



RESPECT

THE BRAZEN BULLS BIRTHRIGHT

SUSAN FANETTI

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THE SERIES CONCLUSION

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Aurora Terminus

To everyone who's ridden with the Bulls all these years.

Great love and thanks to TeriLyn and Jess, who help me make my stories sing. And a special thank you to the members of my reader group, Susan's FANetties, who never fail to remind me why I do this thing.

*Not I, nor anyone else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself.
It is not far, it is within reach,
Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did
not know,
Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land.
Shoulder your duds dear son, and I will mine, and let us
hasten forth,
Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go.*

~Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," 46

THE BRAZEN BULLS MOTORCYCLE CLUB

Mother Charter: Oklahoma

Officers:

Edgar "Eight Ball" Johnston, President

Richard "Maverick" Helm, Vice President

Seth "Dexter" Denson, Sergeant at Arms

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Soldiers:

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Jacob "JJ" Jessup

Duncan Helm

Christian Grady

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Samuel Spellman

Prospect:

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Retired:

Brian Delaney

Conrad "Radical" Jessup

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Cooper Calderon, President

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Alonzo "Lonnie" Little, Sergeant at Arms

Reed Haddon, Secretary-Treasurer

Kai Lewis, Technology Officer

Soldier:

Eugene "Geno" McCord

CHAPTER ONE

Duncan Helm pinched the edge of the tape with one hand and pointed his index finger with the other. “You’re not gonna do it to me this time, right? We’re buds, and you wouldn’t hit a bud in the face twice, right?”

Ethan grinned up at him and said nothing. Like most two-month-olds, he mostly kept his thoughts to himself.

A couple hours ago, right after Kelsey and Dex left for some fancy veterinarian dinner thing—Dex was wearing a suit and tie!—Ethan had gifted his good ol’ UncaDunc with a blow-out diaper and then a surprise golden shower. That had never happened before, and Duncan meant it never to happen again. Not. Cool.

With a cloth diaper at the ready, Duncan released the last tape and opened the Huggie. He dropped the cloth over Ethan’s tiny package and did the move he’d learned when Tildy was this little, slipping a clean diaper under the dirty one. This time the dirty one was only wet, so the cleanup was much easier. A couple wipe-swipes, a couple dabs of cream on the little rashy spot on his tush, flip, tuck, tape, done.

Getting Ethan’s squirmy little feet back into the footie pajamas was the hard part. Ethan was *way* calmer than his big sister, but he did not like clothes. After a mini MMA bout, Duncan got the pajamas zipped and faced the irritated frown of his nephew.

“Okay, dude.” He picked Ethan up, and grinned when the baby did that cool stretch thing, like being gripped under his arms was the best thing ever. “Let’s get back out there before big sis sets fire to something.”

He settled Ethan on his shoulder and left the nursery, wending his way through three dogs. Kelsey and Dex had six dogs, but the pack must have convened a planning meeting, because they always broke into two groups when their children were separated. Charlie and Ripper, the biggest of the pack—

Belgian Malinois and Doberman, respectively—always headed up the groups. It was eerie how that all worked out.

Rowdy, the Helm family dog, was a great dog—loyal friend, good protector, the works—but kind of a dork and not exactly a genius. Duncan couldn't imagine him being as organized as Charlie or Ripper.

Maybe it was Charlie's military training. He and Dex had been Marines together.

Ripper, Lenny, and George followed Duncan and Ethan back to the living room, where they found Tildy, a two-and-a-half-year-old wrecking ball, sitting quietly on her Minnie Mouse couch. Her chubby legs were propped on Mr. Darcy's furry back, one hand clutched Charlie's fur, and the other thumb was firmly planted in her mouth. They were all watching *Frosty the Snowman* for about the seven trillionth time.

It was a week into the new year and Christmas was done and packed away, but Tildy didn't give a fuck.

When he came into the room, Tildy looked over and unplugged her mouth. "HAPPY BIRFDAY, UNCADUNC!"

Tildy's parents were trying to teach her about 'inside voice,' but the lesson wasn't sticking so far. If she was amped—which made up ninety percent of her waking hours—she was yelling. Duncan was supposed to try to get her to repeat things in a softer voice, but he thought she was hilarious, and he got to go home (or at least not be in charge anymore) before he was sick of her many antics.

So he laughed. "Well, thank you, angel. But it's not my birthday."

"FROSTY SAYS IT WHEN HE'S HAPPY."

"Okay. Well, happy birthday, Tildy Wildy." He sat on the sectional behind Tildy's little pink couch and settled Ethan on his lap so he could see the TV, too. He liked to watch the colors and moving images.

Lizzie, their long-haired chihuahua, jumped up and settled against Duncan's hip. The other dogs settled into their usual

places.

Ninety seconds later, Tildy got up from her personal throne and came to him. When she set her hands on his knee and tried to climb up, Dex caught her with his free hand and pulled her onto his lap. She gave her little brother an ambivalent look—still not convinced he was a keeper—and settled into her spot on UncaDunc’s thigh.

It was a Friday night. Duncan was a twenty-five-year-old, single man. He was in good shape, and his looks weren’t bad. He made decent money. He was a member in good standing of the Brazen Bulls MC. He liked girls—a lot, in fact—and loved sex. Sure, he could have gone out tonight and found some action. Plenty of Friday nights he did exactly that. But on this Friday night he was happy where he was.

There was nothing in the world better than this right here.

~oOo~

“Again!” Tildy demanded at a fairly normal volume.

The one time the girl was quiet and pliable was bedtime. Baths really mellowed her out. Kelsey joked that they’d store her in lavender-scented warm water if they could figure out how to keep her from getting all prune-y.

“Nope,” Duncan replied. “Four times is my limit on reading the same story over and over. UncaDunc is done.” He set *This Story Is Not About a Kitten* on top of Tildy’s bookcase. Three shelves crammed with books, and most of them had been loved to tatters.

“But I like it!”

“I know. I like it, too. And tomorrow you can read it again. But now, it’s time to tuck up all cozy in your little house and go to sleep. You can tell yourself the story again in your dreams.”

For her second birthday in August, Duncan and his father had built her a ‘toddler bed.’ Dad had found the plans online: a

platform sized for a crib mattress, and then a frame above it like a little cabin. The plans had been pretty basic, just the frame, meant to be covered in fabric to make more of a tent than a cabin, but they'd customized it, giving it a roof with curved wood shingles and real plank walls, with a shuttered window and a little flower box filled with fabric flowers.

The roof was on hinges, as were two sides, for ease of making the bed, and so she couldn't get trapped in it somehow (if anybody could figure out how, it was Tildy). It was badass, and she loved it.

Was she spoiled? No. She was loved.

Duncan got her tucked in with her chosen stuffies for the night. Her parents allowed her three and only three, otherwise she'd cram the house full and probably smother herself. Tonight she chose a lion she'd gotten for Christmas, a ratty bunny she'd had since before she was born, and a little purple alien-looking thing that probably came out of a fast-food kids' meal.

"Okay," he said as he smoothed her blankets over her. "Gimme smooches." He wedged his shoulders in and got a round of sloppy kisses from his favorite girl. "Love you, Tildy Wildy. Good sleeps, okay?"

She nodded and rolled to her side.

On Duncan's way to the door, he picked up some toys and put them away. This room had been Dex's office, and before he'd been a husband and father he'd built the closet out to store whatever he'd needed to store in his office. The whole thing was shelves and cubbies. Dex said he was going to turn it back into a clothes closet eventually, but Duncan thought they could put it off for a while. Tildy's clothes were tiny, and the cubbies worked great for toys.

"UncaDunc?" Tildy called, her voice already fuzzy with coming sleep, as Duncan reached the door.

He turned back. She was leaning out her little door, the ratty rabbit choked in her fist.

"Yeah, angel?"

“Efan go wif you, okay?”

The transition from only child to big sister wasn't going so well yet. Tildy was used to being the center of attention, and babies took up most of the real estate there. She had some notes.

“No, Tildy. Ethan's yours. Yours and your Mommy and Daddy's. He belongs here.”

She bunched up her face and thought for a second. “I go wif you, okay?”

Duncan walked back and crouched before her. “You belong here, too, angel. This is your home and your family. It's Ethan's home and his family, too. And Mommy and Daddy's. You are all family together.”

“And you! You're famby togever.”

Not having planned to deliver a lesson on the different tiers of family construction, Duncan was at a loss. How was he supposed to explain to a toddler that yes, he was family, but no, this wasn't his home?

He had no clue. So he made a right turn and hoped she'd go with him. “Pretty soon, Ethan will be big enough to play with. Then you'll be glad you both live here.”

That hadn't been his experience; Kelsey was about six years older than him, and he was about that much older than Hannah. To him, Kelsey had been more of a mini-mom, and Hannah had been more of an annoyance to ignore. Neither had been a playmate. They'd never even been in the same school at the same time. But Tildy and Ethan were just more than two years apart. He'd seen that span among his many cousins, and most of them turned out to be friends. Or at least frenemies.

Her eyes starting to cross with fatigue, Tildy let the matter drop. “Piddy soon,” she muttered as Duncan settled her back on her pillow.

When Kelsey and Dex got home a little after midnight, Duncan was in the living room, watching ESPN and feeding Ethan a bottle of Kelsey's breast milk. When Tildy was little like this, the idea of holding a bottle of milk that had come out of his sister's tits had freaked him out well and truly, but he was an old pro now.

He knew they'd arrived before the door opened. He'd been surrounded, as usual, by dogs, though Charlie was stretched out in front of Tildy's door, keeping watch. Suddenly, all five dogs around him got up and hurried to the hallway. Even Charlie left his post to stand at the junction between the main hall and the one that led to the bedrooms. When the door opened, everybody hurried up to greet their people. Charlie, the Dog in Charge, hung back a little, still on the job. That dog was half human—and all soldier.

After the usual greeting melee at the door, everybody headed back to the living room. Making sure not to disturb Ethan's feed, Duncan stood; he knew either Dex or Kelsey would want to hold the boy immediately.

It was Dex who came through first. His tie was gone and his dress shirt unbuttoned to the third button.

"Hey," he said as he reached for his son. "Everything good?"

Duncan handed the baby over. "Perfect, as usual. Tildy went down about eight-thirty. She got up about half an hour ago, when Ethan woke up, but she had a sip and went back down. How was it?"

He'd expected Dex to bitch about hanging with rich civilians for the night, but instead he grinned. "It was great. Kelsey won an award."

"She did?" His sister walked in just then, her fancy hairdo a little droopy now, and her high heels dangling from her fingers, but her sparkly dress still pretty. "I didn't know you were up for an award."

Her grin was happy but about half the wattage of her man's. "I didn't, either. I was shocked." She held it out so

Duncan could see it.

He took it from her and held it up. A glass shape on a lacquered wood base. The glass twinkled in the lamplight. *Oklahoma Association of Veterinary Medicine. Animal Welfare Award, 2024. Dr. Kelsey Denson.*

“Alright, sis!” Duncan handed it back to her. “What brought this on?”

“It’s for her work with rescues,” Dex said, his voice practically ringing with bells of pride. In most situations of his life, the man was taciturn, aloof, short-tempered, and capable of truly scary kinds of violence, but with his family he was a big ball of happy fluff.

“That is awesome, Kelse. Seriously.”

His big sister glowed a little as she smiled again. “Thanks. And thanks for tonight.”

“No prob. You know I love hanging with my minions. We had fun. Though I won’t be sad when Tildy decides she’s had enough of Frosty.”

Dex and Kelsey groaned in harmony.

~oOo~

Once Dex and Kelsey were home and on the job again, Duncan didn’t stay long. Kelsey went to check on Tildy, then took Ethan from Dex when she came back. Duncan said his goodbyes then and was surprised that Dex walked him to the door as if he were a guest.

“Hey,” Dex said as they arrived at the entry and were more or less private. “I’m gonna try to convince Eight and your dad to keep the younger patches home on this next run.”

Duncan, one of the younger patches, was shocked. “What? Why?”

The next run, less than a week off, was not the usual Bulls business. Both charters, Oklahoma and Nevada, were heading

to Northern California to take over a club based in Eureka—in whatever way they had to do it. It was a full-club run, nobody left behind. Marcella and Sage would be running the station, with hangarounds and the prospect working the shop and the garage closed.

They'd been planning this run for months—years, actually, but this actual run had been in the works since the fall. The whole club. And they were ready for war.

“If this goes bad, it could take the whole club down. It makes sense to leave patches back, and it makes sense for a fuck-ton of reasons it should be the young guys staying back. You have less experience and more longevity.”

Seriously, Duncan was stunned. This was the first he'd heard of any reservations about the whole club riding out. Plans were set now, with roles for everybody. And it was even more bizarre that Dex, former Marine Raider who'd signed up for the Corps while he was still in high school, would be balking at twenty-something patches riding to possible (probable) war.

“I don't want to stay back, Dex. And I don't think any of the other Young Guns do, either. We don't want to be sidelined.”

Dex stared hard at him. “Sam almost died a few months back. You're saying he's jumping at another chance to get it done?”

That was the real reason Dex was talking about sidelining the younger guys, wasn't it? He was worried they weren't ready for the fight. He was worried they wouldn't make the ride back.

Duncan took a beat to think out his reply. “I don't mean to talk for him, but I can say I haven't seen him show doubts about it. For myself, I want to ride with my club. I know what it means. We all do. Fuck, Dex, most of us've been living this life since we were born. You don't need to protect us. We wear the same patch you do.”

“Yeah, but yours is a lot cleaner than mine.”

“And yours was as clean as ours once, right? How’d it get stained?”

Again, Dex gave him a hard stare. “You’re sure?”

“I’m positive. I’m a Bull.”

CHAPTER TWO

Phoebe Davis squinted at the lowering sun and checked her watch again. It wasn't that late—almost half past four—but in January that might as well be twilight. From this far west in the state, she had a good four hours of drive time once she got on the road again. She hated towing the trailer at night. She hated driving at night, period, but it was so much worse with the trailer.

She was trying to walk a fine diplomatic line here, when in reality she desperately wanted to knock some heads. But it had taken hours to convince these people to surrender the horse they were neglecting to death, and if she wasn't careful she'd get run off their property at the point of the shotgun the guy had resting in his arms like a newborn baby.

Beginning to feel that burble of anxiety-induced adrenaline that made her snappish and impatient, she pulled up a trick she'd learned in therapy, closing her eyes, taking deep, slow breaths—four beats in, five beats out—and silently repeated the mantra the therapist had taught her: *I am calm. I am strength. I am compassion. I am patience. I am resolve. I am the power of good. I am love.*

A lot of that was new-age bullshit, but, maddeningly, it worked. “Can I take a try, sir?” she asked when she was sure her tone would be gentle and friendly.

“That old cuss is mean as shit,” spat the so-called ‘owner’ of the poor boy at the back of the pasture. The horse had bolted for the treeline as soon as he'd seen the man. “I don't want you suin' me if he kicks you in the head. He'll come when he's good and ready. You ain't got time to wait, you can leave the same way you came.”

“I promise I won't sue if he hurts me. And I'll be careful. I'd just like to see if I can get close.”

“Let 'er try, Ricky,” the man's wife said. “We'll be standin' out here all night otherwise, and I'm cold.”

Ricky glared sourly at his wife, at Phoebe, and out at the skeletal horse. “Fine. You best not fuck with me if that bastard fucks with you.”

Leaving that threat to lie where it dropped, Phoebe went to the split-rail fence and clambered over. She had her pack on her back, with the gear she’d need to get hold of a traumatized thousand-pound beast.

This guy looked like he might be more of a traumatized six-hundred-pound beast. If that. His entire skeleton showed through his dapple coat.

The hardest part of this kind of rescue work was being nice to obviously evil people. Phoebe did not give one single stunted fuck that the couple who owned this land had fallen on hard times. If they couldn’t care for their animals, they should have asked for help right away, or surrendered them while they were healthy. Instead, because they hadn’t wanted to give away ‘good money,’ they’d sold their stock off piecemeal, in the meantime leaving them to live off what they could graze *in the fucking winter*. The old dapple was the last one left.

As Phoebe crossed the frozen mud of the pasture, she seethed. They hadn’t even moved the poor baby to a different pasture. This one hadn’t had grass, even dried winter remnants, for probably weeks. It was like they were intentionally letting him starve to death.

Thankfully, the last person who’d bought stock from them had called the SPCA and reported the dapple. Phoebe was on the call sheets of most rescue organizations in and around Oklahoma, on the short list of people who could foster and/or keep large animals. She’d gotten the call late last night and had spent now more than twelve hours preparing, traveling, and cajoling to get this boy safe.

For the first half of her trek across the pasture, the horse watched her, head drooping. As she got closer, his head came up, and he took a couple wary steps backward. Horses hated walking backward and generally did it only under rein or when they were frightened and cornered.

Phoebe slowed up. Keeping her movements measured and relaxed, she reached back to the side pocket of her pack and snagged the baggie of apple slices from it.

“Hey, handsome,” she cooed, probably still too far away for her voice to make much impression, especially since she was walking into the wind. But she wanted the sound to come to him gradually. “Hi, Smoky. You’re a such a beautiful boy. I’m Phoebe.”

Smoky tossed his head and took another backward step. He heard her, and he was scared, but he wasn’t running. Instead, he stretched his neck a little toward her. He smelled the apples.

Setting an apple slice on the palm of her gloved hand, Phoebe smiled. “Are you hungry, baby? I have some apples here. Would you like some apples?”

A stomp of his overgrown hoof. Then another. Phoebe stopped where she was. It was time for Smoky to come the rest of the way on his own. It was always better to have the horse come to you if possible; it wasn’t a guarantee that they’d be calm when they got there, but that likelihood was exponentially greater if they’d had a part in the decision.

She stood completely still, her arm outstretched and her hand flat, offering that apple slice, while January wind buffeted her and the sun clocked out for the day. She was not leaving without this goddamn horse. When she ran out of sweet nothings to coo, she started singing, the first song that came to her mind that was quiet and calm: “A Thousand Years.”

She didn’t personally like that song (it was too dang sweet, and her taste ran more to the ‘everything sucks so fuck it’ genre), but Margot freaking loved it, and it was therefore a regular worm eating straight through Phoebe’s ear into her brain.

Apparently, Smoky was a Christina Perri fan, because halfway through the song, he took one tentative step forward. Toward Phoebe and her apples. By the end of the song, he’d

come about ten feet closer, and his neck was fully extended, his nose quivering.

Fuck, it was cold out here.

“Come on, baby. You’re safe now. I’ve got a warm blanket for you, and some good hay in the trailer. All the apples you can eat. When we get you home, you’ll have friends, and so much good shit. And I’ll sing sappy songs the whole way. Come on, baby. Come on. It’s okay.”

He nodded his head and nickered softly but didn’t come closer. Thinking—hoping—she knew what he wanted, Phoebe took a risk and tossed the apple slice, aiming for the ground halfway between them.

The horse flinched at the toss, but he didn’t run. He hurried to the apple and snarfed it up. Then he looked at her again and did the same thing, nodding and nickering. She took another slice from the baggie and tossed it between them again.

In that way, she got Smoky to come almost within reach.

“Well, hi, baby. Here.” Again she set a slice on her palm and held it out. He stretched his neck and pooched out his lips, trying to reach it without moving closer. When he couldn’t quite make it, he did the nod-and-nicker thing again, but this time she shook her head.

“Not this time. Now you’re gonna have to trust me. Come on. You’re okay.”

They stood at an impasse for a few more minutes. Twilight was starting to fade away. Pretty soon she was going to be doing this in the pitch dark of an overcast country night.

“Come on, sweetheart. I know you can be brave. Look how much you’ve survived already.”

After one more attempt at stretching enough to reach, Smoky took the last steps and snuffled the apple from her palm.

“Good boy! Good boy!” She snagged another slice and held it out. He shied a little from the sound of the baggie, but he didn’t bolt or charge. As he took the apple, Phoebe

carefully set her other hand on his nose. He shied, tossing his head out of her reach, but he didn't step away.

By the time the baggie was empty, Smoky was all up in her business, looking for more, nibbling at her gloves, her pockets, her hat—and Phoebe was stroking his nose to her heart's content.

God, he was so skinny. She couldn't believe he was still on his feet, much less energetic enough to be suspicious of her. Fiery hatred for the people on the other side of the pasture filled her to the brim.

“Okay, Smoky, my love,” she cooed as she eased her pack from her back and set it on the frozen ground. The horse immediately went to snuffle and paw at it. “Yes, there's more to eat in there. I've got carrots, too, but for those, you need to let me halter you. Okay?”

Keeping an eye on his reaction, she eased open the zipper of the largest compartment. Smoky shied a bit at the sound of the zip, but when he saw the opening, he tried to shove his snout in right away. All of this was immensely promising.

“No carrots there.” Phoebe eased his nose back and slowly pulled out the halter, lead already clipped on. “Those awful people tell me you can't abide a halter or bridle. Is that true?”

Horses became head-shy for two reasons: pain or fear. Actually, those were the same reason: pain made fear. One way or another, a head-shy horse had come into contact with at least one terrible person.

Laying the halter over her hands, she let Smoky investigate. The halter itself didn't faze him, but that wasn't the issue. The issue was that bit of woven nylon going up near his eyes.

Working in all but complete darkness now became a help. Though horses had good night vision, it was still less keen than their day vision, and that gave Phoebe a little bit of room to work around his fear, especially since she'd taken the time to gain some trust.

Hanging the halter and lead over her shoulder so Smoky could still investigate it, she pulled out the feedbag she'd modified for just this purpose.

At the bottom of the bag was about two cups of sweet feed. Smoky caught scent of that and just about knocked her over trying to get to it. Laughing, Phoebe held the bag open, and the horse plunged his head in. While he snacked on oats, corn, and molasses, she eased the bag up his nose, over his eyes—she'd covered the bug screens with opaque nylon—and over his ears with minimal resistance.

Horses were prey animals with sharp eyesight, a big blind spot right in front of their face, and very few defensive moves. Flight was their primary defense, so they were afraid of a whole lot. In the horse world, jokes were legion about all the things, real and imaginary, that could send a horse flying off in abject terror and often taking their person on a wild ride. You could train a horse to get used to a lot of visual and aural commotion, which is how they became mounts for herding, police, search and rescue, or the military, but that training was intense, and the horses were carefully chosen for it. Most horses could at least habituate to their living conditions and the people they lived with, and a horse raised with kids was usually a lot more tolerant of fuss, so long as it was fuss that happened regularly. But in general, horses were giant scaredy-cats and absolutely despised change.

However, they were not great thinkers. If you covered their eyes, and weird noises weren't happening, they generally forgot there was something scary around and calmed at once.

With the hooded feedbag on, Smoky barely noticed the halter going on over it. Now Phoebe wished she'd brought the blanket out here, so she could have gotten that on easily as well. But it wouldn't have fit in her pack.

When the feedbag was empty, the horse got restless, trying to find a way to get more. His eyes were still covered, so she had no trouble getting the bag off, and Smoky immediately began searching her for more goodies. He sniffed out the carrots in her pocket, and snatched them from her hand before she could get them all the way out.

“Easy, baby,” she chuckled. “You gotta start slow after going without so long. Don’t want to make yourself sick.”

Overfeeding a horse meant more than a night moaning on the couch with their jeans unzipped. Horses couldn’t vomit; they had a specialized, one-way digestive system. If their stomach rejected what went down, it was pretty much their stomach itself that came up—and that was fatal. Thus, refeeding a starved horse was a delicate process. Phoebe had to balance the needs of rescuing Smoky with the needs of returning him to health.

Now, though, she had a haltered animal who had decided she was an angel sent from above. So she gave him the rest of the carrots, put her lightened pack on her back, loosely looped the rope lead in her hand, and led him leisurely across the dark pasture, watching each step so she didn’t fold an ankle on the hoof-heaved earth.

When they got to the gate, Ricky and his wife were gone. Lights in the house were on, and she saw the wife at the kitchen window. They’d walked away and left her to her own devices.

Good. She had the surrender paperwork signed and folded up in the pack, so she didn’t need them anymore, anyway. It would have been nice to have another pair of hands in case Smoky balked at the trailer, but she thought they’d become friends enough she could manage to convince him.

He stood calmly while she put a heavy blanket over his back and fastened it, but he did balk at the trailer. He got all the way to the ramp without trouble, but when Phoebe tried to lead him up, he reared back. She’d made the mistake of wrapping the lead too tightly around her hand, doing it without thinking while she was trying to convince him to come forward, and he pulled her off her feet. She face-planted on the ramp and slammed her cheek pretty hard. Ouch. Fuck.

Thankfully, Smoky didn’t run off. As soon as she fell, he settled and came close to nose at her, worried.

“I’m okay, baby,” Phoebe said as she sat up. She stroked his nose. “I’m okay. But now you owe me. You gotta get on

this trailer.”

Not until she offered him another apple did he comply. But as he finally stepped onto the ramp, she heard a sickening crack and saw her phone in actual pieces on the ridged steel. It must have fallen from her coat pocket when she fell, and the horse had crushed it under one cracked hoof.

Smoky had not noticed that noise. He walked the rest of the way into the stall and finished his apple, then started in on the fresh hay. Phoebe stood with the pieces of her phone in her hand and stared at the bony grey ass of the horse she'd finally rescued.

“Win some, lose some,” she muttered and dropped the corpse of her phone into her pack. “Hope we don’t need to make a call on the way home.”

~oOo~

Smoky hated the trailer. As soon as it started to roll, he panicked. Phoebe had to stop every thirty minutes or so and spend fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes back there settling him again, trying to convince him that it was going to be okay, that he had no need to break through the trailer and escape.

Doing this by herself was a huge pain in the pooper. But Margot was away for the weekend, and Vin’s stump was infected, so he was wheelchair-bound outside the house. She’d known it would be a hard day when she’d headed out alone this morning, but damn.

It was past midnight when Phoebe reached the western limit of Tulsa and finally felt stress unspool from her spine. Last hour of the trip. Maybe they’d made their last stop before home.

Sadly, while this might well have been Smoky’s lucky day, it was not Phoebe’s.

Just as she put the southeastern limit of the city behind her, a bang like an explosion filled the air.

A massive flashback surged into Phoebe's head and she went into battle-mode at once, which probably saved her and Smoky both. Not until it was all over and her head was back in the present, with her ass planted in the cushy seat of her truck, was she able to understand what had really happened in the past minute or so.

The bang had not been an IED. There were no IEDs on Oklahoma highways.

Something had gone wrong in her truck. The engine had just up and stopped—probably threw a rod. Not good, but better than getting blown up in the Afghan desert. One of those per lifetime was enough, thanks.

Flashbacks were so weird. While her brain had suddenly time-traveled five-plus years backward, her body had stayed right here and done what it had to do, and it had kept a log. She could remember that minute both as flashback and as the present, two timelines happening at once.

In 2018 Afghanistan, she'd been flying through the air in a storm of fire, gore, and shrapnel. In 2024 Tulsa, the power steering of her truck had frozen with the death of the engine, and it had taken everything she had to get the Sierra 1500 and its trailer and passenger to the side of the road without taking anybody else with them. If it had been a normal hour of the day, she would very likely have caused a pileup and ended up on the news.

So ... this was a better result than either an early-morning bomb or a midday pileup. But it still sucked. She could have perspective and also be pissed the fuck off.

It was the darkest hours of the night, twenty-two degrees and windy, she was on the shoulder of the Broken Arrow Expressway with a dead truck, a sick, cold, freaked-out horse, and no goddamn phone.

They were still well within the Tulsa metro area, so even at this hour of the night there was a little bit of traffic, a few cars whizzing by at a fairly steady clip. She could flag somebody down and at least ask them to make a phone call for her. Surely somebody would stop.

First, though, she had to go back and make sure Smoky hadn't gotten knocked around. She could hear he wasn't calm; he was stomping in the trailer and whinnying that screechy note that meant a horse was deeply unhappy. She'd been listening to that particular tune most of the night.

Sometimes she wished she'd decided on a different kind of life after the hospital. Sold the farm and rented a little apartment, adopted a couple of kittens. Gotten a job in a quiet office somewhere, with a desk and some fake walls to call her own.

She had, however, decided on a life of rescuing and rehabilitating strays. As she herself had been rescued and rehabilitated.

Phoebe sat for a minute and got her mental legs firmly beneath her. Then she closed her coat back up, pulled on her beanie and gloves, and went to check on her newly rescued horse.

CHAPTER THREE

As he drove home from his sister and brother-in-law's place, Duncan's head whirred. That parting shot of Dex's had really set him back: mere days before the Eureka run, the Bulls' Sergeant at Arms wanted the younger patches to stay back? How did that make sense?

It didn't. The club had been talking about this run for weeks. Planning, playing out different scenarios, doing actual drills so everybody would know how to shift things if (when) they hit an obstacle. The range of ways this move to patch over the Nameless MC in Eureka might go stretched from bloodless and easy (They convince the club to take the Bull, despite repeated votes against it.) to a bloodbath (They kill all the Nameless who resist. All-out war.) Every single patch knew exactly how dangerous the run could be; nobody had let anyone forget it.

And they needed the numbers. Every single Bull in both charters. They had to arrive in Eureka looking like an army.

Dex knew all that. Hell, with his elite military experience, he'd been the one drafting most of the plans. So why was he thinking about leaving half the club home?

Before Duncan could work out an answer to that puzzle, his attention snagged on something on the shoulder up ahead. A horse trailer. Complete with horse. He couldn't see a human, but the truck attached to the trailer had its lights on, so maybe the guy was in the cab.

The trailer rocked and shook, and the horse's skinny ass shifted around like the animal who belonged to that ass wanted out.

Duncan didn't know much about horses. He liked them fine and had been around them a bit, and he'd ridden occasionally as a kid, when the fam had a party out at the Wesson farm. But he was not a horse guy. However, he didn't need to be a horse guy to know that an occupied trailer on the side of the expressway at one o'clock in the morning, when

the temperature was around twenty degrees, meant some kind of trouble.

From his earliest days, he'd been taught that Bulls help out on the road. Friend, stranger, even rival, it didn't matter. You saw someone on the road in need of help, you pulled over and helped. So he pulled onto the shoulder and stopped behind the trailer.

As he climbed down from his truck and stepped onto the shoulder, he heard the horse whinnying—if the sound it was making could be called that. To Duncan's ears it was more like screaming. The horse was also stomping and slamming against the back and side walls of the trailer.

Still no sign of a human to go with this freaked-out horse. Was the driver okay?

“Hello?” he called into the windy cold.

“Hey!” a feminine voice yelled back. “Thank you for stopping! Please don't go anywhere, okay?”

A woman? Alone?

The voice had come from the trailer, so Duncan picked up his pace and got to the back of the trailer, which was a tailgate. Closed. How'd she get in there? Was somebody else driving?

“Okay,” he said as he hooked his hands over the gate. It was a two-horse trailer, but the other side was empty. That didn't help the illumination situation much. The interior was an incomprehensible swirl of glare and shadow, and all he could see up front was a vague shape of the rest of the horse and a smaller vague, humanoid shape. “You need help?”

“I do. I just need to convince Smoky here that we're okay. Please don't leave!”

“I won't. I stopped to help.”

“Thank you!” she said. Then she returned her attention to the horse. Duncan couldn't hear much over the stomping and screaming, the wind, the occasional vehicle flying by, but he thought she was singing.

After a few minutes, the horse quieted. Another minute more, and the small vague humanoid shape came to the back of the trailer and into view.

Well goddamn. She was young, around his age, and she was fucking *gorgeous*. It didn't matter that she wore a shapeless, shearling-lined barn coat, leather work gloves, and a dark beanie pulled low over her forehead and ears. It didn't matter that the lighting sucked. Her face was all the view Duncan needed to know she was the most gorgeous girl he'd met in his life. Big, wide-set eyes, pouty lips over a pointed chin. Glory be.

Then she grabbed the top of the tailgate and pulled herself over to land gracefully on her feet before him, and Duncan was thoroughly smitten.

“Hi!” she said and offered her gloved hand. “I’m Phoebe.”

He closed his hand around hers. “Duncan. How can I help?”

“If I could just borrow your phone, that would be a huge help. I’ve been trying to flag somebody down for almost an hour, and you’re the first who’s stopped. I’m surprised you did. I wasn’t even flagging anybody down—Smoky had a little meltdown I had to deal with.”

Duncan glanced at the horse’s ass again. It was bony as fuck. That horse was skinny.

He looked down at the beautiful girl named Phoebe. “I was taught to help people in trouble on the road, and this looked like trouble.”

“In this case, looks don’t deceive.” She glared at the expressway, which was currently empty. “I wish more people had been taught to be helpers, but I’m grateful you were. I don’t want to ruin the rest of your night, though, so if I can just make a call to get a tow, that would be fantastic, and then you can get back to your plans.”

“It’s after one in the morning. My plans were to go home and to bed.”

“Then I don’t want to get in the way of your good night’s sleep.” She held her hand out expectantly.

Duncan didn’t reach for his phone just yet. He took a step toward the side of the road and considered the trailer and truck—a double-cab Sierra 1500. It looked like an early 2000s model, so about twenty to twenty-five years old. “Getting a tow with an occupied trailer is gonna take some effort. I’m a mechanic. I work at Brian Delaney Auto Service. I’ll take a look if you want, see if I can get it running.”

Phoebe stepped over and frowned at her truck. “I don’t mind you looking, but I think it’s a loss. There was a big, loud bang, and then the whole thing just locked up. Steering went and everything. I barely got it to the shoulder. I know a little bit about cars—not like a mechanic, but enough to have a guess. My first thought was a thrown rod.”

Duncan grunted; her description lined up with a thrown rod, sadly. “No comin’ back from that. You mind if I take a look?”

Her eyes narrowed as she stared up at him. After a moment’s examination of his face, she nodded. “Sure, let’s go up and take a look.”

She led him to the front of the truck, then backtracked to the cab, opened the passenger door, climbed in and disappeared below the windshield. Then the hood release popped.

Duncan lifted the hood all the way and used the flashlight in his phone to examine the engine. It took him about fifteen seconds to find the giant hole where a rod had shot through. Yeah, this engine was completely fucked.

When Phoebe came back, he said, “You’re right. Thrown rod. Wanna see?”

She nodded and stepped up onto the bumper to lean over and get a look.

Duncan shone the light on the hole. “You see that?” Leaning farther, Phoebe pressed her body against his. Over the familiar smells of engine, Duncan smelled something cold and

earthy, and also something light and fruity. Strawberries, he thought. Maybe her shampoo, coming up from the messy braids that dangled over her shoulders.

Pulling his head out of his dick, he explained, “That hole is where the rod shot straight through the engine. Yeah, this truck is terminal.”

Phoebe hopped down. “Well, that sucks tremendously. But thank you for checking. And for stopping. If I could just borrow your phone to make a call, I won’t bother you more. My phone broke tonight.”

That made him laugh as he closed the hood. “Your phone died, too? You are having a shitty night.”

“Yes, I am. Shitty enough that I’m not ready to find the funny yet.”

“Sorry.” As he was about to offer her his phone an idea occurred to him, so he didn’t hand it over yet. “I hope you don’t think I’m Buffalo Bill, but my truck has a hitch. If you’re not headed real far, we could hitch you up to me, and I could get you and Stormy here—”

“Smoky.”

“Smoky, sorry. I could get you both home. I can call to have somebody from my shop tow the truck in, and you can deal with that later.”

Again, she squinted up at him, making no pretense that she wasn’t evaluating the fuck out of him. “I can appreciate the *Silence of the Lambs* reference, and if you’re not a psycho serial killer who plans to make a dress out of my skin, I’m grateful for the offer. But that’s a lot of trouble to take for a total stranger. Too much trouble. So much it feels like a red flag.”

“No, it’s a green flag. I’m not looking for anything from you at all. Like I told you—I was taught to help. But here—” he held out his phone—“if a phone call is all the help you need, go ‘head.”

He was willing to help, but he had neither the will nor the need to push his help on her. Besides, it was late and fucking

cold, so if she didn't want a rescue, he wanted to get back in his warm truck and get moving.

She took the phone from him and studied it in her hand. Then she looked up at him and studied him again, like a scientist looking through a microscope. "You'll really hitch up and take us home? No strings attached?"

Duncan grinned. "Well, let's set some boundaries around that. How far you goin'?"

"Down around Checotah, so about an hour."

"Hell, that's nothin'. Sure, I'll get you there."

"You sure? That means an hour back here."

"I'm sure. Let me call the tow in, and we'll get to work on moving the trailer."

~oOo~

The plan Duncan had sketched out in his head when he'd had the idea to offer her a ride home was to back his truck up, then get the horse off the trailer and push the empty trailer backward so he could pull his F150 in front of it, and then hitch it up and load the horse again. Phoebe laughed when he suggested he could move an empty trailer on his own, insisting that it weighed about as much as a car.

As usual, getting laughed at made him even more stubborn about it.

How heavy could an empty trailer be? As much as a car? Come on. It wasn't one of those fancy deals with air conditioning and rooms in front for gear, and it wasn't like he meant to pick the thing up; he simply needed to lift the coupler a little, then push and pull it—on wheels—ten feet or so.

As it turned out, a horse trailer might actually weigh as much as a small car. However, Duncan was strong, especially when he had cred on the line, and he only had to move it a few feet, so he got it done. It had helped that he had a gravity buff:

they were on a slight incline, headed downward in the correct direction; once he'd got it moving, the hard part had been getting it to stop before it crashed into his truck.

He was going to ache for a few days, but he got the fucker hitched up and was rewarded with a look of total shock and a little awe on Phoebe's pretty face.

"Told ya," he said with a grin.

Phoebe grinned back. "Okay. I'm impressed."

Smoky thought getting back into that trailer was a spectacularly horrible idea, and he thought Duncan was possibly Satan himself, so Phoebe had to coax him back in on her own. While she did, talking quietly to the horse, she explained that she ran a large-animal rescue called Ragamuffin Ranch, and that she'd just rescued Smoky from a bad neglect situation, and she suspected abuse as well.

"The guy I rescued him from was a real piece of work. Horses aren't very smart, but they are self-protective. I think he's learned that men are dangerous."

"That really sucks," Duncan said, standing on the shoulder, out of the horse's sightline. "I hate people sometimes."

"Same," she cooed, stroking Smoky's nose as she urged him to take one more step onto the ramp. "But then there are strangers who stop and offer to give themselves a hernia and also drive us two hours out of their way, so I don't hate everybody all the time."

Well, that felt pretty good. Before Duncan could think of a good way to reply, he saw the wrecker coming and hurried toward it, meaning to wave it over before it got too close and freaked the horse out all over again.

Mason Spellman, the club's new prospect (and also Simon's kid and Sam's brother), saw Duncan and understood what he was being asked to do. He pulled over and stopped well behind the trailer. Duncan walked over as the driver's door opened.

Mason jumped down, looking like a guy who'd been pulled from sleep to do a crappy job in the cold. He was the

only prospect at the moment, and he lived on his folks' farm, out in the boonies west of Tulsa, so he'd taken to staying at the clubhouse most nights, just to be closer if and when he got a call like the one he'd gotten tonight.

"Hey, Dunc." Mason shoved his hands in his jeans as a blast of cold wind hit them.

"Hey, Mace." Duncan almost apologized for dragging him out here, but patches did not apologize to prospects for giving them work. "The Sierra up there threw a rod. It's not a repair, just getting it off the road until she can figure out what to do with the corpse."

"Okay. So should I take it to the station, then?"

"Yeah. Just drop it at the back of the lot. I'll be in tomorrow, and I'll deal with it then."

"Is this a paid job?"

"No." When Mason's face took on a fretful scrunch, Duncan added, "I'll text my dad and let him know. You won't get heat for not writing up a ticket."

Relief rolled visibly through Mason's body. He'd been a prospect for only a couple months, but he already understood how the role stung. "Okay, that's good. Thanks."

~oOo~

Once Phoebe got Smoky into the trailer, she went back to the Sierra and packed up her personal shit. Then Duncan and Mason got the dead truck hooked to the wrecker, and Mason headed off to the next ramp, so he could turn back to the city.

As Duncan climbed in behind the wheel of his truck to finally get off this damn shoulder, Phoebe reached over and clutched his arm. "Hey. Thank you for this. Really, *thank you*. After an hour of watching people drive right by me, trying not to panic about how I'd ever get out of here with Smoky, you stopped and gave me so much more help than I hoped for. You are officially a knight in shining armor."

Feeling that praise like it had actual warmth, Duncan smiled and attempted a dumb courtly flourish. “At your service, milady.”

Phoebe laughed and sat back. “Okay, don’t let it go to your head there, buddy.”

~oOo~

For the first few minutes of the trip, they rode in relative silence. A few sentences about where, precisely, Duncan was headed, and some discussion about what temperature to put the heater on. But no kind of real conversation. Duncan tried to pick up her vibe and understand whether she’d even like to talk.

He liked this girl, and he wanted to know more. Eventually he was too curious to keep quiet, so he found something she’d offered about herself and used it to maybe start a conversation.

“How’d you decide to start a rescue ranch?” He almost added that his sister was a vet and had just won an award for her work with rescues—hey, maybe they even knew each other—but decided against it. He wanted to know about her. Details about him, or his family, could wait.

Oddly, Phoebe didn’t answer right away, and when he glanced over, she was watching him, her expression almost blank, just a touch of that evaluative look around her eyes.

“I didn’t mean to get nosy,” Duncan said. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just ... it’s a big, long, heavy story, and I don’t want to trap you in something a lot more involved than you were expecting.”

“Hey, we got an hour to kill, right? I’m listening if you want to tell me a story, heavy or otherwise.”

She nodded but didn’t start her story. For a few more minutes, she was quiet, and every time Duncan looked over, she was watching the road ahead of them.

“I was in the Army,” she finally began. “Deployed to Afghanistan.”

“Oh, shit,” Duncan said. He thought about Dex, but again, set details about his life and the people in it aside for later.

“Yeah. I enlisted after high school. I wanted to go to college, but there was no money for it, and I didn’t want to drown in loans. So I went the military route. I was deployed pretty much right out of training.”

“I know people who fought over there,” Duncan said, because she’d paused like she expected some input. “I’ve heard how rough it was.”

“I was there for less than a year. Then the truck I was in rolled over an IED.”

That statement surprised Duncan so much his foot slipped off the gas. “What? Shit!”

She did not look like someone who’d been blown up by a bomb. Duncan had done a couple of Christmases with Dex at the VFW, and he’d seen what IEDs did. He wondered what her big coat and jeans were covering.

His face must have shown that thought somehow, because she said, “I’ve got all my parts. I don’t even have many scars. The guy sitting next to me was torn apart, but I barely bled.” She looked out the side window. “On the outside, anyway. On the inside, I got kind of pureed. The shockwave from the bomb.”

If they hadn’t been towing a horse, Duncan would have pulled off the road and found somewhere to stop so he could really look at her. Unable to do that, he said, “I’m sorry.”

He caught the shake of her head in his peripheral vision.

“Anyway. I was in a coma for about eight months, and when I came out of it, I had to learn to do everything again—walk, talk, write, read, feed myself, everything. I even had to relearn how to think and remember who I was. I was in rehab for almost two years, the last part of it in a kind of halfway house, where you transition back to living on your own.”

“Jesus, Phoebe. Can I ask—tell me I’m an asshole if I shouldn’t ask—but how old are you?” She looked young and fresh, innocent, even. Not like a wounded warrior.

“Maybe it’s rude, but I don’t think you’re an asshole. I’m twenty-five.”

The same age as him. Suddenly his badass biker life felt like make-believe.

It very much was not; the Bulls practically had a wing of the cemetery as evidence of the extreme realness of their life. But he himself hadn’t faced danger like that. He’d been left behind for most of the hardcore shit. Even now, Dex was trying to leave him behind.

Suddenly, Duncan thought he truly understood Dex’s motivation. Still didn’t agree with it, but understood.

“Jesus,” he muttered.

“Yeah, you said that.” Her tone was teasing. “The transition house was in Ohio, on a working farm. There were six vets there, and our occupational therapy was farm work. I’d been raised out here, in the country—my family place hasn’t been a working farm since my grandpa’s time, too much of the land’s been sold off piecemeal for that, but we always had animals. Horses and chickens, a few goats, all that.”

Again, she fell quiet. This time Duncan didn’t feel the need to fill her silence.

“I don’t know,” she continued. “It was something familiar to me, and I needed that. I’m mostly back to normal, but not totally. When I’m stressed, I have trouble processing information, and I can get overwhelmed pretty fast. So I don’t always deal with urgent problems very well, and when I get to that place, I usually get mad and make everything worse. I didn’t feel like I’d be able to handle college or any kind of job where I had a boss breathing down my neck, and I got to thinking about how broken things deserve a good life, too. That’s how Ragamuffin Ranch was born.”

Duncan was stunned. In fact, he was in awe. He hadn’t seen her fight her way back to health, but the mere thought of

having to relearn everything about *being a person* overwhelmed him. And here she was, talking about it like it was just a thing that happened, a thing in her past.

“Tonight was pretty stressful,” he said, unable to think of anything better he could say. “And you dealt with that great.”

She smiled at him. “You weren’t around for the huge meltdown I had in my truck after about a half-hour of being ignored. There was snot and drool and everything. Also, I cracked the dash.”

“I could name five people off the top of my head who would have lost their shit at being stranded on the side of the road in the middle of a January night with a sick, scared horse, and not one of them had to relearn how to walk and talk after they got blown up. I’m sure I would have at least punched something and broken my hand.”

“That’s a nice thing to say,” she told the side window. “It’s not the same, but it’s a nice thing to say.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Trust me,” Phoebe said. “My mom and I were oil and water. Or maybe—what was the experiment we did in high school?—potassium chlorate and sugar. We got too close to each other and something went boom every time. Turn right at the stop sign. Once my dad passed and there wasn’t anybody between us anymore, it got bad. It was better for everyone involved that she went to Florida and left me behind, and I don’t think she gave a shit that I was in a coma when she got sick and died.”

Duncan stopped at the crossroads that would put him on the gravel road to Ragamuffin Ranch. He looked over, gave her a quick, examining look, and smiled. “I guess you’re the sugar in that metaphor?”

Relieved that he’d chosen to take the lighthearted route through her thorny story, Phoebe grinned. “Let’s go with that, yeah.”

Not much more than two hours ago, she’d been in full meltdown, sitting in an increasingly cold truck while she drowned in panic and rage—and with a horse in even worse shape than her own. No phone, no truck, no hope of any rescue. Every asshole that had flown right past her waving arms had been a little bit of shrapnel to her psyche.

Then, while she was out of sight in the trailer, trying to bring Smoky down from his full-blown panic, a savior had appeared.

A calm, capable, kind savior. Strong and steady. Easy on the eyes, too.

She liked this guy. Enough that she’d spent the past hour puking most of her life story on him.

That part wasn’t entirely her fault. He kept asking questions like he was really interested, and not in the trauma-porn way. Just like he simply wanted to know about her.

It hadn’t been an interview, either. She knew he was her age, that he lived in his family home, too—though he lived

with his parents. He was the middle child, with two sisters, and his older sister was a vet who'd just won an award for her work with rescues.

He'd asked if Phoebe knew his sister, Kelsey, and the name maybe seemed a little familiar, but no. Phoebe probably knew all the large-animal rescue folks in the state, and a good handful of the veterinarians who donated time and resources to caring for those big babies, but that was because they were a pretty small group. A whole lot more people focused on rescuing puppies and kittens.

So no, Phoebe didn't know his sister. But the connection point of rescue work was nice.

He'd also told her he was a Brazen Bull. That was less nice.

She didn't have a problem with motorcycles, or with motorcycle clubs. Though she didn't think she'd ever broken more than the speed limit—not even shoplifting a candy bar as a kid—she didn't necessarily have a philosophical problem with breaking the law. She'd been poor or close to it all her life, and she lived in a community where most people were like her. She'd seen plenty of evidence that laws pretty much only applied to regular people; rich fuckers could do most anything they wanted and get away with it. She didn't hold much stock in rules that applied only to the powerless.

However, the Bulls were *professional* outlaws. One-percenters. Clubs like theirs considered themselves soldiers in some kind of war, and Phoebe had seen all she could stomach of war. So she wasn't thrilled Duncan was one of those outlaws who thought they were soldiers.

Not that it really mattered. She hadn't been in a relationship since high school, and she hadn't been interested in another since she'd come home from a real war. Her Hitachi handled her needs just fine. And she had all the family she needed right here on Ragamuffin Ranch.

Still, she found herself disappointed that her new friend Duncan wasn't perfect.

“There on the right—the big oak? That’s my road.”

Duncan followed her directions. He was good pulling the trailer. Probably he’d done some time driving the wrecker at his station.

“*Road* is a pretty ambitious term here,” Duncan snarked as they bounced over the rutted gravel lane.

Phoebe laughed. “Yeah, I need to get it graded. I will when then cold weather ends.” If she could scrounge up the funds. “Thanks for being careful for Smoky.”

“Is there weed for horses? Because that poor guy is gonna need to smoke a bowl after this night. You, too.”

“Actually, yes, there is weed for horses. It’s CBD, not THC, but yeah, there’s some calming benefits. But refeeding a starved horse is a delicate balance, so weed’s not a good idea until I understand his bigger issues.”

They crested the last rise; in the shallow valley before them lay her family home, bathed in the sickly yellow light of three dusk-to-dawns.

“Pretty,” Duncan said, half under his breath.

To Phoebe this was simply home. She knew of the stable roof that was well past its prime, the leaky basement, the rotting back porch with the ancient wringer washer rusting away in the corner. The tractor she was keeping running with hope and enthusiasm. The fences that needed a new coat of sealant. And now she could add a truck with no engine to her list of derelicts and rejects.

But Duncan’s quiet, single word conjured a spell to brighten her vision. Setting aside her list of things she struggled to afford to replace or repair, Phoebe saw the cheerful red of the house, the bright white trim, the twinkle of Christmas lights she was always slow to pull down. She saw the dormant strawberry pyramid, and the big oaks that sheltered the picnic tables and the brick barbecue pit. The tidy stable full of animals she’d made whole and happy.

This was home, and she loved it. Yes, it was pretty.

“Thanks. The stable’s off to the right there. If you pull up at the doors, I’ll get Smoky out, and we can free you up.”

He nodded and turned toward the stable.

When he parked outside the double doors, Phoebe climbed out at once and headed to Smoky. She was only slightly surprised to find Duncan right there at the back of the trailer, ready to keep helping. Together they got Smoky out—he was much happier to leave the trailer than to enter it, and his opinion of Duncan had improved from terror to suspicion—and she walked him into the stable.

As soon as she stepped in and turned on the center lights, every occupied stall suddenly had a head over the door—or, in the cases of Klaxon and Daisy, a burro and a miniature horse, a head through the door—and the air filled with nickers and yawns.

“Sorry, babies,” Phoebe cooed. “Didn’t mean to wake you. But this is your new brother Smoky. You’ll get to meet him real soon.”

Titan, a twenty-eight-year-old Percheron who’d done decades of hard time as a carriage horse for tourists, kicked his stall door and sent the whole stable shaking.

“Fuck, he’s *huge*,” Duncan said behind her.

“Yeah, he is. But he’s a teddy bear and our best ambassador. That kick was just for attention. Here, take this.” She handed Smoky’s lead to Duncan and walked over to her big boy. “Hey, fella.” He dropped his head over her shoulder and leaned in hard enough to make her sidestep. She reached up and gave him a good scratch in the special place behind his ears he liked best. “That’s Smoky, and I’m gonna need you to show him the ropes when he’s ready. Look—you two are practically twins.”

They were both dapples, but Titan was about twice Smoky’s size, if Smoky were at a healthy weight. The bigger horse stretched his neck and tipped his head, letting Smoky know not to be afraid. Smoky tossed his head back, not sure he

believed it. Then Titan nickered, soft and long, and Smoky cocked his head.

Phoebe went back and took the lead from Duncan. “They can’t get any closer yet. But as soon as he’s out of quarantine, I’m gonna put him right next door, so they can get to know each other.” She walked Smoky through the stable, to the stalls behind the tack room, which led to a small turn-out and was their quarantine zone. She walked him into an empty stall and got the halter off with only a single head-toss to slow her down.

Smoky wasn’t mean or feral. What this poor boy had needed was one person to be kind.

The night was cold and he had no fat on him, so she left the blanket on. Then she went out to get him fresh hay and water.

“Can I help?” Duncan asked.

“Uh, yeah. Sure. You’re not in a rush to get back to Tulsa?”

He shrugged. “Guess not.”

Not knowing how to read that terse reply, she didn’t bother. As she grabbed a slow-feeder bag off the wall, she said, “You can fill this with hay after I hang it up. Then I’ll get the hose. Loose hay’s in that big crate in the corner there.”

“What is that thing?” He cocked his head at the bag.

They’d established on the ride that Duncan was a city boy without a lot of knowledge about horses or any other farm animal. “It’s a slow-feeder bag. The horse has to pull the hay out through the mesh, so he can’t gorge himself and get sick. Once a horse has starved this bad, we have to be careful how we feed him up. This way he can eat all night unsupervised without getting sick.”

In lieu of a reply, Duncan stared at her, a strange expression forming around his eyes.

“What?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing. You just ... know your shit.”

“Well, yeah. It’s my life.”

Again he said nothing, but this time he went and collected a big armful of sweet hay.

They got Smoky settled, and Phoebe went up and down the stable, giving smooches and pets to all the animals housed there: seven—now eight—horses, a burro, a miniature horse, three goats, two alpacas, two cows, and one very dopey sheep. They also had flocks of chickens, geese, and ducks, but they had houses of their own. Five barn cats roamed the place like royalty and called the whole damn thing home. And there was Gremlin, a collie-cattle dog cross who was a great babysitter of their motley herd, but Gremlin was Margot’s and went where she did, so he was having a weekend break.

“All these animals were abused?” Duncan asked.

“Most of them. But Amos over there, the black with the star on his face, is my horse. I got him as a colt. I rescued Titan at auction. The goats came to me after their elderly owner died. The alpacas were in a hoarding situation, and I feel weird thinking about that as abuse, even though it technically is. But hoarding is a mental health issue, so it’s not the same thing as what happened to Smoky, for instance. Or what happened to Titan, who was worked almost to death giving carriage rides to tourists and sent to auction without a second thought once he couldn’t endure that life anymore.”

“People fucking suck,” Duncan muttered.

“A lot of them do, yeah.” Phoebe turned and smiled at him. “But not everybody. I’m pretty sure you don’t suck.”

He smiled. “Or you.”

For a moment, no longer than two heartbeats, they gazed at each other. Phoebe felt a kindling of something she hadn’t felt in a long time.

It was near three o’clock in the morning. She’d been up almost twenty-four hours. More to the point, Duncan’s plans for the night had certainly not included this adventure.

But she liked him, and she liked that kindling feeling. Also, she hadn’t been shy a day in her life. Not even a

traumatic brain injury had made her shrink up—if anything, she was scrappier now. That didn't mean she wasn't anxious and depressed most of the time. Just that it pissed her off so much she stomped right over it.

“Hey—I know you probably want nothing more than to get back on the road and put all this in your rearview, but I'm a little wired, and there's pecan pie in my fridge. You want to come in and have a slice?”

Duncan's grin was big and bright and encouraging. “I'd love to.”

~oOo~

They closed up the stable, and Phoebe led Duncan across the yard, up the porch, and into the house.

They both pulled up short just inside the door; Vin was crashed out in the old recliner in the living room, with Mr. Orange, their giant ginger tabby, conked out in a curl on his lap. Vin's bedroom was on the first floor, but he must have decided it was too much trouble to get his crutches and work his way there.

Mr. Orange didn't even lift his head to see who'd come in. Guarding was below his pay grade.

When Phoebe looked back at Duncan, his frown was very direct. It said, *Huh?*

She put a finger to her lips and nodded toward the hall. She'd explain in the kitchen.

