

Chapter 22 (Lachlan): The Opposite Direction

I was a fucked up human being. Knew that and was taking steps to fix myself for two reasons: one, so I could be a better, healthier person and two, so if Wyn ever took me back, I could be the man she needed and could depend on. The man who would give her the love she'd always been looking for.

The man who would never, ever hurt her or let her down again.

I'd pretty much gone through life never understanding normal what, exactly, that term meant. Maybe it's all relative or a matter of perspective, but I swear I never felt more fucking normal than I did during those six weeks I spent with Butcher. I was fucked up, but that man brought new meaning to fucked up

We spent that month and a half together buying properties, businesses and land, getting construction started on a new club house and moving anything that was in our way out of our way. Butcher was like a steam roller, bulldozer and wrecking ball all in one. Something was driving him relentlessly hard and the landowners, business owners and banks learned really quick to sign on the dotted line and not pull any shit with him or attempt to make any last-minute changes or renegotiate.

"This isn't what we agreed to," Butcher would say flatly.

"Well, no," the person sitting across the table would hedge, "but upon further consideration, an extra five thousand seems a more equitable price --"

"I wonder how much your heirs would sell it for," Butcher would say and then fucking smile. I knew the man, and that fucking smile still freaked me out every time it made an appearance.

Given the hypothetical question and the man asking it, the sellers would immediately reconsider and decide the original price was actually more than fair and sign the papers closing the sale. Then, check in hand, they would pretty much sprint from the title company offices.

On the last day Butcher was with me, he got a call just as we were about to take off.

"It's Trap," he said to me before he answered. His face didn't change as he listened to whatever Trap was saying, but I could actually sense the tension rolling off of him once he ended the call. For Butcher, he was wired.

"Everything OK?" I asked cautiously.

I figured there was less than a one percent chance he'd answer, but he surprised me.

"Raine's having the baby."

No inflection, no hint as to what he was feeling. I either had a long-buried death wish or I sensed he was in an unusual mood given the news he'd just received and he probably wouldn't draw one of the multiple guns he carried on him and shoot me in the face.

"Prez, why are you still here in Northridge? Why not get home to her?"

Normally, a personal question of any sort to Butcher could put you in a world of pain at best or get you dead at worst. The silence stretched and stretched until I realized he wasn't going to answer, but he surprised me at last.

"Raine doesn't want me involved in the boy's life or hers. Made that real clear to me."

How he could make a statement like that with no emotion was unreal. He was talking about his woman and his son, but he might as well have been discussing a bag of potato chips. Just that dead, harsh voice delivering unembroidered facts. An undeniable trait of Butcher was his unerring confidence -- he was always sure of himself, always bold and fearless. Now, for the first time in all the years since I'd met him, he was uncertain.

"Do you want to be part of their lives?"

Those odd, silver eyes pierced me, and a large flash of lightning cracked close by. Looking to the sky, I hoped we weren't about to get a rainstorm.

"Doesn't matter. I'm not what they need. Got no idea how to be with a woman or be a father to a baby."

He was scared I realized with sudden insight. The man who knew no fear was actually afraid of something.

"All of us in Mayhem pretty much had shit childhoods, Prez," I said low. "I'm afraid I'll never be good enough for Elowyn. That I'll fail her again somehow, someday. But I also can't give up because I feel right here," and I hit my fist over my heart, "that she and I are meant to be together. Don't understand it, but it won't let me give up so I know I've gotta keep trying."

Those silver eyes narrowed on me. "You done spilling your guts?"

"Yeah," I said, giving him a lift of my chin. An apology for overstepping. He nodded and we were good again.

"Let's go check progress on the construction site."

We killed another couple of hours walking the site for the new club house, listening to a very nervous construction manager explaining what had been done to this point, what progress we would see in the next couple of weeks and when we'd need to make some choices about certain interior features. After that, we checked out the renovations and signage on some of the businesses and buildings we'd bought, finally stopping at the diner the Mayhem now owned for a late lunch and to go over our notes of things that needed to be done.

Butcher was known for putting away his food, at least three times the amount a normal-sized man could eat, but today it sat in front of him, untouched. Having learned my lesson earlier about trying to talk with him, I just ate and didn't say anything. But he did when I was mid-way through my cheeseburger.

"I want to be with Raine. And our boy."

My head lifted, and I waited him out.

"But I'm not what they need."

Butcher never repeated himself. He said something once, and that was enough. Now, twice he'd mentioned he wasn't what Raine and his child needed. Months ago, I wouldn't have been prepared for this conversation, wouldn't have the first fucking clue what to say. In fact, I probably would have grunted acknowledgment of what he said and finished my fucking lunch. Mayhem didn't do discussions about feelings. But after countless books on feelings and childhood traumas and uncomfortable shit like that, I felt maybe I could help. So I waded in slowly.

"Hear me out, Prez, and don't shoot me. There's a point to my questions. Is Raine stupid?"

"No."

"She weak minded? Helpless?"

"No."

"You trust her?"

"Yeah."

"So, maybe you should trust her to know what she wants, let her decide if you're in or you're out."

Two hours later, Butcher was on a chartered flight, heading home to his woman and their baby.

Despite Butcher being around the last six weeks, I was still able to see Elowyn and take her out to dinner several times a week, as much as she'd let me. Fortunately, Butcher had no desire to go to dinner with Elowyn and me, so I didn't have to share my time with her.

I filled her in on everything going on in the town, the businesses we'd be setting up, the properties we'd bought and the club house being built.

Her face closed up at that last part.

"What, Wyn?"

"The club house. When will you be filling it with club girls?"

"Won't be. Told Butcher if I'm prez here, no club girls. The only women allowed in the club house will be ol' ladies, wives or girlfriends."

"And what if you're not prez?"

I shrugged. "Then Butcher would be, but I don't think he'll be moving here and don't think he'd allow club girls either, in any case. I think he's going to stay where he is."

"So he agreed to your idea of no club girls? What if the brothers moving here complain? Would he override your decision?"

"No. He wouldn't. Like I said, Butcher's never been a big fan of them. So he'll back my decision and say it's whatever I decided. And I decided this chapter wouldn't have club girls. Period."

She poked her food around on her plate for a few minutes. "Lachlan, do you ever wish..."

My hand reached out and took her hand. "Do I ever wish what?"

Her eyes met mine. "Do you ever wish we could just meet now and not have all that baggage from our past?"

I pulled her hand to my lips. "I wish I'd never hurt you, Elowyn. I wish that every damn minute of every damn day. Just know that. But I'd never wish away any minute of knowing you. I can't. Despite how ugly I made it, despite the way I hurt you, I had you in my life and in my heart. You leaving finally forced me to be better so I could become a man you'd want back in your life and I could have the chance to love you the way I should have all along."

"I feel like that's...not entirely impossible now," she said slowly in a measured tone.

I had to break that sentence apart, and when I realized what she was saying, my heart fucking skipped a few beats. I wanted to get on my knees for this woman....but I was afraid she'd think I was proposing marriage again and she'd run screaming in the opposite direction.

Instead, I grabbed both of her hands to tether myself to her.

"Wyn, I've never forgotten that night when you told me you didn't like my version of love. You were right not to because it was shit and I was shit. But I swear to you, you give me another chance and you'll see that my version of love now is all about you and what you need and who I should be as a man who loves his woman more than anything else in his life."