

A man with a full, dark beard and mustache, looking off to the side. He has several tattoos on his arms, including a large, intricate design on his right forearm. He is wearing a dark, collared shirt and has a large, circular earring in his left ear. The background is dark and smoky.

When you know,  
you know.

# Rooster

SATAN'S FURY MC



*NYT AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR*

**L. WILDER**

# ROOSTER

Satan's Fury MC- SG



L. WILDER

**Rooster: Satan's Fury MC-SG**  
**Satan's Fury Second Generation**  
**L. Wilder- 2023**

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# Character Catalog

## **The Brothers of Satan's Fury:**

### **Maverick- President**

**Previous Sergeant at Arms**

Surname- Logan

Married to Henley

Son- Thomas (Torch)

Daughter- Lexie

### **Stitch-**

**Retired Enforcer**

Surname- Griffin

Married to Wren

Stepson- Wyatt (Bones)

Daughter- Mia

Sister- Emerson

### **Cotton:**

**Retired President**

Married to Cassidy

Daughters- Susana and Darby (Twins)

Son- Malcomb (Savage)

Adopted- Lauren

Lauren married their neighbor Flynn

**Guardrail:**

**Retired Vice President**

Married to Allie

Joelle- daughter

**Clutch: Road Captain**

Surname: Thomas

Married Olivia

Olivia's siblings- Hadley and Charlie (Wrath)

Daughter- Casey

**Smokey-**

Surname- Evan

Married MJ

Daughter- Addie

Son- Hayes

**Big- Computer Hacker**

Surname- Mike

Married to Josie

Son- Davis

Daughter- Beck

**Two Bit:**

Surname- Seth

Married to Zoe (Diesel's sister)

Son- Jonas

Daughter Chelsea

**Diesel-**

Surname Scotty

Married Ellie



Son Clayton

**Q-**

Surname Quinton

Married Jules

Daughter- Bella

**Bones- New Computer Hacker**

Wyatt- Stitch's son

Married- Elsie

**Wrath- New Enforcer**

Surname Charlie

Olivia's brother (Clutch)

Ol' lady- Mia

**Savage- New Vice-President**

Surname- Malcomb

Cotton's son

Londyn

Dalton- Savage's son

**Torch-**

Surname Thomas

Maverick's Son

**Rooster-**

Surname Ronin

Maggie

Nathan

Samantha

## Prologue



“I don’t do this.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“No, I’m serious.” She motioned her hand between our hips. “I don’t do this. I’m a mom. I’ve got kids. Two of them.”

“You saying you don’t wanna do this?”

“No, no. I’m not saying that.” She raked her teeth over her bottom lip. “I just wanted you to know that I don’t do this sort of thing.”

The movie theater bathroom was a new one for me, too, but I didn’t see any need in telling her that. Besides, she was already feeling a bit leery, and the last thing I wanted to do was scare her off, especially when her hot little body was pressed against mine, and I had a raging hard-on. I gave her one of my most charming smiles and said, “Baby, I don’t care if you do or don’t. It’s not like we’re courtin’ here. We’re just *fuu...*”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it.”

The crease in her brow faded, and I knew I had her when a smile swept across her face. She nodded, and that was that. I lowered my mouth to hers once again, drawing her closer as I kissed her with everything I had.

She didn’t resist. Instead, she wound her arms around my neck and kissed me back. Need surged throughout me like a fucking wildfire as she eased her hips forward and started

grinding against me. It was all I could do to keep from taking her right there in the hallway.

I was on the brink of losing control when she placed her hand on my chest and pulled away from me yet again. “I’m not a bad person for this, right? I mean, people do this kind of thing all the time, don’t they?”

“Yeah, I guess, but that doesn’t mean you gotta do it.”

“I know, but I deserve this. I always take care of everybody else. This time, I’m going to treat myself.” Her eyes skirted over me. “Instead of some chocolate, I’m having the hot guy I met at the movies.”

“Ah, you think I’m hot?”

“Oh yeah.” A wicked smile swept across her face. “You’re way hot.”

“Right back at ya, babe.”

I pulled her closer and pressed my mouth to hers. This kiss was different. This kiss wasn’t laced with doubt or any resistance at all. Instead, it was smoking hot and filled with a hunger that matched my own. Her body melted into me as her tongue brushed against mine, and then it was over. I’d taken all I could take.

I dropped my hands to her waist and started to unbuckle her jeans. “You sure you’re good with this?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m definitely good.”

The tip of her tongue slowly dragged across her bottom lip as she kicked off her boots, then lowered her jeans and panties to the floor. She stood there staring at me with a wanton look in her eyes as I grabbed a condom from my wallet before lowering my jeans and boxers.

From the moment we’d first kissed, she’d had me all tangled up. My cock pulsed against my fingers while I slipped on a condom. I gave it a hard squeeze, trying to relieve some of the throbbing pressure, but it did little to help. I needed her, and I needed her now.

Unable to resist a moment longer, I reached for her, pulling her close. Anticipation flashed through her eyes as my hands dropped to her hips and lifted her up, pressing her back against the wall. She bit her lip and wrapped her legs around me, making my cock grow even harder. My need for her was palpable, burning deep inside my gut.

*Fuck.*

I didn't know what it was about this woman, but she had me spiraling out of control. With one hard thrust, I buried myself deep inside her. A rush of air hissed through her teeth as I withdrew and drove into her again and again. With her arms wound tightly around my neck, I growled into her shoulder and started thrusting harder and deeper, building up to a relentless pace.

I'd been with many women in my time, but never had a woman made me feel so on edge. Needing more, I turned around and carried her over to the sink counter. Her legs widened, giving me better access as I lowered her onto the edge of the cold porcelain. She immediately leaned back and propped her hands on the sink's ledge.

I lowered my mouth to her neck, kissing her like a hungry animal as I drove deeper, harder. Her head reared back with a sated groan. That was it. That was exactly what I wanted to fucking hear. Her nails dug into my lower back as her hips rocked against mine, meeting my every thrust with more intensity. I could feel the pressure building, forcing a growl from my chest.

"Fuck," I groaned as she tightened around me. She panted wildly, and her thighs clamped down around my hips when I tried to increase my pace. I knew she was close, unable to stop the inevitable torment of her building release. I lowered my hand between her thighs, raking my thumb across her clit, and that was all it took. The muscles in her body grew taut as her orgasm took hold. I continued to drive into her; the sounds of my body pounding against hers echoed throughout the room until I finally came inside her. With a ragged breath, I panted, "Wow."

“Yeah, that was pretty freaking incredible.” She gave me a warm smile as she glanced down at her boots. “Even better than I thought it would be.”

“You doubted me?”

“No, it was me that I doubted.”

“Got no reason to doubt yourself, babe.” I slowly withdrew, then quickly tossed the condom in the trash. “You’re amazing.”

As I was pulling up my boxer briefs and jeans, she hopped down from the countertop and started to get dressed. “Tell my ex that.”

And just like that, there was a shift in her mood. I couldn’t stand the thought of her thinking she was anything but incredible, so I told her, “Your ex is a fucking idiot.”

“Oh, yeah? What makes you say that?”

“He’d have to be to let you go.”

Her smile returned as she said, “Thanks, you didn’t have to say that.”

“Just tellin’ it like it is.” I stepped over to her and placed the tips of my fingers on her chin, forcing her to look up at me. “Why don’t you give me your number so I can remind you whenever you forget?”

“I would, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.” She stood up and fastened the last button of her jeans. “I’ve only been divorced a few months.”

“Okay, then give me your phone.”

“Hmm?”

“Your phone.” To my surprise, she grabbed her phone from her purse and handed it to me. I put my name and number in her contacts as I told her, “My name’s Ronin. If you change your mind or need something, just give me a call.”

“Okay, thanks.” She dropped her phone back in her purse, then eased up on her tiptoes and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. “Thanks for this. I really enjoyed it.”

“Yeah, me too.”

She studied me for a moment, and just as I thought she was going to say something, she turned and walked out the door. I wanted to believe that I hadn't seen the last of the beautiful brunette, but with the way my luck had been lately, I wasn't so sure. Regardless, she'd given me a night I wouldn't soon forget, and I could only hope I'd done the same for her.

## Rooster



“It’s gotta be a password, right?”

“Yeah, but to what? We checked the house and his office. There was nothing there.” Bones sounded frustrated as he added, “And I already have access to his laptop, emails, and bank accounts. What else could there be?”

“I don’t know, but there’s gotta be something. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have kept repeating that Sawyer 247 bullshit.”

“Could it be one of his kids or grandkids?”

“Nope,” Bones answered. “Already checked.”

“What about an employee? Or some woman he screwed around with?”

“Maybe.”

I’d been listening to my brothers go back and forth for over an hour, and I couldn’t help but notice how much had changed over the past couple of months. I’d patched in more than ten years ago, and back then, Cotton sat at the front of the table with Guardrail and Stitch at his side. They were a force to be reckoned with.

Now, Maverick sat in Cotton’s place, and Savage and Wrath were his right-hand men. They were just as fierce and determined, but unlike their older, wiser, more mellow predecessors, Savage and Wrath were still young and quick-tempered. Most of the young ones were. I fell somewhere in between and considered myself to be a decent mix of the two.

*Except when I was hungry or hung over.*

And today, I just happened to be both, and I was teetering on the edge when Smokey asked, “When were we supposed to deliver the next load, or is that still on?”

“Next week, but we got no idea about the who or the where,” Prez answered. “We’ll figure it out, but you know Bruton. He only told us what he felt like we needed to know.”

“Yeah, he was a real gem about that.”

“Maybe there was a reason for that. For all we know, we’re worrying over nothing,” Clutch suggested. “It’s not like his death wasn’t plastered all over the fucking news. Surely whoever he was working with saw it.”

He was right.

Everyone was talking about it.

I couldn’t really blame them. It wasn’t every day that a councilman died in our small town, much less one who was gunned down in broad daylight. Add in the fact that he was shot over an accident due to a traffic light he’d petitioned for, and you had a real story on your hands.

But it’s only half the story.

None of them knew he was a notorious arms dealer who worked with some of the most dangerous men in the world. I wasn’t sold on going into business with Bruton in the first place. We didn’t know much about the guy—just that he’d gone to an extreme to get us all on board, and since then, he’d been a blessing and a curse. He’d really come through for us when we had an issue with the Demarco brothers, only to turn around and buy us trouble with the Stingers.

He had us do a drop in their territory, and they weren’t happy about it. Even tried to get a hold of Savage’s ol’ lady and their kid, but yet again, Bruton swooped in and took care of it. That’s when I learned just how cold and heartless our new partner could be—which made it all that much harder to believe that he was shot by an everyday citizen over a fucking traffic light.

I didn’t give a fuck how the guy died.



He was gone, and all he'd left us with was some dying last words that made no sense to any of us—which led me to say, “But there’s no way to be sure that they saw it or if they even cared. They could still be expecting the shipment, and when they don’t get it, they’re gonna come looking for it.”

“Rooster is right,” Prez agreed. “We got no idea what they’re expecting or what Bruton told ‘em.”

“So, we just wait here like a bunch of sittin’ ducks and see if they come lookin’ for their shit?”

“We’ve still got some time before the delivery is due.” Prez turned to Bones as he said, “We need to work fast and find out everything we need to know about Bruton and his business dealings. Even if that means going through every fucking email and receipt that has ever passed his hands.”

“I’m on it,” Bones assured him.

Big was quick to add, “And I’ll be there to help any way I can.”

“Appreciate that, brother.”

“I’ll be there, too.” Torch shrugged. “I don’t know what I’ll do, but I’ll help if I can.”

Prez nodded, then stood as he told us, “None of us are happy about the way things have played out with Bruton, but these are the cards we’ve been dealt, and we’ve gotta act accordingly. Be careful out there and don’t take any unnecessary chances.”

Without saying anything more, he slammed the gavel on the table and dismissed church. The brothers quickly started to disperse, and those who could stick around began filing into the bar. I followed Savage and Smokey up to the front counter, and we all sat down next to Cotton. We hadn’t even opened our beer when Cotton turned to Savage and asked, “How’s Londyn doing with the big move?”

“Good.” He popped the cap as he continued, “She finally got Dalton’s room the way she wants it and has moved to organizing the bathroom.”

“Which means she’s moving out most of your stuff,” Cotton chuckled.

“Oh, yeah. My stuff has come and gone.” Savage shook his head. “Never seen so many different kinds of shampoo and lotions. Won’t be long and I’ll be swimming in the stuff.”

“It’s the same way with your mother... I have my drawer, and she has the rest.”

“I need to claim a drawer.”

“*If it’s not already gone.*” Cotton smiled as he asked, “What about Dalton? How’s he doing?”

“He’s adjusting.”

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“Cause I’m not.” Savage shook his head and shrugged. “I was kind of hoping we could just step right into all this family shit, and that would be that. But there’s a lot to it, and I have no fucking clue what I’m doing.”

“I’m sure you’re doing better than you think.”

“I don’t know.” Savage turned to his father. “The other night I was just minding my own business, watching TV, and he crawled in my lap. I felt like my chest was gonna explode. Hell, it damn near brought tears to my eyes. What the hell is that?”

“That’s being a father,” Cotton answered. “And I got news for ya. That feeling never goes away.”

“I don’t know if I can take it.”

“You can, and you will.”

“I’m gonna try.” A proud smile crossed his face as he said, “Dalton’s an amazing kid. Hell, I’d claim him even if he wasn’t mine.”

“He really is something.” Cotton cocked his brow. “So, when are your mom and I gonna get to spend some more time with him?”

“Whenever is good with me.” Savage took a pull from his beer. “Let me check with Londyn, and if all is well, he can hang with you guys this weekend. Then, he won’t be underfoot while we’re putting together his swing set.”

“A swing set?” I groaned. “That’s great. Our VP’s getting all domesticated and shit.”

“Says the man who’s yet to find an ol’ lady. You know, you could use some domestication yourself.” He gave me a playful nudge. “An ol’ lady might do you some good. She could settle your ass down.”

“Never gonna happen, brother.” I was tempted to tell him about the gorgeous brunette I’d met at the movies a few months back, but it didn’t feel right. So, I ran my hand over my beard. “I’m a beast that can’t be tamed.”

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that. One day, the right girl will come along...”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath.” I wasn’t in the mood to discuss my love life, so I turned to Smokey and asked, “How are things going out at the orchard?”

And just like that, the conversation turned to MJ and all they had going on at the farm. From the sounds of it, my brother had his hands full, but that was nothing new. He and MJ were always busy doing something, but we were all busy. Each of us had our own lives outside of the club, and I’ll admit, some were more hectic than others. And from the sounds of it, things were pretty hectic over at the orchard.

Hoping to lift his mood, I leaned over to him and smiled, “Do you know the difference between an apple and an orphan?”

Smokey gave me a look, then shook his head and sighed. “Nope. Can’t say that I do.”

“An apple gets picked.”

It took a second for my answer to sink in, but when it did, it got the reaction I expected. “You’re going to hell. You know that, right?”

“What?” I asked innocently. “You didn’t like my joke? I’ve got more. What do you get when you cross a dick with a potato?”

Again, Smokey shook his head.

I chuckled as I answered, “A dictator.”

There was a low rumble of laughter which quickly faded when Torch appeared in the doorway and said, “I think they found something.”

No one responded.

We simply stood and followed Torch down the hall to Bone’s computer room. When we walked in, Big was at the back table sifting through a stack of files while Bones sat at his laptop spouting off dates. It was always impressive to see them work, especially together. From the beginning, Big had an uncanny gift for finding information no one else could find and doing things no one else could do. Bones was just like him, but he had a focus like none other. And when he set his mind to something, he didn’t stop until he got it done.

I stood there in the doorway listening as Bones called out another date. “April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1998... 87256038.”

“Yep. Got it.”

“Got what?” Savage asked as he stepped over to Big and glanced over his shoulder. Big lifted one of the pages and said, “Deposits from one of Bruton’s offshore accounts. They go out every month. Sometimes more than once, but always to a Sawyer Grant, account number 87256038. Been making deposits since ‘98.”

“Oh, yeah?” Savage studied the receipt for a moment. “Wait... ‘98? Isn’t that when Bruton started teaching at the high school?”

“I don’t know, but it wouldn’t be hard to find out.”

“Something to keep in mind.” Savage continued to study the receipt as he asked, “Got any idea who this Sawyer guy is?”

“No, but we’re working on it.”

I felt like we were finally getting somewhere when Clutch stepped into the room and said, “We’ve got company.”

“What?” Savage sounded annoyed as he asked, “Who the fuck is it?”

“We got somebody at the gate.” Clutch cocked his brow as he looked over to me and said, “He asked to speak with whoever’s in charge.”

“And?”

“And we were about to turn him away until he mentioned he had ties to Bruton.”

“Damn. He’s six feet under and still bringing the surprises.”

“That he is.” Clutch started for the door as he said, “Prez is waiting for you in the bar.”

Savage gave him a nod, then started out of the room. He hadn’t gotten far when I started after him and said, “Hold on. I’m coming with.”

When we walked into the bar, Wrath was standing next to Prez, and they were both glaring at the back door. You could literally feel the tension radiating off them as they waited for our guest to make his way inside. We stepped up beside them, and the silence was deafening as the heavy double door swung open.

Seconds later, a man dressed in a jet-black business suit stepped inside. His dark, piercing eyes scanned the room, and he exuded an aura of menace and authority as he took in every detail of the room. A subtle twitch of his jaw represented a warning that he wasn’t a man to be trifled with.

With every step, his polished leather shoes echoed through the bar, intensifying the tension in the room as he started towards us. His back was straight, his chin was out, and his expression was blank. He wasn’t the least bit shaken that he’d just entered the Satan’s Fury clubhouse and was about to face its president, but I couldn’t say the same for me.

Just being around this dude had me rattled.

Fuck.

This dude was no joke.

He walked straight up to Prez and asked, “You the one in charge?”

“Who the fuck’s asking?”

“I go by many names, but you boys can call me Maltese.”

“Why don’t you tell us why you’re here, Maltese?”

“I simply need to deliver a message.” His face remained void of expression as he said, “My boss is a very busy man, and he is expecting his goods to be delivered as scheduled.”

“What makes you think we know anything about your boss or his fucking goods?”

“Let’s not play games. We are well aware of your ties with Bruton and that you have been making his deliveries. I’m just here to let you know that it’s in your best interest, *and ours*, that you fulfill your commitments.”

“And how are we supposed to do that without Bruton?”

“Oh, come now.” A sly smile crossed his face. “You fellas have made quite a name for yourselves, and you don’t do that without crossing a line or two.”

“We’ll take care of it.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” His eyes skirted over to me and Clutch, then back to Prez. “I won’t waste any more of your time. You boys have a good night.”

Before any of us had a chance for a rebuttal, he turned and walked out of the room. Savage was still glaring at the door as he growled, “Well, fuck.”

“Yeah. My thoughts exactly.”

“How many more of these assholes are gonna show up at our door?”

“One is more than enough.” Prez turned to Savage as he said, “We need to figure out this Sawyer situation, and we need to figure it out now.”

## Maggie



“I don’t want to go.”

“I know, but you have to.”

“But why?”

“Because he’s your father, and *it’s his weekend.*”

“Well, that’s stupid,” Nathan huffed. “I don’t even see why we gotta go. He’s never even there. He’s either hunting or playing golf or off on some work thing, and we’re stuck with his stupid girlfriend.”

“Fiancé.”

“*Whatever.*” He rolled his eyes. “She sucks... She smells funny and can’t even make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich right.”

“What?”

“She just slaps everything on there. Doesn’t even cut it in half or take off the crust. It’s gross, and so is she.” Nathan sat down at the kitchen table and poured himself a bowl of cereal as he continued, “I don’t want to be there with her, and neither does Sam.”

I understood his frustration. In fact, I felt the same, but there wasn’t much I could do about it. It was Chad’s weekend, and, like it or not, they had to go. It didn’t make it any less frustrating. He rarely spent time with the kids when we were together, but during the divorce, he did his best to portray ‘father of the year’ and pleaded for every other weekend and various holidays and summer break.

I wanted the kids to have a relationship with their father, so I agreed. At the time, I had no way of knowing that he would pawn them off on Crissy—his personal secretary and new girlfriend. It infuriated me, but there was little I could do. The courts had granted him every other weekend, and I had no choice but to comply.

I wished I had some great words of wisdom for my precious son, but there were none to give. “I’m sorry, honey, but there’s not much I can do about that.”

“I wish he’d get hit by a bus.”

“Nathan,” I fussed. “Don’t say things like that.”

“Well, I do.” He gave me a disgruntled shrug. “He’s the worst.”

“Maybe so, but he loves you and wants to spend some time with you.” I feigned a smile as I suggested, “Maybe you could get him to take you shopping, and you could look for a new pair of jeans to replace the ones with the ripped pocket.”

“Maybe.”

“And you’ve been saying you needed a pair of new boots. Your sister could use a new pair, too.”

“New pair of what?” Samantha asked as she strolled into the kitchen.

“Boots and any other clothes you might need. I was thinking your dad could take you to do some shopping.” I’d already spent a small fortune on their back-to-school clothes. It was only fair for Chad to pitch in with their fall clothes, so I told her, “You really need a jacket and maybe a couple of new hoodies, too.”

“I don’t like shopping with Dad,” Samantha whined. “He’s always fussin’ about how much stuff costs.”

“Well, things are expensive these days, especially when you’re buying for two growing kids.” I poured them each a glass of juice and carried it over to the table. “Regardless, it will give you a chance to spend some time with him.”



Neither of them responded. They just gave me one of their ‘whatever you say, Mom’ looks and started eating their breakfast. I watched them for a moment and couldn’t help but smile. They’d grown up so fast. Nathan was twelve and was growing taller by the second. He had a long, lean frame and a boyish charm that came and went depending on the day of the week.

He and his sister both had thick, curly chestnut-brown hair and the cutest little freckles on the bridge of their noses. Samantha had just turned eleven and had a similar slim build to her brother, albeit a good bit shorter, and her bright, inquisitive eyes were a shade lighter, revealing an innocence that matched her age. They were my heart and soul, and I couldn’t imagine loving them more.

I thought it might help for them to have something to look forward to, so I suggested, “We could grill out on Sunday when you get home and have a movie night?”

“Yeah, that’d be good.” Nathan stood and carried his bowl to the sink. “Hurry up, turd-head, or we’re gonna miss the bus.”

Samantha sighed dramatically, rolled her eyes, and grumbled as she picked up her bowl of cereal and took it over to the sink. “Today is going to be a long day.”

“But it’s Friday.” I stepped over to her and kissed her on the forehead. “You have a whole weekend to look forward to.”

“Yeah, I guess.” She forced a smile and started out of the kitchen. “I love you, Momma.”

“Love you, too, sweetie.”

Samantha grabbed her backpack from the floor and then darted outside to catch up with her brother. Once they’d gotten on the bus, I rushed to my bedroom and changed clothes. It was going to be a busy day at the salon, so I decided to wear my favorite pair of joggers and my tennis shoes. I took a second to fix my hair and makeup before darting out the door.

After a quick stop for coffee, I pulled into the salon’s parking lot and headed towards the building. I unlocked the

door, and as soon as I stepped inside, I was hit with the familiar scent of lavender mixed with vanilla. I inhaled a deep breath as I closed the door and made my way over to my station.

There wasn't much to the place, but it was mine and I was pleased with the latest renovations. Where it was once cold and modern, it now had a rustic charm with comfy sofas, cedar beams across the ceiling, and large, welcoming windows that let the light filter through.

I loved all the earthy tones, exposed wood, and vintage barber chairs, but most of all, I loved the fact that my best friends, Keeley and Ryan, worked there with me. We'd met at cosmetology school, and even though they were both much younger, we'd hit it off from the very start.

As usual, I was the first one there, but I liked having a moment to myself. I used the time to sip on my coffee and mentally prepare, and with the day I had ahead, I was going to need it. I was organizing my station when the front door chimed, and Keeley stormed inside.

The normally bubbly red-headed bombshell didn't say a word as she went over to the sofa and plopped down with a pitiful sigh. Her eyes were puffy, and her cheeks were bright pink, and her bottom lip was quivering. There was clearly something wrong, so I rushed over and sat down next to her. "Hey, are you okay?"

"No, I'm not." She cleared her throat. "Far from it."

"What's going on?"

"Brandon is what's going on."

"What do you mean? What happened?"

"We broke up last night."

"What?" I gasped. "But I thought things were going so good between you two."

"I did, too." She leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. "But apparently, things have been going even better with his ex."

“Oh, no.”

“Yeah.” She pressed her hands against her eyelids, trying in vain to keep the tears at bay. “I should’ve known better. I knew he wasn’t over her when we started talking. I should’ve never gone out with him.”

“This isn’t your fault.”

“But it is.” A single tear trickled down her face as she explained, “I always go for the wrong guy and end up getting my heart broken.”

“That’s because you have a big heart and always see the best in people.”

“I’m an idiot who thinks an issue isn’t really an issue until it smacks me right in the face—just like with Brandon.” She wiped the tear from her cheek and shook her head. “He was so handsome, and he had his life together, so I didn’t think it mattered that he’d just broken up with someone he’d been dating for six years.”

I didn’t respond.

I just sat there and listened as she continued to vent, “The six years part should’ve been enough to make me walk away. I mean, seriously. Who dates someone that long? Brandon, that’s who. What a stupid jerk!”

“I know it hurts, but it sounds like you are better off without him.”

“Yeah, tell my heart that. For some reason, it’s not getting the memo.”

“It will. You’re just gonna have to give it some time.” I reached over and gave her a quick hug. “Why don’t you go across the street and get yourself a cup of coffee?”

“I have a client coming.”

“I’ll cover until you get back.” I stood, then offered her my hand and helped Keeley to her feet. “Now, get and grab me a mocha while you’re there.”

“Sure thing.” A soft smile slipped across her lips. “Thanks, Mags.”

“Anytime.”

I waited until Keeley walked out of the shop before going over to her station and prepping it for her client. I’d pulled her foils when the door flew back open, and Ryan burst into the shop. As usual, she was dressed to the nines. She had on a fitted black dress with knee-high boots, and her sun-kissed blonde hair was swooped up in a messy bun.

Her oversized hoop earrings started to swing when she made an abrupt stop and announced, “It’s official. Men are assholes.”

“So, you heard about Keeley and Brandon.”

“What?”

“She just found out that he’s messing around with his ex.”

“See!” She threw her arms up in the air. “Assholes!”

“Okay. What’s going on with you?”

“Remember how I thought Tony was going to propose last night?” She tossed her bag on the table and grumbled, “Well, it turns out that he had zero plans to ask me to marry him. Like, the thought hadn’t even crossed his mind. How could it not have crossed his mind? We’ve been together for two years. What the hell is that?”

“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s my fault for getting my hopes up.” She let out a defeated breath. “I just thought we were in a different place, and it’s disappointing to find out that I was wrong.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“It’s all good. Some people just aren’t destined to be happy.” There was no missing the disappointment in her voice when she said, “Apparently, I’m one of those people.”

“No, you’re not. You just gotta give it time. I’m sure Tony will wise up and realize that he has a good thing with you.”

“If he hasn’t figured it out by now, I doubt he ever will.”

I understood her doubt. I’d felt it many times, before and after my divorce. That’s what being cheated on does to a person. It fills them with doubt. I doubted myself, my marriage, my entire life, and it killed my self-esteem. It was one of the many reasons why I hadn’t gone on any dates since. I simply wasn’t ready for another reason to doubt myself, so I steered clear of men.

Except for one night when I let myself get swept away—a night I would not soon forget.

I’d gone to the movies to watch a Star Wars marathon. I didn’t like Star Wars all that much, but it was Chad’s weekend with the kids, and I needed something to distract me.

And I found quite the distraction.

I was standing at the concession counter, waiting on my popcorn order, when a man came up next to me. I glanced up at him, and my heart leaped to my throat. He was unusually handsome—the kind of handsome that made me feel immediately insecure in my own appearance. He was rugged, big, and broad in that sexy grab-me-and-throw-me-over-your-shoulder kind of way.

I felt an indescribable urge to run my hands through his reddish-brown hair and down across his thick beard. I was hit with an unexpected flush of desire, which only grew worse when he cocked his head and raked his teeth over the corner of his bottom lip. He was checking me out, and that was something I wasn’t used to. In fact, I hadn’t had a man look at me like that in quite some time.

He spoke to me, but I didn’t hear what he said.

Not that it mattered. I was too flustered to even respond.

I took my popcorn and made a beeline for my movie. I quickly found a seat and thought that would be the end of it, and I’d never see the handsome stranger again. But just as the previews started to roll, he came into the theater and sat a few rows down from me. We shared a few lingering glances, and

before I even knew what was happening, he was following me into the women's bathroom.

He locked the door, and everything from there was a heart-pulsing, desire-infused blur. It was amazing. Just thinking about it gave my stomach butterflies, and a part of me had hoped that this chance meeting was the beginning of something more.

But sadly, I hadn't crossed paths with the handsome stranger since that night, and I feared I never would.

Maybe Ryan was right.

Some people simply aren't destined to find their Mr. Right.

## Rooster



“Are you sure this is the right address?”

“29 Chess Creek Road.” Torch looked down at the GPS on his phone, then went over to the mailbox. “It’s what Bones sent, but it doesn’t seem right, does it?”

“No, but then again, you saw Bruton’s place. Wasn’t much to it either,” I scoffed as I looked over at the modest two-bedroom home. Bruton was a very wealthy man who dealt with some of the most infamous criminals in the world, but he didn’t live in an extravagant house. His place looked just like all the others in town. “Besides, we got no idea who this Sawyer person is.”

“Yeah, but you saw those deposits. Some of them were pretty hefty. You’d think he’d be living high on the hog.”

He was right. The deposits ranged anywhere from two to ten grand each, but we had no way of knowing what the deposits were for—but we knew Bruton and the dealings he’d done. That was enough for us to be leery of the guy and why Prez wanted us to try and figure out who he really was.

Wrath and Savage were parked on the side street while Torch and I claimed a spot across the street. We’d been there for hours, but there’d been no sign of the infamous Sawyer Grant. Torch began shifting in his seat, and I knew he was beginning to lose his patience when a white Ford pickup pulled into the drive. I gave him a nudge and said, “Hey, check it out.”

We both watched silently as a weathered maintenance truck pulled into the drive and parked. Seconds later, the door opened, and a man who looked to be in his late fifties got out and started up to the front door. He was wearing a pair of worn janitor-like coveralls, which made him look like a run-of-the-mill maintenance man, but there was something about this guy.

He walked with an air of dignity, like a man with purpose.

I was trying to get a feel for this guy when Torch asked, “Is this the guy?”

“Certainly looks that way.”

“But he’s a fucking janitor.”

“Something tells me he’s much more than that.”

“You think?”

I grabbed my phone and dialed Wrath’s burner. As soon as he answered, I asked, “You seeing this?”

“I’m seeing it.” Wrath paused for a moment, then said, “There’s no way this guy is who he seems.”

“I was thinking the same damn thing. So, what are we gonna do?”

“We need to get a decent picture of the guy for Bones, and then, we wait and see what he can find on him.”

Bones and Big had already done a full search on the guy, and at first, everything looked legit. He had a job with the city and had lived in this house for the last ten years, but once they tracked back to ’98, the guy disappeared. It was like he never existed, which was a clear indication that he wasn’t who he was pretending to be. Torch and I were parked at a better angle, so I told Wrath, “We’ll get a picture of him as soon as he comes back out.”

“Let me know when you’ve got it, and we’ll figure out things from there.”

“You got it.”

It was a couple of hours before Sawyer came back outside, but I managed to get a clear picture of his face. I sent it to



Bones, then waited to hear back from him. One hour rolled into the next, and there was still no word from him. I started to get concerned, so I messaged Prez to find out what the hell was going on.

**ME:**

Any word on our guy?

**PREZ:**

Nothing yet.

Bones tried his facial recognition software on the image but didn't come up with anything new.

**ME:**

Damn.

**PREZ:**

I'm gonna need you boys to keep an eye on this guy.

Take shifts or whatever you need to do, but don't lose track of him.

**ME:**

You got it.

Let me know if anything changes.

**PREZ:**

You know I will.

I RELAYED PREZ'S MESSAGE TO THE BROTHERS, AND FOR THE next day or so, we took turns following the guy around. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to see.

He was either driving around the city—checking the parks and various city buildings for work that needed to be done, or he was at home working on some minuscule task. Unfortunately, Bones wasn't having much luck with the facial recognition software, so we were stuck watching Gramps until we found something that would help us figure out who this guy really was.

After a long day of watching the old man do not much of anything, my attention was drawn to the neighbor's house across the street, where an older white Acadia had just pulled into the drive. The car's door opened, and seconds later, two rowdy kids jumped out—the boy looked about twelve or thirteen, and the girl just a year or two younger. They were arguing, but their voices were too mottled for me to understand what they were saying.

They stormed up to the front porch and disappeared inside, leaving their driver behind. There was silence for a moment, and then the car door opened, and a brunette stepped out. I couldn't see her face, but I could tell she wasn't in the best head space. She moved slowly, like she was trying to prepare herself for what lay ahead. After seeing her two bickering kids, I couldn't blame her.

I continued to watch as she made her way over to the mailbox. I don't know what it was about her that had me so enthralled, but I couldn't seem to take my eyes off her. And then the wind blew, causing her hair to flutter away from her face, and my breath caught when I finally saw her face.

It was her.

The woman from the movie theater.

And she was even more beautiful than I remembered.

I wanted nothing more than to get out of my SUV and go over to her, but I couldn't. There was no way I could explain what I was doing there, so I had no choice but to stay put and

watch as the woman who'd haunted my dreams disappeared into her house.

Damn.

My chance was right there, and I couldn't even take it. I don't know how long I sat there just staring at her front door. Hell, I might've still been sitting there if my burner hadn't started ringing. I picked it up and answered, "Yeah."

"I'm here," Torch announced. "You can go."

"Oh, it's that time already?"

"Yeah, unless you wanna stay?" Torch scoffed.

"Nah, I'm good."

"Anything exciting with the ol' man today?"

"I wish. The man's about as boring as they come."

"I don't see why we don't just charge up to the door and ask him what's what."

"You never know. It might just come to that." I started my truck as I told him, "Have a good one, and give me a shout if you need anything."

"Will do."

It was late. I was eager to kick off my boots and call it a day, so I wasted no time heading home. After a twenty-minute drive, I pulled up to the house and felt an immediate sense of relief. It was like a sanctuary to me. It had once belonged to my grandparents, and I'd spent the better part of my life there.

It was a two-story, four-bedroom home that had stood the test of time. I could still remember my grandmother saying that the ocean's whispers were woven into the walls, and there were times when I actually believed her. There was something special about that old house, and I couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

I'd put some work into it—a little paint here and there and a full remodel of the kitchen and master bath. The front porch was weathered, but I liked it that way. It had a stone fireplace

that gave it a bit of rustic charm, and with the ocean view and large windows, it was a place I was proud to call home.

As soon as I walked inside, I tossed my keys on the counter and grabbed myself a drink from the fridge. I took off my cut and hung it by the door, then made my way down the dimly lit hallway. I felt like my bed was beckoning me as I entered the room and started undressing.

I sank into the cool sheets and closed my eyes, letting go of the tension of the day, and with the soft hum of the ceiling fan, it didn't take long for me to succumb to my exhaustion. The next morning, I got up and headed to the clubhouse. I went to check in with Prez and Savage and see if anything new had come up.

When I pulled through the gate, I was surprised to find Prez standing outside with Guardrail and Cotton. They were gathered around talking with Two Bit and Stitch, and if Cotton's expression was any indication, they weren't having a friendly chat. It was clear something was going on, so I walked over and listened as Guardrail said, "It's a fucking mess. The inspector wants all the electrical updated before he'll sign off on the addition."

"We don't have time for this bullshit," Two Bit grumbled.

"We're just gonna have to make time." Getting the town square remodel project was a big deal for us, and we all wanted it to go well, especially Guardrail. He ran the club's construction company, and he took his role seriously and never once treated it as just a front.

Redoing the old barber shop had become a bigger nightmare than any of us could've expected, especially with the upstairs addition, but we were making progress. Guardrail was meticulous, so I wasn't surprised when he added, "It's gotta be done, and it's gotta be done right."

"But the addition is supposed to be complete by the end of the month, and with all this bullshit with Bruton..."

"We're handling the situation with Bruton," Prez interrupted. "Just do what you gotta do, and let's get this thing

done.”

I was the best electrician, so I volunteered, “I’ll head over and get things started.”

“Appreciate it, brother.” I was about to head back to my truck when I thought to ask, “Any news on Gramps?”

“No, and I’m beginning to think there won’t be.” I could hear the frustration in Prez’s voice as he said, “There’s something up with this guy. No doubt about it, and I’d say it’s time we make a move.”

“Couldn’t agree more.”

“You’re supposed to take a shift tonight, right?”

“Yeah. I’ll head over once I get things sorted at the site.”

“And tomorrow morning?”

“Torch relieves me at midnight.” I thought for a moment, then added, “But I’ll be back in the morning by eight.”

“Good deal. We’re going to pay our friend a visit first thing tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it.”

I went back to my truck, and by the time I was pulling out, Guardrail and Clutch were loaded up and following behind. We spent the better part of the day pulling out the old electrical and installing the new wiring. It was time-consuming and a pain in the ass, but we kept at it. By the end of the day, we’d finished the lower level, but there was still work to be done.

Thankfully, it wasn’t anything that couldn’t wait for another day. I still had a couple of hours before I had to relieve Smokey, so I stopped to grab a bite to eat and some coffee. Even though I was over an hour early, I was feeling anxious and decided to head on over to take my shift.

I was just a few blocks away from Sawyer’s place when I spotted a car pulled over on the side of the road. The hood was up, but the hazard lights weren’t blinking. I didn’t think much about it until I spotted a woman leaning over the engine.

My first thought was to keep driving and let her do her thing, but my gut told me to pull over and see what I could do to help. I whipped back around, then pulled up to the rear of the vehicle and parked. I got out of the truck, and as soon as I started towards the front of the car, I heard her grumble, “Shit! Shit! Shit! I do not need this right now.”

She never even noticed that I’d walked up to her. I did my best not to startle her as I asked, “Umm, excuse me, miss? You need some help?”

I heard a slight gasp before she slowly peeked around the hood. As soon as I saw those dark brown eyes, I knew it was her—the hot brunette from the movie theater. I was so wrapped up in thoughts of Gramps that I hadn’t even noticed the make of the car, but it was her. It was really her.

I couldn’t believe it. She’d been weighing on my mind since I’d seen her the day before. I’d been trying to think of some excuse to run into her, and now I had it. A soft smile swept across her beautiful face as she whispered, “It’s you.”

“It’s me.” I let my eyes skirt over her and was surprised by the twinge of jealousy I felt when I saw that she was wearing a pair of skin-tight jeans and a low-cut sweater. She was going out for the night, and sadly, it wasn’t a night out with me. “You’re looking hot as ever.”

“Thanks.” A faint blush crept across her cheeks as she told me, “You are, too... I um... I was beginning to think I would never see you again.”

“I thought the same about you, but here we are.”

“Yes, here we are.”

My eyes drifted down to her lips, so pink and full, and I had to fight the urge to pull her into my arms and kiss her right then and there. I didn’t figure that was the best move, so I asked, “Car trouble?”

“Yeah, apparently so.” She glanced back at the engine as she explained, “I was about to go meet up with some friends, and the stupid thing just died. No lights. No radio. Nothing.”

And now, it won't start back up. It just makes this weird clicking sound when I turn the key."

"Mind if I take a look?"

"Please do."

Even though it sounded like her battery was shot, I checked her cables and the line to her battery. They looked okay, so I climbed into the front seat and turned the key. And just as I expected, there was nothing. I got back out and started for my SUV as I told her, "Let me grab my jumper cables, and I'll try jumping you."

She nodded, then watched as I got back in my SUV and drove it around to the front of her car. I grabbed my cables from under the backseat and popped the hood. In a matter of minutes, I had everything connected and ready to go. I got back in her car and turned the ignition. I expected her car to start right up, but it didn't. "Damn."

"Is everything okay?"

"Looks like the alternator is a goner."

"So, what does that mean?"

"It isn't going anywhere tonight. At least, not without a tow."

"Damn. I do not need this right now. It's gonna cost me a fortune."

"Maybe not." I gave her a reassuring smile. "I know a guy who knows a guy."

