

THE BROKEN BEGINNING

PART ONE

*Aces High MC
Charleston
#8*

Christine Michelle

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication & Note:](#)

[Extended Author's Note:](#)

[About the Book](#)

[- Just a Dream](#)

[2 - Waking Nightmares](#)

[3 - Testing, Testing](#)

[4 - The Damage is Done](#)

[5 - The Gifts and Strings](#)

[6 - First Night](#)

[7 - Lonely Nights](#)

[8 - Living Large](#)

[9 - Remembered](#)

[10 - A Son](#)

[11 - In Your Face](#)

[12 - Forgiveness isn't Necessary.](#)

[13 - Becoming Friends](#)

[14 - The Wilted Lily.](#)

[15 - A Desperate Moment](#)

[16 - That One Sweet Night](#)

[17 - Double Betrayal](#)

[18 - Whirlwinds and Letdowns](#)

[19 - Fresh Hurts](#)

[20 - The Push and Pull](#)

[**21 – Overcoming Hard Truths**](#)

[**22 – Beautiful Moments**](#)

[**23 - Old Bones**](#)

[**24 – Buried Away**](#)

[**25 - The Flip of a Coin**](#)

[**26 - Making Amends**](#)

[**Acknowledgments**](#)

[**More Books**](#)

[**About the Author**](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

The Broken Beginning

Part One

Aces High MC - Charleston

#8



Christine Michelle

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Dedication & Note:

For the readers who asked, and then asked again, and again!

You guys are gluttons for punishment, and this is the book you wanted, so you got it! Welcome to Merc and Tiger Lily's story. It starts where all stories should, in the beginning. This is the very broken beginning that won't feel much at all like a romance, because it isn't. Their road is bumpy, the ride is rough, and your heart might get a little bruised along the way. I hope you're ready. You asked for this!

XO,
Christine

PS – In this book, you will see the cost of giving birth listed. Please, remember that this book is not set in current times (as is also evidenced by the types of phones used).

**Newbies who are picking this book up without reading the rest of the series,
read the extended note...**

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Extended Author's Note:

For anyone who picked Merc and Tiger Lily's story up without reading the rest of the Aces High MC – Charleston Series, this message is for:

I wrote this book for fans of the series who, for some reason, wanted to see these two characters have their whole story play out on the page. Readers who have read the series already know the score and ultimately how it ends for both characters (Everlasting's prologue gives you this). So, this warning is for those of you who just wanted to jump into a book, knowing about the cheating, and had higher expectations for the happy outcome. Merc and Tiger Lily never had a happy story, they only had glimmering moments in a long relationship full of strife.

FAIR WARNING:

If you want a book with a happy for now ending, you will want to stop reading at the end of The Broken Beginning Part One. If you want their full story, then you need to also get the second e-book. Part two is much more emotional than the first, so be prepared.

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About the Book

Tiger Lily

When I was a little girl, I always dreamed of my wedding. I dreamed of my husband, my children, my future.

When I developed a crush on the gorgeous boy who was my neighbor, he became the man in those dreams.

When he took my virginity, those dreams were at the forefront of my mind, turning just another hook up - for him - into something more in my heart.

Unrequited love feels like hell when you realize it's unrequited.

It feels worse when you see those two pink lines on the stick telling you that your one fantasy night turned into so much more.

It's unbearable when your love is forced to marry you, but never honors the vows he took.

My heartbreak lasted for years.

Eventually, things changed but our path to get there was never easy.

Merc

She was the girl I always overlooked until one stupid night, and the worst decision of my life, cost me my freedom.

She was the girl who trapped me with a kid I never wanted.

Slowly, as time moved on and another kid was brought about by another dumb decision on my part, I began to realize what I had been overlooking all along.

She was fiercely loyal in the face of my betrayals.

She loved harder than any person I knew.

She was always there for me, even when I never gave her the same courtesy in return.

Then, she decided enough was enough and I learned to fight for what's important instead of taking what was easy.

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1. 1 - Just a Dream

Tiger Lily

“Isn’t it time you gave up on your little crush?” Madeline – who refused to be called Maddy – sniped at me in an acidic tone that had me bristling. It wouldn’t be until much later, and far too late, that I would understand she also had a crush on the same man.

“I already know he doesn’t see me like that,” I whispered while turning away from watching Damon flirt with one of the cheerleaders – Brinley – who only wanted to walk on the wild side with him for a minute. There was no way she planned out her wedding to him the way I started doing when I was twelve. Her dad would never allow that to happen anyway.

“More like he doesn’t see you at all,” Madeline jeered, my narrow-eyed gaze not bothering her in the least as she stood to leave. “I’m getting another beer, and maybe I’ll go fuck your crush while I’m at it. I stand a better chance of getting somewhere anyway.” She glanced back at me after two steps, as if what she’d just said shouldn’t faze me, and I should be following along like a good little dog. That would happen over my dead body! She had just proven, once again, that she was a shitty friend, and I didn’t think staying at the party with her was in the cards any longer. Madeline rolled her eyes as she continued off in the opposite direction looking for her next drink.

I swiped at the traitorous tear that slid down my cheek because there was no going back from this. I'd just lost a friend. Even if she had proved to be a shitty one, and my dreams about Damon were crushed once again. I kept telling myself that I was barely 16, and a lot could change. It was the beginning of my junior year. Just two more years, and I'd graduate and move on to college. My dream was to move to some place new and shiny where people might actually see me. It probably wouldn't happen though. My parents weren't exactly rich enough to pay for school on the west coast. Truthfully, I wasn't sure California was far enough from South Carolina to run from my eventual heartbreak where Damon Donovan was concerned.

I dropped my half empty cup onto the bed of someone's truck and started for the road. Madeline, who had failed third grade, was seventeen, already had her driver's license, and had been my ride to the party. Garret Branson held these parties in the field on the back side of his dad's farm. It was the only place where no one ever complained or called the cops to bust up the party, so everyone always trekked out there. Unfortunately for me, it meant that the walk back home was going to be a long one. Luckily, I had worn my sneakers because I didn't have anyone to impress by breaking an ankle while marching around the field in high heels like some of the girls did.

Just the dirt lane to get out to the highway was almost a mile long. Halfway down the damn thing, headlights lit up the path from behind me, so I moved over to the side. I couldn't get too close though because there was a ditch on either side that always seemed to be filled with water. I shivered at the

thought of what else might be lying in wait in those ditches. Water moccasins were always a possibility, and that was enough to make me want to take my chances at getting hit by some drunken teenager leaving the party rather than a venomous snake bite.

Yeah, it was unlikely, but still snakes were known assholes and I didn't trust a single one of them, especially the ones that I couldn't see lurking in the dark, murky waters that were barely lit by the sliver of moon in the sky. Instead of going around me, the truck stopped. I glanced up to see the familiar rusty red beast that normally sat across the street from my house. My heart rate ticked up exponentially at the sight.

“What are you doing down the lane by yourself?”

His voice was almost enough to bring me to my knees. I never heard it directed at me, so to hear that voice – all deep and sexy in the middle of the night – had my knees quivering.

“Walking home.”

“What the fuck? Home is twelve miles away, sugar.”

I guess the snakes would get a feast tonight, because I had to have been knocked out, dreaming on the side of the damn dirt lane because there was no way I heard that correctly. Damon had just called me sugar. Somehow, I managed to play it cool though, despite the fact that the endearment made me go wobbly on the inside.

“Come on,” he insisted. “Get your ass in the truck. I'll take you home.”

For the first time, I peeked inside his truck. Honestly, I'd expected to see the cheerleader inside. Brinley Jacobs had

been all over him all night long. There was no way I'd ever sit next to her for even a second, let alone a twelve-mile ride back home. She had never been kind to me and being a senior this year just seemed to make her behavior worse.

“Don't have all night, sugar. In or out, but I gotta go.”

“Fine.” I moved quickly and grabbed the handle on his truck and then yanked hard because the door wasn't budging with a gentle pull. He chuckled as it released and flung backwards causing me to stumble a bit. I hauled my butt into his truck and shut the door with a rusty creaking sound before I finally turned to look at him.

“You wanna tell me why you were planning to walk all the way home?” My shoulders bobbed up and down again as Damon shook his head. “You know what kind of people are on the road this late at night, sugar?” He asked and when I didn't answer he proceeded to tell me. “Besides all those drunk idiots back there, who will be driving home sooner than it'll take you to walk the distance, there's all kinds of freaks and perverts who would love to pick up a sweet young thing like you.”

I rolled my eyes at that. “No one would even notice me walking,” I argued.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the way Damon's head turned in my direction, and then he slowly allowed his eyes to drift over my body. “You're barely wearing clothes. Short as fuck shorts and your tits are hanging out your shirt.”

I gasped at his ridiculous description of my outfit. I was wearing some cutoff denim shorts. Maybe the pockets hung down a little lower than the actual shorts, but everything was covered, and it was more than I could say for what Brinley had

been wearing tonight. Her skirt barely hid her ass cheeks from view. And my tank top was an older ZZ Top band shirt that my dad had lying around. There was nothing wrong with it, so long as I didn't lean forward too much. Then, my bra-covered boobs might be noticed. Granted, you could see that bra on the sides, thanks to the over-large armholes since it was a man-sized shirt.

"The only sensible thing you did tonight is wear tennis shoes," Damon grunted, and I wanted to kick him in his teeth. Seriously? My years-long crush finally notices and talks to me, and he was speaking as though I was an idiot.

"You know what? Why don't you pull over and just let me out since I'm so awful?"

"Already told you, there's all kinds of bad people out there who would pick your ass up in a heartbeat."

"So what! Let them! I'm not your problem."

We had made it to the highway by then, but Damon took the next exit off Highway 17 and pulled us into what looked like a deserted driveway that went straight back into a cluster of trees that was too thinned out to be considered a forest, but still thick enough that someone might get lost in the woods if they weren't paying attention. Once the truck was out of view of the road, Damon slammed it in park and then did the craziest thing ever.

He reached across the bench seat and grabbed hold of my leg, sliding me closer to him. That didn't suit him though, so he manhandled me until I was sitting between him and the steering wheel with my legs straddling his.

“Let’s get something straight here. I never fuckin’ said you were awful. I said you looked like something a man might pick up on the side of the road and take home with him.”

Nothing. I had no response. In fact, I was relatively certain that my eyes were far too wide, and my panties were in danger of soaking through my too-short shorts. And that was before Damon pulled me forward and kissed the silence right out of me. By the time his tongue retreated, and he nipped playfully at my bottom lip, a moan vibrated out of me without my permission. His eyes twinkled in the sparse light cast by the dash lights in the truck. Then his lips pulled up into the sexiest grin I’d ever seen on another person.

“Damn, sugar. Didn’t think you had that in you.”

Before I could even wrap my head around his words, let alone question what he really thought of me, Damon dipped back down, tilted his head at a bit of an angle and laid another kiss on me that turned my body to liquid. I melted against him, and those tits that he was worried might fall out of my top at any moment were suddenly squished against his hard chest. All the while, his hands grabbed hold of my ass so firmly, I knew there were going to be finger-tipped sized bruises on it tomorrow.

“Oh God!” The words hissed from my mouth as he pulled back once more, leaving me near breathless before my tank top was ripped up and off my body. Damon then twisted us so that he could lay me down across the cracked leather seat. His door creaked open, and before I knew what was happening, my sexy neighbor – the boy I dreamed of marrying – had my shorts and panties pulled free from my body. His own pants

were quickly shoved down around his knees and then he was back in the truck lying on top of me.

“‘Oh God’ is right,” he told me as our eyes locked. “You can yell that out all you want, sugar.” And then, before I could take my next breath, Damon Donovan took my virginity in one harsh thrust. He filled me to the point of pain and then backed out and did it all over again. His face was buried into the crook of my neck where his mouth sucked at the sensitive skin. The boy of my dreams proceeded to place sweet, shiver-inducing kisses all the way to my shoulder. As good as it felt, I was glad he did it because it meant he missed the tears that leaked into my hairline.

I didn’t think he realized I was a virgin before we started. Maybe that was something men couldn’t really tell? I didn’t know, but it stood to reason that he would have been a little gentler if he’d known. I wasn’t about to complain though because the burning pain that initially caused my tears had changed over to something else and my hips started to move with Damon’s, wanting more. Needing more. I needed him to never leave where he was. We could just stay locked together like this forever and I would die a happy girl.

Unfortunately, that’s not how life works though. My hands gripped onto his shoulders, fingernails digging hard into his skin despite the fact that he was still wearing his shirt. It only occurred to me then, that I was down to just a bra while Damon had only slid his pants down enough to pull his dick out. Still, I figured that was just him being smart in case anyone stopped to see what we were up to. At least one of us being mostly dressed was necessary.

“Damn, sugar,” Damon grunted, bringing me back to the moment. His hand slid up my side and palmed my breast before he slipped the cup of my bra down so that he could grab flesh instead of cotton and lace. Yeah, my bra was pretty basic, but I didn’t exactly go out that night expecting to sleep with anyone. Besides that, my parents would never buy me anything too sexy anyway.

“Damon,” I hissed as my hips rocked up, slamming myself against him a little harder. In theory, I knew I had to be chasing an orgasm. In the moment, I wasn’t sure what was happening as everything started to tingle.

“Fuck!” Damon shouted before he started slamming himself into me harder and faster than before.

“God, yes!” The words were torn from my throat on a scream as lights flashed behind my eyes, and sparks ignited throughout my whole body. My back arched and Damon grabbed hold of my hips with both hands and pumped even faster, if that was possible. His angle shifted with that slight change, and I lost that zinging sensation that had been about to make me combust.

“Jesus, sugar, you’re about to squeeze my damn dick off.” The words were grunted and punctuated by each thrust he made before finally, I felt him swell even larger inside of me, if that was possible. He seemed to realize this too and pulled back almost in a panic. The moment his cock was free of my body, his cum was pumping out onto my pubes and then all over my stomach.

For a moment, we both just stared at the mess he’d made of me. Then, Damon’s sexier than usual grin appeared, and in

combination with his half-hooded eyes, he started rubbing his cum into my skin as if it were his own brand of lotion. He continued to mark me as if possessed by the action itself, and everywhere he touched burned with the knowledge that we were something more now.

At least, that's what went through my mind before he pulled back, and realized there was more going on down there than just a little cum. When Damon went to tuck himself back into his jeans, his brows pulled together in confusion before his eyes met mine again. There was no more half-lidded sexiness to be found though. Instead, there was only a worried stare.

"You were a virgin?" He asked hesitantly.

My answer was a simple nod of my head because I was honestly too stunned by everything that happened to make coherent conversation.

"Shit!" The word was a groan, and not a pleasant one. Damon moved quicker than I'd ever seen after that. He jumped out of the truck backward, as if I was on fire and he needed to escape. Then he leaned down, picked up my previously discarded clothing, and tossed them in for me. "Get dressed. We have to get you home."

Damon turned his back to me, as if seeing me get dressed was too intimate, despite having just had sex, and rubbing his cum into my body moments ago. The sour feeling that developed in my stomach made the aches in my body seem to disappear. I could hear him mumbling, almost as if he were cussing himself out, and that just made the awful, sick feeling in my gut worse. I had just lost my virginity to the boy I'd been crushing on since I was twelve and he was fourteen.

Now, at sixteen and days away from eighteen we were probably still too young, but I loved him and if he just gave us a chance, I knew he could love me too. Obviously, we were good at sex together. Madeline had told me that orgasms never happened on the first time, and that they definitely never happened just from a man being inside of you.

If that was true, then what Damon and I had together physically was even more magical than it felt. I knew that had been the tingly, out-of-this-world feeling I was chasing just before he changed the angle of his thrusts. If we had more time, I bet it would have happened for me. It felt like we were made for one another in that moment.

“You dressed yet?” Damon snapped, dragging me back from the fantasy land I’d been dwelling in. I buttoned my shorts and pulled my shirt down so everything was covered again.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Slide over so we can go.”

A chill ran up my spine when he told me to slide over, but I listened, and pushed my body as far against the passenger door of the truck as I could, leaving a gaping chasm between Damon and me. He didn’t speak the whole rest of the way home, and instead white-knuckled the steering wheel of his truck so hard, I actually worried he might yank the damn thing off. My thoughts stayed inside my head, because I figured they were safer there.

When we pulled up in his driveway, he cut the truck off and got out immediately, not even saying a word to me. Damon didn’t even look back once as he entered his house while I was

still sitting, stunned, in the passenger side of his truck. I watched as his bedroom light came on and then flicked off a couple minutes later. It was only then, when the reality of my situation finally penetrated, that I moved from his truck and ran across the road to my own house.

My parents were out tonight at the clubhouse, celebrating with the rest of the MC. Dad was a biker, same as Damon's father. They were in the same club, which is how we ended up being neighbors. Not that it mattered.

I never bothered turning on any lights in the house as I moved to my room. Once there, I didn't turn any on either. I just went to my bed and collapsed down as the tears began to spill free from my stupid head. Damon hadn't cared that it was me. "Sugar" was probably what he called all the girls who got naked for him. It wasn't special. I had not been special.

My heart felt like it was going to break into pieces as I lie there in the dark smelling of him and of what we had done in his truck. Part of me wanted to jump in the shower and scrub myself free of the memories, but the other part of me just wanted to wallow in them for a little bit longer. That way, I could pretend that things had turned out differently. I wanted to pretend that it was the beginning of us. The start of something that would be a lifetime love, like what my own parents had. They had been high school sweethearts and I just knew it was meant to last between me and Damon, just like with my mom and dad. Maybe that had been a naïve, little girl fantasy, but it was something I had always hoped for.

2 - Waking Nightmares

Tiger Lily

If I thought the previous night had been just a dream, then what I woke to was nothing short of a nightmare.

Screaming.

Yelling.

Cussing.

Then the sound of glass shattering finally pulled me from my uneasy slumber. The clock beside my bed blared the red numbers at me, letting me know that it was only four in the morning.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I heard my dad yell.

I slowly crept out of my bedroom, to the banister at the top of the stairs where I could peek through the spindles of wood to see down below. Everything down there was all open from the entryway through the living room and straight to the kitchen. There wasn't a single part of the downstairs that couldn't be seen from this vantage point except the hallway that went back to the master suite that was my parent's bedroom and the garage door on the wall opposite them. It was a weird setup, but one my dad had specifically planned out because he could be closer to his bikes in case of an emergency with the club.

“I don’t know,” my mom cried. She was sitting there on the old couch that had once been a weird, barn and flowers pattern that was done with brown, gold and orange tones on top of a beige canvas. It had probably been hideous when it was brand new, and they had inherited it from my mom’s parents, but now it was just worn out and dingy. You couldn’t even see the cabin in the design on the back of either side of the couch where people sat the most. The one in the middle was really the only one you could still make out.

“He was my fucking brother!” My dad didn’t have any actual blood brothers, so he must have been talking about a man from his club.

“What do you want me to say?” My mom yelled at him as she angrily swiped the blackened tear trails from her face. Mascara smeared across her cheeks as she did, making her look worse.

“I want you to say that I didn’t see what I saw! I want you to say that you haven’t been spreading your fucking legs for my club brother.”

Silence greeted my father’s accusations. That couldn’t be right. Could it? My mom would never cheat on him. They had been in love with one another since high school. That’s what my mother always told me.

Something must have shown in my mom’s face that I didn’t catch because my dad took in a sharp breath and stepped back as if he had been physically attacked. “It wasn’t the first time, was it?”

Mom shook her head back and forth and sobbed even harder. “I’m so sorry, Robbie.”

“You’re sorry?” He asked, and it was my father who was sobbing now. He stumbled until the backs of his legs hit his recliner and then he just plopped down on it as if his body could no longer hold his weight upright. “How long, Mary?”

“Please!” She pleaded with him. “Please, can we just forget...”

“Forget?” His anger was evident in the tone. “Forget that I caught you fucking one of my brothers at the clubhouse tonight when you thought I was in a meeting?” He scoffed and then launched a coaster across the room where it broke into pieces. “Or should I forget that you don’t seem to want to answer my question? How fucking long, Mary?”

“Three years,” was her answer.

No way. My parents were in love. There was no way that my mom had been cheating on my dad for three years with a man from his club.

“When?” My father’s broken voice crashed into the silence of the room.

“Robbie, please, don’t do this,” my mom begged.

He laughed, though the sound was anything but humorous. “You don’t want me to do this? You don’t want me to ask the tough questions? Or is it that you don’t want to give me the answers? Hell, you say three years, but now I’m wondering. Should we go back even further? What about Lily?”

“What about Lily?” My mom’s startled voice cried out.

“Is she even mine?”

“How could you ask that?”

“Because you are a disloyal, cheating cunt! After what I saw tonight, I have every right to ask that.”

The knots in my stomach tightened again and I felt as though I was going to vomit. I always thought I looked somewhat like my dad. I had his darker hair and a slight cleft in my chin like him. We shared the same blue-green eyes too. The rest of me was all my mom, but every time I’d ever looked in the mirror, I always smiled because I saw their love looking back at me. I was always a mix of the two people who I ached to be like. Now, everything was in question, including my paternity.

“Lily is yours, Rob. You were the only man I was ever with back then.”

“Back then,” he scoffed again, hanging on those last two words. “I’ll be getting a test done, just to be sure. She’s mine now, no matter what, but you better believe me when I say... She is the only female that is still mine.”

“Rob, no!” My mom yelled, clearly understanding the meaning behind his words. “We can work through this. It was a mistake. He was just a mistake. You were always gone so much and...” Her voice trailed off as she looked away from him. I think even she knew there was no excusing a three-year long affair as ‘just a mistake’.

“I don’t want to hear it. All the years we’ve been together, I’ve never stepped out on you. Never even let a club whore look at me sideways, let alone touched one. Never in a million years would I have disrespected you that way. Not only did you disrespect me, and what we had, but you did it in front of my club brothers. Hell, you did it with one of my club

brothers.” He grinned then, an evil look that I would have never associated with my father because all I had ever known of him was the good man that he was to me and my mom.

“You know the punishment for fucking another brother’s old lady?” He asked my mom and whatever color she still held in her face under the mascara-laden tear tracks drained away.

“You can’t!” Her insistence broke my father a little more. I could see it in the bend of his shoulders. The bow of his head. The way he seemed to curl in on himself spoke volumes.

“Pack your shit and go.” He finally told my mother.

“Where am I supposed to go?” She asked him.

“Don’t fuckin’ care, but you’re not staying here.”

My mother stood, her long blond hair a waterfall coming down on either side of her face, hiding some of the sadness I knew she felt. She waited, watching my father with absolute devastation swimming in her eyes. I had no doubt, seeing her in that moment, that she regretted her actions. It was too late though. There was also no doubt of that when my father wouldn’t even look at her.

“You’re banned from the clubhouse.”

“I figured,” she answered meekly.

“And Whisper will be gone by morning.”

“Please, if you ever loved me, don’t kill him because of this.”

My father stood right in her face then. “If you ever loved me, it would have never happened. This is on you. And him. Don’t appeal to my love when you betrayed it.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Not my fuckin’ problem anymore, Mary.”

“So, your daughter isn’t your problem now?” She asked snidely.

“My daughter ain’t going nowhere. She’s safe and sound in her bed, *in my house*, where she belongs.”

“You can’t take my daughter from me too!”

“Bitch! I didn’t take shit from you! You are fuckin’ lucky that I have to answer to that girl upstairs or you’d be suffering the same fate as Whisper. Instead, you get to live with the fact that you killed that man and lost everything you ever had too.” He turned to walk away from her then. “Now, get the fuck out of my house and don’t you ever come back here.”

My mom picked up her purse and walked out the door with her head hung low, shoulders slumped, and not one single other possession to her name. There wasn’t a damn thing she could do about it either. My father had spared her life and that was all she was allowed to walk away with. It was the price of her betrayal.

In a way, I understood it because my father was hurting, and she did that to him. On the other hand, I knew there were plenty of married men in the club who cheated on their old ladies with club whores or even other women who came out to the clubhouse to party with the bikers. They never suffered any punishment for their disloyalty to their women. It didn’t seem fair to me, but then again, I couldn’t fathom cheating on someone I loved.

My mind flashed to the other drama of the night, to being with Damon, and then to him so coldly walking away from me. I couldn't deal with that at the moment, so I quietly made my way down the stairs and into the kitchen instead.

As soon as my father caught sight of me, he winced, probably knowing he would have to explain my mom's absence now.

"Whatcha doin' out of bed darlin'?"

"Couldn't sleep when things started breaking," I explained as I looked around at the broken dishes in the kitchen. Those must have been the noise that woke me to begin with, since I only saw him throw and break the one coaster in the living room.

"Yeah," he hemmed and hawed while drawing a hand across the back of his neck. Finally, eyes that matched my own came back up to look at me. "How much did you hear?"

"Pretty much all of it. Enough, I suppose." There was no point in lying to the man. We were going to be on the rest of our path together without my mom from here on out. Better to start out on the right foot.

"I don't doubt that you're my daughter. Even if you weren't biologically, you would still be mine!" His vehemence damn near stopped my heart. "You will always be my little girl, Lily. I need you to understand that." He stepped closer and then tucked a finger under my chin, bringing my head up taller so our eyes met. "Those are my eyes in your pretty little head," he told me as he also bopped my chin dimple with his finger. "That's all me too."

“What’s going to happen now?”

If a sigh could be soul-shattering, then that’s what my father’s sounded like as he tried to figure out the answer to my question. “One day at a time, baby girl. We’re going to get through this.”

“Do you not want me to see Mom anymore?”

“Damn, I wish I had a few days from now to answer these questions, Lil. My rage says, ‘hell no!’. I know that’s not okay though. Your mom cheated on me, not you. If you want to see her once she gets herself set up somewhere, that’s on you. The only thing I ask is that you don’t use anything of mine to help her out.”

“I would never,” I told him honestly. He nodded his head.

“Come on baby,” he put his arm around me and started guiding me back to the stairs. “Been a long fuckin’ night. You need to get some sleep.”

“What about you?”

He glanced around the house. “I’m gonna clean my mess up and then go to bed too.” He turned to go back toward the kitchen. “School starts up again in a few weeks, let me know if you need anything specific.”

I’d like to say that my dad was just trying to find anything possible to think about in order to hide from reality in the moment, but the truth was, he had been the one to take me shopping the last few years. Suddenly, I was beginning to wonder if my mom hadn’t been cheating on me too. She stopped doing a lot of ‘mom things’ years ago and my dad picked up the slack whenever he was home. I never

complained. Actually, I always assumed it was just because I was getting older, and he was afraid to miss out on time with me before I went off to college one day.

As I climbed the stairs, and went back to my bedroom, it finally hit me that a lot of my life had been sheltered. It didn't matter that I was a club princess for an MC that wasn't exactly on the straight and narrow. None of it ever touched me. Nothing bad ever had - at least not until tonight. Tonight, I learned a lot of cold hard truths.

People couldn't be trusted.

Love didn't matter.

A heart could break and still function.

My mom walked out without even asking to say goodbye to me.

I didn't even get to have a mom and daughter talk with her about losing my virginity to the boy across the street. The same one she knew I'd been crushing on for years. The same one that she had tried and failed to talk me out of falling in love with. Mom always said he would only break my heart, but she never warned me that she would break it too.

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3 - Testing, Testing

Tiger Lily

Six Weeks Later

Geometry sucked.

“How did you do on that test?” Stacey Chambers asked as we huddled our books to our chests while shuffling out of class toward our lockers.

I rolled my eyes at her and frowned.

“That good, huh?” Her brows drew down in concern. “You don’t look like you slept well. Were you up all night studying?”

I shook my head. “No. I wish that was the reason, then maybe I wouldn’t have bombed that test. I was up most of the morning puking.”

“Again?” Stacey asked with a wince, and I knew what she was thinking. It was why I had another test to take today. This one was way more important though. “Remember what we talked about?” She asked.

I nodded. “I have it to take later.”

“Do you want me to come by and be there with you?”

I shook my head. “I think I need to do this by myself. If it’s...” I couldn’t bring myself to finish that sentence. “He’ll be home for a little while before it’s time to go hit up Friday

night parties. If I need to say something, it will be the best time and I think it'll go over better without witnesses." It was my turn to wince. I knew if I had someone at my back when I approached Damon with my suspicions about why I'd been throwing up every morning for more than a week, that he would flip out and not take the news well.

What was I thinking? I was only sixteen and he was about to turn eighteen in two weeks. There was no way he wasn't going to flip out. The truth was, I just didn't want anyone else to see my humiliation when it happened.

It had been six weeks since the night I lost both my virginity and my mother. Mom never came back, never called, and never even bothered to send a letter or anything. She just left that night never to return. Damon had also done a disappearing act. Sure, I saw him coming or going from his house across the street a few times, but for the most part, he avoided me like the plague. He also got himself a shiny new motorcycle that he'd been riding. It was the only reason I knew he had been home over the past three weeks. Seeing him in school was becoming less of a thing, and it wouldn't surprise me at all to hear that he dropped out eventually, even though it was his senior year.

Getting through the rest of the day at school was pure torture and I just knew that at any given moment, the pregnancy test sitting in my bag would jump out and announce itself to every single one of my classmates. The thing felt like a ticking time bomb sitting in my bag.

"Are you ready for this?"

I shook my head, feeling nauseous again as I headed to catch the bus back home. Stacey didn't have her license yet

because her mom couldn't afford the insurance for her just yet. It wouldn't be much longer though. We both had our learner's permits and I kept my fingers crossed that my dad would help me get a car. Granted, he might just throw me out on the streets if the test I had to take came back positive. Maybe, I'd end up left to whatever fate had befallen my now absent mother.

~*~

“Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!”

The chant fell from my lips as I sat there stunned, staring at those two pink lines on the test. I didn't even have to wait for the requisite amount of time. No, instead, I watched as the first line appeared and then the second one developed only seconds behind it. How could this be? It was my one-and-only time having sex and Damon never spoke to me again afterward. It was like I suddenly developed a fatal disease, and he was afraid of catching it.

Actually, that was stupid. I was certain that Damon not speaking to me was more about the fact that he was prospecting for the club that both of our fathers were members of. Damon knew my dad would give him shit, and maybe tank his chances of membership anytime soon, just because he was the one to pop my cherry. He might be the son of a member, but if Dad found out about our night, he could deny membership to Damon damn near permanently. Voting on prospects to members had to be unanimous. At least, that's what Dad told me when I asked why they didn't just make Damon a member.

Okay, yeah, thinking about the club was easier than dealing with the fact that I was sixteen and pregnant. That meant I would spend the majority of my sixteenth year with a giant belly and then become a mom before I even turned seventeen. My dad was so going to kill me. Maybe I wouldn't have to worry about being a mom then. I'd be dead.

No matter what, I had a duty to do. I'd once seen a club girl ostracized, and her baby taken away, because Maker, an older member, was never told that he was going to be a daddy. He accidentally ran into her somewhere and the boy she had with him looked just like him. That boy was four years old now and his mother hadn't been seen around in a long time.

There was no way I would let that happen to me. No freaking way.

I stood up, grabbed the test and plopped it into a plastic bag, because ew – I'd just peed on it – and then headed across the street to Damon's house. I saw both his truck and bike out there in the driveway when the bus had dropped me off, and I hadn't heard either of the engines start up since.

Knocking on the door didn't work, but I could hear music somewhere inside the house so I tried the knob, thinking he just couldn't hear me. It was unlocked. With my heart beating wildly in my throat – where it had lodged, as if trying to expel itself from my body – I took one dreaded step after another toward the room I knew to be Damon's. His bedroom was on the first floor. The house he lived in didn't even really have a full second story the way mine did. His dad had left it open as a loft area where he had his own bedroom and bathroom area while Damon took one of two downstairs rooms. You might

ask how in the world I knew that. It's because our dads were best friends and I'd been to the house before, more times than I could count.

While Damon had never really given me the time of day, I'd noticed everything about him, his house, and... Shoot. That just made me sound even more pathetic. In my defense, when I'd done most of my noticing things, I had been twelve years old.

As I crept down the hall toward his room, the music grew louder. When I finally got there, the door was cracked open, as if someone attempted to shut it, but it didn't latch all the way.

The door creaked noisily when I pushed it open, and there was no holding back the loud gasp that left me at the sight. Brinley, the cheerleader from hell and bane of my existence at school, was in Damon's bed with him. His hands were on her boobs, under her shirt. Her hand was inside his pants that were already unbuttoned and unzipped. It looked like they were well on their way toward having sex in an actual bed. Something I had yet to experience.

Their mouths came apart as they both swiveled their heads to see who had the nerve to interrupt them. I planned to back up and just bolt out of there and tell him some other time when my arch nemesis wasn't around, but her words stopped me cold and kicked in my fight response rather than the flight I had been leaning toward.

"Oh, look honey, virgin Lily was probably hoping you'd pop her cherry for her since she's so in love with you." The snide remark stopped me in my tracks, and I turned narrowed

eyes on the bitch while she laughed at her own joke. The joke was on her though.

“He already did, and now I’m pregnant with his baby, honey!” I lashed the words out in front of me like a weapon and they struck true. I watched momentarily as all the color drained from her face while she shifted her attention from me to Damon.

I hadn’t planned on sticking around after dropping that bomb, especially considering my feelings were about as fragile as blown glass. So, I turned and walked right into mine and Damon’s fathers. The pair stood there with jaws hanging open, shock clear in their expressions, and that fragility I just spoke of had me breaking right there in front of them. I wasn’t ready. Not for them to know.

My father immediately pulled me into his chest, and if I wasn’t mistaken, Boone – otherwise known as Mr. Donovan – was rubbing my back reassuringly before he stepped away.

“Boy, you better get rid of that pricey whore of yours and get your ass out here now!”

It was an order delivered from father to son as my own dad ushered me toward the kitchen. The two of them had apparently been drinking beer and shooting the shit quietly when I passed by them to get to Damon’s room. They were so shocked to see me there that they never said a word, and instead just followed behind me. I never noticed because my nerves had my heartbeat banging away inside my head so loud that it was all I could focus on until Brinley’s evil mouth opened and spewed her nasty brand of venom.

Brinley rushed by and carried her ass out the door in a huff, slamming the damn thing behind her. The sound carried in thick waves through the quiet of the house before Damon finally joined us in the kitchen. My father stood, holding me against him, as Damon took the seat across the bar counter where his dad was also standing.

“Now, darlin’, I know what we just heard,” Boone started. “But what I need to know is if you were just spouting off at that evil little cunt, or if what you said was true.”

My father pried my arms from around his waist so he could see me, and that’s when he noticed the little plastic bag gripped tightly in my hands. He took it from me, and a look of complete sorrow fell across his face. My heart plummeted from where it had been seated in my throat all the way down to my stomach at his reaction. At least, that’s how it felt to suffer knowing I disappointed my dad. He tossed the bag onto the counter where Boone and Damon could see.

It took a Herculean effort, but I managed to turn and face Boone and Damon. Father and son’s eyes were both glued to the test for a moment, before Boone shuddered and took a deep breath. He didn’t manage to get any words out though because his son beat him to the punch.

“How the fuck does that stick equate to it being my kid?”

I gasped, tears brimming behind my eyes at his accusation. “You know I was a virgin,” I offered quietly in my own defense.

Boone smacked one of his big hands up against the back of his son’s head. “That girl has been in love with you since she was just a wee thing. As if any of us had any doubts.”

My eyes widened at the knowledge that I had not kept my crush as big of a secret as I thought I had over the years. That was even more humiliating.

“We only fucked once,” Damon said and again his father smacked him in the back of the head.

“Boy, I’m telling you one time, that you will be respectful here.”

My father was already bristling behind me at the crass way Damon spoke of taking my virginity. If only Dad knew exactly how it happened, I had no doubt Damon would already be knocked out, if not dead.

“Jesus!” Damon hissed. “Sorry. We were only together that one time.”

“What the fuck were you thinking?” His father yelled at him, losing the cool edge of composure he’d held for the rest of this conversation. “That’s Robbie’s kid! I warned you that she was hands-fucking-off!”

Damon swallowed thickly and turned so that his body was facing mostly away from me and toward his own father. His shoulders slumped. “I was pissed at Brinley. We broke up at the field party before school because someone told her family we were together, and they didn’t like it. I found *her* trying to walk home from the party by herself.” When he said *her*, it was with acid in the tone and a slight tip of his head backward indicating where I stood.

“And you decided to play ‘rules of the road’ with her?”

Okay, I was stumped by that, but my father wasn’t. He growled low in his throat at that. Damon glanced over quickly

before looking away, obviously worried that my dad might scale the counter that separated them.

“No. I wasn’t charging her ass, grass, or cash for the ride. That wasn’t payment. We argued about something and then, I don’t know, one thing led to another. I pulled over and…”

His voice trailed off, but his father picked up there. “So, you decided to deflower my best friend’s daughter on the side of the road in your pickup truck?” Boone’s voice held an incredulous tone as he spoke, and I didn’t miss the chastisement that went with it.

“It just happened. I was pissed at Brinley,” he stated again, as if that made everything better instead of worse.

“Let me get this straight. You were pissed that your spoiled cunt of a girlfriend was only taking you for a bad boy ride and you decided it was cool to take your frustrations out on my daughter?” My father asked.

Damon sighed and shook his head. “It’s not entirely like that.”

“Then what the fuck is it like, boy?” My father seethed.

“Come on! Look at her!” Damon demanded. “Lily’s gorgeous. It’s not like it was a hardship to go there. I never did before because Boone said she was off limits, and I started dating Brinley for most of last year and this summer.” That was news to me. They must have been trying to keep things hidden since her family wouldn’t approve.

“Did you suddenly think your dad would be okay with it, since Lil was conveniently placed in your path that night?”

“No. That’s why I stayed away after.”

“You’re a fuckin’ coward!” My father launched those words at him and from the looks of Damon, they cut him deep.

I stood there, shaking in my shoes before my dad turned his anger on me. “Why didn’t you say anything about this?”

I hung my head, allowing my hair to curtain around me in the hopes that it would hide my tears. “I couldn’t,” I whispered.

“Why the fuck couldn’t you? It’s not like we’ve never had conversations about whether or not you need birth control or whatever.” He was right, we did have those conversations – the ones I should have had with my mom if she had been around more.

“Dad, please,” I whimpered.

“Nuh-uh Lil, you’re old enough to get knocked up, you’re old enough to tell me why you never came to me about this shit happening or the possibility that a baby could result.”

“It happened *that* night.” I tried to emphasize what I was talking about. The importance of why I wasn’t able to confide in my parents about losing my virginity and maybe needing to see a doctor. I had promised my dad that when the time came, I would talk to him like an adult so he could make sure I was staying healthy. Granted, I always thought I’d be able to tell my mom first and that we could have a mother-daughter bonding moment over it. Yet another of my naïve dreams that wouldn’t come true.

“Yeah, got that it was at night since he said you were at a field party. You could have said something when you got home.”

Sobs ripped out of me at this whole impossible situation. “It was the night mom left,” I finally managed to choke out.

“Ah, fuck!” My dad groaned before pulling me back into his arms where he rocked me gently back and forth.

“Shit, boy! You fuck up – you fuck up good.” Disappointment dripped from Boone’s words. “You’re going to make this right.”

“I’ll pay for it to be taken care of,” Damon sputtered quickly.

“What the fuck did you just say?” My father yelled over the top of my head. He held me so tight, it was bordering on a painful moment. “Did you just insinuate that my girl needs to get rid of her baby to suit you?”

“I just figured, with our ages...” Damon started to say.

“Ain’t no way in hell my Lil would ever choose to do that.” My dad wasn’t wrong. We had discussed those options once upon a time and he told me if it ever came to it, he would support whatever decision I made. And I politely told him thank you and that it would never be that. It was fine for other people, but I couldn’t see myself doing it. That hadn’t changed.

“Why don’t we let this simmer, give it a few days for everyone to think things through and then Lily can make her decision.”

“Why is it just her decision if it’s my kid?”

“Because it’s her fuckin’ body that has to grow another human being, idiot.” His father explained.

It was then that Damon turned to me and said the absolute worst thing he could have ever said. “Look, if you’re gonna have it, I’ll sign whatever and you can keep it, but I don’t want a kid.”

“You little mother fucking piece of shit!” My dad yelled as he let me go and launched himself across the room.

“Go Lily! Go home. Your dad will be over soon,” Boone called as he attempted to get between my father and Damon. I did just that. I left the pregnancy test, all three men, and hauled ass out of there like my tail-end was on fire.

I was just about to cross the street when a slow clapping started up somewhere over my left shoulder. That’s when I saw Brinley’s baby blue Mustang for the first time. It was such a stupid color for a muscle car. She didn’t deserve it.

“Way to go!” She smirked. “I heard everything. Looks like trying to trap him into something with a baby isn’t going to work out so well for you, you little psycho.”

I didn’t say a word, just stood there with my fists clenched at my side. That wasn’t enough for Brinley though. No! She sashayed her ass over to me, grinning the whole time.

“I don’t want to keep Damon because he’ll never fit into what I want. I need a man who will earn more than six figures a year and keep me living in a lifestyle I enjoy. He’s only ever going to be a dirty biker, but he works to piss off daddy when I need him to. Plus, he’s a good lay when he’s not trying to run away from you as fast as he can. I wouldn’t know anything about that though. Not like you do.”

She laughed and my fist balled tighter at my side before I felt her poke a finger into my shoulder. “He doesn’t want you or your little spawn! You’d do best to keep this quiet because I don’t need anyone knowing that he stupidly knocked your ass up while we were on a break.”

“Fuck you!” I hissed from between my clenched teeth.

“No, sweetie, you’re the one that’s fucked, but what you’re not going to do is bring the rest of us down with you. Now, be a good little shit and get that abortion or I might just have to arrange one for you.”

And that was it. My resolve had been tested. She didn’t just threaten me that time. She threatened my baby. I turned so fast she didn’t even have a chance to step back fully. I clocked her when she was mid-step, just about the same time my father, Boone, and Damon came rushing out the front door. Brinley’s nose immediately spurted blood everywhere as she stumbled and fell flat on her ass, but that wasn’t good enough for me. I didn’t let up. Punch after punch landed against her face, even as the bitch tried to pull my hair to get me off her.

“You think you’re going to organize an abortion for me?” I screamed in her face. “You think you’re going to threaten my baby and have no consequences for it?” I felt one of her teeth give way under that punch. “I will fucking kill you!”

My father lifted me off the bitch and pulled me back far enough that if Brinley could have peeled herself off the pavement, she wouldn’t be in range to throw any punches or kicks of her own.

“Do you see what that psycho did to me?” She screamed at Damon and Boone.

“Yeah, and I heard why she did it,” Boone snapped at her. “Come near her again, and your family will never find your remains.”

“W-what? Damon!” Her eyes quickly sought out the asshole who had remained quiet until now.

“The fucking windows of the house are open, you stupid cunt! We heard every word you spewed at her,” Boone informed Brinley. “Probably the same way you heard what we said inside, yeah?”

It hadn't been wise on her part to speak to me as loudly as she had, but then again, I think a certain amount of adrenaline was involved in that non-decision on her part.

“If you even think of pressing charges, you will disappear. If you even think of going within ten feet of my daughter, you will fucking disappear. You try to get any of your little friends to bother her, and you will fucking disappear right along with the ones stupid enough to follow your orders. You feel me?”

My father's threats had Brinley shaking where she stood, once she was able to drag herself off the ground.

“When your family asks what the fuck happened to your face; you better make some shit up about getting mugged while shopping. And here's a tip, make sure there aren't any cameras around wherever you tell them it happened.”

“If one fucking pig rolls up to our door accusing my son or Rob's daughter of shit, you and your whole family line will dis-a-fucking-pear, bitch. Never liked your stuck-up ass following my son around. Nothing but fucking trouble.”

Brinley had been inching closer to her car during Boone's tirade, but she stopped there with her hand on the door before opening it. "I'm not the one who got knocked up by him," she answered back snidely.

"And thank fuck for that," Boone shot back.

Brinley didn't waste any time after that before getting in her car and reversing away from us. She was either too scared or too frazzled to take a minute to turn around. Instead, she backed all the way down the street until a cross street was available for her to turn down. Then, she managed to drive the wrong way down a one-way street to get away.

"Come on, baby girl, let's go ice those knuckles."

My eyes drifted down to check out the damage to my hands, but when I noticed the tooth lying there on the ground instead, I grinned. Boone saw what I was looking at and took in the grin on my face.

"Damn brother, your girl is blood thirsty. Almost a shame we don't have women riding in the MC."

