



Preacher

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia, Mc

Description: Never say never.

Being President of Satan's Fury was more than a title.

It was my purpose.

My legacy.

It was built with loyalty, trust, and respect.

And in the process, we'd earned quite a reputation.

It was up to me to keep it.

I didn't have time for distractions, especially one like Tabitha Volkov.

She was beautiful with haunted eyes and a past wrapped in secrets.

I had no business getting tied up with her.

Timing and circumstance pulled us in different directions.

But that didn't stop me from wanting her.

She was convinced her chance for love had come and gone.

I was determined to prove her wrong.

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PROLOGUE

There was a time when I thought love was meant to last forever.

I knew it wasn't just a given. You had to work for it, but as long as you took care of it and held onto it, as long as you did your part, you were golden. But over the years, life seemed set on proving me wrong.

First, there was Kay.

We met when I was first making my way up the ranks in the club. I was young and cocky, and she was undeniably beautiful, with a smile that could melt the coldest of hearts. Our love was the kind that burned hot and fast and left me feeling more alive than I'd ever felt.

She was wild and stubborn, but I loved her like no other. In the blink of an eye, I was hers, and she was mine. For a while, we had something real—something I thought would last for the long haul.

I was wrong.

She wanted more than I could give, and I wasn't the kind of man to change. So, we gave up, and in the end, all we had left was Memphis, our boy. He became our pawn of vengeance. We used him to inflict pain on one another, but as he grew older, we grew wiser. We could see that we were hurting him more than we were each other, and suddenly, revenge tasted less sweet.

And then came Jersey.

She was beautiful beyond measure with the bluest eyes I'd ever seen.

She was young with a big heart and a free spirit that refused to be tamed. She wanted to do what she wanted to do, and nothing was going to stop her. I knew better than to get tangled up with her, but when she set her sights on me, I didn't stand a chance.

She had a way of making me feel like the world wasn't such a fucking nightmare, and more than anything, she made me feel like I was the best thing since sliced bread. That was a feeling I planned to hold onto, but life had other plans.

She gave me Beckett, then took her last breath. She left me with a son who never knew his mother's touch, and he never overcame it. He kept searching for a way to fill the void, and it ended up costing him his life.

After that, I gave up on the idea of having a woman at my side.

I had my club and my boys. They were my true constant. They gave me something to get out of bed for. That was all I needed.

Love just wasn't meant for a man like me.

I was okay with that. I'd given it a go, but the losses were just too much to swallow. So, I gave up the chase and stopped hoping for something that would never last. I'd accepted my fate and put my whole heart into Fury. It was all I needed.

Or so I thought.

PREACHER

"Another busy night."

"Just the way I like it."

Saturday nights always brought in a crowd, but tonight, the place was damn near busting at the seams. The music was booming, the lights were flashing, and the drinks were flowing. I looked around at all the beautiful girls working their magic on the various stages, and there was no doubt that business was good.

Hell, business was great.

I sat at the bar with Grim, the club's enforcer. It was rare that we had a chance to sit back and reap the rewards of all our hard work, but tonight was one of those nights. Grim and I had a clear view of the stage, where Misty was working the pole. She was moving in slow, practiced sways and dips that had every man in the place leaning in for more. Grim took a sip of his beer and smirked. "Look at 'em. They can't get enough of her."

I gave him a nod as I watched one of our regulars, a stockbroker-looking asshole in a suit, shove a wad of cash between her tits. "Well, he certainly can't, but she doesn't seem to mind. She's raking it in."

"Which means, so are we."

He wasn't wrong. The Vault had become more than just a place for men to drink and watch pretty girls dance. It was the club's honey hole and made us a shit-ton of money. The liquor, the private rooms, and the drugs all flowed through here and right into our pockets. And with Seven running the books and keeping things clean on paper, we didn't have to worry about anyone sniffing around.

But Seven had been working his ass off.

He was the club's sergeant-at-arms. That in itself was enough to keep him busy, but he'd also taken on the role of managing the Vault. Between all the scheduling and working the books and everything in between, he barely had time to breathe.

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The guy needed a break. Hell, he deserved one, especially with all the recent changes in his life. Which is why I turned to Grim and said, “We’re gonna need to find someone to give Seven a hand.”

“Oh?” He looked over at me with surprise. “He say something?”

“No, and he wouldn’t. The man’s got too much pride for that, but things have changed for him. He’s gonna need more time with his ol’ lady and kid.” I took a drag from my cigar, letting the smoke curl up toward the neon lights above the bar. “We need someone who can handle the books, keep shit running smooth.”

Grim nodded, glancing over at the office door at the back of the club. “Not gonna be easy. Memphis only did it for a couple of weeks, and it about did him in.”

“Yeah, I heard all about it.”

I exhaled, watching as a couple of new faces walked in. I could by looking at them that they were the kind to cause trouble. I looked towards the front, where Goose and Rusty were keeping an eye on things, and they were already on them, making sure they knew the rules before they got too comfortable. That’s why we had men like them at the door. They kept things under control. It was one of the many reasons the club was thriving. I wanted to keep it that way.

“We need to talk to the brothers and see who’s willing to step up to the plate.”

“They’re gonna have big shoes to fill.”

“Won’t have to fill them completely. Just help with the load.”

“Understood.”

We sat back and watched as the night rolled on. The crowd just kept piling in, and I was loving every minute of it. The night couldn’t have been going better, and then, Grim had to fuck it up by asking, “You heard anything from Kay?”

The question hit me right in the gut. I’d done my best to push her out of my head, but I hadn’t had much luck, especially with everyone asking about her. “Couple days ago.”

“She doing okay?”

“As far as I know.” I shrugged. “She made it to her sister’s and is settling in. I’d say she’s doing alright.”

“Hmm.” Grim nodded, studying me like he knew there was more to it. And he wasn’t wrong. There was always more when it came to Kay. “House coming along?”

“Shouldn’t be much longer.” I took a long pull from my beer. “Maybe a couple more weeks. Maybe less.”

“And she’s good with that?”

“She doesn’t have a choice.”

The words came out sharper than I meant, but Grim didn’t question it. Besides, he knew the truth. Kay being at the clubhouse was stirring up shit neither of us needed. The past, the regrets, and all the what-ifs were still there, lurking beneath the surface, and if we weren’t careful, it would’ve dragged us both under.

I didn't send her away because I wanted to see her go. I did it because I had to. It was the only way to keep us from making a mistake that neither of us could take back. But damn if it didn't sit heavy on me. She was Memphis' mother, and there was a time when I would've moved mountains for her.

But that time had come and gone.

"But she's gonna be fine," I said, more to convince myself than him. "It was the right move."

I glanced around the bar and took it all in. It was what I needed to focus on. The club. The work. Not the woman who had a way of getting under my skin. Grim clinked his bottle against mine. "To making the right choices, huh?"

"And to living with 'em."

Right choices weren't always easy to live with. I knew that better than anyone. The weight of leading Satan's Fury wasn't just in the decisions I made. It was in the men who trusted me to make them. Every move, every choice, carried a consequence. Some were good, and others were bad.

And they weren't just mine to bear.

They belonged to my brothers, to their families, and to the whole club.

I won't deny it. There were days when it felt like I was carrying the whole damn world on my shoulders. It was tough knowing that one wrong move could bring it all crashing down, especially when I'd worked so hard to make Fury what it is today. But that was my burden to carry, and I carried it with pride.

Grim nudged my side, pulling me from my thoughts as he motioned over to

Cinnamon on the backstage. “Damn shame about that one. She’s got tits for days but no rhythm.”

I chuckled but said nothing. I finished off my beer and was about to get another when the back door opened, and Seven walked in. I wasn’t surprised to see him. He was there on the nightly, making sure everything went off without a hitch, but I wasn’t expecting Tallie to be with him. She was an old flame who’d recently resurfaced, and she brought a few hard hits with her, including a kid he never knew they had.

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But they were finding their way through it all, and Seven seemed the better for it. I couldn't help but wonder if he was rushing things by bringing her here so early in the game. It was clear from her wide eyes and blood-drained face that this was the first time she'd been here, and possibly, her first time ever stepping foot in a strip club.

Hell, she looked like she'd just walked straight into Sodom and Gomorrah. Her eyes were wide as saucers as they darted from the flashing lights to the half-dressed women weaving through the room. Her lips parted like she wanted to say something, but whatever words she'd had were lost to the sight of a girl straddling some poor bastard in the corner.

"Looks like we got ourselves a first-timer."

"Apparently so."

Seven looked completely unfazed as he guided Tallie through the crowd. He was wearing his cut and exuded an aura of confidence with every step. Tallie, on the other hand, looked like a deer in headlights and ready to turn on her heels and bolt. When they made it over to us, I gave her a smile and said, "Welcome to the Vault."

"Thanks, I think."

"Not what you expected?"

"Yes... No. Not really." She tucked a loose strand of her long, red hair behind her ear and raked her teeth across her bottom lip. "Uh, it's a lot."

“That’s one way to put it.”

“There are so many women.”

“Well, it is a gentlemen’s club.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” She glanced around at the floor. “I mean the customers or whatever.”

“Yeah, there are a few,” Grim smirked. “They like the attention.”

“Attention?”

“Oh, yeah.” Grim motioned his hand over to one of the tables behind us where Candy, one of our more voluptuous girls, was gyrating against an old woman’s thigh. “They can’t get enough of it.”

“Oh, I uh... I didn’t expect that.”

Seven shot us both a look, but I could see the amusement dancing in his eyes. “You two done?”

“For now.”

I gave Tallie a wink, and her cheeks blushed with embarrassment.

Seven shook his head as he reached over and took her hand in his. He was about to turn to leave but stopped when I said, “Hey, before you go, I thought you might be interested to know that we’re looking into getting one of the guys to give you a hand with things around here.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Figured you wouldn’t mind.”

“Nah, I’d welcome any help I could get.”

“Give me a couple of days, and I’ll have someone lined up.”

“Appreciate it.”

Then, after a quick nod, he disappeared down the hall with Tallie trailing close behind. Once they were out of earshot, Grim chuckled, “Poor girl.”

“She’ll get used to it. They all do.”

I leaned back in my chair and thought about the days ahead. They were going to be tough, especially with the way things were progressing. There was no room for mistakes. I would have to keep my head in the game and calculate our every move.

Thankfully, I didn’t have any unnecessary distractions. It was one of the many advantages of not having an ol’ lady. I didn’t have anyone pulling my focus away from what needed to be done. It was just me, my brothers, and the club, exactly the way it should be.

I thought I had it all figured out.

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But little did I know, I was about to get the distraction of a lifetime.

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TABITHA

"You know, we could do this for you."

"No, you couldn't," I argued. "I need to see them for myself."

"But why?" Nikolai pushed. "This place is a shithole, and these poor animals should be put out of their misery."

My youngest wasn't wrong. It was awful. The place reeked of sweat, manure, and the sharp tang of desperation. I knew it too well. I'd lived it, breathed it, and survived it. But these poor souls were still fighting for their tomorrow.

They stood in these rusted pens with ribs pressing against their skin and their eyes hollowed out from the kind of fear that only comes when you've been beaten down and left with nothing. I kept my focus on the entry gate as I told him, "Because I need to see them for myself."

"So, you can pick out the worst of the worst."

"So, I can pick out the ones who need us the most."

I grimaced as I watched the man lead out the next horse. It was a broken mare with a

clouded eye. She was a brown and white swayback who looked like she hadn't known kindness in years and had been discarded like she meant nothing to anyone. It was a feeling I knew all too well.

When I stepped forward, Nikolai groaned, "Oh, Mom. Come on. Not her. Hell, she's on her last leg."

"That's exactly why I want her." I slipped on my glove and called out, "Two hundred!"

A few heads turned. Some recognized me. Others, the ones with new money and soft hands, didn't yet know better than to question a Volkov. Not that it mattered. I didn't give a damn what anyone thought.

The mare was going to be mine.

She wasn't pretty, at least not by society's standards. She was too old and too worn. But once she was home with me, she'd have a warm stall and a full belly, and she would have the freedom to breathe without the weight of a heavy hand hammering down on her. It wasn't much. It wouldn't take away the years of pain she'd endured, but it would be a start.

They'd barely led her out of the ring before they were bringing in another horse. This one was a tall bay, and his coat was dulled by filth and lack of care. It was hard to believe he was anything but a workhorse, but I could see it. He was still holding onto a whisper of his former glory, and that was enough for me.

His ears flicked back at the crack of the whip, and he jolted with an urge to run. I'd seen enough to call out, "Three hundred!"

"Four," some ranch hand countered.

I glanced over and quickly recognized his hard face. He was a buyer for the kill pens, and he looked eager. I wasn't going to let that scare me off. I leveled him with a stare as I spat, "Five."

He hesitated.

He knew the name. Dimitri Volkov had been a cruel, powerful man, but his widow was a different breed of dangerous. The hammer fell, and he was mine. They weren't much to the world, but it was their time to know a life of kindness.

Maybe I saw too much of myself in them, or maybe I just had too much damn money and no one to tell me how to spend it. Either way, they'd get their chance to know kindness and a sense of security.

And most of all, they'd know what it felt like to be free.

The auction dragged on. It was one broken soul after another. Nikolai was growing tired of the gloom and was itching to get the hell out of there. "Okay, Mom. You've picked up three today. That's more than enough."

"I know. I know. Just a few more minutes."

He was right. I'd already bought more than I planned. I already had eight that were still on the mend, but they were slowly beginning to thrive. They were still far from being as healthy as my thoroughbreds and Arabians, but they were holding their own. And it wasn't like we didn't have room for more.

We had over two hundred acres and barn for forty or more. I planned to fill every one of them, but it was a process that couldn't be done in a day. I was coming to terms with the fact that the day was coming to an end when I saw her.

A beautiful, brown and white mare with a swollen belly that swayed with every limping step. She was barely more than a filly herself, and her ribs pressed against stretched skin. Her front foot was bad. It looked to be an old injury that had been left to fester. That was enough for most to pass her by, including me, but then, I caught a glimpse of her eyes.

They were big, dark, and filled with the kind of resignation that only comes when you've been failed too many times.

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“Next up, we got a bay mare. She’s heavy in foal. Looks to be seven to eight months along,” the auctioneer droned. “She’s got herself a bad foot, but there’s still some good meat on her bones.”

I stepped closer to the railing as I asked, “What’s her number?”

“Let me see.” The man beside me squinted down at his clipboard. “Lot ninety-seven.”

I looked at her again and watched as her ears twitched but didn’t lift. She remained still even when the whip cracked behind her. I knew then that she’d already given up. I stepped closer as I whispered, “Hey there, sweet girl. I see you.”

She shifted her weight, and for a moment, I thought she might step toward me. But then the auctioneer barked something, and she froze again. I clenched my jaw. That was enough.

Realizing I was about to make a move, Nikolai groaned, “Come on, Mom. The vet bills alone are going to be a fortune.”

“Two hundred,” someone called.

I didn’t even turn my head when I called out, “Five hundred.”

A murmur rippled through the crowd. It was too much for a mare like her, but I didn’t care. She was going to be mine.

“Six,” a voice countered. I knew without looking that it was one of the kill buyers.

I turned, slow and deliberate, and met his gaze. “One thousand.”

His lips pressed into a thin line.

He knew better than to counter.

Seconds later, the hammer fell, and just like that, she was mine.

They moved her out of the ring, and I immediately made my way over to her. I placed my palm on her side as I leaned in and whispered, “You hear that, mama? You and that sweet baby are getting out of here. You’re going home.”

He led her to the back with the others, and Nikolai helped Wyatt, our handler, load the horses onto the trailer. I couldn’t help but smile as I watched my big, strong, tattooed son sweet-talking the brown and white mare. He was the most intense of my three boys, and it was rare to see his softer side. But it was there, and the horses could sense it.

It was one of the reasons I asked him to come with me. I knew I could trust him to be good to the horses and show them the kindness they deserved. The trailer door clanged shut, and the last of our new rescues were secured for the short drive back to the estate.

After one last check, Wyatt patted the side of the rig and called out, “They’re ready to roll.”

I nodded, and then Nikolai and I got in the car. We followed close behind as Wyatt pulled out of the auction yard and started towards home. The drive was short but just long enough for my mind to wander, and I started to think about how good things had been going.

When we moved from New York, we were able to purchase a great deal of land, some on the riverside and some out in the country. The boys had their plans for the riverfront, and I had mine for the country. I wanted the ranch I'd dreamed of since I was a little girl, and I'd finally had the means to get it.

It was two hundred acres of rolling pastures and thick tree lines. It was beautiful, and the barn was state-of-the-art. Not only did it have an entire loft that housed my very own two-bedroom apartment with all the necessities, but it also had over forty, large-scale stalls. Each of them was temperature-controlled and built for comfort and care. Over twenty-five horses already called this place home, and every one of them had their own story.

Magnus, my black Friesian, was one of my favorites. He was all heart and had a gentle soul. He was on death's door when we brought him home, and all it took was a little time and love for him to find the strength to pull through. Since then, he'd always gone out of his way to thank me for my kindness by giving me a neighing nod or resting his head on my shoulder.

Pearl, my oh-so stubborn Andalusian, also held a special place in my heart. It had been years since I'd brought her home, and she still looked at me like I owed her an apology for rescuing her. But she was good with the younger horses and looked after them like she was a grandmother of sorts.

These new ones—the broken and beaten down—would eventually claim their place here, too. They might not have long, but they'd have a few good years, maybe more, if we were lucky.

The truck came to a stop, and Nikolai and I parked right behind him. I got out and waited as Wyatt opened the trailer door. He shook his head with a wince as he muttered, "Looks like they survived the trip."

“They certainly did,” I said, then added, “Now, call in the vet, and let’s get them back on their feet.”

He gave a nod and was already pulling out his phone. When Nikolai started unloading, I stepped over and helped him with the pregnant mare. I took hold of her reigns and coaxed her softly as I led her into her stall. She cowered in the corner and watched as I filled her bucket with feed and freshened her water.

Once I was done, I didn’t go over to her. I knew she needed some time to adjust, so I stood at the gate as I told her, “You can rest easy, sweet girl. You’re safe now.”

She studied me for a moment, then lowered her head and stared down at the ground. Hoping that she’d eat once I left, I stepped towards the door and whispered, “The vet will be here soon. We’ll get that foot checked out and see how that baby’s doing.”

I stepped out and closed the stall door.

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I wanted to stay and make sure she ate, but I'd been around horses long enough to know she wouldn't touch it until I was gone. That was the thing about horses. They sensed when we were around. She wouldn't move until she knew I was gone, so I headed out back and stood on the mound overlooking the pasture.

Even now, as I stood there looking at the life I'd built with my boys, I hadn't forgotten where I'd come from. I remembered it all very well. I could still hear the low rattle of the wind whipping through the broken boards of my childhood home. I could still see the peeling paint and broken-down furniture. Most of all, I could still see my poor mother balled up on that old, dirty mattress with sweat soaking through her thin nightgown. She was wasting away from the sickness we couldn't afford to fight.

My father was desperate to do something, anything, to save her. But getting her the medical attention she needed would cost money, and he was already drowning in debt. We were barely able to put food on the table, so he started searching for a miracle.

He should've known better than to gamble on a race he couldn't afford to lose. But desperation makes fools of the weak.

I was fifteen when he lost that gamble and handed me over to a man twice my age with a name that carried fear and bloodshed. Dimitri wasn't just ruthless in business. He was ruthless in every way imaginable.

Truth was, he didn't even want to marry me. He liked having his pick of women, but his father forced his hand. He told him a man of his stature needed a woman at his

side—one that was quiet, pretty, and most of all, obedient. Dimitri looked at me like I was a punishment, and he certainly made sure I felt like one.

My first few years with him were hell.

Pain and silence became my closest companions. He wanted obedience, and when I refused, he took it from me the hard way. Thankfully, the beatings slowed when I gave him what he truly wanted.

A son.

Sergei was a blessing in more ways than one. Not only was he a precious child who stole my heart, he was my saving grace. Viktor and Nikolai followed soon after, and with each child, Dimitri's grip on me loosened.

I'd served my purpose.

But he still expected me to look the part of the perfect wife. I wasn't naïve about it. I knew I was attractive. He wanted me there, so he could show me off. He wanted me dressed to the nines with jewels and expensive dresses, so I would turn heads. That was it.

I wasn't a wife. I was an accessory.

But he lost interest in me physically and barely touched me. He left the raising of our boys to me. I knew he was with other women. I didn't care. I knew he didn't love me—not the way a man should love his wife.

I didn't love him either. I didn't even like him.

The only love I ever knew came from my boys, and when Dimitri died, I wasted no

time leaving the past behind.

I wanted no reminders of the life we'd endured, so I sold everything—the house, his businesses, and most of our belongings. We packed up the rest and moved to Little Rock. I thought a fresh start would do us all good. It was a chance to build a new life in a city where no one knew the Volkov name, but my sons had their father's blood running through their veins and had his thirst for power coursing through them.

It didn't take them long to make a name for themselves, and they took what they knew and made it ours, turning the past into profit. They had big plans for a grand casino—one that would stand above all others. It would be their legacy, not mine.

I had my land, the barn, and my beautiful horses. Here, I would have the peace I never thought I'd find. Dimitri might've stolen my past, but he wouldn't have my future. No man, living or dead, would ever take it from me again.

3

PREACHER

Sleep never came easy, but when it did, it was rarely kind.

It felt like I'd barely closed my eyes when I was back there again—back to the night when everything fell apart.

It was just over a year ago. I was sitting at the bar, enjoying a cold one with Grim and Creed, and Beckett came barreling in with his face red with anger. He stormed over to me with his fists clenched and his eyes burning with a rage I'd never seen in him before. "Ruben and his crew raped and killed her."

"Raped and killed who?"

“Amy!” he roared. “They broke into her place, raped, tortured, and killed her!”

I loved him, but my boy was young and naïve. He thought this girl was going to be his one and only, and he’d already started making plans with her. It was clear that he was distraught over her death, and I got it. Nothing worse than losing someone you care about, especially in such a horrific way.

“When?”

“Some time last night. Cops think they got in when she was letting the dog out.” I knew my son well enough to know that he was on the verge of losing it when he shouted, “We gotta go after them and make ‘em pay!”

“We aren’t going after them.” My voice was firm and left no room for argument.

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Beckett flinched like I'd purposefully wounded him. "How can you say that? She was my girl, and..."

"She was a sweet kid, son, and it's a shame that happened to her. But she's got no ties to this club."

"She's got ties to me! That's gotta mean something!"

His voice cracked, and it was clear from the pained look in his eyes he was barely holding it together. There was no denying that he was my son. He looked just like me, but he had his mother's blood running through his veins. And like her, he loved without restraint.

At times that was admirable, but now, it was keeping him from thinking straight. He was clenching his fists and moving his weight from one foot to the other. He was on the edge of a breakdown when he shouted, "She was everything to me, and they butchered her like she was nothing!"

I could see he was hurting, and I hated it.

I wanted to help him, but I had the club to consider.

"I'm sorry, Beck, but this wasn't a strike against the club."

Truth was, I did want blood. I wanted it bad. But I knew this crew. I knew them well. They were nothing but trouble and were always wreaking havoc. So much so, they'd caught the attention of the FBI.

They were building a case against them.

Wires.

Surveillance.

And possibly a rat on the inside.

If we went after them and wiped them out, it would only be a matter of time before the FBI caught wind of it. And when that happened, they'd turn their attention to us.

I couldn't take the chance on the club going down in the crossfire.

Beckett looked like he was teetering on the edge when I added, "As fucked up as it might've been, we're not getting involved."

"I can't believe you're saying this."

"I know you're hurting, son, but we don't move on emotion. You go after them, and you start a war we can't afford to fight."

"So what?" He looked utterly defeated as he asked, "You just expect me to let it go?"

"That's exactly what I expect you to do."

He didn't get it. He wanted revenge. He thought it would ease the hurt and anger, but I knew revenge would only make it worse. I thought some time away would help, so I sent him to Washington to spend some time with our chapter there. I thought the time away would settle the storm inside him, but it didn't.

If anything, it made it worse.

It wasn't the only fight we had over Amy. He came to me again and again, but the answer was always the same. And it was an answer he couldn't accept.

The dream shifted and twisted into something darker.

I heard the words, 'They killed him', and it nearly knocked me off my feet. I'd never felt a jolt like that. It was like someone had taken a dagger and slammed right into my heart. I couldn't think or speak. I just kept hearing those three words over and over.

My world started crashing down around me, and I was consumed with doubt and regret. I told myself it was the smart call.

But every time I saw the cold, dead look in Beckett's eyes, I couldn't help but wonder if I chose the club over him. And maybe I did.

It was my job to lead and protect, and I hadn't protected the one person who needed me the most. I'd failed him, and I'd failed myself.

His casket came into view, and I jolted awake.

I was covered in sweat, and my heart was pounding. The room was still dark. The morning light was just starting to creep through the blinds. I didn't move. I just laid there, staring up at the ceiling with my chest tight and my head tangled up in a dream that clung to me like a second skin.

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Beckett.

My son. My legacy. My biggest regret.

I should've done more. I should've known I was losing him. I should've pulled him back before he spiraled. I should've never sent him to Washington like he was some problem to be handled. My boy was drowning, and I pawned him off. I told myself it was for the best—that he needed to find his way like I had.

But he wasn't me.

And now, he was gone.

I ran a hand down my face and let out a long breath. Dreams like this weren't new. I had them all the time, but they never got any easier.

Hell, maybe they were more than just dreams.

Maybe it was Beckett's way of reminding me of all the ways I'd failed him.

That weighed on me in ways I couldn't begin to explain. I needed to shake this off and mentally prepare for the day ahead. We had a run coming up, and business was booming at the Vault. I needed to be at the top of my game and to do that, I needed coffee and lots of it.

I sat up, and as I eased the covers back, I heard the faint clatter of dishes. Soon after, I caught the slight scent of bacon. Someone was up, and from the smell of it, they were

making a damn good breakfast.

With a groan, I swung my legs over the side of the bed, and my joints protested the movement. I sat there for a second and shook off the last remnants of the dream.

After a moment, I pushed to my feet and started for the bathroom. I took a quick shower, got dressed, and headed for the kitchen, following the scent of bacon and the promise of a new day.

The scent of bacon and coffee grew stronger as I got closer to the kitchen, but there was still a trace of last night's whiskey and smoke lingering in the air. Our hang-arounds were the ones stuck with breakfast duty, but when I walked into the kitchen, I didn't find a couple of blondes with great tits. Instead, I found Goose.

He stood there with a spatula in his hand, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers. He looked like a damn poster boy for trouble—young, strong, and still carrying that cocky ease that came with knowing you could take on the world. I couldn't help but feel a slight pang of something deep in my chest.

Not jealousy. Hell, I'd never been the jealous kind. Didn't have to be. This was more of a reminder of the time gone by. I used to look just like him. Muscled up, young, and tough, and I could turn a head or two. Now, my bones ached when I got out of bed, and I might've groaned a little. And there was more gray in my beard than I cared to admit.

I walked over and started pouring myself a cup of coffee as I grumbled, "Why the hell aren't you home cookin' at your own place?"

"Had a late night." His smirk was all pride and mischief. "Didn't see the point in driving back when I could just crash here."

“You better watch it.” I shook my head. “You gonna make someone a hell of a wife someday.”

“Wife my ass and no husband either.” Goose laughed as he grabbed the plate beside him and started to pile on bacon. “I mean, come on. It’d take one hell of a woman to tie all this down.”

“Or a cattle hand,” I scoffed. “But they’d need to muzzle you, too.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.” He set the plate on the counter and gave me one of his looks. “How come you never stay at your place anymore?”

“Too damn quiet.”

The words came out before I really thought about them, but they were true. My place wasn’t a home. It was just four walls and a bed I barely slept in.

Goose didn’t say anything. He just nodded like he got it. And maybe he did. The club had always been my home. It was the only thing that ever really felt like one, and I had a feeling it was the same for him. Goose was always poking fun and making jokes, but I knew it was just a ruse.

The kid had been through a lot, more than most. Hell, the kid had been chewed up and spit out by life more than once, but he kept going. Kept laughing and acting like nothing could touch him. But I saw through it. He had his struggles, but he hadn’t let them define him.

“What about you? What’s your excuse?”

“I already told ya.” He wouldn’t look at me as he said, “I had a late night.”

“Um-hmm, and what’s the real reason.”

“Ain’t much point in going home to an empty house.” He shrugged. “Nothing but ghosts there.”

“I get it. Home is where the heart is and all that.” I took another drink of my coffee before adding, “But the club has ghosts of its own. Ain’t the same kind, but they’re there.”

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I thought of the ones that still haunted me—the faces and names I couldn't shake. Some I'd lost. Some I'd let go, and some, like Beckett, I carried like a goddamn anchor. Goose finally looked up and gave me one of his smiles. "But ain't just ghosts here. There's family, too."

"You're right about that." I reached over and stole a handful of bacon before saying, "Thanks for the breakfast."

Without saying anything more, I turned and walked out.

The office was a mess. Papers were stacked in uneven piles across my desk, and next to the largest pile was an old coffee cup I'd been meaning to toss out for over a week. I ignored the clutter and got to work.

I started with the inventory from our last run and made notes on any changes we might want to make for the next. The mushrooms were moving better than any of us had expected. That was good news. It meant we were building something sustainable, and I couldn't have been more pleased.

The door creaked open, and Ghost stepped in, rubbing the back of his neck like he was about to ask for a favor. "Hey, Prez."

I sighed, setting down my pen. "What you need?"

He grimaced. "Pretty sure we got a busted pipe out back."

"What makes you think that?"

“Cause there’s water spewing everywhere.”

“And what the hell caused that?”

“Memphis may or may not have backed over it with the track hoe.”

“Of course he did.” I shook my head. “Call Emit. He should be able to fix it without charging us a fortune.”

“You got it.”

“And tell shithead to be more careful.”

He left, and before I could get back to the books, Rusty was in the doorway, a smirk on his face and a beer in his hand.

“You got any wise words for a man who might’ve accidentally proposed to one of the girls at the Vault and forgot about it?”

“Don’t make promises you ain’t gonna keep.”

“Fair enough.”

One by one, they kept coming.

Some wanted advice. Some needed favors.

Some just wanted to shoot the shit. While there were times when it could be exhausting, I never complained. It was one of the many nuances that came with being president. My boys depended on me, and I depended on them.

I got back to work, and it wasn't long before Creed walked in. He was the club's VP and my closest friend. We'd been running the club together for almost twenty years, but we'd been friends for even longer.

Creed gave me one of his looks then asked, "Another bad night?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Might need to talk to someone about that."

"I talked to you."

"Not what I meant, and you know it." He sat down in front of me as he said, "You can't keep going like this. Beck wouldn't want you to."

"I don't know. I think he might," I scoffed. "He'd think it was Karma or some shit like that."

"Yeah, you might be right," Creed chuckled. "Your boy could be an asshole, just like his ol' man."

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“Not in the mood, Creed.”

“Which is why you need to think about talking to someone.”

“Not seeing some fucking shrink, brother.”

“Then, talk to Blade and see if he can give ya something to sleep.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Okay, while you’re thinking...” He tossed a folder onto my desk. “That’s the schedule for the next run. You good with it?”

I looked it over, and as usual, it was a solid plan. “Yeah. Make sure Rusty and Memphis are good to go. They’ll need to head out first thing.”

“Got it,” Creed replied as he continued looking over the paperwork.

I glanced up at the clock and groaned when I saw that it was after seven. Most of the guys had already eaten, some had gone home, and the clubhouse had settled into its usual nighttime lull. I let out a long breath, stretching my shoulders as I closed the last of the books for the day.

Creed stood as he announced, “I think it’s about time we called it a day.”

“I was just thinking the same.”

The words had barely left my mouth when my phone buzzed. I glanced at the screen and saw that it was Duggar calling. I picked it up and answered, “Yeah?”

“Hey, Prez. Hate to bother ya, but you might wanna get down to the Vault.”

“Why’s that?”

“One of the Volkov boys just walked in.” I could hear the concern in his voice when he added, “And I gotta feeling he ain’t here for the show.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen.” I hung up, and as I stood, I looked over to Creed. “Looks like our day ain’t over yet.”

“What’s going on?”

“One of the Volkov boys is at the club.”

“What the hell does he want?”

“I got no idea, but I intend to find out.”

Without another word, Creed followed me out to the lot. I could feel the question hanging between us, but I didn’t have any more answers than he did.

We came head-to-head with the Volkov brothers when they kidnapped Tallie. They were on the hunt for the money they’d entrusted with her father and used her to lure in her brother. They knew he had the information they needed, and once they got it, they released Tallie—unharmd. I thought that was the end of our run in with them.

Clearly, I was wrong.

I'd read all the intel Shep had found on the brothers. I knew they had heavy ties with the Russian mafia. While they didn't play in the same field, their father had been a heavy hitter who ran things with a heavy hand. Dimitri might've been rotting in the ground, but his sons were cut from the same cloth. And no matter what business they were currently in, they still had his ties.

If he was at the Vault, there had to be a reason.

I swung a leg over my bike and was about to start her up when I spotted Memphis and Ghost rushing towards us. Concern marked my son's face as he asked, "Where you two headed?"

"Duggar called," I said, strapping on my helmet. "One of the Volkov boys is at the Vault."

Ghost and Memphis exchanged a look, and Ghost was quick to reply, "We're coming with you."

Didn't bother arguing. They would've followed me no matter what I said. So, I just started my bike and pulled out of the gate. I used the ride over to clear my head and tried to prepare myself for whatever lay ahead. It wasn't easy. I was irritated that this asshole had just shown up at our place unannounced.

It didn't help matters that I was running on three hours of sleep and a few slices of overcooked bacon. I was wavering on the line of full-blown anger when we pulled up to the Vault. The place was busy but not packed like the night before.

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Memphis and Ghost went in first, charging through the front doors like they were an unspoken warning. Me and Creed followed close behind. To everyone else, it was just a regular night. The bass was booming, deep and steady, and there was a low murmur of conversation and hoots and hollers from the crowd.

I barely noticed.

My eyes were already locked on Nikolai Volkov.

I'd recognized him right away. He was the youngest of the Volkov brothers, but he had an edge to him that his brothers didn't have.

He sat at one of the side tables, leaning back like he didn't have a care in the world. He was wearing a white, long-sleeve button-down and black slacks, and he showed no emotion as he sipped on his beer.

He was acting like it was just another night, but I knew better.

He was waiting.

He was waiting for me.

I held up a hand to the others. "Give me a minute."

Memphis scowled but didn't argue. Ghost and Creed just folded their arms and watched with a protective stance. I walked over, and Nikolai's eyes locked on mine as I pulled out the chair and sat down without a word. I let the silence sit between us

for a beat before I finally spoke.

“Alright, you got my attention. Now, why don’t you tell me what the hell you’re doing here.”

4

TABITHA

“I’ll start with the mare.”

“Her name is Faith.”

“Well, Faith is farther along than you mentioned.” Dr Lewis flipped through his notes as he continued, “Best I can tell, she looks to be more like eight and a half months along. Her body is in poor condition. She’s underweight and malnourished which means the foal is, too. And the front left hoof is a concern.”

“Yes, I knew it would be an issue. What are we dealing with?”

“Looks like an old abscess that was never treated properly.” I could hear the horses shifting in their stalls. If I didn’t know better, I’d say they sensed my unease as I listened to him say, “It’s left her with some deep scarring in the hoof wall, and there’s some rotation in the coffin bone.”

I nodded, trying to absorb it all. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Well, she’s gonna need corrective trimming, likely for the rest of her life. Might need special shoes, depending on how she responds. We can manage the pain with anti-inflammatories, but she won’t be much more than a pasture horse.” He hesitated before adding, “It’s gonna take time and money, Tabitha.”

I already knew that but hearing it didn't make it any easier.

Before I could even form a response, he flipped the page and kept going. "She's extremely underweight, especially for being with foal. You'll need to monitor her closely. Plenty of high-quality feed and supplements. If we don't see improvement in the next few weeks, we may need to run some tests."

I barely had time to nod before he moved on.

"Now, the tall bay." He shook his head. "As you know, he's in rough shape. Severely malnourished. He has some muscle atrophy and some rain rot starting on his back. Poor fella's been neglected for a long time."

"Yes, and it's a real shame. He's such a beautiful, sweet horse."

"I think he will come around, but he's gonna take patience." His voice softened a little. "Slow refeeding and a whole lot of hands-on care."

It was a lot, but nothing I hadn't expected. I knew what I'd signed up for, and I was going to do whatever it took to get these horses back on their feet. So, I lifted my chin and met Dr. Lewis's gaze as I told him, "Alright. Let's get started."

Dr. Lewis let out a quiet sigh as he crouched beside the mare. He gently ran his hand down her leg before lifting her hoof. She flinched but didn't fight him. She just let out a deep, tired breath that said she was done fighting. I slowly stroked her neck as I whispered, "Easy girl."

Her coat was dull and patchy, and I could feel the sharp outline of her ribs beneath my palm. She'd known hunger, neglect, and pain. And still, she stood there, trusting me to help her. I was working my fingers gently through the tangled strands of her mane when Dr. Lewis said, "This girl is tough. Not many who could withstand this

kind of torment.”

Tough.

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I knew what that kind of toughness meant.

It wasn't strength by choice.

It was survival.

Dr. Lewis reached for his tools, and as soon as he started scraping away at the hoof, the mare tensed. Her muscles coiled beneath my hand, and she let out a low, uneasy snort and shifted her weight. She was hurting. Hoping to comfort her, I pressed my forehead against her neck and whispered, "Shh, sweetheart. I know it hurts, but he's going to make it better. Just a little longer."

