



# Monstrosity

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Mc

**Description:** Years ago, I made a promise over my wife's grave.

Rio

I promised I'd kill every last Culebra bastard who took her from me. I'd make them pay for murdering my pregnant wife and leaving me to raise our daughters alone.

I've kept that promise. One bullet at a time.

But there's one thing I didn't plan on—Dasha becoming everything I never knew I needed.

She's been there through the nightmares, the rage, the guilt. Watching my girls like they're her own. Looking at me like I'm still worth saving.

I've fought like hell to keep her at arm's length. Good girls don't fall for killers. And I'm the worst kind of killer—the kind who enjoys the work.

But when Bembe threatens her to get to me, everything goes up in flames.

She thinks I'm her friend. Her protector. She has no idea she's been mine since the day she first smiled at my daughters.

Now the cartel's about to learn what happens when you threaten a dead man's only reason for living.

\*\*\*Monstrosity is the fifth book in the Raiders of Valhalla MC: New Blood by USA Today Bestselling Author, Elizabeth Knox. It's a dark motorcycle club, friends-to-lovers romance. Please note, this is intended for mature audiences only

**Total Pages (Source):** 105

# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

Rio

The abandoned Tyson meat processing plant squats in the industrial wasteland like a tomb, all broken windows and rusted metal bleeding into the Florida night.

It's the perfect place for what needs doing.

My phone buzzes as Tor kills the engine.

Doran's name lights up the screen, along with a simple message:

Gift delivered as promised. Enjoy.

I pocket the phone without responding. The Bratva prince keeps his word—I'll give him that.

Three hours ago, he texted intel about Miguel Santos making a late-night pickup at this exact location.

Personal favor, he said.

But this isn't about favors or alliances.

This is about Flora.

"Place gives me the fucking creeps," Bodul mutters from the passenger seat, eyeing the plant's skeletal frame.

Kid's barely twenty-six, still thinks prospect work is about riding bikes and looking tough.

He'll learn tonight that our world runs on different fuel.

Blood fuel.

"Good," I say, checking my Glock before sliding it back into its holster. "Creepy means isolated. Isolated means no witnesses."

Tor kills the headlights, plunging us into darkness thick enough to taste.

He's been with the Raiders longer, knows the drill.

Knows what I am when the leash comes off.

"Target secured?" I ask.

"Zip-tied to a chair in the main floor kill room," Tor confirms. "Been there twenty minutes, probably pissed himself twice by now."

"Good." I step out into air that smells like decay and old death. "Bodul, you're observing tonight. This is where you learn, not participate."

"What am I supposed to learn?"

I look at him across the roof of the car—this kid who thinks violence is about anger and passion.

Who hasn't learned that the most effective monsters are the ones who never lose control.

"How to make someone tell you everything they know before they die," I say simply.

"And how to enjoy the work."

The plant's main entrance hangs open like a screaming mouth.

Inside, our footsteps echo against concrete that's seen too much blood over the decades.

Some of it animal.

## Page 2

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Some of it not.

The kill floor stretches out before us, old hooks dangling from chains like metal fingers.

Someone—Tor, probably—has set up a single work light, casting harsh shadows that dance and writhe with each sway of the overhead chains.

And there, center stage under the light, sits Miguel Santos.

He's smaller than I expected.

Mid-forties, soft around the middle, the kind of man who orders violence but doesn't get his hands dirty.

Zip-tied to a metal chair, duct tape over his mouth, eyes wide with the kind of terror that comes from knowing exactly who you're dealing with.

Smart man.

Fear means he'll talk faster.

"Gentlemen," I say conversationally, pulling on leather gloves. "Meet Miguel Santos. Mid-level lieutenant in the Culebra organization. Responsible for moving product through three elementary school zones, including the ones the club kids go to."

Santos makes a muffled sound behind the tape.

"Where my daughters go," I continue, circling him slowly. "Funny how the world works, isn't it, Miguel? You poison children, and fate delivers you to a man whose children you threatened."

I nod to Tor, who rips the tape from Santos' mouth in one swift motion.

The man gasps, tears streaming down his face.

"Please," he wheezes. "I got kids too, man. I got?—"

"Valentina, age twelve. Juan, age nine." I stop in front of him, letting him see death in my eyes. "I know, Miguel. I know everything about you. Where they go to school. What time your wife picks up groceries. Which playground Valentina likes to visit after school on Wednesdays."

His face goes white. "How do you?—"

"Because knowledge is power, and power is survival." I crouch down to his eye level. "And right now, your survival depends on how useful you can be."

I stand, walking to the small table Tor's set up with my tools.

Nothing fancy—pliers, a knife, a small blowtorch, some other implements that have served me well over the years.

"Let's start simple," I say, selecting the knife. "I want to know about the existing Culebra distribution routes in Jacksonville and Miami. Names, locations, schedules."

"I can't—they'll kill me?—"

"Miguel." My voice drops to barely above a whisper, the tone that's made grown men

piss themselves. "They're not here.Iam. And I promise you, what I'll do to you will make anything Bembe threatens seem like a fucking massage."

For the next hour, Miguel Santos becomes very cooperative.

He spills everything—drug routes, safe house locations, upcoming shipments, personnel movements.

I work methodically, starting with small cuts when he hesitates, escalating to more creative persuasion when needed.

Nothing lethal, nothing that would end our conversation prematurely.

Bodul watches from the shadows, silent but attentive.

He's learning, and Tor keeps watch, occasionally checking his phone for updates.

This is business, and while Tor would normally take the lead, I have unresolved issues with the Culebra cartel.

## Page 3

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The fuckers who took my wife from me.

The ones who left my daughters motherless.

"The elementary schools," I say, making a shallow cut along Santos's forearm. "Why target kids?"

"N-not targeting them directly," he gasps. "Just... convenient locations. Less heat from cops, you know? Who expects dealers hanging around playgrounds? They're too busy looking for pedos to worry about us."

"Men who've studied your operation for two years." I clean the blade on a rag. "Men who've been watching, waiting for the right moment to cut the rot out of their city."

"Look, man, I just follow orders?—"

"Whose orders?" The knife finds the soft spot between his thumb and forefinger. "Bembe's? Or someone higher?"

"Bembe! It's all Bembe! He wants Jacksonville locked down, wants to push north into Georgia—fuck, he wants everything he can get his greedy hands on!"

Blood drips steadily onto the concrete. "Keep talking."

"He's been planning something big. Says he's got leverage now, something that'll bring the MC to their knees." Santos is babbling now, pain and fear making him stupid. "Says he knows how to hurt the guys who matter most."



My hand stills. "What kind of leverage?"

"I don't know the specifics, man, I swear! Just that he's been watching, learning routines. Looking for soft spots."

"Soft spots." I set the knife down, picking up the pliers. "In the MC?"

"In the leadership! The guys with the most to lose!" He's practically screaming now. "Families, kids, girlfriends—anyone who matters to the shot-callers!"

Cold spreads through my chest like ice water. "How long has he been watching?"

"Months! Maybe longer! Please, that's all I know, I swear on my kids' lives!"

"Don't." My voice goes deadly calm. "Don't swear on children's lives. Not when you've been poisoning them with your product."

I apply the pliers to his pinky finger, just enough pressure to get his attention. "Names, Miguel. Which families has he been watching?"

"I don't know names! I just deliver shit and collect money!" The finger snaps with a wet crack. His scream echoes off the concrete walls. "Jesus fucking Christ!"

"Wrong answer." I move to the next finger. "Try again."

"The president's daughters! Runes's twins!" Blood and snot stream down his face. "And some coffee shop girl, I think? Someone important to one of you?"

The world stops.

Everything goes perfectly, terrifyingly still.

Coffee shop girl.

Meghan's coffee shop.

Tor is even more interested than before. Meghan's his ol' lady.

"What coffee shop?" My voice sounds like it's coming from underwater.

"I don't know! Some place downtown! Bembe's got pictures, surveillance shit! Says she's the key to breaking one of your guys!"

The pliers clatter to the floor.

Five years.

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Five fucking years I've been hunting Culebra scum, making them pay for what they took from me.

Five years of careful distance, of keeping my two worlds separate, of protecting what matters most by never letting it touch the darkness.

And they've likely been watching her too.

Watching Dasha.

"You know her, don't you?" Santos' voice is barely a whisper, but it cuts through my rage like a blade. "The coffee shop girl. That's your weak spot."

The truth is, there are multiple women associated with the club who work at the coffee shop.

It could be any one of them.

I turn to look at him, and whatever he sees in my face makes him shrink back in the chair.

"Tell me exactly what Bembe knows."

"I don't?—"

The roar rips from my throat, five years of controlled violence finally breaking free.

"Tell me!"

"Okay! Okay!" He's sobbing now, broken finger dangling uselessly. "He knows about your routine! How you drop your kids off every morning, how she makes your coffee special, how you look at her! He's got photos, man, hundreds of them!"

So, this is about Dasha.

But... I'm still just a prospect.

Why the fuck would they be watching the woman I care about?

"What photos?"

"You with your kids at her shop! Her walking to her car at night! Her apartment building! He knows where she lives, where she works, what time she gets off!"

Each word is a nail in my coffin. A knife in my heart. A promise of history repeating itself.

"He knows she matters to you," Santos continues, mistaking my silence for permission to keep talking. "Says when the time's right, he'll use her to make your club hurt even more, to make you pay for what you did. He said taking one woman wasn't enough, he's taking the other too."

"What I did?" The knife is back in my hand, though I don't remember picking it up. "What I did was justice."

"You killed his cousin last year! Bembe's been planning revenge ever since!"

"His cousin?" He hasn't even named who the bastard is. "Wait... was he the one who liked to rape the girls he was trafficking. Yeah, I remember that fucker!"

I remember every detail. How he begged. How he cried. How he died, slow and scared and alone.

"Please, man, I'm just telling you what I know! Don't kill the messenger!"

"I'm not going to kill the messenger," I say quietly, setting the knife aside. "I'm going to kill the child poisoner who just told me my family is being watched."

"Wait—"

"But first, I want you to tell me about Flora."

Santos goes perfectly still. Even bleeding and broken, he recognizes the name.

"I... I don't know any Flora?—"

"Flora Maria Rojas." I pull up a chair, sitting directly in front of him. "My wife. Five years ago. Shot in the chest while she was pregnant with my youngest daughter."

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His face drains of all color. "Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck, you're?—"

"I'm Riodhr Rojas. Yes." I lean forward, close enough to smell his fear-sweat. "And you were there that night, weren't you, Miguel?"

"No! No, man, I wasn't even in Tallahassee five years ago!"

"Liar." The knife slides between his ribs, just deep enough to nick a lung. Not fatal. Not yet. "I have security footage from the day it went down. You were there. I saw you with my own eyes."

"Okay! Okay, yes! But I didn't pull the trigger! I was just the driver! It wasn't my call!"

"Whose call was it?"

"You already know the answer. We just did our jobs, man. We were told to hit your club hard, and we did."

"Flora wasn't involved in any of this." Even saying the words, all I can think about is her.

My pregnant wife, her only concern being a good mother to our daughters.

"She did more than you think," Santos gasps. "We saw the logs. She reported suspicious cargo manifests. Cost us three million in product and got six of our guys arrested."

"So you killed her."

"No! I just drove the car!"

"But you watched." I twist the knife slightly, just enough to make him scream. "You sat in your car and watched them murder my pregnant wife."

"She fought, man! God help me, she fought so hard! Tried to protect her belly. I thought she was gonna pull through. I really did! You were all there, it all happened so fast. I... I didn't know she was gonna actually die!"

The knife slides deeper.

Something breaks inside my chest. Something that's been carefully locked away for five years, wrapped in rage and buried under an ocean of blood.

"We thought... we thought maybe the EMTs could save her!"

This is pointless.

He will beg and fight for his life for as long as he can, but it won't make a difference.

I stand, walking back to the tool table.

This time, I skip the subtle instruments and go straight for the heavy artillery.

"Miguel Santos," I say conversationally, selecting a particular item that gleams under the work light. "You've been very helpful tonight. More helpful than you know."

"Please, man, I told you everything! I cooperated!"

"Yes, you did. You told me exactly what I needed to hear." I turn to face him, holding my chosen tool. "You even confirmed that the woman I love is in danger because of animals like you. You confirmed that my wife was an innocent who died because she tried to protect children from your poison. And you confirmed that five years of hunting your kind hasn't been nearly enough."

"What... what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to show you what happens to men who threaten children. What happens to men who kill pregnant women." I flip the switch, and the blowtorch hisses to life. "And then I'm going to make sure Bembe gets the message loud and clear."

"Wait! Wait! I can help you! I can tell you where Bembe is hiding! I can?—"

"Miguel." I adjust the flame to a beautiful blue cone. "You've already told me everything useful. Now you're just going to help me send a message."

What follows isn't interrogation anymore. It's art.

It's justice.



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It's five years of controlled rage finally finding an outlet worthy of its intensity.

He screams until his voice gives out.

Then he screams some more, silent now but no less agonized.

I work methodically, precisely, taking my time to ensure the message is clear.

This is what happens to men who threaten my family.

This is what happens to men who take mothers from their children.

This is what happens when you mistake Rio Rojas for someone who shows mercy.

When it's finally over, when Santos is nothing but meat and message, I step back to admire my work.

Bodul is pale but attentive, learning lessons he'll carry for the rest of his life.

Tor just nods approvingly—he's seen my handiwork before.

"Clean this up," I tell Bodul, stripping off my bloody gloves. "I want you and Gorm to make sure it's found in Culebra territory. Let them know what's coming."

"Who are you to give me orders?" Bodul asks, voice slightly hoarse.

I meet his eyes until understanding dawns. "I have permission from the VP and Prez

to give orders to the other prospects. Tor can vouch for me, and you should know better."

I check my phone as we walk back to the car.

Three missed calls from the clubhouse, two texts from Geirolf about timing, and one message that makes my blood run cold.

From Dasha:

Going in early today. Not sure what time you'll be home. Girls are asleep in their room. Tindra will be there babysitting. Coffee's ready for morning. Drive safe.

Simple words. Innocent words.

Words that confirm everything Santos told me.

They know about her. They know she matters. They know exactly how to hurt me.

"Drop me at home," I tell Tor as we climb into the car. "I need to check on something."

The drive takes twenty minutes, which feels like hours.

I sit in the back seat, watching Jacksonville blur past until we're back in Tallahassee, thinking about Flora's last words and Dasha's innocent text and the terrible symmetry of history preparing to repeat itself.

At a red light, my phone buzzes again.

This time it's not Dasha.

Unknown number:

Nice work at the plant. Bembe sends his regards.

Below the text is a photo.

Dasha's car in our driveway.

Time stamp: forty-seven minutes ago.

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While I was torturing Santos, they were watching her.

Learning her patterns.

Planning her death.

I forward the message to Doran immediately, then to the clubhouse, then to every number I trust.

Within minutes, my phone is buzzing with responses—offers of help, demands for intel, promises of violence that would make Santos' death look gentle.

But all I can think about is Flora, bleeding out at the pool party.

All I can think about is Dasha, working at the coffee joint, with no idea that she's become a target in a war she never asked to join.

Tor parks in my driveway at 4:23 AM.

The house is dark except for the kitchen light Dasha always leaves on—a beacon of warmth in the predawn darkness.

I get out of the vehicle, and Tor heads back.

I watch his taillights disappear into the darkness, then turn to study my house.

From the outside, it looks peaceful. Safe. The kind of place where good things

happen to good people.

But I know better.

I know that monsters like me don't get to keep good things without paying for them in blood.

I know that Dasha's kindness and my daughters' innocence are luxuries this world doesn't allow.

I know that Bembe Reyes is coming for everything I love, just like his people came for Flora.

The difference is, this time I'm ready.

This time, I will be ready when they come calling.

This time, I'll make sure they understand exactly what it costs to threaten a dead man's only reasons for living.

My phone buzzes one final time as I unlock my front door.

Another unknown number, another message that confirms my worst fears:

Tomorrow night. The coffee shop girl learns what it costs to matter to you, Rio. Say hello to Dasha for us.

I delete the message and slip inside, moving quietly through my own house like the ghost I've become.

In the living room, toys are scattered across the carpet—evidence of a normal

evening, of children playing while someone who loves them watches carefully.

On the couch, Dasha sleeps curled under my leather jacket, still wearing her Beans & Babes apron.

Her dark hair spills across the cushions, and in sleep, she looks younger than her thirty-nine years.

Innocent.

Untouched by the violence that defines my world.

She has no idea that loving me is a death sentence.

She has no idea that her kindness toward my daughters has painted a target on her back.

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She has no idea that tomorrow night, everything changes.

But I know.

And I'm going to make sure Bembe Reyes learns exactly why I'm not the kind of man who should be fucked with.

Some mistakes you only make once.

Threatening what's mine is the kind of mistake that gets you and everyone you love erased from existence.

I settle into the chair across from the couch and watch Dasha sleep, memorizing every detail of her peaceful face.

In a few hours, she'll wake up to coffee and chaos, to little girl laughter and the normal rhythms of a life she's chosen to share with us.

She deserves that normal life.

She deserves safety and happiness and a man who brings her flowers instead of bloody clothes.

But she's mine now, whether she knows it or not.

And I'll burn the whole fucking world down before I let history repeat itself.

## CHAPTER ONE

Dasha

The morning light filters through Rio's kitchen windows like honey, casting everything in that soft golden glow that makes even the most ordinary moments feel sacred.

I've been up for twenty minutes already, moving quietly through his space like I belong here—which, after two years of this routine, I suppose I do.

The coffee maker gurgles to life, filling the silence with its familiar rhythm.

I know exactly how Rio likes his coffee: black, two sugars, in the blue ceramic mug Florencia made him in art class last year.

It's chipped along the rim and slightly lopsided, but he refuses to drink from anything else when he's home.

I'm wearing one of his old Raiders of Valhalla t-shirts—the soft black cotton that smells like his cologne and something uniquely him—over a pair of sleep shorts.

My hair's twisted into a messy bun secured with whatever elastic I could find in his junk drawer, and I haven't bothered with makeup.

This is as real as I get, and somehow, in this kitchen that's become more familiar than my own apartment, that feels okay.

Normal, even.

The eggs sizzle in the pan as I flip them carefully, making sure the yolks stay intact.



Florencia likes hers runny so she can dip her toast, while Cali prefers hers scrambled with cheese.

Five-year-olds have very specific opinions about breakfast, and after two years of being a regular with their morning routines, I know every preference, every quirk, every way to make these little girls smile.

Footsteps on the hardwood signal Rio's approach before I see him.

My body responds before my brain catches up—that familiar flutter in my stomach, the way my pulse quickens just from knowing he's near.

It's pathetic, really, how affected I am by this man who sees me as nothing more than his daughters' babysitter and his friend.

When I turn to grab plates from the cabinet, he's standing in the doorway.

My breath catches.

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He's fresh from the shower, dark hair still damp and slightly curled at the ends, wearing well-worn jeans that hang perfectly on his hips and a black t-shirt that stretches across shoulders broad enough to carry the weight of the world.

Which, knowing Rio's job with the club, he probably does.

But there's something different about him this morning.

Something tighter around his eyes, a tension in the set of his jaw that wasn't there yesterday.

Dark circles shadow his eyes like he didn't sleep, and when our gazes meet, there's an intensity there that makes my skin prickle with awareness.

"Morning," I say softly, already reaching for his mug. "Coffee's ready."

"Thank you." His voice is rougher than usual, gravelly with sleep and something else I can't identify.

Our fingers brush as I hand him the mug, and that simple contact sends electricity shooting up my arm.

He doesn't pull away immediately—neither do I—and for just a moment, we're connected by nothing more than coffee and the charged air between us.

God, I want him.

The thought hits me with its usual force, leaving me slightly breathless.

Five years of morning routines, of shared dinners and bedtime stories, of being part of his family without actually being part of his family, and I still react to him like a teenager with her first crush.

"You're up early," he observes, taking a sip of his coffee.

His eyes close briefly in appreciation—I've perfected his morning ritual down to the exact temperature.

"Couldn't sleep." Which is true, though not for the reasons he might think.

I was lying in his guest room—the room that's basically become mine—thinking about him down the hall.

Wondering what would happen if I walked those fifteen steps to his bedroom door.

Wondering if he ever thinks about me the way I think about him.

Wondering why, after two years of dancing around each other, we haven't crossed the line we both seem to want to cross.

"Everything okay?" There's genuine concern in his voice, and when I look at him, he's studying my face with those dark eyes that see everything.

"Yeah, just..." I wave a hand vaguely, turning back to the stove to flip the last egg.

"You know how it is."

I don't finish the thought because how do you tell a man that you were awake thinking about what his hands would feel like on your skin?

How do you explain that you've memorized the way he looks at your mouth when he thinks you're not paying attention?

How do you admit that you've been in love with him for longer than you care to admit?

Rio moves behind me to reach for napkins from the counter, and suddenly he's there—his chest nearly brushing my back, his arm extending around me, the heat of his body radiating through the thin cotton of his t-shirt.

Then his free hand settles on my lower back.

The touch is light, could be completely innocent—just Rio reaching around me for napkins.

But his palm is warm against my spine, his fingers spread wide, and when he leans forward that final inch to grab what he needs, I can feel his breath against my ear.

Chills race down my spine, but not the kind that come from cold.

These are the good kind, the kind that pool low in my belly and make my knees weak.

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His hand doesn't move from my back, and I find myself holding my breath, afraid that any movement will break whatever spell has fallen over us.

"Dasha." My name is barely a whisper, but I hear something in it that makes my heart stutter.

I start to turn in the circle of his arm, wanting to see his face, wanting to know if this moment means what I think it means.

But before I can complete the motion, Cali's voice echoes down the stairs.

"Daddy! I can't find my purple socks!"

Rio's hand drops from my back like I've burned him, and he steps away so quickly I actually feel the loss of his warmth.

The moment shatters like glass, leaving me standing at the stove with trembling hands and a racing heart.

"I'll go help her," he says, his voice carefully controlled. But when I risk a glance at him, his jaw is tight and there's something almost painful in his expression.

"Rio—"

"I'll go help her," he repeats, already heading for the stairs. "The purple ones are probably in the laundry room."

And then he's gone, leaving me alone in the kitchen with the smell of eggs and coffee and the lingering warmth of his touch on my back.

I lean against the counter, pressing my palms to my heated cheeks.

This is insane.

We're adults—I'm thirty-nine, he's thirty-two—and we're acting like teenagers who don't know how to communicate.

But there's something there between us, something real and electric and terrifying in its intensity.

The question is: what are we going to do about it?

Heavy footsteps on the stairs announce the return of the Rojas family chaos.

Florencia appears first, her long dark hair tangled from sleep, wearing the pink nightgown she insists on even though it's too small for her eight-year-old frame.

"Dasha!" She launches herself at my legs, hugging me tight. "Did you make the eggs the way I like?"

"Of course, mija." I smooth her hair back from her face, my heart clenching with love for this little girl who's become such an important part of my life. "Runny yolks for dipping, just like always."

Cali appears next, wearing the now-located purple socks and a triumphant grin. "Daddy found them! They were hiding under Florencia's bed."

"They were not hiding," Florencia protests with the dignity only an eight-year-old can

muster. "They were just... visiting."

Rio follows them into the kitchen, and I pretend not to notice the way he carefully avoids making eye contact with me.

Instead, I focus on getting breakfast on the table, on the familiar chaos of morning routines, on anything except the way my skin still tingles where he touched me.

"Can we have pancakes tomorrow?" Cali asks, climbing into her booster seat. "With the Mickey Mouse shape?"

"We'll see," Rio says, ruffling her hair. "Depends on whether you eat all your eggs today."

"I alwayseat my eggs," Cali protests. "Florenacia's the one who feeds hers to the dog."

"We don't have a dog," Florenacia points out logically.

"That's why the eggs disappear," Cali says with five-year-old wisdom. "The invisible dog eats them."

I can't help but laugh at their banter, the way they can turn anything into a grand adventure.

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These girls have been through so much—losing their mother when they were so young—but they still find joy in silly conversations about invisible dogs and visiting socks.

Rio catches my eye across the table and smiles, a real smile that crinkles the corners of his eyes and makes my stomach flutter.

This is what I love most about our mornings—the way we fall into this easy family rhythm, the way the girls treat me like I belong here, the way Rio looks at me like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

If only I could figure out how to tell him that I want to belong here. Really belong here. Not just as the babysitter or the friend, but as something more.

"All right, girls," Rio says after they've finished eating. "Go get dressed. Teeth brushed, hair combed, backpacks ready."

"Can Dasha do my hair?" Florencia asks hopefully. "She makes the braids stay in better than you do, Daddy."

"Hey," Rio protests with mock offense. "My braids are perfectly acceptable."

"Your braids are lumpy," Cali informs him seriously.

I bite back another laugh. "I'll do both your hair after you're dressed, okay? But only if you hurry."



They scramble upstairs, leaving Rio and me alone again.

The tension from earlier creeps back in, settling over us like a heavy blanket.

"Thank you," he says quietly, starting to clear the breakfast dishes. "For this. For them. For... everything."

"You don't have to thank me." I take the plates from his hands, our fingers brushing again in the transfer. "They're amazing kids, Rio. Being a part of their lives... it's not a burden."

"Still." He leans against the counter, studying me with those dark eyes. "I know this isn't what you signed up for all those years ago. Playing house with a widower and his kids."

Playing house.

The words sting more than they should, but I keep my expression neutral. "Is that what you think this is? Playing house?"

Something flickers across his face—regret, maybe, or something deeper. "Dasha?"

"Daddy! I can't get my shirt on!" Cali's voice drifts down the stairs, effectively ending whatever conversation we might have had.

Rio pushes off from the counter. "We should get moving. I'll drop you at work after I take the girls to school."

"Okay." I turn back to the dishes, needing something to do with my hands. "I'll be ready in ten minutes."

Ten minutes later, both girls reappear in the kitchen fully dressed—Floencia in her favorite purple dress and Cali in jeans and a sparkly t-shirt.

"Hair time!" Floencia announces, plopping down in the chair I've pulled out for her.

I work carefully, sectioning her long, dark hair into neat French braids while Cali waits her turn, swinging her legs impatiently.

"See, Daddy?" Floencia says when I'm finished, shaking her head to test the braids. "No lumps!"

From across the kitchen, Rio watches me smooth Cali's shorter hair into pigtails, his dark eyes following my movements with an intensity that makes my cheeks warm.

There's something almost reverent in his expression as he takes in this domestic scene, and when our eyes meet in the mirror on the wall, the air between us crackles with unspoken words.

Twenty minutes later, we're all piled into Rio's truck—a massive black Ford that makes me feel tiny but somehow safe.

The girls chatter in the backseat about their plans for the day while I stare out the passenger window, hyper aware of Rio's hands on the steering wheel, the way his thigh muscle flexes when he brakes, the subtle scent of his cologne filling the enclosed space.

We drop Floencia at elementary school first, where she kisses both Rio and me goodbye before running to join her friends on the playground.

Then it's Cali's turn at the daycare center, where she insists on showing Rio and me the picture she painted yesterday before finally allowing us to leave.

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Which leaves just Rio and me for the ten-minute drive to Beans & Babes.

The silence stretches between us, comfortable but charged.

I find myself stealing glances at his profile—the strong line of his jaw, the way his hair curls slightly behind his ear, the small scar on his temple from some accident he's never told me about.

"Dasha." My name on his lips makes me turn to face him fully. "About this morning?—"

"It's okay," I say quickly, not sure I can handle whatever explanation or apology he's about to offer. "You don't have to?—"

"Yes, I do." His knuckles are white where he grips the steering wheel. "I shouldn't have... I need to be more careful."

More careful.

Like touching me is dangerous.

Like wanting me is something to be avoided.

"Careful of what?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

He pulls into the parking lot behind Beans & Babes but doesn't immediately turn off the engine.

Instead, he sits there for a moment, staring straight ahead.

"You know what," he says finally, and there's something almost pained in his voice.

But I don't know. That's the problem.

I don't know if he wants me the way I want him, or if I'm just convenient.

I don't know if the moments of tension between us mean anything, or if I'm imagining them because I want them so badly.

"Rio—"

"I'll pick you up at five-thirty," he says, cutting off whatever I was going to say. "The girls have soccer practice, so we'll probably grab dinner somewhere after."

Just like that, we're back to the safe topics. Schedules and routines and the comfortable distance we've maintained for two years.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and reach for the door handle, frustrated and confused and more than a little hurt. But before I can get out, Rio's hand covers mine.

