



Seven (Satan's Fury MC: Little Rock #4)

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Category: Action&Adventure

Description: They say time heals all wounds.

Clearly, they don't know what they're talking about.

I've got scars that run so deep they'll never fade.

Each of them hurt like hell.

But none compared to the pain of losing her.

She was my world.

It nearly broke me when they sent her away.

I was left with no choice but to move on.

I built a new life and became the Sergeant at Arms of Fury.

My brothers were my family now, and my loyalty was to them.

Then, she came back.

And now I'm questioning everything.

Past and present.

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:49 am

PROLOGUE

I 'd done it.

I'd finally done it.

I wasn't sure I'd ever pull it off, but I did.

I made it through officer's training and had just been accepted into pilot school. It was something I'd been working for since Tallie and I started getting serious. It was a way for me to give her the life she deserved. She and I came from two different worlds. Her folks were very well off and lived a life of luxury whereas my parents barely had two pennies to rub together.

I met her brother Rooks while playing football in middle school. He was the quarterback, and I was his wide receiver. Even though he was two years older than me, it didn't take long for a friendship to develop, and before I knew it, I was at his house more than I was my own. At first, I was too focused on Rooks and football to even notice Tallie, but once I did, there was no turning back.

I convinced Rooks to let me take her out, and the rest was history. We fell hard and fast, and it wasn't long before we started making plans for the future. Being accepted into the pilot school meant I was one step closer to flying and being able to provide her with the life she'd grown up with. I hadn't even told her yet. I was planning to tell her on our date, but I couldn't wait. I had to tell her now.

"Hey, man." I stepped into the house and dropped my bag by the door. "Where's

Tallie?”

He didn't answer.

Didn't even glance my way.

“Yo, Rooks.”

Rooks and I had been best friends for ten years or more. I could read him better than anyone, and I knew without a doubt that something was up. “What's going on? Where is she?”

Nothing.

Just the drone of some game show on the screen.

Knowing something was wrong, I gave up on waiting for him to answer and darted for the stairs. I took them two at a time, and when I finally reached the top, a feeling of dread made it difficult to move. I forced myself to go to her room, and I nearly hit the floor when I stepped inside.

It was as if the air had been knocked out of me when I saw that her things were gone. Her room was wiped clean. The posters she loved, the pictures of her and me tucked in her mirror, the sketches taped to the walls, and the pile of books always stacked by her bed were all gone.

Even the little jar of paintbrushes she kept on the windowsill was missing. It was like she'd never been there.

I couldn't believe it. I spun around and raced back down the stairs as I shouted, “Rooks! What the hell is going on? Where's Tallie?”

Again, no answer.

He just sat there with his eyes glued to the screen.

“Rooks, look at me!”

I was yelling now, and my hands were shaking at my sides. I was on the verge of losing it when I heard the sound of footsteps coming toward me. I turned and spotted Mr. Warren in the doorway. His expression was lined with guilt as I asked, “Where’s Tallie?”

“She’s gone.”

“What do you mean she’s gone?”

He started towards me as he said, “Look, Holt, you’re a good kid. You know we all care about you?—”

“Where. Is. Tallie?!”

“She’s in Paris.” His back stiffened as he added, “We sent her to art school.”

My world tilted.

Paris? Art school? We’d never talked about her going to Paris. She wanted to stay close and travel after I finished training. Confused and completely gutted, I shouted, “Why would you... she didn’t even tell me anything about it. She didn’t even tell me goodbye.”

“She didn’t know she was leaving,” he said softly.

“What?” My blood ran cold. “I don’t understand.”

“We did what was best for our daughter.”

“But...”

“Holt.” His voice hardened, and his eyes met mine. “I know this is difficult, but you and I both know this thing between you two was never going to work. You could never give her what she needs.”

“But I can. I will. I made it into pilot school, and...”

“And what? She’s just supposed to wait around for the next year and a half?” he scoffed. “I don’t think so. Not my daughter.”

“I love her,” I answered with my voice shaking. “And she loves me.”

“Give it a couple of months, and you’ll get over it. Then, you’ll see this was the best thing for you both.”

“You’re wrong. I’ll never get over her. She’s everything to me.”

He didn’t respond.

He just turned and walked away, leaving me standing there, feeling like my entire world was crashing down around me. Rooks still wouldn’t look at me, and I left there feeling like I had nothing to live for. I tried calling her a million times. I wrote her. Emailed her. I tried every way of contact I could think of, but I never got a response.

I felt lost. I was just going through the motions.

I had no drive left in me, so I opted out of pilot school and never looked back.

Flying might've been my dream, but it wasn't going to drown out the ache Tallie left behind. I needed something that would match the chaos in my chest, so I changed my path and headed for the front line—where precision and focus could cut through the noise in my head.

Becoming a sharpshooter wasn't just a choice—it was survival.

I didn't have to think about the heartbreak or what I'd lost.

It was just me and my target.

Seven men in seven seconds—that wasn't luck.

It was me proving to myself that I could still hit what I aimed for, even when I'd lost the one thing I'd wanted most.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:49 am

1

SEVEN

“Hey there, handsome.”

“What do you want, Misty?”

“Nothing. I was just...”

I glanced up and found Misty leaning against the doorway with her arms crossed and a soured look on her face. “Just what?”

“Have you checked next week’s schedule?”

“Not yet. Why?”

“Keeley’s overbooking herself again,” Misty huffed. “I get that she needs the work, but I don’t want to deal with her drama when she can’t make it in for her shift.”

“I’ll look into it.”

“Okay, great, but can you keep this between us? I really don’t want to get into a thing with her.”

I gave her a nod, and once she’d left my office, I grabbed the schedule. I’d just started looking it over when I heard Grim say, “Thought I might find you here.”

“Seems like I’m here more than I’m not.”

“That’s because you are.” He walked over and sat on the chair in front of my desk.

“How’s it going?”

“It’s going.” Grim was the club’s enforcer. It was his job to look out for the brothers and handle things whenever trouble came knocking at our door. He took his job seriously, so I knew he wasn’t here for small talk. He wanted the lowdown on the Vault and our latest sales. “Keeley’s been pulling her usual crap, so I’m shuffling things around to keep the stage covered.”

“Might be time to send her on her way.”

“I’d consider it if her sales weren’t so damn good.” I leaned back in my chair, rubbing the bridge of my nose. “Hell, she almost sells twice as much as the other girls.”

“Even the shrooms?”

“Especially the shrooms. They are flying off the shelves. Buyers keep coming back for more, which is good, but we gotta keep it tight. No slipping.”

“Tight’s your middle name,” Grim snickered. “But that’s why you’re in that chair and no one else. You’re the reason this place runs as well as it does.”

“Just doing my job.” I tapped my pen against my desk. “Now, unless you’re here to deal with Keeley, I’ve got work to do.”

“Nah, she’s your problem.” He chuckled as he stood and started for the door. “Keep me posted, though.”

“Will do.”

“And hey, don’t forget to take a break.” He cocked his brow. “You’re starting to look a little rough around the edges.”

I smirked as he walked out, already turning back to my work. Breaks weren’t in my job description. There were too many things on the line, so I got back to it. I leaned back in my chair, and the soft creak of leather against leather underlined my irritation as I stared at the schedule in front of me. Keeley had booked herself for six shifts this week, including a double on Friday.

I understood the hustle better than anyone, but this was over the line.

I hit the intercom and barked, “Keeley, my office. Now.”

Seconds later, there was a knock, and Keeley stepped into my office. “Shut the door.”

“Okay.” Her eyes were wide with worry as she stepped inside the office and closed the door behind her. “Is everything okay?”

She looked tired—more than tired.

But I wasn’t about to let that derail the conversation. It needed to be had, and it needed to be had right now. I gestured to the chair across from me and ordered, “Sit.”

“I’ll take that as a no.” She sat down and started fidgeting with the hem of her tank top. “What did I do this time?”

“You want to explain why you’ve got six shifts this week?” I asked, sliding the schedule across the desk toward her. “And two of those on Friday, back-to-back? You think I don’t notice stuff like this?”

“I need the money,” she said quickly, her voice shaking just enough to catch my attention.

“We all need the money, Keeley. That doesn’t mean you kill yourself trying to make it.” My tone was firmer than I meant when I told her, “You’ve been here long enough to know that burning out doesn’t help anyone—not you, not me, not the club.”

“I know.” She looked down at her hands. “But it’s different this time.”

“How?” I asked, leaning forward. “Because unless you’ve got a damn good reason, I’m cutting you back to four shifts with no doubles.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Oh, damn.” I leaned back in my chair as I told her, “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Neither was I,” she replied with a defeated sigh. “And I’m trying to work as much as I can now because, in a few months, I won’t be able to.”

I exhaled slowly, realizing the difficult situation she was in. Keeley was one of my best dancers. She was reliable, professional, and good with the customers. But this changed things. “Why the hell didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Because I knew you’d cut my hours,” she said, her voice breaking. “And I can’t afford that right now.”

“What about the father?”

“I haven’t told him yet.”

Fearing it might be one of the brothers, I urged, “You need to talk to him. No reason

for you to be doing this all on your own when you don't have to."

"I don't think he's going to want me to keep it."

"That's your decision to make."

"I know, but I don't know how I'll make it on my own."

"You're not on your own. You have a family here who is willing to do whatever we can to help."

"I don't want to put anyone out."

"Then, don't overbook yourself and make yourself sick." I rubbed a hand over my face, trying to keep my frustration in check. "You'll burn out before you even make it to maternity leave, and that's not good for you or the baby."

"Okay. Understood." Her lip quivered, but she nodded. "So... what now?"

"I'll give you four shifts a week but no doubles. I'll do what I can to give you good hours, so your tips will be good."

"I'd really appreciate that."

"And if something else comes up..."

"I'll come to you."

"That's what I wanted to hear. Now go get some rest. You've got a shift tomorrow, and I don't want to see you dragging."

“Yes, sir.”

She stood up, giving me a small, grateful smile before walking out. I stared at the door for a long moment after it closed. I didn’t have to be out on the floor to know it was hopping tonight. It was a Friday, and we were always busy on Friday. And lately, we’d been even busier. Since we’d started moving the shrooms, business had skyrocketed, and while that was good for us, it also meant my job had gotten a hell of a lot more complicated.

But that suited me fine.

I liked the chaos.

I was still working on the schedule when I heard a raised voice cut through the steady thrum of the music. I paused and strained to hear it again. Shouting wasn’t unusual at the Vault, but something about the tone set me on edge. It wasn’t playful or drunk yelling. This was laced with anger and came with the sound of glass shattering against the wall.

“Shit.” I pushed back from my desk and rushed out of the office.

As I started down the dark hall, the commotion grew louder. By the time I stepped into the bar, all heads were already turning toward the source of the chaos—a corner booth where one of the regulars was standing, red-faced and yelling at Harley.

Harley was one of our newer girls, and she was a cute redhead with a bit of bite to her. She didn’t take shit off of anyone—no matter how big or small. I had no idea what had gone on at that booth, but it was clear she wasn’t happy. She had her arms crossed, and her expression was a mixture of defiance and unease.

Before I could step in, Memphis was charging over to them.

He wasn't our biggest brother, but he could hold his own, and everyone knew it, especially him. He walked with an air of confidence that drew attention from anyone around him.

He reached the booth in three long strides and grabbed the asshole by the front of his shirt. The guy's protests turned to panicked pleading as Memphis yanked him out of the booth and lifted him like he weighed nothing. He pulled him close, and once he was just inches from his face, Memphis growled. "You've got two choices. You can walk out of here on your own, or I can throw you out."

"Hey, man, I wasn't—" the guy started, but Memphis wasn't having it.

He turned and dragged the guy toward the door, ignoring all his flailing and whining. True to his word, Memphis tossed him out the door.

The dude hit the sidewalk with a loud thud, and Memphis stood in the doorway, glaring down at him. "Consider yourself banned."

By the time Memphis turned and walked back inside, things had already settled back down, and everyone's attention had returned to the dancers on the various stages. Harley had made her way back over to the bar and looked completely unfazed. I wasn't surprised. Our girls knew we had their backs and wouldn't let anyone fuck with them. For us, it was a blessing and a curse.

I walked over to Memphis as he dusted off his hands like he'd just taken out the trash. "You good?"

"Better now." He gave me a smirk. "That asshole has been pushing it for months."

Trouble was standard at the Vault.

It was expected with the booze, drugs, and the temptation that came with so many scantily dressed or outright naked women. We wouldn't be the club we were if it wasn't for Memphis and the other brothers. They took care of the issues and took care of them swiftly—which helped keep the cops at bay.

I gave Memphis a nod as I told him, “Appreciate you taking care of him.”

“Just doing my job.”

“Well, it could've gotten messy.”

“It was messy.” Memphis's lips twitched into a faint smirk. “You might wanna talk to Harley before her mouth gets her into more trouble than she can handle.”

I nodded and started over to her. The second she spotted me coming toward her, she glanced up at the ceiling and shook her head. She knew why I was coming, and I could tell by her expression she was going to give me hell about it. Damn. It was going to be another long night.

2

TALLIE

I 'd finally done it.

After years of blood, sweat, and tears—lots and lots of tears, I'd finally opened my very own art studio. It wasn't much, just a nine-hundred-square-foot room with exposed brick and charm for days. Twinkling lights hung from the ceiling, and a heavy scent of paint and clay was lingering in the air.

Sunlight poured through the large front window and highlighted the various shelves. I smiled, knowing that this was where my vases and bowls would soon sit. I couldn't wait. My shop was on the main strip in Hot Springs. It was a known hot spot for tourists, and I hoped the rustic ambiance of my quaint little shop would draw them in.

I just stood there, taking it all in. I was relishing in the feeling of pride and excitement when Ford, my seven-year-old son, came storming in from the back room. He was sporting his infamous pout, and his dark curls bounced with every exaggerated stomp. He bounded over to me with his favorite stuffed dinosaur clutched to his chest and whined, "I wanna go home."

"Oh, come on, Ford. We just got here."

"Uh-uh." His brows furrowed. "We've been here forever, and there's nothing to do."

"What about your iPad or those coloring books I bought?"

“Those are for babies, Mom.” I laughed softly, glancing at the array of clay creations that lined the shelves. “Okay, how about this? You can help me make something. I’ll show you how to use the wheel, and we can make a bowl together. It’ll be our special project.”

"Can I make it really big?" A hopeful smile spread across his face as he asked, "Like, big enough for a bear?"

"How about big enough for a really hungry cat?"

“Does that mean we can get a cat?”

“Oh, we have a lot more unpacking to do before we can even think about getting a pet.”

“What about after we finish unpacking?”

“Maybe. But only if you promise to help me take care of it.”

“Promise!”

“Okay, deal,” I said, holding out my pinky.

“Deal.”

He hooked his tiny finger around mine, sealing our pact.

I led him toward the pottery wheel, and I couldn’t help but smile as he sat down in front of it with excitement in his eyes. Art and pottery had always been a passion of mine, and now, they were quickly becoming his.

I slipped on his apron and placed some clay on the wheel, letting him play while I went to grab my box of supplies. By the time I returned, he was giggling and covered in clay. He was intent on creating something, even if it resembled more of a lumpy blob than a bowl.

I smiled as I adjusted his apron.

“Okay, bud, let’s make a masterpiece,” I teased, placing my hands over his to guide the clay. The room was warm with the smell of earthy clay and the soft hum of the wheel. It was one of those rare, perfect moments I wanted to remember forever. Ford was just starting to get the hang of it when my phone buzzed on the counter.

I glanced at it out of instinct and shook my head, nudging it aside.

But then it buzzed again.

Something about the persistence made me pause.

My chest tightened when I finally looked.

Dad.

Seeing his name flash across the screen made my stomach twist into a mess of knots. It happened every time he called, and it was even worse when I had to see him in person.

It hadn’t always been this way.

There was a time when I thought he hung the moon.

But that all changed when he sent me away.

I fell for Holt, my brother's best friend, when I was in high school. He was always hanging out at the house with Rooks. He was four years older than me, so I usually kept my distance and left them to do their own thing. Then, one night, we connected over a late-night bowl of cereal, and one thing led to another, and we started dating.

It wasn't really dating at first. I was just a freshman at the time, so we hung out at the house and went to school functions together. But by the end of my senior year, we were making plans for the future. I was going to art school, and he was going to continue to work his way up in the military.

We weren't naïve.

We knew it wouldn't be easy.

Holt and I were from two different worlds, but we loved each other and were willing to do whatever it took to make it work.

But we never got the chance.

Dad didn't like us dating, and when he realized how serious we were about our future, he tried to get me to end things with him. When I refused, he sent me away to art school in Paris, breaking my heart and Holt's. My father promised that one day I'd understand why he'd done what he'd done, but I never did.

I learned things in Paris that I wouldn't have learned anywhere else, but the hurt and betrayal I'd felt all those years ago still clung to me—even more so whenever I looked at Ford and saw his father in his eyes.

That thought had me reaching for my phone and silencing the call.

I was having a moment with my son, and I wasn't going to let my father ruin it. I

glanced down at Ford, watching as he pressed his thumbs into the wet clay. “That’s it. Nice and slow.”

“Like this?”

“Yep. Now, pull it up slowly... like this.”

I leaned in closer and demonstrated with my own hands, showing him how to make the clay rise into a small circular shape. Ford mimicked my movements with a mix of awe and frustration. He tried with all his might, but his little fingers weren’t quite as nimble as mine.

“You’re doing great! This is gonna be the best bowl ever.”

Ford beamed up at me with a proud smile that melted my heart. I was just about to ask him if he wanted to add any designs to the sides when I heard a knock at the door. It wasn’t a knock I recognized, so I glanced over at the clock, checking the time.

We were at least a week away from opening, and I wasn’t expecting anyone, so I was a little hesitant as I pulled my hands from the clay and quickly wiped them clean. “Hang tight, buddy. I’ll be right back.”

A sense of curiosity tugged at me as I started to unlock the door, and then I heard a familiar, loving voice say, “Any day now, sunshine.”

“Marcus?” My heart skipped a beat as I swung the door open, and I found my dearest friend standing on the front sidewalk with that easy grin I always loved. His hair was a little longer, and his waist was a little thicker, but he was just as handsome as ever. “What in the world are you doing here?”

“I came to see how things were going.” He stepped inside the shop and gave it a

quick once over. “Looks like things are coming together.”

“Yes, they are.” I stared at him for a moment, then, out of impulse, I flung my arms around him and almost knocked him off his feet. “I can’t believe you’re really here. It’s been ages.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that.” He shrugged as he sat down next to me. “I would’ve been here sooner, but...”

“I know.”

He stepped further into the shop and waited as I closed the door behind him. He stopped when he spotted Ford in the back corner. “Is that...”

“It is,” I answered as we continued over to Ford. When he looked up at us, I smiled and said, “Ford, I would like you to meet a good friend of mine. This is Marcus.”

“Hey.”

“Hey.” Marcus stepped closer and looked down at the wad of clay in my son’s hands as he asked, “What ’cha making over there?”

“A bowl for a new cat.”

“A new cat, huh?”

“We aren’t getting a cat,” I interjected. “Or a dog. At least, not right now.”

“Why not?” Marcus pushed. “He’s making a bowl and everything.”

“Mom says we gotta get settled first.”

“She might have a point.” Marcus took a quick glance around and grimaced as he added, “But hang in there. It won’t take her long to get this place fixed up.”

Ford gave him a doubting shrug, then returned his attention to the clay. Marcus leaned over to me as he whispered, “He looks just like...”

“Yeah, I know.” I cut him off as I steered him over to the sofa. “I can’t believe you’re really here. It’s been years since I last saw you.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that.” He shrugged as he sat down next to me. “My job isn’t as flexible as I’d like it to be, but I couldn’t let you have your grand opening without at least stopping by to check out the place. And I gotta say, I’m impressed. This place is really amazing.”

“It’s a work in progress, but it’s getting there.” I motioned to the shelves lined with mugs, vases, and bowls in every shape and size. “Still trying to figure out how to display everything, but I think it’s coming together.”

“It definitely is.”

We chatted for a while, catching up on work, life, and everything in between. It was like we’d never missed a beat. It was always like that with us.

We’d met in the seventh grade, and it wasn’t exactly a picture-perfect start. I was the quiet, quirky girl who kept to herself. I spent most of my days sketching away in my notebooks, keeping to myself, while he was busy being the class clown and impossible to ignore.

Everyone loved him. One day, during lunch, he made some joke about my ‘rsf’ face, better known as ‘resting sketch face,’ and everyone around laughed. I wanted to crawl under the table and never come out.

But days later, he came over and sat next to me in art class. He gave me one of his charming smiles and asked, “So, what are you drawing?”

It was like he’d completely forgotten how he’d embarrassed me just days before. I, on the other hand, hadn’t forgotten and snapped, “Nothing.”

“Come on. Let me see.”

I was hesitant but eventually turned my sketch pad over and showed him my sketch of a dragon hiding beneath the forest. He studied it for several moments, then turned to me with wide eyes. “Holy shit. That’s badass.”

“You really think so?”

“Absolutely.” He looked back at the drawing, then suggested, “You should make him breathe fire.”

And that was it.

From that moment on, he was always there walking me to class, making me laugh when I was having a bad day, and showing up at my house like he was one of the girls. He became my safe place—the one person who didn’t just tolerate my silly quirks but actually liked them.

He never made me wonder or left me guessing about our unlikely friendship. I never had to wonder if he hoped for more. He’d made it clear from the start who held his heart, and it wasn’t me. He was head over heels for our history teacher, Mr. Henson. He’d lie on the floor in my room, going on about something he’d said in class or the clothes he’d worn that day. He knew there was no chance that Mr. Henson would feel the same about him, but that didn’t dampen his crush. If anything, it made him even more appealing.

I didn't know what it was like to have feelings like that for someone.

And then, Holt came into the picture.

He and Rooks had been friends for years. I never really paid him much attention until the start of my freshman year. It was late—well after midnight, and I'd gone downstairs for a drink of water. He was sitting at the counter eating a bowl of cereal. I decided to join him, and we spent the better part of the night talking alone in the dark. It started more as a friendship, but the spark that ignited between us was undeniable.

I told Marcus about my feelings for Holt, and while he had his reservations, he was supportive. He was never jealous or resentful, not even when I started to spend more time with Holt than I did him. He was a true friend, and he remained my friend even when I was sent away.

He wrote letters, emailed, and called as often as he could. I did the same. When I discovered that I was pregnant, the calls kept coming. He stood by me the entire time, never judging or giving unsolicited advice. But he listened, and he cared. He always wanted the best for me.

I knew that hadn't changed when he asked, "So, have you been seeing anyone?"

"No, not really."

"Tallie," he said, giving me that look. "We talked about this."

"I know, but I'm just not ready."

"It's been five years."

“I know. I know.” I let out a sigh. Ford was two when I finally gathered the courage to go against my father and reach out to Holt. That’s when I discovered he had been killed in the line of duty. I’d lost him. Our chance for reconnecting was gone. I was so devastated that I shut down and could barely function for months. “I’ve just had so much going on, and to be honest, I haven’t really met anyone I’d want to go out with anyway.”

“I might be able to help out with that.”

The words had barely left his mouth when Ford came rushing in with his new bowl cradled in his hands. “Look, Mom! I did it!”

“Oh, honey.” I smiled through the lump in my throat as I got up and knelt beside him. “It’s perfect, sweetheart.”

“I put a cat face on one side and a dog face on the other. That way, we can use it for whichever pet we get.”

“Smart thinking there, dude.” Marcus chuckled as he stood and said, “I best get going.”

“You just got here.”

“It’s not like I won’t be back.” He gave me a wink. “We’re neighbors now, remember?”

“Neighbors.” I smiled. “I like the sound of that.”

“Me too.” I followed him over to the door, and as he walked out, he told me, “I’ll be seeing you soon.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

“Remember what I said.”

“I will.”

I watched as he walked out to his car and got inside. He gave me a quick wave and drove off, and I couldn’t help but smile. I had my son, my pottery shop, and my best friend. For the first time in a very long time, I felt like everything was falling into place.

Sadly, the good wasn’t going to last.

In fact, everything was about to go to hell in a handbasket.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:49 am

3

SEVEN

“ Y ou got a minute?”

“Yeah.” Prez looked up from his paperwork just long enough for him to gesture for me to come into his office. “Come on in.”

I nodded, then stepped into the room. His office smelled like leather and cigar smoke. It was a scent so familiar it felt like a second skin. Preacher sat behind his desk with his massive frame leaning back in his chair and a cigar clamped between his teeth.

As soon as I was seated, he removed the cigar from his mouth and asked, “What’s on your mind?”

“The upcoming run.”

“Okay,” he replied, leaning forward and resting his forearms on the desk. His eyes burned with the intensity he always carried when it came to business. “What about it?”

“Demand for the shrooms has been higher than we expected. Maybe it was the holidays, or maybe it’s just really good shit. Either way, if we stick to the original schedule, we’ll be out before the next shipment gets here.”

“How much faster are we talking?”

“A week, maybe less.”

He stubbed out his cigar in the ashtray as he grumbled, “Damn.”

Prez had a lot on his plate. Not only did he have a club to run, but his ex ol’ lady had been staying at the clubhouse. She’d run into some trouble when her husband double-crossed some of his work clients. He stole their money, and they didn’t take too kindly to it. They came after him, and when they couldn’t track him down, they came after her.

Under different circumstances, Preacher might’ve told her that he was sorry about her luck, but Kay was Memphis’ mother. And seeing that Memphis was his only living son, he knew he couldn’t turn his back on her. They’d had some fiery moments—some hot enough to make you wonder if there were still some sparks between them.

Preacher would never admit it, at least not to one of us, but I could tell that the whole thing had been weighing on him. I hated to add more to his plate, so I said, “I know it’s a hassle, but we can’t afford to go dry. Customers will start looking elsewhere when we can’t deliver.”

“I’ll put a call into Viper and see if they can move up the date for pick up.”

“Need to discuss upping the shipment while you’re at it. The demand is high, and it’s only gonna grow. We need to make sure we stay ahead of the game.”

He didn’t respond. He just sat there and took a moment to think things over. I understood his hesitation. Upping the load meant more risk. Bigger hauls drew more attention, and the cops in Nashville weren’t exactly on the payroll. Prez gave me one of his looks as he asked, “What are we gonna need to do to make it happen?”

“We’ll need a little more muscle on the ground. Ghost and Memphis can handle the lead with Skid and Smitty, and then Rusty and Goose can follow behind as backup. Maybe even Dagger if he’s available.”

“And the route?”

“Going up there is one thing. Coming back fully loaded is another. Going to need to make some adjustments,” I said. “More back roads and will need to steer clear of the interstate. I’ll see if Shep can find us a better route back.”

“Handle it.”

I nodded, then stood and started for the door. As I started down the hall, I felt the weight of responsibility settling on my shoulders. It wasn’t a new feeling. I’d felt it many times before, especially when it came to the club and our livelihood. But it was what I’d signed up for.

I knew from the start that being the club’s sergeant-at-arms wasn’t just about carrying some title or keeping my brothers in line. It was about loyalty and sacrifice. It was doing whatever it took to protect the life we’d built. The weight of my decisions had kept me up at night, and I’d taken hits that most wouldn’t recover from.

But I’d do it all again and more for my brothers.

They were my family, and if it ever came down to it, I wouldn’t hesitate to take a bullet for any one of them, and they’d do the same for me.

When I walked into Shep’s office, I was hit with the faint scent of coffee and stale cigarette smoke—a smell that seemed to have seeped into the walls over the years. He was the club’s hacker and the only one I trusted to find the best alternate route to the Manor and back.

The flickering light from the monitors reflected off Shep's glasses, which made him look more like a mad scientist than a badass computer hacker. He was focused on his screen and completely oblivious that I was watching him from the doorway. I cleared my throat and said, “Hey, Shep. Got a minute?”

Shep’s fingers never stopped moving across the keys as he looked up and answered, “Sure thing. What’s up?”

“We’re making some changes to next week’s run...”

I took a moment to give him the same spiel about our quickly diminishing inventory I’d given Preacher, and it didn’t take him long to figure out why I’d come to him. “You need me to find a safer route to the Manor.”

“I do, but I don’t want to add a lot of time to the run. The faster we get there, the better—but I need a back road, something under the radar that won’t draw any unwanted attention.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem.”

He whipped around in his chair and began typing once again. In a matter of seconds, he’d pulled up a high-tech navigation program. He scanned through endless streams of maps and satellite images. He wasn’t just a guy who knew how to hack into things; he had a mind that could process information faster than anyone I’d ever known.

“I get that you want to stick to the back roads, but most of them in that area are either dirt or private property. Getting through without anyone noticing is gonna be tricky.”

“How tricky?”

“Nothing we can’t handle.” He zoomed in on a section of the map and highlighted

roads I didn't recognize. "This route should work, but we'll need to prepare for any unplanned guests along the way."

I watched the screen as Shep plotted out the route. "What about cameras or security systems? Are we gonna be in the clear?"

"This route will keep us off the radar for about ninety-five percent of the trip. Some of these roads are out in the middle of nowhere. Worst you're gonna run into is an old farmer with a shotgun."

"Sounds good to me. I'll plan to do a run-through tomorrow."

"Want me to tag along?"

"Probably not a bad idea."

"Then, I'll be there. I'll send the detailed map and coordinates to our phones."

"Sounds like a plan." As I started out of the room, I told him, "Headed to the Vault. I'll be back first thing in the morning, and we can hit it."

"I'll be sitting on go."

"Appreciate it, brother."

I left there and drove straight to the club. It was well after opening, and the parking lot was already filling up. I knew the girls could handle it without me, but I liked to be there to supervise, especially at open. Too many things could go wrong—like one of the girls not showing up or the truck delivery running late. It was my job to make sure things didn't go off the rails, so I parked and headed straight inside to check on things.

When I walked through the front door, I was pleased to see that everything seemed to be running smoothly. Ghost and Gash were covering the entrance and watching intently as Casey made her way to the stage. Skid and Zeke were monitoring the back and watched Stella as she finished her set. Jen was behind the bar, and Misty was taking orders at the front tables.

Since I didn't have any fires to put out, I grabbed a soda from the bar and headed over to Skid and Zeke. I couldn't help but notice that Skid was looking a little deflated as I approached. I had no idea what was up with him until I heard him tell Zeke, "I don't get it, man. I thought I had it locked down."

"Clearly not," Zeke chuckled.

"I don't know what happened." Skid glanced over at Jasmine, one of the new strippers, and sighed. I knew then why he was struggling. She was a beautiful redhead, tall and slender and stacked, and she could have her choice of any man in town. And from the sounds of it, she hadn't chosen Skid. "One minute, she was eating out of the palm of my hand, and the next..."

"Dude, she was literally five feet away from you."

"She was playing hard to get." Skid shrugged. "What can I say? I like a challenge."

"She's more than a challenge, brother. She's more like a no chance in hell."

"You don't get it. She's probably just shy."

"Shy?" I scoffed. "She shows her tits and ass for money. She's far from shy."

We all laughed, but Skid was staring off into space, clearly still replaying the awkward interaction. "She told me she needed to go 'take care of some stuff.'"

“And we all know what that means,” I laughed, as we continued ribbing him.

“It don’t mean shit,” Skid snapped. “She has a set in half an hour.”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with the fact she ain’t interested in picking up what you’re laying down?”

“You know what?” Skid’s eyes narrowed. “Screw you. She’s just playing hard to get.”

“Hard to get?” Zeke nearly spit out his beer. “Brother, she’s playing ‘never gonna happen.’”

We all laughed, and I was about to throw in another jab when my phone started to ring. I pulled it out of my pocket and glanced down at the screen. When I saw that it was Mom calling, I held up my hand and said, “I’ll be back in a bit.”

My mom wasn’t the type to call for no reason, so I dipped out and rushed to my office just in time to answer, “Hey, Ma. What’s up?”

“Hi, sweetheart. I’m sorry to bother you, but...,” she started, her voice tinged with that mix of worry and urgency I knew all too well. “I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know. I just had this feeling, and it’s been gnawing at me all afternoon. I don’t know what it is, but something isn’t right.”

“Well, everything’s good here,” I said, leaning against the wall and running a hand through my hair. “I’m at work, and everything’s golden.”

“Okay,” she sighed.

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“You know how it is when I get one of these feelings of mine... They’re rarely ever wrong, Holt. I’m telling ya. Something bad is coming. I just need you to promise me you’re being careful.”

“Yeah, I promise,” I said, though the knot in my stomach tightened. She wasn’t lying. Her instincts were always on point, and I couldn’t help but wonder what bullshit was about to come knocking at my door. Hoping to ease my mother’s mind, I told her, “You don’t gotta worry, Ma. I’m a big boy. I can take care of myself.”

“Don’t patronize me. I know all too well that you can take care of yourself, but I’m your mother. I’m going to worry. It comes with the territory.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

“Just... stay safe, okay? And call me tomorrow. Let me know you’re alright.”

“Will do,” I said, softening my tone. “Love you, Ma.”

“Love you, too.”

When the call ended, I stayed there for a moment, just staring at the phone. Her words clung to me as I shoved my phone in my pocket, then headed back out to the floor and rejoined Skid and Zeke. They were still going at it, but for me, the teasing had lost its edge. Mom’s bad feeling had turned into my bad feeling, and I had no idea what I was going to do about it.

4

TALLIE

“W ow.” I looked around my son’s new room and smiled. “It’s really coming together.”

“Um-hmm.” Ford was sitting cross-legged on the floor as he worked to remove the backing off of a glow-in-the-dark star. “Where do you think this one should go?”

“I don’t know. Let’s see.” I glanced around at all the stickers we’d already put up, then suggested, “How about right there, next to the moon? We can put several there like it’s the Big Dipper.”

“That’d be cool,” he answered with a satisfied grin.

We’d been working on his room for hours. He wanted a space theme, so I filled the walls with posters of astronauts and hung rockets and the solar system from the ceiling. I thought the stars would give it that special touch, and he was thrilled with the idea.

I watched as he stepped up on the chair and placed the sticker on the wall. He looked at it for a moment, then nodded with a smile. That smile warmed my heart. For the first time in a while, Ford looked truly happy—and it made me feel like maybe I’d done something right by moving us back here.

Once we finished with the stickers, we started unboxing his toys and books. We were

busy lining them on his bookshelf when my phone buzzed on the nightstand. I glanced over, and my stomach twisted into a knot when I saw Dad on the screen.

Noting my grimace, Ford paused and asked, “Who is it?”

“It’s Grandpa,” I said, trying to keep my voice even. “Why don’t you finish the books while I take this?”

He shrugged and went back to work, but I could feel his curious eyes on me as I walked out of the room. As much as I didn’t want to speak to my father, I knew he would just keep calling until I answered. I swallowed hard before saying, “Hey, Dad.”

“Hi, Tallie. This is Janice.” Janice was my father’s secretary, and I wasn’t exactly a fan of hers. She always had an air to her voice that I found off-putting, and tonight was no different. “He would like to see you in his office this afternoon at six.”

“That’s not possible. I’m at the apartment with Ford, and I...”

“I understand,” she interrupted. “But he insisted that you be here promptly at six.”

“Aren’t you already closed by then?”

“Your father’s last client is at five-thirty. He will see you right after.”

“And what’s this in regard to?”

“I believe it has to do with some paperwork that needs to be submitted for your studio lease.”

“What!” While I wasn’t thrilled about him being involved in my acquiring my new

shop, Dad was the best attorney in the state. I knew he wouldn't let me get taken advantage of, but as far as I knew, all the arrangements had already been finalized. "I thought he already submitted the paperwork."

"That's something you will need to discuss with him at six."

I didn't bother responding.

I just hung up and groaned. Ford poked his head out of his bedroom door. Noting the quick change in my mood, he looked up at me with worried eyes. "Are you mad?"

"Yeah, a little." I ran my hand along the back of my neck, trying to ease the building tension in my shoulders. "I have to go into the city to see your grandfather."

"Oh." His nose crinkled. "Do I have to go?"

Ford wasn't a fan of my father either and rightly so.

Dad had never treated him like a grandson—more like a terrible mistake. He never talked to him, much less held him or touched him. He seemed repulsed by him, and his repulsion only got worse after Holt's death.

Needless to say, I couldn't blame Ford for not wanting to see him. But with such short notice, I didn't have anyone to look after him. "Afraid so, buddy."

"Ah, man." I took the books from his hands as he pouted, "We have to go now?"

"We do, but if you're good, we can grab some takeout on the way home."

"Can we get some Mannie's?"

“Sure!”

“Awesome.”

With that, he shot up and raced to the living room to put on his shoes.

Once he was done, we gathered our things and hurried out to my car. The drive over to Dad’s office was quiet. Ford sat in the backseat, humming some song he’d made up while fiddling with his favorite dinosaur toy. I tried to stay calm, but my mind was racing.

I couldn’t imagine why my father was so intent on seeing me at such an odd time of night. I’d like to think that he had a good reason—he wanted to see me or check on things at the shop—but my father didn’t think like that. He was too self-centered to think about anyone but himself.

It was that thought that had me thinking about that day—the one that had haunted me for eight years.

It was just like any other day. I’d been babysitting one of the kids next door, and I’d come home to get ready for my date with Holt. We were going to the drive-in with a couple of friends, and I wanted to take a quick shower before we left.

I wasn’t expecting anything to be different when I walked through the front door. It was the same door I’d passed through a million times before, and I saw nothing unusual until I reached my bedroom. When I walked in, my mother was standing by my open closet, and she was pulling my clothes from their hangers and folding them neatly into a suitcase on my bed.

She hadn’t told me anything about us leaving on a trip, so I asked, “What are you doing?”

My voice came out sharper than I intended, but she didn't flinch. She didn't even pause. She just kept folding away like it was no big deal. Her tone was cold and eerily calm as she told me, "Your father has worked it out for you to go to école des Beaux."

"In Paris?"

"Yes." She glanced over her shoulder with a forced smile. "Isn't that wonderful news?"

"What? No. We've talked about this! I don't want to go away to school."

"It's what's best."

"No! I'm not going!"

"Yes, Tallie. You are."

"But why?"

"It's what's best for you." Mom wouldn't even look at me. She just kept folding my clothes like she wasn't dismantling my life piece by piece. "You're too distracted here."

"Distracted? By what?" And then, it hit me. "Is this about Holt?"

"He's not good enough for you, sweetheart. It's time to start thinking about your future. You deserve more than what he can give."

"He can give me all I need."

“This isn’t up for discussion. Your father has made arrangements, and you’re going.”

“What arrangements?”

“He’s spoken with the headmaster and got you an early acceptance. You’ll be staying with your aunt Genevieve until classes start and...”

“You can’t do this.”

The room started spinning, but this wasn’t the kind of dizziness that came from standing up too fast. This was the kind of spinning that comes when your entire world tilts on its axis, leaving you clinging onto anything that can keep you from falling.

I didn’t know what to do.

This wasn’t what I wanted.

I had plans.

We had plans.

“Please don’t do this.” My voice broke, and tears started to stream down my face. “I love him, Mom. I love him so much.”

“I know you do, but that will change.” She didn’t show even a flicker of sympathy when she told me, “What matters is your future, and your father knows what’s best.”

I couldn’t breathe.

I needed to get out.

I needed to find Holt.

My heart was pounding as I whipped around and started out of the room. The second I hit the hallway he was there.

My father.

His jaw was clenched, and his gaze was hard and unyielding.

Without a word, he grabbed my arm, and his grip was firm as he steered me toward the front door. My pleas caught in my throat, but they didn't matter. They were useless against the steel wall of his authority. He gave no explanations. No goodbyes. Just cold silence and the sound of my heart shattering with every step toward the waiting car.

They loaded my things into the trunk, and neither of them spoke as the driver took us to the private airstrip. I was a mess of tears and muffled sobs, but my father never even looked at me.

Once we got to the airfield, he gave me a harsh look and demanded that I give him my phone. I knew I had no chance of changing his mind, so I handed it over and got on the plane. When the doors closed behind me, it felt like I'd been sealed away from my family, my friends, and most of all, Holt. I'd just lost everything I loved.

It was at that moment that I realized this whole thing wasn't about me and what I wanted. And it wasn't about my parents doing what was best for me.

It was about control, and my father's hunger for it.

It was always about control.

I knew that. Everyone who knew him knew that. It was one of the many reasons I had an uneasy feeling as I got closer to his office. That uneasy feeling grew even more intense when we pulled into the parking lot, and I saw that everyone had already gone for the day. I parked near the entrance, grabbed Ford's hand, and hurried inside. The elevator ride up felt like it took forever, but when the doors finally opened, neither of us moved.

Knowing they were just going to close again, I nodded toward the hall and said, "Let's get this over with."

Ford sighed and followed as I stepped out of the elevator. As we neared Dad's office, I heard his voice—sharp, angry, and louder than I'd ever heard before. "You don't get to dictate terms to me !"

There was a response, but it was too muffled for me to hear.

"I don't care what he said. I'm the one in control here," he bellowed, the words echoing down the hallway.

Ford looked up at me with wide, curious eyes. I was tempted to just turn around and head back out to the car when the unmistakable crack of gunshots rang out, sharp and deafening.

I froze.

My heart slammed against my ribs as I tried to make sense of what I'd heard. Instinct kicked in, and I yanked Ford into the supply closet just a few feet away. I pressed him into the corner and crouched down in front of him, shielding him with my body. He sounded like he was on the brink of tears as he muttered, "Momma?"

"Shh, baby," I whispered back, placing a finger to his lips.

My hands shook as I peeked through the slats of the door.

Two men burst out of Dad's office. They were both dressed in dark suits, and their faces were cold and hard as they started down the hall. One still had his gun drawn while the other barked something I couldn't make out. Seconds later, they were gone, leaving me and Ford completely panic-stricken.

I clung protectively to Ford as I strained to listen for any movement in the office. I didn't know what to do. My mind screamed at me to stay put, but my heart pleaded for me to check on my dad.

