



MANCHESTER CHAPTER

SKYE

PART TWO

UNTAMED SONS MC BOOK SEVEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JESSICA AMES

SKYE

UNTAMED SONS MC MANCHESTER
CHAPTER

PART TWO

JESSICA AMES

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Editing - Dark Syde Edits

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Alpha Readers – Jayne Ruston, Clara Martinez Turco, Jenni Oldham

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book contains upsetting themes. For a full list of these themes visit:

<https://www.jessicaamesauthor.com/jessicaamestwcw>

This book is set in the United Kingdom. Some spellings may differ.

CHAPTER 1

SKYE

Fear makes my legs wobbly as I stumble back from Rage and this man who wants to keep me here. He doesn't look old, maybe in his late thirties, but he has a 'President' patch on the front of his leather vest, though from the way he's commanding things, I would have guessed he's in charge without it. I've been around power, and I know how it looks. Even Rage defers to him.

But I don't care who he is. He's not my president, and there is no way in hell I'm letting myself become a captive again.

"Stay back!" I sound hysterical. I feel it.

What are they going to do to me?

This was always a risk when I came here, but I didn't expect to be discovered so quickly. Now that they know who my father is, my throat squeezes shut, choking me. I keep my hands locked over my baby, determined to get us out of this mess I've caused.

All my bad decisions have brought us to this place. I slide my gaze towards Rage, hoping he will protect me. He has a stake in me staying alive, though it would probably solve all his problems if I'm dead. Then there's no baby and no worries for him.

My nerves are on fire despite how spent I am. I don't know how my body is still moving. I want to lie down and sleep for a week, but adrenaline pulses through my veins, and I suspect it's the only reason I'm still on my feet.

“Skye...”

Rage steps forwards, his hands raised as if he means me no harm. I don't believe him. A moment ago, he was spitting venom at me, calling me a bitch and accusing me of faking my pregnancy to spy.

“You come any closer and I swear I will make you eat your balls.”

The frown doesn't surprise me, but he stops, glancing at his president for instruction. I scan the room, looking for the lady who had taken care of me, but she's standing with the other women, her eyes blank.

There are varying levels of animosity coming from all the women. They think I'm a spy. A cold tingle of dread spreads through my body, attacking every synapse it passes through. It's accompanied by a wave of light-headedness that has me swaying on my feet. I need to sit and eat. I'm so tired of fighting. Maybe dying would be better. At least then I would be with my baby, and I wouldn't have to worry about anything.

Even as that thought enters my head, my survival instinct flares to life. I have to live. I *want* to live.

“I'm not a spy,” I repeat, backing up another few steps. I nudge a table, making it wobble, but I don't pull my gaze from Rage and the other man, who are moving with me in slow, measured steps.

“This ain't gonna help,” Rage says.

“I know what you do to women,” I snap out, fear making me bold. “I'll die before I let you violate my body.”

Rage's eyes narrow, but not in anger. I swear it's confusion I see. I don't have a chance to understand it. Tattooed arms wrap around me from behind, pulling me tight against what feels like a slab of concrete. My pulse skyrockets, pounding so hard, I feel starved of breath.

I thrash against the ironclad grip, trying to free myself, but the man holding me is so strong, I can't move him at all. It

doesn't help that I'm so weak I can't defend myself, meaning I'm easily overpowered.

"Don't fuckin' hurt her!" Rage yells.

I don't know why he cares, but some of those knots in my chest loosen knowing I've not completely lost the only support I have.

"Ain't gonna hurt her," a gruff voice says from behind me. "Just didn't want her hurting *you*. Not sure if you noticed, kid, but this cat's got claws."

I glance up and see a man I don't recognise. It's not the scary-looking guy from before. This one has short hair and a beard. His eyes are dark and stormy, the promise of violence looming in those orbs. I try not to show my terror as it clutches my heart.

The President moves in front of me now that I'm restrained. I don't buck against the hold on me. I'm too exhausted, too frightened, and too done to fight. I peer up at him, trying to be strong, but in the last moment, my resolve fails.

"Don't hurt my baby," I plead.

"No one is touching the kid," Rage snaps, his gaze darting between the President and the man holding me. "Right?"

The President's furrowed brow is the first real emotion I've seen from this man. "Right," he agrees. "I don't know what you've been told, but we ain't the ones killing innocents. You and your baby will be safe, as long as you do as you're told."

I don't miss the threat within those words, but I lift my chin, steeling my spine.

"And if I don't?"

His smile should be disarming, but it's nightmare fuel. I don't doubt this man could kill me a thousand different ways, and I wouldn't be able to lift a finger to stop him.

"Don't test me, Skye. I'm not a patient man." His gaze lifts to over my head. "Put her in one of the rooms for now. We'll

talk after you rest.” He says the last part to me.

Saliva pools in my mouth. What are ‘the rooms’? Are they torture chambers? My gaze darts to Rage, pleading with him to stop this. “Please.”

He looks torn as he scrubs a hand over his jaw.

“No one’s gonna lay a finger on you,” he promises, but I’m not sure this situation is his to control anymore. “Just don’t fight, okay?”

Realising I’m completely alone in this, I sag in the arms of the man behind me. “Keep your feet, darlin’.”

“I’ll take her,” Rage says, his face a mask I can’t read.

“You sure?”

“I brought her here. She’s my problem.”

A problem... that’s all I’ll ever be. I was a problem for my father because I wasn’t a boy. How he wanted desperately a son to take the throne after he dies. I was a problem for Scarlett, and for Tommy. They both expected me to be the good girl who toed the line, and Scarlett hated me for loving Tommy and being loved back by him. Now, I’m a problem for Rage.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out what’s happening around me, but I have to open them quickly when my bicep is grabbed. Rage’s fingers aren’t gentle, but they’re not hard either as he tugs me to get my feet moving.

I glance at the women as I pass them. There’s no softness there anymore, no sympathy. They hold the babies closer, and the older kids are kept behind them, as if I’m dangerous.

My name inspires fear in them.

So does theirs. I’ve mourned the men who died fighting this club. Closed caskets, some were too fucked-up, they couldn’t be buried at all and had to be cremated. These people aren’t innocent in this war either.

Rage tugs me, and I stumble over my feet as he guides me to a door. As we push through it and into a long corridor, my

fear climbs another notch.

“What are you doing?” I try to twist away from him, but I’m no match for his strength.

“I don’t know why you’re pissed off. You’re the one who lied. You put us in this position.”

He continues to frogmarch me up the corridor, passing multiple closed doors. I try not to let the fear consume me, but it’s churning through me, heightening my nausea.

I want this nightmare to end.

As bad as things were at home, at least I knew Scarlett. She hated me, but I knew she would never kill me. Rage, I’m not so sure about.

I try to swallow around the dryness in my mouth, but my tongue feels too thick and wrong as Rage opens a door near the stairs. There’s not time to process anything before he tugs me inside and flicks on the lights. The room is illuminated, and only then does he release me.

I stumble away from him, my gaze roaming around the room. I expect to see chains and torture devices, not a double bed made up with dark blue bedding. There are bedside tables either side, a lamp on each, and a tall dresser against one wall. A small two-seater sofa is against the wall adjacent to the bed, a crocheted blanket draped over the back. It seems oddly domestic considering where I am, but I’m so relieved, I don’t think too hard about it.

Rage locks the door behind him before walking over to the curtains and dragging them open. I’m not sure if the bars on the window are designed to keep someone in or stop someone getting out.

I shudder, trying not to think about why they need bars in the first place.

Rage peers through the window before going to another door and opening it. I glimpse the bathroom suite as he glances around then pulls it closed again.

There's a weird moment as our eyes connect. I can see how disturbed he is by all of this, but I don't feel an ounce of sympathy for him.

"I came here for your help." There is accusation in my tone.

"You knew I was club," he fires back. "You still came here anyway. Why? Is Howler right? Are you here to spy?"

I guess Howler must be the guy with the President patch on his vest. His name is just as stupid as Rage's, but I hold that thought to myself. I'm not exactly on friendly ground here.

"Do you think my father is stupid enough to send his daughter to spy on people who would kill her?"

He doesn't speak as he takes that in. My legs are so tired that I sink onto the sofa, letting my body relax as I take my weight off my feet. I don't want to have this conversation. What I want to do is sleep, but I don't think that's going to happen. Rage doesn't look remotely like he's going to let this go.

"Weirder things have happened.

"My father has no idea I'm here. If he sees me again, he's as likely to put a bullet in me as your club is."

The back of my neck feels tightly knotted. If I was at home now, I'd have a bath in my jacuzzi tub. The pressure of the jets would be amazing against my soreness, but the small glimpse I got of the bathroom didn't reveal a tub, just a shower cubicle.

Rage drops his hands to his hips. "I need you to be honest with me. I can't help you otherwise."

I glare at him. "You're not helping me at all. What's the plan here, Rage? Lock me up in here until the baby's born and then what? Kill me? Or do you plan on sending parts of me back to my father now?"

His jaw flexes, his eyes flashing angrily. "Ain't our style to hurt innocents, Skye. Are you innocent?"

I blow out a breath, trying to keep my composure. "Do you honestly believe I came to spy on your club?"

There's a pause and my paper-thin nerves almost lose control before I can calm myself. If he does think I'm a spy, I'm screwed. How on earth am I meant to convince him I don't have anything to do with my father's business?

"I don't know what to think," he admits, leaning back against the wall behind him. "You come here telling me you're pregnant and asking for money, even though I know you ain't poor. Then you give me some story about being locked up by your family and your dad controlling your life. He controlling you being here?"

I hate that he's using my words against me. "No! He doesn't know I'm here. No one does."

"If you want my help, you gotta start being honest with me."

The glare I give him is glacial, but he doesn't react—not that I expect him to. He's cold as ice. "I have been honest with you."

"Skye—"

"I have," I interrupt before he can deny me. "I'm not involved in my father's business or even his world. My dad is a misogynist whose whole organisation is patriarchal. I don't have a penis, so I'm not invited to the table, which, to be honest, I'm fucking grateful for."

I sag back against the cushions of the couch, wondering if he will say anything if I curl up and sleep. My eyes are gritty, and my body craves rest.

"You really aren't involved in anything? Not even the legit shit?"