"Dasha." When I look at him, his dark eyes are intense, almost desperate. "Be careful today, okay? If anything feels off, anything at all, you call me immediately."

"Why would anything feel off?" I ask, confused by the sudden shift in his tone.

"Just... promise me. Anything weird, any customers who make you uncomfortable, any feeling that something's not right—you call me."

There's an urgency in his voice that makes my stomach clench with unease. "Rio,

you're scaring me. What's going on?"

"Nothing," he says too quickly. "I just... I worry about you. Working in a public place, dealing with strangers all day. Being close to the club. Just, promise me you'll be careful."

I study his face, looking for clues about what's really bothering him.

But Rio's learned to school his expressions, to keep his thoughts hidden behind those dark eyes.

"I promise," I say finally, because the alternative is getting out of this truck without any answers at all.

Relief flickers across his features. "Good. I'll see you tonight."

I lean over and kiss his cheek—a quick, friendly gesture that I've done a hundred times before.

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But today, he goes perfectly still under my lips, and when I pull back, there's something raw and hungry in his expression that takes my breath away.

For a moment, I think he might kiss me. Really kiss me.

His gaze drops to my mouth, and I can see the war playing out on his face—want versus restraint, need versus whatever's holding him back.

"Dasha," he breathes, and my name sounds like a prayer.

Then his phone buzzes, shattering the moment.

He pulls back, jaw tight, and answers without looking at the caller ID.

"What?" His voice is sharp, professional. "Yeah, I'll be right there."

He hangs up and looks at me with something that might be regret. "I have to go. Club business."

"Of course." I force a smile and climb out of the truck, trying to ignore the disappointment settling in my chest like a stone. "See you tonight."

I watch him drive away, noting the tension in his shoulders, the way he immediately makes another phone call as soon as he thinks I can't see him.

Whatever "club business" means, it's clearly serious enough to erase any personal concerns from his mind.

The bells above the door chime as I enter Beans & Babes, and the familiar smell of coffee and fresh pastries wraps around me like a hug.

Meghan's already behind the counter, her red hair pulled back in a neat ponytail, setting up for the morning rush.

"Well, well," she says without looking up from the espresso machine. "Look who's glowing this morning."

"I'm not glowing," I protest, grabbing my apron from the hook behind the register.

"Honey, you're practically radioactive." She finally turns to face me, green eyes sparkling with mischief. "What did Rio do to put that look on your face?"

"He didn't do anything." Which is technically true and somehow makes it worse.

"Uh-huh." Meghan clearly doesn't believe me. "That's why you look like you've been thoroughly kissed and are disappointed about it."

"We're just friends," I say automatically, the lie tasting bitter on my tongue.

"Right. And I'm the Queen of England." She starts grinding coffee beans, the noise preventing further conversation for a moment.

When it stops, she fixes me with a knowing look. "Dasha, honey, I've seen the way that man looks at you. That is not friendship in his eyes."

"Then why hasn't he done anything about it?" The question bursts out of me before I can stop it, two years of frustration bleeding through.

Meghan's expression softens. "Oh, sweetie. Maybe because he's scared?"

"Scared of what?"

"Of messing up what you have. Of losing you if things go wrong. Of not being enough for someone like you. Of the kids losing you if it goes sour." She shrugs. "Men are idiots when it comes to emotional stuff, especially men like Rio who've been through what he's been through."

Before I can talk with her anymore, the morning work rush begins.

The next few hours pass in a blur of coffee orders and small talk with regulars, the familiar rhythm of work providing a welcome distraction from my confused feelings about Rio.

It's around ten-thirty when the stranger comes in.

He's not unusual looking—mid-thirties, average height, dressed in khakis and a polo shirt like any other suburban dad.

But something about him sets my teeth on edge.



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Maybe it's the way his eyes scan the shop too carefully, or how he seems more interested in the layout than the menu board.

"What can I get you?" I ask when he approaches the counter.

"Coffee, black. Large." He pulls out his phone while I pour, seemingly scrolling through messages. "You're Dasha, right?"

My hand stills on the coffee pot. "I'm sorry, do we know each other?"

"Friend of a friend." His smile doesn't reach his eyes. "You work here most days?"

Warning bells start ringing in my head.

Rio's words from this morning echo back to me:

If anything feels off, anything at all, you call me immediately.

"Sometimes," I say vaguely, setting his coffee on the counter. "That'll be three-fifty."

He hands me a five and waves off the change, but he doesn't leave.

Instead, he finds a table near the window and sits there for the next hour, occasionally checking his phone but mostly just... watching.

Watchingme.

When he finally leaves, I catch myself checking the locks on the back door and making sure my phone is easily accessible.

I tell myself I'm being paranoid, that Rio's warning has me jumping at shadows.

But I can't shake the feeling that something's shifted, that the safe little world I've built with Rio and his daughters is about to change in ways I can't even imagine.

I just don't know how right I am.

## CHAPTER TWO

Rio

The clubhouse parking lot is already packed when I pull up, twenty minutes after dropping Dasha at work.

Emergencykirkjameans drop everything and get here now, no questions asked.

The fact that half the club responded this fast tells me word about Santos has spread.

Good. Let them know what happens when you fuck with our families.

Inside, the air carries the permanent markers of club life: worn leather, motor oil ground into concrete, and the ghost of a thousand beers shared between brothers

This place has been my second home since I was caught working for the Patriot, back when I thought the worst thing that could happen was getting tortured to death by that senile old man.

Runes didn't have to give me a chance to show I could be more than one of the

Patriots' men, but he did.

I spied on the Patriot, gave the club intel, and in turn, they provided me with protection.

They gave me a new shot at life before my wife was ripped from me, and they'll never know how grateful I am for that.

"Rio." Runes nods from behind the bar where he's nursing what looks like his third cup of coffee. "Heard you had a productive evening last night."

"Productive's one word for it." I grab a beer from the cooler, even though it's barely past ten AM. Some conversations require alcohol. "Santos won't be moving product near any more schools."

"Good." Fenrir appears from the back office, VP patch gleaming on his cut. "Fucker had it coming. Question is, what's Bembe gonna do about it?"

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"Retaliate." I take a long pull of beer, thinking about Dasha at work right now, probably making someone's latte and having no idea her life changed last night. "He's been watching our people. Learning routines. Looking for soft targets."

"Soft targets like what?" This from Oskar, who slides into the seat across from me.

Still, the temperature in the room drops about ten degrees.

Tor's hand moves instinctively to the knife on his belt, and Fenrir's expression goes from concerned to lethal in the space of a heartbeat.

"How long?" Runes' voice is deceptively calm, but I know him well enough to recognize the rage simmering underneath.

"Months, according to Santos. Maybe longer." I fish out my phone, show them the photo Bembe's people sent. "This was taken while I was dealing with their boy. They wanted me to know they were watching her."

"Motherfuckers." Tor stands abruptly, pacing to the window. "I should have seen this coming. Should have been more careful."

"We all should have," Fenrir agrees. "But hindsight's not gonna solve our problem. Question is, what do we do about it?"

"We end it, once and for all." The voice comes from the doorway, and we all turn to see Bjorn entering, his limp barely noticeable these days.

Behind him, half a dozen other members file in, faces grim.

Within minutes, the main room is packed.

Word travels fast in the club, and everyone knows that when church gets called this early in the day, it's serious business.

Runes takes his place at the head of the table, and the room goes quiet.

"Brothers," he begins, voice carrying the authority of twenty years leading this club. "We've got a situation that requires immediate action."

He lays out what we know—Santos' death, the surveillance on our women, Bembe's escalating threats.

With each detail, the room gets quieter, the air thicker, just waiting to blow.

"This cocksucker's been fuckin' with us for five years," growls Rati, the club's enforcer. "Ever since we took out his operation at the docks. How long are we gonna let him think he can threaten our families?"

"Long enough," Fenrir agrees. "We tried the diplomatic approach. Tried giving him space to rebuild elsewhere. Bastard took that as weakness."

"Not weakness," Runes corrects. "Mercy. Which he mistook for an invitation to keep pushing." His eyes find mine across the table. "Rio, tell them what Santos said about their plans."

I recap the interrogation, leaving out the more graphic details but hitting the important points.

The room gets quieter with each thing I reveal, until you can hear a pin drop when I mention the photos of Dasha.

"So what's the play?" asks Gorm, one of the newer prospects. He's eager, still thinks this life is about the bikes and brotherhood.

Give him a few years, and he'll learn it's really about the blood you're willing to spill for your newfound family.

Normally, I'm not even in Kirkjábey because we don't have prospects in here, but we need all hands on deck when it comes to the Culebra cartel.

"We don't negotiate with terrorists," Bjorn says flatly. "And that's what Bembe is—a terrorist who thinks he can use fear to control us."

"Agreed." This from several members at once.

"What about the cops?" someone asks. "Santos turns up dead, they're gonna start sniffing around."

"Let them," Runes says. "Santos was dirty. Had a long list of enemies. Could have been anyone who took him out." His smile is sharp as a blade. "Besides, where's the body? Far as anyone knows, Miguel Santos just disappeared. Happens all the time in his line of work."

A few chuckles ripple through the room.

Dark humor is normal when you're discussing murder over morning coffee.

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"Rio." Runes' attention turns back to me. "You know this threat better than anyone. What's your recommendation?"

I take a moment to consider, thinking about Dasha making coffee this morning, about my girls sleeping peacefully in their beds, about Flora bleeding out because monsters like Bembe think family is fair game.

"We take the war to them," I say finally. "Stop reacting and start hunting. Bembe wants to play games with our families? We show him what happens when you threaten a Raider's woman."

"Seconded," Tor says immediately.

"All in favor?"

Every hand in the room goes up. Not a single dissent.

"Motion carries." Runes bangs his gavel once. "As of right now, we're at war with the Culebra cartel. Rio, I want you to be point on this. Whatever you need, whatever resources, you got it."

"I want surveillance on Bembe and his lieutenants. Round-the-clock. I want to know when they piss, when they eat, when they breathe wrong." I'm already making lists in my head. "And protection details on all family members. Discrete but effective."

"Done." Fenrir pulls out his phone. "I'll coordinate with our contacts, get eyes on their operations by tonight."

"What about the women?" Rati asks. "Do we tell them what's going on?"

The question hangs in the air like smoke.

It's the eternal dilemma of our world—how much do you tell the people you love about the darkness that surrounds them?

"Need-to-know basis," I decide. "Increased security without the panic. They'll notice, but we can play it off as general precautions."

"Your call," Runes agrees. "But Rio? Don't let pride get in the way of keeping them safe. If Dasha needs to know, tell her."

I nod, but inside I'm already planning ways to protect her without involving her.

Dasha deserves the normal life she's built for herself.

She deserves to make coffee and laugh with customers, and come home to help with homework without looking over her shoulder for cartel killers.

The meeting continues for another hour, covering logistics and contingencies.

By the time we're done, the sun is high and my phone has buzzed with three texts from Dasha.

Morning rush was crazy. Mrs. Preston ordered her usual and asked about you.

Lunch special today is turkey avocado. Want me to save you one?

Everything okay? You seem tense today.



That last one makes my chest tight.

Even through text messages, she can read me better than people I've known for years.

I text back:

Everything's fine. Save me the sandwich. See you tonight.

It's a lie, but a necessary one.

At least until I figure out how to keep her safe without scaring her away.

The afternoon passes in a blur of phone calls and planning.

I check in with our surveillance team, review security footage from around the coffee shop, and try not to think about how easy it would be for someone to hurt Dasha if they really wanted to.

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By four-thirty, I'm parked outside Riverside Elementary, watching other parents gather for pickup.

Normal people living normal lives, worried about homework and soccer practice instead of cartel bullshit.

I used to be one of them.

Before Flora, before the club became my everything, I thought the biggest problems in life were paying bills and fixing leaky faucets. Now I sit in my truck with a loaded Glock under my seat, scanning faces for threats while waiting for my eight-year-old to skip out of school.

Florencia appears in the doorway right on time, backpack bouncing as she hurries toward me.

She's got Flora's smile and my stubborn chin, and seeing her safe and happy eases some of the tension that's been coiled in my chest since last night.

"Daddy!" She climbs into the truck, already chattering about her day. "We learned about butterflies in science, and Tommy said they're just flying worms, but I told him that's stupid because worms don't have wings, and Mrs. Garcia said I was right."

"Tommy doesn't know what he's talking about," I agree, pulling into traffic. "Buckle up, mija. We're picking up Cali and then going to get Dasha."

"Are we having dinner out tonight?" There's hope in her voice.

My kids love restaurant nights, probably because it means they can order chocolate milk and argue about dessert.

"Maybe. Depends on how soccer practice goes."

Cali's daycare pickup is just as smooth, though my youngest daughter has paint in her hair and what looks like glitter stuck to her cheek.

She insists on showing me the masterpiece she created—a stick figure family with a suspiciously tall woman standing next to a man and two smaller figures.

"That's you," she explains, pointing to the tall stick figure. "And that's me and Florencia. And that's Dasha."

My throat tightens.

In Cali's five-year-old mind, Dasha is part of our family.

Has been for months, maybe longer.

The realization hits me harder than it should, followed immediately by the crushing weight of knowing I've put her in danger just by caring about her.

"It's beautiful, baby girl," I tell her, meaning it. "We'll put it on the refrigerator when we get home."

The drive to Beans & Babes takes fifteen minutes, during which the girls argue about whether butterflies or ladybugs are prettier.

Normal kid stuff that makes me feel almost human again.

Until I see the black sedan parked across from the coffee shop.

My blood turns to ice.

The car is positioned for surveillance, windows tinted dark enough to hide occupants.

Engine running, exhaust visible in the afternoon air.

They're still watching.

I park two blocks away and text Dasha:

Running a few minutes late. Are you ready to go?

Her response comes back immediately:

Just finishing up. Everything okay?

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I type her back immediately:

Everything's fine. Stay inside until I get there.

I call Tor while walking toward the shop, keeping one eye on the sedan.

"Yeah?"

"Black sedan, Florida plates, positioned across from Beans & Babes. How fast can you get here?"

"Five minutes. Are the girls with you?"

"In the truck. Two blocks south." I'm moving faster now, hand drifting toward the gun under my jacket. "Just need eyes on this car."

"On my way."

I approach the coffee shop from the side, using other pedestrians as cover.

Through the window, I can see Dasha behind the counter, laughing at something Meghan said.

She looks so normal, so innocent, completely unaware that death might be watching her from across the street.

The bell chimes as I enter, and Dasha's face lights up when she sees me.

The expression is so genuine, so full of warmth, that it physically hurts to know I'm the reason she's in danger.

"Hey," she says, already reaching for her purse. "Just let me clock out and we can go."

"Take your time." I position myself where I can watch the sedan through the window. Still there, still running.

"Everything okay?" Meghan asks, noting my tension. "You look like you're expecting trouble."

"Just tired." I force a smile. "Long ass day."

Dasha reappears from the back room, concern etched across her features.

She knows me well enough to read the signs, even when I'm trying to hide them. "Rio? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." I take her hand, noting how small and soft it feels in mine. "Ready to go?"

She nods, but I can see the questions in her eyes.

Questions I can't answer without admitting that loving me might get her killed.

We leave through the back door, avoiding the front windows.

The sedan is still there when we reach my truck, but as soon as we pull into traffic, it disappears.

"Daddy, why did we go out the back way?" Florencia asks from her booster seat.

"Just felt like a change," I lie, catching Dasha's eyes.

She's studying my expression, trying to figure out what I'm not telling her.

Soccer practice is at the community center, and by the time we arrive, I've spotted at least two more suspicious vehicles in the area.

Either I'm becoming paranoid, or Bembe has stepped up his surveillance significantly.

I text the club group chat while the girls change into their cleats:

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Increase presence around the community center. Fuckers are here too.

The response comes back immediately:

Already on it. Perimeter secured.

"You're being weird," Dasha observes, settling beside me on the bleachers. "More weird than usual, I mean."

"Thanks for that."

"I'm serious, Rio. You've been on edge all day. Checking your phone constantly, scanning exits like you're expecting trouble." She pauses. "Is this club business?"

"Something like that." I watch Cali chase the soccer ball across the field, her purple socks bright against the green grass. "Nothing for you to worry about."

"If it involves you, I worry about it." The words slip out before she can stop them, and I see her flush pink. "I mean?—"

"I know what you mean." I turn to look at her fully, noting the way the afternoon light catches the gold flecks in her brown eyes. "And I don't want you to worry. That's the whole point."

"The whole point of what?"

"Of keeping you safe." The admission slips out before I can stop it.



Her breath catches. "Safe from what, Rio?"

Before I can answer—before I can decide whether to tell her the truth or deflect again—Floencia scores a goal and comes running over to us, face glowing with pride.

"Did you see? Did you see me kick it in the goal?"

"We saw, mija." I scoop her up, spinning her around while she giggles. "You're getting good at this."

"Dasha taught me how to aim," Floencia announces. "She said you have to look where you want the ball to go, not where it is."

"Smart advice," I agree, meeting Dasha's eyes over my daughter's head. "Sometimes the hardest part is knowing where you want to end up."

"And sometimes," Dasha says softly, "you're already there and just too scared to admit it."

The moment stretches between us, loaded with everything we're not saying.

I want to tell her that she's right, that I've been where I want to be for months now, but too afraid to reach for it.

I want to admit that the thought of losing her the way I lost Flora makes it hard to breathe.

But before I can find the words, practice ends and we're swept up in the chaos of collecting gear and corralling sugar-high kids.

"Dinner?" I suggest as we load into the truck. "That new Italian place?"

Cali perks up immediately. "The one with the good breadsticks?"

"That's the one."

Dasha agrees, and twenty minutes later we're seated in a corner booth at Mama Rosa's, where I have clear sight lines to all exits and can position myself between my family and anyone who feels dumb enough to try me today.

The girls chatter about school and soccer while Dasha and I share the silence of two people who've done this dance hundreds of times.

She orders the chicken parmesan, I get the lasagna, and we split a bottle of wine while the girls argue over who gets the last breadstick.

It's so normal it makes my chest ache.

This is what I want—this easy family dynamic, this sense of belonging, this woman across from me who makes everything feel possible.

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"Earth to Rio," Dasha says, snapping her fingers in front of my face. "You disappeared on us there."

"Sorry. Just thinking."

"About what?"

About how much I love you.

About how terrified I am of losing you.

About how I'm going to kill anyone who tries to hurt you.

"About how good this is," I say instead. "All of us together like this."

Her smile is soft, understanding. "It is good, isn't it?"

"The best."

We linger over dessert—gelato for the girls, tiramisu that Dasha and I share even with her protests that she's too full.

The wine has loosened some of the tension in my shoulders, and for a few minutes, I almost forget about the threats and surveillance and the war we declared this morning.

Almost.

The drive home is quiet, both girls dozing off in their car seats while soft music plays on the radio.

Dasha's curled in the passenger seat, bare feet tucked under her, watching the city lights blur past.

"Thank you," she says quietly.

"For what?"

"For including me. For letting me be part of this." She gestures vaguely at the sleeping girls, at the space between us. "I know it's complicated, with their mom and everything. But this... us... it means everything to me."

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. "Dasha?—"

"I know we haven't talked about what this is," she continues, voice barely above a whisper. "And I'm not asking for promises or declarations. I just need you to know that whatever this is between us, I'm all in. Completely."

The words hit me, hard.

Here she is, offering me everything I want, and all I can think about is how loving me might get her killed.

"You shouldn't be," I say quietly. "All in, I mean. You should run. Find someone normal who can give you the life you deserve."

"And what if I don't want normal?" She turns to face me fully. "What if I want complicated and messy and real? What if I want you?"

I pull into our driveway, the familiar sight of home doing nothing to ease the turmoil in my chest.

The porch light is on—I always leave it burning when we're out—and the house looks peaceful, safe.

"We should get the girls inside," I say, avoiding her question because I don't trust myself to answer it honestly.

"Rio." Her hand touches my arm, stopping me from getting out. "Look at me."

I do, and the raw emotion in her eyes nearly undoes me.

"I know you're scared," she says. "I know what happened to Flora traumatized you. But I'm not her, and this isn't five years ago. You can't protect me by pushing me away."

"I can try."

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Her voice is steady, sure. "Because I won't be pushed away. Not anymore. Whatever's going on—and don't tell me nothing is going on—we face it together. That's what people who care about each other do."

"Dasha—"

"Together, Rio. Or not at all."

Before I can respond, her phone buzzes with a text.

She glances at it, frowns, then shows me the screen.

Unknown number:

Sweet dreams, beautiful. See you soon.

My blood turns to ice. "When did that come in?"

"Just now. Probably some creep who got the wrong number." But there's uncertainty in her voice, and when she looks at me, I know she can see the truth in my expression.

"Inside," I say, already moving. "Now."

"Rio, what's?—"

"Inside. Get the girls. Now."

She doesn't argue, sensing the urgency in my voice.

Within minutes, we have both girls unbuckled and moving toward the house.

I'm checking shadows, scanning rooflines, every nerve on high alert.

The house is secure—locks engaged, alarm system armed.

But as I do my sweep of the rooms, checking windows and sight lines, I can feel Dasha watching me.

"You want to tell me what's really going on?" she asks once the girls are settled in the living room with a movie.

I look at this woman who's become the center of my world, who's offering me everything I've ever wanted, and I know I can't keep lying to her.

"There are some very bad people who want to hurt me," I say finally. "And they think the best way to do that is through you."

She goes very still. "What kind of bad people?"

"The kind that killed Flora."

The words hang between us like a blade, sharp and final.

Her face goes pale, but she doesn't look away. "How long have they been watching me?"

"A few months. Maybe longer." I run my hands through my hair, exhausted by the weight of carrying this alone. "I've been trying to keep you safe without involving

you, but?—"

"But that's not your decision to make." Her voice is steady, stronger than I expected.

"If I'm in danger, I have the right to know."

"You have the right to be safe."

"I have the right to choose." She stands, moving closer until she's right in front of me.

"And I choose you. All of you. Even the dangerous parts."

"Dasha—"

"No more lies, Rio. No more half-truths or evasions. If we're doing this, if we're really doing this, then we do it honestly."



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I look down at her—this brave, stubborn, incredible woman who's somehow become my everything—and I know I'm lost.

"Okay," I say quietly. "No more lies."

She smiles, and it's like sunrise after the longest night.

"Good. Now tell me everything."

### CHAPTER THREE

Dasha

"Everything" is a big word, and Rio looks like it might kill him to honor it.

He glances toward the living room where the girls are engrossed in some animated movie about talking animals, their giggles drifting through the doorway.

Then he takes my hand and leads me to the kitchen, far enough away that we can talk without them overhearing.

"Wine?" he asks, already reaching for a bottle from the rack above the refrigerator.

"Definitely."

He pours two generous glasses of red, and I notice his hands are steady despite the tension radiating from every line of his body.

This is Rio in crisis mode—controlled, focused, dangerous.

It should scare me.

Instead, it makes me want to wrap my arms around him and tell him we'll figure this out together.

"The text you got," he starts, settling across from me at the kitchen table. "It's from them. The Culebra cartel."

"The ones who killed Flora." It's not a question.

I know this much, have pieced together enough over the years to understand that his wife's death wasn't random.

"Yeah." He takes a long drink of wine. "What you don't know is that two nights ago, I interrogated one of their lieutenants. Miguel Santos."

The name means nothing to me, but the way Rio says it—cold, final—tells me everything about how that interrogation ended.

"He told me things," Rio continues. "Things about their plans. About you."

My stomach drops. "What about me?"

"They've been watching you, Dasha. For months. Learning your routines, taking pictures, building a profile." His jaw clenches. "They know about us. About how I—" He stops, swallows hard. "About how you matter to me."

"Rio—"

"Santos said they've been watching multiple women connected to the club. Meghan, some others. But specifically you." He meets my eyes, and the raw fear there takes my breath away. "They have photos of you at your apartment, walking to your car, at the shop. They know where you live."

The wine tastes like ash in my mouth. "Why? I'm nobody to them."

"You're not nobody." His voice drops, intense and certain. "You're mine. And they know hurting you would destroy me."

The possessiveness in his tone should probably bother me.

Instead, it sends heat racing through my veins. "I'm yours?"

He goes still, seeming to realize what he's said. "I didn't mean?—"

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"Yes, you did." I lean forward, needing him to understand. "And I'm glad you did. Because I've been yours for longer than either of us wants to admit."

"Dasha—"

"Tell me the rest," I interrupt, not ready for whatever protest he's about to make. "What else did Santos say?"

He looks like he wants to argue, but eventually continues.

"He said Flora did more than we knew. She reported suspicious cargo manifests at her job, costing them millions in product. That's why they targeted her specifically." His hands tighten around his wine glass. "And he said that Bembe—their new leader—has been planning something. That taking Flora wasn't enough. He wants to take you too."

The words come crashing down to me. "He wants to kill me to hurt you."

"Over my dead body." The violence in his voice is absolute. "I've already got the club on it. We declared war this morning. Full surveillance on their operations, protection details on all family members."

"Is that why you were acting so strange today? The car outside the coffee shop?"

He nods. "They're not even trying to hide anymore. They want me to know they're watching."

"Wait." A chill runs through me as I remember. "There was a man today. At the coffee shop."

Rio goes completely still. "What man?"

"Mid-thirties, average looking, but something felt off about him. He asked if I was Dasha, said he was a friend of a friend. Then he sat there for over an hour just... watching me." I drain my wine glass, needing the liquid courage. "I thought I was being paranoid, but?—"

"What time?" His voice has gone deadly quiet.

"Around ten-thirty. He ordered black coffee and barely touched it."

"Fuck." Rio's already pulling out his phone, typing rapidly. "Did he say anything else?"

"Just asked if I worked there most days. Rio, I'm sorry, I should have?—"

"No." He reaches across the table, takes my hand. "You did nothing wrong. This is on me for not warning you sooner." He shows me his phone—he's sent a description to someone. "I'm just glad you noticed. Most people wouldn't have."

"So what do we do?"

"We keep you safe. I've already texted the club—there are brothers watching the house right now. Tomorrow we'll figure out a better long-term solution. Maybe you stay here for a while, or?—"

"Or maybe we stop pretending this is just about keeping me safe." I stand, moving around the table until I'm standing in front of him. "Maybe we finally admit what this

really is."

He looks up at me, and the hunger in his eyes makes my knees weak. "Dasha, this isn't the time?—"

"When will it be the time, Rio?" I'm tired of waiting, tired of pretending. "When there's no danger? When the girls are older? When you stop being scared of letting me in?"

"I'm not scared of letting you in." He stands too, towering over me even in my heels. "I'm scared of losing you."

"Then stop pushing me away." I reach up, cupping his face in my hands. "I'm here. I'm choosing to be here, knowing the risks. Let me choose you."

For a moment, we just stare at each other, years of unspoken want crackling in the air between us.

Then his phone buzzes.

He checks it, frowning. "Tor says there's movement outside. Two cars, both ends of the street." He types quickly. "They're just watching for now, but?—"

"But they're making sure we know they're there." The reality of the situation hits me again. "Rio, maybe I should?—"

"No." He sets his phone down, frames my face with his hands. "Whatever you're about to suggest that involves you leaving, the answer is fuck no."

"I was going to say maybe I should learn to shoot."

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That surprises a laugh out of him, short and rough. "Dios mio, woman."

"What? If people are trying to kill me, shouldn't I know how to defend myself?"

"I'll teach you," he promises. "Tomorrow. Tonight, you're safe here."

From the living room, Cali calls out, "Daddy, I'm thirsty!"

The moment breaks, and Rio steps back. "Let me get them ready for bed. Then we can?—"

"I'll help," I say, because that's what we do. We're a team, even if we haven't defined exactly what kind.

The next half hour is the chaos of bedtime routines.

Teeth brushing, pajamas, negotiations over how many stories constitute "just one more."

It's so beautifully normal that I can almost forget there are cartel members sitting outside watching the house.

Rio takes story duty while I clean up the kitchen, loading the dishwasher and wiping down counters.

Domestic and ordinary, except for how my hands shake slightly when I think about those photos Rio mentioned.

How long have they been watching me?

How many times have I been oblivious to danger while making lattes and small talk?

"They're asleep." Rio reappears in the kitchen doorway. "Out like lights."

"Good." I dry my hands, turn to face him. "Now, where were we?"

"Dasha—"

"No." I move toward him, done with the distance. "No more deflecting. No more protective nobility. Just the truth."

"Truth?" He laughs, but there's no humor in it. "The truth is that I've wanted you since the first time you smiled at me in that coffee shop. The truth is that I watch you with my girls and imagine a life I have no right to want. The truth is that every time you stay over, I lie awake thinking about walking down that hall to the guest room."

