

# Getting It Right

By

Saoirse Roghan

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# Chapter One

A man's past catches up eventually. Chances are it collides with a less than stellar present. This, apparently, was his moment.

A slab of tundra teetered, calved, from the glacier where Walker Northrup kept his heart in check. He closed the commander's door with precise care and moved across the outer office, attempting to *not* look like someone on the verge of going postal. He shoved out of the office, a guided missile seeking the shelter of the impersonal hallway. Armed Forces training took care of the need to travel the long hallways to the doors at a sane pace. He ignored the salute of the poor son of a bitch on door duty. Outside, the fierce Coronado sun had him reaching for his shades. Freeing the scream of pure, hot, rage welling in his throat was a no go; he'd wake up in leather cuffs in sickbay.

Spec Ops folks check their gear; your life depends on it. So Walker's gaze inspected the large bike and then he swung his leg over, firing the engine before his ass was in the saddle. He grabbed the helmet, left the strap dangling, and walked the bike out of the parking slot. He gunned for the front gates.

No surprise to him when two bikes moved up to either side. He knew damn well there'd be more at his back. The engine hummed. Missions went to shit. Missions failing after leaking into the public eye inevitably garnered a spectacular investigation; eight highly trained men sat around wasting time and money. Wasn't there always a goat that caught the shit?

Apparently, it was his turn. Fair enough, he'd been in charge.

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Long after the bitch of rush hour traffic faded, the main highway left far behind, Walker slowed way down and turned the machine into a driveway, which further deteriorated into a rutted path. The condition of the road was one of many ways he protected his lair. His wingmen cursed more from habit and reputation than any real complaint. Walker rounded the last sharp curve and a door at the bottom of the house yawned, lifting clean, and then holding.

Eight bikes pulled in. Eight SEALs on a team.

Walker ignored them. He stalked to the kitchen, set his helmet down and methodically

removed weapons and wallet from his person, running the digital code to open the smaller safe sitting on the counter – the large one housing the majority of his weapons was in the basement. He rolled his shoulders, and rotated his neck, causing pops from constricted vertebrae now loosened.

The team would perform the same routine. Walker headed for the den. The safe thudded shut.

“I’m out. Two months minimum,” he announced to no one, yet everyone, and threw himself into the battered leather couch. He toed his boots off before bringing his feet up to the low table running in front. Fury flashed. He shoved, and the table shot across the room from the force. A hand reached out. He took the shot glass offered, poured it down his throat.

“Another.” Someone tilted more into Walker’s glass.

Someone else righted the table with a foot and shoved it more or less into its correct spot before dropping seven more shot glasses down. Somebody poured. Every man grabbed a glass and knocked it back as one, Walker included, the way they did everything.

The way they had done everything.

“Let’s deal.” Chief Petty Officer Donaldson, known as Chief by those who loved him, liked to get down to the bottom line.

Walker snorted, turned and walked to the large sheet of plate glass, which was the house’s back wall, bulletproof, of course, and braced with his arms. Fuckers trembled. Very manly.

One of the seven brought the glass, refilled with the golden amber liquor into the periphery of his vision.

“Always a little dangerous,” Walker muttered. Some small fraction of Native American genes donated to his make-up. His people shouldn’t drink. He rarely did.

“Got your six.” Trained warrior talk for: I got you.

He let go.

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In the morning, Vegas cranked the water in the shower and stood waiting, hands on hips. They’d done BUD/S together and had been tending each other’s battered body, as needed, ever since. Beaker and Bull, relative babies having come through two years later, eased sideways into the room, Walker hanging from their shoulders. Chief arrived behind them. “Clothes?”

“Fuck it,” Vegas muttered. “Put him in.”

Beaker eyed the large stall. “Turn it off, dude. I don’t want to get soaked.”

“Pussy.”

Vegas turned the water off and Bull and Beaker deposited their load on the floor. Walker tipped; Bull righted the man, then stepped out.

“All systems go.”

Vegas twisted the shower handle, and all six jets exploded icy cold water.

“Fuck.” The word hissed from between clamped teeth.

Vegas grinned, reached the outside controls and adjusted the aim of several of the heads, aiming the water more completely onto Walker.

Beaker left, headed down the short hall to the kitchen. Cupboards slammed. Walker sat forward, thrusting his face directly into a hard stream of water and then laboriously got to his feet. Arms braced against the far wall, the water beat down hard against his back, shoulders, and legs, head dangling between his braced arms.

Beaker returned. “Here.”

Walker took the glass and downed the concoction. “Fuck.” This time the word was gasped.