"Well, I hope this guy is into discounts or coupons or something because I'm gonna need it."

"I'm sure he'll help you out. How 'bout I give you a lift home, and we can make arrangements for him to get it in the morning?"

"Are you sure? I could call an uber or..."

"I'd be glad to take you."

"Great. I'd really appreciate it."

I closed the hood of her car while she grabbed her keys and purse from inside the car. Once she had everything she needed, she locked it up and followed me over to my SUV. I opened the door and helped her inside. As soon as she was settled, I walked around and got inside next to her. Even though I knew where she lived, I turned to her and asked, “Now, where are we headed?”

“I’m about six miles down on your right. Turn on Chess Creek Road. It’s a small white house on the corner.”

I nodded, then pulled off the shoulder and onto the main road.

I knew this whole thing was a bad idea, but I had my opening, and I was damn well going to take it.



# Maggie



I couldn't believe it.

It was him.

It was really him, and oh my land, he was just as handsome as I remembered. And he couldn't have shown up at a better time. The cars were always something my ex took care of, and I would've been completely lost if he hadn't shown up when he did. He took care of everything. He got the name of a tow truck and had it towed to the garage, and if that wasn't enough, he managed to get it done without costing me an arm and a leg.

He was my knight in shining armor, and he was smoking hot to boot.

My heart skipped a beat when his lips curved into a warm smile. There was no denying it. I was attracted to him, and I could tell by the look in his eyes that he felt the same about me. Our little encounter had ignited something in us both, but neither of us seemed to know what to do about it.

After he made all the necessary phone calls, we stood in the kitchen in awkward silence until he announced, "I should go wait on the tow."

"Oh, um... okay." This was it. I was running out of time. I needed to think of some way to see him again, and I needed to do it without sounding completely pathetic. He'd just started for the door when I gathered the courage to say, "I really appreciate your help tonight. Why don't you let me make you dinner as a way of thanking you."

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Maybe not, but I’d like to.”

He studied me for a moment, then said, “You didn’t call.”

He was right.

I didn’t.

I’d considered it a hundred times since that night, but I couldn’t muster the courage to send a message or call. I was too scared. Chad had really done a number on me. Since my self-esteem was basically non-existent, I only seemed to feel worse after seeing what Keeley and Ryan went through. I wasn’t sure my heart could take another hit, so I put my phone away and tried not to think about him.

It wasn’t easy. Our little encounter had left quite an impression on me, and I hoped there could be more. And now that he was standing in my kitchen, asking why I hadn’t called, I was feeling hopeful once again. “I wasn’t sure if I should.”

“Why not?”

“It’s complicated.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“Well, it’s me we’re talking about, and everything in my life is complicated. From kids to my ex to my work. It’s all a hot mess.”

“And you weren’t ready for another complication.”

“Something like that.”

“And now?”

“Now, I’m not so sure.”

His hazel eyes locked on mine as he said, “Well, if that’s the case, I’ll take you up on that dinner, and we’ll see how things go from there. How does that sound?”

“Yeah, that sounds great.”

“Good deal.” He opened the door as he told me, “I’ll go see about the tow, and just message me about dinner.”

“Sure thing.” He was just about to close the door when I said, “I’m really glad you stopped tonight.”

“Best decision I’ve made in a while. Almost as good as going to that Star Wars marathon.”

He gave me a playful wink, then closed the door, leaving me in a puddle of nerves and hormones. I’d done it. I’d made a date with him, and I couldn’t have been more nervous and excited. I couldn’t wait to tell the girls.

I didn’t want them to worry, so I sent them a quick message, letting them know that I was going to be late. I walked over to the window, hoping for one last look, but sadly, Ronin had already gone. Thankfully, it wouldn’t be long before I saw him again.

The kids would be with their dad the following weekend, so it would be the perfect time to have him over. I just had no idea what I would cook or wear. The mere thought of it was enough to get my anxiety going. I figured I could use a little advice from the girls, so I called an Uber and had him drive me straight to the restaurant.

Keeley had her mind set on getting out and about, so we decided to try out Danvers. It was a sports bar where a lot of local guys liked to hang out, and rightly so. There were flat-screen TVs mounted on nearly every inch of available wall space, each one tuned to a different game. Men and women alike would gather around to watch their favorite team, filling the room with their cheers and groans as their teams gave it their all. There were pool tables in the back with pendant lights hanging above, giving the space a more relaxed feel.

When I walked in, the roar of cheering from a couple of guys at the bar, the bright TV screens, and the various smells coming from the kitchen nearly put me in sensory overload. I took a quick glance around and spotted Keeley and Ryan sitting in the back by the pool tables. As I made my way over, I couldn’t help but notice all the empty tables and chairs.

Other than a few guys at the front bar, the place was basically dead. And Keeley didn’t look happy about it. In fact,

she looked fit to be tied. I gave her an encouraging smile as I slipped into the booth next to her and asked, “How’s it going?”

“It’s whatever,” Ryan answered. “What about you? What happened to your car?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I’m pretty sure the alternator has gone out on it.”

“Alternator?” Ryan cocked her brow. “That’s a big word from someone who knows nothing about cars.”

“Yeah, well... the guy who stopped to help me was quite informative.”

“Oh, really?”

“Um-hmm.” I couldn’t hold back my smile as I told her, “He really came through for me tonight.”

“Do tell.”

“He checked everything over, and when he couldn’t fix it, he called me a tow truck. He even got a friend to help fix it without costing me an arm and a leg.”

“Sounds like he went above and beyond.”

“He most certainly did.”

Clearly uninterested in my car troubles, Keeley scanned the room and grumbled, “This place is an official snooze-fest.”

“Yeah, I noticed that. So, where is everybody?”

“Apparently, there’s a big basketball game at the high school tonight.” Ryan shrugged. “State playoffs or something.”

“Oh, I had no idea that was tonight.” I picked up a menu and quickly scanned it, hoping that something might draw my interest. “So, what are you guys having?”

“I just got an appetizer,” Keeley answered. “I’m not very hungry.”

“I got the burger and a beer, but the waitress is slow-moving. I’m not sure if she’ll ever make it back.”

The words had barely left her mouth when Flynn, the bar's owner, came over to our table with a concerned expression. "I'm sorry to keep you ladies waiting, but our lead waitress called in sick today, and we're doing our best to get caught up."

"It's fine. We don't mind waiting."

Flynn was young and handsome with an adorable smile. Keeley and Ryan had mentioned many times that they'd found him attractive, but sadly, he was taken—very taken. Lauren, his fiancé, was a regular at the shop and was a real beauty, so Keeley kept her flirting to a minimum as she smiled and replied, "But it would be great if we could get our drinks."

"Absolutely. I'll get right on it."

Before he darted off, I asked, "Do you mind adding a soda to that order? I was running a little late myself tonight."

"Sure thing!"

He gave a quick nod, then rushed over to the bar and got busy making our drinks. Ryan let out a little sigh as she grumbled, "Why do all the good ones have to be taken?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think there's still some good ones out there."

"Well, if you find one, feel free to send him my way."

"I wouldn't hold your breath." Ryan leaned over to Keeley as she teased, "I have a feeling she's already found one and is *keeping him all to herself*."

"What in the world makes you say that?"

"I saw that spark in your eye when you talked about that guy who stopped tonight." Her already raised brow inched even higher. "Something tells me you like this guy."

I could feel my cheeks warm as they flushed with embarrassment. "Maybe a little."

"And you're just now telling us?" Keeley fussed.

"Well, I really haven't had a chance. Besides, there's not much to tell."

“Oh, don’t you go holding back on us now,” Ryan pushed. “Tell us all about him.”

“That’s just it.” I waited as Flynn placed our drinks on the table, and as soon as he was gone, I added, “I don’t know anything about him. Not really.”

I left out a few minor details as I told them about how we’d crossed paths at the movies and how I was instantly enamored but feared I’d never see him again. Both Ryan and Keeley seemed genuinely intrigued when I told them about him stopping to help me with the car. Keeley’s brows furrowed as she asked, “So, he just showed up out of nowhere?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Hmmm.”

“What?” I pushed.

“Just seems a little odd that he, *of all people*, would show up out of the blue.”

“Wow.” Ryan rolled her eyes. “Bitter much?”

“It’s not like I don’t have my reasons to be.” Keeley gave Ryan a slight nudge. “And you should get it, too, especially after the way Tony’s been stringing you along.”

“About that...”

Ryan’s eyes danced with excitement as she brought her left hand up to her cheek, revealing a stunning diamond engagement ring. Keeley’s eyes nearly popped out of her head as she gasped, “Is that what I think it is?”

“Yep.” Ryan nodded with a smile. “He proposed last night!”

“Seriously?”

“I know. I was just as surprised as you are.” I could hear the excitement in her voice as she explained, “He had a feeling I was expecting it, so he held off until he knew I’d never expect it.”

“He did good!” I reached over and gave her a hug. “A surprise and an absolutely gorgeous ring. Can’t beat that!”

“She’s right. It’s absolutely stunning!” Keeley leaned in and hugged her, too. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks, guys. I’m really happy. Tony is the best, and I really love him. I can’t wait to spend my life with him.”

And just like that, my heart was filled with hope in a way I didn’t know I needed. Maybe, just maybe, my luck was changing, and I’d get my own chance at happiness. There was no way to be sure, but for the first time in a very long time, I was looking forward to finding out.

## Rooster



“Well, hello there, fellas.” Grant took a step back, opening his front door wide as he gave us all a welcoming smile. “I’ve been wondering when you were going to stop by.”

Wrath glanced over at Prez, but neither of them said a word. None of us did. We just stood there a bit stunned as he motioned us all inside. “Come on in and make yourselves comfortable.”

Wrath went in first, then Torch, Cotton and I followed Prez and Savage through the front door. Prez kept his cool as he asked, “So, you know why we’re here?”

“Of course, I do.” He continued into the living room as he said, “I just need the code, and I’ll fill you in on everything.”

None of us replied.

We were too busy trying to make sense of what this guy was saying.

Clearly bothered by our silence, his smile vanished, and he turned to Prez with a grimace. “I assumed that Bruton had given it to you. If that’s not the case, then...”

“2... 4... 7.”

“Yes! Yes! Wonderful.” Grant inhaled a quick breath of relief, then ushered us forward. “Come. Come... We have much to discuss.”

As we continued further into the house, I couldn’t help but notice that everything in the house was either white or black—the walls, the sofa, the chairs were all crisp, bright white with



a black coffee table and end tables. Hell, even the paintings on the walls had variations of white with black or grey background, and the theme continued throughout the entire house with the white kitchen cabinets and black countertops and the black kitchen table with white chairs. It was all nice stuff, but the color scheme was a little over the top.

Grant walked through the living room and over to a wall of shelves. He pulled down one of the books, and without warning, the wall started to slide back, revealing a secret room filled with glass cases of weapons, video surveillance of not only his house but the entire city, and a large round table in the center with at least ten office chairs.

It reminded me of Bones' computer room, but it was much more than that. As we followed him inside, I leaned over to Wrath and whispered, "What the hell is all this?"

Grant smiled as he answered, "This is where all the fun happens."

"Enough of the bullshit." Prez stopped and crossed his arms, taking it all in. "It's time you started talking."

"I understand your urgency, especially during such an unsettling time... Bruton used to call me his Alfred." Grant sat down in one of the office chairs and waited as we all did the same. Once we were all settled, he went on to explain, "Bruton was quite the businessman. He had connections all over the world, and when you have that many irons in the fire, you need a little help to make sure things don't go awry. That's where I came in. I took care of problems. I still do."

"What kind of problems are we talking about?"

"Ones like *the Stingers*." The hairs on the back of my neck prickled against my skin when he said, "They came sniffing around, causing you problems, and I took care of it."

"Holy shit. That was you?"

"The one and only. I must admit, taking out that entire block wasn't one of my finer moments." He scratched the back of his neck and winced. "I'm not a fan of innocents getting

caught in the crossfire, but sometimes, you just gotta do what you gotta do.”

“Never okay to pull a stunt like that,” Prez snipped.

Grant’s confident demeanor didn’t falter as he replied, “Bruton informed me about your feelings on the matter, and I will take them into account in the future.”

“We partnered with Bruton,” Wrath snarled. “Not you.”

“*This is true.*” Grant retrieved a file from the center of the table and pushed it over to Prez. “But in this game we’ve been playing, you have obligations to fulfill, and it would be in everyone’s best interest to fulfill those obligations. I’m here to help you do that.”

With Wrath leaning over for a better look, Prez opened the file and quickly scanned what was inside. I didn’t have to read it to know that it was bad. Hell, it was written all over their faces. Grant’s tone turned serious as he said, “As I’m sure you already know, the Angotti clan has made quite a name for themselves. They can be pretty ruthless when things don’t go their way.”

“We’re aware.”

“So, you understand the urgency behind getting them the goods they’ve ordered.”

“And how many others are out there expecting similar deliveries?”

“There are a few.” Grant motioned his hand toward the stack of files remaining on the table. “But it’s nothing you fellas can’t handle.”

“When is the Angotti shipment due?”

“Everything you need to know, including shipment, location, and dates and times, is included in the files, and of course, I’m here if you have any questions or concerns.”

“Say we continue down this road...” Prez leaned forward with a fierce expression. “Who’s going to take Bruton’s place?”

“We haven’t decided on anyone yet, but we’re looking into it.”

“Don’t bother.” Cotton glanced over at Maverick, then added, “I’m taking it.”

“Well, I don’t know how that...”

“It’s not up for discussion,” Cotton interrupted. “We went into business with Bruton. He’s gone, so now the business is ours. You either work with me, or you’re gone, too. That’s the only choice to be made.”

Grant inhaled a quick breath, then replied, “When you were President of Fury, you made quite a name for yourself. You were respected by your boys and your community. That’s not an easy thing to do in our line of work. That being said, I would be honored to work for you.”

“That will mean doing things my way. No questions asked.”

“Understood.” Grant seemed surprisingly agreeable. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. “And where will you have your headquarters?”

“We’re still sorting out the details on that.”

“Of course. Just let me know what you decide, and I’ll make sure you have everything you need.”

“Well, to start...” Prez motioned his hand over to the stack of files on the table. “I’m going to need to have a look at those.”

“Of course.” Grant eased the rest of the stack over to Prez. “Anything you need.”

“We need the details on Friday’s run.”

“Of course.” Grant pulled out one of the files and offered it to Prez. “Mr. Cardelli will be expecting his shipment on Friday at three. The location is in the file, along with his order.”

“And where will we be picking up his order?”

“That’s already been handled,” Grant answered. “It will be ready for you on Friday.”

There was a brief lull, and Prez used it as an opportunity to stand and say, “I think that should do for now. We won’t take up any more of your time.”

“Of course.” Grant stood and smiled, “I’ve truly enjoyed our little meet and greet, and if there is anything you need, don’t hesitate to ask.”

We were all slow to move, and justifiably so. We’d just had a crap-ton of information laid in our lap, but as soon as Prez started out of the room, we were quick to follow. None of us spoke as we made our way out of his house and down the steps. Before he shut the door, Grant stuck his head out and said, “Until next time. You boys have a good one.”

Without saying anything more, he closed the door and left us to our own devices. Prez immediately turned to Wrath and ordered, “Call everyone into church. We have a lot to go over.”

Wrath nodded, then took out his phone and started sending messages. He was still at it as he followed me over to my SUV and got inside. I waited until everyone else was in their own vehicle, then led the way back to the clubhouse. As I started down the road, I couldn’t help but glance over at Maggie’s place. I’d hoped to get a quick glance at her, but it was almost nine, and she’d be gone for the day.

I quickly turned my focus back to the road ahead, but it wasn’t long before I found myself thinking about the night before when Maggie had asked me to dinner. I was hoping that she would’ve messaged me, letting me know which night, but I hadn’t heard a word from her. I won’t deny that I was more than a little concerned, but I’d put the ball in her court—again.

Like it or not, I’d have to wait and see if she made a move. It wasn’t going to be easy. I wasn’t a patient man, especially when it came to something I really wanted, and I really wanted her. I was thinking of a way I could get around the whole waiting thing when Wrath asked, “You okay over there?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Just got some stuff on my mind.”

“Stuff, huh?” Wrath scoffed. “What’s her name?”

“Ah, it’s not some chick. I just...”

“What’s her name, Roost?”

“*Maggie.*” I glanced over at him as I admitted, “I ran into her a couple of times, but I don’t know if anything’s gonna come of it.”

“You like her?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“Then, make something come of it.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Of course, it is.” Wrath gave me one of his looks. “If I can make something come of me and Mia, you can make something come of you and this Maggie chick.”

He had a point. Mia was Stitch’s daughter, and he was one brother you didn’t want to piss off. Hell, most men wouldn’t dare to even glance in her direction, much less try to claim her, but Wrath would’ve walked through fire for her. There was some back and forth, but in the end, he won her over and her father, too.

That should’ve been enough to inspire me, but I’d been down this road before. I wasn’t looking to get burned, so I told him, “*Yeah, yeah. We’ll see.*”

“We’ll see. *Hmph.*” Wrath gave his beard a quick scratch. “That doesn’t sound like the Rooster I know.”

“The ball is in her court.”

“Well, if she doesn’t make a play soon, you might wanna give that ball a little nudge. That is if you think this is a game worth playing.”

“That’s just it. I’m not sure.”

“That’s something you’re gonna have to figure out later.” Wrath’s attention was drawn back to the road ahead, and as we pulled through the clubhouse gate, he ordered, “Right now, we need your focus on things here. Once we get shit settled, you can figure things out with your girlfriend.”

I gave him a nod, then parked and followed him inside to the conference room. It didn’t take long for it to fill up with

the rest of the brothers, and Prez wasted no time filling them in on everything that had happened. While they all had concerns about working with Grant, they were more concerned about Cotton stepping into Bruton's role, especially Savage.

I got it.

Cotton was his father.

During his time as president, he'd been in some tight spots, and there were times when we all feared for his life. When Cotton stepped down, Savage thought the days of him being in danger were over, but now there was a chance he was going to be taking on an even more dangerous role—a role none of us were sure he should take. I could tell by his clenched jaw that my brother was on the verge of losing it. His eyes were locked on his father as he said, "I'm not sure about this."

"We've gone over this, son." Cotton glanced over at Prez as he said, "With me in this position, we would have access to it all—the who, the when, the where. I would be the one running the show, and while I'm running it, I would be looking out for the club's best interest at every turn."

"But you don't even know what you'd be getting into. It could be dangerous... really dangerous."

"Gun running is gun running, son. It's all dangerous," Cotton argued. "Me taking Bruton's place isn't going to change that."

"Your father is right," Prez interjected. "This could give us a real advantage, and in this business, that's hard to come by."

"And we'd have some extra help from our new friend."

"But we don't know anything about this guy."

"We will soon enough."

Savage was struggling. I could see it in his eyes, but he didn't argue. He simply gave his father a nod and let it go. I understood his concern. There were a lot of unknowns with all this, but it wasn't anything Cotton couldn't handle. And even if he found himself in a tight spot, we'd be there to help out. It's what we'd always done and always would.

We're brothers, and we were going to need each other more now than we ever had before.

# Maggie



I'd been staring at my phone for at least half an hour. I'd already composed the perfect message, and it was ready to go, but for some reason, I couldn't make myself hit that send button. I had no idea why I was hesitant. It was just a short text telling him which day to come over for dinner.

While it seemed simple enough, the thought of being alone with him, sharing a meal and an evening together, made my palms clammy. I was beginning to think it wasn't worth it when suddenly I mustered the courage and pressed send. I was a little stunned by my abrupt actions, but I also felt pretty proud of myself for taking a chance.

But then the waiting set in, and it wasn't long before pride turned to doubt, and doubt turned to self-deprecation. I was silently cursing myself when my phone chimed with a message. I quickly glanced down at the screen, and my heart skipped a beat when I read:

**RONIN:**

Who is this?

**ME:**

Sorry. I forgot to say that it's Maggie.

**RONIN:**



I know.

I was just messing with ya.

I was beginning to think you forgot about me.

**ME:**

Not a chance.

**RONIN:**

How's the car?

Did you get it fixed?

**ME:**

Yes. Thanks to you.

Turns out you were right about the alternator.

Your guy fixed it and had it back to me the next day.

**RONIN:**

Good.

I'm glad it worked out.

**ME:**

Me, too

Are you having a good week?

**RONIN:**

It's been busy, but I can't complain.

You?

**ME:**

The same.

Just ready for the weekend.

**RONIN:**

Can't disagree with you there.

**ME:**

So, is Saturday at six good with you?

**RONIN:**

Yeah, I should be able to work that out.

**ME:**

Great.

How do you feel about chicken and pasta?

**RONIN:**

As long as you're there, I'm good with anything.

**ME:**

Okay. Great.

Saturday night. Chicken and pasta.

**RONIN:**

Looking forward to it.

I WAS SMILING EAR TO EAR WHEN I SHOVED MY PHONE BACK into my purse. I thought my good mood had gone unnoticed until I heard Nathan ask, “What’s up with you?”

“Hmm?” I glanced up and found him standing across from me. “Oh, it’s nothing. I was just texting a friend.”

“A friend?”

“Yeah, a friend. You know, people have those.”

“Not you.” He’d had an attitude all night, and I had no idea why. He rolled his eyes and started into the kitchen as he grumbled, “It’s always Keeley or Ryan with you... I bet you were talking to some dude. That’s why you were smiling like that. Girls always smile when they’re talking to dudes.”

“*Nathan.*”

“What?” He stopped and turned to face me. “It’s not a big deal. You should be talking to dudes.”

“I should?”

“I don’t see why not.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “You’re alright looking. You’ll have plenty of guys who are into you.”

“Oh, you think so?”

“Yeah. You’re a catch.”

“So, you’re okay with me dating?”

“Yeah, and to be honest, I kinda already figured you’d been going out and just not telling us.” Another shrug, and he turned and started over to the fridge. “I don’t care who you talk to or go out with. Just make sure he’s not a douchebag like Dad.”

“Nathan, don’t call your father a douchebag.”

“Well, that’s what he is.” He grabbed a soda and slammed the refrigerator door. “He called last night to let us know that he wouldn’t be able to take us to the hockey game next month because he and what’s-her-face are going to the beach for her stupid birthday.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I know you were looking forward to that game.”

“It’s fine. I’ll just watch it on TV or something.”

“What about this weekend?” It was only Tuesday, but I’d hoped their father had something fun planned—or anything for that matter. It helped them to have something to look forward to. “Do you guys have anything planned?”

“He said something about taking me hiking at the park, but they’re calling for snow. No way we’ll go if that happens.” I could see the light leaving his eyes as he said, “We’ll probably do what we always do. Dad will take Crissy out on some date, and I’ll be stuck babysitting Sam.”

My first instinct was to try and fix things, especially when it came to the kids, but sadly, I couldn’t ‘fix’ their father. His weekends with them were his weekends, and as much as I hated it, the experiences he gave them were his and his alone. I had to stop trying to make up for the bad times they shared with him. That wasn’t my job, and as hard as it was not to meddle, I had to let it go. I let out a frustrated breath before saying, “Maybe you and Sam can take your PlayStations and play a few rounds with your friends.”

“Maybe.” Nathan glanced over at the stove, then back to me. “What’s for dinner?”

“We have to pick up your sister from volleyball practice. I thought we could grab a bite to eat on the way back.”

“Oh.” His eyes widened. “Can we go by the Little General and pick up some hot wings?”

“I was thinking pizza, but wings will be okay.”

“Awesome!”

And just like that, his smile returned, and my heart was full. I grabbed my keys and purse, and then we both headed out to the car. We drove over to the school and had barely pulled into the parking lot when Samantha came barreling out of the front door with several of her friends.

Normally, she would come out chatting and laughing with them, but tonight, she was tight-lipped and wouldn't even look at her teammates. She opened the car door, and without so much as a hello, she got in and closed the door. I glanced over my shoulder as I said, "*Well, hello.*"

"Hey."

"I take it practice didn't go well."

"It was okay."

"You don't sound like it was okay."

"It was fine, Mom."

I could tell from her tone that it was anything but fine, but I didn't push. I simply put the car in drive and started towards the Little General. When we pulled up, Nathan opened his door and bolted inside, giving me a second alone with Samantha. I used the opportunity to turn around to face her as I asked, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"No." Her cheeks flushed as she admitted, "Jessie is having a sleepover this weekend, and she didn't invite me."

"What? Are you sure?" Jessie was one of her good friends. They'd had several sleepovers throughout the years, so I was surprised that she hadn't included Samantha in this one. "Maybe she hasn't gotten around to asking you yet."

"She would've asked me by now."

"But..."

"I'm not invited, Mom." She sounded utterly defeated as she told me, "Casey told me tonight at practice that Jessie is mad because I made the JV team, and she didn't. So, basically, she invited everyone in the group but me."

"But aren't some of those girls on the JV team?"

"Yep, but I guess that doesn't matter."

"Oh, honey. I'm sorry. That's so unfair." Once again, my protective nature kicked in, and I found myself wanting to fix the problem. But again, there was no way I could fix this.

“Maybe you should talk to her and see if you two can work things out.”

“I don’t think so.” Her precious eyes met mine, and then, the sass quickly followed. “She can have her dumb party. I don’t even want to go. It’ll be as lame as she is.”

“Okay, that’s your call.” She was in a tough spot, but I trusted her to handle things in her own way. “Let’s go in and grab some dinner, and we can talk about it some more when we get home.”

She nodded, then got out of the car, and we both went inside to meet up with her brother. I would like to say that our night improved after dinner, but sadly, that was not the case. In fact, things got increasingly worse.

Our water heater died.

And Paisley, our Golden Retriever, got into the trash and made a huge mess in the backyard. It was one thing after the next, and by the end of the week, I felt like I’d been pushed to the brink. Thankfully, I had my night with Ronin to look forward to. I would finally have a chance to escape the chaos, even if it was only for a few hours, and I could enjoy a little adult conversation and just be myself—not Mom, the solver of all the world’s problems.

As soon as I dropped the kids off at their dad’s, I headed straight to the grocery. While I could’ve waited until the following morning, I was worried the weather might turn worse, and I wouldn’t be able to get what I needed to cook dinner. Once I got everything I could possibly need and more, I drove back home and spent the rest of my evening cleaning and catching up on laundry.

The next morning, I woke to a blanket of snow on the ground, and while it was beautiful, I dreaded taking Paisley out. She wasn’t a fan of the cold and was even less of a fan of snow and ice. I forced the covers back and pulled on my boots and coat. After much urging, I finally convinced Paisley to go outside and take care of her business. She bounded back inside, and I got busy preparing for my night. First, I delved

into my closet and started searching for something to wear. I wanted to look nice, but I didn't want to overdo it.

After getting Paisley's approval, I decided on a pair of comfy jeans and an oversized sweater.

I tossed them on the bed and then headed into the kitchen to start meal-prepping. I did all the dicing, slicing, and marinating, and by the time I was done, it was time to get in the shower. I was feeling pretty good about things until I started getting dressed. There was something about seeing myself with my hair and makeup done that filled me with nerves. It had been years since I'd dressed up for a man—at least, not one I wasn't married to, and it was freaking me out.

I kept studying myself in the mirror, and the longer I stood there critiquing myself, the more inclined I was to change. That would seem simple enough, but if I changed even once, I would change a hundred times. Knowing I would just end up making myself crazy, I forced myself away from the mirror and went into the kitchen for a glass of wine.

I poured half a glass, then quickly downed it. I'd just poured me another when Paisley started barking, and there was a tap at my front door. My pulse quickened as I put the bottle down and adjusted the hem of my sweater. I inhaled a deep breath and let it out slowly, hoping it would settle my nerves.

It didn't.

If anything, it made it worse.

Now, I had to worry about smelling like a boozehound when I greeted him. I pushed the thought from my head and rushed over to answer the door. I peeked out the window, and a rush of excitement surged through me when I spotted Ronin standing on my front step. He was wearing a dark plaid flannel that hugged his bulging muscles with the same leather vest he'd been wearing when he helped me with my car and a pair of dark jeans and boots. The man looked positively divine.

I took a moment to savor the view, then stepped back to open the door.

I pushed the dog back, then turned the knob and smiled as I greeted him. “Hey. You made it.”

“Of course.” His eyes skirted over me, sending chills down my spine. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Well, come on in.”

I don’t know which turned me on more—his cologne or his sexy little smirk. Both were quite the turn-on, and I feared I would have a difficult time keeping my hormones in check. Paisley was also intrigued by our guest and had commenced to jumping up on him, sniffing him from every angle. He gave her a friendly pat as he said, “Well, hello there.”

“Paisley, down!” I quickly closed the door then rushed over and grabbed her by the collar. “I’m sorry. She’s not the best about meeting new people.”

“I don’t know. She didn’t bite me, so I’d say she did pretty well.” He took a quick glance around. “Nice place.”

“Thanks.” I motioned him into the living room as I asked, “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Sure. A beer or whatever you’re having will be fine.”

“You got it.” I walked over to the fridge and grabbed him a cold beer, then carried it over to him. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks.” He popped the top as he motioned his head towards the kitchen. “Can I help with anything?”

“No, I’ve got it.” I poured some wine into my glass as I told him, “The chicken needs a few more minutes.”

“No rush.” He sat down at the counter and glanced over at my pictures on the fridge. “Those your kids?”

“They are.” I reached for the most recent picture and brought it closer. “Nathan is almost thirteen, and Samantha is eleven.”

“Your daughter looks just like ya.”

“Thank you. I love her dearly, but she can be a handful.” I placed the picture back on the fridge as I added, “I shouldn’t complain. When I was a kid, I was a handful, too.”



“I’m going to need a little clarification on handful.”

“Oh, I wasn’t that bad.” I chuckled under my breath. “I mean, not really. I had a little bit of a smart mouth at times, but that was only because I was determined not to fall under the shadow of my brothers. They were always right about everything, and... Anyway, I can still remember my mother saying that she hoped that I’d have a daughter who was just like me, and I’m afraid she’s about to get that wish.”

“Now, that’s what I call a spoonful of karma.”

“That it is.”

I was pleased that the conversation seemed to come effortlessly. He listened with genuine interest, and that was something I wasn’t used to. I don’t even remember when Chad stopped listening to me. For that matter, I’m not sure he ever did.

I stepped over to the stove and stirred the pasta as I asked, “What about you? Do you have any kids?”

“No. Can’t say that I do.” He took a sip of his beer before adding, “It’s not that I don’t want any. I just haven’t had the opportunity.”

“So, no one special to speak of.”

“There have been a few here and there, but nothing that stuck.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. I’m not.” He gave me a bit of shrug, then continued, “Besides, my way of life isn’t for everyone.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know if you’ve heard of them, but I’m a member of Satan’s Fury.”

“The motorcycle club?”

“Yeah, that’s them.” He took a deep breath and met my gaze as he explained, “I joined more than ten years ago and still believe it’s the best thing I ever did, but it has its challenges. We are gone a lot. There are no set hours or lines

drawn in the sand. You don't always know what's coming, and there are things that go on that I can't share with anyone but a brother. Adjusting to those demands can be tough, and it can be even tougher when you're with someone who doesn't get it."

"Sounds like quite a commitment."

"It is, but the club is a part of who I am."

I knew he was taking a chance telling me about his life, but I appreciated his honesty. It was the first step in really getting to know him, and I wanted that. I wanted to know all there was to know about him. "I won't pretend to understand what it's like to be a member of a club like yours, but it sounds a lot like family. There's always some kind of push or pull, but in the end, you've always got someone to fall back on."

"You get it better than you might think." He smiled as he added, "I had a feeling you would."

That smile gave my stomach butterflies. I don't know what it was about him, but he had me thinking of things I had no business thinking about. But it felt good to have a man interested in me again—especially one who was so extremely handsome. In no time, dinner was ready, and the food was all set on the table. Ronin grabbed a fresh beer from the fridge and the bottle of wine from the counter then came over and sat down next to me.

He poured some more wine into my glass as he asked, "So, how long have you been a Star Wars fan?"

"Umm... I'm not actually a huge fan. I mean, I like Star Wars fine. They're great movies, but I'd gone to that marathon because the kids were at their father's." I took a sip of my wine before saying, "The house was starting to feel a little big and hollow, so I thought the marathon would help take my mind off things for a bit."

"Makes sense."

"What about you? Are you a big Star Wars fan?"

"It's more a nostalgia thing for me... I watched the original trilogy with my dad, and it just kind of became our

thing.” It was impossible to miss the emotion in his eyes as he spoke about his father, and that tugged at my heart. “We’d watch one here and there, and when his mind started slipping, those movies were one thing that would bring him back.”

“Oh, that’s really sweet and sad, too.”

“Yeah, it was hard to see him like that. He was always such a big, powerful man, and it broke me to see him fade away into nothing.”

“So, he’s not around anymore?”

“No, we lost him a couple of years back. Now, it’s just me, my sister Kendall, and my mom.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure it was tough for all of you to lose him.”

“It wasn’t easy, but we got through it.” He took a bite or two of pasta, then asked, “What about your ex? What’s the story there?”

“Not much to tell. We met in high school. Got married way too young and started a family. And things were good until they weren’t.” I took a long sip of wine before adding, “I thought we would figure it out until I found out he was hooking up with his secretary.”

“Damn.” Ronin shook his head. “You gotta be a real asshole to have a woman like you and fuck it up.”

“You’re sweet to say that, but he wasn’t the only one at fault. I had my part to play in it, too.”

“Sounds like you tried to make things work.” He cocked his brow as he asked, “*You fuck around?*”

“No.”

“You hurt the kids or smack him around?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then, that shit’s on him.”

“I wish it was that simple.”

“I’ve never been married, so I don’t claim to know all the ins and outs. But I do know that if I was married to a woman like you, I’d do my damndest to do everything in my power to keep you, and I sure as hell wouldn’t fuck around, especially not with my fucking secretary.”

“Well, she is very pretty.”

“Don’t care if she’s Ms. Fucking America,” he argued. “He crossed lines that should’ve never been crossed. And he had you sitting across the table, looking the way you look. Damn. You gotta be some kind of jackass to do that shit.”

He was a bit brusque with his delivery, but I appreciated his take on the situation. He saw how wrong it was for Chad to not only break his vows to me, but to get involved with a woman that worked under him. Seeing the injustice of it showed that he had a great deal of character, which only made me like him more.

I gave him a warm smile as I told him, “Thanks, Ronin. It’s really sweet of you to say all that. Unnecessary, but sweet.”

“Just telling it like it is.” He took his last bite of chicken as he said, “This chicken is amazing.”

“Thanks! I’m glad you like it.”

I felt a wave of panic as I picked up our empty plates and carried them over to the sink. I was so worried about making the perfect dinner that I didn’t think about what we would do after. Now that dinner was done, I wasn’t sure what to do—I just knew I wasn’t ready for him to go.

I was wrapping up the leftovers when he came up behind me and asked, “You up for taking a little ride?”

“Umm, sure. Where to?”

“It’s a surprise.” A sexy smirk swept across his face as he said, “You might wanna grab your coat and boots... Maybe some gloves.”

“Gloves?”

“Grab ‘em. It’ll be worth it.”

To say I was intrigued was an understatement. I felt like a giddy schoolgirl as I rushed to gather my things. I had no idea where he was taking me, nor did I care. I was just happy that I was getting to spend more time with him.

It was an unexpected feeling, and it felt good—really good.

## Rooster



Damn.

This chick had it all.

She was smoking hot. She could cook, she was easy to talk to, and she could sled like a fucking champ. At first, she was a little hesitant about going down such a steep hill, but after going down once with me, she was all about it. Hell, she couldn't get enough of it. She'd go flying down like a rocket, only to climb back up that hill, tired and winded, and go again.

While it was fun, and I didn't want to rush a good time, it was bitterly cold, and her cheeks were rosy red, and her nose had started to run. I was worried that Maggie was pushing herself, so I stepped over to her and pulled her close, running my hands up and down her arms as I brushed off the snow that had collected on her sleeves. "You about ready to head back?"

"Yeah, it's getting pretty chilly." A spark of child-like excitement flashed through her eyes as she asked, "Mind if I go one more time?"

"Knock yourself out."

She nodded, then stepped over to the edge of the hill and positioned her sled. Once she had it exactly where she wanted it, she sat down and waited as I gave her a gentle push. Seconds later, she was dashing down the hill like a bolt of lightning. She had almost made it to the end of the hill when she hit a rough patch of snow and let out a high-pitched shrill as she flailed into the air—and not in a good way.

She went several feet up, then immediately came crashing down with a hard thud. Panicked, I raced down the hill to make sure she was okay. When I reached her, she was splayed out on her back, staring up at the stars with a goofy smile on her face. “That was amazing!”

“Holy shit, woman.” I knelt beside her. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Did you see how high I went?”

“Yeah, I did. I thought you were a goner.”

“No, I’m fine.” She tried to sit up but didn’t make it far before she laid back down. “Well, I thought I was.”

“You hurt?”

“No, just a little shaken.”

“Don’t worry. I got you.”

I slipped my hands underneath her and scooped her into my arms. When I started up the hill, she protested, “You can’t carry me all the way up this hill.”

“I can, and I will.” I glanced down at her and smiled. “Don’t wanna take a chance on you taking another spill.”

“I’m fine. Really. I can make it back up the hill on my own.”

“Maybe so, but I’m carrying you all the same.”

When we made it up the hill, I was a bit winded, but I’d managed to get her to the truck without any issues. I was about to put her inside when I glanced down at her and found her staring up at me with those big, dark eyes. They drifted down to my mouth, and I knew exactly what she was thinking.

Hell, I was thinking the same damn thing.

Before I thought about what I was doing, I lowered my mouth to hers and kissed her. A light moan vibrated through her chest when I ran my tongue across her bottom lip.

I was treading on a dangerous path, but I couldn’t help myself. Neither of us could. Her hands wound around my

neck, and her fingers raked through my hair as I deepened the kiss. It felt incredible to have her in my arms. I didn't want to let her go—not now. Not ever.

We were both lost in the moment when I heard a car in the distance and pulled my mouth from hers. Disappointment flashed through her eyes as I lowered her into the seat and closed the door. I took a quick breath, walked around, and got in next to her.

“You good?”

She nodded quietly and muttered, “Mm-hmm.”

“Good deal. Let's get you home and warmed up.”

I glanced back out at the hill, noting our sleds at the bottom. There was no way in hell I was going to trek back down that deep slope, so I grabbed my phone and sent one of the prospects a message, ordering him to come grab them. Once he responded, I tossed my phone down on the seat and started driving towards town.

We hadn't gotten far when Maggie whispered, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For tonight. The ride and for sharing your secret sledding spot.” She glanced over to me with soulful eyes that got me right in the gut. “I can't remember when I've had so much fun.”

“Yeah, it was fun. We'll have to do it again sometime.”

“I'd really like that.”

When we got back to Maggie's place, I parked and followed her up to the front steps. She unlocked the door and stepped inside, then turned to me and asked, “You want to come in for a drink and warm up a bit?”

“It's pretty late.” I thought about our earlier kiss and how badly I didn't want it to end. I knew I needed to go. Don't get me wrong. I wanted to stay, especially when I saw the way she was looking at me, but I really liked this girl and didn't want



to cross a line that couldn't be uncrossed. "I should probably be getting back."

"Oh, okay."

"Thanks again for dinner. It was really something."

"I'm glad you came. I really enjoyed it."

I leaned in and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before saying, "I'll be in touch."

I didn't miss the longing look in her eyes as she watched me turn and start down the steps. I didn't want to go. In fact, it was the last thing I wanted to do, but I figured it was the right thing to do. She was a class act, and I got the feeling I had a real chance with her. I didn't want to fuck that up by rushing things.

But then, I thought back to that kiss on the hill and how incredible she felt in my arms.

When I reached my truck, I didn't get inside.

I didn't start the engine, and I didn't leave.

Instead, I turned and started walking back towards the house. With each step, I thought about the softness of her lips, the scent of her perfume, and all her little whimpers and moans when I pulled her close. I knocked on the door, and when it opened, it took all I had to keep myself from snatching her up and kissing her long and hard. Her face was marked with confusion as she muttered, "You're back."

"Changed my mind about that drink... I mean, if the offer's still good."

"Yeah, of course. Come on in." She waited until I stepped inside, then closed the door behind me. "What made you change your mind?"

"I just couldn't seem to make myself leave."

"Oh?" A soft smile slipped across her lips. "Why's that?"

"Because I wanted to do this..."

