



Spark of Passion (MacKenny Brothers #7)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: It's been five years since I left home and nearly six since Lochlan passed away.

New York isn't the place I envision for my son. I want Beathan to experience the same joyful childhood I had—surrounded by family and be free to run and play without fear. So, returning to my hometown will give Beathan the life I've always dreamed of providing him.

For five years, I lived in New York with billionaire Tyson Reed. Our relationship has remained strictly platonic, though my heart longs for more. Tyson has been a father figure to Beathan and the man I fall for more deeply with each passing day.

But life takes a dark turn when Beathan is kidnapped.

The captors believe he is Tyson's son.

Now, the MacKenny family and Tyson must unite to bring Beathan home.

Cutter, the ruthless enforcer for the Loyal Rebels, must confront his inner demons while vying for a permanent place within the MacKenny brothers' inner circle. His deadly resolve is tested as he struggles to rescue the boy and do as his MC president commands.

It is a desperate race against time, not only to save my son but to ignite the spark of passion between Tyson and me that has been smoldering for so long.

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Annette

Stepping out of the car with Beathan's small hand in mine, we're immediately greeted by the sleepy hum of Becca Falls. It's as if the town pauses for a moment, acknowledging our return after five long years. The air holds a crispness of new beginnings and old memories mingling together. Glancing down at Beathan, his wide green eyes take in everything with pure childlike wonder. His hair is tousled from the drive, making him look like a little explorer ready to conquer new lands or, in this case, rediscover old ones.

"Momma, it looks like a storybook," he says, his voice tinged with awe.

Squeezing his hand, I say, "It does, B. Our story started here."

We stand on the sidewalk, staring up the town's main street. We are two doors down from the bakery, owned by Jamie's girlfriend, Isabelle. It's called Baked Goodness. Trees line the main street, and in front of the building I own is a large oak tree, its branches offering shade on this warm summer day. Beathan's grip tightens around my fingers, grounding me as we stand before the red-brick building that now houses my yoga studio and our new home above it. My heart pounds against my ribcage, and a strange cocktail of emotions floods through me. This town is the past I thought I wanted to leave behind, and now it's the future I'm yearning to build.

Memories flash in rapid succession—the scent of rain on the pavement, the sharp sting of loss that once drove me away. And now, here I am, back to where it all began, with my son by my side.

“Are you okay, Momma?” Beathan’s voice is soft, but an undercurrent of concern belies his years.

I crouch to meet his gaze. “I’m better than okay,” I tell him, mustering a smile. “We’re starting fresh, you and me. This place is part of us, and we’ll make new memories. Just wait and see.”

He nods, his grin infectious, and I feel the weight on my shoulders lighten ever so slightly. We turn toward the entrance, each step taking us closer to the building, and a sense of excitement bubbles within me. Becca Falls has never had a yoga studio, and I’m looking forward to building a new business and creating a life for my son and me.

“Look, Momma, it’s just like you said it would be,” Beathan says, his eyes fixed on the sign above the door, etched with the name of our new sanctuary.

“Serenity Space Yoga,” I whisper the words.

“Can we go inside?” he asks, tugging at my hand, already eager to explore.

“Let’s do it.”

The red door creaks open, its familiar groan a whisper of welcome as Beathan and I step over the threshold. The floors are all wooden, and a desk is set off to one side. It’s one big space with mats and cushions ready for our first clients. At the back of the studio are two doors, one leads to the women’s locker room with showers and toilets, and the men’s is mirrored on the other side. Next to the front door is a set of stairs leading up and at the top is another red door with the word ‘PRIVATE’ written in gold. Beathan lets my hand go and climbs up to our apartment above. He opens the door, and the space wraps around us like a warm embrace. Soft lighting spills from overhead, casting a gentle glow on walls painted in hues of buttercream and honey.

It's a stark contrast to the enormous apartment we shared in New York with Tyson Reed.

Tyson was a lifesaver. Without him these past five years, I'm not sure I could have survived in New York for as long as I did. He was always there to lend a hand, babysit, and take care of us. But as Beathan got older, the skyscrapers of New York didn't feel like the right environment to raise my son. And although it's for the best to be back home, a part of me wishes Tyson had come with us.

"Wow," Beathan breathes out, his voice pulling me out of my memories.

This apartment has two bedrooms and bathrooms, with a living room, small dining room, and kitchen. It's cozy, and as I look at the mismatched cushions scattered on a plush blue sofa, a sense of belonging comes over me.

"Is this really our home, Momma?" Beathan's eyes, like Lochlan's, search mine for affirmation.

"Every corner of it, love," I assure him, my fingers brushing against a photograph on the mantle. Lochlan's smile beams at us from behind the glass, forever frozen in time yet somehow still offering comfort.

From below, laughter filters up through the floorboards, punctuated by the timbre of foreign and known voices. The MacKenny clan, voices that have filled countless phone calls and letters but now swell around me, real and present.

"Who's here?" Beathan asks, inching toward the staircase drawn by the magnetic pull of voices.

"It sounds like your uncles," I reply, swallowing the knot of emotion that forms in my throat.

I take a deep breath and follow Beathan's lead as he bounds back down the stairs. The chatter grows clearer and more distinct as we enter the yoga studio.

"Annette!" Kyle's gruff bark is softened by an undercurrent of joy.

"Welcome home!" Sean calls out.

"Home," I echo silently, allowing myself to be drawn into the fold, into the heart of the MacKenny clan.

Beathan puts his small hand in mine, suddenly shy under the gaze of his uncles.

Kyle, the oldest member of the MacKenny clan, steps forward and holds out his hand to my son. His brown hair, a little more peppered with gray than I remember, doesn't diminish the vitality in his eyes.

"Annette," Kyle says, but his eyes are on Beathan.

"Hello, Kyle."

Beathan looks up at me. "Shake hands with your Uncle Kyle."

Beathan lets me go, and his small hand slips into his uncle's large one.

"Welcome home." Kyle bends to talk to him, then straightens up. His arms, strong and sure, envelop me, and for a moment, I allow myself to rest against his steady heartbeat.

"Welcome back," he murmurs, and the words resonate through me, an echo of all the welcomes we've shared before.

“Thank you,” I reply, pulling back just enough to see him clearly and memorize the lines time has etched upon his face.

Beathan tugs at my hand, a gentle reminder that there’s more to this reunion than my battered heart. I crouch beside him, smoothing back the unruly tuft of brown hair that falls across his forehead.

“Bean, do you remember your uncles?” I ask, nudging him forward.

“Hi.” Beathan’s voice rings with clarity only a child can muster, his green eyes wide and trusting as he waves at the men in front of him.

“Hey, champ.” Kyle’s smile is a thing of warmth, and he ruffles Beathan’s hair with a gentleness that belies his rough exterior.

One by one, the MacKenny brothers approach, their smiles carving a space for Beathan in the fabric of our clan. Beathan meets them with a bravery born of innocence, accepting the place offered at the table of kinship.

“Uncle Jamie, Uncle Mad, Uncle Angus, and Uncle Sean,” he greets them.

“Look how big you’ve gotten,” Jamie exclaims, his laughter filling the room.

“Going to be tall like your da...” adds Sean.

Maddock merely nods, his quiet demeanor a still pool amidst the ripples of our reunion, his smile for Beathan a silent promise of stories yet to be told.

“Got your mother’s eyes, lad,” he says, and Beathan beams under the weight of their attention.

My gaze lingers on Beathan, my heart brimming with silent thanks. His laughter mingles with the MacKennys', a symphony of joy that breathes life into the once-hushed corners of my soul. They toss him gently in the air, his small body buoyant with trust, and I catch my breath at the sight. This is the childhood I've dreamed of for him, one filled with the safety of kin and the magic of belonging.

"Will you teach me to fish?" Beathan asks, eyes wide with hope.

His Uncle Jamie nods. "Of course. The river runs right past my place." He glances at me. "So long as your mom doesn't mind."

"Not at all."

Jamie smiles broadly at me as Beathan removes his hat and puts it on his own head. It immediately covers half his face. Laughing, Jamie tilts it up so Beathan can see.

"Maybe we should get you one of these for yourself?"

Beathan nods at his uncle. "Can it be the same color as yours?"

"Sure."

Heavy boots thud against the wooden floor. I turn to find Cutter standing in the doorway. The light casts shadows across his stern face, but his eyes hold a warmth that belies his imposing stance. He's in Kyle's MC, the Loyal Rebels, and although he's scary to look at, I know he's devoted to the MacKenny brothers.

"Annette," he says by way of a greeting. His gaze rests on Beathan, a subtle softening around the edges of his eyes.

"Hey, Cutter," I manage, my voice steady, though my heart skips a beat.

He's dangerous, but he's also loyal to his MC and the men in this room.

"Good to have you home," he says as he steps closer, the floorboards creaking under his weight, and the room seems to contract around his solid frame. "You've been missed around here."

I nod, the knot of tension in my chest easing somewhat. "Thank you, Cutter. That means more than you know."

A swell of gratitude rises within me, warming my cheeks. Beathan never knew his father, but surrounded by these sturdy men bound by honor and blood, I realize he has something perhaps just as powerful—a legion of uncles with hearts as fierce as their reputations.

From the corner of my eye, I catch movement. Sean moves toward us. "Annette," Sean's voice is steady, unwavering. "Let's get you settled in. Whatever you and Beathan need, consider it done." He extends his hand, not in command but in offering.

Hesitantly, I place my hand in his. His grip is firm yet careful like he's handling something precious. It's not just an offer of help but a lifeline, an unspoken promise that some things can be rebuilt, even from the ashes of the past.

"Thank you, Sean," I reply, allowing myself to lean into the support he offers.

In the embrace of those who share my blood and history, love stitches together the frayed edges of my heart. And as I watch Beathan, so small yet so fiercely embraced by the MacKennys, I know that this, the return to roots and the slow rhythm of Becca Falls, is where healing begins.

The next day, Beathan and I wander through town. The park in Becca Falls hasn't

changed much—the swings creak the same tune, and the slide still boasts its sun-faded red. But as Beathan’s laughter rings out, pure and undiluted by city sirens, something shifts inside me.

“Look, Momma! Ducks!”

“Careful by the water,” I call out, but he knows.

My son squats by the lake’s edge, hands cupping the bread we brought, crumbs tumbling from his little fingers as ducks waddle over with a sense of entitlement only nature can give.

I stand back, arms wrapped around myself, watching him charm the birds.

“Momma, come play!” Beathan beckons, and I can’t help but smile.

“All right, I’m coming.” I approach, kneeling beside him, our reflections fractured on the lake’s surface. “You’re quite the duck whisperer.”

He grins at me, those green eyes sparkling with mischief. “They like me.”

“They sure do.”

“You shouldn’t give them bread,” a voice behind me says.

It’s a woman, in her late twenties, maybe early thirties. She holds out a bag filled with oats.

“Bread is bad for them, but oats are good.” She smiles widely.

“Thank you.”

“You’re Annette.” She points at my son. “And you are Beathan. I’m Charlotte.”

I hold my hand out to her, and she wraps her hands around mine. “Nice to meet you, Charlotte.”

Jamie walks toward us and puts an arm around Charlotte. “This is Isabelle’s sister.”

Charlotte smiles up at him, then looks at me. “I work in the bakery. Jamie says I make the best coffees in town.”

“And you do.”

The smile on her face gets bigger, and she blushes. “I should be getting back. Isabelle will want help cleaning up.” Charlotte bends to look Beathan in the eyes. “It was nice meeting you and remember, no more bread for the ducks.”

Charlotte bounds away, and I look at Jamie.

“She’s a little slow, our Charlotte. But she does make the best coffee in town, and she’s right about the bread.”

“Good to know.”

As the afternoon wanes, we amble down the tree-lined streets of Becca Falls with Jamie. Memories linger on every corner like ghosts from another life, whispering secrets of what once was.

“Are you two settled in?”

Nodding, I say, “Yes. We only have a couple of boxes to unpack. It’s too nice a day to stay indoors.”

“We’re glad you’re home. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.” Jamie tips his hat at me and ruffles Beathan’s hair. “See you around, buddy.”

“See ya!”

I watch Jamie walk to the bakery and disappear inside.

“Are you happy we’re here, Momma?” Beathan asks, slipping his hand into mine.

“Very happy,” I answer truthfully because, at this moment, gratitude wells up, warm and overwhelming.

“Me, too,” he says and skips ahead.

Walking through the heart of Becca Falls, memories flood back. It’s here, between the lovingly tended flowerbeds and the murmur of greetings from familiar faces, that I absorb the full weight of our return.

“Annette, welcome home!” a voice calls, and I turn to see Mr. Corrigan, from his garage door next to the gas station, his overalls stained with grease and oil.

“Thank you, Mr. Corrigan!” I reply.

How different this is from the anonymity of New York, where neighbors pass like ships in the night, their stories untold, their smiles sparing.

“Let’s get some cookies, Momma!” Beathan tugs at my arm, pulling me toward the bakery.

“Of course, let’s go.” Inside, the scent of baked goods wraps around us.

Charlotte beams at us. “What can I get you?”

“Do you have any cookies left?”

Charlotte holds up a finger and disappears into the back of the bakery. A petite woman with kind brown eyes comes out holding a box tied with a string bow.

“Hello! I’m Isabelle, Charlotte’s sister and Jamie’s girlfriend.”

Holding out my hand, I say, “Annette, and this is Beathan.”

“I know.” Her smile is welcoming. “I’m so sorry I didn’t get over to see you when you first arrived, but I hope these make up for it.”

“Cookies?” Beathan asks.

“You bet.” Beathan takes the box from her.

With a hand on his back, I say, “What do you say?”

“Thank you.”

“You are more than welcome, and when you run out, you come see me, little man.”

With big eyes, he looks up at me. “Can I, Momma?”

“If Auntie Isabelle doesn’t mind and you’re a good boy, yes.”

He grins at me, then back at Isabelle. “Thank you.”

“Don’t open them yet. Dinner first.” He pouts at me. “Why don’t you take them

home, and I'll be up in a minute."

"Okay!" Beathan runs away with the box of cookies secured in both hands.

"Thanks for that."

"Anytime, the same goes for you. If you need anything, I'm here most days with Charlotte."

"Well, I should get home before he eats the whole box before I get there."

"Don't be a stranger," Isabelle replies.

"I won't."

"Cherie, Beth, Tula, and I get together once a month for margaritas and pizza. It'd be great if you could join us. It's the first Friday of every month."

"I have Beathan so..."

"Are you kidding? Pick one of the MacKenny boys to babysit. They'll be lining up."

"I'm happy to look after him," Jamie says, stepping into the bakery. "Charlotte and I can give him his own pizza night. We could do a sleepover?"

The only person who's looked after Beathan has been Tyson, and although the MacKennys are family and I know them, I'm not so sure.

"How about I think about it?"

Jamie frowns and opens his mouth to speak, but Isabelle puts an arm around his waist

and another on his chest. “Of course! No pressure. We’re just glad you’re here. It’s an open invitation.”

“Thank you.” I smile at them, then step out of the bakery into the fading light. I pause, allowing the quiet of the early evening to settle over me.

This is what small-town living is all about. This is the life I want for my son, surrounded by family and friends, and the security only a small town can bring.

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Tyson

The steering wheel is cool beneath my palms as I navigate the familiar streets of Becca Falls. At the same time, my mind flutters between anticipation and unease, like a bird caught between different skies. Annette's face, framed by waves of blonde hair, fills my thoughts, her deep-set blue eyes always hinting at more than she lets on. And then there's Beathan, with his mother's smile and an innocence that tugs at something in me I didn't know existed.

But it's the MacKenny brothers that knot my insides. How will they receive me—a suit-clad outsider in their close-knit world? I've crossed the threshold of high finance into the warmth of their family gatherings before, but the uncertainty never fades.

My car eases to a gentle stop outside the familiar two-story building, the engine's hum fading into silence. For a moment, I collect myself, breathing in through my nose, out through my mouth. The present moment stretches, thin and taut.

Then, the door bursts open, and Annette appears. Her movements are brisk, propelled by an energy that speaks of excitement and nerves. She descends the steps in a rush, her figure a blur of motion against the backdrop of her quaint home.

"Tyson!" Her voice reaches me, laced with a cocktail of emotions, and I can't help but mirror her smile.

"Annette," I reply, stepping out of the car to meet her halfway. There's a tremble in her touch as our hands clasp. Her gaze holds mine, brimming with questions and silent pleas as if she's searching my hazel eyes for the assurance I'm not sure I

possess.

“Thank you for coming,” she says, her tone is warm.

This feels like a dance we’ve done before, one step forward, two steps back, ever since my world collided with hers.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I assure her, my voice steady despite the churn of my stomach.

“How’s Beathan?”

“Excited to see you,” she responds, a flicker of maternal pride lighting up her features. “He’s been talking about it all week.”

“Good,” I murmur, allowing myself a moment to bask in the simple joy of being wanted.

But the shadows of past mistakes linger, darkening the edges of this fragile happiness. Diandra’s face flashes in my mind, her presence a ghost of what could have been, followed by the stern visage of Grayson Moore—reminders of doors closed and paths diverted.

“Come on,” Annette beckons, squeezing my hand before releasing it, signaling it’s time to move.

We walk toward the entrance together, side by side yet surrounded by invisible walls built from our respective pasts.

As the door swings shut behind us, sealing away the world outside, I take a deep breath, eager for the reunion and bracing for the unknown. Whatever lies ahead, I remind myself to stay present, to be here, now, with Annette and Beathan.

The living room is a tapestry of unfamiliar faces, all connected by the unspoken threads of family. Annette's hand on my back is a steadying force as we step into the fray of the MacKenny clan. I can feel their collective gazes, measuring and weighing my worth.

"Everyone, you remember Tyson?" Annette announces with an unwavering voice that fills the space. "Tyson, meet the MacKennys."

Kyle steps forward first, his handshake firm and his scrutiny palpable. "Welcome, Tyson," he says, and his tone carries the weight of responsibility for all those gathered.

Sean's nod follows, just as solemn, his eyes sharp but not unkind.

"Thank you," I reply, aware of the careful balance at play here.

They're guardians of their realm, these brothers, and I'm an outsider asking for entry—not just to their home but to their circle, one that now clearly holds Annette and Beathan in its protective embrace, but for five years, I let Annette and Beathan share my home in New York. How the tables have turned now that I'm on their turf.

"Come, sit down," Annette urges, her smile warm but laced with an alertness that tells me she's watching for any sign of discomfort from her kin or myself.

She guides me to a seat, ensuring I'm surrounded by conversation and subtle reassurances of welcome, a touch on the shoulder, a shared laugh, stories of Becca Falls spilling around me like an invitation.

As laughter echoes and the room breathes with life, Annette leans in close. "Would you like to take a walk?" she whispers, her blue eyes searching mine. "I'd love to show you the town."

“Sure,” I answer, grateful for the reprieve from the intensity of this introduction.

“Kyle?”

He raises his chin at Annette. “Yes?”

“Could you watch Beathan for a while? I’d like to give Tyson a tour of the town. We won’t be long.”

The man’s face lights up as a smile spreads across it. “We’ve got him. Take your time.”

“Beathan, be good for your uncle.”

“Yes, Momma.”

We excuse ourselves, slipping out into the quiet calm of the outdoors. As we leave the house behind, there’s a loosening in my chest—an easing of the tension that had coiled there. The air is crisp, carrying the scent of pine and the distant promise of spring.

“Becca Falls has its charm,” Annette says, her voice softer now, intimate against the backdrop of the town’s murmuring heart. “It’s small but full of character. You’ll see.”

“Looking forward to it,” I tell her, meaning it.

There’s something about this place that feels honest, a stark contrast to the crowded streets of New York.

Annette’s gaze meets mine, holding a depth of emotion that speaks of shared understanding. We’ve both known loss and betrayal. The shadows of our secrets

mingle between us, yet here, in the simplicity of a walk, we find common ground.

“Let’s start with the falls,” she suggests, her hand brushing mine as we begin our journey through the streets of Becca Falls.

We meander along the sidewalk, Annette pointing out landmarks, a quaint bookstore, the refurbished theater, and a row of pastel-painted homes that could belong on postcards. The town unfolds like a storybook with each step, and I find myself caught up in its narrative.

“Most of these buildings are originals,” she says, trailing her fingers along an ivy-laced railing. “They’ve been restored over the years, but the essence... it’s still there.”

“Timeless,” I comment, and it feels like an echo of us, of the bond we’re cautiously reweaving after these weeks apart.

“Exactly.” Her smile is tinged with nostalgia as she glances back at me.

Our conversations drift easily from the mundane to the heartfelt work, Beathan’s latest antics, and the books we’ve read. But we dance around the deeper subjects, the tender scars we both harbor.

“Beathan must love it here,” I say, shifting the focus to her son, the spirited boy who reminds me so much of what I’ve lost and what I’m hoping to regain.

“He does. This town is good for him. For us.”

The weight of her words carries more than just affection for the place. There’s resilience and determination to rebuild what was once broken.

As we approach a bakery, the scent of fresh bread envelops us, warm and inviting. Through the large windows, I see two women bustling behind the counter, their laughter spilling out onto the street.

“Let’s grab something sweet,” Annette suggests, pulling open the door.

The bell above jingles, announcing our arrival.

“Annette,” the taller of the two women exclaims, her apron dusted with flour. She comes around the counter to embrace Annette, then turns her bright gaze on me. “And this must be Tyson.”

“Isabelle, Charlotte, this is Ty,” Annette says, her hand resting briefly on my arm.

It’s a simple gesture, but it grounds me, reminding me I’m not an outsider here, not with her by my side.

“Nice to meet you both,” I manage, extending my hand to Isabelle and then to Charlotte, whose kind eyes crinkle as she smiles.

“Tyson owns the New England Warriors and lives in New York,” Annette adds as if to explain my presence, to weave me into the fabric of her life here among these people who have become her family.

“Football must be quite different from running a bakery,” Charlotte observes, her tone warm and curious.

“It has its moments...” I admit, “... but I imagine there’s an art to what you do, which is very different from sitting down with players and coaches, trying to figure out how to make them better. It must be satisfying creating with your hands.”

“Absolutely,” Isabelle agrees, sliding a tray of pastries across the glass counter. “Please, try some. On the house.”

“Thank you,” I say, and it’s more than politeness.

There’s gratitude for the welcome and the sense of belonging that seems to come so easily to Annette here.

We choose a few delicacies and step outside, the paper bag in Annette’s grasp rustling softly. As we resume our walk, I savor the sweetness on my tongue, a flavor rich with butter, sugar, and the subtlest hint of cinnamon beneath it all. It’s comforting and familiar, like the town itself, like the woman beside me with her wavy blonde hair catching the light, leading me through the streets of Becca Falls and, perhaps, into her heart.

The sun’s warmth is a gentle embrace as we leave the soft chime of the bakery door behind. Annette leads the way, her sandals clicking against the sidewalk that meanders toward the park. I follow, my eyes tracing the contour of her silhouette against the backdrop of Becca Falls, a picture of serenity painted in casual strokes.

“Here,” she says, gesturing toward an empty bench nestled under the sprawling arms of an oak tree. Families sprawl across the grass while laughter from children chasing each other fills the air. We sit side by side, our bodies not touching, but the space between us thrums with unspoken words.

Annette tucks a strand of her wavy hair behind her ear and sighs, her gaze fixed on a young boy who reminds me of Beathan. “I come here to think sometimes,” she begins, her voice tinged with the music of vulnerability. “It’s peaceful, you know? Watching life unfold without complications.”

“Complications have a way of finding us, don’t they?” I observe, noting how the

sunlight dances in her blue eyes, casting shadows of the past that linger there.

She nods, pulling her sundress tighter around her knees. “They do. And sometimes, Tyson, they make you wonder if it’s worth it, allowing someone new into your life when all you’ve known is...” She trails off, letting her words hang in the air.

“Getting hurt,” I finish for her. It’s not a question. I’ve seen the scars on her heart and felt them resonate with mine.

“Exactly.” Her eyes meet mine, holding a universe of fears within their blue depths. “I’m scared, Tyson. Scared for me, for Beathan. What if I let you in, and it all falls apart again? The thought of going through that kind of pain, of seeing Beathan go through it...” Her voice cracks, and she looks away, her hands clasped tightly in her lap as if to hold herself together.

“Annette,” I say softly, touching her hand. She doesn’t pull away, and the contact sends a current through me, charged with the gravity of her confession. “I understand. I wish I could promise you a future without hurt or risk. But all I can offer is this. I care about you more than I’ve allowed myself to admit. And I’m here, willing to face those complications with you if you’ll have me.” Taking a deep breath, I continue, “And I’m not going to cheat on you like Lochlan did. It’s not how I’m made.”

Her breath hitches at his name, and I wish I’d never said it. He’s like a ghost that haunts her, not allowing her to be happy. Annette turns her hand beneath mine, our fingers entwining, a silent acknowledgment of the fragile thread that binds us.

The afternoon stretches on, shadows lengthening as we sit in shared silence, absorbing the weight of our confessions, the beauty of the park, and the possibility of what might lie ahead.

I watch a mother push her giggling child on a swing, the simplicity of their joy

piercing the veil of my complex emotions. Drawing in a slow breath, I turn my gaze back to Annette. Her fingers are still laced with mine, a lifeline amid the turmoil stirring within.

“Annette,” I start, my voice barely more than a whisper as I navigate the treacherous waters of my past. “There was someone before... Diandra and her son, Dawson.” The words hang heavy between us, each syllable laden with memories I’ve locked away.

Her eyes lock onto mine, steadfast, urging me to continue.

“Diandra returned to Dawson’s father, Grayson Moore. He’s a former football star and was on my team with the New England Warriors.” My throat tightens as I speak his name, a reminder of the life that slipped through my fingers. “It wasn’t just losing her. It was losing the chance to be a part of a family. Dawson... he had started to look up to me.”

The admission feels like shedding armor I didn’t realize I’d been wearing, piece by agonizing piece.

“Tyson, I can’t imagine how hard that must have been for you,” she says, her voice a soothing balm to the raw wounds of my heart. “I did wonder if you two were ever an item.”

Shaking my head, I say, “No, we weren’t, but I did wish we were for a long time.”

“Am I her replacement?”

A laugh escapes me. “Absolutely not. After being with you, I realized that Diandra was meant to be with Grayson. The upside is I still get to see Dawson from time to time.”

We sit with our shared vulnerabilities hovering around us, the park's laughter and chatter receding into a hushed backdrop. Annette shifts closer, and her presence is a grounding force, pulling me from the shadows of my past.

"Sometimes I dream of a simple life," I confess, staring at the golden leaves rustling above us. "One where success isn't measured by wealth or accolades, but by moments of genuine connection. With you, with Beathan... it feels like that life could be more than just a dream."

Annette's smile is wistful. "And I dream of a future where fear doesn't dictate my choices. Where I can love freely without loss and betrayal looming over me."

The sun dips lower, casting an amber glow across the park, and I feel the shift in us—two people shaped by love and marred by betrayal, finding solace in the honesty of our broken pieces. Our conversation is a gentle dance, a slow progression toward something neither of us fully understands but both desperately crave.

"Tyson, I'm scared, too," Annette murmurs, her voice steady despite the confession. "But maybe... maybe we don't have to be alone with our fears anymore."

"Maybe not," I agree, feeling something inside me unfurl—a willingness to step out from behind the walls I've built if only to see where this fragile connection might lead.

