



Torgash (Ironborn MC #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Ash

They call me the Ironborn's cutthroat strategist for a reason.

I survived the camps, mastered human law, and built a shield around my brothers in a world that sees orcs as expendable. I don't lead with fists—I win with leverage.

I didn't plan for Nova Reyes.

Sharp-eyed. Relentless. Human. She sees more than she should—and doesn't back down.

When her corruption case crashes into club business, battle lines blur. And when she risks everything to protect the innocent, I'm left with one impossible choice: break my oath... or lose the woman who sees the monster and still reaches for the man beneath.

Nova

I came to Shadow Ridge to bring down corruption, not fall for the Ironborn's Vice President.

Ash Thornshade is brutal with his brain, dangerous with his silence, and carries justice like a weapon.

He's the last man I should trust—especially when my only shot at putting my sister's killer behind bars comes with a deal that could destroy everything.

Now I'm gambling my badge, my name, and the only man who's ever made me feel seen.

This gritty, high-heat orc MC romance features a scarred VP with a possessive need, and a determined sheriff who won't be owned, enemies to lovers, sharp banter, emotional depth, and a hard-won HEA.

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Chapter One

Ash

I count exits on instinct. Two doors, one window—boarded over, but the nails are rusted. Three potential weapons are within reach if this goes sideways. The bartender's got a Louisville Slugger behind the register and hands that shake when he pours.

This dive sits twenty miles outside Shadow Ridge, where nobody knows my cut or my record. Out here, there's no Crow watching for cracks, no Diesel making jokes. Just stale air and humans drowning whatever failures brought them here.

The beer tastes like piss, but it's cold and the bartender doesn't ask questions when a three-hundred-fifty-pound orc claims the corner table.

I take it out of habit—back to the wall, clear sight lines.

Conversations pause, then resume quieter.

Eyes flick my way—some curious, some hostile, most just wary.

The table's built for smaller bodies, all sharp edges digging into my thighs. I don't adjust. Let it creak.

Everyone here's running from something. That makes us even.

It's been six months since we buried Victor Hargrove's legacy in Shadow Ridge. It has been half a year since Crow found redemption in Maya's healing hands and Vargan won his freedom. The town's rebuilding, Hammer says. They're learning to trust us instead of fear us.

But that respect feels hollow when Victor's nephew, Royce Carvello, is still breathing and plotting his comeback from whatever hole he's crawled into.

Every legal brief that enters our war room reeks of his influence, every zoning variance and property dispute bears his fingerprints.

He's playing chess with our entire territory.

No, I needed to get the fuck out tonight.

The clubhouse walls were closing in. Vargan stalking the common room, distracted with thoughts of Savvy.

Even Crow, once as cold as I am, now goes soft-eyed whenever Maya calls.

These women have got my brothers pussy-whipped when what we need is focus.

The old Crow would've cracked skulls, not compromise.

And now there's another woman, this one with a badge. Sheriff Nova Reyes has been in town for barely three weeks. Her file has been eating at me since she arrived, her name typed across official letterhead that won't leave me alone.

Never met her. Don't need to. I've memorized every line of her record.

Top of her class at the Georgia Police Academy.

Criminal justice degree with honors. She climbed through Atlanta PD ranks clean—patrol to sergeant then detective in record time.

The kind of trajectory that ends with a federal badge or a mayor's office.

Instead, she's here. In my town. Cleaning up Sheriff Dawson's mess after we ran his corrupt ass out along with his puppet master, Victor.

And I don't buy her story. Not for a goddamn second.

People with records like Nova's don't throw away golden careers for backwater sheriff jobs unless they're running from something or someone's forcing their hand.

The timing is too convenient. Royce loses his bought-and-paid-for sheriff, and suddenly, the state sends us a squeaky-clean replacement with an impeccable record and no obvious ties to our enemies.

Nobody's that clean—especially not cops.

Why is she here? What's she hiding? And why does her name keep returning to my thoughts when I should focus on the real threats circling our territory?

It's not curiosity driving this fixation.

It's caution. The same instinct that's kept me breathing through camp riots and club wars and every betrayal in between.

Nova Reyes feels wrong. Polished on the outside, coiled like barbed wire underneath. Too perfect. Too convenient. Too fucking dangerous.

I drain my beer, the bitter aftertaste coating my tongue. Three empties sit before me,

but I'm stone sober. Orc metabolism burns through alcohol like it's water. Takes a lot more than cheap beer to quiet the noise in my head.

Last week's conversation with Hammer replays in my head. He'd pulled me aside, voice dropping to that tone he uses when he knows I will fight his orders.

"You need to play nice with the new sheriff. We're rebuilding trust here, not ruling through fear."

Trust. Fucking joke.

"We're not the monsters they think we are," he'd added, amber eyes steady on mine.

Maybe we're not. Maybe Crow and Maya proved redemption can grow from blood-soaked ground. Maybe Vargan and Savvy are writing some fairy tale about love conquering all.

But I know what I am. The camps forged me. Survival demanded I become the kind of predator they'd never forget.

The club calls me their lawyer, their strategist. They see the loopholes I find, the legal traps I set. They don't know how many nights I spent teaching myself human law just to fuck them with their own rules.

They don't see the scars. Don't know about the ten-year-old orc who learned that being smart just makes you a target unless you're willing to spill blood to stay on top.

They ignore the mark bisecting my face, courtesy of an orc twice my size who wanted my food ration and figured the smart kid wouldn't fight back.

He learned the hard way.

I made sure he choked on his own fucking teeth.

Intelligence guides me now. The law protects me. But underneath the legal briefs, I'm still the predator who clawed his way out of hell with teeth and fury.

And if Sheriff Reyes thinks she can waltz into my territory and threaten what we've built...

She's about to find out what I do to threats.

I shake off thoughts of Sheriff Reyes. Came here to escape, not obsess. Time to finish my drink and head back to deal with real problems.

I'm pulling a twenty from my wallet when movement outside catches my attention. Through the grime-streaked window, I see them in the parking lot, two men flanking a girl who can't be more than twenty. She's fighting them, but quietly. Smart enough to know screaming will only egg them on.

Not my problem. This town's full of human drama I don't need to inherit.

But then the girl turns, and her eyes lock on mine. No panic. No pleading. Just cold, hard recognition.

Like she sees exactly what I am. Like she knows only a monster can save her from human men.

That's when I clock the setup. The way the men position themselves between her and any escape route. The glances they keep shooting toward the bar. Toward me.

Bait.

Organized. Clean. Like they've done this before. Like they're hoping the big, mean orc takes the bait so they can cry foul and call it justice.

They want to give the state an excuse to clean house in Shadow Ridge.

It's almost clever enough to work.

The smart play is to finish my beer and ghost out the back. Let whatever happens happen. Keep my hands clean and my reputation intact.

But the girl's still looking at me. Still waiting.

And I'm tired of using my brain when my fists are much more fun.

I drop the twenty on the table and rise slowly, my leather cut creaking as I roll my shoulders. The knife on my thigh pulls on my belt. One truth remains: the best legal strategy is making sure there's no one left to testify.

The bartender looks away when I pass. The few remaining patrons suddenly find their drinks fascinating. Smart humans. Their survival skills are still intact. Unlike the assholes outside.

I push through the door into the humid Georgia night. The scent hits me immediately, fear-sweat, adrenaline, and an undercurrent of something else that makes my jaw clench.

The men turn as though they've been waiting. Big. Confident. Soon to be dead.

"Look what crawled out," one says. "The big green monster wants to play hero."

I answer with silence. There is no point wasting breath on corpses. The girl backs

away, her part in this show nearly done. But her gaze stays on mine, and in it I see recognition. Pain that makes my teeth grind.

She's been hurt before. Broken. Used.

Just like us. Just like the ones who made it out of the camps.

Rage settles in my bones, cold and patient. These bastards think they can use her pain as a weapon against me. Think they can turn trauma into ammunition.

They picked the wrong fucking orc.

"You boys lost?" I ask, voice calm.

The bigger one grins. "Nah. Found exactly what we were looking for."

Then they move.

Fast. Coordinated. Not drunk civilians looking for trouble. Actual fighters with a death wish.

Too bad for them, I understand violence.

The smallest one speaks, voice tight with liquid courage and stupidity. "Shadow Ridge trash thinks he can drink where decent people live."

He thinks I give a damn what he calls me.

He takes a step closer, emboldened by my silence. "We heard about you freaks taking over that shithole town. Thinking you can spread your disease wherever you want." His lips curl. "Not here. Not in our county."

I move.

Fast. The first one comes in high with a haymaker that would've caved a human skull. I catch his wrist, twist until I hear the pop, and drive my knee into his stomach. His bib breaks with a wet crack. He goes down hard.

The second one's smarter. He produces a knife from nowhere, blade glinting under the neon. He knows how to hold it, point up, edge out, ready to gut me.

I respect that. That doesn't mean I won't break him.

I shatter his arm in three places.

The knife clatters to the asphalt as he screams. I silence him with an elbow to the head, hard enough to drop him, careful enough to avoid murder charges.

I pick up the fallen blade, testing its weight. Cheap steel, but sharp enough.

I'm about to turn on the third one when:

CRACK.

The shot echoes across the lot, fired skyward, sharp and clean. Not close enough to hit, just close enough to warn.

I freeze. So do they.

Every head turns toward the edge of the shadows, just past the busted fence line.

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A second later, she steps into the chaos, chin up, hips loose, gun drawn, and my world tilts. Sheriff Nova Reyes. Five-foot-nothing of fury in a uniform. She shouldn't register as a threat, but the second our gazes lock, something deep in me surges to life—sharp, possessive, undeniable.

I don't believe in mates. Never have. But my beast roars. Mine. And I fucking hate it. She's human. A cop. A symbol of the system that tried to crush me. And yet every instinct I have screams to grab her, claim her, keep her. It's not just want, it's need. Dark. Violent. All-consuming.

My brain's throwing up roadblocks, warning me of consequences, risk, reputation, but my blood is already committed. I track every inch of her. Strong legs, steady grip on the Glock, eyes that don't blink. She's pure fire.

Somehow, I manage to shove it down. Lock it away. She's a distraction, and I don't lose focus, not for anyone.

She assesses the scene with a sweep of her calculating gaze, me, the knife in my hand, the humans scattered across the parking lot. The gun doesn't waver, her stance doesn't shift. Her confidence comes from experience.

"Drop it," she commands, voice rough. Not loud. Doesn't need to be. It lands with the weight of law and the promise of consequences.

I consider my options. I could take her down before she pulls the trigger. I could disappear into the night. Could call her bluff and see if she's actually willing to shoot an Ironborn VP over a bar fight.

But her expression makes me reconsider. Recognition that sees the predator in me and isn't afraid—is maybe even turned on by it.

The knife hits the asphalt with a dull clatter. Not submission. Strategy.

"Sheriff," the one with the busted lip starts, stumbling forward. "He attacked us. Unprovoked. You saw the knife."

"Shut up." Her voice slices through the night. Not raised. Not angry. Just absolute in its authority.

The man flinches back. "I watched from the shadows for the last sixty seconds," she continues, her gaze never leaving mine even as she addresses him. "You want to go on record pretending this was self-defense?"

The tension between us thrums, unspoken and raw. My thoughts war between challenging her authority and wondering what that mouth would feel like under mine.

"You picked that up after he turned his back," she says to the man, finally breaking our stare-down to address the group. "Crowbar boy swung twice."

The one she dubbed 'crowbar boy' looks ready to piss himself.

Her attention lands on the ringleader. "You came here looking for a fight. Baited it. Tried to outnumber him. And you lost."

None of them speaks. Smart choice.

"You wanna press charges?" she asks, eyebrow raised in mock question. "Because I'll arrest you right now. Every single one of you. I've got the footage from the bar's outside camera, and I'm not in the mood to coddle your fragile fucking egos."

The ringleader's cocky grin dies. His buddies shift their weight, suddenly fascinated by their shoes.

"Didn't think so," she says, stepping forward with measured confidence. "Get the fuck out of here."

They scatter rapidly, leaving me alone with this woman still holding my gaze like she owns it.

The Glock lowers. Not because she trusts me, hell no, but because she's already done the math and decided I'm not the threat to neutralize right now.

She studies me, eyes raking down my body and back up—precise and detached but not uncurious. She's cataloging, profiling, and clocking how much damage I could do.

"You hurt?" she asks, the question surprising me with its directness.

I nearly laugh. "Why? You gonna patch me up?"

She doesn't smile. Doesn't react at all. "No. Just wanted to know if I need to call the meat wagon."

Most humans would've already put distance between us, but she's close enough that I can catch her scent—citrus, clean sweat, and something underneath that makes my blood heat. Close enough to grab. Close enough to ruin.

"You were holding back," she says, the observation landing somewhere beneath my ribs. "That's the only reason this didn't end with an ambulance and a crime scene."

I meet her gaze, refuse to look away first. "And you knew that when you aimed the

gun at me."

She shrugs one shoulder, a casual gesture that looks deliberate. "Had to see what you'd do."

The realization sinks in —she tested me. Saw the killer beneath the surface and didn't flinch. Not because she's stupid, but because she wanted to know exactly what kind of monster she's dealing with.

"I know who you are," she continues, her voice level and controlled. "Ash Thornshade. Vice President of the Ironborn MC. You've got a reputation for playing by the rules until it suits you not to. And for making problems disappear permanently."

I tilt my head, fighting both irritation and unwanted appreciation. "You dig through that file yourself, or have one of your deputies read it to you?"

"Doesn't matter," she counters. "It was accurate."

I let my eyes roam her body, slow and deliberate. Intimidation? Maybe. But part of me just can't stop.

Strong legs. Sharp eyes. That mouth. Christ. That mouth.

When I meet her eyes again, I let the predator show through.

"You're a long way from Atlanta, Sheriff Reyes."

Her expression remains neutral, but her eyes betray her surprise that I've done my homework too.

"I hear you were on the promotion track," I add, the words casual. "Then suddenly... detour. Strange kind of ambition you've got."

The jab is deliberate, probing for weakness, for the truth behind her spotless record and mysterious relocation.

I'm baiting her now, poking back, digging for cracks in her polished mask.

But she doesn't bite. Just lifts her chin. Defiant.

"Strange kind of curiosity for someone who claims not to work with cops."

That actually earns her a smirk. Not cold. Not warm. Just... amused. And maybe a little impressed.

"You don't look like a cop," I say, the words coming out rough. "You look like someone trying very hard not to shoot me."

"I didn't holster it because I trust you," she fires back without hesitation. "I holstered it because I decided not to put a bullet in your leg. Yet."

My respect inches higher. No flinch. No retreat. She's got steel in her spine and fire in her blood, exactly the kind of woman who could destroy everything I've built.

The kind who makes me want to burn it all down myself.

I move a half-step closer, testing boundaries. "You always aim first and ask questions later?"

She doesn't budge, doesn't retreat from my advance. "Only when the predator outside the bar looks more dangerous than the ones inside."

A laugh escapes me, quiet, genuine, surprising us both.

"Guess we'll see what kind of orc I am."

"We will," she says flatly. "Eventually."

Then she turns her back on me, a deliberate power move that speaks volumes, and walks away as though she owns not just this parking lot but the whole damn world.

I watch her go, my body torn between following her and putting as much distance between us as possible. Because she's right about one thing, I am dangerous.

Just not in the ways either of us expected. And I haven't even shown her my worst yet.

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Chapter Two

Nova

The uniform should make me untouchable.

Pressed khakis, polished badge, regulation boots that click with each step across Greene's Diner's worn linoleum. I've worn this armor for eight years, through Atlanta's worst precincts and courtroom cross-examinations that could break careers. It's never failed me before.

So why can I still feel the burn of his stare on my skin?

I slide into a corner booth with my back to the wall—muscle memory from too many nights when backup was twenty minutes out and death was twenty seconds away.

The place has that small-town charm the tourism board probably markets hard: checkered tablecloths, pie cases that actually hold pie, coffee strong enough to raise the dead. Normal. Safe.

A sharp contrast to what I witnessed last night.

The waitress appears before I can flag her down. She has kind eyes that miss nothing, and her name tag reads 'Helen' in faded letters.

"Coffee, honey?" she asks, already reaching for the pot. "You look like you need it."

"Please." I arrange my hands flat on the table, fighting the urge to flex my fingers. They're steady now, but they remember the tight grip I had on my Glock and the way my finger hovered over the trigger.

Helen pours coffee, dark and bitter, steam curling between us. "You settling in alright? I know Sheriff Dawson left quite a mess behind."

"I've seen worse." The lie comes easier than it should. I'm not sure what I've walked into yet, or who I can trust, so I keep my answers vague. I take a sip of coffee and let the bitter heat burn away the memory of amber eyes and controlled violence.

"I bet you have." She doesn't move to the next table. Instead, she refills my cup that's barely half empty. "Atlanta PD, right? Shadow Ridge must be quite a change."

The truth is, Shadow Ridge already feels more real than eight years of city patrol. More dangerous—not because of the corruption I'm here to clean up, but because of what happened in that parking lot when everything I thought I knew about control went out the window.

Helen sets the coffee pot on my table and slides into the opposite seat without invitation. She's younger than I expected, mid-forties with laugh lines and capable hands that speak of someone who's built a life through hard work and service.

"I heard there was some trouble at Murphy's last night," she says. "Word is you handled yourself well. I hope those drunk idiots didn't give you too much grief."

My spine straightens. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Honey, this is Shadow Ridge. News travels faster than gossip, and gossip travels at light speed." Helen's eyes crinkle at the corners, but there's steel underneath the friendly act. "Especially when it involves our boys and the new sheriff."

Our boys. The way she says it—protective, proud—tells me everything about where this town's loyalties lie, not with badges, laws, or the system that sent me here to clean house, but with the Ironborn MC.

With him.

"It was handled," I say, keeping my voice level. "No charges filed, no injuries requiring medical attention."

"Good. Those Murphy's regulars can get stupid when they drink." Helen's expression darkens slightly. "A lot of folks are still angry about changes around here. Some take it out on anyone new, anyone different, like our boys. I hope they didn't turn you off us already?"

I pause, coffee halfway to my lips. She's not fishing for gossip. She's checking on me. When's the last time someone did that?

"I can handle myself."

"I'm sure you can. Doesn't mean you should have to." Helen leans back, crossing her arms. "Look, I don't know what brought you to Shadow Ridge, and that's your concern. But I've been here long enough to know when someone's carrying more than they should."

She glances toward the window, where morning sunlight illuminates the main stretch of highway outside.

"This place was dying before the club showed up. Empty storefronts, families leaving, nothing but bitter grudges and Victor Hargrove's poison." Her voice lifts when she turns back to me. "Now look at it. We've got a future again."

"The Ironborn did that?" I ask over my next sip.

"They helped, but it took all of us." Helen meets my eyes directly. "The Point is, you don't have to fight every battle alone here. Most people here want change. They'll be on your side."

She stands, smoothing her apron. "You need anything—information, backup, or just someone to listen—you know where to find me. This town takes care of its own, and like it or not, you're one of us now."

Helen picks up the coffee pot and walks away, leaving me with the certainty that I'm already in deeper than I planned.

The bell above the door chimes. The shift in the diner's atmosphere is immediate—conversations don't stop, but they quiet, like everyone's suddenly aware of a different kind of presence in their midst. I look up, and my stomach drops.

Ash Thornshade fills the doorway, his broad shoulders blocking the morning light.

Behind him, another orc follows—younger, with an easier smile and less visible damage.

They move unhurried through the space—Ash nodding to the trucker at the counter, the younger orc raising a hand to someone in the back booth.

People acknowledge them with the kind of respectful familiarity reserved for those who've proven themselves.

My peripheral vision tracks Ash as he crosses the room, and I hate how attuned I am to his every movement.

He's changed since last night—clean clothes, leather cut pristine, no trace of the violence that marked him hours ago.

But I can still see the careful awareness in every step, the way he scans the room without seeming to, the deliberate spacing he maintains.

He moves through the space like he owns it, never once glancing in my direction.

Helen appears at their table with a coffee pot and two mugs already in hand. "Morning, boys. The usual?"

"Thanks, Helen." Ash's voice carries across the diner. The younger orc—Diesel, according to the files I've memorized—slides into the booth and immediately reaches for the sugar dispenser. "How's business?"

"Better since you fixed that freezer," Helen replies, already pouring their coffee. "Savvy's got your breakfast coming right up."

They talk like this is routine. I watch Ash's profile as he responds to Diesel's words, his mouth shifting toward what might be a smile.

The conversation flows around them, but his gaze never drifts my way.

My coffee grows cold in my hands. The eggs Helen brought without asking sit untouched on the plate. My appetite vanished the moment he walked in, replaced by a hyperawareness that sets my nerves on edge—every movement he makes, every word he speaks draws my attention like a magnet I can't resist.

This is exactly what I can't afford. Yet I watch anyway, drawn despite every rational thought.

Last night was police work, nothing more.

The fact that I can still feel the weight of his gaze, the memory of those eyes assessing me with something that felt like hunger—that's just residual adrenaline. Biology. Nothing more.

I force myself to take a bite of eggs, chewing mechanically while fighting the urge to look in his direction. This distraction is exactly what I don't want in Shadow Ridge. Getting tangled up with someone who represents everything I'm supposed to be working against.

But then he laughs at something Diesel says—a low, genuine sound—and my resolve cracks. The smile reveals the sharp points of his tusks, making him look both more dangerous and more appealing. Even the jagged scar cutting through his right eye only adds to the contradiction.

Just for a second, I wondered what it would be like to be on the receiving end of that smile, to be the one making him laugh instead of the threat he refuses to acknowledge.

That possibility unsettles me more than his violence ever could.

I drop cash on the table and stand, needing distance before I do something unprofessional. As I head for the door, I have to pass their table. I brace myself for continued indifference, chin up, shoulders squared.

"Perfect timing!" Helen appears beside their booth, plates of food in hand, and a smile that seems a little too convenient. "Ash, Diesel, I don't think you've officially met our sheriff yet, have you?"

I freeze mid-step, and Ash's coffee cup pauses halfway to his mouth.

"Sheriff Nova Reyes," Helen continues, apparently oblivious to the sudden tension. "Meet Ash and Diesel from the Ironborn MC."

Diesel rises smoothly. He's about Ash's age but built leaner, with an easy grin that makes his tusks look almost friendly. Where Ash is all focused intensity, this one radiates warmth. He extends his hand with a genuine welcome. "Sheriff. Welcome to Shadow Ridge."

I shake his hand, surprised by how my fingers disappear in his grip. His skin is deep green like pine trees, with gold flecks scattered across his knuckles. The firm handshake grounds me, even as I note how he studies my face. "Thank you."

Ash sets his coffee down with deliberate care but doesn't stand. Doesn't offer his hand. Just looks at me with the kind of careful stare that misses nothing.

"We've met," he says simply.

Helen's eyebrows shoot up. "Oh! Well, that's wonderful. I forgot you mentioned—"

"Briefly," I cut in, my voice steady despite the heat crawling up my neck. "Official capacity."

"Of course." Diesel's tone is diplomatic, but there's genuine curiosity there. "We should probably sit down soon and discuss coordinating efforts. The club's been helping maintain order in Shadow Ridge for almost two years now. Might be beneficial to talk strategy so we don't overlap."

It's not really a suggestion. It's a polite way of saying we need to talk about territory, about who's really in charge here, about whether I'm a threat they need to neutralize.

Ash finally speaks, his voice low and even. "Wouldn't want to step on any toes."

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The words are innocent enough, but there's something underneath them—a challenge, maybe, or a warning. Our eyes lock, and for a heartbeat, I'm back in that parking lot, remembering the way he'd looked at me like he was deciding whether I was prey or predator.

"I'm sure we can find a way to work together," I manage, then look at Diesel. "I'll be in touch."

I turn to leave, but Helen's not done. "Oh, and Sheriff? The boys do a lot of good around here. Community outreach, keeping troublemakers in line. You'll see."

"I'm sure I will," I say, not looking back at Ash.

But I feel his attention on me all the way to the door, and this time it feels less like dismissal and more like evaluation.

Or a threat.

I'm not sure there's a difference.

The Shadow Ridge Sheriff's Office sits just off the main highway on the opposite end of town from Greene's. The sign out front still reads "Sheriff R. Dawson" in faded letters, another item on my growing list of things nobody bothered to fix.

I push through the front door. The smell hits me first—stale coffee, old paperwork, and something damp. Recycled air that's been circulating too long in a place that's slowly falling apart.

"Morning, Sheriff." Deputy Santos looks up from the front desk, with dark circles under his eyes. He's maybe thirty, with a compact build, the kind of cop who keeps his head down and does his job without asking uncomfortable questions.

"Santos." I nod toward the empty desk beside his. "Still no word from Morris?"

"No ma'am. Three days now." He doesn't meet my eyes when he says it, finding something fascinating about the duty roster instead. "I've been covering his patrol sectors, but—"

"But you can't be two places at once." I study his profile, noting the tension in his jaw. "Any idea where he might be?"

Santos shrugs, the gesture unconvincing. "Morris keeps to himself. Could be sick, could be fishing. Could be anywhere."

Morris isn't sick or fishing, and we both know it. The question is whether Santos is protecting him or is scared of him. Either way, this is exactly the kind of casual insubordination Dawson must have tolerated. I won't be making the same mistake.

"When Deputy Morris decides to check in, have him report to me directly."

Santos nods in understanding.

I head to my office, leaving Santos to his reports. After a week of sorting through what GBI left behind, one thing's clear—Dawson took anything that mattered and left me with scraps.

I settle into my chair—springs shot, upholstery cracked—and start sorting through what's left. Traffic citations from two years ago. Property dispute forms with no resolution notes. Incident reports that stop mid-sentence, as if whoever wrote them

simply gave up.

But what's missing tells the real story. There are no arrest records for the past six months, investigation files on any of the foreclosures plaguing the county, or documentation of the corruption everyone whispers about but nobody wants to elaborate on.

I pull out the bottom drawer, expecting more of the same, when my fingers find something Dawson missed: a manila folder wedged behind other files.

I work it free and flip it open, revealing photocopies of bank statements, property deeds, and correspondence between Sheriff Dawson and someone identified only as "RC. "

I flip through the papers slowly. Bank statements showing regular deposits to Dawson's account—always the same amount, always from "RC Consulting.

" Property deeds with Dawson's signature, but the sale prices are too low for the current market.

And letters—short, formal correspondence about "mutual interests" and "community development projects. "

It takes me three passes through the documents before the pattern becomes clear.

Royce Carvello. RC. Victor Hargrove's nephew, continuing the family operation.

And now I'm wearing the badge he paid to control, wondering how deep this goes.

A knock interrupts my investigation. Santos appears in the doorway, coffee mug in hand, wariness written across his face.

"Thought you might need this," he says, setting the mug on my desk.

"Thanks." I close the folder, noting how his gaze tracks the movement. "Santos, how long have you been working here?"

"Four years next month."

"You must have seen a lot of Dawson's... management style."

His jaw tightens. "Sheriff Dawson ran things his way."

"And Morris? How long's he been around?"

"About the same." Santos shifts his weight, clearly uncomfortable. "Look, Sheriff, I know things weren't ideal before you arrived. But some of us tried to do the job right, even when it wasn't the preferred method."

Some of us. Not all of us. The implication only adds to my assumptions.

"I'm not here to judge the past," I tell him, though we both know that's exactly why I'm here. "I just need to know who I can count on moving forward."

Santos meets my eyes for the first time all morning. "You can count on me, Sheriff. Whatever you need."

"What about the MC? The Ironborn?" I watch his face carefully. "Can I count on them?"

He hesitates, choosing his words carefully.

"I want to say they're solid. They've done good things for this town, helped people

when the system failed them.

But they don't exactly coordinate with local law enforcement.

" His voice drops. "I've been kept out of whatever arrangements they had with Dawson.

So honestly, I don't know how they'll work with you. "

I study his face, looking for the lie, the evasion. Nothing. At least he's not covering for anyone.

"Fair enough. But right now, you're all I've got." I gesture toward the chaos surrounding us. "So we've got work to do. Starting with figuring out what happened to all these missing files."

Santos straightens despite the exhaustion written across his face, something like relief flickering in his eyes. "What do you need me to do?"

"Take a look around the office. See if you can find any recent reports on property disputes, foreclosures, anything with the initials RC." I tap the folder on my desk. "Check everywhere—file cabinets, storage rooms, even Morris's desk if you have to."

"RC?" Santos frowns. "Why those initials specifically?"

"I wish I knew," I admit. "But it's the only lead I have."

He nods, understanding. "I'll turn this place upside down if I have to."

"That's exactly what I need to hear." Finally, a deputy willing to actually investigate. "Start with Morris's desk. If he's been hiding, there might be a reason."

After Santos heads out to search, I sit alone in the wreckage of Dawson's office, surrounded by evidence of coordinated corruption. The uniform that felt like armor this morning now feels like a target, marking me as the threat to everything Royce Carvello built here.

I spread the remaining files across my desk, creating some semblance of order from Dawson's chaos. All of it pointing to the same coordinated corruption. But as I sort through the papers, questions start forming about the bigger picture.

Where do the Ironborn fit into all this? Helen made it clear that the town sees them as saviors, but what if they are just better at managing the racket than Victor was? What if they've simply replaced one form of control with another?

If they're running their own game, I need to understand what I'm really dealing with—starting with their VP.

The way Ash moved in that parking lot keeps replaying in my mind—precise, efficient, deadly. Most criminals I've dealt with fight dirty, fight desperate. They throw wild punches and hope something connects. But Ash? He fought like someone trained to inflict maximum damage with minimum effort.

And then he stopped.

That's what keeps eating at me. When those men went down, he didn't kick them while they were vulnerable. Didn't lose himself to rage or adrenaline. He just stopped, picked up the knife and waited.

What kind of man exercises that level of restraint in the middle of violence?

I pull another folder toward me, trying to focus on foreclosure notices dated three months ago.

The Hendersons on Blufton Street are behind on their mortgage and facing eviction.

The paperwork is standard, except... I frown, flipping through the documents.

The signatures are missing from half the required forms, and the court order lacks a judge's seal.

This isn't right.

I reach for my phone and dial the county clerk's office. "Hi, this is Sheriff Reyes in Shadow Ridge. I need to check the status of a property foreclosure. 247 Blufton, owners Henderson."

While I wait on hold, my thoughts drift back to the parking lot. The way Ash looked at me after I told him to drop the knife. Not with fear or resentment, but with recognition. Like he saw past the badge to the woman underneath.

Like he was deciding whether I was worth trusting.

"Sheriff?" The clerk's voice pulls me back. "I'm showing that property as occupied. There are no foreclosure proceedings on file."

"That can't be right. I'm looking at eviction papers dated three months ago."

"Hold on... let me check with the courthouse." A pause, keyboard clicking. "No, ma'am. No eviction order was ever issued for that address. If someone's been removed from the property, it wasn't through legal channels."

My stomach drops. "Thank you."

I hang up and immediately start digging through more files. The Bauer family on

Clarence Court. The Garcias on Highway 76. Property after property, all with the same pattern—incomplete paperwork, missing signatures, families evicted without the proper legal process.

They were forced from their homes based on fraudulent documentation.

My blood runs cold, but I force myself to think beyond the emotion. This is bigger than I initially thought, which means I need to be smarter about how I handle it. One wrong move, one premature accusation, and whoever's behind this will destroy what little evidence remains.

I've been here before. How many times have I sat in rooms like this, staring at evidence that should have been enough, knowing that somewhere the truth was buried under layers of corruption and lies?

Carman's case files are locked away in my storage unit back in Atlanta, but the frustration feels exactly the same—families destroyed while the system fails them.

I need allies—people I can trust. My GBI contact in Atlanta might be able to help with the legal side, trace the fake documents back to their source.

But for local intelligence, to understand how deep this goes and who else might be involved, I need Helen.