"Almost," my father added as he wrapped his arm around my shoulder and turned us toward our house. Damon didn't say another word and I didn't bother to look back at him either. I had just beaten the shit out of his girlfriend, and I was pregnant with his baby. What else was there to say?

4 - The Damage is Done

Tiger Lily

“He doesn’t want to be with me,” I argued with my father again as he put a crown of delicate little white flowers on my head.

“Baby girl, there are things that need to be done sometimes. Damon needs to take responsibility for his actions and so do you.”

“I didn’t plan this,” I told him, and not for the first time, because after hearing his now ex-girlfriend talk about me being a psycho who plotted to trap him with a baby, that was the line Damon had been using in order to try to get out of our current situation.

“I know you didn’t. Hell, he knows you didn’t, baby girl. That little shit is the one that offered to drive you home. He’s the one who pulled over on the side of the road, hid his truck in the trees, and did what he did. Don’t you worry, we are under no illusions about what went down.”

“Don’t you think this will just make everything worse?”

My father shook his head. “Nope. I think it will all get better. It might take some time for the two of you to get used to one another, but eventually, I think real feelings can

develop. You're going to be taking care of this baby together. Before long, it will bond you."

My eyes moved from the bottom of the mirror where the silver slipper shoes adorned my feet. They were more like ballet flats than anything, but I just didn't feel comfortable wearing heels and my dad wouldn't let me wear my sneakers under the gown he'd gotten me.

The gown was a simple, strapless, ivory sheath with a sinched, beaded bodice that managed to highlight my B-cups rather than make me look like I had no boobs at all. I don't know where my dad found the dress, or how he got the perfect fit, since I refused to go dress shopping with him, but I had to admit that it made me look elegant.

"You look beautiful, baby."

"I don't want to do this," I admitted again while that sick feeling rumbled in my belly.

"You've been in love with him since you were little. I would think this was your dream come true."

I shook my head. "Not like this. In my dreams, he loved me back. This is more like my nightmares, where he's forced to marry me and will never love me."

"Ah, sweet girl, I need you to trust me. It'll happen. Maybe not right away, but I promise, eventually, that boy is going to fall head over heels in love with you and wonder why the hell he was so stupid not to have done so sooner."

I hated my dad in that moment.

He was the sweetest man I had ever known – to me. He wanted only what was best, and maybe he even believed the

bullshit he was trying to sell me on. I didn't know. There was just no getting around the fact that my dad was trying to give me hope where I knew there was none. He was basically forcing me to go through the hairbrained scheme he and Boone had cooked up.

A legitimate, good ol' southern style shotgun wedding for yours truly and her baby's daddy. I thought these things didn't even happen anymore, but guess what? I had been wrong about that too.

"How did you even manage to convince him to go through with this?"

My dad shrugged. "He just finally came to terms with the fact that this was his kid you're carrying."

"We don't lie to one another," I reminded my dad.

His chuckle was the only answer that greeted me. When I poked him in the ribs he relented. "Fine, the boy isn't totally stupid. He knew there was no way in hell that he would ever become a member of the MC if he didn't do the right thing by you."

My heart sank because that was what this whole farce of a wedding boiled down to. Damon Donovan wanted to be a member of the MC for as long as I had a crush on him. Maybe longer. I wondered if there was a time limit on him doing the right thing, or if there was some sort of stipulation or out-clause for him in the end. If my father had anything to do with it, there wouldn't be.

"We don't lie," my father repeated, and I knew there was more and that I probably wouldn't like it. "Baby girl, this

won't be easy. Not at first. I want you to be hopeful for a future where the two of you have mutual respect and realize you're in love."

"But?" I countered quickly, knowing more was coming.

"But I don't want you to be crushed in the meantime when it doesn't start out that way."

That was all I needed to hear to understand that my marriage to Damon would be on paper only. He would be one of those MC men who used the whores at the clubhouse, who fucked the women who came to party, and who rarely – if ever – made it home to his wife and kid. We would be nothing more than a responsibility he didn't want and the only thing keeping him from finding his own happiness one day.

"What if I'm the one who doesn't want this?"

"I need you to give it five years, baby girl."

"Five years?" I asked hesitantly.

He nodded his head. "Five years. If you're not happy then, you can leave, and I will back your choice and make it happen."

"What about him? Does he get to haul ass in five years too, or is he stuck with me if I decide to stay?"

My father simply shook his head, making it clear that this was for life for Damon unless I chose to leave him. A knock on the door indicated that it was time, and my father put both his hands on my shoulders, squeezing gently.

"Everything will be okay, baby girl, I promise."

He stepped back and sniffed back some emotion that the man tried hard not to show before I whispered words to myself that would plague me forever. “We don’t lie.” I knew my father placating me that everything would be okay sounded just like that – a lie on his lips, even if he wanted the lie to be true.

My father walked me out into the back yard where they had set up a pergola at the end of a makeshift walkway. On either side, folding chairs sat witness to my impending nuptials. Some of the chairs were filled with men from the club. Others were filled with their women, all of whom looked upon me with sadness and maybe a little pity in their eyes. Then, there was my one friend who came to support me. Stacey sat front and center at the end of the aisle, almost as if she could catch me or help me flee from this craziness.

She gave me a quick thumbs up as my father began to walk me down the aisle toward the man who was being forced into this marriage with a girl he never wanted. He wore newer black jeans, his worn-in motorcycle boots, and a white dress shirt. Over top the dress shirt was his kutte, and there was no missing the fact that he’d been patched in as a member. His buddy, Charles Brothers, stood beside him. I hadn’t thought to make Stacey a bridesmaid, since this wasn’t a real wedding. I guess he needed to have a best man though. Charles was also working on getting his patch, though from the looks of his kutte, he was still a prospect. Both men wore them with pride. Both men were still just boys to the rest though. Damon was eighteen while Charles was a little younger.

Charles nudged Damon to get his attention. When Damon finally looked up, I could see what amounted to fear in his

eyes. Then determination steeled his spine as he glared me down until I stood right in front of him.

“Boy, if you don’t wipe that look off your face right now, we’ll be hosting a funeral instead of a wedding,” my father threatened him.

I couldn’t lift my eyes to see if Damon was still scowling after that. Instead, I kept my head bowed, almost as if I was praying throughout the whole service. When it was my turn to recite the vows, I did it so quietly, the preacher who was presiding had to ask me to repeat myself. The chuckles in the crowd just made me feel even queasier than I already did, and before I could finish reciting my vows, I threw up right beside the preacher’s shoes. Then I glanced up at him and off to the side in absolute horror.

“Fuckin’ great!” Damon huffed as Charles laughed. Meanwhile, the preacher side-stepped to the right, closer to Damon than me and moved the podium over to block the puddle of nerves that now soaked into the ground there. Thankfully, it was just grass, and would eventually wash away with the rain that was due later today. No muss, no fuss.

Worst wedding ever.

Stacey came waltzing up as if she totally belonged there, in the middle of my nuptials, and handed me a little wet wipe and a tiny bottle of water. Bless my bestie for being so damn kind and prepared.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, completely embarrassed as everyone just watched in complete and utter fucking silence. One sip of water just started my heaving all over again, to my complete mortification.

“Jesus,” Damon said before turning his back on me to speak quietly to Charles. Was it strange that I hadn’t noticed what road name they’d given to Damon?

Not that any of this mattered before, but it was ridiculous that my soon-to-be-husband found me completely disgusting and for good reason. Who pukes during their own wedding? Me. That’s who. The asshole could have at least asked if I was okay though, instead of turning his back on me and the mess I was making.

My best friend, Stacey, stood there and stared every single asshole in attendance down. “You all know she’s pregnant, right? She’s been sick a lot. If someone wants to get off their lazy ass and grab the girl some ginger ale or maybe a packet of crackers to help settle her stomach, that would be fantastic and then we can get this shit show over with!”

My father jumped into action then, but he was beat to the punch by an older woman who I wasn’t really familiar with. Camilla belonged to one of the men from the club, but she wasn’t his old lady. She was his mistress and that was about all I knew about her. It made me wonder if one day, I’d watch from the sidelines as my own husband’s mistress attended club events instead of me. If I had anything left to vomit, it probably would have come up at just the thought.

“Here you are, sweetie. This should help.”

Mistress or not, she was the only one to get off her ass, aside from my best friend, to help me. “Thank you.” I wish my words had come out stronger. I wish they hadn’t sounded like the pitiful whimper they were.

“You are strong, resilient, and you will not let this shit beat you in front of these assholes,” she whispered to me. It was only then that I allowed our eyes to meet. “When this is all over, and you’ve had a moment to settle, I’m going to come see you and we’re going to have a chat about how you’re going to get through this and come out with your head held high, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” was my only response. She popped the top on the can of ginger ale and stood by, blocking everyone else’s view of me while I took a few cautious sips. Then she took the can back from me.

“I think that’s enough for now. Don’t want a repeat performance,” she teased with a wink, and it was the first time I managed a smile all day. I nodded my thanks and both Camilla and Stacey took their seats as I moved back into place and turned my focus to the preacher who smiled kindly at me.

“Sorry.” The apology rolled off my tongue before I could pull it back.

“Sometimes, the blessings we bear come with challenges that must be met.” The man glanced sidelong at Damon and rolled his eyes quickly back to me. “I think your strength shows even as you feel weak. Others aren’t yet wise enough to understand these things.”

It was a dig at my future husband’s response to me being sick at the altar. He had not been amongst the three people who offered to step forward and help me in my time of need. Instead, he chose to shoot the shit with his best man while everyone else took care of me. It was exactly how I thought

this marriage was going to go, so I wasn't sure why I was suddenly so disappointed.

I repeated my vows for the preacher, audibly that time. Damon did the same. There were no rings to exchange, something my father growled about from the audience. There was another moment, where everyone waited with bated breath for something to happen, that simply didn't. Murmurs shot up around the crowd before the preacher moved on and pronounced us husband and wife.

"You may kiss the bride," he insisted while shifting his focus to Damon.

It was Damon's turn to scoff. "You're damn near standing in her puddle of puke, if you think I'm getting anywhere near her mouth right now, you're sadly mistaken. I think we'll skip that part."

"You little mother fucker!" My dad yelled before he charged my new husband and started pummeling him right there in front of everyone gathered. I was quickly pulled back and out of the way by Charles who leaned in to whisper in my ear.

"So sorry, darlin'. I'm sure this isn't how you thought your wedding day would go."

"No," I admitted. "It's exactly how I thought it would go when I was told I had to marry him."

Charles stiffened and turned me around so that I was facing him and not the brawl that was going on a few feet from where we now stood. "You didn't want to marry Merc?"

"Merc?" I questioned.

“Damon,” he corrected. The minute he said Merc, it clicked why he might earn that road name and it made me smile. Damon Mercury Donovan had always been embarrassed by his middle name. Apparently, someone must have found out and told the men of the club. I would bet money that someone was my father, just to fuck with him a little bit harder. I chuckled at the thought.

“Now, answer the question,” Charles demanded in that alpha biker way that he was growing into.

“Of course, I didn’t want to marry a man who wants nothing to do with me,” I answered, voice rising above the noise behind us. “Why on earth would I ever want to marry some asshole who only saw me as a burden, and one time as a convenient fuck, after he temporarily broke up with his bitchy girlfriend who was only using him to piss her daddy off in the first place?”

The silence, along with his bulging eyes, as Charles stood there with his mouth gaping open must have meant that I shocked him. I guess everyone thought that this was all my idea and that I really had trapped Damon – no Merc – with a baby.

“The minute he told me he would pay for my abortion was the minute he no longer mattered to me. I would rather be out on my own, homeless, with no job, and trying to figure my life out than to be stuck married to someone who will never – in this lifetime or the next – care one iota about me or my baby.”

It was only as those angry words left my lips that I realized all the noise had ceased. I closed my eyes, took in a deep breath, and then turned slowly to see that every single eye in

the place was trained on me. That included Damon's, which was quickly swelling closed. He turned and walked away from everyone then, leaving me to stand there and face the music all by myself. I figured it was just a prelude to the way the rest of our time together would go.

My eyes found my father's and I could see the remorse there. "Why did you make me do this?" I asked him again as emotion cracked my voice. "Why would you put me in this position?"

Dad sighed before answering. "You put yourself in this position, Lil. I just made you stand up and face the consequences, same as Boone did for his son."

I nodded my head in understanding. This was my punishment for being stupid enough to get pregnant. I knew I had gotten off too easy, without my dad's wrath ever being aimed at me. I just hadn't realized how quiet his wrath could be. "Five years, and then I'm done. No matter what!"

His gaze swung from me to Boone. Both men appeared resigned to what I said, which clued me in to the fact that they'd both agreed to my out-clause. They hadn't given Damon the same out because he had been given other outlets instead. I had never resented my father more than I did in that moment. I know he truly believed that, given time, something would develop between Merc and me, but I knew better.

Today should have proved it to him, if nothing else did. Merc never wanted to be my friend, let alone boyfriend, husband, or father to my child. This forced marriage was going to destroy us, not bring us together.

5 - The Gifts and Strings

Tiger Lily

Our wedding present came as a huge surprise to both of us. Once Merc – I refused to call him Damon any longer – managed to pull his shit together and ice his eye down, we were summoned to the backyard again by our fathers. Merc’s mother had been gone since about a year after they moved into the neighborhood. She took off with some man in a band and never returned.

No one stuck around after the shit show of a wedding for a reception, cake, or dancing because this wasn’t a real celebration. Instead, they had all hauled ass back to the clubhouse to drink, fuck, and talk about the shitstorm their youngest brother had gotten himself mixed up in. I was pretty sure that I heard something about a new rule for the MC – something about members not fucking around with daughters and sisters just like it was for not fucking around with another member’s old lady. I rolled my eyes at the thought. Somehow, I didn’t think it would go through. I loved my dad and some of his friends, but they didn’t honestly care enough. If they did, I never would have been forced into this marriage to begin with.

“What’s going on?” Merc asked as he strolled up and dropped the ice pack from his face.

“Damn, son, Robbie fucked you up.”

“Yeah, whatever. I had it comin’.” Merc told him while avoiding all eye contact with me. I wasn’t about to argue the point. He did have it coming.

“We wanted to give you guys your wedding present,” Boone spoke.

“No offense, Boone, but I don’t think I want any more presents you guys are offering.”

Boone chuckled, as did my father. Merc just looked at me as if I had two heads and they were both spinning.

“I get it, darlin’. Here’s the deal, we know neither of you wanted this.” Merc scoffed as if he thought I was getting exactly what I wanted. Boone ignored him as my father bristled, ready for a fight again. “It’s what you’re getting anyway because my grandchild deserves a home with both parents in it.” He pulled out an official looking paper then. “The house is yours. Deed is now in both of your names. That means it belongs to you equally.” Boone looked at me pointedly. “If you decide you really want to go when your five years are up, you can keep the house or sell it. If you sell, the money gets split between the three of you.”

“The three of us?” Merc stupidly asked. I guess he already forgot the reason we had to get married today.

“You, your wife,” yep, he flinched at that word, “and your child.”

“So, she gets two-thirds and I get a third is what you’re really saying,” Merc launched back at his father.

“Boy! If you could stop making yourself sound like a selfish prick for just two minutes, that’d be fuckin’ great. One third

will go into a fund for the baby. You both split what's left. That clarify shit enough for you? And let me tell you something else, if you think just because that girl is smart enough to leave your ass in the dust in five years, that your responsibilities end there – you have another thing coming to you. That kid is yours whether the two of you are together or not.”

“Fuck, Boone! You act like she's some innocent angel in all this. She got exactly what she was asking for – hitched her ride to me whether I wanted it or not.”

“You know that's not fuckin' true!” I yelled at him.

“Isn't it?” Merc asked, his eyes desperately searching between all of us for the answer he knew was there. He was wrong though.

“I had a crush on you, it's not a big secret. Trust me when I say, you very effectively killed that for me, and I fought tooth and nail against having to do this. You aren't the only one being punished.”

“No, I'm just the only one without the ability to get out if I want to.”

I laughed at the dumbass. “Seriously? That's what you think?” I glared at all the men then. “I'm expected to uphold my vows to you for five, long years before I can get out. During that time, I can't step out on you. I can't date other people. I can't fall in love. I can't even entertain the possibility of ever having sex again. You're not being held to those standards. You get to do whatever you goddamn well please, because you belong to the club and get to take part in all the perks they provide.”

Merc's eyes darted between his father and mine, lips parted in shock, wondering who let the cat out of the bag.

"They didn't have to tell me. See, something you never knew about me – I'm not fucking stupid."

"Okay, I think that's enough."

I glared at my father. "You guys get to move right into the house. Everyone who wasn't present for the wedding today was over there working on getting the house set up for the three of you."

"Great!" I groaned before Boone and my dad insisted that we follow them over.

I was shocked to see that the place had been totally cleared out and all new furniture had been put in its place. The furniture looked like things I would have picked out. In fact, it looked exactly like the pieces of furniture I put in my wish list for one day when I could afford to move out of my dad's house.

I turned to look at my dad then. "How?"

"You think I didn't know about your hopes and dreams?" He asked as if it wouldn't chip away at the ice block currently surrounding my heart. "Boone parted with the house, I pitched in on all the new furniture to give you guys a true fresh start. Same goes for the furniture as with the house, if the time comes that you want to split up. It gets split equally."

They walked us down the hall, and a quick glance at the kitchen told me that everything in there was all new too, along with a familiar set of dual-toned blue dishes that I had picked out. We continued to move toward the door where my life as I

knew it effectively ended with a blurted pregnancy announcement. What was once Merc's bedroom, essentially the master of the house, had been transformed into a gorgeous master suite again instead of the filthy bachelor pad room of a teenage boy. The bed was a four poster, wooden monstrosity that had to be king sized. It had a white, down comforter on it and white sheets and pillowcases. The curtains were also white, though there were dark wooden shades on the windows to block out the light if need be.

There was a white overstuffed chair in the far corner, and beside that was a new bookshelf that matched the bed perfectly. A dresser sat on the left and the right side of the bed, up against the walls with plenty of space to maneuver in between. I assumed that one would belong to me and the other was supposed to be for my husband, which meant they truly intended for us to live as husband and wife. It would be laughable if I didn't hold so much appreciation for how beautiful the room was. The sad part was that it was designed with a couple in mind and would always serve as a reminder that it was supposed to be just that to whomever occupied the room.

I didn't bother to step into the bathroom that was attached. While I had never seen it before, I also didn't want to. What if Merc's things were still sitting everywhere? What if evidence of him and another woman lingered? Ugh! There was no way they would have left something like that behind for me to find, but it didn't stop the worry from edging past my damn sanity.

"It's been cleaned thoroughly," Boone told me as we turned to leave while Merc ducked in to see what had changed. I

simply shrugged my shoulders and flounced out of the room to the sound of my new father-in-law chuckling behind my back.

“She’s going to give him hell,” he muttered to my father.

“Prick deserves it,” my dad answered back.

Neither of them had been quiet so I just continued to the only other room that was downstairs, and the minute I stepped inside I let out an audible gasp at what I was seeing. Then, the tears began to build and fall as I took everything in while blocking the doorway.

The walls of the second bedroom were painted a soft yellow, but down toward the bottom, from the baseboards to about knee height, there was a border that looked to be painted on. It was all grass and trees with forest animals hanging around here and there. There was a little gray bunny that looked as though it will feel just as soft as the real thing if you pet it.

Looking up, I saw that a similar sized border trailed along the top of the room from the ceiling down about two feet. There was a moon and stars on one side of the room and the sun and puffy white clouds on the other side. In between, on the third wall with the window, the transition was that of a sunset. The wall with the doorway that I was blocking had a similar feature. The whole day was represented along the walls as well as the nature scene below with the adorable baby animals.

On the wall with the moon and stars sat a white crib. It was empty of any bedding, and I had to imagine that was done on purpose. It wasn’t like I had time to imagine what the baby’s nursery would look like yet, so I hadn’t picked anything out.

On the other wall stood an all-white dressing table, a dresser, and in the corner sat a white gliding rocker with pale yellow cushions that matched the walls.

“What’s going on?” Merc asked as my dad slowly pulled me back out of the room. Merc stood there, not daring to step any closer to the door, as he watched tears trail down my cheeks.

“We wanted you to add the final touches yourself,” Boone offered quietly. My only response was to nod as Merc pushed past me and went to see what the big deal was for himself. I didn’t stick around to see his reaction though. Instead, I remembered the loft area that was once Boone’s bedroom and I secretly hoped that it was still set up that way, so that Merc could take that space for himself. It would leave me with the master all to myself, but I figured he wouldn’t want to be that close to the baby when it came anyway.

No such luck though. It seemed our fathers were determined to make us live together as true spouses. Instead of another bedroom up there, it had been turned into what appeared to be a library or office. I nodded my head, knowing this was also my father’s doing.

“Merc has the clubhouse to get away to and work out of. You need a space for yourself for whatever you end up doing.”

“It’s beautiful.” I admitted and then turned to the two men who had put all of this together for us. I knew it was more so for me because none of us were under any illusions about what was going to happen. Merc would most likely spend all his time at the clubhouse and this place would be my own personal gilded cage.

“Thank you for making my prison look pretty,” I told them as I managed to get back down the stairs before Merc started climbing them. I knew he heard me, because his brows pulled together in question. He really thought that I married him thinking we would happily wed. I shouldn’t have been shocked since I had always been the watcher while being ignored by him. The man didn’t know the first damn thing about me.

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6 - First Night

Merc

She cried when she saw the nursery, but I don't think they told her that I was the one to paint it. I hadn't seen the rest of the house, because everything else had been done after I painted. I'd been kicked out after that and sent, with all my shit, to stay at the clubhouse. When he asked me to do the nursery, I never thought he was giving the house to us. Just figured he wanted to make sure she knew there was a safe place for her baby at his house.

I took another look around the room, now that the furniture was in place, I could understand her emotions a bit better. My dad told me this is the second thing a woman dreams of when she's growing up. The first, he told me, was her wedding. The second was the house, more specifically what she would do in her first-born child's nursery. Boone told me I needed to get at least one of them right, even if I fucked up the other. So, I'd painted the room with days and nights while imbuing them with my hopes of a brighter future for her baby.

It still didn't seem real that she was pregnant. She didn't look like she was. Though, I guess puking at our wedding was probably a part of that. She'd been clawing after me since we were kids, so it couldn't have been the wedding itself. The innocent, quintessential girl next door was getting what she wanted, after all. I huffed the frustration out and turned to

leave the room. No one gave two shits about what I fucking wanted in all this.

What I wanted sure as fuck was not a baby or a stage-five clinger who got to ride my dick once when I was feeling out of sorts. I knew, the minute I went there, that it had been a mistake. Knew she had a crush on me and what that would mean, especially once I realized it wasn't just a quick fuck in my truck. I'd popped her cherry and that was bound to mean more to her. Fuck my life – did it ever.

By the time I got to the loft, Lily was just coming down and I managed to hear the tail end of their conversation.

“Merc has the clubhouse to get away to and work out of. You need a space for yourself for whatever you end up doing.”

“It's beautiful.” Lily paused a moment before adding, “Thank you for making my prison look pretty.”

What the fuck?

Prison?

She wanted this marriage. Me. All of it. If anyone had a prison sentence it was me. I watched as they moved away from the loft before I headed up there myself to check things out. I was amazed at the changes. It used to be my father's bedroom on the rare nights that he came home to crash here. It had been transformed into a library with a comfy looking couch and a desk that had a computer set up. Why was this supposed to be *her* space? What the hell did they expect her to do here? I laughed at myself as I remembered she was still in high school. Homework, I guessed.

Beyond that, I had no clue. It was the first time I truly realized that I had been forced to marry a stranger. I knew next to nothing about Lily despite our fathers being club brothers and best friends. I had made it a point not to get to know her because I saw that glint in her eyes even back when we were first introduced. She used to look at me like I was her future. The feeling was not mutual. I just figured she was another troublesome club princess who thought she could get her way with me because of who her daddy was. Low and behold, I hadn't been wrong. She set it all up perfectly.

The annoying voice in the back of my mind told me how wrong that was though. She didn't set shit up that night we fucked. I think, if anything, she was a little shell-shocked that it happened at all. Still, I needed to place the blame where it was. My girlfriend was missing a tooth, black and blue, and refusing to speak to me anymore because of this situation. That reminded me, I had somewhere to be.

I took off for the front door and didn't miss the weighted stares everyone gave me as their eyes followed.

"Where are you going?" Boone asked, and I didn't miss the anger that laced his tone.

"Out," was all the answer I gave before I blazed a trail outside to my bike and left without a single look back. They might have been able to force my hand with the marriage, but they couldn't make me pretend to be her husband when I never wanted to see myself that way. Fuck that. I had somewhere to be anyway.

~*~

It didn't take long to track down Brinley. She was, as usual, wherever she could grab the most attention for herself. Her long legs in that tiny skirt seemed to go on for miles and her tits – already fake thanks to her daddy's bank account – might have been falling out of her shirt if they had any give to them. They didn't. It was the one thing I disliked about Brinley. Her tits were small before, but when she came back from California over summer break, she was sporting the new breasts and they just didn't feel the same.

As soon as she noticed me, she left her friends behind and strolled closer. I could still see the discoloration under her eyes and across her nose from where Lily had pummeled her. I didn't blame Lil for beating the shit out of my girl. She was protecting her baby. I got that. At the same time, I knew this was an impossible situation for Brinley.

She might have played up that "I'm just pissing off daddy" bullshit to everyone else, but we talked about running off together. I had planned on going nomad as soon as my prospect period was up with the club. Brinley and I had plans to go build our own life together.

One stupid freakin' fight and I fucked it all up by screwing the wrong girl when I was pissed at the one that I really wanted. I could kick my own ass for that shit.

"Aren't you supposed to be on your honeymoon or something?" It didn't escape my notice when her eyes shot down to my fingers to see the ring I was supposed to be wearing now. Fuck that. I didn't even buy the rings our fathers told me to get. I warned them I'd be married on paper only and

nothing more. For some fucked up reason, they keep thinking I'll change my mind. That's never happening.

"You know it's not like that."

"Tell me you didn't go through with it." Brinley's voice was nothing more than a pleading whimper.

"You know I had to."

"So, you're really married to that bitch now?"

I nodded my head, not able to speak the words.

"This is so fucked. Why didn't we just leave? Why did you have to wait around to join the stupid MC. You could have joined another one somewhere else!" I tried to ignore the whine in her voice. She knew why. The MC opened doors for someone like me who didn't have a whole lot to fall back on. It was a legacy being passed down to me that I'd dreamed about being a part of for years. The members were family, even if I was pissed at some of them right now.

"I'm sorry baby. It's not forever though."

"It really is, unless you're planning on leaving the MC."

I shook my head and grinned widely for the first time since this all started. "Nah, I learned some things tonight that change everything."

She cocked her head to the side. "Like what?"

"Like, the fact that Robbie gave his daughter an out. If she still doesn't want to be married after five years, she can divorce me, and they'll consider my obligations to the situation fulfilled."

“Wait! You think that stupid bitch is going to actually divorce you?”

“I know she will. First, because she called the house that they gave us today, her prison. She begged her dad to just let it all go and according to Boone she was as dead set against this wedding as I was.”

“And you believe that? She’s been stalking you for years.”

“She’s not a fucking stalker. She lived across the street and had a crush. That’s it.”

“Yeah? And just how did she end up pregnant if she wasn’t stalking you and looking for an opportunity then?”

“I already told you about that. It was a fucking mistake because I was mad at you for trying to break things off again.”

“I know,” she relented, quieter that time. “I know. I’m just so mad at myself. If we hadn’t fought that night none of this would be happening.” We stood there with her in my arms for a while before she remembered something I said.

“They gave you a house?” Her eyes twinkled with glee at the thought.

“Yeah, my house. Well, my dad’s house. It’s mine now.”

“Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

“What?” I pushed away from Brinley then. “Are you insane? I can’t take you there!”

“Why the hell not? You just said it’s your house now.”

“No, I said they gave it to *us*, as in me and my wife.”

“Your wife?! I can’t believe you just called that little slut your wife!”

“She’s not a slut, and I meant it the same way they did. They gave the house to me and Lily for our wedding present.”

“Yeah, I see what they’re doing. They gave you a house to share so that you’ll stay there with her and become a happy little family?” She muttered the question while pouting her lips out dramatically.

“Yeah, I’m sure that was their end game, but it’s not happening. They said I had to marry her, not live with her. Hell, they gave me a free pass to fuck who I want at the clubhouse, and she knows about it.”

“You better not be fucking anyone else there.”

“You know I’m not. It’s me and you babe. We just have to wait a little longer to leave Charleston behind.”

“If you don’t have to live in that house with her then why can’t you just leave?”

“It’s not that simple. They’ll take my patch if I do that. Staying at the clubhouse is one thing. Besides, when her kid is born, I’m expected to be here.”

“Your kid, you mean.” The nasty tone in which she said that made me cringe. When she had threatened Lily and the baby outside my house after learning she was pregnant, I chalked it up to heat of the moment anger. Now, I wasn’t so sure.

“Like I said, I have to be here for her kid in the end. It’s part of the deal.”

“I don’t know if I can sit back and watch you playing happy families with her, Damon. I don’t like it.”

“You know it isn’t like that.”

“It will be. One day, she’ll sucker you in because she’s convenient. You think she’s going to divorce your ass because you’re mean to her, but you forgot that she was in love with you even when you never even acknowledged she was a damn person.”

“Brinley! I don’t know what you want me to do here.”

“I want you to choose me over that whore.”

“She’s not a whore or a slut, stop saying that. Jesus, she had sex one damn time and had the bad fucking luck to get knocked up.”

Brinley started laughing. “That just makes it worse, you idiot. You popped her cherry, and you think she’s ever going to leave you when your dads are best friends?” Her huff coincided with the woman of my dreams turning her back on me. “Why can’t you just choose us over the stupid club?”

“And what would we do?”

“We could go to California together. There are clubs out there, if you want to get into one. I could do my acting thing and support us until you establish yourself with a new MC.”

It was my turn to laugh. “First of all, it doesn’t work like that, Brin. I started prospecting with Aces High right away because I was already family. With a new club, I’d have to be a hang around for months, maybe even years, before anyone even put me up for prospect. Then, at least a year of doing that shit again. It’s not that simple.”

She rolled her eyes at me, so I turned it back to her. “You think you’re just going to fall into acting gigs out there? It’s not that easy either.”

“I am gorgeous and talented. It won’t take much,” she argued while turned slightly away from me with her nose in the air.

“Brinley, Hollywood is full of gorgeous, talented people who serve other people their dinners and wake up to go clean their hotel rooms too. I can’t see you doing either of those things to support yourself.”

“You doubt my skills?”

“No, babe. I doubt the system and I’m a realist.”

“So, you want me to waste my best years and my youthful beauty to stay in this lame ass town for another five years while you live with your wife and kid before we can take off? What then? You’re just going to abandon your kid to come with me?”

My stomach clenched tight because that was one scenario I hadn’t thought of. It was true that I couldn’t really fathom an actual kid ever being involved in my life. It seemed more like someone else’s bad dream waiting to happen, than my reality. I just couldn’t wrap my head around it. She was right though, there was no way I could just take off on my own kid. My mom had done it to me, and my dad would kill me if I ever followed in her footsteps. When I didn’t speak up right away, Brinley got other ideas.

“Or were you planning on bringing your little bastard with us? I’m not raising someone else’s squalling little brat.”

“I doubt it would be squalling by then. It won’t exactly be a baby in five years.” I was joking to lighten the situation, but that comment backfired on me.

“And what about Boone, your little wifey and her dad? Do you think any of them will even let you step one foot out of the city with that kid, let alone cross the country with the little demon, especially if they know I’m the one you want to raise it?”

“Damn, Brin! Tell me how you really feel about the baby.”

“I want it dead!” She shrieked. “That’s how I truly feel. I want her to take a terrible fall and kill the thing inside her that is tying you to her. I want for it not to exist and if you were smart, that’s exactly what you would make happen!”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” I roared the question at her, because her vehemence that she wanted that kid dead was otherworldly. It was also not fucking happening. I might not have wanted to be a parent this young, but damn I didn’t want to kill something that Lily and our dads already loved.

“I’m just being honest. It is ruining everything! Everything we talked about. All of our dreams are ruined because of that fucking girl and her little brat.”

I pulled her back into my chest and wrapped my arms around her perfect body. “I know. I’m sorry, babe. If I could change things, I would.”

“You can though,” she sobbed. If you wanted to, you could change it all. Make her get an abortion. Just leave. None of you even know if that brat she’s carrying is really yours. What if it’s not? What if you stuck around and married that bitch,

and the kid that she's carrying isn't yours, and you lose me as a result?"

"Are you saying you're going to leave me?" I asked, pulling her tighter to me, as if that was all we needed to hang on to the dreams we'd been planning for over the last six months.

"I don't want that to be true, but I don't think I can stay here for another five years. What will I do, Damon? My father is going to disown me as soon as I graduate."

"Come on," I finally pulled her further away from the shadows where we'd gone to have this conversation. "Let's get out of here and go spend the rest of our night together."

"Okay," was the only answer I got before she followed me back to my truck. I brought it instead of my Harley, knowing that we would need a place to be together. Her house was off limits thanks to the tight-as-fuck security her dad had on the place. My house was obviously a no-go now, and I'd catch too much shit for bringing her back to the clubhouse after my brothers just watched me marry a club princess. The only spot I could think of was the place that got us into this mess to begin with.

So, I choked down my own issues with going back and headed up the highway and off the ramp that would take me to the little shack in the woods my dad used for hunting. It was the same place I'd taken Lily that night, only we hadn't made it all the way to the shack. We'd made it halfway down the drive before I stopped the truck and just took her there. If I had known she was a virgin, I would have taken her all the way to the shack. Wait. No. Fuck that. If I had known she was a

virgin, I would have done the smart thing and not gone there at all.

I'd always been aware of Lily's feelings about me. That was the biggest reason I stayed away. My father had already hinted more than a few times as we got older that it would be cool if our families ended up tied together by marriage. He might have claimed earlier that he made her off limits, but that was only if I didn't have intentions of getting serious with her.

I hated that idea and spent as much time as I could avoiding Lily as a result. It was actually that act of rebellion that led me straight into Brinley's arms. I noticed how she tormented Lily in the halls at school and figured that the enemy of my enemy should be my friend.

Sure, Lily was no real enemy of mine, but the fact that our families already wanted us together was a strike against her. The other strike against her was that while she was pretty in her own way, her mousy behavior just didn't do it for me. I needed a woman with some backbone and up until a couple weeks ago when Lily beat the shit out of Brinley, I never thought she had that.

"You're bringing me here?" Brinley shrieked when she saw where we were. I told her the truth about what happened with Lil and me, so she knew this is where we ended up that night.

"We're not sitting in the driveway and fucking in the truck, if that's what you're worried about," I launched the words at her like weapons. She huffed in response and crossed her arms over her chest, at least she tried to before failing, thanks to those bricks she had for boobs.

“I can’t believe you brought me *here*. This is where all our problems started.”

“We’re going to the shack, because there’s nowhere else to go.”

“The clubhouse!” She answered back in her snide, spoiled, rich girl tone.

“Is off limits for you, especially tonight. You don’t think Boone and Rob will be there, looking for me, so they can send me home?” I laughed humorlessly then. “Shit! It’s my fucking wedding night. I’m surprised they don’t have the boys out in force trying to hunt my ass down and drag me back there.”

“And you don’t understand how that’s going to be a problem for the next five years that you expect me to wait around for you?”

“We’ll get our own place that they don’t know about. It’ll be fine,” I reassured her even as a sick feeling formed in my gut at the thought. There was no way that would fly with my dad or Lily’s. If they found out I was shacking up in a very real way with someone else, they would not hesitate to skin me alive, strip my patch, and toss whatever was left in a deep hole somewhere. And, if I was being honest with myself, I’d deserve it. I didn’t have to marry Lily, but I’d agreed to do it for the perks I’d receive in the end.

Brinley never responded to that. I don’t know if it was because she could hear the lie in my voice or if she was smart enough to know that it would never be fine. Trying to hold onto what we had, and all our plans, felt more like trying to hold onto sugar-fine sand that slipped through my fingers. The whole thing made me feel so out of control.

I parked outside of the little shack. There was a small cot inside that my dad used to use for me when he'd go hunting and I just wanted to sleep as a kid. I had a feeling he also used this place to get away from my mom when he needed to. He might have even brought her here to detox the few times she had disappeared. She would seem clean for a few days when she came back, only to start the cycle all over again. At any rate, the shack would serve a different purpose tonight.

"Let's go," I demanded while dragging Brinley to my side from across the bench seat of my pickup. I helped her down and together we walked to the shack and went inside. It was a dusty mess. If I had been a planner, I would have come by yesterday and freshened the place up a bit, maybe left some flowers in here or something.

With the impending wedding hanging over my head, I hadn't been able to do that, especially since Charles, some of the other club kids, and younger members got together to throw me a small party with some of the dancers from the strip joint the club owned. Charles far too underage to have organized it, so I assumed some of the other brothers saw fit to help out so I could have a bachelor's send off into marriage. It didn't matter that Charles was two years younger than me. When his dad started bringing him around the club, we hit it off instantly.

"This place is gross!" Brinley stated as she stomped her foot and pulled me from my thoughts.

"Shoulda come by to clean it up yesterday."

"That would have meant you planned to bring me here." She laughed again. "Is this where you plan to stash me away

so that your little wifey and family don't find out we're still together?"

"No. Fuck, Brin! Don't be a bitch. I'm trying to work things out. It's not like I've been given a fuck of a lot of time to do that."

"I know," she cooed. "I'm sorry. I'm just so sad and angry."

"I know, babe." We didn't waste any more time trying to talk and rehash the shit that couldn't be helped. Instead, we worked at comforting one another the best way we knew how.

Once I had us both naked, I reached back down into my jeans pocket for condoms. "We don't need those," she demanded with a glint in her eyes. "I've been telling you for months now that I'm on the pill."

"Not going bare, babe."

"You did it with her! How else did she get knocked up?"

I sighed and hung my head because it was true. The only person I'd ever gone without protection with was currently knocked up. Yet another reason not to repeat those mistakes.

"I'm not going bare."

"Why not? You did it with her," she argued again. "I don't want her to have that over me. She already has your kid and I don't!"

That stopped me in my tracks. "That's what this is about? You think if I knock you up too, it will somehow change things, fix them, or make you even?"

"They'd have to let you out of that marriage to be with the family that mattered!"

“Brin, you don’t get it. That would just make things worse. They could make you disappear just for trying that shit!”

“What’s so fucking special about her that she gets their fight! Huh?”

“Besides the fact that she’s family? She’s Rob’s daughter for fuck’s sake.” I leaned down and pulled my jeans back up my thighs. “Fuck! I can’t do this. You keep bringing this shit up. I just wanted to forget for the night, but you won’t fucking let me.”

“I’m sorry,” she cooed while trying to put on that pout she thought looked real. It didn’t. If that was the best she had, her acting chops were not going to get her far in the Hollywood dream she wanted to chase so badly.

I sat on the edge of the cot, elbows on my knees, head in my hands, and just tried to breathe. How had my life drifted so far off fucking track? Brinley started rubbing my back in steady circles.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t keep bringing it up. I just don’t like that she got things that were supposed to be mine only.”

“I know,” I mumbled into my hands. “I know that Brin. We can’t do what you’re asking though. We can’t make a baby together when all this other shit is hanging over my head. You don’t understand how dangerous it is to even think of doing that. Boone would fuckin’ kill you and me both for the disrespect. And if by some miracle he didn’t, Rob would. If we managed to escape their wrath, it would only be because Lily stepped in, and you know what? That can’t happen. Me being the father of two kids at eighteen can’t happen. The first one should have never happened to begin with.”

“How is it disrespect when we’re in love with one another?” She asked, ignoring everything else I just said. “We were together, Damon! You were never with her!”

“It doesn’t matter because I still had sex with her and now that fallout is my burden to bear.”

“And mine too, because now it means I can’t have you.”

We sat in silence for a bit letting those words and the reality behind them settle in. “I can’t do this tonight,” she finally said. “I need to go.”

“I’ll take you.”

“I already texted Emily to come get me.” As the words were coming out of her mouth the beams from headlights flashed through the window at the front of the shack. I didn’t even bother questioning when she’d managed to text her friend to come get her. Obviously, I was more out of it and lost to my thoughts than I realized.

“We’ll figure things out, but for tonight, maybe you just need to stay here and be alone for a bit,” Brinley told me as she stood to leave.

“Brin, you know I love you, right?”

“I know you do, but is it really enough when you chose your club over me and married another woman?”

She left.

I threw my body back onto the cot, ignoring the puff of dust that plumed up around me as a result. Well, I ignored it until the sneezing started. I had been about to fuck Brinley here, in a cloud of dirt, locked away in a primitive hunting shack that

was no more than a glorified tool shed. My girlfriend had become the dirty little secret I had to keep, and I was running on fucking empty with no answers as to how to get my fucking life back.

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7 - Lonely Nights

Tiger Lily

No one said a word when Merc left the house after looking around at the loft area. Our fathers stood there awkwardly, not knowing what to say. What could really be said to make this better? One glance down at myself and I realized how ridiculous I must have looked to all of them. The crown of flowers still rested in my hair, the sheath dress and brocade beading were tight across my boobs and the rest draped around me all the way to my silver-slipper clad feet.

I looked every bit the sad bride that I was. When I went to smooth down my dress, my hand slipped into view, still naked with no ring to symbolize the union of two people who became one today. This was not what my wedding night was supposed to look like. Granted, I expected no less when we were forced into this, but I at least thought I'd wear the mark of being a married woman now. My eyes must have betrayed something of what I was thinking because Boone started in after clearing his throat.

“We'll get you a ring,” he offered.

“Why? I didn't marry you.” I told him bluntly. “The man I married didn't want me to have one, so I won't have one.”

“Some of the old ladies moved all your things over here earlier today,” my dad said in an attempt to change the subject.

“Is that why none of them attended my bullshit wedding?”
My father winced.

“They were busy setting all this up for you, darlin’. We wanted it to be a surprise. Something good for you today.”

“Imagine, getting married and the “something good” you have to look forward to that day is a house that was filled and arranged by some club women who probably just didn’t want to have to witness my shit show of a wedding.”

“Fucking hell!” My father hissed.

Boone’s head hung low on his shoulders. “We thought we were doing the right thing for you, darlin’. Your father gave them all your ideas. I know most of this is stuff you picked out yourself. They just threw it together for you.”

I nodded because he wasn’t wrong. Being a brat was a defense mechanism so I wouldn’t break down into a sobbing heap of emotion in front of them. “Can I just be left alone now?”

“You want us to leave?”

I met my father’s eyes for the first time in a while. “Yes.” It was the only word I had left today. Being alone was the only thing I wanted, and there was no worry that my husband would be back to do his duty and consummate our marriage. I think we had a loophole with that since I was already knocked up with his kid, so he would never have to touch me again. Truthfully, that was for the best. His touch could be addictive, and I didn’t want to get used to it only to have it ripped away from me again. The one humiliating time when he jumped out of the truck after having sex with me was plenty.

“I don’t want to leave you alone,” my father admitted.

“Rob,” Boone called softly. “I think she needs the quiet to adjust.”

“What she needed was for her husband to not run off the first chance he got after saying ‘I do’.” My father hissed at him.

Boone dragged a hand down his face, as if he could wipe the image of how the day had gone away from his memories. *Me too, Boone! Me too.*

“We all knew this wasn’t going to be some fantasy fix that they’d live happily ever after right away just because they tied the knot,” Boone tried to explain gently. “How about we all give it some time, allow them to adjust, and reevaluate later.”

“Easy enough for you to say when it’s my kid sitting alone in a new house, heartbroken, while yours is probably out fucking the woman who wanted to hurt their baby.”

My hand immediately moved to cover the non-existent bump at my abdomen. I wasn’t sure if it was more protective gesture, or the sick feeling at the reminder that my husband probably did leave me here to go hunt down Brinley. I knew, because Stacey had seen them together since our altercation. That meant he hadn’t broken things off with her even after she threatened me and our baby. I turned and ran to the bathroom, losing the little bit of water and bile that sat heavier than it should have on my stomach.

I knew he didn’t love me, or even like me. I knew he would be with other people, but at some point, it seemed like a betrayal for him to stay with the woman who had threatened

his family. Whether he saw me as family or not, it was still his baby that I carried.

Once I got myself cleaned up, I went back out to the living room and found Boone and my father in a heated, whispered discussion before Dad turned to me.

“How about you just come home with me for the night?”