Knowing I had to do something, I leaned down and brushed Ford's dark curls back from his face. "I need you to do something for me... I need you to stay here until I come for you. Can you do that?"

"No, Momma." He shook his head fiercely as his little hands reached out for me. "I don't want you to go."

"I know, sweetie. But I need to go check on Grandpa." I gave him a tight squeeze. "I'll only be a minute. Be brave for me, okay?"

He didn't let go at first, but eventually, he nodded.

"Stay right here," I insisted. "No matter what."

He nodded again, and I reached for the doorknob. I hesitated for a moment, then slipped out before I could lose my nerve. I quietly eased the door shut, then pulled out my phone and dialed 911. I didn't press send immediately. Dad was a powerful businessman, and he was very conservative. He would be furious if I called the police for nothing. I needed to check first.

The hallway felt cold and hollow as I started down to my father's office. The silence was heavy, and it grew heavier with each and every step.

When I reached the door, it was already ajar.

I pushed it open just enough to see inside, and my breath caught when I scanned the room and spotted a figure lying on the floor. I stepped closer, and as I feared, it was my father.

He was balled up in a crumpled heap, and blood was pooling beneath him, dark and sticky. It had already spread across the polished wood like ink spilled from a bottle. I quickly pressed the call button on my phone, and as I waited for the dispatcher, I tried to access what happened.

I knelt down beside Dad, and that's when I saw that the gunshots had torn through his chest and shoulder. His shirt was soaked through, and he was barely breathing. Each wheezing gasp was a struggle. His face was pale and slick with sweat, and there was blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. He was always so strong and commanding. I thought the man was invincible, and it broke me to discover that I was wrong.

My voice trembled as I told the dispatcher everything that had happened. She made me stay on the phone and wait as she sent help. As I stood there listening to her try to calm me down, I couldn't help but think about my relationship with my father. We'd had our disagreements, and there were times I thought I would never speak to him again.

But I didn't want him to die.

He was my father, and through it all, I loved him.

“Dad.” My hands hovered uselessly, unsure of where to touch or what to do. “Dad, please...”

His eyes fluttered open at the sound of my voice. There was just a sliver of the sharp, steely focus left in them. “Oh, Tallie...”

His words came out as a ragged cough. More blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, and I knew it was only a matter of time before I lost him.

“You’re gonna be okay,” I assured him as tears rolled down my face. It was a lie. I knew that. There was too much blood. It was everywhere. I pressed one hand to the wound on his chest, trying to stop it from pouring from the wound, but it just kept coming. “Just hang on, okay?”

“I’m... sorry, Tal.”

The dispatcher assured me that help was on the way, but it wasn’t coming soon enough. I was losing him. I saw our lives together flash before my eyes—him carrying me around on his shoulders, playing ball in the backyard with Rooks, the Christmas mornings when he wore that silly Santa hat, and all the school plays where he sat in the front row, watching me with pride in his eyes. All of that was slipping away, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

“Help is coming. I just...”

His hand shot up and gripped my wrist with surprising strength, and I froze. His lips moved, barely forming words, but I leaned closer. His voice was so faint I could barely make it out as he whispered, “I’m sorry... I shouldn’t have... He’s not...”

“It’s okay, Dad. Don’t try to talk. Just breathe.”

“They will... come... for you... All of you.”

“Who will come?” When he didn’t answer, I repeated, “Who is coming, Dad? Who did this to you?”

His grip loosened, and his breath rattled in his chest as he exhaled one last time.

Then nothing.

Just stillness.

The room seemed to collapse around me—every inch of it suffocating me in the awful quiet he’d left behind. I shook my head and pressed my bloodied hand to his shoulder. “No, Daddy. Don’t go! Don’t leave me.”

But it was too late.

He was already gone.

I don’t know how long I sat there staring at him as the warmth of his blood soaked into my jeans. My mind felt empty, and my body numb. I tried, but I couldn’t process what had just happened. My father was dead, but more than that, he was dead because someone had murdered him.

The sound of shuffling footsteps pulled me from my thoughts.

Ford.

I didn’t want him to see his grandfather like this, so I scrambled to my feet. I wiped the tears from my eyes as I turned toward the door. My blood-slick palms left smudges on the desk as I steadied myself. I rushed over to Ford and wrapped my

arms around him. “It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

Even as I said the words, I didn’t believe them.

Half an hour later, the streets were lined with lights, and the office was filled with cops and firefighters. I stood in the corner and watched as the EMTs rushed in. One of them asked me questions while the others tried to revive my father. Their voices were a distant hum beneath the pounding in my ears. The cold seeped deep into my bones, but it wasn’t from the room. It was from the hollow ache spreading through my chest.

I felt numb.

Disconnected.

Weightless. It was like I was watching it all through a pane of glass. When they carried his lifeless body out of the office, that hollow ache grew to the point I feared it would swallow me up whole.

Once they were gone, a detective came over and asked to speak with me. Seconds later, I was sitting in one of the empty offices answering questions I had no idea how to answer. Someone had called my mother, and she was waiting outside the door with Ford. I was doing my best to hold it together as the detective pushed, “Is there anything more you can tell us?”

“Not that I can think of.”

“You can’t describe either of them?”

“I wish I could, but it all happened so fast,” I explained once again. “I only saw them through the slats in the closet door. I wasn’t able to see their faces.”

“I see,” Detective Joyner muttered as he jotted something down on his notepad. “And about what time did you arrive at his office?”

“I’ve already answered that and all of your other questions.”

“I’m aware, but it’s important that we go over it again. It’s the best way to make sure we don’t miss anything.”

“Okay. It was right around six. The office was already closed, but Joyce told me he had an appointment at five-thirty, and he would see me right after.”

I wasn’t a fan of Detective Joyner. Not because of his rotund physic or receding hairline, but because he was arrogant and coy, and he had this annoying habit of sucking air between his teeth.

It didn’t help matters that I was freezing. I wrapped my arms tighter around me, hoping it might help ease the chill that had seeped into my bones, but it did little to help. I was still trembling, and it only seemed to make my nerves worse. I was struggling to keep it together, and Detective Joyner knew it.

His face was a mask of practiced sympathy, and it did little to make me feel any better. In fact, it made me feel worse. “So, you go to his office after closing hours, and you ride the elevator up to the second floor. When you start to your father’s office, you hear the gunshots...”

“No, I heard my father talking first. He was yelling about something, but I can’t remember what was said.”

I went over everything again, and when I was done, I added, “I’m sorry. That’s all I know.”

“And you’re sure you don’t know anyone who might want to harm your father.”

“There’s no telling.” I sighed. “My father and I weren’t as close as we used to be, so I really don’t know what was going on with him.”

“Okay.” Joyner closed his notebook as he stood and said, “You’ve been very helpful, Ms. Warren.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t give you more.”

“You’ve given us more than you think.”

I had no idea what he’d meant by that, but I didn’t question it.

I simply nodded and said, “I’m glad I could help.”

“I will need to question your mother and son.”

“Why would you need to question my son? He didn’t see anything.”

“Maybe not, but there’s always the chance that he picked up on something you didn’t.”

“Okay, but can it wait until tomorrow? It’s late, and he’s been through enough for one day.”

“Absolutely.” His expression softened as he said, “I know this is difficult. Losing someone is hard enough without all this red tape, but we’re doing everything we can to bring you answers.”

Answers.

That was something we all wanted—the police, my mother, and especially me. I wanted to know the why, the how, and the who. Maybe then, I wouldn't feel like my life was unraveling.

“I appreciate it.”

“If you think of anything, even something you think is small and insignificant, please reach out. It could make the difference between us finding and not finding the men who killed your father.”

“I will. Thank you, Detective Joyner.”

This whole thing felt so surreal.

Just hours ago, I was in my new apartment, and my heart was full of hope and excitement. Now, my father was gone, my world was in utter chaos, and all I had was a promise from a man who didn't understand what I'd just lost or what I stood to lose.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 12:49 am

5

SEVEN

“I gotta admit. It’s not half bad.”

“So, all good?”

“Yeah, I think it was pretty damn good. Even better than I’d hoped.”

I wasn’t exaggerating. Shep had really outdone himself. The new route was just what we needed. It was smooth and quick. There were no unnecessary stops or overly sketchy crossroads that were hard to maneuver. Most of all, it kept us under the radar and away from any prying eyes.

“Tomorrow’s the run. We’ll see then if anything changes.”

“Sounds good. You and Prez have a crew ready?”

“Yeah, Ghost and Memphis are taking the lead with Skid and Smitty. I figured we needed a little more muscle on this one, so Rusty and Goose are gonna follow behind. I think that should cover us.”

“Oh, I got all the muscle you need,” a familiar voice chimed in from behind us. We turned and found Goose strolling up behind us with his trademark smirk. “And plenty of good looks, too.”

He flexed his bicep for good measure, and Shep and I both chuckled. “Yeah, you and all that muscle will be what saves the day. Just make sure you keep your eyes on the road and off the mirrors.”

“Don’t worry about me, brother.” Goose leaned against the side of the SUV, still grinning. “I’ve got it covered.”

“I’m gonna hold you to that.”

The words had barely left my mouth when my phone chimed with a text message. I grabbed it from my pocket and absent-mindedly glanced down at it, expecting it to be some random notification, but then, I saw a name I hadn’t seen in over six years.

Rooks:

Hey, man. I know I’m the last person you want to hear from, but...

Struck by disbelief, I looked away from my phone and out into the parking lot. I hadn’t even read the entire message, and I’d already broken into a cold sweat. I gritted my teeth, trying to brace myself as all the old rage and hurt started boiling up in the pit of my stomach.

I couldn’t believe it. After all this time, he’d messaged me. I couldn’t believe he had the nerve. I hadn’t spoken to him since the day I left for Afghanistan, and it wasn’t exactly a cordial exchange.

He’d come to see me off and wish me well. He wanted to pretend like nothing had happened and that he hadn’t watched me fall apart and completely ignored me when I discovered Tallie was gone. I’d asked him a hundred times how I could get in touch with her. It was the only thing I wanted from him, and it was the only thing he couldn’t give me.

I pushed and pleaded for answers, and when he refused, I punched him. I punched him again and again. I wanted him to know the pain I was feeling—the pain I'd been carrying with me since the day I discovered Tallie had been taken from me.

I probably would've killed him if my lieutenant hadn't pulled me off him and forced me onto my plane. I stewed over that fight for almost a year, and it almost ate me alive. Eventually, I had no choice but to put it behind me. Only I hadn't really put any of it behind me.

And deep down, I knew I never would.

I was fighting the urge to toss my phone across the parking lot when Goose waved his hand in front of my face. "Hey, brother. You good?"

I didn't answer.

I couldn't.

My throat felt like someone had put a vice around it. My fingers gripped the phone so hard I thought I might snap it in half. After several moments, I forced myself to look down at the message again, making sure I hadn't gotten it wrong.

I wasn't.

It was definitely Rooks.

After letting out a disgruntled breath, I clicked on the message and read:

Rooks:

Hey, man.

I know I'm the last person you want to hear from, but I thought you should know that Dad was murdered last night.

At first, I thought it might've been some stupid joke. I thought maybe Rooks was just fucking with me, but I knew better. Rooks would never joke about his dad—not like this.

This was real, and I had no idea what to do about it.

Me:

Damn.

I hate to hear that.

Rooks:

We both know that isn't true.

Me:

Any idea who did it?

Rooks:

They're still looking into it.

Tallie was there when it happened.

Me:

Didn't realize she was back.

Rooks:

Yeah, she and Ford are living in Hot Springs.

Me:

Who's Ford?

I was too impatient to wait for his response, so I called his number. It rang and rang and, eventually, went to voicemail. I drew my hands into a fist as I growled, "Fuck."

Realizing something was up, Goose gave me a nudge and asked, "Hey, brother, what's going on?"

"It's Tallie."

"Who?"

"I have to go." I took a step back. "I have to find her."

"Whoa, whoa. Hold up," Goose grabbed my arm. "Who do you have to find? What's going on?"

"Tallie," Shep answered. "The ex."

"Ex? What ex?"

"It was a long time ago. Before the club." Shep stepped closer and placed his hand on my shoulder. "Anything we can do?"

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything. I don’t know where she is or what’s going on. I just know that her brother said she’s back.”

I glanced at my phone again, hoping that Rooks had answered, but nothing. Dammit.

Me:

How long has she been back?

Rooks:

About to board the plane.

I’ll be in touch.

Me:

You can’t be serious.

You gotta give me more than that.

When he didn’t respond, I dialed his number again. This time, it went to voicemail without a single ring. I left a message, but I knew it was a waste of time. He wasn’t going to answer me. Damn.

“So, what’s the deal?”

“I don’t know.” I swallowed hard. “I can’t even think right now.”

“Then, let me do the thinking for you,” Shep offered. “Let’s get to my office, and I’ll see if we can track her down.”

I nodded, and Goose and I followed him inside the clubhouse and down to his office. Shep went over and sat down at his desk. Once he powered up his computer, he started hammering away. Shep was a magician with a computer, and if anyone could track down Tallie, it was him. His eyes were still fixed on the screen as he asked, “What’s her full name?”

“Natalie Rae Warren. Last I heard, she was living in New York. I thought she was still there, but her brother said she’s in Hot Springs now.”

“So, you two haven’t been in touch?”

“I tried.” The knot in my stomach tightened as I told him, “Her father wouldn’t even speak to me, and her brother refused to give me any information on how I could contact her. I was overseas and trying to keep from losing my head, and eventually, it got too hard. I gave up.”

“The father sounds like a fucking tool.”

“He was looking out for his daughter. You can’t blame him for that.”

“But you can,” Goose scoffed. “Someone cock blocked me like that, and I’d hold a hell of a grudge.”

“Oh, I did. Still do, not that it’s done me any good.”

“Found her. She’s living in an apartment just outside of Hot Springs, and it looks like she’s leasing a building down on the strip.” Shep’s jaw tightened. “Did the brother mention that their father was just murdered?”

“Yeah, he mentioned it.”

There was a time when I thought the world of Mr. Warren. He was an influential and highly respected lawyer with money pouring out of his pockets, but he wasn't vain or arrogant. He worked hard and earned it, and I wanted to be just like him.

Until he stabbed me in the back and sent Tallie away.

That's when he revealed his true feelings about me and my lack of potential, and I've spent the past eight years trying to pull that knife out of my back. Over the years, I'd tried to pretend that I was over it, but the dull ache was still there.

I feared it would always be there, but I wasn't going to let it stop me from finding Tallie. She'd meant too much to me, and there was no way in hell I was going to pass up a chance to see her again.

Not now.

Not ever.

"Hate that for the guy, but hey!" Goose gave me a smirk. "He's no longer standing in your way."

"No, he's not."

"So, when are you going to see her?"

"Right fucking now."

"That's what I'm talking about." Goose nodded with approval. "Let's go get your girl."

"I'll go, too," Shep offered.

“I need you to do some more digging and see what else you can find on her and her father’s death.”

“You got it.” He motioned his head down the hall. “You gonna stop by and tell Prez what’s up?”

“Yeah, I’ll stop by there on my way out.”

“Okay. I’ll get to work and let you know what I find.”

“Thanks, brother. I appreciate it.”

He gave me a nod, and Goose and I left to track down Prez. I gave him a quick briefing on what had gone down, and as I’d expected, he’d not only given me his blessing to pursue, but he’d sent Memphis along with us. It was doubtful that we’d come into any trouble, but Prez always liked to cover all bases.

Tallie’s address was just over an hour away, so we decided to take my truck. We each piled in, and as soon as I put the address in the GPS, we were on our way.

Other than the occasional crackle of Goose popping his knuckles or Memphis shifting in his seat, the truck was silent. It suited me just fine. I wasn’t in any mood to talk. I was too busy sorting through all the crazy in my head. I hadn’t seen Tallie in years, but the memory of her face was just as vivid as it was the first day I laid eyes on her.

I’d always thought she was beautiful. She had long, thick red hair, incredible, emerald-green eyes, and an hour-glass figure that would stop any man dead in his tracks. And there was nothing in this world that could match her smile. It was the kind of smile that stuck with you for days on end.

When I fell for her, I fell hard, and I fell fast.

I hadn't wanted to admit it, but a piece of me had always hoped that we would find our way back to each other. And now, that hope was turning into a real possibility, and it had me on edge. Memphis picked up on my tension, and asked, "You good?"

"Yeah," I answered, without taking my eyes off the road.

"You sure about that?" Goose chimed in from the backseat. "Cause it looks like you're about to break that fucking steering wheel."

"I'm good. Just ready to get there."

Thankfully, traffic wasn't all that bad, and it didn't take us long to make it to Hot Springs.

We pulled into the parking lot of a run-down apartment complex on the edge of town, and I wasn't exactly impressed with the state of the place. There was peeling paint, cracked pavement, and a couple of broken-down cars that looked like they hadn't moved in years.

"I thought Shep said her dad was a lawyer," Goose said, breaking into my thoughts.

"He is."

"Then, what's up with her living in a dump like this?"

"No clue, but if I had to guess, I would say she wanted a place on her own or something. Won't know for sure until I talk to her."

I killed the engine and sat there for a moment just staring up at the building. This was it. She was in there.

“You ready?” Memphis asked.

“Yeah,” I lied, pushing open the door.

I stepped out of the truck, and I felt like I was being pulled into a hundred directions as I followed Goose and Memphis up the main entrance. It had been almost eight years since we’d been face to face, and I had no idea what I was going to say to her. There was always the chance that she didn’t want to see me. If she did, she would’ve reached out and let me know she was back in town.

She hadn’t, so I could only assume that she didn’t want to see me.

There was no way to know for sure until I spoke to her. By the time I reached her door, I was a fucking mess. I raised my fist and was about to knock, but I froze.

This was it.

The moment I’d been waiting almost eight years for.

I just prayed it wouldn’t blow up in my face.

6

TALLIE

“How did it go?”

“I’m not sure.” I shrugged. “They don’t have any leads yet.”

“Can you go?”

“Yes, but we have to come back tomorrow. The detective wants to ask you and Ford some questions.”

“But I’ve already talked to one of the detectives.”

“He’s just trying to be thorough.”

“Well, there’s only so many times I can say I don’t know.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me.” I knelt down next to Ford and took his hand in mine.

“How are you holding up, kiddo?”

“I want to go home.”

“I know. Me too. Let’s get your grandmother home first, and then...”

“Please stay with me tonight,” Mom interrupted. “I know you have been through so

much tonight, but I really don't want to be alone."

"Okay. We can do that." I glanced down at Ford as I asked, "That going to be okay with you?"

I could tell by his expression he wasn't crazy about the idea, but he answered, "Yeah, as long as I don't have to sleep downstairs."

"You can sleep with your mom or on the sofa," Mom answered. "Wherever you feel most comfortable."

"We'll figure it out when we get there."

I motioned them towards the door, and they both followed suit. As we started towards the parking lot, I couldn't help but notice a sleek black Mercedes with dark tinted windows that was parked across the street. There was something about it that caused a flicker of unease to pass through me. I paused and gave it a hard look, then shook my head and pushed my doubts aside. With everything that was going on, paranoia was the last thing I needed.

We hurried to the car, and I did my best to shake the weight of the day as I got behind the wheel and started the engine. But just as I started driving, I noticed that the Mercedes pulled out behind us. At first, I thought it was just a coincidence, but with every turn I made, it followed quickly behind.

My hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Mom, do you know who that is?"

"Who?"

"The Mercedes behind us," I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. "Do you recognize it?"

She glanced back and after a quick look, she answered, “No, but I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“I don’t know. I think they’re following us.”

“I’m sure it’s just a coincidence.”

Before I had a chance to argue, we came up on an intersection. I took the turn, but the Mercedes kept straight. I let out a shaky breath and told myself I was imagining things. But deep down, I wasn’t so sure.

Half an hour later, we were pulling up to the house I once called home. We were all exhausted, so we wasted no time getting inside and ready for bed. Mom helped me get Ford settled in my old room, and once he was asleep, she suggested, “Why don’t you go take a hot bath?”

“I’m fine.” I turned to face her as I said, “It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Oh, honey. I’m okay.” Her eyes drifted to the ground as she admitted, “I’m still running on shock.”

“But the shock will eventually run off.”

“Yes, and I will deal with everything then.”

“I’m so sorry, Mom.” I stepped over and wrapped my arms around her. “I can’t imagine how hard this is for you.”

“It doesn’t seem real. I keep waiting for someone to tell me this is all just a bad dream and he isn’t really gone.” She hugged me tighter as she started to cry. “How could somebody do this? He wasn’t perfect, but he didn’t deserve this.”

“Of course, he didn’t.”

“I know this may sound strange...” Mom released me from our embrace and wiped the tears from her eyes as she continued, “But I was almost expecting something like this to happen.”

“You were expecting this?”

“No, not exactly. It was just a feeling that I was going to lose him. And to be honest, it felt like he’d been pulling away for almost a year. Lately, it’s been even worse.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“You have your own things going on with moving back and getting your shop open. Besides, we all know how you feel about your father.”

“Mom, Dad and I had our disagreements, but I loved him. I would never want anything bad to happen to him, especially something like this—even after everything he did.”

“I know, sweetie. I also know he did those things because he loved you and wanted the best for you.”

“Yeah, well, sending me away to art school was one thing. Forcing me to completely cut ties with Holt was another, especially after he found out about Ford.”

My father had always been controlling, but when he decided to put an end to me and Holt, he became ruthless. He sent me to Paris and told me he was giving me the opportunity of a lifetime, but I knew better.

Everyone did.

He wanted us apart, and he didn't care how he did it.

Once I was at school, he restricted my ability to make international calls and monitored my emails. He even had someone from his firm "check in" on me every few days to make sure I wasn't trying to contact Holt.

When I found out I was pregnant, I thought the idea of his grandson might change things, and he would soften a little. But it only made him worse. He told me if I dared to reach out to Holt, he'd make sure I never saw or spoke to him again. I wasn't sure what he meant by that, but I wasn't taking any chances. He was a powerful man who was close to other powerful men. I knew he had the means to keep his word, so even though it broke me, I did as he said.

Mom heard both sides of it, and while she knew I was devastated, she supported the decisions my father made. It was hard not to hold it against her, but she was my mother. I needed her, and more than that, I loved her. I wanted her to be in my life and Ford's.

As the months passed, I became less and less afraid of Dad and his threats. I'd grown up and realized that there was only so much he could do, so when Ford turned two, I decided to reach out to Holt and finally tell him about our son.

I wasn't sure how to reach him, so I tried calling his folks. When I didn't hear back, I tried getting in touch with some of his old friends. Rooks got word that I'd been trying to find Holt, and that's when he broke the news to me that he was gone. He'd been killed during an attack on his brigade. It had happened just a few months earlier.

Not that it mattered when it happened. Either way, I had lost my chance to tell him about our son. I'd also lost any hope of ever seeing him again, and that nearly broke me. I loved him and always believed that we would find our way back to one another. Now, that would never happen.

I don't think I would've gotten through it if it hadn't been for Ford.

He gave me the strength to keep going, but I was never the same.

"That was a hard time for us all," Mom replied, pulling me from my thoughts. "You were so far away, and I so wanted you to come home."

"And I wanted to come home, more than you can imagine."

"I know, dear, but think of all the opportunities you would've missed out on."

"I don't want to get into this tonight." I sighed. "I don't have the strength."

"I understand." She reached over and patted me on the knee. "We both could use a good night's rest."

"Definitely."

"I know the detective wants to talk to Ford, but I was thinking that we could ask Glenda to keep an eye on him for a couple of hours. I just hate for him to be exposed to any more of this investigation mess. It could be traumatic for him. We could ask the detective if he really needs to speak to him, and if he does, we can take him back later. What do you think?"

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea."

"Great. I'll give her a call."

"Thanks, Mom." I reached over and gave her another hug. "I'll be just down the hall. Let me know if you need anything."

“I will. Thank you, sweetheart.”

I waited until she disappeared into her room, then I went back to check in on Ford. As I’d hoped, he was still fast asleep. I didn’t want to wake him, so I went across the hall and slept in Rooks’ room. I’d finally gotten settled when I heard Mom crying across the hall. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to go to her and give her comfort, but something told me she needed the time alone.

So, I gave it some time, and eventually, the crying stopped. She went to sleep and I did the same. The next morning, we slept in and took our time getting ready to go back to the police station. While we wanted to help in any way we could, it was hard to relive everything.

We both just wanted a moment to collect ourselves and prepare for Dad’s funeral, but that wasn’t going to be possible until this investigation was behind us. That thought weighed on my mind as I helped Ford gather his things and walked him over to the neighbor’s house. Once I was sure he had everything he needed, I went and joined Mom in the car.

“You ready?”

“No, but I’m not sure I’ll ever be.”

“It won’t be that bad. You’ll see.”

I wished so much that I could take this all away and make things better for her, but we were stuck. We had to see this thing through, so I started the car and pulled out of the drive. We hadn’t been driving long when I noticed the same black Mercedes trailing behind us. My chest tightened as I glanced over my shoulder for a better look. There was no doubt that it was the same car, so I pressed the gas, quickly picking up speed. I thought I might lose them, but the car stayed with us, shadowing every turn.

“Mom,” I said, my voice sharp with panic, “The Mercedes is back.”

“What?” She turned to look but stayed quiet, her expression tense. “Are you sure it’s the same car?”

“I’m pretty sure. It looks just like it.”

“What do you think they want?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to find out.”

Just as the police station was coming into view, the Mercedes suddenly veered off down a side street, and in a blink, it had disappeared from view. I didn’t slow down until we were in the parking lot, but even then, my heart wouldn’t stop pounding. “I think they’re gone.”

“Should we mention something to the detective?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was nothing.”

“You’re probably right. Let’s just see how today goes, and if we see it again...”

“We’ll tell him.”

I nodded, and once we were parked, Mom and I went into the station. I let the girl at the front desk know we were there, and then we went to have a seat in the waiting area. I couldn’t imagine being more uncomfortable. We were surrounded by strangers, and the plastic chair beneath me creaked every time I shifted.

My mother sat next to me. Her back was stiff, and she was clutching her designer purse like she was afraid someone would snatch it. She hadn’t said much since we got

here, just an occasional, clipped comment about how long this was taking or how "inappropriate" it was to keep us waiting.

I wasn't really listening, though.

I was too busy wishing I was anywhere but there. Every time the door opened, my breath would catch, and I would wait for someone to call out my name or deliver the news I wasn't ready to hear. I glanced at my mother again. She looked composed as ever, but the way her jaw clenched told me she wasn't as calm as she wanted me to believe.

It seemed like we'd been waiting for hours before Detective Joyner came and took us back to his office. He asked about Ford, and when I explained the situation, he agreed to come by the apartment to see him. Once we had that sorted, he asked me more of the questions he'd asked the night before. But his questions for Mom took a different direction.

His brows furrowed as he asked her, "Are you aware that your husband was leading a merger between the city and the Conistone firm?"

"No. Tom didn't discuss his business dealings with me."

"So, he never mentioned any concerns or issues he might've been dealing with?"

"I'm afraid not." Her eyes narrowed. "Do you think this merger has something to his murder?"

"We were hoping you could answer that."

"I honestly don't know." Mom glanced over at me for a brief moment, then turned her focus back to the detective. "He seemed a little more stressed than usual, but, like

I said, he never really discussed his work with me. Client privilege and all that.”

“Yes, I understand.” Detective Joyner studied Mom for a moment, then lowered his pencil and said, “I appreciate you both coming in today.”

“Of course.” Mom gave him a kind smile, then stood and said, “Please be sure to contact us if you find out anything.”

“I certainly will, and I’ll be in touch about meeting with your son.”

“Sounds good.”

We both shook his hand and made our way out of his office. Once we were in the parking lot, I took a moment to scan the area, checking to see if I saw any sign of the black Mercedes, but there was no sign of them. Relieved, I got in the car and drove Mom back to her house.

I helped Mom out of the car, and as we started up the front steps, something felt off. The front door was slightly ajar, and there was a dark smudge on the brass door handle. Concerned, I looked over to Mom and asked, “Did you leave the door open?”

“No, I didn’t,” Mom clutched her purse tightly and stepped cautiously in front of me. “I’ll go check it out.”

“Not without me.”

“Fine but stay behind me.”

We both hesitated before stepping through the doorway. The hair prickled against the back of my neck as we made our way into the living room. At first, nothing seemed out of the norm. Then, I spotted the door to Dad’s office was wide open when it was

always shut. I stepped closer, and my stomach dropped when I saw that it had been ransacked.

All his drawers had been yanked out and dumped on the floor. There were papers and files scattered all over the room, and his antique desk had been smashed to pieces. Books and binders were torn from the shelves, and pages were ripped out and crumpled on the floor. Someone was clearly looking for something, but I had no idea what.

“Oh my God,” Mom whispered, her hand flying to her mouth. “Who would do this?”

I didn’t answer.

My gaze landed on the wall behind the desk, where Dad’s certificates and degrees used to hang. The frames were shattered, and the glass shards glittered on the floor like tiny daggers. It killed me to see his life’s work destroyed and tossed to the side like it meant nothing.

Mom’s voice pulled me from my thoughts when she asked, “What if they are still here?”

“We need to go outside and call the police.”

Mom nodded, and we both rushed out of the house. As soon as we were back in my car, I locked the doors and grabbed my phone. Mom’s face was pale, and her hands were trembling as she listened to me call 911. My voice was steadier than I felt as I explained the situation, and relief washed over me when the dispatcher told me there was an officer in the area and would be there shortly.

I hung up, and Mom and I sat there for several moments in complete silence. It was too much. I was on the verge of completely losing it when Mom muttered, “Thank

God Ford was next door when they came...”

“Yes, thank God for that. We should call and check on him.”

“We need to call your brother first.”

“Mom, he’s in London. There’s nothing he can do about all this.”

“I know. He needs to know what’s been going on though.”

“Okay. I’ll call him.” I nodded and then dialed his number. As soon as he answered, I filled him in on what had happened, and just as I expected, Rooks lost it. “What do you mean someone broke into the house?”

“They only went through Dad’s office. I’m pretty sure they were looking for something.”

“Like what?”

“I wish I knew.”

“My next flight is in an hour, but with my layover and travel time, it’s going to be morning before I can get there.”

“Okay. That’s fine.”

“Just do me a solid and stay in your car until the cops get there.”

“We will.”

“I’m sorry about all this, Tal.” He sounded truly sincere as he said, “I wish it was me

instead of you.”

“I don’t. I wish it was neither of us.” I let out a breath. “Regardless, we’ll get through this. Just get here when you can.”

I ended the call and immediately dialed the neighbor’s number. I let her know what was going on and promised to pick up Ford as soon as I could. I had just ended the call when the first officers arrived. They went in to make sure the house was clear, and then Mom and I joined them in Dad’s office.

They had just started asking us questions when Detective Joyner arrived. He took a quick look around and shook his head. “I don’t want to worry either of you, but this break in wasn’t random. Whoever did this was looking for something.”

“I thought the same thing, but what could they be looking for?”

“That’s what we need to figure out, and we need to find out fast,” Detective Joyner answered as he opened his notebook and jotted down a few notes. “Do you have any idea what’s missing?”

“No,” Mom answered. “We went outside as soon as we saw that someone had destroyed the office.”

“That’s good.” Joyner turned to one of the other officers and ordered, “I want a full sweep of the place. If you find something, I want to be the first to know.”

“You got it.”

“We were followed last night,” I announced. “It was a black Mercedes. They followed us this morning, too.”

Joyner's brows furrowed. "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"I thought it was just my imagination or something."

"I thought I made myself clear." He stepped closer. "If you know of something, no matter how big or small or insignificant it might seem, you need to tell me. It could make or break this case."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry."

"Can you describe the Mercedes?"

"It was a newer model. Black with tinted windows."

"And they followed you home last night?"

"Yes, but they turned off a few streets before we reached the house."

"I see." He wrote in his notepad, then asked, "And today? When did you notice them following you?"

"We weren't far from the house... Maybe around Clay Brook Drive."

"And did they follow you all the way to the station?"

"No, sir. They veered off just a few blocks before." There was no hiding the concern in my voice when I asked, "Do you think they are the ones responsible for all this?"

"There's no way to be sure." He closed the notepad, then looked up at me and said, "I think it's best for you and your mother to find somewhere else to stay for a couple of nights."

“You think they will come back?”

“There’s always the possibility.”

“This is crazy.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Warren. But it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“It’s fine. We can go stay at my apartment.”

“Or we could stay at a hotel,” Mom suggested with a hopeful expression. “It’ll be safer.”

“That’s a good idea.” Detective Joyner nodded. “I’ll have officers patrol the area and keep an eye on things.”

“That would be great. Thank you, Detective.”

“Not a problem. Just let me know if anything comes up, and I mean anything .”

“We certainly will.”

Mom rushed upstairs to pack a bag, and the entire time, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched. It wasn’t just the mess that unnerved me. It was the intent behind it. Someone had come into our home, and they hadn’t just taken Dad’s papers and books. They’d taken a piece of our peace of mind.

Once she had everything she needed, we drove over to the neighbor’s and picked up Ford. He’d barely gotten settled in the backseat when the questions started rolling in. “Why were the cops at Nana’s?”

“They were checking Papa’s office for clues that might help them with their case.”

“Why did you tell Ms. Glenda that we were going to a hotel?”

“Because we are.”

“But why?” Ford pushed.

“Because I need some time away from the house.” Mom’s eyes skirted over to me, and I knew she was just trying to protect Ford when she told him, “It’s hard for your mother and I to be there without your grandfather.”

“But why do Mom and I have...”

“Because we do ,” I cut him off. “It’ll just be for a few days, and then, things will start to get back to normal.”

“I wanna go back to New York,” Ford grumbled in the backseat.

I felt sorry for the kid. He’d been through a lot over the past few years. He’d moved countries, lost all friends, made new ones, only to lose them when we moved back home, and he’d done it all with an absentee mom. I was constantly in class, and when I wasn’t, I was in the studio working on my next big project. I was hoping things would settle down now that we were back home, but that hadn’t been the case. If anything, it was worse.

When we got to the hotel, Mom got us a suite, so Ford and I would have our own room. Ford seemed pretty hesitant about the whole hotel thing until he saw that they had hot chocolate and fresh cookies in the lobby. The second he spotted them, his whole demeanor changed. “This place is awesome.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, they have a pool and everything.” He stopped and crinkled his nose with a pout. “Oh, man. I don’t have my trunks.”

“I can go grab them.” I looked over to Mom as I said, “I need to grab a few things anyway.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“No, there’s no need in that. I’ll just run, get what we need, and come right back.”

“It’s an hour there and back.”

“Which is why you guys should stay here.” I reached over and gave her arm a tender squeeze. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Please be careful.”

I nodded, then knelt in front of Ford. “Be sweet to your grandmother and do whatever she tells you.”

“What if she tells me to jump on the bed?”

“Well, you gotta do what you gotta do.” I gave him a wink before kissing him on the forehead. “I’ll be back when I can.”

With that, I turned and headed back out to my car.

I was running on empty.

Over the past couple of days, I felt like I'd been through hell and back, and I had. It was bad enough to witness my father's murder, but I'd also been questioned by the police, followed by a strange car, and we had someone break into the house. I felt like I might crumble under the weight of it all. I just wanted to crawl into my bed and let the grief and exhaustion pull me under.

But that wasn't possible.

Mom and Ford needed me to keep it together, so I kept putting one foot in front of the other. As I started up the steps, I thought about all the things I'd need to grab from my apartment. It wasn't much, just some more clothes and a few toiletries. Once I had them, I could head back to the hotel and crash for the night.

I planned to do just that, but when I rounded the corner, I was surprised to find three men standing at my door. They were big men, barely able to fit in my small hallway, and they were wearing leather jackets with embroidery I'd never seen before. They were clearly bikers, but none that I'd seen before.

Two of them were talking in low voices, but the third was turned toward my door, his hand raised as if he'd just knocked. Thinking they might have something to do with my father's death, I panicked and started to take a step back. I'd barely lifted my foot when one of them noticed me.

He had a handsome face and kind eyes, but his muscles and tattoos made him look menacing as he took a step towards me. His lips curled into a smile as he said, "Hey there, beautiful. Where you runnin' off to?"

Before he could answer, the man who knocked at my door turned, and my breath caught somewhere between a gasp and a sob. It was Holt, but that couldn't be.

My mind had to be playing tricks on me, or I was dreaming, but it couldn't be real. It

couldn't be him. It wasn't possible. Holt was gone. He'd died overseas. I'd grieved for him. I'd cried endless tears for the life we never got to have.

But there he was, standing right there in front of me.

I could see that he was as alive and real as the ache in my chest.

"It can't be," I whispered to myself. "There has to be some mistake."

But when his eyes locked on mine, full of that same fire I used to know, I knew. They'd lied. They'd all lied.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to run into his arms or fall apart on the spot.

It didn't matter. I couldn't move if I wanted to. I felt like my soul had been yanked from my body, and I was nothing more than a puddled mess. My legs felt like lead, and my heart was pounding like thunder.

My mind struggled to process what I was seeing. His hair was longer, and his shoulders seemed broader. But those familiar, piercing eyes left me with no doubt. They were the same eyes I'd fallen in love with all those years ago. And they were the same ones I'd seen in my son every single day since the day he was born.

"It can't be," I cried. "It's not possible."

"Tallie?"

His voice was low, but it was him. I would recognize that voice anywhere. His gaze softened for a moment, and for a heartbeat, I saw the boy I'd loved all those years ago. The boy who used to make me laugh and promised me the world.

My mind started racing with all the lies I'd been told. I couldn't believe it.

The people I trusted the most lied to me. They shattered my hopes and dreams, and now, I was left to pick up the pieces of their betrayal.

7

SEVEN

“I t can’t be,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“It can, and it is.”

“But I thought you were gone.”

“Right back at ya.”

“Oh my God.” Tears filled her eyes as she whispered, “It’s really you.”

“Yeah, babe. It’s really me.”

I stood there staring at her with the weight of eight years and a million unanswered questions resting on my shoulders, and it was all I could do to keep my knees from buckling beneath me. The only thing keeping me standing was her.

Time had been kind to her. She had grown into a beautiful woman, even more beautiful than I remembered. It was hard being so close to her. It had been so long, and all I wanted to do was take her into my arms and hold her tight.

But it wasn’t the time or the place.

Her eyes flicked over me, then to Goose and Memphis, before locking on mine.

“How did you...”

“Rooks.” Surprise marked her face, making it clear she had no idea that he’d reached out. “He messaged me earlier. Told me about your father.”

She didn’t respond.

She just stood there with this strange look on her face.

Not sure of what to make of her response, I added, “I’m sorry to hear what happened.”

“Yeah, me too.” She quickly wiped the tears from her cheek, then glanced over at Memphis and Goose. Her back stiffened as she gathered the nerve to walk past us and over to her door. She placed the key in the lock, and as she turned it, she said, “I can’t do this right now.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s really not a good time.”

“After eight years, that’s all I get?”

“I’m sorry. It’s just a really bad time.” She gave me a slight shrug as she opened the door and started inside. I took a quick glance inside and was surprised to see a pair of kid’s shoes and a football next to the sofa. Before I could get a better look, she shifted her step, blocking my view. “I’ve got a lot going on with what happened to Dad and taking care of Mom, and I just can’t handle this right now.”

“Okay, fair enough. Just tell me when I can see you again?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Well, I’m not leaving until you do,” I shot back, my voice harder than I meant it to be. “It’s been eight years. I think I deserve five minutes.”

I stopped myself from saying anything more, but the weight of what I’d already said hung in the air. Her eyes snapped back to mine, brimming with tears now. “My father was just murdered, Holt. I was there when it happened. I heard it. I saw it. I watched him die right there in front of me.”

“I didn’t know.”

“That’s only the beginning.” The tremble in her voice faded as she continued, “I was questioned by police, someone’s been following me, and Dad’s office was ransacked when their house was just broken in to. It’s all I can do to be standing here right now, so you’re just gonna have to believe me when I say I don’t have the mental capacity to deal with you showing up here alive and well.”

“Damn. That’s a lot to unpack there.” I didn’t like the fact that someone had been following her and that her folks’ place had been broken in to. There was no doubt that it had something to do with her father’s murder, and I wasn’t leaving until I knew she was safe. “Who was following you?”

“Holt. I don’t want to get into all this.”

“Who was it, Tallie?”

“I don’t know. The police know about it and are looking into it. That’s all I can tell you.” She ran her hand across the back of her neck and sighed. “So, please. Just let me go do what I need to do.”

“Okay, fine.” For a moment, all I could do was stare at her, at the woman I had once loved so fiercely and had longed for all these years. I couldn’t even bring myself to be angry that she’d asked me to go. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a card with my number on it. As I handed it to her, I said, “Call me. Sooner than later.”

She nodded, then took the card from my hand and closed the door.

The sound of the lock clicking into place felt like a punch to the gut, but I didn’t fight it. I kept my word and left. We were almost back to the truck when Goose clapped a hand on my shoulder and said, “That didn’t go the way I was thinking it would.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“She’s a beaut. I’ll give you that.”

He was right. She was beautiful, smart, creative, and everything in between. I knew when I was a kid that she was the only one for me, and that hadn’t changed. I wasn’t so sure she still felt the same about me. If tonight was any indication, things weren’t looking so good.

We’d just gotten back out to the truck when I heard Tallie call out to me, “Holt!”

I turned, and my pulse started to race when I saw her running toward me. Before I could process what was happening, she had thrown her arms around me and was hugging me with all her might. I couldn’t imagine a better feeling.

She buried her face into my neck, and I could feel the warmth of her breath as she whispered, “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

I slipped my arms around her waist, inching her closer.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered, her voice muffled against my chest. “More than you’ll ever know.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut—the kind of punch that leaves you breathless and aching all at once. I wanted to say something, anything, but the words wouldn’t come. All I could do was hold her and relish the sensation of having her in my arms again.

Just as quickly as she’d come, she pulled away. Her eyes met mine for the briefest of moments, and there was something in them—something raw and broken and beautiful.