She said herself that news travels fast in Shadow Ridge.

She'd know which families were affected, maybe even who helped carry out the evictions.

I glance at the clock—almost noon—perfect excuse for an early lunch.

"Santos!" I call out, gathering the most damning files into a secure folder. "I'm heading out for a bit. Call me if you find anything else or if you need backup."

"Will do, Sheriff." His voice echoes from somewhere in the back storage room.

I lock the evidence in my desk drawer and head for the door, but pause on the threshold.

My reflection stares back from the glass—badge straight, uniform pressed, expression all focus.

This is who I need to be right now. Sheriff Reyes, not the woman who spent the morning thinking about amber eyes and dangerous restraint.

I don't have time for complications—for analyzing what Ash Thornshade represents or whether his restraint extends beyond physical confrontation. I've got a job to do in Shadow Ridge, and it's becoming clear that it will require all my focus and skill to deliver justice.

The families who were illegally forced from their homes deserve a sheriff who stays focused on the law, not one who gets distracted by motorcycle club politics. And I will make sure they get exactly that, regardless of who I have to investigate.

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Chapter Three

Ash

The clubhouse feels too small when I walk in. Walls press closer. Air goes stale. My skin's too tight, blood running hot under the surface. It has not been two hours since that diner encounter with Sheriff Reyes, and I can still feel her eyes on me, assessing.

"That was some shit at Greene's," Diesel says from the couch, a half-eaten slice of pizza forgotten in his hand. "What the fuck was that?"

"Nothing." I head straight for the bar, bypassing the coffee we brought back. I need something stronger.

"Nothing?" Diesel snorts. "You two circled each other like you couldn't decide whether to throw down or... something else." He pauses, studying my face, and his expression changes. "That's because you don't know what to do with her."

I slam a bottle of whiskey onto the bar. "Watch your mouth."

"There's the tell." Diesel sets his pizza down, wiping grease on his jeans. "Since when do you give a damn when I talk shit? This new sheriff's got under your skin already?"

My fist connects with the bar top hard enough to rattle glasses. "I said. Watch. Your. Mouth."

Diesel stares at my hand, then up at me, genuine surprise crossing his face. "Holy

shit. You actually—"

"It's not about the woman," I cut him off, pouring two fingers of whiskey.

"It's about the badge. The timing. The fact that she showed up in my town two months after we pushed Royce into a corner.

" I pause, staring at the amber liquid. "Cornered animals are dangerous, and we've been dismantling his operation.

He's about to lash out, and the last thing we need is a new sheriff walking into that without knowing what she's up against."

I down the whiskey in one swallow, welcoming the burn. It helps me focus on what matters—next moves, not whatever the hell happened when I caught Nova talking to Helen.

"Right." Diesel rises from the couch but stops just out of arm's reach, keeping the bar between us. "Because that looked real business-like back there."

"Drop it," I growl.

"Fine." He holds up his hands, but his eyes still hold that knowing gleam. "Just saying, if you're going to start a turf war with the new sheriff, make sure it's for the right reasons."

My phone vibrates—Vargan's number flashing on the screen—saving Diesel from getting his teeth rearranged.

"Yeah?" I answer, turning away from Diesel's too-perceptive stare.

"We've got a situation." Vargan pauses, and I hear him exhale slowly. "Your new sheriff's been asking questions."

My grip on the phone tightens. "What kind of questions?"

"The kind that'll put her square on Royce's radar." I hear the background noise of his shop—metal on metal, grinding gears. "Stopped by Greene's after you two left. Helen says Sheriff Reyes returned for lunch and asked some pointed questions about the families we're watching."

"Fuck. She's moving fast. Too fast for her own good." I think of Nova's calculated gaze across the diner, those sharp eyes taking stock of everything. Of course she'd move this quickly. Should have fucking seen it coming.

"Helen thinks she's legit. Asked all the right questions. Wanted contact info for the families involved. Played it off as community building."

"Those are the wrong questions if you want to stay off Royce's radar." I pour another shot, mind racing. "How the hell did she get that info so quickly?"

"Maybe she came prepared. Or maybe GBI gave her a head start."

The thought that Nova might be working with incomplete intel, walking blind into Royce's web, tightens my chest. "Either way, she needs to know what she's up against before she gets herself killed."

"Savvy thinks we should reach out. Warn her what she's stumbled into. If she's going after the same targets we are, better we coordinate than let her walk into a trap alone."

"Too late for that." I think of Nova's cool dismissal at the diner, the distance she maintained while assessing every inch of me.

"She's already decided we're part of the problem.

" The words taste bitter, and I hate that they do.

Hate that part of me wants her to see something else when she looks at me.

"Maybe." Vargan pauses, waiting. He wants me to be the one to approach her. To test those waters. The idea of getting close to her again—close enough to smell that citrus scent, close enough to see if her pulse jumps when I'm near—sends heat through my chest that has nothing to do with strategy.

"I'll handle it," I say finally.

Vargan's voice drops to barely above a whisper. "We need that badge on our side, not up our ass. Especially with Royce lurking in the shadows. Which means we better keep her alive so we can use that authority when we need it."

I end the call, pocket the phone, and find Diesel watching me.

Vargan's right, and I hate that he is. But part of me thinks he's got it backwards—we're not the ones who need to protect her.

We're the ones who need protection from what she can do with that brilliant mind and legal authority if she decides we're the enemy.

"Sheriff's asking about the foreclosure families," I explain, each word clipped. "She's moving too fast, maybe putting herself at risk."

"You think Royce will see her as a threat?" Diesel crosses his arms.

"If he doesn't already."

Diesel nods slowly. "Want me to stop by her office and feel her out? I can play nice."

The image of Diesel walking into the station with his easy confidence, flashing that smile that's charmed half the women across three counties, sends a wave of possessive rage through me that's as unexpected as it is unwelcome.

But it's not just territorial bullshit—it's the certainty that she'd see right through his act in seconds, dissect his approach with those calculating eyes, and Diesel would never even know she played him.

"No." The word comes out sharp.

Diesel's eyebrows shoot up, but he doesn't back down. "Why not? I handle cops all the time."

"Not this one." I force my voice back to neutral. "My legal background gives me the cover to approach her officially. Keep it appropriate."

"Appropriate." Diesel's mouth curls into a knowing smirk. "Right."

I ignore him, grabbing my cut from the back of the chair. "I need to check those property records again. See what she might have found that we missed."

"And here I thought you might be heading out to watch her office." Diesel makes a show of checking his watch. "You know, for reasons of appropriateness."

I level him with a stare that's made grown orcs reconsider their life choices. Narrow eyes, set jaw, anger simmering just beneath the surface. He just laughs.

"Keep your damn phone on," I tell him, already heading for the door. "If Vargan calls back with anything else, I want to know immediately."

"You're not fooling anyone, brother," Diesel calls after me. "But your secret's safe with me."

I slam the door behind me, cutting off whatever else he might say. The midday sun hits my face as I cross to my bike, mind already mapping the fastest route to the county records office.

Because Diesel's wrong, this isn't about Nova Reyes—the woman with eyes that cut through bullshit and a stance that says she's faced down worse than me.

This is about Nova Reyes, the sheriff who will either be our most valuable ally against Royce or get herself killed walking into his crosshairs alone.

And if I'm riding a little faster than necessary, gripping the handlebars a little harder than usual, it's not because I can't get her out of my head.

It's because I need to understand the enemy before she becomes something different entirely. Something more dangerous than opposition.

Something I might feel obligated to protect.

The town hall sits at Shadow Ridge's center—white columns and brick that used to mean something before Victor Hargrove made it his personal kingdom.

It's been two years since his arrest, and people still avoid the place when they can.

Smart move. Half the town council still jumps when his lawyer calls, and his property empire sits untouched while his appeals drag through the courts.

The town hall parking lot overflows onto Main Street.

I have to park my bike across from Miller's Hardware and walk back.

The town council meeting starts in twenty minutes.

That should be plenty of time to get a read on what the sheriff knows about the foreclosures, maybe gauge whether she understands what she's walking into taking on Royce alone.

Then her cruiser pulls up, and every plan I had goes out the window.

Nova steps out from the driver's seat, making damn sure the town sees who's in charge. Santos exits the passenger side. They've been on a call together. Already working as partners. The thought digs under my skin.

I stay in the shadows of the oak tree, watching. She scans the parking lot—left, right, behind—before moving toward the building.

"File the incident report when we're done here," Nova says, falling into step beside him. Her voice carries in the quiet lot.

"Copy that. You still want me to follow up with the witness about that plate number?" Santos replies, matching her stride.

"Yeah. I want to know if she's sure about the make and model of the car before we contact the owner."

"Yes, ma'am." Santos reaches the door first, pulls it open, and stands aside. "After you, Sheriff."

It's nothing. A basic courtesy. Normal human behavior that shouldn't register on any level.

But my beast prowls through my chest, a low growl building that I have to physically swallow down. The sight of Santos holding that door, the casual deference, the easy way they work together—it fucking burns.

Why?

I know why, and that's the problem.

Nova pauses at the threshold, head turning slightly. Her gaze sweeps the parking lot again, almost connecting with mine before Santos says something that pulls her attention back.

Then she's gone, disappearing into the building.

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I wait three minutes by my watch. Let her get settled. Let my blood cool. Let the beast that rose at the sight of Santos's hand on that door crawl back into whatever hole it came from.

Keep it business-like. Keep it about strategy. That's how this has to go.

Bullshit. But I'm good at swallowing bullshit when I have to be.

I slip in the back door, staying against the wall. The place is packed—standing room only, bodies pressed shoulder to shoulder. Everyone wants a look at the new sheriff, the outsider sent to clean up Shadow Ridge.

She sits at the front table with the council members, back straight, hands folded. She looks contained and controlled. Nothing like the woman who looked at me in the diner like I was shit on her shoe or faced me down in that parking lot with fire in her eyes and a gun that never wavered.

I scan the crowd. Savvy's here with Vargan, his massive frame making the wooden chair he in look like dollhouse furniture. Helen's near the front, notebook in hand—town gossip disguised as meeting minutes. Familiar faces from every corner of Shadow Ridge, all here to size up Nova Reyes.

Acting Mayor Reb Bartlett taps the microphone, clearing his throat. "Folks, let's get started."

The crowd settles. Reb taps the microphone.

"As you all know, we're here to welcome our new sheriff officially." Reb gestures toward Nova. "Sheriff Reyes comes to us from Atlanta PD with an impressive record. We're fortunate to have her experience in Shadow Ridge during this rebuilding period."

Nova stands, and the room shuts up. Her eyes sweep the crowd, then lock on mine.

Fuck.

She's looking at me like she's deciding something. Something that's going to leave marks.

"Thank you, Mayor Bartlett." Her voice cuts through the room. "I appreciate the welcome I've received from most of Shadow Ridge."

She doesn't smile, but her face relaxes a fraction.

"I won't waste your time with speeches. You've heard plenty of those from people who didn't keep their promises." She pauses, letting that sink in. "I'm here to enforce the law. Protect the vulnerable. Help rebuild trust in local government. That's it."

Her shoulders are tight. Her fingers press harder against the table. I can smell the stress on her—sharp, metallic. Her breathing's faster than it should be.

Every muscle in her neck stands out in rigid lines. Her jaw works once, twice, like she's grinding down words that want to escape. The slight tremor in her left hand—the one not gripping the table—gives away what her voice won't admit.

All these people staring at her, waiting to see if she's worth a damn.

All these people, except me.

Because she's still holding my gaze, and I realize she's using me as an anchor point. My beast goes completely still. She's not watching me as a threat. She's steadying herself against my presence.

She picked me. Out of everyone in this room, she's drawing strength from the most dangerous bastard here.

That shouldn't heat my blood. It shouldn't make me want to step closer.

But it does.

I don't move. I don't give her anything that might spook her. Just hold her gaze and let her take whatever she needs.

She takes a breath, then looks away, turning back to the crowd.

"I know what Victor Hargrove did to this town," she continues, her voice gaining strength. "How he used his power to take what wasn't his. How he manipulated the system to hurt those who stood against him."

People shift in their seats and start whispering. Nobody says Victor's name out loud anymore. Too many people are still scared of the bastard.

"Some of you have questions. Concerns. Maybe even fears about what my presence here means." She scans the room again. "That's fair. I haven't earned your trust yet. But I will."

Old man Jones stands up, leaning heavily on his cane. "What makes you different from Dawson? He promised to clean things up, too, then took Victor's money like everyone else."

Nova doesn't even blink. "I don't have ties here. No favors owed. No hands in my pockets. And a documented history of refusing bribes that cost me promotions in Atlanta."

Jones sits back down. He still looks pissed, but he's accepting her answers for now.

"What about the MC?" another voice calls out. Are you planning to run them out, too?"

Every head in the place swings toward me or Vargan. I keep my face blank, but my shoulders go tight.

Nova looks right at me. "I enforce the law, not personal vendettas. The Ironborn MC will be judged by their actions, not their reputation."

Smart answer. Gives nobody what they want to hear, but doesn't piss anyone off either.

"Any other questions before we move to official business?" Reb cuts in.

No one responds, so Nova sits down. But the crowd's not done with her.

"What about our property taxes?" someone shouts from the back.

"You gonna do something about the drug house on Maple?" another voice calls out.

"Why should we trust you won't bail like the last three sheriffs?"

The questions come fast and loud. Nova's shoulders go rigid. I can smell the shift in her scent from here—stress cutting through her usual citrus scent.

My feet start moving before I think about it—one step off the wall, ready to shut these assholes down.

Nova's eyes flick to me, just for a second. Then she smiles—not fake, but sharp as a blade—and stands back up.

"I'll take your questions," she says, voice cutting through the noise. "One at a time."

And fuck me, she does. For the next twenty minutes, she handles every question they throw at her. Doesn't lose her cool. Doesn't give bullshit answers. Just works through them like she's got all day.

She knows how to work a crowd without pissing them off or letting them walk all over her.

Then old Henderson starts getting loud, demanding to know why she's "really here," and my hands clench into fists. Every muscle in my body wants to shut his mouth for him.

Which is fucking stupid. She handled those assholes in the parking lot just fine. She's handling Henderson just fine too, but my beast doesn't give a shit about logic.

"If we could move to our agenda," Reb finally interrupts, "we have several items requiring attention. First, the county's decision to reopen foreclosure reviews."

The room goes quiet. This isn't news to me—Vargan's intel was solid—but judging by the shocked faces, it's a surprise to most.

"What do you mean, 'reopen'?" Helen asks, her pen poised over her notebook. "Those cases were settled."

Reb shifts uncomfortably. "Judge Wilkins received a petition from Caldwell & Associates, representing certain property interests. They've identified what they call 'procedural irregularities' in the foreclosure moratorium we enacted after Victor's arrest."

"Procedural irregularities," Savvy repeats, voice hard. "You mean Royce found a loophole."

"We don't know that Royce Carvello is involved," Reb cautions, but his expression says otherwise.

"The timing is suspicious," Vargan says, his deep voice rumbling through the room. "The first foreclosure reviews are scheduled two weeks after our new sheriff arrives."

Everyone looks at Nova. Waiting to see if she's on their side or Royce's.

"If I may." She stands up again. When her eyes hit mine, there's no doubt left. Just cold focus. "I've been reviewing the foreclosure documentation since my arrival."

People start talking again. I straighten up. This just got interesting.

"Many of these evictions appear to have been executed without proper legal authority." Nova's voice goes hard. She's all business now. "Missing signatures. Incomplete paperwork. Court orders without proper judicial review."

She grabs a folder from beside her chair and slaps it open on the table. "I've identified at least seventeen properties where families were forced out based on documentation that wouldn't hold up in court."

Fuck me. She knows exactly what she's doing.

She's not just calling out Royce—she's doing it in front of the whole damn town. Making his corruption public. Making it impossible for him to handle this quietly. She's telling everyone she's not working behind closed doors, not cutting deals in back rooms.

Watching her do it, knowing she understands the risk and doesn't give a fuck—that steel spine just got a hell of a lot more impressive.

The room erupts. She's been here less than a month. One fucking month, and she's already dug up evidence it took us months to compile.

"That's a serious accusation, Sheriff," Reb says over the noise.

"It's not an accusation. It's a fact." Nova taps the folder in her hand. "I've got copies of every document. I've spoken with the county clerk, the circuit judge, and several of the affected families. The pattern is clear and deliberate."

Reb looks stunned. "Why bring this to the town meeting instead of my office?"

"Because Royce Carvello's legal team is counting on this staying quiet.

" Nova looks around the room, locking eyes with people one by one.

"They're betting that if they move through proper channels—judges they've paid off, lawyers on their payroll—they can reverse our progress before anyone realizes what's happening. "

I glance at Savvy. She's watching Nova with the kind of respect that can't be faked. One steel spine recognizing another. Savvy held off Victor and Royce for three years before Vargan found her. She knows what it costs to stand alone against bastards with money and power.

"What do you suggest we do?" Reb asks Nova, but his eyes dart to me.

Nova doesn't miss a beat. "First, we delay. I'll file a formal request to review all documentation with the state attorney general's office. That buys us time."

She keeps talking—legal moves, gathering evidence, getting the community involved—and I realize she's been working from the same angle we have—following the trails we've followed, building the case we've been building.

She's not just tough. She's brilliant. Scary brilliant.

She's doing exactly what I would have done. Except she can do it through the front door while I have to sneak around back.

That shouldn't heat my blood. Shouldn't make me want to see what else she's capable of. But fuck me, it does.

Her eyes find mine again, and this time there's a question in them. A challenge. She knows I've been working on this too. She's figured out that my legal background isn't just for show. That the club has been mounting our own defense against Royce's latest attack.

She's not asking for help—Nova Reyes doesn't strike me as someone who asks for anything—but she's acknowledging that we're on the same side of this particular battle.

For now.

The meeting breaks apart. People cluster together, talking fast. I stay against the wall, watching Nova work the room. She has quick words with Reb and a longer talk with Helen. She even shakes hands with old Jones, which surprises the hell out of both of

them.

She knows what she's doing. She listens more than she talks and looks people in the eye when she makes promises.

What gets me is how steady she stayed after that moment when our eyes met. Like I gave her what she needed to keep going.

That shouldn't matter to me. Shouldn't tighten my chest. Shouldn't make my beast want to pace the cage, torn between wanting her on our side and knowing she's still dangerous as hell.

I push off the wall and head for the side door. Need to think this through. Figure out how to approach her without showing my hand.

Because one thing's clear: Nova Reyes isn't working for Royce. She's here to tear down what Victor built—just like us.

That knowledge changes the whole damn game.

When I look at her, something dangerous stirs in my chest. My hands want to touch her, see if that cool mask cracks. That shit has to stop.

From what I just saw, that brain could save this town or torch it.

Getting involved with her would fuck everything up. My judgment. The club's standing. One night between the sheets, and my brothers would start to wonder if I'm thinking with my dick. They'd be right to wonder.

But I can't walk away either. Losing her would be a disaster. We need her badge, her legal moves, and a spine that doesn't break.

The truth is, Nova and I could tear Royce apart. She plays by the rules, and I do whatever it takes.

I just have to figure out how to work with her without going crazy.

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Chapter Four

Nova

A nother sleepless night means I'm at the sheriff's station before dawn.

The station is dead quiet. No dispatch chatter, no phones ringing, no deputies shuffling paperwork.

Just me and the mess Dawson left behind.

I flip the lights on, illuminating dust motes that dance in the half-darkness.

The floor creaks beneath my boots as I head for the break room.

It's the perfect time to clear my head. Santos won't be back from night patrol for at least an hour, Walker's not due in until the afternoon shift, and Roberta, our part-time dispatcher, won't drag herself in until eight. I've got the place to myself.

I dump stale grounds from yesterday's coffee filter and measure fresh ones, the familiar ritual grounding me.

With only three hours of sleep and a full day of damage control ahead, I'll need the caffeine.

The ancient pot hisses and sputters to life as I hit the switch, the smell of brewing coffee slowly replacing the lingering scent of industrial cleaner from the night janitor.

While it percolates, I head to my office.

Another box of files waits by the door—evidence of Dawson's corruption that I still haven't finished sorting through.

I drag it to my desk and drop it with a thud that echoes through the empty building.

The Henderson foreclosure file sits on top, the manila folder worn at the edges, the pages inside crisp with official stamps that don't match the forged signatures.

I sink into my chair and pull the file open. Columns of numbers blur before my gaze. My brain refuses to focus, drifting instead to the town meeting a few nights ago—specifically, the bomb I dropped about the foreclosure fraud.

I can still see the shock rippling through the crowd when I laid out seventeen properties with fraudulent documentation.

Conversations died mid-sentence, replaced by angry murmurs and pointed stares.

Mayor Bartlett's face went pale, then red, when he realized I'd bypassed his office entirely and taken the evidence straight to the public.

"You should have consulted with the council first," he'd said after the meeting, tone tight with frustration.

I should have. I should have played nice, worked through proper channels, given Royce's people time to bury evidence and intimidate witnesses, like every other sheriff who'd tried to clean the house and ended up burying themselves.

But it was worth it for the look on Ash's face. Not shock like the rest of them. A smirk. Pure appreciation for a well-executed power play. Like he knew exactly what I

was doing and approved.

Because I did know exactly what I was doing—putting everyone on notice. Royce, his lawyers, and anyone in this town still carrying water for his operation. I'm not here to play politics or work within a system designed to protect the guilty. I'm here to clean house, and I'm not afraid of anyone.

But thinking about that meeting brings me right back to him—back to Ash, back to his gaze.

The way it held mine when I froze at that podium. How it felt like an anchor when I was drowning in a sea of unfamiliar faces. How it seemed to push me forward when my words caught in my throat.

No. I shake my head, trying to refocus on the files. I can't afford to waste time getting distracted by complicated orcs. I used him that night—found his face in the crowd when panic tried to shut me down. Nothing more.

But when I think about that moment again—standing there with the microphone in my hand and a room full of people waiting for me to speak—I remember how the setup hit me. Microphone, crowd, all those waiting faces—it was just like Carman's press conference.

Six years ago, the microphone felt the same. The crowd staring, waiting. For a split second at that town meeting, I wasn't Sheriff Nova Reyes with a badge and evidence to destroy Royce Callo. I was twenty-two again, watching powerful men in uniforms lie about my sister while cameras rolled.

My parents holding each other, fighting back tears. The police chief reading lies from a script. Camera flashes blinding me. Microphones shoved in my face like weapons.

So many people gathered there, so much power concentrated in one place, and the memory of how not one of them gave a damn about the truth still burns.

When I stood at that town meeting podium, the memory blindsided me. For a second, I was drowning in it, helpless. I needed something, anything, to remind me where I was and who I'd become. My gaze swept the room, desperate for an anchor.

And it landed on Ash.

Those amber irises didn't see a woman falling apart. They saw power. In that look, something shifted in my chest—the panic loosened, my breathing steadied. For a heartbeat, I wasn't a victim. I was Sheriff Nova Reyes.

It was enough. Hell, maybe I'd even made it up.

I shake my head again and tell myself I have better things to do than daydream about orcs—things like finding the connection between these foreclosures and Royce Carvello, like figuring out where Deputy Morris disappeared to, like doing my actual job instead of replaying that moment when his stare saw right through me.

I force my attention back to the Henderson file, determined to make progress on something concrete.

The station's front door opens, hinges protesting with a long creak. Heavy footsteps cross the bullpen.

"Sheriff?" Santos calls out.

I close the file, pushing thoughts of Ash back into the locked compartment where they belong. "In here."

Santos appears in my doorway, uniform wrinkled from a twelve-hour shift, dark circles carved beneath his gaze. He leans against the door frame.

"Morris is still a no-show," he says, not bothering with good mornings. "Checked his place last night before my shift. Car's gone. Mail's piling up."

I push the file aside. "Any calls to his cell?"

"Straight to voicemail." Santos rubs his jaw where stubble has grown past regulation length. "I put in his patrol reports for the week. Filled in the blanks as best I could between me and Walker."

"Good, but you look like hell." The words come out sharper than intended, but Santos just shrugs.

"Double shifts'll do that." He attempts a wary grin. "Nothing I can't handle."

My stomach tightens as I watch him. His exhaustion is written in every line of his face, but I keep my expression neutral.

Santos didn't ask for this mess—a missing deputy, a new sheriff with an agenda, a town balanced on the edge of implosion.

Even with Walker picking up extra shifts, we're stretched too thin with Morris gone.

"This can't continue," I say, shuffling papers to avoid meeting his gaze. "You'll run yourself into the ground covering for Morris."

"Someone's gotta patrol the west quadrant."

"I'll take it today." I hold up a hand when he starts to protest. "You're off shift. Go

home. Sleep. I need at least one functioning deputy in this department."

Santos straightens slightly, uncertainty crossing his face. Not quite suspicion, but close. "You know the west quadrant runs right along Ironborn territory."

"I'm aware." I meet his stare directly, challenging the unspoken question. "Is that a problem?"

"No, ma'am." He shifts his weight, hesitating.

"First thing we're doing when the council frees up more funds is getting you more backup," I say, changing the subject. "Real backup, not just Roberta answering phones whenever she bothers to show up."

Santos's mouth twists into a smirk. "Heard that before. Dawson promised two more deputies last spring. Then one last summer. Never materialized."

"I'm not Dawson."

"No, ma'am. You're not." His tone stays carefully neutral, but something shifts in his expression. A question he's not going to ask.

I like Santos. He's competent, loyal to the badge if not necessarily to me. But there's something in his careful answers about Morris, in the way he watches me when we discuss the MC, that makes me wonder exactly what he knows and isn't saying.

"Get some rest," I tell him, softening my words. "I'll handle Morris when he decides to show his face again."

Santos nods, pushing off from the doorframe. "10-4." He turns to go, then pauses. "Oh, almost forgot. Helen called. Said she needs to talk to you when you get a

chance. Sounded important."

I pause, pen halfway to paper. "Did she say what about?"

"No." Santos shrugs. "Just that she'd be at the diner all morning."

After he leaves, I sit in the silence, staring at my coffee mug.

The Henderson file isn't getting any clearer, and every time I try to focus, my brain keeps drifting back to those amber irises and that damned smirk.

I could use some decent coffee instead of whatever motor oil I brewed earlier.

Might as well see what Helen wants. Better than sitting here with my thoughts running in circles.

The bell over Greene's door announces my arrival, and every head turns my way. Conversations pause, then resume slightly louder. They were talking about me.

Helen spots me from behind the counter, wiping her hands on her apron. She gestures to an empty booth in the corner, away from curious ears.

"Morning, Sheriff," she says, sliding a mug in front of me as I settle into the vinyl seat. "Santos, pass along my message?"

"Said you needed to talk." I watch her pour coffee without asking, the dark liquid steaming in the chipped mug. "Sounded important."

Helen glances over her shoulder, checking who's within earshot. The diner's half-full—truckers passing through, farmers grabbing breakfast before heading to their fields, the regulars who come for the gossip as much as the food. Silas Jenkins is in

his usual spot.

Helen leans in, words dropping. "Town's split down the middle after the town hall meeting."

"About the foreclosures?" I wrap my hands around the mug, letting the heat seep into my palms.

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"About the fact that people think you and Ash have some kind of understanding." Helen's weathered face hardens with concern. "Half the town thinks you're cozying up to the MC to push your agenda. The other half thinks you're using them to get to Royce."

"That leaves no half on my side," I point out.

Helen's expression softens. "Well, you have me. And Savvy can't shut up about how you commanded that room when old Henderson started going at you." She grins. "And then there's Ash. That look must have meant something."

"What look?" I ask, but heat flashes through my chest even as I say it.

Helen raises an eyebrow. "The one where you locked eyes with him when you froze up there. Half the room caught it."

My stomach drops. I thought it was just between us. "It wasn't that noticeable," I say. "It was just a glance."

"It was noticeable enough," Helen says, refilling my mug. "Only takes a few sharp eyes in this town to spot something, and by morning everyone's heard about it."

Great. So not only am I working understaffed and with little cooperation, but I'm also under a microscope. Warmth spreads up my throat, settling behind my ears despite my best efforts. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look, I've been serving coffee in this town for twenty years. I know a connection

when I see one." She leans closer. "Shadow Ridge has been through hell. We're still healing. Just... be careful. People are watching, and not everyone wants to see you succeed."

"I'm not playing any sides." The words come out sharper than intended. I lower my tone and lean in. "I'm here to enforce the law. That's it."

"Maybe." Helen doesn't look convinced. "But folks in this town have been burned before. They're watching to see where your loyalties land."

"My loyalty is to the law."

"And if Ash happens to fall on the right side of it?" Helen raises an eyebrow. "Or the wrong side?"

I start to answer when the kitchen doors swing open. Savvy emerges, sleeves rolled up over old burn scars, moving with her usual easy confidence. I've read her files on Victor Hargrove. The woman's got steel for a spine.

Her gaze finds me, and she changes direction, heading straight for our booth.

"Helen, I need you on the grill," she says, authority clear in her tone. "Willie's burning the hash browns again."

Helen straightens immediately. "Yes, boss." She gives me a meaningful look before heading back to the kitchen. "Think about what I said, Sheriff."

Savvy slides into the seat Helen vacated, relaxed but ready. She positions herself so she can see both exits—old habits.

"Didn't expect to see you here this early," she says, studying me. "Thought you'd be

buried in those foreclosure files after your big revelation at the meeting."

"Taking a coffee break." I meet her stare directly. "Your employee seems concerned about town politics."

"Helen worries." Savvy shrugs, the gesture deliberately casual, though nothing about her is. "She's seen this town at its worst. We all have."

"Sounds like she thinks I'm making things worse."

"She thinks you're playing with fire." Savvy's words drop, steel beneath the calm. "Helen's protective of the MC. They were there when Victor tried to burn this place to the ground and all of us with it. When nobody else would stand against him."

Savvy gets straight to the point. No small talk, no pretense. I can respect that.

"I'm not here to undermine the club," I say. "But I enforce the law equally. No exceptions."

"And Ash?" Savvy's tone stays level, but there's steel underneath. "Where does he fit in your equal enforcement?"

My coffee cup stops halfway to my mouth. "Same as everyone else."

"You sure about that?" Savvy leans forward, elbows on the table. "I've seen how cops look at orcs. You don't look at him with the same contempt."

"How I look at anyone isn't your concern."

"It is when it affects people I care about."

" Her words harden. "Ash isn't just the VP of the Ironborn.

He's the one who keeps fighting long after everyone else thinks the threat is gone.

He spent two years making sure Victor's charges stuck, no matter whose palms got greased.

He's earned loyalty here. I don't want to see that challenged. "

I know better than to underestimate someone who is devoted to protecting her people.

"I'm not here to challenge anyone. My job is simple. Separate the truth from the lies and make sure the right side wins." I set my mug down carefully.

"Tall order." Savvy's expression softens fractionally. "Maybe too tall for one person to handle alone."

The diner's energy shifts as someone enters. I don't need to look to know who it is. Conversations drop to murmurs, bodies turning slightly toward the door.

Ash.

I keep my gaze on my coffee, but every cell in my body seems to reorient itself toward him. Toward the space he occupies. Toward the gravity he creates just by existing.

Savvy watches my reaction, something like understanding dawning across her face. She stands, smoothing her apron. "Just be careful, Sheriff. People who get caught between powerful men in this town tend to get hurt."

She heads for the counter where Ash waits, his back to my booth. Savvy claps him on

the shoulder, leans in to say something. He nods.

Helen emerges from the kitchen with a to-go cup, sliding it across the counter to Ash. Their brief exchange reinforces what I already know—he belongs here. He's earned his place in this community. I'm the outsider, badge or no badge.

Not once does he turn toward my booth. Not once does he acknowledge my presence.

The dismissal should sting, but it doesn't. After what Helen just told me, he's being smart. People are watching, and he's giving them nothing to see. I can respect that, even if part of me wishes things were different.