“Why?” I asked. “What’s the use in prolonging this? You guys wanted us married. You got it. Did you think it was going to look any other way?”

“Lily,” Dad cooed my name while reaching for me.

“Nope. You got what you wanted. We’re married. He’s out fucking the same girlfriend who threatened my baby. I’m here alone and pregnant, or at least I would be if you two would ever leave.”

“Come on, Rob. Let’s give her the time she’s asking for.”

“I’m a phone call away,” my dad informed me.

“I already know that.”

“If that son of mine bothers to come back and causes any trouble, you have my number too. Don’t hesitate to use it. You don’t need any extra stress.”

I laughed at that. As if they hadn’t caused me more stress by forcing this issue. I would have been just fine being a single mom with no help. I could have gotten a job. Actually, I had a job that no one knew about. For the past four months, I’d been writing term papers for college kids who didn’t want to do their own work. Was it a morally gray area? Sure. Did that matter to me? Nope. All that mattered was that I had about

\$2,500 saved up so far, and more papers to write. I needed to get it all done this weekend too because come Monday morning, it was back to school for me.

I climbed the stairs back up to the loft area and went to work, which ended up being a balm for my soul since it took my mind off the other events of the day. I wrote three papers and must have fallen asleep where I sat before the fourth one was finished because I woke to all sorts of panicked yelling.

“Well, she didn’t fucking sleep here last night. Are you sure that’s even my baby? Maybe she’s been fucking some other dude that you guys didn’t know about.”

“You’re going to call my daughter a whore one more time and I’m going to knock you into an early grave, boy!” My dad bellowed.

“Then where is she? The bed wasn’t slept in. She obviously wasn’t with you across the street. She’s not on the couch...” Merc yelled back.

“I’m right here,” I called from the banister overlooking the living room below. “What is everyone’s problem?” Their stares made me glance down at myself. It was then that I noticed I had gone straight to work and hadn’t bothered to change out of the stupid wedding dress. Then again, I realized far too late that I couldn’t change out of the dumb thing because I couldn’t reach the zipper and the bodice was too tight to simply lift it over my head.

“Baby girl?” My father called out with some concern. “Where were you last night?”

“I fell asleep up here while writing a paper,” I told him honestly.

“Okay, why are you still wearing that dress?”

The sigh I heaved out should have told him everything he needed to know, but when all three men stared at me impatiently waiting for an answer as to why the crazy girl was still wearing her wedding dress the day after the ceremony from hell, I just shrugged my bare shoulders.

“I couldn’t reach the zipper to get it off.” My mumbled words carried down in an echo that seemed to make them louder than they originally were.

“Shit!” Boone hissed as his son turned his back on everyone. I didn’t know why he did that, nor did I care. My father was the only one to speak some sense.

“Why the hell didn’t you call one of us back here to help you last night?”

Again, I shrugged. “I just came up here and went to work. Honestly, I never had time to think about it because I worked through most of the night and fell asleep at some point. I figured Stacey could come over at some point today and help me out if she was able to get a ride.”

“I think you need to back out of some of the classes you’re taking, baby girl. You’re always working so hard on all those papers you write. I’ve never seen a high school student with so many bullshit assignments.”

Merc turned his narrowed gaze back to me for a minute, assessing what my father was saying. He didn’t know shit

about me though, so he'd never understand the fact that all those papers I worked on weren't mine.

“Get down here, so I can help you with that dress.”

I did as he said and descended the steps carefully. Barefoot now, as I'd kicked off the slippers I'd worn yesterday at some point, I had an easier time navigating them than I had yesterday. Once I got to the bottom of the steps, all three men were watching me carefully, as if I might fall apart the moment they looked away.

Avoiding Merc became a game I played for years. Sure, I watched him covertly, but any time I knew I had his attention, my eyes would never stray toward him. I employed those same tactics as I moved toward my father and then turned my back to all of them. I quickly lifted my hair off my neck to give my father access and heard the soft intake of a shocked breath when the zipper was pulled down.

How in the world me not wearing a bra under my wedding dress could scandalize the three bikers was beyond me, but I couldn't think of any other reason... except... shit!

“Baby girl!” The heartbreak in my father's voice could not be contained. I'd forgotten about the words I had in the middle of my back. They sat on a pile of ashes with a few embers still glowing hot and orangish-red on my skin. Beside the embers and ashes, was the most evil, dangerous looking phoenix to have ever been inked to skin. It peered back over its own wing while taking flight from the ashes. The blue-green eyes of the bird matched my own and seemed so real that it was truly captivating. The artist had been passing through town on a tour as a guest artist, and I just happened to be explaining what I

wanted to someone at a local shop when he told me to hop in his chair. I trusted him and did it. I had it done before I knew I was pregnant. Still, no one had seen the work yet but me.

“What does that say?” Boone asked, clearly not having his glasses.

Before anyone had a chance to respond, I quoted the words inked into my skin. “My ashes spill beyond the flame, forgotten after the desire. Inside them still, my heart does swell, waiting for release. When wicked men are gone again, so then shall rise my beast.”

“What is that from?” My father asked, his voice shaky.

“I wrote it.” That was all the explanation they were getting. Instead of waiting around to hear what else they had to say about my tattoo, I held the bodice of the dress tight against my chest as I made my way to the bedroom to get clothes to change into. Once there, I realized that the bed was still freshly made, which meant that my husband hadn’t come home last night either. He must have come back this morning, saw the bed untouched, and panicked. I wasn’t sure why he would be worried about me not being home when he got there.

I decided to take a shower too instead of just changing my clothes. I had to wash yesterday’s memories away somehow. So, that’s what I did. When I finished my shower, dressed, and made my way back out to the kitchen, it was to see that my dad had breakfast cooked up for everyone.

I sat down at the only place that wasn’t occupied at the small farmhouse table and groaned in appreciation when I slipped a crispy piece of bacon in my mouth. I hadn’t eaten much beyond crackers in the past 24-hours and my body let

me know that it was unacceptable. I ravenously ate everything on my plate before I bothered to acknowledge anyone else. When I finally looked up, it was to see all three men staring at me as if I were some wild beast who had been brought in from the cold.

“What?”

“Do you want more?” Dad asked cautiously.

I shook my head. “No. Sorry, I was hungry. All I had yesterday was crackers.”

“You’re pregnant,” Merc stated in a matter-of-fact manner that prickled my nerves.

“No shit?” I asked sarcastically.

“You have to eat if you plan on having a healthy baby,” he scolded me, as if I didn’t know that or as if he cared. I didn’t miss the smirk on Boone’s face. He thought his son was starting to give a shit. I knew better.

“I didn’t exactly have an appetite yesterday,” I threw back at him.

“Don’t know why. You got what you wanted,” he mumbled under his breath.

I picked my as yet untouched glass of milk up off the table and tossed the liquid on him. “What I wanted was to be left alone, to be a single mother, because it has to be better than being saddled to some selfish prick who won’t be around to give a shit about anything anyway. All being married to you did was limit the choices I have.” I stood and carried my plate and utensils to the kitchen sink, rinsed them off and left them there.

“If you’ll excuse me, I still have a paper to finish writing.” Then, I walked off and left the three men there to clean up the mess they’d made of my life, or at the very least the kitchen. Not that they’d ever do a good enough job of that, but at least it got me out of discussing my marriage, the tattoo, or pretty much anything else that I didn’t want to talk about with them.

At some point, I heard the door latch closed again when everyone left. At least, I thought everyone had gone until I heard *him* speak.

“Is that shit on your tattoo about me?”

I laughed without looking up from what I was typing. “Not everything is about you.”

“Then who the hell hurt you?” He asked, sounding as though he was ready to defend my honor against anyone else, beyond himself.

“I thought you left,” I deadpanned while continuing to work and trying to change the subject.

“Well, after calling our dads to find out where the hell you ran away to, they decided it was best if I stuck around today, to make sure I didn’t lose track of you again.”

I scoffed at that. “I was never missing in the first place. So, your punishment for worrying them is to stay here and bother me?” I asked before finally looking up long enough to see him shrug his broad shoulders. “Well, that sounds like more of a punishment for me. What the hell did I ever do?” I mumbled the last more to myself than anyone.

“You got knocked up,” was his quick response anyway.

“And whose fault was that?” I asked, anger brewing up once again over our situation. When he didn’t answer, I went on to point out the flaws in his logic, where he blamed me for everything. “You’re the one that started everything that night. I just accepted a ride home from a party where my supposed best friend treated me like shit and left me on my own.

“You’re the experienced one. I was the virgin. You’re the one who didn’t wear a fucking condom or pull out quick enough. So, why then is this pregnancy ALL MY FAULT?” I yelled the last few words at him because I was sick of taking all the blame for our predicament.

“Because you could have done something about it sooner.”

“Yeah, well you could have left me alone instead of using me to drown out your anger over your girlfriend pissing you off once again.” The wild angry feeling inside of me wouldn’t subside. “Why aren’t you off coddling the bitch anyway? Doesn’t she need your help massaging her fake bricks – I mean breasts – so that they’ll smooth out?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“That’s what she told me in the bathroom at school on Thursday. Once our farce of a ceremony was over with, you would be massaging her chest for her, amongst other things.”

I mock gagged as he stared at me. “I still can’t believe she thought that was even an attractive thing to use to make someone jealous. She’s not the brightest bulb in the pack.”

His inadvertent wince told me that he agreed with that assessment, even if he wouldn’t say it out loud. Brinley was a

fucking idiot, and as far as I was concerned, if he was in love with her – that made him an idiot by proxy.

“I don’t care if you’re here. I won’t rat you out to our dads. You can leave, stay, whatever the hell you want to do with your life, but I have work to get finished.” I made a shooing motion with my hands.

“Yeah, about that...” he started but cut himself off for a minute as he moved closer to my desk. Before I could stop him, he picked up the stack of papers I had sitting on top of the folders they would eventually be tucked into. Merc scanned them all before his eyes bounced back to meet my own. “What exactly is this?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your dad seems to think you’re breaking your back all the time for your own schoolwork, but these papers don’t have your name on them, Lily.”

“What do you care?”

“I care if someone is taking advantage of you,” he insisted.

I laughed. “No, you don’t.” His eyebrow cocked up at that, as if he was about to call me out on my statement. “If you do, then you’re a hypocrite because you had no problem taking advantage of me and my crush on you to suit your own needs. Your only problem was that you ended up fucking yourself over and got stuck with me afterward.”

That pissed him off enough that he tossed the papers back down on my desk and left. “Good riddance!” I called out too softly for him to hear.

I didn't see Merc again until about a month after that, when he was picking up Brinley on the back of his Harley after school. Her smirk said she won the man. My middle finger and bored look told her I didn't really give a shit. Merc at least looked slightly guilty as he sat there on his bike, with another woman seated behind him, all the while watching me in the line to get on the school bus that would eventually deliver me home.

My father had refused to help me get a car. He said that it was my husband's job now. The same husband, who I hadn't seen for a month – until today, seemed perfectly fine leaving his pregnant wife to ride the school bus. How in the world did my life get so fucked up? There was a time when I had dreams and aspirations. I wanted to finish high school, go off to college, become a famous screenplay writer for movies and television. Yeah, I know, it seems like a pipedream. But at no point while I was dreaming of my future, did being a teen mom ever factor in.

I thought briefly about spending my savings on a car. I would need something to get around in once I had the baby, after all. But every time I thought about spending that much of my money, I worried that I wouldn't have enough to take care of us.

It was a legitimate worry considering the food in our house had run out over a week ago and I'd had to walk the six miles to the grocery store to buy food with the money I got from the last batch of papers I wrote for spoiled college students who couldn't be bothered to do their own work. Luckily for me, Shannon – Stacey's mom – had also been at the store and had given me a ride home with all my groceries. I'll admit, I

hadn't planned out how I was going to walk six miles back with over fifteen bags weighing me down.

The memory fell away as my ass hit the bus seat while I watched as Merc finally took off with Brinley laughing from her seat behind him. It was as if my miserable life were the funniest thing in the world. I supposed, for her, it probably was. She reveled in my misery long before her boyfriend got me pregnant. Why shouldn't she continue to do so since she was riding bitch on my husband's Harley while I was pregnant with his child and taking the school bus home?

~*~

Christmas and New Year's slid by with little fanfare. I thought I would see Merc on Christmas day at the very least, but apparently, he had gone on some trip or other. I assumed it was a run for the club since our parents didn't seem that put out by it. My father and Boone invited me to the misfit's meal the club held for all the single members and hang arounds who didn't have families to celebrate the holidays with. That was where I met a woman named Callie, who apparently danced at the MC's strip club. She seemed nice enough until Boone asked how his grandbaby was doing while patting my belly.

The pointed look he had given Callie, along with the way she avoided me afterward, clued me into who she probably was to my husband. I had heard through the grapevine that Brinley had been disowned and kicked out of her father's home. She had hightailed it to California or something in search of fame and stardom. Good riddance to the bitch. I'd like to say I wished her well, but honestly, I hoped she starred in some lousy porn movies to pay the bills and ended up with a

chronic case of herpes outbreaks as a result. Petty? Yes. Deserved? Also, yes.

After dinner, I feigned being tired and called a cab to take me home. Neither my dad nor Boone noticed that I still didn't have a car. If they did, I guess they were waiting on me to do something about it. I was trying. I went to school during the day, worked at a local pizza chain making pizzas after school, and when the orders came in, I still did reports for college students on the weekends. Considering I had to feed myself and pay for the doctor visits and prenatal vitamins, it was never enough.

When I got back to the house, my heart lurched from seeing the pitiful little Christmas tree I bought. It was just one of those little table-top light up things from the dollar store, but I'd placed three presents on the table. One for each of the men in my life. My father, father-in-law, and husband. None of them came by that day to collect their gifts. I thought about throwing them in the trash, but instead I just left the tree and the presents there. Little did I know that they would sit there for another two months before anyone noticed.

~*~

It was a chilly, overcast day in February, and a rare day off work and school for me, when I finally broke. My humiliation knew no bounds that day. My energy levels had sunk to nil, and I didn't want to spend the money on a cab to and from the grocery store, nor did I want to walk in the cold. Pathetically, all I had in the house was some stale bread, three packages of ramen soup, and one box of macaroni and cheese when my father stopped by to check on me. The only reason there was

even any mac-n-cheese was because I was out of the milk and butter that I needed to make it. I had been so busy staring into my empty fridge, at the absence of those things, that I hadn't heard him come in.

“Where is all your food?” He growled from behind me. I startled and damn near jumped out of my skin, slamming the fridge door shut in the process. That was when my father moved me out of the way, searched the empty fridge and freezer and then started flinging cabinets open. I wasn't sure what he was looking for, but it was clear he wasn't finding it as the red hue of his skin grew darker and darker with each cabinet he searched.

“W-what?” I stammered, but he cut me off by grabbing hold of my arm and directing me toward the front door.

“Get shoes on and come with me.” It was an order that I wasn't about to go against because I hadn't seen my father look that angry since he found out my mom had been having an affair with his ex-club brother.

We ended up at the grocery store where he took a shopping cart for himself and then handed me a second one. I figured we were shopping together, and I was going to have to dip into my savings money once again. I didn't want to, because I wasn't getting as many offers to write reports for money anymore since college kids must have spent too much money over the holidays.

Then there was the problem with my other job. My employer at the pizza place wasn't scheduling me as much since I burned my stomach on a hot pan one night. I couldn't help that my belly seemed to pop out of nowhere and I wasn't

really used to it. I'd been super frugal with money ever since. Who wouldn't be? The number one thing on my mind all the time was if I would starve? Would my baby? So many fears and not enough options available to make a difference.

Once in a great while, Merc ate at home, but it was usually something he brought with him, and then he would change clothes and be gone again. I don't think he ever knew I was there when he came in to get clothes. I usually hid out in my loft until he was gone.

He never left money for me, brought groceries into the house, or anything else. I was beginning to wonder how this was going to work if I wasn't able to get a real job sometimes soon. After asking my father for help getting a car, only to have him tell me that was my husband's job, made me leery of asking him for help.

My father spent the next forty-five minutes filling his shopping cart while I was picky about what I put in my own. When his was over-burdened, mine only had a handful of items in it. I glanced inside my wallet at the sixty-five dollars I had on me while mentally trying to calculate how much everything in my cart would cost. I would be so embarrassed if I didn't have enough money on me and my father was there to witness it.

"Is that all you're getting?" Dad finally asked me, his voice sounding like twice-hardened steel.

"Um?" It was both question and answer, but when Dad glared at me, I tacked on, "I think so."

And that's when my father lost his shit, right in the middle of the Food Lion. "You do realize you're pregnant, right?" I

didn't bother to answer beyond nodding my head. "Your cabinets are empty. Your fridge is just as bad, and you have like five things in your buggy!"

I had a few more things than that, but I wasn't about to argue with my father when he was in angry bear mode.

"Why aren't you getting healthy food?" He yelled at me as my face grew hotter with embarrassment and tears started to swell and burn my eyes.

"It's expensive," I cried. "I only have sixty-five dollars with me."

"Where did you get that money?" He asked, attempting to calm his voice. He finally realized people were staring at us and moved so that I was blocked by his big, broad body while he hovered around me in the corner of the baked goods aisle.

"I had it," was the only answer I could come up with.

"Money you had before you moved out of my house?" His question made me wince, but it was mostly true so I nodded my head and then ducked as my father let out such a furious bellow that I thought he could do damage to the people around us just with his voice alone. Then, he pulled the mobile phone from his pocket, flipped up the antenna and dialed a number just as a security guard cautiously stepped closer to us.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

"Fine," I tried to get out. "Got some bad news," the lie dripped from my lips as they poked out into a pout, making it look like I was saddened by whatever it was.

"You're sure?" He asked again before my father spun and speared him with a glare that could melt glaciers.

“Leave my daughter alone. We’re dealing with something right now. Ain’t no one hurting her, least of all me. Now, get gone and mind your own fucking business!”

My father heard something on the other end of his call finally and he turned his focus back to that. “About time. You hunt down that piece of shit asshole you call a son, and you have him standing by when I get to the clubhouse. Be there in about an hour.” There was a moment where my father didn’t speak after giving that order. “I’ll fucking fill you in when I get there! Just do what I said.”

My father hung up, pushed the antenna back down on the phone, clipped it back to his belt and started adding even more stuff to my shopping cart. The whole time he mumbled about “killing a mother fucker” and “squashing that idiot’s balls”. I had a pretty good idea of which idiot he was talking about, but I didn’t understand why.

“Where was your car?” Dad asked me as he paid the checkout girl once all the groceries from both of our carts had been rung up.

“What car?” I asked him, eyes still bugging out of my head over the nearly \$500 grocery total.

“What do you mean, ‘what car’?”

“What do you mean by ‘where’s my car’?” I countered. “I’ve never had a car.”

If it were possible for a human being’s veins to actually explode, I think that might have happened to my father right there in the Food Lion check out. “Push your buggy, let’s go baby girl, I got places to be and people to kill.”

I followed behind my angry father until we got to his truck and deposited all the bags in the back. Then he helped me hop in, because now that my belly had popped, it was becoming a little more difficult to maneuver into some spaces. Dad quietly seethed the whole way to my house. Then he made me sit my ass down on the kitchen chair while he brought in every single bag of groceries.

“I thought half of that was yours.”

His eyes flew to mine then. “No, baby. These are all for you, and if you ever let me find out that you are going without food again – especially while you’re carrying my grandchild – I will tan your ass and lock you in your room back in my house so that I know you’re at least being fed every day.”

“But, I-”

“No fuckin’ way, Lil! You listen to me, if you ain’t got money for groceries, you let me know. If you can’t find me, you let Boone know. If for some reason we are both gone on a club run, then you let Timeless know and he’ll get it taken care of until we can get back and sort shit for you. Do you understand?”

I hung my head in shame and answered. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Now, that’s cleared up, I have somewhere to be. Get all this shit put away and get something to eat while you’re at it.”

He turned to leave, but something caught his eyes as he moved through the living room. I stepped aside far enough so I could see what it was, and my breath caught as my father dropped to his knees and cried right there in my living room.

“Lily!” My name was a hoarse murmur from his lips. Before I could take two steps in his direction, he threw his head back and roared his displeasure to the heavens above. The pain that filled that sound would stick in my memories for years to come. It was the sound of a father who knew he had failed his daughter. My eyes flitted from the man in pain on his knees to the source of his distress. The little Christmas tree that still sat on my end table with the three unopened presents that waited to be claimed by their owners.

I watched as he shook off the awful feeling and then pried himself from the ground. Unfortunately, his hands met with my work apron, and it only brought another round of questions.

“You’ve been working at a pizza joint?” When I nodded my head, his shoulders shook. “How long? When do you have time to do that?”

“I go after school.”

“You come home at night?” Another nod of my head in answer. “Late?” He asked. Again, I just nodded. “How the fuck are you getting home after work, Lily?”

I shrugged and took a step back from him. “Sometimes, I get a taxi if I earned enough money the week before. Other times, I catch a ride or...” I left the rest hanging as he interrupted.

“Or? Are you fucking walking home from the pizza joint late at night?”

“Only sometimes when there’s no one headed this way to give me a ride.” Before he could get angry, I decided to quell

his fears. “It doesn’t really matter anymore though. They’re barely scheduling me since I burned my belly on a pan.”

“Since you did what?” My dad spun so fast I didn’t have time to move. My shirt was yanked up above my belly so he could see. Then, he dragged a finger over the burn mark that was there. It had already healed up, but the mark it left behind was a noticeable reddish-pink puckered line about two inches long.

“Lily, I’ll be back by later,” he told me and then my father was gone from my house quicker than I’d seen him move for anything in his life.

I was left standing there at the edge of my kitchen staring at heaps and heaps of groceries that needed putting away.

In his wake, I was left feeling completely humiliated and chastised. There was no excuse for me not to eat better. He was right about that. But doing so meant spending the only money I had or sucking up my pride and asking for help. It also fueled the worries that I already had about being able to make enough money to support myself and a baby. It was about time I found a regular job, and that meant I’d probably have to quit school too. Those were the things I spent my time thinking about as I put my groceries away, rather than wondering where my father had run off to in a hurry. I already knew the answer to that.

8 - Living Large

Merc

Everything went to shit the day I had to watch Lily get on a damn school bus while I picked Brinley up on my bike. I wondered why Brin asked me to pick her up in the back lot that day, since I normally grabbed her from out front. It quickly became obvious that she had an agenda, and it was to be seen by my wife.

“What the fuck was that about?” I asked her when we got to the hunting shack. The place had been cleaned up since it was where we always had to go in order to meet up. For the past couple of weeks, I had to pick Brinley up and take her there because her father took her car away. Then, he pretty much kicked her out of the house when he realized that not only was she still seeing me, but someone had clued the asshole into the fact that I was married to another girl, and she was having a kid.

Brinley had nowhere else to go, so the shack became her new home for now. I filled the place with everything she would need since she didn't have a job. She had groceries, a better bed, though we couldn't fit anything bigger than the futon couch that converted to a single bed. Still, she was set, and I bought a space heater that kept it cozy on the cooler days.

“She needs to know her place. It should be her living in this shack and me living in your house and you know it!” Brinley’s temper had been growing worse lately. I supposed that was to be expected when she fell from exalted princess of her daddy’s castle to the lone inhabitant of the one-room hunting shack I had to offer her. “And I can’t keep waiting around here for you to come take me places. I was late to school this morning! I need a damn car!”

“Fine!” I yelled and then threw a couple grand in cash at her. The plan had been to get her a little beater car to get around in anyway because there was no way I could blow off another fucking club meeting to make sure the princess had a ride somewhere. “Take that and get a damn car. I have to get back to the clubhouse.”

“That’s it? You aren’t going to take me to go get the car? You didn’t even kiss me today. Were we going to even fuck or sleep together tonight? Anything that normal couples do?”

“Get off my dick about this shit! You know I blew off an important meeting to come pick you up. I have to go before they decide to fine me for this shit. It’s bad enough that I said I was doing something for Lily, a fine will be the least of my worries if they find out I was lying about that. But using her as an excuse for being late is the only fucking thing that will save my ass from a punishment at this point.”

“Well, you know her skanky ass is on a school bus right now, so obviously she can’t blow your cover.” Brinley spat out.

And there went that feeling in my gut that I was fucking things up in irreparable ways. The girl I thought I loved was

becoming someone I was starting to hate. The one who I was married to was riding a goddamn school bus home while pregnant, knowing I was there to pick someone else up today. I knew it was guilt I felt about Lily seeing that more than anything else, and still, I had been the dumbass who kept Brinley on my bike and watched as my wife got on that bus. My wife. I didn't even know why I started to think of her that way. Probably because that's all our fathers ever said to me. "How's your wife doing? How's the baby? Is your wife okay? Does your wife need anything?"

If she did need something, she never told me about it. Then again, I never asked, and we never really saw one another. Another pang of guilt hit as I glanced around the one-room cabin that was filled with shit that Brinley required to survive, yet my wife hadn't asked for a single thing. I assumed our dads were getting her whatever she needed, and they were just annoying me with the questions to try to get me to think of her.

I left that day and when I didn't hear from Brinley for the next two days, I figured she was just mad at me and hadn't needed a ride since I gave her the money for a car. Finally, on the third day, I got tired of her bullshit and went to the hunting shack. Everything had been cleaned out, including the fucking space heater, futon, and even the mouse trap we put in the corner after she claimed something had been scratching over there at night. The whole place was empty except the note on the counter, where my father's mini fridge used to be. That was something that I hadn't bought for Brinley because it was already in the shack.

Thanks for the truck and the stuff. I can't stick around for your bullshit for another five years though. Did you

plan on keeping me in a sardine can forever? Seriously! You couldn't even put me up in my own apartment, you asshole. I bought a truck. I'm going to California. When you get your head out of that skank's ass and stop playing macho man with your dad, look me up. Maybe we can fuck for old time's sake.

XO,

Brin

I balled the piece of paper up and threw it across the room, not that it had far to go before it fell to the empty floor.

“Son of a bitch!” I yelled into the space. Then I collapsed there and fucking cursed the fact that I’d ever met Lily Ashburn. She’d ruined every fucking thing! She was also the easy scapegoat. The one that made sense to my brain to be mad at because my heart had been all in with Brinley until recently when she started being so damn demanding and bratty.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew she wasn’t going to last. Hell, we were riding on our last leg of the relationship. It was part of the reason I hadn’t bothered to get an apartment established for her. That and the fact that she was always so wishy-washy about whether she wanted to wait around for me to earn my freedom or not. Some days, she behaved as though I’d been sentenced to prison, and she didn’t have any access to me. At least the sentence I was serving came with a little freedom where we could still see one another. We just couldn’t live as a couple yet. Now, any hope of that ever happening was gone. The bitch took everything I gave her and left me.

Lucky for me, I still had her Christmas present in the truck. I had planned on proposing to her, hoping it would let her know how fucking serious I was since she kept shoving it in my face that I chose the club over her. I shook my head when I thought about the ring that I spent three grand on. That ring was the reason I hadn't given her more cash for a car.

~*~

“What crawled up your ass?” Timeless asked me when I finally made it back to the clubhouse after discovering that Brinley bailed. I didn't even need to answer my club president because he knew. It was like the asshole was psychic or something. “That cunt you been wrapped up in finally took off, huh?”

“What makes you say that?”

“That hang dog face for one. For two, because we all knew she was nothing but trashy pussy. Might have come from a rich family, but there was something wrong with that cunt from the very start.”

“What the fuck, Prez?”

“Don't what the fuck me, kid. She took you for everything she thought you were worth and fled the fucking state!”

“How do you know that?”

“You think we haven't had a man watching that bitch?” He laughed at what must have been my shocked expression. “Your little cunt of a girlfriend threatened a member's daughter and grandchild. Hell, she threatened a brother's wife – not that you cared since you don't take being her husband seriously. She threatened your kid. How the fuck you could

stay with her after that was beyond my fucking comprehension, but since we couldn't trust you to think past your dick and do right by the woman carrying your kid, we did it for you and kept watch on the threat."

"You knew about the hunting shack?"

"Yeah, Boone did too. The man isn't a fucking idiot, despite his son being one."

Shit! I guess I deserved that. "He never said a word."

"He's been waiting for you to pull your head out of your ass and do the right thing. Guess he figures now that might actually have a chance of happening."

I scoffed at that and walked away before saying something to my Prez that I'd regret. That didn't stop him from trying to impart some wisdom though.

"Sell that fucking ring you bought and do something nice for your wife with the money instead. I hear she might need a few things!"

Guilt kicked me in the stomach again and I tried to remember when the last time was that I paid the electricity or water bill for the house. Shit.

~*~

Two weeks later, just before Christmas, I packed my stuff up and headed out to California to find Brinley. I found her shackled up with some dude who reminded me of the quintessential Hollywood pimps. The asshole had a gold tooth, a fur coat on, despite the temps being too warm in Cali for that shit, and a legitimate skull topped cane in his hands. Brinley

just smirked at me. She knew I was coming to see her, and had sent me the fucking address.

“Why?” I asked when I went to get back on my bike to head home.

“You needed to see that I can do better,” was her only response.

“Yeah, looks like you’re doing better turning tricks for some asshole in Hollywood. Good luck with that,” was all I could say to her. When her face fell, probably because it was the truth, I didn’t hesitate to rev my engine and get the fuck out of there. Despite getting whatever closure I felt I needed, I didn’t go home for the holidays. Instead, I took off for the Dakotas and spent a couple weeks at the clubhouse up there.

The guys were running a hole-in-the wall bar where they had skin shows every Friday night. It wasn’t quite a dedicated titty bar, but it was something. Diamonds in the Buff was the name. I still chuckled thinking about the first time I saw it on the sign. Fucking idiots.

There was one consolation prize waiting for me there though, and her name was Amber. All the girls had special little gem names and hers was fitting since it was the color of her soulful eyes. She was just barely eighteen with tits for days and an ass you could hang on to while fucking.

And that’s exactly what I did. By the time my vacation was over, and Timeless and Boone demanded I head back, Amber was on the back of my bike coming along for the ride. She was just what I needed to get over the sting of rejection from Brinley walking away with everything.

It was already the new year when I rolled up to the clubhouse with Amber on the back of my bike, road weary and ready for a hot shower, good food, and a warm bed.

“What the fuck did you do?” Boone’s voice carried across the parking lot at the clubhouse as I cut my engine. Rob had been standing outside with him smoking a cigarette, and he turned his angry tight-lipped expression away from me, flicked his cigarette my way, and then went inside.

“That man is going to kill you one of these days,” Boone reminded me yet again.

I shrugged, not caring about the idle threats anymore. The worst Rob ever did was give me a black eye and a cracked rib when he first found out that I knocked his daughter up. My dad, deciding he couldn’t get to me that way any longer, judging by my response, changed tack quickly as he eyed Amber before turning back to speak to me.

“You’re fucking married with a kid on the way!” He growled loudly, making damn sure the woman whose arms tightened around my middle, since we were still straddling my bike, heard every word. “You missed Christmas with your wife. Doctor’s appointments about your kid, and shit with the club too. What the fuck are you doing, Son?”

It was rare that Boone acknowledged I was still his son and not just a club brother he had little tolerance for.

“Amber was heading this direction. I said I’d bring her along. She wouldn’t mind being a dancer in the titty bar or one of the club girls here.”

“You good with letting your new play toy crawl all over your other brothers?” Boone asked.

Again, I felt Amber’s arms tighten on my midsection. I promised before we left the Dakotas that if I claimed her no one else would touch her.

“She’s mine,” I demanded instantly.

Boone threw his head back and laughed. “Nah, son. It don’t work like that. Lily – your wife,” he added for emphasis – “is yours alone. If this sweet thing wants to be a club girl, she belongs to the club or whoever Timeless says she belongs to. You’re just a member, don’t matter that you recruited her.”

“I’m okay with that,” Amber told him as she tossed a leg over the bike and finally got off to stand beside me. Boone gave her a once over, glanced back at me, and shook his head in disappointment once more before he finally followed the path Rob had taken back inside the clubhouse moments ago.

“You didn’t know,” Amber tried to reassure me that she wasn’t mad that she might not be mine alone. I didn’t bother even looking her in the eye because I already knew what the score would be when I brought her back. The thing my father was forgetting was that Amber belonged to whoever claimed her first each night. Since I almost never went home, that would be me.

I took Amber into the clubhouse, we got that shower we both desperately needed to wash the road grime from our bodies and then grabbed some food from the bar downstairs before heading back to my room.

No sooner than the door shut behind us, I started peeling Amber's clothes away. "Don't you have to go home to your wifey?" She teased.

I'd already filled Amber in on the situation before we left the Dakotas. She knew exactly what she was getting into and didn't care one bit about Lily being in the picture. Mostly, because I reassured her that my supposed wife wasn't really in the picture at all. Not for me anyway. Our fathers could certainly keep pushing that agenda, but it didn't mean it would ever happen. I resented her too much for that to ever be a thing.

"On your knees!" I demanded, as the shorts I'd put on after my shower fell to the floor. The thing I learned to love about Amber while we were in the Dakotas was that she complied to orders very well. "Now, suck hard enough that I forget I ever had to come home in the first place."

And suck she did. The woman slid me into her warm and waiting mouth then hollowed her cheeks out as she applied an ungodly amount of suction. Her cherry-red nails scraped across my balls, sending even more sensation racing through my over sensitized body. Still, it wasn't enough. I needed total control because everything else in my life felt like one big round of chaotic shit.

I grabbed hold of the sides of Amber's head and started fucking her face so hard my balls slapped on her chin with every inward thrust. She was gagging and choking on my cock with each forward motion, but her hands remained just touching my thighs, not digging in or pushing away for help. She might have been choking to the point that saliva was

dripping from her chin, but she was loving every fucking minute of it. I cocked my head to the side so I could watch her full tits swing back and forth with the motion as I pumped harder into her mouth.

“Tired as fuck after that ride, babe. Get yourself off.” Yeah, it was a dick move. I was about to blow my load, probably on those unbelievable tits, and already knew I was going to be too exhausted to help her out after. I needed to cum and then get some fuckin’ shut-eye.

Amber didn’t hesitate, and if she minded, she never complained once. Kinda hard to do with my dick in her mouth, I know, but complaints wouldn’t come afterward either. She was a good girl who knew how to listen and never question. If only my wife was that obedient.

Then again, if I remembered correctly, she followed my demands pretty well for a virgin during our one time together. I thought back to the first time I sank into her hot, wet heat that night in my truck. I had never felt anything so fucking exquisite before. I’d always assumed it was just because we hadn’t used a condom, but I wasn’t sure. I allowed my mind to wander back to that hot August night, to the way her hips subtly raised to meet my own after the initial pain wore off. She had tears streaming down her face, though I don’t think she knew I noticed. I did. Only because the salty little things dripped right down her neck into my mouth as I feasted on her while pumping into her without regard for being safe about shit.

The memory of her squeezing that tight pussy around my cock set me off and I started to blow my load down Amber’s

throat while thinking of Lily. I pulled out, just as I had that night with Lil, and instead of shooting all over my wife's stomach and in the cunt hair she never fully trimmed, I shot the rest of my load all over Amber's face and on her glorious tits.

Amber chuckled. "Guess I need another quick rinse off."

"Yeah, babe." When she got off her knees, I slapped her ass and then bypassed her altogether so I could hit the bed.

~*~

To my surprise, it was almost a month later before anyone said anything to me about Amber. If I was being honest with myself, I wasn't really feeling the living situation any longer, but I kept up the bullshit headache of having a veritable club whore living in my room at the clubhouse with me just so it would keep everyone off my back about the wife. It wasn't even so much that I wanted to hurt Lily anymore either, even though I'd been dickish enough in the beginning to want exactly that. I'd had a lot of time to think it over.

I truly didn't want to cause her any harm. The problem was that I was selfish enough to want my freedom more than I wanted to keep her from being hurt. The best way to get to that end was to make our father's see reason and allow her to divorce me sooner than the five-year minimum timeframe they had given her.

It was late January already, almost February, when I sat down to eat breakfast at the clubhouse with my dad. It didn't escape my notice that Lily's best friend, Stacey, was trying to sneak out without being noticed. I knew she'd been seeing another member, Tinder. The fucker who liked to light fires

when he was given permission had given my wife's best friend the perfect opportunity to spy on me. I knew she was taking information back to my wife about Amber and me. It was part of the reason Amber was still in my bed, despite having worn out her welcome there.

“Heard Amber telling the other girls this morning that she was your old lady.”

I laughed, but when Boone didn't return the sound, I shifted my focus from my wife's best friend back to my father. “She knows better.”

“Obviously not. Stacey was standing there too and corrected her, explaining that you're already married which made Lily your old lady.” My brows arched up damn near to my hairline at that, because I honestly hadn't considered the fact that some people – especially Boone and Robbie – would think Lily was exactly that.

“Don't worry,” Boone carried on. “Tinder schooled Stacey in front of your new girl. Said that just because you married her that didn't make her your old lady in the club's eyes. It just made her your legal wife. He told her that a man in the club could have both, plus mistresses, and all the while end up banging club whores on the side too if they wanted.” Boone said all of this with a straight face while buttering his fucking toast. I don't know why that pissed me off.

It was almost as if he was no longer in Lily's corner, and fuck if that didn't feel wrong to me. I could deal with my father and hers raging against me, but she needed someone at her back. Lily didn't have anyone else aside from Stacey, as far as I knew. Her dad was her only family and I thought, until

this very moment, that Boone and Rob had been filling a void in her life and taking care of her. Suddenly, my skin crawled with the reality that they might have left her to her own devices in the hopes that I would step up. Only, I never did. Hell, I couldn't even remember the last time I paid bills on the house. Before Christmas, maybe?

I dropped my fork onto my plate with a clatter, no longer able to stomach the food. Boone didn't even look smug. Nope. Instead, he just seemed resigned to the fact that I would never be with Lily the way he and Rob had once hoped.

"Hey baby!" Amber squealed before scrunching down to wrap her arms around me from behind. Her tits seemed to wrap themselves around my neck. Before I could shake her off, she offered up a greeting for Boone too. "Hey, Dad! How are you this morning."

"Just fine," he told her while offering a smile and failing to correct her assertion that she had a right to call him that.

I glared at my father, but again he didn't seem to have a single fuck to give and instead began to add some jam to the over-buttered toast in his hand.

"What's the matter, baby? You're not hungry?" Amber tried to wiggle herself between me and the table in order to sit in my lap, but I didn't bother scooting back to allow her the room. "It's okay, I'll just sit right here," she tittered awkwardly while planting herself in the chair beside me and moving it as close to my right side as she could possibly get it.

"Lost my appetite," I finally told her while trying to puzzle out what was going on with my father.

“Oh no! Are you getting sick?” Amber asked while tossing the back of her hand none-to-gently onto my forehead to feel for a fever. I knocked it away.

“Stop!” I growled out the word through gritted teeth.

“S-s-sorry,” she quickly stammered. “I’m just trying to take care of my old man.”

“I’m not your fuckin’ old man!” I yelled, halting everyone in their tracks, except Boone. That bastard just continued to spread the jam on his toast as if it wasn’t evenly dispersed already.

“But, we’ve been living here together for a long time already, I just thought-”

“You thought wrong. You assumed shit that I have never said to you,” I clarified for her, and when it didn’t look like it was really sinking in, I kept on going. “I already have a fucking wife I don’t want. What the fuck makes you think I want an old lady to tie me down here too?” I stood to leave, and Amber tried to follow. That was when I had enough.

“Tell you what, get your shit together, get it out of my room, and find somewhere else to stay or some other brother to latch onto because it’s obvious this shit has run its course if you think you’re getting more out of me than a quick fuck and a place to lay your pitiful head at night.”

Boone put his toast down and glanced around the room before spotting what he was looking for. “Prospect!” He yelled and my buddy Charles came running. He was still too young to be patched in, but being a legacy made him a shoo-in once for when he finally hit eighteen. It also didn’t hurt that he

wasn't afraid to take on the dirty jobs to prove himself since his father was a bit of a piece of shit.

“Whatcha need?”

“Help little Miss Amber here get her things from Merc's room. See to it that she only takes things that belong to her and then find her a new place to sleep tonight. Explain the rules to her about being club property and what that means.” Boone glared in my direction then, making it clear that her misunderstanding of the situation had been my fault. “I think someone failed to inform her about exactly what the deal is.” My father's eyes found mine then and he stood and left having never touched that toast he was working so hard on. I had no fucking clue what to do with that shit.

When I turned to head to my room, it was with some doubts in my mind. Had I acted too hastily about Amber? Shit. I didn't know. My head was fucked. The shit I had going on with Lily tended to cloud everything else. I enjoyed my time with Amber, but could I see myself building a future with her? No. Could I see her being my long-time mistress and love interest in that way? Yeah, I could. I wasn't sure what the fuck that said about me though.

When I got to my room and saw the sad look that Amber threw my way, I knew there was no sticking around for this move of hers. “Look, it's not that bad, Amber. We'll still have plenty of time for one another. I just need a little space because you were getting too heavy, way too soon.”

Charles gave me a look like he wanted to punch me in the throat. I just shrugged my shoulders at him. Loved the guy, but he was barely 17. What did he know?

~*~

Two weeks later, it became obvious rather quickly that I did the right thing by putting my foot down where Amber was concerned. The first time one of the other club girls tried to even approach me, Amber went crazy and launched herself at the woman. There was an all-out brawl that ended with the club paying for Wendy's broken nose, sprained wrist, and a blown-out knee.

"You can fuck the whores. You can't fall for them. You can't shack up with them. You can't give them false hope that there will be more from you, even if you think you might want more. You have a pregnant wife at home! What if Amber did that shit to Lily? She's going to be having that baby in just a few months. You think she needs to be getting into fistfights with the crazy bitches you keep bedding down with?"

"Amber wasn't threatened by Lily," I argued.

"Yeah, because Lily never came here looking for you. What would have happened if she had?" My father asked me before walking away once again with his head shaking back and forth, as if he didn't know where in the hell he had gone wrong with me. Fuck! I didn't know either.

The worst part was that I knew he was right. Then again, in all the time we'd been married, Lily had never bothered to come looking for me even once, so it was sort of a moot point. Amber was sent away from the club after the incident anyway. I didn't even bother asking where they'd sent her, and instead was thankful that she was gone. What Boone said settled deep. I might not have wanted her as my wife, but I didn't hate Lily

anymore and certainly didn't want to see harm come to her, so it was for the best.

~*~

The rest of February came and went with me gone on a run that took us into the first week of March by the time I got back. Unfortunately, the minute I got off my bike, a hard fist landed in my face, knocking me on my ass.

“What the fuck?” I yelled before looking up to see who the fist had been attached to. There stood Robbie, looking like he wanted to murder me while my dad stood next to him, not seeming like he'd care if I was dead.

“What did I do now? I've been gone on a fucking run.”

“We're going to take this inside to Church. Me, Rob, Timeless, and your sorry ass.” Boone directed. Fucking hell! I hadn't even touched any of the other club's whores while I was gone. Not that it would matter if I had, since that wouldn't be breaking any agreement, but shit, what the fuck was I getting punched in the face for?

When I got to the large room where we held church, they were all there waiting on me to take my seat. The minute I did, they launched in.

“Remember when you had that whore of yours set up in my hunting shack?” Boone started.

“Yeah, what's that got to do with anything? It was a long fucking time ago now.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Rob yelled from directly across the table from where I sat. The distance didn't stop me from feeling the angry spittle that flew my way. I didn't bother to

tell him I was answering a direct question. Instead, my father charged on with whatever the fuck his point was.

“You remember kitting my shack out for that cunt?”

“Yeah,” I insisted, because Timeless had already told me they had someone watching her, so they already knew these answers.

“You spent money on that bitch. Bought furniture, all kinds of food, a heater, and then, you stupid son of a bitch, you even gave her money for a fucking car.” I nodded, because he was right, it had been stupid of me, and I had done all those things.

Everyone sat there for a full minute just breathing and letting those words settle between us. Then Rob knocked on the table in front of him to get my attention. I gave it to him easily, even knowing he was pissed about something again.

“You ever do any of that for my daughter?”

I was taken aback immediately. What the fuck? “What are you talking about?”

“Did you bother to find out the things that my pregnant daughter needs?” Rob asked.

“She’s never mentioned needing anything.”

“Did you ever ask her?” He questioned, his tone getting shakier and angrier.

“No,” I replied hesitantly.