The horizon bleeds crimson and gold as we shuffle to the stoop of her apartment, our shadows stretching long against the pavement. Annette's hand lingers in mine, warm and tentative. The air is thick with unsaid promises and the faintest trace of her floral perfume.

"Thanks for today, Ty," she says, her voice barely above a whisper as if afraid to break the spell that has settled over us.

“Thank you, Annette.” I squeeze her hand, reluctant to let go. “For trusting me with your fears... and your hopes.”

She leans forward, and for a moment, I think she might close the distance between us entirely. But instead, she brushes her lips against my cheek, a feather-light kiss that sears through me more profoundly than any embrace.

“Let’s take this one step at a time,” she offers, stepping back but still holding my gaze.

“Agreed.” My throat tightens around the words as I’m done waiting. “One step at a time.”

“Goodnight, Tyson,” she murmurs, retreating into the safety of her home.

“Goodnight, Annette.” The door closes softly behind her, and the warmth of her touch fades from my skin.

I turn, descending the steps to where my car waits. Pulling away from the curb, I glance back at her apartment window, half-expecting to see her silhouette. But the glass reflects only the dying light of day.

A hollow sensation gnaws at me, the familiar cloak of solitude settling over my shoulders once again. The road stretches before me, leading back to my life of structured isolation. But Annette’s presence lingers, an invisible thread pulling at the edges of my carefully constructed world.

The sun dips below the horizon, leaving a melancholy purple in its wake. It’s the color of bruised hearts and whispered secrets, of love cautiously rekindled against the backdrop of shared vulnerabilities. The car speeds on, carrying me into the gathering darkness, but a faint light flickers somewhere within. Maybe I can have the life I

want with Annette and Beathan. But it won't be in New York City—that much is clear. I'll need to make arrangements to move to the sleepy town of Becca Falls.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm

Annette

The candle-lit studio is ready. I pace around the space, straightening the already perfectly aligned mats one last time. The incense swirls around me, a heady mix of sandalwood and lavender that clings to my senses, urging calm where there's only a storm of nerves. My fingers linger on the smooth surface of the nearest mat, a purple one, Beathan's favorite color. I exhale slowly, willing the flutter in my stomach to still.

The door above creaks open, a familiar sound that has come to signal safety, like a lighthouse to a ship at sea. I hear their voices before I see their faces, a balm to the chaos of my mind.

"Annette, are you ready?" Sean's voice carries through the open space.

"We can't wait to see everything you've done with the place!" Beth chimes in, her warmth wrapping around me like a well-worn blanket.

Sean is the first to come down the stairs from my apartment above. I find myself enveloped in a group hug that smells of home. Sean's solid presence is grounding, and his tattoos hidden beneath his shirt are a known mark of his loyalty to both his club and family. Beth's smile reaches her eyes, the kind that knows your soul and accepts it, secrets and all.

"Thanks for coming early," I murmur, pulling back just enough to look at them. "It means the world."

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Sean says, and I believe him.

His gaze shifts to Beathan, who is attempting to scale his leg like a particularly challenging cliff face.

“Hey, B,” Beth greets my son with a joyful laugh, scooping him into her arms as if he weighs nothing. “Are you ready for some fun?”

“Yes, and look, Auntie Beth! I’m Spider-Man!” Beathan’s excitement bubbles over, his laughter infectious.

“Of course you are, superhero.” She plants a kiss atop his wild brown curls.

I watch them, this makeshift family of mine, and find solace in their company. For a moment, the weight of the past and the fear of what lies ahead all fade to a whisper. Here, in this space filled with love and acceptance, my secrets feel safe and my heart less burdened.

“Your studio looks great.” Sean places a protective hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you. And thank you for looking after Beathan while I run my first class.”

I glance down at my son, his small hand gripping mine with a trust that squeezes my heart.

“I’ve got him,” Sean says. His assurance is a balm to the low thrum of anxiety in my veins.

“Thanks, VP,” I tease, as it’s what the members of his MC call him. I crouch to meet Beathan’s gaze. “You’re going to spend the day with Uncle Sean and Auntie Beth, okay?”

“Will there be ice cream?” Beathan asks, his green eyes wide with hope.

“Only if you’re good.” Sean chuckles, ruffling Beathan’s hair, which somehow springs back even wilder than before.

“Promise.” Beathan wraps his arms around Sean’s neck, and just like that, he swings into a secure hold. The sight of them together—a powerful man so gentle with a child—fills me with a warmth that pushes back any fears.

“Be good, B,” I say, kissing his cheek.

“Good luck, Mommy!” he calls as they head out, and I can’t help but smile.

“Thank you,” I whisper, though they are already too far to hear.

Gratitude swells within me, not just for the childcare but for the unspoken vow that pulses between Sean, Beth, and myself. They will keep Beathan safe. On that, I stake my world.

The door swings open, and my first students arrive. “Welcome to Serenity Space Yoga,” my voice is steady despite the fluttering in my chest.

It’s a mix of familiar faces and strangers, all seeking respite or strength on these mats.

“Annette, this place is beautiful,” one of the attendees, a friend from the local market, compliments as she steps past the threshold.

“Thank you, Jenna,” I reply, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear, a nervous habit I can’t seem to shake.

My gaze sweeps over the studio, the bamboo floors, the soft lighting, the walls

adorned with tranquil hues. It's a sanctuary I've built from the remnants of a life once fractured, a testament to new beginnings. As the room fills, the incense's subtle fragrance mingles with the scent of anticipation.

"Everyone, please find a mat and settle in," I instruct, finding solace in the routine as I take my place at the front.

The door chimes softly, a gentle intrusion that slices through the hum of hushed conversations. I turn, expecting another local or perhaps a latecomer uncertain about the art of yoga, only to find myself staring into hazel eyes that have haunted the periphery of my dreams.

"Tyson," I breathe, my heart tripping over his name.

The studio seems to contract around me, the walls inching closer with each second as he stands there, immaculate in a casual button-up that does nothing to hide the strength it drapes over.

"Hello, Annette," he says softly.

My pulse quickens, betraying the composure I've meticulously woven around myself. Why is he here? The question tumbles through my mind. He steps inside, a tentative guest in a world that feels suddenly too small, too intimate.

"Didn't expect to see you," I manage to say.

His lips curve in a half-smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "I wanted to see your dream come true. I wouldn't have missed this for the world." There's a sincerity in his eyes, a softness that contradicts the hard lines of his businessman facade.

"Even with your busy schedule?" My attempt at lightness feels brittle and

transparent.

“Especially with it.” He steps closer, and I’m keenly aware of the space between us shrinking. “You’ve created something beautiful here. It’s... calming, just like you.”

His compliment washes over me, both warming and unsettling me. “Thank you, Tyson, that means a lot.” But it’s too much. Too close.

The warmth of his gaze threatens to melt the barriers I’ve built, brick by brick, around my heart. I look away, focusing on anything but the man who stands as an embodiment of temptation and turmoil.

Attendees continue to stream in, their gazes flitting between me and the enigma that is Tyson Reed, sensing the shift in the air. I should be mingling, playing the gracious hostess, but my thoughts are bound to the man who watches me with an intensity that sends shivers up my spine.

“Please, make yourself comfortable,” I say, gesturing vaguely toward the gathering crowd. My voice sounds foreign to my ears, distant and hollow as if part of me has stepped out of my body and left a shell behind.

As I move to greet another newcomer, I can feel Tyson’s gaze on me, a tangible caress I both crave and fear. My heart yearns to acknowledge him and explore the possibilities his presence promises. But memories of Lochlan wrap around me, a reminder of the pain that comes from letting someone in.

“Your space is beautiful, Annette,” a woman says, her smile genuine, yet all I can offer in return is a nod, my attention snagged on Tyson once again.

There he stands, a solitary figure among pairs and groups, his isolation a mirror of my own. Our eyes meet across the room, and for a moment, everything else fades—the

excited chatter, the scent of incense, and the air I breathe. In that glance lies a question, a plea, and perhaps the barest hint of hope.

Today is meant to be about new beginnings, not old fears. Yet here I stand, caught between the past and the future, between solitude and the risk of another heartbreak. With his quiet intensity and hidden depths, Tyson Reed complicates the careful balance I've struck.

I force my feet to move, to walk away from his magnetic pull, even as my soul aches to stay tethered to his side. With each step, I tell myself that this grand opening is about finding peace, not stirring the embers of a fire I'm not sure I can control.

He's standing there, so assured, looking like he belongs in a glossy magazine spread rather than in the humble vibrancy of my yoga studio.

"Where's Beathan?" Tyson asks as he moves closer to me.

"Sean and Beth have taken him while I teach my first class."

He looks around at the other women and nods. "I'll make myself scarce and come back when you're done. Maybe we could celebrate?"

"Celebrate?"

He smiles, and I feel every nerve in my body intensify under his gaze.

"Yes, this deserves to be celebrated. You've created an awesome space for you and Beathan, and I wanted to be here to share in it with you ." His hand runs down my arm, and I swear I feel like I'm about to melt.

Needing to put space between us, I step back, nodding like a mad woman. "That

sounds amazing. Why don't you get something from the bakery and make yourself at home upstairs?"

Tyson's smile widens as though he knows the impact he's having on me. "I can do that."

He winks at me and leaves the building. This is all so new for us. When I lived in his home in New York, there was an invisible wall between us, and although we shared the same space, there were unspoken rules. These rules and walls seem to have disappeared, and I'm not sure I'm ready to think of Tyson as anything but a roommate, even though my heart is telling me otherwise.

Clapping my hands together, I move to the front of the class. "Okay, everyone, if you'll take a position on a mat, we can begin." I smile at everyone and wait until they are settled. "This is a beginner's class and will take about thirty minutes. All I need from you is an open heart and mind." I smile at them and ask, "Are you ready?"

Many nod and a few say yes.

"Okay, my friends, we will begin with a crossed-leg pose called the easy pose."

The class sits down on their mats, their attention on me.

"We're going to loop our shoulders forward and inhale as we do, then on the exhale, wind them back. This is to concentrate on our breathing."

The class continues, and the students follow my lead. After working for Health, Exercise, Longevity, and Performance, or HELP for short, in New York, they taught me all I needed to know to move into the teaching phase. It sure beats working as a personal assistant. This is mine, and as I guide my students through the poses, offering the occasional tip, I feel like I've come into my own.

“Mommy!” A sudden burst of laughter breaks through the door, and I turn to see Beathan, his small frame a blur as he darts across the room toward me.

The class has ended, and students are slowly leaving. Our first lesson went well.

Sean chases after Beathan and catches him as he reaches me. Beth laughs as Sean lifts him into the air.

“Look, Mom! I’m flying!” Beathan squeals, his arms stretched wide as Sean lifts him into the air, spinning him around in a gentle arc.

“Higher, higher!” Beth chimes in, her laughter mingling with Beathan’s.

My heart swells, watching them with the ease and happiness that flow so naturally in their company. It’s what I want for Beathan, this untroubled delight. It’s what I want for myself, though a part of me whispers that such things are not meant for me.

Not anymore.

“Seems like he’s having the time of his life,” Tyson observes, his attention now on the trio’s playful antics as he moves to stand next to me.

“Yes, he is.” My voice is soft, almost lost in the cacophony of giggles and playful shouts.

It’s easier to talk about Beathan, to hide behind the maternal shield, than to confront the tangle of emotions Tyson stirs in me.

Turning back to me, Tyson says, “Annette,” his voice dropping to a murmur only I can hear, “you don’t have to do this alone. Maybe I could move to town. Help you get settled?”

My breath hitches. The offer is hanging between us, tempting and terrifying all at once. I want to lean into the promise of companionship he offers, yet fear keeps my feet rooted to the spot, unwilling to step forward or back.

“Thank you, Tyson. I...” My voice trails off as I watch Beathan leap into Sean’s arms, safe and secure, his laughter the sweetest melody. “I need to think about it.”

“Take all the time you need,” he says, and there’s no pressure in his voice, only quiet understanding.

“Right now, I should see everyone out,” I murmur, using the students as an excuse to escape the intensity of our exchange.

“Of course.” He nods, stepping aside, allowing me to slip away.

As I move through the crowd, saying goodbye with a practiced smile, I can’t help but steal glances back at Tyson, his figure a steady presence amidst the flux of bodies and voices. Each look is a question I’m not ready to answer. Each flutter in my chest is a reminder of the risks of letting someone in. And as the day unfolds, with every laughter-filled shout from Beathan and every silent conversation with Tyson, I’m left wondering if the walls I’ve built for protection might also keep out the very things I yearn for—love, connection, and a shared future.

“Annette? Are you listening?” a student asks.

“I’m so sorry. I was watching my son being taken outside by his uncle. What were you saying?”

“Can I book in for the eight-week beginner’s course? You slowly build up to harder stretches, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. If you come every week by the end, you should be able to do some of the more difficult poses.”

She smiles at me. “I hope so. This was hard, and I’m sweating up a storm.” She chews on her bottom lip, then nods. “Okay, sign me up. Do I pay now or at every class?”

Moving toward my desk in the window, I say, “You pay now, and don’t worry if you miss a class, I’ll still give you eight lessons.”

“Sign me up!”

Sean winks at me and takes Beathan by the hand and outside. He crouches down, eye level with Beathan. They’re about to embark on a treasure hunt in the park across the road—Sean’s idea of an adventure that fits perfectly within the realm of a five-year-old’s imagination. Beth stands close by, her hands clasped together as if she’s holding onto the moment. They are standing beside the open window near my desk, and I can hear their conversation.

“Ready, B?” Sean asks, his voice steady but tinged with excitement. He hands Beathan a crinkled map, edges burned for effect—a pirate’s map, no less.

“Ready!” Beathan’s declaration bursts through the air, full of determination and glee. His grin stretches ear to ear, mirroring the joy in Sean’s eyes as they set off, following the twists and turns of the map.

Beth’s laughter mingles with Beathan’s squeals of delight as he discovers a ‘hidden’ gemstone beside the fountain, and another tucked under a bush shaped like a resting hare. Each find is a triumph, each step drawing them closer, weaving the threads of their bond tighter.

Beth makes her way back to me and steps inside the studio just as I finish processing the sale of my very first eight-week booking.

“Thank you. And I look forward to seeing you next week.”

“Thank you. It was fun, and I got a good workout. Do you have room for more students? I know my sister and maybe my mom will want to come.”

I hand her a business card. “I sure do, and I’d love to have them.”

She holds up the card. “I’ll get them to call you later. Thanks again!”

A wide smile spreads across my face, and excitement and satisfaction swell within me as I say goodbye to her. I can’t help but feel a warm glow of pride welling up inside me. The hard work, the late nights, and the countless hours of dedication have led to this moment. I lift my chin a little higher, feeling a surge of confidence. This is my achievement, a testament to my perseverance and determination. I smile even wider, unable to contain the joy and pride radiating from within me.

“Looks like you’re a success,” Beth observes, appearing at my side, her warmth a welcome presence.

“Hopefully, the first of many.”

“Judging by all the smiles and sweaty people, I think that’s a given.” Beth looks out at Sean and Beathan. “They’re having a great time.”

“They are,” I reply, watching as Sean lifts Beathan onto his shoulders to reach a clue nestled in the crook of a tree branch. “Thank you for being here today.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” she says, nudging my arm gently. “And how are you holding up?”

With everything?"

I exhale slowly, the weight of the day settling like a shawl upon my shoulders. "It's a lot. But it's good. It's progress."

"Annette," Beth leans in, her voice soft yet firm, "you've got this. And we've got you. It's nice of Tyson to show up." Her smile is an anchor, grounding me amid the storm of emotions swirling inside.

"Thanks, Beth, and yes, it is. He's always been a good man."

"Maybe you should tell him that?" She nods in Tyson's direction.

My smile dims a little. "Maybe? I'm not sure."

"It's been five years. No one would blame you for wanting to move on." Beth gives my hand a reassuring squeeze before returning to Sean and my son.

My gaze drifts across the room, once again landing on Tyson. He's standing near the back wall, his hands casually tucked into his pockets, watching me. The soft light filtering through the sheer curtains catches the edges of his dark hair, giving him an almost ethereal glow. I quickly avert my eyes, focusing on the woman who has appeared in front of me.

"Did you enjoy the class?" I ask to cover up the fact I haven't been following the conversation.

"Immensely," she replies, her tone genuine. "You've created a beautiful space here, Annette."

"Thank you. Did you want to book another class?"

She nods. “I’m Jules. My friend, Amy, said she booked in for the eight-week course. I’d like to do that too.”

“Yes!” I say a little too loudly as I steal another glance at Tyson.

He’s moved closer now, his hazel eyes scanning the room until they meet mine. My heart skips a silent confession of the turmoil he causes within me.

After I’ve filled out all the forms and ushered Jules out of my studio, I turn to straighten mats and clean them.

“Need any help with those?” Tyson’s voice breaks through the silence of the studio.

I straighten up, steadying my breath. “No, no, I’ve got it. Thank you, though.”

“Of course,” he responds, the corner of his mouth lifting in a knowing half-smile.

It’s as if he’s aware of his effect on me, and it infuriates me but draws me in.

Tyson’s presence is a constant pulse in the room, a reminder of a connection I’m terrified to explore. Each time our eyes meet, a silent conversation passes between us, one of curiosity, longing, and a shared secret understanding that is as thrilling as it is terrifying.

Sean and Beth come back into the studio. Beathan holds on to each of their hands as they swing him back and forth.

“Mommy!” Beathan runs for me, his little hands digging into his pockets. “Look what I found!”

Smiling, I crouch down, and he pulls out fake gems, a couple of dimes, a small car,

and a motorbike made of wire. Holding up the bike to Sean, I raise my eyebrows at him in a silent question.

“You can never be too young to learn how to ride,” Sean says.

Beth holds out a small plastic horse to Beathan. “Or ride a horse. I’ve got a couple at the farm, and if your momma says yes, I’d be happy to teach you.”

“Can I?” Beathan practically squeals at me, then his eyes land on Tyson. “Ty! Look at my treasures.” He bounds over to Tyson, little hands extended with his bounty.

Beth touches my arm. “We should be getting back.”

Sean’s gaze is on Beathan and Tyson, but he says, “Yeah, I’ve got an early day at the garage tomorrow. And there’s horses to feed at home.”

Beth rolls her eyes. “He makes it sound like a chore, but he loves the horses as much as I do.”

Laughing, I nod and say, “Thank you both for looking after him. I really appreciate it.”

Sean’s attention comes back to me. “How did it go?”

“Really well. A few have booked in for the eight-week course. I think when word spreads around town, business will be steady.” I smile at him. “But in case you didn’t notice, all my students were women. It’d be nice if some men came to a class or two.”

Sean’s hand goes to the back of his neck, and he rubs it. “Ahh, I’ll ask at the clubhouse if anyone is interested.” Beth stifles a laugh, and Sean looks at her. “What?”

“I can just imagine the Loyal Rebels in here doing a downward dog.”

“What the fuck is a downward dog?”

Beth laughs loudly. “If you’re lucky, I’ll demonstrate it at home.”

Sean smiles at me, gives me a two-fingered wave, and they depart. Their easy affection for each other starkly contrasts the complicated dance between Tyson and me.

“Mommy?” Beathan’s voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“Hey, sweetheart.” I walk over to him and Tyson. “Did you have fun today?”

“Uh-huh. I’m glad Ty came,” he says, smiling shyly at Tyson. “Are you coming upstairs?”

Tyson looks at me. “So long as your mom doesn’t mind.”

“I need a shower, but no, I don’t mind. Maybe you two could fix us an afternoon snack while I clean up?”

Tyson scoops Beathan up in his arms, and they go upstairs with me following close behind.

“Sean took me on a treasure hunt. He had a map and everything.”

“Ahh, so that’s why you have so many treasures.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I might have some sweet treats inside.” Tyson smiles at me over his shoulder.

“For real?”

“Uh-huh.” Tyson copies my son.

As soon as they hit the top stair, Beathan wriggles out of his grasp and runs farther into the apartment. Tyson stops and holds a hand out to me.

“We should hurry before he eats everything.”

Smiling, I put my hand in his and say, “Not until he’s had at least a sandwich.”

Tyson grins. “Tough Mom, I like it.” He raises my hand to his lips and kisses it.

A hot blush creeps up my neck, and I shake my head as words won’t form, but thankfully, I’m saved as Beathan runs back to us with a cupcake in his hands.

“Tyson got chocolate frosted!”

Untangling myself from Tyson, I run toward Beathan. “Not until you’ve had a sandwich.”

His little face falls. “Aww, Mom.”

Taking the cupcake from him, I say, “How about half a sandwich? Tyson will make you whatever you want while I go shower.”

With his little lips turning down, he says, “Okay.”

Smiling at Tyson, his hands are in his pockets, and he’s staring at both of us. “Go on,

Mom. I'll make sandwiches."

"Thank you." I kiss Beathan's head and disappear into my bedroom.

The yoga lesson was easy, even though I'm still sweaty. I throw my yoga clothes into the laundry basket as I hurry into my bathroom for a shower. I wash my hair, scrub away the day's efforts, and take care of everything I need to. Then, I wrap myself in a big, fluffy towel. With a swipe of my hand, I clear the steam from the mirror and catch sight of myself, grinning. It feels amazing to finally achieve my dream, surrounded by friends and family who will always support me.

The rich floral scent of my lotion fills the air as I smooth it over my legs and chest. Next, I apply a little lip gloss and some mascara, then lightly blow-dry my hair. Opening my closet, I pull out a light pink, free-flowing dress—Tyson once remarked that it suited me perfectly. Underwear goes on then the dress, and a final check in the mirror shows everything is in place. Satisfied, I hurry back into the kitchen.

"Mom, Tyson made me a peanut butter and jelly."

"I'm so glad you two opted for the healthy sandwich," I tease.

Tyson shrugs. "I made you a chicken and mayo."

Giving my son big eyes, I ask, "Why didn't you have a chicken and mayo?"

"PBJ is better." Beathan giggles.

"Did you eat half or all?"

"All. Tyson cut off the crusts," Beathan admits with a grin.

Tyson laughs. “Geez, buddy, way to throw me under the bus.”

Beathan shakes his little head. “Mom won’t mind. Sometimes she does it for me too.”

“When you’ve been good.”

Tyson holds out a plate to me, and I accept it with a smile. “Thank you. Did you make yourself one?”

He nods. “Yep.”

“He had a PBJ too!”

Surprised, I stare at Tyson with my mouth slightly ajar. “Really?”

“He’s right. They’re good.”

Moving toward the dining table, I take a seat. “But not healthy.”

“Maybe you could cook me dinner?”

The sandwich is halfway to my mouth, and I freeze, staring at Tyson. “You can stay this long?”

He joins me at the table. “Yes. I’ve taken a leave of absence.”

“For how long?”

“Well, that’s up—”

“Mom! Can I have a cupcake now?”

Tyson stands and moves to the box of sweet treats. “That was the deal, wasn’t it, Mom?”

Smiling at Beathan, I say, “Yes, you can, but only one.”

He bounds over to Tyson, who opens the box. “Which one?” he asks as he winks at Beathan.

“Ahh... chocolate!”

Tyson reaches in and hands him a chocolate-frosted cupcake. “Don’t make a mess.”

Beathan takes the cupcake and goes into his room.

“You gave him one already, didn’t you?” I ask as I bite into my sandwich.

Tyson nods. “Yeah, but it was our secret, and we weren’t telling you.”

His cell phone rings, frowning as he looks at the display. “Shit.” He holds it up. “I need to take this.”

“It’s fine.”

Tyson moves into the living room to answer his call. After sharing a home with him for five years, I know it must be something important or he wouldn’t have answered it.

I finish my sandwich and move into the kitchen to do the dishes. Tyson comes in and leans against the kitchen counter.

“That was work. It seems my leave of absence will have to wait a few days.”

“Okay.”

He reaches out and touches my arm. “Will you make me dinner another time?”

His hand feels good on my skin, and every fiber of my being is focused on it. “I’d love to.”

Tyson cocks his head to the side. “I wish I could stay.”

“You’re leaving?” Beathan asks, and we both turn to stare at him.

He has chocolate frosting smeared across his face and over both hands.

Tyson bends to look at him. “Buddy, did you get any in your mouth?”

“You’re leaving?” he asks again.

Tyson nods. “Yeah, buddy. I’m sorry. A last-minute problem that I need to take care of, but I’ll be back.”

“Promise?” Beathan’s little face is screwed up in a frown.

“Promise. Cross my heart, hope to die.” Tyson raises his right hand and places it over his heart, his fingers slightly spread. Then he draws an imaginary ‘X’ over his chest, moving his hand in a crisscross motion. Tyson’s expression is serious, his eyes wide with sincerity to emphasize the truth of his promise.

Beathan throws his chocolate-covered hands around Tyson’s neck and buries his face in his chest. “You’ll come back soon?”

Tyson places a hand on the back of his head. “Nothing will keep me away.”

Satisfied, Beathan leans back and giggles. “You have chocolate on your shirt.”

Tyson looks down at the sticky mess. “It would seem I do. Why don’t you go wash up while I talk to your mom?”

“Okay!” Beathan bounds away.

Wetting a cloth, I move toward Tyson. “I’m so sorry.”

“I don’t mind.”

From the tone of his voice, I know he means it. Standing on tiptoes, I swipe at the chocolate on his neck. “Do you need to leave now?”

His hand comes up and covers mine. “Unfortunately, yes. One last deal and I’m done for a while.”

The air between us feels charged, and I know if I take a step closer, he’ll kiss me, but am I ready?

“Did I get all of it?” Beathan asks as he returns to the kitchen.

I step back from Tyson, breaking the spell, and look at my son.

“Mostly.” I laugh. “Come here.” Using the same cloth, I clean his face. “Now, say goodbye to Tyson.”

“Goodbye, Tyson.”

Tyson ruffles his hair. “See you soon, buddy.”

We walk Tyson down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk. He looks at me, starts to say something, then shakes his head, closes his mouth, and opens his car door.

“I’ll be seeing you both soon.”

“We’ll be waiting,” I say with a smile.

Tyson locks eyes with me, gets in his car, and drives away. There’s so much I wish I had said, but as we watch him drive away, I know he’s a man of his word, and if he says he will be back, he will be.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm

Sean: VP in the Loyal Rebels

“Gotcha,” I exclaim as I sweep aside the living room curtain and scoop Beathan up into my arms.

His giggles vibrate against my chest, a sound that’s become welcomed in Beth’s and my home. In the short time since Beathan and Annette moved to town, seeing them almost every day has been a blessing, and it makes me want to marry Beth yesterday and start a family of our own.

“Uncle Sean, you’re too good at this!” he squeals, his bright green eyes dancing with laughter.

The warmth of the moment squeezes my heart, reminding me just how much light this kid brings into our lives.

“All right, your turn to find me,” I say, setting him down gently.

He nods, his mop of brown hair bouncing as he covers his eyes with his small hands and starts to count. “One... two... three...”

I tiptoe away with no small amount of effort because of my size. I cast one last glance at his concentrated face. And that’s when it happens—the sound of breaking glass violently invades the sanctuary of my home.

The world shifts into slow motion. My heart hammers against my ribcage—not with the adrenaline rush from our playful game, but with cold, numbing dread.

Instincts honed from years in the military snap me into action. I whirl around, my eyes scanning for the source of the noise, every sense heightened. The front window is shattered, and boots are crunching over the broken shards.