I drop cash on the table and stand, gathering my jacket and keys. If I have to pass him on my way out, I'll do the same and act like he's just another citizen going about his business.

But as I move toward the door, he turns, and for the briefest moment, our stares lock.

Recognition slams through me. Awareness. Heat that has nothing to do with the coffee and everything to do with the way he's looking at me.

Then it's gone, his attention returning to Savvy as if I never existed.

The hollow feeling in my chest catches me off guard, but I push through the door into the morning air, breathing deep.

I make it three steps toward my cruiser before the diner door swings open behind me.

"Sheriff."

His voice stops me short, deep as a well, rough as gravel. I turn slowly, keeping my

expression neutral despite my pulse picking up.

Ash stands on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets, shoulders tense beneath his cut. The morning sun highlights the scar cutting through his eyebrow and the sharp line of his jaw.

"We need to talk," he says.

I glance back at the diner, then at him. "Smart move back there. Helen says people are watching."

Ash glances back at the diner windows, where faces suddenly find reasons to look our way. "Not here."

Without waiting for a response, he turns and heads for the alley beside the building. Ash stops when we're hidden from view, turning to face me.

"What's on your mind?" I ask.

"What was that look about?" He steps closer, using his size to crowd the narrow space between us. His words are low and rough, those amber eyes lock on mine with an intensity that makes my pulse jump. "Town meeting. You froze up there and found my face in the crowd. What happened?"

Heat crawls up my throat. "I got through the speech, didn't I?"

"That's not what I asked." His stare doesn't leave mine. "You were drowning up there for a second. Then you looked at me and everything changed."

"Does it matter?" I cross my arms, matching his directness. "You got what you wanted. I dropped that bomb on Royce in front of the whole town. Made it public so

he can't handle it quietly."

"What I wanted?" Something dangerous flickers in his expression. "You think I wanted you putting yourself in his crosshairs?"

"I think you wanted Royce exposed. Mission accomplished." I shrug, refusing to let him see how his intensity affects me. "So what's the problem?"

"The problem is people are talking. About you and me, whether you're working with the MC or against us." His jaw tightens. "Either way, you're compromised."

"According to Helen, there's no half on my side anyway."

"Helen's wrong." The words come out rougher than he probably intended. "But it doesn't matter what she thinks. It matters what Royce thinks."

"So the cold shoulder in there was strategy." I match his energy, refusing to back down from the heat in his gaze. "Helen says people are watching."

"Helen's right." He doesn't step back, doesn't give me space. "This town's balanced on a knife edge. One wrong move, one hint that you're compromised, and Royce wins."

"I can handle Royce."

"Can you?" His tone drops lower, rough enough to make something twist in my stomach. "He finds pressure points. People who matter. Uses them."

The implication hits me. I matter to him.

"I've survived worse than Royce Carvello." Memories of Carman surface before I can stop them. "I don't need your protection."

"Maybe not." His gaze softens fractionally, seeing something in my expression I didn't mean to reveal. "But you've got it anyway."

"I didn't ask for it." I step closer, close enough to catch the scent of leather and something like a sweet spice I can't name but is purely his. "I don't want it."

"Doesn't matter what you want." His voice drops. "Some things just are."

"Like you pretending I don't exist?" I keep my tone level. "That's your strategy?"

"Would you rather I make it obvious? Give Royce's people exactly what they're looking for?"

"There's nothing between us to find."

"You think that matters?" His laugh is dark. "They'll manufacture something if they need to."

I should step back. Should focus on the case instead of the infuriating orc standing too close, claiming to protect me from threats I can handle myself.

Instead, I ask, "Why do you care?"

Vulnerability flickers across his face, quickly hidden behind that mask he wears.

"Town needs a sheriff who isn't corrupt," he says. Too practiced, too neat.

"Bullshit." I step closer, invading his space. "Try again."

Ash goes completely still, predator focus zeroing in on me. For a heartbeat, I think he might say something real.

Instead, he steps back. "You should go. People are watching."

"So that's it?" I keep my tone neutral despite the frustration building in my chest.

"You make the call about what I need, and I just accept it?"

"This isn't a negotiation." Final. Absolute. "It's how it has to be."

"No, it's how you want it to be." I clench my fists, fighting the urge to grab him by that cut and shake him. "I've spent my career being managed by men who think they know better. I didn't come here to add another name to that list."

Respect appears in his gaze. "This isn't about your abilities."

"Isn't it? You've written me off as someone who can't handle Royce. That I need your protection whether I want it or not."

"Royce destroys people for less than what he thinks is between us." His tone drops, intensity burning in every word. "Your life matters more than your pride."

The raw admission stops me cold. My anger deflates, replaced by something more dangerous.

"I never asked you to care."

This maintains the confrontational dynamic while varying the language and reducing the repetitive "decided" pattern.

"I know." Regret crosses his features. "Believe me, I didn't plan on it either."

We stand there, too close in the narrow alley, tension shifting to something more complicated.

"So what now?"

"Now you do your job. I do mine." He glances toward the alley entrance. "And if people are watching, we give them nothing to see."

"And if I don't agree?"

His head shakes. "Doesn't change anything." No room for argument. "Diesel or one of the others will keep an eye on things whether you like it or not."

The presumption reignites my temper. "You don't get to assign me a babysitter."

"Call it what you want." Ash turns toward the alley entrance. "Just don't mistake distance for disinterest."

He walks away without looking back, his shoulders set in a rigid line, which means he's made up his mind. I watch him go, torn between fury and frustration.

I wait five minutes before following. By the time I reach my cruiser, my sheriff mask is back in place.

This is smart. Distractions are the last thing I need when I'm building a case against Royce. My focus needs to be on justice, not on an orc who acts like I'm something worth defending, then pushes me away "for my own good."

I pull out of the parking lot, heading back to the station. Work will clear my head.

But as I drive, I scan my rearview mirror, looking for the black motorcycle I expect to be following at a distance.

The street behind me is empty.

I tell myself the hollow feeling in my chest is relief. And almost believe it.

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Chapter Five

Ash

The war room reeks of Diesel's latest attempt at cooking. Something that might've been pasta before he murdered it. He's sprawled across the couch like he owns the place, boots propped on the strategy table, scrolling through security feeds while I pretend to focus on property deeds.

Pretending being the operative damn word.

I've been staring at the same Bauer family eviction papers for twenty minutes.

Same page. Same words that might as well be ancient Greek for all the good they're doing me.

Because my brain keeps cycling back to yesterday.

Outside the diner. Cornering Nova in that alley because I couldn't handle the tension, couldn't stop myself from crowding her space.

The way she'd gone still when I pressed closer—not surrender but survival instinct.

Hell. Why do I feel the need to make her fear me?

"You're gonna wear a hole in that file," Diesel says without looking up.

I flip another useless document. My jaw's clenched so tight it aches. "Royce is moving money through shell companies faster than we can track it. Each time we get close, another layer appears."

"Uh-huh." His tone says he's not buying my bullshit. "This got anything to do with why you looked ready to murder Santos at the courthouse the other day?"

My pen snaps between my fingers.

Black ink bleeds across the Garcia family eviction notice—another family Royce screwed over while Dawson looked the other way.

The kind of calculated destruction that should have my full attention.

Would have my full attention if I wasn't losing my damn mind over a human sheriff who's been in town all of five minutes.

"Santos was standing too close," I mutter, reaching for another pen.

"To his boss. At a public meeting. In broad daylight." Diesel finally looks up, his gold eyes sharp with amusement. "Real threatening behavior there, brother."

"Drop it."

"Can't. This is too good." He swings his boots off the table and leans forward. "The great territorial Ash getting possessive over a badge-wearing human."

My temper stirs. Restless and hungry, and completely inappropriate for what Nova Reyes represents to this operation. I've spent years building control, learning to channel violence into legal victories instead of body counts.

But something about her strips away those hard-won layers. Exposes the ten-year-old orc who learned that caring brings weakness.

It turns you into prey.

The old memory claws its way up. Always does when I'm feeling too much. I'd screamed for help that day in the camps. Cried while that bastard carved his initials into my face over a piece of stale bread. Waited for someone—anyone—to give a damn that a kid was bleeding out in the mud.

No one came.

So I stopped screaming. Stopped waiting. I built myself into something that never needed rescue again.

Now I'm watching Nova fight the same battles, carry the same weight, and instinct demands I step in. Except she's not some helpless kid. She's a smart woman with a gun and the attitude to use it.

She doesn't need saving.

But I still can't shake the image of her in that courthouse. Shoulders squared, chin up, facing down a room full of strangers while using me to ground herself. And when I'd cornered her yesterday, demanded to know why she'd looked at me like that, she'd deflected.

She talked about getting through her speech instead of answering the real question.

Why me? What made her think an orc in a leather cut would offer anything but more danger?

"She won't accept protection," I tell Diesel, keeping my voice level. Like this is about club business instead of how her scent made my hands shake. "Too proud. Too independent."

"So?"

So if Royce makes a play, she'll face it alone." The words taste bitter. True. "Fight it without backup. Maybe suffer alone because she's too stubborn to ask for help.

Diesel studies my face with uncomfortable perception. He sees too much. Always has. "And that eats at you."

It does. Damn, it does. But admitting that means admitting I care about more than keeping our legal counsel functional. It means admitting I want Nova Reyes in ways that have nothing to do with strategy.

"It's practical," I lie. "We need that badge functional, not martyred."

"Right." His smile turns knowing. Dangerous. "Practical."

My phone buzzes before I can tell him exactly where to shove his observations. Santos's number flashes on the screen, and my gut clenches.

Never good when Santos calls.

"Ash," I answer.

"We've got a problem." His voice carries tension that makes my pulse race. "Had a guy come by the station this afternoon asking questions about Sheriff Reyes. Said he was from some law firm in Atlanta, wanted to verify her employment history."

My blood goes cold. Ice cold, like someone opened a vein and let winter in.

"What kind of questions?"

"Personal stuff. Where she lives, what cases she's working, who she's been talking to." Santos pauses, and I can hear him choosing his words carefully. "Not the kinds of questions a real badge would ask so I called the firm he claimed to represent. They've never heard of him."

Shit, Nova. What kind of trouble are you in?

"Description?"

"Mid-forties, expensive suit, he drove a dark sedan with tinted windows. Polished, but something felt off. The way he studied the building was like cataloging security measures."

Royce. Has to be. Testing defenses, gathering intelligence.

And Nova has no idea.

"Where's the Sheriff now?" I force the words through gritted teeth.

Diesel looks up from his tablet, concern written across his face. He can read the shift in my demeanor, the way my shoulders have gone rigid.

"She left for the courthouse around four. Should be back soon to finish up paperwork."

Which means she's driving back alone. Potentially unaware someone's tracking her movements. My gut clenches as I picture Nova in her cruiser, focused on her radio,

checking her mirrors. Completely exposed.

"Keep your head down," I tell Santos. "And if anything happens, you call me before you call the state."

"Yes, sir."

I end the call, already reaching for my cut. Diesel's on his feet, tablet forgotten.

"Royce?" he asks.

"Has to be. Sending scouts, probing for weaknesses."

"And?"

I think of Nova's controlled fury at the town meeting.

The way she'd laid out evidence like a prosecutor building a case, painting that target on her back just like I'd warned her.

And now here it is. She called Royce out in front of the entire town, and he's responding exactly like I knew he would.

She doesn't know that someone spent the afternoon cataloging her vulnerabilities.

"Pull up residential monitoring," I tell Diesel, moving toward the bank of screens. "Everything within six blocks of Nova's place."

"That's a lot of feeds."

"Start with the emergency protocols."

His fingers pause over the keyboard. "Boss, that's crossing a line we agreed not to cross."

"They crossed it first when they started stalking her."

The words carry weight that has nothing to do with legal strategy and everything to do with the way my chest tightens when I think about someone watching Nova. Studying her routines. Planning their approach.

After a moment, Diesel nods and activates the restricted feeds. Multiple screens flicker to life showing various angles of Nova's street, her building, the parking area behind her apartment.

Diesel switches to the camera positioned across from her building and points to the timestamp from last night: "There. 11:43 PM."

And there she is.

Through Nova's living room window—blinds open, lights on—I can see her silhouette on the couch. Papers spread across her coffee table, her figure hunched over them like she's been working all night.

She looks young. Vulnerable. Human.

And completely exposed.

"Damn," Diesel mutters. "She's got no idea anyone can see in."

Every muscle in my body goes rigid. My hands clench into fists because if I can see her from this street camera, anyone parked outside could see the same thing. Could watch her routines, catalog when she's alone, plan their approach.

Study her like prey.

The urge to tear apart anyone who's been watching her sends something primal and possessive through my chest. The need to put myself between Nova and any threat in this county.

Hell. I'm watching her through cameras just like they are. I'm no better than the bastards hunting her.

Except I'm protecting her, not targeting her. Right?

Shit. I run my hands through my hair, the realization making my skin crawl. Even I don't buy that bullshit.

"She's been working past midnight most nights this week," Diesel observes quietly. "Files, laptop, phone calls. The woman doesn't know how to quit."

I watch her rub her temples. The gesture is aching familiar because I've done the same thing countless times, usually around two in the morning when legal briefs blur together and the weight of protecting an entire community settles on my shoulders.

But she's doing it alone. And anyone observing knows exactly when she's most vulnerable.

"That dark sedan," I say, voice tight. "Pull up yesterday's footage. Show me exactly where it was parked."

Diesel's fingers fly over the keys. The feed switches to yesterday evening, and there it is—the vehicle positioned with a perfect view of Nova's window. The same window where she sits now, unaware she's being stalked.

"Ash. Whatever you're thinking—"

"Tonight we make a move. She won't come to us, so we go to her."

"You planning on asking permission?" Diesel asks.

The question hits wrong. It makes me realize I've already crossed from protection into possession - wanting Nova somewhere I can monitor every threat, control who gets close."

Hell. I'm exactly the monster she should run from.

But I'm done pretending distance will protect either of us from what's coming.

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"Get me everything," I tell Diesel, grabbing the folder containing copies of the reconnaissance photos. Evidence she'll need to see. "Building layouts, security weaknesses, escape routes. If Royce wants to play games, we'll show him what experts look like."

Diesel studies my face, reading the shift in my demeanor. "This isn't just about club business anymore, is it?"

I don't answer. Can't afford to examine what's driving this need to insert myself between Nova and danger. But studying her fight alone while Royce's people catalog her movements sends something savage through my chest.

It makes me want to claim her, whether she agrees or not.

Twenty minutes later, I'm checking the Bowie knife holstered under my cut while Diesel rattles off building schematics.

"You sure about this?" he asks.

"She'll bolt if she sees a pack approaching." I grab my helmet, my mind already mapping the fastest route to Nova's building. "One orc she might talk to. Five orcs looks like an invasion."

"And if it goes sideways?"

"Then you clean up the mess." I head for the door, pulse steady now that I'm moving toward action. "Keep monitoring those feeds. Any sign of that vehicle, you call me

immediately."

The ride through Shadow Ridge takes eight minutes. Each second drags while I imagine Nova alone, unaware someone's been tracking her movements. Learning when she's home, how she lives, when she's defenseless.

That they're probably planning to use all that intelligence against her.

I park two blocks away, approaching her building on foot. The camera that gave us our view into her life sits mounted on a utility pole across the street. Innocent as a bird until you know what it's recording.

Her cruiser sits in its designated spot, engine ticking as it cools. She's been home less than thirty minutes. Barely enough time to decompress from whatever legal battles she fought at the courthouse today.

The front entrance to her building requires a key card, but the security system is a joke. Basic residential setup that wouldn't slow down trained operatives. I could bypass it with a paperclip and thirty seconds.

So could Royce's people.

I pause outside her door, listening. Muffled voices from the television, the clink of glass against wood—probably a wine glass hitting her coffee table. Normal domestic sounds that shouldn't make my chest tight.

But they do. Because behind that door is the woman who stepped between me and danger at Murphy's without flinching. Who used me as her anchor when she was drowning in that crowd, like she saw strength instead of a monster.

Who's about to discover exactly how dangerous caring about her has made me.

I knock.

The sounds inside stop immediately. Footsteps approach—careful, measured, the walk of someone who's learned to assess threats before opening doors.

"Who is it?" Her voice carries through the wood, controlled but edged with wariness.

"Ash."

A pause. Then the deadbolt turns, followed by what sounds like a chain lock. The door opens just enough for her to see me, brown eyes sharp with suspicion.

"Little late for a social call," she says.

"We need to talk."

"Do we?" She doesn't open the door wider, doesn't invite me in. She's a smart woman. "What happened to keeping social distance for the optics?"

She's right. Shit, she's right. We'd been playing it careful. But that was before I started imagining all the ways Royce's people could hurt her.

"That was before your office became a target."

Her expression shifts—suspicion sharpening to attention. After a moment, she steps back, opening the door fully.

"You've got five minutes."

I enter her space, immediately cataloging details my training demands I notice.

It is a small but clean apartment, furnished with practical pieces that say temporary housing rather than home.

Case files cover the coffee table in organized stacks.

A half-empty wine glass sits beside it, dark red against pale wood.

As I scan the room, I catch a framed photograph on the side table—a young woman with Nova's eyes, laughing at something off-camera. But Nova moves faster than I expect, snatching the frame and shoving it into the table drawer.

"Personal," she says with a tight voice when she catches me watching.

Another piece of the puzzle. Another wall she's built that I'm not supposed to see behind.

She's changed out of her uniform into fitted jeans and a tank top that hugs curves I've been trying not to notice. Hair falls loose around her shoulders, softer than the severe ponytail she wears on duty. Without the badge and gun, she looks more vulnerable and more tempting.

She looks like someone I could break just by wanting her too much.

But what stops me cold is the view from her living room window. At night, with the lights on, anyone outside can see everything—her couch, her workspace, and her exact position when she's reviewing case files or making phone calls.

"Jesus, Nova." I move to the window, and she follows. Close enough that her scent hits me—sharp citrus and warm skin that makes my hands shake. "You might as well hang a sign outside advertising your schedule."

"What are you talking about?" She steps beside me, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from her skin.

Standing this close to her heats my blood. Tempts me to cage her against the wall, press my body against hers, and show her exactly how much danger she's in.

From everyone, including me.

Instead, I pull out my phone, and show her the footage Diesel captured. "This is from our street camera just before midnight last night."

When she reaches for the phone, her fingers brush mine, and I feel the slight tremor that runs through her. Not from fear of being watched - from touching me.

Physical response she can't hide. Can't control.

Join the club.

"You've been spying on me?"

"Royce's people have been spying on you." I don't move away, don't give her space to retreat. Because standing this close to her, seeing the way her pupils dilate when I dominate her space, I'm done pretending this is purely business. "We just happened to catch them doing it."

She grabs the phone and studies the screen, trying to process the violation without showing how much it rattles her.

"Santos told me about a man asking questions at the station today."

"Reconnaissance. They're building a profile—your routines, your vulnerabilities,

when you're alone and unprotected."

"Unprotected?" Anger flashes in her eyes, but there's something else there. Something that responds to my proximity despite her anger. Heats my blood further. "I'm a trained law enforcement officer with eight years' experience in one of the most dangerous cities in the country."

"They know exactly when you get home, how long you work, when you go to bed.

What side of the bed you sleep on, when you're in the shower, Christ, Nova, they probably know what color underwear you put on this morning.

They could have a team positioned outside right now, and you'd never know until it's too late. "

Her back hits the wall. But she doesn't try to escape. Instead, she lifts her chin and meets my challenge head-on. Fighting me even as her body betrays her response to my dominance.

Hell. The way she looks at me. Like she can't decide if I'm a friend or an enemy.

"You think I can't handle myself?"

"I think you're stubborn enough to get yourself killed proving a point." I brace one hand against the wall beside her head. Close enough to feel her breath against my throat. Close enough to smell that clean scent that drives my temper higher. "And I'm not going to let that happen."

That truth slips out before I can stop it. The admission is too honest, too raw, too revealing about what she's starting to mean to me.

"You're not going to let me?" Her voice drops to something dangerous. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"The orc who will keep you out of danger, whether you like it or not."

Her pupils dilate. I catch the quick flutter of her pulse at the base of her throat. She's fighting her body's response to my dominance, an attraction that could complicate everything.

That's already complicated everything. Turned me stupid. Forced me to forget that wanting someone this much is exactly the kind of weakness that gets people killed.

"Get away from me," she says, but there's no real heat in it.

"No."

She stares up at me, trapped between my body and the wall, breathing fast enough to make her chest rise and brush against mine.

And I want to kiss her. Want to crowd her closer, pin her wrists above her head, show her exactly how much danger she's in from me. Want to make her understand that caring about her has turned me into something possessive and hungry and completely inappropriate for what she represents.

For what she deserves.

Instead, I force myself to focus on why I'm here. Try to remember that this is about keeping her alive, not claiming her.

"Your office isn't secure," I continue, voice dropping to something rougher. "Your apartment isn't secure. You need somewhere you can work without being monitored,

with proper security and backup."

"And you've decided where that is?"

"The clubhouse has a war room. Secure communications, encrypted files, countermeasures."

"You want me to work out of an MC clubhouse?"

"I want you to stay safe long enough to finish what you started with Royce." I lean closer, until my mouth is almost against her ear. Let myself have this much. This one moment of proximity before she inevitably pushes me away. "And I want you where I can protect you."

She turns her head sharply, bringing our faces inches apart. "I don't need your protection."

"You're getting it anyway."

"Really?" Her voice sharpens, some of that fire returning. "Because I seem to remember a certain orc at Murphy's who didn't need my help either. Had everything under control. But I stepped in anyway."

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The reminder hits like a blade between the ribs. She's right—I had those bastards handled, but she'd inserted herself into the situation anyway. Put herself at risk for someone she didn't even know.

For me.

"That was different," I growl.

"How?" She pushes against my chest, not to escape but to make her point. The contact burns through my shirt, tempts me to grab her wrist. "You were outnumbered, and I decided you were worth the risk. Now you're doing the same thing to me."

"Those men were nothing. Royce is—"

"Dangerous. I know." Her chin lifts in that stubborn gesture I'm learning to recognize. Learning to hate and want at the same damn time. "But so were you that night. And I still chose to trust you."

A dark grin spreads across my face. Can't help it. "Foolish choice, trusting a monster you'd never met. You had no way of knowing I wouldn't turn on you next."

"Arrogant bastard." But her voice has gone breathy, and her eyes drop to my mouth before snapping back up.

"Probably." I don't move away, savoring how her body responds to my nearness despite her protests. Despite all reason she should run from me. "Doesn't change anything."

She sets my phone on the narrow table beside us, the movement bringing her body closer to mine again. Close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from her skin. Close enough to make my hands shake with the effort not to touch her.

"They've been monitoring my work," she says quietly. "All files I review, each phone call I make. They know exactly what evidence I'm gathering."

"Which means they're already building countermeasures. Destroying documents, intimidating witnesses, buying off anyone who might testify."

I see the exact moment she accepts the reality of her situation. I see her weighing options, calculating risks, and trying to find a path that doesn't involve trusting me any more than she has to.

"How secure is this war room of yours?"

"Swept for bugs weekly. No windows. Steel-reinforced walls.

Communications are encrypted and routed through proxy servers.

Soundproof," I pause, letting the next words carry all the weight they deserve.

"And it's staffed twenty-four-seven by people who know how to kill anyone stupid enough to threaten what we protect. "

"Including me?"

Her eyes dare me to mean it.

"Especially you."

She's quiet, weighing options I can almost see cycling through her mind: pride versus pragmatism, independence versus survival, trust versus a lifetime of learned caution.

And I want to tip the scales. Want to push her toward yes, toward safety, toward accepting the protection I'm desperate to give her. But pushing Nova Reyes only makes her dig in harder.

"If I agree to this," she says finally, "what are your expectations? What do you want in return?"

The question hits wrong. Forces me to realize she thinks this is transactional. That I'm offering protection in exchange for something.

When the truth is, I'd protect her for nothing. For less than nothing. Would tear apart anyone who threatened her just because she exists. Because the thought of losing her sends something primal and violent through my chest.

Because I'm already in too deep to pretend this is about club business.

"I want Royce Carvello's head on a spike." The words come out rough. "He's threatened this town, threatened people under my protection. Now he's threatening you."

"I'm not under your protection."

I step forward again, crowding her against the wall. "You are now."

She wants to fight me, but instinct responds to my dominance in ways that satisfy my hunger.

"This isn't just about club business," she says. It's not a question.

"No. It's not."

"Then what is it about?"

I should lie. Keep my damn mouth shut before this thing gets messy.

But standing this close to her, seeing the way her lips part slightly when I crowd her, the truth cuts through all the defenses I've built.

"It's about making sure the only person in this town who can actually arrest the bastard doesn't get buried for her trouble."

Her eyes widen, and for a moment, I think she might bolt.

Instead, she presses herself flatter against the wall, creating distance she immediately seems to regret. "You don't get to push me around."

"I'm not backing down, Sheriff."

"I could arrest you for harassment."

"You could try." Anger sparks in her eyes. I brush a strand of hair away from her face, the touch deliberately gentle. "But we both know you won't."

"Why's that?"

She leans into my touch for just a heartbeat before catching herself. The slip costs her, and we both know it.

I don't move away, don't give her space to retreat. "Because you want someone strong enough to stand between you and the monsters." My thumb traces along her jaw, and

she doesn't pull away. Doesn't stop me from touching her like I have the right.
"Someone who won't flinch when things get ugly."

She closes her eyes briefly, and when she opens them, I see surrender warring with pride. See her wanting to say yes and trust me with this.

To trust me with her.

"When?" she asks.

"Now. Tonight. Pack whatever files you need, anything you don't want them accessing if they decide to escalate beyond monitoring."

But instead of moving toward her bedroom, Nova goes completely still. When she looks up at me, the surrender is gone, replaced by something harder.

"No."

My jaw clenches. "What?"

"I said no." She pushes against my chest, and this time I let her create distance. "I'm not packing anything. I'm not moving to your clubhouse. And I'm sure as hell not playing by your rules."

My beast snarls, confused by her sudden shift.

What the hell happened?

"Nova, you saw the footage. They're monitoring you."

"So I'll be more careful." She crosses her arms, chin lifted in that stubborn gesture I'm

learning to hate. "Close the blinds. Vary my routine. Take precautions."

"That's not enough—"

"It's enough for me." Determination flashes in her eyes. "You think because you showed me some footage, I'm going to run crying to the big, strong orc with my tail tucked? That I'll just hand over my independence because you say it's dangerous?"

I step forward, towering over her. "This isn't about independence. It's about survival."

"It's about control." She doesn't retreat an inch, meeting my advance with her own step forward. And suddenly I understand what shifted. What made her change her mind? "You want me where you can monitor me, manage me, make decisions for me. But it's more than that, isn't it?"

Hell. She's too smart. Sees right through me to the territorial asshole underneath who wants to lock her away somewhere safe.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

You're the one who said we need to keep a distance for optics." Her voice turns sharp. "Now you want me living in your clubhouse? That's a brilliant strategy, counselor."

My chest tightens because she's right. I'd been so focused on keeping her safe that I hadn't thought about how it would look.

How it would destroy the trust she's working to build with the town.

"People will understand—"

"People will assume I've chosen a side." She cuts me off. "And you know what?"

They'd be right. Any case I build against Royce while living in an MC clubhouse becomes tainted evidence. His lawyers would tear it apart in court."

She's right, and I know it. Worse—I should have seen it immediately.

What the hell is wrong with me?

"I drag a hand through my hair, the realization hitting like a gut punch. I've spent years thinking ten moves ahead, and five minutes with Nova makes me stupid. Makes me forget everything I know."

"I want to bring down Royce as much as you do," she continues. "But the minute I walk into your clubhouse, I stop being an impartial law enforcement officer and become the MC's pet sheriff."

"So what's your solution?" I growl. "Pretend we're not on the same side?"

"You were right about maintaining distance. You share intelligence, I build the case, but we do it properly. Legitimately." She straightens, taking control again. "The way that ensures Royce actually goes down instead of walking free on a technicality."

The logic is sound. Infuriating, but sound. And it makes her refusal sting worse, because it's not just about independence— it's about being smart enough to see the trap I almost walked us both into.

"You stubborn, reckless—"

"Careful what you call me," she interrupts, something dangerous flashing in her eyes. "Because I'm not the one who just tried to blow up my own strategy."

My hands clench into fists, the urge to grab her and shake sense into her warring with

the knowledge that she'd probably put a bullet in me for trying.

"You've had your five minutes," She adds. "Now, get out."

"I'm not leaving you here defenseless."

"You're not staying here either." She moves toward the door, opening it wide. "This is my home, my choice, my job. And I choose to handle this my way."

I don't move. Every instinct screams against walking away from her when she's in danger.

"Ash." Her voice drops, something almost gentle beneath the steel. "I appreciate the warning. I do. But I won't be managed, even by someone who thinks he's protecting me."

"This is a mistake."

"Then it's my mistake to make."

We stare at each other across her small living room. Two immovable forces locked in conflict. She won't bend. Won't break. Won't accept the protection I'm desperate to give her.

And part of me—the part that's been drawn to her since that first night at Murphy's—respects the hell out of her for it.

Even as it makes me want to throw her over my shoulder and drag her to safety, kicking and screaming if necessary.

"But when this goes to hell, when they make their move and you're alone and

outgunned, don't come crying to me."

"I won't." The certainty in her voice stops me at the threshold. "I don't cry, Ash. Ever."

"I turn back, caught by something raw in her tone. For just a moment, her guard drops, and I glimpse the woman beneath the badge—someone who's learned that tears are weakness, that asking for help gets you hurt."

Someone who's been fighting alone for so long that accepting help feels like surrender.

Someone a lot like me.

But before I can process that revelation, her walls slam back up.

"Good night, Ash."

The door closes between us, and I'm left standing in the hallway, staring at the wood grain, muscles coiled with the need to act.

My beast demands I kick that door down and stop pretending her consent matters when her life is on the line.

Instead, I force myself to walk away.

At my bike, I stop and look at her window. The blinds are still open, light spilling out into the darkness. She's silhouetted against the glass, a perfect target for anyone observing.

As if she can feel my stare, she turns toward the window and slowly closes the blinds.

One by one, the slats shut, cutting off my view until there was nothing but darkness and a faint glow around the edges.

Message received. She knows what she's facing and the offer I've given. And she's refused.

I stand there for another minute, hands clenched at my sides, before swinging my leg over the bike. The engine roars to life beneath me, drowning out the voice in my head that says I should stay. Should monitor. Should protect her whether she wants it or not.

But as I pull away from her building, the truth slams home. Nova's made her choice. She's going to face whatever's coming alone, stubborn as hell, just like she always has.

I hope she's strong enough.

Because if she's not, if Royce's people get to her... I'll never forgive myself for walking away."

Chapter Six

Nova

I check my rearview mirror like it's part of my morning routine along with coffee, incident reports, and paranoia. Diesel's bike holds position three cars back, careful distancing himself. The same distancing he's kept all week.

This is my new reality. I can't grab coffee without spotting someone watching, can't drive to a crime scene without catching a glimpse of Ash's massive frame leaning against some building nearby, or the orc I've learned is a prospect named Knox camped outside the station and my apartment. They think they're subtle. They're not.

I slam the cruiser door harder than necessary outside the sheriff's station, frustration boiling beneath my controlled composure.

A week of MC members materializing wherever I go, always close enough to respond to threats that haven't surfaced, always far enough away to maintain plausible deniability, is grating on my last nerve.

"Morning, Sheriff," Santos calls as I push through the front door. He looks up from the dispatch desk where he's covering for Roberta, who called in sick again. Exhaustion has carved lines around his eyes, evidence of another sleepless shift covering Morris's abandoned responsibilities.

"Any word from our missing deputy?" I ask, though we both know the answer.