“See you soon,” she said softly.

Then she turned and ran back up the stairs, her long, red hair flying behind her. I didn’t move. I just stood there and watched as she disappeared upstairs. After several moments, Goose broke the silence by saying, “Well, damn. I didn’t see that coming either.”

“That makes two of us.”

We all piled back into the truck and started home. Memphis was riding shotgun and silent for once, and Goose was sprawled out in the back, flipping through his phone. I had no doubt that they both had plenty to say, but neither of them spoke. Instead, they gave me some time to sort through all the thoughts barreling through my head, and I was thankful. I was a goddamn mess and needed a moment to collect myself.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the way Tallie felt in my arms. It had been eight years, and yet, she still fit against me like she’d never left. That hug damn near knocked the wind out of me, and I’d been holding my breath ever since. There was something about the way she looked at me before she ran back to her apartment. There was a

longing in her eyes that was mixed with relief and fear.

The fear stuck with me. It made my chest tighten and my jaw clench. Someone had been following her. Someone had broken into her parents' house. That wasn't random, and it sure as hell wasn't okay. I kept my eyes trained on the road ahead as I muttered, "Doesn't sit right."

Knowing exactly what I was talking about, Memphis asked, "Her being followed or the break-in?"

"Both."

"Is it just me, or do you think it has something to do with her father?"

"Don't know, but I intend to find out."

"Maybe Shep was able to find something."

"I certainly hope so." Tallie wasn't the type to scare easily, not the girl I used to know anyway. Whoever this was had managed to rattle her, and that made my blood boil. "Either way, I don't want to take any chances. If there's even the slightest chance that she's in danger, I want her covered. Someone needs to be on her, twenty-four-seven."

"Understood." Memphis's expression was grim as he added, "Gonna have to run it by Prez, but it shouldn't be a problem."

"I'll speak with him as soon as we get back."

I didn't know what was worse—the thought of her being afraid or the fact that I hadn't been there when everything had gone down with her father. Maybe then, those

assholes wouldn't have followed her or broke into her folks' house. Regardless, I was here now, and I had every intention of making up for lost time.

As soon as we got back to the clubhouse, Goose and I went to track down Shep while Memphis filled Prez in on what we'd found out about Tallie. When we got down to Shep's office, the lights were out, and he was kicked back on his sofa with his computer resting on his stomach. "Hey, brother. You find anything more on Tallie or her dad?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Good, let's hear it."

"Okay, but I gotta warn ya." He sat on the sofa as he said, "You aren't gonna like it."

"I had a feeling I wouldn't."

"So, what do you want first?" He grimaced. "The maybe not so good or the definitely not so good."

"Hit me with the worst of it."

"So, her father was a big real estate lawyer."

"Yeah, I'm aware."

"Well, he's made some pretty powerful connections over the years, and there's always the chance that one of them turned on him."

"And why would they do that?"

“He was representing some outside developers who were known for buying up land in lucrative areas, like along the riverfront. It wouldn’t be so bad, but these guys are using legal loopholes to get the properties at undervalued prices. They’re pushing people out of their homes and shutting down small businesses left and right.”

“Yeah, that could piss some folks off.”

“Exactly.” Shep handed me a file folder. “To make matters worse, these clients are members of one of the Russian mafias.”

“Oh, goddamn,” I grumbled. “What the hell was he doing getting tied up with them?”

“I’m sure they were paying him a pretty penny.”

“Any idea which one he was working with?”

“The Volkov family.”

“Damn. This just keeps getting better and better.” I started flipping through the pages in the file, noting the various properties and images of the Volkov crew, as I asked, “You think they’re the ones who knocked him off, or was it someone else?”

“I’m still working on that.”

I nodded, then said, “So, what’s the maybe not-so-good news?”

“Tallie has a kid.”

I was still trying to process the curveball he’d just thrown at me when he handed me a second folder. I quickly opened it and felt like the rug had been pulled from beneath me the second I saw his photograph. He had dark hair—just like mine, green

eyes—just like mine, and a slight widow’s peak—just like mine.

I was trying to convince myself that the resemblance was just a coincidence when Shep announced, “His name is Ford Jameson Warren.”

“Whoa,” Goose turned to me with surprise. “You’re Jameson Holt.”

“That I am.”

“Ah, hell. Don’t tell me that kid is yours.”

“Can’t be for sure, but it’s certainly looking that way.”

Shep motioned his head towards the folder as he added, “He was born in May of ’18.”

“Tallie was sent to Paris in August of ’17.”

“You reckon she was already pregnant?”

“If she was, I didn’t know anything about it.” I shook my head. “Holy shit. Surely to God, she hasn’t kept my kid from me all these fucking years.”

“Maybe he isn’t yours.” Hoping to console me, Goose suggested, “It could’ve been a rebound hookup or something. Some douchebag she met when she got to Paris.”

“Not a chance.” I slammed the folder shut, but the photograph of Ford’s strikingly familiar face burned into my mind.

Goose let out a low whistle, shaking his head. “Man, if this kid is yours, Tallie’s got some explaining to do.”

“She’s got more than explaining to do.” I stood abruptly, the chair screeching against the floor. “If Ford is mine, I’ve missed seven fucking years of his life. First steps, first words, birthdays... All because she chose to keep him from me.”

“Hold on, now.” Goose raised a hand, his tone cautious. “Don’t go jumping to conclusions just yet. Maybe there’s a reason she kept quiet.”

“Oh, yeah?” Anger simmered beneath my skin as I snapped, “Like what? What excuse could she have for keeping my kid from me?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, clearly uncomfortable with the question. “Maybe she thought it was for the best, or maybe she was scared.”

“Scared of what? Me?” My throat tightened at the thought. “She knew I would’ve done anything for her.”

“More like her father and his threats. You see who he’s working for. Maybe she thought telling you would jeopardize her life in Paris. Or she might’ve thought she was protecting the kid or even you. I don’t know.”

“Scared or not, she should’ve told me.” I ran a hand through my hair. “I had a right to know.”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. We both do.” Shep nodded slowly. “But you don’t need to go running over there half-cocked and demanding answers.”

“So, what the hell am I supposed to do?”

“Give the dust some time to settle,” Shep urged. “She’s got your number. Give her a chance to come to you.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“Well, then, you take matters into your own hands.”

8

TALLIE

“Y ou’ll never guess who I saw tonight.”

“Who?”

I dropped the bags I’d gathered from the apartment on the floor, then watched her expression as I answered, “Holt.”

“What?” Her eyes grew wide, and her face was marked with a mix of surprise and worry. “But how is that possible?”

“Because you and everyone else in this stupid family lied to me, and he didn’t really die overseas!”

I’d spent over an hour sobbing in my apartment, and I still felt like I was on the brink of tears. I felt so betrayed, but more than that, I felt so stupid. I believed them all when they told me he was gone. I never even questioned it. I just couldn’t imagine that the people I loved most would lie to me and watch me fall apart for months on end.

And it killed me that I would never be able to trust them again.

Mom gave me one of her looks as she placed her hand on her chest and said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, give it, Mother! It’s not going to work anymore. I know you’re lying. You’ve been lying to me for years!” I could feel my cheeks burning with anger as I hissed, “How could you! You are my mother! I trusted you.”

“Tallie.”

“No! I want to know,” I pushed. “How could you do this? How could you let me think he was dead?”

“You don’t understand.” Tears filled her eyes as she toyed with the hem of her sweater. “It wasn’t my decision.”

“Oh, here you go,” I snapped. “You’re going to put it all on Dad.”

“I was trying to protect you!” she shot back, her voice raising defensively.

“Protect me?” I scoffed. “Protect me from what!”

“Your father and I worked very hard for you and your brother to have a good life, and we didn’t want anything to jeopardize that.”

“And what about what I wanted? Did that not matter at all?”

“Of course it mattered, but I was…”

“You let me grieve for years and for no reason!” My voice trembled as I told her, “You stole my life, Mom. You stole his life from me. And for what? Because he wasn’t good enough for your perfect little plan?”

Her silence was deafening. Her lips pressed together like she couldn’t find the words, or maybe she just didn’t want to admit the truth. I stepped back, the weight of

betrayal nearly crushing me. “I can’t even look at you right now.”

Before she could say another word, I turned on my heel and walked out, the door slamming behind me. For the first time in my life, I didn’t care if she was hurting. I was heartbroken, and I needed some time to clear my thoughts.

I went downstairs and went to the bar. I had a glass of wine and just breathed for a bit. I tried to clear my head, but I was too distraught. I felt like my entire world had been turned upside down. I didn’t know who I could trust or if I’d ever be able to trust again.

I sat there for over an hour just trying to process it all, but it was futile. This was too much for anyone to accept, especially from their own mother. I had no idea what I was going to do, but I knew I couldn’t stay in that bar all night.

I paid the bartender, then headed back upstairs. When I walked into the room, Mom was sitting on the sofa, and it was evident from her blurred mascara that she’d been crying. As soon as she spotted me, she stood and rushed over to me. “I’m so sorry, Tallie. You have to forgive me.”

“I can’t, Mom. It’s too much too soon.”

“Honey, please. I don’t know what I will do if I lose you. I just don’t think I could take it.”

“You should’ve thought about that before you lied to me.”

“Please don’t do this.”

“I will stay until we get through this mess with the police and Dad’s funeral, but after that, I’m going to need some time. And lots of it.”

“I understand.”

“You hurt me, Mom. You hurt me more than you will ever know.”

Without saying anything more, I grabbed my bags and headed for my bedroom. Being careful not to wake Ford, I slipped into our room and quietly closed the door behind me. I dropped the bags on the floor, and as I stepped over to the bed, I found Ford sprawled across the mattress with the covers balled up next to him.

His little chest rose and fell with the easy rhythm of sleep, and it gave me a sense of peace to stand there watching him. He looked so peaceful, so innocent. Knowing his peace wouldn't last made my heart ache.

I had to tell him about Holt, and when I did, it would open the door to a million questions. Some I wasn't sure how I would answer. There were just too many unknowns.

It had only been a couple of hours since I'd seen him, and I was still in a state of disbelief. He looked the same but older and more rugged. It was clear that life had taken its toll on him, just like it had me. And yet, the second our eyes met, I felt that old, familiar connection that had always been there between us. In so many ways, it was like no time had passed, but then, reality set in.

We were no longer the same naive kids who fell madly in love. I'd missed eight years of his life. I had no idea what life he had led or who he had become, and that left me with an overwhelming wave of regret.

Regret for all the years we lost—regret for all the ‘what ifs’ that might've been ours. Seeing him made me realize how much I still wanted our happy ending.

I didn't know if Holt would want to be a part of our lives, and that was a hard pill to

swallow, especially after seeing him tonight and knowing that our connection was still brewing on the surface.

I slipped on my pajamas before easing into bed next to Ford. I leaned over and gently kissed him on the temple. I fixed the comforter, covering us both, and laid back on my pillow. I closed my eyes and found myself wondering which conversation would be harder: telling Ford about his father or telling Holt about his son.

They would both be so angry and hurt.

I positively dreaded it. I closed my eyes, trying to push away the fear and uncertainty, but they hovered over me like a dark cloud. The storm was coming, and the timing couldn't have been worse. I hadn't even buried my father yet, much less figured out who'd murdered him. My mind was running in circles, but eventually, the steady rhythm of Ford's breathing helped to lull me to sleep.

I got up early the next morning and took a quick shower. Once I'd put on some fresh clothes, I had Ford do the same. We had a busy day ahead. Rooks would be here within the hour, and after I confronted him about his lies, we were going to the funeral home to make arrangements for Dad.

We were also going to stop by the police station so he could talk with Detective Joyner. Rooks knew more about my father's business dealings. He'd even helped him implement one of his company's programs, so I was hoping he might be able to get some answers for us.

I was standing in front of the mirror, adjusting my sweater, when I heard the faint creak of the door. I glanced over my shoulder and found Mom standing in the doorway. We hadn't spoken since our argument, and I could tell it was eating at her. She let out a defeated sigh as she said, "Rooks is here."

“Okay. I’ll be there in a minute.” I gave myself a quick once over in the mirror, then walked over to the sofa and sat down next to Ford. “Hey, buddy. Your Uncle Rooks is here.”

He kept playing his game as he grumbled, “Do I have to go in there?”

“Not yet.” I gave him a pat on the leg. “Just hang out in here for a bit, and I’ll come get you when we’re done talking.”

He nodded, then turned his focus back to his game. I got up and headed for the door, but I didn’t go straight in. I needed a moment to collect myself.

I hadn’t seen Rooks in over a year. Part of me wanted to rush out to see him and feel the comfort of his presence, but another part was dreading seeing him.

Rooks was four years older than me, and when we were kids, I couldn’t have asked for a better big brother. He was sweet and patient, and he always had my back. No matter what was going on, he would stop whatever he was doing to help me with my homework or listen to my silly ramblings about my friends or school.

But somewhere along the way, he changed.

Maybe it was the pressure of his fancy, high-tech job or all the traveling he had done, going off to places I could only imagine. Or maybe it was the fact that he’d been carrying around lies in his back pocket for years. Whatever it was, he was different now. He was cold and distant towards me, like there was this invisible wall that separated us, and I had no idea why it was there.

He barely talked to me, and when he did, it felt forced and ingenuine. And he was even worse with Ford. He would barely even look at him, much less talk to him and goof around like he once did with me. It hurt more than I cared to admit, but I hadn’t

given up hope.

I stepped into the room and found Rooks standing by the door, talking to Mom. He was wearing a pair of Khakis with a dark grey pullover that looked one size too small, and his curly, reddish-blond hair had grown even longer and was hanging down in his eyes. He looked like things in his life were going the way he'd always hoped, and for reasons I couldn't explain, it pissed me the hell off.

"You son of a bitch!" I stormed over to him like an animal ready to attack. "How could you?"

"Whoa! Hold on a goddamn minute!" Rooks stepped back. "What the hell is going on?"

Mom leaned over to him as she muttered, "She saw Holt."

"Oh, well that explains it."

"I can't believe you! You lied to me over and over again, like it meant nothing. Hell, I would still think he was dead if I hadn't found him waiting for me on my doorstep!"

"I know you aren't going to believe this, but I did it for you, Tal."

"Oh, good God. Not you, too."

"I'm serious." He took a step towards me. "I knew you were trying to find him, and I knew what would happen if you did."

"And what's that?" I scoffed. "We could finally have the life that was stolen from us?"

“Dad was never going to let that happen.”

“What was he going to do? Kill him?”

“It was a strong possibility.”

I could tell by his tone that he was serious, and that caught me by total surprise. Dad had shown that he would go to extreme measures to keep us apart, but I never would’ve dreamed that he would actually hurt him. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am.” He gave me a light shrug. “There are things about Dad you don’t know and hopefully never will.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I did what I had to do to protect you and Holt. And Mom did the same.”

“Protecting me from what?”

“From Dad.” He took a step towards me as he said, “He wasn’t the man you thought he was. He wasn’t just blowing smoke with all his threats. He meant every word, and he had the means to back them up. So, yeah. We were protecting you.”

“Okay, if that’s true, why didn’t you tell me that you messaged him and told him I was back in town?” My voice cracked as I shouted, “Do you have any idea how shocked I was to find him standing on my front steps, alive and well?”

“I was going to tell you everything, but the break-in happened and everything else. It just got muddled up.” He ran his hand through his hair. “I didn’t really tell him anything. Just told him about Dad and that you were back in town.”

I didn't respond.

I just shook my head and let out a sigh of frustration.

"I'm sorry, I should have told you... I know I made things harder, but I was trying to mend a wrong." His tone softened, and I could hear the heartache in his voice as he said, "Holt was like a brother to me. He was there for me in ways no one else ever was, and when it was my turn to be there for him, I couldn't. And even worse, I had to betray him in a way that he will never forgive me for."

"Rooks..."

"He loved you, Tal. He loved you so much, and it nearly killed him when Dad sent you away. He asked me a hundred times how to reach you, and I couldn't answer him. I knew what would happen if I did. I prayed in time that you both would just move on, but you never did. Neither of you, so I told you he was gone. It was the only way I knew how to put an end to it all."

"But it wasn't the end."

"No, it wasn't. You were never the same after that." His eyes were full of emotion as he said, "And every time I look at Ford, all I see is Holt. And I'm reminded of what I've done. What we've all done."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say," I muttered, as the realization of why his behavior had changed toward me sunk in.

"Don't say anything. Just think things through." His eyes were trained on me as he said, "You know me. You know the kind of brother I've always been. I wouldn't have done this if there was any other way."

I let his words marinate for a moment.

I was still hurt, but he was, too. Knowing that helped ease some of the anger churning inside of me. It helped even more when he added, “I’m really sorry, Tal. I’m sorry about everything, including this mess with Dad. I wish I’d been here, so I could’ve helped you guys.”

I could tell he was being sincere, so I sighed and said, “Wouldn’t have been much you could’ve done.”

“Maybe not, but I would’ve been here.” He turned his attention back to Mom as he asked, “Did they ever find out what was taken from Dad’s office?”

“No, they’re still looking into all that,” Mom answered. “But we’re supposed to go see the detective this afternoon. I was hoping you could go with us.”

“Absolutely.”

“We also need to figure out the funeral arrangements,” I added.

“Already?” Rooks groaned. “It’s just been a couple of days.”

“Yes, but we need to get something planned.”

“Have they even released him from the coroner yet?”

“I don’t know. That’s something we can discuss with Detective Joyner,” Mom interjected. “But your sister is right. It’s time to start making a plan.”

“Okay, fine. Let’s go and get this thing over with.”

Rooks let out a defeated sigh, then nodded.

I did the same, then went to get Ford.

The ride to the police station was quiet. We were all tense and lost in our own thoughts. I stared out the window, trying to brace myself for yet another meeting with Detective Joyner. I wasn't looking forward to it. I knew we'd just end up leaving with more questions than answers, but Mom clung to the hope that he would have something new for us.

When we arrived, it was even more crowded than the day before, and the entire place reeked of BO and feet, which made me even less thrilled to be there. Thankfully, we didn't have to wait long. Detective Joyner was expecting us and called us right back. His tie was slightly askew, and he looked more tired than the last time we saw him. I hoped that meant he'd been hitting it hard and would have something for us, but he was quick to say, "As of now, we don't have any new developments."

He gestured for us to sit, but Rooks stood near the door with his arms crossed. A scowl marked his face as he asked, "Do you have any developments at all?"

"I'm afraid not," Joyner answered, flipping through the folder on his desk. "We're still following up on leads and reviewing the surveillance footage."

I glanced over at Mom and found her pulling Ford protectively to her side. She was trying to stay composed, but she was struggling. I couldn't exactly blame her. She'd just lost her husband, and her home had been violated. If that wasn't bad enough, her daughter was furious with her, and her two children were at odds.

That thought had me turning my attention to Rooks. I could tell he wasn't pleased about Joyner's lack of information, but I didn't know how displeased he was until he spat, "And what about the files from my dad's office? Have you figured out what was

taken yet?”

“As I told your mother, we’re still cataloging everything.” Joyner sighed, leaning back in his chair. “It takes time.”

I watched the vein in Rooks’ neck start to bulge as he snapped, “There are important documents in that office.”

“I’m aware, and I’m sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Are you? Are you really?” Rooks gave him a smug look. “Cause from where I’m standing, it doesn’t look like you give a shit about anything except where your next meal is coming from.”

“Now, son, I know you’re upset about your father and all, but throwing jabs isn’t going to get you anywhere.”

“I want access to my father’s office. Both of them.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, at least not yet. We’re still in the middle of an investigation, and...”

“How long is this investigation going to last?”

“I can’t answer that. As I said earlier, these things take time.”

“We have a right to know if they’ve been taken!”

“ Rooks ,” Mom scolded.

It was barely a whisper, but it was enough to make him take a breath and back down.

I had no idea why Rooks was so worried about the documents in Dad's office. It wasn't like he was a big-time politician with dark secrets he was hiding in his closet. He was a real estate lawyer.

It made no sense—unless he knew something I didn't.

Joyner clicked his pen as he said, "I understand this is difficult, but we're doing everything we can. I've got a lot of men on this, and we will find the people responsible for killing your father."

Rooks muttered something under his breath and looked away.

I wanted to say something to ease the tension, but I just didn't have it in me. I was too tired. We all were.

Detective Joyner asked Ford a few random questions, and that was it.

He'd left us with more questions than answers.

As we left the station, Ford reached up and took my hand. I squeezed his little fingers, feeling their warmth, and tried to convince myself that this nightmare would be over soon. But with each passing hour, the hope of answers seemed further and further away.

9

SEVEN

“I saw where Tom Warren was murdered.”

“Yeah, I heard about that.”

“You think he was the reason I had my bad feeling?”

“There’s no telling.” It had been a couple of days since we’d last talked, and when Mom called tonight, I was hoping things had settled with her. Clearly, that wasn’t the case. “You still having it?”

“Yes, but it’s not like it was before.” She paused for a minute to think, then sighed, “More like a gnawing feeling.”

“Like the worst is yet to come?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that, but I do wonder what Tom’s death will mean for you.”

“About that...” I didn’t see any point in keeping it from her, so I told her, “I saw Tallie.”

“You did? When?”

“A couple of nights ago.”

“I thought she was still in New York.”

“She was, but she’s back now.”

“Well, how about that.” I could almost hear the wheels turning in her head. “I had no idea.”

“Neither did I until Rooks messaged me.”

“You heard from Rooks, too? I never would’ve expected that.” Before I had a chance to respond, she asked, “Well, how did it go with Tallie? Was she happy to see you? Did you guys talk things out? Are you going to see her again?”

“We didn’t really get a chance to talk. She’s got a lot on her plate with her dad and all, but I plan on seeing her again.”

Mom was there when everything went down with Tallie. She knew how hard it had been on me, so I wasn’t surprised when she asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“Good. Just be careful.”

“I will.”

“I’m serious, Holt. I don’t want you taking any unnecessary chances.”

“Mom, it’s Tallie .”

“It’s not her I’m worried about.” She let out a dramatic sigh, then said, “Your father never wanted me to say anything, but you know he used to clean their father’s

office.”

“I think I remember that.”

“Well, he saw things, Holt. Things that he shouldn’t have.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. I just know he was fired because of whatever he found.” I could hear the regret and worry in her voice as she said, “And I shouldn’t say this out loud, but a piece of me has always wondered if Tom was behind your father’s death.”

“Mom, it was an accident. He wasn’t paying attention and got too close to the train track. You know this.”

“I know he saw those papers and was fired. I know just days later that Tom sent Tallie away, and then we lost your dad a couple of weeks after that.”

“I know, Mom. I was there and thinking all this is anything more than a coincidence is a stretch.”

“But what if it’s not.”

“Mom.”

“Just promise me you will be careful.”

I could see that she was going through something, so I decided not to mention that Tallie had a kid and that there was a possibility he was mine. I just didn’t think it was the right time, especially when I wasn’t certain. I was wiped and ready to call it a night, so I said, “I’m always careful. You don’t gotta worry about me.”

“I’m your mother. It’s my job to worry.”

“Well, take the night off and get you some rest.”

“I’ll do what I can. Good night, sweetheart.”

“Night, Mom.”

I ended the call, then tossed my phone onto the bedside table. I kicked off my boots and took off my clothes before crawling into bed. I just wanted to catch up on some sleep, but I couldn’t stop thinking about everything my mother had said. I had no idea if there was any validity to her suspicions, but there was no denying that it did seem a bit questionable.

It was something I would look into, but only after I got things sorted with Tallie. Shep had told me to give her some time, and that’s what I tried to do. But patience had never been one of my strong suits, and I was struggling. I’d tried to busy myself at the Vault, working on the books, monitoring the run, and checking the new supply—anything I could find to keep myself distracted.

At night, I would try to sleep, but every time I closed my eyes, I’d find her staring back at me. I tried to push the thoughts from my mind, just long enough to finally get some damn sleep, but it was useless. After hours of tossing and turning, I accepted my fate and let the memories roll in.

Tonight, there was one memory that sank its teeth in deep, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t shake it.

It was the summer that I lost her.

She was just about to graduate from high school, and all was right in the world. She

had just come in from graduation practice, and her hair was damp with sweat. It had been sweltering hot all week, and as soon as she walked in, she started pulling off her wet clothes. “Mind if I take a quick shower?”

“Go for it.” I fell back on her bed and propped my head up on her pillow. “I’ll be here when you get out.”

“Great.” She grabbed her things and started for the bathroom. “I won’t be long.”

“Take your time.”

I heard the water turn on, and it wasn’t long before the provocative thoughts started rolling in. I was a twenty-year-old hormone with two feet, so it was no surprise that I couldn’t stop thinking about her hot little body in that shower with the hot water streaming over her perfect breasts.

I tried to resist the temptation, but before I’d even thought things through, I was up off the bed and stripping off my clothes. Her folks were at work, and Rooks was off with his latest arm candy, so I didn’t have to worry about any of them walking in on us.

When I stepped inside the bathroom, I could see her silhouette standing behind the curtain, and I couldn’t imagine a more beautiful sight. This girl had it all. She was smart and beautiful, and she was mine. All mine.

I’d only been standing there for a moment when Tallie peeked her head out from behind the curtain. Desire flashed through her eyes as she glanced down at my bare skin and smiled.

“What took you so long?” she teased playfully.

Without hesitation, I pulled back the curtain and stepped inside the shower. Her arms wound around my neck, and my dick immediately grew hard when I felt her perfect breasts pressed against my chest. Noticing my aroused state, she smiled and then slowly dropped down to her knees.

My cock twitched as her hands trailed up my legs.

We'd started having sex right after her eighteenth birthday, but with her, it always felt like the first time. Her greedy eyes stared at my growing erection, and her fingers gently wrapped around me, moving ever so slowly up and down my dick. I was completely lost the moment her tongue flicked across the head of my cock.

She started slowly, swirling her tongue lightly against the tip before taking it deeply into her mouth. A deep growl vibrated through my chest as her fingers tightened around me. Her mouth felt so fucking good wrapped around me, sucking with just the right amount of pressure. My hands twisted in her damp hair, guiding her as she continued to suck and stroke me.

Unable to control myself, I pushed further into her mouth. Knowing that she was driving me wild, her pace quickened, making my cock throb with need. The combination of the hot water from the shower and the soft warmth of her mouth had me in a state of ecstasy, but I wanted more.

Confusion crossed her face as I reached down and gently lifted her to her feet. As I handed her a towel, I told her, "I need to be inside you. Now."

Once we were dried off, I bent down and lifted her into my arms, carrying her into the room. I dropped her onto the bed and then reached for my jeans. I took out a condom, and she watched with anticipation as I rolled it down my long, thick shaft. Her flushed body squirmed against the mattress as she pleaded, "Hurry."

“Are you sure you want me to do that?” I teased as I lowered myself between her legs. I raked my tongue firmly across her clit, causing her to squirm beneath me.

Her fingers dug into the sheets, twisting them tightly in her hands as she gasped, “Oh, God.”

Her back arched off the bed as I pressed the flat of my tongue against her sensitive flesh. I softly teased back and forth in a gentle rhythm against her, loving the way her body instantly reacted to my tongue. Needing more, my hands slid under her, and I pulled her closer to my mouth as I relished in her taste. Her body tensed as little groans and whimpers vibrated through the room.

I loved seeing her come apart, knowing that I was in complete control of her as I watched her body respond to my touch. Her fingers dove into my hair, guiding me as her knees opened wider. She was close to the edge, and I couldn’t wait a minute longer. I had to be inside her. Her eyes locked on mine as I lifted my body up between her legs.

“Yes,” she moaned as I centered myself at her entrance. She wrapped her legs around my waist, pulling me towards her, and wound her arms around my neck. I felt her tremble beneath me as I slid deep inside her. I stilled, not because I wanted to, but because I had to. She felt so perfectly wet and tight that I had to fight the urge to come from just being inside her.

“You feel so damned good,” I growled as I started to move, grinding against her until I found the steady, hard pace that I knew she was desperate for. I wanted to watch her come apart, to hear all those little sounds she made, and feel her body grow rigid as she found her release.

I began to drive deeper and harder. Her head reared back as she moaned, “Oh, God! Holt, don’t stop!”

Her nails dug into my lower back as her hips rocked against mine, meeting my every thrust with more force and more intensity. I could feel the pressure building, forcing a deep, needful growl from my chest.

Just watching the look on her face as I drove deep inside her made me come undone. I quickened my pace, pounding into her again and again, each thrust more demanding than the last.

She ground her hips against mine, matching my relentless rhythm, as she whimpered, “More.”

Fuck. My girl wanted more, and that’s just what I gave her. Her grip on my shoulders tightened as I tilted her hips, driving deeper and harder with every move. I felt her clamp down around my cock, letting me know that her climax was approaching. When her body started to writhe and jolt, my resistance broke, and I came deeply inside her.

I’d barely caught my breath when she whispered, “I can’t wait until we have a place of our own.”

“Why’s that?”

“So, we can do that any time we want.”

“Yeah, that will be nice.”

I tossed the condom in the trash, then laid down next to her. Without missing a beat, she curled up next to me and rested her head on my shoulder. “I don’t want to live in the city. I want a little house in the country. Three or four bedrooms with a big backyard, a wraparound porch, and a barn. And I want goats. Little baby ones with bells around their necks and a big dog and a baby cow.”

“You do realize that baby cows and goats grow up to be big goats and cows.”

“Yeah, but then, they can have their own babies.” Her eyes lit up as she said, “And I want a pottery room with enough room for a crochet corner.”

“But you don’t crochet.”

“Not yet, but I plan to learn.”

“Okay. You can have a crochet corner. Hell, you can have whatever you want.”

“What about you?” She eased up on her elbow and looked at me with her big, baby blues. “What do you want?”

“Just you.” I eased up and gave her a kiss. “You’re the only thing I want or need.”

I woke up the next morning knowing I couldn’t stand it a second longer. I had to see her and find out what the hell was going on. I threw the covers back and pulled myself out of bed. I threw on some clothes, my boots, and my cut, then headed for the parking lot.

The clubhouse was quiet. Most of the guys were in the kitchen having their morning coffee or hadn’t made it in yet. It was too early to be hunting down Tallie, but my mind had been set. I had almost reached the back door when Shep called out to me, “Where you headed?”

“I’m going to see Tallie,” I said, not bothering to sugarcoat it. “I’m done waiting. It’s time we talked this out.”

“Understood. You checked with Skid or Duggar to see if she’s still at the hotel?”

I'd put Duggar and Skid on Tallie right after she'd admitted that she'd been followed and that her folks place had been vandalized. They'd managed to stay under the radar, from her and the people who might be following her, and I'd been thankful that neither of them had witnessed anything concerning.

Tallie and her mother had been holed up at the hotel for several days, only leaving to go to the police station or the funeral home. Only real news they had was Rooks had shown up. He'd gotten a room at the same hotel and was helping them out with all the loose ends with their father's death. While I had no desire to see him, I was more than ready to see his sister.

"Yeah, she's still there. Hoping to beat them before they head out for the day."

"Need me to tag along?"

"Nah, this is something I need to do on my own."

"Alright. Just give me a shout if you need me."

"Will do."

I continued for the door, but didn't get far before Shep called out again, "Hey."

When I turned to face him, he gave me a brotherly nod and said, "Good luck."

"Thanks, brother."

I continued out to the parking lot and went straight to my bike. It was still fairly cool for a bike ride, but I didn't mind. I needed the bite of cold air to help distract me from the crazy that was running through my head. I kicked my leg over the seat, pulled on my helmet, and turned the key. Seconds later, I was through the gate on my way to

the hotel.

I parked on the side street and headed inside.

I had one thing on my mind as I started through the door, and one thing only. That was finding Tallie and getting answers about her son. I almost didn't notice Duggar sitting in the corner with his cup of coffee. I gave him a quick nod, then started over to the front desk.

As soon as I stepped into the lobby, I spotted him.

He was sitting on one of the sofas with his nose buried in one of those handheld video games, but I could see him well enough to know it was him. He looked just like the picture Shep had shown me, only, in person, he looked even more like me. His nose. His jawline. Hell, even the way he furrowed his brows while playing his game resembled me.

It was like looking back in time, and as I stood there, watching him, I knew the answer. This kid was mine.

I knew the second Shep showed me his picture but seeing him now hit me harder than I could've ever imagined. He got frustrated with his game and tossed it on the cushion next to him. He leaned back and ran his hand over his face, just like I did every time I got aggravated. Damn. Even his mannerisms were like mine.

I wanted to say something, do something, but I just stood there gawking at him like an idiot. And then, like he'd sensed me looking, his head turned, and his eyes locked onto mine. It was only for a moment, but it was enough for me to muster the courage to try to talk to him.

I took a step forward but stopped when I saw Tallie walking over with a cup of coffee

in her hand. Like on instinct, her eyes found mine, and she stopped dead in her tracks. Her mouth dropped as she turned and looked at our son and then back to me.

She knew I'd seen him. She raised her hand, signaling for me to give her a moment. I gave her a nod and watched as she walked over to the kid. She placed her cup of coffee on the table next to him, and then, after whispering something to him, she turned and started over to me.

My eyes were trained on the kid when she approached and asked, "Holt, what are you doing here?"

"He's mine, isn't he?"

"Holt."

"Just tell me."

"Yes, he's yours."

10

TALLIE

I knew I would have to tell Holt the truth about Ford sooner than later. I was hoping I would have a little more time to figure out what to say or not to say, but the second I spotted him standing in the hotel lobby, I knew my time was up.

My chest tightened like it always did whenever he was near, but this time, it wasn't the love I felt for him that pulled at me—it was fear: Fear of what he would think. Fear of what he would say and do when he discovered the truth.

God, I hate myself for letting this happen. I should've never let my father push me into a life I didn't want, but I was scared.

Scared of what my father would do to him.

Scared that Holt would be dragged into a fight he couldn't win.

Scared that my love for him wouldn't be enough

I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought staying away would be better for us both.

But I was wrong.

Very, very wrong.

He was pissed at me. Anyone could see that, but as he stood there in front of me, staring at me with those same dark, determined eyes, I was struck by how much I'd missed him. It was overwhelming. I still loved him, just as I had back then, and it gutted me to see the hurt in his eyes.

I'd said the words— yes, he's yours.

As if answering him would undo the years I'd stolen from him.

But I'd said it. I'd let it out, and as soon as the words left my mouth, I was hit with an overwhelming sense of relief. He might've been furious with me, but the secret was out. Holt deserved the truth. He always had, and now I had to face what came next.

"Damn. I can't believe you did this."

His voice was hard and cold, and I could tell by the look in his eyes that I'd broken something inside of him. "You have to give me a chance to explain."

"There's no explaining this, Tallie. It was one thing for you to go off and leave me and live your life in Paris. That was hard enough to swallow, but this... This is unforgivable."

"I didn't want to go. You know I didn't."

"Fuck, I don't know anything anymore." He turned and looked at Ford as he said, "I want to talk to him."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"I wasn't asking, Tallie."

He had that determined look in his eyes, the same one he got when we were younger, so I knew there was no talking him out of it. I had no idea what he was going to say to him, so I pleaded, “Holt, he’s just a kid.”

“He’s my kid, and he has a right to know that he’s my kid.” The vein in his neck twitched with anger. “And yeah, I want to tell him I’m his father, but I know this isn’t the time or place. I just want to talk to him... I want to hear my son’s voice.”

I nodded and motioned for him to go talk to him. I could barely breathe as I followed him over to Ford. I felt like I was on the brink of a panic attack, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. It was really happening. Holt was finally going to meet his son, whether I was ready for it or not. Ford was still sitting on the hotel sofa, and he was so caught up with his video game that he didn’t even notice that we’d walked up.

I placed my hand on the top of his head, gently toying with his hair as I said, “Hey, sweetie. I have someone I’d like you to meet.”

“Hmm?”

Ford’s eyes narrowed as he looked over at Holt. “This is Holt. He’s an old friend of mine.”

“Hey, Holt.”

“Hey, buddy,” Holt’s voice was almost unrecognizable compared to the hard edge it carried moments ago. He sat down across from Ford as he asked, “What ’cha playing?”

“Minecraft.”

Ford kept his eyes trained on Holt. I could see the wheels turning in his head like he was trying to place him. He didn't say anything more. He just sat there, staring at Holt with those big green eyes that matched his father's, and it almost broke me.

"Minecraft, huh?" Holt leaned forward, glancing down at the screen as he asked, "You dodging all the creepers?"

"Trying."

"How close are you to getting to the End?"

Ford's eyes narrowed. "You've played Minecraft?"

"A time or two."

"No way."

"How else would I know that you gotta wear a carved pumpkin on your head in case the Endermen attack?"

"You beat the dragon?"

"Maybe."

"That's so cool."

There was a pause, a quiet moment where they just looked at each other. It was a moment that made that knot in my throat even tighter. There was a time when I loved Holt more than anything in this world, and this was one of the many reasons why. He was strong and manly, but there was tenderness to him like no one I'd ever met.

Ford didn't say anything, but I could see it in his eyes. There was a spark of recognition, like some part of him knew Holt was more than just an old friend of his mother's sitting there next to him.

His voice was tentative but curious as he asked Holt, "You play a lot of games?"

"Hmmm, not like I used to. But there was a time when I played a good bit."

"Which one was your favorite?"

"Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto were pretty awesome, but those are a little much for a kid your age."

"I haven't played 'em, but I've seen 'em. They look pretty cool."

"Mario Cart was pretty good when you played against the right person."

"Ah, yeah. I like that one. I used to play it all the time with Kirby. He was my best friend back in New York."

"Sounds like a cool kid."

"He is. He wins most of the time, but only because I suck at it."

Ford smiled, and at that moment, I felt the tears burning in the back of my eyes. I turned away, not wanting either of them to see me cry, but it was no use. This was what had been stolen from them. A connection that was so easy and natural it made my heart ache.

"Oh, I doubt that."

“Maybe we could play sometime.”

“Maybe so,” Holt replied, his voice thick with emotion I knew he was trying to hide. “I’ll talk to your mom about it.”

I wiped at my cheeks and turned back to them. “Ford, why don’t you go grab a muffin or something, and then, we can head back upstairs and check on Nana.”

“Okay.”

Ford jumped off the sofa and started over to the complimentary breakfast, but Holt didn’t move. He just sat there with his hands clenched together as he watched Ford. Once he was out of earshot, Holt looked over to me with emotion in his eyes. “Thank you.”

My throat was too tight to respond, so I nodded and smiled.

“He’s pretty great.”

“Yes, he is.”

“When can I see him again?”

“Soon, but I’d like us to talk first,” I started. “There are things you should know.”

“Name the time and place, and I’ll be there.”

“How about tonight at seven? We could meet across the street at Reno’s.”

“I’ll be there.”

His face was void of expression as he turned and headed out of the hotel. I went over to the window and watched as he got on his motorcycle and started the engine. My chest was tight with worry and regret, but for the first time in a very long time, I felt a sliver of hope.

As I watched him disappear into traffic, I found myself thinking about how good we once had it. Holt went out of his way to show me how much he loved me. He was always bringing me flowers that he'd picked on the way to my house or taking me to explore special places around the city. I didn't care where we went or what we did. I just wanted to spend time with him. He knew that, but that didn't stop him from going out of his way to make me feel special.

My mind drifted back to one of the nights he took me out to the old boat ramp to look at the stars. It was a moment that had stuck with me, especially in the days after I was told he had died.

It was late fall. I'd just turned eighteen, football games were wrapping up, and the cool nights of winter were sneaking in. He was home on holiday leave and wanted us to have a special night together. He filled the entire bed of his truck with blankets and pillows, and he'd fixed us a picnic with sandwiches and chips. It wasn't much, but it made the night even more memorable.

I looked over at him, amazed at just how good-looking he was. There was no doubt I was attracted to him. I always had been, but any girl in her right mind would be attracted to all those rippling muscles and his gorgeous face.

And good lord, those eyes—his eyes were what dreams were made of. But it was more than just his looks I was drawn to. He was brilliant and charming in a way you wouldn't expect from such a tough guy, and he was thoughtful and loving, even when he wasn't trying to be. I loved that he was protective, not just with me but with everyone he cared about.

“You didn’t have to do all this.”

“Yeah, I did.” He leaned over and kissed me on the neck. “Gotta make sure my girl knows how much I love her.”

“I do know.” He was still kissing me on the neck when I said, “That’s why I think it’s time.”

He eased back, and his eyes locked on mine. “You sure about that? Cause I’m good. We don’t have to do anything you aren’t ready to do.”

“I am ready,” I pushed. “I’ve been ready. I even got on the pill a couple of months ago.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was waiting for the right time.”

“And you’re sure this is it?”

“I’m more than sure.”

He gave me a look that made my breath catch in my throat. I’d dreamed of being with him a thousand times and couldn’t imagine wanting anything more. He brought his hands to my face, gently cupping his palms along my jaw as he lowered his lips to mine, kissing me with a passion I’d never even known was possible.

Our hunger for each other took over, causing the kiss to become wild and heated. In a matter of seconds, our clothes were tossed to the side, and Holt was lowering me down on the blanket.

What started as rushed and impatient desire slowly slipped into something soft and tender. I felt so safe in his arms, like nothing in the world could harm me as long as he was holding me close. We spent hours making love in the back of that truck, and when we were done, we were both exhausted and completely satiated.

I slipped back on my clothes and nestled up next to him as I stared up at the stars. As I lay there in his arms, I felt like everything was right in the world. I missed that feeling more than I cared to admit.

I was still lost in my thoughts when my phone chimed with a text message. I pulled it from my pocket and saw that it was a message. I had no idea how he got my number, but as soon as I read it, I knew it was from Holt.

Unknown:

Change of plans.

Meet me at my house at 7.

207 Dawson Road.

Me:

Okay.

I'll be there.

I wanted to take it as a good sign that he was willing to talk to me, but I wasn't so sure. Things hadn't exactly been going my way over the past few days. There were still no leads on my father's case—at least, none that Detective Joyner was willing to share with us. They had agreed to release Dad's body, but it wouldn't be until later in

the week.