“Nine... ten. Ready or not, here I come!”

“Beathan, stay there!” I command, my voice low and urgent, hoping to God he listens. But I know he won’t—curiosity is part of his DNA.

“Uncle Sean?” His voice trembles slightly, the first hint of fear seeping through his usual excitement.

“Stay where you are, B.” My words are a shield as I step in front of him, my body coiled tight, ready to protect him from whatever or whoever comes through that broken window.

There’s no time for strategy, no time for anything but raw, primal defense. My hands are clenched into fists at my sides, tattoos stretching over my taut skin.

“Who’s there?” I call out.

I’m used to combat, to facing enemies head-on. But this is different. This isn’t some far-off battlefield but our home and safe haven, now breached by an invisible threat.

“Uncle Sean, I’m scared,” Beathan whispers from behind me, his words cutting sharper than any knife. They slice through the fear, igniting a fierce, protective rage within me.

“Nothing’s going to happen to you, I promise,” I speak with more conviction than I feel because that’s what you do when you love someone—you give them hope, even when yours is hanging by a thread.

Then they're inside.

Shadows turn solid, threats become flesh as they enter the room.

Time to act.

The world tilts into chaos, and my heart beats a drum in my ears. Men, faces obscured by masks, crash through our violated threshold, all sense of safety splintering like the shattered glass on the floor. Beathan's small hand is wrenched from mine, his cry piercing the air, a raw sound that brands itself into my memory.

"Uncle Sean!" he screams, terror lacing his voice.

"Beathan!" I roar, lunging forward, but one of the intruders barrels into me, his bulk a temporary wall between my nephew and me.

They're dragging him away, his bright green eyes wide with fear, seeking me out as if my gaze alone could anchor him to safety. Instinct and training mesh into a single force within me. I shove the man hard against the wall, feeling the impact reverberate up my arms, but he's just one obstacle. There are more, too many, and they're moving fast, efficient in their cruelty.

"Let him go!" My voice is a command, lost in the maelstrom as I dodge another assailant, my mind racing.

I need a plan. Options flash through my thoughts—the exits, the telephone in the kitchen, my brother, Jamie, next door who might have heard the commotion—but there's no time for any of that. Not when Beathan is being pulled to the door, and every second stretches out, each one a possibility of harm to come to him.

"Please, he's just a kid!" But my plea falls on deaf ears, or perhaps they're simply

indifferent to the desperation in my tone.

With grim resolve, I fix my steely blue gaze on the nearest kidnapper, calculating the distance, the risk. I can take one down, maybe two. But Beathan—the fear in his eyes tells a story of trust teetering on the edge. He believes in me and thinks I'll keep him safe.

“Stay strong, B,” I call out to him, my voice steady despite the storm inside me. “I’m right here.”

I make a split-second decision, aiming for the leader, the one holding Beathan. If I can get to him, create an opening...

“Uncle Sean, help!” Beathan’s plea is like a knife twisting in my gut.

I launch myself at the kidnapper with everything I am—a protector, a soldier, a desperate uncle trying to save his world encapsulated in a five-year-old boy.

There’s no going back now. This is the moment where love and loss collide, where secrets kept in the dark must come to light. And I’ll be damned if I let betrayal write the ending to this story.

Surging forward, my muscles coiled and ready to spring, I only get two steps closer when the butt of a shotgun slams into my forehead. Stars swim in my vision, but I can’t lose consciousness. I have to keep it together for Beathan.

My voice slices through the chaos, strong and commanding. “What do you want? Why are you taking him?”

The ringleader, a man with cold eyes turns to face me. He holds Beathan close, an insurance policy against my advance. The boy’s whimpers claw at my insides.

“Let him go,” I demand, my words edged with a lethal calm. “He’s just a child.” Something warm trickles down my face, stinging my eyes. I swipe at it, and my hand comes away covered in blood.

“Maybe to you,” the leader retorts, his voice a venomous drawl. “But to others, he’s leverage.”

“To who? He’s just a kid.”

The man laughs. “Yeah, Tyson Reed’s kid. He’s worth a fortune.”

Shaking my head from side to side, I say, “Listen to me,” I start, taking a measured step closer. The kidnappers tense, but I keep my hands visible, unthreatening. “Beathan is not Tyson Reed’s son. You’ve got the wrong kid.”

He scoffs. “Do we look like idiots?” His grip on Beathan tightens, and I imagine my nephew’s small frame trying to shrink away from the iron hold.

“Tyson doesn’t have any children,” I insist, every sinew in my body screaming to lunge, to fight, to reclaim Beathan from this nightmare. But I can’t risk it, not yet. “You’re barking up the wrong tree.”

The man’s lips curl into a sneer. “He’s valuable to someone, and that’s enough.”

“Please,” I say, the word scraping against my pride. It’s not in my nature to beg, but for Beathan, I’ll grovel before the devil himself. “He’s scared. Let him go. Take me instead.”

Laughter, harsh and mocking, fills the room. “You think you can bargain with us? You have no idea what’s at stake here, MacKenny.”

“Then enlighten me,” I challenge, my gaze never wavering from the man’s. “Because right now, all I see are cowards hiding behind masks, threatening a child.”

“Careful now,” another warns, stepping closer. “Your hero complex might just get everyone hurt.”

My heart stutters, then hammers against my rib cage. Beth. The thought of her in danger scorches through me like wildfire. I can handle being a target, but not her, never her.

“Uncle Sean,” Beathan’s voice is a quiet sob, barely audible over the pounding in my ears. “I’m scared.”

“Everything’s going to be okay,” I promise, though the assurance tastes like ash in my mouth. “Just stay brave for me, okay?”

One of the men chuckles darkly, the sound devoid of any real mirth. “Nice try, VP, but we’re not idiots. You want the kid, you pay up, or maybe we hurt Beth.”

Beth is pushed into the room by another. There are too many of them. Even if I could reach my weapons, I could lose one or both of them.

The room spins, and for a moment, I’m back in the desert—sand, heat, and impossible choices. But this is different. This is personal. Beth’s wide, fear-filled eyes lock onto mine, and the weight of her trust pins me in place. One of them has a shotgun at the back of her head. I can’t risk losing her. Beth is my life.

“Okay,” I breathe out, the word heavy, laden with defeat but edged with a silent promise. “Just don’t hurt them.”

“Smart man.” They back toward the door, taking Beathan with them.

“Hey, B.” My voice cracks as I force the lie out, trying to infuse it with confidence I don’t feel. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

“Uncle Sean...” His small hand reaches out, grasping at the empty air between us.

I watch, powerless, as they bundle him into a nondescript white van, its engine rumbling like some great slumbering beast. As the vehicle pulls away, dust kicking up behind it, a void opens inside me—a gaping chasm where my nephew’s laughter used to echo.

Beth is up and across the room, throwing herself into my arms. “Are you okay?” Tears stream down her face. “Who were they? Why did they take Beathan?”

Cupping her face in my hands, I stare into her eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Y-Yes.”

“They think he’s Tyson Reed’s son.”

“But he’s not!”

I stand there, rooted to the spot by the enormity of what’s just happened. Loss claws at me, tears at the fabric of my soul, while betrayal coils around my heart like a snake.

“I need to call Kyle. Can you ring Angus?”

Beth nods. “I’ll get the first-aid kit. Does it hurt?”

For a moment, I’m confused. Beth touches my forehead, and blood coats her fingers.

“It’s only a scratch.”

Shaking her head, Beth moves past me into the kitchen. She throws a dishcloth at me.

“It’s going to need stitches or at least glue.”

Pulling my cell phone out of my pocket, I dial Kyle as I hold the cloth to my head.

“Hey, brother,” he answers.

“Kyle, a white van could be headed through town. They’ve taken Beathan.”

“What? Who?”

“They think he’s Tyson Reed’s son.”

“ Fuck .”

I hear muffled voices in the background as Kyle issues orders to the MC, then he’s back on the line.

“How many? How long ago?”

“Just now, and at least six men. All trained. In and out. They...” my voice catches.

“They what?”

“They threatened Beth.”

“Is she hurt?” Kyle demands to know.

“No. But I failed, brother. They were going to hurt her, I couldn’t...”

“Don’t. Now is not the time to think about what-ifs. We’ll get him back. Right now, you and Beth need to come to the clubhouse. Get Jamie too. I’ll go to Annette.”

Beth comes back into the room. I hold up my arm, and she wraps herself around me. “No. It has to be me. Annette trusted me. I have to be the one to tell her.” Kyle is silent. “Brother?”

“This wasn’t your fault. If I had to choose between Lola and Beathan, I probably would have made the same choice. This isn’t on you.”

Nothing he or anyone else can say will change my mind. I failed.

“Come to the clubhouse. I’ll get Mad to get Annette.”

“No—”

“Brother, get yourself and Beth into town. We don’t need anyone else to get hurt or worse. Do it, that’s an order.” Kyle ends the call, and I look down at Beth.

“Let’s get you patched up.”

“No time.”

Beth moves out of my embrace. “I’ll use glue. Sit. It’ll take all of a minute.”

Beth opens the first-aid kit with shaking hands and pulls out the wound glue. Using a swab, she cleans the area and then applies the glue and butterfly band-aids.

“See, we’re done. It’s not great, but at least you won’t be bleeding everywhere. I’ll go grab our go bags. You go get armed.”

In this moment of crisis, even though I know she's falling apart inside, Beth is in control and keeping me focused. She kisses my lips, pulls back, and looks into my eyes, then nods.

"We'll get him back."

The clubhouse is a fortress of solemn faces, everyone perched on the edge of seats or standing with backs straight as sentinels. My brothers and cousins, their spouses, are all here.

"Could be because of Tyson's business dealings," murmurs Cherie, Maddock's wife, her brow furrowed in thought. "They'd think snatching Beathan would hit him where it hurts."

"Annette and the kid should've had protection," Cutter interjects, a hard edge to his voice. He glares at an invisible enemy, his hands clenched into fists.

"None of that matters now. What matters is getting Beathan back safely." I crack my neck from side to side.

"Sean's right," Beth says, her voice barely above a whisper. "We can't change what's already happened. We have to focus on what we do next."

I stand, my body coiled tight with purpose. "We're not paying any ransom." My words are a declaration, a vow etched in steel.

"Sean, they have Beathan," Beth replies, her eyes brimming with tears. "What if—"

"If we give them what they want, we open a door we can never close again," I cut in, my tone leaving no room for argument. "I won't bargain with my nephew's life. We need another way."

Maddock walks through the door with Annette close behind.

She falters as she takes in all of us gathered in one place, her eyes searching each of us until they land on me. “Where is Beathan?”

Tyson bursts through the door behind her and wraps her in his arms. “Are you okay?”

“Why are you here? I thought you were in New York?” Annette pushes out of his embrace.

“I was on my way back when Sean called. Do we know anything?”

Annette moves out of his arms and looks at me. “What the hell is going on? Where is my son!” Her voice rises to a yell.

Holding out my hands in front of me, I say, “He’s been taken.” The color drains out of her face. “We called Tyson as they think Beathan is his.”

Annette stands frozen. “Taken.” She clutches at the air as though she’s desperate for something solid to hold on to, something to ground her in this nightmare. Her breath comes in ragged gasps.

Everything around Annette blurs, people move and talk, but their voices are a distant murmur, indistinct and meaningless to me. I watch as her hands and body tremble as if she’s trying to shake off this terrible reality.

“Beathan?” Her son’s name trembles on her lips, a whispered prayer, a desperate plea. Unshed tears are in her eyes, but she blinks them away as though she is refusing to give in to the flood of emotion threatening to drown her.

I can barely meet her eyes. The look on her face is something I will never forget—a

mixture of disbelief, horror, and pain so raw it feels like a physical blow. I feel sick, and my stomach churns with guilt and shame.

My heart races, each beat a reminder of my failure.

How could I have let this happen?

I was responsible. I was supposed to protect him. The excuses I've rehearsed in my head sound hollow and meaningless now, dwarfed by the enormity of what's happened. I want to offer comfort, but I know nothing I say or do can ever make this right.

Annette stands there, trembling, her eyes pleading for an answer, a solution, something to cling to. I struggle to find words, but everything sounds inadequate. My hands shake, and I feel a cold sweat break out on my skin. I want to turn back time to fix this, to do anything to take away the agony I've caused. I'm overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness, a paralyzing fear that we might never find him, that this moment will define the rest of our lives.

I force myself to stay composed and focus on what needs to be done next, but inside, I'm falling apart. The weight of my responsibility crushes me. Each second that passes is a reminder of my failure. For her sake and his, I cannot afford to let despair take over. I have to believe that we will bring him back.

I have to.

"Annette, they will demand a ransom, but we can't pay it."

Her eyes go wide as she stares at me. "We will."

"If we pay it, we may never see Beathan again."

She stares at me, disbelief flashing across her face before giving way to a fierce, almost animalistic rage. “What do you mean you won’t pay?” she demands, her voice rising, cracking with the weight of her anguish. Her eyes are wide, wild, and filled with terror. “He’s my son, and I’ll move heaven and fucking Earth to get him back!”

Her body trembles, a violent shaking she can’t control. Her hands clench into fists, nails digging into her palms. She looks around, desperately seeking anyone to contradict the words she just heard, to tell her there’s another way.

“You can’t do this!” Annette cries, her voice breaking, tears streaming down her face. “You can’t just leave him! He’s my son!” The raw agony in her voice is a palpable force, a pain so profound it seems to fill the room, suffocating everyone in its grasp. “Please, please, he’s just a child. We have to do something.” Her voice softens, a broken whisper, “Please, I’ll do anything.” The last words are a choked sob, her body heaving with the force of her sorrow.

Tyson wraps his arms around her as I stand distant.

This is my fault.

“What’s your plan?” Tyson’s voice cuts through the tension like a cold blade. All eyes turn to him, the outsider in our midst, yet bound to the boy who has stolen all our hearts.

“We’ve got Angus here. He’s the best hacker on the planet. Once they’ve made contact, and they will, we’ll find them and get Beathan back,” I assure him, though my mind races through a thousand scenarios, each as uncertain as the last.

“Annette.” Beth steps toward me, her hand finding mine as she looks at her. “We’re with you, whatever it takes.” Then she looks up at me. “But please be careful.”

I squeeze her hand, grateful beyond words for her support.

“Let’s start with what we know,” suggests Jamie. “How many were there?”

“At least six.”

“How did they know where Beathan was?” Jamie asks.

“They must have been watching him,” I offer, then shake my head. “One of them called me VP.”

“An inside man.” Maddock nods, catching on. “Someone they don’t know is one of ours.”

“Maybe?”

“Or they’ve been watching Beathan and us for a while,” Cutter says.

With his arm still wrapped around Annette, Tyson clears his throat. He’s calm and collected, but his eyes betray a flicker of urgency that mirrors mine.

“Sean, we can’t just barge in guns blazing,” he says, his voice low and steady. “If you’re adamant we shouldn’t pay, what’s the plan?”

I clench my fists. “If we give them what they want, there’s no guarantee they’ll keep their word,” I shoot back.

“Your military tactics are solid, Sean, but this... this is delicate.” His suit seems out of place among the MC and my family’s anxious faces. “We can’t risk provoking them.”

“Then what? We pay up and hope for mercy?” My voice rises, edged with frustration.

Tyson’s gaze doesn’t waver. “It buys us time.” He pauses, considering his words. “Time to plan a more strategic extraction without putting Beathan directly in the line of fire.”

“Time,” I echo, the word hollow. Time is a luxury we may not have. I rake a hand through my hair, feeling the pressure build inside my chest. “Tyson, Beathan is a pawn right now, and they probably won’t hurt him. He’s valuable.”

“Sean .” Tyson looks down at Annette, whose sobs have become louder.

With effort, I force myself to walk across the room and place a hand on her shoulder. “We will get him back. I promise you, we will.” Turning, I look at Beth, and without saying a word, she stands next to me.

“Come on, Annette, let’s get you something strong to drink and eat.”

“No. I need to be here.”

Beth’s face softens. “Honey, we aren’t going anywhere, but let’s just take a minute. Give the men a chance to talk, and then we can all sit down and discuss what we’re going to do.” Beth looks at me. “Because at the end of the day, Beathan is your son, and we will do what you want.”

This is my woman’s way of letting me know what she thinks should happen, but this isn’t the first time I’ve tangled with the wrong side of the law, and I’m trained for this.

Beth guides Annette toward our room in the clubhouse with Cherie following close behind. Lola, Kyle’s woman, looks to Kyle, who indicates she should follow them.

Lola's lips turn down, but she also leaves.

"Let's make a list of pros and cons," I suggest, grasping for control. "We need to see every angle."

"Agreed." Tyson straightens, the businessman reasserting himself. "Should we call in the authorities?"

"No," Cutter replies. "We can get things done that they can't. We will find the kid."

"Will you find him alive?" Tyson asks.

A wave of remorse washes through me, and I pull out a chair and sit down. "If we pay the ransom, they have no reason to return Beathan, but if we make it so there's an exchange instead of a drop-off, we have a chance."

"Let's prepare the ransom," Tyson says. "If they have an inside person, they'll know if I'm moving money around. How much do they want?"

"They didn't say. It hasn't even been an hour." I lock eyes with Angus. "I guess we wait for them to call."

Angus moves toward Tyson. "I'll need your phone." He holds out his hand.

Tyson stares at it for a moment before he reaches into his pocket and hands it over. "You better be as good as they say you are."

My little brother, ever the smart-ass, smiles. "I'm better."

As Tyson stares at his cell phone in Angus's hand, it suddenly buzzes. He quickly snatches it back, his eyes narrowing as he focuses on the screen. His thumb hovers

over the display for a moment, then he swipes to open the message. The screen reveals a photograph of a crumpled note with hastily scrawled words—a ransom demand. His jaw tightens, and he scrolls down to take in the details. “Sean,” he begins as he holds up the picture for me to see. “There’s been a development.”

The words hang in the air, heavy with implication. Tyson’s eyes hold mine, and the world tilts precariously on its axis. A chill crawls up my spine as I brace myself for the unknown.

“Let me get a closer look,” I demand, my heart pounding in my ears. Without waiting for a response, I take the phone from Tyson’s hand.

Tyson takes a deep breath. “The kidnappers have contacted my firm in New York. A letter was delivered to Carlotta Vaughn, my lawyer.”

“Do you trust her?”

Without hesitation, Tyson nods. “Carlotta has been with me for over ten years.”

Time doesn’t mean shit, actions speak louder than words, but if Tyson trusts this woman, I suppose I need to as well.

Angus holds up a hand. “Get it couriered to us here so I can get it analyzed for fingerprints and DNA.”

“You can do that?” Tyson asks.

Angus grins. “I’ve got friends in low places. What are their demands?”

“They’ve sent details for a money drop, and I’m to go alone.”

Barking out a laugh, I shake my head. “No.”

Tyson’s brow creases in a frown. “At least let me prepare the money so it looks like I’m doing as I’m told.”

Taking a deep breath, I nod. But whoever these people are, I’m going to make them bleed.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm

Cutter: Soldier in the Loyal Rebels

The screen's glow is the only light in the room, casting shadows across Angus's face as he hunts and pecks like a man possessed. I stand behind him, my arms folded over my chest, watching his back hunch ever so slightly every time he exhales. He's been at this for hours, the digital breadcrumbs of the kidnappers leading us on a chase that feels like it's spiraling into nothingness.

"Anything?" I ask, my voice a low rumble that doesn't quite hide the undercurrent of urgency. "Wait," Angus mutters, not bothering to glance up. "I think... yeah, hold on."

I'm at the edge, teetering between hope and the void that threatens to swallow us if we don't find Beathan soon. Sweat prickles at the nape of my neck despite the chill in the air while the tension has got my insides twisted.

"Got an IP address," Angus finally says, triumph lacing his tone. It's a step, a damn good one, but it's not enough. Not yet.

"Keep digging," I tell him before I turn and stride out, the need to move, to act, clawing at me.

Logan is waiting outside, his silhouette lean and restless against the fading evening light. The boy has energy to spare, not that he's a boy anymore. Logan is twenty and a prospect in the Loyal Rebels. We exchange a nod, and without a word, we hit the streets.

Becca Falls isn't a big place, but it feels like a sprawling maze tonight. We walk with purpose, our boots pounding the pavement in a rhythmic beat that echoes the drumming in my chest. Houses loom like silent sentinels, windows dark or flickering with the mundane glow of television screens, unaware or uncaring of the drama unfolding in their midst.

"Keep your eyes peeled," I murmur to Logan. His sharp gaze sweeps the area, missing nothing.

"Always do, Cutter," he replies, a hint of his youthful bravado seeping through.

We prowl past closed shops and dimly lit bars, the neon signs casting lurid streaks across the asphalt. Every shadow and alleyway are a potential hiding spot. Every face that passes could be a friend or foe. Secrets fester in this town, breeding in the silence and the dark corners where nobody bothers to look.

A car cruises by slow, too slow, and both Logan and I tense. But it's just a couple of teens laughing behind fogged-up windows, oblivious to the world crumbling around them. I remember being that carefree, but the memory is dull, worn by years of loss and betrayal.

"Think they're still here? In Becca Falls?" Logan asks.

"Tyson's email said they were close," I reply, though I trust Tyson about as far as I can throw him. "They're here but not in town. They'll need somewhere to hide the kid and the van. I'm thinking a few miles out." I cast a glance around our small town. "But they'll have spies keeping an eye on us, and if we find them, we might find the ones who have Beathan."

I can feel Logan's anger, a mirrored reflection of my own. It fuels us and drives us forward even as each step feels heavier than the last. We keep searching, keep

scanning, the night growing darker around us, swallowing the last scraps of daylight.

“Cutter?”

“Yeah?”

“We’re gonna find him. No matter what.”

His words are simple—a declaration, a promise. I clench my jaw, feeling the weight of responsibility settle like a mantle on my shoulders. We have to find him. There’s no other option, no other end to this story that I can allow.

“Let’s circle back,” I suggest. “Check the side streets again.”

“Got it.”

We turn, retracing our steps, moving against the current of secrets that flow beneath the surface of Becca Falls. Every moment Beathan’s out there is a moment too long. And as night falls like a shroud over the town, I swear to myself—we’ll tear this place apart brick by brick if we have to, but we’re bringing him home.

As I walk down a dirty alley, cell phone pressed to my ear, Logan’s shadow merges with mine as we move in the dim lights of the streets. The chill in the air bites at our skin, but the uncertainty gnawing at me has got me feeling cold.

“Angus, talk to me,” I say into the cell phone.

His voice crackles through, rapid and laced with the electricity of a breakthrough. “Got something,” he breathes out. “Encrypted messages between the kidnapers. They’re sloppy and left traces. I’m peeling back the layers now.”

“Good. Keep at it,” I urge, my heart hammering a rhythm against my ribs.

Angus is the key to this puzzle, his mind sharp as broken glass. One message could be the lifeline we need, the thread that leads us straight to Beathan.

I end the call and slide the phone back into my pocket. Logan watches me, his eyes two points of fierce determination in the dim light.

“Where to?” he asks, ready to follow me into hell if that’s what it takes.

“Old contact of mine might know something.” I jerk my head down an adjacent street, and we’re moving again, boots silent on the cracked pavement.

The bar’s neon sign flickers—a dying beacon in the heart of Becca Falls. Inside, it’s a den of whispers and sidelong glances, the kind of place where secrets are currency. I find him in the back, shrouded in shadows and smoke, a man who knows too much and says too little.

“Rafe,” I greet, sliding into the booth across from him.

“Cutter,” he nods, eyeing Logan warily. “He one of yours?”

“Brother,” I confirm, and Rafe’s expression softens just a fraction.

Ties to the MC mean something to the underbelly of this town. The Loyal Rebels keep the town safe and support more than a few of the local families with legitimate and not-so-legitimate work.

We lean in, voices low as we trade cautious words. Rafe squints at me, measuring the depth of my desperation before he speaks.

“Word is there’s a place,” he murmurs. “Abandoned farm, east side. It’s a good thirty miles out of town. Might want to give it a look.”

“Kidnappers?” Logan’s question is sharp, cutting through the haze.

“Could be,” Rafe concedes with a shrug that doesn’t quite reach his wary eyes.

Logan and I exchange a glance, communicating without words. It’s all we have—the thinnest of threads, but it’s enough.

“Thanks,” I say, my voice gravelly with the promise of retribution that looms over us. If they’ve touched a hair on Beathan’s head...

“Be careful, Cutter,” Rafe warns, a glimmer of genuine concern breaking through his hardened exterior. “They’re not playing games.”

“Neither are we,” Logan replies, and there’s steel in his voice.

We slip out of the bar and back into the night’s embrace. Our path is set, a course charted by whispers and the hope of Beathan’s safe return. When we are far enough away from the bar, Logan slows to a stop.

“They must have someone in town.”

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I nod. “Yeah.”

“So, if we head out, they’ll know.”

Logan is Lola’s son. Lola belongs to Kyle, my president. We’ve become close over the years. Logan is like me. He has a demon inside him, a darkness. We know how to get things done in the shadows.

We are the things that go bump in the night.

“Just us, not the whole MC. You and I know how to hide in plain sight.”

Logan smiles, and with a nod, we continue back to the clubhouse.

The cursor blinks, a silent rhythm against the glow of the screen. I watch Angus’s fingers dance across the keys with a fervor that only desperation can fuel.

“Gotcha,” he mutters under his breath, a spark igniting in his words.

The room is still, save for the hum of the computer and the distant roar of traffic outside. He spins around in his chair, eyes alight with a fire that’s been missing since Beathan’s disappearance.

“Email address. It’s sloppy work. They didn’t bother to cover their tracks properly.” Angus’s eyes are two sharp points in a face set with determination. “Traced the IP. It’s local, narrowed down to a few blocks.”

“Where?” My voice sounds eager.

“West side. Near the warehouses by the river.” His fingers resume their frantic ballet, painting a map of possibilities on the screen.

“Where are the others?” I ask.

Angus rises. “Kyle is out back. The women are with Annette in the infirmary.”

I place a hand on Angus’s chest. “Keep it from the women.”

He frowns. “Tula is as good, if not a better hacker than me. There’s no keeping it

from them for long.”

Tula is Angus’s wife and the mother of his twins.

“Let’s talk to Kyle first. I have a plan.”

Angus raises his eyebrows and nods. “Come on, let’s go find Kyle.”

We move through the clubhouse. Outside, they’ve got a bonfire going, and I see the MacKenny brothers in a circle, voices low as they are undoubtedly talking about the boy. The conversation stops as we draw near.

“What have you found?” Kyle asks.

“An IP address that leads to a place on the west side,” Angus answers.

“Let’s ride,” Sean says.

Holding up a hand, I lock eyes with Kyle. “I think it’s best if Logan and I go in alone.”

“Like fuck you are.” Sean’s hands go into fists, and he cracks his neck from side to side.

“Why?” Kyle asks.

“If we’re being watched, things could go south quickly.” I glance at Sean. “For the boy.”

The anger in Sean’s face drains slightly, and he nods. “Fuck.” He steps away from us and stares out into the night. “He’s right.”

“You can’t be serious? Kyle, you can’t just send Cutter after them.” Jamie waves a hand in my direction.

“I’m not. He’ll take Logan with him.”

Jamie scoffs. “The boy?”

“The boy isn’t a boy anymore,” I state. “He’s more than capable.”

Kyle’s mouth goes into a hard line. He’s seen the darkness in me and recognizes it in Logan.