"No ma'am. Three more days and it becomes an official AWOL." Santos hesitates. "Though there might be something you want to see."

I follow him toward the back offices. His shoulders stay rigid, and he won't quite meet my eyes. "What kind of something?"

"Morris cleaned out his locker. His desk. Everything personal." Santos stops beside Morris's desk. The photos are gone. Personal items, too. "Security cameras didn't catch a thing."

Morris knows this building's blind spots better than anyone. He knows which angles the cameras miss and which routes avoid detection. He could have spent hours here in the dark, methodically erasing any trace of his presence.

"When?" I ask, though the timeline doesn't matter as much as his message.

"Between midnight and dawn, based on when the cleaning crew left and when I arrived. Everything department-issued is still here—badge, radio, duty weapon still in the gun safe. But the personal stuff? Gone."

I study the empty desk and the bare walls where Morris's certificates used to hang. He didn't just walk away—he erased himself. This wasn't some emotional breakdown or sudden decision—Morris planned this.

"I'll file the paperwork," I tell Santos. "Make it official. Get him off the payroll so we can hire someone to take his place and give you and Walker a break."

"Yes, ma'am."

I head for my office, my mind already cataloging the implications of Morris's midnight departure. Another piece of the puzzle sliding into place, another

connection between Dawson's corrupt regime and whatever's happening now.

My desk looks exactly as I left it yesterday. Files are in neat stacks, my coffee mug is positioned beside my computer, and my pen cup is arranged within easy reach. Everything is in its place except for one addition that stops me cold.

A printout, folded once, sits dead center on my keyboard.

My hands tremble as I unfold it, dread pooling in my stomach. The headline from six years ago burns across my vision: "Local Woman Found Dead in Apparent Drug Deal Gone Wrong." Below it, Carman's smiling face stares back at me, younger, hopeful, alive.

The official story. The lie that buried her truth.

I drop into my chair, my legs suddenly unsteady. Fresh ink on printer paper. Someone pulled this from an online archive, researched me, found my weakness, and decided to exploit it.

Morris. Has to be Morris. But how does he know about Carman? About the connection between a dead girl in Atlanta and a sheriff in Shadow Ridge?

Unless someone told him.

I fold the article carefully, sliding it into my drawer under the Bauer files. They've done their research. They know exactly how to hurt me.

But they're wrong about one thing. Carman isn't a weakness they can exploit. She's the reason I'm here, the fuel that's driven every decision since I pinned on this badge. They think they're threatening me.

They're reminding me why I fight.

Santos appears in my doorway. "Sheriff? Judge Hendricks moved up the Bauer foreclosure hearing. You wanted to be there."

Right. The elderly couple whose farmland Royce has been circling like a vulture. Mr. Bauer called yesterday, voice shaking with desperation, explaining how they couldn't afford a lawyer but heard the new sheriff might help.

"What time?" I ask, checking my watch.

"Ten minutes ago. The courthouse is running behind, but you should probably head over."

I grab my jacket and keys, shoving thoughts of printed articles and missing deputies into the compartment where I keep things that can't be solved immediately. Right now, an elderly couple needs someone in their corner.

The ride to the courthouse takes twelve minutes, and I spot Diesel's bike following at a careful distance before I'm halfway there.

By now, the surveillance has become routine, predictable enough that I've started timing their shifts, noting their patterns.

Knox handles most shifts as the prospect.

Diesel covers midday. Ash fills in whenever he deems necessary.

Surveillance dressed up as safety.

Inside the courthouse, I head for Judge Hendricks's courtroom, nodding to the bailiff

who recognizes me from previous hearings.

The Bauer case should be straightforward, an elderly couple trying to fight an improper foreclosure, armed with nothing but righteous indignation and a case file thinner than tissue paper.

I slip into the gallery just as proceedings begin, scanning the courtroom for familiar faces.

The Bauers sit in the front row, he in an ill-fitting suit, she clutching a worn purse like a lifeline.

Across the aisle, Royce's legal team spreads across a full bench, briefcases and suits worth more than most Shadow Ridge residents make in a year.

And at the defendant's table, broad shoulders unmistakable even in a tailored jacket, sits Ash.

He's traded his leather cut for courtroom attire, but nothing can disguise the controlled power in his posture or the way other attorneys give him a wide berth.

This is Ash in his element, not the brawler from Murphy's parking lot, but the orc who tried to manage me under the guise of protection just days ago. Same control. Different battlefield.

"Your Honor," the lead attorney for the foreclosure company begins, "this is a simple matter of contract default. The defendants failed to meet their financial obligations as outlined in—"

"Objection." Ash's voice cuts through the courtroom, silencing everyone. He rises slowly, and even in civilian clothes, he dominates the space. "Counsel is

misrepresenting the facts. My clients were never in default because the loan modification they were promised was never processed."

Judge Hendricks adjusts his glasses, jaw tight as he studies Ash with obvious distaste. "Mr. Thornshade, can you substantiate that claim?"

"I can, Your Honor." Ash produces a folder thick with documentation. "Bank records show my clients made every required payment during the modification period. The foreclosure proceedings were initiated in error."

I watch him work, and it's like watching a master craftsman. Every gesture deliberate, every word calculated for maximum impact. He presents evidence with the same precision he probably used to dismantle Victor Hargrove's empire, methodical, thorough, devastating.

But what catches me off guard isn't his legal acumen. It's the moment he turns to explain something to Mrs. Bauer, voice dropping to something gentle, patient. He takes her weathered hand in his massive one, speaking slowly, making sure she understands every step of the process.

This isn't performance. You can't fake that kind of care. The gentleness, the genuine care in his expression, it's the same quality I glimpsed that night at Murphy's when he held back his violence despite having every excuse to unleash it.

"Furthermore, Your Honor," Ash continues, returning his attention to the judge, "the foreclosure company violated state notification requirements. My clients were never properly informed of their right to request a hearing."

The opposing counsel scrambles, shuffling papers, clearly unprepared for this level of resistance. They expected an elderly couple with no representation, an easy victory in an ongoing campaign to strip away everything of value in Shadow Ridge.

But then the lead attorney rallies. "Your Honor, while Mr. Thornshade raises procedural concerns, the fundamental issue remains unchanged. The defendants signed a loan agreement with specific terms and have failed to meet their obligations."

Judge Hendricks nods, studying the paperwork before him. "Mr. Thornshade, the loan application is quite clear about the payment schedule your clients agreed to."

Mrs. Bauer makes a small, distressed sound. "But that's not what we signed," she whispers to her husband, loud enough for the courtroom to hear.

Ash reaches into his briefcase, his movements unhurried despite the tension in the room. "Your Honor, I'd like to submit the defendant's original copy of the loan application."

The change in the room is immediate. Opposing counsel goes rigid. Judge Hendricks takes the document, comparing it to what he'd been reviewing.

"The terms are substantially different," the judge says slowly. "Interest rate, payment schedule, late fee provisions, none of this matches."

"It appears someone created fraudulent documentation to facilitate an illegal foreclosure," Ash says, his voice carrying the weight of absolute certainty.

When Judge Hendricks finally bangs his gavel, dismissing the case with prejudice, Mrs. Bauer bursts into tears. Her husband's hands shake as he grips the back of the pew in front of him.

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Royce's lawyers pack their briefcases with sharp, angry movements. One of them mutters something under his breath that makes his colleague elbow him hard in the ribs. They're pissed, but more than that—they're rattled. They didn't expect to lose.

And I've just witnessed something that cracks the careful walls I've built around my assessment of Ash Thornshade.

Outside the courthouse, I catch up with him as he's loading files into his bike's saddlebags. The Bauers have already left, both of them smiling thanks to the orc who just saved their home.

"That was good work in there," I tell him, keeping my voice neutral despite the strange flutter in my chest. "Hell of a save with that original loan application."

Ash glances up, something almost like surprise crossing his face. "Just doing my job."

"Job or not, it was impressive." I watch his face, noting the way he deflects the compliment. "If you had that document, why didn't the Bauers use it earlier? Before it got to a hearing?"

There's a slight pause before he answers. "They lost their copy years ago. When they asked the bank for a replacement to verify their terms, guess what they got?"

My cop brain processes this. "The forged version." I study his profile. "So how did you get the real one?"

That dangerous smile spreads across his face. "Mr. Archer at Shadow Ridge Loan and Trust keeps very thorough records. Never throws anything away."

"And he just handed it over to you, knowing Royce will pay him back for this once he finds out?"

"Archer's under our protection now." His voice is flat. "Besides, his kid had some legal troubles that needed fixing."

The implication hits me immediately. "You blackmailed him."

"I solved his son's problems." Ash grins. "Kid was looking at serious jail time for some stupid shit. Now he's not."

I process the timeline. Kid in trouble, dad with access to evidence, convenient legal help. "You leveraged the son to pressure the father."

"I beat Royce at his own game."

"That's still against the law, Ash."

His voice goes cold, distant. "That's against your law. Not mine."

The certainty in his voice unsettles me more than the admission itself, like he's thought about this distinction before. Like he's had to choose between legal and right more than once.

"You can't just pick and choose which laws apply to you," I say, though my voice lacks the conviction it should carry.

"Can't I?" He turns to face me fully. "Your legal system puts orc children in cages for

sport. Carved scars into faces for entertainment. You think I owe that system my obedience?"

My eyes go to the scar bisecting his eyebrow. "Wait. Your scar, is that how you got it?"

His expression shuts down completely. "Drop it."

"Ash—"

"I said drop it."

My chest tightens. He was a child when someone carved that scar for entertainment. I recognize the weight because I carry my own wounds, carved by systems that failed us both. His from cruelty, mine from corruption. Different weapons, same injustice.

"Those weren't laws. That was abuse."

"And what do you call a system that lets corrupt bankers forge documents while elderly couples lose their homes?" His amber eyes burn with conviction. "What do you call judges who take bribes and sheriffs who look the other way?"

I want to argue, but the words stick in my throat. Because he's not wrong. The same system I swore to uphold failed the Bauers completely.

"Working outside the law makes you no better than them," I say finally.

"Working within the law got the Bauers a foreclosure notice." His voice is steady, matter-of-fact. "Working outside it got them their home back."

"And when Royce's lawyers find out? If they prove you coerced that evidence?" I

shake my head. "The ruling won't stick. The Bauers will go through losing their home twice. Is that really worth adding another win to your case record?"

He goes very still. His voice turns soft and measured, the kind of control that feels more dangerous than shouting.

"Good to know what you really think, Sheriff. Just another monster padding his scorecard."

My stomach drops. I know that tone—I've used it myself when someone cuts too deep. Suddenly, I'm scrambling. "I didn't mean it like that."

"You waived your fee," I say quickly, trying to salvage the conversation. "Probably covered their filing costs, too."

"You don't know what you're talking about." His jaw tightens, that familiar defensive wall sliding into place.

"I know what I saw." I study his profile, noting the way he avoids meeting my eyes. "You could have charged them thousands. They would have paid somehow, mortgaged the farm they just saved, or borrowed against their retirement. But you didn't."

"Enough."

"Why?" I move closer, invading his space the way he's been invading mine all week. "Afraid someone might think you actually have a conscience underneath all that intimidation?"

His head snaps up, amber eyes blazing. For a moment, I think he might unleash some of that controlled violence on me, pin me against his bike, crowd me against the

courthouse wall, remind me exactly how dangerous he can be.

Instead, he just looks tired. "You don't know me."

"I'm starting to."

Something shifts across his expression, vulnerability quickly masked by irritation. "Yeah? And what do you think you know?"

"I know you saved that couple's home because it was the right thing to do." I hold his gaze, refusing to let him retreat. "I know you sat with Mrs. Bauer until she stopped shaking. I know you explained everything twice because she needed to understand."

"That was just practical."

"Human. That's human, Ash." The words surprise us both. "Whatever else you are, whatever you think you are, that was just... good. Pure and simple."

The change in him is immediate and violent. His entire body goes rigid, hands clenching into fists at his sides. The careful control I've come to expect from him cracks, revealing something raw and furious underneath.

"Human?" The word comes out like a curse, dripping with venom I've never heard from him before. "You think what I did in that courtroom was human?"

I take a step back, startled by the intensity of his reaction. "I meant—"

"I know what you meant." His voice drops to that dangerous register that sends a shiver up my spine. "You meant it as a compliment. But you have no idea what you're saying."

"Ash—"

"Humans put me in a cage when I was ten years old." His hand shoots out, capturing mine before I can react. Not painful, but unyielding. "You want to know what humanity really is?"

He starts to guide my fingers toward his scar. "Feel it."

I jerk my hand back, heart hammering. "Ash—"

"All for a fucking piece of bread I took when I hadn't eaten in three days." Each word comes out harder than the last, decades of suppressed rage bleeding through. "That's your precious humanity, Nova. It hunts and it hurts and it breaks children for sport. Don't you ever mistake me for that."

The confession strips away everything I thought I knew about him. I see him differently now—not just the controlled predator, but the child who survived unspeakable cruelty.

"So don't you dare," he continues, stepping closer, using his size to intimidate, "call my compassion human. Don't reduce what I did to some pale imitation of the species that tried to break me."

"That's not what I meant," I say quietly, holding my ground despite every instinct screaming at me to retreat. "I wasn't trying to—"

"What you meant doesn't matter." His jaw works like he's physically fighting for control. "What I am, what we are, isn't measured by how closely we resemble our oppressors."

For a moment, we stand locked in tense silence. His breathing is harsh, controlled,

like he's fighting not to lose himself completely to whatever memories I've just triggered.

When he speaks again, his voice has dropped to something rawer. More honest.

"When an orc shows mercy, it's not because we learned it from humans.

It's despite everything humans tried to teach us.

" His eyes hold mine, burning with conviction.

"What I did for the Bauers? That's not human kindness.

That's who I choose to be when no one's watching, when there's no reward. When it costs me something to care."

"You're right," I say finally. "I'm sorry."

The apology catches him off guard. Some of the tension bleeds from his shoulders, though wariness remains in his eyes.

"I shouldn't have called it human," I continue. "What you did for them was all you. Your choice. Your compassion." I pause, searching for the right words. "It was good because you're good, not because you're imitating something else."

Something shifts across his expression—surprise, maybe relief—like he's been waiting his entire life for someone to see the distinction.

Then his expression shuts down completely. "Don't make me into something I'm not."

"I'm not making you into anything." I step back, giving him space to breathe. "I'm

just saying what I saw."

He swings his leg over the bike, the engine roaring to life beneath him. "Stay behind me on the way back. Road construction's got traffic fucked up."

The subject change is abrupt and final. But as he pulls out of the parking lot, I catch something in his eyes, not gratitude exactly, but acknowledgment. Like maybe, for just a moment, he let himself believe that someone sees him as more than the monster he's convinced himself he is.

I follow him through Shadow Ridge's winding streets, but my mind isn't on the road.

It's on a ten-year-old orc child, starving and desperate, being permanently marked for trying to survive.

The way his hand trembled with barely controlled rage when he tried to make me feel his scar.

How I pulled away from his pain instead of accepting it.

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The careful balance of power and gentleness I witnessed in that courtroom feels different now. He wasn't just wielding intelligence like a weapon against injustice, he was protecting people the way no one had ever protected him.

That's when I notice the sedan.

We're stopped at a red light when it registers in my peripheral vision.

Black, tinted windows, hanging back just far enough to avoid obvious surveillance.

I might have missed it completely if not for the past week of hypervigilance, but I had been too lost in thought to catalog every vehicle like I should have.

The light turns green. Ash pulls forward. I follow, checking my mirrors.

The sedan follows, too.

Three blocks later, it's still there. Someone who doesn't want to be seen.

I tested my theory by suddenly taking a right down Maple Street instead of following Ash toward the station. In my rearview mirror, the sedan hesitated, then followed.

Definitely tailing me.

My pulse quickens, but I keep my speed steady, mind racing through options. Radio for backup? Santos is covering dispatch and is already spread thin. The irony of needing rescue from the very surveillance I've been rejecting all week isn't lost on

me.

Instead, I test the sedan's intentions. Another turn, this time down the residential street that leads toward my apartment building. Still following, but hanging back, deliberate in its distance.

Just surveillance, then—information gathering, like the black sedan Santos described last week. Uncomfortable but not immediately threatening.

Then we hit the dead stretch between downtown and my building, and everything changes.

The sedan accelerates.

Suddenly, it's three car lengths behind me. Then two. Then close enough to see broad shoulders, hands gripping the steering wheel, eyes locked on my cruiser.

I press the accelerator, but the cruiser responds sluggishly. The sedan closes the distance, pulling alongside me in the opposite lane.

For a moment, we're parallel. Then the sedan swerves.

Hard right, directly into my lane. I yank the wheel right, tires squealing as I fight to avoid a collision. The shoulder drops off into a drainage ditch. If I hit that at this speed, I'll flip.

The sedan follows my movement, staying aggressive, maintaining pressure. This is deliberate intimidation, designed to terrify without quite crossing the line into attempted murder. Payback. For what happened today in court.

My radio crackles to life. "Sheriff, this is Santos. Got a call about a break-in on

Westfield Drive. Are you close enough to respond? I'm stuck covering dispatch."

At least he can see where I am on the GPS. If he runs me off the road, Santos will know exactly where to find me. But I can't answer, can't take my hands off the wheel or my eyes off the road. Santos will know something's wrong when I don't respond.

The sedan makes another aggressive move, forcing me further toward the shoulder.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it's over.

The sedan drops back, tires smoking as it brakes hard. In my rearview mirror, I watch it execute a perfect U-turn and disappear in the opposite direction.

I'm alone on the empty road, heart hammering, hands trembling against the steering wheel.

The radio crackles again. "Sheriff? You copy on that Westfield call?"

I key the mic, forcing my voice steady. "Copy, Santos. I'm... I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Roger that. Thanks, Sheriff."

I drive toward Westfield Drive with my hands locked on the steering wheel, knuckles still white. My pulse hammers in my ears. The sedan could be anywhere now, behind me, ahead of me, waiting.

Mrs. Davis meets me at her front door in a bathrobe, wringing her hands. "I'm so sorry, Sheriff. I was sure I heard someone out there, but it's just those darn raccoons again."

I walk her through the motions. Check the garden, examine the overturned garbage can, test her locks. The routine steadies me. This is what I know how to do, help people, solve problems, keep communities safe.

But when I sit in the cruiser afterward, my pen trembles as I fill out the incident report. Three lines in, I can't hold the pen steady. I stop, flex my fingers.

They know where I live. Where I work. When I'm alone.

I stare through the windshield at Mrs. Davis's porch light, the only illumination on this quiet street. Too many shadows. Too many places to hide.

My radio crackles. Santos checking in about another call. Normal dispatch chatter that should be comforting but isn't. Because whoever was in that sedan knows our frequencies, our protocols, our response times.

I think about the printout on my desk this morning. Carman's face staring up at me from fresh printer paper. Someone researching my life, finding the exact pressure point that would hurt most.

I think about Ash's scarred face, a ten-year-old child marked for stealing bread.

Both of us scarred by different systems, both still fighting the damage.

My hands aren't shaking anymore. Just ready.

The threats are real. Getting worse. And I've been facing them alone because I'm too proud to accept help from someone who understands exactly what it costs to survive injustice.

Maybe it's time I stopped letting pride make me stupid.

Chapter Seven

Ash

The punching bag splits on the fifteenth hit, sand spilling across the clubhouse garage floor like blood from a gutted animal. My knuckles ache, split skin weeping red across my fingers, but the pain does nothing to quiet the rage consuming my chest.

Thirty seconds.

That's how long I was distracted after leaving the courthouse.

Thirty fucking seconds of letting Nova's words about my compassion being "human" dig under my skin, of questioning what she saw when she looked at me.

Thirty seconds where my attention wasn't on my mirrors, wasn't tracking the woman I was supposed to be protecting.

Thirty seconds that nearly got her killed.

"Jesus Christ, Ash." Diesel's voice cuts through the sound of sand hitting concrete. "You trying to train or brake your damn hands?"

I don't answer, just grab a shop rag and wrap it around my bleeding knuckles. The garage reeks of motor oil and exhaust, familiar scents that usually ground me. Today they feel suffocating.

"Santos called again," Diesel continues, leaning against his workbench. "Said the sheriff seemed shaken, but wouldn't accept medical attention. Insisted she was fine."

Of course she did. Nova Reyes would rather bleed out than admit weakness, would rather face down a firing squad than accept help she didn't ask for. That same stubborn pride probably kept her alive when the sedan tried to run her off the back roads.

"Tire tracks?" I ask, unwrapping the rag to assess the damage. The cuts aren't deep, but they'll sting for days. Good.

"Santos documented everything. Expert job, knew exactly when and where to intercept her, knew her route home." Diesel's voice carries the weight of implications neither of us wants to voice. "Whoever did this has been watching her for a while."

I curse under my breath, anger spiking fresh and hot.

We've been so focused on protecting Nova from theoretical threats that we missed the very real surveillance happening right under our noses.

While I was playing games with distance and she was insisting she could handle herself, someone was cataloging her every movement.

"Could be anyone," Diesel adds carefully. "We don't know it was Royce's people."

"Don't we?" I meet his eyes, letting him see the fury there. "New sheriff starts investigating illegal foreclosures, and suddenly she's getting run off the road by experts? That's not a coincidence."

"Could be." Diesel doesn't back down from my stare. "We don't know what kind of ghosts she could have trailing her from Atlanta. She could have vendettas against her

that have nothing to do with Shadow Ridge. We need facts."

He's right, and I hate him for it. Facts require patience, investigation, the kind of methodical work I've built my reputation on.

But every instinct I have screams for immediate action, for finding whoever threatened Nova and making them understand what happens when you target someone under Ironborn protection.

Even if she doesn't want it.

"Where is she now?" I ask, rewrapping my knuckles with more force than necessary.

"Station. Santos said she's been there since the incident, working late." Diesel pauses. "Alone."

The word slams into me. Alone. Exactly what I've been trying to prevent, exactly what she keeps insisting she prefers. But after today, after seeing how easily they can get to her, the thought of Nova sitting in that glorified fishbowl of an office makes my teeth clench.

"If she won't accept our offer," I say, the decision crystallizing with absolute certainty, "we'll make sure she's protected anyway."

Diesel straightens, recognizing the change in my tone. "What's the play?"

"We sweep her office tonight. Check for surveillance, bugs, anything that might explain how they knew exactly when and where to intercept her." I move toward the equipment locker, already cataloging what we'll need: "High-grade detection equipment, camera scramblers, the works."

"That's breaking and entering."

Fuck, now you're sounding like her, brother. "That's intelligence gathering." I pull out the electronic surveillance detector, testing its battery level. "If Nova's office is compromised, she needs to know. And if someone's been watching her every movement, we need to find out who and how."

Two hours later, we're inside the sheriff's station, moving through the darkened building like shadows. The security system is a joke, a basic residential setup that took Diesel all of thirty seconds to bypass. We sweep methodically, starting with the common areas and working toward Nova's office.

The first bug is hidden in the ceiling tile above the dispatch desk. It's military-grade, the kind of equipment that costs serious money and requires serious connections to acquire.

"Royce has been busy," Diesel mutters, carefully extracting the device.

The second one is tucked behind the water cooler, positioned to capture conversations in the break room where deputies might think they could speak freely.

But it's the third bug that makes my beast grow restless.

Not because of its placement or sophistication, but because of what it represents.

This one is attached to the underside of Nova's desk drawer, positioned to record every private phone call, every quiet moment when she thinks she's alone.

When she rubs her temples after a long day.

When she eats lunch at her desk because she's too stubborn to take a real break.

When she works past midnight because she can't let go of cases that matter to her.

They've been watching her most vulnerable moments, cataloging her weaknesses, and violating the one space that should be hers alone.

"Ash." Diesel's voice carries warning as I stare at the small device. "Easy, brother."

My hands shake as I remove it, carefully preserving it as evidence while fighting the urge to crush it between my fingers. My beast beneath my skin grows restless, demanding blood for this invasion, this violation of what's mine—

The possessive thought cuts through me. When the fuck did I start thinking of Nova as mine? When did her safety become more important than club business, more urgent than my own survival?

"Check the drawers," I tell Diesel, voice rougher than intended. "If they put surveillance here, they might have planted other things."

Diesel moves to the filing cabinets while I open Nova's desk drawers with careful precision.

Methodical search technique, though my beast growls at every violation of her privacy.

Pens arranged by color. Case files organized by priority.

A small bottle of ibuprofen that suggests she gets headaches more often than she admits.

Normal things. Personal things. The small details that make up a life lived in careful solitude.

The bottom drawer sticks slightly, warped wood protesting as I pull it open. More files, a backup weapon holster, emergency cash clipped together with a paper clip—

And a printed article, folded once, sitting beneath everything else like a secret she's been hiding.

I lift it carefully. Fresh paper, recently printed. The headline faces down, but when I turn it over, a photograph stops me cold.

The same face that's been haunting me since her apartment. The woman from the photo Nova hid in her drawer, now staring at me from grainy ink. Same stubborn chin, same intelligent eyes, same mouth that looks like it was made for either kissing or telling uncomfortable truths.

Then I read the headline: "Local Woman Found Dead in Apparent Drug Deal Gone Wrong."

Carman Reyes, age twenty-four.

Christ. So that's who she was. The name lands heavy in my chest. Reyes. Sister, by the look of it.

But why the fuck would she bury it this deep? Why hide it like classified intel?

Because I've watched her refuse every offer of help. Seen her work eighteen-hour days rather than delegate. Carry every case like she's proving something to herself. The woman won't even admit when she's hurt.

Same way I shut her down at the courthouse when she got too close to the truth. When she pushed too fucking hard—because if that control breaks, everything useful about us breaks with it.

She's weaponizing her damage, same as me. Using dead family to stay sharp.

Fuck. No wonder I can't stay away from her. She's just as broken as I am, just as willing to let that damage drive her. Takes one monster to recognize another.

I scan the article. College graduate. Steady employment. No criminal history. Doesn't fit the drug deal narrative, but sometimes the easiest story is the one that gets filed and forgotten.

The date says six years ago. Fuck. That's when Nova would have been starting out, probably still believing the system worked.

No wonder she fights like she's got something to prove.

The same way I've carried the weight of family I'll never see again. The same way I've convinced myself that needing anyone makes me weak, that depending on others dishonors the family who died protecting me.

"Found something," Diesel calls, his voice cutting through my focus.

I look up, carefully refolding the article, to find Diesel standing beside the evidence locker with a small recording device in his palm.

"Ash." Diesel's voice sharpens. "Brother, you need to see this."

"This was attached to the lock mechanism," he says. "Every time she opens this locker, it records the sound. Someone's been tracking which evidence she accesses, when she accesses it, probably building a profile of her investigation priorities."

Fuck. They have a complete operational picture.

"They know her cases, her methods, her timing," I say. "Royce has been three steps ahead this whole time."

"We need to get her out of here," I tell Diesel, slipping the paper back where I found it. "Tonight. This office is completely compromised, and whoever's watching her isn't going to stop at surveillance."

"She won't come willingly," Diesel says.

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"Then we make sure she doesn't have a choice." My beast settles into cold determination. "Because I'll be damned if I let them use her dedication against her the way corruption has been used against this entire town."

Diesel studies my face, reading something there that makes him nod slowly. "What's the play?"

"We show her the evidence. All of it. Make her understand that staying here means giving them every advantage." I move toward the door, mind already mapping the fastest route to Nova's apartment. "And we make sure she knows she's not fighting this war alone anymore."

Not the way I've been fighting this war—alone like a fucking idiot.

Nova's been holding her own against Royce while they've been watching her every move. Impressive as hell, but she deserves better odds than that.

And whoever thinks they can bug her office and run her off roads is about to find out what happens when you threaten my people.

Nova's building sits quiet in the midnight darkness, most windows black except for the glow from her corner unit. She's still awake, probably working through case files, unaware that every document she's touched has been catalogued by the enemy.

"You sure about this?" Diesel asks as we climb the stairs, evidence bags in hand. "She's been dodging your calls since the road thing."

"She doesn't get a choice." I knock on her door, controlled, focused, though every instinct screams to break it down and drag her somewhere safe.

Footsteps approach, slower than they should be. The peephole darkens.

"Ash?" Her voice carries through the wood, rough with exhaustion.

"Found something you need to see. About what happened today."

Locks turn, and the door opens wider than I expected. She's changed out of her uniform into jeans and an oversized t-shirt, gun belt hanging on a hook by the door where she dropped it the second she got home. Dark circles ring her eyes like bruises.

She looks like she's been running on nothing but caffeine and stubbornness for days.

My beast snarls at that cut on her temple. Someone got close enough to hurt her. Close enough to—

Fuck that. Not happening again.

"You okay?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

"Define okay." She steps back, letting us in without argument. "Santos said you found something."

"Your office isn't safe. You need to move your investigation to the war room."

Her jaw tightens, and she runs a hand through her hair in frustration. "We've been over this, Ash," she says, reading my expression. "I can't show any sign of leaning to one side or the other. Not until this case with Royce is resolved."

"I figured you'd say that." I dump the evidence bag on her coffee table, surveillance devices spilling across her files. "That's what we found in a ten-minute sweep of your office. No telling if there's more, or how fast they'll be replaced."

Nova stares at the bugs, and I watch exhaustion transform to something sharper. The same focused intensity I glimpsed in that photograph, the determined set of jaw that runs in the family.

"Military-grade," Diesel adds quietly. "Placed when Morris cleared out his stuff, probably. Someone with access and expertise."

"They've been listening." The words scrape out of her throat as she picks up one of the devices. "Every strategy session. Every witness prep." Her fingers close around the small black bug. "Every legal move we planned against him."

The scope of it crushes down on her. "The Bauers' appeal."

"And the Hendersons' hearing last week. The Garcias' whistleblower testimony." I lean closer. "Everyone who trusted you with their case. Everyone who thought they had a fighting chance."

She doesn't move, but I see it—the subtle change in her breathing, the way her pulse jumps at her throat. Not fear for herself. Something deeper.

"Shit." Her voice turns hollow. "If you'd mentioned that loan paperwork about the Bauers in my office, they'd have lost their house today. Royce would have known exactly what evidence we had and moved to block it."

Her eyes meet mine, and I see the moment it clicks.

"The Garcias have that sealed affidavit from Victor's former accountant." Her voice

cracks. "They're scheduled to meet with the state prosecutor on Thursday, and Royce will be one step ahead."

She sets the device down with deliberate control, but her fingers leave indents in her palm when she pulls away. "He knows exactly when and where to intercept witnesses. Which evidence to destroy. Which judge to pressure."

"You couldn't have known—"

"Don't." Just one word, but sharp enough to slice. "I should have checked. I should have been more careful."

Her eyes meet mine, and for one unguarded moment, I see the raw wound beneath her badge—not just failure, but the devastating knowledge that families will lose homes, land, livelihoods because she missed something.

Then she straightens, shoulders squaring. Not bending. Not breaking. Just recalibrating.

"We need to move up the timeline." Her voice hardens with each word. "Get those depositions recorded, evidence secured, witnesses protected before Royce can get to them."

No tears. No collapse. Just fierce, focused rage finding its target.

Her eyes drop back to the surveillance devices, then catch on my hands. The bandages around my knuckles. When she looks up, I'm already watching her face, and she doesn't look away.

"We will," I tell her. "The MC can help."

Her jaw tightens as she scans the room, tallying the invisible damage. "He thinks he's won by knowing our playbook." The ghost of a smile touches her lips. "Poor bastard doesn't understand what he's done."

Fuck, even with her world crashing down, she's already three moves ahead. But I see what she's doing—the way she's using tactics to avoid feeling the hit. It's the same way I use violence to avoid thinking.

My beast wants to hunt down the bastard who put that look in her eyes. But what she needs right now isn't my rage. She needs me to follow her lead.

"What's that?"

"Made this personal. Given me cause to bend every rule I've been following."