My heart is pounding so hard I'm sure he can hear it. "Why don't you?"

"Because I'm selfish." His voice is raw. "Because once I have you, I won't be able to let go. Because you deserve better than a man with blood on his hands and enemies who want to hurt the people he loves."

"What if I don't want better?" I close the distance between us. "What if I want you?"

"Dasha—"

I kiss him.

It's not graceful or perfect.



It's desperate and hungry and years overdue.

For a moment, he goes completely still, and I think I've made a terrible mistake.

Then his arms come around me, and he's kissing me back like a drowning man who's finally found air.

He tastes like wine and promise and home.

His hands span my waist, pulling me against him until there's no space between us.

I make a sound I don't recognize, needy and wanting, and he groans in response.

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"Dasha," he breathes against my mouth. "We should?—"

"Stop talking." I fist my hands in his shirt. "Just kiss me."

He does, backing me against the counter, caging me with his body.

Every point of contact burns—his thigh between mine, his hands skimming my sides, his mouth moving to my throat.

"Fuck, I've wanted this," he murmurs against my skin. "Wanted you. Do you know what you do to me? Walking around my house in my shirts, making breakfast like you belong here?"

"I do belong here." I gasp as he finds that spot where my neck meets my shoulder. "I've belonged here for as long as I can remember."

He pulls back to look at me, and his eyes are black with want. "Say that again."

"I belong here. With you. With the girls. In this life, dangerous or not."

"Dasha—" His phone buzzes again. Then again. And again.

"Ignore it," I plead, but I can already see him shifting back into protective mode.

He checks the messages, and whatever he sees makes him go rigid. "They're moving. Three cars now." He shows me the screen—updates from the brothers watching the house. "They're not approaching, just... circling."

"They're trying to scare us."

"They're succeeding." He runs a hand through his hair. "This is exactly what I didn't want. You in danger because of me, because of being close to the club."

"Hey." I take his face in my hands again, forcing him to look at me. "This isn't your fault. And I'm not running."

"You should be. Any sane person would be."

"Good thing I'm not sane." I try for lightness, but his expression remains serious. "Rio, do you want me to leave?"

"No." The word comes out sharp, immediate. "God help me, no. I want you here where I can protect you. Where I can—" He stops himself.

"Where you can what?"

"Where I can pretend for a little while that you're mine." The admission seems to cost him. "That this is our life, our family. That I get to keep you."

"You do get to keep me," I whisper. "If you want me."

He kisses me again, softer this time but no less intense. "I want you more than I've wanted anything in my entire life. That's the problem."

"That's not a problem." I wind my arms around his neck. "That's the solution."

His phone rings—an actual call this time.

He answers without letting me go.

"Yeah?" A pause. "How many?"

Another pause. "No, stay on them. I want to know the second they do anything besides circle."

He hangs up. "Five cars now. They're making a statement."

"What kind of statement?"

"That they can get to you whenever they want." His arms tighten around me. "But they're wrong. I won't let them hurt you."

"I know." And I do. I can see it in every line of his body, the absolute certainty that he'll die before letting anything happen to me. "So, what do we do now?"

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He's quiet for a moment, thinking. "Now we open that second bottle of wine, and you let me tell you exactly how this is going to go."

Twenty minutes later, we're back at the kitchen table with fresh glasses and the weight of reality between us.

Rio's explained the security measures—brothers rotating shifts outside, panic buttons being installed tomorrow, new protocols for my daily routines.

"I hate this," I admit. "Not the danger—I mean, I hate that too—but the idea of living in fear. Of letting them dictate how we live our lives."

"It's temporary," he assures me. "Just until we handle the situation."

"Handle it how?"

He's quiet for a long moment. "You don't want to know the specifics."

He's right. I don't. But I need to understand what I'm signing up for. "Will you have to kill people?"

"Probably."

The casual certainty should horrify me.

Instead, I find myself grateful for his honesty. "To protect us?"

"I'd burn the whole world down to protect you and the girls," he says simply. "That's not a metaphor, Dasha. That's a promise."

I take a sip of wine, processing this. "I should probably be more bothered by that."

"Why aren't you?"

"Because I know you." I meet his eyes. "I know you're a good man who does bad things to protect good people. I know you'd never hurt anyone who didn't deserve it. And I know that underneath all that violence, you're just a dad who wants his family safe."

"You see too much good in me."

"No," I correct. "I see exactly who you are. And I love all of it."

The words hang between us, heavy with meaning.

His expression shifts through several emotions—surprise, fear, hope, and finally something that looks like awe.

"Dasha—"

"I love you," I repeat, stronger this time. "I've loved you for years, maybe longer. And I know the timing is terrible and the situation is complicated, but I'm tired of pretending otherwise."

He's out of his chair before I can blink, pulling me up and into his arms. "Say it again."

"I love you, Rio."

He kisses me like he's trying to breathe me in, desperate and claiming.

When we break apart, we're both panting.

"I love you too," he says roughly. "God help me, I love you so much it terrifies me."

"Good." I smile, feeling lighter despite everything. "Now what are we going to do about it?"

His answer is to kiss me again, backing me against the wall.

This time there's intent behind it, promise and heat and two years or possibly more of pent-up desire.

His hands skim my sides, thumbs brushing the undersides of my breasts through my thin shirt, and I arch into him with a gasp.

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"The girls," I manage when he moves to my throat.

"Sound asleep." He nips at my pulse point. "I checked."

"Your phone?—"

"Can wait." He lifts me suddenly, setting me on the counter. "Everything can wait. I need—" He pauses, breathing hard. "Tell me to stop if this isn't what you want."

"Don't you dare stop," I breathe, wrapping my legs around his waist.

He groans, capturing my mouth again.

His hands are everywhere—tangling in my hair, skimming my thighs, mapping every curve like he's trying to memorize me by touch.

I give as good as I get, finally able to explore the body I've been dreaming about for months.

The guest room—my room—is familiar and safe, and when Rio lays me on the bed, looking down at me with eyes gone black with want, I've never felt more desired.

"You're sure?" he asks one more time.

Instead of answering, I pull my shirt over my head.

His control snaps. "Jesus Christ, Dasha."



His eyes devour me, taking in the black lace bra I definitely didn't plan on him seeing tonight.

Who am I kidding? I've been wearing nice underwear for months, just in case.

"You're fucking perfect," he growls, then his mouth is on me, hot and demanding.

He kisses down my throat, across my collarbone, teeth grazing the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder.

I arch against him, nails digging into his shoulders as he unhooks my bra with one hand—a skill that shouldn't be as hot as it is.

"Rio," I gasp when his mouth finds my breast, tongue circling before teeth graze just hard enough to make me see stars.

"I've thought about this," he confesses against my skin, hands skimming down my sides. "Every fucking morning when you're in my kitchen. Every time you bend over to help the girls with their shoes. Christ, Dasha, do you know what you do to me?"

"Show me," I challenge, and his eyes flash dangerously.

He strips me efficiently, reverent and hungry all at once.

When his fingers find me already wet and ready, we both groan.

"So fucking wet," he murmurs, working me with skilled fingers while his mouth continues its assault on my senses. "Is this for me, baby?"

"Only you," I manage, hips rocking against his hand. "Always you."

He adds another finger, curling just right, and I have to bite my lip to keep from crying out.

The last thing we need is to wake the girls, but God, he's making it difficult to stay quiet.

"Let me taste you," he says, already moving down my body.

"Rio, I need?—"

"I know what you need." He settles between my thighs, looking up at me with dark eyes full of promise. "Been wanting to do this for fucking years."

The first touch of his tongue makes me arch off the bed.

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He holds my hips steady, devouring me like a man starved.

His tongue circles my clit before sucking gently, and I have to fist my hands in the sheets to stay grounded.

"So sweet," he murmurs against me. "Could do this for hours."

"Please," I beg, already embarrassingly close. "Rio, please, I need?—"

He slides two fingers inside me while his tongue works my clit, and I shatter.

The orgasm rolls through me in waves, and I have to press a pillow over my face to muffle my cries.

He works me through it, drawing out every aftershock until I'm boneless and panting.

"Beautiful," he says, kissing his way back up my body. "But I'm not done with you yet."

I reach for his jeans, needing to touch him.

He helps me push them down, and when I wrap my hand around him, he drops his forehead to mine with a groan.

"Fuck, your hand feels good."

"I can make it feel better," I offer, but he catches my wrist.

"Later. Right now, I need to be inside you." He positions himself at my entrance, eyes locked on mine. "Tell me you want this."

"I want you," I breathe. "All of you. Please, Rio."

He pushes inside slowly, stretching me perfectly, and we both go still when he's fully seated.

"Fuck," he breathes. "Dasha?—"

"I know," I gasp. "I know."

He starts to move, slow and deep, hitting spots inside me I didn't know existed.

I wrap my legs around his waist, changing the angle, and we both moan.

"You feel so fucking good," he groans, picking up the pace. "So tight, so perfect. Made for me."

"Yours," I agree, nails raking down his back. "Just yours."

His thrusts become harder, more demanding, and I meet him stroke for stroke.

The headboard starts to tap against the wall, and he reaches up to brace it with one hand while the other finds my clit.

"Need you to come again," he commands. "Want to feel you squeeze my cock."

His filthy words combined with his skilled fingers push me over the edge.

I bite his shoulder to muffle my scream as I come, clenching around him.

"Fuck, yes," he groans. "Just like that, baby. So fucking perfect."

His rhythm falters, and I know he's close.

I pull his head down, whisper in his ear, "Come for me, Rio. Want to feel you."

He buries his face in my neck, groaning my name as he finds his release.

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I can feel him pulsing inside me, and it triggers another mini-orgasm that leaves me trembling.

We stay locked together for long moments, both breathing hard.

When he finally lifts his head, the look in his eyes steals my breath—possessive and tender and completely wrecked.

"I love you," he says roughly. "So fucking much."

"I love you too," I whisper, touching his face.

He kisses me soft and sweet, a stark contrast to the passion of moments before.

When he carefully pulls out and settles beside me, I curl into him immediately.

"So," I say eventually, still catching my breath. "That happened."

He laughs, pressing a kiss to my hair. "About fuckin' time."

"Years of foreplay will do that."

"Worth the wait?"

I prop myself up to look at him. "Definitely worth the wait."

His expression goes serious again. "I meant what I said. About keeping you safe."

About burning the world down. I need you to understand what you're signing up for."

"I understand." I trace the tattoo on his chest—a skull, beautifully detailed. "I'm not naive, Rio. I know your world is dangerous. I know there will be nights you come home bloody, days when we have to look over our shoulders. But I also know that you're worth it. This family is worth it."

"Our family," he corrects softly.

"Our family," I agree, and the words feel like a vow.

His phone buzzes from the kitchen where we left it.

Then the house phone rings.

Then buzzes again.

"You should probably get that," I say reluctantly.

He kisses me once more, deep and possessive, before pulling on his jeans. "Don't move."

I watch him go, admiring the view, then burrow into the blankets that smell like us.

Like new beginnings forged in this craziness.

He returns a few minutes later, expression grim. "They're gone. Pulled out about ten minutes ago."

"That's good, right?"

"Maybe." He sits on the edge of the bed. "Or they were just making sure we knew they could get close. Wanted to fuck with our heads."

"Well, it's not working," I declare, sitting up and letting the sheet pool at my waist. "We're not going to live in fear."

His eyes darken again, distracted by my state of undress. "No?"

"No." I crawl toward him. "We're going to be smart and careful, but we're not going to let them win by making us afraid to live our lives."

"Our lives," he repeats, pulling me into his lap. "I like the sound of that."



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"Good. Because you're stuck with me now."

"Dasha?" He frames my face with his hands. "There's no going back from this. Once you're mine, you're mine forever. I don't do it halfway, and I don't share well."

"I wouldn't want you any other way," I assure him. "I'm yours, Rio. Have been for a while now."

He kisses me again, slow and thorough, and I can feel his body responding to mine.

But before things can progress, we hear a small voice from down the hall.

"Daddy?"

We freeze. It's Cali, sounding sleepy and confused.

"Shit," Rio mutters, helping me off his lap. "I'll go check on her."

"I'll come with you," I say, already pulling on his discarded t-shirt and my sleep shorts.

He looks at me in his shirt and has to visibly collect himself. "You're going to be the death of me."

"But what a way to go," I tease.

We find Cali standing in the hallway, rubbing her eyes with one small fist. "I had a

bad dream," she mumbles.

Rio scoops her up immediately. "It's okay, baby girl. Daddy's here."

"Dasha too?" She reaches for me, and my heart melts.

"Dasha too," I confirm, smoothing her dark hair. "Want to tell us about the dream?"

She shakes her head, burrowing into Rio's shoulder. "Just want cuddles."

"Cuddles we can do," Rio says. "Back to bed?"

"Big bed," she negotiates sleepily. "With you and Dasha."

Rio looks at me, questioning.

It's a big step, having her in bed with us, acknowledging this new dynamic even to a sleepy five-year-old.

"Big bed it is," I agree, because how can I say no to that little face?

We settle into Rio's room—a space I've cleaned but never slept in.

Cali curls between us, already drifting back to sleep, one hand clutching Rio's shirt and the other holding mine.

"This okay?" Rio whispers over her head.

"Perfect," I whisper back.

And despite everything—the danger, the uncertainty, the men who want to hurt

us—in this moment, it really is perfect.

This is my family now, officially.

Rio reaches over Cali to take my hand, lacing our fingers together.

In the darkness, with his daughter safe between us and brothers standing guard outside, I've never felt more protected or more sure of my choices.

Tomorrow we'll deal with the cartel and the danger and all the complications of merging our lives.

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But tonight, we're just a family, together and whole.

"I love you," I whisper into the darkness.

"I love you, too," he whispers back. "Both of you. All of us."

And that's how I fall asleep on the most dangerous and most perfect night of my life—hand in hand with the man I love, his daughter safe between us, finally where I belong.

### CHAPTER FOUR

Rio

The room is still dark when I slip out of bed, careful not to wake Dasha or Cali.

They're curled together now, my daughter's small hand fisted in Dasha's hair, and the sight makes my chest tight with emotions I don't have time to think about.

Last night changed everything between us.

Not just the physical aspect—though fuck, that was worth the years' long wait—but the promises made, the lines crossed, our family officially formed.

Dasha is mine now, claimed in every way that matters, and that means her safety is no longer negotiable.

I dress quietly, slipping on new clothes, checking my phone as I move through the house.

Seventeen messages from the club, three from Tor specifically, and one from an unknown number that makes my blood run cold:

Sweet dreams, Rio. Hope you enjoyed your night. It might be your last.

I screenshot it and forward it to our tech guy before deleting the original.

No need for Dasha to see that if she happens to look at my phone.

Florencia is still sleeping in her room, one arm thrown over her head in that careless way kids have.

I watch her for a moment, this piece of my heart walking around outside my body, and feel that familiar surge of protective rage.

They won't touch her. Any of them.

I'll paint the streets red before I let Bembe's people get within a hundred yards of my family.

I leave a note on the kitchen counter for Dasha—Had to go to the clubhouse. I'll explain everything later. I love you.—and slip out the front door.

The morning air is thick with humidity, typical Florida weather that makes everything feel heavy.

Or maybe that's just the weight of what's coming.

The brother on watch, Kraken, nods from his bike across the street. "Quiet night after they left," he reports. "No movement since."

"Good, and thank you. Someone should be here within the hour to relieve you."

The drive to the clubhouse takes fifteen minutes, during which I make three calls—one to set up additional surveillance on the house while I'm gone, one to check in with the brothers who watched us last night, and one to Tor.

"About fucking time you answered," he growls. "Dad wants you here ASAP. Shit's heating up."

"Define heating up."

"They hit one of our suppliers last night. Nobody got hurt, but they torched his warehouse. Left a message."

"What kind of message?"

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"The kind written in gasoline. Said this is just the beginning unless we hand over the coffee shop girls. Over my dead body will that happen."

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. "They can fuckin' try."

"That's what Runes said. Get here, brother. We need to plan."

The clubhouse is buzzing to life when I arrive.

Brothers I haven't seen in months have rolled in, answering the call to arms.

War brings everyone home.

I spot Bjorn cleaning his weapons at one of the tables, his movements precise, calculated, like he knows how grave this is.

Rati's sitting near the bar, regaling prospects with war stories that are probably only half true.

Runes is in the room where we holdkirkjawith Fenrir and Tor, maps spread across the table, marking Culebra territory and operations.

The room smells like coffee and gun oil, the breakfast of champions in our world.

"Rio." Runes looks up as I enter. "How's your woman?"

The casual way he says it—your woman—makes something settle in my chest.

Official acknowledgment from the president.

Dasha isn't just some girl I'm seeing—she's mine, my ol' lady, under the club's protection.

"She's good. Safe. For now."

"For now isn't good enough." Fenrir leans back in his chair, his scarred knuckles resting on the table. "They're escalating faster than we expected. The warehouse was a warning shot."

"Which supplier?" I ask, taking my seat at the table.

"One of the Mackenzie's warehouses." Tor slides a photo across the table—the warehouse is nothing but charred beams and ash. "Three million in inventory, gone. Liam is going to be furious."

"Will insurance cover it?"

"For what he said was in there, probably... but it doesn't change shit," Runes says dryly. "We have to handle the Culebra fuckers before the Irish mafia shifts on us. They left an explicit message about the girls, too."

It sounds like Runes is worried, like he's thinking that could happen... but Revna just married Doran, Liam's nephew—Irish blood.

They wouldn't turn on family, would they?

"What exactly did the message say?"

Tor pulls out his phone, shows me a photo. Written in gasoline before they lit it:



The coffee shop bitches or more burns. You have 48 hours.

"Eloquent," I mutter. "When was this?"

"Six hours ago. So we're down to forty-two." Fenrir's expression is grim. "They can want all they like. Doesn't mean they'll get them."

"Agreed." Runes stands, and when he looks at me, I see the president who's led this club through twenty years of blood and brotherhood. "Which is why you're bringing your family here tonight. The clubhouse is fortified, brothers on guard 24/7. Your house is too exposed. All of the club women who work at the coffee shop will be here too, no exceptions."

"Dasha won't like leaving the house?—"

"Dasha will understand when you explain the alternative," Runes cuts me off. "This isn't a request, Rio. Your woman and kids stay here until we handle this."

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Before I can respond, there's a figure in the door of Kirkja—Meghan storms in, blonde hair wild and eyes blazing. She's still in her Beans & Babes apron, which means she came straight from opening the shop.

"Did I just hear Runes say 'your woman'?" She zeroes in on me like a heat-seeking missile. "Rio Rojas, did you finally pull your head out of your ass?"

"Meghan—"

"For years!" She grabs my shoulders, shaking me despite the fact I outweigh her by a hundred pounds. "So many years of watching you two moon over each other like teenagers! Finally!"

"Jesus, let the man breathe," Tor says, but he's grinning.

"Don't you dare!" She spins on her heel to face her old man. "Did you know about this? How long has it been official? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Since last night," I admit, and her squeal of delight could probably shatter glass.

"I need details! All of them! Is she here? Does she know about—" She pauses, taking in the serious expressions around the table, the maps, the photos of the burned warehouse. "What's wrong?"

"Culebra's making moves," Tor tells her, his voice gentling the way it always does for his woman. "You and Dasha are specifically targeted."

The joy drains from her face, replaced by the steel that made her survive this life.  
"Those fuckers think they can come for us?"

"They think a lot of things," Runes says. "All of them are wrong. Which is why you're both moving into the clubhouse tonight."

"I'll talk to Dasha," Meghan says immediately. "She'll listen to me if she gives Rio grief about it. We can close the shop early, tell customers we have a plumbing issue or something."

"I can handle my woman," I protest.

"Sure you can, big guy." She pats my cheek condescendingly. "That's why it only took you years to make a move on her."

The room erupts in laughter, and I flip them all off good-naturedly.

But the moment passes quickly as we return to the matter at hand.

"We got the surveillance footage from the coffee shop," our tech guy, Vanir, announces as he enters. "Ran facial recognition on the creep who was watching Dasha."

He hands me a tablet showing a clear image of the man from Dasha's description.

Average looking, forgettable, exactly the type Bembe would use for surveillance.

The timestamp shows him entering the shop at 10:27 AM, just like Dasha said.

"Got a name?"

"Carlos Mendez. Low-level Culebra, mostly runs errands and intel gathering." Vanir swipes to show more information—arrest record, known associates, addresses. "Lives alone in a shitty apartment complex off the highway. No family in the area, which makes him perfect for what we need."

"Perfect." I study the address, already planning. The complex is in a rough neighborhood where screams don't attract attention. "I'll pay him a visit."

"Not alone," Runes says firmly. "Take Bodul and Geirolf. Kid needs to learn, and Geirolf needs to blow off steam."

I nod. "When?"

"Now," Runes decides. "Before he has a chance to relocate. Get whatever intel you can about their plans for the women."

"And then?"

Runes's smile is cold. "Then remind him why threatening a Raiders of Valhalla's family member is a fatal mistake."

I stand, already shifting into the headspace needed for what's coming. "I'll need supplies."

"Bjorn's got a kit ready in the garage," Fenrir offers. "Everything you might need for a proper conversation."

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Meghan makes a face. "I don't want to know what that means."

"No," Tor agrees, pulling her close. "You don't."

Twenty minutes later, I'm in Bodul's truck with Geirolf riding shotgun.

We're only taking the truck in case we need to take this fucker's body with us when we're done.

The kit Bjorn prepared is comprehensive—zip ties, blades, pliers, a small blowtorch, and other items that would make normal people squeamish.

But we're not normal people.

We're the fucking Raiders, and this is how we handle threats to our family.

Bodul is trying to look tough, but I can see the nervous energy vibrating through him.

His knuckles are white on the steering wheel.

"First time?" I ask.

"First time on a run like this," he admits. "Usually it's just bar fights or escort runs."

"Bar fights are about ego," I tell him. "This is about our family. Completely different animal."

"How do you do it?" He glances at me in the rearview. "Turn it on and off? Be a father one minute and a?—"

"Monster?" I finish. "You don't turn it on and off. You just learn to aim it. The monster's always there, waiting. You just point it at the people who deserve it."

Geirolf nods approvingly. "Like this fucking Carlos. Watching Dasha like she's prey? He deserves whatever Rio gives him."

"It's not about deserving," I correct. "It's about what we need to do. He has information we need. He's a threat to people we protect. What he deserves is irrelevant. What matters is what needs to be done."

The apartment complex is exactly as shitty as Vanir described.

Peeling paint, broken security gate, the kind of place where people mind their own business because everyone's running from something.

A few locals eye us as we pull up, but they quickly look away.

They know predators when they see them.

Carlos lives on the third floor, apartment 3C.

The hallway smells like piss and the fluorescent lights overhead are flickering like a horror movie cliché.

No answer when we knock, but the lock is pathetic.

Geirolf has us inside in under thirty seconds.

The place reeks of stale smoke and old takeout. There's a laptop on the coffee table, still open, showing surveillance photos that make my blood boil.

Dasha at the coffee shop. Dasha walking to her car. Dasha laughing with Meghan. Dasha with my girls at the park.

"Fucking pig," Geirolf mutters, looking over my shoulder.

The photos are detailed, time-stamped, annotated with her routines.

This isn't casual—this is them preparing for something bigger.

"Check the bedroom," I tell Bodul. "Closets, under the bed. He's here somewhere."

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The bathroom door slams shut, lock clicking.

Amateur move.

I kick it open to find Carlos trying to squeeze through the tiny window, ass stuck halfway out.

Geirolf grabs his legs and yanks him back in, dumping him on the cracked tile floor.

"Carlos Mendez," I say conversationally, stepping over him. "We need to have a little chat."

"I don't know nothing," he stammers, crab-walking backward until he hits the tub. "I'm nobody, man, just?—"

"See, that's a lie." I crouch down to his level. "You know a lot. Like where Dasha Reyes works. Where she lives. What time she leaves for work."

His face pales. "You're him. Rio."

"That's right. And you've been watching my woman."

"Just following orders, man. Nothing personal."

"Nothing personal?" I grab his throat, hauling him up. "You took pictures of my daughters. That feels pretty fucking personal to me."



Geirolf produces zip ties from his pocket, and within minutes, Carlos is secured to a kitchen chair.

Bodul stands guard by the door, trying not to look nervous.

I lay out the tools from Bjorn's kit on the kitchen table, taking my time, letting Carlos see each item.

His eyes track every movement, sweat already beading on his forehead.

"Here's how this works," I explain, pulling out my knife. "You tell me everything about Bembe's plans, and maybe you die quickly. You lie or stall, and I get creative. Understand?"

Carlos nods frantically. "I'll tell you everything, just?—"

"Good. Start with why you were watching Dasha."

"Bembe wanted intel on all the women connected to your club. Said they were leverage for something bigger."

"What's bigger?"

"He didn't tell me specifics. Just said he's planning something that'll bring the Raiders to their knees. The women are just the beginning."

I run the knife along his arm, not cutting yet, just letting him feel the edge. "Not good enough. Details, Carlos. I need details."

"There's a shipment coming in next week! Big one, enough product to flood the entire southeast. He needs you distracted while it moves through."

"So he threatens our women to keep us busy?" The knife bites the skin now, just a little. A drop of blood wells up. "Stupid plan."

"It's more than that!" Carlos yelps. "He's got someone inside. Someone feeding him information."

Everything goes still. "Inside the club?"

"I don't know! Maybe! Or someone close to it. He said he knows things, personal shit about your members."

I think about the photo of Dasha's car in my driveway, taken while I was dealing with Santos.

The timing was too perfect to be coincidence.

"Who's the inside source?"

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"I swear I don't know. Bembe plays everything close. I'm just doing surveillance for him."

I believe him, which is unfortunate.

Dead ends piss me off.

"Tell me about the other women you've been watching."

"Just the coffee shop girls mainly. The blonde who's married to your Prez's son. The Colombian who's yours. Sometimes others who come in regular."

"You have files on them?"

"On the laptop. Everything's there. Schedules, addresses, photos, vehicle info."

I nod to Geirolf, who goes to retrieve it.

This intel could be valuable, even if Carlos himself is just a bottom-feeder.

"How long have you been watching them?"

"Three months, maybe four. Bembe wanted to know everything. Their routines, their relationships, who matters to them."

"And what was he planning to do with this information?"

Carlos swallows hard. "Make examples. He said... he said one dead woman sends a message, but two makes a statement."

The knife goes deeper this time.

Carlos screams.

"Please," he whimpers when he catches his breath. "I told you everything. I'm nobody, just a guy with a camera."

"Just a guy with a camera who helped plan the murder of innocent women." I lean in close. "You know what I am, Carlos?"

He shakes his head, tears streaming.

"I'm a fucking monster." The words taste like truth. "I'm the thing Bembe should have warned you about. The kind of man who tortured Miguel Santos for hours and enjoyed every second."

"Santos is dead?"

"Very. And he died screaming, just like you're about to."

"But I told you everything!"

"You did. And I appreciate that." I pat his cheek almost gently. "But you watched my woman. You photographed my children. You think information buys you mercy?"

"Please—"

"Did Bembe tell you what happened to the men who killed my wife?" I ask

conversationally, selecting the pliers from the table. "No? Let me educate you."

What follows is a lesson this man never wanted to learn.

I work methodically, professionally, making sure Carlos understands the price of threatening what's mine.

Start with the fingers—bones snap like twigs, each break punctuated by screams.

Move to the teeth—pliers grip and pull, blood flowing freely.

Bodul turns green but doesn't look away—good kid, he'll learn.

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Geirolf assists, obviously working through his own demons, holding Carlos steady when he thrashes.

"You see," I explain as I work, "pain is just communication. And I'm very good at making myself understood."

Carlos screams, begs, pisses himself. Blood pools on the cracked linoleum, spreading like spilled wine.

None of it matters.

He's just meat and message now.

"The thing about monsters," I continue, switching to the blowtorch, "is that we're necessary. Men like you, like Bembe, you count on civilized people following civilized rules. But I'm not civilized. I'm what happens when you threaten the wrong family."

The smell of burning flesh fills the small apartment.

Carlos has stopped screaming—shock setting in.

"Still with me?" I check his pulse. Can't have him dying too soon. "Good. We're almost done."

When it's over, when Carlos is nothing but a cautionary tale, I step back to survey the scene.

Blood on the walls, on the floor, on me.

The kitchen looks like a slaughterhouse, which seems appropriate.