When they got to the kitchen, where the only light on was the little one in the stove hood, she went over and switched on the milk-glass lamp at the window.

“Can I ask why there's a huge Black guy sleeping in your living room?” Duncan asked, his voice low. “Are you not single?”

On the drive down, Phoebe had talked with unexpected detail about a lot of things, but she hadn't described her living arrangements. At the time, she hadn't expected him to hang around longer than required to unhitch his truck.

“Remember I told you I became good friends with one of the other people in the transition house? That's him. Vin. We're buds and roomies, and he helps me with the rescue stuff. My best friend from childhood, Margot, lives here, too, but she's away for the weekend. She's the only one with a regular job.”

Duncan's grin now was a little snarky—almost enough to be offensive. “So you've got yourself a mini-commune? A little *polycule*?”

The way he hit that word was definitely offensive, and Phoebe wasn't even polyamorous—and didn't think she knew anyone who was.

“No, I've got myself some good friends and a way we can all have an okay life and get at least most of the bills paid. And we're there for each other when we need somebody. I guess being a Brazen Bull means you don't have to worry about whether you'll have food or heat or even somebody to help when there's trouble, but I've had to worry about all that plenty in my life. You know what? I just realized how fucking late it is. You should go.”

His eyes popped wide. “Hey, hold up. I didn't mean anything by that. I was trying to make a joke, but obviously I shot wide. I'm sorry. Really.”

Phoebe crossed her arms and stared at him, considering. She was irritated and ready to shove him back out the door, but she couldn't say she'd be thrilled about it. That kindling feeling warmed the floor of her belly and made her tingly in a way she barely remembered.

He was good looking. Not like a model, all pretty and posed, but like a regular guy, living a real life. His body seemed good under his heavy coat, and she'd seen for herself how strong he was. His hair and beard were dark—that beard was maybe a bit more carefully shaved than she preferred, but

it wasn't some mangy wannabe beard. Thick, slashing brows. And under those, the brightest, keenest green eyes she'd ever seen.

Yeah, he attracted.

He took a step toward her. "Phoebe, seriously. It was a shitty attempt to be funny. I got no right to judge anything about your life, and I wasn't trying to do that. I'm sorry." Another step. "I'll go if that's what you want, but it's not what I want."

His expression was warm and sincere, and she believed him. But she didn't want to make things too easy for him. She sucked her teeth and asked, "Why not? You a big fan of leftover pecan pie?"

A grin found its way back to his face as he took yet another step closer. "Yeah, I really like *pie*. I'd like to spend more time with *pie* and get to know *pie* better."

He was close enough now that she had to tip her head back to keep her attention on his eyes. But he hadn't touched her. Without moving, she replied, "Maybe I should get that pie out of the fridge and leave you two alone."

She'd meant to sound sassy, but her speeding heart choked out her voice, and the whole sentence came out like a breath.

Duncan's hands came out and enclosed her upper arms. "If you don't want me to kiss you right now, you should say or do something to let me know."

Phoebe stared into those keen green eyes and said nothing. She uncrossed her arms and clutched the sleeves of his coat.

Still grinning, he leaned down and stopped about three inches from her mouth. "Just to be clear, if grabbing me was supposed to be a sign that I should go, I'm gonna need some more detail."

"Shut the fuck up and kiss me," Phoebe answered, pulling on his sleeves.

He came down the rest of the way and kissed her. But he didn't push his tongue into her mouth right away—in fact, he

didn't even open his mouth at first. His first kiss was light, his lips brushing back and forth over hers. Then he lifted away a bit and held there. Phoebe opened her eyes and found that his were still closed. She rose onto her toes and pressed her lips to his.

Then he opened his mouth, but still each kiss was small and restrained. His lips explored hers, sucking and sweeping, but went no farther.

On her few hookups with guys she'd matched with on apps, there'd been no seduction and very little foreplay. They'd got busy right away, and the first kiss, if there was kissing at all, was wide open and plunging.

Duncan was seducing her.

That small fire in her belly caught fully, and she moaned.

With a grunting reply, he wrapped his arms around her and drew her tightly against his body. Phoebe let go of his sleeves and slipped her hands up his arms, over broad, beefy shoulders, and pushed her fingers into his short hair. Silky and thick.

Finally his tongue slipped over her lips, into her mouth, but still his kisses were no aggressive siege. He wasn't taking her over; he wanted her to come along. She kissed him back the same way, mapping the terrain of his mouth with her tongue, tasting his lips, brushing her smooth face over his beard.

And damn, the man smelled *great*. Leather and wool and bar soap, and that certain, wonderful scent of man-skin. And just beneath it all was maybe a hint of ... lavender?

He pulled back first. This time, when Phoebe opened her eyes, green eyes flashed heat at her.

"Yeah, I really like pie," he said, his voice low and soft and sultry.

"I really like pie, too. Stay the night?" she asked.

The invitation made him grin again. His lips gleamed from their kisses. "Night's just about over. But I'll stay the

morning.”

She smiled. “My bedroom’s upstairs.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Phoebe took Duncan's hand and led him from her charmingly old-fashioned kitchen, across the creaky wood floor of the hallway, up an even creakier wood staircase that turned back on itself as they climbed, to the second floor. The first thing he saw was the bathroom, right across a carpeted hallway. Illuminated with a pinkish glow from what was probably a plug-in nightlight, the bathroom was at least as old-fashioned as the kitchen. It reminded him of those old, black-and-white shows Grampa D had found on some obscure streaming service.

Still drawing him forward, Phoebe led him past a nook along a railing that overlooked the staircase. In that nook was an ancient wing-back chair and a small round table that held a big, old landline phone.

Phoebe lived in a time capsule. Duncan thought it was cute as fuck.

They passed a few doors and reached one at the end of the hall. The room behind it was at the front of the house. With a smile tossed over her shoulder, Phoebe opened the door and welcomed him into her room.

She flipped the switch beside the door—it made a loud, hard *click*—and a funky glass lamp came on beside her bed.

The room was tidily cluttered. The floor here was bare wood, in urgent need of sanding and refinishing. A queen-size mattress sat on a low frame, with a Seventies-looking arched headboard behind it. White comforter and pillows on the bed, white cotton curtains on the three windows. A double dresser with an oval mirror was obviously a set with the bed. Arrayed across the dresser was a row of little glass animals—*Glass Menagerie*, whispered Mrs. Tatum, his eighth-grade English teacher, at the back of his head.

The table holding the funky lamp was a dark walnut stain and looked like it had once had a place in the living room, at the end of a sofa. A stack of three paperbacks, their spines

striated with the stress of many readings, sat on the lower part of the table. The one on top was Stephen King's *Night Shift*.

No desk, no computer, no television, but a row of three white wicker bookcases neatly crammed with paperbacks and a motley collection of baskets holding apparently random shit. The incandescent light of that single lamp made it hard to tell for sure, but he thought the walls were painted a dusty rose.

He could imagine his mom having a room just like this when she was a teenager.

On the wall between the two doors he assumed were her closets hung three large shadow-box frames, holding carefully arranged collections of memories. One had horse stuff, including ribbons, photos, and newspaper clippings. One had high school stuff, including a dried corsage. And one, smaller than the others, held mementoes of her military service. Something in that one caught his eye particularly, and he leaned in for a better look: a hospital bracelet. Odd choice for a memento. Beside it was a photo of Phoebe in full combat gear, framed by two big guys, one white, one black, in the same kind of gear. They stood in front of what Duncan assumed was a tank; too little of the vehicle was in frame to be sure, but it was not a regular car or truck. All three cradled M4s in their arms, and all three grinned brightly for the camera. Phoebe had eye black on her cheeks.

She'd really been a soldier, had really fought a war. Duncan had believed her when she'd told the story, but seeing her in this shadow box, he really *got* it.

What wasn't in this box was a Purple Heart. She must have been awarded one, but she hadn't included it among her war mementos. The hospital bracelet, yes; the medal for being wounded in action, no. Interesting.

While he studied her memories, Phoebe switched on a couple more lamps. Duncan turned to face the room, and now he noticed that the front wall, at the windows, was a virtual jungle. All three window sills were packed with potted plants, and in one corner a half dozen hung from the ceiling in macrame hangers. On the floor below those were three big

ceramic pots with large, lush plants. Tendrils from some of those plants trailed across the wall above the windows and down over the curtain rods. The woman obviously had a green thumb. Again, he thought of his mom.

Duncan's parents' house, the house he'd mostly grown up in, the house that was still his home, was by most metrics substantially nicer than this one. It was bigger, newer, in better repair, more carefully decorated, with far more modern appliances and such. And it was full of love and good memories. He adored that house. He was comfortable there and had no plans yet to leave it.

He didn't know why, but Phoebe's house felt like something he was missing. Nothing he'd seen here yet was as 'good' as he had it at home, but everything felt warm and cozy and ... he didn't know. He just really liked this ratty old house. Despite the big dude sleeping in the recliner below.

So he told her so. "I really like your house."

She scoffed and pulled her beanie off. As her golden hair shifted, Duncan caught a quick glimpse of a long white line on her scalp.

"Thanks," she replied. "It's falling down around us, but it's home." She shrugged out of her coat and tossed it on the wooden chair beside her dresser, then turned and held out her hand. Duncan took his coat off and handed it over. Immediately he felt cool relief. They'd had their coats on all this time, but until now he hadn't realized he was hot.

Now, finally, he could see more of her body. Phoebe was slim but not skinny. She had a nice, round ass and a good flare to her hips. Her tits looked about average in size. He took note of all that with a surprising lack of enthusiasm—not because he didn't like what he saw (he very much did), but because he didn't actually care. He was already so hooked there was a reasonable chance she could look like Danny DeVito and he'd still be hot for her.

She wore a blue plaid flannel shirt with a white tee under it that he was pretty sure was a beater. The sleeves of the flannel were folded back, and he saw a tattoo taking up most of the

inside of her left forearm: a beautiful, realistically detailed image of a dainty little brown and grey bird on a forsythia branch full of yellow flowers.

“That’s really pretty,” he said, catching her wrist in his hand. “Does it mean something special?”

She shrugged. “The bird is a phoebe. I was only eighteen when I got it, and I thought it was a cool idea. Now I understand how lame it is, but ...” She shrugged again.

Brushing his thumb across the satiny skin over her pulse point, he asked, “Why would you say that’s lame?”

“It’s about one step removed from those dudes who tattoo their own name across their belly.” Her head jerked up and she looked wide-eyed at him. “Please tell me I didn’t just insult the fuck out of you because you have your name across your belly.”

Duncan laughed. “No, I do not. I’ve got three tattoos so far. None of them are my name—or on my belly.”

She switched his hold to hers and picked up his left arm, rolling it so his ink there, over the outer part of his forearm and onto his hand, was in full view. “We share a bird theme, I see. What kind of bird belongs to this wing, and what does it mean?”

“It’s a raven’s wing. And it doesn’t mean anything in particular. I just wanted ink there, and my tattoo guy loves doing feathers, so I told him to have at me.”

“You let him pick the design? No input from you?”

“Not much. He drew it, made the transfer and showed me the placement he planned. I wasn’t thinking to get ink on my hand, but when I saw how it would look going from there to my elbow, I said ‘looks great, go for it.’ That’s the extent of my input.”

“Well, it’s beautiful.”

“Thanks.”

She was still holding his arm. “Can I see your other tattoos?”

“Sure. I’ll have to take my shirt off.”

That made her smirk. “Well, I didn’t invite you up here to show you my fabulous talent for interior design.”

With a chuckle, Duncan reached back, grabbed his hoodie, and pulled it off. His t-shirt came with it, and he dropped the whole wad onto the chair, atop his coat. Phoebe stepped right up close and set her hands on his chest.

Her room was on the cool side, but that wasn’t why goosebumps spread across his skin.

Duncan stood and endured the pleasant torment of her exploration. She brushed her hands over his pecs, drawing her fingertips over the line of text on his left one.

“Is this Greek?” she asked.

“Yep. Ancient Greek, I think. Unless I got fucked over, it means ‘Bring the power.’”

Her eyes lifted and met his. “You’re not sure?”

He grinned. “Well, I did some research to get it right, but I don’t speak Greek, so ...” The research he’d done was to ask on a Reddit forum, but there had been some persuasive agreement in the comments.

“That’s a pretty big risk, getting ink in a language you don’t know.”

“It was my first tat. I was sixteen. As a kid I was really into mythology, and I thought it was real hardcore to get ink in ancient Greek. If I ever find out it says something different from what I meant, I’ll cover it.”

“You got your first ink at sixteen?” she asked, as her exploration progressed from his chest to his shoulders, pausing to examine the Bull tattooed over the ball of his left.

“Yeah. Tattooist is a friend of the family, and my family is very okay with ink. If I’d needed parental permission, I’d’ve gotten it.”

Her hands swept down his arms, over his biceps, to his wrists, and back to his belly, finally returning to rest together

on his breastbone, on the light cover of hair just there. “Your body is gorgeous,” she mumbled.

He knew that, he worked on it, but he still loved to hear it. “Thanks. Can I see you?”

Her eyes came up and settled on his for a moment before she nodded and took one step back. He watched as she unbuttoned her flannel and discarded it, then pulled the beater off. She wore a white bra beneath it, plain but for a thin edge of lace on the cups. When she reached back to unfasten it, her collarbones stood out and made a bow across her chest.

Her tits were nice—medium-size and firm, with large, light brown nipples that canted slightly upward—and he wanted them both in his hands and mouth right now. As she tossed the bra away, as he reached to put his hands there, something else caught his attention and he paused: a significant scar on the side of her otherwise taut, smooth belly. Like something had tried to take a bite out of her.

Earlier she’d told him she had ‘hardly any’ scars from her encounter with an IED, but he’d seen now two substantial ones: on her head and here. If they weren’t from that trauma, she’d had another.

She must have seen where his attention landed, because she said, “They had to take a piece of my skull off to make room for swelling in my brain, and they sewed the piece they took off into my belly to keep it healthy until it could go back where it belonged.”

“Jesus,” he muttered without exactly meaning to.

“I was in a coma at the time, so it didn’t bother me any. And it’s pretty much why I’m still alive and my brain didn’t just explode through my eye sockets or something.”

Duncan met her steady gaze and saw how close she was to defensiveness. She was prepared for him to be disgusted. But what kind of asshole would be disgusted by a scar, especially one like this?

When he reached to touch the scar, she flinched. Duncan focused again on her eyes and asked, “Can I touch you?”

He didn't know how or why that simple question eased her mind, but she smiled, and her relief and pleasure were obvious. "Again, didn't bring you up here to show off my decorating."

Duncan needed no further encouragement. He pulled her to him and kissed her.

When he'd kissed her in the kitchen, he'd been feeling the situation out, trying not to come on too strong. But she'd invited him to her bedroom, and they were half-naked. Now kissing was foreplay.

He wrapped her up snugly, pressing her bare chest to him, claiming her mouth with intent. She moaned into his mouth and threw her arms around his neck, matching his intensity beat for beat. They fed on each other like that for a time Duncan didn't bother to track. Phoebe was a fantastic kisser, neither overly coy or self-conscious nor wild and squirmy. It was like they were dancing, taking turns leading and following. Pretty much the perfect way to make out, in his opinion.

Each join of their mouths, each feminine whimper and moan, each breath that pushed her tits tighter to him, ratcheted his need up a little more. When he felt like he'd go mad if they didn't get naked and move on to the second act, Duncan put his hands around her ribs and lifted her off the ground, lifted her up as high as he could, until she gazed down at him, her dangling pigtails brushing his face. Her eyes were wide in her flushed face; he'd surprised her.

This was, no doubt, a one-night deal, but he meant to make an impression.

"Very *The Notebook* of you," she said with a smirk.

He set her down. "I don't know what that means, but I feel like I've been burned."

"It's a movie. A sappy romance. Margot is obsessed with it, so I've seen it probably ten times. There's a big scene between the couple where they crash together and he lifts her up. I'm not much into the sappy romances, but I will admit to

finding that scene pretty nice. So no burn, that was cool. But let's both agree that it was A Move."

"Alright, fine. I'm giving you my best stuff here, but okay. You want the standard package, we can do that instead."

Her expression became a textbook example of devilish. "I haven't seen your package yet. I can't say whether it's standard or otherwise."

"That's just about enough sass out of you." He picked her up again; this time he tossed her onto her bed. She landed with a squeal and a bounce.

Remembering her scars and their origin, Duncan regretted that move at once. "Oh shit. Sorry. Did I hurt you?"

She grinned. "You threw me on a mattress. I'm fine. I'm not made of glass, and I've been healed for years. Stop being a simp and get naked."

"Simp? Seriously? Okay, you asked for it." He stood at the end of the bed, got his sneakers and socks off, then his jeans and underwear. Phoebe stripped while he did, and when he was ready, she was under her comforter and holding it open in invitation.

Duncan jumped in beside her and snatched her into his arms. She laughed and snatched him right back.

"Your package is definitely premium," she purred and reached under the cover to give it a tug. Needy almost-pleasure, like the first scratch of a maddening itch, burst through him.

"You are trouble, aren't you?" He started to roll forward and put her on her back, but she pushed on his shoulder.

She wanted to be on top? Fine with him. He rolled to his back, and she straddled him and sat up, her hands on his chest. Her weight rested right across his hips, and his swollen, impatient cock felt her slick heat right there, almost exactly where it wanted to be. Duncan groaned and flexed beneath her.

"You know, when I was on the side of the road, getting blown around in the cold by all those assholes driving right

past me, I did not think my night would end like this.”

He grinned. “I was babysitting my little niece and nephew tonight. When I was headed home from there, I did not expect my night to end like this, either.”

Her expression sobered. “I think you might truly be one of the good ones, Duncan.”

“And I think you’re impressive as fuck.” He reached up, wrapped a pigtail around each hand, and pulled her down for a kiss.

Entwined with each other again, they kissed wildly, each one as if they meant to fuse themselves together. Grunting and moaning with every shift, Phoebe gyrated on his hips, driving him so crazy his cock seemed to develop a will of its own, drawing his body up and down, side to side, trying to find the way in.

When he very nearly found the way, felt her folds slip around him, felt his tip catch on her entrance, Duncan freed his mouth and gasped, “Need to get a condom.” He always kept a couple in his wallet, but he hadn’t thought to grab one before he’d tossed his jeans away.

Phoebe slipped off him and rolled to the other side of the bed. He heard a drawer slide open, some rustling, and the drawer slide back. She rolled to him again, holding a strip of three condoms. One purple, one red, one green.

“Colored? Really?”

Her smirk was sheepish. “It’s a long story starring my best friend, who thinks she’s hilarious. I don’t make a habit of keeping rainbow condoms, but they do the job. You got something better?”

He did, but that would require leaving the bed. “I’ll take the purple one.” He grabbed the strip and rolled forward, putting her on her back, and he did it decisively. If she kept control, he could tell he’d blow too quickly. She was hot as lava.

This time, she went beneath him willingly. Tearing off the purple condom, he tossed the other two toward her nightstand

and tucked the purple under the pillow. Now that they'd had a little break, he wasn't ready for it yet. He wanted to explore.

He started at her jaw and moved downward, using his mouth and his hand to seek out everything about her—every scent, every nook and curve, every span of skin. That appealing, musky mélange of horse and soap and strawberry was rich at her neck, growing fainter as he moved to her chest. Her skin was smooth and firm, her arms and shoulders defined, her biceps flexing and releasing as her arms shifted around him restlessly.

She had a smallish oval mole on her chest, a couple inches below her collarbone. He kissed it.

When he moved farther down and reached her tits, Phoebe arched her back, offering them up like appetizers on a tray. Her nipples were already hard.

Duncan took the offered treats with relish, sucking one and then the other into his mouth, moving back and forth until both she and he writhed and moaned with need, simulating an act they could have for real.

When she hooked her thighs around his hips and linked her ankles on his back, Duncan was done exploring. He grabbed the condom packet and sat back.

She didn't release her legs but held him close like that, watching him open the condom and slide it on.

He tried not to think about how weird that purple looked. Instead, he focused on her, the small, trimmed, dark-gold bush, the sleek pink inside her folds, the way the short curls gleamed with want. When he brushed two fingers along that slick line and felt how full her need was, heard the rough edge of her moan as he found her clit, Duncan was torn between needing to taste her and needing fill her.

Phoebe settled the question. "Fuck me, Duncan. Please."

Still kneeling, still wrapped in the firm embrace of her thighs, Duncan leaned over, slipped his arms around her, and pulled her onto his lap.

After a moment's surprise, she understood and used her thighs to rise up a bit, giving him room to position himself so she could sit on him in the exact right way.

And oh fuck, the feel of that entry. She was snug and hot around him, and she clenched even more tightly as her head dropped backward. A moan rumbled up from the bottom of her belly, through her chest, and out.

Duncan felt his eyes roll back. For a few seconds, they stayed just like that, her back arched over his arms, his head thrown back as well. He almost believed nothing else could be better than this. But then he moved slightly, nothing more than a squeeze of his glutes, and she whimpered and twitched around him, and that was better.

As he began to move, using his glutes, quads, and hamstrings to piston with slow force, he drew her to him again. She came up and coiled her arms around his neck, bending down to kiss him. God, she was a great kisser.

They flexed and rocked together, their mouths exploring each other, their hands exploring everything else, until Phoebe closed in on her finish and started rocking and bouncing on him more frenetically than he could track. He gave up her mouth and buried his face against her throat, breathing in her warm, inviting scent as he held her close and matched her needful energy with his own.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she gasped as her body started to stiffen and shake. Duncan slipped a hand between them and found her clit. She jumped and cried out, then drove down onto his cock with determination until she went over, flinging herself backward in his arms, clamping her legs so tightly around him he thought he might pop, then flinging herself forward again and crashing into him.

Holy shit. That was one helluva show.

He hadn't come, but he was on the edge of the cliff. When she started to recover herself, each tiny shift of her body pushed him a little closer.

When he groaned with the effort of holding back, she lifted her head and smiled dazedly at him. “You haven’t come.”

“Not yet,” he gritted. “Very soon.”

She smiled and twisted her hips. He groaned again.

Caught in her eyes, Duncan let Phoebe have the reins. They stared into each other as she rocked, twisted, lifted and dropped, each move purposeful and measured, each pulling him farther over the edge, until he toppled over. His finish clenched his body from his neck downward and wrung him dry.

When his senses returned, she was still watching him, still smiling, still flushed. “Wow,” she whispered.

“Wow,” he agreed.

If it turned out this wasn’t only a one-night deal, Duncan thought he’d like that just fine.

CHAPTER SIX

Duncan crashed out within minutes of their decoupling, and Phoebe slipped into the half-waking/half-dreaming place for about an hour or so. It was too close to dawn for her to be able to go all the way under—able in the sense of her body being able to do it, and able in the sense of all the work she needed to do first thing in the morning. Those two definitions were pretty closely related.

However, she lingered under the covers for a few minutes after Charlie, their rooster, called the place to order. It didn't matter what kind of weather he faced, Charlie was on the job.

Duncan slept straight through the rooster alarm. He lay mostly on his belly, one of his heavily muscled arms across Phoebe's ribs, his face turned toward her on the pillow and his mouth open a little so that his lips pooched adorably.

He really was good-looking. And he really was excellent at sex. Best Phoebe had experienced in years. Possibly ever. Good looking, good loving, good person ... she needed to find some flaws in the guy pretty soon or she might be in some trouble.

Not that it mattered. When he woke up, he'd hit the road and go back to his life. The Ragamuffin Ranch was less than a hundred miles from Tulsa, but it was already extremely obvious that his life there and her life here were two different worlds, separated by more than miles. She'd never seen him before last night, and the smart bet said she'd never see him again after this morning.

Except, wait—her truck. He'd had it towed to his station. The whole thing was probably a loss (and she supposed she had to sit down sometime soon—today—and figure out how to fix that huge problem), but even so, she couldn't just abandon the thing at his station lot. At the very least, she'd need whatever she could get from it for scrap. So they'd probably see each other at least enough for her to deal with that.

Was that a good thing? Her insides said absolutely. Her head wasn't so sure.

Well, she wasn't going to figure it out right now, and she had shit to do. What would come would come. Meanwhile, if she got out of the room while he was sleeping, she could avoid any waking awkwardness.

Carefully, she lifted his arm and set it on the mattress. Then she eased out of bed—it was cold out of the covers!—and hurried into her fluffy robe and slippers. She grabbed some clean clothes and tiptoed out of the room like *she* was the guest. Then she hurried through the chilly hallway to the bathroom.

Because her work got her dirty first thing in the morning and kept her that way through the day, Phoebe routinely showered in the evening. She hadn't last night, and she'd been plenty horsey by the time sexcapades started, so she'd change out her bedding first chance she got. She intended to try for a midday siesta to catch up some of her lost sleep—one of the lingering pesky issues of her brain injury was that she really struggled with focus and memory when she was tired, so she took sleep seriously—and she'd change the bed after that.

In the bathroom this morning, she washed her face, brushed her teeth, smeared some deodorant on, and took her morning meds: Lexapro for depression, Adderall for focus, and a couple of aspirin for the headache taking root at the base of her skull.

She dressed in fresh underwear, heavy socks, winter riding pants, a thermal tee and a flannel over it. She brushed out yesterday's pigtails and did a single over-the-shoulder braid. A quick look in the mirror said the result was as usual: not sexy, but workable.

Downstairs, she found Vin at the kitchen table, hunched forlornly over a cup of coffee. His crutches leaned against the wall.

“Morning, mister,” she said.

He groaned a greeting without lifting his head.

She went over and gave his thick shoulders a squeeze. “You and Mr. Beam have a good time last night?”

“It’s your fault, asshole,” Vin groaned.

“Me? What’d I do?”

He sat up and gave her a harsh look. “You didn’t come home till all hours! I called you five times and texted more’n that.”

Another feature of her brain getting scrambled and reassembled: details sometimes got lost. When she was on her normal routine she did okay, but when life got unpredictable, she had trouble keeping all the bits in mind. She had completely forgotten about her phone, and what it meant that she’d been without it for the whole night, while she was out on a rescue trip by herself. She plopped down in the chair beside him and hooked a hand over his heavily inked forearm. “I’m so sorry. Smoky knocked me down and stomped on my phone. It’s in pieces in my pack. Last night was a whole thing. I will tell you the whole story after I get the animals fed and out. Oh —can I borrow your phone to make some vids? I haven’t posted in like three days.”

Running Ragamuffin Ranch was Phoebe’s full-time job. She kept it running with grants from charitable organizations, individual donations on their website (they were a registered non-profit), donated or discounted services and goods from a local veterinarian and the town feed store, free stuff from companies online, and Patreon. She did fundraising on the ranch’s social media accounts as well.

The actual household, they kept running with Margot’s job as a paralegal and Vin’s disability payments. Phoebe hadn’t qualified for long-term disability; she’d recovered too well. The property itself was her financial contribution to their oddball family. And she paid herself a small salary from the grant money, so she could buy clothes and essentials and help with groceries and such.

It was a tightrope they walked. Some rescue organizations had huge online followings and thousands of patrons. They raked money in and could develop all kinds of cool programs

to help even more animals. Those had all gotten big after they'd gone viral in some way, but it hadn't yet happened for Ragamuffin. She had about fifty thousand followers across several platforms, and she monetized her videos and had a few sponsors. But that wasn't nearly as much income as people thought. She had fewer than five hundred Patreon patrons so far, almost all of them at or below ten dollars a month.

It wasn't bad money on paper, but rescuing and caring for large animals was extremely expensive. Most months they got by with a liberal use of smoke and mirrors.

"Jesus, Bee," Vin complained. "Yes, you can use my phone. But let's get back to the important thing: Are you okay?"

Phoebe didn't drink coffee anymore (between the Lexapro and Adderall, the last thing she needed was coffee), but she plugged in the fancy new kettle Vin had given her for Christmas and began to prepare herself a large travel cup of tea.

As she worked on that, she answered her friend. "Yeah, I'm fine." Her face hadn't even bruised. "But my truck threw a rod, too—like I said, last night was a whole thing."

"Shit! Shit!"

"That was my reaction as well. But a lot louder, and with more snot."

"I'm gonna guess all that has something to do with the flashy blue Ford out front? Is it a rental?"

Phoebe felt her cheeks warm. "Like I could afford to rent that thing. No, a knight in shining armor rescued this dumpy damsel. He hitched the trailer to his truck and drove me and Smoky home." The kettle beeped, and she poured hot water over her teabag.

"And you rewarded him by letting him carry you up to your tower?"

"I know I started the knight and damsel thing, but let's drop it before it gets away from us. Yes, there's a guy asleep in my bed. His name is Duncan, early reports indicate he's a

good guy, and I have no idea what happens next there. But I gotta get outside before Titan knocks the doors down, so please be nice to him if he comes down before I get back.”

Vin pushed his phone toward her. “I will be nice to your hero. I will make a hero’s feast of eggs and pancakes and bacon. But Bee, we gotta hire some help out here. When Margot’s not around and my stump’s fucked, it’s just you and Mickey, and Mickey’s not much help.”

Mickey Hicks was an intellectually disabled guy from town she’d grown up with. He was great with animals, was infinitely patient with even the hardest cases, and fairly capable as a ranch hand. He could do most of the daily work around the place, but he couldn’t do much of it without supervision.

“We can’t afford to hire anyone else. We can only afford Mickey because he only needs play money, and I can pay him minimum without fucking up his life.”

Dissatisfaction bunched Vin’s face. “And now you don’t have a truck. Somethin’s gotta give here, Bee. All I’m sayin’. You know you can’t wear yourself down like this, or somethin’ll give whether you want it to or not. Better we decide what gives than we just get did.”

“I know. I’ll figure it out.”

He grabbed her hand before she could leave the kitchen. “*We’ll* figure it out. You ain’t alone, Bumblebee. Don’t forget it.”

She went back and kissed his cheek. “How could I?”

~oOo~

To try to minimize the outrage when she didn’t get the morning feed going right away, Phoebe sneaked into the stable through the back and checked on Smoky first. He was asleep on his feet, his head tucked into a back corner of his stall. The water tub was about half empty, and the slow-feed bag almost

entirely empty. His belly seemed a little round under the blanket, but not in a scary way. Just nice and full.

Spot, another of their barn cats, slept in a curl in the middle of Smoky's back.

She rapped on the post beside the stall door, and Smoky's head popped up. He looked back at her and nickered at once. Phoebe smiled. He knew her for a true friend already.

Spot woke, stood, stretched, yawned, and hopped down to start her workday with some breakfast. She paused to wind around Phoebe's boots. Phoebe bent and gave her a scratch.

When she stood straight again, Smoky had turned and come to the door. "Hey, baby. How was your night?"

His head came over the top, and he pushed the side of his nose against her head. His version of a horsey hug. Moving with careful attention, Phoebe eased her hands up his neck, just behind his ears. She got most of the way around his neck for her version of a hug before he shied, raising his head out of reach. But he didn't jump or scoot away.

"Not ready for that yet, huh? Hey, I get it. No worries." Pulling her glove off with her teeth, she dug into a pocket of her coat and drew out a handful of treats. "Got some dried apples this morning. How's that sound?"

Smoky thought that sounded great. He snuffled them up and went looking for more.

"Okay, hold on." She pushed his head back a bit. "We gotta get some work done first. And then you can have a few more yums."

She pulled off the other glove, shoved them both into a pocket, and snagged Vin's phone from another. Keying his passcode in, she opened the camera and set it to video.

For this first take, she focused on Smoky's face. "Say hi to Smoky," she spoke aloud as the horse tried to nose at the camera. "He says hi back. He's a big ol' love, and I think he's beautiful, but he's in really bad shape. I rescued him from an abuse and neglect situation yesterday, and we've got some work to do together."

She stopped recording and put the phone away. “Back up, baby. Let’s get that blanket off you for a second. You gonna be okay with that?”

He was fine with it, except that he kept swinging his head over to nibble at her beanie, her braid, her coat, her pockets.

The jerkwad she’d rescued him from had told her he was a ‘mean old cuss,’ or something like that. No, the jerkwad was a mean old cuss. Smoky was a sweetheart—whose spirit was strong enough he could fight back when somebody was shitty to him.

With the blanket off, she got some more footage—TikTokers loved their trauma porn—then checked him over carefully for wounds, signs of illness, or any other indications of special needs to address. She’d call the vet out to do a full workup, but her practiced layperson’s eyes said the boy just needed some meat on his bones and some kindness on his heart.

With all that done, she covered him up again. He was too skinny to go without in this cold. Then she refilled his bag and water tub. In winter, her stock got a ration of feed as well as sweet alfalfa hay, but a starved horse got only hay for the first several days no matter the season. Anything more was carefully portioned treats for rewards and encouragement only.

As she closed Smoky’s stall, she heard the weary grind of Mrs. Hicks’ ancient Country Squire wagon. Leaving the rest of the animals to wait a little longer, she went out the side door and smiled as Mickey clambered out of the passenger side of his mom’s car.

“Hi, Phoebe!” Mickey called, trotting straight for her.

“Hey, Mickey!” she called back.

“Mickey! Your hat!” his mother yelled from the driver’s window. Mickey pulled the beanie in his hands over his head.

Satisfied, Mrs. Hicks waved at Phoebe. “Hi, hon! I gotta get back to town. I’ll pick him up at three, right?”

“Right. Sounds good.” She and Mickey stood and watched his mom turn around and drive away.

“Did you buy that big blue truck, Phoebe? It’s pretty. It’s blue like the Kansas City Royals. Royal blue!”

“It *is* pretty, like the Royals. I agree. But no, it’s not mine. That truck belongs to a friend. My truck broke down last night, and he brought me home.”

“Oh no! Your truck broke? Did it hurt you?”

“Nope, I’m fine. Everything’s fine. Come on, you can meet Smoky. That’s the horse I rescued yesterday. And I haven’t fed anybody else yet, so we’ve got a lot of work to do this morning.”

“It’s after seven a.m., because I start work at seven a.m. and I been here”—he checked his digital watch—“for three minutes. It’s 7:03. We need to feed everybody right away!”

Phoebe hooked her arm around Mickey’s. “Let’s get to it!”

~oOo~

First thing, Phoebe introduced Mickey and Smoky. Though Smoke had shown a keen suspicion of men last night, and he was initially wary of Mickey, it took only a few minutes for him to figure out that Mickey was the best kind of people. Soon enough, the horse was giving Mickey kisses, nosing the tears from his cheeks. Mickey always cried when he met a new resident, especially when they were so obviously suffering.

“Hey, Mick?” Phoebe said when it looked like her ranch hand had no intention of moving anytime soon, “We got work to do. But after we get everybody going this morning, you can clean him up if you’d like. I’m going to see if Doc LeeAnn can come out this afternoon, so we need to get all the mud off him.

“Okay!” He patted Smoky’s neck and kissed his nose. Smoky kissed him back. Horses weren’t big thinkers, but they were excellent judges of character. “I’ll be back soon, Smoky!”

They left Smoky snug in his stall and finally got to the rest of the animals. Smoky, however, had decided he liked company, and he started shouting complaints as soon as they were out of sight.

The day was cold but clear, so everybody could have breakfast in the fresh air. They filled the hay racks in both big pastures, then led the horses and Klaxon (the burro) out to one, and the cows, alpacas, goats, and Puff the sheep into the other.

Her horse, Amos, a spirited young gelding, leapt into a run at once, bouncing and bucking in celebration of his freedom. The others trotted or ambled around in their usual ways. Titan, who led this weird herd, turned right around at the gate and nickered at her, as if he was reminding her they had somebody new to think about.

Smoky was doing a fine job of reminding everybody himself. He'd been yelling almost nonstop. Which did suggest that he was feeling more energetic and secure this morning.

“Go on, big fella,” Phoebe told him, stroking Titan’s nose. “Smoke’s gotta stay on his own for a while, you know that. He’s okay.”

Titan went exactly nowhere. He nickered at her more pointedly and gave her a ‘do *not* make me haul you in for questioning ’ glare as he put his head to her chest and shoved.

She laughed at him and turned away.

While Mickey went in to muck the stalls, Phoebe went to let the flocks out. The chicken coop was out back, beside the barn. Their coop had roosting and brooding space for a flock of four dozen, as well as a small walled yard space, so their seventeen hens and one snarky rooster had plenty of room to stay in from the cold and wander around. However, they would rather be cold than cooped, so she turned them out into their big yard, dropped the good kitchen leavings down with their feed, and went to gather eggs.

Next it was down to the pond. The ducks and geese had houses of their own, and they had predator-proof access so they could come and go as they wished. In warm months,

these flocks were pretty self-sustaining, but they got feed in the winter, and she did a daily head count and checked for anybody looking like they didn't feel well.

Though she intended her video for today to focus on Smoky, Phoebe took at least a few seconds of footage of everybody as she did her morning work. She got Amos having a zoomie, Titan being a cop, the alpacas looking typically loopy, chickens orgasming over their kitchen castoffs. Over it all was the soundtrack of one very lonely horse. She could probably cut it all in to tell the story of Smoky's first day.

Suddenly, the morning was quiet. Standing near the pond, filming the ducks playing on the ice, Phoebe said, "Sounds like Smoky's got some company again. Let's go see how he's doing."

When Phoebe got back to the stable, she discovered most of the stalls weren't yet mucked, but Mickey was with Smoky. He had the blanket off and draped over the door, and a grooming caddy in the shavings at his feet. Smoky was getting a curry-comb treatment and literally moaning with pleasure.

She got Vin's phone out again. "Looks like you two are having a good time."

Horse and hand looked at her, their expressions equally guilty. "I'm gonna finish the stalls, I promise. But I didn't like him crying like that."

It had been plucking her heartstrings, too. She stopped recording and smiled at Mickey. "Go right ahead. Weather's good today, so nobody'll need their stall until this evening. Once you get him all pretty, put that blanket back on and turn him out. I'm gonna head in for breakfast, and I'll call the doc while I'm there. You want me to bring you something to eat?"

Mickey had a standing invitation to eat any meal with them, but he did not like to eat where people who weren't his mother could see. Sometimes, though, he'd accept a to-go plate.

"No thank you, Phoebe. Mama made egg and ham casserole today, and that's my favorite. I had *thirds*."

“Wow! That’s a lot of eggs and ham. You won’t be hungry until lunch!”

Mickey grinned and nodded. When he returned his attention to Smoky, Phoebe left them to their bonding. It was after nine, and Vin got cranky when a meal he’d made sat, getting cold. She headed back to the house for breakfast, wondering if Duncan was still asleep.

Work on this ranch was hard. It started early and ended late. Every day had worries and troubles. Some had bigger worries and troubles than she felt she could match. But every day had pleasures and joys as well. It was good work, with good people, and she was home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Duncan woke into a sunny, chilly room. He was good at orienting himself wherever he woke up, so long as he'd been conscious when he'd gotten there, so he knew it was Phoebe's room and smiled as he opened his eyes.

The pillow beside him was empty and cool. He rolled to his back and stretched—and was quickly reminded that he'd dragged a horse trailer around the shoulder of the expressway last night. His delts and traps felt like solid stone this morning. Totally worth it.

But now the room was empty of anyone but him. Well, she ran a ranch, and the sun was full up. She'd probably had to get to work. Leaving him all snug in her bed was a decent sign she hadn't been sorry to find him here when she woke.

He liked this girl. What did that mean? No idea. But he hoped to play things out a little and find out.

His phone was in his coat, across the room, but Phoebe had an old plastic alarm clock on her bedside table. Assuming it was correct, it was almost nine o'clock. Despite being awake most of the night, he'd gotten nearly his usual sleep in. He felt rested and content, and he didn't have to be at work for a few hours yet. He'd like to spend more time with her—and get a look at this place in the daylight.

Also, he was pretty sure he smelled bacon and coffee. Time to get up and see what was what.

The room was chilly, so he hurried into his clothes and grabbed his coat to carry downstairs with him. He checked his messages, too, and was relieved to find nothing but his mom's *Okay. Be safe*, in reply to his letting her know he might not be home last night.

When he opened the door, the aroma of breakfast doubled, and he thought he could hear the whispered sizzle of the bacon frying. His stomach gave him a kick.

The bathroom was on the way, so he ducked in for his morning piss and to tamp down any bedhead. The spacious room was indeed old-fashioned, with green and black tiles on the bottom half of the walls, a different pattern of green and black tiles on the floor, and toilet, tub, and sink the same shade of green. The curtains at the shower and window were white cotton, like those in her bedroom, and the walls were painted white. Three paint-by-number paintings of horses were framed in black and hung above the toilet.

Again he thought of a time capsule, and again it made him feel something warm and pleasant. Again, he couldn't say why all this stuff so old it was practically historical charmed him so completely.

He splashed water on his face and rinsed his mouth out, then dried off with a black towel hanging next to the mirror. Then he went out to find Phoebe and that breakfast.

~oOo~

He pulled up short at the kitchen doorway. He'd forgotten about the big guy who'd been crashed out in the living room last night, but that big guy was alone in the kitchen, standing at the stove, supported by a pair of crutches as he used a spatula to push bacon grease over eggs in a cast-iron skillet.

He was on crutches because the left leg of his sweatpants was folded and pinned about halfway down his leg. Duncan remembered something else about this guy: Phoebe had met him at the rehab house for wounded vets.

“Uh, morning,” he said, trying not to give the guy a start.

Said guy did not startle. He looked over and smiled. “Mornin’.” Setting the spatula in the skillet, he offered his hand. “I’m Vin.”

Duncan went into the room and grabbed his hand for one of those man-shakes where each let the other know how strong he was. A touch of wariness pinged faintly at the back of Duncan's head. Phoebe had described Vin as a ‘bud,’ so he

hoped he hadn't detected jealousy or competition in the man's grip.

"Duncan," he said aloud and broke the grip. "Good to meet ya. Is Phoebe around?"

"She's out in the barn, getting everybody going for the day. She'll be back in soon for breakfast. There's coffee and mugs under the window over there. Phoebe prefers tea, and that's what the plug-in kettle by the sink is for. Tea bags in the cupboard above, sugar on the table, milk in the fridge. How d'you take your eggs?"

That settled any worry about whether he was invited for breakfast or expected to GTFO. "Thanks," Duncan said as he crossed to the coffee. "I take my eggs however they're served."

Vin chuckled. "That's the way to do it, yep. Good man."

After Duncan got his coffee made and had a couple swallows, he asked, "There anything I can do to help?"

"Just about done here, but if you want to put out some plates and shit, they're in the hutch in the corner."

Duncan found the plates and flatware and set out places for three while Vin arranged bacon and eggs on serving plates and produced a cast-iron pot from the oven that turned out to be full of fluffy pancakes. The guy had been cooking for a while.

Just as Vin made a face at the clock and headed on his crutches toward the doorway, the front door of the house opened and shut.

"Sorry!" Phoebe called breathlessly. "I'm here!"

Vin turned to Duncan, and his expression changed. The guy was looking at him like he knew something Duncan should know. It made him feel self-conscious—then he realized he was grinning. Apparently the sound of this girl's voice, a girl he'd met less than a day ago, made him grin like a dork.

And Vin was letting him know he saw exactly that. Smartass.

But then Phoebe came into the room, and Duncan forgot about Vin.

She was even prettier in the daytime. Her hair was pulled back from her face and had a little static halo, probably from taking her beanie off. Her face was rosy with the cold. She wore a thermal top under another well-worn flannel—this one pink and green—and a heavily faded pair of jeans. On her feet were a huge pair of pink bunny slippers.

She beamed pleasure at him when she saw him standing beside the laden table. “Good morning. Sleep okay?”

“I slept great. You couldn’t have gotten much, though.”

She shrugged that off. “I’m aiming for a nap this afternoon to make up the difference.”

As she came into the room, she slapped hands with Vin and went to the sink to fill her kettle. “I’m glad you hung around till I came back in.”

“I have to be at work at one, but I’m not in a big rush to go, if you’re not in a big rush to get rid of me.”

“I am not,” she assured him as she made tea.

There was some awkward quiet around the table as they all sat and filled their plates, but when Duncan put his first forkful in his mouth and flavor exploded through his head, he swallowed and said, “Damn, bruh. You can cook!”

Both Phoebe and Vin laughed.

“Thank you,” Vin replied. “Glad you like it.”

“You see why I keep him around,” Phoebe teased, turning a snarky look on her friend. Vin simply nodded and dug into his plate.

The ice fully broken, they chatted about incidental stuff at first. Vin talked about his way of making eggs and complained lightly about being ‘gimped up’ by an infection in his stump. Usually he wore a prosthetic and got around just about normally. Phoebe described Smoky’s condition this morning and their ranch hand’s enthusiasm for their new rescue. Then

Vin asked about last night, and Duncan and Phoebe told the story in turns.

“Well, that was a helluva night,” Vin observed when the story wound to a close.

Phoebe sighed and stabbed at her pancakes.

“You give any thought to what you’ll do about the truck?” Duncan asked, because he had given it some thought.

Phoebe shuddered. “I know I need to, but I get a big black spot in my head when I try to think how to fix that problem, so I’ve been kicking it down the road this morning. But I promise I won’t abandon it at your station.”

“That’s not why I asked. I’m not worried about that. But I had a thought. I didn’t see a lot of damage to the chassis last night. I’ll know better this afternoon, when I can get a look in the daylight, but I think the rod must’ve blown out downward, or jammed up in the engine. There might be a divot in the expressway somewhere, but maybe nothing on your truck but the engine is fucked.”

Without looking up from her plate, Phoebe made a dejected sound that might have been intended as laugh. “The engine is a pretty crucial part of the truck, though, and I’m sure a whole new engine is way above my price range. My price range is right around a tank of gas. Barely.”

“Yeah, but does it need to be a brand-new engine? The truck’s, what, early-mid 2000s? Close to twenty years old?”

She perked up a bit as hope sparked in her hazel eyes. “It’s a 2002. More than twenty years old. How much would a used engine cost?”

“That depends. Refurbished and sold by a used-parts dealer, probably around fifteen hundred to two grand.”

Vin whistled and Phoebe barked a laugh. “Yeah, no. That is somewhat higher than my full-tank price range.”

Duncan was not dissuaded. “I get that. But there’s a pick-and-pay scrapyard not far from the station, and I could probably find you a decent engine in a wreck there and pull it

for about five hundred. The owner is a friend of the club, and we buy shit there all the time, so I could probably get him down even lower. I'd install it for you and fix up anything on it that needs work, no charge."

"The club?" Vin asked before Phoebe could react to Duncan's offer.

Duncan faced him directly, ready for an array of reactions. "I'm a member of the Brazen Bulls."

At first, Vin didn't react at all. He met Duncan's gaze steadily, then shifted his attention to Phoebe. She smiled, and Vin finally nodded.

"Okay," he said. "So you think you can work a deal for a cheap engine? One that'll be solid?"

"I do, yeah." Duncan turned to Phoebe. "And like I said, installation's on me."

"You don't have to do that," she protested halfheartedly.

"I know—I *want* to. I kinda feel invested in the situation."

That made her smile. The rosy chill had faded from her cheeks, but something warmer pinked them up now. "Thank you. I don't want to impose, but I won't turn down good help. Looks like you're still rescuing me."

"Knight in shining armor, at your service," he said with a smirk he hoped was intimate and gently teasing. Their first private joke.

Vin cleared his throat loudly and rhetorically. "Anybody want more bacon?"

Duncan and Phoebe both took more bacon, and the trio got back to breakfast. Duncan was about to ask Phoebe if she'd show him around the place when his phone buzzed in his jeans. He pulled it out and tapped the preview of a text from his dad.

Eight wants us in the chapel at 11.

Might be some changes to the plan for

the run. We all need to talk it out.

The run was coming up awfully soon for big changes to be made in their first-tier plan. Duncan had a suspicion this was about Dex's idea to leave the Young Guns home.

He checked the time: quarter to ten. If he was going to be in his seat in the chapel at eleven, he needed to be rolling in the next few minutes.

"I'm real sorry about this, but I gotta get moving." Fuck. Goddammit, Dex. What was the guy's damage?

The answer to that question was long, dark, and bloody as fuck.

Phoebe's expression showed surprise and disappointment. But then she smiled and said, a little too brightly, "Of course. You gotta get back to your life."

Standing, Dex said, "I really am sorry to stuff my face and bail. Vin"—he offered his hand to the seated man, who clasped it with the same strength as earlier—"this breakfast slapped. Thank you. Phoebe, will you walk out to my truck with me?"

She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin and stood.

~oOo~

They got their coats on, Phoebe slipped into her beat-up cowboy boots, and they headed out of the house without talking. On the walk to his truck, Duncan wanted to take her hand, but the impulse was stilled by her silence. There was a new distance between them, one that hadn't been there even last night, when they were strangers to each other.

At his truck, though, he couldn't take it anymore. He caught her arm, put her against the fender and leaned in. As she looked up at him, her eyes round with wondering, he said, "I want to see you again."

She smiled. "You're helping me with my truck, right? It'll be hard to do that without coming into contact again. Plus, I still owe you pie."

“You know what I mean. I want more of you. Thoughts?”

Her hands came up and grabbed the plackets of his coat. “I don’t think I’d hate that.”

“If you were trying to be encouraging, you should try a little harder.”

She pulled harder on his coat, until he bent down and kissed her.

Their first kiss of this new day. To Duncan, it seemed like the first kiss of something else as well. Last night had been a thing with a boundary around it, but this morning the world spread out in every direction.

He folded her up tightly and deepened this kiss, hoping she felt the same way. If her tightening hold on him was any indication, she did.

When he set her back, he brushed loose tendrils of gold from her face. “I need your number.”

“I don’t have a phone right now, remember? Except the landline inside. But I’m going to try to get into town for a replacement this afternoon. Do you have something to write with?”

He pulled his phone out and opened his notes app. “Do you one better,” he said and handed his phone over.

She keyed in two numbers: for the phantom cell phone and the might-as-well-have-been-a-ghost landline. Then she handed him his phone.

“I don’t have your number, though.”

He returned his phone to his pocket. “I don’t think I’ve got a pen in the truck. But I’ll call your landline and leave it on a message. You got one of those old answering machines in there somewhere?”

“I do, yes. That’ll work.” She grabbed his coat again. “Hey, Duncan?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. For everything.”

He kissed her again.

~oOo~

“Look,” Dex said, giving Jay the dead-eye stare that had scared the fuck out of them when they were kids. This time, though, Jay stared right back.

Dex leaned in a little more, speaking with more urgency than Duncan could remember. He focused on each of the Young Guns in turn: Jay, Duncan, Monty, Chris, and Sam. “I’m not saying you’re less of a patch than anybody at this table. I’m not saying I don’t think you can handle yourself in trouble. You’ve all shown you can. I’m not saying you’re less important than anybody else. If I’m saying anything about that, I’m saying you’re *more* important. This is the biggest shit we’ve dealt with since Santaveria. I don’t like what we’re planning, I don’t like the blind spots. If this goes wrong and we’ve got the whole club in the thick of it, that’s the whole goddamn club we’re putting on the line.” He cast a searching glance around the whole table. “Are you telling me I’m the only one at this table who things we should guard against that?”

“You’re not the only one,” Duncan’s father said. Duncan tried not to react like he’d been hit, but he sharpened his focus on his old man—and his old man looked straight at him. “It worries me, too. And I got my *son* on the line here. Simon, too.”

“Dad—” Duncan began, but stopped when his father’s hand came up and cut him short.

“I know.” He sighed and turned to Dex. “You know how I feel, Dex. But the truth is we need every man in Eureka if we got any chance of having this not turn to shit. If we roll into town in force, maybe the Nameless deal with their own and we come in and pick up the pieces. Or maybe they just fold. But if they think they can put up a real fight, we’ll have trouble for sure.” Returning his attention to Duncan and the other young

patches, he continued, “That said, it could still go wrong, and it’s not a bad idea to have an insurance policy. Any of you say you want to stay back, you stay back. No judgment, no shame.”

“Hold up, Mav,” Eight Ball cut in from his seat at the head of the table. “You’re talkin’ out of turn. Like you just said, we need everybody in Eureka to get this done. We decided on a full club run, we need a full club run, we’re doin’ a full club run. Only reason we’re talking about this at all is Dex won’t fuckin’ shut up about it.”

An argument erupted among the club officers. Duncan and the other Young Guns sat back and watched, occasionally sharing uncomfortable looks. They often joked that they were taking up enough of the table to start causing trouble. Looked like Dex had caused some on their behalf before they’d had the chance to do it for themselves.

“Does anybody *want* to stay back?” Jay asked under his breath.

Duncan, Sam, and Monty shook their heads at once. There was literally nothing that would keep Duncan from this run but an outright order, and then he’d be pissed. He meant to be side by side with his father when the shit hit the fan. And he knew Sam felt the same way. Jay’s father and brother wouldn’t have thought of staying back, and his brother would surely be in the thick of it, so Jay would be beside him. And Monty was fucking stubborn and usually looking for any fight he could get.

Chris, however, hesitated. He was the mildest-tempered of them all, but he was no coward. When the other four all focused on him—the older patches were still arguing, and now Eight was yelling—Chris said, “I’m not scared of the run, I just think Dex is right. Maybe somebody should stay back.”

“What the fuck difference does it make if one patch stays back?” Jay snapped. “If everybody else goes down in California, the club’s dead anyway. One patch doesn’t make a club. And if we *all* stay back, the job’s fucked. I don’t know what Dex thinks he’s doin’. I get he was an elite Marine back

in the day, but being a dad's made him soft." Jay turned and pinned Duncan with a look. "Or your sister has."

He and Jay had been close most of their lives, so Duncan had long years of experience managing his friend's tendency to toss around toxic bullshit like that. "Don't bring my sister into this. That ain't it, asshole." When Jay backed off a little and made a semi-conciliatory gesture, Duncan added, "But you're not wrong that they're having a stupid argument. You should say it to them, though, not us."

At once, Jay faced the head of the table. He slammed his hands down on the scratched oak and said, "Hey! Can I get a word in here, or you old farts gonna bicker all day?"

The top half of the table went quiet. An array of very tough old guys gaped at Jay.

Apollo chuckled and did a game-show wave. "By all means, brother. Have your say."

Duncan knew Jay well enough to see the tension in his jaw and the stiffness in his shoulders and understand that he was nervous. But when he spoke, his voice was steady. "While you all were having your slap fight up there, we talked, and we think this is stupid. No offense, Dex, but you're wrong. Leaving one or two patches back—whoever it is—doesn't save the club. We'd need to leave more than that back, enough to keep everything going, and we can't afford to lose that much manpower for this job. Right?" When they kept staring and said nothing, Jay went on. "Right. We keep the club whole by kicking the Nameless's whole ass. So we're all on the run. Debate over."

Duncan's dad turned to Sam's dad. Dex turned to Eight. Jazz and Apollo shared a look. Fitz and Caleb grinned at each other. Then they all broke into laughter.

"Well *goddamn*, JJ," Eight said, still grinning. "You down there anglin' for my job?"

Jay's cheeks colored, but he didn't act embarrassed. Instead he grinned and said, "Watch your back, old man," and the whole table laughed.

Jay had been laughed at a few times at this table, and he always took it badly. But this was different. Duncan watched his friend to see if he understood that this humor was full of pleasure and pride. He'd impressed them—and he'd calmed burgeoning friction at a time when the rapport around the table needed to be tight. They were laughing with him, for him, not at him.

After an uncertain moment, during which he studied the table warily, Jay got it. His grin spread across his face and he sat back, looking like the Cheshire Cat.

Duncan swung a leg out and kicked his friend's boot, letting him know he was impressed, too.

~oOo~

They finished out the meeting with yet another recap of the plan for the run, and the various scenarios they were prepared for once they got to their destination. They were riding two thousand miles west in January, but the trip would take them straight through the southwest, until they hung a right and headed north along the California coast. The weather forecast looked clear most of the way, and the cold wouldn't be too awful.

After the meeting, Duncan had to clock in. As he headed to the lockers to grab his spare uniform, he felt his father's hand on his shoulder. "Just a sec, son."