My hand drifted to my wrist, and I ran the tips of my fingers over the old, knotted break. The ache was faint, but it would never fully go away. I closed my eyes for just a second, and suddenly, I was twenty years old again, standing in the kitchen with Dimitri towering over me.

"You will do as you are told!"

His voice had been calm, but the rage in his eyes had me taking a step back. I knew better. I should've never questioned him, and now, it was going to cost me. I hadn't even seen his hand move before the pain shattered through my arm. It was white-hot and all-consuming.

I crumpled to the floor, and I immediately started crying as I clutched my wrist. He showed me no mercy. No comfort. He just gave me a cold, dead stare as he ordered, "Get up."

There would be no doctor.

There would be no x-ray or splint.

Just a scarf that the maid wrapped around it, and not another word. It wasn't that he didn't want anyone to know what he'd done. He did. He was proud of his cruelty. It was what led people to fear him, and it worked. No one crossed him—ever.

The mare shifted again and pulled me back to the present. I inhaled a deep breath and tried to push the memory down. It was over. Dimitri was dead, and I was here, free. But freedom came with ghosts, and some days, they felt all too real.

“Got as much as I can for today.” Dr. Lewis stood upright as he said, “She'll be sore, but it should help.”

“Okay. Good.”

He met my gaze. “You alright?”

“Better now.” I gave the mare another stroke of the neck as I said, “You did good, sweet girl. We're one step closer to getting you all better.”

“She doesn't know it yet, but she's one lucky girl.” Dr. Lewis gave me a soft smile. “The foal, too.”

“I just want to give them a fair chance.”

“Well, they definitely have that. They all do.” He started out of her stall as he said, “I'll go get started on the others.”

“Thanks, Dr. Lewis.”

“No need to thank me. That’s what I’m here for.”

He gave me a wink, then disappeared into the next stall. I stayed with Faith for a little longer, just stroking her and whispering soft reassurances, and it wasn’t long before she started leaning into my touch. The poor girl was exhausted. “It’s okay. You get some rest, and I’ll be back to check on you in a bit.”

I gave her one last pat, then stepped out of the stall and into the next. Dr. Lewis was already there working on the tall bay. He was nothing but skin and bones, and his long legs were too thin for his frame. I slipped into the stall and placed my hand on his shoulder. “Easy there, big fella. It’s just gonna hurt for a second.”

Dr. Lewis moved quickly and gave him the first shot. The horse stiffened, but I kept my hand steady against him, whispering soft reassurances.

"One more," Dr. Lewis muttered as he switched syringes.

The bay jerked when the second needle went in, but it was done. We moved through the barn, tending to each horse one by one. While he was there, he did his rounds with the thoroughbreds, making sure they were still on track and maintaining. It was slow work, but I didn’t mind. I could spend every minute of every day in the barn with my beauties.

By the time we finished, I was exhausted and ready for a cold drink. I thanked Dr. Lewis for his time, then made my way back up to the main house. I’d barely made it to the front porch when I heard Sergei’s voice. It was loud and angry, but I had no idea why.

Curious, I continued inside, and that’s when I heard him yell, "What the fuck were you thinking?"

I felt my stomach tighten.

"It was necessary," Nikolai answered. His voice was quieter but firm. And he wasn't backing down. "You've got all these big plans and no way to make them happen."

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"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," Sergei snapped.

"But I do, and you know I'm right. Otherwise, you wouldn't be so angry right now."

"That's bullshit! You don't make moves like that without discussing it first."

I gripped the door handle and eased it open. I stepped inside and quickly closed it behind me. My chest tightened as I listened to Sergei's voice boom through the house. It was low and sharp, just like his father's used to be, and it made my skin crawl.

"You're too damn impulsive, Nikolai. You're always letting your emotions get in the way, and one day, it's going to cost us."

Nikolai didn't respond right away.

When he finally did, his voice was cold and decisive. "You have all these big plans, Sergei, but you don't have the backing you need to see them through."

"I have the Volkov name! That's all I need!"

"If that's true, then, why did someone set that fire at the construction site last week? And why are our tools and equipment constantly being stolen?"

Nikolai kept his voice low and steady.

That was him.

He was full of emotion, but he kept it reigned in.

“That sort of thing just happens.”

“It shouldn’t. Not if the Volkov name has the power you think it does. If it did, then no one would dare to fuck with us or our construction site.”

“Maybe it’s time I remind them what happens when you cross a Volkov.”

His words echoed through the door, and I couldn’t help but think about Dimitri. There was a time when all he did was toss harsh words around, and the boys heard it all. They learned from it, especially Sergei.

He hadn’t just gotten his father’s temper but also the tone in his voice and the commanding presence. He’d spent his whole life trying to be the man his father expected him to be, and I had tried my damndest to keep him from it.

But some things were inevitable.

I stood there and listened as Nikolai pushed back. His voice was lower than his older brother’s, but it was just as firm. He’d never been as quick to anger as Sergei, and he was never as prone to violence. But he had his own kind of fire, and it was stubborn and unrelenting.

Whatever was happening between them, it wasn’t good.

And I had a feeling it was only just beginning.

I wanted to go inside and step in like I used to when they were little. I wanted to tell them to stop before they said something they couldn’t take back, but they weren’t kids anymore. They were men, and they had to sort this thing out for themselves.

“You would just make matters worse,” Nikolai argued. “We need these guys, Sergei. Satan’s Fury has built something here. They’ve made a name for themselves, and people don’t just fear them. They respect them, and that’s what makes them different. It’s one of the many reasons the Vault has done as well as it has.”

“They’re a goddamn biker club.”

I had no idea who they were talking about. I had never heard of Satan’s Fury, but it was clear they both had strong opinions about it. I just had no idea which one of them was right.

I could tell Nikolai was becoming frustrated when he shouted, “I don’t care what they are. They have something we don’t. They have a reputation that supersedes them. No one crosses them, and no one questions them.”

“This whole thing is nonsense,” Sergei grumbled. “We don’t need these guys. We don’t need anyone.”

"You're wrong...These people aren't going to forget what you did,"Nikolai continued, softer now."They're always gonna remember that you forced them out of their homes and shut down family businesses. You thought it was over when you signed on that dotted line, but it's far from over."

Silence.

I could picture Sergei standing in his office with his jaw tight, and fists curled at his sides. It was the same way he used to look at his father when he was tearing into him for being too much like me. He would just stand there, taking in every cruel word. It was during these vicious attacks that my son learned that power was the only thing that mattered.

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"And you really think this Preacher guy is the answer?"

"I think Satan's Fury is the answer," Nikolai corrected. "They've been where we are, and they know the challenges we face. They know how to run things without constantly looking over their shoulder. If we have their backing and not just the Volkov name, then maybe, just maybe, we can make this thing with the casino work."

It sounded smart.

It was well thought out, and most of all, it was right.

It was exactly the kind of thinking Sergei should have been doing from the start. The house seemed to go still as Sergei processed it all. He had always been so certain that his way was the only way, but Nikolai might've just proven him wrong.

I didn't know what Sergei would decide.

But I had a feeling whatever came next would change everything.

5

PREACHER

"So, you're really considering this?"

"Need more information before I can make a final decision."

Memphis gave me a look, and I got it. This was out of the norm, and it was weighing on me in ways I couldn't begin to explain. His scowl intensified as he grumbled, "They kidnapped Seven's girl and did God knows what to her brother. I'd think that would be all the information you should need."

I thought back to my conversation with Nikolai, and while it was brief, it left a lasting impression.

As soon as I sat down, I told him, "Alright, you got my attention. Now, why don't you tell me what the hell you're doing here."

"I was hoping to have a word with you." He leaned in and rested his elbows on the table. "I'm guessing you know who I am."

"I do."

"So, that means you know about my brothers as well." I nodded, and he quickly continued, "You've really built something here."

"Yeah, and?"

"It's impressive." He glanced around the club, and his eyes were sharp as he took everything in. "Satan's Fury has a name that carries weight, and not just in Little Rock. And this place runs like a goddamn machine. No loose ends. No unnecessary heat. Just steady business and total control. That's rare."

I wasn't one for flattery, especially from someone I didn't trust, so I leaned forward and rested my forearms on the table between us. "If you came here to stroke my ego, you're wasting your time."

Nikolai smiled like he expected me to push.

His smirk remained as he told me, "I'd like to request a meet between your brothers and mine."

Before giving me a chance to ask questions, he stood and said, "Our place. Tomorrow night at 7:00."

I was tempted to tell him to fuck off, but something in my gut told me this was a meet we needed to take. With that in mind, I looked up at my son and said, "Broader picture than that. They brought no harm to Tallie, even when they knew we had their driver and guard. In my book, that means something."

"I guess you have a point." Memphis crossed his arms. "So, now what?"

"I'm waiting to hear back from Cotton. He's got more connections than anyone." I leaned back in my chair and sighed. "He's gonna do some digging, and hopefully, he can tell me exactly who these boys are involved with and what they have planned for this casino they're building."

"He gave you no idea what they might want?" Grim asked, sounding more than a little skeptical.

"Showed an interest in how we run things. Didn't give many details. Just that he wants us at their place tomorrow night. And before you say anything, I don't like the idea either. I got a feeling something is up there."

"Like what?" Grim asked with concern. "You think they're gonna pull something?"

"No, not exactly." I thought back to my brief conversation with Nikolai, and I couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't telling me something. "I just think there's something off like he wasn't even all that sure what he wanted from us."

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"Ain't too keen on walking into their house blind." Grim let out a low breath as he shook his head. "Especially when you've got a feeling, cause those feelings of yours are never wrong."

"That's why we aren't going in blind."

Goose leaned forward with a smirk pulling at his lips. "What's the play, then?"

"We go in prepared." I tapped my fingers against the table as I ran through the plan in my head. "Me, Creed, and Seven will take the meet. Ghost and Grim, you'll be outside, watching the perimeter. Rusty and the prospects will keep eyes on the road in and out, so if something goes sideways, we'll have a way out."

Creed nodded. "Weapons?"

"Low profile," I said. "We're not walking in there looking for a fight, but we sure as hell aren't going in there unarmed."

Memphis let out a low chuckle. "Glad we're on the same page there."

"I see no point in taking any unnecessary risks with these guys. They've been here for a couple of years now and haven't caused us any trouble. I'm hoping to keep it that way."

"You really think they want to work with us?" Goose asked. "Or is this just a way to size us up?"

"In all honesty, it could be both," I admitted. "We all know what Sergei's done to get that casino. He's made some enemies along the way. Maybe he's trying to decide if we're one of them."

"Or he's going to try to get us to clean up his mess," Creed suggested. "They know what kind of power the Fury name carries."

"It's a possibility, but we won't know until we get there." I let my gaze sweep over the room. "Make no mistake... this meet isn't about what they want. It's about what we want. We will decide if it is worth our time, and we'll discuss the terms. If it's not something we're up for, we walk."

Ghost cracked his knuckles, the only sign he was even remotely interested. "And if they try to play us?"

"Then they learn real fast why no one fucks with Satan's Fury," Grim growled.

And just like that, the table went quiet. Everyone knew this wasn't just some business meet. This was about control and making sure the Volkov brothers knew exactly who they were dealing with. I stood as I told them, "Tomorrow night at seven. Be ready."

I dismissed the meeting with a nod and walked out, leaving the brothers to talk amongst themselves. I made my way down the hall toward the bar. The club was quiet. Most of the regulars had gone for the night or were tucked away in their rooms. I was ready to do the same, but first, I needed a drink.

As soon as I got to the bar, I grabbed a bottle of bourbon and claimed a spot in the back. I was about to pour myself a drink when Misty slid up next to me. She was one of the hang-arounds, and one of her many jobs was to keep the brothers happy—and that didn't just mean keeping their bellies full. Misty was one of the younger hang-arounds, and she was eager. Not only to please but to get her hooks into one of the

brothers.

And tonight, she had her sights set on me.

Her lips curved into that teasing little smirk she always wore when she had something on her mind. “Hey there, handsome.”

She was a pretty girl and always accommodating. She was wearing a pair of tight, cut-off jeans and a low-cut top that showed off plenty of cleavage, and she had no problem showing it. I gave her a slight nod. “Hey, yourself.”

“You having a good night?”

“Pfft. I’ve had better.”

“Ah, that’s too bad. Maybe I could turn things around for ya,” she purred, dragging a finger down my arm.

I brought the glass to my lips and took a slow sip, letting the burn settle deep before answering. “That so?”

“Um-hmm.” She leaned in, pressing herself against me just enough to make her point. “You’re always taking care of everyone else. Maybe it’s time someone took care of you for a change.”

On any other night, I might’ve let her.

I might’ve let her lead me back to my room and let her drown out the thoughts raging in my head.

But not tonight.

I took another sip of my drink before answering, "Not tonight, Misty."

"Are you sure?" she pouted. "I'll show you a real good time."

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I gave her a stern look, and her smirk instantly faltered. Embarrassment marked her face as she stepped back and nodded. “Okay. But you know where to find me if you change your mind.”

She gave me a wink before sauntering off. I ran my hand down my beard and grumbled under my breath before picking up my drink again. I glanced over my shoulder and watched as Misty planted herself in Goose’s lap. I had to give it to the girl. She was tenacious.

I finished another glass before deciding to turn in early. I left the bottle on the table and headed down to my room. After a long, hot shower, I crawled into bed and closed my eyes, but as usual, sleep didn’t come.

I just lay there letting my mind drift from one thing to the next, and my head was all over the place—Beckett, Memphis, the club, the brothers lost, and the brothers gained. Most of all, I thought about the Volkovs and what lay ahead.

When the sun finally broke, I gave up on sleep and got to work. I kept myself busy going over inventory and checking in with the prospects. I handled all the usual day-to-day shit that kept things running, and when I was done, I went out and worked on my bike.

Before I knew it, the boys were gathering, and it was time to load up. Seven and Grim did a final check, making sure everyone was prepared for what lay ahead, and then, it was time to roll out.

Creed and Seven got in the SUV with me, and seconds later, we were pulling through

the gates. We didn't speak. We were all doing what we had to do to get our heads in the game. I was eager to get there and find out what the hell these guys wanted from us.

I thought back to my earlier conversation with Cotton.

He'd called while I was working on my bike, and he made it clear from the start that the Volkov brothers were not their father. They'd walked away from his businesses and cut ties with most of his old affiliates, especially the ones who'd helped build his empire.

They wanted a fresh start, but that didn't mean they had a clean slate. Cotton didn't mince words when he said, "They might've turned their backs on their old man, but they didn't change their ways. They still do business the way he did. Fast, brutal, and without a second thought. They don't give a damn about burning bridges. With the kind of money they have, they don't need bridges. They're the kind who think they can just build new ones whenever and wherever the fuck they want."

That stuck with me.

Most men had to play their cards right to stay in the game. The Volkovs thought they could throw down whatever hand they wanted and still come out on top. That was a dangerous way of thinking, and eventually, it would catch up with them.

When we got close, I glanced over at Creed and Seven. Like me, they were sitting on go and didn't say a word as I pulled up to the long, gated driveway. I had to give it to the Volkov brothers. Their place was impressive. They had wrought iron gates that stood tall and were monitored by security cameras and a security booth, leaving no doubt there were plenty of eyes on us.

As we rolled up, one of the guards stepped forward. Already knowing who we were,

he gave me a nod and pressed the button to open the gate. I drove forward, and the full sight of the Volkov estate came into view.

The mansion itself was massive and screamed power and money. There were stone columns, towering windows, and balconies that overlooked the front drive.

But it wasn't the house that impressed me the most. It was what sat behind it. There was a large pasture with a hundred to two hundred acres lined with dark, wooden fencing and a barn big enough to put most homes to shame. It was brown with black trim and looked to be at least two stories. And then, there were the horses. From what I could see, there were twenty or more, ranging from thoroughbreds to the downtrodden.

I hadn't taken Nikolai or Sergei for the horse-raising type, but then again, I didn't know shit about any of them. We came to a stop at the end of the circular drive, and I killed the engine. Ghost and the others held back, watching from the main road as we got out and more guards stepped forward.

A tall, broad-shouldered bastard with cold eyes gave me a single nod. "Sergei's waiting inside."

That was it.

No bullshit security check.

No pat down.

They weren't worried about us being armed. Either they trusted we wouldn't start shit, or they were confident they could put us down if we did. I didn't question it. I simply met the guard's eye and nodded back before turning to my brothers. "Alright. Let's do this."

As we drew closer, the door opened, and Sergei appeared with a stern look on his face. He was dressed in a tailored, black suit that made him look like he was meeting with a bunch of bankers instead of outlaws. He tucked his hands in his pockets as he sized us up, then gave us a quick nod. "Preacher. Creed. Seven. I appreciate you accepting our invitation."

He knew us each by name. That meant he'd done his research. That was fine by me. I'd done my own. "Nikolai requested a meet."

"So, I've heard." Something about his tone made me question whether he had known about the request. Before I had a chance to question him, he motioned his hand behind him and said, "Why don't we talk it over in my office."

I nodded, and Sergei turned and started down the hall. We trailed behind him, moving down a long hallway lined with expensive paintings and antique furniture. We hadn't gone far when Sergei opened a door and led us into his office. It was a big, lavish room filled with more expensive furniture and a table in the back corner. Sitting at the table were two men I already knew by name, Viktor and Nikolai.

We all made our way over, and my eyes met Nikolai's. Like before, he was calm and collected. He showed no emotion as he gave a slight tilt of his head, silently acknowledging my presence. While Viktor was bigger with narrowed eyes, he seemed the less threatening of the three.

Like his brother, he didn't speak, but I wasn't surprised. These were the kind of men who didn't speak unless they had to, but when they did, people listened.

Sergei gestured to the table. "Make yourselves comfortable."

We all complied, and as soon as we were settled, I looked Sergei dead in the eye and said, "Alright. We're here. Now, tell us why."

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“Well, to start, you should know that I knew nothing about this meet.” His eyes skirted over to Nikolai. “It was all my brother’s doing...”

Creed and Seven exchanged a look, but I kept my focus on Sergei. He was clearly the one in charge. He exhaled and rolled his shoulders like the whole thing was an inconvenience to him. "I was against it. Didn't see the need, but Nikolai convinced me otherwise.”

“And how did he do that?”

“It took some convincing. We’ve worked hard to build something here, something we can be proud of, but even with our father’s legacy, we’ve run into some setbacks. They’ve been minor, but there’s no guarantees that the problems won’t continue and possibly even grow worse.”

“What kind of setbacks?”

“Just some random issues. Some vandalism and a few stolen goods...”

“Over a hundred grand of goods,” Nikolai interjected.

“Yes, and a fire at the site,” Viktor answered. “We found the culprits and dealt with them quickly and harshly. It should’ve been enough to end our troubles, but we’ve had some vandalism and issues with security cameras and lights.”

“They keep fucking with us, even though they know there will be consequences.”

I cocked my brow. "Fear is a powerful thing, but it has limits."

"Exactly. We don't just want power. We want respect."

"And you think we can give you that?"

"I know you can," Nikolai answered without hesitation.

"And I have high hopes that my brother is right," Sergei added. "Your club runs like a fucking empire. Your men are loyal, disciplined, and your Vault is a goddamn goldmine. And that's because of you and how you run it. No one questions Satan's Fury. No one underestimates them. That's the kind of weight we want behind us."

I studied them, taking my time before answering. "You're not looking for a partner. You're looking for a way to clean up your mess."

"We want a partnership." Sergei kept his eyes trained on me as he said, "Not just some temporary deal or a one-time favor. We want to work with you. We want to work with Satan's Fury."

Before I had a chance to respond, there was a tap on the office door, and one of the guards stepped in. He looked at Sergei and said, "I need a word."

"Not now."

"It's important," he insisted.

"It will be just as important five minutes from now," Sergei snapped.

I could see the hesitation in the guard's eyes, and he was clearly struggling. He went to close the door, but stopped and announced, "We have looters at the casino."

“Okay. Take care of it.”

“Your mother is there.”

The blood drained from Sergei’s face as he and his brothers stood. “Dammit, Denson! Why didn’t you say that from the beginning!”

“I’m sorry,” Nikolai started. “We’ve got to cut this short.”

“If it’s all the same to you, we’d like the opportunity to see how you boys handle your business.”

Sergei was already halfway to the door. “If you want to come, then come.”

I didn’t respond.

I simply gave Creed and Seven a nod, and the three of us followed the Volkov’s outside. As we started out of the drive, I glanced over at Creed, and I could tell by his expression that he was thinking the same thing I was.

We didn’t have to wonder whether they needed us.

It was clear they did.

The question was whether we needed them.

6

TABITHA

I've never been much of a decorator. I never really had the chance. My parents didn't have the money for the basics, much less unnecessary décor. And even when I was older and on my own, I didn't have the means. Dimitri made sure of that. He had his people design every corner of our home, down to the family photos arranged on the mantle.

Back then, my opinions had never mattered.

But the boys didn't inherit that way of thinking from their father.

Instead, they valued my opinion. There were times when they actually sought it, like when they asked me to help design the interior of the casino. Most of it was cut and dry. Dark colors and low lighting were common themes throughout, but the entertainment areas and the bars were a different matter, especially the main bar.

It was at the center of the casino and would be an essential component of the building. As I stood there, staring at the blank canvas, I felt something stir inside of me. I was excited about getting the opportunity to help design one of the many bars in the casino. It was my chance to create something from the ground up, and I wanted to

make the space feel warm and inviting. I wanted to make it special.

It wasn't exactly easy—it was in a casino, after all.

But I wasn't just excited. I was determined.

It was late, well past normal working hours, and the construction workers had gone home for the day. The walls were finally up, so the bones of the place were finally coming together. Now was the perfect time for Marissa, our interior designer, and I to take a good look at the place.

I glanced around the room that would soon become the heart of the casino, and my imagination started running wild. I had such grand plans for the place. It was one of several bars we'd planned, but this one was going to be the main draw. I wanted it to feel elegant and sophisticated but not so cold that people felt out of place.

It needed charm.

Southern charm.

"After we talked last week, I put together a few concepts I think you will love." Marissa was holding an iPad in her manicured hands. "They are just what this place needs."

She turned the screen toward me and started flipping through the different images. They were all sleek, modern designs with glass shelving, stark white marble countertops, and chrome accents. They were all beautiful, but they were also cold and lacked any real soul.

I immediately shook my head and said, "No."

"No?" Caught off guard, Marissa stammered, "B-But you said..."

"This isn't what I want. These feel too detached. Like something you'd find in a high-end hotel bar in New York. That's not what we're doing here."

"I thought we agreed on a refined aesthetic?"

"Refined doesn't mean lifeless." I turned and gestured to the open space around us. "We're in the south. We need warm tones, rich wood, and brass fixtures instead of chrome. I'm thinking of deep leather booths and soft loungers that invite people to sit down and stay awhile. I want it to be the kind of place where not only deals are made, but old friends hang out and talk."

"I see." Marissa hesitated, and it was clear she was struggling with my vision when she said, "But if we go too rustic, it could..."

I held up a hand. "Not rustic. Classic. Southern charm isn't about mason jars and farmhouse sinks. It's about warmth. A place that feels clean and well thought out but lived in. Like the bars you find in Savannah or New Orleans. A sense of history and elegance, but with a heartbeat."

"Okay." She smiled. "I can work with that."

"I knew you could."

"Let's look through a few options and see what speaks to you."

"Sounds great."

Marissa flipped through a few images on her iPad, and together, we picked out a few that seemed to go with the aesthetic I had in mind. My vision for the bar was finally

starting to take shape, and I was starting to get excited when my focus was drawn to heavy footsteps coming up behind me. Before I could turn, a sharp, furious voice cut through the air, "Sothis is what those Volkov assholes stole my house for?"

I turned and found three men rushing into the room. They were covered in dust and sweat like they'd just come from a work site. The taller of the three seemed to be the one leading the group. He had broad shoulders and scraggly hair. His eyes were wild and full of rage as they scanned the room.

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His lips curled with disgust as he growled, "Adamn casino?Are you kidding me?"

Marissa stepped back, and I could see from her pale face that she was terrified. I, on the other hand, was angry. This was my sons' place, and they had no business coming in here bad-mouthing them. "You're trespassing."

"Oh,I'mtrespassing?" He let out a sharp laugh, shaking his head. His voice dripped with venom. "On what used to be my land? Where my business used to be? Where my home used to be? Before those lowlife assholes stole it from me and bulldozed it to the fucking ground?"

His words settled like stones in my chest.

I knew what Sergei and his brothers had done to get this property. I hadn't been part of it, but I wasn't naïve to the weight of it either. They'd hurt a lot of people, and they all held grudges. Some more than others. Some felt the betrayal deep in their bones, and they wanted vengeance—just like the man standing in front of me.

I tried to keep my tone soft and nonthreatening as I told him, "I understand that you're upset, but this isn't the time or the place for this."

"Don'ttalk down to me," he hissed. "I go where I wanna go when I wanna go, and you aren't gonna do a fucking thing about it!"

His friend, a wiry man with nervous eyes, hovered just behind him, and I could tell by his expression that he didn't like how things were going. The other guy had already stepped back, and I could barely see his face. I knew I was on shaky ground

when I told him, “This is private property. You need to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere!”

The slight shift of his jacket revealed a flash of metal at his hip.

He had a gun.

Damn.

His whole body tensed, and rage poured off him as he shouted, “I’m done having people run over me!”

“I don’t know what you plan to accomplish here.”

“I plan to make those assholes pay for what they did!”

Clearly nervous and wanting to leave, his friend shifted behind him. "Come on, man. Let’s just get out of here.”

"I’m not leaving!" the man snapped, his hand hovering near his waist. "These people didn’t give a fuck when they stole my land. Maybe I should take something from you and see how you like it."

Panic set in.

I wasn’t stupid.

He was angry and desperate, and that was a dangerous combination.

I had no idea what I was going to do when the doors behind me burst open. Sergei

stormed into the room with Viktor and Nikolai.

Behind them were three men in leather vests, and each one looked more menacing than the next. I knew right away who they were. They were the men Sergei and Nikolai were fighting over the night before. I had no idea why they had come here tonight, but it was clear they were a force to be reckoned with.

The older man with silver hair and beautiful dark eyes took in the scene with a scowl. The other two stood protectively at his side, watching and assessing every move that was made.

Sergei charged toward us as he roared, "Get the fuck away from her! Right fucking now!"

"It's you!" the man shouted. "You're the lowlife fucker who stole my land!"

"That's right." Sergei took a step towards him. "I'm the one you want. Now, get the fuck away from her."

The man didn't budge.

Instead, his anger flared hotter, and before anyone could react, he drew his weapon. My gasp echoed through the room as he aimed it at my oldest son and snarled, "You and that piece of shit lawyer of yours stole everything from me! You left me with nothing!"

"We didn't steal anything," Sergei scoffed. "We bought this land and the properties around it fair and square."

"This land has been in my family for years, and you think you can just take it, and we're just gonna let you get away with it!"

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"You can blame me all you want, but we both know who's to blame." Sergei shook his head with condemnation. "You should've paid your damn taxes."

This wasn't good.

Instead of trying to defuse the situation, my son was antagonizing him.

I don't know what he was thinking. This guy was already on edge and had a gun pointed at him. The man's entire body was trembling with fury, and his finger started to squeeze the trigger.

Dear Lord. He was going to do it.

He was going to shoot Sergei.

Sergei reached behind him and drew his weapon. He started charging towards the man but stopped when the older biker lifted his hand and shook his head. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Sergei didn't take orders from anyone, not even his father, but with a simple hand gesture, this guy had my son lowering his weapon and stepping back.

Confused by Sergei's sudden change in demeanor, the man glanced around, and the blood drained from his face when he saw the biker walking towards him. Uncertainty flickered across his face. "You who I think you are?"

"I am." The biker kept his face free of emotion. "Folks call me Preacher."

“You’re with Fury.”

“I am.”

“But what are you doing here...with them?”

“That’s not any concern of yours.” The biker took a step forward. “You Larry Branson’s boy?”

“Yeah.” The man lowered his head. “Bet he’s rolling over in his grave right about now.”

“He was a good man. I doubt he’d want his one and only son to be in a spot like this.” The biker glanced down at the gun in the man’s hand. “Why don’t you put that away before you lose more than just your land?”

“This guy’s got it coming.”

"Maybe so, but you’re about to make a choice you can’t take back."

Preacher was calm, confident, and with ease, he had full control of the situation. And I was spellbound. I’d never seen a man handle himself in such a determined manner. Dimitri was just the opposite. He wouldn’t have wasted time with words. He would’ve just had one of his men kill him right then and there, and the whole thing would be over.

But Preacher wasn’t so quick to take a stranger’s life.

Instead, he was diffusing the situation with reason and presence, and it was effective. More than that—it was impressive.

And to my unfathomable surprise, I found myself drawn to that quiet authority. I found myself drawn to him, which made no sense whatsoever. This man was in a biker club, and they called him Preacher. And not only that, he was tattooed and dangerous and unbelievably sexy.

Clearly, I needed therapy, and lots of it.

Preacher walked slowly toward the man, and he spoke low and calm as he said, "I get that you're pissed. Sounds like you have every right to be, but there's got to be a better way to handle this."

The man didn't respond.

He just stood there staring at the biker, and the silence was suffocating.

And then, the man's grip loosened. His arm dropped, and he let out a ragged breath. Sergei turned to his brothers and demanded, "Get him the fuck out of here. And his buddies, too."

Nikolai and Viktor moved in, pulling the man and his friends toward the exit. He didn't resist. His fight was gone.

As they dragged him away, Preacher turned his focus to me, and I was dazed by the intensity of dark eyes as they slowly skirted over me. "You alright?"

"I am. Thanks to you." I exhaled shakily and tried to force a smile. "I really appreciate your help."

"Don't mention it."

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With that, he and his buddies turned and started out of the room. They hadn't gotten far when Sergei realized they were leaving. He rushed after them, and after speaking to them for only a moment, he made his way back over to me. "What are you doing here so late?"

"It's not even eight o'clock, Sergei."

"You have no business being here at this hour!" He threw his hands in the air with frustration. "That guy could've killed you."

"He could've killed you, too," I scoffed. "And he would have if your friend hadn't stopped him."

"I would've handled it."

"You sound like your father." Before he could snap back, I raised my hand, stopping him. "We were both lucky. Now, you and your brothers need to do something about the security around here. These men should've never been able to get in here."

"We'll take care of it."

"I'm sure you will." I reached over and gave him a quick hug. "I'm going home."

"I'll take you."

"No, I can take myself." I motioned my head over to Marissa. "Besides, I need to make sure we still have a decorator."

“I’m sorry about all this, Mother.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just fix it, Sergei. Fix all of it, or this whole thing could come crashing down on all of us.”

Without saying anything more, I went over and smoothed things over with Marissa. As we talked, I glanced over at Sergei and his brothers. I had no doubt that they were forging some grand plan to make sure this kind of thing never happened again.

I loved my boys more than anything. I knew how much this casino meant to them. Sergei wanted it to be their mark on this world, and I wanted them to have it.

But dreams like theirs came at a cost.

They were going to face some hard days. I just hoped they had the mindset to face those days therightway.

Not with arrogance.

Not with their father’s brutality.

Because they were in a situation where they could either build an empire or destroy one. Only time would tell.

7

PREACHER

“What do we know about Larry Branson’s kid?”

“Not much. Just that he came back from the military a few years back and was

running his family's bar up until about six months ago. The place shut down and sold, just like several others in the area. Next thing you know, the whole strip was bulldozed to the ground."

"Damn. That's rough."

"Even rougher that his wife left him a month or so later, and she took the kids with her."

"Yeah, that had to be a tough pill to swallow." I took a drink of my coffee before asking, "So, was it really about the taxes, or did he get swindled?"

The Branson's bar used to be right where the new casino was sitting. There was a cigarette shop and a couple of restaurants on the same strip, and his house was just down the block. It wasn't much. None of them were, but those places meant something to them, and now, they were gone.

Shep knew exactly where I was coming from when he answered, "Pretty much a mix of the two. He was more than a month behind. It was more like two years, and he was up to his eyeballs in debt and had no way to pay them. The Volkovs used the opportunity to swoop in and grab the place for dirt cheap."

"I was afraid of that."

I thought back to the night before, and I could still remember the look of frustration and desperation in that boy's eyes.

I'd seen that look many times in my day.

It was a look that a man gave when he'd reached his limit.

Sergei had to know he was on the brink, but he didn't back down. Instead, the smug bastard taunted him. It was like he wasn't even fazed by the fact that the man in front of him was pointing a gun at his head and was seconds away from pulling the damn trigger.

Things were going south, and I knew I had no choice but to try and intervene. It wasn't until I stepped closer that I recognized the man as Branson's son. I didn't know much about him, just that he'd taken over his father's bar a few months before he died. He'd tried to make a go of it, and clearly, he'd failed.

He wasn't a bad guy. Just a desperate one. And I couldn't shake the feeling that, given the right opportunity, he could do something with his life.

Maybe we could give him that.

I leaned back in my chair as I asked, "We got a place for him at the Vault? Maybe a bouncer or bartender?"

"I could find a spot for him," Seven answered. "But need to find out if he's interested."

"Let's call him in and see what he has to say."

“You got it.”

Satan’s Fury had always looked after our own. Sometimes, we even looked after those who weren’t. Branson’s boy was in a tight spot. He had nothing to lose, but it wouldn’t take much for that to change. He needed a chance, and for whatever reason, I felt compelled to give it to him.

I don’t know what it was about him, but he’d gotten under my skin. And he wasn’t the only one. She had, too.

I didn’t have to ask to know who she was. The resemblance was too strong. She had the same sharp features as Sergei and the same quiet intensity as Nikolai. There was no doubt about it.

She was their mother.

I wasn’t often caught off guard, but the sight of her damn near took my breath away. She was the kind of beauty that stood the test of time. She might’ve been fifty, maybe younger, and she had shoulder-length hair with a gray streak that framed her face effortlessly. And her eyes—hazel, deep, and burdened—felt like they could see straight through me.

She carried herself with a quiet kind of power that didn’t need to be announced. It was in the way she moved and the way she spoke.

Calm, controlled, and unwavering.

I’d met plenty of strong women in my time, but there was something different about her. Something that stuck with me long after I walked out of that building.

It had been a long time since a woman had gotten under my skin like that, and I

wasn't sure I liked it. But that didn't stop me from turning to Shep and saying, "I need you to look into the mother."

"You want to know anything in particular?"

"Anything and everything." Before he could ask why, I added, "We need to know all aspects of this partnership, and that includes her."

"Already done." He smirked like he was getting one over on me. "I checked her out when I was looking into the brothers, but there wasn't much to find. Her name's Tabitha. She grew up in New York, and her folks were dirt poor. Her mother got sick. Really sick, and there wasn't much they could do for her."

"So, how'd she end up with someone like Dimitri Volkov?"

"Hard to say. Something must've happened because she married him right around the time her mother died. Hell, she was only sixteen at the time."

His tone turned pointed at that last bit like he knew I'd catch the weight of it. And I did. "Yeah, there's a story there."

"No doubt, but I have no idea what it is." He shook his head. "There's no paper trail. No records. Just one day, she's a poor kid with a sick mother, and the next, she's married to one of the most dangerous men in the state."

"What else you got?"

"Nothing that you don't already know." Shep shrugged. "She's got three sons and has always kept to herself. When Dimitri died, they sold everything and moved here. Now, she spends most of her time working with horses."

“Horses?”

“Yeah, the barn in the back of the property is hers. She’s got everything from million-dollar horses to broken-down mares that she saved from a kill pen.”

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“Hmm.” This woman was full of surprises. “So, you think she’s clean?”

“She’s careful.” His eyes locked on mine. “And careful people usually got a reason to be.”

“So, what are you thinking?” Seven interjected. “Are we going to partner with these guys or what?”

“I have questions that need to be answered before I can make a final call. We still don’t know what they want from us or what we’ll get in return.”

“Sounded like they want us to clean up their fucking mess, and after the glimpse we got last night, I’m thinking that’s gonna be a hell of an undertaking.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. We won’t know until we get some answers.”

Seven leaned forward as he asked, “When are you going to talk to him again?”

“I’ll set something up for later today or first thing tomorrow.”

“We going to play it like we did the last meet?”

I looked over to Creed as I answered, “No need in the whole brigade. We’ll be fine with just Grim and Seven.”

“Sounds good to me. Just let me know when and where.”

I nodded, then pushed my chair back from the table. “No sense keeping you boys any longer. We’ll talk more when we actually know what we’re dealing with.”

They each nodded, and chairs scraped against the floor as the guys started to disperse. Low chuckles and familiar banter filled the air as they made their way toward the door. Memphis was about to walk out the door when I called, “Hey, Memphis.”

“Yeah?”

I motioned for him to come over, and as he started to make his way over, I took the moment to take him in. My boy. My son. My legacy. He had grown into a hell of a man. He was someone I would not only trust with my life but also with my club, and I was damn proud to call him mine.

Our journey had not been an easy one. Not by a long shot.

It was hard to picture the boy he used to be—the one I used to pick up and drop off every other weekend. Week after week, I tried to pretend that I didn’t know that all the back and forth was tearing him in two. I knew it. Kay knew it, too. But we were too damn stubborn to do anything about it.

He was just a kid, caught between two people who once loved each other but couldn’t make it work. I told myself we were doing the best we could, but deep down, I knew we could’ve done better, and we should’ve.