"Holy shit," Bodul breathes. "You really are a monster."

"Yeah," I agree, wiping my hands on a towel. "But I'm a monster who protects his family. Remember that."

"What do we do with..." He gestures at what's left of Carlos.

"Leave him. Let Bembe find him like this." I pick up the laptop. "But we take this. Might be useful."

The ride back is quiet.

Bodul's processing what he's seen, Geirolf's satisfied with the violence, and I'm thinking about how to tell Dasha we need to leave our home.

My phone buzzes with a text from her:

Girls are at school. Coffee shop is slow. Missing you.

Fuck. She has no idea what's coming.

Missing you too. I'll pick you up early today. We need to talk.

Everything okay?

Will be. Trust me.

Always.

That single word hits harder than it should.

She trusts me, even knowing what I am.

Even after I just spent an hour proving exactly how monstrous I can be.

Back at the clubhouse, I hand the laptop to Vanir and head for the bathroom to clean up.

The blood on my hands washes away easily enough, but there's a splatter on my neck I miss.



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The water runs pink down the drain, carrying away Carlos's blood but not the satisfaction of getting the job done.

"Get what you needed?" Runes asks when I return to the chapel.

"Intel and a message delivered. Carlos won't be watching anyone anymore."

"Good. Meghan's already at the coffee shop, preparing Dasha for tonight. You should head over there."

"She's not going to like this."

"She'll like being dead even less," Fenrir points out. "Sometimes protecting the people we love means making choices they won't like."

He's right, but that doesn't make it easier.

I stop by the family quarters to check what supplies we have—the room I'm planning for us is decent-sized, with its own bathroom and enough space for the girls.

It's not home, but it'll do.

Some of the old ladies have already started preparing it, adding feminine touches that will make the transition easier.

The drive to the coffee shop feels longer than usual.

Every car could be surveillance, every pedestrian a threat.

This is what war does—makes you see enemies everywhere.

I find them at the coffee shop, huddled together behind the counter.

The place is empty except for them—Meghan closed it down early.

Dasha looks up when I enter, and her smile is like sunshine until she sees my expression. "What's wrong?"

"We need to pack some things," I say gently. "Us and the girls are staying at the clubhouse for a while."

"Rio—"

"It's not negotiable, baby." I move closer, needing to touch her. "Things are escalating. The house isn't safe."

She studies my face, and her eyes catch on something.

Her hand comes up to touch my neck, fingers coming away with blood I missed.

"Is this yours?" Her voice is carefully neutral.

"No."

"Whose?"

"Someone who was watching you. Taking pictures of you and the girls."

Her face pales, but she doesn't pull away. "What did you do?"

"What I needed to." I catch her hand, link our fingers. "What I'll always do to protect you."

She's quiet for a long moment, processing this. Meghan watches us nervously, probably ready to jump in if Dasha balks.

"He had photos," I continue. "Detailed surveillance. Your routines, the girls' schedules. They were planning something, Dasha."

"Planning what?"

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"To hurt you. To use you against the club." I squeeze her hand. "I won't let that happen."

"Okay," Dasha says finally. "How long?"

"Until it's safe."

"And when will that be?"

"When Bembe Reyes is dead." I don't sugarcoat it. She deserves honesty.

She nods slowly. "Okay. Let me grab my things. We'll need to pack for the girls too."

"Dasha—"

"I said okay, Rio." She stretches up to kiss me, soft and sweet despite the blood on my neck. "I trust you. If you say we need to be at the clubhouse, then that's where we'll be."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that." She pulls back to look at me. "You're not the only one who protects this family. I'll do whatever it takes to keep the girls safe. Even if it means leaving our home for a while."

"Our home," I repeat, the words warming something in my chest.

"Our home," she confirms. "Which we'll come back to when this is over."

Meghan clears her throat. "Not to interrupt this sweet moment, but can we get moving? I'd rather be behind club walls before dark."

She's right.

We move efficiently after that—packing essentials at Dasha's apartment first.

She's practical about it, filling suitcases with clothes and toiletries, grabbing the girls' favorite toys and books.

I watch her work, this woman who's taking upheaval in stride because she trusts me to keep her safe.

At my house, we pack more strategically.

Clothes for a few weeks, the girls' school supplies, medications, important documents.

Dasha knows exactly where everything is, moving quickly.

"The girls' stuffed animals," she reminds me. "Cali won't sleep without Mr. Bunny."

"Already packed him."

She smiles at that. "You're a good dad."

"Trying to be."

By the time we pick up the girls from school, I've arranged for prospects to watch

both properties and had their teachers alerted to the security situation.

The girls are excited about staying at the clubhouse—to them, it's an adventure.

"Will we have sleepovers with the other kids?" Florencia asks.

"Maybe," I allow. "But you'll have your own room with Dasha and me."

"Like a family vacation!" Cali declares.

Dasha meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. "Exactly like that, baby."

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By evening, we're settled into one of the family rooms at the clubhouse.

It's not home, but it's safe—steel doors, armed brothers, and the kind of security Bembe's crew can't breach.

The room is bigger than I expected, with a queen bed and bunk beds for the girls.

Someone's put fresh flowers on the dresser and stocked the mini-fridge with juice boxes and snacks.

The girls are in the common room, playing with some of the other club kids, their laughter drifting down the hall.

It's good for them to be around other children who understand this life, who won't ask questions about why they're suddenly living at daddy's clubhouse.

Dasha stands at the window, watching the sun set over the compound.

She's changed into one of my shirts and leggings, her hair loose around her shoulders. She looks beautiful and brave and everything I never knew I needed.

"You okay?" I wrap my arms around her from behind.

"I'm good." She leans back into me. "This is temporary. We'll get through it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She turns in my arms to face me. "But Rio? Next time you come home with blood on you, maybe clean up better. Cali notices everything."

"Noted." I kiss her forehead. "I'm sorry you have to deal with this."

"I'm not." Her voice is fierce. "I'm sorry those assholes think they can threaten our family. I'm sorry you have to become a monster to protect us. But I'm not sorry for choosing this life with you."

"Even knowing what I did today?"

"Especially knowing what you did today." She frames my face with her hands. "You're not just a monster, Rio. You're our monster. And I love every part of you."

I kiss her then, deep and claiming, pouring everything I feel into the connection. When we break apart, we're both breathing hard.

"I love you too," I tell her. "More than you know."

"I know exactly how much," she corrects. "It's written in blood on the walls of some shitty apartment. It's in the way you look at me and the girls. It's in every choice you make to keep us safe."

A knock on the door interrupts us. Tor's voice carries through: "Family dinner in twenty. Runes wants everyone there."

"Guess we better get the girls," Dasha says.

"Wait." I catch her hand. "I need you to know something. What I am, what I do—it's not going to change. When this is over, there'll be another threat. Another enemy. Another reason to become the monster."



"I know."

"And you're okay with that?"

She pulls me down for another kiss. "Rio, I fell in love with all of you. The father, the protector, and yes, the monster. I'm not asking you to change. I'm asking you to let me stand beside you through it all."

"Always," I promise.

"Good. Now let's go eat dinner with our weird, violent, wonderful family."

As we walk toward the common room, hand in hand, I think about the duality of this life.

In a few hours, I tortured a man to death with my bare hands.

Now I'm about to eat dinner with my daughters and help with homework.

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I'm a monster.

I'm a father.

I'm a man who'll burn the world to keep his family safe.

And for the first time in years, I'm okay with all of it.

Because Dasha's right—I'm not just a monster.

I'm their monster, and that makes a huge difference.

### CHAPTER FIVE

Dasha

The main room at the clubhouse is chaotic as all hell, but it's the good kind—the kind that comes from too many people who love each other crammed into one space.

Long tables are set up family-style, riddled with enough food to feed an army.

Which, looking around at all of my brothers and their families, might not be far from the truth.

The smell hits me first—roasted meats, fresh bread, something that might be Starla's famous mac and cheese that Meghan's always raving about.

It's like Thanksgiving, except everyone's wearing leather and there are probably enough weapons in this room to stock a small armory.

"Dasha, honey, pass the potatoes?" The request comes from Charm, one of the older old ladies whose husband is the VP and has been with the club for over thirty-five years.

She's been nothing but welcoming since we arrived, showing me where everything is, introducing me to the other women with a patience that speaks of years of experience bringing new people into the fold.

I pass the bowl, still adjusting to how natural this feels.

Cali is on my right, enthusiastically describing her day to anyone who'll listen, while Florencia sits across from us next to Rio, quietly observing everything with those serious eyes she inherited from her father.

"So," Meghan slides in beside me, bumping my shoulder. "How's your first official family dinner as Rio's ol' lady?"

"Is that what I am now?" I ask, though the title sends a warm flutter through my chest.

"Girl, you've been his ol' lady for years. Y'all just finally made it official." She grins. "Welcome to the chaos."

Looking around, I can see what she means.

The room is full of leather-clad bikers, tattooed and dangerous-looking, currently engaged in activities like cutting up chicken nuggets for toddlers and wiping faces.

There's Regnor, who is one of the full patch members, currently making airplane noises to get his stubborn five-year-old daughter, Eira, to eat her vegetables.

Magnus, scarred and intimidating, is patiently braiding his daughter Runa's hair while she chatters about her favorite Disney princess.

The contrast should be jarring, but instead it's just... normal.

"Daddy, can we stay here forever?" Cali asks, ketchup already smeared on her cheek. "It's like a big sleepover!"

Rio reaches over to wipe her face with practiced ease. "Just for a little while, baby girl. Until some grown-up stuff gets sorted out."

"What kind of grown-up stuff?"

"Boring stuff," he assures her. "Nothing you need to worry about."

"Is it about the bad men?" Florencia asks quietly, and the table goes still for just a moment before conversations resume.

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Rio meets her gaze steadily. "What makes you think that,mija?"

"You only bring us here when there's trouble," she says with that startling insight that sometimes makes me forget she's only eight. "Like when those men were following Uncle Tor last year."

"You're too smart for your own good," Rio says, reaching over to tug her braid gently. "Yes, there are some not-nice people we're dealing with. But you're safe here. Everyone's safe."

Elfe plops down across from us, her plate piled high with enough food for two people.

At twenty-one, she's got her mom Starla's striking features and her dad Ivar's rebellious streak.

The pink streaks in her dark hair catch the light as she settles in. "This is wild, right? Like summer camp but with more weapons."

"Elfe," Starla warns from down the table. "Not in front of the kids."

"What? They know Daddy and Uncle Rio have guns." She winks at my girls. "Bet you two are having fun with all the kids here."

"There'sso many!" Florencia says, her earlier seriousness forgotten. "And they all know how to ride bikes already. Kira said her dad's teaching her on a little dirt bike. Can we learn, Daddy?"

"When you're older," Rio says automatically, then catches my eye. "If Dasha says it's okay."

The casual inclusion, the acknowledgment of my role in their decisions, makes my heart squeeze. "We'll see," I tell them, which every parent knows means 'probably not, but I don't want to argue right now.'

"But Dasha," Cali protests, "Kira's only seven and she gets to ride!"

"Kira's not our daughter," I point out. "And she wears so much protective gear she looks like a marshmallow."

I notice the way Rio's eyes meet mine when I utter the words 'our daughter'.

She isn't mine, and neither is her sister, but they feel like they've always been mine.

"I'd wear the marshmallow suit," Cali bargains. "Please?"

"We'll discuss it when things calm down," Rio intervenes, giving me a grateful look. "Right now, focus on your dinner."

The meal continues with the comfortable chaos of a large family meal.

I catch snippets of conversation from around the room—Hakon got a girl pregnant, someone else just got a promotion at their legitimate job, a debate about the best route for an upcoming charity ride.

It's all so normal, you could almost forget why we're all here.

Almost.

I watch Rio interact with his brothers, the easy camaraderie mixed with underlying tension.

They're all aware of why we're here, even if they're keeping it light for the kids.

Every so often, I catch meaningful glances exchanged, subtle hand signals I don't understand yet.

"The kids are getting restless," Magnolia observes from down the table.

She's Kraken's old lady, a petite woman with laugh lines and kind eyes who seems to have adopted me when I first came around the club. "Should we do movie night?"

"Movie night!" Several children cheer in unison.

"After baths," Fern says firmly, every bit the matriarch despite being younger than some of the other old ladies. "You know the rules."

"Ladies, let's divide and conquer," Magnolia suggests. "Fern, you and Meghan take the younger ones. Starla, you've got the middle group. I'll help Dasha with her girls since it's their first movie night here."

It's clearly a routine they've done before.

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The women efficiently herd children toward various bathrooms while the men clear tables and start moving toward the room they holdkirkjain—their meeting room.

Rio stops me before I can follow the exodus of women and children. "You good?"

"I'm good," I assure him, reaching up to straighten his collar unnecessarily. "Go do what you need to do."

He glances around, then pulls me into a quick, hard kiss. "I love you."

"Love you too. Be safe."

"I'm just going to a meeting, baby."

"Yeah, where you guys plan God knows what," I point out. "My request stands."

He grins, that rare full smile that transforms his face. "Yes, ma'am."

The next hour is devoted to baths and pajamas.

Each one of the rooms upstairs have an en-suite bathroom and we all go to each member's room.

For example, I'm with the girls in Rio's room, where Vail goes to Vanir's with their kids.

Magnolia shows me where they keep extra towels, bubble bath, and the collection of



rubber ducks that seem to multiply every time someone looks away.

"You're handling this well," she observes as we wrestle Cali into pajamas.

The five-year-old has decided she's a mermaid and doesn't need clothes.

"Even I need pajamas even if I'm a mermaid," I tell Cali firmly. "Mermaids get cold on land."

"That's true," Cali concedes after a moment of thought. "Ariel needed a dress when she got legs."

"Exactly." I manage to get her into her favorite unicorn pajamas while she's distracted by the logic.

"Not everyone adjusts this quickly," Magnolia continues once Cali runs off to find Florencia. "Some women can't handle the reality of club life when it hits."

"I've had years to see how this world works," I reply, gathering wet towels. "And honestly? The love I see here, the loyalty, the way everyone protects each other... it outweighs the danger."

"That's the right attitude." She pats my shoulder. "Come on, let's get these monkeys settled for movie night."

The media room is set up with blankets and pillows everywhere, creating a giant nest on the floor.

Someone's made popcorn, and juice boxes are distributed with the seriousness of a communion ritual.

The kids pile in, my girls naturally gravitating toward some of the other children they know.

"What are we watching?" Florencia asks, claiming a spot between two older girls who immediately make room for her.

"Moana!" someone calls out.

"We watched that last time," another voice protests. "Let's watch Coco!"

A debate ensues that would rival any UN negotiation.

Finally, Starla makes an executive decision. "Finding Nemo. No arguments."

"But we've seen it amilliontimes," Elfe protests from her spot on one of the couches, beer in hand.

"Then make it a million and one," her mother retorts. "Or you can go to bed early."

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Elfe subsides with a dramatic sigh and sticks her tongue out at her mom, but stays put, obviously enjoying the fun the kids are having.

I notice she's got her phone out, texting rapidly with a small smile on her face.

"Boyfriend?" I guess, settling onto one of the couches next to Meghan.

"Something like that," she says evasively. "Dad doesn't know yet, so..."

"Your secret's safe," I assure her.

The movie starts, and within minutes, the younger kids are entranced.

The older ones pretend to be too cool but still watch.

I find myself relaxing for the first time since Rio came home with blood on his neck earlier.

"So," Meghan says quietly, producing a flask from somewhere and adding something to her juice. "Real talk. How are you doing with all this?"

I consider the question seriously. "Honestly? Better than I expected. I mean, I'm terrified about the danger, but... being here, seeing how the club works together, it helps."

"The first time Tor came home bloody, I threw up," she admits. "Not my finest moment."

"When did it get easier?"

"When I realized he wasn't just some violent criminal. He's a protector. They all are. They do terrible things to terrible people to keep us safe." She takes a sip of her spiked juice. "Once you understand that, the blood becomes... not acceptable exactly, but understandable."

"Dasha?" Cali appears at my knee, rubbing her eyes. "I'm thirsty."

"There's juice right there, baby."

"I want water. From the kitchen. The cold kind."

I recognize a stalling tactic when I see one, but I indulge her anyway. "Okay, let's go get some cold water."

The kitchen is quieter, though I can hear the muffled sounds of the men's meeting from down the hall.

Cali climbs onto a stool while I get her water, adding ice because I know she likes to hear it clink.

"Are you and Daddy married now?" she asks suddenly.

I nearly drop the glass. "What makes you ask that?"

"Runa said when mommies and daddies live together and kiss, they're married." She sips her water thoughtfully. "And you live with us and kiss Daddy."

"Well..." I scramble for an age-appropriate answer. "Sometimes adults who love each other very much live together before they get married. Your daddy and I love each

other and you girls very much, but we're not married yet."

"Yet?" She perks up. "So you will get married?"

"Maybe someday," I answer her honestly. "Would you like that?"

"Yes!" She bounces on the stool. "Then you'd be our real mommy!"

"Oh, sweetheart." I crouch down to her level. "I don't need to be married to your daddy to love you like a real mommy. I already do."

She throws her little arms around my neck, nearly knocking me over. "I love you too, Dasha-mommy."

My eyes sting as I hold her tight.

When she pulls back, she's yawning widely.

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"How about we skip the rest of the movie and get you to bed?" I suggest.

"Will you tell me a story?"

"Of course."

Back in our room, I tuck her into the bottom bunk.

Florencia must still be watching the movie.

As I'm making up a story about a brave princess who rides motorcycles, I hear the door open.

Rio slips in quietly, pausing when he sees us.

"And the princess rode her sparkly motorcycle all the way to the castle," I continue, very aware of him watching us. "Where the handsome king was waiting with her favorite ice cream."

"What flavor?" Cali asks sleepily.

"Strawberry with rainbow sprinkles, of course."

"That's my favorite," she mumbles, eyes drooping.

"I know, baby. Sweet dreams."

She's asleep before I finish tucking her blanket around her. When I turn, Rio's looking at us with an expression that makes my heart skip.

"How long were you listening?" I ask softly.

"Long enough." He pulls me into the hallway, closing the door quietly behind us.  
"Dasha-mommy?"

I blush. "She just started calling me that. I didn't?—"

He cuts me off with a kiss that leaves me breathless.

When we break apart, he rests his forehead against mine. "Don't apologize. Hearing you with her... Christ, Dasha. Do you know what you do to me?"

"Hopefully, the same thing you do to me."

"Kirkja's not over," he says reluctantly. "But I needed to see you. To see them. To remind myself what I'm fighting for."

"Is it bad?" I ask. "Whatever you're planning?"

"It's necessary," he says, which isn't really an answer. "Vanir cracked the laptop. We know more about their plans now."

"And?"

He hesitates, clearly debating how much to share. "We need to move fast. Hit them before they expect it. But first, we have to smooth things over with the Irish tomorrow. I'm going with the group to talk to them."

"About the warehouse that burned?"

"Yeah. Bembe's trying to start a war between us. Make us fight each other while he moves his product." His jaw tightens. "We're not going to let that happen."

"Rio!" Tor's voice carries down the hall. "Need you back in here, brother."

"Go," I tell him. "I'll wait up."

"Could be late."

"I'll still wait."



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He kisses me again, quick but thorough. "Check on Florencia? Make sure she gets to bed at a reasonable hour? You and I know this one will be out for the rest of the night."

"Already planning on it."

He heads back to the meeting, and I return to the media room.

The movie's almost over, and several of the younger kids are already asleep in the pillow nest.

Florencia is still awake but yawning.

"Ready for bed?" I ask her.

She nods, taking my hand as we navigate around sleeping children.

"Dasha?" she says as I'm tucking her into the top bunk. "Are we going to be okay?"

The question breaks my heart a little. "Yes, sweetheart. We're going to be fine."

"Promise?"

"I promise we're going to do everything we can to stay safe and together," I say carefully. "Your daddy and all his friends are working hard to fix the problem."

She seems to accept this, snuggling into her pillow. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too, baby. Sweet dreams."

I leave a small light on and settle into the chair by the window with a book I grabbed from the main room.

I can't focus on the words, but it gives me something to do while I wait for Rio.

The clubhouse settles into nighttime rhythms.

I hear doors closing, muffled conversations, someone's TV through the walls.

It's like living in a very dangerous apartment complex.

My phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number.

My blood freezes until I read it:

This is Magnolia. Saved your number from the dinner list. If you need anything tonight, I'm down the hall, in room 12. Don't hesitate. - M

The kindness of these women continues to amaze me.

I save her number and send back a thank you.

Another buzz, this time from Meghan:

Still up? Wine in my room if you need company.

I consider it, but decide to wait for Rio.

I want to be here when he gets back, to see for myself that he's okay.

Time passes. I must doze because the next thing I know, Rio's gently taking the book from my hands.

"Hey," I mumble, disoriented. "What time is it?"

"Late. After two." He helps me stand. "Come on, let's get you to bed properly."

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I check on both girls—still sleeping soundly—before following him to our bed.

He strips down to his boxers, and I can see the tension in every line of his body.

"Bad meeting?"

"Eh, it was a productive meeting," he corrects, sliding in beside me. "Vanir found a lot on that laptop. Carlos was thorough—detailed files on you, Meghan, and Elfe. Schedules, photos, personal information. Even had notes about your coffee preferences."

"That's... creepy."

"That's dangerous," he corrects. "But now we know what they know. And we found their shipping manifest. Bembe's expecting a massive shipment in three days. Enough heroin and fentanyl to supply half the country."

"And you're going to stop it?"

"We're going to steal it, give it to the Irish, and make a fuck ton of money. Gonna destroy his ass.." The certainty in his voice should probably scare me. Instead, I find it reassuring.

"What about the Irish?"

"Meeting them tomorrow morning to tell them the plan. Runes, Ivar, and I will show them the evidence, make sure they know Bembe's trying to play us against each

other." He pulls me closer. "Liam Mackenzie's unpredictable on his best day, but he respects honesty. We'll make it right. The fact that Revna married Doran solidifies the relationship between the club and the Irish, so I don't think things could ever go sour."

"And then?"

"Then we plan. Then we execute. Then we come home safe."

I'm quiet for a moment, processing everything. "Elfe's so young to be caught up in this."

"She's Ivar's daughter. This world is all she's ever known." He strokes my hair absently. "But yeah, when we saw her file... Ivar almost lost his mind. Would've gone after Bembe himself if Runes hadn't talked him down."

"Can't blame him. If someone was stalking my daughter..." I trail off, realizing what I've said.

Rio goes still. "Your daughter?"

"I mean... they feel like mine," I say softly. "Is that okay?"

"It's more than okay." His voice is rough. "It's beautiful."

We're quiet for a while, just holding each other in the dark.

Finally, I ask the question that's been nagging at me.

"What happens after? When Bembe's dealt with? Do we just go back to normal?"

"There is no normal in this life," he says honestly. "There will always be threats. Always be someone who thinks they can hurt us through our families. But we'll handle them. Every time."

"And we just... live with that?"

"You live with it, or you leave." His arms tighten around me. "I'd understand if you wanted to leave. Take the girls somewhere safe, somewhere normal?—"

"Stop." I prop myself up to look at him. "I'm not going anywhere. Neither are the girls. We're a family, Rio. Your world is our world."

"Even knowing what it costs?"

"Especially knowing. Because I also know what we get in return. Love, loyalty, protection, family." I kiss him softly. "That's worth any price."

He rolls us so I'm beneath him, kissing me deeply.

When we break apart, we're both breathing hard.

"I love you," he says. "More than I've ever loved anyone. More than I thought possible after Flora."

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"I love you too," I whisper. "All of you. The father, the protector, the monster. Every part."

We make love slowly, quietly, very aware of the children sleeping nearby.

It's different from last night's desperate passion—this is promise and commitment and something deeper than words.

After, curled against his chest, I think about how much has changed in just two days.

Two days ago, I was serving coffee and living a normal life.

Now I'm in hiding with the man I love and the children who've become mine, surrounded by dangerous people who'd die to protect us.

It should terrify me.

Instead, I've never felt safer.

"Rio?" I whisper into the darkness.

"Mm?"

"Whatever happens tomorrow, with the Irish and with Bembe... just come back to us."

"Always," he promises. "I'll always come home to you."

And in this clubhouse, surrounded by brothers and their families, with our girls sleeping peacefully nearby, I believe him.

## CHAPTER SIX

Rio

Dawn breaks through the clubhouse windows like a threat, painting everything in shades of blood and gold.

I've been awake for an hour already, running through every possible scenario for today's meeting with Liam Mackenzie.

The Irish boss isn't known for his reasonable nature, and we're about to tell him exactly what happened, and why his warehouse went up in flames.

Dasha stirs beside me, immediately alert even though it's early as hell. "You're thinking too loud," she murmurs, pressing a kiss to my shoulder.

"Sorry, baby. Didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't." She props herself up on an elbow, studying my face. "Nervous about the meeting?"

"Cautious," I correct. "Liam Mackenzie's got a temper that makes mine look reasonable. And he just lost three million in inventory."

"But it wasn't your fault."

"No, but proving that to a pissed-off Irishman is going to be interesting." I pull her closer, needing her warmth. "We leave in an hour."



"Who's going?"

"Me, Runes, and Ivar. Small group, non-threatening. Any more and it looks like we're planning something."

"Aren't you?"

I grin despite the tension. "Different kind of planning."

A small voice from the bunk beds interrupts us. "Daddy?"

It's Florencia, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. "Hey,mija. What are you doing awake?"

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"I heard talking." She climbs down carefully and pads over to our bed. "Are you going to work?"

I lift her up to sit between us. "Yeah, baby. Got a meeting with some important people."

"The kind of meeting where you need your gun?" She's too perceptive for an eight year old.

"All Daddy's meetings involve guns," Cali announces from her bunk, apparently also awake. "That's why he's cool."

"Come here, monkey." I help her climb up too, and suddenly our bed is full of my entire world. "Yes, I'll have my gun. But it's just for protection, not for using."

"Like a seatbelt," Dasha offers. "You wear it just in case, but hope you don't need it."

"Exactly." I kiss the top of her head, grateful for her quick thinking.

"Will you be home for dinner?" Florencia asks.

"Wouldn't miss it."

We spend the next twenty minutes in bed together, the girls chattering about their plans for the day while Dasha and I exchange looks over their heads.

These moments—normal, peaceful, family moments—are what I'm fighting for.

Eventually, I have to get ready.

The girls put up a fight when I extract myself from the pile, but Dasha distracts them with promises of pancakes for breakfast.

I shower quickly, dress in my usual—jeans, black shirt, cut.

The weight of my gun at my hip is familiar, comforting even.

When I emerge from the bathroom, Dasha's gotten the girls dressed and ready for the day.

She approaches me while they're distracted with their shoes.

"Be careful," she says quietly, straightening my cut. "I know you have to do this, but?—"

"I'll be careful," I promise, pulling her close. "This is just talking. Negotiating. I'm good at that."

"You're good at a lot of things." She stretches up to kiss me. "Just come back in one piece."

"Daddy, we're hungry!" Cali announces, bouncing impatiently by the door.

"Better go feed the monsters," I say, stealing one more kiss before we head out.

The main room is already busy, even though it's early as shit.

Runes is at one of the tables with Ivar, both nursing coffee and reviewing notes. They look up as we approach.

"Family man," Ivar greets me with a grin. "Ready to dance with the Irish?"

"Ready as I'll ever be." I accept the coffee Meghan hands me with a grateful nod.

"Where are we meeting them?"

"Neutral ground," Runes says. "That warehouse complex off Highway 90. Doran suggested it—his family uses it for legitimate shipping, so there won't be any surprises."

"How many are they bringing?"

"Liam doesn't travel light," Ivar says. "Expect at least six soldiers plus Doran. We'll be outnumbered."

"We're always outnumbered," I point out. "Hasn't stopped us yet."

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"Daddy, can I have syrup?" Cali asks from where she's claimed a spot at the next table.

"Ask Dasha, baby."

"She said to ask you."

I look at Dasha, who shrugs innocently. "You're the one who deals with her on a sugar high."

"Just a little," I concede, which earns me a bright smile from my youngest.

"Whipped already," Tor observes, joining our table. "How long you been official? Two days?"

"Fuck off," I say without heat. "How's Meghan handling lockdown?"

"Better than expected. She's turned it into some kind of slumber party with the other women." He lowers his voice. "You ready for this? Liam's not exactly stable on his best day."

"We've got evidence, we've got truth, and we've got a proposal that makes him money," Runes says. "If he's smart, he'll listen."

"And if he's not?"