Duncan tamped down a sigh as he turned around. He really hoped his old man wasn't going to try to make a case for him to stay back now, after all that mess in the chapel. The matter was decided.

He loved his father with his whole heart, front to back and side to side. He'd grown up thinking of him as a god. Maverick Helm looked like a tough motherfucker—and he was—but as a family man, his heart was wide open. He'd never held back his love or his enjoyment of his wife and kids,

and he'd worked hard to give them everything they needed and most they wanted.

He did not, however, want any of his children to live the same kind of life he lived. For years, he'd done everything he could think of to keep Duncan from a patch, and he'd nearly beaten Dex to death when he and Kelsey got together. Eventually his need for his children to be happy pulled him back, but his protective streak was fucking infuriating.

Kelsey and Duncan were fully enmeshed with the Bulls. Hannah was the last one left, and she wanted in the family business, too. She was by far the most defiant of the three kids, and now she was eighteen. She only wanted to work in the convenience shop, but Dad did the hiring, so she didn't have a chance. If there had ever been any chance he'd give in with her the way he'd relented with Kelsey and Duncan, she'd blown that up when she'd started flirting with Monty awhile back. Monty was too smart to fuck Mav's baby girl, but the guy couldn't help flirting with any and all girls who looked at him twice.

Nothing had happened between Monty and Hannah, and neither of them had been sincerely interested in that, but now Dad had the idea that she might get with a Bull to add to his dire imaginings of Hannah's life. His feet were sunk in cement on the issue of Hannah working in the shop.

Lately Hannah was threatening to bail on the whole family—like run away and disappear—if Dad didn't back off. Duncan didn't really think she'd do it, but she was the only of the three kids who might actually.

They all three had talked about it more than once. Even Kelsey, who tended to act like a parental proxy, thought Dad was irrational about the issue. For one thing, the man had made a family in the Bulls. Kelsey, Duncan, and Hannah had been raised in that family; it was what they knew, who they loved, and the lens through which they understood the world. *Of course* they'd be most comfortable making their own lives within that circle. He had made them comfortable there.

Virtually all of their generation of club kids wanted to stay put. Including Zach, now VP in Laughlin, four Bulls sons had taken the patch, and Sam's younger brother, Mason, was prospecting and would no doubt make number five in a year or so. Kelsey and Athena were with Bulls. Hannah's interest in dating and all that was sporadic at best, but if she decided she wanted romance and family, she *would* probably love to land a Bull of her own one day.

If it was Monty, though, Duncan would stand with Dad in her way. He loved the guy, but Monty was a hound.

Even those club kids who weren't interested in a patch or being with a patch weren't turning their backs. It was a good family, and they all felt it. If Hannah did really bolt, it would be because Dad wouldn't let her in closer.

Dad should be proud that his kids wanted to make their own lives in the nest he'd built. He'd given them a life they wanted to keep. But all he saw was the occasional danger and turmoil that shook the club. Like riding to California to take over another MC. A friendly patch-over had failed, so now the Bulls were going in force, ready to start and win a war if they had to.

For some reason, when he thought of his children's future, Dad could see only the hard times, not the many more good times, and not the way the family closed ranks and kept each other strong during the hard times.

So when he turned to face him after the chapel, Duncan fully expected his old man to try to make a case for him to stay home from the run, or at least consider it.

Instead, Dad said, "Talk to me about that Sierra at the back of the lot. Mason said you had him tow it in."

When Duncan laughed in surprise, his father frowned at him. "That's funny?"

"No, it's just—" There was no point in trying to describe the whirl of thoughts and feelings that had just spun needlessly through his head. "Never mind. Yeah, I was on my way home from Kelsey's last night and stopped to help a woman on the

side of the expressway with a horse trailer hitched to her truck. The engine's shot—threw a rod. So I called Mace to bring the wrecker, and I towed her and her horse down around Checotah, where she lives. I told her I'd check it out today, see if there's damage to the chassis or anything else, then see if I can get my hands on an old engine to drop in it."

His father had started to smile about halfway through Duncan's explanation. "This girl pretty? That why you didn't come home last night?"

Duncan laughed. "Yes, Dad. She's very pretty. And yes, that's why I didn't come home. I like her."

"I assume you want to comp a whole-ass engine replacement?"

"If you or Eight get salty about it, I'll cover it. But she runs a non-profit—a farm animal rescue—so we can probably write it off as a donation."

"Animal rescue? Does she know your sister? And did you hear that Kelsey won an award last night?"

He said it like most people would say *Did you hear that she cured cancer, established world peace, and became Queen of the World last night?* Dad was a sap for any of their accomplishments, but he was especially proud of Kelsey.

Hannah insisted Kelsey was Dad's favorite. Duncan understood that point of view, but he had a clearer sense of how Dad and Kelsey had become close, so he didn't sweat any extra sheen on his love for her. Besides, Dad had always been there for Duncan, too. As he was for Hannah.

Maybe it was just harder to be the second daughter when Kelsey was the first.

"Yeah, Dad," he answered letting the unspoken word *duh* color his tone. "I was with the kids last night. She told me when they got home."

"Right, right. It's great, huh? I'm so proud of her."

"It is great. But Phoebe doesn't know her. I asked last night."

“Phoebe, huh? That’s a pretty name. And she does rescue work? Sounds like a nice girl. So this could be something? Between you two?”

Part of the squishy family-man side of Maverick Helm was an almost grandmotherly interest in his children’s romantic lives—and real enthusiasm, so long as it wasn’t one of his daughters hooking up with a patch. For Duncan, his enthusiasm was unbridled.

Duncan rolled his eyes at him. “No idea, Dad. I just met her like twelve hours ago. But yeah, I want to see if there’s anything there.”

Dad slapped his arm. “Let’s check out her truck.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

In the way of an Oklahoma winter, when the stretch of freezing temperatures that had frozen the world since before Christmas finally broke, a false spring barged in through the cracks. A few days after Phoebe and Duncan had met on the side of the frozen expressway, most of the windows were open at the Ragamuffin Ranch, and the animals were full of piss and vinegar. Gremlin, their farm-slash-herd dog had spent part of the afternoon running the goats, alpacas, cows, and Puff the magic sheep around in circles, apparently just for fun for one and all. Now he was stretched out on the big rock in the corner of that pasture, basking in the sun while he kept half an eye on his weird little herd.

Phoebe had started the morning in a beater and a flannel, with her ancient corduroy jacket on top, but she'd left the jacket in the house at lunchtime, and now she was working with her sleeves rolled up. She loved these warm midwinter days; they were like 'coming attractions' trailers for spring.

Though he was still quarantined and would be for a few more days, Smoky was feeling his oats, too. Already he'd put on enough weight to soften the look of his ribs and hips. His eyes were brighter, his head and tail higher, and he pranced around his little turnout like a wannabe show horse.

He wasn't miraculously recovered from a lifetime of neglect, of course. Doc LeeAnn Gaines had been out to give him a thorough exam, and Smoky had some issues that would take time to resolve—two different kinds of worms, for example, which was why Smoky would be quarantined for a while longer, and why Phoebe was going to be completely grossed out cleaning up after him for the same amount of time. Gross, gross, gross.

But Smoky was proving himself to be a really great horse. Despite his hard life, he trusted Phoebe and Mickey completely already, and he'd been curious and friendly with Margot, too. He loved company and started 'chatting' as soon as he heard someone coming.

His nasty owner had said he was saddle trained (of course the guy had said Smoky was ‘broke,’ but Phoebe had detested that term long before she’d made rescuing horses her job), but she wouldn’t put that assertion to the test until Smoky was at full strength and health. She imagined he’d be a good mount, at least for people he knew he could trust.

He was lonely, though. He couldn’t see the pasture where the other horses were turned out each day, but he could hear them, and he spent a lot of his days at the fence of his turnout nearest the other pasture, calling out to the others. Titan usually called back, and Phoebe knew the big fella well enough to hear comfort in Titan’s tone. He was letting Smoky know everything was going to be okay.

Even so, and despite her experience with rescuing horses, Phoebe’s heart cracked a little with every plaintive wail. Smoky got extra apples as often as possible.

She was washing her hands after giving him his afternoon meds and apples when she heard unfamiliar voices in the stable. The ranch wasn’t a petting zoo, it wasn’t ‘open to the public’ like that, but Phoebe partnered with various rescue organizations, sharing the burdens of their work, and she, like most of the others, adopted out those rescues who were healthy enough, and emotionally resilient enough, to accept new owners. There were four adoptable horses at the ranch at the moment.

That said, people interested in adoption had to go through a series of steps to be deemed acceptable adopters, and that process was by no means a ‘drop-in’ sort of thing. Phoebe had no acceptable adopters at the moment and no appointment to meet with anyone who might be one.

So who the fuck was in her stable?

Warily, wondering if she should grab a pitchfork or something else weapon-like, she stepped out of the stable bathroom and crept to the end of the wall, where it formed a corner with the tack room and she could see most of the main aisle. Two women, maybe in their forties, stood about halfway down the aisle, hanging over the door of Amos’s empty stall.

Phoebe could see only their heads, shoulders, and arms, but she could tell they were the other kind of horse people. Both women wore English-style riding jackets.

Phoebe was a western rider. As a girl, with her first horse, Homer, she'd been a barrel racer and had placed second in the state junior championship when she was fifteen. She'd learned English-style as well and had learned to jump, but never competitively. She felt most comfortable and natural in a Western saddle (or bareback), holding a set of Western reins, but as far as she was concerned, any kind of riding was good riding. As long as the horse was treated well and happy to be ridden.

However, in her experience, Western and English 'horse people' were two entirely different breeds. She had a strong preference there as well. Probably there were lots of nice English riders, but she had yet to meet one. All the English-style horse people she'd ever met were entitled, affected, and downright obnoxious. Even if they treated their animals well (Some didn't, even at the highest levels. An Olympian had punched her horse right there on camera a few years back, so there was no doubt that bitch was even shittier to her horse in private.), they treated people according to a scale of value. If you were as rich as them or richer, you were worthwhile. If you were not, you were beneath notice, if not an outright target of scorn and abuse.

There was, Phoebe thought, an obvious reason why there were few working-class English riders, and it wasn't simply that all the tack and gear was twice as pricey as it had any right to be. It was that the snoots liked it that way, so the 'poors' were priced out of that world.

Trying to tamp down her irritation at the interruption of her day by two of the wrong kind of horse people, Phoebe squared her hat on her head and went into the aisle.

The women were in full riding regalia, jodhpurs and thousand-dollar black boots completing their fits. She was surprised they didn't have their black velvet helmets on, too.

“Hey,” she said, taking a few strides toward them before she stopped. “Can I help you?”

One woman stepped back from Amos’s stall and headed toward Phoebe with her hand out. “Hello. I’m Lydia Copperman.”

Phoebe let her come all the way to her before she offered her own hand. As they shook, she said, “Hey, Ms. Copperman. I’m Phoebe Davis. Can I help you with something?”

“It’s Mrs. My husband is Reynolds Copperman.”

Phoebe had no idea who that was, so she kept a vague smile on her face and waited.

“The founder and CEO of Copperman Resource Management?”

Phoebe was a lifelong Oklahoman. She knew that *resource management* meant drilling for oil. Her husband’s name might be ‘Copperman,’ but here in OK, he was an oilman, no doubt. Though the boom times had ended well before her birth, oil was still a pretty damn big deal here. The drillers had had to get a lot more aggressive and earth-destroying to get to it.

She was no radical Greenpeace type, spiking trees and vandalizing equipment. She used natural resources to fill her truck, cook her food, and keep her house warm and bright, just like most everybody else, and she wasn’t a hypocrite about it. But she also thought there had to be a limit to the fuckery humans did to the earth. They weren’t the only creatures who needed it, but a lot of them sure acted like they were.

But really, the main strike against Mrs. Reynolds Copperman wasn’t that her husband was apparently some bigshot oilman. It was that she was therefore really rich, and Phoebe pretty much hated rich people. The richer the worse. If these brunched-up broads thought they could swan in and take a horse because they wanted one, Phoebe had news for them.

Her response to Mrs. Copperman’s assertion of her husband’s importance was not a response at all. She simply repeated herself: “Can I help you with something?”

While Mrs. Oilman (probably his second or third ‘trophy’ wife, Phoebe thought, not even sorry about her pettiness) sucked her teeth, her friend—dressed almost exactly the same, even her hair the same expensive blonde, but without quite the magnitude of regal entitlement in her bearing—stepped up. “Our riding club is looking to support a rescue organization, and you were recommended. Oh—I’m Carolanne Thompson-Greene.”

Phoebe shook with Rich Bitch Number Two. “Hey. Phoebe Davis.” As she took her hand back, she asked both women, “I’m sorry. Did we have an appointment for you to visit the ranch today?”

Obviously, being sponsored by a chichi riding club would be a help; every little bit of support she could scrape together was a help. But Phoebe would sooner pack up and quit before she’d let somebody tell her how to run her ranch, and at least one of these women was very strongly giving uberbitch. They’d be all up in her business if she let them. She had no intention of making things easy on these uninvited guests.

Mrs. Oilman drew herself up tall. She was thin and angular, and about three inches taller than Phoebe, so she succeeded in literally looking down her nose at her. “I would think you’d be happy to meet with prospective benefactors, appointment or not.”

Phoebe was not shy. Nor was she naturally insecure or reluctant to stick up for herself. Her experience in Afghanistan and the lasting issues from her injury had introduced some anxieties and doubts into her psyche, but even so, she did not feel like she was any less worthwhile a human than any other. Money should not be a consideration of human worth. Period and exclamation point.

Another thing that her injury had introduced into her psyche: impulsivity. Where once she’d been ready to stick up for herself when it was called for, now she sometimes jumped whether it was called for or not, or whether she’d done a risk-reward analysis or not.

She stepped right up to Mrs. Oilman, so that they were chest to chest, and she stared straight into this platinum hag's brown eyes. "I would think you'd have learned the manners not to stomp into someone's home unannounced. I was actually raised in a damn barn, and I know better than that. Please get off my property."

Mrs. Oilman paled to near translucence. She stepped back and smoothed the lapels of her fancy riding jacket. "Do you understand that I can ruin you with a single phone call? One call, and the sponsors you do have will disappear. A second call, and I can have this rathole crawling with inspectors."

Phoebe let the threat roll off her. She'd worry about its veracity later.

"Lydia, don't," Carolanne Whoever-Hyphenate said. "Let's just go." She turned a halfhearted smile on Phoebe. "I apologize for the intrusion. We'll go."

The uberbitch was still staring at Phoebe like she couldn't figure out what kind of creature would say such a thing to her. Her friend tugged on her arm, but she ignored it.

Phoebe stared back until finally the nicer of the two got through, and Mrs. Oilman turned to her friend and shook her hold away. "Fine. Just stop clinging. Let's get out of here. I need to wash the stink off me."

She spun on the heel of her polished boot and stalked down the aisle. Her friend followed. Phoebe followed them both, then stood with her arms crossed as they climbed into a black Land Rover (of course), turned around, and drove away.

Had she just completely fucked her whole life because she couldn't suck up to one imperious rich bitch?

Time would tell, she supposed.

In the immediate future, however, there was work to be done. If she got caught in a whirlpool of worry, that work would go undone. Phoebe turned around, planning to go to the barn and grab fresh hay to fill the stall bins before she brought the animals in for the night.

She was almost at the barn when she heard the growl and grind of a truck rolling over her rutted gravel lane. Were they back? She couldn't imagine Mrs. Oilman would be ready to apologize, so ... what? Had she thought up some more threats?

Actually, that truck sounded bigger than the Land Rover. Curious, Phoebe retraced her steps, watching the place where whoever was coming would top the last rise.

The first thing she saw was a light bar on a white roof. Yellow and red lights—not cops. A wrecker. A flatbed wrecker, and it was carrying her truck. A few seconds more, and she saw Duncan at the wheel.

Phoebe had borrowed Vin's car and gone into town for a new phone the day after she'd brought Smoky home (yay for going ahead and getting insurance on her plan), and she and Duncan had texted back and forth several times each of the past few days. They'd talked about a lot of random things, they'd done some flirting that bordered on light sexting, and he'd kept her apprised about anything he'd learned regarding her truck. She knew he'd found a likely engine, but it needed some work. He had some big trip coming up, he'd be gone for a while, and he'd doubted that he'd be able to get it done before he left.

The last she'd heard, she'd be truck-less for maybe a month, despite the replacement engine he'd found. But here he and her truck were.

He was leaving on this big trip tomorrow. Had he both finished the repair and hauled her truck all the way down here? Or was he returning the empty husk?

Her arms crossed again, she strolled toward him as he drew the flatbed to a stop along the fence-line of the riding corral.

“Hey!” Duncan said as he opened the door and hopped down from the cab.

His smile was bright and wide, so Phoebe guessed he'd come with good news, but she needed that confirmed. “Hey. Are you giving up on me?”

“What?” He’d been coming in for a kiss, she thought, but her question pulled him up short. “No.” He tossed keys at her, and she caught them. “You want to start it up and drive it off the ramp, or you want me to?”

“It’s fixed? Already?”

He reached her and slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her close. “Fixed, washed, and lemony fresh.” With a grand sweep of his hand, he added, “Your carriage, milady.”

Was this guy for real? She’d known him less than a week, but he’d been swooping in all around her, making bad things better. Like she was his very own rescue project.

Actually, that thought had thorns and burrs, so Phoebe kicked herself free of it.

Rising onto her toes, she flung her arms around his neck. “I need you to say something shitty to me right now.”

Again, she’d interrupted his obvious intent to kiss her. Instead, he frowned at her. His eyes were an intensely beautiful bright green.

“What? Why?”

“I want to see the flaws, pal. This whole Mr. Perfect thing has got to be an act. I need to see the grimy underside, right now.”

He laughed and pulled her closer. “Sorry. Washed the undercarriage, too.” Before she could react to that, he knocked her hat off her head and kissed her.

The way he kissed was most definitely not a flaw.

~oOo~

“So you’re just giving her a brand-new engine for free? A woman you just met? You’re not doing that out of the goodness of your heart, so what’s your angle?” Margot stuck her fork in her mouth with a rhetorical flourish.

“Marg, shut up and chew,” Phoebe snapped. They’d been friends from childhood, and back in the day, they’d been about evenly matched, personality-wise. Neither was a shrinking little flower, neither was afraid of confrontation or reluctant to stand up for themselves, and each was doubly scrappy in defense of someone else. But since Phoebe’s injury, Margot had gotten even more protective, to an almost maternal degree. More than Phoebe’s actual mother had ever been.

Phoebe found it endearing and aggravating in equal measure, depending on circumstances. In the current circumstance, it was aggravating as fuck.

But Duncan was smiling. “Nah, it’s okay. Margot’s looking out for you. That’s what a friend should do.” He shifted in his seat at the dinner table to face Margot directly. “First, not a brand-new engine. A junkyard find that I pulled and rebuilt. Second, it’s more a donation than a gift. I cleared it with my work because this ranch is a non-profit”—he shot a glance Phoebe’s way—“Right? Officially?”

She nodded. “We are a 501(c)(3), yes.”

He answered her nod with one of his own and turned back to Margot. “So the station will write it off. Third, I like my work, so I was happy to do the job.” He turned to Phoebe again with a smile. “And yeah, I just met Phoebe, but there’s no angle here. I just like her and wanted to help because I could. Anything else between us, I don’t know yet. I got no expectations. We’ll figure it out together.” He plowed his fork into his dirty rice and shoved the mound into his mouth. With his mouth full, he looked at Margot and added, “Any other questions?”

Margot considered him for a moment, her dark brows drawn into suspicious slashes. “It’s more than a charitable donation. You didn’t just drop off the truck and go. You’re sitting at our dinner table.”

Phoebe dropped her own fork onto her plate. “Enough, Margot. What is your damage?”

As usual, her friend was unfazed. “There is a strange man eating with us. That’s never happened, so I want to know

what's what." She sighed dramatically. "I mean, look, honey. You just told us you ran potential sponsors off the property this afternoon. I know bitches like that are hard to choke down, but you know the ranch needs more sponsors. You're barely staying afloat as it is. Maybe you're not making the best decisions right now."

Furious now, Phoebe barely kept her voice calm. "I am making perfectly good decisions. Maybe I was a little impulsive in the *way* I sent them off, but only that. If she makes good on her threats, I'll figure out what to do then. But I know for sure I don't want those kind of people involved here. Those kind of people will think they can make demands about how we do things. But you're right—money's tight. So I don't know why you're having a hernia about Duncan's help with my truck."

"Because I want to be sure that help doesn't come with an expectation of services rendered."

Now humiliated as well as infuriated, Phoebe slammed her hands on the table and made everything on it bounce and rattle. "Jesus Christ, Marg!"

With a loud sigh, Vin raised both his large hands and entered the chat. "Okay. Take a breath, both of you. Margot, I took Duncan's measure the other day. I sure don't know him well enough to vouch, but he made a good first impression. More importantly, Phoebe's got this. If she wants to invite a guy to dinner, or anything else, that's her call, not ours." He plucked a cornbread muffin from the tea-towel-lined basket and tore it open. As he slathered honey butter on the steaming halves, he added, "And I don't want snooty bitches around here, showing up whenever they feel like it, either."

Phoebe gave Vin a grateful smile. He was always the level head. When she turned to Duncan, he was smiling at her.

Margot studied her three dinner companions in turn, landing last on Duncan. She sucked her teeth, then sighed. "Fine. Just know, Biker Boy, we both got Phoebe's back, and neither one of us is squeamish."

“Noted,” Duncan said, obviously unmoved by her implied threat.

~oOo~

Phoebe closed her bedroom door and left her annoying roommates on the other side. “Sorry about Margot. Since I got back home after ... everything, she thinks I need a minder, and she thinks she’s it.”

Smiling—it seemed like the guy had a smile for every occasion—Duncan caught her by the hips and pulled her close. “It was a little intense, sure, but you’ve got great friends. That’s important. You don’t need to apologize to me for having good people at your six.”

That phrasing struck her. *At your six*. Sure, it had become part of popular slang, but it had originated in the military. She was reminded that Duncan was a member of a biker gang, styling themselves like soldiers. But biker gangs fought wars of their own making. Real soldiers did not.

Was it more honorable to fight somebody else’s war? Phoebe didn’t know. Until now, she’d never had a reason to wonder.

“Hey,” he said, brushing her hair back. “You just disappeared, all of a sudden. Where’d you go?”

His fingers found the edge of the scar that tracked across most of that side of her head and lingered there. When he realized it, he dropped his hand.

She picked his hand up and set it on her head. “Don’t feel weird about wondering,” she told him.

His eyes locked with hers as he took the invitation and gently traced the full span of the scar. “It’s so wild to me that you were hurt so bad. The scars are the only signs, and they barely show. It keeps surprising me, like I can’t keep it in my mind.”

She laughed. “Funny, it’s the same for me. But that’s because there are a lot more signs for me—like my memories are kind of soupy. I get surprised a lot by remembering things I shouldn’t have forgotten.”

There were other things, too; things people in her life needed to know. Things that served as reasons Margot was hyper-protective. Fatigue and stress did weird things to her personality and to her physical coordination, for example. Enough of either, or a combination of both, could make her spin out. She could be impulsive, like this afternoon, jumping down that bitch’s throat without acknowledging the risk. Not all the time, but unpredictably. The switch that kept her reckless impulses in check had gotten just a touch loose. Sometimes she got terrible migraines, and when they hit, she could barely speak or move, or even think. And, of course, she was on daily meds for depression and focus, and probably would be for life.

But none of those things were for casual acquaintances to know, and she wasn’t sure if Duncan was anything more than that yet, or if he wanted to be, or if she wanted him to be.

She was getting a sense about that last one, though. She really liked him, she could feel that gaining speed, and he’d done nothing yet to cause her to tug on the reins.

His smile faded and his hand slipped down to cup her cheek. “Sorry. I sounded like an asshole.”

“No, you didn’t. I’m glad you don’t think of it every time you look at me.”

He bent low and brought his lips almost to hers. His voice deep and low and sultry, he murmured, “Trust me, that is not what I’m thinking about when I look at you.”

Was there a hotter sentence in the world? Not in Phoebe’s world. Her whole body rolled out a welcome mat.

She slipped her arms around his neck. “I need to know what you’re like when you’re an asshole. I don’t want to get blindsided by it.”

He brushed his lips over hers and asked in a breath, “What if I’m just not an asshole?”

She rose onto tiptoes and arched her body into his. Her body really wanted her mouth to shut the fuck up. But her rebuilt brain needed to know. “Everybody’s an asshole, at least sometimes. I sure am.”

“I wouldn’t mind having a chance to get blindsided by that.” He ended the discussion there, claiming her mouth fully, using his tongue to steal all her words.

He was an excellent kisser, exploring without overwhelming, seeking out her response as if a kiss were a waltz. He led, he didn’t dominate. And he kissed as if it was the goal itself rather than a hoop to jump through to get what he really wanted.

In Phoebe’s moderate experience, that was rare.

She was the one to start them moving toward something else. While their mouths waltzed, she slipped her hands from his neck and began undoing the buttons of his shirt. He took the hint and worked her buttons as well. As their shirts came off, she grabbed his belt, still keeping her mouth snug with his, and pulled him with her as she walked backward toward her bed. There, with her legs firm against the foot of her mattress, they finally let the kiss end.

They finished stripping, hardly looking away from each other. His eyes drank her up like water to slake a long thirst. Before he tossed his jeans away, he pulled out his wallet and extracted a condom. With a sly grin, he said, “Let’s skip the rainbow colors tonight.”

Phoebe laughed and slipped her fingertips into the waistband of his underwear: navy boxer briefs; she approved. “I don’t know. The purple kind of worked for me.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t your goods looking like they’d caught something terminal.”

She trailed her fingers up over the ridges of his belly, to the mounds of his pecs, through the light spray of hair between them. His muscles quivered under each touch.

“You seem pretty healthy to me,” she said. “I really like your body.”

His hands slid lightly down her arms. “I like yours, too.”

On a whim, Phoebe dropped to her knees, grabbing his underwear on the way and taking them down with her. His beautiful cock sprang free and brushed her cheek, leaving a light streak of wet there.

“Pheeb, ” he gasped in an earthy rasp.

The sound was perfect. The word was not. It was the first syllable of her name, yes, and thus an obvious choice for a nickname. A gesture of intimacy. But it was also a homophone of a slur she detested, one that had been tossed her way a few times after her injury, when she was still relearning how to be a person.

She looked up and waited until Duncan’s eyes opened and focused on her. “I don’t like to be called that.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“No need. Unless you do it again.”

“I won’t.”

She believed him.

Returning her focus to her task, Phoebe hooked one hand over Duncan’s hip—he had a subtle V-cut, and she settled her hand in that convenient slot—wrapped the other around the base of his pleasingly thick shaft, and brought her mouth to his tip. A bead of wet quivered there, waiting.

With the lightest of touches, she licked it up. His ass tightened, and his hips flexed toward her. She licked him again, with more pressure, and he groaned. His hand landed on the top of her head, but he didn’t grab at her.

When she sucked his full tip into his mouth, he groaned again, long and rough, and his hips began to rock. Picking up the tempo he’d started, Phoebe settled in and sucked him off, using her hand as well so she could touch all of him.

Though his hips rocked steadily, and she could feel a growing urgency all through his legs, his hips, his ass, he never tried to force more on her than she gave him. His hand remained on her head, firm but not forceful. He let her have complete control; he gave himself entirely to her will.

No man had ever done that with her before.

The experience of it, of being on her knees before a man, yet wholly in charge, entirely trusted, respected, was so powerfully arousing, Phoebe thought she'd burn to cinders. Her pussy throbbed hotly. Her juices slipped over her folds. Finally she let her hand slip from his hip, down his leg, to her own body. As soon as she pushed her fingers through her folds and found her clit, she moaned around his cock.

And Duncan grunted like he'd been stabbed. "Fuck," he gasped. "Watching you suck me while you finger yourself is gonna break me in half."

Phoebe set out to find out if that was true.

She almost brought them both to orgasm at the same time. Each time her own pleasure threatened to overwhelm her focus, Duncan would make a move or a sound so replete with fiery need she could only want to give him more.

Then he came, and she let him fill her mouth. As she swallowed, he scooped her from the floor, dropped her onto her bed, and settled between her thighs to finish her off with his mouth.

In mere seconds, he gave her the most explosive, consuming orgasm she'd ever had. And he stayed there, prolonging it right to the edge of pain, then drawing her down gently, until all her spasms had settled and her breath was nearly back to normal.

Where had this guy come from?

He crawled up over her until he was smiling (of course) down at her. "Hey, beautiful. You good?"

She brushed her fingers over his bearded jawline. "Where did you come from?"

“Broken Arrow,” he chuckled. “About sixty miles north.”

CHAPTER NINE

Duncan woke with his pillow vibrating. He shoved his hand under and grabbed his phone to turn off the alarm. The club was leaving on the patch-over run early this morning, and he'd spent the night with Phoebe, so he'd set his phone to shake him awake at three-holy-fuck-thirty A-kill-me-now-M.

Though the weather had become warmer, Phoebe's bedroom had not. As the last time he'd slept over here, the room was almost cold enough to show breath. But inside their little nest of comforters and closeness, Duncan was warm and snug. Phoebe slept naked before him, curled up as the little spoon.

Getting out of this bed would be torture.

But being late for the run would be worse.

Taking the risk for a few more minutes of cozy peace, he tucked in again and pressed a light kiss on her shoulder, where a small cluster of faint scars sat like a grove of brambles. When she moaned softly and burrowed more deeply into the covers, Duncan leaned back again; he wanted to let her sleep.

He'd told her last night that he'd have to leave well before daylight, so she wouldn't be surprised to wake up alone in bed. Even so, he felt guilty about it now.

That wasn't a new thing; though he'd had only two relationships that had been anything close to serious or even monogamous, Duncan was not one to sneak out of bed, even with girls he'd picked up, barely knew their names, and had no intention of seeing again. He'd leave as soon as he could say goodbye, but he always stayed until he could say it. It was a matter of respect.

That was one of the main tenets of the extremely cringe—and also extremely valuable—lecture he'd gotten from his mother on the day he'd gotten his driver's license. For Mom, that had been the day for the Big Talk about dating, sex, and how women experienced the world.

Dad's Big Talk on the topic had happened a few years earlier and was more focused on what he could do, could not do, should always do, and should never do with his body, to himself or anyone else. Also extremely cringe and extremely valuable.

The common theme in both talks was respect. Where women and sex were concerned, Duncan had been taught to ask before acting, to be steady, to be responsive and attentive. To be, in a word, respectful.

That advice had worked out great for him thus far. He knew he was a favorite among the club girls, and he'd rarely had a woman who was glad to hear him say goodbye.

And bonus? Women who felt respected were attentive and responsive in return.

Phoebe sure was. Damn, this girl was fiery hot.

His phone buzzed again; the snooze was going off. Okay, he had to get moving.

Trying not to let too much chilly air under the covers, Duncan eased out of Phoebe's cozy bed. He dislodged a cat he hadn't known had joined them. There seemed to be cats crawling all over this place; he'd seen at least four different ones—five now, including this black and white tuxedo version, who flicked its tail at him as it jumped down and sauntered out of the room.

Through the open door. He clearly remembered closing that door when he'd come back from the bathroom and they'd settled in to sleep. Well, for round three and *then* sleep.

Weird. Did the tuxie who'd just left know how to turn doorknobs?

Not a question that deserved his attention at the moment. Fumbling around in the dark room, trying to be as quiet as he could, Duncan hunted up his clothes and got them on. He had to sit on the edge of the bed to get his boots on, and that bit of shift in the mattress woke Phoebe.

She stretched and sighed, rolled to her back, went still, and finally sat up. He was going to get to say goodbye after all.

“Hey.” Her voice was a sleepy husk, and her body a shadow limned by the faintest blue light.

He scooted up toward her on the side of the bed. “Hey. I have to go. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. What time is it?” She looked toward her clock on the bedside table, the source of that blue light, but Duncan thought he was probably blocking the numbers. “It’s about ten to four. You should go back to sleep.”

“I will. Be safe on this trip you’re taking.”

“Thanks. I will.” As safe as he could be, anyway.

“Do you plan to text me? Or call?”

Here was the interesting thing: a week ago, Duncan would have stated, clearly and from his chest, that he wasn’t interested in getting serious with a woman right now. He wanted the whole family package someday: wife, kids, dog, house with a yard, all that. A life like his parents had. Like Kelsey and Dex had. But not right now.

Right now, he was a man in the fullness of his twenties, and he could drape himself in hot, eager women any time he wanted. He liked that life. He liked the variety. He often enjoyed taking two women at a time, sometimes more. He’d even taken part in an actual orgy—an interesting and educational experience, but in the final analysis, too distracting to become a habit.

Orgies or not, he enjoyed the freedom to choose any girl he wanted, as many as he wanted. He had every intention of sucking the marrow out of being single until at least his thirties.

But he liked this girl. She’d burrowed into his brainstem and settled in.

She was beautiful, yes—every inch of her. That long, gold hair, those inquisitive hazel eyes, that pouty, sassy little mouth, the faint sprinkle of freckles across her nose, the way his hands fit just right at the flare of her hips. She might as well have been created for him in a lab. But it wasn’t her looks that he thought of most. He thought of her standing there in the

cold, ignoring her own worry so she could calm a starving horse—a horse she'd rescued. He thought of her sitting in his cab, slouched comfortably in the passenger seat, telling him her story without a hint of defensiveness or shame, while he drove her and her horse home. He thought of Vin and Margot and the little family she'd made of castoff people and animals.

What he thought of most was who she was, not how she looked.

She was strong-willed and forthright; none of that blushy coyness a lot of girls their age put on around guys. And Jesus, her story. She was maybe tougher than him. For sure, she'd been tested more than he had.

He liked her a lot. But he didn't have to ask to know she wouldn't want something casual and non-exclusive. Her commitment and loyalty were obvious in every corner of her life she'd shown him. If they started something, she'd want to be serious.

Was he ready to give up a life he'd planned to enjoy for several more years?

He didn't know, and he couldn't know while he sat on her bed beside her, his head full of the scent of her, and of them.

Did he plan to text her? Or call?

He wanted to, but he didn't know if he wanted what it might mean if he did. He had to think on that a lot more. The last thing he wanted was to start something with her and end up letting her down.

In his uncertainty, he'd left her question unanswered for too long. "Okay," she said and rolled away, drawing the covers up tight. "Bye, Duncan. Be quiet on your way out."

He started to reach for her but thought better of it. The time she'd be glad for his touch was already past. So he stood and went to the door.

Before he went through, he turned and said to the lump in the bed, "Bye, Phoebe. Take care."

The lump in the bed did not react.

Well, he'd wanted a chance to say goodbye.

~oOo~

Duncan's mom's arms were so tight around his neck he was actually seeing stars. "I'm gonna be fine, Mom," he said as he tried to wedge himself gently free. "If you don't strangle me before I can leave."

She finally eased off, but she didn't let go. "You listen to your father. If he tells you to hang back, you hang back. Don't try to be a hero."

He used a little bit of force and pulled her arms away, but he held onto them. "Mom. I'll do what I need to do. It's not about being a hero."

All around them, the Bulls who had families—and that was most of them—were in similar clenches. The entire family, even Grammo and Grampa D, had shown up at the clubhouse at the crack of dawn to see the whole club off. They'd had a huge breakfast together, and now it was time to mount up, but the goodbyes were taking some time.

"Just come home to me, Duncan. You and your father. Just come home."

"We will, Mom. I promise."

Somehow, those words finally set her tears loose. Fuck, this really was like they were heading off to war.

As Dad came over from his goodbye with Kelsey and took over the handling of Mom, Duncan felt a punch in his kidney. He turned around and found Hannah, his baby sister, glaring up at him.

She wore one of his old *Mass Effect* hoodies, which was about five sizes too big for her. It was like the girl was allergic to the idea that anybody would ever see her body. She dressed like early-days Billie Eilish.

“You’d better come home breathing,” she snarled at him. “If you leave me alone with those mutants we call parents, I will cut your corpse into kibble and feed you to Rowdy.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet. I didn’t know you cared so much.”

When she stuck her tongue out at him, Duncan grabbed her and forced her into a full-body hug. After a couple of seconds, she hugged him back. Hard.

“Still think you’re a cretin,” she mumbled against his kutte.

He kissed the top of her head. “And I still think you’re a swamp rat. But I love ya.”

She grunted and head-butted his chest.

“UncaDunc!” came a tiny, beloved voice from somewhere around his knees. Duncan set Hannah back and picked up his best girl.

“Hey, TildyWildy. Did you get another muffin?”

Tildy’s nod was accompanied by a grin that was far too sly for a toddler. “Mama say no, but Grammo say yes.”

“Grammo is good for sneaky muffins, yep.” He gave her an affectionate little shake. “Hey, are you gonna be a good angel for Mama while Daddy, Papa, and I are away?”

“What’s away?”

“It means we won’t see each other for a little while.”

She frowned and squinched her eyes, like she was trying to imagine literally not seeing him. “I like to see you.”

“I like to see you, too. We’ll be back quick as we can.”

“Okay. I want a muffin.” She squirmed to get down.

Laughing, Duncan put her down, and she scampered off. So much for sentimental farewells.

Kelsey stood there, holding Ethan and looking decidedly drippy. She and Dex must have finished their goodbyes.

“Hey, sis.”

“Be careful, okay? And ...” She turned to watch Dex for a moment, but instead of finishing that thought, she shook her head. “Just be careful.”

“Always.” He set his hand on her shoulder. “Hey. He’ll be careful, too. We all want to get back whole, but nobody wants it more than him.”

“He’s stressed. Just ... look out for him. Okay?”

The idea of Duncan looking out for Dex, who had to be the toughest motherfucker in the club, seemed sort of ridiculous. But the man did have some pretty hardcore mental health issues. Was that what she meant?

“Something goin’ on with him?”

“No. Not really. But he’s stressed. This whole thing has him on edge. So ... just keep an eye out. If you think he’s acting off, call me?”

“Okay.” It would be seriously not okay if their SAA lost his marbles on this run. Duncan hoped Kelsey was just being her usual overprotective self.

“Thanks.” She stepped in for a one-armed hug. Duncan folded her and Ethan in both of his.

“LET’S RIDE, BROTHERS!” Eight roared, and Duncan stepped back.

It was time to ride to Eureka, California and patch over The Nameless MC. A new Bulls charter. By any means necessary.

~oOo~

Typically when Eight Ball and his bad leg were on a run to Nevada, the crew had to stop for the night twice before they reached Laughlin. Sometimes, in the winter, they had to stop three times. But on this trip, Laughlin was only the midpoint, so Eight was driving the van part of the way. And they’d caught a break with some false-spring temperatures, which

promised to follow them all the way west. They were stopping only once before Laughlin—in Tucumcari, New Mexico.

Tucumcari was a tiny town that had a reputation for quirk and kitsch, and its citizens leaned all the way in on that. The motel Fitz had booked for the club—they took almost the whole thing over—was a neon-festooned time machine to about 1960.

It wasn't the first time the club had stopped here on a run, and each time Duncan pulled in to the motel lot, he wanted a chance to wander this weird little town. But they only ever had time for food, drink, and sleep. Moreover, whoever was in charge of any run crew always wanted everybody to stick close together. Today, they'd arrived before sunset, so Duncan might have tried to make a case for a couple hours of free time, but everybody was uptight on this run. If he even raised the notion of time off, Eight would probably rip his head off for acting like he was on vacation or some shit.

Someday, though, Duncan would get a chance to find all the quirky nooks and crannies of Tucumcari.

One town highlight the club never missed, however, was dinner at Watson's Barbecue. Goddamn, that place was good. The restaurant was part of a big ranch-supply store that had a gift shop as well. After supper, while several of the other guys befouled the restrooms, Duncan wandered around the shop, killing time. The ranch supply stuff made him think of Phoebe.

That wasn't true. He'd been thinking of her about eighty percent of the time since he'd left her bed. Probably the way he'd left had burned that bridge, but even so, the same question spun around every thought of her, the same question that had locked him up right before he left her: Did he want more with her? Would he want to try to have a relationship with her?

It seemed insane to consider that question about a girl he'd met mere days ago. What kind of simp started tearing down everything he'd thought his life would be after sleeping with a chick twice? They hadn't even been on anything like a date. He'd done her a couple good turns, she'd fed him a couple

meals, and they'd fucked a couple times. That was a rickety-ass foundation to start something that would change his life.

Or maybe the simp part was thinking moving forward with her automatically meant changing his life forever. Most guys would start something just because they liked a girl and wanted to keep hanging out, and figure out the life-changing stuff later. That was the normal, sensible approach—in fact, it was how Duncan's two semi-serious things had started.

But those had both ended with tears and recriminations, and he hated being the guy who'd made a woman cry.

Plus, Phoebe just hit different. Maybe it was because of what had happened to her in Afghanistan, maybe it was he'd seen her valiantly standing strong against her own troubles while she took care of others. Whatever it was, the thought of making her cry was too much to deal with.

“Since when do you give a shit about horses?” his father said at his side.

Confused, Duncan turned to him. “Huh?”

Dad nodded at the item in Duncan's hand: a little wooden box-like thing that might have been a very small wall hanging? Painted black, it said in white capital letters *All You Need is Love ... AND A HORSE*.

He hadn't realized he'd picked the thing up, hadn't even been really looking at it. He set it back on the shelf. “I don't, I guess. Just wandering around.”

“The girl with the truck rescues horses,” Dad observed unnecessarily. “I guess she gives a shit about them, then. What's her name again?”

“Phoebe. Yeah, she does. But I wasn't looking to buy her anything. We're not a thing. I'm just killing time.”

Dad smirked at him. “Okay. Well, time to mount up. We're headed to that bar across from the motel.”

Great. Sitting around drinking and bullshitting. For something new and different.

Sometimes the Bulls were boring as fuck.

~oOo~

After a few hours drinking and bullshitting in some dark hole of a Tucumcari cowboy bar, Duncan was stretched out on a double bed, watching a two-year-old MMA bout on one of ESPN's spinoff channels. His father sat on a plastic lawn chair outside the door, on the phone with Mom.

Duncan and his father were bunking together on this run. He didn't mind it; they got along great most of the time. That hadn't always been the case—for a few years, they could barely be in the same room together for more than ten minutes.

But they'd stopped getting in each other's grille once Dad had finally let up and cleared the way for Duncan to wear the Bull. Their relationship was a lot more like club brothers these days than like father and son.

That was a relief, as far as Duncan was concerned. Dad's version of fatherhood was pretty heavy-handed. He wasn't a tyrant, and he'd never hit any of his kids as punishment or in anger, but he was a control freak. They'd fought a lot through Duncan's teens and almost constantly while he was prospecting. Their spars in those days had not exactly been familial.

Dad had been a professional boxer back in the day, until he'd killed a man in the ring. He'd given up the profession after that, but he'd still fought regularly in pop-up street fights and bare-knuckle leagues, adding MMA-style moves to his boxer's toolbox.

He'd been forced to fight a lot while he'd been in prison, before Duncan's time. The guards at McAlester had a ring going while Dad was there. Probably still had it going even now. The guards had not been overly concerned with the health and safety of their inmate gladiators.

Though Dad was broken down after all that, with long list of permanently damaged parts, like deafness in one ear, diminished sight in one eye, nearly crippling arthritis in his

hands, and more, he still loved the sport, and Duncan had grown up watching UFC with him. When he was in middle school, when Mom finally gave in, Dad started training him. By the time he graduated high school, he was fighting in underground matches and bare-knuckle street fights, and winning significantly more than he lost. He'd made some decent money at it.

If Dad had succeeded in keeping the Bull off Duncan's back, his Plan B had been to try to go pro.

But the Bull was on his back now, and he no longer had much time for fighting. Besides, Eight wanted the patches to keep their recreational violence in their own ring. Though he'd apparently been a loose cannon as a soldier in the club, stirring up trouble wherever he could, as president he was all about keeping their shit low-pro and not catching the notice of Mr. and Mrs. Normie or John Q. Law.

The fight he'd wanted to see again was over, so he turned off the television. As he headed to the bathroom to brush his teeth, he heard his father laugh at something Mom must have said.

That laugh was specific, and for Duncan it carried a load of feelings and associations. Only Mom got that laugh, and only when they were private together. It was an intimate, secret thing, a lover's laugh, and any time Duncan had ever heard it, he knew he'd caught something not meant for him.

His parents' marriage was the model for what he wanted himself, when he was ready to want it. His father and mother *loved* each other, and it showed every day. They'd been married almost thirty years, they'd been together years longer than that, and they were still completely in love and completely horny for each other.

They argued, sure, and sometimes those arguments were loud and intense. Dad wasn't just a control freak with the kids, and Mom tended to react to trouble with big emotions before she calmed and started trying to solve the problem. That combination sometimes produced an explosion. But they always worked it out, always apologized when they were

wrong, always smoothed the path between them. They didn't hide any of it from the kids, either. If they blew up at each other in front of them, they explained why, and how they'd made it better.

Because for them love was more than attraction, more than passion. It was respect.

Duncan knew more than a few people who thought real love had to hurt, that passion meant fighting, that the best sex was angry sex. But he'd learned that passion was what healed the pain. Real love meant trying not to cause pain in the first place and soothing it when it happened. People fucked up; good or bad, they fucked up. But good people, loving people, owned it and fixed it when they did.

That was the lesson Duncan's parents had taught him about romance and relationships.

Hearing that quiet sound of his father's love for his mother, Duncan felt a weird weight in his chest. He went back to his bed and grabbed his phone.

The last text exchange between him and Phoebe was from a few days earlier. He'd explained that he wasn't sure he'd be able to get the engine in shape before he had to leave town, and she'd replied: *Understood. Whenever you can get to it. I'm just so grateful for this help. It is HUGE, and I will never be able to repay you adequately. But I do intend to try. Really, Duncan. Thank you.*

Happy to do it was all he'd replied.

Now that seemed a stupidly half-assed response. He'd improved on that, certainly, by bringing the repaired truck down to her ranch, but he'd fucked that up in the end by not being able to just say yes, he'd text her while he was away.

Could he do it now? After the way they'd left things this morning?

Maybe he could start by apologizing for that.

Hey, he typed. *I'm sorry about this morning.*

As he tried to think what more he should say, and wanted to say, his father came into the room. As Duncan looked up, his thumb grazed the send button.

Shit.

He stared at his phone. Should he send another message? Add the thought he'd been trying to think? Or would a second message seem like an afterthought—or make him look like a simp?

He set his phone down. Maybe it was better for that apology to stand on its own for now.

CHAPTER TEN

Late in the morning, Phoebe sat at the desk in the living room and worked on her Patreon. She tried to provide ‘exclusive content’ of some sort once a week. It had taken her a while to figure out what her patrons wanted that was special enough to feel like a real exclusive, but it turned out they basically wanted more of the same—longer videos of the animals, more information about their health and welfare. They loved content about vet and farrier visits almost as much as cute and/or silly animal antics.

Some of her most popular videos, on social media and Patreon both, were just closeups of the horses getting their hooves trimmed. People were fascinated—and some commenters even called it their ‘ASMR.’ Phoebe didn’t get it, but hey—whatever brought the donations in.

The end of the month was coming up, and she always did a recap post, like a big journal entry summarizing everything she and the animals had done on the ranch over the previous four weeks or so. Since Afghanistan, staring at words on a screen gave her a migraine after about twenty or thirty minutes, so it took her several days to write a long post like that.

It would be better if she started drafting the recap at the beginning of the month and added to it daily like an actual journal, so she’d have all the details fresh in her mind and could spend only five or ten minutes each day. But she hadn’t started out that way, and the drag of spending several days working on it at the end of the month made her procrastinate starting the next one right away, so Phoebe was caught in a dysfunction cycle of her own making.

Right now, the words were starting to make ghosts in her vision, the code-red sign for ‘get the fuck off the computer or else,’ so she saved her draft and prepared to get the fuck off the computer. Maybe she’d put a few more minutes into the draft after dinner.

On her way to close out of Patreon, she noticed that her number of top-tier patrons had dropped by two—actually, when she got a closer view, she saw that she'd lost three patrons at that level, including her two biggest patrons, but had gained one at the exact same donation amount of one of those she'd lost, the biggest donor by far. That struck her notice because her biggest donor was someone she knew in the real world: Evelyn Hanover, an elderly widow and well-known philanthropist in the Oklahoma animal rescue world. Her monthly donation was a custom \$1978—the year she'd married her husband. She donated the same amount to all her favored rescuers.

The new patron, with an anonymized username (allsoulshavesouls) had set their donation at that exact same amount: \$1978.

That oddity caught Phoebe's interest enough to push a burgeoning panic to the back of her brain. She'd lost three big donors, nearly three thousand dollars of monthly income, but she'd gained most of it back in a strangely specific way. The obvious solution to the mystery was that Mrs. Hanover had canceled her donation under her own name and started a new one under an alias.

The two patrons she'd truly lost also had used their actual names for their accounts, so she knew they were both active in the animal-charity world. Neither of their names was Lydia Copperman, but an echo of the Rich Bitch she'd run off the ranch several days earlier rose up in her head: *Do you understand that I can ruin you with a single phone call? One call, and the sponsors you do have will disappear.*

It looked like Mrs. Reynolds Copperman of Copperman Resource Management was as good as her word. She had apparently decided to manage Phoebe's resources straight out of existence.

That woman had already been stomping around in Phoebe's broken head this morning, after she'd gotten a call from the Oklahoma Humane Society, which had working relationships of one sort or another with most if not all foster and rescue organizations in the state. Becca, her contact at

OKHS, had called to ask if she'd had some contact with ... yep, one Lydia Copperman.

The uberbitch really was on a mission to make trouble for her. Becca had told her that Copperman wanted Ragamuffin Ranch struck from their list of grant-eligible groups.

Phoebe had been forthright with Becca, describing the brief scene in detail and trying to be as clear-headed and dispassionate as possible. Luckily, Lydia Copperman's reputation preceded her among the larger charities in the state, and that reputation was one of complaints and demands. Becca and her colleagues had taken this complaint and demand with a grain.

However, Becca suggested that the uberbitch would likely keep looking for satisfaction, so Phoebe should be proactive and get in contact with any organization she needed to keep on her side.

Welp. The state of her patron roster indicated that the time to be proactive had already passed. She was going to have to make calls to various administrators explaining the situation, expressing regret (that she was sort of truly feeling now) at her brusque reaction, and so on. Damage control, before she lost everything over an impulsive reaction to wealthy entitlement.

Somebody was going to want her to apologize to the uberbitch at some point, she could feel it. And that would fucking suck. She wasn't sure she could manage it.

Now a migraine was no longer threatening but burgeoning. Unable to process any of her feelings or fears, Phoebe let it all switch off. If she tried to contend with this right now, she'd lose her shit, and she had shit to do. Living beings who needed her, no matter the state of her bank accounts.

As she pushed the desk chair in, she saw that the old granny-square throw was wadded up in the seat of Vin's recliner, and a spray of newspaper—Vin liked an actual paper—lay on the floor between the recliner and the wall. She folded up the throw and draped it over the back of his chair, gathered up the papers and set them on the coffee table ... and then fell sideways into cleaning the whole room. Her brain

filled with white noise and her body became Rosie the Robot, a task-oriented machine.

When Vin wrapped a hand around her arm and yanked her back to awareness, the room reeked of Pledge and she was pushing the ancient Kirby vacuum over the area rug.

According to the clock on the mantelpiece, she'd lost forty-five minutes.

That happened sometimes, especially when her brain had been running around like Gremlin, trying to herd a rogue thought into a pen where it would be safe and out of her way.

Vin knew that. So he stood frowning at her and asked, "You okay?"

"Sure," she said, which was both true and false, as Vin knew.

He shaped his mouth into a skeptical twist. "I had to grab you to pull you out. What's happenin' in there? This about that call this morning? That woman trying to fuck with us?"

"Yeah, I guess," she told Vin.

But she was about half lying. Despite the potential disaster the woman could create, Phoebe didn't think it was Lydia Copperman that her mind-Gremlin was trying to keep out of her way. Despite the legitimate worry and fear the problem warranted, she felt sure she'd figure out a way to deal with whatever that woman tried to throw at her, if for no other reason than the need to rescue large animals was greater than the capacity of the large-animal rescues in the state. Ragamuffin Ranch was necessary. Phoebe was maybe a rarer and more important resource than a rich uberbitch. Copperman could fuck with her, she could make life difficult, she could make things uncomfortable, but in the end, Phoebe didn't really fear ruin. Just a mountain of hassle she didn't have time for and awkward apologies she wouldn't really mean.

No, the thought trying to break free today was Duncan.

It completely pissed her off. He was just a *guy*. She'd had sex with him a few times. Big whoop. Why had she been hurt this morning, when he'd as good as told her he wouldn't be

reaching out again? She was not somebody who got all fluttery and clingy over any guy. This one didn't want to get something started with her? That was fine—no, it was *good*. He was a Brazen Bull, and she didn't need that kind of drama in her life. Also he lived an hour away. While sixty-something miles wasn't exactly long distance, it wasn't convenient, either.

Still, she was hurt and depressed. She'd asked if he'd call or text, and he'd done that *guy* thing where he'd sat there and said nothing. Obviously he'd been trying to cook up some smarmy fiction that would 'let her down easy' or just be an outright lie.

Asshole.

It shouldn't matter, but it did. She'd liked him. They'd had two really great nights together—he'd spent *two whole nights* with her (well, one and three-quarters), and actually sleeping with a guy was not a thing she did. But the sex with him had been *really* great. He was incredibly attentive and sweet; he'd really noticed her responses and adjusted accordingly. Definitely on her best-of list. Maybe all the way at number one. And she'd felt cozy and safe sleeping in his arms.

Plus, he'd repeatedly gone out of his way—literally and figuratively—to help her out. He'd saved her from huge trouble, in fact. Twice within a week.

That was the problem, really. He wasn't an asshole. Biker gang notwithstanding, he was a legitimately good guy. He simply wasn't looking for a relationship, and he'd seen, as she had, that any move forward would lead them into relationship territory. She'd been interested in making that move; he had not.

He wasn't as into her as she was into him. It stung.

So he was stuck in her head, and she had no way to pry him out of there. Except her mind-Gremlin, trying to keep the thoughts at bay. Her therapist had 'assured' her these occasional 'hyperfocus' episodes were about her PTSD, not her brain injury (though the PTSD was about the brain injury,

so tomayto, tomahto). Apparently it was considered better to be a little bit crazy than a little bit dented.

Vin took the vacuum from her. His stump had healed sufficiently that he had his leg on again and was fully mobile. “I’ll finish this after lunch. Inside the house is my job, and I’m back on the job. And lunch is ready, anyway.”

That was the arrangement of their weird little family: Vin’s prosthetic was some distance from ‘top of the line,’ and he had some brain damage and muscle weakness that affected his coordination as well. He could walk and work on the ranch’s uneven terrain for only an hour or two in relative comfort, and if he pushed it too far, could end up with a sore like the one that was just healing—or worse, he could fall. But he was a great cook, having been raised in a Creole restaurant-owning family in Louisiana. So he took on the inside jobs, cooking and cleaning and such. He also threw some of his disability benefit into the household accounts to help keep the bills paid.

Margot worked in town and made the most actual income, so she covered most of the monthly bills. Phoebe provided the place to live and paid for the care of the animals. Everybody covered their own personal expenses. They were one of the various versions of a Gen Z family, trying to make it work in a world where all the systems supporting home, labor, and health were broken.

Just then Gremlin trotted into the room. They’d installed doggie doors in the side and back doors, so he came and went at will during the day. Gremlin also got lunch when they did. He was a working dog, and though his herds were small, he got his cardio in every day and needed plenty of calories.

Lunch was his favorite because he got real meat and vegetables rather than kibble.

He *woofed* quietly, and Phoebe laughed. “Okay, okay. Everybody’s nagging me today. Let’s have lunch.”

