



*Merry
Christmas*

*With love, 
The Love &
Gentry families*

DEACON

“Princess! Where you at?” I call out, making my way into the kitchen when I hear her and the twins. Stopping in the doorway I lean against the jamb and cross my arms, the smile instantaneous as I take in the scene in front of me. J-Roc, as we’ve taken to calling Jameson Rocco, and Gigi are sitting at the Island eating pasta, filling the air with their laughs as Frankie dances around the kitchen for them. The song ends and the Princess takes a bow to the erupting applause of her little audience.

“Bravo, mommy! Bellissima!” The twins cheer in unison. At nearly three their Italian is better than mine will ever be.

“You going to show them how well you twerk next?” I ask, startling them all.

“Daddy!” J-Roc screams, just as he does every fucking thing else.

“Ciao, papa!” Gigi says in her sweet little voice, really embracing her Italian roots lately.

“Hello, my Loves.” I greet and with raised eyebrows look over to Frankie mouthing, “Papa?” She just shrugs and smiles, wrapping her arms around my waist and tipping her face up for a kiss.

“I didn’t hear you come in, baby.”

“You were a little busy.” I tease before kissing her softly. Once, twice and then more deeply because I can’t help it. I’m reminded that we have an audience when Gigi starts yelling at her brother to use his “mapkin.” The little Princess can speak Italian but can’t manage napkin. Unbelievable.

Frankie pulls away and goes over to wipe J-Roc’s messy face and hands as I scoop the clean kid up and rain kisses all over her face and nibble on her neck, making her squeal. This shit right here, this is what it’s all about. A smokin’ hot wife and two beautiful, somewhat rotten kids. All those douche bags saying they don’t want to settle down with one woman, have a family...they’re the chumps.

“Oh I meant to tell you. I called Jules. Her, Crew and the kids are coming for Christmas Eve tomorrow. Since our dads and everyone else are out of town ’til Christmas morning, this will be nice for all of us. I’m sure Mav told you they’re in town for the foundation opening and the fundraiser you guys are helping with?”

“He didn’t tell me they were in town yet, no. That’s cool though.” I tell her. And it was. Crew Gentry is an awesome guy, a hell of a fighter. We’d been friends for a long time. I was glad shit was finally going his way. He’d been a little lost and reckless before losing his brother and then a little more so after. Until he had to man up for his family, for his girls. Yeah, my friend and I had more in common than most.

“You told them there wouldn’t be any meat right? Crew’s a meat guy, Princess. We should probably have some meat for him.” My ploy to try and trick her into making some fucking meat didn’t fly.

“You’re not getting meat, Deac. You never do, and neither will Crew. And could you say meat one more time?” She laughs.

Doing my best to appear insulted, “I didn’t mean me! I would never break tradition and go against your wishes.” I bullshit. I’m about to lay it on thick when a thought occurs to me. “Wait. Is Will coming too?”

“I think so. I invited him to come with them. Why?” Frankie asks, puzzled.

“Uninvite him.” Putting a squirming Gigi down I watch as she and her brother race out of the kitchen into the family room to destroy shit.

“Why in the world would I uninvite Will, Deacon?” Her brows are drawn, tone confused.

“I think you like him.” Arms crossed over my chest, “Really like him.” My eyes narrow as I watch the realization of what I mean cross her face.

Frankie laughs at me, straight up laughs. “Have you seen him? Of course I like him.” She admits, unfazed by my glower. “Have you ever noticed how much he looks like Julian Edelman?” My wife asks all nonchalant like.

“What the fuck do you know about football, Princess?” I snort.

“Not much, but I sure as hell know Julian Edelman.”

The fuck?

“You keep saying shit like that and you’re gonna get fucked. I’ll have to remind you of who you’re married to.” I warn, reeling her in snug to me, cuts to curves. Frankie just smiles up at me.

“Promises, promises, Deac. Now eat your dinner, while I put the twins in the bath. It’s bed time...for all of us. I’ll bring dessert.” She purrs suggestively, giving my ass a pat as she strolls out of the room like she didn’t just make me hard and leave me standing in the middle of my kitchen.

