



Wolf's Whisper

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Description: Onyx “Wolf” Dawson turned a new chapter in her life when she joined The Wild Jesters MC. Bounty hunting fit her like a glove, and Wolf saw each mission she took on as a way to make a difference in her own way. Then, one day, Wolf accepted a mission to protect a woman and felt something she hadn’t felt in her chest. When Wolf first saw Janelle Pierce, it felt like she had known her from deep within herself. Throughout the mission, they both felt a connection and the night Janelle was safe, they aligned in a way that sought comfort and healing in each other’s arms. What seemed like a mission to save Janelle Pierce soon became a mission to save them both. Even though the odds are stacked against Wolf and Janelle, the heat of their desire for one another never weakens, and they can’t help but feel that the connection between them is more than just a typical love story. There is something unexplainable about it, as though destiny had brought Wolf and Janelle together.

They could never escape who they were, but Wolf, Janelle, and her kids could build a future together, with Wolf’s Whispers guiding them every step.

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Prologue

Onyx "Wolf" Dawson

Being sixteen is hard.

Coming out as a lesbian in a small town is even more challenging. Everyone has an opinion and tries to introduce me to their sons since this is a phase. But having this conversation with Dad might be even more problematic since he's a deacon. I'm pacing my living room, waiting for him to get home from his factory job.

I hear his beat-up truck pulling into the driveway, and my heart rate quickened.

"Honey, I'm home." He yells the same thing every night, coming into the door and bringing a smile to my face. "Where are you, peanut?"

"I'm in the living room," I holler back at him. I close my eyes and listen to the sounds and know precisely what he's doing. I hear him hanging up his baseball cap, the one representing my school. The next is his jacket. He sits on the bench he made to take off his steel-toe shoes. He groans as he stands up to come into the living room.

"You look nervous. What's wrong?" he asks.

I motion for him to sit down in his reclining chair.

"Dad, I need to talk to you about something important." I sigh before lowering myself onto the sofa directly across from him.

“Honey, you are starting to scare me. Just talk to me. Nothing you can say will ever make me love you less.” He smiles at me, trying to reassure me.

“I don’t know about that, Dad.” I sigh again. “Dad, I’m a lesbian.”

He leans back in the chair, closing his eyes and muttering. Is he praying or trying not to swear at me? He opens his eyes, and all I see are tears. The stinging of my eyes, and if he rejects me, I don’t know what I’d do. He’s my only parent—the single person who loves me unconditionally.

“Onyx, I love you. Nothing could make me stop loving you. I wouldn’t care if you came out as a unicorn. You are my daughter.” The tears flow down my cheeks as I launch myself into his outstretched arms.

I’m a sixteen-year-old girl sitting in my thirty-six-year-old dad’s lap, crying like I did when I was seven and fell off my bike. He kissed those booboos away. Now he is leaving butterfly kisses on my head, telling me how proud he is of me and how much he loves me. He’s the best dad anyone could ask for, and I’m glad he’s mine.

Dad has always been there for me, with everything I have accomplished or failed at through life. He was—and is—my biggest champion, so when I joined the Army at eighteen, it was hard to convince him this was what I needed to do with my life. I had a calling to make a difference in the world. I think he cried harder at me being sent off to boot camp than he did at my graduation ceremony. I knew it killed him to tell me I had to keep my true self quiet since some wouldn’t understand.

I shipped out to boot camp and it was tough, but I made it. The Army was a place where I could make a difference. After the testing and other requirements, they stationed me in Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri because I wanted to be in the

Military Police. I felt like I was making a little mark in the world.

I served in the military for a year before being sent overseas, but my gender prohibited me from serving in a combat position. I was a part of the steady rotation, keeping everything secure within the base, of which I was proud to do. The people I served with became more like family to me. I can still feel the deep emotions of being deployed and away from the comforts of home. I was about to embark on an incredible adventure that taught me about life, death, and the power of love. I remember parts of the day that changed my life completely. It was the end of my deployment, and my unit was traveling to the airfield to return home when suddenly my world blew up around me, and everything went black.

I woke up and felt like I was lying on hot coals, confused where others were. No matter how many times I asked the nurses, no one said anything to me until my dad arrived and let me know I was the only survivor.

The news of my fellow soldiers losing their lives and me being the only one to live still takes a toll on me mentally. I'm barely surviving most days, and my whole back is covered in scars from the burns. I'm twenty years old and don't know what I'm going to do with my life after this. I fight every day through recovery in the hospital and the Army has now medically discharged me.

Going home to my dad's house made the most sense so I could figure out what my next step is now that I am no longer in the military. I make a promise to myself I won't let the lives lost of all my brothers and sisters in arms that day be in vain, and the survivor's guilt is eating at my soul.

I spend the few days when I don't have physical therapy just staring out the window then weeks in a daze until one day my dad tells me about the Wild Jesters MC. They are a group of men and women from all walks of life and different careers. They help men, women, and children who are in abusive situations get justice when they can't

get it for themselves. They try not to break the law because they need everything to be legitimate so that their cases stick. That is true justice for their clients, ensuring those hurting them can't hide behind money, connections, or even the law. He tells me I'm tough, and how I can use my Army training to help the Wild Jesters...

I'm hesitant at first, but when I meet the other members of the MC, I know this is a place where I can make a difference—like when I first signed up for the military. I became a prospect with the club while getting my bounty hunter license. I proudly stand with the Wild Jesters.

I remember when Mouthpiece stood beside me and said, "Buckle up, because you're in for the ride of your life; listen for the call of the Wild Jesters." That's precisely what I did.

Chapter One

Wolf (Onyx)

My bounty hunting business is on the other side of town. I try not to bring clients to the clubhouse, but I will bring my paperwork here. I don't like taking cases while working for the Jesters, but sometimes it happens. I'm known in this town as a bounty hunter and part of the MC, so they can find me in either place.

I'm sitting in my office at the clubhouse reviewing the file for our recent intake, Janelle Pierce and her three children. The file shows her now ex-husband has a real temper, and from the medical records, he likes to take it out on his family. My blood boils with hatred for people like this, and I'll never understand how someone can hurt those they claim to love. It makes me feel stabby. The Wild Jesters never turn away a person or their kids fleeing from an abusive situation, and we have to keep her safe, so we accept the case.

The first thing I do with each case is assess the danger and take stock of their current situation. Most of the time, the abuse is an isolated incident, like a one-time deal and the person leaves so they don't need our help but in Janelle's case, it's every day and didn't stop with just her. The reports show the dickhead also hit his three kids. When kids are part of the abuse, it's even harder. Jack Pierce, Janelle's ex-husband, hates it when someone takes control from him, and he is not one who likes losing his possessions which means his wife and children.

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Doing the job right means going on the road and staying one step ahead of Jack. We travel up and down the Midwest while Jack changes his locations constantly keeping us on a wild goose chase. Coward. I know the danger isn't over, and with his network of friends, family, and business connections, the threats still exist. From the accounts of the nurses the night Janelle finally made the decision to leave, Jack is threatening hell on anyone keeping his family from him. Using my contacts, I found some information on who's pulling the strings—Jack's daddy is a powerful politician in Indiana. It's essential to know this to find/figure out the right tactics to use to protect Janelle and her children. It also gives us greater insight into the case, which is helpful regarding court proceedings.

Next, I set out to establish a spot in our safe house for Janelle and her children to stay. Money isn't an issue. The Wild Jesters own safe houses and cover all expenses for anyone while they stay with us. We do a lot of fundraisers throughout the year to help us, plus our businesses, such as the strip clubs and dispensaries we own, pay for all of this.

Even though Janelle is terrified, she has an exceptional quality—a fire within her—that makes her brave and determination to do what is required of her to provide safety and security for her children. I hear a tap on the door.

“Wolf, you in there?” I hear our VP call out.

“Yeah, Mouthpiece, come in.” I close the file, and as he opens the door, I motion for him to sit.

“What can I help you with, VP?”

He takes a seat, looking at me for answers.

“I need you to do something for me. We got a call from an old friend of ours, the district attorney, and I need you to investigate a case he has. This person knows Jack’s dad and knows some of the men who may be hiding Jack. Can you check it out and see if there is some connection between the cases?”

Mouthpiece is always looking for ways to improve the justice system.

“I got this. He’s off the grid for now, but I have a few moves left to get him to show himself. Until then, Janelle and her kids are safe,” I reply, and he taps his knuckles on my desk in acknowledgment. I have to do something more than be a bounty hunter. I need to be the voice, the help, and sometimes the justice. I have to fight for what is right; this case is my next mission. I’m sure what I will find, but it’s exciting to put the puzzle pieces together.

Mouthpiece claps his hands, “That’s what I like to hear. Good job. Keep me posted on what’s new,” he says, standing up.

I nod. “Will do. Anything else?”

Mouthpiece takes one last look at me. “Nah, you got it handled. Carry on.”

He walks through the door whistling some tune which brings a smile to my face, and look over the case file from the district attorney. This is what I was born to do—catch the bad people and help people feel like they’re getting justice, no matter what the cost. I have to do some digging to find out who was really behind the reasons Janelle and her family are in danger because we know it’s just not Jack and his father and put an end to this once and for all. Because this is what Wolf does...she protects.

Chapter Two

Janella Pierce

I never thought this was where I would be or who I would be. I had dreams and goals in my life when I was younger. I was going to be the next Broadway star. Then, I met a man in college who said all the right things at a time I wanted to be dazzled. I didn't see the red flags until it was too late. I was too far gone by then. Now, I'm this bruised shell of a person, but I have three beautiful children I'm fighting to be better and stronger for. I pray I haven't caused them any long-term issues from seeing what their father did to me. I would do it all over again just for the three angels for whom I thank God daily—my boys Abel and Dillion, and the princess herself, Chloe.

After a beating, I never left the house. Jack would take the kids to his mother's house so they could still attend school. Jack loves playing the perfect role of the husband, the doting father, and dutiful son. His mom lives in our town most of the time so she can be there for the kids and turns a blind eye to what Jack does to me. I run the charities he chose for me and have always gone to business dinners for Jack. When he noticed the bruises were getting harder to cover, he made me stop going anywhere. The beatings were coming frequently enough that people noticed. One night it became too much for me and I guess my neighbor was concerned for me. The kids were home with me since his mom was out of town, and the next-door neighbor must've heard the commotion as she helps the paramedics and cops into the help after Jack left for the night. The cops took my children, and I headed to the hospital.

The nurse who helped me was sweet and very comforting. He told me about an organization that could help me escape Jack. They would protect me and the kids. I agreed and told him I needed to get out now because I was sure someone would call my husband. Now I'm sitting in this house feeling safe but scared of every sound and movement from outside. It's a weird thing to be safe and scared.

I'm standing in the kitchen, drinking a cup of tea, and staring out the window into the front yard. For the past two weeks, everything has been so quiet. I think back to the

day when a plan forms with the Wild Jesters.

A knock at the door makes me a little jumpy, but then I hear a voice on the other side, “Janelle, it’s Wolf from the Wild Jesters; you spoke to Mouthpiece about me.” Feeling more at ease with a name, I answer the door.

Wolf is nothing like what I imagined. She is this short woman with a booming presence and piercing blue eyes that seem to see into my soul. She is also wearing a Wild Jesters cut, which looks very intimidating. “Wolf, please come in.” I invite her into my home, knowing something big will happen. We go into the living room, and she sits and takes a deep breath.

“I just came from the court.” Then Wolf tells me, “Your ex-husband has been charged with threats and domestic abuse.”

“Oh, my God!” I exclaim in disbelief. I can’t believe it. “What do we do now?”

“Yes, his punishment was jail time, but because of his connections, you and your children are in grave danger until he is away for good. It’s a start, but there is more. He has skipped town and we can’t find him. The Wild Jesters and I will be here with you to provide protection and peace of mind until the danger has passed,” Wolf finishes. I sit here in silence, tears streaming down my face. The emotions and bewilderment overwhelm me as I feel my heart beating fast and fear of Jack or someone he knows coming after us sends shivers down my spine. I finally feel like someone cares about my safety and well-being and is here to look after us. I thank God for sending one of his angels.

I look at Wolf and say, “Thank you, Wolf, for your help. I feel so much safer knowing you’re here with us.”

Wolf takes my hand, looks me in the eyes, and says, “We won’t let anyone hurt you

and will keep you and your children safe.” I suspect things are about to get a lot harder, but I know from now on I have allies I can count on.

All the questions she asks about my situation is getting frustrating because I sound like a broken record, but I watch as she takes in what I’m not telling her, the bruises on my face, arms, and his fingerprints on my neck. The fingerprints on the boys’ arms where Jack grabs are fading and Chloe’s lump on her head is finally going down. Her fierce eyes and bold demeanor are intriguing, but it’s her compassion that makes me trust her. Wolf’s determination to keep me and my kids safe and protect us from my ex-husband makes me feel safer.

We develop a plan after talking for what seems like hours. She gives me some options, but I’m too scared to think of one. Wolf offers to handle the details herself, giving me tremendous relief. I have faith she will keep us safe.

Wolf finds us a safe place to stay, and she even considers a few extras for the kids, for which I’m so grateful. I can’t thank her enough, but she reassures me she’s just doing her job.

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Brought out of my thoughts, I hear Chloe calling for me.

“Momma, where are you?” she asks sweetly.

I cannot help but chuckle. “Where am I? I’m in the kitchen deciding what to make for lunch.”

“Can we have grilled cheese and soup?”

“I think I can do that.” I poke her belly, making her giggle. I’m happy she can still smile through it all. “How about you get your brothers and let them know lunch will be ready soon?” Chloe smiles brightly and goes off to get the boys. I can’t help but feel so grateful to have this safe place for me and my children. I’m determined to keep us all safe, and I know that Wolf and the Wild Jesters will lead us in the right direction.

As I prepare lunch, I hear Chloe run in and let me know her brothers are coming soon. Then I listen to Chloe talk about her day. There is a new movie she wants to see about mermaids. I know I’m one of the luckiest moms in the world. Even after all the trials and tribulations I’ve been through, I am still here with my children, safe and sound, and that’s all that matters.

Chapter Three

Wolf

I park my bike, get off, and walk to my favorite spot, a grassy area which gives me an

open view of everything around me. After a bad PTSD episode and I take off on my bike to clear my head, this area is my calming place. It's just a small picnic area a few miles off the interstate. There's a set of bathrooms, picnic tables and an amazing view. I stare off into the horizon. The sky is a brilliant orange, the sun just beginning to set over Reelfoot Lake State Park. I stop here after riding for hours, especially since my body screams for a break. The Wild Jesters MC is and will always be my home, and I'm damn proud to be a member, but lately, I'm feeling something; a strange, new emotion that I can't quite identify, almost a yearning for something more, something of my own.

This latest case is constantly lingering on my mind. I'm one to hyper-focus on the cases I'm a part of, the joys of ADHD. This woman is almost like an obsession. What is this feeling that keeps me awake all night and earlier than usual?

I turn and walk toward my bike and sit on it, allowing my mind to drift to the memories of my past. When I enlisted in the Army right out of high school, eager to make something of my life, the motivation at nearly every task they gave until the medical discharge gives me a purpose and I lost that for a while. The bombing and fire are more than just some skin on my back, I lost myself as well. But finding myself on the bounty hunter path I truly feel whole. It's a strange kind of freedom tracking suspects who escape from their responsibilities, knowing that I am making a difference in some small way again. But this new case feels different. The woman I am supposed to be protecting has held my attention unlike any other.

She is strong, determined, and beautiful—all qualities I find intoxicating. I found myself fighting an internal battle between wanting to protect this woman and ultimately crumbling to her charm. Shaking my head free from my thoughts, I rev my bike and head back to the clubhouse to work on Janelle Pierce and her three children's case. The overwhelming need to protect them all was becoming stronger by the minute. I know whatever lies ahead, I can't let them down. The memories of my fallen brothers come to mind in my dreams, and the guilt of not being able to protect

them only fuels my need to give my all in every case, especially when children are involved. The drive these emotions provide gives me the strength and pride to wear the Wild Jester's patch.

Nothing will stop me now. Come hell or high water, I will make sure they are safe. "Come on, Wolf, you've got this," I whisper to no one but myself. I pray the fear I felt will subside and determination will replace it.

Chapter Four

Janelle

The night falls quiet around the small, secure house the Wild Jesters arranged for us—the quiet that's almost too still, where you can hear the faintest sounds from miles away. I stand at the window, peering through the blinds, every shadow making my heartbeat faster. I know it's ridiculous, but fear has a funny way of sticking around after what you've been through. You're always waiting for the other proverbial shoe to drop.

Wolf says she's having some club brothers station outside for extra security. Even if her presence is commanding and having her reassurance is a comforting reminder that we aren't alone in this fight. I watch their dark figures patrol slowly around the yard, their heads turning at every little noise. Their dedication is something fierce, almost like predators keeping an eye out for their prey.

Wolf in house earlier today, making sure everything is good for us. The way she's looking into my eyes never breaking contact sends a shiver down my spine. It isn't a fear-induced shiver, but one of these rare moments where someone truly sees past your outer appearance and connects with the inner you.

"Momma?" Dillion's voice cuts through my thoughts. I turn to see him standing in

the kitchen doorway, his face scrunches in confusion. "Why are you just standing there?"

I force a smile. "Just making sure everything's all right outside."

He nods, but his brows furrow with worry. "Can I stay up with you for a while?" he asks, his voice small.

"Of course, sweetheart," I say, pulling up a chair beside mine. He climbs up and sits beside me, eyes scanning the darkness outside.

We sit in silence for a few moments before he speaks again. "Is Wolf going to keep us safe forever?" he whispers, the weight of his question heavier than he probably realizes.

I squeeze his hand, reassurance filling my words even if my heart still harbors fears. "Yes, Dillion. Wolf and her friends are very good at what they do. They won't let anything happen to us." I hope I believe it as much as he did.

He seems to take comfort by that and leans his head against my shoulder. "I like her," he admits shyly. "She's like a superhero."

I chuckle softly, ruffling his hair. "She kind of is, isn't she?"

"Yeah," he mumbles, drifting closer to sleep.

Just then, my phone buzzes on the table. I glance at the screen—it was a message from Wolf.

WOLF: Everything's secure outside and there are no signs of trouble. Please try to get some rest tonight.

Reading her words make me feel a little more at ease.

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JANELLE: Thank you, Wolf. We feel safer knowing you're here.

Dillion fell asleep by then, his breath rhythmic and calm against the backdrop of the silent night. I gently pick him up and carry him to his room, tucking him in beside his brother, who is already lost in dreams of whatever fantasy land he's been reading about today.

Returning to the living room, I consider turning on the TV for some mindless distraction but opt against it. The stillness is unsettling, yet I know it is just my nerves trying to find a reason to stay alert. Instead, I sit by the window and let my mind wander back to earlier conversations with Wolf.

Her presence is so magnetic, almost overwhelming at times. Something about her makes you want to trust her immediately—even more so because she carries herself with such an air of confidence tempered with gentle understanding. Whenever she speaks, her voice has a reassuring quality that seems to ease the tightness that often grips my chest these days. Yet, there's also something guarded about her, a depth I can't quite reach but desperately want to. It feels like she's holding back, maybe protecting herself—or perhaps me—from something.

As I sit there, lost in thought, a faint noise outside catches my attention. My heart leaps into my throat as I peer through the blinds again. It's probably one of the Wild Jesters on watch, but after everything, any little sound felt like a potential threat.

“Everything okay?” The deep voice startles me, and I turn to see one of the MC members, Tank, peeking through the doorway.

I nod, trying to calm my racing heart. "Yes, just being overly cautious," I reply, managing a weak smile.

Tank nods and steps inside for a moment. "Wolf told us to check on you every hour or so. She wants to make sure you and the kids are feeling safe."

I appreciate that, and a part of me feels relieved not to be alone despite the house's quietness. "Thank you, Tank. Tell Wolf we're all very grateful."

He smiles a rough, weathered smile that speaks of many battles. "Will do. Try to get some rest; we're here all night."

My gaze returns to the quiet street outside as he disappears into the shadows.

Although dark and empty, knowing that Wolf and her club are out there make the shadows less menacing.

I lean back against the chair, pulling the blanket closer around my shoulders. The fabric is soft but did little to ward off the chill that seems to seep into the house's bones tonight. It could be the echo of my worries or the coolness of an October night closing in.

My phone buzzes again, pulling me out of my reverie. It's another text from Wolf.

WOLF: Just checking in. The doors and windows are all secure. How are you holding up inside?

I stare at the screen for a moment before typing back.

ME: Better knowing you're out there. It's quiet inside...too quiet sometimes.

Sending that message feel like admitting a weakness, but it doesn't feel like a risk with Wolf. There's a comfort in her straightforwardness, her blunt assurance that she's there, watching over us.

WOLF: Quiet is good. Quiet means safe. But I get it—it can be unsettling.

Her reply is quick and to the point. It's funny how she can project such strength in the short exchanges and calm me down simultaneously.

ME: Thanks, Wolf. Maybe quiet isn't so bad after all.

I sit the phone beside me, letting out a long breath. Dillion's earlier question echoes: would Wolf keep us safe forever? In the back of my thoughts, a part of me wishes that could be true, not just for the safety she brings but for the peace that comes with her presence.

Before long, my eyelids begin to droop, the mental exhaustion of the day pulling me toward sleep. Knowing watchful eyes guard the night, I feel like I could rest for once. The reality of our situation hasn't changed, but the feeling—a fleeting sense of normalcy—lulls me deeper into relaxation than I haven't managed in weeks. It's a welcomed feeling.

Chapter Five

Wolf

The night is as silent as a whispered secret, and under the moonlight, I can see the dim outlines of the bikes parked outside Janelle's house. I circle the perimeter every few minutes, ensuring there are no signs of unwanted visitors. The cool night air is a slight relief against the tension building up since we got the call about Janelle's ex getting bolder with his threats.

As I patrol, my thoughts drifted back to Janelle and her kids. They remind me so much of what I fight so hard to protect during my time in the Army—innocence and peace. The way Dillion looks up at me with those big eyes full of trust... stirs something deep inside me. Something protective, almost primal.

I check my phone for updates from Tank or the other guys, but everything is quiet. It was too quiet for my liking—it always makes me more alert.

"Everything all right, Wolf?" Hatchet, one of my right-hand guys, approaches me, his silhouette barely visible in the dim light.

"Yeah, all's quiet," I reply, keeping my eyes on the shadows that dance along the street. "Just making sure it stays that way."

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Hatchet nods, understanding the unspoken weight of responsibility that hangs between us. "You've got an extra eye on this one, huh?"

I can't help but smile a little at his remark. "Something like that," I admit, thinking of Janelle and her kids tucked away inside. The thought of anyone causing them more harm ignited my protective fury.

"We'll keep it locked down tight. No worries there," Hatchet reassures me, clapping a firm hand on my shoulder before returning to his post.

I continue my rounds, each step a silent promise to keep them safe. The night air is chilly, and I pull my jacket tighter around me. It isn't just the physical cold that nipped at my skin—the coldness of the threat lurking in the shadows, unseen but deeply felt. Every creak and rustle of leaves has me on high alert, ready to spring into action if needed.

I paused near the corner of the house, scanning the street again. Nothing moves except for a stray cat that darts across the beam of a streetlight. I take a deep breath, trying to ease the constant tension in my shoulders. This is personal, not just another job or a favor for a friend. Janelle and those kids deserve peace, and I give anything to ensure they get it.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I get another message from Janelle.

JANELLE: Just heard something outside. Probably nothing, but it got me spooked.

Instantly, my senses heighten, and I respond immediately.

ME: On it. Don't worry, stay inside.

I motion to Hatchet, who is nearby, whispering enough for only him to hear. "Check the back, will you? I'll take the front."

Hatchet nods once and moved swiftly toward the back of the house, his steps silent but urgent. I pull my jacket closer and quicken my pace as I make a beeline for the front porch, my eyes scanning every shadow and every potential hiding spot. The occasional streetlight flicker does little to pierce the thick blanket of darkness that has settled over the neighborhood.

As I approach the front door, I keep my hand near my sidearm, ready for whatever might come. The quiet is oppressive, punctuated only by the distant sound of a dog barking. I pause when I reach the porch, listening for any signs of disturbance.

Everything seems normal, and there are no signs of forced entry or unusual activity around the front. My phone buzzes as I'm about to join Hatchet at the back.

JANELLE: Sorry, false alarm. Chloe just knocked over her water bottle. I didn't mean to scare you.

Relief washes over me, but I remain vigilant, my instincts still on high alert from the false alarm. I tap out a quick response to reassure her.

ME: No worries. Better safe than sorry. I'm just glad it's nothing serious.

After sending the message, I take a deep breath and slowly adjust the grip on my sidearm. It's part of the job, responding to every noise, every shadow — because there's no room for error regarding safety, especially Janelle's and her kids.

I continue my rounds, making an extra pass around the house before meeting with

Hatchet at the rear. He reports nothing unusual, just a quiet night with the occasional rustling leaves and distant city sounds.

“We’re good here, Wolf,” Hatchet confirms, his voice low and steady.

I feel a momentary ease in the tension that knots my muscles tight all night. "Thanks, man. Keep your eyes peeled, though, will you? It's these quiet nights that can turn sideways fast."

Hatchet gave a short, affirmative salute making me snicker, and we both stand still momentarily, listening to the subtle nocturnal happenings around us. The peaceful suburban noises contrast sharply with the racing thoughts about potential dangers. This duality—calm yet cautious—define our nights lately.

As Hatchet returns to his post, I pull out my phone again, scrolling through recent calls to ensure we haven't missed any updates from the local PD or our contacts. Everything is as it should be, yet the uneasy feeling lurking in my chest doesn't subside.

I text Janelle once more before continuing my rounds.

ME: All clear out here. Try to get some rest. We're on watch.

Janelle's response comes almost immediately, a small comfort in the quiet night.

JANELLE: Thanks, Wolf. Will try. I appreciate all this.

Her gratitude, always sincere, fuels me. It reminds me why I did what I did—not just for the adrenaline or the camaraderie of the MC, but for people like Janelle and her kids, who deserve to sleep without fear.

As I resumed my patrol, the night continued its silent vigil. The moon is a sliver in the sky, casting faint shadows on the ground that play tricks on my eyes. Every rustling leaf or snapping twig has me tightening my grip on my sidearm, ready to confront any threat that dare to disrupt the peace we are guarding so fiercely.

Halfway through my lap around the house, my phone vibrates again. This time, it was Tank with an update from one of our informants about Janelle's ex, who is still in town and bragging about some big move he's planning. The pit of my stomach clenched with the news. I can't let my guard down, not even for a second.

ME: Keep tabs on him. Any change in his routine?

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TANK: Will do. He's been talking big, but nothing solid yet. Stay sharp.

I pocket my phone, a growl rumbling deep within me. The thought of Janelle's ex causing more terror is more than enough to fuel my resolve. No way am I going to let anything happen to Janelle or those kids on my watch.

Turning a corner, I pause, listening to the subtle sounds of the night — a distant car horn, a dog barking far off. It's the calm before the storm, and every fiber of my being was ready for whatever is coming.

"Everything okay?" Hatchet's voice breaks through the quiet as he approaches from his position at the back of the house.

"Just got an update from Tank," I murmur, keeping my voice low. "Her ex is still making noises about some nonsense. We need to stay alert."

Hatchet's face setting into a grim line that mirrors my thoughts. "Understood. We'll tighten up the perimeter even more. Can't be too careful with that scumbag lurking around."

I take a moment to scan the area again, feeling Hatchet's steadfast presence beside me as an unspoken reassurance. "I appreciate it," I say, clapping him on the shoulder before walking the perimeter again.

Chapter Six

Wolf

The rest of the night passes in a tense vigil. Every slight noise seems to amplify in the darkness, but nothing unusual occurs afterward. As dawn begins to break, painting the sky with streaks of pink and orange, I finally allow myself a moment to relax against the cool metal of my bike.

Janelle texts me early in the morning, and her message is a balm to the night's stress.

JANELLE: Morning Wolf. The kids are up, and everything seems quiet. Thanks again for keeping us safe.

ME Morning, Janelle. Glad to hear all is calm. We'll be around if you need anything.

I pocket my phone and glance at Hatchet, who is just packing his gear. The night is exhausting, and the constant tension wears you down even though it ends without incident.

"Coffee?" I suggest, already knowing the answer. I think Hatchet nod, too tired to muster more than a grunt. We mount our bikes and head toward the local diner that serves as an unofficial checkpoint for the Wild Jester's MC whenever we are on this side of town.

The sun is up when we pull into the diner's parking lot, casting long shadows on the pavement. The warm glow of the morning sun does little to ease the chill from the night's vigil though.

Inside, we settle into a booth by the window. The waitress, a middle-aged woman with no-nonsense air about her immediately comes over with a pot of coffee. "Morning, Wolf, Hatchet," she greets us with a nod. "The usual?"

"Yeah, thanks, Deb," I reply, smiling at her familiarly.

She pours the dark brew into our mugs and leaves without further conversation. Silence settles between Hatchet and me as we sip the hot coffee, letting the caffeine slowly chase away the remnants of fatigue.

After a few moments, Hatchet clears his throat. "We should probably update Battle Axe about the ex's mouthing off," he says, referring to our MC president.

I nod in agreement. "I'll handle it. He must know it might be more than idle threats this time."

The rest of breakfast passes in comfortable silence, with only the occasional clatter of dishes and murmurs from other early risers filling the space. I recheck my phone for any new updates or messages as we finish. None have come through, which was both a relief and a nerve-racking silence. Standing up, I stretch, feeling the wear of the night's vigil easing somewhat.

"Let's bounce," Hatchet says, tossing back the last of his coffee and sliding out of the booth. We toss a few bills on the table for Deb and head out, the bell over the door jangling loudly in the quiet morning air.

As we walk to our bikes, I can't help but keep an eye on my surroundings, always alert for any sign of trouble. The sun is higher now, casting golden rays on the chrome of our bikes, making them glint menacingly.