“You and my girl have been married since early October, and you haven’t once seen to her needs?” I stared at him, stunned, because I was afraid of where he was going with this. Suddenly, I remembered feeling guilty for doing those things

for Brinley when she was kicked out of her house. I remembered thinking that our dads were providing for Lily and that she was just fine since she hadn't said anything to me. Then, the memory of that day when I picked Brin up at school came back to haunt me. The look Lily had given me as she climbed on that school bus while I rode off with my girlfriend should have fucking clicked a few things into place for me back then, but I'd missed it for all the bullshit Brinley was demanding in my ear.

Lily climbed on that school bus because she didn't have a fucking car. I'd given my girlfriend money to buy a car while the woman who I was married to, and was carrying a baby, didn't have access to one. Fuck.

"I think he's beginning to understand," Timeless offered as they all watched me come to terms with what was being shoved at me. The fucking reality I had been hiding from for months.

"No, the fuck he doesn't understand!" Rob yelled. "We've all been stupid fucks!" His accusing look hit my dad then, and Boone bristled, obviously not knowing what was coming. "My girl," he choked up and had to take a minute before he could finish. "My girl had a tiny little tree set up on the table beside her couch for Christmas."

Aw, fuck. I did not want to hear what he was about to say, and judging by the way my father's face lost all color, he was feeling the same.

"She had three fucking gifts wrapped up under that tree. One for each of us. I only just saw them last week when I

stopped by her house because I hadn't seen her since Misfit Dinner at the clubhouse two days before Christmas."

"Fuck!" My dad groaned and then his head hit the table in front of him.

"You're all a bunch of fuck-ups," Timeless snapped.

"You got that right," Rob told him before he turned a deadly fucking glare on me. "Some worse than others because the tree and gifts weren't the worst of what I saw that day."

I felt sick to my stomach as I sat there waiting to hear the rest, as if it wasn't bad enough that no one had even set eyes on my pregnant wife for nearly two months. Christ, she could have been dead and none of us would have known.

"She was standing there, staring into the fridge when I came in. Didn't even hear me there. I looked over her shoulder to see what her choices were and why it was taking her so damn long to pick." He shook his head. "She didn't have any fucking choices. I think she was hoping that the fridge had magically refilled itself or something. There was a half jar of mayonnaise, some other condiments, and a jar that had maybe two pickle spears in it." Rob didn't stop at that heartbreaking revelation. No, he had to crush us with the rest of it too.

"I got angry when I saw that and moved her out of the way. Flung every fucking cabinet open only to find them empty too. One box of pasta, some ramen noodles, and that was it. My girl didn't have any food worthy of a kid scraping by in college, let alone a pregnant woman who is trying to grow a baby."

“Why in the fuck were you putting groceries in my shack for some whore who was fully capable of getting a job, when you couldn’t fill your own house for the woman carrying your baby?” My father shot the question at me like the accusation it was. I’d fucked up more than a single person had a right to fuck up.

“Yeah, speaking of women working for their food...” Rob started, his voice too quiet for the amount of emotion I knew was brewing there. “When I took her to the grocery store...” He had to stop and compose himself again before he could go on. “Her reason for not going, by the way, was that it was too cold, and she was too tired to handle the twelve-mile round trip walk to the fucking Food Lion, the last half with groceries to carry back too.”

Holy fucking hit! Fucking stupid fucking fucker! I didn’t know if I could hear any more of this because I honestly wanted to put myself in the ground. I wasn’t the only guilty party though, because they had let things get this bad for her too. They dropped the fucking ball thinking I’d pick it up, but I had been fucking clueless with my head in the goddamn sand while trying to avoid the marriage I didn’t want.

“She had barely more than fifty bucks in cash on her at the store and was trying to add up if she had enough for the handful of shit she put in the cart. Not a damn bit of it was healthy food, it was all cheap shit.” Rob was shaking physically with the anger raging through him. “I bought her groceries and took them back to her place. Do you know where the money she had on her came from?”

I shook my head. Hell, I hadn't known she'd been starving, how the hell was I supposed to know where she got the money. I didn't think the iron dragons weighing my stomach down could sink it any lower, but what the fuck did I know? Because in the next few minutes, I felt like the absolute worst piece of shit on the fucking planet.

“She was working at a pizza joint after school most nights until they closed. My daughter. The pregnant one. The one without a car.” He carefully emphasized each point he made. “She was either using up some of the meager fucking money she made to take cabs, or she'd hustle a ride from someone, but I have a feeling the majority of the time she was simply walking home late at night. It's two miles to the pizza place from school. I checked, and the school has a bus that goes by there, so she didn't have to walk that part. But it's seven miles from the pizza joint to your house. My baby was walking that road, while pregnant, late at night, and by herself. Only God knows how many times she had to do that, because she wouldn't fucking tell me.”

He shook off the rage that was a tangible thing taking up too much space in the room that normally held up to thirty men.

“She was doing that up until they cut her hours.”

“What did they do that for?” Boone asked, pushing his anger on another source.

“They felt she was a liability after she burned the shit out of her belly while making pizzas. Has a nasty scar across the top of it now.”

“That's it! I've heard e-fucking-nough!” Timeless stood. “Boy, you were given that patch early, but it came with strings

since you disrespected a brother of the club. You were to marry the girl and see to shit. You were to live as a married couple and were given a little leeway with what you could do with the club whores, since we allow everyone to sample them whether they're tied down with a woman or not. From what I'm hearing, you ain't even been home in months, let alone seen to your pregnant wife's basic needs. That ain't how we do things in this fuckin' club. We care for what's ours, and that girl and that baby she's growing, are club family. She's ours."

Our Prez turned cold eyes toward Boone and Rob then too. "The two of you fucked up by not keeping a closer watch on this shit. Straighten it out." He turned back to me. "Get your ass home. Don't let me find you sleeping in this clubhouse again anytime soon, you hear me? I find out you're here for more than just the weekends, or weekday meetings and club runs, I will snatch that patch off your back and burn off any club ink you have myself. You feel me?"

"I feel you," I told him, though my words didn't come out with any strength behind them.

9 - Remembered

Tiger Lily

It was the second week in March, almost three weeks after my dad bought me groceries and stormed out, and I was starting to worry when my boss called me and told me that he didn't have any hours to give me this week. That meant no money coming in and I saw the final notice bill for the electricity taped onto the door before I left for school. I didn't even get to take the damn thing off the door, because I didn't want to draw anyone's attention to it. It was bad enough for me at school. Aside from Stacey, I was a pariah. No one wanted to speak to the married, pregnant girl whose husband didn't even want her.

Thanks to Brinley, the whole school knew about our situation long before I started to show. Most didn't believe her until there was no way to hide my baby bump any longer.

How in the world was I supposed to pay a nearly \$700 electric bill? They had apparently allowed it to go three months behind, but I didn't even know about that until the notice was posted on the door. I wasn't even sure who had been paying the bill before that. Was it Boone that had it paid up, and I was supposed to take over? No one told me! I ran to the bathroom once I got to school because there was no way I would let them see me cry.

But cry I did. How was I supposed to do this? I didn't have the first clue about what bills I should be paying or how the hell to get the money to pay for them. Was there a house payment too that I hadn't known about? Was someone going to come along and kick us out eventually? I couldn't catch my breath and ended up making myself so sick that I threw up the scrambled eggs, toast, and orange juice I had for breakfast.

"Oh honey!" Mrs. Walston, the sweet art teacher, had come into the bathroom and started to rub soothing circles on my back. "Are you okay? Maybe you should go on back home today."

"I don't have a ride," I explained pathetically.

"I'll take you. Come on," she offered. I didn't even think about it after that. To hell with school. I didn't want to be there anymore anyway. I used to value my education, but it was becoming more and more obvious that I'd never get a chance at anything beyond high school anyway, so what did it really matter? I'd been checking into getting my GED at the local community college, and the only thing stopping me was transportation to get there.

Mrs. Walston got me home in record time. When we pulled up, it was to see my father and Boone standing there talking to Merc, who I hadn't seen in months. Actually, that wasn't entirely accurate. My father was screaming at him while waving a piece of paper around in the air.

"Shoot!" I hissed under my breath.

"Should I keep driving?" Mrs. Walston wisely asked.

"Better not. That's my dad, the one yelling." I pointed out.

“I know who Mr. Donavon is.” She rolled her eyes. “Your husband, I mean. I assume the other one is his father since they look so much alike?”

“You got it.”

“Looks like they’re ripping him a new one.”

“There was a final notice for the electric taped to our door when I left for school earlier,” I explained.

“Is that why you were sick?” She asked, the pity in her eyes was hard to handle.

“Yeah. The place where I work told me they don’t have hours for me right now, so I wasn’t sure how I was going to pay it.”

“Lily, I know I’m not your teacher this year, but if you ever need anything, even if it’s a place to stay, I want you to know I will do my best to help find you a safe space where you can go.”

“Thank you. I’m not in danger around them.” I rolled my eyes. “Well, in danger of having to deal with their stupidity. Our dads know about the bill now, so I have no worry that it will get paid.”

“Why didn’t you tell them before?”

“I didn’t know that it wasn’t being paid until this morning.” I shrugged and then got out of her car and bypassed all three men who just stared at me as I went. Then, I unlocked my front door, went inside, and closed it behind me again before dropping my bookbag on the kitchen floor and grabbing a can of ginger ale from the fridge. I hoped that it would calm my upset stomach.

I took the bulky jacket off that I had found at the thrift store in January. Walking to the grocery store was a bit too chilly for simple hoodies, and I didn't have a jacket that would fit my belly, so it was the only thing I could do. I was just draping it over a kitchen chair when the three men finally made their way inside the house, consuming all the space available with their overall bulk and energy.

“What are you doing home and who in the hell just dropped you off?” My father bellowed at me.

I turned and ended up laughing at the shocked gasp that came from Merc. I supposed the way I looked now would be a shock to his system since he hadn't laid eyes on me in months. If you looked at me from behind, you wouldn't even know that I was pregnant. I was in my seventh month now and all belly. There was so damn much of it too.

“Mrs. Walston, the art teacher, found me getting sick in the bathroom and kindly brought me home.”

“Why were you sick?” That time it was Boone, though his voice was at least a little softer and laced with concern.

“Well, I think I had a panic attack to be honest,” I said nonchalantly before taking a sip of my ginger ale and then deciding that my feet hurt. I pulled the chair closest to me out and did the awkward, lean back-squat it took to get my butt in the chair without losing my balance and missing the damn seat. This pregnant belly thing had me all kinds of off balance most of the time.

“Panic attack?” My father asked. I just tipped my head toward his clenched fist that held the balled-up electric shut off notice.

My sigh precluded the shitstorm I knew was about to happen when I explained. “My boss called with the news that he didn’t have any hours for me, then I saw that notice about the electric and I didn’t know what I was going to do. Then I felt foolish because I should have known those bills needed to be paid, but I’d never gotten an actual bill in the mail here, so it never even registered. You know?”

I continued my rambling before anyone could stop me or answer my inane question. “So, then I started kind of hyperventilating because it occurred to me that there might be a house payment I was supposed to pay too. And what will I do if someone comes along one day and tells me I have to leave? Where would I go with no money, no one willing to let me work, and a baby on the way? Or what if it happened after the baby was here? And then I couldn’t breathe, and the vomiting happened shortly after. That was when Mrs. Walston came in and offered to take me home. Now, here I am.”

Not two seconds after I shut my trap, Merc was lying on the floor nursing a sore jaw, because my father didn’t say one word, he just punched my estranged husband right in the face.

“That’s what your selfishness has been doing to my daughter all this time!”

While my dad hovered angrily over a dazed Merc, Boone moved closer and pulled a chair out to join me at the table. “Darlin’ I never meant for you to feel that kind of stress. When I said the house was yours, I meant it. There is no house payment, it was paid off two years ago. You don’t have anything to worry about, okay?”

A simple nod of my head was my only answer as I continued to sip my ginger ale. My father stuck out a hand to help Merc up off the floor, which was kind of him because I would have left him there. I guess that's petty of me but fuck it. I wasn't oblivious to everything going on outside of this house, even if I didn't know about things like house payments, electric bills, and whatnot. Stacey had kept me informed about what Merc was up to, and according to her, he was living with some whore at the clubhouse who claimed she was his old lady.

I'm not delusional. I know I am less than nothing to the man, but it still hurts to know that he would openly claim another woman while still married to me. It makes things worse that both of our fathers had to know about it too since they're all in the same damn club. I wish I could just leave, but that's not how things worked in our world. Merc might not care, but our dads would hunt me down and drag me back because they know I'm carrying a boy. A son of the club. I rolled my eyes and wondered for a minute if they would feel the same if it was a girl.

"Don't worry about the bills, I'll get them caught up," Merc said as my father all but dragged him to the kitchen table. I didn't bother responding because fuck him.

"Do you want a ride back to school?" My dad asked me.

"No. I'm thinking about dropping out anyway."

"What? Why the fuck would you do that?"

"Why wouldn't I do that, Dad?" I scoffed at his angry tone. "Have you seen me? You do realize I'm going to give birth before the school year is even over and I already missed a

bunch of classes because I was so sick in the beginning. Plus, I can't work if I'm going to school. And where the hell am I going to put a baby next year when I'm in school if I can't afford daycare or a babysitter so that I can go?"

My father's response was to turn away from me and roar while launching an ugly lamp at the wall. It was the first thing in his reach, and honestly, I was glad. I wasn't sure which one of the old ladies put that trash in this house, but I hated it. The only thing that had stopped me from getting rid of the thing was because I didn't know if it was something that belonged to Boone or Merc. Maybe it was sentimental family shit? Who knew? I certainly didn't because no one talked to me.

"You don't have to drop out," Merc chimed in. "I'll pay for whatever."

I laughed at that, reached down and picked up the balled-up shut off notice from the electric company that my dad had dropped in the middle of his fit. Then, I took the time to smooth it out and placed it on the table, so the words were facing Merc.

Boone laughed. "I think that's her way of telling you that your kind of help ain't something she can rely on, Son."

He didn't bother responding because what could he honestly say? He hadn't pitched in for shit since we'd been married. At least, not where I was concerned. I saw the truck he bought for Brinley before she skipped town. Brinley herself made sure I knew exactly who bought it for her as she told me to enjoy riding the school bus. To say I had zero faith in Merc doing the right thing was an understatement.

“What is all this?” My father asked from somewhere behind me. I hadn’t been paying attention to the fact that he started snooping through the cabinets, drawers, and counters while I was making my point with the electric notice.

“What?”

He laid the estimate the doctor’s office had given me for how much the birth was going to cost. There were three different estimates there. One was for a simple, no meds, vaginal birth. The second was for a birth that might involve small things like medications and episiotomy and stitching plus the two-day stay in the hospital. The third detailed how much it might cost if I had to go in for an emergency c-section.

“They’re just estimates for how much things will cost.”

“I see that, but why do you have this?” He pointed to the one about the c-section cost. “Is there something wrong that we should know about?”

“No. They just wanted me to have all the potential costs since I’ve been paying a little extra at a time at each visit to make sure that some of the hospital stay and delivery fee is covered. I figured it was better to start paying it now so that I didn’t have a huge bill come due when I had to buy things like diapers and clothes for a growing baby.” I shrugged and took another sip of my ginger ale.

“Fuuuuck! Boone, we’ve been failing the hell out of my little girl.”

“I never even thought about the costs,” he admitted to my dad. “We had insurance from the military when Damon was

born. Never had to worry about shit like that.”

“It was the same for me,” my dad admitted before handing the papers to Boone. “Look at that shit,” he told him. Both men had been in the military before they came to be in an MC together, but I honestly never knew that my dad was still in when I was born. It wasn’t something I remembered.

“They want \$1,700 for a birth if nothing at all goes wrong?” Boone damn near shouted out his shock. Then he turned to me. This says birth only, what does that mean?”

“It means that the \$1,700 is only for the delivery fee and the hospital stay. It doesn’t count the visits, tests, ultrasounds, or anything else leading up to the delivery.” My face was heating with a flush of embarrassment as these men, once again, realized the financial burden I’d been shouldering on my own.

“What about that visit when I went with you?” Boone asked. “The one where we saw the baby,” he reiterated because he’d been to another one earlier on in my pregnancy when I needed a ride. I cringed. That visit had cost me a huge chunk of my savings.

“It was a few hundred dollars.”

“Fuck’s sake, kid! Why didn’t you tell me that day?”

“I knew it would be expensive. I’d been pre-paying. Ultrasounds aren’t cheap, but that was the last one they do unless something is wrong.”

“I want receipts for every penny you’ve spent and then I don’t want you to worry about any of the rest of it, you hear me?” My father ordered in his no-nonsense way. I just gave him a dubious look because I honestly didn’t believe anything

any of them told me anymore. Boone and my father had once reassured me that everything would be okay, and all would be taken care of when they demanded that I marry Merc. They lied.

“Don’t give me that look, baby girl.” His voice softened as he spoke. “Believe me, I know we failed in what we promised you. I thought...” His eyes wandered to Merc’s then. “Never mind what I thought. I was wrong and I should have been double-checking to make sure, but I dropped the ball because I wanted the two of you to figure shit out.”

I laughed then. “You wanted the two of us to figure shit out, and you thought that would happen when I asked for your help getting a car while he bought his girlfriend one instead?” I asked. When no one answered I continued. “How did you think the two of us were going to figure anything out when you know that he has an old lady living with him at the clubhouse and that I’m here alone in this prison you set me up in with no way to get anywhere? Maybe that was your plan all along. If I didn’t have a car, I couldn’t go to the clubhouse and make any trouble. I don’t know, but just when did you think we were working things out when he hasn’t been in this house in months?”

“I don’t have an old lady,” Merc offered up, as if that made everything okay.

“You have a whore who lives with you in the clubhouse. Old lady or not, she’s the one getting your time, effort, and attention. She’s the one whose needs you’re catering to, and they can’t say they didn’t know about it.”

I shifted my attention away from him and back to my father then. “Why did you make me do this? Do you hate me that much? Is this my punishment for being my mother’s daughter? Did you think I would do the same thing she did? Did you feel like I didn’t deserve to be happy? I don’t understand why you would make me go through this.” I started crying then because the tears were both angry and sad and there was no holding them back any longer.

“I’m sorry that I got pregnant. I didn’t mean to. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I don’t even remember most of that stupid night because it just seemed like a dream that never really happened. But then here I am living alone, growing bigger, and I don’t even know anything about how to pay those stupid bills, or how to find a job when I look like this,” I tossed my hands down to indicate my growing belly. “Every single day, I’m just alone with all of this. The least you could have done was told me how in the hell I was supposed to do all the adult things when you start with nothing, because I don’t know.” My dad moved in to swoop me up out of the chair.

“I’m so sorry, Lil! I fucked up! You’re right, this should have never happened. We thought things would change and get better. I’m sorry baby. I promise, I’ll do better. I’m here. Whatever you need. I’m here, okay?”

When my father finally released me from his smothering hug, the other two men were no longer at the table. I knew they must have been back in either the bedroom or the nursery because I could hear faint mumbling sounds, as if they were having a heated discussion while also trying not to be overheard.

“I don’t want you quitting school, Lil. We’ll work out everything else, but you need to finish.”

“Dad, I don’t think I can do this,” I admitted.

“Baby girl, you only feel that way because I failed you. Shit, I never even talked to you about paying bills, let alone checked in on you to see if you needed help understanding, sorting through, or paying anything. That’s on me, kiddo. Not you. You can do this because you are stronger than any man I know.”

“Then why wouldn’t you let me do this on my own?”

“Honestly, Lily, I thought I was saving you both by throwing you together. Never imagined it wouldn’t work out that way. Again, that’s my fault. After you have the baby, if you still feel like you don’t want to be a part of this shit, I will buy the house out from under Merc and you can be on your own here – with my help, if that’s what you want.”

It was the first time I felt hope in months, and I wasn’t going to let that feeling slip through my fingers. The lights never got turned off and the water still ran, so I assumed that Merc had started paying those bills again, and if not him, our parents had done so. After that day, Merc was at the house by six every weekday evening, slept on the couch, and was gone again in the morning. He was never home at all on the weekends, and I assumed those were the days he was shacking up with his little whore at the clubhouse.

Tinder broke things off with Stacey, so after that, I had no way of knowing. I felt responsible for the loss of her relationship, even though she assured me it was no big deal. My best friend, unlike me, would be graduating from high

school in June. She had plans to go off to college and take over the world, and I had no doubt she would succeed. I just wished I was going with her.

Every Monday morning, when I got ready for school, there was money sitting on the kitchen counter for me. Every week, I simply tucked it into the small safe I'd purchased that was stashed in the locked drawer of my desk.

Three weeks after the showdown in my house about the rent, after March had rolled slowly into April, Merc was home when the taxi dropped me off.

"Where were you?" He asked, as he watched out the window while the car pulled away.

"Doctor." It was the only time I bothered responding to him. Otherwise, I just pretended as if he didn't exist. That was what he had been doing to me for months on end, so I felt it was only appropriate. It wasn't as though there was a relationship between us to salvage or anything.

"Is something wrong?" He asked and finally, I turned to look at him. The asshole seemed genuinely concerned, but it just reminded me that he was clueless about my whole pregnancy, and it pissed me off.

"You do realize that when women get as close to their delivery date as I am that they start going to the doctor bi-weekly, right?"

He seemed shocked by that, and I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was. "You're close to your due date?"

"You don't even know when the baby is supposed to be born?"

“Did you ever tell me?”

“Did you ever ask?” I countered. It didn’t take a genius to figure out when I should be due considering we’d only had sex the one time, but he wanted to ask stupid questions, so he got stupid answers.

Merc huffed in frustration as his fingers pinched the bridge of his nose, like he could stave off the headache I was trying to cause him.

“When are you due?” He relented and asked.

“May first.”

“That soon?”

“Not soon enough,” I told him just as the baby gave me a solid kick to the ribs and a one-two punch to my kidneys. “Ouch!”

“You okay?”

“Fine. Just being a punching bag for everyone as usual,” I murmured.

“I’m going on a run for a few days, so you probably won’t see me until next Wednesday.”

“Whatever.”

“I’m leaving money on the counter now, instead of...”

I had already walked off, not caring what he had to say. As far as I was concerned the money was nothing more than hush money to keep me quiet and keep our dads off his back. To my surprise, he followed me.

“Lily, I’m trying to fix shit here, but it is impossible to do if you don’t let me at least try. Do you need anything?”

“Where are you on the weekends when you don’t come home?” I asked, because I had a point to prove. Then again, judging by his response, I supposed he did too.

“Lily, you already know that I stay at the clubhouse on the weekends. That our marriage is on paper only. What do you want me to say about that? We’re not meant to be a couple. I’m just trying to fix things enough that we can make sure you and the baby are taken care of and not forgotten in the mix of things.”

“I’m perfectly fine. Your conscience is clear now, you can head on out. No need to remember me when the door hits you as you go.” The one thing I could say for Merc was that he was consistent. Every time I thought I saw a glimmer of something more in him, he quickly disavowed me of those notions.

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10 - A Son

Tiger Lily

By the time Merc got back from whatever run he'd been sent on, My father and Boone were sent out. Honestly, I didn't even know what they did on those club runs, if it was legal, illegal, or just for fun. I had zero clue and they would never tell me because it was club business, and I wasn't part of the club. At least, not in the ways that counted when information was passed around.

Merc took advantage of the fact that neither of the men were around and stayed more often at the clubhouse. He still came around on Mondays to drop money off, but that was it. My father was due back today, after promising me that he would be in town the week before my due date just in case.

Last I heard from him, he was still on the road, and that was a tough pill to swallow because my water broke, and he wasn't answering the phone that he took with him. A contraction slammed into me as I attempted to remember the number for the club where Boone was staying. They had given it to me a few days earlier, just in case of an emergency. Unfortunately, I had written it down on a little chalkboard beside the phone in the kitchen and must have brushed against it at some point. The last four numbers were barely visible, and yet not visible

enough because I got two wrong numbers while trying to breath through the pain in my lower abdomen.

Finally, I gave up trying to figure the number out and called the number that Boone had given me for the sat phone Merc had. The only reason I put my pride aside to make that call was because I desperately needed a ride to the hospital and didn't want to add an ambulance bill to the mix.

"Hello?" A familiar woman's voice answered. I couldn't place the sound though because pain tore through me.

"I need to..." I groaned through a contraction before I could form words again. "Merc. Need Merc," I yelled into the phone then.

"He's busy!" She snapped and then hung up.

I called back.

"Hello?"

"I need Merc now, it's an-"

She hung up again, but as she did so I could hear laughter in the background.

"Son of a bitch!" I screamed into the lonely confines of my house. I only had one other option, beyond dialing 9-1-1 a that point. I called my best friend, the one who was getting ready to jet off to college in a few months, and luckily, she answered right away.

"Hey preggio, what's shakin'?" Stacey teased.

"Help!" Was all I could manage as another contraction not only hit but doubled me over with the strength of the pain that whipped from my back to my front.

“Oh my God! Where are you!” Stacey screamed into the phone.

“Home. Labor. Please, hurry.” I panted the words out in a burst.

“We’ll be right there.”

She hung up the phone, but at least this time I knew someone who cared would be on the way to help me. I managed to drag my hospital bag over to the door, unlock it, and throw it open by the time they got to my house. Luckily, Stacey didn’t live that far away.

“Oh, you poor thing!” Shannon called out as she threw the car door open and came to my side to help me. “Stace, grab her bag. Make sure you get her keys and lock up while I get her into the car.”

Stacey moved past me as her mom managed to get me into the backseat. “I think I’m leaking,” I told her.

“Hush now. Don’t even worry about it.”

By the time we got to the hospital, I was sweating buckets, in so much pain I wanted to chew my own belly off, and there was a pressure between my legs that had me cupping my hands over myself just in case my baby fell out. I didn’t think that was a thing that could actually happen, but I’d heard one too many horror stories about prom night babies falling into toilets to not be traumatized.

Thank you to all the high school bullies who thought it was fun to scare the pregnant chick with that bullshit!

The minute they put me in a wheelchair, I leaned forward and screamed, but a nurse slammed me back up. “None of

that. You can't push yet."

"Oh my God, I can feel it..." I started to scream. "It burns so bad!" That stopped the nurse cold in her tracks. She bent down right in front of me, careful of my modesty, she slid the nightgown I'd been wearing up, and my soaked panties aside, then I watched as her eyes bugged out.

"We're going to need a doctor over here right now and a gurney!" She proceeded to yank my underwear off me, no longer concerned about what anyone might accidentally see.

Shannon had brought me to the emergency room entrance rather than trying to get me through the front of the hospital and up to where labor and delivery was located.

"Okay, sweetheart, we're going to lift you up and place you on the gurney. I need for you to try to stay still and not panic."

Shannon scoffed. "You're telling a 16-year-old girl who is in active labor not to panic as people try to lift her?"

"Not helping, ma'am."

Shannon rolled her eyes. I needed to push again and to hell with the nurse who tried to tell me I couldn't. I bared down and screamed through the pain.

"Oh shit!" A man at the other end of the hall yelled as he saw what was happening.

"Can we get her into a room with some privacy?" Shannon yelled at the staff.

"We're trying!" the nurse snapped back.

"Brenda, get out of here!" A man ordered as another nurse ran up to assist. Several people moved at once then and I

couldn't keep up as my body was lifted and placed onto a bed just as another contraction tore through my body. I screamed while trying to basically do a sit up and using my own thighs for leverage to get there.

"Look at that, you don't even need coaching. You're a natural. That's it, keep pushing, the head is already crowning, sweetie." The man cooed to me in a kind voice, that didn't sound the least bit as panicked. That was reassuring.

"Okay, now, rest until the next one. We're going to move you a little at a time in between pushes and see if we can't get you behind a curtain until your little one arrives. Then we'll wheel you both up where you belong, okay?"

"He's early," I cried.

"How early?"

"She's not due until the first of May," Shannon informed him as I began to bare down once more.

"That's okay. Not too early then. Everything will be fine, sweetie. That's it, breathe and keep going. Good job! Now rest." He ordered the others, "Move!" The bed immediately began to roll, and we were on our way, almost to a curtained off area before I was trying to do another sit-up and screaming through the burning hot pain in my girly bits.

"Keep going, you got this. That's it. Okay, stop for a second." I could feel things going on down below, but my eyes were scrunched shut so I wouldn't have to acknowledge how many people were getting a good look at my wrecked vagina.

"Okay, push when you feel it again. Once you get those shoulders out it will be smooth sailing."

That was the weirdest thing anyone had ever said to me, but I listened because the next thing I knew, I was scrunching my poor body up again and pushing for all I was worth. There was a popping sensation, like something finally breaking free, and then an easy slip of the body being expelled from my own. Seconds went by that felt like minutes before I heard the high pitch wailing of a baby's cries.

"You have a healthy baby boy!" The doctor announced and too many voices around us let out whooping cheers and congratulations.

"Let's get you behind the curtain so we can deliver the placenta and get you two taken care of and ready to move upstairs," the doctor ordered. I think it was more for the nurses benefit than mine, to get them moving. I didn't honestly care because someone laid my little boy's body right on my chest and I held onto him for dear life. He was wrinkled, wet, bloody, cheesy, and all-around ugly for the birth experience, but he was also the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my whole life.

After a bunch of gross shit happened, I tried to fight a nurse who wanted to take my baby from me, and once they got my son and me stable, we were wheeled to an elevator. Thankfully, the doctor who delivered my son came with us because I sure as hell didn't trust the nurses.

"Shannon, please, don't leave me. Don't let them take my baby!" I cried to her, wishing my big, scary dad was there to see to things.

"I'm not going anywhere, honey." She tapped my foot reassuringly because it was the only thing she could reach.

“Did you get a hold of your dad?” Stacey asked me.

“I left a message for him when he wouldn’t answer. He was on the road, so that thing was probably in his saddlebag.

“Your dad a biker?”

“Yeah, he’s a member of the Aces High MC.”

The doctor smiled at me. “You know Junior?”

I nodded. Junior was a little younger than my dad, but not by much. “Junior and Liz are great. She gave me a beautiful blanket for the baby.”

“Junior is my older brother,” the doc said.

“Wow. I didn’t know he had a brother.” Something flashed in his eyes then, but I was too out of it to connect the dots. “Don’t feel bad about that, I don’t spend a lot of time around the MC these days. Besides, it’s not like they tell their life stories to a member’s daughter.”

“It’s okay. Junior and I haven’t spoken in about fifteen years.”

“Why?” I asked as we made our way off the elevator.

“I dated Liz first,” was all he said in answer. Oh shit!

“That sucks.”

The man chuckled before tapping the side of my bed so the nurse would stop at the rounded desk in the middle of the hall. I tuned out all the medical mumbo-jumbo and the rush to get a room ready for me, but I heard the last of what the doc said before he walked away.

“She was a champ! Make sure that my fees get waived when her billing is done. I shouldn’t get paid when she did all the work.” He winked at me and then he was gone.

“Michael is just the sweetest, isn’t he?” One of the nurses swooned. I’d say! He just bumped about a thousand dollars off my bill.

A nurse attempted to take my baby from me again and I was not having that. “NO! You get me and this baby those ID bracelets that they told me about when I came up here to pre-register. You don’t take my son anywhere until that’s done.”

“Sweetheart, you’re tired and it is going to take a little time to get those made. We need to make sure the baby stays safe while we wait.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing!” I yelled at her. I was thankful for the bit of adrenaline boost too because tired was an understatement for how I felt. I could sleep for a week at this point, but not before I was certain my son would be safe.

The elevator door slid open, and my dad came bounding out. “I made it as fast as I could. Holy shit! That’s a baby! You already had the baby!” Then my father glanced around and noticed we were still in the hallway. “What the fuck is my daughter doing out in this hallway instead of in a private room?”

“Sir, we’re going to need you to calm down.” One of the nurses tried to instruct. She was saved from my father’s wrath when Dr. Michael Hastings came back around the corner.

“Hey man. We just brought your girl up from the ER and they’re getting a room ready for her.”

“Mike?” My dad asked, seeming somewhat shocked to see him there.

“Yeah man. Just got back to town a couple months ago. I was pulling a shift in the ER downstairs when your girl came in.”

“Shit. You been taking care of my girl?”

“She took care of herself. You should be proud. That’s one feisty momma bear.” Mike winked at me as he said that. “Tell you what, your girl there is exhausted and needs a minute to rest, but she won’t let the nurses take the baby to get him cleaned up and weighed in. How about you promise to go stay by his side so she can rest easy for a bit?” Mike suggested.

“You good with that, baby girl?”

I nodded, feeling ready to drop off at any moment.

“Get her some warm blankets. She’s starting to crash from the adrenaline.”

“What does that mean?” My dad asked.

“It’s not anything to worry over. She had a pretty crazy delivery down in the ER and then her fight response kicked in twice now when the nurses tried to take the baby from her. She’s just coming down off that rush.” He pointed at me. “See the shivering? We’re just going to get her warmed up and allow her to rest while the nurses take care of the baby. Her regular doctor was paged, and he’ll be in shortly to see to her.”

“Can’t you handle her?”

“Sorry, Rob. I’m needed down in the ER.” He patted my father on the shoulder. “Congratulations, Grandpa!”

My father's face broke into the biggest smile I think I had ever seen. It was his first time being called Grandpa while there was an actual grandson for him to fawn over.

"Thanks," he muttered before turning back to me and the nurse who had brought what looked like a clear plastic, rolling baby bassinet over.

"All right, let's get this little fella cleaned up and weighed, shall we?"

My father followed along, never taking his eyes off my baby boy, which settled me because I knew he'd be in good hands.

"Are you her mom?" The other nurse asked Shannon.

"No, I'm her best friend's mom. Her mom isn't in the picture anymore."

"I see, well you can come along if she says it's okay. We have her room ready."

I nodded and Shannon and Stacey followed behind me. I could hear Stacey talking to her mom. "That was wild. Did you see everything?"

"I did. Let that be a lesson to you to make sure birth control is a priority."

That made me laugh. "Where were you nine months ago when I needed that lecture?"

"Oh hush, you! Real proud of you, girl. I've never seen a woman handle labor like that before in my life. I cried and cursed everyone up and down the east coast for breathing

when I was in labor, and you just started doing everything all on your own.”

I giggled at Shannon, but even that seemed to take more effort than I had to give. “We’re just going to sit here with you until your dad brings your boy back. We’ll make sure you’re safe. Rest now.”

I didn’t bother responding and instead just closed my eyes. “Why is she so paranoid about safety all of a sudden?” Stacey asked her mom.

“The most vulnerable a woman feels in life is when she gives birth to her child, especially the first. You’re so tired that you know you can’t protect them for long. And honey, after everything she’s been through, someone needs to protect her too, even if it’s just from that womanizing little shit who got her pregnant.”

“Do you think he’ll show up?”

“No, honey. I really don’t think he’ll man up enough to do that.” That was the last thing I heard as I snuggled under the warmth of the heated blankets and drifted off to sleep.

~*~

When I finally woke again, my eyes barely opened, but it was enough to see that the room was darker. Night had fallen fully and there was a small light on over the sink to the right of my bed. That same rolling bassinet was at the end of the bed, and my father sat in a chair that was positioned between that bassinet and the door to the room. He was on guard, and it was the cutest thing. The in-room phone was stretched over to where he sat.

“He’s a handsome guy. Seven pounds, fifteen ounces.” My dad paused before quiet laughter erupted from him. “Yeah, nearly the size of a good eight-ounce steak, you idiot.” There was another pause, and the laughter left his voice.

“He never showed. Don’t know if she got in touch with him, but he was told to be home while we were gone, and from what Junior and Crew had to say, he’s been at the clubhouse more than not since we’ve been gone. Nah. I’m not calling the bastard now. Don’t know if she even wants him here at this point. If he’d been home, she wouldn’t have had to make a bunch of frantic calls to try to get a ride to the damn hospital. For fuck’s sake, she delivered in the middle of a hallway in the ER. What would have happened if she hadn’t gotten Stacey and her mom to the house in time?”

There was another lengthy pause then my father sighed. “Yeah, I’ll ask her what she wants to do when she’s up. Hurry back, yeah?” The way my father spoke to Boone made me think of the way he used to talk to my mom on the phone when she would go visit her parents before they died. Once again, it made me wonder if the two men were more than just best friends. Some days, it felt like they were so much more.

As soon as my dad hung up the phone and put it back on the table beside the head of my bed, I moved to let him know that I had woken up.

“Hey baby girl,” he called out while leaning in to kiss my forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I just squeezed a baby out of somewhere it never should have fit,” I answered.

Dad threw his head back and boomed out laughter that startled the little baby burrito in the bassinet. “Shit. Sorry,” he apologized and went to retrieve my son before he could start screaming. “The nurses bottle fed him earlier because you were knocked out and they hadn’t been able to ask if you wanted to breast feed or not.

“I’d like to try,” I admitted. “It’ll be cheaper than buying all that formula.”

“Hey!” Dad scolded me. “If you need formula for the baby, then that’s what we’ll get him. Don’t you worry about the cost.”

“I’d still like to try. I read about it and it’s better for the baby. They get stuff from mother’s milk that keeps them from getting sick.”

“All right. You need me to leave the room while you try to do that?”

“No. You might want to turn around for a minute though. I’m not really sure how to do this.”

“I’m gonna go get the nurse,” he told me as he handed my son off to me. “They said they could help with him latching on, if you needed.”

I nodded my head in response but was already placing the baby up to my nipple by the time he got out the door. When he came back with a nurse in tow, my son was happily suckling away.

“Well, it looks like you didn’t need me after all. I’m just going to check on a couple things while the little guy gets his fill.” She picked up one of my wrists and then wrote down

something on my chart. “Don’t forget to swap sides with him too. How are you feeling? Any cramping? Have you been to the bathroom yet?”

She promised to come back and help me to the bathroom when I was done feeding the baby, so I took the time to swap sides, and let him get his fill, until his little milk-filled mouth popped off. Then I burped him, and my father put him back in the bassinet for me.

“Could you get the nurse again. I need help with the...” I nodded toward the in-room bathroom just across from my bed.

Once I was finally situated again, my dad asked the pressing question I had been waiting for since he hung up with Boone.

“Do you want me to get Merc here?”

I shook my head.

“He has a right to meet his son.”

“I tried calling the number to his phone several times because I needed a ride to the hospital when I couldn’t get in touch with you or Boone.”

“He didn’t answer?”

“A woman answered both times. Both times she hung up on me, the first after being an asshole and telling me he wasn’t there. The second time I was trying to tell her it was an emergency and she laughed while hanging up on me.”

I could see the anger brewing in my dad’s face. “Please, stay calm. No need to wake the baby up again.”

“I will find out who the hell that was, and deal with the bitch.” I shrugged because it didn’t even matter, and it wasn’t

like I expected much more out of the asshole man I'd been forced to marry. "I assumed your friend brought you in?"

"Yeah, Shannon and Stacey came and got me."

"I owe that woman a nice dinner."

"I'm sure she would appreciate it. And, um, maybe offer to have her car detailed too."

"Why?"

I scrunched my nose up in distaste as I had to admit to my father about leaking amniotic fluid on Shannon's upholstery.

~*~

Two very long days later, both Declan and I were released from the hospital. His name was mine to give since his father never bothered to show up, and he never bothered to take enough of an interest in my pregnancy to even suggest a name before his birth anyway.

"Boone will be getting into the clubhouse around the same time we're heading out of here, would you mind if we stopped by there?" My father asked.

I sighed because I could see through his ploy. He wanted me to rub my son in Merc's face too. Seeing Boone immediately was just the ruse to make it happen. Otherwise, Boone would clean up and meet us at the house.

"Fine," I muttered as I wrapped my boy up like a burrito again the way the nurses had shown me. Swaddling, they called it. Whatever it was, it worked for him. My boy loved being cozy in there when he wasn't directly touching my skin.

When we got to the clubhouse, I immediately saw Boone's Panhead sitting near the front door, and I could also hear the ticking of the engine that always happened just after it was shut off at the end of a long ride. It meant Boone had only just beat us here. I walked in behind my father and abruptly stopped and moved to the side to see why we were bottlenecked at the door. Boone stood there with disbelief and rage clear on his face, my father too, and then when I glanced across the room I sighed as understanding dawned.

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11 - In Your Face

Merc

“Mads, spread those legs wide baby. It’s our last day before I have to go back to the ball and fucking chain.” I was a little buzzed, otherwise I wouldn’t have said that shit out loud in the middle of the clubhouse. Boone and Rob might not have been here for the past couple weeks, but that didn’t mean some of the other older members wouldn’t fucking rat me out to them for talking shit about their princess.

“We should go to your room,” Madeline cooed at me even while she spread her legs and showed me what I already knew to be true. She wasn’t wearing any panties under that tiny little skirt she had on. Perfect.

“No need.” I moved my head side-to-side pretending to glance around, like I cared. “There aren’t that many people here anyway, babe.”

I slid my right hand up her silky-smooth leg and dragged my thumb across her tight little bud. She was already plump and waiting, moisture seeping from her gash made it easy to glide up and down, teasing her clit before dipping two fingers right into her heat. She was more than slick which meant I didn’t have to go easy on her.

Two fingers wasn’t really enough to fill Madeline. She needed way more than that, so I gave her a third, then a fourth before she reached up and pulled my face to hers with an

eagerness that she hadn't really shown the past couple of days that we'd been fucking our way through every position in the Kama Sutra.

Her tongue dove into my mouth before I could stop her this time, and for once, I went with it instead of pulling back and avoiding kisses the way I normally did. I don't know why I thought that would make it all right. Despite what my father thought, I had a little bit of a conscience that niggled in the back of my mind when I was doing stupid shit. Somewhere along the line, I'd convinced myself that if I didn't kiss the women I was with, it wasn't all that bad. Lily knew the score. She knew she had her out-clause just as well as she knew I had permission to do what I wanted at the clubhouse.

Most of the time, I did what I wanted here in the hopes that it would get back to her so that she would take that out and leave my ass. Then, I could keep my patch and get out of the marriage I never wanted to be in, but it only worked if she fucking hated me and wanted out. Still, I had drawn the line at kissing for some reason, as if it would somehow lessen the blow for Lily when she heard about what I'd been getting up to.

Madeline released my lips long enough to scream, "Harder!" as I continued to pump my fingers into her wanton pussy. Shit, if I went any harder, I'd damn near be fisting the girl. Chills spilled across the back of my neck as I realized we had an audience, and that Madeline was playing up for it. I tilted my head just enough to see a woman standing there in my peripheral vision holding something blue in her arms. Then, my eyes drifted further and registered that Robbie was there glaring daggers at me along with my dad.

I jumped up and swiped my hand – the one that had just been inside of Madeline – across my jeans. When I turned, it was to see my father walking away from them and toward the bar, looking worn out as fuck and pissed the hell off. Then, my eyes slid back to *her*. The woman standing there with the blue bundle. It took a minute for my brain to register what I was seeing. Lily stood there, no longer looking pregnant, and that blue bundle... Shit! Oh, fucking shit! I was going to die.

My father slammed the shot on the bar, turned back to me, noticed my face, and then his head tilted back to see Robbie and Lily standing there. Apparently, they hadn't come in together and had simply all been caught up in the scene of me getting Madeline off in public.

“Is that my grandson?” Boone’s voice boomed with happiness that belied the evil intensity of the stare he had just pinned me in place with. Unfortunately for him, Lily was closer to me, and I made it to her first.

“Thought you were already back, brought him by on the way home so you could see him,” Robbie answered my father as I moved even closer to try to see the baby.

I reached out to move the blanket that obscured my view, but Lily sidestepped me and headed toward my father instead. She offered the baby up to him with a giant smile on her face.

“What the fuck? I want to see him!” I demanded. “Why the hell did you just put him in Boone’s arms first?” My questions were dripping with accusation. There was only so much shit I was going to put up with from this bitch.

She turned a scathing glare my way as my father smirked while cooing at the baby. The same baby that I still couldn't

see. He was just a damn blue blanket from where I stood.

“You’ve had two whole days to come to the goddamn hospital and see this baby born, hold him, get to know him, or even name him if you wanted to do that. I called and called because Boone and my father were gone, and I needed a ride to the hospital when I went into labor a few days early. My best friend had to come get me instead.” She paused a moment and tilted her head to the side before adding the last bit that fucking sunk me. “Some cunt kept hanging up on me or telling me you were busy while I was in labor and trying to get in touch with you so I could get a ride to the hospital.”

She glanced back toward where I left Madeline lying there with her legs still spread wide and a smirk the size of the grand canyon on her face. Oh shit! Fuck me. Madeline. There was something about that girl that I’d been trying to remember, and it just now hit me. She used to be Lily’s best friend. The night we made our son, was the night Lily told me she was walking home because she’d had a fight with her friend and had basically been stranded there. Of all the bitches to hook up with... And she had been in my room all weekend. If Lily had attempted to call, it would have been Madeline who was hanging up on her.

