

Misguided (Fallen Aces MC Book 5)

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MISGUIDED

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The first step toward getting somewhere, is to decide that you aren't going to stay where you are.

- *Unknown*
ONE

Dog

"You're a fucking embarrassment to my name," my father yells across the dinner table, the glassware rattling with the force of his fists as he slams them down.

My name.

Sums it up perfectly, really. If you asked my father, the von Essen name belongs to him. I bet if the asshole could copyright it, he would.

Me? It might be mine by birthright, but as he likes to remind me, I haven't earned the perks that go with it yet.

Not sure I ever will.

"I told you I'm not interested in enlisting."

"So you turn up to the interview I set up, drunk?" He scoffs, leaning on one elbow dramatically. "The things I do for you ..."

Correction: the things he *thinks* he does for me. Rollan von Essen does nothing for anybody else, only things that'll help him. Me enlisting was one of those.

"Imagine the esteem that would come with my son being in the army."

He wants a general, something distinguished to add to the family tree. Only problem is, I'd actually have to give a fuck long enough to reach that status. Not going to happen.

"Seemed like a good idea at the time, and considering," I snap, "that I wanted to get my ass booted out the door as quick as I came in it, I'd say the plan was a success."

"Show some respect," my older brother mutters as he slices delicately into his rare steak.

I swing my gaze right to the pretentious asshole and then drift a little further to his waif of a wife who picks at her salad as though she's not surrounded by a testosterone filled room of hate. *He trained that one well.*

"Mind your fuckin' business," I snarl.

"Your constant degradation of our name *is* my business," he growls, slamming his fisted knife onto the tabletop.

His wife doesn't flinch.

"Can you comprehend on *any* level how awkward it is when the first thing a shareholder says to me is, 'I see that brother of yours got arrested again. Must make family dinners awkward, huh Derek?'" His nostrils flare, my father watching on with sick interest from the far end of the table. "What am I supposed to say to that, Koen? You tell me."

"Same thing I said before." I give him a tight-lipped smirk. "Mind your fuckin' business."

His face flushes red, his fists clenched so hard on the oak tabletop that his knuckles turn white.

"Boys, please," Dad roars, despite the fact we're two grown men capable of holding our own. "Koen, I tolerated your pastime at the start because it seemed like a phase, a passing curiosity, but now ..."

"Now, what?" I challenge him, pissed he's brought up my *real* family.

"Now, it's proving to be a bad habit you need cleansing of."

Oh, no he didn't. "Fuck this," I snarl, tossing my pretentious napkin down on the table. "I don't even know why I came here today."

He's got no right to tell me what's right and wrong. No business to look down on my choices simply because they aren't the same as his. Neither of them does.

"You know why you're here," Derek says. "What today means." His eyes are hard, his heart probably even more so.

"Yeah," I scoff as I push my seat out and stand. "I do. Question is, why the fuck did I decide to come here and celebrate it with *you*?"

This time last year, I witnessed my father show weakness for the first and only time in his life. This time last year, I held my mother's hand as her grip fell lax, waiting on her to pull the next breath, to fight to stay with her family.

Yet she didn't.

She was tapped out and tired of life, and I knew it as well as my father and Derek did, that she welcomed death.

Dad sighs at the far end of the long table, running a heavily adorned hand over his rapidly aging face. "Koen ..."

"No, Rollan. I'm done." I shake my head, hands braced on the back of my seat. "Done with you tryin' to direct my future, done with both of you lookin' down on my choices, and done with you actin' as though you wish I'd never been born."

He doesn't deny it, instead choosing to sit stoic as I take my leave from the place I used to call home. It lost all semblance of family when Mom left us. Never will be home again.

Derek chooses to ignore me by staring down at the table, yet his wife watches me go with a hint of jealousy; as though she wishes she could up and walk out like I am. I snort a pitied laugh at her dead eyes, at the shell of a woman she is. *That* is what being a real von Essen does to people—drains them of all distinctive traits until they're compliant zombies.

Unlike my father and brother, I don't get a kick out of stripping people of their free will. Bullying others around simply because I was lucky enough to be born into a family that has lorded a fucking name over the lesser for decades, was never my game.

That sick game of cat and mouse is *their* specialty.

I might share the same physical features as my blood, but on the inside, where it counts, I'm nothing like them. And that couldn't make me any fucking happier.

The cool night air bites at my collar as I step out the front doors of the house, and I shrug my cut a little higher on my shoulders, relishing it's comforting weight as it hangs on my back. The Fallen Aces are my home now; best decision I ever made.

My father? My brother? They're dead to me.

Them and their million-dollar empire of hollowness and misery.

Mel

Crickets sing outside the walls of the barn, a gentle melody to lull us to sleep while we wait on our ride to turn up. Hay scratches at my back, poking its sharp ends through the thin sweatshirt I wear.

I wasn't prepared to run. Hell, I wasn't prepared to take down a man with the gun Johnny left me, either.