“Don’t tell Marg about that call this morning, okay?” Phoebe stabbed her fork into her gumbo. She had not yet told Vin about her Patreon, and she wasn’t sure she would. She was already sorry she’d told him about Becca’s call.

Vin stopped chewing and stared at her. “Why?”

“Because she’ll make a bigger deal of it than it is. Becca is on my side, and I’m going to take her advice today and reach out to everybody who matters. Uberbitch can try to hurt me, but she won’t succeed.” Those words felt a bit bigger than she could hold, but she was determined to make them true.

Dropping his sopping bread into his mainly empty gumbo bowl, Vin did some more judgmental staring before he finally said, “If she’s got enough weight behind her, maybe not getting her way will just escalate her. Eventually, it’s not gonna matter she’s being ridiculous. If she’s a big enough deal, she can hurt you—and it’s not just you, Bee. It’s *us*. We’re a squad, right? You go, I go. Might be you’ll need help from Marg’s boss.”

“Tyrone P. Miller, Attorney at Law? He works out of a storefront in Checotah, Vin. Literally next to the laundromat. If I need legal help against Mrs. Oil Baron Uberbitch, I don’t think a guy who fixes speeding tickets and does bankruptcies and probate on fly-specked old farms is gonna be a help.”

“You’re makin’ my case for me, Bee.”

Phoebe’s jaw clenched so hard her teeth creaked. God, she did *not* want to talk about this shit! But if she tried to shut it down, Vin would find ways to push and prod until she caved and he got the discussion he wanted.

She took a breath and explained, “No, your case was about telling Margot, and there’s nothing she can do to help if that woman really goes after me—us. What Marg will do is run around with her hair on fire, thinking she’s got to fix a problem she didn’t make and *she can’t fix*. And I’ll get the blast from that directly in the face. She already thinks I’m half as capable as I actually am, no matter how much I prove what I can do. The last thing I need is for her to get anything she can interpret as evidence that she’s right.”

With a sigh, she pushed her half-finished lunch away. She loved her best friend most of all, but Margot was a bossy mother hen as well—a lifelong tendency that had been turbocharged after Phoebe had come home from the Army dented.

“If I have to, I’ll kiss some uberbitch ass, okay? I’m sure the chance to humiliate me will satisfy her. I will handle it and make sure she doesn’t become a problem. I promise.”

“I don’t want you to have to kiss that woman’s ass.”

“And I don’t want to do it. So let’s just wait and see, okay?”

More meaningful staring. “Alright,” Vin finally conceded. “Just be careful, right?”

“Just as careful as I ever am,” she told him.

He chuckled and went back to sopping up the last of his gumbo.

Fuck, it was like she lived with a new set of parents—and, like her original set, they were just as fucked-up as she was.

~oOo~

That night, after the animals were all tucked in, the chores and jobs all completed, and a good dinner of pork chops, fried apples, and fresh bread was consumed, Vin, Margot, and Phoebe were settled into the living room continuing their rewatch of *Peaky Blinders*.

Vin had zonked out in his chair about halfway through the second episode of the night, but Margot and Phoebe were fully invested.

Margot had a major crush on Tommy. Phoebe thought he was a bit too pretty to be worthy of a crush. She had a real soft spot for Arthur, actually. But Polly was her favorite character by a mile.

Phoebe sat on the floor in front of the old sofa, framed by Margot's legs as her friend sat behind her, brushing her hair. As they watched Polly stand before a hangman's noose, trying to be brave, Phoebe huffed. It didn't matter that it was fiction, it didn't matter that she knew how it all turned out—she was worried for Polly and angry at Tommy all over again.

“I don't know how you can forgive Tommy for what he does to everybody. I don't care what his reasons are. Family should come first.”

“In his mind, family is coming first,” Margot asserted. “Everything he does is for the family.”

“No, everything he does is for himself. He just assumes the family will come along with him. He's the one with the grand ambitions. Arthur and the rest would have been happy to stay in Small Heath.”

Margot only grunted as she began braiding Phoebe's hair. They'd had this disagreement the first time they'd watched the show as well, so Phoebe could interpret the grunt. Margot thought Aunt Polly was just as ambitious as Tommy.

“You just think Cillian Murphy is hot.”

“No, I think Tommy Shelby is hot. Cillian Murphy is cute. It's all in the attitude. Since you're into hot outlaws now, I'd think you'd come around to Team Tommy.”

Phoebe pulled away and turned to look behind her. “That was bitchy.”

Margot's forehead bunched up. “Why? Are you not into a hot outlaw? Pretty sure a Brazen Bull counts.”

“I'm not into a Brazen Bull.”

“Pfft. He slept over! Twice! How long have we lived together? That's the first time since we have that you've had a boy over long enough for breakfast, honey. You like him. A lot. I know I played bad cop when he had dinner with us, but I think I actually like him, too. Preliminarily speaking. He really leaned in helping you out. And Snorey McSnoreson over there says he made a good impression. Also, he's definitely hot. So

he plays in the deep end. Maybe that's only a problem if he drags you in with him."

Now Phoebe drew her brow in. "You'd be okay if I brought an outlaw into our lives? You?"

Her best friend shrugged. "Look. All the time at work, I see banks and big companies fucking over little farmers, old ladies, and young people just trying to get by, and I see all that fucking-over is totally legal. If some regular folks band together to get some back, maybe that's not a bad thing, no matter how illegal it is. My granny used to say all the time she'd shoot a Fed on sight if one tried to get onto her property. She'd trust a Brazen Bull over a government agent a million times out of a million."

Margot's great-grandmother, the one person in her family she'd been truly close to, had been a citizen of Choctaw Nation. She'd come by her suspicion of the government honestly. Practically genetically.

Phoebe sighed and settled back against the base of the sofa. "It doesn't matter. I'm not going to see Duncan again."

Starting the braid over, Margot asked, "Why not?"

"He doesn't want to start something, and I don't want to be a booty call." That was the truest explanation, and she needed to take it onboard herself: he wasn't an asshole, and she wasn't an idiot. They were merely in different places.

"All you've wanted since you got back from ..." Margot let the sentence fade out; she had a hard time saying any of the words that would finish it: got back from *Afghanistan*, from *the Army*, from *war*, from *a coma*, from *re-learning how to be a human*. "All you've wanted is easy hookups. If you don't want that now, is this guy that special?"

"I think it doesn't matter what I think. He's not interested."

"Are you sure about that? Did he say those words specifically?"

"What is your deal?" Again, Phoebe turned to glare at her friend. Margot was holding Phoebe's new phone; she must

have left it on the sofa cushion when she scooted down for a hair-brushing.

With a wry smirk, Margot handed her the phone. When the screen woke back up and the phone recognized her, she saw a preview of a text from the outlaw in question: *Hey. I'm sorry about this morning.*

“What did he do this morning?” Margot asked quietly.

Phoebe stared at her phone, wanting to see if there was more to the text but not wanting to put it on read. Not yet. She needed to think. “He didn’t do anything. He just didn’t answer when I asked if he’d be in touch again.”

“Well, I guess he’s answered now.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

No need to be sorry.

Duncan stared at the text for a while.

His father was already asleep in the other bed, snoring in the way only a late-middle-aged man whose nose had been broken multiple times could snore. Duncan had his AirPods in and was watching motorcycle travel videos on YouTube; Phoebe's text had popped up over the latest one.

He'd sent his latest text about an hour earlier, and it was an hour later in Tulsa than in Tucumcari. After midnight there. Though his time with her didn't support the assumption, he'd figured her to be a habitual early-to-bed, early-to-rise chick. Farmer's hours.

Well, whether she was not an early-to-bed type or she just couldn't sleep tonight, she was awake now, and a sense of urgency tweaked him. He wrote back.

I got the sense you were mad when I left.

The message went read at once, and dots popped up. Her phone was in her hand. It was stupid how much that charged his blood.

Not mad. You could have just said no,

tho. You wimped out on that

Little disappointing tbh

Was his leaving the disappointment, or his freezing up when she asked if he'd keep in touch? The evidence of the order of her thoughts suggested the second, so he went with that.

*Didn't wimp out. Just didn't
know the right answer.*

Again, she read his message as soon as it was sent and began at once to reply.

You didn't know if you

planned to be in touch?

Was there someone else

you needed to consult with?

Duncan laughed. Some girls might attempt a complicated linguistic dance, trying to draw out the words they wanted him to say without putting too much of themselves out there first. He thought he understood why they did it; his mom and sisters had riffed often enough about the challenges of being a woman dealing with men. He would play the game and try to make things easy on them, but he preferred just being straight. It got tiring to constantly try to figure out what they meant, like every interaction was a puzzle to solve. It was probably equally tiring to try to create that puzzle. Relationship shit was hard—one reason he'd been planning to avoid it for a few more years.

Phoebe was always straight, usually with a side of snark or sass. That was his favorite kind of woman. Maybe it meant that she didn't care enough to start the game, but he didn't think that was it.

So he was straight right back.

No, snarkypuss. I didn't know what

I wanted this morning. Felt like we

were at a

He paused for a second, trying to come up with the right word, and eventually decided on

threshold, and I needed to think if

I wanted to cross over.

Though she read him right away, this time it took her a little longer to respond.

I'd say that was pretty poetic

if you didn't also just call me snarky

puss. Lolwtf

So ... not charming?

Maybe in an “aw, so helpless” way.

Before he could respond to that barb, she sent another message.

Well, I guess you decided to text.

What does that mean?

Did you decide to cross over?

*I don't know. You were not in my
plans, snarkypuss.*

Let's hit the kill switch on snarkypuss, please.

*I do not consent to nicknames yet. And that one
will never happen.*

Yeah, he really did like her. Each interaction with her charged the spark he felt—even texting with hundreds of miles between them as well as some tension.

Noted

Thank you. As for my question?

What does this convo mean?

What *did* it mean? Why had he reached out again? Why did it flood him with serotonin that she'd responded? Was he ready to try settling down? Was that what was going on here?

He still did not fucking know. The thought of being with Phoebe more—a lot more—excited him, but the thought of being settled, of being *limited*, soured his stomach. He liked her, and he liked his life. Couldn't he have both?

Even as the question occurred to him, he knew that was the road to Asshole Central. Unless she'd be interested in something open.

Okay, but he didn't like the thought of sharing her, either.

Yep. Asshole.

Because he'd left her on read for a few minutes, he typed the only thing he could think to say.

Does it have to mean something?

Hey, you're the one who choked this morning because texting me might mean something you don't want.

Okay, fair. But I still don't know.

What do you want?

Dude.

What

You're seriously gonna play that game?

Shit. Was *he* trying to do that dance? No. No. He just wanted to know where she was in this.

Not a game. Just asking.

Okay then.

What I want is not to get jerked around by some game-playing asshole who won't say what he fucking means. Bye, Duncan.

Fuck! He'd fucked it up, and he was going to lose something—someone—he might actually want. Adrenaline shot through his body as he hurried to catch her if he could.

Phoebe, wait.

She read that right away, so at least she hadn't dropped the phone like dropping a mic. And it didn't take more than a minute for her to start writing. If he *were* playing games, he'd read something encouraging in that.

Her actual text wasn't encouraging, but it wasn't an ice bath, either.

It's late. I'm over this talk.

So say something real or don't.

Afraid if he took the time to think and compose, she'd bail and then block him or something, Duncan jumped in and wrote out his thoughts.

I really like you. A lot. I texted because I've been thinking about you all day and wishing I'd had an answer this morning.

He sent that, so she wouldn't get impatient waiting for a text wall, and kept writing.

*I wish I had one now.
But I had a plan for my life, and getting serious with anyone now was not part of it.
I also like being single and doing what I want.
I like my life. Meeting you, it feels like it could be a big deal. I don't know if I'm ready for my life to change like that.
I know that makes me sound like a selfish shit, but that's the honest answer. I don't know.*

Though she'd read right away, it was a long time before she responded. So long that Duncan figured she'd decided to ghost. He went back to YouTube, feeling sour and depressed.

Almost half an hour later, while he was staring at, but not really watching, a video of a couple touring Iceland on a Triumph, another text popped up.

Thank you for being honest. You don't sound like a selfish shit. You should have the life you want. So should I. I like you, too. I don't think saying we want to see each other more should be a commitment to changing our lives forever right off the bat, but I do think it means maybe starting to be accountable to

*each other. If what you want right now
is being single and doing what you want
(I assume that means doing WHO you
want), then we're not in the same place.
Is that what you're saying you want?*

*I'm saying I don't know whether
I want that, or I want you.*

As soon as he hit send, he wondered if that, too, was a shitty thing to tell her.

LOL. Be still my heart.

Sorry. Truly.

No, honesty is good.

*Okay. Sounds like you need
to figure your shit out.*

When you do, if you want, hit me up.

*I'm not going to sit here and wait, but
if we land in the same place at the same
time, then maybe we'll see.*

Good night, Duncan.

Be safe on your trip.

Those last sentences were a firm latch on the door of this conversation at least, so Duncan didn't try to say more.

Night Phoebe.

He set his phone face-down on the cheap bedspread of this kitschy motel and stared at the popcorn ceiling.

She'd locked the door, but maybe she'd left a window open.

Now he had to figure out if he wanted to go through it.

~oOo~

“If you don’t lay off with that bullshit, Eight, I swear to fuck ___”

“You’ll *WHAT?*” Eight charged at Cooper and went face to snarling face with him. “What are you gonna do, motherfucker?” he growled, pushing with his chest.

Cooper pushed right back. “I don’t even have to break a fucking sweat. I’ll destroy your gimpy leg with one kick and make you cry like a goddamn baby.”

“ENOUGH!” Duncan’s father shoved himself between them. As he grabbed Eight by the kutte and forced him backward, Zach grabbed his president and dragged him back as well.

The entire Brazen Bulls MC, both charters, stood in the Nevada clubhouse, watching their presidents try to tear each other apart—and with them, the club itself.

“This has got to fucking stop!” Simon yelled. Duncan nearly flinched; Simon was not a shouter. It had the right effect, though. Everybody else was as surprised as Duncan, so Simon got even Eight and Cooper’s attention.

With it, Simon continued, “This shit between you is fuckin’ stupid, and it’s going to get us all killed. We’re riding out tomorrow toward what might be a goddamn war.”

Speaking directly to Eight Ball, whom he still had by the kutte, Dad said, “He’s right. You have got to get right with each other *tonight*. I’d say get in the ring and fight it out, but you two will fucking kill each other, and we can’t afford to lose the manpower.”

At that, Kai laughed, but Duncan didn’t think his dad had been trying to make a joke. Everybody was sick to death of the beef between Eight and Cooper, but maybe nobody was as sick of it as Dad was. On a few occasions, lubricated with some booze, and swearing Duncan to secrecy, he’d opened up and talked about how half of his job as VP was being the leash that kept Eight in line.

Dad gave Eight a hard shove. “Sit the fuck down, Eight.” He whipped around. “I know it’s your house, Coop, but you park your ass, too.”

Zach, Cooper’s VP, helped him do just that.

“Holy shit,” Jay muttered at Duncan’s side. “Are Mom and Dad gonna get divorced?”

Duncan turned a frown on him. “Don’t joke, bruh. This shit’s fucked up. Simon and my dad are right. They’re gonna get us all killed. Even if they don’t, they could break the club apart.”

“Maybe I’m joking,” Jay answered, “but only halfway. Yeah, these assholes are gonna fuck us up one way or another.”

“This looks like a damn intervention now,” Monty said.

“My dad is fucking sick of it, too,” Sam said, “I think he and some of the others’ve been talking out what to do. Maybe this is it.”

Simon, Sam’s father, had stepped up again. “You two need to talk to each other without throwing blame around,” he said.

Eight’s frown made his face look like wadded paper. “There *is* fuckin’ blame to throw around. Laughlin nearly fucked us all into the ground in the fall.” He turned that look directly on Cooper. “You had a fuckin’ spy in your house! Gun’s in a fuckin’ chair for the rest of his life because of it. How is that not your fuckin’ fault?”

“We vetted Jordan completely,” Kai, their tech and intel officer, said before Cooper could answer. “It’s not like we threw open the doors and took whoever walked in. When we made him prospect, he was clean. Harridan flipped him, he didn’t install him. You wouldn’t’ve seen him coming, either.”

“I was a Tulsa patch for a long time,” Cooper said—to Simon, not to Eight. “The mother charter’s had its share of mistakes. I know the story about a patch killing the first VP right in the middle of the party room. How’d that happen? What got missed there?” Simon reacted to that question in a way Duncan couldn’t quite read, but he didn’t answer.

Cooper turned to Eight. “Or how about—why’d you do time, Eight? That was before my day, but it was still fresh enough when I got there that I know the deets. You were a righteous fuckup back in the day, weren’t you? Like I’ve never been.”

Dad had to hold Eight in his seat.

“That’s not helping, Coop,” Zach said, holding Cooper down as well.

“I don’t give a shit. I am sick to fuck of being treated like the motherfuckin’ help,” Cooper snarled. “I deserve some goddamn *respect*.” He took a deep breath, then another. When he spoke again, he seemed to address the whole room.

“Shit went south in the fall, yeah. The cleanup’s been hard, yeah. I’m sorry it happened at all, and I’m sorry it happened here. But we lost a *brother* in that mess. We buried *Ben*. Y’all didn’t know him, but he was our *core*. We lost Gargo before we could even get the fucking patches sewn on, and that’s on *you*, Eight, breaking our deal with the Dragons to get this charter going. We’re also the ones putting our necks out every couple months, muling weapons *into Mexico*. We could get dead or worse ten different ways every time, but we do the run. And in Tulsa y’all are sitting back with your fuckin’ feet up thinkin’ *we* make *your* life hard? Fuck you. All of you.”

He hadn’t yelled, exactly, but he’d spoken so passionately that he was sweating when he sat back and glared at Eight.

“He’s not wrong,” Duncan said. Until the words were loose, he hadn’t been sure if he’d meant to mutter them to the Young Guns or say them out loud, but they came out so the room heard. Eight whipped his head around—and his look was so angry, Duncan wished he’d muttered.

But Dad was looking at him with pride and interest, as were most of the men in the room, so he went on. “Nevada does take on most of the danger. Going into Mexico scares the fuck outta me. I didn’t have a patch in the Perro days, but I remember the lockdowns. I remember people I loved coming home in the back of the van. Or not at all. I would do it if I had to, but the thought of crossing the border carrying what we

carry scares the fuck outta me. It means something that Nevada does it as a routine.”

Now he felt like an idiot. This was not the right place to talk about being afraid.

When he hesitated, Jay picked up the thread. “Same. And as for fuckup patches, I think there’ve been a lot over the years. Gun was one—he’ll tell you the stories himself. Over and over and over.” That got a stunted laugh from most of the men in the room—including both Eight and Cooper. Jay turned to the Tulsa president. “Eight, you know you were one, too. And I guess I can claim the most recent title myself.” That got another, fuller laugh, and Jay smiled. “Coop’s right, Prez. The hit here in the fall was a mess, but it wasn’t something anybody did wrong. Except the prospect. We do everything we can to know the people we bring close, but at some point, we gotta trust. Jordan betrayed that. He’s the fuckup, and he was handled, right?”

“Right,” said Cooper, with something like awe in his voice. Coop hadn’t been in Tulsa to see Jay’s glow-up. He probably only remembered the fresh patch who couldn’t get out of his own way. The fuckup. In Tulsa.

Duncan’s dad stepped back and gave Eight some room. “I know the pressure is intense, Eight. We’re all feeling it. We’re not looking for you to take the whole load, but we can’t dump it off on Nevada, either. We share the trouble, and we share the good. We are *all* a family. I know you know that.” He turned to Cooper. “And Coop, you jumped into a boiling pot when you took this gig. I know you weren’t expecting shit to go like it has, but you’re doing a good job. This is a tight charter, and you are doing hard work. But you get defensive too fast, brother. Pointing out a problem isn’t always blame, you hear?”

As a response, Cooper looked very directly at Eight. “Tell him that.”

“I just did,” Dad growled. “Now I’m telling you.”

“Stand up, both of you,” Simon ordered. Though he’d been VP himself once, he wasn’t even an officer now. Still, Eight and Cooper both stood. Dad and Zach watched them warily.

“Make it right between you. Now,” Dad said.

For an uncomfortably long time, Eight and Cooper stood and stared at each other, neither willing to be the one to make the first move. Finally, though, Eight grumbled, “Never said I wasn’t an asshole.”

Cooper chuckled harshly. “You’d be lying if you did.” As Eight threw a *What the fuck?* look at Dad, Coop quickly added, “And yeah, my chain slips sometimes over sitting at the head of this table, so maybe I’m defensive before I need to be.” He shored up his will with a breath and added, “It fucks with my head, taking grief from you, Eight. I sat at your table.”

Eight considered that for a moment. Then he sighed, and his posture eased out of fight readiness. “I guess I’m a control freak. Sorry.”

Cooper relaxed as well. “Okay. I’m sorry, too.”

Zach gave Cooper a little shove toward Eight. Dad did the same with Eight. The two men hugged. At first it was the most awkward, unwilling, stiff-armed thing imaginable, but then they settled in and actually hugged. They probably weren’t friends again yet, but maybe they’d remembered they were brothers.

“Mont’s right,” Sam mumbled. “This was an intervention.”

“Let’s just hope it fuckin’ worked,” Jay said. “I do not want to die in California because those two shitheads can’t get their dicks untangled.”

“Great,” Duncan said. “That’s an image I’ll be stuck with for a while. Thanks a bunch, bruh.”

~oOo~

Twenty-four hours later, after the most boring ride Duncan had ever experienced, through the California desert, both charters of the Brazen Bulls MC had just about taken over the clubhouse of the Night Horde SoCal, in Madrone, California.

The ride had been only about three hours long, by far the shortest leg of this run. They'd taken their time in the morning, getting some good rest and a big breakfast. Eight and Cooper had seemed fine all day. They weren't easy with each other, but they were respectful, at least.

Now, Eight, Duncan's dad, Dex, Cooper, Zach, and Lonnie were holed up in the SoCal chapel—the Night Horde had a big boner for Viking shit and called their chapel their 'keep'—with Hoosier, Bart, and Connor, the SoCal president, VP, and SAA, respectively.

They hadn't shared the topic of their private conversation, but all the Bulls, at least, figured they were in there figuring out what appetite SoCal had for crossing the road to the outlaw side again. If SoCal wanted in on this whole Volkov-Vega partnership, that could get Laughlin out of Mexico, which meant Laughlin would come east a bit for the handoffs with Tulsa, then turn around and ride it to SoCal. That would shorten Tulsa's western runs considerably and keep all the Bulls on the safer side of the border. And SoCal would start really earning again.

Win-win-win, so far as Duncan could see.

While the senior officers hashed that out, everybody else was in the party room—the Horde called it their 'hall.' It was a large room, and pretty nice, with a definite Hollywood vibe. Their bar was a full-on bar like for an actual business, and a prospect named Peaches was pouring actual drinks. Duncan didn't think he'd ever known a prospect in Tulsa who could do more than draw a beer or maybe dump some soda in a glass of rum, but just now Duncan had watched Peaches mix up a Moscow Mule for a girl in a tiny dress made of hot-pink sequins.

"Goddamn, the pussy in this place is Grade A *Prime!*" Monty declared as Miss Moscow Mule took her fancy drink and swung her hips across the room.

As she neared one of the Horde (Jesse, maybe? Duncan had met most of them for the first time tonight, so he wasn't

clear on names), he lifted his arm, and she slipped into his hold.

Duncan thought Monty was right. The girls in the Tulsa clubhouse were great, and many of them were objectively hot, but the girls here seemed extra sparkly, and not just because a lot of them wore sequins and glitter. Bigger boobs, brighter hair, longer legs, firmer asses. By the evidence available in the SoCal clubhouse, California girls were just ... extra.

He definitely enjoyed the view, but he wasn't sure he shared Monty's enthusiasm. All that sparkle and energy seemed like a lot of work. For everybody. It made Duncan think of Phoebe, in her faded, tattered jeans, worn flannels, scuffed boots, and that stained cowboy hat. Inside all her extreme lack of sparkle was a really beautiful girl with big doe eyes and a small, pouty mouth that gave her an aspect simultaneously sweet and sassy. Like a SweetTart.

Maybe she was a lot of work, too, in a different way. Certainly, if he started something with her, she wasn't going to make shit easy on him. The way they'd left things, Duncan supposed his task now was to figure out if he wanted her to make shit hard on him.

Monty turned back to the bar. "Peaches, my brother, do all the girls in California look like the girls here? Is it the sunshine, you think?"

Peaches chuckled. "We got ugly girls, too. But I know what you mean. When I first got out here, I thought the same thing. I think it's 'cuz they all work out, and they don't cover up so much out here."

A different pretty blonde, also in something sparkly, sidled in beside Duncan and scanned his kutte. "Hi, Duncan. I'm Fawn."

"Hi, Fawn," Duncan said.

She put a shiny red mouth around a straw and sucked up the last of her drink. "Buy me another?" she asked as she set the glass on the bar.

Duncan glanced at Peaches. "You're charging?"

“No,” Peaches answered. At the same time, Monty slapped him upside the head. Oh, right. A little game.

“Get the lady another on me,” he said—and immediately felt a kick of guilt.

But hold up. Why should he feel guilty? He and Phoebe weren't together. She'd said it herself: they weren't in the same place. In fact, she wanted him to figure his shit out, right? She wasn't going wait around for him to do it, because they weren't together.

He'd known her for a week. One freaking week. They'd been together two nights.

So why the fuck should he feel guilty now?

He should not.

In fact, he should be figuring out what he wanted, right? Right. Okay then.

He hooked his arm around Fawn's slim waist. “There somewhere private in this place?”

She picked up her fresh drink and smiled at him. “Sure. I'll show you.”

As he stood, he asked, “How'd you feel about asking one of your friends to come along?”

~oOo~

“What crawled up your ass and dug a hole?” Jay asked as he leaned on the fence beside Duncan. “You've been mopey all morning.”

The Bulls had stopped for food and gas near a town called Santa Maria. Ocean to the left, vineyards to the right. Most of the Bulls were still sprawled in chairs on the patio of the little Mexican place where they'd just had lunch. But Duncan had been moody and restless since he'd woken up naked in a strange bed buried under two naked girls whose names he couldn't remember. After his lunch, he'd gotten up to walk it

off, and he'd wound up here, leaning on a bit of split-rail fence behind the restaurant, at the edge of a cliff, watching the ocean below.

Today was one of the longest days of the run, from Madrone west to the coast, then up the Pacific Coast Highway to Monterey. More than four hundred miles, almost all of it on a two-lane road.

But what a two-lane road. Duncan had seen the Atlantic Ocean twice, on family vacations to Florida, and he'd thought it was cool. But the Pacific Ocean, and the California coast, laid him out. So dramatic. So fucking *beautiful*. Even in his, yes, mopey mood, Duncan was dazzled by the view. Once the desert was behind them, California sparkled. It was the most beautiful state he'd ever seen.

"Just tired, I guess," he told Jay. "Didn't sleep great."

Jay laughed. "I guess not. Sounded like California girls are extra energetic."

Duncan looked away, returning his focus to the ocean. He felt like shit today.

Actually, he felt guilty as shit today.

It was so stupid. He owed Phoebe nothing—and that wasn't just him trying to twist things around to make a case to her that he hadn't cheated last night. She herself had made it clear that he owed her *nothing*. Yet his first thought upon waking and seeing himself tangled up with two SoCal sweetbutts had been that he'd fucked up.

Having the option to fuck whom he wanted when he wanted was the life he'd chosen. He hadn't pretended otherwise with Phoebe, and she hadn't made any commitments to him, either. So why the fuck did he feel practically sick with guilt?

"Seriously, Dunc," Jay said, setting his hand on Duncan's back. "What's up?"

Duncan shrugged him off. "Nothing. Fuck off."

Jay shoved away from the fence. “Okay, buzzkill. I’m gonna go back and get some churros. You wanna talk, let me know. Otherwise, mope away.” He turned and strolled back to the restaurant.

Duncan stood where he was, watching the waves wash up against the rocks below, and examined what was going on inside him. He’d been in his head all morning, so he pretty much understood already: it didn’t matter that she didn’t care whom he slept with, he still felt disloyal. Which meant he liked Phoebe a lot. Enough to change his life to be with her.

But, again, *one fucking week*. It seemed crazy to even consider changing his life for a girl he barely knew. And what if she was back in Oklahoma, deciding that she wasn’t interested, regardless? It had been only a week for her, too. Maybe she didn’t want to change her life, either. Maybe she was a lot less conflicted about it than he was.

Fuck, what if he went back and said he’d decided he wanted to try to make something with her, and she told him, *nah, no thanks*? What a fucking simp he’d be then!

A familiar hand settled on his shoulder, and Duncan jumped. He hadn’t heard his father come up.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Son. We’re getting ready to ride out. You ready?”

Duncan inhaled slowly and pulled himself out of his thoughts. “Yeah.”

As he pushed away from the fence, Dad caught his arm. “Hey. You want to talk? We can take a few minutes.”

He nearly deflected and moved to return to the restaurant, but his dad was looking at him so intently, Duncan ended up asking, “Can I ask a personal question?”

“Sure.” Dad leaned back against the fence and settled in. “Hit me.”

“How did you know Mom was who you wanted to be with forever?”

For a second, Dad regarded him quietly. Then a smile emerged and grew. “Are you thinking about the truck girl?”

“Her name is Phoebe, Dad.”

“Sorry. Phoebe. So yes, you are.” When Duncan acknowledged the truth with a nod and a shrug, Dad continued, “Well, you know the story about how Mom and I met.”

That was one of those stories his parents told at every opportunity. “In Walmart. She helped you pick out a purse for Cissy.” Cecily had been a little girl back then; Dad had always had an extra soft spot for her.

“Right. Your mom was this beautiful, sweet girl, with a little bit of sass under the sweet. I liked her right off and got her number before I left the parking lot. I don’t know exactly when I decided I wanted her forever, though. I just wanted her then, and I kept wanting her, and then I wanted her forever.” Wearing a nostalgic smile, he turned to face the ocean. “I guess if there was a moment when I knew it for sure, it was when she told me she was pregnant with Kelse. We’d only been together a couple months then. But I knew. And it wasn’t just responsibility for the baby, or anything like that. I knew I wanted *your mom*. I’d wanted a family my whole life, and that was when I knew I wanted to make that family with her.”

“You were older, though. Right? Like thirty or so?”

“Twenty-eight when we met. Not that much older. I was thirty-three when we got married. We lost four years while I was in McAlester.”

Duncan knew most of the details of that story, too. His parents hardly ever told that one, however. “I want a family, too,” he said, “but I don’t know if I want all that right *now*. I feel too young to settle down like that. What if I miss something good?”

Reaching back, Dad drew Duncan forward to stand beside him, and hooked his arm across Duncan’s back.

“There’s no way not to miss things in this life, Dunc,” Dad said as they watched the water together. “Whatever path you

take, you close off all the others, and you lose whatever was on those paths. It's about wanting the things you choose and not worrying about what you close off. That whole YOLO thing is bullshit, Dunc. Yeah, we've only got one life, but the way to live it is not to try to do everything. It's to try to do the *right* things."

"You think I should try with her? Is that the right thing?"

"I'm not going to tell you what to do, son. You have to decide what the right thing is for you. But think about what I said at first: I didn't meet your mom and think right then that I wanted her forever. When I met her, I thought she was a hot piece of ass. Being with her made me want to be with her more, and more, and then forever. Good relationships *develop*, Dunc. They don't just pop up fully formed. It sounds like you're trying to see the destination before you take the ride. That's a good way never to get on the road at all." Duncan chuckled softly, and Dad turned a look on him. "Why's that funny?"

"It's not funny. It's good advice. The way you said it, though—you and all the uncles, you all give advice like old biker poets. Everything's a road and a ride with y'all."

Now Dad chuckled, too. "Hey, that's what this life is—a ride on a road, with our family riding along, taking all the turns with us."

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Hold on, hold on, I’m not done yet!”

Phoebe shouldered Jethro, a big Angus steer, out of her way and finished tightening the final bolt. She gave the last new cattle brush a good tug to make sure it was firmly affixed, and got out of the way.

“There ya go!”

Jethro almost ran her down in three steps, getting to the bright blue bristles. He rubbed his chin over them, and his eyes rolled up. He actually moaned.

Phoebe looked over to make sure Mickey was getting the whole scene on video. Sometimes he lost focus and forgot to keep recording, but he was on the job this afternoon.

Despite a few conversations with charity heads and grant officers that indicated how much effort Lydia Copperman was devoting to trying to take her down all the pegs, Phoebe was feeling extra confident that Ragamuffin Ranch would weather the storms of one Mega-Karen, no matter how rich and influential she was. She’d done a new fundraising push on social media, and the fruits of those efforts were already ripening.

The UPS truck had made an appearance today, with several Amazon boxes—she’d put out a link to her wish list, and gifts were rolling in. Amongst an array of other much-needed supplies, somebody had donated *six* big cattle brushes. Just about enough for the whole motley herd.

They weren’t the mechanical kind, which spun on rollers like car-wash brushes, but in her mind these bolt-down ones were better. No mechanisms to break down. Just good places where the animals could get a scritch whenever they wanted, and could scrape off their own mud and not have to wait until grooming time. Also less grooming for the humans to manage. Wins all around.

Now, in both pastures, the animals were enjoying orgasmic scratch-a-thons, vying for space on the bristles. All but Titan, who stood at stalwart attention in the horse pasture, monitoring his charges, and Smoky, who was counting down his time in quarantine.

“Hey, Mick, look over there.” She pointed to the bright-yellow brush on the other side of the gate, where Derek, Justin, and Brad, the goats, were rubbing their faces in almost perfect unison. Mickey turned and focused Phoebe’s phone on them.

Later, she’d turn the camera on herself for a moment and say thank you, and tonight, she’d cut the footage together into a three-minute version for social media and a longer one for Patreon. She’d never imagined herself being a ‘content creator,’ and she’d prefer not to have to add her noise to the cacophony online, but that content creation was why the Ragamuffin herd had just been gifted about two thousand dollars’ worth of goodies, not to mention being able to afford hay and vet care and everything else, so she’d keep making noise.

Once they had enough footage, Phoebe took her phone back, and she and Mickey gathered up the tools and the empty boxes and headed back toward the barn.

“Mr. Vin’s coming,” Mickey observed about halfway across the yard.

Phoebe looked over and saw Vin heading their way, bundled up against the cold. Noticing the extra hitch in his gait that suggested his prosthetic was rubbing wrong on his stump as he navigated the gravel paths, she told Mickey, “Go on in. I’ll be there in a few minutes. Will you flatten the boxes for me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said and continued to the barn.

Phoebe met Vin. “Hey. You look like you’re hurting.”

“Nah, just tryin’ not to. Hey, the mail came. This was in it. I signed for it.” He handed over a business-size envelope.

The first thing she noticed was a green sticker: CERTIFIED MAIL. The second thing was the return address: The McIntosh County Health Department, Animal Welfare Division.

Ragamuffin Ranch was a licensed large-animal shelter. To keep said license valid, the state sent an inspector in annually to evaluate the site. They'd passed their most recent inspection in November.

"Why is the Health Department sending me a certified letter?" she wondered aloud, still staring at the back of the envelope.

"I don't know," Vin replied. "But I never got any mail with that sticker on it and found good news inside."

"Yeah, me either." Her heart picking up some speed, she set her toolbox down, pulled her work gloves off, and dug her finger under the envelope's flap. In the envelope was a single sheet of white paper with official letterhead across the top in a businesslike serif font.

Under that letterhead, all caps, boldface, was the alarming phrase NOTICE OF ACTIVE INVESTIGATION.

She tipped the page so Vin could read that much.

"Oh shit," he muttered.

Phoebe nodded and began to read.

Dear Ms. Davis:

Our office has received serious complaints regarding the condition of Ragamuffin Ranch, the large-animal shelter registered in your name at the address of 175263 N4810 Road, Checotah, OK 74426. The complaints filed allege serious degradation of conditions and potential danger to the animals sheltered there. Our office has opened an investigation into these allegations. You will have an opportunity to respond to the allegations during a full interview, but first we will be conducting a complete inspection within 24 hours of your receipt of this notice.

Please feel free to contact our office with any questions.

Harry Morgan, Inspector

Department of Health, McIntosh County

Eufaula, OK 74432

Phoebe read the letter three times through. Then, because fury and panic were making her vision dark and sparkly, she handed the page to Vin. He took it, and she walked stiff-legged to the pasture fence. The animals were still geeking out over the brushes.

This was Lydia Copperman's big move. Her efforts to turn Phoebe's donors and patrons away wasn't returning the results she'd hoped for. *I can have this rathole crawling with inspectors*, UberBitch had also threatened, and she had meant it.

Phoebe ran a tight ship and cared for her charges as if they were her family—because they *were* her family. She knew Ragamuffin was completely up to code. In fact, in most cases, it far surpassed the minimum expectation of 'up to code.' There were a few things—like the roof of the stable—that the inspector in November had suggested they keep an eye on because they were only a year or two out from needing repair or replacement, but she knew for an absolute fact that everything on this ranch that had passed inspection in November would pass inspection two months later.

A fair and honest inspection, at least.

She had no confidence whatsoever that the inspection coming up—today or tomorrow!—would be fair and honest. UberBitch was siccing the health department on her, and to get this kind of speed from a government agency, she was obviously throwing her weight and her wallet around. This would not be a fair and honest inspection.

This inspection could very well ruin her.

And then she would lose everything. *Everything*.

Phoebe had lived on this farm all her life, as her father had before her, and his father before him. Her mother had been miserable here—unhappy with the farm, with the man she'd married, and with the child who had caused them to marry—

and during Phoebe's senior year of high school, less than two months after her father's death, her mother had given her the farm and escaped to Florida to live like she'd never made a series of unfortunate choices in her own adolescence.

To Phoebe's mother, this property had been an albatross. A prison. But she knew Phoebe loved it, so she knew it belonged with her.

It was the one truly decent thing her mother had ever done for her.

They hadn't done any paperwork to transfer the deed to Phoebe's name, because neither of them had thought about it. Phoebe had been an eighteen-year-old about to graduate and go into the Army when her mother had given her the property and scooted south to Florida, and then Phoebe had been in a coma, and then in rehab, and then in a transitional house, relearning complicated things like how to eat soup by herself, and legal paperwork had been sort of beyond her.

However, after she'd come out of the coma, she'd learned that her mother had died of a fentanyl overdose, so by the time she was capable of legal paperwork, all she had to do was procure and submit her mother's death certificate and prove that she was the only heir.

Margot had lived in this house alone during Phoebe's stint in the Army and her years of recovery. 'Housesitting,' she'd called it.

After Phoebe came home, with Vin in tow, they'd all been focused on figuring out their new little family, and building the business of Ragamuffin Ranch. They'd flung open their doors to other broken, lost strays just like them.

They'd made the place she'd been raised in, the land she loved, into a home, and they'd built a family in it.

Now one entitled woman with an aggrievement fetish was trying to tear it all down.

Vin came up alongside her and rested his meaty forearms on the fence. "It's just an inspection, Bee. Everything's in great shape. We got this."

She shook her head. “It’s an inspection based on a complaint. That’s not routine. They’ll be looking for trouble this time. The stable roof is getting old. The last inspector said we probably only have a year or so before it won’t pass. Maybe this inspector will say we don’t have that year. The fences need sealant. Maybe this inspector will care about that. Puff’s worn that sore on his ass again. And Smoky still looks like a polka-dotted skeleton. Maybe this inspector will say those are our neglect. If this inspector’s in the pocket of my UberBitch, then of course he’ll make a big deal of anything he finds—maybe he’ll even plant shit on us.”

Her head pounded, her chest ached. The problem was becoming so big in her head she couldn’t see its edges anymore. Maybe it had no edges. It was a huge, endless blob of blackness that would take over everything and crush her under its weight. No solution, no recovery, nothing but ruin.

“Hey,” Vin said as he pulled her around to face him. “Slow down. You’re breathing too fast.”

She looked up and shook her head again. She couldn’t begin to think how to slow down. Or do anything at all.

Vin drew her to his chest and crushed her in his arms. “We got this, Bumblebee. We will figure it out. We’re a squad, right?”

All Phoebe could do was shake her head. Everything was no.

~oOo~

“Well, did you call and ask?” Margot asked.

Phoebe, Vin, and Margot sat at the kitchen table. They hadn’t bothered yet with supper; they’d barely bothered to turn on any lights. Everyone sat in the gloom, figuratively and literally.

On the old oak table was a bottle of Cuervo—now about half empty—three juice glasses, and the letter. The page was

badly wrinkled now; Vin had clenched it in his fist without realizing it and then left it in a wad until Margot smoothed it out to read it.

Staring at the half-full glass in her hands, Phoebe shook her head.

“I fucking will, then. They need to give us more information. Fuck, maybe I’ll call the UberBitch herself and tell her what a cunt she is.”

“No, Marg,” Vin interjected. “That won’t help nothin’.”

Phoebe didn’t have the energy to participate in the conversation. Her head felt like a cauldron of boiling lava. She stared at her glass and only shook her head.

Then she felt Margot’s slim, manicured finger under her chin. “Look at me, honey. You gotta click back in now.”

“I’m clicked,” Phoebe said softly as she lifted her chin off Margot’s finger. “There’s just nothing to say.”

“What, you’re gonna just give up? Just let that bitch destroy everything you—*we*—have because you didn’t greet her with open arms when she barged in here like she owned the place?”

The bitter irony that maybe UberBitch would actually own this place when she was done forced a choked snicker from Phoebe’s throat. If either Vin or Margot reacted to that sound, Phoebe didn’t see it; she was staring at her glass.

“Can we fight this someday?” Vin asked. “Margie, can you talk to your boss?”

Margot sighed. “I can, and I will. There may be a couple things we can try. Ty’s at his kid’s basketball game, but I will call him later tonight. I’m sure he’ll help us out.”

“In the meantime, we need to do everything we can in the little bit of time we got to make this place sparkle,” Vin said, with a little more energy. And we need to make sure there are plenty of witnesses to this inspection.”

“And video documentation, too,” Margot added.

Hearing a tiny flutter of hope in her friends' words, Phoebe finally looked up. Vin reached over and grabbed her hand. Seeing that, Margot grabbed her other.

"We got this, Bee," Vin said, and Margot squeezed Phoebe's hand as she reached for Vin's.

Linked snugly with her family, Phoebe managed a small smile, but she wasn't able to muster up a nod.

~oOo~

After that talk, Vin started on dinner, Margot went up to make some calls, and Phoebe sat down and worked on editing the day's footage. Her head felt trapped in a vise, and she could not have been in less of a mood to make a cutesy video of the animals enjoying their new toys, or recording her own stupid face looking happy and grateful while Lydia Copperman was trying to destroy the ranch and everything Phoebe had in the world. However, she needed to keep her patrons and followers engaged and invested. Especially since somebody was actively trying to *disengage* her patrons.

She missed Duncan.

That thought drew her up so short she fucked up a splice in her edit. Giving her pounding head a brisk shake, she went back and fixed her mess.

No, she fucking did *not* miss Duncan. Mr. 'I don't know if I want to fuck all the women or just you.' He'd been honest about it, so he wasn't technically an asshole, but he was definitely a player, definitely immature, definitely not ready for anything remotely real. Anyway, even if he was ready for something real, the very last thing she needed right now was that kind of distraction and complication.

Why would she even *think* she missed him? Because he was good in bed? Hardly. Yes, he was, but getting her rocks off would not solve a single one of her problems.

No, it wasn't that.

But he had made her feel safe and protected. He had helped her out of a crisis. Or two.

That was it—she missed him because she was in another crisis.

She missed him because she wanted him to save her again.

Oh holy shit.

Fuck that sideways and into the ground.

“Hey, Bee,” Vin said behind her.

Phoebe looked over her shoulder. The living room had gone dark around the circle of light from the desk lamp and computer screen. Vin stood in the wide entrance to the room, backlit by the light coming from the kitchen. Her vision had gone wonky from being on the computer too long, and with a migraine, so her friend’s outline wavered and hopped.

“Hey,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “Supper ready?”

“Still in the oven.” He came in and sat in his recliner. “I had a thought.”

“Okay.”

“In case we need to repair that roof quick, I know where we can get some money. You know my people back home don’t have a lot, but they got the restaurant. My mama said part of it’s mine, and if I ever need it, to let her know—”

“No, Vin,” Phoebe said before he could finish. “I know that, but I also know you mean never to take that money. It would mean your family losing the restaurant.”

“I don’t know if that’s true. They been havin’ some good years lately. They might be able to help without hitting the restaurant. I could ask.”

“No. That’s your family, and your back-up if you need it. I’m not going to let my mess make a mess for your family. I’m just lucky you’re here with me and not back home.”

He grinned. “I’d just be in the way, with this leg. Shit moves fast at Byen Veni Café. This is more my speed, right here.”

Vin always had a bit of a Creole lilt to his speech, but when he spoke of his family, his accent sank waist-deep into the bayou. Phoebe grinned, and it felt good. “I love you, Ervin.”

He reached out and caught her hand. “I love you, Bumblebee. We’re gonna be okay.”

She brought his hand to her mouth and kissed his knuckles.

She didn’t believe him, but his presence eased her heart a little nonetheless.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

About fifty miles south of Eureka, Eight and Cooper led the convoy off the Pacific Coast Highway, east into the hills and forests of Humboldt County. Again, Duncan was dazzled by the landscape. Redwoods soared into the sky, and every turn of the mountain road seemed to open to a new valley vista that went on forever. Eucalyptus and pine scented the air like Mother Nature was burning incense.

And goddamn, the ride was fun. The PCH had been beautiful and fun as well, but some spans along the coast were downright treacherous. A long span around Big Sur had actually been washed out, the route detoured inland, but several other stretches brought the road right up to the cliff edge. Here, it was easier to open up the throttle a little and really enjoy the twists and turns—and dodge the massive trucks hauling lumber.

Jay rode at Duncan's side; every time they looked over and met each other's eyes, they laughed out loud—and they weren't the only ones. Riders whooped and laughed around every turn. Yeah, they were riding toward violence, possibly war, but right now, life was just *good*.

They rode past tiny communities and homesteads that had the familiar look of people just scraping by. The people in these mountains were obviously not the same kind of people who lived in those cliff-edge seaside homes made of glass. These properties looked more like the kind of homes they found in rural Oklahoma. Not a lot of quinoa-fed Birkenstock folks in these mountains.

Eventually, about ten miles past a little scrap of a town that was mainly a roadside bar and bait shop (with a huge mural on the side of the building proclaiming it the Bigfoot Capital of the World), Eight and Cooper turned onto a narrow dirt lane and led the club into the forest itself.

They rode through thick brush over a lane that was barely more than a trail until they came up on a heavily reinforced gate with a big security rig, camera and intercom.

As Eight pressed the button on the intercom up ahead, Duncan sat astride his bike and looked around at the dense forest surrounding them. Pinpricks of anxiety stabbed at his nape; danger seemed to loom somewhere within the seemingly peaceful scene.

Then he saw something in the brush. He reached out and slapped at Jay's arm.

Obviously feeling the same thing, Jay didn't speak. He gave Duncan a look that said, *What's up?* and Duncan nodded at the bit of sheen he'd glimpsed in the brush. There was a sturdy metal—and electrified—fence concealed among the eucalyptus, manzanitas, and redwoods. On a pole rising up from a fence post was another camera.

This guy felt he needed some hardcore security.

A buzz sounded, then the clunk of a latch disengaging, and the gate swung open. Duncan and Jay fell in with the rest of the club and pulled through.

Inside the gate, the lane continued just as narrow and crowded as before. They rode another few minutes like that, then went around a sharp turn. Everything opened up on the other side of that bend, and before them was a crowded, cluttered property, a crazy quilt of ramshackle buildings, trucks, bikes, cars, old appliances, weathered picnic tables, rusting lawn chairs, broken toys. It was as much a post-apocalyptic obstacle course as a down-on-their-luck family home.

A wall of greying hay bales at one side, at the edge of the forest, was a makeshift shooting range. At the other side was what looked like a clothesline, but the 'laundry' was a row of about a dozen rabbits and hares, throats cut and bled into a metal trough.

At first, it looked like no living humans were around, but as the Bulls pulled up and parked, several rough-looking men piled out of the largest building, a double-wide mobile home with a massive, amateurish American flag—Betsy Ross version—painted on the siding.

A short, round man with a bald head and a bushy beard like steel wool came down the steps of the wooden deck, leading four other men, all but one of a similar age.

“Welcome, my brothers!” Brillo-Beard called out in a harsh rasp. “Hope you’re hungry—we’re about to get the grill going!”

That was such an unexpectedly friendly greeting in this decidedly unwelcoming place, Duncan laughed.

Jay grinned at him. “I guess it’s always grilling season in California. Even January.”

That wasn’t why he’d laughed, but Duncan nodded. Yeah, California weather was amazing. The day had been sunny since a morning fog had burned off, and the high temperature was in the low fifties. That was spring, by Oklahoma standards.

By Oklahoma standards, in just about every way (except maybe traffic), even in this cramped-up hole in the forest, California was heaven and Disneyland and Valhalla combined.

“I guess that’s the guy?” Duncan asked as he dismounted. “What’s his name?”

Sam came up to his side. “Yep, that’s the guy. Little Jon Androuet.”

The Nameless had voted down the patch-over repeatedly, but never by a wide margin. Eight Ball had spent the past few months trying to make a bloc of those members who would stand with the Bulls against the rest of their club, and Little Jon Androuet was his man on the inside. It hadn’t been an easy task, and Duncan was surprised that there were five men here—the Nameless had only ten men on their roster, and most of those had either voted against the patch-over or were too loyal to go against the vote. Five members on the Bulls’ side now seemed like too many.

“Fuck, I hope they don’t expect to feed us fuckin’ *rabbit*,” Jay grouched, his mind obviously on other things.

Again, Duncan shifted his mind’s gears. He didn’t think he’d ever eaten rabbit. “Is it bad?”

“My dad likes it, but I think it tastes like feet.”

Chris and Monty came up, and the circle of the Young Guns was complete.

Monty slapped Jay on the back. “Chug enough beer, and you won’t taste the meat, whatever it is.”

“Glad you shitheads have your priorities straight,” Duncan said with a grin.

Jay laughed and flipped him off.

~oOo~

They did serve rabbit—as kabobs. Not the animals hanging on the line, but some other poor bunnies. They also served venison steaks. And hamburger and chicken. Duncan tried a kabob, but Jay was right—it tasted gamy as fuck.

“Dirty chicken feet,” he told Jay and the others.

But there was plenty of cheap beer and good whiskey, and a mountain of baked potatoes, so the eating was, all in all, good. The place was Little Jon’s, and he had a big fire pit as well as a brick grill, so the yard was plenty warm. Everybody was sprawled around on old picnic benches, rusty chairs, or on the ground itself. A few bully-type dogs trotted around begging for scraps, and for a few hours, the Bulls were simply at a barbecue with some new friends.

“Fuck that,” Jay muttered after the face-stuffing had wound down. He rolled to his feet.

“What?” Duncan asked. He had a black and white dog named Orca draped over his lap.

“The old farts are talking serious,” Jay said. “I’m sick of those assholes circling up and leaving half of us out in the cold.” He stalked over that way.

Sam and Duncan watched him go. “Should we go with?” Sam asked.

“He’s probably gonna start some kinda shit,” Monty answered. He lay flat on the ground with his hands linked over his chest and showed no signs of wanting to move. Monty didn’t care about strategy or secrets or anything like that. He had his patch and had no ambition for anything more. He was perfectly happy for other people to do the strategizing and tell him where to point his gun.

Jay stirred up a different kind of shit lately, these days he was more interested in being a part of things than he was in tearing shit down, but either way, diplomacy was not his chief asset. Duncan had been pulling his friend out of the fire most of their lives—and just about full time since Zach had moved to Nevada.

He set the dog aside and stood. “Yeah, let’s go over.”

Duncan and Sam crossed the wide yard to a cluster of five large, ancient, round redwood tables, where the five Nameless sat, along with Eight, Dad, Dex, Simon, Apollo, Caleb, Fitz, and Jazz, and Cooper, Zach, Lonnie, and Kai. Jay had taken up a showy position between Eight and Little Jon and stood there with his arms crossed. Duncan went to his side, and Sam followed.

All the older men noticed, but no one said anything about the young guns in their midst. At least one of the Nameless wasn’t much, if any, older than them.

“We’re not the fuckin’ CIA,” Eight was saying, obviously irritated. “I don’t know how you think we’re gonna do some covert operation. We gotta take the fuckers *down*.”

“We will,” Little Jon replied. “But you said you don’t want a smokin’ hole left”—Duncan shot a glance at Jay, because Jay was the one who’d argued that they’d leave a hole if they went in hard —“We need somethin’ we can build back up on, and I’m sayin’ if we do it low-pro, we can get it done pretty clean.”

“It is a lot of moving parts, bro,” Cooper said.

“And a lot of trust,” Apollo added. “No disrespect meant here, but there are three men sitting right here we don’t know

at all.” He looked directly at three men sitting across from him, all Little Jon’s guys, including the youngest of them. “You three aren’t Nameless, right?”

“This goes right, and me and Arlo ain’t Nameless much longer either,” Little Jon said, nodding at the big, shaggy, grey-haired man at his side. Arlo, apparently. “*I* trust these men. If you trust me, then extend that to Billy, Dean, and Digger here. It’s just me and Arlo ready to take the patch off our backs. You want a charter here, you’re gonna need more than two men. So I did a little recruitin’ on my own. You got a problem with that, then I’m out, and you fight me, too.”

All the Bulls in earshot exchanged glances. Eight and Cooper seemed to have a whole silent conversation. Eventually, Cooper shrugged, and Eight sighed heavily. “Alright.”

Little Jon nodded and leaned in again. “Good. As for the plan, Arlo and me, we know this area, and we know the Nameless. There are two ways to do this—loud or quiet. We either got a lotta moving parts, but it all goes down quiet-like, or we make one big move, blow a big hole in Cypress Avenue, pull all kinda attention our way, and make a mess’ll take years to set right.”

“What’s the quiet plan?” Jay asked. Eight glared at him but didn’t shut him down.

Duncan’s father answered. “Surgical strikes. Break into teams, each one assigned to take out a Nameless patch.”

“*Assassins?*” Duncan asked without thinking. He’d been too stunned to consider whether he should have kept his mouth shut. His father gave him a quelling look, and Duncan took a step back.

“Killin’s killin’, kid,” Arlo said. His voice was like a truck tire grinding through gravel. “In the face, or back of the head, all the same. I didn’t think y’all’d be precious about it.”

“We’re not,” Eight snapped. “But you’re talking about hitting eight guys in different places, all at the same time. That is some *Mission Impossible* bullshit.”

Eight men. They were talking about killing eight men. Not in a firefight, not self-defense. Assassination. Duncan's stomach turned to acid. He looked at Jay, who was laser-focused on the discussion. He turned to his other side and met Sam's eyes, which were wide open and stunned.

"There are, what, twenty-four, twenty-five men sitting right here," Little Jon pressed. "Teams of three? I'll let you divvy the teams up however you like, make sure your trust is solid. But this is the easiest, cleanest way to make sure there's something left to build on."

"And you can deal with eight bodies?" Apollo asked. "There's a story we can make?"

"None of those guys has living family on the outside?" Kai asked.

Little Jon shook his head. "Kirk Landry has an ex-wife and a couple of kids, but they live down in Bakersfield, with her family. Kirk ain't seen his kids since she left. Jensen Dahl's old lady's in a permanent coma after she sailed her Escort off the side of Highway 1 while she was tweaked as balls. Everybody else's people are dead, inside, or they never had any outside the club."