I could still remember the way he’d cling to Kay’s side when I came to get him. His little hands would grip hers like he wasn’t sure he should let go. We’d spend a great weekend together, and when I took him back, he’d watch me like he was afraid I wouldn’t come back.

I should’ve known what I was doing to him.

I should've done better—for him and his mother.

Hell, the guilt of it all never really left me. Probably never would.

But he made out alright. He came to live with me when he turned sixteen and started prospecting as soon as he turned twenty-one. He was working his way up the ranks when the wreck happened.

That phone call nearly took me to my knees.

There's nothing worse than hearing that your kid has been in an accident. But hearing that my son had laid out on the road, broken and bruised, for the better part of the night gutted me. It was tough seeing him laid up in that hospital bed. It was even worse seeing his spirit hanging by a thread. But he pulled through. He fought like hell to get back on his feet, and he had Antonia by his side every step of the way.

I wasn't blind to what she did for him.

None of us were.

We all knew she was his anchor when the weight of it all threatened to pull him under. And now, she was more than just the woman who helped him heal. She was his ol' lady.

Once he made his way over, I gave him a fatherly pat on the shoulder and asked, "You good?"

"Can't complain." He gave me one of his looks as he asked, "What about you? Have you recovered from last night?"

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“Ah, wasn’t nothing to recover from.”

“You say that like I don’t know that dude was a loose cannon.” He shook his head.

“You’re lucky you didn’t get your ass shot getting in the middle of that bullshit.”

“It wasn’t all that bad. The guy just needed to blow off some steam. You’d be the same way if you’d just lost everything that meant something to ya.”

“If you say so.” He crossed his arms with a sigh of disapproval. “You’re gonna have to start being more careful.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“Pop. I already lost Beck. Don’t wanna lose my ol’ man, too.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“So, you’re doing better with things?”

“I’m good.” I hadn’t told him about the dreams or the sinking pit in my stomach, and I had no plans to. He’d struggled with the loss of his brother, and I had no intention of adding to his pain. “What about you?”

“Taking things one day at a time.”

Ready to change the subject, I asked, “What about Antonia? How’s she making it?”

“She’s good.” His mouth curled slightly. “Real good.”

“Is that right?” His grin widened in a way I hadn’t seen in quite some time. “Something going on?”

“Maybe.”

“Memphis.”

“What?” He gave me a light-hearted shrug. “I told ya. She’s good.”

“Um-hmm.” I cocked my brow. “Why do I get the feeling there’s something you aren’t telling me?”

“Cause there’s something I’m not telling ya,” he admitted. “And I’m not gonna, or Antonia would have my ass.”

“I see.”

I didn’t press. I didn’t have to.

It was written all over his face. My son was going to be a father. I might’ve read it wrong, but I felt confident in my guess. The thought of him having a kid made my chest tighten with pride. I gave him a slow nod and patted his shoulder, letting my hand rest there for just a second longer than usual. “Just let me know when you can.”

Memphis nodded, his eyes flashing with something unspoken. “You’ll be the first to know.”

He gave me a wink, then turned and walked out, leaving me feeling a little lighter than I had only minutes prior.

Unfortunately, it wasn't a feeling that would last for long.

I started for the door, and my burner started to ring. I took it out of my pocket, and when I looked down at the screen, I groaned at the sight of Sergei's name. I let out a long breath before answering, "You've got Preacher."

"We need to talk."

"We certainly do."

"Can you meet me at the house in an hour?"

"Yeah. I can make that work."

"Appreciate it. See you then."

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As soon as I ended the call, I went out front to track down Creed. He and Seven were talking to Goose, and as usual, he had them chuckling over something stupid he'd said. Their laughter fell silent, and their attention was all on me as soon as I walked up. "Just got a call from Sergei. He wants to meet."

"When?"

"Within the next hour."

"I'll go with you," Creed offered.

"No, Seven can go. I need you to stay here and keep an eye on things."

"You got it."

Creed sounded concerned as he asked, "You sure going over there with just one cover is a good idea?"

"Sergei might be an asshole, but he isn't stupid. We'll be fine."

"Okay, but we'll be sitting on go, just in case."

"Good deal. I'll call if we run into any trouble."

Seven and I headed out to the parking lot and got on our bikes. It was a nice day. I saw no reason to let it go to waste, so we took the long route to Sergei's house. It was a good call. The sun was shining bright, and it gave me some much-needed therapy. I

didn't have to think. I could just enjoy the open road and the steady growl of my engine. The weight of everything started to ease with every mile.

Seven rode right there beside me. He was solid as ever. My brother. My SOA. We'd been through hell and back together, but we were still here and going strong. No matter what lay ahead, we'd handle it. Just like we always did.

When we rolled up to the house, the guard let us through the gate, and we drove down to the house. I parked and was taking off my helmet when my attention was drawn over to the barn where Tabitha was out at the front gate. She was brushing one of the horses, and the wind was blowing through her long hair.

But she didn't pay it any mind.

Her focus was on the horse and nothing else.

Damn.

This woman was something else. Even in a pair of jeans and a simple gray T-shirt, she was all class, but not the kind that felt like she was trying. This was effortless. This was just who she was, and damned if I wasn't intrigued by it. Unable to stop myself, I got off my bike and glanced over at Seven. "Give me a minute."

He gave me a knowing look but didn't say a word. He just gave me a nod and stayed by the bikes. I made my way toward her, and it wasn't until I got closer that she finally looked up. Her hazel eyes locked on mine, and just like the night before, I felt something stir in me that I no longer thought existed.

I stepped up to the fence as I told her, "Afternoon."

"Afternoon." A small smile slipped across her full lips before she went back to

brushing the horse. “How are you?”

“I was just about to ask you the same.”

“I’m good.” Her gaze lingered for a moment. “Thanks again for your help last night. That could’ve turned into a real mess.”

The way she said it, so low and genuine, made my chest tighten. “Just did what needed doing.”

“Appreciated all the same.” She studied me, those sharp eyes of hers seeing more than I was probably comfortable with. “I love my boys. All three of them. They’re good men, and I probably shouldn’t say this, especially to you, but Sergei can be a bit bullheaded at times.”

“Not exactly a secret.” I chuckled. “I knew that the second I met him, but he’s no more bullheaded than I am.”

“I don’t know. I don’t see you as the bullheaded type.” Her eyes quickly skirted over me, and there was no denying that there was something going on between us, something that lingered just beneath the surface. “You seem more like the type who picks his battles.”

“That so?”

“Just my take.” She ran the brush down the horse’s side once again. “You strike me as a man who knows when to push and when to step back. Bullheaded men don’t have that kind of patience.”

She wasn’t wrong.

I didn't waste time on fights that didn't matter.

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But when I knew something deep in my gut, I had no problem standing my ground. Hell, I'd dig my heels in and never let up.

And right now, with the way her eyes lingered on mine and the warm churn in my chest, I had a feeling she was going to be one of those things. I should've walked away.

Sergei was waiting.

Seven was, too.

But bad idea or not, I couldn't and wouldn't pull myself away.

8

TABITHA

"What about you?" Preacher's dark eyes remained focused solely on me as he spoke. "Do you think you're bullheaded?"

"To a degree." I shrugged. "But only because I have to be. I'm the mother of three boys, remember?"

"I get it. I have two of my own and..." His words trailed off, and regret flashed through his eyes as he said, "Well, I had two. I lost one of my boys last year, but they both gave me a hell of a time when they were kids."

“I’m sorry about your son. I’m sure that was tough for you.”

“It was. Hell, it still is, but the world keeps turning and all that.”

“Yes, it does.”

I went back to brushing Titan, but my focus wasn’t on the horse. It was on him. Preacher had a presence that couldn’t be ignored. I could see him still standing there, looking every bit the man he was—rugged and self-assured, and it was hard not to stare. I pretended not to notice him watching me as he said, “Good looking horse you got there.”

“He is a beauty.” I ran my hand along Titan’s neck. “He’s been fighting a bout of colic, but he’s holding his own.”

“You got a soft spot for him.”

“I do.”

Preacher’s lips quirked. “Guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“And why’s that?”

“Just seems like you’d appreciate a fighter.”

Something about the way he spoke, low and self-assured, sent a shiver down my spine. It was strange. I’d spent years around a man who made me nervous, but it was a different kind of nervous with Dimitri. That was fear.

This was something else entirely.

I motioned my head towards Titan. “Do you ride?”

“Back when I was a kid,” he admitted. “I wasn’t all that good at it. It took a level of trust I wasn’t used to.”

“I get it. It’s hard to put your faith in an animal, but you should consider giving it another go. It’s great therapy. I’ve never found a better way to clear my head.”

“I feel the same way about my Harley.” He crossed his arms, and his lips curled into a sexy smile. “Have you ever considered straddling a bike?”

“I’d trust myself more on a wild Mustang than one of those things.” I shook my head. “I’m just not built for it.”

“Oh, you’re built for it. No doubt about that. You just haven’t had the right person to ride with.”

“And you think you’re the right one.”

“Won’t know unless you agree to go on a ride with me.”

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“I don’t know. I um...”

“Don’t go getting in your head about it.” I could still feel the weight of his eyes on me, and it was making my pulse race. His grin didn’t falter as he said, “It’s just a ride. It can be as long or as short as you want it to be.”

It seemed simple enough. It was just a ride. No expectations. No pressure. And a piece of me found the idea thrilling. I’d never done anything like it before. In all honesty, I’d never really spent time with a man because I wanted to.

Dimitri had never taken me on dates or whisked me away for a long weekend. Our time was structured and controlled. He never cared what I wanted. It was always on his terms.

This was different. He wasn’t telling me. He was asking me.

And that had my heart nearly beating out of my chest.

Because the choice was mine.

All mine. And God help me, I wanted to say yes.

I tried my best to keep my emotions hidden as I looked back over to him and asked, “And when would we go on this ride?”

“That’d be your call.” He gave me a slight shrug. “Cause if it was up to me, I’d say we go right now.”

“But isn’t Sergei waiting on you?”

“He is, and if I had to guess, I’d say he’s biting at the bit.”

“I’m sure he is,” I giggled. “If my son is anything, it’s impatient.”

“Then, maybe I can teach him a little grace.”

“By making him wait even longer.”

“Oh, I’m not the one making him wait.”

It took me a second to understand what he meant, but when he raised his eyebrows, I knew. “Woah, how is this on me?”

“You’re the one who hasn’t told me when we’re going on that ride. As soon as you do, I’ll head inside.”

“That sounds a little blackmailish.”

“I like to think of it as a negotiation tactic.”

“Oh, you’re good.”

He grinned wider and cocked his head, but he didn’t say anything. He was waiting for me to give him an answer, so I gave him one. “Okay, then. Let’s negotiate.”

“Okay. I’m all ears.”

“I could really use a hand around here, so you come help me out and for every hour you work, I’ll spend one out riding with you on your motorcycle.”

“So, a trade?”

“Yeah, you could call it that.”

“Okay, but I’m not shoveling shit.”

“Not the kind of help I need.”

“Alright, then. I’d say you got yourself a deal.”

“Great.” I had no idea what I was getting myself into, and it both excited and terrified me at the same time. “Can you be here around noon tomorrow?”

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“Yeah, I can make that work.” He gave me one last smile, then turned and started back up to the house. “See ya tomorrow, Tabitha.”

“See ya tomorrow!”

I stood there and watched as Preacher walked back up to the house. He walked like he had all the time in the world. Once he made it over to his friend, I forced my attention back to Titan. I gave him a few more strokes with the brush before I led him back out to the pasture.

He trotted off, leaving me alone to deal with the crazy in my head.

I needed something to do, something to distract me, so I headed inside to start cleaning stalls. I figured busy hands would lead to a quiet mind. It seemed like a good plan, but no matter how hard I tried to keep my focus on the task at hand, my thoughts kept drifting back to him.

Tomorrow, I would be spending the better part of the day with him, and the thought of being near him for hours on end sent a rush through me.

I was being ridiculous. I was a grown woman. I had no business getting worked up over some man’s attention. But no matter how much I tried to ignore it, I could feel the anticipation building in the pit of my stomach.

By morning, it was a full-blown knot, and I was a nervous wreck.

I told myself I was being silly, but that didn’t stop me from taking a little extra time

getting ready. I tried on at least three pairs of jeans before I found the ones that fit just right. I put on a black t-shirt and my boots, then I took a few extra minutes to style my hair. I had no business styling my hair.

I was going to be working in the barn with horses and manure. After chastising myself, I tossed my brush on the counter and went to the kitchen for some coffee. By the time I made it down to the stalls, I was starting to regret ever making this silly deal with Preacher.

I had no business getting involved with him or any man. I was too old for this nonsense. The doubts continued to riddle my every thought as I busied myself with putting out fresh hay and having a lengthy talk with Faith. The pregnant mare didn't give me any grand advice, but she was a great listener. I was telling her all about our little bargain when I heard it.

The low rumble of his motorcycle coming down the drive.

A thrill shot through me.

I shouldn't be this excited.

It was silly.

I knew better.

But as that rumble drew closer, I felt a slow, traitorous smile tug at my lips. I was in trouble.

I wiped my hands on my jeans, then stepped out of the stall and watched him park near the barn. I felt like I was going to jump out of my own skin, but I managed to hold myself together as I made my way out to the front gate. Preacher swung his leg

over his bike and removed his helmet. He took a quick moment to stretch out his shoulders before making his way over to me.

He looked a little different from the day before.

There was no biker vest. No Satan's Fury emblem on his pocket. He was just wearing a plain t-shirt and a pair of worn jeans that had clearly seen their fair share of hard days. As he got closer, I crossed my arms and smiled. "I can't believe it. You actually came."

"Of course I did." His lips curled in a confident smirk that made my stomach tighten. "You really think I'd back out?"

"I had my doubts." I lifted a brow. "I figured something would come up. An issue with the club, a sudden injury, bad weather, or flat tire."

"You underestimate me, Tabitha." He gave me a wink. "When I say I'll do something, I do it."

"Guess we'll see about that."

"You're killing me with all these doubts."

"Not doubting. Just reserving judgment." I shot him a teasing smile before nodding toward the barn. "You haven't seen what I have in store for you yet."

"That doesn't sound good."

"It's nothing a man like you can't handle."

"Guess we'll see about that."

“Yes, we will.” I led him inside and stopped at the first troubled stall. I ran my fingers over the loose hinge on the door, jiggling it so he could see just how unstable it was. “These are a little loose.”

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Preacher reached over and gave it a harder shake, testing it for himself. He grimaced when he saw how loose it really was. “I’d say that’s more than a little loose.”

“It’s gotten worse. Some of the horses, especially the new ones, get anxious when we first bring them in. They push and kick against the doors. I’ve already had two nearly work their way loose.”

“Yeah, I don’t think a simple tightening is gonna cut it. Could be dangerous if one of ‘em busts out.”

“So, they have to be replaced.”

“It would be the safest option.”

“Can you do it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Great.” I moved down the row to one of the older stalls, gesturing toward a cracked board along the lower half. “There’s more... This one’s splintering and it’s not going to take much for it to completely break.”

“I see that. Looks like someone did a real number on it.”

“Yeah, it took a few kicks from a nervous mare.”

Preacher crouched down and ran his hand along the break. “Where are your tools?”

“I have a screwdriver and a hammer out front. Might have some nails, too.”

“Gonna need more than just a hammer and a couple of nails for this.”

He pushed up to stand and reached into his pocket for his phone. He scrolled through his contacts, then brought his phone up to his ear. “I need you to get over to the Volkov place. Bring the tools and a couple of prospects.”

He paused for a moment, then nodded and said, “Yeah, and there’s some scrap lumber out back. Bring that, too.”

Preacher nodded, then chuckled, “Yeah, bring it all. We’ve got some work to do.”

He ended the call and slipped his phone back into his pocket. When he turned his attention back to me, I asked, “Prospects? You calling in all the reinforcements, huh?”

“You want it done right, don’t you?”

I had underestimated him, and clearly, that was something you didn’t do when it came to Preacher. I stood near the entrance of the barn and watched silently as he moved through each stall. He tested all the hinges and checked all the boards, knocking against the wood to check for weak spots. He wasn’t just glancing things over.

He was being thorough and making a mental list of everything that needed to be fixed. He approached this whole work thing like it mattered to him, like it wasn’t just a favor or an obligation. I couldn’t seem to take my eyes off him.

I told myself it was just my way of making sure he didn’t miss anything and that it had nothing to do with the way his broad shoulders flexed beneath his t-shirt as he

moved.

He was still looking things over when a black SUV pulled up the drive. They parked down by the back entrance of the barn, and seconds later, a group of young men jumped out. They were all dressed in jeans and worn t-shirts, and they looked both eager and curious as they made their way over to their president.

Preacher barely had to say a word.

He gave a few short directions, and they all got to work.

There was no hesitation.

No questioning or complaints. They just did as they were told, and they did it without him yelling or making threats. They respected him. I could see it in the way they listened and kept full eye contact when he spoke. They gave each task their all, and they waited for his approval before moving on to the next.

I was in complete awe.

Not with just the boys, but with Preacher.

He didn't just give orders. He worked right alongside them. He pulled off the broken boards, hammered in new ones, and tested all the hinges after they were replaced. He was precise, methodical, and strong.

He was a true leader, and damn if it wasn't one of the most attractive things I'd ever seen.

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It was a dangerous thought. One I had no business having. I shook it off, exhaling as I turned away and busied myself with a nearby stack of brushes. I tried telling myself that this wasn't a big deal. It was just a few repairs. A favor. Nothing more.

But deep down, I knew it was much more than that.

9

PREACHER

“That should do it.”

“This is incredible.” Tabitha stood near the entrance, her gaze sweeping over the finished work, admiration clear in her expression. When she turned back to us, there was a warmth I wasn't expecting. “I can't thank you enough. I mean it. You all went over and beyond.”

“Glad we could help,” Goose replied, wiping his hands on the front of his jeans. “Just let us know if you need a hand with anything else.”

“I wouldn't dream of it.” She looked around at all we'd done, and I could see the pride in her eyes as she said, “You've done more than enough already. This place looks incredible.”

She was right.

It did look incredible, and we'd busted our asses to make it happen. Hell, the whole

damn barn was a mess, and now, every stall was secure, the busted boards had been replaced, and all the weak spots had been reinforced. It looked good. Damn good. I was proud of the work we'd done. We all were.

Goose being Goose, gave her one of his playful smirks. "Glad you approve."

"I certainly do." She looked at each of them, making sure they knew she meant it. "Seriously, you all did an amazing job."

They ate it up, nodding and exchanging grins, but my eyes stayed locked on her. I couldn't seem to take my eyes off her. Her smile, the spark of excitement in her eyes, and the way her face lit up as she took in the repairs captivated me. The woman had no idea how damn beautiful she was, and that only seemed to captivate me more.

"Time for us to head out."

"Oh?" she almost sounded strained as she asked, "What about that bike ride?"

"Afraid we've lost too much daylight for a ride today." I motioned my head toward the darkening sky. "Best to postpone until tomorrow. Or maybe the weekend. Whatever works best for you."

A light blush crept along her cheeks as she answered, "I don't know. I guess I would be good with either. You tell me."

Damn.

That blush was gonna be the death of me.

"Let's plan on Saturday. I'll be here around ten."

“That sounds perfect.”

I held her gaze for a second longer than I should have, then finally turned to the boys and ordered, “Load up.”

With that, the boys got back in their SUV, and once I’d gotten on my bike, we headed back to the clubhouse. The ride was smooth. It gave me a chance to clear my head, and I was feeling pretty good about things until I made it up to the back door and found Goose waiting for me.

He had his arms crossed and was sporting a shit-eating grin, and I knew he was about to say something that would piss me off. “So, when were you gonna tell us about the new girlfriend?”

The prospects snickered as they headed inside, but I shut that shit down when I barked, “Don’t.”

“Easy, killer.” Goose held up his hands. “I was just asking out of concern. I mean, she is a Volkov, right? Their mother?”

“I don’t need your fucking questions, and I don’t need your fucking concern.”

“Ah, damn.” Goose grimaced. “You really like this chick.”

“You’re walking a fine line, son.”

“Yeah, I shouldn’t have called her a chick. She’s all lady and a classy one, too. Don’t blame ya for wanting to hit it.”

“Goose.”

I shot him a look that had him clamping his mouth shut.

I wasn't about to let him or anyone else turn this into something it wasn't. Or maybe something I couldn't let it be. I glared at him a moment longer, then headed inside.

I wasn't in the mood for anyone else's bullshit, so I headed down the hall and went straight to my room. I stepped into the bathroom and turned the shower on, letting the water run hot while I kicked off my boots. I was tense. I tried rotating my shoulders, hoping it would ease the stiffness, but it didn't quite do the trick.

It'd been a long damn time since I'd worked like I had today. I did plenty of shit around the club but not much real, hands-on labor. Don't get me wrong. I enjoyed it. It felt good to put in the work and see the results, but it had done a real number on me.

Every muscle in my back and arms ached, which was an unwanted reminder that I wasn't twenty-five anymore. I let out a deep breath as I peeled off my clothes and stepped into the shower. I groaned as the heat started to work into my tight muscles.

It felt good, damn good, and for a few minutes, I just stood there, letting the steam rise around me. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back, and it wasn't long before she crept into my head.

The way she'd watched me when she thought I didn't notice.

The way her lips had curled into that soft, easy smile.

The way she tucked her hair behind her ear when she got nervous.

Damn.

I leaned forward and braced my hands against the tile as I tried to will the thoughts away. But they just kept coming. The way she moved, graceful and effortless. The way her voice softened when she thanked me.

And that blush.

Fuck me.

There was no forgetting that blush.

A slow heat spread through me. It was different from the warmth of the water. I knew where this was heading, and hell, if I wasn't tempted to let it go there. It had been too damn long since I'd felt this way. She'd gotten under my skin. She wasn't some club girl or an easy distraction.

She was something else entirely.

And if I let myself go down this road, even just in my head, there'd be no coming back from it.

I tried to shake her from my thoughts, but I couldn't seem to get her out of my head. Damn. I felt like I was coming apart at the seams. I needed to get her out of my system, and I needed to do it fast. Hoping it would knock some of the edge off, I turned the hot water up and took my throbbing cock in my hand, gripping my fingers tightly around my pulsing shaft.

I needed to feel the bite as I started to move my hand up and down. I closed my eyes and thought about her in my bed, completely bare and waiting. That thought alone had me almost spiraling. It was strange. I was older. I'd been around the block more than once and had seen and been with my fair share of beautiful women.

I didn't get worked up. Not anymore.

At least, I didn't think I did. Tabitha was proving me wrong. I could almost feel her soft, smooth skin against my fingertips. My breath quickened as I thought about her body responding to my touch. Her skin blushing. Her thighs clenching. Her pulse racing. Her little whimpers echoing through the room.

With each vision, my grip tightened, and my hand moved faster. Every stroke had me closer to the edge. My cock pulsed in my hand when I thought of her back arching off the bed as I raked my tongue against her clit. Tasting her. Tormenting her until the moment when her orgasm took hold. Dammit. I couldn't get enough.

I stroked harder, faster, and my hand never stopped moving until I finally came long and hard. The water was starting to run cold, so I finished up and got out. That's when I noticed that my dick was still standing at full salute.

Damn.

Getting this woman out of my system was going to be harder than I thought. I left the bathroom and went back to the bedroom. After throwing on a pair of clean boxers, I collapsed into bed. My muscles were sore, and I was beat. It didn't take long for my exhaustion to take hold, and I crashed.

Sleep came fast, but morning came faster.

I woke up earlier than I'd planned. It seemed my internal clock was refusing to let me

rest. The room was still dark, but I knew better than to roll over and try to go back to sleep. My mind was already running, and once that happened, there was no going back.

I pushed off the covers and eased out of bed, wincing slightly as my muscles protested. Shit. I was stiffer than I'd expected, and it pissed me the hell off. I would have to hit the gym later and put an end to this shit. I pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt with my cut, then made my way down to the kitchen.

I started a pot of coffee and took a moment to enjoy the silence while it brewed. The clubhouse was quiet this early, just the way I liked it. As soon as it was ready, I poured myself some coffee and headed to my office.

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I didn't have to worry about how I'd spent the morning. There was always work to be done. Calls to make, shipments to track, and deals to keep in check. I spent the next hour going through emails, making notes, and checking in on club business.

I was making real progress when there was a tap at my door.

I glanced up just as the door swung open, and Creed stepped inside with Seven following close behind. I could tell by their expressions that they weren't there to shoot the shit.

"Morning," Creed said, helping himself to the chair across from me.

"You're looking a little rough around the edges this morning," Seven greeted me as he took the other chair.

"Feeling a little rough, but nothing more than usual." I leaned back in my chair. "You got something on your mind?"

Creed glanced over at Seven before saying, "We just wanted to check in and see where your head is with the Volkov brothers."

"I'm still thinking it over."

"And?"

"I'm intrigued." Sergei had called me in to discuss some of the perimeters of the partnership, and while he made it seem pretty cut and dry, I knew better than that. A

partnership like he was suggesting would be complicated at best. “A lot of money on the table and the potential for a lot more.”

“Yeah, but at what cost?” There was no missing the concern in my VP’s voice as he said, “We’ve worked hard to make the Fury name what it is. The last thing we need to do is piss it all away by getting tied up with the wrong assholes.”

“I don’t think we’ll be pissing anything away by tying up with these boys.” I’d thought it all through, and I meant it when I said, “They’re arrogant motherfuckers. No doubt about that, and they’ve made some mistakes, big ones, but they’ve good ideas and they’re trying to make a real go of this place. And they’re smart enough to know they need help.”

Seven, who’d been quiet up to this point, shook his head. “They got balls coming to us for help after what they did to Tallie and Rooks.”

I got that he was pissed about how things had gone down with Tallie, but it could’ve been much worse, especially after what we’d done to the guard and driver. And Rooks was a fucking asshole who’d not only had his father killed but tried to steal a shit ton of money from him and the Volkovs. I knew he wouldn’t like it, but that didn’t stop me from saying, “Can’t say that I would’ve handled it any different, especially with Rooks.”

“They got him locked up in the fucking basement!”

I’d made the mistake of asking Sergei about Rooks, and he was quick to tell me that he’d considered killing him. He certainly deserved it, but Rooks had a particular skillset that could be useful to a man like him. It was that thought that led him to spare Rooks’ life—at least for the time being.

“But he’s still breathing,” I countered. “Which means he’s still got a chance to walk.

That's not something I would've given him."

Creed leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms with doubt. "You really think we can trust them to do what we tell 'em?"

"If they don't, we walk." I leaned forward and looked him dead in the eye. "I'm not going to let these guys fuck this up. They'll either play by our rules, or we're out."

"They best step in line, or I'll rattle some heads."

"You and me both."

"So, what's the plan?" Creed asked. "Do you know the expectations?"

"For now, they just want our presence at the Casino. They want people to see us and know that we've got their back, and they have ours."

"Sounds simple enough."

"Nothing simple about it," I countered. "Sergei and Tallie's father made a lot of enemies with all the shit they pulled to acquire all that land. We need to look into everyone they fucked over, so there are no surprises."

"I'll get with Shep and have him look into it." Creed exhaled. "I gotta say, there are some advantages to partnering up with him. I mean, hell. Having them as allies makes us untouchable in this city."

Seven grimaced. "But if this thing goes sideways..."

"It won't," I answered without hesitation. "I won't let it."

Creed studied me for a moment, then nodded. “So, when are we gonna break it down to the others?”

“This afternoon. I’ll call the boys in for church and lay it all out.”

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“I’ll spread the word.”

I nodded, then he and Seven left my office.

The days that followed were all business. There was no time to sit around or to dwell on the unknown. I called the boys in and laid everything out, explaining my expectations for the Volkov partnership. I told them exactly what was on the table and what wasn’t.

There was no room for mistakes with this deal.

If this partnership was going to work, we had to handle it right.

Some of the guys had their concerns about the deal, but they knew me well enough to know I wouldn’t stand for any bullshit. Sergei and his brothers either toed the line or we’d walk. I let them know this wasn’t just about making money. This was about securing our future and evolving with the times.

And times were changing.

Faster than I cared to admit.

For years, we’d made the bulk of our money at the Vault and by moving product under the table. But with the way things were looking, it wouldn’t be long before marijuana was fully legal, and when that happened, we would be left empty-handed.

If we wanted to stay ahead, we had to move with the tide, not against it.

That's where the Volkovs came in. They had the kind of setup that could secure our future. I wasn't naive enough to think we'd ever be clean, not fully, but if we played this right, we could secure a foothold in something with real longevity.

After our meet, I kept myself busy in the office. It was the easiest way to keep my head clear. But, even with everything going on, she was still lingering in the back of my mind. I told myself it wouldn't last. That it was just something new and unexpected, and once I got to know her, the newness would wear off.

By the time Saturday rolled around, I was more than ready for a break. Not just from business but from the weight of it all. With everything that had been going on, I couldn't think straight, and there was no better way to clear my head than a ride on my bike with the woman who'd been haunting my thoughts all damn week.

I pulled up into the drive and was about to head up to the gate when Tabitha stepped out of the barn. The sight of her nearly took my breath. Her dark hair was down with loose waves cascading around her shoulders. She had on a pair of distressed black jeans with a white top that hugged her curves and a pair of cowboy boots. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." She stepped through the gate and made her way over to me. "So, where are we headed?"

"That's up to you." I waited until she made it over to me before handing her my spare helmet. "If I remember your terms of our negotiation, I believe we have about four hours for our ride, so that should..."

"No," she interrupted. "After all you did, we can do whatever you want for as long as you want."

"Is that right?"

I gave her a smirk, and she immediately started back peddling. “Um, wait. That didn’t come out right.”

“Oh, I don’t know. It sounded pretty good to me.”

“Preacher,” she scolded.

For reasons I couldn’t explain, I wanted to hear my true name roll across her full lips, so I told her, “When it’s just us, you can call me Hudson.”

“Okay, Hudson.” She smiled. “You ready to go?”

“Ready when you are.” I felt a sense of satisfaction knowing I had her all to myself for the day. I was getting into dangerous territory, but I couldn’t help but wonder if she was beginning to feel the same. “You look incredible.”

“You don’t look too shabby yourself.” She motioned her head at my Harley. “You’re gonna have to take it easy on me. I’ve never ridden one of those things before.”

“You’ll do fine. Not much different than a horse.”

“Hmm. We’ll see about that.”

Once she’d put on her helmet, I offered her my hand and helped her onto the back. “Hold on tight.”

She nodded, then positioned her hands at my waist. Her grip tightened as I eased out of the drive, and it tightened even more as we started down the main road. After a few miles, she started to relax and eased back, signaling that she was starting to enjoy the ride—which made me enjoy it even more.

I liked having her on my bike. It had been a long time since I'd ridden with someone, mainly because chicks always tried to read something into it, especially when you're the president. Usually, it was just a damn ride. Nothing more.

But this was different.

This one meant something. I just wasn't sure if I wanted it to.

10

TABITHA

"Well, what did you think?"

"It was even better than I expected," I answered with a smile. "Both the ride and the springs."

"Good. Glad you enjoyed it."

Hudson smiled at me in a way that made me think he knew exactly how much I'd enjoyed myself. And he wasn't wrong. The ride had been everything I'd hoped it would be and more. I loved the feeling of the wind whipping through my hair, the warmth of the sun on my face, and the sheer freedom of it all. I hadn't realized how much I'd needed a day like this.

"It was perfect." I pulled my feet from the springs and reached for my shoes. "So, where are we headed now?"

"I thought we'd grab a bite to eat, then head back."

He held out a hand, and I hesitated only for a second before slipping mine into his.

His grip was strong and comforting as he helped me to my feet. I felt an unspoken promise in it. No rush. No pressure. Just him and me, and I liked it more than I expected.

“You have a place in mind?”

“There’s a little diner a couple of miles from here. Nothing fancy, but it’s got the best burgers in town.”

“That sounds perfect.”

I meant it.

A simple, little diner and a good burger sounded perfect.

We walked back to his bike, and after I slipped on my helmet, I climbed on behind him. It felt oddly comfortable as I wrapped my arms around his waist. The ride had changed something. I felt more at ease, and I wasn’t so worried about doing or saying something wrong.

The engine roared to life, and seconds later, we were pulling out of the park and headed to our next destination.

The ride to the diner was just as much fun as the ride to Hot Springs, if not more so. It was a little cooler. The wind had picked up, and the sun had started to set. And this time, I wasn’t quite as nervous, and I found myself leaning into Hudson and holding onto him a little tighter.

It felt good to be so close to him, which surprised me.

I usually wasn’t so comfortable around men, especially ones as powerful as Hudson.

But he had this way of making me feel at ease, safe even. And I liked it. I liked it more than I cared to admit.

I was almost disappointed when we pulled up to the diner. It was a small, rustic place with worn leather booths and checkered floors. The scent of fried food and fresh coffee lingered in the air, and I had no doubt that it was a hot spot with the locals. I couldn't imagine a better spot to have dinner with Hudson.

He led me to the back, and we settled into a quiet booth in the corner. It wasn't long before a waitress came over and took our order. She was in her late fifties with kind eyes and a knowing smirk. Hudson told her we wanted two burgers, fries, and a couple of sweet teas. She nodded, and as soon as she walked away, Hudson's eyes settled on me.

I could tell by the way he was looking at me that he had something on his mind. He cocked his brow as he said, "So, tell me about yourself."

"Like you don't already know all there is to know about me." I cocked my brow. "I've been around long enough to know how men like you work."

He leaned back in his seat, and his lips twitched with amusement as he asked, "And what exactly do you think you know about men like me?"

"I know you don't walk into anything blind. So, you've had your men dig up whatever they could about me and the boys long before you ever laid eyes on us." I shifted in my seat before adding, "So, what is it that you really want to know?"

Hudson's dark eyes stayed locked on mine, and for a moment, I thought he might try to change the subject. Instead, he leaned forward and admitted, "I know the basics. I know your family struggled, and your mother was sick. I know you married Dimitri right before she died. And I know you had three boys. But that's just facts on paper. I

want to know the rest.”

The rest wasn’t exactly easy to talk about.

I’d tried to put my past behind me, but it had this nasty habit of sneaking up on me. I shrugged and tried to sound nonchalant as I said, “Dimitri was difficult. He was very controlling and wanted things his way, and I learned to make sure he got it, which wasn’t always easy.”

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“I can imagine, especially at your age.”

“You saw that, huh?”

“I did.” He gave me a slight grimace. “I’m sure that was tough.”

“You could say that.” I hated that he knew that about me. It was something I didn’t share with anyone. Partly out of embarrassment and partly because it wasn’t a choice I would’ve made for myself. But it was out there. He knew all about it, so there was no sense in trying to avoid it. “I hadn’t even had a boyfriend, and I was suddenly married to a man twice my age.”

“So, this wasn’t something you wanted?”

“God, no,” I scoffed. “But I didn’t have a choice in the matter.”

“Sounds like there’s a story there.”

“There is, but let’s save it for another day.”

“Fair enough.” He studied me for a moment, then asked, “What about you and your boys? Are you guys close?”

“As close as we can be,” I admitted. “They are my whole world. Sergei’s my firstborn, and it shows. He’s eager to please, but he has a lot of his father in him and can be stubborn at times. Viktor is more reserved, but in a good way. He has a kind soul. And Nikolai is the youngest and has the biggest heart, but at times, he’s the

hardest to reach. But I get it. I can be hard to reach, too.”

“We all can.”

“I guess so.” I didn’t want the conversation to be all about me, so I asked, “What about you and your boys?”

“Memphis is my oldest. He’s stubborn as hell, but he’s got a good head on his shoulders. And Beckett was...” He stopped and exhaled a deep breath. “I lost him a while back, and I’m still trying to make sense of it all.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Hudson gave a small nod, brushing off the pain as he added, “It’s a story for another day.”

I had no idea what had happened, but I could tell by the expression on his face that the death of his son had hit him hard. The last thing I wanted to do was cause him anymore pain, so I nodded and said, “Another day.”

The waitress returned with our food and drinks. She placed everything on the table, then gave Hudson a flirty smile before rushing back to the kitchen. Hudson reached for his burger as he asked, “Are we done with the heavy stuff?”

“Umm, I might be mistaken, but I do believe you were the one who started it with the heavy stuff.”

“Maybe, but I’ve had enough for one night. How about you?”

“Yes, I’m good.”

“Good. Now, dig in.” He motioned his head towards my plate. “It’ll be the best burger you’ve ever had.”

I picked up my burger and took a bite, and just like he’d promised, it was amazing. “Wow.”

“See. I told ya.”

“I’m glad to see you’re a man of your word.”

“That I am.”

“So, tell me, Hudson... what does a man of his word motorcycle president do for fun?”

“Well, at the moment, he’s having dinner with a beautiful woman.”

“And you’re having fun?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good. I am, too.”

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He cocked his brow. “You sound surprised.”

“I might be a little.” I could tell by his expression that he didn’t know how to take what I’d said, so I added, “Not because of you. It’s me. All me.”

“Um-hmm.”

“I’m serious. I can’t remember the last time I really had fun.” I shrugged. “I didn’t think I had it in me anymore.”

“I think you’ve got a lot of fun left in you.”

“You think?”

“You wouldn’t be sitting here with me if you didn’t.”

“So, there’s hope for me yet.”

“Oh, absolutely, and I’ll prove it to ya.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

“I’m thinking we’ll take a different route home.” A smirk slipped across his handsome face as he said, “One with a few more curves, and if you’re up for it, one more quick stop.”

“Yeah, I’m up for it.”