We mount up, engines roaring to life beneath us. As we pull out of the parking lot, I can't shake off the feeling Janelle's ex is planning something big. My gut is rarely wrong.

As we ride back toward Janelle's place, I decide to swing by her house again before I head home. I just want to reassure myself the perimeter is still secure and there are no signs of her ex lurking around.

As we near her house, I notice the usual quiet of the neighborhood was intact. Children playing in their yards, and neighbors went about their morning routines, none the wiser to the undercurrent of tension that had kept me awake all night. I pull up to the curb across from Janelle's place, my eyes scanning for anything out of place.

Everything seems normal, but my instincts tell me not to let down my guard. I cut the engine and sit there for a moment, watching. That's when I saw a flicker of movement from the side of the house that didn't match the rhythm of innocent play or mundane chores.

I nudge Hatchet and nod toward the spot. Without a word, we both dismount quietly, our boots hitting the pavement softly as we move closer to investigate. As we round the corner, I can hear my heart pounding in my ears.

There is a man crouching near one of the windows, and he isn't anyone from the club. Hatchet moves faster than I've seen in a while, his large frame surprisingly swift as he closes the distance between him and the stranger. The man by the window freezes, his eyes widening as Hatchet's shadow falls over him.

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"Stand up, slowly!" Hatchet commands, his voice low and menacing. The stranger complies, hands raised slightly to show he isn't holding a weapon. I keep my hand on my sidearm, not taking any chances.

"Who are you, and what're you doing here?" I ask, stepping forward to stand beside Hatchet. The morning light was harsh on the man's face, revealing a scruffy beard and nervous eyes that dart between us.

"I—uh, I'm just... looking for my dog. He ran off," the man stammers, his voice unconvincing.

"Bullshit," Hatchet growls. "We've been watching this place all night. No dogs running around here except you."

The man's face flushes a deeper shade of panic. He licks his lips, glancing around for an escape route. "Look, I didn't mean any harm. I just—"

"Save it," I cut in sharply. "Who sent you?"

His jaw tightens, and for a brief second, defiance flashed in his eyes, but he quickly looks down, avoiding my gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about," he mutters.

"Wrong answer," Hatchet says, stepping closer until he is almost nose-to-nose with the guy. "You're trespassing, and if you don't start talking, I can make sure the cops here take their sweet time deciding what to do with you."

The man swallows hard, looking between Hatchet and me. "Okay, okay," he finally

blurts out. "It was Jack. He paid me a few bucks to check and see if she is alone."

I clench my fists, anger boiling up inside of me. Janelle doesn't deserve this—she has been through enough already. "And what were you supposed to do after checking?" I press, voice low and dangerous.

"Just to report back," he stutters, his eyes pleading for understanding. "I swear that's all."

Hatchet and I exchange a glance. I watch the man closely, my mind races through the various scenarios this could escalate into. But he seems to deflate under Hatchet's stern gaze, his shoulders slump as the realization of his situation began to sink in.

"Look," I say, my voice deliberate and calm, "you're going to tell us everything you know. Names, places, what he's planning next. The more you give us, the better it'll be for you when the cops show up."

The man nods quickly, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously. "All right, all right," he agrees, a bead of sweat trailing down his temple. "I can give you names. Just—please don't hurt me."

Hatchet snorts disdainfully but steps back, allowing me some space to handle it. I dial the local police, keeping my eyes on our uninvited guest. "We've got a situation here," I inform the dispatcher succinctly. "Need a unit sent over."

As we wait for the police to arrive, the man spills everything. Janelle's ex hired him through some shady online forum, promising him cash in exchange for information about her daily routines. His specific instructions are when to check the house and what details to look for.

"He didn't tell me everything," the man confesses, his voice shaky. "But he's

desperate to get her back—or at least make her life miserable."

The sound of sirens approach, cutting through the tension like a knife. Hatchet and I exchange a look of grim satisfaction. At least we have something to work with now.

As the police cruiser pulls up, I see Eagle and his partner in the car. They exit the car and approach us, "Good morning, Officer Hastings and Officer Ford." I won't call Eagle by his road name at work, even though he says it's a nonissue for him.

"Morning, Wolf. What's the situation here?" Officer Hastings asks, clipboard in hand, and his expression all business.

"We caught this guy snooping around Janelle's house," I explain, gesturing toward the nervous man who seems even more unnerved by the presence of the cops. "Claims he was just looking for his dog, but we got him to confess her ex sent him."

Officer Ford, a tall woman with a keen eye, kneels to his level, her voice stern yet controlled. "You understand you're in a lot of trouble here, right? We need full cooperation."

The man nods vigorously. "I told them everything I know," he repeats his story, pointing at Hatchet and me. "I swear."

"Good. That'll help your case," Ford replies before standing and turning to Officer Hastings. "We need to take him in for questioning, get all the details down officially."

Hastings motions for the man to stand and head toward the cruiser. "Let's go. You can tell us more at the station."

I watch as they handcuff him and lead him away, a part of me is relieved that we intercepted something potentially dangerous. Another part of me is furious that

Janelle's peace is once again disturbed by her relentless ex. I can feel Hatchet's gaze on me, his brow furrowed in concern.

"You okay, Wolf?" he asks once the police have driven off with their suspect.

I shake my head, trying to dispel the anger bubbling inside me. "Not really. This is far from over, isn't it?"

Hatchet claps a hand on my shoulder, squeezing firmly. "We'll handle it, just like we always do. We're not letting anything happen to Janelle or her kids."

I nod, grateful for his unwavering support. "Thanks, man. Let's head back to the clubhouse and plan our next move. We need to tighten security around Janelle's place and maybe keep a closer watch ourselves."

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As we ride back, the roar of our bikes slicing through the cool morning air, my mind races with all the possibilities. What if Janelle's ex tries something more drastic? The thought leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

After returning to the clubhouse, I text Battle Axe and request an urgent club meeting today if possible. I need to discuss the latest developments in Janelle's case and the new information that has surfaced.

The rest of the morning passes in a blur, and before I know it, the guys are all coming in and heading into Church. Battle Axe is at the head of the table as they sit around it, his large hands splayed out on the worn wood, commanding attention without saying a word.

"All right," Battle Axe starts, his voice firm, drawing everyone's attention. "Wolf's got something. Let's hear it."

I nod and stand up. "Thanks, Battle. We caught a guy this morning at Janelle's house. He snooped around, and Janelle's ex hired him to gather intel on her routines. He's with the police now, but this means her ex is escalating things."

The room falls silent, every member of The Wild Jester's MC turning their full attention toward me. You can feel the tension prickling like electricity in the air.

"Her ex is pushing boundaries, trying to claw his way back into her life by any means necessary," I continue, pacing a small circle in front of the table. "We need to step up. I'm talking about surveillance rotations, increase the presence around her house — anything and everything we can do to ensure Janelle and her kids feel safe."

Rumble, one of our newest members, leaning against the back wall, crosses his arms and nod. "You think he's gonna try something more physical next time?" he asks, his voice rough like gravel.

"It's a possibility we can't ignore," I reply seriously. "The guy today was just there to get information for the ex-husband. Who knows what he'll resort to if we spook him enough?"

There are murmurs of agreement around the table; the club is no stranger to dealing with threats, but this is personal. Janelle isn't just another case; she has become something more to me.

Needles, who hasn't said much, finally speaks up from his corner. "Let's install some extra cams around her place, and maybe a couple of us can do random drive-bys throughout the day and night."

"I like that," I agree, nodding toward Needles. "Visibility might deter her ex or any of his cronies from coming around."

"Plus, we keep close tabs on any vehicles that don't belong in the area," Hatchet adds. "Note license plates, make models—anything out of the ordinary."

I could see Battle Axe processing everything, his brain ticking behind those observant eyes. "Wolf set it up. Coordinate with Hatchet on the logistics. I want updates every morning unless something urgent comes up."

"Will do, Pres," I respond firmly, feeling a weight settle on my shoulders and fierce protective determination coursing through my veins. "We won't let Janelle and her kids down."

The meeting ends with a series of nods and gruff agreements, the club members

dispersing with a renewed sense of purpose. I hang back momentarily, thoughts swirling around Janelle's safety and the grim possibilities that her ex might concoct next.

As I'm about to leave, Battle Axe caught my arm. "Wolf," he says in a low tone, "you're doing good. Keep your head sharp and your heart guarded."

I nod, unsure where his advice came from, but my heart doesn't entirely agree. The truth is guarding my heart around Janelle is becoming increasingly difficult. Something about her resilience, the way she smiles even after everything she's been through, has me feeling in ways that I haven't expected. But feelings have to take a back seat. I know that. Getting too close can interfere with my judgment, and right now, Janelle needs protection, not complications.

I leave the clubhouse with those lingering words echoing in my mind, but the next step is to check in with Janelle. It isn't just about updating her on the security situation; I also need to ensure she's holding up all right.

I pull up to her place, cutting the engine and striding to the front door. The sound of laughter from her kids playing filter through the door as I knock. Janelle answers, her smile faltering slightly when she sees it's me, not because she isn't happy to see me but because my presence often means trouble.

"Hey, Wolf," she greets, stepping aside to let me in. "Everything okay?"

I follow her into the kitchen, where she pours two cups of coffee. The rich aroma fills the small space, mingling with the scent of something sweet baking in the oven. "We've got a bit of a situation," I start, accepting the mug she offers me.

Her brows knit together with concern. "What happened?"

I explain everything, from the snooper we caught this morning to our increasing our surveillance and protection plans. I watch her absorb the information, her fingers tightening around the mug. "We're taking every precaution," I assure her. "You and the kids are our top priority."

Janelle nods, a slight tremor in her voice as she spoke. "Thank you, Wolf. Knowing you're all looking out for us."

The room hums tensely as she sips her coffee, looking into the living room where her kids were playing. The sight seems to steel her resolve.

"I just want this to be over," she confesses, glancing back at me with weary eyes. "I want to stop looking over my shoulder. I mean, hell, I want to stop being in hiding."

I place my cup down on the counter next to me as I mirror her posture. "We're working on it, Janelle. We'll do whatever it takes to make that happen."

Her gaze holds mine, searching for reassurance in my eyes, a reassurance I'm determined to provide through words and action. "I know," she says softly, breaking eye contact to look back into the living room. "It's just hard sometimes. But having you here helps... more than you might realize."

There's a hint of something more profound in her words. It's hard to tell, and I ignore the warmth that spreads through me in response.

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"I'll be around, Janelle. Anytime you need me," I tell her, my voice low and earnest. "You're not in this alone."

She nods, her expression softening. "I believe you," she replies, and there's a weight to her words that suggests they are more than just a polite response.

As I push off the counter to leave, Janelle walks me to the door. Her hand brushes against mine briefly as she hands me my helmet. The touch is electric and fleeting but charges with an unspoken connection.

"Stay safe out there," she smiles, concern lacing her tone.

"I will. You do the same," I reply, securing my helmet. I pause, looking back at her from the doorstep. "And remember, call me, day or night, if anything feels off. There will also be guys doing rotation day and night, so try not to worry."

Her nod is firm, a small smile touching her lips. "I will, Wolf. Thank you."

With that, I climb onto my bike, the engine roaring beneath me. As I pull away from Janelle's house, I can't shake the feeling that everything will change. Not just for Janelle and her kids but for me, too.

Chapter Seven

Janelle

It's late when I finally manage to get the kids to bed. Abel, always the protector,

asking me a dozen questions about the security around the house. Dillion, who is less concerned with the details, simply wanted to know if Wolf would be stopping by often. Chloe, too young to understand the full gravity of the situation, has been content with a simple assurance that "Wolf is watching over us."

Alone in the quiet of my kitchen, I replay my earlier conversation with Wolf. Her presence brings a mix sense of relief and anxiety. Relief because I know her capabilities and trust her implicitly, anxiety from the looming threat that make such protection necessary. And then there is something else, a fluttering in my chest whenever she looks at me a certain way. A feeling that's so foreign to me but welcomed.

I pour myself a glass of wine and sit at the kitchen table, my mind wandering back to when I first met Wolf. She has come into my life during a time of turmoil, wearing her strength-like armor but carrying a gentleness in her eyes that contradicts her tough exterior. This complexity draws me to her, the silent understanding that she has faced her share of battles. The phone on the counter buzzes, snapping me out of my reverie. It's a text.

WOLF: Everything is quiet outside. Settle in and try to get some rest. I'll be around if you need anything.

I smile, my fingers hovering over the keyboard as I type out a quick response.

ME: Thank you, Wolf. Goodnight, and stay safe.

I place the phone down and stare out the window into the neighborhood's darkness. It's a clear night, the crescent moon in the pitch-black sky. It's the kind of night that's perfect for sitting on the porch and listening to the quiet of the world settling down if circumstances were different.

Instead, I wish that Wolf could be here, not just as a guardian but as someone to share the silence with. The warmth in her words through that simple text message feels like a small beacon in the dark, comforting yet highlighting how much I want her close.

The wine swirls in my glass as I take another sip, letting the rich flavor settle my nerves. I glanced at the clock; it was getting late, but sleep felt distant. My mind is too wired, filled with what-ifs and plans for keeping my family safe.

A soft noise from upstairs catches my attention, and I stand up quickly, heart pounding with a mix of fear and readiness. But then I hear a small giggle; Chloe probably snuck out of bed again, looking for one last adventure before sleep claims her. I shake my head with a soft chuckle and make my way upstairs.

As I tiptoe into Chloe's room, I find her sitting in bed, clutching her teddy bear and grinning sheepishly. "Mommy can't sleep," she whispers, her small voice filled with mischief and innocence.

I smile, moving to sit beside her on the bed. "It's late, sweetie. You need your rest," I whisper back, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear as she leans into my body.

Standing, I help her in bed, and as I get her tucked in, smoothing back her hair, Chloe looks up at me with sleepy eyes. "Will Wolf keep the bad dreams away, too?" she whispers.

I smiled, brushing a kiss on her forehead. "Yes, baby, Wolf will also keep the bad dreams away."

Back downstairs, I settle on the couch with my wine, thinking about how much my life has changed. From thinking my soon-to-be ex-husband is one thing and turns out he is something else to meeting the Wild Jesters, especially Wolf. Pausing for a moment, not only have my physical surroundings changed, but my emotions are also

in turmoil. Am I developing feelings for Wolf? It's a question that keep nudging me, persistent and unnerving. She's strong and protective, yes, but also surprisingly gentle, the exact opposite of everything I've known before.

The house is quiet now, with only the occasional creaks and whispers of a settling building. I wrap a blanket around myself, feeling oddly exposed despite being alone. It's funny how the mind plays tricks on you at night; every shadow seems to hold a threat.

I must have dozed off because the next thing I know, there's a gentle knocking on the front door. Startled, I glance at the clock; it's past midnight. Heart racing, I grab the baseball bat I keep by the couch and creep toward the door. I pray quickly before peeking through the peephole, my breath caught in relief. It was Wolf, standing there with a small but reassuring smile.

I open the door, trying to appear composed despite the adrenaline coursing. "Wolf, is everything okay?"

She shrugs, eyes scanning the quiet street behind her before returning to meet mine. "Couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Wanted to make sure everything was okay here."

I let out a nervous laugh, feeling both grateful and slightly embarrassed by my anxiety. "I must look like a mess."

Wolf steps inside, her presence filling the small entryway. "You look just fine, Janelle. Better safe than sorry, right?"

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As I nod, our eyes lock for a moment longer than necessary, and the air between us charged with an unspoken understanding. She's here because she cares, not just out of duty.

"Thank you," I say quietly, my voice thick with emotion.

She dips her head and glances around. "Everyone asleep?"

"Yes," I confirm, leading her into the kitchen, where I offer her a cup of coffee, which she accepts gratefully.

As we sit at the kitchen table, the earlier tension begins to ebb away, replaced by a comfortable silence that speaks volumes of our developing friendship.

Wolf sips her coffee, then sets the cup down with a gentle clink. "You know, Janelle, it's not just about the job for me," she begins, her voice low and earnest. "I care about what happens to you and your kids."

There's more that she wants to say or maybe that's just my thoughts projecting onto the situation. "I... I appreciate that, Wolf. It means a lot to us."

She smiles a little pink coloring her cheeks, but the seriousness in her eyes make the smile seem more poignant. "Good. That's good."

Outside, the wind picks up, shivering through the trees and against the house. It seems like nature itself is waiting for our conversation to unfold.

The silence stretches on for a moment before I gather my courage. "Wolf, can I ask you something personal?"

"Of course," she replies, her gaze steady.

"It's just... well, how do you manage it?" I ask, swirling the wine in my glass nervously. "The danger of your job, the uncertainty—how do you keep from getting overwhelmed?"

Wolf leans back in her chair, considering the question. "Honestly, it's not easy. I try to find something to anchor myself to that keeps me grounded when everything else is flying off the handle."

Her eyes drift to the window, watching the leaves flutter wildly in the wind. "For me, it's remembering why I joined the Wild Jesters in the first place. It's about more than just the adrenaline or the camaraderie; it's about making a difference, even if it's just one person at a time. They're not just a crew; they're family."

She turns back to me, her expression softening. "And recently, it's also been about coming here, knowing I might make things a little better for you and your kids."

My heart skips a beat at her words. It's clear now; the connection isn't just in my head. Wolf cares genuinely and sincerely. "That means everything to us," I manage to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

Wolf bobs her head, her gaze lingering on mine before she looks away, perhaps sensing the shift between us. "Anyway, that's how I cope. Finding meaning in the madness."

The room is silent again as we both contemplate her words. Finally, she stands, stretching slightly. "I should probably check around the house one last time before I head out," she speaks matter-of-factly.

I nod, grateful for her protective instincts yet feeling reluctant about her leaving. "Thank you, Wolf. Really."

She smiles and move toward the door, pulling on her jacket. I follow her, watching as she checks each lock with meticulous care.

Outside, the moon hangs low in the sky, casting long shadows across the yard. Wolf pauses at the edge of the porch, looking back toward me. "Keep your phone close, Janelle. Call me if anything, even just a strange noise."

I agree, feeling a mix of safety and sorrow as she climbs onto her motorcycle. The engine roars to life under her skilled hands, and for a moment, the night seemed to pulse with its beat.

As she pulls away, the sound fading into the distance, I feel an unexpected emptiness. It's silly. Wolf is just doing her job, but it has become more than that somewhere along the line.

Shivering slightly in the cool night air, I lock the door behind me and lean against it. The house felt different now—safer but also lonelier.

I can no longer deny it; my feelings for Wolf were complicated. Is it just gratitude? Admiration? Or something more profound I was afraid to name?

Returning to the living room, I catch my reflection in the hallway mirror. The look in my eyes startle me—there is a depth of emotion there that I haven't allowed myself to acknowledge until now. Shaking off a lingering chill, I grab another blanket from the closet and wrap it around myself, trying to warm up physically and emotionally.

Sitting back on the couch, I couldn't stop replaying our conversation. Wolf's words echo in my mind: "Finding meaning in the madness." She did that; I may need to start

doing that, too. I need to find my anchors and reasons to keep moving forward despite the chaos of my past and the uncertainty of my future.

Chapter Eight

Wolf

The following day feels different, as if something has shifted inside me. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but the heaviness that usually greets me with the dawn seems a bit lighter. I throw on my leather jacket, the one with the Wild Jesters' emblem stitched boldly on the back and head out to meet the guys for our morning ride.

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As I ride through the streets, the wind tears through my hair and against my face, pulling at me like it's trying to rip away the thoughts swirling in my mind. The ride's always my time to clear my head, but today, flashes of Janelle's face fill my mind, her soft voice asking me those deep questions last night.

I pull up at the usual spot, where I see the rest of the crew standing around. Tank leaning against his bike, a cigarette dangling from his lips. Blaze fiddling with his bike's engine, and Spike tossing a lighter back and forth between his hands.

"Morning, Wolf," Tank calls out as I park my bike. "You're looking more broody than usual. Everything all right?"

"Just thinking about some stuff," I reply, shrugging off their curious glances.

Blaze straightening up, wiping his greasy hands on a rag. "Problems on the home front?"

"Not exactly," I quickly assure him, though part of me wonders how much of this is becoming personal. "Just sorting through some thoughts about a case."

Spike tosses the lighter again before catching it and pocketing it. "You know you can talk to us, right? We're not just your brothers in arms; we're here for whatever you need."

I nod appreciatively at Spike's words. Sometimes, I forget how much these guys are willing to stand behind me, even when things get messy beyond the roads we ride on. "Thanks, man. It might come to that, but I'm handling it."

Tank takes a long drag from his cigarette, blowing the smoke out slowly. "If it has anything to do with that lady and her kids you've been helping, just know we've got your back, Wolf."

The solidarity is comforting, reassuring even. It reminds me why I choose this life every day and these people as my family. "Appreciate it. I might take up on that soon," I say, thankful for their unwavering support.

We kick off the morning ride, engines roaring as we descend the open road. The freedom of speeding down the highway with nothing but the rumble beneath us felt like a cleanse for my clutter thoughts. We take turns leading, weaving through the lesser-known roads that cut through the landscape.

The ride gives me the space to think. Janelle and her kids have snuck their way into a corner of my mind that I reserve for case files and mission objectives, and I can't shake the feeling that what I feel for them went beyond professional concern.

We pull up to the diner, and we all love the breakfast food they serve here. We go inside, and I slide into the booth across from Tank and Blaze, who are arguing about which breakfast special is the superior choice.

"Man, you can't beat the classic eggs and bacon," Tank insisted, pointing at the laminated menu with a greasy finger. "It's the breakfast of champions."

Blaze snorts, shaking his head. "Please, the pancake stack is where it's at. Carbs are a biker's best friend."

I chuckle at their banter, but my mind is elsewhere. The image of Janelle's tentative smile haunts me, her eyes holding fierce and fragile stories.

Spike slid in next to me, nudging my shoulder. "You're miles away, Wolf. Pancakes

or eggs?"

"Uh, pancakes, I guess," I mutter, my gaze drifting outside where the morning sun paints the world in hues of gold and amber.

"So," Spike say, lowering his voice as he leans closer. "You gonna tell us what's eating you up? Or do I have to guess and make it awkward for everyone?"

I sigh, stirring my coffee slowly. "It's Janelle and her kids. They've kind of gotten under my skin. It started as just another job, but now—"

"It's more than that," Spike finishes for me, nodding knowingly.

"Yeah." I glanced up to meet his understanding eyes. "She's been through a lot, and I want to help her more than just professionally. But I'm not sure how to handle this without crossing lines."

Spike nod again, his expression serious. "It's tricky when feelings get involved. But you've got a big heart, Wolf. Just make sure you keep your head in the game, too."

Tank interrupts with a snicker, slapping the table lightly. "Look at Spike, going all Dr. Phil on us!"

Blaze laughs along, but his eyes are kind as they met mine. "We're just saying, be careful, Wolf. We know you care about her. Just make sure it doesn't backfire on you. Plus, before you spill all your secrets on her, is she batting for the same team as the kids say?"

Tank spits his coffee all over the table. "Blaze, seriously, what the fuck!" he sputters, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, still chuckling. "But seriously, Wolf, you gotta be sure about where things stand before diving too deep."

"Point taken," I say, grabbing a napkin to help Tank clean up the mess he is making. The laughter around the diner helps lighten the mood, and I let myself enjoy the camaraderie momentarily.

Spike leans back in his seat, sipping his coffee thoughtfully. "All jokes aside, Wolf, we've seen you in action. You're good at what you do, helping people. Just remember, we're here if you need us. Whether it's a ride or someone to talk to."

I hide my face from all of the attention on me but I'm grateful for the reminder that I'm not alone in whatever was coming next. "Thanks, guys. It means a lot."

We spend the rest of breakfast tossing ideas back and forth, from ridiculous plans to genuinely helpful advice about handling sticky situations. When we stand to leave, I feel more determined than ever to carefully and respectfully figure things out with Janelle.

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Riding back home, I decide to swing by Janelle's place unannounced. Considering the delicacy of her situation with her ex, it's risky, but something inside me needs to see her—to make sure she's all right.

As I walk up to the door, it's abnormally quiet. "Weird, maybe it's nap time." I knock gently, but there is still no answer. Knocking a couple of more times and still nothing, my hands begin to sweat so I take out my key and open the door.

The house is eerily silent as I step inside, shutting the door quietly behind me and move deeper into the house, my senses are heightened. As a bounty hunter, I've been in tense situations before, but this was different. This was personal. My boots echoing on the hardwood floor. "Janelle?" I called out softly, not wanting to startle anyone who might be inside. There was no response, only the soft hum of the refrigerator from the kitchen.

The living room is tidy; toys are in their bins and throw blankets are folded neatly on the couch. It looks normal, but something feels off. I head to the kitchen next, noticing a warm coffee mug indicating Janelle hasn't been gone long. Or worse, that something unexpected had happened. I grip my gun as I take it out of the holster on my side.

"Janelle?" I try again as I pass through the kitchen and approach the hallway leading to the bedrooms. Still no answer. My heart starts racing as I reach Janelle's bedroom door and hear a low moan. I fear Janelle is in trouble because someone else is in the house.

As I open the door, I see Janelle on the bed, naked, and I hear one word that sends

chills down my spine, “Onyx.” My name is on her lips as she climaxes. I freeze, caught completely off guard. My mind scrambles to make sense of the scene before me. For a few seconds, everything seems surreal—the kind of shock that makes the world tilt on its axis. I put my gun away since there’s no need for it now.

Janelle notices me standing there, and her expression instantly shifts from surprise to mortification. She quickly grabs the sheet, pulling it up to cover herself. "Onyx! Oh God, I didn't hear you come in."

I blink, trying my best to regain composure, even as my heart thuds painfully in my chest. "I thought something was wrong," I manage to say, words stumbling out awkwardly.

She sits up straighter, wrapping the sheet more securely around her. "No, I'm sorry if I worried you. I was just taking some time for myself." Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, or was it guilt?

I nod slowly, still trying to process everything. "Right. Sorry for intruding."

"No, no," her voice shaky. "It's not your fault. I should have locked the door and maybe not assumed privacy in the middle of the day when the kids are napping."

There’s an awkward silence then—a chasm that seems too vast to cross easily.

"I'll just..." I gesture vaguely toward the door, unsure how to make a graceful exit from something as delicate as this. "I'll see myself out."

As I turn to leave, Janelle's voice stops me. "Onyx, wait. Please."

I pause, hand on the doorknob, not looking back as I attempt to steady my breathing.

"Yes?" The word is a half-whisper, betraying the turmoil inside me.

"I didn't mean for you to find me like this," she says, her voice thick with emotions.

"I... I think about you. A lot more than I probably should."

This confession makes my heart skips a beat. Slowly, I turn around to face Janelle, finding her eyes wide and sincere. "Janelle..."

She bites her lip, searching for words. "Please don't leave us because of what I did here. I never want you to feel uncomfortable here or around me."

Does she not know that I'm a lesbian? Is that why she is hesitant? "Janelle," I start, my voice steadier than I feel. "You need to know something about me. Something important." I take a deep breath, feeling the weight of what I'm about to disclose.

"I'm gay, Janelle. I've known since I was a teenager."

Her eyes widen slightly, not shock, but perhaps with a dawning understanding. "Oh," she exhales softly, her fingers nervously twisting the sheet around her. "I didn't know that, and not that would ever change anything if I did know beforehand."

"Yeah," I reply, my shoulders relaxing as the truth hangs between us. It feels freeing, yet it adds a new layer of complexity to our already complicated relationship.

"I'm sorry if this makes things weird now," she continues, her voice laced with worry. "I don't want to lose your friendship or help, Wolf. You've been a big part of why we're even surviving all this mess with my ex."

"Please, when it's just us, or the kids and us, call me Onyx. But outside, in any other situation, it's Wolf, okay?" I add, trying to keep the boundaries clear but friendly.

Janelle nods, the tension easing from her shoulders a bit. "Of course, Wolf... Onyx. I

can do that.” She offers a small, tentative smile. "And thank you for being honest with me."

Chapter Nine

Janelle

I close the door after Wolf leaves, and I have so many mixed thoughts in my head.

Closing my eyes as I stand at the closed door, thoughts and emotions swirl in my head like a relentless storm. It's strange, this feeling. I married young and thought I knew what love was, but with Onyx, it's different. There's a depth, an intensity that I haven't felt before. Something about her awakened something inside of me.

Did I simply admire her strength and the security she provided? Or was it something deeper, something more personal that I hadn't allowed myself to explore until now?

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I wander back to my bedroom and sit on the edge of the bed where I had been lost in my world moments ago, a world where fantasies didn't seem so impossible. My cheeks heat up as I remember Onyx walking in on me. God, how embarrassing! But then, her revelation added another layer to my already complicated feelings.

I sigh and look around at the quiet room. My kids are safe, the house is peaceful, and there's space to think. But all I can do is replay our conversation over and over. Did I handle it right? Could I have done something differently?

The word 'gay' hung between us like a delicate, unspoken, yet powerful challenge waiting to be accepted. Not that it bothers me—no, not at all, but I worry about the implications for Onyx and us. What does this mean going forward? Do her feelings mirror mine, or is she just being protective? Will this affect her position in the club she's with?

I stand up and pace around the room, trying to clear my head. This isn't just about me anymore. There's Abel, Dillion, and Chloe to consider. They adore Onyx—her visits are the highlights of their week. And now, knowing she's gay does it change anything? No, it shouldn't. She's still Onyx, who stood up for us when we felt alone and vulnerable.

But a voice inside me whispers of possibilities that excite and terrify me. It's scary to think about wanting more, to imagine a life intertwined with someone who has become my rock. My heart races as I feel about the idea of us together, and I quickly shake my head, trying to dispel these thoughts.

"Focus, Janelle," I mutter to myself. "You've got kids to think about, a life to rebuild.

You can't get distracted by whatever this is."

Yet, as I try to dismiss these feelings, a small, insistent part of me won't let go. The part that recalls Onyx's gentle concern every time we talk is how her presence makes me feel safe yet unsettled in an entirely new way.