"Then we remind him that his nephew is married to my daughter," Runes says darkly.

"Family means something, even to the Irish."

I spend the next half hour eating breakfast with my girls, listening to their chatter while mentally preparing for the meeting.

Dasha keeps shooting me concerned looks, but she maintains a cheerful front for the kids.

"Time to roll," Runes announces eventually.

I stand, dropping kisses on both girls' heads. "Be good for Dasha. I'll see you at dinner."

"Love you, Daddy," they chorus.

"Love you too, monsters."

Dasha walks me to the door. "Rio?—"

"I know." I cup her face in my hands. "I'll be careful. I promise."

"You better be. We have plans for tonight that require you intact."

That surprises a laugh out of me. "Is that so?"

"Mm-hmm. So don't go getting shot or stabbed or whatever it is you boys do."

"I'll do my best."

One more kiss and then I'm following Runes and Ivar out to the bikes.

The morning air is thick with humidity, promising another scorching Florida day.

We take three bikes—separate targets if things go sideways, but able to maneuver better than cages.

The ride to the warehouse takes thirty minutes.

I use the time to center myself, pushing thoughts of family aside and pulling on the mask I wear for meetings like this.

Calm, controlled, dangerous when needed.

The warehouse complex is mostly deserted this early, which is probably why Doran and Liam suggested it.

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We spot the Irish convoy immediately—three black SUVs arranged in a defensive formation, men in suits standing guard.

"Subtle," Ivar mutters as we park our bikes.

"Liam doesn't do anything subtle," Runes reminds us. "Remember, let me do most of the talking. Rio, you present the evidence when I signal. Ivar, try not to threaten anyone."

"When have I ever threatened anyone for no damn reason?" Ivar asks innocently.

"Tuesday," Runes and I say in unison.

The warehouse door opens, and Doran steps out.

Revna's husband looks comfortable in his expensive suit, every inch the Irish and Russian prince.

But I catch the tension in his shoulders, the way his hand hovers near his hip.

He's nervous too.

"Gentlemen," he greets us. "Thanks for coming. Uncle Liam's inside, and he's... agitated."

"About his warehouse or about this meeting?" Runes asks.



"Both. He doesn't like being summoned."

"We didn't summon him," Ivar points out. "We requested a meeting to clear up a misunderstanding."

"You say tomato," Doran shrugs. "Just... be careful. He's got a short fuse today."

We follow him inside, where the temperature drops ten degrees.

The warehouse has been set up as a meeting space—table in the center, chairs arranged formally.

And at the head of the table sits Liam Mackenzie.

The Irish boss is exactly what you'd expect.

But his presence fills the room like smoke, dangerous and choking.

His red hair is going silver at the temples, and his green eyes are like chips of ice as he watches us approach.

"Raiders," he says, his Irish accent thick with disdain. "You've got some fucking balls, my warehouse burnt down, and you ask for a meeting without fixing the bloody problem."

"We're here to come to an agreement, to resolve this giant fuckin' issue," Runes says calmly, taking the seat across from him. Ivar and I flank him, staying standing. "That's what we're here to discuss."

"Discuss?" Liam leans forward, and I can see the rage simmering just beneath his controlled exterior. "Three million dollars of my property goes up in smoke, and you

want to talk about it?"

I speak for the first time, keeping my voice level. "Yeah, since we're all cool and everything."

Liam's eyes snap to me. "Rio Rojas. The prospect who likes to paint walls with blood. Aye, I know who you are, boy."

"Enough." Runes holds up a hand. "Liam, we called this meeting because someone is trying to start a war between us. Someone who benefits if we're busy killing each other."

"And who might that be?"

"Bembe Reyes. Culebra cartel."

Liam's expression doesn't change, but I catch the slight tightening around his eyes.

"Go on," he says finally.

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Runes nods to me, and I pull out the tablet we prepared. "Two days ago, I had a conversation with one of Bembe's surveillance guys. He was very informative."

I slide the tablet across to Liam, showing him the photos from Carlos's laptop. "These are screenshots from his files. Detailed surveillance on our women, our operations, and—" I swipe to the next image, "—your warehouses."

Liam studies the images, his face giving nothing away.

Doran leans in to look as well, though I suspect he's already seen them.

Revna would have made sure her husband was informed.

I swipe to the shipping manifests. "Bembe's bringing in a massive shipment in two days. Enough heroin and fentanyl to flood the entire country. He needed a distraction, something to keep us busy."

Liam is quiet for a long moment, and the tension in the room ratchets up another notch.

His men shift slightly, hands moving closer to weapons. Our side tenses in response.

"This is bloody nuts," Liam says finally, "what are you proposing?"

This is the crucial moment.

Runes leans forward. "We hit Bembe's shipment together. The drugs go to you for

distribution through your networks. We split the profits and eliminate a common enemy."

"You want me to help you steal from the cartel we already destroyed?" Liam's laugh is sharp and humorless. "What the fuck. I guess it doesn't matter. It might be dangerous, but?—"

"More dangerous than letting Bembe succeed?" I counter. "If his plan works, we go to war. Both our organizations get weakened. And he moves his product while we're distracted."

"The boy has a point," one of Liam's lieutenants says.

He's older, with the look of a man who's survived by being smart rather than brutal.

"Shut it, Connor," Liam snaps, but I can see he's thinking.

Doran clears his throat. "Uncle, if I may?"

Liam waves a hand, granting permission.

"The Raiders have always been straight with us," Doran says carefully. "When there was trouble, they came to us first. When the feds were sniffing around our gambling operations, they gave us warning. They've earned some trust."

"Trust," Liam repeats the word like it tastes bad. "Trust doesn't bring back three million in inventory."

"No," Runes agrees. "But taking Bembe's shipment would, plus more. Street value on that much product? We're talking twenty, thirty million. Your usual cut would more than cover the warehouse loss."

I watch Liam process this, can see the exact moment his rage transforms into greed.  
"Thirty million, you say?"

"Conservative estimate," I confirm. "Could be more, depending on purity."

"And you need us why?"

"Distribution," Ivar says bluntly. "We can take the shipment, but moving that much product isn't our specialty. It's yours. We can move a small amount of it, but, if we got rid of that shit fast, it'd tip off the feds."

It's a calculated compliment, acknowledging the Irish's superior smuggling networks.

Liam's ego accepts it readily. "What's your plan?" he asks.

Runes smiles for the first time. "Rio?"

I pull up the next set of files. "The shipment comes in by boat to a private dock in two nights. Bembe will have security, but he's expecting to be dealing with locals, not us. We hit them hard and fast, take the product, leave bodies."

"How many men?"

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"Our surveillance says twenty, maybe twenty-five. But they won't be expecting the both of us working together. We think Bembe might have thought that you'd believe we were behind his warehouse attack."

Liam looks at Connor, some silent communication passing between them.

Then he turns back to us. "If we do this—if—I want sixty percent."

"Fifty," Runes counters immediately. "Even split, even risk."

"Sixty," Liam insists. "My networks, my risk once the product is in play."

"Fifty-five," Ivar offers. "And the Raiders owe you a favor."

Now that's interesting. Ivar doesn't offer favors lightly.

Liam considers this. "A favor from the Raiders. To be called in at my discretion."

"Within reason," Runes adds. "We won't move against allies or harm innocents."

"Fair enough." Liam stands, and we all tense. Then he extends his hand to Runes.

"You've got a deal, Runes. But if this goes sideways, if this is some elaborate setup..."

"It's not," Runes says, shaking his hand firmly. "You're our family now, Mackenzie. We want Bembe gone as much as you want your money."

"More," I add quietly. "He threatened our families. This is personal."

Liam studies me with those cold green eyes. "I heard about your wife. And now he's after your new woman?"

"And others," I confirm, not bothering to ask how he knows about Dasha.

Information is currency in our world.

"Family is everything," Liam says finally. "A man who threatens women and children deserves whatever comes to him."

"On that, we agree completely."

The rest of the meeting is logistical bullshit.

We coordinate timing, communication channels, division of forces.

Doran acts as liaison, his position in both organizations making him the perfect go-between.

By the time we're done, I'm cautiously optimistic.

Liam's still a volatile bastard, but his greed outweighs his anger.

"One more thing," Liam says as we're preparing to leave. "I want Bembe alive."

"Why?" Ivar asks.

"Because I want to have a conversation with him about trying to use me as a tool." His smile is sharp and predatory. "A long, detailed conversation."

"After we get what we need from him," Runes agrees. "He might have information

about other operations."

"Of course. I'm patient when it serves me."

We shake hands again, the deal sealed.

As we're walking out, Doran falls into step beside me.

"That went better than expected," he says quietly.



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"Your uncle was reasonable."

"My uncle was greedy," Doran corrects. "But it works in our favor. Just... watch your backs. He'll honor the deal, but he's always looking for angles."

"Aren't we all?"

"True enough." He pauses at his SUV. "Revna's asked me how everyone is doing, with the club on lockdown? I have her and Dalla being taken care of, no one will fuck with them."

"Everyone is tougher than they look, even the kids," I remind him.

"I know. Doesn't stop her from worrying."

I understand the sentiment completely.

The ride back to the clubhouse is lighter, the success of the meeting lifting the weight from our shoulders.

We've got allies, we've got a plan, and in two days, Bembe Reyes will learn what happens when you threaten the Raiders' families.

"That was smooth," Ivar says over the comms. "Thought for sure Liam was going to start shooting when you pulled out that tablet."

"He's smarter than he looks," Runes replies. "Knew there was profit to be made."

We pull into the clubhouse lot to find an unexpected scene.

In the fenced area, Dasha has both girls suited up in protective gear, teaching them basic self-defense moves.

Several other women and kids are participating, turning it into a class.

"Is that your woman teaching our daughters to throw punches?" Ivar asks, amusement clear in his voice.

"Looks like." I can't help but smile as I watch Cali practice a palm strike on a practice pad.

Her form is terrible, but her determination is fierce.

"She's a keeper," Runes observes. "Not many women would think to turn a lockdown into training time."

We park and head over to watch.

Dasha sees us coming and smiles, but doesn't stop her instruction.

"Remember, ladies, the goal isn't to win a fight," she's saying. "It's to create an opportunity to run. Hit and run. Always run."

"What if they chase us?" one of the older girls asks.

"Then you run faster," Dasha says simply. "And you scream. Make noise, draw attention. Bad guys don't like witnesses."

"My daddy says I should go for the balls," Runa pipes up.

Several mothers laugh, and Dasha grins. "Your daddy's not wrong. But only if you can reach them safely. Otherwise, eyes, throat, knees. Vulnerable points."

"Daddy!" Cali spots me and abandons her stance to run over. "Look! I'm learning to fight!"

I scoop her up, protective gear and all. "I see that. You look very fierce."

"Dasha says I'm a natural," she announces proudly.

"I said you have natural enthusiasm," Dasha corrects, joining us.

She's slightly flushed from the workout, hair pulled back in a ponytail, and she looks absolutely beautiful. "How did the meeting go?"

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"Good. We have an agreement."

"Thank the Gods." The relief on her face is palpable. "I was worried... well, I was worried."

"Daddy, are you going to teach us to fight too?" Florencia asks, having followed her sister over.

"Maybe when you're older," I offer.

"Dasha says knowing how to protect ourselves is important," she counters with her eight-year-old logic.

"Dasha's right," I agree, shooting my woman a look that promises we'll discuss this later. "But let's start with the basics she's teaching you, okay?"

"Fine," Florencia sighs, clearly hoping for more advanced lessons.

"Inside, girls," Starla calls out. "Lunch in twenty minutes."

The crowd disperses, kids chattering excitedly about their new moves.

I wait until we're relatively alone before pulling Dasha close.

"Self-defense classes?" I ask.

"They need to know how to protect themselves," she says firmly. "I won't have them

be victims."

"Our girls know about stranger danger?—"

"It's not enough," she interrupts. "Not in this life. They need practical skills, muscle memory. Even if they never use it, they need to know they can."

I study her face, seeing the determination there. "This is about more than just general safety."

She nods. "Carlos had photos of them, Rio. Detailed surveillance of our babies. I can't... I won't let them be helpless if someone tries something."

"Hey." I tilt her chin up. "No one's going to touch them. I promise you that."

"You can't be everywhere," she says softly. "And neither can I. But we can give them tools, teach them to be smart and strong."

She's right, of course.

In our world, knowledge and preparation can mean the difference between life and death.

"Okay," I agree. "We'll teach them."

She stretches up to kiss me. "Now, tell me about the meeting. Are the Irish in?"

I fill her in on the basics as we walk back to the clubhouse, my arm around her waist.

She listens intently, asking smart questions about logistics and backup plans.

"Two days," she muses. "And then this is over?"

"This immediate threat is over," I correct. "There will always be others."

"I know. But we'll handle them."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Because that's what we do. We protect our family."

Inside, lunch is another chaotic family affair.

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I end up at a table with Runes, Ivar, and several other brothers, discussing plans for the raid while trying to keep the conversation kid-friendly.

"Uncle Rio, is it true you killed a man with a spoon once?" Zayder asks, eyes wide.

I nearly choke on my sandwich. "Where did you hear that?"

"Daddy said you did," the kid replies, pointing at Aesir.

I shoot Aesir a look. "Your daddy exaggerates."

"So you didn't?" The kid looks disappointed.

"It was a spork," I deadpan, which gets laughs from the adults.

"Rio's kidding," Dasha says firmly. "There was no spoon or spork."

"But there was something else?" Florencia asks, too perceptive as always.

"Eat your lunch," I deflect.

The afternoon passes quickly.

We spend hours in the chapel, planning every detail of the raid.

Maps are studied, contingencies discussed, roles assigned.

By the time we break for dinner, I'm confident in our plan but exhausted from the mental gymnastics.

I find my family in our room, the girls playing quietly while Dasha reads.

It's such a normal scene, it makes my chest tight.

"Daddy!" Cali abandons her dolls to launch herself at me. "We learned more fighting moves after lunch!"

"Did you?" I settle on the floor with them. "Show me."

What follows is an enthusiastic but highly inaccurate demonstration of self-defense techniques.

I correct their form gently, turning it into a game.

Dasha watches from the bed, that soft smile on her face that never fails to warm me.

"Bath time," she announces eventually, which triggers the usual protests.

"But we're not dirty!" Cali argues.

"You're covered in marker," Dasha points out. "How did you even get it on your elbow?"

"Art is messy," Cali says seriously, which cracks me up.

"Can't argue with that," I say, earning a glare from Dasha. "But you still need a bath."

The bedtime routine is becoming familiar—baths, pajamas, stories.



I take story duty tonight, making up tales about brave princesses who ride motorcycles and fight dragons.

Both girls are asleep before I finish, worn out from their busy day.

"They're getting comfortable here," Dasha observes as we settle into our own bed.

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"Kids are adaptable," I agree. "How are you doing with all this?"

"Honestly? Better than expected. The women here are incredible, the kids all play together well, and I feel safe." She curls into my side. "I just want it to be over so we can go home."

"Soon," I promise. "Two more days."

"And then?"

"Then we go home. We live our lives. We be happy."

"That sounds perfect."

We're quiet for a while, just holding each other in the dark.

Finally, Dasha speaks again. "Rio? Whatever happens with this raid, promise me you'll be careful."

"I promise."

"I mean it. I don't want to lose you. Just get the job done and come home."

"Yes, ma'am."

She props herself up to look at me. "I'm serious."

"So am I." I cup her face. "I've got too much to live for now. You, the girls, our future. I'm not throwing that away for anything."

"Good." She kisses me softly. "Because we have plans, remember?"

"Oh, I remember." I roll her beneath me. "Want to practice for those plans?"

Her laugh is quickly muffled by my kiss, and for a while, I forget about Irish alliances and cartel threats.

There's just us, here and now, stealing moments of peace in the chaos.

Two more days.

Two more days and we're able to go home.

I can't wait.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Dasha

The familiar smell of coffee grounds and fresh pastries should be comforting, but this morning it just reminds me how much I miss my normal life.

It's been three days since we moved into the clubhouse, and while I understand the necessity, I'm starting to go stir-crazy.

Which is why I convinced Rio to let me work the morning shift.

"You're insane," Meghan says, pulling shots for a customer's latte. "We're in

lockdown because psycho cartel members want to kill us, and you volunteer to come to work?"

"I need some normalcy," I tell her, wiping down the counter. "Even if it's just for a few hours. Plus, we need the money. Lockdown doesn't pay the bills."

"Rio wasn't happy about it," Tindra comments from where she's arranging pastries in the display case.

At twenty, she's the newest addition to our coffee crew, having started just a month ago.

Her purple-streaked hair and piercings might look intimidating, but she's got a smile that puts customers at ease.

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"Rio's never happy when he can't control every aspect of something," I reply. "But he agreed to let us open today, with conditions."

"Let me guess," Meghan counts on her fingers. "Prospects outside, check-ins every hour, and back to the clubhouse by one?"

"Pretty much." I glance toward the door where I know Gorm is stationed, trying to look casual while being obviously armed. "At least business is good this morning."

It's true—the morning rush has been steady, almost normal.

Regular customers ordering their usual drinks, complaining about traffic and weather like the world isn't dangerous and unpredictable.

It's exactly what I needed.

"Order up," Tindra calls, sliding a completed drink across the counter. "Vanilla latte with an extra shot."

I grab it and head to the pickup area, calling out the order.

The customer, a middle-aged woman I don't recognize, thanks me with a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

Something about her makes me uneasy, but I push the feeling aside.

I'm being paranoid.

"Dasha, can you handle the register while I grab more milk?" Meghan asks.

"Got it."

I move to the register just as the door chimes.

A man approaches—thirties, average height, nothing remarkable about him except the way he's looking at me.

Not like a customer looks at a barista.

Like a predator studying prey.

"What can I get you?" I ask, hand hovering near the panic button Rio insisted we install under the counter.

"Coffee. Black." His voice is flat, emotionless. "And a message delivered."

Before I can react, his hand shoots out, grabbing me by the throat.

His grip is iron, cutting off my air as he yanks me partially over the counter.

"Bembe sends his regards," he hisses.

I can't breathe. Can't scream.

My vision starts to blur as I claw at his hand.

Dimly, I hear Meghan screaming, Tindra dropping something that shatters.

Then I see movement from the corner of my eye—another man coming around the

counter, moving toward Meghan.

The front door explodes open.

Gorm charges in like a battering ram, not even slowing as he body-checks the second man.

The attacker goes flying, crashing over the counter in a tangle of limbs and coffee supplies.

"Get the fuck out of here," Gorm roars, already moving toward the man holding me.  
"And tell Bembe to fuck off!"

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The pressure on my throat releases suddenly as my attacker shoves me backward.

I fall, gasping, as he and his partner scramble for the exit.

Gorm pursues them to the door but doesn't follow—his priority is protecting us, not chasing them.

"Lockdown! Now!" he barks, already on his phone. "I need backup at Beans & Babes. Two fuckers, fleeing on foot. Yeah, they touched her."

Meghan's at my side immediately, helping me sit up. "Jesus Christ, Dasha. Are you okay?"

I try to answer but all that comes out is a croak.

My throat feels like it's on fire.

"Don't try to talk," Tindra says, appearing with a glass of water.

Her hands are shaking as bad as mine. "Fuck, that was... fuck."

Customers are screaming, fleeing, phones out recording everything.

Great, we'll probably be on social media within minutes.

"Everyone get the fuck out!" Gorm commands, his presence filling the small shop.

"Police are on their way. Coffee shop's closed."



The next few minutes are chaos.

Two more prospects arrive—Bodul and another I don't know well.

They efficiently clear the shop and lock it down while Gorm hovers over us protectively.

"Time to get the ladies out of here," Bodul announces. "We need to move. Now."

"I need to close out the register—" I start, voice raspy.

"Fuck the register," Meghan says firmly. "We're leaving."

They bundle us into a waiting SUV, prospects forming a protective detail that would be comical if I wasn't still shaking.

The drive back to the clubhouse takes ten minutes that feel like hours.

I keep touching my throat, feeling the bruises already forming.

Rio's waiting at the door when we pull up.

Someone must have called ahead because his expression is carved from stone, only his eyes showing the fury beneath.

He doesn't say a word as I get out of the vehicle, just opens his arms.

I fall into them, and suddenly I'm shaking harder.

The adrenaline's wearing off, leaving only the reality of how close that was.

"Are you okay?" His voice is deadly calm, but I can feel the tremor in his hands as he holds me.

"It was close," I admit against his chest. "If Gorm hadn't been there..."

"But he was." Rio pulls back to examine my throat, and I see his jaw clench at the already-visible bruises. "Did they say anything?"

"Bembe sends his regards."

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The sound he makes isn't quite human.

For a moment, I see the monster he keeps leashed, and even though it's not directed at me, it's terrifying.

"Dasha!" Two small bodies barrel into us—the girls, excited to see me back early.

"Careful," I manage, voice still rough. "Dasha's not feeling great."

"Are you sick?" Cali asks, then notices my neck. "You have owies!"

"Just a little accident," I lie, catching Rio's eye. "But I'm okay."

Starla appears as if summoned, taking in the scene with experienced eyes. "Girls, why don't we go make those cookies we talked about? Give Daddy and Dasha some grown-up time."

"But—" Florencia starts, looking between us with those too-wise eyes.

"Cookies, Florencia," Starla says firmly. "Chocolate chip. You can help measure."

The promise of cookies wins, and they follow Starla with only a few backward glances.

Once they're gone, Rio's control cracks.

"I'm going to kill him," he says, voice terrifyingly calm. "Slowly. Personally. I'm

going to make Santos look like a paper cut compared to what I do to Bembe."

"Rio—"

"Hetouchedyou." His hands frame my face, thumbs ghosting over the bruises on my throat. "He put his fucking hands on you."

"But I'm okay?—"

"You're not okay!" The words explode out of him. "You're bruised, you're shaking, and you could have been—" He cuts himself off, pulling me against him again. "Fuck. Fuck."

"Hey." I wrap my arms around him, feeling him tremble with rage. "I'm here. I'm safe. Gorm protected us."

"Gorm's not in the doghouse for the first time in his fucking life," he mutters. "And you're never leaving this clubhouse again without me."

"That's not realistic?—"

"Fuck being realistic right now." He pulls back to look at me. "We need to get out of here. Now. Before I do something stupid like storm Bembe's compound alone."

"What?"

"Come on." He takes my hand, already moving. "We're going for a ride."

"Rio, I should check on Meghan and Tindra?—"

"Tor's with Meghan. Vail's hanging out with Tindra. They're fine." He stops at our

room just long enough to grab his jacket and my helmet. "You need air. I need to not commit murder in front of my children. We're going on a ride."

I follow him to the garage, still processing everything that happened.

My throat hurts, my hands won't stop shaking, and part of me wants to curl up in bed and cry.

But the other part—the part that's adapted to this life—knows Rio's right. We both need this.

He hands me my helmet, checking the strap himself before putting on his own.

The bike roars to life beneath us, and I wrap my arms around him, pressing close.

The vibration, the power, the solid warmth of him—it all combines to finally slow my racing heart.

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We ride without a destination at first, leaving the city behind for the open highway.

The wind whips past us, carrying away some of the morning's terror.

Rio drives like he fights—controlled but intense, every movement precise.

I lose myself in the rhythm of it, in the trust of letting him carry us both away from danger.

After about forty minutes, he exits onto a smaller road I recognize.

We've been here before, months ago when we were on a day out with the kids.

There's a trail system that leads to a secluded spot by a creek, beautiful and private.

He parks the bike in the small lot—empty on a weekday morning—and helps me off.

My legs are steadier now, the ride having worked its magic.

"Better?" he asks, removing his helmet.

"Getting there." My voice is still rough, and I see him flinch at the sound.

"Come on." He takes my hand, leading me toward the trail. "Let's walk."

The forest is quiet except for birds and the distant sound of water.

We walk in silence for a while, hands linked, both processing the morning's events.

The trail is well-maintained but deserted, winding through old trees that filter the sunlight into green-gold patterns.

"I'm sorry," Rio says suddenly.

"For what?"

"For putting you in danger. For bringing this chaos into your life. For?—"

"Stop." I tug his hand, making him face me. "None of this is your fault."

"Isn't it?" His eyes are tortured. "If you weren't with me?—"

"If I wasn't with you, I'd be half-alive," I interrupt. "Going through the motions, serving coffee, existing but not really alive. You didn't bring chaos into my life, Rio. You brought purpose. You gave me love, family."

"Dasha—"

"I'm not done." I reach up to cup his face. "Yes, this morning was terrifying. Yes, I'm scared. But I'm not scared enough to run. I'm not scared enough to give up what we have."

"Even if what we have gets you killed?"

"It won't." I say it with more confidence than I feel. "Because you won't let it. Because the club won't let it. Because tomorrow, this threat finally ends."

He studies my face for a long moment, then crushes me against him.

The kiss is desperate, all teeth and need, like he's trying to prove I'm really here and alive.

I give as good as I get, pouring all my own fear and relief into the connection.

When we break apart, we're both breathing hard.

"I need you," he says roughly. "Right now. Need to feel you, taste you, know you're okay."



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"Yes." It's all I can manage before he's kissing me again.

He backs me against a large oak tree, hands already working at my clothes.

There's nothing gentle about it—we're both too keyed up, too desperate.

I fumble with his belt while he shoves my skirt up, both of us racing against the need consuming us.

"Someone could see," I gasp as he lifts me, wrapping my legs around his waist.

"Don't care." He positions himself at my entrance. "Need you now."

He slides home in one thrust, and we both groan.

There's no finesse, no slow build—just raw need as he pounds into me.

The tree bark is rough against my back, the position is awkward, and anyone could walk by.

None of it matters.

All that matters is proving we're alive, we're together, we survived.

"Mine," he growls against my throat, careful of the bruises even in his desperation.

"My woman. My everything."

"Yours," I agree, nails digging into his shoulders. "Always yours."

It's fast and fierce and exactly what we both need.

When I come, it's with a cry that echoes through the trees.

Rio follows seconds later, my name on his lips like a prayer.

We stay pressed together afterward, both trembling from more than exertion.

Slowly, carefully, he lowers me back to my feet, holding me steady when my legs wobble.

"Fuck," he breathes, resting his forehead against mine.

"Yeah." I'm shaking again, but this time it's release rather than fear.

We fix our clothes in silence, both a little stunned by the intensity.

Then Rio takes my hand and leads me off the trail to a small clearing by the creek.

He sits with his back against a tree and pulls me into his lap, holding me like I might disappear.

"Talk to me," he says quietly. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that I understand now," I admit. "Really understand. Why you become the monster. Why the violence is necessary."

"Yeah?"

"When he had his hand on my throat, all I could think about was the girls. How they need me. How I couldn't leave them." I touch the bruises gently. "And I realized I'd do anything to stay alive for them. To protect them."

"That's the thing about having something to lose," Rio says. "It makes you dangerous in ways you never imagined."

"Is that what happened to you? After Flora?"

He's quiet for a long moment. "When Flora died, I thought I'd never feel that kind of rage again. Thought I'd burned through it all hunting her killers." He tightens his arms around me. "Then you came along. You and your smile and your coffee and the way you looked at my girls like they mattered. And suddenly I had something to lose again."

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"Rio—"

"Tomorrow night, we end this," he continues. "The Irish are in position, our intel is solid, and Bembe won't see us coming. By this time tomorrow, he'll be dead and his organization will be scattered."

"And then?"

"Then we go home. We live our lives. We probably face new threats eventually, because that's the nature of this world. But we face them together."

"Together," I echo, settling more firmly against him.

We sit by the creek for another hour, talking about everything and nothing.

About the girls' school plans, about maybe taking a vacation when this is over, about the future we're building.

Normal couple things against the backdrop of cartel wars and brotherhood.

Finally, as the sun reaches its peak, Rio stirs. "We should head back. The girls will wonder where we are."

"And I should check on Meghan and Tindra," I add. "Make sure they're okay after this morning."

The ride back is calmer, the desperate edge worn off.

I still hold Rio tightly, but now it's about connection rather than fear.

By the time we pull into the clubhouse, I feel almost steady again.

"There you are!" Meghan rushes over as we enter. "I was worried—your throat, holy shit, the bruises are worse."

"I'm okay," I assure her, voice still raspy. "How are you? And Tindra?"

"Shaken but fine. Tor's been hovering like a mother hen, and someone told me Bodul apparently gave Tindra his number 'in case she needs anything.'" She makes air quotes, grinning. "I think our little purple-haired barista has an admirer."

"She could do worse," I observe. "How's the shop?"