Beaker nodded. “It’s a harsh remedy. Never fails, though.” He grabbed the white metal trashcan from the floor and handed it in. It didn’t take long. The four men turned their backs. Every one of them had experienced the Beaker Quick and Nasty Cure.

“There has to be a better way,” Walker gasped, lurching from the shower. He emptied the contents into the toilet, flushed. Sloshing water from his body with every step, he moved to the window, leveraged it open and tossed the metal can outside.

“When you find it, be sure to let my great grannie know,” Beaker muttered.

Walker peeled wet clothing from his body. “Fuck your grannie.”

Chief rubbed his meaty hands together. “Okay. Progress. Bull? Breakfast?”

Bull headed out the door, and Walker went back into the shower, cursing, reaching for the handles to deliver a more reasonable temperature of water to his body.

He heard Chief rifling through his medicine cabinet. He stuck his head out; the man grabbed and emptied packets into a glass of water, and opened the bottle of aspirin. Walker waited. Chief shook several into his palm. “Round two.”

Walker took the offered glass, and stretched out his other for the pills.

“Do a steam,” Chief ordered. He shot a glance at the clock on the wall. “Breakfast at 0900.”

Walker grunted. Seemed to him that when a man’s life imploded, he deserved a pity party lasting longer than a handful of hours, finishing with him sober and eating breakfast at nine the next morning.

Of course, the other seven had to report to base.

And him? Take up gardening. Tutor at risk youth. Learn a language – because five wasn’t enough? Extreme sex with his fuck buddy? He jerked his head to clear it; no way to even think about the woman who was his best friend. Serve his ass right if Mel – a top ranked sniper – shot his ass. Which she would. If she knew. So shut up, asshole.

Walker climbed out of the shower and jerked the door to the steam room. He wouldn’t be heading back on base. Not today, not for Christ knew how long. If he was to be honest, should he ever go back? No one’s body lasted forever, and his was certainly not going to be the exception. Add to that gem of a fact of life one additional nugget: his heart and his head didn’t shut out the grim noise of his business as completely as he had once been able to manage.

Bull produced a traditional breakfast: everything, plus strong coffee. Done, Chief cleared his throat, “Way I see it, Walker, you’ve got options, you’ve got time. Get the fuck away from all of this. Chill.” He shot the man a look. “Come back in two months. See how you feel.”

Walker scowled. “Job one comes courtesy of your home state politician.” He lifted the mug by his plate and waved it in Bull’s direction.

Being a good guy, Bull hefted the pot and poured.

“Fuck?” Chief grunted the word past his fork. Universal code for ‘what the fuck?’ in SEAL language.

Walker shook his head. “Goddamn if I know. Some asswipe framed the story around my personal life, not my professional skills. The country’s in deep shit: the American public prefers trash gossip to real facts. Guess my personal life isn’t wrapped up neat enough for Congressman McMahan.”

Chief’s fork hovered over his plate. One wild eyebrow shot up his forehead. “As in Congressional Subcommittee Investigating Our Fucked Up Mission McMahan?”

Walker grimaced, swallowed his coffee, nodded.

“Nice.”

“Gotta be a woman,” Bull announced. Heads nodded.

Vegas flashed one of his world famous grins. He shoved his chair back and yanked open a drawer at the base of one of the cupboards. Deep, it had probably been designed to hold the household pots and pans. This drawer held unopened envelopes.

“And here’s where he keeps her,” Vegas crowed, dipping his hands in and rifling the pile.

“Fuck you,” Walker muttered. This is what happened when you let someone crash at your house for too long. They found your skeletons.

“Ooh. That hurt! Go clean up your past!” Vegas pulled a paper bag out from under the sink and snapped it open, thrusting a hand into the deep drawer. “It’s time you opened these, dude. And deal with it. Whatever the fuck it is.”

The rest of them laughed and made rude comments, including “Man has a wife somewhere.”

Walker swore. “Divorced!” Then muttered, “I think.”

He drained his coffee cup, nodded, and avoided looking anyone in the eye. Nothing would change if he whined he didn’t want to go away for two months, so he kept his trap shut. Okay. Truth? He had no fucking idea what to do for two months.

He was trained to infiltrate, practice mayhem, kill, and exit clean. He didn’t have leisure skills.

\*\*\*

Emma June Lucy Northrup stood in the middle of the windowed cubicle with her hands on her hips, a last ditch attempt at defiance. Her lip trembled. She pulled a huge breath into her lungs through her nose. Emma’s yoga teacher said this breath soothed and built strength. Emma June failed to understand how something could do both at the same time, but she was willing to try.