Fuck dinner, all I need is dessert. I follow after her to help with the twins. The faster we get them clean and in their beds. The faster I can get my wife dirty and in ours.

CREW

I stretch my legs, working through the pain. It’s a part of my nightly ritual, one that keeps me from tightening up like a board. I pause mid-motion when Julia’s voice trickles from the adjoining room. “That’s right, Michael. Tomorrow you get to meet new friends,” Jules whispers. “Go to sleep, baby boy, and tomorrow will get here even faster.”

Tomorrow. What a concept.

There was a time in my life when I didn’t know if tomorrow would come. Shit, there were many times in my life I didn’t care if tomorrow came or not. But these days? There aren’t enough tomorrows. Every morning when I wake up, I give a prayer of thanks for another day with my family. That one is followed by another, being a selfish dickhead and asking for another because life with Julia, Ever, and Michael is the things dreams are made of. And I’m living the fucking dream.

The sheets rustle and the box springs squeak as Jules finishes tucking in our children.

Our children.

Sometimes the realization hits me so damn hard I can't breathe. I'm always grateful for the chance to amend my wrongs, or try to because God knows there are a lot of them to be fixed, but there are times, too, that I feel so ... guilty. Things like this—a good wife, brilliant, healthy children, a second chance at life—they don't happen to assholes like me. They're not supposed to anyway. They're supposed to happen to the nice guys, the ones that check off all the stupid boxes along the way. The good guys. The respectable ones.

Guys like Gage.

I miss my brother so fucking much. It gets worse at times like birthdays or holidays, things I wish he could see. I take Ever to the cemetery a couple times a month; it's kind of our thing. She hangs out, dusts off his stone, and I tell her stories about the man that will always be her father, too. I'll never let her forget that, or him.

The door pulls shut. Julia's eyes meet mine, giving me a quick once-over and reading me like a book. As always.

"What's wrong, Crew?"

I shake my head, motioning for her to come to me. She pads across the hotel room floor and I pull her onto my lap. Holding her close, breathing in the scent of her perfume mixed with Mr. Bubbles bubble bath from Michael, I know that while I may not understand it, this is exactly where I'm supposed to be. It's where I was always supposed to be, holding the only girl I've ever loved.

The past couple of years has made me question a lot of things. There's been a little bitterness, a little frustration, a lot of anger. I've watched Jules go through more than any one person ever should between Everleigh and me. Yet, in the midst of the pain and unfairness, I've watched her be the strongest person I've ever known. She's fought for Ever's health, pushing the doctor's and asking questions and never letting the ball drop. Jules has pushed me, tenderly, sometimes, and with a sharp tongue when I needed that, too. She's my little soldier and I hope, eventually, I can be half as much to her as she has been to me.

"You okay?" She pulls back, brushing my hair out of my eyes. She tries to read me again, searching my face for one of my "tells", as she calls them—little ticks that tell her what I'm feeling. She says I've had the same ones since I was a kid.

"I've never been better."

She plants a sweet kiss to my forehead. "Good. Ever is waiting on you to tell her a bedtime story."

"What am I going to do when she decides one day she's too cool for bedtime stories?"

"You're going to cry," she laughs.

"I can't deal with it, Jules. I might just force her to let me tell her a bedtime story until college. You know, withhold her allowance or something."

"You can try. But, baby, you do realize that one day, some boy is going to want to take her on a date—"

"Not happening."

"And," she continues, ignoring my interruption, "there's a better than probable chance that one of those boys is going to be some hot-shot kid at the gym."

I scramble to my feet, setting her on her own, the fastest I've been since my fight with Davidson. Julia giggles and watches me with mischief in her eyes.

"Not happening, Jules. There's no way my baby girl is going to fuck around with some cocky little fucker from the street that thinks he's this hardass. Some guy ..."

"Some guy like you?"

There's so much truth to her words that it hits me square in the chest. Before I can declare that she's never setting foot in a gym again, that I don't care how much she loves wrestling, that I don't care how good my daughter's Head Outside Single is getting, the door to the suite pops open with a thud.

"Well, hello," Will halfway slurs, stumbling in the room. He swipes his hand twice at the door before it connects and he pushes it closed. "What are we doing this fine evening in the Marriott in downtown Chi-cago?"