“They aren’t going to have Beathan at this address. But whoever is at this address can give us the exact location. At least that’s our hope.” I cross my arms over my chest. “If we all roll out together, they could tip off the kidnappers, and then we may never find the boy.”

Jamie puts a hand on Kyle’s arm. “Brother, this feels like a mistake.”

Jamie has had the least to do with the MC out of all the MacKenny brothers. He’s a farmer and has never accepted the club. I’m not surprised that out of all of them, he’d be the one to disagree with me.

“I can wear an earpiece. Angus will know everything we know, and if there’s trouble, he can tell you.”

Kyle looks at me, then at his brother’s hand on his arm, and nods. “Cutter and Logan will go in alone. There’s less chance of them getting caught, and maybe they can take whoever this is by surprise. We’ll wait for their signal.”

Jamie releases his brother as though he’s touched something foul, shakes his head,

and steps back. “If anything happens to Beathan, it’s on your head.”

Sean shakes his head. “No, brother, that’s on me.”

“Let’s roll,” Logan says, already halfway out the door.

We ride through Becca Falls, a town too quiet for comfort, the rumble of our bikes slicing through the silence like a warning. The streets are empty, the night air thick with the weight of unspoken fears. We know these roads—every pothole and blind corner—but tonight they feel alien and hostile.

To be safe, we do a drive-by of the house. It’s rundown and sits on the edge of the industrial estate. The buildings around it are scarred with graffiti, making me think it looks like a war zone. The front window has its curtains drawn, but you can see light behind it. Someone is home. We kill the engines a block away, the sudden quiet heavy on our shoulders.

“Stay sharp,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

Logan nods, his green eyes scanning the shadows for danger. We’re brothers, not by blood, but by choice—a bond forged in the fires of adversity and loss.

We approach the house, each step deliberate and measured. My heart thumps against my ribs, a drumbeat echoing the cadence of our boots on gravel. My hand rests on the cold grip of my concealed weapon. We reach the door. Its paint is peeling, and the bottom of it looks swollen from too much rain. Beyond it lies either our deepest fears or our greatest triumph. With a nod, I signal Logan to go around the back. His eyes look bright in the dim light. He smiles and disappears around the side of the house. It’s not our first time working as a team—Logan knows what we need to do.

“Time to get some answers,” I say as I try the door handle.

The knob won't budge, but the whistle signals Logan is inside. I step back and kick the door open. It slams against the wall, bounces back, and shuts. I step into the abyss.

The air feels thick here, heavy with the stench of dog and mildew. Each step forward peels back another layer of the unknown. Somewhere in this labyrinth lies the person who will give us answers.

Advancing into the belly of the house, shadows cling to the walls like cobwebs, making every corner suspect and every crevice a potential hiding spot. My heart keeps time with the pulsing fear that courses through my veins, but it's tempered by the fire of determination that burns just as fiercely. Whoever is in this house must have heard me enter, but it's quiet.

I navigate cautiously, my senses on high alert, searching for any sign of Beathan or the ones who took him from us. An empty soda can lies crushed underfoot, the noise startling in the silence.

Silently, I swear. There's no room for error in this grim game of hide and seek.

A noise—a faint scuffling—stops me cold. Every muscle is tense for action. Logan appears at the end of the hall. I signal with my hand, three fingers, then two, then one. On 'one,' we pivot, taking separate paths, closing in on the source of the sound.

"Clear," Logan breathes out, and I echo the sentiment.

The only sign of life is a rat, scurrying among the ruins of human neglect.

"Damn," I mutter under my breath. For a second, hope had surged, a cruel tease that left my adrenaline spiking.

“Stay focused,” Logan says, a verbal nudge I don’t need but appreciate all the same.

He knows where my head is at—always a few steps ahead and wrapped around what could go wrong.

Logan and I creep throughout the house, searching each room, but there’s no one here.

“Angus, can you hear me?”

“Affirmative.”

“There’s nothing here.”

“Nothing?”

“No one is home.”

I hear his sharp intake of breath, and then he relays the information back to those waiting at the clubhouse.

Logan puts his gun away and returns to the room at the front of the house with the light on. It’s as though no one has been here for a long time. The place reeks, but there is nothing to suggest anyone lives here now.

Logan’s lips turn down, and he walks back into the hallway. His hands are on his hips, and he looks up at the ceiling. He tilts his head to the side and pulls his gun back out. Without looking at me, he points up, holding a finger to his lips.

Quietly, I position myself next to him, noticing the attic door above us outlined by a faint line of light. A dangling cord hints at access, but any attempt to open it risks

alerting whoever might be hiding inside. If they're armed, our chances are slim once we expose ourselves. I touch Logan's arm and motion toward the rear of the house. He keeps watch on the ceiling as we silently retreat.

"What's our move?" he whispers urgently.

"They know we're here," I murmur, weighing our options. The element of surprise is gone. With a resigned sigh, I signal him to hold position and head down the hallway.

"I know you're up there!" I shout, aiming my gun upward and firing into the ceiling. Plaster rains down, scattering over the grimy carpet in a cloud of white powder.

"I'm coming up. Shoot me, and my partner will make you regret it," I declare loudly.

Logan grins, his eyes alight with anticipation. I reach for the cord and pull down, revealing the attic stairs. Slowly, cautiously, I ascend. Before popping my head above the opening, I glance back at Logan, nodding in silent encouragement.

I peer into the attic and quickly withdraw, relieved not to be met with gunfire. Reassured, I climb further. In the corner stands a woman, hands raised in surrender, eyes wide with fear as she awaits my approach.

With my gun trained on her, I scan the attic. It's neat and smells a hell of a lot better than downstairs.

"Do you know who I am?" I ask.

"Y-Yes."

"Do you know why I am here?"

“The boy.”

Logan joins us, and I holster my gun. “Sit,” I command.

She moves to a chair in front of a computer. Logan circles her, then sits down next to her, his gun aimed at her.

“This is Logan. Everything you’ve heard about me is true, but the man next to you... he’s far more dangerous than I’ll ever be. Who are you?”

She scowls and clears her throat. “Elaine.”

“Did you tell whoever you’re working for that we are here, Elaine?”

“I didn’t know the boy was going to be kidnapped. I swear.”

Logan leans in and smiles. Elaine cringes and shuffles slightly away.

“That’s not what he asked you.”

“No. I was hoping you’d leave.”

“If you’re lying to us, Elaine, we will find out, and it will be ten times worse for you.” I move around the attic, picking up her things and studying them. This space is a self-contained home—a bed, a small table with a microwave, and even an area for a bathroom. “How long have you been here?”

“Always.”

Frowning, I drag another chair over and sit on her other side.

“This was my parents’ home,” she explains. “When they died, I inherited it. But I lived up here long before that.”

Logan picks up a lock of her hair, twirling it around the barrel of his gun. “It’s clean,” he remarks.

She flinches, a sob escaping her lips.

“Where do I know you from?” I ask, scrutinizing her face.

A tear trickles down her cheek. “We met at one of the MC parties about a year ago. We...” She looks down at her hands. “We hooked up.”

I lean in closer, studying her features. She’s around twenty-five, with pretty brown eyes and long brown hair. My gaze travels down to her skirt, and I lift it slightly, revealing mottled skin on her left leg as though it’s been burned.

“I remember you now,” I say.

Elaine quickly snatches the fabric from my hands, pushing the skirt back down. “Don’t!” she snaps.

Logan chuckles while Elaine pulls her feet onto the chair, wrapping her arms around her legs protectively.

“You left before I woke up, and I couldn’t find you anywhere.”

Her eyes meet mine. “You looked for me?”

“Yeah.” Sucking in a breath, I let it out slowly. “Do you know where they are keeping the boy?”

“No.”

Logan tugs on her hair, puts his gun away, and pulls out a knife. He waves it in front of Elaine, and she buries her head onto her knees and puts her hands over her head.

“I swear I don’t. But I do know how to contact them.”

“Why did you do this?” I ask in a soft tone.

“They paid me to give them information on the MC. I didn’t know they were going after the boy.”

“When did they first approach you?”

Elaine lifts her head and looks directly at me. “The day before the party. I’ve been feeding them information on all of you since then.”

My earpiece crackles, and Angus says, “Bring her and her computer to the clubhouse.”

“Will do.”

Elaine tilts her head to the side in confusion.

I stand as does Logan.

“We are to take her and her computer to the clubhouse.”

“No!” cries Elaine.

“Did they say alive or dead?” Logan asks.

Smiling, I say, “They didn’t specify.”

Elaine glances from Logan to me, her eyes wide with fear. I smile at her, but it’s the predatory kind, cold and calculating. Whatever she sees in us makes her tremble, her head shaking from side to side in silent dread.

“You can either come willingly and alive, or dead and wrapped in a blanket... makes no difference to me,” I tell her, even though this isn’t true.

I remember her from the party. She was cute, in jeans and a tight tank top. Elaine chatted with Charlotte. Everyone knows I look out for Charlotte. She has the mental age of a teenager, and sometimes people take advantage of that.

But she wasn’t making fun of Charlotte. They were deep in conversation, and when I approached, Charlotte excitedly told me she was her new best friend. I remember thinking she was different. And I guess she was. She used Charlotte to get to me.

Elaine stands as more tears fall. “I can help you get him back.” She stands frozen, her chest rising and falling in shallow breaths, fingers tightly entwined. Her knuckles blanched white as she wrings her hands, the motion frantic and continuous, like she was trying to squeeze the fear out through her skin. “I can help you get him back,” she says again, her voice trembling.

Without hesitation, I grab her by the arm and drag her toward the stairs. “Get her computer,” I order Logan. Then, leaning in close to Elaine, I whisper, “You’re damn right you’re going to help. And after that, you and I are going to have a nice long chat.”

Elaine shivers and bites on her lower lip, eyes wide with fear.

The streets bleed into each other, a maze of shadows and silence. We ride hard, the

night air cold against our faces, with Elaine on the back of my bike. We dismount, and the silence is deafening. The clubhouse normally has music or loud voices pouring out of it, but tonight, we are all on edge.

Walking into the clubhouse, all eyes seem to land on us with the same questioning look on their faces that turn hard when their gazes land on Elaine. She hangs her head, letting her hair cover most of her face. With my hand wrapped around her upper arm, I walk her into the club's meeting room.

Angus is hunched over his laptop, tapping away on his keyboard. He looks up as we enter, a frown on his face, holding his hand out for the laptop Logan is carrying.

I roughly push Elaine into a chair and let go of her. She whimpers but says nothing.

"Who is she?" Kyle asks.

"Elaine. She's been spying on us for the better part of a year. She claims she doesn't know where Beathan or the kidnappers are."

"I swear, I don't," Elaine says pleadingly.

Angus holds up a hand. "What's your password?"

Elaine looks at him, then back down at the table. "Cutter."

Angus barks out a laugh. "Capital C?"

She nods.

"Seems you made an impression," Logan says with a smirk.

Staring down at Elaine, I almost feel sorry for her. But anyone who betrays the MC is as good as dead. Kyle gave me a home when most would have abandoned me. I owe him everything. He gave me a place to belong, a mission. Whatever he asks me to do to this woman, I will do it. No questions, no doubts.

Kyle places his knuckles on the opposite side of the table, leaning over it as he fixes his gaze on Elaine. “What did you tell them?” he demands.

“It was all stuff they could have found online. I told them who the heads of the MC are and your women.”

“Beathan?”

“All I told them was that Annette had moved back to town with her son and that she had dated Lochlan MacKenny.”

“Why do they think Beathan is Tyson Reed’s?” Kyle asks.

“Because he is? She’s been living with him in New York.”

“He’s not. He’s Lochlan’s son. Annette came home to give Beathan a better life, and you offered him up on a silver platter,” Kyle’s voice drips with venom as he speaks to Elaine. “If anything happens to him...”

Elaine shifts back into the chair and shakes her head. “They paid me money to give them intel on all of you. They didn’t even seem that interested in Annette and the boy. You have my laptop. You can see all of our interactions.”

Kyle stares at Angus.

“She’s telling the truth.” Angus leans back in his chair. “And I think I might know

where they are.”

“What are we waiting for?” Logan asks.

Angus ignores him and asks Elaine. “Would it be unusual for you to send them a message?”

“No.”

“Doesn’t matter what time of day?”

“No.”

Angus looks up at Kyle. “I can pinpoint their location if they respond. The question is... what do we tell them to get them to respond?”

“You tell them Tyson Reed has their money, and he’s at the clubhouse,” Tyson answers as he walks into the room.

Angus nods. “Yep, that should do it.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm

Cutter

The night feels thick around us as Logan and I crouch in the shadows, watching the old warehouse. The only light leaks through busted-out windows, casting a faint glow onto the cracked concrete surrounding it. This place is eerie, forgotten since they rerouted the highway years ago.

I glance at Logan, his eyes fixed on the warehouse like a hawk on prey. Our brothers from the MC are out there, unseen but ready at their posts. I think of them, silent and vigilant, surrounding the place. We're all here for one reason—to get to Beathan before anyone else does.

My gut tightens with worry. Beathan's just a kid caught in a mess he shouldn't be part of. He's family, one of our own, and we don't leave family behind.

The night air is still, almost suffocating, when suddenly a bird's whistle cuts through the silence—a sharp, distinct sound that breaks the tension like a starter's gun. Logan and I exchange a quick nod.

It's time.

“Ready?” Logan's voice is steady, but his eyes mirror my resolve.

“Always.”

We move forward, each step deliberate and quiet, shadows swallowing us whole. Tonight, we're ghosts in the darkness on a mission that means everything to us.

We slip inside, every sense on alert. The place is a labyrinth of discarded boxes, pallets, and industrial equipment. There's music playing, and each of my footsteps sounds loud to my ears as we advance, guns drawn, eyes sharp.

Peering through the gap between some old, rotting crates, I catch sight of two men inside the warehouse. They're armed, of course. I signal to Logan with two fingers, pointing wide to indicate he should flank them.

He nods and slips into the shadows, leaving me to decide my next move. A part of me wants to wait and come up with a better plan, but time isn't on our side. Beathan's in here somewhere, and every second counts. So, I holster my gun, take a deep breath, and walk straight into the lion's den.

The men spot me immediately. I stride forward with confidence, making my presence known. But as I get closer, my heart sinks. Two more men emerge from the shadows, making it four against one.

"Evening, gentlemen," I say, trying to buy time and keep my nerves steady. "I'm here for the kid."

They don't answer, but their weapons do the talking, aimed directly at me. I grit my teeth, hoping Logan and the others are ready. We've faced worse odds, but the stakes feel higher this time.

I hope my brothers are positioned well enough to overcome them before it's too late for Beathan and me.

The biggest one sneers, his gun raising higher to take me out with a head shot.

"Let's keep this simple," I say, my voice low and controlled. "Hand over the kid, and you walk away."

“Big talk for a man on the wrong end of a gun.”

“Am I?”

In a flash, Logan and I spring into action. There’s no hesitation. I know my brothers in the MC are here, and worse, I know the MacKenny boys will kill all of them to protect the boy.

One of them, a burly man with shoulders as wide as a freight train, inches closer. His eyes flicker with something feral, a hunger for violence that matches mine. He thinks he’s got the drop on me, that I’m just another notch on his belt.

He’s wrong.

With a sudden lurch, he lunges at me, his fist slicing through the air toward my face. It’s a move I’ve seen a thousand times—too slow, too telegraphed. If he wants to use fists instead of guns, I’m happy to give him what he needs.

I pivot to the side, my feet light on the dusty concrete floor. My left arm shoots up, the motion practiced and precise, parrying his punch with a sharp slant of my forearm. His momentum carries him off-balance, and that’s when I strike.

My hand balls into a fist, tight as iron, and rockets forward. There’s no hesitation, no second-guessing. This is survival. This is retribution.

My knuckles connect with the sweet spot—right on the hinge of his jaw. A satisfying crunch echoes through the space, the sound of bone giving way, and I know it’s a hit that he’ll remember if he wakes up from it.

In that instant, I am every bit the storm they whisper about, a force of nature that will sweep away everything in its path. And right now, my path leads straight through

anyone foolish enough to stand between the justice we've come to deliver and me.

Logan darts into the fray, a blur of lethal intent. His fists are hammers, his kicks scythes, each strike choreographed chaos. I watch for a split second, admiration mingling with my adrenaline.

A gunshot cracks through the chaos, marking a shift in the fight. Bullets cut through the air. One grazes my arm—a sharp burn that snaps me back into the moment. Blood oozes, warm and sticky, but there's no time to feel the pain. This fight is no longer muscle on muscle. It is now fought with guns. "Cover!" Kyle's voice cuts through the din. He and Sean materialize from the shadows like avenging wraiths.

They move with the same purpose as Logan and me, synchronized, honed by countless battles too many to count. Their arrival shifts the balance even further, the crack of their return fire lifting one man off his feet as he flies through the air, dead before he hits the floor.

I shake off the sting of my wound, refocusing on the task at hand because until every last one of these bastards is down, none of us can afford to be distracted by anything as trivial as a little blood.

The men opposing us might as well have been forged from a military mold—they pivot into formation with a precision that hints at countless drills. Yet, despite their training, their movements are textbook—predictable. In contrast, Logan, Kyle, and I are more than trained. We're battle-hardened, our tactics born of necessity and honed in chaos. Sean is ex-Special Forces and will know their moves before they do and act accordingly.

Logan ducks under a sweeping arm, his counterattack not just precise but vicious, exploiting gaps only he can see. Kyle's shots don't just hit, they incapacitate two enemies before they even realize they've been targeted. Sean's hands are blurs—each

strike is a sentence of finality for anyone on the receiving end.

And me? I'm Cutter. I don't just fight, I dismantle. My strikes aren't just hard, they're ruinous, leaving nothing to chance.

One by one, they fall until the warehouse echoes with the thud of bodies hitting concrete rather than commands. The air is thick with gunpowder and sweat, and when the dust settles, it's clear we're not just better—we're dominant.

Only one man remains. The leader, chest heaving, eyes darting for an escape that doesn't exist. He knows it's over. We know it's over. But there's something else we need from him—Beathan's whereabouts.

"Where is he?" I growl, stepping forward, but Sean acts before the words leave my mouth. With a twist that speaks of both urgency and anger, the leader's neck snaps, the sound grotesquely loud in the sudden silence.

"Sean!" Kyle's scream cuts through the stillness, frustration and fear mingling in his voice. "We needed him! We don't know where Beathan is!"

Sean stands there, chest heaving, a mix of satisfaction and realization dawning on his face as the weight of his impulsive action sinks in. We needed answers, not another body. Now, we're back to square one, searching for Beathan with nothing but hope to guide us.

The silence is a living thing, oppressive and thick, filling the warehouse now the violence has ceased. I can hear the blood in my ears, the ragged breaths of my brothers-in-arms as they stand among the fallen enemies—a testament to our grim work.

From the shadows at the edges of the warehouse, more figures emerge, their faces

smeared with soot and blood. They're the rest of our motorcycle club, those who have been fighting our enemy outside. The room feels suddenly crowded as they fill the empty spaces between us, their expressions grim, their eyes searching ours for answers we don't have.

"Beathan?" The question hangs heavy in the air.

We shake our heads, the collective defeat momentarily outweighing the triumph of survival. The dim light catches on the various cuts and bruises that paint our skin—proof of the battle. Logan leans against a crate, his knuckles split open, his chest rising and falling with labored intensity. Kyle wipes a smear of blood from his eye, his gaze fixed on the lifeless body of the leader while Sean stands motionless, his face a mask of self-reproach.

A silence descends upon us, the kind that follows a storm—the world holding its breath, waiting for what comes after. We all feel it, the hollowness of victory when the prize remains lost.

Then, cutting through the quiet like the softest whisper of wind comes a sound so faint it might be a figment of my desperate hope. A cry, barely audible, yet unmistakably human. It's small, scared, and pulls at something primal within me.

"Did you hear that?" Kyle's voice is strained, his earlier anger replaced with cautious optimism.

We all pause, our heads tilting, straining to catch the sound again. Logan straightens up, his warrior's poise returning as he zeroes in on the source. Sean's eyes, once clouded with regret, sharpen with renewed purpose.

The crying comes again, a plaintive whimper that echoes off the walls, guiding us, reigniting the fire within our chests. It's the promise that all our sacrifices might not

have been in vain.

“Over there,” Sean whispers, pointing toward the far end of the warehouse where stacks of crates create deep shadows.

We move as one, drawn to the sound, blood and exhaustion forgotten. The mission isn’t over until we find Beathan.

Fanning out, each stride purposeful, each set of eyes scanning. I kick at a toppled crate, flipping it to reveal nothing but the dust it had cradled. Logan is a few steps ahead, his hands working methodically as he lifts and shifts debris with mechanical precision.

“Anything?” Kyle’s voice cuts through the silence, impatient and tinged with frustration.

“Nothing!” Sean calls back, his tone matching Kyle’s urgency. Their voices bounce around the cavernous space, a stark reminder of how empty the warehouse feels despite our presence.

Sweat mixes with the grime on my skin, creating streaks of muddy color. My fingers scrape against wood and metal, pushing aside boxes that look like they haven’t been touched in years. The dim light from the high windows casts long shadows, making the ordinary seem ominous.

“Dammit!” My curse echoes as I lash out in frustration, the sole of my boot slamming down. But the sound isn’t right—it’s hollow. My heart hammers. I freeze, then shift my weight, feeling the slight give beneath me.

“Guys,” I bark, my voice carrying an edge of command.

Dropping to my knees, I claw at the dirt and grime until my fingers find the edge of what can only be a trapdoor.

“Over here!” Sean is instantly by my side, Kyle and Logan close behind. Together, we clear the remaining debris, revealing the full outline of the hidden exit—or entrance.

I don’t wait for consent or contemplation, my hands are already on the ring, pulling with all the might left in my battered muscles. The door groans in protest but gives way, opening to reveal darkness below.

A small gasp floats up, fragile as a soap bubble, and there, in the dim light seeping into the pit, I see him. Beathan. His face is streaked with dirt, and tears carve clean lines down his cheeks. His eyes, wide and shimmering with fear and relief, lock onto mine.

“Hey, little man,” I say, my voice surprisingly gentle amid the chaos that has been our reality. “We’ve got you.”

The cool air rushes past me as I drop into the pit, my boots thudding against the compacted earth below. Beathan flinches at the sound. My hands, still trembling from adrenaline, reach out and scoop him up with a gentleness that belies their bloodied knuckles.

“Uncle Cutter?”

“Hey, little man, you’re safe now,” I whisper against his matted hair, feeling his small arms cling to my neck with a desperation that wrenches at my insides.

His body shakes against mine, but it’s over now, and we won’t let anything else happen to him.

I crane my neck upward. Sean's outstretched arms are there, ready to lift us out of this darkness. The relief flooding through me is a palpable force, washing through me.

"Up we go, buddy," I say as I nod to Sean.

Strong hands grasp Beathan first, hoisting him into the light. His small frame disappears from my hold.

"Take him home, Sean," I call out, my voice steady despite my pounding heart.

The sight of Beathan being carried to safety is the silent promise that some things can still be made right.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm

Annette

Standing near the bonfire, the flames crackling and sending sparks into the night, I find the heat comforting, but my heart is a storm of worry. I don't know if Cutter or the MacKenny brothers have found Beathan or if they ever will. I stare at Tyson Reed, the man who might just hold my heart. It's because of him that my son was taken. If Beathan isn't returned safely, will I ever be able to love Tyson completely?

The roar of Harleys breaks through my thoughts, echoing through the night. My pulse quickens. I sprint through the clubhouse, pushing past the front doors as the bikes roll to a stop. My eyes scan the group, frantically searching until I see Sean dismounting, Beathan in his arms.

"Beathan!" I scream, running toward them.

Sean closes the distance quickly, and I grab my son, pulling him close. I clutch him to my chest, kissing his face over and over, tears of relief streaming down my cheeks.

"Mom, stop! That tickles!" Beathan laughs, wriggling in my embrace.

Finally, I pull back, holding a hand to Sean's face. "Thank you," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion.

Sean's eyes glisten as he shakes his head. "It wasn't all me," his voice cracks.

Searching the faces of the men before me, I say, "Thank you. Thank..." Words fail me. How do I tell them thank you for rescuing my heart?

Cutter approaches me and smiles, but then he looks beyond us, and the smile falters slightly.

Tyson steps forward from the shadows. “Let’s get you both home,” he offers quietly.

Nodding, I lock eyes with my son. “Are you hungry, little man?”

“Yes, Mom.”

Kyle steps closer. “I’ll send some men to keep watch. You’ll be safe.”

“I’ll do it,” Sean offers.

Kyle nods at him, and I’m grateful for the protection.

As we turn to leave, Angus’s voice stops Tyson in his tracks. “Tyson, we’ll need to talk first thing in the morning.”

The words hang in the air, a heavy reminder of the consequences yet to come. I frown at Angus, but Tyson gives him a curt nod, accepting the inevitable. He guides us to his car, the weight of the night still pressing on us. Tyson opens the back passenger door, and I slide in, keeping Beathan on my lap, holding him close.

The drive to our home is short, the streets are empty and quiet under the moonlight. The tension in the car is palpable, but I focus on Beathan, his steady breathing calming my racing heart. By the time we arrive, he’s fast asleep, his little body relaxed in my arms.

Tyson opens the door and holds his arms out for Beathan, but I’m not ready to let him go. Instead, I shuffle forward, keeping him close, and awkwardly exit the car. Sean puts a hand on my elbow, steadying me as I get to my feet.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

Sean doesn’t respond. Instead, he holds out his hand, and I hand him the keys to my home. “Stay here,” he instructs, then opens the door and steps inside.

He heads upstairs while the other two members of the MC stay downstairs, methodically checking every corner to ensure no one is hiding in the yoga studio.

I stand there, unsure whether to feel relieved or panicked that they’re making sure my home is safe. This is Becca Falls, my childhood home. The thought that it could be a place of danger never occurred to me until now.

Tyson clears his throat. “I’m so sorry this happened.”

“It’s not your fault.” I smile down at my son. “The only thing that matters is he’s home and safe.”

Sean and his men exit the building, and he nods at me. “It’s clear. You need anything, scream, and we’ll come running.”

“Thanks, Sean. I feel safer with you out here.”

He nods. “You are safe.”

Walking up the stairs with Tyson at my back, I carry Beathan into my bedroom and place him on the bed, pulling a blanket over his small body. I kiss him on the forehead, and a frown creases his face, but he’s out cold.

I unplug Beathan’s night light from his bedroom, take it into my room, and plug it in. He might be frightened if he wakes up in the dark, and the sight of the familiar stars on the ceiling should comfort him.

Glancing at him one last time, I tiptoe out of my bedroom and into my kitchen, where Tyson is making a fresh pot of coffee.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

Tears blur my vision as the reality of the night finally hits me. I cling to Tyson, burying my face in his chest, and his arms wrap around me tightly. His hand strokes my hair gently, a soothing rhythm against the chaos in my mind.

“Having a child is like having your heart exist outside your body,” I say between sobs. “If anything ever happened to Beathan, I don’t know what I would do.”

Tyson’s grip tightens. “I promise, Annette, I’ll take every step to ensure your safety. I feel responsible for what happened to Beathan, and I won’t rest until I find out who’s behind this.”