Thankfully, that gave us more time to plan his memorial, even though I wasn't really feeling the need to remember my father and all the not-so-wonderful things he'd done. So, I let Mom and Rooks handle all the arrangements, and Ford and I spent the day at my shop. I still had a ton of unpacking to do, and it was a much-needed distraction from Holt and our looming conversation.

I had so many things I wanted to say to him. I just prayed that he would give me a chance to say them, and I hoped that he would understand why I did what I did. I tried not to obsess over it too much and focused on getting my displays completed. I was already days behind, and if I didn't push it, I would have to delay my grand opening—which was pretty inevitable at this point. There was just too much that needed to be done and zero time to do it.

After working for as long as I could, I gathered up my things, and Ford and I headed back to the hotel. I took a shower and tried to find something suitable to wear. I was trying on my third pair of jeans when Mom popped her head in and asked, "How's it going?"

"Not great." I glanced at myself in the mirror as I groaned, "I have nothing to wear."

"You look beautiful, Tal." Mom stepped further into the room. "But then, you always do."

"You're just saying that."

"I'm not. You really do look beautiful."

"So, you think the sweater is okay?"

“I think it’s perfect, not that it really matters. Holt was never the kind to care about what you were wearing.”

“I just want things to go well.”

“I know you do, and I’m sure they will. You just have to be patient and give him time to process it all.”

I was still upset with her for lying to me, but she was my mother. She was the one I’d always turned to for things like this, so it was out of instinct that I told her, “I really hope you’re right because I don’t think I could stand to lose him again.”

“Just tell him the truth and hope for the best. That’s all you can do.”

“You’re right.” I glanced over at the clock, and when I saw the time, I gasped, “I better get going. Are you sure you’re okay with watching Ford?”

“Of course.” She smiled. “We’re going to go downstairs and have some dinner with Rooks, and then we’ll watch a movie or something.”

“Okay. Just be careful, and if anything seems off...”

“I know. I know.” She gave me a pat. “We’ll be fine. Now, off you go.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m going.”

I grabbed my purse, and after telling Ford goodbye, I rushed downstairs and out to my car. I put in Holt’s address, and then, I was on my way. I was a bundle of nerves, but not in bad way. No matter what the outcome, I was ready to sort things out with him.

It had been too long.

Too much wasted time.

Good, bad, or ugly, it was time to move forward.

I'd barely made it halfway up his drive when I spotted a big white dog with a thick, fluffy coat and a little gray and white goat wearing a pink collar with a tiny bell. They walked close together like they were old friends. I couldn't help but smile despite the knot twisting in my stomach.

My chest tightened when I glanced past them and over to the little white farmhouse. It was a three- or four-bedroom home with a wraparound porch and oversized swing. And it had a big back yard with a barn off to the side.

I couldn't believe it.

It was the house I'd told Holt I wanted when we were kids. He'd not only remembered everything I'd told him I wanted, but he'd made my dream a reality. He hadn't given up on us. If only, I had done the same. But maybe, just maybe, there was still hope for us yet.

11

SEVEN

“Y ou have a goat.”

“Yeah, her name is Mable.”

“And the dog?”

“Percy.”

“Any cows?”

“Not yet.” Damn. Why did she have to look so damn beautiful? Just being next to her made it difficult to breathe, much less to think. It made me almost forget how angry I was with her. I’d been tied up in knots since she pulled up in the driveway, and I couldn’t take it anymore. “I’m not really interested in talking about cows and goats, Tal.”

“I know. I just don’t know where to start.”

“How ‘bout you start with Ford?” I sounded angrier than I’d intended as I snapped, “I’d really like to know why the hell you never told me about him.”

“Okay.” She let out a breath, then started, “First, you should know that he wasn’t planned. I didn’t even know I was pregnant until months after I got to Paris.” There

was no missing the turmoil in her eyes as she said, “I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to tell you right away, but Dad made it difficult.”

“How so?” I pushed.

She leaned back on the swing and sighed. “He monitored my phone calls and emails, and he warned me time and time again that I wasn’t to reach out to you or there would be consequences.”

“For you or me?”

“Both, but I wasn’t worried about me,” she answered without hesitation. “I didn’t care if he cut me off or made me leave art school. I could’ve figured things out, but when it came to you... I didn’t know how far he was willing to go and couldn’t take the chance.”

“And how long did you buy into his bullshit?”

Her silence was answer enough.

My jaw tightened as I let out a slow, measured breath, trying to temper the frustration building inside me. “Answer me, Tal.”

“Ford was almost two.” She lowered her head and toyed with the hem of her shirt. “I was still scared, but I couldn’t take it anymore. I wanted to see you and tell you in person about Ford, so I started trying to find you. That’s when they told me you were...”

“I was what?”

“That you were dead, Holt.” Tears pooled in her eyes as she repeated, “They told me

you were dead.”

“What the fuck?” I’d gone through a hundred scenarios in my head from she wasn’t sure he was mine to she didn’t think I’d want him. I never dreamed her father would go so far as to say I was dead. “Who the hell told you that?”

“Mom. Dad. Rooks. They all did.”

“Fuck me.”

Surprise wasn’t something I handled well. I was a guy who liked to be in the know. Maybe something I’d picked up in the military, or maybe it was ingrained in me as a kid, but I always wanted to be prepared for anything and everything. I didn’t want to be caught off guard.

Needless to say, hearing that people I once cared about lied and said I was dead wasn’t an easy pill to swallow. Some might say I was in shock, but to me, it was much more than that.

I felt like every molecule of air had been knocked right out of me, making my lungs seize up and burn. I struggled to take in a simple breath like I’d forgotten how to fucking breathe. Tallie didn’t look like she was doing much better.

She looked up at me, her eyes desperately searching mine, and I could see that she was anxiously waiting for my response. I knew she wasn’t lying. Hell, I could tell just by the way she was looking at me with that pained expression that she was telling the truth.

But the whole thing seemed unfathomable, and the longer I sat there trying to make sense of it, the more confused and hurt I became. Rooks was my best friend for the better part of my childhood. We’d always had each other’s backs, and now, he’d put a

knife in mine. “They really thought I was a piece of shit, huh? Couldn’t stand the thought of me being in your life.”

“No, it wasn’t like that.”

“Then, what was it?” I snapped. “Why were they all so determined to keep me out of your life?”

“It’s more about me than you. They thought it was the right thing for me, but they were wrong. They were wrong about it all.”

“This whole thing is a clusterfuck.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have trusted them.” Her eyes met mine as she added, “I should’ve come back and made sure you were really gone.”

“Yeah, you should have. I deserved that much.” I tried to reign it in, but it was too much. The secrets and betrayal had my anger simmering deep within. “Hell, you could’ve at least asked Marcus.”

“But I did.” Her brows furrowed. “Marcus was there for me through it all. I don’t think I could’ve survived it all without him.”

“You gotta be fucking kidding me.” I shook my head. “Him, too?”

“What?”

“I never bought into that bi bullshit. I knew he was into you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Marcus knew I was alive, Tallie.” There was a mix of surprise and hurt in her eyes as I told her, “He saw me not long after I got back. Hell, we even talked. It wasn’t for long. Just some idle small talk. I even asked about you, but that wasn’t the only time we crossed paths.”

“But he never said anything.”

“Yeah, clearly.”

“No, you don’t understand. I fell apart after I heard the news. I was crying all the time. I couldn’t get out of bed, and I leaned on him through it all.” With tears streaming down her face, she gasped, “I still don’t understand how he could do that. How could he just let me fall apart like that and never say anything?”

“That’s something you’ll have to ask him, but if you ask me, it was because he was hoping to have you for himself.”

“What?” she gasped. “He wasn’t interested in me that way.”

“He was, and I’m guessing he still is.”

“That’s not possible.”

“It is, and I get it. You’re an amazing woman. He’d be a fool to miss out on a chance to snatch you up. But your brother...,” I swallowed hard. “I don’t get what he was thinking.”

“He said he was trying to protect you.”

“Protect me? What a load of bullshit. He had his agenda, and it had nothing to do with protecting me.”

I sat there, staring at her, my mind spinning with everything she'd just told me. Lies. Years and years of them. Her father had used them to tear us apart, only it wasn't just him. It was everyone she cared about. They all let me believe she was gone forever.

My chest was so tight I could barely breathe, and it only got tighter when she said, "I loved you, Holt. I loved you with all my heart and soul. They can tell their lies, but nothing can change that."

I ran a hand over my face, trying to make sense of it all. "I loved you, too."

"So, what now?"

"I can't answer that. Not right now." I stood and took a step back. "I'm gonna need time to sort through all this."

"Okay. I understand."

Pain flickered across her face, but she nodded, understanding even when it was killing us both. She reached for her bag and stood. She hesitated for a moment, like she wanted to say something else, then just turned and started down the front steps.

"Tallie?"

"Yes?"

"He's been lied to long enough." Her eyes widened as I added, "He deserves to know the truth."

"I agree. We can find a way to tell him together."

She gave me a half-smile, then continued out to her car.

The knot in my stomach churned as I watched her climb inside and close the door. She wiped the tears from her eyes, then started the engine and backed out of the driveway. She didn't look back. Not even for a second, and it made me wonder if I'd made a mistake in letting her go.

She was gone, and the house suddenly felt suffocating.

I couldn't stay here.

I grabbed my keys and headed for my bike. I wasn't thinking about where I was going or what I'd do when I got there. I just knew I couldn't stay in that house a second longer. The turmoil raging inside me wasn't something I was accustomed to. I was the Sergeant at Arms. It was my job to maintain order and control. To do that and do it well, I had to keep myself in check.

I didn't get the luxury of losing my cool or acting without thinking.

Every move I made had to be deliberate and controlled.

But at that moment, nothing I was doing felt deliberate or controlled.

It was anything but.

I tried to steady myself, but the noise in my head was too loud. Hell, the roar of the engine barely cut through it. Riding was usually the one thing I could count on to clear my mind, but tonight, it did little to ease anything—not my mind or my anger.

I drove and drove, and before I knew it, I was pulling up to the hotel where Tallie and her mother were staying. I parked, and I'd just gotten off my bike when Duggar came walking up. "Hey, brother. Everything okay?"

“I need a minute with Rooks.”

“Alright.” When I didn’t move, Duggar said, “He’s up in his room. Number 218.”

I nodded, then started towards the elevator.

When I got to the second floor, I charged down the hall and banged on Rooks’ door. It took him a minute, but eventually, Rooks opened it and smiled when he saw that it was me. “Holt. I was wondering when you’d come around.”

The bastard stood there smirking at me like he didn’t have a care in the damn world, and he didn’t seem the slightest bit fazed to see me standing in the hallway. My blood boiled just looking at him.

All the lies he fed Tallie came flashing through my head, all the years he had stolen from her and from me, and it was just too much. My rage took over, and I lunged at him. I tucked my shoulder as I charged forward and rammed into him, sending us both tumbling to the floor with a hard thud.

I didn’t give him a chance to recover before I was on him. I straddled my knees at his sides and started laying into him as I shouted, "You son of a bitch!"

I punched him again and again, each hit fueled by the thought of Tallie’s tear-streaked face. "You lied to her! You made her believe I was fucking dead!"

Rooks tried to block the hits, but I was relentless. His lip split, sending blood seeping down his chin, but it wasn’t enough. Nothing would be enough. I grabbed his jacket, yanking him up just to slam him back down. "How could you do that to her? To me?"

His eyes were already swelling, and he was winded, but he managed to choke out, "You don’t understand..."

He was right. I didn't want to understand.

I stood and looked down at him as I roared, "Make me understand, then. Explain how you could destroy your sister like that! How could you do that shit to me? After all those times I had your back!"

Rooks coughed, and blood speckled the floor beneath him. But he didn't answer. He couldn't. There was no reason good enough for the knife he'd put in my back. I glared at him for a moment longer, then turned and headed back outside to my bike.

I didn't even speak to Duggar.

I was too pissed to speak.

I just left the hotel and drove straight to the clubhouse.

As soon as I pulled into the parking lot, I parked and walked into the bar. As usual, the place was buzzing. Music was playing from the jukebox, and there were brothers at the pool tables and a few in the back playing darts. I barely noticed any of them.

I grabbed a bottle of bourbon and a glass, then sat down. I poured myself a tall one and kicked it back. I was about to have another when Preacher came over and sat down next to me. He glanced down at my hands and asked, "What the hell happened to you?"

"It's been a night."

"Oh, yeah? Wanna tell me about it?"

Preacher had his own shit going on and I hated to unload on him, but there was no one I trusted more to give me advice. I poured another and tossed it back before

answering, "Tallie came by my place tonight."

"And?"

"She had quite a story."

"I can imagine."

"Nah, there's no imagining this. Hell, this was one for the books."

I cleared my throat then told him everything Tallie had told me. At first, he didn't say anything. He just let it all sink in. After a moment, he finally let out a breath, "Jesus. They did a real number on you both."

"Yeah, they did."

"Doesn't explain why your hands look like they've been through a meat grinder."

"I stopped by the hotel and had a word with Rooks."

"I see." He studied me for a moment, then asked, "You really care about this girl?"

"Yes, sir. Always have."

"So, what are you going to do about it?"

"She asked me the same thing." I rubbed my hand over my face. "I just don't get why she'd wait two years to reach out to me. I don't give a fuck what her old man said. I could've held my own."

"Shep said he was involved with the Volkov family."

“Yeah, among others.”

“Would be enough to make anyone leery, especially a young, single mother who was off in another country alone.”

I understood what he was saying. They were bad people who didn’t think in the lines of limits, but I wanted to believe I was strong enough to handle whatever they would throw at me. And maybe I was, but I couldn’t say the same about Tallie. “But what if she didn’t know about her father’s dealings? What could’ve kept her from reaching out?”

“Even if she had no idea who he was involved with, she knew he was powerful in his own right. And he was her father. That would be enough to make her hesitate.”

“I guess you have a point there.”

“Definitely one to consider.” He took a pull from his drink, then asked, “How’d you two end things?”

“I told her I needed time to think it over.”

“What are you thinking?”

"I don't know," I said honestly. "But the thought of losing her again is fucking killing me."

“Hmmm.” Preacher leaned back with a knowing look—one that told me he’d already figured out what I hadn’t yet. "Sounds like you already know what you gotta do."

“But how am I supposed to just let all this shit go? I lost seven years with my kid.”

“Sounds like that was on her folks and not her.”

“She’s not completely innocent in all this.”

“No, but forgiving her isn’t for her.” Preacher kept his eyes trained on me as he said, “It’s for you. Let that sink in for a minute.”

“That’s kind of deep, Prez.”

“Maybe, but it’s true. Just give it time. You’ll see.”

Prez sat with me as I finished another drink and then another. Once the alcohol took effect, I decided to call it a night. Prez’s words were still rattling in my head as I left the bar and walked down the hall to my room. I couldn’t help but wonder if he was right. Maybe it was better to just forgive her and move on, but I wasn’t sure I had it in me to just let it go.

I didn’t bother taking off my clothes before I collapsed on the bed. The room spun just enough to force me to kick my leg over the side of the bed. I rested my foot on the floor and willed the world to stop spinning, even if it was just for a minute. Thankfully, it didn’t take long for me to drift off.

It was the kind of sleep that felt more like falling into a black hole than actually sleeping. There were no dreams. No thoughts. Just nothing.

Only the nothing didn’t last long.

I had no idea how long I’d been out when my phone started buzzing in my pocket. The harsh sound cut through the silence like a knife, and it wouldn’t stop. It didn’t take long for me to become irritated, and I pulled out from my pocket. I looked at the screen, and I sat up the second I read Duggar’s name.

“What’s wrong?”

“They’re here,” Duggar answered.

“What do you mean? I was just there a couple of hours ago.”

“I don’t know what to tell ya, brother, but that Mercedes is parked right out front, and two shady-looking assholes just headed into the lobby.”

“Dammit.” I swung my legs off the bed and stood as I ordered, “Stay there. Keep eyes on ‘em. I’m on my way.”

“Got it.”

I ended the call before shoving my phone back into my pocket. I grabbed my jacket and my piece, then headed down the hall to find Prez. I had to give him a heads up about what was going down, and then, I had to get my ass to that fucking hotel before those assholes did something we’d all regret.

When I told Prez about Duggar’s call, he was quick to reply, “Go but take Goose or Skid with you. Whoever’s closest. I don’t want you going there alone.”

“Understood.”

I sent them both a text, and by the time I made it out to the parking lot, they were both standing by my SUV. As soon as we’d loaded up, I filled them in on what was going on with Tallie and the Mercedes that had been following her. Goose was the first to ask, “Any idea who these guys are?”

“No clue, but it’s clear they’re up to no good. I need to get them out of there.”

“Understood.”

When we got to the hotel, it was still dark, and the streets were clear. I eased the truck up to the curb and parked. We scanned the area, but there was no sign of the Mercedes.

Goose was taking another look around as he said, “I’m not seeing ‘em.”

“Looks like they’ve bolted.”

“Need to make sure.”

The three of us climbed out and made our way toward the entrance. It was barely daybreak, and the ladies were just starting to put out the coffee and the breakfast bar. We continued into the lobby, and that’s when I spotted Duggar near the vending machines.

He immediately started towards me and announced, “They’re gone.”

“How long?”

“Just missed them. They took off after the security guard questioned them.”

“Damn.” My jaw tightened. “What about Tallie and Ford?”

“They’re still upstairs.”

That was all I needed to hear. Without another word, I turned and headed for the elevator. When we reached the door to her room, I knocked, sharp and firm. There was no answer, so I knocked again, louder this time.

Finally, the door creaked open, and Tallie appeared wearing a pair of gray pjs and her hair up in a messy bun. Her eyes were puffy with sleep, but the second she saw me and the boys, she woke right up. “Holt, what are you doing here?”

“They were here.”

“Who?”

“The men who’ve been following you. They were here.”

“Were?”

“They’ve gone.” I tried to keep my voice low and steady as I told her, “I don’t know where, but we both know they’ll come back. And I don’t want you here when they do.”

“How would you know all this?”

“I just know.” Growing impatient, I stepped into the room and said, “We need to get you and Ford out of here. Now .”

“I can’t just leave.” She shook her head. “Mom and Rooks...”

“Rooks can handle himself,” I snapped, leaving no room for argument. “I’ll find a place for him to take your mother, but for the time being, you and Ford are with me.”

“I don’t know. I...”

“This isn’t up for discussion, Tal. I’m not leaving you here. Not with those guys sniffing around.”

“You promise to make sure Mom and Rooks are safe?”

“You have my word.”

She hesitated for one more second, then nodded and started over to Ford. Once he was up, we started gathering their things. Skid and Goose went next door to get Tallie’s mother, and then, down the hall to get Rooks. They would take them to one of the club’s safe houses until we could figure out the best place for them.

We were almost set to go when Tallie looked over to me with worry in her eyes. She looked like she was on the verge of breaking when she muttered, “Who is doing this?”

I’d been asking myself the same thing. I knew her father was involved with some shady folks. Hell, you can’t get more dangerous than the Russian mafia, but I didn’t get why they were so intent on hunting down Tallie. It was enough to make my stomach turn, but I wasn’t going to let her know that.

Not wanting Ford to hear, I stepped over to her and whispered, “Don’t have to worry about that. The boys and I will handle them.”

“But how?”

“Let me worry about that.”

She nodded, then gathered the last of her things.

Minutes later, I had Tallie and Ford loaded in the SUV, and we were driving over to my place. Tallie sat in the back with her eyes fixed on the road ahead. She didn’t say a word, but she didn’t have to. I could tell that she was scared and confused. Ford was, too. But as long as they were on my watch, I planned on keeping them both out

of harm's way.

12

TALLIE

“W hat are we doing here?”

“We’re just visiting for a bit.”

“Come on, Mom,” Ford fussed. “You can tell me the truth. I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“I know, but there’s really nothing to tell.” I didn’t want to scare him, so I kept it simple. “We’re just going to hang out here for a couple of days.”

“I know there’s more to it.”

“Consider it an adventure.” I glanced around the small guest room and saw no reason why Ford wouldn’t be comfortable there. It was modest, with neutral walls, a dresser, a small desk, and large flat-screen TV. “It’s a new place with your own room and giant TV.”

“But I liked the hotel. They had cookies at the front desk and breakfast every morning.”

“I know. But this is just for a little while. Besides, we couldn’t stay at the hotel forever. And Holt was kind enough to let us stay here.”

“Who is he anyway?”

“I already told you. He’s an old friend of mine.”

“Never seen him before.”

“We were friends when I was younger... before you were born.”

Ford studied me for a second like he knew there was more to the story. “He’s kinda scary lookin’.”

“It’s just a few tattoos. You’ll see right past them once you get to know him.” I gave him a look as I said, “He didn’t seem all that scary when you were talking about your game.”

“Yeah, I guess not.”

“Just give him a chance.”

"Okay."

That one word carried more trust than I deserved.

I stood and gave him a quick kiss on the top of his head. "How about I go see if there’s anything I can scrounge us up for breakfast?"

“Okay, but I’m not really hungry.”

“Maybe something to drink and a snack?”

“Yeah, that’d be good.”

“I’ll go see what he has.”

As soon as I started for the door, Ford reached for his bag and pulled out his game. I usually hated him having so much screen time, but today, it was a welcomed distraction. I stepped out of the room, and as soon as I started down the hall, I heard voices coming from the kitchen.

I didn’t think much about it until I heard Holt growl, “I’m not fucking around. I want the guys found, and I want them found now!”

“We’ll get Shep on it and see what he can find,” one of his brothers replied. “It shouldn’t take him long to track them down.”

“He should’ve already tracked them down,” Holt snapped. “I don’t get what’s taking him so goddamn long.”

I’d never heard Holt so angry and frustrated. I took another step and peeked around the corner. He was in the kitchen with Goose and Skid, and they all looked tense, especially Holt. “He needed more than the make of the car. Thanks to Skid, we have a plate number. Now, it’s just a matter of time.”

“I want them found, and I want them six feet under.”

Six feet under.

He wasn’t talking about scaring them off.

He wasn’t talking about calling the police.

He was talking about handling them in a way that didn’t leave room for second chances. It was a revelation that sent a chill down my spine.

I knew the minute I saw him standing on my front step that Holt wasn't the same boy I'd once known and loved. He was rougher, harder, but hearing him talk like this came as a complete shock.

And yet, beneath the shock, there was something else.

A small, dark part of me that wasn't horrified.

Instead, it was relief that I felt. Holt wasn't going to let these men or anyone else hurt me or Ford. He was going to do whatever it took to stop them, and deep down, I knew that was exactly what we needed.

I didn't want them to know that I'd been eavesdropping, so I eased back down the hall and quietly opened one of the bedroom doors. I immediately slammed it shut and walked with a harder step, making sure they heard me coming.

As soon as I walked in, Goose tapped Skid on the arm and said, "We best be going."

"Yeah, I'm right behind you."

They started for the door, and before they walked out, Holt called out to them, "Take her car. Have Memphis check it out for any tracking devices."

"You got it."

"I'll be over in half an hour. Maybe less."

"Take your time," Goose answered. "We got you covered."

With that, they climbed into my car and disappeared down the drive. Holt waited until he was sure they were gone before turning to me and asking, "You guys settled

in?”

“We’re getting there.”

“Good. Can I get you anything?”

“Ford could use a drink and maybe something to eat.” I stepped further into the kitchen. “Do you have any crackers or chips?”

“Chips for breakfast?”

I shrugged. “I’m picking my battles today.”

“Understood.” He motioned his hand towards the pantry and said, “Help yourself.”

That’s when I noticed his knuckles. They were bruised and scratched. They hadn’t been like that when I came to talk to him the night before. I was tempted to ask him what happened, but I thought better of it. The last thing I wanted to do was overstep, especially when he and his brothers were doing so much to help us.

I opened the door and quickly grabbed a pack of peanut butter crackers. By the time I turned back around, Holt had a bottle of juice from the fridge and was holding it out for me. “Perfect. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

I lingered for a moment, trying my best to gather the courage to ask the question I so desperately wanted to ask. Sensing something was up, Holt gave me one of his looks. “Something on your mind?”

“I’ve got so many things going through my head, I don’t even know which way is up

anymore.”

“I understand that all too well, but we’ll get through it. We just need to figure out who these guys are and what they want.”

“And you think your brothers can really find them ‘cause I can always call Detective Joyner and...”

“The cops had their chance to find these guys and failed. Now, it’s our turn.”

“I’ve never heard of a biker club that fights bad guys.”

“We fight ‘em, but don’t get it twisted. We’re not the good guys.”

“I had a feeling you weren’t.”

Once again, I was struck by how much he’d changed. The boy in him was completely gone. He was all man, and every ounce of me was drawn to him like the tide to the shore. I wanted to wrap myself in him, hold him close, and pretend that everything was right in the world.

Unfortunately, it was anything but, and I wasn’t sure it would be ever again. Holt’s expression was intense as he took a step towards me. “I know this is a lot, but you can trust me, Tal. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I know.” I placed the juice and crackers on the counter and crossed my arms. “Why are you doing this?”

“ You know why .”

“I want to think that I do, but I’m not so sure.”

“You know.” His eyes never left mine as he took a step towards me. “You’ve always known. That’s why you’re standing here right now instead of staying at the safe house with your mother and brother.”

“But there’s so much. It’s too much.” My voice cracked as I asked, “How are we supposed to get past it all?”

“I don’t know.” He held my gaze for a moment and then took one final step that left him standing right in front of me. “I’m not even sure we can, but I’m damn well gonna try.”

Before I had time to think, he pulled me close and lowered his mouth to mine, kissing me with an intensity like I’d never known. His lips were soft and warm, and suddenly, I was leaning right into him.

His arms wound tight around me, inching me even closer as his tongue found its way into my mouth. He kissed me long and hard, and it was all I could do to keep myself from unraveling. I’d missed him. I’d missed his touch, his scent, and how incredibly safe I felt in his arms.

I was holding on by a thread, and just as I was becoming completely lost in his touch, he pulled back, quickly breaking our embrace. His eyes danced with lust as they locked on mine. He lifted his hand up to my mouth, gently brushing the pad of his thumb across my bottom lip, and said, “Even better than I remembered.”

“So, now what?”

“I’ve gotta get to the clubhouse and check on some things. We’ll pick up from here when I get back.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Not sure. A couple of hours. Maybe more, but Duggar will be here to keep an eye on things. If you need anything, just let him know, and he’ll handle it.”

“Okay.”

He kissed me on the forehead, then turned and headed for the door.

As soon as he walked out, I stepped over to the window and eased the curtain back, watching as he made his way out to his Harley. He moved with such purpose, like nothing could stand in his way. He swung a leg over the bike, and seconds later, the engine roared to life.

I brought my hand up to my mouth and ran my fingertip along my bottom lip. It was still tingling after our kiss, and I wanted to hold onto the feeling a little longer. It had been so long since I’d been kissed like that, and I wanted to savor the moment.

I was wondering if we might kiss again when I heard Ford call out, “Mom?”

“Hey, kiddo. I’m sorry! I’m coming.”

With a deep breath, I tore myself away from the window and grabbed the juice and crackers from the counter. I carried them both to Ford’s room, and he barely looked up as he muttered, “Thanks, Mom.”

“You need anything else?”

“Nope, I’m good.”

“Okay. I’m going to go to my room and call your grandmother.”

“Um-hmm.”

He was deep into his game, so I turned and made my way down the hall. The house felt big and unfamiliar, but I felt oddly safe as I made my way into the bedroom. I grabbed my phone from my purse, then sat on the edge of the bed and dialed my mother's number.

My fingers tightened around my phone as it rang. Mom and I hadn't talked much since our argument. I just hadn't known what to say to her. I was still angry and hurt that she'd lied to me, and I wasn't ready to forgive her. I wasn't sure I ever would be.

That didn't mean I didn't love her.

I did. I loved her very much, and I didn't want anything bad to happen to her. Holt assured me that they were okay, but that didn't stop me from worrying. A wave of relief crashed over me when my mother's voice finally came through the line. "Tallie?"

"Hey, Mom," I answered. "Are you guys okay?"

"Yes, sweetheart. We're fine," she assured me, though there was a weariness in her tone. "What about you and Ford?"

"We're okay. We're at Holt's." I kept it short and to the point. "Ford's in the other room playing his game."

"That's good." Mom's voice tensed as she told me, "Holt's friend told Rooks that the men in the Mercedes were back, and they think they were looking for us."

"Yeah, they're trying to find out who they are and what they want."

"Are you sure they're the ones who need to be doing all this?" Mom asked with a worried tone. "Shouldn't we call the police?"

“The police knew, and they weren’t able to stop them from showing up at the hotel this morning.”

“Yes, this is true.”

“Holt won’t let anything happen to us.”

“He has a young man here. He’s been standing out front for hours, and he’s barely moved. And I’m pretty sure he’s armed,” she added quietly. “Your brother isn’t too happy about that.”

“I’m sure he isn’t, but you’re safer there than at the hotel,” I replied, trying to convince myself as much as her.

“I just don’t know, Tallie,” she said gently. “I don’t like being away from you.”

“I don’t like it either, but right now, we don’t have a choice.”

There was a beat of silence before she finally said, “Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I will,” I whispered. “I promise. Tell Rooks I’ll call him soon.”

“Okay. But be forewarned. He isn’t in a good mood.”

“Oh? And why’s that?”

“He and some guy got into an argument last night at the hotel bar.” I could hear the worry in Mom’s voice as she told me, “He gave him a black eye and a busted lip.”

“Oh, that’s not good. I’m sure he’s in a terrible mood, but don’t worry. I can handle

him.”

“I know you can,” she giggled. “I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

We said our goodbyes, and I sat there for a long moment, just staring at the phone in my hand. Dad’s death had set so many changes into motion. I just hoped we had the strength to hold on until the dust settled.

I was exhausted, so I laid back on the bed and closed my eyes. I just planned to rest for a bit and ended up dozing off. I woke up several hours later to Holt standing at the foot of my bed. I sat up with a jolt and gasped, “What time is it?”

“Just after six.”

“Ford.”

“He’s fine. He and Duggar went into town to grab us a couple of pizzas and some wings.”

“Oh, okay. Do you think it’s safe for Ford to be out?”

“He’s fine. He’s with Duggar. He won’t let anything happen to him.” His face was void of expression as he announced, “I was about to have a beer. You want one?”

I nodded, then stood and followed him into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and pulled out two bottles of beer. He popped the tops and offered one to me. “Did you find out anything about the men in the Mercedes?”

“We’re following up on some leads.”

“So, that’s a yes?”

“You haven’t told me about Paris.”

He clearly wanted to change the subject and what a subject it was.

Just the mention of Paris made my throat tighten. When I first arrived, I felt like I’d been thrown into a completely different world, and it filled me with mixed emotions. I was heartbroken over losing Holt and terrified about having a baby on my own, but my classes were captivating, and the people I met were incredible. I had no idea how to put it all into words, so I answered, “I don’t know what to say.”

“Was it worth it?”

“No,” I answered without hesitation. “Not even close. I saw incredible things, learning things I would’ve never learned anywhere else, but the cost was too high. I lost you, and Ford lost the chance to know his father.”

“He hasn’t lost his chance. I’m right here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“We need to decide how we want to tell him.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“Do you think we can?” My voice cracked a little. “Or have I made too much of a mess of everything?”

“This isn’t all on you, Tallie.”

“It certainly feels that way.”

“I felt like that for eight years. Still not so sure I was wrong.”

“You were definitely wrong. You were the love of my life, and they took you from me. I haven’t been the same since.”

“You really believe that.”

“Without a doubt.”

“Come here,” his voice cut through the air, low and rough, like a whisper meant only for me.

All the fear, the regret, the anger raged inside of me, making it difficult to know what to do.

“Tallie.”

I didn’t move. I just stood there, staring at him. I was torn between wanting to run out the door and wanting to leap into his arms. The pull I felt towards him was impossible to ignore, and before I knew what I was doing, I’d taken a step forward. And then another.

“I should’ve fought harder,” I whispered, barely audible, my voice trembling. “I should’ve made them see...”

His tone was firm and demanding as he ordered, “Now, Tallie.”

I took another step. I was finally standing right in front of him. We were just inches apart. My eyes searched his, looking for any sign that he might feel the same way I did.

But he gave me nothing—not yet.

Not until I was exactly where he wanted me.

His eyes were still trained on mine as he slipped his arm around my waist and pulled me against him. I gasped, startled, but before I could even think, his mouth crashed against mine. It wasn't soft. It wasn't gentle. It was angry. And raw. And desperate.

It was everything we'd both been holding back for years.

I could feel his hand at the back of my neck as his fingers tangled in my hair. My hand rested against his chest as he deepened the kiss. I let myself melt into him. My body responded to his like it had been starved for him.

When he pulled back just enough for us both to catch our breath, he reached up and cupped my face, gently brushing his thumb across my cheek. My tears were still there, and when his eyes landed on them, something in him cracked, and I could feel it.

“Damn, I’ve missed you,” he whispered, his voice thick, raw with the truth of it.

I almost couldn't speak. My lips trembled as I whispered back, my heart beating so loudly in my chest that it felt like it was going to burst. “I missed you, too. You'll never know how much.”

I wrapped my arms around him, holding him just as tightly as he was holding me. And for the first time in a long time, everything inside me finally calmed . He was here. He was holding me. After all the pain and lost time, I finally had him back.

He looked down and studied me for a moment, searching for some kind of confirmation that I wanted this moment as much as he did, and once he found it, his

mouth crashed against mine. We both let go of our doubts and just let ourselves get lost in the moment.

The tips of his fingers trailed along my spine, and I arched towards him, seeking the heat of his touch. He continued to kiss me, and I could feel a fire burning deep inside me, smoldering as it spread through my body. He kissed me long and hard, and we were inching to the point of no return when he eased back and whispered, “Never could get enough of you.”

“I wasted so much time. Why did I do that? Why did I let them...”

“Don’t do that. Don’t go back there. Stay here with me. Right now, in this moment. Can you do that?”

I wanted this moment with him. I wanted to forget about the past and let my heart be my guide. I could feel my emotions building inside of me, and I had to fight back my tears as I nodded and muttered, “Yes, Holt. I can do that.”

My pulse started to race as he leaned towards me and pressed his lips against mine once again. Holt owned a piece of my heart that no one else could have. Right or wrong, I wanted him, needed him, and I was willing to put everything on the line to have him in my life again.

He trailed kisses along my neck, sending chills throughout my entire body. My breath caught when I felt his hand inching its way down my stomach. He stopped at the buckle of my jeans, and in an instant, he had them unfastened and was slipping his hand down the waistband of my lace panties. And just like that, my doubts started rolling in.

I suddenly became nervous when he led me over to the sofa. I hadn’t been with anyone since the last time we were together. I’d had a child—his child. I was worried

that he would notice the changes in my body and wouldn't find me as appealing as he had once before. But when I looked up at him and saw the longing in his eyes, my doubts were quickly forgotten. The truth was, I wanted him just as much as he wanted me, if not more.

As soon as his fingers drifted between my legs, my entire body shivered with anticipation. I gasped as the tips of his fingers grazed across my center with slow, methodical circles. Every single touch made me yearn for more.

It felt so good, so right, to have his hands on me again, like they were made for my body and my body alone. I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes, relishing the sensation as he moved his fingers against me. As soon as I started to feel that familiar tingling in my abdomen, he eased my panties to the side and slid his fingers deep inside me.

He began teasing me with the pad of his thumb, using just the right amount of pressure to make me come unglued. It felt incredible, better than I'd remembered, and after just a few moments, I felt my orgasm start to take hold. His fingers curled deep inside me, and when he increased the pressure, I was done.

With a gratified moan, my head fell back, and my entire body started to tremble uncontrollably. My climax surged through me with a powerful force, causing me to mumble over and over, "Oh, dear God!"

I was struggling to remain standing when Holt growled, "Dammit."

He quickly withdrew his hand and took a step back as he announced, "They're back."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"Not something I'd joke about."

“Talk about bad timing.”

“You’re telling me.”

I fastened the button of my jeans and quickly straightened my shirt. Holt’s eyes slowly skirted over me, and a sexy smirk slipped across his lips as he said, “Oh, don’t worry. I’m not done with you yet. Not by a long shot.”

13

SEVEN

“ W e found them.”

“Them?”

“The driver and one of the guards.”

“Where?”

Memphis and Goose had already checked the address on the car’s registration, but it was a dead end. The house was empty and looked to have been abandoned for quite some time. Shep had continued digging but came up empty handed. Without a real name or address, there was no way for any of us to know where this guy could be.

It was going to take some time to track him down, so I had used the opportunity to go back to the house to check in with Tallie and Ford. And I made damn good use of the opportunity. I’d missed hearing Tallie come undone and looked forward to hearing it again soon.

But now, I had to deal with this fucking driver and find out what he was up to. I was surprised when Shep answered, “He and his buddy had gone back to the hotel where Tallie was staying.”

“And?”

“Memphis and Goose just picked them up,” Shep answered. “They’re on their way to the clubhouse.”

"I'm on my way."

As soon as I hung up, Tallie's eyes were on me, reading me like she always did. "You're leaving?"

“Afraid so.”

She didn't ask why. She didn't have to. Tallie knew me well enough to know that I was a man who kept his word. I told her we'd find the men who had been following her, and we'd done just that.

"Okay. Be careful," she murmured, her voice softer now.

I leaned down, pressing a quick kiss to her forehead before turning to Duggar. "Hang here until I get back."

Duggar nodded, and they watched silently as I grabbed my Glock from the side drawer and made my way out the door. I hated leaving, especially when things were going so well, but I needed to know who these assholes were and what they wanted with Tallie.

When I got to the clubhouse, Shep was waiting for me out front. I parked, and as soon as I made my way over to him, I said, "Tell me what ya got."

“The license plate was tied to a man named Boris Sokolov. It took some digging, but I was able to connect him to Sergei Volkov.”

“The guy Tallie's father was working with.”

“The one and only.”

“This Boris fella is one of his drivers, and he’s as green as they come. The guard, too. Hell, Goose and Memphis just put a gun to the back of their heads and threw out a few threatening words, and the assholes both folded like a couple of cheap hookers.”

“Where are they now?”

“They got them out back in a couple of the holding rooms. Grim’s already working on the driver.”

“Good deal. I’m going to go see how it’s going.” I gave him a brotherly pat on the shoulder. “Appreciate your help on this.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

I gave him a nod, then started around back. By the time I got to the holding room, Grim had already done a real number on the driver. He was standing shirtless with his hands bound over his head, and his face was already black and blue with bruises. I walked over and stood in the corner, watching as he whimpered and whined like a wounded animal. Grim stood in front of him with a cattle prod that was strong enough to jolt a fucking elephant and snarled, “I’m not a man who likes to repeat myself, Boris.”

“Zen stop asking questions I do not know ze answer to.”

I knew he was lying.

Grim knew it, too.

“I think you do,” Grim told him as he tossed his cigarette to the floor and took a step

towards him. Boris wasn't a big guy. He was about five-ten and might've weighed two hundred pounds if he was soaking wet. He was playing the tough guy, but it wasn't a game he could play for long. It was written all over his face.

He grimaced when he noticed Grim getting closer. "Vat is it you want from me?"

"Haven't you been listening?" Grim flipped the trigger on the prod, causing the current to arc. "I want to know what you wanted with the girl and her mother."

"I vant nothing. I know not about any girl."

"My patience is running thin, Boris."

Grim took the prod and rammed it against the guy's chest, sending a jolt of electricity surging through his entire body. Boris arched his back, and he grew rigid as he let out a stream of Russian curses. I'd lived in the South long enough to know a thing or two about the zing of a cattle prod. It hurt like a bitch, and that was just a regular one.

That thing Grim was using had to be lighting Boris up. It certainly looked and sounded that way. Grim removed the prod from his chest, and Boris fell completely limp. Grim's voice was low and firm as he growled, "Best get ready, 'cause I can do this all night long."

He stood there staring at him for a brief second, but when Boris didn't respond, Grim slammed it into his chest again. He removed it and waited for a moment for Boris to speak. When he didn't, he took the end of the prod and pressed it against the dude's balls.

Boris started thrashing side to side as he tried to break free from his restraints, but it was no use. He wasn't going anywhere. Ignoring his little fit, Grim started after him again but stopped when Boris cried, "No, no! I tell you." Grim lowered his hand and

cocked his brow, waiting until Boris said, ““ Ve are looking for code. Must find the code .”

“Code to wait?”

“ De account .”

“Come on, now. You know I’m gonna need more than that.”

Grim started towards him with the prod, and Boris yelped, “Da money! Must find code to get da money!”

And there it was.

Boris was just a driver. He wasn’t made for this kind of torture, so I wasn’t surprised that he folded so quickly. Grim stepped back as he asked, “Where did the money come from?”

“I’m not privy to such information.”

“What makes your boss think the girl has the code?”

“I know not. I’m just da driver. I do as I’m told.”

Grim lowered the prod, and we both watched as Boris’ shoulders sagged with relief. Knowing what would happen, he’d done his best to keep his mouth shut about his new connection with Volkov, but in the end, he was just like all the others—he sang like a canary.

Grim left him hanging from the ceiling as he walked over to me and asked, “You think Tallie knows anything about this code?”

“She hasn’t mentioned anything to me, but I’ll certainly ask about it and let you know.”

Grim gave me a nod, then started down the hall. “I’ll let you know if I get anything more from the guard.”

“Appreciate it, brother.”

It would be a couple of hours before Grim would have anything from the guard, so I decided to stop in and speak to Prez and Shep before I headed back to the house. When I got to Prez’s office, he was sitting at his desk, talking with Shep and Memphis. As soon as he spotted me in the doorway, Prez leaned back in his seat and asked, “How ya holding up, brother?”

“I’m hanging in, but barely.”

“And Tallie?”

“About the same. She and the kid are settling in at my place, but I can tell they’re on edge. This whole thing is wearing on them.”