"We've put the kids to bed," Julia admonishes him. "Be quiet."

"Oh. Right." He clamps his hand across his mouth, his eyes as wide as plates. "Shhh."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah. Shut your suck."

"Ah!" he laughs, pointing his finger at me and nearly losing his balance in the process. "That's funny. You using my ... thing. Phrase? Words? Come on, Jules. What am I trying to say?"

"You're trying to say you need to sleep off however many you've drunk tonight," she sighs with a smile. "Tell me there's not a girl in the hallway."

"There's not," he says, an emphasis on the last sound. "But, did you know how many bea-u-tiful women there are in Chicago? Because I did not. But there are a lot. Like, a lot-lot."

Julia cringes. She and Macie are good friends and I know she feels in the middle in this last little breakup. Macie did what Macie does. She laid down the law. Will did what Will does. He cracked a joke and walked away.

The two of them are a thorn in my fucking side. Well, Macie's not and I respect her for trying to corral my best friend, but when she pushes it just shoves him to me and I'm ready to kick him in the ass myself.

“Let’s talk numbers.” I cross my arms over my chest. This is a conversation we touched on before our plane took off and one that Julia is worried about. While I tried to convince her I have Will on the straight and narrow—well, Jules knows Will. So maybe if I bring it up now, we’ll all be on the same page.

“I’m not good at math,” he snorts.

“How many hot women do you think live in Chicago?” I ask.

“Just guessing?”

“Yeah, just guessing.”

He furrows his brow. “Am I supposed to count Jules since she’s technically in Chicago now?”

“I’m going to fucking kill you, Will.”

“Easy,” he says, holding his hands out in front of him. “It’s the holidays. It’s the time of love.”

“Speaking of love,” I say, “you do know Deacon’s wife is one-hundred percent off limits, right?”

“Yeah, Crew. So I’ve heard.”

“No. I’m fucking serious. You fuck with me all the time about Jules, but don’t even crack a joke about Frankie. Deac will bust your mouth before you get the sentence out and I’ll be damned if I’m getting in the middle of the Love brothers.”

“Is she that hot?”

Drool nearly drips down the side of his inebriated face, just like it did when I told him Frankie was a dancer. It’s not boding well for Christmas Eve dinner tomorrow.

Julia huffs beside me, setting off towards him. Her finger is jabbing through the air, as serious as Jules gets. But the grin on her face takes away from the ferocity I think she’s trying to bring to the table.

“Frankie is one of my very best friends and if you dare say something stupid—”

“Oh, like I ever do that!”

“Will, so help me God ...” she laughs.

He sticks his arm around her neck and turns to me. “I’ll be good. I promise.”

“Have you heard from Macie?” Jules asks.

Will drops his arm from around her and groan. He doesn’t answer. Instead, he moseys his way across the room and into his bedroom and out of sight.

Jules comes over to me and rests her head on my arm. I pull her into my side. “He’ll behave. Trust me.”

I know he will. I have faith in him. Because, at the end of the day, he's always had my back.

DEACON

Christmas Eve, my wife has the Christmas music playing, and the house smells so damn good. I'm about to dip some bread into the simmering pot on the stove when the doorbell rings making me jump like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, or in this case, in the sauce.

"Deacon, can you get that please?" Frankie calls from upstairs.

"Got it, Princess." I yell just as the twins come flying through the kitchen, racing me to the door.

"They're here! They're here!" They scream. Because that's the only fucking volume they know.

"Shh, shhh, you'll scare them away, you animals." I say, laughing. That shuts them both up. They're so damn excited to meet Michael and Ever. The only kids in the family, they're stuck with adults a lot of the time. Swinging the door wide to greet them my smile slips a little when I see Will. Handsome bastard. Before I have time to give him a proper glare down the twins are pushing their way between my legs to greet our guests. The kids immediately take off running like they've known each other all their lives, for who the fuck knows where. Allowing them in and out of the cold I shut the door on the snow and wind.

"Crew! What's up my brotha?" I ask offering my hand and then pulling him in for a hug. "You look good, man. Not as good as your beautiful wife, but whatever." I smirk as he glowers at me. Laughing, I reach past him for Jules. "Come give me some sugar. Quick, before Frankie comes down here." She giggles and slaps my chest.