I slipped my arms around her waist and pulled her against my chest as I lowered my mouth to hers, kissing her with fervor. I feared she might pull away, but instead, she slipped her arms around my neck and kissed me back, long and hard. My hand moved up to the nape of her neck and gently pulled her closer. A shudder ran through her body as she parted her lips, giving me full access to delve deeper.

Our tongues tangled, and I knew one kiss would never be enough. Just as things were starting to get heated, Maggie placed her hands on my chest, giving me a gentle push, and pulled back. As she slowly exhaled, she muttered, “I need to say something.”

“Okay.” I could tell by her expression that it was something serious, so I asked, “What’s on your mind?”

“I don’t know if we should do this.”

“This?”

“Yeah, this.” A light blush crept across her cheeks as she motioned her hand between us. “I know we’ve done it before, and I really enjoyed it. I actually enjoyed it a lot, but this is different. This time it means something.”

“I’m not sure I’m following.”

“I don’t do well with the whole casual thing. I get too emotionally attached, and I already like you... *a lot*. I’m not really up for a one-night stand, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m not looking to hit it and quit it, Maggie.” I didn’t want to make promises I couldn’t keep, so I told her, “Like I told you earlier, I’ve never really done the long-term thing. At least, not like you have. Don’t even know if I’m built for it, but since that night in the movie theater, I haven’t been able to get you out of my head.”

“Yeah, I’ve been the same way with you.” Her eyes were fixed on mine as she whispered, “I’ve even wondered if there could be something between us.”

“I’ve wondered the same.” Her eyes locked on mine as I asked, “So, what are we going to do about that?”

“I’m willing to give it a try if you are.”

The words had barely left her mouth when she was back in my arms, and we were kissing once again. Damn. This woman was going to be the death of me. One by one, I’d watched my brothers nearly lose their minds when they fell for their ol’ ladies. At the time, I didn’t get it. I thought they were crazy to let a woman turn their entire world upside down, but now, I finally got it.

Everything about Maggie, from her loving but strong nature to her dark brown eyes and warm smile, had me tied up in ways I never had before. While it scared the living hell out of me, there was no way I could just walk away—not when it felt so fucking good to have her back in my arms.

I couldn’t remember ever wanting anything like I wanted her, and with every touch, every little whimper and moan, she had me wanting her even more. She shifted her hips forward, grinding herself against my ever-hardening cock.

“Damn, woman. You’re unbelievable.”

Her lips opened in a small gasp, giving me better access to her mouth, and I delved deeper, letting all the passion I’d been holding back come pouring out. She moaned into my mouth as I lowered my hand to her waist and unfastened the button of her jeans before slipping my hand through the waistband.

Knowing my intention, she widened her stance giving me access to trail further down. Her breath quickened as the tips of my fingers grazed the lining of her panties. My cock throbbed against my zipper as I whispered, “Holy hell, angel. You’re soaking fucking wet.”

Embarrassed, she immediately inched back, but I held her close. “I like it. Hell, I love it. I can’t wait to make you even wetter.”

“Hmmm,” she moaned, shifting her hips forward. She rested her head on my shoulder, closing her eyes as I continued to slowly caress her—teasing her and making her want even more.

All her little whimpers were driving me wild. I slipped my hands from her pants, then lifted her into my arms. I carried her over to the sofa and carefully lowered her down on the cushion. She raked her teeth over her bottom lip as she kicked off her boots, letting them drop to the floor. I lowered my hands to the hem of her sweater and slipped it over her head.

Her eyes never left mine as I reached behind her and unclasped her bra, letting it fall from her shoulders, revealing her perfect round breasts. I trailed kisses down her collarbone to her breast, then began swirling my tongue around her sensitive flesh. “Oh, God.”

I nipped and sucked, relishing the sounds of her little moans and whimpers as I teased her with my tongue and teeth. Needing more of her, I took off my cut and laid it across the arm of the chair, then quickly removed my shirt. I didn’t miss the spark of desire that flashed through her eyes as she looked up at my bare chest. “You gotta stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” she asked innocently.

“Like you’re about to have me for dinner.”

“I can’t help it,” she purred as she placed the palm of her hand on my chest, her finger tracing the line of my tattoo. “You’re just so... good looking. It’s not even fair.”

“Is that right?”

She nodded, and I could tell by the way she was looking at me that she meant it. I lowered her jeans and panties down her legs, then waited as she laid back on the sofa cushions. Unable to wait a second longer, I lowered my mouth between her legs, and she inhaled a deep breath as soon as my beard brushed the inside of both thighs.

I raked my tongue across her clit, and the second I tasted her, I knew I’d never be able to get enough. I teased back and forth in a gentle rhythm against her sensitive flesh, loving the way her body instantly reacted to my touch. “Fucking incredible.”

“Don’t stop.”

Her breath became uneven and hitched as I thrust my finger deep inside her, rubbing against her g-spot—slow and steady. She tensed around me, and goosebumps prickled across her skin. I continued to tease her, staying just inches away from that spot that I knew would send her over the edge.

Her hips lifted from the sofa, begging for me to give her more. I instantly drove my fingers deeper inside her while my mouth clamped around her clit and sucked hard, giving her exactly what she needed.

“Ronin!” she shouted as her head thrashed back.

“That’s right. Say it again.”

“Ronin! Ronin!”

I continued teasing that spot that was driving her to the edge as I tormented her with my tongue. She whispered my name over and over as she spasmed around my fingers. While she was still in the throes of her release, I quickly pulled my wallet out of my back pocket and grabbed a condom.

I hurriedly dropped my jeans to the floor, kicking them off along with my boots. I slipped on the condom and then took a moment to look down at her.

*Fuck.*

She looked so damn beautiful with her long hair flowing around her shoulders and that wanton look in her eyes. Her eyes were trained on mine as she whispered, “Ronin.”

I didn’t make her wait.

I couldn’t.

I needed to be inside her. Like a moth drawn to a flame, I inched towards her and settled between her legs, raking my cock across her center. She was warm and wet, and I ached to be inside her. Clearly feeling the same, she arched her back towards me and moaned while her legs wrapped around my hips to pull me forward.

I didn’t need any more encouragement. I wanted her just as much as she wanted me, so with one swift move, I thrust deep inside.

I immediately froze. I couldn't help myself.

She felt too fucking good.

I needed a second to get my act together, or I'd be done before I ever got started. I regained my focus, then worked in deeper until I'd given her every inch. Relishing the sensation, my tortured growl echoed through the room as I slowly withdrew.

A slight hiss slipped through her teeth as I drove into her again and again—each time a bit faster and unforgiving. It was like a reward and punishment rolled into one, and she couldn't get enough. She dug her nails into my back, and she shouted, "Oh God, yes!"

I reached up and twirled her hair around my palm, giving it a gentle tug, and she cried out in pleasure when I thrust forward, giving her every fucking inch. Damn. I couldn't imagine a better feeling. I held onto her waist with my other hand as I withdrew and plunged deep inside repeatedly.

Her panting and moaning urged me on, and it wasn't long before I could feel myself getting close. I didn't want to come with her on the fucking sofa, so I quickly withdrew and lifted her into my arms. "Where's the bedroom?"

"Down the hall."

I nodded, then carried her straight to the bedroom. When I reached the bed, I carefully lowered her onto the mattress, then took a moment as my eyes roamed over every inch of her gorgeous body. I was suddenly overcome with a dull ache in my chest. I didn't know what to think of it, and then it hit me. I felt something for her, and it wasn't simple lust or the need to get off.

It was something more.

I'd been with countless women, and never once did I have a feeling like that. Needless to say, it took me by surprise. I barely knew Maggie and had not spent a lot of time with her. I was still trying to make sense of it when Maggie eased up on her elbows as she whispered, "Ronin."

Hearing my name on her lips got me right in the gut, and I couldn't wait any longer to be back inside her. I lowered myself onto the bed, quickly settling between her thighs as I whispered, "I'm right here, baby."

With one firm thrust, I was buried deep inside her. Shifting her hips upward, her tightness gripped firmly around me. I couldn't believe how incredible she felt as I rocked my hips forward. This woman made me burn for her, every inch of her, and as I drove deeper inside her, I only yearned for more.

I could feel her pulsing all around me as her second orgasm started to take hold. My body grew rigid as I struggled to hold back my own release, and it only became more difficult when she clamped down around me as her body writhed in pleasure. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh. My. God!"

I looked down at her, and I was in complete awe as I watched her gasp for breath. I knew it would be good with her—hell, it was great the time before, but this was even better. She was so damn hot, and we seemed to just fit like her body was made just for me. Unable to control myself, I slowly drew back and slammed into her again and again, giving her everything I had.

"Fuckkk!" I shouted out as my throbbing cock demanded its release too fucking soon. Unable to restrain myself, I continued to drive into her in a feverish rhythm until, at last, she twisted the sheets with her hands and let out a tortured groan. Her body clamped down around me like a vise as my hips collided with hers, and I was done. I recklessly drove into her a few more times, then finally came deep inside of her. I kept my hands planted on her hips, holding her in place as I relished the last moments of being buried deep inside her.

After taking a moment to catch my breath, I removed my condom and tossed it in the trash before collapsing on the bed next to her. We hadn't been lying there long when Maggie reached over and grabbed the blanket from the foot of the bed, quickly pulling it over her. I glanced over and saw that she had it tucked under her chin like she was trying to hide.

Amused, I chuckled as I asked, “Why you trying to cover up? You know I just saw every inch of you, right?”

“Yeah, but that was different. It was during the heat of the moment and all that.”

“Maybe so, but I saw you just the same. Every inch of you, and I gotta say, I liked what I saw.” I reached over and pretended to peek inside the blanket. “I liked it a lot. Hell, I like it so much, I might need another go.”

“Oh, really?” A sexy smirk crossed her face as she replied, “Well, you won’t get any complaints from me.”

That was all the invitation I needed to rip that blanket from her clutches and to ravish her once again. By the time I was done, we were both sated and completely exhausted, and I couldn’t imagine a better feeling.



## Maggie



I'd had the night of my life.

Ronin and I had talked and laughed. We'd shared one story after the next, and we'd gone sledding. And if that wasn't enough, we'd spent the remainder of the night tangled in each other's arms. It was incredible. I should've been floating on cloud nine with visions of rainbows and butterflies.

Instead, I'd woken up in a panic—not because something was wrong. It was just the opposite. Ronin was everything I'd hoped for and more. He had this magnetic presence that pulled me in and made me feel safe. I felt free to be myself—to open up and laugh without worrying about saying or doing something he might not like.

It was like he awakened something inside of me, making me feel alive and excited, and that was both thrilling and unnerving at the same time. As much as I liked him, I didn't want to get my hopes up, especially when there were many things we didn't really know about one another.

I knew it was crazy to be thinking like this. We'd only gone on one actual date, but I didn't want to put my heart out there unnecessarily. I needed to know where he stood before I got too invested which led me to roll over and ask him, “You know I have two kids, right?”

“Mmm-hmm,” he mumbled without opening his eyes. “Picture on the fridge.”

“Remember me saying they can be a handful.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And I work full-time at the salon.”

“Mm-hmm.” One eye fluttered open as he asked, “You trying to get at something here?”

“Just making sure you know what you’re gettin’ into.”

“Oh, I’m fully aware of what I’m gettin’ into.” He reached down and lifted the covers, taking a quick peek. “And like I told you last night, I’m totally good with it.”

“I’m being serious, Ronin.” I tugged the covers back and sat up. “I don’t want to start something that neither of us can finish.”

“I get where you’re coming from, but I think you might be overthinking things a bit.”

“I know, but I have to.” I grabbed the blanket and carefully wrapped it around me before easing out of bed. “I’m not just some chick you hooked up with at the movies. I’m a mother. I have responsibilities.”

“You had those same responsibilities last night when you went flying down that hill, and you still had ‘em when I was going down on you on the sofa.”

“Don’t be crass.”

“Just telling it like it is.” He tossed the comforter back, got up, and walked over to me, completely unfazed by the fact that he was completely naked. “You may have responsibilities, lots of them, but you’re still *you*. And I happen to like you, even when you try to hide behind blankets.”

He gave it a quick tug, pulling it from my grasp. Before I had a chance to protest, he’d pulled me into his arms and was kissing me, making me temporarily forget about all my earlier doubts. Just as I was about to completely melt into his arms, he pulled back and said, “I’ve got responsibilities, too. They’re not the same as yours, but they are just as important.”

I was still in a haze and unable to speak, so I simply nodded.

“I’m not going to make any promises, especially ones I can’t keep, but like you said last night, I wanna try this. I’m

willing to deal with whatever responsibilities you might have. I just ask that you do the same for me.”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

“Good.” He gave my bare ass a quick slap, then turned and started walking towards the bathroom. “I’m gonna take a hot shower. You’re welcome to join me.”

I froze. I hadn’t taken a shower with a man since college, and thinking about taking one with him now had every instinct in my body wanting to reach back for that blanket. When he saw that I hadn’t followed, he stopped in the doorway and said, “Let me rephrase that... Get in here and join me.”

Without any further hesitation, I skirted over to the bathroom and joined him in the shower. Needless to say, it was a heart-pulsing way to start the morning—even better than coffee, but it made it that much harder when it came time for him to leave. I tried not to sound too disappointed when I told him, “I had a really good time with you last night.”

“Right back at ya.” He stepped over to me and slipped his arms around my waist as he asked, “When will I get to see you again?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve got the kids every night until next weekend.”

“Any way we can work around that?”

“I could get my mom to watch them for a night or...”

“Or what?”

“You could just come and meet them and see how it goes.”

“Yeah, we could do that.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’d like to meet them. Just let me know when, and I’ll do my best to work it out.” He leaned down and gave me a quick kiss before turning and heading for the door. “I’ll be in touch.”

And just like that, he was gone.

I only had a couple of hours before the kids came back from their father's, so I got busy cleaning up the dishes from dinner and starting my grocery list. I felt like the clock was ticking as I rushed to the store and tried to find everything we would need to get through the week.

When I got back home, I quickly organized my haul, putting everything in its designated place in the kitchen and the pantry. I felt a sense of satisfaction when all the bags were empty, and everything was ready for the kids to come home. Thankfully, I didn't have to wait long before the back door flew open, and Nathan came barreling inside.

"Hey, sweetie. How was your weekend?"

"It was alright." He continued towards his room as he told me, "Dad took us to eat pizza and to the new Spiderman movie."

"That's great."

Seconds later, Samantha came rushing through the door, and her eyes were wide as she told me, "Hey, Dad's coming in."

"What?"

Before she could say anything more, Chad appeared in the doorway. He was wearing his Sunday clothes, a pair of khakis and a button-down with dress shoes, and his hair was neatly combed like he'd been to church. But I knew that wasn't the case. He hadn't been to church since he and Crissy got together, but he was still dressing the part. I never understood why he felt it necessary to put on a show. It repulsed me and made it hard to even look at him.

He didn't say a word.

He simply stood there and watched as Samantha came over to me and gave me a quick hug. Once she'd disappeared into her room, he cleared his throat and muttered, "Hey, Mags."

"Hey, Chad." He wasn't one to chat, especially during drop-offs, so I had a bad feeling that something was up. "You need something?"

“We drove by here on the way to the movies.” He sounded wounded as he said, “I saw a black SUV in the driveway.”

I didn’t respond. There was no reason to. We were divorced. He had no say in my private life, so I just stood there and stared at him.

“It was still here this morning when I went to get the kids’ breakfast.”

“And?”

“Whose was it?” I just stared at him blankly. “So, are you seeing someone?”

“How is that any of your business?”

“Because you are my wife, and...”

“I am your *ex*-wife, and who I’m seeing or not seeing is none of your business.”

“I just...”

“What?” I pushed. “Did you think I was going to sit here and pine for you for the rest of my life?” I crossed my arms with a huff. “I hate to break it to you, but that’s never going to happen. I deserve to be happy, too.”

“I want you to be happy. I just... You’re the love of my life, Mags. I don’t know if I can take you being with someone else.”

“The love of your life? You’ve gotta be kidding me!” I could feel my blood pressure rising as I fussed, “You’re with Crissy! You’ve been with her for God knows how long, and you left me, the love of your life, to be with her!”

“I should’ve never done it.” He stepped through the doorway and started over to me as he said, “I had it so good, and I...”

“Just stop. I don’t want to hear it.” There was a time when I would’ve given anything to hear those words from him, but at that moment, it sickened me. “You need to leave.”

“Fine, I’ll go, but I’m not giving up on you, Maggie.” He turned and started out of the room. “You will be mine again.

Just wait and see.”

“That’s never going to happen.” He’d already closed the door and was halfway to his truck when I shouted, “*Never!*”

Tears of frustration welled in my eyes as his words echoed through my head. After everything he’d put me through, hearing ‘You are the love of my life’ was like a cruel twist of the knife. I couldn’t believe he had the nerve to say those things to me.

He’d shattered our marriage with his betrayal, and now, after a year had come and gone, he wanted me back. It was ridiculous. He had his chance, and he threw it away. I was still fuming when Nathan peered into the kitchen and whispered, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, sweetie. I’m fine.” I walked over and gave him a hug. “Your father and I were just having a little chat.”

“I heard.” He looked up at me with worry in his eyes. “I wish he wouldn’t do stuff like that. It’s not right.”

“No, it’s not, but let’s not let it ruin our day.” I turned and started for the fridge as I asked, “What would you guys like for dinner?”

“I don’t know. Whatever is fine.” He cleared his throat before asking, “So, is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“Was there some dude here?”

“It wasn’t just some dude,” I corrected. “His name is Ronin.”

“Is he the one you’ve been textin’?”

“Yeah, we’ve talked a couple of times.” I was treading on new waters and wasn’t sure how much I should and shouldn’t say. “He was the one who helped me when the car broke down.”

“Oh, okay.”

I could only imagine how hard this must’ve been for him. He had been the man of the house for over a year, and the

thought of someone new coming into the fold had to be a little daunting. I tried to reassure him by saying, “He’s really nice, honey. I think you will really like him.”

He didn’t respond, which made me nervous, so I added, “He works construction and has a great sense of humor. He’s really tall and reminds me a little of your grandfather.”

Again, no response.

“I’d really like you and Samantha to meet him... I was thinking we could meet up at Dano’s for some pizza and...”

“Meet who?” Samantha asked from the doorway.

“Mom’s new boyfriend.” Nathan let out a breath. “She wants us to go have pizza with him.”

“You have a boyfriend?” Samantha gasped. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, first, he’s not exactly my boyfriend. He’s just someone I’m seeing.”

“Since when?”

“Not long.”

Sam put her hand on her hip as she sassed, “How long is not long?”

I knew then it was going to be a long night, and a long night it was.

But in the end, they both agreed to meet Ronin and promised to have an open mind. I just hoped they could keep that promise, because my future with Ronin depended on it.

## Rooster



“Preacher and Grim are here.” Torch motioned his head towards the door. “And they brought Preacher’s son.”

“Oh, really? Wow. They’re a long way from Little Rock. Something going on?”

“Yeah, the kid’s girlfriend got done over by some rival gang.”

“Ah hell, that’s rough.”

“Yeah, sounded like they did a real number on her.” Torch winced as he added, “Beckett’s the one who found her, and he’s having a hard time of it. Preacher’s hoping that a couple of months here might help get his mind off things.”

I followed him into the bar, and Prez and several of the other brothers were sitting at one of the back tables with our brothers from the Little Rock chapter. Preacher, the president of the club, looked just as menacing as the last time I’d seen him. He was several years older now with deep lines etching his face, but his eyes were still sharp and unyielding as they peered around the room.

Grim, his towering enforcer, sat next to him, and his imposing figure seemed to accentuate his president’s fearsome aura. Together, they exuded pure dominance and control. They were a force to be reckoned with, no question about it, but the kid next to them looked anything but fierce or intimidating.

Beckett resembled his father but in appearance alone. They shared the same dark hair, eyes, and tattoos, but this kid wore his anguish like a second skin. His eyes smoldered with a mix



of hurt and anger, and he looked like he could break down at any minute. Losing his girlfriend had clearly done a real number on him, and I had no idea how bringing him here was supposed to help anything.

Knowing how protective Preacher was over his son, I asked, “So, what are they gonna do about the girl?”

“Nothing. He hadn’t actually claimed the girl. At least, not in any way that really counted. Hell, I’m pretty sure she was only sixteen or something, and they just aren’t willing to go to war with a gang twice their size over a hookup.”

“Can’t really blame them for that.”

Torch and I had just sat down at the counter when Beckett slammed his fist down on the table and roared, “That’s bullshit, and you know it!”

“That’s enough, Beckett!” Preacher growled.

“It will never be enough.” Beckett stood, and his chair fell behind him. “Not until every last one of them is dead and fucking buried.”

With his fists clenched as this side, he stormed out of the clubhouse and into the parking lot. Words were exchanged between Grim and Preacher, and after a quick nod, Grim got up and went after Beckett. Once he’d stepped back out, Preacher continued his conversation with Prez and Savage.

“Damn.” Torch grimaced. “The kid’s a livewire.”

I’d only been with Maggie a couple of times, but I would’ve felt the same as Beckett if someone hurt her. Hell, I would want to burn the motherfuckers to the ground and more. It was that thought that led me to say, “Can’t really blame him. The whole thing is fucked up.”

“Yeah, it is. Preacher thought the time away would help him cool off, but I don’t see that happening.”

“Yeah, me either.” I could feel the tension building in my neck. “I hate it for him. I know Preacher’s in a tough spot, but we’ve already got our hands full with the renovations and this

Bruton change of hands bullshit. We don't have time to babysit some heartbroken kid."

"Busy or not, he's here to stay, so we're gonna have to figure it out."

The room fell silent when the back door swung open. I thought Beckett and Grimm were coming back, but it was Londyn, Savage's ol' lady, and their son. Londyn must've realized that they'd walked in on something because she stopped at the entrance and didn't come in any further, waiting for Savage to come to them instead. He quickly excused himself from the table and rushed over to them. After a quick word with Londyn, he knelt to say something to his son.

Dalton was the spitting image of his father. He not only had the same eyes and hair, but he also had his father's intense demeanor. He listened intently as Savage explained that he had things to tend to but promised that he would be home soon. He nodded with wide-eyed trust, then reached out and gave Savage a hug. Emotion marked Savage's face as he hugged Dalton back.

After giving him a quick kiss on the temple, he rose to his feet and watched as Londyn and Dalton slipped back out the door. Savage stood there for a moment, letting their brief exchange sink in, and then, he headed back over to Prez and the rest of the group. It was clear they were going to be there awhile, so I stood and told Torch, "I'm gonna get going."

"Where you running off to?" Torch cocked his brow. "Got another hot date?"

"Nah, I've just got some things to tend to, and while I'm out, I thought I'd go back and check in with Guardrail. I want to make sure they were able to get us back on track."

"I'm sure they did, especially if Guardrail has anything to say about it." Torch leaned back and crossed his arms. "So, you're really not gonna tell me about last night."

"It was good. We had dinner and talked. Nothing out of the norm."

“Ah, come on. You gotta give me more than that,” he pushed. “Are you gonna see her again?”

“Planning on it.”

“So, you’re into this chick.”

“You could say that.”

“That’s awesome, brother. Look forward to meetin’ her.”

“Ah, I don’t know about all that. Wouldn’t wanna scare her off with your ugly mug.” I gave him a brotherly slap on the shoulder as I said, “I’m outta here. Call if anything comes up.”

Without giving him a chance to respond, I turned and left the bar. When I stepped outside, I was immediately hit with a rush of cold air and groaned. I didn’t exactly mind the winters in Port Angeles. The snow and ice were pretty and all, but it sucked not being able to ride my bike. I got in my truck and started the engine, quickly kicking up the heat. I let it warm up a minute before pulling out of the gate and heading towards town.

When I pulled up at the site, I wasn’t surprised to find Guardrail’s truck parked at the club’s trailer. I had no doubt that he was in the office hammering away at the plans for next week’s projects. I pulled up and parked next to him, then headed inside. And just as I expected, he was sitting at his desk with a pile of papers splayed out before him.

“Hey, brother.” I closed the door and sat down in the empty seat in front of his desk. “How’s it going?”

“It’s going.” He leaned back in his chair with a huff. “Might actually get this shit done if we didn’t have so much other shit going on.”

“Guess that means you heard about Preacher and his kid.”

“Yeah, Cotton called and told me all about it. Shame about the kid and his girl, but I’m not sure being here is gonna make things any better for him. If anything, it’ll only make it worse.”

“I hope, for his sake, that isn’t the case.”

“Guess time will tell. At least, it will give us another set of hands. We could certainly use it, especially with all the runs we got coming up.”

“Sounds like we got more than we were expecting.”

“Yeah, you could say that.” Guardrail shook his head. “Cotton’s been going through all the shit Grant gave him, and it looks like the next couple of months are gonna be rough.”

“You’d think Bruton would’ve given us some kind of heads up.”

“I got no idea what the hell was going on with Bruton, but it wasn’t good.”

“Afraid of that... I hope Cotton hasn’t bitten off more than he can chew.”

“It’ll be a lot. No doubt about that, but it’s Cotton. Nothing he can’t handle.”

“Sure hope you’re right about that.”

“I am,” Guardrail answered confidently. “Cotton’s spent the better part of his life juggling men like this. It won’t be easy, but he’ll get the job done and he’ll get it done right.”

“He’s definitely a one-of-kind.”

“That he is.”

I motioned my hand toward the stack of papers on his desk as I asked, “So, how behind are we?”

“Yeah, a little, but we can manage it. We’re just gonna have to hit the ground running.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Before I got up to leave, I asked, “There anything you need me to do while I’m here?”

“Nothing that can’t wait until tomorrow.”

“Good deal. I’ll see you first thing.”

“Thanks, brother. Appreciate ya.”

I nodded, then headed back out to my truck. I hadn’t heard anything from Torch, so I decided to call it a day and started home. I was just a few miles from the house when my mind

drifted to Maggie. It had been hours since I'd left her place and the memory of her touch still lingered on my skin. It left me with a dull ache that had me wishing I was back in her bed with her head on my chest and her legs draped over my own. I couldn't deny it. My night with her was out of this world, and not just because of the incredible sex.

It was her.

It was the way she looked at me, her eyes filled with desire and a hint of mischief. It was the way she touched me, like she knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to take it. Just thinking about it had me needing to adjust myself. Damn.

When I got to the house, I went inside and grabbed a beer from the fridge. As soon as I was settled in my recliner, I took out my phone and sent her a message.

**ME:**

How's it going?

**MAGGIE:**

Pretty good.

The kids got home a few hours ago. We had dinner, and now, they're holed up in their rooms.

**ME:**

And what about you?

Where do you hole up?

**MAGGIE:**

Usually in my room.

But tonight, I'm in the living room.

I have the fire going, and I'm watching a movie.

**ME:**

Sounds nice.

Wish I was there.

**MAGGIE:**

Me, too.

I could use a snuggle buddy tonight.

**ME:**

Is that right?

**MAGGIE:**

Yeah, my heat has been acting up.

**ME:**

You don't have any heat?

**MAGGIE:**

No, but we're okay.

**ME:**

Why didn't you say anything?

**MAGGIE:**

Because we're okay.

I've got some little heaters I borrowed from Mom.

And the kids are bundled up. I've got the HVAC guy coming tomorrow.

**ME:**

I'll be there in ten.

**MAGGIE:**

Are you sure?

It's cold and dark.

We can make it until morning.

**ME:**

There's no way I'm leaving you three there with no heat, babe.

I'll be there in ten.

**MAGGIE:**

The kids are here.

**ME:**

It'll be fine.

Probably just the pilot light.

I'll do my best to be quiet.

I WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO RELAXING FOR A COUPLE OF hours, but there was no way I could do that while Maggie and her kids were without heat. So, I grabbed my coat and gloves, then went out to the shop for my tools. Once I had everything I could possibly need, I got in my truck and drove over to her

place. I knew she was concerned about the kids seeing me, so I parked across the street and quietly made my way to the side of the house.

With the cold night air prickling against my skin, I knelt in front of the furnace and carefully removed the side cover. I used my flashlight to check the flame, and just as I suspected, it was out. I grabbed my extended lighter from my bag and lit it, coaxing the flame back to life. Seconds later, the soft glow of the flame grew brighter, letting me know that it had lit.

I grabbed my phone from my coat pocket and sent Maggie a message.

**ME:**

It was the pilot light.

Try it now.

**MAGGIE:**

Okay. Hold on just a second.

IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE THERE WAS A CLICK, AND THE UNIT kicked back on. I

waited to put the cover back on until Maggie texted back.

**MAGGIE:**

It's working!

**ME:**

Good deal.



I SHOVED MY PHONE BACK IN MY POCKET AND WAS JUST starting to put the cover back on when I heard a man's voice say, "Hold it right there."

I quickly glanced over my shoulder and found Grant standing behind me. He was wearing a pair of plaid sleep pants with boots and a heavy winter coat, and he had a gun in his hand that was pointed directly at my back. "Grant?"

"Who are you and what are you doing with Ms. Maggie's unit?"

"The name's Ronin. My brothers call me Rooster."

"Wait." He lowered his gun as he asked, "You're with Fury?"

"I am." I didn't blame him for not recognizing me without my cut. It was dark and cold as fuck, and he had no clue what I was doing in his neighbor's yard. I screwed in the cover, then stood and faced him. "Maggie's heat went out, and I just came by to light the pilot for her."

"I see."

"You make a habit of checking on her?"

"I wouldn't say that I make a *habit of it*." He glanced over at the window as he explained, "She's a single mother living here alone with two young kids, and I do what I can to make sure they're doing okay."

"Got it."

"What about you?" His brows furrowed. "How'd you know her heat was out?"

"She told me."

"Oh? So, you know her?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"So, you two are an item?"

"Don't see where that's any of your business, Mr. Grant." My phone started to ring in my pocket, so I grabbed it as I told

him, “Well, the heat’s fixed now, so she and the kids are good.”

“Okay. Good to know.” He turned and started to leave as he said, “I’ll be seeing you around.”

As soon as he was out of sight, I looked down at the screen and saw that it was Maggie calling. I quickly answered, “Hey. You okay?”

“I am now. Thanks to you.”

“It was nothing.”

“It was far from nothing.” I could hear the smile in her voice as she asked, “Do you think you could come around back so I could give you a proper thank you?”

“Yeah, I think I could manage that.”

“Okay. I’ll go unlock the door.”

I ended the call, and then started toward the back of the house. I’d barely rounded the corner when I spotted Maggie at the back door. I was freezing. My fingers were numb, and my cheeks chapped from the frigid breeze, but the second I saw her standing there with that blanket wrapped around her, I felt warm all over.

A smile swept across her face when she spotted me, and I couldn’t imagine a more beautiful sight. When I got closer, she opened the door wider and whispered, “Hey.”

“Hey there, beautiful.”

“Hey there.” She shivered as she said, “It’s so cold. I hate you had to come over here like this.”

“It’s all good. I’m glad I could help. Besides, it gave me a chance to see you.”

Without warning, I slipped my arm around her waist and pulled her close, then bent down and captured her mouth in a kiss. Her soft, full lips opened with a moan, giving me deeper access. Her hand roamed across my chest, then slowly continued up to the nape of my neck as her fingers tangled in my hair.

Having her so close and not being able to do anything about it was fucking with my head. I needed to stop before I got carried away, so I eased back and said, “I better get out of here.”

“Okay. You’re freezing. Go warm up.”

“I just did.”

I gave her a wink, and as I started walking back to my truck, she called out, “Text me later.”

“You can count on it.”

I gave her a wink, then went back and grabbed my tools. Once I was back in the truck, I glanced over at Grant’s place and found him staring out the window. I gave him a quick wave, then started the truck and drove home. It was late and had been a hell of a day, so I went straight to bed.

The next morning, I got up early and drove over to the construction site. I’d barely gotten out of the truck when Guardrail came charging towards me. I could tell by the look on his face he was about to tell me something I didn’t want to hear. He inhaled a deep breath, then said, “The kid’s coming today. I’m gonna need you and Torch to take him under your wing.”

“Ah, man. Seriously?”

“I would do it myself, but I’ve gotta go pick up a load of lumber.”

“We’ll do it. No problem.”

“Don’t take it easy on the kid. He’s gonna be here a while. He’s gonna have to step up and do the work or...”

“Oh, he’ll do the work. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. Thanks, brother.”

I grabbed my tool belt from the backseat, then went to track down Torch. I filled him in on Guardrail’s request, and he wasn’t exactly pleased with the news. “Ah, man. You gotta be shittin’ me.”

“We gotta do what we gotta do. No sense bitching about it.”

“Yeah, but why couldn’t they just get a prospect to hang with the guy?”

“I’m sure Guardrail had his reasons. Now, grab your shit, and let’s get to work.”

Torch nodded, then grabbed his things and followed me over to Beckett. He was standing out front, and he looked like a pouting two-year-old as he stood there glaring at all the metal scaffolding and various tools. I got that he was going through some shit, but I didn’t have time to coddle him. “Alright, kid. You need to grab your toolbelt and come with us.”

“Where we going?”

“Upstairs to finish up some drywall.”

“But I don’t know how to do any of this shit.”

“You’ll learn.” I started through the door as I told him, “I’m Rooster, and this is Torch. We’re gonna show you the ropes.”

Beckett mumbled something inaudible as he followed behind me, and I wanted nothing more than to turn around and give him the riot act. Torch, on the other hand, was much more patient than me and was able to keep a calm tone as he told him, “Look, I know this is a lot, and you probably don’t wanna be here, but we got a job to do here. And we could use your help.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.”

I led him to one of the back rooms that still needed some demolition work. I pointed to the sledgehammer and said, “You take that hammer and start demoing the walls.”

“I thought we were putting up drywall.”

“Torch and I are. You are doing the demo.”

“Whatever.”

Beckett walked over and grabbed the hammer, and fueled by a raw energy, he swung it with reckless abandon, demolishing walls and structures with an almost primal force. Dust and debris scattered in every direction. The once-sturdy walls crumbled under his relentless assault, leaving a mess that mirrored his chaotic temperament.

After a few swings, Beckett glanced over at us and asked, “How’s that?”

“Not bad.”

“Good.”

And just like that, we’d found a use for our moody guest.

It wasn’t what I would call a great day, but Beckett did as he promised and gave it his all. I couldn’t help but think that his visit here might do him some good after all.

For his sake, I hoped it did.

Only time would tell.

## Maggie



“What do you think about a lighthouse wedding?” Ryan sounded both excited and apprehensive as she added, “Maybe out at New Dungeness? It’s so beautiful out there, and I love the whole symbolism thing for lighthouses... The beacon of light through the storm.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“You really think so?” Without waiting for a response, she added, “We could do it in the spring just as the weather breaks, and we could put tables out on the lawn and maybe a tent. We could even get someone to come play music during the reception.”

“It sounds like you have it all planned out.”

“No. Far from it.” She sat back in her salon chair with a groan. “Every time I think I’ve come up with the perfect idea, I end up talking myself out of it.”

“Well, you have plenty of time to figure it out.”

“Not if we want to get married in the spring,” Ryan argued. “I need to book a venue, get a caterer, a dress, a preacher. The list goes on and on. It’s a nightmare.”

“Maybe you should consider getting a wedding planner.”

“Yeah, but they’re so expensive.”

“This is your wedding, Ryan. It’s supposed to be your special day, not a nightmare.”

“I know, I know, but I really want to try to do it on my own.” A thought crossed her mind, and she pursed her lips before saying, “You know, it would be awesome if I had someone to give me a hand with all this. Someone who is a dear, dear friend who knows all my likes and dislikes.”

“Oh, sure!” I smiled as I teased, “I think Keeley would be perfect for that.”

“Umm, I was actually thinking about you.” Ryan shrugged. “I think Keeley would be great to help here and there, but she’s not really in the best headspace these days, especially when it comes to me getting hitched.”

“You know she’s happy for you.”

“Yeah, well, she has a crappy way of showing it.” Ryan rolled her eyes. “She won’t even go with me to look at dresses.”

“Just because I couldn’t go last weekend doesn’t mean I don’t want to go with you,” Keeley sassed as she walked through the front door. “I do, but I had some things to take care of last weekend and couldn’t make it.”

“Are you sure?” Ryan pushed. “Because it seemed like you were put off by the idea of shopping with me.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I’m not looking forward to it at all.” Keeley turned to Ryan and smiled as she teased, “You are the most indecisive person on the planet. It took you hours just to pick out a pair of boots last week. I can only imagine what you’ll be like when it comes to picking out your wedding dress.”

“She’s got a point there,” I giggled.

“I’m not that bad.”

“Weren’t you just telling me what a hard time you were having finding a venue you liked?”

“Yes, but I’ve made up my mind,” she lied. “I’m doing the lighthouse.”

“Really?” Keeley gasped. “That will be so beautiful.”

“You think so?”

After several days of awkward silence, it was nice to see them back in each other’s good graces. I left them to carry on with their conversation and started getting ready for my next client. I was just about to start sweeping when my cell phone chimed with a message. I picked it up from the counter, and my heart skipped a beat when I saw it was from Ronin.

**RONIN:**

Hey, beautiful.

How’s it going?

**ME:**

Hey!

Things are good here. How about with you?

**RONIN:**

Can’t complain.

Just wanted to let you know I’m going to be out of pocket for the rest of the day.

**ME:**

Is everything okay?

**RONIN:**

Yeah, all is good.

I just have to take care of something.

**ME:**



Gotcha.

Well, I hope it all goes okay.

I WAITED FOR A RESPONSE, BUT THERE WAS NOTHING MORE. I thought it was sweet that he took the time to tell me that he was going to be gone for the day. It was a far cry from what I dealt with in the past. There were times I couldn't get in touch with Chad for hours, especially when he was at work, and it was beyond frustrating. I could only assume that those were the times when he was off somewhere with Crissy, but I'll never know for sure.

Not that it mattered now.

My time with Chad had come and gone.

I'd moved on to greener pastures, and it was time for me to put all thoughts of him behind me. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. It seemed like every time I turned around, I would hear his voice in the back of my mind:

*'Maybe if you put me before the kids once in a while...'*

*'Maybe if you took better care of yourself...'*

*"Maybe if you put some effort into making me happy...then I wouldn't have felt the need to go looking for someone else to fill my needs.'*

It was those words that haunted me in the thick of the night, making me wonder if I was the reason my marriage fell apart. I could feel myself starting to spiral when Ryan called out to me, "Hey, Mags! Your ten o'clock is here!"

"Okay. Coming!"

I quickly shook the negative thoughts from my mind and rushed over to greet my client. I was thankful that it was a busy day, and I didn't have time to get lost in my head. Once the last customer had gone, the girls and I worked together to close for the night.

By the time I made it home, I was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed. Sadly, that wasn't going

to happen. Samantha had volleyball practice and math homework, and Nathan had a science project that was already a day late. I decided to make life easier on myself and grabbed some Chinese takeout when I went to pick up Samantha, and we all sat at the kitchen table and ate while we worked on homework.

It was a long day that turned into a long week.

The only thing that kept me going was the late-night phone calls from Ronin. He would tell me about his day, and I would do the same. The conversations were brief, but just being able to talk to him lifted my spirits. I felt even better when we finalized our plans to get together on Saturday night. While I was nervous about taking such a big step with the kids, he assured me there would be nothing to it and that the kids would have a good time.

I did my best to feel out the kids, and they seemed to be okay with going to meet him—until we made it to the pizza place, and they actually saw him. They were right by my side as we walked through the front doors, and they hovered close as I quickly scanned the room, searching for Ronin.

When I spotted him in the back, I nodded my head in his direction and whispered, “Oh, there he is.”

“Wait.” Nathan took a step back. “That’s him?”

“Um-hmm.”

“Holy shit, Mom.”

“What?”

“He’s massive,” Nathan fussed. “Look at him.”

“Yeah,” Samantha’s eyes were wide as she muttered, “He could totally kick Dad’s ass.”

“*Samantha*,” I scolded.

“Well, he could. Bet he was a linebacker.” Worry marked Nathan’s eyes as he asked, “Are you sure about this guy?”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. He just looks kind of scary.”

“Remember that saying about don’t judge a book by its cover?”

“Yeah, but...”

“Just give him a chance, Nathan. For me?”

He nodded, and I gave him a reassuring smile before starting through the crowd. Their faces were marked with a mix of curiosity and worry as they followed me over to Ronin’s table. When we got closer, Ronin stood and smiled, “Hey there.”