"Then I know the story," Kai said. "They shuttered the club and rode out of town." He leaned toward Apollo and Jazz. "The Nameless've been struggling for years, and they've been without a president for months. It makes sense they'd give it up eventually. So why not now? Little Jon and Arlo staying behind makes that even more convincing—a schism in the club. It's a story that's mostly true—the best kind. Between the three of us, we could put it all together in a day."

Duncan stood and watched that idea click with all the older men. They went from arguing about which plan to actually planning. They were going to assassinate eight men.

In cold blood. Because those men didn't want the Bull.

He wanted to step back, walk away, go back where he'd been. All the way back to Oklahoma if he could.

But he couldn't. He was a Bull, and he belonged here. This was his family.

Even when it made him sick.

~oOo~

Because they needed to keep a low profile until the job was finished, and because the planning went deep into the night, the Bulls stayed on Little Jon's property that night. They spread out in a few tents or on their bedrolls near the fire.

Duncan had a bedroll near the fire, but he didn't sleep much. For one thing, Monty slept next to him on one side, filling the air with rabbit-meat farts like biological warfare, and Jay slept on his other side, on his back and snoring like a bear, as he always did when he was whiskey-drunk.

For another thing, while it was a lot warmer here than in Tulsa, it was still January, and the night was not sultry. The fire kept the area warmer than freezing, but it was still damn chilly.

And finally, Duncan was still trying to get his head around the plan. He'd been ready for war, for a firefight. Not looking forward to it, but ready for it. That kind of violence made sense to him. In his mind, there was honor in it. These sneak attacks they were planning, how was that honorable?

He was also thinking about Phoebe, wishing he'd left things better with her, wishing he'd done better when they'd texted after, wishing he hadn't fucked around in SoCal. He kept telling himself that he'd done nothing wrong, and that he could make things better with her when he got back home, but that felt like lies. Maybe if he could text her again and let her know he thought he'd figured out what he wanted, but he hadn't had decent cell service in more than a day, and there was none at all in this hole in the woods.

His head was as noisy and busy as a jet engine. Sleep was impossible.

“Jesus fucking *Christ*,” Sam moaned and sat up. Seeing Duncan, he grinned and nodded at Monty. “I will never understand how that dude gets so much trim. He never fucking stops farting!”

Duncan grinned and held his hands about a foot apart. “Tripod. Guess it’s worth some poisoning.”

“Ugh, fuck off,” Sam chuckled darkly. “I gotta piss.”

Duncan waved him off. “Don’t need the announcement, my guy.”

Sam struggled out of his sleeping bag and stood. He trudged sleepily toward the forest. Duncan sat where he was and watched the fire.

A couple minutes later, just as he’d clocked Sam’s return, Duncan heard a tent zipper coming down. He looked over and saw his father working his way from the tent he shared with Eight.

Dad closed the zipper, then stood facing the tent, stretching his body loose. When he turned, he saw Duncan at once and came over.

“Hey, boys. Not sleepin’?”

“I am,” Sam said as he settled into his bag again. “Just needed to piss.”

“Yeah, me too,” Dad said. “Dunc, what’s up?”

This was the first opportunity he’d had to talk to his old man about their plans for the Nameless. It was after three in the morning, but if he put it off to a more reasonable hour, the privacy would be gone. “Can we talk?”

Dad frowned and peered sharply at him. “Yeah. Let me take care of business, and yeah, we’ll talk. You okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Just need to work some shit through.”

Dad set his hand on Duncan’s head, a lifelong gesture of love and comfort. “Be right back.”

~oOo~

He was gone for about ten minutes. When he got back, Duncan was up and standing near the picnic tables.

“You want to sit?” Dad asked as he came up.

“Can we walk a little?”

Dad looked around. “I don’t want to go far. There are full-on bears and mountain lions in these woods. Maybe wolves, too, for all I know. Best we stay in sight of the fire and the lights.” He squinted at Duncan, who realized he’d made a frustrated face. “But yeah, we can step off a little. Let’s head to the bikes.”

They walked in silence to the cluster of bikes and the Tulsa van. When they’d each sat astride their own rides, Dad asked, “What’s goin’ on, bud?”

“I’m trying to get my head around this job. I never expected we’d do anything like we’re planning.” He swallowed and said something else he’d been thinking. “I never expected you to be okay with something like this.”

Dad’s first reaction to that hesitant criticism was a sharp, chopped chuckle. “Assassins,” he muttered, and Duncan registered, after a beat, that he was repeating his own word back to him.

“Yeah. That’s not what I thought we were.”

“What we are, son, is Bulls. We do what we have to do for our club and our family.”

“And this is something we have to do?”

Dad looked him dead in the eyes. “Yes.” Then he took a deep breath, turned to stare toward the dark woods, and said, “For a long time, I fought for the club to be something different. When I went inside, the club was barely outlaw. We did some shit for the Volkovs back then, but it was little shit. We weren’t in bed with each other. We were just taking jobs that would pay. But D and Dane hooked up tight with Irina while I was away, and when I came back out, everything was

different. The Bulls were real one-percenters when I came back to the table. I didn't want that. I fought it for years, but I never won."

Duncan knew a lot of the history his father was recounting now. But something in Dad's tone was different from other times he'd told these stories. Duncan sat quietly and let his father find his way to his point.

"There were a lot of times, over a long stretch of years," Dad went on, "where I thought maybe there wasn't a place for me in the club anymore. That scared the shit out of me—the Bulls are the only family I've ever had. But I couldn't get right with the road we were on, and I couldn't get enough brothers to agree with me. The most I could do was make everybody think twice, try to do what we were doing safely, take it all seriously. Every time I thought I'd hit the end and I had to walk away, somebody—Becker, or Eight—would talk me out of it. They always said they needed me to keep them honest. That was just enough handhold to keep me at the table, I guess. That and loving these fuckers all the way through. Even Eight. I hated that fucker for a long time, but I loved him, too, even back then. Leaving the club would have meant walking away from my family, and I don't know I would've survived it, even with your mom and you kids. I had to get right with who the Bulls had become. I had to figure out where my place was in that."

"I know this stuff, Dad," Duncan said. His father seemed to be wandering off into old memories, and none of this seemed relevant to his own worries.

Dad turned back and focused on Duncan. "Yeah, I know you do. I guess I'm saying it all again because it sounds like you're having your first struggle like I used to, where the club is taking a road you don't want to travel. I'm real glad to know you are, Dunc. It says a lot about the man you are. You *should* have doubts. You *should* fight against the dark. You *should* say your worries out loud, with your chest. That way, when you follow the club anyway, you know you, and everybody else, have really thought it out. We all understand the reason, and the price. That's how I finally got right with the club and my

place in it: I saw that being the speed bump *is my place*. It's not my job to stop the club from doing what it needs to do, but it is my job to make the club know for sure that we *need* to do it. That's why Eight tapped me to stand at his side. He knows he's a hot-headed asshole who hates not getting his way, and he knows that's no way to wield the gavel. He knew I'd be his leash."

Duncan processed all that for a while and then asked, "So this plan—you're convinced it's the right way? Sneaking up on these guys and killing them?"

Leaning over his handlebars and peering deeply into Duncan, Dad said, "First, you've sat at our table often enough while we hashed out this problem with the Nameless to know not a single one of those guys is a good man. The club terrorized this area for decades. They are abusers, at least one's a serial rapist, every bad thing in the book. They don't keep their business on the dark side, either. They beat, bully, and shake down regular folks as a matter of course—and that's gotten worse since weed went legal and they've had trouble earning. Not one of these guys deserves a worry from you or anybody else."

"Little Jon and Arlo, they were part of all that, too, right? We're gonna put the Bull on their backs."

"Yeah, true. Apollo and Jazz read them as ... call it reformable. They were soldiers in the Nameless, not making the decisions. Little Jon's record is the least worrisome of anybody in that club. He did time for the weed, nothing violent."

Duncan started to challenge that, but his father put his hand up. "No, look. These guys being no loss to the world isn't the main thing. The main thing is that *we* need this place. And we need to do it as clean and quiet as we can. Don't romanticize a frontal assault, Dunc. War is not honorable. Not ever. Yeah, if we went in through the front door, they'd see us coming, but for them, the result would be the same—dead. Difference would be, they'd probably take some of us down with them, and we'd make a big, noisy mess in the middle of Humboldt County. That could mean arrest, prison, you name

it. Not to mention trouble getting established here, which is the whole fucking point. Doing this quiet is the best result for everyone. It's the right call."

"I guess," Duncan conceded. "It just feels different from who I thought we were."

"We're outlaws, son. We are family, we protect *our own*, and we are one-percenters. This is who we are. We run guns, sometimes we run drugs. Sometimes we're killers. Nobody's gonna confuse us with the Pope, or Gandhi. That's the thing I finally realized: this life is *not* honorable. Never has been. Why the fuck do you think I fought so goddamn hard to keep you kids out of it?" He dismounted and came over to Duncan's bike. Setting his hands on Duncan's shoulders, he said, "You're in it now, so here's my last bit of wisdom. What Arlo said earlier is right: killing is killing. In the end, it doesn't matter to these fuckers if we go in through the front door or the back. But to us, it's the difference between everybody riding back into Tulsa on their own bikes, or some of us coming home in the back of the van. All I give a shit about is my family. Keeping us whole and getting done what we need done is all that matters. Taking these guys out quiet is the right call."

Duncan looked into his father's eyes and saw the truth. But it shook him to his core.

"You taught me to be honorable. You taught me to be a good man. Now you're saying we aren't."

Dad squeezed Duncan's shoulders, then turned and rested beside him on his bike. "I did, and you are. I'm proud as fuck of you, son. But what I mean by honor is being the best man you can be in the life you live. You treat people with respect. You're decent to women. You take care of people in need. That's honor. Having doubts about club business, expressing them, helping the club make the best decisions it can—that's honorable, too. We keep our dark shit in the dark—there's honor in that. Maybe that's the only kind of honor anybody can really have—to do the best we can inside the life we live. We can say we're no worse than the people we fight, including the people running the world. And I really believe that—the

world is deeply fucked, and there's no outlaw as bad as most of the shitheads in suits, running the place. But you will make yourself crazy trying to shape it in your mind that we're the good guys, like in stories. We're not, Dunc. We're just guys, making our way best we can, trying to keep our mess to ourselves. There's honor in seeing that for what it is, but nobody's gonna pin a medal on our chests for it." He laughed quietly and slapped the *Righteous Fist* flash on his own kutte. "Our kind of honor gets us this."

Righteous Fist: awarded to men who'd killed in service of the club.

Duncan had not earned that flash yet. But it looked like he would soon.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tyrone Miller, the lawyer Margot worked for as a paralegal-slash-secretary, put his elbows on his desk and gave Phoebe a serious look. “It’s good you haven’t called her yet. We should have a clear strategy before you do.”

“I don’t want to talk to her at all,” Phoebe said. “I wish I’d never heard her name.”

“Understood. Do you have solid evidence that this woman,” he glanced down at the notepad before him, “this Lydia Copperman is the one who filed the complaint? Or is trying to get your donors to cut you off?”

Phoebe pressed her fingers to her forehead. She could feel the beginning of her scar there, and beneath it the slight dent in her skull. Her head hurt worse today than it had in years, and she was having a lot of trouble making sense of what Ty was saying. Since she’d been injured, stress created a fog that rolled through her head and made it difficult to find her thoughts and put them in the right order, and she’d been running on maximum stress for days now. Since that fucking certified letter.

“Besides the fact that she threatened to do exactly this?” she finally answered.

Ty nodded. “Yes, besides that. It is extremely difficult to prove defamation, Phoebe. We need hard proof—and corroboration. Someone who heard her make the threats, someone she spoke directly to and made false claims. Someone who can back up your accusations.”

With a sigh, Phoebe gave him the best evidence she had. “Rebecca Salisbury at the Humane Society told me that Copperman contacted her and tried to pressure her to remove me from the list of grant-eligible rescues.”

Ty jotted down a few words. “And did she make false claims about the ranch, or did she simply try to influence them to stop helping you?”

“I don’t know. Aren’t they both bad?”

“For you, sure. But if all she did was ask them to reconsider you, or even if she threatened to withhold her support if they continued supporting you, she would be completely within her rights. It’s only if she lies about you and that lie does real harm where defamation comes in—but again, it is extremely hard to prove to a legal standard. We might have better luck if she made false statements in her health-department complaint. They did the inspection this morning?”

Sitting at Phoebe’s side in Ty’s humble office, Margot scoffed loudly. “They showed up at six-fucking-thirty this morning. Tell me that’s not harassment.”

Ty gave her a level look. “Now, I know you know better than that. *We* might feel sure there was malicious intent, but as this was an unscheduled inspection based on a complaint, you know they can and will show up when they want. Without proof, a text message or memo or voice mail, something like that, where someone involved states clearly that they mean it as harassment—or better, that this Harry Morgan is colluding with Copperman—we can’t prove harassment. Filing a false report is a crime, but that’s for the health department to address. For us, we could use the false report as evidence of defamation, but only if we can prove that it was false, and that she knew it was false.”

“She did it to hurt me. She didn’t care whether it was true or false.”

Now it was Ty’s turn to sigh. “Do you have the inspection report with you?”

Phoebe had the clear impression that his patience with her was wearing thin. She pulled the inspection report from the manilla folder she’d brought, with every kind of documentation she could think of. In fact, she also pulled the previous inspection report, the one the ranch had passed only two months earlier. Leaning forward, she passed the papers to Ty.

He spent a few minutes looking over them both. Phoebe looked over at Margot, who gave her an encouraging smile.

But Phoebe wasn't capable of encouragement at the moment. She'd known coming in here that she was fucked, and nothing that Ty had said yet had suggested there was any way she'd be unfucked.

A four-person inspection team had arrived on the ranch that morning while the sun was still hitting snooze. Those four people had spent two full hours scouring the place while Margot, Vin, Phoebe, and Gremlin had sat on the porch like condemned souls waiting their turn at the gallows.

When they were finished, Harry Morgan, the inspector in charge, had handed Phoebe a much thicker report than the previous one. And the result was different. Not an outright fail, but a 'provisional pass.' They now had thirty days to replace the stable roof, replace about thirty feet of the corral fence, regrade the gravel, and have a state-appointed vet provide a welfare certification of every single animal. If all that wasn't done by the deadline, the ranch's license would be withdrawn and the animals removed.

They could replace the fence themselves. It was labor- and time-intensive, and it would be much easier to do in April than in February, but they could do the work, and the actual cost would be only a few hundred dollars. They could manage that.

The other required items were where disaster lurked. She'd gotten bids on a new roof when the previous inspector had warned her a replacement wasn't too far off. Those bids averaged about \$100,000. Grading the gravel lot and the road would be around ten grand. And paying an unfamiliar vet what would no doubt be a premium for certifying the welfare of twenty-five animals was going to be thousands as well.

At the moment, Phoebe had less than a thousand dollars in her savings account. She had more in checking, but that was for paying the usual bills. After dinner last night, Margot had created a GoFundMe, and she'd released it after the inspectors left, but they needed like \$150,000 right away. They didn't have time for the usual dribs-and-drabs pace of her fundraising.

Or they could fight the inspection, but Phoebe already knew—she'd known before she sat down in this fake-leather chair—that there was nothing to fight. She didn't have enough proof, enough money, or enough power to take on RichBitch Karen Trophy Wife.

“I'm going to be straight with you, Phoebe,” Ty finally said, pushing the papers back together in a neat stack, “I don't see anything actionable here. The inspector in November noted that the stable roof was showing clear signs of wear. He noted that the corral fence was due for maintenance or repair. He doesn't mention anything about the road, but between November and February, our weather can be hard on roads, so ... does it need grading?”

Reluctantly, Phoebe nodded.

“As for the welfare certifications, that's within parameters when there's been a complaint about an animal's condition. The new inspection here notes that there's a dapple gelding in rough shape.”

“Ragamuffin is a *rescue ranch*. We have animals in bad shape there all the time, because I *rescue* them from bad conditions. Smoky's only been with us a couple weeks, after years of abuse and neglect. It takes a while to recover.”

“The report says there's an open sore on his foreleg.”

“Yes. He didn't like being on his own during his quarantine period, and he hurt himself making a ruckus about it. Abuse and neglect cause trauma, too, you know. We're treating it. My actual vet has been out to see him four times already. Can't we ask her to tell them how we treat our animals? Whose side are you fucking on here, Ty?”

Margot reached out and grabbed her arm, and Phoebe realized she was almost out of her seat. She sat back and tried to get control of the panic, and the way it was playing her brain like a steel drum.

“I'm on your side, Phoebe,” Ty said gently. “I serve you best by being honest. I'm taking this case as a favor to you and Margot, but I'm not rolling in cash over here. You know this. I

don't have the resources myself to take on McIntosh County and some rich chick from the City, not unless I know we have a real shot at winning. And I don't see it yet."

"She really is doing this to hurt me," Phoebe insisted without any heat at all. Another spike of pain speared through her head, and her vision began to swirl. She clenched her hands around the arms of her chair.

"I believe you completely," Ty assured her. "I just don't see how we can prove it."

"I just want to live," she said, because it was the only clear thought in her head. "I just want my little life."

Margot leaned over and tried to hug her, but Phoebe leaned away. She'd break apart if so much pity touched her now.

~oOo~

Work was the only thing that pushed the chaos to the back of her mangled head and let her function with some semblance of normalcy, so Phoebe went straight to the stable when she got back from town. She didn't even bother to change her clothes. Her good boots were suede and sure to get ruined, but right now, that was the least of her worries.

Mickey was in the tack room. His big job for the day was washing the blankets, and Phoebe found him folding a pile fresh from their old industrial dryer.

He grinned when he saw her at the door. "Hi, Phoebe! Did you have fun in town?"

She found a smile to answer his. "I didn't go in for fun, but I got my errands done, yep."

"I always have fun in town. Mama takes me for Taco Bell, and then we get ice creams."

"That does sound fun. I'll have to do that next time. It's time for Smoke to come out of quarantine, so I'm gonna work

him, see what he can do. When you get those folded, you want to come out and help?”

“Yes I do! I’ll do these real fast, okay?”

She laughed and actually felt a little lighter. “Okay. We’ll be in the corral. I want him to see the other animals while we work him this first time.”

“Okay! Can I bring treats for him?”

“We’ll use the nuggets for training, but you can cut him up some apples for afters.”

“Okay!” Mickey cheered again. Phoebe felt her heart swell and realized, maybe for the first time, that she loved this kid.

Actually, she loved this *guy*. Mickey was about her age. His cognitive differences made his personality akin to a middle-schooler, but he was, in fact, a grown man. Did she treat him like a child? She didn’t think so; she thought she treated him the way he wanted to be treated, whatever that was. She treated him like Mickey.

He was part of her weird little family of people who fit right here and nowhere else.

Mickey, too, would lose the place where he fit if Lydia Copperman stole the ranch out from under them all.

She had to find a way to keep that from happening.

~oOo~

Phoebe always waited until a new rescue was out of quarantine before she made the horse do any kind of work. Most animals who came to her had been in some kind of bad situation, and horses were generally the most abused and traumatized, because they were generally the large farm animals who interacted with humans most directly. A goat or cow or alpaca might well be neglected, might be left trapped in a stall that was far too small and never cleaned, but those animals weren’t usually work animals, so humans didn’t have

much cause to beat them—except for those terrible, thankfully fairly rare, instances when a human caused pain for sport.

Horses, on the other hand, were work animals who often spent their days in the company of people, and were thus often both abused and neglected before they came to rescue. So Phoebe focused first on building trust and making sure the animal understood they were safe.

Smoky had shown signs of both abuse and neglect when she'd collected him from that nasty farm. But now, two weeks later, he'd plumped up and calmed down—if the inspectors had seen him when he'd arrived here, they would have been impressed at how much *better* he looked now.

They would also have been impressed at his psychological healing. Phoebe and Mickey were now both able to put their hands all over Smoky's head, walk all around him, and lean on him. He didn't like his feet picked up, but he'd tolerate it with some sweet talk and treats. He'd also abide a halter and lead.

The wound on his leg was healing, and Doc LeeAnn had cleared him for training. It was time to find out what Smoky thought about saddles and bridles. Phoebe wasn't even sure yet if he was truly saddle trained—his previous owner had said so, but she didn't trust anything that crusty old bastard had told her.

Before she collected the horse, she carried out her training saddle, pad, and two bridles—one with a curb bit and one with a snaffle. She also brought a hackamore, just in case. A hackamore was a bitless bridle, and Smoky was fairly mouthy; there was a chance he'd resist a bit.

She got everything set up inside the corral and went back to collect Smoky. The first part of understanding what a horse could do and would tolerate was seeing what he thought of the tack. A lot of horses who'd been abused under saddle reacted to the tack itself.

Smoky was in his little turn-out, but he trotted right back into the stall when he saw her coming, nickering and flapping his lips, begging for a treat. Phoebe grabbed a few nuggets

from her pocket and palmed them. “You are spoiled already, I see,” she cooed as he shoved his snout into her hand.

“He’s not spoiled, he’s loved,” Mickey said behind her.

“That’s right. You want to lead him into the corral?”

“Yeah!” Mickey grabbed the halter and lead off the hook and approached Smoky. “Do you mind, boy?”

Smoky nickered in response and mouthed Mickey’s coat, always searching for treats.

“Wait until he’s haltered, then give him a few,” Phoebe said.

The halter went on smoothly, as did the treats, and they walked Smoky out and around the stable toward the corral.

Vin had pulled in while they were collecting the horse, and he stood beside his car with an armload of Sav-A-Lot bags.

“Hey!” Phoebe called. “You need help?” Smoky swung his head in the direction of Vin and immediately stopped short and pinned his ears back. He gave Vin a wide-eyed, laser stare. Vin was thirty feet away, but that was too close, as far as Smoky was concerned.

“That horse is racist,” Vin said with a chuckle.

“No, he’s sexist. It’s not that you’re Black, it’s that you’re a dude,” Phoebe corrected with a grin.

“He likes Mickey fine, though.”

“That’s because I spend time with him and give him treats!” Mickey said. “If you give him treats, he’ll like you, too, Vin!”

“Thanks for the tip, there, Mick. I think it’s better if me and Smoke keep a respectful distance.” Vin liked the animals, but he was not a horse guy.

When Vin gave her a silent but meaningful look, Phoebe let Mickey and Smoky head off to the corral while she met Vin at his car.

“How’d it go?” he asked as she approached.

She'd had almost an hour of not thinking about the looming ruin of her life, and she almost lost a step as all those thoughts stampeded forward now. "Very bad. Ty doesn't think we have a case."

"Shit." Vin sighed and looked over to the corral. "You think you oughta be working that horse now? You should be resting. Margot said you were slurring your words by the end."

Phoebe hadn't realized that, and it pissed her off that Margot was gossiping behind her back. "It's stressful. It's a lot to think about. But I'm on top of it. I'm fine." Vin's eyes narrowed, and she wanted to punch him. "Fuck off, Ervin. I said I'm fine."

"And I'm gonna worry no matter what you say. GoFundMe's already up to forty-three hundred, by the way."

That was a lot more than she'd expected after about six hours, but it still was nowhere near enough. "And that's not even three percent of what we need."

Ty's actual legal advice was to arrange a meeting, with witnesses, where Phoebe would apologize to Copperman and grovel until the rich bitch was satisfied. But that pill was the size of a meteorite. She didn't think she could swallow it. The meeting with Ty had ended with her promise to think about it and let him know.

Feeling the fog roll in again, Phoebe shook her head. "I feel better working. If I rest, I'll just lay there and think about all this shit, and that's what's fucking up my head. So let me be, okay?"

"Okay. I'm gonna make those cheesecake cookies you like. Storm front's moving in, too, so watch the weather. Temp's supposed to crater around sunset."

"I know. I'm paying attention."

He gave her another extremely annoying, paternal squint, and finally nodded. "Okay. See you inside."

Smoky was not at all happy about the saddle, but he was trained to it. They started slowly, walking him up to the tack, giving him treats when he didn't shy, then letting him mouth the saddle and bridle, walking him around the corral and doing it all over again, until he'd decided the saddle wasn't going to hurt him. Then they worked on saddling him, starting by merely laying the pad over his back. He hated that very much, and reared up at the first several attempts, so they focused there, trying to get him to stand and allow the pad to rest on his back.

Phoebe and Mickey worked Smoky together until three, when Mickey's mom came to pick him up for the day, and then Phoebe worked Smoky herself for another hour or so, until the sky darkened and the wind picked up. By then, all the animals had moved close to the gate, and Smoky had lots of distractions to go with his pervasive distrust of this whole 'saddle' nonsense.

One day of training was not going to miraculously solve all of Stormy's issues. But by the time Phoebe had to call it and get everybody inside before the storm broke, he would accept the pad and walk calmly around the corral with her while it lay on his back. That was progress, and they were in no rush. Hopefully.

As she was giving Smoky hugs and kisses for having such a good session, she registered that her migraine had diminished by at least half.

With only Gremlin's help, she got everybody into their stalls, got their blankets on and their dinner distributed. She didn't get to the chickens before sleet started to fall, but she was pretty sure she and the dog were the only ones who were actually miserable when the work was finally done.

They returned to the house and the cozy scent of dinner in the works. Vin liked to make a pan roast on wintry days, with garlic mashed potatoes and mixed squash. She could hear his and Margot's affectionate bickering as she sat on the front-hall

bench and pulled off her—yes, ruined—boots and shed her various layers of outerwear.

Her phone rang as she hung her scarf over her coat on the hook, and she fished it out of her coat pocket.

For a moment, she stared and let it ring. Duncan was calling. She was glad it was a regular phone call and not FaceTime, because she could not possibly look good after an afternoon of work, the last bit of it in wind and sleet. Also, it was kind of charming to get a regular call. Everybody she knew used FaceTime by default when they called a friend or family.

Or maybe Duncan didn't think of her as a friend?

Finally, she answered. "Hi?"

"Hey. It's Duncan."

The pleasure in his voice was obvious, and Phoebe found herself smiling—and feeling a mood worthy of a smile. Like hearing from this man she barely knew was aloe on the burn of her worries.

That didn't mean she was going to let him up easy, however. "Yes, I know. Your name came up with the call. Because that's how phones work."

He laughed. "Okay, okay, sassypants."

"We talked about nicknames, remember?"

"I remember. I remember you said I couldn't call you snarkypuss. So I'm trying something different."

She walked into the living room and settled in Vin's recliner. "Sassypants is also a no-go."

"Damn, you're tough. I'll keep trying, though. Hey—I hope it's okay I'm calling."

The mere sound of his voice had settled so much of her turmoil, she knew she had to be careful. She liked this man more than he liked her. If she let her guard down, he could really hurt her, and this was not a good time for her heart to take more damage.

But damn. Ninety seconds of this phone call had done what all the support and wise words of her actual dear friends had not. She could finally breathe deeply again, and the fog in her brain wafted away.

She *had* to be careful. “It is. But why are you?”

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot, Phoebe.”

“Really? That’s interesting, since it’s been days since you last texted.” Fuck, that sounded needy, didn’t it? But it was true, and it was what she was thinking—what she was feeling. Still, it seemed a dangerous thing to say aloud.

The line was fine between being careful and playing games.

“I know,” he answered, and seemed frustrated. “I haven’t had good service for days. You’d think being so close to all the tech companies out here they’d have great service, but they very much do not. I finally got three bars, and I wanted to say ... well, that—I’ve been thinking of you. And I’m sorry I’ve been an asshole.”

Why did he keep hitting that note? What did he want her to say? “You haven’t. I told you that before. You’ve been straight with me. You’re not an asshole because you don’t want to get involved.”

“No, but maybe I am for not knowing what I want—or for knowing and being too chicken-shit to realize it.”

Unable to parse out his meaning there, Phoebe sighed and said, “Duncan, if you want me to absolve you of something, I absolve you. It’s fine. You don’t owe me anything. I don’t know what else to say.”

“A few nights back, when we were in SoCal, I fucked a couple girls.”

Her breath stopped in her chest. She had no right to be hurt, he owed her nothing, but wow. Ow. How long after they’d last texted had he waited? And a *couple* girls? Like at once?

It didn't matter. He owed her nothing. Reclaiming her breath, she said, "Okay ..."

"And it's been fucking with my head since. I feel like a total shit for it."

"You don't owe me anything, Duncan," she repeated, though it felt less true now. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because ..." he stopped there, was quiet for a few beats, and picked up again. "Because it's been fucking with me, and I know I don't owe you anything. I know I didn't cheat, but I feel like I did. I think that means something."

Choosing her words as if each one might explode beneath her, Phoebe asked, "What do you think it means?"

"I think—when I get back home, can I see you?"

He hadn't answered the question, and she was not about to let that slip by. "What do you think it means, Duncan?"

"I think I want ..."

Another pause. This was stupid guy behavior, trying not to put himself out there too far, and she hated it—but then, she was doing the same thing, wasn't she? Trying to protect herself? Of course, she had put herself out farther than he had already, so it was only fair that he inch his way toward her.

At last, he did. "I really like you, Phoebe. I think I want to try to be something together. If you do, I mean."

Her life was on the brink of disaster. The smart thing—the *sane* thing—would be to say no, not right now. She needed to focus on saving the ranch, if that was even possible. And if it wasn't, she would need to figure out a whole new life she couldn't begin to visualize yet.

But she felt so much better, so much clearer, talking to him, and she really did like him. He had done nothing to suggest he was dangerous to her—even fucking other girls hadn't been a harm, despite the hurt she felt. Duncan had been only ever a help and a comfort.

She didn't want to need him, or to use him, but if having him close gave her strength, that wasn't a bad thing. Right?

“Come see me when you get home,” she said.

“Yeah?” Again, there was so much pleasure in his voice, Phoebe felt it reach out and touch her from California.

“Yeah. And Duncan?”

“Yeah?”

“Now it would be cheating. Just to be clear. From now.”

“Understood.” It wasn’t exactly pleasure in his tone now, but it was something warm and deep and comforting.

It was hope, she realized.

Exactly what she needed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Duncan and his father rode through the heart of Eureka with their coats over their kutties. A few blocks from the ocean—or the bay, whatever it was—they arrived at their destination, a little diner next to a Best Western. They parked their bikes in the crowded lot and went in.

The interior of the diner was like most of the probably hundreds of diners Duncan had been in. Bikers, outlaw or otherwise, generally had an encyclopedic understanding of diners, truck stops, and dive bars, and this one was a textbook-worthy example. No fake Fifties vibe like all the Mel's Diners out here in California, cashing in on a fifty-year-old movie and a seventy-years-gone era. This one—named for a woman who probably was, or had been, the owner or related to the owner—was a real diner, where real people ate. Weary and rundown, stained carpet, water-spotted ceiling, the laminate worn down on the counters and tabletops, duct tape patches on the booth benches. And the best goddamn aromas of breakfast one could conjure.

The place was packed, and patrons shoved food into their mouths like they were having their last meal. This was a good fucking diner. It reminded him of Hal's back home.

Dad grabbed Duncan's arm and, with a nod, directed his attention to the back room, where Arlo, Little Jon's friend and now Duncan and Dad's 'squad mate,' had a booth in the back corner. Duncan followed his father through the diner to that back booth.

Dad gestured for Duncan to slide in across from Arlo first, so he did. Then they were both facing a man they barely knew and now had to trust as an ally. They were the 'squad' assigned to take out Bruce Lopez, the SAA of the Nameless.

A server came by with coffee and two more menus. They all took the time to place their orders and send her on her way before they started any kind of serious talk.

“We can talk here? Safely?” Dad asked after a sip of his coffee. He drank it black.

Arlo sneered at Duncan’s coffee cup as Duncan dumped a creamer and a sugar packet in. “Yeah. Everybody on the dark side around here knows this is a neutral zone, and safe. But I also did a check.” He patted his coat pocket. Then he looked at Dad and said, “He’s home—I confirmed on my way here. He’s workin’ on his boat today.”

“Where’s home?” Dad asked.

“Samoa. On the peninsula. In the winter, it’s quiet as fuck out there.”

Duncan got his phone out—only two bars, but probably enough—and opened his map app to find Samoa. He showed his father.

“That looks like a tiny town. Everybody crowded in together.”

“It is, but the folks out there mind their business. And the boat’s a good cover—it’s a piece of fuckin’ shit, so hauling trash out won’t cause any notice.”

Today, eight squads of Bulls and soon-to-be Bulls were scattered through Humboldt County, preparing to kill the eight Nameless who had elected not to take the Bull. The initial plan had been to synchronize the moves, but it had quickly become clear that synchronizing couldn’t be certain—several squads were in the hills, in remote locations like Little Jon’s place, or practically in the water, like Bruce Lopez’s place, and cell service around here was obviously not reliable.

They needed to keep their targets from raising an alarm, so, in lieu of syncing up everybody’s moves perfectly, the key was not to miss. To get each of these guys before they knew what had happened.

Dad squinted again at the satellite view on Duncan’s phone. “These houses look small and, like I said, right on top of each other. How’re we gonna get over on this guy and not be seen by anybody else, working in broad daylight?”

“You’re gonna hang back. I’ll do him myself, and then you can help me take out the trash.”

Duncan liked that idea—getting both his father and himself out of Eureka without either of them killing anybody sounded perfect.

But Dad was glaring at Arlo. “We’re not your underlings, Arlo. We’re running this show.”

Arlo glared right back. “And here I thought we were a team.”

“We are,” Dad said. “And I’m your captain.”

Arlo chuckled darkly and took a big swallow of his coffee.

The server returned, arms laden with large breakfast platters. She distributed everyone’s breakfast, asked if they needed anything else, and smiled a patient smile when Arlo waved her off.

“Look,” he said as he cut into his steak and eggs. “I’m on board for takin’ the Bull. My club’s been a fuckin’ mess for years now, and everything’s off the rails. We’re not earning. We don’t even have a goddamn president because we can’t get our shit together enough to pick one. We’d’ve all killed each other eventually, some of that shit’s already gone down. And while all that sniping and bullshit’s goin’ on, most of us are starvin’. So I’m glad to take the Bull, and I’m glad to get in on the work, and the take, that comes with it.” He leaned over the table, so that the plackets of his canvas coat almost brushed the food on his plate. “But you listen up. Jon and me, we got *history* with these men. Love and hate both. Lately, mostly hate. I want Bruce’s blood on my blade. He’s earned that. And so have I. But more important to you, I know the scene. I’ve been to that piece of shit house many times. I know how to get him done the way we need. So let me, and then help me clean it the fuck up.”

Duncan watched as the older men stared each other down. Dad was the one to back off first. He sat back against the patched plastic of the booth and sighed. “Alright. We’ll back you.”

~oOo~

Samoa was even humbler than it appeared on satellite. A grid of a few streets, most of the houses tiny, weather-beaten, and on stilts. Several driveways had boats, but few of those boats were new or in good shape. Lots of the houses were ‘decorated’ with bits of marine gear, like nets and floats and old ship wheels.

Signs at seemingly every intersection warned that this was a tsunami zone. Until now, Duncan hadn’t realized anywhere in the US—the continental states, anyway—had tsunamis. But there was a designated shelter in this tiny village.

As he sat in the passenger seat of Arlo’s truck, waiting and watching with his father, Duncan wondered what kind of work the people in this community did. Were they fishermen? Did they work at the pulp mill on the peninsula? What was it that drew them to this dinged-up little place?

“What a shithole,” he muttered under his breath. “Who would want to live here? The houses are shit, and the ocean apparently comes up and erases it from time to time.”

Dad blew out a quiet chuckle. “You, son, are spoiled. You think because you live in a bigger house, your home is better, but you can’t know that. Home is home for lots of reasons.” He nodded out the windshield, to a historical marker. “There’s history here. These houses’ve stood for a long while, in a tsunami zone. They weren’t erased. For all we know, the people here’ve been here for generations. That says something—they are stronger than the *ocean*. The siding with the paint worn off, the cracked boards, the bare yards, that’s all the stuff that stood firm against harsh times. So be careful who you judge.”

Duncan thought of Phoebe’s house, the time-capsule-ness of the place. Every room was full of things long used and deeply worn. The peeling front porch shook with every step, and the siding was in serious need of a paint job. Yet he found

that place quaint. Because he liked the woman who called it home.

Maybe that was why this little hamlet seemed so bleak to him. He was here to kill a man who called it home.

As if hearing Duncan's thoughts, Dad nodded off to the side, toward Bruce Lopez's house. "That's the only place we're here to judge."

Duncan checked the time again—and noticed the words *No Service* at the top of his screen. Again. Jesus Christ. "He's been in there almost ten minutes. And I lost the single bar I had out here."

Keeping his focus on Lopez's house, Dad nodded. "We knew phones were gonna be trouble. Arlo's not late yet. We'll give him—" He stopped because the sound of motorcycle engines—Harleys—rumbled up from behind them. They both sank low in their seats. Duncan peered into the side mirror and saw two bikes, a Softail and a Street Bob, roll around the corner.

They didn't look like they were in any particular rush, but they pulled into Lopez's driveway and dismounted.

Both wore the Nameless patch. Duncan had seen photos of all the Nameless several times, but he'd never been able to keep them all straight.

Whoever they were, though, something had gone wrong somewhere. All the squads were supposed to be hitting all the Nameless at about the same time. These two riders meant two hit squads without a target.

"Fuck," Dad said, scooting up a little more to confirm what he'd seen. "That's Graham and Stevenson. That's Eight and Jay's target and Fitz and Sam's."

"Does that mean it went wrong?"

Dad checked his phone. "I don't have service, either. I don't know. Time to improvise." He pulled his Glock from its holster and checked the mag. Duncan did the same with his Beretta.

“You got your knife, too, yeah?” Dad asked.

Duncan patted his hip and nodded.

“Okay. You stay behind me. We go in low and quiet, try to get the lay of the scene first. We’re gonna have to take all three of the fuckers out—and be ready to have to take Arlo down, too. Maybe this is an ambush.” He checked his phone once more. “Fuck this shit. You ready?”

Duncan had no idea if he was ready, but he knew that didn’t matter. “Yeah.”

“Put your hood up,” Dad said as he pulled his own up.

They eased quietly from Arlo’s truck and went up the narrow alleyway behind Lopez’s house. Keeping close to any available cover, they inched through the yard and up against the house, under the raised deck. The house itself was on stilts about eighteen inches high, and the deck was raised more than six feet off the ground.

There were two windows under the deck, with open blinds. Dad pressed himself to the concrete wall and took a quick, sidelong peek through the nearest window. Without speaking, he nodded and held up four fingers—the men were in that room.

Because Apollo’s daughter was deaf, most of the Bulls had some facility with ASL. Because Duncan was of a generation with Athena and had grown up with her, he was fluent. Dad, deaf in one ear, had found it useful for himself in certain situations, so he’d become fluent, too. Now they communicated in ASL—one handed, as they were both holding their sidearms.

“All four men are in that room,” Dad signed. “Arlo’s down—dead or wounded, don’t know which. Lopez must’ve seen him coming and got over on him.”

“What do we do?”

“If these guys get away, the whole thing is fucked. We have to take them down, and we still have to be quiet if we can. So here’s what we’re going to do.” He reached under his

hoodie and into his kutte, and he pulled out a suppressor. “Switch guns with me,” he signed.

“Why?”

“Because I only have one for my Glock, and I want you to use it. I’ll use my knife.”

That sounded crazy dangerous. “Dad—”

“Look, we don’t have time to fight about it. I want you at a distance. We’re busting in. I’ll go for Lopez, because he’s closest to the door, and you take out the other two. You’re a good shot, Dunc. You keep me safe by aiming true and not hesitating.”

“What if Arlo talked before he went down? What if they’re ready for us?”

Dad shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. We gotta get this done now, or the whole things goes ass over. You understand? There’s no choice here. We do it, or we’re fucked. Get over here and understand the scene, where everybody is.”

Dad pulled him forward to trade places, and Duncan pressed himself to the wall and peered through the side of the window. He saw Arlo face down on the floor. Lopez and the other two stood around him—Lopez was about five feet from the door, his back to it; he was bleeding from his forehead. The others faced him on the other side of Arlo’s feet. They were all agitated, talking over each other and gesturing wildly. From the little Duncan thought he could make out of their crosstalk, it seemed they did not know why Arlo had come after Lopez. That, at least, was something.

Dad probably hadn’t heard any of their talk. Duncan told him now, “I don’t think they know about us. I can hear a little what they’re saying, and they’re trying to figure out what the fuck.”

“That’s good. Let’s move while they’re wondering and not paying attention.”

Duncan nodded, and his father drew him around to the door.

It had glass panes. Dad held him back, counted off three, and kicked the door in.

Absolute chaos ensued.

Duncan knew very little of what was going on around him; all he knew was his job. He aimed and fired as soon as he hit the doorway, and dropped one of the guys. Off to his left, his father was struggling with Lopez. But Duncan had a job to do, so he didn't let that fact sink in yet.

The other guy charged at him. Duncan's first shot at him went wide, and the guy knocked him down. They fought over the gun, and the guy punched Duncan hard in the face three times while Duncan put all his effort into keeping hold of his father's Glock.

Finally, he got his hand free and slammed the gun into the side of the guy's head, hard enough to stun him. Then he pushed off with one foot and rolled them both over. Once he was on top, he shoved the suppressor under the guy's chin and fired. The top of the guy's head blew off, and brain matter and blood sprayed out and hit the wall in a plume.

Duncan rolled to his feet and spun around at once, ready to help his father.

Lopez and Dad were both on the ground. Neither was moving.

"Fuck! Dad!" Duncan clambered over the mess and dropped to his knees beside his father. Blood soaked the front of his hoodie.

"Dad!"

"I'm okay," Dad groaned. "I'm okay. It's my shoulder."

He groaned again, louder, and tried to sit up. Duncan helped him, then started tearing the zipper of his hoodie down.

Dad brushed him off with one hand. The other, on his wounded side, was limp. "Hold up. Make sure we're clear first. Check 'em."

With a nod, Duncan stood and did a check of the bodies in the room. Four men, zero pulses. It looked like Arlo had been

choked out. Lopez had Dad's knife in his chest. In his heart. Duncan had killed the others with his father's gun.

"They're dead. All of 'em."

Dad nodded. Maybe he thought he was okay, but he was pale and sweaty, and his face was creased with pain. Duncan dropped to his knees again and finished opening his father's clothes until he finally reached his bare chest. The wound was high on the right side, in the meat between his clavicle and his armpit. The gash was deep and puffy, bleeding freely, and the skin around it deep red, working toward purple. But there were no organs up there, so yeah, probably not fatal. As long as he didn't bleed out.

"My own fuckin' knife," Dad said in a groany half-chuckle.

Duncan grabbed the bandana out of his own pocket and pressed it to the wound. "Hold it there. We gotta get you sewn up."

"You too," Dad said. "You're bleeding."

Duncan wiped the blood from his cheek with his sleeve. "Fuckhead's wearing a big ring. I'm okay."

Dad took over the bandana with his good hand. "We have to deal with the bodies first thing. Make yourself presentable, go out to the truck, and get the supplies. I'll walk you through this, but you're going to have to do it on your own, son."

The supplies. Those meant to dismember a body and turn it into trash, so it would look like they'd been helping Lopez work on his boat.

Duncan was going to have to do that for four bodies. On his own.

He took a deep breath and stood up.

~oOo~

"You did good, kid," Eight Ball told Duncan.

He held out his hand, and Duncan took the thing he offered: the Righteous Fist flash.

Duncan looked down at it. His hand shook a little, so he clenched his fist around that strip of embroidered cloth. “Thanks, Prez.”

Sitting shirtless in a vinyl recliner in Little Jon’s front room while Digger sewed him up, Dad gave Duncan a look that was equal parts proud and sympathetic. He understood that Duncan had had no ambition for this ‘honor,’ and he also understood that he had done what needed doing, without hesitation, nonetheless.

Duncan now understood that about himself as well.

The whole crew was back, and the job was done. The Nameless were no more. On their side, Arlo was their only loss, and Dad and Duncan were the only wounded. Digger had stuck three stitches in Duncan’s cheek, and he was working on about a dozen in Dad’s chest. Dad was also getting a transfusion; Digger, it turned out, was a nurse at a local hospital and had ready access to pretty much any medical supplies they might need. Including O-negative blood.

The other squads had gone off without a hitch, except for Eight and Jay’s squad, and Fitz and Sam’s—and, as a result, Dad and Duncan’s. Justin Graham and Brad Stevenson had simply not been where they were supposed to be, because, apparently, Bruce Lopez had called them over to help him with his boat. The squads hadn’t been able to communicate the trouble because they were in the hills, and they wouldn’t have known where they were anyway, so Dad, Duncan, and Arlo were caught flat-footed.

But they got it done, and Duncan had singlehandedly dismembered four bodies and bagged them up like trash, hauled them to Arlo’s truck, cleaned up the scene, and gotten his father to the truck, all without any notice from the neighbors. It had helped that it was dusk by the time he was moving around outside.

When they were finally able to get hold of Eight and report the situation, Eight, Jay, Fitz, and Sam come to Samoa to

collect all the bikes and ride off like they were the dead men on their way out on a run.

Now Billy, Dean, Chris, Sam, and Monty were burying the bodies in the forest. Each one had been interred in an old oil barrel, covered in lye, and sealed up. The Nameless had a field just like the Bulls had in Tulsa, but far more bodies had been buried in these hills over the years.

Duncan had done a lot of disgusting shit as a prospect, cleaning up after the patches had handled some messy business. He had a strong stomach, and he understood his family, so that work had been unpleasant but not existentially upsetting. But this, disposing of bodies he'd made, while he was still working through a new understanding of just how far his club—his family—would go to get what it wanted, had put his head in an existential rock tumbler. He was exhausted and vaguely ill.

He slipped the new flash into his pocket and went looking for a drink.

~oOo~

“Since the plan is to let the Nameless’s clubhouse look like it’s shuttered for a while,” Eight told the group the next day, “Little Jon’s place here will be the Eureka charter clubhouse until the timing is right to hang the Bull on the building. The story we’ve got is good, so let’s keep it straight and solid.”

“Can we go over that story again?” Billy asked.

Little Jon sighed with extreme rhetoric. “Listen up good, kid. The Nameless bailed on Eureka. That’s the story. You know it makes sense, people’ve been wanting us out for a long while, and we’re broke as shit.”

“Don’t say ‘us,’ Jon,” Cooper said quietly.

“I gotta say ‘us’ for a while, Coop. And remember, those men we killed, they were my brothers. For decades, some of ‘em. They weren’t good men, sure, but none of us are. And I

loved some of ‘em for most of my life. Believe me when I say what we’re doing ain’t easy for me, but I did it, and I’m in. I’m a Bull now, but until we can hang the sign up, it does no good for any of us for me to forget I was Nameless.”

Cooper stared hard at him, glanced at Eight, looked back at Jon, and finally nodded. “Just keep your allegiance straight.”

“I know where my loyalty lies, and you should, too. I just buried my family in my damn yard to prove it.”

“Okay, okay,” Eight said, obviously impatient. “Let’s get back on track here. Caleb?”

Caleb stood, went to a table in the corner of the room, and brought a cardboard box back. He set it on Little Jon’s dining-room table in front of Eight and Cooper.

They both stood, and Eight opened the box. “As president of the mother charter of the Brazen Bulls Motorcycle Club, I officially welcome Little Jon Androuet, William Graves, Dean Barker, and Douglas “Digger” Daniels to our new Northern California charter.”

As the men crowded into the room applauded and offered or accepted congratulations, Eight and Cooper dealt out five Bulls patches, and five bottom rockers that read *NorCal*. One of each was for Arlo. His body had not yet been buried, so that he could be put to rest as a member of the club he’d died for. Arlo had no people, and the Nameless had few MC friends, so they would bury him here, but with respect.

Eight also handed Little Jon a *Righteous Fist* flash; he’d been the one to kill his squad’s target.

Eight withdrew flashes for the various officer positions from the box as well. Those, he handed to Fitz.

“Fitz, Jazz, and Geno are staying around to help get the charter rolling,” Eight said. “The plan is they’ll stay until the clubhouse is claimed—and by then, y’all should have figured out the officers for this charter. Until then, Fitz is acting president, Jazz VP, and Geno SAA.”

Cooper added, “They got no intention of staying here, so the first order of business is figuring out recruitment and

structure. And charm patrol—the Bulls need better relations with the civilians here than the Nameless had. We need the town to think of this as an improvement, and we need law on our side—or at least out of our way. The reason we make bank is because we stay out of civilians' way, and we get law to clear a path for us to work.”

Dean laughed. “That’s a tall order. People fuckin’ hate the Nameless around here. Contempt or fear, for most folks. Or both. And the cops? They are not friendly.”

Eight slapped Fitz’s back. “That’s why we’re leaving these guys here. They know how to make nice, and they know how to grease the wheels. You want to be looking for places to hold out a helping hand, too. This is a whole new world, brothers. You’re Bulls now, and we stay inside the fuckin’ lines.”

Duncan thought of the bodies dissolving in vats of lye, all because the Bulls wanted this location. He wondered exactly where the lines really were.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The change in the weather had brought in a winter storm. Most of Oklahoma got an inch of ice followed by somewhere between four to six inches of snow. Around Ragamuffin Ranch, they got about five inches. Lots of wind blew it around so that it was more than a foot deep near the buildings and fences, and just a dusting over the lanes and wide spaces. A dusting of snow over an inch of ice.

Ty's law office closed down for two days, and Margot stayed home, but ranch work didn't stop for any kind of weather. Animals needed taken care of no matter what mood Nature was in.

The storm took out a chunk of fence near the front gate. Luckily, the fence there was only rail and barbed wire, and they had the supplies on hand. So, on the day after, while Margot took on the brunt of the animal care, and Vin stayed inside where he couldn't fall and fuck up his prosthetic, Phoebe went up in full winter gear to sink the post in a fresh hole and restring the barbed wire. It took the better portion of the morning, and it was not easy work in the frozen ground, but she got it done.

The thing about a country fence, though: there was a lot of it. If the storm took it down in one place, odds were good that other parts had fallen as well. So after a good, warm lunch, and ignoring the burgeoning ache in her back and shoulders from the repair at the front gate, Phoebe bundled back up, saddled Amos, and did a full perimeter check of the property.

"Can't this wait?" Margot had asked as Phoebe had pulled her snowsuit back on. "We're keeping the animals close until the weather breaks. Nobody'll get close enough to the perimeter to be in trouble."

It could have waited. But since the trouble with the health department, Phoebe's mood and mindset had hardened. All she could think about was this ranch. Her home. Either she was working on it, or she was worrying about it. When she worked, she felt like she had some control over things. The

ranch felt most like hers when she was taking care of it. It was when she tried to rest that she most felt like she could lose it all.

She hadn't explained that to Margot, however. Her only response had been, "I'm doing it now."

Margot had given her that maternal look Phoebe hated, and she prepared a rebuttal for the argument she was sure was coming—the one where Margot pointed out that Phoebe had been continuously stressed for days now, and things like coordination and spatial awareness tended to get fuzzy when she was stressed. But her friend showed a rare moment of restraint and delivered that argument with only a look.

So Phoebe turned away and headed to the stable.

Amos was a young gelding, only three years old and full of sass. But he loved Phoebe, and he loved working. He got bored with pasture time, and when he was bored, he went looking for mischief. He was happier on a longe line, working on gait cues, than munching grass all day. He knew the saddle meant some kind of adventure, and he got excited, dancing in the aisle like a little kid waiting to go on a roller coaster. Even when it was twenty degrees and the world had turned to ice and snow, Amos was down for an adventure.

Phoebe kept the horses unshod in the winter; they were more sure-footed on frozen ground with their own hooves, and when there was snow, it packed in around the shoes and turned them into ice skates. Amos seemed to enjoy the feel of snow on his bare hooves; he stepped high and proud like a gaited horse, held his tail and head aloft, and basically did everything short of trying to catch snowflakes on his tongue.

For a while, as she rode her happy guy through the snowy, quiet woods, Phoebe felt peace and contentment wrap around her. She felt good for the first time in days. In fact, as they worked their way along the fence line, all of it intact so far, she felt like maybe she could beat Lydia Copperman after all. Her attempts to fuck with donors hadn't panned out; almost all Phoebe's patrons were still on board, and none of the charity organizations she worked with had caved to Copperman's

demands—in fact, they'd all informed Phoebe that it had happened, and a couple, including Becca, had offered to sign an affidavit about the situation.

Only the health inspection had worked to cause big trouble, and that was still a huge threat looming in the near future. But the GoFundMe was up to almost twenty thousand dollars. That would cover grading the road, and at least some portion of the welfare certifications. Maybe they'd reach their funding goal and be able to replace the roof, too.

God, if Phoebe did end up face to face with that bitch again, it would be so much better if she could present her with a passed inspection report instead of a fucking apology for refusing to suck shit directly out of the woman's ass.

Amos drew up short suddenly, his head high and his ears at full attention. The mane at his withers trembled lightly with his focus.

Phoebe looked around and saw nothing but the peaceful wonderland of the snowy woods. Then, about a hundred feet ahead, near the fence line, she saw the brush shudder.

One thing about horses; since they were afraid of basically everything, they were great at alerting to possible danger.

Oklahoma didn't have much in the way of large predators. No bears or cougars or bobcats outside of zoos. Bison didn't roam wild. There were deer, maybe the occasional antelope, but those weren't dangerous unless they were running scared and you were in the way.

What Oklahoma had were feral hogs. Those fuckers were big, destructive, and mean as fuck. And they grouped together in large herds called 'sounders,' which were like the outlaw gangs of the animal world.

When Phoebe urged Amos forward, he balked. He knew about deer; there was a herd that often showed up in the pasture and grazed along with the horses. If he was afraid, there was something else up there.

The brush shook, but Phoebe couldn't see, or hear, what was up there. Even so, she unlaced the rifle from behind her

saddle and brought it forward. Obviously, having been raised in the country, she knew her way around firearms, and the Army had trained her to be a crack shot, but she didn't especially like guns. She wasn't a hunter, and she disliked the thought of killing any animal herself, but she wasn't about to get charged by some monster boar and let Amos be hurt.

Again, she tightened her legs around Amos's middle. He grunted with impatience but took a few careful steps forward. Then he stopped again and glanced back at her.

Knowing it could be a very stupid move, Phoebe dismounted. Staying in the saddle would mean a faster getaway if they needed to run, but if she had to shoot something, she didn't want to do it so close to Amos's head. He wasn't trained to gunfire.

And she could mount at a run if she needed to.

Well, when she was younger, when she was barrel racing competitively and in the saddle almost every possible moment of her life, she could mount at a run. Back then, she could mount bareback at a run. But that was before the Army. Before the IED. And the coma. And all that shit.

Still, if she needed to, she was sure she could manage it. Even in her winter gear.

She could do it. If she needed to.

She could.

When she stepped forward, Amos nickered softly and stretched his neck out, trying to grab at her with his soft mouth. She could almost hear him tell her she was being stupid and should come back to him at once.

"I got it, bubba," she assured him. "It's okay."

He did not look convinced.

Phoebe turned back to the mystery at hand and took another couple of steps, coming up against a sturdy hickory tree. She aimed the rifle and peered through the sight. Within seconds, she saw the thick rear end of a large hog.

It was very obviously male, which could be both good and bad. Good because there was a chance it was alone. A sow was almost definitely with a sounder, but sometimes boars were without a family. A sounder that had decided it needed to defend itself was bad news—but that generally happened when there were piglets to protect, and winter was not the season for babies.

However, a lone boar could be bad news, too. A loner was protected only by himself and almost certainly hyperaggressive. A sounder might be content to tear up an acre of forest rooting for goodies in the ground and barely give the other creatures around them any notice, so long as said creatures let them be and didn't pose a threat. A lone boar might well see threat in any large creature nearby.

Of additional interest to Phoebe as she peered through the sight of her rifle: the fence was down. An old oak had fallen and taken at least two posts down with it. The boar was snuffling under the trunk. That oak had been dead for a few years; Phoebe had intended to pull it down and cut it up for firewood, but that was work she couldn't do on her own, and neither Margot nor Vin could help, so she'd been putting it off because hiring help was expensive.