"It's good to see you, Deacon. Thanks for having us." Julia says, giving me a peck on the cheek making Crew growl low in his throat. Before I can give him shit about it he cuts in.

"Oh, hey Frankie! Have you met my cousin, Will?" That motherfucker. Now it's Crew's turn to hit me with a smirk of his own.

"Well played, you dick."

"That's enough you guys." Frankie's raspy voice is full of humor as she pushes past me to envelope Jules in a hug. "I've missed you, woman. I'm so glad you could come."

"I've missed you! Thanks for the invite. I was afraid I'd have to spend the day with these two," Julia jerks her thumb over at Crew and Will, "In the hotel while Ever and Michael asked for the millionth time how Santa was going to find them."

"Where are the kids?" Frankie asks, looking around the foyer.

"They all hauled ass the moment I opened the front door. Probably in the toy room." She nods and turns to Crew.

"Hey stranger. You clean up nice."

Crew snorts, "So do you, Mrs. Love." He gives, Frankie a hug as I take Julia's coat from her and greet Will.

"Long time no see, man." I tell him, refraining from squeezing his hand too hard. Will being Will, he just chuckles at me and smiles.

"Why you mad dogging me, Deac? I haven't even properly introduced myself to your wife yet." He grins wider and drops my hand. Turning to Frankie, "It's great to finally meet you, Frankie. They told me you were hot but they didn't say you were wicked hot." Will says, bravely.

I glance at Frankie when she giggles. The fuck? Pulling her hand out of his I push her behind me.

"Alright Casanova. Give me your fucking jacket and stop touching my wife. And don't call her hot." I warn.

"Wicked hot." He retorts.

I close my eyes and shake my head. 'I will not hit my friend's cousin. I will not hit my friend's cousin.'

Opening my eyes again I see that they're all grinning like a bunch of assholes. They're loving this. "Just get in the fucking house, yeah?" Snatching his coat from him I hang them all in the hall closet as I follow behind everyone into the living room to where Frankie has all kinds of little appetizers and snacks set out.

"I'm gonna go stir the sauce and check on the kids, you want to get drinks for the guys, Jules?"

Julia agrees and the three of us watch them walk into the kitchen. I'm lost in thought, admiring the sway of Frankie's ass in her little black skirt, her heels clicking on the wood floor. I turn to Crew and Will to say something when I notice Will also admiring my wife's ass. "Dude, are you looking at my girl's ass?" I ask incredulously. He glances my way quickly.

"What? No. I was watching Julia's—" He clamps his lips shut when Crew pins him with a glare. He's saved from a tag team when the kids come tearing ass through the room yelling excitedly.

"Yo! Monkey! Slow down." Crew says, beaming. No real heat in his words.

"Sorry, daddy. The boys were chasing us." Ever replies, cheeks flushed, smile wide.

Our eyes meet over her head and the fear in his eyes has to reflect the fear in mine at the mere mention of boys chasing our little girls. Jesus fuck, we're screwed.

"Why don't you take Ever into the kitchen, Gigi, and help her mom bring out the drinks. Boys, go play with trucks or something." I suggest. Anything to separate them for the moment. They scatter and I look over at Crew and he nods in approval.

Will whistles softly through his teeth and plops down on the couch. "You guys are in trouble when those two are older."

Crew and I glare down at him as we take our seats around the coffee table. “I may have to kill your cousin on Christmas Eve.” I deadpan.

“I might fucking help you.” Crew tells me.

We reach out and bump fists without taking our eyes off of the Julian fucking Edelman look alike sitting in my living room.

CREW

“So, how ya been, Deacon? How’s Mav?”

Deacon leans back in his oversized recliner, the playfulness now gone.

“We’re good. Real good. It’s been a rough couple of years, a lot of changes ...” He watches his son barrel through the room, the spitting image of Sonny. A look crosses his face that reminds me of what I feel when I look at my children—a feeling of pride, of button-bursting love, of watching one tiny human embody traits of so many people you admire. I can’t look at Ever or Michael and not see myself, my Ma, Jules ... and Gage. Sometimes one of the kids will look at me and it’ll be so much like my brother I can’t breathe. You can’t put a price on that and I know Deacon feels the same way about little Jameson.