My smile is thin and unamused. "Not even the legit shit."

I feel the weight of his stare. It's as if he's trying to penetrate through my brain and see the lies he thinks are buried there. "Tell me about them locking you up."

I don't want to revisit what I did, but I don't think there's a choice if I'm going to get him to trust me. "I tried to run," I say. "I didn't want to be around that life anymore. I was done

sitting at home, waiting for a call to say my dad was dead because of—”

I break off, wincing.

“Because of my club?”

“Yeah.”

His face contorts into an angry snarl. “Everything that’s happening to the Pioneers, they brought on themselves, Skye. Everything.”

I don’t know how I manage, but I get to my feet, my fists clenched at my sides. I may not agree with how my father does business, but I refuse to accept that he is completely at fault here. “Oh, and because your club has clean hands, right? I mean, it’s not like we were burying men every week, is it? Do you know how many times we heard that a burial had to happen with a closed casket because of the brutality of...” I swallow down my words as they crack. “We’ve lost so many too, so don’t sit there and preach at me as if you’re so holy. Your club is as dirty as my father’s organisation.”

He rounds the bed, coming straight for me. I can’t help but backpedal, trying to avoid the onslaught of anger radiating from him. I didn’t just touch a nerve, I set it alight.

I swallow my terror as he gets in my face. “We’re fuckin’ dirty? Is that a joke? Your father is an animal, and the best thing that could happen to him is a bullet, but even that would be too fucking quick and easy. My club is going to pull him apart piece by piece for what he’s done.”

I don’t breathe, trying to calm my wildly fluttering heart rate. “Your club killed friends of mine.”

“Your father murdered a pregnant woman,” he counters.

I don’t know if it’s the ground that shifts or if my legs forget how to work, but I stumble, horror hammering into my chest. “What are you talking about?”

My father would never do that. Sure, I know he’s no saint, but then I doubt Rage is either. But he would never kill an expectant mother.

Rage sucks all the air out of me as he crowds my space. “Her name was Mara. She was pregnant with the little girl you saw in the common room. They blew a hole in her brain, killed her instantly.” My stomach bottoms out. The rush of bile into my mouth almost makes me retch as a disgusted feeling spreads through me. I don’t want to believe my father did these things.

“You’re lying,” I whisper, tears no doubt shimmering in my eyes.

“I wish I was, Skye. Luckily, her old man was barely five minutes from the hospital. He was able get her there, and they cut that baby out of her while she was dead.”

I can’t stop the sob that escapes my mouth. If what he’s saying is true, my father is an animal. I think about my baby and how I would feel if I died before I met him or her.

“And that ain’t the worst of his crimes,” Rage continues, not taking his foot off the gas as he delivers blow after blow. “There was a sixteen-year-old girl gunned down and murdered for being in a Pioneer bar.”

My chest feels like it’s caving in. Sixteen? Just two years younger than me, and her life just stopped. I know what these men do is dangerous and there are no mercies in that life, but these deaths aren’t people in that world.

Jack, and even Tommy, they joined the Pioneers knowing what they signed up for. That child will grow up without a mother. I know how that feels. I lost mine when I was young, and it changed me in ways I can’t explain, and it will change her too.

My father.

Desmond.

He did that to that little baby.

I step back, needing space, but he grabs my wrists, forcing me to stay in place.

“Then there was the two lunatics with machetes who ran me and two of my club brothers off the road. I had to fight for

my life with my bare hands.”

It feels like someone is turning bands around my chest so tight, it’s crushing my lungs.

“So, don’t stand there, Skye, and tell me we’re the same. We don’t target women or children. We don’t touch people not in this life. Your father doesn’t have those same scruples. He’d kill *you* if it served his fuckin’ purpose.”

“I’m sorry.” It’s a useless thing to say, but I don’t know what I can do.

“Your apology doesn’t bring back Mara or Jade.”

I try to swallow, but my throat feels like sandpaper. “It doesn’t, but I didn’t kill them. I didn’t even know it happened. I’m not Desmond. I don’t have blood on my hands.”

“Don’t you?”

I don’t know what he’s accusing me of here, but I’m scared to say anything. He’s still holding my wrists, and I’m sure he can feel my pulse pounding beneath his fingers. I can hear it in my ears.

“I see my father once in a blue moon, Rage. He drops in, lectures me about something, and then vanishes for months. It’s been like that for years. I’m not involved in his life that way, and I’m not responsible for his actions any more than you would be for your father’s.”

It’s the wrong comparison to make. Rage stiffens, his eyes blazing for a moment before he seems to realise what he’s doing. He releases me, stumbling back. I do the same, even though the illusion of space between us is just that—an illusion.

I watch him unravel in front of me, blinking as if trying to clear something from his eyes before he locks his gaze to mine. “No, you’re not responsible,” his voice is raw, “and that’s why you and our baby are still breathing. Ain’t no one ever gonna put a bullet in you because of who your daddy is.” He scrubs a hand over his mouth. “Get some rest. I’ll have something brought for you to eat.”

He all but runs to the door, unlocking it and dragging it open.

“Don’t leave me in here,” I beg.

He stops, turning to face me from the door frame, and I don’t know what I see in his eyes, but he shakes his head. “We have to know you’re not a threat before we can let you out. We can’t risk losing anyone else to the Pioneers.”

The door is closed behind him and I hear the scrape of the lock. My heart thuds as I stagger to it, grabbing the handle and pulling. The door doesn’t open, not that I expected it to. I lean my head against the wood, trying to breathe through my panic.

I left one prison for another, only I don’t think I’ll be able to escape this one.

CHAPTER 2

RAGE

As soon as I shut the door and lock it, I sag against the wall, my breath tearing out of me. My anger is a ball of knives inside my stomach, and I don't know how to calm it.

Skye bringing up my father the way she did unlocked something painful inside me, something I've tried to bury for years. Her words struck a nerve because I genuinely fear turning into that fucker.

I had to get out of that room before I did or said something I couldn't take back. That cunt is enough to flip the darkness on. I felt myself losing control, so I did the cowardly thing.

I ran away.

I drag my fingers through my hair. This is exactly why I shouldn't be near Skye or this baby. My father told me what I was when I was barely five years old, and he continued to feed me that narrative until I left him to die.

It's so strange how long it's been since I heard his voice, yet it still rings in my ears. I'll never forget that rasp and the mad glare in his eyes as he burned me or choked me out.

The devil is in you...

He told me that so many times, I started to believe it, but he was wrong. The devil wasn't in me until he put it there. Everything I am, everything I have become, was because of him. He created the monster I am. He fed the rage within me until it became an entity of its own.

Ragged breaths tear through me as I have the urge to put my fist through the wall. This situation is a fucking disaster, and there's no getting around it. I've created a shit storm, and I don't know how the hell to fix it.

Skye Richardson.

Of all the women I could have fucked that night, the universe put the daughter of a man my club is actively trying to kill in front of me. She was practically gifted to me on a silver fucking platter.

I sag against the door, scrubbing a hand over my face. I don't know what my brothers are thinking. Do they assume I'm working with her? Do they think I'm in Richardson's camp because I fucked his daughter?

The line I'm walking is so fine that for the first time since I joined the Sons, I feel genuine fear. I'm not scared of dying, though that is a possibility if they believe I've betrayed the patch.

What terrifies me most is losing my kutte. This piece of leather might mean nothing to Skye, or to outsiders, but it represents everything I've struggled to achieve.

Without my place in the Sons, who am I?

The club operates on trust. If that foundation is rocked, that's a problem. The men have to believe I will have their backs, and their families' backs too. Even the slightest hint of doubt will be a death sentence for my time here.

Maybe if I'd been here longer and had time to prove my loyalty to Howler...

But I ain't earned that in Manchester yet.

I'm not even sure I would be in a better position if this had happened while I was in London.

There's not a single thing I can think to say to fix this shit storm. I don't want Skye locked in that room, not when she's sick, but I'm also aware that her future is in the hands of the club too. If they decide she's here to collect information, then I don't know what the fuck will happen. As a rule, the club

doesn't hurt women, but I don't know if that extends to those who are actively trying to harm us.

I don't want to, but I need to man up here and face my brothers. I have to explain myself and try to fix this mess. I have to deal with the fallout of what we've done and try to do some damage control.

Pushing off the wall, I make my way back to the common room. As soon as I step inside, I'm again pinned by the weight of the entire club—brothers and old ladies. I force myself to cross the room, heading for Howler.

I don't know what to expect, so I brace in case he decides to lash out. Ravage would have put me on the ground, but that's not what Howler does.

"I've called a doctor."

Not what I was expecting him to say, so I frown. "Thanks."

His tongue presses against the inside of his cheek. "Don't like having her here, but the fact is she is here and she's clearly sufferin'."

I catch sight of Pia standing with the other women. She gives me a small smile, and I wonder if she had anything to do with getting Skye help. Pia has a good heart, and she's also been in a position like this, though when she was taken captive, she was abused by the club that took her. No one will hurt Skye—I won't allow it.

"She needs food too."

"She'll get whatever she needs," Howler assures me before he lifts his head, addressing the entire room. "Church, now."

I don't move. I'm not an officer, so I don't get an invite to sit around the table. Neither does Hawk. As a former nomad, he hasn't earned his place here either, so I'm surprised as fuck when Howler turns back to me. "You're coming too."

I can't help but feel this doesn't bode well for me. My stomach is knotted as I follow after him, Blackjack, and Terror. I've never been in the room where the club holds the

meeting that decides every single thing that happens, and as I approach it, Blackjack nudges me. “Phone, keys, and wallet need to be left in the box.”

I fumble in my jeans pocket for those things and follow behind the others, depositing my shit in a large wooden box on a table before the doors.

My heart is hammering in my chest. I don’t know what’s going to happen. Is Howler going to ask for my kutte right away? Or will he give me a chance to explain?

I pause before the box and close my eyes as I duck my head. I’ve fucked up a lot in my life, but this? I don’t know that there’s any coming back from it. I’ve put everyone in a dangerous position because I’m a fucking impulsive prick.

I want to lose my shit. I want to scream and yell and show exactly why I’m called Rage, but it won’t solve anything. Maybe Hawk’s mentorship is having a good influence on me. Before I came here, I would’ve lost it. I would have gone straight on the defensive, falling back into those familiar patterns of behaviour that have enabled me to survive over the years.