Marilou Montrose, Family Services Home Worker, stood with her arms crossed over her big chest, chin tucked, blocking the door. Since she weighed five hundred pounds, it was clear she wasn’t letting Emma June through.

Disbelief held Emma June trapped in the middle of the office. She looked over her shoulder at Mrs. Westin. The woman’s face was a neutral mask. She didn’t look like a woman who had just tricked a mother into handing over her child. But she was. A slight frown furrowed



the woman's brow. She pecked at the computer on her desk, now ignoring Emma June, letting family worker Marilou do the dirty work.

"You can't do this," Emma repeated herself.

"She just did." Marilou's words dripped with satisfaction.

"Oh, shut up, Marilou." Emma June stalked over and using both hands plus all of her weight, shoved, trying to dislodge Marilou from the door.

"You can't move me, little lady."

"Why it wasn't you at the top of the cheer pyramid back in high school," Emma June snapped. She kicked, stabbing her boot toe in Marilou's shin.

Behind Marilou, a palm with some weight behind it made contact with the door and an ugly tight line of a smile split Marilou's face. She surged forward. "That would be the sheriff."

Seeing Emma's face light up with hope because the sheriff was her friend, Marilou smiled broadly. "Too bad, so sad! The man has to follow the law!"

Dawson Watts pushed past Marilou, as polite as a man can be while maneuvering his way past a heifer and nodded at Emma June. His grim face told her all she needed to know and her throat closed up and her heart seized.

Baby Girl had been with Emma June for eight months and was, only now, so close to talking again. She had actually started to let her sharp, skinny body relax a little against Emma when she sat on her lap. She'd be terrified. She wouldn't show it, of course, and when Emma got her back, if Emma got her back, they'd be back to square one.

And then everything in Emma June's body just turned off.

The next thing Emma June knew, she was lying on the floor. Her body, when she checked to make sure it was actually there, weighed a ton. All her pieces and parts responded like a female teenager requested to do chores. She managed to get her knees up and the soles of her feet planted on the floor, causing her head to gape open and her brains to fall out of her head, metaphorically speaking. This was a black day; might as well experience your first faint. She put a hand up to explore the damage.

"Don't move," Sheriff Watts ordered, apparently well schooled in passing out. "It'll pass. We're alone."

Emma kept her eyes shut tight and moaned.

"I know you love that child. Shit. Westin knows it. But she answers to a boss, same as I

do. You have to fight this within the system.”

Emma June sat up fast. “You know? Oh God!” She clutched her head.

“I warned you. You never listen. Lie down.” Dawson Watts pushed her back to the floor, pressed his palms to either temple, and began applying pressure. “Swear to God, Emma June, if you ever did listen, much of the mess in your life would disappear. Now shut up.”

And Emma did. The pressure on her temples caused her head to feel like a grape about to pop; it felt good too. Dawson was part Apache. Or something. Anyhow, he had powers.

Dawson walked Emma June to her truck. As usual, her battery was dead. “Drive over to Emil’s right now.” He let the hood drop, slapped his hands on his jeans, and then wrapped her jumper cables into a neat pile.

“I can’t afford a battery,” Emma June called out her window and slipped the truck in gear. Dawson put a hand on her door and she didn’t quite have the nerve to run over his foot even if they had kissed in the high school band closet. Twice.

“You can’t afford to not have a battery. You’ll pay me back.” He stepped away.

Emma June ground the gear and pulled out, refusing to acknowledge the wetness forming in her eyes. She swiped at herself with the heel of her palm. There was a long list of people she was supposed to pay back and a short list of things to pay them back with.

She called her lawyer and left a detailed message with the secretary who promised to update Maggie, Emma’s lawyer, just as soon as Maggie left whichever courtroom she was currently terrorizing. Then there were ten thousand other details of life to attend to.

She was supposed to let Henry Blue into the house for Mrs. Clark. Henry Blue had been plumbing everyone’s house in West Fork for thirty years. Why Mrs. Clark thought someone needed to let him in was beyond Emma June’s understanding, but as long as Lonnie Clark paid her thirty bucks to show up, she was willing to whistle Dixie while she unlocked the door.

There wasn’t much Emma June wouldn’t do for thirty bucks.

“You weren’t there, Emma June,” Henry explained when she got the man to answer his phone. “I waited as long as I could. I can’t afford to miss this job. Tell Miz Clark I’ll swing by later this evening on my way home.”

