go."

"We can go look," I said with a smile as I turned the car off. "But just from the outside, okay?"

"Okay!"

"You need to stay with Mama," I warned as I got him out of his seat. "No running away."

“No runnin’ away,” he repeated.

“And you have to hold my hand.”

“Grandma,” he said as he gripped my hand. “Grandma house.”

“Yeah, this was Grandma’s old house.” We walked forward to the edge of the yard and peeked over the fence.

“Me go,” Rhett said excitedly, pulling at my shirt so I’d lift him up to see.

“No, buddy, we can’t go in there,” I said, my heart thundering in my throat as I took in the familiar backyard. It was stupid, it was just a hammock—a million people had one—but something about it hanging there, swinging slightly in the breeze made me homesick for the past.

“Grandma,” Rhett ordered, wiggling on my hip. “Grandma’s house.”

It was then that I realized my serious royal fuck up. My chest ached as Rhett looked toward the front of the house, wiggling to get down. He thought my mom was in there.

“Grandma’s not here, buddy,” I said gently as I carried him back to the car. “This was my house when I was little. It’s someone else’s house now.”

“No, Grandma’s house,” Rhett yelled, trying to jerk out of my arms, looking at the house over my shoulder.

“It’s not—” I said, stopping when I realized he wouldn’t understand no matter how many times I said it. “Grandma’s not there, Rhett.”

“Grandma,” he said, resting his head on my shoulder. He sniffled and I swallowed against the lump in my throat. “Grandpa?”

“Grandpa’s not there, either, pal,” I said softly, rocking him from side to side. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, the words muffled against my neck.

“It’s going to be okay,” I murmured. “I promise.”

“My best friend,” he replied quietly.

“Well, that’s good,” I teased as I put him back in his seat. “Because you’re *my* best friend. You ready for the next stop?”

“No car,” he said with a sigh, letting me buckle him.

“It’s not too far,” I said, my stomach twisting with memories and anxiety. “Only a few minutes and then you can run around and play, okay?”

“Okay.” He didn’t sound like he believed me, and I wasn’t surprised. I’d been dragging him along with the assurance that we’d *be there soon* and *just a little longer* for days. He was over it, and frankly, so was I.

The drive was only a few minutes, just like I’d told Rhett, but it felt like a lifetime. Memories of driving the exact same route hit me like a sledgehammer and by the time we were driving slowly up the gravel driveway, I felt like at any moment I was going to burst into hysterical laughter or vomit.

“Trees?” Rhett asked excitedly, pointing out his window.

“We’ve been surrounded by trees since we got to Oregon,” I said with a laugh.

“Lots trees.”

“Yeah, there are a lot of trees.” I looked out the windshield, marveling at the changes and all the things that had stayed the same. The front door was painted red now, and there was a huge pot next to it that was filled with plants of every color. It looked good there. The roof was a different color, they must’ve redone it. They’d changed the landscaping at the front of the house, it was more polished than it had been the last time I’d seen it. Fancier.

“Out?” Rhett asked.

“Sure,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Just a sec and I’ll come get ya.”

I straightened my shoulders and opened my door, knowing that at least one person was looking out the window to see who was in their driveway. When you lived in town, you got used to people driving past or parking at the sidewalk. You didn't even really notice it after a while. But when you lived on a piece of property, there wasn't a reason for someone to be in front of your house unless they were there to see you. A car in your driveway was always noticeable.

I strode around the car, keeping my eyes off the front of the house.

"Okay," I said, brushing Rhett's hair out of his face. "You ready?"

"Yeah." He swung his feet with impatience.

"Best behavior, alright?" I said as I got him out and set him on his feet. "Use your manners."

"Manners," he agreed, looking around me at the house.

"Let's go, then," I said, grabbing his hand.

He walked next to me like it was the most normal thing in the world to visit some random stranger's house in the middle of the woods. I swear nothing ever fazed Rhett. He was happily taking everything in when the door opened and a familiar face came into focus.

"Emmy?" Myla said in disbelief. Her eyes grew wide as she looked at me and then down at Rhett. For a few seconds she gaped like a goldfish, then turned to look over her shoulder. "Mom, you better get out here!"

"Hey Myla," I said, smiling halfheartedly. I knew it was weird that I was there, and I knew they were all probably pretty angry with me and would be even angrier by the end of the day, but it was still so wonderful to see her. She was beautiful. I'd known when she was just an awkward little kid that she would be.

"What's wrong?" her mom asked, coming up behind her. As she passed Myla to look out the door, her hand shot up to



cover her mouth. “Holy fucking shit.”

“Hey, Mrs. Hawthorne,” I said awkwardly as Rhett wrapped his arms around my thigh and leaned his head against my hip. “It’s been a while.”

“Holy fucking shit,” she whispered again, her eyes on Rhett.

“Mama, up,” Rhett whispered, his body practically vibrating with tension.

I hefted my son onto my hip, but that was the only movement in the front of the house until someone else poked his head over Mrs. Hawthorne’s shoulder.

“He doesn’t live here anymore,” the teenage boy said flatly, his eyes on me.

It took a moment to realize who it was. “Otto?” I stuttered in disbelief. He was huge, even bigger than Michael had been at his age. “What are they feeding you?” I asked stupidly.

“Literally everything,” Myla said dryly, sidestepping as Otto tried to swat at her from behind his mother.

“Mama go? Rhett go?” Rhett asked. He pressed his face against my neck.

“Holy fucking shit,” Mrs. Hawthorne said one last time as she came down the steps. Within seconds, she’d wrapped her arms around me and Rhett both, pulling us in for a tight hug. “Oh, sweetheart. I was so worried about you.”

I shuddered at the feel of her arms around me. I’d been waiting years for that particular feeling.

“Looks like she’s just fine to me,” Otto said from the doorway. He was leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Shut up, Otto,” Myla hissed.

“You’re okay?” Mrs. Hawthorne asked, leaning back to look in my face.

“I’m okay,” I said quietly.

“And who’s this?” she asked, taking a step back.

“This is Rhett,” I said, my voice wobbling just a little.

“Who’s the dad?” Otto asked sarcastically.

“Otto William,” Mrs. Hawthorne snapped, swinging her head around to glare at her son. “If you don’t go inside right now, I’m going to let *your brother* deal with you when he gets here.”

“He’s not gonna—” Otto’s mouth snapped shut at whatever he saw on his mom’s face. Without another word, he spun and disappeared inside.

“Ignore Otto,” Mrs. Hawthorne said, her voice soft as she spoke to Rhett. “He’s like a grumpy bear with a thorn in his paw.”

“Bear?” Rhett asked, his head turning just a little so he could look at her with his forehead still tucked into my neck.

“Yep, he’s just like a bear.” Mrs. Hawthorne said. “A stinky, grumpy bear.”

“Huh,” Myla mused from the porch. “That’s a good description of Otto.”

“You guys want to come inside?” Mrs. Hawthorne asked tentatively, taking her eyes off Rhett for only a second to glance at me. “We’ve got snacks and drinks.”

She grimaced at me and spoke to Rhett. “You thirsty? Want some juice?”

“I bet he’d love some,” I said, smiling at her. Rhett rarely got anything except water or milk. “You want some juice, Rhett?”

“Yes,” he said, lifting his head up.

“Come on in,” Mrs. Hawthorne said, leading the way. “We have all different kinds.”

I followed her into the house and got a flash of déjà vu as we walked through the living room and into the kitchen. Everything was the same. They had a new couch, but it was in the same place. The blankets were different colors, but they were still draped messily over the furniture. The photos on the walls had been added to, but the old ones were still there. The table in the entryway had been painted, but the shape was familiar. There were backpacks stacked on the bench near the door, and for an instant, I could see my purple one from high school in the pile.

“Myla, can you get Rhett some juice?” she asked. “Use one of the sippy cups, okay?” She glanced at me. “I’ll be right back.”

“Sure,” Myla said, heading for the kitchen door. “What kind do you guys like? We’ve got everything.”

“Nothing for me,” I said, wishing I could put Rhett down so I could rub my sweaty palms on my jeans. “But thank you.”

“Do you like orange juice?” Myla asked.

“Apple juice,” Rhett replied shyly.

“It’s his favorite.” I bounced Rhett a little on my arm. “What do you say, Rhett?”

“Please.”

“Got it,” she said. “Be right back.”

She stepped outside and the gravity of the situation settled into the pit of my stomach. I knew with absolute certainty that Mrs. Hawthorne had gone to call her husband and probably Michael, too. She was telling them to get their asses home. She was telling them that I’d shown up out of the blue with a little bruise on my hip that looked just like Michael. She was

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“Okay, I got you an iced coffee even though you said you didn’t want anything,” Myla said as she stepped back inside. “I figured you wouldn’t want a beer since you’re driving, so caffeine would have to do.”

“How long have I been gone?” I asked ruefully, shaking my head.

“Hey, I might only be ten, but I know what’s up.”

“I can see that,” I said as Rhett straightened his body, trying to get down. I set him on his feet.

“You should probably drink this at the table,” Myla said to Rhett, setting down the sippy cup. “So you don’t spill it.”

“Go ahead, bud,” I said, pressing on his back a little to get him moving. As soon as he climbed onto the chair, I stood behind him, running my fingers through his hair.

“I like apple juice, too,” Myla said, sitting down in the chair across from him. “But my favorite is pineapple. Do you like pineapple juice?”

Rhett looked up at me.

“I don’t think he’s ever had any.” I smiled. She was exactly how I remembered her, and I felt something inside me settle at the knowledge. For some reason, Myla’s chatter made me feel like I’d made the right move coming here.

“Oh, man.” Myla sighed dramatically. “It’s the best. Next time, you’ll have to try it. I bet you’ll love it.”

“Apple Rhett’s favorite,” Rhett said happily, taking a drink of his juice.

“Good choice, Rhett,” Myla replied. “Did you know that pineapples grow on plants? Most people think they grow on trees like apples, but they don’t.”

Rhett shook his head and I knew he was only grasping about half of what she said, but he was riveted.

“I’m back,” Mrs. Hawthorne said, gliding into the kitchen. “You got your drinks? Are you hungry?”

Rhett looked up at me questioningly and I nodded.

“Hungry,” he said quietly.

“Well, then we’ll have to get you something to eat. What do you like?”

“Apples,” Rhett replied.

“Maybe something easier,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder.

“I have crackers,” Mrs. Hawthorne said with a smile. “Do you like crackers? And maybe some grapes?”

“Crackers,” Rhett said with a nod.

“What do you say, bud?” I whispered.

“Please.”

“You have very nice manners,” Mrs. Hawthorne said as she handed Rhett a few crackers. “Myla, you want to wash some grapes for me?”

“Okay,” Myla said, getting up from the table.

“Hey, Myla,” I called, feeling completely uncomfortable but unable to stop myself. “Could you cut those grapes in quarters?”

“I’m an idiot,” Mrs. Hawthorne said ruefully.

“No,” I argued instantly. “No, I’m just overprotective. I’m always afraid he’ll choke.”

“That’s not overprotective, just smart!” Mrs. Hawthorne said, smiling at Rhett. “Your mom knows what she’s doing.”

We were all kind of just standing around while my son chowed down on his grapes when Mr. Hawthorne strode through the kitchen door, coming to an abrupt halt when he saw me.

“Well, hell,” he said, sounding surprised even though Mrs. Hawthorne had to have warned him. “Good to see you, kid.”

“You, too,” I murmured. He must have come straight from work because he was wearing a greasy t-shirt. He’d also obviously left there in a hurry because while he’d cleaned his

hands and wrists thoroughly, there was still black grease starting about halfway up his forearms.

“Holy Christ,” he muttered as Rhett turned to look at him.

“This is Rhett,” I said, setting my hand gently on the top of his head.

“*Not* the second coming,” Mrs. Hawthorne joked.

“You’re not funny,” Mr. Hawthorne snapped, but there was no heat in the words.

“Just trying to lighten the mood,” she said a bit nervously.

Mr. Hawthorne shook his head. “It’s nice to meet ya, Rhett,” he said, his eyes on my boy. “I’m afraid the mood ain’t gonna get any lighter. Mick’s—”

“Right behind you,” Myla said helpfully.

My eyes shot up above Mr. Hawthorne’s shoulder and my belly swooped in a way it hadn’t in nearly three years. My skin tingled, my mouth watered and I could hear my heartbeat in my ears as his eyes met mine.

Then everything inside me stilled as his eyes traveled down my arm to where my fingers tangled in Rhett’s hair, his eyes widened, and he lost his balance, stumbling into the doorframe.

## CHAPTER 2

### MICHAEL

I HADN'T QUITE believed it when my dad came to let me know that Emilia had shown up at their house out of the blue. I knew it wasn't something he'd lie about—what would be the point of that? I just couldn't really wrap my head around it. I hadn't seen or heard from her in three fucking years.

One day we'd been happy as hell floating down the river in a couple of inner tubes and the next, she'd just vanished. No phone call. No letter. Nothing. Her parents had just packed her up and left for parts unknown. The only reason we'd known they weren't dead in a ditch somewhere was the fact that a local realtor my dad knew had spent the rest of the summer selling their house.

So, while I'd recognized the old Subaru parked in front of my parents' house, I was still fucking stunned when I stepped inside the kitchen and there she was, standing by the table as if no time had passed. Her hair was longer than I'd ever seen it and her face had thinned out, making her eyes seem even bigger than they'd been before—but it was her. I'd know her anywhere.

I glanced down her body instinctively, both calculating the changes and making sure she was in one piece, but stopped short at her hip. A little face peeked around the chair next to her and it felt like my legs had turned to water beneath me. I stumbled to the side, bouncing off the doorframe.

“Michael.” She stepped forward in concern then paused as I regained my footing.

“What the hell?” I breathed, staring at that little face.

It was like being transported back in time and looking into a mirror.

“This is Rhett,” Emilia said. She was going for confident, and it probably would’ve worked if her voice hadn’t shook.

“Hi, Rhett,” I stuttered, still completely disoriented. He looked so much like me. He had to be mine, right? Of course he was. He looked the right age.

“You wanna sit before you fall?” my dad asked quietly.

I took a step forward and then stopped myself. I wanted to touch him. Run my hand over his hair, down his arms. I wanted to hold him, but he was still nervously peeking around the chair and I knew that without a doubt if I did any of that I would freak him out.

Did he bite his nails? He looked tall. How tall was he when he was standing up?

“Hi,” Rhett said softly, his thumb going into his mouth.

“I’m—” I floundered. Did I tell him my name? How did you introduce yourself to your own fucking son?

“He knows who you are,” Emilia said, running her hand over his head the way I wanted to. “Don’t you, Rhett?”

He looked up at Emilia in confusion before looking back at me. She crouched down next to him and turned his chair so they were both facing me.

“You know him,” she said gently as they both stared up at me. “Look at his face, baby. *Who is that?*”

Rhett’s mouth dropped open in excited recognition and his head whipped to the side to look at his mom. “Daddy?”

“That’s him,” she confirmed, her eyes on our son.

“Big,” Rhett whispered, making my dad chuckle.

“I told you he was big. That’s why you’re so tall,” she said with a smile, poking him in the side. “And you have the same brown eyes.”



“Hi,” Rhett said again, looking back at me.

“Hi, buddy,” I rasped. I knew I should do something. Say something. But it felt like the world had suddenly shifted and I was trying to figure out how to keep standing. My skin felt hot. The air in the room seemed too thin.

I moved forward and crouched a few feet from him.

“You havin’ a snack?” I said dumbly, running my hand over my beard. Fuck, I hadn’t even looked in a mirror before I’d left the shop. I probably looked like a goddamn madman with my hair flying all over the place.

“Yeah, snack,” he replied easily.

“I told you we were going to see your daddy,” Emilia said, putting her hand on his back.

“Daddy,” Rhett repeated, reaching forward to touch my beard. He snatched his hand back quickly and leaned against Emilia.

“It’s gettin’ kind of long,” I said, reaching up to tug on my beard.

Rhett just looked at me, swinging his legs a little.

“It’s really nice to meet you,” I whispered. “You’re so big.”

“I’m two,” Rhett replied around the thumb in his mouth. It took me a second to decipher what he’d said.

“You’re two?” I dropped my mouth open in surprise. “Whoa. You’ll be driving a car soon.”

“No car,” Rhett said, his nose wrinkling.

“He’s sick of the car,” Emilia explained with an embarrassed huff of laughter. “I don’t really blame him. It was a long drive.”

Suddenly, and without warning, I felt like I was going to blubber like a baby. How long of a drive was it? Where had they been?

“Car shirt,” Rhett told me, raising his eyebrows as he pointed to his chest. It sounded like he was saying *car shit*, and I couldn’t help the smile that pulled at my lips.

“That’s a very cool shirt.”

“It’s his favorite,” Emilia said, sounding as shaken as I was.

“You car shirt?” Rhett asked, pulling his thumb out of his mouth.

“I don’t have a car shirt.” I shook my head. “But I have a couple motorcycle shirts.”

“Motorcycle,” Rhett replied, his eyes lighting up. He made a sound that was remarkably similar to the roar of Harley pipes.

“Whoa, man,” I said, falling back on my heels, making him giggle. He made the sound again. “You’re good at that!”

“Yeah, he likes motorcycles,” Emilia murmured. “Don’t you, Rhett?”

“No surprise there,” my mom said, her voice trembling.

“Mom, I need to do some laundry. I’m not goin’ to the laundromat again. The little old ladies always hit on me, and I’m startin’ to have a hard time fightin’ them off—” Rumi called out from the front of the house. “Who’s car is out front? I swear it looks just like the one—”

He came to a stunned stop as he reached the kitchen, his mouth dropping open in surprise. “Emilia?”

“Hey, Rum,” Emilia said, straightening up. “How’ve you been?”

“Holy shit,” he shouted, dropping the garbage bag of laundry as he lurched for her. He didn’t hesitate for a second before wrapping her up in a bear hug and spinning her around in a circle. “Where the hell have you been, sprite?”

“That’s a good question,” I said. I didn’t want to touch her, but the ease in which he’d done it made something like

jealousy flare hot in my chest.

Rumi looked down at me and then at Rhett, and dropped Emilia abruptly onto her feet again.

“Who are you?” he asked Rhett in confusion.

Rhett immediately clammed up and his thumb went back into his mouth.

“You had a kid,” my brother said dumbly, his tone still incredulous.

“This is Rhett,” Emilia confirmed softly.

“Hey Rhett,” Rumi said, still staring at my son. “I’m Rumi.”

“Rumi,” Rhett mumbled, tipping his head back to look at his mom.

“Yep, that’s your name, too, huh?” Her eyes met mine and she looked away quickly. “Can you say your whole name?”

“Rhett Michael Rumi *Hawtorne*,” Rhett said. He’d clearly practiced it.

Emilia nodded. “Rhett Michael Rumi Hawthorne.”

“You named him after me?” Rumi asked in disbelief.

Emilia shrugged and reached up to brush her hair out of her face. She looked embarrassed.

The room was silent and when Rhett reached for Emilia, she immediately lifted him into her arms. As he pressed his face into her neck, she tilted her head down by his, whispered something I couldn’t hear.

“It’s just a little overwhelming,” she said to the room apologetically, rubbing our son’s back.

He was so tall that his feet hung halfway to her knees.

“I know the feeling,” I muttered, running my hand down my face.

“Michael—” she said softly.

I cut her off with a jerk of my head. I didn't want to talk to her. Not yet. I didn't want to hear any excuse or explanation; I didn't want to deal with any of it—not now. Not when I was looking at the cowlick on the back of my son's head for the first time.

I didn't have the bandwidth to deal with anything else. Just him.

“Why don't I order us some lunch,” my mom said, her eyes on Emilia. “You guys are staying for lunch?”

Every muscle in my body tightened. No fucking way was she leaving. The tension in the room skyrocketed.

“Sure, we can stay for lunch,” Emilia replied.

“Hey, Rhett,” my baby sister called, striding through the room until she was at Emilia's shoulder. “You wanna go play outside with me for a while?”

“Outside?” Rhett asked, his voice muffled.

“Yep,” Myla replied. “There's all sorts of things to do out there.”

“Maybe you guys should stay inside,” I said automatically. I didn't want him out of my sight, not yet. Embarrassment hit like a brick to the face when I met Emilia's gaze.

“I'll watch him really close,” Myla said as Rhett reached for her. “I promise.”

Emilia bit the inside of her cheek.

“She's been keeping an eye on all the littles for a couple of years,” my mom assured Emilia. “He'll be safe with her.”

“Okay,” Emilia conceded. She didn't seem sure, but she allowed it. “Here, baby, put your sunglasses on.”

As soon as they'd left the house, the five adults stood there in silence.

“We have a lot to talk about,” Emilia said softly.

She was talking to me, but I couldn't even look at her. Now that Rhett was out of earshot and I didn't have to regulate what I said and did, every emotion was bubbling to the surface. Anger, disbelief, shame, elation and surprisingly, relief, warred with each other until my stomach churned with nausea.

"You've got a lot of explainin' to do," my dad said, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned back against the counter.

"I know," she said.

I still couldn't look at her.

"I don't think you do," Dad replied. He looked at my mom for a moment then sighed. "But before you get into it all, want you to know, you've always been welcome in this house and you'll always be welcome in this house."

"Thank you." It sounded like Emilia was crying, but I was so focused on keeping everything leashed that I still didn't look at her.

"Well, that's bullshit," my little brother Otto said from the hallway. "She took off, let her stay gone."

"Shut the fuck up, Otto," I barked.

"She took off and stole your kid," Otto said, staring at me incredulously.

"It's not that simple, Otto," Emilia said.

"Don't talk to me," he replied flatly.

"Another word and we're gonna have problems," my dad said darkly, making Otto spin on his heel and leave the room again.

"It's okay," Emilia murmured. "I get why he's mad."

"Don't think mad is an accurate descriptor," Rumi said in a tone he'd never used with Emilia before.

"I—"

“You can feel however you want, Rumi,” my mom said. “So can Otto. But this is between Mick and Emilia.”

“Because none of the rest of us were worried as hell when she took off?” Rumi barked. “Because none of us went looking for her and calmed Mick down when—”

“Because they share a son and nothing is more important than that,” my mom replied, cutting him off mid sentence. “I’m going to go call in some Chinese food. Does Rhett have any allergies?”

“No,” Emilia replied, the word barely audible.

Rumi stared at Emilia. “I can’t believe you had a baby, and you never—”

“No, son,” my dad ordered, cutting Rumi off. “Got time for that later. Come on, let’s give them a minute.”

He shoved Rumi out of the room and suddenly it was just me and Emilia.

“I’m so sorry, Michael,” she said softly, the words like nails on a chalkboard. “I don’t have any excuses. I—we’re here now, though.”

“You’re here now?” I asked, deliberately keeping my voice low so little ears outside wouldn’t catch it. “Are you fuckin’ kiddin’ me?”

“I did the best I could with the options I had,” she said stubbornly.

“He’s two years old!” I stared at her.

I *knew* her. I knew the way she moved and the way she laughed and the freckle on the bottom of her left foot. I knew how she ate her hamburgers and the feel of the callus on her middle finger where she held a pen. I knew it all. I’d seen every emotion cross her face, every bad haircut she’d ever had. Hell, she’d borrowed my sweatshirt when she’d had her first period in sixth grade and bled through her pants. I *knew* her, and yet looking at her now felt like I was looking at a fucking stranger.

“I can tell you all of it,” she said, moving toward me. “I know that you won’t forgive me, but maybe it’ll explain a little why—” She reached out to touch my arm and without thought, I knocked it away.

“You get kidnapped?” I asked, staring at her. “Been held in a hole the last three years?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head.

“Amnesia?”

“No, I—”

“Witness protection?”

“No, I wasn’t in witness protection,” she replied, exasperated. “Would you let me speak?”

“I already know how it played out,” I said with a huff. And I did. I knew exactly what had happened. I would’ve bet every dime I had on it.

“Sure,” she said sarcastically. “After ten minutes with us, you just know everything.”

“Not everything,” I ground out. “When is his birthday?”

“February sixteenth,” she said, straightening her shoulders. “He just missed Valentine’s Day.”

“Has he started school?”

“No, he hasn’t started school,” she muttered incredulously. “He’s not old enough.”

My cheeks burned with embarrassment. I should’ve known that. “What’s his favorite thing to do?”

“Play in a sandbox or dirt. Second favorite is playing with cars. Any cars, big, small, whatever.”

“Favorite color?”

“He doesn’t have one yet.”

“Favorite food?”

“Pizza.”

“What—” My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat. “What was he like as a baby?”

“He was a mama’s boy,” she replied softly. “He wanted to be anywhere I was. Happy. He slept good from the beginning.”

“Was he big or small?”

“Huge,” she said, sniffing a bit as she smiled. “He weighed nine and a half pounds when he was born.”

“Tell me somethin’ else,” I demanded.

“What?”

“Tell me somethin’ I don’t know to ask about,” I said in frustration. I’d missed it all. I didn’t even know what I was supposed to know.

“He sleeps in bed with me,” she said, biting the inside of her cheek. “He drags my old pink blanket around like it’s one of his limbs. He doesn’t like the crust on anything, so he won’t eat it. Um... he always wears sunglasses outside because he says it’s too bright even when it’s overcast. That’s why I put them on him when I sent him outside.”

I shook my head and stared at the floor. It was just bits and pieces. I didn’t know him. I looked at him, and I loved him, but I had no fucking clue what he was like.

“Please,” she said, walking toward me. “Let me explain.”

I glared at her. “I don’t want our boy’s first memory of me to be us fightin’,” I ground out. “So let’s table this for now.”

“I don’t want to table it,” she argued. “I at least have the right to actually tell you what happened.”

“You bailed. You have no fuckin’ rights,” I shot back, struggling to keep my voice down.

If she’d argued again, I could’ve maintained my distance. If she’d stayed frustrated and earnest, I would’ve been able to shut her down. But as what little fight she had drained out of her, and her chin began to tremble, I was thrown back to our



senior year of high school when she'd shown up after a particularly bad fight with her parents, hollow-eyed and sad.

"You're absolutely right," she said softly, her eyes filling with tears. "I'm just so glad that we're finally here." She dropped her face into her hands and shuddered with a suppressed sob. "God, it took so long."

I'd never been able to see her cry without doing *something* and I supposed I still wasn't able to, because before I realized what I'd done, my arms were wrapped around her. She pressed her forehead against my chest and shuddered.

"I know you won't forgive me," she murmured. "I know. But we're finally here."

"Shh," I whispered against the top of her head. Jesus, how had it been three years since the last time I'd felt her against me? How had so much time passed? It seemed impossible. Her hair felt the same, but I noticed now it got caught in my beard.

We were quiet for a while as she calmed down. She smelled the same, but she didn't feel the same. She was leaner than she'd been before, more angles than curves, but she still felt incredible. As she slid her arms around my waist and pressed her chest more fully against me, I knew I needed to put some space between us. My mind was starting to travel a very dangerous road.

"You named my boy *Rhett*?" I muttered, loosening my arms.

"What's wrong with Rhett?" she asked, pulling away. "It's an awesome name."

"If you say so."

"His name is perfect," she said stubbornly.

"He sounds like some old southern gentleman."

"Good."

"We're not southern."

"I gave him your name, too," she pointed out.

“And apparently Rumi’s,” I said dryly, running my hands over my face.

“Well, I knew—” She looked flustered as she glanced around the kitchen. “I knew that you’d choose Rumi, but I wanted him to have your name.” She looked up at me defiantly. “So that’s why.”

I stared at her.

“Who’s here?” my little brother Titus yelled as he barreled through the front door. “Someone’s car is out front. Hello? Where is everyone?”

He came into the kitchen on a run, sliding in his socks halfway to the table before catching himself.

“What the hell?” he said in confusion as he caught sight of Emilia.

“Hey, Titus,” she said, smiling nervously.

“You’re back?”

“I’m back.”

“Holy crap,” he said, glancing at me. “Where the hell have you been? Mick went nuts when you—”

“Titus,” I barked, cutting him off. “You stink, man. Take a shower.”

“You try running like five miles and see how you smell,” he shot back, lifting up his arm to sniff his pit. “Nah, I’m good.”

“You smell like ass.”

“Then I won’t get too close,” he said in exasperation, rolling his eyes. “Jesus.”

“Are you doing track?”

“Yep,” Titus said, peeling off his socks. “And I’m faster than everybody so I’m on varsity.”

They kept talking, but I tuned them out as I walked over and looked out the big window behind the dining table. Myla

and Rhett were playing on the bottom level of the tree house that was really just a platform about a foot off the ground. Once upon a time, we'd had a little picnic table there. I watched as the two chattered away, talking a mile a minute.

They'd just met, but their expressions and the way they moved were so similar. With their matching brown hair, they looked like they were siblings.

Rhett said something to Myla, and she nodded then hopped off the platform. As she turned to face him, he jumped too. It should've been no big deal. The drop wasn't very far, but something must've tripped him because he landed with a thump on his hands and knees on the gravel below, his sunglasses falling off his face.

I was on the move before I even heard him howl. I'd almost reached them when Myla lifted him onto her hip. If my heart hadn't felt like it was going to tear its way out of my chest, the sight of them would've been funny.

"You're okay," Myla soothed as she hugged him, a little unsteady on her feet as she shifted his weight.

"Hey, pal," I said, reaching for him. "You okay?"

"Fell," he wailed, letting me take him from Myla.

"What happened?" Emilia asked, running toward us. As she stopped beside me, I could see her indecision between letting me hold him and comforting him herself.

"Fell," Rhett cried. "Owie."

"Aw, man," Emilia said, coming closer. "That stinks."

"Hurts," Rhett cried.

He didn't reach for her, and I felt about ten feet tall.

"Let's go in and clean those owies," Emilia said, rubbing Rhett's back. "Okay?"

"Band-Aid?" Rhett asked as we started for the house.

"We'll put a Band-Aid on if you need one."

“I’m so sorry, Emmy,” Myla said, her voice quivering. “I don’t know what happened. He was just going to jump off the platform, but he fell somehow.”

“Not your fault,” I said, sending her a reassuring smile. “He tripped.”

“Ties,” Rhett said miserably, resting his chin on my shoulder so he could look at Emilia. “Shoe ties.”

“Aw, man,” Emilia said, grabbing Rhett’s foot. “I’m sorry your shoe came untied.”

“Ties,” Rhett whined. He kicked his feet, and I had to quickly shift him so he didn’t hit me in the nuts.

“Hey, don’t kick me.” My words weren’t angry or even stern, but Rhett started crying again, and Emilia fluttered closer.

“It’s okay, it’s—”

I glanced at her. “He almost kicked me in the balls.”

“Mama,” Rhett sniffled, reaching for Emilia.

“It’s okay, buddy,” she said, meeting my eyes in apology as I handed him over.

“Looks like someone wiped out,” my mom said, opening the kitchen door for us.

“Rhett fell off the platform,” Myla replied guiltily.

“Accidents happen,” Emilia said, smiling over at her. “I should’ve double-knotted his shoes, I guess.”

“I’ll get some Band-Aids and the peroxide,” my mom said, hurrying back out of the kitchen. She paused and looked over her shoulder at me. “I ordered food, and can you turn on the dishwasher? Titus just hopped in the shower, and I owe him one for doing laundry right when I was trying to run a bath the other night.”

“Your mom hasn’t changed at all,” Emilia said, setting Rhett down on the counter. He’d quieted down again, but I had

a feeling he was still on the edge.

“Nope.” I moved around her to start the dishwasher.

“Aw, man,” Myla said, leaning down to look at Rhett’s knees. “You ripped your pants.”

“Oh no,” Emilia mumbled grimly as Rhett began crying in earnest again.

“Owie,” he sobbed.

I wanted to do something, say something, but it seemed like anything and everything was setting him off. Instead, I just stood there like a dumbass, hovering.

“Hey, bud, look at me,” Emilia said softly, straightening out Rhett’s leg. “Look, it’s okay. Totally fine. And we can put a Band-Aid on it.”

“You can?” he asked, hiccuping.

“Promise.”

“I’ve got Band-Aids of every shape,” my mom announced. “But these philistines don’t like the cool patterned ones anymore, so we don’t have any of those.”

“Philistine?” Myla looked at my mom in confusion.

“A cultureless swine,” my mom said with a flourish, grinning at my sister. “Here’s the peroxide, Em.”

My breath left me in a quiet whoosh at my mom’s casual nickname for Emilia. I was struggling. Every breath I took was painful, and I didn’t know what to fucking do, but I guess my mom just planned on starting back up where we’d left off—like nothing had even happened. I grit my teeth until my jaw popped.

“Whoa, little man,” Rumi said as he strode into the kitchen. “Did you get in a fight with a raccoon?”

“Owie,” Rhett sniffled, watching as his mom wiped at the scratches on his palms.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, looks like it.” Rumi sidled up close and looked down at Rhett’s hands. “But you see the bubbles? It foams up like that as it cleans all the germs out. Pretty cool, right?”

“Ouch,” Rhett whined, trying to pull his hand away.

“Stop it, Rhett,” Emilia ordered, her voice firm but gentle as she continued to clean out his scratches. “I’m almost done.”

Rhett wailed louder.

“Almost done,” Emilia said again.

I watched as Rhett continued to scream bloody murder, and Emilia kept going, and while part of me felt sick to my stomach that she seemed to be ignoring the fact that she was hurting him, most of me felt nothing but respect at her quick efficient movements. It only took seconds for me to realize that it was bothering her just as much as it bothered me, she just knew that the dirt needed to be cleaned out, and she didn’t want to prolong it.

When she was done bandaging him up, she lifted him into her arms and carried him to her purse, pulling out a pinkish-gray blanket from inside. He snatched it from her hands and pulled it to his face.

“Well,” my mom said, moving around the crowded kitchen, gathering up plates and utensils. “I’m glad that you were so brave, Rhett. Wiping out sucks.”

“Band-Aid,” Rhett said, following her movements with his eyes.

“I saw that,” she said. “Very cool.”

Rhett’s gaze moved to me. “Daddy me up.”

“Daddy picked you up?” my mom asked, turning toward him. “Yeah, that makes sense. Daddies are fast.”

“Fast,” Rhett agreed, jerking his chin toward me.

Mom smiled at me, her eyes bright.

“Mama,” Rhett said, reaching out to run the fingers of his free hand gingerly through Emilia’s hair.

“You’ve got the best mama, huh,” my mom said kindly. She looked at Emilia. “It took me years to be able to clean out the kids’ little scrapes and shit. Tommy had to do it.”

“Really?”

“Yep,” my mom said, leaning on the counter across from Rhett. “I got better at it, but I’m not exactly cool under pressure.” She laughed. “When Micky fell way back at the edge of the property and broke his arm, I heard him over the sound of the vacuum. I panicked so hard I almost knocked myself out on the doorframe when I was running out to get him.”

Rhett watched us, his eyes growing heavy.

“Feelin’ better, pal?” I reached out and gently ran my hand down his back. I could feel every bump of his spine. Jesus, he was so fucking small.

“Owie,” Rhett informed me around his thumb.

“I know.”

“Hopefully I’ll be better with grandkids,” Mom said ruefully. “Sorry, Rhett, you’ll be the guinea pig on that.”

“Grandma,” Rhett murmured.

“This is your grandma, too,” Emilia said, kissing his head. “This is your other grandma. Daddy’s mom.”

Rhett shook his head. “Grandma.”

“Sorry.” Emilia grimaced. “He doesn’t really get it yet.”

“He’ll figure it out,” my mom said, waving her off.

“And Mr. Hawthorne is your grandpa,” Emilia continued, laying her cheek against Rhett’s hair. “And Uncle Rumi and Uncle Otto and Uncle Titus and Auntie Myla.”

Rhett’s eyes closed.

“He doesn’t seem impressed,” I said with a quiet laugh, everything inside me freezing up at the sight of his sleeping face.

Did everyone feel like this when they had a kid? He was so beautiful, take-my-breath-away-beautiful. I wanted to count his eyelashes, measure his skull in my hands, take his shoes off so I could count his toes, hold him against me so I could feel his heartbeat beneath my hand. It was fucking weird, right? I was a fucking lunatic.

“To be fair, you don’t look like a grandma,” Emilia told my mom dryly. “It might be kind of confusing.”

“Thanks, sweetheart,” she said happily. “That’s the best compliment I’ve had in a year.”

“Just told you yesterday that your ass looked hot as shit in your jeans,” my dad mumbled, joining us in the kitchen.

“Oh, good grief, watch your mouth,” my mom whisper yelled, throwing a serving spoon at him. “And keep your fucking voice down, your grandson’s asleep.”

Dad caught the spoon as it hit his chest and grinned at her.

A knock on the front door prevented an all-out cutlery war in the kitchen when both my parents left to answer it.

“Mom says that Dad scares the delivery guy,” Myla informed Emilia. “So she always goes with him to the door.”

“He does scare him,” Rumi said in amusement. “Because he caught the guy checking Mom out like a year ago.”

“I smell Chinese food,” Titus called from down the hallway. He, Otto, and my parents all converged on the kitchen at the same time. “Oh, whoops!” he whispered when he caught sight of Rhett. “Sorry.”

“You done being an ass, Otto?” Myla asked as she grabbed a plate.

“You done bein’ a spoiled little princess, Myla?” he shot back.



“Never.” She looked over her shoulder as Dad walked back in carrying the food. “Dad would never allow that.”

“Enough,” Dad ordered, his lips twitching with suppressed laughter.

“You want to lay him down?” my mom asked Emilia.

“I can just hold him,” she replied, shaking her head.

“That works,” Mom said, shrugging.

“Uh, I can hold him if you want.”

Emilia glanced at me and shook her head. “That’s alright. I’ve got him.”

I silently berated myself as everyone moved around the kitchen, filling their plates. I should have *asked* to hold him, not offered. It had sounded like I was doing her a favor when it was really the opposite. I was dying to hold him. I’d only gotten my hands on him once, and he’d been crying then. I wanted to know what it felt like to hold him while he slept.

As we all went to sit down, I realized that there weren’t enough chairs for everyone.

“Otto and Titus sit at the counter,” my dad ordered, realizing the same thing.

“Right,” Otto mumbled under his breath, spinning away from the table.

“Man, really?” I asked, staring at him. The kid was generally pretty easygoing. He had that whole middle-child-needs-more-attention thing going on, but he wasn’t usually such an ass.

“Everyone’s actin’ like the prodigal daughter just returned,” Otto said with an incredulous laugh. “Am I the only one here who remembers—”

I took a step forward and his mouth snapped shut.

“You see my kid right there?” I asked, my voice low, pointing to where Emilia was sitting. “He’s the reason you’re

gonna keep a civil tongue in your head. Got it?”

“He’s asleep,” Otto shot back.

“Swear to God—” I muttered, taking a step forward.

“Fine,” Otto snapped, throwing himself onto a barstool. “I *won’t* say what everyone else is thinkin’.”

I stared at him for a moment, making sure he was actually done. Then, I set my plate down carefully on the counter so that I didn’t slam it and strode out of the kitchen. I needed a fucking breather. From the moment I’d walked in and seen Emilia and our son, I hadn’t had a single second of time when there wasn’t someone watching me.

Once I was outside, I gulped in the fresh air. It smelled like it was going to rain, even though there were barely any clouds in the sky.

Jesus.

I bent at the waist and braced my hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath.

I had a kid. We had a kid. A two-year-old kid. What the fuck did you even do with a two-year-old kid? My experience with them was pretty fucking limited. We always had kids of all ages around the club, but beyond chasing them with a squirt gun and making sure they didn’t run with anything sharp, I barely had anything to do with them. He wasn’t even old enough to play with a squirt gun, was he? I tried to remember when Myla was two, but it was all kind of a blur. I’d been too focused on chasing Emilia to spend much time with my baby sister.

How the fuck was I supposed to be someone’s father? And where the hell had they come from? I didn’t even know where they fucking lived.