He comforts me with light kisses on my forehead and temple, each calming the storm inside me. The gentle kisses become more passionate, his lips finding mine in a desperate need for connection and reassurance. For a moment, the world narrows to just the two of us, and I lose myself in the intensity of his kiss. My hands entwine his hair, and his tongue sweeps across my lips, making me groan. Tyson’s hand wraps in my hair and pushes me backward until my ass hits the kitchen counter. My hands move to the hem of his shirt, needing to feel more of him. This kiss is all-consuming, and my body tingles and aches in a way that it hasn’t done in a very long time. Tyson pulls back, his eyes hooded as he stares at my mouth. He smiles slightly then leans in, sucking on my bottom lip as his hand fists more of my hair tightly, igniting a flame within me.

I need him in a primal chase-away-all-my-fears kind of way.

Instead of trying to touch more skin, I drop my hands to his belt and zipper. His

intake of breath as I graze the front of his pants sets my core on fire.

This is what I need, this is the man—

Suddenly, a piercing scream shatters the moment. “Mommy!” Beathan’s terrified cry echoes through the house.

I break away from Tyson and run to Beathan, scooping him in my arms. “It’s okay, sweetheart. Mommy’s here,” I whisper, rocking him gently.

There’s a loud sound, and I’m sure it’s Sean bursting through the front door. He appears in my bedroom doorway with his gun drawn and eyes wide with alarm.

Sean sees Beathan in my arms, his small body trembling. He nods at me and walks backward as I softly hum a lullaby I’ve sung to Beathan since he was a baby. His sobs gradually fade, and his eyelids grow heavy until he drifts back to sleep.

I lay him down gently, brushing his hair from his forehead and kissing him one last time. I slip out of the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind me. Tyson and Sean are waiting in the living room with concern etched on their faces.

“I’m going to lie next to him and get some rest,” I tell them, my voice weary.

Tyson nods. “I’ll sleep on the couch. I want to be close in case you need anything.”

Sean heads for the door. “I’ll go back outside and keep watch. No one’s getting near this place tonight.”

I manage a small smile, grateful for their presence and protection. “Thank you,” I whisper, then turn and head back into the bedroom, hoping tonight will bring us all some much-needed peace.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:53 pm

Tyson

My fingers strum a silent rhythm on Annette's dining room table, and the morning light filters in through the window, painting the room in hues of gold and warmth. Annette's home is just like her, and I can see why she picked this building in her hometown. After everything she's been through, the familiar must be comforting, but having it shattered by Beathan's abduction makes me wonder if she'll stay. Tension coils within my chest, and it feels as tight as a spring when I think of anyone hurting either of them.

The memory of last night's kiss lingers on my lips, a passionate promise that left me yearning for more. Her lips were soft, eager, and honest—so damn honest that it nearly broke me. I can still feel the press of her body against mine, a moment of pure connection that makes me question everything I've ever wanted or worked for.

Now, with the new day dawning, I'm wrestling with the conflict raging inside me. I want her, God, how I want her. Yet, I'm straddling the line between desire and patience. Surely, she must feel it too? Five years is a long time, enough to build trust and lay down roots. She knows me—my strengths and my failings. But does knowing equate to readiness?

I catch myself staring at the empty chair across from me, picturing her seated there, her laughter filling the room, dissolving all my uncertainties. But I won't—I can't rush her into anything. I've learned love isn't something you take—it's given freely, without constraints or expectations. And so, I wait with a heart full of hope that she'll see in me what I see in her beyond just this moment of passion we shared.

Taking a deep breath, I exhale slowly, steadying the restless thrum of my pulse. Because no matter how much I ache to move forward, it's not just about what I want. It's about us and whether she's ready to take that next step with me.

The soft pad of footsteps precedes her appearance, drawing my gaze toward the hallway. Annette emerges, the morning light casting a warm glow around her. Her light pink dressing gown clings to her figure, a pale fabric that whispers against the contours of her body. It's her hair that captures my attention the most—blonde strands in a tangled disarray from sleep, a chaotic crown that somehow accentuates her natural beauty. I've seen her polished and poised, but this disheveled state is breathtaking in its intimacy. This is Annette, unvarnished and real, and it strikes me just how profoundly she's engraved herself into every corner of my being.

"Morning," she mumbles, her voice husky with sleep, rubbing her eyes with delicate fingers.

"Good morning," I reply, my voice steadier than I feel.

I push back from the table and move to the counter, reaching automatically for the coffee pot. The familiar ritual grounds me and gives me something to do with hands that itch to reach out to her.

"Coffee?" I ask, even though I know the answer.

"Please," she says, a ghost of a smile touching her lips as she sits at the kitchen table.

I pour the steaming liquid into a mug, the rich aroma filling the room with a comforting scent. Handing her the mug, our fingers brush briefly, sending a jolt of electricity through me. Her smile deepens, and for a moment, I'm lost in the depth of her eyes.

“Annette,” I begin, leaning against the counter, my coffee forgotten. “I need to head over to the MC. Angus and the others... they’ll be waiting for me.” The words are heavy, tasting of duty and the unspoken dangers that lurk outside these walls.

“Is everything okay?” Concern etches her features, her brow knitting together.

“Everything will be fine,” I assure her, though the weight in my chest belies my confident tone. “I just have some things to sort out with the MacKenny boys, but I’ll return as soon as possible.”

She nods, cradling the mug in her hands, the steam curling up like tendrils. “Maybe we could talk about us when you get back,” she says softly.

My heart skips a beat at her mention of a partnership, but I don’t want to get ahead of myself. “I’ll always make time for you,” I respond with a half-smile, hoping to inject a bit of levity into the air thick with unspoken fears.

“Promise me you’ll come back,” Annette says, staring into my eyes.

“Promise,” I affirm, holding her gaze. In that simple word lies the entirety of my world, bound by an unbreakable oath, not just to return but to return to her.

It’s Annette who anchors me—she and the hope of a future that hangs on the precipice of a single kiss shared right here in her kitchen.

Moving toward her, I lean in, my lips finding hers in a quiet farewell. Annette’s cheeks bloom with color. The kiss is gentle, a whisper of a thing, yet it stirs a storm within me. Her taste, sweet and warm, lingers on my tongue, morning breath be damned. I pull away reluctantly, memorizing the way her eyes flutter open, heavy with sleep and something more.

“See you soon,” I murmur, my thumb brushing her cheek one last time before I turn for the door.

The crisp morning air bites at my skin as I climb into my Charger, the engine roaring to life beneath me. The drive to the Loyal Rebels clubhouse is a blur, my mind replaying that tender moment over and over like a favorite song stuck on repeat.

Arriving at the clubhouse, the sight of Maddock lounging against the front steps pulls me back to reality. His nod is curt, a silent acknowledgment between men who understand each other’s worth without needing words. Maddock is an accountant, methodical in everything he does, and although many don’t see it, he’s like the rest of his brothers with a wild streak. He plays at being the businessman, but I’ve seen him fight and saw him when he came back from exile. His family and Cherie are his everything, and he’ll do whatever it takes to keep them safe.

“Let’s not keep them waiting,” Maddock says, his voice gravelly as he leads the way inside.

The meeting room feels like stepping into a den of lions. Kyle stands at the head, his presence commanding even in stillness. Sean slouches in a chair, dark circles under his eyes, speaking of a night spent on high alert. Jamie, always the outlier with his farmer’s tan and calloused hands, nods a greeting. And there’s Angus, perched on the edge of the desk like some dark avian observer, his gaze sharp and calculating.

“Tyson,” Kyle greets, his handshake firm.

“How was the night on the sofa?” Sean asks, a wry smile tugging at his lips despite the fatigue.

“I slept fine.”

“Let’s get down to business,” Angus cuts in, his voice devoid of warmth or welcome.

The initial camaraderie is tangible as I sit among the MacKenny brothers. There’s a shared nod here, a half-smile there—unspoken affirmations of solidarity that have always been their way.

Angus speaks up, his tone slicing through the comfort like a knife. “Carlotta Vaughn,” he says, and my blood runs cold at the mention of my lawyer’s name. “She’s behind Beathan’s abduction.”

My head snaps up, eyes locking onto Angus, searching for some hint of jest, but his face is all hard lines and grim certainty.

“How do you know this?” I demand, but even as I speak, I dread the answer.

Angus’s hand lifts, pointing out into the clubhouse where a sliver of daylight reveals a silhouette. “Elaine,” he states flatly. “The woman we found in the attic. Carlotta loaded her with cash to spy on Annette and the club. I’ve traced everything back to Carlotta, her signature is all over the operation.”

“Dammit, Angus, why would she...?” My voice trails off as the pieces fall into place, jagged edges cutting at the trust I’ve held for over a decade.

“Because you were cleaning house, Tyson.” Angus leans forward. “Bringing in new people, a new company that’d sniff out the rot. She’s been bleeding you for years.”

His words hang heavily in the room, dense with accusation and disbelief. It’s a gut punch, a betrayal that stings sharper than any blade could.

“Tyson, man,” Angus shakes his head, almost pitying. “How did you not see it?”

A storm of confusion and disbelief churns inside me. Carlotta, she's the woman who's been my confidante, advisor, and friend . For over ten years, she's stood by me, and I've trusted her with not just my legal matters but with the fragments of my personal life. How could she betray Beathan, Annette, and me ? They are my world, even if the blood ties say otherwise. I would lay down my life for them. Carlotta knows this. She knows everything.

The room feels like it's closing in, the air thick with tension and unspoken thoughts. My hands clench into fists beneath the table, nails digging into my palms to anchor me against the tide of betrayal washing over me. I glance at the faces surrounding me, etched with concern and anger, and realize that these men, the MacKenny boys, are more than just a club, they're family. And they look at me now, awaiting my lead.

"All right," I start, my voice steady despite the storm raging within me. "What's our play with Carlotta?" I ask the room. It's a gesture of respect, acknowledging their stake in this too. Carlotta's deceit doesn't just wound me, it endangers the very fabric of loyalty and trust that binds us all. "I'll back whatever you decide."

They need to know I stand united with them when it comes to protecting our own. Whatever course we choose, it needs to be decisive. Carlotta's treachery won't go unanswered, not when it threatens what I hold most dear.

Sean's face breaks into a rare grin, his head nodding once, sharp and decisive. He raises his hand, a silent signal that reverberates through the room like a gunshot. The door swings open with a menacing creak, and Cutter steps in, a hulking shadow that commands an immediate unease in the pit of my stomach.

Cutter's eyes find mine, and I can't help but feel the ghost of every warning instinct flare to life. There's a dangerous edge to him, a blade hidden beneath a veneer of controlled calmness. He seems to thrive on the fringes of darkness, and I've learned to trust the wary tension that tightens my muscles in his presence.

“Carlotta,” Cutter says, his voice rough like gravel. “I’m going to fetch her. We’ll bring her to the pit.” His lips curl into a smirk, but it doesn’t reach his cold eyes. “Then we decide as a family.”

The words hang heavy, and I can almost taste Cutter’s desperation to be counted among the MacKenny boys as one of their own, to carve out his place within the tight-knit circle of brotherhood. But there’s something off in how he claims the word ‘family,’ as though it’s a title he’s still trying to earn, a badge not yet pinned to his chest.

‘Family’ to the MacKennys isn’t just about blood—it is loyalty, the bonds forged in fire and trust. Cutter yearns for that connection, maybe more than any of them realize, and at this moment, his hunger to belong is laid bare, naked and raw against the backdrop of our grim council.

My gaze flickers around the room, searching the faces of the MacKenny brothers for some hint of what’s to come. The weight of silence settles over us before I clear my throat, a low rumble that feels louder than intended. “And the girl...” I start, my voice steady despite the turmoil within, “... the one who helped Carlotta... what happens to her?”

Cutter’s eyes snap toward me, a spark igniting in their depths, and his lips stretch into a smile that doesn’t promise kindness. “The girl...” he says, tone dripping with a venomous pleasure, “... she belongs to me now.” There’s ownership in his words, a declaration that sends an icy draft through the room. “I’ll deal with her as I see fit.”

His smile is a predator’s grin, all teeth and no soul—a cruel twist that speaks of punishments not yet devised but certain to be merciless. My stomach knots at the implication, a silent alarm that this could spiral into something dark and irretrievable.

It’s then I feel compelled to stand, every muscle tensing with a mixture of anger and

resolve. I rap my knuckles against the table's wooden surface—a sharp, commanding sound that seems alien as this isn't my kingdom but Kyle's.

Words fail me, and my thoughts scramble. My hand rests on the table, the wood cool beneath my touch, grounding me in this pivotal moment where decisions are life and death, and loyalty is the currency that binds or breaks us.

“Tyson...” Kyle says, his voice steady as he rises from his chair, “... what are your intentions with Annette?”

All thoughts of Elaine drain away, and I feel the weight of their scrutiny. My hands twitch at my sides, but I plant them firmly on the table, anchoring myself.

“I...” The word is a tremor, and I clear my throat. “I love her.” The confession feels like shedding armor in enemy territory. “And Beathan,” I add, a fierce tenderness swelling in my chest. “If she'll have me, I want to move to Becca Falls to be with them. Start a life together.” I pause, scanning the faces before me for any sign of judgment. “I've got money, more than enough. They'd never want for anything.”

A moment stretches, taut as a wire. Then, one by one, the MacKenny brothers stand. Their eyes don't waver, each a sentinel guarding a sacred trust. It's Kyle's smile that breaks the standoff, slow and deliberate.

“Good to hear, Tyson. We're glad. But it's not money Annette needs. She needs a strong man to love her. To protect her. If you truly do...” his eyes lock onto mine, “... then we won't stand in your way if it's what she wants.”

Their silent verdict ripples through me, a mix of relief and resolution. These men, bound by loyalty thicker than blood, have offered me something rare—a chance, not bought but earned. And it's that realization, more than any promise of wealth or safety, that cements my resolve. They all loved Lochlan MacKenny, Beathan's father,

but he failed Annette in many ways. He broke her trust in a way I could never do. I would burn down the world to protect her and Beathan, and I think the MacKenny brothers know this.

The door of my Charger closes with a soft thud, the sound somehow final. The engine is silent behind me as I step away from the curb. My footsteps echo on the pavement, each step syncing with the drumming of my heart. It's a short walk, but one that stretches infinitely as I let the weight of the meeting settle over me.

The MacKenny brothers' words replay in my head, a mantra reminding me of what's at stake. Their approval is not about the money—it never was. It's about strength, protection, love, and whether I'm the right man for Annette and Beathan.

With each step toward Annette's front door, my doubts scatter. I've always known deep down that it wasn't my wealth that would make the difference. It's something more profound. A truth I'm only now beginning to fully grasp.

My hand finds the doorknob, and I step inside, the warmth of the studio enveloping me like an embrace.

"Tyson?" Annette's voice floats down the stairway, laced with surprise and something softer, gentler.

"Just me," I call back, shedding the remnants of my earlier apprehension.

I follow the murmur of voices and the sweet scent of vanilla to the kitchen. Climbing the stairs, each rise seems to lighten the burden on my shoulders, lifting the armor I didn't realize I'd been wearing.

Reaching the top, I pause at the threshold, struck by the scene before me. Beathan's bright and unburdened laughter peals through the air as he stands on a stool beside his

mother. Annette's hands guide his, helping to spoon the cupcake batter into a tray. Her blonde hair catches the afternoon light, spilling around her shoulders in a disheveled halo.

"Momma, look," Beathan exclaims, proud of the dollop he's managed to get in the cup rather than on the counter.

"Perfect," Annette praises, her smile reaching her eyes. They shine with that same unconditional love I feel swelling inside me.

Something shifts within me witnessing their simple joy. The enormity of what I've just committed to pales compared to what I stand to gain. Not money, not power, but this—laughter in a sunlit kitchen, a bond forged in patience and care, and a family, imperfect and real.

"Tyson," Annette says again, her voice softer this time. She turns, a trace of flour on her cheek, and her smile widens as our eyes meet.

"Hey," I reply, my voice thick with emotion.

I walk over, reaching out to brush the flour from her skin, my fingertips grazing her warm face. Beathan looks up, vanilla batter smeared across his chin, and grins.

"Tyson, you're home!"

Home.

The word resonates, echoing through the kitchen, filling every corner of the space and my heart. And I realize, standing here among the sticky counters and the smell of baking cupcakes, that all the wealth in the world doesn't hold a candle to the riches found in these moments.

This is what matters.

This is where I belong.

With Annette and Beathan, surrounded by friends who are family.

Together, we are safe.

Together, we are loved.

Cutter

The dim light in the room throws shadows across Kyle's face, making his expression unreadable. I stand my ground but can't help shuffling slightly from one foot to another, a nervous tick that betrays my usual composure. I'm used to being the one others fear, the unpredictable storm of violence and mayhem. But it's different here, alone with Kyle, the president of my MC. My palms itch with a mix of anticipation and anxiety.

He doesn't say anything for what feels like hours. He just stares with those piercing eyes that have more authority than any gavel or badge I've ever encountered. In his gaze, an intensity sees through the layers of bravado and the scars of countless fights. Sometimes, I think he knows me better than I know myself.

"Sit down, Cutter," he finally says, motioning toward the chair opposite him. His voice is too calm, setting off alarms in my head.

I comply, the leather creaking under my weight, but I can't shake the feeling of being a mouse scrutinized by a hawk. Kyle rests his elbows on the table, his fingers laced together as if in prayer, but I know better. He's calculating, always calculating.

"Something on your mind, Prez?" I manage to keep my tone steady despite the unease coiling in my gut.

Kyle's scrutiny doesn't waver, though his lips twitch in something that might pass for a smile. "Cutter, you're a good soldier," he starts, and I brace myself for the 'but' that always follows such praise.

My reputation within the MC is built on blood and bone, doing the dirty work without flinching. But Kyle is the mastermind, the keeper of our creed, and his word is law. It isn't the prospect of violence that has me on edge—it's disappointing him. Because despite everything, his approval means something. It means maybe I belong somewhere, after all.

Kyle cocks his head to the side, his gaze sharpening in a way that feels like he's reading the darkest parts of my soul. "I'm going to ask you to do something that might not come easy, Cutter."

I lean forward, ready for orders that usually mean someone's about to bleed. But this time, his next words slice through my expectations.

"Elaine... I don't want you to hurt her."

My brow furrows, and for a moment, I'm a kid again, lost without a map. "Why?" The word comes out rough, like gravel grinding underfoot.

Elaine's face flashes in my mind—the woman who ratted us out. My hands itch with the need to mete out justice. It's what I do and what I am.

"Kyle, she—" I stop myself, confusion knotting my insides. Betrayal is a sin punishable by pain in our world—a lesson taught in blood. Elaine's betrayal sits on my tongue, heavy as lead, but Kyle's unspoken command weighs even heavier.

Kyle's stare holds me captive, and there is nowhere to hide. "I see your demons, Cutter," he says, his voice low, threading through the tense air between us. "But it isn't too late for you. You don't have to be this man, the one you think you're destined to be. There's a chance for you yet... to be better."

His words hit me like a gut punch, knocking the wind out of my sails. I've always

seen myself as the sharp edge of our club's knife, nothing more. But Kyle sees something else, something I can't fathom.

"Better?" The word tastes foreign on my tongue. "But she betrayed us, Kyle. She betrayed you." My voice splinters, rough with disbelief and an edge of desperation. "She has to pay. That's the code. Our way."

There's a fury that courses through my veins, the kind that is fueled by loyalty and a lifetime of being tossed aside. It demands retribution, a balancing of the scales, and Elaine's deception weighs heavily on the side of vengeance. But Kyle's command is a shackle I can't break, even if every fiber of my being screams for justice.

Kyle shakes his head, a slow, deliberate motion that cuts through me. "I talked to Elaine," he murmurs, and I can't help but flinch at her name. "Whatever she told Carlotta, isn't anything that couldn't have been dug up with a simple internet search."

"Internet?" I echo.

"Yep. Annette's big move back to Becca Falls? All over social media, man. The firm threw a party so grand that it was begging for attention." He leans back in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight—a sound that usually signals the end of someone's good standing within the club. But now, it feels like the prelude to something else.

Something unnerving.

"Elaine's remorseful, Cutter. She's scared out of her mind, knowing she crossed us." His eyes search mine, seeking what? Understanding? Redemption? "And maybe, just maybe, she's the one who could help you face down those demons you keep locked up."

“Help me?” I splutter, incredulity lacing my tone. My hand unconsciously grazes the scar on my arm, a physical reminder of battles fought outside and within.

“Then what am I supposed to do with her, huh? If not make her pay?” I demand, the question clawing its way out of my throat.

Kyle’s smile is a rare sight. It doesn’t belong in our world of chrome, leather, blood, and vengeance. Yet there it is, softening the hard lines of his face. “That’s still up to you, brother. But look at her. Really look. She’s damaged. Can’t you see that? You, of all people, should understand what it’s like to be broken.”

“Broken,” I repeat, the word echoing hollowly.

Broken like the homes I’d been thrown out of, broken like every promise ever made to me.

“Damaged goods, then,” he murmurs.

I push off the chair, its legs scraping against the wooden floor with a sound that seems too loud in the silence that’s settled between Kyle and me. My boots are heavy on the floor as I leave the room we call church, a place hallowed by loyalty and blood oaths rather than prayers.

The hallway outside is dim, the walls lined with faded posters of rallies past and glory days that seem like they’re from another lifetime. I feel the weight of Kyle’s words pressing down on me as I pass each door, the idea of redemption like a foreign object lodged in my chest.

As I reach the door at the end of the hall, my hand hesitates on the knob. What am I doing? The question ricochets around my skull, but it’s too late to turn back now. I twist the handle and step inside into the stale air of a room that feels more like a cage

than any kind of sanctuary.

Elaine is sitting on the edge of an old cot, her hands clasped together as if she's trying to hold herself together. The moment I enter, her head snaps up, those hazel eyes—wide and brimming with something akin to recognition—lock onto mine.

There's no fight in them. Not a trace. It's just like when I'd first found her. She'd been cornered then, too, by a life that had dealt her a crap hand. Fear is etched into every line of her face, and it strikes me that she's as much a prisoner of her own making as she is of ours.

She doesn't stand, scream, or plead. She waits, trapped by the invisible chains of her guilt and the very real ones of our retribution. And for a moment, amid the quiet dread hanging in the air, I see her, not as the traitor who sold us out, but as someone who's already been through hell in her own way.

"Elaine," I say, my voice steadier than I feel. But before I can gauge her reaction, I'm already thinking about Kyle's words, wondering what comes next.

I take a deep breath, the weight of the decision pressing down on me like a lead vest. The air in this room is stale and tastes like old fears and desperation. I'm ready to speak to give her the words that might set her free when she shatters the silence.

"Please," Elaine chokes out between sobs, her voice cracking under the strain. "I'll do anything, anything. Just... please show mercy."

Her tears, genuine and raw, slice through my resolve. She's begging for her life with the intensity of someone who has tasted death's cold breath. And as she pleads, something inside me shifts uncomfortably.

Maybe it's the way Kyle looked at me earlier and saw right through the hard shell

I've built around myself. Or maybe it's the fact that Elaine, in all her brokenness, is a mirror reflecting the parts of me I've fought so hard to bury.

An idea worms its way into my thoughts, unbidden yet persistent. If I do what Kyle asks and let Elaine go, perhaps the MacKenny brothers will finally see me as one of their own. Maybe they'll give me that nod of approval I've craved since I was nothing more than a kid bouncing from one foster home to the next, never belonging anywhere.

My chest tightens at the thought—a home. A real one, where my place isn't up for debate and not just waiting for the day when someone decides I'm too much trouble and tosses me aside. No more being the stray dog always left out in the rain.

"Elaine," I say, my voice barely above a whisper, my mind racing with possibilities of brotherhood and acceptance. "You hear me?"

She nods frantically, her eyes searching mine for a hint of the fate that awaits her. And in those hazel depths, I see the chance to rewrite my story—one where I'm not the outcast or the psycho but a man with a family and a place to call home.

Staring down at Elaine, I can't help but let the corners of my mouth twitch upward. It's a strange sight, me grinning like a loon while she sits on the edge of the cot her face slick with tears and fear.

"Maybe you don't gotta be scared," I murmur, more to myself than to her.

I never had a steady girl or thought I needed one. But as I look at her, something stirs—a longing for something permanent, someone who might understand the chaos that whirls inside me. The idea tastes new and unfamiliar but not entirely unwelcome. Maybe she could be that. Maybe she could be my anchor in this relentless storm.

The smile that splits my face feels alien—the grin of a madman finding an unexpected treasure in a pile of trash. Confusion knits my brow when her sobs grow louder, her body shaking as if trying to dispel the terror that holds her captive.

“Hey, hey... what’s with the waterworks?” I ask, my tone softer than I intend. “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

Her words come out in a rush, a desperate plea that clings to the still air between us. “Please... I’ll do anything. Just don’t kill me. I’ll stay here with you or go anywhere you want. Just please...”

It’s raw, the way she throws herself at my mercy. It carves through the tough hide I’ve built around myself, reaching the boy who was always left behind, who knows what it’s like to beg for scraps of affection. I offer her the only thing I have—the promise of safety, even though violence is all I’ve ever known.

“Look, no one’s dying today,” I say, trying to sound reassuring. “I’ll take you home if that’s what you want.”

“Home?” Her voice cracks, the word a fragile thing in her mouth. “No! I mean, anywhere but there. Anywhere with you.”

She doesn’t want to die. And hell, maybe I don’t want to be the one to pull the trigger today. Not when there’s a chance the MacKennys might see me differently after this—someone worth keeping around.

“All right, all right,” I whisper, a plan forming. “We’ll figure something out. You got my word.”

A word I’m not sure is worth much, but it’s all I got. And right now, it’s all she’s clinging to.

I let out a bark of laughter, the sound sour even to my ears. But then I see the stark terror in her eyes, and nothing is funny about that. She's serious, she's damn serious. My chuckle dies in my throat like an engine sputtering out.

"Hey," I say, softer now. I crouch in front of her, trying to seem less like the looming reaper she thinks I am. My hands find her knees, a gentle weight meant to steady rather than frighten. "You're safe, Elaine. You hear me?"

The door creaks, and I snap my gaze up. Logan's silhouette fills the doorway, his presence like a storm cloud on a clear day.

"Whatcha doin', Cutter?" His voice is gravel, suspicion laced through each word. "She ratted us out."

"Didn't rat much," I tell him, repeating the gospel according to Kyle. "Just stuff any jerk with a laptop could've dug up on Facebook or the internet. We're cool."

Logan's eyebrow shoots up, a silent question hanging between us. His eyes flick from me to the trembling figure on the cot.

"Besides," I continue, feeling the weight of my next words, "we had a thing once." I try to make it sound casual like it's enough of a reason. "Maybe she could be my steady, you know?"

There's a challenge in Logan's stare, but I hold it. This is my play now, my chance for something resembling redemption or maybe just a shot at not being alone.

Elaine's face goes from a mask of terror to one of bewildered shock, her eyes darting between Logan and me as if trying to find the safer bet in a game where all the odds are stacked against her. For a moment, she looks like a cornered animal, wild-eyed and desperate, but when my words sink in—no death sentence hanging over her

head—her features soften. It's a subtle shift, like the sun peeking out from behind storm clouds, and her hands, trembling and uncertain, cover mine.

"Please," she whispers, so faint it's almost lost under the weight of Logan's skeptical gaze. Her fingers squeeze, nails pressing into my skin in a silent plea for affirmation.