“Hey.”

“Glad you guys could make it.”

“We wouldn’t miss it.” I motioned over to the kids. “This is Samantha and her brother, Nathan.”

“Nice to meet you guys. Your mom has told me a lot about ya.”

They both feigned a smile and sat down next to me. Once we were settled, I leaned over to Ronin and asked, “How did things go today?”

“Not bad. The kid is finally starting to catch on to things.”

“That’s great. I was hoping he would.”

Ronin looked so handsome in his black pullover. It brought out the dark flecks in his eyes and the pink of his lips, and it conveniently covered most of his tattoos. I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d worn it in hopes of making a good impression on the kids. His eyes nervously skirted over to Samantha and Nathan as he asked, “What about you guys? Did you get everything done that you wanted to get done?”

“No, but we made progress.” I gave Samantha a little nudge as I said, “Someone still has some laundry to put away, but we’ll get it done tomorrow.”

“I would’ve finished if avocado-head would’ve just opened his stupid bedroom door. *But nooo*. He had to finish getting ready.”

“Maybe I’d open the door if you weren’t such a...”

“That’s enough, you two.” I grabbed a couple of menus and offered them to the kids as I said, “Figure out what you want to eat before you scare Ronin off.”

“Don’t gotta worry about that,” Ronin scoffed. “I had a sister. I know how it can be.”

Nathan glanced over at Ronin with a cautious appraisal, like he was trying to decipher if he was a mass murderer or actually a decent guy. He seemed to be going with the latter when he asked, “Was your sister always barging into your room uninvited?”

“As often as she could.”

“Sounds like Sam.”

“You come in my room, too,” Samantha argued.

“Not unless I have to.” Nathan rolled his eyes. “Cause there’s no way I’d ever *want* to go in there.”

“Can you two at least pretend that you like each other? Just for a little while?”

I gave them both a warning look and prayed that would be enough to stop the nonsense. Nathan nodded, then turned his focus to his menu. After studying it momentarily, he announced, “I’ll have a meat lovers.”

“Meat lovers sounds good. What about you, Samantha?”

“I just want some cheese sticks.”

“You got it.” I glanced over at Ronin as I asked, “What are you thinking?”

“I’m good with whatever. We could split a supreme or a meat-lovers?”

“Either would be great.”

“Perfect.”

Ronin motioned for the waitress and gave her our order, and we continued with our small talk while we waited for our drinks. Ronin asked Samantha about volleyball, and she told him all about the party she hadn’t been invited to and why her

friend hadn't invited her. Ronin sounded truly sincere as he told her, "Sounds like this girl is a bit of a twit."

"Oh, yeah. She's a big ole twit, and Lexie told me the party was lame. Her mom wouldn't let them watch anything but the Disney channel all night."

"That does sound pretty lame."

"I don't know." I took a sip of my drink. "I happen to like their movies."

"I like them, too, but not at a party. That's lame."

"Whatever you say, boss."

The conversation died down when the waitress brought over our pizza and placed the boxes on the table. As the lids were lifted, there was a chorus of "oohs" and "ahhs," and eyes were wide as we each grabbed a slice and placed it on our plates. Cheese strings stretched and toppings tumbled, but none of us cared. We were too eager to take our first bite, and it didn't matter that the pizza had just come out of the oven.

The table was silent for several minutes as each of us began devouring our dinner, but it wasn't long before the eating began to slow. That's when Nathan looked over to Ronin and asked, "So, what do you do? Like for a job and stuff?"

"Yeah, I work in construction. I mainly do electrical work and stuff like that." Ronin kept a light-hearted tone as he told him, "We're actually doing the big renovation down on the square."

"The bank and ice cream shop?"

"Yeah, that's us."

"Wow. That's pretty cool." Nathan sounded so grown up as he said, "It's looking a lot better down there."

"We're doing what we can."

Samantha's eyes danced with excitement as she leaned forward and announced, "Mom said you had a motorcycle."

"Yeah, I do."

“Do you ride it a lot?”

“When I can.” Ronin glanced over at me as he explained, “It’s tough to ride when there’s snow and ice on the road.”

“You ever been in a bike crash?”

“Yeah, a few minor burns, but nothing too serious.” Ronin glanced over at me as he added, “I always try my best to be careful.”

“Will you take us for a ride sometime?”

“That’ll be up to your mother.”

Samantha and Nathan both turned to me with hopeful expressions. I held my hands up as I told them, “I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it.”

“Oh, come on, Mom,” Samantha fussed.

“I said I would think about it. Now, finish up your pizza.”

To my surprise, they both complied, and it wasn’t long before our plates were empty and our bellies were full. Ronin paid our bill, then said, “I need to move around a bit. Are you guys up for some bowling or maybe the arcade?”

“Yeah, that’d be awesome,” they both answered in unison.

“Alright then.” Ronin stood as he told them, “But I gotta warn ya, I play to win, or I don’t play at all.”

A smirk crossed Nathan’s face as he snickered, “That sounds like something a loser would say.”

“Oh, you’re going down, kid.”

Ronin tossed the tip on the table, and we were on our way.

Going bowling was a wonderful idea. The kids laughed and opened up to Ronin in ways I didn’t expect. I won’t say that he’d won them over—at least, not completely. That would take some time, but he’d made some definite progress—with them and *with me*.

I was really starting to like him, *a lot*, and it scared the hell out of me.

I'd come a long way over the past year. I'd worked really hard, and I liked the life I'd created for me and the kids. The last thing I wanted to do was screw it all up, but there was something about this man that made me wonder if my fresh start had really just begun.

## Rooster



“She lived in a dump right in the middle of the hood. I told her a hundred times that she needed to move, but she wouldn’t listen.” Beckett took another slug from his drink and swallowed hard. “It was her grandmother’s place, and Amy couldn’t stand the thought of walking away. She was just so damn stubborn.”

He was on his third round of drinks, and the more he drank, the more he talked. The angry kid with fire in his eyes and rage in his step had been replaced by a pitiful sight. The poor guy looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders as he sat there staring at his drink.

I’m not sure how we got on the topic of his girlfriend, but it was the first time he’d really talked about what happened to her. Knowing it was something he needed to get off his chest, we all sat back and listened as he said, “She saw them. She knew they were watching her. The Assassins watched everyone, including me.”

His voice wavered with the raw emotions he’d carried with him for much too long, and his eyes glistened with unshed tears of frustration as he added, “They saw me countless times. They knew who my father was. They knew I had connections to Fury, and they knew she was my girl. But that didn’t stop them from...”

Anguish etched his face as he took the bottle of whiskey and refilled his glass. He immediately downed it, and I thought that was going to be the end of it until he said, “She was just letting her dog out. She opened that back door like she’d done



a million times, but this time, they were there waiting for her in the shadows. They drug her back into the house and..."

His voice broke, but he didn't have to say the words.

We all knew what had happened.

It took him a second to pull himself back together enough to add, "And when they'd had their fill, they slit her throat and left her to bleed out like some animal."

"Damn, brother," Torch muttered. "That's all kinds of fucked up."

"Yeah, it is." He filled his glass once again as he grumbled, "And my father is letting them get away with it. I just don't get it. Those motherfuckers deserve to burn for what they did to her, and he knows it."

I could see the torment in Beckett's eyes. He loved and respected his father, but he was clearly struggling with his father's decision not to retaliate against the Assassins. It was a hard call, but I knew Preacher had his reasons for choosing not to go after the Assassins. And it didn't matter that Preacher was his father.

He was the president of their chapter.

And his words reigned supreme.

"I know it's tough, brother," I started. "But in the club, we gotta follow the president's rule even when we don't agree or when it goes against our personal beliefs."

Beckett frowned, clearly having some reservations. "But what if he's wrong? What if he's taking the pussy's way out?"

"First of all, your father is anything but a fucking pussy. He's led that club through thick and thin, and because of him, you guys have grown to be one of the most notorious MCs in the south."

"Yeah, but what kind of message does this send to those assholes."

"Something tells me this thing isn't over." I tried to keep my tone calm and steady as I continued, "You gotta trust in his

judgment on this, and if it is a mistake, then you will deal with it as a club.”

Beckett turned to me with a pained expression. “I was gonna claim her, man. She was my whole world, and they took her from me. How am I supposed to just let this go?”

“You take the time your father has given you here, and you do what you can to put it behind you.” I reached over and picked up the bottle of whiskey, slowly pouring him another drink. “It won’t be easy. It’s gonna take a lot of hard work, but eventually, the burn will start to fade, and you can move on with your life.”

“You actually sound like you know what you’re talking about.”

“Let’s just say I know a little something about losing someone you care about.” I shrugged. “Nothing as tragic as what happened with your girl, but it hurt nonetheless.”

“I’m being a real dick, aren’t I?”

“Nah, you’re good.” I motioned my head over to Smokey and the others as I told him, “We get it, and we’re glad you trusted us enough to tell us what happened.”

Beckett nodded, then finished his drink and stood. He wobbled a bit as he started for the door. Just before walking out, he turned to us and slurred, “You’re good guys... damn good guys.”

And with that, he disappeared down the hall. We’d all had our fill for the night, and after a brief goodbye, the rest of us dispersed and made our way home. The following day, I got up early and was about to head to the construction site when I got a message from Savage asking me and Torch to come by his place.

Back in the day, I would’ve questioned him or even given him hell about asking me to come over at such an early hour. But things had changed, and he was now my VP. You don’t question your VP and you certainly don’t give him hell, so I messaged Torch and told him to meet me there.

When I pulled up, I was surprised to find Londyn's dad standing outside with Savage, but I wasn't surprised to see that they seemed to be in the midst of a heated discussion. The two weren't exactly on the best of terms.

Back when they were both a good bit younger, Londyn's father managed to convince Savage to break things off with his daughter. Of course, her father never told her what he'd done. He didn't approve of their relationship, and even when he saw how heartbroken she was over the breakup, he held on to his beliefs and his secret.

And he kept holding onto them even after she had Savage's son. Five years had come and gone before the truth had come out, and they found their way back to each other. Since then, they'd been inseparable. Londyn and Dalton moved in with Savage, and they were becoming the family they were always meant to be.

But neither of them had forgotten the part Londyn's dad had played in their initial breakup. It had been months, but they were still pretty unsettled about the whole thing. Londyn had kept her distance from her father, and until today, Savage had done the same.

And from the looks of it, things weren't going so well.

Savage was standing just inches from Londyn's dad, his jaw clenched and shoulders tense, and he looked like he was about to punch the guy in the throat. The vein in his neck pulsed as he shouted, "You stole five years from me! There's no getting that back."

"I thought I was doing the right thing!"

"How could keeping my son away from me be the right thing?" Their eyes locked for a moment before he said, "Oh, yeah. That's right. Because I'm a dangerous criminal, and your daughter and grandson should steer clear of me. Isn't that right?"

"We're going in circles here."

The tension between them were running high and only grew more intense as I listened to Savage shout, "Because

you've yet to admit that you were wrong!"

"I was wrong, and I'm sorry. How many times do I have to say it?"

"Until you actually mean it!" Savage snapped. "And then, only then, you say it to your daughter."

"She won't talk to me. I've tried calling, and I've even sent flowers, but she won't let me in."

"Because she trusted you, and you lied to her over and over again."

"I know neither of you get why I did what I did, but you just wait and see how you feel when you have a little girl of your own. You hold her, love her, and do everything you can to protect her. Then, and only then, will you truly understand why I did what I did."

Londyn was standing at the window, her eyes filled with concern, as she watched their exchange. I thought Londyn's father was starting to make some leeway until Savage said, "Daughter or not, I don't think I'll ever get it."

"So, we're never going to get past this?"

"I can't answer that." Savage glanced over at Londyn and sighed. "That'll be up to her."

"So, what am I supposed to do?"

"You back off and give her some time to sort this thing out on her own."

"But it's been months... I miss her. I miss Dalton, too."

"I don't know what to tell ya. There's no easy fix for what you did, so you're just gonna have to be patient and pray that she comes around."

He nodded, then said, "I appreciate you talking to me today, even if it didn't change anything."

"Maybe it did. Only time will tell."

Londyn's father looked over to the window and gazed longingly at his daughter. He gave her a quick wave, then

turned and headed for his truck. Before he got in, he turned back to Savage and said, "I'm not giving up on her."

Without giving Savage a chance to respond, he got in his truck and pulled out of the drive. In all the excitement, I hadn't noticed that Torch had come up until he said, "Holy shit, brother."

"Yeah, sorry about that." Savage shook his head with a sigh. "I had no idea that he was coming by here."

Torch sounded concerned as he said, "I didn't realize that you guys were still on the outs."

"It hasn't been good." Savage motioned his head towards the house. "Especially for Londyn. She's all torn up about it, and it doesn't help matters that Dalton keeps asking about seeing his grandfather. She keeps putting him off, but that's only going to last for so long."

"That's gotta be tough, especially for the kid," I interjected. "But time has a way of sorting things out."

"I hope you're right." Savage started up the front step as he said, "Come on. I need help moving some stuff for Londyn."

"I thought you two were done with all that."

"I did, too." Savage glanced over his shoulder. "But I've learned that when the wife wants to move the furniture, you move the furniture."

"Understood." Torch and I followed Savage into the kitchen, and I made a beeline for the coffee pot. "If we're moving stuff, I'm gonna need coffee and lots of it."

"You got it." Londyn walked over and grabbed me a cup from the cabinet. "I appreciate you guys coming over to help with this."

"No problem."

After pouring me some coffee, Londyn grabbed a piece of paper from the counter and took it over to Savage. "Here's what I was thinking."

“Oh.” Savage’s eyes grew wide. “So, we’re moving everything around.”

“Trust me. It’ll look great and give us so much more light.”

“If you say so.” He motioned his head toward the living room. “Come on, boys. Let’s get this shit done.”

Once we were in the living room, Savage showed us where Londyn wanted everything, and we started moving stuff around. It didn’t take long for chaos to ensue. Savage looked around and scratched his head as he said, “She said this would give us better light, but I’m not seeing it.”

“You gotta trust the process, brother.”

We continued moving stuff around, narrowly avoiding one collision after the next, but we managed to get everything where Londyn wanted it. I looked around the room as I told Savage, “I hate to break it to you, brother, but it’s not any lighter now than it was before.”

“No, it’s not.” Savage looked around and shrugged. “But if this is what she wants, then this is what she’ll get.”

Before either of us could respond, Dalton came into the room, and clearly confused by the scene before him, put his hands on his hips and huffed, “What are you doing?”

“Just moving a few things around,” Savage answered with a smile. “It was your mom’s idea.”

“Oh.” Dalton gave his father an unimpressed shrug. “I like it.”

“You do?”

“Um-hmm.”

“Good deal.” Savage reached down and lifted Dalton into his arms. “I’m glad you approve.”

“You gotta go?”

“Afraid so.” Savage’s smile faltered. “We’ve got to check in with Poppa Cotton and see how he’s doing.”

“Can I go with you?”

“Wish you could, but we’ve got some business to tend to. But you’ll be seeing him this weekend while your mom and I run some errands in the city.”

“Come on, Dalton,” Londyn called from the kitchen. “Your cereal is ready.”

“You better get moving.”

Savage lowered Dalton to the floor and watched as he hurried into the kitchen. Once he was out of earshot, I leaned over to Savage and asked, “Why we heading over to Cotton’s?”

“He’s got something he wants to go over with us, but I got no idea what it’s about. But it didn’t sound good.”

“Okay. In that case, I’m ready when you are.”

“Then, let’s get going.”

We said our goodbyes to Londyn and Dalton and made our way outside to our trucks. Once we were all loaded up, Savage pulled out of the drive, and Torch and I followed close behind as he drove toward Cotton’s.

His new office was in an old warehouse by one of the docks. From the outside, it appeared to be just an ordinary warehouse. Looks can be deceiving though. On the inside, Bones and Guardrail had installed an underground bunker with all the bells and whistles. Not only did it have its own living quarters, but it also had state-of-the-art computers, monitors, and the most advanced surveillance system.

There was also an arsenal of weaponry, meticulously organized and ready for any sign of trouble. When we pulled up, Cotton and Prez were waiting outside. As soon as we approached, Cotton greeted us with a quick, “Morning, boys.”

“Morning, Pops.”

“Morning.”

“Come on in, and I’ll explain why I asked you to stop by.”

Prez nodded, and we all followed Cotton as he led us inside. Once the door closed behind us, Cotton walked over to the back wall and pressed the code into the keypad. Seconds later, the metal floor slid open, and a set of stairs appeared. We followed Cotton down into the bunker, and the place was in total disarray.

There were files and papers scattered all over the table, and each monitor had a different image on the screen. Prez was the first to ask, “What is all this?”

“I’ve been going through all the orders Grant gave me, and I have some concerns.”

“Concerns about what?”

“Some of the guys Bruton was working with.” Cotton motioned his hand toward the files. “We got no business tying up with men like these. Hell, if anything, we should take these motherfuckers down. Here, see for yourself.”

Cotton slid one of the files over to Prez and Savage and waited as they scanned it over. Prez was visibly upset as he spat, “The Benedettis and the Rossis? Seriously? They’re into some heavy shit!”

“Yeah, you’re not kidding.” Cotton shook his head as he added, “Sex trafficking. Kid trafficking. Gun trafficking. You name it, and if we give them the weapons they’re asking for, then...”

“We’d be helping them do it,” Prez interrupted.

Savage shook his head as he muttered, “And that’d make us just as fucked up as they are.”

“Exactly. It’s just one big clusterfuck.”

“So, what are we going to do about it?”

“I’m all for fulfilling obligations and all that, but not like this.”

“Then, get with Grant and tell him we’ll complete the other runs, but it’s a no-go with the Benedettis and the Rossis.”

“And if there’s blow back?”



“Then, we’ll handle it,” Prez answered without hesitation. “Just get with Grant and put the wheels in motion. We’ll see where the cards fall.”

None of us were surprised by Prez’s response.

We were Fury.

We faced trouble head on. We stared it down without flinching. Satan’s Fury wasn’t just another MC. We were a force that stood tall against the storm, and we didn’t kneel to anyone. Not now. Not ever.

## Maggie



It had been a pretty decent week. Ryan and Keeley were excited and talking nonstop about the wedding, which was entertaining and made the day at the shop go by faster. Ronin had been busy with work, but we'd talked or texted every night, and we'd managed to slip off for burgers while the kids were with their dad.

I was trying to get things settled around the house for the kids and to get ready for a night out with Ronin when Nathan called out from his room, "Hey, Mom! Can you come here for a minute?"

"Yeah, just give me a second." I threw the rest of the dirty towels in the hamper, then made my way down the hall to Nathan's room. "Hey, what do you need?"

"I wanted to ask you about something."

I could tell by his expression that something was weighing on him. It wasn't the first time. It seemed to happen a lot when the kids had been to see their father, so I walked over and sat down at the foot of his bed. "What's on your mind?"

"I was thinking about you and Dad," Nathan began, his voice a hesitant whisper, "It's just been weird, you know."

"No, I don't know. What do you mean?"

"I just thought you guys would work things out, and you haven't."

"We tried, Nathan. You know we tried."

"Do you ever think you'd be willing to try again?"

“Oh, I don’t know.” My throat felt tight as I told him, “It’s been over a year, Nathan.”

“Dad’s really sorry about the stuff he did and wants to make things right.”

“Okay, where is all this coming from?”

“Nowhere. I’ve just been thinking about things.” I could tell he wasn’t being completely honest with me when he added, “I know he messed up, but people make mistakes, right? Maybe if he tries really, really hard, things could go back to like they used to be.”

The air seemed to thicken as I wrestled with my response. My first impulse was to tell him that his father cheated and lied about it over and over again and that there was no way we could go back to the way things used to be. But I took a deep breath and forced myself to remember that Nathan was just a young boy who loved his father.

“Honey, things will never go back to the way they used to be. Your father and I aren’t the same people we were back then. I’ve grown stronger and more independent, and he’s with Crissy now, and he really seems happy with her.”

“But he’s not.” Nathan’s eyes filled with worry as he explained, “He talks about you all the time. He misses you and wants you back.”

“Okay, and what about what I want?” It pained me to see that solemn look on my son’s face, but I simply couldn’t go down this road with him. “I know this might be hard for you to understand, but I’ve finally gotten over what happened between your father and me. And it took a lot for me to be able to do that. There were days when I wasn’t sure it was even possible, but I’ve finally managed to put it behind me, and I have no intention of ever going back.”

“Okay. I get it.”

“Does this have anything to do with Ronin?” He’d been by several times since the night we’d gone bowling, and I thought things were going well. Now, I wasn’t so sure. “Are you worried about him or...”

“He’s alright.” Nathan shrugged. “Seems nice enough. He’s just different is all.”

“I can’t disagree with you there, but sometimes, different can be good.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I could hear the sincerity in his voice as he said, “I want you to be happy, Momma. I really do.”

I was just about to reach over and hug him when Samantha stuck her head in the room and fussed, “Did you really do it?”

“No.”

“You did, too. I can’t believe you’d actually...”

“Shut up, ass-face.”

“Nathan, watch your mouth!” I scolded. “What’s going on with you two?”

“Nothing.” He leaned over and gave Samantha a threatening look. “The nosy turd-head is just running her mouth like she always does.”

“Nuh-ugh.” Samantha crossed her arms and sassed, “I heard what Dad was saying to you.”

“*Shut up, Sam.*”

“Okay, enough.” I held up my hand and gave them both a stern look. “No more name-calling. Just tell me what’s going on.”

“I told you. It’s nothing,” Nathan lied.

“Okay.” I looked over to Samantha and asked, “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“Dad was going on and on about Nathan asking you to give him another chance.”

“What?”

“Yeah, he said he really missed you and missed us not being around all the time. He also said Nathan was the reason you found out about Crissy.” Samantha’s expression softened as she glanced over at her brother and said, “And he was counting on Nathan to make things right.”

“Oh, he didn’t.” Samantha nodded. “You both know that’s not true, right?”

“But it is true,” Nathan muttered. “If I hadn’t gotten sick that night, then you would’ve never found out about... you know.”

His father was laid up with Crissy in some stupid motel while I was sitting frantically in the ER with Nathan. He was dehydrated from a terrible case of the flu, and even after calling everyone I knew, I couldn’t find Chad. It wasn’t until he showed up hours later that I figured out where he’d been.

All it took was one look at his guilty face to know that he’d been with someone else. At first, he tried to deny it, saying he was at work, but the lipstick on his collar and the scent of perfume lingering on his skin told a different story. The fact that Chad had tried to guilt Nathan over that night was appalling.

I had to fight back my anger as I told him, “Me finding out what happened that night had nothing to do with you, sweetheart, and I’m so sorry that your father made you think that it did. That wasn’t fair, and it certainly wasn’t true.”

“I don’t want you to get back with him, Momma.” Nathan’s voice was strained as he told me, “I wish you’d left him a long time ago.”

“Your dad has made his mistakes, and he’s still making them, but he isn’t all bad. There’s a lot of good in him.” I reached and placed my hand on his shoulder. “For one, he loves you and your sister very much. He might not always show it in the best ways, but he does. And even though it can be hard at times, I think it’s important for him to be a part of your lives.”

“And what happens when you marry someone else? Will we still have to go see him?”

“Me marrying someone else won’t change the fact that he’s your father.”

“So, that’s a yes.”

*“That’s a yes.”*

“I thought so.”

I gave him a quick pat, then asked, “Are you still okay with hanging with your sister tonight?”

“Just while you guys go to dinner, right?”

“Right. It shouldn’t be more than an hour or so.”

“Yeah, it’ll be fine.”

“Great.” I stood and gave him a quick kiss on the forehead, then told Samantha, “I’m going to put a load of towels in the wash. I’m going to need you to put them in the dryer when they’re done.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks, punkin.”

I left Nathan’s room, and after I threw the towels into the wash, I went to the bathroom for a shower. I’d hoped it would help clear my head and help me to stop dwelling on what the kids had just told me about their father. I was tempted to call him and give him a piece of my mind.

I knew it wouldn’t do any good. He was too bullheaded to admit that what he’d done was wrong, so I left it and tried to focus on my date with Ronin. With a towel wrapped around me, I went over to my closet and stared aimlessly at all the clothes. We were just going to grab some Italian at a little place downtown, so I decided to go with a pair of slim-fit jeans and a loose, off-the-shoulder top.

I left my hair straight and put on a little makeup, and then I was ready to go. I was just about to slip on my ankle boots when there was a knock at the door. Samantha was the first to shout, “I’ll get it!”

Seconds later, I heard Ronin’s voice say, “Hey there, shortie. How’s it going?”

“Alright.” I heard the door close as she told him, “I was just watching a movie.”

“Anything good?”

They continued to banter back and forth as I finished getting ready. Once I put on my boots, I stepped across the hall and stuck my head into Nathan's room. He had his headphones on and was playing his game, so I just waved to let him know we were leaving. He gave me a thumbs-up, and I smiled and left him to it.

I started down the hall, and the second I walked into the living room, a smile swept across Ronin's face. "There she is."

"Hey. Sorry, I was running a little behind." I grabbed my coat as I told him, "But I'm all ready now."

"That you are." He turned to Samantha as he asked, "You mind if I steal your mom for a bit?"

"As long as you bring her back."

"I think I can manage that."

"Bye, sweetie." I walked over and gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. "We'll be back in a bit."

"Bring me back some dessert."

"You got it, kid."

Ronin took my hand and led me out to his truck. He opened my door, and I was about to get inside when he whispered, "I missed ya."

"You just saw me two days ago."

"What can I say?" He lowered his mouth to mine, kissing me briefly before saying, "I'm a sensitive fella."

"Yeah, whatever."

I shook my head and giggled as I got in the truck. He closed the door behind me, and seconds later, we were on our way toward town. Ronin took me to a charming Italian restaurant right on the square. It was small and quaint, with little twinkle lights hanging overhead, and we had the perfect corner table with a view of the people walking by.

It was like something out of a scene from a romance movie, and I couldn't have asked for a better evening. As soon

as we finished eating, Ronin placed his napkin on his plate and asked, “You ready to break out of here?”

“I guess, but it’s still kind of early.”

“Yeah, but I’d hate to leave the kids home alone for too long.” He gave me a playful wink. “You never know. They might join forces and form an uprising.”

“Yeah, that could be a problem.”

“Exactly.” He paid the bill as he said, “Maybe we get there in time to convince them to watch a movie instead.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

We paid the bill and quickly gathered our things before Ronin led me out of the restaurant. It was cold, and my focus was on getting back to his truck until I heard Ronin mutter, “Oh, damn.”

“What?”

“Nothing, it’s just Clutch and Liv.” I could feel his body tense as he said, “He’s one of the brothers.”

“Oh, is there a reason you don’t want to see them?”

“No, it’s just I haven’t really said much to the guys about me and you.” My expression must’ve given me away, and he immediately added, “It’s not like that. I just kind of wanted to keep you all to myself.”

“Well, that’s kind of sweet.”

“More like self-preservation, but you’ll see soon enough.”

Clutch and his wife approached with kind smiles on their faces. Clutch was older with shaggy salt and pepper hair, and his wife was absolutely stunning. Clutch gave me a curious look as he said, “Hey, brother. How’s it going?”

“Good. We just finished having dinner.” Ronin motioned his hand towards me as he said, “I don’t think you guys have met... This is Maggie.”

“Hey, Maggie. We’ve heard a lot about you.”



“You have?” I glanced up at Ronin as I muttered, “I thought you...”

“I didn’t,” Ronin interrupted.

“Oh, you know how word gets around.” Clutch gave me a wink. “It’s good to finally put a face with the name.”

“Same. It’s really good to meet you both.”

“You’ll have to bring her by the club this weekend for family day.”

“Yeah, I haven’t had a chance to tell her about that just yet.”

Clutch turned to me as he asked, “You got kids, right?”

“I have two. A son and a daughter.”

“You should bring them, too. It’d be a good chance for them to meet everybody.”

“That sounds nice. We’ll talk about it, and maybe I’ll see you guys there.”

“I hope so.” Liv looked over at Clutch, then awkwardly back to us. “Well, we’ll let you guys get back to your night.”

“Yeah, you two get to it.” Clutch gave me a friendly smile as he said, “It was really good to meet you.”

“You, too. Enjoy the rest of your night.”

Without saying another word, Ronin took me by the hand and led me back to the truck. Neither of us said a word as we got in and buckled up. And the silence continued as Ronin started the truck and pulled out of the parking lot. The awkwardness was getting to me, so I finally said, “Clutch and Liv seemed nice.”

“Yeah, they’re great.”

And just like that, silence fell over us once again.

I couldn’t deny that I was hurt that Ronin hadn’t even mentioned the club party. I knew his brothers and the club meant a great deal to him, and I couldn’t help but think that there was a reason why he hadn’t told me about it. And me,

being me, figured whatever was going on wasn't good, and my mind was running wild with ideas like maybe he was planning to take someone else or maybe things with us weren't as good as I thought they were.

“Is there a reason why you didn't mention the club party?”

“Yeah, but it's not what you think.”

“Then, what is it?” I pushed. “Why don't you want me there?”

“I do want you there, Maggie. More than you could possibly know, but Fury isn't just a bunch of guys who ride bikes and hang out. It's a lot more than that.”

“I know. You told me they're like family to you.”

“They are, and when things go south, I know they'll always have my back.”

“That sounds really nice.”

“It definitely has its advantages. It's like a family you never knew you needed. You'll see what I mean when you meet everyone.”

“I'm not getting it. I don't see the problem.”

Ronin's tone turned serious as he explained, “It's not all rainbows and butterflies, babe. There's heavy stuff that goes down, and it doesn't always end well.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“That's just it. I'll never be able to tell you about it. Not fully.” His eyes met mine as he said, “Club business is club business.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Not for you or the kids.”

“So, it is dangerous.”

When he didn't respond, I knew I had my answer.

My heart started to race as all these intrusive thoughts came rushing through my mind. I'd been so foolish. I'd heard the rumors about Satan's Fury, but I thought they were just

silly stories made up by bored housewives who watched too much TV. I never dreamed they were truly involved in criminal activities; otherwise, I would've steered clear of Ronin and his brothers.

“So, the rumors are true?”

Again, no answer.

“You do realize that not answering is an answer.”

Ronin pulled into the drive and turned to face me as he said, “Yeah, but it's the only one I have to give.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Afraid so.”

“Then, I think it's best that we call it a night.” I opened my door and quickly grabbed my things as I told him, “I wish things could've been different.”

“Don't do this.”

“I don't have a choice, Ronin.” I had to fight back my tears as I told him, “Those kids in that house are my life. I live and breathe for them, and I can't put them in danger. I won't do it.”

Without saying anything more, I got out of his truck and rushed inside, quickly closing the door behind me. I was relieved to find that Samantha was no longer in the living room. I didn't want her to see that I was on the verge of crying, so I used the opportunity to rush to my room.

As I walked by, I could hear them both shouting and laughing, which was a clear indication that they were both playing online. I stopped at Nathan's door and tapped on the door as I told him, “I'm home!”

“Okay!” was all I got, and he was right back to his game.

I took off my coat as I continued down to my room. I threw it on my treadmill and kicked off my boots before collapsing on my bed. I could feel the tears stinging my eyes as I stared up at the ceiling. I couldn't believe it. I'd really grown to like Ronin *a lot*. I really thought we had something,

and it broke my heart to think that I would never see him again.

But I didn't have a choice.

I couldn't put my children in danger. I was their mother. It was my job to protect them, even if it meant walking away from a man I truly cared about. The more I thought about it, the more I cried. I was a mess. I was balled up on my bed and working myself into a real pity party when I heard a tap on my window. I thought it was just my imagination until I heard it again—louder this time.

Curiosity got the best of me, and I got up to see what was making the noise. I pulled back the blind, and my breath caught when I found Ronin standing there with a fierce expression on his face. "Open up."

"Ronin."

"Open the window, Maggie."

I unlocked the bolt before raising the window. Without waiting for an invitation, he placed a hand on each side of the window, then hoisted his broad shoulders through the small opening and stepped into my room. "We need to talk."

"We've said all there is to say."

"Not even close." He brought his hand up to my face and used the pad of his thumb to brush away a tear. "Clearly, there's still lots that needs to be said."

"But it's not going to change anything."

"Maybe. Maybe not." He turned and closed the window before saying, "But I'm not leaving here until I've had a chance to say my piece."

I didn't argue.

I simply nodded, and he let out a sigh of relief.

"I know you like pretending that you don't have your walls up, but I see them. I know they're there. And right now, you're scared and looking for any excuse to put an end to us, but baby, this ain't it."

“I don’t want to get hurt... and I don’t want my kids to get hurt.”

“I get that, but there is a part of the club life that you aren’t getting. I wasn’t born into that family. I chose them, and they chose me. There’s a strength in that.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“Once you’re in their fold, there’s nothing they won’t do for you. Nothing, and those aren’t just words. I truly mean that.” He reached over and took my hand. “I’m not going to sugarcoat it. The secrets are tough. All the ol’ ladies hate ‘em, but we do the things we do to protect and take care of the people we love the most. I’d never put you or those kids in danger. Hell, I’d die before I let that happen.”

“But...”

“You can trust me, Maggie.” His eyes never left mine as he said, “I know that’s hard for you, especially after what you’ve been through, but you can. And one day, I’ll prove that to you.”

“It won’t be easy. I’ve all but forgotten how to truly trust someone.”

“I know. But I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

I needed him to know how hard it would truly be, so I told him, “You can have your club secrets and you do what you have to do there, but that’s where I draw the line. No lying to me or keeping things from me. Just like this. You should’ve just told me from the start.”

“You’re right. I should have, but it’s a lot, especially for someone who’s never been a part of the club life. And I didn’t want to scare you off.” He gave me a snicker. “I was kind of hoping I could get you to warm up to me before I hit you with the heavy stuff.”

“That’s not really fair.”

“I know, but I’ll make it up to you.”

“And how are you planning to do that?”

A sexy smirk slipped across his face as he said, “Oh, I can be creative when I wanna be.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, you just wait.” He pulled me close once again. “Little by little, I’m gonna wear you down, and one day, you’ll give into me. Just wait and see.”

## Rooster



It had just begun, but winter was already kicking our asses. Because we'd had several big bouts of snow and ice, it had been weeks since we'd been able to ride. However, today was turning out to be a real beaut, so Torch and I decided to take advantage of the brief thaw and ride our bikes over to the construction site. The cold winter air was biting at our cheeks as we revved our engines and pulled out onto the road.

The snow had melted, leaving behind glistening patches of damp asphalt, but thankfully, there was no sign of any black ice or lingering patches of snow. The motorcycle's tires hummed against the pavement, drowning out any thoughts that might be lingering in my head, and by the time we arrived at work, I was feeling better than I had in days.

Unfortunately, the good mood didn't last. Torch and I had barely parked when Savage and Wrath started over to us, and I could tell by their fierce expressions that they weren't bringing good news. As they drew closer, I asked, "What's going on?"

"We've lost track of Beckett," Wrath answered. "When he wasn't at breakfast, we just assumed that he'd come in to work early, but there's been no sign of him."

"I've tried calling him, but he's not picking up." Savage sounded concerned as he said, "He was on another bender last night, so there's no telling where he ended up."

"What do we need to do?"

"Preacher trusted us to keep an eye on him," Savage explained. "Last thing we need is for something to happen to

him.”

“Then, we’ll find him.” I looked over at Torch as I said, “We’ll go over to the clubhouse and give it another once over while you guys check around town.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Torch and I started up our engines and wasted no time getting over to the clubhouse. When we pulled up, I wasn’t surprised to find that it was pretty cleared out. It was a weekday, so most of the guys were either at work or off on their own. Knowing Savage and the others were waiting to hear from us, Torch and I quickly parked and made our way inside.

You could hear our boots trudging against the worn floorboards as we made our way down the hall. We started opening doors, and with each empty room, the sense of urgency grew stronger. We called out his name, but time after time, there was no answer. After an exhaustive search, we were about to leave when Torch hesitated outside of Addison and Michele’s room.

They were a couple of the club’s hang-arounds, and Addison hadn’t been bashful about letting everyone know that she had her eye on Beckett. Hell, she’d been after him since the day he arrived. Torch motioned his head towards her door as he asked, “You think?”

“I don’t know, brother. His wounds run pretty deep. I’d think it’s a bit early for that.”

“Yeah, but you know Addison. She can be pretty convincing.”

“Open her up and see.”

He nodded, then reached for the door handle. The door creaked open slowly, revealing a scene of unexpected vulnerability. There, in the midst of all the girls’ pillows and fuzzy blankets, lay Beckett completely naked and motionless on the bed. The room was a wreck. Clothes and empty bottles were strewn all over. And if that wasn’t enough to throw a red flag, he was in one bed, and they were in the other.



We knew then that hurt had gotten the best of him, and the girls had done what they could to help him through it. Torch and I exchanged a concerned glance, then Torch slowly closed the door. “I’ll message Savage and let them know we found him.”

I took out my phone, and after I sent a text to Savage, Torch and I started back out to our bikes. We hadn’t gotten far when I heard Prez call out, “You find him?”

“Yeah, he’s okay.” Torch and I waited as he approached. “He was laid up in Addison’s room.”

“Oh.” Prez cocked his brow and scoffed. “Guess that’s a good sign.”

“I’m not sure about that.” Torch glanced over at me. “Looks like they had quite a night.”

“I can imagine.” Prez looked oddly concerned when he said, “You know, we got that run for Bauco coming up. Are you two still planning to take the lead?”

“Yeah, we’re all set.”

Cotton had his reservations about Bauco. He’d heard stories, and none of them were good. He had Bones look into him but found nothing out of the norm. He brought it up to Grant, and he assured him that Bruton had never had any issues with him. And yet, Cotton’s reservations remained, so he asked that we take extra precautions—which is why I told him, “Chains and Q are coming, too. Maybe Clutch and Diesel, but I haven’t heard the final word from them.”

“Good.” His back stiffened. “Wrath and Two Bit are gonna tag along. They’re going up half an hour earlier to check things out and make sure everything looks good. They’ll wait there until you arrive with the goods and stay until the deal is done.”

You would’ve thought Torch was reading my mind when he asked, “That really necessary?”

“Cotton’s concerned, and that has me concerned.”

“Why? What’s the deal?”

“Bauco is sending runners to pick up the load, and he hasn’t been very forthcoming about who he’s sending. Cotton threatened to cancel the drop, but Bauco assured him that there wouldn’t be any trouble and even offered extra money as security.”

“That sounds pretty shady. You think Wrath and Two Bit are gonna be enough?”

“Should be... Cotton and Grant will be close by just in case you need them.”

“Sounds good.”

Torch and I said our goodbyes, then headed back to the construction site. It was barely nine, and it had already been a hell of a day. I wasn’t exactly surprised. That had become the norm since Bruton’s death. I couldn’t remember a time when the club had so much going on, and it was starting to take its toll. We needed a break, but sadly, there was no reprieve to be had—at least, not anytime soon.

We made our way back to the construction site, and after a quick word with Guardrail, Torch and I headed upstairs and got to work. The familiar sounds of machinery filled the air, and it wasn’t long before my mind drifted to thoughts of Maggie. It had been a couple days since our ‘discussion’ about the club, and while we’d talked on the phone a couple of times, I hadn’t actually seen her.

But one way or another, that was going to change tonight.

I took out my phone and sent her a text.

**ME:**

I need to see you.

**MAGGIE:**

Who is this?

**ME:**

Don't play with me, woman.

**MAGGIE:**

Okay. Okay.

I have the kids tonight.

**ME:**

Don't care.

Just need to see your face.

**MAGGIE:**

Come over whenever you want.

I'll order some Chinese takeout, and we can watch the game.

**ME:**

You order it, and I'll grab it on my way.

**MAGGIE:**

Perfect!

**ME:**

I'll see you around 6.

**MAGGIE:**

Can't wait.

I FELT A LITTLE LIGHTER AS I SHOVED MY PHONE BACK INTO my pocket and got back to work. As the day unfolded, I found myself counting the hours until I could wrap things up and head over to her place. When I finally finished my drywall section, I did a quick cleanup and gathered my things. On my way out, I glanced over at Torch and Two Bit and teased, “Catch you losers later.”

“Woah, where you running off to?”

“I’ve got an order of Chinese with my name on it.”

“Oh, so you got yourself a hot date.”

“Something like that.”