I walked toward Emilia’s car and looked inside. It was packed from floorboard to roof with stuff. Did they live in her car? Is that why she’d come back? Was she homeless?

“You alright?” my dad asked, coming out onto the front porch.

“I’m fine.”

Dad chuckled. “No you’re not.”

I turned to face him. “What the fuck is even going on right now?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he replied, pulling a joint out of his shirt pocket. “Looks like you have a son.”

“Nice to know, right?” I asked, shaking my head.

“He’s pretty cute. Looks like you.”

“Don’t think I’ll be needing a DNA test,” I said sarcastically. The kid was a mini version of me. The only similarities I saw to Emilia were his hands and his smile. She had a great fucking smile, and now he did too.

“She tell you why she’s here?” he asked curiously as he sat down on the steps. “Why now?”

“Nope,” I said, sitting down next to him. “Just that they were *finally* here.”

“*Finally*, huh?”

“That’s what she said.”

Dad made a noise in his throat. “You may want to take a minute, bud,” he said after a few moments. “Because that girl in there is afraid. She’s hidin’ it well, but she’s definitely scared outta her mind.”

“And?”

“She came to you,” he said, looking over at me. “Knowin’ that you were gonna be pissed. Knowin’ that we were gonna be pissed, she still came here.”

“I have a two-year-old son I just met,” I snapped. “No wonder she’s fuckin’ scared.”

“Hear her out,” he said, taking a puff of his joint. “That’s all I’m sayin’.”

“I will.” I sighed.

I’d woken up late that morning, and the only thing I’d thought I was going to have to deal with was my dad bitching at me. Instead, I was hiding out on my parents’ porch while the entire earth shifted around me.

“She named him *Rhett*,” I muttered, scrubbing my hands over my face.

Dad’s laughter filled the front yard.

## CHAPTER 3

### EMILIA

**T**HE DAY WENT by so quickly that I couldn't seem to catch my breath. It was amazing watching Rhett surrounded by a big loud family for the first time. His experience up until that point had just been my parents and me. We loved him, but it just wasn't the same. Everyone in Michael's family wanted his attention, and he soaked it up like a sponge. Even Otto seemed to have warmed up a little, if not toward me, then definitely toward his nephew.

By the time he'd woken up from his nap, he'd been the sunny bright kid that I knew, his owies practically forgotten. I watched as my son hopped around, flitting from person to person with a lump in my throat. The house was loud and fun, and he was on cloud nine. After the year we'd had, it made me want to weep.

He should've had this since he was born. They adored him.

"Where are you stayin'?" Michael asked, bending down to rest his elbows on the back of the couch I was sitting on.

"Um." I froze, unsure about what to say. He'd asked not to discuss anything, and I was trying really hard to respect that, but how did I tell him that we didn't exactly have money to keep staying at a motel?

"Not a hard question," he said, looking over at me.

"We were at a motel last night—"

"You got here last night?" he asked incredulously.

"It was late."

"You were in Eugene last night," he said flatly.

"I came here first thing."

“Right. So which hotel?” he asked, watching as Rhett did a somersault across the living room.

“I give it a nine-point six,” Rumi announced loudly.

“What’s wrong with you?” Titus argued. “Perfect ten!”

“We checked out this morning,” I hedged. “So, we’re open.”

“You livin’ in your car?” he asked baldly, his eyes still on Rhett.

“No!” I wheezed, choking on nothing. “Why would you ask that?”

“The back of that hatchback is filled to the roof,” he replied quietly. “Don’t lie to me.”

“We’re moving up here.” I tried to say the words like it was no big deal, but I could feel the palms of my hands start to sweat. The fog of safety I’d felt being surrounded by the Hawthornes suddenly didn’t feel as comforting.

“You got a movin’ van comin’?” Michael asked. “Didn’t see any furniture in there.”

“Are you ready to talk now?” I countered.

Michael glared at me, but it didn’t have the desired effect. Instead of making me back off, it gave me something like courage instead.

“Let’s go out back,” I said softly. “We can talk out there.”

At his nod of agreement, I stood up.

“Mama?” Rhett asked, pausing in the middle of the floor.

“I’m going to go talk to your daddy for a few minutes. I’ll be right outside.”

“I come.” He hurried over to his shoes.

“No, baby,” I argued. “You stay in here.”

“I come,” he replied almost desperately.

“Rhett, I’m just going out on the back deck.”

“I come with.” He sat down on the floor, holding his shoes.

“Baby—”

“It can wait,” Michael said quietly, putting a hand on my back briefly as he watched Rhett frantically try to push his shoes on his feet.

“I—”

“Let it be, Emilia,” Michael ordered, his voice still low.

“Let’s just stay inside, baby,” I said, kneeling down next to Rhett.

He looked at me suspiciously.

“I don’t need to go out right now,” I said with a shrug, taking the shoes from him and setting them aside. “Go tumble some more. I’ll watch.”

“Okay,” he replied, getting to his feet. He looked back twice before he got to the middle of the living room.

“He’s usually not so clingy,” I said apologetically, glancing at Michael as I stood back up. “I don’t know what his deal is.”

“He’s not sure of us yet,” Michael replied, smoothing his beard down with his hand. “Didn’t want you to leave him.”

“No.” I shook my head. That couldn’t be it. My kid didn’t worry about things like that. He was the kid, and I was the parent, I worried about *him*. “He’s not afraid of stuff like that —”

“He doesn’t understand any of this,” Michael said sharply, cutting me off. “He’s gained an entire family in one day. None of this shit is normal. *He doesn’t know us.*”

“It’s getting chilly out there,” Mrs. Hawthorne said as she and Mr. Hawthorne came in the front door. They brought in the smell of fresh air and weed with them.

“I’d somehow forgotten how fast it cools off here,” I replied. “As soon as the sun goes down I’m freezing my butt off.”

“Sounds about accurate,” she said with a laugh. “It’s supposed to get pretty damn cold tonight. Where are you guys staying?”

“Oh, well, we got a motel last night.”

“You can stay here if you want,” she said as her husband helped take her coat off. “I can have one of the boys sleep in the living room if you can stand the smell of feet. I can’t seem to erase the stench from their bedrooms.”

I debated it, but only for a second. I could feel Otto’s eyes on the back of my head. He’d warmed up, sure, but I had a feeling that staying the night would cause that thaw to disappear, especially once Michael wasn’t running interference. I hated that he was so angry with me. I understood it, but I really hated it. I’d expected it from Michael. I’d prepared myself for it, but I hadn’t expected it from his teenage brother.

“That’s okay,” I said, waving her off.

“They can stay with me,” Michael said, his eyes on Rhett as he shuffled from side to side. “I’ve got the room.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Hawthorne replied. I couldn’t read her tone. “Okay, yeah that makes sense.”

Otto started to laugh, but I didn’t turn to look at him. Something about the sound made me apprehensive.

A couple hours later, I was following Michael’s motorcycle as we wound through a neighborhood close to the one I’d grown up in. It had only taken Rhett minutes to pass out from exhaustion and the car was silent around me as I thought about the day. It hadn’t gone as bad as I’d planned for, if anything, it had gone way better than I’d expected. Michael’s parents had been as welcoming as the first time I’d met them and they’d all adored Rhett, though, I’d known they would, so that hadn’t been surprising.

What had been surprising was Michael.



He was so different from the last time I'd seen him. The boy I'd left behind was a goofball. He'd rarely been without a smile on his face. This new man was serious, calm, reserved. I couldn't believe the difference. He rode a fucking motorcycle, which granted, I shouldn't have been surprised about considering he'd always planned on getting one, but it was still kind of startling.

He was also hotter, which I hadn't thought was possible. Michael had always been bulky, but now he was hard, for lack of a better word. The muscle he'd always had was honed to perfection. I wiped the smile off my face with the back of my hand.

I didn't need to be thinking about how hard Michael was. I didn't need to be thinking about the beard he had now and how it would feel against my skin. I didn't need to imagine tangling my fingers in his hair as I—

The fantasy I didn't need to be thinking about cut off abruptly as I pulled up behind him in a very familiar driveway. What in the hell was he doing?

I put the car in park and stared at him as the garage door opened up and he drove inside, parking his bike beside a very familiar truck. I was still staring, my mouth hanging open as he walked back toward me, the garage rolling shut behind him.

"You comin' in?" he asked dryly as I rolled down the window.

"What the fuck?" I blurted in confusion.

"Damn." He huffed. "When did you start sayin' *fuck*?"

"Probably when I was in labor," I shot back. "Why the hell are we at my house?"

"We're at *my* house," he replied, his expression completely blank. "You need help bringing our boy inside?"

"No, I got him." I rolled up the window and got out of the car, leaving it running. "What do you mean *your* house?"

"My house. I own it."

“You bought my house?” I hissed incredulously.

“No.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “My dad bought this house from the nice little family that bought it from yours. They realized during their first Oregon winter that maybe they shouldn’t have left California. I bought it from him.”

“This is *my* house,” I repeated stubbornly, pointing at the cement under our feet. “I lived here my whole life and you *bought* it? Why would you do that?”

“Seemed like a good idea at the time,” he replied flatly. “You comin’ in or what? It’s gonna rain in about thirty seconds.”

He started for the door while I stood there sputtering in disbelief. What in the hell was going on? Why would he buy my childhood home? I shut off the car just as the rain started sprinkling and by the time I got Rhett out of his seat, I had to throw his blanket over him to keep him from getting wet. Michael watched us from the front porch.

“Do you have somewhere I could lay him down?” I asked as I climbed the stairs.

The third one didn’t creak like it should’ve. I grit my teeth.

“Yeah, come on in,” he said, swinging the front door open. “I’ve got a couch in the office you can put him on.”

“The office?” I looked around in confusion as we stepped inside.

Everything was different. The kitchen wall had been knocked out so that it flowed right into the family room, and the formal living room had been completely walled off. Michael walked that direction and opened the door.

“I’ll get him a pillow,” he said, leaving me standing there, gaping like a fish.

If I hadn’t seen the outside, I would’ve had no idea that it was the same house I’d spent so many years in. The walls were painted a light gray and at the far end of the dining room an entire wall had been converted into a massive floor to

ceiling bookshelf. The only familiar thing was the staircase, right in the center of it all, but the banister was completely new.

“You gonna lay him down?” Michael asked as he came back.

“What did you do?” I asked as I laid Rhett on the couch. He didn’t stir.

“What? With the house?” Michael asked easily, walking back out of the room. “Demolished most of it.”

“I can see that,” I replied, following him. “You took out a wall.”

“Took out more than one. You want a beer?”

“No, I don’t want a beer.”

“You don’t drink beer?”

“Yes, I drink it. No, I don’t want one.”

“Alright.”

I followed him into the kitchen and looked around wide-eyed. All new appliances. New countertops. Updated cabinets. A fucking *window* where there hadn’t been before. I was reeling.

“You must make a lot of money,” I stuttered, turning in a circle.

“I do okay,” Michael replied. “My pop helped with most of it. He’s been flippin’ houses since before I was born.”

“You’re going to flip it?” I asked, pausing to look at him.

“Nope.”

“But why?” It didn’t make sense. Out of all the houses to choose from, why had he bought ours? It wasn’t because he’d loved it, he’d gutted the entire thing.

“Wanted it,” he said with a shrug.

“This is so weird,” I murmured under my breath.

Michael laughed, the sound anything but joyful. “I guess so.”

“You’re living in my house.” I ran my hand over the new concrete countertop.

“Rhett’s sleepin’.” He took a sip of his beer. “Start talkin’.”

“What?” I snatched my hand back from the counter.

“Where you been?”

“I—well, everywhere, really.”

“Cut the shit, Emilia,” he barked. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Arizona,” I replied quickly. “We went to Arizona.”

“Huh,” he murmured thoughtfully.

“I got in to Arizona State, remember?” I said, swallowing hard at the memory.

“Yeah, I remember.”

I struggled to find something to say. I’d planned everything out on the long trip to Oregon, but suddenly none of it seemed right, not when he was standing there, fully grown, with a beer in his hand.

I knew how to talk to the boy I knew before, I didn’t know how to talk to this man.

“Well?” he snapped. “Say what you wanna say. Explain this shit to me.”

I decided to start at the beginning.

“I found out I was pregnant the morning after we got home from the river,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “And my mom found out about an hour later because she was nosy and she always knew everything.”

“Not everythin’,” he muttered.

I conceded that with a nod. “They freaked out.” I glanced around the kitchen again, this time thankful that it didn’t look

like anything from my memories. “Long story short, they said they wouldn’t pay for college unless I put the baby up for adoption and cut off all communication with you.”

“Bullshit,” he argued, setting his beer down.

“I swear to God.”

“You had a full fuckin’ ride at U of O.”

I stared at him wide eyed. “I had a *sports* scholarship,” I reminded him. “Which I couldn’t exactly follow through with while pregnant.”

“Then why not have an abortion?” he asked easily, picking his beer back up. It wasn’t accusatory, just curious.

“Because,” I sputtered, shaking my head. “Because.”

“Far as I remember, you were pro-choice.”

“I still am,” I ground out. “But it wasn’t something I considered then.”

“Why?”

How had I not prepared myself for where this conversation would go? I’d imagined that I’d just tell the timeline of events, explain where I’d been, and then we would move forward somehow from there. What an idiot.

“Because it wasn’t,” I finally said. I wasn’t willing to clarify further. “I knew that I needed to go to college. It wasn’t an option not to. So, I went along with it.”

“You went along with it,” he muttered darkly.

“I was eighteen years old.”

“So was I,” he replied. “You think my parents coulda kept me from you?”

“They never would have,” I shot back. “That’s the difference.”

“No, the difference is I never woulda left you,” he said, pointing his beer bottle at me. “That’s the difference.”

“So, I went to Arizona,” I said, frustration making my words short. “Because I had a partial academic scholarship there, and they said that they’d pay for the rest. And they did. All through my pregnancy and up until Rhett was born.”

He was silent as I started to pace around the kitchen, the memories making me feel itchy.

“But then I couldn’t do it,” I said, coming to a stop across from him. “I’d picked the perfect parents. They were so nice, Michael. The dad was some kind of software engineer and the mom was the receptionist at a pediatrician’s office, but she planned on staying home once he came. They were perfect, and I—” My voice began to wobble and I stopped, swallowing hard. “I couldn’t give him up. He came out, and he looked just like you and I couldn’t do it and I broke their hearts.”

Mick stared at me, the muscle in his jaw throbbing.

“So, I brought him home and my parents were livid. They’d paid for school under the condition that I’d give him up for adoption and then I didn’t go through with it. So they stopped paying.”

“Fuckin’ cunts.”

“They let us live with them,” I said with a shrug. I’d been so thankful for that. “They supported us.”

“So you wouldn’t come back to me,” he said with a scoff, shaking his head.

I didn’t argue. It was something I’d always suspected but never said out loud.

“It was okay,” I said softly. “They loved Rhett, and it was okay.”

“So why are you here?” he asked, putting his bottle in the sink.

“Last year they were in a car accident,” I replied quietly, remembering the way the lights had lit up the front of the house when the state troopers had come to inform me.

“Both of ’em?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. They were awful to you.”

“I’m sorry for you,” he said with a sigh. “They were still your parents.”

I nodded, my eyes watering. “So,” I said with a watery laugh. “Turns out that when your only skill is a perfect back handspring and you have no work history whatsoever, it’s nearly impossible to get a job that pays enough to support a child.”

“They didn’t leave you anythin’?” he asked dubiously.

“When I sold the house, it paid the inheritance taxes and their debts. There wasn’t much left.”

“Shit.”

“I made it work for a while,” I said, remembering how tight it had been. Selling clothes and pawning my mom’s jewelry. “But childcare pretty much wiped out my entire paycheck, so we were living in a dump and walking because I couldn’t afford to put gas in the car. It wasn’t sustainable.”

“So you came here.”

“No,” I said softly, shaking my head. “It took a while longer, because I had to save up to get here. I’ve been saving since I knew that Rhett was coming home with me. It was the only money that I refused to touch, no matter what. I saved a little with every paycheck. Sometimes, I didn’t have more than a few dollars to add.”

“You could’ve fuckin’ called,” he argued angrily, taking a step forward. “You know I woulda come and got you.”

“I had no idea what your phone number was,” I said, embarrassment making my cheeks grow hot. “And I had to do it myself.”

“You had to do it yourself?” he spat. “I didn’t get the last two years with my son because you had to save pennies until you had enough to drive up here?”

I wasn’t sure how to make him understand. I’d been so dependent on my parents for everything, so boxed in by what they wanted, I hadn’t been able to reach out to him. I’d been so afraid when Rhett was a baby that I’d step out of line and they’d cut me off completely. I’d imagined a hundred worst-case scenarios where I’d contact Mick and he’d want nothing to do with us, but they’d kick us out for even attempting it. Saving up had been the only way that had felt safe, knowing that at some point, I could just go, and damn the consequences. It was my way out. Our way out.

Explaining all that to a man who’d been raised by parents that loved him and supported him no matter what... impossible. Half the time, I didn’t even fully understand the choices I’d made.

“I did the best I could,” I said huskily. “I got him here as soon as I could.”

“If you would’ve given my son up for adoption without me even knowin’ he existed,” Mick murmured, shaking his head.

“I know,” I said softly. “I knew the minute I saw his face that I’d never be able to do that—not to either of us.”

“I wake up one day, and you’re gone again. There’s not one place on this earth I won’t find you,” he ground out. “You understand that, right?”

How many nights had I laid awake, wishing that he’d show up at our door? A hundred? A thousand? I’d sat up by the window nursing Rhett, watching for headlights.

“Is that a promise?” I asked, my voice cracking. His expression softened.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

It only took two steps for him to reach me, less than a second for his hands to tangle in my hair, and a single breath



before his mouth was on mine.

The kiss was a mixture of everything I remembered and nothing I'd ever known. Forceful. Desperate. The sweet boy I'd known, who'd kissed me the way I liked, was gone. This was a man who kissed how *he* liked. I wasn't complaining, though, because it was a million times better than any kiss we'd ever had before.

I was struggling for air and unsteady on my feet when he jerked away abruptly.

"Go to bed," he ordered, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

I stared at the way his pulse thrummed heavily at the side of his neck. "I don't know where we're sleeping," I stuttered. I wanted to kiss that spot. Suck it between my teeth. Bite it.

It was just a kiss, and it hadn't even lasted that long, but I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so turned on. My lips felt swollen and hot. The rest of me was on fire.

"Pick a fuckin' room," he snapped, turning his back to me. "Go, Emilia."

I hesitated, watching as he reached down to grip the edge of the sink. He was struggling with something, but I couldn't decide if it was the urge to throw me on the floor and fuck my brains out or toss me out of his house.

Taking what I considered the safest route, I hurried out of the kitchen, barely glancing at my surroundings as I made my way to Rhett. He hadn't moved from the position I'd left him in, his arms flung above his head with his blanket weaved in between his shoulder and neck and wrapped halfway around his torso. I held back a grunt as I lifted him into my arms.

"Let's find a bed," I whispered, kissing the side of his head.

Not going to lie, carrying him up the stairs was a bit of a struggle, but I managed it. Instinctively I went straight to my old bedroom door and swung it wide without hesitation, but

froze when I realized that I really needed to stop thinking of the house as mine.

My little bedroom with the purple walls, window seat, and tiny closet was gone, and in its place was a massive bedroom with what looked like a connected walk-in closet and bathroom.

“Holy shit,” I muttered, backing out of the room. I stood for a moment in the dark hallway contemplating my options. There were four other doors to choose from, I just needed to pick one and see what I found.

What followed was me snooping through Mick’s upstairs. I wasn’t proud of it, but I couldn’t seem to help myself. The bathroom had been updated from a plain white tub to a sleek shower with glass doors and one of the fanciest showerheads I’d ever seen. Tile had replaced the old linoleum. Even the sink and toilet had been updated.

The second door was a linen closet, and I gave a little chuckle of relief when I realized that it was the one thing he hadn’t changed. It still had four wooden shelves that were piled high with towels and sheets and blankets.

The third door had been the guest bedroom when I was a kid and still was, but that was where the similarities ended. The room had been expanded, making it almost twice as big as it had been before with an added walk-in closet. The walls were a different color, the carpet had been replaced, even the light fixture was different.

I put Rhett down in the center of the bed and pulled the quilt out from under him so I could tuck him in.

“Mama?” he asked, not opening his eyes.

“I’m right here,” I whispered back, trying not to wake him completely. “Sleep, baby.”

“Okay.” Within seconds, his body had completely relaxed again.

I looked at the doorway in indecision, knowing I probably should just go to bed, but instead, I walked back into the hallway, listening for Mick. When I knew he was still downstairs somewhere, probably cursing me, I continued to the last bedroom. My parents' old room.

I hadn't been in there much as a kid. Most of the house had been my playground, but my parents' room had always been off limits. It was a rule that had been strictly enforced even after I'd become an adult and was probably why Rhett and I had shared a bedroom and a bed for his entire life. I couldn't imagine trying to keep him out of my space.

I opened the door, knowing that it wouldn't look the same. The wall between the room Rhett was sleeping in and the old master bedroom had been moved, which I thought meant the master would be much smaller, but it wasn't. Instead, the huge closet my parents had used was gone, and in its place was a more modest walk-in. He'd also added another window on the far side of the room. I glanced around, taking in the light gray walls and carpet, waiting to feel something, sadness, nostalgia, *anything*, but I didn't. I didn't recognize it. It was like I was in a completely different house.

I walked slowly back to where Rhett was sleeping and closed the door quietly behind me.

Why the hell had Mick bought our old house and then completely renovated it? The floor plan wasn't even close to the original. It didn't make any sense. When someone bought a house, I'd always assumed it was because they *liked* it, but he clearly hadn't because he'd changed *everything*. I knew it must have something to do with me, with us, but I couldn't figure it out.

I stripped down to my underwear and a t-shirt and climbed into bed. It felt odd not to brush my teeth, but I was too nervous that I'd come face to face with Mick again in the hallway, and I wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

I'd known that seeing him again would be difficult. Seeing an ex after so long would be uncomfortable under the best

circumstances and this was a million times more complicated than that... but it had been both better and worse than I'd hoped for.

He didn't have a significant other from what I could see. He didn't have more kids. He hadn't screamed or raged. He hadn't questioned if Rhett was his or threatened me legally. His family hadn't shut the door in my face and had been really welcoming except for Otto. These were all good things. It was a good start, I hoped.

I guess, in my heart of hearts, I'd hoped for something different, even though I could barely admit it to myself. While I'd saved and planned to make my way back to him, I'd had this vision in my mind, that he'd see me and pull me into his arms. That he'd be so grateful that I was back that he'd embrace our return wholeheartedly, with understanding and thankfulness.

I knew it was a bullshit dream. I knew that life didn't work that way and he had a lot of valid things to be angry about. I knew that it wasn't going to play out like the fantasy in my head, but after feeding that fantasy for so long, the reality had still been a bit of a blow.

I lay there thinking about how thankful that it had gone as well as it had, that Rhett and I were finally back where we belonged, and that our flight from Arizona was finally over. But I fell asleep reliving the feel of Mick's beard as it rubbed against my face, the bite of his teeth on my lips, and the taste of beer on his tongue.

## CHAPTER 4

### MICHAEL

“**W**HAT ARE YOU doin’ here?” I asked, swinging the front door wide for my brother.

“Thought I’d come make sure you’re not doin’ anythin’ stupid,” he joked, stepping inside. “Where’s Em?”

“She’s upstairs,” I muttered, shutting the door behind him. “Come on in.”

“Ah, but which room upstairs?” he joked as he moved toward the kitchen like he owned the place.

“No idea,” I replied flatly. “I told her to pick one.”

Rumi laughed under his breath. “She’s probably in your bed.”

“Highly doubt that.”

“It’s me you’re talkin’ to. You realize that, right?” He grabbed a beer out of the fridge and used the counter to pop off the top. “If you think I didn’t see the longing looks you two were shooting at each other when you thought the other person wasn’t lookin’—”

“There were no *longing* looks.”

“You could cut that tension with a knife, brother.”

“She’s been gone for three years,” I said flatly, sitting down at the table. There were four empty beer bottles on the table in front of me and one still half full.

“Not quite three,” Rumi countered, sitting down across from me. “You dealin’?”

“With which part?” I asked sarcastically. “The fact that my high school girlfriend is suddenly back and sleepin’ in my

house or that she brought our two-year-old son with her?”

“In your house that used to be her house,” Rumi pointed out. “Rethinkin’ that one yet?”

“No,” I said stubbornly. “I like this house. I’ve done a hell of a lot of work on it. It’s mine.”

“You had to do a hell of a lot of work to it, considering the state it was in when you bought it.”

“You here to bust my balls or what?”

“Nah.” Rumi shook his head. “Just checkin’ in. Knew you’d still be awake. Today was a complete mindfuck.”

“Understatement.” I reached up to rub the back of my neck where a tension headache was starting. “This was not how I’d thought my day would go when I woke up all fired up to paint that Dyna.”

“How’s that goin’?”

“She’s fuckin’ beautiful, man,” I said with a sigh. “Thought I’d deal with rust, but not a speck. It’s been a fuckin’ dream.”

“Can’t wait to see it finished.”

“Should only be another week.” I finished the last of my beer and leaned back in my chair. “Assumin’ I get into the garage.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“The fuck am I supposed to do with them?” I asked, jerking my chin toward the stairs.

Rumi looked at me like I’d grown two heads. “Well, considering that Emilia is an adult and has been a parent for a couple years already, I’m guessin’ you can just leave them to do their thing?”

“I just go back to normal?” I said incredulously. It didn’t even seem possible.

“You gotta work, man,” Rumi replied with a laugh. “What did you think, that you’d just retire at twenty-one and live off your good looks?”

I threw a bottle cap at him. “Asshole.”

“Not sure your old normal is ever gonna be your normal again,” Rumi said, catching the cap. “But yeah, you’ll find a new normal. You gotta go to work, man.”

I nodded, but the thought made anxiety pool in my gut.

“You got the rest of the weekend to get them settled, yeah?” he said, watching me closely. “By Monday, you’ll be itchin’ to get outta the house like always.”

I nodded again, but I wasn’t so sure about that.

“Mick,” my brother said quietly, almost gently. “She wouldn’t have come all this way if she was just gonna take off again, yeah?”

“Wouldn’t have thought she’d take off the first time,” I replied. “Know her even less now. I got no fuckin’ clue what she’d do.”

“Alright, well take it from me, your younger but smarter brother—”

I scoffed.

“She didn’t come all this way to leave again, and you’re not the eighteen-year-old kid that she left the first time. It’s all good, man. Instead of worryin’ about what could happen, try just enjoyin’ gettin’ to know your son.”

“He looks like me,” I said, a grin pulling at my mouth.

“Fuck,” Rumi said, drawing out the word. “He’s a fuckin’ clone. When I saw him, it was like bein’ transported back in time. Hopefully he won’t be a little asshole like you were.”

“I wasn’t an asshole!”

“You were.”

“I always let you play with me,” I argued. “I was always nice to you.”

“You tolerated me at best,” Rumi said, pointing his beer bottle at me. “And that was only if Mom was watching.”

“Crybaby,” I muttered, making him chuckle.

“He’s got Em’s smile though,” Rumi said. “You notice that?”

“How could I miss it?”

“The rest is all you, though. Kid’s a bruiser. He’s gonna be bigger than me by the time he’s twelve.”

“I can’t believe I have a kid,” I murmured, shaking my head.

I wanted to both punch something and scream the news from the rooftops. I had a son. A two-year-old son. A son that looked just like me and was currently sleeping upstairs. It was wild.

“Unpopular opinion,” Rumi said hesitantly. “But you couldn’t have *picked* a better mother for him.”

I just looked at him.

“She fucked up, clearly, and I’m seriously fuckin’ pissed.”

I huffed.

“But she’s good with him, man, and he adores her. She’s a good mom, even if she did a shitty thing.”

“Can’t even wrap my head around the fact that she just didn’t say anythin’ for three fuckin’ years.”

“Me either,” Rumi muttered.

“Her parents died.”

“What?” Rumi watched me walk to the fridge, his eyes wide.

“Yep.” I grabbed another beer. “Car accident.”



“Sad for her, but I sure as shit won’t miss ’em,” Rumi said flatly.

“No shit.”

“That’s why she came up here?”

“Part of it,” I confirmed. “Realized she couldn’t support him on her own.”

“She’s here for money?” The look on my brother’s face was a mixture of surprise and disgust.

“I don’t think it’s as mercenary as that,” I said tiredly. “There’s a long ass story, but the CliffsNotes version is that her parents wouldn’t support her if she had any contact with me, and she was afraid to rock the boat. Once they were gone, she tried to do it on her own and finally realized it was time to come home.”

“Jesus.”

“Her fuckin’ parents, man,” I said, shaking my head. “What a couple of psychopaths.”

“They were always fuckin’ weird,” Rumi replied. “You remember when we had that big Halloween party in elementary school, and they said Em couldn’t eat any of the candy?”

“Yeah,” I said, remembering Emilia in her pigtails, smiling as she eyeballed all the shit she wasn’t allowed to have. “Thing that always stuck with me was the fact that she didn’t eat any of it even though they weren’t there watchin’.”

“I woulda fuckin’ gorged myself,” Rumi said with a shrug. “Worry about the fallout later.”

“Me too.” Hell, any kid would have had at least one treat and damned the consequences, but not Emilia.

“Seems like they were good to Rhett, though,” Rumi said, reaching up to pull his hair out of his face into a ponytail. “He mentioned them a few times earlier. All good things.”

“Yeah, except for the fact that they manipulated his mother into keepin’ him a secret from his father,” I replied flatly. “I’m sure they were a fuckin’ joy to be around.”

“I’m just sayin’—” He put his hands up in surrender. “He has happy memories of them. That’s a good thing. Wouldn’t want to have to dig ’em up just to piss on ’em, you know?”

“You’re a fuckin’ nutcase.”

“Yeah, well, guilty.” Rumi shrugged, unconcerned. He looked at me over his beer bottle. “Now let’s talk about the elephant in the room.”

“There’s no elephant.”

“What are you gonna do about Em?” he asked, talking over me.

“Nothin’.”

“She’s just gonna live with you platonically?”

“She’s not livin’ with me,” I snapped. “She’s stayin’ the night. One night.”

“You’re gonna kick her out tomorrow then?”

“Of course not.”

“So she’s stayin’?”

“For now.”

“Bullshit.”

“Until she gets a place, she and Rhett can stay here,” I said, grinding my teeth. “Why are you pushin’ this?”

“So,” Rumi said thoughtfully. By his tone, I knew he was just going to irritate me further. “She’s gonna stay until she finds a job and saves up enough to pay first and last on a rental somewhere? She lives here, brother. Just lean into it.”

“She’s not fuckin’ livin’ here,” I snapped. “Would you leave it alone?”

“Just tryin’ to figure out if you’re about to make a big fuckin’ mistake or not. You gonna keep it civil and let her stay until she can find a place or are you gonna see if you can get back in there and play house with the only chick you’ve ever looked twice at and never gotten over?”

“I’m not makin’ any fuckin’ mistake,” I shot back. “She can stay until she’s on her feet. My son lives with her. It’s not like I’m gonna let her be homeless.”

Rumi just watched me like he knew something I didn’t. “Never said which scenario I thought was a mistake,” he said finally.

“And I’ve looked twice at plenty of women,” I barked. “It’s not like I’ve been waitin’ around for Emilia to show up. I get laid plenty. I’m sure she’s been fuckin’ other people too. It’s been three fuckin’ years.”

“Actually, I’ve been a little busy,” Emilia said from behind me. “Raising a kid and working doesn’t leave a lot of time to *get laid*.”

I closed my eyes and held back a groan.

“Hey Em,” Rumi said in amusement.

“Hey, Rum.” She walked into the kitchen as I opened my eyes again. “Sorry, Rhett woke up thirsty, and I didn’t think anyone would be down here.”

“Right of the sink,” I told her as she opened up the wrong cabinet looking for a glass.

“Thanks,” she muttered.

“You know,” Rumi said, turning around in his chair to watch her. “I bet Mom would watch Rhett if you’re plannin’ on findin’ a job.”

Emilia laughed. “What the hell else would I do? We have to eat.” She filled the glass halfway with tap water. “But thanks, that’s actually a good idea. I’ll ask your mom about it. It would be fucking awesome if I didn’t have to pay for daycare.”

“When did you start swearing?” Rumi asked in surprise.

Emilia rolled her eyes. “Your brother asked me the same thing.”

“You were such a princess,” Rumi said with a smile.

“I was a kid,” she countered. “I’m gonna take this up to Rhett. Night guys.”

“Night,” I muttered as she walked past me.

“Night, Emmy Lou,” Rumi sang, making her wave over her shoulder.

“Emmy Lou?” I asked my brother. “Really?”

“What?”

“You’re just gonna act like everythin’ is fine?”

“You want me to treat her like shit?”

“I want you to be on my side,” I muttered, knowing I sounded like a twelve-year-old.

“I’m always on your side, Michael,” Rumi said seriously. “But I knew her almost as well as you did before. Fuck, man, she was family. Am I supposed to act like that’s gone now?”

“Isn’t it?”

“You tell me,” he shot back. “For all you know, she’s spent the last three years robbin’ people or bein’ a fuckin black widow, yet she’s still sleepin’ in your house.”

“She’s not a fuckin’ thief.”

“So, quick to come to her defense.”

“Jesus Christ, you give me a headache.”

“I have that effect,” he said easily, getting up from his seat. “Look, I’m not gonna treat her like shit or freeze her out because she did somethin’ shitty. She had enough of that growin’ up and I’m not gonna add to it. You wanna do that, it’s on you.”

After he left, I cleaned up our beer bottles and closed up the house for the night, making my way upstairs in the dark. The closer I got to my room, the more anxious I got, wondering if I was going to find Emilia in my bed like Rumi had mentioned. How the hell would I throw her out? Because I knew I'd have to. Fucking Emilia would be the stupidest thing I'd ever done, and I wasn't about to go down that road. She'd screwed me over once, and I wasn't about to let that happen again. We had a son to think about, and we needed to keep things friendly between us—sex would mess that up in a hurry.

When I reached my bedroom and found the door open, I braced but realized almost immediately that she wasn't in there. Ignoring the disappointment I felt—I must be a goddamn masochist—I closed myself in.

The room was as close to perfect as I could get it. I'd picked out every feature, from the ceiling fan to the massive California king bed myself. My mom said I got so caught up in the minute details because I was an artist, my dad argued it was because I was a perfectionist, but I just thought I knew what looked good, and I wasn't willing to cut corners. The carpet was plush, the curtains were blackout, and the sheets were fucking amazing. I could live in the same work jeans and a worn-out flannel no problem, but I wasn't willing to sleep on shitty sheets. Life was too goddamn short.

I wondered what Emilia thought of the house as I got ready for bed. She'd obviously done some looking around, because I knew that I'd shut my bedroom door and it had been open when I got there. Did she like it? Was it weird for her?

*Of course it was fucking weird for her. I was living in her fucking house.*

No, it was *my* house. I'd made it mine.

It hadn't been when I'd moved in. The family I'd bought the place from hadn't changed it much and it had still felt like Emilia's house. It had the same carpets and most of the same wall colors. Same cabinets, appliances, hell, they hadn't even changed the window blinds. I'd only been in her house a

couple times while her parents were gone, but I'd remembered exactly what the place had looked like back then.

I shrugged off the memory of the first day I'd come back here, looking for answers.

The hot water did little to relax my shoulders and neck, but I stood there for a long time anyway. I couldn't believe she was back. Fuck, for a year after she'd gone, I'd fall asleep with her on my mind. It didn't matter if I was drunk or sober, Emilia had been the first thing on my mind when I woke up and the last thing on my mind when I'd gone to sleep. I'd worried about her, fuck, I'd worried. Silently and not so silently raged at her. Missed her. Loved her. And then, sometime in the past year, that shit had all calmed. I'd still thought of her often, but not as often. I'd still worried, but that had mellowed, too.

Now suddenly she was back, and I didn't know what to do with that. We had a son, and I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do with that either.

When people said that you didn't know the depth of feeling you could have until you had a kid, they weren't lying. The moment I met Rhett, I knew I'd die for him. When he'd wiped out in the yard and I'd heard him crying, I'd felt it deep in my chest. Instant fear and the urge to make it better no matter what I had to do. It was a fucking trip, to say the least. I didn't even know anything about him, but I knew he was mine. One hundred percent mine.

Okay, fifty percent. Whatever.

He was so fucking sweet, and you could tell just by looking at him how much he loved Emilia. She was his north star. I scrubbed at my body as I contemplated how it might all work.

Eventually they were going to get a place of their own, but I wanted him with me. It made me nauseous to think of the things that I'd already missed. Spending half his time with me

and half his time with Emilia seemed like the fairest thing. Equal time. We were both his parents.

Then I thought of the way he looked at her, the way he'd orbited around her, the way he'd clung to her, and I knew fifty-fifty was never going to work. Not yet anyway. Not for a long time.

She was his everything and I was just some giant that he didn't know and didn't trust.

Fuck.

Letting the water pour over my head, I counted backward from a hundred, feeling the anger and frustration dissipate a fraction at a time.

I finished in the shower and headed to bed, wondering how early Rhett woke up. Would I hear him in the morning, or would Emilia make sure he didn't wake me? I was pretty sure it was the latter, so I set my alarm for six thirty. I didn't want to miss any time. Would he want cereal in the morning? I had some. Or fruit? I was pretty sure I still had some strawberries in the fridge—or maybe I'd take them to breakfast and make it a whole welcome home thing.

I fell asleep debating whether I'd take them to the pancake place down the street or the diner closer to my parents' house. Less than an hour later, I woke up with my hand on my cock and a very vivid dream of Emilia playing over and over in my head. She was gorgeous with her light brown hair sweaty and wild, her tits heavy as they swayed with each roll of her hips, and her eyes closed as she threw her head back and moaned.

I finished myself off, groaning under my breath, before I even realized what I was doing.

“Fuck,” I muttered, breathing heavily as I stared at the ceiling fan. I'd just beat off to the thought of Emilia while she slept down the hall. What the hell was I doing?

I knew the kiss had been a mistake the second I'd done it. Old habits died hard, I guess, because she'd been looking at

me like she used to, with absolute trust, like I could fix anything and be anything and I'd caved.

Sure, I'd thought about doing it since the moment I'd walked into my mom's kitchen and seen her standing there—but I hadn't actually planned on doing it. I didn't even know her anymore. Rumi was right. She could be anyone now.

I got up and cleaned myself off, throwing on a pair of sweatpants in an effort to keep my hands off my junk if I had any more dreams.

I needed to keep a little distance between Emilia and me while we figured out exactly how we were going to move forward. Playing house while we did that would confuse the situation in ways neither of us wanted to deal with. We had a child to take care of. We needed to take care of him first, make sure he felt good and secure. That had to be my priority—not banging his mother.

Though, I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep the dreams at bay. Fuck, she looked good. Like before, only better. She used to be so sweet and carefree, now you could tell that she'd lived a little. Her eyes were no longer wide and searching. They were knowing, and goddamn if that didn't do it for me. She wasn't a teenager anymore, and neither was I, and I had a feeling that if we did end up in bed, it would be a million times better than before.

I rolled over and shoved my face into the pillow, growling in frustration.

It would be easier if I didn't find her attractive anymore. If she'd somehow become less *her*. As angry as I was with her—and I could feel that anger still bubbling just beneath the surface—I still wanted her. Badly.

Eventually I fell asleep, but I had no idea how long it took.

When my alarm went off the next morning, I shot out of bed, sure that Emilia and Rhett were gone. Without bothering to put on a t-shirt or let my morning wood disappear, I practically ran down the hallway and threw open the first door.



It was pure luck that I was able to keep it from hitting the wall when I found them sound asleep in the guest bed.