Yet needs were a must.

"Quit your fidgetin'," Hooch grumbles, his eyes still closed as he tries to catch twenty.

I lean into my brother's side a little more, shifting my hips around so the worst of the hay misses my lower back. "Shouldn't you be asleep?"

"Too much on my mind," he rumbles, the vibration of his words tickling my arm where it rests across his chest.

We haven't always been this close and cuddly, but being thrown on the back of a bike and left to hide out without any idea if you'd ever see a familiar face again kind of has a snuggly effect on me.

I've lost count of the days, unsure what month it even is anymore, yet Hooch tells me it's a little over a year since I went into hiding. Apparently it's safe to return now; the man who had a price on my head lost his own when his son, Sawyer, came to visit one last time.

Families. They'll fuck you up like that.

"Is she okay, you think?" I jerk my chin towards where the girl Hooch brought with him lies on the other side of the barn.

"Don't know."

He hasn't said much about her. Hell, she said more than he did on our rocky truck ride here to escape the feds that were bearing down on me. I don't usually trust strangers, but this girl has a fire in her eyes that I like. She's smart, headstrong, and unaware of either of those traits in herself.

Plus, I trust Hooch. He wouldn't have brought her if it weren't necessary.

"She seems unsure of herself," I muse aloud. "Like she doesn't believe she's any good for anything."

"Hit the nail on the head, big sis." Hooch shifts, pulling his smokes out of his cut.

"Out of coke?" My brother only smokes this often when he's short of blow. The habit's one he's had since he was an easily swayed teenager hanging around men who should have known better than to share drugs with a kid.

"Afraid so." He offers the pack my way, and I lift my hand.

Yeah, I used to smoke. But I'm not wasting the progress I made being forced cold turkey after I went into hiding.

"We've all missed you," Hooch says before placing a kiss on the top of my head. "Everyone will be happy to see you when we get back home."

When we get back home. Thanks to my self-defense stunt, I *still* can't show my face in Fort Worth until the details are sorted. Placing three bullets in the chest of a Federal agent tends to leave people looking for answers; ones that won't make sense considering I'm supposed to be six-foot under.

"You never told me how you did it," I say, pulling out of Hooch's hold to sit up and allow him room to smoke. "How did you make them believe I was dead?"

"Nothing you need to know, princess."

"Don't call me that." I hate the reminder of my supposed "special" role in the club. I'm nothing special; my birth name doesn't offer me any unique skills or use over that of the other members.

It's the main reason my old man and I had a falling out. Daddy never quite saw things the same way I did.

"Precious, you're royalty to these roughnecks. You gotta play your part, baby."

My part, which consisted of finding myself a fitting suitor that would ensure strong offspring to head up the table for generations to come. Our family has headed the Fallen Aces, Fort Worth since the start, and for some unknown reason, it's assumed we always will.

What makes us so special?

"You gotta let that go," Hooch mumbles around his cigarette. "You take away what those men and women believe in, and they'll start lookin' towards people less desirable to fill that role."

"Is that what you do?" I bite. "Act like a fuckin' god for them because it's what *they* want?"

His eyes bore holes into mine, the anger evident despite the lack of light in the dark barn. "You know I don't."

"So don't tell me to act all high and mighty if you can't stomach it either."

He sighs, pushing off the wall to rise and walk over to his gypsy girl. I slump in his spot watching as he approaches her slowly, treating her with caution. He's not this way with many people, which shows how deeply he must care about her.

I can't help but feel jaded seeing him so freely choose whoever he wants to be by his side. I thought I had the one, the guy who lit my days up and made me live, but it wasn't to be.

The mentally unhinged son of a drug lord wasn't Daddy's first choice for me. And when the two of us refused to stop sneaking around behind his back, he packed Sawyer off to our northern brothers for safekeeping.

Right before he tried to play matchmaker and force me into a relationship with the man *he* thought would be more suited for the daughter of the president.

Not that it worked out. Having Sawyer, the only man who made me happy stolen away cemented the anger I felt towards my father, right until the bitter end.

Anger I sometimes recognize when I look at Hooch, knowing he felt the same struggle to be free as me. How can he know what it's like to be constrained, held back and forced into someone else's preconceived ideal of what you should be, and then so freely apply that same pressure to me?

Why can't I be welcome to choose who I want, be who I want, and act how I want?

Is the real me, the girl inside, really that bad?

THREE

Dog

My yell echoes off the trees, disturbing the serene night beyond. A simple rest stop on the hills near my old home—my mother's favorite spot. It's beautiful, just like she was. Peaceful and calming, exactly like I remember her to be.

Moonlight casts eerie shadows through the trees, the long spindly tendrils reaching for my boots where I stand on the gravel, flexing my fists, ruing what's left.

I read somewhere that a boy will always have a strong connection to his mother, often so over that of the masculine bond between a father and son.

The ache in my hollow heart tells me the same.