Without saying anything more, I walked out and headed outside. I was covered in a day’s worth of dust and grime as I made my way out to my bike. Since I was in dire need of a shower, I wasted no time heading home. As soon as I got to the house, I made a beeline for the bathroom and took a hot shower. Once I was done, I threw on some jeans and a T-shirt, then drove over to our favorite Chinese spot.

After I picked up our order, I drove to Maggie’s house, and my chest tightened when I spotted her standing at the front door in a pair of leggings and an oversized sweatshirt. She was waiting for me. I’d never had someone waiting for me, and it got to me.

She got to me.

Damn.

This woman was doing a real number on me.

I couldn’t wait a moment longer to have her in my arms, so I grabbed the food and charged towards her. As I got closer, she opened the door wide and smiled. “Hey there, handsome.”

“Hey, beautiful.”

I leaned down and pressed my mouth to hers, kissing her long and hard. I would’ve kept kissing her if I hadn’t heard

Samantha giggling in the kitchen and Nathan complaining, “Ew. Gross.”

I quickly released her from our embrace and whispered, “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. They can get over it.” She gave me a wink, then turned and said, “Come on in. We’re starving.”

“That’s good because there’s plenty of food to go around.”

I carried the food over to the table, and in a blink, Nathan and Samantha were diving in to find their order. Nathan had his eye on the prize when he glanced up at me and said, “Hey, Ro. How’s it going?”

“Can’t complain.”

“Hey.” Samantha was at the bottom of the first bag when she asked, “Did you get my sweet and sour chicken?”

“Should be in there.”

“Let me take a look.” Maggie stepped over and started going through the various boxes. “Here it is.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Samantha took the box of food and plopped down in the seat next to Nathan. They both started diving in while Maggie and I gathered our food and sat down beside them. I’d just taken a bite of my sesame seed chicken when Samantha announced, “Casey’s having a sleepover next weekend, and she asked me to come.”

“Okay, that’s fine, but it’s your dad’s weekend. You’ll have to work that out with him.”

“I already told him, and he said it was okay.” She took another bite of her food, then added, “She didn’t invite Jessie.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she said it was only fair because she didn’t invite me to hers.”

“I don’t think that’s the best way to handle that.”

“Well, she’s the one who started it.”

“But that doesn’t make it right,” Maggie argued.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about it.”

“You could talk to Jessie and try to sort things out.”

“But she’s been a total jerk to me.”

Maggie shrugged. “Maybe, but there was a time when she was a really good friend, and there’s a chance you could be again.”

“But I didn’t do anything wrong. Why do I have to be the one to try and fix things?”

“I don’t know much about this kind of thing,” I interjected. “But I’ve always believed that if you want good friends, you have to be a good friend.”

“So, you think I should talk to her?”

“Don’t think it’d hurt.”

“Okay.” Samantha sighed. “I’ll talk to her.”

“That’s my girl.” Maggie leaned over and kissed Samantha on the forehead. “Now finish your dinner, and we’ll go into the living room and watch the game.”

“No football for us tonight,” Nathan announced.

“Oh? Why not?”

“Matt and Brayden are hopping on Fort in a few minutes, and me and Sam want to get on with them.”

“Okay, well, that sounds fun.”

“It will be when we kick their as—” Nathan grimaced as he corrected himself. “Butt.”

“Yeah, they have it coming,” Samantha added. “Especially Brayden. He was a total tool the last time we played.”

“Why? What did he do?”

Samantha went on to tell her mother all about Brayden and how he’d sabotaged their last game when he quit the game without telling them. That story led to another. And another. And before I knew it, we’d all cleared our plates, and dinner

was over. The kids disappeared into their rooms, and I helped Maggie get dinner cleaned up.

I was gathering the trash when Maggie said, “Thanks for saying what you said to Samantha. It was really great advice.”

“Glad I could help.”

“And thanks for picking up dinner and helping me clean up.”

“You don’t have to thank me.” I gave her a wink as I cinched up the garbage bag and placed it outside the door. “It’s what I do.”

“Well, since *it’s what you do*, would you mind helping me replace the lights in my bedroom fan? Several of them have gone out.”

“Sure thing.”

“Great.”

Maggie grabbed some fresh light bulbs from the cabinet, and then I followed her down the hall. There was an echo of shrills and shouts as we passed the kids’ rooms. I chuckled as I said, “Sounds like they’re having a good time.”

“You think?” She shook her head. “I bet the neighbors can hear them three blocks away.”

When we got to her room, I looked around and asked, “You got a step ladder?”

“Sure. Let me get it.”

She stepped over and grabbed it from the closet. I took it and got to work. I climbed up the ladder, and a few minutes later, I had the new bulbs in and was remounting the globe. Once I had it secure, I climbed down and folded it up. I put it back in the closet, and as I closed the door, I couldn’t help but notice the emotion in Maggie’s eyes.

Worried that something was wrong, I asked, “You okay?”

“It’s been a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t had anyone around to help me with stuff like this. I’ve gotten used to just doing it myself, even before my divorce, and then, you come along. You fixed my heater and now my fan. It’s just really nice. I appreciate it.”

It was hard to believe that such a mundane chore would get to her the way it did, but that was Maggie. She wore her heart on her sleeve, and I liked it. I liked it a lot. “Come here.”

“Why?”

“Come here.”

“The kids are in the next room.”

“And they are playing their game. Listen. You can still hear them screaming. Trust me, they could care less what we’re doing.” I dropped my hands to her waist, pulling her closer as I leaned down and began trailing kisses down her neck. “Besides, I can be quiet if you can.”

“That’s just it. I don’t know if I can.” She placed her palms flat against my chest, giving me a slight push. “Not with you.”

“Oh, and why’s that?”

“Because you keep doing that thing.” She drew her shoulder up to her ear, trying in vain to prevent me from teasing her any further. “There’s no way I can keep quiet when you do that.”

“You like that, huh?”

I continued to kiss her along the neck, causing her to moan, “Maybe just a little.”

“Then, there’s no way in hell I’m gonna stop.”

I reached for the hem of her sweatshirt, quickly pulling it over her head. I wasn’t patient. I needed to feel her against me to ease the burning need that was building in the pit of my stomach.

Her fingers slid up under my shirt, and the muscles of my stomach grew taut against the touch of her fingertips. She eased it over my head and tossed it toward the bed. “I knew you were going to be trouble.”



“Baby, you have no idea.”

Her eyes locked on mine as she removed her leggings and kicked them to the side. I bent down and lifted her into my arms. I carried her over to the bed and dropped her down on the mattress. I wanted her so bad I could barely think as I eased her legs over my shoulders and lowered my mouth between her thighs. She inhaled a deep breath when the bristles of my beard brushed against her soft skin, her back arching off the bed as my tongue skimmed across her smooth center.

I spread her trembling legs wider, and a needful moan echoed through the room as I began to nip and suck her delicate flesh. “Damn, baby. You taste so fucking good...like fucking heaven.”

Her hips inched forward as her thighs tensed around me, and goosebumps prickled across her skin. Loving how her beautiful body responded to my touch, I eased my fingers inside her as I continued teasing her clit with my tongue, tormenting her as she writhed beneath me. Overcome by her impending release, her hips lifted from the mattress, and her head thrashed back as she gasped, “Yes!”

“That’s it, baby.” Adding more pressure, I demanded, “Come for me.”

That’s all it took.

While muttering my name, she submitted to her release and clamped down around my fingers. Damn. Seeing her come undone turned me on more than I could’ve ever imagined. I couldn’t wait a moment longer. I had to be inside her.

She was still in the throes of her release when I grabbed a condom from my wallet. Her eyes locked on mine as I lowered my jeans enough to free myself and slid it on my thick, throbbing cock. I leaned down, slipped my hands under her knees, and pulled her to the edge of the bed. *Fuck.*

She looked so damn beautiful, sprawled out and waiting for me with that wanton look in her eyes. I brushed my throbbing cock against her slick center and nearly lost it. I did

my best to keep my voice low as I told her, “I’ll never get enough of you.”

Inhaling a deep breath, I tried to calm the storm of need that was raging inside of me, but Maggie was eager for more. Unable to wait a moment longer, she wrapped her legs around me and forced me deep inside. I froze. She felt too fucking good. I slowly withdrew, watching her expression as I asked, “You gonna be a good girl and stay quiet?”

She managed a slight nod as I thrust deep inside her.

A slight hiss slipped through her teeth as I drove into her again and again. Maggie reached down and grabbed the back of her thighs, holding them back in hopes of softening the faint slapping sound that echoed through the room when our bodies collided. It did little to help. Each time was a little harder, a little louder, and it felt unbelievably good.

Her heels dug into my back, and she moaned, “Ronin.”

As much as I loved having her this way, I wanted more. I needed to feel her, to touch every inch of her gorgeous body, so I withdrew and quickly lifted her into my arms. I pushed my jeans down a bit further, then sat down on the bed, letting Maggie’s knees straddle me. I dropped my hands to her waist and started guiding her over my cock in an unforgiving rhythm.

She placed her hands on my shoulders, trying to steady herself as she shouted, “Ronin!”

Fuck. There was something about hearing her call out my name that sent an intense heat coursing through my body. Every fucking inch of me was consumed with need for this woman. I’d never felt anything like it before and feared I might never feel this way for anyone else. Shifting her hips upward, she continued to rock against me.

When I slammed into her again, I could feel her muscles contracting all around me as her second orgasm started to take hold. My body grew rigid as my release inched its way through me. Her head fell back as she cried out, “Oh yes. Yes!”

I fisted my hand in her long hair, giving it a gentle tug as I thrust forward, driving inside her once again. She was so fucking hot, so tight, and it was all too much. Damn. I couldn't imagine a better feeling.

*"Fuckkk!"* I shouted out as my throbbing cock demanded its release. My fingers dug into her hips as I guided her forward in a feverish rhythm until I came deep inside of her. We both stilled, fighting to catch our breath and after several moments, Maggie eased off me and collapsed on the bed next to me. "That wasn't quiet."

"No, it wasn't, but you heard them. They were playing their games." I stood and tossed the condom in the trash, then pulled up my jeans before sitting back down next to her. "I doubt they heard anything."

She didn't move. She just lay there staring up at the ceiling as she whispered, "I'm a terrible mother."

"Don't go there. You're an awesome mother, and you know it. There's nothing you wouldn't do for them."

"Except for when I scar them for life with my sex-capades."

"Sex-capades?" There was something about the way she said it that hit differently, and I found myself wondering if I was missing something. "Is that what you think this is?"

"What?" She pulled her sweater over her head. "No, of course not."

"Hmmm."

"Ronin, you know this is much more than that."

"Yeah, I was just checking." Even though I still had my doubts, I let it go. I stepped over to her and kissed her as I said, "I'm gonna go grab a drink from the fridge."

"Ronin?"

"Yeah?"

She gave me a strange look, then shook her head. "Oh, nothing."

I opened the door, and as soon as I stepped into the hall, I spotted Nathan standing in his doorway. His head was down, and his eyes were narrowed like a bull ready to charge, but he didn't move. He just stood there, giving me the eye, and I knew then that we'd been louder than I thought.

Damn.

This was turning out to be a bad deal all around.

And I had a feeling that things were going to get worse before they got better.

# Maggie



“You were right.”

“Right about what?”

“We weren’t quiet.” Ronin walked over and placed a glass of water on the bedside table. “I’m pretty sure Nathan heard us.”

“Oh God, nooo,” I groaned. “What did he say?”

“Nothing. He just gave me a look.”

“A look? That’s it?” I was grasping for any shred of hope when I said, “Maybe he didn’t hear anything. Maybe it was something else.”

“He knows, babe. You’re just gonna have to trust me on that.”

“Damn. Did you say anything to him?”

“I was going to, but he closed the door before I got the chance. I could go try again.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

I started for the door but stopped when Ronin said, “Hold up. You might wanna give him a little while before you go in there.”

“You think?”

“If I was in his shoes, I’d need a minute.”

“How long is a minute? Later tonight? Tomorrow?”

“A month or two should do the trick,” he teased.

“*Ronin!*”

“Give him a day or so when it’s just you and him. And hey, I might be wrong. He might not have heard anything. He could be pissed that I ate his fortune cookie.”

“You ate his fortune cookie?”

“I was still hungry.”

“But the fortune cookie is the best part!”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I ate it,” he teased. “I mean, if you don’t want me eating his cookies, then you best be gettin’ me some more snacks around here and get some good ones. None of those off-brand Twinkies like you got Samantha. Poor kid. Don’t know how she could choke those down.”

“*They aren’t that bad.*”

“They are. And those fake Oreos are pretty crappy, too.”

“You’re a snack snob. I can’t believe I’m just finding that out.”

“I don’t know what to tell ya.” A sexy smirk crossed his face as he stepped over to me and slipped his arms around my waist. “*I like what I like.*”

“Um-hmm.”

“It’s true. *And just so you know*, you’re the best snack of them all.” He leaned down and trailed kisses along the crook of my neck. “And I keep wanting more and more, and I gotta tell ya. A night here and there just isn’t enough.”

“So, what do you wanna do about it?”

“I was thinking maybe you and the kids could come stay with me this weekend?”

“At your house?”

“Yeah, why not?” Ronin actually sounded excited as he said, “The kids would love it. I’m right on the water, and there’s plenty to do. We could grill out. Build a fire. Maybe take the kids sledding, and on Sunday, we can go to the clubhouse for family day.”

“That sounds pretty great. I’ll talk to the kids and see what they think.””

“Just let me know.” He glanced over at the clock before saying, “It’s getting pretty late.”

Ronin had stayed over several times but never when the kids were there. Even though things were going well, it was too soon, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want him to stay. I did, which is why I wrapped my arms around his neck and said, “I wish you didn’t have to go.”

“Yeah, me, too. More than you know, but we’ll give things a test run this weekend. I have plenty of room. We won’t have to worry about any big ears or ex-husbands driving by.”

“This weekend visit is sounding better all the time.”

“Good. Then, my plan is working.”

He gave me a wink, then took my hand and led me out of the room. When we reached the front door, he stopped and said, “Don’t forget I’ll be out of pocket tomorrow.”

“When do you think you’ll get back?”

“Can’t say for sure, but I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

Ronin reached up and gently cupped my face, then leaned in and pressed his lips to mine. His touch was both tender and affectionate as he kissed me good night. He lingered for a moment, then said one last goodbye before heading home. He’d barely made it out of the driveway when I found myself missing him and wishing he could stay. I locked up then headed back to my room.

When I passed Nathan’s room, I thought about what Ronin had said about giving him some time, but my motherly instincts told me something different. So, I tapped on his door and eased it open. He was sitting on his bed, playing his video game and hadn’t even noticed I’d walked in until I stepped in front of the TV. He removed his headphones as he said, “What?”

“Can we talk for a minute?”

“About what?”

“*Earlier.*” I took a deep breath, trying to find the right words to ease his mind. “And what you might’ve heard.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I couldn’t tell if he was telling the truth and was completely oblivious or if he was just too embarrassed to talk about it—which was completely understandable. Hearing what he did had to have been quite a shock. It definitely shocked Ronin when he walked out of my room and found Nathan in the hall.

I needed to try and smooth things over, so I walked over and sat down on the edge of his bed. “You didn’t hear anything tonight?”

“No.” His brows furrowed. “What would I have heard?”

“Umm, nothing. I was just talking with Ronin and thought...”

“I don’t want to hear that mushy stuff you guys say.”

“I would guess not.” Since I’d opened the door, I figured it was as good a time as any to say, “You know how I’ve been spending a good bit of time with Ronin, and I’ve grown to really care about him.”

Nathan shrugged. “Yeah, Mom. I know, and it’s cool. Ronin’s a good dude.”

“Are you sure about that? Because I don’t want you to think that I’ve forgotten about you or Samantha.” I reached over and put my hand on his knee. “I love you and your sister so much. You guys mean the world to me, and I wouldn’t ever want to do anything to hurt you or make you unhappy.”

Nathan had grown up so much over the past year. He was taller, more mature, and reserved, but he was still the same sweet kid he’d always been. He pondered for a moment, then shrugged and said, “Mom, it’s really not that deep. If he makes you happy, then we’re happy.”

“Nathan.”

“I mean it, Mom. It’s cool.””



I reached over and wrapped my arms around him, hugging him tightly. “I love you more than you could possibly know.”

“I love you, too.”

“Since you’re good with everything, Ronin has invited us to come spend the weekend out at his house. He lives out at the coast, and he said we could grill out and make a fire. Maybe go sledding.”

“Yeah, that sounds awesome.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I just have one favor.” His face twisted into a grimace. “If you were talking about what I think you were talking about, don’t be doing that where we can hear it or whatever.”

“Yeah, sure thing.”

“Good. Then, we’re golden.”

I chuckled, grateful for my precious son. “You know if you are ever worried or....”

“Yeah, I know.” He motioned his head over to his TV. “Can I get back to my game now?”

“Yeah, go ahead, but don’t stay up too late. Since you’re out of school tomorrow, we’re going to go see your grandparents.”

“Oh, man. Do we have to?”

“Yes, we have to go. They haven’t seen you in weeks, and they’re really looking forward to seeing you. And I hate to break it to you, but you’re gonna need to take a shower before we go. Either tonight or in the morning.”

“Oh, man. Now, you’re just being extra.”

“I don’t want you going to grandparents with the funk, Nathan.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll take a stupid shower.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” I stood up and gave him a quick kiss on the forehead. “Goodnight, sweetie.”

“Night, Mom.”

I left his room and went to check in on Samantha. To my surprise, she was already in bed and sound asleep. I walked over and tucked her in. After I gave her a quick kiss goodnight, I went to my room and got ready for bed. I’d just gotten into my PJs when the Imperial March from Star Wars ringtone started playing on my phone, and I immediately groaned.

It was the one I’d chosen for Chad, and I cringed every time I heard it. I grabbed my phone from the bedside table and checked the message:

**CHAD:**

I want to take Nathan hunting this weekend.

**ME:**

It’s my weekend.

**CHAD:**

I know, but we were invited in on a big hunt.

He will want to go.

**ME:**

I’ll talk to him, but we already have plans.

**CHAD:**

What plans?

**ME:**

I’ll talk to Nathan and get back to you.

**CHAD:**

I miss you.

**ME:**

Don't.

**CHAD:**

But I do.

We had a good thing.

We can again.

**ME:**

It's not going to happen. You need to stop.

**CHAD:**

I'm not giving up on us.

**ME:**

Goodbye, Chad.

I TOSSED MY PHONE BACK ON THE NIGHTSTAND AND COLLAPSED into bed. I was exhausted, but I couldn't stop thinking about Chad and his stupid messages. I was growing very tired of his nonsense, and I wasn't sure how to make him stop. It was a thought that weighed on my mind as I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, I got up early and took a quick shower. Once I was dressed, I woke the kids, and twenty minutes later, we were in the car and headed to my parents. I hadn't gotten

far when the nerves started to kick in. I hadn't had the chance to tell them about Ronin, and I wasn't sure how they would take the news, especially my mother.

She got me better than anyone, and while I knew she would want me to be happy, she hadn't forgotten how hard it was for me to get over what happened with Chad. Those wounds ran deep, and being the protective mother she was, she wouldn't want me to get hurt again—not when I was finally getting back on my feet.

I didn't either. In fact, it was the last thing I wanted and one of the many reasons why I hadn't let myself get too carried away with him. I would let myself like him a lot, but I wouldn't give him my heart until I knew for certain that he would take care of it.

As soon we got to the house, I parked the car, took a deep breath, and turned to the kids. “Okay, guys, we're here. Now remember, you haven't seen your grandparents for several weeks. They've missed you and will want to spend some time with you. So, hang around and talk to them for a bit. And keep the phone time down to a minimum. Just while we're here.”

Nathan and Samantha exchanged annoyed glances, then grumbled, “Yes, ma'am.”

I opened the car door, and together, we walked up the path to the front door. As soon as we stepped onto the porch, the door opened, and Mom and Dad welcomed the kids with warm hugs and smiles. Once she'd hugged them both, Mom turned her attention to me. She was squeezing me tightly as she said, “Oh, my goodness. It's been too long.”

“It's just been a couple of weeks.”

“That's too long,” she fussed. “We're old. We need to see our sweet babies as often as possible.”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

“Please do.” Mom motioned us all inside as she teased, “Now, get in here and tell me what's been going on with you all.”

We followed her inside, and I was immediately hit with the familiar scent of vanilla and lavender—Mom’s favorite scent. She and Dad guided Nathan and Samantha into the living room, and they all sat on the worn-out couch. They’d barely sat down when the kids delved into animated tales of the past few weeks. Nathan told them about being nominated to the Student Council, while Samantha shared her experiences on the volleyball team.

My dear, sweet parents listened with affectionate ears and seemed genuinely disappointed when they had no more tales to tell. I could hear the pride in Dad’s voice when he said, “You two have done quite well. I’m very proud of you both.”

“Thanks, Grandpa,” Nathan replied with a smile.

“There’s some ice cream in the fridge if you’re interested.”

“Yes!”

They both hopped up and rushed towards the kitchen. I could hear them giggling and whispering as they opened the fridge and started searching for the ice cream. When I heard the bowls clinking together, I knew they had everything they needed. That’s when I turned to Mom and said, “I have some news, too.”

“Oh? What kind of news?”

“There’s a reason why we haven’t been around very much lately.”

“I figured as much.” Mom and Dad exchanged a knowing glance before Mom announced, “You’ve been seeing someone.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I have.” Dad shifted in his seat as he listened to me continue, “His name is Ronin, and we’ve been going out for several weeks now. He’s not like anyone I’ve ever met before. He’s smart and funny and handsome. And he’s so thoughtful. He’s always doing these little things to help me and the kids, and I don’t even have to ask. He just does them... and I really like him a lot.”

“He sounds like a very nice young man.”

“He is. He really, really is.” I swallowed the knot that was forming in the back of my throat. “The kids have met him several times, and they really like him, too.”

“That’s good.”

“I thought so.”

I went on to tell them about his job and that he lived in town. They both listened attentively and once I’d finished talking, I leaned back and braced myself for their response. The room held a moment of suspended silence before Mom finally broke into a warm smile. “It sounds like you are very fond of this Ronin fella.”

“I am, but don’t worry. I’m being careful.”

“What do you mean *careful*?”

“I’m not letting myself get carried away. I’ve already messed up once. I’m not going to let my heart get broken again, so I’m keeping my guard up.”

“Oh, honey. You can’t go into this like that,” Mom fussed. “It’s not fair to him, and it’s not fair to you.”

“I know, but I just...”

“You have a good heart, Maggie. You always have, and if you liked him enough to introduce him to the children, then that tells me all I need to know.” She reached over and patted me on the leg. “Now, when are your father and I going to get to meet him?”

“I’m not sure. He had to go out of town today, and I’m not sure when he’ll get back. But we’ll figure out a time to come by soon.”

“Good. We both look forward to meeting him.”

I thought having their blessing would ease my mind, but it didn’t. Instead, it made me feel even more anxious. That’s when I realized that my worry had nothing to do with them and everything to do with me.

## Rooster



“So, what’s the deal?” Torch motioned his head over to Wrath’s truck, where he and Two Bit were watching over us. “Why do we need all the extra precautions?”

“Just playing it safe.”

“Cotton and Grant on the rooftop is playing it safe?”

“I don’t know what to tell ya.” I shrugged. “This whole thing is new to everyone. We’re still learning all the ins and outs, and we don’t want to take any chances until we have figured everything out.”

“And if these runners are looking for trouble?”

“Then, they’ll find it. We just drove four fucking hours. I’m hungry, tired, and I need to take a piss.” We were at an old, abandoned school in Portland, and the place was in rough shape. There were remnants of broken windows and graffiti-covered walls, and the grounds were covered in litter. “I’m not in the mood to fuck around with some fucking assholes with an axe to grind.”

“Same, brother. Same.”

Torch and I stood in the center of the courtyard, waiting impatiently with Chains, Clutch, and Q, and it wasn’t long until two black Camaros pulled up to the school. I squared my shoulders and watched as the car doors eased open, and one by one, the handlers stepped out of the vehicles. They were wearing leather cuts that bore the unmistakable emblem of a reaper wielding a scythe.

“Fuck,” Clutch muttered. “It’s the California Reapers.”

“Yeah, what about ‘em?”

Clutch remained eerily calm as he explained, “Our California chapter has run into some trouble with them.”

“We could always tell them to fuck off.”

“I’m with Q. They can get their guns from someone else, especially if they’re using them to go against our brothers.”

“It’s not their guns, remember?”

There was always a level of distrust when doing an exchange, but meeting with a rival MC took that feeling of distrust to a whole new level. The first to start walking towards us was sporting an enforcer patch. A mountain of a man, he exuded an air of intimidation as he gave us the once-over.

The second was slightly taller and much thinner. He was covered in ink and moved with a calculated ease, much like the man behind him. This guy was a towering figure with a shaved head and a gaze that seemed to pierce through the shadows. The last guy was muscled up like his brothers, only he was much older and walked a bit slower than the others. But he wasn’t any less menacing.

The air crackled with an unspoken challenge as the first approached and asked, “So, you boys are Fury?”

“We are.”

“We’ve had run-ins with your brothers from the Los Angeles chapter.”

“So, we’ve heard.”

“They’re some real pricks.” The enforcer glanced over at his brothers before adding, “Bet you boys are cut from the same cloth.”

“That’s what makes us brothers.” I knew he was trying to fuck with me, but I wasn’t going to have it. “You want the fucking goods or not?”



“Wouldn’t be here if we didn’t.” His lip twitched with disgust as he asked, “So, how’d you boys manage to pick up this gig?”

“Don’t see how that’s any of your concern,” Q barked.

“It’s a curiosity. Not a fucking concern.” He glanced over at his brothers as he scoffed, “Damn. You Fury boys really think a lot of yourselves.”

“You best watch your fucking tone.”

“You best watch yours.” His eyes narrowed. “We already had to show your brothers what’s what. Don’t make us do the same with you.”

He was goading me, and it was working.

I didn’t want to let the motherfucker get to me, but when he put his hands on my chest and gave me a hard shove, I was done. I reared my fist back and slugged the asshole right in the jaw, sending his head flailing back.

And just like that, we were at each other’s throats.

And not just us.

The others joined in, making it a full-on brawl. It was intense. The enforcer was on me like white on rice, hammering me with one blow after the next, but I held my ground. I took him punch for punch until Wrath came up and put his gun at the asshole’s temple, causing everything to still.

His brothers were going for their weapons when a round of gunfire exploded at our feet, causing all of us to withdraw and cease fighting. Disheveled and bloody, we all glanced up on the school roof and found Cotton and Grant staring down at us. Cotton still had his rifle aimed at the Reapers when he growled, “That’s enough.”

“Bunch of fucking pussies,” the enforcer barked. “You’re lucky I didn’t fucking kill each and every one of you.”

“I said that’s enough!” Cotton was his typical controlled self when he ordered, “Get your shit and get the fuck out of here.”

I could tell by looking at him that Cotton was on the brink, and I was right there with him. These assholes had crossed a line, but we weren't in position to let our tempers get the best of us. We had a business deal to complete, and like it or not, it had to be done. That didn't mean Cotton was going to take anymore bullshit off this asshole.

He was done.

A red dot from Cotton's AR flickered on the enforcer's chest as Cotton warned, "Cause the next time I shoot, it won't be at your fucking feet."

"You got it, boss."

With a sinister smile on his face, the enforcer gave the other three a nod, signaling them to get the crates from the back of my SUV. They didn't even bother to open them and check them out. Instead, they just picked them up and carried them over to the trunk of their car.

Once everything was loaded, the enforcer stepped over to me and handed me an envelope. "Until next time."

"There won't be a next time," Cotton announced.

"The fuck?"

"You heard me." Cotton showed no emotion as he told him, "Tell Bauco that he'll have to get his goods elsewhere."

"You don't want to do that."

"It's done."

"This isn't over."

"Oh, it was over the second you started running your fucking mouth."

The enforcer glared at him, then shook his head and started over to his Camaro. He was about to get inside when he stopped and looked up at Cotton. "I hope you know, you and your boys are as good as dead."

The words had barely left his mouth when Cotton lifted his rifle and pulled the trigger, shooting the Reaper's enforcer

right in the head. The second his body hit the ground, a fury of gunfire erupted around us, and chaos ensued.

We darted behind my SUV and used it for cover as we returned fire. Cotton and Grant continued to shoot overhead, and it wasn't long before the man next to the first car had been taken out. I was doing my damndest to do the same with the men in the second car when I heard Chains shout, "Fuck."

A hard thud followed, and I quickly turned to see him on the ground with blood rushing from his throat. He was clutching his neck, trying in vain to stop the bleeding, and I had no idea what to do to help him. Guilt washed over me as I quickly ripped the sleeve from my t-shirt and pressed it against the wound. "I got ya. I'm right here. I need you to hold on."

"It's bad," he muttered.

"Nah, it's just a graze," I lied. "I'm sorry, brother. This shit's on me. I shouldn't have lost my cool. It's my fault..."

"No," he mumbled. "Not... on... you."

His eyelids started to grow heavy, and I knew we were losing him. With bullets still flying overhead, Q knelt beside me and said, "He's right. Those assholes came here looking for a fight, and they found it."

"But..."

"I mean it, brother. It's on all of us." Q glanced down at Chains as he said, "We need to get him to Doc."

"We don't have that kind of time."

The words had barely left my mouth when the shooting suddenly stopped, and silence fell over us. I could hear my brother's footsteps as they trudged through the gravel, and as soon as they approached, Torch grimaced and asked, "How bad is it?"

"It's pretty fucking bad," I answered. "He's lost a lot of blood."

Knowing time wasn't on our side, Wrath opened the back hatch as he said, "We gotta move, or we're gonna lose him."

“Let’s go.” I looked down at Chains, and he didn’t look good. He was pale, and his eyes were glassed over. I put my hand on his chest, trying to get him to come around. “Chains, are you with me, brother? I need you to hang on. You hear me?”

Nothing.

No groan.

No movement.

But I wasn’t giving up.

I swallowed hard, trying to release the knot in my throat as I told him, “We’re gonna have to move you. You with me?”

Again, nothing.

Torch shook his head as he helped me and Clutch lift him into the back of the SUV. As soon as we laid him down, Torch stepped back and said, “I think we lost him.”

Clutch reached over and placed his fingers on his neck, checking for a pulse. Moments later, he turned to us, and his weathered face bore the weight of grief as he said, “He’s gone.”

“Fuck.”

Losing a brother was tough, but to lose one during the heat of battle cut deep. One minute, you’re side by side, fighting for survival, and the next, they’re gone. The loss hits you like a Mack truck, unexpected and merciless, and the fact that I had a part to play in his death hit even harder.

Anguish marked Cotton’s face as he stepped forward and growled, “Damn.”

He sighed as he draped a blanket over Chains’ lifeless body. He stood there, breathing deep as he tried to collect himself, and after a few moments, he looked over to me. “This is on me. No one else, and you have my word that his death won’t be in vain. They will pay for this shit.”

“Yes, sir. Understood.”

“You gonna be able to manage that without blowback on the club?” Torch motioned his hand over at the two cars we’d just shot up. “Bauco had to know we were doing the drop, and if I had to guess, I’d say he’s not going to be happy about how things played out.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Grant answered. “As soon as you say the word, I’ll handle Bauco, and I’ll do it in a way that’ll leave them with no means to give you boys any trouble. Same goes for the Reapers.”

None of us questioned Grant’s ability to handle both Bauco and the Reapers. We’d all seen what he could do and knew he’d send a message that everyone Bruton worked with would hear loud and clear.

Wrath cleared his throat and then asked, “What do you want us to do about our friends?”

“Torch ‘em,” Cotton answered. “It’s the safest route.”

“And the goods?”

“Leave them in the trunk,” Cotton answered. “Bauco needs to know we delivered as promised.”

We each gave him an understanding nod, then got to work loading the bodies into the cars. We siphoned some gas from their tanks, just enough to douse the interior, then set them on fire. It didn’t take long for the flames to take hold, and within minutes, both vehicles were totally engulfed. Fearing the smoke might draw attention, Cotton announced, “It’s time to move.”

And just like that, we all dispersed and loaded into our separate vehicles. No one said a word as we pulled out of the parking lot and started home. We’d driven less than a mile when I glanced up at my rearview mirror and spotted the blanket that Cotton had draped over Chains.

I thought back to his last moments, and I couldn’t help but feel guilty about how things had played out. It didn’t matter what Cotton said. I should’ve just ignored the asshole and made the exchange, but I let my anger get the best of me. The only thing that kept me from losing it was knowing that I

wasn't alone in my torment. Each of my brothers felt the same, and together, we would find a way to pay a proper homage to our fallen brother.

Everyone was there waiting for us when we got back to the clubhouse. Doc and Prez were standing in front with a gurney, and they all stood silent, watching as we moved Chains from the truck. Doc carried him down to the infirmary and started preparing him for his burial.

The rest of us gathered in the bar, and we spent the next hour filling in Prez and the rest of the brothers in on what had gone down. Just as I expected, Prez wanted both the Reapers and Bauco to pay and he wanted them to pay big.

There was some back and forth on how to make that happen, especially after what happened to Chains. Even though we all had a thirst for revenge, there was no reason to put the club or the brothers at any further risk. We all agreed that Grant would handle it, and I could tell by his expression that he had big plans for them.

The following day, we all met out back and had a small service for Chains. He didn't have any family or connections to outsiders, so we buried him with our other fallen brothers. Prez said a few words about Chains, then read a brief scripture.

Once he was done, we all headed out to the parking lot. It was cold, but thankfully, the roads were clear, and we were able to do our tribute run. We all waited and watched as Prez pulled up to the gate and revved his engine. We all followed suit—the roar of our engines echoed the unspoken pain that lingered within all of us.

With the wind whipping around us, we pulled out onto the open road, and a sense of sorrow enveloped us as we followed our leader out towards the coast. The road stretched out ahead like a winding memorial—each mile a symbolic gesture for our fallen brother.

We returned to the clubhouse and met in the bar for a couple of drinks, but none of us were in the mood for much more than that. I still needed to get the house ready for Maggie

and her kids, so I tossed my empty bottle in the trash and announced, “I’m heading out.”

“Where you running off to?”

“Maggie and the kids are coming out to the house tonight, and the place is a total fucking wreck. I gotta get groceries, too.”

“You could always take a couple of the girls with ya,” Savage suggested. “They could give you a hand getting things ready.”

“Yeah, and let Maggie get all kinds of pissed at me? Hell, no. I’d rather not have my ass in a sling,”

“Can’t say I blame you there.”

“Have a good one, brother.”

Without saying anything more, I left the bar and headed out to my truck. As I pulled out, I glanced over at the back of the lot where we buried Chains, and bile rose to my throat. I was struggling. Hell, I was more than struggling. I was a fucking mess, but the thought of seeing Maggie helped to ease the ache in the pit of my stomach.

I ran by the grocery store and picked up everything I thought we might need, then drove home and started cleaning up. Thankfully, the house wasn’t as bad as I thought, and I was able to get it in order without it being a huge ordeal. I’d just finished putting the dirty dishes in the dishwasher when my phone chimed with a message.

I grabbed it out of my pocket, and my spirits lifted the second I read:

**MAGGIE:**

We’re on the way.

**ME:**

Great.

**MAGGIE:**

Do we need to pick up anything on the way?

**ME:**

Nope.

I got it covered.

**MAGGIE:**

Are you sure?

I could stop by the Dollar Store and grab some knock-off Twinkies.

**ME:**

Don't you dare!

**MAGGIE:**

Okay. Okay.

We'll be there in twenty.

**ME:**

Good deal.

Be careful.

I SHOVED MY PHONE BACK IN MY POCKET AND GOT BUSY getting dinner started. I decided to make them a pan of my special lasagna. It had always been a favorite with the



brothers, and I hoped Maggie and the kids would feel the same.

It wasn't long before I had the entire house smelling like fresh tomato sauce and sizzling garlic. I placed the pan of lasagna in the oven and rushed to the bedroom to change. As I pulled on my jeans, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and was surprised to find that I was actually smiling. It was at that moment that I realized just what an effect this woman was having on me.

I was a fucking goner, and it felt good.

Damn good.

## Maggie



“So, what are the rules?”

“No fighting, no name calling, no talking back, and no snooping around,” Samantha answered.

Nathan added, “And say thank you and clean up after ourselves.”

“Good.” My nerves were wreaking havoc on me, and they only got worse as we approached Ronin’s house. I wanted the kids to have a good time, but I didn’t want them to have too good of a time, especially at his expense. “And be respectful. This is Ronin’s home, and we are his guests.”

“Mom, chill,” Nathan huffed. “We know how to act.”

“Yeah, and none of that.” I motioned my hand in the air. “I don’t need you telling me to chill or to calm down—even if I need to. You got that?”

“Yes, ma’am. I got it.” When we pulled up into Ronin’s drive, Nathan leaned forward to get a better look and gasped, “Dang, this place is huge.”

He was right. Ronin’s house was rather large and very beautiful, and just seeing it brought butterflies to my stomach. Once I was parked, we grabbed our things and got out of the car. As we started up the steps, I glanced over at the kids, and their eyes were filled with both curiosity and excitement.

It meant the world to me that they were so excited about staying with Ronin. I couldn’t help but think it was a good sign. I knocked on the door, and it wasn’t long before Ronin

appeared with a big smile on his face. “Hey, guys. Come on in.”

With wide eyes, we all stepped into his house and took a quick glance around. All the natural tones and large windows made it the perfect mix of old and new. I don’t know what I was expecting, but I certainly wasn’t expecting something quite so stunning. I couldn’t hide my surprise when I gasped, “Wow. It’s so beautiful.”

“I’m glad you like it.” He motioned his head towards the stairs as he told the kids, “The guest rooms are upstairs. Why don’t you two go up and figure out which room you want...”

He didn’t even finish his sentence before they both bolted for the stairs. Their footsteps echoed through the house as they charged up the steps, and Ronin laughed when they each shouted their claims to one of the rooms. I shook my head and said, “I guess I better go up and put my things away, too.”

“Not a chance.” He reached over and took my bags from my hand. “You’ll be staying in my room with me.”

“But it’s kind of soon, don’t you think?”

“You got two smart kids, Maggie. They know what’s what.” He narrowed his eyes. “It’s only a big deal if you make it a big deal.”

“Okay, but if they ask what’s what, I’m going to let you explain it to them.”

“Deal.”

Smiling, he leaned forward and kissed me, then disappeared down the hall with my bags. When he returned, he took my hand in his and led me to the kitchen. It was twice the size of mine, with a large island and stainless-steel appliances. The walls were painted white, and the cabinets were a beautiful dark gray, which gave it a modern flare.

“Wow, Ronin. This kitchen is amazing.”

“It’s a work in progress.” He walked over and pulled a pan of lasagna from the stove. “Just like dinner.”

“Oh my, you went all out.”

“Well, yeah. Gotta do what I can to impress.” Ronin grabbed the Caesar salad from the fridge and carried it over to the table. “I thought I’d make us a fire after dinner and let the kids roast some marshmallows.”

“That sounds perfect.”

I helped him make the drinks, and then we called the kids to come down to eat. The rich aroma of lasagna and garlic bread enveloped us as we gathered around the dining table. I couldn’t help but smile as I watched Nathan and Samantha’s eyes light up when they saw that Ronin had made lasagna. It was one of their favorite meals, so I wasn’t surprised when they eagerly dove into their plates.

We talked and laughed throughout the entire meal, and it wasn’t long before all my nerves had subsided, and I was feeling completely at home with Ronin and his beautiful home. After we finished eating, the kids and I helped Ronin clear the table and load the dishwasher.

As soon as we were done, Nathan asked, “Are we still gonna do a fire?”

“Only if you and your sister will help me get it started.”

“Yeah, I’ll help.”

“Then, let’s get to it.” Ronin got up and grabbed a few wire coat hangers from the hall closet and a lighter from the drawer. “Give us a second to get the fire started.”

“What can I do?”

“Ummm.” Ronin opened the back door. “You could get us a couple of drinks.”

“You got it.”

Ronin and the kids went outside, and together, they started tossing wood into the fire pit. Once he had the flames rolling, Ronin and Nathan gathered a few chairs and started placing them around the pit. I took that as my cue to start grabbing the drinks and the two large bags of marshmallows he’d left on the counter.

I carried them outside and sat down next to Ronin. He handed each of the kids one of the hangers he'd unwound and told them, "Here you go. Roast away, but don't get too close to the fire."