Welp. Add this to her list of the perils of delayed maintenance. Because the fence was down, now she had a wild boar problem.

Actually, right. She could not let this boar hang around. Wild hogs could have all manner of diseases. Plus they tore up grazing land—and they even ate smaller livestock. Like chickens. In addition to being bullying assholes.

Shit. With no way to keep it out, she had to shoot the fucker. And figure out a way to get it back to the house. And then figure out what to do with it.

None of that mattered right now. Right now, she had to deal with the threat to her home.

Phoebe did something she had never wanted to do again in her life. She reached back to the deepest corner of her mind and intentionally pulled the soldier forward.

All at once, her head filled with sense memories, and then, after the rush nearly left her breathless, everything went quiet. There was nothing but her and her target. She sighted the boar again and put her finger on the trigger.

Just then, a nearby branch dropped its load of snow. Phoebe the soldier registered that occurrence but didn't react.

The boar, however, did. It flinched, and its big, shaggy black head came up. Two dun-colored fangs—big ones, this guy had been around the block a few times—protruded from its mouth. It looked her way, and through the sight, Phoebe saw a glint of sun catch the lens and throw light back toward the boar. That was enough to gain its full attention. It made the growly, grunting snort that meant aggression and turned to face her completely.

As it lowered its head, Phoebe fired. She'd aimed between its eyes, but his movement shifted her aim. The bullet went through the boar's ear.

Screaming in pain and rage, it charged.

The rifle had been her father's hunting gun: a bolt-action Remington, not remotely automatic. With the angry beast barreling toward her, faster than anything with such short legs had any business moving, she racked the gun again. This time, she didn't bother to sight. Trusting her training and instincts, she pointed and fired.

The boar dropped. It had been moving so fast that it skidded through the snow for a few feet, coming to a stop so close to her that she caught snow spray in her face.

But Phoebe wasn't in her wintery woods. She was in the heat of the desert. She crouched where she was, gun up, and scanned the area for enemies.

It lasted probably only a second or two longer, and then the actual world returned to fill in the space around her. As it did, actual awareness, memories she'd made without realizing it, returned, and she knew everything that had really happened. The desert broke apart like a dream upon waking.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw that Amos had bolted in the fracas, but he was only about twenty feet back. He'd held pretty fast for a boy who'd never heard gunfire before and had just had a wild boar charging toward him.

“Good boy, bubba,” she called to him. “Good boy.”

First, she made sure the boar was gone—it was; the second bullet had hit above its left eye. Then she trudged through the snow and brush to the downed oak and got a better look at the damage to the fence. Three posts pulled over, at least one of them broken. This was going to be a bitch of a repair.

But first she had to figure out what to do about the boar.

With no field-dressing tools—and no confidence that she could field dress a freaking wild boar—and no way to carry the carcass back, there was literally nothing she could do about it now. She had to go back and get the tools, and the help, she needed.

The cold would keep rot away, and probably slow scavengers for a little while. So Phoebe went to Amos, tied up the rifle again, mounted, and headed back to the house.

~oOo~

When she came in view of the house and other buildings, Phoebe drew up short. A bright blue Ford truck was parked near her weary GMC.

That Ford was Duncan's truck. He was home? They'd texted a bit during his trip, more once he'd finally told her he wanted to see her again. However, he'd complained repeatedly that service was spotty where he was in California, so their contact had not been extensive. The last she'd heard, the Bulls were heading back home, which would take a few days.

Had that been a few days ago already? Apparently so.

Riding toward the house, she pulled out her phone. Service on the ranch wasn't what anyone would call stellar, but she

had a couple bars. She checked her messages—nothing from Duncan for almost two days.

As she returned her phone to her pocket, she saw Duncan and Margot at the fence of the front pasture, where the llamas, goats and Puff hung out. All the animals were lined up on the other side of the fence, obviously getting treats.

Margot was still a little suspicious of Duncan, and she tended to think of herself as House Mom. Phoebe hoped she wasn't lecturing him about his 'intentions' or anything otherwise stupid and humiliating.

When they heard her coming up behind them, they turned. Duncan grinned brightly—and Phoebe noticed that his face was hurt. One cheek and eye showed a large, aging bruise, and he had a bandage across his cheekbone.

"You're back," she said as she pulled Amos to a stop.

Still grinning, he came up and stopped so close that when she swung from the saddle and hit the ground, he reached out and caught her arm without even having to stretch.

"Hey, sweetheart."

She laughed and hooked her gloved hand into his coat, where the zipper was open on his chest. "Sweetheart? Pretty generic nickname, don't you think?"

"Not sweetheart—SweeTart. Like the candy."

"Oh my god." She rolled her eyes. "Really?"

"Yep. Sweet and tart. It's perfect. And I notice you haven't said no yet. You knocked the others down right away."

She thought this one was dumb, too, though maybe a little cute. Still, she didn't need or want a nickname. "It's a no."

"Fine. Your loss." His grin faded. "I missed you, you know."

She'd missed him, too, but it felt dangerous to admit it so freely already. Like flying down a steep hill in a toboggan, toward a lake you're not quite sure is really frozen.

Rather than reply, she gave his coat an affectionate shake and looked past him to Margot. “We met a boar in the woods. The fence is down along the back line, and he came through. I shot him, but I don’t know what to do with him now.”

“A boar?” Duncan said before Margot could. “You okay?”

Obviously, she was. “Yeah, fine. But we can’t leave the carcass out there. It’ll draw scavengers, and might draw more hogs.”

“Vin can dress it,” Margot said. “And we can take into town and have Terry butcher it.”

Terry Groves was the town butcher; in addition to the usual butchering of beef and fowl and such, he had a service for hunters as well.

“Vin can’t dress it in the field,” Phoebe pointed out. “Especially not in this weather.”

His prosthetic came from the VA and was some distance from top-of-the-line; he got around just fine on floors and paved surfaces, and he managed well, carefully, around the homestead, but he did not hike the woods even in summer. Certainly not in snow and ice.

“It’s a huge black boar. Probably weighs two hundred pounds or more. And it’s almost two miles back.” Feeling suddenly exhausted and frustrated, Phoebe stomped her foot. “Fuck! I don’t know what to do!”

“Hey.” Duncan caught her hand. “I’m standing right here. I’ll help.”

“It’s not your job to save me, Duncan.” She wasn’t sure why she’d said that or why it had felt like the most important thing to say.

“I know. I got a job already, anyway. But I am standing right here, and I can help, and I want to. I guess it’s not clear enough for a truck back there?”

“Not at all. We have an old four-wheeler, but even that would be tight back there. Can you ride?”

“Technically, yeah. I got family with a farm, and when I was a kid I rode there a bunch of times. But not for years. I’m not a cowboy, but I know how to get on a horse and use the reins.”

Phoebe tried to think how to handle the boar problem—but her brain simply refused to work on it. She could not get past the question and even take a step toward an answer.

“Fuck!” She slapped her forehead. “My stupid fucking brain!”

Margot pushed in between Phoebe and Duncan and clutched Phoebe’s shoulders. “Look at me,” she ordered.

Phoebe looked at her.

“Take a breath.”

Phoebe took a breath.

“What problem do we need to solve?”

“The fucking boar!”

“Okay. You killed it, right?”

Phoebe nodded.

“So we need to get it out of the woods so we can deal with the carcass. Right?”

She nodded again.

“It’s too big to carry, so we need to haul it. How about Titan? He’s big and strong. Could he carry the boar on his back?”

Starting to get purchase on the problem, Phoebe took another breath and had an answer. “Yeah, but he’s eighteen hands tall. How do we get the boar on his back?”

“That’s where I come in,” Duncan said. “I can overhead press two-twenty. I can get a two-hundred pound boar to a horse’s back.”

Phoebe focused on him. “Two-twenty overhead? Seriously?” That had to be close to, if not greater than, his body weight.

His grin widened again. “I mean, I’m not doing many reps at that weight, but yeah. Let me help you.”

Because her thinking still felt shaky, Phoebe looked to Margot, who nodded.

“Okay. I think that can work.”

~oOo~

They saddled Maple, a gentle gelding large enough to carry Duncan comfortably, and fastened a pack pad over Titan’s back, with a waxed canvas tarp and some good rope. They mounted up, and Phoebe led Titan while Duncan followed on Maple.

He was obviously not completely comfortable on horseback, but he knew well enough what he was doing. Phoebe made sure to lead them over the easiest possible terrain.

When they got to the boar and dismounted, Duncan didn’t hesitate. He went straight to the carcass and crouched beside it to check it over.

“Damn. Good shot.”

Phoebe pulled the tarp and rope off Titan’s back. “I missed the first. See its ear?”

Duncan looked. He grabbed the ear and studied the shredded space where the bullet had taken out a swath. “I see. Still, though. For a miss, it’s a great shot.”

That wasn’t worth debate, so Phoebe didn’t bother. “You sure you can lift that beast?”

Shifting to a weightlifter’s crouch, he slipped his hands under the carcass and gave it an experimental lift. “Yeah. Once we get it wrapped up, no sweat.”

Phoebe brought the tarp over. They spread it over the snowy ground, and Duncan rolled the carcass onto it, then rolled it over until it was wrapped like a Tootsie Roll. They

bound it—Duncan tied excellent knots—and then he shifted into that deep crouch again, shoved his hands under the bundle, and stood.

Though he'd moved with slow precision, clearly feeling the weight, Phoebe was impressed. He hadn't even take a sidestep. He hadn't made a sound.

But he had the bundle cradled at his chest. Titan's back was several inches higher than that, and if the bundle wasn't laid carefully, the horse could be hurt.

"Careful," Phoebe warned as Duncan approached the Percheron.

"I am," Duncan assured her.

What an interesting way to put it. Most people would say something like *Okay*, or *Don't worry*, or maybe *I will be*. *I am*, Duncan had said, as if it were a statement of being more than an observation of the moment. To her ears, he'd meant *I am a careful person*.

Phoebe believed it. And was eased.

Duncan hoisted the bundle up and laid it so gently over Titan's back that the horse barely shifted his stance. Together they bound the bundle snugly to the pack pad.

"Excellent. Thank you. Ready to head back?" Phoebe turned to Amos.

Duncan caught her hand. "Wait. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure ..."

"You shot this boar in the head. Twice. It was facing you. Was it charging you?"

"Yeah. Not the first shot, but after that, yeah."

"Jesus, Phoebe."

She shrugged and pulled her hand free. As she turned again to Amos, she said, "Not the worst thing I've had coming at me."

“No, I guess not,” he said, barely louder than a mutter.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On Amos, Phoebe rode ahead, leading Titan and the boar. Duncan and Maple took up the rear. He hadn't been on a horse in years, but he'd liked riding on the Wesson ranch as a kid, and most of the muscle memory had stuck around.

In some ways, it was a little bit like riding his bike. He'd be enjoying it if they'd gone out just for fun. He was enjoying it a little bit anyway.

But mostly he was focused on Phoebe up ahead. This visit had not at all gone the way he'd imagined it during the long ride from California. He hadn't called or texted much, because cell service was spotty half the time he might have called, and also because he'd started to build up a little fantasy about surprising her—showing up unannounced, her meeting him outside the house, him saying something like *Hey baby*, and her jumping into his arms. Then he'd thought to call her SweeTart and had spent some time enjoying the imagined banter as she swatted away another attempt at a nickname.

Vin called her 'Bumblebee,' or just 'Bee,' and she seemed great with that. Duncan was a little jealous—it was a cute nickname, and he wished he'd both thought of it and had the chance for it to be his.

He'd had the chance to try out SweeTart, and there had been a little bit of banter, but by then the surprise had already gone off plan.

First, when he'd arrived, Phoebe hadn't been around. She'd been riding the fence line, checking for downed portions. Margot and Vin were around, and they'd yanked him into the house and laid a whole lot of baggage on him over coffee and cookies.

They were in danger of losing the ranch—specifically, Phoebe was in danger of losing the only home she'd ever had, because some rich oil wife had it out for her, and she was using government connections to cause trouble. They had more than a hundred grand in county-mandated repairs to

make basically immediately. Margot and Vin had wanted to know if Duncan or the Bulls could help.

Margot had laid out an elaborate proposal having to do with the Bulls becoming a sponsor-slash-partner with Ragamuffin Ranch, essentially buying a share of the property, writing it off as a charitable endowment or something like that. She'd spewed a lot of legal jargon at him, but the end result of her hard sell was she thought the Bulls should buy in.

If he hadn't been so stunned at the magnitude of the problem, he might have laughed at the notion he could go to the club and suggest they drop six figures on a farm-animal rescue ranch.

He had, however, ultimately promised to do exactly that—or almost exactly that. He could talk to his dad. That was as good or better than bringing it to Eight, and Dad would try to offer other solutions when the answer to the first question was no. Which it obviously would be.

Being a patch, Duncan had a decent sense of the club's financial situation. He was sure they could technically afford to do it, but it wasn't like they were sitting on a warehouse full of cash, *Breaking Bad* style. Most of the actual cash in the club's coffers was earmarked for something. And who knew how much liquidity any individual patch had. Dad seemed always able to produce the funds to buy a new vehicle, big repairs on the house, family vacations when the kids were young and nice getaways for him and Mom now, but Duncan wasn't sure where he kept it all or how much trouble he took to get to it.

Dad had advised Duncan about how to handle his cash, so he figured it was something similar: only Duncan's service-station wages or money he got from a bike sale or something went into his actual bank accounts. Everything else was kept cash, in quantities no greater than twenty thousand dollars in any one place. He had a safe in his room at home, safe deposit boxes at two different banks, and anything else he triple-wrapped in plastic and buried in various places.

It had occurred to him that, if the club itself couldn't or wouldn't help Phoebe, maybe he could convince the patches individually to help her out. If he could figure out enough upside to make it worth their while.

He wanted to help. Seeing her again had galvanized that impulse into a call to action.

Another thing Margot had told him, while they were outside giving the animals treats: Stress changed Phoebe's personality, and the trouble about the property was causing her deep and continuous stress. The issues around stress had to do with her brain injury, and she understood that but often didn't realize it was happening.

Duncan remembered Phoebe explaining, their very first night together, that when she was stressed she had trouble processing information and didn't handle challenges very well. He'd seen a little of that earlier today, when she'd been trying to figure out how to deal with the boar. She'd gotten frustrated and agitated, and Margot had grabbed her and forced her to focus and walk step by step through the problem with her.

He'd also noted that her speech was less clear—not slurred, exactly, but a little muddy. And she was deep in her head, barely making eye contact and slow to reply in conversation.

Another thing he'd noticed, probably the first thing: she seemed a lot less interested in him than before. More than a week apart, and a conversation during that time that he thought had put them on a 'couple' track; he'd shown up unannounced for a romantic surprise. Yet they hadn't kissed yet. She'd barely touched him yet.

Margot had said that she 'disengaged' at times like this, so maybe—hopefully—it was only that. It would seriously suck if he'd decided to go out on a limb and try to be in a relationship and she'd changed her mind about wanting it.

Now was not the right time to worry about that, though. Phoebe was struggling, in real trouble, and he wanted to find a way to help her.

~oOo~

When they arrived back at the main part of the ranch, Margot and Vin were ready to help. Duncan pulled the carcass off of Titan's back and followed Vin to a small shed near the house, which might have actually been an old smokehouse from way back in the day. It smelled smoky and earthy inside, which he figured a smokehouse would smell like. Whatever it was, a wide, darkly stained wood table took up the center of the space, and Duncan laid the boar on it.

"Thanks, man," Vin said. "You've been a real help around here, from day one."

Duncan gave the man a nod. "Happy to do it."

Vin tilted his head. "I know you are. Phoebe, she doesn't like needing help, especially when she needs it most. You gotta come in sidelong. You get me?"

"I think so," Duncan answered. He preferred to be straightforward, and Phoebe seemed to as well, but he thought he understood Vin's point. Sometimes you had to pry the lid up a little before you could get a good enough hold to open it all the way.

When Vin pulled a heavy leather apron from a hook and opened a chest full of sharp things, Duncan took his leave. He'd seen enough gore in California to last him a while.

Outside, the horses and women were gone. He headed to the stable, hoping to find them there.

Titan was in his stall, head buried in a bucket of what was probably horse food, and Phoebe and Margot were tying Amos and Maple up in the aisle.

Duncan went to Margot and Maple. "I got this," he told her.

"Yeah? You know what you're doing?"

“Sure,” he said, which was only about half true. He remembered some things, probably the main things, about unsaddling a horse. For anything he’d forgotten or had never known, he could watch Phoebe. The important thing was finally getting a chance to be alone with her, so he could get a read on what she wanted of him.

“Okay,” Margot said. “I guess finishing supper is on me, anyway. Terry’ll be here in about an hour, so we’re probably gonna have to feed him, too.” She turned to Phoebe. “You need anything before I go, hon?”

“No,” Phoebe answered as she walked past them with Amos’s saddle.

Giving Duncan a look full of meaning he could only hope he understood, Margot left the stable.

Duncan went to Maple’s saddle and tried to remember the steps. First the back belt thing. He unfastened that. Then ... right. He lifted the stirrup, or whatever the part was called that the stirrup was attached to, and found the cinch thing. Instead of a belt buckle, this was a leather strap sort of knotted. Was he on the wrong side?

“Here,” Phoebe said and pushed him aside. She undid the leather strap. When the cinch fell free, she grabbed the saddle and pulled it off the horse’s back.

“I had it,” Duncan said, feeling defensive.

“You can bring the pad and the bridle—it’s hanging there.” She nodded at the nearest post.

He took the pad off Maple’s back, collected the bridle from its hook, and followed Phoebe back to the tack room.

She was settling the saddle on a big peg on the wall. Five other saddles rested on similar pegs. Then she took the bridle from him and hung it on a wall full of bridles, halters, and leads.

“Hang the pad by the window, next to mine. They need to air out before they get put away.”

A thick cord like a heavy-duty clothesline stretched across the room, in front of the window. Titan's pack pad and Amos's saddle pad were hooked over it. Duncan hung Maple's beside it.

"Hey. Wait," he said as Phoebe started to leave the room.

She stopped and turned back. "The horses are still tied in the aisle. I need to brush them down and put them away. Then I need to bring everybody else in and get them fed."

He'd heard, and felt, each time she'd said *I* instead of *we*. "I can help with that. But can we just take a minute first?"

"Why?"

There was a new distance between them, but it didn't have to be physical. Duncan went to her and took her hand. "I *missed* you, Phoebe. Unless I went crazy and started hallucinating while I was gone, I think we decided to be a couple. As far as I'm concerned, that is some significant shit right there. Like, life-changing shit. I've been thinking about seeing you again, holding you, *kissing* you, since the last time I saw you, and fuck, I've been here hours, and we've barely touched. You feel miles away. Did you change your mind?"

She stared at him—not at his eyes, but at, he thought, his nose. "There's shit going on I've got to deal with."

"I know. I want to help." He figured she was only talking about the boar, but he meant more than that.

"You have helped—and thank you." Those last two words seemed to register more deeply with her, and Duncan actually saw her pull out of her head. Her eyes came up to his. When she spoke again, even her voice was more focused. "Sorry. I'm sorry. There's a lot on my mind. But I am happy you're here and really thankful for the help—and no, I didn't change my mind."

"Good. Can I kiss you now?"

She nodded, and he pulled her into his arms. When he bent and put his mouth over hers, she sighed softly, and her hand swept up his arms and around his neck. Duncan changed the kiss and took her into the deeps with him.

This was right. He couldn't define the difference he felt with Phoebe in his arms, except for that: he knew this was right. Not just enjoyable. Not just hot. Right.

Then a spasm went through her, and she pulled away. When Duncan looked down at her, he saw that her eyes had blurred with unshed tears.

"Hey," he murmured as a drop slipped from its bounds and slid onto her face. He brushed it away with his still-gloved thumb. "It's okay."

She shook her head. "It's not, actually. Things are shit."

"Margot told me about the what's going on with the health department."

Surprise took over her face and was quickly supplanted by anger. "What? Fuck her!"

"I want to try to help. I'm going to ask if the Bulls can maybe do something."

"Like give me a hundred thousand dollars? Come on, Duncan. That's nuts—and I don't *want* you to do it."

"Why not? I don't know if the Bulls can help, or how much they can, but I want to try. If I can help, and you need help, why wouldn't you let me?"

"We can't start being together with this between us. There's no way I can pay back something so huge, the whole problem is I can't pay for something so huge. So it's us as a couple or you as a donor. Which do you want?"

Well, that was just plain stupid and self-defeating. He was not about to make that choice. "I want you *and* to help. There's no ledger here, Phoebe. You won't owe me shit. But like I said, I don't know how much I can do, or the club can do. I just want to ask the question."

She looked up at him for another few seconds. Then her eyes shifted away from his, and he felt the distance return. "I need to take care of the horses."

She pulled out of his hold and went to the door. Duncan followed.

They weren't done, but he'd let her have her distance for now.

~oOo~

They got the animals tended to and buttoned up for the night. As they left the stable, the butcher guy was pulling the boar carcass toward his truck on a hand cart, and Vin was closing up the smokehouse or whatever it was.

They all went into the house and shared a meal of hearty beef stew and cornbread.

Duncan liked these people. Even the butcher guy, Terry. The conversation around the table was real—about the boar, about the effects of the storm on properties around the area, about town politics and gossip—and rough around the edges. Everybody ate with gusto and no fuss about the fancier manners.

After the meal, Terry left, and Duncan offered to help Vin clean up. The two men didn't talk about much beside the work they were doing, until Vin stopped at the sink and turned to face him.

“Be patient with her, man. You might be thinking she's different from when you met her. She's not. She's still Phoebe, and she is good. She's just scared right now and feeling trapped. It makes her button up tight.”

“I get it.” Duncan considered for a moment, then went ahead and said what he was thinking. “It's PTSD, right?”

“Yeah. I don't think anybody in a combat deployment comes back from that mess without it. But she's got some ... complications, I guess you'd say, because of her injury.”

“You know, I only know one of my brothers in the club who's diagnosed with it, but it wouldn't surprise me if half the Bulls have it. Shit gets intense with us, and some of the guys don't handle it so well. Prickly and moody is like the club personality.”

Vin chuckled and nodded at Duncan. “By the look of your face, shit got intense with you pretty recently.”

Duncan brushed his wounded cheek. Phoebe hadn’t yet noticed—or, at least, hadn’t bothered to mention it. “Yeah. It did.” He shook off the memories of his father lying bleeding at his feet, of those fucking drums of dissolving bodies—and fuck, the *smell* of them. “Anyway, I won’t say prickly and moody is easy, but it is familiar. It won’t scare me off.”

“Good.” Vin went back to rinsing dishes. “Because I like you, Duncan. I like you for our girl. You have a talent for being around when she needs someone.” He handed Duncan a plate to dry and added, in a smoothly conversational tone, “But don’t think I won’t break you apart like a wishbone if you hurt her.”

Duncan laughed. He didn’t take that last bit as a threat so much as a declaration of loyalty. Either way, he could appreciate it. “Noted.”

~oOo~

When he stepped into the living room, where Margot and Phoebe were watching television with Gremlin and four cats, Phoebe stood at once.

“You ready to go?” she asked as she walked to him.

He was not; he’d planned to stay the night. His imagination had created an entirely different reunion from the one he was getting. “Do you want me to go?”

She stared up at him, expressionless, and didn’t answer.

“No, she does not,” Margot answered from the sofa. Putting on a fake voice that was nothing like Phoebe’s, she went on, “Hey, Duncan, wanna go upstairs and mess around?”

Phoebe turned and gave her friend a look Duncan couldn’t see, but could vividly picture anyway.

He brushed a hand down her arm. “I’ll go if you want.”

“You can stay,” she said, turning her head halfway so she spoke to her own shoulder.

As seduction scenes went, this one was still a rough draft. Taking heart from her friends’ obvious support, he weaved his fingers with hers. “Then let’s go upstairs.”

Nodding, she turned and led him to the stairs.

~oOo~

When they got to her bedroom, she closed and locked the door, then turned and grabbed him by the hoodie. She yanked him close, rose up onto her toes, and slammed her mouth on his, already fighting to pull the hoodie up.

Duncan was a fan of *enthusiastic* sex, but he didn’t really do rough. He felt guilty pushing a woman around, even if she said she wanted it. He’d pull hair if she wanted—actually, that was damn hot—and *move* her around, take charge, that kind of thing. That was all great, if the woman thought so, too. And he was also very good with a woman taking charge.

But Phoebe was vibing today, and he didn’t ever nudge up against the line where play became hurt. He pushed her back. “We are not matching energies here, babe. What’s goin’ on?”

“I don’t want to talk. I want to fuck.”

Ah. She was trying to keep him from using the opportunity of their privacy to bring up the trouble with the ranch.

He pulled off his hoodie and t-shirt and tossed them away. Clasp ing her arms firmly, he pulled her close. “We don’t have to talk.”

When he kissed her, again she dived in deep right away. Her mouth moved wildly against his, and her hands dug into his hair, pulling where it was long enough to catch hold of, her fingernails digging into his scalp. Every touch, every pull, every scratch tautened his need until he was nearly at the breaking point.

Nearly at it. “I’m not gonna be rough,” he warned, whispering against her mouth, into it.

“Just turn off my head,” she whispered back, nipping at his lips. “Fuck me until I forget my own name again.”

Wow, he hated the way she’d said that.

But he shook it off and picked her up. This woman—*his* woman, though that was still a strange thought without a secure spot in his head—needed a therapeutic fuck, and he meant to give her what she needed.

She’d flung her legs around him the second he’d lifted her from the floor. Duncan turned, meaning to carry her to bed, but his footing was off, and he sidestepped, slamming them into her dresser. Some of the things arrayed there fell over with a musical clatter.

Still in his arms, still wrapped around him, still kissing him with wild abandon, Phoebe was almost sitting on the dresser, and Duncan realized the perfection of this position. If they’d been naked, he’d might have been inside her already.

He pushed her more completely onto the dresser and started ripping her clothes off. She helped only enough to shift around and pause the kiss so he could get her naked. Most of her attention was on ravishing him.

“Fuck me, fuck me,” she moaned when he pulled her sweater and thermal tee off.

“I mean to,” he growled back and returned to the feral riot of their kiss.

As for the rest of his own clothes, he took only enough time to get his fly open and a condom on. Then he grabbed her hip, grabbed his cock, and pushed into her, hard, fast, and deep. Phoebe cried out in a shattering burst of sound. When he pushed a hand between them and found her clit with his thumb, she shuddered and buried her face against his throat. She sucked on him like a vampire seeking a meal.

“Jesus!” Duncan gasped as a lash of hot need whipped through him. Slamming a hand to the wall for balance and leverage, he shoved himself into her as hard and fast as he

could. Each time he landed as far into her as he could get, she squealed and pulled his hair.

Shit on the dresser was falling over, falling off, making a noisy mess. Duncan didn't care, and Phoebe clearly didn't, either.

She got wilder and wilder, crying out each time they slammed together, like there weren't two other people in the house to hear, yanking on his hair so hard he felt the strands giving up their grip in his scalp, sucking his neck raw. "Harder!" she gasped. "More more more!"

He widened his stance and found a way to give her more. But still it wasn't enough. She started grinding on him, not only countering his thrusts but working herself on him, practically wringing him out.

"Oh my fuck," he groaned, trying to hold himself together while she tried to rip him apart. "Baby, you're so hot you're gonna burn me down to the ground."

"That's it, that's it. Just call me baby," she panted. Even in his lust-fogged stupor, he found that funny. Of course she'd prefer a straightforward, standard endearment like that.

"Yes, ma'am," he chuckled. Then he pulled out, flipped her over, and took her from behind.

"Yes! Fuck yes!" she yelled and flung her hands back to grab his arms. "God! Fuck! *Fuck!*" In his arms, her body trembled and twitched.

Suddenly, after a whole goddamn concert of cries and moans, she went utterly silent. Her ass rocked with frenetic purpose against him and then went rigid.

Duncan went rigid, too, digging deep to find the will and the ability to hold on until she was finished.

He didn't quite get there. She was still coming, still rigid and pulsing, when he had to let go. He thrust manically into her, hearing her hyper-stimulated squeals and unable to stop until he hit his own crest and went momentarily blind and mad with pleasure.

When he knew sense again, he was sprawled over her back on the dresser. They were both sweaty and panting. She still quivered. He was still hard inside her.

“Fuck,” was the first word he was able to form. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you?”

Beneath him, Phoebe’s body shook harder. At first, he worried that she was crying, until he saw her face. She was laughing.

“I’m okay. That was fucking perfect. It was damn near *medicinal*.”

He laughed. “Good. Felt pretty good over here, too.”

Easing out of her carefully, Duncan leaned back and helped her turn around. He brushed damp tendrils of golden hair from her face. “Can I stay tonight?”

She nodded and set her fingertips on his lips. “I want you to.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Can we talk now?” Duncan asked.

Phoebe opened her eyes and sighed.

They were in bed together in the dark. She was nestled against him, her head resting on his chest, feeling the warm, weighty comfort of his arm around her, and she'd thought they were heading toward sleep. Just before, with his fingers tracing lazily up and down her arm, she'd felt that beautiful moment right before going under, when her body truly relaxed.

“If it's about the ranch, no.”

“Baby, come on. Let me in. I want to help.”

She liked that he'd given up all the dumb nickname attempts and had started calling her baby. That one really worked for her; its very ordinariness made it special in her mind. Not something that had to be invented, not something that had to be planned, just something that came out on a wave of sincere feeling.

However, she did not like that he'd just used it as a lever, to push her toward something he knew she didn't want.

“I told you. It's too big, too much. It'll fuck with us, and we haven't even started building whatever this is.”

“Yeah, we have,” he said.

She pushed out of his embrace and sat up, turning to face him. The only light in the room was the faint glow through the closed curtains, from the moonlight on a snowy landscape. She didn't move to switch on a lamp; it felt better to have this conversation in shadow.

“Okay. We've started building something. But it's early, we're still pouring the foundation, and I don't want that foundation to be me needing help and you helping. Especially not something like buying part of my fucking ranch. It doesn't

matter if you think I owe you. *I* will feel like I do. I don't want that."

"You'd rather lose the animals?"

"Fuck you."

He sat up and propped his back against the headboard. "Why? Because I said the truth? That's what this is coming down to, right—you will lose your license without help."

"We've got the GoFundMe up, and it's doing pretty well. If it funds, that will cover what we need."

"Good. I hope it works—and I don't even know if the Bulls can help. I just want to ask the question, so you know if there's a backup plan there."

There was something else, a wrongness to bringing in the Bulls, but, though it had scraped at her brain all afternoon and evening, Phoebe hadn't been able to understand why the idea felt wrong.

Now, more relaxed than she had been in days, even in the midst of a disagreement that was growing into an argument, she understood. Saying it would surely inflame the situation, but she had to say it.

"You can't be a backup plan. I can't let the Bulls own the ranch. Not even part of it."

"Why?" In the dim, she knew Duncan was frowning; she could hear it.

"I don't need details to know the Bulls do a lot of illegal shit. I know law types know it, too. So how long before somebody gets a warrant to search the ranch because they know it's connected to the club? When it gets out that the ranch got, like, *raided*, what do you think will happen with my donors? Or my eligibility for grants? Shit, Duncan. Look at the trouble I'm in because I was a little rude to an entitled trophy wife. I can't even guess how bad it could be to be owned by an outlaw MC."

There was more—she wondered whether the club itself would feel she owed them and want to pull her in, to ask her to

hide something for them, or whatever, and make her and the ranch complicit in their outlaw dealings, but she decided not to say that part. Duncan was obviously offended by what she'd already said. He hadn't spoken yet, but his stillness felt active, as if anger vibrated inside his skin.

When his silent non-response continued, Phoebe had to fill it. "I'm sorry to say it like that. I already told you that, personally, I don't care. Any single billionaire has done more evil to the world than all the outlaw bikers in the whole world combined. I saw a doc on Netflix about a wacked-out rich family in like South Carolina, or North Carolina, whichever, that had the whole state's legal system helping them cover up murders and manslaughters and all kinds of bullshit for *generations*, and you know they're not the only ones. The world is fucked, and everything is rigged to benefit the worst possible people, so I don't give a fuck that you're an outlaw. It's not like law does any kind of real good in the world. But the people providing the money to keep this ranch going, keep the animals fed and cared for, they'd give a fuck, I think."

Still Duncan said nothing.

"Say something, please. I don't mean to hurt your feelings."

"You didn't," he finally said, and reached out to set his hand on her knee. "And you're right. I see what you mean. But I want to *help*."

"You are. This helps. Having you at my back, making me feel good in the middle of feeling like shit, making me forget for a while, it all helps. Just knowing you're here helps. Vin and Margot have my back, too, but this is happening to them, too. You, though—you feel like my private, personal thing. It helps."

"Okay." She heard the smile in his voice.

What an interesting man Duncan was. He was an outlaw biker, pretty much on par with if not outranking military men for their reputation for hypermasculinity, but he'd taken her refusal of his help and her critique of his lifestyle—no, of his *identity*, his *world*—calmly, and had even backed down. It

spoke to a confidence so deep-seated it didn't need to be loud or assertive.

There was a line from a book she'd read once, so far back she wasn't sure which book, but the line had stuck with her. Something like 'real power needn't announce itself.' Duncan was showing her what that looked like.

And it was incredibly hot. Also, it was comforting. He felt like a safe haven.

She laid her hand over his on her leg. "Thank you, Duncan. Just being here, you've made this all feel ... survivable."

He shifted their hands and enfolded hers. "Happy to help," he said, that grin chiming through each word. Then he pulled her to him and whispered, "How'd you feel about another round of forgetting your worries?"

Laughing, she settled back on the pillows as he moved on top of her. Now she could see his smile. It made the bandage on his cheek bunch, and she set her fingers lightly on it.

"I wondered if you'd noticed," he said, still smiling.

"The big band-aid on your cheek? The bruises? Yeah, I noticed. I figured you'd tell me about it if you wanted me to know."

His head tilted to the side. "You are a unique woman, you know that?"

"What, you don't know a bunch of brain-damaged vets who run animal rescues?" she tried to joke.

His smile was gone. "It's not about that. I don't know anybody else who's so sure of who they are, so clear about their boundaries—and so respectful of other people's. That's unique."

Phoebe laughed.

"Baby, don't. I'm being serious."

"I know. I'm sorry—and I love the compliment. It's just ... weird that you think I'm sure of who I am. A few years back, I

didn't even remember my own name.”

“Maybe that's why.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe that's why you know yourself so well. You had to learn yourself. Not many people have to do that. We're mostly just a collection of accidents wrapped up in a sausage casing.”

For the first time in a while, Phoebe laughed with true, wholehearted humor. “That image is both hilarious and disgusting.” Settling into quiet again, she added, “But I like the idea that something about what happened to me turned out to be good.”

He brushed her hair from her face. “Everything about who you are is good, and everything that happened made you.”

Oh, she liked this man.

Shifting beneath him until she could feel his cock, hot and ready, pressing against her, she said, “I don't want to talk anymore.”

His only response was to scoot down on the bed, under the covers, and settle between her legs.

Phoebe closed her eyes and began to forget her problems again.

~oOo~

A few evenings later, Phoebe parked her truck at the curb of an intimidatingly large house in Broken Arrow. The wide, three-car driveway was crammed with vehicles: two big SUVs, a crossover of some sort, a Jeep Wrangler, three Harleys, and one bright blue Ford pickup.

Duncan's family had a lot of modes of transportation. And every one of those vehicles was much newer than her Sierra.

Still behind the wheel, she ducked a little and studied the house. A great big suburban spread—not quite a McMansion,

but not all that far off it, in her estimation. There was an array of enormous, two story windows up front, showing a living room ablaze with light and motion. She didn't see Duncan, but she saw two women and two men. One of those men— younger than the other—had a baby in his arms. The baby was probably Duncan's nephew, whose name she couldn't remember, which made the man holding him probably Duncan's brother-in-law. The older of the men was probably Duncan's father.

His dad is Maverick, she began to list in her head, making sure she remembered. Maverick is the vice president of the Bulls. His mom is Jenny. She owns a bar in Tulsa. His older sister is Kelsey. She's a vet here in Broken Arrow, and she's married to Dex, another Bull. He's a club officer, too, I think—and he's the one who was in Afghanistan, right? Little sister is ... Hannah.

Duncan wanted her to meet his family. When he'd asked if she'd come to a family dinner they'd had scheduled, she'd thought sure, why not. That was a thing one did when one started a relationship. Besides, it was only fair; he'd met all the important people in her life, and Margot had subjected him to a third-degree before they'd had each other's full names committed to memory.

But now that she was here, seeing all those people in that huge house, she felt shy and reluctant. It didn't make much sense; she knew how to talk to people she didn't know, how to schmooze and mingle and all that, and she'd been to a few awards ceremonies and charity events where everybody was dressed up. It wasn't like she walked around with mud on her face and grass in her hair. She knew how to be social. Didn't like it, but knew how to do it.

This was weird, though, and she tried to figure out why. It was like it wasn't fancy enough. Yes, she could pretend to be a Disney princess for a night to support the ranch, but that was work—and events like that were so far outside her actual life, her actual personality, they were like bonus Halloweens. She was pretending to be someone else.

Tonight, the whole point of her joining this dinner was so Duncan's family could meet her. She couldn't pretend to be someone else. Duncan wanted them to know *her*.

Actually, she was kind of pretending anyway. Her closet was full of jeans, flannels, hoodies, and t-shirts. She had two formal dresses—one an actual evening gown, which was her prom dress from high school reworked to be a bit less poufy and a lot more grown up, and the other a satin thing Margot called a 'cocktail' dress, which she'd found at a vintage thrift in Tulsa.

Neither of those was appropriate to this evening, and she didn't think she should show up to meet his family in jeans and a flannel shirt, so every piece of her outfit tonight was out of Margot's closet: a slate blue sweater dress, black tights, black knee-high boots, and a black wool winter coat. Margot had dressed her, forced a full face of makeup on her, and done her hair in a fishtail braid that Phoebe would never in a million years be able to do on her own. She was pretty good with regular braids—she'd had long hair in the Army, so a braided bun was her daily style, and she'd braided plenty of horse manes—but a fishtail? On her own head? That was some complicated nonsense. Horse hair was much easier to work.

None of it felt like her. She was cosplaying Margot tonight. Blonde edition.

Well, Margot was better at this shit anyway.

If she didn't get moving, somebody was going to look out those huge windows and notice the ancient pickup parked outside, bringing down the property values. Phoebe grabbed the little black suede purse that matched the boots and held her phone, keys, ID, and debit card, and she carefully collected the plastic pie holder Vin had sent her away with. She got out of the truck and headed up the walk.

As she stepped onto the front porch, the door swung in, and Duncan was there, grinning broad and bright—then he got a look at her, and surprise reshaped his expression.

“Hey, baby,” he said and held out his hand. “You look amazing.”

He was dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt. Though the shirt was cotton and not flannel, it was pretty much his usual look. So ... yeah.

“Thanks. It’s all Margot’s.” She took his hand and let him pull her close for a kiss. But those huge windows were right there, so she backed off before he could turn a hello kiss into something not G-rated.

“Nervous?” he asked with a smirk before letting her go.

“A little,” she answered, downplaying the truth.

He took the pie holder from her. “They don’t bite. Rowdy might jump on you, but I’ll try to get ahead of that.”

“Rowdy is a dog?” That was one of those names that worked as a human nickname, too, so she wanted to be sure.

He laughed. “Yes. A pit bull. But sweet and goofy, not scary.”

“I’ve never actually met a scary pit bull. They’re all sweet and goofy.”

“I’ve met a couple, but it wasn’t their fault. They had scary humans. C’mon in.”

He led her into his family home, so much different from her own.

That bank of two-story windows should have prepared her for a corresponding two-story room, but Phoebe nearly gasped aloud when she stepped into the house. They stood in an entryway that was pretty normal, but it led directly to a huge living room with a vaulted ceiling that was practically like a church. There was even a balcony where the second floor overlooked the room! The fireplace—complete with roaring fire and a massive, carved-wood mantelpiece—was framed with soaring stonework that went straight up to the ceiling.

Jeepers.

The room itself was full of comfortable-looking furniture that seemed simultaneously coordinated and tossed together. Matching leather sofas, the color of baseball gloves, faced each other before the fireplace. A thick-pile, busily patterned

rug lay between them, with a wide coffee table on it. In one corner were two big armchairs, upholstered in a busy fabric, and a round table. By the window was a love seat. Lamps and tables were arranged with the seating, all of it looking like it was planned but also randomly collected. And scattered over it all, like a rainbow confetti bomb had gone off, were about a hundred toys. A little kid in jeans and a bright yellow sweatshirt sat on the floor pushing a yellow Tonka dump truck over the stone hearth and making weird sounds that were probably supposed to be dump-truck noises. That had to be Duncan's niece, Tildy.

Nobody was dressed up at all for this meal. It was jeans and hoodies and casual tops all around. Sigh.

Phoebe noticed all that before Duncan drew the attention of the people in the room to her.

"Hey!" he called over the clamor of play, conversation, and music—oh, there was music, too. Some country-folky singer-songwriter stuff she didn't know.

Everybody turned, and Duncan, still holding her hand, led Phoebe all the way into the room. "I want you to meet my girlfriend, Phoebe Davis. Phoebe, that's my dad walking toward us—Maverick."

"Hey, Phoebe," Maverick said with a smile. "Welcome." When he held out his right hand, she noticed he did so stiffly, and his grip shook a little. It reminded her that he'd been stabbed in California, at the same time that Duncan's face had been injured. She didn't know most of what had happened out there, but he'd volunteered that much.

"Hi, Mr. Helm. It's good to meet you."

"It's Maverick, please. Or just Mav. And it's really good to meet you, too."

"Hi, I'm Kelsey, this reprobate's big sister." A pretty blonde cut in with a big smile and offered her hand.

"Hi, Kelsey. Phoebe."

"I know. He's been talking about you a lot lately."

Phoebe turned to Duncan and found him blushing. “Not that much,” he muttered.

Dex, Kelsey’s husband, and Hannah, Duncan and Kelsey’s baby sister, made their greetings as well. Even Tildy came over and demanded her chance to get in on the action. And the baby’s name was Ethan.

Everybody was warm and friendly and seemed genuinely glad to meet her. Phoebe was a little overwhelmed—the bright, lofty room, the warm fire and homey décor, the friendly people, it all seemed somehow alien.

Why, though? She had a good house of her own. Okay, it was a little, uh, well-worn, but it was her home and she loved it. She had a good family, too. Not a regular one, but Vin and Margot were totally her family, and she loved them. This was simply a bigger, shinier version of the same thing. So why did it feel so strange?

“Would you like something to drink?” Kelsey asked. “Dad’s got a bar over there with all the good booze.”

“Actually, I’m gonna take her in to meet Mom,” Duncan said. “We’ll get something after.”

He took her hand and led her through the room, past a large dining room with a table set for company, and into a large, modern kitchen. A pretty older woman with a shoulder-length auburn bob stood at the counter, shifting what appeared to be a roasted squash medley from a royal-blue Le Creuset into a glass serving dish.

If Phoebe could afford Le Creuset, that shit would be on the table. Fuck the serving dishes.

“Hi!” Duncan’s mom said with a cheerful smile as she set the pan on the stove.

“Mom, this is Phoebe.” There was a different tone in Duncan’s voice as he introduced her to his mother. A hint of little boy bringing a good grade home from school. “Phoebe, this is my mom, Jenny.”

Her mother had been a nightmare as a parent, but her father had been okay. Tried, at least. He’d taught her to respect

her elders, and though, yes, she'd cast some of his notions of who deserved respect aside as ... problematic, it was not in her genetic makeup to call someone so much older than her by their first name. Not on first meeting.

Duncan's mom was wiping her hands on a tea towel, so Phoebe didn't try to do the handshake thing. "Hi, Mrs. Helm. It's good to meet you."

"Just call me Jenny, hon. Please." She hung the towel on the oven-door handle and came over. Before Phoebe could put out her hand, Duncan's mother swaddled her in a snug, warm, lingering hug. "I'm so glad to meet you, Phoebe."

Phoebe relished hugs from people she loved, but she was not a casual hugger. At first, she was tense within Duncan's mother's embrace, but it was so ... what was it? Like, quiet. They'd only just met, but Duncan's mother—Jenny—was hugging her like she was a member of the family. More even than that. She was hugging her like she knew Phoebe needed a hug.

And she wasn't wrong. Phoebe settled in and hugged her back. "Hi, Jenny."

This was an outlaw biker family?

She'd been completely honest with Duncan: she truly didn't care about his outlaw doings, whatever they were, and she truly didn't think anything they were doing outside the law could be anywhere near as horrible as any billionaire or the corporations they headed did on the daily within the law. However, she'd apparently had some preconceptions about what an outlaw biker life looked like, and those preconceptions were not consistent with this family as wholesome as a some TV movie family like the Pearsons or the Bravermans.

"Can I do anything to help?" she asked when they unclenched. "I'm not much of a cook, but I'm very good at taking directions."

"Phoebe brought pie, I think," Duncan interjected, holding up the evidence.

“It’s sour cream apple. I hope it’s not an imposition to bring dessert. My friend Vin is a wizard in the kitchen, and he would have slapped me upside the head if I’d come to dinner empty-handed.”

Jenny took the pie from Duncan. “No, it’s wonderful! Thank you. I’d planned sundaes for dessert, so that’s an easy switch—and an improvement.” She set the holder on the counter and removed the lid. “Oh wow! It’s beautiful. And it smells *amazing*.” Turning back to Phoebe with a smile, she asked, “Vin—he’s one of your roommates, right?”

“I guess that’s technically what he is, but really, we’re closer than that. He’s like my big brother.”

“Right, right. Duncan said you’ve made yourself a found family.” She smiled at her son. “We all understand the beauty of that.”

Suddenly, a riotous burst of noise erupted from across the room. Phoebe looked in that direction and saw a large dog on the other side of a set of French doors.

Jenny laughed. “I don’t think Rowdy can stand another second of being left out.”

“I got him,” Duncan said. “C’mon, babe. I got somebody else for you to meet.”

~oOo~

She met Rowdy, who was, in fact rowdy, and also sweet and goofy. After the dog got his greeting cuddles and settled down, Dex put Ethan in an electric swing, and Kelsey put Tildy in a big high chair, and everybody sat down to dinner. The meal was beautiful, though Vin would probably have called it ‘basic’: grilled chicken breasts, the roasted squash, a tossed salad, and white rolls.

Phoebe thought Vin would have revised his critique upon tasting: the chicken was nicely seasoned, and the roasted squash had a warm, cinnamon tang. It wasn’t basic at all.

There were two bottles of chilled white wine on the table, but only the women drank it. The men drank beer, or whiskey, or just ice water. Since Phoebe had a long drive home, she had only one glass of wine and stuck with water after that.

For most of the meal, the conversation was lively and diverse. There was, of course, the ritual interview of the new person, but Phoebe discovered that Duncan really had talked a lot about her, so all the questions started off like second or third-stage queries. Kelsey was particularly interested in her rescue work—and, surprisingly, so was her husband—and for fifteen or twenty minutes, they were in danger of overwhelming the table with shop talk. It turned out they knew a lot of the same people, and had formed a lot of the same opinions of some of them.

For instance, Kelsey knew Lydia Copperman. It helped immeasurably to see Kelsey, who came off as sweet and gentle, roll her eyes dramatically at the bitch's name. She had not heard that Copperman was trying to blackball Phoebe, but she said she wasn't surprised. Phoebe didn't want to talk about the issue in any depth at this dinner, so she found a way to return the conversation to small talk.

They talked about the club a bit, mostly light gossip, and anecdotes about family, especially about Tildy and Ethan. Phoebe felt comfortable and content. She liked these people, and could feel they liked her.

Eventually, as seconds were disappearing from the plates, Hannah got a turn in the spotlight.

Already, Phoebe had marked the little sister as the family black sheep. For one thing, the way Duncan had spoken of her—with something like affectionate confusion—indicated that he didn't totally get her. Now having met her, Phoebe saw that she was a little off step with the rest of her family. She was obviously loved and included, but still. She was just a little bit different.

Her hair was dyed solid, deep black, and cut so short it was basically a high-and-tight. Her eyebrows were dyed platinum. She was dressed in baggy green chinos that might have been

old uniform pants from the Bulls' Sinclair station—Duncan had come to her straight from work once wearing the same pants—and an enormous black hoodie that probably could have fit her and Duncan inside together. She had several facial piercings: a thick ring through her septum, barbells through the bridge of her nose, and a labret ring. But her ears, as far as Phoebe could see, weren't pierced at all. With all her baggy clothes, Phoebe didn't know how much ink Hannah had, but there were delicate little designs between the first knuckles on all her fingers. And chipped black polish on her bitten-to-the-quick nails.

Hannah Helm looked like she wanted to be noticed for anything but her actual self. With a physical presentation like that, Phoebe would have expected her to be sullen and resentful, but she was a lively participant in the table talk, giving and taking shit, laughing or groaning loudly at jokes, offering opinions, fully engaged with and interested in her family. Phoebe was fascinated by the littlest Helm.

Everything was going great until the meal was over and everybody pitched in to shift the table from the dregs of dinner to the promise of dessert. Phoebe sliced the pie and laid pieces on fresh plates, Duncan dropped scoops of vanilla ice cream beside each slice, and Hannah made a messy avalanche of Reddi-Wip on each one. Then everyone dug in, and Phoebe got a contact high from the effusive praise for Vin's pie.

And then Duncan ruined it all.

“Hey Dad,” he said around a swallow of pie and ice cream. “I've got a question. This trouble that Copperman bitch is causing for Phoebe ...”

Phoebe flung her head around and stared at him. “Duncan, don't.”

He completely ignored her. Didn't even look at her.

“She's not just trying to blackball her. She's also got the health department up Phoebe's ass.”

“Duncan, shut up!”

This time, his eyes darted to her, but he kept going. “She’s got less than a month to raise over a hundred thousand to make repairs or they’re gonna shut her rescue down.”

“It’s nothing!” Phoebe said to everybody else at the table. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve got it handled.” She wanted to add, *And it’s none of Duncan’s fucking business!* but this was his family, and even while mortification and fury flooded her veins, she didn’t want his family not to like her.

“I just want to ask the question, baby,” he said. To his father he said, “I just want to know if there’s anything we can do to help.”

“I fucking told you no,” she muttered back, staring at her plate. The ice cream was melting into a puddle under the pie.

The table had gone completely silent. Phoebe couldn’t lift her head; she knew they were all looking at her. All these people with their perfect lives, their happy family, mothers and fathers adoring their children, snug in this huge, pretty house. They were looking at her and seeing how broken she was.

Broken not merely because she’d been blown up on a rutted Afghan road. Broken also because everything she’d worked for, humble as it was, rested on shifting sand.

She lifted her napkin from her lap and set it on the table. But she couldn’t lift her head.

“Thank you for dinner,” she said to her plate. “I need to go now.”

“Phoebe, wait!” Duncan said and tried to catch her arm.

She snatched it out of his reach. “Fuck you, Duncan,” she snapped quietly, shoving tears back down deep.

“Baby, please—I just want to help. I want to *help* you.”

She ignored him and fled that happy home as quickly as she could.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Oh. My. *God.*” Hannah said, gaping at Duncan. “You are a moron. You’re like the *king* of the morons.”

Duncan ignored her and jumped from his seat. Before he could take more than a step in the direction that Phoebe had *literally run*, his mom said, “Duncan, sit *down.*”

She’d used her mom voice, and even now, years after he’d become an adult, his whole body clenched at the sound.

“Mom, I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. She’s trying to get away from you. Don’t chase. Sit.”

The front door slammed. Phoebe was out of the house. How could he just let her go? She’d think he didn’t care enough to go after her!

Needing another opinion, he looked to his sister. Kelsey’s expression was wide open with shock, but when she saw the question on his face, she nodded and mouthed, *Sit.*

He sat.

“You really fucked up, my guy,” Hannah said with gleeful awe.

“Fuck off, swamp rat,” Duncan muttered. He set his elbows on the table and dropped his head into his hands.

“Maybe I didn’t hear things clear enough,” Dad said, “But I got no idea what just happened.”

Hannah started to answer, but she only got as far as “Dunc —” before Mom slammed her hand on Hannah’s shoulder and cut in to answer herself.

“I think Duncan just crossed a pretty important boundary with Phoebe.”

“Yeah, I got that. I just don’t know what it was about.”

“That’s the boundary, I think, Dad,” Kelsey said. “She didn’t want him to bring up the topic.”

“Mama, I want DOWN!” Tildy roared.

“Got her!” Dex called, with the enthusiasm of a tween yelling *DIBS!* He leapt from his seat and went to his daughter, obviously wanting nothing to do with Duncan’s trouble.

Duncan was just trying to *help*, though. Phoebe needed help. She did *not* have it handled. He understood her reluctance; the Bulls had a reputation that was a hindrance in as many places as it was an asset, but maybe there was a way they could help off the record. Fuck, the club *lived* off the record. But he wasn’t high enough in the hierarchy, nor long enough in a patch, to know on his own what options there were, if any. *He had to ask the question.*

“She’s in real trouble. She could lose her life’s work in a few weeks. I just want to know if there’s a way we can help her.”

“It sounds like you already told her that, and she told you no,” Kelsey said. Dex had Tildy out of her high chair and hightailed it into the kitchen to clean her up.

Duncan nodded in response to his sister’s observation. “She did. She says she doesn’t want that much help from me, or the club, because it could fuck things up between us. She’ll feel like she owes me, and that will screw up the power between us, or something like that. But it’s really bad. She could lose *everything*. It’s so frustrating that she won’t even consider—”

“You’ve known this girl a month, is that right?” Dad asked, speaking over him.

“A little more than that,” Duncan corrected. “I really like her, Dad.”

Dad smiled. “I know. I like her, too. But you can’t force your idea of help on her, son. You have to listen to what she says she wants. We’re talking about *her* life here. A life she’s been living a lot longer than you’ve known about.”

A strange, strangled laugh came from the direction of Mom’s chair, and Duncan looked that way. Mom was staring at Dad with a weary, deeply ironic twist to her mouth. “That is

a lesson your father learned the hardest possible way, Dunc. Trust me when I tell you.”

Duncan looked back to his father, who was smiling sheepishly at Mom.

Had he ever seen his father look sheepish before?

“What’s that mean?” he asked.

Dad was the one who answered. Before he did, he reached over and grabbed Kelsey’s hand. “You all know why I went away, back before Mom and me were married. When she was pregnant with Kelsey.”

“Yeah. Mom’s dad”—Duncan had never thought of that awful man as his grandfather—“was abusive. He beat her up when she was pregnant with Kelse, and you went for him and nearly killed him with your bare hands.”

Despite the pain and danger for Mom and Kelsey, despite the hard years Dad had done in McAlester for aggravated assault, Duncan loved that story. It showed exactly who Dad was: someone who would do anything to protect and avenge the people he loved. That was a formative story in Duncan’s life. A role-model story.

“What’s that got to do with this?” he asked, ready to defend that story and his attachment to it.

Dad sighed. “I guess a part we don’t talk about so much is that Mom did not want me going after him. She wanted to handle it herself, and I didn’t listen. I thought she was too soft on the guy, and I wanted to kill him for hurting her.”

“Of course you did!” Duncan said. “He deserved it.”

“I agree,” Dad said. “But your mother didn’t deserve what happened because I did what *I* thought was right. I went away for years, son. I was ready to pay that price when I went for him, but because I did, Mom was alone in the world when she had Kelsey. And I didn’t kill Earl, I only broke him. When his insurance ran out, he had to go back home, and your mom had an infant and an abusive father I’d made a vegetable to take care of. So what I really did was fuck up her life and put myself out of reach to be there for her—and for Kelse. When I

finally came home, I had a lot of making up to do. And a lot of work to figure out how to take care of my family without bulldozing everybody under my will.”