Emma June had two hours. Then she needed to fetch Sampson (another thirty bucks) from the groomer’s. His owners were other regular customers of her services. She’d go on in and do *something* for the Clarks, thereby justifying her intention to pry money out of Lonnie Clark’s

hand. She headed for Regan's room.

The girl had never left a piece of clothing on a hanger in her life. And her bathroom was always a disaster. Emma June could zip through both rooms fast, legitimizing a charge, and still make it in time to pick up Sampson. Meanwhile, she'd call SuzeAnna and see if Baby Girl was okay. Where would they put her? After all, in this county, the person who took in all the emergency placement kids, at least all the Native kids, was her.

Susan Dunlop was the other go to foster mom. She might be convinced to take a Native child who was a *girl*. More convincible if the kid was *young*. Make the kid cute and Family Services would have a done deal.

Oh God.

Baby Girl was half-Native, all female and at two-and-a-half years old, irresistibly cute. Dunlop had argued heatedly at the time of Baby's placement that she should have the highly publicized little girl. And the only reason Dunlop didn't win, was the fact Baby Girl was equipped with her very own protector: her half-brother, Davis. He was undeniably Native American, full-blooded, no less. Irrefutably male. And extremely angry. Family Services had been grateful as heck to Emma June for taking both. Pressure to keep siblings together was high in the foster care world, and difficult to pull off.

Emma June clenched her jaw. Davis would go on the warpath. Pardon the racist stereotype.

She knew this: her life wasn't normal. Probably most people's lives didn't go this way. But she didn't know how this happened. Or how to make the crazy stop. So she just kept going.

Two and a half hours later, Lonnie Clark did the thing with her mouth where her lips disappeared in a tight line of disapproval. "Where is Mr. Blue?"

"He had an important job in New Fork. He's going to come by on his way home tonight."

Which was true, even if a few details were missing. It also made it sound like Henry thought Mrs. Clark's job wasn't important. Emma's mind raced, searching for a sentence or two to fix that.

"Mr. Clark will not want plumbing activities going on while he eats dinner," Lonnie informed her.

Emma June had nothing. Henry was on his own. "I could tell Regan had a bad morning, Miz Clark. So I did up her room and bathroom. I don't want you to have to fuss after all your

hard work at the Women's Shelter. Or Regan after a hard day at school." The little witch probably had three study halls and her toughest class was Home Science. Still, thirty bucks.

Lonnie Clark sighed. "It was hard this morning at the Women's Shelter. I don't understand why those women stay..."

Because they have children, Emma June thought. And no money. And nowhere to go. But she put a sad and thoughtful look on her face and shook her head back and forth. She even closed her eyes at one point and gasped, "I can't imagine how you do it, Miz Clark." Once she had the twenty and the ten out of Lonnie's hand, she cut the head shaking short. "I do have to get the little folks, Miz Clark. You remember I have Minelle's twins while she's called up? Now, you call me if you need a thing!"

"Because my children are sick of mac and cheese." She said it under her breath, race-walking down the drive. She'd left the truck two blocks away on a hill. Just in case the battery didn't feel cooperative.

And I need dog food, she thought.

Emma June was N.O.T., *Not On Time*, in her pieced together brood's terminology. So, Georgia, age eleven going on ninety, was waiting for her mother. Her bookbag was at the curb, with the twins' bags right next to it. Emma looked across the grass to the playground and let the truck idle. For some seconds, everything fell away and left her in peace, watching the twins laugh like hyenas.

Then Emma remembered: Sampson (one more job standing between her and starvation – still not completed), the kidnapped Baby Girl, the fact that somewhere there were teens waiting. She leaned on the horn.

Georgia got up from the bench, nose still in her book, turning to face her mother. The four-year-old twins screamed with glee, hanging from the bars, trying to swing hand over hand and falling to the ground. Emma June got out and opened the door to the back. Bill caught her around the legs and she swooped down and hoisted him up, slinging him into the back. "Climb in there, partner!" she said and turned to get his twin.

Bob was shy, so he buried his face in her leg, but hung on anyhow, and giggled when she tickled him and then swung him up into a massive hug before she tossed him in next to his twin.

"Hi, Emma June," her daughter Georgia said. The girl lurched, swinging the weight of her huge backpack onto the floor of the truck and then stooping to reach for the smaller bags

belonging to the twins. She boosted herself in and began buckling Bill's booster seat straps.

"Hi, Georgia Blossom." Emma June, balanced on the running board, leaned across both twins and brushed her lips over her daughter's cheek. "Good day?"