The flames illuminated their faces as they placed a marshmallow on the end of the skewer and extended it over the fire. I watched them for a few minutes, then grabbed myself a hanger, poked it through the marshmallow, and held it over the flame. "I can't remember the last time I roasted marshmallows."

"It's been a while for me, too."

"We did some at Dad's last summer, but he had those gross marshmallows from the gas station."

"They weren't that bad," Samantha argued.

"They melted right off the stick."

"That's because you burned them." Samantha pointed to his marshmallow over the fire as she fussed, "Just like you're doing now."

"Oh, man." He quickly pulled it from the fire and started blowing on it. It was completely black and crispy. "What do I do with it?"

"Eat it," Ronin answered.

"No way. It's gross."

"You don't know what you're missing." Ronin reached over and grabbed the marshmallow from the end of his stick, then tossed it in his mouth with a smile. "Burnt is the only way to go."

"I wanna try a burnt one!"

Samantha took another marshmallow from the bag and stuck it right in the fire. Once it was engulfed in flames, she pulled it out and blew on it. Worried she might burn herself, Ronin warned, "Give it a minute to cool off first."

She waited a second, then popped it in her mouth. She chewed for a second, and it wasn't long before she winced and

started shaking her head. “Nope. I don’t like it.”

“It’s an acquired taste.” Ronin chuckled. “You’ll appreciate it more when you get older.”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

Samantha put another marshmallow on her skewer and placed it over the fire. She and Nathan ate a couple more marshmallows, but the excitement started to wear off. Noting the shift in mood, Ronin looked over to Nathan and asked, “Hey, man. What’s your high and low for the day?”

“My what?”

“Your high and low?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s something my dad used to do with my sister and me.” Ronin glanced over at me, then back to Samantha. “You tell your high or your good thing for the day and your low, which is something that was not so great.”

“Ah, okay. I got it.” Nathan thought for a minute, then answered, “I’d say my low was failing my science test today. It sucked, but everybody else failed, too.”

“This is the first I’ve heard about the test.”

“Everybody failed it, Mom.”

“I’m not worried about everybody else.”

“Any-way... I’d say my high was not having to go hunting with Dad.”

“Oh, yeah.” Maggie grimaced. “What did you tell him?”

“Just that we were going out of town.”

“Good.”

“Okay, Samantha,” Ronin interrupted. “It’s your turn. What’s your high/low?”

“Hmmm.” Her brows furrowed as she toyed with her skewer. “I don’t really have a low. It was an okay day, but if I had to name one bad thing, it’d be when Ms. Downy wouldn’t call on me in math today. I knew the answers and raised my

hand, but she wouldn't even look at me. It was like she was doing it on purpose, but whatever. It doesn't matter. My high was having lasagna for dinner. It was the bomb."

"I'm glad you liked it." Ronin turned to me as he said, "And what about your highs and lows?"

"Well, my low would be finding out that my kids had a not-so-great day today and that they didn't even mention it to me." I let out a breath, then added, "And my high would be right here and now, with all of you. It's been nice."

"I'm glad you've enjoyed it."

"What about yours?" Nathan asked Ronin. "You gonna tell us your high/low?"

"Sure." Ronin's smile faded as he started, "My low was pretty low today. I lost a good friend, and we had his funeral a few hours ago. It was tough."

"Oh, Ronin," I gasped. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"I know, and it's all good," Ronin let out a sigh. "He had a good run and will be remembered well. Can't ask for more than that. Besides, I've gotta pretty damn good high that's helped get me through it."

"Oh? And what's that?"

*"You."*

He cocked that sexy eyebrow, and it was all I could do to keep myself from going over and kissing him long and hard. But that wasn't going to happen—not after what happened the last time we were together. I had no choice but to keep my hands and mouth to myself.

I did my best to play it cool as I asked, "I'm your high?"

"You are." A sexy smirk crossed his face as he added, "I like having you here at my place. The kids, too. Hell, I might have to just keep you here."

"Oh, it's early yet," I snickered. "Let's see how you feel on Sunday."

"Yeah, we'll see."

I had to admit I was a little surprised. The night turned out better than I could've imagined, and it was clear from all their laughing and carrying on that the kids felt the same way.

We'd been sitting out by the fire for almost an hour when Nathan stood up and asked, "Can we go set up our PlayStations now?"

"Yeah, that's fine, but I don't want to hear any shouting." I glanced over at Samantha as I said, "And that goes for you, too, little Ms. Screecher."

"Yes, ma'am."

And just like that, the kids disappeared, and Ronin and I were left alone by the fire. It was the first time I'd had a chance to really look around, and it was truly a beautiful spot. The porch was slightly elevated, which gave a better view of the ocean. The moon was full, and the light shimmering on the waves beckoned me to come for a better look.

I stood and leaned over the railing. Ronin came over and stood next to me, and we both watched as the waves crashed against the rocks below. "It's so beautiful."

*"You're beautiful."*

I glanced up at him, and my heart nearly jumped out of my chest when I saw the way he was looking at me—like he'd never get enough of me. His hands slipped around my waist as he leaned towards me and pressed his lips firmly against mine. The kiss was hungry and full of desire as he pulled me closer. I wound my arms around his neck as his calloused fingertips roamed down the small of my back.

When he touched me, it was just him and me, making me forget about everything else—the doubts, the chaos, and everything in between faded into nothing. A low moan vibrated through my chest, and that's all it took for Ronin to pull away, breaking our embrace.

"Oh, no, you don't," Ronin snickered as he stepped back. "None of that."

"What do you mean?"



“You know damn well what I mean.” He motioned his hand between us. “You get me all worked up, and the next thing you know, we’re going at it.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“Fuck no,” he scoffed. “Fucking you is a high every day of the week.”

“Well, if that’s the case...”

I reached down and took hold of his hand, then led him into the house. I closed the door behind us and continued through the kitchen and down the hall to his bedroom. I didn’t know what had gotten into me. There was just something about him that had me thinking things I’d never thought before—very naughty, wicked things that had me wanting to try things I’d never tried before.

As I stood there before him, I’d never felt so alive, so sexy and carefree. I wasn’t just a mother; I was a seductress, and I had my sights solely set on him. His eyes locked on mine as I slowly dropped to my knees, reaching out for the waistband of his jeans. His eyes widened when I undid his jeans and started inching them down his hips.

“Maggie.”

A torturous groan vibrated through his chest when I took him in my hand and began to stroke up and down his hard, rigid shaft. His fingers clamped around the edge of the dresser, and his eyes shut when I brushed my tongue across the head of his cock.

“Fuck,” he mumbled as I took him deep in my mouth. I continued to stroke him slowly, with my fingers wound tightly around his cock, feeling him throb against my tongue. His fingers tangled in my hair as his hips thrust forward, guiding me to take him deeper. Seeing how his body responded to my touch gave me such a sense of power.

The thought of making this man lose control fueled my desire and made me want him even more. With just the twist of my hand, a guttural moan echoed through the room, and a pained expression crossed his face. I loved seeing him fall

apart by my touch, and I was shocked when I was suddenly yanked up from the floor and tossed onto the bed.

Without saying a word, he started to undress, and I took that as my cue to do the same. It was his turn to be in control, and he took full advantage. He made love to me long and hard, and it was a toe-curling, heavy panting time that left us both exhausted and wondrously sated.

I nestled into his side and rested my head on the crook of his arm. We lay there motionless for several minutes, trying to catch our breath. I'm not sure what spurred the thought. Maybe it was feeling the connection between us growing stronger, or maybe I just needed him to know how I felt. Either way, I looked up at him. "Ronin?"

"Um—hmm."

"I was thinking." I propped up on my elbow, so I could look at him as I said, "I don't know about you, but I think you and I have a good thing. And that scares me a little. No, that scares me a lot."

His voice was soft and low as he whispered, "Maggie."

"You don't have to say anything. I'd prefer that you didn't. I just wanted you to know that I'm happy."

"There it is." A smile swept across his handsome face. "I'm wearing on ya."

"And here I thought I was the one wearing on you."

"Oh, you are, baby. Without a doubt."

I curled into him a little closer, then closed my eyes and listened to the soothing sound of his breathing. I tried to fight it, but I was wiped and drifted off to sleep. I woke up the next morning in an empty bed with a note from Ronin on my pillow.

*GOOD MORNING, BEAUTIFUL.*

*The kids and I are down by the water.*

*There's coffee and toast in the kitchen.*

HE WAS RIGHT.

He was wearing on me—in all the right ways.

## Rooster



“So, what about you and Mom?”

“What do you mean?”

Nathan grimaced as he asked, “You like her, huh?”

“Your mom is an amazing lady.”

“That’s a yes.” Samantha smiled wide as she chimed in, “It’s pretty obvious. He smiles whenever he looks at her.”

“Is that right?”

“See?” She giggled. “He’s smiling right now, and we’re just talking about her.”

“Like I said, your mom is an amazing lady.” Nathan and Sam trailed beside me, their feet leaving imprints in the damp sand as we made our way down the coastline. “And I really like spending time with her.”

“You guys gonna get married?”

I could see that he was concerned, so I did my best not to take the question lightly. “I’ve got no idea what the future holds, but yeah, I could see myself hitched to your mom. That’s if she’d have me.”

“Would you guys live here?”

“I would hope we all would.” I stopped and turned to face him. “Your mom made it clear that you three were a package deal, and I was good with that. I still am, but I’m not looking to do anything until everyone’s ready, including your mother.”

“Does that mean I can have the room I’m staying in now?”

“If that’s the one you want.”

“Me, too?” Sam asked excitedly.

“Sure thing, kiddo.” I didn’t want us to get ahead of ourselves, so I added, “Consider those rooms yours any time you come.”

“Awesome.”

We continued walking and talking, and just before we headed back inside, Nathan stepped over to me with another one of his looks. “Mom said we’re going to your clubhouse tomorrow.”

“That’s the plan.”

“What’s it gonna be like?” Samantha asked. “Is it just a bunch of hairy guys and their bikes?”

“Hairy guys?”

“Well, yeah.” She motioned her hand towards my beard. “I mean, look at you. You’re pretty hairy.”

“Yeah, she’s got a point.”

“I got a beard, kid. That doesn’t make me hairy.”

“Don’t most bikers have beards?”

“Some do.” It was clear that neither of them knew anything about bikers, so I told them, “No two bikers are the same. The same goes for the clubs.”

“Some bad.”

“That’s right. Everybody is different, so you gotta find which one is best for you.”

“Did you do that with yours?”

“I did, and I learned real fast that it’s best not to judge a book by its cover.”

Samantha’s brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Some of the biggest, scariest looking dudes are some of the best guys you’ll ever meet. You just gotta take time to get

to know ‘em.” I gave Nathan a playful nudge. “That goes for the ladies, too. Just because they’re all dolled up doesn’t mean they’re one of the good ones.”

“I wish my dad knew that.” Nathan rolled his eyes. “Crissy is pretty, but that’s about it.”

They went on to tell me all about Crissy and how she was their father’s fiancé, and neither of them was a fan. I was glad that they felt like they could talk to me about it, but the last thing I wanted to do was add fuel to their fire. So, I did the only thing I could. I kept my trap shut and kept my two cents to myself.

When we got back to the house, we found Maggie had woken up, so the kids helped me grill up some hot dogs for lunch, and we all ate while we watched the big game in the living room. We’d just started to clean up when I got a message from Wrath telling me that I was needed at the clubhouse. As much as I hated to leave Maggie and the kids, I had no choice. Thankfully, Maggie was understanding and had no problem with me going.

By the time I got to the clubhouse, Torch, Q, and Wrath were waiting for me in the bar. I could tell by the look on their faces that they were about to hit me with something I didn’t want to hear. “What’s going on?”

“We got the new dishwasher, and when we installed it, the power went nuts. Lights were flickering, and the whole left wing went dark.”

“Probably an overloaded circuit.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“Then, why didn’t you fix it?”

“Cause I put in the dishwasher, and look what happened,” Torch answered. “Besides, you’re the electrical guy.”

“Yeah, whatever.” I started back to my truck as I told them, “I need to get my tools.”

Once I got everything I thought I’d need, I headed inside. When I got to the kitchen, I was hit with immediate

aggravation when I found it in complete disarray. Torch had shit everywhere, and the old dishwasher was still sitting in the middle of the room.

The overload could've happened for any number of reasons. I wasn't looking to rebuild the entire electrical system, so I decided to go with the easy route and tried to reduce the load. I started by unplugging some non-essential appliances that shared the same circuit. After I assessed the power distribution, I redirected the new dishwasher to a less burdened circuit.

Just as I'd hoped, it was enough to keep the dishwasher going without kicking the power off to anything else. I'd just started to put my stuff away when Wrath, Torch and Q came strolling into the kitchen. "You got it?"

"Yeah, you're all set." I glanced over the old dishwasher as I told him, "Have a couple of prospects carry this out to the dump and clean up this mess."

"Already on it."

"Good deal." I picked up my tool bag as I asked, "What did Prez decide about family day?"

"Not gonna happen. Not after what happened on the run," Wrath answered. "But he's not calling for a lockdown. Just wants us to continue to stay alert."

"Understood."

As soon as Wrath walked away, Torch nudged me and teased, "Shouldn't you be getting home to your girl?"

"Yeah, I'd be there now if you hadn't fucked up the dishwasher."

"Hey, that shit wasn't on me."

"Yeah, whatever you say, boss." I turned my attention to Q as I asked, "What do you and Jules have going on tonight?"

"Nothing much," Q answered. "We'll probably go out and grab a bite to eat. Maybe stop by here and see what's going on."

“What about Savage? You got any idea what he’s got going on?”

“He said something about running by her folks’ place to help with one of her mother’s projects first, then they’re supposed to come back here to meet up with us.”

“Okay, good deal.”

“Why? What do you have going on?”

“I was thinking of bringing Maggie and the kids by so they could check out the place.”

“You didn’t ask what I was gonna be doing,” Torch asked, sounding wounded. “What’s up with that?”

“I know what you’ll be doing,” I answered. “It’s Saturday night. You’ll be here, soused, and looking to get laid.”

“Touché.”

“I’ll see you boys tonight.”

“Later.”

I went back out to my truck and groaned when I saw that I’d been gone for almost two hours. I was worried that Maggie would be pissed, but when I got back to the house, she seemed perfectly content. She was in the living room, curled up on the sofa, watching a movie, and the kids were upstairs doing their own thing. As soon as she spotted me coming towards her, she sat up and said, “You’re back.”

“I am.”

“How did it go?”

“It went.”

I lifted her legs, then sat down at the end of the sofa. As soon as I started to rub her feet, she settled back on the sofa with a smile. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“I don’t know.” I kept massaging. “Is it working?”

“As a matter of fact, it is.”

I rubbed a little longer, and it wasn’t long before she was a puddle in my hands. Her eyes were closed, and she was



perfectly relaxed. I figured now was as good a time as any to tell her, “There’s been a change in plans with family day.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, it’s been postponed.”

“Oh, man,” she mumbled. “That’s too bad. I was looking forward to going.”

“Good, ‘cause I was thinking we might run by there tonight.”

Her eyes flew open as she gasped, “Ummm, what?”

“Torch and a couple of the brothers are gonna be there, and I thought we’d just stop by for a bit.”

“So, it would be just a couple of the guys?”

“And their ol’ ladies.”

“What about the kids? What will they do?”

“Oh, there’s plenty for them to do. There’s a family room full of TVs and pool tables. Trust me. They’ll love it.”

“Okay, sounds good to me.” She sounded a little uneasy when she asked, “What time are we heading over?”

“There’s no rush. I figured we’d have dinner first.”

“So, I can finish my movie?”

“Absolutely.”

A sigh of relief slipped through her lips as she nestled back into her spot. We finished her movie, and when it was over, I fried up some pork chops and made a batch of homemade mashed potatoes. Maggie seemed cool as a cucumber all through dinner, but when it came time to get ready, she went off the rails.

“I don’t know.” She held a sweater up to her chest. “I’m afraid I’ll get hot, but it’s pretty cold outside.”

“Yeah, the sweater would be good, but you could always wear what you’ve got on.”

“I’m not wearing sweatpants to the clubhouse!”

I sat on the bed and watched with amusement as Maggie sorted through her suitcase. In a blink, my bedroom became a flurry of fabric as she tossed one outfit after the other onto the floor. I couldn't help but chuckle at her indecision. She looked up at me with a scowl. "It's not funny, Ronin."

I appreciated her effort to make a good impression on my brothers, but she had nothing to worry about. I knew there would be no convincing her of that, so I just kept my mouth shut and watched the show. After several outfit changes, she finally settled on a pair of distressed jeans with a fitted sweater and boots, and she looked amazing. Maggie was still unsure and shot me a hesitant glance, seeking reassurance. "You look great, babe."

"Okay, then let's do this."

With that, we gathered the kids and headed out to my truck. Once we were all loaded up, I drove us over to the clubhouse. The kids were talking back and forth the entire way, but the truck fell silent the second we pulled up to the gate. They shared a few apprehensive glances as they looked up at the tall, imposing fence.

I couldn't blame them for being uneasy. There was an air of mystery and intimidation to the place, and having a guard at the entrance gave it an extra layer of formidability. Nathan's eyes were wide as he leaned in for a better look. "Holy shit. This place is ginormous."

"Nathan!" Maggie scolded. "Language."

"Sorry, but geez."

"It looks bigger than it is." I parked, then opened my door as I told them, "Come on. I'll show you around."

Maggie was visibly shaken as she nodded and opened her door. Without saying a word, she and the kids followed me up to the door. Knowing they were all a little nervous, I stopped and asked, "Remember when I said not to judge a book by its cover?"

Samantha and Nathan nodded.

"Well, this is one of those times."

I opened the door, and their eyes were filled with intrigue as they stepped inside. I took them down the hall to my room first. It was small, with just a bed and dresser, so the tour didn't take long. From there, I led them down to the kitchen and family room. Just as I expected, the kids were stoked to see all the TVs and pool tables. Nathan made a beeline for the dart board as he gasped, "This place is awesome."

"I thought you would like it."

"Can we hang out in here for a little while?"

"Absolutely." I glanced over to Maggie as I added, "That's if it's okay with your mother."

"You promise to stay right here and not to wander?"

"Yes, ma'am," they both answered.

"Nathan, do you have your cell phone?" When he nodded, she told him, "Okay, just call me if you need anything."

"Yes, ma'am."

"The kitchen is to your left. Help yourself to anything in the fridge, and if you need either of us, we'll be down at the bar... just down the hall on the right."

By then, Samantha was racking the balls for a game of pool, and Nathan was searching for a cue stick. But they both managed to answer, "Yes, sir."

Maggie hesitated for a moment but eventually looked up at me and said, "I think they're good."

"Yeah, I think so too, but I'll come back in a bit to check on them."

"Okay, sounds good."

We both started down the hall and the second we stepped into the bar, Torch lifted his beer and said, "There he is. I was beginning to think you guys weren't gonna make it."

"Somebody had a hard time figuring out what to wear."

"Well, I don't know if I would've gone with that ugly ass shirt, but the jeans and boots are alright."

“Fuck off, Torch.” I slipped my hand around her back, easing her forward. “This is Maggie. And Maggie, this is Torch, Q, and Savage.”

“It’s really nice to meet you.”

“You, too.”

Q gave her the once over, then asked, “So, you’re Rooster’s ol’ lady, huh?”

“I really don’t know how all that works.” Maggie glanced over at me with a smile. “But yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“Hmmm.” Q cocked his brow. “You look like a smart girl. I’d think you’d know better than to get tangled up with this guy.”

“I don’t know about that,” Maggie giggled with a shrug. “I happen to think *he’s* pretty great.”

“Ah, give it some time,” Q chuckled.

“Come on, brother. Don’t do me like that.”

“Awe, she knows I’m just messing around.”

Before he had a chance to say anything more, Londyn and Jules came over and introduced themselves. They barely said two words before they snatched her up and took her over to their table. They got her a drink, and in no time, the trio was carrying on like old friends. Seeing that she was good, I grabbed myself a beer and sat down with the guys.

“Damn, brother.” Torch motioned his head over to Maggie and the other girls. “You did good.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“She seems to be fittin’ right in.”

“Seems so.” I glanced over my shoulder, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride as I watched Maggie laugh at something one of the ol’ ladies had said. “I can’t say I’m surprised. She has a way with folks.”

“So, what’s her story?”

“Not much to tell. She’s divorced, has two kids, and works at a salon on the square.”

“And you met at the movies?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Savage said something, but I didn’t hear him. My focus was still on Maggie. Her face was overly animated, and I let out a chuckle when I realized she was telling Londyn and Jules about Samantha and the burnt marshmallows. I continued to enjoy the show even after I heard Savage tease, “Ah, man. He’s got it bad.”

He was right.

I did have it bad, and I was working hard to get to her the way she’d gotten to me. I was doing pretty well until Beckett walked in with Addison and Michele, and as usual, they were both scantily dressed and looking for a good time. They trailed behind Beckett as he meandered over to the counter and sat down next to Torch.

For the first night in days, he seemed to be doing okay. I’d hoped the girls would stick with him, but Addison had other plans. Her eyes locked on mine, and I knew she was about to head my way. Before I could stop her, she was by my side and had her arm around my neck. “Hey, Roost. How’s it going?”

“It’d be going better if you’d go back over and hang with Beck.”

“But I thought we could...”

“Not interested, Addy.” I kept my voice low and stern. “Just go.”

“Okay, suit yourself.”

Disappointment marked her face as she turned and headed back over to Beckett. When I was certain that she’d gotten the point, I glanced over at Maggie and found her glaring at me with a look of heartbreak in her eyes. Damn. I’d tried to put the fire out, but the damage had already been done.

## Maggie



Ronin told me all about his brothers and what to expect at the club, but the second I walked through the front door, I forgot everything he'd said. Nothing was like I'd imagined it would be, and I was a bit overwhelmed. And then, I met a couple of the guys and quickly realized I had no reason to be so nervous. Things got even better when Londyn and Jules came over and asked me to have a drink with them.

They were wonderful. We hit it off right from the start. They told me all about their first time at the club, and I told them about how Ronin and I had met and our weekend at his place. It was all going so well until I saw that woman pawing all over Ronin. The casual banter between Ronin and the other woman was brief, but it was enough to leave me with a knot in my stomach.

He sent her away, but there was something about her that didn't sit well with me. I leaned over to Jules and whispered, "Who's the girl at the bar?"

"Oh, that's just Addison," she answered nonchalantly. "She's one of the hang-arounds."

"A hang-around?"

"Rooster didn't tell you about them?"

"Afraid not."

"Well, they're relatively harmless. They just hang around the club and help out with parties and stuff."

"And stuff?"

“They ah... They take up the slack whenever needed,” Londyn answered.

“So, they hook up with the guys.”

“From time to time, but that stops when an ol’ lady comes into play.” Jules glanced over at the girls as she added, “They respect our boundaries, and we respect theirs.”

“You do that knowing they’ve been with your guys.”

“That was before us.”

I understood what they were saying. It made sense and all that, but it did little to help the growing knot in my stomach. Ronin must’ve noticed that something was up because he was watching me like a hawk. I needed a breath of air, so I stood and asked, “Where are the restrooms?”

“Right around the corner.”

“Thanks.”

I quickly skirted around the table and made my way to the bathroom. I went in and looked at myself in the mirror, then fussed at myself for getting so worked up. I tried to convince myself that it was nothing, but I’d been in this situation before. Chad’s indiscretions destroyed us, destroyed me, and I wasn’t going to let it happen again. I couldn’t.

With a newfound resolve, I stepped out of the bathroom and plowed right into Ronin’s chest. Concern marked his face as he asked, “You okay?”

“Hang arounds?”

“I thought you might be upset about that.” He grimaced. “I should’ve told you about them earlier.”

“Yes, you should have.” I felt a mix of hurt and frustration as I said, “I thought we had an understanding.”

“We did. We do.” Ronin sighed. “I just wasn’t thinking. Those girls don’t mean anything to me. They’re just here, and...”

“So, you’ve never been with any of them?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Oh, God.”

“Come on, Maggie. You know that was before you.” He placed his hands on my hips, easing me closer. “You’re the one I want. You gotta know that.”

I didn’t want it to bother me that he’d been with those girls, but it did. In fact, it bothered me a lot. I knew it was ridiculous. I was a grown woman with a past of my own. I’d even had children with another man, and yet, I had the audacity to be jealous of some hookup that didn’t mean anything to either of them.

My eyes drifted to the floor as I whispered, “I know it’s crazy for me to be jealous over something that happened in your past, but...”

“*Jealous, hmmm...*” Ronin smirked. “That means you like me.”

“Maybe just a little.”

His eyes locked on mine as his mouth crashed down on mine, kissing me with a passion like I’d never known. My entire body tingled with desire, and it was clear he was feeling the same sensation when his fingers dug into my hips, pulling me closer to him. The bristles of his beard lightly scratched against my skin as he took complete control. A light moan vibrated through my chest as my hands began to roam over his chest, gliding over the bulging muscles of his abdomen. I wanted to touch his bare skin and feel his body pressed against mine, but this wasn’t the time or the place.

I slowly brought my hands up to his chest and took a step back, breaking free from our embrace. We both stood there gazing at one another. Neither of us spoke. We knew what that kiss had meant. The feelings we’d been experiencing were mutual, and as much as we wanted to act on them, they would have to wait—at least for now.

He ran his hand over his beard as he muttered, “I think it’s time for us to go.”

“I think you might be right.”



Ronin took my hand in his and led me back out to the bar. We both said our goodbyes to the group and after assuring them all that I would come back soon, we went to get the kids from the playroom. When we walked in, they were in the midst of a heated dart game, and if Nathan's facial expression was any indication, Samantha was winning.

"Okay, kids. It's time to go."

"What?" Nathan whined. "Why? We're in the middle of a game!"

"I see that, but it's getting late, and we have a busy day tomorrow."

"Guess that makes you a *lo-ser*," Samantha goaded.

"Samantha," I scolded. "Don't start no mess, and there won't be no mess."

"Yes, ma'am."

She rolled her eyes, and they both pouted as we made our way out of the clubhouse. As soon as we got back in the truck, Nathan leaned up front and said, "Your clubhouse is badass."

"Glad you liked it." Ronin glanced over at me, then told him, "But watch that language."

"Yes, sir."

Nathan sat back with a smile, and it wasn't long before he and Samantha put the dart game behind them and were back to their old selves. When we got back to Ronin's, the kids disappeared into their rooms, and Ronin and I slipped down the hall to finish what we'd started at the clubhouse. And, like always, it was incredible, and I forgot all my doubts and insecurities.

The next morning, Ronin made us breakfast, and then we all said our goodbyes. The kids went to put their things in the car, and I used the opportunity to steal one last kiss. "I had a great time this weekend."

"Right back at ya." He leaned in and gave me the kiss I was hoping for, then said, "Call me later."

“Sure thing.” As I started for my car, I told him, “Try not to get into too much trouble today.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I left Ronin’s and went straight home. I had a mountain of laundry to tend to, and I needed to get some groceries. I wasn’t looking forward to it either, but thankfully, I had the entire day to get it done and I could take my time. And that’s exactly what I did.

I didn’t even fix dinner until almost eight, and there wasn’t much to it. Just a couple of sandwiches and some soup. Once the kids ate, they finished up some homework and went to bed. After a quick call to Ronin, I did the same. The next morning, I got the kids off to school and headed to the salon.

As soon as I arrived, I unlocked the door and headed inside to get ready for a busy Monday. Sunlight streamed through the windows, casting a soft glow on the freshly swept floors. I flipped the sign to “Open” and started a pot of coffee. Before going over to my station, I turned on some soft background music and took a moment to savor the calm before the crazy began.

I’d just finished organizing my tools when the front door chimed, and Keeley walked in with Ryan. Keeley dropped her purse on the counter and gasped, “You aren’t going to believe this!”

“What?”

“I was going to tell her,” Ryan fussed.

“Okay, then tell her!”

“I don’t care who tells me. Just spill it!”

“I found the dress!” Ryan announced, jumping up and down. “It’s so perfect!”

“You’re kidding! I have to see it!”

“Well, I don’t actually have it. They had to order it.” Ryan grabbed her phone from her purse. “But I have a picture.”

She scampered over and showed me the picture of the dress she'd ordered, and it was really something. "Wow, Ryan. It's gorgeous."

"Isn't it?" Ryan sounded like she was on cloud nine. "I bet we went to twenty different stores before we stumbled across it. Of course, it was two sizes too big, but they special ordered one in my size and it should be here by the end of the week."

"That's so exciting!"

"Yes! It makes this whole wedding thing seem so real."

"It really does. So, what's next?"

"She's gotta make a decision about the reception," Keeley answered. "Do they use tents or no tents?"

Our conversation was cut short when Keeley's client came in, and mine followed quickly after. We chatted between colors and cuts, but there was no final decision made on the tents. We were too busy to really get into it, especially me. It seemed I was booked for every hour on the hour, and I barely had time to look up.

When it came time to close, I was still finishing up a client, so I told Keeley, "You guys go ahead. I'll lock up."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I've got it."

They both slipped out, and I got back to work on my client's hair. It was just a cut and touch-up, so thankfully, it didn't take too long. Once I finished, she quickly paid and left me alone to close up for the night. I was busy sweeping when the front door opened. I turned, and I was surprised to find Chad standing at the front counter.

"Chad." My heart started to race with panic. "What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk."

"Not like this, we don't. You call first and let me know that you're stopping by. You don't just come in here unannounced."

“I tried calling, but you didn’t answer.” His cheeks were growing red with anger, and his brows were doing that crinkly thing they did when he was about to go off. I was tired and not in the mood for an argument, so I softened my tone as I told him, “I’m sorry. We’ve been really busy today, and I haven’t had a chance to check my messages.”

“Maybe you wouldn’t be so busy if you didn’t spend so much time with your new boyfriend.”

“What?”

“I know that’s where you were this weekend.”

“Yeah, and what of it?” I snapped. “Nathan told you we wouldn’t be home.”

The vein in the side of his neck started to pulse as he roared, “You kept my kid from me so you could go shack up with your new biker boyfriend!”

“I didn’t keep him from you. Nathan made the choice not to go.” I’d never worried about Chad physically hurting me, but that didn’t mean that I wasn’t nervous about being there alone with him. “Chad, you need to go. This isn’t the time or the place for this.”

“That wouldn’t be a problem if you ever answered your damn phone.”

“I already told you. I was busy with work.”

“Nothing ever changes! You’ve always got some damn excuse!” He took a charging step towards me and pointed his finger in my face as he snarled, “If you think I’m gonna let you whore around in front of our kids, you’ve got another thing coming!”

“Dating is not whoring around.”

“You’re the one dating. Not the kids!”

“You mean like you’ve done for the past year and a half?” I scoffed. “You’ve got some nerve to say anything to me after all the things you’ve done.”

“Don’t bring Crissy into this,” he warned. “What happened between us is nothing like this!”

“You are right! It is completely different. I’m not cheating on you,” I shouted. “We were divorced for months before I ever even thought about dating. So, take your stupid judgements and get the hell out of my salon.”

“This conversation isn’t over.”

“You’ve got two seconds to get out of here, or I’m calling the cops,” I warned. “Better yet, *I’m calling him.*”

Chad shook his head with disgust. “You’re better than this, Maggie.”

“Just go, Chad.”

He glared at me for a moment longer, then huffed and walked out. And just like that, a good day was shot to hell. It wasn’t the first time Chad had ruined a perfectly decent day, and I feared it wouldn’t be the last.

## Rooster



“Did you get the text?”

“No.” We were finishing up at the construction site, and I was busy loading my tools as I asked, “What text?”

“Prez has called us into church.”

“Oh, okay. Any idea why?”

Wrath cocked his brow. “I have my ideas.”

I knew Wrath well enough to know that it wasn't going to be a good meeting, and my shit day was about to get even shittier. Not that it mattered. Prez had called us in, and I was going. End of story.

By the time Wrath and I got to the clubhouse, the rest of the brothers were there and had already gathered in the conference room—everyone except Bones and Big. They were nowhere in sight, which left me with an uneasy feeling as I took my spot at the table. As soon as Wrath and I were seated, Prez brought the meeting to order.

“As you all know, we ran into some trouble with the California Reapers. I brought you here to let you know that the problem has been handled.”

He cleared his throat as he reached for the remote and turned on the TV. Within seconds, a warehouse appeared, and it was completely engulfed in flames, with thick smoke billowing into the night sky. We all watched in silence as the camera circled the building, making it clear that the entire place was ablaze.

Prez didn't have to say. We all knew it was the Reapers' clubhouse, and that was enough to send a chill down our spine. But then, we saw the chains on the doors. The Reapers were inside and had been totally unsuspecting when the fire started. The flames flickered, casting eerie shadows on nearby structures, and as we continued to sit there watching, an eerie unease started to sink in.

The Reapers had gotten what was coming, but the realization that we could have a similar fate ignited a sense of vulnerability among the brothers—a vulnerability I didn't like.

Not one fucking bit.

When he was certain that we'd seen enough, Prez cut the TV and said, "This might seem a bit extreme, and it is. But they'd gathered there to initiate their plan to come here and take us down."

"We all knew that was coming."

"Exactly, and we had to send a message to everyone on Bruton's list that if you fuck around with us, there will be repercussions. We aren't here to play fucking games."

"What about the buyer?" Wrath asked. "Has he been dealt with?"

"We're still working on him," Cotton answered, "He's gone underground. Bones and Big are doing what they can to track him down, so rest assured, we will find him, and he will be dealt with."

"Any idea what you'll do?"

Cotton glanced over at Prez and then back to Wrath. "We have a couple of ideas we are playing with, but some deciding factors will come into play when we find him."

"What kind of deciding factors?"

"It seems that we aren't the only ones looking for him." Prez leaned back in his chair as he explained, "Bauco crossed a line with his predecessor, Cardelli."

"Our first shipment guy?"

“The one and only.” Prez was quick to add, “He’s not a man you want to get on your bad side.”

“So, what does that mean for us?”

“I’m not sure,” Prez confessed. “Cardelli won’t like it, but we really need to be the ones to find Bauco first. We have a point to make, and we can’t do that if Cardelli gets to him before we do.”

“And when we do?”

“Grant will step in and handle things from there.”

I wanted to ask what Grant planned to do with him, but I didn’t get the chance. The conference door flew open, and Bones walked in with Big. “We got him.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, he’s in Seattle.” Bones walked over and typed something on the computer. Seconds later, Bauco’s face came up on the screen. “He’s at the penthouse at the Four Seasons. He has his entire crew with him, and if I had to guess, I would say they’re making their way to us.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I sent Grant everything I found. I also cut off Bauco’s financials, so hopefully that will slow him down a bit.”

“I wouldn’t count on that.” Prez turned to Wrath as he said, “You and Savage need to get over there and keep an eye on him. If he makes a move, I need to know about it.”

“You got it.”

They both stood and made their way out of the room. Once they were gone, Prez turned his attention back to us. “We’re coming around the bend, boys. It won’t be long before we can put this mess behind us.”

“A man can hope,” Smokey grumbled.

“Hell, isn’t that the truth.” Prez shook his head and sighed. “It’s getting late. You boys head out but stay close to your phones. I want to be able to reach you if I need ya.”



“Understood.”

Prez dismissed church, and one by one, the brothers started to file out of the room. When we got outside, Torch and Q followed me out to the truck. Torch looked torn as he asked, “Where you running off to?”

“Heading to the house. I’m wiped.”

“I hear ya. It’s definitely been a long one.” Torch scratched his beard. “What do you think about this Bauco bullshit?”

“I don’t know. Just curious to see what Grant’s gonna do to him.”

“Got no idea, but he’s gonna have to be creative. The Four Seasons is a busy place. Lots of eyes.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” I hadn’t forgotten about how he’d handled the Stingers. Blowing up that entire block was bad, and after seeing what he’d just done to the Reapers, I couldn’t help but wonder just how far this guy would go. “He’s looking to make an impression, and I got a feeling he’s willing to do anything necessary to make that happen.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Q shook his head. “Honestly, I don’t give a fuck what he does. I’m just ready for him to do it and put an end to this bullshit.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” I opened my truck door as I told them, “I’m gonna hit it. Give me a shout if you hear anything.”

“Will do.”

I left the clubhouse thinking the ride home might help to clear my head and ease the unsettled feeling that lingered in the air. Sadly, it didn’t.

The night was too quiet and did little to distract me from the weight bearing down on my shoulders. There was so much going on with the club and the brothers, and it left me feeling like I had no control over what was coming. That wasn’t a good feeling.

I turned a corner, and as I started around the square, I spotted Maggie’s salon. The lights were on, and her GMC was parked out front. She usually didn’t work this late, so I decided

to stop by and make sure everything was okay. I parked and made my way up to the door. I knocked, and Maggie whipped around with a start.

When she saw that it was me, she let out a visible breath of relief and walked over to unlock the door. As soon as she opened it, she smiled and said, “Hey, what are you doing here?”

“Saw your light was on and wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“I am now.”

“What do you mean? Did something happen?”

“Chad stopped by here.” She closed the door behind me as she explained, “He was upset about the weekend.”

“What about it?”

“Who knows? He was just mouthing.” She wouldn’t even look at me as she went over and collected her purse and keys. “He’ll get over it.”

“What was he mouthing about?”

Maggie stopped and looked up at me as she said, “It doesn’t matter. It was...”

“Maggie.”

“Okay, but honestly, it’s not that big of a deal.”

She leaned against the front counter as she recounted the disturbing encounter with her ex. Not only did he show up at her place of work unannounced, but he came after hours when she was alone, and that enraged me. Sensing my building fury, she tried to diffuse the situation.

“He knows things are getting serious between the two of us, and he’s struggling with it.”

“That doesn’t give him the right to come in here and give you a hard time.”

“I know, but...”

“Don’t make excuses for him, Maggie.” Today was not the day. I was tired and on edge, and just the thought of that asshole giving Maggie a hard time had me ready to blow. “He doesn’t deserve them.”

“I know. You’re right. He shouldn’t have come here, but there’s nothing I can do about it now.”

“Maybe not, but I can.”

“What?” Her eyes widened with panic. “No. I don’t... you don’t... Just leave it, Ronin. I don’t want you getting in the middle of all this.”

“I already am.” I motioned my head towards the door as I told her, “Now, lock up and get home to the kids.”

“But what are you going to do?”

“This is where that trust comes into play.”

“I trust you, Ronin. It’s Chad that I don’t trust.”

“I can handle him. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“And I can’t talk you out of it?”

“Afraid not.”

She shook her head and grabbed her things. I waited for her to lock the door before walking her out to her car. “You heading on home?”

“Yeah, I’ve gotta make dinner and help Samantha with a project for school.”

“Then you best get going.”

I gave her a quick kiss goodbye as she opened her door and got inside. “You’ll call me later?”

“You know I will.”

She nodded, then started the engine and pulled out of her parking spot. As soon as she pulled off, I got in my truck and sent Bones a message asking for Chad’s address. A few minutes later, he texted me back, and I plugged in the location on my GPS. My hands gripped the steering wheel, and my

knuckles were white with anger as I sped toward Chad's house.

I couldn't stop thinking about him being in that salon with Maggie, yelling at her about spending the weekend with me. It was bullshit. The guy had no claim to her, and it pissed me off that the arrogant prick thought he did. I was determined to set the score right—one way or another.

When I got to the address Bones had sent, I parked and charged up to the front door. I knocked, and seconds later, it eased open, and Chad appeared. It was clear from his expression that he was taken aback by my presence, but he tried to appear unbothered as he asked, "Can I help you with something?"

"That depends... Are you Chad?"

"Yeah, that's me." He rolled his eyes with disgust. "So, you're the new boyfriend."

"The name's Ronin." I had to fight the urge to punch that fucking smug look on his face as I said, "Maggie told me all about your little conversation at the salon."

"That was between us."

"Well, now it's between you and me," I snarled.

Chad tried to put on a brave front but stumbled over words as he replied, "It was nothing. You know Maggie. She exaggerates everything."

"You coming into her salon and yelling at her isn't nothing!"

"She can whore around with whomever she wants, but she can't do it with my kids around!"

The words had barely left his mouth when I was on him. I fisted his collar in my hand, nearly choking him as I pulled him close. "You had your chance with her and fucked it up. You two are done. You made sure of that."

"She's my..."

“She’s nothing to you!” I interrupted. “She has her own life now. You have no say in what she does or who she does it with. You got that?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“And if you have an issue with what’s going on with the kids, handle it like a man, but no more disrespecting her. Because if you do it again, our encounter won’t be so friendly.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say.”