Emilia was on her back, her arms thrown above her head and her mouth hanging open, but it was Rhett that made me stop and stare. He was asleep wrapped around her, the entire top half of his body pressed against her side, his arm and one leg flung over her and his head resting on her shoulder, his face just inches from her neck. Both of them were completely out, snoring softly, and I just stood there staring.

They were mine. He was mine. She might be different, I knew she was, but she'd still come to me. She'd stayed at my house instead of my parents' place. She'd driven from Arizona to find me, and instead of staying at a motel and keeping her distance, she'd snooped through my house and slept in my guest room.

I rubbed at my sternum as my heart thundered in my chest.

I wanted to crawl in bed beside them and sandwich Rhett in between us. Maybe I'd fall asleep and wake up with his arm flung over my belly. Maybe she would wake up and smile at me over his head with a secret look of pride at this little person who was curled up between us.

I quietly gasped for air as I stepped back out and closed the bedroom door. Fucking hell, I could see us as a family so clearly. The perfection of it.

And then reality hit me like a hammer.

She'd chosen something different. We could've been a family three years ago, two years ago, last year. She'd lived a completely separate life, keeping the knowledge of our son to herself for almost three years. The family unit I'd been imagining was a fantasy. It was bullshit.

At some point, maybe Rhett would sleep next to me, kicking me in the side and hogging the bed, but Emilia wouldn't be there snoring next to him. That wasn't in the cards, and I needed to deal with that shit and move on.

I straightened up and squared my shoulders.

I needed to focus on what was important—getting to know my son—and I was going to start by taking him and his mother to breakfast. After that, I'd see where the day took us. Maybe he liked the park, or he'd think it was cool to skip rocks at the river. I was a fucking pro at skipping rocks. Maybe I could impress him that way. Show him how it was done.

Did he have a bike? Maybe we could pick one up for him. I'd seen kids his age riding around the club on little bikes without pedals. Get him riding on two wheels early, like I did. Maybe he'd be into that.

My mind raced through different ideas of how I'd get my kid to like me as I got dressed and ready for the day. *That* was what I would focus on from that point forward.

## CHAPTER 5

### EMILIA

“MAMA,” RHETT WHISPERED, his morning breath making me wrinkle my nose in disgust. “Mama, awake?”

“I’m awake now,” I whispered back, opening my eyes.

“I’m hungry.” His face was about two inches from mine.

“You’re always hungry,” I teased, brushing my hair out of my face. “Did you sleep good?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” I said, pulling him down next to me in bed. “You sure you don’t want to sleep some more?”

“No. Hungry.”

“Oh, right,” I mumbled, looking around the room. At least he’d let me sleep until the sun was up. The bedroom looked different in the light of day. The colors were warmer and even more welcoming than they’d been the night before. Whoever picked them out had good taste.

“Lunch?” Rhett asked, pulling away so he could slide off the bed.

“Breakfast, baby. Lunch is in the afternoon,” I reminded him with a sigh. I would have liked putting off seeing Mick again for at least a little while longer after that kiss the night before, but I knew Rhett wouldn’t let me stall. If I didn’t get up and start getting ready for the day, he would quickly melt down. The word hangry could’ve been invented with my kid in mind.

The fact that he didn’t once ask where we were made a little starburst of shame flare in my chest. We’d woken up in

so many different places lately that he wasn't concerned by one more.

After getting us dressed and a quick trip to the gorgeous bathroom upstairs, Rhett and I ventured down to the kitchen. Mick was seated at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Hey, how'd you sleep?" he asked, his eyes on Rhett.

"Great," I replied, jerking to a stop so I wouldn't trip when Rhett paused in front of me. "That bed is really comfortable."

"Kinda pointless to buy one that isn't," Mick replied with a shrug. "There's coffee on the counter if you want some. You guys hungry?"

I looked down at the top of my son's head, waiting for him to answer. The entire reason we'd gotten out of bed was because he was hungry—but Rhett was silent. The moment grew awkward as Rhett and I both stood there silently.

"Rhett's starving," I said, ruffling the top of his head as I moved around him to toss his pull-up in the trash. "But I could get away with just coffee."

"You wanna go get some pancakes, Rhett?" Mick asked casually. "There's a restaurant a few minutes away that makes killer pancakes."

"Like pancakes," Rhett replied tentatively as I poured myself a cup of coffee. "Syrup?"

"Absolutely."

I turned around and leaned against the counter, watching their interaction. Rhett had moved a few steps closer and was standing with one sock-covered foot on top of the other.

"Mama too?" Rhett asked, glancing at me.

"Of course. Mom's gotta eat, right?"

Both of them looked at me expectantly, and I set my full coffee cup down on the counter with a sigh. "Okay, let's do it."

Everything was going smoothly as we got our jackets and shoes on, but the moment we walked outside and Mick started toward the garage with Rhett following behind him like a duckling, I had to break the spell.

“Uh, Rhett,” I called, chuckling. “Where you going, bud?”

“Pancakes!”

“Your car seat is in our car,” I pointed out, literally jerking my thumb toward our car. “You gotta ride with me.”

“Pancakes, Mama.” He looked over his shoulder at Mick.

“Your dad can ride with us if he wants,” I said, automatically calculating how long it would take for me to clean off the passenger seat. On a good day, there were always random wrappers and toys up there, but we’d been on the road for a while. It was kind of a nightmare.

“We can put his seat in my truck,” Mick said as I picked Rhett up and carried him to the car.

“That’s okay,” I called over my shoulder as I swung open Rhett’s door and set him in his seat. “Just give me a sec, and you can ride with us.”

“Let’s just take the truck,” Michael replied stubbornly.

I knew it would be news to him, but somewhere along the line, I seemed to have grown a bit of a backbone. Years ago, I would’ve done whatever he wanted. Go to the river even though I was on my period and really just wanted to lie around watching movies? Sure, Michael. Lay on the hammock for an hour even though I was bored and wanted to go do something? Sure, Michael. Go to the hamburger place even though I’d really like tacos? Absolutely, Michael, burgers sound great.

Fighting with Michael was the last thing I wanted to do, but I also didn’t want to be that person anymore. After spending my entire life under the thumb of my parents, I’d spent the last few months finding out what it was like to make my own decisions and stick by them. I had no interest in going back to how I’d been before.

I wanted to drive my car. I didn't want to go through the hassle of getting Rhett's seat out of the back and putting it back in an hour when we got back from breakfast. It was heavy and awkward and just plain annoying.

I finished buckling Rhett in and found a mostly empty fast food bag. Leaning into the car, I used the bag to gather up all the little bits of garbage on the front floorboard, tossing toys in the back seat as I hurried.

"Jesus," Michael's amused voice came from right behind me. "You're a slob."

I shot up so fast that I bumped the back of my head on the roof of the car.

"I'm not a slob."

"Sugar," he murmured, glancing at me, the car, and then back at me again. "Your car's trashed."

I scowled, ignoring how the endearment made my stomach flip.

"Do you have any idea what it's like to never be able to just get out of the car and run into the store, or a restaurant, or the bank, or just straight into your house after a long day?" I asked, glancing at Rhett. "I have to grab my purse and then get out, go around the car and open Rhett's door. Fifty percent of the time, I have to put his shoes back on before I get him unbuckled and out of the car. Then I have to grab whatever toy he's brought with him, his blanket that he can't seem to leave home without—"

Mick's gaze shot to Rhett, who was trying to pull said blanket out from under one of his feet.

"And then I have to usher or carry him into wherever we're going. I'm sorry if my car isn't up to your standards, but I only have two hands, and they're usually full of our son's shit."

"I can have one of the prospects detail it for you," Mick replied, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "If that would help."

“Only until the next time Rhett rode with me to the store,” I muttered, leaning back in to grab the last of the flotsam and jetsam that was littering the passenger seat of my car. I waved my hand in his direction. “I noticed that you’d joined the club.”

“Hard to miss,” he said, glancing down at the leather cut he wore. Taking the garbage from my hands, he strode over to a garbage can by the side of the house and threw it inside.

“You ready, buddy?” I asked, knocking on Rhett’s window as I rounded the car.

“Truck,” he yelled in response. I should’ve anticipated that. If the choices were to ride in Mom’s boring old Subie or a cool truck, the answer would always be the truck for Rhett.

“Maybe next time,” I called back, chuckling.

“Keys?” Mick asked, holding his hand out across the hood of the car.

“I can drive.”

He just stared at me, his hand between us.

“It’s my car,” I huffed.

Mick looked down into the passenger seat, and I followed his gaze. It took me a moment to realize he wasn’t going to fit.

“I can try to push the seat back,” he muttered. “But I doubt it’ll do much good with Rhett’s car seat there.”

He was right. In order for Rhett’s car seat to fit, the passenger seat had to be pushed all the way forward. It was the entire reason he wasn’t behind the driver’s seat. I didn’t need much legroom, but I also didn’t enjoy being an inch from the steering wheel.

“Fine,” I conceded, tossing him the keys as I went back around to the passenger seat. Michael laughed at my glower as he passed me.

“Your mom’s poutin,’ Rhett,” he said as he opened the driver’s side door.

“Mama pout.”

“I am not,” I said, spinning to face Rhett as Mick closed my door. Rhett was giggling, his face pressed into his blanket.

“Mama pout,” Rhett teased, grinning at me in the little mirror.

“It’s like drivin’ a clown car,” Michael grumbled as he pushed the driver’s seat as far back as it would go. “Was it always this small?”

“That’s what she said,” I mumbled under my breath.

Michael’s surprised gaze shot to me. The joke was an old one, but I hadn’t ever said it. Back in the day, it had been his and Rumi’s favorite one-liner to make me giggle and scold them.

He cleared his throat. “I can’t believe you’re still drivin’ this thing.”

“She’s reliable.” I reached out and patted the dash. “Why would I get something new?”

“I remember when your parents bought it for you after graduation,” Mick said, backing out of the driveway. “I couldn’t tell if you were going to jump up and down with joy or cry.”

“I felt like doing both. It was ‘*ah, freedom and I’m going to look like a fifty-year-old hippie librarian*’ rolled into one. She’s been a good car, though, and I’ve got killer trunk space.”

“Drives nice,” he replied. “You’ve been keepin’ up on maintenance?”

“You sound like my dad,” I joked.

The words fell like an anvil between us. It was a generic teasing statement, but there was too much history there for it to be funny. I wasn’t even sure how to backtrack.

“Frances,” Rhett piped up from the back seat. “Frances!”



“Who’s Frances?” Mick asked, reaching up to adjust the mirror so he could look at Rhett.

Rhett patted the window. “Frances.”

“What is he talking about?” Mick asked me in confusion.

An embarrassed laugh made its way up my throat, and I struggled to keep it contained.

“You can do it, Frances,” I said, snorting, patting the dash. “Just a little bit further, old girl.”

“Jesus,” Mick muttered in amusement.

“Do it, Frances,” Rhett copied in the back seat, patting the door.

“I’ll put some more gas in as soon as we get to Eugene,” I continued, loving the sound of his chuckle as I rubbed along the dash. “Won’t that be nice?”

“Nice, Frances,” Rhett parroted.

“Coupla weirdos,” he said, shaking his head. “Hey, if you take it to the shop on Monday, I can have one of the boys make sure everything’s good after your road trip.”

“You don’t need to do that,” I said, relaxing back into my seat. “I had an oil change and my tires rotated before we left.”

“You need new tires,” Mick said easily. “The ones you’ve got are bald as fuck.”

“Bald fuck,” Rhett parroted.

“Michael,” I hissed.

“It just means the tires are gettin’ old,” Mick replied loudly like the volume of his words were going to make Rhett forget his fun new word. “You have to replace them when they could pop when you’re drivin’.”

“Pop. *Fuck.*”

“They’re not going to pop,” I sang, glaring at Mick. “They’re not that old.”

“Have you looked at ’em since you got here?”

“They’re fine.”

“Look at ’em when we get out of the car.”

“I don’t need to,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I just had them checked before we left.”

“Well, I don’t know what kind of route you took to get here, but they’re shit now.”

“Have you always been this controlling?” I asked in exasperation. “Because it’s really annoying.”

Michael looked at me. “Controllin’ would be takin’ the keys so you couldn’t drive my kid around on your bald ass unsafe tires,” he said flatly. “Not tellin’ you that they’re bald and you need to look into gettin’ new ones.”

“I think I can decide when I need new tires.”

“Fuck!” Rhett hissed in the back seat.

“Suit yourself,” Michael said with a shrug as we pulled into the familiar pancake house we’d gone to when we were kids. “Don’t call me when you’re stuck on the side of the road with a flat.”

“I won’t,” I shot back stubbornly.

We were silent as we parked and got out of the car. Stomping back to Rhett’s door, I refused to even glance at the tires. I knew they were fine.

“Fuck,” Rhett said as I got him out of the car.

“You ready for some pancakes?” I asked, trying to distract him from the fun new word.

“Yes.”

“With syrup?” I poked him in the side.

“Yes.” Then a few seconds later, “*Fuck.*”

“Why you gotta be so smart, huh?” I asked, rolling my eyes. Maybe I should’ve warned Michael that I never really

swore in front of Rhett for this exact reason. He copied *everything*.

I closed the car door and found Michael crouched by my front tire with a penny between his thumb and pointer finger, measuring the tread of my tires.

“Are you serious right now?”

“I’m right,” he countered, gesturing to where he held the penny. “You need new ones.”

“Jesus, Michael,” I whispered, pulling Rhett’s head against my shoulder and covering his ear with my hand. “Read the fucking room. Where am I going to get money for a new set of tires?”

Michael’s expression changed from smug to understanding in less than a heartbeat as he rose to his feet.

“Can we get some breakfast?” I asked, letting Rhett raise his head back up. “Rhett’s starving.”

“Hungry,” Rhett agreed.

“Yeah,” Michael replied, waving us past him. “Let’s get some breakfast.”

Straightening my shoulders, I stomped toward the restaurant. I was embarrassed that I’d mentioned that I couldn’t afford new tires, but the truth was the truth. It wasn’t like Rhett and I were completely destitute or anything like that, but until I found a job and started bringing some cash in, I had to hold back from any big purchases. It was just plain luck that nothing expensive had gone wrong yet.

“I can get you some tires,” Michael said in my ear as he opened the door for us.

“I don’t want you to buy me tires,” I countered, my voice quiet as I slid past him.

“Tough.”

“Micky Hawthorne,” the hostess said with a smile, coming around the front of her little podium. “I haven’t seen you in

months!”

“Hey, Nova,” Michael said, stepping around Rhett and me so he could give the girl a hug.

My stomach dropped as he wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her off the ground, swinging her a little from side to side.

“Who’s this?” she asked, still smiling when he set her down.

“Oh, this is Emilia,” Michael said, gesturing toward me. “And our son, Rhett.”

“Your what, now?” she sputtered, her mouth dropping open.

Michael reached up and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “My son.”

Nova’s mouth opened and closed a couple of times before she realized that she was standing there gaping like a fish and changed her expression. “It’s nice to meet you, Emilia and Rhett,” she said with an awkward smile.

I smiled back and nodded as Rhett watched her silently.

“So, uh, table for three, right?” Nova asked, going back behind her podium to grab menus. “Come on back.”

“You still workin’ at the craft store?” Michael asked as we followed Nova to our table.

“Yep,” she chirped, smiling at him over her shoulder.

I followed with Rhett a couple steps behind Michael, my stomach in knots.

“Both places then,” Michael said. “Damn, girl. When do you sleep?”

“I’m picking up extra shifts whenever I have a spare minute. Sleep is for the old and the dead,” Nova joked. “I’m hustling.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“Here’s your table,” she said, setting our menus down. “I’ll go see if I can get some crayons so Rhett can color while you guys wait for your food.”

“Thank you,” I replied, setting Rhett on my side of the booth. He crawled across the seat, going for the little sugar packets on the table. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Nova giving Mick’s forearm a squeeze as she walked away.

“Nova, huh?” I asked casually as I sat down. “She seems nice.”

“She is,” Michael replied, handing me a menu.

“Is she our age?”

“Few years younger.”

“I don’t remember her.”

Michael put his menu down and looked at me. “She went to a different high school.”

“Huh,” I mused.

“She actually went to a private school. On scholarship.”

“It didn’t seem to do her much good,” I mumbled, glancing around the diner. I don’t know why I said it. It was snarky and rude and just plain shitty.

“Don’t know about that,” Mick replied. “*She’s* got a job.”

I jerked back in surprise.

“I’ll find a job,” I repeated quietly, my skin tingling like at any moment it was going to burst into flames. “We just got here.”

“I know.” Michael sighed and ran a hand over his face. “Look, she works her ass off, alright? Not sure why the hell you’d look down on her for that.”

“I’m not looking down on anyone,” I argued, frozen in place.

“Sure you weren’t,” he replied tiredly, picking his menu back up.

I sat there, my face on fire as he looked away. My throat felt tight and my nose stung. Holding my breath, I set my hands on my lap, focusing on the way my thumbs brushed against my jeans. I didn't look at Rhett as he started putting all the sugar packets on the table. I didn't look at Michael as he set his menu down in front of him. I didn't even look at Nova when she brought over a couple crayons so Rhett could color on his kid's menu.

If I'd moved or even breathed, the tears that threatened would've become a reality. I refused to cry in the middle of a crowded pancake restaurant.

"Pancakes," Rhett told me, snuggling in against my side.

"Okay," I whispered, leaning down to kiss the top of his head.

"What do you want to drink, Rhett?" Michael asked, his voice almost too loud as he tried to pretend the table wasn't practically vibrating with tension.

Rhett didn't answer.

"You want some juice, bud?" I asked, wrapping my arm around his waist as he leaned over the table.

"Yeah," Rhett replied.

I wasn't sure if I was more embarrassed that I'd been called out for being a snob or the fact that Mick had put me in my place. He was right. At least Nova had a job. Hell, Michael was so much better off financially it was ridiculous. He owned a freaking house. One could argue that he was doing so well because he hadn't had to take care of a child for the last two years like I had—but I wasn't going to make that argument.

The most idiotic thing about it was that I hadn't even made the comment about Nova because I cared where she worked. It wasn't like I had any room to talk. It was jealousy, pure and simple. I'd seen the easy way he was with her, and I'd wanted to ruin it. I'd wanted to make her lesser somehow.

We sat silently until the waiter came and took our order.

“He’d like the kid’s pancakes and syrup, please,” I said, smiling at the waiter. “And some apple juice cut with water.”

“Okay. What about you?”

“Just coffee, please.”

“Nothing to eat?”

“No thanks.”

“Get some food,” Michael ordered, his voice low.

“No thanks, I’m not hungry.” The thought of trying to choke down a meal while Michael sat across from us made me want to vomit.

“Just get somethin’ to eat, Emilia.”

“No, I’m good,” I said, shaking my head. I shot the waiter another smile.

“I’d like the strawberry pancakes,” Michael said. “With coffee.”

“I’ll get those right out,” the waiter replied cheerfully, walking away as quickly as he could.

“You serious right now?” Mick asked, staring at me. “You’re not gonna eat?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Then why did we come to breakfast?”

“You and Rhett are hungry.”

“You’re acting like a child.”

“Just drop it,” I ground out through my teeth. I turned to Rhett and pointed to his menu coloring page. “Are you going to color the tires?”

For the rest of the meal, Michael and I barely spoke. Rhett and I talked, and Michael spoke to Rhett, but there may as well have been a wall between us. Our son could feel the tension in the air and immediately snuggled into my side. He

barely looked at Michael. I felt bad about it, but I wasn't sure how to fix it.

By the time we got up from the table and headed toward the front door, Michael was so tense he looked like at any moment he was going to Hulk out of his clothes. When he stopped at the hostess station to talk to Nova, I gave a little wave but kept walking. I told myself it was because I didn't know her and it would be awkward for me to stop, but the truth was that I was embarrassed.

I'd been talking shit when the girl had been perfectly nice to me. It hadn't been my best moment.

"No car," Rhett whined as I put him back in his car seat.

"We're just going back to Daddy's house," I said, running my fingers through his hair.

"Grandma's house," he said, looking at me.

"You're right," I said, nodding. I'd wondered when he would realize it was the same house we'd visited when we got into town. "It was my house when we were little, but it's Daddy's house now."

"Daddy's mean."

"Your dad's not mean, buddy," I said in surprise. "Daddy's awesome."

"Daddy." Rhett scrunched his face into a scowl, and it was almost startling how closely it resembled Michael's.

I sighed, struggling to find a way to explain. There was no way to explain the nuances of a relationship to a two-year-old.

"He wasn't being mean," I said, brushing his hair back from his forehead. "I wasn't being very nice, and he was just making sure I knew that."

"Mama's *nice*," Rhett replied stubbornly.

"You're my best friend," I said, leaning in to kiss him. "You know that, right?"



“My best friend,” he said, sighing. He pulled his blanket against his face and stared down at his feet as I closed the door between us.

“You know, maybe it would be better if me and Rhett spent some time without you,” Michael said, startling me as I turned toward my door.

My stomach lurched. “What?”

“When you get somethin’ up your ass, he thinks I’m the problem,” Michael said in exasperation. “Which I get because you’re his mama. But you seem to have somethin’ permanently stuck up there, so he’s never gonna fuckin’ talk to me.”

“He met you *yesterday*.”

“And whose fault is that?” Michael snapped, his voice getting louder.

“You’re not taking him anywhere,” I said firmly, glancing at Rhett through the window. “Now can we leave the parking lot, or do you want to continue giving everyone—including our son—a show?”

Without another word, he rounded the hood of my car and climbed into the front seat. As I got in my own seat, my mind raced. I didn’t know how to make things easier between us. If I wanted Rhett to have a good relationship with his dad, I needed to facilitate it. I knew that. But I wasn’t sure how to ease the tension. It really didn’t matter what we were talking about. There was always this undercurrent of something threading through the conversation. My son wasn’t stupid, and he’d spent his first year and a half living with my parents—he knew how to read body language and tone.

I wasn’t any closer to figuring out what to do when we pulled up in front of my old house. Michael’s house. I needed to start thinking of it as Michael’s house. When I got Rhett out of the car, he whined and refused to walk, and I had to carry him inside.

“Hey buddy,” I murmured into his ear as I kicked off my shoes near the front door. “You wanna play with your cars?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?” I needled. “You love cars.”

I gave him a squeeze as he pushed his forehead against my neck.

“Okay.” He was so quiet I almost didn’t hear him.

“Come on, I’ll grab your cars,” I said, carrying him into the living room. I ignored Michael as he went into the kitchen and began cleaning up the coffee we’d left.

“Here you go,” I said, unzipping his little backpack so I could pour the cars onto the carpet. “How’s that?”

“Mama play?” Rhett asked as I set him on his feet.

“Not this time,” I replied. “But I’ll be right back, okay?”

He babbled something I didn’t understand, but in less than a minute, he was happily playing with the toys.

“I’m sorry about the stuff I said in the restaurant,” I murmured as I walked into the kitchen. “It was shitty.”

“Nova’s smart as hell,” Mick replied. “She’s savin’ up to go to school so she can cut hair and shit.”

“I’m sure she is,” I replied quietly as my stomach lurched. “She seemed nice.”

“She’s fuckin’ great,” he said, swinging the dishwasher closed. “And she doesn’t deserve people talkin’ shit, not even passive-aggressive comments about what she’s doin’ with her life.”

“You’re right,” I said, turning away from the window. “It was stupid.”

“Funny thing is, you’d like her,” he said, leaning against the counter. “The two of you are a lot alike.”

I really didn’t want to hear about how *alike* me and the beautiful woman from the pancake house were, especially

since Michael seemed to be a little too defensive of her.

“You’ve been weird all mornin’,” Michael said, watching me closely. “Havin’ second thoughts about comin’ back here?”

“Not at all,” I replied quickly, shaking my head. I glanced into the living room. Rhett was driving cars off the edge of the couch. “I’m glad we’re here.”

“You know I’d never do anythin’ to hurt him, right?” Michael asked seriously.

“Of course,” I replied hastily, turning to look at him.

“You were pretty damn quick to say I couldn’t have him on my own.”

I swallowed hard at the accusation in his words.

“He’s not ready for that yet.”

“Is *he* ever gonna be ready?”

“Why would you even ask me that?”

“Just tryin’ to see where we stand,” he said flatly.

“We just got here, Michael,” I said, lifting my hands palms up. “Give him a few days at least.”

“I’m not plannin’ on takin’ him from you.”

My entire body flared hot and then instantly ice cold at the words. Maybe it was naïve of me, or just plain stupid, but that scenario hadn’t even occurred to me. Now that he’d said it, I couldn’t think of anything else.

He had a home. A job. A close-knit family for support.

I had a beat-up Subaru filled to the brim with Rhett’s things and a suitcase full of clothes.

“I’m a good mother,” I rasped, taking a step back toward the door. “I’m a fucking great mother.”

“I never said you weren’t,” he said gently, his eyebrows pulling together in confusion.

“No one would ever take him,” I continued. “A judge would never agree to that.”

“A judge?” He took a step toward me, his face creased with concern. “What are you talking about, Emilia?”

“I think we should probably find somewhere else to stay,” I said, looking at Rhett again.

“You can stay here,” Michael replied. It only took two of his long-legged steps to reach me, and before I could take a single step, my wrist was captured in his grip. “What the fuck is happenin’ in that head of yours?”

“I think I did this all wrong,” I said with a little laugh. Hysteria bubbled up inside of me, making the sound far from joyful. “We should definitely get some kind of plan in place. I shouldn’t have just invaded your life.” My eyes shot to Rhett again.

“Emilia,” Mick said gruffly. When I didn’t look at him, he gave my arm a little shake.

“Stupid,” I muttered, trying to smile like it was no big deal. “I think I was just so excited to be back that I didn’t really think of the logistics, you know?”

“Look at me.”

I glanced at him and then away again. I didn’t know him, not anymore. My mistake had been assuming that I still did. Once, I’d known every little thing about him. I’d been able to read him, anticipate what he would think and how he would react. That wasn’t the case anymore. Stupid. So stupid.

Mick mumbled something under his breath and then moved past me toward the living room.

Without thinking, I threw myself in front of him.

“The fuck?” he blurted, staring at me in bewilderment.

It took me a second to realize that I was acting like an absolute lunatic. I forced my body to move out of his way.

“Rhett,” he called, walking into the living room. “You wanna go over to Grandma’s house?”

“Yes!” Rhett called back. He came running. “Grandma’s house?”

“Yep,” Michael said, picking him up. “I’ll carry you to the car, yeah?”

“Coming, Mama?” Rhett asked worriedly over Michael’s shoulder.

“Yeah, Mama,” Michael said, walking toward the front door. “You comin’?”

I followed them out of the house and back to my car, then stood there stupidly while Michael figured out Rhett’s car seat buckles.

“You wanna double-check these?” he asked as he backed out of the way. “Not sure how to tighten them.”

I nodded silently and tightened the belts, leaning forward to give Rhett a kiss on his head.

“Play outside?” Rhett asked as soon as we were pulling out of the driveway.

“We’ll see, bud,” I said, staring out the windshield. Internally, I was still panicking, but the knowledge that we were headed to Michael’s parents’ house soothed it somewhat. There was something about that house that made everything feel like it was going to be okay. I didn’t take the time to analyze it.

When we pulled up in front of the house, Mrs. Hawthorne came outside to greet us.

“Okay, so I didn’t want to intrude,” she said, coming toward the car as we climbed out. “But I was really hoping you guys would come back over today.”

“Can Rhett hang with you for a while?” Michael asked, making me jolt in surprise. I thought we were all going to hang out with his family.

“Always,” Mrs. Hawthorne replied easily. She looked over at me. “As long as that’s okay with Emilia?”

“Mama, out!” Rhett called from his seat.

I hesitated.

“He’ll be fine here for a little bit,” Michael told me over the roof of the car. “Relax.”

The panic inside me receded a little, but only enough for anger to take its place.

“You’d think that with a mother like yours, you’d have learned by twenty-four years old not to tell a woman to relax.”

“Rookie move,” Mrs. Hawthorne agreed. “But he’ll be totally safe with us, Em. You know that.”

I opened the back door and leaned in to talk to Rhett.

“Hey, you wanna hang out here for a little bit so me and your daddy can run an errand?”

“Mama go?” Rhett asked uneasily.

“Just for a little bit,” I repeated. “I bet Grandma will give you a snack if you ask, and you can play outside.”

“Okay,” Rhett murmured, unsure.

“We’ll be back in just a little bit,” I assured him as I unbuckled his seat.

“Hey, Rhett!” Mrs. Hawthorne said happily as I helped him out of the car. “I was thinking of making some cookies or cupcakes or something. You wanna help me?”

“Cookies?” Rhett said, glancing up at me as I set him on his feet.

“Have all the cookies you want,” I said with a chuckle. “Go ahead. Have fun.”

He kissed my arm before hurrying over to his grandma.

“We’ll be back in a few,” Michael told his mom as he climbed back into the car.

“We’ll be here,” Mrs. Hawthorne said to me. “No plans today except making some treats.”

I watched as she walked Rhett into the house before getting back into the car.

“That was bullshit,” I said quietly as Michael turned around in the driveway. “You ambushed me.”

“You could’ve said no.”

“Not without hurting your mom’s feelings.”

“We needed a minute without Rhett, and now we’ve got it.”

I didn’t respond. I felt naked without Rhett. Like I’d forgotten something. It probably wasn’t healthy, but I was used to him being with me always. To drive off without him made my stomach churn with nausea.

“Where are you going?” I asked suspiciously as we turned down a familiar country road.

“Somewhere we won’t be interrupted,” Michael said calmly.

I crossed my arms over my chest, not really believing that he’d go where I thought he was going. When we pulled up to the gate outside the Aces Motorcycle Club compound, I glared at him.

Mick rolled down the window and nodded, and the prospect at the gate rolled it open without a word, letting us pull through.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I mumbled under my breath.

The path he took was overgrown with weeds and blackberry bushes, but we’d spent enough time carving it out in high school that it was still passable. The closer we got to our spot, the antsy I got and by the time he rolled to a stop, I was already unbuckling my seat belt. I hopped out of the car

and slammed the door shut, anger and disbelief running through me.

“Why the hell would you think we should come out here?” I asked as he calmly climbed out of the driver’s side.

“Never been interrupted out here before. Figured we wouldn’t be today.”

“Felt like a trip down memory lane?” I asked dubiously, yanking my hood up as it started sprinkling rain. “I’m pretty sure Rhett was conceived out here.”

“In the back of my truck,” Mick replied, rounding the car. “Yeah, I remember.”

“I want to go back to your parents’ house,” I said, holding my ground as he came closer. “Right now.”

“Let’s figure some shit out first.”

“There’s nothing to figure out right at this moment,” I argued.

“Thought you wanted to put a plan in place,” he said easily, coming close. “Let’s make a plan.”

“I can’t make a plan out here,” I replied desperately, looking anywhere but at him.

The woods were so familiar. We’d carved our goddamn initials in the tree not ten feet from my front bumper, picked fresh blackberries from the bushes, been bitten by a million mosquitoes.

“Emilia, calm down.”

“You calm down,” I argued nonsensically.

It was too much. The memories were too much. The butterflies, the fear of being caught, the exhilaration when we weren’t. Back then, I hadn’t realized how massive the consequences of our little trysts would be.

“Sugar,” Mick said in exasperation, catching my head between his palms. “Look at me.”



“What?” I snapped.

“What the hell is goin’ on with you right now?”

“Nothing.”

“You started losin’ your shit back at my place, and it doesn’t seem to be lettin’ up.”

“So you bring me to the spot that you know is going to make it worse?” I spat. “Jesus.”

“Didn’t think it could get worse,” he replied, leaning down so our faces were close together. “Can’t figure out what’s goin’ on, so I’m throwin’ shit at the wall to see what sticks.”

“I should have done this right,” I said quickly, staring at his warm brown eyes. “I shouldn’t have just shown up. I should’ve called first, and we could’ve met for coffee or something, and then I could have told you about Rhett, and we could have figured out a plan for you to meet him and spend time with him, and then we could’ve figured out visitation and sleepovers and—”

“Slow down,” he murmured softly, his thumbs brushing over the hair at my temples.

“I just came here and upended your life.”

“Wish you woulda done it sooner.”

“I didn’t have a plan of what that should look like,” I said, almost in a daze. “That I’d have to just—” I shook my head, my breathing growing ragged. “Just give him to you.”

“What the hell are you talkin’ about?” he asked in disbelief.

“He’s never spent a night without me,” I rasped, the thought of it making me shake. “But he’ll have to go with you. You deserve that time with him. I know that. I just didn’t think it through, you know? I just—I guess I just didn’t see a future that we weren’t all together.”

Mick’s face lost all expression as he jerked back in surprise.

“Fuck,” I whispered, the blood draining from my face. “Forget I said that.”

“What, you just thought you’d come back here, and we’d start where we left off?” he asked incredulously, his hands tightening in my hair.

“No,” I backtracked. “That’s not what I meant.”

“That’s what you said.”

“No, it isn’t.” I pulled against his grip, but he didn’t let go. “I just didn’t plan ahead.”

“You thought you’d come back and we’d be a little happy family?” he growled. “After three fuckin’ years?”

“That’s not—” I stuttered. “No, that’s not what I meant.”

“For all you knew, I was fuckin’ married,” he continued, his voice still laced with bewilderment. “Or a fuckin’ addict. Or fuckin’ my way through the county. I coulda been a complete piece of shit. You don’t even goddamn know me anymore.”

“I know you,” I breathed, taking in his long eyelashes and the scar on his forehead that he’d gotten by hitting his head on his parents’ front porch when we were eight. The freckle on the side of his nose was as familiar as my own face, I’d kissed it so many times. “I’ll always know exactly who you are.”

“Jesus, Emilia,” he whispered, his head fell forward. A heartbeat later, I jerked in surprise when his lips met mine.

I almost pulled away to ask him what the hell we were doing, but the thought of losing his fingers in my hair and his tongue running along my bottom lip kept me silent. I’d dreamed that I’d have him back like this, that I’d feel him against me at some point, someday, but the fantasy had nothing on real life. It was so much better. Every sense was heightened as one hand left my hair and slid down my body, pressing between my shoulder blades, running firmly down the back of my jeans and finally gripping my ass hard.

It only took a moment for me to realize what he wanted, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and leaped, wrapping my legs around his waist. My back hit the side of the Subaru with a thud. Using his hips to pin me in place, Micky's hands started to roam. I gasped against his mouth as his hands slid under my sweatshirt, his long fingers finding their way along each rib until his thumbs slid over my nipples.

After that, there was no stopping us. It was inevitable, really. No matter how old we were or how long it had been since we'd seen each other, we were drawn like a couple of magnets. The spark that had started our friendship as kids and morphed into more as teenagers was still there, always simmering just under the surface. All it took was a look, an argument, a touch, and that spark burst into flame. We didn't even notice as the rain went from a sprinkle to a downpour.

He stripped off my sweatshirt, my tank top, my bra. I tore at his leather cut, flannel, and the t-shirt beneath it. His fingers didn't hesitate or fumble as he unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans.

I should have anticipated it. Maybe then, I wouldn't have been surprised to find myself bare-assed except for my socks and sneakers in the middle of the woods, soaking wet from the rain, getting fucked against the side of my car.

"Holy shit," I wheezed, my nails digging into Mick's back as he slid inside.

His hands gripped my thighs, holding me in place like it was nothing, and as he pulled out and thrust back in again, he used them to shift my body just a fraction. The slight change in position as he thrust made my eyes water and my mouth fall open in shock. I didn't know where he'd learned that trick, and I didn't want to know—I just wanted him to keep doing it.

"Goddamn," he whispered, his face in my neck. "Fuck, Emilia."

Letting my head fall back against the car, I tightened my arms around his neck, dug my fingers into his back, closed my

eyes, and let the rain pour down my face as he thrust over and over again, his cock hitting in exactly the right spot. Minutes later, I came with a loud moan that I couldn't have held in if I'd tried. It seemed to echo around us as he froze and ground against me, finding his own release.

Almost immediately afterward, still wrapped around each other and panting heavily, we both stiffened as reality set in.

My legs felt stiff and achy as he gently lowered me back onto my feet, and I was acutely aware of how cold it was outside as I reached for my now soaking-wet clothing. I shivered as I stepped away from the car and started to dress.

“That was a fuckin’ terrible idea,” Mick said, righting his jeans and boxers.

In our haste, he hadn't even fully taken them off, just let them sag around his thighs. For some reason, it made me embarrassed as hell that I'd been fully naked. I turned my back to him as I tried to clasp my bra. My fingers felt numb from the cold, and I struggled with it until warm hands brushed mine away and clasped it for me.

“Thanks,” I muttered, dragging on my freezing cold tank top.

“You covered?”

It took me a moment to grasp what he was asking. “Yeah, I have an IUD.”

“Thank Christ,” he muttered, grabbing my sweatshirt from the ground. “Here—it was under my flannel.”

I threw the sweatshirt on, thankful that it had been shielded a little from the rain and wasn't quite as damp as everything else. I tucked my underwear into the pocket of my jeans, thankful that they fit baggy and I was actually able to pull the damp fabric over my shoes and up my legs.

“So, um...” I murmured, looking anywhere but directly at him. It was insane how uncomfortable I was while still feeling the lingering effects of the orgasm I'd just had.

“Get in the car,” he ordered, not unkindly. He opened the door for me and closed it again once I was safely inside.

I slicked my hair back from my face as I watched him jog around the hood, then dried my face with the sleeves of my sweatshirt, hiding, as he climbed into the driver’s seat.

We were silent as he started the engine and turned the heater on full blast.

If there was something more uncomfortable than sitting in a rapidly heating car while wearing clothes that were damp all the way through, I couldn’t think of it. Everything clung, and my jeans chafed as I shifted in my seat.

“I’m not gonna take him from you,” Michael said quietly, his voice in the silent car startling me.

“What?”

“I’m not gonna take him,” he said, staring at the fogged-up windshield. “I’d never do that.”

“It was a poor choice of words,” I replied quietly. “I know you won’t.”

“I know he’s not ready to just be with me, especially overnight,” he continued. “You’re his mama. He doesn’t wanna be without ya.”

“Thanks,” I said with a sigh, leaning my head back against the seat. “I’m sorry I freaked out.”

“I’m sorry my reaction to you freakin’ out was to bang you against the side of your car,” he muttered.

I barked out a surprised laugh as he scrubbed his hands over his face.

“I was a willing participant,” I said ruefully. “Not my most intelligent decision.”

“It was a really fuckin’ dumb move,” Mick said, wrapping his hands tightly around the steering wheel.

I agreed with him one hundred percent, but the words still stung. I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling even colder than I'd been before.

“We've got a lot of shit to figure out,” he continued. “Sex'll just confuse things.”

“You're right.”

“I am?”

“Did you think I was going to argue?” I asked with a hollow laugh. “We haven't seen each other since the summer after high school, and we have a son. I don't even have a job or a place to live.” I shook my head.

“You can stay with me as long as you need to,” he replied immediately. “Don't worry about that.”

“I have to get things figured out,” I countered. “I've worked really hard to stand on my own two feet.”

Michael was quiet for a little while before he spoke again. “Do you know what kind of job you wanna get?” he asked, turning to look at me. “Where did you work before?”

It took everything inside of me not to show any reaction to the question as memories of the night I'd quit my job flashed through my mind. I shivered.

There wasn't any reason for Michael to ever know about that part of my life. It meant nothing now. Less than nothing.

“I was a waitress for a while,” I said, keeping my voice even. “So I could probably do that. Or a receptionist somewhere? Maybe retail or a coffee shop? I don't know. I'll take anything, really.”

“You ever think about going back to school?” he asked quietly.

I smiled wistfully. “I don't think that's in the cards, not until Rhett is older at least.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because I have to work,” I replied with a chuckle. “Between working and spending time with Rhett, my days will be completely full. I know that sounds dramatic, but it’s true.”

“What if you didn’t have to work?” Michael asked.