That ain’t gonna wash here.

Opening my eyes, I dump my stuff in the box, and once I’m clean, I step through the door. The room is surprisingly small, just big enough to fit a long table with several chairs around it. There’s a sideboard and mini fridge pushed against the far wall, and the Untamed Sons insignia is directly in front of me, painted on the white wall.

I take in the skull with a crown on it, wings poking out from behind it, without a word. This is what I’ve fought so hard to be a part of for years. The Sons was always my end game, and it still is. I want to be a part of this club so badly, but... Skye’s having my baby, and that changes everything.

Howler is already seated at the head of the table, a wooden gavel clutched between his fingers as he settles in. Blackjack and Terror are either side of him—his right and left hands. I don’t know which seats are reserved for who, but I know

better than to claim one. I move to the back of the room and lean against the wall, trying to ignore the blossoming unease.

No one speaks as we wait for the other officers to arrive. Socket comes first, taking his place at the table. He doesn't ask why I'm in church, but I see the curiosity in his eyes. Brewer and Hawk walk in at the same time. I don't expect to see him, and I can tell Hawk is as unsure about this invitation by how his eyes narrow in question. I don't say anything. No one does as the door is shut and locked.

Howler gestures to the only remaining empty seat. "Sit."

I push off the wall and drag the chair out, taking my place around the table. I've never felt like more of an imposter than I do in this moment.

I can feel Hawk's eyes burning into me, but he doesn't ask the questions I know he must be desperate to fire at me. I've never cared about pissing people off, but for some reason, the thought I might have disappointed Hawk leaves a foul taste in my mouth.

"We have a problem," Howler starts with a monumental understatement.

"What kind of problem?" Brewer glances at me, and I can see he's confused why I'm here.

"Rage impregnated the enemy," Terror says.

The glibness of his statement takes a moment for the others to realise what he's said.

Hawk's gaze snaps to me, and I force myself to meet it. I fucked up, but the only way to get through this is to brazen it out. I'm not working with the enemy, and I'll do whatever it takes to prove that. Knowing the damage my actions are going to cause is the worst feeling. I wish Howler had called this meeting without me present.

"I'm confused." Brewer leans forwards on the table, his brows knitted together. "He impregnated... the enemy? You mean, Desmond Richardson?"

Terror side-eyes the brother. “Too much fucking is rotting your brain.”

“Richardson’s daughter,” Howler says before Terror can add more insults.

The air is so heavy, it’s suffocating.

“Did you know?” I don’t miss the accusation in Hawk’s tone as he glares at me.

This is going to hit him hardest. He lost someone he considered a daughter to the Pioneers, and I’ve put a baby in the most high-ranking female in that organisation.

“No,” I say, my voice quiet. “Not until about five minutes ago.”

“What does it mean for the club?” Socket interlaces his fingers on top of the table, getting to the root of the problem.

“I don’t know,” Howler admits. “It depends on her intentions in coming here.”

“She came here for help,” I say. “She ain’t involved in her father’s business.”

“And you know that for certain, do you?” Blackjack leans forwards to peer up the table at me, and I force myself to remain steel under his scrutiny.

“No, but do you really think Richardson would send in his own daughter to spy, knowing if she got caught, she could be killed?”

“Richardson is unhinged,” Brewer points out, not helping the case I’m trying to make. “I wouldn’t put anything past him.”

“She told me her father would likely kill her if he sees her again.”

“Why?” Socket questions.

“I don’t know.” I never asked because I’d freaked and run out the room like a fucking baby. “She said she ran away and her father dragged her home and locked her up.”

There's silence for a beat as everyone takes in that information.

"You believe her?" Terror sounds sceptical and I don't blame him for that.

My shoulders shift. "I don't know what she'd gain from lying. She ain't exactly hardened in a way I'd expect her to be if she were in the life."

Skye is the opposite. Yeah, she has fire, but the moment she was pushed, she'd crumbled. It doesn't align with her fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with Richardson.

"Even if we keep her here, how the fuck are we meant to discover if she's working for him?" Terror's words settle over the room like a heavy shroud. It's a good point, and one I don't see an answer to.

"If she were a guy, we'd... *extract* that information from her." Brewer rubs the back of his neck, and my anger flares at the suggestion.

"She's fuckin' pregnant," I snap. "Ain't no one torturing her."

"That's not what I was suggesting," Brewer counters with a wince.

"No one is going to lay a finger on her," Howler agrees. "Not while she's carrying."

I don't know why, but that doesn't give me a warm feeling.

"So, what the fuck *do* we do with her?" Hawk doesn't look at me as he asks this.

My thoughts are turbulent and chaotic as I listen to my brothers discussing the mother of my child like she's disposable. I shouldn't care, she's Richardson's daughter, but I feel responsible for both her and her impact on the club.

"She my responsibility," I say. "I'll do whatever is necessary."

"You've already done enough."

I would have preferred Hawk to hit me than say that. It's a blow to my chest that sends a wave of pain through me. I should take it, it's deserved, but it stokes the fire inside me. "I didn't do shit. I met a girl in a bar and fucked her. I didn't know who the hell she was. This wasn't part of some grand plan. She didn't know who I was either."

"How can you be sure of that?"

I grit my teeth. I understand his anger, his accusation, but fuck, it pisses me off. "When I left, there was a moment where she followed me outside. She saw me putting my kutte on. Her reaction told me everything, Hawk. She was fucking terrified. I don't believe she knew who I was."

"Wait a fucking minute..." Blackjack sits forwards. "Why was your kutte off?"

Oh fuck. This is a can of worms I absolutely do not want to open. I glance at Howler, who is watching me intently.

"Crank's orders. No one moves around the city wearin' colours. I was told it's to protect brothers from being killed by Pioneers."

"Fuckin' cowards," Socket mutters.

"I argued, believe me, I did, but that's just how they do shit down there. They wouldn't let me leave the clubhouse without removing it."

"Ain't it time to deal with fucking Crank?" Hawk demands.

"Way past time," Howler agrees, "and he will be dealt with, Hawk. I give you my word."

That seems to calm the brother, and he sinks back into his seat.

"This is all fascinating," Terror says, "and Crank is a fuckin' cunt, but it still doesn't answer our immediate problem. What do we do with this girl?"

"Send her back to her father," Brewer says, shifting his shoulders.

The growl that erupts from me is unexpected. “Ain’t happenin’.”

“Just say she isn’t working with the Pioneers and Richardson finds out we have her. He’s gonna come for his daughter,” he fires back, hackles raised as he gets defensive.

“I don’t care. Ain’t givin’ her back to her father. She ran from him, and I don’t have the details yet but the fact she did is enough for me. Ain’t putting my kid in a dangerous situation where I got no control.”

Everyone starts to speak, talking over each other, deciding what to do with the woman carrying my child. I try to find calm, but this is my life, my... family.

And that feels weird to say, but no matter what transpires here, Skye is connected to me forever if she has this kid.

“Quiet!” Howler shouts to be heard over the noise, and everyone silences. “You think she’s in trouble?” This question is directed at me.

“From what she’s said, yeah. She’s got marks on her face, on her wrists. Her car is damaged too. I believe her when she says she needs my help, and maybe I’m stupid for taking that chance, but you grow up the way I did, you learn to read people. I can see through the liars and the cheats. She ain’t either of those and she ain’t faking her fear.”

“Okay. We keep her here for now. She’s to be under guard anytime she leaves the room, and she ain’t to leave the clubhouse without an escort. I’ll put out some feelers, see if anyone’s talking about her being missing. No one is to touch her while she’s here. And Rage?”

I meet his gaze. “Yeah?”

“You get close to her. You see if she’s playin’ us and find out what the fuck she knows.”

It’s no less than I would expect, so I nod before Howler brings down the gavel. Everyone stands at the same time, pushing their chairs back. I don’t move for a moment, my head swimming.

“I’m loyal to the patch,” I say, making my brothers stop to listen. “Being part of this club is all I’ve ever wanted, and I’ve fought and clawed my way to earn this kutte. I know I came here under a cloud, but I’m trying everything I can to prove to you all that I’m worthy to be a Son. I know I brought this shit to us, but I didn’t know who she was, and if I had, I’d never have touched her. I can’t change what’s happened. I wish I could, but... I won’t apologise either. That kid... this ain’t how I imagined building a family, but I created this mess and I’m gonna do what I can to be a good father. That said, if she’s playing us, once my child is born, I’ll kill her myself.”

“No one doubts you, kid,” Hawk says, and I feel some of the bands wrapped around my ribs begin to loosen.

I push up and follow the others out the room. Hawk lingers behind, waiting until the rest have left. I’m not sure what he’s going to say to me, and that makes me edgy. I respect the fuck out of Hawk. I’ve never wanted anyone’s approval before, but I find myself wanting his respect more than I care to admit.

“When you fuck up, you really go all out,” he murmurs.

“Didn’t know who she was,” I protest, even though he knows this.

“You want to raise the kid?”

“I didn’t have the best start in life, Hawk. I don’t want to repeat that.”

He nods, his hands dropping to his hips. “I understand that. You know what you’re getting yourself into? Kids are demanding, hard work. You can’t just walk away when it gets too much.”

I snort, irritation making the sound harsh. “I fucked up and I made a mistake, but yeah, I’m in this.”

This seems to please him. “Okay then.”

He squeezes my shoulder before walking away. I don’t know how to take his response, but he didn’t punch me, so I guess that’s an improvement on how these talks with Hawk usually go.

I'm not sure I'm ready to face Skye yet, but I need to find out exactly what is going on with her. And this time, I can't run away.

CHAPTER 3

SKYE

I stare at the locked door. Yet again, I'm a prisoner, and I want to tear my hair out. I left one cell for another, only this one is far more dangerous. These people have a reason to hurt me. The things Rage told me that my father has done sit in my veins like ice. I don't want to believe he is capable of committing such evils acts, but I know in my heart he absolutely is. Desmond Richardson, even as a father, has never been a soft man. There has always been a part of me that is afraid of him. Growing up, I knew exactly when to push him and when to retreat, though I still tested those boundaries from time to time.