I study her face, searching for cracks in that iron resolve, finding none. She's recalculating, adapting, the analytical mind behind that badge changing focus with ruthless efficiency.

"This changes everything," she says, more to herself than to me. "We need a new approach. Somewhere secure to operate from."

The opening I've been waiting for. "The war room at the clubhouse. Swept for bugs daily. Soundproofed. Every file, every call, every strategy session stays clean."

Her jaw works as she weighs options rapidly diminishing. I can almost see the calculations running behind those eyes—risk versus reward, pride versus protection, lone wolf versus reluctant alliance.

"Same offer as last time. you take the lead, but we share intel. No secrets as far as Royce is concerned." I keep my voice level. "Joint task force. Official cooperation."

"And my apartment?" She glances toward her bedroom. "They could have—"

"Clean," Diesel interjects. "But for appearances, it'll look better if you're here at night. We'll have a prospect sit on the place during the day, one of us in the shadows every night. No more case business happens here, though."

I shoot Diesel a look for giving her an escape route when I need her contained and protected. But he's right. She'll need personal space, somewhere to retreat when the walls of cooperation get too tight.

Nova considers this, rubbing her temples. In the dim light, the resemblance to that photograph is even stronger, the same stubborn tilt of chin, the same refusal to break under pressure.

"I'm in charge," she says finally. "My investigation, my rules."

"Agreed."

"And when this is over..." She meets my eyes. "Back to how things were."

My beast grows restless, but I nod.

She looks around her living room, scattered files, the evidence of fighting alone evident in every exhausted gesture.

"Twelve hours," she says. "Set up your war room. After that, we work."

It's not a victory, I force myself to accept. It's a strategic alliance. Nova Reyes just chose to trust me with the fight I've been waging for two years. Choose to tag me in.

She's not Carman—some idealistic kid who got in over her head. Nova's steel

wrapped in flesh, and she just proved it by crossing every line she's drawn to protect this town.

Ten minutes ago, she was fighting this war with one hand tied behind her back, following every rule in the book. Now she's ready to fight dirty.

I thought Nova following rules was dangerous. Turns out that was her with the leash on.

Watching her break free from those self-imposed rules is the most beautiful fucking thing I've ever seen.

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Chapter Eight

Nova

I 'm losing my mind, and it has nothing to do with the work, that's progressing faster than I dared hope.

The interviews with displaced families have revealed a pattern more systematic than I initially suspected.

Under-the-table cash bonuses for "early departures.

" Above-market offers with twenty-four-hour deadlines.

And when residents hesitated or refused, follow-up visits from men who weren't there to negotiate.

Mrs. Henderson described them perfectly: "Big fellas who didn't say much, just stood on my porch looking at my grandkids playing in the yard.

" The Garcia family got a similar visit after turning down Royce's first offer.

Suddenly their cattle started getting sick, their well water tested contaminated.

Coincidences that weren't coincidences at all.

Working from the MC's war room should make this easier. Instead, what's driving me

insane is the suffocating presence of Ash Thornshade.

He's everywhere. Reviewing legal briefs over my shoulder. Questioning my investigative methods. Hovering like a six-foot-four shadow every time I take a phone call or step outside for air. Security, he calls it. Joint task force cooperation.

This is control wrapped in his legal terminology, and we both know it.

"The Garcia deposition needs to be moved up," I tell him without looking away from my laptop screen. "Royce's people contacted them yesterday. Offered to settle for triple their original mortgage value if they withdraw their complaint."

Ash leans over my chair to scan the notes, his chest brushing my back. The contact makes my pulse spike despite my irritation. He smells like leather and warm spice that I can't identify, but makes me want to lean closer.

"Smart move on his part," he says, his words rumbling near my ear, reminding me we're working on cases and not whatever my brain was just doing. "Buy them off before they can testify about the forged documents."

I lean forward, creating an inch of space between us. It's not much, but it gives me enough room to think. "Which is why we need their sworn statement today. Before he sweetens the offer enough to make them reconsider." I shift to glance at him. "Can you arrange it?"

"Already done. Henry Garcia will be here at three."

Of course, he's already handled it. Ash anticipates my needs before I voice them, coordinates witnesses before I ask, reviews evidence with the kind of thoroughness that should reassure me, but instead feels like another form of surveillance.

"You could have mentioned that earlier," I mutter, irritated when I should be thankful.

"I'm mentioning it now."

I turn to glare at him, but he's already moved away, settling into the chair across from me with that casual sprawl that somehow looks both relaxed and predatory.

Days of close quarters, and I still can't read him—every gesture calculated, every expression controlled.

Layers of carefully guarded information locked away behind those amber depths.

Except for his gaze. The way it tracks my movements when he thinks I'm not watching.

The subtle flare of his nostrils when I lean close to point out details on his screen.

The careful distance he maintains, like he's fighting the same unwanted awareness that's been eating at me since I walked into this room.

His breathing changes. His jaw tightens.

His hands clench briefly before he forces them to relax.

My phone buzzes. Santos's name flashes on the screen.

"Sheriff, we've got a situation at the Caldwell farm. Vandalism, but it looks deliberate. Property destruction, threatening messages spray-painted on the barn."

I grab my jacket, already standing. "I'll be right there."

"Whoa." Ash rises too, blocking my path to the door. His massive frame fills the doorway, and for a second, I'm struck by just how much space he takes up. How solid he is. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To do my job. You know, that thing I was hired for?"

"Your job is building a case against Royce. Santos and Walker can handle vandalism."

"My job," I say, stepping closer, close enough to catch that leather and spice scent again, "is protecting the people of this county. All of them. Not just the ones convenient to our investigation."

His pupils dilate slightly. His nostrils flare.

We're standing close enough that I have to tilt my head back to meet his stare, and the angle makes my breath catch.

"The people trying to hurt you are still out there, Nova.

The sedan that ran you off the road? The surveillance equipment in your office?

None of that disappears because we're making progress on Royce. "

"So I'm supposed to hide in here indefinitely? Let Santos handle everything while I play desk jockey in your bunker?"

"You're supposed to stay safe long enough to see justice done."

My ribs tighten around my lungs. Not because he's wrong, but because he's right—and because the concern in his tone sounds genuine instead of possessive.

"The Caldwell farm is fifteen minutes away," I say, moderating my tone. "Santos rides with me, we check it out, file a report. Standard police work."

"Not alone."

"Santos will be—"

"Not just Santos." Ash's jaw tightens. "If you're going out there, I'm going with you."

"Like hell you are." The automatic refusal surprises even me with its force. "I don't need a babysitter."

"You need backup that knows how to handle threats more sophisticated than drunk vandals."

"You think I can't handle myself?"

His laugh is tight. "I think you're stubborn enough to walk into danger just to prove you don't need help. And I think whoever's watching you is counting on exactly that kind of predictable behavior."

My jaw clenches. The words hit their mark because they're accurate. I have been making choices based on pride as much as practicality, refusing assistance that might actually keep me safer just to maintain my independence.

But admitting that feels too much like surrendering ground I can't afford to lose. Not to him. Not now. But if he's not going to let me out of the room until I agree, I don't have much of a choice.

"Fine," I say finally. "You can follow at a distance. As a civilian. But you don't interfere unless shots are fired."

"Agreed."

We'll see about that.

Twenty minutes later, Santos and I pull into the farm's gravel drive, Ash's bike a discreet distance behind us.

The Caldwell farm stretches across a few hundred acres of pasture, but most of the fields stand empty.

A few head of cattle cluster near the farmhouse—maybe a dozen where there should be hundreds.

The barn needs paint, the fence posts sag, and the whole place looks like a victim of time and economics.

The vandalism is clear before we exit the cruiser.

"SELL OR DIE" screams across the barn's weathered siding in blood-red letters three feet tall.

Beyond that, the real damage becomes clear—fence posts snapped clean through, gates hanging off their hinges, tire tracks cutting deep ruts through what used to be carefully maintained pasture.

"When did you discover this?" I ask Tom Caldwell, noting the exhaustion in his weathered face.

"This morning," he says. "Heard the cattle bellowing around five, came out to check, found this mess." He gestures toward the barn, anger and resignation warring in his expression. "Took me three hours to round up the stock, and I'm still missing two

head."

Santos documents the scene while I walk the perimeter, cataloging details. The fence cuts are clean, marking this as Royce's work, not teenage vandals. This was meant as a clear message to get the hell out of town before worse happens.

"Has anyone approached you recently about selling?" I ask Tom. "Real estate agents, developers, investors?"

His mouth tightens. "Matter of fact, yes. A man came by last week. Didn't give a name, just said there were parties interested in acquiring agricultural properties for development. Offered twice what the land's worth."

"You turn him down?"

"Course I did. This land's been in my family for four generations. If I didn't sell out to Victor Hargrove, I'm not selling to some developer who wants to pave it over for condos."

The pattern fits perfectly with everything we've documented about Royce's operation. Identify undervalued properties. Make generous offers. When those are refused, apply pressure through legal harassment, economic sabotage, or, in this case, direct intimidation.

"I'll need a full description of this man," I tell Tom. "Vehicle, approximate age, anything distinctive you remember?"

Tom's stare drifts past me toward the tree line, and his expression hardens. "That one of them biker things watching us?"

I follow his gaze to where Ash waits in the shadows. "He's providing security

backup."

"Security." Tom spits into the dirt. "Didn't think you'd be fool enough to get mixed up with those... creatures. Bad enough they're squatting in our town without the sheriff cozying up to them."

The casual dismissal makes my spine stiffen. My hands clench at my sides. "That 'creature' has more honor and integrity than half the humans in this county. He's risking everything to help people like you keep your land, while you stand here throwing slurs around."

Tom's stare narrows. "If you say so, Sheriff. Just hope you know what you're doing."

His tone suggests he thinks I don't. I bite back my immediate response.

"Santos will take your full statement," I tell him, gesturing my deputy over. "Vehicle description, timeline, anything else you remember about this man."

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While Tom provides details to Santos, I scan the property line where the pasture meets the county road.

The tire tracks in the pasture are clearly part of the vandalism—deliberate destruction of maintained grass.

But there are no tracks leading from the road to the damaged areas, no clear path showing where the perpetrators parked.

The ground near the road is too hard to hold impressions.

Whoever did this knew enough to park on pavement and walk in.

My gaze drifts back to the tree line where Ash waits.

Even knowing he's there, he's nearly invisible in the shadows, positioned with a clear view of both the farmhouse and the road.

Exactly like he promised—close enough to respond to threats, far enough away to avoid interfering with official police business.

Watching. Always watching.

My radio crackles. "Sheriff, this is Roberta. I got a call from the County. They're asking about your location and said they need to discuss case coordination with you ASAP."

I frown. "What kind of case coordination?"

"Didn't specify. Want me to patch you through?"

County law enforcement shouldn't need to coordinate anything with me unless they're planning to take over jurisdiction. And the timing—right when I'm investigating vandalism that clearly connects to Royce's operation—feels too convenient.

"Tell them I'll call back in thirty minutes," I reply. "I'm finishing up a crime scene."

But tension crawls up my neck. Every instinct screams that this is wrong. County doesn't just call demanding immediate case coordination. They send emails, schedule meetings, follow proper channels.

Unless they're not really county.

I catch Santos's attention, gesture to him away from Tom Caldwell. "Pack it up. We're done here."

"But Sheriff—"

"Now, Santos." The urgency in my tone has nothing to do with my own safety and everything to do with getting my deputy out of whatever crosshairs I've painted on us.

He reads the urgency in my words, immediately switching to compliance mode. "Yes, ma'am."

I walk toward the tree line where Ash waits, keeping my expression neutral despite the adrenaline building in my system. He emerges from the shadows as I approach, amber gaze scanning my face with uncomfortable perception.

"What's wrong?" he asks before I can speak.

"Maybe nothing. Maybe everything." I key my radio. "Roberta, about that county call—did they give you a callback number?"

"Negative. Said they'd call back in a few minutes."

His expression hardens. "Royce?"

"Testing response times. Checking our coordination protocols. Seeing how quickly they can get me to expose my location." The pieces fall into place with ugly clarity. "They're mapping our vulnerabilities."

"Time to go." Ash is already moving toward his bike. "Follow me back. Don't go straight to the clubhouse—we'll take a route that flushes out any surveillance."

"What about the Caldwells?" I ask, looking back toward the farmhouse. "If this was a setup to get me out here—"

"Crow will post a prospect in the tree line tonight. If anyone comes back here, we'll know about it."

For once, I don't argue. The open farmland suddenly feels exposed, the county road too convenient for an ambush. I wave Santos toward his cruiser, my stomach churning with certainty that we've stayed too long in one place.

Ash leads us on a winding route through back roads before pulling into the station parking lot. Santos parks his cruiser and gets out, looking confused by the circuitous route we just took.

"Sheriff, you want me to start processing the Caldwell report?"

"Tomorrow," I tell him. "Keep the station locked tonight. And Santos? Keep your radio and your phone close."

As soon as I finish giving the instructions, Diesel's bike rumbles into the lot.

He parks where he's clearly visible from the street, then settles against it like he's got all night.

The timing is too perfect to be a coincidence—Ash has been coordinating this since I alerted him of the possible threat.

Santos glances between the bikes, finally reading the tension. "Yes, ma'am." He heads inside, and I know he'll lock up tight.

From there, Ash leads me on another route to the clubhouse, more expert countersurveillance that reveals just how much thought he's put into keeping everyone safe.

By the time we reach the clubhouse, my hands are steady but my mind is racing. Every "random" call from county. Every "routine" question about my location and activities. Every piece of information I've shared with dispatch, thinking I was coordinating with fellow law enforcement.

How much have they learned? How much of our investigation has been compromised?

Back in the war room, I slam the door harder than necessary, frustration boiling over into panic that makes my hands shake. Days of careful progress, witnesses scheduled, evidence compiled—all potentially worthless if Royce knows exactly what we're planning.

"They've been fishing," Ash says, settling into his usual chair. "Testing our response protocols, mapping our movements. Professional intelligence gathering."

"How long?" I demand, pacing the small space. "How long have they been listening to dispatch calls, monitoring my location, tracking every move I make?"

"Does it matter?"

The casual question stops me cold. "Does it matter? Of course it fucking matters! If they know everything we've planned—"

"Then we change the plan." His tone stays level despite my rising panic. "Adapt. Improvise. Use their intelligence against them."

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one who's failed every family counting on me for justice."

The Bauers, the Hendersons, the Garcias—they trusted me, and I've been so determined to prove I don't need help that I missed what was right in front of me.

Too proud to ask the right questions, too stubborn to admit I was in over my head. "

His expression darkens. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm tired of pretending this is a partnership when you've been managing me from day one. You knew I was outgunned, didn't you? Knew Royce had resources I couldn't match, but you let me stumble around playing sheriff while you watched from the sidelines."

Ash goes very still. "You're not stumbling, Nova. And I'm only keeping you safe."

"You're keeping me controlled." I turn to face him fully, done with careful diplomacy. "There's a difference."

"Is there?" He stands, and suddenly the room feels smaller, the air thicker. "Because from where I'm standing, they're the same thing."

"Of course you'd think that." Tension crawls up my neck, anger and awareness making my pulse race. "Control disguised as protection. Dominance wrapped in concern. It's probably how you justify everything."

His stare narrows to amber slits. "Careful, Nova."

"Or what? You'll prove my point?" I step closer, challenging him with proximity. I'm using his own game against him. "Show me exactly how much control you think you have over me?"

For a moment, he doesn't respond. Just stares at me while his hands slowly clench into fists at his sides. His gaze drops to my mouth, then back to my pupils, and I see the exact moment his control starts to crack.

"You have no idea what you're asking for," he says, words rough with warning.

"Don't I?"

My heart pounds so hard I'm sure he can hear it. Days of dancing around this attraction, pretending careful distance could contain what's been building since that first night at Murphy's parking lot.

But I'm done pretending. Done fighting battles on every front while denying the one thing that might actually make me feel less alone in this war.

"You think I don't see what this is?" I continue, closing the distance between us with deliberate steps. "You think I don't know you've been protecting me not because the club needs a clean sheriff, but because you can't stand the thought of anything happening to me?"

His hands clench into fists. "Nova—"

"Say it." I'm close enough now to feel the warmth radiating from his skin, to catch the subtle shift in his breathing. "Say you want me."

For a heartbeat, I think he might walk away. Might rebuild those impenetrable walls and pretend this moment never happened.

His hands tremble slightly at his sides. I watch him fight it—duty warring with desire, control battling need.

Instead, his control cracks like ice under pressure.

"You want the truth?" His tone drops to a register humans can't reach, all gravel and dark restraint.

"Since the night you held a gun on me, I've wanted you.

Can't get you out of my fucking head for a second, and it's been driving me insane, Nova, because for the past three nights I've thought of nothing but bending you over this table and showing you exactly what happens when I stop protect you. "

The admission sends arousal spiraling through my core. For three nights, he's been fighting the same war I have—wanting something he thinks he shouldn't have. The knowledge that I've been driving him just as crazy makes something fierce and hungry unfurl in my chest.

"So do it," I challenge, the words ripping from somewhere deep and reckless. "Stop treating me like I'm going to break."

His laugh is dark, predatory. "Careful what you ask for, Sheriff. Because once I start, I'm not stopping until you're begging me to."

"I don't beg."

"You will." The certainty in his tone makes my knees weak. "On your knees, on your back, however I want you."

My body responds with a rush of arousal so intense it nearly buckles my legs. He sees it—reads my reaction like he's been studying me for years instead of weeks. His nostrils flare slightly.

"There it is," he murmurs, stepping closer until his massive frame towers over me. "The need your body won't let you deny."

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His hand rises, fingers tracing the air just above my cheek without quite touching. When his thumb finally makes contact, brushing across my lower lip, I part them slightly, tongue darting out to taste salt from his thick finger.

His pupils dilate.

"Strip," he commands, tone dropping to that register that vibrates through my bones.

My hands freeze on my belt buckle. Once I do this, there's no pretending it's just coordination. No going back to careful distance and measured words. This changes everything.

"You heard me." He doesn't step back, doesn't give me room to think. "Everything off. Now."

The order sends liquid arousal racing through my veins. My fingers shake as I work my belt free, the leather sliding through the loops with a whisper. His gaze never leaves mine, burning with an intensity that makes me feel exposed even fully clothed.

The belt hits the floor. My hands move to the buttons of my shirt.

"Slower," he orders. "I want to watch every piece come off."

My face flushes, but my fingers comply. Each button reveals another inch of skin. When the shirt finally slides from my shoulders, pooling at my feet, his sharp intake of breath makes me shiver.

My hands move to my bra clasp, but he stops me with a single word.

"Wait."

I freeze, arms halfway raised, suddenly hyperaware of how I must look.

"Tell me what you want," he says, circling me slowly.

"I want..." The words stick in my throat.

"Say it." His tone turns commanding. "Or put your clothes back on and walk out."

"I want you to touch me."

"Where?"

My face burns. "Everywhere."

"How?"

My words drop to barely above a whisper. "However you want."

Triumph flashes in his gaze. "That's my girl."

The praise sends a shock of arousal straight to my core. He moves behind me, and I feel the warmth of his body against my back.

"Hands on the table," he orders. "Palms flat."

I comply without thinking, bending slightly to place my hands on the war room table's surface. The position leaves me exposed, vulnerable.

His fingers finally make contact, tracing the line of my spine through my bra. The touch is electric, sending shockwaves through every nerve ending.

"So responsive," he murmurs, his breath hot against my ear. "I can smell how much you want this."

His hands work the clasp of my bra. When it falls away, I make a sound I've never heard myself make—part relief, part desperation.

"Please," I whisper.

"Please, what?" His palms cup my breasts—his hands so much larger than any human's, spanning from ribcage to collarbone—thumbs brushing over nipples already tight with need. "Use your words, Nova."

"Please touch me. Make me—" I can't finish the sentence.

"Make you what?" His teeth graze the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder, tusks pressing cool against my flushed skin.

"Make me feel," I gasp.

One hand slides down my ribcage, fingers splaying across my stomach. "Last chance to change your mind."

Instead of answering, I press back against him, feeling the solid wall of muscle and the evidence of his arousal. He's huge.

"That's my answer," he growls.

His hand moves lower, fingers working at the button of my pants. When the fabric

pools around my ankles, the cool air makes me feel exposed in ways that have nothing to do with nudity.

"Step out," he orders.

I comply, kicking the pants aside. His hands settle on my hips.

"Turn around."

I obey, turning to face him. His amber gaze devours every inch of newly revealed skin.

"On the table."

My legs shake as I boost myself up, the cool wood against my flushed skin making me gasp. He steps between my spread thighs, hands settling on my knees.

His touch is maddening—close enough to feel but not where I need him most. I try to shift closer, but his grip on my knees holds me in place.

"Patience," he commands. "You'll take what I give you when I decide to give it."

"Ash—"

"Wrong name." His thumb brushes against the edge of my panties, barely a whisper of contact. "My name is Torgash."

Understanding floods through me. Not the human-friendly version meant to civilize him. His real name. The one that acknowledges the beast he keeps caged.

"Torgash."

His expression transforms—surprise, maybe relief, like he's been waiting his whole life for someone to see him without flinching from what they find.

"Better." His smile is wicked, predatory. "Say it again."

"Torgash, please—"

His fingers hook in the lace at my hips, dragging the fabric down my legs with deliberate slowness. When I'm finally bare before him, he takes a moment to just look.

"Perfect," he breathes.

Then his mouth is on my inner thigh, lips and teeth working their way higher. When his tusks graze sensitive skin, I cry out at the contrast—cool hardness against flushed flesh.

His mouth moves higher, breath hot against my center, and I'm trembling.

"Tell me what you want," he demands.

"Your mouth," I gasp. "Please, I need—"

The first stroke of his tongue tears a cry from my throat.

He's relentless, skilled, building me higher with each calculated touch.

His tusks graze my inner thighs as he works, the cool contrast making me arch against him.

When his tongue finds exactly the right spot and circles with maddening precision,

I'm already trembling on the edge.

Then he slides one thick finger inside me, and I nearly come apart.

"Not yet," he commands, pulling back. "When you come, it's because I decide you've earned it."

A whimper escapes me before I can stop it.

"Please," I beg, all pride forgotten.

He adds a second finger, stretching me, filling me in ways that remind me he's not human. Everything about him is bigger, stronger, more intense.

"Look at me," he orders when my gaze drifts closed.

His free hand catches my chin and holds me there until I force them open, meeting his burning stare. Something primal lurks there. Unleashed. Raw.

"Say my name," he commands, thumb finding that perfect spot.

"Torgash," I breathe.

"Again."

"Torgash, please, I can't—"

"You can." His tone turns hypnotic. "Let go, Nova."

His fingers curl, finding that spot that makes pleasure explode through my vision. The climax builds with relentless pressure, mounting until I'm teetering on the edge.

"Come for me," he orders. "Now."

The command breaks the last thread of control I've been clinging to. Permission to stop fighting myself, to finally let go.

The orgasm rips through me, stealing my breath and buckling my spine. My back arches off the table as pleasure tears through every nerve ending. I cry out his name as surge after surge overwhelms me.

He works me through it, fingers gentling but never stopping, drawing out every last tremor until I'm boneless and gasping.

When awareness slowly returns, his hand slides under my neck, lifting me to meet his mouth as it crashes down on mine.

The kiss is fierce, claiming, tasting my surrender on his lips.

His tusks graze my bottom lip, the careful scrape of his tusks making me gasp against him.

I can taste myself on his tongue, feel the barely leashed hunger in the way he devours my mouth.

When he finally pulls back, his gaze is molten amber.

"Mine," he growls against my lips, and I don't have the strength or desire to argue.

For a long moment, we stay like that—his forehead pressed to mine, both of us breathing hard. Then he pulls back slightly, and I realize I'm sprawled across the war room table, thoroughly debauched. Ash hovers over me with concern etched in the lines around his amber depths.

"You okay?" he asks, tone gentler than I've ever heard.

I nod, not trusting my words yet. My body feels like it's been taken apart and put back together.

He scoops me up easily, carrying me to the oversized leather chair in the corner.

He settles into it with me cradled in his lap, and I can feel the evidence of his arousal pressing against me, but his hands only hold, only comfort.

The leather of his cut is warm against my bare back, softened by years of wear.

He took nothing for himself. This was entirely about breaking me apart and putting me back together.

I should protest, insist on getting dressed, and reestablish distance. But when he pulls me closer, the tension in my shoulders melts away.

For the first time in months, the constant vigilance that's been my companion since arriving in Shadow Ridge finally quiets.

"Better?" he asks quietly, one hand stroking down my spine.

"Yeah." The word comes out barely above a whisper. I turn my face against his chest, inhaling that leather and spice scent. "You're still an asshole."

He chuckles, the sound rumbling beneath my ear. "That's not what you called me earlier. Something about having more honor and integrity than half the humans in this county."

My gaze snaps open. "You heard that?"

"Orcs have excellent hearing." His tone holds quiet satisfaction. "Especially when someone's defending us."

My face flushes, but I don't pull away. I close my eyes again, letting his warmth seep into my bones. "This changes everything."

"I know." His words rumble in his chest beneath my ear. "Let me worry about that now."

For the first time since I arrived in Shadow Ridge, I'm not fighting.

Not calculating my next move or measuring the cost of letting someone else take the lead.

The families counting on me, the investigation, Royce's corruption—none of it disappears.

But for tonight, the crushing weight of carrying it all alone finally lifts.

I don't have the strength to argue. Don't want to. Tomorrow can bring whatever it brings.

Chapter Nine

Ash

The war room is compromised.

I sit in the chair where Nova came apart in my arms, staring at the table where I spread her open and took her mouth like I owned it.

The leather still holds her scent—citrus and woman and the musk of what we did together.

My hands remember the weight of her thighs, the way she trembled when she said my name.

Torgash.

Not the sanitized version I give humans who can't handle the truth of what I am. My real name, the one that tastes like blood and survival on my tongue. She said it with reverence, with absolution, seeing straight to the core of me without flinching.

The trust in that moment—letting me see her completely undone, calling me by my real name without fear—it's carved itself into my bones. Makes the secret I'm keeping about her sister feel like poison in my chest.

Something restless prowls through my chest, confused by my restraint. I could have taken her completely. Could have buried myself inside her until she forgot every

reason we shouldn't be doing this. But that's not what she needed.

She needed to surrender without being conquered. She needed to know she could let go without losing herself, that she could trust me.

And hell, watching her break apart under my hands, seeing that fierce control finally crack—it was better than any claiming could have been.

The door clicks open behind me. I don't turn, don't acknowledge whoever's stupid enough to interrupt.

"Brooding makes you look almost human," Diesel says, dropping into the chair across from me.

If he can smell what happened in here—and with an orc's senses, he definitely can—he's not letting on. Club courtesy, maybe. Or he's smart enough not to poke that particular bear.

"Go to hell."

"Can't. Got news you need to hear." He sets a folder on the table, careful not to touch the surface where Nova's scent still lingers. "Another foreclosure went through. Williams family. Lost their farm to some shell company out of Atlanta."

I force myself to focus, to push thoughts of Nova's broken breathing aside. "Same pattern?"

"Identical. Fake documentation, rushed timeline, judge who's suddenly very accommodating." Diesel leans back, studying my face. "Judge Kellerman's been rubber-stamping Royce's bullshit for months."

"Kellerman's been taking bribes for years," I realize. "Not just from Royce, from anyone willing to pay."

"Looks that way. Organized corruption that chews up anyone who gets in its way." Diesel's expression darkens. "The Williams family is just the latest."

The pattern makes sense in a way that's almost worse than conspiracy. Not some grand design, just a machine designed to grind up anyone who can't afford to fight back.

Just like Nova's fighting now.

Diesel pulls out another document. "There's more. Vargan found irregularities in the property transfers—they're not random. Royce is building a corridor."

I study the highlighted parcels on the map. "Access to what?"

"Transportation. Something big enough to require multiple properties in sequence." The connections become clearer as I trace the pattern. "Hotels, maybe. Casino. Something that needs significant infrastructure and road access."

"That's a lot of families to displace."

"All of them with the same documentation problems, all pushed through Kellerman's court." I trace the pattern of seized properties. "He's not just taking farms—he's reshaping the entire county for development."

Damn. Royce isn't just stealing land—he's erasing an entire community.

"We need to move faster," I tell Diesel. "We need to record the depositions, secure the evidence, and protect the witnesses before Royce realizes how much we know."

"And Nova?"

"Stays protected. Whatever it takes."

Diesel studies my face, reading something there that makes him nod slowly. "You know this won't end quietly, right? Royce has too much invested to just walk away."

"I know."

"And you know what that means for her? For whatever's happening between you two?"

I meet his eyes, letting him see the cold determination in my bones. "It means I keep her safe while she sees justice done. Everything else is secondary."

After Diesel leaves, I sit alone in the war room, surrounded by evidence of corruption and the lingering echo of Nova's surrender. Two battles raging simultaneously—one for Shadow Ridge's future, one for the woman who's getting under my skin in ways that terrify me.

But as I study the map of displaced families, the pattern of destruction, one thing becomes clear: Royce underestimated the woman he's threatening. Nova isn't just another obstacle to remove. She's the reckoning he's been avoiding.

And I'll be damned if I let anyone stop her from delivering it.

Even if it means burning down everything I've built to keep her safe.

The burner phone on the desk buzzes, breaking the thought. Hammer's encrypted number flashes on the screen.

"Yeah?" I answer, settling back in the chair that still holds Nova's scent.

"Diesel says you've got movement on the Royce situation." No greeting, no small talk. Straight to business, the way Hammer handles everything.

"More than movement. We've mapped his entire operation." I pull up the property files on my laptop. "He's not just stealing individual farms—he's carving out a development corridor. Twenty-three properties so far, most seized through Kellerman's court."

"Twenty-three?" Hammer's pause carries calculation. "That's infrastructure-level planning."

"Casino, most likely. Maybe a resort complex. Royce thinks like his uncle, but with bigger ambitions. Whatever he's planning needs highway access and doesn't give a damn about displaced families." I trace the highlighted parcels again. "We're talking hundreds of millions in development potential."

"And your sheriffs stumbled right into the middle of it."

"She's not stumbling. She's hunting." The distinction matters more than it should. "Question is whether we let her finish the hunt or step in before Royce decides she's too dangerous to leave breathing."

Hammer goes quiet, processing implications. Running an MC means thinking ten moves ahead, weighing risks against rewards, deciding which battles are worth the blood they'll cost.

"The brothers want to escalate," he says finally. "Vargan's been pushing for a show of force since the Henderson foreclosure. Says we're wasting time with paperwork when twenty brothers rolling up to Royce's office would solve this faster."

"Vargan's wrong." The words scrape the back of my throat.

"We start throwing our weight around, and Nova's case becomes worthless.

Everything she's built gets tainted by association with MC intimidation.

We could crush Royce tomorrow, but unless Nova proves the corruption legally, some other piece of shit will just step into his place next month. "

"And if Royce moves first? Eliminates the threat before she can use what she's gathered?" Hammer counters.

The thought sends ice through my veins. "Then we handle it. But Nova gets to fight this her way first."

"Because you're going soft on a human sheriff?" Hammer's voice goes flat.

Heat crawls up my neck. Hammer's writing off Nova like she's some civilian who's got me twisted around her finger instead of the sheriff who's built a bulletproof case so fast.

"Because she's good at her job, and the legal route keeps us clean when this goes federal," I tell him.

"Uh-huh." Hammer's testing me. "How good at her job is she?"

Sharp enough to build an airtight case in three days. Smart enough to see patterns other investigators missed. Stubborn enough to keep fighting when anyone reasonable would have accepted the threats and backed down.

"Skilled enough to make Shadow Ridge untouchable for the next son of a bitch who

thinks of following in Royce's footsteps," I tell Hammer.