“But you know how that goes, Crew,” Deac says, pulling his attention back to me. “If anyone knows how to stick and move, it’s you, my man.”

We exchange a look that only the two of us can understand.

Two men.

Two fighters.

Two beasts that have had our lives turned upside-down, spun on their heads, and we did what fighters do—we took the hits, rolled with the punches, and came out on top.

“Stick and move,” I grin. “Yeah, that’s one way to put it. I’d have preferred to have been stuck a little less.”

Deacon snorts. “No shit. We’ve been shot more than our fair share.”

“But look at us now. It’s a good view from this side.”

“I’d say you both have a good view when you ...” Will suddenly seems to realize exactly where he’s sitting. “Yeah, let’s just pretend I didn’t talk.”

“Yeah. Let’s,” Deac glowers.

“Just so you both know,” Will starts again and raises his hands as Deacon gives him another warning glance, “I give you guys shit. I know. It’s what I do. But for the record, I admire the hell out of both of ya.”

I try not to crack a smile at my cousin. I’ve been letting him run off at the mouth for a couple of weeks now, let him use the couch in the basement when he gets hammered and doesn’t want to go home alone and Macie won’t answer his calls. I only do it because I know why Will’s acting the fool—he’s scared shitless.

His antics are him proving to himself that he’s still got it. That he can pull in the pussy, prowling the streets if he so chooses. It’s normal behavior for a guy that’s getting serious about a girl for the first time. And it’s no surprise to anyone that’s seen him around Macie, or heard him talk while in a drunken stupor about her, that she’s got him by the balls. She’s a cutie, I’ll give him that, but that’s not what has his balls in a knot. It’s her game right back at him. Her refusal to let him fuck with her. She’s playing him like a fiddle and he doesn’t understand the song that’s being played. But he’s learning and, if I’m not mistaken, that song will end up sounding a lot like the wedding march.

“You admire me, huh?” Deacon smirks. “Good to know.”

“Yeah,” Will says, “don’t let it go to your head or anything, but you’re a good guy. When you called after the Davidson fight ... that meant a lot to us all. You’re a class act.”

Deacon seems surprised at Will’s profession. He starts to say something when Jules walks in, Gigi at her side, with drinks.

“Here you boys go!” Julia hands a drink to Will and then to me, kissing my cheek. “How ya feel, babe?”

She knows the trip has been hard on me, but she also knows it’s one I wouldn’t miss. Her foundation, The EnGage Foundation, has caught on in different cities around the country. Fighters from different disciplines have opened their own version of the charity in four cities so far; Chicago will be number five. This one will be dedicated to Sonny Love.

“Yeah, Crew,” Deacon says, springing forward like a man that just remembered his manners. “Shit! Do you need anything, man? Are you comfortable?”

“I’m fine. Relax,” I laugh, squeezing my wife’s hand. “I’ll be better when I get some of whatever your wife is cooking in my stomach. Man, that smells amazing.”

“Frankie can cook. Almost as well as she fucks.” He turns immediately to Will. “No commentary, Edelman.”

“What the fuck?” Will laughs.

“Don’t ask.” Deacon stands and shakes his head. “Let’s go find my wife and see if it’s ready.”

“It is. I was coming to get you,” Jules says, grabbing my hand and going through the motions of pulling me to my feet. Of course it doesn’t really do anything—she doesn’t weigh enough to do shit—but I let her think it does.

Deacon leads the way into the kitchen, grabbing Jameson and Michael by the back of their shirts as they fly by. He tucks them each under an arm, much to their delight. Will follows, tickling Michael's feet. I wrap an arm around the love of my life and pull her into me.

"I love you, Mrs. Gentry," I whisper against her lips.

"I love you, too, Crew. So much."

DEACON

Frankie and Julia are putting food on the table as we all enter the room. Bowl after bowl, her and Jules tote to the table as us men try to wrangle the kids. Gigi has latched on to Will, my girls have both lost their damn minds, so he's strapping her into her booster seat as Crew and I tend to our boys. Ever bounces off to see if she can help the women. We decided to forgo the formal dining room tonight and eat family style in the kitchen.