I'm not used to being someone's lifeline rather than their end. It's unfamiliar territory, but it sparks something in me, a flicker of power that isn't laced with fear. She believes me, and I'm her salvation in this mess we're both tangled up in. That thought alone swells in my chest, filling spaces I didn't know were hollow.

All I have to do is sell it to Logan now. He's standing there with his arms crossed, his jaw set hard enough to grind stones to dust. He's a skeptic, always has been, but I've got an ace up my sleeve. The unspoken brotherhood, the loyalty we bleed for. He can't just shrug that off.

"Logan," I say, steady and sure, my hands still under Elaine's. "She's not a threat to us, man. Dead, she's just another problem we gotta hide. Alive? She might just owe us more than we could ever beat out of her."

I watch the gears turn behind his eyes, calculating the risks and rewards. There's a long pause, thick enough to choke on before he finally nods, curt and noncommittal. Logan's nod is the silent verdict I've been straining for, and the weight of impending violence lifts off my shoulders. It's like that first gulp of air after a dive too deep, too long underwater. Elaine's grip on my hands tightens, her nails digging into my skin, a silent plea and a thank you wrapped in fear.

"Look after her," Logan grunts, turning on his heel.

"Will do," I call after him, but he's already melting into the shadows of the corridor, leaving Elaine and me in the dimly lit room. The buzz of a solitary bulb overhead fills

the silence between us.

I stand up slowly, towering over her small frame. Her eyes, wide and shimmering with unshed tears, follow my every move. Something about her gaze and vulnerability ignites a strange warmth in me—a twisted sense of protectiveness that's both alien and exhilarating.

“Let's get outta here,” I murmur, offering her a hand up.

She hesitates as if contemplating the sincerity of my offer, then places her trembling hand in mine. As I pull her to her feet, there's a moment where our proximity blurs the lines of the captor and the captive, the protector and the endangered.

“Thank you,” she whispers, a hint of disbelief coloring her tone.

“Nothing to thank me for yet,” I say, my voice gentler than I intend it to be. “We're not out of the woods. But you're safe. For now.”

I can see the questions dancing behind her eyes, but she bites them back, nodding instead.

As we step out of the room, I can't help but feel the shift in the air and within me. Maybe this is the crossroad where I start carving a different path for myself, where I'm not just the muscle or the madness waiting to be unleashed.

But as we walk through the clubhouse's empty halls, my mind drifts to the future that has yet to unfold. Kyle believes in redemption, in second chances, and maybe, just maybe, I could buy into that fairy tale. If I play my cards right and keep Elaine close, I might cement my place in the MacKenny family.

Home.

A permanent spot at the table. No more looking over my shoulder, worrying about being tossed aside like yesterday's trash. She could be my ace, my shield against the solitude I've known all too well.

And yet, as I glance down at Elaine, her steps hesitant beside me, I can't shake the darker undercurrents that swirl beneath the surface of my thoughts. There's one last job that needs doing, one last dance with the devil before I can claim any semblance of peace—Carlotta, the lawyer who thinks she holds our reins. She's got to go. Once she's out of the picture, once her blood is a memory on my hands, that's when I'll truly be free to build something new.

Yeah, it's twisted, but that's the price of admission to a life without chains. I'm a psycho, born and bred for chaos. But perhaps, I can mold and shape it into something that resembles a future worth claiming.

For now, I'll play the savior to Elaine and let the darkness wait for its turn.

It is patient—always has been.

Cutter

The chill of the undercover garage seeps into my bones as I lean back against the cracked leather seat of our nondescript van. The blacked-out windows offer us the anonymity we need. Sean fiddles with something on his wrist, probably a blade or some lock-pick gadget. Logan's eyes, sharp and calculating, don't miss a thing. Tyson stands by the sliding door, his face a mask of resolve that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"Remember..." I start, my voice steady as I fix my gaze on Tyson, "... you just get her down here. We will handle the rest."

Tyson nods, a rigid jerk of his head. "No complications," he says, though it sounds more like he's trying to convince himself than inform us.

"Carlotta Vaughn won't know what hit her," Sean adds, a dangerous glint in his eye.

With one last glance, Tyson steps out of the van and disappears into the belly of the building. The heavy door thuds closed behind him, and we're left in a silence that buzzes with anticipation.

"Does he really own this whole building?" Logan asks, and I nod at him. "Think he can pull it off?"

"He's got no choice," I reply. "He knows the stakes. It's personal for him, too, after what happened to Beathan."

“Revenge is a powerful motivator,” Sean muses, almost philosophically. But there’s an edge to his voice that speaks of blood and retribution.

“Tyson’s not one of us, though,” Logan points out, leaning closer to the window as if to see through the walls themselves. “You think he understands what needs to be done?”

“Doesn’t matter if he does,” I say, eyes on the van’s rearview mirror, where Tyson’s figure should reappear with Carlotta in tow any minute now. “He’ll play his part because he knows we’re not asking. We’re telling.”

“Damn right,” Sean says, a smirk pulling at his lips.

We settle into a watchful silence, each of us lost in our thoughts about the impending snatch. I can’t help but wonder how far Tyson will go when push comes to shove. Will he embrace the darkness needed to see this through? Or will he falter, a liability in our midst?

I shake off the doubt. Tyson is in this deep, and there’s no turning back now for any of us. And Carlotta Vaughn is about to learn that the hard way.

“Hey, Cutter,” Logan’s voice cuts through the silence. “How’s Elaine holding up?”

I can’t help but smile at the mention of her. Elaine is scared of everything but me, which is weird. When we are together, she seems relaxed, almost grateful to be in my presence.

“She’s good,” I say, the words rolling off my tongue like a tender caress. “Planning to cook something nice for dinner tonight.” As I speak of mundane domestic bliss, a part of me relishes the thought of making her happy and finding some normalcy.

But underneath, in the dark recesses of my mind where shadows play, I know I'm far from the average guy with a nine-to-five and a white picket fence dream. The thrill of the hunt and the taste of fear are addictions no sweet smile or warm meal can cure. I'm a wolf in sheep's clothing, and Elaine is the unsuspecting lamb I've taken under my wing. Yet, I want to believe I can be more for her.

Sean cocks his head, studying me with eyes that have seen too much. "You're different with her," he observes, a touch of surprise lacing his tone.

Logan smirks, shaking his head as if he's heard the funniest joke. "I don't get it, man. Why didn't we just off Elaine? She's a loose end."

My hand tightens on the steering wheel, and my knuckles go white. I snap, the friendly facade cracking. "Because Kyle said so," I growl, the name of our president carrying all the weight of an unchallengeable decree.

"Kyle's word is law," Sean says quickly, a hint of caution in his voice, recognizing the dangerous edge creeping into mine.

"Exactly," I affirm, clamping down on the rising aggression. Kyle made his call, and we fall in line. It's how our world works. "Besides," I add, my smile returning, hollow and cold, "Elaine's proven... useful."

"Useful's good," Logan concedes, leaning back against his seat.

"Useful keeps you breathing," I finish the thought, my gaze flickering back to the mirror.

The chatter in the van cuts short, a silent signal that something has shifted. Sean's hand comes down on my forearm with a muted thud, fingers pointing through the blacked-out window. I follow his gesture, and there they are—Tyson and

Carlotta—walking through the dimly lit garage. They're engrossed in conversation, her hands move with each word, painting the air with her seriousness. Yet, her eyes don't flicker with suspicion or fear. She's clueless about the trap she's sauntering into.

"Showtime," I mutter under my breath, an anticipatory shiver running down my spine as I watch them draw nearer.

Logan is already moving. The door swings open with a smoothness that belies our tension, an unspoken command rippling through us. We fall into our roles—Sean slips out of the van just as Tyson nudges Carlotta toward him. She stumbles slightly, confusion blooming across her features for a mere second before Sean's arms clamp around her, securing her from escape.

"Sorry, love," Logan says, though his voice is void of any remorse.

From over Sean's shoulder, Logan presses a rag damp with chloroform against her mouth and nose. Carlotta's muffled gasp is the last bit of resistance she offers before her body goes slack in Sean's hold. Together, they hoist her into the back of the van as though they've done it a thousand times.

"Neat and tidy," Logan grunts as he slams the van door shut, sealing Carlotta inside our darkened world.

Sean gestures to the security cameras in the garage. "What about those?"

"Disabled for a maintenance check. They'll come back on in another hour."

Sean cocks his head to the side and raises his eyebrows. "No one will suspect foul play?"

“No. I’m the boss, and I asked them to do a sweep. It’s something I do from time to time. We’re good. It’s normal.”

Tyson brushes a hand against the van’s cold metal frame. He locks eyes with me, a silent plea etched into his rigid features.

“Don’t do anything to Carlotta until I’ve had a chance to talk to her.” His voice is steady but edged with an urgency that doesn’t quite mask the unfamiliar tremble beneath.

I hold his gaze for a moment longer than necessary, letting the weight of his request settle in the dense air between us. Then, I flash him a grin, all teeth and no humor. “You got it, Tyson,” I reply, the lie rolling off my tongue as smooth as velvet.

He nods, seemingly satisfied. The van door closes with a soft click, the finality of it echoing in the cramped space.

I watch him as he stands there, eyes cast down, lost in his thoughts. My grin fades, replaced by the familiar tightness that coils around my thoughts like barbed wire.

“I don’t take orders from a suit,” I murmur to the empty air, my voice laced with a venomous disdain that would have made Tyson’s blood run cold if he’d heard it. But he can’t hear me, and there’s only us—the predators and our prey, bound and unconscious in the belly of our beast.

The van rolls into motion, the engine’s growl a low purr against the symphony of New York’s chaos. In the rearview mirror, Tyson’s figure shrinks, one hand on his hip, the other rubbing the back of his neck—a universal sign of exasperation or maybe regret. He shakes his head as if to dispel an unpleasant thought and pivots back toward the building.

“Can we trust him?” My voice cuts through the rumble of the moving vehicle, eyes still locked on Tyson’s retreating form in the mirror.

Sean turns to look at me, his gaze steady and unflinching. “Yeah,” he answers with a nod, the lines of his face hardening like concrete. “She tried to kill Beathan. Tyson’s aware of the stakes.”

Satisfied, I spin the wheel and steer us further into the maze of the city’s heart.

Logan’s hands are methodical and precise, looping rope and zip ties around Carlotta Vaughn’s wrists with practiced ease. She’s in her fifties, but her appearance speaks of meticulous self-care—manicure flawless, makeup impeccable despite the disarray of our actions. Logan’s movements betray no recognition of her dignity—she is just another job to carry out.

Her eyelids flutter open as he secures the last knot, revealing the sudden alarm in her wide, startled eyes. Logan grins down at her like a predator baring teeth to its prey. He shoves a rag into her mouth, cutting off any chance of a scream, sealing it with tape that stretches into a cruel imitation of a smile across her face.

“Shouldn’t have gone after the kid,” I say, my voice flat, detached from the reality of the woman bound and gagged before me.

Logan pulls a hood over her head, casting her world into darkness.

Our mission is clear—revenge is not just an action but a statement. And for Carlotta Vaughn, it’s one she’ll hear loud and clear.

The dust behind the van swirls like dirty ghosts as we pull into our usual spot, a godforsaken patch of land that’s far enough from prying eyes. It’s wrapped in silence, save for the occasional hoot of an owl or the rustle of wind through the scrub brush.

We're miles from anywhere, the perfect place to party or to get rid of problems like Carlotta Vaughn.

Sean's the first one out, slamming the van door with a finality that sounds louder than it should. Logan follows, both of them striding with purpose toward the back doors. They fling them open and haul Carlotta out like she's no more than a sack of feed. Logan pulls off the hood, and she winces as her eyes adjust to the light. Then her eyes go wide, darting from the pit to us, the terror plain to see.

"Easy," I say, stepping out and stretching my legs. "You're going in the hole, Carlotta. Best remember to bend your knees when we drop you, or it'll hurt something fierce." My words are casual as if I'm giving advice on how to jump into a swimming pool instead of a grave.

She's shaking uncontrollably, whether from fear or cold. I don't care. With a flick of my wrist, I unsheathe my knife. The blade glints briefly before I slice through her bonds, freeing her limbs but leaving the gag firmly in place. A muffled whimper escapes her, and I can almost taste the sweet tang of her desperation.

Logan and Sean each take an arm, their grips ironclad. On a silent count, they hoist her backward, letting go at just the right moment. She falls, her body twisting in a feeble attempt to follow my advice. There's a dull splash as she hits the bottom.

We stand there, listening. After a moment that stretches too long, her cries bubble up from the darkness below, muffled but frantic.

"Shout all you want," I call down, leaning over the edge with a grin. "No one's around to hear you." I let out an evil chuckle, rich with mockery. "Oh, and watch out for the rats."

The sound of her sobs rises, tinged with hysteria now. There aren't any rats, but the

fear of them will gnaw at her just the same. Fear is a funny thing—it doesn't always need to be real to do its damage.

We turn our backs on the pit, the distant whimpers fading as we stroll toward the building where the rest of the club throws down. The gravel crunches under my boots, a satisfying sound that matches the rhythm of my heart.

“Rats?” Sean’s voice cuts through the stillness, his eyebrow cocked in my direction.

I chuckle and shrug, letting the lie sit comfortably between us. “No rats. But let her mind play tricks on her in the dark. She deserves it for taking Beathan.” My words are cold, the truth in them colder still.

Sean’s lips pull into a tight line, but he nods, understanding the game. His woman, Beth, could have been hurt when Carlotta’s men took the boy. It’s an unspoken rule—an eye for an eye.

The three of us step into the building’s warmth. It’s another world in here when the MC is partying, one where Carlotta’s pleas don’t exist, the rules are different, and loyalty to the brotherhood is everything. Kyle will be out here after dark, and then Carlotta’s fate will be sealed.

As I make my way to the bar, the thought of Elaine creeps into my head. I wonder what she’ll have on the stove when I get back. Her cooking is a comfort, no matter the chaos of the day.

But as I sink onto a barstool, the image of Carlotta shaking and terrified at the edge of the pit doesn’t even flicker in my mind. There’s no room for sympathy, not for her when she crossed the line. I take a long swig of my beer, feeling the cool liquid slide down my throat, washing away any lingering traces of the evening’s dirty work.

Yeah, whatever Elaine has got cooking will hit the spot because out here, in this life, you can't afford to care too much. That's how you survive. That's how you keep ruling the roost with an iron fist and a heart just as hard.

And me?

I've got demons aplenty to make sure it stays that way.

Kyle

Leaning against the cold steel of my bike, thoughts of Annette hijack my mind. She's back now, dragging memories of Lochlan along like shadows clinging to her heels. And she's not alone, not since Beathan came into this world with his father's defiant chin and a laugh too pure for the likes of us.

The kid got snatched because some goons got it twisted, thinking he was Tyson Reed's offspring. Tyson, who took them in and gave them a penthouse view of New York, is in love with Annette. He's admitted it to us. But does she love him? That's the million-dollar question, isn't it?

But Beathan... he's innocent in all this, a pawn. And I swear on Lochlan's grave, I'll burn the whole damn world down before I let that kid get caught in the crossfire again.

This place is used for two things—partying and disposing of enemies. There's a woman in the pit—Carlotta Vaughn, Tyson's ex-lawyer turned thief and kidnapper. I can't see her in the twilight as I peer into the pit. It is an old well with enough water in it so you can't sit and deep enough so climbing out is almost impossible, but I know she's trembling down there in the dirty water, her designer clothes now nothing more than rags clinging to her.

I can't help but let my thoughts drift to her treachery. She skimmed off Tyson's millions with a lawyer's precision, thinking she'd never get caught. But when Tyson played his retirement card, planning to hand his empire over to some corporate suits, Carlotta panicked. She figured a dead boy would stop it all and keep her secret safe.

It's a cold move, even by our standards.

Sean moves to stand next to me, his gaze hard and unforgiving. He's always been the one to remind me that justice in our world isn't blind—it's an eye for an eye. Cutter stands a few paces away, flicking a knife open and closed in a rhythm that syncs with my irritated heartbeat. The man's got a reputation that makes grown men cross the street, but he's loyal to the bone.

And then there's Logan, the kid I'm trying to mold into something more than what this life usually offers. He's got that fire, but it needs direction. He watches from the shadows, silent, learning how this world turns, maybe pondering his place in it.

"Should have known better than to snatch a kid," Cutter grumbles, almost to himself. "Especially one of ours."

I nod, my mind already made up about Carlotta's fate for Beathan, Annette, and the code we live by. She played a dangerous game and lost. And the Loyal Rebels MC—we're not ones for giving second chances.

The sound of gravel in the distance and a car engine signals the arrival of Tyson Reed. Tension coils in my gut like barbed wire as I stand sentinel over the pit, its dark mouth open and waiting.

"Tyson's wheels," Cutter says, his voice a low growl.

I nod, my gaze sweeping over my brothers-in-arms. Sean's eyes are flinty with the resolve that comes from years of living by the Special Forces' and MC's code. Cutter's hand rests casually on the hilt of his knife, a silent testament to his deadly skills. And Logan, he stands apart, his youthful face a mask of determined calm. Each man here knows the weight of what's coming.

Tyson's car slides into view. Resolute steps carry me to the edge, and with a grunt, I heave the rope ladder down into Carlotta's makeshift cell.

"Up you come, Carlotta," I call, my voice hollow against the earthen walls.

Each creak of the ladder is a drumbeat to her doom. She emerges, once the picture of poise and professionalism now reduced to a disheveled mess, her designer clothes smeared with mud and defeat.

Tyson arrives at the pit as Carlotta stands, her fearful eyes searching each of us.

"Quite the fall from grace," Tyson observes, his tone flat.

"Grace has no place here," I reply. "Not after what she did."

Carlotta's eyes dart between us, searching for mercy where there is none to be found. It's in this pitiless tableau that Tyson must find his footing if he's to stand with us and protect Annette and Beathan. He needs to grasp the harsh realities of our world. This is not just about punishment but about survival, loyalty, and the relentless pursuit of justice as defined by the Loyal Rebels MC and the MacKenny family.

"Welcome to the family, Tyson," I say, clapping him on the shoulder as I try to lead him away from the pit, leaving Carlotta to reckon with the consequences of her greed and deception.

Tyson's brows knit together, a shadow of pity fleeting across his face before it hardens into something more unforgiving. His gaze locks on Carlotta, drilling into her like a cold, accusatory spotlight.

"Carlotta," he starts, the name seemingly tasting bitter from the twisted expression on his face. "Why? You had everything."

The words hang in the air, heavy and sharp. I watch closely, searching for any sign of weakness in Tyson's stance, any hint that the glittering world he comes from has softened him too much for our brand of justice.

He turns to me, and I brace myself for the plea for mercy, the clemency I'm sure he'll beg for on behalf of his once-faithful lawyer. But it doesn't come. Instead, there's a steeliness in his eyes that wasn't there before—a resolve that speaks of a man pushed beyond his limits.

“Kyle,” he says, his voice low and even. “What needs to be done?”

It takes me a moment to hide my surprise, to mask it with the cool indifference expected of a man in my position. A smirk tugs at the corner of my mouth, approval and respect mingling in the depths of my chest. Tyson Reed might just have what it takes, after all.

Carlotta's legs buckle as if the gravity of her betrayal finally weighs her down, and she crumples to her knees in the dirt. Mud cakes her once pristine suit, a stark contrast to the polished image she's always maintained. Desperation twists her features as she raises her eyes to Tyson.

“Tyson, please... you have to save me,” she pleads, her voice cracking with fear, hands clasped as though in prayer.

I glance at Tyson, expecting some flicker of hesitation, a crack in his resolve, but there's none. His face is stone, unreadable, and distant. I step forward, filling the silence that stretches between the three of us, my voice cutting through the tension like a knife.

“Fast or slow?” I ask, keeping my tone neutral, almost bored.

Carlotta's eyes dart between us, confusion etched on her brow. "What does that mean?" she whispers, hope and dread mingling in her voice.

"Fast," Tyson replies without missing a beat, his gaze never leaving her dirt-streaked face. There's no warmth there, none of the camaraderie that must have existed between them once upon a time. It's just a cold, hard reality. "We worked well together, Carlotta. At one point, I thought you were a friend. But what you did..." His voice trails off, disgust replacing the pity I saw moments ago.

The finality in his tone says it all. This is a man who knows the cost of betrayal and understands the harshness of our world. I can see now that he's prepared to pay the price and do what's necessary. He's one of us, whether he likes it or not.

I sling my arm around Tyson's shoulder, the fabric of his coat rough under my palm. He stands rigid as a statue, his eyes still on Carlotta, where she cowers in the dirt. Her pleas spiral into a crescendo, "Tyson, please!" But we're already turning our backs, walking away from the broken figure and her desperate cries.

"Save me, Tyson!" she screams, her voice cracking with terror.

The two of us stride toward the clubhouse, the heavy thud of our boots a grim drumbeat against the gravel. As we reach the door, I pull it open and usher Tyson inside. The moment it closes behind us, an eerie silence swallows Carlotta's wails. We're enveloped by the dimly lit warmth of the building, the stench of spilled whiskey and cigarette smoke comforting in its familiarity.

I know without looking that Cutter is doing what needs to be done—swiftly like Tyson wanted. Sean and Logan will handle the rest, ensuring no trace of Carlotta is left to mar the earth of Loyal Rebels' territory. They're good soldiers, loyal, and they understand the stakes better than most.

“Drink?” I offer, moving behind the bar and grabbing a bottle of bourbon—the good stuff reserved for occasions that need forgetting or celebrating. It’s hard to tell which this is.

Without a word, Tyson nods, his hand trembling ever so slightly as he takes the glass I slide toward him. He knocks it back in one gulp, the liquid fire undoubtedly scorching a path down his throat. His face remains impassive, but his eyes are haunted.

A while later, the door opens again, admitting Sean and Logan back into the sanctuary of the clubhouse. Their expressions are somber, yet there’s relief there too. It’s done.

“Remember...” I say, locking eyes with Tyson, who is nursing his second drink, “... you never breathe a word of what happened here tonight. The MC looks after its own. Annette and Beathan will always have our protection. And now you... you’re part of this family.” My voice is low, infused with the weight of the unspoken oath between us.

He looks up at me, shadows playing across his face as he nods. “I understand,” he says, and there’s steel in those words, a newfound resolve that tells me he means them.

Tyson’s nod is slow and deliberate, his jaw is set as though he’s absorbing the gravity of his new reality. The silence in the room feels heavy like it’s soaked up the echoes of Carlotta’s last pleas. I watch him closely, gauging his response to the unspoken covenant he’s just entered into with us.

“Good to hear,” Cutter suddenly chimes in, his voice slicing through the tension as he strolls into the room. “Because I really didn’t want to have to dig another hole tonight.” His laugh rumbles low in his chest, dark humor glinting in his eyes that

doesn't quite reach the rest of his face.

The mood shifts as if Cutter flipped a switch. A collective exhale rolls through the room as Sean and Logan crack grins, the grim atmosphere dissipating. Even Tyson's lips twitch, a reluctant smile acknowledging the absurdity and the camaraderie in Cutter's words.

"Man's got a point," Sean adds with a chuckle, clapping Tyson on the shoulder.

I can't help but join in the laughter, albeit mine is more subdued. My gaze finds Cutter again, and I'm hit with an unsettling mix of respect and concern for the man. Something about him has always been untamed, a ferocity that Elaine might just be the key to softening.

Elaine. I almost lose my smile thinking about her. That woman has been through hell and back, and I'm not sure I've done her a kindness by pairing her with Cutter. It's a gamble keeping them together, but sometimes the broken pieces fit in a way that whole ones never could. Maybe they'll find a kind of healing in each other that neither could achieve alone. It's a hope—faint, but there.

"All right, enough of this sentimental crap," Cutter says, breaking into my thoughts. "Let's get back to business."

We all nod, the laughter fading, but the sense of unity remains. Tyson still has that half-smile lingering as he puts down his empty glass. It's clear he's seen a side of our world that can't be unseen, but instead of running, he's standing with us, bound by blood-soaked loyalty.

"Welcome to the family," I say again, and the phrase rings true this time. Tyson is one of us now, for better or worse.

One by one, the men rise from their seats. Sean claps a hand on Tyson's shoulder with a brotherly firmness that speaks volumes. Logan lingers by the door, his prospect patch worn like a badge of survival rather than mere affiliation.

Cutter stands, the joke still smoldering in his eyes, but the twitch of his scarred knuckles and the restless shadow that dances across his face tell me he's ready to step back into the darkness where he thrives. There's a quiet understanding between us—maybe even respect—for the monsters we've both learned to harness in the name of loyalty and necessity.

"Take care, brothers," I say, my voice low but carrying through the now-silent room. They nod, each carrying the weight of what's transpired tonight, the gravity of our shared secret binding us tighter than any spoken oath.

Tyson pauses at the threshold, glancing back at me with a complexity in his eyes that wasn't there before—acknowledgment, gratitude, maybe the stirrings of kinship. He's crossed into our world, and there's no stepping back. I nod to him, affirming his new place in this chaotic family.

With heavy boots thudding against the wooden floor, they leave the room, their silhouettes swallowed by the night outside. The door swings shut behind them, leaving only silence.

And then it's just me, alone in the cavernous space that has played host to countless celebrations and secrets. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, the sound eerily loud. My fingers trail over the scarred surfaces, the residue of revelry and reckoning alike.

I slowly walk to the switchboard, feeling the ghosts of a thousand memories whispering around me. This building, our sanctuary and council chamber, stands as a testament to the lives we've led—gritty, raw, but ours.

My hand hovers over the switches snuffed out with a flick. One by one, the bulbs die, their filaments cooling until all that's left is the faint glow of embers in the air.

Finally, the last switch clicks down, and darkness floods the room, save for the sliver of moonlight that slides through the window. In this stillness, I can almost hear the echo of Carlotta's pleas, the ghost of her screams.

I take a moment, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness, feeling the mantle of leadership settle heavily on my shoulders.

Turning, I stride toward the door, my hand finding the cool metal knob. I give it one final glance, the outlines of tables and chairs blurred shadows in the dimness, and then I step out, pulling the door closed behind me with a definitive thud.

The lock clicks into place, sealing away the night's deeds. Standing here, bound by blood and secrets, the brotherhood of the Loyal Rebels MC wraps around me like a cloak.

Whatever comes next, we'll face it together.

Cutter

The rumble of my Harley cuts through the stillness of the industrial part of town as I ride to Elaine's place. The old factory buildings hollowed out and graffitied stand like tombstones, marking the death of a more prosperous time. It's fitting in a morbid sort of way—Elaine's family home nestled among them, a mausoleum to her past sufferings.

She didn't want to come back here. I can't blame her. The house is filled with memories of her parents—they were cold, unyielding people from the little she's told me. Even while they lived, she might as well have been a ghost haunting the attic of that decrepit house. But it's hers now, free and clear, and it seems stupid not to use it.

I throttle down, feeling the vibration of the bike between my legs. The thought of Elaine up there in that attic stirs something wild in me—a primal need. I want more for her than just survival—more than my cramped room at the MC clubhouse, where privacy is a joke, and every moan could be ammunition for the guys' next round of ribbing.

Here, in this desolate place, no one will hear us. No one will interrupt.

As I near her house, my thoughts take a darker turn, edging toward the carnal. I think about the last time I saw her, the curve of her hip as she leaned over that rickety table in her attic. There's an itch in me to explore those curves with rough hands—to map out the territory of her body that's been hidden beneath layers of fabric.