“I can imagine. Grim making any progress with the driver?”

“Yeah, apparently Volkov is looking for some code to access some money somewhere, and he thinks Tallie or her mother has it.”

“Does she?”

“I highly doubt it, but I won’t know until I ask her.”

“Might want to ask the brother, too.”

“Why? You know something I don’t?”

“I’m not sure.” Shep’s eyes narrowed. “What do you know about his line of work?”

“Not much. Just that he travels around doing some kind of tech stuff.”

“He’s a financial software engineer.” Knowing I didn’t have a fucking clue what he was talking about, Shep went on to add, “He designs software for international banking systems.”

“Yeah, and?”

“He has the means to manipulate transaction records, and if he was so inclined, he could create hidden pathways for major money transfers.”

“Okay. Good for him. Don’t see what that has to do with...”

“There’s a possibility he was aware of his father’s business dealings, and...”

“Ah, damn. You really think he’s involved in this mess.” I shook my head. “Of course, he’s involved. He was so far up his father’s ass, dude couldn’t even take a breath without getting his approval.”

“Well, I’d say it’s time for you two to have a conversation.”

“No doubt. I’ll get with him first thing in the morning.”

“Good deal. Let us know what you find out.”

“Will do.” I started for the door. “I already told Grim, but if anything comes up, I want to know. I don’t care when or what else is going on. I want to know.”

“You got it, and you do the same.”

I walked out of Prez’s office and made my way to the parking lot. I wasted no time getting on my bike and starting towards home. I left the clubhouse with more questions than answers. It was clear that Tallie’s father had gotten in over his head, and it cost him his life. Now, Volkov and his crew had turned their sights on Tallie and her mother, but they were wasting their time.

No way in hell I was going to let them near either of them.

I needed to put an end to this shit and fast, but before I could do that, I needed to know what the hell Tallie’s father had been up to. It was nothing good, no doubt about that. The pieces I had just didn’t fit, and it frustrated the hell out of me.

It weighed on me all the way home. By the time I pulled into the driveway, the night air had done little to ease my frustration. The house was quiet. All the lights were out except for the one in the kitchen. The tightness in my chest eased at the thought of Tallie still being awake. I wanted to see her more than I realized.

I parked my bike and headed up the back steps. When I walked into the kitchen, I found her standing at the counter with a slice of cold pizza in her hand. Her hair was up, and she was wearing a pair of worn gray flannel pajamas. They were frayed at the cuffs, and a button missing near the collar, but they looked good on her—damn good.

Surprise flickered in her eyes when she looked up and saw me standing in the doorway. But the surprise quickly faded, and a soft smile crept across her face, and it hit me like a punch to the gut. And just like that, her spell had been cast.

I crossed the room without a word, closing the space between us. The questions, the frustration, all of it faded as I slipped my arm around her waist and pulled her close, kissing her like she was the only thing that mattered. She tasted like pepperoni and

the comfort of home. Her hands slid up my chest, fingers curling into my shirt like she needed me just as much as I needed her.

After a few moments, she eased back and smiled, “Hey.”

“Hey, yourself.” I let my eyes skirt over her as I said, “Surprised you’re still up.”

“Yeah, well, Ford has been out for hours, but I couldn’t sleep.” She motioned her hand toward the half-eaten slice of pizza in her hand as she said, “Thought a bite to eat would help, but no such luck.”

“I got something that might do the trick.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I mean, I can’t make any promises,” I cocked my brow, “but we could definitely give it a try.”

“I’m game.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

I took what was left of the slice of pizza and tossed it into the sink, then took her hand in mine and led her down the hall. Once we were in my room, I closed the door, and just like that, I forgot about the Volkovs, about her father, and all the bullshit that came with them. My focus was all on her, and the way she looked at me like I was her whole world. I was about to show her that she was mine.

Tallie stopped at the foot of the bed and watched as I kicked off my boots. “Is this really happening, or am I dreaming?”

“Oh yeah, baby. It’s really happening, and it’s been a long time coming.”

I stepped closer, gently placing my hand on the nape of her neck and pulled her mouth to mine. The touch of her lips set me on fire, and I knew there was no more holding back. I couldn’t resist a moment longer.

I needed her, and from the way she kissed me, there was no doubt she felt the same about me. I’d imagined this moment countless times over the past eight years. I’d longed for it, prayed for it, and I’d all but given up hope that it would ever happen again. And now, here she was in my arms, and I won’t deny that it terrified me.

She felt too good, too right, and I was afraid I didn’t have it in me to let her go again. I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. I trailed kisses down her neck as I whispered, “I’ve waited so long for this.”

“I’ve waited, too.” It was insane to think a beautiful, young, vibrant woman like her hadn’t been with other men, but I couldn’t help but hope. Like she knew exactly what I was thinking, she looked up at me and whispered, “It’s always been you. Only you.”

My cock stirred in response, and I slammed my mouth against hers once again. Little moans and whimpers filled the room as I kissed her long and hard. I slowly trailed kisses down her neck to her collarbone. I kissed her skin softly, teasing her, wanting her wet and aching for me. I unbuttoned her pajama shirt and slid it off her shoulders, letting it flutter to the floor.

Concern marked her face as she whispered, “We’ll have to be quiet.”

“We can try.”

“I’m serious,” she pushed. “The last thing we need to do is scar Ford with hanky-panky sounds.”

“Hanky-panky? When the hell did you start saying shit like that?”

“When I became a mother, now can you be quiet or not?”

“I can. The question is, can you?”

Goosebumps prickled her skin as I lowered my head and took her breast in my mouth, twirling her nipple with the tip of my tongue. Her hands moved to my hair, and her fingers wound themselves in the strands as I nipped and sucked at her sensitive flesh. With every move, every touch we were in sync. It was like we’d never skipped a beat.

She was mine. She always had been and always would be.

Heat filled her gaze as she reached up and released her hair, letting it fall loose around her shoulders. Her eyes remained trained on mine as she hooked her thumbs in her black lace panties and slid them seductively down her long, lean legs.

And there she was—completely bare and waiting for me.

My God, she was stunning—even more so than I remembered. She stepped towards me, running her hands along my chest and under my cut.

“Your turn,” she whispered. She looked up at me tentatively, and when I didn’t stop her, she carefully slid my cut off and laid it on the bed. I eased my t-shirt over my head and pulled her against me. Her skin was warm and soft, and a jolt of need surged to my cock.

She gazed up at me wantonly, biting her lip. That was all the restraint I could muster. I slid my hand to the nape of her neck and pulled her mouth to mine. A soft whimper escaped from her lips as they parted, allowing me to kiss her deeper.

Without breaking the kiss, I lowered my free hand to my waist and unfastened my belt and jeans, letting them drop to the floor. Her hands dropped to the waistband of my boxer briefs. She pulled back from our kiss for a moment, her eyes flashing as she wrenched the waistband of my boxers down and saw my arousal. Her mouth opened with a little gasp, and I couldn't take it anymore.

I pulled her to me, walking her backward until we reached the wall.

My tongue caressed her soft lips and tongue, teasing and tasting her. She was absolutely incredible. I wanted every fucking inch of her. I knelt in front of her and lifted one of her long legs to hook over my shoulder. I heard her breath catch in anticipation as she leaned back and waited for me to touch her.

Tallie squirmed and groaned as I slowly touched my lips to her ribcage and trailed kisses down her stomach. I pulled back, appreciating her soft, smooth skin before lowering my head between her legs. A hiss escaped through her teeth as I raked my tongue against her inner thighs. Each lick, each kiss, each tiny taste made me hungry for more.

Her hips jerked forward as I pressed the palm of my hand firmly against her center, rhythmically rubbing her clit. With two fingers, I slid through her folds and delved deep inside her. I smiled when I felt that she was already soaking wet. The anticipation of what I was going to do to Tallie was getting to her just as much as it was getting to me. As much as I wanted to be inside her, my dick was going to have to wait.

I started slow and steady, teasing her clit with my mouth. Her little moans and whimpers filled the room, and I reveled in the effect I was having on her. As I sucked on her tender flesh, I moved my fingers in and out in a punishing rhythm, curving them forward to hit her most sensitive spot.

“Yes!” she cried as her hands wound in my hair, pulling me more tightly against her. I considered telling her to be quiet, but I couldn’t help myself. She was too close to stop. After just a few more flicks of my tongue, her orgasm took hold, causing her entire body to quiver and shake uncontrollably.

I slowly stood up, brushing my chest against hers. She gazed at me with lust-filled eyes as my mouth came down on hers. I pressed my bare flesh against hers, pinning her to the wall before sliding my hands underneath her firm ass and lifting her to my waist.

Her legs immediately wrapped around my hips as her arms wound around my neck, holding my mouth to hers. I could feel her heart hammering against mine as I carried her over to the bed and lowered her onto the mattress.

She looked up at me, so trusting and full of desire, and I couldn’t imagine wanting anything more. Without saying a word, I grabbed a condom from the pocket of my jeans, then pulled off my boxers and positioned myself between her legs. We had both thought about whether we’d be together again, and now that it was happening, it felt too good to be true.

Her eyes were full of desire as I brushed my throbbing cock along her center, driving us both wild with need.

“Holt,” she pleaded as she wrapped her legs around me, pulling me forward. A deep growl vibrated through my chest as I thrust deep inside her. She felt so damn good, and I couldn’t resist driving into her again and again. My pace became hard and demanding, but she tightened her legs around my waist and rocked against me, encouraging me to give her more.

I buried my face in her neck as I growled, “You feel so fucking incredible.”

I thrust deeply, again and again, each move more intense than the last. Her head fell back as my cock grazed against her G spot, causing her to tense around me. I raked my teeth over her breast as I took her nipple in my mouth.

Every nerve in her body seemed to explode with my touch, and while I was enjoying every single moment of watching her come undone, my resistance was faltering. Her breath quickened as she clamped down around my cock, making it damn near impossible not to come.

“Oh, God! Holt!”

She reached for a pillow and pulled it over her mouth, crossing her arms to secure it as I continued to drive deep inside her. I could feel her imminent release, so I thrust harder, deeper, forcing her over the edge. Her back arched, and she released the pillow and dropped her hands to her side, fisting the sheets in her fingers.

She came and I tried to fight it, but it was futile. With her body spasming around me, she wrapped her arms around my neck, and I felt her breath against my chest as I drove deeper inside her once more, finally giving into my own release.

Overcome with exhaustion, I collapsed on the bed next to her.

Once we'd had a chance to catch our breath, I rolled over and removed the condom, quickly tossing into the trash. I'd just laid my head on the pillow when she inched closer and placed her head on my chest. I started to toy with her hair as I told her, “Damn, I'm going to enjoy making up for lost time with you.”

“You'll hear no complaining from me.” A sated smile crossed her face as she sighed and said, “That was amazing. Even better than I remembered.”

“Well, get ready. I was just warming up.”

I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers, and we spent the rest of the night tangled in each other's arms. There were things that I needed to discuss with her, and I would. But after all we'd been through, we deserved this night together. And consequences be damned, I was going to take it.

And there would be consequences.

Like neither of us could've imagined.

14

TALLIE

"Come on, sleepyhead." Holt nudged me gently. "Got something to show you."

"Hmmm." I squinted at the morning light creeping in through the blinds. "What time is it?"

"It's late." He pulled on his boots as he snickered, "It's already six-fifteen."

"Six-fifteen?" I groaned. "When did you become one of those grandpas who gets up at the crack of dawn?"

"Grandpa?" he scoffed. "I've been up an hour watching you sleep. You snore, by the way."

"I do no such thing."

"Yeah, you do." He cocked his brow. "Probably why you're so tired. Bet you're gonna need one of those sleep machines."

"I'm tired because someone kept me up all night."

I snuggled up next to him, and my entire body tingled when I thought about the night we'd shared. I'd spent so many nights dreaming of being with him again, and they were all wonderful and got me through some hard times. But they didn't compare to

the real thing. Being with him again, feeling his body against mine, and knowing that this wasn't just a dream was everything. It was like coming home after years of being so utterly lost.

It gave me hope, and that was something I thought had died when I was torn away from him. But after the night we shared, I dared to believe that we could still have the future we always hoped for—the one that was stolen from us so many years ago.

Holt gave me a sexy smirk as he teased, “Are you complaining?”

“Nope. Not even a little.” I reached over and took hold of his collar, gently tugging him over to me. “In fact, why don't you get back in this bed and do that thing you did with your thumb again.”

“You liked that, huh?”

“Hm-hmm.”

“Well, be good and get up, and I might do it again later tonight.”

“You're really gonna make me get out of this bed?”

“Afraid so.”

“Okay. Okay.” I groaned with a stretch before I eased the covers back. “What do you have to show me?”

“Gonna have to get dressed to find out.”

Curiosity outweighed my need for more sleep, so I pulled myself out of bed and slipped on my pajamas. “I'll be right back.”

“Take your time. I’ll wait for you in the kitchen.”

It was still a bit cool, so I slipped down to my room to change. I pulled off my pajama top, and I couldn’t help but smile when I caught a hint of his scent on my skin. It was a mix of cologne and something warm and familiar, and it filled me with a sense of peace I hadn’t felt in years.

I changed into a pair of jeans and a long-sleeve t-shirt before pulling my hair up. Once I was ready, I rushed to the kitchen to find Holt. When I walked in, he had a tumbler of coffee waiting for me. “Thought you might need this.”

“I definitely do.” I took it from his hand and smiled. “Thanks!”

“Come on.”

He took my free hand and led me out of the house. The door had barely closed behind us when Mable and Percy came rushing over. Holt gave them each a quick rub on the head, but that didn’t suffice. They both kept bumping up against him, begging for more. “Alright, alright.”

He stopped and gave them each some love, then promised, “I’ll feed ya in just a minute. I’ve got something to show the pretty lady first.”

To my surprise, they both settled down and walked patiently next to us as we continued towards the barn. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think they understood you.”

“‘Cause they did.” He chuckled. “Any mention of food, and those two are all ears.”

“They are adorable.”

“They have their moments.”

When we reached the barn, Holt pushed the door open, and I followed as he walked past the different rows of stalls. “I’m thinking about two or three more goats and maybe a couple of cows.”

“It’s perfect.”

“Yeah, it’s got some potential. I’ve just gotta take the time to work out all the details.”

I was amused by his enthusiasm, but it was the door off to the side that caught my attention. He hesitated for a second, then pushed it open with a small, proud smile. Inside was a room bathed in natural light. The walls were clean and white, with shelves lining the walls, and there was a sturdy table in the center. It was the perfect art studio. My mouth dropped as I gasped, “Is this...”

“It is.”

I stood there completely speechless, looking around at everything he’d done. My heart swelled with emotion as I turned to him and whispered, “It’s wonderful.”

“I hoped you would like it.” He stepped closer and placed his hands on my hips, pulling me gently against him. “It’s a work in progress, but we can add whatever you need.”

It was at that moment that I realized just how well he knew me and how much he really cared. This wasn't just a room. It was a piece of my heart he'd given back to me. “Thank you. It’s perfect.”

We lingered outside the barn, and we both threw out some possible ideas to make the barn even better. We’d just started back towards the house when Holt turned to me and said, “I need to ask you about something.”

“Sounds serious.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“I need to know more about your father,” he started. “Do you know anything about his business or the people he was involved in?”

"No. I mean, I knew he was a real estate lawyer, but that's about it." I shrugged. "We were never all that close, and things got even worse when he sent me away. So, whatever he was into, he kept me out of it."

“That’s what I thought.” Holt nodded slowly, but his jaw tensed. "So, you don’t know anything about a code.”

“No, I can’t say that I do.” I shook my head. "Why?”

“The men who were following you think you have some information they need.”

“Well, too bad for them because I don’t know a thing. And if I had to guess, Mom doesn’t either.”

He studied me for a beat, then asked, "What about Rooks? Do you think he might know?"

There was something in the way he said Rooks' name that led me to believe that he knew something I didn’t. My chest tightened. "You think he's involved, don't you?"

"I don’t know for sure, but it’s a possibility, especially with his line of work.”

“I don’t know. There was a time when I trusted him more than anyone.” My chest tightened as I told him, “Now, I don’t know. He and Dad were always so close, so there’s a chance...”

“Sounds like he and I need to have a conversation.”

“I’m sorry. I know things between you two haven’t been great.”

“That’s an understatement.” Holt opened and closed his fists. “But this supersedes any conflict between us.”

“Will you go to where he and Mom are hiding out?”

“No. I’ll have him come to the clubhouse.”

“Oh.”

“If he knows something, we will need to move on it.”

I didn’t know what was going on, but whatever was buried in my family’s past was clawing its way to the surface. And Holt was determined to uncover it with any means necessary. “Okay. I get it.”

“You and Ford should come, too. It’ll give you a chance to look around and meet some of the brothers.”

“I’d like that.”

“Good deal.”

We went back inside, and after we got Ford up and dressed, we all piled into Holt’s

SUV. I'd never been in a clubhouse before, so I just assumed it was a small building where they all gathered from time to time. But the second we pulled through the large metal gate, I realized it was much more than that.

This place was enormous, and it was secured at every corner with barbed-wire fence and security cameras. Holt was as cool as a cucumber as he parked and led us inside. I, on the other hand, was a nervous wreck. I felt like we'd stepped into a different world that we didn't belong in. The wide-eyed look on Ford's face showed he was just as hesitant as I was. I pulled him in a little closer for reassurance, and I put on a big smile as Holt introduced us to one brother after the next.

But I couldn't help but notice that they all kept calling him Seven instead of Holt. Curious why, I tugged at his sleeve and asked, "What's up with the name Seven?"

"It's a name I picked up in the military, and it kind of stuck."

"What does it mean?"

He hesitated, then answered, "You're not gonna like it."

"Just tell me."

"Seven men in seven seconds."

"What?" The question had barely left my mouth when it hit me. He could kill seven men in seven seconds, and that revelation floored me. Holt had always been so kind and compassionate. It seemed strange to think of him killing someone. My back stiffened as I muttered, "Never mind."

"Don't do that." His brows furrowed. "Just say what you were thinking."

“Nothing. It just makes me realize just how little I know about you.”

“You know the important stuff.”

“Do I?” I pushed. “What about your time in the military or your role here at the club? You haven’t shared any of that with me, and clearly, they’re a big part of your life.”

“There’s stuff you haven’t shared with me either. Your pregnancy, Ford’s first words and his first steps. Paris. New York. And everything in between. I want to know every detail, but we haven’t had a lot of time on our hands.”

“No, I guess we haven’t.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know, but let’s get through today first, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Come on.” He took my hand in his. “I’ll show you guys around.”

I nodded, then Ford and I followed as he started down a long corridor lined with bedrooms. Holt explained that they were for the brothers who stayed over. The walls bore framed photos of rides and various gatherings, and they gave me a sneak peek into this strange, new world he’d delved into.

We walked past the bar with a jukebox, pool tables, dartboards, and every kind of liquor you could imagine, and from there, we made our way to the kitchen. It had all the necessities and an enormous family-sized wood table in the center.

We continued down the hall to a spacious family room filled with wide-screen TVs, pool tables, and dartboards, and Ford let out a notable gasp. Holt chuckled as he said, “It’s pretty cool, huh?”

“It’s awesome.”

“Go ahead.” Holt motioned his head inside. “Go check it out.”

Ford had just made his way over to one of the pool tables when Goose, one of Holt’s brothers, came over to us and announced, “They’re here.”

The words had barely left his mouth when in walked my mother and Rooks. Mom looked a bit freaked out while Rooks was trying his best to show zero emotion. I started toward them, and I couldn’t help but notice the bruising under both of Rooks’ eyes. His bottom lip was swollen, and there was a deep scratch on his chin.

I went to Mom first and gave her a hug. “Hey, how ya holding up?”

“I’m still standing.”

I glanced over at Rooks as I asked, “What about you?”

“Can’t complain.”

“You sure about that? You look terrible.”

“Just a rough night’s sleep.”

“If you say so.”

Mom leaned over to me with wide eyes as she asked, “What is this place?”

“It’s a biker clubhouse,” Rooks answered. “It’s where they do the things they do if you know what I mean.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Well, it’s probably best that you don’t,” Rooks scoffed.

“Don’t say it like that,” I fussed.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re implying they’re all up to no good. You know nothing about them or what they do here.” I crossed my arms as I continued, “And in case you forgot, they’re trying to help us. The least you could do is show them a little respect.”

“Yeah, if you say so.”

They both grew tense when Holt came up next to me. Mom gave him an awkward smile. “Hello, Holt. It’s good to see you.”

“Good to see you, too, Mrs. Warren. I hated to hear about Mr. Warren.”

“Thank you, Holt. I know you might find it hard to believe, but he always thought a lot of you.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about that. But that’s neither here nor there. I’m sorry, just the same.”

Rooks hadn’t stopped glaring at Holt since he walked up. I knew things would be tense between them, but they both looked like they could claw each other’s eyes out. Rooks’ jaw was clenched tight as he snarled, “What are we doing here, Tallie.”

“We have some questions,” Holt answered.

“What makes you think I’ll answer them?”

“Because your mother and sister’s lives are at stake.” Holt held his glare for a moment, then turned and glanced over at Ford. He was playing a game of pool with one of the brothers and looked to be having a great time. “He’s good for a bit. Why don’t we go down to the conference room, where we’ll have a bit more privacy.”

I nodded. Holt then motioned over to Shep, one of the brothers I’d met when we first arrived, and he followed as we all started down the hall. Holt opened a door and led us into a small room with two flat-screen TVs on the wall and a large round table in the center of the room.

We all took a seat, and as soon as we were settled, Rooks turned to Holt and said, “Alright, let’s get on with it.”

“What do you know about your father’s involvement with the Volkov family?”

“Dad worked with a lot of people. What’s so important about these guys?”

The blood drained from Rooks’ face when Holt replied, “Sergei Volkov’s driver and one of his guards were the ones following your mother and Tallie.”

“And how do you know it was his driver?”

“Because I know.” Holt remained calm as he looked at his childhood friend and said, “If you know something, now is the time to...”

“Dad always said that there was a fine line between right and wrong in real estate, and he often pushed the perimeters. That push led a particular clientele to come knocking at his door.”

“What are you saying?” Mom asked. “Your father was working with crooks?”

“Well, they weren’t in his Bible study.”

“Rooks!”

“I’m sorry, Mom, but you know Dad. Once he set his mind to something…”

“I just can’t believe that he would do anything illegal.”

“I didn’t say that. I said he pushed the perimeters. There’s a difference.”

“Tell that to people he booted out of their homes,” Holt grumbled.

“Look, he did what he had to do. I don’t know what else there is to say.”

“Well, for starters, you could tell us about the code.”

Rooks gave Holt a strange look, and anyone could see that he was lying when he answered, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Volkov’s driver said he was sent to retrieve a code. We’re guessing it’s a password or routing number to an offshore account,” Shep interjected. “Would you know anything about that?”

“Don’t know what makes you think I’d know anything about it.”

“We all know what you do, Rooks. It doesn’t take much to put two and two together.”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree, man. I don’t know anything about any offshore

accounts or any stupid codes.”

I don't know if it was the tone in his voice or the weird way he was squinting his eyes, but I could tell he was lying. And I wasn't the only one. Holt and Shep knew it, too. I could tell by the way they were glaring at him. I just didn't know what they were going to do about it, but something told me they would stop at nothing to get the information they needed.

Even if it meant putting everything on the line.

15

SEVEN

“He’s lying.”

“Oh, yeah, he was lying big time. So, what are you gonna do about it?”

“Not much I can do. Not like I can sick Grim on him.” I glanced over at him with an aggravated look as I said, “He’s Tallie’s brother.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“We need to get into her father’s files and see if there’s anything that might help us figure this thing out.” I turned to Shep. “You think you can get access to his server?”

“Yeah, I’ll see what I can find, but I’d get a lot farther if I had his laptop.”

“I’m guessing that’s with the fucking cops.”

“More than likely but give me some time. Let me see what I can do.”

“Need a hand?”

“I get that you want a hand in this, but you know me. I work better alone.”

“Understood. Just let me know if you need anything.”

“You know I will.”

Shep gave me a pat on the shoulder, then turned and went back to his office. I stood there for a moment, and my mind instantly went back to Rooks. He lied right to our faces, and he did it knowing that his sister and mother were in danger. Rooks had never been a saint. Hell, he’d pulled some shady stuff back when we were kids, but nothing that would ever put anyone in harm’s way, especially his own family.

There had to be a hell of a good reason for him to lie about his involvement, and I had every intention of finding out what it was—even if it meant beating the hell out of him again. It wasn’t like the smug asshole didn’t have it coming.

It was a thought that was weighing on my mind as I headed back to the family room to check on Tallie and Ford. They’d been off on their own for over an hour, and I figured they were ready to get back to the house. But when I walked in, I saw that I was wrong. They were doing just fine.

Tallie was sitting on the sofa with Bridgett, one of the hang arounds, and Casey, Ghost’s ol’ lady. They were all laughing and carrying on about something or another. Ford was playing some video game with Casey’s son, Toby, and from the sounds of it, they were having a blast. I couldn’t deny that the sight of them all together got to me in a way I didn’t expect.

I leaned against the doorway, letting myself take it all in. Tallie looked happy, really happy, and she was here, in my world, in my space. She and Ford looked like they belonged here just as much as I did. I couldn’t believe it.

She and Ford had only been here a few hours, and they were already starting to settle in. For so long, I’d tried to imagine what it would’ve been like if things had gone differently. Now, I wasn’t just imagining it. I was watching it unfold right in front of me. And damn if it didn’t make me want to hold onto both of them with everything I

had.

I was so caught up watching them that I didn't notice that Ghost had walked up and was standing next to me until he leaned in and whispered, "That her?"

I didn't have to ask what he meant. I knew. He was talking about the girl I'd spent countless nights rambling about when we were deployed. He'd heard all the stories, good and bad, and he knew that she was the one. She'd been the one even when I was too damn angry to even say her name.

"Yeah." My chest tightened. "That's her."

Ghost let out a low chuckle as he crossed his arms and took a good look at Tallie and Ford. It was like he was seeing a piece of my past finally make sense. "Well, I'll be damned."

"Yeah."

"I gotta tell ya. I wasn't so sure this day would ever come."

"If her folks had a say, it wouldn't have." I shook my head. "Went so far as to tell her I was dead and buried."

"No shit?"

"Yeah. It's been a tough pill to swallow."

"You two going to make a go of it, or is it too much?"

"It's a lot, but it'd take a hell of a lot more to make me walk away from her and my son."

“So, he is yours?”

“He is.”

“Don’t know why I even asked. Hell, he looks just like ya. Even has the same bad hair.”

“Hey, now. Don’t be hatin’ on my hair. Not everybody can pull off the whole Goldilocks thing.”

“It takes a special kind of badass for this kind of hair.”

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that.”

Tallie laughed at something Bridgett said, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was so damn beautiful. Ghost chuckled as he said, “You’d think they’d known each other forever.”

“You really would.” I was still watching them as I said, “It’s good to see your girl doing so well.”

“Yeah, those first couple of months were rough.” Ghost stood with his arms crossed, and his expression was unreadable as he watched Casey. “Felt like I was always waiting for the other shoe to drop, but now things seem to be settling.”

I had to admit that she had been looking better, happier, and stronger. But I knew better than most that just because someone looked okay didn’t mean they were. “How’s she doing with everything?”

“She’s getting there. She’s not looking over her shoulder as much, but...” He let the words hang.

"But it's still there," I finished for him.

"Yeah." His eyes stayed locked on her as he continued, "Dylan did a real number on her. For the most part, she's pushing through, but I can tell when things start weighing on her. She'll check the locks three or four times before going to bed. She sleeps light. Wakes up with a start and struggles to go back to sleep. But she's tough. Stronger than she knows."

"Good she has you to help her through it."

"I don't know about that." Ghost shook his head. "You know me. I'm not good at that staying calm bullshit. She even mentions something about what that asshole did, and it makes my blood boil, and I wanna kill him all over again."

"Yeah, nobody's ever gonna mistake you for Dr. Phil, but you've helped her in other ways." I motioned my head over to the girls. "You've made her feel safe, and that's something she hasn't had in a long damn time."

"Nothing I wouldn't do for her or the kid."

"How's he making it with the new school and all?"

"Aw, he's a tough one. He's already making all these friends, and he's been talking about joining the junior football team." There was a hint of pride in Ghost's voice, which was something I hadn't heard from him before—at least, not like this. "I think we've got a quarterback on our hands."

"That'd be awesome." I gave him a pat on the shoulder. "I gotta say, family looks good on you, brother."

Ghost smirked. "Ah, hell. Don't go getting all sentimental on me, brother."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

We stood there a little longer, watching our women talk, and it wasn't long before the sound of Kay's voice drew our attention to the hallway. Neither of us was looking to eavesdrop, but it was impossible not to hear her as she yelled, "It's ridiculous! Those girls are half your age, and they're pawing all over you like you're some kind of god."

"I can't help that they have good taste."

"Oh my God! You are as ridiculous as they are!" Kay roared. "You are truly incorrigible."

"And what do you care? You've made it clear that you want no part of me or the club."

"I've done no such thing!"

"Oh, but you have." There was no missing the sound of frustration in Preacher's voice as he snapped, "In fact, you've been crystal fucking clear about it, and I'm done."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I never was and never will be the man you thought I should be. I'm good with that, and it's time you got good with it, too. Because that ship's come and gone."

Silence hung between them for a beat before the sound of hurried footsteps echoed through the hallway. A door creaked, then slammed shut. Ghost let out a low whistle. "Damn."

A few seconds later, Preacher stepped into the family room. He looked like he'd just been kicked in the gut. His shoulders were slumped, and there was a defeated look in his eyes. He ran a hand down his face before he spotted us watching him.

"Damn, Prez." Ghost raised a brow. "That was rough."

Prez didn't answer right away. He exhaled a heavy breath, then shook his head. "Yeah, I can't keep doing this shit."

I exchanged a glance with Ghost. We'd both seen Preacher handle more than his fair share of shit over the years, but this mess with Kay was different. She got to him in a way nothing else did. It was clear he was torn, so I suggested, "Maybe it's time to tell the girls to back off?"

"It's not about the fucking girls. It never has been." He kept his eyes trained ahead as he added, "Not gonna matter what I do. It's not gonna be enough for her."

"What are you saying?"

"She's gotta go."

Her ex-husband had given himself up to the men he'd deceived and robbed, but we hadn't heard anything from him since. There was still a chance that there would be further backlash, so Ghost was compelled to ask, "You sure that's a good idea?"

"Don't have a choice in the matter. This shit isn't fair to either of us." Prez shook his head. "There was a time when I loved her like no other. Hell, I would've done just about anything for her, but now, I just wanna wring her fucking neck."

"You know what they say... there's a fine line between love and hate."

“Well, right now, it feels like a fucking ravine.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“That’s something I’ll have to discuss with Memphis.” He ran his hand over his face, then shook it off and asked, “He still covering for you at the Vault?”

“Yeah. The last I talked to him, he was basically living over there.”

“I bet Antonia is loving that.”

“Hopefully, it won’t be for much longer.”

“About that... what’s the latest with your girl?”

“Her brother is a lying asshole, but I got no way to prove it or make him come clean.”

“There’s always a way.”

“I got Shep working on it. Maybe he can come up with something, but I have a feeling that the only way we’re gonna get any real answers is to get her father’s laptop and that’s in his office.”

“Which is gonna be tough with all the yellow tape and security hovering over the place.”

“Exactly.”

I hadn’t even realized that Tallie had walked up until she said, “Maybe I could help.”

“We got it covered.”

“I’m sure you do, but I could help,” Tallie pushed. “I could ask Detective Joyner if he could let me in the office.”

“Doubt he’d go for that.”

“I could tell him that I need some important papers from the safe or something?”

“Hmm.” Preacher shrugged. “That could work.”

“But she’s gonna need a good excuse.”

“I could say that I need Ford’s birth certificate so I can register him for school. If he lets me in, I could try to get access to his computer and whatever else you think we might need.”

Ghost gave me one of his looks. “It’s worth a shot.”

“Not if it means putting her in danger. I’m not...”

“I’ll be fine,” Tallie argued. “I’m sure Detective Joyner will be there with me.”

“The same detective who couldn’t keep Volkov’s men from following you.”

“Yeah, you have a point there.” She thought for a moment, then suggested, “Then, you come with me.”

Preacher shook his head. “Detective would never go for that, and even if he did, he’d be suspicious as hell.”

“Don’t need cops thinking we had anything to do with this mess,” Ghost added.

“Okay, then you guys can wait outside or something. I don’t know, but me going to the office makes the most sense.” Tallie remained calm and rational as she told us, “I mean, it’s not like you guys can just bust up in there, at least not easily. It’s a three-story office building with security guards and cameras, and Dad’s office is blocked off with yellow tape.”

“She’s got a point.”

“I don’t know.”

“Just let me talk to Detective Joyner and see if he will even consider it, because there’s a really good chance that he won’t.”

“Okay, fine. But it’s just to the office. Nothing more.”

“Whatever you say.” Tallie seemed proud of herself when she asked, “When do you want me to go talk to him?”

“First thing tomorrow.” I glanced over at Prez and Ghost as I said, “That’ll give us some time to prepare.”

“Okay. Sounds good to me.” Tallie gave me a smile. “I’m gonna head back over to the girls. Just let me know when you get ready to go.”

“Give me five.”

“Take all the time you need.”

Once she was out of earshot, I turned my attention back to Ghost and Prez. “If we do this, we do it right. We need to take every precaution.”

“Shouldn’t be much to cover her to the station and over to the office.” Prez turned to Ghost as he said, “You and Goose get with Rusty and Skid. Work out a plan to keep eyes on her at all times.”

“So, we just doing the office or is she going to try going over to the house, too?”

“Just the office. If she doesn’t find anything there, then we’ll make plans to check out the house ourselves.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll get with Shep,” Ghost offered. “I’m sure he’ll have some input to all this.”

“I’m sure he will. Thanks, brother.”

“Get with us in the morning, and we’ll piece together a plan.”

“Sounds good.”

By the time I got Tallie and Ford back to my place, it was already pushing dinnertime. Ford had been talking nonstop about Toby and the games they’d played, but as soon as we walked in the door, I could see it—he was starting to slow down. I figured he was getting hungry, so I started for the kitchen. “You like hot dogs?”

“Yeah.” His eyes lit up. “As long as you’ve got some ketchup.”

“Got plenty.”

“Awesome.”

Tallie leaned against the counter, arms crossed, watching as I got everything together.

“Need a hand?”

"I've got it." I tossed the hot dogs in the pan before starting on the macaroni. It wasn't anything fancy, but Ford didn't seem to mind. He ate every bite like he hadn't eaten in days. Hell, he even gave me a couple of nods and a thumbs-up. I considered it a grand success.

After dinner, we all settled on the couch, and I flipped through the channels until we landed on some animated movie I'd never seen before. Ford curled up between two pillows, and it wasn't long before the weight of the day caught up to him. He let out a little sigh, and then, the kid was out like a light.

Tallie looked over at him with a soft smile. "He looks so peaceful when he's sleeping."

I didn't respond. I couldn't. I was too enamored by the sight of my son sleeping so soundly. I got up and walked over to him, just watching him for a moment. Then, being careful not to wake him, I scooped him up into my arms. His head rolled to my chest as I carried him down the hall to his room. I eased him down onto the mattress, and once he was settled, I pulled the covers up to his chin.

He didn't move.

He just let out a breath and continued snoozing. I just stood there, watching him for a moment longer. My chest tightened at the thought of how much time I'd missed with him. I didn't want to miss another second. He was mine, and it was time he knew it.

When I got back to the living room, Tallie was sitting on the edge of the sofa with her knees drawn up to her chest. I could tell by the way she was looking at me that she knew what was coming. Hell, she didn't even blink an eye when I told her, "It's time to tell him the truth."

"I know. You're right. He deserves to know, and I want him to know. I just don't know how to tell him."

"We'll tell him together." I sat down beside her and took her hand in mine. "We don't have to make it complicated. The simpler, the better."

"He's a lucky kid." Tallie gave my hand a squeeze. "He's got an amazing father."

"You're the amazing one."

Still holding her hand, I stood and gave her a gentle tug, urging her to her feet. Once she was up, I leaned down and lifted her into my arms. I carried her up to my bedroom and tossed her onto the bed. A flash of desire crossed her face as I eased down on top of her, hovering above her for a moment before I crashed my mouth against hers.

Her kiss was warm and soft, and each swirl of her tongue made the blood rush straight to my cock. There'd never been anyone on this planet who could get to me the way she did, and that hadn't changed. Not even a little. Fuck. Just feeling her body against mine nearly sent me over the edge.

My need took over, and my hands suddenly became rough and impatient. I lowered my mouth to her neck and whispered, "You're so fucking incredible," I ran my lips leisurely from the curve of her jaw down to her shoulder, "every goddamn inch of you."

"God, I've missed your foul mouth," she rasped as she pulled her sweater over her head and tossed it to the floor. As she unfastened her bra, she whispered, "I've missed all of you."

"Right back at ya, sweetheart."

I continued trailing kisses past her collarbone, and her fingers tangled in my hair, pulling me towards her when my mouth reached her breast. Heavy breaths and low moans filled the room as I flicked my tongue against her nipple. Her head fell back, and goosebumps prickled across her skin as my fingers worked their way across her abdomen, through the waistband of her jeans, and further down between her legs.

A small whimper escaped her throat as my fingers grazed across her center, circling her, teasing her. Unable to contain herself, she rocked her hips forward, begging for my touch. Fuck. I could barely contain myself. Seeing her so wound up made my cock grow thick with need. I eased my fingers deep inside her, and I'd just begun to stroke her when she moaned, "Oh God, Holt... Please."

The moment I brushed my thumb against her clit, I felt her begin to tremble. Knowing she was close, I increased the pressure as I grazed my fingers over her g-spot. She moaned loudly, and she tightened around my fingers. Her head dropped forward as her entire body tensed with her release. She called out my name, and I was done. I couldn't wait a moment longer to have her; I withdrew my fingers and moved my hands to the waistband of her jeans.

Once I had them unfastened, I gave them a tug, removing them in a blink and tossing them to the floor. Equally as eager, Tallie reached for the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head then started to work on my jeans. In a matter of seconds, we were both completely undressed, and we spent the next two hours tangled in each other's arms.

The next morning, I didn't want to get out of bed. I wanted to stay there with Tallie, safe and warm in my arms, but she was up and in the shower before I had a chance to stop her. Like me, she was eager to put this mess with her father behind us, but I had a gnawing feeling that things were going to get a lot worse before they got better.

I should've listened to that voice in my head, and it was a mistake I would soon come

to regret.

16

TALLIE

“Did they find the code thing or whatever it was they were looking for?”

“No, Mom. They didn’t.”

“I still don’t understand why anyone would think we’d have such a thing.”

“I don’t know either, but they do. And now, we’re stuck trying to figure out why.”

“Was it just me, or did you get the feeling that Holt and his friends thought Rooks was involved?”

“No, it wasn’t just you. I’m sure they thought it, and I thought it, too.”

“You can’t truly believe that your brother would know something and keep it from us.”

“Come on, Mom. You saw the way he was acting. He couldn’t have looked more guilty.”

“That’s your brother you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, he’s the same brother who lied straight to my face for years and never batted an eye.”

“That’s not fair.”

“It’s absolutely fair,” I argued. “We have men who have been following us. They broke into your house and rifled through Dad’s office, and they came looking for us at the hotel. He knows we are in danger, and he’s not doing a damn thing to help us figure out why.”

Mom couldn’t have sounded more patronizing when she said, “Well, I guess it’s good you have Holt to look after you.”

“Yes, it is. I’m also lucky that he’s looking after you and Ford, too, because no one else is.”

“So, what happens now?”

“I’m not sure. I’m going to finish getting dressed, and then, I’m going over to the police station to have a word with Detective Joyner.”

“Oh? Why are you doing that?”

“I’m going to see if he will let me into Dad’s office.”

“His office?” she gasped. “Why?”

“To see if I can find anything about that code.”

“Oh, I don’t like the sound of that, Tallie. It could be dangerous.”

“I’ll be fine. Besides, we don’t even know if he’ll let me in there.”

“I’m sure he will. He seems like a nice man.”

“I guess time will tell.” I glanced over at the clock, and when I saw the time, I told her, “I’ve gotta get going. We’re supposed to leave here in ten.”

“Okay. Just please be careful and call me when you get back.”

“I will. And Mom, don’t say anything to Rooks about all this. I think it’s better that he doesn’t know.”

“Okay. I won’t say anything.”

“Thanks. I’ll call you later.”

I hung up the phone and tossed it back in my purse, then walked over to the mirror and gave myself a quick once over. I ran the palm of my hands down the front of my blouse, trying to smooth the wrinkles, then tugged at the hem like it would somehow make me feel less out of place in it. I didn’t know why I was so nervous, but my stomach was in knots.

I let out a slow breath and reached for my earrings, and my hands trembled just enough to make putting them on harder than they should’ve been. I was still fumbling with the clasp when I saw Holt’s reflection in the mirror.

He was leaning against the doorway, watching me with a soft smile. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks,” I scoffed. “I feel like I’m going to throw up.”

“Hey, now.” He pushed off the doorframe and came to stand behind me, resting his hands on my hips. “You don’t have to do this. We can find another way.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t.” His touch was grounding, solid, but it didn’t stop the nerves from twisting inside me. “If this doesn’t feel right, Tallie, we’ll figure out another way.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine. I’m just a little nervous.” I swallowed hard, meeting his gaze in the mirror. “It would just help if I knew what I was looking for.”

Holt didn’t answer right away. It made me wonder if he even knew what we were searching for. After a couple of seconds, he turned me toward him, and his hands slid down to mine. He held on tight as he said, “It’s hard to tell. Just start off with the small stuff. Look around and see if anything feels off. Paperwork, notes, anything that doesn’t make sense. And if you don’t find anything, then at least you tried.”