Before I could answer, I screeched in surprise as the outline of a person appeared outside Michael’s window.

## CHAPTER 6

### MICHAEL

**W**HEN EMILIA'S EYES widened, her gaze pointed over my shoulder, I immediately reached toward my lower back. By the time she yelled, I was already turning, drawing the pistol from the holster there. I paused, my hand still behind me when I realized who was outside the car.

"Fuck," I muttered, holstering the pistol again as I rolled down the window.

"Didn't expect to find you two back here again," my grandfather said, a half grin pulling at his lips. "Don't you have a house you could be foolin' around in?"

"Why the hell are you out here in the rain?" I looked around the clearing. "On foot?"

"Daily walk," he replied innocently.

"Uh-huh."

"Your gram gets on me if I don't get my exercise."

"You're in better shape than I am," I replied flatly.

"Hey, Emmy girl," he said, ignoring my comment as he leaned down into my window. "How you been, honey?"

"I'm good Mr.—"

Gramps cut her off with a huff.

"I'm good, Gramps," she amended.

"You bring that grandbaby by tonight," he ordered, pointing at her. "No excuses. Been here two damn days, and we haven't even met him yet."

"They got here yesterday," I corrected.



“That’s right,” he replied, straightening back up. “Today and yesterday.”

“We’ll bring him over.”

“Damn right, you will,” he said, glaring at me. “And stop maulin’ the girl out in the rain. You’re too damn old for that shit. You got a bed, use it.”

“I wasn’t—” I sputtered.

Gramps just raised one eyebrow.

“Understood,” I muttered.

“I’ll see ya tonight,” he said as he backed up a step. “Gram will make dinner. Bye, Em.”

“Bye, Gramps,” Emilia called as he walked away.

“Nosy old coot,” I mumbled as I rolled the window back up.

“I cannot believe that just happened,” Emilia moaned in embarrassment, pulling her sweatshirt up until it covered everything below her eyes. “How did he even know where we were?”

I started to chuckle as I put the car in reverse and turned around, and by the time we were making our way back toward the front gate, I was full-out laughing. Jesus, of course he’d come out there to give me shit. Of *course* he had.

“What?” Emilia asked, staring at me like I was crazy. “What? Why are you laughing?”

“They always knew where we were at,” I told her between laughs. “Every fuckin’ time.”

“What?” she yelled.

“It wasn’t a secret,” I replied, glancing at her. “You had to know that.”

“I did not know that,” she replied, letting the sweatshirt fall from her face. “What do you mean, it wasn’t a secret?”

“All the boys knew where we were and exactly what we were doin’,” I said, waving at the prospect as he opened the gate from us. “Hell, they used to throw condoms at me on a daily basis.”

“You told them?” she asked in disbelief, smacking my shoulder. “Gross!”

“Of course I didn’t tell them,” I replied, catching her hand. I rubbed my thumb over the back of it without thinking, then dropped it like a hot coal when I realized what I was doing. “They knew. We were drivin’ out there to park in the middle of nowhere at least once a week. Did you think they wouldn’t figure it out?”

“I didn’t think anyone was paying attention,” she said sharply.

“The prospects opened the gate for us every fuckin’ time,” I said, glancing at her to see if she was serious. She was scowling at me like I’d kicked her dog.

“No one ever said anything,” she said skeptically.

“Not to you, no,” I agreed. “They had all sorts of shit to say to me, though.”

“Did your parents know?” she whispered in horror.

“I’m sure my mom suspected,” I replied, huffing out a laugh as she groaned. “Dad definitely knew.”

“Oh my god,” she whispered.

“Emilia, we have a kid,” I reminded her. “They know we were havin’ sex back then.”

“That doesn’t mean they need to know details!”

“Calm down,” I said, almost reaching for her. I tightened my hands on the wheel instead. “They know we were sneakin’ off. It’s not like they know you like your nipples pinched, for Christ’s sake.”

“That was uncalled for,” she hissed.

“What?” I asked innocently. “You do, don’t you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” she snapped.

“If I reached over there and slid my hand up your sweatshirt—”

“I’m going to stop you right there.”

“Doubt you would,” I said under my breath.

“I can’t tell if you’re flirting or being an ass right now,” she huffed. “But knock it off.”

Crazy thing was, I wasn’t sure either. Part of me was just trying to needle her, but even saying the words out loud had made my hands itch to follow through. Even though I knew it was completely insane, I wanted her again.

We were quiet for the rest of the drive, but as we pulled up in front of my parents’ house, I realized that we really hadn’t figured anything out. I’d taken her to our old spot to hash things out and instead the situation had gotten even more fucked. Pun intended.

“Em, wait,” I said, grabbing her arm as she reached for the door.

She looked at me in surprise.

“Let’s just ride it out,” I said impulsively.

“Ride what out?”

“You and Rhett livin’ with me,” I said, letting go of her arm. “We don’t have to have all the answers right now. Let’s just ride it out. You can find a job, and we’ll figure it out as we go.”

“That’s probably a really bad idea.”

I knew it was. It absolutely was. I could already feel the pull of her, the way she’d easily burrowed back under my skin. Jesus, I’d fucked her at the goddamn compound even though I knew that every brother would know about it by day’s end. I could’ve taken her back to the house to talk, went for a drive,

*anything*, but instead I'd taken her back to our spot. Jesus, what was wrong with me?

It was so fucked up, and I didn't understand it, but no matter how angry and resentful I was, I still wanted her as close as possible.

"You're right," I said finally. "You got a better idea?"

I watched the expressions flit across her face. Surprise, worry, wistfulness, and finally stubbornness.

"So, we'll stay with you while I find a job?" she asked, letting go of the door handle. "How much do you want for rent?"

"Yeah," I replied, my lips twitching. "And I'm not takin' money from you."

"I—" Her mouth snapped shut, and she just looked at me. She sighed. "While my pride would really like to say that I can't live at your house without paying rent, my sanity knows that would be a fucking godsend."

"Good, 'cause I wouldn't take it from you anyway."

"And hands off, right?"

"We're not gonna figure shit out if we're muddyin' the waters," I agreed.

"Okay."

"Yeah?"

"We'll stay with you for a while," she said, nodding. She paused for a moment, looking at her hands. "Thanks, Michael."

She reached for the door handle again, and she was halfway out of the car before I spoke.

"Even if you didn't have Rhett," I said, unable to let the words go unsaid. "You'd never be homeless, Em. I'd always have a place for you."

She turned to look at me, her eyes bright and her mouth trembling. It was wild, because less than a second later, that bright-eyed look was gone and in its place was an easy smile.

“Ditto.”

She strode off toward the house, and I followed slowly behind, taking my time as I got out of the car and walked up the driveway.

Emilia had been everything I’d imagined and more. She was less muscular than she’d been before and her tits were smaller, but she was still the same girl I’d fallen in love with all those years ago. Her skin was still as smooth as the satin binding on the blanket I’d carried around as a kid, and when I fucked her standing up, her heels still dug into my back in the exact same spot on my lower back. Her stomach wasn’t as flat, and she’d traded in the six-pack she’d had before for a little pooch that I guessed was a leftover from carrying Rhett, but I liked it. I took a deep breath and shook my head as I remembered how wet and snug her pussy had been—that hadn’t changed at all.

I had to stop thinking of her as a sexual partner and start thinking of her as a roommate and the mother of my kid. If I didn’t, we were going to be seriously screwed.

It didn’t matter how well-matched we were in bed—she’d taken off without a word and stayed gone for three years. She’d kept my son a secret for all that time. It was because of her that I’d missed the first two years of his life, his first steps, his first words, his first everything. I felt a very familiar rage rise up inside of me as I mentally listed all the things she’d kept from me and stopped on the porch, taking a moment to count backward from ten.

If we were going to make any kind of relationship work, it had to be a platonic one. Anything more than that was impossible. I needed to keep my dick in my pants, for fuck’s sake.

“Aren’t you cold out here?” my brother Titus asked as he opened the front door. He gave a dramatic shiver. “Looks like you were caught out in the rain.”

“Shut it, jackass,” I said, starting forward again.

“Emilia seems to have been caught in the same rain,” he said with a laugh, dodging as I tried to smack the side of his head.

“We were talkin’,” I muttered as I pushed him out of my way. He followed me into the living room like an overeager puppy.

“Really?” he said, glancing over at Emilia, who’d peeled off her sweatshirt and was crouched down kissing Rhett on the top of his head. “How’d Emilia’s shirt get turned inside out?”

“What?” Emilia said, looking down at herself as Rhett hurried back to where my mom was sitting between the couch and coffee table. “Oh, shit.”

Titus laughed loudly and ran as I grabbed for him.

“You two are never as clever as you think you are,” my mom said dryly from rearranging little wood puzzle pieces on the table in front of her. “I don’t know why you even try.”

“I must have put it on inside out this morning,” Emilia said so quietly, I almost didn’t hear her. “Whoops.”

I didn’t even speak. There was no way that I’d convince my mom we hadn’t been fooling around, not with Emilia’s face as red as a tomato.

“Get things worked out?” Mom asked, looking up at me.

“They’re gonna stay with me for a while,” I replied.

“I bet they are,” Mom said knowingly.

“Until I can find a job and get us our own place,” Emilia added quickly, smiling at Rhett. “I should probably start the search tonight.”

“What kind of job are you looking for?” my mom asked, pointing out to Rhett where a puzzle piece should go.

“Anything really,” Emilia said, pulling her sweatshirt back on. “Retail or waitressing or whatever. Something that will pay the bills.”

My mom hummed. “You ever make coffee?”

“Every morning,” Emilia replied dryly.

“I meant espresso.” Mom chuckled. “Charlie’s always looking for baristas. I bet you could get a job there.”

“I don’t need any favors.” Emilia smiled uncomfortably.

“No favor,” my mom said easily. “I wasn’t joking when I said she’s always looking. I swear turnover is shit at her carts. She’s always hiring.”

“I’ve never worked as a barista,” Emilia replied, widening her eyes at me like she wanted me to say something. I wasn’t sure what exactly she was hoping for. My cousin Charlie was always looking for help, and I knew the pay was okay. Nothing spectacular, but above what the normal rate was. She could do worse.

“She’ll train you. I’ll call her later,” my mom said, going back to the puzzle. “See what she’s got.”

“Okay,” Emilia said faintly as she sat down in my dad’s recliner.

“You two coming over for dinner tonight?” my mom asked.

“Dinner?” Rhett asked.

“Can’t, Ma,” I replied at the same time. “Gramps invited us over.”

Mom’s lips twitched like she was holding back a smile.

“You already knew that.”

“Your grandma called me,” she said with a laugh. “Just wondered if you’d tell me that Asa caught the two of you

steaming up Em's car."

"Asa?" Emilia asked.

"Grease," I clarified. "Gramps. She calls him Asa to bug him."

"It's his name," my mom said with a shrug.

"Oh right," Emilia said, realization dawning. "You're named after him."

"Yep." I looked back at my mom. "We weren't steaming up anything."

"That's not what the old man told Rose."

"Jesus Christ," I muttered.

"Bad word," Rhett said in horror, turning to look at me.

"He's an adult, Rhett," Emilia piped up. "He can use whatever words he wants."

"Bad word," Rhett repeated, still looking at me.

"Sorry, bud," I replied. "I won't say it anymore."

"Good luck with that," my mom muttered.

"A," Rhett announced, picking up a J puzzle piece.

"That's a J, sweetheart," my mom corrected gently.

"We haven't started working on letters yet," Emilia confessed, shamefaced. "I should probably find him a preschool or something."

"I'll ask where Kara and Draco sent their girls," Mom replied. "And we can get him signed up once he's old enough."

"Slow your roll, Heather," I said immediately, making my mom stiffen. "We'll find Rhett a preschool and take care of it ourselves. He's two. He doesn't need to know his letters yet. Pretty sure Rumi was still puttin' anything and everythin' in his mouth at two."



“It’s okay, Michael,” Emilia said quietly. “She’s just trying to help.”

I glanced at Emilia who still looked embarrassed, then back at my mom.

“Of course,” my mom said contritely. “Though Rumi was arguably the least intelligent of the five of you. I didn’t mean to overstep.”

“We know that,” Emilia said quickly.

“Just let us figure it out, yeah?” I asked, reaching out to tug at my mom’s ponytail. “And I’m tellin’ Rumi you said that.”

“Sorry, babe,” she said with a half-smile. “Rumi called me old yesterday—you can tell him whatever you want.”

“It’s really okay—” Emilia’s mouth snapped shut when I sent her a look to cool it.

“I can text Kara,” I told my mom. “See what school they used.”

“I just know they really liked it,” my mom said, her shoulders relaxing.

We stayed in the living room, hanging out while Rhett and my mom did the same alphabet puzzle at least four times. It was easy and goddamn *cozy*, and after a while I felt my body relaxing into the couch as I dozed off.

“Daddy.” A little hand tapped my knee. “Daddy!”

“What’s up?” I asked, my eyes shooting open. Shit, *I was daddy*.

“Time go.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked, watching as Rhett pulled his blanket against his face. “It’s time to go?”

“Yeah.”

“You ready to go back to the house?” I asked as he leaned against my knee.

“Gran tired.”

“Grandma’s tired?”

“Yeah,” he murmured, leaning more heavily against my knee.

I didn’t think it was my mom who was tired.

“Where did your mama go?” I asked curiously.

“Gran’s room.”

“I wonder what they’re getting,” I said, reaching out to lift him onto my lap. I didn’t go slowly or anything like that, but I was hyper-vigilant as I picked him up, making sure he didn’t mind it.

My chest felt like it was going to pop the buttons on my flannel as he curled into a question mark against me, his head on my shoulder.

“Don’t know,” he replied sleepily.

“Did you have fun today?” I asked, rubbing his back gently. He was such a sturdy kid, heavy and solid, that when you looked at him it was easy to forget how small he really was. Holding him, though, brought back just how fragile his little body was. I could feel the tiny bumps of his spine, the sharp point of his elbow against my sternum, his miniature toes curled against my thigh. A rush of protectiveness hit so hard and fast that my heart started to race, and I wrapped my arm around him, pulling him close.

“I make cookies,” Rhett replied, reaching up to scratch his nose.

“Oh yeah?”

“Sugar cookies.”

“I love sugar cookies.”

“No chips,” Rhett said with a yawn.

I chuckled. “Yeah, Gran always runs out of chocolate chips.”

“You guys ready to go?” Emilia asked, coming up behind me. She reached past my head to run her fingers through Rhett’s hair, and I instinctively pulled the scent of her into my lungs. Jesus, I needed to get my head right.

“All done with my mom?” I asked, tipping my head back to look at her.

“Yeah,” she said, walking over to the door to put her shoes on. “She just had some pictures she wanted to show me.”

“She’s got enough of ’em,” I replied, carrying Rhett with me as I got to my feet. “I’ll just carry him to the car.”

Emilia looked at me and then Rhett. “That works,” she said with a smile. “Then I don’t have to put his shoes back on.”

“You guys leaving?” my mom asked.

“Yep.” I turned to look at her. “Told Rhett to call you gran, huh?”

“He was getting kind of confused, I think,” she replied, glancing apologetically at Emilia. “Two grandmas, you know.”

“Gran’s perfect,” Emilia said quietly. “Thank you.”

Mom squeezed Emilia’s shoulder.

“We’ll get out of your hair before the horde descends,” I muttered.

Mom laughed. “No such luck. Dad’s on his way back from the club with Titus and Myla. You’re going to just miss them.”

“I’ll see him tomorrow,” I said as she hugged me and Rhett together.

“You should come over tomorrow while Michael’s at work,” my mom said to Emilia, leaning around me to look at her. “The kids will all be at school, and I’ll have the place to myself. We can talk to Charlie about that job.”

“Okay,” Emilia replied with a tight smile.

I followed her out of the house and helped her put Rhett in his car seat and minutes later, we were headed back toward my place.

“Your mom’s so nice,” Emilia said with a sigh, leaning her head back against the seat.

“You’re surprised by that?” I asked curiously.

“I don’t know,” she mumbled. “Yeah. I guess.”

“She’s always been nice to you.”

“I know,” she replied. “I guess I just wasn’t really expecting it. Polite, yes. Nice, not so much.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I screwed you over,” Emilia said tiredly. “Because I got pregnant at eighteen, disappeared, and showed back up here with a two-year-old. Surprise!”

“She doesn’t hold grudges,” I lied.

Emilia looked at me skeptically. “Yes, she does.”

“Not against you, apparently.”

“I’m just grateful, I guess.” Emilia shrugged and grew quiet again.

“What would be the point in treatin’ you like shit?” I asked as we pulled up in front of the house. “You’re here. You’re Rhett’s mama. We’re family.”

“You’re right,” Emilia said with a halfhearted smile. “I should probably just lean into it, huh?”

“My parents aren’t like yours, Emilia,” I said quietly, glancing back at Rhett who was passed out in his seat. “They’re not gonna turn on you all of a sudden or freeze you out because you pissed them off.”

“I know that.”

“You piss them off, they’re gonna say somethin’ about it,” I continued. “You’ll know.”

“They must be mad at me,” she argued. “There’s no way that they’re just okay with how it all played out.”

I sighed. “I don’t know. I haven’t had a chance to talk to them since you got here.”

“I just—” She flapped her hands awkwardly in her lap. “I just don’t want to get used to it if it’s going to change.”

“It’s not gonna change,” I replied, reaching out to stop her frantic gestures. “They’re not gonna cut you off or start treatin’ you like shit. That’s not their style.”

“But at some point, it’s going to all come out,” she whispered. “They’re going to say something.”

“Probably,” I replied seriously. “But that will be it. They’ll say somethin’ and give you the opportunity to answer whatever questions they have, and that will be it.”

“I can’t imagine it’ll be that simple,” she muttered.

“Christ, none of this is simple,” I replied, looking back at Rhett again. “But we’ll figure it out.”

I carried Rhett inside and upstairs, and the entire time he was completely limp in my arms. He got that from me. I could remember so many times in my childhood when I’d fallen asleep somewhere and woken up hours later in a completely different place. A few times, I’d fallen asleep at the clubhouse and woken up in my own bed at home, completely unaware of the car ride in between. I couldn’t remember when that had stopped—probably around the time when I’d grown too big for my parents to carry me.

I tucked Rhett into the guest bed and headed back downstairs to find Emilia searching through my fridge.

“Need help?” I asked, making her yelp in surprise.

“I’m starving,” she said sheepishly, turning to face me.

“You shoulda eaten breakfast at the restaurant,” I replied dryly, moving around her to the pantry. “You want a grilled cheese?”

“What kind of cheese do you have?” she asked happily, crouching back down to look in the fridge.

“No clue,” I mumbled as I grabbed the bread. “Probably just cheddar, but I’m sure you can find a way to church it up.”

She’d always loved grilled cheese. We’d made hundreds of them as teenagers, mixing all the stinky cheeses my mom kept in the fridge, always trying to find the best formula.

I hadn’t had one since she’d left.

“This one time,” she said as she stood back up, holding half a block of cheddar and a bottle of sriracha in her hands. “I got this really good peach and jalapeño jam at a farmers’ market and put it on there.”

I wrinkled my nose in disgust.

“It was so freaking good,” she said with a laugh.

“You’re really going to put sriracha on it?” I asked as I grabbed her a pan.

“I feel like something spicy,” she said with a shrug. “This will work.”

“That’s gnarly.”

“Hey, you never know until you try it,” she argued. “When I was pregnant with Rhett, I tried every combination imaginable.”

The familiar anger rose up inside me, but I tamped it down hard. This was how I’d learn things. This was how I’d know what I’d missed. Little comments here and there, random memories that didn’t mean anything to her, but that I was starved for. I leaned against the counter and forced a smile.

“Not surprisingly,” she said as she started assembling the sandwich. “Tomatoes are great on them. Jam, too.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I replied. The kitchen was silent except for the sounds of her slicing the cheese. Eventually, my curiosity couldn’t be contained. “Was that your only craving?” I asked casually.

“Nope,” she said, tossing a piece of cheese into her mouth. “I also wanted watermelon all the time, actually any kind of melon I could get my hands on. Oh, and McDonald’s cheeseburgers.”

“Nice,” I murmured.

“Which is kind of hilarious,” she said, putting her sandwich in the pan. “Because Rhett won’t eat melons of any kind. He hates them.”

“Got too much of them when he was on the inside,” I joked.

“I guess so,” she murmured, smiling at me.

I stood there, unsure of what to say. She was moving around easily, putting things away like she was comfortable in the space, and I was staring at her wanting to ask a million questions while simultaneously remembering exactly how I’d stripped off the clothes she was wearing earlier that day.

Jesus, it was like any time Rhett wasn’t in the room, my mind went right back to getting her naked.

“What—”

“Do you think—”

We spoke at the same time and then both stopped.

“Go ahead,” I said with a nod.

“Do you think we should bring anything to your grandparents’ house tonight?” she asked, checking on her sandwich.

“Like a present?”

“No, like food,” she replied. “Should we bring an appetizer or something?”

I made a noise that was somewhere between a scoff and a snort. “No,” I said flatly. “We’re not that fancy.”

“It’s not fancy, it’s just polite.”

“Okay, then we’re not that polite,” I clarified. “We don’t need to bring anything. My grams won’t even let you help her clean up afterward.”

“It feels weird just showing up,” she said, grabbing a plate for her food. She slid it off the pan and set it on the counter to cool. “I feel like we should bring something. Flowers?”

“We’re bringin’ Rhett,” I replied. “That’s all they care about.”

“Right,” she mumbled.

“Why are you so worried about it all of a sudden? You’ve been over there before.”

“I wasn’t—” She flapped her hands around before clasping them together at her waist. “I wasn’t the whore of Babylon who stole their great-grandson then.”

“You’re not the whore of Babylon now.”

“Okay,” she snapped. “But I’m still the monster who didn’t tell them about their great-grandson.”



## CHAPTER 7

### EMILIA

**M**ICK LET OUT a harsh laugh and shook his head, then reached up and smoothed his hair back with both hands.

“I’m not sure what you want me to tell you,” he said tiredly. “Everyone’s been more than nice to you since you showed up out of the blue. My guess? They’ll keep bein’ nice to you.”

“Sorry my nervousness is bothering you,” I replied, turning toward my sandwich. My stomach rolled, but I forced myself to take a bite anyway. I had a hard time eating when I was anxious or stressed. The physical manifestation was always nausea and lack of appetite, but I knew I had to force something down.

“I’m not sure what you want me to say, Emilia,” Mick said to my back. “You made decisions, and now you’re feelin’, what, embarrassed? Ashamed? I can’t help ya with that.”

“I didn’t ask you to,” I replied, forcing another bite into my mouth.

“Seems like you’re tryin’ to get me to reassure you.”

“I’m not trying to get you to do anything,” I snapped, setting the sandwich back down.

The day had been such a roller coaster of emotions I felt like I was going to get whiplash. Fear, anxiety, nostalgia, sexual tension and release, anxiety again, it was all too much. I’d felt calm, almost relaxed, at his parents’ house, sitting in the living room with Heather, Michael, and Rhett. But before and after that, I’d felt like I was going to come out of my skin. Nothing was helping.

Michael had been my safe place and sounding board my entire childhood, but he wasn't anymore. I hated that I could no longer read him. It was like all of the youthful exuberance he'd had when we were younger had completely disappeared. He was calm, almost unnaturally so, all the time. Even when I knew he should be angry and frustrated—those would be normal reactions—he didn't show any of that. He was both a stranger and someone I knew on a cellular level. It was confusing and exhausting trying to figure it all out.

"I'm sure we'll have a good time at your grandparents'," I said, walking the uneaten food to the trash. "I'm going to go upstairs and change."

"Emilia," he called as I walked toward the stairs. "What the hell?"

"What?" I turned to look at him.

"You just made that and threw it away?" he asked, coming toward me.

"I guess I wasn't that hungry."

"Bullshit," he replied. "What the hell is going on?"

"I really want to get out of these damp clothes," I said, pulling at the neck of my sweatshirt.

"This why you're so skinny?" he asked, coming closer. "You just don't eat?"

"I eat."

"Really? 'Cause you've barely touched your food since you got here."

"I ate at your parents' house last night."

"Barely."

"Are we really arguing about what I eat?" I asked in frustration. "Because this is ridiculous."

"Fine," he said, raising his hands in surrender. "Eat or don't eat. Do what you want."

“I’m going to change and lie down with Rhett,” I replied tiredly. “We’ll be down in plenty of time to go to your grandparents’.”

“Sounds good,” he said over his shoulder as he walked away.

As I dragged myself up the stairs, exhaustion hit me like a freight train. It had been such an intense couple of days it felt like I hadn’t had even a minute to relax. Every muscle in my body was tight with tension, my mind always racing a million miles per hour.

Instead of just changing my clothes, I opted for a shower in Michael’s fancy guest bathroom. The hot water felt fantastic on my sore muscles, and I finally felt warm after our little interlude in the rain. Within fifteen minutes, I was curled up next to Rhett, completely passed out.

“MAMA, DINNER,” RHETT whispered, his lips so close to my ear that I could feel the tickle of his breath.

I shuddered and moved my head away, but that didn’t stop him from tap-tap-tapping on my shoulder.

“Mama, dinner!”

“I’m awake,” I assured him, opening my eyes. I sat up, and Rhett’s eyes widened.

“Mama’s hair,” he said, wrinkling his nose as he sat back on his heels. He lifted his hands until they were level with his ears and about a foot away from his head. “Whoa.”

“Crazy, huh?” I cackled. My hair flowed around my head like a cloud, and Rhett laughed himself silly as I shook it from side to side. “I think it’s marvelous.”

“Brush hair, Mama.” He giggled.

“I think I’ll leave it how it is, actually,” I teased, dramatically tilting my head to the side so my hair flopped around again.

“Looks good to me,” Michael said from the doorway.

I screeched in surprise and threw myself back against the pillow, pulling the blankets over my head. Rhett laughed so hard he fell over.

“Did you know he was there?” I asked him, sliding my arm out from under the blankets to poke him in the belly. “Traitor!”

“I caught him in the doorway a little while ago,” Michael said, his voice laced with amusement. “We should probably grab a baby gate for the top of the stairs.”

I groaned and threw back the blankets. “Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

“Mama?” Rhett asked tentatively. “Brush hair?”

“Yes, I’ll brush my hair,” I said, pulling him down for a hug. “Give me twenty minutes, and I’ll be the gorgeous mother you know and love.”

“My best friend,” he replied seriously, drawing his head back to look at me.

“You’re *my* best friend.” Setting him back next to me, I gave him a little push. “Go with your daddy while I get ready.”

It took less than twenty minutes for me to get dressed and ready, but not much less. Rhett was right. My hair had been an absolute shit show. I just barely managed to tame it without having to wash it again. I was zipping up my sweater as I walked down the stairs when Rhett slid to a stop at the bottom, a huge grin splitting his face.

“Mama see?” he asked, his eyes wide. “Slide!”

“Nice sliding. Just be careful, okay?” I warned. “Don’t go on the stairs in those socks, or you might biff it.”

“I won’t,” he agreed, nodding. I knew the minute my back was turned, the little stinker would be doing exactly what I’d told him not to do. “Mama pretty.”

“Thanks, you little flatterer. Yours looks sweaty.”

“Sweaty, yeah,” he announced with relish.

“Okay, well maybe calm down on the sweating?” I wrinkled my nose as I ruffled his hair. “You’re going to meet your great-grandparents tonight.”

“I know,” Rhett said, following me toward the front door.

“I really loved it before you knew that phrase,” I joked, sliding my shoes on as my stomach lurched with nerves.

“Daddy, a motorcycle.” Rhett pointed to the garage door. They must’ve done some exploring while I was getting ready.

“That’s cool, bud.”

“Daddy, a truck.”

“I know. Daddy’s had that truck for a long time,” I murmured, smiling.

“Long time,” he said, nodding his head.

“You excited?” I asked, crouching down so we were nose to nose.

“Yeah.”

“Are you having a good time?”

“Yeah.” He put his hands on my cheeks.

I pressed a hand against my chest, trying to slow the pounding of my heart.

“I’m so glad, bud,” I said, my voice hoarse. “I like it here, too.”

“My house.”

“This is Daddy’s house.” I chuckled.

“My house,” Rhett insisted as I straightened. “Mama’s house. Daddy’s house. *My* house.”

“Okay.” I knew better than to argue when he got that stubborn tilt to his chin. I looked up as Michael came walking out of the kitchen, and my mouth went dry.

“Sorry,” he muttered quietly. “I told him that it was his house, too, now.”

I nodded distractedly. He was wearing a different take on the same outfit he'd been in the last couple of days, but damn, he looked good. He'd trimmed his beard and pulled his hair back into a low knot. The jeans he was wearing were familiar—they looked just like the others—worn in and just snug enough in all the right places, but he'd put on what looked like a brand new flannel under his cut.

“Should I go change?” I asked, looking down at the leggings and sweater I was wearing. It had seemed appropriate for a family dinner, but not if Michael was dressing up.

“Why?” he asked in confusion as Rhett tugged on my hand. “You look fine.”

“But you're all—” I waved a hand in his direction.

Michael looked down at himself. “What?”

“Dressed up,” I finished awkwardly.

Michael scoffed and dropped to one knee to help Rhett put on his shoes.

“Ugh,” I groaned. “Sorry, bud. I forgot to put your shoes on.”

“Grams got me this shirt,” Michael said, glancing at me. “I haven't worn it and I knew she'd ask about it, so.”

“Ah,” I said sheepishly. “Gotcha.”

“Where the hell have you been if you think this is dressed up?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Tuxedos weren't common,” I replied ruefully.

“Fuck tuxedos,” he said, grinning at me. “But I'd at least put on jeans without grease stains and a hole in the pocket.”

“Fair enough,” I conceded with a laugh.

I wasn't sure why things were so calm between us since I hadn't left things in a great place when I'd headed up to take a nap, but I was thankful that he seemed to be trying to put me at ease. I was on edge already without adding more tension

between us. I hadn't seen Michael's grandma in so long, and while I couldn't wait, I also dreaded it. She'd been good to me. Kind. And I'd disappeared.

"Coat, son," I murmured, helping Rhett put on his jacket.

"I put his seat in the truck," Michael said as I threaded my arms through my own jacket sleeves. "I watched a video to make sure I got it buckled right. Figured that would be okay."

"It's fine," I replied. It wasn't worth fighting over, not when we seemed to be in a good place for the moment.

We followed Michael out the garage door, and as I heard the wind and rain outside suddenly rise in volume, I was actually thankful that we were taking his truck. I stayed dry and relatively warm as I buckled Rhett into his seat, something I wouldn't have been out in the driveway near my car.

"You're gonna have to ride in the middle," Michael murmured, herding me around the hood of the truck.

"Yes, I noticed," I replied dryly.

"His seat won't fit in the middle."

"It's fine."

"Safety first."

We both acted like I didn't know how much he'd loved when I sat in the middle seat of his truck, my shoulder tucked behind his and our bodies pressed together all the way to our knees.

I fought the feeling of déjà vu as we drove toward Michael's grandparents' house on the other edge of town. They'd lived in the same place forever, since Michael's uncle Will was just a baby, and I couldn't count the number of times I'd been there for family events. Birthday parties, holidays, family dinners just because—they were all held at the family home. I could still remember the first time Michael had brought me there, the anxiety I'd felt being surrounded by so many people of all ages. They'd welcomed me right into the fold, though, learning my name and including me in their

conversations and their plans and their inside jokes. Michael had teased that he was using the family events to prepare me for life at the club and all the chaos that reigned there, but we'd never actually made it to a club event. The only experience I had at that particular place was limited to a tree at the back of the property where we'd carved our initials. By the time I'd been old enough and brave enough to go to a club party, I'd been long gone.

Rhett was excitedly thrumming his feet against the seat and I didn't have the heart to stop him. He kept up a steady stream of chatter all the way to Grease and Callie's house. He asked about food, if he could have juice, if he could play outside. He talked about trucks, pointed out a random motorcycle, pulled at his seat belt.

By the time we pulled into the driveway of the familiar house, Michael's face was slack with sheer astonishment at the number of mismatched words Rhett had packed into a ten-minute drive, and I was trying to keep from bursting into laughter.

"I'm not sure what you did while I was sleeping, but you must have broken the dam," I murmured as I followed him out of the truck.

"All I did was have him help me put some shit away in the garage," he whispered back.

"You found the key," I joked, rounding the hood of the truck. "If you want him to break out of his shell, ask him for help."

"Good to know."

"Out," Rhett ordered as I opened his door.

"I'm working on it," I said, putting a hand on his knee to stop his fidgeting. "Good gravy, you're like a grasshopper today."

"Not grasshoppa. I'm Rhett."

"You're jumping around like one."



“I’m a boy,” he argued.

“Actually, you’re the *best* boy,” I corrected, helping him out of his seat. “My favorite boy in the entire universe.”

“Go?” he asked as I set him on his feet.

“Really?” I asked, putting my hands on my hips.

“Best mama,” he replied quickly. “Go?”

“I guess,” I huffed jokingly.

My pride was soothed as he grabbed ahold of my hand before walking toward Michael.

“You ready?” Michael asked Rhett. “Not sure who’s gonna be here. There might be a lot of people.”

“Ready,” Rhett said with a smile. He reached out to hold Michael’s hand and my stomach did a little swoop as we walked toward the front door that way.

“I thought I saw your truck,” Michael’s grandma called as she threw the front door open.

“Ooh, Grandma pretty,” Rhett murmured to me, making my lips twitch.

He wasn’t wrong. While Heather looked like she could still be running her kids to preschool, Callie looked like she’d be the one stuffing them with candy and sending them home. She was round and soft and beautiful, her black hair shot with silver, laugh lines around her eyes and mouth.

“Hey Grams,” Michael said, smiling proudly. “This is Rhett.”

“Like, *Gone with the Wind*,” she said, bending down to meet Rhett’s eyes. “I approve.”

“Hi,” Rhett said shyly.

“Even if it’s problematic,” I muttered, glancing at Michael. He laughed under his breath. It was a subject I’d bored him with at least a hundred times when we were in high school.

“Sometimes the best literature is a bit problematic,” Callie murmured seriously. “Your mama understands that.”

“Yeah,” Rhett said, leaning against my leg.

“She always was smart,” Callie said as she straightened. “Hello, Emmy Lou.”

“Hey, Grams,” I replied, the words getting caught in my throat. They came out like a croak as my eyes watered.

“Oh, honey,” she said, stepping forward to pull me into a hug. “Look at that beautiful boy you made.”

I took in the scent of her and the feel of her hair against my cheek and closed my eyes, holding on for dear life. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get here.”

“I’m just glad you’re here now,” she whispered back, running her hand through the back of my hair.

“I missed you,” I sniffled, trying and failing to get myself together.

“We missed you, too,” she said, giving me a squeeze.

While Michael’s parents’ house had always felt like home, secure and safe and steady—Michael’s grandparents’ house felt like a warm hug. It was the place you went when you needed to be loved on, where you went to escape, where you went when you screwed up. It was the net that caught you when you fell.

*Callie* was the net that caught you when you fell. No recriminations. No lectures. She was the epitome of unconditional love.

“Startin’ to rain again,” Michael said softly. “Let’s get inside.”

“Well, look at us,” Callie said, wiping at her own cheeks as she pulled away. “Just a couple of crybabies.”

Rhett watched me closely as we headed inside, but whatever questions he had, he kept to himself. I wasn’t even sure if I could answer him. Someday, when he’d screwed up

and was afraid to come home, he'd understand the magic of Callie and why my cheeks were wet.

"They're here, Asa!"

"I can see that, Calliope," Michael's grandpa said in amusement from right inside the door. "No need to yell."

"Shit," she yelped before laughing. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"I live here," he teased, smacking her ass lightly as she led us into the house. "Whoa, you must be Rhett."

Rhett stared up at the big man, wide-eyed, his hand clutching mine.

"I thought you'd be smaller," Grease said conversationally.

"You big," Rhett mumbled, making his great-grandfather laugh.

"Where you think *you* got it?" Grease asked, chuckling. "Someday, you'll be tall as me."

"Okay," Rhett breathed, making us all laugh.

"Hey, you wanna come help me get the table cleaned off? My wife's a hoarder, and she's got papers and shit everywhere." Grease reached his hand out, and after a small hesitation, Rhett let go of me and moved toward him.

"Wife?" he asked curiously.

Grease pointed at Callie with his thumb.

"Oh," Rhett said.

"Yup," Grease replied.

"I'm not a hoarder," Callie said as they passed her, backhanding Grease lightly on the belly.

"If the shoe fits, sugar," Grease said with a laugh as he walked away.

"Juice?" Rhett asked as they moved out of view.

“There aren’t that many papers,” Callie said to us with a huff. “Come in, come in. Sit down. Take your coat off.”

“I figured you’d have the entire family here,” Michael said as I shucked my coat and hung it on the coat rack.

“Thought about it,” Callie said with a grin. “But we decided we wanted to have Emilia and Rhett all to ourselves this time.”

“Hey, what about me?” Michael asked with a laugh.

“We see you all the time,” Callie replied with a wave of her hand as she sat on the couch.

“I’ve been replaced,” Michael said jokingly, leading me over to a chair.

As soon as I’d sat down, Callie’s gaze rested on me again. “Where’ve you been, honey? You look like you’ve gotten some sun.”

The laugh that burst out of my mouth was awkwardly loud and short, and I slapped my hand to my mouth to keep any other weird noises from escaping. Yeah, I’d been in the sun a bit.

“We were in Arizona,” I said finally, dropping my hand to my lap. I cleared my throat uncomfortably. “My parents moved us there when they found out I was pregnant.”

“Seems pretty dramatic for a teenage pregnancy,” she murmured.

I looked at Michael, but there was no help from that direction. His face was emotionless as he watched me.

“My dad’s company had a branch down there,” I said, winding my fingers together in my lap to keep from fidgeting. “And since I’d gotten into Arizona State, they figured I could just transfer there.”

“And did you?” Callie asked curiously.

“For a while,” I replied softly. I forced a smile. “And then Rhett came, and I took care of him.”

“And you did a good job with that,” Callie said, glancing at Michael. “Heather said he’s a real sweetheart.”

“He is,” Michael agreed quietly.

The room went silent for a few heavy moments.

“They didn’t want me to contact Michael,” I said, straightening in my chair. “It was part of the deal we made so Rhett and I could stay with them.”

“Assholes,” Callie said under her breath.

“They always followed through,” I said, fidgeting a little. “So if I had contacted him—” I glanced at Michael, who was staring at the carpet between his feet, and then back at Callie. “I knew they’d kick me out.”

“Awful people,” Callie muttered. “Just awful. I’m sorry, Emmy, but that’s disgusting.”

“Yeah,” I breathed.

They had been awful. Terrible, manipulative, mean people. But they’d also been my parents. They’d giggled with Rhett and bought my favorite ice cream, and made sure that I had everything I’d needed.

Except for Michael. He’d been the one thing they’d refused to let me have. The memory of those arguments, the tears, the sense of hopelessness, the fear, rushed back in an instant, making my stomach lurch. I shoved it away.

I was back in Eugene. Michael was sitting less than five feet from me. Rhett was currently giggling in the kitchen at something his great-grandpa was saying.

They’d kept Michael from us. Kept us from him. But they no longer had that power.

“Her parents died,” Michael said as I snapped out of the memory. I must’ve missed Callie asking me a question.

“I’m sorry,” Callie said sympathetically. “For all their faults, they were still your parents.”

“Thanks.”

I was sorry, too. But mixed in with the hole their deaths had left and the things I missed about them was guilt and relief in equal measure. If they hadn't died, how long would it have taken me to work up the courage to leave? I wasn't sure. I'd told myself a thousand times that I would leave, get in the car and go—but it had taken their deaths and my desperation for me to do it.

I glanced guiltily at Michael.

“Ice cream,” Rhett said, practically flying into the family room. “Hamburgers.”