"Cops came, took statements, made a mess." Meghan shrugs. "We'll be closed tomorrow anyway while the guys handle business. Might as well stay closed until this is over."

It's a stark reminder that tomorrow night, while we're safely locked in the clubhouse, our men will be at war.

"Dasha!" Cali's voice carries across the room. "We made cookies! And saved you some!"

"Did you?" I move toward the kitchen, where both girls are covered in flour and chocolate. "What kind?"

"All kinds," Florencia says proudly. "Starla said we could experiment."

"I made pink ones," Cali announces. "With sprinkles!"

"Of course you did." I accept a thoroughly decorated cookie, taking a bite even though I'm not really that hungry. "Delicious."

The rest of the day passes in a blur of normal family activities.

Lunch with the club, helping with homework, refereeing a dispute between the girls over whose turn it is to pick the movie.

If it wasn't for the bruises on my throat and the guys watching the club with their guns drawn, it could be any day.

Dinner is quieter than usual, everyone aware that tomorrow is the big night.

The men talk in low voices, finalizing details, while the women keep the children distracted.

I catch Rio watching me throughout the meal, his expression soft even with the circumstances.

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"Bath time," I announce when the plates are cleared, grateful for the routine.

"Do we have to?" Cali whines.

"Yes. No arguments." I'm too tired for negotiations.

Surprisingly, they comply without putting up a fight.

Maybe they sense the tension in the air, the way everyone's being extra careful with each other.

Even their bedtime story requests are mild—Floencia wants to hear about the princess who rides motorcycles again, while Cali just wants to cuddle.

"Dasha?" Floencia asks as I'm tucking her in. "Is your neck going to be okay?"

"It'll be fine, sweetheart. Just bruises. They'll fade."

"Daddy looked really mad when he saw them," she observes.

"He doesn't like when people hurt the ones he loves," I explain carefully.

"Neither do I," she says firmly. "If I knew who did it, I'd use my new fighting moves on them."

"That's very brave of you," I tell her, smoothing her hair. "But that's Daddy's job, okay? Your job is to be a kid."

"Being a kid is boring sometimes," she sighs, but settles into her pillow and eventually drifts off to sleep.

Cali is already snoring her little head off.

Once I know both of the girls are sleeping soundly, I head downstairs to the main room to chat with the ladies.

We talk about dumb things, about the things that don't really matter but make all the difference when it comes to stressful situations.

He's showered and changed, looking calmer than he did earlier.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, sitting beside me on the couch.

"Sore but okay." I touch my throat self-consciously. "The bruises look worse than they feel."

"Liar." But he says it gently, wrapping an arm around me.

"Get a room," Meghan teases, but there's affection in it.

"Don't mind if we do," Rio replies, standing and tugging me up with him. "Early night. Big day tomorrow."

The knowing looks from the other women follow us out, but I don't care.

We need this time together before tomorrow's storm.

Back in our room, Rio checks the locks—a new habit—before joining me in bed.



We don't make love again, both too emotionally wrung out.

Instead, we hold each other in the dark, not needing words.

"After tomorrow," he says eventually, "we're taking a vacation. Somewhere safe and boring. Maybe Disney World."

"The girls would love that," I murmur against his chest.

"What about you? What would you love?"

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"Just this," I tell him honestly. "You, me, the girls, together and safe. That's all I need."

He presses a kiss to my hair. "One more day."

"One more day," I echo.

And as sleep finally claims me, bruised and exhausted in the arms of the man I love, I let myself believe it's true.

One more day and this nightmare ends.

One more day and we can start building our future without looking over our shoulders.

One more day.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Rio

It might be four in the morning, but the clubhouse is quiet as all hell, that deep silence that comes before war.

I've been awake for an hour, running through tonight's plan until I could recite it in my sleep.

Tonight, we hit Bembe's shipment.

Tonight, this threat to my family ends.

Or we die trying.

I slip out of bed carefully, not wanting to wake Dasha.

She needs her sleep—God knows she got little enough last night, tossing and turning, her hand reaching for me even in dreams.

The bruises on her throat have darkened to purple-black, a reminder of how close I came to losing her.

Never again.

I walk downstairs and find the room where the club holdskirkjawide open.

Runes sits at the head of the table, maps spread before him, while Ivar cleans his weapons.

Tor's on his phone, probably checking in with our scouts.

"Morning," Runes greets without looking up. "Coffee's fresh."

I pour a cup, noting my hands are steady.

Good. Can't afford to be nervous today.

"Irish are in position," Tor reports, ending his call. "Doran says they've got eyes on the dock. No unusual movement yet."

"They won't see us coming," I say, settling into my chair. "Bembe thinks he's safe. Thinks his ambush yesterday bought him time."

"Maybe it did," Ivar points out. "He knows we're coming for him now."

"He knew anyway." I pull up the aerial photos of the dock on my tablet. "But knowing and being ready are two different things. He's expecting a few bikers looking for revenge. Not a coordinated strike with Irish backing."

"Speaking of which." Runes slides a phone across to me. "Liam wants confirmation we're still good for tonight."

I dial the number, unsurprised when Liam answers on the first ring.

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The Irish boss doesn't sleep much either, apparently.

"Raider," he greets. "My boys are getting antsy. Tell me we're not sitting on our arses for nothing."

"Eight PM sharp," I confirm. "Your men hit the boats while we take the warehouse. Bembe won't know what hit him."

"He better not. I've got a lot riding on this—money and reputation." His pause is heavy with meaning. "This better be worth it"

"It will."

"We'll see," But there's dark humor in his voice. "My nephew speaks highly of you all. Says you're a man of your word."

"Doran's good people."

"Aye, he is. Which is why I'm trusting you with this. Eight PM. Don't be late."

The line goes dead.

Typical Irishman—always have to have the last word.

"Friendly as always," Tor observes.

"He's risking a lot," Runes says. "Twenty million in product doesn't just disappear

without consequences. The cartel will come looking."

"Let them look," I say. "After tonight, Bembe's organization will be too scattered to mount any real response. Cut off the head..."

"And the snake still thrashes," Ivar finishes. "But yeah, it'll buy us time. Maybe enough to establish new territories before they reorganize. Maybe even enough to kill the Culebra cartel once and for all."

We spend the next hour going over details one more time.

Entry points, extraction routes, contingencies for when—not if—things go sideways.

Every man knows his role, every possibility accounted for.

Except the ones we can't predict.

"Weapons check at noon," Runes decides. "Final briefing at six. We roll at seven-thirty."

"What about protection here?" I ask. "The women and kids?—"

"Fenrir's staying with a full security detail. Nobody gets in or out without his say-so." Runes meets my eyes. "Your family will be safe, Rio. You have my word."

I nod, trusting him completely.

In this life, a president's word is law.

The meeting breaks up as the sun rises, brothers heading off to prepare in their own ways.

Some will spend the day with family, some in meditation or prayer, some cleaning weapons obsessively.

We all have our rituals before violence.

Mine is breakfast with my girls.

I find them in the kitchen, Dasha helping Cali with her cereal while Florencia reads at the table.

It's such a normal scene it makes my chest tight.

This is what I'm fighting for.

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This is what I'll kill to protect.

"Morning, Daddy," Cali chirps, milk already on her chin. "Are you going to work today?"

"Tonight," I tell her, dropping a kiss on her head. "Got some important business to handle."

"The dangerous kind?" Florencia asks without looking up from her book.

That kid sees too much.

"All business is dangerous in our world,mija." I settle next to Dasha, who wordlessly hands me coffee fixed exactly how I like it. "But I'll be careful."

"You better be," Dasha says quietly. The bruises on her throat are stark in the morning light. "We have plans, remember?"

"Disney World," Cali announces. "Daddy promised after his business is done."

"That's right, baby girl. Mickey Mouse and everything."

The conversation stays light through breakfast, but I catch Dasha watching me when she thinks I'm not looking.

She knows today is different. They all do, even if we're pretending otherwise.



"Girls, why don't you go find Starla?" Dasha suggests when the plates are empty. "I think she mentioned something about a craft project today."

"Crafts!" Cali's off like a shot, Florencia following more sedately after marking her page.

Once they're gone, Dasha moves to straddle my lap, arms around my neck. "Tell me you'll be careful."

"I'm always careful."

"Rio." Her fingers trace my jaw. "I mean it. Don't be risky. No heroics. Get in, get the drugs, get Bembe, get out."

"That's the plan."

"Plans go to shit," she says bluntly. "Promise me—if things go bad, you'll prioritize coming home over everything else."

I frame her face with my hands, thumbs brushing those damned bruises. "I promise I'll do whatever it takes to come home to you. All of you."

She studies my face, reading the truth there. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I trust you." She kisses me soft and deep. "Just... come back to us."

"Always."

We stay like that for a while, holding each other in the morning light.

Eventually, duty calls—weapons to check, plans to finalize, brothers to coordinate.

But for now, there's just the two of us.

"I should go," I say eventually.

"I know." But she doesn't move. "Rio? Whatever happens tonight... I love you. The girls love you. We'll be here when you get back."

"I love you too." I kiss her once more, pouring everything I feel into it. "More than you know."

The day passes in a blur as we all prepare.

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Weapons are cleaned and loaded, bikes fueled and checked, communication systems tested.

The atmosphere in the clubhouse is electric—that particular combination of tension and anticipation that comes before battle.

I find myself checking on Dasha and the girls throughout the day, needing the small moments of normalcy.

We have lunch together, I help with homework, and even have to break up a fight over crayons.

Regular dad stuff while preparing for war.

"Why is everyone so serious?" Florencia asks during dinner.

The main room is quieter than usual, conversations muted.

"Just grown-up stuff," Dasha tells her. "Nothing for you to worry about."

"Is it about the bad men? The ones who hurt Dasha?"

Too smart for her own good, this one.

"Yes," I answer honestly. "But after tonight, they won't be able to hurt anyone again."

She nods solemnly. "Good. I don't like people who hurt our family."

"Neither do I, baby. Neither do I."

The final briefing is at six, brothers packed into the room where we have kirkja.

Runes runs through everything one more time while I study the faces around me.

These men will bleed for each other tonight. Some might die.

But we all know the stakes.

"Questions?" Runes asks when he's done.

"What are the rules for this run?" Bodul asks.

He's trying to look tough, but I can see the nerves coursing through him.

"Anyone at that dock who isn't us or Irish is an enemy," Runes answers. "Put them down hard and fast. This isn't a negotiation—it's an extermination."

"Except Bembe," Tor adds. "He comes back alive, as promised."

"Barely alive counts," someone mutters, getting dark chuckles.

"Remember," Runes says, standing. "We're not just fighting for territory or money. We're fighting for our families. The men we face tonight wanted to murder our women and children. Show them what that costs."

"One more thing," Runes says, his voice cutting through the rumble of agreement.

"Rio, front and center."

I freeze.

This isn't normal, or at least I don't think it is.

I move to the front of the room, aware of every eye on me.

"You've been prospecting for this club for many years," Runes begins. "Years of loyalty, of sacrifice, of proving yourself worthy of our colors."

My heart starts pounding.

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Is this actually happening?

"You've bled for us. Killed for us. Protected our families as if they were your own."  
He pauses, looking around the room. "Brothers, I put it to you. Has this man earned his patch?"

The roar of approval is deafening.

Fists pound on tables, boots stomp the floor.

"Then by the power vested in me as President of the Raiders of Valhalla," Runes continues, pulling something from his cut, "I present you with your full colors. Welcome to the brotherhood, Rio."

He holds out the patch—the full Raiders of Valhalla rockers.

My hands shake slightly as I take them.

"Turn around," Tor says, grinning. "Let's do this right."

I turn, and Fenrir steps forward with a knife, carefully removing the prospect patch I've worn for so long.

Then, it all happens in a blur, multiple brothers work to sew on my new colors.

The weight of them feels different—heavier with responsibility, but also lighter somehow. Like I'm finally where I belong.

"Brother," Runes says when they're done, pulling me into a hard embrace. The others follow, each welcoming me properly into the brotherhood.

"About fucking time," Ivar mutters, but he's smiling.

"Hell of a timing, Prez," I manage when the congratulations die down.

"Figured you should face tonight as a full member," Runes replies. "You've more than earned it, and your woman deserves an old man with full colors."

That gets another round of cheers and good-natured ribbing.

"Now," Runes says, bringing us back to focus. "Let's go show these fuckers what happens when they threaten the Raiders of Valhalla. All of us. Together."

A rumble of agreement runs through the room. These men are ready for blood.

"Lock and load, brothers. We ride in thirty."

Kirkjaempties, men heading out to say goodbye to their ol' ladies and kids.

I make my way to our room, finding Dasha helping the girls into pajamas.

"But it's not even dark yet," Cali protests.

"Movie night in the main room," Dasha explains. "Thought you might want to be comfy."

Smart woman, giving them something to focus on besides the men leaving.

"Daddy!" Florencia runs to me. "We made you something!"

She produces two pieces of paper—drawings in crayon.

Hers shows a stick figure on a motorcycle with "DADDY" written in careful letters.

Cali's is more abstract but includes what might be a heart. Or a potato. Hard to tell with five-year-old art.

"For luck," Florencia explains seriously.

"They're perfect." I fold them carefully, tucking them inside my cut. "I'll keep them with me."



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"Really?" Cali bounces excitedly.

"Really. Can't have too much luck, right?"

Dasha watches this exchange with soft eyes, but I can see the fear underneath.

Time's running out.

"Give Daddy hugs," she says quietly. "He has to go to work."

They attack me simultaneously, small arms wrapping tight.

I breathe them in—shampoo and cookies and innocence.

Everything worth fighting for.

"Love you, monsters," I tell them.

"Love you too, Daddy. Be careful at work!"

If only they knew.

Dasha walks me to the door while the girls run ahead to claim good spots for movie night.

In the hallway, she grabs my cut and pulls me down for a fierce kiss.

Her hands freeze on my shoulders.

She pulls back, eyes widening as she takes in my cut.

"Rio... your patch." Her fingers trace over the full colors where 'PROSPECT' used to be. "You're... they made you a full patch?"

"About an hour ago," I confirm, unable to keep the pride from my voice.

"Oh my God!" She throws her arms around my neck, kissing me again with even more intensity.

When she pulls back, there are tears in her eyes. "I'm so proud of you. You've waited years for this."

"Worth the wait," I tell her, meaning more than just the patch.

"My old man," she says softly, touching the rockers again. "Officially. God, Rio, this is huge."

"Changes nothing about tonight," I remind her. "It's still dangerous."

"I know. But now you're going out there as a full brother. They have your back completely." She straightens my cut, smoothing the leather. "You've earned this. Every thread, every stitch. I've watched you sacrifice for this club, bleed for them. I'm so fucking proud of you."

Her pride means more than all the congratulations from my brothers combined.

"Come back to us," she whispers against my lips.

"Always."

"My full-patch badass," she adds with a watery smile. "I love you."

One more kiss and then I'm moving, switching from father to warrior.

"Ready?" Tor asks, appearing at my shoulder as I head for the door.

"Born ready."

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"Confident. I like it." He checks his own weapons. "Meghan made me promise to keep you alive. Something about Disney plans."

"Dasha made me promise the same about you. Something about you and Meghan watching the girls if anything happens to us."

"Jesus, that's morbid." He pauses. "But yeah, of course we would. You know that."

"I know. But she wanted it said out loud, I guess. Making sure everything's covered." I adjust my holster. "Plus Cali's apparently decided you're her favorite uncle."

"Smart kid." He grins. "Though Fenrir's gonna be pissed. He's been bribing her with candy for months trying to win that title."

"Mount up!" Runes' voice carries across the lot.

Engines roar to life, the sound of two dozen Harleys enough to shake windows.

I swing onto my bike, feeling the magnitude of what's about to happen.

The drawings in my cut press against my chest—reminders of what matters.

We roll out in formation, a convoy of death heading for the docks.

The sun is setting, painting the sky blood red. Fitting.

The meeting point with the Irish is an abandoned truck stop five miles from the

target.

Their vehicles are already there—black SUVs that scream organized crime.

Professionals, not street thugs.

Doran meets us as we dismount. "Evening, gentlemen. Ready to get rich?"

"Ready to end threats," I correct. "The money's just a bonus."

"Spoken like a man with priorities." He gestures to the assembled Irish soldiers. "My boys are ready. We'll hit the boats on your signal, secure the product while you handle the warehouse."

"Bembe?"

"If we see him, we'll coral him your way." His smile is sharp. "Uncle wants his pound of flesh, but he respects your claim."

"Appreciated."

Doran and Liam's lieutenant—Connor, I think—go over final coordination while I study aerial photos one more time.

The dock is isolated, approach roads limited.

Good for containing everything that's about to go down but bad if we need to get out of there quick.

"Two minutes," Tor announces.

I check my weapons one final time.

Glock at my hip, backup at my ankle, knife in my boot.

The weight is familiar, comforting even. Tools of the trade.

"Remember," I address my team. "We go in quiet until we can't. Priority is securing the warehouse and finding Bembe. Anyone else is collateral damage."

Nods all around. These men know their business.

"Let's ride."

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The final approach is done with engines off, coasting on momentum and darkness.

The dock comes into view—warehouses squatting against the water, boats bobbing at their moorings.

Lights are on, movement visible.

They're here.

Runes signals the teams to split.

Irish peel off toward the boats while we head for the main warehouse.

Everything depends on timing now.

We're fifty yards out when I see him—a guard having a smoke, bored and careless.

I'm off my bike before the engine's fully dead, moving on pure instinct.

The knife finds my hand like it belongs there, like it's been waiting.

The guard doesn't even see me coming—too busy checking his phone, the glow lighting his face.

Amateur move. His last one.

I come up behind him fast and silent.

My hand clamps over his mouth as the blade slides between his ribs, finding the gaps in bone like I've done this a hundred times.

Because I have.

He jerks once, a muffled grunt against my palm.

His eyes go wide, phone clattering to the concrete.

I hold him up as his legs give out, lowering him gently.

Can't have him making noise on the way down.

The blood pools black in the darkness, spreading like an oil slick.

First blood on me tonight, and the night's just getting started.

"Go, go, go," I whisper into comms.

We flow forward like shadows, brothers who've done this dance before.

Two more guards go down before alarms sound.

Then all hell breaks loose.

Gunfire erupts from multiple positions—they were ready for us.

Muzzle flashes light the night as we dive for cover, the easy infiltration becoming a firefight.

"Ambush!" someone yells, like we hadn't figured that out.



"Push through!" I order, returning fire. "Irish, what's your status?"

"Engaged!" Doran's voice is strained. "Fighting like bloody hell at the boats!"

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Fuck. This was supposed to be easy, to come in the dark and take everything from them.

"Gorm, Bodul, with me!" I break cover, sprinting for the warehouse's side entrance.

We need to get inside, find the drugs and Bembe before this goes completely sideways.

The door explodes inward under my boot.

The interior is chaotic—men scrambling for positions, others running for exits.

I drop two before they can raise weapons, Gorm and Bodul flanking me.

"Clear right!"

"Clear left!"

"Moving!"

We push deeper, following the sound of panicked voices.

The drugs have to be here somewhere.

Then I see them—pallets wrapped in plastic, enough product to flood the entire Southeast.

And standing beside them, shouting orders, is Bembe fucking Reyes.

Our eyes meet across the warehouse.

It's like time physically slows.

He smiles—actually smiles—and raises his weapon.

I'm already moving, diving behind a forklift as bullets spark off metal. "Bembe's here! Northwest corner!"

"On the way!"

But Bembe's not waiting.

He's running, two guards covering his retreat.

I pursue, not willing to let him escape.

Not after what he did to Dasha.

Tor's voice in my ear. "Rio, wait for backup!"

"No. He's running."

I burst through a door into the night air, catching sight of Bembe heading for a speedboat.

Oh, hell no.

The distance is too great for accuracy, but I fire anyway, trying to slow him down.

One guard stumbles, goes down.

The other returns fire, forcing me to cover.

When I look again, Bembe's almost at the boat.

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I run, pouring everything into closing the distance.

Can't let him escape. Can't fail my family.

The remaining guard turns, weapon rising.

I don't slow, trusting instinct and armor.

His shots go wide—panic fire.

Mine don't.

He drops, and suddenly it's just me and Bembe at the water's edge.

"Rio!" He's not smiling now. "Let's discuss this like civilized men."

"Civilized?" I advance on him. "You threatened my woman. My children. Where's the civilization in that?"

"Business," he says, backing toward the boat. "Nothing personal."

"Everything's personal when it comes to family."

He lunges for the boat.

I tackle him, both of us crashing into the shallow water.

We grapple, fighting for dominance.

He's stronger than he looks, desperate.

But I'm angrier.

I get position, raining down punches.

His nose breaks, blood mixing with seawater.

He bucks, trying to throw me off, hand scrambling for something.

Gun.

I grab his wrist, slamming it against the dock until he releases the weapon.

Then I wrap my hands around his throat, ready to end this.

"Wait!" he gasps. "Flora! I know about Flora!"

Everything stops.

"What?" My grip loosens slightly.

"Your wife," he coughs out. "I know who really ordered the hit. It wasn't us!"

I laugh, dark and bitter. "Really? That's what you're going with? The mysterious puppet master defense?"

"No! Listen! We were hired. Contracted. Someone wanted her dead and used us to do it!"

"Bullshit." I tighten my grip again. "You think I'm fucking stupid, Bembe? You think I haven't heard every desperate lie from men about to die? 'It wasn't me, it was orders.' 'Someone else made me do it.' Same old song."

"I have proof!" He's clawing at my hands now, face turning purple. "In my office! Documents! Recordings!"

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"How convenient. Proof that's nowhere near here." I lean in close. "Here's what I know—your men shot my pregnant wife. That makes you responsible."

"But we were just?—"

"Just what? Just following orders? Just doing business?" I slam his head against the dock. "You put shot her while my daughter watched. Shot her when she was pregnant. There's no 'just' about it."

"Rico Castellano!" he gasps out desperately. "It was Rico Castellano who paid us!"

I freeze. Not because I believe him, but because he's reached the truly pathetic stage—throwing out random names, hoping something sticks.

"Who?" I'm shaking him now. "Never heard of him. Try again."

"Please! I can prove it! The Irish—they'll want me alive—you promised!"

"The Irish want you breathing. They didn't specify how much." My knife appears in my hand. "Maybe I take a few pieces first. Help jog your memory about whose idea it really was to kill Flora. Maybe I don't even give them to you alive after everything you did to my family."

"Rio!" Irish soldiers surround us, weapons trained. "Boss wants him alive, remember?"

I look at Connor, then back at Bembe. "Change of plans."



"That wasn't the deal?—"

"The deal was we help you get your drugs. They're in the warehouse, probably thirty million worth. This piece of shit?" I haul Bembe to his feet. "He's mine. Personal business."

Connor's jaw tightens. "Liam won't like this."

"Liam gets fifty-five percent of the biggest score he's ever seen. He'll get over it." I press my knife to Bembe's throat, just hard enough to draw blood. "Unless you want to try and take him from me?"

The Irish soldiers exchange glances.

They're outnumbered now, with more Raiders appearing from the warehouse.

Connor's not stupid—he knows this isn't a fight worth having.

Doran comes up, obviously overhearing the situation. "Leave him. I'll explain to my uncle. It was necessary. Bembe gave them no choice."

Connor looks at Doran and nods, knowing better than to argue with the man who has Irish and Russian mob blood flowing through his veins.

"Rio!" Tor's voice on comms. "We've secured the warehouse. You need to see this."

Connor finally says, "But this better not come back on us."

Doran grabs Connor by the throat, "Did I fuckin' stutter?"

"It won't." I'm already dragging Bembe toward the warehouse. "Tell Liam he'll get

his money. This is between me and the man who tried to murder my family."

Inside the warehouse, my brothers have set up a perimeter.

Bodies cleared to the sides, drugs stacked and cataloged.

And in the center, a nice clear space that'll do perfectly.

"String him up," I tell Gorm, shoving Bembe forward. "Time to see if his story changes when he's got proper motivation."

"Rio," Tor says quietly. "The Irish?—"

"Will get their cut and go home happy. Doran's already covering for us." I'm already pulling out my tools. "This fucker threatened Dasha. Put bruises on her throat. Made my daughters live in fear. You think I'm letting him walk out of here?"

"Didn't say that." Tor's smile is dark. "Just wanted to make sure you knew what you were doing. Need help?"

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"No. This one's personal."

They string Bembe up from one of the ceiling beams, arms stretched above his head, toes barely touching the ground.

The position puts stress on everything—shoulders, back, legs.

Won't take long before the pain starts.

"Last chance," I tell him, circling slowly. "Truth about Flora. Who really ordered it?"

"I told you—Rico Castellano?—"

My knife parts cloth and skin in one motion. Not deep, just enough to hurt. "Lie."

"It's true! I have proof?—"

Another cut. "You said documents. Recordings. Convenient things that don't exist."

"They do! In my safe—the combination is?—"

"Don't care." This time I go deeper. "Because you're lying. Creating phantom villains to save your worthless life."

For the next hour, I work slowly.

Every time he spins a new story, changes a detail, I make him pay for it.

My brothers stand guard, making sure no one interferes.

The Irish have wisely decided to focus on loading trucks.

"Please," Bembe sobs eventually. "I'll tell you the truth."

"Finally." I step back, wiping blood from my blade. "So tell me."

"We... we did it. The cartel. Because she was looking into our shipping manifests. She found discrepancies, was going to report them. She did report us, to someone, about something different."

Now that sounds like truth, and I already know Flora knew more than she should have.

Flora always was too honest for her own good.

"But someone did tip us off about her," he continues desperately. "Someone who knew what she'd found, that she was going to do more. I don't know who—I swear I don't—but it came from inside."

"Inside where?"

"I don't know! The message just said to handle the accountant before she caused problems. That she was a threat to operations."

I consider this.

It's possible.

Flora worked for a shipping company that handled lots of cargo.

If someone was using it to move drugs...

"Who gave the order on your end?"

"Mateo Vega. He ran our Florida operations then. He's dead now—you killed him three years ago."

I did. Slowly. But this is the first I'm hearing about Flora being targeted for her job rather than being my wife.

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"You're telling me my pregnant wife died because she was good at her job?"

"I'm sorry?—"

"No." I pick up the blowtorch. "You're not sorry. Not yet. But you will be."

What follows would make what I did to Carlos look merciful.

Every ounce of rage, every moment of grief from the last five years gets channeled into making Bembe understand the cost of his choices.

He screams about Flora. About the threat to Dasha. About targeting my children.

He screams until he can't anymore.

And when it's finally over, when Bembe is nothing but meat and memory, I step back and survey my work.

"Feel better?" Tor asks quietly.

"No." I wipe my hands clean. "But it's finished. He can't hurt anyone else."

"What about his story? Someone inside tipping them off about Flora?"

"Maybe true, maybe not." I'm exhausted suddenly. "If someone did betray her, they've had five years to cover their tracks. But, I saw the fear in his eyes—he was telling me what he thought I wanted to hear, thought I'd let him keep his life."

Gorm offers. "If someone in our city got your wife killed, we'll find them."

I nod, grateful for the support, but I know a desperate man will do and say anything. "Right now, let's finish here. Get the drugs moved, scene cleaned. I want to go home to my family."

"Rio?" Tor holds up his phone. "The Irish are asking about Bembe."

"Tell him Bembe didn't make it. Tried to escape, forced my hand." I look at what's left of the cartel leader. "Tell him I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but we had no other choice."

Runes comes up, overhearing every word. "Leave Liam to me. You did what needed to be done. All of you, clean the place up"

We do exactly what our Prez wants—cleaning up evidence, making sure our tracks are covered.

By the time we're done, you'd never know the massacre that took place here.

Except for the missing drugs. And the missing cartel leader.

But those aren't our problems.

## CHAPTER NINE

Dasha

"Dasha, this box says 'kitchen stuff' but there's a lamp in it," Florencia announces, holding up evidence of my terrible packing skills.

"That's... uh, a suggestion, not a rulebook," I offer weakly, looking around my apartment at the chaos we've created.

Two weeks since the night Rio came home covered in blood but whole, and we're finally making it official.

I'm moving in to his house.

The morning sun streams through the windows, highlighting the disaster zone my once-tidy apartment has become.

Boxes are everywhere, some taped, some still gaping open, most labeled in my increasingly creative shorthand that made sense at the time but now seems like a foreign language.

"You're really bad at packing," Cali observes from where she's "helping" by putting my throw pillows into a box one at a time, stopping to hug each one first.



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"She's not wrong," Rio says from the kitchen, where he's wrapping my dishes in newspaper with the kind of precision usually reserved for loading weapons. "Why do you have seventeen coffee mugs?"