The words came out before I had a chance to really think about what I was saying—which was a good thing. If I'd really thought about it, I might've told him no, and I would've missed out on a wild ride home. He'd taken the back road, and it curved and dipped like it had a mind of its own. And he didn't hold back with the speed. There were times when we were flying.

I had a feeling he did quite often, and he did it without thinking like he knew every inch of the pavement. He picked up speed on one of the long curves, not enough to be reckless, just enough to make my breath catch and my hand reach for the edge of the seat.

But I wasn't scared.

Not even a little.

It was a strange thing to feel safe while going fast, but that's exactly how it felt with him. There was a sense of trust there that made no sense to me, but I knew he was in control and wouldn't let anything happen to me. When we came up to a red light, he placed his hand on my calf and asked, "You good?"

I nodded, and when the light turned, we were off again.

We weren't far from home when he slowed down and turned into the city park. The lights were on, and there were two teams out on the baseball field. They were middle school age, and they looked to be playing one hell of a game. The score was tied, 6 to 6, and the coaches were shouting out plays like they were in the middle of the World Series.

We parked, and after removing our helmets, we made our way over to the fence. It wasn't long before a couple of the outfielders spotted us, and a couple of them shouted, "Hey, Coach G!"

Hudson lifted his hand and gave them a small wave, then motioned at them to keep their focus on the game. There was a big hit, and the outfielders started hustling for the ball. When one of them caught it, Hudson started clapping, “Heck yeah! Good catch, Pete!”

He tossed the ball back to the pitcher, and right as he was preparing to make the throw, Hudson shouted, “James! Square up your feet.”

The pitcher shifted his gate and then threw the ball. The batter swung and missed. The boys continued to play, and every now and then, Hudson would call out to the boys, giving them advice or congratulating them. I was quickly learning that there were many layers to the MC president.

I had no idea how long I’d been staring at him when he chuckled and asked, “What?”

“You’re a coach?”

“Part-time, but yeah.”

“How’d that happen?”

“Got roped into it a few years ago when one of the brother’s kids was playing. He found out I used to play and was pretty good, and one thing led to another.” He shrugged with a sexy smile. “Figured I could do worse with my time.”

He was trying to play it off like it was no big deal, but I saw the way he watched those boys. He looked at them like he not only knew their name but every detail of their story. It clearly meant more to him than he let on. I smiled as I told him, “I think it’s great that you help out like you do. I’m sure the kids love you.”

“I don’t know if I’d go that far.”

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He chuckled, and we turned our attention back to the field. It was the last inning, and the pitcher was on fire. He was throwing strike after strike, and when he threw the last player out, the team erupted in cheers.

He glanced over to me with an excited look on his face and asked, “Do you mind?”

There was no way I was going to keep him from those boys, so I quickly nodded and said, “Go! I’ll wait right here.”

He held my gaze for a moment, then jogged out onto the field. Several of the boys ran up to him, each giving him a high five or a fist bump. He spoke to each of them, and they listened to every word.

I found the whole scene both surprising and heartwarming.

As I stood there watching him with his boys, it hit me. I liked him. I really, really liked him, and I had no idea what I was going to do about it.

Once he’d finished up with them, we got back on the bike, and he drove me home. He walked me up to the barn entrance, and we lingered there for a moment. The night air was cool against my skin, but I barely noticed it. Not with him standing this close and looking at me the way he was.

I wasn’t ready for this.

I knew that.

I could feel it in my bones. I should've said something. I should've done something to break the spell before it swallowed me whole.

But I didn't.

Instead, I stared into those beautiful dark eyes as he lifted his hand and gently brushed his fingers along my jaw. A move that seemed much too gentle for a man like him. He inched closer, and my breath caught. My entire body tingled with anticipation.

And then it happened.

He kissed me.

It wasn't rushed. It wasn't demanding. It was slow and deliberate, like he was giving me time to pull away if I wanted to. But I didn't pull away. Instead, I leaned into him, kissing him back.

And just like that, the world around us faded into the night. It was just him and me. My pulse roared in my ears as his lips moved against mine. Coaxing. Unraveling. His other hand slid to my waist. He was firm but careful, holding me there like he wasn't going to let me go.

Heat stirred in the pit of my stomach. It was a feeling I barely recognized. It was one I'd buried a long time ago, and now, it was waking up all at once.

I wanted this.

I wanted him.

But then reality crashed through the haze.

I placed the palms of my hands on his chest and gave him a slight push, breaking the embrace. “I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“This,” I muttered, shaking my head. “I don’t know how to do this.”

Hudson didn’t move. He didn’t push. He just stood there staring at me with an unreadable expression. “Tabitha...”

“I mean it.” I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, but it didn’t budge. “I don’t know how to be with someone. I mean, reallybe with them. Not like this.”

The words tasted bitter as I said them, but that didn’t make them any less true. Dimitri was a man who took. He took, and he took. And he had no remorse when he took everything from me. He stole the last years of my childhood, my free will, my virginity, and my voice.

He left me with nothing, and I had learned to survive it.

But this wasn’t about survival. This was something else, and I had no idea how to handle it. Hudson’s jaw tensed, but after a long moment, he gave a slow nod.

He didn’t try to push back.

He didn’t try to convince me that I was wrong.

He just let me go.

And somehow, that made it even harder to watch him walk away.

11

PREACHER

We've all had those mornings when we know we woke up on the wrong side of the bed. It had happened to me more times than I could count, but this morning was more than just the typical rough morning.

Hell, the second I woke up, I felt it.

It was a low hum of tension buzzing in the back of my skull like a fucking hornet caught in a jar. It didn't help matters that it was barely seven, and the clubhouse sounded like there was a fucking party going on. There was music playing, pool balls clacking, and someone was laughing entirely too loud in one of the back rooms.

Normally, I would've let it slide. Hell, most mornings, I wouldn't have even noticed. But today wasn't most mornings.

I hadn't slept. At all.

I spent the whole night tossing and turning, trying to make sense of my night with Tabitha. It had me all tangled up, and that wasn't something I was used to. And I didn't like it. I didn't like it one fucking bit.

My jaw was clenched tight as I got out of bed and got dressed. I knew I was on edge when I left my room, but I didn't know exactly how bad it was until I walked into the kitchen and found a gallon of milk sitting on the counter. It was already sweating and half-warm, and the sight of it threw me into a rage.

"Who the hell left this out?"

Goose glanced over his shoulder with a smirk. "That'd be me. I'll get it in a sec."

"Don't bother." I picked it up and tossed it in the trash. "It's garbage now."

"Woah," Goose gasped. "That was still good."

"Yeah, if you like drinking curdled milk." I started pouring myself some coffee as I grumbled, "Next time, put the damn thing back in the fridge."

He muttered something under his breath, which only twisted the screw in deeper. My mood was far from improving when Memphis strolled into the kitchen. As he opened the pantry door, he glanced over his shoulder and asked, "You hear about the flat on the SUV?"

That had my entire throat turning into a knot. I turned to face him as I snarled, "What flat?"

"The back left," he answered like it was no big deal. "Looked low yesterday, but it's damn near dead now."

"And no one thought to fix it?" I snapped. "No one thought, 'Hey, maybe we shouldn't let the only reliable set of wheels we got sit on its ass in the lot?'"

"I was gonna..."

“Don’t say you were gonna take care of it,” I cut him off. “You either did, or you didn’t, and clearly, you didn’t.”

I could feel the whole room shift. The boys sitting at the kitchen table looked down at their food, doing their best to avoid eye contact, and those who were standing by the door made their way out. No one wanted to poke the bear, not when I was already halfway to losing it.

But Goose was never one to tread lightly.

He ignored all the red flags and turned to face me with a smirk, “So, I’m guessing your night out with your new lady friend didn’t go so great, huh?”

I glared daggers at him, but he didn’t flinch.

He just sat there with that shit-eating grin and added, “Ah, damn. It went that bad.”

And just like that, it hit me like a punch to the gut.

I wasn’t pissed about the noise or the stupid milk.

I wasn’t even all that pissed about the damn tire. Not really.

It washer.

It was the way she'd looked at me last night when she told me she couldn't do this. I'd thought things were going fine. Better than fine. But somewhere between the ball field and the ride home, I'd felt her pull back.

It was subtle, but it was there.

I couldn't figure out why it had happened.

Regardless, it had nothing to do with the boys, and it wasn't fair to take it out on them. I raked a hand down my face, and I felt the fight drain out of me like air from a slit tire. "Shit."

Goose raised an eyebrow but didn't press.

He just gave me that look, the one that said we all get hit sometimes, and it meant something to me that he got it. They all did. Without saying anything more, I turned and walked out of the room.

I went to my office and slammed the door with a little more force than necessary, but I didn't care. I needed some space, and I finally had it. I walked over and sank into my chair. I leaned back with a heavy breath and tilted my head back. I didn't bother turning on the lights. I needed a minute, and I was damn well going to take it.

The quiet was good.

There were no questions. No sideways looks.

No damn milk on the stupid counter.

It was just me and the hum of the ceiling fan. Too bad it wasn't loud enough to drown out the thoughts in my head. Maybe then, I wouldn't have been thinking about things I had no business thinking about.

My mind should've been on club business. On shipments. On keeping our boys in line. But every time I tried to shift gears, she was there, and I kept hearing her say the same thing, over and over—"I'm sorry. I can't do this."

I couldn't help but wonder if she meant she couldn't do it or couldn't do it with me. She hadn't said the words outright, but I didn't know any other way to take it. And I sure as hell didn't know what to do about it. It felt like a door had closed that I didn't even know I'd walked through.

It made no sense, and I wasn't sure it ever would.

I was thinking back over our dinner together when there was a soft knock on the door. Without waiting for me to answer, Memphis stepped inside, flipped the light on, and sat down in the chair in front of me.

He gave me one of his looks before asking, "You wanna talk about it?"

"Nope."

"Didn't think so." He leaned back in the chair and folded his hands over his stomach. "So, Goose was right?"

I didn't answer.

“I was afraid of that. Damn.” He raised his eyebrow. “He was talking about Sergei’s mother, right?”

I still didn’t answer.

Not that I had to. He was my kid. He knew me better than anyone. He let out a slow breath like he didn’t want to say what he was about to say. “I know you don’t wanna hear it, but maybe it’s for the best.”

“You’re right. I don’t want to hear it.”

I glared at him, hoping it would be enough to shut him up.

It wasn’t.

“Come on, Pop. We’re going into business with her sons. She’s just gonna complicate things.”

“She’s got nothing to do with it.”

“She’s their mother. Of course, she has something to do with it,” he snapped. “And even if she didn’t, she’s gonna make things complicated, and you don’t do complicated.”

I didn’t respond. Partly because I’d already said too much and partly because he was right. He looked at me for a beat, then said, “You really like her.”

It wasn't a question. It was a fact.

A damn truth I couldn't bring myself to deny.

When I didn't answer, he leaned forward, forearms on his knees. "That changes things."

"Does it?"

"Well, yeah. You don't like anyone," he chuckled. "If this woman has gotten to you, then there has to be a reason. A good one."

"Like you said, it's complicated."

"You know, if the roles were reversed and it was me sitting there, you'd tell me to quit my fucking sulking and go get my woman."

"Not that simple."

"Of course it is. You just tell her what's what, and don't take no for an answer."

"Not doing that."

"Why the fuck not?"

"Cause people have been telling her what to do her whole damn life. I'm not going to be one of those people."

“So, what’s the deal? She tell you to fuck off or what?”

“Didn’t tell me much of anything. Just that she couldn’t do this.”

“Couldn’t do this?” His brows furrowed. “Sounds like she didn’t think she had a choice in the matter.”

“Maybe not. I know she’s been through it.” I shook my head. “Hell, I don’t know. Maybe she thinks we couldn’t work, and she’s saving us the trouble.”

“Or maybe she thinks it will, and it scares the shit out of her.”

“Either way, it’s a lose-lose.”

Memphis sat there for a moment, then said, “How about this? Maybe you don’t tell her shit. Maybe you just show her what’s what.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Show her the kind of man you really are, and then, she’ll see she’s got nothing to be afraid of.”

I’ll be damned. He might have something there.

Memphis stood as he said, “This old guy once told me you don’t lose the fight by getting knocked down. You lose it by staying down.”

“Old guy, huh?”

“Yeah, he’s a real pain in the ass. Like huge. He’ll have you second-guessing all your life choices.”

“Um-hmm.”

“But he’s a good one.” His tone softened. “A damn good one, and any woman around would be lucky to have him by her side. It’s time he remembered that.”

Without saying anything more, Memphis turned and walked out of the room. I didn’t think. I was afraid if I did, I would talk myself out of it, so I turned on my computer. I started searching for the different types of bedding and how they can affect each horse.

When we were working in the barn, I couldn’t help but notice that Tabitha had a sweet spot for her pregnant mare. She was constantly going to check on her and talking to her, and she looked so concerned when she let her out to pasture.

I got it. The horse was in rough shape. She was not only pregnant, but she had a bum foot that was causing her to limp. She’d told me all about her. Explained how the vet had come and how they were working to get her better, but it was slow going.

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I'd seen how she was with that animal. I knew she was more than just some horse to Tabitha. She meant something to her, and she hated that the mare was in pain. She shrugged it off like it wasn't anything major—just one more burden that she'd have to carry, and maybe it was. But I wasn't going to let her carry it alone.

I spent the better part of an hour reading about stall flooring. I had no idea there were so many options. Most used rubber mats, straw, sawdust, or peat moss, but after a little more digging, I discovered that crushed limestone topped with pine shavings was the best option. It wasn't just cushioned. It had good drainage, which would help keep her hooves dry, and it was easier on the joints.

I grabbed my keys and headed out to the parking lot. I hooked up the trailer, and half an hour later, I was at the Co-Op, signing for two loads of bedding, bentonite clay, and limestone.

I didn't say much to the guy loading it into the truck. I could tell by his expression that he was wondering what I was up to, and I had no desire to explain. Once he got the trailer loaded, I drove over to Tabitha's place. Without even asking questions, the guards motioned me through, and I drove up to the barn like I belonged there.

I didn't knock.

I didn't ask.

I just started hauling the bags and buckets from the trailer down to the barn. When I walked up to her stall, the mare didn't look all that happy to see me. It was like she knew I was up to something. I gave her a smile and said, "Easy there, missy. I've got

ya something I think you're gonna like."

I lifted one of the bags of pine shavings, showing her what I'd brought. "I'm gonna help ya out with that bum foot."

She nickered softly in what felt like approval. I dropped the bags at her door and headed back for more. I was bringing up my third load when I heard her boots coming up behind me. I didn't have to look to know it was Tabitha. I could feel a shift in the air.

I glanced over my shoulder, and my stomach took a nosedive when I saw how incredible she looked. She was wearing a white button-down with jeans and boots, and her long hair was pulled up, revealing her wide, surprised eyes. She put her hands on her hips, and her brows furrowed as she asked, "What are you doing?"

I dropped the last bag by the stall door and brushed my hands off on my jeans. "You mentioned something about her vet saying she might need better footing."

She didn't respond.

She just stood there, staring at me, and damn if that look in her eye didn't hit me square in the chest. She didn't know what to do, much less say, so I helped her out. "This should help her."

She blinked, and a single tear slipped down her cheek. Her mouth parted like she was about to say something, but the words didn't come. Not right away. Eventually, she managed to mutter, "Hudson."

Something shifted in her, and she gave me a look that nearly gutted me. It was the kind of look that would make a man do just about anything to keep it there. "It's nothing."

“No, it’s not nothing.” A light blush crept over her cheeks. “It’s the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me.”

And there it was.

That damn blush.

It got me every damn time.

I wasn’t sure what to say to her. I wasn’t doing it for credit. I just wanted to do it for her. I couldn’t do what needed to be done with the mare still in the stall, so I asked, “You got a place for her to go while I get this done?”

She nodded, then opened the gate and walked over to the horse. She slipped on the halter as she said, “Come on, sweet girl. We’re going to get you some fresh grass to munch on for a bit.”

When she started to lead the horse out of the stall, she looked over to me and said, “I’ll be back in a minute, and I’ll give you a hand.”

“Don’t gotta do that.” I grabbed one of the shovels and stepped into the stall. “I’ve got it.”

“I thought you didn’t want to shovel shit.”

“I don’t, but that doesn’t mean I won’t do it. Now, get going so I can get this done.”

“Okay. If you say so.” She took another step, then turned back to me and whispered, “Thank you, Hudson.”

I nodded and got to work.

I had to clean out the stall first. That wasn't something I was looking forward to. I hated shoveling shit, but it had to be done. So, I got it all cleared out and down to the base floor. The barn was state of the art and all, but they were in dire need of some TLC.

I laid out the bentonite first, and once I had it good and level, I went in with the limestone. It was the tricky part. It had to be just right, or it would shift. I'd tamped it down before I added the shavings. I put more down than I'd planned, but I wanted to make sure it was thick enough to soften every step.

Once I had it just the way I wanted, I closed the gate and gathered my things. By the time I made it to the trailer, the air was cooler, and the sun was starting to set. I was feeling pretty good as I got behind the wheel.

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Not in the proud, beat-your-chest kind of way.

Like I'd done something that mattered kind of good.

There was no sign of Tabitha as I started the engine and eased down the drive. Not that it mattered. She knew I'd been there, and I wasn't giving up on her, not yet.

But the ball was in her court. It was her turn to make a play. I just hoped she would take the chance. That's all either of us needed.

12

TABITHA

I was up in my apartment, making myself a bowl of soup, when my front door opened, and Nikolai walked in. I could tell by his expression that something was bothering him, but I had no idea what it could be. He was still in his dress pants and button-down, so I knew he'd just left Sergei's office.

I assumed it had something to do with one of his brothers until Nikolai sat down at the counter and asked, "Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

His jaw tightened. "Are you seeing him?"

I felt my chest go tight.

Not from shame or guilt but from the way he was looking at me. It made me feel like he thought I'd done something wrong. I was used to judgment. I'd had it all my life, but not from Nikolai. He was the one person who loved me unconditionally, and he certainly never judged me or my choices—until today.

“I'm not seeing him. I went on a date with him.”

“And he was here today?”

“He was.”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Nikolai.”

“I'm serious, mother,” he fussed. “You have no idea who this guy is.”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Clearly, you don't!” Nikolai's temper was starting to get the best of him when he growled, “He's dangerous. More dangerous than anyone we've ever dealt with.”

“And yet, you went to him to ask for help.”

“We went to him because everyone in this fucking city is scared of him!”

“That's not the only reason, and you know it.”

“It doesn't matter. You're not getting involved with him.”

“That's not up for you to decide. The choice is mine and mine alone.”

“So, you’re planning to see him again?”

A cold ache settled in my chest as I crossed my arms and answered, “No, as a matter of fact, I’m not.”

“But I thought...” He sucked in an angry breath. “What the fuck did he do?”

“Stop.” I held up my hand and shook my head. “He didn’t do anything. He was just like I thought he would be. He was a perfect gentleman. This is about me.”

“What are you talking about?”

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“Nothing.” I waved him off and stirred my soup. “I’ve just decided not to see him again.”

He crossed his arms and stared at me for several moments before asking, “What are you not telling me?”

“Nothing. Just let it go.”

“Ah, damn.” Nikolai shook his head and sighed. “You really like him, don’t you?”

“Even if I did, it wouldn’t matter.” I shrugged and looked away. “I should’ve never gone out with him. Maybe then...”

I swallowed hard, hoping it would keep my tears at bay, and he must’ve noticed because he sighed, “What’s going on with you?”

“I’m just trying to come to terms with the fact that my time has come and gone.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You know the saying ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks’.”

“Oh God, Mom.”

“I’m serious. I’m too old to learn how to date and all the things that go with it.”

“Oh, don’t give me that bullshit.” He exhaled hard and pushed away from the

counter, walking around until he stood beside me. I felt his hand come down gently on my shoulder. “I know you had a rough go of it with Dad, but that doesn’t mean your life is over.”

“But it does.” I shrugged. “You know how things were with us. There’s just too much that I don’t know how to do or if I’m even capable of doing it.”

“Like what?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just forget it.”

“Don’t do that. Talk to me.”

“I can’t. Not about this. It’s not fair to you.”

“I’m the one who’s asking. Besides, if you can’t talk to me, who can you talk to?”

He was right. I didn’t have a mother or any girlfriends. It wasn’t that I hadn’t tried. I had. I had gotten close with one of the house servants. It was just by happenstance. We’d talk and share secrets while she cleaned, and as time passed, we became close. She was like family to me, but then, she caught Dimitri’s eye. Once he started pursuing her, she blamed me for not putting a stop to it and our friendship abruptly ended.

It happened again with the next girl and the next.

I tried making friends with some of the other wives, but they were older and looked down on me. I was nothing but trash wrapped in a pretty bow. I saw no reason to try and prove them wrong. It just wasn’t worth it.

So, I was on my own.

And at times, it was lonely.

Very lonely.

But I had my boys. And I was closest to Nikolai, especially now that he was older. His brothers loved me, and we were close, but it was different with Nikolai. He and I were the most alike, and he just seemed to get me. I glanced up at him and was surprised by the softness in his eyes. “So, what is it that you like about this guy?”

“There are lots of things. He’s handsome and confident, and he is well-spoken. He talks to me. Not at me. And he listens like he cares what I have to say.” I felt the sting behind my eyes before I could blink it away. “I felt like he saw me. The real me.”

“Ah, Mom. Damn.” He let out a breath and shook his head. “You’re gonna have to give him a chance.”

“What? I thought you said he was dangerous, and I had no business seeing him.”

“I did say that, and I’m not saying I was wrong. This guy is dangerous, but he’s no more dangerous than me. If he fucks up, I’ll kill him. Simple as that.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that.”

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“I gotta say, I’ve never seen you like this before. It’s clear he’s gotten to you, and if he managed to do that, he’s gotta be alright.”

Hearing him say that made my tears fall even harder.

He pulled me into a hug, and even though I knew it would only make me cry harder, I let myself lean into it. No one on earth could hug me like him, and at that moment, I couldn’t imagine needing anything more. My face was buried in his chest as I muttered, “I’m scared.”

“It’s okay to be scared. Just don’t let your fear keep you from doing something that might make you happy. Because if anyone deserves to be happy, it’s you.”

Maybe he was right.

Maybe it was time I let myself find my happiness, even if the idea of it scared the hell out of me. I wiped the tears from my eyes as I said, “Okay. I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t. You overthink everything. You’ll just end up talking yourself out of it and regretting all your life choices.” He chuckled. “For once, just go for it. Just for the hell of it. If it doesn’t work out, it’s not the end of the world.”

“You really think?”

“I do, but don’t tell Sergei that I gave the okay, or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“My lips are sealed.” I reached over and gave him a hug. “Thank you, Nikolai.”

He gave me a squeeze, then turned and started for the door. “Don’t stay out too late. You know how Sergei worries.”

“You think I should go see him now?”

“No time like the present.”

“But I don’t know where to find him.”

“I’ll text you the address.” Before he walked out, he stopped and faced me. “Just because I’m telling you to go for it doesn’t mean you don’t need to be careful. If you have any trouble, you call me, and I’ll handle it. And I mean any trouble at all.”

“I got it.”

He nodded, then walked out and closed the door behind him.

I stood there for a moment, thinking about everything he’d said, and there was one comment that stood out above the rest. You overthink everything. You’ll just end up talking yourself out of it and regretting all your life choices.

He was right. I overthought everything and usually ended up talking myself out of taking any real chances. I didn’t want to keep making the same mistake, so I took my soup and dumped it in the sink. I took a couple of deep breaths, and then I went to my room to change.

I put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, then slipped on a couple of my favorite bracelets and my boots. I brushed out my hair, and after a quick check in the mirror, I grabbed my keys and made my way downstairs. Once I’d locked up, I started out to my car. When I passed Faith’s stall, I peeped my head in and smiled when I found her eating.

Hudson was so thoughtful to fix her stall, especially after the way I'd ended our date. I hoped it was a sign that I hadn't completely ruined things between us. That was a thought that clung to me as I made my way to the car. I got inside, and as I started the car, my heart did this stutter-step thing, like it couldn't decide if it was excited or terrified.

I knew the answer.

I was both.

The drive to the clubhouse wasn't far, but my nerves made it feel longer. When I pulled up, the first thing I noticed was the size of the place. It looked more like a compound than an actual clubhouse. There was a tall security fence that wrapped around the entire property, and there was a gate out front that was guarded by two men.

As soon as I rolled to a stop, the larger of the two men came over to my window and asked, "Can I help you?"

"I'm Tabitha." My voice sounded strained, so I cleared my throat and continued, "I'm here to see Hudson... I mean, Preacher."

He eyed me for a second, then pulled a radio from his belt and stepped back. His words were mumbled as he spoke into it, making it difficult to hear what was being said. A few moments passed before he gave me a short nod and waved me through. "You're good. Pull on in and park up front. Someone will be out to meet you in a minute."

"Okay. Thanks."

My heart started to pound even harder as I eased through the gate and parked at the

front. I hadn't even turned off the engine when the door opened, and a young man stepped out. When he started towards me, I got a better look at him and remembered meeting him when the guys helped at the barn. I smiled as I closed my door and said, "Hey."

"Hi, Ms. Volkov. It's good to see ya again."

“It’s good to see you, too.”

“How are those hinges holding up?”

“They’re doing great.” I smiled. “I appreciate you guys coming out and helping me.”

“Glad we could help.” He motioned me toward the door. “Prez is inside.”

“Okay.”

He opened the door, and I followed him inside. The hallway was dark and smelled of leather, smoke, and old bourbon. And something else. Something older. Like time had settled in the walls, and while it was somewhat rustic, it gave it a feeling of home.

The floors were dark hardwood, and the walls were covered in framed photos, patches, and old black-and-white pictures that gave a glimpse of the club’s history. I was trying to peek at each of them when the hall suddenly ended, and we were standing in a bar.

It looked like one you might find downtown with weathered wood, iron brackets, and a row of mismatched stools. The shelves behind it held bottles of every kind of liquor you could imagine. There were pool tables and dart boards, and the place was filled with men in leather vests and women in tight jeans and low-cut tops.

I felt him long before I saw him.

The heat of his stare sent a chill down my spine.

When I turned, I found him sitting in the back of the room, sitting at a table surrounded by two men I didn't recognize and two women who looked like they were trying too hard to get his attention.

But he wasn't paying them any mind.

His eyes were on me and me alone.

There was no smile. No spark in his eyes.

He just sat there, watching me like a king on his throne, as I forced myself to walk over to him. The two men next to him stopped talking the second they noticed me coming toward them. They glanced over at Hudson, and as soon as they saw the way he was looking at me, they both got up and took the girls with them.

There was a whole room full of people, but all I saw was him.

He looked so unbelievably handsome that it made my heart race.

He was wearing a black t-shirt and his black leather cut, and his salt and pepper hair was disheveled in perfect disarray. The years etched into his face, and they told a story I didn't know. But I wanted to. I wanted to know everything about him. That alone should have had me turning around. Instead, I felt pulled to him, like a moth to a flame.

His eyes never left mine as I walked up to him and said, "Hey."

He held my gaze for a moment, then replied, "Hey. I didn't know you were coming by."

“I didn’t either.”

“Was there something you needed?”

“Just wanted to tell you thanks again for coming to fix Faith’s stall. It was very thoughtful of you.”

“I was glad to do it, but something tells me that’s not the real reason you’re here.”

“No, I guess it’s not.” I folded my arms and cocked my brow, “But you didn’t have to call me on it.”

“Yeah, actually, I did,” he answered without hesitation. “If you have something to say, say it.”

My chest tightened. He wasn’t going to make it easy for me. I didn’t necessarily blame him. I’d been pretty cutthroat when I told him I couldn’t do this thing with him, and now, he wanted my truth. I just didn’t know how to give it. “It’s complicated.”

“I see.”

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, then motioned his head toward the chair next to him. Once I’d sat down, he leaned forward and placed his hand on my arm, giving it a light squeeze. My chest tightened, but not out of fear or disgust. I liked his hands on me. It felt like a promise, and I wanted to believe it even more than I cared to admit.

He studied me for a moment, then said, “You look like you could use a drink.”

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“Yeah, a drink would be good.”

“You got it.” Hudson signaled over to the guy behind the bar. “Bourbon or something more girly?”

“Bourbon is good.”

“You got it.”

Seconds later, there was a drink in my hand, and Hudson was sitting next to me with a serious expression on his face—like he was trying to figure me out. “So, you ready to tell me what’s so complicated?”

“It’s a lot.” I motioned my hand. “I’m not sure this is the place to talk about it.”

He nodded like he didn’t like my answer but understood it. He was about to respond when one of the brothers came over and leaned down to whisper something in Hudson’s ear. Whatever it was made his jaw tighten.

“I gotta take care of something,” he said, standing up. “You gonna be okay for a few minutes?”

“Sure. Take your time.”

“I won’t be long.”

I nodded, and my stomach twisted into a nervous knot as I watched him walk away. I

glanced around the room, taking in the sea of black leather and hard eyes. Hudson's brothers were scattered throughout the room. Some were leaning against the front counter, others leaned over pool tables or sitting at tables, talking and laughing like they didn't have a care in the damn world.

Their patches were worn and faded from time, but the power and fear they represented was steadfast and strong. It should've unnerved me to be sitting in that room alone with them. Strangely enough, it didn't. It was just the opposite.

I'd lived the better part of my life in a world ruled by powerful men in tailored suits. Politicians, mob bosses, and all sorts of criminals with expensive taste and ice for blood. They used charm like a weapon and always hid their cruelty behind their wicked smiles.

But these men didn't hide what they were.

They were raw, fierce, and open in a way I wasn't used to. There was no doubt that there was power there. I could feel it with every breath I took. I didn't know their names, didn't know their stories, but there was a sense of brotherhood and companionship in that room I'd never witnessed before.

I hadn't been sitting there long when two women made their way over to me. Both were beautiful in that effortless, lived-in kind of way. They were young and dressed in loose-fit jeans and bright T-shirts. One was tall with long, dark hair and a bubbly smile. The woman next to her was slightly shorter, with sharp cheekbones and a smirk that said she was up to something. She was the first to speak. "Hey. I'm Antonia, and this is Jenna."

"Hi. I'm Tabitha."

"Yeah, we heard." Antonia glanced over at Jenna, then looked back to me. "Mind if

we join you?”

“Sure,” I said, gesturing to the empty seats in front of me. “Preacher was here but had to step away.”

“We saw,” Antonia replied, glancing toward the hallway where he’d disappeared. “Didn’t want you sitting here alone.”

“Appreciate that.” I paused, then asked, “Have you two been here long?”

“You mean tonight, or when did we meet our ol’ men?” She’d barely gotten the words out when she started to giggle. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to saying that.”

“I take it you haven’t been here all that long?”

“Not quite a year,” Jenna answered. “But I could’ve been here for ten, and I still don’t think I’d be able to call Lawson my ol’ man without at least a little giggle.”

“Same, girl. Same.” Antonia pressed her lips together, then smiled as she asked, “You’re the one with the horses, right?”

“Maybe? Preacher brought a few of the guys over to help me with a few things in the barn.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Weston told me you had some really beautiful horses out there.”

“I do. They’re pretty great.”

“I’d love to come see them sometime.”

“Of course. Come by any time.”

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“I might just take you up on that.”

“I hope you do.”

Antonia leaned in a little closer as she whispered, “So, you and Preacher, huh?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. We’re just... I don’t honestly know what we’re doing.”

“But you’re here to see him, right?”

“I came to talk to him, yes.”

“So, there’s a possibility there.”

“I guess, but I’m sure there are plenty of women knocking at his door.”

“Yeah, no. At least, not that we know of,” Jenna laughed softly. “He doesn’t bring women to the clubhouse.”

“Like none? No women at all?”

Before either of them could answer, the air shifted around us.

He was back.

Antonia whispered, “We’ll finish our chat later.”

“Okay. I’d like that.”

They both stood as Antonia said, “It was really nice to meet you.”

“It was nice to meet you, too.”

They both smiled as they turned and headed back over to their table. Jenna gave me a quick wave as she said, “Don’t be a stranger.”

And just like that, it was just me and him again. Hudson gave me a look, then asked, “You wanna get out of here?”

“We can, but we don’t have to.”

“Thought you said this wasn’t a good place to talk.”

I didn’t respond. I just gave him a slight grimace and a mumble, and that’s all it took. He reached over and took my hand in his, then led me out of the bar. He started down the hall as he asked, “You park out front?”

“I did.”

“Good.”

He led me out the door, and once we were outside, he held out his hand and said, “Gonna need your keys.”

I didn’t ask why. I just reached into my pocket and grabbed my keys, then handed them over to him. He unlocked it, then opened the passenger door, waiting silently as I got inside. I had no idea where he was taking me, and I wasn’t sure I cared. I had things I needed to say, and I didn’t care where I said them.

I just hoped, when it was all said and done, he would understand.

Otherwise, things with us would be over before they started.

13

PREACHER

“So, where are we headed?”

“Your place.”

“Oh.”

She sounded surprised, so I added, “Figured your boys would worry if you were out late.”

“My boys know I’m grown.”

“Your boys aren’t blind. They know their mother is beautiful and is bound to turn a head or two. Never know when it’s the wrong one.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a compliment or not.”

“You can take it any way you want, but your boys are right to be concerned about you. They’ve made their fair share of enemies in the area. They’ve gotta watch their backs.”

“Isn’t that what you are for?”

“We’re gonna do what we can.”

On the drive over, she seemed to be holding her own, but I could feel her energy shifting as we got closer to the house. Neither of us spoke. We just kept our eyes on the road ahead, and the tension in the car built with every breath.

I parked, and neither of us said a word as we got out and started up to the gate. She

opened the gate and motioned for me to follow as she started up the stairs.

When we got to the top, she opened the door, and I followed her inside.

I took a quick glance around and stopped cold.

Damn.

I knew it would be nice, but I wasn't expecting it to be a full-blown penthouse. It was incredible. There was a large living room and modern kitchen, along with two full bedrooms. And everything was decorated to the hilt.

The walls were painted a mix of white and gray, and there was an oversized sofa centered in the main room with end tables on either side. There were several large paintings of various white flowers. I didn't know what kind they were, but they clearly meant something to her.

It was feminine, but not overly so.

It suited her.

All of it.

I was still taking it all in when I told her, "Nice place."

"You sound surprised."

"Maybe a little." I shrugged. "Didn't know a stable could look like this. You got good taste."

"Thank you. I'm glad you like it." She walked over to the kitchen and opened the

fridge. “Wine?”

“Yeah, sure.”

She poured two glasses and handed one to me. Her fingers brushed mine, just for a second, but it was enough to feel the tension humming in her.

I followed her over to the sofa, and we both sat down. She tucked her legs beneath her before taking a long sip of her wine. She stared off into space for a moment too long, and I knew she was struggling.

“Tabitha,” I whispered. “This doesn’t gotta be hard. Just talk to me.”

She looked at me for a long moment, then replied, “I know. It’s just a lot.”

I didn’t move.

Didn’t speak.

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I just sat there and waited for her to gather the courage to say what she had to say. She took another sip of her wine, then set the glass down and sighed.

“You already know the gist of it. I got married when I was sixteen. It wasn’t by choice.” She fidgeted with one of her bracelets as she continued, “My father made a bad bet he never should’ve made and lost. When he couldn’t pay, he gave them the only thing he had.”

Her voice didn’t crack.

It didn’t shake.

She just said it plain, like she was numb to it all. “It all happened so fast. I was just a girl one day and someone’s wife the next.”

I felt my jaw tense, but I kept quiet.

“I wanted no part of it, and Dimitri wasn’t exactly thrilled about it either. He didn’t want to marry me, but his father forced his hand. Dimitri didn’t like being told what to do, and he took his anger out on me. He was pretty brutal, especially in the beginning. He wanted things his way. He was very controlling, cold, and sex was...”

She paused, her lips pressing into a thin line. “It wasn’t about me. It was never about me. It was about power. About control. About putting me in my place.”

I could feel the burn in my chest.

“Things got better once I started having the boys. He let up some and wasn’t quite so harsh. And after Nikolai was born, something changed. I think he saw me differently.” She shrugged. “Maybe because I gave him what he wanted or maybe I lost my appeal. I don’t know. But he stopped coming to me. Stopped touching me. And I was okay with that. Relieved, even.”

She finally looked up at me with a somber expression. It was tough to see the hurt in her eyes, but I didn’t look away. I kept my eyes trained on hers as she told me, “I had my boys. They were my world. I figured that was enough. It had to be. And then...”

“And then?” I pushed.

“I met you.”

Her words hung between us. She’d given me the ultimate compliment. Tabitha was a beautiful woman. She could have her pick of men, and yet, it was me that turned her head. I wasn’t sure what to say to that. It was a moment when I was feeling a little proud, cocky even, but that was the last thing she needed.

Especially when she announced, “I don’t know how to do the whole dating thing.”

“Come again?”

“I’ve never done it. I went where I was told and pretended I wanted to be there or paid the consequences.” She took a long sip of her wine, trying to muster the courage to say, “I don’t know how to let a man in without thinking he’s going to use me or hurt me. I don’t know how to trust... And to just get it all out there, I don’t know how to kiss. Not really. Not the way kissing is supposed to be.”

“Hmmm.”

“It’s a lot, isn’t it?”

“It is, but there’s something you gotta remember.” I leaned in and looked her dead in the eye. “I’m not him. I’ll never be him or anything like him.”

“I know,” she said quickly. “And that’s why I’m sitting here with you right now. But you need to know it’s not going to be easy with me.”

“Thanks for the heads up, but I’m good.”

“You sure?”