“Ice cream after the hamburgers,” I informed him in case there was any confusion.

“French fries,” Rhett announced happily.

“Come on into the kitchen,” Callie said, getting to her feet. “You can keep me company while I finish dinner. If I leave your gramps in there alone, we'll be eating raw hamburger and burned fries.”

“I told you it wouldn't be bad,” Michael said, stopping me with a hand on my arm.

“I know,” I huffed, shaking my head. “But the thought of the most forgiving person on the planet *not* forgiving you is a little scary.”

“You don't have to tell my family what happened,” he said quietly, his eyes on mine. “You told me. That's enough.”

“They deserve an explanation,” I argued with a shrug.

“If they want one, I'll give them one.” He squeezed my arm gently before letting go. “You don't have to lay your shit bare for everyone who asks.”

“It's Callie,” I said defensively.

“And tomorrow, it will be one of my aunts, or an uncle, or a cousin. They'll all want to know why you stayed away.”

“Fuck.”

“You’re not hearin’ me,” he said, leaning closer. “You’ve talked to my parents. You’ve talked to Grams. That’s it, okay?”

I nodded.

“Everyone else can get fucked. This is between you and me.”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to shield me,” I reminded him.

“I said I wasn’t gonna reassure you,” he grumbled, striding toward the kitchen.

“Well, I’m feeling pretty reassured,” I joked lightly, following him. He ignored me.

## CHAPTER 8

### MICHAEL

**D**INNER WAS EASY. Calm. My grandparents were in love with Rhett and they peppered him with questions. He soaked it all up. Our son wasn't saying full sentences quite yet, but he knew a hell of a lot of words. You could follow along pretty easily if you just paid attention to the inflection he put on them.

Gramps asked him about dinosaurs Rhett babbled for an entire minute. Grandma made a mention of her garden and Rhett told her about bees. They held an entire conversation back and forth with Rhett only adding in a word or two here and there and Gram filling in the rest.

He was such a trip. My grandparents were *delighted* with Rhett. I couldn't think of any other word to describe it.

"You know," Gramps said, pointing his fork at me. "Little Mick used to lay out all my tools in a row and tell me what each one was and how it was used. I bet he could do the same for you."

"Daddy's big," Rhett pointed out, taking a bite of his hamburger.

Gramps chuckled.

"He wasn't always big."

"We call him Little Mick because he was named after his uncle," Grams said gently, glancing at Gramps. "So when someone was talking about your dad, we'd know it was him and not his uncle."

Rhett was quiet for a moment, processing. "Big Mick?" he asked finally.



Gramps cleared his throat. “He died, son.”

Rhett’s eyes widened as he looked at his mom.

“Yes,” Emilia replied. “You know that word, huh? Grandma and Grandpa died, too.”

“Died,” Rhett confirmed, going back to his food. He may have known the word, but it didn’t hold any meaning for him, not yet.

The table was quiet for a minute, everyone lost in their own thoughts. My uncle Mick, the original Mick, had died as a teenager, long before I was born. He’d been my mother’s best friend and my dad’s baby brother and I knew they felt that loss still, nearly thirty years later.

“Daddy Michael?” Rhett asked Emilia curiously, breaking the silence.

We all watched him in confusion, but Emilia seemed to know exactly what he was asking.

“When your dad and I were kids, he told me he didn’t like being called Mick,” she said.

My grandparents sat up straighter and glanced at me, then back at Emilia.

“He didn’t like being compared to his uncle. They were both big guys, and they were both smart, and both funny, and both kind.” Her eyes met mine again. “And he was feeling kind of bad about that, so from then on, I called him Michael.”

“Oh,” Rhett said easily. I wasn’t sure he’d followed what she said.

“I called him Mick when we were little, though,” Emilia said with a smile.

I appreciated the way she’d answered Rhett. She’s explained it all, even though he hadn’t fully grasped it. I had a feeling that was why he knew so many words—because she didn’t talk down to him.

I hadn't just disliked being compared to my uncle, I'd hated being a reminder. My grandparents had never recovered from my uncle's death, and I wasn't sure my parents had either. I hadn't known them before, so I couldn't be sure, but I'd always been keenly aware of when I'd remind them of the kid they lost. My mom would send my dad a look, or my grandma would pull me to her for a kiss for no reason at all, and I'd feel it. The loss.

"We didn't know you didn't like it," my gramps said gruffly, his eyes on me.

"I was a kid," I replied easily, shooting him a smile. "I grew out of it."

And I had. As I'd grown up and matured, I'd realized that while my similarities to my uncle had hurt in some ways, they'd also been a balm. I grew proud of carrying on the name of someone they'd loved so much. I'd never admit it, but as I'd grown older than my uncle Mick had ever been, I'd also realized that they didn't have anyone to compare me to anymore. He'd never been an adult. I was no longer walking in his footsteps.

"You should have said something," Grams said, shaking her head as she swatted me with her napkin.

"I told Emilia," I replied, dodging. "That was enough."

"Rhett Michael Rumi *Hawtorne*," Rhett said happily.

"Yep, that's your name," Emilia confirmed.

"That's a damn mouthful," Gramps muttered with a laugh.

"Hey," Emilia said with mock offense. "Not everyone can be named after lubricant."

Gramps sputtered before bursting out in full-out laughter, the sound filling the room.

"She's got you there," Grams sang merrily, her own laughter joining in.

"Lubicant?" Rhett asked, making all of us howl.

“It’s something that makes things slick.”

“Slick?”

“Yeah, like—” Jesus, why was I drawing a blank? My mind was so far in the gutter, I couldn’t find a PG example.

“Like lotion,” Emilia said in amusement. “Or soap.”

“Oh,” Rhett said, drawing out the word as he nodded. Then he looked at Gramps in confusion. “You name?”

“They call me Grease,” Gramps said.

Rhett wrinkled his nose.

“But his mother named him Asa,” Grams chimed in. “That’s his real name.”

“Asa,” Rhett mused.

“I like that name better, too,” Grams agreed.

“Grease is better than Mr. Hawthorne,” Gramps said, going back to his food. “Which is what your mama called me for a long ass time.”

“It’s a sign of respect,” Emilia said defensively.

“Not respectful if someone asks you to use a different name,” Gramps argued.

“Are we really having this conversation again?” Emilia asked in amusement. “I started calling you gramps, just like you asked.”

“Only took ya a solid year,” Gramps muttered.

“You’re planning on staying at Mick—” Grams paused. It was only for a second, but I noticed.

“I’ll always be Mick,” I said, reaching over to squeeze her hand. “Grew out of that shit. Promise.”

Grams squeezed my hand back.

“You’re planning on staying at Micky’s while you get on your feet?” she asked Emilia.

“Yeah.” Emilia glanced at me. “That’s the plan.”

“Well, good. You let me know when you find a job. We’d love to have Rhett over one day a week.”

“That would be so awesome,” Emilia said, her eyes lighting up.

“I’d ask for more days than that,” Grams said with a grin. “But Heather might kill me if I take away her babysitting time.”

Emilia laughed.

“Club’s havin’ a barbeque next weekend,” Gramps said to me. “You’ll be there?”

“Hadn’t heard anythin’ about it.”

“Tellin’ ya now,” he replied with a scowl.

“We’ll talk it over.”

Gramps scoffed. “You’ll be there,” he said knowingly.

“Emilia’s never been to a club party.”

“Hell, there’ll be kids runnin’ all over.” He waved his hand dismissively. “It ain’t like it’s gonna get rowdy.”

“I’ll let you know.”

“Better to throw ’em into the deep end right away,” he joked. “Give her a chance to dip her toe and she’ll run screamin’ into the night.”

“She already did that once,” I muttered.

“Don’t think that was her choice,” Gramps replied, lowering his voice. “That girl looked at you like you hung the fuckin’ moon.”

“Things change.”

“That didn’t,” he replied with a scoff.

“Maybe Wednesday?” Grams said, raising her voice a little to interrupt us. “Does that work for you, grandson?”

“What’s on Wednesday?”

“Family dinner.”

I scrubbed my hands over my face. I was still getting used to having Emilia and Rhett back, and it looked like I was going to have to share them. Again.

“That works,” I said, looking to Emilia for confirmation.

“My calendar’s empty,” she joked.

A couple hours later, I found myself driving us back to my place, Emilia tucked in next to me. Rhett hadn’t fallen asleep, probably because he was enjoying the unfamiliar view out the window, but he was tired enough that the truck was quiet.

“I missed your grandparents,” Emilia said softly. “Sometimes, I used to play out entire conversations with Callie in my head.”

“Oh yeah?” I cleared my throat. “About what?”

“Everything,” she said with a quiet chuckle. “How Rhett was doing. How cute he was. How scared *I* was.”

“You coulda called her,” I murmured. “Hell, she probably wouldn’t have told anyone.”

“I didn’t want to put her in that position,” Emilia replied ruefully. “Stupid, right?” She sighed.

“You coulda come home at any time, Em,” I reminded her. “You knew that.”

“You can think you know something and still not believe it,” she said, reaching out to run her fingers through Rhett’s hair. His head was nodding forward as he fell asleep.

It only took us a few more minutes to get home, but that’s all it took for the familiar edge of frustration to start scratching underneath my skin. Counting backward didn’t help. Telling myself that getting angry didn’t fix shit and never had didn’t help either. She’d known she could come back. My family had never been anything but good to her. Supportive to a fault.

Even now, even after the shit she'd pulled, they'd welcomed her in with open arms.

Even if I could believe that she'd been unsure of me—and I couldn't figure out how that was possible—she'd known that my family would take her in. They'd never let her struggle if they could help it, and Rhett only added to that surety.

I let Emilia carry Rhett inside because she seemed to need to. As she wrapped her arms around him and he clung to her like a baby koala, she pressed her nose to his hair, cuddling him close.

She found me in the kitchen a little while later, her eyes wary and tired.

“You're mad again,” she said tentatively, leaning against the island.

“Think I've earned it,” I muttered.

“Yeah, you have,” she conceded. “How can I fix it?”

“Get a fuckin' time machine?”

“What else?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“You kept him from me,” I said, closing my eyes as I tried to calm my rioting emotions. “Jesus. Three years. I don't even know *how* he knows half the words he spouts.”

“I don't either,” she joked. It fell flat.

“I just don't get it,” I said finally. “I really don't. You knew you could come back here. If you thought I was gonna be an asshole, you still knew that my family would take you in. They fuckin' love you and always have.”

“It's not as simple as that.”

“It's exactly as simple as that,” I snapped. The tether I held myself back with was fraying, and I wasn't sure how to stop it.

“You have no idea what it was like,” she hissed, pointing at me.

“Right,” I scoffed.

“I was eighteen years old!”

“So was I!” I yelled, pointing at my chest. “I was the same goddamn age, Emilia.”

“Yes,” she said, taking a step forward. “And the only thing you had to worry about was whether or not one of your cousins would have time to buy you beer that weekend. You didn’t have to worry about if Rhett was eating enough or pooping enough or getting enough sleep. You didn’t have to panic every time he had a fever or a diaper rash or bumped his head on the kitchen table!”

“I didn’t get to.” I struggled to lower my voice, but it was no use. “You took that from me.”

“I didn’t want you to have to worry about those things! I didn’t want to be a burden.”

“Instead I was worryin’ if you were okay,” I shouted. “If you were safe. If you were out there somewhere tryin’ to get back to me. If you loved me. If you hated me. If your parents had done somethin’ to you.”

“You seem to be doing just fine,” she burst out, throwing her hands in the air. “You have a good job. You joined the club. You bought a fucking house!”

“Yeah,” I said, laughing joylessly. “I bought a house. This fuckin’ house. Because I broke in after the old owners left and fuckin’ *demolished* the place. That wall.” I pointed, shame burning in my gut. “That wall. That wall.” I dropped my arm. “It was so fucked up, I had to buy it, or I woulda gone to fuckin’ jail.”

“You what?” she breathed, looking at me in confusion.

“I was a nineteen-year-old kid,” I spat, embarrassment creeping up my neck. “I thought, fuck, I don’t know what I thought. That you’d left me a fuckin’ note in a wall. That if I could just get in here, I’d find somethin’.”

“Micky.” Her eyes grew glassy.

“It had been almost a fuckin’ year, and I’d heard nothin’. You’d just disappeared like fuckin’ *smoke*. So, I broke in here. Searched the place from top to bottom. When I couldn’t find anythin’ I started tearin’ up carpet. Puttin’ holes in walls. Climbin’ through the crawlspace under the floor.” The memory of those few days burned in my gut. My worry had become desperation and that desperation had morphed into a fury that burned so hot I hadn’t felt it before or since. “By the time Rumi figured out where I’d been, the house was a fuckin’ shell. My dad had to swoop in and make an offer on the place and then carry the loan until I could buy it from him.”

“Oh my god,” she whispered, looking around the room.

“And the whole time you were fine,” I said with a bitter laugh. “Livin’ in Arizona. Goin’ to school. Havin’ my kid.”

“I wasn’t fine,” she replied, shaking her head. “I was terrified. I missed you so much that I was sick with it.”

“Sure seems like it.” I didn’t bother trying to hide the sarcasm.

“You know what it was like for me?” she said, her voice quiet. “I cried the entire way to Arizona. Threw up. Cried some more. I laid in the back seat, hoping that we’d stop for the night somewhere and there you’d be, waiting to bring me back home. I watched the front of my house for months. Years. Waiting for the day I’d see your truck show up, like some knight in shining armor. I searched every face on campus, thinking you’d find me there. I lay in bed every night, wishing, hoping, praying that you’d show up and I wouldn’t have to face my parents alone. But you didn’t.”

I stared at her.

“Of course you didn’t,” she said sadly. “You didn’t know where I was. You didn’t know I needed you. I understood that. But like I said, thinking you know something and believing it are two entirely different things. I believed that you’d show up, even knowing that I hadn’t given you any clues. I couldn’t imagine that life or the universe or whatever would keep you



from finding me. I had to believe that, or I would've spiraled so badly I would've never been able to pull myself out of it."

"All it would've taken was a single phone call," I said hoarsely. "One letter."

"I don't think you really ever understood what my house was like," she replied with a grimace. "It made me sick to defy my parents. It was like, the minute I did something wrong, they'd know, and the panic of that was a physical thing. The only time I'd ever been able to do that was with you. You made me feel safe. You made me feel like the consequences would be worth it, and once you were out of my reach, I lost any shred of courage I'd had."

"I would've come to get you," I ground out, my throat tight. "I would've been there so fast."

"I understand that now," she replied, tears dropping onto her cheeks. "But I didn't know it then. It took every single shred of courage and self-confidence I had to go against their wishes and keep Rhett, after that, I had nothing left. Not for you, not for anyone."

I scrubbed at my face and realized my hands were shaking. I knew her parents were terrible. I'd always known it. But I don't think I'd ever acknowledged just how bad they'd been. They hadn't just been shitty or strict or narrow-minded. They been controlling to the point of making their only child too afraid to make any of her own choices. The realization was like a sucker punch to the jaw.

"Once, when I'd talked about getting a job and getting my own place," Emilia said, her voice barely audible in the quiet kitchen. "They started discussing how young I was to be a mother and ill-equipped to handle doing it on my own, and how much more prepared *they* were to raise Rhett." Her eyes met mine and her breath hitched. "So, I never brought it up again."

It took everything I had not to throw something. Hit something. Tear something apart. Those *motherfuckers*.

“Once they were gone, it took me a minute to get my feet under me,” she said with a shrug. “I was still so scared of making the wrong choice, even though they weren’t there to punish me for it.”

“Come here.”

“I didn’t know how to make my own decisions anymore,” she said, ignoring me. “And I didn’t want to just show up here, weak and useless, so that you could make my decisions for me.”

“Come here, Emilia.”

She shook her head just once. “So I got a job,” she said with a huff. “It was at a strip club.” She ignored my startled jerk. “I was just waitressing, but the tips were still good, and I could leave Rhett with the neighbor and he liked that. She was sweet and older, and they watched cartoons until he fell asleep. It was fun for him, and I could work, and it was okay. Sort of okay.” Her words just kept coming, faster and faster as she stared at nothing. “But then the manager started getting handsy and controlling, and I didn’t like it. At all. He finally cornered me in the back hallway and I kned him in the balls and I never went back. He creeped me out so bad that I took what money I had and we completely left town.”

“Sugar, *come here*,” I snapped, finally getting her attention.

“Are you going to strangle me?” she asked with a breathless uncomfortable laugh, walking toward me.

Just the act of pulling her into my arms made the rage in my chest dull from a tsunami to a quiet roar.

“I was worried he’d follow us,” she said with an embarrassed huff. “So we took the long way here. Stupid, I know. But he seemed so much scarier in Arizona. He knew everyone, and I think he was into shit I didn’t ever see. I don’t know, people were afraid of him and I knew he was probably really pissed that I’d turned him down.”

“What’s his name?” I asked, running my fingers through her hair. A little trip to Arizona wouldn’t be a big deal. I could be there and back in a few days and I was sure Rumi would love to ride along.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said softly, her body relaxing into mine. “We’re here and he’s just another bad memory.”

“You want me to look into him?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, tipping her head back to look at me. Goddamn, she was beautiful. Even with her eyes red-rimmed and her face blotchy from crying, she was almost startling to look at she was so pretty.

“I mean, the club’s got resources and we can check to make sure he’s still doin’ his shit in Arizona and stays that way.”

The expression on her face was there and gone in an instant, but I still knew exactly what had gone through her mind. I tightened my arms around her.

“We’ve got contacts all over, sugar, but they got no idea how to find a middle class businessman that hasn’t even had a fuckin’ speedin’ ticket. You coulda been anywhere.” I brushed her hair away from her face. “But some douchebag that runs a strip club in Nowheresville, Arizona—I could find out plenty about that guy.”

“We lived in Mesa, not Nowheresville.”

“Same shit.”

Her little huff of laughter wiped away the last of my rage, leaving me the calmest I’d been since she’d shown up with Rhett.

“Sure,” she said with a sigh. “You can look into him.”

“Wasn’t askin’ permission,” I joked.

“You wouldn’t know who to look for if I didn’t tell you his name.”

“Can’t be that many strip clubs in Mesa.”

“You’d be surprised,” she shot back, smirking.

“I’m just glad you weren’t dancin’,” I said with a sigh, pulling her with me as I leaned back against the counter. “You’re bendy, but you have fuckin’ terrible rhythm.”

“That is unequivocally false,” she argued, her smile turning into a scowl. “I’m a great dancer.”

“Sure you are,” I replied, my lips twitching.

“I am!”

“I know.”

“Quit agreeing with me.”

“You’re a fuckin’ great dancer,” I said, trying to keep my voice serious. “I apologize.”

“I totally could’ve danced at the club,” she huffed. “If I’d wanted to.”

“I’d rather see you on a pole,” I replied without thinking. She pinched me hard. “What? It’s not like I want anyone else seein’ you. But pole dancing is hot as fuck and I bet you’d be good at it.”

“How is this even a conversation we’re having?” she asked in disbelief.

“No fuckin’ clue.”

She laid her head against my chest. “I know that we’re not good yet,” she said with a sigh. “But I still feel a little better.”

“That’s what dinner with my grandparents’ll do to ya.”

“That helped,” she agreed. “But talking about shit helped even more.”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you,” she breathed.

“For what?”

“For all of it. There are a million different horrible ways all of this could’ve played out.” She tipped her head back to look

at me. "Believe me, I imagined most of them."

I scoffed. "Not for us."

"I'm still scared," she said with a sigh. "But not of this. Not of you."

"Really?" I murmured. "Because I'm terrified as hell."

## CHAPTER 9

### EMILIA

**A**FTER OUR DISCUSSION in the kitchen, Michael and I came to an unspoken truce and things became surprisingly... normal. Or at least our version of the word.

Michael's home transformed as I unpacked the Subaru bit by bit and little cars, building blocks and stuffed animals were strewn across the house. A basket of bath toys found a place under the sink in the master bathroom, the only bathroom with a tub. Rhett's shoes and mine became tangled up with Michael's in a pile by the front door.

I went grocery shopping and started making dinner for the three of us. Michael went to work and came home smelling like the garage. I brought Rhett to visit Heather and called around to different preschools—he wasn't old enough for any of them and I was secretly relieved. I wasn't ready yet. Michael took Rhett out to the hammock when it wasn't raining and half the time Rhett fell asleep while they swung lazily from side to side.

If I stared a little too hard when Michael washed his hands before dinner, mesmerized by the way he scrubbed his muscled forearms, he didn't mention it. When his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets after Rhett had splashed me with bathwater, making my white shirt nearly transparent, I didn't say a word either. We partnered on tasks that required both of us and otherwise orbited around one another, close but never too close.

Wednesday's dinner at Callie and Grease's house was chaos in the best way. Kids ran from one end of the house to the other and cousins, aunts and uncles filled every piece of

furniture. Their voices filled the house from floor to ceiling, a symphony I'd never thought I'd hear again.

Only two people had cornered me, Michael's aunts Molly and Rose. The two were like night and day, Rose asked pointed if not aggressive questions while Molly talked around the subject but basically asked the same things. I wasn't surprised by their questions or the fact that they'd somehow culled me from the rest of the group, but I had been surprised by the way Michael had immediately noticed and saved me. He was on guard the entire night, his shoulders and neck visibly tense, but I thought the whole thing had gone surprisingly well.

I wasn't so optimistic for the festivities at the club, though. I stared at my clothes spread out on the bed, my hands on my hips. I didn't have much, I'd never really needed much, but now I was wondering if I should've bought something new to wear. The problem was I had no idea what someone wore to a party at a motorcycle club. It wasn't as if I had a Harley tee lying around in my wardrobe. None of my shirts were name brand, if I was being honest.

Long ago, I'd seen the women that flocked to club parties in their mini skirts and booty shorts, but even if I'd had those—and I didn't—I wouldn't have worn them. For one thing, it was cold outside and I was still getting used to the Oregon temperatures again. For another, wearing a mini skirt while chasing a two year old sounded like a wardrobe malfunction waiting to happen. Plus, I was someone's mother. I liked feeling sexy as much as the next girl, but my days of flaunting my ass around were mostly in the rear view.

I sat on the bed with a huff.

"Hey, my cousin Charlie stopped by," Michael said, striding into the room without knocking. "She left a bunch of clothes—" His mouth snapped shut when he realized I was sitting there in my underwear.

"This is why we knock," I murmured, my lips twitching as he stared.

The black garbage bag in his hand fell to the floor with a thump.

“Rhett’s ready,” he said, his face jerking to the side. “I thought you were, too.”

“It’s easier if I just get him ready first,” I explained. “Then I don’t have to worry about it.”

“Makes sense.” He nodded, his eyes still on the wall.

“Are you going to leave so I can get dressed?” I asked in amusement. At any other time I probably would’ve been embarrassed or self-conscious that I was sitting there in my raggedy bra and underwear, but he was clearly uncomfortable enough for the both of us.

“Yeah, I’ll just—” As he turned to leave, his boot caught on the side of the garbage bag and he stumbled. I couldn’t help the bark of laughter that came out of my mouth.

“Shut up,” he grumbled as he untangled himself and stomped out of the room.

As soon as he was gone I hopped up and grabbed the bag, upending it onto the bed. Michael’s mom had mentioned that Charlie was going to pass on some clothes that she didn’t wear anymore, but I had no idea she’d send so much. A piece of paper caught under a high neck black tank top caught my eye and I pulled it from the pile.

*You can’t look like shit if you’re working at one of my carts – Charlie*

I grinned as I dropped the paper back on the bed. I’d spoken to Charlie a few days before about working for her as a barista, but she hadn’t given me an answer until now. I didn’t blame her. I’d never made coffee before and I was pretty sure his family saw me as a flight risk.

As I sorted through the clothes, jeans and shorts, long sleeve tops, t-shirts, tank tops, and even a jacket—I realized that I wouldn’t need to buy anything new. She’d given me the clothes she didn’t wear and it was twice the amount that I



currently owned. I hadn't had this many clothes since before Rhett was born.

"We gotta leave," Michael called through the door, knocking on it twice.

"I'll be right there," I called back, frantically looking over the clothes.

Eventually, I grabbed a pair of bootcut jeans and pulled them on. They were a little tight in the thighs and ass, but I could get them buttoned and zipped, so I figured they probably looked okay. I wished I had a full-length mirror as I paired the jeans with a black ribbed shirt. It was snug, too, but not tight. I was kind of amazed that the clothes fit so well. Charlie had always seemed so tiny.

"Mama," Rhett said as he burst through the doorway, his coat already on. "Be late!"

"Can you really be late to a barbecue?" I asked curiously.

"You can if you're bringin' the hot dog shit," Michael replied from the hallway. "Kids are gonna riot if we don't get there on time."

"Okay, I'm ready," I said, grabbing the olive green jacket from Charlie.

I put the coat on as we moved through the house, and a few minutes later we were in Michael's truck and headed for the clubhouse.

The drive seemed shorter than I would've liked and as we parked in the gravel out front, I wiped my sweaty palms on the thighs of my jeans. I'd seen most of Michael's family already, but I could already see that this group was a lot bigger. There were men and women outside, sitting on picnic benches and roaming around barbecues that were set out on the grass. Kids played in little groups around them.

"Relax," Michael said as he climbed out of the truck. "It'll only hurt for a second."

"Haha, very funny," I muttered as I slid out behind him.

I got Rhett out of his seat while Michael pulled the cooler out of the bed of the truck and then I followed him over to the crowd.

“Little Mick,” an older man called. “’Bout time. You got the dogs?”

“I got ’em,” Michael confirmed, shooting me a look as he lifted the cooler higher.

“And who’s this?” the man asked, looking at Rhett and then up at me.

I knew him. He was distant family of Michael’s and I was sure we’d met before. I’d never forget the scar that bisected his face, but I couldn’t remember his name.

“This is my son Rhett,” Michael said, his chest puffing out a little. My lips twitched. “And his mother Emilia.” He looked at Rhett. “This is Leo, he’s married to my dad’s cousin Lily.”

“Right, we’ve met before,” Leo said to me. I couldn’t read his tone. “And nice to meet ya, Rhett.”

Rhett leaned against my thigh. “Hi. Owie.” He pointed to Leo’s face.

I nearly groaned in mortification, but Leo didn’t even flinch. He crouched down until he was at Rhett’s level. “Nah, big man,” he said easily. “It doesn’t hurt.” He poked at his face. “All good, yeah?”

“You want me to leave the dogs here?” Michael asked, setting the cooler down.

“Yeah, you get the buns?” Leo stood back up.

Michael lifted them from the cooler in answer.

“Give those to the women inside,” Leo ordered.

Michael handed them to me and I stood there awkwardly for a moment.

“Can you bring ’em in?” he asked as he pulled packages of hot dogs out of the cooler.

I wanted to glare at him and tell him no. We'd been at the clubhouse for less than five minutes and he was already ditching me? What the fuck? But as I glanced at Leo, who was watching me closely, I realized it was a test.

"Sure," I said, grabbing Rhett's hand.

I strode through the forecourt, carrying bags of hot dog buns, and I could've sworn I was being watched. It felt like every single person had their eyes on my back as I walked up the couple stairs leading to the clubhouse door.

If I'd thought that it was busy outside, I'd been kidding myself. Inside was chaos. Kids ran all over, men and women sat at tables, talking and laughing, and at the center of it all, Michael's grandma Callie and great aunt Farrah held court.

I stopped inside the doorway and let my eyes adjust to the dim interior, looking over the room. Michael's siblings were nowhere to be found, but his aunts were bustling in and out of what I assumed was the kitchen, carrying big bowls out to the bar that ran the length of the room. I headed in that direction.

"Mama, hold me?" Rhett asked, pulling at my hand. I didn't blame him. I wished someone could carry me through the room.

I hefted him onto my hip and strode toward the end of the bar, barely sidestepping as an old man turned toward me.

"Crap," I yelped. "I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry, sweetheart," he said with a raspy laugh. "My fault." His blue eyes twinkled as he took us in. "You must be Emilia and Rhett. I'm Michael's uncle Casper. Think we met a long ass time ago."

"We did," I said, recognition dawning. I don't know how I'd forgotten those eyes. The blue was striking against his tan skin.

"You look like you're about to fall over," he joked, gesturing at the child clinging to me for dear life. "You need some help?"

“I’m supposed to bring these in to *the women*,” I said, shaking the buns.

“Just throw ’em up on the bar,” he said, jerking his chin toward it. “These vultures’ll find ’em.”

I did as he ordered and then used both hands to resettle Rhett, who was watching something over my shoulder.

“Hey, pal,” Casper said, reaching out to pat Rhett’s back. “You wanna go play with the kids?” As Rhett turned to look at him, Casper’s smile grew and his voice gentled even further. “Got some grandkids around here somewhere for you to play with.”

Rhett looked at me and I nodded.

“Damn, he looks like his pop,” Casper said with a chuckle.

“You think?” I joked as I set Rhett on his feet.

“Now, I know there’s a lot of ’em,” Casper said as he reached out and grasped Rhett’s hand. “But you’ll learn who’s who.”

They walked away and I suddenly felt naked. I was used to Rhett sticking to me like a barnacle. My hands felt empty. Bare.

“You’re here,” Heather yelled from across the room, getting my attention by waving her arms over her head. “Where’s my grandson?”

I strode to her, ignoring the curious looks I got from around the room. If the people inside hadn’t noticed me before, they surely did now. “He just took off with Casper,” I told her as she pulled me in for a hug. “They were going to find some kids.”

“There’s enough of them,” a woman said dryly.

“He’ll be running through here with a pack of them in no time,” Heather said, squeezing my hand. “Okay, I know you know some of these people, but I’ll introduce everyone

anyway. That's Trix on the couch, then Lily, Brenna, Molly and Rose you already remember, of course, and Kara."

"Hey," I said, awkwardly waving.

"Welcome, honey," Brenna said kindly. "Don't worry, you'll keep us all straight eventually."

"*Hey you* works too," Lily joked.

"Emilia," a voice boomed behind me. I didn't have time to turn before strong arms picked wrapped around my waist and lifted me off my feet.

"Rumi," Heather said in exasperation as Rumi carried me away. "You're such a pain in the ass."

"She's my friend," he argued, not even pausing. "She doesn't wanna hang with a bunch of *girls*."

I snorted as he continued to carry me toward the front door.

"You're welcome," he said, dropping me to my feet as I reached it. He didn't let me go, his arm heavy on my shoulders as we walked outside.

"For what?" I asked dryly. "Your mom had just introduced me to everyone."

"Those are the nosiest women on the face of the planet," he said, dragging me toward a picnic table. "I saved you."

"If you say so." I scanned the yard for Michael and found him talking with a group of men over by the barbecues.

"Emmy Lou," Rumi said, pulling my attention back. "This is Nova—"

"We've met," Nova said with a smile. My stomach lurched with guilt even as I smiled back.

"Gray and Olive," Rumi continued. "Charlie, you must know, since you're wearing her jacket."

The speed at which my face flamed a deep red only increased my embarrassment.

“You’re an ass,” Charlie said, rolling her eyes. “Jesus, Rumi.”

“Huh,” Rumi joked, throwing his leg over the bench so he could sit down. “Mom just said the same thing.”

“It looks better on you than it ever did on me,” Charlie said generously. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled. “Nice to meet you Olive and Gray.”

“Hey,” Gray returned, lighting a cigarette.

“You too,” Olive said with a grin. “and Don’t worry, clothes get passed around like crazy around here. It’s no big deal.”

“Barely anyone wants my shit, though,” Charlie said with a laugh.

“That’s because it won’t fit any of us,” Nova pointed out. She looked at me. “You’re lucky. Charlie always has the best stuff and none of us can fit our asses into it.”

“It’s not the ass you have to worry about,” Olive argued. “Everything is too short.”

“Can we stop talking about clothes?” Rumi asked, scooting over so I could sit next to him.

“You brought it up, Einstein,” I said, elbowing him in the side.

“The only reason you even recognized that coat is because you’re the one that dropped a lit joint on the sleeve and left that mark,” Charlie said, pointing at my arm.

I hadn’t even noticed the small hole with blackened edges on the shoulder.

“Guilty.” Rumi stretched his arms above his head, and tattoos peeked from the edges of his sleeves. “Shouldn’t have have bumped into me.”

Charlie rolled her eyes. “Where’s Rhett?” she asked me.

“Casper took him to meet all the kids,” I said, curling my fingers together in my lap. I couldn’t see him anywhere outside, so he must’ve still been in the building. I knew that there were at least twenty adults keeping an eye on the pack of kids but it still felt weird not to know exactly where he was and what he was doing.

“Oh, cool,” Charlie said, nodding. “My pop will make sure he’s good before he leaves him to it. Don’t worry, he’ll fit right in.”

I nodded, my eyes unintentionally straying back to where Michael was standing. I hadn’t really had time to look at him properly before we’d left the house, and it probably wasn’t the most intelligent idea to let my eyes roam over him in a crowd full of people, but I didn’t let that stop me. He was wearing jeans that hung low on his hips but were somehow still tight enough to show off his muscular ass and thighs, and a dark gray hoodie that he’d pushed up his forearms. I wasn’t sure why that part of his body made my mouth water the way it did, but I wasn’t sad about it. Something about the muscles there, tapering into thick wrists and big hands... yeah, I needed to think of something else. On top of his hoodie was the leather vest that he never left the house without.

“That’s my brother,” Rumi said, jabbing me in the side. “Could you not?”

“What?” I snapped, looking back at the table.

“It’s like ten degrees warmer out here,” Charlie joked, pulling at the neck of her sweater. “Damn.”

“So,” Olive teased. “Living together must be going pretty well.”

“I don’t wanna be a part of this conversation,” Charlie said, getting up from the table. “Call me and we’ll figure out some shifts for you.”

“Thank you so much,” I said as she waved me off.

“You’re going to work for Aunt Charlie, too?” Olive asked, drumming her hands on the table. “Maybe we’ll have

the same shift.”

“You work there?”

“Yep,” she grinned. “I’ll ask if I can train you. It’ll be fun.”

“Where’s our boy?” Michael asked, coming up behind me. He set his hands on my shoulders and I couldn’t help the way my body instinctively leaned into him.

“Playing with the kids,” I said, looking up at him.

“Cool. You ready to eat?”

I nodded and let him pull me to my feet.

“What, no hello for us?” Nova joked.

I tried and failed to keep the tension from my shoulders.

“Hey, Nova,” Michael replied. “Hello, Olive Oil. Gray.”

“You’re hilarious,” Olive replied, getting to her feet.

“Brother,” Rumi greeted with a grin.

“I already said hi to you, jackass,” Michael laughed, swinging at Rumi’s head.

The group of us all ended up heading for the bar inside, and the noise level was so high that I could barely hear myself think. I scanned the room for Rhett but didn’t see him anywhere.

“I’ll go find him,” Michael said, leaning down until his breath tickled my ear. “You hold our place in line.”

As he strode away, weaving through the group of people waiting to get their food, I forced myself to look away from his ass.

“When we were kids,” Rumi practically yelled from behind me. “We used to get to load up our plates first.”

“Yeah,” Nova replied. “When the hell did that stop happening?”

“When you became adults?” Olive asked dryly.



“Stupid,” Rumi griped.

Within minutes, Michael was back at my side and leaning in close again. “My mom got him a plate and he’s eatin’ with Gram.” His hand gripped my hip and gave a slight squeeze, and everything inside me froze.

Then the moment was over and he was looking over his shoulder to say something to Rumi. I stared blankly at the floor, trying to talk myself out of the feeling that was spreading through my limbs.

We’d been doing well and making things work while we shared a house, but something felt different at the club. It was as if when we walked through the forecourt we’d become a unit. Our little family of three, a part of things but also a bit separate. I thought about the way he’d put his hands on my shoulder, the hand on my back as we’d walked into the building, the way he’d gone to check on Rhett and then come straight back to let me know our son was fine and already eating, the hand on my hip.

Like he was claiming us for everyone to see.

It was dangerous to fall into that feeling. I knew it. I couldn’t seem to stop, though.

“Swear to Christ,” Michael said in my ear, startling me. “My brother could bitch about the sun rising.”

“He probably has,” I replied with a huff, turning toward him.

It was a logistical mistake, but once I’d done it, there was no going back. Our faces were just inches apart.

“You hungry?” he asked, his lips tipping up in one corner. The words were innocent, the tone was not.

“What’s on the menu,” I murmured back, glancing down at that half-smile.

“Sky’s the limit—” he started to say before a large hand slapped down on his back, interrupting us.

“Got a minute?” his dad asked, glancing between us.

“Sure, what’s up?” Michael asked.

Tommy jerked his chin toward the door behind us and Michael followed him out of the building.

“What was that about?” Rumi asked, leaning down by my shoulder.

“No idea.” I shrugged.

Within seconds, Rumi was following his dad and brother out of the clubhouse.

I didn’t think much of it as the line slowly inched forward but when I’d filled my plate and headed toward the tables where Rhett was sitting with Callie and Michael still hadn’t returned I started getting a little nervous. By the time we were finished eating, a small knot had formed in the pit of my stomach.

It was almost a relief when Michael came back inside, or it would’ve been if his entire body hadn’t seemed to thrum with anger. I searched his face for a clue to what was happening as he stopped at our table.

“Come outside with me?” he asked, glancing at his gram.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Nothin’ big,” he assured her. “Could you watch Rhett for a minute?”

“Go outside,” Rhett said, trying to climb off his chair. He must’ve read something he didn’t like in Michael’s expression, because it had been days since he’d worried about me leaving his side.

“You stay inside with Great Gram,” Michael ordered.

Rhett’s face screwed up into a scowl.

“I’ll be right back, baby,” I told him, leaning over to kiss his forehead. “Why don’t you go play with the kids.”

Michael towed me to the open doorway while my mind raced. What could've possibly happened that he needed me for?

We were halfway across the forecourt when I figured it out.

## CHAPTER 10

### MICHAEL

I KNEW THE second Emilia saw the douchebag leaning against his car in the forecourt. Her hand jerked in mine, but I was actually kind of impressed that she didn't stop. She followed me all the way over until we were standing next to my dad, grandpa, Rumi, and Dragon, the club's president.

"Emilia," the douche said, standing straighter. "You're a hard girl to find."

More than anything, I wished I'd found the fucker first. We'd talked things over almost a week ago, and I'd told her I'd check him out, but shit had been so crazy I hadn't made the time. I'd barely thought about it.

"What are you doing here, Parker?" Emilia asked through her teeth.

"Funny you should ask," he said with a laugh. "See, you took off and the next day I found a bunch of money missing from the safe."

"Bullshit," she shot back.

My lips twitched. I'd been hoping whatever game he was playing wouldn't end well for him. The guy was a clown.

"Must not have known my office has cameras," he said conversationally to my dad.

All the blood left Emilia's face and whatever smugness I'd been feeling disappeared in an instant. Fuck.

"I didn't steal your money."

"Should we watch it?" he asked condescendingly. He reached for his pocket and my hand went instinctively to the small of my back, but all he pulled out was his phone.

“You can watch whatever you want,” Emilia replied. She was so close to my side that I could feel the way she trembled, but she held her head high.

“Okay,” he said with a shrug. He started the video.

“I only took the money you refused to pay me,” she said, her lips barely moving as we watched her unlock the safe and reach inside. “Not a penny more.”

“Huh,” the douchebag muttered. “Looks like more than that.”

“I’d worked twenty-eight hours,” she said, looking at my dad, my grandpa, Dragon. She sounded close to tears, but kept going. “Eighteen dollars an hour. That’s five hundred and four dollars. I took five hundred.”

“Come on, now,” Parker, or whatever the fuck his name was wheedled. “No reason to lie. I’ve got proof here.”

“I didn’t take any more than you owed me.”

“Pay back the five-thousand dollars you took and we can all just walk away from this,” he responded flatly, all emotion gone. There was something in his eyes that I didn’t like. He seemed to enjoy making Emilia nervous, putting her on edge. The fucker was getting off on it.