As the evening draws in, my mind continues to churn with thoughts of Onyx—of Wolf. I should be making dinner, focusing on homework with the kids, and doing any of the few tasks requiring my attention. Instead, I find myself leaning against the kitchen counter, staring blankly at the pasta pot boiling over.

"Mom?" Abel's voice cuts through my fog. "You okay? You look like you're on another planet."

I snap back to reality, turning down the heat under the pot. "Yeah, sorry, sweetheart. Just got a lot on my mind."

He looks at me with those wise-beyond-his-years eyes. "Is it Onyx? Did something happen?"

My heart skips a beat. Even my twelve-year-old notices how much she means to us. "No, nothing bad," I assured him quickly, not wanting to worry him or his siblings. "Just grown-up stuff."

Dillion comes bounding into the kitchen, his energy contrasting sharply to the heavy atmosphere. "Can we have extra cheese on the pasta tonight?" he chirps, his innocent eyes full of hope.

I manage a smile, grateful for the distraction. "Extra cheese it is," I say, ruffling his hair. Moments like these, the simple ones filled with childlike requests, anchor me back to my reality.

Chloe, the youngest and always curious, tugs at my pants leg. "Is Onyx going to come play with us again?" she asks with that sweet lisp that always melts my heart.

I kneel to her level, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "I hope so, honey. She likes spending time with you guys a lot," I assure her, and the sparkle in her eyes tells me how much that means to her.

The rest of the evening passes in a whirlwind of family activities—homework, dinner, and bedtime stories. But through it all, my mind keeps racing back to Onyx. The feel of her presence lingers like a comforting and confusing shadow.

Later, when the kids finally sleep, I cannot follow suit. I go and lay in bed with my e-reader. I try to lose myself in a digital page-turner, but the words blur together, meaningless. My thoughts keep drifting back to Onyx—her strength, her vulnerability, the way her eyes seemed to search mine for understanding when she told me she was gay. Once straightforward, the layers of our relationship now feel intertwined with new, unspoken questions.

I think about Onyx's life with the Wild Jester's MC, her complicated background, and all she carries on her broad shoulders. It's no wonder she's so protective, so fiercely independent. And yet, beneath all that toughness, there's a tenderness she rarely shows, a vulnerability she's only hinted at with me.

My thoughts circle back to her revelation today, and I can't help but feel a mix of admiration and concern. How difficult it must be to navigate her world with such secrets. It makes me want to protect her and be someone she can rely on.

I am thinking about tomorrow and about seeing Onyx again. Will our interaction be awkward, or will we slip back into our easy camaraderie? I wonder if she feels this turmoil, this seismic shift in our relationship that seems inevitable now.

Lifting my phone, I hesitate. Part of me wants to call her, hear her voice, and reassure myself that everything is okay between us. But it's late, and I don't want to overstep. She needs space just as much as I do to process everything we discussed. I set the phone back down, sighing deeply. The silence of the night feels heavy, loaded with unanswered questions and burgeoning feelings.

Maybe it's just the quiet that makes everything seem more intense. With the chaos of life buzzing around us in the daylight, these emotions might feel more controllable. But here, in the stillness of the night, they expand, filling every corner of my mind.

I flip through my e-reader again, trying to focus on the fictional drama unfolding on the screen rather than the real one in my life. But it's no use. My heart isn't in it; my thoughts are with Onyx—her laugh, her intense blue eyes, the way she holds herself like she's ready to take on the world. I finally set the e-reader aside and turned off the bedside lamp, leaving the room in darkness. The shadows seem to echo my restlessness, and as I lie back, I can't help but wonder about the paths not taken, the words not said.

Chapter Ten

Wolf

The morning's light spills into my room, messy with the spill of half-unpacked bounty hunting gear and last night's stakeout remnants. I blink against the glare, my thoughts sluggish from a night spent tossing and turning. Janelle. Her name hammers in my head like a bikers' rally revving up at dawn.

I roll out of bed, feeling every bit of my thirty-six years and then some, padding to the kitchen to brew some strong coffee—black, no sugar, just how I like it to kick start a sluggish morning.

My phone buzzes on the kitchen counter as if on cue with my thoughts. Razor, one of my club brothers, wants an update on a lead we've been following. But even his usual gruff humor can't fully capture my attention today.

After I give him a quick rundown, he asks, "Is everything okay, Wolf?"

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"Yeah," I lie, pouring myself a cup of coffee and leaning against the counter. "Just didn't sleep well. Nothing a good ride can't fix," I add, trying to sound more like myself.

Razor grunts through the phone skeptically, but he doesn't push it. "All right, just remember, we've got your back if you need us."

I nod, even though he can't see me. "Thanks, man," I say before hanging up. The warmth of the brotherhood always eases a bit of the weight on my shoulders, but this morning, it's Janelle who occupies my thoughts.

Dragging my fingers through my hair, I decide a ride is exactly what I need. The cool wind against my face always helps clear my head. Maybe it'll help me sort out these tangled feelings about Janelle.

Throwing on my jacket, I grab the keys to my bike and head out. The engine's roar fills the air as I take to the streets, the early morning light casting long shadows on the asphalt. The city is just waking up, and the peacefulness starkly contrasts the turmoil inside me.

The cool breeze slaps against my skin as I ride, sharp and invigorating. It's like each gust is trying to blow away the confusion and clear a path through the fog of emotions that cloud my judgment. I need this ride, need this momentary escape to figure things out.

The streets blur past, each turn and stoplight a reminder of the rhythms of a life I know all too well. But today, they feel different, charged with the weight of what's

been left unsaid between Janelle and me. The usual thrill of the ride is tempered by a restlessness that grips my chest—a knot of worry and wonder about where we stand.

I pull over at a familiar overlook, where the city stretches out below like a sprawling tapestry. It's quiet here, the rumble of the city muted by distance. I kill the engine and sit there, allowing the silence to wash over me.

As I look over the city, my thoughts drift back to Janelle. Her smile, her resilience in the face of everything she's been through, her eyes light up when she talks about her kids... it all comes crashing into me like a wave. This isn't just about protecting her anymore; it's something deeper, something more personal, that threatens the barriers I've built around my heart. I know the rules—don't get too close, don't make it personal—but with Janelle, every rule seems to bend, twist, and ultimately break.

I fish out my phone from my jacket pocket, thinking I should just call her and hear her voice. But then I hesitate. What would I even say? 'Hey, I'm sitting here thinking about you and how you're changing my life'? That is a conversation for another time when I'm less confused and less overwhelmed by my feelings.

Instead, I tuck the phone away and sit there longer, watching the sun climb higher in the sky. It casts golden hues over the city, painting everything in shades of promise and new beginnings. It's beautiful but daunting. Change always is.

Finally, with a deep breath, I start up the bike again and head back toward town. As much as I want to escape, running isn't the answer. It's time to face this with Janelle head-on, whatever that might mean for us.

As I ride back, the streets start filling up more—the buzz of the city coming to life, acting as a backdrop to the whirl of my thoughts. I decide to swing by the clubhouse first; sometimes, a bit of noise and laughter from my club brothers is just what I need to get my head straight.

Pulling up, I see some guys outside, working on their bikes. Smoke, always with a wrench, nods as I kill the engine.

"Morning, Wolf," he calls out, his voice echoing slightly in the cool air.

"Morning, Smoke," I reply, dismounting and walking over. The familiar smell of oil and metal fills the air, grounding me a bit. "What's up?"

"Just tweaking the old beast," Smoke says, gesturing to his motorcycle. "She's been acting up lately. Needs a bit of tender loving care."

I chuckle, leaning against my bike. "Don't we all?"

He looks at me for a moment, his eyes sharp. "Something on your mind, Wolf? You seem off today."

I hesitate, not sure how much I want to divulge. The guys are like family, but this feels different—more personal. "Just thinking about some stuff," I manage to say.

Smoke nods, understanding not to pry further. "Well, if you wanna talk or throw back a beer later, let me know," he offers with a supportive slap on my shoulder.

I nod appreciatively. "Will do."

The morning at the clubhouse is always a mix of repair noises, laughter, and the occasional shout over the rumble of engines. It's comforting—it reminds me of simpler times before life got tangled up with emotions too big to fit in the garage.

"I might just take you up on that beer," I tell Smoke, forcing a grin.

He chuckles, wiping his hands on a rag. "You know where to find me."

As I walk into the clubhouse, the noise picks up—a blend of rock music and rough voices. The place smells like leather and stale beer, a scent I've come to associate with refuge. The guys are gathered around, some throwing darts, others deep in conversation. I grab a coffee from the pot that's always brewing and settle into the familiar environment.

But even amid the chaos, my thoughts drift back to Janelle. It's like she's become this constant presence in my mind, her image superimposed on every surface, her voice a soft echo in the back of my head. It's disconcerting and yet oddly comforting. I wonder what she's doing right now—probably getting the kids ready for their homeschooling, making breakfast, trying to make life as if everything is normal. But for me, nothing feels normal anymore.

I sip my coffee slowly, letting the bitter warmth slide down my throat, grounding me back to the present. Be it the caffeine or the familiar surroundings, my thoughts align with a clearer perspective. I know I can't keep circling my feelings for Janelle. It's time to face, understand, and embrace them.

"Hey, Wolf! You gonna join in or just brood over that coffee all day?" Tank shouts over from the pool table, cue stick in hand and a challenging grin on his face.

I shake off my reverie with a smirk. "You sure you want to lose this early in the morning?"

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Laughter erupts around the room as I stride over to the table, grabbing a cue from the rack. The light banter and clatter of pool balls hitting each other is a welcome distraction. I line up my shot, focusing on the task rather than the turmoil.

"Always cocky, Wolf," Tank teases as I sink a solid ball into the corner pocket.

"Just confident," I shoot back with a wink, allowing myself to get lost in the game. With each stroke, tension ebb away, replaced by the familiar thrill of competition and camaraderie.

We play a couple of games, laughter and good-natured ribbing filling the air. Moments like these remind me why I love this brotherhood so much—they're an escape, a family, a constant in my ever-complicated life.

After losing narrowly to Tank in the second game, I lean against the wall, watching as Smoke takes his turn against Tank. The room is filled with clinking glasses and the low hum of conversation, a perfect backdrop to gather my thoughts.

I realize I can't keep Janelle and what I feel for her at bay much longer. It's like trying to hold back the tide with my bare hands—futile and exhausting. She's seeped into every crack of my hardened exterior, making me question everything I thought I knew about love and connection.

As Smoke lines up his shot, I pull out my phone again. This time, my fingers are steady as I dial Janelle's number. The phone rings, each tone echoing slightly in the noisy room.

"Hey Wolf," Janelle's voice comes through, sounding surprised yet pleased. "Everything okay?"

I take a deep breath, leaning further against the cool wall. "Can we meet? We need to talk about a lot, and I don't think it can wait."

Sure, ah yeah, that sounds good. Obviously, you would come here." Her voice is cautious but open, a hint of hope threading through her words.

"Perfect. I'll be there in an hour," I reply, feeling a strange mix of nerves and relief.

As I hang up, I glance around at my brothers; their faces blurred into the background of my sudden determination. Smoke catches my eye, giving me a knowing nod as if to say, 'Go get what you need.'

I smile gratefully and make my way out of the clubhouse, mounting my bike more purposefully than I've felt in a long time. The engine roars under me, mirroring the tumultuous excitement brewing in my chest.

The ride to Janelle's is quicker than usual, or maybe it just seems that way because my thoughts are rushing faster than my bike. When I pull up to her modest single-story house, the front yard where her kids often play is quiet and serene. It feels like even the universe is holding its breath.

I rehearse what I want to say as I knock on her door. The questions, the confessions, all of it tumbling around in a chaotic symphony that I'm desperate to conduct into some semblance of a melody.

The door swings open, and there she stands—Janelle, with her hair pulled back in a messy bun, wearing a simple t-shirt and jeans that somehow make her look more beautiful than any decked-out dame I've ever seen.

"Hey," I manage to say, my voice steadier than my racing heart feels.

"Hi," Janelle replies, her smile cautious but genuine. "Come in."

I step inside, my thoughts going a mile a minute. If she doesn't like me the same way, then what? Is it a crush or forbidden fruit?

No time for second-guessing now. I follow her into the kitchen, where a pot of coffee, probably just as strong as the one back at the clubhouse, is brewing. The homely smell settled some of the chaos inside me.

Janelle pours two cups, her movements graceful and familiar. She places one in front of me on the small kitchen table, then sits opposite, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "So, what's on your mind, Wolf?"

I take a deep breath, picking up the coffee cup for something to do with my hands. "Look, Janelle," I start, pausing to gather my thoughts. "I know this might come out of left field, and I don't want to make things weird between us. But I've got to be honest about how I'm feeling."

Her brow furrows slightly, concern etching her features. "Okay..." she prompts, her voice soft.

"It's about us," I continue, feeling the weight of each word as it leaves my mouth. "I think there's something here, more than just friendship or... or whatever this started as. And I need to know if you feel it, too."

Janelle remains silent for a moment, her eyes searching mine. The tension between us stretches, tangible and thick.

"I... I've felt something too," she finally admits, her voice barely above a whisper.

"But I'm scared, Wolf. Scared of what this means, scared of jumping into something new when my past still feels so present."

I nod, understanding her hesitation all too well. "I get that. I'm not saying we rush into anything. Just that... maybe we start exploring what this is. Together."

Her smile returns, cautious but hopeful. "That sounds... doable," she says, a lightness seeping into her tone.

Locking eyes with her, I approach her from the table, but she stands up as I approach her. Janelle looks up at me, her eyes reflecting fear and excitement. "Wolf, what if I told you I want you to kiss me?"

The room becomes tense, a moment frozen as I process her words. A smile slowly spreads across my face, like the rising sun. I move closer and gently hold her face in my hands.

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"Then I would say," I whisper, leaning in so close our breaths mingle, "that I've wanted to do that for a long time."

She closes her eyes and our lips. The touch is hesitant, and the kiss is ever so gentle. It's as if we are both cherishing the new chapter we are entering. It is filled with hope, potential, and the cautiousness of past hurt.

When we finally pull back, a glow in her eyes mirrors my heart's quiet joy. "That was..." Janelle starts, her voice is soft.

"Better than good?" I offer with a half-grin, my thumb gently caressing her cheek.

She laughs, a light, genuine sound that sends a thrill through my chest. "Yeah... better than good."

Our smiles meet in silence, a silent agreement echoing between us. We want to explore this, something real and raw and potentially beautiful.

As I pull away, I take her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"We'll take this slow," I promise, meeting her gaze steadily. "And Janelle?"

"Yeah?" she asks, her brow furrowing slightly at the seriousness in my tone.

"I'm in this with you. No matter what." As the sweet taste of our first kiss lingers on our tongues, those words hang between us, a promise that binds us together.

Her smile widens at that, her eyes shining with hope. "Thank you, Wolf," she says softly. "That... means more than you know."

I nod, feeling the weight of my words settle firmly in my chest, and it feels right. Looking around her cozy kitchen, I realize this place could become as familiar as the clubhouse, a new kind of haven.

As we stand there, the kitchen clock ticking in the background, I realize how much strength it takes to open up like this, especially for Janelle. Her past isn't just a shadow; it's a looming figure that has shaped her and tested her. But here she is, stepping into the unknown with me.

"I should probably get going, not that I want to," I mention as the reality of time nudges at me. "But I need to get back to the clubhouse for a meeting. I'll call you later?"

Janelle nods, "I'd like that," she says, and there's a warmth in her voice that makes me believe in possibilities.

I leave her with another quick kiss; this one feels filled with something more like hope. As I step out into the evening air, the world seems a little brighter, a little sharper. Riding back to the clubhouse, my mind replays every moment of our conversation, each word and pause etched deep into my memory.

As I ride, I can't help but replay that kiss repeatedly in my mind. It's like a loop. The road stretches before me, but my thoughts are all tangled up with Janelle.

As the clubhouse comes into view, I'm pulled back into reality. I park my bike and dismount, still feeling a sense of euphoria. As I walk in, Smoke is the first to notice my grin.

"Look who's back with that cat-that-ate-the-canary smile," he teases, nudging me with his elbow as I pass.

I roll my eyes but can't wipe the smile off my face. "Something like that," I admit, trying not to give too much away yet. But Smoke knows me better than most.

He raises an eyebrow, leaning closer. "So, it went well with Janelle?"

I nod, unable to suppress the joy bubbling up inside me. "Yeah, it did. More than well."

Smoke claps me on the back with a hearty laugh. "That's what I like to hear! You deserve some happiness, Wolf."

Just then, Tank strolls over, a suspicious look on his face. "What's all the commotion about? Wolf turning soft on us?"

"Nothing like that," I retort quickly, the defensive edge in my voice softer than I intended. "Just good news is all."

Tank smirks, folding his arms across his chest. "Good news that involves Janelle?"

I raise an eyebrow, challenging him. "And if it does? Are you all gossiping hens?" I can't stop the smile on my face.

Tank's smirk widens into a full grin. "Nah, just happy to see you smiling for once. It's about time something good happened to one of us."

Smoke nods in agreement, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Exactly. And if anyone troubles you, you know we've got your back, Wolf."

I feel a warmth spread through me, a mix of affection and gratitude for these rough-around-the-edges brothers of mine. "Thanks, guys," I say, my voice thick with emotion. "Means a lot."

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Just then, the clubhouse door swings open, and Battle Axe walks in, his face serious, scanning the room. "Are we here for gossip hour or meeting about current and new protection cases?"

Everyone straightens up, the mood shifting as Battle Axe's presence commands attention. I wipe the residual smile from my face, switching gears from personal to professional.

"Meeting time," Smoke confirms, shooting me a quick wink before turning serious. "Let's gather up."

We enter Church, and all move toward the large table at the center of the room where our meetings usually occur. Chairs scrape against the concrete floor as everyone finds a seat. Battle Axe stands at the head of the table, folders and papers in hand, his expression unreadable.

"Can I have an update on the Janelle Pierce case?" He asks, but I feel his eyes on me.

I clear my throat. "All quiet on that front," I start, keeping my report professional. "No new incidents. The gifts have stopped appearing after we increased patrols around her place."

Battle Axe nods, his eyes scanning the room, ensuring everyone's attention is on the matter. "Good work on that, Wolf. We'll keep the patrols up, though. Better safe than sorry, especially with her ex still out there."

"Absolutely," I agree, feeling the protective instincts kick in strongly.

The meeting continues with reports on other ongoing cases and plans for upcoming rides, but my mind keeps drifting back to Janelle. It's hard to keep my face neutral professional when inside I'm replaying that kiss, her smile, and the hopeful look in her eyes.

Battle Axe lingers at the table as the meeting wraps up, scribbling some last-minute notes. I wait until the others have left before approaching him.

"Got a minute?" I ask.

He looks up, his face softening slightly. "Sure thing, Wolf. What's on your mind?"

I hesitate, knowing what I'm about to share could change how we handle Janelle's case. "I need to disclose something," I start, trying to keep my voice even. "Janelle and I... we're exploring a relationship."

Battle Axe raises his eyebrows but doesn't seem surprised. "I sensed something was changing," he admits. "Does this affect your ability to stay objective?"

I take a deep breath, considering his question. "I can keep my personal feelings separate from my professional duties," I reply confidently. "But I wanted to be upfront about it."

Battle Axe nods thoughtfully, tapping his pen against the table. "I appreciate your honesty, Wolf. It's important for the integrity of the club and our operations. We'll need to discuss this with the rest of the leadership to see if we need to adjust the case management."

I take a deep breath, "I can remain professional," I say firmly. "I know the stakes, and I wouldn't let my personal feelings interfere with her safety or the club's operations."

Battle Axe nods thoughtfully, his eyes carefully studying me. "I appreciate you bringing this to my attention. We need to make sure there are no conflicts of interest. Wolf, you're one of our top members, so please keep me informed about any developments."

"I will," I assure him. "And if you think it's becoming a problem at any point, I'll step back."

He gives me a sharp nod. "Fair enough. We'll monitor the situation closely."

"Thanks, Axe," I say, relief washing over me at his understanding. "I want to do right by the club and by her."

"We know you do," he replies, giving me another firm nod before gathering his papers and standing up. "Keep me updated, and let's keep our standards high."

As I leave the meeting room, I feel a weight lifted off my shoulders. Being honest with Battle Axe was necessary, though not easy. Balancing personal feelings with club duties is tricky, but it's a line I'm determined to walk carefully.

Chapter Eleven

Janelle

As I watched Wolf leave, I touched my lips. I still don't know how I went from being married to a man to having this attraction to a woman. I know nothing is wrong with it, and my parents instilled in us the belief that a person's character matters, not their choice of who to love.

But still, there's a part of me that hesitates and wonders if this is right. Not because of Wolf, but because of how fast everything is moving. I'm still protected by my soon-

to-be ex-husband and trying to regain my life. Here I am, caught up in something that feels like it could consume me.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I need to do some laundry and get the kids started on their homeschool studies.

As I'm sorting through the laundry, I can't shake the image of Wolf's smile and how she looked at me with such intensity. It's a feeling that is exciting yet scary because of the unknown. I take a deep breath and focus on the task at hand.

Abel comes bouncing into the room, his energy levels are always high. "Mom, when's lunch?" he asks, his eyes wide and hopeful.

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I glance at the clock. "In about an hour, honey. Why don't you help Dillion with his math homework? I saw him struggling earlier."

Abel groans but nods, knowing better than to argue when chores or schoolwork are involved. "Okay," he says and trots off to find his brother.

I smile to myself; they're good kids. They've been through so much, but they keep pushing forward like their mom.

As soon as Abel disappears searching for Dillion, I hear Chloe enter the room. I see her clutching her favorite stuffed bunny in one hand and carrying her coloring bag, which has all her coloring books and crayons, in the other. She looks up at me with those big, innocent eyes that always fill my heart with love

With a soft yet determined voice, she asks, "Can I color with you, Mommy?"

"Of course, baby," I say, patting the space next to me on the couch. She plops down, her tiny legs swinging as she flips open her coloring book to a page half-filled with scribbles.

I fold a towel and glance over at her. "What are you drawing there?"

"It's a wolf," she says proudly, holding the page for me to see. My breath catches momentarily as I take in the crude but adorable depiction of a gray-furred creature with bright blue eyes.

A wolf. Of course.

"That's beautiful," I say, keeping my tone light despite my heart beating. "Why a wolf?"

Chloe grins, her little nose scrunching up. "Because Abel told me that wolves are strong, and they protect their pack," she explains, her voice filled with the confidence only a five-year-old can have. "Just like you, Mommy."

I blink rapidly, trying to fend off the sudden sting of tears. "Oh, baby girl," I whisper, reaching over to smooth her hair. "That's very sweet of you to say."

"Is Miss Wolf your pack?" she asks innocently, her crayon pausing mid-stroke.

I freeze for a moment, caught off guard by her perceptiveness. Leave it to a child to cut straight to the heart of things without realizing it. "Well," I start carefully, "Miss Wolf is... someone very special who's helping us right now."

Chloe nods sagely as if this explanation satisfies her for the moment. "Okay," she says, returning her focus to her drawing. "I like her. She looks at you like Daddy used to before he got mean."

Her words hit me like bricks, and I struggled to keep my face neutral. How do you explain the complexities of love, heartbreak, and healing to a five-year-old?

"I'm glad you like her, sweetheart," I manage to say, trembling slightly. "She's very kind, isn't she?"

Chloe nods emphatically, her bunny ears flopping as she does. "She makes me feel safe," she says matter-of-factly.

And there it is—the thing I can't deny. Around Wolf, I do feel safe. Not just physically but emotionally too. It's something I haven't felt in years.

I stay quiet as Chloe continues coloring, her small hand steadying the page while she fills in the rest of the wolf's fur with streaks of gray and white. The innocence in her actions gives me a moment to reflect, to let the chaos in my mind settle. For all the noise in my head, this simple act of coloring with my daughter feels grounding.

"Mommy," Chloe says after a while, tilting her head as she studies her work critically. "Do you think Miss Wolf has a pack too?"

I chuckle softly, leaning back against the couch. "I think she does, sweetie. A very big one." I think of the Wild Jester's MC—loud, rough around the edges, but fiercely loyal to their own.

Chloe hums thoughtfully, pressing her crayon into the paper. "Do you think we could be part of her pack one day?" Her question is so innocent, so sincere that my heart clenches.

"I don't know," I admit gently, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "But I think she'd like that."

She beams up at me before returning her focus to the page, her little tongue poking out in concentration. "Good," she says simply. "Because I think she'd be a good wolf for us."

Later that evening, after dinner and the bedtime routine that always feels like running a marathon, I finally collapse onto the couch. The boys are tucked in, their video game arguments thankfully silenced for the night. Chloe had insisted on sleeping with her wolf drawing beside her pillow, and seeing it there made my chest ache in a way I couldn't quite describe.

I run a hand through my hair and grab my phone from the coffee table. My thumb hovers over Wolf's name in my call log. We hadn't spoken since she left earlier

today, and I can't help but wonder if she's thinking about me as much as I'm thinking about her.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I hit dial.

She picks up on the second ring. "Hey," she says, her voice low and warm.

"Hey," I reply, my voice sounding softer than I expected. The weight of the day seems to slip away just hearing her.

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"Everything okay?" she asks, concern lacing her tone. "The kids good?"

"Yeah, yeah, they're fine," I assure her quickly. "They're amazing. Chloe... drew a picture today. Of a wolf."

There's a pause on the other end, and I can almost hear the smile in her voice when she says, "A wolf, huh? Smart kid."

I laugh lightly, tucking my legs under me on the couch. "She said wolves are strong and protect their pack. She asked if you have a pack, too."

Her chuckle is low and genuine. "Well, I do. But it's not exactly the kind of pack you'd bring up at show-and-tell."

I smile, picking at a loose thread on my sweater. "She also asked if we could be part of your pack one day."

Wolf is quiet for a moment, and I think maybe I've overstepped. My stomach twists nervously. But then she speaks, her voice softer than I've ever heard.

"She did, huh?" There's a pause, and I can almost picture her rubbing the back of her neck like she does when thinking. "What did you say?"

"I told her I didn't know," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper. "But that maybe you'd like that."

There's another beat of silence before she replies. "I would," she says simply. The

simplicity of her words makes them hit even harder. No hesitation, no doubt—just truth.

"Janelle," she says, and how she says my name sends a shiver down my spine. "You know I don't have a lot of people I let in. Not really. But you and those kids..." She trails off, taking a deep breath before continuing. "You're different."

I swallow hard, my heart pounding in my chest. "I know," I say softly. "That's why it scares me a little."

"Scares you?" she echoes, her voice gentle but firm. "Why?"

I sigh, leaning my head back against the couch. How do I explain the whirlwind of emotions of letting someone in after everything I've been through? After everything the kids have been through?

"Because," I start, searching for the right words, "letting someone in... it's not just about me anymore. It's about them, too. And I've already let them down once. I can't—" My voice cracks, and I take a shaky breath. "I can't do that to them again."

"You didn't let anyone down," she says firmly, cutting through my self-doubt like a knife. "You got out because you had to. You protected them. You're still protecting them. That's not failure, Janelle. That's strength."

Her words wash over me, strong and steady like a tide that refuses to back down. I don't know why hearing it from her makes it feel more real, but it does. Maybe it's how her voice carries a conviction I haven't been able to muster myself.

I take another breath, forcing my fingers to stop fidgeting with the hem of my sweater. "It doesn't feel like strength most days," I admit quietly.

"That's because you're too close to it," she replies without missing a beat. "You don't see it the way I do."

I blink at that, surprised by the honesty in her voice. "How do you see it?" I ask before I can stop myself.

She hesitates for just a second as if weighing her words carefully. "I see someone who's fought through hell and came out the other side still standing," she says, her voice steady and sure. "I see someone raising three incredible kids and doing it with more grace than most people could ever hope to. I see someone who hasn't let the worst parts of life break her. That's strength, Janelle. Whether you feel it or not."

Her words settle over me like a blanket, warm and comforting but heavy with meaning. I don't respond right away because I can't. I feel a lump forming in my throat, and my eyes start to sting from the tears that I'm trying to hold back. No one has ever spoken to me with such sincerity before.

"Why are you so good at this?" I manage to choke out, half-laughing through the emotion in my voice.

"At what?" she asks, her tone dipping into playful territory. "Being ridiculously charming? It's a gift."

I laugh softly, wiping at my eyes even though no tears have fallen yet. "Well, it's working," I admit, and I can hear the smile in her voice before she even responds.

"Good to know," she says. "But seriously, Janelle... you don't have to do it alone. You've got people who care about you. About the kids."

The weight of her words sinks in, and for the first time in a long while, I feel something shift inside me—like maybe letting someone help carry the load doesn't

make me weak. Maybe it just makes me human.

"Thanks, Wolf," I say after a moment, my voice softer now. "For saying that."

"Anytime." Her reply is simple, but there's an undertone of something more—something steady and reliable that makes my chest ache in a good way.

We fall into a comfortable silence for a few moments, which doesn't feel awkward or forced. It's strange how easy it is to talk to her, even when we're not saying anything. Her breathing on the other end of the line feels like a lifeline I didn't know I needed.

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"So," she says eventually, her tone lighter now. "What's the plan for tomorrow? More wolf drawings? Maybe some pack initiation rites?"

I snort, shaking my head even though she can't see me. "Oh. I'll have the kids build a fire pit in the backyard, and we'll howl at the moon together."

"Perfect," she shoots back. "I'll bring marshmallows."

"You're ridiculous," I say, trying to sound exasperated but failing miserably because I'm smiling too hard.

"Ridiculous is my middle name, didn't you know?" she quips. Then there's a pause, and when she speaks again, her voice is quieter but still teasing. "But seriously, Janelle. If you need anything—anything at all—you call me, okay?"

A warmth in her voice makes my chest tighten in a way I can't quite explain. "Okay," I promise, the word barely louder than a whisper.