I miss her. I fucking miss her. And the worst part? I can't tell anyone about this pain because then the questions would start, the judging, the rumors. As far as my brothers at the Aces know, I'm the son of a farm mechanic, a delinquent looking for a stable home life.

Not even remotely true. My father's no mechanic. The bastard wouldn't know how to wield a socket wrench if the instructions were laid out before him. His hands are clean, unwrinkled and soft. He isn't a real man. He's a front, a fraud, and a callous asshole that only wants what's best for him.

He's everything I don't want to be.

I draw in a deep breath, the air shuddering into my lungs as I breathe my way through the grief. I don't cry, not often anyway, but fuck, at times like this it's hard to keep that staunch front that's become such a part of my life.

I play the fool, joke around and make light of my promiscuous reputation. But deep down there's a little boy still calling for his momma, not ready to let go of her yet.

My phone breaks the still night; the shrill sound a cruel juxtaposition to the natural grace of the forest around me. I fish it out of my pocket, hitting the Accept button as I bring it to my ear.

"Where about are you, brother?"

Callum. Our VP.

"On my way back in." I swallow the knot in my throat, steeling myself once more. "You need me for somethin'?"

"King needs you. He's got a midnight run he thinks you would be good for."

"Bit short notice, ain't it?" We've been sitting on our hands for weeks; nothing more than a few ripples in the relative calm surface of the criminal underbelly to worry about. A run in the dead of night seems odd.

"He only just got the call to action himself. Can you make it?"

"Yeah. I'll see you in twenty." Lord knows I need the excuse to open the throttle a little wider and blow off some steam.

I disconnect and pocket the phone, turning for my bike. As I kick my leg over, a deep sense of something profound hits me in the chest, weighing heavy and stealing my next breath. I sit there awhile, staring out through the break in the tree line as the ache eases, my chest rising a little easier as time goes by. I know the feeling; it was what I got the day I walked into the Fallen Aces compound behind Callum, ready to be introduced as a new hang-around.

It's the unease before the change—a new beginning.

Some would say it's suicide to cut my father and his financial support off, but truth is, I've lived the past four and a half years without needing a penny from his filthy empire. I sure as fuck don't need it now, and even if I did, I'd rather crawl bloody and broken over crushed glass to beg for it from our enemies before I let him lord that kind of debt over me.

A bird startles in the trees as I fire the bike to life and turn for home. At least, the only home that means anything to me since Mom died.

King's bike is already lined up in the yard by the time I pull in, a couple of prospects loading one of our spare rides into the back of the crash van under his supervision.

"Hey, pres." I tip my chin his way as I approach, pulling my smokes from the pocket of my cut.

"Dog." He jerks his head in response, arms folded tight across his chest. "You good?"

I meet his concerned gaze and lie as I always do. "Yeah. Of course." I finish the bullshit off with a chuckle and cheeky smile. "What's the rush?"

He eyes the prospects as they strap the bike down, fixing it in place. "Hooch needs our help."

Of course he does. If the guys up here think I'm trouble, then they should be thankful Hooch is all the way down in Fort Worth. He's been quiet, moping around since shit went down in the ranks and his old man, and sister, got killed. But before that he was the quintessential shit stirrer, always causing trouble wherever he went.

"What's he done now?"

"Picked up someone we need to bring home."

I narrow my eyes on our president, wondering why he's beating around the bush so much. King's as straight up, no bullshit, as they come.

"Dare I ask who?" I say, sparking my smoke. "Or will you change the subject?"

He smirks. "How's that new carburetor working out for you?"

Asshole. I shake my head, wandering over to the clubhouse to stock up on essentials. "How long we gone for?" I call out.

"Just the night," he shouts back. "Bring a spare helmet."

I hesitate at the door that leads inside and glance at him over my shoulder, lifting an eyebrow.

King laughs, pointing to the darkening sky. "Mighty fine weather we're havin' ain't it?" Bastard's laugh follows me down the hall as I walk through to the ruckus in the common room.

An hour ago I stared down the man who gave me life, wishing more than anything in the world I could have been born to anyone other than him. Just now, I felt what it would have been like had that wish come true.

Why waste my time with a man who doesn't want anything other than to beat and shape me into his idea of perfection, when I've already got the role models I need in my life?

Everything I need is right here, right now.

Everything I am, contained in the colors that adorn my back.

Welcome home, Dog.
FOUR

Mel

Hooch slides the entrance to the barn open, throwing his back into it as he shoves the heavy wooden door along its steel rail. The reverberation of bikes grows louder, headlights casting shadows as he passes by the waiting vehicles.

I've never missed a sound more; the comforting syncopated rhythm of multiple V-Twins.

King rolls in first, lifting his fingers from the handlebar in a semi-wave as he smiles at me. I step back, allowing him room to turn around as the second bike enters. The rider holds my gaze with wide eyes, never once breaking as he follows King's path and pulls up alongside. I fail at fighting the smile that twitches on my lips. I couldn't forget those dark and soulful eyes if I tried, but damn has he grown up a lot in the last year.