“Five thousand?” Emilia sputtered, her eyes wide.

“How about you fuck off and run back to Arizona,” my brother snapped. My dad put a hand on his shoulder and Rumi went quiet.

“You only took what was owed to ya?” Dragon asked Emilia.

“I swear,” she answered hoarsely. “I only took five hundred. He actually still owes me four dollars.”

The moment Emilia’s old boss realized that he wasn’t going to get what he’d expected from us, he stepped forward. Every single one of us tensed, but I think I may have been the only one that was hoping he’d actually pull something. From

the moment he'd driven up to the clubhouse, I'd been waiting for that particular event. We'd listened to him as he said that Emilia had stolen money from him and he'd been convincing as fuck, but I'd still wanted to get my hands on him. Even while I wondered if she'd lied to me about why she'd left Arizona, I'd known that she hadn't been lying when she'd mentioned being afraid of him.

It wasn't until we brought Emilia outside and she'd stared at him in incomprehension that I'd realized we'd been played.

"Sounds like you still owe her four dollars," Dragon said, his voice hard and quiet. "How about we call it even and *we can all just walk away from this.*"

Rumi chuckled.

"I'm not leaving without my money," Parker muttered stubbornly, glaring at Dragon and then Emilia.

"Boy," grandpa said with a huff. "Are you that stupid?"

"He is," Emilia mumbled under her breath.

"You ain't gettin' shit," my dad said firmly. Parker jerked back in surprise at the venom in his words. "And in case you were thinkin' about botherin' my son and his woman again—don't. Club's got a long arm and a long fuckin' memory."

"This isn't over," Parker blustered, opening his car door. "Cops'll be real interested."

"Let me stop you there," I said through my teeth, making him pause. "You were payin' Emilia under the table and I'm guessin' you pay everyone else that way, too. Pretty sure that ain't exactly legal. Gramps?"

"It sure isn't," Gramps muttered, glaring.

He gaped at me like a fish, searching for something to say.

"Don't fuck with me," I finished. "You won't like the result."

"Parker," Emilia called as he threw himself into the car. "How did you even find me?"

The douchebag scoffed. “Bitch, if you were trying to hide, you shouldn’t have been runnin’ your mouth to all the other useless gash I employ.”

Only Gramps’s hand on my chest stopped me from ripping him back out of the car.

Seconds later he pulled away, spraying gravel like a moron.

“Don’t wanna deal with this bullshit again,” Dragon muttered, shooting me a look. “Waste of my goddamn time.”

“I’m so sorry,” Emilia said, her voice hitching.

Dragon ignored her as he walked back toward the clubhouse.

“I didn’t mean for—” Emilia’s words cut off as my dad wrapped his hands around her head, his palms on her cheeks, pulling her closer so he could kiss her forehead.

“Family takes care of family,” he murmured. “Don’t matter if you took five hundred or five million, yeah? It’s over.”

“Hell yeah, we do,” Rumi said with a grin.

Dad, Gramps and Rumi walked away, leaving us standing alone in the middle of the forecourt.

“I didn’t take five thousand dollars,” Emilia said, turning to me. “I swear, Michael. I only took what he owed—”

“You don’t think you shoulda given me a heads up?” I asked in frustration.

I’d thought we’d gotten past all that shit. I thought she’d told me everything. Instead, her old boss had shown up at the club while they were throwing her a fucking *welcome to the family* barbeque saying she stole a bunch of money. Jesus, had Rumi been right when he’d reminded me I didn’t know her anymore?

“Jesus Christ, Emilia,” I spat. “What else aren’t you tellin’ me?”

“Nothing,” she answered quickly. “Nothing, that’s it.”

“Right,” I muttered, stepping around her. “Go back inside.”

The rage I’d tamped down for years bubbled, and I found myself clenching and unclenching my hands. I’d never hurt Emilia, not in a thousand years, but all of the anger coursing through my veins needed a goddamn outlet.

She’d been in Oregon for a week and she hadn’t said shit. She’d driven my son from Arizona with a target on their backs, and she hadn’t said shit. We were goddamn lucky that he’d shown up at the club. That motherfucker could’ve shown up at our house at any time while Emilia and Rhett were there alone, and I wouldn’t have been able to do anything. He could’ve found them at some cheap ass motel off the interstate before I’d even known Emilia was coming back to me or that Rhett existed. I thought about every time I’d come home from work while Rhett was playing in the back yard, the trips to the grocery store that Emilia had gone on alone, the way she’d had sagged in relief when she said they were *finally here*, the way she’d glossed over the fact that her boss might be looking for her because she’d turned him down, the way I’d been blindsided when he showed up at the club asking to talk to whoever was in charge. The nasty look in his eyes as he’d watched Emilia defend herself, scared and shaking.

“Come on,” I barked, grabbing Emilia’s hand. I towed her behind me back to the clubhouse.

“I’m sorry,” she said, struggling to keep up. “I know I should’ve said something, but—”

“We’ll talk about it later,” I ground out.

I knew myself. I knew that I needed to get my emotions under control before we had any kind of conversation. My skin felt too tight over my bones, almost itchy, so heated that I was sweating even in the cool air.

I brought Emilia to the table and left her standing next to my gram as I searched for Rumi. He was standing with Nova



by the pool tables and the minute our eyes met, he nodded. He must've recognized the look on my face, he'd seen it before.

"Give these to Emilia," I ordered, tossing my keys to Nova.

"What?" she asked in confusion, barely catching them. "Wait, why can't you give them to her?"

"Thanks, No!" Rumi called over his shoulder as we walked away. "I'll call you later."

Rumi thumped me on the back as we left the clubhouse.

"We're gonna party like it's 1999," he sang.

"You brought the truck?"

"Why?" He grinned. "Don't feel like riding bitch on the back of my bike?"

"Never gonna fuckin' happen."

Rumi rolled his eyes. "I brought Nova," he said, pulling his keys out of his pocket. "And you know she won't ride on the bike, so yeah. I brought the truck."

"Hey, where you guys goin'?" Otto called out as he strode forward to meet us. "I just got here!"

"Gonna go tear some shit up," Rumi replied jovially.

"Everythin' good?" Otto looked at me closely.

"Just goin' to blow off some steam," I muttered. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Depends on the favor."

"Can you hang at my place tonight until I get home?"

"You fuckin' kiddin' me?"

"I'll explain it all later," I promised, glancing behind me. I had a feeling that at any moment Emilia was going to follow us outside and I really didn't want to get into it with her again. "Just keep an eye on things."

"Babysit your ex, you mean," Otto grumbled.

“Just do it, yeah?”

“Not like I have a choice,” he replied, throwing his arms in the air.

“You really don’t,” Rumi mused, punching him lightly in the stomach.

“Thanks, turbo,” I said to Otto as he walked backward toward the clubhouse.

“Jesus, are you ever gonna stop callin’ me that?” he spat, not waiting on an answer as he spun around.

“You told us to call you Turbo,” Rumi reminded him.

“I was five,” Otto yelled over his shoulder, flipping us off.

“You think that’s a good idea?” Rumi asked me as we got into his truck. “Sendin’ Otto to hang with Em?”

“Better than no one,” I murmured, swiping my hair back from my face. “I’m guessin’ that fuckwad is on his way back to Arizona by now, but I’d rather someone was with them at the house in case he’s feelin’ squirrely.”

“Coulda asked Dad.”

“Dad woulda just brought them to his house,” I said with a sigh as I tried to keep my knee from bouncing. “And I’m guessin’ Emilia’s gonna need some downtime after that shit show we just witnessed.”

“Can’t believe our little Em stole money from the safe in a strip club,” Rumi replied with a chuckle. “Didn’t think she had it in her.”

“Fuckin’ stupid,” I mumbled. “Have a feelin’ if he’d caught her in the act, he wouldn’t have called the police.”

“Lucky she came straight home, huh?” Rumi said, glancing at me.

“Yeah, real lucky. Too bad she didn’t say shit to me about it.”

“Feelin’ out of the loop, big brother?”

“I’m feelin’ like I shoulda known that she’d stolen money from some asshole who was just enough of a fuck to drive a thousand miles to get that shit back,” I countered. “He coulda caught up to her at any point.”

“He didn’t.”

“He could’ve.”

“Where you at with Emilia?” Rumi asked after a long pause. “You two back together?”

“No.”

“Sure looked like it back at the club.”

“We’re not back together.”

“Livin’ together.”

“Strictly hands off.”

“That ain’t gonna last long.”

“Why are you so interested?”

“Because I’m waitin’ for you to figure it out.” He paused. “Plus there’s a pool—”

“You’re betting on us,” I replied flatly.

“In more ways than one.” He chuckled. “I figured you’d pull your head out within twenty-four hours. I’m actually kind of impressed by how long you’ve held out.”

“We can’t just pick up where we left off, Rum,” I said quietly. “Doesn’t work that way.”

“Don’t see why not. You love her, she loves you, you both love Rhett. Boom. Instant family.”

“I’ll probably always love her—”

“She’s easy to love,” he said simply.

“But she took off, man,” I reminded him. “Not sure that’s forgivable, yeah?”

“Okay,” Rumi said seriously. “So, what’s the plan then?”

“No idea. Break shit, I guess.” I leaned my head back against the seat and closed my eyes, counting backward from one hundred.

## CHAPTER 11

### EMILIA

I SAT NEXT to Callie, surprisingly numb. After worrying for the last week and a half that Parker would find us, I'd somehow pushed it to the back of my mind once we were safely ensconced in Michael's house. I'd gotten overconfident.

I should've known that the minute I let my guard down, something would happen. The fact that he'd actually come to the club surprised me though. For some reason, I'd thought that just my association with the club would be enough to deter him from bothering us.

Five thousand dollars. What a lying sack of shit. I'd taken what he owed me and not a penny more. What bothered me about the whole thing wasn't even that he'd lied or followed us up here. It had been the look in his eyes when he'd seen my nervousness. Parker didn't need the money I'd taken. It was mine, and we both knew it. He was pissed that he hadn't *won*. That he'd made a pass, and I'd turned him down and then when he'd tried to force the situation, I'd taken off and there was nothing he could do about it. We'd gotten away, and I'd gotten paid, and that killed him. It made him furious, and I was beginning to see that it made him unpredictable, too.

"Hey, Emilia?" Nova said, coming up behind me. "Micky asked me to give you these." She set Michael's keys on the table.

"What?" I asked blankly. "Where is he?"

Nova shrugged. "He left with Rumi."

"He left the property?" I asked in disbelief as I got to my feet. "Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure," she answered uncomfortably.

“Where the hell would he go?” I looked at Callie, but she was talking to someone at the table behind her.

Nova shrugged.

I stuffed the keys in my pocket and headed toward the center of the room where Rhett was playing with Lincoln Logs on the floor. He was surrounded by other kids, and if I'd taken a minute to look at them, I'd probably be able to tell who they belonged to, but I didn't have the time. I scooped Rhett up and tickled him to keep him from screaming as I walked toward the front door. As soon as we were outside, I marched toward the parking lot, coming to a stop at the edge when I realized I had no idea what Rumi drove.

“Hey, you leavin' already?” Otto called, jogging up behind me.

I glared at the rows of cars and motorcycles. “What does Rumi drive?”

“An old black Dodge,” Otto replied flatly. He reached for Rhett and pulled him out of my arms, lifting him high before pretending like he was going to drop him. “They already left.”

“Where did they go?” I asked, looking down the long driveway.

“Not sure,” Otto said, setting Rhett on his feet to explore.

“Well, when are they going to be back?” I asked in frustration, turning to him. I was so tired of his attitude. Yeah, we all knew he was pissed at me. He hated me, whatever. But I still remembered rubbing his temples because his head hurt while we watched movies. I remembered riding around in Michael's truck, bringing him to his friend's house. I remembered when he started getting zits and he was too embarrassed to ask his brothers how the hell to get rid of them and I'd smuggled him some of my face wash in a travel bottle so they wouldn't give him shit about it. I knew him. He was as close to a little brother as I'd ever have, and like it or not, I was as close to a big sister as he'd ever had, and I was done with his shit.

“I’m guessin’ they won’t be back anytime soon since Mick asked me to babysit you.”

“He said what?” I asked darkly.

“Told me to go to his place and keep an eye on things until he got home,” Otto replied, catching Rhett as he tripped.

“Fucking fantastic,” I muttered.

“So if you’re leavin’, let me know, and I’ll follow you back.”

“I’m not leaving,” I ground out, picking Rhett back up. I strode back toward the clubhouse, my hands shaking with anger.

Michael had actually taken off and left me with a crowd full of people I barely knew. His people. The people he’d assured me that he’d run interference with. The people who were going to be watching me and speculating why Michael had just disappeared from the barbecue they were throwing for us.

The fear that had been a quiet thrum while I knew I was safe on club property dissipated almost entirely as fury replaced it. What an absolute asshole. Fine, he wanted to just leave me at the party, assuming that I’d go home without him? Well, I’d stay the whole goddamn night. They were going to have to throw me out.

As soon as we were back inside, I threw myself into talking to everyone. While Rhett played with the kids and snuggled with his gran, I made the rounds. I told people where we’d been living, where we were living now, how Charlie had hired me at one of her coffee carts, that my parents had died, that I’d worked at a strip club to make ends meet but it hadn’t been enough and that why we’d come back. I joked about how Michael’s grandpa had caught us out at the back of the property and shrugged when they asked if we were back together. Let them wonder. I mentioned that I’d taken the money that was owed to me and my old manager had followed

me all the way to Oregon. I answered any questions people had, no matter how embarrassed or ashamed I was.

I discussed childbirth and motherhood with Brenna and Trix and going back to school with Lily. I talked about clothes with Olive and her mom Cecilia. I debated shoe brands with Michael's aunt Molly and promised her daughter Rebel that she could come hang with Rhett and me soon. Michael's cousin was completely enamored with our son—I couldn't really blame her. I was too, and he was at his cutest as he got more and more tired and punchy.

I talked to a guy I didn't know about finding some tires for my car. Agreed to let Michael's dad set up a time to have the Subaru detailed. I talked about everything and anything, no topic was off limits. I was a fucking joy. I was outgoing and bubbly and the life of the party.

I felt drunk, even though I hadn't had a drop. I convinced myself that if Michael had wanted to keep things between us, he wouldn't have abandoned me to the sharks. My open book policy felt like retaliation. It was the only thing that kept me from clamming up. Instead, I babbled and droned on and on. Eventually, Tommy and Heather started to look concerned. Gram Callie watched me closely. Gramps threw his arm over my shoulder and tried to lead me to a quiet corner.

"Honey, why don't you take the boy home?" he said, kissing the side of my head. "He's fallin' asleep where he sits."

"I was hoping Michael would come back," I replied easily, smiling at Rhett. "No reason to head back to his house if he isn't there."

"Except for the fact that your baby is exhausted, and so are you," he mused.

"It's not like I'll be going home to sleep," I mumbled. The clubhouse was still loud with voices, but it had definitely mellowed from earlier in the night. People were taking off, bringing their kids and their wives home to bed.



“Give him hell,” Gramps said with a chuckle.

“If he doesn’t want to be here with us,” I said with a shrug. “Why would I give him hell for it? I’d rather he wasn’t here if he doesn’t want to be.”

“Bullshit,” Gramps said. “Don’t go playin’ that game. Nobody wins that game.”

“I’m not playing any game.”

“You want him beside you, you fight for it.”

“I shouldn’t have to fight for it,” I countered.

“Sweetheart,” he said with a sigh, squeezing me before dropping his arm. “Don’t you think it’s about time you did? Think on it.”

It wasn’t long after that I rounded up Rhett and Otto and headed back to Michael’s house. Gramps was right, I needed to get Rhett home to bed, and I was honestly exhausted from keeping up with the happy façade. Michael’s family had seen right through it, and they’d watched most of it with smiles on their faces. They knew I was pissed, and they seemed to be happy about it, which seemed weird.

Rhett passed out before we’d even gotten off club property, so the truck was silent as I followed the familiar route to my old house, the lights of Otto’s car illuminating the rearview mirror.

I was so tired. Disappointed and tired. Nervous and angry and scared and tired. Part of me wanted to go searching for Michael, even though I had no idea where he’d gone, but most of me just wanted to crawl into bed with Rhett and think about everything in the morning. I’d made it through the club gauntlet mostly unscathed. Parker had followed me like I’d worried he would, and he’d made the mistake of following me straight to the club, so that was over, too. Heather agreed to watch Rhett when I started work the next week, and soon I’d have some money coming in.

So why, as everything was falling neatly into place, did I feel so overwhelmed? Why did Michael seem further away than when he'd walked into his parents' house and found Rhett and me there? My stomach churned as I turned into the driveway and watched the garage door roll open.

"Hey, you need any help?" Otto asked as I climbed out of the truck.

I debated asking him to carry Rhett inside, then shook my head. "I got it."

"Alright," he muttered. "I'll be right behind you." He hit the garage switch as he walked back out and it closed as I grabbed Rhett out of his seat.

I was dragging and lost in my own thoughts as I kicked off my shoes and carried Rhett through the house, and it's the only reason I can think of that I didn't see the man sitting on the chair in the living room.

"Where's your boyfriend?" Parker asked, making me jolt so hard that I nearly dropped Rhett.

"What the hell are you doing?" I hissed, staring at him. Whenever I'd imagined him finding us, I'd always thought I would jump into action, making sure Rhett and I were safe and out of his reach before he could blink. It didn't happen that way, though. It was like I couldn't comprehend how he was there, in Michael's house, in the dark.

"Give me back the money you stole," he replied grimly. He tapped his hand against the arm of the chair, the pistol in it making a dull thudding noise that made me flinch.

"I don't have it," I stuttered, wrapping my arms tightly around Rhett. He was still passed out, completely unaware of the way my entire body shook. "I-I used it. Coming up here. On hotels and gas and—"

"Bullshit," Parker barked. "No way you spent all five grand already."

“I told you, I only took five hundred,” I whispered desperately. Was he just fucking with me, or did he actually think I’d taken five thousand dollars from him?

“Okay.” He laughed nastily. “This shit is over. Go get my money.” I knew the instant the muscles in his arm shifted as he pointed the pistol at me. For a moment, I was sure that I was going to lose all control of my bowels.

“Please,” I said, my breath coming in gasps. “Please, I didn’t take it. I swear.”

Thoughts flew through my head in less than an instant. Where could I put Rhett? I could drop him behind the couch, but what if it hurt him? He was so asleep that his arms dangled down at his sides. He’d never be able to break his fall. The thought of Rhett’s head hitting the hardwood warred with the thought of him being hit with a bullet. If we both dropped down, I could shield him somehow. Protect him with my body. But what would Parker do with him after I was gone? Would he hurt him? Take him? Was my body even big enough to stop a bullet, or would it go right through me and into my son’s fragile little body? Dark spots danced in my vision as I took a step backward.

“No,” Parker ordered, getting to his feet. He raised his arm and the loudest thud I’d ever heard filled the room. I flinched, dropping down and curling my body around Rhett’s.

“No,” I whispered, tightening my body around Rhett as he started to cry. “Shh, baby.”

“Emilia.”

“Stay still, baby,” I choked out, trying to hold Rhett under me. “Shh, stay still.”

“Emilia.”

I started to rock, holding Rhett to me. I couldn’t see anything, but I could feel him. My baby. His hands pinched at my sides as he tried to escape, not comprehending why his mama was crying and holding him against the floor.

“Em!”

Otto’s voice was so loud that it seemed to reverberate through the floor. His hands on my shoulders pulled me upright, unyielding and firm.

“You okay?” he asked, his eyes wide and frightened. His hands brushed over me, running through my hair and down my shoulders, over Rhett’s back, skimming over my hips and legs.

“Otto?”

“The fuck,” he whispered, glancing over his shoulder. “Who the fuck?”

I followed his gaze to find Parker face down on the floor.

“I hit him,” he said, sounding almost surprised. “I used a pan from the kitchen. Why the fuck doesn’t Michael have a fuckin’ bat or somethin’? Jesus!”

“Otto,” I said, scooting backward until I hit the wall behind me. “Call 9-1-1.”

“Fuck that,” Otto spat, pulling out his phone. “I’m calling my dad.”

“You need to stop saying fuck so much, or Rhett’s going to say it, too,” I murmured, my thoughts everywhere all at once.

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that,” he muttered, holding the phone to his ear. “Dad? You need to get the fuck over here, right fuckin’ now.”

When Michael’s dad and the others showed up less than ten minutes later, I was still on the floor with Rhett in my lap. He’d calmed down once he was sure that everything was okay but didn’t fall back asleep, content to curl up against my chest with his thumb in his mouth, his favorite pink blanket wrapped around him. Otto stood above the still-unconscious Parker holding a gun he’d found stashed somewhere.

“You okay?” Tommy asked, coming straight to me as the others filed into the house behind him.

“We’re okay,” I confirmed, my eyes watering as he helped me to my feet. “Otto—”

“Thank fuck he was here,” Tommy said, pulling me into his arms. “Thank fuck.”

I didn’t bother telling him not to say fuck.

“Where the hell is your son?” Michael’s uncle Will barked, looking over at us.

“Otto, call your brother,” Tommy ordered, then more gently, “You can put that away, bud.”

Otto nodded, his eyes still wider than normal. He set the gun on the table behind him and kind of stumbled away from it.

“You did good, kid,” Gramps told him with a nod. “Real good.”

“Looks like he’s about to puke,” Leo chimed in with a laugh. “Don’t worry, we’ll handle it from here.”

“His head sounded like a ripe cantaloupe,” Otto muttered in disgust, making the men laugh.

“Call Micky,” his dad ordered. When Otto pulled his phone out and walked toward the kitchen, Tommy looked down at me. “You sure you’re good, sweetheart?”

“He thinks I took his money,” I murmured, staring at Parker.

“You did.”

“No, he thinks I took way more.” I shook my head in confusion. “Or it was his excuse? I don’t know. He’s going to keep coming back.”

“No,” Tommy replied grimly. “He will *not*, I can promise you that.”

I wasn’t sure what Otto had said to Michael, but when he came back from the kitchen, his face was even paler than it had been before.

“He’s on his way.”

Tommy nodded and walked me toward the stairs. “Take Rhett up, yeah? Get him tucked into bed. We’ll handle this.”

“I don’t—” My words trailed off as I glanced around the living room. The men looked calm, relaxed even, but each of them was carrying a weapon or five, some out in the open and others just bulge hidden inside their clothes.

“Go on up,” Michael’s dad repeated. “Get Rhett settled, yeah?”

I nodded and walked upstairs. Every shadow and shift of light in the hallway made me jump, and as I walked into the bedroom Rhett and I shared, I knew I wouldn’t be able to stay in there. Every piece of furniture seemed to loom at me from the dark. I quickly backed out of the room and went straight to Michael’s room. His light switch had a dimmer, and I turned it all the way down before tucking Rhett into the middle of the bed.

“Mama sleep,” he murmured. “Grandpa?”

“Mama will lay with you,” I replied. “Grandpa’s going to stay downstairs, though.”

I climbed into the bed and let the scent of Michael soothe me as I waited for Rhett to fall back asleep. The rumble of voices downstairs was pretty steady, but I couldn’t hear what any of them were saying until the minute Michael walked through the front door.

“Emilia!” he called, just once before he was quieted.

I slid out of bed and made my way downstairs. The whole situation from the moment I’d found Parker waiting for me inside Michael’s house seemed like it was happening to someone else. I felt almost separate from it, like I was watching through a window.

Will held Michael near the front door, murmuring something I couldn’t hear.

“Em,” Michael barked, pushing past his uncle easily as he rushed toward me. “Are you okay?”

His hands moved over me, much like Otto’s had earlier, searching for any hurts.

“I’m okay,” I murmured, pulling away. “I’m fine.”

“What the fuck, sugar?” he asked, searching my face. “He was waitin’ in the house?”

“He was sitting in the chair,” I replied, glancing at it. I could still hear the thud as he’d tapped his pistol against the arm.

“He’s comin’ ’round,” Gramps said, surprising me. He must’ve gotten there while I was upstairs with Rhett.

“Can’t have that,” Michael’s uncle Casper said, crouching down by Parker’s head. “Hey there,” he greeted with a nasty smile. Then with an easy thump on the back of Parker’s head near his ear, he knocked him back out. “Come on, young’uns. Pick up the garbage, and we’ll take it outta here.”

“Why’re we doin’ all the heavy liftin’?” one of the guys joked as he—and what must’ve been his twin brother—lifted Parker by the armpits and feet.

“Cause we’re old,” Casper replied, shooing them. “Quit bitchin’ and go out the garage. We’ll take him in Micky’s truck.”

“Hold,” Gramps said. He patted down Parker’s hips and pulled out a set of keys. “Find his car.” He tossed the keys to Rumi. “Take care of it.”

“On it,” Rumi replied. He didn’t even look at me as he left the house.

“Emilia,” Michael said, pulling my attention back to his face. “What happened, baby?”

“What happened?” Otto snapped from across the room. No one stopped him as he stormed forward, stopping just inches from Michael’s face. “You took off and left Emilia and your

son to deal with whoever the fuck that was. What the fuck is wrong with you, man?”

“I didn’t leave them to deal,” Michael spat back. “I sent you with ’em.”

“I didn’t even know what the fuck was goin’ on,” Otto shot back, throwing up his hands.

“I asked you to keep an eye on shit.”

“I was out callin’ my girl,” Otto countered, his eyes wild and his breathing heavy. “If she woulda answered her phone, I’d probably still be out there and Emilia’d be in here dead.”

I don’t think anyone had anticipated the punch Otto threw, not even Otto. One second he was glaring daggers at Michael and the next, his voice was breaking and every bit of terror and rage from the night was pouring out of him as he swung.

Thankfully when Otto had stomped toward us, Michael had backed away from me a little, because when Otto’s fist clipped his chin, he staggered.

“Whoops,” Leo said, coming around the side of them to wrap his arm around my waist and physically carry me a few feet out of the way.

“Aren’t you going to stop him?” I asked as Otto swung again.

“Nope,” Leo said, leaning against the wall. “Micky’s got it comin’.”

“He didn’t know—”

Leo shot me a look. “After that scene at the club, he took off poutin’ like a baby and left his teenage brother to look after his woman,” he said flatly. “Fuckin’ stupid.” He looked back at Otto and Michael. “And seriously unfair to Otto.”

“We thought he was gone, man,” Michael said defensively, dodging Otto.

“You didn’t think he was gone.” Otto threw another punch, hitting Michael in the stomach. “Or you wouldn’t have asked



me to watch the house.”

“Man, I knew you could handle it,” Michael defended.

“I didn’t know what the fuck I was handlin’, asshole,” Otto spat, his arms finally dropping to his sides. “They coulda fuckin’ *died*. He was *pointin’ a fuckin’ gun at them*.”

Michael’s face lost all color as he looked across the room at me, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Otto.

He shoved Michael away from him by the neck of his sweatshirt. “When I hit him, she dropped to the floor,” he choked out. “Covered Rhett so well you couldn’t even see him. Only way you knew he was there is ’cause you could hear him cryin’.” He let out a sharp sob and angrily wiped at his nose with the back of his hand. “She didn’t even hear me calling her name.”

“Alright, son,” Tommy said quietly, putting his hand on Otto’s shoulder. “Alright.”

Otto shrugged off his dad’s hand, ducking his head in embarrassment.

“I knew you didn’t hate me,” I said, my words practically echoing in the suddenly silent house. Otto looked at me. “I mean, I would’ve preferred an ‘*I forgive you, Emmy,*’ but saving me from a psycho works.”

“Fuck, Em,” Otto said, his body shuddering.

I moved through the men and wrapped my arms around Otto’s waist, laying my head against his chest. “Thanks, Otto-mobile,” I said softly.

“Fuck,” he murmured again, his arms coming up to encircle my head, his biceps resting on my shoulders. He shuddered again as he laid his cheek against the top of my head.

It was so weird. When I’d left three years ago, he’d been the same height as me and now suddenly he was man-sized. He’d grown up when I wasn’t there to see it.

“We’re headed out,” Tommy said, patting Otto on the back so hard that I felt it. “Come on, son.”

“You good?” Otto asked as he pulled away.

“Yeah.” I let him go and tried to smile. It must’ve been really unbelievable because Otto snorted.

“You stay here,” Gramps ordered, pointing at Michael as he shuffled by. He kissed my forehead and kept moving, which made me sigh in relief. If he’d babied me even a little, I would’ve fallen apart.

Michael tried to argue. “I’m not—”

It was the first time I’d ever seen that particular expression on Gramps’s face as he stared Michael down, and I hoped I’d never see it again. “You stay here and take care of Emilia.”

Michael’s mouth snapped shut.

In less than a minute, the house was empty except for the three of us. The silence was deafening.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t—”

“Save it,” I murmured tiredly, cutting him off. “Just save it.”

“Emilia—”

“No.” I put my hand up to stop him as he walked toward me. “I’m not—I can’t do this right now.”

“I shoulda been here. I know that now.”

“Oh, you know that now?” I asked sharply. “You know that *now*?”

“Yeah, I know it now.”

“Why didn’t you know it before? Where the hell were you?”

“I went with Rum,” he said, running his hands through his hair. “We went to a house my dad’s demoing. Just blowin’ off some steam. Just—”

“You left me at the club by myself so you could go demo a house?” I hissed in disbelief as I took him in. He was covered with a fine layer of dust that I hadn’t noticed before.

“I do that sometimes,” he explained. “When shit’s too much. It clears my head. After that shit at the club, I needed a minute.”

“You didn’t think that maybe *I* needed a minute?” I asked quietly, disappointment making my shoulders slump. “That maybe going back into the party your family was throwing us *alone* wasn’t what I wanted to do?”

“I figured you’d leave,” he said, taking another step forward. “Bring Rhett home and decompress.”

“You left me there by myself,” I said, my voice nearly inaudible. “You were pissed at me, and you left without a word.”

“You really wanna talk about who left who?” he asked, getting defensive.

I let out a bark of laughter so raw that it hurt my throat. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“Yes, you did,” he replied flatly. “You had a choice.”

“Yeah, well, so did you,” I spat back. “And you’re not eighteen, pregnant, and scared out of your mind.”

“I thought we’d taken care of him.” He glanced at the living room. “I didn’t think he’d be back.”

“So, that just makes it okay?” I shook my head. “You know what, I’m not even mad about that.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m really not.” It was true. I wasn’t angry that he hadn’t been there. Neither of us had realized how nuts Parker was. Neither of us had anticipated it. “I’m angry—no, not even that. I’m disappointed—”

Michael scoffed.

“I’m disappointed,” I said again, my voice wobbly no matter how hard I tried to keep it steady. “That you took off the minute you were pissed, just like I’d known you would.”

## CHAPTER 12

### MICHAEL

**“T**HAT’S NOT FAIR,” I ground out, frustration making my hands ball into fists. “I left for a few fuckin’ hours.”

“And how’d that work out for you?” she asked softly. “You get what you needed?”

I swallowed hard. No, I hadn’t. Tearing down a wall hadn’t hit the same as it always had before. The entire time I’d wanted to come home and have it out with Emilia, but I’d been too stubborn. I’d just kept going, waiting for the familiar release of tension that never came.

Emilia was quiet as she lifted her hands out in front of her, watching as they trembled.

“I’m so sorry,” I choked out, moving forward. “I thought he was gone.”

“Yeah,” she whispered. “So did I.”

I wanted to hit something. I wanted her to hit something. Hit me. If we were angry, maybe we could overlook how badly I’d failed her.

I hadn’t thought for a second that asshole Parker would stick around after we’d sent him on his way. If I had, I never would have left her and Rhett alone. I’d still been strung pretty tight, though, which was why I’d sent Otto with her. I’d felt a little better knowing someone was with her until I got home. I just hadn’t wanted her coming back to an empty house alone.

Jesus, what a fucking moron.

“He was just sitting there in the dark,” she mumbled, looking at me in confusion. “How did he even know where you live?”

“I don’t know, sugar.”

“He wasn’t even nervous.” She shook her head. “Like he knew that you weren’t with me. And he kept telling me to give his five thousand dollars back. Michael, I didn’t even take that money.”

“I know you didn’t.”

“Why does he think I took it?” she asked desperately, her eyes filling with tears. “I don’t—”

“Come here, baby,” I ordered, moving the last few steps that separated us.

As soon as I’d gotten my arms around her, she clawed at me, pulling me as close as she could. I found myself helping her as she wrapped her legs around my waist and clung. She shuddered silently once. Then again a few seconds later.

“You’re alright,” I whispered, pressing my lips to her ear. “Thank fuck. You’re alright.”

The first sob didn’t even surprise me. Honestly, I was impressed at how well she’d held it together until that moment.

“I thought he was going to shoot us,” she gasped, the words garbled against my neck. “I thought he was going to shoot Rhett.”

My nose burned as I held her tighter.

“I just kept thinking if I could shield him somehow,” she sobbed. “He might be okay even if I wasn’t.”

I knew she needed to get that shit out, that she needed to talk about it and process it, but the words nearly brought me to my knees. I could barely wrap my head around how badly I’d fucked up sending them home without me.

My hands moved over her restlessly instinctively searching for wounds, making sure that she was okay even as she talked about how Otto had knocked Parker out with a frying pan.

“He was so scared, Michael,” she cried harder. “The look on his face.”

“He protected you.”

“I thought he hated me,” she choked out.

“He never hated you,” I replied, not even sure if she was hearing me. “He was pissed at you.”

“I’m so glad you’re home,” she said with a shudder, her body finally relaxing into mine. “I was so scared.”

I sat down on the couch as my legs began to ache and held Emilia on my lap as her breathing slowed and her arms loosened.

“I fucked up,” I murmured, kissing her head. She didn’t argue with me.

We sat there in silence until Rhett’s voice carried down the stairs, calling for Emilia. She was off my lap in less than a second, and I was right behind her as she jogged up the stairs and into my room.

“Mama,” Rhett whined, sitting in the middle of my bed.

“Hey, why are you awake?” Emilia asked gently, crawling onto the bed. She laid down next to him, and Rhett toppled over like a freshly cut tree, his head landing on her arm.

“Mama,” he murmured around his thumb, rolling toward her.

Emilia closed her eyes and pulled her knees up until Rhett was curled up in the curve of her body. They looked so small in the middle of my bed that I felt my stomach lurch. I’d just found them and I’d already almost lost them again. If I hadn’t sent Otto home with her. If Otto hadn’t come inside when he did. *Jesus. I should’ve been there.*

I kicked off my boots and climbed in on the opposite side of Rhett, laying close to his back on my side, my arm folded under my head. Tears were silently leaking from under Emilia’s closed eyelids as she gently rubbed Rhett’s back. I’d

seen her happy and sad and angry and every emotion in between, but I don't think I'd ever seen this expression before. It was a mixture of devastation and relief—I was pretty sure that my own was a mirror of hers. When Rhett had fallen back asleep, without opening her eyes, Emilia reached out and set her hand on my side.

I'd been afraid to touch them and break the spell, but the moment she reached for me, I was scooting closer, wrapping my arm around them both. Rhett was tiny between us. His little butt pressed against my sternum as he flung one arm above his head and then settled again.

"I know I messed up," I whispered. "But I swear to God, I won't ever let anything happen to you again."

I was pretty sure neither of them heard me since they'd both passed out.

Hours later, I silently climbed out of bed and walked downstairs to find my phone. My dad answered on the first ring.

"How they doin'?"

"They're sleepin'," I said with a sigh, dropping my ass to the stairs.

"Good."

"You know why I'm callin'," I muttered, glancing behind me.

"Know you wanted to take care of it," my dad said cautiously. "But—"

"He attacked my family," I ground out. Arguing about whether or not I got the chance to fucking end that asshole was not something I was willing to do.

"I'm aware of that," Dad said grimly. "Idiot's already dead, though."

"Say what?"



“Yeah.” He was quiet for a few moments. “Started seizin’ on the way out of town. By the time we got to where we were goin’ fucker was already dead.”

“What the fuck?”

“Head wounds are un-fuckin’-predictable,” he mumbled. “Don’t tell your brother.”

“I won’t,” I sputtered in disbelief. Otto didn’t need to know he’d killed a man. He was too young to carry that weight.

“It’s over,” Dad said tiredly. “All taken care of.”

“I know I fucked up,” I told him, staring into the living room.

“Good,” he replied instantly. “Lucky for you it turned out okay.”

“Yeah.”

“Next time—”

“There won’t be a next time,” I said, cutting him off.

“There’s always a next time. Thankfully, you’re not a fuckin’ idiot, and you’ll learn from this.”

“I thought he was gone.” I ran my hand over my face. “Fuck, Dad. I thought he’d gotten the message.”

“Unfortunately for him, he was an idiot,” my dad grumbled. “Go take care of your family. I’m goin’ to bed.”

“Alright,” I said, talking to myself because he’d already hung up.

Light was beginning to filter in through the windows as the sun came up, and I knew I wasn’t going to be able to sleep. I just stared at the living room, picturing Emilia standing there frozen with Rhett in her arms. Parker holding her there at gunpoint. Fucking taunting her.

I got up quickly and strode into the room. Less than ten minutes later, the recliner was on the sidewalk out front with a

*free* sign on it. It was a nice chair—someone would pick it up.

I was moving the couch into a different spot when Emilia made her way silently down the stairs.

“What are you doing?” she asked quietly, her voice hoarse.

“Redecoratin’,” I replied, straightening. I rubbed at the back of my neck, a little embarrassed. Maybe it had been a stupid idea, but I’d thought that it might help if shit looked different when she came back downstairs.

“I like it,” she said with a small nod. “But now you’ll have to move the TV or you won’t be able to see it from the couch.”

“Shit,” I muttered, glancing at where the television was mounted to the wall.

“You didn’t have to do this.”

“I know,” I acknowledged, turning back to look at her.

“Did you sleep at all?” she asked gently.

“Nope.”

“Yeah.” She sighed, crossing her arms over her chest. “I kept waking up thinking I’d open my eyes and he’d be standing in your room.”

“He’s not gonna be back,” I assured her.

“You didn’t see him,” she argued. “He was so sure that I took that money.”

“He won’t be back, Emilia,” I repeated firmly, hoping she wouldn’t ask any questions. I wasn’t forbidden from telling her, no one had given that order, but the less she knew about her old boss, the better for her.

“Oh,” she breathed, understanding dawning on her face. “Okay, then.”

“You’re safe, sugar,” I said, taking a step forward. “I swear I won’t ever let somethin’—”

“Michael,” she said, lifting one hand to stop me. “I think me and Rhett should stay with your parents until I find a

place.”

“What?” She couldn’t have surprised me more if she’d slapped me.

“We tried, you know,” she murmured with a shrug. “But living together isn’t working. This isn’t working.”

“Sugar, I know I let you down,” I said, my heart starting to thump hard in my chest. “I fucked up. I know you can’t see past that now—”

“That’s not what this is,” she said, shaking her head. “Not at all.”

“Then why do you think you need to move?”

“I needed you at the club yesterday,” she replied, her eyes sad. “I was scared and embarrassed, and I needed you, and you bailed.”

“I already told you—”

“You bailed because you’re still angry at me,” she said, talking over me. “And I get it, okay? I do. But I can’t just live here, waiting for the day that you decide to forgive me for something I didn’t feel like I had any control over. I can’t live like that, half in and half out and walking on eggshells so you don’t get pissed and take off for a few hours... or for good. I thought I could, but I can’t.”

“I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

“You’re saying that because of what just happened,” she said, lifting her hands in supplication.

“I’m sayin’ it because it’s the damn truth.”

“Keep your voice down.”

“You want me to tell you I love you? I love you. There. Done. You’re not movin’ out.”

Emilia scoffed. “Yeah, that’s exactly what I was looking for.”

“I told you,” I said, stepping forward. “You leave and there’s nowhere on this earth I won’t find you.”