"And I mean it," she adds, her voice firm. "Even if it's two in the morning and you just need someone to remind you how badass you are, my phone's always on."

My lips curl into a smile at that. "I'll try not to overuse the privilege."

"Please overuse away," she says without hesitation. "I'd rather hear your voice than spend another night arguing with Jackson about whether or not pineapple belongs on pizza."

I let out a genuine laugh at that. "And which side of the debate are you on?"

"Oh, I'm firmly Team No Pineapple," she declares with mock seriousness. "Anyone who disagrees has no taste."

"Clearly," I agree, trying to stifle my laughter but failing miserably.

There's a pause before she speaks again, her tone soft and laced with a touch of vulnerability. "You know, Janelle... I don't think I've laughed like this in a long time."

Her confession catches me off guard, and I don't know what to say for a moment. Then I realize I don't need to say anything profound. "Me neither," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Guess that makes us even," she teases gently, but her words have an edge of sincerity. "You make me feel... lighter. Maybe all the heavy stuff doesn't have to win every time."

I swallow hard, my throat tightening at her honesty. "Same here," I say softly, meaning every word. "I didn't think anyone could make me feel like this again."

There's a pause on the other end, and her voice is warm and steady when she speaks again. "Well, I'm glad it's me."

My heart stutters in a way that feels both terrifying and exhilarating. I glance at the clock, realizing how late it's gotten, but I can't bring myself to end the call. Talking to her feels too easy, like slipping into a warm bath after a long day.

"So," she says, breaking the silence with a hint of mischief. "What's the verdict on my pack application? Am I officially in?"

I chuckle softly, shaking my head even though she can't see me. "I don't know, Wolf. You're going to have to prove your loyalty first."

"Oh, is that how it works?" she asks, feigning offense. "Do I need to slay a dragon or swear an oath under the blood moon?"

Before I can respond, there's a sudden crash from upstairs, followed by the unmistakable sound of Chloe wailing and Abel shouting, "I didn't do it!"

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. "And now chaos reigns again," I say with a half-laugh.

Wolf chuckles softly. "Parenthood in action, huh?"

"Every minute of every day," I reply as Chloe's cries grow louder and Dillon starts yelling something about a broken lamp.

"You better go handle that," she says, but her tone has no urgency—just an understanding that feels like second nature to her.

"Yeah," I groan, bracing myself for whatever disaster awaits upstairs. "But don't think this conversation is over. I'll be quizzing you on pack loyalty tests later."

"I'll be ready," she promises, her voice warm and steady. "Good luck, Alpha Mom."

I laugh despite myself. "Thanks, Wolf. Talk soon?"

"As soon as you need me," she says softly, and the line goes dead.

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I momentarily stare at the now-silent phone, her words lingering in my ears. "As soon as you need me." It's ridiculous how those six words make my chest feel like it's both expanding and tightening at the same time.

Chapter Twelve

Wolf

The sound of my phone clicking off feels louder in the quiet of my room at the clubhouse. I stare at it momentarily, her voice still echoing in my head. It's been a while since I let someone in like that—since I wanted to. Janelle has this way of making the walls I've spent years building feel more like paper than steel.

I glance over at the clock on the wall. Midnight. I should be asleep, but I'm sitting in the middle of my bed, absentmindedly flipping a knife in my hand. It's an old habit that calms me when my brain refuses to shut up. Right now? It's going a mile a minute.

"She makes you soft, Wolf," I mutter, shaking my head at myself. But even as I say it, the words have no malice. If anything, there's a strange comfort in knowing someone like her exists—someone who sees through all my rough edges and still chooses to stick around. Not out of obligation or pity but because she wants to.

The door creaks open, and Tank pops his head in. His leather vest is half-off, and he's holding a beer in one hand like it's an extension of him. "You talking to yourself again?" he drawls, smirking like the smartass he is.

“Get lost,” I say without any real heat, flipping the knife once more before catching it by the handle.

“Trouble sleeping?” He steps inside anyway, plopping down on the edge of my bed uninvited.

“Nope,” I lie, twirling the knife again.

He eyes me momentarily, his smirk fading into something more genuine. “You’ve been different lately.”

“Thanks for noticing,” I deadpan, not looking at him.

“I’m serious.” He tips his beer back and takes a long swig before continuing. “You’re not as much of a hardass. You smile more. I even laughed the other day. Thought maybe the world was ending, but nah, it’s just you.”

I roll my eyes, but his words hit closer to home than I care to admit. “Maybe I’ve got a secret stash of dad jokes I’ve been practicing,” I shoot back.

He raises an eyebrow, clearly not convinced. “Yeah, right. Is this about that woman? Janelle?”

The mention of her name sends a jolt through me, and I hate how easy it is for him to read my reaction. “What about her?” I ask, trying to sound casual but probably failing miserably.

“She’s got you all twisted up,” he says with a lazy grin like he’s enjoying every second of this. “You don’t talk about anyone the way you talk about her. Hell, you barely talk about anyone at all.”

I glare at him, but he just keeps grinning like the smug bastard he is. “I talk plenty.”

“Sure,” he agrees sarcastically. “About work, bounties, and how much you hate pineapple on pizza. But this? This is different.”

I let out a long sigh, flipping the knife one last time before setting it down on the nightstand. “She’s been through a lot,” I say quietly, my voice softer than intended. “And she’s still standing. That’s something.”

Tank nods, surprising me by not making another snarky comment. “Sounds like someone worth sticking around for.”

“She’s got kids,” I blurt out, like that explains everything.

“So?” he asks, shrugging. “You like kids?”

“Not really,” I admit with a half-smile. “But hers... they’re a part of her. And I think I could get used to them.”

Tank whistles low, leaning back against the wall with an exaggerated look of shock. “Look at you, Wolf. Thinking about playing stepmom already.”

“Shut up,” I can feel heat creeping up my neck, and the last thing I need is him seeing me blush like some lovesick teenager.

But Tank doesn’t let up. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his beer dangling from his fingers. “You like her.”

“Of course, I like her,” I snap, maybe too quickly. “She’s smart, strong, and she doesn’t take crap from anyone. What’s not to like?”

“No, no.” He shakes his head, pointing at me with the neck of his beer bottle. “You like her.”

"Are we back in junior high, Tank?" I try to sound annoyed.

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He snorts, clearly enjoying himself. “You’re dodging the question, which means I’m right. Admit it, Wolf. You’ve got it bad.”

I groan, running a hand over my face. “Fine. Whatever. I like her, okay? Happy now?”

“Ecstatic.” He grins like he just won the lottery. “Man, this is gonna be fun to watch.”

I grab the nearest pillow and chuck it at him. He catches it easily, laughing as he tosses it back onto the bed.

“Are we going to have pillow fights and braid each other’s hair now?” As he rubs his hand over his bald head, laughing. “All jokes aside,” he says, his tone softening slightly. “She seems good for you. You deserve that, Wolf.”

The sincerity in his voice catches me off guard, and for a moment, I don’t know how to respond. Tank isn’t usually one for heartfelt moments, so when they happen, they hit hard.

“Thanks,” I manage to say after a beat, my voice quieter than intended. Tank just nods, taking another swig of his beer before standing up.

“Don’t screw it up, though,” he says casually, but there’s an edge of seriousness in his tone. “Women like that don’t come around often.”

I know he’s right. “Noted. Now get out of my room before I start charging rent.”

He smirks, tipping his beer at me in a mock salute. “Night, Wolf.”

“Night, Tank,” I mutter as he shuts the door behind him.

The room falls quiet again, but it feels less suffocating this time. I lean back against the headboard, staring up at the ceiling and trying to process whatever is happening inside me. Tank’s words replay in my mind—she seems good for you.

Good for me. The idea feels foreign and almost laughable. People like me don’t get “good.” We get chaos, scars, and excuses to keep people at arm’s length. But Janelle... she’s different. She makes me want to try. To be better. Not just for her but for myself, too.

I groan and grab my phone again, staring at the screen like it holds all the answers to my messed-up thoughts. My thumb hovers over her name in my contacts list. I could call her—hear her voice again, maybe even tell her some of this swirling mess in my head. But what if I scare her off? What if she doesn’t feel the same?

“Damn it, Wolf,” I mutter under my breath. “You’ve faced down armed men without flinching, and here you are, scared of a phone call.”

Before I can chicken out, I hit the call button. The phone rings twice, and my heart races as if I am about to jump out of a plane without a parachute. On the third ring, she answers.

“Onyx?” she says, slightly surprised but not unhappy. “Hey. Everything okay?”

I clear my throat, trying to sound casual and not like an idiot. “Yeah. Everything’s fine. Just... couldn’t sleep.”

There’s a pause on her end, and I hear faint shuffling in the background. “Same

here,” she admits softly. “Chloe had a nightmare earlier. Took me a while to get her settled.”

My chest tightens at the thought of her dealing with that alone. “She okay now?” I ask.

“She’s fine,” Janelle says with a small laugh that’s more tired than anything else. “She’s tougher than she looks.”

“Must run in the family trait passed on from her mom.” There’s a pause, and I wonder if I’ve overstepped, but then she laughs softly. The kind of laugh makes my chest feel lighter like maybe I said the right thing for once.

But then Janelle speaks, her voice barely above a whisper. “You always know what to say, don’t you?”

I let out a nervous chuckle, scratching the back of my neck even though she couldn’t see me. “Not really. Most of the time, I just wing it.”

“Well,” she says, and I can hear the smile in her voice now, “you’re doing a pretty good job tonight.”

That warmth spreads through my chest again, and for once, I’m not fighting it. “Glad to know I’m not completely screwing this up.”

“You could never screw this up,” she says softly, and those five little words hit me like a freight train.

I look down at my hand, balled up on my lap. It's like I'm trying to hold onto something. My voice is softer than usual when I reply, "That means a lot to me."

There's a brief silence on the call, and I feel my anxiety rising. Did I say too much? Did what I said sound strange? Just as I start to worry, Janelle's voice breaks through the quiet

“I have to tell you that you mean a lot to me, Onyx,” she says quietly, her words steady but laced with vulnerability. “More than I think I’ve let myself admit, especially since this is extremely new territory.”

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My throat goes dry, and I forget how to form words for a moment. My heart hammers in my chest, louder than the silence stretching between us. I know it's my turn to say something, but all I can manage is a weak "Yeah?"

Smooth, Wolf. Real smooth.

Janelle laughs softly, but it's nothing but warmth, no malice. "Yeah, Onyx, I was with my husband for so long. I never knew that I could even feel this way about someone. Let alone... another woman." Her voice dips into something shy, almost unsure as if she's afraid of saying too much or scaring me off, but there's a strength in her honesty that takes my breath away.

"You're not alone in that," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. I lean forward, bracing my elbows on my knees as if sitting up will somehow ground me. "This is new for me too... in its way."

"Really?" she asks, sounding genuinely surprised. "You? I figured you'd have this whole thing down to an art."

I laugh softly, shaking my head even though she can't see me. "Hardly. I've had what you would call relationships, some hook-ups, sure, but this... this feels different." I pause, searching for the right words and hoping I don't sound like a complete fool. "With you, I want to try—not just go through the motions or keep things safe."

She's quiet momentarily, and I can hear her breathing on the other end of the line. It's steady but slower now, as if she's processing what I've just said.

“I get that,” she finally says, her voice soft but certain. “I feel it, too. Like I’m not just surviving anymore, you know? With you, it’s like... I can breathe again. Like maybe I deserve to be happy.”

Those words hit me harder than I expected, and I forgot how to respond for a second. We have helped so many people and families before, but the thought of being someone who could make her feel that way—like she deserves happiness—makes the walls I’ve built around myself crack a little more.

“You do deserve it,” I say firmly, leaning back against the headboard. “You and your kids. All of you deserve to feel safe and happy.”

Janelle lets out a shaky breath, and I can tell she’s trying not to get emotional. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“Don’t thank me,” I reply quickly, feeling awkward under the weight of her gratitude. “I’m just stating facts.”

She laughs softly, and the sound eases some of the tension in my chest, “Maybe when all of this is over with, and my ex-husband is no longer a threat, we can see how this thing between us works,” she finishes, her voice tinged with cautious hope. “If you’re willing to stick around for all the chaos that comes with me and my kids.”

“Janelle,” I say, my tone serious enough to make her pause. “Chaos doesn’t scare me. Hell, I live in it. And your chaos? It’s nothing compared to what I’ve seen. Besides...” I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself before I say something I can’t take back. “You and your kids aren’t chaos to me. You’re... life. Something real. Something worth fighting for.”

The silence on the other end is heavy—not uncomfortable, but thick with unspoken emotions that neither of us knows how to articulate. Finally, Janelle speaks, her voice

trembling slightly. “You have no idea what that means to me.”

“I think I do,” I reply softly, letting the words hang between us.

“Onyx,” she starts, then pauses. I can hear her shifting, maybe lying down or getting more comfortable. “I don’t want to keep you up too late.”

“I called you,” I remind her with a small laugh. “So technically, this is my fault.”

She chuckles, and it’s a sound I wish I could bottle up and keep with me forever. “Fair point. But seriously, you’ve got your stuff to deal with. You don’t need to lose sleep over me.”

“Janelle,” I say, surprised by how steady my voice sounds. “If talking to you keeps me awake, I’ll gladly trade sleep for this.”

“You know,” she says, her tone lighter now, “I never thought I’d find myself having late-night heart-to-hearts with a biker named Wolf.”

I chuckle at that, shaking my head. “Yeah, well, I never thought I’d be spilling my feelings to a woman who once threw a pot of spaghetti at her ex-husband’s head. Life’s funny like that.”

Janelle laughs, the kind of laugh that starts soft but builds like she can’t help herself. “Hey, for the record, he deserved it.”

“Oh, I have no doubt,” I say quickly, grinning. “Honestly, I respect the hell out of it. Spaghetti as a weapon? That takes creativity.”

“It was all I had at the moment,” she says, her voice still warm with laughter. “I wasn’t exactly in a position to be picky.”

“Well, remind me never to piss you off when there’s pasta in the vicinity,” I tease.

She snorts—a full-on snort—and I swear it’s the most adorable sound I’ve ever heard. “Noted,” she says. “But don’t worry. You’re safe... for now.”

“Good to know,” I say lightly, but my voice softens as I continue, “because I’d hate to lose my chance with you over a poorly timed pasta mishap.”

There’s a pause on her end, and I can almost hear her smiling through the phone. “Your chance, huh?” she asks, her voice teasing but gentle.

“Yeah,” I admit, feeling more vulnerable than I have in years. “My chance to see where this could go. My chance to be the kind of person you and your kids deserve.”

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“Onyx,” she murmurs, her tone shifting to something deeper, something more serious. “You already are.”

Those words hit me square in the chest, and for a moment, all I could do was sit there, clutching the phone like it was the only thing tethering me to reality. Janelle doesn’t know it, but she’s breaking down walls I didn’t even realize I still had up.

Chapter Thirteen

Janelle

After our talk three nights ago, I haven’t seen Wolf. Tank has been here and told me she was sent on a run but would be back soon. She has managed to send me a few messages but mentioned that communication may be limited for her. I’m not worried about the status of her and I, but more about her safety.

I’ve been trying not to overthink it. I have. But every time my phone buzzes, my heart leaps into my throat. I know it’s ridiculous, and she told me she’d be back soon and she was safe, so I believe her. Still, the days feel longer without her around. Suddenly, my thoughts are interrupted by Abel yelling.

“Mom! Chloe’s trying to flush her Barbies down the toilet again!” Abel’s voice echoes through the apartment like a fire alarm.

I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Coming!” I shout back, already bracing myself for whatever chaos awaits me in the bathroom.

When I arrive, Chloe proudly stands on her tiptoes, with Barbie in one hand and the toilet lid in the other. Abel is hovering nearby, looking equally annoyed and smug because he gets to play the role of tattletale hero. Dillon is leaning against the doorframe, munching on an apple like this is some kind of spectator sport.

“Chloe Grace Pierce,” I say, using my best mom voice. “What are you doing?”

“She wanted to go swimming,” Chloe says matter-of-factly, holding up Barbie like she’s about to give a TED Talk on aquatic toys.

“Swimming?” I repeat, crossing my arms. “In the toilet?”

Chloe nods enthusiastically. “She said she’s a mermaid princess, and mermaids need water!”

I sigh, trying not to laugh because I know that will only encourage her. “Sweetheart, the toilet is not a swimming pool. If Barbie wants to swim, we’ll set up the bathtub later, okay?”

Chloe pouts, her big brown eyes staring at me with the innocence only a five-year-old can pull off. “But the toilet’s right here.”

“And it’s also where germs live,” I say firmly, taking Barbie from her little hand and closing the toilet lid with finality. “No more toilet swimming, got it?”

“Fine,” she says dramatically, stomping toward her room as if I’ve ruined her entire day.

Abel smirks and gives me a thumbs-up. “Good save, Mom.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” I reply dryly, ruffling his hair as he ducks away. “You

okay, Dilly?” I ask, leaning against the door frame now that the Barbie crisis seems to be resolved.

He shrugs and says, “Yeah. Just waiting for the next episode. Chloe’s kinda funny.”

I laugh despite myself. “She is. But let’s try not to encourage her toilet antics, okay?”

“Deal,” Dillon says, holding up his pinky for a pinky promise. I loop mine around his and shake it before sending him off to his bedroom.

As I walk down the stairs, suddenly the front door opens, and Tank is standing there with a murderous look.

“Tank?” I ask, my voice cautious as I step closer. “What’s going on? Is it Onyx?”

He shakes his head, his jaw tight and fists clenched. “No, Wolf’s fine,” he says gruffly, but an edge to his tone makes my stomach knot. “It’s your damn ex.”

My heart drops into my stomach. “What did he do now?”

Tank reaches into the pocket of his leather vest and pulls out a crumpled piece of paper. He hands it to me without a word, his eyes blazing with barely contained fury.

I unfold it with shaking hands, only to find a crude drawing—a stick figure family labeled with our names: me, Abel, Dillon, Chloe. But there’s another figure looming over us, holding what looks like a knife. It’s labeled simply “Daddy.”

“Oh my God,” I breathe, my knees threatening to give out.

Tank catches me by the elbow before I can collapse and steadies me with a firm grip. “You need to sit down,” he says, his voice softer now but still carrying that

unyielding edge of protectiveness.

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“I’m fine,” I manage to choke out, though I know I’m far from it. My hands tremble as I clutch the paper, my mind racing. “He—he’s escalating, isn’t he?”

Tank nods grimly. “Looks that way. Wolf’s not gonna like this when she hears.”

I blink up at him, my throat tightening. “Don’t tell her yet. I don’t know what she is doing, and if she is distracted, will she be in danger?”

“Are you kidding me?” Tank growls, his massive form towering over me like a human shield. “We’re telling her. This isn’t something you keep quiet about, Janelle. Wolf would kill me if she found out I didn’t let her know.”

I open my mouth to argue, but the look in his eyes silences me. He’s serious, and I know he’s right. Wolf would want to know—no, she needs to know. But the thought of adding more weight to her plate makes my chest ache.

“Okay,” I say finally, my voice barely above a whisper. “But don’t tell her until she’s back. I don’t want her distracted while she’s out there.”

Tank doesn’t look thrilled with my compromise, but he nods reluctantly. “Fine. But the second she gets back, she’s gonna hear about this, and until then, I let Pres know.”

I nod, my eyes still glued to the drawing in my hands. The crude lines feel like they’re burning into my skin, a constant reminder of the man who refuses to let me go.

Tank hesitates momentarily, then places a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “He is

sending Hatchet and Rumble here. Don't worry, we'll handle this," he says firmly. "You're not alone in this fight, Janelle."

His words are meant to comfort me, and maybe they do, but the weight of the situation still presses down on me like a heavy stone. Even though my chest feels tight, I nod and force myself to meet Tank's gaze. "Thanks," I murmur. "Really."

Tank gives me a curt nod, his hand squeezing my shoulder briefly before he steps back toward the door. "They'll be here soon. Just keep the kids busy and stay in the house and away from the windows until Hatchet and Rumble show up," he says, his voice all business now.

"Got it," I reply, clutching the paper so tightly that it crinkles under my fingers. As Tank leaves, shutting the door behind him, I lean against it for support, closing my eyes for a moment to steady myself.

"Mom?" Abel's voice snaps me out of my spiraling thoughts. He's standing at the bottom of the stairs, his face twisted with concern as he looks at me. "Are you okay?"

I force a smile, pushing the fear deep down where it can't reach him. "Yeah, buddy, I'm okay," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. "Just grown-up stuff. Nothing to worry about."

He doesn't look convinced, but he doesn't push either. Abel's always been the most perceptive of the three, but he is sometimes too mature for his age. "Okay," he says slowly, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Do you need help with anything?"

I walk over and ruffle his hair again, needing the normalcy of the small gesture. "Nope. I just need you, your brother, and your sister to play in your rooms please."

"Sure," he says, though there's a flicker of something in his eyes—worry, maybe? I

hate that they've had to grow up with this shadow hanging over them.

Once he disappears back up the stairs, I exhale deeply, letting myself sink against the door momentarily. My heart is still hammering like an offbeat drum in my chest, but I don't have time to fall apart. Not now. Not when the kids are upstairs and expecting me to hold it together.

The sound of a motorcycle roaring outside snaps me out of it. My head jerks toward the window, and I peek through the curtain. Hatchet's already pulling his bike into the driveway, his massive frame unmistakable even with his helmet on. Rumble isn't far behind him, parking next to him with a smirk that somehow manages to be reassuring and unnerving.

I brace myself as they approach the door, not bothering to knock before stepping inside—because they wouldn't. This is their territory now as much as it is mine.

"Evening," Hatchet grunts, nodding at me as he shuts the door behind him. His eyes sweep over me, assessing like he's trying to figure out if I'm about to crumble into a million pieces. "You look like hell."

"Gee, thanks," I shoot back, crossing my arms over my chest. "Always nice to get compliments."

Rumble snorts, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. "We aim to please."

"Cut the crap," Hatchet growls, his gaze flicking toward the stairs before settling back on me. "Tank filled us in. Where's the paper?"

I don't hesitate to hand it over, and Hatchet takes it with a grim expression, unfolding it like it might bite him. His jaw tightens as his eyes scan the crude drawing.

“This guy’s a real piece of work,” Rumble mutters, craning his neck to peek at the paper. “Stick figures? Really? What is he, five?”

“Yeah, well, five-year-olds don’t usually draw themselves holding knives,” I point out flatly, my voice sharper than I intended. “And they don’t stalk their exes either.”

Rumble shrugs, unfazed. "Fair point." He tilts his head toward Hatchet. "You think he’s close, or is this just another one of his little mind games?"

Hatchet folds the paper back up and stuffs it into his pocket. His face is like granite—hard and unreadable. “Doesn’t matter. Close or not, we treat him the same way. Like a threat.”

I swallow hard, and my mouth suddenly dried. “So what’s the plan?”

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“The plan?” Hatchet echoes, arching an eyebrow at me like I just asked if the sky was blue. “The plan is to keep you and the kids safe while we track this asshole down and make sure he gets the message loud and clear.”

“And by ‘message,’ he means breaking a few bones,” Rumble adds cheerfully. “Maybe more than a few.”

Hatchet looks practically murderous, “If it was up to me, I would rip his spine out through his asshole and then shove his dick deep down his throat. Hurting a woman and babies like that deserves a death that echoes a thousand times in the fiery pits of hell.”

I blink at Hatchet, my eyebrows shooting up. “Wow,” I say slowly. “That’s vivid.”

Rumble gives a low whistle, shaking his head with a crooked grin. “Remind me never to piss you off, man.”

Hatchet grunts, crossing his arms over his chest like he’s daring me to argue with him. “I mean every word,” he says flatly. “Scum like him don’t deserve a slap on the wrist or a ‘stern talking to.’ They deserve pain. Fear. And to know that they’ll never mess with someone again.”

I open my mouth, then close it again. What’s there to say? He might be crude—okay, really crude—but he’s not wrong. My ex has done nothing but haunt me and terrorize my family for far too long.

“Look,” I say after a moment, trying to keep my voice steady as I meet Hatchet’s

hard gaze. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, but let’s not go straight to medieval torture, okay? I just want him out of my life. Permanently.”

Hatchet narrows his eyes at me, “Permanently means ensuring he can’t return. Ever.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Rumble interjects with a lazy wave of his hand. “We get it, Hatchet. You’re the king of overkill. Let’s focus on step one before you start planning the guy’s funeral.”

Hatchet scowls but doesn’t argue, which is probably as close to agreement as I will get from him.

“All right,” I say, pushing off the door and straightening my shoulders. “What’s step one?”

“Step one,” Hatchet says, his voice all business now, “is making sure this place is locked down tighter than Fort Knox. No windows open, no doors unlocked. If you hear so much as a squirrel fart outside, you call us. Got it?”

I nod, but Rumble pipes up with a grin before I can say anything. “Squirrel farts are surprisingly loud, you know. Especially the big ones. Like... mutant ninja squirrels.”

I stare at him for a beat, unsure whether to laugh or groan. “Are you serious right now?”

“Dead serious,” he replies, his face completely straight. “You ever hear one of those things? Sounds like a mini leaf blower.”

Hatchet pinches the bridge of his nose like he’s reconsidering all his life choices that led him to this moment. “Rumble,” he growls, his tone warning.

“What?” Rumble shrugs innocently. “I’m just saying she should be prepared for all scenarios.”

“Right,” I interject before Hatchet can explode. “I’ll keep an ear out for suspicious squirrel activity. Anything else?”

Hatchet grunts again—apparently his favorite form of communication—and starts pacing the length of the livingroom. “We’ll do a perimeter sweep,” he says, ignoring Rumble’s comment. “Check for anything out of place. You stay here with the kids and keep them occupied.”

“Occupied,” I echo with a dry chuckle. “Sure. I’ll just whip out my ‘Distract Your Kids While Their Mom Deals with a Deranged Ex’ handbook.”

Rumble grins, clearly enjoying my attempt at humor despite the tension in the room. “I like her,” he says to Hatchet, jerking his thumb in my direction. “She’s got spunk.”

Rumble snickers, but Hatchet just levels me with a stare that could freeze lava. “Spunk doesn’t keep people alive,” he says bluntly. “Focus on what matters.”

“Geez, Hatchet,” I mutter, throwing my hands up. “I’ll make sure the kids don’t start a circus act while you’re out there playing Navy SEAL.”

Rumble doubles over, laughing, clutching his stomach. “Oh man, she’s good! Are you sure you don’t want her in the club full-time? I’d pay to see you two bicker like an old married couple.”

Hatchet shoots him a look that could probably kill a lesser man. “You done?”

“Never,” Rumble wheezes, wiping a tear from his eye.

I glance toward the stairs, and my ears perked for any signs that the kids might've overheard our conversation. But all I hear is the faint sound of some cartoon theme song blaring from the TV in Abel's room. Good.

I heard a motorcycle pull up as I was about to turn back to say something to Hatchet. I go to see who it is, and I am stopped by Hatchet's arm shooting out like a steel bar across my path. His expression tightens, his jaw flexing as he tilts his head toward Rumble.

"Rumble, check it out," Hatchet orders, his voice low but commanding.

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Rumble doesn't need to be told twice. He's already halfway to the front door, his playful grin replaced with a sharp focus that reminds me these guys aren't all jokes and mutant squirrel farts. They're dangerous when they need to be—and right now, I'm grateful for it.

I peer around Hatchet's solid frame, my pulse quickening as the rumble of the motorcycle engine dies. The next sound is boots hitting gravel, deliberate and heavy. Whoever it is doesn't seem in a hurry—or worried about being noticed.

"It's Wolf." Rumble calls back. "And she looks like she is as mad as a hornet in a tin can."

The tension in my shoulders eases slightly at the mention of Wolf's name, but it doesn't dissipate entirely. I step around Hatchet, ignoring his muttered protest, and reach the door just as Wolf pushes it open without knocking.

Her blue eyes are blazing, her dark hair disheveled like she's ridden through a storm—and judging by how her leather jacket hangs off one shoulder, she probably has. She looks like chaos incarnate, but she still takes my breath away.

"Wolf," I start, but she cuts me off with a sharp wave.

"Don't," she snaps, her voice low and taut with anger. "Don't even try to tell me to calm down."

I blink, caught off guard by the fire in her tone. "I wasn't—"

“He left another ‘gift,’ didn’t he?” she interrupts, her jaw clenching as she scans the room like she’s ready to take on an army single-handedly. Her gaze lands on me, piercing and unrelenting. “Where is it? What did he leave this time?”

“Wolf,” I say softly, trying to ground her before she combusts. “I was going to tell you when you came back, I didn’t want to distract you when you were gone.”

Her eyes narrow, and she might lose her temper. But instead, she takes a deep breath, although it doesn’t seem to calm her down. “Distract me?” she repeats, her voice thick with disbelief. “Janelle, do you realize how I felt when I arrived at the clubhouse to clean up before coming here and found out from the Battle Axe what was happening?”

I swallowed hard, and my throat suddenly dried. “I... I didn’t want to worry you.” My voice sounds small even to my ears, and I hate it.

Wolf steps closer, her boots thudding against the hardwood floor like warning shots. “Worry me? Janelle, worrying about you is my full-time job now! You and those kids are all I think about, day and night.” Her voice cracks slightly on the last word, making my chest ache.

Then suddenly, Wolf brings her hands to my face; her calloused hands cup my cheeks with a gentleness that seems at odds with the storm raging in her eyes. “Janelle,” she says, her voice softer now but no less intense. “You don’t get to decide for me what I can or can’t handle. Not when it comes to you. Not when it comes to this.”

I blink rapidly, her words sinking as my heart does a weird flip-flop. “I didn’t mean to—”

“I know,” she interrupts again, but there’s no anger in her tone this time. It’s just raw emotion that makes me want to crumble right there in her arms. “But you’ve got to

trust me, all right? I'm not going anywhere. Not until this bastard is six feet under, and you're safe." Then she leans in and places her lips on mine with a tenderness that catches me completely off guard. Her soft, deliberate kiss speaks volumes more than her words ever could. It's not rushed or desperate, despite the chaos swirling around us—grounding, an anchor in the middle of the storm.