Dog was a prospect when I saw him last, young and misplaced. Looking for a home like so many of our members are. He's a definite man now, comfortable and at ease in his new life. It makes me so happy to see that he found his niche, found where he belongs. Almost as happy as I am to see these familiar faces.

Hooch wanders over as the crash van reverses part way in, blocking most of the exit and any

possible prying eyes in the process. The girl he brought with him, Dagne, sits off to the side of our group, watching intently as she no doubt sizes the guys up.

Men in leather and denim, wearing colors and weapons, are nothing unusual for me. But for those not accustomed to the life, the brotherhood, they're intimidating, threatening and most often misunderstood because of it.

I reach out, offering her my hand, and she slips to her feet to make her way over.

"Don't be shy," I say with a smile. "They're harmless."

She nods, giving my hand a squeeze before letting go and heading for the relative safety she finds in Hooch. We had a chance to talk a little this morning, and I like her. She's straight up, headstrong, and sensible. Everything Hooch needs in his life.

Big sis approves.

I turn to my right as Dog approaches at speed with his arms out wide. He wraps me in his strong embrace and lifts me clean off the dirt floor.

"Fuck, Mel. You know how good of a surprise this is?"

"I can guess," I say with a laugh as he sets me down.

"Heard you were missing, assumed dead." He reaches out and picks a piece of hay off my sweater, pain clear in his eyes. "And yet here you are."

"Here I am." I fold my arms as I smile shyly at him.

Dog and I are about the same age, so naturally when he became a permanent fixture at the club gatherings, the two of us found common ground in our struggles to find our place amongst the ranks. Although our stories couldn't be any more different: I was born into this life, he chose it; I've had my life's choices dictated to me from as young as I can remember, whereas he's been able to pick and choose his path into the Fallen Aces.

Still, the two of us would hang out at the club meets, swapping stories from our respective chapters and generally enjoying each other's company. He's my first real friend inside the club, and was right up until I walked away.

When his touch became something I'd crave, rather than pay no mind to.

I shake my head while I appreciate how ridiculously good he looks now his physique fills his shirt right out. "I can't believe how much you've changed."

"Been a while, huh?" He knocks his shoulder into mine.

"Far too long since I've seen anyone, that's for sure." I duck my head and pull in a deep breath. "So, how the hell are you anyway? You look as though you lift weights in your sleep. Might've been sharing his tubs of protein with you?"

"You approve?" He throws me a wink, the same one he would always give me before stealing a bottle of liquor from the bar at the club get-togethers.

The man sure is pretty, but damn I hate cocky son of a bitches.

"You make me feel as though I should have applied all my spare time a little better," I tease, pulling the sides of my loose sweater out to show how little I've changed.

He shrugs; lip pinched between his teeth as he blatantly checks the length of me out.

"No complaints over here, Mel."

I snort a laugh at him and look away at the prospects as they open up the back of the van. Dog was always trouble with the ladies back when he was a prospect, so Lord only knows what a killer he is now with all the thirsty women that turn up on a weekend.

Something I sure as hell don't need to mess with, that's for sure. Almost went there once, not getting sucked in again.

The hairs on my neck prickle, and I realize that while I've been watching the boys unload the van, Dog's been watching me. I turn my head and fix him with a frown.

"Words, Dog."

He shrugs again, both hands jammed in his pockets. "Never seen you without makeup is all."

"Well, now you have." I lift my shoulders a little, hoping my sweater will hide me some.

"Still as gorgeous as ever, though."

He reaches out and brushes my hair from my face, which results in my back going as stiff as a board. His is the first non-platonic touch I've received in over a year, and I'm not too sure how I feel about that. Especially since I made a promise to myself to only ever be friends with the guy.

Too many memories of awkward failed kisses for this tender ego to handle right now.

"Seriously," I snap. "Stop before you really embarrass yourself."

"Come on, Mel. Don't be like that." He ducks his head a little to level our gazes. "I'm still on a fuckin' high from seeing my girl here in the flesh when I thought she was gone for good." He sighs, twitching a small smile. "I missed you, missed our chats. Missed seein' your smile."

I shake my head and back up a step. "Dog, we went there. It didn't end well, remember?"

"Went where?"

I peer out from under my lashes at him, giving my best "don't fuck with me" stare.

"Can't fault a guy for tryin'." He shrugs.

"Except your timing is *way* off." I'm not even home yet, still on the way back to the club after being hidden from everyone I love for the past year. He could at least let me have a damn shower and sleep before he starts on with this.

He could at least give me time to catch my breath.

"Well," he snaps. "Good to know you didn't feel the same way, then."

"Don't, Dog. I've missed everyone, I just ..."

"Didn't miss me that much."

"I missed my *friend*," I stress. "I want my friend here right now, okay?"

I expect the usual brush off, the "I wasn't interested anyway" bullshit that comes when you wound a man's pride. I don't expect the absolute shutdown that happens right before my eyes.