Fuck. I really wanted to punch this guy, but the thought of it hurting Samantha or Nathan had me releasing his collar. I glared at him a moment longer, turned and headed back for my truck. “Until next time.”

I’d like to say that I felt better when I left Chad’s place, but I didn’t. I was still wound up and struggling to focus. There was only one thing that would set me straight, and that was Maggie. Unfortunately for me, she had her own thing going on, so I was on my own.

Damn.

It was going to be a long night.

## Maggie



“I can’t believe he said that!”

“I know. He’s such a narcissistic asshole.” I laid back on the sofa as I told my mother, “He doesn’t even see that what he does is wrong.”

“He’s always been that way, sweetheart.” I could hear the torment in her voice as she said, “I can still remember the day you two were married, and Jeanne and Roger gave him that envelope of money as your wedding gift. He jerked it right out of Roger’s hand and stuck it in his coat pocket. I know you never saw a dime of that money.”

“No, I had no idea they’d given it to us.” It wasn’t the first time I’d heard that story, but like the times before, it added fuel to the fire. “He knew I was writing thank you notes and never even mentioned that they’d give that to us.”

“And when your brother was so sick, and I’d been with him for all those weeks. I finally got to come by to see the kids, and he didn’t even get up from his chair to say hello to me, and he certainly never asked how your brother was doing.”

“I know. That was so rude and thoughtless of him.”

“He never much cared for us, and I had no idea why.”

“He knew he wasn’t treating your daughter right and was ashamed.”

“I don’t know.” Her tone turned to annoyance as she added, “I think he thought he was too good for us.”

“I have no idea why he would ever think that. You and Dad are wonderful and have done very well for yourselves.”

“Well, we aren’t as wealthy as his parents.”

“Money isn’t everything, Mom.”

“You might need to remind him of that.”

“There wouldn’t be a point,” I scoffed. “He thinks he’s right about everything.”

“I’m so glad you don’t have to deal with him anymore.”

“I wish that were true, but as long as the kids are young, I’ll be dealing with him all the time.”

“Yes, but you have to set some boundaries and make him stick to them,” Mom pushed. “He shouldn’t call or expect to talk to you unless it has something to do with the kids. And he certainly has no business coming into your place of work, especially when you are alone.”

“I have a feeling that’s not going to happen again any time soon.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Ronin went to talk to him.”

“He did!” Mom gasped. “What did he say?”

“I have no idea. He hasn’t called to tell me about it yet.” I glanced over at the clock, and my chest tightened when I saw it was almost nine. I’d been so busy helping Samantha with her project that I hadn’t realized that it had gotten so late. It had been at least three hours since I left the shop, and I still hadn’t heard from him. Fearing that something might’ve happened, I told her, “I should probably call and check on him.”

“I certainly would because you never know what Chad will do.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” she fussed. “I need to know tonight if everything’s okay.”

“I’ll text you as soon as I know something.”

“Okay. I hope everything’s okay.”

“Me, too.”

As soon as I hung up, I dialed Ronin’s number and let it ring numerous times, but he never answered. I called a second time, and again, no answer. I needed to know that he was okay, so I sent him a text.

**ME:**

Hey.

Are you okay?”

I WAITED AND WAITED, BUT NO RESPONSE.

Thinking he might be in bed or driving home, I decided to give him a few minutes and went to my room to change into my pajamas. As I started down the hall, I heard Nathan talking, and there was something about his tone that brought me to an immediate halt.

I put my ear closer to the door and listened as he said, “I don’t know, Dad. I think he’s a pretty cool guy.”

There was a long pause, and then Nathan whined, “But I don’t want to live over there, Dad, and neither does Samantha.”

I couldn’t believe it.

The asshole was trying to manipulate the kids into moving in with him—even though I knew damn well he didn’t really want them there. He was too busy with his new fiancé and his fancy job to care about where the kids lived. He was just trying to hurt me, but I wasn’t going to give him that satisfaction.

Nathan sounded truly distraught as he muttered, “Don’t do this, Dad.”



Unable to hold back my anger, I opened the door and found Nathan sitting on his bed, and he looked to be on the verge of tears. And that angered me even more. I extended my hand as I demanded, “Give me the phone.”

“It’s Dad.”

“I know. Now, give me the phone.”

Nathan looked horrified when I took the phone from his hand and stepped out into the hall. I kept my voice low as I hissed, “You have some nerve. I can’t believe you would try to pit the kids against me.”

“I’m just looking out for *my kids*. Clearly, you aren’t.”

“I’m the only one who looks out for them!” Fearing the kids would hear me, I darted down the hall to my room and closed the door. “I’m the one who feeds them, clothes them, takes them to school and all their sports. I’m the one who takes them to the doctor and looks after them when they’re sick.”

“I would do the same if they were here with me.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! You don’t even buy them shoes when they need them!”

“My kids don’t want for anything!”

“You’re right. They don’t! And that’s because I make sure they don’t! It has nothing to do with you!” I snapped. “And just to make things clear, they aren’t your kids. They’re our kids!”

“I gave you a chance to come back to me, Mags. I told you that you were the love of my life, and I meant that. I really did. But you chose to throw those words in my face and started fucking around with that asshole biker. And if that wasn’t enough, you had the nerve to send him here to fight your battles for you.”

“I didn’t send him, Chad. He went there on his own.”

“I don’t care why he came! He should’ve kept his nose out of my fucking business, and the fact that he didn’t is a decision that will cost you both!”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

I waited for an answer, but there was none. The line had gone dead, and I was left with a dull ache in my chest.

I stared down at the screen, and for a moment, I considered calling him back, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. He was mad and embarrassed, and he needed time to cool off. I had Nathan's phone, so I went back to his room and tossed it on his bed. “Good night, buddy.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yes, sweetie. Everything is fine.”

“It didn't sound that way.” Worry filled his eyes as he said, “Dad was pretty pissed.”

“He'll get over it.”

“But what if he doesn't? What if he keeps pushing, and me and Sam have to go live with him.”

“That's not going to happen, Nathan. I won't let it.”

“But how can you stop it?”

“I've gotten this far, haven't I?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“And now, we have a little help.” I leaned down and gave him a kiss on the forehead. “We're gonna be okay.”

“Okay.” I started for the door but didn't get far before Nathan said, “Mom...”

“Yeah?”

My precious son had the sweetest look on his face as he told me, “I love you.”

“Oh, honey. I love you, too.” I gave him a smile and said, “Now, get to bed. It's getting late.”

He nodded and started easing back his covers. Once he was settled, I continued out of the room and closed the door. “Goodnight.”

“Night.”

I stepped down the hall and checked in on Samantha, and as I'd hoped, she was already fast asleep. I turned out her light and closed the door before heading down the hall. I was ready to put the day behind me, but I still hadn't heard back from Ronin and there was no way I could sleep until I did.

It was that thought that had me going over to my phone.

I brought up my last message to Ronin and grumbled when I found it was still unanswered. I hadn't had the greatest day, and I was struggling to keep from completely losing it. My patience was wearing thin, which is why my message was a little more abrupt than I intended.

**ME:**

Seriously?

You can't answer a simple text.

How hard is that?

I'm sitting here out of my mind with worry, and you can't reply?

**RONIN:**

In the middle of something.

I'll give you a shout later.

**MAGGIE:**

I just wanted to know that you are okay.

I'm going to bed.

FEELING EVEN MORE FRUSTRATED, I TOSSED MY PHONE BACK on the bedside table and crawled into bed. I closed my eyes and tried to force myself to sleep, but sleep never came—at least, not in the way I'd hoped. I tossed and turned, and when I

woke up the next morning, I could feel in my bones that it was going to be a long day.

I should've just gone back to bed.

If only...

## Rooster



I was on my way to the house when Prez called and told me to get to the city. Grant was ready to make a move on Bauco, and they needed a hand to put his plan into action. When I got to the Four Seasons, Savage and Wrath were waiting for me out front. Neither of them had on their cuts. They didn't want to take a chance on being recognized, but it was a lost cause. Their size and intimidating glares made them stick out like sore thumbs.

They needed to get off the street, so I took off my cut and got out of the truck. As soon as I got over to them, I asked, "You fellas get paid by the hour or is it by the night?"

"You couldn't afford it either way," Savage bit back. "Now, cut the bullshit. You ready to do this?"

"Sure thing, but I'm gonna need you to tell me what *this* is."

"Grant wants us to put these in Bauco's gas tank." Savage held up a small explosive, "And we gotta do it without being seen, which won't be easy with so many folks around."

The Four Seasons was one of the most popular hotels in the city, which meant there would be people all around and lots of them at that.

"No, it won't, but we'll figure it out." I motioned my hand toward the explosive. "So, we're just gonna have a late-night BBQ?"

"That depends on when they come down. Could be tonight. Could be tomorrow," Wrath answered. "Whenever

they load up, Grant will hit the detonator, and the deed will be done.”

“GRANT’S ALREADY TAKEN CARE OF THE SECURITY CAMERAS, and when we’re ready, he and Cotton will make sure all the guards are distracted,” Savage informed me.

“Alright then. Let’s get this party started.”

We made our way down to the garage. It was late, and thankfully, there wasn’t anyone around, making it easier to maneuver. As soon as we got down to the bottom level, I spotted three imposing black SUVs. I motioned ahead as I told Savage and Wrath, “That’s gotta be them.”

Wrath nodded, then sent a message to Grant, letting him know we were ready to take action. Moments later, a car alarm started to go off in the level above us, and soon after, a second car alarm went off. And then, a third and a fourth and fifth.

Knowing the guards would be preoccupied, we took the opportunity to make our way over to Bauco’s SUVs. We wouldn’t have much time. As soon as we pressed the gas tank door, the alarms would sound off. We each positioned ourselves next to the lid, and as soon as Wrath gave the signal, we each pressed the door, and it flipped open.

As expected, the alarms started blaring, which meant we were running out of time. We each slipped our devices into the tank, closed the door, and made haste to get out of the line of sight. We huddled up behind two concrete pillars, and watched as the guards came over to see what was going on with the alarms. And then, as quickly as the ruckus started, it ended.

The alarms stopped blaring and silence fell over the garage.

The guards couldn’t have been more puzzled. They looked around, but thankfully, they quickly lost interest and headed back to their stations. Wrath and I exchanged a silent look of relief. We both knew the stakes when we headed into that garage. We were putting our lives on the line, but we had to do what we had to do to protect the brothers and the club.

One hour rolled into the next, but there was no sign of Bauco. Hell, there wasn't a sign of anyone. It was just us and the fucking guards, and when I saw the faint glow of the sunrise, I started to worry that this whole plan was going to be a bust. Then, Wrath nudged me and whispered, "Here they come."

Neither of us moved. We stayed hidden in the shadows, quietly watching as Bauco and his men emerged from the elevator and started towards their SUVs. When they got close, Bauco's lead guy stopped and scanned the garage. He suspected something. I could see it in his eyes.

After a moment, he turned to the others and said, "There's something up."

"What are you talking about?"

"I got a feeling."

"I don't have time for you and *your feelings*," Bauco complained.

"Just need a minute," the guy pushed. "Trust me on this."

A knot formed in the pit of my stomach when they all started looking around. I glanced over at Wrath and Savage, and they both looked equally concerned. Wrath's eyes were trained on mine as he reached behind him and placed his hand on his Glock.

Time stood still as Savage and I reached for our own weapons.

Everything hung in the balance, and one wrong move could cost us everything. The low hum of traffic in the distance and the flickering fluorescent lights only added to the intensity of the moment. His men were getting closer when Bauco finally opened the back door of the SUV and growled, "Enough! You're wasting time! Let's move."

His men exchanged a quick glance, then did as Bauco ordered and loaded up into their separate SUVs. We held our breath, waiting silently for that crucial moment when Bauco and his entourage tried to depart, and just as they started out of

the garage, a deafening roar of the explosions shook the ground beneath our feet.

We were yards away, but I could still feel the searing heat rolling off the vehicles. It wasn't long before the air was filled with the foul scent of burning rubber and fuel, making it hard to breathe. Savage glanced over to Wrath and me as he whispered, "We need to get the hell out of here."

Wrath nodded, and Savage and I followed as he darted for the rear exit.

I could feel the burning heat as we skirted past the inferno. By the time we'd made it back to my truck, there was a significant crowd forming. The last thing we needed was to be seen, so we loaded up, and I got us the hell out of there.

"Where did you park?"

"Across the street at the Mapco."

I weaved between the pedestrians and oncoming police, and eventually, I managed to make my way across the street. I pulled up to Wrath's SUV, and I'd barely gotten parked when Cotton and Grant appeared at my door. I rolled down the window, and Cotton sounded relieved when he said, "You boys did good back there."

"Did everything go okay on your end?"

"Looks that way." Cotton glanced over at Grant, then back to us. "We should know for sure soon enough."

"You need us to stick around for a bit?"

"No, it would be best if you headed back."

It had been a long night, so none of us argued. Savage got in the truck with Wrath, and I followed them back to the clubhouse. We filled Prez in on everything that had gone down with Bauco and his men, then went to our rooms and crashed for a few hours.

When I finally woke up, it hit me that I hadn't called Maggie.



She'd messaged me the night before, but I hadn't been able to talk to her. I'd promised to call later, but with everything that went down, it slipped my mind. I had a feeling that hadn't set well with her, but thankfully, she hadn't acted on it. At least, I didn't think she had.

I grabbed my phone and dialed her number.

It rang several times, but she didn't answer. I figured she was busy with work, so I sent her a text.

**ME:**

Hey, babe.

Sorry about last night.

I had a lot going on.

**MAGGIE:**

No need to apologize.

You don't owe me anything.

*OH, DAMN. SHE WASN'T JUST PISSED. SHE WAS REALLY PISSED.*

**ME:**

Can we talk later?

**MAGGIE:**

I've got a busy night with the kids.

**ME:**

Maggie.

**MAGGIE:**

I'm at work.

I'll text you later.

**ME:**

You okay?

**MAGGIE:**

Been better.

**ME:**

Anything I can do?

**MAGGIE:**

Maybe try calling when you say you're gonna call.

**ME:**

Understood.

**MAGGIE:**

Especially when you go and talk to my ex-husband.

**ME:**

Got it.

**MAGGIE:**

I was really worried.

**ME:**

I know.

I would've called if I could.

**MAGGIE:**

It's fine.

**ME:**

No, it's not, but it's going to happen from time to time.

**MAGGIE:**

I know.

When can I see you?

**ME:**

When do you want to see me?

**MAGGIE:**

Soon.

**ME:**

You got it.

I TOSSED MY PHONE ONTO THE BED, THEN RUSHED TO THE bathroom for a quick shower. I grabbed some fresh clothes

from my closet, and once I was dressed, I headed out to the parking lot. It'd just started snowing again, so I had no choice but to take the truck. Without telling the guys where I was going, I whipped out of the gate and drove over to the salon.

When I pulled up, I could see Maggie standing at her station. She was working on a client, but that didn't stop me from going inside. As soon as the door opened, Maggie turned around, and her mouth dropped open when she saw that it was me. "Ronin."

"You got a minute?"

"Yeah, ah..." she stammered. "Just give me one sec."

I nodded, then walked to the back where we could talk without being gawked at by the other women in the shop. I was standing there waiting for her when I heard one of them ask, "Is that him?"

"Yes, that's Ronin."

"Holy smokes, woman," one of them gasped. "You didn't tell me he was so stinking hot. Now that I think about it, you haven't told us anything about this guy."

"I've been a little preoccupied."

"Clearly!" another one gasped.

"Hush, or he's going to hear you."

"Too late," I chuckled from the back.

"Oh, God," Maggie groaned. "Will you guys cool it?"

"Sure, just make sure you two talk loud enough so we can hear."

Seconds later, Maggie rounded the corner, and as she continued towards me, it was impossible not to notice that her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment. "Hey there, beautiful."

"Hey," she whispered. "I didn't know you were coming by."

"You said you wanted to see me."

“I did, and I do.” Her expression softened. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know.” She glanced down at the ground as she whispered, “Chad can be a bit of a handful.”

“I can handle Chad. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes filled with worry. “He was pretty upset that you’d stopped by.”

“How do you know that?”

“I overheard him talking to Nathan. He had him all worked up. Said some pretty crazy stuff like they were going to have to come live with him.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“I know, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t going to try.”

“I’d never let that happen. Not now. Not ever.” I placed my hands on her hips and eased her towards me. “I meant what I said about protecting the people I care about most. I won’t let anything happen to you or those kids. You’ve got my word on that.”

“Man, going to the movies that night was one of the best decisions I’ve ever made.”

Before she could say anything more, I lowered my mouth to hers, silencing her with a deep, demanding kiss. I feared she might protest and break free from our embrace, but she didn’t. Instead, she ran her fingers through my hair, pulling me closer and returning my kiss with fervor.

Maggie’s lips opened in a small gasp, exactly like I wanted, giving me complete access to her mouth. My need for her hung in the air, taunting me as she moaned into my mouth. My cock throbbed against the zipper of my jeans, aching to be buried between her legs.

Maggie’s breath caught as I reached the dip between her neck and collarbone. She inhaled a quick breath, suggesting that I’d just found her sweet spot. I almost lost it when Maggie

shifted her body forward, pushing her breasts against my chest with a little whimper.

Damn.

I had no choice but to step back and say, “Easy there, beautiful. Your friends are just around the corner.”

“Oh, yeah.” A soft smile slipped across her face. “I kind of forgot about them.”

“We’ll pick up from here later.” I gave her one last quick kiss, then said, “I better let you get back to work.”

“Yeah, you probably should, but I should warn you. We’re going to be talking about you for the rest of the afternoon.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” I gave her a wink, then started for the door. Before walking out, I gave her friends a wave and said, “Have a good one, ladies.”

I walked back out to my truck, and as I got back inside, I couldn’t help but notice that all the ladies in the shop were staring out the window, watching as I started the engine. I gave them all one last wave, then drove back over to the clubhouse. I wanted to be there in case Prez or Cotton needed me, so I decided it was best for me to stick around for the next couple of days.

Thankfully, it was pretty quiet.

There were no fires to put out with the club. Most of the guys were either at home or crashed right after dinner, and the girls kept to themselves. Hell, even Beckett was pretty chill. He’d do his time at the construction site, and when the day was done, he went to his room and stayed there until morning. That was all well and good, until it wasn’t.

I’d been at the clubhouse for several nights when I heard Beckett yelling in his room. I thought he might’ve been getting into it with one of the hang arounds or one of the brothers, so I went to check it out. I crossed the hall, and when I got to his door, it was wide open. He was pacing in the center of the room as he talked on the phone.

“I know what he said, Grim, and I’m telling you, I don’t fucking care. I don’t want to talk to him, and I definitely don’t wanna see him.”

He listened for a moment, then shook his head. “He can say or do whatever he wants, but it’s not gonna change anything! What’s done is done.”

He continued to pace angrily back and forth as he listened to the other end of the call. Grim was doing his best to get Beckett and Preacher back on track, but he wasn’t having it.

I’d seen what the kid had been through, and I wasn’t sure that was ever gonna happen, especially when Beckett said, “I’m done, man. I mean it! I’m not doing this anymore, even if it means I gotta walk away from Fury. I just can’t do it. Not anymore.”

He ended the call and tossed his phone on the bed as he grumbled, “Sonofabitch!”

“Hey, brother.” I stepped up to the door. “You good?”

“Yeah, man. I’m golden.”

“Need anything?”

“Not anything you could give me.” He shrugged. “I’m just out of luck these days.”

“Things will turn around. You’ll see.”

“I wish I could believe that.”

“Sometimes you gotta walk through hell to get to the other side.” I gave him a pat on the shoulder. “You just gotta keep on walking, brother, cause if you stop...”

“I’ll be in this hell forever?”

“Yeah, and nobody wants that.” I started out of the room as I told him, “We got a long day tomorrow. You best get some rest.”

I walked back to my room, and as I got ready to crash, I was pleased that there was no more yelling coming from Beckett’s room. I hoped that meant he’d called it a night, and I quickly did the same. When we got up the next morning, I

found him in the kitchen drinking his coffee, and while neither of us mentioned the night prior, he seemed to be in better spirits.

He held onto his good mood all through work and that had me feeling pretty good about things. But the second I pulled back into the clubhouse and spotted an unmarked black Mercedes parked at the front, my good mood went flying out the window.

Torch had pulled in with me, so I turned to him and asked, “Any idea who that might be?”

“No clue.”

Curious, we both started up to the front door. We’d barely stepped inside the bar when I spotted Prez sitting at the front counter with Savage and Cotton. And standing in front of them was Maltese, Cardelli’s lead man. He looked just as menacing as he did the last time he’d shown up at the clubhouse. He had on a similar black business suit, and those crazy dark eyes were skirting around the room like he was waiting for something or someone to come out of the shadows.

Torch and I walked over to see what he was doing there, and as we got closer, I overheard him say, “As you might know, Mr. Cardelli had an ongoing issue with Mr. Bauco and his men. They’d cost him a business deal or two, and he was growing tired of their interferences.”

“We’d gotten wind of it, but that was no concern of ours.”

“No, it wasn’t, but you dealt with them and dealt with them well. My boss was quite impressed with the way you handled them, and I must admit, I am, too. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“You’re walking a fine line between a compliment and an insult, and trust me when I say, now is not the time to be insulting Fury.”

“Oh, there’s no doubt about that. You made that very clear. In fact, I don’t think you will have any further troubles with your deliveries or anything else for that matter.” He kept his



serious tone as he added, “So, no. My comment wasn’t an insult. In fact, it was the farthest thing from it.”

And there it was—confirmation that our endeavors hadn’t been in vain. We’d made the statement we needed to make, and we could only hope that Maltese was right, and we wouldn’t have any more trouble with Bruton’s business. It was a laughable thought.

In this line of work, there’s always trouble.

But it was nothing the brothers of Satan’s Fury couldn’t handle.

We’d already proven it once, and if necessary, we’d prove it again.

## Maggie



“Holy Toledo! Look at all this stuff!”

Samantha’s eyes lit up with excitement as she looked around the dark, cold attic. It wasn’t a place she or her brother typically got to go, especially without me, so she was both curious and excited about all the Christmas treasures that were waiting for her in the various boxes.

It was a sight to see. I’d always loved Christmas. It was my absolute favorite holiday, and it tickled me that my children loved it just as much as I did. That being said, I didn’t want them to get carried away, so I warned, “You have to be careful. There’s a lot of breakable stuff up here.”

That was an understatement. Our attic was a treasure trove of holiday memories, and I cherished each one. They each held a story, a piece of our history, and I loved revisiting the memories with the kids. When Samantha found the box of glass ornaments, she gasped, “I found my snowman!”

“Great.” I stepped over and glanced into the box, making sure it was the right one. “Carry that one downstairs and put it on the table.”

“Okay, but what about the box with the fairies?”

“Um, that one’s at your father’s, remember?”

“Oh, man,” she pouted. “Why did he have to get those?”

“I don’t know, honey.” I was just as disappointed as she was. I could still remember the day Mom and I bought them at a little shop in the mountains. I loved them, and when I

couldn't find them last Christmas, I searched high and low for them—until I came across a picture of the kids on Chad's Facebook and spotted them on Chad's tree. I feigned a smile as I told her, "I'm sure he just wanted his tree to be special and remind you of home."

"Well, it doesn't. It just reminds me that he took something that didn't belong to him." She rolled her eyes and started downstairs. "I'm gonna get them back."

"Just leave it, Samantha. We'll get some more later."

"They won't be the same!"

I would've continued arguing with her, but she was already downstairs, and there was still so much that needed to be done. Nathan was pilfering around in some of his old sports boxes, so I asked, "Can you help me with the tree?"

"Yeah, just a sec." He kept digging, then whipped out an old baseball glove that was at least two sizes too small. "I was wondering where this was!"

"I was saving it for you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I thought you could give it to your son or daughter one day."

"They are not gonna want my dirty, old glove."

"Well, I'm keeping it all the same." I grabbed the end of the tree as I asked, "Now, are you gonna help me or not?"

"I'm coming!"

He rushed over and grabbed the other end of the tree, and together, we managed to get it down my death-trap set of stairs. We set it up in the corner of the living room, and the entire room lit up when we plugged in the lights. Samantha was beaming as she gasped, "Oh, Momma. It's already pretty."

"Well, it will look even better when we get the ornaments on it."

"I'll go grab the other boxes," Nathan offered.

“I’ll come help.”

In no time, we had the rest of the totes down from the attic and circled them around the tree. The air tingled with anticipation as we started putting various ornaments on the tree, and it wasn’t long before we had a real masterpiece on our hands. I stood back and smiled as I told them, “Oh, my. It looks even better than it did last year.”

“Yeah, it looks pretty good.” Nathan took a step back, appraising it from a distance. “So, now what? Are we gonna put out the rest of the stuff?”

“I’ll do it. You guys can go do your own thing and...”

“No,” Samantha fussed. “I wanna help.”

“I don’t mind helping.” Nathan gave me a look. “As long as we can order pizza or some Chinese for dinner.”

“I think we can manage that.”

“Awesome.”

We dove back into the boxes and collected the rest of the decorations. It took us a bit to figure out where to put all the Santas and snowmen, but after some careful consideration, we found the perfect spots. I hung garland across my mantel and doorways, and with a little help from Nathan, I strung lights from the ceiling as you headed down the hall to the kids’ rooms, making it look like a Christmas tunnel.

The kids loved it all, and while it had been fun, they were quickly growing tired and hungry. “Are you guys ready for me to order dinner?”

“Yes!” they both cheered.

“Pizza?”

“I want pepperoni!” Nathan answered.

“And I want cheese!” Samantha called out as she headed to her room. “With extra cheese!”

“Okay, I’m ordering now... And just a heads up. Ronin is going to come by and eat with us.”

“Then, you better order two pepperonis because last time, he ate most of mine.”

“He does have a habit of that, doesn’t he?” I chuckled.

“Yeah, he does. And not just my pizza. He eats all the good snacks, too.”

“I’ll be sure to order extra pizza, and I’ll do the same with the snacks.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

He slipped off to his room, and I placed our order for pizza. Within an hour, Ronin was there, and we were all sitting at the table eating pizza. The kids were talking about all the snow we’d gotten and the snow we were expected to get overnight, and before I could stop him, Ronin was telling them all about the night he took me sledding.

“She flew down that hill like a pro!” Ronin glanced over at me with a smile. “And she climbed right back up and did it again.”

“No freaking way.”

“Yep, she did great until that last run.” He reached over and placed his hand on my thigh. “She took the dip a little too fast, and she went sailing into the air. She scared me. I thought she’d really done a number on herself, but she bounced right back up.”

Nathan turned to me, his eyes wide with disbelief. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“He’s exaggerating. It wasn’t that big of a hill.”

“Oh, don’t listen to her. It’s a beast,” Ronin teased. “I’ll take you guys sometime, and you can see for yourself.”

“When?” Nathan pushed.

“I don’t know.” Ronin shrugged. “We could go tonight if you guys are up for it.”

“Seriously?” Nathan quickly turned to me. “Can we go?”

The schools were closed for inclement weather, so I answered, “Um, yeah. I don’t see why not.”

“Yes!”

And just like that, the kids popped up from their seats and started gathering their cold-weather gear. Ronin chuckled as he stood and said, “I guess that means we’re going sledding.”

“It would appear so. Do you have the sleds with you?”

“No, but I can have one of the prospects carry them over.”

“Okay, great. I guess I’ll go get ready.”

After we cleared the table, I went to get ready. It was pretty cold out, so I grabbed some extra gloves and put on an extra hoodie. By the time I was dressed, the kids were ready and waiting by the door. They were all bundled up in their thick winter coats, scarves, and waterproof mittens, and they couldn’t have looked more excited.

We headed outside, and the kids exchanged excited glances as they hopped into the backseat of Ronin’s truck. The snow-covered roads were a bit dicey, so he drove extra carefully up to the same spot he’d taken me on our first date.

As soon as we were parked, the kids jumped out and gasped as they looked over at the hill. I couldn’t blame them. It was pristine, untouched by any previous tracks, and the glistening snow seemed to beckon us all to be the first to glide down its stealthy slope.

A prospect had left four sleds over by the big tree. I grabbed them and brought them back over to the kids, and there was no missing the excitement in Nathan’s voice as he took his from my hand and announced, “This place is awesome!”

“Yeah, it is,” Ronin agreed. “I’ve been sledding down this hill since I was your age, and I can guarantee that it’s the best spot around.”

With sleds in hand, we started for the top of the hill, each step accompanied by the crunch of snow beneath our boots.

Once we reached the edge, Ronin turned to Nathan with a twinkle in his eye. “Ready for a wild ride?”

“Heck yeah!”

The children’s cheers echoed through the valley as they launched themselves down the hill, and I couldn’t help but cheer right along with them. They flew down that hill with big smiles on their faces, and when they reached the bottom, they jumped up and yelled, “That was awesome.”

Ronin chuckled as he said, “I think they like it.”

“They most certainly do!”

My heart swelled as I watched my sweet children hike back up the hill with big smiles on their faces. A memory was being made, and Ronin had given it to them. I stepped over to him and slipped my arm around his as I whispered, “Thank you for this. They are having such a great time.”

“No need to thank me, babe.” He leaned down and kissed me on the forehead. “I’m enjoying it as much as they are.”

“I know.” I looked up at him, and I was overcome with emotion as I told him, “And that’s why I love you.”

“I finally did it.” He smiled proudly. “I wore you down.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Well, I got news for you. You wore me down, too.” He slipped his arms around my waist, pulling me close. “I love you, Maggie. I love everything about you, including your kids.”

He pressed his lips against mine, and I was putty in his hands. His tongue drifted over my bottom lip, and with a slight whimper, I opened my mouth, giving him access to delve deeper. Unconscious of my own movement, I leaned towards him, and in a matter of seconds, we were both lost in the moment. It was like the world around us had just disappeared, and it was just him and me.

Until Nathan yelled, “Ewe, gross.”

“Sorry, man.” Ronin stepped back with a chuckle. “I just couldn’t help myself.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Nathan positioned his sled at the edge of the hill. “Just be good to her, and we’re good.”

“Planning on it.”

Nathan nodded, then jumped on his sled and flew down the hill. He and Samantha went several more times, and then Ronin and I joined in. Our laughter echoed through the night air as we both hurtled down the snowy hill. Ronin was laughing like a kid on Christmas morning as he watched me fall off my sled for the second time.

We went down several more times, and it wasn’t long before a chill began to settle in. I’d tried to bundle up, but it was colder than I’d expected it to be, and the cold was seeping through my layers. I could tell by their rosy cheeks that the kids were cold as well. I hated to put an end to our great time, but I didn’t want us to get sick, especially with the holidays coming.

“Okay, guys. I think it’s time to go,” I announced. “I’m about to turn into an ice cube over here.”

“Oh, man,” the kids complained.

“Your mom is right.” Ronin, noticing me shivering, nodded in agreement. “It’s pretty frigid, and it looks like the next round of snow is about to come in.”

The kids looked like they lost their best friend as they gathered their things and carried them back to the truck. Amused by their pouting, Ronin glanced over to me and said, “I don’t know about you, but I could go for some hot chocolate.”

“Yeah, hot cocoa sounds good.” I turned back to look at the kids. “How about you guys? You want some, too?”

“With marshmallows?” Samantha asked.

“Absolutely.”

As soon as we got back home, I made us all some hot cocoa and turned on the fire. I wrapped myself in a cozy



blanket and curled up next to Ronin as we watched TV. I couldn't imagine a better ending to a perfect night. I'd feared that this day would never come, but I was happy—truly, utterly happy.

## Rooster



“What’s Grim doing here?”

“Came for Beckett,” Torch answered. “Seems Preacher is ready for him to come home.”

“Not so sure Beckett will agree.”

“Grim thought the same, so he brought a friend with him.”

It had been weeks since we’d had any drama at the club. Our runs had gone as planned, Cotton was making ground as Bruton’s successor, and we were making good money. Hell, we’d been doing better than ever, and it felt good—really damn good. I wasn’t exactly pleased to hear that things might be taking a turn. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“He brought one of the guys who killed his girl,” Torch answered.

“No shit?”

“Yeah, he hoped that having a taste of revenge would help Beckett finally put all this mess behind him.”

“So, where is he now?”

“They’re in Wrath’s playroom. Beckett’s working him over as we speak.”

“Holy shit.” I ran my hand down over my beard. “Well, it will either help the kid or add fuel to the fire.”

“Only time will tell.” Savage motioned his head towards the cooler. “I could use a beer. How about you?”

“Hell, yeah. Maybe two.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Savage grabbed us a couple of beers and sat down at the bar. I glanced back over at Grim, and damn. I’d been around many a fierce man, but none had been quite so menacing. Something about his heavy build and ominous, dark, fierce eyes sent a chill right through you.

His thick beard added to his rugged demeanor, and with his Fury cut, he was a daunting force that commanded respect. I would’ve thought the hang arounds would be all over him, but they wouldn’t even look at the guy. I considered going over and talking to him, but just as I was about to head over, he got a phone call.

He glanced down at the screen with a scowl, then answered, “What the fuck do you want?”

There was a brief pause, and then he went on to say, “I don’t want to hear your fucking excuses. You fucked up, and if you ever disrespect me like that again, I’m gonna rip your throat out!”

Doing my best to ignore the conversation going on behind me, I sipped on my beer and tried to tune him out. It wasn’t easy, especially when he started ranting.

“You’re telling me the goods are there and are up to par, and if that’s the case, we’ll take our fucking money and go. But if it turns out you’re lying and we got some shit like we did last time, then I’ll take every fucking dime of that take, and I’ll use it to fuck you up. I’ll go after your crew, one by one, and I will mess them up in ways you can’t begin to imagine.”

Damn. This dude was no joke.

I got it. He was the enforcer, and just like Wrath, he took that role seriously and wasn’t going to let anyone fuck him or his brothers over. His fierce expression seemed to soften slightly as he listened to the other end of the line. After a few moments, he nodded and said, “You better fucking hope so.”

He ended the call and grabbed his beer, turning it back for a long drink. Once he'd finished it off, he stood and tossed the empty bottle in the trash. His expression remained blank as he started walking over to us. "How you guys making it today?"

"Can't complain. What about you?"

"I'll be better when I can get back home and wrangle in a couple of assholes, but I can't do that until I sort out this shit with Beckett."

"Maybe this thing today will help out in that department."

"I don't know, Savage. I've got a feeling he's not gonna let it go, but maybe working this guy over will do him some good."

"How long has he been back there with him?"

"I don't know." Grim glanced over at the clock. "An hour. Maybe two."

"Might be time to go check on him and see how things are going?"

"Yeah, you're probably right."

Grim followed Savage and me out to the playroom and up to the two-way mirror. He and Savage stopped to take a look, but I didn't bother. I wanted to see Beckett face to face, so I just walked right in and was immediately hit with the stench of death, making my stomach churn from the smell. Beckett was sitting on a stool in the corner, smoking a cigarette, and he didn't seem to notice I had walked in.

"Beckett?" I called out to him. When he didn't answer, I walked over to him, placing my hand on his shoulder, and said, "Hey, man. How you making it?"

He didn't speak.

He simply nodded and kept staring straight ahead.

It was impossible to miss the glazed look in his eyes or his blood-soaked shirt. He was looking straight ahead, glaring at what was left of the man they'd brought in last night. When I

caught sight of his mangled body, my gut tightened, thinking of what had taken place in that room.

The man's wrists were bound in thick chains, and he was hanging from a rafter in the ceiling. He still had on his shirt, but his pants were down around his ankles. There were multiple lacerations all over his body, which partly explained the blood that was dripping down around his feet. I could only imagine where the rest had come from. If I had to guess, I'd say it was hidden beneath the hem of his shirt.

Both of his shoulders were dislocated, and his head hung low with his chin resting on his chest. He didn't look like he was still conscious or even breathing, but even if he was, I wouldn't be able to tell from all the swelling on his face. Both of his eyes were completely swollen shut, and his face was covered in blood and bruises.

There wasn't much left that he could do to the guy, so I eased over to Beckett and said, "Why don't you go take a shower and get cleaned up?"

"He wasn't the only one."

"I know, but he's all you got." I placed my hand on his shoulder as I told him, "You gotta keep walking, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember."

He got up, and his eyes never left the ground as he walked out of the room. I was about to follow after him when my phone started to ring. I grabbed it out of my pocket, and when I saw that it was Nathan calling, I got an uneasy feeling. "Nathan? Everything okay?"

"No, it's not." His voice trembled. "Mom fell."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know what really happened. She and Dad were arguing over something, and she fell." He sounded like he was on the verge of tears as he told me, "She says she's okay, but she's bleeding."

"I'm on my way."

I charged out of the room and headed straight for my truck. Concerned, Savage rushed after me and asked, “Yo, Roost. Everything okay?”

“Not sure.” I got in my truck and cranked the engine. I was about to whip through the gate when I had a thought. I rolled down my window and called out, “Hey, Savage?”

“Yeah?”

“Do me a favor. Don’t move our friend in the playroom. I might need him.”

“You got it.”

I pressed my foot to the accelerator and sped out of the gate. My heart was racing as I drove over to Maggie’s house. The mere thought of her being hurt in any way had me spiraling. I wanted to get to her and make sure she was really okay. I tried calling her, but she didn’t answer—which only added to my panic. When I got to her house, I didn’t bother knocking.

I just charged into the house and called out, “Maggie!”

“She’s in the bathroom with Samantha,” Nathan answered.

I didn’t bother asking him what had happened. I needed to hear it from Maggie, so I stormed down the hall and into Maggie’s bedroom. “Maggie?”

“I’m in here.” Before I could get to her, she stepped out of the bathroom and appeared to be perfectly fine. “You didn’t have to come. I’m fine.”

“What the hell happened?”

“It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have taken the fairies.” Samantha stepped out of the bathroom with a pout. “But they were Mom’s, and I wanted her to have them back.”

“It’s not your fault, sweetie. It was just a misunderstanding.” Maggie slipped her arm around her, giving her a gentle hug. “Everything’s fine now. You don’t have to worry.”

“I’m really sorry, Momma.”

“Oh, honey. Please stop. You have nothing to be sorry about.” She gave her a kiss on the forehead, then said, “Why don’t you go find your brother, and you guys play a game or something?”

“Okay.”

Samantha’s head hung low as she skirted out of the room. As soon as Maggie closed her bedroom door, I asked, “What the hell happened?”

“The kids and I had just gotten home and were putting our things away when Chad showed up. I could tell when I answered the door that something was wrong, but I let him in anyway.” She sat down on the edge of the bed as she continued, “He didn’t even speak. He just walked over to my tree and started yelling when he saw that the fairies were back on my tree.”

“Fairies?”

“They were some ornaments my mother and I bought years ago. He took them when we split and refused to give them back to me.” Maggie shrugged. “I know it’s silly, but Sam wanted me to have them back. So, she took them off her father’s tree and brought them here. I didn’t even notice that she’d done it until Chad showed up here and started ripping them off the tree.”

“Damn. This guy is a real fucking douchebag.”

“Yeah, he is.”

“So, that was it?”

“Pretty much.”

I could tell by her expression that she wasn’t telling me something, so I gave her a little nudge. “Nathan said you were hurt.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far.” Maggie raked her teeth over her bottom lip. “I tried to stop Chad from grabbing all the fairies, and he kind of pushed me. I fell back and hit the corner of the coffee table. It wasn’t a big deal. It was just an accident.”

“An accident that should’ve never happened.” I snapped.  
“Let me see it.”

“It’s nothing. Really.”

“Maggie.”

“Okay. Fine.”

She stood and lifted the hem of her sweater, revealing the makeshift bandage. I could already see bruising all around it, so I knew it was going to be bad. I eased it back and let out a stream of curses when I saw the gash. “I’ll fucking kill him.”

I saw red. Nothing else. I turned and opened the door, and I could hear Maggie calling out to me as I stormed down the hall. I was over this bullshit. I’d already talked to him once, and clearly, he didn’t get the message. But that was about to change. I sent Wrath a message and told him I needed his help and to meet me at the front of the clubhouse.

Half an hour later, I’d picked him up, and we were in the back of Chad’s office parking lot waiting for him to come outside. It was already after five, so we didn’t have to wait long for the douchebag to come strolling out. The second he got close, Wrath and I got out and met him at his car door.