Hammer goes quiet. I can practically hear him calculating moves and countermoves.

"Then we give her the room to work. But Ash?" Hammer's voice turns hard. "You make this work. Whatever it takes. Club's invested too much in this town to lose it because some corrupt prick got lucky with an ambush."

After Hammer ends the call, I sit staring at the phone. The weight of club expectations pressing against something more personal, more urgent. They want Nova protected because she's useful. I want her protected because—

Because what? Because she said my real name without flinching? Because she surrendered to me completely, trusting me with her pleasure and her vulnerability? Because every time I think about losing her, something vicious and possessive snarls in my chest like something vital is being ripped away.

The war room door opens again. Vargan fills the doorway, massive even by orc standards, hardened face grim with whatever news he's carrying.

"Morris surfaced," he says, jaw tight.

I straighten. "Where?"

"Atlanta. Meeting with a lawyer from Pierce & Associates." Vargan drops into the chair Diesel vacated, metal protesting under his weight. "Same firm handling Royce's property transfers."

Shit. Morris is selling everything he knows. "What's he trading?"

"Department procedures, security protocols, which judges take bribes." Vargan's

expression darkens. "Plus every backdoor Dawson built into the system."

My hands clench. Morris knows the sheriff stations' weak spots, the corrupt channels Nova's trying to shut down. He's handing Royce a roadmap to destroy her case.

"Santos know?"

"Santos figured it out when Morris cleaned out his locker. Been waiting for him to surface somewhere." Vargan glances at his phone. "But here's the thing—Morris doesn't know Nova's been operating from here."

Thank the gods for small favors. Everything we've built stays secret.

"We need to move fast," I tell Vargan. "Before that piece of shit connects the dots."

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"Crow's already on it. Got three witnesses willing to testify, documentation that proves the fraudulent transfers." Vargan pulls up his sleeve to check his watch. "But we're talking hours, not days, before Royce realizes his intelligence is outdated."

Hours. Damn. Maybe less, if Morris starts comparing notes with whoever's been watching Nova's place.

"Where's Nova now?"

"Her apartment. Said she needed clean clothes and space to think." Vargan scrolls through his messages. "Got prospect Knox keeping watch from the street."

Should be enough. Knox is solid, building's secure, threats contained. Everything handled.

Except the restless thing in my chest won't stop pacing.

Won't accept that Nova's safe just because some kid with good intentions is parked across the street.

She's alone right now, processing what happened between us, and hell knows what conclusions she's drawing.

Whether she'll decide trusting me was smart or the biggest mistake she's made since coming to Shadow Ridge.

My instincts scream at me to stay put. Let her think without me hovering like some

possessive piece of shit who can't handle five minutes of separation.

But I'm not listening to instincts right now.

"I need to—"

"You need to stay here," Vargan interrupts. "Let her work through whatever's got her twisted up. Woman's got enough pressure without you hovering."

My jaw clenches hard enough to crack a tusk.

Because the prick's right, and I hate him for it.

Nova's been carrying this whole investigation, the threats, watching her back every second.

Last thing she needs is me showing up like some clingy asshole who can't handle her being out of sight for five minutes.

But damn, sitting here doing nothing while she's alone—it's the camps all over again. That sick helplessness crawling through my chest, knowing someone I... someone important is vulnerable and I can't do a damn thing about it.

I yank out the secure laptop, fingers too tight on the keys as I scroll through Royce's files. I've been over them a dozen times, but I need something to focus on besides the feel of her in my arms.

My phone buzzes, and Knox's name flashes on the screen.

Lights went out ten minutes ago. All quiet.

She's trying to sleep. Or lying awake staring at the ceiling, replaying what happened between us. Deciding if she made a mistake letting me touch her.

Hell with it. I close the laptop and head for the door.

"Where you going?" Vargan asks.

"Brief the prospect on new threat protocols." Half-truth at best. "Morris changes everything."

Vargan's look says he knows I'm full of shit, but he doesn't call me on it. "Don't spook the kid too bad."

Twelve minutes through empty streets, and I'm questioning every choice that led me here. I park two blocks out and approach on foot—all the tactics I'd use for actual surveillance instead of whatever the hell this is.

Knox is leaning against his Honda, probably bored out of his skull watching a dark building. Kid's doing his job, staying alert, following orders.

Knox. Twenty-eight, eager to prove himself, smart enough to follow orders without asking stupid questions.

I step up behind him without a sound. He jumps, then relaxes when he recognizes me.

"Sir," he says as I fold my arms over my chest and lean on the car he's using for cover. "All quiet. No movement since she went inside."

"Any suspicious vehicles? Anyone taking too much interest in the building?"

"Negative. A couple residents came home from late shifts, nothing weird." Knox

pulls out a small notebook. "Lights went dark twenty minutes ago."

I scan the building. Nova's corner unit shows nothing but a faint glow from what's probably her bathroom. Brushing her teeth, getting ready for bed, doing all the normal shit people do when they think they're safe.

"Protocol change," I tell Knox. "Morris is feeding intelligence to Royce's people. They might have detailed knowledge of law enforcement procedures."

Knox straightens. Kid's smart enough to understand what that means.

"Watch for operatives. Clean clothes, expensive gear, vehicles that don't belong." I nod toward the utility pole across the street. "Perfect sight line to her window. Someone with the right equipment could track her from blocks away."

"Should I report anything suspicious to Vargan?" Knox asks.

"No." My jaw locks tight. "You call me directly. Immediately. Don't wait for confirmation, don't try to handle it yourself." I meet his eyes, making sure he understands. "Your job is early warning, not heroics."

After explaining recognition patterns for surveillance teams and escape route protocols, I walk the perimeter of Nova's building.

Telling myself it's tactical assessment—sight lines, escape routes, vulnerable approaches.

The kind of sweep that's kept me breathing through wars and betrayals and every son of a bitch who thought they could eliminate the Ironborn's protection.

But that's bullshit and I know it.

This isn't about the club. This is about the woman sleeping three floors up, the one who said my real name like it meant something sacred instead of cursed. The one who let me see her come apart in my hands, trusting me with her pleasure and her vulnerability.

The one who might wake up tomorrow and decide she made the biggest mistake of her life.

I study the fire escape that runs past her corner unit.

Easy access for anyone with basic climbing skills.

The alley behind the building sits dark, no security cameras, perfect concealment for anyone wanting to get close without being seen.

Too many weak points, too many ways for someone to get to her.

Something predatory and possessive prowls through my chest, demanding I go upstairs. Demand entry. Make sure she's actually safe instead of standing down here like some stalker piece of shit who can't handle five minutes of separation.

Hell. When did I become this? This possessive prick who can't trust a trained law enforcement officer to sleep safely in her own bed?

The moment she said my name. The moment she surrendered to me completely and trusted me not to break her.

Now I'm the one who's broken, standing in the shadows of her building at two in the morning because the thought of something happening to her while I'm not here makes my chest feel like it's caving in.

I should leave. Go back to the clubhouse, let Knox do his job, stop acting like some obsessed asshole who thinks he owns a woman just because she let him touch her.

Instead, I find myself looking up at her dark window, wondering if she's really asleep or lying awake thinking about what we did. Whether she's planning to rebuild those walls I spent weeks tearing down.

Whether she's regretting the trust she gave me.

Damn. I need to get out of here before I do something stupid. Like climb that fire escape and check on her myself.

Chapter Ten

Nova

My body won't let me forget what it felt like to melt under his hands. Four days of walking into the war room and feeling every place he touched me. Days of sitting across from him during depositions while my body remembers precisely what it felt like to let go.

To surrender.

I pour another glass of cheap red wine and settle into the corner of my couch.

The case files spread across my coffee table should demand my attention.

We're closer than I've ever been to taking down someone who destroys lives for profit.

The Bauer family depositions. The Henderson evidence.

Bank records Ash secured through non-legal channels, I'm still trying to justify.

But I keep thinking about that feeling of being completely safe with him in that moment - rational brain turned off, every worry dropped, just being there in a complete show of trust I still don't understand.

My gaze drops to my computer and the small thumbnail of Carman's college

graduation photo in the corner. Her smile. Her warmth. All of it taken for granted, used against her. She never had safe. Never felt protected.

The thought brings an unwelcome ping of appreciation for Ash, despite myself.

She'd been dating that asshole Derek then—the one who convinced her she needed him, that she was too naive to navigate the world alone.

I'd tried to warn her, tried to get her to see what he was doing.

But Carman was stubborn, trusted too easily, and believed people could change if you just loved them enough.

I take another sip of wine, the alcohol doing nothing to quiet the rage burning in my chest. Years of investigations. Years of watching her case file gather dust while Derek walked free and the real story stayed buried.

"I'm going to get them," I whisper. "All of them. For every voice they've silenced."

The wine has me making promises I might not be able to keep. But sitting here alone, surrounded by evidence of corruption that reaches into every corner of the justice system, I feel the weight of every case I couldn't solve, every victim who didn't get justice.

Carman deserves better than the lies they printed in the newspapers. She deserves more than being written off as another young woman who made the wrong choices.

I'm reaching for the wine bottle when something crashes in the kitchen. The sound cuts through my thoughts. I freeze, bottle halfway to my glass.

"Shit." I set the wine aside and move toward the kitchen, hand automatically

checking for my gunbelt even though I took it off an hour ago when I came home.

The window above the sink hangs open—I'd cracked it when I got home—and the ceramic bowl that usually sits on the sill lies shattered on the counter.

Just wind. Nothing sinister, nothing threatening.

But my nerves are shot, and I've been running on caffeine and stubbornness for days. I'm crouched beside the broken bowl, gathering pieces, when my front door explodes inward.

The frame splinters, wood cracking with explosive force.

Ash fills the doorway—shoulders blocking the hallway light, eyes wild with lethal intent as they sweep the room for threats.

His leather cut hangs open over a black shirt, and there's something in his stance that speaks of violence barely leashed.

"Where is he?" Ash growls.

"There's no one—" I start, but he's already moving through my apartment, clearing rooms like he's expecting an ambush.

"I heard breaking glass. Thought someone was—" His gaze finds mine, and I watch him cycle through relief to fury in the space of seconds. "You're bleeding."

I look down to find a thin line of red across my palm where I'd gripped a ceramic shard too tightly, probably from the shock of having a hulking orc kick in my door. "It's nothing. Just a broken bowl."

His fingers close around my wrist with surprising gentleness, examining the shallow cut like it's hurting him more than me.

He pulls my hand closer, pressing a kitchen towel against the cut. Basic first aid.

"How did you get here so fast?" The timeline doesn't add up. "Knox was supposed to be on watch tonight."

Something crosses his expression—guilt, maybe defiance. "Knox's at the clubhouse."

"Then how—" I connect the dots. "You've been out there. Every night."

"The last few, yes." No shame, no explanation. Just fact.

"Even though we agreed—"

"I couldn't leave your safety to anyone else." His jaw works like he's physically fighting for control. "Not when losing you would—"

"Would what, Ash?"

His eyes drop to my mouth, then back up, and I see the precise moment his control fractures. "Would destroy me."

The raw admission makes something clench low in my stomach.

"We can't," I whisper, but even I can hear how weak it sounds.

"Can't we?" His voice drops to something rougher, making my pulse jump. "Tell me you don't think about it. About what happened in the war room."

Heat floods my face. "That was a mistake. A one-time thing to relieve the pressure—"

"Bullshit." He steps closer, backing me toward the wall. "You think I could forget the way you came apart in my hands? The way you said my name?"

"Ash—"

"You gave me a taste of what we could be, Nova.

And now I'm starving for the rest of you.

" His palms brace against the wall on either side of my head.

"Watching you come undone like that, knowing you trust me enough to stop fighting, it's given me a hunger I'll never be able to satisfy with anyone else. "

"The case—"

"Fuck the case." His breath is hot against my ear. "For once in your life, stop thinking like a cop and feel like a woman."

"You think I haven't been feeling?" I step forward, jabbing a finger into his chest. "You think it's been easy pretending what happened didn't change everything? That I don't think about your touch on me every time we're in that room together?"

His hand shoots out, catching my wrist.

"Then why are we still talking?"

His palms frame my face, large enough to span from jaw to temple. His thumb

strokes across my cheekbone. I should push him away, should remember every reason this is wrong.

Instead, my fingers fist in his shirt and pull him down to me.

"I hate you," I whisper against his mouth.

"Good. You should." His forehead drops to mine.

"Then why won't you let me?" My grip tightens on his shirt.

"Because I'm selfish." His mouth hovers over mine. "Tell me to leave, Nova. Tell me to walk away before I can't."

I open my mouth to do just that—to be the responsible one who remembers that this leads nowhere good.

But what comes out is: "I can't."

Something feral burns in his amber eyes before his mouth crashes down on mine. All teeth and desperation, tasting like coffee. I should push him away, should remember every reason this destroys everything I've worked for.

Instead, I bite his lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

He growls against my mouth, the sound vibrating through my chest. "Is that how you want this? Rough?"

"I don't want your restraint." I grip the back of his neck, pulling his mouth closer. "I want you to give me what I need."

"And what do you need, Nova?"

I go very still under his touch.

"Someone who won't disappear when they see who I really am," I whisper.

His eyes darken, pupils dilating. "I've seen you, Nova. All of you. And I'm not going anywhere."

I search his face for the lie, but can't find one.

He lifts me like I weigh nothing, carrying me from the living room toward the bedroom while I wrap my legs around his waist. The movement presses his hard length against me, and I can feel every inch of him.

My back hits the bedroom doorframe as he pauses to devour my mouth again, fingers already tearing at my shirt.

The fabric gives way under his impatient touch, and buttons scatter across the hardwood floor.

His mouth follows the path of destruction, lips and tongue mapping the hollow of my throat, the curve of my collarbone.

When he reaches the lace edge of my bra, he pauses, looking up at me with eyes that burn like amber fire.

"Still with me?" he asks, voice strained.

"Stop asking and start taking."

That's all the permission he needs. My bra joins my shirt on the floor, and his mouth closes over one peaked nipple while his hand cups the other breast. The dual sensation makes me arch against him, as a cry tears from my throat.

He carries me the rest of the way to the bed, laying me down with surprising gentleness before stepping back to look at me. The way his gaze maps every inch of exposed skin makes me feel powerful instead of vulnerable.

"So fucking beautiful," he murmurs, working at my jeans. "I've been imagining this for weeks."

The denim slides down my legs, taking my underwear with it, leaving me bare beneath his burning stare. But when I move to cover myself, his hand shoots out, catching my wrists.

"Don't. Let me see you."

For a long moment, he just looks. His gaze travels from my face down my body and back up, slow and thorough. I feel exposed, vulnerable, but not ashamed. The way he's looking at me - like I'm something precious he's been waiting his whole life to unwrap.

His touch is powerful against my skin as it maps every inch he's uncovered, mouth following the path of his fingers. When he reaches the scar on my thigh—knife wound from my rookie year—he pauses, lips pressing gentle reverence to the raised flesh.

"My warrior," he murmurs, and I understand he sees my scars the same way I see his, not as damage, but as proof of survival.

His mouth moves lower, taking his time, kissing and nipping until he reaches the

juncture of my thighs. I try to close my legs, suddenly shy, but his hands—so much larger than any human's—hold me open.

"Trust me," he says, breath hot against my most sensitive skin.

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His tongue traces along my folds with maddening slowness, exploring, learning what makes me gasp and arch beneath him.

I grip the sheets, trying to stay still, but my body has other ideas.

When he finds that perfect spot, he focuses there with devastating precision, circling and teasing until I'm trembling.

"Ash," I breathe, but he doesn't rush. Just continues that relentless torture, taking his time like he has all night to learn precisely what drives me wild.

When he adds his fingers, I rock against him, meeting each thrust. This time I'm not shy about what I want.

I know what his touch can do to me. His thumb joins the assault, applying pressure where I need it most. The combination makes my back arch off the bed, but now I'm seeking more friction, more pressure.

"More," I gasp, and he rewards me with what I need.

My body responds instantly, and my hips move on their own. The pressure builds, and my thighs shake with the effort to stay open for him.

With my next labored breath, I begin to come undone in his grip, my voice breaking on his name.

He finally lifts his head, his lips glistening with evidence of what he's done to me.

That wicked grin spreads across his face as he watches me come back to reality, satisfaction and possession written in every line of his expression.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, crawling up my body, all muscle and intent. "You're absolutely fucking beautiful when you let go."

He captures my mouth in a kiss that lets me taste myself on his tongue—salt and musk and something uniquely mine. The intimate flavor should embarrass me, but instead it makes me feel claimed, marked in ways that have nothing to do with the physical.

"That's just the beginning," he promises against my lips, then starts to stand.

But I'm already moving, sitting up and catching his wrists before he can step back. "My turn."

I push his palms away and pull the shirt over his head myself, revealing the expanse of green-tinged skin I've been fantasizing about.

Scars crisscross his chest and arms—some old, some newer, all telling a story.

Tribal tattoos wind around his biceps and across his shoulders in intricate patterns and bold lines.

But it's the tattoo directly over his heart that makes me pause—circles within circles creating a never-ending loop of rings that are hypnotic in their perfect symmetry.

I trace them with my finger, feeling him shiver under my touch. His eyes never leave my face, watching my reaction to each mark, each piece of his story.

When I reach for his belt, his hands cover mine.

"You don't have to—"

"I want to." I look up at him, seeing the careful control he's maintaining. "I want to see all of you."

I work his belt free, then his jeans, pushing them down thick thighs and muscular calves. When I hook my fingers in the waistband of his boxers, I meet his burning gaze instead of hesitating.

The fabric slides down his hips, and my breath catches.

He's magnificent. Larger than I expected, but somehow perfect for the feel of his erection when I was sitting in his lap days ago. Surprisingly human in some ways—the dark hair that trails from his navel, the smooth shaft—but it's the underside that makes my core clench with anticipation.

Ridged texture runs along his length, pronounced enough that I can see it, tactile enough that I know I'll feel it when he slides inside me.

I reach out confidently, circling my fingers around his length. He's hot, harder than steel, and when I give him one deliberate stroke from base to tip, he groans deep in his chest.

"Nova," he hisses, my name torn from his throat.

My fingers trace those ridges with fascination, imagining how they'll drag against sensitive places and drive me wild. His powerful hand drops to my hair, gathering it into one fist so he can watch my face.

I meet his burning gaze as I lean forward, taking just his tip into my mouth. He tastes of salt and something uniquely him, clean and masculine and intoxicating. My tongue

laps at the smooth head, exploring, learning.

His groan this time is lighter, more controlled, but I feel his hips begin to move, pressing forward incrementally. I take him deeper willingly, letting him fuck my mouth with careful thrusts that make me moan around him.

"Fuck," he breathes, free hand bracing against the wall. "Your mouth, Nova—"

I work him with my mouth, hollowing my cheeks, using my tongue to trace those fascinating ridges. His control fractures, hips bucking forward, and I breathe through my nose as his substantial length fills my mouth completely.

His head falls back, eyes closing as his breathing turns ragged, the hand in my hair tightening as he fights for control. Then his hips still.

"Stop," he gasps, pulling back. "Stop or I'll come, and I need to be inside you first."

"I want to taste you," I protest, reaching for him.

But he's already lifting me easily, settling me back onto the bed before covering my body with his.

The sheer size of him, the heat radiating from his green skin, makes me feel small and protected in ways I've never experienced.

When he settles between my thighs, I can feel him pressing against me, hot and hard and perfect.

"Look at me," he commands, one broad hand cupping my face. "I want to see your eyes when I take you."

I meet his gaze as he guides himself to my entrance. The first press of him makes me gasp—even knowing how big he is, feeling those ridges stretch me is overwhelming. This is what it means to be with an orc.

"Breathe," he murmurs, voice strained with the effort of holding back. "Let me in, Nova. All the way in."

I breathe through the stretch, my body adjusting to accommodate his size. As he sinks deeper, I feel every ridge along his length dragging against sensitive places that make me cry out. The friction is intense and threatens to unravel me before we've even begun.

"God," I gasp, nails digging into his shoulders. "I can feel—the ridges, they're—"

"Perfect for you," he finishes, voice rough with possession.

When he's fully seated inside me, we both go still. Every piece of me locks into place around him.

"How does it feel?" he asks, thumb brushing across my cheek. "Perfect," I whisper, and watch his eyes go molten.

When he starts to move, I meet each thrust. Each withdrawal drags those ridges against my inner walls, each thrust sends them pressing into places that make me arch beneath him. I'm trembling, but not from fear.

"More," I gasp, wrapping my legs around his waist. "Harder."

"Careful what you ask for," he warns, but his rhythm increases, thrusts becoming deeper, more urgent.

Pressure builds inside me with each drive, my body coiling tighter. His broad hand finds the place where we're joined, thumb circling with perfect pressure.

"Come for me," he commands, voice turning hypnotic. "Let go and come on my cock."

The orgasm hits me hard and fast. I scream his name as my body clenching around him with enough force to make him groan. Every ridge along his length drags against me as I spasm around him.

"Fuck, Nova, you're—" His words cut off as his own control snaps. He drives into me, chasing his release while I'm still shaking.

When he finally spills inside me, he buries his face in my neck, growling my name. The rawness of it vibrates through my bones.

For long moments, we stay locked together, breathing hard, hearts hammering against each other. The ridges along his length continue to provide sensation as he slowly softens inside me, aftershocks rippling through my oversensitive body.

"Jesus," I gasp when I can finally speak.

"Not Jesus," he says, lifting his head to look at me, lips curving in that wicked smile. "Just me."

"Just you," I agree. My fingers drift up to trace the jagged scar that bisects his eyebrow.

He goes very still under my touch, watching my face with careful intensity.

I remember the first time I saw this scar, how it made him look dangerous.

Now it just makes him look like Ash - complex, real, mine. "Perfect, complicated, impossible you."

He rolls us so I'm sprawled across his chest, one broad hand stroking down my spine and along the rise of my ass. The movement causes him to slip from my body, and I feel the wet evidence of what we've done trickling down my thighs.

"You okay?" he asks without the usual edge to his voice.

"Better than okay." I press my face into his neck, breathing him in. "I feel... quiet. For the first time in months, my head is quiet."

His arms tighten around me.

"Good," he murmurs, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "That's what I wanted. For you to have peace, even if it's just for tonight. You carry too much weight alone."

"My sister carried too much weight alone, too." The words come out barely above a whisper. "Carman. She was... she was everything I'm not. Trusting. Hopeful. Believed people could change if you just loved them enough."

Ash goes very still beneath me, but his hand never stops its gentle stroking. "Tell me about her."

"She was dating this guy—Derek. Real piece of work. Controlling, manipulative, the kind who convinces you that you need him." I taste copper in my mouth. "I tried to warn her, tried to get her to see what he was doing. But she was stubborn."

"Sounds familiar," he says quietly, and I can hear warmth in his voice.

"She was twenty-four. A college senior studying accounting."

Had this idea that numbers never lied, that truth always surfaced if you knew where to look.

" I trace the tattooed patterns on his chest, following the lines with my fingertip.

"She called me one night, scared. Said Derek was involved in something illegal, that she'd seen some documents that didn't add up. "

Ash's breathing changes slightly, becoming more controlled. "What kind of documents?"

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"Bank records. Cash deposits that didn't match any legitimate income. She thought Derek was laundering money through fake businesses, but she wasn't sure." My throat tightens. "I told her to stay out of it. To focus on school and let the authorities handle it."

"Nova—"

"Three days later, she was dead." The words come out flat. "Found in an alley, apparent drug overdose. Except Carman never touched drugs. She barely drank wine with dinner."

His hand stops stroking, settling heavy and warm between my shoulder blades. "What did the investigation find?"

"Nothing. Derek had an alibi. No witnesses. The detective in charge said sometimes good girls make bad choices." I bite out each word. "Case closed in under a month."

"But you knew better."

"I knew my sister. She was trying to get away from Derek, not deeper into whatever he was involved in."

"I lift my head to look at him, seeing something dangerous burning in his amber eyes."

"The worst part? I wasn't there when she needed me."

I was working a case in Atlanta, too busy being a good cop to save my own sister. "

"It's not your fault."

"Isn't it?" The words spill out of me. "She called me for help, and I told her to mind her own business. If I'd listened, if I'd taken her seriously—"

"She'd still be dead." His voice turns hard, certain. "Because men like Derek don't leave loose ends walking around."

I go quiet. No platitudes about everything happening for a reason. Just truth.

"The case went nowhere," I continue. "The detective in charge retired months later, moved to Florida. Derek disappeared too—left town, changed his name. By the time I got my detective shield and could dig deeper, the trail was cold."

"That didn't stop you from trying."

I shake my head. "It took me four years, but I finally tracked him down.

" I can feel the old frustration burning in my chest. "I found out where he was living, who he was pretending to be now.

But he had protection—someone with serious money and influence keeping him clean.

Ironclad alibi for the night Carman died, paperwork that made him look like a saint. All of it bought and paid for."

Ash's jaw tightens. "How much protection?"

"The kind that makes evidence disappear and witnesses forget what they saw.

The kind that gets cases buried so deep they never see daylight again.

" I press my face against his chest. "I had nothing.

Just a dead sister and the knowledge that her killer was walking free because someone wanted him to. "

"When this thing with Royce is over, we'll find him. Derek, the detective, whoever else was involved." His arms tighten around me. "Your sister deserves justice, and you deserve peace."

"Ash—"

"No arguments. Some debts can only be paid in blood, and I'm very good at collecting." Something dark and certain in his voice makes me shiver.

"Why?" I ask. "Why would you do that for me?"

His hand tilts my chin up so I have to meet his eyes. "Because you matter to me. Because what happened to her is part of what made you who you are. And because no one should carry that kind of grief alone."

My throat closes for a moment.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Don't thank me yet. Thank me when Derek's body turns up in a ditch." His smile is dark, predatory. "And it will, Nova. I promise you that."

I believe him. The thought should scare me.

"For now," he continues, voice gentling, "you need sleep. Real sleep, not the short catnaps you've been surviving on."

"I don't sleep well."

"You will tonight." His hand moves to my hair, fingers combing through the tangled strands. "I've got you. Nothing's getting through me to hurt you."

Lying there in his arms, listening to his heartbeat, I believe that too. I close my eyes and let someone else stand guard.

Sunlight streams through my bedroom window. My body aches in places that remind me of everything Ash did to me last night - a good kind of ache.

The other side of the bed is empty, sheets already cool. That's Ash - no morning-after conversations or lingering breakfasts. He protects by keeping distance when it matters.

I stretch, muscles protesting slightly. I slept through the night without a single nightmare. No dreams of Carman's funeral. No visions of black sedans or broken glass. Just sleep.

The shower washes away the evidence of our night together, though I can still feel the phantom touch of his palms on my skin. Still taste him when I run my tongue across my lips.

By eight-thirty, I'm in uniform and heading for the sheriff's station. Another routine check-in to maintain the illusion that I'm still working out of the compromised office instead of the MC's war room.

The building feels hollow as I unlock the front door, footsteps echoing in the empty bullpen. Santos won't be back from rounds for another hour, and Roberta rarely shows before nine. Perfect timing for a quick appearance before heading to the clubhouse.

I push open my office door and freeze.

Royce Carvello sits behind my desk like he owns it, expensive suit immaculate despite the early hour. He's reading through a case file—one of the foreclosure documents I'd left there yesterday for appearance's sake.

"Good morning, Sheriff." His smile is warm, friendly, and fake. "I hope you slept well. You certainly sounded like you were having a good time last night."

My blood chills. He heard us. Has been listening to us. The surveillance of my apartment wasn't just visual—they've been recording everything.

"Mr. Carvello." I keep my voice level, controlled, though my hand moves instinctively toward my sidearm. "You're trespassing."

"Am I?" He gestures to the chair across from him—my own chair, in my own office. "Please, sit. We have much to discuss."

"I'll stand."

"Suit yourself." He closes the file and leans back, studying me. "Quite a night you had. Very... passionate. I particularly enjoyed the part where Mr. Thornshade promised to find Carman's killer."

Carman's name in his mouth makes my fists clench. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Please, Sheriff. We both know your apartment has been under surveillance for weeks. Audio and visual. Very high quality equipment." His tone stays conversational. "I have to say, you're much more vocal than I expected. And Mr. Thornshade is certainly... thorough in his attentions."

My jaw clenches, but I force myself to remain still. "What do you want?"

"To make you an offer. A generous one, considering the circumstances." He opens a desk drawer—my desk drawer—and pulls out a manila folder. "Derek Sullivan. Current address, employment records, daily routine. Everything you'd need to find him."

My heart stops. "That's not possible."

"Oh, but it is. You see, unlike Mr. Thornshade, I don't make promises I can't keep."

"Royce slides the folder across the desk."

"Derek's been living in Jacksonville under the name David Martinez."

Works at a marina, lives alone in a studio apartment above a bait shop. Very isolated. Very... accessible."

I stare at the folder without touching it. "Why?"

"Because I can deliver what your lover cannot."

Justice for your sister. Real justice, not the kind that takes years and might never come.

"His voice drops. "I can put Derek in a room with you, Sheriff."

Just you and him, and all the time you need to get answers.

And when you're finished—when you've done whatever you feel needs doing—I'll make it all disappear.

Accident at the marina. Tragic drowning. You'll never be connected to it."

Everything I've wanted for years. Right here.

"What's the catch?"

"Hardly a catch. More of a... adjustment to your current investigative priorities.

" Royce straightens his tie. "You continue being sheriff.

You still meet with families, still fight for justice, still play the part of the incorruptible law woman.

You just do it a bit more slowly. And under my guidance. "

"You want me to be your puppet."

"I want you to be reasonable. The families you're helping—they'll still get help. Just not in ways that interfere with legitimate business interests." His smile never wavers.
"Everyone wins."

"And if I refuse?"

"Nothing dramatic. No threats, no violence." He shrugs. "Just some interesting evidence surfacing at your next court hearing. Photos of you entering the MC clubhouse. Audio recordings from this office. Documentation of your intimate

relationship with their vice president."

My face goes cold. "You're blackmailing me."

"I'm offering you choices." He stands, smoothing his jacket.

"How do you think Judge Kellerman will react when he discovers the sheriff building cases in his courtroom has been compromised by personal relationships?

How will the families you're trying to help feel when they learn you've been playing both sides? "

"I haven't been—"

"Haven't you?" His voice turns cold. "You've been working out of an MC facility. Using their resources. Sleeping with their leadership. Any case you've built becomes tainted evidence the moment that comes to light."

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a cell phone, setting it on my desk beside the folder. "When you're ready, call the first number in the contacts. I'll take care of the rest."

Royce moves toward the door, then pauses. "Oh, and Sheriff? Don't take too long deciding. Every breath Derek takes is another moment he stole from your sister, and opportunities like this don't last forever."

The door closes behind him with quiet finality, leaving me alone with the folder and the phone and the weight of an impossible choice.

I sink into my chair—the one he'd been occupying moments before—and stare at the folder. Inside is the man who destroyed my sister's life. The man who's been living

free while Carman lies in the ground. Justice, real justice, within my reach.

All I have to do is betray everything I believe in.

I think about last night. About Ash's touch on my skin, his promise to help find and prosecute Carman's killer, the way I slept through the night for the first time in months.

I pick up the folder.

Derek Bauer. Current address. Daily routine. Everything I need.

My fingers don't even shake.

The question is: which version of justice am I willing to live with?

Chapter Eleven

Ash

Nova's twenty-three minutes late, and something restless prowls through my chest.

I check the war room's secure entrance again, scanning the empty parking lot behind the clubhouse. No county cruiser. No sign of the woman who's been arriving at nine sharp every morning for the past week, armed with case files and that stubborn determination that makes my chest tight.

The Garcia deposition is scheduled for eleven, and she wants to prep the witness beforehand. We should be reviewing testimony by now.

I pull out my phone and call Knox. "Yeah, boss?"

"Where's Nova?"