Dog's gaze falls to the ground, his shoulders curl inward, and he jams his hands in his pockets as he walks back to his bike.

I almost feel sorry for the guy.

Almost.

"Dog giving you grief already?" King asks as he approaches.

I look over to the man in question as he flops dramatically onto his bike and stares at the wall with his arms folded.

"He seems more sensitive than I remember." I pull my chin back, making a mock "oops" face.

King frowns. "Something's up with him these past few days. Don't let it bother you. I'll have a quick word." He pats me on the arm and follows after Dog to have a quiet conversation in the corner of the barn.

I turn my attention to the prospects that unload an unmarked stock standard bike from the back of the van. They wheel it over next to Hooch's, transfer his gear over, and then wheel Hooch's custom bike into the van in the spare bike's place.

All the while my brother makes cutesy with his new plaything. I'm happy for him, honestly, but damn, talk about feeling like the fifth wheel.

I hover on my spot, trying to decide what to do. I can't get on Dog's bike yet because King is still having words with him, and I can't help the prospects because that would undermine their job; take away their pride in doing what they've been instructed to by the president.

So I stand, wondering if this is how life will feel from here on out. I'm supposed to be dead. In theory, there's no place for me in this world any longer. Am I always going to wake up wondering what the purpose of the day will be? While I was in hiding, I understood the feeling of pointlessness. After all, there's not much you can do when you're literally unable to show your face to another living person besides those who know where you are, which for me, was one man.

A trusted third party hired by the club to put me into hiding, and then promptly "forget" the address.

Days went by the same as the one before, and each and every night as the sun would sink behind the trees I'd lie there on the grass, watching the stars come out, dreaming of a life back with my club.

This wasn't exactly how I pictured it.

I mean, I didn't expect a fanfare, a huge welcome home party or anything. But I guess I thought I'd fall back into my role as the president's daughter. Except my brother is now the president, and when I ask him why Daddy didn't come to get me, he changes the subject.

A niggle I've been trying to ignore.

A question I'll demand answers for when we arrive in Lincoln at the Fallen Aces mother chapter.

Right now, I just need to focus on the task of getting there with a guy who's making it clear by the daggers he fires my way he's pissed I friend-zoned him. *Yay.*

Let the fun begin.

FIVE

Dog

Fucking stuck-up club princess.

Maybe I laid it on a little thick, but shit, the woman was a fine piece of ass when she wore a shit-ton of makeup and dressed in figure-hugging shit that left nothing to the imagination. Yet pure as the moment she woke up, bare and demure in a baggy sweatshirt? Makes me think all kinds of inappropriate things.

I wasn't lying—I've missed the hell out of her. But shit, I've done a lot of growing up in the last year too, and part of that was realizing what I should have appreciated more when I had it.

I thought I'd lost her, thought she was gone for good. And fuck it all if that didn't tear me apart. Seeing her alive and well, remembering all the things that I love about her that almost pushed us to breaking our friends only rule ... I don't want to be the pussy that misses out a second time.

"Here." I shove my spare helmet her way as she approaches, her brow pinched in a frown.

"Thanks."

She makes a point of grabbing it on the exact opposite side I hold it so there isn't a snowball's chance in hell of our fingers touching.

"Might be a bit big for you." Then again, with an ego like hers ...

"I'll make do."

She lifts the open-facer to her head, sliding it on and promptly losing herself in it as the helmet slides down over her face.

I can't help it. I snort at her predicament.

She whips the damn thing off as though it conspired against her and shoves it back at me. "Fucking hilarious, asshole."

"Hey," I protest, taking it from her and twisting to pack it back in my saddlebag. "I legit thought you might be able to strap it up real tight. Something was better than nothin', right?"

Not as though these assholes told me who we were on the way to get, either. I can't believe Hooch knew she was okay and kept it a fucking secret.

"I guess." She crosses her arms, hip popped and her lips pursed as she scowls down at me.

"You gettin' on or what?"

"Can I trust you not to dump the thing and kill me if I have no helmet?"

I thumb to the patch on my back. "Does that say I'm useless as horse shit at ridin'?"

Her huff of breath sends the dark strands of hair near her face adrift. "I guess not."

"Besides," I say as she lifts her leg and slides it over the back of the seat. "You think King would pick me for the run if he couldn't trust me to get precious cargo like you back in one piece?"

"I'm not precious, and you know I hate it when people say that, so don't," she mumbles, her breath tickling the back of my neck as she adjusts her seat.

I adjust my own to counteract the effect the roll of her hips has on the fella downstairs. *Lord, give me a sign that it's wrong to pursue this a second time.* I glance around as she draws a deep breath, her chest pressing into my back while I look for the thunderbolt that's bound to strike me dead any second.