For a moment, I forget where we are. Forget about the looming threat outside and the weight of everything pressing on my shoulders. It's just her and me, and this moment feels like it was carved out of time just for us.

When she pulls back, her forehead rests against mine, and I can feel her warm breath on my lips. Her blue eyes search mine, her expression softer now but still filled with determination. "You're not alone in this," she whispers. "Not anymore."

I want to say something—anything—but my throat feels tight, and my eyes sting with the threat of tears. Instead, I just nod, hoping she can see the gratitude and relief written all over my face.

"Well," Rumble pipes up from behind us, his voice cutting through the tension like a knife through butter, "that's one way to declare your undying devotion."

Wolf doesn't even flinch. She turns her head just enough to shoot Rumble a glare so sharp I half expect him to start bleeding. "You got something to say, Rumble?" she growls.

He raises his hands in mock surrender, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Not a thing, Wolf. Just enjoying the show."

Wolf rolls her eyes and turns back to me, her hands still on my face. Her thumbs brush lightly against my cheeks, and for a moment, the room feels like it's holding its breath. "Ignore him," she murmurs. "He's an idiot."

“Hey!” Rumble protests from behind her.

I let out a shaky laugh despite myself, the tension in my chest easing just a fraction.

“I noticed,” I say softly.

Wolf’s lips twitch, almost forming a smile, but the weight of the situation quickly pulls her back to reality. She drops her hands from my face but doesn’t stop, and she turns her head slightly, just enough to look at Rumble. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be?” she asks him.

Rumble raises his hands in mock surrender with a cheeky grin. “All right, all right, I’m leaving. But you two lovebirds might want to save the smooching for after we figure out how to keep Prince Charming from dropping more ‘gifts.’” He winks at me before retreating toward the front door, Hatchet following close behind with an exasperated shake.

The door shuts behind them, leaving just Wolf and me standing there in the quiet tension of the room. Her hands are still on my face, her touch grounding despite the whirlwind of emotions coursing through me. I’ve never seen her like this—so raw, so protective.

“Wolf,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “I didn’t mean to shut you out. I just... I didn’t want to feel like a burden.”

Her blue eyes darken, and for a second, she might growl. “A burden? Janelle, you’re not a damn burden. You and those kids—” She pauses, struggling to find the words. “You’re everything.”

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Wolf steps back, finally letting her hands fall to her sides, but her eyes don't leave mine. "What was it this time?" she asks, her voice steady but low like she's bracing herself for the answer.

I point to the kitchen table where the drawing he left is there. Wolf strides over to the table, her movements sharp and deliberate. She stops in front of the drawing, her hand hovering above it like she's afraid touching it might make it worse somehow.

Wolf's jaw tightens as she flips the paper over and sees the drawing of the 'Daddy' stick figure with a knife over his family lying on the ground. Her knuckles go white as she grips the table's edge, her breathing shallow and almost primal.

She doesn't say anything at first; the silence is more unnerving than if she'd started yelling. Her shoulders rise and fall with each breath, and I can see the tension rippling through her body like a live wire ready to snap.

"Wolf," I say softly, taking a cautious step toward her. "It's just another scare tactic. He's trying to mess with me—with us."

She doesn't look at me, her eyes locked on the crude stick figure drawing like it's a personal insult. "This isn't just messing with you," she says, low and taut. "This is him saying he's not done. That he's still out there, watching, waiting." She finally turns to face me, and the fire in her blue eyes makes my stomach flip. "And that is not something I'm going to let slide."

I take another step closer, reaching out to touch her arm. "We don't even know for sure it was him," I say, though the words feel hollow as they leave my mouth. We

both know who it was. We've known all along. But admitting it out loud feels like giving him more power than he already has.

Wolf's gaze snaps to mine, sharp and unyielding. "Come on, Janelle. You honestly think some random creep just happened to leave this?" She gestures to the stick figure drawing with a flick of her hand, her voice dripping with frustration. "It's him. It's always been him."

I bite my lip, struggling to hold back tears. "I just don't want to believe he's still out there... still watching us." I swallow hard, my heart pounding at the barely restrained fury radiating off her. "What do we do?" My voice wavers despite my best effort to sound strong.

Wolf straightens up, her jaw set like granite as she turns back to me. "We fight back," she says simply, her tone leaving no room for argument. "But first, you and the kids need to be somewhere safe. Somewhere, he can't get to you."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. "You're not sending us away," I say quickly, shaking my head. "I'm not running. Not again."

"It's not running," she counters, her voice firm but not unkind. "It's regrouping. No more staying in this house. I've got a place—secure, off the grid. He won't find you there. Do you think I'm gonna let this guy get anywhere near you or those kids? Over my dead body."

My chest tightens, and I feel the sting of tears I refuse to let fall. "And what about you, huh? What happens to you while we're 'regrouping'? You're just gonna stay here and face him alone?"

Wolf steps closer, her hands finding my shoulders, grounding me with her presence. "Listen to me," she says softly, her thumbs lightly brushing against my arms. "I've

dealt with worse than this guy. He's nothing but a coward hiding behind his little games, and I'm not about to let him think he's got the upper hand." She leans in slightly, her voice dropping even lower, her eyes locking onto mine like a lifeline. "Janelle, I know you're strong. You've been through hell and back, and you protected those babies to get to us for help. I need you to trust me on this, Janelle. I need to know you and the kids are safe so I can do what needs to be done."

Her shoulders relax just a fraction, but the intensity doesn't fade. "Good," she says firmly. "Pack what you need for you and the kids—just the essentials. We'll head out tonight."

"Tonight?" My voice comes out higher-pitched than I intended as panic starts to bubble up again. "You mean right now?"

Wolf nods, already moving toward the kids' rooms' hallway. "Yeah, right now. The longer we stay here, the more chances he has to make another move. We're not giving him that opportunity."

I follow her as she strides toward the living room, her biker boots thudding against the hardwood floors with purpose. "But what about the kids? They'll know something's wrong if we just disappear overnight."

Wolf stops and turns back to me, her expression softening as she places her hands on my shoulders again. "Janelle, I promise you, this is temporary. Just until I can figure out how to stop this guy for good. The kids will adjust—and so will you. But the most important thing right now is keeping all of you safe."

I nod reluctantly, knowing deep down that she's right but hating every second. "Okay," I whisper. "I'll start packing."

Wolf enters Abel and Dillion's room with a small, reassuring smile in my direction. I

can only hope that all this chaos will end soon and we can finally taste normalcy, or at least something close to it.

Chapter Fourteen

Wolf

As I walk into the boy's room, I take a breath to gather my thoughts. The boys are sitting on the floor, building a fortress with their Lego blocks. Already building protective walls. Abel looks up; first, he's looking me over like he always does when trying to figure out if something's wrong. The kid's too smart for his own good.

"Wolf, what's going on?" he asks, his voice steady but curious. He's only twelve, but a seriousness about him reminds me of someone who's seen too much too soon. It's probably because he has.

Dillon, the younger one, glances between us, his big brown eyes wide and curious. "Yeah, why do you look serious, Wolf? Did someone steal your bike?"

I can't help but laugh softly at that. "No one's touching my bike, buddy." I ruffle Dillon's hair, trying to keep my tone light. "But we've got a little adventure to go on tonight. Gotta pack some stuff and head out for a bit."

Abel narrows his eyes at me, clearly unconvinced. "Why? Is it because of him again?" His voice is so quiet, but it feels like a cannon firing in the room. Confused, Dillon looks up at his brother, but Abel doesn't break his gaze from mine. The kid knows. He always knows.

I crouch down to their level, resting my arms on my knees as I try to figure out how to explain this without scaring them more than they need to be. "Look," I start, keeping my voice steady, "you remember how we talked about staying safe and being

smart? Somewhere quiet where you guys can just be kids and not worry about anything.”

Abel crosses his arms over his chest, his jaw tightening. “But we’re not safe here? You said you’d protect us.”

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“I am protecting you,” I say firmly, holding his gaze. “This is part of that. This is about keeping you, your brother, and your sister safe while we figure out how to stop him for good. That’s my job.” I pause for a moment, trying to soften my tone. “And I wouldn’t do this if it wasn’t important.”

Dillon tugs on my sleeve, his little face scrunched up in confusion. “But you’re staying, right? You’re not leaving us?” His voice wobbles slightly, fear creeping in despite the bravery he tries to muster.

I reach out and put a hand on each of their shoulders. “I’m not going anywhere,” I promise them, my voice steady but gentle. “I’ll be close by. I’m just ensuring you are safe so I can handle this problem without worrying about you. You’ve got my word, okay?”

Abel studies me like he’s trying to decide whether my word is good enough. After what feels like an eternity, he finally nods. “Okay,” he says quietly, though his arms remain crossed. “But you better come back.”

Dillon wraps his small arms around my neck in a hug that almost knocks me off balance. “You have to promise!” he mumbles into my shoulder, his voice muffled but insistent.

I hug him back tightly, ruffling his hair again before pulling away slightly to look him in the eye. “I promise,” I say, sealing it with a pinky swear that makes him smile just a little.

“Now, start packing up your favorite things,” I tell them as I stand up and glance

around the room. “Not everything, just what you need and can’t live without for a little while. And don’t forget your toothbrushes. I don’t want any complaints about gross morning breath.”

Dillon scrunches up his nose dramatically, which gets a small laugh out of Abel despite his obvious worry. “Ew, Wolf! You’re the one with gross morning breath!” Dillon teases, sticking out his tongue.

“Hey now,” I shoot back with mock offense. “I’ll have you know my morning breath smells like roses and fresh coffee.”

“Roses that died a long time ago,” Abel mutters under his breath, but a slight grin pulls at the corners of his lips. I take it as a victory.

“All right, comedians,” I say, clapping my hands together to refocus them. “Get to it. I’ll be back in a few minutes to check on you.”

Leaving the boys to their packing, I head down the hall to Chloe’s room.

Chloe is sprawled out on her bed, her tiny body surrounded by stuffed animals. She’s holding her favorite one—an old, slightly worn-out bunny with one floppy ear. Her chubby little fingers are tangled in their fur as she hums a tune I don’t recognize. It’s the kind of peaceful moment I hate to ruin.

She looks up when I step in, her big brown eyes lighting up like she’s just seen Santa. “Wolfie!” she squeals, abandoning the doll and running toward me at full speed. Her little arms wrap around my legs, and I bend to scoop her up.

“Hey, munchkin,” I say, settling her on my hip. “We’re going on an adventure tonight. How does that sound?”

Chloe's eyes widen, and she tilts her head to the side, clearly intrigued. "An adventure? Like pirates?" She gasps again. "Or astronauts? Are we going to space?"

I chuckle softly and shake my head. "Not quite space, but somewhere safe and fun. You'll stay with your brothers and Mommy the whole time."

She frowns a little at that, her tiny brows furrowing in confusion. "What about you? You're coming too, right?"

These kids and their concerns about me sink into my chest like a stone, but I force a reassuring smile onto my face.

"Of course, I'll be around," I say. "You think I'd let pirates or space aliens mess with my favorite crew? No way."

Chloe giggles at that, her frown disappearing as quickly as it came. "Okay, but if we see pirates, I'm gonna fight them!" She punches the air with her tiny fists, and honestly, it's the most adorable thing I've seen all day.

"You're my fierce little fighter," I say, setting her back down on the floor. "But first, you need to pack up your important stuff. Like Bun-Bun here." I pick up her floppy-eared bunny and hand it to her.

She holds it close to her chest like it's a treasure. "Okay! But can I take all my animals?"

I glance at the mountain of stuffed toys on her bed and wince inwardly. "Maybe not all of them, munchkin. Pick a few of your favorites—enough to keep you company, but not so many we need a truck just for your room."

Chloe pouts, her lower lip jutting out like she's auditioning for the role of cutest kid

in the universe. “But they’ll be sad if I leave them!”

I kneel down so we’re eye level and give her a grin. “Here’s the thing, Chloe. Someone has to stay behind and guard your room while we’re gone. Just like Ramble and Hatchet stayed behind when I was gone. I mean it’s a big responsibility. Do you think your animals can handle that?”

Her eyes grow wide with understanding. She glances back at the stuffed army on her bed, her small hands clutching Bun-Bun tighter. “Okay,” she says after a brief second of thinking. “But Mister Snuggles is the boss, so he has to stay and be in charge.”

“Good choice.” I nod solemnly as if this is a matter of national security. “Mister Snuggles will do a great job. He’s got that leader vibe, you know? Reminds me of Hatchet with his very commanding presence.”

Chloe beams at me, her faith in Mister Snuggles’ abilities unwavering. “Yeah! Just like my Hatchet, he’ll tell everyone what to do. Bun-Bun will receive messages if they need me.”

I can’t help but grin at her and cannot wait to tell Hatchet. “Sounds like a rock-solid plan, munchkin. Pick a few friends to go on the adventure with us.”

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She nods vigorously and rushes back to her bed, immediately starting to sort through her stuffed companions with the seriousness of a general assembling their troops. As soon as she is done, she stands in front of me.

“Good job, munchkin.” I ruffle her hair as she beams up at me. “Now go check on your brothers and make sure they’re not packing something ridiculous like the toaster.”

She giggles and skips off down the hall, her backpack bouncing behind her. I take a deep breath, and step out into the hallway, running a hand through my hair.

Janelle’s voice pulls me out of my thoughts. “You’re really good with them, you know.”

I glance up to see her leaning against the doorway of her bedroom, arms crossed but not in a defensive way—more like she doesn’t know what to do with her hands. Her eyes are soft, but there’s something else there too. Gratitude? Admiration? Maybe she’s just trying to figure out how I managed to talk Chloe out of bringing an entire zoo with us.

I shrug, trying to play it off like it’s no big deal. “Kids are easier than adults sometimes. They tell you exactly what they’re thinking. No guessing games.”

Janelle smirks slightly, pushing off the doorway. “And yet you managed to convince Chloe to leave Mister Snuggles in charge without a meltdown. That’s some kind of magic.”

“Trade secret,” I reply with a wink, though inside, my chest tightens in that funny way it always does when she looks at me like that. Like I’m something more than just a biker with a questionable moral compass and a knack for trouble.

She steps closer, and suddenly, the space between us feels smaller than it should. “Seriously, Onyx. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Her voice is quiet, almost fragile, catching me off guard. Janelle’s usually strong and composed, even with everything she’s been through.

I wish she could see the lioness I see. “You’d do just fine. You’re tougher than you give yourself credit for.”

Her lips press into a thin line, and she shakes her head. “I don’t feel tough. Not when he’s still out there... watching.” Her voice breaks slightly on the last word, and I feel that familiar surge of anger bubbling up inside me. Anger at her piece-of-trash ex, who doesn’t know when to quit.

I take a step closer, my boots heavy against the floorboards. “Janelle,” I say firmly, my voice low but steady. “As long as I’m around, he won’t touch you or the kids. I don’t care if I have to stand guard 24/7. He comes near you, he’ll regret it.”

Her eyes meet mine, glistening with unshed tears. For a moment, she doesn’t say anything, just looks at me like she’s trying to figure out how I’ve managed to shoulder so much of her burden without ever flinching.

“I don’t want you putting yourself in danger,” she says finally, her voice barely above a whisper. “You’ve already done so much for us. Too much.”

“Danger’s kind of my thing,” I reply with a crooked grin, trying to lighten the mood. “And besides, you’re worth it.” I want to tell her this isn’t a job anymore to me; this feels like the start of forever.

The words slip out before I realize what I'm saying, and the air between us feels electric for a split second. Her eyes widen slightly, and I can see the faintest hint of a blush creeping up her neck.

I clear my throat, glance toward the hallway, and quickly place my hands on her face, cupping her cheeks. Her quick intake of breath is the only sound in the room as I lean down, just enough for her to know what I'm about to do. I pause, giving her a moment, an out if she wants it. But she doesn't move away. Instead, her eyes flutter closed, and that's all the confirmation I need.

When our lips meet, it's soft at first, like we're both afraid of breaking whatever fragile connection we've been building between us. But then she leans into me, her hands finding their way to my waist, fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt like she doesn't want to let go. And I'm gone—completely and utterly gone.

It's not the kind of kiss that sets off fireworks or makes the world spin; it's something quieter but no less profound. It feels like coming home after years of wandering lost. It feels like safety and warmth and everything good that I didn't think I deserved.

When we finally pull apart, "Janelle," I whisper, my thumb brushing against her cheekbone. "I know this... us... it's complicated. But I'm here for you. Not because I have to be, but because I want to be."

Her eyes search mine, and I swear I can see a storm of thoughts swirling behind them. She might say something momentarily, push me away and tell me this is all a mistake. But instead, she places her hand over mine, the one still cradling her cheek, and leans into it like she's drawing strength from me.

"I'm terrified," she admits softly. "I've been scared for so long that I don't know how to feel anything else. But when I'm with you..." Her voice trails off, and she shakes her head slightly as if frustrated with herself. "When I'm with you, I feel like

maybe... maybe it's okay to hope again."

Her words hit me harder than any punch ever could. Hope. It's such a small word, but she carries so much weight. I swallow hard, trying to keep my voice steady. "Then let me be your hope, Janelle. Let me be the one who stands between you and everything that scares you and show you that it's okay to breathe again. You deserve that—you and the kids. I'm not going anywhere."

Her lips part like she wants to respond, and nothing comes out, but her grip on my hand tightens, and that's all the answer I need for now.

Chloe's voice echoes from down the hall, breaking the spell between us. "Mom! Abel's trying to sneak the waffle maker into his bag!"

Janelle lets out a startled laugh, and I can't help but chuckle. The moment might have been broken, but the warmth between us remains. She pulls back slightly, her cheeks still flushed and gives me a small, sheepish smile.

"I should go stop that before we end up with half the kitchen in the car," she says, her voice light now but her eyes still holding that vulnerable warmth from earlier.

I laugh, stepping back reluctantly but keeping my hand over hers for a moment longer. "I'll handle it," I offer with a grin. "You've got enough on your plate without negotiating with a twelve-year-old over aquatic travel companions."

She gives me a grateful smile, and for the first time in what feels like forever, her eyes have a glimmer of lightness. "Good luck. You're gonna need it."

I arch an eyebrow playfully as I head down the hall. "Luck's overrated. I've got charm and sheer stubbornness on my side."

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As I approach the kids' room, chaos is in full swing. Abel is standing defiantly with the waffle maker in one hand, like it's Excalibur, while Dillon attempts to zip an overstuffed bag with more than just clothes. Bless her tiny heart, Chloe is perched on the bed, supervising like a pint-sized mob boss.

"What's going on in here?" I ask, leaning against the doorframe and crossing my arms. My voice carries just enough authority to make them pause mid-chaos.

Abel turns to me, his expression caught somewhere between guilt and determination. "We need it," he declares firmly. "What if there aren't waffles where we're going?"

I bite back a laugh and nod solemnly. "A legitimate concern. But let me ask you this—do you know how to use that thing without setting the house on fire?"

He falters momentarily, glancing down at the waffle maker like it might betray him at any second, and that hits me hard. "I mean... how hard could it be?" he mumbles, though the hesitation in his voice is evident.

"Hard enough that I don't think your mom would appreciate the kitchen or the house smelling like burned waffles," I reply, stepping fully into the room. "Tell you what. Leave the waffle maker here, and I'll personally guarantee you a waffle breakfast, no matter where we end up."

Abel narrows his eyes, clearly weighing the odds of my promise, and it makes me want to bring even more pain against his father. "You swear?" he asks, his tone skeptical.

I press a hand over my heart. "Scout's honor," I say with a grin.

"I thought you were in the Army," Dillon pipes up from behind the overstuffed bag.

"Same difference," I shoot back, earning a giggle from Chloe and a begrudging smirk from Abel. Finally, Abel sighs and places the waffle maker back on the table. "Fine," he relents, crossing his arms over his chest. "But if you break your promise, I'm holding you personally responsible."

This kid, I can tell will keep me on my toes, and if not him I know his sister will. I need to see what Dillon has in his overflowing bag.

I kneel down in front of Dillon's bag, eyeing it suspiciously. "All right, little man," I say, gesturing for him to step aside. "What exactly do we have in here? You planning to open up a traveling flea market or something?"

Dillon hesitates, clutching the zipper tightly like I might confiscate his most prized possessions. His nose scrunches up in defiance, but eventually, he steps aside with a dramatic sigh. "It's important stuff," he insists. "Stuff we might need."

"Important stuff, huh?" I unzip the bag slowly, watching his face for any signs of panic. His eyes dart nervously between me and the bag as I start pulling things out one by one. A stuffed T-Rex missing an arm. Three action figures that look like they've been through a war zone. A half-empty box of cereal. And... oh no.

"Dillon," I say, holding up a bright pink bottle of bubble bath shaped like a unicorn. "You wanna explain this one?"

Chloe gasps from her perch on the bed. "That's mine!" she exclaims, pointing an accusatory finger at her brother, "Did you steal it?" With a sad look that replaces the anger. Dillon's face flushes red and stammers, "I didn't steal it! I was... borrowing it!"

For emergencies!”

“Emergencies?” I echo, raising an eyebrow and trying hard not to laugh. “What kind of emergencies require unicorn bubble bath?”

Chloe crosses her arms, her tiny face scrunched in righteous indignation. “It’s mine! You don’t even like bubbles!”

“Well, maybe I do now!” Dillon shoots back, his chin lifting defiantly.

“All right, all right,” I interject before this escalates into a full-blown sibling war. “Let’s put the unicorn bubble bath back where it belongs. Chloe, you can keep your emergency bubble reserve. Dillon, we’ll find you something cooler to pack. Deal?”

Chloe narrows her eyes at her brother but nods solemnly, clearly feeling victorious. Dillon sulks for a moment before finally mumbling, “Fine.”

A smile spreads across my face as I notice that Hatchet's influence has affected her. I zip the bag back up and stand, brushing imaginary dust off my knees. “All right,” I announce, clapping my hands together. “Crisis averted. Are we ready to hit the road, or does someone else have a secret waffle iron stashed somewhere?”

Abel smirks but doesn’t answer, and Dillon casts one last longing glance at the unicorn bubble bath before nodding. Chloe, as always, looks like she’s ready to take on the world with her tiny fists of fury.

“Good,” I say with a grin. “Let’s load up. Your mom’s probably wondering what’s taking us so long.”

As the three of them shuffle out of the room, I can’t help but feel a strange mix of emotions watching them go. They’ve been through so much—more than any kid

should ever have to—but there’s resilience in them, too. A fire that refuses to be snuffed out.

Janelle meets us in the entryway, her arms crossed and a knowing look on her face. "Do I even want to ask what took so long?" she asks, though there’s a hint of amusement behind her words.

“Just some emergency bubble bath negotiations,” I reply with a grin, gesturing toward Chloe, who now clutches her unicorn bottle like it’s the Holy Grail.

Janelle raises an eyebrow. “Bubble bath?”

“I’ll explain later,” I say with a chuckle. “Let’s just say your kids have creative packing strategies.”

Her lips twitch like she’s trying not to laugh, but she gives me this soft look that feels like sunshine on my skin. "Thank you," she says simply, the weight of those two words hitting me harder than I expected.

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“For what?” I ask, genuinely confused.

“For being... you,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. Her eyes flicker to the kids heading to the car, then back to me.

I was caught off guard by the tenderness in her words. For being me? I’ve been me my whole life, and it’s not exactly something people hand out medals for. But the way she says it like it’s this monumental thing makes my chest feel tight in the best way.

I scratch the back of my neck, trying to shake off the sudden wave of emotion. “Well,” I say, grinning, “if being me involves refereeing bubble bath disputes and ensuring waffle security, then I guess I’m doing okay.”

Janelle laughs softly, and it’s like music. “You’re doing more than okay,” she says, her eyes lingering on mine for a beat too long. Or maybe not long enough.

I clear my throat and gesture toward the door. “We should get moving before Abel decides he suddenly needs to pack the toaster or something.”

She nods but doesn’t move right away. Instead, she steps closer—just enough that I can catch the warmth radiating from her. Her voice drops to a whisper meant just for me. “I don’t know how you do it, Onyx. You come into our chaos, and somehow, you make it feel... manageable. Safer.”

Her words wrap around me like a warm blanket, like a weight I didn’t know I was carrying suddenly lifted. I manage a crooked smile, my default when emotions start

creeping in too close. “Hey, chaos is kind of my thing,” I say lightly, though my heart’s hammering in my chest. “And besides... you and those kids? You’re worth every bit of it.”

She might say something that will completely undo me. Instead she just nods, a small smile playing on her lips. “Let’s get going.” she says her voice warm and steady.

Before we can turn to leave, Chloe barrels back upstairs, clutching her unicorn bottle like it’s been knighted in battle.

“Mom! Wolf said I could keep my emergency bubbles!” Chloe announces loudly, breaking the moment like a glass shattering on tile.

Janelle steps back quickly, her hands finding her hips as though she needs an anchor. “Did she now?” she asks lightly, giving me a look over Chloe’s head that says this conversation isn’t over.

“Hey, I don’t make the rules,” I say with a shrug, bending down to ruffle Chloe’s hair as she beams up at me. “I just enforce them.”

Janelle shakes her head, laughing under her breath, and I take that as my cue to start ushering the kids out the door. Abel and Dillon are already halfway down the front steps, arguing about who gets the window seat, while Chloe skips behind them clutching her unicorn bottle like it’s a VIP pass to some exclusive five-year-old bubble party.

Outside is a black SUV with darkened windows waiting for us, and my brother Tank is behind the wheel.

Tank rolls down the window as we approach, his grin as wide as the state of Texas. “Took y’all long enough,” he says, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

“What’s the holdup this time? Somebody forget to pack their lucky socks?”

“Emergency unicorn bubble bath,” I reply, deadpan.

Tank blinks at me, then at Chloe, who’s still clutching her precious bottle with a look of pure determination. “I’m not even gonna ask,” he mutters, shaking his head. “Get in before Abel and Dillon kill each other over the backseat.”

Janelle quickly glances at me, her lips twitching like she’s trying not to laugh again. It’s becoming a pattern today—her laughing and me feeling like my insides are doing somersaults. I open the passenger door for her, and she slides in gracefully while I herd the kids toward the back.

Before I can sound off what the orders are, Chloe speaks from the back, “Are you not coming with us Wolf?” Her voice so small and unsure which is not like Chloe at all.

I pause, one hand on the door handle, caught off guard by Chloe’s question. Her big eyes stare at me like I told her Santa doesn’t exist. “Of course I’m coming,” I say quickly, flashing her a reassuring smile. “After I make sure you all are buckled in, I will follow behind on my bike, okay.”

Her little face scrunches up, clearly not satisfied with my answer. “But why can’t you come in the car with us? There’s room! Abel said he’ll squish!”

“Hey!” Abel protests from the backseat, looking mildly offended. “I didn’t say that!”

Chloe ignores him, and her focus is solely on me. “Please, Wolf? You can sit next to me and hold my bubbles so they don’t spill.”

Janelle turns in her seat, her eyes softening as she watches the scene unfold. I’m caught between laughter and a strange ache in my chest as Chloe stares me down

with those big doe eyes. I've faced down armed fugitives and angry bikers without breaking a sweat, but this kid? She's got me teetering.

"I promise your unicorn bubbles are safe," I tell her gently, crouching down to her eye level. "And besides, someone needs to watch over my bike. It gets lonely if I leave it behind." I tap my temple as if it's the most logical thing in the world.

Chloe's pout deepens, her lower lip jutting out in a way that could probably bring world peace if harnessed properly. "Your bike doesn't have feelings," she counters with five-year-old certainty.

"Maybe not," I say, leaning in conspiratorially, "but don't tell it that. It thinks it's the coolest ride around, and we wouldn't want to hurt its feelings."

That earns me the faintest giggle, though she still doesn't look entirely convinced. "Fine," she sighs dramatically, clutching her unicorn bottle closer. "But you better not take too long to catch up!"

"I'll be right behind you guys," I promise, holding up two fingers like I'm swearing an oath. "Scout's honor."

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Tank taps the steering wheel, breaking the moment. “I hate to be the bad guy here, but we need to get a move on before traffic turns into a nightmare,” he says in his usual gruff-but-friendly tone.

Chloe suspiciously narrows her eyes at me but finally relents with a small nod. “Okay. But you have to beep your horn when you catch up so I know you’re there.”

“Deal,” I say, grinning. “One honk for Chloe. Got it.”

With the kids finally settled and Janelle giving me one last lingering look before turning forward, I close the door and step back. Tank gives me a mock salute before rolling up the window and pulling away from the curb. Tank and I can hear Abel and Dillon arguing faintly through the glass as the SUV disappears down the street.

I stand there for a moment, hands on my hips, watching them go. The ache in my chest flares up again, but this time it’s mixed with something else—a strange kind of hope I haven’t felt in a long time.

“Those kids are something else especially Chloe,” I mutter to myself with a shake of my head before heading toward my bike parked by the curb. My Harley gleams under the sunlight like an old friend waiting patiently for me.

As I swing my leg over the seat, the leather warm from the sun. The familiar weight of the handlebars in my hands grounds me, but my mind is still stuck on those big doe eyes and Janelle’s soft smile. I start the engine, the low rumble vibrating through me like a second heartbeat.

“All right, girl,” I say to the bike, giving the handlebars a small pat, “let’s catch up to our new favorite chaos brigade.”

The engine purrs in agreement as I pull out onto the road, following the path the SUV took. The wind whips through my hair, and for a moment, it’s just me, the open road, and the steady rhythm of my Harley beneath me. But then—because lifelikes to keep things interesting—I spot something in my rearview mirror that makes my stomach knot.

A black sedan. Tinted windows. Keeping a little too close for comfort.