“Well, that explains a lot,” Hannah muttered. Duncan gave her a sharp look, and she gave him an *Eat glass, asshole*, look back, but nobody else seemed to have even noticed her snarky comment.

“I love you,” Mom said to Dad, her quiet voice traveling the length of the table like a waft of spring air.

“That’s six,” Dad said, his eyes locked with hers.

They had a weird thing they’d always done, between them and with the kids, where they counted each day’s ‘I love you.’ Duncan thought it was one of those cringey-cutesy things parents did. He liked it because it was such a Helm Family Thing, but he’d be embarrassed to ever try to do it with someone else.

“You are so much like your father, Duncan,” Mom said, her tone softer but back to Mom Voice. “In all the wonderful ways, and the frustrating ways as well. I thought we covered all this while you were growing up, but apparently nature overcomes nurture. So let’s try again. Look me in the eyes right now.”

Duncan did.

She leaned on the table, over the crumbled remains of the pie, and stared hard at him with eyes he’d inherited, vivid light green, like jade. Girls fell all over themselves squeeing about his eyes, but to him they were just the things he looked out of. He never thought about the color as pretty unless he was looking at his mom. Her eyes were beautiful.

“You don’t always know better,” she said, in a gentler version of the lecturing tone he knew so well. “And where someone else’s life is concerned, it doesn’t matter if you *do* know better, not unless you’ve been invited to help or give an opinion. No means no not just in sex but in life. You *know* this, honey.”

“I’m not trying to force anything on her. I just want her to know all the options she has, and I honestly don’t know if we can do anything to help. I had to ask. The whole reason I asked tonight is because she was here. I didn’t want to sneak about it.”

“Yep, king of the morons,” Hannah said. She’d been mostly quiet, avidly soaking up the conversation, but as usual, she was only there to troll.

Generally, Duncan’s feelings about his much younger sister were tolerant affection and a spectator’s enjoyment of her antics. He was older enough that they’d never squabbled over toys or attention, or whatever else siblings usually fought about. He’d thought of himself as a protector and sometimes a mentor for her. Not until Hannah had evidenced a sarcastic, jaded streak worthy of Johnny Rotten had they ever really argued, and even then, he enjoyed her watch-the-world-burn takes most of the time.

Not tonight, however. “Fuck *off*, you little alien freak.”

She tried to look like the insult had bounced off her, but Duncan saw where it had hit.

“Hey,” she threw back. “Don’t come for me because you’re too poisoned with testosterone to respect the woman you’re supposed to love.”

Love? Not yet. They were still getting to know each other; it was far too early to think of love. But when Duncan tried to say that aloud, the words wouldn’t come.

“I respect her,” he managed instead. “I’m in awe of her.”

Duncan’s head had become a jumble of obscure thoughts and half-formed ideas, like a mud-wrestling pit, with notions he only hoped he understood popping up randomly from the morass.

He hated all the attention on him now. He felt guilty, and also defensive, about bringing the ranch up at dinner. He felt guilty and anxious that he was just sitting here while Phoebe fled back to Checotah, their trouble unresolved.

Fuck, what if her leaving him tonight meant that she was leaving him *period*?

That thought set loose another volley of worries and thoughts he couldn't quite get control of.

Of *course* he respected her. He *was* in awe of her. Phoebe had survived a whole lifetime of shit already, and despite it all she was strong and warm-hearted and really knew who she was and what she wanted. He couldn't say the same about himself. For all his cocksure sense of his own toughness, for all the badassery that came with the Bull on his back, he'd never really been tested. California was the closest he'd come, but it didn't feel nearly the same as what she'd overcome. Phoebe made him want to be more than he was.

Maybe he did love her. If not, maybe he could. If given the chance.

He looked to his mom. "How do I fix it?"

~oOo~

I was way out of line and I'm sorry. Can we talk?

More than an hour later, dinner was cleaned up, Kelsey and Dex had taken their kids home, Hannah was up in her room, and Mom and Dad were somewhere in the house together. Duncan sat on a sofa in the living room, Rowdy stretched out on his back beside him, snoring.

He stared at his phone, waiting for something to happen. Mom had advised him, with Kelsey's agreement, that all he should do was send a short, clear text. No defense, no rationale, nothing but an apology. He'd followed their counsel, adding only the request to talk.

So far, more than an hour after she'd fled the house, his text remained the last in their thread.

"You okay, son?"

Duncan looked over his shoulder at his father. “I really fucked up, didn’t I?”

Dad came into the room and had a seat on the sofa facing the one Duncan and Rowdy were hogging. The dog lifted his head and wagged his tail, then dropped back into his hedonistic stupor.

“Seems like it. Also seems like Phoebe really means something to you.”

“I think she does.” He set his phone screen-down on the cushion beside him. “It’s kind of hit me like a truck. I didn’t see her coming at all, and now ... I don’t know. I feel ... scared right now.”

“Scared of loving her, or scared of losing her?”

Duncan took a few beats to understand the question and try to find the true answer. “Both, I think.” When Dad stayed quiet, Duncan focused on the dying fire and tried to explain himself. “I liked my life. I knew what I wanted it to be. I had a plan, and I liked where I thought I was headed. I thought I knew myself, but now that’s all turned upside down.”

“Knowing Phoebe did all that?”

As if the question were a password to something locked in his head, Duncan suddenly saw the full truth. “Not just her. I think ... I’ve felt out of sync since Eureka. That whole deal fucked with me, Dad. We killed so many men who barely even *knew* us. I know they were bad men, the wrong kind of outlaws, but we didn’t kill them because they were rapists or wife-beaters or child molesters or whatever the fuck they were. We killed them because we wanted their house. It doesn’t feel right. I guess I’m trying to figure out who the Bulls are, and who that means I am.”

Duncan fell quiet because he’d spoken his thoughts, and also because those thoughts had shocked him. Dad didn’t reply right away; he let the silence go on so long, Duncan worried that he’d said something very wrong.

When he did speak, Dad said, “I’m so damn proud of you, Dunc.” He tapped his chest with a loose fist. “*So* proud.”

It felt good to hear, and was a great relief, but Duncan didn't really understand what it had to do with what he'd confessed.

Dad didn't make him wait to clear that up. "There are a lot of things the club has done, and will do, that don't feel right to me. That's been true almost as long as I've sat at that table. I struggled most of my years as a Bull with how far over the line we've gone. I fucking hate some of the things we've done as a club, and some of the things I've done in the name of the club."

He sat forward and stared hard across the coffee table. The softening glow of the fire drew the scars on his face in shadows. "I once killed an innocent kid, about your age, whose only crime was being related to a man we needed to hurt. I did that because D told me it had to be done. He told me he wanted me to do it because the man we needed to hurt had hurt me. And that was true. I would have enjoyed killing *that* motherfucker. But I hated killing the kid, it still fucks with me all these years later, and I'm pretty sure the real reason D had me do it was to pull me back in line and make sure I stayed there."

Dad had told Duncan a lot about his years as a Bull. When he was trying to talk him out of prospecting, he'd pretty much dumped every bad thing he could think of on Duncan's head, trying to dissuade him from wanting a patch. But these were new details, never shared before. And he was talking about Grampa D, the sweet (and also crabby) old man whom Duncan had only ever known as a grandfather who would listen to any kid's story, no matter how long and rambling it was, like it was the most fascinating thing he'd ever heard, and who loved to let kids 'work' with him, building goofy toys out of random parts.

Duncan loved Grampa and couldn't imagine him manipulating a situation like that. Eight, on the other hand, he could totally see.

He didn't know what to say, so he said nothing.

Dad wasn't done, anyway. "I'm still wearing the Bull. After that, after the shit that went down that got Dane killed, after we started muling drugs, I hated all of it, and I fought to stop it. Sometimes it felt like I fought the whole table. There were times when I wanted out. But even with all that, I'm still wearing the Bull. When it comes down to it, leaving the Bull behind would mean leaving myself behind. So I will die in this kutte. Remember the talk we had in California about this? Do you remember what I said?"

Duncan did remember, though it hadn't factored into his feelings since they'd returned home. Now he let himself relive that talk.

"This life isn't honorable. But it's the life we have, so we have to do the best we can and be the best we can be while we live it."

He wasn't sure if he was quoting his father's wisdom, or if he was speaking his own interpretation of it, but Dad was nodding.

"Before anything else, the Bulls are a family. Our family. The way to see through the grime and blood is to remember that this is our family, and hold that knowledge tight. We take care of our family, whatever that means. But within that, be the best version of yourself. Take care of the people you love," Dad said. "Treat all people with respect, unless they've shown you they don't deserve it. Be loyal to the people who are loyal to you, and fight to keep your world strong and whole. That's all anybody can do, Dunc. We just do it over here on the dark side."

"Can I bring somebody like Phoebe into this life?" Duncan asked.

"It's not your call. It's hers. So if you want that, you ask, and you accept the answer she gives you. The hardest lesson of my life has been trying to accept that I can't make other people's choices, even when I'm trying to protect them." Dad grinned. "You taught me that yourself. And your mom, and your sisters."

Hannah and Dad were still faced off about her future plans—she wanted to work at the station and be as deep into the Bulls’ world as she could get, and Dad was holding her back with his whole body.

Duncan grinned back at his father. “Hannah would say you haven’t learned the lesson yet.”

“Yeah. And she’s right. It’s hard, son. But maybe it’s time for me to back off there, too.”

“It’s your fault, you know.”

“What is?”

“That we all want to be as deep into the Bulls’ world as we can get. We love you so much, and you gave us this family, this life. It’s a good family, and a good life. I think that’s why Eureka is fucking with my head. I’ve been a patch for years now, but that was the first time we did something that didn’t feel right to me. Maybe I’ve been pushing Phoebe to let me ask the club to help—”

Dad finished his sentence. “Because you need us to do something good. Balance out something that feels wrong to you.”

Duncan nodded, finally seeing it. “Yeah. I think so.”

“The club does a lot of good, Dunc. You know that. We help out in the neighborhood, we do charity work, blood drives, ...”

“Charm patrol,” Duncan said, sounding more dismissive than he’d intended.

“That’s true. It’s good press and good rep, and it makes our dark work easier. But it is also good work. But I don’t think we can help Phoebe, even if she’d want us to. Buy into her ranch? That’s got to be a huge chunk of money.”

“About a hundred thousand.”

Dad shook his head. “Caleb has a fuller handle on the finances, but I know enough to know taking that much money out of the club chest would hurt us. You could try to get the patches to throw in themselves from their personal funds. But I

don't think it would be good for the ranch to have us involved, anyway. When we get involved with charity work, it's one-off donations or volunteer stuff. Charities don't want us on their rosters—that would tarnish their rep. Dropping that kind of money, it would be almost impossible for her to keep us out of it, and it might put a red flag right on her roof. If the Feds come sniffing around again, they might go for her, too. If there's a way to *scare off* this woman who's after her—”

“Her husband is the CEO of Copperman Resource Management. I did some googling, and he's a heavy hitter, with fingers in politics all over the state.” His father didn't need to tell him that would be too much a risk for the club to undertake. They had good relationships with law and government types throughout the state, but the balance was fragile.

Dad sighed. “I don't see what we can do, other than make sure she's safe if it does all go south on her.”

Duncan sighed, too. “Fuck.”

Then his phone vibrated against his leg. He picked it up and read the short text on the lock screen:

We can talk.

“It's Phoebe. She'll talk.” He felt like his heart was beating for the first time since she'd left.

Dad slapped his knees and stood up. “Good. I hope you work this out. If you want a little bit more advice from me, let this drop, son. She told you she doesn't want the club's help in this. I don't think we can help her the way she needs, anyway. So I think you should let it drop right here.”

“I will,” Duncan said and meant it.

~oOo~

Phoebe opened the door and stood there, arms crossed. She didn't say a word; she didn't invite him in. She wore baggie, blue flannel pajama bottoms and a big, tattered brown hoodie

with the words *Yes, I smell like a HORSE. No, I don't consider that a problem* emblazoned across the front. Her hair was still in that pretty braid from dinner, but it had loosened considerably since then. Her makeup was washed away.

Her eyes were puffy and red-rimmed. She'd been crying. Duncan had made her cry.

"I'm sorry," he said. The impulse was on him to say more, to explain, to assure her he'd meant to help, that he hadn't been trying to be a manipulative dick, but he wrestled it into submission and simply stood there, waiting for her to forgive him.

"You said you wanted to talk," she finally said. "If that's what you wanted to say, you already said it in text."

"I don't want to bury the apology until you accept it," he explained, wondering if that was an okay thing to say.

"And if I don't accept it?"

How could she not? He meant it sincerely—he knew he'd fucked up. What reason, then, could she have not to accept it? What more did she want?

No means no not just in sex but in life, his mother had said.

He understood consent. He thought he had, at least. But Phoebe had told him she didn't want the club's help. He'd thought he'd found a loophole, asking Dad at home, and he'd thought doing it while she was there meant he was being aboveboard.

But that had just been him trying to get his way despite what she wanted, wasn't it? And feeling entitled to being forgiven was pretty much the same thing, wasn't it?

Fuck.

Duncan studied her lovely, vulnerable hazel eyes, swollen and sore because of something he'd done. Because he hadn't respected her wishes about something that was truly not his business. His good intentions didn't matter.

"If you don't accept my apology, then there's not much more to talk about. I'll go and leave you be."

“Is that what you want?” she asked.

God no. He was actually afraid that she was done with him.

His feelings for her had come up on him so damn fast. A month ago, he’d been content with his single life, loving the freedom and variety. Now he felt like something would get ripped out of him if this one woman didn’t want him.

“No,” he answered, working to keep his voice steady. “But right now, what I want isn’t important. I’m interested in what you want.”

She stood where she was, arms still crossed, and stared at him like she was trying to dig into his brain through his eyes and find all the asshole parts in there.

When she spoke, her voice was low. “I didn’t think you’d do that—what you did at dinner.”

“I’m sorry.” Again he quashed the urge to explain. Really, what was there to explain? She knew why he’d done it. She could probably figure out why he’d done it the way he had. Trying to explain something she already knew would just be him putting words into the air for their own sake.

“No. I mean I *trusted* you not to do something like that. I don’t trust easily.”

Fuck. “I really am sorry.”

Her head canted slightly to the side, and Duncan almost thought he caught a glimpse of a smile. “How many times are you going to say that?”

“As many times as you need to hear it.”

A sharp gust of frosty wind kicked up right then, sending ancient leaves swirling up from the porch floor and blowing the loose strands of Phoebe’s hair back. She shivered and closed the door a little, so its opening wasn’t much wider than her shoulders.

Cold and anxious, beginning to feel impatient, Duncan almost stepped up onto the threshold, ready to suggest they continue this inside, but, again, he throttled the urge.

“I don’t know if I can explain how bad that felt, Duncan,” Phoebe said. “You betrayed my trust, and you made me feel small and weak. And you did it while I was meeting your family for the first time. That’s their first impression of me.”

“If it helps, they were all really impressed by you, and every one of them is Team Phoebe right now.” Rather than step in uninvited, Duncan offered his hand, palm up. “I am very sorry, and I will try never to do anything like it again.”

She’d focused on his hand, but now her eyes snapped up to his. “You’ll *try*?”

He smiled a little. “Well, obviously I’m deeply flawed. Feels fake and cheap to swear I won’t ever fuck up again.”

Phoebe turned her attention again to his outstretched hand. She set hers on it.

When he closed his fingers around her hand, she stepped back and pushed the door open. “You can come in.”

Relief flooding his veins and making his limbs tingle, Duncan went into Phoebe’s home.

Though it wasn’t that late, not even eleven o’clock, the house was dim and quiet. The living room was dark, and only the glow of the light over the sink illuminated the kitchen. He caught the soft sounds of a television coming from the back of the house, where Vin’s room was.

He turned back as she closed the door. “I know we need to talk, and I want to, but right now, I really just want to hold you for a minute.”

She leaned back on the door and shook her head. “We don’t need to talk about it anymore. I forgive you, and I don’t want to dissect it over and over again. It seems like you get it.”

“I do, and I’m sorry.”

“I know.” She took his hand again. “You can stop apologizing now. I don’t need more.”

“I think I’m falling in love with you,” he said—and then could have torn his stupid mouth clean off his face.

Holy shit, what was he doing?! It was like he'd been sitting on so many words trying to apologize properly that the second he relaxed a bunch came rushing up to the top—and not the words he'd been wrestling with all this time. Not any attempted explanations for his fuckup. Instead, something much, much worse.

It wasn't a lie, but *fuck*, he wasn't ready to put that out in the world—and she couldn't possibly be ready for it to be out. He'd just fucked up, and now he was dropping love bombs? She'd think he was trying to manipulate her again.

“I don't know what to say to that,” she said.

Not words a guy who'd just dropped the L-word for the first time in his life wanted to hear, but certainly words that fit the situation.

“I know. I'm sorry. I don't know why those words came out. I promise I don't mean some kind of ... I don't know, emotional blackmail. I just ... my head's so *loud* tonight. It's like a demonic rave in here.”

“Are you saying they're not true?”

Duncan frowned. Did she *want* him to fall in love with her? Or had she discovered something that could humiliate him and get some revenge for what he'd done?

No. Phoebe wasn't a game-player. And neither was he.

“They're true. But they were too early.”

“Yes, they were.” She stepped to him and looked up to meet his eyes. “But when I said I trusted you, and I don't trust easily, I was saying something similar. That's why tonight hurt so much.”

Duncan didn't know how to understand the sensation coursing through his body, like someone had shoved a Roman candle in his chest, and it was going off in all directions. It hurt, but it felt *great*, too.

He finally put his hands on her, sliding his fingers into her hair. “I don't ever want to hurt you again,” he murmured.

She smiled, bright and sweet. Her hands came up, slid over his shoulders and around his neck.

Duncan bent low and kissed her, and all his doubts and worries sloughed from his back. He didn't know why Phoebe had changed so much about what he wanted in his life, but he knew the changes were right. When he had her in his arms like this, he could feel that it was right.

She wrapped herself more tightly around him and whispered, "Let's go upstairs," against his lips.

He gathered her into his hands and lifted her up. She slung her legs around his hips.

Still kissing her, Duncan turned and made his way to the stairs.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“This is damn good, Dunc,” Vin said as he shoveled into his mouth the last of his serving of Duncan’s breakfast casserole.

“It really is,” said Margot, “and if you start cooking all the time like this, I might actually get an ass. With all this cheese and potatoes, there’s got to be like two hundred calories in each *bite*.”

Grinning, his cheeks pinked with pride, Duncan shrugged. “Aren’t you the one that did ten minutes the other night on how stupid counting calories is?”

Margot shrugged back. “I’m not counting, just observing.”

Duncan turned to Phoebe. “What do you think, babe?”

For almost a month now, Duncan had spent so much time at the ranch he was practically a resident. Pretty much the only nights he didn’t spend here were after he’d worked the last shift at the station, or was doing some kind of work for the Bulls that either had him working late or had him out of town. This morning, a Saturday bright and fresh with coming spring, he had to be at the station at ten, but he’d woken with a crazy amount of energy and high spirits and announced that he was going to make breakfast.

He’d insisted several times that he knew how to cook, but this was the first evidence. And it was as good as Vin and Margot declared. Eggs, sausage, cheese, hash browns, and enough spices that even Vin was satisfied. It would be on nobody’s heart-healthy or weight-loss plan, but that was why it was so good.

Phoebe slipped a cheesy forkful into her mouth and chewed. “I think my guy is the complete package.”

“Damn straight.” He leaned over and kissed her.

“Gross! Get a room!” Margot teased.

It was more than the new burst of spring weather that had them all in a good mood this morning: they’d also gotten some

good news. The GoFundMe and other fundraising efforts had raised over eighty-thousand dollars, and they'd been able to pay for all the animals to get checked over by the state-appointed vet, and get the road graded, and repair and seal the corral fence. But the good news they'd gotten this morning was the best news: Duncan's father had given them the name of a roofer with ties to the Brazen Bulls. Toby Keller was going to do the roof at a discount as a favor to Maverick (and Duncan), and he'd agreed to start the job with fifty-percent down and work out a payment plan for the balance.

That was the kind of help Phoebe could feel comfortable taking from the Bulls—with the bonus of making Duncan happy by letting him be involved.

Eighty thousand dollars was enough to cover all the work they'd gotten done and the fifty-percent down on the roof. They had almost a week left before the county's deadline; there was a chance the stable roof would be finished by then. At the very least, it would be close and obviously underway.

The trouble wasn't behind them just yet, but it was no longer looming over their heads like a slaving beast. And it was a gorgeous spring Saturday. Who could be in a bad mood on a day like this?

"When are the adopters due?" Duncan asked as he stood from the table, gathering up the emptied plates.

"Noon-ish," Phoebe sighed. That was the one grey cloud in today's sky: George, a sweet bay gelding whom she'd rehabilitated from founder, and then trained as a roping horse, and who had lived on the ranch for nearly a year, was getting adopted today. The family was a farm family from around Oklahoma City. They had a fifteen-year-old girl, Izzie, who'd been riding competitively since Pee-Wee age and wanted to learn roping. George had the basics, and a gentle, cooperative temperament, so it was a good match. Izzie and her dad had been out to the ranch twice to see him; today they were coming with their trailer.

Phoebe was happy about it, of course. Ragamuffin was a rescue ranch, not a hoarding situation. Sometimes she kept an

animal she'd rescued, either because they didn't have the kind of personality that most people could be patient with and was thus a likely return (Daisy, her chestnut miniature mare, was an absolute bitch to half the animals on the ranch and every human but Phoebe) or because they had hard-to-manage health issues (Klaxon had digestive issues that required an array of meds, including weekly suppository insertions, and even with all that, about twice a year he ended up in a sling, on IV meds for a week), or because she'd simply fallen too deeply in love to give them up (Titan, Maple, and Puff). But most of the animals she brought to the ranch, she intended to find other homes for, and every successful adoption was cause for celebration.

And also tears. She loved every single animal as one of her own babies, even if she was only their temporary mama. It was hard to say goodbye. But she tried to hold the sad back until the new family was on their way home and out of sight.

Duncan had witnessed this happysad emotional seesaw a few days earlier, when all three of the goats had been adopted into a brush herd. Brush herds were organic, environmentally friendly lawnmowers, brought onto large stretches of wild growth, like vacant lots or unsown fields, and turned loose to munch all day and bring the growth down to a few inches. If the herder was a good person and treated the goats well, it was a pretty sweet life, hanging out with the homies and eating all day.

Great for Derek, Jared, and Brad (who very likely would never be called those names again), but sad for Phoebe—and also for Puff, who'd wandered around the pasture for two days, bleating for her buds. Eventually the alpacas distracted her, and now she followed them around. The alpacas were a bit confused by her attention, but they were confused by pretty much everything. Phoebe was going to put the word out that she was particularly interested in fostering any sheep or goats.

“Maple is really going to miss George,” she said aloud. “Maybe I should shift Smoky and Junie's stalls, and see if Smoke and Maple will bond.”

“Smoke likes Titan, though,” Duncan pointed out. “Won’t he be sad not to share a wall with him?”

“And Selkie will pitch a fit if Junie’s not close.” Margot added.

“Selkie is a terrible influence on the other mares,” Phoebe countered. “She’s like Regina George, and Junie and Merry are the Plastics. A little separation there might not be a bad thing.”

Margot laughed. “We need an Elle Woods mare. All positivity and can-do attitude.”

“Bend and SNAP!” Phoebe replied, flipping her head dramatically, and they both broke into giggles.

“Okay,” Duncan said and kissed the top of her head. “Chick hilarity I don’t get is my sign to GTFO.”

“Oh sure, abandon a brother in the soup,” Vin complained theatrically. “Whatever happened to leave no one behind?”

Duncan made an exaggerated shrug. “Sorry, Vin. I’ll pour one out for you, though. See y’all later.”

As he headed toward the hall, Phoebe stood. “Wait up. I’ll walk out with you.”

He smiled and held out his hand.

Holding hands, they walked out to the yard, to Duncan’s big black Harley. The gas tank had an elaborate painting of a furious bull charging through flames. The art was airbrush-style, and the colors were so vivid they reminded Phoebe of the Day-Glo paint they used in high school to make signs for pep rallies and football games.

Duncan was not a flashy guy, but that artwork screamed that he was a Brazen Bull.

He grabbed her hips and pulled her close. “Call me after George goes home,” he said as he lowered his head to hers. “A call, not a text. I want to see you’re okay.”

“I will be okay, but I will call.”

He smiled. “Good. I love you.”

“I love you,” she echoed, holding him close.

~oOo~

Phoebe leaned on the fence and watched Izzie and George trot around the corral. A ride hadn't been on the agenda for today, but Izzie had asked, and Phoebe hadn't seen a reason to deny her.

Izzie's dad stood beside her. “I was on Facebook, looking at the pictures you posted when you brought George here. I can't believe that beautiful guy there is the same horse. You do good work, Phoebe.”

“Thanks.”

“It'd be a damn shame if you lost this. I'm gonna put some money in your GoFundMe. I can't spare too much, but I'll help as much as I can.”

She turned to smile at Izzie's dad. “Thank you, Mr. Powell. You know, we got some good news the other day. We got a good deal on the roof, so we're close to raising all the money we should need. I don't want you to do anything that'll hurt you, but we really appreciate the help. Truly.”

He gave her a half-smile and touched the brim of his hat, good-ol'-boy style.

When Izzie and George were done with their ride, Phoebe let Izzie help her unsaddle him and give him a quick brushing. Then, after some treats for George and the usual box of adoption goodies for Izzie (a lot of free samples, a small photo album, George's halter and lead, and his favorite brush), Phoebe led him into the trailer. There, alone with him for the last time, she rested her head on his nose and let the first lash of loss thread through her.

“You're a good boy, Georgie Porgie. Izzie's gonna love you so hard.”

George, who enjoyed a good cuddle, pushed closer. He nickered softly, as if he'd understood her words.

She kissed him and stepped away as he dropped his nose into the hay box.

As she stepped out of the trailer, Izzie slammed into her and threw her arms around her. “Thank you so *much*, Miss Phoebe! I love him so *much*! I promise I will make him happy every day!”

Remembering a version of herself that had been a lot like Izzie, Phoebe hugged the girl back. “I know you will. And I hope the two of you win lots of roping trophies!”

~oOo~

After the Powells left, Phoebe wiped her face and headed back to the stable. Mickey was off today, but the work was the same seven days a week. Often, Margot helped out on Mickey’s days off, or, lately, Duncan, but Duncan had a shift at the service station, and Margot was at Ty’s office, catching up on busy work she’d gotten behind on while she’d focused on the ranch troubles.

So Phoebe was mucking stalls on her own this afternoon. Yay.

As she headed back to the stable with the empty wheelbarrow, having carted out a load of manure to the composting bin, a flash of light caught her eye. She looked toward the house and saw a black Land Rover pulling up to it.

Dropping the wheelbarrow where she was, she headed toward the house. She’d just pushed her work gloves into a back pocket of her jeans when the driver of the car got out and stood up—and Phoebe stopped dead in her tracks.

Lydia Copperman.

Feeling like a coward and a sneak, Phoebe ducked behind the stable’s propane tank. She pulled her phone out and texted Vin: *RICHBITCH JUST SHOWED UP. HURRY AND LOCK THE DOOR. DON’T ANSWER IT!*

While her phone was in her hand, she texted Margot, too: *COPPERMAN JUST SHOWED UP HERE!!!*

Margot returned within seconds: *OMG! Do NOT talk to her about ANYTHING.*

I won't, Phoebe wrote back.

When Copperman finally headed up the porch steps toward the front door, Phoebe used the distraction to hurry back into the stable. This was ridiculous and she knew it; she couldn't hide all day. For one thing, her truck was parked right there, a few feet from the Land Rover, and next to Vin's truck. They were obviously home. Surely when she couldn't get an answer at the house, Copperman would come down to the stable looking for her.

But she needed a few minutes to figure out how to deal with this completely unexpected development. Why was the woman here *now*?

The five minutes or so it took Copperman to make her way to the stable seemed a year at least. Phoebe was in the tack room, cleaning the saddle George had used, trying to seem busy and focused.

"Phoebe?" Copperman called, and Phoebe shuddered at the sound of that voice. "Phoebe Davis! Are you in here?"

With a deep, full breath for strength, Phoebe stepped out of the tack room and went to the corner, where she could see the stalls. She was in about the same place she'd watched Mrs. Princess Oilman snark about the ranch, back in January. This time, however, she'd left her nicer friend behind.

She was dressed much the same, like a Monied Horsewoman—jodhpurs, pussy-bow blouse, fitted riding jacket. Her perfectly dyed blonde hair was perfectly styled in a sleek French twist.

Phoebe didn't speak until the woman finally saw her and they made eye contact.

"There you are!" Copperman's tone was of the 'talking to the help' genre.

Phoebe had to be careful. Lydia Copperman had caused weeks of trouble and worry at the Ragamuffin, all because Phoebe hadn't shown her the respect she believed she deserved. They were only just crawling out from under that mess, and they weren't in the clear yet. It would be beyond foolish to get cocky and spin this woman up all over again.

But oh, how she wanted to make Lydia Copperman feel small.

She couldn't. Too much at stake. The roof wasn't done, the deciding inspection hadn't happened; there was mischief Copperman could still wreak.

"Mrs. Copperman. What are you doing here?" She kept her voice completely calm, and she did not move any closer to that viper.

Copperman moved closer to her. She came to the intersection of the aisles and stopped at the corner of the end stall. She gave the manicure on her right hand an affected look and said, "I've heard you've been having some trouble, and I think I can help. I wonder if you have anything to say to me that might induce me to help you."

Phoebe had been raised by a bitter, gaslighting, passive-aggressive woman who'd resented everything about her life, including the child who had 'trapped' her in that life. She was fluent in the language of contemptuous misdirection, and she understood exactly what Copperman was doing here.

She knew she'd been unable to turn away most of the ranch's donors, and she'd also heard that Phoebe was on her way to sorting out the inspections as well. Lydia Copperman understood that her scheme was failing, so she'd shown up here to try to flex some muscle while she still had it.

She thought she could bully Phoebe to an apology.

Phoebe had to be careful, but the thought of apologizing to this woman was more vile now than ever before. She understood that she could maybe make the whole thing go away by simply giving this bitch what she wanted, just a few words she wouldn't mean, and maybe UberKaren would go

back to her mansion and leave them alone. Why was the thought so *poisonous*?

A slight change in the light around Phoebe's peripheral vision caught her attention, and she slid her eyes toward the main door.

Vin had come into the stable. He had his phone held up like he was taking video.

He *was* taking video.

Copperman's attention was locked on Phoebe; she had not noticed Vin's entry.

Phoebe made a quick, instinctive, probably impulsive decision. She didn't weigh the risk because she already knew the risk. But she did it anyway.

She strode to Lydia Copperman, with such purpose that the woman actually took a step back. When she was sure they'd both be in the frame of Vin's video, she stopped, about four feet away from her nemesis. Just enough distance to warrant a slight raise of her voice.

From the corner of her eye, she saw that Vin had taken the opportunity to come closer as well.

"I don't know what you think I'd want to say to you, Mrs. Copperman. As I told you the last time you were here, we don't do adoption by drop-in. You have to make an appointment, and there is paperwork, an interview, and a site check we do before we consider an adoption."

She couldn't remember if she actually had told her all that last time, but it didn't matter. The important thing was getting that on video.

It also had the desired effect on Copperman. She stood stiffly, her expression hardening, her eyes becoming glaciers. Phoebe stood in place and stared right back.

Come on, come on, come on, she thought. *Do something. Show yourself.*

And Lydia Copperman finally did.

“Your attitude is terrible,” she snarled. “I know you know who I am.”

Phoebe hoped Vin was getting the dialogue of this scene. “Yes, I do. You told me the last time you were here. You’re Lydia Copperman, wife of Reynolds Copperman, the CEO of Copperman Resource Management. I assume that means you’re wealthy.”

“Yes. Very.” She took two steps toward Phoebe and leaned slightly in—just a hint of threat. “I am also powerful. My husband and I are among the most philanthropic people in the state. We donate *millions* every year. And who are you? Some inbred country fuck who thinks she’s in *charge*? I throw away more money than this place is worth every time I clean out my closet!”

Phoebe said nothing, but she allowed herself half of a smug smirk—which had the precise reaction she’d hoped.

“You unschooled, arrogant little *bitch*! You think siccing the health department on you was bad? There’s much more I can do to you. I know more powerful people than Harry Morgan, I assure you. The governor attends our Christmas party every year! I will drive your two-bit little ‘rescue ranch’ so deep it’ll be a thousand years before anyone unearths a sign you ever *existed*!”

“Oh, I don’t think you’ll be doin’ anything like it, ma’am,” Vin said as he came the rest of the way up the aisle, holding his phone so Copperman couldn’t miss it.

“Who are you?” she asked, eyeing his phone.

“I’m Ervin Abellard. Friend and roommate to Phoebe here.”

Copperman’s eyes bounced frantically inside their sockets. “Did you record me? Without my permission?”

“Oklahoma’s a one-party consent state, ma’am. All’s I need’s one of y’all to be okay with it. How you feel about me recording, Bee?”

“I feel great about it, Vin,” Phoebe answered with a grin. Her voice shook a little; blossoming victory had flooded her

veins with adrenaline. “Did you get anything good?”

“Well, let’s see.” He tucked up close and started the video, canting his phone so all three could see.

The audio was soft, but it was clear. Even better: Phoebe had stood in place, at a distance and shown no hostile or threatening expression or gesture. Copperman, on the other hand, surged forward and got right in Phoebe’s face, and when Vin turned the sound up, every word the woman had snarled was clear.

Now that woman crossed her arms and attempted an unimpressed look. “I don’t know what you think that will do for you,” she huffed.

Vin slipped Phoebe a sly wink. “You know, Bee, I was thinking—what if we put this video on the ranch’s TikTok? I bet it’ll go viral and push the fundraising over the top. People love a David and Goliath story, yeah?”

“Yeah, they do,” Phoebe said, turning a smile on Lydia Copperman. “We can put it on Insta, too. Almost all our donors follow us in one of those places. A lot of big names in Oklahoma philanthropy.” She leaned in close to Copperman, as if she had a secret meant for her alone. “I’m totally going to do it, by the way. I wonder what your friends in high places will think about it. I wonder what the governor will think about you using him to threaten me—and everybody knowing about it. Doesn’t make him look great, either, if you think about it. I’m sure he’ll be happy about that.”

“You insignificant little shit!” Copperman snapped—but she looked scared.

A scared UberKaren was dangerous, too, but Phoebe wasn’t worried. She could see the defeat in the woman’s eyes.

“I can’t let you talk to my friend that way, ma’am,” Vin said. “I’m gonna need you to apologize now.”

Phoebe nearly laughed—but she saw how she could both protect herself and give Lydia Copperman just enough of an out to quell any urge she might have for mutually assured destruction.

It had occurred to her that she might be able to use this moment to get Copperman to pay for the balance of the roof replacement—which would only be fair, considering she'd caused the unnecessary and maliciously nit-picky inspection to happen. But Phoebe decided against it. The Bulls had helped her get a good deal on a new roof, and she could handle it without anything from this woman. That was the more powerful feeling.

No, she needed only one thing from this entitled bitch.

“I don't need an apology. You wouldn't mean it any more than I would, and I honestly don't give a fuck if you're sorry. I just need you to go away and stay out of my life, and out of my way.”

“That's all?” Copperman asked warily—and Phoebe grinned. She really had this woman by the nape, didn't she?

“That's all. Get the fuck out of my life and stay the fuck out of my way.”

Copperman sucked in a deep breath and let it out. “And the video?”

“Oh, I'm keeping it. It's insurance. If you call off your dogs at the health department, and you stay away from me and the ranch, leave my donors alone, I won't post it. But if you make one more move to hurt me, ever, I will put this video everywhere I can think of.”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

Phoebe's grin grew so wide her cheeks ached. “You don't. You're gonna have to trust me anyway.”

It would have, *should* have, ended right there. Lydia Copperman should have taken her L and slunk off to her two-hundred-thousand-dollar SUV and hurried back to where she belonged.

Instead, in an apparent fit of desperation, she lunged at Vin, her hands thrown forward like talons, and tried to wrest the phone from him.

Vin tried to simultaneously duck and swing out of her way, but his prosthetic leg didn't have that kind of agility. It folded, and he fell, knocking his head on a stall door as he went down.

Stunned, Phoebe watched all that happen as if in slow motion. It had been a single second, two at the most, but it seemed to have taken full minutes.

Vin landed, then lay still. The blow to his head had knocked him out. His phone slipped from his hand and skidded a few inches away on the concrete floor of the main aisle.

Copperman dived for it, and Phoebe dived after her. She grabbed that bitch by the French twist and yanked her backward. Copperman screamed and swung around, her fingers hooked like claws again, and Phoebe just barely ducked as those claws swept across her cheek, missing her eye by the width of an eyelash.

Then they were both in the fight of their lives, rolling around on the floor, punching, pulling, screaming, grunting. Phoebe was trained in hand-to-hand combat, but Copperman was surprisingly strong. Her desperation had turned her into an animal.

But Phoebe was desperate, too, and Vin was hurt. Lydia Copperman had hurt him. She was the enemy.

The stable faded away, and Phoebe was rolling around in hot sand. Gunfire and explosions erupted around her. She was a soldier in battle, with fallen comrades all around her, and she fought with that fire.

Eventually, the desert was satisfied and receded from her consciousness. She was in the stable again, fighting Lydia Copperman. She realized that she wasn't getting hit back anymore, and her senses fell into place. She stopped and reared back, scooting out of the field of engagement until her back slammed up against a stall door.

Lydia Copperman lay on the stable floor, unconscious. Her face was a bloody, swollen mess. Phoebe's gloves were soaked

with blood, and she felt warm, viscous drips slipping down her cheeks and neck.

Vin's phone lay about six feet away. A large black hand reached for it and picked it up; he was awake.

"You okay?" she asked him. Her voice sounded strange in her head.

"Yeah," he said and set his free hand on the back of his head. "Gonna have a lump like a baseball back here, and my stump fuckin' hurts getting wrenched like that, but I'm okay. You?"

Phoebe wiped blood from her face. She had some scratches, deep enough to bleed, but otherwise she felt fine. "Yeah, I'm good."

Vin nodded at the unconscious woman sprawled between them. "What about her?"

Lydia Copperman had not moved. Phoebe considered her still form, sprawled in an awkward twist across the aisle. Something about it seemed wrong.

Though she'd been wounded in Afghanistan before she'd been there a year, she'd been in plenty of engagements with the enemy in the months she was there. She'd seen plenty of bodies, friend and foe, unconscious and unalive.

She'd learned that there was a visible difference between an unconscious body and an unalive one. She couldn't explain exactly what the difference was—a change in the skin, perhaps, or a difference in the form of the musculature, something—but the difference was there, and they'd all known about it. They'd saved soldiers who were hardly more than torsos because they could see the difference. They'd mourned bodies that seemed unharmed because they'd known it was too late. Probably it was the reason she'd been saved herself, buried under the gruesome detritus of her squadmates.

Before she rolled to her feet, went to Lydia Copperman, and checked for a pulse, Phoebe knew she wouldn't find one. And she didn't.

“She’s dead,” she said, the words pushed out on a gust of shock.

“Jesus,” Vin muttered. “Oh sweet Jesus.”

Phoebe’s head began to fill with noise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Okay,” Eight said, leaning back in his chair at the head of the table. “I appreciate everybody getting their asses in their seats on short notice this morning.”

Duncan looked around the table. Half the Bulls wore Sinclair greens under their kutties, and he was one of them; they were on shift, in the shop or the bays, this morning, so it hadn't been a particular hardship to set aside what they were doing and walk next door to the clubhouse.

Jay had been last in; for most of the week he'd been out at his folks' place first thing in the morning, helping his old man with a particularly complicated bike rebuild. He looked irritated at the interruption of his day, but these days he was a lot better about keeping his mouth shut and not complaining about every damn thing he didn't like.

Eight had called an unscheduled meeting this morning because he'd heard from Fitz, who was acting president in Eureka until they could get that charter established. More than a month since they'd shut down the Nameless, most of the news from the coast had been fallout from what they'd done, with very little forward movement.

The story they'd built, about the Nameless simply breaking camp and abandoning their clubhouse, had been more or less accepted; there had been a few skeptics, a few people who'd needed to be convinced or otherwise dealt with, but they'd had to end only one of those skeptics—a cousin of one of the Nameless, whom Little Jon had forgotten existed. Other than that, the NorCal Bulls had been staying low-pro, discreetly recruiting, quietly doing good around the area, strengthening relationships Little Jon had and building new connections.

“Fitz says they're ready to hang the sign on the building. They got a roster of eight, not counting Fitz, Jazz, and Geno, who all want to come home. Little Jon will take the gavel. He's naming Dean Barker his second and Digger Daniels to SAA. He wants our input on this. Remember, we got our first run on this route coming up in about a month, an exchange

south of the border, and a handoff in NorCal, up to Vancouver.”

“Are the SoCal Horde in on this yet?” Chris asked. “Or is Nevada still crossing the border?”

“The Horde’s working their shit out,” Duncan’s dad answered. “Nevada will make this cross. Hopefully it’ll be their last, and they’ll hand off to the Horde from then on.”

“I don’t like that they don’t have a tech guy in Eureka yet,” Apollo said. “In these times, the work we do, they gotta have a tech guy.”

“Why doesn’t Jazz stay until they do?” Jay asked.

Apollo turned to answer him, and gave him a cross look as he did. “Felicia’s pregnant,” he said, as if that was an obvious answer.

If Jay saw Apollo’s irritation, it didn’t slow him down. “I know, but only like, what, two months? She found out after we were back from Cali. It would be different if she was about to pop, but that’s months away. I get that he wants to be home, but can we do without somebody handling digital security out there while Felicia gets nightly foot rubs or whatever?”

The whole table, made up mostly of firmly attached men, erupted in a chorus of laughs, groans and other noises of shared reactions that couldn’t quite be classified. Call it male turmoil. Probably they all sort of agreed with Jay, but they also all understood the consequences of agreeing if any of their women had heard what he’d said—including Jay’s own old lady.

Duncan knew maybe more than others at the table about the situation, because he’d overheard his mom and Kelsey talking about it a couple of times. Felicia was unexpectedly pregnant. Their youngest, Kaia, was about to be eight years old, and Jazz and Felicia had thought they were done making the next generation. They were, overall, happy—had come to be happy—about the new baby, but Felicia was around forty now, and the pregnancy was apparently uncomfortable in ways her others hadn’t been. (Duncan hadn’t focused too much on

those details.) She wanted her man home. And Jazz wanted to be home for her.

That had been going on for a while now—most of the time since the Bulls had been in NorCal. But, though he'd been characteristically flippant, Jay really was right—they needed a tech specialist in the new charter. It was dangerous, in myriad ways, not to have someone who could handle all that. It was, objectively, more important than a wife with morning sickness.

“Jay’s right,” Duncan said aloud. “I don’t see how we can be open for business in NorCal without a tech specialist at the table out there.”

Eight stared at the Young Guns’ end of the table, wearing an expression that had become pretty familiar. They’d talked about it amongst themselves and had decided it was his ‘burned-out assistant principal’ expression. He was tired of the patches he considered ‘youngsters’ making good arguments at the table. But he was slowly developing a patience for it, Duncan thought.

Now Eight rubbed his bald scalp. “Yeah, it’s a problem. You’d think in Cali they’d have their pick of hackers and shit, but I guess Humboldt County is a lot more inbred mountain yahoos than crunchy granola tech bros.”

“I think the tech bros and the crunchy granola crowd are two different groups, Prez,” Monty said with a grin. “And the tech bros are farther south.”

“I don’t give a fuck. Okay. I’ll tell Fitz to not to pack up yet. If anybody’s got a problem with that, or has something else to say about the situation, do it now.” When no one spoke up, Eight turned to their tech officer. “Apollo, get on Jazz’s ass. Tell him if he wants to get home, then he needs to fuckin’ find his replacement.”

Apollo nodded.

“Good.” Eight picked up the gavel. “Alright, that’s the meet—oh.” Stopping just before he’d have struck the table, he set the gavel down. “Fuck. One more thing. It’s too goddamn

early, but Marcella's on my ass about it, so let me just say it so she'll let me up for air. 2025 is the fiftieth anniversary of the Brazen Bulls MC. We should do something for that. Something big, in the summer. Trust me, I already know that's more than a fucking year away, but Marce says we need to start planning now, and if we don't at least give her some input about what we want, then the old ladies are gonna plan whatever they fucking want. Knowing her, she'll make me pay by doing some girly bullshit, so let's think about it."

Sam put up his hand. "I got—"

Eight cut him off with a sigh. "Not now, son. I don't want to start throwing random ideas around and turning this chapel into a party-planning office. Just think about it. Talk about it with each other. We'll talk ideas soon enough. But let's get back to work now."

Sam put his hand down.

~oOo~

Jay threw out a quick *see ya* and booked it out of the clubhouse and back to his folks' place as soon as Eight gaveled the meeting to an end. The guys on shift were next out, headed back to work. As Duncan, the last of those, grabbed his phones from the safe box—only the tech officers were allowed to have tech of any kind in church—his personal buzzed in his hand. He turned it over and saw that he had a stack of texts and three missed calls from ... Vin? And Margot, too?

What the fuck?

Since he'd been staying most of his nights at the ranch, he'd gotten to know Vin and Margot pretty well, and over the course of the past few weeks had had occasions when they'd needed to talk to each other directly, so everybody had exchanged numbers. But he'd texted with either of them only a few times—with additions to a grocery list, or a request for

help with something on the ranch. For sure, they'd never actually called each other.

He opened the texts first. The first one, from Margot, said, *Got trouble here, need you to call asap*, and all the others, whether from Vin or Margot, were variations of that one, with increasing intensity. They'd all occurred in a span of about twenty minutes, while he'd been in the chapel. But none had any detail at all about what the trouble was.

None of the calls included a voice mail.

"Dunc, you okay?" his father asked.

He looked up from his phone. "I don't know. There's some kind of trouble at the ranch, but none of these have any info."

"Something she can't share in a text?" Dad asked.

For just a second, Duncan's head went entirely blank as adrenaline flooded through him. Vin and Margot were frantically trying to reach him and not telling him why. Phoebe, however, was not trying to reach him. Something bad had happened to her. Something they didn't want to tell him in any kind of message.

Shit, she was hurt. Or worse. Holy fuck!

"It's Vin and Margot, her roommates, trying to get me," he said when his brain worked again, "not Phoebe." Because it was the one on his screen, he hit Vin's number at once. Dad looked almost as worried as Duncan felt.

"Something wrong?" Dex asked, coming up alongside Dad.

Duncan let his father handle that because Vin was picking up.

"Dunc!" Vin shouted.

"Vin, what's wrong? Where's Phoebe?"

"Is your phone secure?"

Duncan took the phone from his ear for a second to stare at it, because that question had derailed him. Looking at the screen of his personal gave him no information he didn't

already have, of course, so he put the phone to his ear again and said, “I’ll call you back on a secure line. I’m calling right now, so pick up.”

He dropped his personal on the table and dialed from his burner. As soon as Vin picked up, Duncan repeated, “What’s wrong?”

Vin told him what was wrong.

~oOo~

Less than an hour later, Duncan pulled through the gate of the Ragamuffin Ranch. Riding with him were his father, Dex, and Eight Ball. The entire top of the Bulls’ food chain.

Vin had explained the trouble—that Lydia Copperman had shown up out of the blue, that now Phoebe and Vin were hurt and Copperman was *fucking dead*, that Phoebe had gone catatonic or something, and they didn’t know what to do. Duncan had told him to hang tight and he’d be there as soon as he could.

By the time the call was over, most of the Bulls were clustered around him, wondering what was wrong. Duncan had focused on his father as he’d explained, and then he’d asked for help.

He’d been talking to his father specifically, but Dex had piped in at once, asking pointed questions about the situation, Phoebe’s condition, who Lydia Copperman was, for most of which Duncan had had no answer. Then he’d announced he was coming along.

And then Eight had thrown in as well, muttering about wanting to be there this time when half the table ran off to deal with a civilian problem.

Duncan was glad for any help. The details about what had happened were so thin they were practically invisible, but it was clear that, at least, they had a body to deal with.

The ranch looked completely peaceful. Sun shining, spring breeze blowing, the animals wandering lazily in the pastures. The little windmill near the well spun gently.

Except for the unfamiliar Land Rover parked by Phoebe's truck, nothing seemed out of sync. The contrast of appearance and reality was so jarring Duncan had to shake his head straight.

As they approached the house, Margot ran from the front of the stable, waving her arms, so Duncan passed the house and led the others to the stable. He dismounted almost before he got the stand down.

“Where is she?”

“In there. No change. She's just gone, and I want to call 911, but we have to ... come on, come on, I'll show you.”

With his father and the others at his back, Duncan followed Margot into the stable.

As was typical for this time of day, the stalls were empty and the stable was a little dim. Phoebe didn't use the overhead lights unless it was dark or heavily overcast.

It was a big stable, with a dozen large stalls, six on either side of a wide main aisle. Where the stalls ended, the aisle diverged into two narrower passageways around the center of the stable, where the tack room, feed room, bathroom, and a small area like an office/kitchen combo were located. Behind that central core were three quarantine stalls, each with a small corral thing Phoebe called a 'turnout,' facing the barn.

The trouble was at the end of the main aisle, where Vin was pacing in a short loop, holding an ice bag to his head. A blonde woman in fancy riding clothes lay on her back in the aisle. From the entrance of the stable Duncan could see that her face and pale blonde hair were soaked red.

That was Lydia Copperman. Her body, at least.

Of much greater interest to Duncan was Phoebe, who sat on the aisle floor, against Amos's stall. Her legs were folded up against her chest, her arms locked around her knees. She stared straight ahead. Her face was badly scratched, her lips

and chin were smeared and streaked with blood in varying stages of drying out, and her cheek and mouth were swelling around the damage.

He was both relieved to see her alive and mostly unharmed, and infuriated to see the harm she'd suffered.

“Phoebe!” Duncan called and hurried to her. She didn't acknowledge him at all, not even when he crouched before her and cupped her face in his hands. Her eyes moved with her head, locked in their sockets. They were almost pointed at his eyes, but she wasn't seeing him.

She'd told him that high stress made her ‘check out’ sometimes, and he'd seen a hint of it once or twice. He'd seen Margot get in her face and tell her to ‘click back in.’ But this was much scarier than he'd understood. She was just *gone*.

“Phoebe!” he said again, almost yelling. He had the thought to slap her, like in the movies, but he didn't want to hurt her. Instead, he dropped his hands to her shoulders and shook her. “Phoebe!”

“Hey, don't,” Dex said, crouching beside him. “That's not gonna work. You gotta be calm, Dunc. It's intensity that sent her away, and if she's back in the desert, yelling and shaking are only going to push her deeper in.”

“I don't know what to do!” Duncan said, to Dex and anyone else. Throwing a glance over his shoulder, he looked to Vin and Margot, who were obviously worried but had no wisdom to offer.

“This is the worst she's ever been,” Margot said.

“I haven't been on the outside of one of these since I was a kid,” Dex said, “so I'm mostly guessing here, but try this. Take her hands.”

Her hands showed damage from fighting—the knuckles bruised and bloody, a couple fingernails shredded. Her arms were crossed around her knees and her hands had a punishing grip over her arms, but when Duncan unhooked them from their death grip, she didn't fight him.

“Hold them lightly and just talk to her,” Dex instructed. “Nice and calm, only good things. Nothing about what’s goin’ on here. Everybody else’ll step away and start working out what to do about the body.”

Without taking his attention from Phoebe, Duncan nodded. “Hey, baby,” he said, fighting off adrenaline to keep his voice at something close to a whisper. But what could he say? His head was packed solid with what was going on here.

“I’m home early,” he finally decided on. “Missed you too much to stay away.” Her hands lay flaccid in his. He brushed his thumbs over their backs, but she didn’t seem to notice. Still, it made him feel a little better, so he kept it up, caressing her lightly with the pads of his thumbs.

“I love you. You know that, right? I mean, I know we say the words, but I want to make sure you really know it. I *love* you, Phoebe.” No reaction. All he could think to say that was safe and calm and good was to pour his heart out, so he kept going. “It’s funny—I was so scared to get close to you because I thought I’d lose so much if I gave up my single life. I always had this idea in my head that ‘settling down’ meant life getting boring, all obligation and responsibility and that kind of shit, so I figured I’d put it off until I was ready to be boring. But you know, I *like* feeling responsible for you. I like being expected somewhere. I like knowing somebody will be disappointed if they don’t see me. It’s not boring at all. It’s exciting. Loving you makes my blood fizz all day long. Being with you feels like having my finger in a socket—but, I mean, in a good way. I feel fucking *alive*.”

He thought he felt her hands move. When he looked down, they were unchanged, still loose and seemingly lifeless, but he was sure he’d felt something. “You’re safe, Phoebe. I promise you’re safe. I won’t let anybody hurt you anymore. I need you here, babe. I’ll keep you safe. I’ll always keep you safe.”

He could hear the others speaking softly, could hear Vin probably explaining the situation. He could sense in his periphery that they were moving around near the body, but he didn’t let it distract him. Right now, the only thing he cared about was Phoebe, who’d been like this a long time. More than

an hour. What if this had broken her—what if something that woman had done, one of the blows that had hurt her face, had hurt her brain, too? Or what if she'd simply snapped? What if she never came out of this? What then?

The change happened in painfully slow increments. First her hands twitched again, and that was all for what seemed like fifteen minutes but was probably closer to fifteen seconds. Then she took an audible breath. Duncan lifted one of her hands to his lips and kissed it, but nothing more seemed to happen. He'd run out of things he could think to say, so he started repeating, "Come back, babe. I love you," over and over, like a mantra, or an incantation. A resurrection spell, or something.

And then, all at once after so long, she was looking at him. "Dunc?"

His face exploded into a grin. "Hey there, beautiful. How're you feeling?"

She didn't answer. For a few seconds, she was obviously confused. Then she looked around, and understanding landed on her so quickly, he saw it drop through her eyes.

"Oh no! I—"

He cupped her face again, hoping to stop that sentence. "It's okay. It's okay."

"It's not ... I killed her. I don't ... remember doing it."

"Doesn't matter. We're going to take care of it. You're okay."

"We?"

Dex crouched beside Duncan again. "Hey, Phoebe. Do you remember me?"

She turned and squinted at Dex. "Dex. You're here?"

"I am. I know you don't know me too well, but I'm gonna ask you to try to help me out, okay? If you can. If it's too much, we'll figure something else out."

"Okay." She squeezed Duncan's hands. He squeezed back.

“Why was this woman here? Do you remember?”

Dropping her head, Phoebe took a long, slow breath. “Uh ... She wanted to talk, I think. But ... I don't think we ...” Her halting attempt at an explanation stopped suddenly, and for a second Duncan feared she'd gone away again.

But then she said, quickly and with anger, “arrogant little *bitch!*”

Duncan and Dex both reacted. They flinched and glanced at each other, but neither could guess where that outburst had come from.

However, Phoebe was all the way back. “Oh shit! She wanted to try to make me apologize. I think she found out we worked out the repairs, so she came out to make more threats. I told her she had to go. But Vin came down, and he recorded her making the threats. She was angry, but I thought we'd won. I thought she'd go—but then she jumped at Vin and knocked him down. He hit his head. When she tried to get his phone, I grabbed her. She swung at me, and then we were fighting. I don't remember after that—except oh shit, Dunc! I killed her! I killed her!”

Duncan grabbed her and pulled her close, held her as tightly as he could. She flung her arms around him and clutched at the back of his kutte.