All I find is Hooch watching us diligently. *Close enough.*

King starts the bike, the crash van coughing to life soon after, signaling it's time to go. I turn the key and push the button to start, trapping my breath in my lungs as Mel sets her hands on my hips in preparation. *Focus on the bike, I remind myself. Pretend she's not even there.* Except I can't. It's my duty as a responsible rider to be aware of her every move. *Fucked. I'm fucked.*

"Do what King tells you, and don't cause trouble," Hooch warns her, stopping beside the bike.

"Yes, brother dearest."

"I'll be in touch when I can."

I turn my head and look at the sad son of a bitch over my shoulder. I've got no idea what's going on here, but I recognize that look: it's the look of a man who's losing something he's only just regained.

I'm pretty sure it's the look I wore when Mom passed. I'm also pretty sure it's how I'd look if Mel were taken away from me again, too.

"Don't worry about me," Mel answers, her hands tightening on my hips. "Spend that call wisely on the one who'll need the reassurance. I know you, and I know you can look out for yourself. She doesn't."

The woman Mel talks about sits awkwardly astride King's bike, her legs stiff and her eyes wide. *Newbie.*

King eases the throttle open, winding his bike through the narrow gap left between the van and the barn door. I lean the bike upright, taking both my weight and Mel's, and kick the stand in.

I don't miss the way her chest expands against my back as she watches her brother shrink in the distance. I also don't miss the subtle pinch of her fingers as her hands clench a little tighter around my hips, sliding together until she rests her hands against the V of my stomach.

She's sad, understandably so, but what I recognize most is the stoic silence of a person who wants to deny it all. Silence not only in her words but in the most telling language of all, her body, as she settles in to the position she holds for the next hour until we pull off the highway for gas.

A club princess with probably the most revealing story to tell. And yet, as the gas flows into my tank, she holds my gaze and says nothing at all.

She doesn't need to say any more.

I get it.
SIX

Mel

Misty rain falls across the light cast by the flood lamp over the yard as we pull into the Lincoln compound. The weather grew progressively worse as we rode, the clouds thickening until they became a dense blanket across what's left of the early dawn light.

I shiver as Dog maneuvers the bike into the garage, my sweatshirt soggy and stuck to my body in places. I'd like to think he would have offered me a jacket, but given the fact his skin is covered in goose bumps, his dark T-shirt soaked, I'd say he didn't even pack one.

Men.

He stops the bike in the wide aisle, allowing me space to get off before he backs it into the lineup. Dagne dismounts ahead of us, King offering her an arm to steady herself. I don't even get that, just an indifferent stare as I try to slip across the wet seat, the damp flesh of my leg sticking to the surface.

"Thanks for the help," I sass, promptly shedding the wet sweater.

I pull the fabric over my head and discover Dog clearly checking out my painfully erect nipples through the light tank I have on. Bunching the sweater in my hands over my chest, I scowl at him and head for the common room.

"What else did you think I'd do?" he calls after me.

I stop midstride and spin on my heel to face the fucker. "Show some goddamn respect."

"I was, by showin' how much I appreciated what you chose to share with me," he quips.

Fuck him and his alluring smirk, the way his clearly defined lips pinch in at the corner, somehow drawing attention to his ridiculously sharp jawline.

Pretty boys are always the worst kind of torture—I know, I had Sawyer after all.

Not again. I'm not getting suckered into the challenge of humbling a jackass a second time.

He chuckles as he starts walking the bike backward, King now standing at my side as he frowns over at Dog.

"Ignore him. You know he's harmless."

"Still a pain in the ass, though."

King nods, eyebrows raised. "Yeah. That he is." He pats me on the arm. "Come on. Come inside and warm up. Sonya can probably find you some dry clothes."

"Thanks, King." He always was one of my favorites. Selfless and more concerned with everyone around him, than his own wellbeing. "I've missed you guys," I admit as we cross through to the hub of the clubhouse.

He stalls, retracing his steps ahead of me to loop an arm around my shoulders and give me a quick hug. "We've missed you too."

His lips press to my head in an adoring big brother type of way as Dog enters from the garage. I peer out from King's embrace, intrigued by the anger in Dog's stare as he walks by. He holds my gaze as I break from King's embrace, twisting his head to keep eye contact until he physically can't anymore.

"So." I clap my hands together, rubbing the palms furiously. "When will my old man get here? Or do I have to wait until I'm back in Texas to see him?"

King sighs, his eyes sad as he looks me over. "I'll get one of the prospects to find Sonya and arrange what you need." He holds his hand out to the side, snapping his fingers. "I need a moment with you first in my office."

Okay. The reasons he'd have to talk with me alone are few, but all I can do is assume it has something to do with Hooch's current situation and the fact he just clean blew off my question about Daddy.

"What size are you, sweetheart?" King asks as a shaven-headed prospect appears at his side.

"Um, an eight I think." I've lost weight considering I haven't touched anything deep fried or overly sugary in so long.

King turns to the young blood, giving him instructions to search for Sonya and have clothes set out in the bathroom upstairs for me. The guy scampers, and King turns his attention back to me. I don't like what I see.