It also occurred to me that I hadn’t seen the satellite phone my father had left for me just in case Lily went into labor while our fathers were gone. Fuck! I’d deal with Madeline later. For now, I had a son to meet, so I turned my full attention back to Lily who wasn’t done telling me about myself, especially when I attempted to take the baby from my father.

Lily stepped right in the way and shoved me backward. A few of the men who had been hanging around, stood as if they might jump into the fray. Didn't matter who you were, if you didn't wear the patch, you didn't put hands on a brother.

“You don't get to put your sexually transmitted disease infested hands on *my* baby! You couldn't even be bothered to help me to the hospital to have him or to jump out of that nasty whore's snatch long enough to see if he was living and breathing. *My* son is still innocent, sweet, and disease free and I'm keeping him that way as long as I can. If that means not allowing your filth to touch him, then that's exactly what will happen. Now, go fucking shower, because you stink like nasty whore and cheap liquor. Get some fresh clothes on, sober up, and don't even think about coming around *my* son until you do!”

It did not go over my head that she was emphasizing the fact that the little bundle of blue my father held was *her* son and not *ours*. I guess I deserved that, considering the whole time she was pregnant with him that's exactly how I referred to the baby. He was *her* kid. It kept things from being real for me. Now, too fucking late to matter, I finally realized the damage I'd been doing.

Boone chuckled and grinned with pride as he watched his daughter-in-law give me shit. “That's a fierce little momma right there. Reminds me of a tigress with her cubs. No one fucks with her babies. Our fierce little Tiger Lily,” he finally said, the awe dripping from his voice as he turned his attention to Rob momentarily.

Then he redirected his attention to me. “Where the fuck is the phone that I left for you?” Boone finally asked, and he was pissed, forgetting that he held a tiny baby in his hands when he bellowed out those words. “I didn’t know she didn’t have anyone at the hospital with her. Christ! I would have fucked off that run and come straight there, sweetheart.” My dad told her as he handed my now screaming son to his mother.

She cooed sweetly into his ear as she did a slight little bounce-rock thing, while holding the baby tight to her body. “You’re okay. Grandpa just has a loud voice when he’s upset with his idiot son. You’ll be fine. We’re going to go home and get you fed and changed, and all will be right in your world again.”

Jesus, I think she had every single man in the place under the same spell she was weaving around my kid.

“The phone?” My father asked again, softer this time, but the venom wasn’t missing from the whispered words.

I glared back at Madeline whose face had turned red. She wouldn’t meet my eyes though, which told me everything I needed to know. “I don’t know. It disappeared at some point over the past couple days.”

“Your wife’s lifeline at the end of her pregnancy just disappeared and you didn’t tear down the world trying to find it?” Boone asked. Madeline still refused to look at me so I turned my attention back to my dad and said the most honest thing I could in that moment.

“I wasn’t thinking of the phone to make the attempt to find it and that was my fuck up that I’ll have to live with for the rest of my life.”

Boone scoffed at me. “Now, he thinks he gets it. Boy, you don’t know the half of how badly you’ve been screwing all this up, but you will. And when it really hits you, you won’t be standing because the weight of it all will crush you completely.”

My father’s eyes left mine then and moved to Madeline’s. “Don’t know what the fuck you did with that phone, girl, but you will take the prospect to my son’s room and go find it quick like. Then, he’s going to take you to a special room where you’re going to stay until I can deal with you.”

“What?” Madeline screeched, obviously aware that she had just incurred the wrath of Boone. “I didn’t do anything really, just shoved the damn thing in a drawer.”

“And why’d you do that?”

She almost couldn’t stop herself from snickering. “It wouldn’t stop ringing,” she admitted.

Holy shit!

“Get her out of here before I kill her myself,” I raged. I missed my son being born because my selfish ass was with a woman who was worse than me. I missed being able to name him or have any input at all, and I pissed his mom off so much that I doubted she’d ever let me near him.

“Come on baby girl, let’s get the two of you home. You look like you’re about to drop and that boy looks about two seconds from gumming his fingers off, he’s so hungry.”

Lily chuckled at that. “He does, doesn’t he?” She turned and moved toward the door without giving me another thought. The worst part was, it was no more than I deserved.

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12 - Forgiveness isn't Necessary

Tiger Lily

Merc didn't show up at the house that day. By ten o'clock that night, I kicked my dad and Boone out, fed the baby, put him in his crib, and turned on the baby monitor that Shannon and Stacey had gotten for me. Then, I took a hot shower and crawled in bed without giving Merc another thought.

Just after midnight, something stirred me from sleep, but at first, I was too groggy to understand what it was. Then, like I was in a nightmare I felt my jelly belly where the baby used to be. It took a second to remember I had already given birth, and the noise that woke me was coming from the baby monitor in my son's room.

"You're so tiny," a gruff voice attempted to coo. "And wiggly," he laughed lightly, so as not to startle the baby. "Look at those arms go. We'll definitely have to get you into sports, huh?"

I had to smile at that until my eyes landed on the clock beside my bed and I realized how late it was. The asshole didn't get to fuck around with whomever at the club and then come here fresh from fucking his whores and straight to touching my baby.

Anger made me less cautious than I normally would be about things, so when I jumped out of bed and grabbed the

baseball bat by my door, I didn't bother to put on a robe over the nightie that I wore to bed. I had grown out of the damn thing with the pregnancy and the way my boobs swelled with breast milk while I slept, but what I hadn't realized was that I started leaking since it was time to feed the baby.

So, I went charging into my son's nursery wielding a baseball bat with a nightie that fit too tight and looked as though I had just entered a wet t-shirt contest.

"Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!" Merc yelled out quickly, trying to placate and calm me. "I have the baby in my arms," he tacked on quickly.

"What in the hell are you doing here?"

"I live here, remember?" He asked.

"Since when?" I threw back at him.

His shoulders slumped in as he breathed out a heavy sigh. "I deserve that, Lily, but I promise shit is going to change."

I laughed at his bullshit promise. "Oh, you're right about that. Remember, my dad told me I could move up my timetable once the baby was born."

It was weird because I could have sworn that I saw regret in his eyes before he lowered them back to the squirming boy in his arms. "I know, but Lily, no matter what, he's mine too."

"Really? Could have fooled me. You spent my entire pregnancy not giving a fuck about that baby. You never, not once, even referred to him as your kid. Did the DNA test come back to confirm paternity, so now, you're sure?"

“I never doubted that you were pregnant with my kid, no matter what I said in anger.”

“That’s just it, this whole time you’ve been acting like I tried to trap you with a baby, but I’m more trapped than you will ever be. At least you have your club and all the whores you fuck. All of my dreams are gone.”

“What dreams did you have, Lily?”

“Did you think I didn’t have any aspirations for myself?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know. I never really thought about it.”

“Of course you didn’t because you’re the same selfish prick you’ve always been. Other people exist around you and guess what? They’re not put on the earth just to be your fuck toy or make your life run smoother.”

“I’m having a really hard time hearing anything you’re saying when you keep waving your tits around like that.”

“What?” I yelled angrily before glancing down and noticing for the first time that my top was very wet and transparent. Dammit. “Get up!”

“What? Why?”

I sighed at his cluelessness. “Well, I didn’t hose myself down for your benefit before coming in here. My boobs are leaking because it’s time to feed Declan.”

“Declan,” he whispered the name, almost as if he were in awe of it. “That’s what you named him?”

“Yeah, now get up.”

“You still haven’t said why.”

“I did. You’re just stupid.”

“Lily, I don’t want to fight with you.”

“Then stop being obtuse. I need to feed the baby. My boobs are leaking and there’s no point getting myself cleaned up until he’s fed. Now, move so I can sit down and get comfortable, because in case you’ve forgotten, I just had a baby two days ago and standing up while trying to feed him doesn’t exactly feel that great right now.”

“Son of a...” he mumbled under his breath, berating himself for once again being a thoughtless dick. Once he was on his feet, I slid into the chair and reached out for the baby. Unfortunately for me, Merc didn’t seem to know what personal space or privacy was so he stood there staring at me while I pulled one side of my nightie down enough that my boob could be taken out of it. The whole thing had to be popped out because of the fit of the stupid nightie. It made me wish, once again, that I still had a mom in my life who might have been able to tell me that I needed special clothes for this.

As Deck finally latched into place, I glanced back up to see that Merc had moved even closer and had squatted down to get a better view. “What the hell?” I asked, pulling him from whatever trance he’d been in.

“I’ve never seen anything like that before,” he admitted.

“Well, it’s not for you to see.”

“Please, don’t.” He begged quietly. “I want to be here for him. For you too. I know I’ve been an asshole, and I’m sorry for that.” We both sat quietly as Declan greedily drained my breast. “Lily, I want to be in this, to be part of this family,

but...” He trailed off, once again mesmerized as I switched sides with Declan.

The nurses told me that eventually, I would probably only have to feed him from one breast per feeding, but for now, as my milk was still coming in, it would take two. Judging by the amount of leakage I had, I was guessing he wouldn't take much of the second breast this time, but I made sure to put him on it anyway.

Unfortunately, because of my nightie, this meant that I had one breast hanging out still while Declan latched onto the other. I tried to ignore my slight discomfort, but that's when Merc started talking again.

“Um, did you need to do something with that?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I don't have the right clothes for this. No one ever told me that I would need to buy new stuff or that my boobs would get this big. If you weren't here, I would just have taken the whole thing off. So, what is it you want from me? I'm doing the best I can. Shit, Merc, I'm only sixteen and I don't even have a mom who I can ask about this stuff.”

“You're doing great. Sorry. I just didn't know either.”

“Yeah, so anyway, you were saying that you wanted to be part of this family, but...” I reminded him.

“Lily, I...” It was obvious he didn't know how to break the news to me that he wanted to play family, but just not with me, like that was ever in question.

“Whatever Merc. Like you fucking every whore who spreads her legs for you didn't clue me into how much you

don't want me to be your wife." I rolled my eyes again. "I already know that, so why are you trying to spare my feelings now? You certainly didn't when I had to ride the bus home while you were picking up your girlfriend. You didn't want to be my husband when I had doctor's appointments and no way to get there, and was hustling to write college kids' term papers so I could pay for it."

"That's just it, Lily. I don't want you to have that stress. I want to do better with all that shit, but I just. I can't be with you like that. It's not you. There's just no spark for me. I've never really seen you like that."

"Except that one time when you knocked me up."

He looked even guiltier, if that was possible. "I was angry with Brinley," he admitted.

"Don't. Please, don't sit here and tell me how my son was the result of an angry, convenience fuck. What kind of piece of shit person are you?"

"I'm just trying to be honest. I don't want you to get your hopes up for things that will never happen."

"Trust me, I'm not delusional. And what the hell makes you think I would want you now?"

His head flew back, almost as if I had slapped him physically, instead of with a question. "What?"

It was my turn to laugh and truly mean it. "Jesus, Merc. Seriously? I had a schoolgirl crush on you at one point, sure. You're a good-looking guy, and I have eyeballs. The thing is, you can be model-perfect, and your personality eventually makes you ugly to people who you've treated like shit. You

made sure I never saw you as more than what you presented yourself as.”

“And what’s that?”

“A selfish, self-indulgent, womanizing, uncaring, frustrating, egotistical-”

“Okay, I get the picture, no need to throw in more adjectives.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I mean, I could totally keep going.”

“I’m sure,” was his sour response.

“None of that was a lie. You can be mad that I told you the truth, because sometimes the truth hurts, but you can’t be angry that I didn’t lie to you.”

“I’m not that bad,” he mumbled.

“Right. Because if it weren’t for my dad I would have starved to death while pregnant with your baby, or maybe froze to death. Although, we live far enough south, I think I would have just been really uncomfortable while I starved to death.” I chuckled. “But hey, I had my anger to keep me warm at night when I thought about your porn star ex-girlfriend driving around in the truck you bought her while I had to walk the six miles to the grocery store as you fucked the latest whore who was living with you. But yeah, you totally weren’t that bad.”

Declan stopped suckling and I moved him off my breast and up onto my shoulder so I could burp him as Merc got to his feet. I watched as he angrily swiped at a tear running down his

face, but I refused to be moved by the fact that he was finally showing emotion.

“If you come to visit your son, you do it clean. You don’t come here drunk, high, or smelling like you just crawled out of a whore house. You shower before you walk into this house. You wash your hands before you touch him.”

“Jesus, I’m not dirty or diseased, Lily!”

I stared at him.

“Fine,” he relented.

“And you don’t just get the easy parts at playtime. You can change his diaper, help feed him, bathe him, and dress him. All or nothing, Merc.”

“Well, I can’t magically produce his meals the way you can,” he teased while motioning to my breasts, one of which was still visible.

“I’ll pump some milk for bottles. The nurses told me about it before I left the hospital. I just have to get someone to take me to the store to buy a breast pump.”

“Didn’t you have a baby shower or something to get all the things you need.”

I really did laugh then. “Who the hell would throw me a baby shower, Merc? My dad? My best friend who was concerned with taking her SATs so she could get into college? My ex-best friend? No, she was too busy fucking you and making sure you weren’t available to me in an emergency.”

“She’s been dealt with.”

“She shouldn’t have had to be dealt with. Honestly, Merc. Who deals with you? It was your fault! She might have been a conniving bitch, but you’re the one who had her in your space, knew who she was to me, and still fucked her anyway. You know that day you drove me home from the party? She and I fought because she wanted to fuck you and thought my crush was stupid. You are what ended our friendship. Yet she was the reason you weren’t there to see your son born.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Who cares? The fact remains that her actions are on your shoulders, not hers alone.” I laughed. “Brinley made sure that everyone at school hated me, so all the friends I used to have, besides Stacey, wouldn’t talk to me anymore. They went out of their way to be mean, actually. The only old lady at the club who stopped by to give me anything was Liz, Junior’s woman. She gave me that blanket. Shannon, Stacey’s mom, gave me the baby monitor. There was no one else to give a shit about getting me things for the baby.”

He stood there, letting everything sink in, and maybe realizing that his shit treatment and behavior went far beyond what he thought it did. Merc thought I would be the most upset about him being with other women, because I once had a crush on him. He was a stupid man to think so. Carelessness and neglect did a far better job of forming a wall around my heart where he was concerned than who he was sleeping with or the fact that I’d only been with my husband one time, before we were married.

“I’ll take you to go get the pump tomorrow,” he finally told me as he moved toward the door.

“How do you plan on doing that?”

“I’m not stupid, I know I have to bring the truck, not the bike, Lily.”

I cocked my head to the side. “So, you have an infant car seat in your truck then?”

“Fuck!” he hissed the word under his breath before turning again and heading for the door. “I’ll get one.”

~*~

My dad and Boone happened to be there the next morning, checking in with me, when Merc showed up in a shiny, new, red Jeep Cherokee.

“Nice new wheels you got. Decided to trade in the truck?”

“No.” Merc told Boone and instead of adding anything more to it, he walked right over to me and dropped the keys to the vehicle into my hand – the one that wasn’t holding our son. “Car seat is already installed.”

I laughed. “I told you that you needed a car seat in the truck in order to take me to the store, not a whole new truck.”

“And you need a vehicle to get the two of you around whenever I’m not here, so that’s yours. I got another car seat installed in my truck.” He shrugged his shoulders, while keeping his back to our fathers. That was probably wise, because both of their jaws were scraping the floor. “Damn car seat took up so much room in my truck, the three of us would barely fit. Figured you can drop me at the clubhouse to pick it up after we go get your pump thing.” He was pointing at my breasts as he said that, and Boone nearly doubled over

laughing at his son's awkward as all hell reference to a breast pump.

"Boy, never thought I'd see the day!" Boone chuckled.

"About damn time," my dad muttered under his breath as he turned to look out the window at the Jeep that was apparently now mine. I'll admit, Merc had finally surprised me in a good way.

"Well, I guess you two have this parenting thing covered for now, so we'll be on our way." Boone turned and ran his hand down my father's back as he continued to stare out at the Jeep. "Come on, let's give them some space. Seems my boy has his head removed from his ass. At least for today, anyway." Boone gave two pats to my dad's lower back, where he hadn't removed his hand before and then finally stepped away and opened the door for Dad to go through. He never did turn back around and say goodbye or anything, so I think Boone was just helping to keep my dad's overflowing emotions from being seen.

Once they were gone, Merc turned to me and there was this weird look on his face. "Do you ever get the idea that maybe those two..." He shook his head as if he couldn't believe he was about to say what he was thinking.

"Are a couple?" I finished for him.

"Yeah," he whispered.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Not my business unless they make it that way, but ever since my mom left, I've always felt that there was something more between them. Like her leaving left it open for them to finally become more than friends."

“You’re okay with that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? If they’re happy and they love one another, who cares?”

“I guess. I just worry what the club would think if they found out.”

“Then maybe your club isn’t that great a place to be.”

“Hey now! I never said it bothered me, no need to get an attitude. I’m well within my rights to worry about how other people will treat them though. They might not always get shit right, or things I like, but I would die for either of them.”

I nodded as my eyes filled with tears. It was oddly sweet to hear Merc include my father in that sentiment. I felt the same about Boone, so I didn’t know why it was weird that Merc could love my father that much.

“I’ll just go get my things.” It took me a minute to realize that I needed to finish getting dressed too. I was wearing a pair of shorts, fuzzy slippers with floppy dog ears hanging on each side, and a flannel shirt that allowed for easy button-down access to my boobs for Declan. “Shoot! Could you hold him for a minute while I go get dressed? Sorry, it’s just been non-stop this morning with dirty diapers, feeding the little piglet, and trying to feed myself in between all that.”

“You don’t have to apologize for needing help with our boy,” Merc told me as he held his arms out to accept our son. *Our boy*. It was weird to hear him acknowledge that fact now.

13 - Becoming Friends

Merc

We ended up going to Babies R Us, which was located smack dab between the naval base and the air base in Charleston. Normally, if I was in this area on my bike, either I received longing stares from the assholes in uniform or scathing glances. The latter came from the ones who could smell the freedom on the wind behind me and knew they would never taste it for themselves. The former, just longed for the day that their time was up, and they could join our ranks and belong to a civilian brotherhood.

Lily didn't seem to notice any of them, though they certainly noticed her. You would never know, thanks to the clothes she had on, that she had a baby just three days ago. There had to be some changes to her body, besides those tits of hers that had grown so much, but the clothes she wore hid everything except the overabundance of cleavage and I wasn't even sure whether to be happy about that or pissed at the attention she was attracting because of it.

“Are you sure you want to go in with me? I can just hook the carrier to the front of a cart and do this on my own. You can head off to wherever the men go.” She tipped her head toward some of the other places along the strip of shopping hell that we were in.

“Nope. We’re doing this together,” I informed her and then replaced the scowl I knew was on my face with a quick smile. “Let’s go.”

Before we even made it out of the parking lot and to the store’s front doors, we were stopped by one of the punk-ass sailors who had been eyeing my wife.

“Lily Ashburn? Is that you?” The man called loudly, making sure he had her attention. Lily turned and grinned so widely at the dick that it knocked me back a step. I’d never seen her look so genuinely happy to see someone. What the fuck?

“Killian!” She shouted before closing the distance to the man and wrapping her arms around him. “Oh my God! Are you stationed here now?”

He shook his head. “No. I’m on a Destroyer out of Jacksonville. Just up here to see family before we head out for a few months.”

“Oh! Well, I’m glad I got to see you before you deployed?” She questioned. “Or is it underway? I can never keep it straight.” Her teasing tone was something I didn’t think I ever heard from her, at least not in that light and airy way she was speaking to the asshole.

He just grinned at her, and I didn’t think the fucker actually heard the words Lily spoke because he was having too hard a time keeping his eyes on hers instead of her tits.

“Lily,” I called to her, and it broke whatever trance the two of them had been in. I knew that she had been a virgin when

we had sex, but it was obvious that there had been something between them at some point.

“Oh, sorry,” she hesitantly offered. Then pointed from Killian Jefferies to me, as if I didn’t know who he was when we had gone to school together since middle school. “Killian, do you remember Mer-um-Damon,” she stumbled over my name. I would have found it funny in any other instance, but it was just then that I realized she hadn’t called me by my given name since I’d earned my road name when I married her.

I tipped my chin up at the guy as his eyes bounced back and forth between the two of us. Then, like a lightbulb went on over his head, a knowing spark lit up.

“Right! You guys are neighbors!” How the fuck did that prick know that? “Listen, I have to get going in a few, but I’m here until the end of next week on leave. I’d love to take you out to dinner, catch up, and maybe...”

Thank fuck my son had perfect timing. He started squalling and reaching his little grabby hands out of the infant carrier I was still holding in my hand. It caught Killian’s attention immediately. He grinned sloppily, which I was not anticipating.

“How did I know that you’d knock some chick up within a year of graduating?” He laughed hard and then turned to Lily. “It’s awesome that you’re helping out, but don’t you think that’s something his unfortunate baby’s mom should be doing?”

Lily’s happy demeanor melted away into a sour, pucker-lipped expression. “Considering I’m the unfortunate baby momma,” she started to tell him, but I butted in.

“And my wife,” I tacked on just to piss the dick off.

“No fucking way! You married that guy, Lily?”

“We do have a baby together,” she informed him.

“Yeah, but, he’s...” he let his words trail off while he stood there looking completely wrung out. What the hell had gone on between the two of them? “I guess congratulations are in order.”

“Thank you,” she said in a much softer, insecure voice that I didn’t like at all.

“Lily,” he shook his head as if he didn’t believe what he was about to say. “I always thought I’d be able to come back when you were done with school and take you away from this place.”

“What the fuck, man?”

He shrugged his shoulders at my question and basically blew me off. “It’s the truth.”

Lily just looked stunned, like this was news to her as well. “We didn’t even date.”

“No, but only because you weren’t ready, and I knew I was leaving for boot camp after graduation.” A car horn honked from not too far away and caught Killian’s attention. “Sorry, I really do have to go. Can I call you later?”

“Seriously, man?” I asked. The asshole shot me a look that said he knew I was probably a shit husband and he’d have no problem with stealing my wife out from under me.

“I think maybe that’s not the best idea right now, Kill.”

He leaned in and whispered something to her, and she responded just as quietly, the whole interaction putting me on edge as my son started to get louder. I picked the carrier up so that he could see my face and the minute he caught sight of me, the little guy quieted.

“Hey, buddy, we’ll get you fixed up in just a minute, okay?” I asked him in as gentle a voice as I was able to muster.

I glanced back over just in time to see them sharing another hug before Killian walked away and Lily headed back toward me. I didn’t miss the way the fucker turned to stare at her ass either.

“He can’t be hungry since I fed him before we left, but maybe he needs a diaper change?” Lily questioned as she made it to my side and peeked in at our son. His head turned slightly in the direction of his mother’s voice.

“Let’s head on in and we can check,” I agreed. Then I swapped the infant carrier to my other hand and put my now free hand on Lily’s lower back to keep her next to me. Was it a dick move to show Killian what he couldn’t have? Absolutely. Did it also strangely feel right? Yeah, and that shit was almost more upsetting than dealing with some dick being interested in my wife. At least I knew his ass was going to be on a boat out in the ocean before long. Hopefully, that fucker would sink with him on it.

Lily’s immediate response to my hand being on her back was to stiffen, but then she settled and walked in step with me to the store where we snagged a cart and fit the infant carrier to it. “Where the hell do we go in this place?” I asked because when she first said this was the store we needed to go to, it

never occurred to me that the space would look like a giant warehouse for baby shit.

“Well, I think we can avoid that side of the store since we have all the furniture he needs for now. Let’s head to the smaller aisles where the pictures of bottles are, that’ll probably get us close, I think.” Good to know that Lily seemed just as overwhelmed as I did.

We made it closer to the bottles when something else caught her eyes. “Actually, I need to duck into the restroom really quick,” she seemed a little panicked, but stayed long enough to make sure I had the baby. While she was gone, I peeked inside my son’s diaper and didn’t see any shit in there, so I figured he would still be good to go for a bit. His crying had stopped the minute he could see me or his mom anyway.

“When I left to go shopping for my sister’s baby shower, I never thought I’d find Damon Donavon in the store,” a woman called out from behind me. I turned to find Abbi Spencer standing there looking like sex on a fucking stick in her crop top, jeans and boots. Her blond hair hung long in spiral curls, which were new for her, but didn’t detract from her beauty one bit. Even as I was enjoying the view, I wished her away because I didn’t need the day ruined for Lily.

I had most definitely hooked up with Abbi, quite a few times, and some of those since I’d married Lil. That fucking sinking feeling in my gut, while simultaneously feeling like I’d swallowed a bunch of steel dragons that were cutting me up inside hit hard.

Remembering Lily’s interaction with Killian outside, and how it made me feel, turned the volume up on all the bullshit

turmoil swirling inside me. By the time I tuned into whatever the fuck Abbi had been saying, Lily was already approaching us, but her head was down and she appeared to be examining her shirt. I wondered if she ran to the bathroom so fast because she started leaking breast milk again, but there was no way I was asking and embarrassing her in front of one of my hook ups.

“Oh! Hi.” Abbi called out awkwardly, which had my wife snapping her head up in our direction finally.

“Hi,” she offered back tentatively while noticing how closely Abbi had moved to my side. Shit. This was not happening. I didn’t miss the way Lil’s eyes dragged down to our son and then the accusing glare she shot at me. She did not want some other woman – one I’d fucked – anywhere near our boy. Not that I could blame her. I’d probably have murdered Killian if he wanted to get close to Declan to try to get an in with Lil.

“Abbi was just saying something about a gift she had to get for her sister,” I told Lily, trying to make her understand that I had no control over who showed up in the store.

“Yeah? What are you getting her?” Lily asked, not at all ready to believe me. It hurt, but I didn’t blame her one bit. Abbi was reluctant to leave my side for some reason, but then she moved closer and showed Lily her basket.

“My mom gave me the idea. She said it’s the best present to ever get someone for a baby shower because no one else thinks of it. Of course, she also said that it will probably be the least popular gift until it’s needed and then suddenly my sister

will call me in the middle of the night to thank me for it.” She laughed awkwardly.

“Tylenol and Motrin?” Lily asked.

“Well, yeah, it’s the baby friendly stuff. Plus, some gas drops, nail clippers, a thermometer, extra batteries, another one of those nose sucker thingies, and more burp cloths. I’ll probably add in a couple cute onesies in various sizes too that say #1 Aunt. Those are just to piss my sister off though. The rest is necessary stuff.”

“Huh!”

“New parents never think about their baby getting sick ahead of time, or so my mom says. That’s what makes it the perfect gift, because they aren’t having to run to the store when their kid gets a fever in the middle of the night, and they don’t have anything that can help it.”

“I guess that is smart.” Lily looked thoughtful, and I knew she was thinking the same thing I was. We didn’t have any of that shit at the house either, and honestly, I wouldn’t have known that you could even give a small baby stuff like that, let alone that there were gas drops. What the fuck were those used for?

“So, anyway,” Abbi turned back to me then. “I haven’t seen you in a while and when I noticed you here, I figured I’d come let you know that my cousin Janie invited me to the clubhouse this weekend for some party you guys are having.” There was a hopeful grin on her face until Declan chose that moment to start squirming around and grunting.

Lily jumped into action right away and pushed Abbi aside so she could get to him.

“Wow, your nanny just totally almost knocked me on my butt,” Abbi tried to laugh off what had just happened. Which was like her. She was a nice girl, too nice to be hanging around a bunch of bikers with her cousin all the time. Which was why this was about to get a boatload more awkward for her. Lily pulled Declan from his carrier and held him up to her chest, cradling him there and doing that rock-bounce thing that seemed to settle him so easily.

“Lily isn’t my nanny, she’s my wife,” I pointed out.

“Your...” Abbi’s eyes widened almost comically as they moved from me to Lily to the baby that was now in her arms. “Oh, God!” Her face turned several different shades of red as she put even more space between us. It was clear that she was putting two and two together and figuring out that I’d most likely been married and that my wife had been expecting our baby while I was hooking up with her. The disgust that replaced the embarrassment on her face, yeah, that made me feel like a whole pile of shit until Lily spoke up and then I just felt worse.

“Don’t worry, it’s not like that with us,” my wife told her. “Think of our marriage like a shotgun wedding that only really matters on paper. He’s free range. We haven’t even been together since this guy was made,” she tacked on. I wasn’t sure if she was helping or hurting the situation in general, but she was breaking my heart and I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why the fuck that was. Nothing she said had been untrue.

“Um, well, congratulations on the baby, I guess,” Abbi offered awkwardly before she turned and hauled ass away from us. Unfortunately for her, she left her basket lying on the floor, where she’d placed it when she was going through it and showing us everything that she was planning to put in her sister’s gift basket.

Lily bent at the knees, scooped the basket up one-handed, and put it in the back of the shopping cart. “Well, that saved us a little time in getting shit we didn’t know we needed.” She winked at me and the grin on her face made me laugh.

“You’re fucking ridiculous,” I told her.

“Nope, I’m just an opportunist. Her loss is our gain.”

Why did I like the sound of that so much? ‘Our gain’. She was including me in something and, for once, it felt fucking right. Our son. Our life. Our gain. I might not have been ready to settle down and have a family in the traditional sense of the word, but things were finally starting to fall into place with Lily so that we could at least become friends and I wanted to keep it that way.

“Shall we go try to find that breast pump before someone else from our pasts comes along to throw a wrench in the day?”

Lily laughed at me while turning to walk toward the aisle she had pointed out earlier. Once we were done picking out a breast pump that she felt like she might be comfortable with, we also had to get bottles to put the milk in and Lily chose based on how realistic the nipples were in comparison to hers, which just made me groan while needing to adjust my fucking dick in the baby store.

All I could think about was last night when she had been wearing that nightie that became completely transparent thanks to the leaking her breasts were doing, and heaven fucking help me, but I wanted to scoot my son out of the damn way and slake my own curiosity with the woman who absolutely would have kicked me in the dick if I had tried it.

As we were checking out, I noticed a little blankie for babies that had all kinds of tactile shit on it. There was a crinkly corner, one that was plastic and kind of nubby, while the third was super soft and fluffy, and the final corner had a bear head on it. I grabbed the thing and put it with the rest on the conveyor belt as the cashier rang everything up. The smile on Lily's face as she noticed it was worth the whole day. Fuck the grin she'd given to Killian outside; this one was mine. Well, mine and my son's, and I was going to fucking keep it in my memory bank to pull out on the days I was too fucking stupid to do right by her.

At least, when I was being a complete dick, I'd know that we had a moment where I'd made her happy. For whatever that was worth.

~*~

When we got back to the house, something Abbi had said at the store finally penetrated and I grabbed the phone in the kitchen to call the clubhouse.

“Yo!”

“Who the fuck is this?”

“CJ,” the cocky shit answered back.

“Fuck, man. What are you doing there?”

“Prospecting like a boss!”

CJ, otherwise known as Charles Brothers, was a couple years younger than me, but he was cool as fuck. I couldn't wait until he was made a full-blown member because then, I felt like I would actually have someone close to my own age in my corner. Then again, he hadn't made any bones about telling me what a dick I had been to Lily, so maybe it would be a bit of a contentious friendship.

When I got lost in my thoughts and didn't say anything, CJ prompted me. “What's going on?”

“Yeah, some chick hit me up at the store today, talking about a party she's going to at the clubhouse with her cousin this weekend. You know anything about that?”

“If it was ‘some chick’ and no relation to a member then she's going to have a hard time getting in. Family and club only from what I heard but hang on and I'll check.”

I heard him yell the question out to whomever was close enough to hear, but then a familiar voice in the background asked: “Who the hell wants to know?”

“Merc,” CJ answered immediately.

“Boy! I'm telling you now, if you're thinking of bringing some skank with you to this party, I will gut you.”

“What the fuck, Boone? I was just asking because some chick at the store told me about it, and I hadn't heard anything about a party before.”

“That's because you weren't supposed to know yet. It was a fucking surprise that the cunt ruined.”

“What surprise?” It couldn’t have been my birthday because I turned 19 a few weeks back, to no fanfare at all since my dad was out on a run and the guys forgot. That made me remember something odd that I’d seen in the other room earlier. I’d been avoiding the look from my dad when they realized I bought Lily a car and I noticed that the tiny Christmas tree still sat on the table in the living room. I stretched the cord of the phone as far as I could get it and peeked around the wall to see that I hadn’t been wrong. The three Christmas presents that had been under the tree were still there. There were two more added to the pile though. Both were wrapped in what looked like colorful birthday paper.

“We’re celebrating the newest member of the club family.”

“Yeah?” I asked absently. “One of the prospects earning his kutte?” There was no way to reach the gifts while I was on the phone to see who they were for, but now curiosity had taken hold and the need to get my dad off the phone was never stronger.

“You’re a fucking dick!” My father told me, bringing my full attention back to him.

“What? Why am I a dick now?” Lily happened to be walking through with Declan in her arms as I asked, and she snickered.

“Oh, let me count the ways,” she mumbled while moving past me to grab a bottle of water off the counter. I watched as she basically chugged the whole thing.

“Your fucking kid is the newest addition to the club’s family, asshole.” Then my father hung up on me. Well, shit.

I moved back to hang the phone up and turned to Lily. “Did you know the club’s throwing a party this weekend?”

“Well, I didn’t until your little friend at the store mentioned it.”

I couldn’t help the sigh that escaped. “I didn’t know either until she said something, but listen, you don’t have to worry about Abbi showing up.”

“Yeah, I kind of got that impression when she was muttering apologies to me after you basically called her out in front of me for being a homewrecker.” I knew Lily was teasing, but it bothered me that either of the women would think that.

“She’s not a homewrecker.”

“Tell her that. She obviously didn’t know you were married, and whether you are happily married or not, there are a lot of women who would never touch you if they knew the score.” She shook her head at me, as if in disappointment. “You should be honest and upfront with them so they can make an informed choice.”

“Jesus,” I muttered, not wanting to have this talk with my wife.

“And Merc?”

“Yeah?”

“If they don’t care once you tell them, don’t you dare ever allow them around my child.”

That took me aback. “What? Why would I even do that?”

“I don’t know, but that is a hard line for me, and you better never cross it. If a woman disrespects my position in your life so much that she’d be with you, knowing you’re married, then I don’t want her tainting the image my son has of me. It’s bad enough I’ll look like a weak, pitiful, spineless twat to Declan when he’s old enough to understand what you do behind his mom’s back while married to her. At least do me the favor of keeping the awful bitches away from him, since you don’t care what they have to say to me.”

“Who the fuck says I don’t care? And who has been talking shit to you?”

Lily laughed. “Are you serious right now?”

“Dead fucking serious.”

“Your porn star ex-girlfriend talked so much shit about me that the rest of the school did too even after she left. Every single girl you’ve slept with before and since I got pregnant has been in my face about how they get to ride your dick and I’m just your dirty little secret that wasn’t well kept. Then there’s Madeline, who sent me this card in the mail. It was in the mailbox today.”

She tossed a card to me. It was blank until you flipped it open, and it said:

Congrats on the bastard, but you still lose. I’ve ridden his dick more than you’ll ever know and that was his choice. How many times did you get him? Oh, right, once and then he left your ass like yesterday’s garbage. I’ll be back one day, and I’ll be riding his dick then too. He can’t stand you, and talks shit about you all the time, so my money is on you never getting to touch him again.

Xo,

Madeline

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me about this?”

“I just did and honestly it doesn’t matter. And it’s mostly the truth anyway.”

“Like hell it is!” I yelled as I threw the card on the table. “Why didn’t you tell me about the trouble at school?”

She laughed at me. “Like you cared?” I got ready to argue, but the look on her face stopped me. “I don’t know what changed for you recently, Merc, but back then you didn’t care. You knew – whether you wanted to pretend you didn’t or not – you knew what Brinley was like. Hell, you were there the day when I tried to tell you I was pregnant and heard the things she had to say to me. You didn’t try to put a stop to it then, you continued to see her and take care of her in a way you never attempted to do for me. So, let’s not back peddle into a different reality that never existed.”

She popped my son off her boob, and it was the first time I noticed she had been feeding him during our conversation. “Now, what exactly was the point in telling me about the party that you’re going to with Abbi?”

“I’m not going to a party with Abbi. I didn’t even know about it until she said something, but Lily, that party is supposed to be a surprise for us, and is club members and family only, to welcome our son.”

She rolled her eyes. “Considering I wasn’t invited, I doubt that.”

“I just got off the phone with Boone who confirmed it. I guess they were going to try to just get you there without telling you since it’s a surprise and everything.”

“Well, that’s stupid! What if I didn’t have everything that I needed with me for the baby? And why would I want to bring the baby to a loud, smelly, smoke-filled clubhouse full of nasty whores and men who don’t shower near enough anyway?”

I had to laugh at her description because it wasn’t entirely inaccurate. “Tell me how you really feel about the place.”

“Okay, it’s no place for a baby!”

“How about I make sure the place is cleaned up, aired out, and that you have everything you need?” I asked and she just looked at me like my head was spinning circles on my shoulders. “Would you go then?”

“I know that we aren’t anything to one another in any real sense, but like hell do I want to go to a party where all your past hookups will be lined up waiting for another chance to hop on your dick. I think I’ll pass.” She turned to leave the room then.

“Wait, I told you it’s club and family only.”

She shrugged. Before she could get down the hall toward the bedroom, I called out to her again.

“Lily, what’s up with the presents in the living room?”

“Three are Christmas presents that you and our dads never got because no one showed up on Christmas to get them. The other two are birthday gifts for Boone and you, since you both just had birthdays recently. I forgot about them because I had other things on my mind, so I just put them with the others.”

“Were you ever going to give them to us?”

She shrugged. “One day, when you guys remembered I was here.” Then she walked off, leaving me feeling like absolute shit all over again. Fuck me, I couldn’t win with the woman, and it was all my own damn fault.

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14 – The Wilted Lily

Merc

1 year later

Lily never did attend the club party to welcome Declan to the family. I couldn't blame her for declining either, and honestly, she had been right. Some of the club girls lived there, and while they were supposed to be respectful and stay out of sight during family events, some of them enjoyed testing those boundaries and making trouble.

Ever since then, I had it in my head to eventually get Lily out to a party somewhere. All she ever did was go to school and take care of our son. She was almost eighteen and about to graduate from high school, but never got to live the party life that I had enjoyed during my high school years. If I was being honest, I still enjoyed more than my fair share of parting

“My dad wants to stay in tonight and thought it would be good to take Declan for you so you can go out and have a good time for once.”

“Your dad thought that, huh?”

“What do you want, Lily? I said I would take you out because they're worried that you never leave the damn house.” There was no way I'd tell her that it had been my idea because then she definitely wouldn't go.

“Well, tell them to stop worrying. I don't need your pity.”

Lily and I had been making good headway toward a friendship before, but that all ended abruptly when she

accidentally ran into me at the grocery store one day a few months back.

Two of the club girls joined me to pick some things up for a patch party the club was having for one of CJ. The hope was, that between the three of us, we would remember everything. Among the shit we were stocking for the night were a jumbo pack of condoms and several bottles of lube.

I didn't even realize Lily and Declan were standing there at the other end of the aisle as Marissa teased me about needing to get an extra box of the larger size condoms just for my room.

"That way you can pound my pussy all night long, baby!" Unfortunately, she was fucking loud when she said and drew the attention of the two people at the opposite end of the aisle.

"Dadddeee!" My son squealed, and when I lifted my head and noticed them standing there, I wondered if it was possible to have a heart attack at the ripe old age of twenty. The look of disgust on Lily's face was deserved, but the heartbreak and sheer hopelessness as her eyes darted between my son and me stung.

I took one step closer when Marissa took hold of my arm, as if she owned me. Taryn or Karyn - whatever her name was - followed suit. I didn't even know her. She was new to the club and had tagged along mostly because Marissa wanted to show her the ropes for when they had to shop for the clubhouse.

Lily shook her head, telling me it was not okay to approach.

"Daddeee!!" Declan squealed again in that adorably drawn-out way of his. I literally had to decide there in the

fucking aisle, with diapers on one end and condoms on the other, if I was going to piss Lily off further by breaking her one hardline rule, or if I was going to ignore my son and pretend that I hadn't seen him.

I knew what I had to do, so I shook off both girls and turned in the opposite direction of my family and walked away.

"Damn, that's cold as hell, Merc."

"Don't worry baby, I'll fuck you good later and you'll forget all about that shit."

"Shut the fuck up! You two are the reason I can't go to my son right now." We heard him start to cry, and swear to God, I wanted to gut myself right there in the store.

"I think that bitch is the reason you can't see your son. That just ain't right."

"No one blames her for not wanting whores around her kid. I certainly don't. That shit you just pulled," I told them both, "putting your hands on me like I belong to you, that just proved her point. You don't fucking get to disrespect my wife in front of my kid. Not ever. You sure as fuck do not get to act like you own any part of me. Both of you get fucking gone, and don't let me see you at the party tonight."

"But, we have to be there. Timeless said attendance for club girls and dancers is mandatory tonight since it's a patch party."

"Then I guess you'll have to suffer the consequences and hope Prez is feeling generous."

"That's not fair!" Marissa shouted at me.

“Neither is the shit you just pulled that stopped me from being able to go to my kid.”

I was not welcome at the house for weeks after that incident. Finally, Lily relented and let me come around to see our son again. The last thing I wanted to do was fuck shit up between us once more, but our fathers were on my ass about making nice with Lily. They weren't alone. Besides, I needed to make sure she was living and not just playing the role of Mommy without ever getting a break. Boone and Robbie, obviously felt the same, telling me that she needed to be able to get out of the house at least a fraction of the time I was able to. And yeah, that had been an indictment on the fact that I was at the clubhouse more than I was ever with my kid in recent months.

“Just come out with me. It will get them off both of our backs, you'll be able to loosen up, and the party isn't even at the clubhouse. It's at a friend's place who doesn't have shit to do with Aces High.”

“Fine, but after this, no more placating to Boone and Dad's schemes.”

I couldn't believe she agreed. “Pick you up at nine.”

“Nine?” Her eyes grew wide at the prospect and the way she glanced back to her bedroom made me laugh.

“Yeah, nine. A perfectly acceptable time to head out for a party when you're an adult.” I continued to chuckle as she sneered at me. “I know for a fact you've been to parties before, so what's the problem?”

“I only ever went to that one and I'm a mom now.”

“You’re also a woman who needs to have some fun,” I pointed out again.

“I already said that I’d go.”

“Yeah, see you later.”

~*~

Lily was a giant ball of nervous energy when I picked her up, but damn the woman looked good. It was hard to believe she ever had a kid, except for the fact that I knew she now had wider hips and bigger breasts as a result of having Declan, or maybe just from growing more. Shit, I didn’t know. The Lily standing before me looked more like a woman than she had the night we made our son. That was made obvious with those tight ass jeans she wore and the shiny red halter top. The girl was still in there somewhere though, because she had on red canvas shoes rather than high heels like all the other women who were out to impress.

Twice, I had to shake off women who attempted to approach me, and if there was any hope it hadn’t gone unnoticed by my wife, she quickly disavowed me of that theory.

“If you want to go say hello to your whores, feel free.”

“They’re not whores,” I insisted, thinking she thought they were club girls.

Lily turned to me. “Are they women who sleep with taken men? Did they know you were married with a child waiting for you at home when you fucked them?”

“Jesus, Lily!” I hissed at her, taken back by her forthrightness.

“Well?”

“Lil! Come on!” There was no fucking way I was answering that question. It was a fucking trap and even an idiot would know that.

“That’s what I thought. Any woman who would sleep with a man, knowing he’s married, is a whore. She’s taking something that doesn’t belong to her.”

“Yeah? What’s that make the man?” Why the fuck did I ask that?

“Garbage! It makes him a garbage human being.” She walked away from me after that and I let her because if ever there was a blow to a man’s ego, it was when his wife told him he was a garbage human being. There was no disputing it because it was fucking true.

I stood back, in the shadows, and watched as Lily made her way through the party instead of following her. She found the liquor and did a few shots with a few people. Unfortunately, some of those people were very interested men. It was the first time I ever had regrets about not getting my wife a wedding ring when we were married. They had no clue she was taken.

Then again, was she really taken when I fucked around like a single man all the time? Fuck that! There was no way I could stand back and watch Lily flirt with those men and possibly leave with one of them. I pushed off the wall and headed in her direction, dodging a woman I’d fucked just last weekend on my way. Yeah, I was aware that it made me a fucking hypocrite.