The bloodshed seems so pointless when this is the outcome. A motherless child and a dead teenager are added to the list of bodies piled up because of this war. Too many casualties have already been created on both sides.

I try not to think about that woman dying before she got to know her baby, but it sticks to my brain like molasses. How could my father sanction the death of a pregnant woman? He knows how hard I fought to come back after Mum died. To take someone so vulnerable and kill her is unconscionable.

My stomach churns, making a wave of queasiness wash through me. I can't imagine not meeting my child, though considering my predicament, it might become my reality. I touch my belly, something I'm finding myself doing more and more since I discovered my pregnancy. I don't know why, but it makes me feel connected to my baby.

"I'm sorry I got us into this mess, little one," I murmur. I doubt he or she can hear me, but I say it anyway. It makes me

feel better to vocalise my apology.

I make a pledge in this moment that I will fight no matter what to protect my baby, even if I have to go against Rage and his entire club. Against all the insurmountable odds, I will survive, and I will raise my child alone if I have to. I should've done that in the first place.

Coming here must have been a moment of temporary insanity. What was I thinking? That Rage and I would walk off into the sunset with our baby?

No wonder my father never wanted me in his business. I'm a naive fucking fool. I might as well have gift wrapped myself before I handed my life over to these people.

I twist to look at the bed behind me. The mattress is soft and the duvet inviting. I would love to sleep for a week, but I can't afford to let my guard down. I need to have my wits about me in case they try to harm me. I'm not having my throat slit while I'm catching z's.

Despite feeling lightheaded, I push up off the bed and walk over to the window. The bars covering the glass look pretty solid, and unless I become as skinny as a piece of paper, there's no way I can slip between them and the window.

I wander into the ensuite. It's surprisingly large. There's a double walk-in shower alongside the toilet and basin. Towels hang on the rail, ready to use, and when I look in the cupboard under the sink, I find toiletries for both men and women.

How many people use this room?

Do they have a steady stream of prisoners?

How many people have died in this room?

I push that thought back savagely. I don't need to think about dying because it's not going to happen. Rage might be wary of me, but he's also been protective.

No, he's been protective of the baby. You're just the incubator.

I don't like how much that hurts. I shouldn't care. Rage is just some guy I fucked in a bar, and the only thing that keeps

us tethered together is that mistake. If I didn't have a bun in the oven, I would've run from my house and disappeared.

I should have done that anyway.

As I step back into the room, the sound of the lock turning freezes me in place. I didn't expect anyone to come back so soon, and I don't have a plan yet for getting out of here. I'm not strong enough anyway. My body is shaky as the door creaks open. I can't describe the relief I feel when it's Rage who steps into the room. *Better the devil you know, right?*

He kicks the door shut behind him but doesn't lock it. I'm not sure if that's because he knows I'm incapable of running, but his lack of concern that I might try annoys me. I'm down, but I'm not out. His gaze roams over me as he steps inside, his eyes tight... his shoulders too. He obviously doesn't like what he sees because his expression deepens.

"You feelin' bad still?"

"It doesn't really go away," I say, my tone glib.

"You gotta eat. Ain't good enough to be passing out 'cause you're hungry."

Is he serious?

"I was kept captive. I didn't get a choice about mealtimes." I stare at him in disbelief that he's blaming me for this. "How did I ever fuck you? You are the most sanctimonious prick I've ever met, and that's saying a lot because most of the people in my life are dicks."

"You done?" The bored tone he adopts pisses me off.

"No, I'm not done. I'm so far from done. I trusted you, Rage. I came here hoping you were the only person left in my life who wouldn't shit on me, but you're just like everyone else. You want to use me and then discard me when I've fulfilled your purpose."

"You don't know me well enough to assume that's what I'll do."

"I don't need to know you. I've dealt with plenty of men like you. Those with power, and those with the means to take

that power away from others. I know you think I'm this stupid, naive girl, and in a lot of ways I am, but I know enough to know when someone is only keeping me around for their own gain. If I wasn't pregnant, would you kill me?"

"No." The answer is given so fast, I believe him. "I told you, we don't kill innocents and we don't hurt people not in the life. But if you're working with your father... that changes things."

"I'm not. I swear to you, Rage."

"Okay then."

I raise a brow. "Okay?"

"I don't have a reason to doubt you. Don't give me one."

He's holding a brown paper bag and a bottle of something that looks sugary. There's a measure of uncertainty as he moves closer to me and thrusts the bag and bottle in my direction.

I don't move to take them from him. "What's this?"

"A peace offering. Doc's on the way, but he said you should eat something in the meantime. I don't know what you like, so I asked the prospect to get you something plain. The girls said strong smells aren't a good thing for someone who's..."

"Pregnant?" I finish for him.

"Yeah." He seems uncomfortable admitting that.

"I'll eat anything," I assure him, taking the stuff from him. I move over to the sofa and sink onto it before I balance the bag on my knee. I make quick work of tearing it open. I'm starving, and my stomach is in knots as it grumbles away.

I'm not sure what I'm expecting to find inside, but there's a sandwich. The label says it's ham, but it looks like good meat, not that cheap processed shit the supermarkets sell. The bread looks good too, light and fluffy. There's some kind of small pie thing as well and a pot with fresh fruit in it. Another little bag inside hides a chocolate muffin.

“Thanks.” I pull out the muffin first, unwrapping it and picking a chunk off so I can stuff it into my mouth.

The sugar hits my tongue instantly, and I almost groan around my first mouthful. My poor stomach growls loudly in response to getting what it needs.

Rage says nothing as I eat the muffin, not caring if it’s on my face. I don’t come up for air until I’ve finished it. Only then do I uncap the drink and take a long sip. I was right about it being sugary. It’s so sweet, it almost makes my tongue curl, but I’m already starting to feel better.

I slow down as I start on the sandwich, but Rage hasn’t moved or said a word this entire time.

“Are you just going to watch me stuff my face?” I demand, pausing only for a second before I take a huge bite of my sandwich.

“I didn’t want to stop you eating.”

I don’t know if he means that to be sweet but tears prick my eyes anyway. I don’t want to cry, but there are a hundred emotions circling through me, and all of them are so heightened, it’s too much.

“You watching me like some kind of food pervert isn’t going to stop me,” I counter.

He moves into the room, sitting on the edge of the bed opposite me. Leaning forwards, he clasps his hands between his parted knees. “You don’t have to eat like this is your last meal. I’ll bring you as much food as you want.”

Bring me.

The implication is that he intends to hold me here for longer. My appetite doesn’t flee, but it certainly isn’t as good as it was. I put down the sandwich, making sure nothing is leaking out of the sides and onto the bag, then I raise my gaze to his.

“How long are you planning on keeping me locked up here?”

“I don’t know,” he admits.

“I haven’t done anything wrong. I don’t deserve to be kept like an animal in a cage.”

“No, you don’t, but there are women here, kids too. Until we know your intentions aren’t bad, we have to be careful. The club’s lost too much already.”

“That argument is just going to keep us moving in circles. Your club did bad shit, my father has done worse, but where does it end? When you’re all gone?”

“When *they*’re all gone,” he amends.

“To what end? To say you won? It won’t bring back the people who are dead.”

He doesn’t respond to that, only a slight tick in his jaw telling me he’s pissed. “You still feel sick?”

The subject change doesn’t surprise me. I don’t know that we’ll ever see eye to eye on this topic. He’s too stubborn to be reasoned with, too wrapped up in his hate and anger.

“No, but the food helps.” I pick the sandwich back up and nibble on the remaining half that’s left. “I really didn’t come here to stir trouble.”

“I believe that,” he says, surprising me. “You said your dad is likely to put a bullet in you if he sees you again. Why?”

Fuck. I don’t want to tell anyone what I did. The shame burns through me, but what choice do I have? I need Rage to trust me, and for that to happen, I may need to give him something to hold on to.

“I told you I was kept captive. After I left the club, my father’s men found me and dragged me home. The girl I was with... I thought she was my friend, but turns out, she’s in love with... that doesn’t matter, but she was pissed at me, so she helped me to run away only to tell my father where I was.”

Rage doesn’t make any indication he’s fazed by this. Not one single emotion crosses his face. I take that as a sign to continue.

“She was given the role of my jailer, and she took that pretty seriously. I’ve spent the past six weeks confined to my

bedroom with an armed guard standing outside the door.”

This time, he can't hide his reaction. His brows snap together and his eyes flash. “What the fuck?”

“Scarlett knew what we did, and that the condom broke. When I told her I needed the morning after pill, she refused to help me. She wanted to punish me by forcing me to have this baby.”

“Why?”

“Because she's in love with a guy who has been my friend since we were in nappies, and she think he and I are together.”

I don't miss the way Rage tenses. “Are you?”

Is that a growl in his voice?

Is he... is he *jealous*?

That would be ludicrous. What would he have to be jealous of? I'm no one to him, and about ten seconds ago, I was pretty sure he wanted to kill me after I birth our baby.

“No, not that it's any of your business if we were. You and I fucked one time in a bar, and considering the fallout from that, I don't think we should repeat it.”

“Right.” He draws the word out in a way that makes it unclear if he agrees or not.

“Anyway, obviously, I did get pregnant thanks to your efficient swimmers, and I was getting scared. Scarlett was becoming crueller and more aggressive.”

“She give you those bruises?”

My fingers skim over the tight skin on my cheek. It's as if remembering my injury triggers the pain to resurface. “I fought back,” I say more defensively than I intend.

Rage's tongue darts out, wetting his lips as he tries to control his anger. I can see the struggle waging inside him, and part of me wishes he'd just unleash and deal with his feelings.

“You shouldn't have to fuckin' fight. You're pregnant.”

“Yeah, I am, but I was also in a life and death situation, Rage. I chose to fight and save us both.”

“That ain’t what I mean.”

“I know exactly what you mean, but you weren’t there, and honestly, I had no choice. If they knew who fathered my child...” I break off, closing my eyes for a moment before I reopen them. “My father will never let this baby live. He won’t see it’s a part of me. All he’ll think about is the part that’s you.”

“He won’t fucking touch you.” The vehemence rolling off his every word makes my heart skip a beat. It relieves some anxiety knowing I have someone in my corner.

“I don’t need you to stand in my corner.”

“No, I don’t think you do, but I’m gonna anyway.”