“Look, I know you’ve been through hell. I ain’t expecting you to run out the gate and fall into my arms. But I’m here. And I’m not going anywhere unless you want me to.”

Her breath hitched, just a little. “I don’t want you to.”

“That’s all I need to know.”

My fingers twitched with the need to touch her, but I didn’t rush it. I leaned in slow, giving her every second to pull away if she needed to.

But she didn’t.

She stayed right there, watching me as I lowered my mouth to hers. When I finally pressed my lips to hers, it was as soft and tender as I could manage. It was a quiet kind of kiss. The kind that didn’t demand or take. It wasn’t about heat or hunger—even though I had plenty of both for her.

It was about giving her a chance to take in the moment. I was letting her know it wasn’t just about me. I wanted her to know that she had a say and that what she

wanted mattered.

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She kissed me back, hesitant at first, like she was thinking her way through it. But then she settled in, just a little, but it was enough. And before I knew it, she wasn't just kissing me back, she was leaning into it. And damn if that didn't hit me right in the gut.

When we finally pulled apart, her eyes stayed closed for a second, and she inhaled a deep breath. I couldn't help but smile when I told her, "Thought you didn't know how to do this."

"I don't."

She let out a shaky little laugh, and it was the sweetest damn sound I'd heard in a long time. "You do, and if you aren't careful..."

"Kiss me again."

"Tabitha."

"I thought you said I was good at..."

Before she could complete her thought, I leaned in and crashed my mouth against hers, silencing her with a kiss.

This kiss was different. This kiss wasn't laced with doubt or any resistance at all. Instead, it was hungry and possessive and filled with a need that matched my own. I wanted to devour her right there on the spot, but this wasn't about me or what I wanted.

This was about what she wanted, what she needed, and about me giving it to her. And I wanted to give it without expectation or crossing any of her boundaries. It wouldn't be easy. She'd made that clear, but I was here for as long as she wanted me to be.

A slight moan slipped through her lips as she wound her arms around my neck. When she inched closer, my hands drifted down to the small of her back, and I couldn't believe how unbelievably perfect she felt in my arms.

Damn, there was no denying it.

This woman was going to be my fucking kryptonite.

Her body melted into me as her tongue brushed against mine, and I reached my breaking point. I'd taken all I could take. I eased back, breaking our embrace, and asked, "I'm gonna need to know how far you wanna take this."

"As far as you want to."

"No, babe. We're not doing that." Her eyes grew wide when I said, "This is all about you and what you want."

"I don't want to stop."

"Okay. I can kiss you all damn night, but if you want more than that, you're gonna have to tell me."

She nodded, then leaned back in, kissing me once again. It didn't take long for things to become heated. Tabitha had inched her way closer and was practically sitting in my lap when she gasped, "I want more."

"How much more?"

“A lot more.”

Without saying anything more, she reached over, took my hand in hers, and stood. I followed suit, and as soon as I was on my feet, she led me to her bedroom. When she reached the center of the room, she stopped and turned to face me. Without batting an eye, she reached for the hem of her shirt and slowly slipped it over her head. She sat down on the edge of the bed, and when she started taking off her boots, I asked, “You sure about this?”

“No,” she admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I want to stop.”

“Tabitha.”

“Look, I’m not making any promises...” she reached behind her and unhooked her bra, letting it fall to the floor. “We may have to stop, but I want to try.”

“Okay, but we’re gonna take this thing slow.”

From the moment we’d first kissed, she’d had me all tangled up, and now, I was in complete knots. I closed in on her and slipped an arm around her waist, easing her to lay back on the bed as I hovered over her. I dropped my mouth to her neck, and when I started kissing along her shoulder, she shuddered beneath me.

“So damn beautiful,” I said against her collarbone as I moved down further. When I reached her breast, I closed my mouth over her nipple, and she immediately arched her back. I almost lost it when I saw how her body responded to my touch. Her hands dove into my hair, then down to my shoulders. She was all over me.

She wasn’t just into it. She was hungry for it.

“Oh my God,” she breathed as I kissed down the flat of her stomach.

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I undid the button on her jeans and inched them, along with her panties, down her long, lean legs. I felt almost feral as I stared down at her in nothing but those black lace panties waiting for me. The years had been kind to her. She was absolutely exquisite. She was the kind of woman a man didn't just want to touch. He wanted to worship, and my God. I wanted to worship every inch of her.

My hands slid down between her legs, and the second I raked my fingers across her wet center, she inhaled a deep breath and hissed, "Oh. My. God."

Hearing her start to unravel spurred me on. I licked the length of her, teasing her in a steady rhythm before I focused on her clit. After a minute, I increased the pace, and she started to stiffen.

"Oh, God. I think I... I'm going to..." she broke off as I sucked down hard, my fingers slipping in, sending her over the edge. Her thighs squeezed as she contracted around me, and a deep-seated moan vibrated through her as she arched off the bed again.

When I moved up over her, she was motionless, and her eyes were hazy and sated. I brushed a strand of hair from her forehead, and she searched my face with an awed expression. "Oh, my. That was incredible."

It most certainly was.

Damn. She was killing me.

My laughter died as I moved over her again and kissed her with her taste still on my

tongue. In a matter of seconds, she started writhing beneath me again. She seemed into it, really into it, and I was too. Hell, I wanted her more than my next breath, but I didn't want to push her. "We should probably stop."

"What?" She looked up at me with furrowed brows. "No."

"We've got time, Tabitha."

Without saying a word, her hands dropped to my belt, and she fumbled around, but she wasn't getting anywhere. With a soft chuckle, I lowered my hand and snapped open the buckle.

I eased off my boots, then pulled off my jeans along with my boxer briefs. I quickly fished out a condom from the pocket, and a spark of anticipation flashed through Tabitha's eyes as she watched me roll it on. I eased back on the bed, and her hands moved to my hips as I settled between her legs.

Her eyes locked on mine, and her breath hitched as I raked my cock against her center. She lifted her hips towards me, urging me on as she cried, "Yes!"

"Fuck me," I choked out. "You're killing me here."

With one hard thrust, I buried myself deep inside her. I'd been too rough, or at least, I thought I had. When I didn't move, she groaned with need and shifted her hips, taking me deeper.

And just like that, I lost what was left of my restraint. Fuck.

A rush of air hissed through her teeth as I withdrew and drove into her again. I didn't know what it was about this woman, but she had me spiraling out of control. I couldn't get enough of her.

With her arms wound tightly around my neck, I growled into her shoulder and started thrusting harder and deeper, building up to a relentless pace. I glanced up at her, and when I saw that her eyes were clamped shut, I said, “Open your eyes... Look at me.”

She blinked her eyes open, her pupils were huge, and her cheeks were flushed. Her breath caught when I added, “I want you to see who’s fucking you.”

I lowered my mouth to her neck, kissing her as I drove deeper, harder. Her head reared back with a sated groan when I whispered, “I want your eyes on me when you come all over my cock.”

“Oh, God. Oh... God.”

That was it.

That was exactly what I wanted to fucking hear. Her nails dug into my lower back as her hips rocked against mine, meeting my every thrust with more intensity than the last. I could feel the pressure building, forcing a growl from my chest.

I hooked one of her legs over my arm as my hips started driving into her harder, faster, and she started to tighten around me. “I’m going to...”

She panted wildly and hooked her other leg around my hip when I increased my pace. She was close, so I lowered my hand between her thighs, raking my thumb across her clit.

That was all it took.

She let out a small groan as her back bowed off the bed. The muscles in her body grew taut as her orgasm took hold. Watching her and feeling her pushed me over the edge, and I came right along with her.

I released her leg and collapsed onto her, letting her take my weight for a moment before I pushed up slightly to scan her face. Her cheeks were flushed, and her breath was ragged as she muttered, “Wow.”

“You liked that, huh?”

“Ummm, yeah,” she scoffed. “It was even better than I thought it would be.”

“Oh, so you doubted me?”

“No, it was me that I doubted.”

“Well, I never doubted you for a second. I knew you would be incredible.”

I dealt with the condom, then laid down on the mattress next to her.

I was still trying to catch my breath when Tabitha curled up next to me and rested her head on my chest. I covered us both with the comforter. I could feel the nervous tension in her again, feel the frantic beating of her heart, and stroked her back to try to help her settle. “I know you don’t believe it. I know you don’t trust me yet. But I will prove it to you.”

She kept her face buried in my chest and hidden from me.

I didn’t say anything else.

I just let her have her moment. Eventually, she whispered, “Thank you.”

“For?”

“Everything.” She glanced up at me with those gorgeous hazel eyes and said, “For not giving up on me, even when I gave you no reason not to. And for listening to me, really listening, and making me feel like what I have to say matters.”

“Right back at ya, beautiful.”

She closed her eyes, and it wasn't long before she drifted off to sleep.

It was quiet. Not the restless kind of quiet, but the one that brought peace. Real peace. The kind that settled in your chest like it had always been there. It felt good. She felt good. She had one arm slung across me like I belonged to her. And I liked it. I liked it a lot, so much so, I didn't want to leave.

But I had to.

Her boys were right next door. If they saw me walking out of here in the morning, they would raise ten shades of hell. I needed to go, but I didn't move. I just laid there, for over an hour, listening to the soft sound of her breathing and feeling the warmth of her body next to mine.

Eventually, I forced myself to shift enough to slide out from under her arm. I tried not to wake her, but as soon as I got out of the bed, her eyes flew open. "You're leaving?"

"Afraid so." I pulled on my boxers as I told her, "It's almost daylight. I need to get back to the clubhouse."

"Okay, but how will you get back? You drove my car, remember?"

"Yeah, I'll have one of the boys come get me."

She nodded, then eased the covers back and slipped on her robe. She sat at the foot of the bed and watched as I finished getting dressed. I would've told her to go back to bed, but something told me she wouldn't do it. My girl would want to walk me to the door, and I was good with that.

Once I was ready, she followed me into the living room, and before I walked out, she

reached up and gave me a hug. “Thank you for tonight.”

“I should be the one thanking you.” I hugged her back, then said, “Have dinner with me tonight.”

“Okay. Just tell me when and where.”

“My place. I’ll pick you up at six.”

“Sounds good.”

I let my hand linger on her shoulder as I passed, memorizing the feel of her under my fingers. Then I opened the door, glanced back at her one last time, and said, “Lock up after me.”

She gave me a quiet nod, and as I stepped out into the night, my heart was pounding in a way it hadn’t in years. I left there not knowing where this road would lead, but for the first time in a long damn while, I was looking forward to the ride.

14

TABITHA

“They’ve finished painting.”

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:38 am

“Oh, really? I thought they wouldn’t be done until next week.”

“That’s what they told me, but they ran late last night just so they could wrap it up,” Marissa explained. “I was wondering if you might want to meet me over there and check it out. I could show you some of the new furniture I’m looking into.”

“Sure, that would be great.” I still needed to feed and water the horses, and I still hadn’t showered yet. “I can head over in about an hour.”

“Perfect. I’ll see you then.”

I ended the call, then put on some old clothes, and made my way downstairs. Harlan, one of my farm hands, had already cleaned out most of the stalls and was starting to change out the feed and water buckets. I gave him a hand, and once we had them all taken care of, I rushed upstairs for a much-needed shower.

As I got undressed, I tried not to think about Hudson or how amazing our night together had been. I tried not to catch his scent on my skin or feel my tender, swollen lips, but it was tough. I never imagined that I could enjoy being with a man so much, and the sex was even better than I could’ve possibly imagined.

I had always closed my eyes and let myself escape to another time or place, blocking anything and everything that was happening around me, but Hudson wanted me there and in the moment. He wanted me to feel everything he was doing to me and for me to know exactly who was making me come undone. And when he said, ‘eyes on me, baby’, it turned me on in ways I can’t describe, and it turned me on now just thinking about it.

Damn. I needed to pull myself together.

I only had a few minutes before I had to leave to meet Marissa at the casino. I took a few deep breaths, then hopped into the shower. Once I was done, I put on some fresh clothes and pulled my hair into a loose bun. I didn't bother with much makeup. I wasn't going to be seeing anyone important—not until later. So, I slipped on my shoes, grabbed my things, and rushed out to my car.

Twenty minutes later, I was pulling into the casino's parking lot, and the first thing I noticed wasn't the new awning or the billboard sign. It was the motorcycles that were lined up along the curb. It was official. The Fury boys were making their presence known. They weren't really doing anything. They were just sitting there, talking among themselves. But something about having them there brought a shift to the air.

They were powerful and fearsome, but they didn't seem to notice it.

Or maybe they did.

Maybe that was the point.

When I started up to the front door, one of them looked up. He was a big guy with long hair that was pulled back into a low tie. His leather cut fit snug over broad shoulders. Recognition flickered across his face, and he gave me a quick chin lift.

I gave him a smile and a slight wave, then pushed through the doors and continued inside. I was immediately hit with the scent of fresh paint. Curious, I headed straight for the bar. When I walked in, it was everything I'd hoped for and more.

The deep charcoal on the walls was stunning. It was even richer than I'd imagined, and it looked bold and sophisticated against the high white ceilings and the soft shimmer of the chandeliers overhead. It was exactly what I had envisioned.

I ran my fingers along the edge of the bar, already imagining bottles lined up behind it, and smiled. This was good. Very good. I was still taking it all in when I heard the soft click of heels behind me, followed by, “Oh my heavens! It looks better than I imagined.”

“It does look good, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah. You nailed it, Tabitha.”

I turned, smiling as she came up beside me with her purse in one hand and her tablet in the other. Marissa always had that pulled-together, city-girl look about her. A sharp blazer, perfect eyeliner, and not a hair out of place.

“It really does look good,” I said, still taking it all in. “That contrast with the ceiling makes the place.”

“I knew it would!” she beamed, then flipped open her tablet and tapped the screen a few times. “And wait until you see these.”

She was practically beaming as she turned the screen toward me and revealed the black leather booths she found. They were sleek with deep tufted backs and brass accents along the trim. “They’re perfect.”

“I thought you would like them.” Her smile widened as she flipped the screen. “And here are the stools.”

“Oh, these are great.” They were round and low-backed with the same leather and brass accents as the booths. “They’re exactly what I was hoping for.”

“I found a local guy who can get these custom-made,” she said with her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Real leather, too. We don’t want that fake stuff that will

crack in six months.”

“No, we certainly don’t.” I flipped back and forth between the pages, imagining the way it would all come together. Every detail was starting to feel like a piece of me stitched into this place. “It’s going to look amazing.”

“Classy but still bold.”

“Exactly. This bar’s going to have its own gravity. People will walk in and feel it.”

“They certainly will.” Marissa slipped her tablet back into her bag, then said, “I have some color swatches that I wanted to show you, but I left them in my car. Give me a minute, and I’ll go grab them.”

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“Sure. Take your time.”

Marissa darted for the door, leaving me alone to give the place a quick once over. I was checking the trim and molding when I heard Nikolai say, “Looking good in here.”

I smiled as I turned to face him, watching as he looked around the bar and nodded in approval. “Real good, actually.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Not at all. I knew you’d be great at this.”

“Well, I’m glad you were so certain. I was beginning to think I was too old for this.”

“You’re not old.” His lips curled into a smirk. “You’re just refined.”

“That doesn’t sound like a compliment.”

“Well, it could be,” he scoffed. “On a different note, I think we’ve finally settled on a name for the place.”

“I thought you’d already decided on the Syndicate.”

“I thought so too, but it just didn’t feel right. So, we decided to go with the Black Crown. It just seems to fit better, especially with the directions we’re going with the décor.”

“Oh, you’re right! I love it, and I couldn’t agree more.”

“I thought you’d like it.”

“I do! It’s perfect.”

“I thought so, too.” He studied me for a moment, then asked, “So, are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“How things went with Preacher?”

The words hit me square in the chest.

I should’ve known he would ask.

He was the one who’d encouraged me to go, but I doubted he would’ve approved of how things had turned out. I glanced down, brushing imaginary dust off the bar. “It was good.”

I answered coyly, pretending I wasn’t immediately flooded with the memory of our night together. His hands, his mouth, and the low rasp of his voice in the dark. The way he looked at me made me feel desired. Not property. Not out of convenience. But wanted. Truly, utterly wanted.

It was everything I’d hoped it would be and more. And I meant it when I told him I didn’t know it could be like that. Dimitri’s love came with bruises and broken rules, and fear was tangled into every kiss. I’d learned to brace for pain, even in the soft moments—especially in the soft moments.

It wasn't until my entire body was humming with need that I realized just how wrong I'd been about everything. I thought I would've made a mess of it all. I thought Dimitri had ruined me, but he hadn't. Maybe it's true and time heals all wounds or maybe it was the fact that Hudson's touch had me spell bound, and my longing for him drowned out all my doubts and fears.

I'm not sure what it was, but I could still feel.

I could still want, and my God, I wanted him like I'd never wanted anything. Hudson made me feel alive in ways I didn't know were possible. There had been no fear. No tension. No calculating moves. It was just him and me and the heat of the moment. We got caught up in each other, and then, it was over.

"It was good?" Nikolai asked, pulling me from my thoughts. "That's all I get?"

"Afraid so."

"Come on," he pushed. "You gotta give me something."

"I don't ask you about your personal life."

"You can't be serious." He chuckled. "You ask all the time. You're always asking."

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“Okay. Okay.” I gave a soft sigh, letting my fingers drum gently on the bar top. “It was good. It was even better than I expected. He was kind. Gentle. And he made me feel... It was good. It was really, really good.”

“Well, how ‘bout that,” Nikolai chuckled. “Mom is stepping out and taking names. I’m proud of you.”

“I’m trying.” I looked at him, and my chest tightened. I’d raised him through hell, alongside a man who only knew how to terrorize, and he’d still managed to become a good, decent man. And I adored him, but he was still my son, and there were things I simply couldn’t say. So, I said, “I’m taking it one step at a time.”

He nodded like he understood, and I think maybe he did. “So, when are you seeing him again?”

“Tonight, actually. We’re having dinner at his place.”

“Man, you two don’t mess around.”

“At our age, you gotta get while the gettin’ is good.” I glanced down at my watch, and when I saw the time, I winced. “Speaking of which, I gotta get going. I’m supposed to meet the vet in half an hour.”

“What about Marissa?”

“I’ll catch her on my way out.”

“Okay, so what time will you be home?”

“I don’t know. Late, I would imagine.”

“How late?”

“Nikolai.”

“What?” he fussed. “I’m watching out for my dear, beloved mother.”

“Your mother can take care of herself.” I patted him on the chest, then turned and started out of the room. “Have a good afternoon, sweetheart.”

“You know I hate when you call me that.”

“I do.”

“Then, why... ah, forget it.” I’d almost made it out of the room when he called out, “Behave tonight. Be careful and remember who you are.”

I stopped dead in my tracks and whipped around to face him. “And who is that?”

“Tabitha Volkov. She’s an amazing lady. No one on the planet like her.”

“Thank you, Nikolai.”

He gave me a nod, and I was on my way. I met Marissa in the hallway and gave my approval on the color swatches. We planned to meet later in the week so we could go over some of the final details. As soon as we were done, I made my way back out to my car, and like earlier, the Fury boys were still posted out front.

I gave them a quick wave, and they each waved back with no emotion on their faces. I couldn't tell if they were okay being there or not. It wasn't something I gave much thought. I had too many other things on my mind. I needed to get to the barn and find out what the vet had to say about Faith and several of the other horses he was checking in on.

When I finally made it to the barn, Dr. Lewis was already there and in the far stall, crouched beside the mare. His vet bag was open at his side, and I could hear his voice, calm and steady, as he tried to reassure Faith while examining her hoof. The mare flicked an ear toward him but didn't pull away.

"Hey, Doc." Not wanting to disturb them, I stood by the gate as I told him, "I'm sorry I'm late. I got caught up in town."

"No need to apologize. We've been doing just fine without you." He looked up and gave me a quick smile. "She's looking better. That hoof's healing up nicely. The new stall upgrade is great. It's just what she needed."

"A friend did it for me. I think she likes it."

"She certainly does." Doc gave me a little side glance. "It's making a difference."

That warmed me a bit. I didn't say that Hudson was the one who'd helped me. I didn't need to. Just knowing he'd had a hand in helping Faith stuck with me more than I expected.

Doc finished checking the mare, then stood and stepped back with a concerned expression. "She's holding steady. Good weight. No swelling and it looks like her appetite is picking up."

“It is.”

“Good. Good.” He cocked his head to the side, and something about his expression made my chest tighten. “I’m a little concerned about the foal.”

My stomach dipped.

He moved around to the mare’s side, pressing his stethoscope low on her belly, and listened closely. His expression didn’t change, but I caught the slight tension in his jaw. It was enough. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure. It could just be positioning,” he answered hesitantly. “But the heartbeat’s not as consistent as I’d like it to be. Could be nothing. Could be something.”

“Okay, if it’s something, what could it be?”

“I don’t like making guesses.” Doc brushed his palms on his jeans. “But it could be a weak valve or simply slow development. Maybe even placental issues. All could be expected with the state she was in when you brought her here. I’d like to do a scan and get a better look at what’s going on. Maybe pull some blood work.”

“Okay. Whatever you need to do.”

I hated the not knowing. It made my mind spiral. I looked over at Faith, so strong and beautiful, and I felt a deep ache. She didn’t deserve complications. Not after everything she’d been through. I opened the door and walked over to her, gently

running my hand down her neck. “She’s such a good girl.”

“She is,” he agreed. “And she’s mighty lucky to have you watching out for her.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Not until you have something to worry about.” His expression softened as he told me, “It’s just a few tests.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it, Tabitha. I’m going to take good care of your girl and her foal. There’s no need for you to lose sleep over this.”

“You know me well.”

“I certainly do,” he chuckled.

“You mentioned on the phone that you might have some potential buyers for Whiskey Rose.”

“I do. They’re interested in her and Beau Sins.” He sounded pleased as he explained, “They have a place out in Fayette County in Tennessee. About half an hour out of Memphis. It’s a family ranch that hit hard times a few years back, but they’re back on their feet and looking to grow.”

“Well, they couldn’t have picked any better horses to grow with.” Whiskey Rose was a Dutch Warmblood. Her breed was known to be smart, athletic, and amazing at show jumping. Beau Sins was a quarter horse, but he came from an elite bloodline and was a gorgeous reining horse. “Do these folks have a name?”

“Lincoln and Riley,” Doc answered. “It’s Riley’s family ranch, so I imagine she’ll be the one who reaches out about coming by to see them.”

“Okay. I’ll look forward to their call.”

Doc didn’t stay much longer. He checked on the other horse and was on his way. He promised to return in the morning to start the test. He reminded me not to worry, but I couldn’t help myself. I stayed in the stall for the better part of the afternoon. I couldn’t do much for her. Just brushed her coat and talked to her for a bit, but it seemed to do her good. It definitely did me some good.

I would’ve stayed longer, but I had dinner plans with Hudson. I hated to cancel, so I said my goodbyes to Faith and went to track down Harlan. I found him at the other end of the barn, cleaning out one of the stalls. He was humming one of his tunes and hadn’t noticed I’d come up until I said, “Hey.”

“Hey.” He glanced up and gave me one of his easy smiles. “How’s it going?”

“It’s going.” I let out a sigh. “I need you to keep an eye on Faith tonight.”

“Everything okay?”

“I think so. Doc is just a little concerned about the foal. I’d feel better if you’d check in on her every few hours and let me know if anything feels off.”

“You got it, Miss Tabitha,” he answered without hesitation. “I’ll take good care of her.”

“Thank you.”

I was a little hesitant as I made my way upstairs. I should’ve been excited about

seeing Hudson, and I was. I wanted to have dinner with him and let myself just be for a little while.

But something wasn't right.

Something was coming. I could feel it in my bones.

15

PREACHER

“Wow.” Tabitha’s eyes slowly skirted over the living room and kitchen, and she sounded anything but impressed as she muttered, “It’s really nice.”

My place wasn’t extravagant like her apartment or mansion of a home she owned with her boys, but it was my home, and I was proud of it. The boys and I tore it down to the studs and built it back up again. It was on the roster for historic homes, so I kept the old bones—exposed brick, wide plank floors, and tall ceilings with the original beams.

The house had a story to tell, and I wasn’t going to take that away from it. I liked that it had history, but that didn’t mean Tabitha had to love it or even like it. It was just a house, after all.

I motioned my hand toward the two wine bottles on the counter and asked, “Red or white?”

She didn’t answer right away.

She just stood there with a lost look in her eyes. I was about to ask again when she

finally answered, “Either is fine.”

Something seemed off, but I had no idea what was going on. She looked good—damn good. She was wearing a short, green dress that hugged her curves like it was made for her, and her hair was down around her shoulders. But it felt like she was a hundred miles away.

“You alright?” I asked, stepping a little closer. “You’re awfully quiet.”

“Yes, I’m okay.” She blinked and gave a small smile. “I’m sorry if I seem quiet. I just had one of those days, but your home is beautiful. You kept so much of the original character, and the kitchen looks like it should be in a magazine.”

“I don’t know about that, but I appreciate you saying so.”

I poured her a glass of wine, and she came over and sat down at the counter. I’d gone simple tonight—pasta with my special sauce and garlic bread. Not exactly fancy, but it smelled good, and I was hoping it’d ease whatever nerves she had. I gave the pasta another stir as I told her, “Hope you’re hungry. There’s enough here for an army.”

She nodded and gave me another half-smile, but it didn’t make it to her eyes. She crossed her arms loosely over her stomach and stared down at the floor. That was it. I set the spoon down and took a breath.

“Tabitha,” I said gently. “Something’s going on with you. Are you gonna tell me what it is, or do I have to start guessing?”

She hesitated, eyes falling to the floor, then back up to mine.

And just like that, the armor cracked.

“It’s Faith,” she said softly. “Doc came by to do his weekly checks, and he’s concerned about her. She’s not due for a few weeks, but something’s not right. Said there might be an issue in utero, and I just... I can’t shake this feeling.”

There it was.

The weight she’d been carrying since I’d first picked her up.

I didn’t say anything. I just turned off the stove and reached into the cabinet for some plastic food containers. When I started filling them with the food I’d made, Tabitha asked, “What are you doing?”

“Taking you home,” I said simply, sliding the bread into a paper bag. “You need to be with her.”

“But what about dinner?”

“We can eat it just as easy in your kitchen as mine.”

“Hudson. You don’t have to do that.”

“But I do,” I said, giving her a look. “You love that horse. You got every right to be with her if something feels off.”

She didn’t respond. She just sat there, looking at me with doe eyes, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say she was doing her damndest not to cry. I didn’t say anything. I simply boxed everything up and put it into a cooler, and once I had everything together, I turned to her and said, “I’m ready when you are.”

“You’re something else, you know that?”

“So, I’ve been told.”

I hated that Tabitha wouldn’t get the chance to spend any real time at my place, but I could tell by the smile on her face that I’d made the right move in moving things to her place. I loaded everything into the SUV, and then we were on our way.

We didn’t say much on the drive over.

Didn’t need to. I knew what was on her mind. That horse had gotten under her skin, and she was riddled with worry—almost overly so. She had one hand curled tightly in her lap while the other rested on the door handle like she was bracing for something. She always seemed so strong and put together, but I was witnessing a crack in her façade.

I couldn’t help but wonder if this was the norm for her.

It would make sense, especially after what she’d been through.

She needed a sense of control, and without it, she struggled to keep it together. I might’ve been wrong. She might’ve just been worried about her horse, and that was all there was to it. Only time would tell.

By the time we pulled up to the stables, the sun had set, and it was starting to get dark. As soon as I killed the engine, Tabitha hopped out and made a beeline for the stables. I followed behind, and when we reached Faith’s stall, I was surprised to see that Harlan was in her stall, brushing her with slow, even strokes.

He was talking to her with a soft, easy drawl, and she was still on her feet. I figured it was a good sign, but her eyes looked tired. Tabitha grimaced as she asked, “How’s she doing?”

“Seems like her usual self.” Harlan kept brushing her as he said, “She ate like a champ and seems to be settling in for the night.”

“So, no pacing or head low or fever or sweating. Anything like that?”

“No, ma’am. She’s been good.”

“That’s great.” Tabitha exhaled with a mix of relief and ache. She stepped forward, resting her arms on the top rail as she smiled and said, “Thank you for staying with her.”

“Told ya I would.” Harlan gave her a sheepish little grin. “Truth is, I like hanging out with her. She’s a sweet one. Pearl could learn a thing or two from her.”

“Yes, she could.” Tabitha slipped her hand through the bars to stroke her neck. “Would you mind hanging out with her for a little longer? We haven’t had a chance to eat dinner yet.”

“Sure thing. You guys go ahead.” Harlan tipped his chin. “I got nowhere to be.”

“Thank you, Harlan. I owe ya.” Tabitha glanced up at me with a relieved smile. “You ready to eat a bite?”

“Absolutely.”

I went back out to the SUV and grabbed the cooler, then Tabitha and I headed up to her apartment. She set the table while I unpacked the food, reheating what I could in

her oven and pouring two glasses of wine.

When we finally sat down, her shoulders looked a little lower.

The worry hadn't left, but it had loosened its grip.

I watched her for a moment, then asked, "So, what's the draw to the horses?"

Her brows furrowed like she was surprised by the question. She thought for a moment, then she smiled. Not the forced kind, but the real kind—the one that reached her eyes and made my chest feel tight.

"I wanted them since I was a little girl, and now, I have them."

"Oh, come on. I know there's more to it than that."

"Yes, but..."

"I want to hear it. I want to know your story."

"Okay, but only if you'll share yours."

"You have yourself a deal."

"And no holding back?"

“No holding back.”

“Okay, fair enough.” She stared at me for a moment, then smiled and said, “So, I guess it all started with my father. He worked as a hand on a big ranch outside of the city, and he’d take me to work with him from time to time.”

A solemn look marked her face as she continued, “The man he worked for had a daughter. She was sixteen or seventeen, and she had this beautiful chestnut mare with long legs and a white blaze down her face. I’d sit on the fence and watch her ride for hours. She was really something. They both were.”

She paused, and her eyes drifted toward the window like she could still see that old ranch in her mind. “I spent years dreaming of having a horse just like hers. I even went so far as to ask Dimitri if he would buy a couple for the boys, but of course, he refused.”

“But when he died...”

“But when he died, I was able to buy the stables and several thoroughbreds, and I loved them. They were everything I’d always wanted, but there was something missing. It just didn’t feel right, and then, one day, I found myself sitting at the kill auction. I don’t know how I found out about the place, but when I saw those horses and the state they were in, I knew... They were the missing piece.”

We sat in silence for a beat, and then, I reached across the table and wrapped my hand around hers. “You’re not that little girl on the fence anymore. You’re the woman she hoped she’d become.”

Tabitha didn't say anything. She just gave my hand a squeeze and said, "Thank you."

I watched her more than I ate. The way her fingers traced idle patterns along the rim of her glass. The way her eyes drifted every so often toward the stables below. The way she toyed with her pasta and barely ate.

She was still worried.

Even with me here and knowing Faith wasn't alone, she hadn't let herself fully settle. I didn't press her. I just made sure to listen when she talked and stay close when she didn't.

When our plates were empty, I reached over and placed my hand on hers. "You ready to head back down?"

"If you don't mind," she answered in barely a whisper. "I'd really like to check on her before it gets too late."

We made our way down together, and sure enough, Harlan was still in the stall, cross-legged in the straw, talking to the mare like she was a baby girl instead of a thousand-pound animal. She was calm—ears twitching, tail flicking, but she didn't look distressed. That was a good sign.

"Hey, Harlan," Tabitha said softly. "Thank you for staying."

"Of course." He stood up with a grunt, brushing hay from his jeans. "I'll be in early, but if you need me...."

"We'll be fine." Tabitha gave him a grateful smile. "Go on home, get some rest. I'll stay with her tonight."

“You sure?”

“Positive. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Sure thing.”

He gave me a nod on his way out, and I returned it. Once he was gone, I turned and started back up the steps. I hadn’t gotten far when Tabitha called out, “Where are you going?”

“To grab a couple of blankets.”

I could tell by her expression that she wasn’t following, so I added, “I know you want to stay with her, and if you’re staying, I’m staying. Simple as that.”

“You really don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

I continued up the steps and up to her apartment. It didn’t take long to grab a couple of blankets and an extra pillow. When I came back down, Tabitha was still in the stall, brushing Faith’s side with slow, even strokes, and for the first time tonight, she seemed calm and relaxed.

And she couldn’t have looked more beautiful.

Damn. There was no doubt about it. She was getting under my skin.

I laid the blankets out just outside the stall so we could keep an eye on Faith without disturbing her. It wasn’t the most comfortable setup, but it would do. After a few minutes, Tabitha came over and sat down next to me.

I don't know how long we just sat there, listening to the rhythm of the barn and the slow breaths of the mare.

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Then, quietly, her voice broke the silence.

“Will you tell me about Beckett?”

The question hit me like a damn freight train. I hadn’t talked about him in so long, not really. But something in her voice and the way she was looking at me made it feel like maybe I could.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything. No holding back, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

I didn’t want to, but I kept my word.

I told her about Jersey.

Told her how we met, how we burned bright and fast, and how she left the world just moments after she’d given me Beckett. And then, my story shifted to him.

I told her about how smart he was and how he was fierce like his mama and stubborn like me. And how he was always pushing the edges of things and never backed down. I told her he loved hard and that he got that from his momma, too.

It was tough talking about him like he was a memory.

He was more than that to me. He was still a part of me. I could still feel him with every breath, and it took all I had to keep myself from getting lost in the pain of losing him.

Telling her about what those assholes had done to Amy was tough.

My words were laced with guilt and hard to choke out.

I had a feeling it was just as hard to hear, especially after everything she'd been through.

"I wanted to fix it." The memories started rushing in. The disappointed look in his eyes. The crack of his voice when he spoke. The drop of his shoulders when he realized my decision had been made. I swallowed hard, trying to force down the knot in my throat. "Wanted him to have his revenge. But he wasn't patched in, and she wasn't an ol' lady. I had to think of the club. Think of all my men, not just my boy."

Tabitha didn't speak.

She just reached over and laid her hand over mine.

I told her about sending him to Washington and how I'd hoped it would help get his head straight. "I thought the time away would fix things. I thought he'd finally be able to let it go. But he couldn't. He went after them on his own and got himself killed."

"Oh, Hudson. I'm so sorry."

"I should've done more."

"You did what you thought was right. There's no way you could've known that he'd

take matters into his own hands.”

“That’s just it. I was his father. It was my job to know.”

“Did you make them pay?”

“The men who killed him?” When she nodded, I immediately answered, “Without question.”

“Then, your son’s soul is no longer restless.”

“Well, mine certainly is.”

“It just needs some time. You’ll see.”

We sat there in silence, and I could feel the weight of it pressing down on my shoulders. But her fingers never left mine. For a while, we just sat there in the stillness of the barn, letting the quiet settle between us, and I was good with that. I needed the moment to clear my head. I looked over at Faith, watching as she moved around in her stall. Her tail swished as she adjusted her weight, and the rhythm of her breathing was slow, steady.

It was a good sign.

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Tabitha must've thought the same because she didn't move. She just sat there, holding my hand, and after a while, she looked up at me with a soft smile. "Tell me something about the club... something good."

"That narrows it down," I scoffed.

"Come on." She nudged me with her shoulder. "I know there has to be something, otherwise you wouldn't love it the way you do."

I leaned my head back against the wooden beam behind us. "You ever tried running a crew of grown-ass men who think they know everything?"

"I raised three boys. Does that count?"

She cocked that sexy eyebrow, and it was all I could do to keep myself from pulling her into my lap and kissing her, long and hard, but that wasn't going to happen. I knew how incredible her body and her lips felt against mine—how she tasted—so if I got too close and physically touched or kissed her, I wouldn't be able to stop.

I couldn't let that happen. Not tonight.

Tonight was about her and making sure she was good, so I gave her a nod and answered, "Absolutely."

"Surely they aren't that bad."

"Oh, but they are," I scoffed. "I swear, being president of Satan's Fury is less about

keeping us in the black and out of harm's way and more about keeping a pack of bullheaded troublemakers from burning the whole damn world down."

Tabitha lifted a brow. "That bad?"

"Worse than a bunch of toddlers," I said, shaking my head. "They're all good men and sharp as hell, but they tend to be magnets for bad decisions. Hell, they could start a fight in an empty room, and God forbid they go a day without some kind of fuck up."

Tabitha laughed, and damn if it wasn't the sweetest sound.

"But they're loyal," I went on. "To the club. To me. To each other. And when shit goes sideways, they're the first ones in the fire. I give 'em hell for being reckless, but there isn't a man among them I wouldn't bleed for."

"Sounds like you have yourself quite a family."

I nodded. "I certainly do."

We kept talking about the club and old stories, and she got tickled when I told her about the time Rusty got locked in a gas station bathroom for two hours because he was too damn drunk to figure out the push door. For the first time that night, she relaxed—really relaxed. She let herself laugh and let go of her worries.

And then my burner buzzed.

I pulled it from my pocket, and even before I looked down at the screen, my stomach had twisted into a knot. I knew it wouldn't be good. It was late, and the boys never reached out unless something was up.

The message on the screen was short and to the point.

Goose:

NeedyouattheVault.Now.

“Dammit,” I cursed under my breath as I pulled myself to my feet. “I’ve gotta go.”

Tabitha stood as she asked, “Is everything okay?”

“The boys need me at the Vault.”

Her lips pressed into a tight line. She didn’t ask why or demand I stay. She simply asked, “Do you want me to ride along?”

“Probably best that you don’t.” I glanced over at Faith as I said, “I don’t wanna leave you here alone.”