“Merc!” She shouted after me, but I simply shook my head and kept on going into the kitchen where my wife had just thrown her head back in laughter over something the asshole standing next to her had said.

I walked right up to him and shouldered the guy out of the way.

“Hey man! Not fucking cool!”

“No, what’s not cool is you trying to get all up in my wife’s space,” I warned him. Lily had been distracted by the girl on the other side of the room who hopped up on the counter for body shots. Judging by the way my wife was watching, she’d never seen them done before.

“Your wife?” Asshole sputtered. I couldn’t remember his name, but I’d seen him around before. He hung out with the band I was friends with.

“That’s what I just fucking said.”

“Yeah, okay,” he laughed it off. “I just saw you fucking Sabrina at a party last week.” It would figure that Lily would tune back into the conversation at exactly that exact moment. “Sabrina!” Asshole called out to the chick who was about to offer her body up for shots. “Weren’t you and Tina fucking Merc at that party last weekend?”

She turned her attention from asshole to me and winked while licking her lips. “I sure was, and maybe if I’m a lucky girl, we’ll go back for thirds tonight.”

Asshole laughed. “See!” He shouted in that obnoxious way drunk men do. “He just tried telling me that this woman is his wife!”

You could have heard a pin drop with the way everyone stopped and turned to look at Lily who was angrily slamming another shot back. Fuck! I punched asshole in the face, knocking him out cold with that one hit, then I grabbed hold of Lily before she could walk out, but Sabrina wasn't about to let shit go.

“Are you serious right now? You brought your wife to a party where you've fucked at least half the women here?”

“Are you serious right now?” Lily asked her in return. “Knowing his wife is standing right here, you're going to keep making things worse for all of us?”

Sabrina shrugged. “It's no skin off my nose. I'm not the one married to him. That's your problem.”

“It's not my problem either,” Lily threw back. “Because he's not bringing home your diseases to me, but you know how many of these women have some shit you don't want? You're passing him around like it doesn't matter, but condoms don't protect against everything.” When Sabrina only rolled her eyes, Lily continued.

“I wouldn't let him in my house for like two weeks after he kept scratching at his crotch so hard. I'm guessing he got that fixed, but how many of you was he with before he did?” With that, she flounced away giggling to herself. If she hadn't just told an entire room full of people that I had itchy dick problems, I'd probably have found it funny, especially when Sabrina and a few others took off and left the party after that.

I gave Lily some space for a while and continued watching as she got tipsy and laughed more. She was beautiful. I don't know why I'd never really noticed much before. I always

knew she was pretty, but Lily possessed this inner glow that most women just didn't have.

"Come on, Lil, time to get you home before you turn into a pumpkin," I finally told her a couple hours later when she was failing miserably at playing pool while nursing a beer.

"Why? I'm having fun."

"You'll have Declan tomorrow," I reminded, and she huffed.

"It must be nice to be you," she declared.

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"You go out and party all the time and never have to worry about being the one to take care of your own damn son. You just assume I'll give up my life to be there to do it. And I will! But you know what? Fuck you for assuming that and behaving the way you do!"

Once again, she wasn't wrong. No argument could be made because I was able to just come and go with no real feeling of responsibility. Sure, I loved my son, but I knew he was taken care of no matter what I was doing and that was thanks to his mom being a far better person than I was.

~*~

By the time we got back to the house, I walked Lily in and kicked the door open with my foot as she tried to slam it shut on me.

"Nuh-uh, we're going to talk about all the shit you spewed out of your mouth tonight."

"Why? Most of it was true, and the rest, you deserved anyway. The whole point in not going to a clubhouse party

was so that I wouldn't be in a room full of women you'd fucked!"

"I'm sorry. I honestly didn't think it would be like that," I tried to explain.

Lily scoffed as she bent and yanked one of her shoes off her feet. I was not expecting to have to duck so she ended up nailing me in the shoulder with that one. Before I could get over the shock, the other clipped my ear.

"You can fuck off now!" She yelled at me.

"You think you're cute?" I asked while stalking toward her. The way her eyes widened, and her mouth popped open into a shocked little "O" almost made me laugh. Instead, I kept a straight face as I advanced on her. Then, my beautiful wife turned tail and ran toward the bedroom. She was quick, I'll give her that, but I was faster.

"You're going to pay for that," I warned.

"Fuck you!" She sassed while backing up across the room.

"Nah, it's the other way around, sweetheart."

"What?" It took a minute before her brain caught up to my words. "Oh, hell no! I meant what I said tonight. I'm not going to be one of those stupid twats who catches your diseases. I had my own close call once and caught pregnancy instead, but I just got lucky that you didn't give me anything else along with Declan."

"We're not talking about our son right now, and I've never had any fucking diseases."

"Says you, but you lie!"

That stopped me in my tracks for a minute. “I haven’t lied to you.”

She laughed then. “You lied when you stood up in front of God, your club brothers, and me and said your vows.”

I growled out my frustration and lunged for her. Once I had her in my arms, I leaned in and took in her scent. She smelled fruity tonight. Lately, she had been using a coconut shampoo or body wash that always made me think of the beach when she breezed by me, but now there was an undercurrent of something else and it made me wonder if it was something she drank, the shots she did, or if she had put on some new perfume she’d never worn before. No matter what, it was intoxicating when mixed with everything that was Lily.

My nose slid up her neck, and then I took the time to nibble at her earlobe before whispering in her ear. “I’m going to fuck the hate out of you tonight.”

“That’s impossible,” she breathed into my chest.

“Challenge accepted.”

Our clothes came off in a blur of motion and I had her on the bed, underneath me, as I ripped a condom open and pulled it on. Her eyes tracked my every movement before I leaned forward and sank myself into her with one quick thrust. My mistake was in forgetting she wasn’t one of the whores I was used to. Lily hadn’t been ready. Not at all. She cried out beneath me as tears sprang to her eyes and I drew back for a minute while one of my hands trailed down to meet up with her clit and give a few gentle rubs, tugs, pats, and pulls.

“We’ll make it better,” I assured her. What I didn’t do was apologize, because my explanation for why I didn’t check to make sure she was ready for me, would have sent her running again.

When she finally started writhing beneath me, and I could feel her wetness lubricating my way, I slammed into her again and then continued to do that as she just lie there, refusing to make eye contact. Like hell I would be able to get off on the dead fish routine, so I turned her face until our eyes locked.

“Move those hips!” It was an order that she complied with, though, eventually I was the one who couldn’t stomach the eye contact and all the questions I saw swimming there. Then there was the look on my own face that was reflected back at me through her eyes.

“Turn over.” I pulled out, smacked her hip, and then when she didn’t move quickly enough, I flipped her so that she was face down. Then I gripped her hips and pulled them up far enough so I could sink right back inside her body. I took her hard and fast until I blew my load and then I tapped out. Literally. I patted her ass and got up to go dispose of the condom.

When I came back out with a washcloth for her to use to clean up, Lily was curled up in a ball and crying. “Should have never happened,” she was mumbling to herself.

Holy fucking shit. Seeing her like that stopped me cold and had me replaying the night over in my head.

“I didn’t force you,” I blurted out, startling her out of her crying jag.

“Never said you did. Isn’t it time for you to leave?”

“Lily, we should...”

“Nope. Nothing has changed. This was a mistake. That’s all.”

“Fine!” I snapped as I tossed the washcloth back into the bathroom and snatched my shit up off the floor. I walked out of the room, still naked, and dressed myself in the living room before leaving the house altogether. She was right. It had been a mistake and a mediocre fuck at that.

I didn’t want to examine why that was, since I knew it was mostly my fault. She deserved more than a half-assed hate fuck from me. She deserved someone who would fucking cherish her, take his time with her, worship that perfect fucking body she always hid away. My wife deserved to never have to deal with my bullshit again, and I vowed then and there that I would take my needs elsewhere as I’d been doing before, because when her five years were up, she was going to find her perfect world, the man of her dreams, and I’d watch her go because it was exactly what she deserved.

For the next couple years, I fucked off and played with whoever I wanted and ignored our fathers when they begged me to just go the fuck home to my family.

As if to prove how much none of the men in her life – besides my son – deserved her, the Christmas and birthday presents for Boone, Robbie, and me continued to stack up under the tree on that table in the living room. We never touched them, because I think in the back of all our minds, we realized we hadn’t earned anything she was willing to give us.

Instead, they sat there accumulating. As those presents piled up, so did my sins.

Lily and I became friendly enough that we co-parented Declan like pros. I was there for his first steps, first words, and for the first time Lily panicked and had taken our boy to the hospital when she couldn't get his fever down after an ear infection.

I'd almost missed that because I was busy fucking one of the whores at the clubhouse. Robbie had broken my door off the hinges, dragged my ass out of the room, and told me to get to the fucking hospital I ended up there on slab in the morgue. He didn't give me the chance to shower or clean up and for that reason, Lily turned me away the minute she saw me.

I've never forgotten the sick look on her face when she saw me as she held our sick son, rocking him back and forth as she slicked his sweat-dampened hair back off his forehead. She warned me before that it would cause problems if I ever tried to go around my son like that, and she hadn't lied. For every bit of progress we made, I destroyed with the stupid decisions I made.

We had missteps like that intermixed with all our good moments. There was never a doubt that I was the asshole at the root of every fuck-up that sent all the progress in our relationship reeling backwards just as quickly. It was one of those times that ended up cementing our family and taking away Lily's chance to ever get away from me.

For a while, it made her hate me even more. I couldn't have been more thankful though, because it gave me the shove that I needed to make things right with my family once and for all.

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15 - A Desperate Moment

Tiger Lily

2 years later

“Where’s Deck?”

Merc was standing at the top step of the loft stairs watching me type furiously on the computer. I didn’t bother glancing up, just took note of him from my peripheral.

“He’s with our dads for the night. They’re going camping and gator hunting tomorrow.”

“Gator hunting?” Merc chuckled at the idea. “Those old fools ain’t huntin’ no gators.”

I shrugged. “That’s what they told me. Said it was man’s business and when Deck agreed with them, I just packed him a bag and let it happen. He’ll be happy to be able to pee in the woods.”

“Yeah, my kid does love to water the trees.”

We both laughed at that because if our son could be naked from the waist down every day, he would.

“So, what are you doing up here?” When I didn’t answer and kept typing, he stepped forward a few paces, coming to the chair I had on the other side of my desk. “You better not be writing other people’s term papers for them. Told you, it should be you going to college.”

Not for the first time, I scoffed at that ridiculous notion. “I could barely keep up with high school after having Deck. There’s no way I could handle college.”

“He’s older now, you could put him in daycare whenever I’m not around or our dads can’t help.”

“I don’t want him in daycare when I can be here with him.”

“Lily, you have to start living your life too at some point.” I remembered the last time he told me to do that and took me to a party. It ended up being the second, and only other time besides when we made Deck, that we’d had sex. It wasn’t exactly a night that bared repeating.

“Who says I don’t live my life, Merc?” That question seemed to throw him off a bit, which was my intention. “I get out. Stacey was just in town two weeks ago and we went out dancing.”

“Where the fuck did you go dancing?”

I didn’t bother answering that. “Plus, I went out to lunch with Mitchell’s dad the other day. He was really nice.”

“Mitchell’s dad?” Merc’s brows knit together so tight, I thought he might just give himself a migraine. “Who the fuck is Mitchell? And why were you having lunch with his dad?”

I shrugged, as if it was nothing, but really it had been a test to see if I was ready to date. Granted, the whole marriage thing complicated the issue, but it had become even more obvious that all Merc and I were ever meant to be, was friends. He continued to fuck whoever he wanted, and I was left at home to take care of our son. I guess he never thought I’d be willing to live my life on my terms the way he did too.

“I met him at the park where I take Deck to play. He’s really nice and Deck loves to play around with Mitchell. They’re playground friends.”

“Playground friends?” Merc asked, as if I hadn’t just spoken plain English. “So, you took the boys out to eat after they played together?”

I shook my head. “Oh, no. I brought Deck back home and my dad watched him for a while. Paul came to pick me up. I guess he left Mitchell with the nanny or maybe his mom.” Again, I shrugged my shoulders as if it was no big deal. “We went to that new fancy Italian place near the beach.”

“You went on an actual fucking date with someone?” He asked, and I didn’t miss the shock in his voice.

“Um, yeah, I guess it was a date.” I smiled up at him then. “I had a great time.”

“You had a great time?” He questioned, seeming too stunned to do more than parrot my words back at me.

“Yeah, why?”

“You went on a fucking date?”

“Yes, I went on a date with a nice guy.”

“We’re fucking married, Lily! What the hell do you think you’re doing going on a date?”

“Well, Merc,” I started off with a sarcastic tone. “We’re not going to be married forever and what does it even matter to you?”

“It matters! You’re my wife! You can’t date other people.”

I laughed so hard I nearly peed my pants. All the while, Merc moved between staring angrily at me and seeming puzzled, as if I had lost my mind.

“You can’t be serious right now.”

“I’m dead fucking serious.”

And that stopped me dead in my tracks because for a minute there, I thought he’d been joking and playing the jealous husband role. We sometimes teased one another about our marriage, as if it were real. I just thought this was one of those times. Now, I was seeing it absolutely wasn’t and it was my turn to get angry.

“How many women have you fucked since we got married, Merc?”

“What does that matter?”

“Because I went out on a date with one guy and you’re trying to piss around my office like you have a claim over everything in it, including me.”

“I do. You’re. My. Wife.” He said slowly, as if I wasn’t catching on.

“Only on paper, Merc.”

“Bullshit!”

“How many women have you fucked since we got married, Merc?”

“That’s different.”

“You’re. My. Husband.” I shot back at him in the same tone he had used.

“You know the difference.”

“Do I?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He argued and again, I laughed, only that time it came out sounding cold and damn near evil.

“How many women have spent the night in your bed?” He didn’t answer, just stared at me. “How many women have you moved in with you at the clubhouse for more than a weekend?” Again, no answer. “How many women have you purchased gifts for? Cars? Bought their groceries? How many have you gone to dinner with? Lunch? Breakfast because you were still together in the morning?”

He turned his back to me then, shoulders lifting and chest heaving with the effort to contain his anger. I didn’t know if it was still directed at me or where it belonged, at himself. Maybe, he hadn’t even realized how many lines he had crossed in our marriage, how often he disrespected me, our marriage, and even our son.

“I had to take Declan out of the IHOP last month because you showed up looking wrecked with some whore who couldn’t be bothered to put actual clothes on before leaving your fuck-fest. We couldn’t even finish our pancake breakfast because I didn’t want my son to see you with your whore like that. Not that you cared about being seen out in public with another woman looking freshly fucked. And you want to come in here and try to lecture me about how I can’t go out on a simple lunch date with a man because we’re technically still married?” I huffed my discontent into the room. “You have a lot of fucking nerve.”

“Things have to change,” he told me without turning around.

“And they will, as soon as those five years are up. I do believe that I have one year and three months to go. Lucky for me, we’re getting closer by the day.”

His shoulders stiffened then, but instead of arguing further, he left the loft and a few minutes later, it was clear by the noise of a slamming door that he left the house too.

About twenty minutes later, when I couldn’t focus on the story I wanted to tell anymore, I called Stacey and told her all about my little argument with Merc. Her immediate response was laughter.

“Girl! What did I tell you all those years ago? That’s how you should have handled his ass back when everything first started, and he was still fucking around with Miss Gangbang Porno Queen.”

It was my turn to laugh. “I still can’t believe she came back to town last month and tried to pretend like she was a big movie star, like every swinging dick in Charleston hadn’t seen videos of her taking it in every hole.”

“No kidding. Like, what else could: *Hot Holes for Hard Poles* be but porn?” We were both laughing to the point of tears over that one, and not for the first time either. I put the phone on the speaker setting so I didn’t have to hold it while I looked for the notes that I had stuffed in the drawer last night for the story I was writing.

“Seriously though, Stace, you know I couldn’t date anyone when all this shit started because I was pregnant. No one

wants to date the knocked-up teenager.”

“Yeah, too bad for you everyone wanted to fuck teen baby daddy though. But here’s the thing, you’re 19 now and Declan is easier to handle for the dads. That means you can go out with Paul again!”

“I doubt it. Once I explained that I’m still married and sort of, sometimes, lived with Declan’s dad, he lost interest.”

“That’s a bummer.” I could hear Stacey’s pout on the other end of the phone.

“It is and it isn’t. Obviously, he’s a great guy and what kind of decent man would be okay getting in the middle of my crazy situation? You know? The problem is the only guys who will go for my situation are the ones who aren’t worth my time. I’ve had enough of being cheated on by my husband to last me a lifetime. The last thing I need is to go into a relationship with someone who thinks it’s okay to do it because I allowed it before.”

“Yeah, that does suck. Maybe, all you really need is a fuck buddy.”

“I think casual sex is what got me into this shit in the first place and now you’re suggesting I go right back to that?”

“Hear me out,” Stacey added quickly. “You, my dear, need a confidence boost. That man, whether he intended to or not, has been chiseling away at your self confidence for years and you need a way to get it back. So, you can’t get into a real relationship until you can finalize a divorce, but you can fuck. You can see that men out there want your sexy body. You can feel good about sex instead of being stuck with just two

miserable memories of awful fucking. Lily, you should know what an actual orgasm feels like that you didn't have to give yourself."

I chuckled because Stacey had been trying to get me to get back out there into the big bad world of sex and relationships for a long time now. Paul had been my first real attempt at doing just that, but he had been legitimately pissed off with me when I explained that I was still married and couldn't divorce just yet.

"Fine, I'll think over the fuck buddy situation, because it doesn't actually sound too bad. Who cares if the guy is an asshole, if all we're doing is fucking when I get some free time?"

"Exactly!" Stacey shouted into the phone at the same time something came crashing down by the stairs. I turned to see that Merc was standing there with a glass vase broken at his feet while flowers and water spilled out all around him.

"Shit! Stacey, I'll call you back." I hung up the phone and grabbed my trash can that sat beside my desk. I leaned down, started picking up the flowers, and setting them off to the side after shaking out the glass.

"Don't. It's my mess, I'll clean it up."

"It's fine, Merc. My hands aren't broken." He leaned down and started picking up the larger shards. "How long were you listening to my conversation?"

The tips of his ears burned red hot for a minute, which tipped me off that it had been enough, no matter how much he overheard.

“I was about to come give you the flowers when I heard you call her.”

“You just stood there and listened to my whole conversation?”

“Honestly, it was the only way I was going to learn anything real about you, so yeah.”

My scoff was met by narrowed eyes.

“Come off it, Merc. All you ever had to do was talk to me in order to learn anything substantial. I’ve never stopped you from getting to know me over the years, you held yourself back from that.” I flicked residual water off my hands and stood up. “I don’t even know what you were so afraid of. I would think you would want to know something substantial about the woman who is raising your son.”

“It’s not like that,” he muttered.

“Well, whatever it’s like, you’re not going to blame me because you never took any of the many opportunities you had to get to know me.”

“You’re right.” He scraped up a few more pieces of glass as I slid past him to go downstairs and get some towels to mop up the rest of the mess.

When I got back, he took the towels from me. “There are tiny pieces of glass mixed in. I don’t want you getting cut,” he told me, so I moved to go lean against the edge of my desk.

As soon as he got all the moisture up, he threw the towels inside the trash can too and then moved to me, holding his hand out. Curious, I took it with my own.

“Come with me?” He asked.

“Depends on where we’re going,” I answered honestly.

“We’re going for a ride, but you need to go get changed first.”

I eyed him skeptically but followed him downstairs anyway. When I was finished getting some jeans and boots on, he was waiting for me in the living room with two helmets in his hands. One was clearly meant to be a woman’s helmet since it was a sparkly purple color.

“Yeah, no, I’m not wearing that!” I told him automatically.

“What? Come on, I’ll drive safe, I promise.”

The noise that came out of me was the sound of disbelief, but it had nothing to do with whether I thought he would keep me safe. “I’m not wearing the helmet that you put all your whores in when they ride with you.”

His head drooped immediately, sinking between his shoulders as if it was too heavy to be held up any longer. “Fuck, Lily! Can you make anything easy? I just fucking bought this thing so I could take you on a ride. I haven’t even had a bitch on the back of my bike in years.”

I wasn’t sure I believed that last part, but I moved closer and noticed that there was still a tag stuck to the helmet. “Fine.”

“Can you try to trust me for a minute? I know that I’ve done fuck all to earn it over the years, but I’m really hoping you can try, just for today.”

He sounded so sincere that I gave in, grabbed the helmet and put it on. “Let’s ride then.”

He grinned as he put on his own. Then he took my hand and walked me out to where his bike was parked behind my Jeep.

“Wait,” I yelled and started heading back to the house, but his grip on my hand made me come to an abrupt stop.

“What?”

“I need to call my dad and let him know where I’ll be.”

“No, you don’t. I left a note on the table, the prospects at the club know, and grandfather duty isn’t supposed to be up until sometime tomorrow anyway, right?”

“Right,” I agreed reluctantly as he threw a leg over his Harley, and I had no choice but to follow. I got settled behind him and rested my feet on the pegs that Merc had flipped down for me.

He walked the bike backward out of the drive, slowly, trying not to tip us since my added weight made it a little awkward. “I could have waited to get on once you turned around,” I teased.

“Hush,” was his response as he reached around, grabbed my hands and pulled them tight around his mid-section. I held on, as he intended for me to do, and he took off down the street heading for the highway, I presumed.

To my surprise, we rode for a little over two hours and ended up in Savannah, Georgia. When he finally pulled off down in the French Quarter. We both took our helmets off and then just sat there for a moment. “What are we doing all the way down here?”

“Lily, outside of what you told me earlier, when’s the last time you went anywhere without Declan, just to enjoy some

time to yourself out of the house?”

He got off the bike and helped me up as I thought about it. The lunch I had with Paul was the last time I left the house without Declan in months. Before that, it was to go see a movie in the theater with Stacey when she came to town to visit as well as a night of dancing while Shannon watched Declan for me. There wasn't really anything else. I wasn't counting the party Merc took me to a year ago, because I tried to forget that ever happened.

“It's been a while,” I admitted.

“I'm an idiot,” he told me as he put the helmets down on the bike and pulled me closer to him. “I'm going to do a little something to make it up to you, but you have to trust me, okay?”

Once again, he was asking for a pretty tall order, but I hadn't been to Savannah since before my mom left us, so for the night, I was just going to let go and see where this adventure took us. “Okay, lead the way then.”

To my complete surprise, instead of stepping back away from me, he leaned in and kissed the top of my head, then made sure he had ahold of my hand before he spun and pulled me along with him.

The complete personality change was something I didn't trust. As we walked, I wished I had a way of talking to Stacey so she could give me her spin on things. Then again, I think her spin was already known. She had been harping on me from the beginning to just make him jealous, so he could see what he would be missing out on if I were to take everything that was me and give it to someone who wasn't him.

Never being one to beat around the bush I addressed the elephant in the room.

“Is this because you heard Stacey and me talking about dating and fuck buddies?” His shoulders stiffened, but he shook his head.

“I bought the helmet while I was out, before I heard your conversation, remember?”

“Well, same difference, because you left after finding out that I went on a date with Paul.”

“I don’t want you dating Paul,” he admitted.

“Well, that’s cool because Paul doesn’t want me dating him either.”

“Sounds like he’s a smart guy.”

I rolled my eyes at that because if I told him that I was dating him tomorrow, Merc would have talked about what an idiot he was.”

“I honestly don’t understand what’s going on here. You can go fuck whomever you want, but I can’t go on a date without you losing it,” I complained.

“I’m not giving my heart to anyone.”

“Me either, and you seem to forget the times your heart was in it with other women too.”

“My heart was never in anything with anyone. I thought it was with Brinley because I was young and dumb as fuck.”

“Still are,” I mumbled. To my surprise, he laughed at that instead of getting pissed.

“That is something I love about you,” he insisted. “You tell it like it is, no matter whether it will make the other person feel bad or not.”

“Truth hurts sometimes, that doesn’t mean things don’t need to be said.”

“I agree. So, I’m going to give you some truths.”

“I’m all ears,” I countered with every bit of sarcasm dripping from my words.

“I wasn’t ready for you.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Shut up and listen,” he snapped. Merc was lucky that the way he did it had a slight teasing tone to the abrupt order, or I would have punched him in his balls and walked the whole way home. It should only take like two days to get back. Totally doable, I tried to convince myself.

“I wasn’t ready for you. To be tied down. To be a family.”

“You have a family though, whether you wanted it or not.”

“I know that, Lily. The thing is, they gave me enough leeway to pretend that it wasn’t true for a long time.” I understood that because it was exactly what he had done through the entirety of my pregnancy.

“By the time I realized just how badly I’d been fucking up, you hated me.”

“I never hated you,” I lied.

“Yeah, you did. No blame either because I deserved that hate.” He sighed and squeezed my hand tighter in his hold. “At first, after I realized what a dumbass I’d been, I struggled with

what to do about it. But, you know, you made it perfectly clear that the only thing you wanted to work on was being friends. So, I continued doing the same old shit. At first, I did it to spite you because when I was ready to try for something more, we had that one night, and it turned out the way it did. Seeing you instantly regret it, knowing that neither of us was in a healthy place to have gone there that night anyway..." He shook his head, looking almost defeated.

"It took a while to remember, or to process the fact that I created that whole situation to turn out exactly the way it did. My actions made you feel that way. My inactions fueled that fire. I get it now. I've known it for a while."

We were quiet for a bit after that revelation. There was really nothing I could add to his observations. It was all just sadly true. Well, at least my part of it. I wasn't sure about whether his feelings were genuine.

"I've been hoping that you would start seeing that boy you had a crush on again."

I laughed, despite his sincerity. "That will never happen."

He stopped walking and turned me to face him. "Why?"

"Because that boy I had a crush on never existed."

"The fuck I didn't."

I sighed. "I crushed on someone who was unattainable, gorgeous, and who I thought was funny, kind, and sweet. I thought those things because I mixed my own unhealthy amount of fantasy with the small little tidbits of you that I got to see, Merc. None of it was ever real. That crush was worn thin as paper and then it simply floated away on the wind after

you burned it to ash with the way you treated Brinley as opposed to how you treated me.”

“So, because I was stupid enough to care about my girlfriend back then, you’ll never give me another chance?”

“I never said that.”

“You just did.”

“No. I said that I could never see you the way I saw that boy I crushed on. The truth is, we are both different people now. We’ve lived different experiences. I’ve had to watch as you have given everything you have, including yourself and your time, to other people after taking vows to me. You were sometimes a witness as I sat home, struggling just to exist for a while, and then flourishing as a mother, but also struggling with life still. I got to see you become a good father during the times when you bothered to come around, but then you went to spend the rest of your time and energy on other people. You can’t expect me to develop feelings for a person who still doesn’t see me.”

“I see you!” He insisted.

“Let’s agree to disagree on that point for now. Where are we headed?”

“Fine, but we’re coming back to this because I’m tired of playing games, Lily.”

“Merc, I have never played games with you.”

His huff of frustration didn’t even bother me. “I know,” he mumbled. “It’s one of the things that keeps drawing me to you, even when I know you’d be better off riding out the rest of the five years and scraping me the fuck off.”

“The suspense is killing me. What made you bring me all the way to Savannah?” I asked again, trying to change the subject.

“I know some guys who are in a band and they’re playing down here tonight. We’re going to have some drinks, listen to music, and chill the fuck out for a while. You are going to dance your ass off and not worry about shit!”

Giddiness that I hadn’t felt since before I had Declan swam in my tummy, making it feel like a million little fish were in there wiggling against my insides. “Seriously? I get to just have fun?”

“Jesus, I’ve really been fucking up. Yeah, Tiger, you get to have nothing but fun tonight. Our boy is safe with Boone and Robbie, and I got your back, so you have nothing to worry over.”

I did an excited little shimmy-shuffle that made Merc laugh before he was moving us along once more. “We’re grabbing some food first, then I’m taking you to the bar where they’ll be playing.”

“Oh! Wait! I’m not old enough yet. You might have turned 21, but I’m not there yet.”

He grinned at me. “Do you remember when I told you no worries tonight? I have it covered. Trust me, Tiger.”

“Why are you calling me that all of a sudden?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s what most of the guys at the club call you.”

“They call me Tiger Lily.”

“Well, they’re not special enough to be able to shorten it. Besides, I’m usually the one you’re taking bites out of, so I earned the right to do it.”

I laughed because he wasn’t wrong. I definitely took my fair share of swipes at his character whenever he left himself exposed enough for me to do so. Damn. That kind of sounded dirty, but totally wasn’t.

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16 - That One Sweet Night

Merc

Carefree, fun-loving Tiger Lily was just about the sexiest thing I had ever seen. Obviously, she hadn't dressed to be sexy, for clubbing, or to have men ogle her. My wife had dressed for a ride, but somehow the way she was covered up perfectly, while also cutting loose, had every fucking eye in the place settling on her.

Half of me was proud as fuck to be there with her. The other half was once again wishing I had bought us those wedding bands so these fuckers would know she was mine. The fuck of it all was that her being mine was just an illusion anyway. She could have been mine if I'd gotten my head out of my ass sooner, or at all.

Now that I wanted to convince her to try to go there with me, I also had shit in my life that I needed to clean up. If she found out that I'd had a steady woman on the side for the past few months, there was no way in hell that she'd take me seriously when I suggested the two of us try a real relationship on for size. Maybe it was the fear talking and knowing that we had just a little over a year to go before she was free to leave me permanently. Maybe, it was the fact that she had entertained a date with another man that woke me up. Truthfully, I think it was just a matter of me starting to fall in love with my wife a little bit at a time as we developed our friendship. No matter what was at the root of things, it boiled

down to me needing to clean my life up in order to keep her in it.

“Your woman is on fire tonight! She doesn’t look like a club whore though. Where’d you pick this one up?”

I turned to Tommy Burrows, the guitarist in the band that I brought Lily to see. They had just finished their set about fifteen minutes ago and my woman was currently dancing to the house music. “She’s no fucking whore. That’s my wife.”

“Your wife?” His head flew back. “Since when did you get married?”

“Since she was pregnant with Declan.”

“That’s your son’s mom?”

“Yeah,” I answered honestly while keeping my eyes on her the whole time.

“You have that fine ass ball of fun sitting at home, taking good care of your boy, and you still fuck around with nasty club whores?”

For the first time all night, I turned my eyes away from Lily in order to try to set my friend ablaze with the fury that I was feeling as a result of his question. He threw his hands up, as if he surrendered to something.

“Hey man! Don’t blame me for pointing out the obvious. Is she a raging bitch at home or something?”

“Nah. Never has been unless I absolutely deserved it. Even then, she’s never given me the amount of shit she should have.”

Tommy shook his head. “Why would you ever step out on her then?”

“Stupidity. Bad timing. Thought I was in love with someone else when I knocked her up, and it tainted everything. You name it.”

“You trying to change that shit up now?”

“Maybe, if she lets me.”

“You got a place in town tonight?”

“Nah. Figured I’d just ride her back when she was done having her fun.” My eyes were back on Lily as she continued dancing the night away with some of the girlfriends of the band members.

“Here,” Tommy said as he dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out a key. “It’s to my place. Ain’t much, but it’ll give you some privacy for the night and as luck would have it, I put clean sheets on the bed today.”

I laughed. “Hoping to get lucky tonight?”

“Something like that, man. I’ll stay with one of the guys though. When you leave tomorrow, just leave the key on the table. I’ll grab the spare from my mom’s place before I head home.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. They have a suite at the hotel just down the street since I’m the only one with an apartment here.” I still didn’t understand why Tommy kept a place in Savannah when the bunch of them lived in Charleston, but I wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. I’d take a night alone with my

gorgeous Tiger Lily over the two-hour ride back. I wasn't drinking, but she had been.

When we got back to Tommy's place, Lily gave me a dubious look. "He said it wasn't much, but that it was a clean place to crash for the night. I can always go try to find us a hotel room."

"No. It's fine. No need spending the money."

As if I needed to worry about money. Once we got inside the tiny apartment, Lily let out the breath she must have been holding. "Well, I guess he didn't lie about it being clean."

I laughed. "Tommy has a neat freak living inside of him. He's always kept his place in Charleston pretty spotless because he says when they all tour together, the rest of the band are complete pigs and he can't stand it."

"Right." Lily only gave a one-word response as she looked around. There was a chair sitting in front of the television, and it was not one of those comfortable reclining kinds. "I'm afraid to look in the bedroom."

The bedroom was just a bed hiding behind some sheets that were thumbtacked into the ceiling. It offered the only privacy barrier from the bed to the kitchen/living room we were standing in.

"He did not over exaggerate when he said it was a tiny place."

Both of us devolved into laughter at that. "Let's do some shots!" Lily yelled as she grabbed Tommy's sealed bottle of Patrón.

“You sure you want to add tequila to whatever you were drinking tonight?”

Lily shrugged. “I don’t know. Will it make me sick?”

“You’ve been drunk before, right?”

Lily shook her head. “I’ve drank before, but never been drunk. The closest I ever came to being drunk was the last time I went out somewhere with you.”

I wanted to ask what kind of fucking rock she had been living under that she hadn’t been drinking since then, but it didn’t take much to remind myself that she had been pregnant for nine months the year she was 16, then she was taking care of a baby and breastfeeding for over a year after that. Lily really had lost out on a lot of experiences for our son. All while I wasn’t missing anything. I fucking needed a shot after that thought.

I took the bottle from her, cracked the seal, and poured us both a healthy shot in the mismatched coffee mugs Tommy had in the cabinet. They were the only things there that could be used for glasses.

~*~

Two hours later, my tongue was in Lily’s mouth and her arms were wrapped around my neck, pulling me closer. The moan she made sent vibrations rattling straight down to my dick, making me harder than I ever remembered being.

“Fuck baby!” I breathed against her mouth as she started clawing at my t-shirt.

“Off!” She demanded, and who the hell was I to deny her. I gently put her on the bed, tore my shirt over my head in one pull, and then kicked off my boots before helping Lily get hers off too. The rest of our clothes quickly followed.

“Lily,” I whispered against her neck as I licked and sucked every surface that I could get my mouth on before stretching my naked body overtop of hers, reveling in the heat that built between us.

“Merc, I need you right now.”

For the briefest of moments, I wanted to pull back, clear my fuzzy head, and make her say my name the right way. Then, Lily grabbed my cock with her hand and gave it a squeeze and pump that sent shockwaves up my spine.

“My sweet Tiger, you do that again and this will be over before we get started.”

“Then get inside me already,” she demanded before lining me up with her and rocking those hips up in order to take my length inside her.

“FUUUUCKK!” The word slipped past my lips like a prayer to the gods. Her slick heat was a velvet vice grip on my dick and, swear to everything that was holy, I never wanted to move from that spot. She felt that fucking good. Maybe it was time, our night together without my past muddying the waters, or the drinks that loosened both our inhibitions, but this was different than it had ever been between us.

Not that we had much history sexually. There were only those two times, and her friend hadn't been wrong earlier today. They were both lacking in pretty much every way, but

especially for Lily, and that had been all my fault. It was also something I planned on making up for this time.

Nails bit into my ass cheeks, pulling me down as she thrust up. My girl was attempting to top me from the bottom, but I wasn't having that. Instead, I pulled out, flipped her over, and then slid right back inside her. Using Lily's hips as handholds, I moved her on and off my cock at a rapid pace that had my wife tossing her head back, groaning, and moaning every obscenity known to man.

“Fuck, Lily! You feel so goddamn good.”

“Please! Don't stop whatever it is you're doing!” She was begging me for her climax, and it damn near turned me feral. Not fully knowing her intimate cues, I could only guess at what she needed to push her over the edge. I slid one of my hands free of the hold I had on her hip and made good use of my fingers as they circled her clit while I pumped in and out of her sweet heat that I couldn't get enough of.

“YES! That's it!” She cried out as her head sunk down between her shoulders and her fingers clawed at the sheets.

The ink on her back was something that I vaguely remembered seeing before, but couldn't really focus on in the moment. Still, I ended up tracing the image over and over with my other hand while Lily took control of her pleasure again and started bucking her hips into me without me guiding her. I stroked her clit, traced that tattoo, and allowed my girl to pound herself on my cock while I closed my eyes to try to stave off my own orgasm until I felt hers building too.

Each pulse and flutter of her pussy tugged my cock and sent me well past the danger zone. There was something I needed

to remember. Something important.

“Fuck baby, so fucking...” the words were trapped as the zing of electricity sizzled down my spine, tightened my balls, and then when Lily slammed into me one more time as she clamped down, we both went over the edge into a world of mutual bliss.

“Should have always been like this,” I muttered against her neck when I was capable of moving again.

“This only happens in books and dreams,” was her answer before she drifted off, and was out for the count. It was only as I started to pull out of her that I remembered what had been so important moments ago. We hadn’t used protection at all.

It was only my second time going bare in a woman. Both times happened to be with Lily. What were the odds that... Nah. I wasn’t even going there. I got up, moved to the sink and wet some paper towels because I couldn’t find anything else. Then, I cleaned Lily up before I got in bed, pulled her body tight to my own, and fell asleep just as fast as she had.

Round two had come a couple hours later as I lazily entered her from behind while we were spooned in bed together. Hand to God, it was probably my favorite damn experience with her as we just enjoyed getting to know one another in a totally different way. By the time it was over, we were both well and truly worn out for the night.

~*~

Sleep slowly dissolved away as the body heat burning against me began to make me sweat. Since I couldn’t reach the

ass that was tucked into my crotch, I slapped the side of her thigh. “Shaina, slide that ass over babe, you’re hot as fuck.”

Her body stiffened so quickly that she actually hit me in the dick before she flew out of the bed as if it were on fire. That woke me up quicker than anything because normally Shaina would have teased me, grabbed my dick, and told me she could show me something hotter.

The minute my eyes flew open, I knew how badly I’d just fucked up, and my stomach turned so damn hard I thought I’d puke right there in the bed.

“Oh shit!” The words escaped me before I could pull them back. Lily had her back to me, so I could see the tattoo in the light of day, and the image of me tracing it last night came to the forefront of my mind as she bent down to pick up her clothes.

“Lily!” I called out but she was already moving beyond the sheets that hung from the ceiling, and not speaking. Quiet Lily was never a good thing.

“Lily,” I tried again, softer this time as I jumped out of the bed and followed her.

“Get dressed, Merc. I need to get back so I can be there when my dad brings Deck home.”

“Lily, please, look at me.”

“Why?” She yelled angrily. “Do you need a visual reminder of who you actually fell asleep with last night?”

“Fuck! Baby, don’t.”

“Don’t ‘baby’ me, you dick. You made me believe your little fairytale all day yesterday. You told me to trust you, and I did. I gave you that, and this is what I get in return.”

“Lily, I promise you it’s... it’s fucking complicated, okay? I never thought I’d have a chance with you again after last time!”

“And you’ll never get another one.” She shook her head sadly. “I have never been enough of a thought in your mind to keep you from going to your whores on the side. Actually, I guess it’s just one now, right? Shaina, was it? She gets your faithfulness while your wife gets another woman’s name whispered to her in bed! Fuck you, Merc!”

She huffed out a frustrated groan. “If you were ever serious, I would have gladly tried with you. The thing is, you have never once made the attempt to be serious about us, otherwise you would have never been with other women while trying to make that happen.” She angrily yanked her jeans up her legs and then buttoned them before throwing her shirt on, followed quickly by one of her boots.

“Lily, it was a mistake,” I tried again.

“Oh, you’re not wrong about that part!” She laughed as she thrust her foot into the other boot. “It was definitely a mistake and one that won’t be happening again.”

I knew there would be no talking her out of this while everything was still fresh, so I moved back beyond the wall of sheets and grabbed my own clothes, putting them on just as quickly as Lily had put hers on.

All the while, I thought about how long she might stay pissed before my thoughts drifted to Shaina. Shit. That was another fuck up. Lily wasn't wrong. I had pledged my faithfulness to another woman. I had only been exclusive with Shaina for the past four months, before that I'd been casual with her and still fucking some of the club women for a few months. Shaina would lose her shit over this, especially since I never told her I would be gone last night.

Unease settled deep inside me as I realized the truth of what Lily had guessed. I'd given other women the one thing I'd never given her, and I'd excused it all away based on how I thought Lily felt about me. All the while, if I'd just shown Lily an ounce of respect, it would have changed her mind and maybe her heart completely.

Boone tried to warn me so many times. Robbie just threatened to kill me on the regular, and then he told me he couldn't wait until the five years was up so that I would have to watch his daughter fall in love with the right man and have him dote on her and my son.

I never understood, until recently, why Robbie didn't just release his daughter from our marriage, but then Boone explained it to me one night when he was trying to make me see reason.

“That man loves that girl something fierce. She is all he has left, and he knows that once she's free, she won't stick around here where her whole life has been tainted by things she couldn't control. He's using your marriage, and their deal, to hang onto her just a little bit longer. He's part of the reason

she's been so miserable, and he knows she'll run the minute she's able to."

"Not with my son!" I demanded.

"Boy, if anyone in this world could have stopped that from happening, it would have been you. Unfortunately for all of us, you're too fucking dumb to see you have everything you could ever want, and you're going to lose it all."

"You'd let her walk away with my son?"

"I sure the fuck would. That girl deserves no less after watching you give and give to everyone else over the past few years. I'll go with you to visit wherever she ends up, because that girl is too good a person to keep her kid from you, but make no mistake, we will all let her go when it's time. And I won't allow you to blame her for any of it because you didn't care to fight while she was here."

He had laid it all out for me when I first started getting serious with Shaina. I guess my father saw the writing on the wall and knew what was happening there. Once again, I never listened to good advice. Now, it looked like I would pay for it twice over. The thing is, losing Shaina didn't matter one bit, but because I had her in the first place, I would lose any hope at changing Lily's mind about me, and there definitely wouldn't be an *us* in the equation.

17 - Double Betrayal

Merc

When we got back to the house, Lily hopped off my Harley like the fucking thing was on fire. Not that I blamed her.

“Thanks for the shameful night. Please, don’t come around for a few days.” She took two steps away from me. “Actually, call before you try to come over even after that.”

“Lily, please!”

She turned, angrier than I’d ever seen her. “No! Don’t Lily, please me! I thought you had finally decided to change. I thought you were finally going to give me all of you for once. How long have you been with this Shaina chick? Were you even going to say anything to me about it or just lie and hope you didn’t get caught? Did you think you could start something real with me and keep your mistress on the side? Or, and this is the real kicker here, was I supposed to be the side piece while you had your real woman tucked away elsewhere? Considering last night was only the third time we ever slept together, I think that last was probably what you must have been thinking, right? What was all that bullshit about you being pissed about my lunch date when you have a woman you supposedly have been faithful to until last night?”

“Lily, I don’t fucking love her. She’s not important. Shaina was... fuck! She was nothing more than a placeholder in my life.”

“A placeholder for what, Merc? A placeholder,” she repeated and laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. If I had to put a name to it, it sounded like humiliation. “A placeholder for when you got rid of me?”

“NO! Fucking Christ, if you’d ever listen to me, she was a placeholder for when you finally came around and started to like me again.”

“If you would ever speak with your actions instead of your empty words, that might have happened a long time ago. Now, I’m just done. I’m done holding out hope that one day I will mean enough to you. Don’t come around without calling.”

“It’s my home too.”

“No! It’s not your home. This is the house you visit when you want to pretend to have a family. This is *my* home, but if you’re going to play stupid games, I can easily find another, and you won’t have an ounce of access when I do. I’ll have my father meet you at the closest McDonalds to let you see your son. Do not push me any more than you already have!”

Fuck!

Fuck!

Fuck!

In all the years since I’d knocked her up, my fuckups had always felt shitty in the wake of seeing what they did to her, but never like this. It felt final this time. My heart raced as I pulled back out of the driveway of the home that I was no longer welcome in, and I had only myself to blame for that. Instead of going straight back to the club, I drove to Shaina’s place. I had some shit to straighten out and there was no way

that Lily would take me seriously, or ever forgive me, if I didn't get that shit handled now. She was right. I had never shown her in actions – not in the way that counted most – that I was hers alone.

Shaina was home when I got there, which made sense since she had weekends off. Truthfully, I usually picked her up on Friday night and we'd go do something together before I crashed with her all weekend. Last night was the first time I didn't do that, or at least stop by to let her know I had club business, in months.

The door opened before I even had the bike parked, and once I was standing on my own two feet, she ran for me, jumping up to wrap her legs around my waist as I caught her. I closed my eyes to savor the feel, only in my mind, I pictured Lily being this happy to see me for once. Yeah, that made me fucked up all around.