What the hell do I say to that? And why is my stomach fluttering? Get a grip, Skye. He’s never going to want you like that. He’s only being nice because you’re having his baby and he feels responsible for you.

I try to ignore the suffocated feeling that clings to my throat. Rage isn’t mine, and I’m not his. The only thing that joins us together is the little bunch of cells growing inside me.

“I know I shouldn’t want this baby. We’re basically kids ourselves, and our families are at war, but when I was locked in that room, alone, worrying about my future, all I had was her and I’m not willing to give her up.”

“Her?”

I smile. “I don’t know. I just feel weird calling her ‘it’, and I have a fifty-fifty chance of being right so...”

“You want a girl?”

“I want a baby who’s going to be allowed to be born, Rage. I want a healthy child who’s going to have all the love I can give her. I want—” My voice cracks. “I want to be able to be a mother to my baby, and I want her to know her father too.”

I swipe at the tear careening down my cheek. I don't want him to see me falling apart. It's a weakness I can't afford to show, but I'm so rung out, so tired, I can't control myself.

Rage stands from the bed, and every inch of me stiffens as I wait to see what he will do. He crosses the carpet, crouching down in front of me, his eyes scanning my face. "If you're not lying and you truly came here for my help—not for your father's gain—then I promise you, no one will take this baby from you."

I shouldn't, but I believe him. The sincerity in his words isn't feigned, and when he reaches out and captures one of my tears before it slides down my cheek, I freeze. I like how his hands feel on me. I like the feeling of being touched, even if it is by a man I barely know.

"I will hold you to that," I warn him. "Because at some point, my father is going to discover what I did to get here and he's not going to forgive it. Trust me when I tell you he's going to destroy everything in his path to find me."

His fingers pause on my skin, but he doesn't move away. I focus on the little dimple between his eyes, trying not to think about the hell I've brought to him and his club. My father won't care that my baby is his enemy's blood. He'll care that I killed one of his men and the daughter of one of his prominent soldiers. He'll care that I've embarrassed him by being here.

"What did you do, Skye?" His voice is soft, soothing, and without reproach. It won't remain that way, but I let myself soak it in for a moment longer than I should.

Then I swallow down the bile collecting in the back of my throat and pluck up the courage to give him the words that have haunted me from the moment I left the house.

The words stick in my throat like glass shards, tearing at the soft flesh of my windpipe.

"Skye? Talk to me."

It's now or never. If I don't tell him and it comes out later, I will destroy any trust I build between us. There can be no lies, no doubts either. I have to be completely honest with him.

Taking a shaky breath, I meet his gaze, then I drop the bombshell I've been holding inside me.

"I..." The pause nearly undoes me, and I have force myself to keep talking before I bottle it. I savour the look on his face, the concern and the need to help me, before I rip the plaster off savagely. "I killed them."

CHAPTER 4

RAGE

Skye's admission nearly knocks me off my feet. Who the fuck did she kill? She's not exactly built to murder. She's not petite, but she ain't pushing over five-foot-six either.

The thought of her locked in a battle to survive turns my stomach into puree. I can't bear it, though I don't know why. She's right when she says we're no one to each other, but something has changed between us. Knowing she's having my baby has awoken some primal instinct within me to protect her and that child.

I'm already scared of the lines I might cross for them, but this is the right thing to do. I'll never be Trick. I'll never walk away from my son or daughter.

My mind is already in overdrive, coming up with plans to ensure Skye's safety if Richardson comes for her. How can I keep her hidden? Would her own father actually kill her? How far would I go to protect them?

"I didn't want to do it," she rambles, bringing me back to the conversation, "but I had to get out of that room. Scarlett... she was never going to let me leave."

"That's who you killed?"

She chews on her bottom lip before admitting, "And the guard. He was trying to stop me, and I couldn't fight him physically. He was too strong, so I... I used the car."

The last part is whispered. I can see how ashamed she is by her actions. Death ain't something I worry about. I've watched

the light fade in many eyes over the years and I've never felt a hint of remorse for that. Death is inevitable—when it comes depends on the person. If someone gets in my way, I'll end them.

“You did the right thing,” I assure her.

Her eyes snap to mine, and I see the dismay mix with her anger. “No, I didn't. Killing people is not right, Rage. The fact you're not even fazed by what I've done honestly scares me.”

She should be scared. She's sitting in the middle of a hornet's nest.

“This is who I am,” I tell her. “And I'm not sorry they're dead because that means you're not.”

Her bottom lip wobbles as she tries to control herself. “I can't just switch it off like you.” She ducks her head, gripping the edge of the sofa. “I've never hurt anyone like that before.”

And if I have my way, she'll never be in that position again.

A knock on the door stops my response, and I curse whoever the fuck is on the other side. The interruptions are fucking annoying.

Seething, I stand, walking over to the door and tearing it open. Hawk is standing there with a man I'm pretty sure is the doctor Howler called. He looks like a rich, pretentious twat, with his shirt and tie, neatly pressed trousers, and his little leather doctor's bag.

It shows growth that I don't sneer at him, but I'm grateful he's here. I'm worried about Skye and how unwell she seems. I know pregnancy ain't easy—I witnessed that more times than I can count when I was at London. Brie's last pregnancy was particularly rough.

But Brie wasn't mine to take care of.

Skye is, whether I like it or not.

“You two okay?” Hawk glances around me at Skye, who hasn't moved from the sofa.

“We’re fine.” I step aside to let the doc in, ignoring the weight of his judgement. I can sense it radiating from him. It’s the same shit I’ve dealt with my entire fuckin’ life from outsiders. They look at me and think I’m scum without knowing a thing about me. This cunt has already judged me and found I don’t live up to his expectations.

“Where’d you find him?”

“Fuck knows. Some cunt Howler has on his books.”

“Skye... she, um... she left behind two bodies when she escaped.”

“I’ll let Howler know.” Hawk roams his gaze over me. “You doing okay with all of this? It’s a lot to take in.”

I blow out a breath. “No.” It feels good to admit that, even though it makes me feel weak to say it. “I don’t want a kid, Hawk. I don’t. But then there’s part of me that...”

I don’t know how to explain it, so I lose the words I need to explain.

“I get it,” Hawk says.

“How do you get it? I don’t even get it.”

“Having a kid changes you. This whole thing is gonna change both of you.”

“It already has.”

“First lesson I’ll give you is just always remember this ain’t about you. It’s about that baby and its future.”

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

“No one ever thinks they can do it, but they do, and you will too. If you need me, send me a message. I’m not going far, okay?”

The weight lifts off my shoulders. I didn’t know if my brothers were on my side, and that scared the fuck out of me. “Hawk, I know everyone’s pissed with me, but I am loyal. I swear that to you. This club is all I got, and I’m really trying to do the right thing by everyone here.”

He reaches out, squeezing my shoulder. “Everyone sees that too. No one doubts you, kid.”

Thank fuck for that. I suck in a breath, my pulse calming with that knowledge. “Thanks for everything.”

He smirks. “Don’t think this shit gets you out of dinner. Wren ain’t letting it go.”

I laugh under my breath as I shut the door on him and turn back into the room. The doctor has already gone to work while I was talking. Skye’s food is on the nightstand, and she’s sitting with her arm resting on her leg as the doctor pulls a tourniquet around her bicep.

As I wander back to them, the doc glances up at me. “I’m just getting some bloodwork so we check on the baby.”

I watch as he fiddles in his kit for what he needs. I’m not fucking squeamish, but clearly Skye is. She turns her head away as the doctor prepares the needle to draw her blood.

“What are you looking for?” I ask.

“Right now, I want to look at the hCG levels. I’ll do a test today and then another in a couple of days to see if there’s any fluctuation. There are a few other things as well that we do as standard during early pregnancy.”

“Just do whatever you need to.” Skye squeezes her eyes shut, letting out a little whimper as the doctor presses the needle into her skin.

“You don’t like needles?” I want to go to her and sit with her while she suffers, but we’re not there yet—not even close. Skye came here as a last resort, not because she needs me to be her partner in this.

“I don’t like anything that causes pain, Rage. I’m pretty sure that’s normal behaviour.”

I don’t agree. For me, pain is the thing that tells me I’m still alive and capable of feeling. I need pain to ground me, but I keep this to myself.

The doctor fills a few vials with her blood and then releases the tourniquet before pressing a small square of gauze

over the site as the needle is removed. “All done.”

Skye glares at me as she takes over pressing the gauze while the doctor grabs some tape to hold it in place.

“I’d like to do a urine sample as well. Do you think you can pee in this for me?”

He hands her small sample jar.

“Sure.” She takes it from him and glances at me. I don’t know what that look is meant to convey, but she says nothing before walking into the bathroom.

Once the door is shut, the doctor turns to me. There’s a sneer on his lips, and I can tell he wants to say something.

“What?” I demand, not caring about being rude. He’s the one making this a thing.

“I don’t like being ordered around,” he says. “Howler thinks he can snap his fingers any time, day or night.”

I stiffen, wondering if this dickhead has a death wish ‘cause coming at my president is not a smart plan.

“He can. That’s why you’re here.” My voice is stone as I speak, daring him to challenge it further.

“My debt to the Sons—”

“Is between you and Howler. You got a fuckin’ problem with how he’s doing shit, you take that up with him. Right now, you’re here to treat Skye and that’s it.”

His mouth is tight, and I can tell he’s dying to say more. Part of me wants to advise him against it, but the other part—the more sadistic side of my brain—wants him to keep poking the bear.

“Is this baby yours or one of the other men in this club?”

“Ain’t sure why that’s your fuckin’ business,” I fire back.

He shifts his shoulders. “I’m still a doctor. I have a duty of care to those I treat.”

I step up to him, relishing the fact he moves back from me. He’s mouthing off, but he’s still smart enough to have that

modicum of fear. “This ain’t a hospital, Doc. There’s no rules here. Your only job is to do what the fuck you’re told.”

Oh yeah, he’s scared, but he’s also a stubborn fuck because he doesn’t back down like he should. He pulls his shoulders back instead, making himself seem bigger. He could be a foot bigger than me and a hundred pounds heavier, I wouldn’t give a shit. I’ll still fight him if he comes at me.