"What's going on, King?" I clasp my arms across my chest; the chill suddenly ten times more intense than it was a moment ago.

He beckons for me to follow and leads us into his office. I oblige—after all, I'm a guest in his house—and take a seat in front of his solid desk. A coat is draped over my shoulders, the fluffy lining warm and inviting.

"Thank you."

King simply smiles briefly, rounding his desk to pull out a short bottle of whiskey and two stainless tumblers. My heart sinks as he pours the two drinks, his brow pinched as he concentrates on the task at hand.

He only drinks this way when he doesn't like what he has to talk about. Why doesn't he like it? What's happened?

"Here."

I accept the offered drop, holding it tight in my quivering fist. "Where's Daddy?"

The realization strikes me like a red-hot hammer to the heart. Despite the differences between us in the last few years, my father loved us girls without compare. If he knew Hooch was going to collect me, he'd be there to see me home, welcome me back. He wouldn't sit idle in Fort Worth and wait for me to come to him; he'd bring the party to me.

"King?"

He sucks in a deep breath, licking his lips before downing his tumbler in two hefty gulps. "I really don't know how to break it to you, baby girl. But I get the feelin' you already know what I'm going to say."

My chin crumples and I choke on my next breath, pulling all manner of faces as I try to compose myself enough to keep my grip on the tumbler. Tears streak my cheeks as I toss the drink back, the burn nothing compared to what erupts inside of me.

"Another," I demand as I hold the tumbler out to King.

He refills the cup, his brow firm.

"Was it him?" I ask with shaky tones. "Carlos? Did he do it?"

I knew when I left that Daddy intended on having a face-to-face sit down with the asshole drug lord. I begged him not to, but when the tyrant had placed a bounty on my head after kidnapping my baby sister, how could I have expected my father to sit idly by and not put up a fight?

King's eyes close; his forefinger and thumb pinch the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, it was him."

Fuck. Fucking fuck. That ... asshole. That cold-blooded fucking monster. My heart stops, stutters, and restarts with painful determination.

"How?" I whisper before smashing the second drink.

"I won't tell you that." King regards me with nothing short of pity, and in that brief yet connected moment I know it was bad.

Really bad.

"It was after I left, wasn't it? He went there to try and get Dana, didn't he?" My voice quivers despite the fact I barely speak above a whisper in an effort to control it.

King nods.

All this time ...

“Dana?” Another missing face from my impromptu welcome home. “He get her too?”

King swallows, his eyes pained as he holds my unwavering gaze.

I don't want to believe it. My head literally can't fathom the fact that while I was holed up like the precious treasure I'm not, *both* my father and sister were taken—no doubt brutally.

I haven't heard anything about my family while I've been kept off the grid; the only contact I received was a box left at the end of the access road twice a week containing food and provisions. I lived in hope, in futile hope that somehow my father had outsmarted the asshole that placed the bounty on my head, and won.

That good prevailed over evil.

Yet it was never to be. We never stood a chance against a man who held no ounce of remorse for the things he did, the consequences he set into action. How could we? How could innocence and love ever withstand the relentless barrage of pain and suffering men like Carlos inflict in their deluded crusade to reach the top?

“Hey,” King croons as he sets his tumbler down on the desk. “Hey.”

I look into his eyes as he slides to his knees, shuffling until he's before me, hands over mine. Only when his steady touch grounds me do I realize how badly I shake.

“Don't hold it in.” He squeezes my hands, imploring me to understand. “Let go of it all: the hate, the anger, the pain. We're here to catch you.”

I wish I could. I want to, so badly. I'd love nothing more than to fall apart and have the people I love cradle me until I felt strong enough to stand on my own again. And yet, I can't. I'm afraid that if I do let all those things he mentioned flow in, that I might never find my way back out of the maze of grief they create.

I'm afraid of losing the last strands connecting me to who I was before all of this.

“Carlos ...?” I crinkle my eyes at the corners, scrutinizing our northern president, searching for a clue.

Hooch said he'd been taken care of, but if he avoided the truth about our family, was he bending the facts on this also?

“He's gone.”

I huff a sharp breath, knocking King's hands away. I know it's unfair, unjust that I'm offloading on him, but that last revelation has me angrier than the news Carlos took my baby sister and daddy from me.

Somebody else closed my door. I didn't get to finalize that chapter of my life, get closure and deal with the hurt at my losses the best way I know how: by channeling the frustration and anger into retribution, penance against the person who stole from me.

I've been robbed of my revenge.

"Tell me what you need," King demands, pushing to his feet.

I shake my head and stare at the photo that hangs behind his desk of the founding members. "I don't know."

What *would* help? What could honestly lessen this ... this shock of hearing my worst nightmares confirmed? I sat out there, in the middle of nowhere, and played this scenario over in my mind. But hearing it brought to life, hearing the words given strength by someone I admire so much? Fuck, it hurts.