“Okay.”

I bit my lip and nodded. He made it sound so simple. Like I wasn’t about to step into my father’s office—into his world—and dig through all his secrets. “It’s going to be okay. Just don’t take any unnecessary chances. Get in and get out.”

"Okay," I whispered. "No unnecessary chances."

“Good.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small flash drive. “Now, with that in mind, I need you to try and get this plugged into your father’s desktop computer.”

“Okay, but where am I supposed to plug it in?”

“On the hard drive tower. There should be a couple of places to slip it in. Just choose one and go.”

“What if it’s the wrong one?”

“It won’t be.”

I nodded, and he leaned in and pressed a kiss to my forehead, lingering there for a moment before pulling back. “We better get going.”

“What about Ford?”

“Ghost is bringing Whit and Toby by. Figured he’d enjoy hanging out with them.”

“That was very thoughtful of you.”

“What can I say?” A sexy smirk crossed his handsome face. “I’m a thoughtful guy.”

“Yeah, and kind of handsome, too.”

“Kind of?”

His brows furrowed like he was wounded, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “Okay, okay. You’re hot. Smoking hot. Like set the ground on fire kind of hot.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Crazy about you.” He leaned in and kissed me once more. “You ready to hit it?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

I grabbed my purse, and after we said our goodbyes to Ford and Duggar, Holt followed me outside. When we got out to my car, he opened my door and said, “I’ll be right behind ya.”

“Okay.”

“Just play it cool, and everything should go as planned. I have guys at the station and at his office. We’ll be watching you every step of the way.”

“I’ve got it. Go to the office and come straight back here. You can stop worrying.”

“It’s my job to worry.” He gave me a wink, then said, “Now, get in and buckle up.”

I did as he said, and in a blink, we were headed to the police station.

When I got there, I looked all around, but I saw no sign of Holt or any of his brothers. I had no idea where he was, but I knew he was there, watching every move I made. I could feel the weight of Holt’s stare on my skin. It was a silent promise that he wouldn’t let anything happen to me.

And even though I couldn’t see them, I knew his brothers were out there too. They were lurking in the background, ready to step in if things didn’t go as planned. It should’ve made me more nervous, but somehow, knowing they were close made it easier to keep walking.

I thought back to my father, and I couldn’t help but wonder if I ever knew him at all. Clearly, he wasn’t the stand-up, righteous man I’d always thought he was. Instead, he was involved in shady deals that ended up getting him killed. And not only that, he’d put his entire family in harm’s way. It made me so angry with him—almost blindingly so.

It was that anger that gave me the courage to walk straight up to the front counter and announce, “I’m Tallie Warren. I would like to speak with Detective Joyner.”

“Can you tell me what this is in reference to?”

“He’s investigating my father’s murder.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right.” The officer picked up the phone and dialed Joyner’s extension. As soon as he picked up, the officer told him, “You have a Tallie Warren here to see you.”

There was a brief pause, and then, he said, “Sure thing. I’ll send her on back.”

He motioned me through the side entrance, then led me down the hall to Detective Joyner’s office. When I walked in, he was sitting at his desk, flipping through files, and he didn’t seem pleased to be interrupted. “Good morning, Ms. Warren. I’ve been meaning to reach out and give you an update on things, but unfortunately, there have been none to give.”

“I didn’t figure there had, but that’s not why I’ve come. I mean, it is, but I need your help with something else.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“I need to get into Dad’s office.” A suspicious look crossed his face, so I quickly added, “I need to get my son registered for school, and I can’t do that without his birth certificate and shot records. They’re in Dad’s safe or possibly his desk. I’m not sure where, but I know they’re there.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.” He gave me a look that was meant to be understanding but came off as patronizing. “Your father’s office is part of an active crime scene, and everything in it is considered evidence.”

“I understand that, but these are important documents that I can’t just replace overnight.” Knowing what I’d said was true, he grimaced, so I gave him a little push. “I’m only asking for a few minutes.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s just not possible.”

“Come on, Detective.” The words tumbled out sharper than I intended, but I couldn’t stop them. “This investigation has been going on for a while now, and you have nothing. You’re no closer to finding out who killed my father than you were when he was first murdered. I haven’t pushed or complained. I know you are doing what you can, but we both know my son’s documents have nothing to do with my father or what happened to him.”

“Sometimes it’s the things we least expect that end up being critical to an investigation.”

“Detective Joyner, please.” I tried to keep my voice calm as I pleaded, “I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. Ford is already a week or more behind. I can’t afford to wait for you to finish your investigation.”

Joyner sighed, setting his pen down and folding his hands on the desk. “How long do you think it would take for you to get everything you need?”

“Twenty minutes. Maybe less.”

“I’ll have to look through everything you plan to take.”

“That’s fine. I have nothing that I would want to hide.”

“My day is packed solid, so if we’re going to do this, we’re going to need to do it now.”

“Okay. That’s great.”

Before he had a chance to change his mind, I stood and waited for him to do the

same. He let out an annoyed breath, then closed his files and grabbed his weapon from his drawer. He slipped it into its holster before standing and starting for the door.

“Okay. Let’s get this done.”

“Should I ride with you or...”

“I’ll follow you over.”

“Okay. Sounds good.”

The detective’s heavy footsteps echoed against the floor as he led me through the station and out to the parking lot. After I showed him where I was parked, he followed me across town to my father’s office. We quickly parked and started for the front door. It was only a ten-minute drive, but I could tell by his tense expression that he was already growing impatient.

I expected the place to be covered up with detectives and Dad’s old employees, but there were just a couple of security guards and a stray worker or two. Nothing like there normally was, and even though I found it odd, I didn’t question it. I just kept my expression neutral, and my hands clasped in front of me like I was nothing more than a daughter tying up loose ends.

That’s what I wanted him to believe—that I was there for something simple. But with every step I took, I could feel my facade starting to crumble.

Detective Joyner pulled back the yellow tape covering my father’s door, then opened the door and gestured for me to step inside. "Just try to be quick and don’t move anything.”

“It’s going to be hard to look for the files without moving anything.”

“Yeah, just go easy at it.”

“Okay.”

I gave him a tight smile before stepping inside. The room was filled with the familiar scent of my father’s cologne mixed with the faint scent of leather. Everything was exactly how I remembered—even the blood stain on the floor where he’d died.

I was staring at it when Joyner said, “Hey, ah... sorry about that. We can’t let the cleaning crew do their thing until...”

“It’s okay. I understand.”

“Heard you decided to just go with a memorial.”

“Just thought it would be easier.”

“Was it?”

“Not really.” I shrugged. “But we got through it, and once he’s cremated, we can do something special with the remains.”

“Sounds like you have it all figured out.”

“I wish,” I scoffed. “Right now, I feel like I’m scrambling.”

“Well, I won’t hold you up. Go on and see if you can find what you need.”

“Thanks.”

I moved to his desk first, opening drawers and rifling through all the neatly stacked files and documents. On the surface, it was exactly what I should've expected—paperwork, case notes, and a few scattered receipts. But nothing that resembled a code.

Knowing Joyner was watching me, I grabbed a file labeled "Vital Records" and flipped it open. It should've been there, but strangely enough, the file was empty. In fact, several of the files were empty.

I turned to the bookshelf and scanned the rows of legal texts and binders, searching for anything that might be considered suspicious. Unfortunately, I didn't find anything.

"Damn," I muttered under my breath.

I glanced over at Detective Joyner, and he was leaning against the doorway, toying with his phone. He wasn't paying me much mind, so I used the opportunity to step over to my father's desktop.

I reached into my back pocket and pulled out the small drive Holt had given me. I did like he'd told me and slipped it into the USB hub. I didn't want to take a chance on Joyner seeing me, so I quickly stepped away from the desk.

That's when I spotted the safe.

It was my last hope.

I dropped to my knees and quickly entered the combination. Strangely enough, it was my birthday. One might think it was my father's way of saying that I was important to him, but I knew better. There was only one person who was important to him, and that was him.

The lock clicked open, and I pulled the door wide.

I expected to find what I was looking for, but all that was inside were a few stacks of cash, his gun, and a folder filled with legal documents.

No laptop.

No hidden ledgers.

No codes.

Nothing.

I clenched my jaw as I closed the safe. If he was hiding something—and I knew he was—it wasn't there. I rose to my feet and quickly stepped away from the desk before announcing, "They're not here."

Joyner was still looking down at his phone when he muttered, "That's too bad."

Holt had made it very clear that I was only supposed to check the office and then head back to his place. I had every intention of doing exactly what he wanted me to, but I was so close. I could feel it, and Detective Joyner was already here. It would only take us a few minutes to check the house, so I gave him a pleading look as I said, "Maybe they're over at the house."

"Look, this has already taken longer than..."

"Please. They're really important, and if they aren't here, then they have to be at the house." I replied with a grimace. "It won't take me long to check. I'll be in and out in no time."

He studied me for a long moment before sighing, "I have a feeling I'm gonna regret this."

"You won't. I promise."

I gave him a smile, but inside, my stomach churned.

I knew my chances of finding that code were growing slim. But I wasn't giving up. Detective Joyner closed the office door and secured the yellow tape before leading me out of the building. I glanced around the parking lot, searching for any sign of Holt, but like before, I saw no sign of him or the brothers. When I got to my car, I pulled out my phone and was about to call him when I decided against it.

I knew what he would say.

He'd tell me to forget it and to go back to his house, and I could've done that. But I just couldn't shake the feeling that there was something I needed to find—something I needed to see with my own eyes. I had no idea what that was, but I had to find out. So, I tossed my phone back into my purse and started the car.

I shook off my unease, and with Detective Joyner following close behind, I pulled out of the parking lot and sped over to my parents' house. Normally, I wouldn't have gone so fast, especially with an officer tailing me, but I knew time wasn't on my side. I needed to get to the house, search the office, and get back to Holt's before he realized what I'd done.

My phone rang, and when I saw that it was Holt, I declined the call—twice. I also ignored his text. I was already at the house and didn't plan on being there long. I hopped out of the car, and Detective Joyner and I rushed up to the front steps.

"I'll be quick."

“You’ll have to be. I’ve got a meeting in ten.”

He removed the yellow tape that blocked off the front porch, then we continued up to the door. He pulled out the key, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. He stepped aside and let me enter first. He closed the door behind us, then said, “You go ahead. I have to take a call.”

I gave him a nod and watched as he stepped out, already answering his cell. The moment he was gone, I exhaled and turned my attention to the office.

It was still a mess from the break-in. All his files and papers were still sprawled out on the floor.

I started there. I scooped them up and flipped through each one of them before stacking them on the table. It was just listing after listing. Nothing that seemed out of the norm. I moved to the desk and started skimming through the remaining files.

When I didn’t find anything there, I went over to the bookshelf. I was looking through all the different books when I spotted a small brown box. I picked it up and opened it. Inside, I found several letters bound together. There was something familiar about the handwriting that made me give them a closer look.

That’s when I noticed that they were addressed to me.

They were letters from Holt—letters that my father had stolen and hidden from me. I wanted to stop and read each one of them, but I needed to hurry. I looked for a place to hide them, in a pocket or even inside my shirt, but there was no way Detective Joyner wouldn’t see them.

Before I had a chance to think it through, I walked over and opened his office window. I leaned out and dropped the bundle of letters behind the bushes. I rushed

back to continue my search at the bookshelf, and it wasn't long before I spotted a thick ledger tucked away with some old law books. I reached for it and had just flipped it open, and I knew right away it was important.

I rushed back over to the window and let it fall behind the bushes with the letters. I was just about to close the window when gunshots rang out.

Two of them, in quick succession.

The sound sent ice through my veins. My throat went dry, and every instinct screamed at me to run, but my legs wouldn't move. I was frozen, trapped in my dad's office with no idea what was going on.

My hands were shaking as I eased the office door open and stepped into the hallway. I was terrified, but I forced myself forward, gripping the edge of the doorframe as I peered into the living room.

My stomach dropped when I saw Detective Joyner sprawled on the floor. His phone was still clutched in his hand, and blood was pooling beneath him. I was about to dart back into the office when I saw him—a man dressed in all black standing across the room, and he had his gun pointed directly at my head.

Damn.

I'd really done it now.

17

SEVEN

“She’s in,” Shephard’s voice crackled through the SUV’s speakers. “Just past security.”

“Good.” He was back at the clubhouse, watching the security feeds he’d tapped into the night before, and he could see her every move. “Any issues?”

“Not that I can see. They just got on the elevator.”

I exhaled slowly, rolling my shoulders. “How does she look?”

“She’s steady.” A pause. “Focused.”

That was Tallie. She had a fire in her. It burned low and steady—a quiet determination that even her father couldn’t smother. But I knew her well enough to know that her nerves were right there on the surface, reminding her that things could take a turn at any second.

“They just made it to the office. He’s taking the tape off now.”

“Anyone else on the floor?”

“Just a security guard and some guy working in a corner office.”

I stared up at the row of windows that stretched across the second floor. One of them belonged to Tallie's father, and at that moment, she was up there with Detective Joyner, searching for the code. I knew he was a cop and should've been more than capable of keeping her safe, but I hated that I couldn't be with her.

Grim sat next to me in the passenger seat, and he was drumming his fingers against his thigh in a slow, steady rhythm. Like typical Grim, he was solid and unshaken. He wasn't much for talking, but he didn't need to be. He was there to step in if things went sideways.

"Tallie just went in. Joyner is standing at the door watching."

"Can you see what she's doing?"

"No actual cameras in the office. Client privilege and all that."

"Damn." I clenched my jaw. "I don't like this."

"She's good. No one on the floor is moving."

Another long, agonizing pause.

"Hey!" There was no missing the excitement in Shep's voice when he announced, "She just got the drive put in."

"That's great. You gonna be able to access the computer now?"

"Should be. I'll check as soon as she gets out of there."

The streets were starting to get busy with morning traffic, and it had me on edge. It was a reminder of how little control I had over how this all played out. While I was

pleased that she'd gotten the drive put in, I was ready for this thing to be done.

A few more minutes passed, and then Shep announced, "Alright, they're headed for the door."

"She got anything with her?"

"Not that I can tell. Just got on the elevator."

I held my breath until I heard him say, "Okay. They're out and coming your way."

"Good deal. Appreciate your help, brother."

"That's what I'm here for. I'll see you when you get back to the clubhouse."

"Sure thing."

My attention was all on Tallie as I ended the call. I watched her walk over to her car and open the door. Even from across the lot, I could see the tension in her shoulders. The weight of the day had taken its toll. She wasn't used to this kind of shit—sneaking around and searching for codes like she was one of us.

But she'd done it, and she'd done it well.

She started her car, and Detective Joyner followed as she started out of the parking lot. I quickly pulled out behind them. I was no longer worried about being seen, so I stayed pretty close. Tallie weaved through the traffic like she had somewhere to be. I had no problem keeping up until a fucking semi pulled out in front of me, blocking my view.

In a blink, the streets seemed to implode, and cars were clogging up every damn lane.

A red light caught me, and Tallie and the detective slipped through.

“Shit,” I muttered, gripping the wheel.

I grabbed my phone and dialed her number, but after one ring, it went straight to voicemail. By the time I made it through the next break in traffic, she was gone. I checked every lane, but there was no sign of her or Detective Joyner.

I dialed her number again, and when her voicemail came on, I spat, “I’ve lost you. I got hung up at the light. Call me back.”

I waited a minute, then sent her a text.

When I didn’t get an answer, I tried again. This time, I was a little harsher. “ Tallie. What the hell? Answer your goddamn phone.”

I ended the call and was about to try again when Grim asked, “You told her to head to your place after, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, she’s probably headed there.”

“You’d think, but why won’t she answer the fucking phone?”

“It’s probably on silent or ran out of juice.”

“I don’t know, man. I knew this wasn’t a good idea.” I grabbed my phone and dialed Ghost’s number. As soon as he answered, I told him, “I lost Tallie in traffic. She’s supposed to be headed there, but I’m not sure. Call me if she shows.”

“Alright. I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Appreciate it, brother.”

I continued towards the house, but something didn’t feel right. Grim must have had the same feeling because his expression turned tense, and he said, “If you’re that worried about it, call Shep and have him ping her phone.”

“Good idea.”

I immediately called Shep and started filling him in on the situation. I tried to keep my voice steady, but the panic was creeping in. “I lost her in traffic, and now she’s not answering her damn phone. Need you to do your thing and find her.”

“Gimme a second.”

I could hear his fingers tapping on the keys, but I had no idea what he was doing, and I didn’t care. I just needed him to find her. “Come on, Shep. Tell me you got something.”

“I’m gettin’ there. Just hang on a second.”

Grim didn’t say a word. He knew I was two seconds away from losing my mind, so he just sat there and waited for Shep to announce, “I got her.”

“Thank Christ. Where the hell is she?”

“She’s over on Cooper Lane at her parents’ place.”

I didn’t even respond.

I just ended the call and pressed my foot on the accelerator.

Traffic blurred past as I raced across town. I had no idea why she'd decided to go against me and go over there alone. I knew there had to be a reason. I pushed the thought away. It didn't matter why. The only thing that mattered was that she was there, and no one was looking out for her.

And I had a bad fucking feeling about it.

Grim shifted beside me. "Need to slow down, brother."

I didn't.

We got to the house in under ten minutes. Tallie's car was parked out front, and Detective Joyner was parked right next to her. They should've been inside, but the house seemed eerily empty. And to make matters worse, the front door was wide open.

Wide open.

I'd barely put the SUV into park before I was out and rushing up the steps. When I reached the door, I stuck my head inside and shouted, "Tallie!"

No answer.

My pulse quickened as I stepped inside and shouted again, "Tallie!"

When she still didn't answer, Grim leaned in and whispered, "Something feels off."

I nodded, then drew my weapon and started inside. Grim was right behind me as I headed into the living room. We both stopped cold when we spotted Joyner sprawled

out in the middle of the floor with blood pooling around him. “Ah, damn.”

I scanned the room, searching for something that might give me some hope. “Where the hell is Tallie?”

There was no sign of her.

The room spun.

My hands shook.

Rage and fear boiled up inside me so fast I couldn’t think straight.

“Tallie!” My voice cracked, raw and broken.

Again, no one answered.

I fucked up. I knew something was off the second I lost her in traffic. I should’ve tracked her down right then and there. Hell, I should’ve listened to my gut and never let her go. I’d just gotten her back, and now, I’d let her slip through my fingers again. I had no idea where she was or how to find her. I didn’t know if she was hurt or in danger, and it was fucking killing me. My chest was so tight I could barely take a breath, much less think.

I couldn’t lose her.

Not like this.

Grim put his hand on my shoulder and tried to sound reassuring as he told me, “We need to check the rest of the house.”

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat as I followed Grim through the house. We cleared the kitchen first. We saw nothing out of the ordinary—just a few dirty dishes and an old newspaper that had been left on the counter. The hallway was empty, and the bedrooms seemed to be untouched.

But when we reached the office, Grim stopped short. “Window’s cracked.”

I stepped inside for a better look and could see that the side window was slightly open, barely enough to stick a hand through. Something about it didn’t sit right, so I walked over and opened it wider. I stuck my head out, but I didn’t see anything out of the norm.

“Dammit.”

Grim didn’t say a word.

He just stood there watching as I let out a frustrated breath. My gut was screaming at me to move. I needed to do something, but I didn’t know where to start.

“We gotta find her.”

“We will. You can count on it.”

Grim hadn’t stopped searching. Even as he stood there next to me, his eyes were scanning every inch of this fucking place. We moved out of the office into the rest of the house. Grim was like a bloodhound, so I wasn’t surprised when he mumbled, “What the hell is that?”

He walked over to the detective and knelt beside him as he reached into his hand and pried something from the dead detective’s fingers. I stepped closer and saw that it was a crumpled piece of paper. It was stained with blood, which made it difficult to

read. “What does it say?”

Grim smoothed it out, and his eyes narrowed as he read. He looked up at me with a cold expression as he replied, “Send the brother.”

My stomach dropped.

I’d known all along that Rooks had a part to play in all this, and now, it was confirmed. A new kind of rage burned through me, hot and consuming. “ I’m. Going. To. Fucking. Kill. Him .”

“Gotta make sure you get that chance.” Grim clenched his jaw and crumpled the note in his fist. “We need to get the hell out of here. Cops’ll be swarming this place soon.”

He was right.

I forced myself to take a breath, to push past the fury clawing at my chest. If we got caught here, we’d be no help to Tallie. I motioned my head towards the detective’s body as I asked, “What about him?”

“He’s not our problem.”

“What about Tallie’s car?”

“They know she was with him.”

“But...”

“They’ll think she had something to do with it.”

“Okay, fine. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Grim and I rushed out of the house, and my thoughts raced as we jumped into the SUV. The moment the doors slammed shut, I threw it into drive and peeled out of the driveway. Grim reached out and gripped the front dash, holding on as he said, “We need to bring the brother in.”

“Already on it.” I grabbed my phone and hit Ghost’s number. After a couple of rings, he came across the speaker, “She never showed.”

“Yeah, I know. I need you to get over to the safe house and get Rooks. Bring him to the clubhouse.”

Ghost was quiet for a second. “Something going on?”

“Just do it.”

“What about the mother?”

“Just need Rooks.”

“You got it, brother.”

The call ended, and I shoved my phone onto the console. I continued towards the clubhouse, and it wasn’t long before Grim asked, “How far you willing to take this?”

“As far as I need to.” My grip tightened on the wheel. “I’m done playing games. Rooks either tells me what the fuck is going on, or he spends some quality time with you in the playroom. Hell, I might even join in on the fun.”

“Whatever you need to do.”

Grim leaned back in his seat and tapped his fingers against his thigh. “I gotta say, I

kind of hope the motherfucker plays dumb, so I can have a go with him.”

“Knowing Rooks, you’ll get your chance.”

I felt like the weight of the world was crashing down on me as Grim and I stepped into the clubhouse. We’d had a plan. It was clear and concise, and we thought we’d worked through all the possible missteps. We were wrong.

Never once had we considered the possibility that Tallie would go to the house without telling us. I knew her well enough to know that she wouldn’t have pulled a stunt like that without a good reason. I just had no idea what that reason could be, and it pissed me the hell off. It was my job to keep her safe, and I’d failed.

And now, Tallie was out there somewhere, with people who clearly knew how to play this game better than we did. That was enough to have us all on edge.

Prez’s expression was hard as stone as he waited for Grim and I to make our way over to the bar. “What the fuck happened?”

Memphis and Goose were standing there with him, and they listened as Grim and I filled Prez in on everything that had gone down, including finding Detective Joyner dead and the note that was left in his hand. Goose shook his head as he grumbled, “I knew that asshole was up to no good.”

“Yeah, you and me both.”

“I put a call in to Cotton,” Prez announced. “He’ll get back to me when he finds something.”

Cotton had been the president of the Washington chapter for as long as I could remember, but he’d stepped down a few months back and had taken on a much more

powerful role. He'd taken over a kind of distribution role that put him in contact with some of the most powerful men on the planet, and their power hadn't come from politics or old money. These guys were heavy into the mafia and cartel, and everything in between.

If anyone knew something about the Volkovs, it would be him.

I gave Prez a nod. "Appreciate it."

My patience was running razor-thin when the clubhouse doors swung open, and Ghost walked in with Rooks. Rooks followed behind him, his jaw tight and his eyes narrowed with anger, and when they reached us, Rooks snarled, "What the hell is this about?"

I didn't even think.

I charged at him.

My fist connected with his jaw, forcing his head to the side. He recovered fast, and unlike the time before, he swung back, catching me in the ribs. Pain flared, but I didn't let it slow me down. I rammed my shoulder into his chest and tackled him. We both crashed to the floor and immediately rolled. Fists flew, and we both landed some solid hits.

I barely felt a thing.

My body was running on pure adrenaline.

I caught him under the jaw and dazed him. I used the opportunity to pin him down with my knee digging into his chest. I grabbed the front of his shirt and yanked him closer as I roared, "They took Tallie, you piece of shit!"

Rooks froze beneath me. His eyes locked onto mine, and the whole damn clubhouse was silent. And for the first time since this nightmare started, I saw something flicker in his expression.

Something like fear—not for himself, but for Tallie.

Fuck. This was even worse than I thought.

18

TALLIE

I had no idea where I was.

We hadn't driven far, so I knew we were still in Little Rock. I didn't know much else, just that I was sitting in a massive office that was filled with expensive leather furniture and smelled of expensive cigars and aged whiskey. There were floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lining the walls and a grand fireplace nestled in the center. And then, there was the desk.

It was huge and looked like it belonged to a king, and behind it sat the man who had taken me.

I expected a monster.

A scarred, ruthless brute with menacing eyes and a fearsome sneer.

But that wasn't what I got. Not even close.

This guy was handsome, intimidatingly so, and I found it difficult not to stare at him. He was tall and muscular but not overly so. He had a chiseled square jaw and high cheekbones, and his wavy, dark hair was neatly combed back. His black suit was tailored to perfection, and it made him look powerful and intense.

He was well put together. There was no denying that.

But it was his eyes that intrigued me the most.

They were icy blue, almost too blue, and they shimmered against the darkness of his features. I expected to find a sense of evil lurking behind them but found none. Instead, there was something else. Something I couldn't quite comprehend.

"Do you know who I am?"

"No." I straightened my back as I asked, "And what about me? Do you know who I am?"

"You wouldn't be here if I didn't." His face was void of expression as he told me, "I'm Sergei Volkov, and you are Natalie Warren, artist extraordinaire. Daughter of Jody and Tom Warren."

"So, what am I doing here? Does this have something to do with my father?"

His lips twitched like he was amused, but it was gone in an instant. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the desk. "So, you do know why you're here."

"No, I don't." I lifted my chin and looked him right in the eyes. "I just assumed it had something to do with him since you murdered him and have been searching for something ever since."

He didn't deny killing my father.

Nor did he deny he was searching for something.

He just sat there, staring at me with those cold blue eyes for what felt like an eternity. Eventually, he leaned back in his leather chair and said, "Your father made promises. Promises he did not keep."

“My father and I weren’t close.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then, you know...” My heart pounded, but I didn’t let it show. I refused to let him see an ounce of fear. “I have no idea what my father has been up to, not with you or anyone else.”

Silence.

He didn’t look angered by my answer. It was almost like he expected it. He stood and walked across the room. I didn’t move. I just sat there and watched as he eased the door open and said something to one of the men standing guard. They spoke for a moment, and then, he closed the door and started back over to me.

I should’ve been terrified.

I should’ve been crying and begging for my life.

But I wasn’t.

He didn’t look at me like he wanted to hurt me.

Instead, he seemed intrigued by me. He stopped next to my chair and reached over to me, taking a strand of my hair between his fingers. “You’re beautiful, Miss Warren. I haven’t seen such beautiful woman in quite some time.”

I didn’t respond.

I just gave him a slight roll of the eye.

“It’s true, but that’s not news for you.” His eyes skirted over me. “A woman with your appeal knows the power she possesses. And I must say, it makes me wonder why a lady of such fine caliber would degrade herself by associating with that biker fellow.”

It was strange. He was clearly Russian, just like the men who’d brought me here, but his accent was almost nonexistent. He just dropped a word here and there and had an occasional mix-up on words. It made me wonder if he’d ever actually lived in Russia. Regardless, he was an arrogant asshole. “You don’t know anything about me or my caliber, and you certainly don’t know anything about him!”

“I know his little biker club has made quite a name for themselves.” A smug look crossed his face as he spat, “Good for nothing criminals, if you ask me. Certainly not fit for woman like you.”

“Are you honestly trying to say you’re any better?” I had no idea what I was thinking when I snapped, “You killed my father... and the detective and you kidnapped me! That’s three for three, and I still don’t have any idea why!”

“You have it wrong.” He came back over to the desk and glared at me as he sat down. “I didn’t kill your father.”

“What? But you said...”

“I never said I murdered him, Miss Warren. I said he made promises he did not keep.” He leaned back in his chair. “Your father and I have worked together for many years, and he has made me great deal of money. I considered him a friend. I had no reason, nor desire, to kill him.”

“And the detective?”

“Oh, don’t shed a tear for Detective Joyner. He’s on the payroll. Not mine, but somebody’s. He’s known who killed your father for quite some time, but he has made no move to arrest them. Nor will he.”

“But he seemed...”

“Don’t they all?” He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “And as far as you are concerned, yes. I had you kidnapped as a means to an end.”

“What does that even mean?”

“You’re bait,” he answered flatly. “I believe that’s what your people call it.”

“Bait for who?”

“Your brother.”

“What does he have to do with any of this?”

“He has information we need.”

“But he said...”

“He has information we need, Miss Warren, and it would be in his best interest not to pretend otherwise.”

A million questions came rushing through my mind, but before I could ask any of them, there was a tap on the door, and a man walked in. He was wearing a black and clearly expensive suit, and like Sergei, he had dark hair and blue eyes. Only, he wasn’t quite as tall, and he looked to be several years younger.

He never took his eyes off me as he walked over and stood next to Sergei. Once they were side-by-side, it was easy to see that they weren't just related but brothers. He was still glaring at me when he asked, "This her?"

"It is." Sergei's tone was nonchalant as he said, "Miss Warren, I would like you to meet my brother, Viktor."

"She's quite beautiful."

"Yes, she is."

"Does she know why she's here?"

"We were just discussing that."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Viktor glanced over at me. "I'd say she already knows too much."

"Well, that's for me to decide." Sergei gave him a firm look. "Did you take care of what I asked you to take care of?"

Viktor gave him a look as he handed him the ledger that I'd tossed out the window.

"Don't I always."

"And the cars?"

"Taken care of."

"Good."

I might've been wrong, but I had a feeling they were talking about Detective Joyner

and my car. I wondered if they might've brought it here, and if so, I could possibly use it for a grand escape. I found that doubtful, especially the way these two seemed to handle things, but it was something to hope for.

Sergei turned his attention to me. "We should get her somewhere more comfortable."

Viktor nodded, then took a step towards me.

"Keep her close, in case..."

"Understood."

Viktor stopped when he reached my chair and waited silently until I stood. Without a word, he took hold of my arm and led me out of Sergei's office. His grasp wasn't too tight or too loose. It was controlled and steady, just like everything else about him. He opened the office door, and my breath caught when I saw that we weren't in an office complex or shady hideout. No, this place was something else entirely.

I was only in the hallway, and I could tell that the house was positively exquisite. The ceilings were at least ten feet tall, and every wall was adorned with elaborate paintings of landscapes that looked like they belonged in a museum. There were chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, and these weren't just any old chandeliers. These were the kind that made you gasp just looking at them.

The place screamed wealth and power.

Viktor didn't say anything as he guided me forward. There were so many things going through my head, and the silence was killing me. When I couldn't stand it a second longer, I asked, "Can I ask you something?"

The side of Viktor's mouth twitched like he wasn't sure if he wanted to hear

whatever I was about to say. “Go ahead.”

I hesitated for a second, then went for it.

“You don’t have an accent.”

His grip on my arm loosened slightly. “Neither do you.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I said. “The others, the men who brought me here had a pretty heavy Russian accent, but you and your brother...”

“That’s because I wasn’t born there. My brothers and I grew up in New York.”

“Really? What part?”

“Brooklyn.”

“No way.” He looked slightly amused when I told him, “My son and I lived in Bay Ridge for almost two years.”

“Bay Ridge?”

“Yeah. We moved there after...” I trailed off, not wanting to finish that sentence.

“Anyway, we used to eat at a little diner called Maggie’s. Have you ever heard of it?”

He let out a short laugh as he nodded, “Yeah, I know it. Used to go there quite a bit.”

“Seriously?”

“I don’t joke, Miss Warren.” When we reached the end of the hall, Viktor opened a door and said, “You should be comfortable here.”

I stepped inside the enormous bedroom, and just like the hallway, it was elaborately decorated with a king-size bed, a dresser, a sofa, and a private bathroom. I'd never stayed in such a fancy room, but I didn't like the idea of being locked in there for days on end. "How long will I have to stay in here?"

"As long as it takes."

"And how do you know that I won't try to escape?"

"Because if you do, I'll have to put a bullet in that pretty little head of yours, and neither of us want that." He reached into his pocket, and I feared he was going to pull out his weapon until I saw bundle of letters. "I believe these belong to you."

He tossed them on the bed and closed the door. The lock clicked, and just like that, things had gone from bad to worse. I wanted to believe that Rooks would give them the information they needed, and this nightmare would be over. But I had a feeling it wasn't going to be that easy.

That should have had me spiraling, and it did.

I didn't know what Sergei and his brother had planned.

I didn't know if I was going to make it out of there alive, and it terrified me to think that I might not make it back to Ford and Holt. I had no idea what that would mean for them. But as I stood there in my storm of terror and regret, I couldn't stop staring at the letters.

I knew if I opened them, it would break something inside of me, and I was already on the verge of losing it. I wasn't sure I could take much more. But the longer I stared at those little white envelopes, the more tempted I became.

19

SEVEN

“Y ou don’t understand.” Rooks curled his hands into a fist. “I just helped him set up the accounts.”

“Okay, then why didn’t you tell us that from the start?”

“You were asking about a code. I don’t know anything about a code.”

“They’re Russian.” Goose shrugged. “Maybe there was a mix up in communication or something.”

“There wasn’t a mix-up. He knew damn well what they were wanting!”

Tension had filled the bar with the kind of thick, suffocating pressure that settled deep in your bones and refused to let go. I’d already gone a round with Rooks, and as I sat there glaring at him, I had to resist the urge to go after him again, especially when he kept feeding us a line of bullshit no one believed.

“We’re not getting anywhere with this.” Grim looked over to me as he said, “We need to set up an exchange, and we need to do it now.”

Before I could respond, Prez stepped back into the bar and motioned for me and the others to step into the hall. Once we were gathered around, Preacher looked to me as he said, “Just got off the phone with Cotton.”

“And?”

“These guys aren’t your typical mafia. They come from old money and have deep pockets. Real deep. They don’t do shit by the book. They run some dope, but not the hard stuff and a few weapons here and there. But nothing over the top.”

“So, what were they doing with Tallie’s father?”

“He was helping them buy up properties along the river. They’ve been using them as fronts for their drug and weapon distribution, but Sergei’s ultimate goal is to build a high dollar, water-front casino with all the bells and whistles.”

“That’s the last thing we need around here.”

“You’re telling me,” Preacher scoffed. “But he’s got his head set on it, and Tallie’s father was doing everything he could to make it happen.”

“They’ve pushed a lot of people out of their homes and businesses to make room for this plan of theirs.” He paused, his gaze locking onto mine. “And things seemed to be going their way, so it makes no sense for Sergei to kill him.”

“Then, who the fuck killed him?”

“Good question. If it were my guess, I’d say he pissed off the wrong person. But I don’t think it’s the Russians.”

“So, what now?”

“We need to be smart about it. Volkovs aren’t the type you just storm in on unless you want a full-blown war. If they want the brother, we’re giving them the brother.”

As we started back into the bar, Grim leaned over to Preacher and said, “I’ll take him.”

“Not unless I’m with you.” I cocked my brow as I looked at him with disdain. “He might not come back, but I’ll get him there. The question is where the fuck am I taking him?”

“They’ve got properties all over the city.” Shep shook his head. “No way to know where they’ve taken her.”

We’d barely sat down when the back door creaked open, and seconds later, I heard a small, uncertain voice call my name. “Holt?”

I turned, and my stomach dropped when I saw Ford standing in the doorway with Casey and Toby. His little face was tight with worry as he stood there searching the room. He was clutching the sleeve of his hoodie in one hand while the other was balled into a nervous fist.

Damn.

I was moving before I even thought about it. I weaved through the brothers, and once I reached him, I crouched in front of him, trying my best to hide my panic. “Hey, buddy. What are you doing here?”

He tried to put on a brave front as he asked, “Where is she?”

The kid might as well have punched me straight in the gut.

I had no answer.

None whatsoever, and I hated myself for it.

“Tallie promised to be back by noon, and he got worried,” Casey grimaced as she explained, “I’m sorry, but he kept insisting to see you.”

“You don’t have to apologize. If he wants me, he gets me.” I placed my hand on Ford’s shoulder as I said, “I know you’re worried, but everything’s gonna be okay.”

“She said she’d be back,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “She should be back.”

“I know. And she will be. I’ll make sure of it.”

Ford’s little fingers twisted tighter around his sleeve, and it was all I could do to fight the urge to pick him up and hug him as I made promises I wasn’t sure I could keep. I had been so focused on finding Tallie, I hadn’t thought about Ford. I should have known he’d be worried when she didn’t show. He searched my face, and whatever he saw there must’ve been enough because, after a long second, he finally nodded.

“That’s my boy.” I stood and turned to Casey. “Why don’t you take the boys down to the family room and let them hang out for a bit?”

“Sure,” Casey answered.

I looked to Ford and asked, “That good with you?”

Ford was hesitant to leave, but eventually, he nodded and followed Casey and Toby down the hall. It was rough watching him go. The kid had already gotten to me, and there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for him. And that included bringing his mother back. Hell, I’d burn down the entire city if I had to.

Once he was gone, I stood and rushed towards the back door. I charged out of the bar and ignored the voices calling after me as I stormed out. We’d been sitting here trying

to figure out our next move and trying to get information from Cotton and Rooks. It was a waste of fucking time. The answer had been right under our noses the whole damn time. The second the realization hit me, I didn't think. I just moved.

The second I reached the playroom, I threw open the door so hard it banged against the wall. The driver jolted to attention. His eyes were wide with terror as he struggled against his restraints. He was a wiry bastard, mid-fifties with graying hair and a nose that looked like it had been broken more than once. He reeked of sweat and fear, and I fucking thrived on it. "No. No more."

I grabbed the cattle prod and pressed it against his throat as I roared, "Where did they take the girl?"

"I know not."

I squeezed harder. "Wrong answer."

I pressed the button, and his body jerked against the ties as the current pulsed through his jaw. His face turned red, and his eyes bulged like a damn fish out of water. I gave him a second, then growled, "Where were you supposed to take her!"

"To da boss," he stammered.

"And where is the fucking boss?" When he didn't immediately answer, I slammed my fist into his gut, and his chest heaved. "I'm getting tired of the bullshit, man. Real fucking tired. Don't make me break out the sheers."

He looked from me to Grim, who was now standing in the doorway with his arms crossed, watching. Waiting. Ready to step in and do whatever I couldn't.

"Da house," the driver finally gasped. "Boss is at da house."

“That’s more like it.” I dropped the prod as I pushed. “Where’s the house?”

“Rahling Road.”

“What’s the number?”

“I know not. I just drive.”

“Shep can get the number,” Grim interjected.

I nodded, then followed Grim back to the bar. As soon as we walked in, I made my way over to Rooks and demanded, “I need the address to the house.”

“I know the area, but I’m not sure about the exact address. I’d need Dad’s ledger to find out for sure.”

“We got no ledger.”

“I don’t know what to tell ya.” Rooks shrugged. “I can’t do much without that ledger or having access to Dad’s computer.”

“Well, today’s your lucky day.” Shep stood and pushed his laptop across the table as he said, “There’s your access.”

Rooks looked down at Shep’s laptop, and after studying it a moment, he looked back at Shep and asked, “You did this?”

“With a little help from your sister.”

“But how?”

“The how doesn’t matter,” I snapped. “Goddamn it! Find the fucking address, so we can go get Tallie!”

“Okay. Okay. Just give me a minute.” Rooks starts hammering away at the keyboard, and it wasn’t long before he announced, “29 Rahling Road.”

“About fucking time.” I grabbed Rooks by the arm and pulled him to his feet. “Let’s move.”

“Hold on.” Rooks gave me a look. “Before we go flying out of here, how did you know they wanted to see me?”

“Doesn’t fucking matter.”

“But it might.”

Grim stepped over and replied, “They left a message.”

“Where?”

“At your folks’ place.”

“Where at my folks’ place?”

“In the detective’s hand.” I snarled, “The one they shot in the fucking chest.”

“Yeah, of course they did.” Rooks let out a breath. “What did this message say?”

Grim scowled as he answered, “Send the brother.”

“What the fuck does any of this matter,” I growled. “They want you, and we’re taking

you to them. End of story.”

“You might wanna rethink that.” Rooks let out a slow breath and rubbed his hands over his face like he was already nervous about what was coming. “The Volkovs are men who say what they mean and mean what they say. If they told you to send me, then that’s exactly what they expect. No more, no less.”

“And you think we’re just gonna let you waltz in there alone?” I glared daggers at him. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“You don’t have a choice.” Rooks turned his sharp gaze on me. “If they see any of you, this thing will go sideways fast. I know how they work. If I go in alone, we might actually have a shot at getting Tallie back. Otherwise, this will turn into a bloodbath. You can count on it.”

“Damn.” Knowing he was right, I blew out a breath and grumbled, “Fine, but we’re going to monitor every damn move you make.”

“How are you gonna manage that?”

“You’ll wear a wire.”

Rooks cursed under his breath. “You don’t need?—”

“Yeah, we do,” I cut him off. “You might trust these guys to play by some code, but I don’t. You go in wired, we sit close, and if anything feels off, we move in. No arguments.”

Rooks looked around at the brothers and sighed when he saw that we were all in agreement. Finally, he gave a nod and muttered, “Fine. But if they so much as get a whiff that you’re out there, we’re all screwed.”

"Then don't give them a reason to look or it'll be the end for you and them. Cause come hell or high water, I'm getting my girl back. Count on it."

20

TALLIE

T allie,

I don't know how to start this because nothing I say will make this hurt any less. You're gone, and everything feels wrong. I keep thinking I'll turn a corner and see you standing there, smiling at me. But you're not here. And every damn part of me misses you.

I don't care what your father says. I don't care what plans he's made for you. None of that changes a damn thing. I love you, and I'll wait for you. I don't care how long it takes.

One day, we'll find our way back to one another, and it'll be just like we always talked about. We'll have the little house in the country, far away from all this bullshit. We'll have those goats you wanted and baby cows. We'll have that porch with the swing. We'll have it all. I don't care how long it takes to get there. That's our future, Tallie. Ours.