I imagine tying her hands with my belt, rendering her helpless under my touch. My

mind sketches the image of her looking up at me with those big doe eyes, filled with trust and something fiercer—need. The thought of her submitting to my desires, letting me push her boundaries in search of new peaks of pleasure, is intoxicating.

I can almost feel the softness of her skin, the heat of her breath as she whimpers my name, a mixture of pleasure and desperation. The anticipation coils tight in my gut. I'm going to show her things she's never felt before, sensations that will make her forget every harsh word, every cold shoulder her parents ever gave her.

Yeah, I'm going to make damn sure Elaine knows she's wanted and desired, not just by anyone, but by me. Cutter. The man who will tear down her walls and build her back up, piece by screaming piece.

I kill the engine, the last growl of my Harley fading into the dusk. My boots hit the gravel with a satisfying crunch, and I can't wipe this stupid grin off my face as I swing my leg over the bike. I'm buzzed with anticipation, my blood singing with the thoughts of what's to come.

The back door to Elaine's inherited hellhole creaks like a dying man as I push it open. The stench of dog pee is like a slap across the face, and I wrinkle my nose, cursing under my breath. My eyes scan the graffiti-marred walls—tags from local gangs trying to mark territory that no one really wants. It's a dump, but it's where she's sheltered herself away from the world.

"Fuck me," I mutter, my vision already slicing through the grime and seeing potential.

I imagine the walls cleaned up, maybe painted in some warm color that'll make her feel safe, a couch here, a rug there, hell, maybe even some curtains. It won't be the Ritz, but it'll be miles from this shithole. It'll be ours—a place where she doesn't have to hide in the shadows but lives like a normal person in her childhood home.

Elaine isn't going to be an attic rat forever , I vow to myself.

As I tread through the filth, the sound of my boots echoes in the darkness. At the foot of the attic steps, I pause, reaching up to pull down the creaky fold-out ladder. It descends with a groan, dust motes dancing in the air like tiny specters.

“Elaine! Baby, it’s me!” My voice is rough but warm, carrying enough to let her know who’s coming up and the endearment so she doesn’t get scared.

She’s had enough fear in her life. The thought tightens something in my chest, a protective instinct that has nothing to do with the club or its rules.

Each rung brings me closer to her, the woman who has unwittingly become the center of my fucking universe. The attic is a stark contrast to the dereliction below—cleaner, lived-in, with the smell of simmering food hitting me in the best way. My stomach growls, reminding me I skipped lunch.

“Smells good up here,” I say as I spot Elaine hunched over a small hot plate, her focus on the pot before her.

Moving in close behind her, my hands find the curve of her hips with familiar ease. She stiffens under my touch, and I can feel the coil of tension in her body. But I let it slide, my curiosity piqued by what’s cooking. Leaning around her, I peer into the bubbling mixture.

“Whatcha got there? Dog or cat?” I tease, trying to draw a lighter mood from the heavy air.

She chuckles, a sound that seems too rare coming from her, and shakes her head, dismissing the absurdity with the grace of someone who is used to worse jokes than mine. “Neither, smart-ass.”

For a moment, I really look at her, seeing beyond the shadows of this place she's made her refuge. The laughter softens her face, lighting up her eyes, and damn, if she isn't beautiful. It's like I'm seeing her clearly for the first time since that night at the clubhouse all those months ago—the memory of her pressed against me, warm and alive, flooding back, and it's all I can do not to pull her into my arms right then and there. But I don't because this is Elaine's safe space, and I'm just a visitor. At least for now.

The scent of the stew seems to thicken the air as Elaine's hands move automatically, ladling the hearty mix into a bowl. I watch her closely. She's got this delicate way about her that belies the strength I've seen flash in her eyes from time to time.

“Been busy today?” Elaine asks casually.

Leaning back against the counter's edge, I cross my arms. “Had to deal with some scum threatening the MacKennys' stability.”

Her hand jerks slightly, sending a small splash of broth over the bowl's rim. The stew pools on the worn wooden floorboards, but she doesn't seem to notice, her eyes wide and fixed on me, the spoon clattering against the ceramic. The tremble in her fingers doesn't escape my attention—fear has a scent, and it's starting to mingle with the aroma of her cooking.

“Hey,” I say, my voice low and steady as I step closer, trying to reassure her without spooking her further. “You don't need to worry about that. You're safe here with me.” I lock eyes with her, trying to impart the certainty I feel. “Kyle made it clear you're under our protection.”

I mean every word. Psychotic tendencies aside, I'm a man of my word, a follower of orders. And when Kyle, our president, lays down the law, you can bet your last bullet I'll follow through. No harm will come to Elaine while she's with me, not by my

hand or anyone else's. It's an unspoken promise that is as solid as the iron of my Harley.

"Understand?" I ask, searching her face for any sign that she believes me.

Elaine's chest rises and falls as she attempts to steady her breathing, her eyes still locked onto mine. She nods at my words, a fragile attempt at composure. I can tell by the taut line of her shoulders and how her fingers grip the table's edge that she's fighting a battle within herself. It's a struggle I know too well but for different reasons.

"Look at me, Elaine," I coax gently, softer than most would ever hear from Cutter, the psycho. "I'm here now, ain't nothin' gonna happen to you."

She looks up at me, her gaze skittering over my face before settling on my eyes. There's a vulnerability there that tugs at something deep in my gut. I've seen fear before, witnessed it on countless faces, but this is different. This is personal.

"Really?" Her voice is small, almost lost.

"Really." My affirmation is a gravelly promise.

Elaine's lips part as if to speak again, but instead, she takes a step forward. Her movement is hesitant, her hand lifting slowly as if unsure of its destination, until it lands lightly on my cheek. The touch is a whisper against my skin, warm and tentative.

"Thank you, Cutter," she murmurs so quietly it could be mistaken for the sigh of the wind. "Your words mean more than you know."

I freeze, not from fear or surprise, but from the unexpected surge of protectiveness

that floods through me at her touch. It's a sensation I'm unaccustomed to that doesn't fit with the man I see staring back at me in the mirror every day.

"Anytime..." I manage to say, but my voice trails off as I realize she's close enough to feel her breath against my face.

"Anyway," Elaine starts, pulling back ever so slightly, her cheeks flushed with mixed emotions. "I-I was trying a new recipe today... thought you might like it. The attic isn't the best place to try new things, but I added some basil to the stew. I've never used it before, but I think it adds something—"

Her words tumble out in a nervous torrent, each sentence overlapping the next as she babbles about finding an old cookbook buried beneath some boxes, about the challenge of cooking on the hot plate, about anything and everything except the tension that zings between us like live wires.

I could listen to her babble all day, finding comfort in the normalcy of her chatter. It's a stark contrast to the violence and chaos that usually fill my days, and it makes the stew simmering on the hot plate seem like a banquet fit for a king.

"It's perfect," I say, finally breaking into her monologue, my voice rough with sincerity. "Just like you."

The bowl clinks softly against the wooden surface as I set it aside, my hands now free to frame the softness of Elaine's face. Our lips meet, and something electric charges through the space between us, igniting a fire I hadn't realized was simmering just beneath my skin. She trembles at first, but then, as if a switch has been flipped, she melts into me, her fear dissolving into a heated urgency that mirrors mine.

Rising from my seat, I pull her up with me, our kiss unbroken, fervent, a dance of tongues and teeth and everything unsaid. My fingers find the hem of her tank top,

tugging the worn cotton upward in one swift motion. It floats to the floor, forgotten, as we become a tangle of limbs and need.

As my lips meet hers, a rush of warmth floods through me, igniting every nerve in my body. Her breath mingles with mine, a delicate dance of desire and anticipation that sends shivers down my spine. I feel the softness of her lips, the gentle yet firm pressure as we draw closer, our bodies instinctively leaning in, craving more.

Time seems to slow, each second stretching into eternity as we savor the sweetness of this kiss that speaks volumes without a word. Her scent envelops me, intoxicating and familiar, filling my senses with an overwhelming need. I can taste the faint hint of her favorite lip balm—there is much I crave to discover about her.

Our lips move in perfect harmony, exploring, teasing, and deepening the kiss with a fervor that leaves me breathless. My hands slide back up to cradle her face, my fingers tangling in her hair, pulling her closer as if to fuse us. I feel her hands on my chest, gripping my shirt, her touch setting my skin on fire even through the fabric.

Her small sighs and gasps send waves of pleasure through me, urging me to kiss her deeper, harder. The world around us fades away until the two of us are lost in this moment of pure, unfiltered passion.

I can feel the intensity building between us, a magnetic pull that I can't resist, nor do I want to. This kiss is more than just a physical act but an expression of everything we feel, everything we are. And as our lips finally part, leaving us breathless and wanting more, I rest my forehead to hers. Elaine smiles. Our bodies come together with a primal intensity, every touch stoking the flames higher. I worship at the altar of her skin, tracing every curve and line until she's gasping, clinging to me like I'm the only solid thing in a spinning world.

Elaine walks backward, pulling me with her. We crash onto the bed, Elaine

underneath me, her breaths coming fast and ragged. Heat pools inside me as I hook my finger under her bra's lace, dragging it aside with a roughness that's all too familiar. Her nipple, ripe and inviting, finds its way between my lips. My tongue rolls over the delicate peak, coaxing it to hardness, feeling it pucker and pebble, a sweet contrast to the softness everywhere else.

"Ah, Cutter," she gasps, her hands tangling in my hair, urging me on without words.

Her encouragement is fuel, stoking the fire within me, and I obey, trailing kisses laced with hunger down her body.

Reaching her waistband, my fingers work with eager impatience, unbuttoning her jeans. I peel away the denim and cotton barrier, revealing her, laid bare and beautiful, trimmed to perfection. My gaze lingers there, soaking in the sight of her pussy, the thrill of discovery never growing old. A wicked smirk stretches across my face as she arches up to meet me, a silent plea written in the arch of her spine.

"Beautiful," I murmur, more to myself than to her, admiring the view that only I can see.

I press my palm against her chest, pinning her to the mattress with a firmness that's a command and a caress. My smile is all dark edges as I slide down her body, settling myself between her thighs.

"Please, Cutter," she breathes out, and it's music to my ears, a symphony of desire and anticipation. Her plea is all the permission I need.

My mouth descends, my tongue drawing a lazy path until I find that sweet spot. Her cry fills the room when I flick over her clit, the sound raw and unfiltered. Her fingers tangle fiercely in my hair, holding me where she needs me most. But this isn't about control—not tonight. This is about giving, about taking every moan and turning it

into a fire.

For once, the thought of pleasing her consumes me. The old Cutter would've taken what he wanted, satisfaction his only goal. But Kyle's words echo in my mind, molding my actions. "Keep Elaine happy," he'd said, and I finally understand why. With every pull of my mouth and stroke of my tongue, I'm not just following orders—I'm rewriting the man I am.

And as Elaine shivers beneath me, her grip on my hair a lifeline, I know I'm doing more than leaving her breathless. I'm shifting the balance between us, finding pleasure in her pleasure, something I never thought I'd crave. Kyle was right. Keeping Elaine happy might just be the key to a life I never dared to imagine for myself.

Elaine's body trembles, a quake that ripples through her from the inside out. Her shivers rake through her, and her moans of pleasure make me harder. Elaine is coming undone beneath me, and I'm the one who has unraveled her.

Rising urgency takes over, stripping away clothes. The T-shirt is tossed to a forgotten corner, and boots are kicked away with a thud that mirrors my racing heartbeat. Jeans and boxers—useless barriers—are next, discarded in a heap of denim and restraint. Now it's bare skin against skin, with nothing between us but the heat we're generating. Agonizingly slowly, I push into her. Every inch I claim is a new discovery I'm conquering, not by force but by invitation. She's tight around me, heat, silk, and everything a man could drown in willingly. Then, I move faster and harder, the way I know how, the way I've always known, but only this time, it's different. This time, it's not just about taking but about giving back every ounce of pleasure she wrings from me.

Elaine meets me thrust for thrust, her nails digging crescents into my back. Each mark she carves is a wordless declaration that she's here, feeling every bit of this and

as lost in the sensation as I am. Her legs wrap around me, pulling me deeper, urging me on without a single spoken plea. She's taking all of me, and in this moment, I'm not Cutter the ruthless, Cutter the cold—I'm just a man driven by something more than need.

Her eyes are wide open, locked onto mine, with a hunger there that mirrors mine. We're two halves of a shared madness, spiraling together toward something neither of us has known before, something that feels dangerously close to a connection, to wholeness. As I pump into her and feel her clenching around me, I realize that maybe, just maybe, there's more to this life than the ride-or-die creed I've lived by. Maybe there's room for something like this—wild, raw, and unexpectedly tender.

Locking eyes with Elaine, the intensity of our connection refuses to waver even as I'm teetering on the brink. The release comes like a tidal wave, and in its wake, a thought that's both terrifying and exhilarating washes over me—I could have a life with this woman, something real and lasting.

“Elaine,” I gasp, my breath ragged, muscles quivering.

My gaze never leaves hers. It's as though she's anchoring me to this moment, to the possibility of a future I'd never dared to envision. She's not just another warm body, another conquest. She's the calm at the center of my chaos.

The tremors of pleasure begin to subside, and I'm suddenly aware of every point where our bodies are joined and her warmth envelopes me. Gently, I roll off her, taking care not to crush her with my weight. I lay there beside her, our sweat-slicked skin barely touching, and the vulnerability I've always guarded against threatens to break through.

“Are you okay?” I ask, my voice rough with emotion. “Was it... was it good for you?” My heart thuds erratically, uncertain but needing to know she felt even a

fraction of what shook me to the core.

Elaine turns to face me, her expression soft, eyes glistening with a sheen of satisfaction. “It was so good,” she whispers, a smile curving her lips, and I can feel the sincerity of her words wrapping around me.

Relief floods through me, soothing the raw edges inside. Her hand reaches out, fingertips tenderly tracing the line of my jaw, and I lean into her touch. It’s strange, this gentleness between us, but it’s a strangeness I want to get used to.

“Good,” I murmur, closing my eyes for a moment. When I open them again, the world hasn’t shattered. It’s still just us here together, wrapped up in the aftermath of something that feels a lot like hope.

The world feels silent except for our mingled breaths, and I let the stillness wash over me. The warmth of Elaine’s body beside me is a strange comfort I’m not used to feeling. Kyle’s words echo in my head, his belief that I could be more than what I am and could find some kind of good with Elaine. Maybe the bastard is right.

“Elaine,” I start, propping myself on one elbow to look at her. Her hair fans out on the pillow, a dark contrast to the pale sheets. “There’s someone I want you to meet.” It’s a simple sentence, but it feels like I’m crossing into new territory.

“Who?” she asks, curiosity lighting up her features.

“Do you remember Charlotte?” Her name stirs a protectiveness in me. Charlotte, with her laughter that’s too loud and her love for coffee, and who sees the world through the wonder-filled eyes of a child. “She’s... special to me. Like the sister I never had.”

Elaine sits up, wrapping the sheet around her. “I remember her. I’d like that, Cutter. When?”

“Tomorrow morning? At Baked Goodness.” My voice is uncertain, a rarity, but this matters. Charlotte matters, and so does Elaine’s opinion of her.

“Then it’s a date.” She nods, her smile genuine, and something inside me eases. “If it’s important to you, then it’s important to me too.”

As she agrees, I feel a flicker of something unfamiliar. I pull her close again, breathing in the scent of her hair, letting myself believe, just for a moment, that things can be different.

This woman, Elaine, she’s broken and soft in all the right places. And I find myself thinking maybe I could be happy with her. Well, as happy as a guy like me can get.

Almost happy.

For a psycho.

“Elaine...” I say, my voice low and steady with conviction, “... you belong to me now. And I’m gonna keep you safe. Always .”

The rumble of my Harley cuts through the morning air, a deep, comforting growl that’s music to my ears. Elaine clings to me from behind, her arms wrapped around my waist. She’s new to this world—the world of leather jackets and brotherhood, loyalty and rebellion. Today, she’s getting a taste of the family side of it.

We pull up in front of Baked Goodness, the scent of fresh pastry mingling with my bike’s exhaust. I cut the engine, relishing the sudden quiet, save for the distant town sounds and the soft chatter from inside the bakery. Isabelle owns the place, her connection to the club solidified through Jamie, Kyle’s brother. A sense of pride swells in my chest, knowing we’re all intertwined, part of something bigger than ourselves.

What I'm asking of Elaine is no small thing for me. There are parts of my life I don't share with anyone. Charlotte is more than just a friend, she's family. She sees straight past the ink on my skin and the scars I carry right into my heart. To her, I'm not Cutter, the man who has seen and done too much. I'm just me.

The familiar scent of fresh pastries wafts through the air, but before I can fully appreciate it, a blur of excitement bursts from the bakery's doorway.

"Charlotte!" I call out, barely getting the words out before she's upon us, her feet barely touching the ground as she skips forward.

But then she stops dead, her joy faltering into a heart-tugging frown as she catches sight of Elaine standing next to my bike.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I ask, concern etching my voice as I swing my leg over the bike and reach out to put an arm around Elaine.

"Nothing," Charlotte says, her voice small, not convincing me in the least. I know that look—it's the fear of change, the worry of being replaced. And my chest tightens because nobody can replace my Char.

"Come here." I move away from Elaine and open my arms.

After a hesitant second, she steps into them. I pull her close, wrapping her up in a hug that I hope conveys everything words can't. She's important and irreplaceable, no matter who else comes into my life. She holds a piece of my heart that's hers alone.

"Missed you, Cutter," she mumbles against my leather jacket.

"Missed you more, Char," I say, letting the truth resonate between us.

Charlotte steps back, her eyes flicking between Elaine and me, a wrinkle of confusion creasing her brow. “Who’s she?”

I reach for Charlotte’s hand and squeeze gently. “Do you remember Elaine? You and she met at a party at the clubhouse,” I say, trying to keep my tone even and reassuring. “She’s my girlfriend.” Her hand trembles in mine, but I hold on tight. “But you know you’re my special girl, right, Char? No one can ever take your place. We’re friends, always.” The words are a promise, an unbreakable vow etched deep in the marrow of my bones.

Elaine shifts beside me, her gaze softening as she looks at Charlotte. She reaches out, her hand brushing against Charlotte’s free one. “Can I be your friend too?” Elaine’s voice is tentative, almost shy.

Charlotte’s eyes widen, searching Elaine’s face for sincerity. Then, slowly, a smile starts to bloom, tentative at first but growing stronger until it’s the Charlotte smile I know so well—the one that could light up the darkest corners of any soul.

My heart swells, relief flooding through me like a dam burst open. Watching them together, it feels like a weight has been lifted. They might come from different parts of my life, but here they stand, their hands linked, and I can’t help but think this is how it’s meant to be.

“Friends,” Charlotte echoes, her voice laced with newfound warmth, and I feel like I’ve just won more than any jackpot could ever give me.

Charlotte releases my hand and turns toward Elaine, their fingers intertwining with the ease of old friends rather than two people who hardly know each other. There’s no hesitation in Charlotte’s step as she leads Elaine toward the bakery’s entrance, her shoulders squared with a sense of purpose.

“Elaine, how do you like your coffee?” Charlotte asks, her voice brimming with pride and enthusiasm.

I trail behind them, watching as Elaine responds with a smile that matches Charlotte’s in its brightness.

“I love a good latte. Extra foam, if you can manage that,” Elaine replies, playing into Charlotte’s expertise.

“Extra foam, coming right up!” Charlotte declares, pushing open the door to Baked Goodness with a flourish. The bell above chimes, announcing our entry to Isabelle, who looks up from the counter where she’s arranging a selection of pastries.

“Isabelle, this is Elaine,” Charlotte announces, tugging Elaine forward into the warm bakery. “My new friend and Cutter’s girlfriend.”

Isabelle’s eyes flicker to me for a brief second before she steps around the counter, her apron dusted with the evidence of her craft. She extends her hand to Elaine, a genuine smile lighting up her features.

“Welcome to Baked Goodness, Elaine. It’s great to meet you.” Isabelle’s welcome carries the weight of family and community—the same feeling that permeates the very walls of this place.

The scent of freshly baked bread and the sound of laughter fill the bakery as I lean against the wall, my arms crossed over my chest. Watching Elaine fit into this world, my world, with such ease, it’s like watching the last piece of a puzzle click into place. The Loyal Rebels, my brothers, have always been my anchor, but something about today makes everything feel more complete.

Elaine’s smile is infectious, her laughter mingling with Charlotte’s bubbly chatter and

Isabelle's welcoming tone. A warmth spreads through me that has nothing to do with the warmer weather creeping in from outside. It's a sense of belonging and home that's been elusive for so long. Right here, with these people, I'm not just Cutter of the Loyal Rebels, I'm a man with a life that's finally shaping up to be about more than just the next ride or fight.

The bell above the door chimes again, a familiar soundtrack to the bakery's daily rhythm, and I turn to see Annette step in, her hand gripping Beathan's tiny fingers. Tyson follows, his broad shoulders filling the doorway. His eyes meet mine, and he nods at me with a grin.

"Hey there, Cutter," Tyson calls out, his voice a deep rumble that cuts through the soft hum of conversations. "What brings you into Baked Goodness?"

"Tyson," I reply, pushing off from the wall to greet him with a clasp on the shoulder. There's an unspoken understanding between us—another thread in the web of connections that makes this life what it is. "Just bringing in my girlfriend, Elaine, to meet Charlotte." I glance at Elaine, who is now chatting animatedly with Charlotte as they beam at Isabelle.

"Girlfriend?" Tyson asks.

"Yep."

He looks from me to Elaine and back again. "I thought she was..." Tyson doesn't finish his sentence.

Knowing what he means, I say, "She was, but she's mine now."

Tyson looks surprised, but his attention moves to Charlotte as she walks toward us, a steaming cup in her hand and a mischievous glint in her eyes. The warm scent of

caramel and vanilla drifts toward me before she even reaches us. Everyone's eyes flicker with curiosity as she sets the mug on the table next to me. It looks like it belongs at a kids' birthday party rather than in the calloused hands of a man more accustomed to the rawness of the road.

"Here you go, Cutter," she says, her voice bubbling with pride. "Your extra-special caramel macchiato with whipped cream and rainbow sprinkles, just how you like it."

A gentle ribbing rises from the crowd within Baked Goodness, a mix of surprise and amusement. My cheeks heat up, betraying a rare moment of vulnerability as I look down at the concoction that contradicts the ink and leather image I portray.

"Man, never would've pegged you for a sprinkles guy." Tyson chuckles, shaking his head with a wide smile that crinkles the corners of his eyes.

"Hey, we all got our vices," I retort, my voice steady despite the blush that refuses to fade. I glance up at Elaine, whose lips curve in an affectionate smirk, and I feel a surge of defiant pride.

"Guess I like what I like," I say with a shrug, meeting her gaze. The warmth in her eyes tells me she gets it—that underneath the tough exterior, there's room for sweetness too.

The laughter around us softens with nods and smiles of understanding. I'm surrounded by family—both blood and chosen—and realize these small revelations, these glimpses of true self, are just another part of the ride.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

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Annette

Watching Cutter accept the cup from Charlotte, I expected him to be embarrassed or, at the very least, tell her he doesn't want the monstrosity, but instead, he looks at Charlotte, and his gaze softens as he slurps the brew. Even when Tyson teases him, he only shrugs and says, ' Guess I like what I like .'

His presence in the bakery—all leather, tattoos, and denim amidst the pastel décor—seems inappropriately out of place, and yet, the way he talks to Charlotte and the easy conversation with Tyson reminds me that although he's dangerous, if you're in his inner circle, he'd do anything for you.

"Annette," Cutter greets me, the rumble of his voice softer than usual.

Charlotte beams at me, her innocence stark against the backdrop of Cutter's rugged demeanor. She's twenty-nine, but the way she tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear with childlike grace tells another story.

"I made it special for Cutter," she says proudly, her voice tinged with excitement.

"Thanks, Charlotte," he says, and I swear his voice holds a note of tenderness I wouldn't have believed possible if I hadn't heard it myself.

Charlotte's laugh rings out, pure and unburdened, filling the space between the steaming espresso machines and glass cases of pastries.

I can't help but watch them, this odd pair, and feel a twinge of something—surprise,

maybe, or admiration. In a world where Cutter's name evokes whispers of fear, here he stands, unguarded, sharing a moment of simple joy over a whimsical beverage. And as I look up at Tyson, his attention momentarily pulled away from their exchange, I see the same capacity for gentleness reflected at me.

"Ready for some baked goodness?" Tyson asks as he laughs at his joke and threads his fingers with mine.

I nod, squeezing his hand in response. "Sure am." I bend and look in the glass cabinet filled with cakes and pastries. "Coffee, chocolate chip muffin, and..." I smile conspiringly at my son and point to a cupcake.

He shakes his head and points at the chocolate chip cookies.

I hold up a finger, and he shakes his head, so I hold up two, and he says, "Three!"

Laughing, I straighten up and look at Tyson. "And three chocolate chip cookies."

Isabelle winks at Beathan. "It's a better deal if you buy six."

"Done," replies Tyson. "And I'll have another coffee to go, please."

"Okay, so one chocolate chip muffin, six cookies, and two coffees. Is that the lot?"

Tyson nods at Isabelle. "Sounds right."

"Nothing for you?" I ask him.

"Maybe he's sweet enough," quips Isabelle as she rings up our order.

Tyson winks down at me, and my heart skips a beat. Apart from some passionate

kisses, we haven't gone further. It's almost like he's holding back, but I'm ready for our relationship to go to the next level.

He's been sleeping on my couch, taking such good care of Beathan, and talking about staying here permanently. Tyson even wants to look at houses with me, but I need more than a friend I can kiss.

So much more.

Laughter ripples through the cozy space of Baked Goodness, breaking me out of my inner thoughts. Cutter is talking to Charlotte and has his arm around the shoulders of a woman who is staring at him as though he's hung the moon.

Tyson pays for our order, and I like comfort in this routine, a sense of normalcy that feels as though we're building something together.

We gather our treats, and I shepherd Beathan toward the door, his small hand clasped in mine. The bell above the entrance jingles merrily as we step outside, where the crisp morning air is suddenly split by the low rumble of a motorcycle pulling up. Beathan's face lights up, and he wriggles free from my grasp, bounding toward the familiar sound with unrestrained energy.

"Uncle Sean," he exclaims, a bundle of joyous laughter as he approaches the gleaming Harley.

"Hey, little man!" Sean greets him, the corners of his eyes crinkling with affection. He swings his leg over the bike, dismounting with the ease of someone who has spent half his life on two wheels. Beth follows suit, her smile soft but genuine.

"Want to sit up here for a sec?" Sean offers, hoisting Beathan onto the leather saddle in one fluid motion.

Despite the ink that snakes up his arms and the scars that tell tales of battles fought, Sean's gentleness always surfaces around Beathan. It's a stark contrast against his rugged exterior that never fails to warm my heart.

Beathan grips the handlebars, his imagination undoubtedly transforming the parked bike into a steed of incredible speed. His giggles fill the quiet street as Sean steadies the Harley, and he smiles at his nephew.

"Look at you, champ," Beth coos, standing close by. Her presence is a calming anchor, balancing Sean's more unpredictable nature.

"Vroom, vroom!" Beathan yells out, lost in his mock adventure, and I can't help but laugh along, grateful for these moments of pure, unfettered happiness.