"Because they're all special!" I protest, rescuing my favorite one from his efficient packing. "This one's from that trip to Savannah, and this one Meghan gave me for my birthday, and this one?—"

"And they're all coming home with us," he says, kissing my temple as he passes. "Every single one."

Home. Not his house. Home. Our home.

The past two weeks have been a whirlwind of adjustments.

After that terrible night when Bembe threatened everything we held dear, Rio eliminated him and the threat he posed.

The bruises on my throat faded from purple to yellow to nothing, but the memory of that desperation—and Rio's absolute ruthlessness in protecting us—remains.

Some nights I still dream about it.

The feeling of hands on my throat, the moment I thought I might not see my girls again.

But then I wake up in Rio's arms, in our bed, safe and protected, and the fear fades.

Now we're here, packing up my old life to start our new one properly.

"Can I have this for my room?" Cali holds up a sequined throw pillow that's definitely seen better days.

"Of course, baby."

"Yay! Our house is gonna be so pretty with your stuff in it!" She adds it to her personal pile, which has grown to include two blankets, a ceramic elephant, and inexplicably, my colander.

"Why do you need a colander?" Florencia asks her sister with the exasperated tone only an older sibling can achieve.

"For things," Cali says mysteriously.

Rio catches my eye and winks.

God, I love this man. Two weeks of waking up next to him every morning, of being an official family unit, and I still can't believe this is my life.

"Mija, that's enough claiming Dasha's things," he tells Cali gently. "She needs some of them for the kitchen."

"But Daddy, our kitchen is boring. It needs pretty things!"

"My kitchen is not boring," he protests.

"It's a little boring," I stage-whisper to Cali, who giggles.

"I heard that." But he's smiling as he says it. "What's wrong with my kitchen?"

"It's very... masculine," I say diplomatically. "Lots of black and stainless steel."

"That's called modern."

"That's called bachelor pad," Florencia chimes in, not looking up from the book she's carefully packing. "Meghan said so."

"Meghan says a lot of things," Rio grumbles, but he's fighting a smile.

The apartment looks strange half-empty.

I've lived here for three years, my safe little space away from the world.

The walls still show faint outlines where pictures hung, little ghosts of the life I built here.

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My first Christmas tree in the corner by the window.

The spot where I spilled red wine and could never quite get the stain out.

The kitchen where I taught myself to cook after the divorce, burning more meals than I care to remember.

Now it feels like it belongs to someone else, someone who didn't know what it was like to be loved by Rio Rojas and his daughters.

"You okay?" Rio appears at my elbow, reading my mood as always.

"Just... nostalgic, I guess. This was my first place after the divorce. My fresh start."

"Regrets?" There's something vulnerable in his voice, like he's afraid I might be having second thoughts.

"No," I say quickly, turning to face him. "Never. It's just strange, you know? Closing one chapter."

"And starting another," he finishes. "A better one."

"Thebestone," I correct, standing on my toes to kiss him.

"Ew, they're being gross again," Cali announces.

"They're always gross," Florencia agrees. "It's what people in love do."

"How do you know about people in love?" Rio asks, narrowing his eyes at his eldest.

"I read," she says primly. "And watch movies. And have eyes."

"Too smart for your own good," he mutters, but he's smiling.

A knock at the door interrupts the moment.

Rio immediately goes alert, hand drifting toward where his gun would be, before relaxing.

Old habits.

Even with Bembe gone, even with the immediate threat eliminated, he's still protective.

Still watching for danger.

I used to find it excessive.

Now I understand it's just part of loving someone in this life—you're always aware of what could be lost.

"It's just Meghan," I say, checking the peephole. "She said she'd stop by."

I open the door to find not just Meghan but also Tindra, Starla, and two other women from the club I've gotten to know—Everly and Astrid.

"Moving committee has arrived!" Meghan announces, pushing past me with a box of donuts. "Can't have you packing on an empty stomach."

"Or without proper supervision," Starla adds, eyeing my haphazard box labeling. "Honey, what system are you using here?"

"Chaos?" I suggest.

"Creative chaos," Astrid corrects, already pulling on work gloves. "But we're here to impose order."

"Men, out," Everly commands, shooing Rio toward the door. "This is women's work now. Take the girls to the park or something."

"I don't get shooed from anywhere," Rio grumbles, but he's already reaching for his jacket.

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"You do today," Astrid says firmly. "We've got gossip to share and you'll just give us the death stare if we talk about your brothers."

"I don't give death stares to people who don't deserve it."

Everyone in the room gives him a look.

"Out," Starla repeats. "Give us three hours."

"Three hours?" He looks mildly panicked. "What am I supposed to do with two kids for three hours?"

"You're in an MC," Meghan points out. "I think you can handle your own daughters."

"The club's easier," he mutters, but he's already herding the girls toward the door. "Come on, monsters. Let's go get ice cream while the ladies do their thing."

"Ice cream!" Cali abandons her packing immediately. "Can we get sprinkles?"

"All the sprinkles," he confirms, then leans in to kiss me. "Don't let them pack anything weird."

"Define weird."

"You know what I mean." Another kiss. "Love you."

"Love you too."

"Love you three!" Cali shouts.

"Love you infinity," Florencia adds, not to be outdone.

After they leave, Meghan immediately pounces. "Okay, spill. How's it been? Living together officially?"

"Amazing," I admit, accepting a donut. "Like we've been doing it forever."

"The sex must be incredible," Tindra says, then blushes. "Sorry, that was?—"

"The sex is incredible," I confirm, making her blush deeper. "But it's more than that. It's the little things. Coffee in bed every morning. Him braiding the girls' hair while I make breakfast. Family dinners where we actually talk about our days."

"The girls seem thrilled," Starla observes, starting to repack my kitchen box properly. "Florencia cornered me yesterday to ask if you being there all the time meant you were her 'real' mom now."

My heart clenches. "What did you tell her?"

"That 'real' is about love, not just biology. And that she's lucky to have you." She wraps a plate carefully. "That little girl adores you, you know. Both of them do."

"I adore them too," I say, throat tight. "Sometimes I can't believe I get to be their mom."

"Believe it," Everly says, joining us in the kitchen. "Those girls claimed you long before Rio got his head out of his ass."

"Speaking of Rio," Meghan grins wickedly, "how's he handling having you there all



the time? Still walking around like he won the lottery?"

"Pretty much," I laugh. "Yesterday I caught him just standing in the doorway watching me fold laundry with this dopey smile on his face."

"That's disgusting," Astrid declares. "And adorable. Disgustingly adorable."

"None of that," Everly says briskly. "We've got work to do. Tindra, start on the bathroom. Meghan, bedroom. I'll tackle this disaster of a living room."

"I feel like I should be offended by everyone's assessment of my packing skills," I say.

"You labeled a box 'stuff and things,'" Starla points out.

"It has stuff and things in it!"

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"That's not a system, honey."

We work in silence, the women sharing stories and club gossip as we pack.

The apartment fills with laughter and the easy camaraderie I've come to love about these women.

They've welcomed me into their circle without hesitation, treating me like I've always belonged.

"So Tindra," Meghan says with exaggerated casualness, "how are things with Bodul?"

Tindra flushes prettily. "Mom, ugh. Good. Really good. He's taking me to that new Italian place tomorrow night. As friends."

"Friends? That's a joke," Everly observes. "Boy's smitten."

"He's sweet," Tindra defends. "And respectful. And?—"

"Hung like a horse?" Meghan suggests.

"Meghan!" Starla scolds, but she's laughing.

"What? We're all thinking it. Prospect boys are always eager to please."

"I doubt he'll be a prospect for long," Tindra reminds us. "Look at Rio, he got

patched in."

"Rio was a prospect for what felt like half a century," Astrid says. "Full patch, still eager to please. Best of both worlds."

"How are you really doing?" Starla asks quietly when we're alone in the kitchen later. "After everything that happened?"

I know she means the attack at the coffee shop, the bruises that marked my throat, the night Rio came home from ending that threat.

"I'm good. Really. It was scary, but... I knew Rio would handle it. And he did."

"He did more than handle it," she says carefully. "Word is Bembe's death was really intense."

"Good." The viciousness in my voice surprises even me. "He threatened my family. He got what he deserved."

Starla smiles approvingly. "You're gonna do just fine as an old lady. You've got the right instincts."

"Is it weird that I'm not bothered by the violence? Like, I should probably be more concerned about the fact that my boyfriend tortured someone to death, right?"

"Honey, that someone tried to kill you. Threatened little girls. In our world, Rio did exactly what needed to be done." She wraps a plate carefully. "The fact that you understand that means you're meant for this life."

"I was just a woman who worked in a coffee shop not too long ago," I say, slightly amazed at the transformation. "Now I'm... what? A biker's old lady?"

"You're family," Everly says, coming in with empty boxes. "You're one of us now. Which means we protect you, you protect us, and everyone protects the kids."

"Speaking of protection," Meghan bounces in, "when are you and Rio making it official official? Like, rings and papers official?"

"We haven't really discussed it. Everything's been happening so fast."

"Fast?" Astrid snorts. "You two have been dancing around each other for years. If anything, you're moving at glacial speed."

"They're right," Tindra adds, joining us. "Bodul says Rio's been gone for you since basically the beginning. Just took him forever to act on it."

"Well, he's acting on it now," I say, feeling my cheeks heat.

"I'll bet he is," Meghan waggles her eyebrows. "Full patch member, full of testosterone from taking out the threat, finally got his woman..."

"Stop," I laugh, throwing a dish towel at her. "There are innocent ears present."

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"Innocent?" Tindra looks offended. "I'm twenty, not twelve."

"Still a baby," Everly declares. "Now come on, we've got two more rooms to pack."

The bedroom is both the easiest and hardest room to pack.

Easy because most of my clothes have already migrated to Rio's over the past weeks.

Hard because this is where the most memories live.

The bed where I cried myself to sleep after the divorce.

The dresser I bought with my first paycheck from the coffee shop.

The mirror where I gave myself pep talks every morning about starting over.

"Oh, what's this?" Meghan holds up a photo from my nightstand—me and my ex on our wedding day.

"Trash," I say immediately.

"You sure? No sentimental value?"

"The only value that has is reminding me how far I've come." I take the photo, studying it. The woman in the picture looks young, naive, trying so hard to be what someone else wanted. "I barely recognize her."

"Growth," Starla says approvingly. "You became who you were meant to be."

"Cheesy," Astrid comments. "But true."

I toss the photo in the trash bag without ceremony.

That life is over. Has been for years, really, but now it feels final.

By the time Rio texts that they're heading back, we've got everything packed and labeled properly.

The apartment is empty except for the furniture that came with it, looking bigger somehow without my life filling it up.

"Incoming," I announce, reading his text. "Apparently someone let them have unlimited ice cream."

"Amateur," Starla shakes her head. "Never give kids unsupervised sugar before moving day."

Sure enough, when they return, both girls are practically vibrating with energy. Rio at least has the grace to look sheepish.

"They said they only wanted small cones," he defends.

"Daddy let us get sundaes!" Cali announces, bouncing. "With extra everything!"

"Traitor," he mutters.

"And then we went to the bookstore," Florencia adds. "And the pet store, but just to look."

"Cali tried to convince me we needed a rabbit," Rio explains.

"His name would have been Professor Fluffington," Cali says seriously.

"Did you bring us any?" Everly asks.

"...maybe." He produces a bag from behind his back. "Meghan said you like cookie dough."

"Forgiven," she declares, making grabby hands.

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The afternoon becomes an impromptu party, everyone eating ice cream while sitting on boxes.

The girls regale us with stories of their park adventure, which apparently included Rio pushing them "super high" on the swings and Cali attempting to adopt a duck.

"His name was Gerald," she informs us seriously. "Daddy said he couldn't come home with us."

"Daddy was right," I say. "Gerald has his own family at the park."

"But he looked lonely!"

"All ducks look lonely," Florencia says with eight-year-old wisdom. "It's just their faces."

"Like Bodul," someone mutters, getting a laugh.

"Hey!" Tindra protests. "He does not have a duck face!"

"He kind of does," Meghan says. "But in a cute way."

Eventually, the party breaks up.

The women head out with promises to meet us at the house to help unload. Rio starts loading boxes into his truck while the girls do a final sweep for forgotten treasures.



"Found one!" Cali emerges from the closet with a stuffed unicorn. "Mr. Sparkles was hiding!"

"Good catch," I tell her. "Can't leave Mr. Sparkles behind."

I stand in the empty apartment, keys in hand.

Three years of my life, ending. But instead of sadness, I feel only anticipation for what's coming next.

"Second thoughts?" Rio asks softly, coming up behind me.

"No. Just... taking a moment."

"Take all the time you need." He wraps his arms around me from behind. "Though the girls are getting antsy."

"Dasha! Come on! We wanna go home!" Cali yells from the hallway.

"So much for taking my time," I laugh.

I lock the door one final time, leaving the keys on the counter for the landlord. End of an era.

The drive to our house—and God, how I love thinking of it that way—is filled with the girls' chatter about where all my things should go.

Apparently they've been planning this for days.

"Your mugs go in the special cabinet," Florencia explains. "We cleaned it out and everything."

"And your blankets go in the living room so we can all use them for movie night," Cali adds.

"What about my books?" I ask.

"Daddy's building more shelves," Florencia says. "He said you have too many books, but I told him there's no such thing as too many books."

"That's my girl," I say, reaching back to squeeze her hand.

"You two have thought of everything," I say, touched by their inclusion.

"We had to make room for you," Florencia says simply. "That's what families do."

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Rio reaches over to squeeze my hand, and I have to blink back tears again.

These girls are going to make me cry all day.

The house already has several bikes parked outside when we arrive.

True to their word, the moving committee has reassembled, now including several of the men.

"About time," Tor calls out. "We've been waiting to unload the heavy stuff."

"You've been here two minutes," Rio retorts.

"Still waiting."

"Some of us have real jobs," Dag adds, grinning. "Can't spend all day moving furniture."

What follows is chaotic as all hell.

The men handle furniture and heavy boxes while the women direct traffic on the road, getting the neighbors to drive past.

The girls "help" by running commentary on everything.

"That goes in Dasha's craft room!" Cali announces about a box of books.

"We don't have a craft room," Rio says.

"We do now. It's the little room next to the laundry."

"That's my office."

"Was," Florencia corrects. "We voted."

"I wasn't included in this vote."

"That's because you would have voted wrong," Cali explains patiently.

I watch Rio realize he's been completely outmaneuvered by his daughters and have to hide my smile.

"Fine," he sighs. "Craft room it is."

"Yay!" Both girls hug him, and his mock annoyance melts immediately.

"You're so whipped," Tor observes.

"Says the man who drove across town at midnight last week for pickles because Meghan had a craving," Rio shoots back.

"She was persuasive."

"She was asleep. You saw the empty jar and panicked."

"Brothers," Starla interrupts. "Less talking, more moving. These boxes won't carry themselves."

"Yes, ma'am," they all say, properly chastised.

The house fills up quickly with my things integrated among theirs.

My colorful throw pillows brighten the brown leather couch.

My plants line the kitchen windowsill—Rio even installed special shelves for them last week.

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My photos join theirs on the walls, creating a visual timeline of our blended family.

"It looks like a real home now," Everly observes. "No offense, Rio, but your decorating style was totally 'bachelor with kids.'"

"I have decorations," he protests.

"Motorcycle posters don't count," Astrid informs him.

"They're vintage!"

"They're still posters."

"What about my leather?—"

"Also doesn't count."

"The skull collection?"

"Definitely doesn't count."

"Women," he mutters, but he's smiling.

By evening, everything's unpacked and in its place. The helpers have drifted away with hugs and promises of dinner soon. The girls are crashed on the couch, sugar high finally worn off, watching cartoons with glazed eyes.

"Bath time," I announce, getting predictable groans.

"But we're so tired," Cali whines.

"Ice cream hair needs washing," I say firmly. "Come on."

"Can we have bubbles?" she negotiates.

"All the bubbles."

"And toys?"

"Within reason."

"Deal."

I've done bedtime routine dozens of times, but tonight feels different.

Tonight, this is officially my house, my family, my life. No more guest status or temporary stays.

"Dasha?" Florencia asks as I'm tucking her in. "Are you happy?"

"So happy," I tell her. "Are you? Having me here all the time?"

"It's the best," she says simply. "Now you can't leave."

"Wasn't planning on it."

"Good. Because we need you."

"I need you too, baby."

She hugs me tight, and I breathe in her shampoo-and-little-girl scent. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Always."



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"Sometimes I forget Mommy Flora. Not forget-forget, but... her face gets fuzzy." She sounds guilty. "Is that bad?"

My heart breaks a little. "No, sweetheart. That's normal. You were very young."

"Daddy shows us pictures and tells stories, but it's not the same as remembering." She pulls back to look at me. "But I remember you. Every day, every moment. Is that okay?"

"That's more than okay," I tell her, blinking back tears. "And we'll always keep Mommy Flora's memory alive, even as we make new memories together."

"I love you, Dasha-mommy."

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

Cali's already half asleep when I check on her, but she mumbles, "Love you, Mommy-Dasha."

The name they've settled on makes me smile every time.

Not quite Mom, respecting Flora's memory, but acknowledging what I am to them now.

I find Rio on the back porch, beer in hand, watching the sunset.

The evening is warm, cicadas singing their summer song.

He pulls me into his lap without a word.

"Good day?" he asks.

"The best day." I steal a sip of his beer. "The girls were amazing. Your brothers were helpful. The women have officially adopted me."

"They've been wanting to do that for years," he says. "Just waiting for us to get our shit together."

"Well, we got it together now."

"Yeah, we do." He's quiet for a moment, and I can feel him thinking. "Dasha?"

"Mm?"

"Marry me."

I sit up so fast I nearly fall off his lap. "What?"

"Marry me," he repeats, steadier now. "I don't have a ring yet, and this isn't how I planned to ask, but... marry me. Be my wife. Official, legal, the whole thing."

"Rio..."

"I know it's fast. I know we just moved in together. But baby, I've been in love with you for years. You're already my family, the girls' mother, my everything. Let's make it official."

"Yes."

"I mean, if you need time to think?—"

"Rio. Yes. Of course yes." I kiss him hard. "Yes to marriage, yes to forever, yes to all of it."

"Yeah?" His smile is brilliant.

"Yeah."

He kisses me deeply, then stands, lifting me with him. "Inside. Now. We need to celebrate properly."

"The girls?—"

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"Are exhausted. They'll sleep through anything tonight." He's already carrying me through the house. "And we need to christen our bedroom. Officially."

"We've been christening it for two weeks," I laugh.

"Not as my fiancée," he points out, kicking our door shut. "Completely different thing."

"Is it now?"

"Absolutely. Changes everything." He sets me on my feet, hands already working at my clothes. "My future wife. Fuck, I love how that sounds."

What follows is a thorough and very satisfying celebration of our engagement.

Rio is attentive and passionate, whispering promises against my skin between kisses.

When he says "my wife" experimentally, I nearly combust.

"Say it again," I gasp.

"My wife," he growls, moving deeper. "Mine. Forever."

"Yours," I agree, then flip us over because two can play this game. "My husband."

His eyes go dark. "Fuck yes."

After, we lie tangled together, both breathless and satisfied.

"We should probably get rings before we tell anyone," I say eventually.

"Tomorrow," he agrees. "Let the girls help pick them out. They'll love that."

"They're going to be so excited."

"Cali's going to want to be flower girl."

"Floencia will want to plan everything."

"We'll let them." He pulls me closer. "Whatever makes them happy."

"What about what makes you happy?"

"You. This. Our life together." He kisses my hair. "I never thought I'd have this again after Flora. Never thought I deserved it."

"You deserve everything," I tell him fiercely. "Love and happiness and peace."

"Got all that now." His voice is getting sleepy. "Got you."

"Always," I promise.

I lie awake a little longer, listening to him breathe, marveling at how much life has changed.

Two weeks ago, I was serving coffee and living alone.

Now I'm engaged to the love of my life, mother to two amazing girls, part of a

massive extended family that would kill or die for each other.

It should be overwhelming. Instead, it feels like it was always meant to be.

"Love you," I whisper into the darkness.

"Love you too," he mumbles, pulling me impossibly closer.

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Tomorrow we'll shop for rings, tell the girls, start planning a wedding. Tomorrow the real world will intrude with all its demands and chaos.

But tonight, in our bed, in our home, with our children safe down the hall, everything is perfect.

This is our happily ever after, earned in blood and tears and patience. And I wouldn't change a single thing.

### CHAPTER TEN

Rio

I wake up before the sun, which isn't unusual. What is unusual is the way I can't stop staring at Dasha's left hand resting on my chest, imagining how it'll look with a ring on it.

My fiancée.

My future wife.

Jesus, I actually asked her to marry me last night. No ring, no plan, just sitting on the porch like an idiot and blurting it out.

And she said yes.

She fucking said yes.

Dasha stirs slightly, pressing closer to me in her sleep.

Her hair is a mess, she's got a crease on her cheek from the pillow, and she's never been more beautiful.

This woman who walked into our lives with coffee and smiles, who loves my girls like they're her own, who stood by me through all the violence and threats—she's going to be my wife.

I ease out of bed carefully, needing to move, to do something with this energy buzzing under my skin.

The house is quiet as I make my way to the kitchen, automatically starting coffee and pulling out ingredients for pancakes.

Cooking gives my hands something to do while my mind races.

We need rings. Need to tell the girls. Tell the club. Plan a wedding.

The list feels endless, but in the best way.

These are good problems, happy problems.

The kind I never thought I'd have again.

"Daddy?" Florencia appears in the doorway, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "Why are you up so early?"

"Couldn't sleep, mija. Excited about something."

She perks up immediately. "What kind of something?"



"The kind that requires pancakes to discuss. Want to help?"

"Yes!" She grabs her step stool, dragging it to the counter. "Can we make shapes?"

"Whatever you want."

We work in silence for a few minutes, her carefully pouring batter while I manage the griddle.

This kid has been making breakfast with me since she could barely reach the counter.

Some of our best talks happen over pancake batter.

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"Is Dasha awake?" she asks.

"Not yet. Should we make her favorite?"

"Blueberry with the crispy edges!"

"Exactly."

Cali joins us ten minutes later, drawn by the smell of bacon. "Pancakes on a not-Sunday? What's happening?"

"Dad has exciting news," Florencia informs her sister. "It requires a special breakfast."

"Is it a puppy?" Cali asks hopefully.

"Better than a puppy," I tell her.

"Nothing's better than a puppy," she says seriously, but she climbs into her chair, ready to listen.

Dasha appears as I'm plating the last pancake, wearing one of my t-shirts and looking soft and sleepy. "Morning, family. What's all this?"

"Daddy has news!" Cali announces. "And it's better than a puppy, which I don't believe is possible."

"That's a pretty high bar," Dasha agrees, kissing each girl's head before coming to kiss me. "Morning, handsome."

"Morning, beautiful." I pull her close for a moment. "Ready for this?"

"Ready," she confirms, and I can see the excitement dancing in her eyes.

We all settle at the table, girls bouncing with anticipation.

I clear my throat, suddenly nervous.

How do you tell kids their world is about to change, even if it's for the better?

"So," I start, reaching for Dasha's hand. "You know how Dasha's been living with us?"

"Forever," Cali says. "Like two whole weeks."

"Right. Well, last night I asked Dasha a very important question."

"What kind of question?" Florencia asks, but I can see she's already figuring it out, her eyes going wide.

"I asked her to marry me," I say simply. "To be my wife and officially be your?—"

The explosion of screams drowns out whatever I was going to say.

Both girls launch themselves at us, talking over each other in their excitement.

"You're getting married!"

"Dasha's going to be our real mom!"

"Can I be a flower girl?"

"Can we have a big cake?"

"Will you wear a princess dress?"

"Can we get matching dresses?"

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"Whoa, whoa," I laugh, trying to contain the chaos. "One at a time."

"This is the best day ever!" Cali declares, attaching herself to Dasha like a koala. "You're going to be our mommy for real!"

"I already am, baby," Dasha says, voice thick with emotion. "This just makes it official on paper."

"But now no one can say you're not," Florencia points out with eight-year-old logic. "When people ask, we can say 'that's our mom' and it's true."

"It's already true," I remind her. "But yes, after the wedding it'll be legally true too."

"When's the wedding?" Cali demands. "Tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow," Dasha laughs. "We need time to plan. And we need rings first."

"Rings!" Both girls shriek in unison.

"Can we help pick them?" Florencia asks.

"We're counting on it," I tell her. "In fact, how about we go today?"

"Now?" Cali's eyes are huge.

"After breakfast. And after everyone gets dressed. Properly dressed," I add, eyeing Cali's tendency to try leaving the house in costume pieces.

"I'll wear my fancy dress!" she decides. "The one with the flowers!"

"I'll wear my purple one," Florencia adds. "Ring shopping is serious business."

They inhale their pancakes at record speed, then race upstairs to get ready. I can hear them chattering excitedly through the ceiling.

"That went well," Dasha observes, sipping her coffee.

"Better than expected. I thought there might be more questions."

"They're too excited for questions. Those will come later." She leans into me. "You sure about ring shopping with two hyperactive kids?"

"They're part of this," I say firmly. "We're becoming an official family. They should be involved."

"You're a good dad, Rio Rojas."

"And you're going to be an amazing wife." I kiss her softly. "Still can't believe you said yes."

"Like I could say anything else. You're stuck with me now."

"Best kind of stuck."

An hour later, we're walking into the jewelry store, girls dressed in their finest and practically vibrating with excitement.

The salesman takes one look at us—tattooed biker, beautiful woman, two little girls in fancy dresses—and his customer service smile becomes genuine.

"Shopping for something special today?"

"Engagement rings!" Cali announces before anyone else can speak. "Daddy's marrying Dasha and we're helping pick!"

"How wonderful," he says warmly. "And what excellent helpers you have."

"The best," I agree. "Ladies, want to look around while I talk to Mr...?"

"Davidson," he supplies. "And please, take your time. This is an important decision."

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The girls immediately gravitate toward the biggest, sparkliest rings in the case, pointing and discussing seriously.

Dasha follows, indulging their enthusiasm while trying to steer them toward more practical options.

"That one looks like Elsa's ring would!" Cali declares about a massive diamond surrounded by blue stones.

"It's very Frozen," Dasha agrees diplomatically. "But maybe something a little smaller? So it doesn't get caught on things?"

"What about that one?" Florencia points to a classic solitaire. "It's elegant."

"Where'd you learn the word elegant?" I ask.

"Books," she says, like this explains everything.

Which, knowing her, it does.

"What do you think, Dasha?" I ask. "What catches your eye?"

She moves along the cases slowly, considering. "I don't need anything huge or fancy. Just something... us."

"That one!" Cali suddenly shouts, pointing to a ring in the far case. "Daddy, look! It's perfect!"



We all move to see what's caught her attention.

It's a vintage-style ring with a center diamond surrounded by smaller stones in a flower pattern.

Not huge, not flashy, but intricate and beautiful.

"Can we see that one?" I ask Davidson.

He pulls it out, and I know immediately.

It's perfect.

The design is delicate but strong, traditional but unique.

Like Dasha herself.

"Try it on," I urge.

She slides it onto her finger, and all four of us go quiet.

It fits perfectly, catching the light and throwing tiny rainbows.

"That's the one," Florencia whispers. "That's Mommy's ring."

"What do you think?" I ask Dasha, who's staring at her hand with suspiciously bright eyes.

"It's perfect," she manages. "Absolutely perfect."

"Then that's the one." I turn to Davidson. "We'll take it."

"Excellent choice. And for wedding bands?"

"Can we pick those too?" Cali asks hopefully.

"Of course," Dasha says. "This is a family decision."

We spend another hour looking at wedding bands, the girls taking their job very seriously. They debate between different styles, widths, and metals with the focus of tiny wedding planners.

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"These match," Florencia points out a set with subtle engraving. "See? They have the same pattern."

"Like us," Cali adds. "We all match now."

"Yeah," I agree, throat tight. "We do."

We end up with simple platinum bands with a subtle carved pattern—nothing too fancy for my lifestyle, but special enough to mark the occasion.

Davidson boxes everything up, promising to have the wedding bands sized within the week.

"Can we get something too?" Cali asks hopefully. "So we all have special jewelry?"

I'm about to say she doesn't need anything, but Dasha catches my eye and nods slightly.

"What did you have in mind?" I ask.

They drag us to a case with necklaces, pointing out various options before settling on matching heart pendants.

Simple, sweet, perfect for little girls.