They can't take that from us.

So, you do what you have to do, and I'll be here when you finally get to come home.

Forever yours,

Holt

I read the first letter over and over, and each time, I cried a little harder. I moved to the next letter, and it broke my heart a little more. I hated seeing that Holt was suffering like I'd suffered. I'd always hoped that he'd been able to move on and put what happened behind him. Clearly, that wasn't the case. Tears were still falling as I opened the next letter and read:

Tallie,

It's late. I've tried to sleep, but every time I close my eyes, all I see is you.

I try to picture where you are and what you're doing. I imagine you're in some studio, and your hands are covered in clay. Your brows are furrowed like they always do when you're making something out of nothing. The sun is streaming through the window and makes your long, red hair shimmer like fire. I wish I could be there. Watching you the way I used to. I would take you in and memorize every freckle on the bridge of your nose.

But I'm stuck here. Half a world away, surrounded by sand and steel, and even with the sun blaring down on me, nothing ever feels warm. It doesn't help that the guys are restless. We all know something is coming. We can feel it in our bones, but all we can do is wait for it.

I tell myself it's only temporary, and one day, I'll see your beautiful face again. I'll get to touch you. Hear your voice. Hold you like I should have every damn day before you were taken from me.

But on nights like these, it's hard to hold onto the hope. I fear I lost you the second you got on that damn plane, and I've just been lying to myself ever since.

I don't know if you'll ever read this. Hell, I don't even know if you'll ever see it. But if you do, if you're out there thinking of me even half as much as I think of you, then remember the love we had and the promises we made.

Because I swear to you, Tallie, no matter how much time passes, I'll be here waiting.

Always,

Holt

Each letter was more heart-wrenching than the last. I couldn't take it. After the fourth one, I had to take a break and go into the bathroom to wash my face and try to collect myself. Once I could actually breathe, I went back to the bed and picked up the last envelope. I just sat there and stared at it for a moment. I knew it was going to be bad, and I tried to brace myself as I tore it open.

Tallie,

I don't even know why I'm writing this.

Maybe it's just habit. Maybe it's the last piece of you I can still hold onto. But the truth is, I don't even know if you're reading these letters. I don't know if you ever got the first letter or any of the ones that followed.

And I guess that's what's getting to me the most. The not knowing.

I've told myself a thousand times that there was still a chance, but I'm not so sure anymore. It's been so long, Tallie. You haven't written me back. You haven't taken my calls or responded to my emails. I can't help but wonder if you've gotten these letters and just don't give a damn anymore. Maybe you've moved on, and I'm a jerk for holding on to the past.

I think this will be my last letter. Not because I don't love you, because I do. I don't think I'll ever stop, but I can't keep doing this to myself. I can't keep holding out for something that might never come.

So, this is it. I won't write again. But if you ever decide to come back and look for me, you won't have to search far. I'll still be here. I'll still be waiting.

Holt

It broke my heart to think that Holt had been half a world away, missing me, thinking of me, and hoping for something I thought had been lost forever.

I could almost picture him sitting in his military fatigues in some foreign place that was under fire and trying to hold onto the future we'd always talked about. I could feel his loneliness, his desperation, his hope. God, he still had hope, even when I had none.

I was sobbing as I ran my fingers over his name at the bottom of the page. I'd thought he'd moved on. I thought he'd forgotten about me and that time had erased whatever we had. But I was wrong.

I was wrong about everything.

He had been waiting for me, and he was out there waiting once again. I was such an idiot. I should've never gone to the house. I should've done exactly like we talked about and gone straight back to his place. My impatience had landed me in this nightmare, and I wasn't sure I'd ever get out.

I wiped the tears from my face and walked over to the window. I eased the curtain back and was surprised to find that Sergei's house was in the middle of a beautiful subdivision with houses the size of castles and yards that had been landscaped to the

hilt. Everything around—the houses, the cars, the boats—screamed money. Everything except my old, beat-up Pathfinder that sat in the driveway.

I was right. They had gone to the house. I'm sure they cleared the place of any evidence of wrongdoing. They certainly had the means to do so. They clearly had the means to do whatever they wanted.

My chest tightened as I thought about Ford. I could almost feel him worrying over where I was. He was a tough kid and tried to put on a brave front, but he was too smart not to realize something was wrong, especially after everything that happened with my father. I'd promised him I'd be back by lunch. And now, it was dark.

I pressed my fingers against the glass, and I wished there was some way I could reach through it and escape. But then, I thought about Viktor and his threat of putting a bullet in my pretty little head. Needless to say, it was enough to make me give up on the idea of trying to get out of here on my own.

I dropped my head into my hands and took a few cleansing breaths, hoping it would help settle my nerves. I actually thought it was helping until I heard a knock at the door.

I turned just as it creaked open, and a man stepped inside.

He was dressed in a crisp, white button-down and black slacks, and he had the same dark hair and square jaw as Viktor and Sergei, making me wonder if they might be related. But there was something different about him. He seemed colder, more intense, and the dark tattoos along his throat and hands only added to his menacing presence.

He didn't speak. He just stared.

Waiting.

Almost daring.

Then, he stepped into the room, slow and deliberate, and his eyes remained trained on me and not in a good way. I swallowed hard, hoping it would ease the knot in my throat.

I stayed perfectly still and watched as he crossed the room. It wasn't until he turned slightly that I noticed that he had a tray of food in his hands.

He walked over to the dresser and set it down without a sound. I glanced over at it and saw that there was a plate of roasted chicken, greens beans, potatoes, and a glass of water. I hadn't eaten all day, and it smelled amazing, but I couldn't bring myself to move.

He motioned his hand towards the tray as he told me, "For you."

"Thank you."

"Hmmm." His eyes skirted over me, and a slight smile slipped across his lips as he said, "Viktor said you know Maggie's."

"I do."

"Best burger in the States."

"Yeah, they weren't half bad, but their French toast was hard to beat."

"You ever checked out DUMBO?"

DUMBO was the natives' terminology of Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass. It was an area filled with shops, bookstores, and art galleries. It was quite trendy, and this guy looked anything but trendy. "You know about that area?"

"Yeah, my mother was a big fan of the place." He didn't smile, but I could hear the amusement in his voice as he said, "I was the only one she could get to go with her."

"My son wasn't a big fan, but I loved it there. Bushwick, too."

"Yes. They have some impressive murals in that area."

"You into art?"

"You could say that." He pushed back his sleeve, revealing the intricate tattoos that marked his skin. "It's not for everyone, but it tells a story that only a few will ever truly understand."

"Art isn't always just about beauty." I gave him a half smile. "Sometimes, it's about remembering."

He might've been a bit more intense than Sergei or Viktor, but I felt I would actually kind of like him—if he wasn't holding me captive. That made it difficult for me to see him as anything but a villain. But he made me question that even more when he asked, "So, you're with one of the Fury brothers?"

"I am."

"I hear they're good men. Their president has made a name for himself and his club."

"Sergei didn't seem to agree."

“My brother needs reminding of where he came from.”

“Well, feel free to remind him.”

“I certainly will.” He started for the door as he said, “I’m Nikolai. If you need anything, just let me know.”

“Thank you, Nikolai.”

Before he walked out, he motioned his head toward the tray of food. “Eat. At the very least, hydrate. We don’t want that boyfriend of yours thinking we didn’t take good care of you.”

I nodded but stayed put as I watched him close the door behind him. Seconds later, the lock clicked, and I found myself alone once again. I walked over and gave the tray a quick once over. The food looked fine, so I picked up the tray and carried it over to the bed. I sat down and took a bite of bread. It didn’t have a funny taste or smell, so I went for it.

I kept eating and ended up finishing most of the plate.

It was really good, like fancy restaurant kind of good, and I was too stuffed to take another bite. I was about to carry the tray back over to the table when a strange warmth spread through my body. My head felt heavy, and my thoughts became cloudy. I tried to move, but my body wouldn’t cooperate.

The room started spinning, and panic set in.

I tried to fight it, but a thick fog settled over me, dragging me under. I closed my eyes, and darkness swallowed me whole.

21

SEVEN

“These glasses have a built-in camera, mic, and earpiece.” Rooks sat in the chair with his arms crossed, and he looked like a deer in headlights as Shep stood over him, adjusting the thin-framed glasses on his face. “We’ll see what you see, hear what you hear.”

“Which means don’t fuck around and try something stupid,” Grim warned.

“You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Keep your head straight, and don’t touch them.” Shep stepped back. “If you start messing with them, they’ll know something’s up.”

“Got it.”

Once Shep had the glasses where he wanted them, he stepped back to his laptop and checked the feed. “Looks good.”

“Remember, keep it simple.” Grim had already laid it all out for him but felt the need to repeat, “Get in, give him what he wants, and get out. No small talk, no hesitation.”

“I’m not planning on staying for dinner, man. I want this thing done just as much as you do.”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” I grumbled under my breath.

Rooks met my gaze, something unreadable flickering in his expression. I didn’t care what he had to say. We were in this fucking mess because of his bullshit, and he damn well better fix it or there would be hell to pay. "Let's move."

Without another word, we headed out to the SUVs. I slid into the driver’s seat and waited as Shep climbed into the passenger side, laptop balanced on his thighs. Grim took his spot in the back, checking his weapons like he expected things to go to hell fast. It wasn’t exactly a bad assumption. None of us knew what we were getting ourselves into.

I glanced up in my rearview, and I saw Goose, Memphis, and Rusty piling into the second SUV. As soon as Rooks started for the gate, we all followed behind, tailing as close as possible. Prez and the rest of the brothers were holding tight and would be sitting on go if things went south.

The drive was quiet. Shep had the surveillance feed open and was watching through Rooks’ glasses as he drove toward the Volkov estate. When we started getting close, I slowed the SUV and parked across the street while Goose parked a few houses down.

When Rooks started through the gate, I leaned over to the laptop’s mic and said, "Rooks? You good?"

“Yeah.” His voice came through the earpiece, steady but sharp. "Just ready to get this over with."

"Good," Grim muttered. "Now, don’t fuck it up."

We all watched as the gates eased open, and two guards stepped out to meet him. They motioned him forward, and he drove on to the house.

This was it.

He drove up to the front and parked. He killed the engine before announcing, “I’m going in.”

“Good. Now, remember what we said,” I warned. “If you fuck this up...”

“I know. I know. Damn,” Rooks huffed. “I’m not gonna fuck it up. They’ve got my sister in there, and I’m not leaving without her.”

“Then get to it.”

“You sure you can hear and see me?”

“Crystal.” He was wearing a pair of glasses that Shep had fitted with a hidden camera and earpiece. Shep was a master at technology, so we knew unless Rooks fucked it up, we had a birds-eye-view of inside the house. “Relax. We’ve got you covered.”

With that, he opened his car door and got out. As soon as he started up to the estate, two guards came over and started patting him down. “You carrying?”

“No weapons.” He lifted his laptop. “Just my computer.”

One of the guards took it and motioned for him to follow as they started inside. The house was massive and reeked of money. Every inch of the place was decorated with the finest of everything.

The screen shifted as the guards guided him through the house and down a long hallway. They finally stopped at a steel door. One of the men punched in a code, and the lock clicked open.

“Where the fuck are they taking him?” Grim muttered.

“I don’t know.” Shep exhaled sharply. “Looks like the garage.”

The feed flickered as Rooks stepped inside. The second the camera adjusted, my blood ran ice cold.

Tallie was hanging in the middle of the goddamn garage with her wrists bound over her head, and her body was completely limp. Her chin was down, and her hair was covering her face, making it impossible to tell if she was dead or alive. Seeing her so out of it sent me into an immediate rage. “What the fuck! I’ll fucking kill them!”

“Easy, brother.” Shep kept his voice steady as he said, “We don’t know that she’s hurt.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? Look at her!” I motioned my hand toward the screen. “To hell with this. I’m going in.”

Grim caught my arm before I could move. “Wait.”

“Wait?” I jerked free. “She’s fucking hanging there, Grim! She?—”

Then Rooks' voice cut through the feed, “What the hell is this?”

“This is what happens when you try to play games with me.” Rooks turned slightly, and the camera caught the man standing just a few feet away. “I don’t play games, Mr. Warren. I simply do not have the patience for it.”

“I’ll give you whatever you want. Just let her go,” Rooks pleaded.

“She’s fine.” The man glanced over at Tallie. “I did this for her benefit.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Imagine how terrified she would be if she was awake when I had her hung from the rafter.”

“Why the hell did you have to hang her from the rafters in the first place?”

“Because if you don’t give me what I want, this will end badly for you both. I like her. I wouldn’t want her to suffer.” His face was void of expression as he growled, “You, on the other hand.”

“Understood.”

My eyes were still locked on the screen as I told them, “That’s gotta be Sergei. He’s the one in charge.”

“I was thinking the same,” Shep agreed. “And yeah, he’s clearly running the show.”

The guy looked calm, but not in a good way. His calm made my skin crawl. His eyes were cold and showed zero emotion as he said, “Do you have the code?”

“I don’t know about a code. I have everything that I set up for my father, including all the offshore accounts and passwords.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” Sergei glared at him for a moment, then pushed, “Where the hell are they?”

“On the computer.” Rooks motioned his head toward the back of the room. “Your guard took it from me.”

Sergei snapped his fingers, and the guard brought over the laptop. Sergei snatched it

and handed it over to Rooks. “You better make it fast. We don’t want the girl to wake up and wonder why her brother caused her to be in such a state.”

“I didn’t...”

Rooks stopped himself from saying something he would regret and turned his focus to the laptop. He opened it and immediately started typing. We could see the various accounts and all the money held within them, and it wasn’t just a couple hundred thousand. It was millions. Now, I got why Sergio had gone to such lengths to get it back.

Rooks turned the screen to face Sergei as he announced, “Okay. Here it is.”

“It’s all there?”

“Every penny. It’s just like you left it. I just need to know what you want to do with it.”

“I want it to stay right where it is.” He turned to one of the guards and motioned his head toward Tallie. “Get her down.”

“So, that’s it? That’s all you wanted?”

“Yes, and you would’ve known that had you answered any of my calls or emails.” I could see them lowering Tallie’s arms, and I was so focused on trying to make sure that she was okay that I almost missed it when he said, “I must say, I found it rather odd that you were avoiding me.”

“You killed my father. What did you expect me to do?”

“You know I didn’t kill him.”

“And how would I know that?”

“Because you were behind it.” Sergei’s face was stone cold. No emotion. No anger. No annoyance. Just cold and matter of fact. “And don’t waste my time by trying to deny it.”

“I wasn’t even in the country when he was killed.”

“Hmm, there you go running in circles again. I told you I didn’t have patience for games.” Sergei gave a quick chin lift, and one of the guards rushed Rooks, securing his arms behind him. “I never said you killed him. I said you were behind it.”

“But I had no reason to kill him.”

“Ah, I’d say you had about four million reasons.”

“I have my own money. I have no reason to try and take his, or yours, for that matter.”

“You’re right. You did have your own money until you lost it all trying to launch your own company.” Sergei shook his head with disgust. “Your father tried to warn you that it would never work, but you wouldn’t listen. And when he wouldn’t bail you out, you killed him.”

“Dad was a lying asshole! He deserved what he got,” Rooks roared. “But that doesn’t mean I had anything to do with his murder.”

“Enough running in circles again. It’s one thing to try and steal from your father.” Sergei leaned in close, “It’s another to try and steal from me.”

“But I didn’t. I wouldn’t.”

“But you did, and now, you will pay.”

“No, wait! You have to believe me! I didn’t try to steal your money!” The guard tugged him over to where Tallie had been hanging and secured his hands over his head. “It’s all right there. You can see it in black and white.”

Once Rooks was secured, Sergei stepped in front of him. His face was completely void of expression as he looked directly at Rooks. But he wasn’t actually looking at Rooks. He was looking into the glasses.

Damn.

The fucker knew.

Hell, he’d known all along.

Sergei tilted his head slightly, a ghost of a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. “You can transfer the girl out front.”

Sergei’s face was filling most of the screen, but I could see the guard who was holding Tallie. Her body sprawled across his arms like a broken doll. He gave Sergei a nod, then started for the door.

I was still watching the guard when Sergei said, “I want my driver and my guard back. You have until midnight.”

He paused, letting the weight of his words sink in before adding, “Or there will be consequences.”

Then, before any of us could react, he reached up and pulled the glasses from Rooks’ face. The screen jolted, and you could hear Rooks call out, “Wait! Don’t!”

A sickening crunch echoed through the speakers, and then, the video feed went black. The only thing left was Rooks' muffled voice, pleading, begging to be let go before the line went dead.

Silence.

I was still staring at the blank screen when Shep announced, "He's coming out with Tallie."

I looked up at the front door, and I held my breath as I watched the guard step outside with Tallie cradled in his arms. Her head was leaning back on his shoulder, and she was still out cold. Without saying a word to the others, I threw the truck into drive and gunned it toward the gate.

As soon as it opened, I punched the gas, barreling through before they could think twice. The guard barely had time to react before I was on him. I slammed the truck into park, threw the door open, and jumped out, closing the distance between us in seconds.

He hesitated for a second. Then, without a word, he carefully placed her in my arms. I exhaled sharply, adjusting her weight against me. She was warm, and her breathing was soft but steady. Whatever they had given her was still running through her system and keeping her under.

Grim got out, and I didn't argue when he ordered, "Get in the back with her."

I climbed into the truck and held Tallie against my chest. He was about to close the door when the guard stepped over and handed me a wad of letters and a set of car keys. "She'll want these."

"Where's the car?"

“Around back.”

“I’ll get it.”

Shep got out and grabbed the keys, then rushed around back.

Grim got behind the wheel and slammed his door. Knowing he and Shep had things under control, I turned my complete attention to Tallie. I brushed a strand of hair from her face, checking for any sign that she was waking up, but nothing. She might’ve been out cold, but my girl was in my arms, and she was okay. That’s all that mattered.

Shep’s voice came from the front seat. “What are we gonna do about Rooks?”

At first, there was nothing but silence. Then, Grim shook his head and answered, “It’s too late for him. He made his own bed, and now, he’s gotta lay in it.”

Nothing else was said, so Shep tore out of there, leaving nothing but darkness and death in our wake.

22

TALLIE

I was floating, or at least, it felt like I was floating. My body felt completely weightless. I tried to fight it, but I was lost in a haze that kept pulling me under. Everything around me was a blur. Shadows were moving in and out, and voices were muffled like they were coming from underwater.

But then I heard him.

Holt.

His voice was raw, thick with something that felt like desperation and anger all wrapped into one. “What is this? What the fuck did they do to her?”

Someone said something, but I couldn’t make out of the words.

I could feel Holt’s arms around me. He was holding me against his chest, and I could feel his warmth seeping in, easing the cold emptiness that had taken me over. I wanted to reach for him and tell him I was okay. I wasn’t sure that was true.

I couldn’t tell.

Not that it mattered anyway.

Even if I wanted to reach for him, I couldn’t. My limbs wouldn’t cooperate. My

tongue was heavy, and my thoughts were too slow to string together the words. I felt like I was swimming in complete darkness when I heard Holt whisper, “Damn it, Tallie. You scared the hell out of me.”

I tried to open my eyes, but I didn’t have the strength. I could feel his heart pounding against my cheek. It was fast, almost frantically so, and I could feel the tension rolling off him. He was shaking with it. I couldn’t tell if it was from anger or relief. Either way, he wasn’t in a good place.

“What the hell were you thinking? We had a plan,” he rasped. “You shouldn’t have gone there alone. You knew it wasn’t safe, but you walked right into it like you had something to prove.”

I did.

I had to.

I wanted to tell him that.

I wanted him to understand that I was trying to do the right thing. I was so damn close to finding what we needed. I truly thought it was the safest way. I didn’t want to pull him or his brothers into this mess. But that’s exactly what I did. I hated that it had turned out this way. I wanted desperately to tell him just how sorry I was, but my throat was too thick with whatever drug they’d given me.

Holt was still laying in to me. It was hard to keep up with everything he said, but I heard him fuss, “You don’t get to do that, Tallie. You don’t get to put yourself on the line like that without me. Not ever again.”

I needed to tell him that I was sorry.

I needed to tell him that I knew I'd been reckless, and I should've waited. But the darkness was pulling me under again, and this time, it swallowed me up, and I could barely hear him as he whispered, "I almost lost you..."

I had no idea how long I'd been asleep when I felt myself being carefully lifted. Without opening my eyes, I knew Holt was cradling me in his arms. The warmth of his body was too inviting, and I was too damn exhausted to protest. So, I rested my head on his shoulder and let him carry me to the room.

I couldn't even remember him putting me in the bed, but I woke up the next morning with my head plastered on his bare chest. I slowly lifted myself up, trying my best not to wake him, and carefully eased myself onto the floor. I went to the bathroom and freshened up a bit. Washed my face and brushed my teeth. That's when I noticed that I was wearing pajamas that I didn't even remember changing into.

I went back out to the bedroom and stopped at the foot of the bed. It was still early, and Holt was still sound asleep. My heart ached as I stood there looking at him. The worries from the night before had melted away.

Lying there with his face free from his dark thoughts, he actually looked peaceful, almost vulnerable. "How long are you planning to stand there, staring at me like that?"

"I don't know. How long you planning to stay mad at me?"

"How do you know I'm mad?"

"Aren't you?"

"Absolutely." He opened one eye. "I have a good reason, don't ya think?"

“You do.” I raked my teeth over my bottom lip. “But I had a good reason for doing what I did.”

“I’m sure you do. Not sure I want to hear it.”

“Come on, Holt. Don’t be like that,” I pleaded. “I was just trying to find what we needed, and I felt like we were so close. I didn’t think it was going to turn out like it did.”

“Were you thinking about anything when you went over there?” Holt sat up on his elbows. “Were you thinking about me or the plan we had laid out? Were you thinking about Ford and how he’d feel if something happened to you?”

“I didn’t think...”

“That’s right. You didn’t think, and you almost got killed because of it!”

“Holt.”

“No, don’t Holt me. You got any idea how bad this thing could’ve been?” He shook his head. “I could’ve lost you. Ford could’ve lost you, and I don’t think I’d ever be able to forgive myself if that happened.”

“It would’ve been my fault.”

“You’re my woman, Tal. It’s my job to protect you. End of story.”

The guilt of what I’d done and the hurt I’d caused started to get to me, and I could feel the tears stinging my eyes. I didn’t want him to see me crying, so I turned to face the dresser. That’s when I saw the letters.

I remembered the heart-felt words that marked the pages, and the dam broke. Tears started to stream down my face. I'd messed up, and I didn't know how to fix it. I turned to face him as I muttered, "I'm sorry. If I could go back and do it differently, I would."

As soon as our eyes met, I knew he'd seen that I'd been crying, and his expression softened. "There are some things you need to know."

"Can we not?" It meant a great deal to me that he cared so much, but I didn't want to talk about what happened or anything else for that matter. "I know it was bad. I know they drugged me, and I have no idea what happened after that. And for a little while longer, I want to keep it that way."

"Tallie."

"I mean it. I just want to pretend that none of that happened. I just want it to be you and me. Nothing else. Just for another hour." I needed to escape in his arms and ignore the anxious feeling that was festering in the pit of my stomach. I needed to touch him, to feel that sense of safety I always felt when I was in his arms and forget about Sergei and his brothers. "Can you do that? Can you pretend with me?"

In just a blink, he was there, towering over me with a look of lust in his eyes that made me want him even more. I placed the palm of my hand against his cheek as he said, "Yeah, baby. I can do that. But we're gonna have to face this eventually."

"I know, and we will."

His hand slipped behind me, pulling me close to his chest, and when I felt the warmth of his body next to mine, my world stopped spinning. When he leaned over and covered my mouth in a hungry kiss, everything else around seemed to fade away.

The caress of his lips was pure magic. I felt safe in his arms as if nothing in the world could come between us. He pulled me even closer and delved deeper into my mouth. I could feel his heart racing, and it was all I could do not to completely unravel in his arms.

He released my mouth just long enough to look down at me and say, “I can’t lose you again, Tallie. I just can’t.”

“You won’t.” My eyes locked on his as I whispered, “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” he whispered, the warmth of his breath caressing my cheek. I could see the longing in his eyes, the same longing I felt deep inside of me.

He studied me for a moment, searching for some kind of confirmation that I wanted this moment as much as he did, and once he found it, his mouth crashed against mine. We both let go of our doubts and just let ourselves get lost in the moment. The tips of his fingers trailed along my spine, and I arched towards him, seeking the heat of his touch.

He continued to kiss me, and I could feel a fire burning deep inside me, smoldering as it spread through my body. The feeling only grew more intense when he reached for the hem of my pajama top. As he pulled it over my head, I felt the palm of his hand linger at my waist, making me shiver with anticipation.

He didn’t move.

He just stood there, staring at me, and when I noticed the passion that lay behind his eyes, my pulse pounded harder, roaring in my ears as he inched closer. I wanted him so much. Too much.

Unable to wait a moment longer, I lowered my hands to the waistband of my pajama

shorts, and with Holt watching my every move, I lowered them to the floor. I heard him take in a hastened breath as he reached behind me to remove my lace bra.

Once it hit the floor, his eyes dropped to my breasts, and he breathed, “So damn perfect.”

“Holt...,” I pleaded, stealing the last of his restraint. I gasped when he lifted me up, cradling me close to his chest as he carried me over to the bed. He held me tightly, making me feel safe and secure in his arms, then lowered me down onto the mattress.

He stood over me, gazing down at me as he removed his clothes, and he took his time about it. He knew I was watching him. It was impossible not to. He was all muscle, and the tattoos just seemed to accentuate every ripple and curve. His body had always been a thing of beauty, but now, he was no longer a boy. He was all man, and he was mine.

A rush of heat washed over me as he lowered himself onto the bed, covering me with the warmth of his body. His mouth dropped to the crook of my neck, and he began trailing kisses down my collarbone.

My desire for this man was running rampant through me, and I was losing what little control I had. It just felt so good. So right. He took my bare breasts in his hands, holding them firmly while brushing his calloused thumbs across the sensitive flesh.

I loved the feel of his hands on my body—every touch had me longing for more. He nipped and sucked at my sensitive skin before lowering his mouth to the curves of my stomach. I groaned with anticipation when I felt him lower my panties down my legs before settling his head between my thighs. My legs quivered as his tongue gently raked over my center.

His touch was soft and gentle as he circled my clit, making my entire body tingle

with need. While he continued to torment me with his mouth, he eased his fingers inside me, twisting and swirling as he found the spot that caught my breath.

I loved how his hands felt against my skin, so strong and solid, and after just a few moments, I could feel my release approaching, causing me to whimper as my body tensed and filled with heat. He'd always been able to make my body come alive in a way no one else could.

When the sensation grew to be more than I could bear, I twisted my hands in the sheet. I muttered his name over and over as my orgasm exploded, rocking me to my very core. I was still in a blissful haze when Holt's eyes met mine, and he asked, "Am I what you want?"

Unable to even string together coherent words, I nodded, praying that he wouldn't stop. His voice was stern when he said, "Say the words, Tallie. Tell me you want me."

His words caught me by surprise, but I knew he meant exactly what he'd said. Without reservation, I whispered, "I want you, Holt. I've always wanted you and only you."

"Good, 'cause you're stuck with me. You and Ford aren't going back to that rat-hole apartment. You're staying here."

"What?"

"We've already lost too much time. I don't want to lose another second." His eyes grew intense. "I want you both here, under my roof. I want you at my table for dinner. I want you in the barn making your pottery. I want to teach the kid to help with animals and how to ride a bike. And don't tell me no to that, because it's gonna happen. I want you in my bed at night and when I wake in the morning. I want the

dream, Tallie. I want our dream.”

“Oh, Holt. I want it, too. I want it all.”

“That’s good because you’re about to get it. I’m giving you everything you’ve ever wanted. I’m gonna love like no other man could. Every minute of every hour, you will know that you are mine and only mine.”

I could feel myself becoming more turned on by the second, and when he stood, and I caught sight of his throbbing erection, I nearly lost it. I couldn’t resist the temptation to reach for him. I took him in my hand then slowly started to stroke him.

A sense of satisfaction washed over me as I felt him grow even harder, urging me on as I moved my hand up and down his long, thick shaft. He shifted his body closer, and his eyes were trained on mine as I leaned forward and gently sucked the tip of his cock into my mouth.

“Fuck,” he growled.?

“Hmm,” I moaned and opened my mouth wider. His hand dove into my hair, gently tugging as he silently begged me for more. When I took him in my mouth as far as I could, he tilted his head back and incoherently muttered my name.

I loved seeing him so completely lost in the pleasure I was giving him. A low rumble worked its way through his chest when I started to move faster, licking and sucking his cock, making him struggle to maintain his control. I listened to his sharp breaths and watched the torment on his face until his eyes suddenly opened and locked on mine.??

“Need to be inside you, Tallie. Now,” he growled.??

He reached for his jeans, and I lay back on the bed, watching as he slid the condom down his thick shaft. A needful moan vibrated through his chest as he gazed down upon my naked body, and then a devilish grin spread across his face while he settled his hips between my legs, making my entire body tremble.

The bristles of his day-old beard prickled against my skin as he lowered his chin to my ear and whispered, "Mine. All mine."

"That's right. I'm all yours."

A part of me wanted to go slow. I wanted to be able to savor the moment, but I was too far gone and just couldn't restrain myself. I wanted him. I needed him. Spreading my legs further to accommodate him, I shifted my hips up towards him as he rubbed himself against my clit. My entire body ached for him.

His forehead rested against mine as he grazed his cock against me. His erection, hot and hard, burned against my clit before he thrust deep inside, giving me all he had in one smooth stroke. He gave me a second to adjust to the intrusion, then slowly started to move. Needing more, I rocked my hips, begging him to continue. His hands reached up to the nape of my neck, fisting my hair as he drove into me again.

Slow and demanding, he was in complete control. Every smooth slide of his cock into my body was a statement of dominance. His teeth raked over my nipples, and I cried out, pleading for more. I dug my nails into his back as my whole body ignited with such intense heat; it was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before.

Holt thrust deeper inside me, and as I tightened around him, he let out a growl and then quickened his pace. His control shattered, and unable to restrain himself any longer, he drove into me with hard, steady strokes. I fought to catch my breath as I felt my climax approaching. My entire body jolted and shook as my orgasm crashed through me.

I continued to tighten around his throbbing cock until he found his own release. His body collapsed on top of mine, exhausted and sweaty. I loved how Holt felt pressed against my bare skin, buried deep inside me. He took a moment to catch his breath and then rolled over to settle next to me on the bed.

Neither of us spoke. Instead, we just lay there, listening to the sounds of our breathing slow, and it wasn't long before Holt whispered, "Ford was worried about you."

"I figured he was." I rolled over and placed my head on Holt's chest. "What did you tell him?"

"Not to worry, that I was going to bring you home."

"And you did."

"Yeah, but you're still gonna need to talk to him and make sure he's good."

"I will. I think it's time we told him about you, too."

"I agree. Need to tell him about moving, too."

"So, you meant that, huh?"

"Absolutely."

"What about my pottery shop?"

"You can keep it." Holt toyed with my hair as he said, "I'll have a couple of the girls help you out so you can spend more time at home with Ford."

"That would be nice, but what girls are you talking about?"

“A couple of the hang-arounds or a few from the Vault. Most of them have more than one job and would be open to having a little quiet time in a pottery shop.”

“The Vault. Hang-arounds?”

“Yeah, we have a lot of catching up to do.”

“We most certainly do, and we will. But first, let’s go check on Ford. Once we know he’s okay, we have some other things to discuss.”

“Other things?”

“Like I said before,” his tone became firm as he said, “There are things we have to talk about.”

“Yeah.” I grimaced. “It’s going to be bad, isn’t it?”

“Some of it, but it’s a means to an end.” He leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. “Get dressed.”

With that, he tossed the covers back and got out of bed. I didn’t want to move. I was happy and content in his bed, and I knew what waited for us outside of this room would change things. But I had Holt, and as long as I had him, I could make it through anything.

23

SEVEN

“ B ut how could you just leave him there?” I could still hear her voice, the sharp edge of betrayal cutting through every word. “He’s my brother, and I know you’ve had your differences, but there was a time when he was your best friend?”

“It wasn’t my choice to make.”

She’d looked at me like I was someone she didn’t recognize, like I was some kind of monster, and she could barely stand to breathe the same air as me. And maybe she was right.

Maybe I was a monster.

But I’d done what I had to do.

Rooks was a dead man the second he tried to steal from the Volkovs. The club lived by the same code. So, I got it. I understood why they wouldn’t let him get away with it. They had to set an example so no one else would think they could get away with doing the same.

Still feeling the weight of Tallie’s glare, I ran my hand down my face and sighed. I hated seeing her so upset with me. Hell, her entire body trembled with anger and heartbreak. I hadn’t even tried to defend myself. There was no point. Nothing I could say would’ve taken her hurt away. She had to process it on her own, and once she

did, she'd see that I'd had no other choice.

"He had consequences to face."

"Consequences for what?" she gasped. "He didn't have anything to do with any of this."

"But he did." I tried to keep my tone calm as I told her, "He tried to steal their money, but that was only after he'd tried to steal your father's."

"What?" she gasped. "But why?"

I should've broken it to her gently.

I should've found a way to soften the blow, but she needed to know the facts. And there was no gentle way to say, "His business had gone south, and he was looking for a way out."

She didn't respond, but I could see the wheels turning in her head. She was starting to piece it together. "So, he asked Dad for money, and he wouldn't give it to him?"

"That's right, so Rooks decided to take it."

The realization hit her all at once. Her face went pale as she muttered, "Oh, God. Please tell me he didn't have something to do with Dad's death."

"I wish I could. I really do."

"No." I watched as the truth settled over her like a weight too heavy to bear. It was too much. I knew it would be, and I hated that I was the one who had to break the news to her. But it had to be done. Defeat in her eyes, she muttered, "I can't believe

it. He was behind it all the whole time.”

“Afraid so.”

“Oh, Rooks. Why would you do this? I just don’t understand.” Tears started streaming down her face, and her voice cracked as she said, “And he knew that he’d put Mom and me in danger, and he still...”

“His bad choices caught up with him, Tal, but that doesn’t mean they’re going to catch up with you. I’m not going to let that happen. Not now. Not ever.”

When her tears started to fall even harder, I stepped over and wrapped my arms around her, holding tight as she started to sob. She cried and cried some more, and my heart ached for her. She’d been through so much, and I wanted nothing more than to take all her hurt away.

When she finally collected herself, she stepped back and looked up at me with worry in her eyes. “What am I supposed to tell Mom?”

“I can’t answer that for you, but she’s a smart lady. She’ll figure it out sooner or later.”

“What about the case and Detective Joyner?”

“I can’t say for sure, but the Volkovs are powerful men. They’ll pull some strings and make your father’s case go away.” Since she was no longer in danger, we’d moved Tallie’s mother from the safe house and put her back up at the hotel. We figured she’d be happier there, especially with Rooks being gone. “And when that happens, your mother can go back home, and life will go on as you’ve always known it.”

“Can it really be that easy?”

“None of it is easy, Tal. But people like them make things happen.”

“So, that’s it. Dad and Rooks are gone in one fell swoop.” Tears started to pool in her eyes as she said, “I’ve lost them both.”

“I know it has to be rough, but you aren’t alone in this. I’ll be here every step of the way.”

“I’m good as long as I’m with you.”

“Feelings mutual, babe.” I leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. “I need to get over to the club and check in with Prez. You and Ford good for a bit?”

“Yeah, we’ll be fine.” She let out a breath. “You think we could talk to him about everything when you get back? I think it’s time.”

“Yeah, that’d be good.”

“Great.” She held my gaze for a moment, then whispered, “I really do love you.”

“And I love you.” I gave her a wink before saying, “I’ll be back.”

She nodded, and I headed out the door. I wasn’t exactly thrilled about leaving her. She’d been through so much over the past few days, and I wanted to be there for her. But before I could do that, I needed to check in with Prez and the brothers and make sure the drop with the driver and guard had gone off without any issue.

They would’ve called if something had come up, but I wanted to be sure. The drive over was a bit of a blur. I hadn’t slept, and my head was all over the place. One minute I was thinking about Tallie and how good her mouth felt on my cock, and then, I jumped to thinking about Rooks and whether or not he survived the night. It

was a thought that was still clinging to me as I pulled into the clubhouse parking lot.

I pulled around back and parked. I pulled off my helmet, and I was about to head inside when I spotted Preacher talking to Kay and Memphis. I could tell right away that something was off. Kay wasn't crying, but she looked like she had been or was about to.

Her hands were tucked in the back pockets of her jeans, and her back was stiff, like she was trying to put on a brave front. But even from where I stood, I could tell she was hanging by a thread.

Memphis didn't look much better. His jaw was tight, and his arms were crossed. It was clear he wasn't happy. I wasn't sure what was going on, and then I saw all the bags in the back of the car.

That's when I knew it was finally happening.

Prez was sending her home.

I got off my bike, but I didn't say anything. I just stood there for a moment, watching as Kay turned to Prez and offered him a small, grateful smile. "Thank you for everything you've done. It means more than you know."

"Don't gotta thank me. That's what I'm here for." His face was unreadable as he told her, "You know the door's always open."

"I know."

Her gaze shifted to Memphis then, and I watched as something flickered between them. Something heavy. Something unspoken. He sighed, then reached out and gave her a hug. "I'm gonna miss having you around."

“I’m going to miss being around, but you have my number. Just give me a call whenever you want some of my motherly advice.”

“I’ll do that, and you call me any time you need me to set you straight.”

She nodded against his chest, then stepped back as she answered, “I will.”

“Love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too.”

She looked back over at Preacher, and then, without another word, she climbed into her car and started the engine. Seconds later, she was pulling through the gates, but none of us moved. We just stayed put, watching as she disappeared down the road.

After a few moments, I walked over to them and asked, “So, where’s she running off to?”

“She’s going to stay with her sister for a couple of weeks, and then, she’s headed back home to Memphis.”

“What about her house? I thought it was torched?”

“Insurance came through, and they’re rebuilding.”

“Don’t see why she couldn’t just wait here until it was done.”

Prez exhaled, glancing at Memphis before looking back at me. “She needed to go.”

That was all he said.

Memphis's fists were clenched at his sides, which told me he wasn't pleased about how things had played out, but he knew better than to go against his father. So, he shook it off and did his best to accept what had to be done. Figuring he could use a change of subject, I asked, "How'd the drop go with the driver and guard?"

"As good as could be expected," Prez answered. "We cleaned them up and sent them on their way. Haven't heard anything more, so I'd say that's the end of that. What about Tallie? How's she making it?"

"She's still coming to grips with some things, but she'll be okay."

"She know about her brother?"

"Yeah, that was a tough one." I shook my head. "Had to be hard to hear that your brother was a lying, cheating, murdering asshole."

"It was, but it is what it is." I shrugged. "At least, now she can move on and put all this behind her."

"So, you really think Rooks is done for?"

"No way to know for sure, but it certainly sounded that way."

"So, what happens now?"

"Tallie and Ford are gonna be staying with me. I'll get a couple of the prospects to help me move her stuff over from her apartment, and then, we'll figure out something with her shop."

"Sounds like you got it all figured out."

“No, but we’re trying.”

“So, when are you gonna be ready to take back control of the Vault?” Memphis asked, sounding overly hopeful. “Cause that shit’s about to drive me up the fucking wall. I don’t know how you do it. If it’s not the girls bitching about the schedule, it’s some assbat starting shit and causing a fucking brawl. And then, you gotta deal with all the broken chairs and glasses.”

“I was thinking about passing the reins to you.”

“Fuck no,” Memphis groaned. “I don’t mind helping out here and there, but no way I’m stepping into those shoes.”

“Ah, I’m just fucking with ya. Just give me a few more days to get things settled, and then, I’ll be back.”

“You got it.”

I turned my attention to Prez as I said, “I appreciate your help with all this mess with Tallie. I know it was asking a lot.”

“That’s what we’re here for.” Prez gave me one of his nods, and that was that. He was ready to put it behind us. “You gonna be up to put together next week’s run?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good deal. Then, go home to your woman, and we’ll start putting a plan together at the end of the week.”

“Sounds good.” I gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Thanks, Prez.”

With that, I got back on my bike and headed straight back to the house. When I pulled up in the drive, I couldn't help but notice that Mable and Percy were waiting for me at the barn. I hadn't gotten around to feeding them, and they both let me know as soon as I got off my bike.

Mable started baahing and Percy started barking, and they put on quite a show. You would've thought they hadn't been fed in days, and they kept at it until I made my way into the barn. I started over to the feed, and Mable almost knocked me off my feet.

"Hold on a damn minute, Mable!" I fussed. "I'll get to you in a minute."

I poured Percy some food, then grabbed her bag of pellets and started pouring them into her trough. I was about to get them both some fresh water when I spotted Ford standing in the doorway. He was just standing there, staring at me with this strange expression on his face. When he didn't say anything, I started towards him and asked, "You alright, kid?"

"Is it true?" he asked in barely a whisper. "Are you really my dad?"

Damn.

She finally told him.

She must've talked to him while I was gone. I couldn't tell if he was angered or relieved by the news. Either way, there was no denying it. "Yeah, I'm your dad."

"Oh."

"I wanted to tell ya as soon as I found out, but..."

“I know. Mom told me.” His eyes dropped to the ground as he added, “She said we would talk more together, but...”

“What? You can say it.”

“I just don’t get why didn’t you come and find us?”

“Well, for starters, I didn’t know there was an us. I didn’t know anything about you until I saw you in that hotel.” I knelt in front of him. “Had I known, I would’ve been there on day one. I promise you that.”

“You kind of look like me.”

“I think it’s the other way around, but yeah. We certainly favor one another.”

“You think I’ll be a biker like you one day?”

“It’s possible, but that’ll be up to you.”

“I think I want to.”

“Well, you have plenty of time to decide.”

“Mom said we’re gonna live with you.”