“I’m not alone,” she answered with a smile. “I’ve got her, and she’s got me. Go. Handle your business.”

I hesitated, torn between her and whatever bullshit was waiting for me back in town. But she wasn’t shoving me away. She trusted me to go.

I reached over and cupped her face. Just for a second. Just long enough to feel the warmth of her skin against my palm. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She nodded.

Without warning, I dropped my hands to her waist and pulled her close, then bent down and captured her mouth in a kiss.

She didn't resist.

She didn't pull back or ask me to stop.

Instead, her soft, full lips opened with a moan, giving me deeper access. Her hand roamed across my chest, then slowly continued up to the nape of my neck as her fingers tangled in my hair. Having Tabitha so close was fucking with my head, and I was finding it difficult to keep my cock in check.

I slipped my fingers through her long, dark hair and gave it a firm tug, forcing her head back. She gasped as I delved deeper into her mouth, kissing her with all the need pulsing through my veins. She inched even closer, shifting her hips against me, and I knew I had to stop before we got carried away.

I had to get to the Vault.

I eased back, breaking free from our embrace, and as she looked up at me with her lust-filled eyes and flushed cheeks, I said, "Damn. You don't make it easy to go."

"Isn't that the point?"

"If it is, you certainly made it." I gave her a wink, then turned and started for the

truck. “You’re one of a kind, Tabitha Volkov. One of a kind.”

I left there without any idea what was going on at the Vault, but I didn’t care. For the first time in a very long time, the pit in my stomach didn’t feel quite so deep, and I could face just about anything.

16

TABITHA

It had been weeks since that night in the barn with Hudson and Faith—weeks since I’d sat on the blanket next to him with a heart filled with worry and nerves so tight I could barely breathe. The warmth of his voice and the steadiness of his presence gave me peace in ways I hadn’t expected.

In the weeks that followed, we spent as much time together as possible.

He took me for another ride on his bike. We rode out to the lake and sat by the water for hours, just soaking up the sun. It was wonderful. We laughed and talked, and I felt more alive than I had in years.

A few days later, he took me to the clubhouse for a gathering. I wasn’t sure how I would be received, especially with the new partnership with my sons. But when Hudson walked in with his hand on the small of my back, it was like they all stepped aside for him—forus.

And he’d come to the auction with me. He’d seen the terrible state of some of the horses, and for the first time, he truly understood why I did what I did. He stood back and watched as I assessed and negotiated and haggled like I’d done from the beginning. And all the while, he stayed engaged, listening and asking questions.

It meant the world to me.

I'd gone so long without being seen, really seen. I'd always been more of a possession than a real partner. I was paraded around like some trophy, all polished and perfect, but behind closed doors, I was invisible.

I was just a ghost in heels and lipstick.

But it was different with Hudson.

He didn't care if my hair was up or down. He didn't care if my boots were caked in mud or if I was in an outfit that cost more than his bike. He looked at me the same—like I was someone he not only wanted to be with but liked.

He made me feel good. Better than I ever thought possible.

And it scared the hell out of me.

I knew what it felt like to be with wrong kind of man. I'd lived through that. Survived it. Hudson was a different kind of danger.

He was the kind that made me hope.

He made me happy, and that terrified me just as much as it thrilled me.

I carried the mix of feelings with me as I headed up to the house. I needed to speak with Sergei and let him know that the couple was coming by in the next day or so to purchase Whiskey Rose and Beau Sins. Normally, I wouldn't have to involve him, but I wanted to let him know that a good bit of money would be coming into the account.

The sun was just starting to set as I made my way down the steps. The

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barn was quiet. It was the good kind of quiet. There were no worries about sick foals or wounds that needed my attention. As I passed Faith's stall, I paused and peered over the gate. "Hey there, sweet girl."

She lifted her head lazily from the hay. Her eyes were soft, and her belly was much rounder than it had been just days before. There were no signs of distress and no restlessness. Dr. Lewis said she was coming along well, and if all went well, she'd deliver her foal in the next few weeks.

I reached out and gave her a gentle rub between the ears. "You just have to hang in there a little longer, and then, you'll have a sweet baby at your side."

I left her with a smile tugging at my lips and relief settling in my chest.

It wasn't much, but I'd take it.

By the time I reached the main house, it was after six, so I expected the boys to be winding down for the night until I heard Sergei say, "...since Satan's Fury started hanging around, we haven't had a single issue with theft or vandalism."

"I told you," Nikolai boasted. "I knew they were what we needed."

"About time you got something right."

"Damn," Nikolai grumbled. "Can't win around here."

"No, Sergei's just being a dick," Viktor interjected. "Things have improved, and they

wouldn't have if Preacher and his boys hadn't come into play."

"Yes, I have to say, I didn't think they'd take to the place so quickly," Sergei admitted. "But their presence has made a notable difference. I just have to wonder if they're who we'll need around once the casino opens."

"Why would that change anything?"

"We want high rollers with deep pockets. We don't want them being scared off by some leathered, tattooed bikers."

"Those tattooed bikers have been saving our asses, and I think they're exactly what we need," Nikolai argued. "People need to know that they have eyes on them. Their eyes. People know them, fear and respect them, and we're still working to build that."

"We build that by having security guards, and I plan on having more than we could possibly need."

"Yeah, you could do that, or you could wait and see how things play out with the Fury boys."

"I'll think it over."

"I know neither of you want to hear this..." Viktor cleared his throat. "But he's been calling again. A lot."

There was a beat of silence.

"Me too," Sergei said. "Twice this week."

"Same here," Nikolai replied, sounding defeated. "He's not taking the hint."

My stomach sank.

I knew exactly who they were talking about.

Their uncle Vasili. Dimitri's brother.

He hadn't reached out since the funeral. He hadn't shown up to mourn or offer condolences over his brother's death. He didn't care about his brother or his children. The fact that he was calling them now, almost a year since his death, wasn't a good sign.

I took a quiet step back and was about to make my way to the kitchen when Sergei's voice rose again. "So, when were you going to tell us about Mother?"

"What about her?"

"That she's screwing around with Preacher."

My blood turned to ice.

There was a long pause, and then, Viktor muttered, "She didn't say anything to me."

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“Well, she didn’t say anything to me either,” Sergei let out a sharp exhale. “But then, I’m not her precious Nikolai. He’s the only one she would tell about it.”

“How did you find out?”

“I saw them,” he answered in almost a growl. “He picked her up the other night, and it was late when he brought her back. And don’t pretend you didn’t notice the way she looks at him.”

“Mother can date whoever she wants.”

“Mother has no idea who this guy truly is.”

“She does.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Shit.

This was going to be bad.

I could go in there and put an end to their argument, but Nikolai was right. I could date anyone I wanted. I didn’t need their permission. And I didn’t care if they didn’t approve of Hudson. I did, and that was all that mattered. I was getting myself riled up when my cell phone chimed with a text message.

I quickly pulled it from my pocket, and the tightness in my chest all but disappeared

when I saw that it was a message from Hudson.

Hudson:

Hey, beautiful.

A smile crept over my face as I messaged him back:

Me:

Hey! How has your day been?

Hudson:

No complaints.

Would be better if I could see you.

Me:

Who says you can't?

Hudson:

So you're free?

Me:

I am.

Hudson:

You up for coming over to the clubhouse?

Me:

Sure. Sounds good.

I'll head that way in just a bit.

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Hudson:

You just made my night.

See you soon.

I was just about to put my phone back in my pocket when another message came through.

Hudson:

Be careful.

Me:

Will do!

I turned and rushed for the door.

I made my way back to the stables, and my chest was still tight after what I'd overheard. The boys didn't just have the casino and me to worry about. They had to figure out what they were going to do about their uncle. I had no doubt that he wasn't pleased that they had cut ties with the family, especially when they had inherited the majority of his brother's money.

He wouldn't allow them to put him off forever.

He would get his answers, one way or another.

I don't know what I was thinking. I should've known something bad was coming. It was my job to know, but I'd let myself get too comfortable. I thought we finally had a handle on everything, and now, I wasn't so sure that we had a handle on anything.

I tried to shove all my doubts and worries aside as I rushed upstairs and changed into a pair of jeans and a summery top. Nothing fancy, but I had a feeling Hudson would like it. I barely glanced in the mirror before grabbing my keys and rushing out the door.

I was looking forward to seeing Hudson and all the brothers. I'd had such a great time the last time I was there, and I could use a fun night to take my mind off things at home. I parked up front, but unlike the times before, no one came out to meet me.

I assumed that meant Hudson thought I could find my way on my own, so I headed inside. But when I stepped through the door, something felt off. I figured it was just in my head, so I kept moving forward. The bar was busy with guys sitting at both the bar and several of the tables. A couple were playing pool while others gathered around the dart board.

It seemed like a regular night, but there was an expected tension in the air. I didn't understand why. The last time I'd been here, there were easy smiles, hugs and handshakes, and plenty of good-natured teasing. But tonight, the guys would barely even look in my direction. And when I walked towards them, they turned and looked the other way.

It was odd.

I felt like I'd stepped into a room where I didn't belong, so I hesitated near the door. Then I spotted him. Hudson was sitting at a table in the back with his arms crossed

and a fierce expression on his face. His eyes locked on me the second I started toward him, and they stayed on me as I started weaving through the crowd.

I glanced to my side and stopped when I noticed Antonia and Memphis. They were leaning in close, laughing low about something, but their smiles slipped a little when I stepped over to them and said, “Hey, guys. How’s it going?”

“Good. Just having a couple of drinks.” Antonia said quickly. “How about you?”

“I’m good. Just had one of those days and ready to let off some steam.”

“I totally get that.”

There was something about the way that she was looking at me that was a little unsettling. She was clearly uncomfortable, and I had no idea why. Things were good the last time we talked. Actually, they were better than good. Antonia and Jenna were so sweet and easy to talk to. It made me wonder if I’d said something wrong or if I’d made a bad impression.

And then, Memphis cleared his throat and said, “Hey, Tabitha. I’d like you to meet my mother.”

I turned my head slightly, and that’s when I finally saw her.

Hudson’s ex.

She was even more beautiful than he’d described, with honey-blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a cautious smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. She was a little younger than me, but not by much, and she was dressed in a pair of black slacks and a flowy blouse.

Memphis motioned his hand in her direction and said, “This is Kay... Mom, this is Tabitha.”

"Nice to meet you," I said, offering my hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

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“Hi.” Her eyes skirted over me as she shook my hand and said, “I wish I could say the same about you.”

There was a moment, just the briefest of moments, where her gaze darted toward Hudson, then back to me. Something tightened in her jaw, but she smoothed it out so fast I almost missed it.

Almost.

“Well, you aren’t missing out on much.”

“I highly doubt that.”

No one had to tell her. She knew exactly who I was, and it was hard to tell what she thought about it all. Memphis cleared his throat and muttered something about getting another round, and just like that, the tension doubled. Antonia grimaced, then asked, “Would you like to sit and have a drink with us?”

“Maybe later.” I glanced over at Hudson. “I need to go over and say hello first.”

“Of course.”

When I took a step forward, Kay said, “I hope we get a chance to chat later.”

“Of course.” I forced a smile. “I’ll be back over in a bit.”

I gave them a quick nod, and my heart went into overdrive as I continued towards

Hudson. Once I made it over to him, his expression immediately softened. “Hey there, beautiful.”

“Hey, yourself.” I sat down next to him and leaned in close. “So, how’s it going?”

“Better now.” He shook his head. “Hell, up until about two seconds ago, I had as soon to have been kicked in the nuts than to be sitting here.”

“Oh, that good, huh?”

“I didn’t know she would be here tonight.” He glanced over to the table where Kay was sitting with Memphis and Antonia. “No one did.”

“And I take it you aren’t exactly thrilled about it.”

“I could care less if she comes or goes. She’s Memphis’s mother, and she has every right to want to see him.” He cocked his brow. “You, on the other hand, might not agree. I’m more concerned about that.”

“Why would you be concerned about me?”

“I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about her being here.”

“Are you still in love with her?”

“She’s my son’s mother. I will always care about her, but no. I’m not in love with her.”

It wasn’t the answer I was hoping for, but it was close. I gave him a slight shrug, then said, “Then, we’re good.”

“I mean it, Tabitha. My time with Kay has come and gone. You don’t have anything to worry about with her or any other woman.”

“What exactly are you saying?”

“Got no interest in anyone else.” He reached over and took my hand in his. “I’m in this. You and me got something, and I plan to see where it goes. You good with that?”

“I’m definitely good with that.”

He nodded and got the bartender to bring us over a couple of drinks. Over the next hour or so, the brothers and their women kept their distance, giving Hudson and me a wide berth. I got it. Kay wasn’t just Hudson’s ex.

She was Memphis’ mother, and they had history with her, liked her, and knew that she meant a great deal to both Memphis and Hudson. Not only that, when her husband ran into trouble, she moved in with them, and they’d all put their lives on the line to protect her.

And now, I’m in the picture, and none of them knew how he would handle having her and me both there at the same time. It made sense that they would be concerned about saying or doing the wrong thing, so they steered clear.

Except for Goose.

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He didn't seem to care about anything as he sauntered over to us with an easy, cocky grin. He dropped down in one of the empty chairs in front of us and leaned way back as he snickered, "You two having a good night?"

"We were," Hudson grumbled. "What do you want, Goose?"

"Nothing." His smirk widened. "Just thought I'd come over and assess the situation."

"What situation?"

"The one with Kay and Tabitha." His smile never faltered. "Just wondering if she's gonna go over and kick Kay's ass."

"What the hell are you talking about? There will be no ass-kicking tonight."

"Are you sure?" he pressed. "Kay's been giving her the eye all night."

"She has done no such thing."

"Look at her. She's doing it right now." He cocked his brow with a smirk. "Come on. Go kick her ass."

Out of pure curiosity, I glanced over, and Kay wasn't looking at me or Hudson. In fact, she was completely turned around, talking to one of the hang-arounds. Hudson shook his head and said, "You've got a screw loose, son."

"Yeah, well, carnival rides do too, but folks still like to ride 'em." He turned his

attention back to me. “Come on, Tab. You can take her.”

“I thought you liked Kay.”

“I do,” Goose scoffed. “Think the world of her, but there’s nothing like a good catfight.”

“Fuck off, Goose. I don’t have the patience for you tonight.”

“Alright. Alright. You’re no fun.” He stood and tipped his chin toward me, all playful and full of mischief. “You know, you’re makin’ our old man look mighty good over here. I’m sure he appreciates it. I know I do.”

“Well, thank you,” I giggled. “I appreciate that.”

I was grateful for the way he cut through the tension. Hudson just shook his head and muttered something under his breath that made Goose chuckle even harder before he finally drifted off to join the others. After that, no one else came over.

I didn’t mind.

Actually, I appreciated it.

It gave me a chance to soak in a quiet moment with Hudson without any major distractions. He might have been the club’s president and the leader of the chaos within, but for this little moment in time, he was just mine.

And it felt good.

We had another round of drinks, and I was starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. My cheeks were warm, and I had this undeniable urge to inch a little closer to

Hudson. He didn't seem to mind. He held my gaze as he reached for his beer, and my eyes dropped to his mouth as he brought the bottle up to his lips. Damn. What I wouldn't give to feel those lips on mine.

He must've had the same thought, because he leaned in and whispered, "Want to get out of here for a bit?"

"Sure. Where did you have in mind?"

"My room." He cocked his brow. "I don't know about you, but I could go for a little privacy right about now."

"Yes, privacy sounds good. Really good."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

He reached over and took my hand in his and then led me out of the bar and down the hall. A few moments later, we were standing in his room. I hadn't even had a chance to look around before Hudson pulled me towards him and pressed his lips against mine.

The kiss was soft and tender and filled with promise. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him closer until there was no space left between us. Being with him felt like home, and my entire body melted into his.

A low moan escaped through my parted lips as he kissed me deeper, and suddenly, everything changed. Every single nerve in my body came alive as rough, calloused hands held me against his broad, muscular chest.

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I'd never felt anything so intense.

My insides felt like they were on fire.

In a matter of seconds, the manliterally had my head spinning.

I wound my arms around his neck and held on tight, pulling him closer as he deepened the kiss. When his hands started leisurely roaming over my body, I knew there was no turning back.

I needed him to know that I wanted him just as much as he wanted me. "I need you, Hudson. I need you now."

He was a man who liked to hear the words, so I gave them freely, without any doubt in my mind. Reaching for the hem of Hudson's white t-shirt, I slipped it over his head. He immediately pulled me in for another kiss.

He felt so good, smelled so good, and just being near him made my entire body ache for more. Overcome with the urge to touch him, my hands started to drift over his chest, gliding down his abdomen. I unfastened his jeans, and I caught us both by surprise when my fingers slipped through the waistband of his boxers.

A light hiss slipped through his lips when I curled my fingers around him and gently started stroking. I loved how he felt in my hand, so thick and erect, and the thought of having him inside me had me stroking him even harder.

"Did you mean what you said?"

“About?”

“Me not having to worry about other women.”

“Damn right, I meant it.”

“You sure about that?”

His eyes grew intense. “I could be in a room full of women, and all I’d see is you.”

“Oh my, that was a good one.”

“Because it’s true.”

He held my gaze for a moment, and then, he crashed his lips against mine. Needing more, both our hands became frantic, and we quickly removed the clothes that separated us.

In just a few seconds, we were on the bed, and I was lying beneath him.

With his tousled hair and penetrating dark eyes, Hudson was so unbelievably handsome. My heart fluttered when his hands slowly roamed over my body. “You’re beautiful. Every fucking inch of you.”

Something about the way he spoke, so low and gruff, sent a chill down my spine. His hands slowly drifted up my abdomen, and a wave of lust consumed me the minute his mouth reached my breast. Hunger danced in his eyes as he looked up at me for just a moment, and then his mouth resumed its heavenly torture of kissing and nipping the delicate flesh.

Anticipation washed over me when he settled between my thighs. His eyes met mine

as he raked his cock against me. “Is this what you want, baby?”

“Hmm-hmm.” I lifted my hips, grinding against him as I tried desperately to find relief from the throbbing need that was building up inside me. “Yes!”

He reached into his bedside table for a condom, and I shook my head. “You don’t need it.”

“But...”

“You don’t need it,” I repeated.

He nodded and tossed it back in the drawer, and a look of satisfaction crossed his face as he settled back between my legs. He clenched his jaw before lifting my hips and driving deep inside me, filling me completely.

He slowly began to move, each thrust deliberate and powerful. When I let my legs spread farther open for him, he growled, “Fuck. Never had anything feel so damn good.”

“Hudson,” I panted, tilting my hips towards him, wanting him deeper, harder. Sensing what I needed, he quickened his pace, as I quickly became lost in the waves of carnal sensation surrounding me and the fullness of his body inside mine.

He increased his rhythm, each thrust more demanding than the last. My inner muscles clenched around him as I felt another orgasm building inside me. “Oh, God. You feel so good.”

Hudson’s punishing pace never faltered as his body continued to crash into mine. I’d never felt anything like it: having him inside me was so intoxicating that I was finding it difficult to even breathe. I wanted to savor every moment...to focus on how

incredible he felt, but it was all just too much.

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A burst of pleasure exploded inside of me, and I shuddered around him as my orgasm took over. Wrapping my legs tighter around him, I could feel the muscles in his abdomen grow taut as he finally found his own release.

We both stilled as we listened to the satisfied sounds of our hearts beating. I felt so close to him, and I never wanted it to end. Eventually, our breathing began to steady, and he slowly lifted his body from mine.

I wanted to wrap my arms around him and keep him close, but he'd already collapsed on the bed next to me. He released a sated breath and said, "You're incredible, Tabitha Volkov. No other way to put it."

"You're the incredible one." I inched closer and settled into the crook of his arm. "And I mean that. It just keeps getting better."

"Must mean I'm doing something right."

"You definitely are."

"Good to know."

His chuckle vibrated through his chest and brought a smile to my face. I laid my head down on his shoulder and closed my eyes, letting myself soak in the moment. The dark corners of my heart were quickly fading, and I felt whole in a way I never had before. As scared as I was to admit it, I was falling fast, and I was falling hard. I wasn't one to have this kind of happy, and I couldn't help but wonder what it was going to cost me.

PREACHER

I couldn't remember a night when I'd slept so well, and it had done wonders. I woke up feeling pretty damn good, and to make my morning even better, Tabitha was still curled up next to me. I shifted slightly, careful not to wake her, so I could get a better look at her.

She was still dead to the world and breathing slow and steady. The sheet was tangled loosely around her waist, and she had one hand tucked under her cheek. My God, the woman was beautiful and effortlessly so.

I let my eyes trace the curve of her shoulder, the way her lashes fanned against her cheeks, and the slow rise and fall of her chest. It hadn't taken long for her to settle under my skin. Faster than I'd expected, and that wasn't a good thing. Hell, if anything, it was dangerous.

I had a club to run. I couldn't afford to lose myself in her—no matter how tempting it might be. That thought had me carefully slipping out of bed. I needed a shower and maybe a bucket of cold water.

By the time I got out, the sun was just starting to rise, so it wouldn't be long before the others were up and moving. I threw on a clean pair of jeans and a T-shirt, raked a hand through my wet hair, and made my way down to the kitchen in search of coffee.

I rounded the corner and stopped dead in my tracks when I found Kay sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a cup of coffee. She was already dressed in white slacks and a black tank, and her hair and makeup were done. If I didn't know better, I'd say she had herself a hot date.

She looked up at me over the rim of her cup, a quiet smirk playing on her lips like she knew she'd caught me off guard. "Good morning."

I grunted and made a beeline for the coffee pot. "You're up early."

"Could say the same to you." Her back stiffened, and she inhaled a quick breath. "I wouldn't have expected you to be alone."

I ignored the bait and poured my coffee. I don't know what Kay was thinking, but I wasn't about to sit here and get grilled first thing in the morning, especially about Tabitha. Not when she was still in my bed, and just thinking about being tangled up with her had my cock stirring to life.

I leaned back against the counter, nursing my coffee, and waited. Kay might've been trying to play it cool, but I knew her too well. She didn't just drop by to see Memphis and catch up. There was more to it, so I let out a breath and said, "Alright, Kay. Why are you really here?"

"Actually, I was hoping to talk to you," she admitted.

"About?"

"Us." She ran her hand through her hair, glancing away like it physically pained her to say, "I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I was wondering if we could try and give things with us another go."

"You can't be serious."

"I am. I love you, Hudson. I always have, and I always will."

Damn. I stared at her for a long moment, letting the words settle between us. Part of

me wasn't surprised. She and I had history, and some of it was good. Damn good. But history wasn't enough. Not for me. Not anymore.

"You're a good woman, Kay," I said, keeping my voice even, "but you and me had our time. It was good, but it was never enough for either of us. And if you really think about it, you were really never all that happy with me."

She flinched like I'd slapped her.

But to her credit, she didn't argue.

She just sat there and listened as I laid it all out.

“You couldn’t get past who I am,” I continued. “What I’ll always be, and I’m not just talking about the club. Although, it’s a big part of it. You hated always coming second.”

“It wasn’t just that. It was everything.” She looked away, blinking fast. “The danger. The late nights. The wondering if you were coming home to me or if you were out there dead somewhere.”

“I know,” I said. “You needed someone who could give you something I never could. Stability. Normalcy. I don’t blame you for it. Hell, I understood it even back then. I understand it now.”

She was quiet for a moment, then glanced up at me with a pained smile.

“And Tabitha?” She looked up at me, her eyes glassy but fierce. “Do you think she can handle this life? Can she handle always coming second?”

“She knows what she’s getting into.”

The words had barely left my mouth when I heard soft footsteps behind me. I turned just as Tabitha came into the kitchen, dressed in one of my old T-shirts and her jeans. Her hair was a little tussled from sleep, but her eyes were sharp and clear.

“He’s right,” Tabitha said, stepping up beside me. Her voice was steady, and she didn’t seem like she was the least bit rattled by what she’d just walked in on. “I know

exactly what I'm getting into, and I'm here for it."

I felt her hand brush lightly against my back. It was a small, quiet touch that steadied something inside me. I looked down at her, and my whole world seemed to still. Kay stood with a strange look on her face. I thought she was about to lash out at me or Tabitha. Instead, she said, "Just so you know, if he ever looked at me the way he just looked at you, I would've never walked away."

"Kay."

"It's true, but I get it." She looked back over at Tabitha. "When it works, it works."

"Now, I see why the boys think so much of you."

"And I think the world of them," Kay replied.

"I hope you'll stick around for a little while."

"I'd love to, but I really have to get going." Kay stood and carried her cup over to the sink. "The contractors are wanting my approval on a few things with the house, and I really can't put them off any longer."

"I understand. I'm sure you're looking forward to having your house back."

"Very much so."

"Let me know if you need any help with anything," I offered.

"Thanks, but I won't." Kay stepped in front of me as she said, "It's good to see you this way. It gives me hope that my person is out there somewhere."

“No doubt.”

Kay smiled at Tabitha as she said, “Keep him in line, and if he steps out, a swift kick to the balls should do the trick.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

She gave me a wink, then turned and started for the door. As she walked out, she said, “Tell Memphis I’ll call him later.”

“Will do.”

Once she was gone, I turned to Tabitha and said, “Sorry about all that.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.” She inched up on her tiptoes and gave me a quick kiss. “You told me you weren’t interested in any other woman, and I believed you... What happened with Kay just shows me I was right to trust you.”

“Well, alright then.” I couldn’t believe how lucky I was. “Good morning, beautiful.”

“And good morning to you.”

“You hungry?”

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“Not yet.” She reached over and swiped my cup of coffee. “But I’m in dire need of some caffeine.”

“Help yourself.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” She took a long sip before asking, “So, what’s on your agenda for the day?”

“Not a lot. Just need to tie up some loose ends with your boys and check on things over at the Vault. What about you?”

“I have some buyers coming by either today or in the morning,” she answered. “I need to get back and find out when they’re coming so I can prep the horses.”

“Which ones are they interested in?”

“Whiskey Rose and Beau.” She grimaced. “I hate to let them go, but it’s part of the game.”

“I get it. You want me to come give you a hand?”

“No, you have your own things to deal with, but maybe we could meet up for dinner or something?”

“Yeah, dinner or something sounds good.”

Things with Tabitha were going good. Damn good.

She steadied me in ways nothing else could. She was beautiful without even trying, and she looked at me like I was something more than just a biker with a past full of blood and broken promises. And fuck me if I didn't believe it.

It was like she was rewriting the parts of me I thought were already set in stone. With every kiss, every touch, she had me wanting things I'd given up on a long damn time ago—things like lazy Sunday afternoons and waking up each morning lying next to someone I actually cared about. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted it. Not just today but every day.

I slipped my arm around her waist and said, "I'm sorry again about the business with Kay."

"Don't be." She reached up and put her palm on my cheek, sighing as she soaked me in for a moment. "I better go get changed."

"Changed? Why? I like you in my shirt."

"Then, I'll keep it." With that, she turned and started for the door. "I'll see you later tonight."

I watched her walk out, and a piece of me wanted to follow. But I knew what would happen if I did. I would toss her on the bed and have my way with her all over again. I didn't have time for that shit, and neither did she. So, I poured myself another cup of coffee and made my way to the office.

I spent most of the afternoon working on the books and putting out fires. It was nothing major—just the usual nonsense. Once I had a handle on things, I decided to head over to the Vault. Things had been quiet over the past few days, and quiet wasn't always a good thing.

With that in mind, I fired up my bike and headed for the Vault, letting the hum of the engine settle my nerves. I wanted to check in with Seven and see how things were going with our new hire.

We'd brought Tanner in a few weeks back. He'd been tending bar, and as far as I could tell, the kid had a solid work ethic and kept his head down. That was something I appreciated. We'd only had one rough night, and that was the night Seven messaged while I was in the barn with Tabitha and the pregnant mare.

Two drunk assholes were trying to impress a couple of dancers and were mouthing off. Tanner didn't approve and ended it fast.

Fists first, questions later.

We handled the fallout and made sure the message was clear, but I wanted to make sure he knew the difference between ending shit and starting shit. It was a thin line, and it was one he had to learn—the sooner, the better.

It was midafternoon, so things were quiet. I parked in the back and made my way up to the front door. Grim and Goose were covering the front, so I stopped and asked, "How are things going?"

"Pretty slow so far." Goose gave me one of his damn smirks as he asked, "What about you? How are things with you and..."

"Don't start," I cut him off. "I'm not in the mood for your bullshit."

"Ah, come on. You gotta give us something."

"I don't gotta give you shit." I cocked my brow. "Now, where's Seven?"

“He’s inside,” Grim answered. “Pretty sure he’s at the bar with Tanner.”

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I nodded, then made my way to the back. I spotted Seven sitting at the end of the bar, watching Tanner. He was pouring drinks and moving with a confidence I hadn't seen when we first hired him. I walked over and sat down next to Seven as I said, "How's it going?"

"Can't complain."

"And Tallie?"

"She and Ford are at the shop. She's got some new pottery she's putting out, and he's giving her a hand."

"That's good." I turned my attention to Tanner as I asked, "And how are things with you? Are you settling in?"

"Sure am, thanks to Seven. He runs this place like a damn machine." He hesitated for a second, then added, "Thank you again for giving me a chance. I appreciate it."

"Just make good use of it and remember why you're here."

"Yeah, I know." He let out a defeated breath. "I fucked up that night. I should've walked away, but they were running their mouths and saying shit about you and the brothers. I couldn't let it slide."

"Alcohol makes people do all kinds of dumb shit. Gotta remember to use your head before your fists. We're no saints, but we don't throw hands unless it's truly necessary."

“Understood.”

“Good.”

I stayed with them a while longer, just shooting the shit, and it was good to see that things with Tanner were going well, especially after how they’d started. He’d found his rhythm behind the bar, and Seven seemed pleased. I didn’t have to micromanage. That alone told me I’d made the right call bringing Tanner in.

I messaged Tabitha as I was heading out, and we made plans to order pizza and watch a movie at my place. After the week I’d had, a quiet night with her sounded damn near perfect.

By the time I got home, she was already there waiting for me. She was wearing a pair of shorts with an oversized T-shirt that hung off her shoulder, and she had her hair pulled back in a messy knot. Damn. She didn’t even have to try, and she still managed to look amazing.

We ate on the couch with some rom-com playing in the background. I didn’t even pretend to know what was going on in that movie. I was too busy watching her tilt her head back and laugh without holding back.

Eventually, she snuggled up next to me with her head resting on my chest. And just like that, everything in me settled. The noise, the weight of the club, and the tension I carried on my shoulders all quieted with her in my arms.

I have no idea how long we’d been sitting there when she whispered, “You know, I really like being with you.”

I smiled, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “And I like being with you—even when you make me watch cheesy chick flicks.”

She laughed quietly, her fingers drawing lazy patterns on my chest. “You’re lucky I didn’t pick the one with the sparkly vampires.”

“God no.”

“Oh, let me guess...” she looked over to me with a smirk. “You’d rather watch some old John Wayne western.”

“Hey, now. Those are classics.”

“You better watch it. You’re showing your age now.”

"You're playing with fire, woman."

"Oh, really?"

“Really.”

“Hmm.” A spark flashed through her mischievous eyes as she sassed, "What are you going to do about it?"

"Oh, no. It's not what I'm going to do about it." My eyes locked on hers. "It's what you're gonna do about it."

I slipped my arm around her waist and pulled her close.

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The wanton look in her eyes got to me to me every time.

I dropped my mouth to hers, silencing her with a kiss. Her mouth was warm and wet, and all her little moans and whimpers made my cock ache with need. I knew right then that there was no going back. She felt too good, too right. The scent of her skin, the warmth of her mouth, got to me in a way that no woman ever had.

My hands made their way past the small of her back down to her perfect ass, and I pulled her even closer. As I lowered my mouth to her neck and began trailing kisses along her collarbone, my hands roamed across the curves of her body. Damn, she felt so fucking good. She inched closer with a muffled groan, and it was all I could do to keep myself in check. I slipped my hand under the opening of her shorts and trailed my fingers along her bare thigh up to her center.

I smirked as I eased her panties to the side and slipped two fingers inside her. A wave of gratification washed over me when I found her soaking wet—which left no doubt that she was just as aroused as I was.

She planted her hands on my shoulders, bracing herself as she waited for me to make her come.

I didn't—at least, not yet.

Disappointment marked her face when I removed my hand and stood. I didn't say a word but simply started unbuckling my jeans, and that sinful look in her eyes returned. Her breathing grew ragged with need as I pulled out my throbbing cock and began stroking it.

Tabitha ran her tongue along her bottom lip, and that was it.

I was done.

I had to be inside her, and I pulled her over to me.

She removed her shorts and panties, then lowered herself down on my lap, straddling her knees on each side. She reached down between us and took me in her hand. She wrapped her fingers tightly around my hard, thick shaft and began stroking me, which had me instantly on edge.

A slight hiss slipped through my lips as her fingers found their way to the base of my cock and guided me to her entrance. Our eyes met as she lowered herself, taking me in inch by inch until I filled her completely.

This woman had me tangled up in ways I never dreamed possible, and I found it hard to believe that she didn't know the effect she had on me.

But I spent the rest of the night making sure she finally understood.

The next morning, she was up and dressed before I'd even had my first sip of coffee. I sat up in the bed and rolled my shoulders, trying to work out the kinks as I asked, "Where are you running off to so early?"

"Those buyers I told you about are coming this afternoon." She pulled her hair up as she said, "I asked Harlan to come in early to help me get them ready."

"You nervous?"

"A little, but it's only because I hate to lose them."

“Then, don’t sell them.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“I know, and I get it. They mean something to you, and it’s hard to let go.”

“Exactly.” She leaned down and gave me a quick kiss. “I better get going. Will you call me later?”

“You can count on it.”

She smiled and slipped out of the room, and she hadn’t closed the front door when I started to miss her presence. Damn. I needed to get a fucking grip. I had a meet with Sergei and his brothers in less than an hour, so I pulled myself out of bed and took a long, cold shower.

Half an hour later, I was on my bike and on the way to the city. The casino was just a few weeks from opening, maybe less, and there was tension in the air that reminded me of a storm right before it broke wide open. We’d been keeping eyes on the construction site, rotating the boys on shifts around the clock, and they were out front for everyone to see.

I wanted our presence known.

I wanted everyone to see our cuts and know that we were there for a reason, and there would be no bullshit—from anyone.

And it had worked.

We hadn’t run into any major issues. Hell, we hadn’t had any issues at all, but I wasn’t fool enough to let my guard down. I knew something was coming. Something

big. I could feel it in my bones. You don't live the kind of life I'd lived without learning to trust your gut, and mine was yelling loud enough to rattle my damn skull.

When I pulled up to The Black Crown, I spotted Memphis and Goose posted at the back. Ghost was inside, and Rusty was walking the perimeter. They were all in their assigned posts, and they would remain there until the next group came in to take their shift.

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I didn't make contact. I didn't need to.

They had a job to do, and so did I.

I continued inside and found Sergei and his brothers waiting for me in the front foyer, and all of them looking grim. No fake smiles. No smooth, Bratva hospitality. Just cold eyes and tight jaws. Damn. These boys were killing me.

"Okay. I'm here. What is it that you wanted to discuss?"

Sergei didn't answer right away. He gave a quick glance to Viktor, then Nikolai before turning his attention back to me. "First, we want you to know that we've been very pleased with our partnership thus far."

"Why do I feel like there's a 'but' coming?"

"No, we are truly pleased."

"Just tell him," Nikolai pushed.

"Tell me what?"

"We might have a slight issue that might or might not need to be addressed."

"Just cut the bullshit and tell me what the hell is going on."

"It's our Uncle Vasili," Viktor answered. "He's the issue."

“You’re gonna have to give me more than that.”

Sergei grimaced as he said, “He’s a powerful man, even more powerful than our father was, and he’s been trying to reach out.”

“Trying? That mean you haven’t actually talked to him?”

“No, and I’d rather not,” Sergei answered. “He’s just going to try to force us back into the family business, and we want no part of it.”

“And you can’t just tell him that?”

“Not unless we want a fucking bullet in the head,” Nikolai scoffed. “He’s not the kind to take no for an answer.”

Nikolai added, “He abides by the old family code and expects everyone in the family to follow suit.”

“I see.” When I agreed to partner with them, I thought we were just facing some local grievances that would fade with time, not the fucking Russian mafia. “And what are you wanting from me?”

“We simply wanted to make you aware.”

“You thinking he’s going to show up here?”

“There’s no way of knowing what he may or may not do.”

I didn’t like this, not one fucking bit, but like it or not, we would have to face it head on. I thought for a moment, then looked to Sergei and ordered, “Double your security here and at the house. Have a guard with your mother at all times. I’d rather it be one

of my boys, but for now, I'll leave that up to you."

"I'll take care of it."

"We'll need to do a full check of your security system here and at the house."

"Understood."

"I need to talk with my boys. I'll get back to you in the morning."

"Are you going to bail on us?"

"Not unless you give us reason to." I turned and started for the door. "Get the guards and check the security system."

“On it.”

I left the foyer and headed outside. When I got to my bike, I pulled out my phone and called Shep. As soon as he answered, I told him, “I need you to find everything you can on Vasili Volkov.”

“Sure thing. Am I looking for anything specific?”

“Consider him a threat. Look for everything.”

“You’ve got it.”

“I’m on the way to the clubhouse. Have something for me by the time I get there.”

I ended the call, got on my bike, and started over to the clubhouse. It had finally happened. I finally knew what my gut had been trying to tell me for days, and now, I had to figure out what the hell I was going to do about it.