"Annette, why don't you and Tyson go check out some of those houses you were talking about?" Sean suggests, his voice carrying the rumble of his usual confidence. "I can hang with the little dude here." He ruffles Beathan's hair, still perched proudly atop the Harley.

I hesitate, a lump forming in my throat as memories rush back—the fear, the kidnapping, the endless waiting for news. It wasn't just the kidnapping but the shadow it cast on every offer of help since then. But Beathan's bouncing up and down on the Harley, his excitement palpable, and I feel my resolve waver.

"Can we, Mommy? Please?" Beathan looks up at me, eyes wide with hope.

"Um..." The word catches in my mouth. Tyson's hand finds mine, a silent source of support. He doesn't push or pull but stands there, solidly beside me.

"Stay in town, okay?" I finally manage to say, the words scraping past the tightness in my chest.

Sean's smile dims for a fraction of a second, and he nods solemnly. "You got it, Annette. Nothing's gonna happen to him. Not ever again." There's steel in his voice.

Tyson squeezes my hand gently, a quiet reassurance.

I muster a smile, hoping it looks more convincing than it feels, and nod. "Okay," I breathe out. "Okay, but call me if anything—"

"Nothing will," Sean assures me, and something in his gaze makes me believe him despite the ghosts that linger.

"Be good for Uncle Sean," I tell Beathan, bending down to kiss his forehead. He's all giggles and wriggles, oblivious to the storm of emotions churning through me.

"Will do!" he chirps, and I stand upright, locking away the worry in a mental vault as best as I can.

Holding out the bag containing his cookies, I wink at Sean. "Only let him have one."

"Aww, Mom!"

Laughing, I say, "If he's good, maybe two."

Sean looks down at Beathan and winks. "And if he's really good, three?"

Beathan's small face lights up, and I cross my arms over my chest to try to look stern. "Well, he'd have to be really good."

Beathan nods his head excitedly, and I let Tyson pull me away.

"Let's go house hunting, then," Tyson says, his voice warm like a blanket wrapped

around my shoulders.

His thumb brushes against the back of my hand, sending an electric charge through me. With one last glance at Beathan, now chatting animatedly with Sean, I let myself be led away.

The leather seat is cool against my skin as I slide into Tyson's car and take another sip of coffee. I glance at him, his profile calm and sure as he navigates the streets with an ease that belies the tension I feel.

"Tyson?" My voice is barely above a whisper, but he hears me, turning his head slightly to indicate he's listening. "Do you really think Beathan will be okay with Sean?"

He reaches over, his hand finding mine, giving it a reassuring squeeze as we stop at a light. "Sean won't let anything happen to Beathan," he says firmly. "You know he'd do anything for him... for both of you, and Cutter is in the bakery too." He shakes his head. "Someone would have to have a death wish to mess with both of them."

I nod, trying to believe it. Tyson knows more than he can say—the secrets of the MC world shadowing his words.

We pull up to the curb, and the house before us takes my breath away. It's a vision of suburban bliss, two stories of gleaming white siding with shutters that beg for windows to be pushed open to welcome in a spring breeze. The real estate agent, a woman with a clipboard full of details, greets us enthusiastically as we approach.

"Isn't she a beauty?" the agent gushes, motioning to the house with a sweep of her arm. Tyson listens intently, nodding along to her spiel about a renovated kitchen and en suite bathrooms, but I find myself drifting through the rooms.

Each space is large, filled with potential and echoes of laughter that could fill them. I run my fingers along the cool granite countertops, gaze out at the spacious backyard, and try to picture us here. But each imagined scenario is missing a crucial piece, like trying to complete a puzzle with a box of mismatched pieces.

Why do we need all this space?

My thoughts are chaotic as I ascend the staircase, my hand trailing along the polished banister. Apart from the heat of our kisses that promise so much more, we haven't crossed that final threshold. Our passion is undeniable, yet here we are, standing in the shell of a future that feels both vast and uncertain.

"Annette?" Tyson calls from the doorway of what could be a nursery, snapping me back to the present. His eyes search mine, concern and something softer shimmering in their depths.

"Beautiful," I murmur, though I'm not sure if I'm speaking about the house or the burgeoning life I'm tentatively building with Tyson.

"Annette?" Tyson asks, and I turn toward him, feeling the weight of his gaze. He leans against the doorframe, arms folded, his expression an open book of patience and curiosity.

I hesitate, the expansiveness of the empty room amplifying the tightness in my chest. "It's big," I confess, my voice a whisper that seems to get lost in the high ceiling and grandeur of it all.

"Too big?" he probes gently, stepping closer.

My eyes meet his, and suddenly the words tumble out unbidden. "I don't know why we need so much space." A pause, a breath, and then the truth. "We haven't even had

sex.”

His reaction is immediate, a mix of surprise and understanding that flickers across his features. Tyson lifts a hand to the back of his neck, rubbing it with a sheepish smile that softens the lines around his eyes. “Is that what’s bothering you?” he asks, the smile reaching his voice.

Heat crawls up my cheeks, and I nod, unable to look away from the kindness in his eyes. There’s no judgment there, only an earnest desire to understand, to bridge the gap between us with honesty and affection.

Tyson once again takes my hand and leads me back downstairs. He lets me go to shake hands with the real estate agent.

“We’ll think about it,” he says.

The agent nods, offers a practiced smile, and retreats, leaving us in the dimming light of the would-be living room.

“Let’s head back,” Tyson suggests, guiding me out with a hand at the small of my back.

His touch lingers a moment longer than necessary, an unspoken promise that sets my nerves alight.

The drive is a blur, streets merging into a haze of anticipation. My home looms ahead, the familiar brick facade offering a semblance of normalcy. Below, the yoga studio is quiet, its patrons long gone, leaving behind only the faint scent of incense and serenity.

We ascend the stairs, my pulse quickening with each step. The air between us

crackles, charged with unspoken words and shared glances. Tyson's lips brush against the sensitive skin of my neck, igniting a trail of sparks that dance down my spine. I can't help but lean into him, craving more of his warmth, of him .

But then I pull away, suddenly emboldened. I turn, walking backward with a playful tilt to my lips, watching his eyes darken as I slip off my jacket, letting it fall to the floor with a soft thud. Each step I take is deliberate, a silent beckoning.

His gaze follows me, hungry and intense. I continue the dance of fabric and skin, shedding layers. Each piece discarded reveals more of me, and I revel in the heat of his stare, the way his breath hitches ever so slightly.

Slowly, Tyson mirrors my actions, pulling his shirt over his head, revealing the landscape of muscle beneath. His movements are measured and controlled, but his eyes never leave mine. There's a hunger there, a longing that matches the one roaring through my veins.

The distance closes, the last barriers fall away, and I'm left bared before him, not just in the flesh but in the soul.

His hands find the small of my back, drawing me in closer until there's no air left that isn't shared between our lips. Our kiss speaks of friendship set aflame, now an inferno of connection and raw need.

His touch is familiar and electrifying, tracing paths over my skin as every caress sends shivers down my spine, awakening memories I thought were long forgotten.

I arch against him, lost in the sensation, in the perfect fit of his body against mine. There is no hesitation, only the fluid motion of two people moving as one. Right now, the world beyond this room fades to a distant hum—irrelevant and forgotten.

“Annette,” he breathes out, my name a sacred word on his lips, and I feel it everywhere.

We move together, every stroke and sigh melding into a rhythm that speaks of desire and connection. Time has no meaning. There is only this perfect joining of souls, once merely friends, now lovers.

I take his hand, feeling the warmth of his palm ignite a fire within me as I guide him toward my bedroom. The soft glow of the bedroom window casts a sensual, inviting ambience. Neither of us speaks as his eyes meet mine, a smoldering promise of what’s to come. My heart races, each step bringing us closer to the sanctuary of my room. The air feels thick with desire as I pull him inside, closing the door behind us. The world outside disappears, leaving only the intoxicating heat between us.

Tyson kneels before me, and suddenly, I feel exposed. He leans forward and kisses one of the stretch marks that mar my stomach.

“Don’t,” I whisper.

Tyson’s eyes meet mine, and he frowns. “Don’t?”

Shaking my head, I walk backward until I hit the bed, then sit down, pulling the comforter over myself. “I did everything right during my pregnancy. I used moisturizers and massaged in every cream under the sun, took vitamins, and with a week to go, I felt it rip. The stretch marks appeared, and I haven’t been able to get rid of them.”

My hands are clasped in my lap, and I’m staring at my fingers, wishing I could go back to a moment ago when my only thought was having Tyson make love to me. Instead, I’m self-conscious and wish this hadn’t started.

Tyson's hand covers mine, and he reaches up, his fingers tilting my head back so I have to look into his eyes.

"You're beautiful. These marks show your journey from a woman into motherhood. They are part of you. How could I not love them as I love you?"

The world seems to stop. Those three words, so simple yet so powerful, echo in my mind. I search his eyes, seeing the raw vulnerability and sincerity there. My heart swells with surprise, joy, and a deep, overwhelming love.

His eyes never leave mine as he continues, his voice more confident now. "I've loved you for so long. I can't imagine my life without you. You and Beathan are everything to me, Annette."

Tears well up in my eyes, blurring my vision. I can feel their warmth spilling down my cheeks, but I don't care. All that matters is Tyson and the love radiating from him. I reach out, cupping his face in my hands, feeling the stubble on his jaw under my fingertips.

My voice is barely a whisper, choked with emotion. "Tyson, I love you too."

His eyes close for a moment as if he's savoring the words. Then he stands and pulls me into his arms, holding me close. I can feel the steady beat of his heart against my chest, a rhythm that matches mine.

Tyson's lips find mine, and all my insecurities vanish.

He loves me .

The moment is electric, a current that zaps straight to my soul. It's not just a kiss but an affirmation, the kind that erases every doubt that has ever clouded my mind. The

world around us could crumble, but in this instant, I'm anchored, tethered to the here and now by the warmth of his mouth on mine.

He loves me.

The thought blossoms inside me like a revelation, each petal unfurling with the truth of it. It's in the gentle pressure of his lips, the tender way he cradles my face in his hands, and the soft sigh that escapes him and mingles with my breath. This isn't just a physical connection, it's the intertwining of souls, the silent language of hearts speaking volumes in a single embrace.

My fingers thread through the soft hair at the nape of his neck, pulling him closer as if I could merge into him completely, leaving no space for those old specters of self-doubt to wedge back in. His touch is a tender whisper and a fiery spark, igniting every nerve in my body with its intensity for Tyson, and I let myself be loved.

The room deliciously spins as Tyson sweeps me off my feet, a strong arm under my knees and another cradling my back. His eyes lock onto mine, brimming with unspoken promises as he lays me on the bed and hovers over me for a heartbeat, his gaze worshipful as it traces the roadmap of my life etched into my skin, the silver lines of my stretch marks illuminated by the dim light.

"Beautiful," he breathes out the word, and this time I believe him.

His lips find the tender spot below my ear, igniting a trail of fire that licks down my neck. Each kiss is an approval for the body I've learned to love less. But through Tyson's touch, I feel adored, every inch of me cherished. And when his mouth grazes the valley between my breasts, I'm awash in a sensation so potent it's like I'm feeling everything for the first time.

I arch beneath him, offering myself as his lips continue their descent, his tongue

painting strokes of pleasure that seep deep into my core. My fingers tangle in his hair, guiding him, silently pleading for more—his teasing bites and the suckling kisses that draw gasps from my lips. When he finally reaches the center of my longing, his tongue delves into the heart of me.

Each lick is a call to which my body responds, each nip drawing me closer to the edge of bliss. The heat within me coils tighter, anchored only by the softness of his mouth and the relentless pursuit of my climax. His name becomes a mantra on my lips, each syllable punctuated by the rhythm of his devotion as I teeter on the precipice, ready to fall into the abyss of ecstasy.

Electricity surges through me, a current fueled by Tyson's unerring lips and tongue. The air in the room feels charged, each breath I take crackling with the tension of impending release. His mouth is relentless and worshipful as if every part of me he touches is sacred. This man knows exactly what he's doing. His confidence and skill are undeniable. He navigates my body, each movement deliberate and aimed to bring me closer to the edge.

It's been over five years since I've let someone in—since I've allowed myself the vulnerability of being touched, tasted, and loved. I'd shoved that part of me away, a compartment too tender to expose, but now, with Tyson, it all comes flooding back. The pleasure, the connection—I'd almost forgotten how intoxicating it can be, how consuming. The sheer goodness of it swells within me, threatening to overwhelm me, and I clutch at him, my nails digging into his shoulder muscles, anchoring myself to the here and now.

And then, with a crescendo of sensations that obliterates every lingering doubt, my orgasm crashes over me. It's a tidal wave, sweeping away years of self-imposed solitude, leaving nothing in its wake but pure sensation.

I cry out, his name torn from somewhere deep within me—a primal call that fills the

room. “Tyson!”

He doesn’t stop. He draws out every tremor that wracks my body, every last quiver of pleasure until I’m spent, lying beneath him like a storm passed. My breathing is ragged, and my heart is a drumbeat echoing in the aftermath.

As I come back down to earth, Tyson’s lips find my face. They press soft kisses against my forehead, cheeks, and the tip of my nose. I open my eyes to see him smiling down at me, a look of tenderness that wraps around me as warm as a blanket. His smile is so genuine—a promise that this is just the beginning.

As the last echoes of bliss fade, Tyson’s touch remains a constant, tender presence. His fingers sketch patterns across my skin, meandering paths that draw lazy circles over the rise and fall of my breasts. The gentle exploration stirs embers into life, kindling flames that had briefly settled in the aftermath of our passion.

His lips follow the trail blazed by his fingertips, descending to capture one of my nipples with a warmth that makes me gasp. The delicate suction, the flick of his tongue—each motion fans the fire within me, a flare that reignites my desire as if it had never dimmed.

“I need you,” I whisper into the quiet of the room, my voice barely audible above the sound of our mingled breaths.

But he hears me, always attuned to the softest utterances of my heart.

The corners of Tyson’s lips curve upward in a smile, a silent acknowledgment of my whispered plea. He leans down to kiss me, a slow melding of mouths that speaks volumes in the silence. Our tongues tangle, a dance of intimacy that says more than words ever could. This kiss is a promise, an affirmation, a seal over our unspoken vows.

With this new hunger rising between us, he shifts, his body a solid comfort atop mine. My legs part almost instinctively, welcoming him, wrapping around him with an eagerness that matches the beat of my racing heart. In the tangle of limbs and the meeting of souls, I find myself lost once again in the magnetic pull of the man who has become my everything.

As Tyson enters me, it's as if we complete a circuit, the energy flowing between us tangible and powerful. I'm enveloped by him—entirely, irrevocably.

With the tender strength that always surprises me, he cradles my head between his forearms, caging me in a fortress of intimacy. His lips find mine again, a soft counterpoint to the profound depth at which he joins me. He moves within me, setting a pace that is maddening in its slowness.

The silence between us is filled with the sound of our mingled breaths as he moves within me. But my body, a live wire of need and sensation, craves more. The slow burn he's kindled needs to blaze.

“Faster,” I whisper. A plea. A command.

He responds not with words but with action, his hips drawing back before surging forward with renewed purpose. Our connection deepens, his rhythm intensifying, each thrust driving higher peaks of pleasure. The bed creaks beneath us, a rhythmic accompaniment to the quickening pulse of my heart.

“So beautiful,” Tyson breathes out against the shell of my ear, his voice rough like gravel but tender as a caress.

The phrase wraps around me, a mantra that feeds the flame he's stoked.

My response is instinctual—I bite down on my lower lip, holding back the sounds

that threaten to spill from my throat. His praise ignites something primal within me, and the fire that has simmered now roars into an inferno. My fingers dig into the sheets, clutching at them as Tyson pumps into me faster, hitting me just right.

The moment fractures and splinters into a climax that shatters the room's silence. Tyson's body tenses above me, his name a strangled cry on my lips as he reaches the edge.

"Annette!" The word is torn from him, a raw sound filled with the essence of everything unspoken, every emotion we've dared to feel.

His lips crash against mine in a desperate kiss, fierce and possessive. I can taste his moans, muffled against my mouth, vibrations of pleasure that resonate within my chest.

A surge of warmth floods through me, a tidal wave that carries me over the precipice—my orgasm cascading in tandem with his. Our breaths mingle, a shared gasp of release, while the world contracts to the space where our bodies are joined, and Tyson's heartbeat drums against my skin.

The aftershocks ripple through me, gentle waves lapping at my senses. His hands, once urgent and demanding, now roam softly, tracing the contours of my face with a tenderness that belies the intensity of what has just passed between us. Tyson's gaze holds mine, a silent vow lingering in the depths of his eyes—a promise that this, us, is more than fleeting passion. It's something worth holding onto.

I'm wrapped securely in Tyson's arms, nestled against the man whose strength and tenderness have looked after me for five years.

As sleep tugs at my consciousness, I let go, sinking into dreams with the certainty of a woman who has found her place in the world. Here, in this embrace, is home—not

just for me, but for Beathan too. Tyson's steady breathing is the promise of a future filled with care and devotion, and I drift off, knowing in my heart that we are where we belong.

Together.

Logan

Leaning back against the wall in the dim corner of the Loyal Rebels MC clubhouse, my gaze sweeps over the brothers and women scattered around the room. The clink of pool balls and the low murmur of conversations create a familiar soundtrack to my thoughts. I'm the youngest one here, just twenty, a prospect on the edge of being something more. In this world of leather and loyalty, I know my patch is inevitable—Kyle, my stepfather and president of this chapter, wouldn't have it any other way.

I'm not like the rest of them, though. I've always been a loner, more at home in the shadows than basking in the camaraderie and booze-fueled laughter. My inner landscape is darker, etched with urges that don't play well with others. It's probably why Kyle stuck me with Cutter. Once, Cutter was the blade of the MC, the silent enforcer of its darkest deeds.

Now?

He's just another puppet, strings pulled by the need to please Elaine, his woman.

"Logan!" Cutter's voice cuts through my internal musings. "You missed a spot." His tone is light, but there's an undercurrent of authority—a reminder that even though he's gone soft, he's still above me in the hierarchy.

Pushing off the wall, I saunter over to him. I can almost feel the grit under my palms from when I tore out the filthy carpet in Elaine's house, a shithole Cutter's hell-bent on turning into a palace for her. I remember the dust in my lungs, the relentless

scraping—it was a menial task, beneath even a prospect, but orders are orders.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You were told to get rid of all the flooring in Elaine’s home.”

Rolling my eyes, I say, “No, you said the carpet, and I got rid of it.”

“No,” Cutter pauses, and his top lip curls back in a snarl.

It’s useless to argue with him. I’ll be in the wrong no matter what.

“Fine. What did I miss?”

Cutter smiles like he’s won, and I want to punch it off his face.

“The bathroom, the linoleum needs to be thrown out.”

Now, it’s my turn to curl up my top lip, but it’s in disgust. Elaine’s home is rundown with years of dog pee and graffiti, and the medical experiment that is her bathroom is simply a breeding ground for every kind of disgusting body fluid the human body has. I will need more than gloves—I’ll need a hazmat suit to get it out.

“I’ll do it tomorrow,” I mutter.

It’s all part of the game, proving my loyalty until they finally decide I’m worthy to wear their colors full-time.

“Good. Thanks, kid,” Cutter says, clapping me on the back with a grin that’s too damn happy. “Elaine’s thrilled. Can’t wait to get out of that attic.”

Nodding with fake interest, but inside, I’m scoffing. Once feared and respected,

Cutter now spends his days picking paint swatches and worrying about making a former recluse smile. Kyle's influence has blunted his edge. Where a sharp weapon once was now sits a lovesick fool. Walking away, I brush my hands off on my jeans, imagining the disgusting things I'm going to have to touch in that bathroom. They're all oblivious to the storm brewing inside me. To them, I'm just Logan, Kyle's stepson, the kid who'll soon wear the patch. What they don't see is the ambition coiling in my gut, and the darkness waiting to be unleashed.

One day, I'll rise above all this. And when I do, the MC won't know what hit it. I'll be the new fury, the fresh blade. And no amount of love or domestication will soften me like it did Cutter.

For now, I slide back into my corner, the perfect picture of the devoted prospect. I catch Kyle's eye and flash him a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes. It's all a performance I've mastered—the art of pretending. Kyle returns his attention to my mother, who smiles at him adoringly.

Biding my time is crucial. Because if I slip up and show my hand too early, I could end up discarded, thrown into the pit reserved for those who don't measure up.

But that won't happen. I'm Logan, and I'm going to make sure this club is mine. It's only a matter of time.

My gaze shifts from a rowdy card game to Sean, muscles rolling under his inked skin as he tosses back a shot. He's our VP, and yet, whenever Beth walks into the room, it's like he forgets the weight of his cut. His eyes soften, tracing her every move with a reverence that seems out of place in this den of sinners. I scoff silently. It won't be long before he's pushing a stroller around, trading his Harley for a minivan.

The memory of Beathan's abduction flashes in my mind, that frantic chaos still fresh despite the weeks that have passed. I remember how Sean tore through the city like a man possessed, fear and fury etched into every line of his face. We found Beathan

and brought him home, but a slice of guilt still shadows his features when he looks at the kid. The iron-hard killer with a soft spot for family—I can exploit that if I need to.

As laughter erupts from a nearby table, I turn to see what's caused the commotion. Tyson Reed, the billionaire playboy who's somehow stitched himself into the fabric of the MacKenny clan, stands amidst the old ladies, a smirk on his lips. I can't help but wonder how a guy who should be rubbing elbows with CEOs and supermodels fits so seamlessly here with the grease and leather crowd.

Annette's hand glitters under the clubhouse lights, the diamond on her finger large enough to buy a small island. She's laughing, head tilted back, basking in the attention as the club regulars hover. Tyson's arm is casually draped around her shoulders, an unmistakable claim.

"Look at 'em," Cutter murmurs as he moves to stand next to me, nodding toward Tyson and Annette. "Never thought I'd see the day where the MacKennys let a suit into their family."

"Lochlan had money," I mutter.

Lochlan MacKenny, the youngest of them, has been dead for over five years. His name still makes Kyle's face cloud over with sadness. However, a piece of him lives on in Beathan. The kid will never meet his father, but his uncles seem determined to keep his memory alive for him. They each have photographs of him in their homes. He was never one of us. He dated models and dabbled in the real estate game making bank. It figures Annette would gravitate to another suit.

"Yeah, but he was family." Cutter walks back to Elaine, his hand landing possessively on her waist.

But I'm always watching because every bond and weakness is a potential weapon in this world. And I'm learning how to wield them all.

Beathan appears at my side, tugging on my hand to draw my gaze downward. He has a green cowboy hat on his head, and a huge grin lights up his face.

“Do you like my hat?” he asks eagerly, not waiting for a reply. “Uncle Jamie and Uncle Sean gave it to me. Uncle Sean said when I’m older, he’s going to get me a bike, just like his!”

The kid is cute, and after everything he’s been through, a wave of protectiveness washes over me. No one so young should have faced what he did.

I gently lift the hat from his head, examining it with a smile before placing it on my own. “What do you think?”

Beathan bursts into giggles. “It’s too small for you, Logan.”

Chuckling, I set the hat back on his head. “Looks good, kiddo.”

He nods and ambles back over to his mom and, I guess, Tyson, his new stepdad. With a final glance at the spectacle, I lean back against the wall, pushing the noise and the revelry to the edges of my consciousness. The time will come when my observations pay off, when I’ll step out of the shadows and claim what’s mine. For now, I play the part, silent and watchful—the perfect prospect—but the ambition burns bright inside.

The raucous laughter dulls to a low hum as my gaze drifts, finally settling on her—my mother. She’s perched on a barstool, blonde roots betraying the fiery red she drenches her hair in, all for Kyle. It’s like she’s his own personal siren, luring him with that fake shade of passion. She laughs at something he says, and it’s clear as day, the way they orbit each other, bound by some gravitational pull of mutual need that I will never understand.

“Red suits her,” Kyle remarks, suddenly at my side.

His voice is gruff, a note of pride threaded through it like a hidden vein of gold. I grunt noncommittally, not sure what he sees in her. But love isn't a code I've ever cracked—not that I've tried.

“Yep,” I say, because what else is there to comment on? The lengths people go to keep the fire alive?

“Never let it get boring, son,” Kyle advises, clapping me on the shoulder with a weight that feels like a warning.

His eyes scan the room, miss nothing, yet fail to read the deeper currents swirling beneath the surface. The way his brothers lean into their women, how Tyson Reed has woven himself into the fabric of our world, with Annette glittering at his side.

“Everything changes,” I murmur, more to myself than to him, my mind already racing down the path I see unfurling before me.

“Change keeps us sharp,” he replies, but his eyes are distant now, lost in thought.

Maybe he's pondering the future, or maybe it's the past that haunts him. Either way, he's missing the inevitable transformation within his ranks.

With Cutter domesticated, an opening has appeared—a dark void begging to be filled. And who better to step into that role than me? There's a hunger in me, a craving for chaos and control that can't be satiated with menial prospect tasks or the patched-in members' approval. Kyle doesn't see it yet, but I can feel the mantle waiting to settle on my shoulders. Cutter's old role is mine for the taking, the blade to be wielded, the silent wrath to be feared.

A day will come when the Loyal Rebels MC answers to me. Until then, I'll watch, learn, and wait. As Cutter laughs at something Elaine says, a softness in his eyes that was once unimaginable, a cold resolve cements in my chest.

Patience, I tell myself, the word a silent vow whispered amongst the noise and revelry. Your time will come.

Kyle nods at someone across the room, his attention already shifting away. I lean back, feigning ease, but every muscle is coiled tight.

I muster a smile, my lips stretching into a façade of warmth as I turn to Kyle. He's deep in conversation with one of the patched members, giving orders with a subtle nod here, a hand gesture there. The clubhouse buzzes with energy, but in this corner, it feels like we're a world apart. My stepfather—the president—looks my way, and I make sure to let the dutiful respect glimmer in my eyes. It's an act, a performance honed over time.

"Everything good, Logan?" he asks without really looking for an answer.

"Couldn't be better," I reply, keeping my voice steady and devoid of any real emotion.

He claps me on the shoulder, a heavy, grounding touch meant to reinforce some familial bond I've never truly felt.

"Good man," he says, his focus already shifting back to his biker brothers, to the club's business at hand.

My gaze slips away from him, drifting across the room. It lands on Cutter, who is sharing a quiet moment with Elaine. She laughs at something he whispers in her ear, and he looks at her like she's the north star in his dark sky.

Our eyes meet—Cutter's and mine. There's a mutual understanding, a silent recognition of what we are—what he was and what I'm becoming. We're cut from the same cloth, shaped and molded by the club's ruthless demands.

I'll need to be careful and bide my time if I don't want to end up in the pit—a place for those who move too fast or too carelessly.

For now, I'll keep smiling at Kyle, playing the part of the devoted stepson, while the truth of my intent simmers just beneath the surface.

“See you later, old man,” I say casually to Kyle. My voice carries no weight, just the lightness of a young man with no worries in the world.

“Later, kid,” he replies, distracted.

As I move through the crowd, every step is measured, and each breath controlled. My smile never falters, even as my mind races with plans and possibilities.

One day, the Loyal Rebels MC will be mine. But for now, I wait, watching Cutter and knowing the dance we're both bound to—one of us stepping out, the other poised to step in.