"Holy shit look at all this food!" Crew says as he sits gingerly next to Michael.

"My girl is Italian. I don't think they know how to cook small meals." I laugh.

"She cooks like this all the time and I'm moving in." Will says as he begins filling his plate. He doesn't notice the narrowed eyes drilling into the top of his head until Crew chuckles under his breath. He looks up into my hostile gaze, "What? Like a roommate. Ya know, I'm starting to think you're afraid I can steal your wife." He cracks with a smirk.

"Like hell, Edelman." This only makes him smile wider.

"She thinks I look like Edelman doesn't she? So ya been talking about me, huh?"

"Holy shit, Will. Are ya trying to get your teeth knocked out?" Crew asks him, barking out a laugh. "I told ya, I'm not stepping in to save ya. I'll be the one yelling YAHTZEE this time."

"Yahtzee?" I ask confused.

"Just a little fight in a bar one night where instead of helping this asshole over here sat drinking his beer calling out Yahtzee when teeth went flying."

We all bust out laughing at that. Will almost shooting beer out of his nose making the kids join in on the hysterics.

"What in the world is going on over here?" Jules asks as she sets the last plate on the table, kissing Crew on the head as she takes her seat next to him.

"Do we even want to know?" Frankie jokes as she sits down to my right. At least her and Will are separated by the twins.

"Just man business ladies." Crew winks at Jules when she looks at him with squinty eyes.

“Well that’s enough “man business” let’s eat.” Frankie says, putting food on J-Roc’s plate while Gigi giggles over something that Ever is saying to her from across the table.

My boy Crew and I, we’ve lost so damn much but as I look around this room, cheesy Christmas music mixing with the excited voices of our kids, the happy and content smiles of our women, even the stupid pretty boy mug of Will, and I’m thankful for all that we’ve gained. Maybe we had to lose big to win big. Maybe nobody fucking knows the answer or the why’s but I know that what we have now I wouldn’t trade for a million bucks. I also know that all of this can be taken away in the blink of an eye and that neither of us will ever take what we have for granted again. That’s one thing we’ve learned over the last couple years of getting our asses handed to us, testing our Stick and move at every turn.

“Hey, where’d you go?” Frankie asks softly, her blues searching my face.

“Nowhere, Princess. I’m here. Just thinking about what a lucky bunch of fuckers we are.” I punctuate those very true words by grabbing up her hand and laying a kiss to my spot.

“Even though there’s no meat?”

She jokes just as Crew says, “Frankie, are you a vegetarian or some shit? Where’s the meat?”

“I was just gonna ask the same question.” Will adds around a mouthful of lasagna.

“Oh my god, can you guys all stop with the meat?” She pins me with a glare. “Did you put them up to this?”

Laughing I put my hands up in surrender, “I didn’t say shit. I told you Crew was a meat man.”

Jules snorts delicately, catching herself when Crew turns to her with wide eyes, fork poised in front of his open mouth.

“Sorry, it just sounded funny.” She says, trying to stop the smile taking over her face and failing miserably.

“You knew about this didn’t ya?” He accuses. When she shrugs nonchalantly he shakes his head. “You’re supposed to be on my team, not Frankie’s.” Crew feigns hurt. Which just makes her lose it all together and break out in full on laughter, my wife and the kids joining in.

“Now that’s a team I’d like to be on. The Jules and Frankie team. Where do I sign up?” Will cuts in with an eager smile.

I growl just as Crew groans and yells out, “YAHTZEE!”

CREW

A fire is burning in the fireplace, a family of little stockings hung across the mantle. Frankie has Christmas Carols playing through the PA system just likes she has since we walked in the door. Although now, instead of Jingle Bells and the happy shit, she’s got some softer stuff playing.

Bing Crosby croons through the speakers as we spread out in the Love's living room. Deacon and Frankie are curled up in an oversized recliner, Deacon's arms around her waist in a way that can only be him saying, 'mine'. It makes me laugh because I know exactly how he feels. When you find the right girl and convince her to love you, she's the center of your world and you'll pull every punch necessary to keep it that way.