"Station. Normal route this morning, apartment, coffee stop, then there."

"What's keeping her?"

"Don't know. She's just... been inside longer than usual." Knox pauses. "Santos rolled up maybe ten minutes ago, so maybe she was waiting for him? But she should've been done by now."

Something's off. Nova doesn't wait around for small talk. She grabs what she needs

and moves. And she definitely doesn't need Santos for anything related to our case.

"Any visitors? Anyone else go in or out?"

"Negative. Just her, then Santos. Roberta hasn't shown yet."

I end the call and check the time again. Nine twenty-five. Maybe I did wear her out last night. The thought makes my mouth curve despite the irritation gnawing at my chest. She'd been responsive as hell, coming apart in my hands like she'd been starving for it.

But Nova's tougher than that. A few hours of good sex wouldn't slow her down, if anything, she'd be sharper. More focused.

So what's keeping her?

The Garcia deposition can't be delayed. Mrs. Garcia is nervous enough about testifying against Royce's people without us showing up unprepared. And if Nova is running behind on prep work, it could compromise the entire case.

I spend the next fifteen minutes pacing the war room, checking my phone every few minutes. The Garcia files sit ready on the strategy table, but without Nova's witness prep notes, I can't do much more than review what we already know.

Nine forty-five comes and goes. Then nine fifty.

I'm about to call her cell when I finally hear tires on gravel outside.

When Nova finally walks through the door, I'm ready to give her shit about the timing.

"The Garcias are already nervous about testifying. We can't afford to—"

The words die in my throat.

Her shoulders are rigid, spine straight as a steel rod. Her face carries that careful blankness she wore when we first met—jaw set, eyes focused on everything except me, lips pressed into a thin line. She moves with sharp, efficient motions, every gesture controlled and deliberate.

This is different from the competence she puts on for witnesses or court hearings. This is colder, more distant. The woman who saw me as just another threat to manage.

The annoyance dies, replaced by something darker. Something that makes tension coil through my ribs.

"The judge is running behind," she says without meeting my eyes, dropping her laptop bag onto the strategy table. "The Garcias' deposition was pushed to noon."

Her voice carries no trace of last night. No acknowledgment of what passed between us, no lingering warmth from the way she'd curled against my chest and trusted me with her secrets.

That's when the worry kicks in. Real worry, not just irritation about being late.

Something happened between when I left her apartment and walking through this door. Something that put those walls back up and locked me out completely.

"Nova." I move toward her, but she steps away, putting the table between us.

"Then we can review the Williams testimony before the Garcias arrive." She flips

open her laptop, fingers already flying across the keys. "Their timeline doesn't match the bank records. It's just like all the others."

I put my palms on the table and lean in. "Look at me."

"The discrepancy could be—" She's blocking me.

"Look at me." I don't raise my voice, but authority bleeds through.

Nova's hands pause on the keyboard. When she finally lifts her head, her eyes hold nothing. No anger, no regret, no echo of the woman who'd whispered my real name like she owned it.

Just cold, empty assessment.

"What happened?" The question comes out rougher than intended. It's not guilt asking, it's genuine concern. Fear. Because this isn't morning-after regret. This is something deeper.

"Nothing happened." She returns to her screen. "We have work to do, Ash. We need to focus."

Her pulse jumps at her throat when she says it. The lie makes her breathing shallow, barely perceptible unless you know what to look for.

But the restless energy under my skin won't settle. There's more than just the cold shoulder and careful distance. Nova's scent carries traces of anxiety, faint but unmistakable to an orc's senses. It's not old fear from yesterday's threats, but fresh. Recent.

Knox said she'd been in the station longer than usual. And now she's here acting like

I'm a stranger she has to manage.

The pieces don't fit. I need to retrace her steps.

"I need to handle something before the Garcias arrive," I tell her, keeping my voice casual as I push off the table. "I'll be back in thirty. Call me if they're early."

Something flickers across her face—relief, maybe like she's grateful for the breathing room.

"I can handle the Garcia prep alone."

My jaw tightens. She wants me gone.

I'm already moving toward the door, pulling out my phone as I head for the parking lot. Knox said no visitors at the station, but something spooked her during those extra twenty-five minutes. Diesel answers on the second ring.

"Yeah?"

"I need you to call Vargan. Have him check with Savvy about Nova's stop at the diner this morning. Who she talked to, how she acted."

"Something wrong?" Diesel's voice sharpens.

"Maybe. Something's got her spooked, but she won't fess up to what." I swing my leg over the bike, engine roaring to life. "I need to know what happened."

"On it," Diesel says, and I can hear him already moving.

Twenty minutes later, I'm standing outside Nova's apartment while Knox works on

the door I destroyed.

The splintered wood has been replaced, new hardware installed.

No trace of my violent entrance remains.

Kid's doing good work, erasing the evidence of what a monster I am.

"How's it look?" I ask him.

"Good as new. Maybe better." He tests the lock mechanism, then meets my eyes briefly. "Figured it needed fixing."

Knox doesn't wait for approval or thanks. Just saw what needed doing and handled it, which is why Diesel put him on Nova's detail.

"Anyone else been around? Building maintenance, residents, anyone suspicious?"

"Negative. Been quiet all morning." Knox packs his tools and stands. "The door should hold up fine now."

"Good." I grab his shoulder. "Head back to the clubhouse and keep tabs on Nova's movements. From a distance. She needs space today."

Knox nods his understanding, then opens the door and hands me the keys before walking off.

Nova's apartment shows no signs of intrusion beyond my own. Her wine glass still sits on the coffee table, an open bottle next to it. The bedroom carries the scent of sex and Nova's recent shower, but nothing else.

Nothing wrong here. So whatever spooked her happened elsewhere.

The sheriff's station carries a tension I can taste. Roberta sits at the dispatch desk, filing her nails to avoid actual work. Santos hunches over a mountain of paperwork at his desk, looking like he hasn't slept in days.

"Morning, Santos," I call out, heading toward Nova's office. "Need to grab a file."

"Sure thing." He doesn't look up from his reports.

I step into Nova's office and freeze. The air carries expensive cologne—not the cheap shit most cops wear, but something that screams money and power. Rich, cloying, with undertones that make every instinct snarl with recognition.

And underneath it, the same anxiety I'd detected on Nova this morning.

Royce was here. In her space, where she's supposed to be safe. And he left his mark like a fucking dog pissing on territory.

I'm moving before the rage fully hits, crossing to Santos's desk in three strides. "Who's been in Nova's office this morning?"

Santos looks up, eyes wide. "Just the sheriff, far as I know. Why?"

"Anyone else? Visitors? Delivery people?"

"Negative. Been quiet all morning." Santos frowns. "Is there a problem?"

But I'm already moving. I need to get answers from her, and then I'll finish Royce once and for all.

Nova doesn't look up when I walk back into the war room, but her shoulders go rigid at the sound of my boots on concrete. She's arranged the Garcia files in neat stacks, every document perfectly aligned, every paper clip positioned just so.

Obsessive organization. Her fingers tremble slightly as she adjusts the papers.

"Find what you were looking for?" she asks, still staring at the paperwork.

"Yeah." I study her profile. She won't look at me. "Expensive cologne in your office. Recent. Anxiety mixed with it. Someone was in your office that shouldn't have been."

Her hands pause on the files. "That's not possible. I have the only key."

"Locks can be picked. Doors can be bypassed." I move closer, and she immediately shifts away. "Royce was there, wasn't he?"

"Lots of people go in and out of the station. Anyone would be nervous in there."

Too smooth. Too rehearsed. She's been practicing this lie, which pisses me off even more than the fact that she's lying.

"Look at me," I demand, fighting to keep my voice level.

Nova glances down at the table, purposely deflecting. "Garcia's deposition prep takes priority—"

"Look at me." I don't hold back this time.

She finally lifts her head, and for just a moment, the mask slips. I see the fear underneath. The terror she's trying so hard to bury.

Then the walls slam back up.

"Last night was a mistake," she says, voice emotionless. "We lost perspective. Got distracted from what matters."

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 11:37 am

Her voice shakes when she says it. Her fingers grip the table edge until her knuckles go white.

"You don't believe that."

"I believe in the case. In justice for the families Royce has destroyed." She turns back to the files, refuses to look at me. "Everything else is secondary."

"Everything else?" I step closer, close enough to smell her fear again. Stronger now. Desperate. "Is that what you call what happened between us?"

"What happened between us was a lapse in judgment." Still staring at the paperwork. "It won't happen again."

I slam my palm down on the table beside her. The possessive fury wants blood, wants to tear apart whoever made her this afraid. "Because someone threatened you. Someone made you believe that what we have undermines the case."

Her hands go completely still. "There is no 'we,' Ash. There's the job. That's all there's ever been."

Her voice cracks on 'ever been.'

"You're terrified." I move around the table. "Royce got to you. Used what we shared against you somehow."

"Stop." She stands fast and puts the chair between us. "Just stop. You're reading

things that aren't there."

"Then explain the anxiety. Explain why your hands shake when you think I'm not watching. Explain why you can't look me in the eye when you tell me last night meant nothing."

Christ, Nova. Don't let him convince you I'm the enemy.

"Because it didn't mean anything." Too loud. Too desperate. "Because I don't need you complicating my life. Because this job is all I have, and I won't let anyone—including you—destroy it."

"Including me." Christ, that cuts deep. "So I'm just another threat now. Another problem to manage."

"You've always been a threat." She finally meets my eyes. Ice cold. "I was just stupid enough to forget that for one night."

Silence. Heavy and brutal. I want to grab her, shake her, demand the truth about what happened in that office this morning. I want to hunt down Royce and tear him apart with my bare hands.

She's done with me. Already back behind that fucking badge where I can't reach her. Maybe that's what she needs right now—distance from the monster who's made her life hell.

"Williams' timeline review. Garcia prep." Her voice goes flat. Dead. "We should get started before the deposition."

"Nova—"

"Bank records still don't match the Garcias' testimony. Timeline's off by several months."

She won't look at me. Won't let me in. And pushing harder will just make it worse.

So I step back.

"Fine," I tell her, moving to the opposite side of the table. "Let's prep the Garcias."

We work through the testimony without speaking. The silence cuts like broken glass. But one thing's clear: Royce got to her. Threatened her. Used me against her.

He thinks he won.

Stupid fuck just poked the beast.

The Garcia deposition goes exactly as planned. No surprises. I guide the farmer's wife through her testimony while Nova takes notes from the gallery.

When the Garcias leave, Nova immediately starts packing up files. "I need to grab lunch before the Williams meeting this afternoon."

"I'll come with you."

"That's not necessary." She won't look at me. "I'm perfectly capable of eating alone."

I watch her walk out, then give her a few minutes before I follow. When I see her county cruiser parked outside Greene's Diner, I know exactly why she picked it. Public space. Witnesses. Smart move if you're trying to avoid a real conversation.

The diner's packed with the lunch crowd when I walk in. Nova sits in a corner booth,

back to the wall, coffee cup gripped tight in both hands. She doesn't look up when I slide into the seat across from her.

"I told you I didn't need company," she says quietly.

I signal Helen for coffee. "We need to talk."

"We talked. In the war room. I was very clear about where we stand."

"You were clear about the lies you're telling yourself." I lean forward, and she leans back. "Royce got to you. Threatened you. And now you're running scared."

"I'm not running from anything." Her knuckles go white around the coffee cup. "I'm being rational."

"Rational." I let that sit for a moment. "Is that what you call it when you can't even look at me? When you flinch every time I get close?"

"I don't flinch."

"You're flinching right now."

Her jaw hardens. "You want to know what I'm doing? I'm correcting a mistake. I'm getting back to why I'm here instead of letting myself get distracted."

"Distracted." Christ, that cuts. "Last night was a distraction? What you told me about Carman was a distraction?"

"Yes." Flat. Final. "It was just sex, Ash. Don't make it into something it wasn't."

Her eyes are wet. She's fighting not to take it back.

"You think sleeping with me gives you the right to hover and protect and manage every aspect of my life?"

"That's not what this is about."

"Isn't it?" She leans forward. "This was always about control with you. Protection, partnership—just different words for the same thing. You can't stand that I might handle something without your input."

My hands clench under the table. She's ripping apart what we had, making it sound ugly. Every word meant to wound me. To drive me away.

"You want to know about control?" My voice drops low. "Control is sitting here listening to you lie instead of dragging you somewhere private and demanding answers."

"There it is." No warmth in her smile. "When you don't get your way, you threaten to force it."

Something twists in my chest. She just called me exactly what everyone else sees—a monster who takes what he wants.

"The real me held you while you confessed your deepest secret. Made you feel safe enough to surrender." I lean closer. The fear's stronger now. Desperate. "The real me knows you're terrified, and it's not because of anything I've done."

Something cracks in her face, just for a moment.

"This is about Carman, isn't it?" I watch her carefully. "If I could find out about your sister, so could he."

Her eyes snap to mine, and her face goes pale. "What did you just say?"

Fuck.

"Nova—"

"You already knew." Her voice goes flat. Dead. "When I told you about Carman, you already knew."

The betrayal in her eyes cuts deeper than any blade. She thinks I manipulated her into opening up about her sister.

"Background checks are routine—"

"Don't." She sets down her coffee cup with careful control. "Just don't."

Before I can explain—before I can tell her it didn't matter what I knew because hearing it from her was everything—Savvy appears beside our table.

"Nova," she says, voice sharp with authority. "Helen needs to see you in the kitchen. Something about the Bauer family."

Nova looks grateful for the escape, sliding out of the booth fast. "Of course."

Savvy's eyes meet mine as Nova heads toward the kitchen. Pure warning in that look.

I want to follow Nova. Corner her. Shake her until she spills what happened in that office. I want to hunt down Royce and rip his fucking throat out.

But Savvy's right. I push harder, and Nova shuts down completely.

I leave cash on the table and walk out. She's made her choice—handle this shit alone.

Twelve minutes back to the clubhouse. The restless energy paces behind my ribs, wanting blood. Wanting to tear apart everything that's hurting her.

Royce used her sister against her. Had to be. Hit her where it would destroy her—Carman's memory, her guilt, her need for justice.

And I fucked it up worse by letting slip I already knew. Christ. She thinks I manipulated her into confessing something I already had intel on.

Smart move, asshole. Real fucking tactical.

She's alone now. Completely cut off. Can't trust me, can't trust anyone. Exactly what Royce wanted.

Perfect fucking strategy. Isolate the target, eliminate support systems, apply pressure until they break.

Except he miscalculated one thing.

I park behind the clubhouse, hands locked on the handlebars so tight the metal bends. Nova's in trouble. She won't let me help. Sees me as another threat instead of the monster who'd burn the world down to keep her safe.

She needs protection, whether she wants it or not.

Royce thinks he neutralized the MC threat by turning her against me.

Stupid fuck has no idea what he just unleashed.

I don't need her permission to hunt.

Chapter Twelve

Nova

I've been staring at Derek Sullivan's photograph for three hours.

I haven't moved from this kitchen chair since I got home. Haven't opened the folder again. Haven't touched the burner phone Royce left beside it. Haven't done anything except stare at the face of my sister's killer and catalog every reason this deal will damn me.

Derek Sullivan. David Martinez now. Current address, employment records, daily routine documented like a fucking case file. Six years of hunting him, and now I have it all. Address. Work schedule. The name of the coffee shop where he gets his morning latte.

Except I don't have shit.

Location isn't evidence. Having his new identity doesn't prove he killed Carman. For that—for the evidence that proves Derek's alibi was fabricated, for the witness statements that got buried, for the forensics that were never processed—I have to earn it.

That's the deal. Royce made it clear. The proof I need for three months of looking the other way while families lose their homes.

Stall the Henderson appeal. Find procedural issues with the Garcia testimony. Look

the other way while Royce steamrolls families who can't fight back. Become the kind of sheriff who works for the highest bidder instead of the badge.

My hands won't stay still. They keep drumming against the table, reaching for the folder, pulling back. Like movement will somehow make this choice easier.

But nothing's stable anymore. Not the case. Not my certainty. Not Ash's face when I pushed him away at the diner.

He saw right through me. Read every tell.

"Something happened. Someone threatened you."

Dead accurate. And I let him think he was the problem instead of admitting Royce had me cornered.

I close my eyes and I'm back in Ash's arms last night. Telling him about Carman while he held me together without trying to fix it all.

He'd made a promise. "When this thing with Royce is over, we'll find him. Derek, the detective, and whoever else was involved."

Twelve hours later, I've got Derek's location sitting on my kitchen table. But not the proof. Never the proof.

I push back from the table and walk to the window, Derek's surveillance photo still in my hand. Street's empty, but I can feel the surveillance. Always watching.

Is Ash out there? Posted up somewhere with that lethal stillness, cataloging threats? Or did he hand off babysitting duty to one of the prospects, reduce me to just another asset that needs monitoring?

I press my palm against the window. Ash trusted me with his scars once. Let me see the evidence of what they did to him as a kid.

But I can't show him this. Can't let him see I'm capable of becoming the kind of bastard who would have left him bleeding in that camp.

I pull my hand back from the window, leaving a perfect print on the glass. The decision locks into place. Cold. Final. I'm compromised, not by Royce's threats, but by my own need for justice. Six years of wanting Derek's blood, and now I'm willing to sell out an entire town for it.

That makes me dangerous to anyone counting on me to do the right thing.

Dawn hits my kitchen window when I reach for the burner phone.

My hands are stable now. Strange how purpose cuts through doubt. Leaves you with nothing but the job that needs doing.

Royce answers on the second ring.

"I was wondering when you'd call." That smooth, practiced tone that made my skin crawl. "Have you made your decision, Sheriff?"

"I want the deal." Tastes like copper. Like blood. But the words come out clean. "I need specifics. Timeline. What do you want me to stall and for how long?"

"Smart woman. I knew you'd see reason." Papers rustling. "Three months. Appeals get delayed. Depositions postponed. You find procedural issues that require additional review. Nothing that implicates you directly."

"Three months of people losing their homes."

"Three months of you getting justice for your sister. Unless you'd prefer Derek Sullivan keeps his new life?"

"And in return?"

"All of it. Derek's real alibi, the one that puts him at your sister's apartment the night she died.

The witness who saw him leave. The forensics that somehow never made it into evidence.

The detective who made sure it didn't." His voice drops, going soft.

"Or if you prefer a more... personal approach, I can have him brought to a secure location.

Somewhere private. Somewhere you can ask all the questions you want without worrying about Miranda rights. "

My free hand clenches into a fist. He's offering me Derek gift-wrapped, defenseless. The chance to look him in the eyes when I tell him Carman's name. To watch his face when he realizes his new life is over.

"How did you access sealed evidence files?" The detective in me kicks in despite the rest. "Those records were buried deep. I've been trying to get at that corruption network for four years."

Royce chuckles. "You were looking through official channels, Sheriff.

Limited by warrants and jurisdictions, and procedural rules.

I have... different resources. People who aren't restricted by badges or oaths.

It's amazing what information becomes available when you're willing to pay the right price. "

"And yet you're willing to give all that to me."

"Consider it a gesture of good faith. A down payment on our working relationship in the future."

"Three months," I repeat, forcing my voice level. "And then you deliver what you promised."

"Of course. But there's another element we need to discuss." His tone sharpens. "The MC. Your... relationship with their leadership has been quite convenient."

"What about it?"

"I need you to maintain that connection. Keep playing the part. Let them think you're still fighting for these families, still building cases against me." He chuckles. "Unless, of course, you've fallen for their Vice President and can't bear to deceive him?"

"I can handle the VP."

"Can you? Because from where I sit, you two looked quite cozy at that town meeting. Some might say you've gotten... attached."

"You're seeing what I wanted you to see." The words scrape out of my throat like glass. "He's useful. Access to their intelligence, their resources. Nothing more."

My stomach turns saying it. Each word a betrayal of what Ash and I shared. But

Royce needs to believe I'm just another corrupt cop he can control.

"Ah. So the relationship is purely... professional?"

"It served its purpose." I force my voice flat. Dead. Like I'm reading from a police report.

"Good. Because I need you to keep him believing you're on their side. Keep building that trust. Can you do that?"

A pause. My free hand clenches until my nails bite into my palm. "Yes."

"Excellent. Three months to delay the legal proceedings, maintain your cover with the MC, and keep their leadership believing you're fighting for justice."

"And the corruption files?"

"All of it. Financial records, witness statements, and the whole network that protected Derek. You have my word."

"Your word." I force out a laugh. "How do I know you won't just disappear once you get what you want?"

"Three months," I repeat. My voice sounds hollow even to me. "You'll have your delays."

"Excellent. I'll be in touch soon to check on your progress. And Sheriff?" His voice turns cold. "Don't disappoint me. Derek Sullivan has been untouchable for six years because corrupt officials protected him. It would be a shame if that protection continued indefinitely."

The line goes dead. I hit stop recording and upload the file to my secure cloud drive, then copy it to a flash drive. It goes into my bag with the corruption files and all the materials I've compiled for the hearings.

I pull on my uniform like I have every morning for eight years. Badge over heart. Service weapon on hip. Hair back in regulation ponytail. In the mirror, I look like the sheriff Shadow Ridge hired to clean up their town.

I'm about to become what they brought me here to stop.

I exit through the front door, in full view of any surveillance. I let them see me leaving for work, business as usual. I scan the street as I walk to my cruiser, cataloging threats, looking for Ash's bike.

Knox's Honda is parked two blocks down, partially concealed behind a delivery van.

Relief hits me like a physical blow. It's not Ash watching me. I'm not sure I could go through with this if I had to look him in the eyes one more time.

I drive deliberately slow, taking the most visible route to the station, checking my mirrors at each turn. Knox stays three car lengths back, skilled enough in his surveillance that most people wouldn't notice. But I'm not most people. I've been trained to spot tails.

I stop at Greene's Diner like I do every morning. Helen pours my usual coffee without being asked, and I make the same small talk about the weather. I even complain about the Bauer family's paperwork taking forever, same as I have all week. My voice stays level, casual. Natural.

Helen hands me the to-go cup with a smile. "You take care now, Sheriff."

"Always do." The lie comes out smooth as silk.

When I pull into the station parking lot, I take my time getting out. Let Knox see me walking in with my usual coffee and laptop bag, same routine as always. Let him report back that Sheriff Reyes stopped for coffee, chatted with Helen, and went to work. Business as usual.

The station is quiet this early. Roberta won't show for another hour. Santos is still running his overnight patrol. I'm alone with the evidence of my own corruption, about to join the list of dirty officials who've worked out of this building. Dawson. Morris. Now me.

My office feels different as I arrange it all on the desk. The recording, clearly labeled. Every file I've compiled on the foreclosure fraud. Bank records. Property transfers. Witness statements. A roadmap to destroying what Royce has built.

I write the note fast and direct:

Santos, This is what you need. The recording proves bribery and conspiracy. Use it. Ash will know what to do with the rest. The families deserve justice. Make sure they get it. N.

I place my badge on top of the stack. My service weapon goes in the desk drawer, locked.

Then I change clothes. Black jeans, dark sweater, boots that won't echo in empty hallways.

I take my time hanging the uniform in the small closet by the bathroom.

Each piece precisely aligned, smoothing my fingers over the crisp fabric one last

time.

Eight years of my life hung neatly on a wooden hanger.

Morris mapped every exit in this building, including the back window that opens to the narrow alley. The window opens onto the narrow alley behind the building, where dumpsters provide cover from the tree line and security cameras don't reach.

I boost myself up onto the sill. The drop is maybe five feet to the pavement below, nothing I can't handle. One last look at my office and what I'm leaving behind, then I swing my legs over and lower myself down.

I stay low, moving along the building's shadow until I reach the tree line.

Movement near the front entrance catches my eye as I pause to scan the perimeter.

Knox. He's leaning against a lamppost, eyes fixed on the front door, occasionally checking his phone.

Probably texting updates to Ash or Diesel.

A twinge of guilt hits me as I watch him. He's just doing his job. Following orders. And in a few hours, he'll be the one facing Ash's fury when they realize I've disappeared. The prospect doesn't deserve that fallout, but there's no clean way out of this.

I ease deeper into the shadows, making sure he doesn't spot me. No sign of other surveillance from this angle—no watching eyes or waiting motorcycles.

I slip through the woods, keeping to the shadows. No other surveillance visible.

Twenty minutes through the woods, then residential streets back to my apartment. My sedan sits in the lot, packed with essentials only.

I scan the area one final time. No sign of Ash's bike or his massive frame waiting in the shadows. The street stays empty.

The way I planned.

I slide behind the wheel and allow myself one moment—just one—to look up at the window to the apartment where Derek's photograph still sits on the kitchen table.

My throat closes as I think of Ash hearing that recording. The cold dismissal in my voice when I called him useful. Access to intelligence. He'll believe it because I made sure it sounded true. I had to, so he won't try to follow.

Carman's photograph sits on my dashboard. Four years of keeping tabs on Derek, making his life hell in every legal way possible. Four years of hitting walls because the corruption ran deeper than one man.

Now I have the evidence to prove that conspiracy. And I'm leaving it behind.

The families will keep their homes. Ash will get his victory. Shadow Ridge will heal.

My fingers tighten on the steering wheel as the weight of what I'm doing crashes through me. I've spent my entire career believing in the system, in doing things by the book. Now I'm using that same system against itself.

The math is simple. If I stay, any lawyer destroys the recording as entrapment. But if I disappear after taking Royce's deal? The recording becomes evidence instead of misconduct. Ash gets what he needs to finish this legally.

I press my forehead against the steering wheel. Ash will hear those words—useful, access, nothing more—and believe them. He'll think what we had was strategy.

I pull back and start the engine. In my rearview mirror, Shadow Ridge shrinks to nothing. My badge, my life, my chance at justice for Carman—all of it left behind so Ash can do what I couldn't.

Stop the corruption legally. Save the families. Win the case.

The highway stretches ahead, empty and dark. I've got a full tank of gas and nowhere to go. No badge, no authority, no identity except the one I just burned to save a town that never trusted me.

Derek Sullivan gets to keep his new life. The corruption network that protected him stays buried. Carman's real killers will never face justice.

But Shadow Ridge will be free. Royce's family loses their stranglehold on the town. Families keep their homes. The cycle of corruption that's been strangling this place for years finally breaks.

And Ash gets to be the hero he's always been, instead of the monster everyone expects him to be.

Chapter Thirteen

Ash

The war room is silent except for Santos's breathing.

"I found her badge on the desk this morning," he says, shoulders rigid by the strategy table.

His uniform's wrinkled to shit, and he has dark circles under his eyes from pulling another all-nighter.

"Service weapon locked in her drawer. Files stacked neatly.

Even left her damn uniform hanging in the locker. "

I stare at the thumb drive he dropped on the table. Santos looks like hell, deep lines around his eyes, and there's something else in his expression. Pity, maybe.

"This was with it," Santos continues, tapping the drive with one finger. "It's... you need to hear it. Before the others."

Santos hesitates. Fuck. That's never good. Whatever's on there has Santos, a guy who's dealt with bar fights and domestic calls for fifteen years, struggling for words.

"I listened to it," he admits, jaw working. "Had to know what I was dealing with."

"And?" I keep my voice level despite the dread building in my chest.

Santos meets my eyes directly. "It's her and Royce. A deal of some kind."

Christ. I force my expression to stay neutral even as my mind races through scenarios, none of them good. Santos reads my face, then digs into his pocket.

"There's more," he says, pulling out a folded piece of paper and sliding it across the table. "She left this, too."

I recognize Nova's handwriting immediately. Short, direct: Santos - This is everything you need. The recording proves bribery and conspiracy. Use it. Ash will know what to do with the rest. The families deserve justice. Make sure they get it. - N

Her badge sits there. The thing that meant everything to her, just abandoned on the table. She's gone.

Santos studies my face, then nods. "I'll be at the station if you need anything else." He turns to leave, pausing at the door.

"Take Knox with you," I tell him. Santos is still moving like every step hurts. "Kid needs to focus on something besides beating himself up, and you could use the backup."

Santos hesitates. "You sure? With Nova gone—"

"Station still needs to function. Town still needs protection." I meet his eyes. "That's what she'd want."

He nods, and some of the tension leaves his shoulders. "Thanks."

"For what it's worth," he adds, hand on the doorframe, "she believed in what we were doing. Whatever's on that recording... just remember that."

My hands are steady as I plug the drive into my laptop, though they shouldn't be. Nova vanishing without a word, leaving behind only evidence and her badge—that should have me tearing apart every road between here and Atlanta.

Instead, I'm locked down. Dead calm. The same fucking emptiness that settled in my bones when I realized a weak orc wouldn't survive the camps and I had to become something else or die.

The file opens after Santos leaves. Single audio recording, timestamp from this morning. I click play and Nova's voice fills the war room.

"I want the deal."

My teeth grind together. Her voice is cold. Certain. Nothing like the woman who'd whispered my real name in the dark.

Royce sounds smug as hell through the speakers. "Smart woman. I knew you'd see reason."

I lean forward, hands clenched, as Nova negotiates terms I never saw coming. Three months. Delayed appeals. Procedural roadblocks.

"The MC. Your... relationship with their leadership has been quite convenient."

The air leaves my lungs, waiting for her response.

"You're seeing what I wanted you to see." Her voice is flat. Dead. "He's useful. Access to their intelligence, their resources. Nothing more."

The screen blurs, and I blink hard. Shit.

"So the relationship is purely...?"

"It served its purpose."

I stop the recording.

My hands clench as I replay those last thirty seconds, listening to Nova dismiss what happened between us like it was some strategic play. Like she'd been playing a long con from the moment we met.

But that's bullshit.

I've interrogated liars, manipulators, people who've spent decades perfecting deception. Nova's good, better than most, but she's not that good. Nobody is.

The way she'd trembled when I first touched her. The catch in her breath when I said her name. The tears she'd tried to hide when she told me about Carman.

You can't fake surrender like that. Can't manufacture the kind of vulnerability she'd shown me in the dark, when she thought no one was watching.

I rewind further, listening to her voice again. Too controlled. Too practiced.

Damn. I see it now.

"You're seeing what I wanted you to see," her voice repeats from the recording.

Hell.

I slam my fist on the table hard enough to rattle the laptop.

Why would Royce risk having this conversation at all? Bastard's too careful, too paranoid to leave himself exposed like this. Unless...

Unless he thought he was safe. Because any recording of this deal would implicate Nova just as much. A sheriff caught taking bribes has no career, no credibility. The moment she tried to use this against him, she'd destroy herself too.

Royce thought he had her figured out. Thought I did too.

"He's useful. Access to their intelligence, their resources. Nothing more."

My gut twists, hearing it again, but now I see what she did. She played Royce's game, said what he wanted to hear, and let him think he'd won. All to create evidence she'd never be able to use herself.

Son of a bitch. We both got played by our own assumptions.

But I remember the weight of her in my arms after she'd broken down, the way she'd said Torgash like it was sacred instead of feared, her fingers tracing my scars while she whispered about nightmares and dead sisters and carrying grief alone.

She couldn't have faked that—wouldn't have known how.

Which means she was playing Royce, not me. Painting herself as the villain to protect us from whatever leverage he thought he had.

Clever as hell, and she'd seen his weakness from the start—arrogant bastard would underestimate a dirty cop, think she was just another piece on his board. So she became exactly what he expected while handing us everything we needed to bury

him.

I drop my head into my hands as grief hits first, then respect, and fury that she thought she had to do this alone.

She didn't sell us out.

She torched her own life to save the town. To keep families in their homes. To make sure two years of fighting corruption actually meant something.

The war room door slams open. Diesel fills the doorway, eyes wild with barely controlled fury.

"Prospect's tearing himself up over missing her slip," he snarls. "Heard you sent Knox to the station with Santos."

Behind him, I can see Crow making his way in.

"Santos needed backup. And Knox needed to focus on anything besides feeling guilty."