His eyes widened when he saw me coming towards him, and he opened his mouth. But before he could speak, my fist rammed into the side of his face, forcing his head to lurch back. Before he had a chance to recover, I reached up and grabbed him by the throat, lifting him off the ground as I hauled him over to the truck.

He tried to fight against my hold, but I reared back and slammed my fist into his gut, completely knocking the breath out of him. He barreled over as I shoved him towards Wrath. “Get him inside.”

Wrath nodded, then pulled a bandana and a zip tie from his back pocket. He wrapped it around Chad’s head, blindfolding him and binding his hands before tossing him in the backseat. Chad remained silent until Wrath and I both got in the truck and closed the doors. As soon as I started the engine, he cried, “Wait! Where are you taking me? What are you going to do?”



I didn't answer.

I simply put my foot on the accelerator and drove.

When we got to the clubhouse, Wrath and I got him out of the backseat and led him into the playroom. Once we had him positioned in front of the two-way mirror, I reached over and carefully lifted his blindfold—just enough for him to see the man Beckett had killed.

“Ah, hell,” Chad cried, pulling at his restraint. “What is this?”

“This is your last warning.” I leaned in with my mouth close to his ear as I growled, “I already warned you once about fucking with Maggie and the kids, but you're too fucking thick-headed to listen. Your kids are the only reason you're getting another chance.”

“I didn't do anything,” he lied. “I just wanted...”

I didn't give him a chance to finish his thought. Instead, I grabbed the back of his head and shoved it forward, slamming it into the two-way glass. “Take a hard look, asshole. This is you if you ever do anything to them again. Is that clear?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“You said that last time.”

I pressed his head harder against the glass, making it difficult for him to breathe. “I got it. I got it. I won't fuck with her ever again.”

“That's better.”

I released his head, then pulled his blindfold down, covering his eyes once again. We took him back out to the truck and drove him back over to his office. I jerked him from the backseat and pulled him over to the car. I removed the blindfold, then reached behind him and cut the zip tie that restrained him.

He quickly turned, thinking that I was actually letting him go, but he was wrong... so fucking wrong. When he took a step forward, I reared my fist back and quickly slammed it into his throat, causing him to instantly start gasping for air. When

he stumbled back, I grabbed his wrist, twisting it firmly behind his back until I felt it crack against the pressure.

His knees buckled to the floor as he cried out in pain.

“Remember this day... Remember how fucking lucky you are and be fucking grateful you aren’t six feet under.”

I released his hand, and he quickly pulled it to him, holding it protectively against his chest. “I’ll remember.”

With that, I got back in the truck with Wrath and started driving back to the clubhouse. We were just a few miles out when Wrath said, “I don’t think you’ll be having any more problems out of him.”

“Yeah, he looked pretty freaked out.”

“Can’t say I blame him. Hell, Beckett did a real number on that guy.”

“He certainly did.” As we pulled through the gate and up to the front door, I asked, “Speaking of Beckett, what’s the plan for him?”

“Ah, hell. He and Grim have already left. It’s a hell of a drive, so it’ll take them a bit to get back home.”

“Hate I wasn’t here to see him off.”

“I’m sure you’ll hear from him.” Before he got out, he looked over at me and asked, “You good?”

“Not yet, but I will be.”

“You know where to find me if you need me.”

“I do, and I appreciate it.”

“Any time, brother.”

He got out, and once he headed back inside, I drove back over to Maggie’s place. Unlike the time before, I knocked and waited for Maggie to come to the door. It didn’t take long before it flew open, and she appeared with a worried look on her face. “You didn’t answer my calls.”

“I was busy taking care of something.”

“Taking care of what?” She closed the door behind me.  
“What happened?”

“Nothing for you to worry about.”

“You’re gonna have to give me more than that, Ronin.”

I stepped in front of her and placed my hands on her hips, and she looked up at me with those soul-searching eyes, and it got me right in the gut. Damn. I would move mountains for this woman. “You’re not gonna have any more trouble with Chad.”

“What does that mean?”

“We had another chat, and this time, I made my point a little clearer.”

“Oh, no. He’s going to take the kids for sure now.”

“He isn’t gonna do shit,” I scoffed. “Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if the guy bought you a Christmas present this year.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, yeah. He’s got a whole new mindset, and so do I.”

“Oh? And what’s changed with you?”

“I’ve been trying to take this thing with us slow, but that’s not working for me anymore.”

A mix of disappointment and fear crossed her face as she asked, “It’s not?”

“Nope.” I pulled her closer. “I think it’s time for us to take a step forward, and not just a little step. I’m thinking a big one, like a really big one, and I think we should take it sooner than later.”

“Okay, I’m lost.” She looked as puzzled as ever. “What are you talking about?”

“I think you and the kids should move in with me.”

“Woah, I wasn’t expecting that.” Her brows furrowed. “Do you really think we’re ready for that?”

“I know it’s soon, but yeah, I do.” I could see the doubts flickering in her eyes, so I added, “We got a good thing here,

Maggie. We can keep doing this whole dating thing if you want, but it's not gonna change anything. We'll still have a good thing. Or we could take that step and start our lives together."

"I gotta say, it's pretty tempting."

"Then, let's do a trial run," I suggested. "You guys come and stay with me for a couple of weeks. The kids are off for Christmas break, and things are slowing down at the salon, so this is as good a time as any."

"When would you want to do this?"

"Tonight."

"But what about the Christmas tree and all their presents?"

"I'll take care of that. You won't have to worry about a thing." I could see the wheels turning in her head, so I gave her a little push. "Come on, Maggie. It's not going to be perfect. Hell, there is no perfect. There will always be struggles. You just have to figure out who you want to struggle with, and I want to struggle with you. Day in and day out. It's you."

"I want to struggle with you, too."

"Is that a yes?"

## Maggie



“You’re serious about this?”

“As a heart attack.” Ronin’s lips curled into a sexy smile. “I want you in my house and in my bed, and I want you there tonight and every night after.”

I wanted to say yes. I really did, but I wasn’t sure how Nathan and Samantha would feel about leaving the only home they’d ever known. “I should talk to the kids first and see how they feel about it.”

“I’d be good with it.” I turned and found both Nathan and Samantha standing in the kitchen. “I think it would be fun.”

“Me, too.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, as long as you are,” Nathan answered.

They all three stood silently, waiting eagerly for my response, and before I realized it, I was nodding and saying, “Yes, we will come stay with you.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” Ronin looked over at the kids and said, “Go pack a bag and be sure to grab your snow gear. We’ll hit the hill later in the week.”

“Awesome!”

They bolted down the hall and disappeared into their rooms, leaving me alone with Ronin. “We’re really doing this?”

“Looks that way.” He motioned his head towards my room. “You best get to packing. Won’t be long before the kids are packed and ready, and you don’t wanna keep them waiting.”

“Yeah, you’re right about that.” I eased up on my tiptoes and gave him another quick kiss. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Don’t get carried away. I’ll get the guys to come grab some more tomorrow.”

“Okay. Will do.”

I felt a mix of excitement and apprehension as I rushed to my room and started packing. It was crazy. I knew it was too soon, but for reasons I couldn’t explain, it felt right. It felt more right than anything had in years. I started throwing things into my bag and was trying to make sure I didn’t forget anything when Samantha stepped into the room.

“What about my blanket and favorite pillow?”

“You can take whatever you want, sweetie.”

“What about my TV and the lamp beside my bed?”

“There’s already a TV in your room.”

“I know, but it’s not my TV.”

“Ah, I see.” I knelt down in front of her as I said, “I know this is a little scary, but we’re doing this together. And when you feel overwhelmed or a little homesick, Nathan and I will be there to help you through. And you’ll do the same for us.”

“What if we don’t like being there?”

“Then, we’ll figure it out. Just like we always do.”

Concern marked my daughter’s sweet face as she asked, “And what about Dad?”

“Nothing’s going to change with that.” I understood her concern. This was all happening so fast, and it was a lot for her to take in. It was a lot for all of us to take in. I tried to reassure her the best I could. “Your father has his life with Crissy, and you’ll still go and see them every other weekend, just like always. Does that sound okay?”

“Hm-hmm.” She nodded, then reached up and wrapped her arms around me, hugging me tightly. “I love you, Momma.”

“I love you, sweet girl.”

“I’m gonna go finish packing.”

“Okay. Just give me a shout if you need any help.”

“I will.”

We both went back to packing and, in a blink, we were in the truck headed to Ronin’s house. The kids were quiet but in a good way. Like me, they seemed excited and hopeful, but I knew better than to think they didn’t have their concerns. I knew they did, and I had them, too. But when I turned and looked at Ronin, my heart felt full, and I just knew I had to take a chance—not just for me, but for all of us.

When we got to Ronin’s house, he helped us get our things out of the back of the truck and carry them inside. Ronin went with Nathan and helped him get his room situated while I did the same with Samantha, and after an hour or so of utter chaos, things started to come together.

The kids’ rooms actually looked like their rooms, and the kids seemed pleased with how they’d turned out. In fact, they were carrying on just like they did when we were back at our house. Nathan was on the phone with one of his buddies and playing on his PlayStation, and Samantha was watching a movie while she organized her art supplies. Since they were all settled in, I decided to go back downstairs and finish putting my things away.

Ronin had moved things around in his closet and even cleaned out an entire dresser for me, so it didn’t take long for me to put my things away. I headed to the bathroom and was busy arranging my toiletries when Ronin came up behind me. “Need any help?”

“I think I’ve got it.” I put my shampoo in the shower as I told him, “Thanks for helping Nathan with his room.”

“No problem. He seems good with it.”

“Yeah, I was actually a little surprised by how good he was with it.”

“What do you mean?”

“He really loved his room. It’s kind of his safety net, and it seems strange how quick he was to walk away from it.”

“Maybe you should go up and talk to him?”

“I will in a bit.” I turned to face him. “I want to give him a few minutes to adjust.”

“What about you?” He placed his hands on my hips. “How are you adjusting?”

“Pretty good, actually.”

“That’s good. What about your side? How’s it doing?”

“It’s all good.”

“You sure about that?” He lowered his hand to the hem of my sweater and carefully lifted it over my head. He was about to reach for the clasp of my bra when he motioned to the large bandage of gauze and Band-Aids on my side. “This isn’t nothing, babe.”

“It’s fine. Samantha just got a little carried away with the Band-Aids.” I tried to reassure him. “Seriously. Don’t freak out about this. I’m fine.”

*“Each time you say that, I find it harder to believe.”*

He slowly peeled the bandage back and sighed as he looked at the wound. “It looks a little better than it did before.”

“See. I told you.”

“Not gonna apologize for being worried.” He grabbed me and pulled me against his chest. “Just know that I’m here for you. Now or whenever you need me.”

“I know.” I lifted on my tiptoes and slipped my arms around his neck. “And it just so happens that I need you right now.”

“Is that right?”

“Um-hmm.”



He lifted his hand to the nape of my neck, pulling my mouth to his. The touch of his lips set me on fire. In all my life, I'd never felt such a hunger for a man, and from the way he was kissing me, there was no doubt he felt the same. His rough palms slid effortlessly over my skin as he untied my black joggers and let them fall to the floor, leaving me in just my lace panties.

A rush of heat rolled against my skin as he stood there staring at me, appraising me. I'd never wanted anyone like I wanted him. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, and the way his eyes filled with lust when he looked at me only made me want him even more. I reached out, grasped the hem of his t-shirt, and carefully pulled it over his head, tossing it to the floor.

I laid my hand on his heart, relieved to feel that his beat was fast and hard like mine. "I love you, Ronin. I love you so much."

"I love you too, babe. Let me show you how much."

His lips brushed against mine, but not gently like before. Instead, it was hot, passionate, and demanding. I feared that I might lose myself in the moment, but I couldn't pull myself away. I moaned into his mouth, stealing the last of his restraint. I gasped when he lifted me up, cradling me close to his chest. He held me tightly, making me feel safe and secure in his arms as he carried me over to his bed.

Seconds later, I was sprawled out on the mattress. I motioned my hand towards the door as I whispered, "Make sure it's locked."

He nodded, then stepped over and turned the bolt. In a blink, he was on top of me with his body covering mine. His weight pressed against me as his hands, rough and impatient, roamed over my body. I felt utterly possessed by him as his mouth closed over my breast, scraping his teeth across my sensitive flesh.

My breath caught as his hand slid between my legs. He ran his fingers along my center while his other hand cupped my breast. Every nerve in my body tingled with his touch, making

me impatient for more. Unable to resist, I reached down, tugging at his jeans as I pleaded, “Now.”

“I like a woman who knows what she wants.”

“That’s good because I want you and only you.”

“I’m here for the taking.”

And that he was, but at that moment, he was the one doing the taking. He’d stolen my heart, and with every kiss and seductive touch, he was showing me that I’d stolen his as well. We didn’t spend hours making love. With the kids right upstairs, that wasn’t an option, but we used the time we had to our best abilities. And when we were done, we were both floating a little higher and able to tackle the rest of the night.

I finished putting my things away, then went upstairs to check in on the kids. When I got to Nathan’s room, I was surprised to find that he wasn’t playing his game or talking to any of his buddies. Instead, he was lying on his bed watching videos on his phone. “Hey, buddy. You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“I wanted to make sure you were okay with coming here for a while.”

“I’m fine with it.” He glanced down at his phone as he mumbled, “At least, here we won’t have to worry about Dad storming in and freaking out over something stupid like fairies.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that was still an issue for you.”

“It’s not an issue, Mom.” I sat on the edge of his bed and listened as he continued, “I’m just tired of Dad being such an asshole all the time. I really hated it when he came in there today and pushed you around. I don’t want him doing that again, and I know Ronin will make sure he doesn’t.”

“Yes, he will, but that’s not the only reason we’re here.”

“I know. I get it, and I’m not super happy about not being home for Christmas, but I like it here. It’s cool being close to the water, and my friends will think it’s badass.”

“Yes, they will.” I placed my hand on his arm. “I’m sorry that your father scared you today. You must know that wasn’t his intention.”

“Mom, you have to stop defending him. I know about the affair. I know that he lied and cheated. He did that to you, and he did it to me and Sam. He did those things. Not you. You didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“I’m still sorry you had to deal with all that, but I have a feeling things are going to get better for all of us.” I gave him a quick pat, then stood and said, “Maybe we can all go sledding tomorrow afternoon and have a movie night.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Great.” I leaned down and gave him a kiss on the forehead. “I love you, sweetheart.”

“Love you, too.”

The next morning, I woke feeling like something was amiss. I rolled over, and when I found that I was in the bed alone, I eased the covers back and went to find Ronin. I started in the kitchen, but he was nowhere to be found. There was coffee, so I poured myself a cup and continued with my search.

I stepped into the living room and was surprised to find him standing in the corner next to our Christmas tree. He was busy rearranging the skewed ornaments and didn’t even notice that I’d walked into the room. “How did you do this?”

“Good morning, babe,” he greeted, his eyes reflecting the joy of the surprise. “I told you I would, and I did.”

“But how?” I pushed. “You even managed to get all the presents and our decorations.”

“I had a little help.”

I looked around the room, and my chest tightened when I saw that the entire house had been transformed into a holiday wonderland. I knew at that very moment that moving in with him was the right decision. “I can’t believe you did all this.”

“You’re my girl.” He gave me one of his smiles. “I’ll do anything for you, babe, even if that means gettin’ up at the crack of dawn to bring you a Christmas tree.”

“And that’s why I love you like I do.”

I helped him finish putting out the decorations, and it wasn’t long before the kids woke up and came down to join in on the fun. Ronin made us breakfast, and then we went out sledding for a while. When we got back, Ronin and I made dinner, and then we watched a silly Christmas movie. The next day was more of the same, and with each hour that passed, his place started to feel more and more like our place.

We had finally decided it was time for Ronin to meet my parents and were getting ready to go to their house for dinner when I noticed Ronin had left his phones on the kitchen counter. I picked them both up and was about to take them to him when one of them buzzed with a text message. Worried that it might be something important, I called out to him, “Hey, Ronin! You got a text.”

“Okay. I’m coming.” As he got closer, I shouted, “It’s on your personal phone.”

“Oh?” He looked surprised as he came into the kitchen and asked, “Who’s it from?”

“Oh, umm.” I glanced down at the screen. “Beckett.”

“What’d he say?”

I look back down at the phone and read out loud:

*I HAD A LOT OF TIME TO THINK ON THE RIDE HOME.*

*Sorry brother, but I don’t think I can keep walking.*

I HAD NO IDEA WHAT THE MESSAGE MEANT, BUT I COULD TELL by Ronin’s expression that it wasn’t good. Concerned, I asked, “What is it? Is everything okay?”

“No, I don’t think it is.” He came over and took the phone from my hand, then dialed someone’s number. When they didn’t answer, he shook his head and sighed. “Damn.”

Before I could ask what was going on, he dialed another number. He waited for them to answer, then said, “Hey, brother. You heard anything from Grim or Beckett?”

He paused for a minute, then said, “I got a weird message from him. I tried calling, but he didn’t answer. If you hear anything, let me know.”

I waited for him to finish talking, and once he’d hung up, I walked over to him and asked, “Who’s Beckett?”

“A kid who’d been staying with us. He was going through some stuff, and from the sounds of that message, he’s about to do something stupid.”

“Is there anything you can do to stop him?”

“I don’t know.” He glanced up at the clock. “Do I have time to make another call?”

“We’ll make time.”

He nodded, then stepped outside.

He closed the door and stood out on the porch as he made his call. I wasn’t sure how long it was going to take, so I poured myself a glass of tea and went into the living room. I’d barely sat down when I heard Ronin snap, “He did what?”

I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but it was impossible not to hear, “Damn, brother. That’s all kinds of fucked up. I knew he wanted his revenge, but I never dreamed he’d do something like that. You got any idea what Preacher’s gonna do?”

I could tell from his tone of voice that he was both heartbroken and worried. I could only assume that meant something bad had happened to his friend. “Just say the word, and we’re there. We’ll get these guys...”

His words trailed off, and I was left wondering what in the world was going on. I wanted desperately to go out there and ask him what he’d meant when he said ‘get these guys’, but then again, I wasn’t so sure I wanted to know. Besides, I

trusted him. I knew he would deal with whatever was going on, and I would be there to help in any way I could—just like he would do for me.

When he came back inside, he was visibly upset.

I got up and walked over to him, and without saying a word, I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him tightly. “Everything okay?”

“No, but it will be.” He held me for a moment, then kissed me on the forehead and asked, “You ready?”

“We don’t have to go, Ronin. My parents will understand.”

“We’re going,” he pushed. “You’ve kept me your secret boytoy long enough. Besides, your folks are waiting on us, so round up those hooligans of yours and let’s roll.”

“Whatever you say, boss.” I started for the stairs, but stopped when I felt the need to say, “I know there’s something going on and you can’t or won’t talk about it, but I want you to know that I’m here for you just like you’re here for me. It’s a two-way street.”

“I know, babe.”

I felt warm all over as I told him, “In case I haven’t told you today, I love you.”

“And I you.” He motioned his head towards the stairs. “The clock’s tickin’.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m going.”

I called down the kids, and soon after, we were on our way to my parents’ place. When we got there, he followed the kids and me up to the front porch and waited patiently as I knocked. Seconds later, the door opened, and my parents appeared with bright smiles on their faces. They greeted the kids with hugs and laughter, and when they got to Ronin, those smiles faded.

With a look of apprehension, Dad extended his hand and said, “You must be Ronin.”

“Yes, sir. It’s nice to meet you.” Ronin shook his hand as he said, “I appreciate you and your wife inviting me over to dinner.”

“We’re glad to have you.” Mom looked unsure of him as she told him, “The kids have told us so much about you.”

“Good things I hope.”

“Um-hmm,” my mother nodded. “Yeah, lots of good things. Come on in, and we’ll get dinner started.”

“Sounds good.” Ronin was quick to ask, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No, thank you. We’ve got it.”

I could tell that my folks were leery, and I got it. Ronin didn’t look like the men I’d dated in the past. He was big and tall with a beard and tattoos, and they knew nothing about him which led them to ask a million and one questions. They asked everything from where he grew up to where he worked and everything in between.

It was a lot.

And it didn’t help matters that Ronin wasn’t himself.

That text message had done a real number on him, but he put on a cheerful front, and it wasn’t long before he’d charmed both my mother and my father. By the time we left, they were singing his praises, leaving no doubt that they approved of him and us, and that made me feel even better about my decision to start a new life with him.

Later that night, when we were home and alone in bed, I curled up next to him and asked, “You really think this moving in thing is going to work?”

“Wouldn’t have asked you to if I didn’t.”

“So, you think we’re going to be okay.”

“We’re going to be more than okay, baby. *Just wait and see.*”

## Epilogue



Rooster

*One Year Later*

Christmas at the clubhouse has always been a big event, but this year, the brothers outdid themselves. There wasn't a corner or crevice that didn't have some kind of light or decoration, and there were countless presents under the enormous tree. We'd had a big year. Cotton's new role had given the club new life. We were both feared and respected by everyone in our line of work, and other than a few normal hiccups, our runs had gone off without a hitch.

We'd done well, and we wanted to celebrate our success. It's what we always did, but this was taking it to a whole new level. Hell, I could barely even walk through the family room to get over to Torch and Savage. They were standing in the corner with Wrath and Q, watching as the kids chased each other with pool sticks, and neither of them even attempted to make them stop.

"You know it's only a matter of time before one of them loses an eye, right?"

"Awe, they'll be alright," Torch snickered. "And if not, patches are cool."

"Yeah, you have a point." I looked to Savage as I said, "I'm not sure Londyn will agree."

"You're probably right."



Savage handed me his beer, then rushed after Dalton, taking his pool stick from his hand. He talked to him and the other kids for a moment, then sauntered back over to us. He took his beer back as he said, “That should be the end of that.”

“FOR THE TIME BEING, ANYWAY.” I CHUCKLED. “GIVE ‘EM A minute. They’ll be into something else soon enough.”

Savage motioned his head over to the corner of the room where Grim was sitting. “He doesn’t look so good.”

“No, he doesn’t.” The usually fierce, unstoppable man was leaned back in his chair with his shoulders slouched, and his eyes fixed on something in the distance. He’d been sitting there for the better part of the day, tossing back one drink after the next. “It’s been a year since that shit went down with Beckett. You know it had to be bad if it’s still fucking with him now.”

“Yeah, the guilt is eatin’ him up.”

“But it’s not his guilt to carry.”

“Well, he’s carrying it all the same. Hell, he came all the way here just to try to escape it.”

“Doesn’t look like it’s working.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

Clearly wanting to change the subject, Torch turned his back to Grim and looked over at the dart board where the kids were playing. “Nathan seems to be doing good. Hell, looks like he’s grown two feet since the last time I’ve seen him, and that was just a couple of weeks ago.”

“Yeah, they’re both growing fast. No doubt about that. They both seemed so young when Maggie and I started dating. It’s hard to believe that in a couple of months, Nathan will be trying for his permit.”

“How’d he like the bike you got him?”

“He’s a little unsure of it just yet.” The year before, I’d gotten Nathan a dirt bike, and he’d damn near ran the wheels

off of it. Since he was getting older, I decided to get him a 1967 Harley that we could restore together. It would take us some time to get it up and running, but when we were done, he'd have something to be proud of. "But he'll come around."

"What about his father?" Torch asked. "He cool about you gettin' it for him?"

"Probably not, but so far, he's been good about it." He shrugged. "I wouldn't be surprised if he ended up helping Nathan out with some of the parts."

"That'd be good." Savage glanced over at Maggie and Samantha. "And what about the girls?"

"Samantha's been begging for these ugly, brown slipper things, and they'd been out of stock for weeks. But Maggie worked her magic and was able to find 'em. And I got that new claw foot tub she's been hinting at for the past year. So, I'd say all is good. What about you two? Did your crew get everything they wanted?"

"Dalton got a house full of shit. Everything from games to an electric scooter, so he's tickled. Londyn, on the other hand, is still very pregnant, so she didn't get her Christmas wish," Savage chuckled.

"Pretty sure Mia feels the same."

I glanced over at Londyn and Mia, and they were both sitting on the sofa with their hands propped on their round bellies. It wasn't their first rodeo. They'd both already had a kid, but that didn't seem to help matters. In fact, it might've made it worse because they both seemed pretty miserable in their gargantuan state. "It looks like they're about to pop."

"That's because they are," Savage scoffed. "Londyn was due yesterday, and Mia's due next week."

Before I could respond, Prez stepped into the center of the room and announced, "It's been brought to my attention that it's time to open gifts. Torch and Q, why don't you guys do the honors and start passing out? I'm sure the kids will be glad to help."

And just like that, chaos ensued.

I went over and sat down on the sofa with Maggie. I leaned in close and whispered, “How are you making it?”

“Good. I’ve just been catching up with Jules and the girls.” She glanced over at all the presents under the tree and sighed. “Looks like the guys went overboard.”

“It wouldn’t be Christmas if they didn’t.”

The room buzzed with excitement as everyone started tearing open their gifts. Echoes of laughter and cheers erupted with each reveal. Some were gag gifts, while others were valued treasures, and I couldn’t help but smile as I watched Nathan and Samantha open their gifts. They both seemed pleased, and that made me pleased.

Torch brought my gift over to me and announced, “This one’s from me.”

“Ah, hell. What’d you do?” I knew my brother well enough to know that his gift would be one to remember. I just didn’t know if it was a gag gift or one that was legit. As soon as I ripped the paper and pulled it back, I could see that it was an old picture of him, me, and a bunch of the brothers that was taken back when I was prospecting. “Where in the hell did you find this?”

“It wasn’t all me,” Torch admitted. “Prez found it in an old stack of pictures in his office.”

“This is awesome, brother.”

“Glad you like it.”

He went back to passing out gifts, and Maggie and I continued watching everyone open their gifts. Just as things were starting to settle down, Maggie reached down to the floor and picked up a small package. “I have one last gift for you.”

“What?” I took it from her hand. “I thought we’d opened everything at the house.”

“Yeah, well, this is a last-minute surprise.”

“Okay?” I reached inside and pulled out a small package of pills with three rows of white and one of orange. It took me a minute to get that they were her birth control pills, but once

it sunk in, I was over the moon. We'd gotten married a few months after she and the kids had moved in, and while I hadn't pushed, I'd been hoping that this day would come. "Are these what I think they are?"

"Um-hmm."

"Are you sure?"

"I've been sure for a month or so." She smiled as she announced, "Those are from November."

"So, you could be pregnant right now?"

"Maybe." She giggled. "But if not, we can keep working at it."

"Ah, that's my kind of work."

"I thought you might think so." She slipped her arm around my neck. "So, you're good with this?"

"I'm more than good with it, babe." I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers. "You just made me a very happy man."

"I love you, Ronin, and I can't wait to have a little you running around."

"I was just thinking the same about you."

I leaned down and kissed her once again. I couldn't believe it. In just a few brief moments, she'd managed to change my life once again, making me happier than I ever dreamed possible.

As I sat back and looked around the room, I thought back to the days when I prospected for Fury. I wasn't just joining another club. I was becoming part of a family—a family that wasn't defined simply by names or blood. Satan's Fury was a group of men who valued brotherhood, and they committed their lives to one another. It wasn't always easy. There were days when I thought it would all fall apart, but here we were—strong and as determined as ever.

We were family, through and through, and together, we would face whatever came our way, and we would prevail—

just like we'd been doing from the very beginning. And when we did, I would have my woman and my kids right by my side. I couldn't ask for more than that.

*THE END*

Thanks so much for reading! Satan's Fury MC- Little Rock will be coming soon! **Keep up with all new releases-**

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**EXCERPT FROM SAVAGE FOLLOWING ACKNOWLEDGMENTS~**

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on and back.)

# EXCERPT FROM SAVAGE



## Prologue



“You got a minute?”

“Yes, sure.” Completely unaware that he was about to turn my world upside down, I got off my bike and headed over to him. “Whatcha got on your mind?”

“She told you about the scholarship, right?”

“Yeah, she did.” I smiled as I told him, “It’s awesome. I’m real proud of her.”

“I’m proud of her, too. She’s worked damn hard for that scholarship.” He ran his hand through his salt and pepper hair. “It’d be a shame if she passed it up.”

“Why would she pass on it?”

“You know why.” He shook his head. “She loves you. There’s no way she’s gonna be away from you. Hell, you haven’t been apart for more than a couple of days since you two started dating.”

“Yeah, but college is different.”

“You’re right. It is... *It’s completely different.*”

His harsh tone was unexpected. I’d always thought a lot of him, and I thought he felt the same about me. Clearly, I was wrong. “I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“She needs to take this scholarship.”

“Never said she shouldn’t.” He seemed rattled, so I tried to calm him down by saying, “I care about Londyn. I want the best for her.”



“Yeah, as long as it goes along with what you want.”

“I’m not following.”

“It’s not like it’s hard... Everything has always been about you. Your family. Your brothers. Your club. Your rules,” he snapped. “She’s young. Her path hasn’t been set like yours. She has options. She has a chance at a different life... *One that doesn’t include the dangers she’d face being associated with Fury.*”

“You never had a problem with us being together before.”

“I never thought it would go anywhere. Thought it was just a phase and you’d both grow out of it. But that never happened.”

“It’s never gonna happen. I love her... I always will.”

“You say that now, but in time, things will change.” His eyes locked on mine as he told me, “You’re a good kid. She’s always thought a lot of you and your folks, but you’re not the right guy for her.”

I wanted to respond, but I couldn’t.

His words hit me like a sledgehammer. I’d always felt like I wasn’t good enough and hearing it from her father only reinforced that feeling. I was doing everything I could to keep from completely losing it when he poured salt on my wounds. “You two are on two different paths. You have the club. That’s set. It’s who you are and who you wanna be, and that’s great. I’m glad you have that. But Londyn’s door is wide open. She can go anywhere. Do anything. And if you love her as much you say you do, you’ll let her find her own way.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.”

“You can, and if you’re the man I think you are, you will.” He reached over and gave my bicep a fatherly squeeze. “Let her have the life she deserves. Convince her to take that scholarship.”

Without saying anything more, he turned and went back into the house, and I was left feeling like my heart had been ripped from my chest. I’d wanted to believe that he was wrong

and that I could give her the life she deserved, but deep down,  
I knew he was right.

He was right about everything.

I just had to figure out what I was going to do about it.

## Savage



“I give up,” Torch grumbled, his gaze fixated on Wrath and Mia sitting alone in the back corner. “It’s just not gonna happen.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Me finding an ol’ lady.” Torch shook his head. “It’s not gonna happen. At least not for me. Hell, Beauty and the Beast over there seem as happy as they can be, all cozied up, happy and fancy fucking free, and I can’t even find a date for Friday night.”

“Ah, you just gotta keep at it. Someone will come along,” Hayes answered, trying his best to be supportive.

“Nah, you’re not getting it. They have come along,” Torch shook his head. “I’ve gone out with the good girl, the bad girl, single women, married women, and every single time, things seem to be going good, and then, in a blink, it all goes to shit.”

“And when it goes, it goes fast.”

After a week that seemed like it would never end, we all gathered at the bar for a round of drinks. Like most nights, the air was thick with the scent of booze and cigarettes, and there was a low hum of music and idle conversations. It was the perfect setting to wind down.

Cotton, my father and the president of the club, was sitting at one of the front tables with Stitch, Maverick, and several of the older brothers while the younger crew sat at the bar. I was sitting sandwiched between Rooster and Torch, and we were

shooting the shit about this and that when Torch started whining about his romantic woes.

“You’re not wrong there.” Rooster, with his disheveled hair and mischievous eyes, leaned in closer, and his voice tinged with humor as he told us, “I hooked up with a chick last week that had a snake for a pet, and I’m not talking about any snake. I’m talking about a fucking python, and this thing was a beast. Longer than my goddamn leg.”

“No shit?”

“Nooo shit.” Rooster’s face was animated as he told us, “I tried to be cool about it. Figured it wasn’t a big deal until we were going at it, and she noticed that the fucking thing had gotten out of his cage. She didn’t think nothing of it. Thought it was no big deal that the damn thing was just roaming around her apartment, but I wasn’t having it. No damn way I was gonna let that fucking thing slither into bed with us. I didn’t need that kind of competition, so I grabbed my shit and got the hell out of there.”

“You didn’t even get your nut off?”

“Fuck nah. I got the hell out of there and never looked back.”

“Can’t say I blame ya. If I had a chode like yours, I would’ve done the same fucking thing.”

“You must not know who you’re talking to. I’d blow the bottom out of the well.”

“Okay, buddy. You keep telling yourself that.”

Torch gave his perpetual five o’clock shadow a quick scratch, then reached over and grabbed a cold beer from the cooler as he said, “Kind of reminds me of that time Hayes convinced me to go out with that cute, little librarian. I thought I’d stumbled into something pretty good with her until I found out she had a thing for cats. And I’m not talking about one or two. This girl had a house full of them.”

“Ah, hell naw.”

“Yeah, it was pretty bad, but she was cute and pretty eager. I figured I’d still try and make a go of it. I hooked up with her and woke up the next morning with thirty beady cat eyes staring me down like I was a piece of fucking roast beef. Creepy as shit. I knew right then and there that it didn’t matter how good she was in the sack. It just wasn’t going to work out.”

“Cat chicks are as crazy as those rock chicks.”

“Rock chicks?”

“You know, those bitches who make spells and shit and sleep with rocks. They’ll burn sage in your house and talk about your aurora and shit. That mess scares the hell out of me.”

“Says the man who’s killed a guy with his bare hands.”

“Dude, I’m telling ya, these chicks are next level. If a chick asks about your birth month or sign, run.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Rooster chuckled as he said, “What about that chick with the whip? You still see her?”

“Not since the night she cost me my manhood.” Torch reached down and adjusted his crotch. “I got a spot on my left nut that still ain’t right.”

Rooster immediately snickered, “Guess you could say she left a lasting impression.”

“No more than the redhead you went out with a couple of months back.” Torch exhaled a couple of smoke rings and cocked his brow as he said, “Way I remember it, you’re lucky your ass doesn’t whistle when you fart.”

“Touché.” Rooster shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I really need to start looking into the women before I take ‘em out.”

We continued to bare our souls, exchanging tales of heartbreak, missed connections, and the search for the woman who would set our world on fire. I listened for a while but eventually grew tired of the nonsense and tuned them out. My mind started to wander as I ran my hand over the wooden

counter, the tips of my fingers trailing the worn grooves carved by my brothers, and it wasn't long before my thoughts drifted to Londyn.

It had been just almost five years since the day I ended things with her, and I still hadn't forgotten the pained expression on her face when she got in her car and drove away. It had haunted me, so much so that I feared I might never put it behind me.

There were times when I considered checking in on her to see how she was doing, but I just didn't have it in me. I couldn't stomach the idea of her moving on or being with some other dude, so I didn't chance it. I told myself it was the best thing for both of us, but there were times—like tonight—when I wasn't so sure.

I was still contemplating what could've been when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned and found my father standing behind me with a serious expression on his face. "You got a minute?"

"Yeah, what's up."

"Let's step outside."

"Ah, hell," I grumbled under my breath and stood. "That doesn't sound good."

Dad didn't respond. He simply turned and started towards the door. I followed him through the crowd of brothers, and the second we were outside, Dad looked at me and asked, "You making it okay tonight?"

"I got no complaints." I wasn't in the mood to beat around the bush, so I asked, "Whatcha got on your mind, Pop?"

"You." Worry etched his face as he said, "You know the vote is coming up."

"I'm aware."

I wasn't exactly shocked when I first heard that my father was stepping down as president. He'd held the position for as long as I could remember—long before I was even born, and the years had taken their toll. And rightly so. He was known

for his unwavering dedication to the club and his brothers. And because of that dedication, he was both feared and respected by all who knew him.

As much as we all hated to see him step down, I knew we would find a way to carry on. I wasn't sure the same held true for him, so I asked, "You sure you're ready for this?"

"I'm not leaving the club. I'm just stepping down and giving some fresh blood a chance to lead. A serious expression marked his face as Dad continued, "That being said, I know you are hoping that the fresh blood will be you, but I don't think you're ready."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I know you don't agree, but I think you need more time. You still have some growing up to do."

"Oh, for fuck's sake. What do you want from me?" I huffed. "I've proven myself time and time again, and it's never enough for you."

"Being president isn't just about being tough or fearless. It's about making decisions that can affect not only your life but the lives of our brothers and the reputation of this club."

"You don't think I get that?" I argued. "Hell, I've been watching you do it since I was able to walk."

"Watching and doing it for yourself are two different things. You can't just slap that president's patch on your chest and that be the end of it. It's about leading and listening, honing your instincts, and everything in between."

"Never thought otherwise."

He reached over and placed his hand on my shoulder. "You have to trust me when I say experience is the best teacher. You'll see that this role is a heavy responsibility—one that will weigh on you in ways you can't begin to imagine."

He wasn't just speaking as my father. He was also there as the revered President of Fury—a role he hadn't taken lightly. His weathered face carried the marks of the countless battles he'd fought and the lessons he'd learned from them. He was a

pillar of strength in both the brotherhood and as my father. He was respected by all, especially me—which is why it hurt so deeply to hear him say, “I’ve been through it all. I’ve been through the good and the bad. I’ve seen the highs and the lows, and I don’t want you to rush into something you’re not ready for.”

“How can you think I’m not ready?” I tried my best to keep my voice low and steady as I told him, “I’ve been preparing for this day since I was born. You’re talking to me like I’m clueless about this shit.”

Beneath my father’s rugged exterior, there lay a compassionate heart that beat fiercely for his club and the values it upheld. His leadership was unwavering, guided by a deep sense of honor and unwritten codes of loyalty. Like a seasoned oak in a storm, he anchored the club and its brothers, providing guidance and protection, and I’d always hoped to follow in his footsteps.

It pained me to hear him say, “I know you’re not clueless. I also know you aren’t ready. The day will come when you are, but for now, you still have some learning to do. Let the road teach you its lessons, and when the time comes, you’ll be the president this club truly needs.”

“But you don’t think that time is now.”

“No, son. I don’t.”

“Then, that’s all that needs to be said.”

Without saying anything more, I pushed past him and headed back inside the clubhouse. I didn’t bother going back to the bar. I was in no mood to deal with the guys, so I headed straight to my room and crashed down on my bed. As I stared up at the ceiling, I thought over everything my father had said, and it was impossible not to feel disappointed and hurt.

I’d dedicated my life to the club, proving my loyalty, and I honestly believed I’d earned my place among the ranks. Hearing my father’s lack of faith in me gutted me, but that lack of faith also stirred something inside of me.



I was more determined than ever to prove my father wrong.

Not only to him but to myself.

## Londyn



Growing up, I always imagined myself living in a small house on the Washington coast with a beautiful view of the North Pacific. I would have a career in law, saving the world one case at a time, with a loving, doting husband and two precious children. It was a wonderful dream, but it was just that.

A dream.

I actually lived in Seattle in the Belltown area. It was a bustling area that was growing by the minute, and while I liked it there, I worried that it wasn't the best place to raise Dalton, my four-year-old son. He was energetic, curious, and often rebellious, and there were times when I wondered if I'd made a mistake when I chose to move to such a busy part of the city—especially when I had to rise an extra forty-five minutes early just to get him to preschool in time for his graduation.

I was sleeping so soundly when the warm sun started to peek through the curtains, announcing that it was time for me to get out of bed. I tossed back the covers and was hit with a mix of nostalgia and excitement. I couldn't believe that it was Dalton's last day of preschool. It was a day that would mark the beginning of a new chapter in our lives. While Dalton was thrilled, I was a bit apprehensive.

I felt like time was flying by, and I was just standing alone in the wind.

I shook the feelings off and went to Dalton's room to wake him. When I walked in, he was still sound asleep, his little

chest rising and falling ever so softly. I walked over to the edge of his bed and brushed a strand of hair away from his face as I whispered, “Hey, buddy. It’s time to get up.”

“Hmm-hmmm,” he fussed with a groan.

“Come on, sweetheart.” I leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. “We gotta get ready for your big day.”

Dalton stirred, slowly opening his eyes, and a sleepy smile formed on his face. “Graduation?”

“That’s right. It’s your last day of preschool.”

“Really?” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

“Yep. You better get moving or we’re gonna be late.”

Dalton sat up and stretched, then reached over and gave me a long hug. Once he’d given me my morning love, he got up and waited as I placed his clothes on the foot of the bed. As soon as he was dressed, I combed his hair, and he brushed his teeth. After a quick breakfast, we both rushed out of the house and to my car.