My grip tightens on the handlebars as I glance back again. Could be nothing—a coincidence. Or it could be something else entirely. Something worse.

I pick up speed slightly, testing whether the car will follow suit. Sure enough, it does. My chest tightens as old instincts kick in. I reach up to tap my helmet’s Bluetooth communicator and call Tank.

“Yo,” his voice crackles through the line, casual and oblivious.

“We’ve got a shadow,” I say, keeping my tone calm but firm. “Black sedan. Tinted windows. Been tailing me since we left. You see anything like it near you?”

There’s a pause as Tank processes what I just said. “Hang tight, Wolf. Lemme check the mirrors.” A beat later, his voice returns, sharper now. “Yeah, I see it. About two cars back from us.”

“Great,” I mutter, glancing at the SUV in the distance ahead of me. My heart rate picks up, but I force myself to stay steady. “What’s the play here? Kids are with you—can’t risk anything stupid.”

Tank chuckles darkly, his usual bravado slipping into his words. “Don’t worry about my end. Just make sure you don’t end up on tonight’s news as ‘local badass biker causes highway chaos.’”

“Not planning on it,” I shoot back, though my fingers itch to twist the throttle and lose the sedan in a cloud of dust. Not an option with the kids so close. “Stay on them but don’t engage. I’ll try to lead them off.”

Tank grunts his agreement. “You sure about that? Janelle’s not gonna be thrilled if you go all lone wolf on this.”

I glance at the SUV again, now a few more car lengths ahead. Janelle doesn’t need this. Not today. Not with everything she’s already dealing with. “I’ll be fine,” I say firmly, though my stomach twists at the thought of her worrying. “Just keep them safe.”

“Copy that,” Tank says, his voice laced with reluctant trust.

I disconnect the call and let out a slow breath, my mind racing through possibilities. Whoever’s in that sedan clearly isn’t here for a friendly chat. Could it be Janelle’s ex? His goons? Or someone from one of my less-than-sunny escapades? The list of people who might want to tail me isn’t exactly short, and none of them scream “birthday party guest.”

“All right, Wolf,” I mutter under my breath. “Time to play this cool.”

I ease off the throttle just enough to let the sedan think I’m none the wiser. Maybe I can use that to my advantage if they think they’re being clever. My eyes dart to a side street up ahead—a quiet-looking residential road with just enough twists and turns to make things interesting.

I glance ahead at the SUV. Janelle's soft smile flashes in my mind again, and for a moment, I wish I could tell her everything. Then I shake that thought away. No time for wishful thinking when shady sedans are involved.

The side street comes up fast, and without signaling, I veer sharply onto it. My tires screech slightly against the pavement as I lean into the turn, feeling that familiar rush of adrenaline surge through my veins. The sedan hesitates for a split second but then follows, its tires squealing to keep up. Gotcha.

The street is quieter than I hoped—no cars parked along the curb, no pedestrians to act as witnesses. Just me, my bike, and whoever's stupid enough to think they can tail me without consequences. I glance at my mirrors again. The sedan's still there, its dark windows like soulless eyes staring back at me.

"All right, buddy," I mutter under my breath, "let's see how good you are."

I push the throttle, the Harley roaring in response as I speed down the narrow street. My eyes dart around, scanning for anything—a sharp turn, an alleyway, a convenient dumpster—that could give me the upper hand. The sedan keeps pace, but it's clear they're struggling to handle the tight corners as gracefully as my bike can.

It was then I see another black sedan break off and head toward where Tank was heading. "Fuck there was two of them, and this guy is a fucking diversion."

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I slap my hand against the handlebars, frustration bubbling up in my chest. "Damn it," I hiss, scanning the street ahead for an opening. My heart races, pounding against my ribs like it's trying to escape. Tank and the kids are ahead—vulnerable—and now there's another sedan closing in on them.

I tap my communicator again, hoping Tank picks up fast. The line crackles before his voice comes through, gruff and irritated. "What now?"

"There's a second car," I say quickly, weaving around a pothole as the sedan behind me sticks to my tail like glue. "It broke off and it's heading your way. This one's just here to keep me busy."

There's a beat of silence where I can practically hear Tank processing the situation. Then: "Son of a—okay, okay. I'll handle it. You focus on staying alive back there."

"Tank," I growl, the panic creeping into my voice despite my effort to stay calm. "You've got three kids with you. You can't exactly go full Rambo."

"I know what I'm doing, Wolf," he snaps back, but his tone softens after a beat. "I'll keep them safe. Just... don't get yourself killed playing hero."

I grit my teeth, watching the sedan in my mirrors as it inches closer. "No promises," I mutter, cutting the line before I can overthink it. Tank's got the kids, and he's no amateur, but that doesn't stop the gnawing worry from clawing at my chest.

The sedan behind me makes a bold move, swerving closer like it's trying to nudge me off the road. I jerk the handlebars to the side just in time, narrowly avoiding its

attempt. My heart leaps into my throat, but I force myself to focus. This isn't my first dance with road games.

"All right, you wanna play?" I growl under my breath.

I spot an upcoming alleyway—narrow enough that the sedan won't be able to follow without some serious scraping. It's a gamble, but I'm willing to take it. Tightening my grip on the handlebars, I angle toward it and gun the throttle.

The Harley roars to life, the engine growling like a caged beast as I shoot toward the alley. The sedan hesitates for a split second before trying to follow, but the narrow entrance proves too much for its bulky frame. I hear the crunch of metal on brick and glance back to see the car scrape against the wall, sparks flying. Serves them right.

"Not today," I mutter, speeding down the alley with my heart still thundering in my chest. The walls close in around me, and for a moment, it feels like I can't breathe—like the fire is back, licking at my skin, burning through my memories. But I shove it down. Focus. Not now.

Chapter Fifteen

Janelle

Tank is on the phone with Wolf and the atmosphere has changed in the car. The kids are chattering in the backseat, their voices are a mix of excitement and sibling bickering, but Tank's sharp tone silences them. Abel, ever the observant twelve-year-old, frowns and lean forward slightly. "Is everything okay?" he asks, his voice tentative.

Tank glances at him through the rearview mirror, his jaw tight. "Yeah, kiddo. Everything's fine." He doesn't sound convincing, even to me.

I turn in my seat to look at the boys and Chloe, who clutches her stuffed bunny like a lifeline. Her big eyes lock onto mine, silently asking a thousand questions I can't answer. My stomach twists in knots.

"Tank," I say quietly, keeping my voice steady for their sake. "What's going on?"

He doesn't answer right away, his attention glued to the road ahead. His hands tighten around the steering wheel as he mutters something under his breath that sound suspiciously like a string of curses. Finally, he sighs and glances at me, his eyes flicking between the road and my face.

"There's another car," he tells me, his voice low but urgent. "Might be trouble. It could be nothing but it's better to safe than sorry. Wolf thinks it's heading our way."

My breath catches, panic threatening to rise. "Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

"The bad kind," he's not sugarcoating it. "Could be your ex's guys. Could be someone else. I don't know yet." His jaw tightens again, and he adds, "But I promised Wolf I'd keep you and the kids safe. That's what I'm gonna do."

I swallow hard, forcing myself to stay calm for the kids' sake. Abel is still staring at Tank, his brows furrowed in that way that reminded me too much of his father—minus the malice. Dillon looked confused but didn't say anything, and Chloe clutching her bunny so tightly I worry its ears might pop off. I reach back and gently place a hand on her knee, giving her what I hope is a reassuring smile. "It's going to be okay, sweetheart," I murmur.

Tank's eyes flick to me again, and he jerks his head in the direction of the backseat, "Keep them calm." The car feels too small, the air too thick with unspoken fears. My hands itch for something to do, something to hold onto other than the rising terror curling in my chest.

“Why would someone be following us?” Abel’s voice breaks the tense silence. He sounds older than his twelve years, like he’s already figured out it isn’t good but needs to hear someone else confirm it.

Tank doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he takes a sharp turn onto a smaller road, making Chloe squeal and clutch at her bunny even tighter. I look back and see the car behind us and catching up. I twist back around, my heart hammering in my chest. "Tank," I said, my voice sharper than I intended. "They're right behind us."

Tank grunts, his knuckles white against the steering wheel. "I see 'em."

Abel leans forward again. "Is it...is it bad guys? Like in the movies?"

"Abel, sit back," my voice firm but not harsh. The last thing I need was for one of the kids to get hurt because they weren’t buckled in properly.

"But Mom—"

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"Abel," Tank cut in, his voice like steel. "Listen to your mom. Sit back and keep an eye on your brother and sister."

That shut him up, though he looks like a million more questions were brewing in his head. He slumps back into his seat with a huff, crossing his arms over his chest.

The car jolts as Tank swerved again, and that's when I feel it. The other car had hit us from behind. It throws us forward, my hands instinctively flying out to brace myself against the dashboard. Chloe cries sharply, her little voice trembling as she clung to her bunny with all her might. Abel and Dillon both yelp, but thankfully their seatbelts hold them in place.

"Tank!" I shout, my voice cracking with fear.

"I'm on it," he barks back, his focus razor-sharp as he tightens his grip on the wheel. He sped up, but the car behind us was relentless, slamming into us again. The sound of metal against metal made my stomach churn.

Chloe starts sobbing softly from the backseat. "Mommy," she whimpers, her tears soaking into her bunny's fur.

I twist in my seat to face her, gently stroking her leg. "It's okay, baby," I sooth, though my voice wavered. "We're going to be okay. Just hold onto your bunny and stay buckled up, all right? Mommy's got you." My words feel hollow, but I can't let her see my fear.

Tank mutters under his breath again, something about needing a better car for this

kind of heat. “All right, Janelle,” he says, his voice clipped but steady. “I need you to check the glovebox. There’s a little surprise in there.”

I blink at him, my heart still racing. “A surprise? Tank, this isn’t exactly the time—”

“Just do it!” he snaps, his eyes flicking toward me for half a second before returning to the road. The car jolts again as the one behind us rams into us harder this time. Chloe screams.

I fumble with the glovebox, my hands shaking so badly it takes two tries to get it open. Inside was a small handgun and a single clip. My stomach drops.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I whisper, staring at the weapon like it might bite me. My hands freeze mid-air, trembling. The weight of the moment hit me like a freight train. I’ve never held a gun in my life.

"Janelle!" Tank barks, his voice pulling me back to the chaos around us. "Load it. Now!"

"I—Tank, I don’t—" My voice cracks as panic surged through me.

"Janelle!" he bellows again, his tone brooking no argument. "You need to do this! For your kids!"

That snaps something inside me. I grab the gun and the clip with shaky hands, fumbling to fit them together. My fingers felt clumsy, like they belonged to someone else. Another jolt from behind nearly sent the gun tumbling from my grasp, but I clench my teeth and force myself to focus.

Before I’m able to get more than three bullets in, the car hit us again, but this time it sends us sideways. All I see in front of us was a tree, and the world seems to slow

down. Tank yanks the wheel hard to the right, trying to regain control, but the car skids on the dirt and gravel. The sound of tires screeching fills my ears, mixed with Chloe's terrified cries and Dillon's panicked shouts.

"Hold on!" Tank yells, his voice cutting through the chaos like a whip.

The impact comes fast and hard. The car slams into the tree with a sickening crunch, throwing us all forward. My forehead hits the dashboard, stars exploding in my vision as pain shoots through my skull. For a moment, everything went silent except for the ringing in my ears.

I blink rapidly, trying to shake off the disorientation. My heart pounding so loud it feels like it might burst out of my chest. My first thought is of the kids.

"Abel! Dillon! Chloe!" I croak, twisting around in my seat despite the sharp pain in my shoulder and ribs. "Are you okay? Talk to me!"

Abel groans, his face pale but his eyes open. "I'm... I'm okay, Mom," he says, though his voice was shaky. Dillon holding his arm, tears streaming down his face. "I think I hit my elbow," he snuffles, but he didn't look hurt. Chloe sobbing uncontrollably, her little body trembling as she clutches her bunny like it was the only thing keeping her grounded.

I look over to Tank, and there's so much blood. He isn't moving but before I could check; the door whips open. The cold night air rushes into the car as someone stands in the open door, and I instinctively raise the gun, though my hands are still trembling. A tall figure looms over me, silhouetted by the car's headlights. My heart may explode.

Coming into view, it's my ex-husband, Jack, and his face twists into that all-too-familiar sneer. His greasy hair clings to his forehead, and his eyes glint with anger

and satisfaction. My stomach churns at seeing him, my fear momentarily replaced by a wave of white-hot rage.

"Hello, Janelle," he drawls, leaning casually against the door frame as if he hadn't forced us off the road. "Miss me?"

"Get away from us," I say through gritted teeth, tightening my grip on the gun despite my trembling hands. My voice steady, even though every fiber screamed to grab the kids and run.

Jack's eyes flick to the gun in my hands, and he chuckles darkly. "You? With a gun? That's cute." He leans in closer, his voice dropping to a menacing whisper. "We both know you don't have it in you."

"You don't know anything about what I have in me," I snap, louder than I intended. My finger twitches on the trigger, though I wasn't sure if it was from fear or anger. Probably both.

Jack smirks, the kind of smirk that makes my blood run cold. "Oh, but I do, sweetheart," he sneers. "I know you're just a scared little girl playing pretend. You wouldn't dare."

In that moment, something inside me shifts. Maybe it's the way Chloe's sobs cut through the night air like a knife. Maybe it's the sight of Abel clutching Dillon protectively in the backseat. Or maybe it's the years of being told I wasn't strong enough, brave enough, good enough. Whatever it was, it lit a fire in me.

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"Get away from this car," I say again, with a steeliness that surprised even me. The gun feels heavier in my hands now, not because of its weight but because of its responsibility. I wasn't just holding a weapon—I was having the safety of my children, the promise of their tomorrow. My finger tightens on the trigger.

Jack's smirk doesn't falter, but I see it—the briefest flicker of hesitation in his eyes. He isn't expecting this. He isn't expecting me to stand my ground.

"Janelle," he tsks, his tone dripping with condescension, "put the gun down before you hurt yourself."

"No," I simply say. The word feels like a declaration, a line drawn in the sand. "You've done enough hurting for one lifetime."

His jaw twitches, and I can tell he isn't used to being denied. "Don't make me do something you'll regret," he warns, though his voice lacks the usual venom. Maybe he's starting to understand that I'm the same woman he used to control.

"I won't regret protecting my kids, asshole!"

Jack's face twists, his smirk finally faltering. "You think you're some kind of hero now? You think you can just erase everything I've taught you?" His voice sharp, cutting through the tension like a jagged blade.

I don't flinch. Not this time. "No," I say, my voice steady despite the storm raging inside me. "But I can end it."

The sound of gravel crunching under boots draw my attention for a split second. My heart leaps into my throat as another figure emerges from the darkness, their shadow long and imposing under the flickering headlights. For a terrifying moment, I think Jack brought backup.

But then I see her.

Onyx.

Her leather cut catches the light, and her blue eyes lock onto mine like a lifeline. Relief floods through me so forcefully I almost drop the gun. She looks furious—her usual calm, sarcastic demeanor replaced by something colder, sharper.

"Step away from the car," Onyx demands, her voice low and deadly. She doesn't shout—she didn't have to. The authority in her tone is enough to make even Jack hesitate.

Jack's sneer falters briefly before he straightens, trying to puff himself up like some kind of alpha male. "And who the hell are you supposed to be?" he spits, his words dripping with disdain.

Onyx doesn't answer immediately. Instead, she takes a slow, deliberate step closer, her boots crunching on the gravel like a warning drumbeat. When she speaks again, her voice ice-cold. "The woman who's about to shove your face into the dirt if you don't back off."

I almost laugh at that. Almost. But I can't quite manage it with my heart still racing and my hands still gripping the gun like it's the only thing keeping me tethered to reality.

Jack scoffs, but I catch the way his eyes dart nervously toward Onyx, weighing his

options. He's a predator, sure, but Onyx? She was the wolf in this scenario, and he knows it.

"You don't scare me bitch," he tries to act tough, though his voice trembles just enough to betray him. His eyes dart toward Onyx's hands—scarred knuckles flexing at her sides like they were itching to introduce themselves to his face. "Oh, I get it," he says with a sneer, though his voice wavers slightly. "You're her knight in shining leather, huh? What are you gonna do? Save the damsel in distress?"

Onyx tilts her head, a dangerous smile creeping onto her lips. "Something like that," her tone as smooth and deadly as a freshly honed blade. "But see, the thing is..." She takes another step closer, forcing Jack to instinctively back up a step. "This damsel? She doesn't need saving. She's doing just fine holding her own."

Her eyes flick to me briefly, and that one glance make my chest tighten for some reason. I can still feel the weight of the gun in my hands, but it isn't as suffocating now. Onyx has a way of doing that—making the unbearable feel just a little less heavy.

"Now," she continues, her gaze snapping back to Jack like a predator zeroing in on its prey, "here's what's gonna happen. You're gonna turn your sorry ass around, walk away, and never come near them again. Because if you don't..." Her voice drops, and suddenly, all you could hear were the sounds of many bikes in the background.

The rumble of engines grows louder, the unmistakable roar of motorcycles cutting through the tense silence like a war cry. Jack's bravado falters further, his sneer freezing mid-formation as he glances over his shoulder. At least half a dozen bike headlights cut through the night, their beams bouncing off the gravel and illuminating his paling face.

One by one, they roll in—big, burly figures with leather cuts and hard stares. The

Wild Jester's MC. My breath catches as they form a semi-circle behind Onyx, their presence a silent but deafening statement. Each one looks like they'd been dragged out of some gritty action movie, all tattoos, scars, and tough-as-nails attitudes.

Jack visibly swallows. "What is this?" he barks, his voice cracking slightly despite his attempt at authority. "You brought your little biker gang? What, you couldn't handle me on your own?"

Onyx doesn't even blink. "No," she replies coolly, her gaze steady on him. "I could handle you just fine. But see, I like to share." She nods over her shoulder at the group of bikers now dismounting their rides, each one moving with a deliberate calm that sent a clear message: you don't mess with family.

Jack takes a shaky step back, and I can't help but notice how much smaller he seems now. His chest isn't puffed out anymore, and his sneer long gone, replaced by something suspiciously like fear.

Just then, Hatchet steps forward. "This the guy causing trouble for Janelle?" he rumbles, his voice deeper than a canyon. He doesn't even glance at me—he looks at Onyx like she was the only one who needed to answer.

Onyx nods once. "That's him."

"Figures," the man mutters, cracking his knuckles like a warm-up before a particularly satisfying workout. "He looks like the type."

Jack's eyes dart between the growing wall of leather-clad bikers and Onyx, who hasn't shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "You're all insane," he spits, though his voice had lost its earlier venom. It sounds hollow now, defensive. "You think I'm scared of a bunch of criminals?"

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As he steps closer to Onyx's side, Hatchet chuckles, low and menacing. "Criminals?" He glances at Onyx with a smirk. "That what we are now?"

Onyx shrugs, unimpressed by Jack's attempt to insult them. "I've been called worse."

Before anyone could say or do anything else, the lights and sirens of police cars come up the road. The flashing red and blue lights slice through the darkness, painting everyone in an eerie, shifting glow. For a moment, the only sound is the wail of sirens and the quiet rumble of the bikes still idling.

Jack's face morphs from fear to something resembling smugness. He steps back, squaring his shoulders as if he'd just been handed a lifeline. "Oh, looks like your little gang's fun is over," he sneers, though his voice still wavers at the edges. "You're all about to get exactly what you deserve."

Onyx doesn't flinch. She doesn't even turn to look at the approaching squad cars. Instead, she crosses her arms over her chest and tilts her head at him, her lips curving into a slow, almost amused smile. "You are going to be surprised," her voice so casual.

The cops pull up, two cars screeching to a halt with their lights still blazing, and two officers get out. Onyx and Hatchet acknowledge one of the officers, "Hello, Officer Hastings."

Hastings tips his hat slightly, his eyes flicking from Onyx to the rest of the MC crew before finally landing on Jack. He doesn't look surprised—if anything, he looks mildly irritated, like a dad showing up to break up a fight between unruly teenagers.

"Evening, Dawson," Hastings says in his gravelly voice. His hand rests casually on his belt, inches away from his holstered gun, but his stance has no tension. He looks over at Hatchet and gives him a nod. "Hatchet."

Jack blinks, his smugness faltering as he realizes there was no immediate rush to cuff anyone. "Wait a second," he stammers, pointing accusingly at Onyx and the others. "You're just going to stand there? They're threatening me! This is a gang!"

Hastings raises an unimpressed eyebrow and turns to Onyx. "You threatening people again, Dawson?"

Onyx smirks and shrugs, the picture of nonchalance. "Threatening? Nah. Just having a friendly chat. Jack here was just leaving, weren't you, Jack?" Her tone drips with a mock sweetness, making me bite my lip to keep from laughing.

"Like hell I was!" Jack bluster, but the crack in his voice betraying him yet again. He points at Onyx, Hatchet, and me like he can't decide who to blame first. "She's got a gun! And these thugs—"

"Careful," Hatchet cut in smoothly, his voice calm but carrying a weight that silenced Jack mid-sentence. "Choose your next words wisely."

Hastings sighs deeply, clearly exhausted by whatever shenanigans led him to this moment. He pinches the bridge of his nose and mutters something under his breath before leveling his gaze at Jack. "You're on thin ice already, Jack," his tone flat. "We know about the assault charges, and now it seems like a violation of a restraining order. Am I right?"

Jack's face turns beet red, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. "That's... that's not what this is!" he stammers. "I wasn't violating anything! I was just—"

“Just?” Hastings cuts him off sharply, his tone sharp enough to slice through Jack’s weak excuses. “You’ve already got a record longer than a CVS receipt, and you think anyone here is buying your story?” He gestures toward me and the others, his gaze hardening. “You’re harassing a woman who has a restraining order against you, Jack. That’s plenty for me to bring you in tonight.”

“I didn’t—” Jack starts again, but Hastings held up a hand.

“Save it,” Hastings barks. He pulls out his handcuffs and takes a step toward Jack, who immediately takes several panicked steps back.

“No, wait!” Jack nearly trips over himself in desperation. “You’ve got it all wrong! I was just trying to talk to her!” His voice cracks, his bravado crumbling faster than wet tissue paper. He points a shaking finger in my direction. “She’s making this out to be worse than it is!”

I cross my arms, raising an eyebrow at his pathetic deflection. “Oh, please,” I shoot back, rolling my eyes. “You showed up uninvited, again, leaving your creepy little ‘gifts.’ You were told to stay away, Jack. Restraining orders aren’t suggestions.”

Hastings doesn’t even pause. He reaches out and grabs Jack by the arm with all the ease of someone snatching a toddler mid-tantrum. “Yeah, yeah, they always are,” he mutters as he slapped the cuffs onto Jack’s wrists. “You can tell your sob story down at the station.”

“You think this is over?” his voice trembling more than he probably intended. “You think you’ve won?”

Onyx raises an eyebrow, her smirk growing wider. “Won? Honey, I haven’t even tried yet.”

Hatchet chuckles beside her, his deep laugh rumbling like thunder rolling in the distance. “You should quit while you’re behind, Jack,” he says, his voice carrying that dangerous edge of amusement. “Before you dig yourself an even deeper hole.”

Jack’s eyes dart between Hatchet and Onyx, but whatever fight he had left in him quickly drifts away. Hastings practically drags him toward the squad car as Jack continued his halfhearted protests.

“Unbelievable,” Hastings muttered, shaking his head as he opened the back door and shoved Jack inside. “I’ve had more pleasant evenings scraping roadkill off the highway.”

As the door slams shut, I let out a shaky breath. The tension around us melts away as the flashing lights paint Jack’s sulking face in hues of red and blue through the window.

Hatchet claps a hand on Onyx’s shoulder, his grin still firmly in place. “Well, that was entertaining,” he says, his tone light now that the drama and I decide I can slip out of the car.

“Do you know Officer Hastings?” I ask Onyx and Hatchet.

Onyx turns to me with a small smile, her arms still crossed over her chest. “Officer Hastings, we usually call him Eagle. He is a club brother.”

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“A club brother?” I echo, my eyebrows shooting up. “You’re telling me he’s part of The Wild Jester’s MC?”

Hatchet chuckles, leaning casually against his bike. “Is your mind blown, Janelle?”

I blink, trying to process what Hatchet asks me. “Blown? More like mildly singed,” I retorted, crossing my arms. “So you’re telling me the guy dragging Jack’s sorry butt into a squad car is on your payroll?”

Onyx snorts, shaking her head. “Not quite payroll, sweetheart. Eagle’s one of ours, but he’s clean as a whistle regarding his badge. Keeps his club life and cop life separate.”

“Mostly,” Hatchet adds with a sly grin.

“Mostly?” I repeat, looking between them suspiciously. “That doesn’t exactly scream trustworthy to me.”

“Relax.” Onyx gives me a reassuring pat on the shoulder before stepping closer, her voice drops just enough to make the moment feel more intimate. “Eagle’s solid. He’s been with us for years, and trust me, if anyone knows how to keep things above board when it counts, it’s him.”

I glance at Onyx when I hear Chloe say from the car, “Is that my Hatchet?”

Hatchet’s grin widens, and it almost throws me off. Noticing I was staring, he straightened up, looking toward the car. “Well, if it isn’t my favorite little lady.” His

voice softens in a way I hadn't expected.

Chloe's tiny head pops out of the window, her curls bouncing as she waves both hands wildly. "Hatchet! Mommy said you were busy with bikes and stuff!"

"Bikes and stuff, huh?" Hatchet replies, walking over to the car with a swagger that screams "big bad biker," but his tone was all marshmallows. "Well, I had to make time for my best girl, didn't I?"

Onyx smirks at me, clearly enjoying the bewildered look on my face. "He's got a soft spot for kids," she explains.

I blink at her. "Hatchet? The guy who made Jack look like a deflated balloon has a 'soft spot'?"

"He's full of surprises," Onyx shrugs, leaning against her bike with an air of nonchalance that only makes her look even cooler. She watches Hatchet as he crouches down to Chloe's level, his broad, tattooed arms resting on his knees.

Chloe giggles, her eyes sparkling as she claps her hands. "Hatchet! Did you bring Mr. Rumble, or did he stay at the house? He's so funny."

The guys laugh and Rumble stands there with the biggest smile. "Hey Chloe girl, I am here waiting for you all."

Chloe's face lights up brighter than the neon lights outside the dive bar down the street. "Rumble! You're here too?" she squeals, practically vibrating with excitement as she scrambles to open the car door. Abel and Dillion aren't far behind, their heads popping out like meerkats as they grin at the sight of him.

"Of course I'm here," Rumble announces loudly, spreading his arms wide like he was

about to catch a flying tackle. “What kind of uncle would I be if I missed a chance to hang out with my favorite crew?”

The boys already out of the car, racing toward him like they haven’t just been sitting there terrified out of their minds five minutes ago. Chloe follows right behind, her little legs pumping as fast as they can go.

I watch in amazement as the kids swarm Rumble and Hatchet, their tough biker exteriors melting into something oddly wholesome. Rumble scoops Chloe up effortlessly, spinning her around until her joyful giggles fills the night air. Hatchet is busy ruffling the boys' hair, pretending to dodge their playful punches with exaggerated movements that have them laughing like maniacs.

Suddenly there’s a noise in the car. “Don’t worry motherfuckers; I’m not dying in here.” Oh my god Tank—I am a horrible person.

“Tank, are you okay?” I get out of the way so the other two guys can move around to the front of the vehicle to help Tank.

Tank groans as he pushes open the passenger door, one massive hand gripping the car frame for support. “Do I look okay?” he grumbles, his voice a mix of irritation and exhaustion. “Y’all left me in here like a damn sack of potatoes while you had your little family reunion.”

Hatchet chuckles, clapping Tank on the back as he steps around to help. “Relax, big guy. You’re too stubborn to die on us.”

Rumble snorts, adjusting Chloe on his hip as she rested her head on his shoulder. “Yeah, Tank. If you were dying, we’d at least have heard some dramatic last words about how you’re going out ‘like a warrior’ or something.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Tank shoots back, wincing as he eases himself out of the car. “I’ve got plenty of dramatic speeches lined up for occasions just like this.”

Onyx rolls her eyes, as she leans against her bike. “Tank, if you’re gonna die, at least do it quietly. We’ve got kids present.”

Chloe, still perched on Rumble’s hip, raises her hand like she was in school. “Mr. Tank, are you gonna say a speech now?” Her big eyes blink up at him with innocent curiosity.

Tank groans dramatically, clutching his chest like he’d been mortally wounded. “Oh, sweet Chloe,” he says, his voice dropping into a theatrical baritone. “If this is my end, then let it be known that I died surrounded by laughter, chaos, and the most annoying bikers I’ve ever had the displeasure of knowing.”

Hatchet doubles over laughing, slapping his knee. “You’re ridiculous, man.”

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Rumble shakes his head, trying to keep a straight face for Chloe's sake but failing miserably. "You hear that, Chloe? He's blaming us for his 'tragic demise.'"

Chloe giggles and pats Tank's arm with her tiny hand. "But you're not really dying, right? Mommy says people only die if they eat too much candy or don't wear their seatbelt."

Tank straightens up, placing a hand solemnly over his heart. "Don't worry, little one. I wore my seat belt and haven't eaten nearly enough candy to be in danger."

The kids erupt into laughter, their infectious giggles filling the air as Tank gives a mock bow. Onyx shakes her head, a small smile playing on her lips as she watches the scene unfold. I can't help but look at her, the way she seems so at ease amid the chaos, like she belongs here in some unshakable way that I envied.

"You've got quite the crew," my voice soft enough so only she could hear.

Onyx glances at me, her blue eyes catching the dim light from the streetlamp above. "They're not bad," she admits with an almost shy shrug. "They're family."

I nod, suddenly feeling a lump in my throat. Family. It's a word that carried so much weight for me—so much pain and hope tangled together that sometimes it felt impossible to sort through it all. But watching Onyx with her crew and how she manages to keep them all grounded in their chaos while still being a part of it, I start to wonder if maybe family doesn't have to be so complicated. Maybe it's just about showing up, about being there when it counted.