"Sawyer did it, right?" I ask, shifting my gaze to the corner of King's desk.

He leans against the front of it, legs crossed at the ankles. "Yeah. Who it always should have been."

Good. The pain Carlos caused that man was unimaginable. I can't think of anyone else I'd relinquish the satisfaction of returning the favor to, either.

"Can I go now?" I avoid King's pity by focusing on making a pattern with my fingers as I lace and unlace them.

"Sure." It's there, in the single word, his regret, his sadness at having to be the one who dumped this on me.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

He stops midway around his desk.

"For burdening you with this." It should have been Hooch. My brother, my last remaining family member, should have been the one to sit me down with the news.

"Go get some rest, Mel," he says quietly. "Make me a list of what you need, and I'll get one of the girls to go out and pick it up for you." He runs his finger across the timber top as he speaks. "I'm takin' you didn't have anything with you?"

Glimpses of the man jolt through my mind, the shock that registered on the agent's face as he realized I'd delivered a fatal shot. "Nope. Didn't really get time to think much about what to pack."

"It gets better," he offers futilely.

Yet, that's not what I want to hear. I don't want somebody to tell me how they moved past their own grief once, how the days will get brighter as time goes by.

I want somebody to justify my anger, the deep resentment that grows like a vine around my heart. I want somebody to be mad with me, to throw a fist to the wall and curse out every fucking deity there is who did nothing to help my family when they needed protection most.

King says nothing further when I drop the jacket and rise from the seat, leaving his office with

more composure than I thought possible. People pass by me in a blur as I head for the stairs that lead up to the living quarters. Life echoes on repeat in my mind, the tense moments before I rode away to my seclusion.

A princess locked in her tower.

The final words I spoke to my father weren't kind, the last thing I said to my sister pointless. What *would* I have said if I had known? I left in a hurry with the naïve assumption that Dana would be okay if I went. In my mind, I was the martyr; leaving everything I loved behind in order to free my family from some fucked up dispute with a man who never cared how it ended, as long as he won.

My foot falters as I crest the top step onto the landing; my toe catches the final riser making me stumble. A sob hiccups from my chest at the pathetic failure. So I tripped? It shouldn't matter. I recovered. I stood strong and made it to the second floor. And yet, it irks me on a deeper level. I screwed up. I made a simple mistake that had the chance at turning a hell of a lot worse. What if I'd fallen down the stairs? What if I'd twisted my ankle trying to recover?

What if I'd never left? Beaten off the nomad sent to take me away from my family and refused to go?

What if?

What if?

My knees give way and I crumple to the floor, right there in the hall, not giving a fuck who sees me in this moment. My chest aches, the pain as my heart shatters so real. I always thought it poetic how people say others can die of a broken heart, and yet, as I clutch at my stomach, groaning as the pain radiates through my core, I believe it: I feel it.

Loss carries an agony like no other.

A million realizations fleet through my mind; the endless list of things I won't have anymore, I won't get to experience.

My daddy'll never walk me down the aisle. And I'll never see him do the same for my baby sister.

I'll never share another full table at Thanksgiving.

Never celebrate another Christmas, laughing as Daddy plays the same clichéd carols and lip-synchs into the top of his beer bottle.

Stupid things like the way he'd wave his arm about when he coughed, or how I would forever be tucking the tag in on Dana's shirts.

"Jesus, girl."

I stick my arm out to fend off his approach, determined even in my most desolate hour that I don't need anyone to save me.

And yet, he forces it away and pulls me to my feet all the same.

"Hey, talk to me." Dog jams his arms beneath my own, stopping me from falling to the floor again.

I stare through blurry eyes at his clear concern and laugh before dissolving into tears once more.

Talk to him. I wish I could. Yet when I urge the words to form, the sentence to construct in my mind, it melts into a black pool of nothing.

They're gone. And what hurts the most is the way in which my loved ones went: painful and terrifying.

I don't need to know the specifics to know that Carlos wouldn't have spared them in the slightest.

"You heard, huh?" He jostles me in his hold, slinging me closer to his broad frame.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, not so much out of a need for *him*, rather out of a need for comfort in whatever form it comes. *

Only by losing my freedom, did I realize I was never free at all.

My father, the president of the Fallen Aces MC, sent me away to save me from a cold-blooded fate handed down by a tyrannical drug lord. Now, over a year later, my brother has come to take me home.

Except it doesn't feel like home anymore.

I'm lost, wandering familiar yet foreign halls as I try to work out what my purpose is in this club. What can I offer the people who sacrificed so much to save me? I need a guiding light, something to get me on the right path. Or someone.

Someone like him.

A cocky, playful ladies man, Dog is nothing like what I thought I'd ever need. But as he strips the colors from his back, and reveals the true brilliance of the ones below, I can't help but fall in love with the overbearing yet guarded man.

He's guaranteed to break my heart, yet here I stand with it in my hands, offering him all I have left.

All that I am.

Maybe I'm not supposed to survive after all?

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