“That young lady needs to be taken care of, and looking at the state she’s in, I don’t believe you’re going to do that.”

My reactions are faster than my brain. I latch my fingers around his throat in a grasp so hard, he gasps as his airway is cut off. Fuck this prick. I get a moment of intense pleasure as fear flashes in his eyes. He should be fucking scared.

“I could snap your neck and not one single person in this building will stop me.” My voice is menacing, just as I intend it to be.

The doctor claws at my hand, trying to loosen my grip as he fails to get air. I force him onto the bed, his back hitting the mattress as my hand tightens on this neck. This is a vulnerable position for anyone, and one most people would fight against, but he doesn’t. Like the prey about to be eaten, he goes into some kind of shock and gives up, accepting his fate.

“I don’t know why you think you have any right to interfere with this shit. You do your exam, you make sure she’s got everything she needs, and that’s all.”

“She looks underweight and exhausted, so excuse me for not believing you. What Skye needs is care. I can give her that if you just let me take her with me.”

What the fuck? I squeeze harder on his throat. “Why the fuck would you want to take her?”

“She’s a vulnerable person. I can’t stand by and do nothing. It goes against everything I stand for.”

I increase the pressure on his throat, watching as his face turns red. “You workin’ for someone?”

“N-no.”

“Then why the fuck would you want to take her from me?”

I loosen my hold so he can speak. “I have a duty of care to my patients—”

“Your only duty is to do what you’re fuckin’ told.”

I hear the toilet flush, and although I don’t want to, I release him and step back. I don’t want Skye confronted with any violence, not when she’s so vulnerable.

As soon as I step back, the doctor scrambles up, pulling his clothes back into place. “You’re a fucking animal.”

It seems like it cost him a lot to swear at me, but I don’t care. Words are just words, and I stopped being scared of them a long time ago.

“Yeah, you should probably remember that before you push me again.”

The bathroom door opens, and Skye comes out holding the jar, which is now half-full with piss. She must sense the tension in the air as her gaze darts between us. She stays in the doorway, as if she can hide in the bathroom if things explode.

“Everything okay?”

“Fine,” I growl. “Get on with it,” I snap at the doctor, who seems frozen in place.

He shakes himself and reaches for the sample jar, taking it from Skye.

“This shouldn’t take long,” he mumbles, opening his bag and pulling out a small container.

I don’t give a fuck what he’s doing, but his words do have an impact on me. I’m not a completely heartless cunt, and when I look at Skye, I understand his concern. She’s so pale, it’s hard not to be concerned, but that ain’t my doing. If I’d known earlier, I would have brought her here and taken care of her.

“Well, you’re definitely pregnant,” the doctor says. He doesn’t make eye contact with me and, in fact, he tries to avoid

being near me as he moves around the room. “There’s nothing suspect in your sample either.”

Skye blows out a breath. “That’s good, right?”

“Yes, it’s good. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to do an ultrasound. At this stage, you’d need a transvaginal one, but I can’t do that here. The equipment is at the hospital.”

Is this joker for real? There is no fucking way he’s taking Skye out of here. “No,” I counter, pissed he would even suggest it considering the conversation we just had.

“It’s the quickest way to check everything is progressing as it should be.”

“I don’t give a fuck. She ain’t goin’ to the hospital. Come up with something else.”

His jaw ticks as he grinds his teeth. “I have a portable device we can try here, but it’s likely it won’t pick anything up. It’s too early in her pregnancy for this kind of scan.”

“Try that,” I order.

“Do you think there’s something wrong with my baby?” Skye’s voice trembles, and I want to punch him for scaring her.

“I’m worried you look underweight and that you’re clearly exhausted.”

“Stop it,” I growl at him.

“She deserves to know what she’s dealing with,” the doctor snaps. “If you want to leave with me—”

I hit him, my fist slamming into his face hard enough to lift him off his feet. He stumbles back, unable to keep his balance, and hits the carpet with a grunt of pain.

I step towards him, intending to beat the snot out of him. I warned him.

“Rage! Stop!”

I kick him in the side, hard enough to bruise. Fucking bastard. Over and over, I kick him until I feel Skye’s hands on

me.

I don't know what happens, but it's as if all the anger instantly drains out of me. I stumble back, instinctively trying to shield her so she doesn't get caught up in my frenzied attack.

"Stop," she whispers, her hands cupping my face, bringing my attention back to her. "Focus on me, okay?"

I take a shaky breath, not because I have remorse, but because my lungs burn like I've run a marathon. "Don't do that again," I warn.

She doesn't back down, even though I can see she's afraid of me. "Do what?"

"Get in my path when I'm in that zone. I could've hurt you."

She swipes her thumbs over my cheeks, and fuck, I don't like how much I want her to continue doing it. "You won't hurt me," she assures me, though I don't know how she can be so sure of that.

The anger seeps out of my pores until I feel calm again. "You okay now?" she asks.

"Yeah. Are you?"

She nods. "I'm okay, Rage. I feel better after eating. A good night's sleep and I'll be back to normal."

It's an oversimplification of the situation, but it's enough to soothe me further.

"I'm not leaving," Skye says to the doctor, even though she doesn't tear her eyes or her hands from me. "I'm grateful for your concern, but Rage didn't cause this, and I want to be here."

I know that last part is a fucking lie, but I appreciate her saying it. Somehow, Skye achieved what no one else ever has. She stopped me from exploding, and she didn't knock me out to do it.

I don't know what the fuck that means, but when she steps back, removing her touch from me, I feel the loss in my gut.

“Can you try the portable device you mentioned?”

The doctor swipes at the blood pooling under his nose, a dismayed look on his face. “It might not work,” he says.

“If it doesn't work, it doesn't work. What do you need me to do?”

“Can you lie down and pull your sweater up?”

Skye smiles as if she hasn't just witnessed the violence I inflicted, and I don't know what the fuck to make of it.

I watch as she moves over to the bed and positions herself on the mattress until she's comfortable. The doctor rummages in his bag, getting the shit he needs ready.

“I didn't think you could do this outside the hospital,” Skye says. She's making small talk to diffuse the tension in the room.

This behaviour ain't normal. It's learned, and it fucking upsets me knowing she's probably seen this kind of thing before.

“Technology's come a long way,” the doctor mumbles, swiping at his nose again. It's still bleeding, though he makes no attempt to clean it.

“It's good,” Skye says, her gaze coming to mine. “We might be able to see our baby.”

“Yeah.” I don't know what else to say, though that one word seems so inadequate.

Skye's eyes are a little distant as she pulls her sweater up. The leggings she's wearing sit high on her waist, so she has to push them down too.

I try not to stare, but my eyes are glued to her stomach. Skye's slight frame means I can see the smallest protrusion between her hip bones. If I didn't know she's pregnant, I would assume she's bloated, but I know that's our baby growing inside her.

My mind short circuits. It's one thing to talk about it, but seeing it makes it all the more real. Skye *is* pregnant, and I'm going to be a dad in a matter of months.

Fuck.

This entire afternoon has been a whirlwind of emotion, and I don't know that I've had time yet to catch my breath.

"Rage? Can you sit with me?"

I don't want to move, but she's asking for me, so I force my feet forwards and round the bed so I can sit next to her. The mattress dips with my weight, jostling her slightly, but all I can focus on is her stomach.

I want to touch it, to feel what's there, but the doctor squirts a clear, thick liquid onto her abdomen before I can move.

The device is tiny and fits his mobile phone into the top of it. I don't know what the fuck to expect. I've never seen an ultrasound, so I hold my breath as the doctor presses a probe onto Skye's stomach.

"At this stage, we're not going to see a fully formed fetus—if we can see anything at all—but hopefully, I should be able to see the gestational sac."

"What about a heartbeat?"

"It really depends. Six weeks is early for that, but sometimes it can be picked up. This device isn't as good as the machines we have in the hospital, so I'm not sure what we'll see."

Her eyes lock on the ceiling, and I don't breathe as the doctor moves the probe around her stomach, his eyes locked on the device.

"As I expected, I can't really see anything."

Disappointment floods me, and the strength of that feeling rocks me to my core. This isn't a fairy tale relationship where I'm thrilled at the prospect of having a baby.

Skye and I are strangers, joined only by a bunch of cells that don't even show on his fucking piece of shit device.

“It would be better to have the vaginal probe.” He glares at me. Does he want another beating? “Are you having morning sickness, Skye?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“She projectile vomited less than an hour ago,” I interject.

The doctor ignores me, focusing only on Skye. “And you're eating okay?”

“I'm trying to. It's hard sometimes between the nausea and the vomiting.”

“I can give you something for the morning sickness if you need it. I'm also going to test for anaemia and any vitamin deficiencies. Are you taking folic acid?”

“No. What's that?”

“It's a medication that is needed in the first trimester to keep your baby growing well. I'll write you a prescription for it. You need to take it until you're around twelve weeks.”

“I'll take whatever is needed,” she assures him.

He grabs a paper towel from his bag and wipes it over her stomach. I grab his wrist, stopping him, and the air becomes thick.

He doesn't want to, but he relinquishes his hold on the towel and moves away to clean up his stuff.

I glare at him before taking the towel and slowly cleaning the gel off her stomach. She doesn't stop me, but I feel the weight of her stare as I take care of her. When I'm finished, I toss the dirty towels on the bedside table and help her sit up.

“Thank you,” she says softly, her palm warm against mine. “I wish we could have seen her.”

“Yeah, me too.” As I say this, I realise how true it is. I'm terrified of all this, but I'm disappointed we didn't get to see the baby.

The doctor stands, his kit packed up. “Get plenty of rest, try to minimise stress, and keep on top of mealtimes. If you have bleeding or cramps, get checked out.”

He doesn't look at either of us as he says this, and I follow him as he walks to the door.

He turns to me before he opens it. “The first trimester has the greatest risk for miscarriage. Be careful with her.”

He leaves the room, and I shut the door behind him, taking a moment to catch my breath before I turn back to Skye. She's sitting on the edge of the bed, her hand pressed against her stomach, and the look of serenity in her eyes hits me right in the fucking gut.

There is no way in hell she's going to remain that happy, because whether we like it or not, we're caught up in a hurricane, and there's no escaping the strength of the storm that's coming for us.