I was stuck in my own warped cycle. Somewhere along the line, I'd fallen for my wife, and wanted exactly this, but since I was too much of a dipshit to figure out how to get it from her, I got it from someone else. And now, I was stuck in this bullshit place where I think I finally lost all chance with Lil, but in case that wasn't true, I had to end things with Shaina.

“Where were you last night? I missed you!” It was only then, as she tucked her head into my neck and I felt her body tense against mine, that I realized I hadn't showered away my night yet.

She leaned back with tears in her eyes as she put her hands on my cheeks and held me there. “Where were you?” She asked again, her question strained with emotion.

I walked to the house, not saying a word and never taking my eyes off her. Shaina was a good woman. She was one I could have seen a life with if Lily hadn't been in it. She would have even made a good stepmom to Deck, if things had been different. Even though all that was true, I hadn't lied to Lily. Shaina never had my heart. Maybe she could have if I hadn't started falling for my wife instead.

Once we were inside, with the door shut behind us, I moved us to the couch and set Shaina down gently while taking the seat next to her.

“There are some things I need to tell you.”

She crossed her arms defensively over her chest. “You should start with where in the hell you were last night.”

“I was with my wife.” She flinched at the mention of my being married. Shaina wasn't stupid. We had never really talked about it, but she knew all along that I had a wife, that we didn't really have a marriage in the true sense of the word, but that we co-parented our kid. She also knew that I had never before referred to Lily as my wife, not to anyone while in her presence.

“Your wife?” She questioned.

“I went to see Declan yesterday.”

“Your son, who you still haven't introduced me to,” she accused.

“My son who I couldn't introduce you to, even if I wanted to.”

“And why is that, Damon?”

“I made one promise to Lily that I swore to keep because I broke far too many others. She made me promise that I wouldn’t get any other women involved with my son until the day we could divorce.”

“So, I’m just ‘another woman’?”

“Drop the attitude. I’m trying to be straight with you here, and let’s be real, you knew I was married when we started. Hell, you’ve met Lily’s father.”

“Yeah, and he’s never had a kind word to say to me.”

“And why would he, when you’re his son-in-law’s mistress.”

“That’s how you see me?”

“That’s what you are by definition since I’m married, Shaina.” She huffed but didn’t say anything, because how could she argue that?

“Look, I went to see my son yesterday, but he wasn’t there. Our dads took him on a camping trip.” Her eyes lit up then.

“Aw, that’s so cute, so you met up with them?”

I shook my head. “No. While I was there, I pissed Lily off and then came back to apologize because she didn’t deserve the things that I said to her.”

Shaina rolled her eyes.

“Whether we have a normal marriage or not, we co-parent, and have a decent relationship in that regard. I didn’t want to mess that up,” I admitted. Truthfully, there had been more to it, but Shaina didn’t deserve the full truth, it would only hurt her.

“So, you apologized and what?” She flicked her hand toward me. “I’m not stupid, Damon. I can smell another woman on you. It’s been months since you used the women around the club, so what changed?”

How fucked was it that she looked like she was already set to forgive whatever fuckup I’d made? I knew that wouldn’t be the case when she realized it wasn’t a club whore I was with.

“When I got back to apologize, I overheard her talking on the phone to a friend of hers. Hell, I think she’s my wife’s only friend.”

“Well, that’s pathetic.”

“It is, and it’s also entirely my fault that all the rest were chased away after she first got pregnant with Declan.” Shaina’s eyes shifted away from me, and I knew she was thinking about her best friend who did not support our relationship because she knew I was married.

“I listened in to something I’d never even considered before. My wife has had almost no life since she got pregnant with my son. First, she was pregnant at sixteen, then nursing him, and now that he’s finally old enough to where she can leave him with our dads, she needs to get a life. The problem is that her best and only friend moved to New York for school and work, so she isn’t around all that often.” I didn’t bring up the whole lunch date with Paul thing. No point in letting Shaina know I was jealous, and that jealousy spurred on the rest of the night.

“What does that have to do with you?”

“I decided to take her for a night out and show her what she’s been missing. Give her a night where she could relax and not have to worry about our son, being safe, or anything else besides having fun.”

“You took your wife on a date?”

I shook my head. “I took her to go see a band and kept watch while she drank, danced, and had fun.”

“You kept watch? So, you watched as other men danced with your wife?”

“She didn’t dance with other men. Mostly, she danced with the girlfriends of the band that was playing.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” She stood up and started pacing the room. “You took your wife out drinking and dancing and came home to me smelling like you’ve been riding, but that you were ridden hard before that. Plus, you have a fucking hickey the size of Texas on your neck!”

“We stayed at my buddy’s place because we were down in Savannah, and it was late. We got to drinking while we were there, and...”

“And? You fucked your wife?”

“Yeah, we had sex.”

“What are you even doing, Damon?”

I shook my head and blew out my frustration before answering. “That’s just it. I’ve been doing everything all wrong this whole time.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I was waiting on my wife to notice that I’d fallen in love with her, but she fucking hated me for all the shit I’d done. So, being the weak as shit man I am, I drown my sorrows and threw my pity party the same way I always do.”

“You don’t drink often or do drugs,” Shaina suggested, no doubt, knowing exactly where I was going with this.

“Drinking and drugs aren’t my poison of choice, no. Women are.”

“Me, you mean. You think I’m your poison?”

“When we first got together, it was just casual, and you know that. I wasn’t only with you.”

“Yes, but then you committed to me.”

“I’m married.”

“And you told me that you never slept with your wife. Obviously, that’s not true.”

I shook my head again. “Last night was only the third time I ever slept with her. The first being when I got her pregnant, the second about a year after she had our son, and the third was last night.”

She gasped. “Are you serious? You’ve been married for almost four years!”

“Yeah, and I didn’t lie when I told you our marriage wasn’t real except on paper.”

“Only now, you’re calling that woman your wife, you slept with her again too, and I’m pretty sure I just heard you mention that you fell in love with her at some point.”

“Yeah, that’s all true. Only I fucked it up because this morning, I thought it was you in bed with me and I told you to scoot over, only...”

She laughed at me then. “So, you called out my name and she got pissed? Now, you’re back here to what? Be honest with me and get back together because your wife doesn’t want you when she realizes exactly who you are in the harsh light of day?”

“No. I came here to be honest with you and let you know that it’s over between us. Even if my wife won’t ever have me again after this shit, I have to try to show her that I was serious and I can’t do that with another woman waiting on the side.”

“So, you came here to tell me that you’re suddenly in love with your wife and that you’re dumping me?” Tears fell from her eyes as she asked the question.

“I’m here to tell you exactly that. You’re a good woman, Shaina. You deserve to be someone’s one and only.”

“And up until last night, I *was* your one and only, you bastard!”

“No, you weren’t.”

“So, you’ve been cheating on me?”

I shook my head. “I wasn’t sleeping with anyone else, Shaina, but my heart has never belonged to you. My heart belongs to Lily. I didn’t have sex with anyone else since I told you I wouldn’t, but I was never yours.”

“Get out!” She shouted at me then, and I stood to leave. “Don’t come back here again, Damon. I don’t want to see you right now. Maybe never again.”

“I understand.”

I left without looking back and made my way to the clubhouse where I found Boone and Robbie unpacking a fucking eight-foot-long gator from the back of Rob’s truck while my son tried to help by hefting its tail.

“What the fuck?” I yelled.

“Now, Son...” Boone started with a placating tone.

“Lily will kill you!”

“Well, what she doesn’t know won’t hurt,” Boone began to say, but he cut himself off from anything further when Robbie interrupted him.

“I think we all know that things we think she doesn’t know hurt her all the time.” His eyes pierced mine then.

“I just broke things off with...” It was my turn to censor myself in front of my son. “I’m going to try to do this the right way from here on out.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Whats da fucks?” Deck mimicked. The two shit-for-brains grandfathers laughed and ruffled my kid’s hair while I rolled my eyes.

“She’s really going to kill you both for that if she hears it.” They just laughed some more. “Now, you want to explain why you have a fucking gator trussed up in the back of your truck when my kid is with you?”

“The thing is, we joked about going gator hunting with Lily before we left, but little man heard it and the whole time we were out that’s all he kept talking about. How we were going

to kill and eat a gator. Couldn't disappoint the little shit, could we?" Robbie asked while trying to look like the picture of innocence.

"She's never letting you take him camping again." I shrugged and went to collect my son. "Before you even try it, you know this guy is going to run his mouth about it, so there's no point trying to keep it from her."

"Shit!" Boone hissed. "Tiger Lily's going to come out and rip us both a new one."

Robbie glared at me for a minute, then grinned widely. "No, I think we got our get out of jail free card right there." He pointed at me. "I can smell it on you, boy. You screwed up again, and she'll be too busy being mad at you that she won't even think twice about this."

"What are you talking about?"

"You have a huge hickey on your neck, but you just told us you broke it off with that person. So, where'd you get the hickey?"

I rolled my shoulders and tucked my son's face into my neck.

"You finally got the nerve to do something about my daughter and let me guess, she gave in and then found out about your side piece?"

Was he psychic?

"We already called to tell her we'd be bringing little man home soon," Boone finally told me. "She spilled the beans because she said under no circumstances were you allowed to join us in dropping him off if we ran into you."

Well, shit!

Timeless stepped outside then, “Merc! Need you on a run. Pack for a couple weeks, it’s gonna be tricky.”

“Mother fucker!”

“It’ll be good, gives Tiger Lily time to put the claws away,” Boone laughed as he tried to convince me.

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18 - Whirlwinds and Letdowns

Merc

Five fucking miserable weeks.

That's how long I was gone on the fucking run after screwing everything up with Lily, breaking things off with Shaina, and not getting a chance to go set it all right with my wife again. Boone told me that Shaina came around the clubhouse a few times looking for me and didn't believe that I was actually on a run. He seems to think I'll have trouble where she's concerned when I get back, and that's just fucking fantastic, considering I told her I was done.

I didn't even stop by the clubhouse when I finally rolled into town. Priority number one was to see my son. Part two of that, was to get shit straightened out with his mother too. One of the neighbors seemed to be having a party, so I had to park down the street and walk to the house, which actually worked in my favor for once.

I let myself into the house as quietly as possible and quickly realized that either my son was napping or he wasn't home, but his mother was. I could hear her voice up in the loft. She was speaking to someone, and judging by the quality of the other voice, it was a phone call.

“Let me get this straight, this woman comes to your house and delivers pictures proving her happy life with Merc, and

then tells you she's pregnant with his love child on the same day that you found out you're pregnant again?"

"I think that just about sums it all up. God, Stacey!" Lily whined. "My life is a whole talk show waiting to happen. Jerry Springer is going to call any day and offer us a huge payday to have me sit there and be confronted by all the women Merc has been with since marrying me. I just know it."

"Girl, while I think that's a touch dramatic, you really do have the absolute worst luck with sex! I'm sorry I ever pushed you to go there again!"

Lily laughed at her friend's response, but I was stuck there on the top step, stunned by what I'd just heard. Pregnant? Lily was pregnant again? And fuck me, but that hadn't been the only pregnancy announcement they mentioned.

Fuck. My. Life.

I'd bet anything, that little visit she got was from Shaina, and I knew without a doubt, that I'd always been double careful with her. She had those implant things in her arm, and I never went without a condom with anyone besides Lily in my life.

"Seriously, what are you going to do?"

"Maybe I can afford a bigger place near you, and we can be roomies for a while?"

What? No! Stacey lived in New York. The fuck if my pregnant wife and son were going to live so far away.

"What about the bullshit with your dad? It hasn't been five years yet, and what's he going to say about that when he finds out you're pregnant again? I hate to say this, because I want

nothing more than your happiness, but you might be stuck there.”

“Then I’ll get my own place here that the fucking asshole doesn’t get access to. I can’t deny him entry into this house since it was his family home, but I can damn sure get my own.”

“There you go! That’s my girl!”

I backed down the steps just as quietly as I’d gone up them. There was something I needed to do before confronting Lily about everything.

Once I got to the clubhouse, she was there waiting, just as I thought she’d be when I had Boone call and tell her to get her ass to the clubhouse because I was back in town.

“Damon!” Shaina squealed when she saw me. She did her usual run at me thing, but this time, I didn’t bother catching her when she tried to jump and instead, she sort of just bounced off me and landed on her ass. I didn’t know any pregnant women who would go jumping around like that, so it only worked to confirm my suspicions.

“Let’s go inside.” She moved to head toward the door to the clubhouse, but I caught her arm. “Nuh-uh. Around back.”

I took her to the entrance of the room we had built out of the old inground pool that once stood behind the clubhouse. When we got to the bottom, Boone and Robbie were waiting.

“What’s going on? What’s this about?”

I sat her ass in the chair where we usually put the men that we needed to extract information from. There was no need to

tie her down, especially when she saw the leather straps that were there for that purpose. Fear shown brightly in her eyes.

“Do you want to explain what the fuck you’ve been up to since I’ve been gone?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I hummed out a sound of disbelief and then leaned down in her face. “So, you didn’t pay my wife a visit while I was away?”

“I-I-Um-I went to tell her that we were together.”

“But we’re not together. I broke up with you before I left, and even if we were together, that was for me to do – not you. Never you!”

She shook her head. “Our breakup wasn’t permanent. We both knew that the day you left.”

“No, I meant every word I said that day. It sure as fuck was permanent. I remember telling you that there was nothing between us, that I loved my wife, and would do whatever it took to get her to trust me.”

“That’s not what I took away from that conversation.”

“Then you weren’t listening.”

“I love you!”

“You love me so much that you went and put my pregnant wife in distress while my son was there?” I didn’t know if Lily had been stressed by the situation, though I had a feeling it wasn’t exactly easy to get a visit like that on the same day she found out she was pregnant. It was obvious by the way the

men around me stiffened, that they hadn't been aware that Lily was pregnant again.

Shaina laughed. "Is that what she told you?" She smirked. "What a desperate bitch! She's just telling you what I told her."

"That you're pregnant with my kid? That we never stopped seeing one another?"

She nodded.

"And are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Pregnant."

"No, but I could be. I had the implants removed last month."

"I wasn't home last month, and I've never fucked you without a condom."

She shrugged as if it made a difference.

"So, you went to my family home, where my son lives, and you lied to my wife, upsetting her in the process. Now, she wants to move away to New York."

"Good! Then she'll be gone, and we can finally be together the right way!" Shaina screamed at me.

"Nope. The problem there, beyond the fact that you were a mistake I bided my time with, is that if Lily goes, my son goes too."

"Just take him and let her go," she shouted at me while ignoring the other half of what I'd just said.

“You want me to take my son from his mother – the woman who protects, loves, and cares for him all day long, every day?”

“I can do all that,” she insisted.

“And what about the baby that isn’t here yet? I’m supposed to miss out on all of that for you?”

“You’ll have your son and me, what more do you need? I can give you another baby. Let her have that one and go.”

“If you don’t do something about this, I’m going to kill her myself,” Robbie threatened through clenched teeth. It was only then that I looked up and noticed how pissed he was. There was blood dripping from one of his hands where his fingernails had dug in and cut through the skin on his palms.

“Do what you want with her. I have to go see Lily before she does something stupid.”

Robbie looked me in the eye then. “I will not force her to stay with you this time.” He pointed at Shaina then. “My daughter deserved more than this bitch coming to her doorstep and throwing shit in her face after everything she’s already had to see. She deserved more than the half-ass attempt you made.”

“You’re right. And if she never wants to speak to me again after our conversation, then I’ll respect her decision – to a point. She isn’t leaving though. Whether we’re still married or not, she can’t take my kids away.”

Robbie said nothing, and I knew I wouldn’t get a fight out of him on that because he didn’t want her to go either, no matter how much he wanted her to be happy one day. The man

was just as selfish as I was, only in a different way. I couldn't complain either, because it might be the one thing that helped me keep Lily here long enough for me to prove to her that there could be something between us.

And there was another baby coming. We were getting a chance to do everything over, hopefully the right way. I turned back to Robbie before leaving the pit. "If things go the way I think they will, I'm going to need to crash at your place for the foreseeable future. She won't trust anything she doesn't see and that makes staying here at the clubhouse impossible now."

Robbie turned from me to Boone. "Look at that, he's finally thinking with the right head."

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19 - Fresh Hurts

Tiger Lily

Talking to Stacey helped. I called her two days ago, when I first got the positive pregnancy test. Then, I called her again and left another message about an hour later after some bitch dropped off pictures of her and Merc together. The woman, who I figured was Shaina, claimed to be pregnant by him, but honestly, it sounded like more of a desperate claim than the truth, especially since she couldn't look me in the eye as she said it.

Still, those pictures hurt me on a soul deep level that I didn't even realize existed up to that point. She had more of him than I ever had. Even if it was over between them and this was her angry attempt at trying to make me push him back to her. If she only knew. I didn't have him either. Never had. What I also never had of Merc was a single picture of the two of us together. There were a few around the house of Merc with our son, but none with me. We didn't even have wedding photos. If someone were to walk into my house and try to figure us out based on what they could see, they would never assume that Merc and I even knew one another. Or at the very least, that maybe he was a distant relative who hated me.

The pictures this woman shoved at me were an assortment of their time together. There were a couple of them laughing,

and obviously out on a date. I saw his truck in the background instead of the motorcycle, so maybe he had told me the truth about not having anyone on his bike. Still, there he was laughing and looking happy with this other woman. There was one of them in bed together and a couple of him in what must have been her bed alone. He looked peacefully at sleep with the sheet just covering his naughty bits. She got that part of him. Repeatedly. I'd only ever slept with Merc one time – actually slept – and it was the same day I found out for sure that this woman in the pictures existed. He mistook me for her when he was first waking up, which meant he had built habits of waking up with her over time.

We never had that kind of intimacy. We didn't have pictures. There was no proof that Merc and I ever existed together at any point except for our son, the piece of paper that documented our farce of a marriage, and now the new baby that was growing inside me. I hoped it was a girl because it would be the last baby I had if it was. No matter whether I left and fell in love at some point, I never wanted to have a child twisted between me and another person again.

I set the pictures aside, and threw myself into a different world, in order to try to forget my own reality. I was so immersed in the world being created at my fingertips, that I didn't even realize someone sat down in the chair on the opposite side of my desk until he cleared his throat. When I looked up, Merc sat there looking destroyed. Good for him. Maybe Shaina had just dropped the bomb that she was pregnant.

“I thought I told you not to come here without calling first.”

“Would you have let me in if I had called?”

“Sure, I just wouldn’t have been here,” I told him truthfully.

“So, it’s a good thing that I stopped by without calling then. We need to talk.”

I chuckled at that as I continued to type out my final sentence before hitting save and giving the asshole my undivided attention again.

“No need,” I told him as I picked up the pictures his girlfriend had left with me and threw them at him. “I already know about your bullshit.”

“And just what do you think you know?”

“That this woman was so desperate to keep a hold on you that she came to my house with those pictures and lied about being pregnant with your child. Or maybe she was telling the truth about that but lying about some other part of it, I don’t know. And you know what? I also don’t care. Go be with your new woman. At least she got your fidelity for the most part. She certainly got more than you have ever given me beyond that too.”

“Yeah? How do you figure?” His voice held a little attitude now too.

“You have the proof lying all over you.”

Merc glanced down at the pictures. “What is that supposed to mean?”

I spelled out everything those pictures symbolized to me, the fact that she even had pictures of the two of them together,

to them obviously habitually sleeping together in the same bed like a real couple, his laughter, his smiles, his happiness.

“I’ve never had any of that from you.”

“There are pictures of me all over this house,” he argued.

“Yep, pictures of you and your son – for your son’s benefit. Trust me, I’d rather not see your face around every corner.”

He nodded. “You know almost everything you just said is a bunch of bullshit, right?”

“Excuse me?”

“First, let’s make this clear. She isn’t pregnant. Second, she came to you because she was desperate because after I dropped you off, I went to tell her that I would never see her again because I was in love with my wife.”

I did laugh at that, because if he thought I believed that for even a minute, he was nuts. The bastard ignored my outburst though.

“Third, those pictures are all old, from when we first started...” he trailed off there because he knew no matter how he tried to swing it, just the fact that he’d started something - especially something more than a casual once-in-a-while fuck - was not going to look good for him. “She took those pictures because it’s what she does. Shaina is a photographer. She lives her life through pictures. She got yelled at for most of the ones she took with me because I never wanted to be in them.”

“Feeling guilty?” I asked sarcastically, knowing he never did feel anything.

“Yeah, as a matter of fact. I never wanted there to be evidence of my own stupidity out there. Certainly, never wanted it shoved in your face. The fact is, she had those pictures of me because she took them. She demanded something of me and made it happen.” His narrow-eyed stare pinned me down then. “What have you ever demanded of me?”

“To not flaunt your women in my son’s face and yet this one showed up at my doorstep. Thankfully, he wasn’t here when she showed up.”

“I’m thankful for that too and sorrier than you’ll ever know that my shit decisions spilled over to you, to our home.”

“My home,” I corrected.

“Our home,” he repeated as we sat there quietly staring at one another for a while before he broke the silence again. “Do you have anything else you want to tell me?”

I sighed. How did this fucker already know? I could tell he did because his eyes drifted down to my midsection, as if he could see through the desk to the non-existent baby bump that I might have been hiding there.

I quickly bounced my shoulders up and down. “It doesn’t really matter because it changes nothing.”

“It changes a whole fuck of a lot, Lily.”

“No, Merc, it does not.” I sighed and looked away from him. “All it changes is the fact that I need a bigger house because two bedrooms won’t cut it. The room Declan is in now is too small for two growing boys and definitely too small if it turns out to be a girl.”

“All right, we’ll work on getting a bigger house.”

“No!”

“What do you mean, no? You just said...”

“I said that *I* need a bigger house, not *we*.”

“I see. So, this is my official notice that I’m no longer welcome?”

I laughed again. “I already gave that to you, but sure, if you need to hear it again, I don’t want you here. If you need to see Declan, I’ll have one of our fathers bring him to you. I would appreciate you keeping to the no whores around my boy promise you made, but I see that’s difficult for you, so...” I paused to think about a solution for that, and it was killing me because I didn’t want my son to grow up seeing the way his father behaved. There was no way I wanted him to grow up and think it was okay to ever treat a woman the way his father had treated me.

“You want your space – it’s yours. Stay here in the house until I can get you a new one.”

“I don’t want a house that belongs to you too.”

“It won’t. Now, hush and listen.” Fury burned inside me as he said that, but then the bastard continued talking despite seeing the flush of frustration on my skin. “I want you to stay in this house until you have the baby. It’ll give you time to make sure the new place is painted and set up the way you want without having to deal with toxic fumes or anything else. It will also give your dad and I the chance to be close by in case anything happens so we can be there for Deck and for you.”

“You and my dad?”

He nodded. “Had a feeling you weren’t going to let me in the house anymore, so I’ll be rooming with your dad across the street until you move or change your mind.” I was about to interrupt, but he stopped me once more. “It will also give me access to Declan in an environment you feel is safe and whore-free. Plus, there’s the added benefit that you’ll be able to see I’m serious about wanting only you now!”

“What kind of games are you playing? Like I’m going to believe you now?”

“No games.”

“You tried this when we were in Savannah and come to find out you had a girlfriend who you were serious enough about to not cheat on her.”

“I did though.”

“Did what?”

“Cheated on her.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better?”

It was his turn to shrug. “I was with you. I finally got who I really wanted, and I cut her loose that same day.” I rolled my eyes, but the asshole persisted.

“I know that I fucked it up all along the way and should have never had to worry about cutting anyone loose if I was serious about you. I am man enough to admit that I fucking swallowed stupid pills thinking that was any kind of a plan of action. I’m sorry, because I know it caused you pain and I don’t want to keep doing that to you, Lily. I know you won’t

believe me now, but maybe in time you'll see that I mean it this time."

"I can't stop you from living where you want, but it won't be here. I don't want you coming over whenever you want either. That is a hard limit for me and if you test it, I will pack bags and Declan and I will be long gone before you ever even know it."

"I will respect your boundaries, Lily."

"And if I want to date, you will not interfere," she tacked on.

"No fuckin' way! You're carrying my child. No other man's cum is going to be shot up in there."

"You're disgusting."

"I'm fucking honest."

I rolled my eyes again. Stupid idiot. "Take it or leave it, I'm not changing my mind."

"How am I supposed to prove to you that I only want you, that we should be a family, when your plan is to go out and date other people?"

"What you have to prove isn't my problem. It's yours. You already blew a thousand chances with me. If I find someone who loves me without having to fuck every woman in Charleston before he realizes it, then sorry for your bad luck, I'm going to take the guy who saw my worth from the beginning."

"We'll see." Merc stood then and moved to leave. "What were you working on over there anyway?"

“None of your business, Merc.”

“For now,” he bit back and then he walked away, just like always. Only, unlike all the rest of the times, he stayed true to what he promised. He lived at my dad’s house across the street, was respectful about not just showing up, and he sent flowers every Wednesday just to ‘brighten up my week’.

A month later, he brought me a cell phone that already had four numbers programmed in: his, my father’s, Boone’s, and the number to the clubhouse. It was a Nokia 9110i, and the damn thing flipped open on its side to reveal a full keyboard and a screen that could be used to access the internet, which was just insane. I had no clue what in the world I was supposed to do with all of that, but I was probably going to have fun figuring it out.

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20 – The Push and Pull

Tiger Lily

I didn't think I would ever get used to receiving messages on my own personal phone that I could carry anywhere with me.

Merc: When is your next appointment?

Lily: Tuesday at 10. Why?

Merc: Because I am going to be there.

I thought long and hard about that. On the one hand, I hadn't invited him and wasn't sure I wanted him there. On the other hand, when I was pregnant with Declan, I used to wish that he had come with me just once because I stupidly thought it would have changed his mind and made him take my pregnancy and me more seriously.

The problem then was that I never wanted to force him to do anything, and in hindsight, maybe I should have. Now, he was the one demanding to go, but I'd taken as much shit from Merc as I could stand. The real problem was that I didn't want to think he was changing only to have him break me all over again.

In the end, I just never responded back because what was there to say? Either he would show up and demand to go anyway or he would forget, and I'd be left to feel the dejection

that would follow. I remained quiet and instead, finished the final chapter on the latest book I'd been writing.

The Sea Captain and the Nymph was a bit of a departure from my usual books, but my publishing company loved the idea. I had been writing historical romances, the type everyone referred to as “bodice rippers” and I might have even had a certain special someone who everyone was drooling over grace one of my covers with his long, flowing blond locks and chiseled jaw. He wouldn't work for my sea captain, but that was okay.

The publisher had suggested maybe having a mixture of realism and fantasy art for the cover considering it was a blend of historical and fantasy fiction wrapped up in a pretty, little romantic bow. I giggled at that thought because that was how Stacey phrased it in order to sell the book. We both got extraordinarily lucky when she received an internship at Eager Meadows Publishing, one of the largest publishers of romance books with a world-wide reach. Stacey pitched my books, and not only sold them on my stories but on me.

Well, she sold them on Brinley Amber Madeline, which was the pen name I'd chosen, and yes, it was a nod to the happily ever after I didn't get in my real life, so I wrote them instead. The best thing about my BAM persona was that no one – not even my father – knew who she was. They had no clue that I earned my own money and stashed every last penny away for a rainy day. I glanced at my calendar and swiped my marker across it. There were two countdowns underway now. One for the due date of my second child and the other for the day I could file for divorce and finally find my happiness.

Until then, I was going to keep on writing my stories, hopefully selling the hell out of them too, and collecting my royalties. My children and I would be just fine, no matter what. There would never come another time, like when I was pregnant with Declan, and worried about whether I could get to the grocery store for food.

~*~

Two days later, I was putting Declan in the car seat in the back of the Jeep when Merc came sauntering over from my dad's house across the street.

“How is it that I see you coming and going from over there all the time, but my father is never around anymore? Did you kill him off and hide his bones on a pig farm somewhere?”

Merc laughed. “Nah, he's been staying with my dad at his new house.”

“Boone bought a house?”

“Yeah, says he's getting old and shit, and wants to have a place for when he retires from the club.”

That caught my attention. “Boone's thinking about retiring out of the club?”

He shrugged. “Going inactive at any rate. His hands have been bothering him a bit. Hard to ride with all the vibrations when it causes him pain.”

“He never said anything to me about it.”

“Lily, he's a fucking tough ass biker. He ain't about to let his daughter-in-law know shit don't work like it used to. That makes a man look weak.”

I rolled my eyes at him and his father. “Men are stupid.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think you’ll get an argument on that one from me. I proved it enough for you already.”

That admission also shocked me. I never thought I’d see the day where Merc openly admitted that he had been wrong and sounded as though he genuinely meant it. I guess, eventually, even he was bound to grow up some.

“Keys, sweetheart.” He demanded with his hand out.

“No.”

“I’m not riding passenger.”

“Then I guess you better drive yourself there.”

“Come on, Lily.”

“No.”

“This is no time to bring the tiger out, just let me drive you there.”

“Did you buy me this car?”

“Yeah, I fucking did, now hand over the keys.”

“Did you buy *ME* this car?” I repeated, emphasizing that he bought it for my use.

“Yes, Lily, I bought the damn thing for you.”

“Then I suppose you intended for me to be the one driving it.” I made a silly face at Declan that caused him to burst into laughter as I closed the door.

“That’s just wrong. Look!” He pointed at his son in the window but couldn’t wipe the smile off his own face. “You made my son laugh at me.”

“It’s tough out here in the world for grumpy bikers who can’t get their way.” I mock-pouted and teased as I happily jumped in the driver’s seat and locked the door behind me.

Merc sighed, silently conceded, and tucked himself into the passenger seat instead.

“Boy, you and I are gonna have a talk about whose team you’re on!”

“Momma’s team. She wins!”

“That’s right, baby!” I agreed cheerily with my son.

“Can’t even argue,” Merc mumbled. “I always want him to be on your team.”

That was an oddly sweet and unselfish thing for him to say. I might have to start marking the nicer things down in a journal or something so that when he went back to the Merc he’d always been, I could look back at the fond memories and remember the moments when he wasn’t a complete dick.

“Why are we taking Deck to the appointment? Isn’t it going to be weird for him to see all your bits?”

“He doesn’t have to see my bits, I’ll be mostly covered by a sheet and what do you think I’m supposed to do with him whenever there’s no one else to rely on to watch him?”

“Lil, I promise, you will always have me there to keep him if you need privacy for these visits. If not me, one of our dads...”

“Do you know how many appointments I went to alone when I was pregnant with Declan?”

I watched from the corner of my eye as he blanched. “That’s never happening again.”

“I’m a realist this time around, Merc. I don’t expect anything from anyone, and I have a plan A, B, and C in place already for when I go into labor.”

“You’re killing me,” he mumbled. “So damn sorry that I did that to you, Lily. You’ll never know how many regrets I have.”

“I’m not even trying to make you feel bad. You need to understand that saying sorry now doesn’t change how the past shaped me. It just did. Now this is who I am and how I look at things. There is no wishing away regrets and wrong doings, there’s only moving forward. Either you can move forward and accept the way the past has made me different, or you can get out of the way, so I don’t have to dwell there anymore.”

“Okay,” was all he managed to choke out after that.

~*~

By the time I got situated in the doctor’s office with the little paper blanket draped over my legs, Declan had asked about a million questions. “Why we here? What’s this? What’s that? Can I gets ice screams? Play wif me!” And on, and on, and on. Little boys do not belong at obstetrical appointments, and my headache told me that this was shaping up to be a very long pregnancy, relatively speaking.

“Well, it looks like the tests agree with you,” Dr. Marks said as he came into the room. You are definitely pregnant.”

“What’s preg-ant?” Declan asked his father while tapping a finger against Merc’s forehead. The doctor smirked at him as if to say, “Good luck with explaining that.”

“We’ll talk about it later. Let’s just be quiet while the doctor talks to Mommy, yeah?”

“Okay, but can I has a lollypops?”

“I don’t have any, Deck.” My boy poked his lip out in a pout that always made me giggle.

“There are some in the bag behind the screen,” I informed Merc. He looked at me like I’d lost my mind by not telling him that thirty or so questions ago, but I shrugged my shoulders. “Forgot I had them until he asked.”

Dr. Marks chuckled. “Mom brain got you down already?”

It was my turn to laugh. “Does it ever really end? I’m beginning to think not.”

“According to my wife, the answer is that it doesn’t.” Dr. Marks took a moment to go over my chart and then he looked up at me, the nurse wrote down that you know the exact date of conception?”

“Yup,” I told him. “I gave it to her. And yes, I am absolutely sure.” Dr. Marks gave me a funny look. “I promise you, that there is no other day it could have been. I’ve only had sex three times, and only two of those without protection, in my entire life. The result of my first time is right over there.” I pointed to Declan who was in Merc’s arms, dribbling sticky sucker spit all over his shoulder.

Dr. Marks’ eyes widened, but wisely he refused to look at my husband. We both knew what was in the chart, that I was married, and while he might have been curious about our relationship dynamics considering what I’d just told him, he was wise enough not to question me further.

“Doc, I need you to do an STD test on me too. The whole works, just in case.” That time, Dr. Marks did look over his shoulder and no one in the room missed the accusing glare he threw my husband before slipping his poker face back in place.

“I can do that.” Dr. Marks called out to Merc then, “You can go behind the screen over there for a minute, because I’ll have to lift the sheet, and Mrs. Donovan will be exposed.”

“Nothing I haven’t seen before,” Merc bit back.

“Maybe so, but the little guy there will probably have a whole bunch of questions if he sees what I’m about to do to his mommy.”

Merc moved so that Declan’s view was blocked, but his own was not, and I just rolled my eyes at his bullshit. There was no doubting that he was pissed off. Whether it was about me admitting to only having sex three times in my life despite being married, or because I had to ask for a sexually transmitted disease screening, I didn’t know. I also didn’t care. It had to be done since he had been with plenty of women, and many of them questionable.

Dr. Marks did his thing, took the swabs, and handed them off to the nurse who stood quietly at the door the whole time. She was an older lady who looked at me with pity in her eyes. I hated it. I hated her for that. Mostly, I hated it because I would have done the same if I was standing in her shoes. Once the doctor got everything he needed, he left me there lying at the edge of the chair with my feet up in the stirrups, and then adjusted the paper blanket over my thighs.

“I’m going to do a transvaginal ultrasound for you. It will confirm your conception date and allow me to see what’s going on. I don’t want you to be concerned if we don’t hear a heartbeat just yet. From what you said, I think you’re right on the borderline where we might see evidence of it, but maybe not.”

“I understand,” I told him. Six weeks was the magic number, and I was hovering right around there so it could go either way.

“She’s covered, you can bring him back out so you can see now.” Again, Dr. Marks called out to Merc without looking at him. Instead, his focus was on the little screen to my side as he wiggled what basically looked like a sex toy around inside me. Briefly, I wondered if this technically counted as my fourth sexual experience.

My awkward laugh had everyone turning their attention up to me. “Sorry, weird thought. Carry on.”

Dr. Marks grinned, and I swear that man must have been a mind reader, or maybe other women had similar thoughts but spoke them out loud. Either way, the nurse had a smirk on her face too and Merc just looked puzzled.

“Okay, let’s see this little one, shall we?” Dr. Marks asked as he moved the wand around and finally stopped when a tiny blob appeared. Sure enough, I could see the little beating heart. The doctor smiled as he flicked a switch, and the sound filled the room. “Looks like we got lucky today. Perfect little heartbeat.”

“That’s the baby? The whooshing sound?” Merc asked.

Dr. Marks looked at the man, and the child he was holding, then turned back to what he was doing. “Yes, that’s the baby. As Mrs. Donovan progresses and we use the Doppler, you’ll usually hear her slower heart rate and then the baby’s will sound more like galloping horses in comparison.”

“That’s wild.”

Dr. Marks didn’t respond as he measured everything. “Everything looks good.” He gave me the due date and then smiled at me. “Every pregnancy is different, but I think we should make a plan for you possibly going early, especially considering the way you gave birth last time. I still haven’t heard the end of it from Dr. Hastings about that time he had to catch your baby in the hallway of the ER.”

We both chuckled over the memory, but Merc cut in with a loud, “What the fuck?” We both snapped our heads around to him. “What did you just say?” He asked again.

“Can we do this later? I’m sure Dr. Marks has other patients and going over something that happened years ago is just going to hold him up.” The doctor removed the wand from me and patted the outside of my thigh.

“All right, everything looks good. We’ll have your prescription for prenatal vitamins at the front desk. Have you been having any morning sickness this time?”

“Just a bit. Not as bad as last time, but I feel like I should knock on wood now, so I don’t jinx myself.”

He chuckled. “If you have any issues, call and let us know. I’d rather get you something to help settle your stomach than

have you losing too much weight and becoming dehydrated, okay?”

I nodded. “Okay, we’ll see you in about four weeks.”

“Why so soon?” Merc asked as the nurse and doctor both ignored him and walked out.

“It’s always every four weeks through the first and second trimester, unless something goes wrong. Then it’s every two weeks and maybe down to one week apart at the end, depending on how things go.”

“I think you need a new doctor,” he finally said after absorbing that information.

“I really don’t.”

“I don’t like him.”

“Well, it’s not your body, so you don’t have to like him, but I do. I trust him and he’s going to continue to be my doctor.”

“He doesn’t even try to hide the fact that he can’t stand me.”

“Well, both times I’ve come in here to confirm a pregnancy, I’ve had to ask for an STD test, so I guess that doesn’t sit well with a doctor who tries to protect women’s health.”

“You didn’t have to do that, I’m clean.”

“I don’t know that.”

“I just told you.”

“When was your last check up?”

“I don’t know. About six months ago, I guess.”

“Yeah? And how many women have you slept with since then?”

“I never go without a condom.” It didn’t escape my notice that he didn’t have a number to throw out.

“That’s a lie, otherwise we wouldn’t be here right now.”

“You’re the only one I’ve not used one with.”

“No offense, but I find that hard to believe. Besides, even if it’s true, that doesn’t mean anything.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You can still get those diseases while being cautious. Did you use a condom on your tongue when you went down on those other women?” I asked. His head shot back in shock. “I will take that as a no. Did they use one while delivering oral to you?” He didn’t answer. “You do know that several STDs can be transmitted that way, right?” He didn’t answer, just clenched his teeth so hard I could see his jaw working with frustration.

“Look, I’d rather not discuss this right now,” I nodded my head toward Declan who was half-dozing in Merc’s arms. “I’m going to get dressed and be right out. If you want to go ahead and take him down to the car, I’ll meet you there.” I went to grab my Jeep keys out of my purse, but noticed they weren’t there. The bastard had already taken them, determined to drive us back since I wouldn’t allow him to drive here.

“Apparently, you already have the keys.”

“Yeah, I do,” he said with a grin before walking out of the room. I finished getting dressed, grabbed my prescription, my appointment card, and tried to pay for the visit too, but was surprised to find it had already been taken care of.

“Your husband already paid, honey. You’re all good.”

“Thanks,” I called out as I turned to leave the office, stunned that Merc would even think about making the payment for me.

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21 – Overcoming Hard Truths

Merc

Leaving the doctor's office with my son in my arms, I had never felt like a bigger piece of shit. It was clear what the doctor thought of me, and I was thankful Declan was too young to understand most of what just happened. The thought that my son might one day realize what a piece of shit I am and how horribly I treated his mother when she was pregnant with him, and while he was still young, killed something inside of me. I never wanted him to look at me as if I was the enemy, but there was no doubt that's exactly how it would go down if I continued on the path that I'd forged for myself.

When I paid the bill for Lily's visit, my gut clenched at the thought that I hadn't paid one single dime of her visits where Declan was concerned. The bill for the day had been almost four hundred dollars. That was just one visit. She had done it all on her own the last time. My heart squeezed tightly in my chest as I put Declan into his big boy car seat and tucked the blanket that had been on the seat next to him, so that his neck wouldn't lull too far to the side. Then I waited for Lily to come out.

When she emerged from the building, the sun hit her just right so that the little bit of copper in her hair seemed to catch fire, making the normally plain brown look extraordinary. She

tipped her face up toward the sun, as if it was everything to feel those warm rays on her skin and all I could think was that I had never taken my family to the beach.

Some of the pictures that Shaina had used to torment Lily had been of us hanging out at the beach together, and remembering that was just another kick in the pants to the type of absolutely selfish prick I had been. No more. I vowed to myself as Lily approached that everything that I had belonged to my family now, that included the memories I wanted to make with them.

I opened the passenger door for Lily, and she simply shook her head and tittered out a small laugh, almost under her breath, like she didn't want me to know she found my bullshit amusing. I soaked it all in as she settled into the seat, and I shut the door.

“Want to go get some lunch while we're out?”

She turned back to look at our son. “Maybe just pick something up on the way home. He'll be a cranky little brat when he wakes up. He always is after falling asleep on car rides.”

That was something I did not know about my own son. “Okay, what are you in the mood for?” I asked so that I didn't once again dwell on the fact that there was so much that I should know and didn't.

~*~

We ended up eating pizza with Declan on the living room floor while we watched The Lion King. There was no telling

how many times my kid had seen the movie, but he damn sure knew most of the lines.

“He really loves this movie.”

Lily just grinned at me. “It’s his favorite.” Come to think of it, there were all kinds of stuffed animals in his room now that suddenly made sense. The warthog, the lions, and the elephants. “That’s why he won’t leave that damn monkey behind anywhere?” I questioned as realization dawned on me.

“You got it, and it’s a baboon not a monkey.”

“Same difference.”

Lily rolled her eyes at me as she started to close the pizza box and collect all our paper plates. When she stood, I moved with her. “This was nice,” I admitted.

“What was?” Lily moved across the kitchen, disposed of the empty pizza box and plates, and then grabbed some paper towels and ran them under water before wringing the excess out. No doubt, it was to clean up our son’s messy pizza fingers before he did too much damage.

“Our living room picnic, spending time with you guys, seeing our baby’s heartbeat.”

Lily sighed as she moved past me. “There’s never been anything stopping you from experiencing any of that Merc.”

“I know, it was just a good day.”

“This is our every day,” she informed me as she took Declan’s hands and wiped them clean while he attempted to sing along with the weasel and the pig.

“No! Top tit!” My son screamed, though some of it became muffled behind the damp paper towel that Lily was using to wash his face up. I was pretty sure he meant “Stop it,” but by the time she got all the sauce off his face, he was back to singing and dancing along with the movie.

“Can I stay a while longer?” The hesitancy to ask had to be clear in my voice, but I didn’t want to do anything to upset Lily. She was the one setting boundaries, and for once, I planned on sticking to them. Mostly.

“Of course. Do you mind hanging out with Dec so I can get some work done?”

“Work?” I asked, once again curious about what the hell she did in her little loft office all day long.

“Um, yeah, I just have some things I want to get done upstairs.”

“Sure.” Truthfully, I had been hoping for more family time with the three of us, but I’d take what I could get. She wasn’t kicking me out and sending me back across the street, so for now, I was counting it as a win.

22 – Beautiful Moments

Tiger Lily

When I finally looked up from what I was doing, four hours had gone by. “Oh my God!” I damn near shouted as I jumped and ran for the stairs. By the time I got there, I stumbled to a stop and stared into the living room below me. Merc had put together a blanket fort for our boy and while it wasn’t big enough for both of them to fit inside, Declan was asleep with his head poked out and his hand held by Merc’s. My husband was asleep on the floor just beside the tent with his upper body curved around so he could see Deck and hold his hand.

I quickly ran back to my desk and pulled out the disposable camera I got to take pictures of Declan at the beach, knowing there were still a few shots available on it. Then I took one picture from up in the loft and quietly sneaked down the stairs to grab two more at closer range. Finally, I took of just their hands clasped together, but then the camera ran out of film.

I had to remember to take that in tomorrow to get the pictures developed. While they slept, I moved into the kitchen to get dinner started. The minute I threw the ground beef on the pan, ready to cook it up for tacos, my stomach churned violently, and I had to snatch the pan off the burner and run for the bathroom.

When I was done getting sick, Merc had the windows open to air the house out and was working on cooking up the meat for me.

“Sorry,” I told him before holding my breath and quickly ducking into the fridge to grab a ginger tea. It was something I noticed in one of those hippy stores near the beach one day, so I grabbed a few to see if they helped with morning sickness. They absolutely did.

“Don’t apologize. I’m guessing the meat doesn’t smell too good while cooking right now?”

I shook my head. “It’s insane because I will eat all of it that gets put in front of me, but smelling it raw or just freshly cooking, and I’m running for the nearest safe spot to puke. I just forgot for a minute.”