My own girl is leaned against me, our hands interlocked and sitting on my lap. Ever and Gigi are coloring pictures beneath the tree while the two wild boys are tearing up the playroom. Their laughter drifts into the room and it's the perfect addition to this picture-perfect evening. It's exactly what the holidays should be.

There are some gifts around the Love tree and I think back to the carefully wrapped presents stowed away in the closet of the hotel room. This has been the first year Jules and I have been able to be a little freer with our money at Christmastime. Now that I'm getting coaching jobs and some commentary work and shit, we've been able to get out of a lot of our bills. Things are finally a little comfortable, but we've decided not to change much from how we normally operate. Ever and Michael are getting a few gifts and, of course, I got something for Jules. But I don't want Christmas turning into a department store holiday for our family. As long as I'm around, it'll be about the things that matter: faith and family.

I take a sip of the coffee Frankie made to go along with her massive dessert spread and catch Will leaned against the wall, his fingers flying over his phone. I know that look.

"Hey, Will. You alright, man?" I ask.

He doesn't look up, lost in whatever he's texting Macie. I don't have to ask, I know that's what he's doing. That furrowed brow, the intensity in his face gives it away. A man only looks like that when he's dealing with his girl—the girl. Not a chick from the bar. Not a girl from the crowd after a fight. The girl, the one that has your heart in one hand and your nuts in the other. The one you can't imagine living without. That's Macie for Will, just like Jules is mine and Frankie is Deac's. Will just hasn't put it together yet, or maybe he has and is fighting it. We all do that at some point. He'll come around and he'll get the girl because Will's a good guy. And Macie's not dumb.

"Will?" Julia asks, raising her head off my shoulder.

"Yeah?" He looks up and notices me watching him. "You okay, Crew?"

I smile. "Yeah. I'm fine. How are you?"

"Good, good ..." He looks at his phone again and then back to me. Just as quickly, his eyes shift to Julia. "Can I ask ya something, Jules?"

"Sure."

"It's Christmas Eve, you know. And it's not too late yet. And if I could, you know, get back to Boston tonight ..." His throat bobs with a forced swallow.

"You want to go home to Macie?"

The grin that sweeps over his lips is undeniable. “Yeah.”

“If you can get a flight, then go,” Julia tells him. “I know you were going to stay for the opening and I appreciate that—”

“I feel like such a fuck for even saying anything.”

“No, Will. Don’t.” Julia sits up straight, her motherly tone taking over. It always makes me laugh when she parents Will. “You have done so much for our family over the past few months. Without you, we wouldn’t have made it.”

Will’s cheeks turn the same color as the fire truck Michael pushes through the living room.

“I mean it,” Jules stresses. “You have been there through it all. I’ve cried on your shoulder, bossed you around. You’ve taken Ever to treatments, made Crew get his ass out of that bed so many times, taken the brunt of our bad days ...” Her eyes start to water and she stands and pads across the room. Pulling my cousin and best friend into a hug, my chest swells with pride.

There’s not a lot in my life I’m proud of, but my family is one. I have the best fucking wife in the world, the most loyal friend out there. I have the Love’s, a family that, as cheesy as it sounds, loves in the very same way we do. It’s about family with the people in this room, about the simple things in life. Deacon and I, and Will, too, for that matter, love just the way we fight—with everything we have. And it’s Will’s turn find that.

“Will?” I say, grabbing his attention.

“Yeah?” He pulls away from Jules as she wipes her eyes.

“Get the fuck out of here. Go spend the holiday with your girl.”

“Are you absolutely sure? Because man, if you need me—”

“No offense,” Deacon interrupts, “but I’m right here. If Crew needs anything, he’s got me. Frankie. Mav will be showing up anytime. So go. Get some pu—”

The words fall quickly as Frankie shoves an elbow into his side.

Will nods, understanding the sentiment. He looks to Julia again because this is really her project. This is her brainchild, her way of honoring all of us—me, Ever, and Gage, and there’s little doubt that if Will reads one wrong sign, he’ll stay.

“Will. Go,” Julia says, “We’ll be fine.”