“Hey, you okay?” Onyx’s voice cut through my thoughts, gentle but direct. She tilts her head slightly, those sharp blue eyes studying me like she could see right through every wall I’d ever built.

I blink, forcing a smile that appears more awkward than I intended. “Yeah. Just... thinking.”

“Dangerous pastime,” she teases, her lips curving into that cocky grin that somehow made my stomach flip every time.

Before I could respond—or try to come up with something clever—Chloe comes barreling back over, her little hand tugging at mine with all the urgency of a five-year-old on a mission. “Mommy! Mommy! Come see! Mr. Rumble said he can lift Tank! He’s gonna try right now!”

I laugh, letting her drag me toward the chaos unfolding in front of the car. Tank stands there with his arms crossed, looking unimpressed, while Rumble flexes dramatically like a cartoon strongman.

“All right, all right,” Hatchet interjects, holding up his hands like a referee about to stop an impending disaster. “Before anyone breaks their back or ends up on YouTube for all the wrong reasons, let’s remember we’ve got kids here.”

“I can handle it,” Rumble insists, puffing out his chest. “Tank’s just all talk and hot air anyway.”

Tank raises an eyebrow, his slow grin full of mischief. “Oh, is that so? All right then, big guy. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

The kids squeal in delight as Tank crouches down slightly, bracing himself like he was preparing to be hoisted into the air. Rumble, clearly committed to this ridiculous

challenge, cracks his neck and wiggles his fingers dramatically before stepping forward.

“All right, folks,” Rumble begins, addressing the kids like a ringmaster at a circus. “Prepare to witness the most daring feat of strength ever attempted in Wild Jester territory!”

Abel and Dillion are practically bouncing on their toes, chanting, “Do it! Do it! Do it!” while Chloe claps her hands together like she’d just spotted a unicorn.

“Rumble,” Onyx warns, her tone laced with amusement but also a healthy dose of skepticism. “If you throw your back out trying to lift Tank, I’m not driving you to the ER again.”

“Hey, I’ve been working out,” Rumble shoots back with mock outrage as he positions himself beside Tank. Tank smirks, crossing his arms over his chest. “All right, Hercules, let’s see what all those protein shakes are doing for you.”

Rumble huffs like a bull about to charge, planting his feet with unnecessary drama before wrapping his arms around Tank’s waist. The kids cheer louder, their excitement infectious.

“On three,” Rumble declares, glancing back at his tiny audience for effect. “One... two...” He grunts as he gives it all he has, veins practically popping out of his neck. Tank doesn’t move an inch. Not. One. Inch.

Chloe gasps loudly, covering her mouth with her hands as if she’s watching a suspenseful movie. Abel and Dillion start laughing so hard they could barely stand up straight.

“Need a hand there, buddy?” Hatchet chokes out between fits of laughter.

“I got this!” Rumble barks, clearly determined to salvage whatever shred of dignity he had left. He tries again, planting his feet wider this time and letting out a warrior-like roar. Tank, ever the showman, yawns dramatically, patting Rumble on the back like he was a toddler trying to lift a boulder.

“Don’t hurt yourself now,” Tank grins like the Cheshire cat.

Rumble’s face turns redder than a stop sign as he strains one last time before collapsing onto the ground in a heap of defeat. The kids erupt into wild cheers and laughter, clearly finding his failure more entertaining than any success would’ve been.

“I think the earth moved more than Tank did,” Abel wheezes, clutching his stomach as he leans on Dillion for support.

Chloe tugs on my sleeve again, her eyes wide with wonder. “Mommy, can you lift Mr. Tank?”

I laugh so hard I nearly snort. “Sweetheart, I think even superheroes would have trouble lifting Mr. Tank.”

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Tank chuckles, puffing out his chest. “Damn right, I’m superhero material. Made of pure steel and stubbornness.”

Onyx groans, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Great, now his ego’s gonna need its own zip code.”

“Come on, Wolf,” Tank say, turning to Onyx with a sly grin. “You think you could take a shot? Show ‘em how it’s done?”

I swear the whole group turns to look at her at once, even the kids holding their breath like this was some Olympic-level event.

“Oh no,” Onyx says quickly, holding up her hands. “I’m not getting into this mess. I’ve got enough sense to know my limits.”

“But Wolf!” Chloe whines dramatically, her little lips forming an exaggerated pout. “You’re so strong! You can do it!”

Onyx looks down at Chloe like she had just been handed a live grenade—equal parts fear and disbelief dancing in her eyes. "Chloe, sweetie, I think you're giving me a little too much credit," she says, her voice gentle but firm.

"But you're Wolf! Wolves are the strongest!" Chloe insists, her tiny fists on her hips like she was giving a motivational speech. Abel and Dillion agreed, their grins so wide I'm sure their faces will be sore later.

"Yeah, Wolf!" Abel calls out. "You can't let Rumble be the only one who tried!"

"I'm not sure what's more insulting," Onyx mutters under her breath, "the fact that they think I can lift Tank or that they're lumping me in with Rumble's level of ridiculousness."

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. "Well, you do have a reputation to uphold," I say innocently, batting my eyelashes at her.

She shoots me a look that could melt steel. "Not helping." That causes the whole group to start laughing even more.

Onyx sighs, raking a hand through her hair. "All right, fine," she relents, holding up a finger to silence the cheers that erupted instantly from the kids. "But if I end up in traction, all of you are chipping in for my medical bills."

"Deal!" Chloe squeals, clapping her hands like she'd just won the lottery.

Onyx rolls her eyes but can't quite hide the small smile tugging at her lips. She steps up to Tank, who is now grinning ear to ear like the cat that just ate the canary.

"All right, big guy," Onyx says, pointing at Tank. "You better not sandbag this or I swear I'll make you clean my bike for a month."

Tank smirks and crouches slightly again, his arms out like he's welcoming a bear hug. "Bring it on, Wolf. Let's see what you've got."

The kids fall into a hushed silence, their eyes wide as saucers as Onyx positions herself beside Tank. Even the adults seem to lean in a little closer, smirks tugging at their mouths as they wait for the show.

"You've got this, Wolf!" Abel shouts, pumping his fist in the air.

“You’re already cooler than Rumble!” Dillion adds with a laugh that makes Rumble groan from his spot on the ground.

“Gee, thanks, kid,” Rumble mumbles, but his slight grin betrayed his amusement.

With that, Onyx crouches in front of Tank, wrapping her arms around his waist like Rumble had. She glances up at him. "You ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Tank replies smugly.

"Okay, here goes nothing," she mutters.

Watching Wolf and seeing her muscles flex, is almost like foreplay. I quickly shake that thought out of my head, focusing instead on the spectacle unfolding before me. Onyx takes a deep breath and plant her feet firmly on the ground, her eyes narrowing in determination. The kids are utterly enraptured, their tiny faces filled with awe and hope as if they truly believe she might accomplish the impossible.

“Wait, Wolf, don’t hurt yourself, I can move out of here. I was messing with Rumble.” Tank is now laughing at the look of complete sabotage that crossed Rumble’s face.

“You are an asshole Tank.” Rumble shoots back and flips him off.

“Oh, Mr. Rumble, that is the spicy finger and we are not to ever use that,” Chloe scolds, which causes more laughter in the group.

Onyx paused mid-squat, her arms still wrapped around Tank as she bursts out laughing. "Spicy finger?" she chokes out, her grip loosening slightly. "Chloe, where did you even learn that?"

Chloe folds her arms, looking every bit the stern little teacher. "Mommy says it's a bad word finger, and we call it spicy instead."

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I cover my face with my hand, clearly trying to stifle my laughter. "She's not wrong," I manage to say, my voice muffled.

"Well, thanks for the life lesson, kid," Rumble says, sitting up and giving Chloe a mock salute. "I'll make sure to keep my spicy fingers in check from now on."

"You better," Chloe says with all the seriousness a five-year-old could muster.

"All right, all right," Onyx interrupts, straightening up and releasing Tank with an exaggerated groan. "This is turning into more of a circus than I signed up for. Let's get you out of here big guy."

Tank moves and stand up from the vehicle, and Wolf helps him limp over to the group. "Now how am I supposed to get home because I am not riding on the back of anyone's bikes."

"Well besides Tank, we have to get home too." I look at Onyx.

"Don't worry Janelle. Pres is on his way with a van to pick up our precious cargo." Hatchet tells us.

Onyx tilts her head, a sly grin forming on her face. "Precious cargo, huh? Tank, you finally got yourself a nickname that fits."

Tank groans, rubbing the back of his neck. "If you start calling me 'Precious,' I swear I'm stealing your bike and painting it pink."

"Please," Onyx shoots back with a smirk. "Like you could reach the pedals."

The kids giggle uncontrollably, and even laugh softly beside her. Onyx's laughter is like music to my ears; it's been too long since I'd heard it without a trace of worry. I felt peace for once.

Chapter Sixteen

Wolf

Luckily, Tank didn't suffer any major injuries, so we can begin the process of getting Janelle and the kids back home. The idea of them being far away from me makes me feel physically ill.

I know that they need to start their new life not under the fear of Jack showing up, but I want to be in their life. As I help Janelle buckle Chloe into her car seat, the thought hit me like a punch to the gut. What would their life look like without me hovering nearby? Would they be safe? Would Janelle still laugh like she did earlier, that soft sound that felt like sunlight breaking through the clouds?

"You're awfully quiet, Wolf," Janelle said as she leans against the car door, watching me fuss over the straps. "Everything okay?"

I straighten up quickly, brushing my hands off on my jeans. "Yeah, just...thinking."

"About?"

I glance at her, noting the way her brows furrow slightly in concern. She was beautiful when she wasn't worrying about her safety every second of the day. "Just logistics," I lied smoothly. "Making sure everything's in place for you guys to settle in."

Her lips twitch upward in a knowing smirk. She didn't buy it for a second. "Wolf, you've been nothing but honest with me since the day we met. Don't start lying to me now." Her voice is soft but firm, like she was giving me an out while also daring me to take it.

I rub the back of my neck and sigh. "All right, fine. I was just wondering... what happens when you don't need me anymore?"

Her expression softens, and for a moment, I saw something in her eyes that looked like hope. She steps closer, her hand brushing against mine as she took Chloe's backpack from the car seat and set it on the floorboard. "Wolf, you've done more for me and my kids than anyone ever has. But needing someone and wanting them around are two different things."

I blink at her, caught off guard by the honesty in her words. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," she began, her voice steady but filled with emotion, "that just because I'm starting over doesn't mean there isn't room for you in that new beginning. You don't have to hover, Wolf. But you don't have to disappear either."

My throat feels tight, and I swallow hard to process her words. Before I could say anything, Chloe chimes in from her car seat, her little voice cutting through the moment like a ray of sunshine. "Wolf's coming with us, right? She's not going anywhere!"

Janelle turns and gives Chloe a soft smile. "Wolf has her own life too, sweetie."

"But I like her in our life," Chloe pouts, crossing her tiny arms.

"Well," I say, crouching down to look Chloe in the eyes, "I like being in your life too, kiddo."

Chloe beams at me like I'd just promised her a lifetime supply of candy. "So you're staying?"

"I... we'll see," I say cautiously. It wasn't a promise I could make lightly.

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Janelle clears her throat, drawing my attention back to her. Her eyes lock with mine, and it feels like the world had gone quiet for a moment. "Wolf," she says softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "You don't have to decide right now. But just know... we want you around. Not because we need a protector, but because we—because I—want you here."

I feel my chest tighten again, but it wasn't from worry or fear this time. It was hope, pure and warm and terrifying all at once. I nod slowly, unable to form words just yet.

"Okay!" Abel interrupts loudly, breaking the tension as only a twelve-year-old could. "If Wolf's coming with us, can she help me build my Lego city? 'Cause Dillon keeps messing it up."

"I do not!" Dillon shouts defensively from the other side of the car.

"Do too!" Abel shot back.

"Do not!"

"You literally stomped on it yesterday, Dillon!" Abel accuses, glaring at his younger brother with all the fury a twelve-year-old could muster.

"It was an accident!" Dillon whine, his face scrunching up in frustration. "I tripped!"

"Tripped my butt," Abel mutter under his breath, crossing his arms like a mini adult.

Janelle sighs and pinch the bridge of her nose, though I could see the faintest hint of a

smirk on her lips. "Boys, enough. If Wolf agrees to help, it's going to be under the condition that there are no fights. Got it?"

Both boys eye each other warily before mumbling reluctant "Got its" under their breath. Chloe claps her hands together as if she'd just won a prize. "Yay! Wolf's gonna stay!"

I stand and lean against the car, looking over at Janelle with a helpless shrug. "Guess I don't really have much of a choice here, huh?"

Just then Chloe and all her innocent wonder asks, "What will Wolf be to us?"

Janelle pauses, her cheeks flushing a light pink as she glances at me, clearly caught off guard by her daughter's question. "Well, um..." she starts, fumbling for words.

"Obviously, I'll be a part of the Lego construction crew," I said quickly, trying to deflect and ease the sudden tension in the air. I shoot Chloe a playful wink. "You need an expert builder if you're gonna make a city that can survive Dillon's...accidents."

Chloe giggles, but her big blue eyes—so much like her mom's—were still fixed on me with curious intensity. "Noooo, I mean like... is she family?"

Janelle lets out a soft laugh that was half-nervous and half-endearing. "Chloe, honey, Wolf is..." She trailed off again, looking at me like she was silently asking for backup.

I could feel my heart thudding in my chest. Family. That word carries weight. I wasn't sure I was ready to bear but looking at Chloe's hopeful face and Janelle's uncertain smile, I knew the answer mattered. Not just to the kids, but to Janelle too.

Before I can get another word out, Chloe shocked us all, “Is she like how you and Dad were? Because I saw you kissing in the hallway.”

The world froze. Janelle's face turned beet red, her eyes wide as saucers, while I choke on air. Abel and Dillon's heads whip around so fast I was surprised they didn't sprain something.

"You kissed Wolf?!" Abel exclaims, his voice a mix of horror and fascination, like he'd just witnessed the greatest plot twist in his young life. "When? Where? Why didn't I see it?"

"Yeah!" Dillon chimed in, now completely invested. "Is Wolf your girlfriend?!"

Janelle looks like she wants the ground to swallow her whole. "Kids, that's not—"

"Wait a second," I interrupt, trying—and failing—to stifle a laugh at Janelle's mortified expression. "Let's rewind here for a minute. Chloe, you 'saw' us kissing?"

Chloe nods enthusiastically, her pigtails bouncing. "Uh-huh! In the hallway when you thought nobody was looking!"

I rub the back of my neck, trying to figure out how to navigate this minefield without making things worse. "Well, uh, that's...news to me," I said, glancing at Janelle, who was now covering her face with both hands.

"Mom kissed Wolf!" Abel declares like he'd just announced the winning touchdown at the Super Bowl. "This is so weird!"

"It's not weird," Dillon argues, though his nose scrunches up like he wasn't sure he believed himself. "It's kinda cool. Like...action movie cool."

"Action movie?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. That was a new one.

"Yeah!" Dillon grins. "You're like the secret agent who saves Mom, and then you guys fall in love and fight bad guys together."

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Janelle peeks through her fingers, her voice muffles as she groans, "Can we not turn my personal life into an action movie plot?"

"But it is like an action movie!" Dillon insists, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "Wolf's a bounty hunter, right? That's, like, one step away from being a superhero!"

"Pretty sure superheroes don't get paid to bring in people who skipped bail," I mutter, shooting Janelle a look of pure amusement. Her cheeks were still bright red, and she looks like she's debating whether to laugh or crawl under the car.

"Okay, okay," Janelle said finally, surrendering her hands. "Enough about me and Wolf. We've got groceries to put away, remember?"

"But you didn't answer my question!" Chloe pipes up again, her voice almost singsong in its persistence. "Is Wolf your girlfriend?"

Janelle turns to her daughter with a look that screamed "help me," but I decide to jump in before she could say anything.

"Chloe," I say gently, crouching down so we are eye level again, "sometimes adults need a little bit of time to figure things out. Your mom and I are still working on what this is, okay?" I shoot her a soft smile, hoping she'll accept my answer and let Janelle off the hook for now.

Chloe tilts her head, clearly pondering my words like a pint-sized philosopher. Finally, she nods solemnly. "Okay. But if you're her girlfriend, you have to promise not to make her cry like Daddy did."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. Janelle freezes beside me, her eyes wide and glassy. For a second, no one said anything—just the sound of a car passing by in the distance and the faint chirping of birds in the trees.

"I..." I swallow hard, glancing up at Janelle. Her lips pressed into a thin line, her hand resting protectively on Chloe's shoulder. I turn back to Chloe, steeling myself. "I promise, Chloe. I promise I would never do anything to hurt your mom. Ever," I say, my voice is steady despite the lump forming in my throat.

Chloe studies me for a moment, her little face serious and way too wise for a five-year-old. Then she gives a big toothy smile and nodding, as if granting me her approval. "Okay. You can be her girlfriend then."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Abel interrupts, raising his hands like a referee calling a foul. "You don't get to decide that, Chloe! That's not how it works!"

"Yeah," Dillon agrees, though he seems less certain. "Don't they have to like... go on dates first or something?"

Janelle groans again and leans against the car, muttering something under her breath that sounded suspiciously like "kill me now." I can't help but laugh at the absolute chaos unfolding around us.

"All right, all right, time out," I say, holding up my hands like I was trying to calm a group of unruly bikers at the clubhouse. "First of all, I think we're jumping the gun here. Second, your mom and I are grown-ups, meaning we get to figure this out on our own time."

"But you 'like' her, right?" Chloe asks, undeterred, her eyes wide with curiosity.

"Chloe!" Janelle's voice is sharp but tinged with embarrassment as she shifted

uncomfortably.

I glance at Janelle, who looked like she was about two seconds away from sprinting to the nearest hiding spot. Deciding to throw her a lifeline, I lean closer to Chloe and whispered loud enough for everyone to hear, "Your mom makes the best pancakes I've ever had. Of course, I like her."

Dillon snorts a laugh while Abel looks unsure if he should be grossed out or impressed. Chloe, however, beams like I'd just told her she was getting a pony.

"Pancakes are important," she declares with all the authority of a five-year-old who knew her priorities. "That means you like like her."

"Chloe," Janelle groans again, her face buried in her hands. "You're not helping."

"But it's true!" Chloe insists before spinning on her heel to face her brothers. "Abel, Dillon, it's official! Wolf is Mom's girlfriend because she likes her pancakes!"

Abel crosses his arms, clearly skeptical. "That's the dumbest reason ever. Liking pancakes doesn't mean you're dating someone."

"Yeah," Dillon agrees, nodding seriously. "They probably have to kiss again or something for it to count."

Chloe tilts her head, considering my words with all the seriousness a five-year-old can muster. "So... you're family?"

I glance at Janelle again, who was watching me with equal parts warm and cautious expression. Janelle's arms cross over her chest, but she wasn't looking away this time. She was waiting for my answer too.

"Yeah," I say softly, gently tapping Chloe's nose. "I think I am."

Chloe squeals in delight as she kicked her legs in her seat.

I can't help but notice how effortlessly kids seem to accept things, while adults are always more difficult to handle. I glance at Janelle and then at the children, and I can't help but wonder what I did to deserve such peace and joy.

The moment of serenity is short-lived, of course. Abel decided to remind us all why preteens are top-tier chaos agents.

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"Okay, but if Wolf's part of the family now," he says, leaning casually against the car like some kind of twelve-year-old philosopher-king, "does that mean she has to come to all our boring family stuff? Like Aunt Linda's weird cookouts where she makes those gross tuna Jell-O things?"

I blink. "Tuna Jell-O?"

Janelle cringe, rubbing her temples. "Don't ask. Just... don't."

"But it's true!" Abel presses on, clearly enjoying his role as instigator. "If Wolf's dating Mom, she has to deal with Aunt Linda's tuna Jell-O and Grandpa's conspiracy theories about pigeons being government spies."

"Pigeons aren't real!" Dillon chimes in enthusiastically. "They're drones! Grandpa said so!"

"Right," I say, dragging the word out as I reach up to scratch the back of my neck. "Well, if pigeons are drones, I guess that explains why they always look so suspicious."

Dillon's eyes lit up like I had just confirmed the biggest secret of his young life. "Exactly!"

Janelle groans again, this time louder, and leans heavily against the car like she was physically holding herself together. "Can we please stop talking about tuna Jell-O and robot pigeons?"

"But it's important!" Dillon protests, his nine-year-old voice full of conviction. "Wolf has to know what she's getting into if she's gonna be part of the family."

"Yeah," Abel adds, nodding sagely. "Family is a package deal. You can't just pick Mom and skip the rest of us."

I smirk at him, crossing my arms over my chest. "Oh, don't worry, kid, because you also get mine with your family." Looking at each of the kids with a smirk, "You will get a bunch of new uncles that will protect you with their lives."

Abel raises an eyebrow, clearly intrigued but trying to play it cool. "Uncles? Like biker uncles? The kind who wear leather and have tattoos?"

"Yep," I pop the 'p' for emphasis. "The whole Wild Jester MC crew. They'd probably spoil you rotten and teach you how to ride a dirt bike before you even hit high school."

Dillon's jaw drop, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "No way! Dirt bikes? That's so cool!"

"Don't encourage them," Janelle mutters under her breath, though a tiny smile tugs at the corners of her lips.

"But Mom!" Dillon whines, turning to her with wide, pleading eyes. "Can I get a dirt bike if Wolf's in the family? Pleeese?"

"Absolutely not," Janelle's tone leaving zero room for negotiation.

Abel smirks at me, arms still crossed like he was some kind of pint-sized negotiator. "Guess we'll have to see how serious you are about this whole 'family' thing, huh, Wolf?"

I laugh, shaking my head at the challenge in his tone. "Oh, don't worry, Abel. I'm plenty serious. But I'm also not stupid enough to cross your mom when it comes to dirt bikes." I shoot Janelle a wink, which earns me an exasperated eyeroll.

Chloe tugs on my sleeve again, her small voice cutting through the chaos. "Wolf, if you're family... does that mean you'll come to Christmas?"

The question hit like a sucker punch to the chest—not because it scared me but because of the pure hope in her voice. I glance at Janelle, who looks startled by the question herself. Her eyes search mine, uncertainty flickering there.

"Well," I said carefully, crouching down again so I was eye level with Chloe. "If I am family and I want to be a part of everything that family does, which would include holidays, right?" I look over to Janelle for approval.

Janelle stands there, her lips parting slightly as if she wanted to say something but couldn't quite find the words. Her eyes flick between me and Chloe, and for a moment, I think she might tell me I was getting ahead of myself. But then she sighs softly and gave a small nod with a wide smile, her form of a silent permission.

Chloe's face lit up brighter than a Christmas tree. "Yes! You have to come! We make cookies and hot chocolate and watch movies all day!"

"And," Dillon adds with the seriousness that only a nine-year-old could muster, "we build the best snow fort in the neighborhood. Wolf, you can be on my team."

"Hey!" Abel objected, glaring at his younger brother. "You don't get to claim her just like that. Maybe she wants to be on my team."

I hold up my hands, laughing. Before I could get anything out Chloe pipes up again. "Does this mean you will live with us too?"

The question hung in the air like a live grenade, and I swear I saw Janelle flinch. Her eyes widen and look like she wants to crawl under the nearest rock. I catch her gaze, trying to silently let her know I wasn't going to overstep.

"Whoa, whoa," I say, raising my hands in mock surrender. "Living together is like... level ten on the family scale. We're still working on level two: pancakes and Christmas."

Chloe frowns, clearly unimpressed with my answer. "But if you're family, you should live here! Families live together."

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Janelle takes a deep breath, stepping forward before this conversation can spiral completely out of control. "Chloe, honey," she's gentle but firm, "Wolf has her own home. And we're not talking about anyone moving in right now."

Chloe frowns thoughtfully, tapping her chin like she was seriously considering my answer. "Okay," nodding like some tiny CEO making an executive decision. "Maybe not right now, but if you live with us, can you bring your bike?"

I laugh, shaking my head. "Deal."

Chloe grins triumphantly, as if she'd just won the most important negotiation of her life. "Okay, but you have to let me ride it sometimes."

"That's a hard no," Janelle cuts in, her mom voice on full display. "You're not even tall enough to reach the pedals."

"Mom!" Chloe whines, stomping her foot. "I'll grow!"

"Not fast enough," Janelle retorts, her lips twitching with suppressed amusement.

Abel smirks at his sister, clearly enjoying her defeat. "Guess you'll just have to wait until you're old enough to get your own bike."

"I'm gonna get a pink one with sparkles," Chloe declares, undeterred. "And it'll be faster than yours, Abel!"

"Dream on," Abel shot back before turning his attention back to me. "So, Wolf, if

you're gonna hang around for Christmas and bring all these biker uncles..."

It's been a couple of weeks since Janelle and the kids practically adopted me into the family. Things have been running so smoothly and to be honest I have been here more nights then at the clubhouse.

I'm sitting at the kitchen table, trying to make sense of Janelle's scribbled notes on the grocery list. "Green things for salad" and "that one cereal Abel likes but I don't remember the name" were my marching orders. The kids are in the living room, their laughter echoing through the small house as they argued over which movie to watch. It was chaos, but it was the kind of chaos that felt... right.

Janelle bustles into the room, her hair pulled up in a messy bun and an oversized sweatshirt hanging off one shoulder. She looks tired but relaxed in a way I haven't seen before. It's nice—seeing her like this. Like she was finally catching her breath.

"So," she leans against the counter and crossing her arms. "You've officially spent more nights here than at your own place this month. Should I start charging you rent?"

I smirk, leaning back in my chair. "Depends," I cross my arms to mirror her stance. "What's the rent? Pancakes on Sundays and putting up with Abel's interrogation sessions?"

Janelle chuckles, shaking her head. "That might cover it. But you'd also have to throw in 'fixing whatever Chloe breaks' and 'keeping Dillon out of the cookie jar before dinner.'"

"Sounds like a steep price," I tease, tapping the pen against the notepad. "But I think I

can manage."

She rolls her eyes but smiles. That smile makes my chest feel a little lighter every time I saw it. "You're ridiculous," she said, grabbing the kettle to fill it with water.

"Ridiculously helpful, you mean," I quip, holding up the grocery list like it was Exhibit A. "Who else would decipher this masterpiece of cryptic instructions?" I pointed to one particularly confusing note. "'Not too spicy but not boring'? What am I supposed to do with that? Hunt down the world's most balanced salsa?"

Janelle laughs, the sound warm and easy. "It means get something everyone can eat without complaining," she says, setting the kettle on the stove. "Which, considering this house, is basically an impossible task."

"Ah, so you're setting me up for failure. Got it," I reply, scribbling a dramatic question mark next to the note on the list.

She shakes her head, leaning against the counter again as she watched me. "You know, you don't have to do this," she said softly. "The grocery runs, the helping out with the kids... all of it. You've already done so much for us."

I look up at her, my pen stalling on the page. The way she's looking at me—it wasn't pity or gratitude. It was something deeper. Something warmer. "I want to," I said simply. "This isn't just about helping out or doing my job. I care about you, Janelle. About the kids. This feels... right. Like where I'm supposed to be."

She blinks, and for a moment, I think I've overstepped. But then she smiles, soft and a little shy, and it was like the whole room got warmer. "You're really something, Onyx," she murmurs, shaking her head like she can't quite believe it.

"Something good, I hope," I say lightly, trying to ease the sudden tension in the air.

Janelle's eyes soften, and for a moment, there was just the quiet hum of the kettle heating up and the distant sound of the kids arguing about whether they should watch "Frozen" or "Star Wars". She opens her mouth to say something, but Dillon burst into the kitchen like a hurricane before she could.

"Mom! Abel's being a buttface again!" he announces loudly, his hands on his hips like a pint-sized lawyer ready to present his case.

Janelle sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. "What now?"

"He said if we watch 'Frozen', my brain will freeze and I'll turn into Olaf forever," Dillon huffs, glaring over his shoulder as if Abel were standing right there.

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"Olaf's pretty cool," I interject, trying to hide my grin. "Pun intended."

Dillon looks at me with wide eyes. "But what if he's right? What if I really do turn into Olaf? I don't wanna melt in the summer!"

Janelle groans, muttering something under her breath about needing an extra coffee just to manage the chaos. I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table as I gave Dillon a serious look.

"Listen, buddy," I lower my voice like I was sharing some top-secret biker wisdom. "I've seen 'Frozen' probably a hundred times—don't ask why—and not once has anyone turned into Olaf. You're safe."

Dillon squint at me, clearly skeptical but wanting to believe me. "You promise?"

"Cross my heart," I draw an invisible X over my chest. "And you know what? If Abel keeps being a buttface, we can always make him watch it on repeat until he learns all the songs."

Janelle snorts into her hand, trying to stifle her laughter as Dillon's eyes lit up with delight. "Yeah! We'll make him sing 'Let It Go' in front of everyone!" he declares, already plotting Abel's doom.

"Sounds like a plan," I say, winking at him.

"Thanks, Wolf!" Dillon beams before dashing back into the living room, yelling something about his new plan to his siblings.

Janelle shook her head, clearly torn between exasperation and amusement. "You're such a bad influence," she smiles, her tone teasing as she grabbed two mugs from the cabinet.

"Hey," I said, my voice equally soft. "That's what partners in crime are for."

Her cheeks flushed a light pink, and she busied herself pouring water into the mugs. "Partners in crime, huh?" her voice quieter now.

"That's right," I reply, leaning back in my chair with a grin. "You, me, and the cookie heist crew out there. We're unstoppable."

Janelle laughs softly, shaking her head. But she didn't turn around immediately. Instead, she stood there for a moment longer than necessary, her hands resting on the counter's edge. I could see her shoulders rise and fall as she took a deep breath before finally turning to face me again, holding one of the mugs out.

"For your trouble," she said with a small smile.