“It’s okay, you can’t help the way your body reacts. I do worry about this happening if I’m not here though. Deck could have gotten hurt if he’d been in here with you.”

Well, that made me feel lousy.

“Don’t. I just said it because you can’t do things the same way you did when you were pregnant with him. It’s not going to be as easy to go it on your own this time, and you don’t have to. Please, Lily, lean on me too. There’s no making up for our past or my part in how hard it was on you, but I don’t want to repeat the same damn mistakes anymore.”

“Okay,” I relented. He was right. I had to put my pride aside, if for no other reason than I would never allow my son to get hurt just because I was being stubborn. “It doesn’t mean

anything as far as we're concerned though. It just means I'm conceding to taking the help that's offered."

"It's a start."

The man was infuriating, and yet I couldn't hide the smile on my face. How many days and nights had I prayed that he would finally take things seriously? Now, here we were, and it looked like he was doing just that. My stomach bubbled again, and I backed slowly away from the kitchen to the sound of the knowing chuckles Merc let out.

"Go wake our boy and get him straight before dinner. I'll take care of this in the meantime, so you don't have to smell it."

I turned and went to do just that, making Deck help me put all the blankets from their fort back on his bed or in the closet where they belonged.

"Daddy builded me a fort. It was so cool. We watched Turtles and he taught me how to pow-pow-punch da baddies." Declan attempted to show me exactly how to do that, including a kick to the air that landed him on his butt. His cheeks reddened in embarrassment as he picked himself back up.

"That was some amazing fighting, baby. Sometimes, the baddies knock you down and you know what you do when that happens?"

"What?"

"You get right back up and show 'em you're made of tougher stuff!"

“Yeah!” He fist-pumped the air. “Tough stuff,” he mimicked. “Wook at these muscles!” My boy flexed his scrawny little arm at me, so I humored him and used my thumb and forefinger to wrap around his bicep and pretended to not be able to squeeze him there.

“Wow! Those are some manly muscles. You keep eating all your food and one day, you’ll be great big and strong.”

“Yeah, like my dad and boff my pops.”

I smiled at Deck and turned to see Merc standing there with a look of such awe on his face that I wished the camera I still had in my pocket had just one more photo available on it.

“You good?”

“Meat’s done cooking and seasoned. Figured it was okay for you to come back in now.”

“We’ll be there in just a minute.”

He tapped the edge of the wall and then turned to walk away. There were moments where I thought maybe if Merc had been around more, just the presence of his son in his life would have changed things. The kid had superpowers already, whether he realized it or not. His soul was a balm to everyone around him simply because he loved life and the people who lived in his world.

Then again, I never wanted to put that kind of pressure on my son, not even unknowingly. If nothing else came from this time Merc was trying to “make up for the past”, I hoped that at least it solidified a greater bond between father and son.

Merc ate dinner with us, cleaned up all the mess, and then helped Declan get his bath before tucking him into bed.

“Can you be here all the nights, Daddy?”

Well shit.

“I don’t know, buddy. Daddy has to work sometimes and,” it was obvious he was stumbling over what to say. “How about I’ll try to be here as much as I can.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“Love you too, Deck. Now, get some sleep.”

I stayed right where I was, in the hallway, when Merc came out of our son’s bedroom. “That mural I painted in there, kind of fits in with his Lion King obsession now. Think it might need some retouches, but if you’re going to move, I can just redo it in whatever house you end up picking.”

“What?”

“What-what?”

“The mural you did?”

“Yeah, for the nursery,” he said as he hitched a thumb back toward our son’s room.

“I never knew you painted that.”

“Oh. Well, I did. Maybe that’s why he likes that movie so much? Although it’s not the same kind of animals on the walls. I could change it up to his favorites when we move. I mean, when you guys move. When you pick out a house. The bigger house...”

I couldn’t help laughing as he rolled through his own version of verbal diarrhea.

“You think that’s funny? Laughing at my insecurities where you’re concerned?” Merc moved closer with his fingers outstretched and started tickling my sides. We ended up falling into my bedroom, and I was laughing so hard Deck decided to come join us. Merc had me pinned to the bed, fingers in my side with me about to piss myself as my little savior took a running leap right onto his dad’s back.

“I’ll save you from the tickle monster, Momma!”

“My hero!” I cried out in dramatic fashion.

“Guess that makes me the villain,” Merc teased with a wink, but I caught the slight wince too. He knew that had been exactly his role in my life for a long time. He might not have been tying me to train tracks and trying to get me run over like in cartoons, but he had been his own version of a villain none-the-less.

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23 - Old Bones

Tiger Lily

Do you know the feeling, when everything is going so well, and you have that anxious little knot in your belly waiting for the other shoe to drop? That feeling had been nagging me for months.

Merc had not only become a father, but a husband in the past couple months. He was there at every checkup I had and made sure to pay the bill before I could even find out how much it was. He made sure our kitchen stayed stocked, and we wanted for nothing.

Merc took my Jeep to have it completely serviced. Of course, that was after he attempted to talk me into trading it on a newer model. He thought I deserved the luxury of the Jeep Grand Cherokee instead of my “little red shitbox” as he called it. I loved my Jeep though and didn’t want to part with it, so he made sure that it was in tip-top condition.

Then there was the time he spent with us. We went without seeing him for one full week when he had a run for the club, and another week when he was trying to help Double-D track down his woman, Lucy, who had disappeared after thinking her man was cheating on her. He hadn’t been, and there had been a whole lot of upheaval in the club as a result, including a few club whores who were no more. I can’t say I was entirely

sad about that, especially knowing that they had all been with Merc at one time or other during our marriage.

I wished Lucy would come back though, because she had become an unlikely friend. I'd never gotten on with the old ladies, since I wasn't technically claimed in that way and tended to stay away from the club, but it had been nice to have Lucy there whenever I had to show up for family things with Declan.

Outside of all that drama, he was with us most days and nearly every night. I still made him stay across the street at my dad's place a lot, but there were plenty of nights where he crashed on the couch after tucking Declan in for the night. He always had an excuse that made it impossible for me to argue.

"Tomorrow is Pancake Sunday. I can't leave tonight, or I might miss it."

"Declan wasn't feeling well all day, I think I should stay, just in case."

"You look worn out, I just want to be here in case Deck needs someone, that way you can sleep."

It was always something, and it was always sweet. Merc had become a different man, and maybe that was why my body was on edge and couldn't trust it. As much as I had always hoped for this version of him, it was hard to believe he had changed so much. The crazy thing was that the shoe that dropped, it wasn't on Merc's foot. He was the one there to catch me as my world fell out from beneath my feet.

There I was, almost four months pregnant, feeding my son lunch, when the sound of my world imploding came with a

stiff knock on my door. I got up, made my way there, and looked out the peephole to see two police officers standing there.

“Can I help you?”

“Lily Ashburn?”

“Lily Ashburn Donovan, yes.”

“We would like for you to come down to the station with us.”

“In regard to what exactly?”

“Get some shoes on,” the second officer huffed at me in frustration, and that attitude put me in no mood to cooperate with whatever bullshit was going down.

“Am I under arrest for something?”

“No, ma’am,” the other man stated coolly while side eyeing his partner.

“Then I think you need to leave, because I’m not inclined to speak with people who talk to me that way.”

“Ma’am, we really need you to come down to the station. It’s about your mother.”

That had me bristling because I hadn’t seen my mother since I was sixteen years old. “I haven’t seen or heard from my mother in years, so I’m afraid I won’t be much help to you.”

“Ma’am, we really need you to come to the station.”

“I’ll tell you what, Officer Cook,” I said to the nicer of the two. “I’ll meet you there with my lawyer later.”

“What the hell do you need a lawyer for?”

“Well, considering your attitude, officer asshole, I’d think that seems self-explanatory.”

He stepped forward as if he thought he would put his hands on me, but Officer Cook halted him. “I don’t know what the hell your problem is, but you need to go wait in the car now.”

“She’s a fucking biker whore.”

“Excuse me?” I yelled.

“Chris!” Officer Cook hissed. “Get to the car now!”

“I’m going to have my lawyer file a complaint against him when I get there.”

He tapped at something on his chest. “I have no problem giving a statement about your treatment.”

“That’s surprising.”

“It shouldn’t be. His attitude puts me in danger right along with everyone else.” I nodded and turned to make sure Declan was still occupied.

“I don’t have anyone to watch my son right now, so I’ll either have to bring him or wait to come to the station.”

“It’s okay to bring him. I promise, nothing will happen to you. We just have some questions.”

“What’s going on with my mother?”

“I think that will be better explained at the station, ma’am.”

“Fine.”

Two hours later, I approached the station with Declan in my arms and Barry Bartholomew Esq. at my side. He was the lawyer I used for my book deals, so he promised that he might

not be much help. I bartered a healthy hourly fee for him just to stand by my side anyway because I didn't have the time to look for another attorney, and for once, I couldn't get a hold of Merc, my father, or Boone.

When they finally got Officer Cook for me, the first thing he did was sit us in a far too cold room to wait. Then he brought his superior in to speak with me.

“Mrs. Donovan, I'm Lieutenant Shaffer, and I want to apologize for the way you were spoken to at your home earlier today. It was uncalled for and the officer in question is being handled appropriately.”

“All the same, I want an official complaint filed against Officer Asshole so that I know it's in his record.”

Lieutenant Shaffer's lip twitched, but he managed to keep a mostly straight face as he sat in the seat opposite myself and Barry. Officer Cook continued to stand near the door of the room.

“Mrs. Donovan,” he started.

“Lily,” I corrected.

“Lily, can you tell me the last time you saw your mother?”

“I sure can,” I gave him the exact date.

“Can I ask how it is that you know the date like it was yesterday?”

I laughed. “That date held a lot of significance for me. I looked down at the boy squirming in my arms. “It was the day he was made, the day I lost my virginity, and the day my father found out about my mother cheating on him with one of his

club brothers. It was also the day he told her to leave and never come back. She left and I never saw or heard from her again.”

“Your dad stayed at the house when your mother left?”

“Yes, he was there with me.”

The Lieutenant nodded. “Do you know if the man whom she had an affair with was...” he glanced down at a tiny notepad and then looked back at me, “Jeremiah Thompson?”

“Bridges?” I laughed at the thought. “I really don’t think so, he was with the club up until he died of cancer a while back.”

“Why does that mean it couldn’t be him?”

“Listen, it just couldn’t.”

“Because the club has rules about members who sleep with other members’ old ladies?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “That’s club business. I don’t know anything about that.”

“You’re an old lady though.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You are married to Damon Donovan, otherwise known as Merc?”

“I am.”

“I’m confused.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“That you’re confused,” I said deadpan, but both Barry and Officer Cook chuckled noticeably.

Lieutenant Shaffer sighed and gave me a look that said he didn’t think I was that funny. “Your husband is a member of the Aces High MC, that makes you his old lady.”

“No, it doesn’t. It makes him my husband. It does not make me his old lady. That is something different.”

“I see,” he said, though judging by his wrinkled brow, I didn’t think he saw at all.

“I think my client has answered everything she is going to answer without knowing why she’s here,” Barry finally spoke up as if just remembering that he was my lawyer.

“Some remains were found out on the Thompson Farm after it was sold. I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you this, but they were identified as your Mary Ashburn during the autopsy that was conducted.”

“How long?”

“It’s only been a few days, but we were waiting on positive identification before we brought you in.”

“No, how long since she died?”

“We think that she died not long after she went missing, maybe a few months later.”

“She’s been dead this whole time?” How had I not known my own mother was dead? It didn’t seem possible.

“I’m terribly sorry,” he added as an afterthought.

“Does my father know? Has he been told?”

“We haven’t been able to reach your father yet.”

“Okay. You said you did an autopsy. Do you know what happened to her?”

“Did your mother have a problem with drugs?”

I sighed, knowing what the cause of death must have been just from that question.

“Listen, I didn’t know my mother had been having a years-long affair until the night my father caught her. All I knew was that she had grown more distant, and I missed talking to her about the important things in my life. That night, I had hopes that I could talk to her about having sex with the guy I’d been crushing on. I wasn’t able to do that because by the time she came home, my father started yelling at her, and the next thing I knew, she left without looking back or even saying goodbye to me.” I shrugged. “Could she have been using? I wouldn’t have known.”

“When will her body be released so that my client can plan for her burial?”

Thank God that Barry was there, because I hadn’t even thought about the fact that I would have to bury my mom. My dad had mentioned when he was officially divorced, six months after he kicked my mom out. That meant she had to have been alive then for that to happen. His being divorced from her made the burial my problem though since I was her only remaining family.

“Autopsy is already complete, should be able to release the remains to the funeral home of your choosing within the next day or two.”

I nodded. "I guess I'll have to figure out a place and..." I felt a little sick to my stomach and numb all at once. "You said remains. It's been years, so I'm assuming there's no need for..." I choked up.

"Momma! You okay?"

"Fine baby," I tried to make it believable, but my voice cracked.

Declan turned around and narrowed his gaze on Lieutenant Shaffer then. "You made my momma cry!" He yelled at the man, as if he was already big enough to jump over the table and make the idiot bleed for messing with his momma's emotions.

"It's okay, Declan. Momma's just sad because her mommy went away and she's not coming back."

"That's not nice." My baby looked panicked for a moment. "You won't go away from me?"

"Never!" I reassured him. "Never, baby."

"Are we done here then?" Barry asked.

"Yes," Lieutenant Shaffer dropped a business card onto the table between us. "If you can think of anything that might help, like who your mom was having the affair with, or whether you remember things about her possible drug use, it would be helpful. Though, we think it was a matter of accidental overdose at this point and that Mr. Thompson simply didn't want any trouble and took care of the issue himself."

I received a knowing look, as if there was some conspiracy in what he said that I should know about. I just stared at him,

because there was nothing else that I could help with. Barry picked up the card and stuck it in the pocket of his trousers before helping me and Declan up so he could escort us out of the building.

One thing I knew for sure though was that if my mother had been buried on Bridge's farm, my father and Boone already knew about it and they'd both kept that information from me. I wasn't sure if Merc knew too, but I was going to get to the bottom of it sooner than later.

As we were leaving the police station, Merc was there bursting through the doors. "Lily!" He called out the moment he saw me.

"What are you doing here?"

"Some asshole cop just came by the clubhouse looking for Rob. Said they had you in custody down here. What the fuck is going on?"

"He didn't tell you?"

"No, when they said they had you I hauled ass over here to get your ass out of jail and make sure Declan was taken care of and not dumped in foster care."

"Thank you," I whispered because at least he had been thinking of our son in that regard. It hadn't occurred to me that could ever be a possibility. I squeezed my son a little tighter at the thought.

"What's going on?"

"Can we talk at home?"

“Yeah, come on,” he said before noticing the man trailing me. “Who the fuck are you?”

“My lawyer,” I said before Barry could.

“You have a lawyer?” Merc asked, sounding stunned.

“I do now,” was my only response. We were on better grounds now than we ever had been, but that didn’t mean I trusted anyone to know about my books or finances. It was my only failsafe to get out from under the life I was living if it ever became too much, and honestly, knowing that my father might have hidden the fact that my mom was dead – for years – might just be the thing to push me. If only Merc was still being his dickish, selfish self these days.

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24 – Buried Away

Lily

When we got home, my father and Boone were there waiting. Luckily for them, they hadn't seen fit to let themselves into my home.

"Lily," my father called out to me as I bypassed him to go inside.

"Fierce, little Tiger Lily, at the very least, allow us just a few minutes to explain things," Boone added.

I turned to face both men while gently shifting my son into Merc's arms. "It's funny that you want me to give you a chance to explain things when you've had years to try to do just that."

I turned and walked into my house, but of course the men saw themselves in anyway. Merc took Declan to his room and got him situated. Our boy had a busy day, and if there was a God looking out for him, he would allow my baby to sleep through the breaking of my relationship with his grandfathers.

"You were pregnant and already not doing well," my father explained.

"Oh! So, it's my fault that you hid the fact that my mother died and didn't even get a proper burial for years?"

“No. Christ, Lil, that’s not what I’m saying. I wasn’t around much. Remember when I showed up to find you with barely any food in the house?”

I nodded.

“Well, just before that, we got word on where your mother was hiding out. I needed her to sign off on divorce papers. So, Boone and I took off to find her, only when we did, she was in some rat-infested hovel that Whisper, and his cousin, had taken her to. They were both fucking filthy, strung out, and hell Lil, your mom had a needle hanging out of her arm when we got there. Whisper was gone. Bastard overdosed before I could beat his ass.”

“Whisper should have already been dead, but the fucker skipped town before we could strip him of his patch and ink.” Boone added.

“We got Mary out of there, took her to Bridge’s farm to help get her clean. It was the only out of the way place that was quiet enough.”

“So, you what? Got her detoxed enough to sign those divorce papers then killed her off and made it look like an overdose?”

“No. Fuck no!” My dad yelled adamantly. “Got her detoxed and she signed the papers. While I was gone, she fucking found some shit Bridges had lying around. Bastard never bothered to mention he had a fucking problem. Might have forgotten he left a rig and shit back there at some point. I don’t know, but when we got back, the fucker was digging a hole in the ground.”

“So, instead of just putting her somewhere to be found, so she could get a proper burial, you let him bury her on the farm and then pretended that she was still missing all this time?”

“I thought it was best that you never knew she was an addict, Lil. She held it together the best she could before I kicked her out, but even you had to know that she was losing her fight. The woman forgot to come home some nights; it was why I followed her the night I found out she was with Whisper. We were supposed to go on a fucking date that night to try to put us back together, but...” He shook off whatever else he’d been about to say.

“Loyalty,” I mentioned under my breath as I shook my head clear of the thought.

“What?”

“It’s why you told her to get out, because she wasn’t loyal, right?”

“I guess that’s what it boiled down to,” my father said.

“Loyalty was always our thing too. We were never supposed to lie to one another,” I reminded him.

“Lil,” he whispered, obviously seeing where I was going with this. He had kicked my mom out and told her not to come back because she had been disloyal.

“You lied to me about her. You made me stay married to a man who didn’t have a single loyal bone in his body. You were never supposed to be the one I couldn’t trust. You were always supposed to be there for me. It was all a lie though. Who is disloyal now, Dad? By your standards, I should kick you out of my life and never allow you to come back.”

“Lily,” he looked like he was searching for the right words, but there were none to make up for what my father had done. He had lied to me about my mom and then trapped me in a loveless marriage to a man who did to me - on the daily - what *he* sent my mom away for. What if he hadn’t sent her away? She might still be alive. I might not have lived the lonely existence I did. Maybe we would have escaped together, and she would have stayed healthy for me, for my baby. That might have all been a pipedream, but I’ll never know now.

“Get out!” I yelled at him as I stood quickly and pointed at my front door. Unfortunately, the minute I did, pain laced through my abdomen and then another whipping burn ripped around from my back to my hips and I knew exactly what that pain was. I yelped before plopping back onto the sofa and trying to breathe through my pain and panic.

My father and Boone were immediately at my side. “GET OUT!” I screamed at them.

“Get the fuck out before you upset her anymore!” Merc’s voice boomed across the room as he came for me. “I’m calling the doctor.”

“We can take her, or watch Declan while you go to the hospital,” Boone offered.

“Get away from me!” I demanded through clenched teeth. Merc moved both men out of the house while on the phone with the doctor’s office.

Dr. Marks met us at the hospital, and we had Declan with us because like hell was I going to leave him with either of our fathers.

“I want to keep you overnight. If for no other reason than to get some fluids into you. You’re dehydrated, which isn’t helping the situation. From what you said, family stress is an issue too. Maybe here, you’ll get some much-needed rest and be able to bounce back easier.

“I don’t like the idea of leaving you here alone,” Merc told me.

“We can set up a cot in the room,” Dr. Marks offered before looking at Declan. “Though, it’s not the greatest environment for a small child who will get bored easily and end up not allowing Mom to get the rest she needs right now.”

“Damn, Doc. Thanks for the guilt trip,” Merc mumbled.

Dr. Marks chuckled. “Just telling it like it is. Take your boy home, let Lily get her rest, and come back in the morning so we can discuss a plan to keep her as calm and stress free as possible.”

“Lily?” Merc asked, as if the final decision was in my hands.

“Go. I’ll be fine.”

Once Merc was gone, Dr. Marks popped his head back in my room, seeing that I was still awake, he came on in. “Just wanted to check in with you again before I go. I’m on call, so if there are any problems, they’ll page me immediately to come back.”

“Thank you.”

“Lily, I don’t mean to overstep here, but since I was with you for your first child, I just wanted to make sure everything was okay at home, beyond the fight you had with your dad. I

know things were rough during your first pregnancy. It feels like maybe your husband has turned a corner and decided to get serious about life, but if that's not the case and you need help..."

I smiled warmly at Dr. Marks. "Thank you for caring so damn much. I promise you; I wouldn't be here right now if there was a problem I couldn't handle. My husband has been a completely different person this time, and just so we're clear, he has never been abusive toward me in any way. Neglectful – absolutely. Abusive – never."

"Well, neglect can leave scars too, sweetheart, but as long as you aren't in over your head, then I'll leave it at that, but know that all you have to do is order a Crazy Hawaiian Pizza for dinner and I will get the ball rolling through a network I am close to in order to get you and your son the hell out."

"You are the absolute best! It isn't necessary, but you have my thanks and gratitude."

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25 - The Flip of a Coin

Merc

When we finally got Lily back home, I started sleeping in bed with her, just in case she had any problems and needed someone there to help. It was a fight at first, but eventually she relented, and I'd been lying beside her every night after we tucked Declan in bed. Then I woke up beside her every morning when our son came to make sure someone got up to feed him breakfast. How I was ever stupid enough to miss out on this the first time around was beyond me. I didn't even mind that I was having to beat my dick half to death in the shower every night.

Dr. Marks informed me that gentle sex was okay, but not to push it. Since Lily and I didn't exactly have a sexual relationship built already, it never seemed like a good time to bring it up, although, if her dreams were any indication, she was craving some physical action too. Some nights I woke to her grinding on my leg, and it took every ounce of fucking willpower to keep my hands to myself. As much as I wanted her, I wouldn't risk our baby, or the possibility of her kicking me out of our bed.

"What are you doing?" Lily asked from where she was parked on the sofa watching mind-numbing cartoons with Declan.

“I’m making a little office space for you downstairs because you shouldn’t be climbing up into the loft right now.”

“Oh!” The genuine shock in her tone made me stop and put the desk down that I’d just brought into the house. It killed me that she was still surprised whenever I did something nice for her, but that was all on me, and as much as it hurt to realize how badly I’d fucked up; I knew my fuckups had done worse harm to her over the years.

“Where did you get that desk? It’s gorgeous!”

That washed away all the miserable feelings her surprise brought about. “Double-D and I saw some old guy throwing this out last week not far from the clubhouse. It wasn’t in the greatest shape then, but I’ve been working on it. Got it sanded down, patched up, and then stained it to match everything you have in here.” I glanced around at the dark cherry wood furniture that sat throughout the living room. “Where do you want it? I can put it out here or see if we can squeeze it into the bedroom.”

The simple roll-top writing desk wasn’t that big, but we did have a king-sized bed and several dressers in the bedroom that made it hard to fit anything else in there without doing a bit of moving.

“Out here is fine, that way I can keep a close eye on Declan while I work.”

“Did you used to take him upstairs with you?”

“Yes,” she offered with a roll of her eyes. “And he would be good for about ten minutes before he got bored and wanted to scribble in all my books.”

“I drewed you picsters!” My son corrected her, letting us know that even while his eyes were locked on the screen ahead of him, he was listening to everything.

“You draw the best pictures for Momma, but remember we talked about drawing them in the proper places.”

“Not the walls!” He repeated with a huff.

I had to turn away to hide my own amusement while Lily just covered her face with her book.

“So, where would you like the desk to go?”

Lily glanced around and then nodded to the space between the end of the sofa and the wall. “What if we move the end table and just put it here. That way I can see into both the living room and the kitchen easily if I’m working.”

“Okay, what about all this stuff?” I pointed to the tiny Christmas tree and all the wrapped gifts that had been piling up on the table since that first Christmas when we all let Lily down.

She shrugged her shoulders indifferently even as a flash of pain crossed her face. “Upstairs I guess, so it’s all out of the way.”

Out of sight. Out of mind. I got it, especially now that it didn’t look like our fathers would ever get the chance to open their gifts from her. Then again, she’d sort of given me a second chance, so they might still get one too.

Our lives were starting to resemble that of a real family. My closest club brother, Double-D and I had been working hard on making sure that our chapter of the club could mostly operate on the legit side of things. We have plans for

expanding our strip clubs out and up the coast to Myrtle Beach and down into Georgia. It was just a matter of time and finances we had to contend with, but Double-D was a whiz with the finances, so we both felt our plans would come to fruition sooner rather than later.

The only reason I wasn't home most days during regular business hours was that we had been setting one such club up on the north side of Charleston. When it came time to start auditioning talent instead of getting the bar setup, I took off and carried myself home - away from temptation and any possible rumors that might arise and get back to Lily. She didn't need any more shit in her life, and all I needed was my family, so my plan to stay on the straight and narrow involved keeping out of places I shouldn't be until we built trust between us again. Even then, I only wanted to deal with the business as much as I had to. Someone else could audition the women.

It was surprising, considering I hadn't been home much over the past week, that whenever I did get back Lily was always hard at work on the computer that I brought down from the loft for her to use. She would always shut it down as quickly as possible the minute that I walked through the door, which made me a bit nervous. That led me to pull some stupid shit, but I was fucking glad I did, because once I realized what she had been up to, it changed everything.

~*~

“What do you mean you can't come in today?” Double-D asked as I hopped off my bike. I'd driven two blocks down the road from our house and parked the bike, intending to sneak

back in and surprise Lily so I could finally find out what she had been up to all day, every day on her computer. I told my brother exactly what I was doing, and the son of a bitch laughed at me.

“You think it’s wise to spy on her? If anyone should have trust issues in your relationship, it should definitely be her, not the other way around.”

“I fucking know that, but why is she so secretive about it if it isn’t anything bad?”

“Beats me, but what could she really be up to when she’s so pregnant she’s about to pop?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“Maybe she’s doing that at-home porn shit for assholes who have pregnant chick fetishes.”

“What the fuck are you even talking about?”

“Never mind, I gotta run. Let me know what you find out and how much trouble you’re in when you do. I’d say my couch is open, but I live at the fuckin’ clubhouse, so that won’t be helpful.”

“Yep!” I hung up on the bastard as one wild fantasy after another played out in my mind about Lily and her beautiful pregnant body. She better not be showing that off to anyone else. It’s mine, and even I barely ever got to see it.

I decided that the front door would make it too easy for her to shut things down before I was able to get a good look, so I hopped our fence into the backyard, and sneaked in through the back door, which was unlocked. Lily needed to remember

to lock that shit up after she brought Declan in, but I'd talk to her about that after.

"I can't believe you rolled around in the one mud puddle in the yard, Declan!"

My son's answering giggles came from the bathroom, letting me know that she was probably bathing him after the mud puddle incident. Good boy! He just gave his daddy extra time to snoop.

I went straight to her computer and low and behold, it was open to whatever she had been working on. I started reading hot-as-fuck sex scene about a pirate and a mermaid?

"What the hell is this?" I whispered to myself before scrolling back to read some more.

"Who owns this ass?" Capt. Etienne asked again as he slapped the siren's butt cheek, leaving another red mark to appear in the shape of his hand.

"You do!" She sang out in that lyrical voice that he couldn't resist.

"That's right! I own this ass," he tormented her as his cock thrust forward hitting depths that both tingled her senses and sparked a quick flash of pain.

"Holy shit!" Double-D hadn't been too far off when he guessed my wife was creating porn, thankfully, this wasn't exactly what he'd pictured.

I scrolled all the way to the beginning of the word document and read something that turned the excitement in my veins to straight chills just as a notification for an incoming email

popped up on the screen. The Sea Captain and the Nymph Return by Brinley Amber Madeline.

“No! Fuck no!”

I clicked on the email and read it. Sure enough, that name, along with her real one, was there to taunt me as some agent, publisher, or some shit talked about how much money she was getting for this book upfront and it was a lot. This was real, and from the looks of the rest of the email, it was far from her first book.

“Tell me she isn’t using the names of women I’ve fucked as her writer name!” I hadn’t even realized that the words were said out loud until someone cleared their throat behind me.

“What are you doing?”

I spun to face my wife, and I couldn’t even find it in me to be angry that she had a whole career I never knew about. Instead, I was fucking devastated for her that she felt she had to use those names.

“Why that name?” I asked.

“It was to remind me that there are no happy endings outside of fiction.”

“Aw, fuck! Lily, you’re killing me!” I moved until she was right in front of me and then pulled her into an awkward embrace. It was only awkward because her belly kept the majority of our bodies from touching the way I wished they could in that moment. “I’m so fucking sorry, beautiful.” I might be a rough-as fuck biker, but I’m not too proud to admit that I cried in my woman’s arms as I held her. It wasn’t for me and all the time and memories I’d stupidly lost with her

because of my own bullshit. No, it was for the damage I'd done to her.

My wife never deserved the amount of shit I heaped on her shoulders, whether I felt trapped by our situation or not. I should have respected her enough not to put her through that everything that I did, especially while she carried our first child. There was no going back and fixing anything though. We were stuck with the ramifications of my actions.

"I'm so sorry!" I murmured into her shoulder again as she ran her fingers up and down my back.

"I know. And I knew then that we didn't have anything between us besides a kid you didn't want at the time. What happened is in the past."

"It's not," I reminded her while turning slightly to point an accusatory finger at her computer screen. "It's right there, in your face, every single day. The reminder of what a piece of shit I am. No wonder I can't get anywhere with you. Hell, every minute I'm gone, you dive into a world where you become the personification of your worst days and nights."

She laughed at me then. "Okay, drama queen. It's not all that, so stop getting your panties in a twist about it. When I first gave Stacey my pen name, I did it out of spite. I wanted to show all those bitches that I was more than they would ever be. They might have had you in ways that I didn't, but I had a success they could never achieve. And it had the bonus of being a reminder that not everyone gets a happily ever after."

"You can! You should! You deserve more than a happily ever after, Lily. Hell, you deserve far more than me, but I'll be selfish and beg that we fucking start acting like the family we

should have been all along. I want that. I want us to be a family. You and me, but also you, me, and our babies.”

“Merc, where have you been the past few months?”

“What is that supposed to mean? I’ve been right here with you.”

“Exactly! We already are that family.”

That shocked me. “You mean it? The you and me part too?”

“As long as that’s how it remains, then yes.”

“I promise,” I started to say, but she cut me off quickly.

“Nope.” Her head shook back and forth adamantly. “No promises.”

“Why the fuck not? You should demand promises from me.”

“Promises are easily broken, Merc. You started our marriage with broken promises. The only thing I ask from you, is that you show us every day that we are what’s important. You show *me* every day that I am the only woman who matters, and the only one you’re having sex with or sleeping with. That is what matters. I need to see the actions, not the empty promises.”

“One day, I’m going to make you a promise, and you’re going to believe me.”

She nodded her head. “For now, you just have to keep showing me, like you have been over these last few months, and we build from there.”

“Lily?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re an amazing mom!”

She ducked her head shyly when I told her that, as if it was something that embarrassed her.

“I’ve been watching you with Declan, and I think back to all the things I missed out on, and how much you struggled to do it all on your own, but you did. That kid is fucking amazing and it’s all down to you. I know I don’t tell you enough how much I appreciate you, and there was a long time where I didn’t even realize that I should have appreciated anything you were doing, so when I don’t say it enough – call me on it.”

“Never. That’s something that should just come from you when you feel it.”

“Then know that I’ve been watching you grow into this beautiful, talented, strong person, and I know exactly what I’ve been missing out on. Trust me when I say, I’ve been kicking my own ass a lot lately. But I’ve also been so damn thankful for you.”

“That means a lot,” she finally admitted before peeking up from under her lashes. I didn’t wait to ask for permission or hesitate, I dove in and captured her lips with my own.

For the first time since we made our second child, I took Lily to bed. After we made sure everything was locked up and Declan was truly down for his nap.

It was the first time in my life that I ever just rocked into a woman slow and gentle while our gazes stayed locked, and the memory of that time together would forever live in my mind when I closed my eyes at night. That was the one. The one that

got me through dark times, the one that pulled me through my own stupidity and made me see reason again when I would one day need a reminder. The memory of making love to my wife for the first time was magic and I cherished every damn second of it.

~*~

The following day, when I left to go to work, that's not where I ended up. Instead, it was as if divine intervention led me straight to my father's house. Ever since he'd bought the new place, Robbie hadn't stayed a single night in his house across the street from ours.

"Merc? Is something wrong? Declan? Lily?" Rob asked in a panic when I shut the engine down.

"They're all fine. I needed to talk to you."

We went inside, where my father was brewing tea like some old hen about to serve up scones and shit. I didn't mention it, and instead took a seat on their couch. That was what it was. It didn't take a genius when glancing around at the place. They were both home here with little touches from each of them scattered everywhere, including a fuck ton of pictures of the two of them together, with my son, some with Dec and Lily too. I was in a few of the pictures, but it was the ones of the two of them together that really sealed some of my theories about them.

"What was it you wanted to talk about, Son?" Boone finally asked after noticing how my eyes trained on all the pictures.

So, I laid everything out for them that I'd found out yesterday. I was somewhat happy to see that neither of them

knew about Lily's books or her success until Boone got up and went to his bedroom and came back with a book and threw it on the coffee table.

“What the hell? I thought you didn't know?”

“I didn't. I thought the name was fucking hilarious and planned to give it to you as a gag gift, but you're never at the clubhouse anymore.” He stopped then and pointed at me. “Make no mistake when I say that's a good fucking thing too. You needed to be home more with your family.”

“We should have never been a family!” I yelled at my father. “What in the hell were the two of you doing? You thought you were playing God with people's lives! You thought you could change me, and the shit you pulled just pushed me further away and made me hate her when she did nothing to earn that hate. It was all yours. You should have fucking let her go! You should have given her the freedom from me that she needed to be fucking happy! YOU LET ME COMPLETELY RUIN HER!” By the end, I was screaming at the top of my lungs, but I was also purging years of hurt, pain, and frustration. It came pouring out in angry tears in tandem with my pain-laced words.

“If that's how you truly feel then you need to either fix the shit that you broke with my daughter or let her go,” Rob answered me quietly. “We already know the part we played and harbor our own regrets because of it. Hell, I can't even see my daughter anymore and that's all down to me – as you said – trying to play God and do what I thought was best for her.”

“We know we should have done things differently, Merc. There's no going backwards though.”

“How in the hell am I supposed to undo years of what I did to her?” I whined like a little bitch, but honestly, I needed to know because there was no way to stop trying to patch it all back together and make things right. “Every time I think I’m getting somewhere; shit falls apart again.” I pointed to the fucking book on the table. “Look at that! That’s the name she chose to write books under. She chose to...”

“She chose to own her pain, Merc. From what you told us, it’s something she isn’t that upset over. It was a decision she made for her own reasons and the weight of that decision doesn’t necessarily apply in the same ways anymore.”

“I told her I wanted to be a real family.”

“What did she say?”

“She said that we already were and that my promises were no good. I have to show her I mean it every day.”

Rob smiled. “My daughter is a wise woman; you should listen to her. Sounds like you’ve already put in enough work to get her to concede to that, so why are you here and so upset?”

“We can’t keep going like this. Yesterday, when I told her I wanted to be a family. I included her and the kids, but it’s bigger than that. You are both essential parts of our family too. I need to know what the hell to do to get her to see that without losing her again. I need my family to be whole.”

“Now, he needs his family to be whole!” Boone teased.

“We’ll do whatever it takes!”

“Good, then I suggest you get some shit together because we’re going to have Christmas early. I think it starts with all of us fucking owning the fact that we fucked up and that she

wouldn't have gotten us those damn gifts if she didn't ever intend for us to have them.”

“You're saying it's time we were worthy enough to open them?”

“Yeah, that's what I'm saying.” I laughed at the two men who were essentially both fathers to me. “It has to happen tomorrow though. We're not letting this go any longer because we need you to both be there when Lily has the baby. Whether she realizes it or not, we all need one another.”

“Looks like my daughter finally got the man she always hoped you would be. Don't fucking disappoint her again,” Rob warned.

“I'm going to do everything in my power not to,” I promised him. He nodded his head, and then it was time for me to get my ass back home to my wife and son.

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26 - Making Amends

Merc

“What’s going on?” Lily asked the question from her desk when I came in the next day loaded down with takeout food I got from her favorite restaurant.

“I don’t want you to get mad,” I started to say when she pushed into the room, belly first, and started helping me take the food containers out of the bag.

“God! This smells divine!” The woman was practically salivating over the containers as she unpacked them. “And it’s never a good thing when you start a conversation with, ‘I don’t want you to get mad,’ so out with it!”

“Remember how I said I wanted us to be a real family?”

“Yes, and I told you that we already were.” She glanced around. “This is a whole lot of food, Merc! What were you thinking?”

The sound of motorcycle engines out front must have caught her attention. If the clock on the stove was correct, they were early, and I hadn’t warned her yet. That wasn’t a good sign.

“Well, we need to have our family whole and there’s no way to do that without...”

A knock at the door interrupted me as Lily's eyes narrowed into a penetrating glare that I swear burned me right down to my soul.

"What in the hell did you do?" She yelled at me.

"Hear me out," I told her with my hands raised in the air. "Our kids are going to need their full family at their back, and you and I are going to need a babysitter so we can have date nights and I can show you how much I love, appreciate, and respect you. Plus, we're going to need someone to watch Declan when you go into labor. I know they have a lot of..."

Another knock interrupted me, but that time, Lily's features softened, and I swear, she swatted a tear away.

"Go answer the damn door, Merc." There was no heat in her voice though, so I knew she was starting to see reason.

"Pops!!!" Declan screamed as I opened the door and he noticed both of his grandfathers standing there.

"Hey, little man!" Boone called out as he hefted my son into his arms. "Merc." He tipped his head to me and moved further into the house, taking cautious steps as if anticipating my wife hurling a frying pan at him.

"Thanks for having us," Robbie told me as he lifted a bag full of wrapped presents. "We come bearing gifts."

"Isn't that usually what evil people say?" Lily asked, though again, there wasn't any venom in her words. She was just being her usual smartass self.

Rob chuckled. "I suppose, but in this case, our only ulterior motive is to get you to let us back in."

She glanced over at me, sighed, and then turned around to go set the table. “Might as well come on in and get settled while the food is hot. Merc bought enough to practically feed the whole clubhouse.”

Once everyone was seated, I ducked out and headed up to the loft to grab all the gifts that had been waiting to be opened – some of them for years. Earlier that morning, I’d packed them into a bag to make them easier to carry downstairs, and to leave me with a free hand to bring the tree as well. The end table had been moved into the kitchen, near the window, where Lily planned to put some sort of houseplant that she kept talking about but never seemed to produce. So, I put the tree on the table, plugged it in, and unpacked the presents all around it. Rob got up and added the gifts he brought to the rest.

“Momma! Why you crying?”

Lily couldn’t answer, so I took the liberty of speaking for her, which was honestly something neither of us was used to doing.

“Mommy just has crazy, pregnant woman tears,” I told him.

“Momma’s crazy?” He asked, eyes going wide.

“Merc!” She hissed, but there was laughter in her voice too as she swiped her face free of tears.

“Momma’s just happy to see your pops!” She told our son.

“Cause you cries a lot when they don’t come visit.” Like the wise little angel that he was, our boy had missed absolutely nothing, even if he didn’t understand the full dynamics of our family’s latest rift.

Sometimes, all it takes is the innocent little kid at the table to break the ice and start patching up all the old hurts.

“We promise never to do anything that will keep us away again,” Robbie said, speaking for both himself and Boone. The code-talk in front of Declan was obviously appreciated by my wife too because she managed a smile for her father.

~*~

We sat around and opened our gifts, some that were years in the waiting. My Tiger Lily had gifted me a badass watch, some fucking awesome patches, and other cool shit. The thing is, the one present that destroyed me was the family photo album she had put together, no doubt just before finding out she was pregnant again.

“This was supposed to be my parting gift, wasn’t it?” I asked her quietly while our fathers knowingly kept Declan’s attention with the toys they’d wrapped for him, knowing we would all be opening things. She nodded her head, and shame filled my heart. There wasn’t a single picture of me in the album. There were pictures of my son going back to his first ultrasound right up until just before she must have wrapped the book up. Pictures of Declan playing, him with his two grandfathers, and even a couple where Lily was in the shot with him. There were none of me.

I remembered that day when I showed up and she threw those pictures in my face that Shaina hand delivered to her. Pictures of me living my life with another woman while my son and wife had nothing to show of me in their lives and it hit home just how devastating that moment must have been for her.

Part of me wanted to run and hide from the shame I felt. The other part of me, the one that was tired of missing the life I should have been leading all along, reached over and grabbed hold of my wife. I pulled her into my lap and held her so tightly, it wasn't comfortable for either of us. "I'm so fucking sorry, Lily. I missed everything."

"I made that when I was angry," she admitted

"Doesn't matter. I know the truth. There aren't any memories of me in that book because there were never any to put there, and I will regret that for the rest of my damn life."

Lily leaned in so our heads were seated in the crook of one another's necks. She placed a sweet kiss there at the bend and then leaned up to whisper in my ear.

"You're here now. I've taken more pictures. I took ones of you sleeping beside the blanket fort you made for our son, where your hands are touching. I took some when you were showing him how to catch a ball out back. I took more when you were doing the dishes for me one night when I wasn't feeling great. They just haven't made it into a book yet because I was going to put them up on the walls instead. You've been earning your place in our family over the past few months, don't throw all that progress away because of things that can no longer be changed."

"I don't deserve you," he whispered back.

"You deserve exactly what you think you do. Believe in yourself and you will never let me down again, Damon."

It was the first time she'd said my name in years and it sent shivers up and down my spine. I knew this day was about

setting things right for our whole family, but I really wanted to kick our fathers out and have them take Declan with them just so I could lie in bed wrapped around my wife. There was nothing I wanted more in that moment than to just be as close to her as possible. I'd be inside her too, if I didn't think it might be a problem considering her pregnancy had been complicated at points by stress and other shit.

“I love you, my Tiger Lily. Thank you for being so damn fierce.”

She sucked in an audible gasp and then leaned back to look me in the eyes. “What did you just say?”

Her question drew everyone's attention, and I figured to hell with it, she probably wouldn't believe me if I tried to keep the words between the two of us. So, I repeated them for everyone to hear.

“I said, ‘I love you, my Tiger Lily. Thank you for being so damn fierce.’”

“Well, shit!” Rob mumbled.

“Finally pulled his head out of his ass,” Boone concurred.

“Daddy, why your head in your ass?”

We all laughed as Lily whispered, “Thank you for my family!” I wasn't sure if it was directed at me, or if it was a prayer she was sending up, but I agreed with her.

~*~

This is the end, for now, but please read this special note!

~*~

This book was written because of an overwhelming amount of reader requests I received to get Merc and Tiger Lily's full story. I broke it into two parts because it was exceedingly long and because I wanted to give you the opportunity for a Happy For Now ending. The story can end here for you, if that's what you need!

For those of you who have **NOT** read the rest of the series, the question remains: Do they have a happily ever after? As happy as it can get for them, but there will be a whole lot of pain, betrayal, and more cheating if you continue with the next part of this book. If you want a happy for now ending, you can stop here. If you want the full story, you will need to remember that part two isn't a romance, it's just about a life lived and choices made between two very flawed people.

If you have read the rest of the *Aces High MC – Charleston Series*, then you know that Merc and Tiger Lily's story didn't end here, and there were many good, bad, and truly awful times to come. You know how their retirement goes, because you saw them together in *A Love So Hard*. You know how they both eventually die too, because it was written in the epilogue of *Everlasting*. If you want to find out about everything in between the end of this book and the end of their story, then carry on with part two.

THE BROKEN BEGINNING

PART TWO



*Aces High MC
Charleston
#9*

Christine Michelle

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Christy Sears for helping me get things done so quickly. I know it was a challenge!

Thank you to all the readers who have loved this series and wanted to see more of the characters so much that this was the third reader requested story I had to write for the Aces High MC – Charleston Series! I appreciate the extra work, guys!



Seriously, thanks so much for all your support and for the love you have shown my books, and this series in particular!

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I write under these names:

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Christine Michelle:

MC Romance, Rock Star Romance, and other
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