18

TABITHA

Whiskey Rose was all brushed and slick, and her mane fell just the way I liked it. I gave her a final stroke along her flank and smiled at how good she looked. She was so regal and strong, just like the name I’d given her. Just a few more touches, and I would be confident showing her to the buyers.

Harlan was across the barn, brushing down Beau, and I had no doubt that he would have him looking just as good as Rose. The boy had a knack for not only making horses look good but keeping them calm and steady. I was feeling good about the sale. In fact, I was feeling good about everything, and for the first time in a long time, hope stirred in my chest.

It was a feeling I hadn't allowed myself to have, but lately, it had taken root and grown fast. I knew Hudson was the reason. We'd had such a good night together. It was one of many wonderful nights with him. It was hard not to feel good about things. It had me thinking about the future, and not in a way that made me feel trapped or terrified.

Sadly, it wasn't a feeling that would last.

I was giving Rose one final rub down when the air suddenly shifted, and I heard a voice that made my breath catch in my throat. "Hello, Tabitha. You're looking beautiful as ever."

My hand froze mid-motion.

It had been over a year since I'd heard that voice, so smooth and smug, but I knew right away it was Vasili. I turned, and there he was. Standing at the stall door in his black suit and thick gold chain around his thick neck. His thinning salt and pepper hair was slicked back, and it wasn't doing him any favors. He looked old, but just as threatening as he had twenty years ago.

He smiled at me like I still belonged to that world I'd fought so damn hard to leave behind, and the barn around me felt suddenly smaller and the air heavier. My heart started pounding so loud I could barely hear anything else.

He looked so much like his brother, and just looking at him made my skin crawl. I

didn't bother trying to hide my disgust as I asked, "What the hell are you doing here, Vasili?"

"I came for what's mine."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't pretend like you don't know." He opened the stall door and stepped inside. "You thought you could just walk away and take what didn't belong to you... The money. The ties. The blood."

I swallowed hard as I tried to get a glimpse of Harlan. He couldn't hear us over the fans or his humming. It was just me. I was on my own, so I took a step back as I said, "Dimitri's gone. There are no more ties."

"He may be dead, but his blood runs strong in those boys of yours," he murmured, tilting his head. "You cut off the Bratva like we were nothing. That's not how this works."

He kept walking until I could feel the cold wall of the barn behind me. I didn't remember moving, but suddenly, I was cornered. Rose had stepped to the back corner and was stomping anxiously. I tried to look strong, tried to be strong, but those old fears I had with his brother were already creeping in.

My hands had started to tremble as Vasili towered over me. The smell of his expensive cologne clung to him, and his gold watch clinked on his wrist. "You were always such a pretty little thing. Obedient too. Eyes down. Mouth shut. I thought Dimitri taught you well, but clearly, I was wrong."

"I'm not his wife anymore. You have no control over me."

His hand slammed the wall beside my head, and my stomach turned to ice. I wanted to scream, to shove him and run, but my body wouldn't move. "Pretty, but clearly not very smart."

Vasili's hand shot out, and his rough fingers wound around my throat.

I gasped and clawed at his wrist, but he only squeezed harder. My back hit the back wall with a hard thud, and my lungs screamed for air. His eyes were dark and soulless as he hissed, "You should know, once a Volkov, always a Volkov."

I continued to claw at his hand, but it didn't matter. He didn't let go. He didn't even flinch. He just kept squeezing, tighter and tighter. I was no match for him. My vision was already starting to blur, and I was on the verge of passing out when I heard, "Let. Her. Go."

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The voice wasn't loud, but it rang through the barn with enough weight to still the air. Vasili froze. His grip loosened slightly. I blinked through the haze, and after a moment, I could finally see him.

Harlan was standing just a few feet away with a pitchfork gripped tight in his hand. His jaw was locked, and his eyes glared right at Vasili. The boyish innocence he always carried was gone, and he looked threatening as he growled, "I said let her go."

At first, he didn't move. He just stood there with his hand on my throat, staring back at Harlan. Eventually, he looked back at me, and there was no missing the hate that flickered behind his eyes as he finally released my throat. I collapsed against the wall, coughing and gasping, and Vasili shook his head as he stepped back and smoothed his suit jacket like nothing had happened.

"This isn't over."

And with that, he turned and waltzed out of the barn like he ruled the world.

I held my hands to my throat, still gasping for breath. Harlan dropped the pitchfork and rushed to my side. "Easy there. You're okay. I got ya. You just gotta breathe. Slow and easy."

It took me a moment, but I was finally able to stop gasping as Harlan asked, "Who the hell was that?"

"No... one."

“Sure as hell didn’t look like no one to me.”

I was still trying to steady myself when the sound of tires on gravel caught my attention. Damn. It was the buyers. They were early.

I quickly smoothed my hands over my jeans and tried to shake off the panic clawing at the edges of my thoughts. There wasn’t time to fall apart. Not now. I had horses to think about. I turned to Harlan as I said, “I’m going to need you to do me a favor.”

“Yes, ma’am. Whatever you need.”

“Pretend like none of that happened.”

“But...”

“Just for the next hour or so.” I placed my hand on his shoulder. “Please. I need you to do this. We have to get these horses sold, and then, we’ll deal with the other.”

“Yes, ma’am. Whatever you say.”

“Thank you. Now, go make sure that Beau is all set for our guests.”

He nodded, then turned and darted out of the stall. I took a second to collect myself before heading out to greet our guests. I had just made it out of the barn when the truck doors opened, and a man and a young woman stepped out. I took a quick look around, and I felt a slight sense of relief when I saw no sign of Vasili.

He was gone, but I had a feeling he wouldn’t stay gone for long.

The couple started towards me, and the man offered a friendly smile as they approached. “Afternoon.”

“Good afternoon.” He was tall with blondish-brown hair with a thick beard and tattoos, and he was wearing a leather vest with jeans and boots. He didn’t look like the horse-riding type, but that didn’t stop me from saying, “You must be my buyers.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m Lincoln, and this is Riley.”

“Hi. I’m Tabitha. It’s nice to meet you both.” I forced a smile as I told them, “Dr. Lewis spoke very highly of you.”

“He spoke highly of you as well.”

As he spoke, I found myself staring at his leather vest. It looked very similar to Hudson’s. It even said Satan’s Fury, but at the same time, it was different. And I’d never seen him before. “You’re wearing a Satan’s Fury cut.”

Lincoln glanced down, then back at me with furrowed brows. “I am. Been wearing it longer than I’ve been shaving.”

“It’s like Hudson’s, but it’s not...”

“Hudson?”

“He’s the president of Satan’s Fury. They call him Preacher.”

“Ah, shit.” He tilted his head and looked at me a little closer. “You know Preach?”

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“Yes, I know him well and I thought I’d met all the brothers, but...”

“Oh, you don’t know me. I’m with a different chapter,” he interjected. “We’re based out of Memphis. I mean, we’re all Fury, just spread out across different states. Preacher and me go way back. He’s a good man and a hell of a president.”

There was warmth in his voice when he said Preacher’s name and hearing it brought a smile to my face—almost making me forget that sense of dread that was lingering in the back of my mind. “Yes, he is.”

Maybe the timing of it all was just a coincidence. Or maybe this was Hudson’s doing. There was no way I’d ever really know, so I left it alone and said, “Well, I’ve got two horses prepped for you to take a look at. Whiskey Rose is in the second stall, and Beau Sins is toward the end.”

“Great,” Riley replied. “I can’t wait to see them.”

“Well, let’s get to it.”

As I led them inside, I could still feel the anxious knot in my stomach and Vasili’s hands on my throat. I thought I’d finally put him and the rest of the Volkov family behind me and the boys. Clearly, I was wrong. I couldn’t think about that right now. I had to keep my head in the game, so I glanced over at Riley and asked, “It’s your father who owns the ranch, right?”

“Yes, but I’ve kind of taken the reins over the past year or so. He will always have a say, but he’s ready for a break and is eager to retire.”

“I understand. It can be exhausting at times.” When we reached her stall, I stepped inside, took Rose by the reigns, and led her out, giving them both a chance to get a good look at her as I said, “This is Whiskey Rose. Like I mentioned on the phone, she’s a Dutch Warmblood, and she lives up to the breed. She’s smart and amazing at show jumping.”

“Oh, she’s a beaut.” Excitement filled Riley’s eyes as she looked over to Lincoln and said, “Isn’t she just gorgeous?”

“That she is.”

“I’ve never had a moment’s trouble from her.”

“That’s great.” Riley smiled, then looked back at Lincoln. “Do you mind if I walk her out?”

“Of course.”

I handed over the lead, and Riley watched every movement like a hawk.

Whiskey didn’t disappoint. It was like she knew this was her moment, and she took every step with confidence. Riley smiled as she muttered, “Wow. She’s really something.”

I didn’t respond.

I just stood back and watched as Riley looked her over.

Once she was finished, she handed the lead back to me and asked, “And the quarter horse?”

“He’s a few stalls down.”

I led Rose back into her stall before taking them down to see Beau. I was pleased to see that Harlan already had him saddled. I don’t know how I would’ve managed without him. Harlan opened the stall door and stepped aside, waiting silently as I said, “This is our Beau. He’s three years old, and he’s out of Mason Bar bloodline.”

“So, he’s top tier.”

“He’s massive is what he is,” Lincoln announced. “Damn. He’s got quite the build.”

“And he’s fast,” I said. “And gives an unbelievably smooth ride.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

Riley gave him a slow walk-around, murmuring softly as she ran her fingers along his flank, checking hooves and his teeth. She was all business, but I could see it in her eyes that she liked what she saw. “I’d like to ride him.”

“Of course,” I said, swallowing the lump that had been stuck in my throat since Vasili showed his face. I needed to get through this. Needed to breathe. “You can take him out to the back pasture.”

Harlan and I stepped aside and watched as Riley mounted him and took off. She wasn’t gone long before she came back and announced that she wanted them both. She didn’t muddle numbers. She gave the asking price without question. They transferred the money into my account and then loaded them in their state-of-the-art horse trailer.

Before leaving, Lincoln came over and shook my hand. “Be sure to tell Preach that Murphy said hello.”

“I sure will. It was really great to meet you both. I hope we cross paths again someday.”

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“I’m sure we will.”

I watched as he and Riley got into the truck and waved as they started to back out of the driveway. As soon as they were gone, Harlan came up next to me and asked, “You good?”

“I don’t know what I am,” I admitted. “Right now, I’m just going through the motions.”

“You need to go tell your boys what happened.”

“I know. I was just about to head to the house and...”

Before I could finish my thought, my cell phone started to ring. I grabbed it from my pocket and answered it as soon as I saw that it was Hudson. I barely had a chance to say hello before he ordered, “Get to the house. Go to Sergei’s office and lock the door. Don’t come out until I get there.”

“But...”

“Just do it, Tabitha.”

I didn’t ask questions. I’d heard the urgency in Hudson’s voice, and I could tell he was concerned. I started towards the house as I told Harlan, “Watch the barn.”

He gave me a quick nod, then rushed back to the barn, closing the doors behind him. I rushed up to the house. My nerves were already frayed, but when I saw the extra

guards out front, it lit a fire of fresh panic in my chest.

There were two Fury brothers at the door I didn't recognize. They had their arms crossed, and they were scanning the front gate like something was about to come barreling through. I'd barely made it up to the porch when I spotted two men in blue polos.

One was on a ladder near the front door camera, and the other had the panel to the side door ripped open and was rewiring something. It looked like they were doing a security upgrade, and it didn't take much to guess why.

I wanted to ask one of them what the hell was going on, but I kept hearing Hudson's voice in my head and headed straight inside. I closed the door behind me and hurried down the hallway to Sergei's office. I slipped in and locked it behind me, just like Hudson had told me to do.

My hands were shaking as I paced back and forth. It had to be Vasili. He would be the only reason why the boys were going to such an extreme. I just prayed that they didn't know something I didn't.

My adrenaline was about to get the best of me when there was a knock at the door. "Mom, open up. It's me."

"Just a second."

I rushed over and unlatched the lock, and Sergei opened the door and stepped inside. Panic marked his face as he asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I think so." I motioned my hand toward the security camera overhead. "Does all this mean you know he was here?"

“Uncle Vasili?”

“Yes.”

“He’s here?”

“He was... He showed up at the barn just before my buyers arrived,” I started. “I was going to tell you, but Preacher called and...”

“Dammit.” Sergei ran his hand through his hair. “What did he do? Did hurt you?”

“I’m fine.”

“So, that’s a yes.” He clenched his jaw. “Son of a bitch.”

“We knew this was a possibility, Sergei. We always knew they wouldn’t be happy about us turning our backs on the family.”

“Well, too fucking bad.”

Before I could respond, the office door flew open with a bang. Hudson stormed in, and his eyes landed on me. Like he knew, they dropped to my neck, and he froze. The whole room shifted with his silence.

“Who did that to you?” he growled, his voice low and dangerous.

“It was...” I brought my hand up to my neck, realizing too late that the bruises must’ve already started to show. “It was Vasili... Dimitri’s brother.”

That was all it took.

In a blink, Hudson was across the room, and his hands were up, cupping my face like he wasn't sure whether to hold me or break something. His voice was strained as he growled, "He touched you?"

I nodded, swallowing hard.

"I'm gonna fucking kill him."

"How did this happen?" Sergei asked with concern. "How was he able to get to you?"

"I don't know. He just showed up at the barn, and before I knew it, he had me pinned to the wall." I blinked, trying to push the tears away, but it was no use. "He said Dimitri didn't teach me well enough. Said we were gonna pay."

Rage filled Hudson's eyes as he turned to Sergei and barked, "Why the fuck didn't you tell me he already made a move?"

"He didn't know," I said quickly. "No one knew. It just happened."

Hudson turned back to me, and his eyes were softer now but no less intense. "You should've called me the second it happened."

"I was about to, but the buyers came and..."

My voice cracked, and he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around me, pulling

me into his chest. And that's when the dam broke. I wasn't a crier—not anymore, but there was something about Hudson that gave me the okay to break. I knew he had me, so I let the tears fall as I told him, “I thought we were done with them, but they just won't let go. Vasili will never let go.”

“He won't have a choice.” He held me tighter. “I'm not letting that bastard anywhere near you again.”

I nodded against him, relieved that he was there and so understanding.

Today was bad. Really bad.

But I had a sinking feeling that this was just the beginning.

19

PREACHER

“How the hell did you let this happen?”

“I didn't let anything happen,” Sergei argued. “I called her. I was going to tell her to get to the house, but she didn't answer.”

“You didn't think to call her back. Text her. Or send a guard after her.”

“I thought we had more time.”

“Well, that's what you get for thinking.” I was struggling to keep my anger in check as I barked, “I thought we had an understanding.”

“We did, and I was working on it.” Sergei lowered his head and sighed. “Look, I'm

just as upset about this as you are. Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've seen my mother cry? Fuck. I want to rip that asshole in two for hurting her, but it's not as simple as putting a bullet in his head."

"I was thinking more like slitting his throat."

"Doesn't matter how you want to go about it. You can't do it. Not without putting a target on our backs. I know you're aware of the Volkov family ties. I don't know what experience you have with the Russian mafia, but I can assure you, they don't take kindly to you taking out one of their own."

I didn't say anything right away.

I couldn't.

I was too fucking angry to speak.

My fists were clenched, and my jaw was locked so tight it hurt. Every part of me wanted to storm out that damn door and hunt Vasili down myself. I didn't give a shit who his family was or what retaliation might come. He'd touched her, he'd put his hands around her throat like she was his to punish, and there was no way in hell I was going to let that fucking go.

But as much as I'd hated it, Sergei was right.

Retaliation would put them and the club in danger.

I couldn't let that happen.

"I've had enough experience to know the kind of fire those bastards rain down when you cross 'em," I finally muttered. "Doesn't mean I'm gonna let him walk away from this unscathed."

"Agreed." Sergei looked at me, calm and steady. "But if we aren't careful, we won't just be going up against Vasili. It will be the entire Volkov family and the entire Bratva."

"Then, we do it in a way that won't trace back."

"And how the hell are we going to do that?"

I didn't answer right away. My eyes drifted back to the door, and I thought about watching Tabitha walk out just minutes before. She was bruised, shaken, and yet, she was doing everything she could to keep it together for her boys. I could only image it was something she'd done for the better part of her life, and that thought alone was enough to make my blood boil.

"I don't know. Not yet, but we'll come up with something." I stepped in closer as I snarled, "But if that bastard so much as breathes near her again, I'll end him."

"Understood."

“There has to be something we can do to get Vasili out of the picture without bringing a war to our backyard. Get with your brothers. You boys see what you can come up with. I’ll get with mine and do the same.”

And with that, I walked out.

I was already turning over plans in my head as I started outside. By the time I was done with him, Vasili would wish he’d never stepped foot in Arkansas.

I didn’t go straight to Tabitha.

Not yet.

I needed a moment to collect myself, so I stepped out back and lit a smoke I didn’t need. I took a couple of drags, then pulled out my phone and called Shep. As soon as he answered, I told him, “You were right. He was here.”

“In Little Rock?”

“No, I mean literally. The asshole cornered Tabitha and had the fucking nerve to put his hands on her.”

“Damn. Is she okay?”

“Pretty rattled, but anyone would be after the stunt he pulled.”

“So, what are we gonna do about it?”

“I’m still trying to sort that out. I could really use your help with coming up with something.”

I took a moment to lay out the situation, making sure he understood the risk involved, and once I was done, I said, “I need you to find a way to bury this motherfucker without causing any blowback to us or Tabitha and her boys.”

“It’ll take me some time, but I’ll come up with something.”

“Appreciate it, brother.”

“Are you headed back?”

“Not yet. I’m going to check on Tabitha and make sure she’s okay, but if you come up with something or need me...”

“You’ll be the first to know.”

I ended the call and immediately called Goose. “Get with Shep. As soon as he has you a location for Vasili, I want you and Memphis on him.”

“How on him do you want us to be?”

“Track him, but don’t engage. I want to know every move he makes.”

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“Copy that,” Goose answered. “You want him still breathing by the end of the night?”

“For now.”

Goose chuckled. “Noted.”

“This is important, Goose. Maybe the most important thing I’ve ever asked you to do.”

“Understood, Prez.” His tone was all business as he told me, “You can count on me.”

“I know. That’s why you’re the one I called.”

“Well, that has me feeling all warm and fuzzy inside.”

I didn’t even respond. Hell, there was no way to respond other than to just hang up on the smart-ass, so that’s what I did. Seconds later, my phone chimed with a text message. Knowing it was him, I gritted my teeth as I pulled it out of my pocket.

Goose:

If it was anyone else, that might’ve hurt my feelings.

But don’t worry. I’m good, and I’ve got ya covered.

Without responding, I shoved my phone back in my pocket and started down the steps. My mind was still reeling, caught somewhere between the image of Vasili’s

hand on Tabitha's throat and the sick feeling in my gut that I hadn't been there to stop it.

I silently cursed myself as I crossed the back lot. I'd always believed a man should lead with his head, not with his heart. But now mine was tied up in a woman I never saw coming, and I'd burn the whole goddamn world to protect her.

As I got closer, I could see Tabitha's lights were on, and just knowing she was up there, alone, after what he did had my stomach in knots. I gave the guards a nod as I made my way up the steps.

I'd barely made it to the top when Tabitha opened the door, and she sounded relieved when she whispered, "You came."

"Of course I did." Her hair was still damp from her shower, and she was in loose-fitting pajamas. She'd done her best to cover it up, but I knew the bruises were there. "No way I was leaving without seeing you first."

I stepped inside and closed the door before slipping my arm around her waist pulling her close. "You okay?"

"Better now. How about you?"

"I've been better." I leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"Hudson, don't. None of this is your fault."

"But it is. You're my girl. It's my job to protect you and..."

"Your girl?" A smile slipped across her lips. "When did that happen?"

“The minute I saw you in that casino.”

“That soon?”

“Absolutely. Now that we have that covered, you have two choices.”

Her brow furrowed just slightly. I could tell she already knew what I was about to say. “Which are?”

“You can pack a bag and come stay with me at the clubhouse, or you can go up to the main house and stay with your boys. Either way, I’m not leaving you down here alone.”

“I can’t leave the horses.”

“Okay, I get it,” I said. “But you’re not staying down here alone. Not after this.”

“Okay, but...” She swallowed hard and looked away. “I don’t want to go just yet. I need some time. Just a few hours to breathe and feel safe. A few hours to just be with you.”

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God help me, I wanted that, too. I needed it.

I stepped toward her and reached out, brushing my fingers gently against the edge of her jaw. She flinched, just the slightest bit, and it damn near shattered me. I dropped my hand and said, “Okay. A few hours, but then I have to get back to the clubhouse. We have to figure out what we’re going to do about Vasili.”

“I hate this so much.”

“I know, but you don’t have to worry. I’m going to handle Vasili. I won’t let him hurt you or your boys ever again.”

She didn’t say anything. She just stepped into me, pressing her face against my chest, arms winding tight around my waist like she was trying to hold herself together.

I wrapped her up in my arms, holding her tight.

After a few moments, she reached down, took my hand in hers, and led me to the bedroom. As soon as we reached the foot of the bed, she slipped off my cut and draped it over the dresser. Still silent, she reached for the hem of my shirt, and I bent forward as she eased it over my head. Her eyes were locked on mine as she said, “I wanted us to have this night together before...”

She tossed my shirt to the floor, then reached for her own and carefully lifted it over her head, exposing her perfectly round breasts. I dropped my hands to her waist, pulling her to me as I lowered my mouth to hers, kissing her long and hard.

This wasn't just any kiss.

It was a kiss filled with promise—a promise that I would be there for her in any way that she needed me to be. And not just now in this moment, but for the days to come.

It wasn't long before we both started to lose ourselves in the moment. It happened every time we were close. I lowered my mouth to her neck and whispered, “No one has ever gotten to me like you do.”

I ran my lips from the curve of her jaw down to her shoulder. “No one.”

Her hands slid up my arms as she inched closer, pressing her breasts against my chest. A flash of desire crossed her eyes as I grabbed the back of her neck and crashed my lips into hers, our tongues twisting and tasting each other with nothing but passion and desire. Her mouth was warm and soft, and each swirl of her tongue made the blood rush straight to my cock.

The feel of Tabitha's body against mine sent me over the edge, and my hands suddenly became wild and impatient. I continued trailing kisses past her collarbone, and her fingers tangled in my hair, pulling me towards her as I lowered my mouth to her breast.

Heavy breaths and low moans filled the room as I flicked my tongue against her nipple. Her head fell back, leaving no doubt that she liked having my mouth on her. With her eyes closed, she mumbled and moaned incoherently.

Goosebumps prickled across her skin as my fingers worked their way across her abdomen and through the waistband of her pajama pants. I slipped my hand between her legs, and her breath caught when I raked the tips of my fingers against her wet center. Damn, I loved how her body responded to my touch.

“You like that?”

Her only response was a strangled groan, so I continued teasing her.

Unable to contain herself, she rocked her hips forward, begging for more. I slid my fingertips inside her and had just started stroking her when she moaned, “Hudson.”

Hearing my name on Tabitha’s lips drove me wild, and as I brushed my thumb against her clit, she began to tremble. Knowing she was close, I worked two of my fingers deeper inside her, finding the spot that drove her crazy.

Her breath quickened, and her head fell back as her entire body tensed. She was close—so close. With the pad of my thumb on her clit, I increased the pressure enough to send her over the edge.

Seeing her come undone turned me on in ways I couldn’t describe. Unable to wait a moment longer, I withdrew my fingers and moved my hands to her waist, reaching for the drawstring of her pants. As soon as I gave it a tug, they dropped to the floor.

Equally as eager, Tabitha reached for mine, and in a matter of seconds, we were both completely undressed. The room stood silent as we each took a moment to gaze at one another, and the sight of her took my breath away. “So fucking beautiful.”

Without saying a word, she placed the palms of her hands on my chest and playfully pushed me back on the bed, then started towards me with a determined glint in her eye. She arched her brow, then positioned herself at my hips.

Her greedy eyes stayed fixed on my throbbing cock while her fingers wrapped around me, then her lips curled into a smile as she slowly stroked her hand up and down my shaft, gradually tightening her fingers around me. Her lips parted, and her tongue skirted over the head of my cock before she took me into her mouth. I’d never felt

anything better.

My hands dropped to her head, tangling in her hair, as she opened her mouth wider, taking me deep. When I felt myself pressed against the back of her throat, a hiss slipped through my teeth, and before I could rebound, she quickened her pace, nearly sending me over the edge.

Tabitha's warm, wet mouth was driving me nuts, but I wanted more.

I slipped my hands under her arms and pulled her forward. "I love your mouth, babe, but I want to be inside you when I come."

I carefully lifted her by the hips as she straddled her legs across my body, then shifted a bit. A fevered hiss slipped through her lips as she slowly inched down, taking me deep inside. She was so fucking tight and warm and wet that I thought I'd explode right there on the spot. Tabitha felt like heaven, and I wanted to feel every sensation and savor every second.

A deep growl resonated through my chest as she quickened her pace, and even though it felt incredible, I needed more. Unable to control myself, I clutched Tabitha's hips and guided her as she took me deeper and deeper.

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Her hips gyrated and rocked against mine in a heated rhythm until she let out a tortured groan. With one last deep thrust, Tabitha's body tensed as her breath stilled, and her head fell back. Her orgasm exploded as she clamped down around me.

"Fuck." I tried to hold back, not wanting the pleasure to end, as I continued to pump into her. She jolted her hips forward, and that's all it took to send me over the edge. My body jerked as I rode the wave of ecstasy and came deep inside her.

She was mine.

All mine.

I held on to her hips, holding her in place as I caught my breath. Still trembling, Tabitha collapsed on top of me, her heart beating wildly next to my own; neither of us moved as the aftershocks from our pleasure rolled over us. I ran my fingers through her hair as I told her, "My woman is one amazing lady."

"Does that whole mine thing go both ways?"

"Hmmm?"

"If I'm yours, then you're mine, right?" Her breath caught before she admitted, "I really hope you are because I love you, Hudson. I know it's too soon, and I probably just..."

"Say it again."

“I love you.” She gave me a slight shrug. “I love you more than I thought possible.”

“Fuck, I love you, too, babe.”

“Are you sure? Because I know I don’t make it easy.”

“I learned a long time ago that easy isn’t all it’s chopped up to be.” I leaned in and kissed her softly. “The love you have to work for, the one that’s a little harder to reach, is something else altogether. It’s one that’ll have you coming back for more. It’s worth fighting for, and I’d fight for you every chance I get.”

20

TABITHA

Hudson’s chest rose and fell beneath my cheek. It was low and steady, and it grounded me in ways I couldn’t begin to explain. I curled in closer, breathing him in, and letting his warmth wrap around me like a blanket I didn’t know I needed.

Simply put, I felt safe.

Truly, deeply safe.

It wasn’t a feeling I was used to. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt it. I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt it, especially when Dimitri was alive. Back then, I’d always had to watch what I said, how I moved, what I knew. But now, lying in Hudson’s arms and feeling his strong, possessive hand on my hip, I felt like I could finally breathe.

More than that, I felt like I could live, truly live, and I could love and be loved. I could truly be happy. And I owed it all to Hudson. He’d been so patient and understanding with me, even when my past came rearing back, ready to rip us apart.

He was willing to fight for me.

His was the kind of love that brought hope to the hopeless.

And I didn't want to lose it.

I wanted to hold onto it with everything I had. In order to do that, I had to find a way to face my past. I had to face it head-on. With Vasili. With the Volkov name. With all the things we'd never been brave enough to speak out loud.

"I never really knew what they were involved in," I said quietly. "I was taught early on that you didn't ask questions, especially about money or things they tried to keep secret."

Hudson didn't say anything.

He just let his hand move slowly along my back, letting me say all the things I needed to say. Things I should've said from the beginning.

"I knew it was bad. I could tell by the way they whispered in corners. They tried to keep everything so quiet, but I saw things. Heard things. Dimitri never came home with blood on his clothes. He was usually hands-off. Took a lot of calls and gave a lot of orders."

I glanced over at Hudson, and again, he didn't respond.

He just laid there and listened as I said, "But there were nights when he didn't come home or came in really late, and the days that followed, he would be even colder and angrier than usual. Those were the nights that me and the boys would steer clear. I always wondered what he was doing... What was awful enough to affect a man like him? It had to be pretty terrible."

“It was... It is,” Hudson replied. “They’re into the worst of the worst. The kind of thing me and my boys don’t touch. Not ever.”

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“That’s why I was so desperate to get my boys out of New York and away from those monsters.” I rested my head on his shoulder. “I didn’t want them spending their lives with blood on their hands or carrying around that kind of darkness inside them. I didn’t want them turning into their father or Vasili.”

“They didn’t,” Hudson said firmly. “They’re good, head-strong boys. They’re going to be okay, and you had a big part to play in that.”

“But now I’m worried I did it all in vain. Vasili will keep hammering away at us until he gets his way, and everything we’ve tried to do will...”

“Don’t.” Hudson shifted so he could look down at me, and his voice was low and sure as he told me, “It’s going to be okay. One way or another, we’re going to deal with Vasili and whoever else might come knocking.”

The conviction in his voice should’ve eased me more than it did, but the truth was, I’d spent years running from a shadow I didn’t fully understand. And now it was here, and just a few hours ago, it was standing in my barn, choking the breath out of me. I just wanted it gone. I wanted him gone.

I let out a deep breath as I shook my head and said, “I don’t want to be afraid anymore.”

“We’ll deal with Vasili.” He kissed the top of my head. “The family, too, if it comes to that. You’re not alone in this, Tabitha. Not anymore.”

And for the first time that night, I let myself believe him.

Just a little.

We both stayed silent for a moment,

“I learned a long time ago that the guy with the loudest bark is usually the one trying the hardest to hide something, and Vasili has always had a hell of a bark.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“The loudest.” I let out a slow breath. “And when you think about it, he had a lot of nerve showing up here like he did. Making demands himself instead of sending someone else.”

“I’m not following. What difference does it make?”

“None really, but normally, something like this would be brought before the family council, and they would send someone. As far as I’ve heard, that’s how it’s always been done. But I have a feeling that Vasili showing up here and threatening me wasn’t sanctioned. It was personal.”

“So, you’re thinking he acted on his own?”

“There’s always the possibility they sent him, but it’s doubtful.” I met his eyes. “He wasn’t one of their trusted. Dimitri was the favorite of the brothers, and Vasili always knew it. They tolerated him because of his bloodline, but they didn’t trust him to make the big plays.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t privy to information like that, but from what I saw, he was a hothead who wanted everyone to think that he was the strongest and most powerful of

them all. So, he spoke loudly and made the big threats, and everyone just bought into it.”

“Hmph.” Hudson gave a slow nod, and I could see the wheels already turning behind his eyes. “If there’s even the slightest chance that he’s been working under the table, we need to find it. But then what?”

“We find someone who can get it to the council.”

“And how the hell do we do that?”

“Very carefully. I have some ideas, but Sergei is more than likely our best bet.”

“We need to talk to him.” Hudson pulled himself out of bed and started getting dressed. “Now.”

I nodded as I threw the covers back and got up. I could still feel the warmth of his skin lingering against mine as I went to the bathroom and cleaned up. Once I was dressed, I grabbed my overnight bag and tossed in a change of clothes, some toiletries, and my phone charger.

By the time I was done, Hudson was fully dressed and was waiting at the front door. As soon as I made it over to him, he reached for my hand, and he didn’t let go as we walked down the stairs. He continued to hold it as we crossed the lot to the main house.

The wind had picked up, and it carried the scent of hay and something colder underneath it. I didn’t know if it was just the night air or the storm we were about to walk into, but the feeling had me holding onto Hudson even tighter.

When we made it up to the house, one of the guards opened the door and waited as

we stepped inside. The house was quiet, but I knew the boys were still awake. Call it mother's intuition, but I could feel it. They were just as tense as I was, and there was no way they could be sleeping.

Hudson's grip tightened on my hand as we reached Sergei's office. He didn't knock. He just opened the door and walked in like he didn't need permission. I knew Sergei had to hate it, but I found it sexy that he was so sure and confident. We walked in and found Sergei sitting behind his desk, with Viktor and Nikolai sitting across from him.

They all looked up, and while Sergei raised an eyebrow, he didn't seem surprised to find me with Hudson. I should've known it wasn't a secret that we were together. My boys were smart and could see the changes in me, just as I'd seen the changes in them.

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I gave Hudson's hand a gentle squeeze before pulling it back. "I'll give you guys some privacy."

I had barely turned when Hudson's voice cut through the room. "Stay."

I paused.

"This is your fight, too," he added, his eyes locking with mine. "You've earned your seat at this table, Tabitha."

It was just one sentence.

Just a few random words.

But they meant the world to me. I swallowed down the knot in my throat and gave a small nod before taking hold of his hand once again. Together, we walked into the room and over to Sergei's desk. Hudson's tone was unwavering as he told him, "We have things to discuss."

"Okay." Sergie stood and motioned over to the table in the corner. "Have a seat, and I'll make us all a drink."

Viktor followed Hudson and me over to the table while Nikolai and Sergei poured us each a glass of brandy. They brought the drinks over and sat down across from us. No one said anything right away, and it was like waiting for the first domino to fall. When I couldn't stand the silence a moment longer, I turned to Sergei and said, "Hudson and I have been talking, and we have some thoughts."

“Your mother has some thoughts, and you should consider what she has to say.”

With that, Hudson turned the conversation over to me. I told them everything I’d told Hudson, and they were able to understand in ways Hudson couldn’t. Even though I’d tried to protect them from it, they’d grown up in this world. They were part of it. I would always see them as my three precious boys with rosy cheeks and footed pajamas, but they were men now.

They were all grown up with minds of their own.

I had no way of knowing what they would think of everything I’d told them. I wasn’t even sure they’d believe me, but then Sergei gave that look. I knew it well. It was a look he gave anytime he set his mind to something, and I knew once he gave it, there would be no backing down.

“What do we need to do?”

“We need to figure out exactly what he’s been up to.”

“And how are we going to do that?” Viktor leaned forward with narrowed eyes. “I mean, hell, even if he is up to something, we have no way to prove it. We don’t exactly have access to Volkov financials.”

Hudson smirked as he swirled his brandy. “Actually, I think you might, and it’s a lot closer than you might think.”

Viktor’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Your little friend in the basement.” I had no idea who they were talking about. I’d never heard them mention anyone living in the basement, but Hudson seemed to know all about him. “He’s got the means to do just about anything when it comes to

money.”

“You think he can get into Vasili’s accounts?”

“I know he can. It’s what he does.”

“Well, we’ve had him locked down tight for weeks. Figured we’d squeeze him for something eventually. Looks like now’s the time.”

Sergei nodded slowly, the idea settling in like a puzzle piece snapping into place. “If we can tie Vasili to an unsanctioned operation... if he’s skimming off the top or moving product without the family’s blessing...”

“Then we have leverage,” Hudson finished. “And a damn good reason to make a move without painting a target on your backs.”

He leaned back in his chair, eyes on the fire crackling in the corner. “Let’s get it done.”

21

PREACHER

"He’s really down there?”

“That’s what they tell me.”

“And he’s alive and well?”

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“Won’t know for sure until we get down there.” Seven seemed hesitant, so I asked, “You good?”

“No, but I’m here.” He let out a breath and ran a hand through his hair. “Time to see what we’re dealing with.”

“Agreed.” I turned to Grim and Memphis as I asked, “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

I opened the door, and they all followed as I made my way down the basement stairs. I was still doing what I could to shake off the lack of sleep, and it wasn’t easy without my daily pint of coffee. I didn’t let it slow me down, though. I was eager to get this thing done, so I’d called the boys in early and had them meet me at the main house.

I’d done my best to fill them in on everything that had gone down, but even I had my questions on how we’d gotten to this point. It was a lot. But we had a plan. It was a good plan. We just needed things to fall into place, and for that to happen, we would need Rooks to piece it all together.

We were halfway down the steps, when Memphis leaned in and asked, “You good?”

“Been better.”

“It’s all right. We’re not gonna let anything happen to your girl.”

“I’m gonna hold you to that.”

Memphis nodded, and we continued down the steps.

When we reached the basement, Sergei and his brothers were waiting for us. Sergei motioned his head towards the back as he said, “He’s in there.”

“You keeping him locked in the damn wine cellar?” I muttered.

“Guest quarters,” Sergei corrected. “Well, they used to be. It’s been modified, but not unbearable.”

I gave him a look but didn’t question him. I just held back with Seven and Grim, watching as Sergei walked over and unlocked the door. I half-expected to find Rooks chained to a pipe in the dark, half-dead and pleading for his life, but when Sergei unlocked the door and pushed it open, I stopped short.

The room was nicer than ours over at the clubhouse. There was a big bed and a small sofa facing a giant flat-screen TV, and there was an adjoining bathroom. Hell, it even had its own mini fridge in the corner.

Rooks was sitting on the sofa, and he was dressed in gym shorts and a T-shirt. He was sporting a lengthy beard, some old bruises, and his arm was in a sling, but other than that, he looked in pretty good shape.

I could hear Seven behind me as he muttered, “What the fuck?”

Rooks stood and a scowl marked his face as he growled, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Wondering what the fuck you’re doing still alive and breathing,” Seven grumbled.

“Sorry to disappoint.”

“I definitely am,” Seven snapped. “I would’ve thought Sergei would’ve given you what you had coming.”

“Alright, ladies,” I interrupted. “That’s enough of that. We’ve got business to attend to.”

“What kind of business?” Rooks spat.

“We have a job for you to do.”