"Fine. But why aren't we out there looking for her?" Diesel snaps. "She's already got hours on us, probably halfway to—"

"Atlanta." The words come out sharp. "She went home. Not hard to figure out."

Diesel's expression shifts, hearing something in my tone. "So we ride. Be there in two hours, drag her ass back here for answers."

My spine goes rigid, every muscle in my body screaming to do exactly that.

To fire up the bike and beat pavement until I'm standing in whatever shithole apartment she's hiding in, demanding to know why she couldn't trust me with this.

Why, after everything we'd shared, she had to shut me out of this.

My beast wants blood. Wants answers. Wants to hunt her down and drag her back where she belongs.

But that's not what she'd want. And maybe that's the point. She made her choice, and now I have to make mine. Let her go, or become the monster who drags her back into a mess she sacrificed everything to escape.

I stare at her badge, memories hitting me hard. That first night at Murphy's, her stepping between me and danger without fear. The night she touched my scar without flinching, saw Torgash and didn't run.

The pattern was there from the beginning. Nova rushing headfirst into other people's battles, putting herself between them and harm, never counting the cost.

This is who I am, Ash. This is what I do.

And I fucked it up for her. Pulled her into my orbit, complicated her mission, made her vulnerable in ways that could get her killed. My need to control her situation, to keep her close, I backed her into a corner where sacrifice was the only way out.

I could chase her down. Find her. Drag her back like some possessive asshole. But then what? Force her to watch what she fought for turn to shit because I couldn't let her go?

"No," I force out through gritted teeth. "We don't ride."

"The fuck we don't. Someone threatens family—"

I hit play on the laptop. Nova's voice fills the room, confident and businesslike as she negotiates with Royce. Diesel goes rigid as he listens, confusion and anger fighting for control of his expression.

When it ends, Diesel's face is unreadable. "That's not right." He shakes his head slowly. "I've seen a lot of betrayals in this life. People selling each other out for money, for freedom, for their own skin." His eyes narrow. "That wasn't it."

Good. I'm not the only one who heard it. "I know."

"That's a performance. She's baiting him, saying exactly what the bastard needs to hear. Hanging herself out there to save us."

"Why would she do that?" Diesel asks, confusion replacing anger. "Why agree to any of this?"

"Because we need evidence that would stick," I explain, picking up the note Nova left. "Royce would never incriminate himself unless he knew using it would destroy her. Any recording would make her look just as dirty as him."

Diesel flips through bank statements, his expression shifting from anger to calculation. He stops at a particular page, taps it twice, then looks up.

"She knew what she was doing," he says quietly. "This recording..." He nods toward the laptop. "We could use it tomorrow. End Royce for good."

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"And destroy her career in the process," I add. Something heavy settles in my ribs. "No badge. No law enforcement. Ever."

Diesel studies me. "That was her choice."

"A choice I'm not going to let her make." The words come out harder than intended.

"Why?"

"Because this badge is everything to her. Has been since her sister died." I run my thumb along the edge of her badge. "And I'm not going to be the one who takes that away."

Diesel leans back, studying me. "Even though she's handing you Royce? The thing you've been working toward for two years?"

"Even though."

Diesel's mouth quirks up. "Guess she's not the only one willing to sacrifice everything."

My phone buzzes. Hammer's number.

"Yeah?"

"Vargan called me." Hammer's voice is sharp. "Says Nova left what you need to end this tied up in a pretty little package for you." A pause. "What's our move?"

I walk to the window, staring out at the empty parking lot where Nova's cruiser should be. Where it won't ever be again.

"She knew what she was doing," I tell him. "Left me evidence that would destroy Royce tomorrow. But using it destroys her, too."

"Ah." Papers rustle on his end. "And you can't do that."

"She'd lose everything. Badge, career, any future in law enforcement."

"I figured as much." Hammer's quiet for a moment. "You know I've got to ask—what about the families? The town? We've put two years and significant resources into Shadow Ridge. It's become one of our most valuable territories."

My grip tightens on the phone. The weight of what he's saying settles in my chest. "I know."

"This is bigger than just you now, brother. The club's invested. Other charters are watching how we handle this. If we let corruption win because you can't sacrifice one woman..."

"She's not just one woman." The words come out rough.

"No," Hammer agrees quietly. "She's not. But you've got to weigh what matters more—her career, or justice for everyone Royce has destroyed. Including her."

I stare out at the empty lot. At the scar reflected in the glass.

"There has to be another way."

"Maybe. But are you willing to bet everything on maybe?"

The line goes quiet again. Waiting.

"I'm the one who wanted this," I continue. "It's my blood the town should be freed by. Not hers."

"How?"

I turn back to the war room, to years of work spread across tables and pinned to walls. Evidence gathered and connections mapped. Everything I've built to take down the bastards who've been bleeding this town dry.

"I'm not using the recording," I tell him. "At all."

"You've built this case from nothing."

"And I'm handing it over without destroying Nova." I close the laptop containing every legal brief, every strategy memo, every piece of research I've compiled. "The moment that recording surfaces in any court, she becomes the corrupt sheriff who took bribes."

"You're talking about walking away from guaranteed victory," Hammer says quietly. "The victory she gave you and wanted you to use."

"I'm talking about making sure Nova still has a future when this is over."

Hammer's quiet for a moment. "So what's your play?"

"Give everything I've built to clean lawyers.

Human lawyers with no connection to Nova, no connection to me or the club.

They use the bank records, property transfers, witness testimony.

My contacts, my sources." I push the laptop away.

"Takes longer without the recording, but it sticks just the same. "

My fingers tighten around the phone. Legal warfare has been my weapon since the camps. The thing that kept me alive when fists weren't enough. Now I'm handing it all over to strangers.

"Royce won't see it coming," I add. "He thinks he's got us trapped—use the recording and destroy Nova, or don't use it and have no case. He never planned for a third option."

I'm not walking away from a fight. Sacrificing my biggest advantage.

And maybe that's what this is really about. For weeks, I've been trying to control every piece of this. Demanding she let me protect her, getting pissed when she made her own choices.

This is how it has to be. I keep the case alive, keep her safe, and lose every damn thing that matters to me in the process.

Hammer's quiet for a long moment. Then: "You think she's coming back?"

Something cold spreads through my ribs. "She's done with this place. Done with me. But at least she'll still have a badge when this is over."

"What do you need from me?"

"Someone with federal connections. A lawyer whose reputation is spotless."

"I might know someone. Former Atlanta DA's office. Clean record, iron spine. One of the few humans who helped those few years after the camps closed."

My shoulders drop an inch. "Perfect. They take point, build the case independently. Separate from anything Nova or I touched."

"I'll cover your ass on this," Hammer says after a moment, "but I need you to tell me why she's so important. This isn't just about Shadow Ridge anymore, is it?"

My throat tightens. On that laptop sits a recording of Nova negotiating for justice she's been denied for years. A sister buried while her killer walked free. A wound that's never healed.

"She deserves to have the system work in her favor for once," I say, the words scraping out. "She's spent her whole damn life fighting other people's battles. It's time someone fought for her."

Hammer goes quiet for a moment. When he speaks again, there's something different in his voice. "You sure about this? Once we start down this path, there's no going back. No case for you, no Nova."

I stare at Nova's badge on the table. The beast in me wants to hunt her down, drag her back, make her stay. But that's exactly the kind of monster she was running from.

"I'm sure."

"Why?"

I don't hesitate. Don't calculate legal angles or weigh strategic advantages. Just answer.

"Because keeping her alive matters more than keeping her."

"She's in Atlanta right now. Probably sitting somewhere, hating herself for what she thinks she had to do." My throat closes. "Maybe she'll figure out what I gave up. Maybe she won't. Doesn't change anything."

"And if she doesn't come back?"

"Then at least she'll still have options."

The line goes quiet for a long moment. Then Hammer's voice, rougher than usual: "Send me what you have. I'll have someone in Atlanta within six hours."

After I hang up, I sit alone in the war room surrounded by years of work I'm about to hand over to strangers. My hand hovers over the thumb drive—Nova's voice captured in digital hell, the evidence she thought would save everyone but herself.

I pocket it, then wipe the file from the laptop. One last act of protection.

I could be in Atlanta by midnight. Could hunt her down, demand answers. My beast claws for that confrontation, that closure.

Instead, I reach for the nearest file box and start organizing evidence for Hammer's lawyer.

Can't chase someone who doesn't want to be found. Can't undo a sacrifice that's already made.

Her badge sits in the evidence box Santos brought. Not mine to keep. Belongs to the woman who torched her life to save a town that never trusted her.

But I hold onto the thumb drive. That part of her story isn't finished yet.

I'll make sure the families get their justice. And then I'll do what she couldn't—I'll find Derek Sullivan.

She gave up everything for people she barely knew. Least I can do is finish what she started. For the sister who never got justice. For the woman who walked away from everything that mattered to her.

Not because I'm some fucking hero. Because she ripped my guts out showing me what real strength looks like.

Stepping back. Letting go. All the shit I never learned how to do.

Two years I thought I was the only one who could save this place. Three weeks with her and I find out there's more than one way to win a fight.

Now I get to finish what she started. Clean up the mess we both made. Make sure the woman who destroyed herself for people she barely knew gets something out of it.

Doesn't matter that it's killing me. Doesn't matter that I'll never see her face again. Doesn't matter that every breath feels like swallowing glass.

She walked away from everything that mattered to her.

The least I can do is let her sacrifice mean something.

Chapter Fourteen

Nova

I've been counting ceiling tiles for an hour when the alarm finally goes off.

Three months in Atlanta, and I still don't sleep. My body runs on three-hour chunks—enough to function when surveillance jobs run past dawn.

I swing my legs over the side of the narrow bed, bare feet hitting cold laminate.

My apartment doubles as a workspace. Six hundred square feet with walls covered in surveillance photos and case timelines.

The kitchen table disappeared two weeks ago under stacks of background checks I've pulled through former colleagues who still owe me favors.

No badge doesn't eliminate options.

Derek Sullivan. Living as David Martinez in Jacksonville. I've known his location for four years—Atlanta PD contacts made that simple. Location was never the problem. The problem was proving which badges helped him fabricate his alibi, which files got buried, which evidence disappeared.

Until Royce confirmed what I'd suspected—the proof exists.

Six years of hitting dead ends because I followed procedure. Respected chain of

command. Trusted the system. Now I can pursue leads that would have gotten me suspended.

Derek thinks a new identity and bought alibis will keep him safe. He's wrong.

He was wrong.

I push through fifty push-ups, forty sit-ups, thirty burpees. Physical conditioning is an asset I might need. My PI license permits investigation, not arrest. When I finally track Derek down, I want options.

The shower runs cold after three minutes. I've stopped noticing. Cold is just another variable, like the restlessness that followed me from Shadow Ridge. Nothing a caseload can't fix.

Coffee brews while I dress. Black tactical pants, gray t-shirt, holster that doesn't carry a badge anymore but still holds steel. The weapon stays concealed—a PI with visible hardware makes people nervous. Contingency I hope never to need.

My phone buzzes. Romano—my old partner from Atlanta PD. Early for him to call.

"Nova." He sounds different. Tight, almost careful. "Are you sitting down?"

"What happened?" My coffee mug stops halfway to my lips. Shadow Ridge. The MC. Ash.

"Someone's reopened Carman's case." Romano pauses, letting that sink in. "New evidence submitted to the DA yesterday. Serious material—witness testimony, financial records, forensics that were buried during the original investigation."

The mug hits the counter harder than intended and cracks along the handle. "What?"

How?"

"Don't know details yet. But there's more." His tone drops. "Package came with credentials from some high-powered law firm in New York. Letterhead that made the Chief sit up straight. This wasn't some random tip—this came through channels with power."

New York. My grip tightens on the phone. The timing feels too precise for coincidence.

"Figured you'd want to know right away." Romano sounds puzzled. "Nova, who the hell do you know with enough pull to fast-track a six-year-old cold case overnight?"

I'm halfway through telling him I don't know when my call-waiting beeps. Unknown number.

"I need to take this," I tell Romano. "Call me if anything else breaks."

I switch calls, expecting a client or the security firm.

"Sheriff Reyes." The caller is male, deep, unfamiliar. Authority that doesn't negotiate.

"Not Sheriff anymore. Who is this?"

"Hammer. Shadow Ridge MC. New York Chapter."

My grip tightens on the phone. The president of the motorcycle club. A man I know by reputation only—the power behind the throne, the one who sanctioned Ash's operation in Shadow Ridge. We've never spoken directly.

"What do you want?" I keep my tone neutral, shoulders tensing.

"Heard you got some news about your sister's case." No small talk, no explanation for how he knows about a call I received minutes ago. He knows my business.

"What's it to you?"

He chuckles, low and brief. "You got a right to know who made it happen."

"Romano said—"

"Your cop friend knows what he was told to tell you. I'm telling you what he didn't." His tone hardens. "Ash stepped down as Shadow Ridge chapter lead the day after you left. Handed control to Vargan and caught the first flight to New York."

My free hand grips the counter. Ash stepped down. Left Shadow Ridge. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because he's spent three months building your sister's case. Called in every legal contact he's cultivated for fifteen years. Burned bridges that can't be rebuilt." A pause. "And made damn sure you'd never know he was behind it."

The counter edge cuts into my palm. "That's not possible." The words come out too fast. "Derek's alibi was airtight. I've spent six years trying to break it—"

"Nobody with a badge." Hammer cuts me off. "But a man with the right motivation and wrong connections? Different story."

My throat closes. Six years. Six years of hitting dead ends, following leads that went nowhere, carrying Carman's death like a weight that never lifted. "What exactly did he do?"

"Got Derek Sullivan to sign a full confession, for starters." Grim satisfaction bleeds

through the phone. "Let's say he had a compelling conversation with some associates who helped him understand the value of clearing his conscience."

Derek confessed. The words don't process. Can't process. Derek Sullivan, who walked free while my sister's body went cold in the ground, who disappeared behind bought alibis and dirty badges—he confessed.

"Why would Ash do this?" My own question sounds distant, like someone else asked it.

"You'd have to ask him that." His tone softens marginally. "But he made it clear none of us were to contact you. Said you deserved to move on without Shadow Ridge's baggage. Without his."

"Then why are you calling me?"

"Because loyalty runs both ways, Sheriff. He gave his all for this club when we needed him. Figured someone should return the favor."

My chest tightens. I blink hard, refusing the reaction. "Where is he now?"

"New York chapter house. Taking point on business deals that keep him behind a desk and away from anything that might remind him of Shadow Ridge." A pause. "Orc's functioning, but that's about all I'd call it."

I should thank him for the information. Should feel grateful that Carman might finally get justice. Instead, anger builds in my chest, sharp and unexpected.

"He had no right." The words shake as they spill out. "This was my fight. My sister. My burden to carry."

"Your burden became his at some point. At least, that's how he feels about it." Hammer doesn't sound sympathetic.

"I didn't ask for his help."

"And he didn't ask for permission to give it." A pause. "Just thought you should know who to thank when your sister's killer goes to prison."

The line goes dead before I can respond.

I stand motionless in my kitchen, coffee cooling, phone clutched tight. The evidence wall stares back at me—six years of work, leads that went nowhere, a system that failed my sister at every turn.

Ash fixed it. Without telling me. Without asking. Derek Sullivan will go to prison because of what Ash gave up.

Just like he promised in my bed three months ago: I'll help you get justice. Even if you hate me for it.

I throw the coffee mug against the wall. It shatters, dark liquid splattering across crime scene photos like arterial spray.

Six years. Six years of carrying Carman's death, fighting a system designed to forget victims like her, promising her grave that someone would pay.

And he took that from me, too.

Except... he didn't. He gave Carman justice. Got me the outcome I'd fought for and failed to achieve on my own.

I grab my laptop, fingers moving before my brain processes the decision. Flight to New York, one way, leaves in three hours.

I don't pack. Don't plan. Don't think beyond the urgent need to stand in front of him and demand answers. To understand why, after everything, he would do this and then disappear without a word.

To ask the question that's been burning in my chest since Hammer spoke his name: What exactly did Ash give up to get my sister justice?

And what the hell am I supposed to do with that?

New York doesn't care that I'm running on zero sleep and pure adrenaline. The city swallows me the moment I step off the plane. Another body in the crowd. Exactly how I've lived for three months.

Not anymore.

The cab driver gives me a side-eye when I tell him the address. "You sure about that, lady?"

"Just drive."

He shrugs, meter running as we crawl through late afternoon traffic. The New York chapter house sits in an industrial zone in Queens. Unmarked brick building with reinforced doors. Security cameras positioned at every angle. Different location, same setup as Shadow Ridge.

I pay the driver and step onto the sidewalk.

Two prospects guard the entrance—orcs with green skin and the tattoos that mark

camp survivors. Their patches are newer, but their scars are just as deep as any full member's. They track my movement, hands shifting toward concealed weapons.

"I'm here to see Ash."

The taller one looks me over—jeans, boots, leather jacket, exhaustion I can't hide. "Nobody here by that name."

"Tell Hammer's VP that Nova Reyes is here. He'll see me."

Recognition shifts across their faces. Wariness. The smaller one disappears inside while his partner keeps steady watch on me, not hostile but ready. They know exactly who I am. And probably why I'm here.

My chest tightens. What am I doing? Flying across the country to confront an orc who... what? Fixed the thing that's been destroying me for longer than it should? Got justice for Carman when I couldn't?

Minutes drag. Finally, the door opens. Not Ash. An orc with shoulders like granite slabs and intricate tattoos wrapping around forearms thick as my thighs. Forest-green skin marked with scars from the camps, and a single gold ring piercing one tusk.

"Sheriff." His patch reads Road Captain. His name tape says Grinder. His tone doesn't leave room for argument.

"Not Sheriff anymore."

"Inside."

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Grinder leads me through a common area where brothers pause mid-conversation to watch us pass.

A dozen orcs scattered around - some playing cards, others nursing beers, one reading a newspaper.

All with the unmistakable green skin that marks them as Ironborn.

No hostility in their gazes, just curiosity.

And something else. Respect, maybe. Or caution.

We reach a hallway lined with doors. Grinder stops at the last one, raps his knuckles against metal.

"What?" His voice is rough, distracted.

"Visitor." Grinder opens the door without waiting for permission.

Ash sits behind a desk covered in paperwork, head bent over a laptop and ledgers. Three months since I walked away. His green skin looks pale under fluorescent lights, scars more pronounced. Hair longer, jaw shadowed.

Then he looks up.

My chest locks. I can't breathe. Can't think.

His face goes blank in half a second. Whatever I saw—shock, pain, something that looked like relief—disappears behind the walls we both know how to build.

"Grinder." His tone gives nothing away. "Out."

The door closes.

I'm standing three feet from him, but it feels like miles. My hands shake, so I shove them in my jacket pockets. He doesn't move. Doesn't speak. Just watches me with those amber eyes I know too well.

"Why?" My throat barely works.

He closes the laptop deliberately and leans back in his chair. His eyes move over my face, down to my hands, back up. Taking in details. The weight I've lost. The exhaustion I can't hide. How long I've been standing in his doorway.

"You need to be more specific."

Same deflection. Same cold tone. But those eyes catalog everything.

"Derek Sullivan."

He nods once.

"Carman's case."

Another nod.

"Shadow Ridge."

Something flickers across his expression. "The operation was complete."

"Bullshit." The word explodes from me. "Hammer told me you burned legal connections and called in favors you can't get back. You did all of it without telling me. Without asking."

"Hammer told you?" His face goes completely still.

"Yes. He was worried about you." I step closer. "Why, Ash?"

"Would you have wanted me to ask?" One eyebrow raises. "Or would you have told me to stay the hell out of your business?"

Tension coils through my shoulders. He's right, and I hate him for it. "That wasn't your call to make."

"No?" He stands slowly, hands braced on the desk. "You left, Nova. Left your badge. Left that recording. Left me to figure out what the hell you were trying to accomplish."

"I was protecting you. The club. The case."

"So when you protect me, it's noble. When I protect you, it's wrong." His voice has an edge now.

"It was the only solution."

The bottom falls out. He's right, and I hate that he's right.

"You get to make unilateral decisions, but I'm not allowed to do my fucking job?" He moves around the desk now, closing the distance. "You get to sacrifice what matters

for what you think is right, but I'm not allowed to?"

"This was my fight. My sister."

"And you were losing because you used your leverage to win my war." Flat. Brutal honesty. "You handed me victory and walked away with nothing."

Air catches in my throat. "So you fixed it. Made it all better. Swooped in and solved the problem I couldn't."

"No." He's close enough now that I catch his scent—leather and soap and that unique scent that is all Ash. "I kept a promise I made in your bed three months ago. I told you I'd get justice for Carman, even if you hated me for it."

"I don't hate you. I hate what you did."

"Then why are you here?" His eyes search my face. "You got what you wanted. Carman gets justice. Derek pays, and Shadow Ridge wins. It's everything you wanted."

"Because you didn't give me a choice."

"Neither did you when you left." His voice cracks slightly. "You made your decision. I made mine."

We're three feet apart. I can see the pulse in his throat, the way his hands clench and release like he's fighting not to reach for me. The same fight I'm losing.

"What did Derek's confession really cost you?" I flew all this way to find out.

"Nothing that mattered."

"Don't." I step closer. Heat radiates off him. "Don't dismiss it. Tell me what justice for Carman cost you."

He studies me for a long moment, weighing something in his mind. Finally, he sighs. "Legal connections. Resources I can build again."

"And Shadow Ridge?"

"Vargan's running the chapter. Club's fine without me."

"That's not what I asked."

His jaw works. "They don't need me anymore, and what I wanted wasn't there."

The words hit harder than they should. "Because of me."

"Because of the choices we both made."

Another step closer. Close enough now that I have to tilt my head back to meet his eyes.

"Why didn't you want me to know?" This question matters most. "Why arrange it all anonymously?"

Something shifts in his expression. "Because you didn't want my help. Made that abundantly clear. But Carman deserved justice, with or without your permission."

"And you?" My voice drops. "What did you deserve?"

His laugh is bitter, barely a sound. "I'm an orc with bloodstained hands, Nova. I don't waste time thinking about what I deserve."

"That's not an answer."

"Fine." His voice turns sharp. "I deserved to know why you couldn't tell me what you were planning."

The truth sinks in, heavy and undeniable. I'd done exactly what I accused him of—made decisions that affected us both without consultation, without trust.

"We're even, then." I meet his gaze steadily. "Both making choices the other didn't ask for."

"Is that why you came? To establish equal footing?"

"I came because—" The words stick in my throat. Why did I come? To confront him? To thank him? To understand what kind of man dismantles his life to keep a promise to someone who walked away?

"Because you fixed what I couldn't," I finally say. "And I needed to know why."

Something softens in his expression. "You know why."

And I do. The knowledge has been there since Hammer's call, since the moment I understood what Ash had done. I just haven't been ready to name it.

"Say it," I challenge him, needing to hear it aloud. "Tell me why you did it."

His hands clench once, then relax. "Because you fought alone long enough. Because Carman deserved justice. Because I promised."

"Those are reasons. Not the reason."

His gaze burns into mine. "Because I love you. Have since you pulled a gun on me in a diner parking lot. Will until they put me in the ground."

The confession lands hard. Three words that terrify me more than anything Royce ever threatened.

"That's not—" I shake my head. "You don't know me. Not really."

"I know exactly who you are, Nova Reyes.

" He steps closer, eliminating the remaining distance between us.

His massive frame dwarfs mine, skin the color of pine needles stark against the white office walls.

One tusk slightly chipped from some long-ago fight.

"Stubborn. Righteous. Too damn brave for your own good.

Willing to burn yourself to the ground if it means getting justice for someone else. "

His hand rises, hovers near my face without touching. "I know you push people away because letting them close means risking loss. Know you'd rather sacrifice yourself than ask for help."

His voice drops lower. "And I know that scares the hell out of you—someone seeing all the broken parts and staying anyway."

"You left," I remind him, the accusation weak even to my own ears.

"I stepped back. There's a difference." He doesn't look away. "Gave you the space to

choose. To decide if what we started was worth fighting for."

"And if I choose to walk away?" The question is barely a whisper.

"Then you walk away." His voice roughens. "But you get the choice this time. No manipulations, no sacrifices, no noble bullshit about protecting each other."

Three months ago, I left to protect him. Now he's asking me to stay. To choose him instead of running.

"I don't know how to do this," I admit. The confession costs more than I expected.

"Neither do I." His honesty is unexpected, disarming. "But I'm willing to figure it out if you are."

His hand finally makes contact, callused fingers brushing my cheek with impossible gentleness. The touch breaks something loose inside me—a dam I've been maintaining since the police knocked on my door, since I learned how dangerous it is to love someone in a world that takes without mercy.

I lean into his palm, closing my eyes briefly against the rush of feeling. When I open them again, his gaze is steady on mine, waiting for an answer I'm not sure I know how to give.

But I know how to show it.

I close the final distance between us and press my mouth to his.

Nova

The needle slides through fabric, securing another button to Ash's sheriff uniform shirt. The third one this week. At this rate, I'm going to have to buy buttons in bulk—his shoulders keep outgrowing the standard-issue uniforms.

"Hold still," I mutter, perched on the kitchen counter while Ash stands between my knees, patient as granite but radiating warmth.

His palms rest on my thighs, thumbs tracing lazy circles that make it hard to concentrate on anything except the way he's watching my mouth.

"Unless you want to walk into the town council meeting with your chest hanging out."
"

"Might make the budget discussion more interesting," he says, those golden eyes dancing with amusement.

"Helen would have a heart attack." I bite through the thread and examine my handiwork, but my focus keeps drifting to the way his shirt strains across his chest, the badge sitting crooked against fabric that's fighting a losing battle. "There. That should hold until your next growth spurt."

"Orcs don't have growth spurts after thirty-five."

"Tell that to your shoulders." I smooth the shirt over his chest, fingers deliberately tracing the outline of muscle beneath the crisp fabric. His breath catches, and I file

that reaction away for later use.

"Could always go back to the cut," he says, but there's no real conviction in it. We both know he won't.

"And give Mayor Bartlett another reason to complain?

He's still adjusting to having an orc sheriff.

" I slide off the counter, but he doesn't step back, keeping me trapped between his body and the granite.

My palms move to straighten his collar with the kind of muscle memory that comes from months of this routine, except now every touch feels charged. "Besides, you look good in uniform."

"You think so?" His voice drops to that familiar rumble that makes my pulse skip and my thighs clench.

I should deflect. Should make some crack about authority figures or redirect to work. Instead, I meet his gaze and let him see exactly what I'm thinking. "I think the residents of Shadow Ridge sleep better knowing you're the one keeping the peace, even if your shirts keep trying to escape."

Took us months to figure this out after New York.

Him stepping into the sheriff role like he was born for it.

Me starting my PI practice and pretending I wasn't checking the rearview mirror for his bike every time I left the apartment.

Two people who'd spent their whole lives armored up, learning how to be partners

instead of just allies.

Turns out admitting you're wrong gets easier when the alternative is losing everything that matters.

"You know," I say, fingering the badge pinned to his chest, feeling the metal warm under my touch, "a year ago I never would have imagined this. You wearing the law instead of running from it."

"World's fucked," he says, fingers settling on my waist, gripping tight enough to leave marks. "Had to change with it."

There's the cynicism I know. The edge that never quite disappears, even when he's being domestic. Even when his thumbs are stroking against my hipbones through my jeans.

"You could have been a lawyer. You have the education, the credentials—"

"And sit behind a desk pushing papers while someone else handles the real work?" He shakes his head, and I catch the hunger in his eyes. "This fits better—badge by day, patch by night."

I glance toward the living room where his cut hangs on the back of a chair. Vargan's running Shadow Ridge as president now, but Ash is still MC. Still family. The badge doesn't change that, just gives him another way to protect what he claims. Another way to control his territory.

"Even if the uniforms don't fit?"

"Even if the uniforms don't fit."

I trace the edge of his badge with one finger. Sheriff. The title still catches me off

guard sometimes, not because he can't handle the authority, but because it fits him so well.

"Besides," he continues, voice dropping lower, "I like having you as my go-to PI. Nice to have someone I trust handling the cases that require... discretion."

"Is that what we're calling it?" I smile up at him. "Collaboration?"

"Among other things."

His thumb brushes across my bottom lip, and fire spreads through my chest. The same reaction he's pulled from me since that first night in my kitchen, when I was still pretending this was just physical.

He leans closer, chest expanding as he inhales, and the shirt button I just secured pops free, hitting the floor with a metallic ping.

We both look down at it, then at each other.

"That's the fourth button today," I observe.

"Shirt's defective."

"Shirt's too small." I tug at the fabric straining across his chest. "You're going to have to special order these."

"Or you could keep sewing them back on."

"I'm not a seamstress, Ash. I'm a private investigator."

"You're good with your fingers."

The way he says it sends molten need low in my belly. My touch is still pressed against his chest, feeling his heart beating steadily beneath the badge.

"Take it off," I murmur.

"The shirt?"

"The shirt."

He reaches for the remaining buttons, but I catch his wrists. "Let me."

My fingers work slowly, deliberately, releasing each button with careful precision. The fabric parts to reveal the landscape of scars and ink I've memorized over the past months, each mark a story, each story a piece of the orc who chose to trust the law rather than fight it.

When the shirt falls away, I press my palms flat against his chest, feeling the burn of his skin and the power coiled beneath.

"Better?" I ask.

"Getting there."

His fingers frame my face, thumbs stroking my cheekbones. The same touch that could snap bones, treating me like spun glass.

"Nova." My name on his lips still undoes me.

I rise up to meet him, lips crashing against his. No hesitation, no soft exploration. We're past that. The kiss is hungry, demanding, all teeth and tusks and tongue, the kind of desperation that comes from knowing exactly what the other can do.

His grip slides down to my thighs, lifting me back onto the counter with enough force to send the salt shaker skittering across granite.

The cool surface against my skin contrasts sharply with the furnace of his body as he steps between my legs, pressing close enough that I can feel exactly how much he wants this.

"We should—" I gasp as his mouth finds that spot just below my ear that makes my spine arch involuntarily. "Helen's expecting us at the diner for—"

"Helen can wait." His voice is rough against my throat. "She's survived this long without us."

"The town council meeting—"

"Doesn't start for two hours."

His teeth graze my pulse point, and rational thought scatters. My head falls back, giving him better access as his touch slides down my sides, mapping curves he knows by heart.

"Ash." His name escapes as a sigh.

"Right here, sweetheart." He pulls back to look at me, eyes dark with hunger. "Always right here."

And he is. Has been since that first night he showed me exactly what those fingers could do, since I learned what it felt like to be completely consumed by someone who sees straight through every wall I've ever built.

I can see it in the way he watches me—like he wants to devour me whole, claim me, make me forget everything except the way he can make me fall apart. That darkness

that makes him dangerous is focused entirely on me right now.

"Upstairs," I demand against his mouth, teeth catching his bottom lip. "Now."

"What about your reputation? Can't have the sheriff's consultant showing up to meetings looking well-fucked."

"Ash."

"Yes, ma'am."

He lifts me from the counter, and I lock my legs around his waist, pressing against him as he carries me toward the stairs.

His grip on my ass is firm, possessive, and I bite down on his shoulder hard enough to leave marks.

The abandoned sheriff's shirt lies forgotten on the kitchen floor, another casualty in our ongoing battle with properly fitted uniforms.

My mouth finds his neck, tasting salt and something purely him. "Move faster."

"Demanding little thing," he growls against my ear, but his pace quickens, taking the stairs two at a time.

This isn't the life I planned. But fuck if I'd change a single thing about the orc sheriff who thinks he's a monster and the way he makes me feel like I'm the only thing in the world worth protecting.

In a few hours, we'll be facing Mayor Bartlett and the budget committee, all business and procedures. But right now the only thing that matters is this—his touch on me, his mouth claiming mine, and the promise of what waits upstairs.