CHAPTER 5

SKYE

It's the fear that wakes me. I jack-knife up, my heart pounding as the remnants of the nightmare nips at my heels. Sweat collects between my shoulders and across the back of my neck, leaving a sticky clamminess behind.

Engulfed by darkness, I fumble for the lamp on the bedside table. My breath tears out of me in ragged gulps as I find the switch and flick it.

The room floods with light, chasing the shadows away, but it doesn't settle my wildly fluttering pulse.

I turn my hands over, expecting to see blood coating my skin, but they're clean. The dirty deed I committed isn't visible, not to anyone who looks at me, but I feel it staining my soul.

Fuck.

I don't know how my father kills without any remorse. I feel it deep in my gut, a visceral pain that I can't stop gnawing at me. I didn't much like Scarlett in the end, but I didn't have the right to kill her.

Or the guard.

I didn't even know his name and I've stolen his life.

“You okay?”

The voice makes me jump. I snap my head around and see Rage sitting on the sofa adjacent to the bed. I don't know how I missed him when I first switched the light on, but he's sitting so still, so quiet, like a dark sentinel.

“What are you doing?” The words slip out before I can really consider whether I should say them.

For a moment, he says nothing, as if he’s not really sure himself what he’s doing. “I... I didn’t want to go too far in case... in case you needed something.”

I can see how much it costs him to admit that, and I don’t know why but my pulse does a little flutter in my throat. “Oh. I’m okay. You don’t need to sit with me while I’m sleeping.”

“You collapsed, Skye. You ain’t okay.” He’s not wrong, but even so, I don’t want any fuss. “What were you dreaming about?”

My breath catches in my throat. How do I explain to him the guilt I feel? I don’t know Rage, but I know men like him. Jack would’ve never had a moment of remorse for taking a life.

“I was dreaming about Scarlett and the guard.”

Sinking back into the pillows, I try to slow my pounding heart and ease the ache in my gut. I had to do it to survive, and when I think about my baby dying at their hands, I feel even worse that I know what I did was necessary.

Rage pushes up from the sofa, and I take a moment to study his physique. He’s not overly bulky, but he isn’t small either. Broad shoulders and a body that is clearly made for sinning are all I see as he sits on the edge of the bed, our bodies connected only by a small brush between his thigh and my knee. It’s enough to make my skin heat anyway.

“I meant what I said earlier. You shouldn’t feel shit for them. They tried to hurt you, Skye. What you did was self-fuckin’-defence.”

It was, and I don’t doubt that for a second, but I still can’t turn off my guilt.

“She was my friend,” I say in barely a whisper, my heart squeezing. “Or I thought she was.” I don’t like the bitter laugh that escapes my lips, but I don’t stop it. I am bitter. She turned me into someone I never wanted to be. “I don’t know how to deal with my feelings about it.”

I expect Rage to mock me for my pathetic behaviour, but he doesn't. He places a hand just above my knee, and I freeze, my heart starting to race. "Life makes us do things sometimes that we'd never imagine ourselves capable of."

"Have you done those kinds of things?" I don't know why I ask this. Rage is clearly a man who does not stop to consider consequences, and he's someone who lives on the edge of his anger all the time.

"And worse," he says. "You protected yourself and... our baby. That's all that matters."

My hand slips to my stomach as a protective wave washes over me. "Rage, what happens now?"

"What do you want to happen?"

I consider this question, completely at a loss how to answer it. I have nothing and no one. My survival is at the mercy of Rage's generosity. He can choose to keep me locked in this room forever, or even kill me once this baby is born. I have no say in anything and that should terrify me, but I'm not scared. He has been protective with me, standing against his club friends and even the doctor.

I don't believe Rage wants to hurt me.

"I want to be safe, and I want to meet my baby when she comes."

His fingers trail over my leg through the thin sheet covering my body. I want to push it aside and let him ease the growing ache between my legs, but I don't dare move in case he stops.

"You'll have both," he assures me.

"You don't care that my father is your enemy?"

His fingers stop, and I curse myself for asking that question. "I care, Skye. I do. Your father has caused a lot of heartbreak, but you're not him. You can't be judged for his shit just because you share DNA."

I'm not sure if we're still talking about me and my dad. It feels like there's a hidden meaning behind his words, but I

don't think it's a good time to push that—not when he's being sweet with me.

“I never wanted any part of his world,” I say. Feeling a little bold, I reach out and press the pads of my fingertips against his hand on my leg. “Rage? Promise me something?”

“What?”

“That if something happens to me, you'll take care of our child. Don't let my father get her or let her go into the foster care system. She didn't ask to be born. She deserves someone to love her.”

His throat bobs as he swallows, as if there is a giant lump blocking his airway. “Ain't gonna let anything happen to her or to you.” I want to believe that, I really do, but there's an uneasy, ugly feeling that I can't shake. “Why don't you try to sleep again? The doc said you need to rest.”

“I don't think I can.”

He hesitates for a moment before muttering “Fuck it” under his breath. I watch as he undoes his laces and toes off his boots before he rounds the bed. I don't know what he's doing, but I don't react as he lies next to me. “I'll stay with you while you sleep,” he says.

“Don't you have things to do?”

“Nothin' that can't wait. Try to rest, Skye.”

I snuggle against my pillow, closing my eyes and trying to empty my mind enough to release my body, but I'm so aware of him next to me, it's impossible.

I shift positions, lying on my side with my back to him, hoping that will help, but it doesn't. I'm acutely aware of his presence behind me.

“Sleep,” he orders again, as if it's that easy for me to just switch off and let go.

“I can't.” I turn onto my back, opening my eyes. “My mind is going a hundred miles a minute.”

“I get that,” he says. “Mine is too. Didn’t expect to start this day out learning I’m gonna be a dad.”

“It’s a lot to take in,” I agree. “I’ve had weeks to deal with it and I still can’t believe it.”

My hand, as it always seems to, gravitates to my stomach, but this time, Rage’s joins mine, sliding over the top. I move so that his palm is pressed directly to my belly, and it feels as if the room holds its breath.

“I know this isn’t exactly how either of us planned this,” I say, “but I’m not sorry it happened either.”

I don’t expect him to say anything back, and he doesn’t, which makes me wonder where his head is at. I get some indication when he splays his fingers wide over my stomach. “Does it feel weird?”

“The baby?”

“Yeah. I mean... it’s just... in there.”

I laugh a little. “I don’t feel anything—yet. Just sick and tired. My boobs hurt too, but that’s probably far too much information.”

His eyes drop to my chest, his tongue dipping out to wet his lips. “They’re bigger than the last time we were together.”

I peer down at them. They are bigger, though not by much. I’m surprised he noticed considering he’d fucked me from behind.

“That’s what you noticed?”

“Babe, I’m always gonna notice tits.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course, you are. I don’t really know what to expect over the next few months.”

He fumbles in his pocket and pulls out his phone. I watch as he pulls up a browser and types in ‘what to expect in early pregnancy’. I don’t know why but him doing that makes tears prick my eyes. I don’t want to cry in front of him, but my body wants to release all the pressure inside me that has been building over the last few weeks.

“Tender and swollen tits, nausea and vomiting, increased urination, fatigue, food cravings, heartburn, and constipation.” He frowns. “You got all that going on?”

“Some of it,” I admit. “You had a front row seat to the vomiting.”

He keeps reading, flicking between other sites. “I think it’ll get worse before it gets better.”

“That’s comforting,” I mutter.

He tosses his phone on the bedside table. “You don’t want to do this, Skye, I ain’t gonna make you. There’s still time and options.”

Bile burns through my chest. I know he’s trying to be kind, to give me back those choices that were stripped from me when I was held prisoner, but I hate it.

“I’m not having an abortion. If you don’t want to be involved, that’s fine. I respect that. But this baby is all I have, Rage. I can’t just get rid of her.”

“Ain’t sayin’ I don’t want to be involved.” He sits up, twisting his body to look at me. “This shit ain’t gonna be a fairy tale, though. You’re a Richardson, and a lot of the brothers here have been affected directly by your dad. That ain’t gonna be easy for them to get past.”

The pit in my stomach is uncomfortable. “I know, and they should feel that way. What you said my father did is just...” I break off, my words shattering.

Rage reaches out, swiping at my cheek and capturing a tear I didn’t know had fallen. “You’re not him.”

“I’m not,” I agree, “but that doesn’t change how people are going to feel about me. He killed a pregnant woman and a child. I don’t know how to deal with that.”

“None of us do either. I didn’t know Jade, but I met Mara a few times. She was a good woman. She was a doctor, and she was excited about becoming a mum. Her and Trick both.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Ain’t for you to apologise for, Skye. Unless you pulled that trigger, this ain’t your doing.”

“The little girl... does she have a good life? A happy one?”

Torturing myself like this is pointless, but I can’t stop from wondering.

“She’s taken care of. The club looks after its own.”

“If something happens to me, will the club take care of our baby too?”

“Ain’t nothin’ happening to you, Skye.”

“You don’t know that,” I say. “This life we’re in isn’t rainbows and hearts. It’s dangerous, and people die all the time.”

His brows come together as he stares at me. “You ain’t dying.”

“But if I do—”

“No,” he snaps, losing his temper. “Ain’t happenin’. You’re gonna raise this kid with me, Skye, ‘cause I ain’t ready to be a single fucking parent. I don’t know the first thing about raising a kid. I don’t even know if I can.”

“Of course, you can.”

He shakes his head. “My life ain’t lent itself to being that kinda role model.”

“No one expects you to be the perfect father, especially not me. The fact you’re here and wanting to step into that position is enough.”

“Is it?” He shakes his head. “Our lives are fucked-up. I mean, I’m in deep with the club, and you’re being held here against your will.”

“I’m here because I want to be,” I counter.

“We locked you up.”

“I know, and I’m hoping I can earn enough trust to be free eventually, but I understand why every single person in this club doesn’t trust me, Rage.”

“Prove you’re worthy of that loyalty, and you’ll get it back.” He blows out a breath. “And I’ll give you that promise. Anything happens to either of us our kid will be looked after, Skye. Howler and the others will make sure she’s raised with love.”

That knot in my belly unfurls. His words give me hope and comfort. “Thank you,” I say, genuinely meaning it.

“But nothin’ is gonna happen to you.”