"Not bad. A 100 in History. 99 in Vocab. Where's Baby Girl?"

"Later, GB." Emma's voice was harsher than she'd meant it to be, and Georgia shot her a quick look, which turned worried too fast for a kid who was eleven.

Emma June was a worthless wreck of a mother.

Georgia leaned forward to pull the door on her side shut, and then reached for her seat belt. "Bruce had detention," she informed her mother. "And Joaquin and Davis waited for him."

Emma June sighed. She didn't bother to ask how Georgia knew. The high school was across town. Granted, West Fork wasn't very big, but Georgia didn't have a phone, so how did she know these things? Didn't matter how. She always did.

Emma pulled up at the high school and once again tried to locate her phone. "You'll have to send them out, Mr. Harris," she said, the device located after a serious excavation of her bag. The man liked formality more than he should; she called him 'Mr.' to soften him up. "I can't turn off the truck. And I can't leave the little guys in the truck with it running. Sorry."

Waiting, she listened to a voice mail – finally! – from Maggie telling her to sit tight, not make things worse, and she'd be in touch.

Emma shut the phone with a sigh. She'd lied to the principal; she wasn't sorry. At least three times a week Harris found some reason to keep one of the big boys after school. Usually there was a really stupid reason. Minelle, one of her best friends, said the reason was real basic; Harris had the hots for Emma June.

Too bad. Her big boys, two of the three being exotic blends of ethnicities, but predominantly Native American, the third being 100%, would gut and skin Harris if Emma slept with him, even if it kept them from detention. Besides, she was busy sleeping with Masters to keep him from foreclosing on the house. Although she hoped, they didn't get *that*. You hate to admit *that*, but there it was. Like a million women in the country weren't staying with husbands for the same reason. So shoot her.

Please.

The sky turned gray with weather by the time Harris escorted the three boys out. He had a lot to say. Emma June fixed a thoughtful look on her face. She practiced looks late on Friday

nights when the children were asleep and she wasn't on a date. She aimed for both polite and somewhat worried. She spent much of her day pinning faces to her skull she hoped would keep her out of trouble. Bruce, Joaquin and Davis all climbed into the truck bed.

Harris stopped his discourse to point out it was illegal to ride in a truck bed.

Emma June pointed out this was Wyoming, rural Wyoming.

On the way home, Davis stuck his head in the window and made the twins giggle. Bruce climbed onto the roof of the cab and sat there. Emma slowed down.

"Where's Baby Girl?" Joaquin could grow up to be a policeman, Emma June thought. Or a nanny. Something where never missing anything was useful, maybe crucial. She waved her hand, said something vague and added, "Later." She said it loud, with her face scrunched, like it was hard to hear with the back window open. Which it was.

Pulling in through the gates to the small farm should have brought some feeling of relief. It didn't.

Two Rotties on the ground in front of the porch, bodies rigid in threat, paced. A thin man stood on the porch rail, clutching the column supporting the roof of the porch.

Bruce hooted.

Joaquin hopped to the ground and stalked toward the porch. Emma yelled. A horn sounded. Davis followed Joaquin with his laid back, casual gait, belying the force coiled like a snake in his body. She dreaded telling the boy about his sister.

Emma June whipped around to see who else was joining the party.

Great. A sheriff's deputy, driving the Animal Control truck, who had most likely been called by the guy on the porch rail. Emma slumped back against her seat.

Next, a paneled van pulled in, this one the groomer's, and the driver began unloading Sampson, the Burmese Mountain Dog, forgotten after all. One of the Rotties turned to assess the new possibility of attack.

Sheriff Dawson's SUV made the turn through the gates and pulled onto the grass. Emma shut the truck off and opened her door, planning to get out and deal. But then all her steam left her. Why not just sit there? Sit there and see what happened next.

Davis discovered the frightened man, balancing as best he could, clutched a Notice of Foreclosure. Bruce, interested, got down from the roof.

Georgia said, "Oh for Pete's sake, Emma June."

The twins started to cry.

The deputy turned to Dawson, shrugged, and headed for his van. The groomer marched to Emma's truck and thrust the Burmese's leash into her hand.

A throaty rumble of engine made them all pause. A latecomer was joining the fracas. The largest motorcycle Emma June had ever seen pulled into her yard.

Her heart split into pieces. Several lodged in her throat. Others headed for her brain to form an aneurysm.

A grin was transforming the sheriff's face. A grin, which told her everything she needed to know, everything she had feared in that fraction of time when her heart split between giddy joy and dread.

Her husband was home.