"So we're all connected," Florencia explains seriously.

"We're already connected," I remind her, but I'm already nodding to Davidson to add them to our purchase.

Walking out of the store, each girl wearing her new necklace and Dasha admiring her engagement ring in the sunlight, I feel something I haven't felt in years.

Complete. Whole. Like all the broken pieces have finally come together.

"Clubhouse?" I ask. "I want to tell everyone."

"You mean Cali wants to tell everyone," Dasha corrects.

"I won't tell!" Cali protests. "I'll let Daddy do it!"

"Sure you will, baby," I say, knowing full well she'll last maybe thirty seconds.

The ride to the clubhouse is filled with wedding planning courtesy of our two tiny directors.

"We need pink flowers," Cali decides. "And purple ones," Florencia adds. "And white ones to tie them together."

"Where's it going to be?" Florencia asks. "Church? Beach? Here?"

"We haven't decided yet," Dasha tells them. "Where would you like it?"

"Somewhere pretty," Cali says. "With room for dancing. And cake. Lots of cake."

"Multiple cakes," Florencia agrees. "Different flavors so everyone's happy."

"You two have thought about this a lot," Dasha observes.

"We've been waiting for Daddy to ask you forever," Florencia says matter-of-factly.  
"We had time to plan."

"Forever?" I raise an eyebrow.

"At least a whole year," Cali confirms. "Maybe even two years."

"Or since always," Florencia adds.

The ride to the club passes by in a blur, and man is it busy for a weekday afternoon.

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Several brothers are working on bikes in the garage, others lounging at the bar.

The energy shifts when we walk in—something about the way we're all grinning probably gives it away.

"Family meeting in five," I called out. "Someone get the women."

"What's going on?" Tor asks, abandoning his bike.

"You'll see," I say, trying to keep the smile off my face.

People gather quickly, curious about the impromptu meeting.

Meghan appears with flour in her hair—she must have been doing something in the kitchen.

Starla comes from the office. Others drift in from various corners of the compound.

"What's this about?" Runes asks once everyone's assembled.

I stand, pulling Dasha up with me. The girls flank us, practically bouncing.

"We have an announcement," I start.

Cali explodes, unable to contain herself one second longer. "Daddy and Dasha are getting married!"

The eruption is immediate.

Meghan screams so loud I think glasses might break.

Women swarm Dasha to see the ring.

Brothers pound my back hard enough to bruise.

The girls are swept up in hugs, basking in the attention.

"About fucking time!" someone shouts.

"Finally!" This from multiple sources.

"Let me see that ring!" Meghan demands, grabbing Dasha's hand. "Oh my God, it's perfect!"

"The girls helped pick it," Dasha tells her, pulling our daughters close.

"Of course they did," Starla says warmly. "This is a family affair."

"When's the wedding?" someone calls out.

"Soon as possible," I answer, pulling Dasha close. "Don't want to give her time to change her mind."

"Like that would happen," she says, kissing me to hoots and hollers.

"Bachelor party!" Tor announces. "I'm planning it. It's going to be epic."

"Strippers?" someone suggests.

"Kids present!" multiple women scold.

"What's a stripper?" Cali asks innocently.

"Someone who takes paint off furniture," I say quickly. "Very boring job."



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"Oh." She loses interest immediately.

The party continues for another hour, everyone offering congratulations and already making plans.

The women corner Dasha to discuss wedding details while the men start planning what sounds like an increasingly elaborate bachelor party that I'm already dreading.

"Rio." Runes motions me over to a quieter corner. "Walk with me."

I follow him outside to the picnic area, curious about the serious tone.

"You've come a long way," he says once we're alone. "I'm proud of you, brother."

"Thank you," I say, meaning it. His approval matters.

"Flora would be happy for you," he continues. "She'd want you to find love again. To give those girls a mother."

"I know." And I do. It took years to accept, but Flora wouldn't want us frozen in grief. "Dasha... she doesn't try to replace her. She honors her memory while building something new."

"That's a rare woman." He pulls something from his cut—a small velvet box. "This was a gift from an old friend during a time of need. Got me through some serious shit, and I want you to have it."

I open it to find a simple gold compass, worn from age. "Runes, I can't?—"

"You can and you will. It's got good luck in it." He clasps my shoulder. "You've earned your second chance, Rio. Don't waste it."

"I won't," I promise, pocketing the compass. "Thank you. For everything."

"That's what family does."

We head back inside, where the party is still going strong.

By the time we extract ourselves, a few hours have gone by.

The girls are starting to fade, overwhelmed by excitement and attention.

Dasha looks happy but tired, her ring catching the light every time she moves her hand.

"Home?" I ask.

"Home," she agrees.

The girls chatter all the way back, making increasingly elaborate wedding plans.

By the time we pull in the driveway, they've decided on a menu, color scheme, and guest list that includes "everyone we've ever met."

"Bath and early bed," Dasha decrees, herding them inside. "You can plan more tomorrow."

"But we're not tired!" Cali protests, yawning hugely.

"Uh-huh. March, little wedding planner."

I handle bedtime while Dasha cleans up from our abandoned breakfast.

The girls are asleep almost instantly, worn out from the day's excitement.

I find Dasha on our porch, two beers waiting.

Our spot.

The place where I proposed, where we've had our most important conversations.

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"Hell of a day," she says as I settle beside her.

"Good day though."

"The best." She holds up her hand, admiring the ring in the fading light. "I still can't believe it's real."

"Believe it. You're stuck with me now. Officially stuck."

"My favorite kind of stuck." She curls into my side. "The girls were amazing today. They're so happy."

"They've been waiting for this," I admit. "Florenxia asked me months ago when I was going to marry you."

"What did you tell her?"

"That things like that take time." I laugh. "She said I was being too slow."

"Smart girl."

"Gets it from her mom." I kiss the top of her head. "Both of them."

We sit in comfortable silence for a while, watching the sun set.

This is what I never thought I'd have again—peace, happiness, a future to look forward to instead of just surviving.

"What kind of wedding do you want?" I ask eventually.

"Nothing huge. Just family, the club. Maybe in the backyard? The girls would love that."

"Whatever you want. Long as you're there and you say 'I do,' I'm happy."

"That's all?" she teases.

"Maybe a cake. Cali was pretty insistent about cake."

"Multiple cakes," she corrects. "Can't disappoint our wedding planners."

"God forbid."

"Rio?" Her voice goes serious. "I want to do something for Flora. In the ceremony, I mean. Honor her somehow. She's part of our story."

This woman. This amazing, perfect woman who understands that loving me means loving all of me, including my past.

"She'd like that," I manage past the lump in my throat. "Maybe... maybe the girls could do something? Light a candle for her or something?"

"That's perfect." She tilts her face up for a kiss. "I love you."

"Love you too. Future Mrs. Rojas."

"Mm, I like the sound of that."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She stands, pulling me up. "Come on. Let's go celebrate our engagement properly. Again."

"Insatiable," I tease, but I'm already following her inside.

"You love it."

"I love you," I correct, pulling her close as soon as we're in our room. "Everything about you. Your heart, your strength, the way you love our girls."

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"Our girls," she repeats softly. "Our family. Our life."

"Forever," I promise, sliding the ring off to kiss her finger before putting it back.

"This ring is just the beginning."

"Then let's make it a good beginning," she says, pulling me down for a kiss that promises everything.

And as I lose myself in the woman who'll soon be my wife, I send up a silent thank you to whatever force brought her into our lives.

Second chances don't come often. But when they do, you hold on tight and never let go.

Which is exactly what I plan to do.

## EPILOGUE

Dasha

March

"Stop moving or I'll stick you with this pin," Meghan threatens, kneeling beside me with my hem in her hands.

"I'm not moving," I protest, trying to hold perfectly still in the middle of the clubhouse bedroom that's been transformed into a bridal suite for the day.

"You're vibrating with nerves," Starla observes from where she's curling my hair. "Which is natural, but try to breathe."

"I am breathing."

"Barely," Everly chimes in, adjusting my veil. "Honey, you're marrying the man you love, who loves you back, in front of people who adore you both. What's to be nervous about?"

"Nothing. Everything." I catch sight of myself in the mirror—white dress—simple but beautiful—hair being styled, makeup already done. "I just want it to be perfect for the girls. And Rio."

The dress was a find at a consignment shop—not new, but new to me.

Meghan and I spent an entire Saturday trying on dresses until we found this one.

A-line, lace bodice, simple but elegant.

Nothing like the pouffy monstrosity I wore for my first wedding.

This dress is me—the woman I've become.

"It will be perfect," Tindra assures me from where she's organizing the bouquets. "Have you seen the backyard? The guys outdid themselves."

"And stayed within budget," Astrid adds, finishing my makeup. "Mostly because they did all the work themselves."

It's true.



When Rio and I decided on a backyard wedding, I expected simple.

Maybe some streamers and balloons.

Instead, the club had other ideas.

Everyone chipped in—Bjorn built an archway from reclaimed wood, Bodul strung lights he "borrowed" from a construction site, the women made decorations from mason jars and wildflowers.

It's not fancy by traditional standards, but it's perfect for us.

"Remember my wedding?" Everly asks, spraying my hair. "We got married in Sturgis, completely drunk, wearing matching leather chaps."

"Romantic," Meghan laughs.

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"It was, actually, and he still looks at me like I'm the best thing he's ever seen." She winks at me. "That's what matters. Not the dress or the flowers or the venue. Just the way your man looks at you."

"Mommy-Dasha!" Cali bursts through the door in her pink flower girl dress, twirling. "Look! I'm a princess!"

"You're beautiful, baby," I tell her, my heart squeezing at how she's fully embraced calling me Mommy-Dasha.

Florencia follows more sedately in her purple dress, carrying their flower baskets. "Cali, be careful. You'll wrinkle your dress."

"It's okay," I assure her. "Wrinkles are part of the fun."

"See?" Cali sticks her tongue out at her sister. "Mommy-Dasha says it's okay."

"She's nervous," Florencia informs the room. "She already changed her shoes three times."

"I wanted the right ones!" Cali defends. "First, the white ones were too tight, then the pink ones didn't match right, and now these ones are perfect!"

I pull both girls close, careful of my hair and dress. "You both look perfect. Absolutely perfect. Daddy's going to cry when he sees you."

"Daddy doesn't cry," Cali says.

"He might today," Florencia says wisely. "Uncle Tor said he's been pacing for an hour and practicing his vows in the mirror."

"Tor's got a big mouth," I mutter, but I'm smiling.

The image of Rio practicing what to say is endearing.

"Speaking of the men," Meghan says, standing back to admire her hemming work, "Emil's been driving everyone crazy with his best man duties. You'd think he was planning a military operation."

"That's Emil," Saga says from the doorway, and I notice how several heads turn at her arrival.

She looks stunning in her bridesmaid dress—a soft blue that brings out her eyes. "Everything has to be perfect or he gets twitchy."

"More twitchy than usual?" Vera asks with a knowing smile.

"Significantly." Saga fidgets with her bouquet, not quite meeting anyone's eyes. "He actually made Tor practice walking down the aisle. Tor told him where to stick his practice. Then Emil tried to create a timeline for the wedding."

"A timeline?" Astrid laughs. "For a wedding? Weddings never go according to plan."

"He said we need to account for different things like wind speed affecting the music and potential delays if someone objects." Saga rolls her eyes, but there's fondness there. "I told him the only person likely to object is him, to his own eventual happiness."

"What did he say to that?" Tindra asks, clearly invested in this drama.

"Nothing. Just stomped off to reorganize the chairs for the third time." Saga shrugs, but I catch the hurt flash across her face.

We all laugh, but I notice the way Saga's eyes soften when she talks about Emil, even when she's complaining. Interesting.

"Saga, can you help me with this necklace?" I ask, holding up the simple chain Rio gave me this morning—a wedding gift with a small charm that has our wedding date engraved.

She comes over, her fingers gentle as she fastens the clasp. "You look beautiful," she says softly. "Rio's a lucky man."

"I'm the lucky one," I tell her. "Finding love again, gaining these girls, this whole crazy family."

"It suits you," she says, adjusting the chain so it sits perfectly. "The whole ol' lady thing. Though I could never..."

"Never say never," I advise, catching her eye in the mirror. "I was pretty sure I'd never remarry. Now look at me."

"That's different," she insists, but there's something in her expression that suggests she's trying to convince herself. "You and Rio make sense. You fit. Some people just... don't."

Before I can probe further, there's a knock at the door.

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"Ladies, we need the flower girls for photos!" It's Bodul's voice. "And Tindra, I... uh... you look really pretty!"

Tindra blushes furiously while the rest of us try not to laugh. Young love is adorable.

"Five minutes!" Starla calls back, then turns to us. "Okay, everyone out except the bridal party. Time to get this show on the road."

The room empties except for Meghan, Saga, and the girls.

I stand, smoothing my dress, and take a last look in the mirror. The woman staring back at me is so different from the one who served coffee a year ago.

Stronger, happier, complete.

"You forgot something," Florencia says seriously.

"What's that, baby?"

She produces a small wrapped box. "From Daddy. He said to give it to you right before."

Inside is a simple bracelet with three charms—two small hearts with F and C engraved, and a coffee cup. I laugh through sudden tears.

"Don't cry!" Meghan warns. "You'll ruin your makeup!"

"Happy tears don't count," I insist, fastening the bracelet.

It's perfect. Rio knows me so well.

"Ready?" Meghan asks, handing me my bouquet—simple wildflowers the girls picked this morning from the field behind the clubhouse.

"Ready," I confirm.

We make our way outside where the transformation takes my breath away.

The backyard is strung with lights and white fabric, creating an ethereal canopy.

Chairs are arranged in neat rows, filled with our chosen family.

The archway Magnus built is wrapped in flowers and more lights, with what looks suspiciously like some of Rio's mother's lace tablecloth woven through it.

And there, at the end of the aisle, stands Rio.

He's in his cut over a black button-down and jeans—not traditional, but perfectly him.

When our eyes meet across the space, his face transforms with a smile that makes my knees weak.

Beside him, Emil stands at attention, looking uncomfortable in his role but determined to do it right.

He keeps tugging at his collar like it's strangling him.

"Daddy's crying," Cali whispers, sounding delighted.

She's right. Rio's eyes are definitely wet as he watches us line up.

The music starts—someone's acoustic guitar playing something soft and sweet.

I recognize Aren, who apparently plays in a band when he's not prospecting.

Florencia and Cali go first, taking their flower girl duties seriously.

Cali throws petals with enthusiasm while Florencia follows, making sure the coverage is even.

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The crowd chuckles at their different approaches.

Someone—probably Tor—whispers loudly about taking bets on whether Cali will run out of petals before she reaches the end.

Saga goes next, and I definitely notice Emil's jaw tighten as she walks past him.

His hands clench and unclench at his sides.

She keeps her eyes forward, but there's a slight flush on her cheeks.

Oh yes, there's definitely something there.

Then Meghan, my maid of honor and best friend, who gives me one last wink before starting her walk.

She does a little shimmy halfway down that makes everyone laugh and breaks some of my tension.

And then it's my turn.

The aisle seems both endless and too short.

I'm vaguely aware of the faces turning to watch—Runes and his wife, Ivar and Starla, Tor and Meghan, all the brothers and their families who've become ours.

I see Liam Mackenzie from the Irish, here because his nephew Doran is part of our



extended family through Revna.

I doubt he's here for our wedding, though, probably just stopped in for business.

Even some of my regular customers from the coffee shop made it.

But mostly I just see Rio, waiting for me with tears on his cheeks and love in his eyes.

When I reach him, he takes my hands, squeezing tight.

"You look beautiful," he whispers.

"You clean up pretty good yourself," I whisper back.

"You two know we can all hear you, right?" Runes says, making everyone laugh.

As club president, he's officiating, and he's taking his job seriously—or as seriously as Runes takes anything.

"We're gathered here today to witness the union of Rio and Dasha," he begins properly. "Two people who found each other in the aftermath of loss and built something beautiful from the ashes."

I hear sniffles from the crowd already.

"But before we continue," Runes says, "Florencia and Cali have something they'd like to do."

The girls step forward, each carrying a small candle.

Rio lights them with a larger candle, and together they walk to a small table set to the side.

On it is a photo of Flora—not prominent, but present. A part of our story.

"For our first mommy," Florencia says clearly. "Thank you for watching over us and sending us Dasha."

"We love you," Cali adds, placing her candle carefully. "And we promise to take good care of Daddy and our new mommy."

There's not a dry eye in the house as the girls return to their places.

Rio reaches for my hand again, and I squeeze it, letting him know I'm here.

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Even Emil looks suspiciously glossy-eyed, though he'd probably deny it.

"That was beautiful, girls," Runes says, voice rough. "Now then, Rio and Dasha have written their own vows."

Rio goes first, pulling a paper from his pocket with shaking hands.

He unfolds it, looks at it, then folds it back up and speaks from the heart.

"Dasha," he begins, then has to clear his throat. "Years ago, you walked into my life with coffee and kindness. I was broken, angry, convinced I'd never find happiness again. But you saw past all that. You saw the man I could be, the father I was trying to be, and you loved us anyway."

He looks down at our joined hands, then back up at me.

"You gave my daughters a mother. You gave me a reason to smile again. You stood by us through violence and threats, never wavering. You've seen me at my worst—covered in blood, consumed by rage—and somehow you still look at me like I'm worthy of you.

You are the strongest, bravest, most loving woman I know, and I promise to spend every day showing you how grateful I am that you chose us. I promise to love you, protect you, and build a life with you that's worthy of the second chance you've given me. I promise to always make your coffee exactly how you like it, to dance with you on our porch, and to never take for granted the miracle of you saying yes. I love you, Dasha. Forever."

I'm crying, not even trying to hide it.

Meghan hands me a tissue while I pull out my own vows, though the paper is shaking so badly I can barely read it.

"Rio," I start, voice shaky. "I thought I knew what love was. Then I met you and realized I'd only been scratching the surface. You showed me what it means to be cherished, protected, truly seen. You gave me not just your heart, but your daughters, your family, your whole world."

I look at the girls, including them in this moment.

"Florencia and Cali, you two have given me the greatest gift—the chance to be your mom. I promise to love you both as fiercely as if I'd carried you myself. To be there for every milestone, every heartbreak, every joy. To make sure you always know how special you are and how proud I am to be your Mommy-Dasha."

Back to Rio, who's openly crying now, not even trying to be the tough biker we all know he is.

"Rio, I promise to stand beside you through whatever comes. To be your partner, your best friend, your safe place. To love the man you are—father, protector, provider, and yes, even the darker parts that keep us safe. I promise to always have coffee ready in the morning, to slow dance with you even when there's no music, and to remind you every day that you deserve all the happiness in the world. You're my everything, and I choose you today and always."

"Beautiful," Runes says, wiping his own eyes. "Now, the rings. Emil?"

Emil steps forward with the rings while Meghan hands mine to me.

I notice his hands are perfectly steady even with the emotion of this moment.

He murmurs something to Rio that sounds like "Don't fuck this up" but could have been "Don't drop the ring."

"Rio, place the ring on Dasha's finger and repeat after me," Runes instructs.

Rio slides the band onto my finger, his voice strong as he repeats the traditional words. "With this ring, I thee wed."

"Dasha, same for you."

I take Rio's hand, sliding on the band that matches mine. "With this ring, I thee wed."

"By the power vested in me by the state of Florida and the Raiders of Valhalla," Runes says with a grin, "I now pronounce you husband and wife. Rio, kiss your bride like you mean it."

Rio doesn't need to be told twice.

He pulls me close, kissing me deeply while the crowd erupts in cheers.

The girls attach themselves to our legs, making it a family hug that has everyone awwing.

"I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Rio Rojas!" Runes announces. "Now let's eat!"

More cheers as we make our way back down the aisle as a family, the girls holding our hands.

The reception is set up on the other side of the yard—picnic tables decorated with

mason jars full of wildflowers, string lights creating a canopy, and most importantly, the cake table.

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True to their request, there are multiple cakes.

Chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, and what appears to be some kind of rainbow creation that has Cali's name all over it.

Each one is decorated differently—by Aziza's bakery, and some even have her flare put on them.

"It's perfect," I tell Rio as we take it all in.

"You're perfect," he counters, spinning me into a dance even though the music hasn't officially started. "My wife."

"Say it again," I request, echoing that night in our bedroom.

"My wife," he growls, pulling me closer. "Mine."

"Get a room!" someone shouts—definitely Tor.

"Later!" Rio shoots back, making everyone laugh. "Much later!"

The reception flows beautifully.

Speeches are made—Emil's is surprisingly eloquent for a man of few words, talking about brotherhood and second chances.

He actually makes a joke about Rio finally getting his act together, which gets a huge

laugh.

Meghan's is equal parts funny and touching, threatening Rio with bodily harm if he ever hurts me while also welcoming him officially to the best friend's husband club.

"But seriously," Meghan says, raising her glass, "I've watched these two dance around each other for years. Watched Dasha light up every time Rio walked into the coffee shop. Watched Rio find excuses to need coffee five times a day. They were so obvious everyone had a betting pool on when they'd finally get together."

"Who won?" someone calls out.

"Starla," Meghan admits. "She had faith it would happen eventually."

More laughter and clinking glasses.

The girls perform a dance they choreographed themselves, which mostly involves spinning and jumping but is absolutely perfect.

They rope other kids into joining, and soon there's a small mob of children doing what can only be described as interpretive wedding dancing.

During a quieter moment, I find myself at a table with Saga while the crowd watches Rio dance with both girls standing on his feet.

He's laughing as they direct him where to step, looking happier than I've ever seen him.

"They're good together," Saga observes. "All of you. A real family."

"We are," I agree, then decide to probe a little. "Speaking of together, I saw you at the



store yesterday with Emil."

She stiffens slightly. "We just ran into each other. He was getting parts for his bike."

"Uh huh. And that guy who was hitting on you?"

"What about him?" But her cheeks are pink.

"Emil looked ready to kill the guy. I thought he was going to throw the guy through the window when he touched your arm."

"He's protective of everyone," she deflects. "It's his nature."

"Saga," I say gently, "I've seen Emil protective. This was different. This was... personal. The way he stepped between you and that guy, the way his hand went to your back to guide you away..."

"Nothing," she insists. "It was nothing. Emil and I are nothing."

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"He asked about you three times while we were out the other day" I mention casually. "Wanted to know if you were coming to the wedding, what color your dress would be, if you were bringing a date..."

"He did?" The hope in her voice is quickly squashed. "Probably just being nosey. You know Emil."

"Well, if you ever want to talk about nothing..."

"Thanks," she says, then brightens artificially. "Oh look, my mom's waving me over."

She escapes to go over to her mom, but not before I catch Emil watching her go with an expression that's anything but nothing.

He actually takes a step to follow her before catching himself.

The next thing I know we're cutting the cake and it's chaotic, mainly because Cali insists we cut all the cakes "to be fair."

Rio smashes a piece in my face, I retaliate, and soon the girls are giggling and covered in frosting too.

"Food fight at a wedding," Everly laughs. "That's a new one."

"Nothing about us is traditional," I point out, wiping chocolate from Florencia's nose.

"Best wedding ever!" Cali declares, licking frosting off her fingers.

As the sun sets and the party continues, I find myself watching our guests.

The club that's become family, the women who've embraced me, the children who play together like siblings.

This is what we've built from loss and pain—something beautiful and lasting.

"Time for the bouquet toss!" Meghan announces, clearly having the time of her life.

"All you single ladies, get your asses over here!"

There's good-natured grumbling as the unmarried women gather.

I notice Saga trying to hide behind Tindra, but Meghan drags her front and center.

"No escaping!" Meghan declares. "The universe has plans for you!"

I turn my back, count to three, and toss.

There's squealing and laughter, and when I turn around, Saga's standing there holding my bouquet with a look of absolute horror on her face.

"I triednotto catch it!" she protests. "It hit me in the face!"

"Destiny," I tell her with a wink.

"Now the garter!" Tor announces. "Single men, line up!"

Rio makes a show of sliding his hand up my leg to retrieve the garter, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

The crowd hoots and hollers.

The single men are notably less enthusiastic about participating.

Emil stands at the very back, arms crossed, clearly only there because Tor physically dragged him over.

Rio winds up and lets it fly.

By some miracle—or maybe careful aim—it hits Emil square in the chest.

He catches it reflexively, then looks at it like it might explode.

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"Put it on her!" someone shouts.

"That's tradition!" another voice adds.

Emil's face is murderous as he stalks toward Saga, who looks like she wants the ground to swallow her.

He kneels stiffly, garter in hand.

"Just get it over with," Saga mutters.

Emil slides the garter onto her leg with hands that are definitely not as steady as before.

When his fingers brush her skin, I swear I see sparks.

He lingers for just a second longer than necessary before practically leaping back.

"There. Happy?" he growls at the crowd.

"Ecstatic," Tor says with a shit-eating grin.

Emil storms off toward the bar while Saga escapes in the opposite direction.

The crowd disperses, but I notice they keep catching each other's eyes across the yard for the rest of the night.

"Dance with me," Rio requests, appearing at my elbow.

"Always," I agree, letting him lead me to the makeshift dance floor.

Other couples join us—Tor and Meghan, Runes and his wife, others.

The song is slow and sweet, and I melt into Rio's arms.

"Thank you," he murmurs against my ear.

"For what?"

"For this. For choosing us. For giving me a life I never thought I'd have again."

"Rio—"

"Let me finish," he says softly. "After Flora died, I was convinced that was it for me. One shot at happiness, and I'd lost it. I was going to raise the girls alone, be alone, die alone. Then you walked into my life with your smile and your coffee and your stubborn refusal to let me push you away."

"You tried," I remind him. "Especially in the beginning."

"Half-heartedly," he admits. "Even then, I think I knew you were special. I just didn't think I deserved another chance."

"You deserve all the chances," I tell him firmly. "You're a good man, Rio Rojas. The best man. My man."

"Forever?"

"Forever."

We dance through two more songs before Cali interrupts.

"Daddy! Mommy-Dasha! Family dance!" she demands, tugging at our clothes.

"Yeah, family dance!" Florencia agrees.

We adjust to include them, Rio lifting Cali while I hold Florencia's hands.

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We must look ridiculous—a four-person dance huddle—but I've never been happier.

"Best wedding ever," Cali declares.

"The very best," Florencia agrees. "Can we do it again tomorrow?"

"Once is enough," Rio laughs. "But we can dance whenever you want."

As the night winds down and guests start leaving, everyone stops to hug us and offer congratulations.

Liam Mackenzie shakes Rio's hand formally, welcoming me to "the family" in his thick Irish accent.

Even he brought a gift—an envelope that Rio tucks away without opening, but I'm guessing it's cash to help with honeymoon expenses.

Soon it's just the core group left, and I find myself back where it all started—on our porch.

Rio joins me, two beers in hand, the girls finally crashed in their beds, exhausted from the excitement.

"Hell of a day," he says.

"Perfect day," I correct. "Everything was perfect."



"Even Emil nearly starting a fight with that guy?"

"What?" I missed that apparently.

"When you were dancing with your coffee shop regulars. That kid—what's his name, Brandon?—asked Saga to dance. Emil almost ripped his head off."

"And Saga?"

"Told Emil to mind his own business, danced with the kid anyway." Rio chuckles. "Emil spent the entire song glaring holes in the poor boy's head."

"Those two are going to realize what's going on between them eventually" I observe.

"Or kill each other trying," Rio agrees. "My money's on combustion. Sexual tension like that has to go somewhere."

We sit in silence, still in our wedding clothes, watching the last of the lights twinkle in the backyard.

The crew will clean up tomorrow.

Tonight, it's just ours.

"Thank you," Rio says suddenly.

"For what?"

"For saying yes. For taking on me and my baggage and my kids. For becoming my wife." He takes my hand, thumb rubbing over my new ring. "For saving us."

"We saved each other," I correct. "That's what this is—two broken people who made something whole."

"Nothing broken about you."

"Not anymore," I agree. "Not since I found you."

He kisses me softly, and I taste promise and forever and home.

"Ready to go inside, wife?"

"Lead the way, husband."

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We leave the porch, hand in hand, heading inside to start our married life properly.

The house is quiet, full of sleeping children and visiting family and the echoes of celebration.

Tomorrow we'll deal with real life—work and school and all the mundane details of existence.

"I love you, Mrs. Rojas," Rio whispers as we close our bedroom door.

"I love you too, Mr. Rojas. Forever."

And as I fall into my husband's arms, I know that forever isn't just a promise—it's a certainty.

We've earned our happy ending, and nothing will take it from us.

Nothing at all.