“Yeah, as long as that’s okay with you.”

“Do I get to keep my room?”

“Absolutely.” I smiled. “And you can do whatever you want to it.”

“Okay. That’d be cool.”

“And if you’re up for it, I’m gonna need some help with Mable and Percy. Mable’s gonna be getting a couple of friends soon, and it’d be great if you could give me a hand.”

“I can help feed ‘em and stuff?”

“Absolutely.”

“That’d be awesome.”

“Glad you think so, because your momma wants more goats and a baby cow.”

“A baby cow would be soo cool.”

“You say that now, but it’s no fun cleaning out a stall when it’s five below.”

“I’ll help.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” I gave it a minute for the dust to settle, then asked, “So, you okay with all this? You know, with me being your dad and all?”

“Yeah, I think it’ll be cool to finally have a dad.” His brows furrowed as he asked, “What about me? Are you okay with me being your son?”

“I’m more than okay with it.”

“Cool.” Ford nodded, then it was back to life as usual. “So, what’s for dinner?”

“Good question. Let’s head inside and see what your mom’s thinking.”

Ford gave me a small nod, like we had some kind of silent agreement, and without another word, we headed inside. The second we stepped through the door, we were hit with the smell of garlic and tomatoes. Tallie was at the stove, stirring a pot of sauce. Ford stepped up next to her and glanced down at the stove, and his eyes lit up as he said, “We’re having spaghetti! Awesome!”

“Go wash up. It’ll be ready in a minute.”

Ford didn’t argue. He just bolted down the hall and straight into the bathroom. When the water kicked on, Tallie turned to me and asked, “How’d it go?”

“Good.” I exhaled. “Couldn’t have gone better.”

Her lips parted like she wanted to ask more, but I gave her a small nod, letting her know that everything was okay . Better than okay.

She smiled, then went back to cooking dinner. “I talked to Mom.”

“Oh?” I started making our drinks as I asked, “How’d that go?”

“Not great.” She shrugged. “She had a lot of questions about Rooks, and she refused to believe that he had anything to do with Dad’s murder.”

“She’s going to need some time to process everything.”

“I think it’s more than that.” There was hint of sadness in her voice as she explained, “She’s lost a lot over the past couple of weeks, and things with us are still strained. That doesn’t really help matters.”

“You guys just need some time.”

“Maybe, but I’m not sure things will ever be right again.” Tallie shook her head. “I love my mother, and I will always want her in our lives. But I don’t think I’ll ever be able to truly forgive her for what she did to us.”

“And that’s completely understandable. And to be honest, I feel the same way.”

“So, I’m not being dramatic?”

“Not in the least.”

“I love you.” She smiled. “I really do.”

“Love you, too, babe.”

Once it was ready, we carried it over to the table, and we ate together, just like a family.

It was easy. Comfortable. Right.

As soon as we finished eating, Ford and I carried our plates to the sink, and Tallie rinsed them off and put them in the dishwasher. After everything was put away, Ford stepped over to me and asked, “Wanna play a round of Fortnight?”

“I don’t know, bud. It’s kind of late.”

“Come on. Just one round.”

I glanced over at Tallie, and once she gave me a nod of approval, I told him, “Okay. Just one.”

In a blink, we were all piled up in the living room. Tallie was on the sofa, sound

asleep, and Ford and I were sitting on the floor, having the battle of our lives. “Get him! Get him! No! Build! Build! ”

Ford’s whisper was barely a whisper, and his entire body tensed with excitement as he clutched the controller. His eyes were glued to the screen, and his fingers were moving as fast as they could. And he was biting down on his lip, trying his damndest not to yell.

“On your left,” I whispered, leaning in. “He’s in the bush.”

Ford’s fingers flew over the buttons. A second later, a gunshot rang out through the speakers, and the words Victory Royale came across the screen. Ford gasped, and his arms shot up in the air. “We won!”

“Damn right, we did.”

Tallie stirred on the sofa, and we both froze.

She stilled, and her breathing stayed slow and steady. Ford let out a breath of relief, then whispered, “I better hit the bed, or she’ll know I was up late.”

“Good call.”

He got up and tossed the controller onto the coffee table before whispering, “Night, Holt!”

“Night.”

With that, he disappeared down the hall. Once he was gone, I turned my attention to Tallie. She was curled up on the sofa, and she was out cold. Her hair had fallen loose around her face, and there was something about the way she looked, so peaceful and

angelic, that made my chest tighten.

For so damn long, this house had been just a house.

It was a place to sleep, to eat, and to just get by.

But with her and Ford here, it felt like home.

I pushed to my feet and leaned down, sliding my arms under Tallie's back and legs before carefully lifting her into my arms. She sighed in her sleep and curled closer to my chest, but she didn't wake. As I carried her to our room, something settled inside me, something deep and certain.

I had her. I had Ford.

I had my club and a roof over my head.

I didn't need anything else.

24

TALLIE

“If it’s any consolation, I think your shop would’ve done amazing.” Jenna looked around the room with a smile. “Your stuff is incredible.”

“Thank you.” I ran my fingers over the rim of one of my favorite vases and traced the smooth ceramic as I let out a slow breath. “I’m hoping it will do well at the gallery.”

“Oh, you won’t have any problem there. People around here love anything handmade.”

I looked around at the half-empty shelves and sighed.

This was my dream. It was going to be my fresh start, and now, I was packing it all up. I couldn’t deny that it was hard—harder than I’d expected. Casey must’ve sensed the shift in my mood because she came over and placed her hand on my shoulder.

“You sure about this?”

“Yep. I’m all good.”

“You say that, but you look like you’re on the brink of tears.”

“No, no crying today. I’m all good.”

“Mmhmm. We’ll see.”

I sighed and picked up another piece, wrapping it carefully before placing it in the box. “It’s just weird, you know? I spent so much time thinking about making this place mine, and now I’m just leaving it.”

“You’re not leaving it,” Casey corrected. “You’re taking it with you.”

“Exactly,” Jenna agreed. “And let’s be honest, you’d run yourself ragged if you tried to keep this place going.”

She wasn’t wrong.

Moving in with Holt had changed things. Not just for me but for Ford, too. He was starting a new school and making new friends, and I needed to be there to help out whenever I could. I couldn’t do that and run a pottery shop two hours away. It just didn’t make any sense.

So, I made the decision to do something different.

I’d turn the barn into my new workspace. I would make my pottery there and sell it at the local art gallery. Eventually, I would work toward online sales. I may have been a little sad to let go of a dream, but I knew I’d made the right choice.

Casey nudged my shoulder. “We should have girl’s wine night at the barn. You can show us what you’re making and even teach us a thing or two.”

“Oh, I’d love that!” Jenna gasped. “You could do pottery for kids, too! I know Luna would love that.”

“Toby would, too!” Casey’s mouth dropped wide. “That’s a really good idea! I can’t believe I didn’t think of it.”

“Hey, hey. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We still have a lot of packing to do.”

“She’s right.” Jenna gave her a stern but playful look. “Let’s get to it.”

We spent hours boxing everything up and making trip after trip, loading everything into the trailer. We’d been at it for over an hour when I said, “Holt and I had an interesting talk last night.”

“Oh, yeah?” Casey stopped in her tracks. “What about?”

“Everything.” I continued wrapping one of my bowls as I told them, “We’d really never talked about the years we were apart, so we spent a lot of time talking about that. I told him all about my time in Paris and New York, and he told me about his time in the military.”

“That’s good.”

“It was. We both learned a lot about each other.”

“Hmmm.” Casey’s brows furrowed. “Why do I feel like there’s something you’re not telling us?”

“Well, there was a lot of talk about the club and all the rules.” Jenna glanced over at Casey, and they shared a knowing glance. “There’s a lot there, isn’t there?”

“Yes, but it isn’t too bad.” Casey shrugged. “The secrets can be tough at times, but you have to remember it’s for our benefit.”

“Yeah, that’s what he kept saying, but I wasn’t so sure I agreed.”

“It’s one of those things that takes time.”

“What about the hang arounds and all the strippers? Do they take time getting used to?”

“Actually, the girls are pretty cool,” Jenna admitted. “Once one of the guys is claimed, they keep their distance.”

“And they do a lot around the club house and help out any way they can.” Casey picked up a box as she said, “You met Bridgett. She’s a hang around, and she’s awesome.”

“Yeah, she really was.”

“Just give it time. If you still have concerns about something, talk to Seven about it, and he’ll get it sorted.”

“Thanks. I’m glad to know I’m not the only one who’s gone through all this.”

“No. We’ve all been there, and I can honestly say, the good outweighs the bad ten-fold.”

“Good to know.”

We kept at it, and when we’d almost gotten everything done, I sent Casey and Jenna home. I wanted to wrap up the last of it myself so I could have a moment alone before I closed this chapter on my life.

Once I had my last few pieces boxed up, I wiped everything down, and I was about to hit the lights when I noticed a figure at the front door. It startled me, but then I saw that it was Marcus.

I never thought I’d look at him and feel anything other than love and loyalty. He had

been my best friend since high school. He was the one person I could always count on and had never let me down.

Until now.

Now, I knew the truth, and the mere sight of him made my stomach twist into a knot. He must've seen the storm brewing in my eyes because his smile faded the second I started toward the door. His easy stance stiffened, and when I opened the door, his brows furrowed. "Tallie? What's wrong?"

"You have some real nerve showing up here."

His jaw clenched, but he didn't interrupt.

I stopped just a foot away, close enough that I could see the flicker of guilt in his eyes when I asked, "How long did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That Holt was alive?"

He didn't answer.

I took a step closer as I pushed, "How long, Marcus?"

Shame was written all over his face as he muttered, "A while."

The words hit like a slap.

A while.

All those years I spent grieving. All those nights, I cried myself to sleep, thinking I'd lost the only man I'd ever loved. And he knew . He knew Holt was alive, and he let me drown in that grief anyway. "You were supposed to be my best friend."

"I am your best friend! That's never changed."

"You lied to me!"

"I was trying to protect you."

"Oh my God! Why does everyone keep saying that? It makes no sense! I didn't need protecting. I needed Holt!" A bitter laugh escaped before I could stop it. "Do you have any idea what that did to me? Do you have any idea how much I needed to know the truth?"

He looked away, but I wasn't done.

"I trusted you, Marcus. More than anyone. I told you everything . And you never said a word. You let me believe he was dead ."

"I didn't know how to tell you. And when I did, it was too late."

"You're right. It is too late. You need to go, Marcus."

"Tallie, please. Let me explain."

"There's nothing you can say."

"Tallie..."

"No," I cut him off. "We're done, Marcus."

His whole body went still.

I could see it in his face. He knew I meant it, and it wasn't just anger talking. I was done .

"I'm sorry, Tallie." When I didn't respond, he lowered his head and said, "If you ever change your mind..."

"I won't."

With that, he gave me a nod and turned to leave. It was hard to close the door on a friendship that I'd had for so long, but deep down, I knew I had no other choice. He'd lied to me for years, and there was no coming back from that. I felt the same way about my mother.

She was my mother. Nothing could change that.

But I'd never look at her the same way again.

She let me believe Holt was dead. She watched me grieve and held me while I cried. I spent years drowning in that pain, and she just let me. She never once considered telling me the truth.

It was a hard pill to swallow.

She was the person I turned to when life got hard. She was someone I trusted. But that trust had been broken, and no matter how much I wanted things to go back to the way they were, I knew they never would.

I would never forget what she did, but in time, I would forgive her.

She would still be a big part of our lives. She was Holt's grandmother, and she was all we had left of our family. And more than that, she was my mother, and I loved her dearly. I could never turn my back on her, so in time, we would figure things out and find our new normal.

By the time I pulled into the driveway, I was exhausted. Packing up the shop had taken more out of me than I'd expected. I was worn out and ready to call it a day until I got out of the car and spotted Holt and Ford in the backyard. Holt had a baseball glove on one hand and was tossing a ball to Ford with the other. Ford caught it and smiled proudly.

"There ya go," Holt called out. "See? You're getting it."

Ford beamed and puffed out his chest like he'd just won the World Series. And my heart melted right there on the spot.

I glanced over and saw the smoke billowing from the grill. Holt had the picnic table set up with plates and several bags of chips. It was the perfect way to end a long day. I started over to Ford, and he smiled widely as he told me, "I've caught six in a row."

"Oh, really." I dropped my bag down on the porch. "That's pretty impressive."

"Hey, babe." Holt gave me one his smiles that sent a tingle straight through me. "How'd it go?"

"About like I expected. But it's done."

He studied me for a second, then nodded like he knew exactly what that meant. He didn't press. He just reached out, catching my hand and giving it a squeeze. Ford tossed the ball up in the air and caught it in his glove as he announced, "We're making burgers and hot dogs."

“I see that. It smells great.”

“Should be about ready.”

Ford started up the front steps as he shouted, “I’ll get the ketchup.”

I didn’t even think about it.

I walked straight over to Holt. He was at the grill, flipping the burgers when I wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed my cheek into his back. I loved the feeling of his body next to mine. I loved how he always smelled of cologne mixed with leather. I loved how he made me feel safe.

I loved him.

I loved him so much it made my chest ache.

Holt stilled for half a second, then let out a low chuckle and turned to face me. “What’s this about?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head against his chest. “I just love you.”

His arms tightened around me instantly, pulling me in and holding me close. He pressed a slow, warm kiss to my neck, and I felt him smile against my skin. “And I love you, but I’ve got cooking to do here, woman.”

“Just one more second.”

Holt chuckled again, softer this time, before he pulled back just enough to look at me. “You good?”

I nodded. "I'm more than good."

Holt's lips curled into a knowing smile, and then he leaned down, brushing a kiss against my forehead. "Love ya."

"And I love you."

He gave me a wink, then went back to flipping the burgers.

As I stood there, looking at the love of my life, I knew things weren't always going to be wonderful. I knew we would fall on hard times, and there would be days when I doubted everything. There would be days when I loved him more than I could stand, and there would be times when I wanted to wring his neck. But I loved him, and he loved me.

And as long as we had each other, we could get through anything.

I was finally where I was meant to be.

THREE MONTHS LATER

“Y ou sure about this?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

Ford was practically leaping out of his own skin as I strapped the helmet on and said, “You remember everything I told you?”

“Um-hmm.” His grin was wide, and his eyes were shining with the kind of joy only a kid could have. “I remember. Hold on tight and lean against the curve.”

“Alright, then. Let’s do this.” I chuckled and swung a leg over my bike, then patted the seat behind me. “Hop on.”

He scrambled up, and his small arms wrapped around my waist before I even had a chance to tell him to hold on. Seeing him so excited about his first ride did something to me, and I had to fight the urge to pull him in for a bear hug.

I’d never thought of myself as father material. Hell, I never even let myself think about having kids. That wasn’t my world. I was too hard, too deep in club life, and too damn selfish to be responsible for someone else.

But Ford made me rethink everything.

He looked at me like I hung the damn moon and trusted me like I’d been there since day one. I don’t know when it happened or how it happened, but I became the father I

never thought I'd be. And now, I couldn't imagine my life without him.

I won't deny that it scared the hell out of me. I didn't want to screw it up or let him down. But when I saw the way his face would light up whenever I came around, I knew I'd do whatever it took to be the father he deserved.

I eased out of the driveway, and at first, I kept it slow.

I wanted him to get used to the feeling before I let loose. But once we hit the open road, I gave it a little more throttle. Not too much. Just enough to let him feel the wind and hint of freedom that came with riding. It was a feeling he would become accustomed to in the years to come.

I gave it a little more throttle, and I couldn't help but smile when Ford let out a loudwhoop. The kid had a lot of his ol' man in him. It was one of the many reasons things had been so easy with him. It was strange, but we just clicked.

The kid had been glued to my side since day one, and I hadn't minded. Not even a little. We rode around for a bit before finally heading back home. The second we pulled into the driveway, Ford hopped off and removed his helmet. "That was awesome! Can we go again?"

"Maybe later. We need to check in with your mom first. I'm sure dinner is almost ready."

"Okay." His grin didn't falter. Instead, his eyes lit up with another idea. "Wanna play Fortnite after we eat?"

I huffed out a laugh. "Yeah, I'll play a round with ya."

"Awesome." And with that, he bolted for the door and shouted, "Thanks, Dad!"

Tallie was back in the bedroom, reading on the Kindle. She barely looked up as I lay down next to her and started fiddling with my phone. “How’d it go?”

“Great. The kid’s a natural.”

“Did you go slow like you promised?”

“Of course.”

“How long do you think it’ll be before he starts asking for a bike of his own?”

“Won’t be long.”

“That’s what I figured,” Tallie sighed.

She turned her attention back to her book, and I was half-listening to some reporter talk about this week’s games and half-listening to her usual little hums and gasps when she got lost in a book.

She seemed perfectly content when, out of nowhere, she jolted up in bed with her jaw dropped open. It was clear something was wrong, so I asked, “What?”

She jabbed at the screen like it had personally offended her as she announced, “I can’t believe it. I’ve been reading the wrong book!”

I raised a brow. “Huh?”

“This isn’t the right book.” She turned to me with a look that was a mix between anger and betrayal. “It has the same title as my favorite series. Well, it’s close to the same title, but it’s not the same author! It’s like they copied it thinking I wouldn’t notice!”

“How close we talkin’?”

“Too close.” She tapped on the screen of her Kindle, then turned it towards me. “Here’s the one I was just reading.”

“Okay.”

She tapped on the screen again, and when she found what she was looking for, she turned towards me. “And here’s the one I was supposed to be reading.”

“Okay. I’ll give it to ya. They’re pretty fucking close.” I bit back a grin. “And how long did it take you to figure that out?”

“The first chapter was okay ,” she huffed. “But then the lead hero, who was supposed to be this brooding, tortured biker, starts calling the heroine Ladybug and talking about his favorite pumpkin spice latte.”

“Okay?”

“Pumpkin spice , Holt!” She threw her hands up. “The man was supposed to be a badass outlaw, not a freaking barista!”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

My woman was having a come-apart over a book, and it was fucking adorable. When she noticed me laughing, she gave me a shove and sassed, “This isn’t funny, Holt! It’s book fraud !”

“I don’t know if it’s all that.”

“It is!” she argued. “I feel violated .”

“Baby.” I rolled toward her and slid my arm around her waist. “I get that you’re upset, and I’m really sorry about that.”

I inched her closer. “But I gotta tell ya, seeing you getting all riled up over your smutty books is fucking hot.”

She scowled at me. “This isn’t smut! It’s action-adventure romance, and...”

I cut her off by pressing my lips to the side of her neck, trailing soft kisses up to her ear. Her breath hitched as she said, “You’re trying to distract me.”

“Is it working?”

“Maybe.”

“Good.” I stopped kissing her long enough to say, “Now put the knockoff book down and give me your mouth.”

With a sigh of defeat, she tossed the Kindle onto the nightstand and turned toward me. “Fine. But I’m still mad.”

“That’s okay. I can work with mad.” I dropped my hands to the hem of her pajama top and slipped it over her head. “So, tell me. Who do you think of when you read this biker porn of yours.”

“It’s not biker porn!”

“Does it talk about his hard, throbbing cock?”

“Maybe.”

“Then, it’s biker porn,” I chuckled as I eased her lace panties down her legs. “Now, who do you think about?”

“You, of course.”

“Um-hmm.” I started unbuckling my jeans as I asked, “You really expect me to believe that?”

“Well, yeah. Cause it’s true.” She gave me a look before she asked, “Are you gonna lock the door?”

“Shit. I forgot.” I eased up and darted over to the door. While I was up, I kicked off my boots and jeans, then eased back on the bed. “So, I’ve been thinking.”

“Uh-oh.”

“I’m serious.” I hovered over her as I announced, “I think we should have another kid. A girl this time. We could name her Ellie or another boy could work, too. Ford would make a hell of a big brother, don’t ya think?”

“Yes, he would.”

“So, does that mean you’re game?”

“Yes, I’m definitely game.” She gave me a warm smile. “When do you want to start trying for this baby girl or boy?”

“No time like the present.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

The End

PROLOGUE

Something breaks inside a man when he watches the casket close on his own flesh and blood. He can try to put the pieces back together. I certainly did, but they no longer fit.

My ears were still ringing with the sounds of the crash when Seven walked into my hospital room. I wasn't exactly surprised to see him. We were long time friends, and he knew I hadn't been right in the head. "What the hell, man?"

"I know. I know. I fucked up."

"That's a fucking understatement."

Seven walked over to my hospital bed and shook his head when he saw just how bad things really were. I'd broken my arm and had a severe concussion. There was a thick, white bandage wrapped around my head, concealing the stitches, but it did little to hide the fact that my face was black and blue, and my eyes were practically swollen shut.

I was lucky.

I hit a telephone pole and was thrown through the windshield.

I could've hit someone—killed them and myself. I wouldn't have been all that bothered with the latter. Hell, it had crossed my mind more times than I could count.

“So, after two fucking tours in Iraq where we fought every fucking day to see the next sunrise, this is how you’re gonna go out?” he snapped. “What the hell were you thinking? Drinking and driving. Have you lost your fucking mind? You could’ve gotten yourself killed or worse. You could’ve killed someone else.”

“I know. I know. It was a dumb move.” I let out a defeated sigh. “I went to see Tracy.”

“Ah, damn. Why the fuck would you go and do that?”

“I guess I’m just a glutton for punishment.”

Seven and I had served together, and while out on patrol, we talked. Hell, we talked a lot. He knew my history with her, so I wasn’t surprised when he said, “Well, you had to know that was a bad idea.”

“I did, but I needed to see her.” I shifted slightly and winced when the movement sent a sharp pain through my arm. “I needed to know that she was okay.”

“And?”

“Oh, she was okay.” My voice was strained as I told him, “Hell, she was more than okay. She’s remarried and has a kid on the way.”

“It’s been five years, brother. It’s not crazy to think she would’ve moved on.”

“Five years is a fucking blink!” I started stammering with emotion. “How could she just forget what happened?”

“I don’t know, man, but she let it go and you’re gonna have to do the same.”

“How the hell am I supposed to do that?” I grabbed my phone and threw it across the room. “My head is full of all these fucking memories, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t shake ‘em. Hell, I see his face every time I close my eyes.”

“You can’t keep going on like this.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“Come to the clubhouse. I’m tellin’ ya. It’ll change everything.”

“I don’t know, man. I know it’s your thing now, but I just don’t think that biker shit is for me.”

“You’re wrong.” He sounded like he truly meant it when he said, “That sense of brotherhood we had in our platoon isn’t gone. And that adrenaline rush we got when we were on a mission, it’s still out there. You just gotta take a chance, and you’ll see for yourself that these guys are the real deal.”

“I haven’t ridden since I was a kid.”

“Doesn’t matter. Once a rider, always a rider.” He studied me for a moment, then gave me one last push. “So, what’s it gonna be? You gonna piss your life away with booze and bad choices, or are you gonna pull your head out of your ass and start living again?”

“I guess I’m running out of choices here. I can’t keep doing this. What do I gotta do?”

“You just gotta show up.”

1

GHOST

“Y ou sure I can’t convince you to stay?”

“Nah, sir.” Louie shook his head. “I gotta get back. I have folks to see about.”

“We can take you to see your folks and bring ya back.”

Big Louie was a local homeless man who spent the better part of his night in the back alley of the Vault—a strip club owned and run by the club. He was there the night of the drive-by shooting that took out Little Nix and had taken a bullet trying to save him. He’d been recovering at the clubhouse, and he was finally back on his feet. We were all hoping he’d consider staying, but he wasn’t having it.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m a rambling man. I ain’t one to be tied down.”

“I understand.” Prez gave him a pat on the shoulder. “But know you always have a place here if you need it.”

“Yes, sir. You’re a good man.”

“You’re the good one.” Emotion filled his eyes as Prez told him, “You put your life on the line for one of my boys, and that’s not something I will soon forget.”

“Just did what he would’a done for me.”

He was right. Little Nix might've just been a prospect, but he was a good kid who would've put his neck on the line for anyone he cared about, including Big Louie. Prez gave him a nod, then turned to me and Goose. "You two mind taking him?"

"Yeah, sure thing." I reached down and picked up the backpack we'd put together for him as I asked, "Where we headed?"

"You can drop me off at the bus station."

I wasn't surprised by his response. The bus station was a big hanging spot for a lot of the homeless around town, and I felt certain he had folks there who would be happy to see him. Louie followed us outside and out to the truck, and when he got inside next to me, I couldn't help but smile.

Louie was a big dude, and while he was a great guy and I'd always thought a lot of him, he didn't always smell the best. In fact, there were days when he was quite foul, but today, he was not only smelling good and clean, but he looked the part as well.

The brothers had gathered up all his belongings and laundered everything he owned. They also threw in a few extra things to see him through the long, hot summer. We wanted to do more, but Louie wouldn't allow it. He might've been down on his luck, but he was prideful and wasn't looking for a handout—especially from a man he respected like Prez.

When we got to the station, Louie hopped out and grabbed his bag. He gave us a warm smile as he said, "Appreciate the ride, boys."

"Anytime." Before he closed the door, I shouted, "If you need us, you know where to find us."

"That I do!" He closed the door and waved. "I'll be seeing ya!"

Moments later, he vanished into the crowd, but I wasn't worried. I knew it wouldn't be long before he'd made his rounds and would be back in our alley, watching over us as we worked.

We hadn't been sitting there long when Goose turned to me and said, "Hard to see him go."

"Yeah, it is."

"You think he'll be okay?"

"No doubt in my mind," I scoffed. "Hell, it's Big Louie. Nothing's gonna get him down."

"Hope you're right."

"Me, too." I put the truck in drive, and as I pulled out of the parking lot, I asked, "What do you got going on today?"

"Not much. I figured I'd head back to the clubhouse and grab a bite to eat. Maybe change out that carburetor that's been giving Memphis trouble."

"You need a hand?"

"If it's your hand you're offering, then hell yeah."

"It's all yours."

Once we got back to the clubhouse, Goose and I went straight to the kitchen and started pilfering through the fridge. Goose made a plate of leftover spaghetti while I made one of my famous grilled cheese and pickle sandwiches. I grabbed us both a

beer, and we'd just sat down at the table when I heard a woman's voice snap, "This is ridiculous!"

"Yeah, well. It is what it is," Prez growled back.

"Don't give me that 'it is what it is' mess! You know how I hate that!" I knew then it was Kay who was pitching a fit. She was the only one around who had the nerve to speak to our president with such a defiant tone. "I just want to know how long you're planning on keeping me here."

"I can't answer that."

"What do you mean? This is my life we're talking about."

"Yeah, and I'm doing what I can to protect it." Prez's tone was unwavering as he told her, "So, you're staying put."

"You can't force me to stay here."

"I can, and I will."

Prez entered the kitchen, and Kay quickly followed. She crossed her arms tightly over her chest, and her fiery eyes glared at Preacher. "You can't be serious!"

"I get that you aren't happy with this whole situation, and I gotta tell ya, I'm not all that thrilled about it either, but it's not safe for you to leave."

"So, what? I'm just supposed to sit around here and wait for you to decide when it's okay for me to leave?"

"That's exactly what you're supposed to do."

“But I want to go home. I want to get back to my life.”

“And what are you going to do when one of Carmine’s targets comes after you?”

“Who’s to say that they will?” Kay cocked her brow. “They may not even think to look for me.”

“Oh, they will. No doubt about it.” Standing his ground, Prez stepped forward and towered over her as he added, “It’s only a matter of time before these guys figure out what Carmine was up to, and when they do, they will be out for blood. When they can’t find him, they’ll come looking for you, and they will make you pay in ways you can’t begin to imagine.”

I watched as Preacher’s jaw tightened, the tension in the room was palpable. I knew Preacher well enough to see the struggle behind his eyes—the conflict between his protective instincts and the remnants of whatever had once been between him and Kay. But I knew that Preacher wouldn’t bend on this, not when Kay’s life was on the line.

“I hate this.” Tears filled her eyes. “It’s so unfair.”

“Yeah, it is, but we’re working on it. I know how hard it is for you, but you’re going to have to be patient and let us do what we need to do.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Not even a little.”

“Well, that goes for both of us.”

With that, she spun on her heel and stormed off, leaving Preacher standing there, his

expression unreadable. His shoulders slumped slightly, the weight of the situation weighing on him. I took a long pull off my beer and shook my head. I'd seen this kind of thing before—two people too stubborn to admit they cared.

It was a dangerous game—one that could lead to more than just hurt feelings. As the door to Kay's room slammed shut in the distance, I let out a breath and muttered, "I feel a little tension in the air."

"You can say that again." Goose looked over to Prez as he asked, "So, whatcha gonna do?"

"Nothing that she's gonna like." Prez walked over and sat down across from us. "She doesn't get that she can't go back to her old life. Carmine made sure of that, so we're gonna have to keep her here or set her up with a whole new life somewhere else. And if we do that, there's no coming back."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just give up Carmine?"

"Yeah, it would, but I gave my word to Antonia, and I'm not going back on it."

Antonia had recently become Memphis's ol' lady, but before that, she was his stepsister. They'd always had a connection, but it took Memphis almost dying for them to admit their true feelings. Antonia was there for him during his recovery and helped him get back on his feet, and Prez felt indebted to her for helping his son walk again.

We all were, so when her father got himself into trouble, Prez assured her that he would help. And he had. He'd managed to get him out of the country and under the radar, but he was still trying to figure out what to do about Kay—Memphis's mother.

Just in time to interject his opinion on this, Memphis strolled into the room and

asked, “Going back on what?”

“We were just discussing your mother.”

“Aw, yeah. I just saw her storming into her room.” Memphis walked over and grabbed a soda from the fridge. “What’s got her panties in a twist?”

“She’s wanting to leave.”

“Well, that’s not happening any time soon.”

“Yeah, that’s what I told her.” Prez shook his head. “But you know your mother. Damn, she’s stubborn.”

“That’s putting it lightly.” Memphis came over and sat down at the end of the table. “You know, if she’s so eager to go, you could let her go stay with Aunt Janice for a while. Just until the dust settles.”

“Hmmm.” Prez grumbled under his breath.

“I know she can be a bit much, but she’s all the way out in California. Mom would be safe with her, especially if we take her credit cards away and give her some cash and a new identity. Hell, for that matter, send a prospect with her.”

“She isn’t going to like having a babysitter.”

“Well, that’s too damn bad. This could be her ticket out, and she can either take it or leave it.”

“You’ve got a point.” He thought for a moment, then said, “I’ll have Zeke drive her out there tonight, and he can stay out there with her for a couple of weeks and see

how it goes.”

“Good deal. The break will do you both some good.”

“No doubt.” Preacher leaned back in his chair and announced, “While I’ve got you here, I got a call from Viper this morning.”

“Something up with the run?”

“You could say that.” Prez leaned back in his chair. “When you go, you’re gonna be bringing back more than this month’s take. You’re going to have some company with you.”

“Come again?”

“Viper needs us to look after a girl and her son for a while.”

“Seriously?” Memphis groaned. “Don’t we have enough going on?”

“Viper helped us when we were in a pinch, so we owe it to him. Besides, it sounds like this girl could really use our help.”

“She in trouble or something?”

“She’s got something going with an ex. Some kind of stalker issue, and she and her kid need a place to hide out for a while.”

“This guy hurt her?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty bad. Viper will explain everything tonight when you guys get to the Manor.”

“Got it.”

Prez turned to me and Goose as he said, “We got no idea what this ex might pull, so I’m putting you two in charge of keeping an on eye on them. Make sure they have what they need, and neither of them leaves the premises without one of you with them.”

“Understood.”

After Goose and I finished eating, we headed out to the garage with Memphis. We spent a few hours working on his carburetor, and then we started preparations for our run. We gathered our weapons and extra ammo, then cleared the storage compartment beneath my backseats. It was a modification Memphis and a couple of the brothers had made to the truck a few months back. It enabled us to hide several pounds of product securely, and with the scent-lock storage containers, we wouldn’t have to worry if we got pulled over on the way back.

I gave everything one last scan, then announced, “Looks like we’re all set.”

“Then, let’s get moving.” Memphis started for the passenger door. “I have a beautiful woman waiting at home for me.”

“Yeah, yeah. You can stop with the bragging.”

“Not bragging. Just stating facts.” He waited for me to get in and close the door before he added, “You could call up your stalker friend. I’m sure she’d love to...”

“Not a chance,” I interrupted. “I’d rather die alone.”

“Oh, she wasn’t that bad.”

“I knew her two days, and she got my name tattooed on her wrist.” His smirk widened when I added, “And she sprayed everything I owned with her strong-assed perfume—even my fucking underwear!”

“Sounds like she really liked you.”

“Oh, yeah, she was crazy about me.” I patted my chest as I boasted, “But you can’t really blame her. I mean, look at me. I’m irresistible.”

“You’re even more delusional than she is.”

“Whatever, man. At least I’m not hooking up with my little...”

“Whoa,” Memphis snapped, cutting me off. “Don’t even.”

“Well, don’t start no shit, won’t be no shit.”

“Oh, I’m about to start some shit in about two seconds if you don’t start this fucking truck and get us on the road and find us something to eat. I’m fucking starving.”

“I’m going. I’m going.” I turned the key as I mumbled, “Damn.”

Seconds later, we were pulling through the gate and headed towards Nashville. It wasn’t a hard drive. It was just a long one. It was about five hours, but the traffic was light, and Goose had plenty of stories to help pass the time. But as we drew closer, the stories came to a halt, and our focus was on the road ahead.

Goose’s fingers tapped nervously on his thigh as he kept a close eye on his side mirrors, watching for any signs of trouble. Memphis toyed with the police scanner, and just as we were coming into Nashville, he leaned forward and announced, "Looks like we’ve got a speed trap up ahead."

I nodded and eased off the gas.

I dropped to just above the speed limit and hoped it was enough to keep them from becoming suspicious. The area was a hot spot—not because of the Manor. No one knew it existed, but the interstate through Nashville had become a high-traffic area for criminals of all kinds, and cops patrolled the area like vultures waiting to swoop.

I checked my mirrors and speed once more, then continued towards our exit. We got off, and twenty minutes later, we were pulling up to the gates of the Manor. We sat silent as the security did their check. It took a moment, but once we were cleared, the gates eased open, and we continued up to the main building.

The night air was thick with a low-lying fog that clung to the ground as we parked and exited the SUV. It was dark and eerily quiet. The only sound that could be heard was the sound of our boots hitting the gravel as we approached the entrance. I opened the door and found Viper waiting for us inside. He was a big guy, older and a bit intense, but he had a protective, fatherly way about him that reminded me of Preacher.

His broad shoulders cast long shadows on the wooden floor as he stepped towards us and said, “Hello, boys. Welcome back.”

“Viper.” Memphis gave him a nod and extended his hand. “How’s it going?”

“Busy. Too busy. Need a few more hours in the day.”

“Feel you there.” Memphis shook his head. “Seems like there’s always something.”

“No doubt.” Viper nodded in agreement. “Can I get you boys anything? A drink or a bite to eat?”

“No, sir. We grabbed something on the way. Besides, it’s late. We should be getting back.”

“Understood. We got your order packed and ready.” Viper motioned his head towards the front door. “The truck unlocked?”

“Yeah, I’ll go out and give the guys a hand.”

“They can manage. Besides, I’ve got someone who’s been waiting to meet you.”

“Prez mentioned something about that,” I interjected. “Said they were going to be coming back with us for a while.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“So, what’s the back story on these two?”

“The mother has been having some issues with an ex.” Viper ran his hand over his goatee and sighed, “They’ve had a couple of run-ins, and when she tried to break things off, he lost it and worked her over again.”

“Damn.”

“It gets worse.” Viper took a step closer, and his tone was filled with annoyance as he explained, “He’s a cop.”

“No fucking way.”

“Afraid so.”

“Now I see why you wanted to get them out of town.”

“Yeah, but don’t get me wrong. If push comes to shove, I’ve got no problem putting this guy six feet under. He certainly has it coming, but I’m hoping he will lose interest and give up this obsession he has with her.”

“Out of sight, out of mind.”

“Exactly.” Viper motioned for us to follow as he turned and started out of the room. “Come on. They’re just down the hall.”

I nodded, then exchanged a quick glance with Memphis and Goose before following Viper down the hallway. I could feel the tension building as we neared the room. When we reached the door, Viper turned to us and said, “We got her a new ID and social. She’s gonna go by the name Whitney, and her son will keep the name Toby. No sense in changing it. We also got her a new phone.”

“Good.”

He hesitated for a moment, then said, “You’re gonna have to be patient with them. They’ve been through a lot, and it’s going to take some time for them to come around.”

He eased the door open and led us inside, and my blood ran cold when I spotted the beautiful woman and her young son. Viper hadn’t exaggerated. They were both in rough shape. The woman’s wrist was wrapped in a makeshift splint, and her eyes were swollen with an angry shade of purple that spread down to her cheeks. There was a cut on her lip that was still fresh with blood, and her arms were covered in various bruises and cuts.

Beside her was a young boy who couldn’t have been more than ten. He had hazel eyes like his mother, but he had light brown hair, where hers was jet-black. His arms were covered in bruises that resembled handprints, and there was also a large, purple

bruise across the thick of his cheek—one similar to his mother's.

Damn.

Just looking at them pissed me the fuck off, and the longer I stood there staring at them, the angrier I got—and not just at the ex who'd put his hands on them. I was pissed at her, too. It wasn't fair. It wasn't her fault. She didn't deserve this. I knew that, but there was a piece of me that couldn't help but blame her for putting herself and her son in such a fucked-up situation.

It was wrong to think that way. This girl had been through hell, and no one deserves that shit, but the feeling was still there, gnawing at me. I inhaled a deep breath and let it out slowly, but it did little to help steady the storm of emotions raging inside of me. I watched in silence as Viper walked over to the young woman and said, "I have some friends I'd like you to meet."

She nodded nervously as she listened to him say, "This is Memphis, Goose, and Ghost. They're members of Satan's Fury, the MC out of Little Rock. They're going to take you two back with them and watch over you."

She glanced up at me, meeting my accusatory glare, and immediately looked back to Viper and asked, "Are you sure we can't just stay here?"

"You know that'll never work, not for the long haul. Leaving is the best option."

"Yeah, you're right."

"I know it's hard, but you're in good hands with these guys. They'll keep you safe."

"He's right. You can trust us." Memphis took a step forward and gave her a reassuring smile. "We'll do everything we can to keep you and your son safe."

Whitney lifted her head slightly, and she looked over at him with a mix of wariness and hope. She studied him for a moment, then forced a smile and said, “Thank you. I really appreciate your help.”

“Glad to do it.” Memphis turned to me and Goose as he said, “It’s late. Let’s get these two loaded up and back to the clubhouse.”

I didn’t speak.

I simply nodded and followed them all out to the truck. We said our goodbyes, and with our guests in tow, we quickly loaded up and headed towards home. Whitney and Toby huddled up in the backseat, and it wasn’t long before they’d both drifted off to sleep.

I glanced back in the rearview mirror, and as I looked at Toby curled up next to his mother, I found myself thinking about the past—something I tried to never do. One memory rolled into the next, and it wasn’t long before I was thinking about the day that nearly destroyed me.

2

CASEY

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS EARLIER

“Frankie?”

“Casey? Is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me.” I swallowed hard, trying my best to push back my tears. “I’m in trouble.”

“What do you mean? Where are you?”

“I’m at a hotel in Franklin. I used the last of my cash to get us a room.” I knew I wasn’t making any sense. I was trying, but my head was all over the place. “He found me.”

“What? Nooo.”

“He was at the house when I got home from work.”

Even as I said the words, I couldn’t believe it.

I’d done everything to get away from him.

I'd moved. I'd gotten a new job. I'd even colored my hair.

It had been weeks since I'd last seen him, and I thought I'd finally done it.

I thought I'd finally gotten rid of him.

But I couldn't have been more wrong.

Frankie sounded heartbroken as she said, "But you were so careful."

"It doesn't matter how careful I am. He's a cop." I could still feel the panic I felt when I saw his car pull up outside. My heart started pounding in my chest, and my hands started to shake. I couldn't move. I couldn't think. It was like the walls were closing in on me, confining me, and I had no way out.

Because there was no way out.

He'd proven that over and over again.

I tried not to cry as I told her, "It's his job to find people."

"So, what happened?"

"He just showed up on my doorstep with that stupid smile on his face." Frankie and I had become friends when I started working for her at the coffee shop. I'd worked there for almost two years, but sadly, I'd had to quit when I moved. She knew all about Dylan and what I'd been through with him, so I knew she would understand when I told her, "I told him to leave, but of course, he refused. He played it off like he'd done nothing wrong."

"Are you serious? How can he play off stalking you, hurting you, and then, hunting you down and doing it all over again."

“He couldn’t. He knew he’d gone off the rails, but he kept going on and on about how he’d changed and would never hurt me again.”

I knew it was all a lie. Dylan wasn’t just a man who put his hands on a woman and her kid. He was a psychopath. He decided that I was his one and only, and he refused to let me go. I would try to smooth things over and convince him that things would never work between us, but he thought he could force me into submission.

My throat tightened as I told her, “He realized I wasn’t falling for it, and he got mad and choked me, and things went downhill from there.”

“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t know what to do anymore.” I wiped the tears from my cheek as I told her, “I try to get away from him, but each time, he comes back and hurts me more than the last.”

She sounded horrified when she asked, “So, how bad was it this time?”

“It was the worst yet. He forced his way into the house and started wailing on me, and then, poor Toby came rushing in to help. He hurt him, too. This time he was on a tear like never before. The neighbor must’ve heard and pulled the fire alarm. He threatened me and took off.” I broke into tears as I mumbled, “Oh, Frankie... I—I don’t know what to do. I’ve tried everything, but he won’t leave us alone. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

“Enough is enough. We gotta do something.”

“But he’s... he’s a cop, Frankie. I can’t report him. No one is going to believe that he would hurt me, and even if they did, they would just turn things around to make it my fault. I’m stuck. I can’t protect my son or myself when he knows he has all the power.”