“You won’t have to look,” she sputtered. “We’ll be two miles away at your parents’ house.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Why are you making this so hard?” Her hands balled into fists.

“That’s what she said,” I replied, the words falling off my tongue with zero thought.

Emilia’s mouth gaped open incredulously.

“You set yourself up,” I pointed out dumbly.

“Glad to know you’re taking this seriously,” she snapped, turning on her heel. “I’m calling your mom to make sure the offer’s still open.”

“The hell you are,” I countered, following her.

“This will be better,” she said, climbing the stairs. “You’ll see.”

“You’re not movin’ out, Emilia,” I argued, two steps behind her.

“Watch me.”

The tether that I’d been holding on to by my fingertips over the last week snapped. There was no other explanation for it. I’d been holding myself back, keeping my distance, keeping my hands to myself in an effort to not make our situation messier than it already was—but I’d been kidding myself. There wasn’t any way to make things messier. We were already at peak fucking mess.

I caught her as she reached the landing, and she let out a yelp of surprise when I spun her to face me.

“You remember when you asked me if I’d ever get bored?” I asked, pulling her face to mine. “We were in the hammock.”

“I remember,” she replied in bewilderment, her hands coming up to grip my wrists.

“Never did.”

“What?”

“I never got bored. Never wanted anyone but you.”

She jerked in surprise. “You said you got laid plenty.”

“I lied.”

When I kissed her, I’d expected resistance. I’d braced for the moment when she’d pull away and deck me—but she didn’t. Instead, her hands left my wrists, and she cupped my face between her palms. Without a word, she calmed me, turning the kiss from frenzied to slow and deep.

“You don’t leave me,” I said against her mouth, pulling away just enough to meet her eyes. “I won’t leave you.”

“We have a lot to figure out,” she whispered back, running her thumbs along my cheeks. “We’re adults now. We have a child. We can’t just—”

“You love me?” I asked. I knew the answer.

“Yes,” she breathed, her eyes roaming my face. “Always. Since the moment I knew what it meant.”

“Ask me,” I ordered.

She inhaled sharply, her eyes locking on mine.

“Ask me,” I repeated.

“Do you love me?” she asked softly.

“Yes. More than yesterday,” I replied, just as soft. “Less than tomorrow.”

“I missed you,” she said, her voice breaking.

“Baby, you have no idea.” Wrapping my arm around her waist, I walked her backward toward the guest room. “Rhett’s gonna sleep for a while?”

“Yeah,” she breathed as the backs of her knees hit the bed.

I wanted to go slow, take my time, map every change in her body and commit it to memory—but that wasn't how it happened. Things were too raw between us, too new. We got tangled up as I tried to take off her shirt while she attacked my belt buckle. Her bra ended up twisted around one of her arms because I was too preoccupied with her nipples to take it off completely.

At one point, when my face was between her thighs and I was reveling in her whimpers and moans, I slapped at my side, feeling like something was crawling on me... it was just the fuzzy socks she never took off, brushing against me.

None of it mattered. The moment I slid inside her it was like the entire world shifted into focus. Everything became clear.

“Holy shit,” she groaned, tipping her head back so I could kiss her throat.

We didn't even make it fully onto the bed. I braced her, the bends of my elbows behind the backs of her knees, my thighs burning as I half crouched for the exact angle I needed. I nearly staggered as I came, way too soon, feeling it from my scalp to the tips of my toes.

“Jesus,” I mumbled, dropping my head to her shoulder. “I barely made it.”

Emilia giggled, running her fingertips up and down my spine. “Hey, I came. I'd say your timing was perfect.”

“Next time you'll come twice,” I promised, gently setting her legs down on the bed.

Emilia groaned. “I'm not quite as flexible as I used to be.”

“Did I hurt you?” I lifted my head to look at her.

“No way,” she murmured, running her fingers through my hair.

I kissed her and stood up, holding back my own groan as my legs protested. Emilia scooted backward on the bed and

curled onto her side to watch me put my boxers and jeans back on.

“So, we’re agreed, then,” I said as I reached for my shirt. “You’re not movin’ out.”

“Oh, is that what this was?” she joked.

“Emilia.”

“You want us to stay?” she asked softly. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” I confirmed, brushing her hair back from her face.

“I can’t change the past, Michael,” she said cautiously. “No matter how much I wish things would’ve been different.”

“I know that.”

“I never wanted to be away from you.”

“I know that, too.”

“Do you believe it, though?”

I stared at her, naked and rumpled on the bed, looking at me like I was the answer to everything.

“I believe it.”

“Mama?” Rhett called from the doorway, making me jump in surprise. “Mama, hi!”

“Hi, buddy,” Emilia said, sitting up with an embarrassed smile. “You’re awake!”

As she scrambled for her clothes, Rhett walked over and reached for me so I’d pick him up.

“How you doin’, bud?” I asked as he laid his head on my shoulder.

“Hungry,” he replied with a dramatic sigh.

I laughed. “Let’s give Mama a few minutes to get dressed, huh?”

“And clean up,” Emilia mumbled, glancing downward with a grimace.

“Take all the time you need,” I ordered, winking. “Use my shower.”

“Bossy,” she said, waving us out.

When Emilia came downstairs later, Rhett and I were just finishing up our cereal and were discussing motorcycles. Well, he was throwing in a random word here and there and I was trying to educate him on the sweet-ass Dyna I’d just finished reconstructing.

“Thank you,” she said to me, kissing my neck as she passed me. “I don’t remember the last time I took a shower that long.”

“I thought you were thanking me for *before* the shower,” I teased.

“Please,” she scoffed. “You should be thanking me for that.” She grinned at me over her shoulder.

“You’re not wrong.”

“Your mom called me,” she said, grabbing a cup of coffee from the counter. “She talked to your dad and wanted to come over, but I said we could stop by their house today instead. That okay? I wanted to check on Otto while we were there.”

“Fine with me.”

I helped Rhett get down from the table and watched as he toddled over to Emilia and wrapped his arms around her thigh. Without fanfare or thought, her hand fell to the top of his head and her fingers started sifting through his hair. I could tell it was a dance they’d done a million times before, easy and unconscious, and for some reason, it hit me really hard. I swayed for a second in my chair before straightening.

I’d almost lost them.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked quietly, her eyes meeting mine.



“Feelin’ lucky, I guess,” I replied hoarsely.

“Funny.” She smiled behind her coffee cup. “I was just feeling the same way.”

“I want more kids,” I blurted, making her eyes widen in surprise as she choked on her coffee.

“So do I,” she gasped, nodding. “But maybe not for a minute?” She glanced down at Rhett. “I’ve got my hands full.”

“We,” I corrected. “We’ve got our hands full.”

“Right.” The smile she shot me lit up the entire fucking room.

## CHAPTER 13

### EMILIA

I'D GOTTEN UP early, was wearing one of the new outfits Charlie had given me, actually put on makeup and done my hair, and was generally feeling pretty damn good about my first day of barista training with Michael's cousin. Honestly, I was feeling like hot shit. I couldn't help it. I'd spent half the night exploring Michael's body and the other half enjoying as he explored mine. I was exhausted, but it was absolutely worth it.

Things felt solid with Michael. I was starting a new job, and the day before Rhett had pooped on the toilet for the first time ever. There was a spring in my step as I headed out to my car, leaving Michael and Rhett asleep upstairs.

And then my car wouldn't freaking start.

"Michael," I called, jogging up the stairs. I jerked to a stop when he stepped out of the guest bedroom.

"Was watchin' you leave, but you didn't go anywhere," he said sleepily, scratching at his beard. "What's wrong?"

"I think my battery's dead," I replied, tossing him my keys. "Could you jump it?"

"Sure, baby." He kissed my head as he moved past me and jogged down the stairs.

Anxious and frustrated, I went to sit in with Rhett. We still hadn't put up the stupid baby gate, so one of us had to stay with him upstairs. I must've checked the time every thirty seconds, and each time I did, I got more frustrated. All I'd needed was for Michael to jump start the battery in my car. What the hell was taking him so long? I was going to be late.

Panic had begun to set in by the time Michael came back up the stairs.

“Is it running?” I asked, reaching for the keys.

“Nope,” he replied, striding toward his hoodie. “Looks like the starter went out.”

“Fuck,” I hissed. “Can I take your truck?”

“Can’t, sugar,” he reminded me as I pulled the hoodie on and simultaneously stepped into his boots. “Got the car seat in my truck, and I gotta take Michael to my mom’s on my way to work, remember? That’s why I’m not on my bike.”

“Oh, my god,” I whispered, looking around the room. “I’m going to get fired.”

“You’re not gonna get fired.”

“I am if I show up late!”

“You’re not gonna be late,” he assured me. “Go get in the truck. I’ll carry Rhett down, and we’ll drive you.”

“He’s going to be a monster if we wake him up this early,” I replied, grabbing his arm to stop him. “And your mom will have to deal with it all day.”

“They can deal,” he replied as my nose started to sting.

God, why did I think this was a good idea? If I screwed up at Charlie’s business, it wouldn’t just be a job I could leave. There would be repercussions throughout Michael’s family if I looked like a flake. Any mistakes I made would be fodder for the gossip queens.

“Em, go,” Michael ordered, lightly smacking my ass. “We’ll be right there.”

I grit my teeth and held Rhett’s hand while he whined for the entire ride to the coffee shop I was working at that day. He didn’t understand why we’d woken him up, he was seriously pissed that we’d put him in the car, and I had a feeling that when I tried to leave, he was going to lose his mind.

“Hey, it’s gonna be good,” Michael reassured me, his hand on my thigh tightening. “Stop stressin’.”

“It’s going to be a disaster,” I grumbled back. I was so nervous that every muscle in my body was tight, and when we met Charlie outside five minutes late, I felt like I was going to throw up.

“Emilia’s car shit the bed this morning,” Michael announced as he let me out of the truck.

“Likely story,” Charlie joked easily, glancing at me. “It’s fine, dude. You made it.”

“I’m so sorry I’m late.”

“Seriously,” she said, glancing at Michael and then back at me. “It’s not a big deal.”

“I tried to tell her,” Michael said as Rhett began to wail inside the truck. I turned to go to him when Michael stopped me. “Go, baby. I’ll settle him down.”

I felt like I was going to throw up as I nodded and followed Charlie into the little lit-up trailer. A few moments later, I heard Michael’s truck leave the lot.

“Rough morning, huh?” Charlie asked sympathetically.

“It was going good until my stupid car refused to start,” I replied with an embarrassed laugh.

“Happens to the best of us.” She shrugged. “Can’t plan for everything all the time. You ready to clock in?”

The next few hours would’ve been funny if they hadn’t been so horrific. Charlie had chosen the cart that had the least amount of customers in the morning when we’d be training, but it still felt like I didn’t have a single second to stop as car after car pulled up to the window. They wanted everything from drip black coffee to flavored energy drinks and while learning on the fly might’ve been how Charlie trained other new hires, it clearly didn’t seem to be working for me. I grabbed the wrong syrups, made a gigantic fucking mess that I never had time to clean up, messed up orders, dropped an

entire latte between the window and the car outside, and somehow took down the entire system that Charlie used to process credit card transactions. It was a complete shit show.

By the time I did something very concerning to the espresso machine, causing it to make a loud screeching noise, both Charlie and I were so frazzled that I was surprised she hadn't ordered me not to touch anything ever again.

"What the fuck?" Charlie yelled over the noise, staring at her machine in confusion. "What did you do?"

"I don't know," I yelled back, my eyes starting to water. "I did it exactly how you showed me."

When the espresso machine was unplugged from the wall and the screeching had finally stopped Charlie and I were sweaty, disheveled, and our ears were ringing.

Charlie reached for a switch on the wall, turning off the lights. "Looks like we're closed for the day," she said with what was either a laugh or a huff—I couldn't tell. "Can't run a cart without the espresso machine, or we'll cause a riot. I'll come back later to see if I can get old faithful working again."

"I am *so* sorry," I replied quietly.

Charlie shrugged and looked around at the mess. "I'll deal with this later. You want me to give you a ride to Heather's?"

"I can call Michael to pick me up."

"You sure?" She gestured for me to leave before her, then stopped to lock up once we were outside. "I don't mind driving you."

"Yeah," I replied, trying to sound nonchalant and not as desperate to disappear as I felt.

We stood outside in the wind while I called Michael.

"Hey, sugar," Michael answered, out of breath. "How's your first day?"

"I'm done for the day," I replied, sounding almost cheerful. "Can you come pick me up?"

“Done for the day?”

“Yep!”

There were a few seconds of silence when I knew he was debating whether or not to ask why I was done four hours before my shift was supposed to end, but God bless him, he decided against it. I wasn't sure how to answer while Charlie stood next to me, zipping up her coat.

“Be there in five,” he said finally. “I'm on the bike.”

“He's coming to get me,” I told Charlie with a smile, putting my phone away. “You don't have to wait.”

“I'm not leaving you out here alone,” she replied with a snort. “I can wait ten minutes.”

“You really don't have to.” I was so close to tears that the lump in my throat was hard to ignore.

“Not happening,” she said flatly, leaning over to bump my shoulder.

We stood there in the silence, shivering inside our jackets until Michael pulled into the lot on his motorcycle. I wasn't sure how or why he'd gone back home to get it after he'd dropped Rhett off, but I wasn't about to ask. I just wanted to get the hell out of there as quickly as humanly possible.

“Same time tomorrow?” Charlie asked with a smile and wave. She strode to her car and was inside it before Michael had turned off his motorcycle.

“What happened?” Michael asked as I hurried toward him.

“Just get me out of here,” I ordered desperately, trying clumsily to climb on the back.

“Wait, wait, wait.” He stopped me by grabbing my hips and pushed me backward a little so he could climb off. “You okay?”

“I'm fine,” I snapped back. I was losing the fight against my tears and brushed angrily at my face. “Can we just go, please?”

“You’re freezing,” he muttered as he took off his helmet. “Why the hell didn’t you wait inside?”

“She probably wanted to get me as far away from there as possible,” I mumbled under my breath.

“What?”

“I just want to go home.”

“Alright,” he replied with a sigh, still watching me closely. “Here, put this on.”

A few minutes later, he’d put his helmet on my head and helped me onto the bike, ordering me to hold tightly to his waist before pulling out of the parking lot. My stomach swooped with fear as we turned onto the road and I forced my body to move with his even though everything inside me urged me to lean in the opposite direction. Then, we were on the road, and for a few moments, it felt like we were flying.

As I grew more comfortable on the back of the motorcycle, reality started to seep in. No matter how hard I’d tried, I’d failed miserably at something that should’ve been relatively easy. Take an order, make a drink, accept payment and deliver the drink. Simple. I’d served plenty of bar food and drinks just fine, so why on earth had the day making coffee been so hard? Charlie had been there to help me and I’d still been a complete disaster. I didn’t understand it, and I felt like a complete moron.

“How did you leave the truck here?” I asked when we parked in front of Heather and Tommy’s house.

“Figured you might need it before I was done today,” Michael replied with a shrug, helping me dismount. “So, I parked the truck here and rode to the house in the tow truck with my dad.”

“Tow truck?”

“Gotta figure out what’s wrong with the Subaru,” Michael replied easily, taking the helmet off of me. “We brought it to the garage.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” I argued. Things were beginning to feel very out of my control and I hated it. I understood that he’d been trying to do something nice, but he hadn’t even asked me.

“We need both vehicles,” he reminded me. He was so matter-of-fact that I got even more annoyed.

I *knew* that I needed my car. Michael worked far more hours than I would be and sometimes he’d need his truck. It wasn’t as if he had to inform me of that fact.

“Tell me how much it’s going to cost,” I said flatly, starting toward the house. “I’ll cover it somehow.”

“Whoa,” Michael barked, grabbing my arm. “What the hell is going on?”

“You didn’t even ask me if you could take my car!”

“Are you serious?”

“It’s *my* car,” I ground out.

“And it was stuck in the fuckin’ driveway,” he shot back at me, looking at me like I’d grown an extra head. “You just wanna leave it there like a lawn ornament?”

“Maybe I just wanted a say on what to do next!”

“Fine.” He threw up his hands. “What do you want me to do with the hunk of metal sitting in the forecourt at the garage?”

“I don’t know!” I yelled back.

“While I’d normally love to watch this play out,” Heather said dryly from the front porch. “Your son’s asleep on the couch and you’re being pretty goddamn loud.”

“Sorry,” I replied, deflating. I just wanted the day to be over. I wanted it to be bedtime, so I could tuck Rhett into bed and sit in the quiet for a few minutes and figure out what the hell I was going to do.



“You’re home early,” Heather said as I walked toward her. “Everything okay?”

“Well, considering the fact that I’ll probably have to pay for the espresso machine that I trashed and my car won’t start, I’d say it’s been a less than okay day.” I passed her and walked into the house, ignoring Michael when he asked what the hell I’d done to the espresso machine.

Rhett was asleep with his head on a throw pillow and his feet up on the arm of the couch. I sat down near his head with a sigh, throwing my arm over my face.

“Sounds like it’s been a stressful day,” Heather said quietly as she smoothed her hand over my hair. She walked across the room and sat in a chair. “First days are the worst.”

“It wasn’t the usual first day,” I groaned, leaving my arm over my eyes. “It was a complete nightmare.”

“You’re new,” Michael replied, leaning on the back of the couch. “Once you get the hang of things—”

“Please,” I said, putting up my hand. “Just stop, okay?”

It was quiet for a few moments, and I knew I’d hurt his feelings, but I didn’t try to fix it. I just wanted to be left alone for a minute.

“I’m gonna head back to the garage,” he said finally, leaning down to kiss my head. “I’ll see you after work.”

“Okay.”

“Love you,” he said quietly. I listened to his footsteps and then the door opening and closing.

“What’s the real problem?” Heather asked after he was gone. “A bad day hasn’t ever made you shit on Michael.”

“I wasn’t shitting on him,” I argued, dropping my arm.

“Well what would you call it?” she asked, raising her eyebrow.

“I just needed a second.”

“Well, now you’ve got one.” She shrugged. “He left.”

“He had to go back to work.”

“Honey, I love you.” She paused. “But quit yanking him in and then pushing him away.”

“I’m not trying to do that.”

“You want to be with my son, that’s clear as day,” she said, standing up. “Let him be with you, too, yeah?”

I threw my arm back over my face as she left the room and let the tears slide down the sides of my face. What a godawful day. I hadn’t meant to start a fight with Michael, and now, sitting in the quiet, I was grateful that he’d seen a problem and went out of his way to start fixing it. If I was honest, it was something I’d always loved about him. If he saw that I needed something, he went out of his way to get it without me having to ask. If I was struggling with something, he tried to fix it. He’d always been that way, even when we were kids.

Everything just felt out of control. Once me and Michael had decided to make a go of things, all in, forever, I’d been in a cloud of happiness. Everything had seemed possible. But all too soon, reality seemed to be seeping into our little bubble, and I had no idea how to navigate it. I thought about my day at work and sniffled.

What the fuck was I going to do?

A few hours after I’d left Heather with a hug and a promise to stop being an ass to Michael, Rhett and I were home making dinner when I heard Michael’s Harley in the driveway. I stayed by the counter, mixing up the meatloaf while Rhett ran to the door to the garage and stared at it.

“Careful,” I called out as Michael opened it and Rhett ran toward him.

“Whoa!” Michael said, laughing. “Were you waitin’ on me?”

“Daddy work,” Rhett replied as Michael picked him up.

“Yep. Daddy was at work. I’m home now, though!” His eyes met mine across the room.

“Sorry for my meltdown earlier,” I said quickly. “I was an ass.”

“You were stressed,” Michael countered, coming forward to kiss me. “Didn’t mean to step on your toes.”

“What you did was nice—”

“Well, *I* thought so,” he joked, setting Rhett on his feet.

“I’m not used to this,” I replied quietly. “I’ve never just left Rhett screaming so someone else could comfort him. I drive myself where I need to go. I take care of my own car.”

“We’re a team, sugar,” Michael reminded me.

“I know, I just—” I shook my head. “It’s too much all at once.”

“I mean... I can be less helpful?”

“I just need to wrap my head around it,” I mumbled, turning back toward the stove.

“Tomorrow will be better,” Michael murmured, wrapping his arm around my waist.

The knot in my stomach that I’d been trying to ignore felt like it multiplied in size at his words. I didn’t even want to think of tomorrow. Imagining going back to work at that cart, facing Charlie after I’d messed up so bad, and potentially breaking something else made me want to cry.

“Daddy play,” Rhett ordered, pulling on Michael’s pant leg. “Me play.”

“Oh, you want to play, huh?” Michael replied, letting go of me so he could scoop up our son. “What do you want to play?”

“Dinner’ll be ready in ten,” I said to their backs as they walked toward the living room.

“Thanks, baby,” Michael said, tickling Rhett as he pretended to throw him on the couch.

We ate dinner as a family and spent a little time outside in the grass and for a while, I could pretend that my anxiety wasn't through the roof. I laughed and teased and snuggled Rhett, but the whole time there was this thrum of unease just below the surface. The later it got, the closer I was to work the next morning the worse my anxiety became. By the time I'd gotten Rhett to sleep, I was nearly in a panic.

I could not go back there the next day. I couldn't force Charlie to keep me on because of some family obligation when I was so incredibly bad at the job. Those thoughts, of course, brought me to the fact that my car was a big lump of unusable metal and I had no money to get it fixed, which meant I *had* to keep the barista job. It was a vicious cycle that eventually had me throwing up what little I'd been able to choke down at dinner.

Michael watched me like he couldn't figure me out, and I finally went up to shower just so I'd have a second away from his scrutiny. Before I could lose my nerve, I text Charlie that I wasn't feeling well and I wouldn't be able to work the next day. I knew it was a coward's move, but it instantly made me feel a little better.

The relief only lasted until the end of my shower, though, and then I was in another thought spiral about what the hell I was going to do. Before I'd considered the repercussions or really thought it through, I had scissors in my hand, and I was cutting.

Michael found me not ten minutes later, staring in the mirror at my new massively shorter lopsided bob and curtain bangs, his mouth dropping open in surprised horror.

“What the fuck did you do?” he asked in disbelief, his eyes wide.

“It'll grow,” I replied dully, running my fingers through the shorter strands. Just like after the cowardly text message, I was

feeling a bit of relief, but I knew it wouldn't last.

“Sugar, it looks like you caught your head in a fan.”

“It's not that bad.”

“You've got long pieces in the back,” he pointed out, his gaze roaming over my hair. “It's all jagged.”

“Maybe I'll start a new trend.” I set the scissors on the bathroom counter.

“What is goin' on with you?” he asked, leaning against the doorframe and crossing his arms. “You're freakin' out.”

“It was miserable there today,” I confessed through gritted teeth. “*Miserable.*”

“It was your first day—”

“I broke shit,” I said, talking over him. “I messed up orders. Spilled more liquids than you want to know. I broke the entire credit card thing. I made the espresso machine start *screaming.*”

Michael's lips twitched.

“It wasn't funny,” I snapped, my eyes starting to water. “It was awful!”

“It'll get better.”

“I don't want to go back there,” I whispered, turning back toward the sink.

“So don't.”

“I can't just quit,” I argued.

“Why the hell not?” he asked, straightening. “It isn't your thing. You can find something else.”

“I can't just bail on your cousin,” I argued. “I'd look like an asshole.”

“Number one, who cares?” He put up one finger. “And number two, stayin' at a job you hate is just stupid.”

“I need the money.”

“No you don’t,” he replied with a sigh. “I’ve got us covered until you find somethin’ else.”

“I don’t want you paying for everything. That’s weird.”

“You know who worked when I was a kid?”

“Both your parents?”

“Sometimes,” Michael replied with a nod. “And sometimes it was just my dad. When my mom had a new baby or it just made sense for her to stay home for a while—she did. You think that’s weird?”

“No, it’s not weird.”

“Then why the hell do you think it’s weird for us to do it?”

“Because I just got here,” I blurted out. “Your parents were married and settled and—”

“We can get married.”

“Shut up,” I groaned.

“Thought you’d want a whole proposal,” Michael said with a shrug. “Wanted to save up and get you a nice ring and shit—but if that’s your hang up, I’ll marry you tomorrow. You might want to get your hair fixed first, though, if you want pictures.”

“Could you just be serious for once?” I snapped in frustration.

“I am bein’ serious,” he countered so calmly that it irritated me even more. “I’m in it to win it, sugar. As far as I’m concerned we don’t need a paper to make it official, but if it’ll get you out of your head and help you relax for half a second then let’s get married.”

I started to cry before he’d even finished speaking. I didn’t know what the hell was wrong with me. Of course I wanted to marry Michael eventually, but he was right—I did want the big proposal. I wanted to do it right when we were ready and excited about it. I didn’t want to get married so that I felt more settled and secure.

Getting married wouldn't erase this feeling that I was an albatross around his neck, something I swore to myself a long time ago I would never be.

"Man," he said, lifting me off my feet. "I really wish you'd tell me what I'm sayin' wrong here."

"I have to carry my own weight," I said ironically, laying my head on his shoulder as he brought me downstairs. "I need to be a productive member around here."

"You're takin' care of Rhett," he argued, sitting down on the couch. "That's pretty fuckin' productive."

"You'll resent it," I muttered, closing my eyes. "No one wants a mooch who just expects the other person to pay for everything."

Michael froze, but I didn't realize it at first. After a few moments, though, I noticed that his hand was stationary on my back and his heart was thundering beneath my ear.

"That sounds like your parents talkin'," he said, his voice rough with anger. "That what they told you? That I'd resent you if you came back with Rhett, and I had to support the two of you?"

I didn't reply because it was so close to the truth. I loved my parents, and for most of my life, I'd trusted them, but they'd never let me forget that I had a responsibility to pull my weight within our household. When I was a kid, it was to get good grades, follow the rules, do all the chores. Any time I didn't meet their expectations, the punishment was swift and awful. I didn't clean the dishes, well then I could eat off the counter the next day. With my fingers. The bathroom wasn't clean? Then I wasn't allowed to shower. A bad grade? I couldn't do anything except study after school until bedtime.

It was their house, and I didn't contribute financially so I had to contribute in other ways and if I didn't, then I didn't get to enjoy the things they so selflessly provided. After I was grown and had Rhett, those conversations had become even more direct. They were supporting me, putting a house over

my head and Rhett's, and any time I hadn't met their expectations, I was reminded that they paid the bills. They could no longer force me to eat with my hands or wait to shower, but they used other ways to get their point across.

*Oh, I thought being with Michael would be so much better? How would he feel when I brought Rhett to him, two extra people to support and me with no marketable skills? Was I just going to mooch off of him like I mooched off of them? How long did I think that would last before he'd had enough? Did I really think that he'd just let me sit on my ass all day while he worked, like they did? What, what I going to put Rhett in daycare so I could get some menial job that barely paid for groceries, much less child care? How would Michael feel about that situation?*

The memories slapped me, one after the other, making the knot in my stomach wind tighter.

Michael's head snapped up when someone started knocking on the front door.

"Who's that?" I asked, climbing from his lap.

"Don't have x-ray vision," he muttered, striding toward the door.

When he swung it open, and I saw Charlie standing there, I nearly groaned in mortification.

"Hey," she said brusquely, striding inside, she looked at me. "Nice hair. Not feeling good?"

"What?" Michael asked in confusion.

"I've just had a headache all night," I said, trying to be vague enough that she'd believe me. I pulled at the unfortunate haircut.

"You just didn't want to come back tomorrow after the shitshow today," she corrected, moving into the living room. She threw herself into a chair. "I don't blame you."

"I'm so sorry—"



“Stop apologizing,” she said, waving me off as Michael and I sat back down. “Nobody gets it right on their first day.”

“Told you,” Michael mumbled.

“I’m really not feeling great,” I replied, reaching up to rub my forehead for effect.

Charlie watched me closely. “I hope you don’t think I was mad at you today,” she said after a few moments. “I wasn’t.”

“I killed your espresso machine—”

“That’s what I get for buying it secondhand,” she argued ruefully. “You didn’t kill it. The thing was on its last leg already I was just too cheap to replace it.”

“And now you have to.” I grimaced.

“What part of you isn’t understanding that it’s not your fault?” she asked curiously.

“Even you called it a shitshow.”

“Well, yeah, it was,” she said, leaning forward in her chair. “Your car wouldn’t start so you were a few minutes late, you had to leave your kid while he was crying, and then we had to cut the day short so you didn’t even get your full eight hours.” She stared at me. “And then it looks like you got into a fight with a lawnmower. Sounds like a shitshow to me.”

“I broke your card thing.”

Charlie scoffed. “It goes down at least twice a week. You didn’t break it.”

“I spilled shit everywhere!”

“You should’ve seen how much Kara spilled the first week she was working in our old shop,” she countered. “She slipped in it and nearly took out the entire shelf of syrups. At least you didn’t do that.”

“Because I was frozen in terror.”

Charlie’s bark of laughter startled me, but I couldn’t help the smile that pulled at my lips.

“Listen,” she said, still smiling. “I didn’t want you to think I was mad at you or anything. You worked your ass off even if you didn’t get everything right. In my book, that goes a lot further than slinging drinks like you’re Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*.”

My cheeks burned with embarrassment, and I had no idea what she was talking about, but Michael murmured, “Nice reference,” under his breath.

“Take tomorrow off,” she said as she got to her feet. “Take the day to have Farrah or Aunt Callie fix your hair and to decide if you want to come back. I’d love to have you, especially considering how worried you were about being five minutes late this morning—most people don’t give a shit—but I don’t want you to come back and be miserable.”

“Thanks Charlie,” I said as I followed her to the door.

“Of course, dude.” She made it two steps outside before spinning back around. “Uh, I wasn’t sure if you noticed—” She grimaced and then laughed lightly. “But that shirt you were wearing today?”

“The one you gave me?”

“Yeah, it’s got some writing on the back.”

“It does?”

“You don’t seem the type to wear it to work.” She paused. “Or anywhere near an elementary school.”

My eyes widened in horror.

“Okay, bye!” She jogged down the steps, waving over her shoulder.

“Michael,” I called as I shut the door. “Did you notice anything about the shirt I was wearing today?”

“No?”

I hurried up the stairs to the bathroom and pulled the shirt out of the laundry hamper, flipping it right side out to read the back.

*Young enough to steal your boyfriend, old enough to fuck your dad.*

“Oh my god,” I breathed in embarrassment as Michael came up behind me and started laughing.

“I wore this to work,” I whispered, horrified. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You had a coat on,” he said defensively as I tossed it in the garbage.

“I’m going to bed,” I announced, pushing past him. “To *sleep*.”

“We weren’t done talking,” he argued, catching me around my waist.

I deflated against him, the headache I’d pretended to have suddenly becoming real. “Can we talk tomorrow?”

He sighed and kissed my temple. “Sure. I’m gonna turn off the lights and then I’ll be right behind you.”

“Thanks,” I said, squeezing his arm before pulling away.

“Emilia,” he called softly as I reached the bedroom doorway. “We are gonna talk tomorrow, sugar.”

It sounded less like a promise than a threat.

## CHAPTER 14

### MICHAEL

I CLIMBED OUT of bed that morning, knowing there was no way that I was going to work. After the conversation we'd had and the way Emilia had clammed up right before Charlie had come knocking, I knew that if I left all day by the time I got home that night, she'd be all balled up again. I never wanted to sit through another dinner where she picked at her food and put up a very transparent front trying to act like everything was okay.

The car shit had thrown her, and the bad first day at work had exacerbated it—but there was something else going on that I wasn't quite seeing. She was so fanatical about paying her own way and doing things herself, it almost seemed like a compulsion. Logically she knew that I could fix up the Subaru no problem with minimal costs, but she was still panicking about paying for it. She hated the job at the coffee cart after one day, even I could see it, but she didn't speak up and tell Charlie that it wasn't going to work out—even though Charlie had given her the perfect opening.

I needed to figure out whatever the hell was going on in her head, because if we didn't, eventually it was going to become too much, and I had to know how to mitigate the fallout.

Sighing, I started a pot of coffee and leaned against the counter. I'd thought after we decided to be back together that everything would settle into something easy, but that just wasn't happening. Little things that I hadn't paid much attention to had practically lit up like neon signs as I'd lay in bed trying to sleep. The way she'd taken so long to come home after her parents died because she'd wanted to save up money, instead of running back as fast as she could like it was

clear she'd wanted to. She'd given in about letting me pay the rent but had stocked my kitchen with hundreds of dollars in groceries and hadn't let me pay her back. How little clothes she had, even though Rhett was fully kitted out. The way she'd made such a stink about me buying her new tires or getting her car detailed. How she'd assured me over and over that she'd find a job and pay her own way, even though I'd assured and reassured her that I wasn't worried about it.

As I stared at the coffee dripping into the carafe, my gut burned. She was so fixated on paying her way, of not being a *mooch*, as she'd put it, that she was tying herself up in knots. I was pretty sure she'd wound herself up so bad that she'd puked the night before. She'd tried to play off her run from the room, but I'd seen that shade of green before.

Then she'd hacked off her hair, just like she used to when we were kids and she'd had a particularly bad night at home.

I was sitting at the table drinking my second cup of coffee when Emilia stumbled into the kitchen in my t-shirt. Her short hair stuck up in every direction, and it flew around her face as she squeaked and jerked to a stop.

"I thought you went to work," she sputtered, crossing her arms over her chest and then trying to smooth her hair, going back and forth between the two like she couldn't decide if she should hide her braless tits or the mad scientist thing on her head.

"Took the day off," I replied, watching her in amusement. "Coffee's hot if you want some."

"That's actually why I came down." She gave me a tight smile as she tried to walk past me like she didn't have a care in the world, tugging on the t-shirt.

"Rhett still sleepin'?" I turned to watch her.

"Yeah. I thought I'd enjoy a cup of coffee on the stairs." She glanced at me over her shoulder. "A few minutes of peace and quiet but still able to stop him if he wakes up and tries to come down on his own."

“Smart,” I replied, getting to my feet. “I’ll join you.”

I settled on the stairs to wait for her, wondering how I was going to bring up the day before. I hated to rock the boat because she seemed calmer than she had been, but I couldn’t let that shit fester.

“Why’d you take the day off?” she asked as she sat beside me, pulling her knees up under the t-shirt until only her toes were poking out of the bottom.

“We need to finish our conversation,” I replied, leaning against the banister.

“It could’ve waited until you got home.”

“And have you spinnin’ out all day?” I huffed.

“You heard Charlie,” she replied, taking a sip of her coffee. “It wasn’t as bad as it seemed. I’ll go back tomorrow, and it’ll be a little better, and the day after that will be even better—”

“You fuckin’ hate it,” I realized, watching the emotions cross her face.

“You don’t have to like your job to do it,” she countered. “It’s a paycheck. It’ll work until I find something else.”

“Why?” I asked in confusion.

“Because.”

“Sugar, I told you I make enough to cover us.”

“You shouldn’t have to cover us by yourself,” she replied stubbornly.

“I want to.”

Emilia’s mouth snapped shut. “So, I’m the little housewife,” she said slowly. “Barefoot and pregnant?”

“Jesus.” I laughed. “I hope not. Wear some shoes.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I,” I replied firmly. “Look, Em. I’m not sure why you think you gotta work a job that you hate just to bring some

extra cash in—”

“I don’t know why you think I wouldn’t.”

I took a deep breath, knowing that I was stumbling through a minefield. Somehow she’d gotten it into her head that she had to be hustling to bring some money in, but I didn’t think it had anything to do with her feeling of self-worth or a genuine interest in working. It was darker than that somehow.

“Put it this way,” I said gently. “Why would you be goin’ in to a job you hate instead of spendin’ that time with Rhett before he’s off to school.”

“That’s a low blow.” Her spine snapped straight. “Lots of moms work. That doesn’t mean they don’t want to spend time with their kids. No one would ever say that about a *dad*.”

I closed my eyes in frustration. The conversation wasn’t going the way I wanted it to, and I wasn’t sure how to salvage it.

“I know that,” I ground out. “I wasn’t sayin’ that. If you loved your job, got some fulfillment from it, or hell—even if you didn’t but you needed to work to pay the bills—I’d get it. Alright? Then it would make sense to work—but sugar, none of that applies.”

“I can’t just sit around on my ass all day.”

I looked at her in disbelief. “Is that what you call chasin’ Rhett around all day, picking up after him, wiping his ass, feeding him twelve times, and then cleaning him up after? Because I gotta tell you, I got him ready to head to my mom’s yesterday, and I was fuckin’ exhausted before I ever got to work.”

“I don’t even know why we’re having this conversation,” she said, beginning to stand. “I need to work.”

“Sit down,” I ordered, my patience fraying.

“This isn’t open for discussion,” she said, her ass hitting the stair again. “I have to work.”

“Jesus,” I murmured, staring at the mutinous set of her mouth and the way her body practically thrummed with tension. “What the fuck did they do to you?”

“What do you mean?” The words were indifferent. Condescending, even. I ignored them.

“Why would you twist yourself in knots to work a job that you hate when you don’t need to?” I asked gently. “What did they say to you to make you think that you had to do that?”

“Making me pull my own weight isn’t some horrible thing.”

“Jesus Christ, Emilia,” I spat. “You already pull your own weight and half of mine.”

She scoffed and shook her head.

“You’re takin’ care of our son.”

She didn’t respond.

“You’re takin’ care of the house—it hasn’t been this clean since I fuckin’ moved in. Doin’ the grocery shoppin’ so I don’t have to—”

“I live here, too,” she said, cutting me off. “Of course I clean up after myself.”

“Let’s be real here,” I replied. “You clean up after all three of us. You do three times the shit I do around here. How’s that not pulling your weight?”

“Like I said,” she muttered stubbornly. “I don’t know why we’re having this conversation. I have a job, and I’m going to go back tomorrow.”

“No. You’re not.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ll call my fuckin’ cousin and ask her to fire you.”

“She’ll never listen to you.”

“Wanna bet?”



“Why are you doing this?” she barked, getting to her feet. “Why is this such a big deal?”

“You tell me,” I replied, standing. “What the fuck is goin’ on in that head that’s convincin’ you to go back to a job that makes you throw up and hack off your hair?”

“I’m going to pull my own weight—”

“There’s that phrase again,” I rasped darkly. “Where’d you hear it?”

“It’s a common phrase.”

“You keep usin’ it.”

“Maybe because I’ve heard it a few million times,” she shot back in frustration. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she paled.

“You haven’t heard it from me,” I said softly. “You wouldn’t ever hear it from me.”

She crossed her arms over her chest again, looking at her feet.

“You don’t gotta do anythin’ but be here, sugar,” I continued, watching her struggle, hoping she’d fucking believe me. “Me and you aren’t keepin’ score. You can do whatever you fuckin’ want, sleep all day, spend the entire day at the park with Rhett watchin’ the ducks, train to be a fuckin’ clown for all I care. I don’t need you tryin’ to meet some ideal of your share of the load—I just need you to be here with me. That’s it.”

“No one wants an albatross around their neck,” she whispered, raising her head.

“I do,” I countered. “Baby, I’d carry both our weight every day and twice on Sundays. No joke.”

“But for how long though?” she asked with a sad smile.

“Forever. I already told you that.” I waited a few seconds for my words to sink in, then reached out and pulled on a

strand of her crazy hair. “But not if you’re keepin’ this haircut. A man can only take so much.”

“Shut up,” she said, shoving at my chest. “You’re not funny.”

“Who’s jokin’?”

I was about to pull her against me, hoping I’d gotten through to her, when a little voice at the top of the stairs made my heart drop into my stomach.

“Daddy!” Rhett called happily. Half a second later, he was stepping off the top stair like he knew exactly what to do and I was lurching forward, trying to stop him.

Emilia got there first. Just as Rhett missed the first stair and started to tumble, Emilia hit her knees a few stairs down and caught him before he made contact. He screeched in surprise as I came up behind her and helped to turn Rhett right side up.