“Oh?” His cocky grin faded just a bit. “And what makes you think I’ll do anything for you assholes?”

“Because helping us is your only shot at walking out of this house alive.”

There was no missing the hope in his voice as he asked, “You mean that?”

“Wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t.”

“Okay, what do you need?”

“Let’s move this upstairs.”

Sergei nodded, and he and Viktor took Rooks by the arm, leading him out of the room. We all followed them upstairs and into Sergei’s office. Sergei took him over to the table where he had Rooks’ computer and all the files Shep had gathered on Vasili.

Rooks turned on his laptop while Seven stood behind him, watching him like he wanted him to step out of line. But Rooks wasn’t that stupid. He knew if he fucked up, Seven would put a bullet in his head.

Rooks glanced up at me and Sergei as he asked, “So, what do you want me to do?”

“We need access to Vasili Volkov’s financials,” I answered. “We need them all. every shell account, offshore transfer, or possible front business. Whatever dirt you can dig up.”

“Okay, what kind of dirt am I looking for?”

“He’s Russian mafia.” Rooks’ eyes widened. “We think he’s working under the table. We want proof.”

“Alright then.” Rooks leaned forward and started typing away. “I can do that, but I’m gonna need something in return.”

“You’re in no position to negotiate.”

“I am if you want it fast,” Rooks countered.

“You’re pushing, asshole.”

“I just want a chance to talk to Tallie. I need a chance...”

“No fucking way,” Seven roared. “She’s just now starting to put all your bullshit behind her. No way I’m gonna let you fuck her up again.”

“I can’t take knowing that I hurt her again, and I just want a chance to make things right.”

“You should’ve thought about that before you had her father killed.”

“He was my father, too.”

Seven’s eyes narrowed as he growled, “That’s not helping your case.”

“You can write a letter,” I suggested. “Seven can read it when your done and decide if he wants to give it to her.”

“You good with that?” When Seven nodded, Rooks let out a breath and said, “I need the Wi-Fi password.”

Sergei wrote it down and slid it over to him, and that was it. Rooks took everything Shep had found and used it to dig even further. One hour rolled into the next, and he kept at it. Grim and Seven hovered over him, watching and waiting.

Sergei had one of the servants bring us food and drinks, but he and his brothers never left. None of us did. We didn’t trust him, not for a second, but I couldn’t deny the kid had a gift.

He dug deeper than most would dare. Through shell corps and blind accounts,

through a wall of Russian smoke and mirrors, and just as the sun started to set, he leaned back and let out a breath. “I got him.”

We all stood and gathered around him. Sergei was the first to ask, “What did you find?”

“He’s been laundering through an international shipping company. It’s registered in Cyprus and operates out of Rotterdam. He’s masking the transfers as transport fees.” Rooks sounded sure of himself as he announced, “He’s been moving funds into a private account in Dubai. Not a Volkov family account. His personal one.”

Sergei stepped forward, and there was no missing the hope in his voice when he asked, “You’re sure?”

“Oh, I’m positive. Hell, look for yourself.” He turned the laptop so we could see. “No Bratva clearance. He’s pulling money off the books, and he’s been doing it for at least a year.”

“I’ll be damned. You actually did it.”

“So, what now?”

Rooks turned to me. “You guys gonna lock me back in that damn basement?”

“For now.” I crossed my arms. “Once we verify what you found, we’ll work something out.”

“Damn.”

“Think of it this way... Now, you’ll get your chance to write that letter.”

Rooks looked between us, trying to decide if we were completely full of shit or if he really did have a chance to finally get out of the basement. Growing impatient, Sergei stepped behind him and ordered, “Let’s go.”

Rooks hesitated, but this time, he didn’t mouth off.

He just stood and followed Sergei to the door. Sergei motioned to one of the guards and ordered him to return Rooks to his room. Rooks paused in the doorway and looked back at Seven. “I meant what I said. I really am sorry. I know I can’t, but I’d like to try and fix things. At the very least make them better. For Tallie, Ford, and for you.”

“This is a start.”

He nodded and disappeared into the hallway.

Seven didn’t say anything, but I caught the way his shoulders dropped just a little. Grim glanced over at me and gave a barely-there nod, confirming what I’d hoped for.

We had what we needed to take Vasili down.

Sergei came over to me and said, “I have a contact with the Bratva. He’s not at the top, not even close, but he has the means to get the information to Andrei Vetrov, the

Obshchak.”

“Who the hell is that?”

“Think of him as the treasurer of the family. He oversees all the money and handles everything that goes along with it, including dealing with those who step out of line. I’ve only met him once, but it was enough. I’d never want to cross him.”

“And if this Vetrov guy doesn’t bite?”

“Then, we kill Vasili on our own and stage his death to look like something else—a cartel hit or an accident. Something messy but believable.”

“Yes, that could work.”

Sergei nodded, then dialed the number. Seconds later, a voice with a thick Russian accent came across the speaker, “Sergei. Been awhile.”

“Yes, it has. Hope you’re doing well.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m good.” Realizing something was up, he asked, “Why do you call? Someone dead?”

“Not yet,” Sergei told him. “But I got something you’re gonna want to see.”

“I’m listening.”

“Not something I can discuss over the phone.” Sergei glanced over at me as he continued, “I’ll send you a copy by messenger. You should have it by morning.”

“What’s this about?”

“You’ll see in the morning.”

“Now, I’m intrigued.”

“Call me as soon as you get it.”

With that, Sergei ended the call. He tossed his phone on the desk before walking over to me and the boys. “I’ll make a copy and get it sent over.”

“Good. Let’s call it a night, and we’ll be back in the morning.”

“Sounds like a plan.” When we started for the door, Sergei called out, “Preacher?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. Thank all of you.” There was no missing the emotion in his voice as he added, “We wouldn’t get through this thing without you.”

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“Glad we could help.”

“I know it means a great deal to Mother as well.”

“And she means a great deal to me, so it all evens out.” I gave him a nod and continued out of the office as I said, “We’ll see you in the morning.”

Grim, Memphis and Seven followed me outside, and once we were out to their bikes, Seven asked, “What are they gonna do about Rooks?”

“Not my call to make.” I could tell he didn’t like my answer, so I added, “Things have a way of sorting themselves out. You’ll see.”

“Yeah, I’m not holding my breath.”

“You heading back?” Memphis asked. “Or are you staying?”

“Staying. I’ll get one of the prospects to bring me over a change of clothes or something later.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Memphis offered. “Anything else?”

“Not yet, but we’re gonna need the club to be ready in case things go south. I’ll be there first thing in the morning for church. Pass the word.”

“You got it.” Memphis kicked his leg over the seat of his Harley. “Give Tabitha our best.”

“Will do.”

I waited until they had both gone down the driveway and out the gate before I started for the barn. I was ready to see her. I hadn't even had a chance to call or text her all day, and I was eager to see if she was okay.

It was getting dark, but the lights in the stables were still on. I knew she would be there, and just as I expected, I spotted her in the first stall.

She was brushing one of the horses and singing softly under her breath. Her sleeves were rolled up, and her hair was pulled back in one of those messy buns. Damn. The woman couldn't have looked more beautiful.

She didn't see me at first. She was too lost in her thoughts, and even with Sergei's guards stationed at every damn corner, I still felt the need to get to her and make sure she was okay.

I didn't say her name. I just stepped into the barn, and it was as if she felt my presence and whipped around. Her eyes were wide like she hadn't expected anyone, but relief washed over her the second she saw it was me.

She stood frozen as she asked, “Well?”

“You were right.” I opened the stall door and stepped inside. “Vasili was dirty.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah.” I continued over to her as I explained, “We got the proof, too. There's no talking around it. Vasili is done.”

She stared at me for a beat, like her mind was trying to catch up with what her heart

already knew. Then she let out a breath, and in a blink, she was in my arms.

No hesitation.

No questions.

She just wrapped her arms around my neck and held onto me as tight as she could. After a few seconds, she looked up at me and pressed her lips to mine, kissing me with everything she had. And hell, I kissed her back, long and hard.

I didn't give a shit that we were in a dusty barn or that her hands smelled like horse and feed. It didn't matter.

Nothing did.

Not the Bratva. Not Vasili.

Not the years she'd spent surviving instead of living.

She would have her happy ending, even if it meant sacrificing my own to make sure she got it.

22

TABITHA

“You need to be the one to make the call.”

“What?”

“Because he’ll only believe it if it comes from you,” Sergei pushed.

I knew something was coming the second I walked into the room. Preacher stood near the window, arms crossed, jaw tight, while my boys were all seated around the table with soured expressions on their faces.

I was expecting them to be in better spirits. Sergei had gotten the files on Vasili to his contact, and after seeing what was inside, he did as he promised and got them in Vetrov’s hands. It wasn’t long after that when Sergei got the call that he was sending in Leonid Sokolov to deal with Vasili.

I wasn’t surprised. A man like Vetrov never dealt with matters like this. He had men for that—men like Leonid Sokolov. He was the one who came whenever someone stepped out of line. They told Sergei to have Vasili at the house by six, and Sokolov would take care of the rest. It seemed simple enough until Sergei announced that I had to be the one to call Vasili.

“Why do I have to call him?” I crossed my arms defensively. “Because I’m weak?”

“You’re anything but weak, doll,” Hudson argued. “We need you to do it because you’re the one he still thinks he can manipulate. He knows the bullshit his brother put you through, and he thinks he can use it to his advantage.”

I hated it, but I knew he was right.

I clinched my fist and tried to steady myself before asking, “So, I just call him and what? Tell him that he wins, and we’re ready to make a deal?”

“That’s exactly what you do.” Sergei nodded. “Tell him we’ll make things right. That the money’s negotiable, and that you just don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

I looked over to Hudson, and suddenly, the storm inside me started to settle. Yes, I was afraid. I was terrified. But he was there. He was watching over me and my boys, and I knew he’d never let anything happen to us. So, I let out a breath and said, “Okay. I’ll do it.”

“Good.”

Nikolai got up and walked over to me. “Don’t let him rattle you. He’s gonna try.”

“I know. I’ll remember.”

After a few deep breaths, I dialed a number I thought I’d never use again.

And just as luck would have it, he picked up on the very first ring.

“Well, well. If it isn’t the beautiful Tabitha Volkov,” Vasili’s voice oozed with smugness and sent a shiver down my spine. “I was wondering how long it would take you to get your head straight.”

“I talked it over with Sergei and his brothers, and we’ve all decided that you are right. We should’ve never tried to walk away from the family.”

“It was a betrayal. That’s what it was.”

“And we are sorry and want to make things right. We’ll do whatever you want.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.”

“I thought it would be.” I gritted my teeth as I told him, “Why don’t you come to the house tonight, and we can talk things over. That is, if you are still in town.”

“Oh, I’m still here, and I’ll be there.” He was silent for a moment, then added, “You’ve made the right decision, kroshka. I’ll be there at six.”

He hung up without another word.

I didn’t realize I’d been holding my breath until the call ended. I looked up at Hudson, and he gave me a nod of approval. We were getting close. It was almost over.

Almost.

I barely had a chance to catch my breath before everything was set into motion. The boys pulled in their guards and gave them explicit directions to cover the house and the grounds, but to do it without being seen. The security cameras were checked, and extra feeds were synced into Sergei’s office. Hudson called the brothers, and they did the same, slipping into the house without a trace.

Every corner.

Every window.

Every exit was under watchful eye.

We were ready. I just had to pretend I wasn't terrified.

But I was. I was so scared I could barely breathe, but I put on my dress and makeup. I fixed my hair and put on my jewelry. I looked like I was ready for an old family dinner, instead of preparing to face a monster.

By the time I made it back downstairs, Hudson and Sergei were in the foyer with Grim and Nikolai. They were talking quietly, and as I got closer, I heard Nikolai say, "I don't want her to do this. I can answer the damn door."

"I don't like this either," Sergei agreed. "But this is the best way."

"But why is this the best way? Why does it matter who opens the goddamn door?" Nikolai snapped. "He could have a gun or..."

"It will be fine," I interrupted. "I appreciate your concern, sweetheart, but I can do this. It's best if he sees me. He will feel less threatened, and hopefully that will make it easier to draw him in. And you will be close by to help if I need it."

"Yes, but I don't like it. I don't like any of it."

“None of us do, but it will be over soon. We just have to get through this next bit, and...”

Before I could finish my thought, there was a knock at the door. Sergei’s back stiffened which threw my nerves into overdrive. I stood back and watched as he and Viktor went over and answered the door. Seconds later, Leonid Sokolov entered the house.

He was nothing like what I’d expected.

He didn’t come in weapons drawn or surrounded by a brigade of guards. He was a simple man of average height with a bland grey suit, brown hair, and hazel eyes. He wasn’t big or tall. He didn’t have menacing eyes or a fierce presence. But I’d learned early on that men like him were the most dangerous. With a snap of their fingers, you would be done, and they had the means to make it happen.

He certainly did.

He had two guards who stood at either side. They wore black suits and were the size of linebackers. They didn’t speak. They just glared ahead, cold and silent. We didn’t bother taking them to the office. Sokolov wasn’t a man who wasted time. He wanted the original files, and Sergei gave them to him.

Hudson stood back and watched as Sergei did most of the talking. He gave him a moment to review everything they’d discovered, then said, “I can show you where the files were recovered and how.”

“No, I’ve seen enough.” Sokolov shook his head and said, “This is not the first I’ve heard of his indiscretions. But it’s the first with proof.”

“What do you need us to do?”

“You will do nothing,” he answered firmly. “Not unless you want his blood on your hands when we’re already watching.”

“You’re saying Vasili’s already under investigation?” Sergei pressed.

“Yes, for quite some time.” Sokolov gave a slow nod of his head. “You just gave us the final nail. Ded will be appreciative of your efforts, even with your selfish intent.”

Mikhail Antonov, or Ded Mikhail to those who feared and respected him, was the Bratva leader. He gave the final say on everything, so I wasn’t surprised when Sokolov mentioned his name. I had no doubt that he knew all about Vasili and what he had been up to.

“What happens now?”

“Vasili will be removed, and you will carry on with your endeavors.”

“And Ded and the rest of the family?”

“The family does not approve of you parting ways, but we are willing to give you some leniency.”

“Leniency?”

“We won’t come for your head, but possibly ten percent of your casino profits. I think that would suffice. What about you?”

“Five percent would be better, but I’m willing to discuss.”

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“That’s a discussion for another day.” He glanced down at his watch and asked, “When can we expect our guest?”

The words had barely left his mouth when one of the guards stepped forward and announced, “There is a car at the gate.”

“Let them in.”

He nodded, then disappeared from view.

I heard Vasili’s car pull up, and my chest tightened. I was so nervous I felt like I could crawl out of my own skin, but I reminded myself that I wasn’t alone. Hudson and my boys were right there within reach, and they wouldn’t let anything happen to me. Vasili pounded on the door, and I drew in one final calming breath.

I walked over and opened the door slowly. Vasili stood on the front step in his tailored suit and slicked back hair. His chin was tilted upward like he owned the world, and he had a smug smile painted across his face. His eyes skirted over me, and his smile turned sinister as he said, “Tabitha. So good to see you again.”

“I wish I could say the same about you.”

“Oh, come now. I thought this would be a cordial visit.”

“Not so much.”

“I understand. It can be difficult to submit, but you will submit. And I’m looking

quite forward to it.” He stepped closer. “I’ll take my time reminding you of your place.”

Even with his vile words, I didn’t flinch. I didn’t cower. I simply stepped back and opened the door wider, revealing Sokolov and his guards. Vasili froze on the threshold, his smile faltering, and his eyes darted from me to the three men next to me.

“What is this?” he spat, his voice rising. “You trying to scare me, moya kroshka? Because it’s not working.”

Sokolov kept his eyes trained on Vasili as he replied, “I know... I know everything.”

“What do you mean?” The color drained from Vasili’s face. “There’s nothing to know.”

“I don’t play games, Vasili. You know this.”

Vasili’s face grew red, and before I realized what he was doing, he’d reached into his pocket and pulled out a small handgun. He aimed it at me, and every guard and every Fury brother stepped out of hiding. Panic filled his eyes as he gasped, “There’s been a mistake.”

“I don’t make mistakes. You know this.” Sokolov took a step forward and calmly said, “Put the gun down.”

“Why? I’m as good as dead either way.” He glared at me as he said, “At least this way I can take her with me.”

“And then, I would do the same to your wife and your boys and boys’ wives and their children. Surely you don’t want that.”

“You don’t understand.” Vasili didn’t move. “Those exchanges were just a test run. I wanted to make sure they were legit before...”

“Don’t,” Sokolov interrupted. “I’ve heard enough of your lies.”

I was starting to worry that he was actually going to shoot me when Seven stepped up behind him and placed the barrel of his gun at Vasili’s head. “Drop it, asshole.”

Defeat washed over Vasili as he lowered his weapon and begged, “You have to listen to me. I can explain everything.”

Showing no signs of sympathy, Sokolov ordered, “Take him.”

The guards grabbed Vasili, and when they started down the steps, he started shouting out rambles about betrayal and lies. But his voice grew quiet as they shoved him into the backseat of their SUV.

And just like that, the man who’d haunted my past disappeared like a bad memory.

I stood by the window, arms wrapped around myself, staring off into the distance. I wanted to feel victorious. I wanted to feel like this nightmare was finally over. But all I felt was tired.

So damn tired.

I thought I could collapse with exhaustion when I felt Hudson step behind me and slip his arms around my waist, pulling me close. I leaned back against him, feeling his strength and peace wash over me. He lowered his mouth to my ear and whispered, “It’s over. He’s not coming back.”

“Thank God for that.” The adrenaline was still humming through me, but the fear had

started to loosen its grip. I leaned my head back so I could see him. “I need a hot bath and a drink.”

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“You got it.” He gave me a quick squeeze, then said, “Give me a minute with the boys, and I’ll walk you back over to your place.”

“Sounds good.”

Sergei was talking quietly with Viktor and Nikolai. Their voices were low, but I could tell by looking at them that plans were being made. But this time, I didn’t need to be part of it. I’d done what I needed to do.

Hudson walked over to them and said a few words, then gave Sergei a pat on the back. “I’m taking your mother back to her place.”

“You staying with her?”

“I am.”

“Good. I don’t want her to be alone tonight.”

“Won’t be a problem.”

Sergei glanced over at me, and I gave him a reassuring smile. “I’m okay. I’ll see you boys in the morning.”

“Call me if you need anything.”

I nodded, and Hudson led me out the back door and out to the porch. I held back and waited as he walked over and had a word with Grim and several of the other brothers.

As I stood there watching them, I was overcome with emotion. They didn't know me or my boys, not really, and yet, they came here today and put their lives on the line to help us. It meant more to me than I could ever express, but I felt compelled to try.

I took a slight step toward them as I said, "Thank you. Thank you for coming today and last night and helping the way you did. It meant a great deal to me and to my boys, and I'll never forget you being here when we needed you most."

I was rambling, but I couldn't help myself.

"I know it was asking a lot, but you did it anyway, and..."

"It's okay, babe," Hudson interrupted. "It's what family's supposed to do." I didn't respond.

I was too busy crying for that.

Hudson shook his head and smiled, then took my hand and led me back to my place. On the way, he didn't bother asking if I was okay. He already knew the answer. By the time we got upstairs, the weight of everything that happened had settled over me like a thick blanket.

Hudson closed and locked the door behind us, then turned his attention to me, "Go shower and put on something comfortable. I'll take care of the rest."

"The rest?"

"Shower," he pushed.

"Okay. Okay."

I did as I was told and took a long, hot shower, and by the time I was done, I'd started to feel more like myself again. I slipped on a pair of pajama pants and an old, oversized t-shirt.

I towel dried my hair before heading back to the living room. When I walked in, I found Hudson in the kitchen, and he'd made us both a grilled cheese and a bowl of tomato soup. He'd even cut the grilled cheese in diagonals, just the way I liked them.

He had a bottle of wine already uncorked, and one of my favorite movies was playing on the TV. "Is that Practical Magic?"

"It is."

"You know it's a chick-flick, right?"

"I do." He poured me a glass of wine as he added, "I also know it's one of your favorites."

I stood there a second, just staring at him and feeling my heart swell in my chest. And just like that, the chaos of the day faded away. I crossed the kitchen, wrapped my arms around his middle, and pressed my face to his chest. "And this is why I love you."

"And all this time, I thought it was because I was good in bed."

"Well, you are, but it's how you take such good care of me that makes me love you the most."

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He smiled as he kissed the top of my head, and whispered, “Yeah, well. Get used to it, darlin’. I’m not going anywhere.”

We ate our dinner, then moved over to the sofa. The movie was still playing in the background, but neither of us were really paying attention. We were just enjoying being there together.

Hudson ran his fingers through my damp hair as he asked, “Feeling better?”

“Getting there.” I took another sip of my wine before asking, “So, what do you think about my boys?”

“Oh, that’s a hole I don’t want to step into.”

“I’m serious,” I pushed. “Do you think you have them all figured out?”

“About as well as I need to.” He shifted in his seat as he said, “Viktor’s the grumpy one. Nikolai’s your smooth-talker, and Sergei’s the one who is always about two seconds away from throwing someone through a wall.”

“So, you don’t know them at all.”

“I know them just fine.” He gave me a side-eye. “Hell, I have been around them nonstop for weeks.”

“So, you know that Nikolai loves art, and he’s been drawing since he could hold a pencil in his hand.”

“Nikolai?”

“Mmhmm. He’s always dreamed of owning his own studio.”

“The one with all the tattoos and the death stare?”

“The very one.”

“How ‘bout that.” He rubbed his jaw. “Never would’ve thought it.”

“And Viktor has a thing for racing,” I added, “He plans to build his own car one day.”

“So, one of your sons is a tortured artist and the other one wants to be Ricky Bobby.”

I gave him a playful shove. “You’re terrible.”

“Seriously, your boys are grown with minds of their own. They’re men, and I’ll treat them like I do all my boys. And I’ll be as close with ‘em as they’ll let me.”

“I would appreciate that, and they will, too.” I rested my head on his chest as I whispered, “I don’t know how I got so lucky.”

“Oh, don’t get it twisted. I’m the lucky one, and I plan on showing you that every chance I get.”

“There’s no time like the present.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when Hudson was up and had me in his arms, carrying me to the bedroom. He spent the rest of the night making love to me,

showing me exactly how lucky we both were, and just as we were about to drift off to sleep, he turned to me and said, “It took me a long time to find you, but you’re the one. The only one.”

And just like that, everything was right in the world. “You’re my one, too. You’re mine.”

“Damn right, I am, and you’re mine.”

23

PREACHER

The night had finally come.

After months of planning and issues with construction, the casino had finally opened, and the place was packed. It was shoulder to shoulder from the front door to the back poker tables, and it was something to behold. Flashing lights. Clinking chips. The low hum of conversation. The scent of cigar smoke and expensive perfume. And the music playing overhead gave it just the right edge of class mixed with possibility.

It was a hell of a turnout.

But I wasn't watching the crowd.

I was watching her.

Tabitha was sitting next to me at the bar she'd helped design. She'd hand-picked every detail, from the tile floor to the paint color on the ceiling, and she'd outdone herself. And while it was beautiful, it couldn't compare with how amazing she looked tonight. She was wearing a deep green dress that hugged her curves like it'd been made for her, and her hair was down over her shoulders.

She sparkled even more than the chandelier above us, and she was practically beaming with pride as she asked, "Do you think they'll come back?"

"Oh, they'll come back. No doubt about it." I took a pull from my beer before saying, "I mean, hell. Look at this place. It's amazing, and so are you."

"Thank you." She leaned into me with a smile. "You're pretty great, too."

She glanced over at Viktor and Nikolai, and they were working the floor, greeting everyone with a casual nod or firm handshake. Sergei was posted up near the private room, looking down on everything like a hawk.

They were new to the game, but it didn't show. Hell, this place was running almost as well as the Vault. The guards made themselves known without being in your face, the bartenders were staying on top of things, serving one fancy cocktail after the next,

and the servers were dressed seductively, but not overly so.

I leaned over to Tabitha and told her, “Your boys did good.”

“They did, didn’t they?” Her smile widened. “I know they must be proud. I know I am.”

“As you should be.”

When she spotted someone she knew, she gave them a quick wave and said, “I’m going to walk around a bit. You want to join me or...”

“No, you go ahead. I’ll hang tight and finish my beer.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Take your time.”

Tabitha eased off her stool and made her way around the room. I watched as she went over and talked with a few of the guests and VIPs. They all seemed starstruck as she did her best to make them feel at home. Eventually, she made her way over to Memphis and Goose, and after talking with them for a moment, she headed over to Grim.

He was sitting in one of the lounges with his girl curled up beside him. They talked for a moment, and then, she was off again. She made her rounds to all my boys, and damn if she didn’t look beautiful doing it. Hell, she walked through the room like she owned it, and I couldn’t be prouder that she was mine.

I sipped on my beer and watched as several people walked by. A few gave a hard look while others avoided eye contact entirely. They all knew who I was, knew the

wrath me and my boys were capable of, so I couldn't necessarily blame them for wanting to steer clear.

It was the cost of making things happen, and I was a man who made things happen. It was that thought that had me thinking about Vasili and the moment I knew things with him were truly over.

Shep had been monitoring things in New York, waiting and watching for any word of Vasili. At first, there was nothing. No word of him or his disappearance. Not even a whisper or false report.

But on a random Tuesday night, Shep came into my office and announced, "There were three fires in the city last night. All within hours of each other."

"You think they're connected to Vasili?"

"There were no names in the reports. Just the number of casualties. But I ran the addresses and cross-referenced them with property records." He hesitated, then dropped the hammer. "One belonged to Vasili and the others to his two sons."

"Damn. The whole damn line got wiped out."

"Sure did. It was like they were never there."

That kind of thing just didn't happen. There were too many cops, too many neighbors and friends, and all the politics. A wipeout like that took a lot of money and power, and clearly, these guys had it.

It made that ten percent sound not so bad after all.

"A hell of a way to send a message."

“Message received. Loud and clear.”

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It wasn't long after that when Sergei called me in and announced that he'd released Rooks. He'd sent him out of the country and threatened to end him if he ever came back. Hard to know if it was the right call, but Rooks had done his part and helped us out of a tight spot.

He'd written the letter for his sister and gave it to Seven, but I never heard whether or not he passed it along. Didn't figure it was my place to ask, but I knew Seven well enough to know that he would do what he thought was best for Tallie, even if it meant tossing the letter. He certainly had every reason to.

My mind snapped back to the present when I heard Tabitha laugh. I glanced over and saw that she was on her way back to me. She'd almost made it back to the bar when Goose called her back over. She eased over, and seconds later, something was said that made Goose laugh so hard several heads turned to see what was going on.

I couldn't help but smile.

My woman fit. Not just with me but all of us.

And she did it without even trying.

Tabitha was still giggling when she sat back down next to me and said, "Wow, they're in rare form tonight."

"You are, too."

She gave me that look—the one that made my chest tight. It was hard to explain, but

it was like she could see right through all the years of bloodshed and guilt and still wanted me anyway. It was that look that would carry me to the end of my days.

A soft smile crossed her face as she whispered, “Thank you.”

“For?”

“For being you.”

She reached under the table and took my hand, lacing her fingers with mine. And for the first time in a long damn time, I let myself lean back and enjoy the moment. The noise. The people. The music.

And most of all, her.

My ol’ lady.

I had it good. There was no denying it, and it was just the beginning.

Tabitha’s eyes danced with mischief as she leaned towards me and asked, “Want to play a round of blackjack?”

“I don’t know,” I smirked. “Hate to take money from your boys on their opening night.”

“You think it’ll be that easy?”

“Absolutely.” I stood up, brushed my hands down the front of my jacket, and leaned in close enough to whisper, “But a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

“Okay. Okay.” She grinned and looped her arm through mine. “But try not to

bankrupt the family on the first night.”

“I make no promises.”

With that, we made our way over to the blackjack table. We played a few rounds, and to my surprise, I lost every damn time. I expected Tabitha to give me hell about it, but she didn’t. She just gave me one of her knowing smiles and let it go.

A few hours passed, and the crowd slowly started to thin out. Tabitha gave a little yawn and rolled her shoulders. It had been a long night, and I could tell she was ready to kick off her heels and collapse somewhere quiet—preferably on top of me.

“You ready to call it a night?”

“God, yes.”

“Then, let’s get the hell out of here.”

Tabitha nodded and slipped her arm through mine, and we made our way toward the front. We stepped outside, and the cool night air was a welcome change from the warm casino floor. I walked over to the valet and gave him our ticket, and when I turned back, I saw that Sergei had come up behind us.

“You two leaving?”

“Afraid so,” I answered. “But it was a hell of a night. You boys outdid yourselves.”

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“We have some things to work on, but it was definitely a good start. Seven and the boys were impressive tonight. They made their presence known without scaring anyone off.”

“Thought the same about your guys. You hired well.”

“Just following your lead.” Without giving me a chance to take in the compliment, he looked over to Tabitha and said, “So, I’ve been doing some thinking.”

“About?”

“The house.”

“Oh?” Panic filled her eyes. “What about it?”

“I’m moving out. I’m going to find a place closer to the city.” Without missing a beat, he added, “Nikolai and Viktor are going to do the same.”

“What?” Tabitha’s brows lifted. “Why so sudden?”

“We’ve all talked about it, and it’s not so sudden. Not sudden at all,” he scoffed. “We should’ve done it a long time ago.”

“But...”

“It’s been decided, Mother,” he cut her off. “Now you and Preach don’t have to go back and forth between your place and his. The house is yours. Both of yours.”

Sergei wasn't one to mince words, so I took it as his way of saying that he and his brothers gave us their blessing. It was something I hoped for but hadn't expected. They knew all about me and the life I'd led. It wouldn't be surprising if they hadn't wanted a man like me with their mother, especially after what she'd been through.

Tabitha must've been just as surprised, because she was all but stunned by his offering. She just stood there and stared at him for several moments. And then the tears came, and she reached out and hugged him tight. He grumbled a little under his breath but hugged her right back. "Ah, now, don't get all emotional on me now."

She hugged him a moment longer, then released him and said, "You know you don't have to do this."

"But we do. And it's settled. So, just take the house and let this be the end of our little Hallmark moment."

"Okay. Well, thank you, but if you change your mind..."

"We won't." I chuckled as he turned and started back inside. "Good night, Mother."

"Good night!" she called back, but he was already back inside.

She didn't move. She just stood there staring at the closed door. After a second, I placed the palm of my hand on the small of her back and asked, "You good?"

"I'm more than good." Her eyes met mine, and she smiled. "Let's go home."

The valet had finally come back with the SUV, so we both got in and I drove us back to her place. As soon as we walked into the house, I reached for her hand and led her into the bedroom. "Do you have any idea what you put me through tonight?"

“What are you talking about?”

“That dress.”

“What about it?”

“You knew what it would do to me, and now, you’re going to get exactly what you were asking for.”

“Oh, really?” Her cheek flushed. “You liked it?”

“I did, and you’re about to see just how much.”

I put one of my hands behind her neck and pressed my mouth against hers. Her lips parted in surprise as I pulled her body close to mine. The kiss was possessive and demanding, leaving no question as to what I had in mind for her.

My mouth roamed over the curve of her neck as I whispered, “You love taunting me, don’t you?”

“Maybe.” My hands greedily moved to her shoulders, easing the straps of her dress down her arms as I caressed her breast. In almost a whisper, I heard her say, “But no more than you love taunting me.”

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I'd known from the start that Tabitha was going to change my life. I just had no idea how much. She was my missing piece, and now that I had her, I wasn't letting her go. "My woman knows how to get to me. No doubt about that."

My words seemed to stir something in her as she reached for my cut and eased it down my shoulders, laying it across the foot of the bed. When my hands dropped to my belt buckle, she bit her bottom lip as she lowered her dress to the floor, revealing that she was wearing nothing underneath.

Fuck.

The woman kept me on my toes, and I couldn't get enough of it.

My fingertips roamed over her bare skin, only stopping when I reached her breasts. A low growl rumbled in my throat as I lowered my head to her breast, flicking my tongue across her sensitive flesh. Her breath quickened as I moved to her other breast, and she gasped as I continued teasing and tormenting her with my mouth.

Unable to wait a moment longer, I lifted her into my arms and carried her over to the bed, carefully lowering her down onto the mattress. She looked so damn perfect sprawled out on the bed, every inch of her was mine, and I intended to cherish her in ways she couldn't begin to imagine.

Her eyes locked on mine as I stood before her and slowly removed my clothes. My entire body was on fire, burning to touch her, to taste her, and seeing the way she was writhing on the bed with anticipation only made my hunger for her more intense. I lowered myself onto the bed, and goosebumps prickled against her skin as I settled

my head between her legs.

With my beard tickling her inner thigh, I whispered, “My one and only.”

I spent the rest of the night making love to her, and when I finally collapsed on the bed next to her, I felt a sense of peace I’d never felt before. I had it all. My son and a possible grandkid on the way, my club, and my woman. A man couldn’t ask for more than that.

EPILOGUE

“He’s beautiful, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he’s a beaut.” Tabitha stood by the gate and watched as the new foal darted around his mother. He was brown as old leather with a white diamond right in the center of his forehead. “He’s got some fire in him. That’s for sure.”

“Just like his momma.” She smiled as she watched him gallop by. “He’s going to be a handful. No doubt about that.”

“You talking about the horse or me?”

She laughed. “Yes.”

Memphis was leaned up against the fence with Antonia standing next to him, and Seven and Tallie were close with Ford perched between them. The foal came a little closer, and Ford gripped the rail tighter as he leaned forward and tried to reach out and touch him. “He’s so fast.”

“And stubborn, too,” Tabitha chuckled. “We’ve been trying to come up with a name but haven’t been able to come up with anything yet. Do you have any suggestions?”

Ford thought for a second, then replied, “Don’t they usually have weird names like Farfenugen Sasquatch?”

“I don’t know if they’re that weird, buddy,” Seven answered. “But yeah, some of them have some odd names. Not sure this little fella looks like a Farfenugen, though.”

“Me neither. I was just asking.” Ford looked back to the foal and then over to Tallie. “What about Star Light or Magnum Flare?”

“I like both of those. I already have a Magnum, but Star Light is a real possibility.” Tabitha gave me a nudge. “What do you think?”

“I like it a lot better than Whiskey Runs and any of those other names you’ve been tossing out.”

“Hey, they weren’t all bad.”

“They weren’t good either.”

“Okay, Star Light it is.”

Grim and Luna walked up with several of the other club kids, and they were all squeals and gasps when Harlan brought out Pearl and Magnum for them to ride. Seven chuckled as he scoffed, “And just like that, Star Light is all but forgotten.”

“They’re here for the rides,” I said. “Foal’s just the warm-up act.”

“Can I ride next?” Ford asked excitedly.

“Yeah, buddy. We’ll get you on up there,” Seven answered. “You just gotta wait your turn.”

I stood back and watched as the brothers gathered around and started helping the kids take turns riding. It was a sight to see—one that was good for an old man's heart.

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I could still remember the day I took a chance and agreed to start the Little Rock chapter. That one chance opened the door to so many more, and with each one I took, I created the life I have now—a life filled with so much good that I couldn't believe it was mine.

Little by little, I had assembled a family that wasn't defined simply by names or blood. I'd chosen men who would value the brotherhood and commit their lives to one another. And they'd all remained loyal, even when it was easier to walk away.

It hadn't been easy.

There were days when I thought it would all fall apart,

But we'd faced the hard days head on, and we hadn't let them tear us down. We were family, through and through, and I took pride in the fact that even after I was dead and gone, the Satan's Fury legacy would still carry on without me.

It was a feeling that had my chest tightening with pride.

Tabitha stepped over to me and slipped her arm around mine. "This is nice."

"Hm-hmm." I watched Tallie laugh as Seven tried to convince Ford not to stand up in the saddle like some kind of rodeo star. Thankfully, Magnum didn't seem to mind. "It really is."

We weren't in the city or the clubhouse, and for once, none of us were looking over our shoulders. We were just sharing a warm night with good people and that little

star-headed colt starting his run in the world.

And damn if it didn't feel like exactly where I was supposed to be.

Later that night, after the kids had their fun and the horses were fed and settled, we headed back up to the house. After a shower and a change of clothes, Tabitha and I ended up on the back patio. It had become our spot over the past few weeks.

It was quiet, and she could look out into the pasture.

I started a fire, and she nestled up next to me. "We've almost got this place together."

"We're definitely getting there."

There were still boxes to unpack. Half my closet was back at the old place. Her kitchen was still figuring out how to live with my coffee addiction and the way I liked to organize my damn spices. But we were getting there.

"My boots in the hall closet?"

"I don't know. Is that where you put them?"

"No. That's where you put them."

"Well, it was either the closet or the garage." She grinned. "I didn't want 'em getting rained on."

"Kind of you," I said, tipping my bottle toward her.

"It's strange, isn't it?" She looked back toward the fire. "How fast things change. A year ago, I didn't even know you or where you kept your damn boots."

“And now you’re hiding them from me.”

“Now I keep putting them in our closet where they belong.”

That hit me harder than I expected. I looked around at the chairs we’d picked out, at the wind chimes she liked, and the battered old grill I refused to part with. Little by little, we were blending in together.

Her soft and elegant touches.

My stubborn and lived-in ones.

There was no more hers or mine.

It was just ours.

And I wouldn’t have it any other way. I gave her a little nudge. “You know I love you, right?”

“I do, and I love you, too.” She turned to me with a smile. “It’s why I put up with you and your old, dirty boots.”

“And that’s why you’re my one and only.”

The End