“It's okay, it's okay,” he said into her hair. “We're going to handle this. I promise.”

“We are,” Dex said, still crouched beside them, but leaning back a bit now. “If you can answer one question, we can take it from here.”

Phoebe turned her head and peeked at Dex from the shelter of Duncan's chest.

Dex smiled kindly and asked, “Do you have any problem of any kind with us taking the body away and staging an accident with her car?”

“I killed her,” Phoebe said.

Dex leaned on his knees and peered directly at her face. “First, sounds like she was attacking you, so anything you did was self-defense. That’s a result of her actions, not yours. There’s no guilt here for you unless you take hers on.” He stood up. “Now, I’m gonna need your man for a while, so we can take care of this. We don’t want you to be part of what happens next. Do you think you’re good to stand and let Margot and Vin take you up to the house?”

She looked up at Duncan. Though she didn’t speak, he understood the question in her eyes.

He wanted to stay with her. He wanted to sweep her up in his arms, carry her up to the house, up to her room, put her to bed and curl himself around her, to keep her safe from all the troubles around her and all those inside her, too.

“I will be back, fast as I can. But we’re gonna fix this for you. Okay? Let me do this.”

Her head dropped, and she curled more tightly against his chest. Duncan snuggled her close again and kissed her head.

“Okay,” came a small voice, muffled inside his kutte. “Thank you.”

~oOo~

Once Margot and Vin had Phoebe well away from the stable, the Bulls huddled up.

“Here’s what we know,” Dad started. “Her name is Lydia Copperman. Her husband runs Copperman Resource Management.”

Eight sighed heavily. “Goddamn, you youngsters got a knack for hooking up with chicks who got trouble with important civilians. How many accidents we gotta stage to deal with your girls’ bullshit?”

Duncan figured he was referring to Athena’s ex-boyfriend, who had raped Athena, and had therefore been killed by her family: the Bulls. They’d staged a car accident to dispose of

that body as well. It was an effective means of dealing with a body when the person who'd worn it couldn't simply be erased. Like the son of an advisor to the mayor of Tulsa. Or the wife of a CEO.

"Athena's trouble and this trouble got nothing to do with each other, Eight," Dex snarled. "And we deal with the trouble we got."

"Yeah, I know," Eight grumbled. "I got on the horn with Apollo," he added. "He ran her deets quick with what Margot and Vin knew, and he's digging deeper now. Margot ran up to grab the woman's purse from her car, so we've got her license and cards. She has one of those leather planner books. I guess she's old school. Anyway, we know where she was headed next today, so we got a sense of the route she'd have taken."

"So here's the deal," Dad said, taking over again, "We're going to put the body in the back of her car. We've got Chris bringing Lynette down here." Lynette was one of the club's girls. She had long, straight, pale hair, and Duncan guessed what his father said next: "She's going to drive the Rover back toward the City. We'll follow her. There's a tricky patch before we get to I-40, where we can set a scene."

"We can rig it to make sure it burns when it hits," Dex continued. "We want fire so nobody questions her facial damage. We'll hang around long enough to make sure the car's fully involved, and then we'll turn home. There's been enough wet weather this year that we don't have to worry much about a fire going out of control."

"So what's the story here?" Duncan asked.

"Story is the truth, as far as we can take it," Dex said. "Lydia showed up here, Phoebe showed her the door. What happened after she left, nobody here knows."

Eight mused for a moment, then nodded. "That's good. That should work."

Duncan turned and studied the body on the floor. Her eyes were closed; Vin or Margot must have done that. People almost always died with their eyes open.

It was self-defense. Phoebe had done nothing wrong. They should have been able to call 911 and let law handle it.

However, like all the rest of his family, Duncan had no faith in the legal system. In fact, the Bulls were intimately familiar with how corrupt all law enforcement organizations he knew of were—the club was a corrupting factor, paying off virtually all the official-types with any measurable power. People who could pay were allowed to go about their business, whatever that business was. People who couldn't pay bore the brunt of the 'justice.'

This woman was known to have caused Phoebe a lot of trouble. They had clearly been in a violently physical fight. Phoebe had survived, and Copperman had not.

More importantly, Lydia Copperman was one of those to whom laws did not apply. Phoebe Davis was one to whom they did. And the Bulls did not have quite the same influence here as they did in Tulsa, especially not with an oil baron's wife dead on the floor.

So no, they could not have called 911 and let the LEOs handle it.

“Let's get it done,” Duncan said.

~oOo~

It was nearly midnight when Duncan split off from the other Bulls (and Lynette, who rode with Dad) and headed back to the ranch, the work of the night complete.

He was exhausted. Every muscle in his body was sore and making sure he knew it. He reeked of gasoline and fire. But he felt good. Things were good.

The afternoon had scared the shit out of him in a few different ways, but now everything was fixed. Phoebe's tormentor was gone, and with her, most of Phoebe's problems. She probably still had to finish the required repairs, but she

had a way to do that, and now there was no one who might try to fuck her up some more.

She hadn't let him help her in the way he'd first wanted to, having the club buy in on the ranch, but he'd found another, less intrusive way, by simply hitting up Toby Keller, who'd replaced the roof on the clubhouse a few years back, and had done work on some of the Bulls' homes, too.

But now, he'd been able to offer her the kind of help only the Bulls could provide. When she'd been in that kind of trouble, he'd been there. He'd helped. He'd fixed it.

His family had been there for them both. Seen through the lens of this night, the shit they'd done in Eureka finally made sense to him. They did what they had to do to protect the people they loved. Period. It wasn't always clean or simple or pretty. Usually it was messy and complicated and ugly, and it left them reeking of blood or fire or both.

But in the end, the people they loved were protected. Secure, safe, healthy, comfortable.

Not one damn other thing mattered.

~oOo~

The house was quiet when he went in the front door. Gremlin stood in the hallway, growling softly until he saw who it was, then his tail started up and he came in for some love. The dog wasn't thrilled with the way he smelled, but he liked him enough to give him a pass. Duncan crouched at the door and ruffled his ears, then scratched his belly.

"All clear?" came Vin's voice, low and careful, from the far end of the hall.

"All clear," Duncan replied.

"Thank you, Dunc. I don't know how this would have gone without you."

“Doesn’t matter. It went the right way. I’m never gonna let her get hurt.”

Vin chuckled softly. “I don’t know that’s a promise you can make, but I get the need to make it.”

Duncan nodded. “How’re you doin?” Your head okay?”

“Got a bell-ringer headache, but I’m okay. The more important thing is she didn’t break my leg or fuck my stump when she knocked me over. And the most important thing is Phoebe’s safe.”

“Yeah. She is.”

Vin gave his shoulder an affectionate slap. “G’night, brother.” He turned and headed back to his room.

“Night, Vin,” Duncan called after him.

On the way to Phoebe’s room, as Gremlin nosed his way back into Margot’s room, Duncan detoured into the bathroom and took a quick shower. Then, leaving his clothes in a stack beside the hamper, he wrapped the towel around his hips and went to Phoebe.

The room was dark and cool. She was asleep, curled up on what had become her side of the bed, since he’d been taking up real estate there. He could see the bottle of her sleeping pills, glowing with the light of her alarm clock.

Dropping the towel, Duncan slipped in beside her and scooted close. As he tucked her into the bowl of his big spoon, she sighed and began to wake.

“Dunc?” Her voice was soft with sleep, and he heard an almost childish lilt as well. It sounded sad and scared, like a little girl trapped in the evanescent tendrils of a nightmare.

“I’m here, baby. I’m here. Everything’s okay.”

She sighed again, wrapped her arms around his where he clasped her chest, and slipped quietly back into sleep.

Exhausted as he was in mind and body, Duncan lay holding her for a long time before he allowed sleep to take

him. He didn't want to fall away from the feeling that had gripped his chest and pulled.

He had never before felt so right, in his life or in his own skin.

This was where he was meant to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Phoebe woke wrapped snugly in Duncan's arms, cozy and content. The room was a little cool, but she squirmed more deeply into his embrace, more fully under the covers, and sighed peacefully.

Dawn made the windows glow with watery light; she was going to have to get up and head down to the stable soon—

Stable. That one word turned on all the lights in Phoebe's mind, and she remembered everything that had happened in the stable the day before. Now that her memory was awake, she could feel the sting and ache in her face, too, where Lydia Copperman had struck her.

She had killed a woman.

Though Phoebe had been hurt in Afghanistan before she'd been deployed a full year, she'd been on an infantry fireteam. She had killed people: three whom she'd seen die by a bullet she'd shot—one at close range—and very likely more in the chaotic engagements where bullets flew back and forth in a swarm. She recalled each of the three with crystal clarity and was sure she'd remember them until her dying breath.

But that was war, and those men had been trying to kill her at the same time. She was deeply affected by the lives she'd ended, but wouldn't say she felt guilty about any of them.

Yesterday she had killed a woman in her own stable. In her *home*.

She didn't know how she felt about that.

Her memory of the day before felt like an old sponge, stiff and porous. She knew what had happened, but her mind couldn't absorb it as something that had happened to her. It was more like watching an old movie on a malfunctioning projector. She saw herself hiding behind the propane tank, texting Vin and Margot, running to the stable. She saw Copperman come in. She saw their truncated argument, saw

Vin come in, saw Copperman fly at him and knock him down. She saw herself grab her, saw them start to fight.

After that, there was nothing but noise and red fog, like film getting jammed in a projector. And then Duncan was there.

Nothing about yesterday felt real, but she knew it all was.

She had killed a woman.

The impact of that sentence should have been seismic. *She had killed a civilian. In her own home.*

No matter how many times she thought those words, however, they never accrued any power.

She didn't care that Copperman was dead, and she didn't care that she was involved in it happening.

God. That made her a monster, didn't it? No matter how horrible the dead person had been, a normal, decent person would feel guilt or loss or at least worry about what might happen next. She felt none of that.

Finally Phoebe identified the emotion she felt most keenly this morning: relief.

She was glad Lydia Copperman was dead. She didn't care that she'd been involved in making it happen. If that made her a monster, so be it. The people who loved her, her family, would understand.

A new thought stepped into the spotlight, and Phoebe sat bolt upright. Lydia Copperman was dead, and Duncan had done something to get rid of her body. There was nothing more that woman could do to hurt her.

"Hey," Duncan mumbled sleepily as he sat up. "Hey, it's okay." He put his arms around her again. "I got you."

Phoebe settled into the comfort of that embrace, but she said, "I'm okay, Dunc. Really."

He leaned back and peered into her eyes. "Yeah?"

She smiled and set her hands on his hair, smoothing his bedhead. "Yeah. It probably makes me a monster, but I'm not

fucked up about yesterday.”

“You were pretty fucked up yesterday.”

“I know. That’s all weird in my head, like it’s underwater or something, but I think that was about Afghanistan more than yesterday. Or maybe it’s all tangled up into one nasty mess, like a trauma bomb. But I’m okay about what happened. I’m relieved, actually.”

He blinked. As he shifted to lean against the headboard, he brought her along with him, and she settled in under his arm, with her back against his chest.

“Wow,” he said softly.

Now she felt a little anxiety. “Are you thinking I’m an awful person?” She really needed him to understand.

“No, not at all,” he answered right away. “I’m just surprised. After yesterday, I thought you’d have a rough time for a while.”

She shook her head. “I think ... like I said, I think yesterday was more about the Army and what happened over there than what happened in front of me in the stable, or feeling guilty about it. I guess I would have been scared what would happen if Margot or Vin had called 911 and gotten the cops involved.” She shifted in his hold and smiled back at him. “But they called you. And you and ... Dex?”

“Yep. Dex, and my dad, and Eight Ball, our president. They came with me.”

“And you all helped me.” Remembering the big gap in her memories, a gap into which Copperman’s body had disappeared, she asked, “What did you do?”

Duncan surprised her when he shook his head. “I think you’re better off not knowing what we did. Probably you’ll never hear about that woman again, but we made it look like she had trouble after she left here. If cops do look into it, it’s better if you can say she came, you made her leave, you don’t know what happened afterward. As much truth as possible.”

So maybe it wasn't completely over. Maybe cops would come and ask if she'd seen Lydia Copperman. Strangely, that thought didn't feel dangerous. A new worry entered her thoughts, but her mind didn't get noisy or muddy or numb. She was simply worried.

When Duncan moved her so he could comfortably look her in the eyes, when his hand slipped gently over her cheek, his fingertips brushing the scratches there, and the butterfly bandages over them, that new thrum of manageable worry quieted almost to nothing.

He was why she wasn't afraid. Duncan, and Vin, and Margot. Her family. And Duncan had brought even more to her life—his family, his club. They'd helped him help her. They'd been there for her, no doubt at risk to themselves. Because Duncan was who he was, because he was a Bull, she was protected.

Whatever happened, she'd be okay. She had support. She had family, one she'd built herself. And a motorcycle club at their backs.

“Hey.” He tipped her chin up so she looked him in the eye. “Whatever happens, you're gonna be okay. I promise. We'll figure it out.”

We'll figure it out. We. She really was going to be okay.

“I love you, Duncan. Throwing a rod on the highway was pretty much the best thing that's ever happened to me.”

Laughing, he pulled her against his chest again. “That night completely rearranged my life. I like it better this way.” He pressed his lips to her head and whispered, “I love you so much.”

Phoebe felt good. She was home, in the arms of a man who loved her, and she felt strong and safe and like everything was going to be okay. Wanting to be as close to Duncan as she could get, she turned in his arms, so they were almost completely chest to chest. Still not as close as she wanted, she threw her leg over his and straddled him—and discovered that he was completely naked, and he was completely hard.

In fact, he grunted lustily as she landed on his thighs. “Babe,” he rasped.

In that earthy, almost pained sound, she heard a warning and understood. He was hard for her, but he didn’t want to push to make anything happen. He was being careful with her.

This was real love. Fire and passion, yes, but also warmth and calm. Above all things, love was *care*.

She didn’t think she’d understood that until right now.

“It’s okay, babe,” she whispered. “I’m okay. And I want you.” To punctuate her point, she pulled off her t-shirt and offered him her breasts.

With one last questioning dive into her eyes, he took the invitation, catching both breasts in his wonderful hands, their long, rough fingers wrapping around them, then drawing inward to lightly pinch her nipples. Phoebe threw her arms around his neck, buried her hands in his hair and pulled him to her chest, begging for his mouth. With another deep, rasping grunt, he obliged, sucking on a nipple as his fingers excited the other, switching back and forth, letting his teeth clamp down gently each time he left one for the other. Each suck, each pinch, each nip was an arrow arcing through her body to strike her core.

Still in her underwear, Phoebe rocked on his thighs in time with his mouth and hands. His cock stood like a lead pipe between her legs, and she quickly discovered the move that would press him to her clit. Even through the silky gusset of her underwear, the intensity of that contact was like an electric charge, and she cried out and arched backward.

Growling like a wild animal, Duncan followed with her, somehow laying her on her back, her head at the end of the bed, and rose above her. She looked up and saw how deep and ferocious his own need was, and knew hers was no tamer.

“Be wild with me,” she gasped, lifting her hips to find contact with his again. “I want to be wild.”

“What’s that mean?” he asked, straining to form the words through his panting breath.

At first, she thought she didn't know. She'd never been interested in the weirder corners of sex. No ropes or chains or safe words, nothing like that. But she needed something more now—what was it?

Then she got it. She didn't need anything *more*. She simply wanted abandon. She trusted Duncan so completely, was so confident that he wouldn't hurt her or push things too far, that she wanted to let go.

“I want us both to let go. Don't be careful.”

He frowned, and his head tilted, asking if she was sure.

“I trust you, Duncan. I love you, and I know you love me. You won't hurt me, I know it. Let's be wild.”

His frown became a grin—and then he dived down her body, tore off her underwear, threw her legs over his shoulders, and began to feed. Wildly.

Already stimulated from her ride on his lap, now feeling his fervent enthusiasm as he sucked and nipped and licked, Phoebe soared with pleasure at once. She let go, let herself feel everything, let herself make any sound, let the world fall completely away until her climax caught her and she broke apart.

She was still dazed, still throbbing, her blood still fizzing, when Duncan disappeared and left a chill where he'd been. Before she could make sense of that, he was back and sliding into her. The cool slick of his entry told her he'd gotten a condom on. So a little bit careful, after all.

He filled her with a desperate groan, and for a moment, he lay on her, unmoving. All her most sensitive bits, still throbbing from one of the most intense climaxes of her life, were full of him, and she couldn't keep still. Twisting and squirming, she moved around his steady cock, finding all the best places inside her.

“You are so *fucking* hot,” he rumbled against her shoulder after a groan tore through him.

“Fuck me, Dunc. Do it hard, please.”

He shifted onto his elbows and slammed into her. “Fuck!” he shouted.

“Yes!” she cried, flinging her legs around his hips.

Phoebe had never had sex like it before. They fucked each other hard and wild, flipping over, twisting, slamming, grunting. They pulled hair, bit skin. She strafed her nails down his back; he pinched her nipple so hard she arched into a bow. Almost too much, but not too much. Exactly what she wanted. This was a trust fall, and he caught her every time.

“Oh, oh, I’m close!” she finally gasped as her belly flooded with fire and her legs began to quiver.

“Me too, me too,” he panted. “Come with me, baby, come with me.”

He slammed into her as hard as ever, and he pinched her clit at the same time. Then he slammed again and pulled. She was wet, and his fingers slipped off, but it was that, the feeling of slipping through his clenched fingers, that set every cell in her body on fire at once.

Duncan roared directly into her ear as he came, too.

“Holy *shit*,” he gasped a few minutes later as he pulled out and flopped to his back beside her. They were both sweaty, and the linens were a damp snarl around them. “Holy fucking *shit*!”

All Phoebe could do was chuckle. She felt languid and sated, and so completely relaxed she might have been a couple inches taller.

“I’d like you to move in,” she said when her breath had settled enough for speech. “I want my home to be yours.” The thought had occurred to her before, but now it felt right to say it aloud. And she was not remotely worried about his answer—whichever it was, she knew everything would be okay.

“Yeah,” was his answer. “I’d like that, too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Duncan's mother unlocked the padlock, and Duncan pushed the door to the storage locker up.

"Jesus," he muttered when he saw the contents of the locker.

His parents had three storage lockers that he knew of, at three different self-storage places. All three had excess junk from the house, but in the other two lockers, the house junk was just camouflage for the kind of shit they wouldn't want LEO types finding. Guns and ammunition and safes packed solid with cash, for instance.

This locker, the size of a two-car garage, was the only one that held only house junk. It was the only locker Duncan hadn't seen inside in, like, years. It was crammed with furniture, old rugs, half-closed cardboard boxes, and probably a hundred big plastic tubs.

Mom laughed. "Yeah, I know. Every time we buy something new, I can't help but hold onto the old stuff. Maybe I'm just a hoarder, but I thought it would all be useful. I figured with three kids, we'd need to help you all get your first place furnished. But Kelsey mostly bought her own stuff for her apartment before she moved in with Dex, and you're moving straight from home to Phoebe's place, and I'm starting to think Hannah is going to be with us forever. We've got about three houses' worth of shit nobody wants."

Duncan had found a narrow pathway through the chaos and begun to push his way in. He clocked the slightly rusted red fender of his old pedal fire truck, from when he was about three, and grinned. "Wow, this is like a tour through my whole life."

Mom had followed him in. "I think that's why it's so hard for me to let anything go. Everything's a memory. See that rocking chair on top of the old chest freezer? I rocked you and Hannah to sleep every night in that.

“Not Kelsey?” Duncan asked, picking an old Bop-It game out of a cardboard box full of well-used toys. He ‘pulled it,’ but nothing happened. Of course the batteries were dead.

It took Mom a couple beats to answer, long enough that he looked over his shoulder at her. Her expression was pensive, and Duncan recalled the situation for his parents when his older sister was born.

“No,” she eventually answered. “I didn’t get a chance to really prepare for Kelsey, and I didn’t have anybody to throw a baby shower for me or anything like that. So I never had a rocking chair for her.”

“Sorry. I didn’t think.”

“It’s okay. Those days were hard, but I had Kelsey, so everything we went through was worth it. I have great memories of that time, too. Kelse gave me lots of them. And then your dad came back to us, and we made everything exactly right.” Her smile beamed love at him. “And then we had you.”

He smiled back. “I love you, Mom.”

“And I love you. My sweet teddy bear.”

He rolled his eyes at her old nickname for him. “Mom, I’m a grown man.”

“Son, you will be my teddy bear until the day I die, even if I’m a hundred and you’re almost seventy. Deal with it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he chuckled and returned to the hunt.

He didn’t need a lot; Phoebe’s house was pretty full. Most of her stuff was old, but he liked the cozy vibe and didn’t want to disrupt it. However, he needed some kind of dresser, and the one in his room at home was way too big to fit in her room. And now he wanted that rocking chair, too.

“Can I take the rocker?”

Again, Mom didn’t answer right away, and he looked back at her. She was going through a box of somebody’s school papers—Hannah’s, it looked like. He saw a coloring page with

the outlined image completely obscured by black crayon—yep, definitely Hannah’s.

“Mom?”

“Oh—sorry. You want the rocker? Sure, I guess. You know those glider rockers are made for rocking babies.”

He’d been reaching for the rocker, but now he pulled back. “It can’t just be a chair?”

“Sure, it can. But ... you know. As long as we’re on the subject ...”

“Fuck, Mom! We’re just moving in together. We’re not planning on babies at this time.”

“I know, I’m obnoxious. No pressure. You’re young. I was just curious.”

“We haven’t talked about kids at all yet.” He was still reeling from the Tokyo Drift his life had taken in the past few months, and Phoebe was still dealing with her own shit. It had been only a few days since that scene in the stable, and since they’d decided Duncan should move in. They still didn’t know if the staged accident was going to pass as a real one. That was just about all the massive life shit they could handle right now.

“But you want kids,” Mom said.

“Yeah. Someday.”

“Does Phoebe?”

He set the rocker down on the little bit of floor before him. “Mom. I just told you we haven’t talked about that stuff yet.”

“I know, but you’re moving in together. That’s a step toward building a family. It’s good to know if you both want to build the same kind of family. I mean, are her roommates staying?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t they?”

“And that doesn’t seem strange to you? You won’t have any privacy.”

Apparently, standing here in this overcrowded locker, he was going to have to give his mother a lesson about twenty-first-century families. “It’s not strange, Mom. The time of mom and dad and two-point-five kids and a white picket fence is over. Families are whatever works for the people in them. Right now, at the ranch, that’s me and Phoebe and Vin and Margot. Maybe someday Vin or Margot will get with people and want places of their own, or maybe they’ll bring partners into the house. I don’t know. But no, it doesn’t seem strange.”

“And if you do have kids?”

“Then there will be a lot of people around to help.” He leaned back against a shelving unit full of clear plastic tubs. “Why are you so hung up about this? *Our* family is weird by the white-picket-fence standard—and it’s you all who made it that way. You, Dad, Simon, Uncle Rad and Aunt Willa, just about *everybody* from your generation came from some kind of big family damage. You all had shitty parents or dead ones or both.”

“Jesus, Dunc! That’s harsh.”

“Yeah, that came out nastier than it sounded in my head. Sorry. But I’m not wrong, am I?”

She thought for a minute. “No. I don’t like lumping in the families that broke from loss with the families that broke because somebody broke them, but you’re right. We were all a mess.”

“But you made a great family. All that damage, but you didn’t pass it on. None of you did. My generation? We’re good. We all grew up in tight homes, with parents who love each other and work through their shit without dumping it on the kids. We all grew up knowing that our parents and a whole lot of other people love us like crazy. There’s been a lot of loss, but nobody broke anything on purpose.”

Mom studied him for a while; he could see her combing through her own memories. “I’ve never actually sat down and thought about it, but you’re right. Everybody who’s in a committed relationship, married or not, is totally committed—

and healthy, as far as I know. All these years, and we're all still together, if we can be. Wow."

Wending his way over to her, Duncan set his hands on his mom's shoulders. "I know how to make a family. You taught me."

His mother smiled up at him, tears rising in her eyes. "You're a good boy, Duncan."

He kissed her cheek and whispered, "You taught me that, too."

~oOo~

Bop it!

Pull it!

Flick it!

Bop it!

Flick it!

Twist it!

Twist it!

Twist it!

Ugh, game over. Do it again, but better.

Duncan groaned.

With some fresh batteries and a couple swipes with a shop towel to clean it up, the old Bop It worked just fine. He'd forgotten how much fun the thing was.

"Okay, my turn," Jay said and snatched the old toy from Duncan's hands. "I'm taking you down this time."

"Don't get cocky 'til I had my turn," Monty said. "We both kicked your ass last round, and I only missed Dunc by one." He leveled a look at Duncan. "I'm comin' for you."

“Go ahead and come,” Duncan volleyed with a laugh. “Wanna make it interesting?”

“Always,” Monty said. “How much?”

“I’m in,” Jay added.

Before Duncan could respond, a familiar, gruff voice said, “The fuck you all doin’?”

They all turned to face their president, who stood just inside the door with his arms crossed.

“Playing Bop It,” Jay answered. “Wanna try it?”

“No, I do not want to try your little toy. How ‘bout you try some fuckin’ work?” He waved pointedly at the three cars in the bays.

Duncan answered before Jay could say something snarky and get them all trouble. “There’s no work. We’re done with all three, just need to put them on the lot.”

“It’s fifteen minutes till we close up the bays, anyway,” Jay said, because his favorite hobby was poking the bald bear who sat at the head of their table. He started a new round on the Bop It, like Eight wasn’t still glowering at them.

Jay washed out on the sixth action. By then, Eight had come fully into the bays and was close enough to watch over Duncan’s shoulder.

“Let me see that,” the president said.

Jay clutched it to his chest. “You’re not gonna fuck it up or anything, are you?”

“No, I’m not gonna break your toy. Let me see.”

Reluctantly, Jay handed it over.

“How’s it work?”

Duncan demonstrated the Bop It to Eight, who then took a turn of his own. He made it to four before he wiped out. “I’m goin’ again,” he said.

“You want in, you’re gonna have to take your turn,” Jay said, pulling the toy from Eight’s hands and handing it to

Monty. “Now it’s Monty’s turn.”

Eight actually let that happen. He leaned back and crossed his arms. “Where’d you get that?”

“It was mine when I was little,” Duncan explained. “I found it in our storage locker, when I was looking for furniture to take to the ranch.”

“That’s right!” Eight hooked his arm over Duncan’s neck, “Baby Bird Helm is flying the nest. How’s your little chick doin’?”

Monty started his round while Duncan answered.

“She’s good. She’s grateful for the help.” He didn’t want to get into particulars about Phoebe’s state of mind without her permission.

“As long as it doesn’t come back on us, I’m glad we could help. Apollo said they found the car this morning. He tell you that?”

“No. When did he tell you—and how did he find out so quick?” Also, why hadn’t Apollo let him know?

Eight shrugged. “I don’t understand half the shit that dude can do. I guess he was monitoring the radio for the stadies, or whatever he does. He told me about an hour ago.”

“Is he still in the clubhouse?”

“Far’s I know.”

“Dunc, you in?” Monty said, shaking the Bop It at him.

“Nah, you all play—but don’t fuck it up. I gotta go next door.”

“I’ll take Dunc’s place,” Eight said, snatching the toy before Jay could take it.

~oOo~

“Sorry about that, brother,” Apollo said, offering Duncan a folding chair in his cramped, crowded office. “I’ve had my

head down with Eureka shit, and I thought we decided Phoebe shouldn't know anything ahead of time."

They'd decided it was better for her if she was as in the dark as possible, so her reaction would be as authentic as possible if any official types talked with her.

"Yeah, but *I* wanted to know."

"I would've got to you soon. Before you left for the day. Anyway, yeah, they found the wreck about ten this morning. I didn't hear it come over when they found it, but I heard them at the scene, arranging to haul the wreck up, all that. It'll get investigated, but I don't think they'll dig deep. I did some digging myself, and Lydia Copperman had three DUIs in the past seven years—all three pleaded down to reckless driving, which is some aggressive twisting of the law, by the way—thirteen speeding tickets, about fifty unpaid parking tickets. A fatal accident is probably the way she was gonna go out someday anyway. The only reason that woman still had a license is the size of her bank account."

Duncan rolled his eyes. "The rich really do live in a different world from everybody else."

"They sure do. Good job, by the way. Photos of the scene went up on their online system an hour or so ago, and it looks great. There's almost nothing of use left. The rear end of the car was partially intact, enough to read the plate. So they were able to make a prelim ID. They'll wait for dental records to confirm—she's nothing but bone—but with her driving record, I don't see them bothering with DNA or anything else. They'll call it an accident and file it away in their cleared cases." He grinned. "I'm impressed."

"It was mostly Dex telling us what to do. I just did what I was told."

Apollo chuckled. "That's how you learn, kid."

Duncan didn't think he wanted to learn that particular lesson—but actually, yeah, he did. He didn't *want* to be in another position where he had to dispose of a body, or make one, but if he were in that position again, and he needed to

protect someone he loved, yeah. He wanted to know how to do it. To be sure.

~oOo~

About two hours later, Duncan was about to turn onto the gravel lane that led to Ragamuffin Ranch when a black police cruiser pulled up to the turn, coming from the ranch. The state-shaped logo on the door marked it as Oklahoma State Police. Two uniformed officers sat in the front seat.

They pulled out and made obvious note of Duncan, who was obviously about to turn in. He put a confused look on his face and lifted his hand in a vaguely friendly greeting. The driver nodded, and they drove on.

Duncan made the turn calmly, then checked to make sure the cops were out of sight. Then he did the half mile of that lane in a flash. He skidded into his parking place and jumped off.

Phoebe was on the porch, coming down to meet him.

“You okay? Everything okay?” he asked as he trotted to her.

She smile. “It’s okay. I’m okay. I was about to text you.”

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly. “Tell me what happened.”

She led him to the wooden bench next to the porch steps, and they sat. “They asked me if I knew Lydia Copperman. I told them I did, and they asked when I’d last seen her. I told them when, and that I’d asked her to leave.”

“That’s good. How’d they take it?”

“Fine, I think. I think they believed me.”

“Well, it’s mostly true.”

Her smile was a little hesitant, but it showed up. “Yeah. One of them is a vet. He saw the sticker there on the storm

door. We traded a couple stories. He was over there about the same time I was. I told him about the IED.” A blush rose on her cheeks. “I think that helped. I feel dirty about it, but I think knowing I got hurt over there ... helped them believe me.”

Drawing her close to him again, Duncan kissed her head. “It’s not dirty. I’m glad you used what could help.”

With a sigh, she went on. “They asked me what kind of car she was driving when she was here, and I told them it was a black Land Rover, one of the really expensive ones. Then they showed me some pictures from the scene—the back end of her car, pointing up from a deep ravine or something like that. I said it looked like hers.” She looked up at him. “Duncan, I think they really believed me. I think that’s it.”

A light, evening breeze was tossing loose wisps of her hair around; Duncan brushed them from her face. “I told you everything’s going to be okay. Just like I promised.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist. “Just like you promised.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Phoebe plopped down on the end of the bed and wiped her brow with her forearm. It was early April and the day was just warm enough that they had the windows open. A cool breeze made the curtains dance. But moving furniture around in a two-story house was hot work.

She considered the ancient wicker shelving units facing the bed. A lifetime of books were crammed on those shelves. It had been years since she'd read most of them. "Maybe I can put the shelves downstairs somewhere."

Duncan leaned back against the dresser that stood awkwardly just inside the bedroom door. "You shouldn't have to move your books out of reach. I don't want to turn your whole life upside down here."

"That's silly, babe. You're moving into my life. Mine's not the one getting turned upside down. And downstairs isn't out of reach."

He studied the bookshelves, then did an eyeball tour of the rest of the room. "I like this room as it is. Everything in here is a part of you."

That was sweet, but they were currently trapped in this magical Phoebe exhibit, because his dresser was wedged in front of the door. The place they'd thought it would fit was not a place it would actually fit.

She stood back up. "Duncan. This room is not my room anymore. It's *our* room. You should be present in it, too. And it's past time it got a redo, anyway. It's looked like this for basically my whole life." Taking a step to her own dresser, she picked up a little china figurine of two cats lapping milk on a bale of hay. There were several similar pieces on the dresser, as well as a few ancient bottles of Avon perfume her grandma had given her way back in the day.

Phoebe hadn't worn perfume since about middle school.

Duncan was wrong; this room wasn't her almost at all. Aside from the books on those shelves, she'd picked out virtually nothing here. It was all hand-me-downs, castoffs, and gifts from a sweet old grandma who'd died when she was nine. Maybe because he'd first seen it the night they'd met, Duncan *associated* all this old crap with her, but really, it looked like this because she hadn't cared to change anything. Until now.

She held up the kittens on the hay bale. "I don't even remember getting this thing. It's just always been here. I don't think I'm actually a china figurine girl, you know?"

He frowned at her. "What are you saying?"

With a shrug, she did a slow spin and took in the room. "The plants." She'd chosen those—and nurtured them. "I want to keep those up here. I like plants in every room; they make me calm. We need the bed, and we both need a dresser. For now, we have this furniture, but I'm good with moving the books someplace else and putting your dresser there, and then maybe thinking about what we want our room to look like. We can take down the wallpaper and paint, redo the floor, different furniture, whatever. Let's make it look like *us*."

Grinning, he came over and slipped his arms around her. "I like that plan."

As he leaned in to kiss her, Phoebe, feeling suddenly mischievous, shouted, "VIN!" right in his face.

Duncan jumped back, then laughed as Vin called up, "WHAT?"

"GET YOUR BUTT UP HERE!"

"What's that about?" Duncan asked. "If I'm just learning now you're into a poly thing after all, we need to talk."

"No! He can help take books downstairs."

"Even with his leg?"

"It's a below-the-knee amputation. He goes up and down the stairs fine unless he's sore. You've seen him."

"Yeah, but not with an armload of books. That's okay?"

“I’m fine for hauling,” Vin said in the doorway, “But I’m not so good with parkour, so ...” he indicated Duncan’s dresser. “And I don’t know why you like to yell when a text would be so much more pleasant.”

“That’s why,” Phoebe told him and stuck her tongue out.

Vin laughed. “You’re full of vinegar today, missy.”

Duncan went to the shelves and grabbed a full shelf of books between his hands. He carried them to his dresser and set them down. “The dresser’s stuck until we make room, so how ‘bout we put the books here and you take ‘em downstairs? That okay?”

“I’m not a cripple, Dunc. I got it.”

“Technically ...” Phoebe teased.

“You!” Vin returned, shaping his expression into mock annoyance. “Are due for a time out, I think.” He picked up the books Duncan had set down, restacking them into an armload.

“You’re not the boss of me.” She pushed behind Duncan and jumped over the dresser. “I’ll carry, too.”

Duncan went for another stack and set them on the dresser. Before Phoebe could pick them up, he caught her arm. “Hey.”

His look was so earnest, she felt a flicker of concern. “Yeah?”

“I like to see you like this.”

“Like how?”

“I don’t know. Playful. It’s the first time, I think.”

“Well, jeez. Am I usually a downer?”

He chuckled. “No, babe. Hardly. You’re just ... lighthearted today.”

Of course she was lighthearted. Lydia Copperman was dead and buried. There had been a few news stories about her disappearance, and then her body had been found. Since then, there had been only two mentions of her in any significant

news source: an article about her ‘fatal accident,’ and then her obituary.

Moreover, the repairs to the ranch were done. The stable had a new roof, the fences were repaired and sealed, the road graded—and donations had kept coming in, so they’d had the funds for other repairs and even some improvements. They’d turned the front pasture into a training field, with jumps and barrels and other enrichments.

Now Duncan was moving in. He’d mentioned marriage, in a ‘someday’ way, and they’d talked about kids, which they both wanted ... also in a someday way. For now, though, they were young and happy and together. Vin and Margot loved Duncan, too, and he loved them. They’d all been folded into the Bulls family as well.

For the first time ever, Phoebe could stand in the middle of her life, look around, and be nothing but glad. The present was full of love and the future full of promise. She was *happy*.

She reached over the dresser and grabbed her man by the front of his t-shirt. “I am lighthearted. I’m light everywhere. I have everything I need, and nobody can take it away. I love you.”

He leaned to her and kissed her with his beautiful, smiling mouth.

EPILOGUE

August 2025

“Again, Unc! Again again again!” Tildy yanked on Duncan’s left hand.

From his right hand, twenty-one-month-old Ethan grabbed his sister’s arm and said, “NO, Tiddy! Too scawy!”

Tildy stopped shouting and trying to drag them all back to the line for the little teacup ride. She let Duncan’s hand go and set her hands on her little brother’s shoulders. In the sparkling rainbow tutu and matching wings, the butterfly facepaint, and the pink tiara with the bejeweled ‘4’ in the center, she was a both birthday sprite and her brother’s good fairy.

Tildy had needed some convincing to see that a little brother was a good thing, but she’d been fully convinced the day Ethan first laughed when she’d tried to be funny for him. Now Ethan had a short, loud, bossy but surprisingly gentle and ferociously protective guardian.

Several of them, in fact. They also had a pack of six vigilant dogs at their back. Not to mention a whole MC.

“You were scared?” Tildy asked her brother.

Ethan nodded with dramatic solemnity. “Too scawy.”

“Oh.” She looked around. “Let’s do something else. What do you want to do?”

Suddenly empowered with the freedom of choice, Ethan looked around as well, his eyes wide so he could take in all possible options.

In addition to Tildy’s fourth birthday, this weekend was the fiftieth anniversary of the Brazen Bulls MC. Since 1975, the club had sat right here, an anchor to a community that had changed with the times but remained solid and steady as well. In some cases, the club had friendships with neighboring families that went three generations deep.

To celebrate such a momentous anniversary, they were throwing a party for the whole weekend. They'd gotten a festival permit and closed off two blocks to turn their sliver of South Tulsa into a wonderland. They'd rented five rides (including teacups) from one of those parking-lot carnival places. They had games booths, food booths, booze booths, face-painting clowns and juggling clowns. They had live music, a four-act bill for this evening, with the Lowdowners, Marcella's band, headlining.

They'd set up a little track on the clubhouse lot and had pedal-bike races for the littles. And the folks of Ragamuffin Ranch—that was Phoebe, Duncan, Margot and her boyfriend Taylor, and Vin—had hauled the trailer up with some of their current residents for a small petting zoo at the back of the lot: Puff the sheep, Klaxon the burro, and Ricky and Fred, two Nubian goats who were the ranch's newest rescues.

Phoebe was sticking close to the petting zoo. They'd brought up the animals who were best with people and most patient with getting tugged on, and several of the older club kids were on hand as minders, but she was keeping an eye on things anyway.

Duncan wanted to get back and check on her soon. She wasn't feeling so well today.

"How about the goats?" he suggested with a grin. "Want to see the goats again, Ethan?"

"Puff and Klaxon, too, Unca," Tildy reminded him. "They're not goats."

"That's right. Sheep and a burro, too. Wanna go cuddle?"

Though these two got lots of cuddle time whenever they visited the ranch, there was apparently no limit to the attraction of a petting zoo. Ethan grinned hugely and slapped his hands together. "GOATS! I want GOATS!"

"Okay!" Duncan started to turn around and head back to the clubhouse, but Ethan yanked on his hand.

"Caww, Unca! I want caww!" He threw his hands up and slammed his little body into Duncan's legs.

“You got it, pal.” Duncan dipped down, ready to swing the boy into his arms and carry him.

“Me too, Unc!” Tildy cried, putting herself between Duncan and Ethan. “I want carried!”

Chuckling with weary affection, Duncan nodded and crouched lower. “Climb up, monkey legs,” he said, and Tildy clambered onto his back and immediately clamped arms and legs around him so tightly he could probably be shot like a rocket into space and she’d still be attached. Then he grabbed Ethan and stood, settling the boy in his arms so he had a kid’s head on each shoulder.

He’d figured out this method with a lot of trial and error.

Strolling down the middle of their anniversary fair, Duncan grinned and offered a wave, a nod, or a snarky riposte to friends and family either working or playing—Jay was at the Gertrude’s stand, playing barback while Petra served beer, wine, and simple cocktails from their rainbow-striped tent. Gunner sat in his fancy motorized wheelchair and played carnival barker at the ring-toss tent, while his kids, Aidan and Larissa, worked the game.

Duncan’s sister, Hannah, and Mason (their newest patch) and Anne (one of Aunt Sage’s twins) worked the candy tent. Mason and Anne had been a couple since last Christmas; Duncan thought it was both a little bit strange and pretty cool that brothers Sam and Mason had fallen for girls they’d called cousins right up until they’d started making out. Talk about keeping it in the family.

Hannah was running the cotton candy machine, and Duncan laughed at the massive globs of pastel floss his little sister was handing out on flimsy paper cones. Each one was planet-sized. She saw him laughing and flipped him off with panache.

Hannah had finally won their father over. She’d started working in the convenience mart last summer—and she was immediately such a pesky, nosy presence in the bays that Dex had eventually handed her a wrench and told her if she was

going to be in his way she'd better be productive while she was there.

Now she was an apprentice mechanic at Brian Delaney Auto Service. The first woman ever to work in their bays. And his little sister had a new goal: she had decided that she would also be the first woman in their chapel.

All the old patches patted her on the head and thought that was cute. They couldn't imagine a woman wearing a patch, and Hannah was notorious for stirring shit just to work her shoulder, so they didn't take her seriously. But Duncan thought if anybody could do it, Hannah would be the one to kick open that door. For her whole life, she'd heard the word 'no' as a dare.

Also, with Mason patched, the Young Guns had almost half the table. They thought about the world a lot differently than the old Boomers and Xers at the other end, and the two current prospects, Book and Charlie, were in their early twenties. When they took patches, the vote would swing to the other side of the table.

Change was on the horizon.

"WICKY AND FWED!" Ethan screamed into Duncan's ear. Laughing, he crouched and set his nephew down while his niece dismounted his back. Tildy grabbed Ethan's hand, and they ran the rest of the way to the petting zoo, which was about ten square feet of temporary fencing. Vin was at the makeshift gate to let them in.

Phoebe sat in a folding camp chair in the corner of the enclosure, wearing a straw cowboy hat and a big pair of sunglasses. He was glad to see her sitting.

With Tildy and Ethan in the competent hands of their Unca Vin, Duncan devoted his attention to his beautiful girl.

"Hey there." He crouched before her and picked up her hands. "Feeling any better?"

She pulled him close and kissed him. "Lots better."

"Excellent." He stayed close and caressed her cheek with his lips. "You give any more thought to my crazy idea?" he

whispered.

“It’s a pretty crazy idea, Dunc,” she whispered back, playing her fingers over his beard.

“But is it a *bad* one?”

They had not planned to start a family, but ... uh ... sometimes they got a little too excited and didn’t completely plan *not* to start a family, and eventually that occasional laxity had produced a pink cross on a stick. Phoebe was about ten weeks pregnant; they’d be parents in January.

They’d talked plenty about marriage and children and what that would look like in their unusually blended family, but they’d been thinking like five years down the line. However, as soon as that pink cross had popped up, they’d both taken it as a sign to speed up their timeline.

They’d told everyone about the pregnancy right after Phoebe’s first OB appointment. Really their attention had been on that—the pregnancy, if there might be any additional concerns because of her brain injury (her doctor said not really, but they were monitoring her closely anyway), managing her intense morning sickness, starting to figure out how to set up the house for a kid—and they hadn’t talked much at all about the marriage part. On top of the unexpected baby stuff, the idea of planning a wedding made Phoebe’s head noisy.

This morning, as they were preparing to load up the critters and haul everybody the sixty miles that made up his daily commute, a thought had struck him like a lightning bolt. Upon hearing that thought, Phoebe had promptly announced he was nuts. But she’d been grinning, and he’d gotten her to agree to think about it.

“It’s perfect, babe. Everybody we love is already here. Like *everybody*. We can use this party as our reception, so the planning is already done! And Levi can do the ceremony. He got one of those online ordinations for when he did Kelsey and Dex’s wedding. All I have to do is ask, and I know he’ll say yes.”

“We don’t have a license. We need a license. Can’t get one on a Saturday.”

Those kinds of questions weren’t roadblocks so much as speed bumps. Phoebe wanted this, too. It was her way to poke at what she wanted and find reasons she couldn’t have it. Duncan took it as his mission to find reasons she could always have what she wanted.

And he’d already thought about this one. “So ... okay. You’re right. But that’s just paperwork. We can have a wedding today and do the courthouse thing to make it legal when we get back. Or I’ll ask Apollo to get his friend to backdate a license to make today legal. Or we’ll be in Nevada in a few days—we can do it the legal part there. Lots of options.” The last part of this anniversary weekend was a fun run to Eureka and back. They were stopping in Laughlin and Madrone on the way.

Picking up her hands again, he kissed her knuckles. “I just want to marry you today, with all our friends and family here, and a whole damn carnival for a reception.”

Phoebe pushed him back a little and considered him seriously. “I do love the idea, but I ... I’m only gonna do this once, babe. I don’t want to be wearing cutoffs and a 4H t-shirt when I get married. It should be special.”

“This is as special as the Bulls ever get—and I think you look hot as fuck in those Daisy Dukes.” As she opened her mouth to continue her argument, Duncan put a hand up to stop her. “But I hear you about wanting to look a certain way. Can we bring my mom into this? Because nobody on the planet can put a great party together faster or better than Bulls women.”

“Duncan. They’re already so busy. We’ve all been working on this weekend for *months*.”

“And what could be more perfect than a wedding in the middle of an anniversary! They will be excited. Trust me, baby. I say the word ‘wedding,’ and they will leap at it.”

The women leapt. They shoved Duncan out of the way, grabbed Phoebe, and leapt.

By dusk, Duncan and Phoebe's impromptu wedding was set up. Duncan had been forcibly stripped and re-dressed, so he was now wearing his best jeans and a crisp white Oxford, and his boots and kutte were newly polished. He had a ring of his mother's in his pocket and a yellow daffodil from the florist around the corner in his buttonhole. Yellow was Phoebe's favorite color.

It was the intermission of the live music, and the Lowdowners would take the stage next.

The whole carnival had stopped for this. They hadn't set up chairs, but everybody in attendance was now clustered before the stage in two groups, leaving something like an aisle between them, leading to the stage steps.

Levi, Caleb's older brother, stood center stage, looking amused. Duncan stood before him, with Jay at his side. Margot, now wearing a pretty yellow sundress and holding a spray of daffodils and white daisies, stood across from them. Dash Cotter, the lead guitarist of the Lowdowners, stood behind them all, his Fender in his hands.

Below them, Duncan's mother made a sign, and Dash began to play.

Kelsey came down the 'aisle' first, with Tildy and Ethan in each hand. They had little baskets and tossed flower petals on the street as they walked. Ethan tossed huge handfuls and ran out after a few steps. When he started to cry, Tildy gave him half of her remaining petals, and they got all the way to the stage together.

Duncan saw Vin at the back of the crowd. That man had driven all the way back to the ranch for his dress uniform so he could walk his friend down the aisle as she deserved. He took a few steps forward between the groups of their wedding guests, and then Duncan saw Phoebe, her arm hooked around her friend's.

This was Duncan's first time seeing Phoebe as his bride. She was beautiful, but he wasn't surprised about that.

Her hair flowed loosely under a crown of daffodils and daisies, and she carried a bouquet of the same flowers. He recognized the dress she wore as one of Kelsey's—white, strapless, and reached her ankles. With each step she took, one of her old cowboy boots kicked out from under the hem.

He thought that was his favorite part.

Vin escorted her through the mass of their family and friends to the foot of the steps. He hugged her as Duncan went down the steps to collect her.

As he took her hand, he slid the sapphire ring onto her finger. "It was my mom's. Now she wants you to have it."

Phoebe grinned, and her eyes sparkled as she admired the glittering stone. "Aren't you supposed to wait to give me the ring?"

"This is your engagement ring. I got the other one." Their family had made sure they had wedding rings, too.

"Shortest engagement in history," she laughed.

"You two coming over here, or should I shout?" Levi called out, and laughter rang out through the street.

Duncan took Phoebe's hand. "You feel like gettin' hitched?"

She shrugged saucily. "I guess I don't have anything better to do tonight."

~oOo~

The Lowdowners' set became their reception dance music, and the whole neighborhood partied with them. More than that—friends from all around the country had arrived in Tulsa for the anniversary, and most of them were headed out on the run to Cali with them the following day, either headed back home or even farther from it.

The street was packed with people who cared about the Bulls.

As was usually the case at a wedding, whether it was planned or spontaneous, shortly after their first dance, the groom and bride were separated by the good wishes of their loved ones. At some point, Duncan looked over the head of Mrs. Carver, a little old lady from a few blocks down, who had his hand trapped between both of hers and had spent a good five minutes telling him about watching him grow up around the neighborhood, and he saw Phoebe dancing and laughing in a big group of Bulls women. Petra had them doing some kind of line dance, and the street was filling up with women joining in—they rebuffed every man who tried to get involved. This was a woman’s dance, and they were having a blast.

“She fits right in, doesn’t she?”

Duncan looked down and smiled at the woman who’d come to his side. “Yeah, she does. Hey, Grammo.”

“Hello, love.”

Mrs. Carver gave his hand a final pat and let him go. “I’ll let you two talk.”

“Thank you, Bess,” Grammo told her with a smile.

Maureen Delaney was not related to a single Bull or any of their family by blood. But she was sister, aunt, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother to every one of them. For some, like Duncan and his sisters, she was the only grandmother they’d ever had—and the only one they would ever need.

“Where’s Grampa?” Duncan asked as he pulled his Grammo close.

“You know your grampa. Once it gets dark, he wants quiet. He’s in the clubhouse with Eight. We’re going to be heading home soon.” She gave him a squeeze. “Well, you certainly turned a party into a celebration tonight.”

“I hope that’s a good thing.” Phoebe was the only one who’d expressed any reservation whatsoever, everybody else thought it was a great idea the instant they’d heard it, but

Duncan realized they'd never actually asked Grampa or Grammo if it was okay—and they were the guests of honor for the anniversary. They'd started the club.

“It's the best possible thing,” Grammo reassured him, smiling up at him. “It feels a bit like the passing of a torch.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked around the street—the sweeping strings of colored lights, the tents still churning out food and drink, the music and dancing, the laughter, the friendship, the love. “Well, when Grampa and I came here to Tulsa, we started something new. A business, but also a family. A life, full of all this.” She swept an arm out to encompass the whole neighborhood. “That was a long time ago, and it's not really ours anymore, but it's still strong. We left it in good hands.”

“It'll always be yours, Grammo,” Duncan protested. “We wouldn't be here if not for you.”

“Hush, love. I'm not feeling sorry for myself. But Brian retired a long time ago, and the club is different from how he made it. It's different from how Becker made it, too. And the station as well—and that's as should be. Everything must change and grow, or it dies. The club is strong *because* it's not exactly as Brian made it. The Bulls have moved on from us, as you should. You and Phoebe, what you did tonight, here, this weekend—that is a move toward the future. Now the anniversary of the club will always be your anniversary as well. And Tildy's birthday, too. We started the day with balloons and toys, and we ended it with a wedding. All new things. Things looking forward, and to look forward to.”

He got it. She was saying what he'd been thinking earlier in the day: Change was on the horizon.

Duncan bent down and wrapped his grandmother up in his arms. “I love you, Grammo.”

She hugged him back just as snugly. “And I love you. That, my love, will never change, and never die.”

“You let me know if you need me to pull over. Don’t try to be brave about it, okay? I’d rather pull over than get puke running down my back.”

Phoebe groaned and socked him lightly in the gut. “Don’t say that word.”

“You know what? We can wait. We can hold off and leave after you’re feeling better. We’ll catch up to them by lunch.”

She groaned again. “Don’t say that word, either. And I don’t want to wait. Part of the excitement is riding off in this huge scary mass of metal. I’ll be fine.”

On the bike to their right, Sam signed and said, “Morning sickness can’t be fun on a bike. We can wait with you.”

Sitting behind him, Athena signed, and Duncan interpreted for her. “It’s not fun—and we will wait with you. But it would also suck not to go out with everybody. Can we get them all to wait?”

“There’s more than a hundred bikes here, Frosie,” Sam signed.

A few people were staying back—Vin and Margot, obviously, and Sage and the prospects, and those club kids who were old enough to go but not as interested in a five-thousand-mile round trip motorcycle ride. Most kids who grew up in the Bulls family loved all things motorcycle, but not all of them. Some actually *disliked* bikes. Duncan did not understand that.

They, with some trusted hangarounds and club girls, would oversee the tearing down of the carnival and the returning of the street to its normal state, and the care and feeding of the younger club kids, for the two weeks the Bulls would be away. But otherwise, the whole club and virtually all of their MC friends were riding out. Tulsa would shake from north to south and east to west when they rolled out.

“I really am fine,” Phoebe said, and Duncan signed for her. “We’ll pull over if I need to, but I’m excited for this. I want to ride out with everybody.”

She was trying to learn ASL but it wasn't coming easily. After months of study, she could only use or understand a handful of signs reliably. She'd picked up a lot more Arabic much more quickly in the Army, so she suspected her brain injury had something to do with her struggles now.

"We good over here?" Dad asked, strolling over from his bike. "Eight's calling for everybody to form up."

"Phoebe's feeling sick this morning," Sam said.

"Sam, shut up!" Phoebe snapped. "I'm fine, Mav."

Dad gave her his patented paternal frown—the one that said, *I got you, and you should listen to me*. "You sure, hon? Dunc, if you want to hold off until she's—"

"HEY!" Phoebe yelled, and Dad shut up. "I'm pregnant, and I'm nauseated, and now I'm pissed the fuck off! I don't want to wait! I will handle my puke myself!"

Dad laughed and held his hands up in surrender. "My bad. Okay, then, quit yer yakkin' and form the fuck up!" He slapped Duncan's shoulder and spun on his boot, headed back to his woman and his ride.

More than a hundred engines kicked to life and yes, the ground beneath their feet shook with that thunder. The old guard of the Bulls, including retired patches, led the formation, and the Young Guns fell in behind. After them, the unpatched club kids on their own bikes, then the allied MCs, in their own order.

Gunner and Leah rode up with the OG Bulls, in the custom bike the Bulls had built for his wheelchair. Grampa D and Grammo were up there, too, on the trike Grampa hadn't ridden for more than a year. They four were riding along only until the run stopped for lunch and then turning back, but they were part of this run. Rad and Willa were on a trike as well, but they intended to go the whole way.

Whether they were on two wheels or three, whether they meant to ride all the way to Eureka and back, or be home by supper, every living patch was on this run. Virtually every patch had a woman riding with him. Most of the OG had some

or all of their children riding behind them as well. And dozens—no, *scores*—of their friends were mounted up with them.

The Brazen Bulls had been called many things, most of them unsavory. Killers. Torturers. Criminals. And all of those things were true. They were outlaws of the kind civilians feared.

But Duncan wasn't a civilian, looking at the surface from a distance. He had been nurtured in the Bulls' arms. Raised at their tables. Schooled by their wisdom. He knew the Bulls from the inside out.

He had learned what the world was, what family was, who *he* was, in the clubhouse. And he knew what the Bulls were above all else: husbands, sons, fathers, uncles. They were lovers. They were friends.

Hearing Jay's wild laughter above the roar of a Harley armada, he looked over and saw his best friend riding beside him, his woman's arms around his chest and his arms outstretched. Duncan felt Phoebe holding him the same way and threw his head back and his arms out. At his other side, Sam followed suit, with Athena behind him grinning hugely. Then Monty, Chris, and Mason did the same. All the Young Guns, riding free, full of love and hope and the future.

Above all else, this was what the Bulls were.

They were family.

Forever.



THE END

If you're feeling inspired to support a large-animal rescue and the important work they do, please consider [Oliver and Friends Farm Sanctuary](#), [Gentle Giants Draft Horse Rescue](#), [Longmeadow Rescue Ranch](#), or a sanctuary in your home state.

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