“No, Rhett,” Emilia said, her voice stern before they both burst into tears. “No stairs!”

I dropped onto my ass and pulled them both onto my lap as I tried to catch my breath.

“Don’t pull your weight, my ass,” I mumbled, my heart still racing. “Jesus. We’re goin’ to get a gate right the fuck now.”

“After I get dressed,” Emilia said, sniffing as she kissed Rhett’s hair. “I’m not leaving the house in this... and I think I peed my pants a little.”

“Better than me,” I joked with a shudder. “Pretty sure I shit mine.”

Emilia started giggling, and I smiled. “Come on, Rhett,” I said, gently pulling him away from his mother. “Let’s get you dressed while Mama gets ready.”

It took nearly as long to change Rhett—he *had* shit his pants—and get him dressed as it did for Emilia to get ready.

I'd just barely gotten his little shoes on when she came swinging into the room, her eyes wide.

"What's up?" I asked, rising to my feet.

"We have to stop by your grandparents' house," she said, pulling at her hair. "I can't go in public like this."

"It's not so bad," I lied.

"I look like a complete weirdo."

"I like weirdos."

"I'm calling Callie."

"Alright." I looked at Rhett. "You wanna go see Great-Gram?"

"Great-Gram," he agreed, raising his arms so I'd pick him up.

Half an hour later, Rhett and I were watching cartoons in my grandparents' living room while Gram moved around Emilia in the kitchen, clucking and humming as she tried to figure out how to salvage her hair.

"What in the world did you do, honey?" she asked in genuine confusion.

I laughed silently.

"Stressful day," Emilia replied vaguely.

"I've had plenty of those," Gram said with a scoff. "But I've never cut my hair with a pair of nail clippers."

"I had scissors."

"If you say so."

"Can you fix it?" Emilia said nervously. "I can't leave it like this."

"Well," Gram said, drawing the word out. "I can, yes. But don't you want to go to someone that's up on all the new cuts? I haven't worked in damn near forever."

“I do *not* want someone else seeing it like this,” Emilia murmured.

“Are you sure?” Gram prodded. “If I try and keep the length, you’re going to look like Dorothy Hamill.”

“I don’t know who that is,” Emilia replied.

“Figure skater?”

There was no response.

“Aw, hell. I can cut it into a cute pixie, but I think...”

“What are you doing?” Emilia asked suspiciously as I leaned my head back on the couch to try and see into the kitchen.

“I’m calling in reinforcements,” Gram said grimly.

I couldn’t help the burst of laughter that exploded from my mouth.

“You be quiet in there,” Gram ordered, peeking around the wall.

“Sorry, Grams,” I called back.

Ten minutes later, my great-aunt Farrah came sashaying into the house.

“Where’s the patient?” she asked importantly, not even pausing when I pointed toward the kitchen.

I waited.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Aunt Farrah practically shouted right on cue. “What did you do?”

I tried to listen to what Emilia said back, but someone else was coming through the door.

“Hello, baby boy,” my mom greeted.

“Hey Ma.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, dumbass,” she replied easily. “Rhett! How’s my grandson?”

“Myla!” Rhett scrambled off my lap and rushed to my sister.

“Oh how the tables have turned,” I joked as my mom scowled. “Ready to say hello to your *first* baby boy now?”

“Pfft,” she replied, waving me off. She quickly bent down to kiss my head before moving toward the kitchen, Myla and Rhett following behind her. After that, the door didn’t stay closed for more than a few minutes at a time. My aunts and cousins came inside, practically ignored me, and eventually made their way into the kitchen. I wasn’t even sure how they were all fitting in there.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked as I followed the last batch.

“No boys allowed,” my cousin Rebel announced. “Except Rhett. He can stay.”

“That’s not fair,” I pointed out.

“I don’t make the rules,” she countered firmly.

“Who makes ’em?”

She pointed at Charlie who was smiling at me in satisfaction.

“You’re a menace.”

“You have a dick. Skedaddle.”

I looked through the group and found Emilia who was still sitting in the middle of the room on a kitchen chair, a towel draped around her shoulders.

“You good?” I asked. I couldn’t even walk toward her because there were women everywhere.

“She’s fine,” Kara called from behind her.

“I’m good,” Emilia said, rolling her eyes. “As long as no one takes any photos.”

“Too late,” Aunt Farrah cackled, grinning at Emilia.

“We love you,” my aunt Rose said, poking me in the belly. “But seriously, get out.”

I stood there for a second, unsure what my next move should be. While I knew Emilia was safe, obviously, I didn’t feel right about leaving her with the female piranhas I called family. It wasn’t as if she’d ask me to stay, even if she wanted to. She’d be too embarrassed by that.

“What, you think she’s gonna spill your secrets?” Charlie called. “We already know about your escapades on the property. Against a car? Really? Didn’t think you had it in you.”

My face burned like hellfire as I looked back at Emilia. She shrugged, her own cheeks beet red.

“Why don’t you go get that gate, baby?” she asked desperately, her eyes widening.

I pushed through the throng until I reached her, leaning down to give her a kiss.

“We’re gonna talk about this later,” I warned.

“I got a little chatty when you left me at the club,” she confessed.

“Great.”

“Why don’t you leave Rhett here?” she said, obviously trying to change the subject. “He’ll be fine with all these babysitters. Escape while you can.”

I huffed. “I love you, but you’re a pain in the ass.”

“Back atcha,” she murmured, her lips curving into a smile.

“Tell Charlie you quit.”

“Zip it,” she hissed.

“You tell her, or I will.”

I left the house with my guts in a knot that I tried to ignore. Emilia was fine, and I knew that, but I still hated to leave her. I wasn’t sure that I’d gotten through to her that morning, and I

honestly wasn't sure I ever would. Christ, I hated her parents. I didn't care that they were dead. I wished I could tell them what pieces of shit they were.

How the hell could she get past years of conditioning that she never did enough? How could I convince her that she didn't have to work her ass off just for the right to exist in her own fucking space?

## CHAPTER 15

### EMILIA

“OKAY, so I used to think it was cute how you were always changing it,” Heather said to me, running her fingers through the back of my hair. “But it’s feeling less cute now.”

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “It’s bad.”

“Why the heck did you do it?” she asked, coming around to face me. “It doesn’t even look like you were trying to keep it even.”

“I was stressed out,” I mumbled, looking at the floor.

“Stressed out?” Heather asked in surprise. “Hell, when I’m stressed I just jump Tommy.”

“Ew, Mom!” Myla cried from the floor near the fridge. “Gross!”

“It always helps,” Heather continued, ignoring her daughter. “Always.”

“That’s my son, you know,” Callie said dryly from her seat at the table.

“We have five kids, Ma,” Heather returned brightly. “I know you don’t think we’re celibate.”

“I’d rather not hear about it,” Callie pointed out.

“It’s just something I do,” I said, cutting in so I didn’t have to hear anything else about Michael’s parents’ sex life. “I don’t know why.”

“Well, you’ll have to find some other way to cope,” Farrah announced as she rummaged through her bag. “Because if you wanna cut it after I’m finished, it’ll have to be a buzz cut.”



“You’re cutting it that short?” I asked, whipping my head in her direction.

“It’ll be a pixie, hon,” she replied distractedly. “I won’t make it super short, but you’re not gonna have a lot to work with when I’m done. Don’t have a choice. You’ve got some really short pieces in the back.”

“She’ll make it cute, don’t worry,” Michael’s cousin Cecilia assured me. “She’s always done my hair.”

“That’s because you’re too cheap to pay someone,” Farrah joked. “If you fuck it up again, Emmy, you’re gonna have to have Ceecee fix it. She’s a barber. Got it?”

“Got it,” I said faintly. It was stupid how nervous I was about cutting my hair even shorter. I’d done it to myself, looking for that rush that had always blocked out whatever punishment my parents had decided was good for me. I’d just never expected such bad results because I’d never done such a hack job before.

“You’re gonna need a nose ring after this,” Heather said, hopping up onto the counter. “It’ll go with your whole look.”

“Pass,” I murmured as I felt Farrah’s fingers sift through my hair.

“Oh, come on,” Michael’s aunt Rose whined. “Live it up a little.”

“You don’t have any piercings,” I pointed out.

“Not where you can see them,” Lily muttered, making the entire group howl with laughter.

“Most of us have had one piercing or another,” Charlie said with a smile. “I’m not saying you have to in order to fit in, but—”

“Don’t listen to her,” Michael’s aunt Molly ordered, rolling her eyes. “The only thing I’ve pierced is my ears.”

“I almost got you to pierce your eyebrow,” Heather pointed out.

“I was plastered,” Molly shot back. “You’re lucky Will stopped me, or I would’ve killed you.”

“Blah blah.” Heather waved her off. “I wanna know why the hell Emmy Lou’s so stressed. What’s going on, kid? You’ve got Michael back—and all of us who come with him—and Rhett. You’re good honey, finally.”

“I don’t know,” I replied evasively. “It’s just a lot happening all at once.”

“I can understand that,” Molly murmured. “Been there.”

“All of us have,” Callie said with a nod.

“Okay.” Heather watched me closely. “But what’s the real issue here?”

I sat there with nowhere to run, still as stone while Farrah cut at my hair, and all eyes in the kitchen on me.

“I didn’t come up here to mooch off of Michael,” I replied finally. “And it seems like that’s all I’ve been doing.”

“Not *all* you’ve been doing,” Charlie said with a laugh.

“And I brought my problems with me,” I continued. “My old boss followed me up here—” I stopped to swallow at the lump in my throat. “And all of that happened. And now my car is dead, and Michael has to fix it, and I broke Charlie’s coffee shop, and Rhett cried when I left him for work, and I was already late so I couldn’t even calm him down.”

The kitchen was silent.

“And Michael wants to help with all of it and it’s so sweet but I don’t want to be a burden. I’m so tired of being a fucking burden I could scream.”

“Bullshit,” Callie said with a wave of her hand. Then everyone started talking at once.

*“That’s what family is for.”*

*“Don’t you think he wants to help you? That’s what these idiots live for.”*

*“I told you that you didn’t break my fucking espresso machine.”*

*“That motherfucker should’ve stayed in Arizona. He got what was coming to him.”*

*“Leaving your babies to go to work is hard.”*

*“Man, you need a vacation. No joke.”*

*“We all have our cars fixed at the shop. It’s no big deal.”*

Heather’s eyes were still on me as she raised her hand, and the group quieted.

“How the hell could you be a burden when you gave my son exactly what he’s always wanted?” she asked, tilting her head to the side. “That boy has been a caretaker since he was born. Once, when he was fussing for like an hour straight and Tommy was at work, I started to cry. You know what he did? Stopped freaking crying. Just like that. I was upset, so he stopped to make sure I was okay. He wasn’t even a year old. He’s been taking care of his siblings and me since before he started school—and after that, he found you and you joined that little circle.”

I gripped my hands together so tightly that my knuckles were white as Farrah stopped touching my hair.

“Since he was a kid, he hasn’t ever wanted anything but you. My other boys, they’re screwing around, sowing their damn oats—but not Micky. Hell no. He found what he wanted when he was young and that’s never wavered. You showing up with Rhett was just the cherry on top of the sundae that he’s been waiting years for. Don’t give up that gift because you’re worried that he’s going to be disappointed or feel like you’re a *burden*—I’m his mother, and I’m telling you that’s not even possible.”

“Let him carry the weight for a while,” Callie said softly. “He’s got the shoulders for it—and believe me, there will come a time when you’ll have to carry it for him.”

“And I hate to be an asshole, but you’re fired,” Charlie announced. “If working is making you take a weed whacker to your hair, it’s not worth it.”

“Don’t fire me,” I choked out, horrified.

“Fine, I’m not firing you,” she said with a laugh. “I’m laying you off. Until I get that machine replaced, that cart is closed anyway and I’ve got enough people to cover the others.”

“We’ve all been in your shoes one way or another,” Molly said, shooting me a sweet smile. “We get it. Just... find a different coping mechanism. Your hair’s really bad.”

The group started laughing and even though I could feel my eyes welling up with tears, I had to join them. They were incredible. Every single one of them sat there with no judgment, listening to me boo hoo about my life when I knew quite a few of their stories were much worse than mine. Rose had been kidnapped with her husband and had to leave him behind wounded, in order to get help. Lily had been blind for most of her adolescence because of a shooting that the older generations had lived through. Each story was more terrifying and gut-wrenching than the last, but still, when they’d heard that I was at Callie’s and something was wrong, they’d come running.

“I need to find a job,” I choked out, making them laugh again. “Anyone have any leads?”

“You don’t need a damn job,” Farrah said, forcefully setting my head back in the position she wanted it in. “Stay home and take care of Rhett—”

“And Micky,” Lily called out with a laugh.

“And get your feet under you,” Farrah continued like her daughter hadn’t spoken. “You got your whole life to work. Settle in for a bit. See how you feel in a couple of months.”

“That’s not really fair to Michael.”

“It is so weird hearing you call him Michael,” Kara said with a snort.

“Well, it makes it easier to know who she’s talking about,” Rose said, smiling. “We’ve got your dad, Mack. CeeCee’s man, Mark. And Mick. It’s a fucking nightmare.”

“To be fair, everyone calls him Woody,” Cecilia pointed out.

“He likes it when she calls him Michael,” Callie said, smiling at me. “I think it’s sweet.”

“Enough to give you a toothache,” Farrah muttered behind me. “And back to what you said, Em, it’s plenty fair to Michael. He gets to come home to you and his boy every day. Nothing better than that.”

“Amen,” Michael said from the doorway, his eyes on me.

He must’ve snuck in at some point, but I wasn’t sure how much he’d heard. My stomach flip-flopped at the smile he sent me.

“You’re early,” Heather said, turning to face him. “We’re not done.”

“Well, I’m not leavin’ again,” he announced, walking forward.

“I hope you’re not planning to carry her off *An Officer and a Gentleman* style,” Callie said with a smirk. “Because her hair’s not done.”

“Almost is,” Farrah said, blocking my view as she came around to stare at me face to face. “And it looks fucking fantastic if you ask me.”

“Hear, hear!” someone agreed.

Farrah took a few more minutes running her fingers through my hair, snipping off tiny pieces, before she stepped back and pulled the towel from my shoulders with a flourish. She handed me a hand mirror before taking her comb and

scissors back to her bag, and I stared at myself, my stomach twisting.

It was so short. Cute, because Farrah would never let it be otherwise, but short. I'd never worn it that short before. I looked like a different person. My eyes met Michael's as he crouched down in front of me.

"It's so short," I whispered, regret burning in my stomach as I tried not to cry.

"I think it looks beautiful," he whispered back, smiling. "Sexy."

"Shut up."

"Not kiddin'," he said, resting his hands on my thighs. "I like it."

"Really?"

"Really, sugar." His eyes roamed over me. "It makes your eyes look huge."

"That's a good thing?"

"Reminds me of when we were kids and you were all wide-eyed and innocent," he said softly.

"I feel like this is going to venture into mushy can't-live-without-you territory, so I'm out," Charlie announced with a chuckle. She kissed her mom and Callie goodbye before waving at the group and sauntering out of the kitchen. Michael stood back up as one by one the women followed her, saying their goodbyes and giving hugs. Eventually, it was only me, Michael, Callie, Heather, and Molly in the kitchen.

"Reb's in playing with Rhett," Molly explained with a small smile. "I figured I'd give her a few more minutes of baby time before I headed out."

"She's so good with him," I said, glancing toward the living room.

"She's always been good with babies," Molly replied wistfully. "I kind of always wished that we would've given her

some siblings to love on.”

“She’s never been short on cousins,” Callie said consolingly, patting Molly’s hand.

“Very true.”

“It looks good,” Heather said, pulling my attention to her perch on the counter.

“Really?” I asked, running my fingers through the short strands of hair. I felt bald.

“Really,” she replied. “It suits you.”

“Thanks.” My voice broke on the word, and I covered my face in embarrassment as I started to cry.

Heather telling me my hair *suit*ed me just like she had every time I’d shown up with a new home haircut seemed to open the floodgates. I cried so hard that I got the hiccups. I cried so hard that I didn’t even hear when Rhett came into the kitchen until he called my name.

“Mama?” he asked in confusion, his face screwed up like he was going to start crying too. “Mama hurt?”

“I’m okay, buddy,” I said, trying to catch my breath as I pulled him onto my lap.

“Hair,” he murmured, reaching up to touch it. “Mama hair.”

“I got a haircut,” I said, wiping at my face with one hand while I held him steady with the other. “Do you like it?”

“No.”

“Out of the mouth of babes,” Molly said ruefully, making Callie and Heather laugh.

“Me cut,” Rhett demanded, reaching for his own hair.

“Let’s wait on that,” I said, pulling his hand back down and kissing it. “You don’t have enough to cut yet.”

“When your hair gets a little longer, we’ll go together,” Michael said. “Sound good?”

“No.” Rhett pouted.

“Well, I like your hair,” Rebel said sweetly. “It looks sassy.”

“Sassy, huh?” I said with a laugh.

“Yep. Like you have an attitude.” She jutted her hip out for emphasis. “But not a bad attitude, though.”

“A woman who goes after what she wants,” Molly agreed, slinging her arm around Rebel’s shoulders.

“Like me,” Rebel agreed. “Maybe I should cut my hair.”

“If you want,” Molly said with a shrug as Rebel pulled away. “Why don’t you think about it for a couple of days and then if you still want to cut it then we’ll ask Auntie Farrah.”

“I want Gram to do it,” Rebel countered.

“Of course, baby,” Callie said as she grabbed a broom to sweep up the kitchen.

“As long as you don’t care,” Rebel said, looking at me sheepishly. “Charlie said some women don’t like it when you copy their style.”

“I’d love to have the same haircut,” I assured her.

“Me too!” Her eyes lit up.

“Okay, we’ll decide in a few days,” Molly said firmly. “You ready to leave? Let’s bring dad some lunch.”

“Ready.” Rebel nodded. “Bye, sweet Rhett.”

“Bye, Reb,” Rhett said around his thumb. His head was already leaning tiredly against my shoulder.

After they’d gone, Heather looked at me. “Feeling less stressed?”

“Maybe a little,” I replied sheepishly.

“You’ve got a whole tribe now,” Callie said as she passed me. “Don’t you forget it.”



“Kind of hard to when they swarm you like bees,” Michael joked.

“The beginning is always hard,” Heather told us. “No one is immune to that. Sometimes you just need a reminder that you’ve got a lot of people at your back, hoping you figure it the fuck out.”

“Well, that started really sweet,” Michael mumbled.

“Get out of here,” Heather ordered. “Put my grandson down for a nap and relax for a while.” Then she looked right at me. “You don’t have to figure anything out today, girly. You don’t have to figure it out tomorrow either. Just soak this shit up, yeah? You’ll only get this time once.”

“I’m trying.”

“Try harder,” she ordered dryly. “Now go. Scoot.”

We gave Callie and Heather hugs, and a few minutes later, we were headed home in Michael’s truck.

“He’s already passed out, huh?” Michael asked quietly as he leaned around me to get a look at Rhatt.

“Yep,” I murmured, laying my head on his shoulder. “Charlie fired me.”

“That bitch,” he replied instantly.

I laughed. “Shut up.”

“You feelin’ better about everythin’?” he asked tentatively.

“Honestly,” I sighed. “Yeah. I am.”

“I had a full fuckin’ monologue earlier where I laid my heart out and that didn’t touch it, but an hour with my family did?” He shook his head.

“It was both.” I smiled. “It seems like they’d hate me for taking off on you, but they don’t.”

“Of course they don’t.” He scoffed. “You got railroaded when we were just kids. Took me a minute to figure it out, but I get it now.”

“You do?” I looked up at him, marveling at the way the sunlight turned his brown hair almost golden. His eyelashes were so long that they cast a shadow on his cheek as he watched the road. I couldn’t believe, after everything that had happened, that I was right there beside him again, driving down a familiar road in the middle seat of his truck.

“You never wanted to leave me,” he said quietly, putting his hand on my thigh.

“I didn’t.”

“Your parents—” He paused as if searching for the right words. “They didn’t give you much of a choice, baby. And I don’t mean they kidnapped you.” He looked down at me and then back at the road. “I think I’m startin’ to figure out what that house was like.”

“I think they did the best they could,” I said tentatively.

“I think they completely mind-fucked you and you somehow got out from under that shit after they died. You’re still findin’ your way out of it.”

“Maybe,” I breathed, staring out the windshield. I knew he was right, but it was still hard to admit, even to myself.

“Most importantly,” he said, squeezing my thigh. “You’re not goin’ anywhere again.”

“Never.”

“Then we’re square.”

I huffed out a laugh, and he looked at me questioningly.

“We’re square?” I choked out.

“We’re square,” he said, widening his eyes as he nodded. “You know, we’re good. We’re fine.”

“I know what it means,” I said, my body shaking with laughter. “You were just being so sweet and romantic, and then you said that.”

“What’s wrong with it?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” I gasped, trying to keep a straight face. “We’re square.”

“You’re an asshole,” he joked, starting to laugh. “I’m bein’ sweet here.”

“Of course you are.”

“Emilia,” he barked, trying to act stern but failing miserably as he laughed again. “I love you, and I’m going to fix shit if you need it and I’m going to pay the fuckin’ bills until you find a job you actually like—no, love—and you can just deal with it. If I ever hear about you carrying your own weight again, I’m gonna be super pissed, alright?”

“And we’re back to the romance again,” I replied, wrapping my arm around his waist.

“I’m serious, yeah?” he said, kissing the top of my head. “We’re in this shit together.”

“I know.”

“There’s no my weight and your weight and keepin’ score on who’s doin’ what.”

“Okay.”

“Good.” He nodded and glanced down at me, his lips pulling up in a half-smile. “Then we’re... square.”

My laughter woke Rhett up. I reached out to hold his hand as he stared blearily through the windshield and we stayed that way for the rest of the ride, the three of us connected.

I was still uneasy about not having any of my own income. I still felt a little like something bad was going to happen. But for the first time since I’d left him years ago, I didn’t worry, not even for a second, that Michael would someday realize that I wasn’t enough. As he glanced down at me, so much emotion in his eyes that it took my breath away, I understood that I wouldn’t have to do anything to deserve Michael’s love or his respect. I’d always had it.

## EPILOGUE

### MICHAEL

**T**IPTOEING DOWNSTAIRS, I glanced around the corner and then hurried toward the laundry room, sliding on my socks around the creaky floorboard. I eased open the washing machine and threw in my work clothes from the past week and an exceptionally muddy pair of jeans that Rhett had worn. I'd added soap and turned on the machine when a laugh from behind me had me jerking in surprise.

“You dropped a sock,” Emilia said drolly, swinging the sock from side to side between us.

“Just puttin’ a load in before we go,” I replied with mock nonchalance, snatching the sock out of her hand so I could put it in with the rest.

“You’re sweet, you know that?” she said, leaning against the doorframe.

“Try my best.”

“And sneaky.”

“I don’t need you to do my laundry.”

“I don’t mind doing it.”

“Yeah, sugar, I know,” I replied with a sigh, slinging my arm over her shoulders as I led her through the house.

“You do a lot of other stuff,” she pointed out, patting my chest.

“Rhett!” I called as he dropped from standing on the couch to landing on his ass, bouncing and laughing like a maniac. “Don’t jump on the couch, bud.”

We'd already moved any furniture with sharp edges into the garage, but I still had visions daily of him falling and breaking his arm. The sweet baby that Em had brought home with her had turned into a death-defying adrenaline junky in the few months that they'd been home. He climbed everything, using chairs and stools in the kitchen to get up on the counters, shimmying his way up the outside of the banister on the stairs like a monkey, and generally almost giving us heart attacks every few hours. It didn't matter how many times we told him no, redirected him, or made it harder for him to get into trouble—he still found it.

“Couches are for sitting,” Emilia reminded him as she went to pick him up. “Not jumping.”

“I jump.”

“No,” she said, poking him in the belly. “You don't.”

“I jump,” he yelled back.

“So, this age is fun,” Emilia muttered to me, rolling her eyes. “You ready to go?”

“Just gotta get my boots on.”

“Rhett, you want to go see Gran and Papa?”

“Gramps?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Yeah, Gramps will be there too,” I replied, stuffing my feet into my boots. “And Uncle Rumi.”

“Myla?”

“Yep, Myla too.”

“Okay,” Rhett said, bouncing in Emilia's arms. “I go.”

We'd developed a system of getting out of the house, and I watched happily as Emilia strode out the door with Rhett, confident that I'd make sure to grab his bag and blanket. It had been weeks before she'd relaxed enough to let me make sure we had everything he needed. It wasn't like there was much, blanket, sippy cup, diapers and wipes, and a change of clothes.

She'd just felt like she needed to make sure everything was there, that it was her responsibility alone.

We'd been working on that. I tried not to let it bother me when she did things alone that would've been easier for us to do together... and she tried not to freak out when I insisted on helping. It wasn't even a control thing for her—she knew I could handle it—she was just still struggling with that arbitrary amount of things she had to contribute in order to feel like she was doing her part.

It was getting better. She'd stopped worrying about getting a job as soon as humanly possible and had started really looking for something that would make her happy. She liked helping people and was considering teaching, but it would require a few more years of school and she wasn't sure she wanted to wait that long to start bringing some cash in. I hated that she still had that in the back of her mind, but I let it go.

I couldn't let go of the way she seemed almost obsessed with doing everything around the house. Some days I'd come home, and I swear the shine off the kitchen counters would burn my eyes because she'd polished the damn things. I had to cajole and threaten and seduce her into sitting with me and watching a movie after Rhett went to bed because she always had a list of things in her head that she still needed to get done. When I found her building the toddler bed we'd bought for Rhett, awkwardly using a screwdriver and cursing under her breath, I'd put my foot down and went to get the drill from the garage.

I didn't let it become a problem, I wasn't willing to cause issues between us, but whenever I could, I pitched in without saying anything. I threw clothes into the washing machine, cleaned the mud off of Rhett's boots, picked up the toys that Rhett had spread across the living room—sometimes before he was completely done playing with them—just to take a little off her plate.

“I put the potato salad and macaroni salad in the cooler,” she told me as we drove toward the club. “So be careful when

you take it out of the truck so you don't tip them over."

"Are they on ice?" I hadn't even seen her go outside that morning.

"Yeah." She wrinkled her nose as she looked up at me. "I had to take like forty-five trips from the ice machine in the fridge to the cooler because I didn't want to buy a bag at the store."

"Why didn't you just bring the cooler inside? And where the hell was I?"

"Because it would've been too heavy to carry back outside once the ice was in it and you were in the shower."

She patted my leg consolingly as I scowled.

It was shit like that all the time. I could've carried the cooler to the truck. Did she ask me? Nope. She just carried smaller cups of ice from the kitchen to the driveway over and over, making it ten times harder than it needed to be because she refused to ask for help.

"Bags of ice are only two dollars," I reminded her. She shrugged.

"Gramps?" Rhett asked suddenly, leaning forward as far as he could to look out the back window.

"Yeah, man, I told you Gramps will be there, too."

"Like Gramps."

"That's because he gives you candy," Emilia teased, tickling him.

"I like candy."

"Really," I replied dryly. "I wouldn't have guessed that."

"Guess that."

"I'm looking forward to this," Emilia said happily as she leaned against my shoulder. "And I'm glad we took the truck."

"We should've sent Rhett to my mom's and we could've taken the bike," I said with a wink, making her grin. After a

particularly... bendy date night, Emilia had a new appreciation for my Harley.

“Do you think that Rumi will bring a date?” she asked, sitting up in her seat.

“You need to stay out of that,” I warned.

Emilia had easily found her place in the extended Aces family, and she hung out with Olive and Nova pretty often which was great. What wasn't great was the fact that she had it in her head that Nova was in love with my little brother and had decided that it was her responsibility to protect the poor girl from Rumi's manwhoring.

“You saw her face,” she shot back fiercely. “When he brought that girl over.”

“She was nice,” I mused. “What was her name? Mandy? Margo? Something with an M.”

“Her name was Candace,” Emilia said, looking at me like I was an idiot.

“I can't keep 'em straight,” I muttered, shrugging as I rolled down my window at the club's gate.

“My man Rhett in there?” Gray asked, coming up to the window.

“Gray!” Rhett squealed.

“What the hell are you doin' on the gate?” I asked with a laugh.

“Prospects are shittin' their guts out,” he replied with a scoff. “I told 'em I'd watch it for an hour while people were gettin' here, so no one had to deal with that.”

“Are they sick?” Emilia asked worriedly.

“More like they ate some expired ass seafood and chased it with Ouzo,” Gray said flatly. He looked at his watch. “They better get their nasty asses up here in the next fifteen, or I'm gonna bust some heads.”



“Have fun with that,” I said as he walked backward to open the gate.

“I’ll see you up there.”

“He’s so nice,” Emilia said, glancing at Gray out the back window. “Why doesn’t he have a girlfriend?”

“I haven’t asked,” I replied dryly. “Why, you lookin’?”

“Puhlease.” She elbowed me in the side.

“Not everyone settles down when they’re kids,” I pointed out as I found a place to park.

“I guess we just got lucky.” She unbuckled her seat belt and leaned up to kiss my cheek.

“I guess so.”

“Gram!” Rhett yelled, kicking his feet and pointing.

“Give me a sec, bud,” I said, catching a glimpse of Gram out the window. “I’ll get you out.”

The party was in full swing as I carried the cooler over to the picnic tables, and it reminded me of that first one I’d brought Emilia and Rhett to. I had a feeling if I left her now, she’d wave me off and tell me she’d see me at home.

“I like it better when the kids are here,” Emilia said to me quietly as a group of them went running by, squirt guns in their hands.

“You had a pretty good time when they weren’t,” I reminded her. I’d never forget Emilia drunkenly trying to teach the women to do a backbend. We were lucky we hadn’t had to take anyone to the hospital.

“Yeah, yeah.” She strode away to a group of women who were walking toward the building and I dropped the cooler off on one of the tables and took a seat beside it to watch my gram teach Rhett how to blow a bubble.

She’d blow some, and he’d giggle and chase them around. Then he’d try to blow one and would spray the soapy water

everywhere, get frustrated, and she'd blow another batch of them to distract him. It worked every time. I laughed.

"Hey, kid," my uncle Will said, slapping me on the back as he sat down on the table next to me. "How goes it?"

"All good."

"Yeah? That's good. Settlin' in?"

"Like she never left."

Uncle Will nodded. "No nightmares?"

I glanced at him in surprise. "How'd you know that?"

Uncle Will scoffed. "Swear to Christ, nightmares might be the thing all these women have most in common."

"Seriously?"

"Someone broke into your house, man," he said, watching Rhett and Gram. "Ended fine. No one was hurt. Still leaves a mark."

"Sometimes I gotta get out of bed and check the entire house before she can fall back asleep."

Uncle Will nodded. "It'll get better." He looked around the yard until he found my aunt Molly. "Never fades completely, but it gets a helluva lot better."

"Does Aunt Molly still..."

"Rarely, but it happens."

"What—" I swallowed hard. We didn't talk about shit like this. With my dad, maybe. With my mom, sure. But never with Uncle Will. "What should I do?"

"Get up and check the house," he said simply, smiling at me. "You're a good boy."

"Thanks?"

"Don't fuck up again," he ordered, getting to his feet. "You're lucky Otto went for ya before I did that night because I woulda dropped ya."

My face went slack with surprise.

“Figure that girl doesn’t have a dad lookin’ out for her,” he said quietly. “And the one she had was shit.” He looked at me. “Consider me a stand-in.”

It took a few minutes for me to pick my jaw up off the ground and he was nearly halfway across the yard before I could think of anything to say.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit incestuous?” I yelled, making heads jerk my way in confusion and disgust.

Uncle Will just flipped me off over his shoulder as he reached Aunt Molly.

“Get off the table,” my mom ordered as she and Emilia came up behind me. “We’re setting the food out.”

“What’s wrong with your face?” Emilia asked, grabbing my arm as I tried to get out of the way.

“Just had a super fuckin’ weird conversation with my uncle,” I muttered. “You can call him Dad from now on.”

“Wait, what?”

“New weird conversation coming in hot,” my mom announced as my dad strode toward us.

“You ask ’em?”

“I didn’t say anything, Thomas,” my mom replied primly, bustling around the table.

“You find anything you wanna do yet?” my dad asked Emilia bluntly.

“Uh, no,” she replied slowly. “I was thinking teaching, but —”

“They don’t get paid shit,” he barked.

“You’re off to a great start,” my mom told him, laughing. “Keep going.”

“You know, you could be quiet for two fuckin’ seconds,” he shot back.

“What fun would that be?”

“Dad, did you have an idea?” I asked before their bickering really got going.

“Real estate agent,” my dad said, grinning. He made a frame with his fingers and looked at Emilia through it. “It’s perfect.”

“Um.” Emilia looked at me, her eyes so wide it looked like she was having some kind of fit.

“I’m serious,” my dad said, nodding. “You can sell my houses.”

“Sell your houses?” Emilia said slowly.

“He’s not insane,” my mom said drolly. “Just looks like it.”

“Look, I wanna flip ’em,” he said, ignoring my mom. “I don’t wanna do all the paperwork shit when I’m buyin’ and sellin’, so I have to hire a realtor for that.”

“You want me to buy and sell houses for you?”

“Heather takes care of the accounting shit, so we don’t go under.”

“Thank you very much,” my mom said, taking a small bow.

“But I need someone that’ll write up the offers and do all that shit and then get the word out and negotiate and shit when I’m sellin’.” He looked back and forth between us, grinning. “I don’t know what all goes into it, but I’d rather be payin’ you commissions than some dumb fuck I barely know.”

“Uh.” Emilia looked like a deer caught in the headlights.

“We’ll talk it over,” I told my dad, who was still grinning like a lunatic.

“Best thing is,” he said, still trying to sell it. “It’s not full-time, yeah? Work around Rhett’s schedule and shit.”

“It sounds really great,” Emilia replied tentatively. “I’m just not sure how much school that takes—”

“We’ll figure it out,” he said happily, reaching out to squeeze her shoulders. “Business partners.”

As he walked away, my mom laughed. “He’s had the idea for weeks, but he was worried you’d say no.” She shook her head. “It took a couple shots and a pep talk for him to say anything today.”

“It’s actually kind of a good idea,” Emilia said, glancing at me.

“I figured you could branch out,” my mom said with a shrug. “Once you’ve got your feet under you, maybe take on more clients or whatever. You’d have a built-in client base with all the people connected to the club.”

“We’ll talk about it,” I replied firmly. I wasn’t about to have Emilia railroaded into a new job that she hated. I steered her away from the tables, glancing back to make sure Rhett was still happy with Gram before I brought her around the edge of the building for a little privacy.

“Don’t say yes just because my dad asked,” I ordered, backing her up against the wall.

“I won’t.”

“You can choose whatever you want to do. There’s no rush.”

“I know.”

“And he’s a giant pain in the ass to work with—just warning you now. I see him every day at the garage, and half the time, I want to beat him to death with a wrench.”

“You hide it so well,” she teased.

“I’m just sayin’—”

“I know what you’re saying,” she said, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. “And I love you for it.” She paused. “It actually sounds really cool.”

“Really?” I asked doubtfully.

“Yeah. It’s worth looking into.”

“Alright.”

“Did you bring me back here to lecture me or kiss me? Because there’s been a whole lot of lecturing and not enough —”

Her words cut off as I pressed my lips to hers. We hadn’t been back to our spot at the back of the property again, but kissing her in the shade of the clubhouse felt like a pretty nice substitution. She’d just tightened her arms, and I was about to lift her so she could wrap her legs around me when someone came around the corner and smacked right into us.

“Oh shit,” Nova said, falling back a step. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said, turning to face her. My mouth went dry when I caught a look at her face, and my arms around Emilia dropped. “What the fuck happened to your face?”

“Not a big deal,” Nova said with a huff, reaching up to run her finger under her eye. “Had a few too many and tripped face first into the porch railing.”

“That looks like it hurts,” Emilia said sympathetically, circling me until she was between Nova and me.

“It looks like someone clocked you,” I argued, leaning forward to get a better look.

“Nope.”

“*Nova.*”

We stared at each other, neither one of us backing down. I’d known her since we were babies. I’d splashed in kiddie pools, rode around on dirt bikes, taken my truck to the river and gotten so drunk we’d had to sleep it off in the truck bed, watched a million movies, hung out at a million club barbecues, and talked late into the night more times than I could count.

I *knew* when she was lying.

“Nova!” my brother yelled as he came around the corner. Rumi wasn’t a big guy, he was built wiry like my dad, but when he slid to a stop and stared at Nova, he looked like he could tear apart the world without breaking a sweat. “Who?” he barked.

“Come on,” Emilia said quietly, tugging at my hand.

“Someone hit her in the fuckin’ face,” I argued, following Emilia but glancing over my shoulder at where Nova and my brother stood a few feet apart, glaring at each other.

“Rumi will take care of it,” Emilia said, yanking on my hand.

“I can’t just—”

“You can,” she cut me off. “I’ll talk to Nova about it later. Can’t you see she’s about to cry? She doesn’t want us standing there staring at her.”

“Someone hit her in the fuckin’ face,” I repeated, my free hand clenching into a fist.

“Michael,” Emilia said, spinning to face me as soon as she felt like we were far enough away. “I love you, and I love that you want to protect her, but we’re at the clubhouse. She’s safe here. Give her a minute to deal with your brother, okay?”

“Fine.”

Emilia rolled her eyes. “You think Callie will watch Rhett for a while?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because I planned on seducing you in our spot,” she said, her hands going to her hips. “But if you’re not up for it—”

She screeched as I threw her over my shoulder and stomped toward the back field.

“I love you,” she said, kissing my back as she laughed.

“Love you, too.”

Eventually I set her back on her feet and we walked hand in hand toward the little clearing that we'd made when we were kids.

We already lived like we were married, but I wanted to make it official, so I planned to bring her back again later in the summer when the blackberries were ripe to propose. I could probably put the expensive ass ring on her finger at any time and she'd happily say yes, but I was going to do the whole down-on-one-knee speech thing. She'd probably laugh and tell me to get up, tease me about it later, and tell anyone and everyone about how cheesy I was—but I had a feeling she'd also probably cry a little and I was hoping it would be something she'd remember always.

“You wanna lay out on the hammock after Rhett goes to bed tonight?” she asked easily, swinging our hands back and forth between us.

I groaned theatrically, making her laugh. “You really *do* love me.”

*Watch for the next story in the Hawthornes  
saga,*

*Rumi*

*Summer 2023*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Have you actually gotten this far? Sometimes I read the acknowledgements in a book and sometimes I don't. I never know if anyone other than my mom is reading these things. It's been nearly ten years since I published my first novel and it's been a hell of a ride. I have so many people I'd like to thank. My kids and my fella, first of all. They're pretty much the reason I do everything, from waking up eleventy-seven times a night to buying ice cream at the grocery store and all the messy fantastic things in between. To my parents who were a little weary of this new career when it started—their kid was going to be writing sex scenes for everyone to read after all—but who are bursting with pride now. To Nikki who was my editor for years and became a beloved friend. To Ellie who was a beloved friend for years and is now my editor. To Letitia, who creates the gorgeous covers for these books. To Amber, Melissa and Ashley who read these stories before anyone else to make sure they don't suck. (I always feel like they suck at some point in the process and fall in love with them all over again by the time I finish them. It's the curse of a writer.) To Pam and Bea and Michelle who keep an eye on my reader group when I'm knee deep in other things—kids or writing, it's always kids or writing—and drop everything to beta read when the book is ready. To Madeline and Toni, beautiful writers who I get to call my friends. To the readers and the bloggers and the TikTokers and the Facebookers and the Instagramers who show up with every release, no matter how long it's been since the last one. I couldn't do what I do if you weren't doing what you do—I owe my livelihood to you and I never forget that for a second. And lastly, to Donna, who once upon a time took a chance and reviewed a book from a brand new writer, changing her life forever.

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