I take the mug from her, our fingers brushing briefly. It was nothing—just an accident of proximity—but it still sent a little jolt through me. I didn't imagine how her eyes flicked up to meet mine, either. "So I was wondering how you felt about getting a babysitter this weekend and letting me take you out on a real date?"

Her fingers tighten slightly on the mug she was still holding, her eyes widening just a fraction. I thought she might say no for a second—that I'd misread everything and put my foot in it big time. But then her lips curved into the softest smile, making my chest feel like it might burst.

"A real date, huh?" her voice teasing but warm.

"Yeah," I reply, trying to keep it casual even though my heart was beating loud enough to drown out the kettle's hum. "You know, the kind where you don't have to yell at anyone for trying to stick crayons up their nose or negotiate TV treaties."

She let out a quiet laugh and shakes her head. "You make it sound so glamorous."

I shrug, sipping the tea she'd handed me before replying. "Well, I can't guarantee it'll be fancy. But I can promise good company, decent food, and maybe even a chance to relax for a whole evening. What do you say?"

Janelle tilts her head, considering me with that same soft smile. "You drive a hard bargain, Onyx."

"That's my specialty," I say. With a smile, I rise from my seat and make my way over to her. She sets her cup down as I hug her, kissing her lips.

Before I could give her another kiss, Abel's voice rings out from the living room. "Dillon's trying to make me sing 'Let It Go!' MOM!"

Janelle groans, sinking against the counter and pressing her palms to her face. "This is our life now," she mutters.

I chuckle, setting my mug down and standing. "Want me to handle it? I'm pretty good at mediating disputes. Former Army and all that."

She peeks at me through her fingers, one eyebrow raised. "You're seriously volunteering to step into that chaos?"

I roll up the sleeves of my flannel like I was heading into battle. "Absolutely. I've faced worse. Trust me, a Frozen-versus-Star Wars feud is nothing compared to wrangling a platoon of disgruntled soldiers." I kiss her.

Janelle chuckles, shaking her head in disbelief. "All right, Wolf. You're on. But don't say I didn't warn you."

I salute her and stride toward the living room, where the three kids are mid-battle. This is my life, and I embrace it.

Chapter Seventeen

Janelle

I couldn't resist Onyx's invitation and eagerly agree to spend this weekend with her. The kids are heading over to Mouthpiece and Jenna's place. They have two teenagers and are excited to have younger company in the house.

I'm finishing up on my make-up in the bathroom when Onyx pokes her head in, "You are gorgeous with or without make-up." She gives me a smile and winks at me.

I roll my eyes but can't stop the blush creeping up my neck. "Flattery will get you everywhere, Onyx," I tease, dabbing on a final touch of lipstick. "But if I'm going out on a real date, I'm putting in the effort."

Onyx leans against the doorframe, her arms folded across her chest. She has that lopsided grin that always makes my heart skip a beat. "I'm not sure," she says, a hint of playfulness in her voice. "I'll watch all these people looking at you and wanting you."

I laugh softly, capping the lipstick and turning to face her. "Oh, please. You're the one who's going to have heads turning. Leather jacket, that confident biker swagger—trust me, you'll be the show's star."

She steps closer, her blue eyes locking on mine. "Don't care about anyone else looking at me," she murmurs, her voice dropping just enough to shiver down my spine. "Just want your eyes on me."

Damn it, how does she do that? One sentence, and I'm already melting.

"Well," I manage to say, trying to sound composed despite my knees feeling like jelly. "You've got my attention. Now let's see if whatever you've planned for tonight is as impressive as your smooth talking."

Onyx grins and offers me her arm with a dramatic flourish. "Ma'am, your chariot awaits."

I loop my arm through hers, laughing as she leads me out of the house. Parked in the driveway is her motorcycle, polished to perfection and gleaming under the soft glow of the porch light. A second helmet rests on the seat, waiting for me.

"You weren't kidding about the chariot part," I say, eyeing the bike with excitement and nervousness. It's been years since I've been on one, and never with someone I trusted as much as Onyx.

She smirks, grabbing the helmet and holding it out to me. "Told you, I don't do things halfway. Are you all right with riding? We can take my truck if you'd rather."

The thought of sitting that close to her, my arms wrapped around her waist as we ride into the night, sends a thrill that I can't entirely hide. "I'll take my chances," I reply, slipping the helmet on and securing the strap under my chin.

"Good choice," she says, pulling on her helmet before swinging a leg over the bike with practiced ease. She starts it up, and the engine roars to life, sending a vibration through the night air that makes my heart race for reasons beyond the obvious. She turns back to look at me, her eyes sparkling behind the visor and pats the seat behind her. "Hop on, partner in crime."

I take a deep breath, smoothing my dress before climbing behind her. My hands

hover awkwardly, unsure where to put them until Onyx reaches back and grabs one of them, guiding it firmly around her waist. "Hold tight," she says over the rumble of the engine. "I don't want to lose you halfway there."

"Like I'd let go," I mutter, primarily for my reassurance.

The ride was exhilarating in a way I hadn't expected. The wind rushes past us as we weave through streets bathed in golden light from streetlamps. The city feels alive around us, but I can only focus on the steady warmth of Onyx beneath me and the sense of freedom that comes with being on the open road. I rest my cheek against her back, letting the rhythm of the bike and the scent of leather and faint cologne lull me into a strange sense of peace.

After a while, we pull up outside a cozy little restaurant tucked away from the main roads. Fairy lights are strung along the patio, casting a warm glow over the tables, and soft jazz music drifts through the air. It's intimate, charming, and nothing like I'd expected.

Onyx cuts the engine and helps me off the bike, her hand lingering at my waist as I steady myself. "Well?" she asks, tilting her head toward the restaurant. "Impressed yet?"

I take in the scene, a grin creeping across my face. "I'll admit it. You've outdone yourself."

"Good," she says, leading me toward the entrance. "Because I wasn't coming here just for the food. I figured it should be somewhere special if I'm going to wine and dine you."

I arch an eyebrow at her as we step inside, where the warm interior matches the charm of the patio. "Special, huh? Is this your go-to spot for impressing women?"

Onyx laughs, low and amused, shaking her head as she pulls out a chair for me at a corner table. “Nah. You’re the first person I’ve brought here. Usually, it’s just me and a burger joint if I’m lucky.”

I smirk as I take my seat. “So what you’re saying is...I’m special.”

She leans on the back of my chair, bending down to meet my gaze. Her blue eyes are so intense they make me momentarily forget how to breathe. “You have no idea,” she says softly before straightening up and sitting across from me.

The server arrives with menus, but honestly? I can barely focus on the words in front of me. My eyes dart at Onyx, watching as she casually leans back in her chair, flipping through the menu. This is no big deal; she didn’t just say something to replay in my head for the next week.

“You okay over there?” she asks, her lips twitching upward as if she knows exactly how flustered I am.

“Perfectly fine,” I reply, lifting my menu to hide my face—smooth Janelle. The server comes back, and we pick our entrées. Onyx chose water to drink since she was driving but encouraged me to drink a glass of wine since we don’t have the kids tonight.

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As the waiter leaves the table, I smile at Onyx. We both go to speak simultaneously, which makes us laugh.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this nervous.” Onyx touches the silverware, trying to keep her hands busy.

“We can pretend that we’re at the safe house. We’ve never been at a loss for words there.” I tell her. She smiles back at me.

“You are right.” I search my jacket pockets for my cell phone.

Pulling up the record app, I slide the phone over to her side of the table, “Could you please repeat that so when we argue and think I’m in the wrong, I can play this for you?” I tease her. She picks up my phone, licking her lips before opening her mouth to speak.

“Janelle Pierce, you are right, and I am wrong. Don’t use this unless you’re ready for the consequences.” The husky way she says consequences has me clutching my thighs together. I swallow hard. The waiter interrupts my thoughts to bring us our salad and refill our drinks. I ask for water so I’m not tipsy on the bike.

The conversation started to flow once we relaxed, and I realized we were friends first.

Chapter Eighteen

Wolf

My heart races through dinner because the more time I spend with Janelle, the more I know she's my future. Dinner has been great, and the conversation is flowing. There has been no lull since we initially laughed about our nervousness. I love hearing about the kids, her dreams, and talking about my dad. Janelle knows about my military days and my PTSD. She's gentle about it and asks questions to understand how my mind works.

I paid for dinner and held my hand to her and we left the restaurant hand in hand. "Let's walk before we head home." The city is silent as we walk downtown, even with people walking around us and cars driving by.

"This city is beautiful during Christmas. The kids love the lights and all of the fun activities."

"We always do some fun activities as a club to raise awareness of what we do. It's always a fun time." There's a bookshop where we stop because we notice a few books the kids would like. As we walk through the aisles together, we pick up some books to read for Chloe at bedtime, adventure books for Abel, and history books for Dillon. Janelle and I browse some books for ourselves as well. We read the back of the books; some are quite steamy. I lean into her, "Maybe we can reenact some of the scenes in the books." Janelle does something that completely shocks me; she turns to face me and kisses me right there in the romance aisle. It's a deep and heated kiss. "We need to buy these and get home. Right now." I grab her hand, dragging her toward the register and making Janelle laugh. I am on high alert and must feel Janelle's body near me. I need to taste her, feeling her writhing under me.

The ride back to Janelle's place on the bike seems to take forever. The way her body pressed against mine, her arms squeezing my waist, and feeling her chest rise and fall against my back has me very aware of Janelle. Pulling into the driveway, I shut off the bike and helped Janelle off the bike. We grab the books and walk up the sidewalk to the house.

Once we're inside, we remove our shoes by the door. I grab her hand, taking her to the couch. We sit close, and I place her hair behind her ear. "You're so fucking beautiful." Her cheeks pink with my compliment. I lean in to kiss her, and she meets me halfway. My hand wraps around the back of her neck pulling me closer to me if that is even possible. The little moans she makes as I deepen the kiss has me squeezing my thighs. I want this woman so fucking bad.

Her hands find their way to my jacket, tugging it off my shoulders with a sense of urgency that makes my pulse race even more. I let it fall to the floor without a second thought. My fingers thread through her hair, tilting her head so I can deepen the kiss. She tastes like wine and something sweeter—something distinctly Janelle.

"Are you sure?" I ask breathlessly when we finally break apart for air. My forehead rests against hers, and I'm doing everything I can to keep myself from diving back in. "I don't want to rush you."

She cups my face, her eyes searching mine with an intensity that makes my chest tighten. "Onyx," she says softly, her voice trembling just enough to make me pause. "I've never been surer of anything."

That's all the confirmation I need.

I stand, pulling her up with me as we make our way down the hallway toward her bedroom. The house is quiet, the faint creak of the floorboards beneath our footsteps the only sound accompanying us. I can feel her fingers gripping mine tightly, a mixture of anticipation and trust in her touch. My heartbeat pounds louder with every step, echoing in my ears like a drum.

When we reach the bedroom door, she hesitates for just a moment before pushing it open, revealing a warm and inviting space that feels distinctly hers. There are small touches everywhere—photos of the kids on the dresser, a soft blanket draped over the

bedframe, and a faint scent of lavender lingering in the air.

I pause at the threshold, suddenly overwhelmed by how intimate this moment feels. It's not just the physical pull between us; it's everything—the laughter we've shared, the trust we've built, and the quiet strength she's shown me time and time again. I realize that being here with her means more than I ever thought it could.

Janelle turns to face me, her lips curving into a reassuring smile that makes my knees feel unsteady. "You okay, Onyx?" she asks, her voice carrying a playful lilt that contrasts the tenderness in her eyes.

I nod, swallowing hard as I step into the room. "Yeah," I manage to say, though my voice comes out a little rough. "I just—this feels big, you know?"

Her smile widens, and she takes my hands in hers, guiding me further inside until we're standing at the foot of the bed. "It is big. But it's also just us," she says softly. "And I trust you."

Those three words do something to me—like they've unlocked a part of my heart I didn't even realize I'd closed off. My fingers tighten around hers as I take a deep breath and let myself sink into the moment.

"Okay," I whisper back. "Just us."

She steps closer, her hands sliding up to rest on my shoulders as she leans in. She steps closer, her hands sliding up to rest on my shoulders as she leans in for another kiss. This one is softer, slower—like she's savoring every second of it. My hands find her waist, pulling her flush against me, and I can feel the steady thrum of her heartbeat against my chest. It's grounding in a way I didn't expect, calming the storm of emotions swirling inside me.

Her fingers trail from my shoulders down to the hem of my shirt, hesitating there for just a moment. When she looks up at me, her eyes searching mine for permission, I nod. She lifts it over my head and lets it fall to the floor. The cool air hits my skin, but all I can focus on is the warmth of her touch as her hands explore the scars on my back.

She presses a kiss to one of them—a small gesture that makes my throat tighten and my eyes sting. I want to tell her how much that means to me, how much she means to me, but I can't seem to find the words. "You're incredible," she whispers, her lips brushing against my skin as she speaks. "Every part of you, Onyx. Every scar, every story... it's all a part of who you are, and I wouldn't want you any other way."

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Her words hit like a thunderclap in my chest. I've heard variations of that before—people trying to tell me my scars don't define me, that they're just marks on the surface. But with Janelle, it feels different. It feels real. She isn't dismissing them; she's accepting them as part of me.

I grip her waist tighter, pulling her closer until there's no space left between us. My lips find hers again, this time with more urgency, more need. The heat building between us is undeniable, but there's also this undercurrent of something softer—a vulnerability we're both sharing in this moment.

"Janelle," I murmur against her lips as my hands trail up her sides, I pull back just enough to look at her, brushing a strand of hair away from her face. "You're the incredible one," I say, my voice thick with emotion. "You've been through so much, Janelle. And you're still here. Still standing."

She shakes her head with a small laugh, her fingers tracing idle patterns on my arm. "We're not doing the pain Olympics tonight, Onyx," she teases, though there's no bite in her tone. "This is about us. Not what broke us, but what's building us."

I blink at her words, stunned by their weight and truth. She has this way, this maddeningly beautiful way, of cutting right to the core of things, stripping away all the noise and leaving nothing but clarity in her wake. It's humbling. And it's terrifying. But it's also why I'm here, why I can't pull away from her even if I tried.

"You're right," I say, my voice steadier now, though my heart is still doing somersaults in my chest. "This is about us."

Her smile softens, and she steps back just enough to tug me toward the bed. I let her guide me, the trust between us an unspoken thread pulling tighter with each passing moment. As we sink onto the mattress together, the world outside feels like it's melting away. It's just her and me, wrapped up in something that feels bigger than either of us but grounded in this small, sacred space we've created.

The way she touches me—gentle yet purposeful—feels like a discovery. Her hands map out every inch of me like she's memorizing every detail, every curve, every scar. It's almost too much, the way she looks at me like I'm the only thing in the universe worth noticing. My breath catches in my throat as she presses her lips to my collarbone, then to the hollow of my neck. I feel like I'm unraveling, piece by piece, under her touch.

“Janelle,” I whisper her name like a prayer, my hands sliding up her back to pull her closer. “You’re killing me here.”

She chuckles softly against my skin, her breath warm and teasing. “Good,” she murmurs, nipping lightly at my shoulder. “Because you’re driving me crazy too.”

I can't help but laugh, the sound breaking through the intensity of the moment like a ray of sunshine. “We’re quite the pair,” I say, my voice low but filled with affection. “A bounty hunter and a mom of three. Who would’ve thought?”

She stands before me, and I crouch down to gently nip at the delicate curve of her neck. My lips trail down her skin, feeling her pulse quicken beneath them. I let my hands explore her, too, tracing over the curves and planes of her body with a reverence I didn't know I was capable of. Every soft gasp, every quiet moan from her lips spurs me on, urging me to show her just how much I want her—how much I care for her.

“Onyx,” she whispers my name like it's a prayer, her fingers tangling in my hair as

she pulls me closer. The sound of it sends a shiver down my spine, and I can't help the small smile that tugs at my lips.

"Yeah?" I murmur against the hollow of her throat, pressing a kiss there before looking up to meet her gaze. Her eyes are dark and full of something that makes my stomach flip—desire mixed with trust, with love.

"Don't stop," she says softly but firmly, her voice carrying a weight that makes my chest tighten in the best way possible. I nod, my lips brushing against her skin again as I follow her silent command, letting her guide me as much as I'm guiding myself. Every touch, every kiss feels like a promise I'm making, and keeping, to her. The world outside fades into nothingness as we lose ourselves in the connection between us. Each kiss, each touch is a conversation, saying all the things we don't have words for yet. Her breath hitches as my lips graze her shoulder, and I pause, letting the moment linger.

"You okay?" I ask softly, pulling back just enough to search her face.

Her lips curve into a smile that's equal parts sweet and mischievous. "Better than okay," she whispers. "But you really don't have to keep asking."

I chuckle, feeling a little sheepish. "Sorry. Old habit."

She shakes her head, her fingers brushing my cheek. "Don't apologize. I like it. Makes me feel... cared for."

I grin at that, leaning into her touch. "Well, get used to it," I say, my voice low but steady. "Because that's not changing anytime soon."

I gently take the bottom of her shirt and look for permission from her in the same way she had done with me. Her nod is subtle but sure, and I carefully lift the fabric over

her head, letting it join mine on the floor. My breath catches as I take her in—her strength, her softness, every inch of her that tells a story I want to learn by heart.

“God, Janelle,” I murmur, unable to stop myself. “You’re beautiful.” I softly press my lips against the curve of her breast, savoring its warmth and softness beneath my touch.

Her breath hitches, but she doesn't pull away. Instead, her hands find their way to my face, cradling it as if I'm something fragile, something precious. I don't think I've ever been looked at like this before—like I'm not just wanted but needed. It's overwhelming and grounding all at once.

I slowly trail my lips to her other breast, savoring the taste of her skin as I slip my tongue out to caress it before pulling back just slightly, my breath mingling with hers as I look up at her face. Her eyes are half-closed, her lips parted in a way that makes my heart stutter. She's breathtaking like this—completely unguarded and trusting me with every part of her.

“Janelle,” I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. “You’re everything.”

She lets out a shaky laugh, her fingers sliding through my hair and tugging gently. “You keep saying things like that, and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with myself,” she murmurs, but there's no hesitation in her touch, no doubt in the way she holds me close.

“Just let me love you,” I reply softly, the words leaving my lips before I even realize I've said them. And oh, how true they feel. They hang in the air between us for a moment, heavy and raw, before she leans down and captures my mouth in a kiss that steals my breath away. It's not hurried or frenzied—it's deliberate and filled with meaning, like she's answering me without needing to say a word. Her lips move against mine, soft and sure, and I lose myself in the way she feels, the way she tastes.

I pull her closer, my arms wrapping around her waist as if I can keep this moment frozen in time. "I don't know what I did to deserve you," I murmur against her lips, the words tumbling out before I can stop them.

She pulls back just slightly, her eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that makes my chest tighten. Looking into my eyes, "Let's not speak anymore. I want you to show you how much you mean to me." She gently brushed his lips against mine, igniting a fire within me. "I want to make love to you until the stars fade from the sky."

My hands find their way to her hips, pulling her closer until there's not an inch of space left between us. Her words echo in my mind, and all I can think about is making her feel safe, cherished, adored.

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Slowly, I lay her back onto the bed, my lips never straying far from hers. The way she responds to me—her soft sighs, the way her body arches into mine—it's like a melody only we know the lyrics to. I let myself get lost in it, in her, because right now, nothing else matters.

I sit up and trail my fingers down her stomach to the button on her pants. Her breath catches as my fingers linger there, and she gazes up at me, her eyes searching mine. I pause, letting the moment stretch, giving her the chance to say no, to stop this if she wants to. But instead, she reaches down, her hand covering mine, guiding me to undo the button.

"Onyx," she whispers, her voice barely audible but filled with a kind of certainty that sends a shiver through me. "I trust you."

Those three words hit me harder than I expect. Trust isn't something I take lightly—not with my past, not with hers. It's a fragile thing, and yet here she is, handing it to me like it's the most natural thing in the world. I kiss her again, slower this time, pouring everything I feel into it—my gratitude, my desire, my promise to never break what she's giving me.

As I slide her jeans down her legs, she watches me with an intensity that makes my heart race. She is wearing a red bra and lace panty set, but my gaze is drawn to a small damp spot on her lace panties, igniting a deep primal desire within me. My inner beast awakens, yearning to possess her completely.

Leaning forward I put my face in the apex of her thighs and cannot stop from taking a big breath in and smelling her essence. The scent of her is intoxicating, like a drug I

never knew I needed until now. It's earthy, real, and uniquely her. My breath hitches as I steady myself, pulling back just enough to meet her gaze again. Her cheeks are flushed, her chest rising and falling with each shallow breath, but there's no hesitation in the way she looks back at me. If anything, there's an unspoken challenge in her eyes—a dare, a plea.

"Are you sure about this?" I whisper, my voice low and raw. I need to hear it again, to know that every step forward is one she wants as much as I do.

Her hand slides into my hair again, tugging just enough to send a delicious shiver down my spine. "Onyx," she says softly but firmly, her lips curving into that same sweet yet mischievous smile. "Stop overthinking and just love me."

My lips quirk into a grin before I press a soft kiss to the inside of her thigh, letting my lips linger against her skin. "Your wish is my command," I murmur, my voice thick with affection and a hint of teasing edge. I glance up at her, catching the way her eyes flutter closed, how her fingers tighten in my hair like she's bracing herself for what's to come.

"Patience," I murmur against her skin, trailing kisses down one leg and then back up the other. Her body trembles beneath me, her breath coming in short gasps as I take my time savoring every inch of her.

"Patience?" she repeats, her voice a breathy mix of frustration and laughter. "You're killing me here, Onyx."

I chuckle softly, nipping at the sensitive spot just above her knee. "Good things come to those who wait," I tease, though my own pulse is racing like never before. The truth is, I don't want to rush this—don't want to take a single second for granted. She deserves more than that. We both do.

Her laughter turns into a low moan as I press a lingering kiss to the spot where her thigh meets her hip, my hands gliding slowly up the curves of her legs. That sound—God, that sound—is going to haunt me in the best way possible. It's like a melody I didn't know I needed to hear until now.

"Onyx," she breathes, and there's something in the way she says my name that makes me pause for just a moment. It's not just the need in her voice—it's the trust, the vulnerability, the way she's giving herself to me completely. It takes everything in me not to lose myself right then and there.

"Yeah?" I breathe against her skin, my lips brushing so lightly it feels like a whisper.

She lifts her head slightly to look at me, her dark eyes full of emotions I don't think either of us can name yet. "I've never..." She hesitates, biting her bottom lip like she's unsure if she should continue.

I pause, my heart pounding as I lift myself up just enough to look her in the eye. "Never what?" I ask gently, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face. My voice is soft, but there's no mistaking the weight of my curiosity—and concern.

She swallows hard, her cheeks flushing even deeper. "I've never... been with someone who made me feel this way," she says finally, her voice barely above a whisper. "Like I'm not broken. Like I'm... worth something."

Her words hit me like a freight train, and for a moment, I forget how to breathe. God, this woman. How could she not see how incredible she is? How strong and beautiful and worthy of every damn thing this world has to offer?

"Janelle," I say softly, my fingers tracing gentle patterns along her side. "You're not just worth something—you're worth everything." My throat tightens as I speak. "And I'll spend the rest of my life proving that to you, if you let me."

The last shred of self-control evaporates as I slide my fingers beneath her lace panties. "Do you like these?" I whisper, and she shakes her head frantically. Without hesitation, I tear them apart at the sides, revealing her bare skin to me.

Her body is beautiful and I look to see her bare pussy I can't help but admire the glistening arousal between her thighs. "God, you're so wet for me," I rasp, my voice thick with desire. Her cheeks flush even more, but she doesn't say anything as I slip a finger inside her. Her pussy gripped my fingers and I thought I may orgasm just from how her juices gathering on my fingers.

Her body clenches around me, and she moans softly, her eyes slipping shut. "Feels so good," she mumbles, arching her hips against my touch.

"This is just the beginning," I promise her, my voice raw with need. "I plan on spending all night worshipping every inch of this gorgeous body of yours."

Chapter Nineteen

Janelle

Onyx made good on her promise of worshipping my body. She also taught me how to please her as this is my bi awakening or switching my sexuality or whatever it is but one thing for sure is, I'm head over heels for this woman.

I stare at the ceiling while Onyx is asleep on my chest. I run my hand down her back as I think back to early this morning with my head between her thighs and her screaming my name. I never knew sex could be this good or feel this amazing. With Jack, it was always about his pleasure and making sure he was getting off. When he would finish, I'd go take a shower and take care of myself.

I slowly move Onyx off my body because I need to pee. I kiss her forehead before

walking into the bathroom. I do my business and head back to the bedroom. Onyx is sitting up with the sheet wrapped around her naked body. I'm walking around completely naked, not ashamed and with her lust filled eyes on me, I feel sexy even powerful.

“Good morning.” Onyx's blonde curly hair is everywhere which makes me smile.

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“Good morning, beautiful.” I crawl onto the bed and kiss her. She wraps her hand around my brown hair controlling my movements. We both moan and I straddle her. “I could get used to waking up like this.”

“Me too. I never thought I’d find someone who I’d want to spend my life with or become a part of a family.” I smile. I can’t help it. This woman makes everything brighter and sweeter. “What do you want to do today?” Onyx runs her hands up my thighs. She starts out kissing my neck, leaving butterfly kisses to my collarbone, licking the swell of my breasts. I arch into her and god, I love the feel of her on my body.

“I think I’m going to be addicted to you,” I whisper against Onyx’s hair as her mouth is sucking on my nipple. I groan loudly. “God yes.” Onyx giggles.

“I love how your body comes alive with my touch.” Onyx is looking up at me through hooded eyes. “I’ve only had my mouth on your neck and nipples and I can smell your arousal. If I put my fingers inside you, I bet they’ll come out soaked.” I shiver at her words.

“Please. I need you to make me come,” I beg Onyx. She grabs my thighs flipping me onto the bed as Onyx goes straight for my pussy. Onyx’s tongue sucking on my clit makes my hips buck off the bed.

“So, fucking sweet. I love the taste of your pussy. I could be between your legs like this for days at a time. If I could I’d spend the whole weekend here.” Onyx kisses my thighs before flicking my clit with her tongue as she slowly moves her fingers in and out of me. I could come right now. Her dirty talk in the bedroom is hot. “Baby, I want

your cum all over my tongue, dripping down my chin.”

“Yes, please!” I beg. “I want your mouth on my pussy. I need your hands on my body.” Onyx sucks on my clit while her fingers are inside me, in and out, twisting, and even a scissor like movement. It’s pure heaven. Every nerve ending is awake. My hips buck up as she bites on my clit. “God, yes.”

“Does my girl like pain with her pleasure?” I shrug. “That is something we can explore. The world is ours to do as we please.”

“Yes. All of my firsts are with you. I want this with you and I want to see where our sex life can go.” I know I’m starting to ramble some because my thoughts are all over the place. I’ve never had this kind of communication in bed or in a partner. I open my mouth to say something but Onyx goes back to sucking my clit and all thoughts of talking fly away.

“I want you to play with your nipples. Imagine it’s me playing if you need inspiration,” Onyx tells me as she stares at me through my thighs. I smirk at her as I roll my nipples before tugging on them. Onyx watches me and she licks her lips. The desire in her eyes sends shivers through me. The pain of me playing with my nipples, Onyx focusing on my clit with her mouth and fingers moving in and out has me bucking my hips.

“I’m so close,” I whisper.

“Come for me, baby.” Onyx sucks on my clit, and I scream out my pleasure as my pussy convulses around Onyx’s fingers. Onyx climbs up my body and kisses me and I can taste myself on her tongue. This kiss is primal, a claiming of sorts and I’m happy to claim Onyx too.

My future is looking bright, and it has everything to do with the woman kissing me.

The End

Epilogue

Wolf

The squeals of about ten six-year-olds make me smile as I stand at the kitchen window watching Chloe and her friends during her birthday party. It's been a year since Janelle and her kids came into my life. Jack was sentenced to thirty-five years in prison. Dillon and Abel did an amazing job testifying and so did my girl. The divorce was finalized a month ago and Janelle got down on one knee the day after proposing marriage to me. The kids all had parts in the proposal and it made me cry. I never thought I'd be here but I can't stop smiling.

"Hey you." Janelle comes up behind me and hugs me. "Are you ready to run yet?" she teases me as she kisses my temple.

"I might be." I laugh. "They are loud." I spin in her arms resting my hands on her hips. "But I'm not sure who is having more fun, Chloe and her friends or Hatchet." We both laugh.

"One of things I always worried about when we first left Patrick was having a male presence in their life. The boys will have questions I can't answer. You gave them a grandfather, lots of uncles, and a couple of cousins. Mallory and Wesley are amazing with the kids. I'm a lucky woman. I'm marrying my best friend who happens to be the love of my life and gaining a ready-made family."

"And you gave me a new found reason for getting up in the morning. I'm also happy to be mama to the three best kids I know." Janelle wipes a tear. I kiss her before we hear a bunch of kids yelling for cake. "We better get out there before someone tries to eat Rumble." I grab the princess cake and walk out the sliding door. "Who is ready for some cake?" I sing as I put it down on the picnic table.

“Mama! It’s a wolf princess just like I asked for.” Chloe wraps her arms around my legs. “I love it.”

“It’s your birthday and whatever the birthday girl wants, she gets.” I wink at her.

“Since it’s my birthday, can I get a baby sister?” Chloe’s big eyes are staring up at me.

Rumble barks out a laugh. “I think you and the Mrs. are missing the one part to do that.” My brothers laugh as I death glare them.

“What part are they missing Rumble?” Chloe stares back at him with that childlike awe.

Rumble begins to stutter then yells, “We should be singing ‘Happy Birthday’ to our girl so we can eat cake.” Chloe easily distracted with sugar goes back to being the star of the show. I can’t stop the smile on my face because my life is perfect. I got the girl, the kids, and my family by my side.