“I’ll pick you up at the airport,” he promises, turning to look at me. “And if you need anything, call me. I’m just—”

“Get the hell outta my house, Edelman!” Deacon bellows, making us all laugh.

Will turns a shade of red. "Okay. Uber can have a car here in three minutes, it says."

I lift off the couch and get steady on my feet. Will pulls me into a hug.

"I love ya, Crew. Merry Christmas."

"Be safe. Call me if you have any problems."

He nods and pulls back, turning to Deacon. "I'd come and hug you, but I'm afraid you'll stick a knife in me if I get that close to your wife."

"Smart move," Deacon laughs.

Frankie starts to stand and Deacon pulls her right back on his lap. "Sorry but not sorry, Princess."

We all burst into laughter as a horn sounds out front. Will makes quick work of saying goodbye to Ever and Michael and is out the door in a flash.

"He's adorable," Frankie says, looking at Jules. "Seriously adorable."

"Not feeling it, Princess," Deacon warns.

Julia laughs and takes her place by my side again. "Will's a goofball, but I have to say that, without him, we wouldn't be here right now. He's been a Godsend."

I wrap my arm around my wife and kiss her on the forehead. "You're a Godsend."

"We're lucky bastards," Deacon says, catching my eye over the top of Jules' head. "Lucky fucking bastards."

DEACON

Long after I helped carry Ever and Michael out to Crew's rented SUV and saw our friends off, Frankie and I sat enjoying the quiet. The crackling fire and Silent Night the only sounds in the room.

"You awake, Princess?" I murmur, against her hair, pressing a kiss to the coconut scented strands.

"Mmmm, barely." She answers sleepily. "It was a good day, wasn't it? It was so good to see Jules and Crew so happy." I can hear the smile in her voice.

"It was perfect. You outdid yourself, Mrs. Love. And I'm glad that you invited them. We could all use a little more family around." Shifting so I can pull her across my lap I sweep the hair off her forehead, hiding those blues. "Crew looks good, strong. A lot of that has to do with Jules and the kids, having Will in his corner. He's a fighter, tough as shit but without that support..." My voice trails off. Crew's struggles are different from my own but like him, none of my fight would matter without Frankie and the twins. "Can't go to war without backup, baby." With my girl wrapped in my arms I feel the truth in those words.

"I'll always fight with you, Deac. And for you." Frankie says as she leans back, head cradled against my shoulder, a soft smile on her beautiful face. Lifting her hand I place a kiss on her wrist and then dip lower to steal a kiss from my hot as fuck wife.

"Oh yeah? Why don't we go upstairs and fight?" I nuzzle into her neck nipping at the sensitive skin exposed by the low cut of her pajamas.

"You wanna take me to the mats, Deacon?" She giggles, arching and giving me access, laying across my chest now.

"More like the mattress." I say, making us both laugh at my lame attempt at sexy.

"Marriage making you soft, Mr. Love?" My wife goads, batting her eyelashes at me in the most bullshit attempt at innocence.

Snatching her hand I drag it down my front, never breaking eye contact and tuck it into the front of my sweats. "Nothing soft about me, baby." Her gaze is full of heat, her body pliant against me, her hands soft and her touch pure fucking magic as she strokes over my cock. Lids have at look down at my girl and watch as she works me over. Hips lifting, pushing more firmly into her hand. She lets slip a sexy little moan.

"Mmmmm, we're not going to make it to the bedroom." Frankie purrs as she drags her self up my length to straddle me. Her night shirt bunched at her waist, hardened nipples straining against the paper thin material. I stack my hands and watch as she pulls her pretty lace panties to the side and glides the head of my cock through her wetness, aligning us and then finally inching down slowly. Tortuously slow.

"Jesus fuck. Princess, don't play. I want inside." I groan as she raises up and glides back down, still teasing the both of us. She looks down at me, a wicked little grin flirting with her lips.

"Oh no, baby. Just the tip, this is part of your Christmas present Deac." Frankie plants her hands on my chest so she can push herself back up bit before she can I grab her hips, my fingers curling into the swell of her ass and thrust hard and deep.

"Fuck just the tip, Princess." My voice is rough with need. "Merry fucking Christmas to me."

On a contented sigh she says, "Merry Christmas indeed, my Love."