I smile because I don’t want to fight with him, not when we’re having this moment—whatever it is. Instead, I press my hand against his on my stomach, joining the three of us together.

He doesn’t recoil or pull away, though I expect it.

Instead, his hand flexes beneath mine. “It’s fuckin’ weird.”

“What is?” I yawn, my eyes starting to feel gritty and tired.

“Knowing there’s a baby beneath our hands.”

It’s not what I’m expecting him to say, and my lips twitch. “Does it freak you out?”

“A little. Does it you?”

My eyes close, exhaustion making it hard to stay awake, but I need to answer this question. “No. It makes me feel... not so lonely. No matter what happens, I have her with me. There were times when I was locked away in my room where I wanted to give up, but knowing our daughter was inside me, relying on me, gave me the strength to keep fighting.”

“Or son.”

“Or son,” I agree as my hand tightens around his, my body relaxing into sleep. “I don’t think I can stay awake.”

“Then don’t. Rest.”

It’s all I need to hear to let myself go.

I don’t know how long I sleep for or how deeply, but when I wake, I’m disorientated. Light is battling to come through the

thick curtains hanging over the window, and the light at the side of the bed is turned off.

I reach for Rage, but all I hit is cold sheets and empty air. Sitting up, I turn to where I left him when I closed my eyes and see nothing. The disappointment is unwarranted. We're having a baby together, but that doesn't mean we're a couple, and I shouldn't have any expectations of Rage. He's already done more than I have any right to expect.

So, why do I find myself so disappointed to wake up alone in this bed?

CHAPTER 6

RAGE

It's a shitty thing to do, but for the next week, I avoid Skye. Watching her sleep next to me fuckin' terrified me. Everything felt too quick, too certain.

I gave her promises I ain't even sure I can keep. How the fuck could I tell her that I'll raise this kid if something happens to her?

I'm not father material.

She shouldn't trust me with a kid—even if it is half mine. My father's voice echoes through my mind on a loop. He told me all those years ago how useless I was, and he was right. I am a waste of fucking space. I can't be a dad. I can't even be useful to my fucking club. All I've done is bring problems.

She and I had a moment in that room, a sense of growing closer because of our shared interest in this baby, and I realised in that moment I needed to step back and put some distance there.

So, I've thrown myself into club business. I know Skye's being looked after, I've made sure of that, but I can't be around her. I can't risk getting close to her and wanting things I can't have.

“You okay, kid?” Hawk's voice drags me from my thoughts.

He's been the hardest of all my club brothers to face. I don't owe anyone here shit, but Hawk has been good to me, and I hate the thought that I might have disappointed him.

“I’m good,” I lie. It comes easily to me, the ability to hide my true feelings from others. I’ve done it for so long, it barely registers that I’m doing it anymore.

“I doubt that,” he snorts. “I sure as fuck wouldn’t be good with any of this shit happening if it was me.”

I peel my gaze from the side window to turn towards him. The van, which had moments ago seemed roomy, is suddenly claustrophobic. “It’s a good thing I ain’t you then, ain’t it?”

“Kid.”

I don’t bristle at him calling me that, not like I would in the past. I know with Hawk it comes from a good place. It ain’t meant to demean or destroy me in the way others have tried over the years.

I blow out a breath. “What do you want me to say, Hawk?”

“Whatever you want to.”

There’s no answer I can give that will explain the depth of emotion I’m wading through. “You want to talk about your feelings, go and see a shrink. I don’t need to offload.”

“Okay then.”

We sit in silence, and I hate it. I wish this fucking run would be done already.

“You want to explain why you’ve been avoiding me? I get you sidesteppin’ the girl, but me? What the fuck did I do?”

I keep my gaze locked on the window, mostly so I don’t accidentally look at him. “Ain’t avoiding anyone.”

“I didn’t come down in the last downpour, Rage. I know you’re avoiding me. What I can’t work out is why.”

Because he makes me question my integrity.

Because he makes me face my misdemeanours.

Because I’m fucking ashamed of my actions.

I don’t say any of this. I don’t know how to without opening myself in a way I would never recover from. “You really need me to pat you on the back all fuckin’ day long?”

“No.”

“I’m busy, Hawk. I got a baby on the way and a shit storm I need to clean up between me and the club.”

I’m defensive, more so than I need to be, but I want to get off this conversation.

“You think anyone blames you for this shit?”

I do, because I would if this happened to another brother. “You should.”

“We all make mistakes, but you can’t let that shit define you. All that matters is what you do now.”

“I appreciate the pep talk, but ain’t necessary. This mess is mine, and I’ll clean it up myself.”

Hawk’s face contorts into a discomforting grimace. “Ain’t your choice anymore, kid.”

“Meaning what?”

The tension in the van is suddenly heavy. “You’re one of us, and your problems are club problems. You don’t get to bury your head in this and deal alone. This is bigger than you and Skye.”

“I don’t need help.”

“Don’t matter whether you need it or not. You have it.”

The warm feeling that spreads through me is so foreign, so alien, it takes me a moment to realise what it is. Relief.

“I know I’m walking a tightrope here,” I say, “but I want two things and I don’t know how to have them both.”

“The club and your child?” Hawk hazards a guess, and it’s a good one because it’s right on the money.

“Yeah.”

“That why you’re avoiding the girl and the rest of us?”

I snap my gaze to him. “I’m not avoiding anyone.”

“Ain’t you?” He snorts. “I see your worry, Rage.”

I hate how in my head he is. I always thought I was good at hiding my feelings, but with Hawk, he seems to strip all that back and leave me raw and bleeding. “I’m not worried about anything.”

“Bollocks. You’d be fuckin’ stupid not to be, but if the girl’s clean, the club’ll welcome her.”

“She is clean,” I say without skipping a beat.

“Let’s hope so.”

Neither of us speak for a moment, but questions burn through me that I need to answer. “How did you... how did you know how to be a dad?”

Hawk laughs. “I don’t know, kid. That shit was just there for me. I love Wren’s babies like they’re my own, and you’ll feel that the moment you see your child. When the Pioneers attacked us when we were in hiding, I was so fuckin’ scared for those kids and Wren. All you gotta do is your best, Rage. Show up, be there, and the rest’ll come.”

He makes it sound so easy, though I know it’s not. “I don’t think it’s gonna come like that for me.”

“I think you’ll be surprised.”

“My dad...” I break off, the words sticking in my throat like glass shards.

“Your dad what?”

“He was... sick.” Hawk doesn’t ask what that means. He waits for me to continue speaking, and although I don’t want to, I need to know if I can escape the curse given to me because of him. “He did things to me that no kid should ever go through.”

“You don’t have to tell me this. Not if you don’t want to.”

I’ve never told anyone the details of my younger days, and I lose my nerve despite my earlier resolve. “The point is he wasn’t a good parent. My ma neither. I don’t want to have my child live in the same fear I did.”

“So, break the chain.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

He pushes his hair back from his face. “Isn’t it? You don’t want your kid to go through what you went through, so change it. Be different. You got a lot of good shit here, Rage. Brothers not by blood but by a deeper bond. You want the girl and the kid, we’ll help you have that. You just want the kid... well, we’ll fix that too.”

A shiver works up my spine. “Skye ain’t to be touched,” I warn, a crack of darkness in my voice.

“Okay then.” His eyes go to the windscreen. “He’s here.”

I follow his line of sight, seeing a tall guy crossing the street and heading into a building. The frontage is dull, the neon lights above the door turned off, but this bar is usually lit up like a fucking Christmas tree.

We get out the van and cross the street. Hawk glances around before he tries the front door. Stupid fuck didn’t lock it, granting us access into the club.

There are no windows inside, but the main floor is lit up with overhead lights that are as dull as the decor. I take in the bar along one wall and the few booths lining the back of the space. It stinks of bleach mixed with stale booze, but I don’t give two fucks about that. My adrenaline is pumping, ready for the altercation I know is coming.

This prick owes the club five fucking grand and thinks he can keep dodging collections. He’s about to realise how wrong he is. I siphon all my anger and all my rage into one box inside me that I can open when the time is right. I’m itching for a fucking fight.

Hawk walks through the space with a confidence I wish I could project. The door that leads to the staff only area is no barrier as we make our way through a maze of corridors and into the back rooms.

My brother wastes no time in putting a boot to the door. It flings open, hitting plaster as it swings back, and I glimpse the fuck we’re here to hurt for a moment before Hawk fills the

door. The pleasure I experience seeing the fear mask his face is indescribable.

As soon as Hawk gives me the space to step around him, I make a beeline for the cunt. I don't hesitate before I slam my fist into his jaw hard enough to make him stumble back, clearing most of the end of the desk of papers and other shit.

“What the fuck?” His surprise irritates me. He knows exactly why we're here and acting otherwise is fucking stupid. “Are you crazy?”

I give him a toothy grin that I hope conveys just how insane I am.

“We call him Rage for a reason,” Hawk says, leaning back against the wall by the door. “You owe us money, Stefan. Why are you avoiding paying it?”

Stefan's eyes dart around the room, as if he's looking for a weapon or a way out. He'll find neither.

“I'm not—”

I hit him again, this time spraying blood from his mouth as I connect. He falls like I've taken a two-by-four to his head. That red film that controls me seeps into my bones and I want to lose my shit, but Skye's image flashes in my vision and all that anger, all that rage, is doused in an instant. I can't be who I was. I beat this guy to death then I lose the respect of Howler, of my brothers. Dead men can't pay, and we need these contracts to keep making money for the club. I need them too. In seven months' time, I'll have a kid to take care of.

I stagger back from him, forcing calm into my muscles. What the fuck is happening to me? I would never have had these thoughts before Skye. I wouldn't give two fucks who it upset, I would've had my fun with this cunt.

My heart is racing as I stare at the man in front of me, ignoring his wails. I don't dare look at Hawk. I don't need to see the weight of his judgement right now.

“Call your bulldog off, Hawk. I'll get you the money.” Blood coats under his nose and his lips. There are bright red

drops on his shirt collar too, a stark contrast to the bright white of the material.

An image of Skye with a big belly lying on the ground fills my mind. She's bleeding, blood pooled around her, and the terror that chokes me is so real, I nearly gasp out as I shutter my eyes to make it disappear.

"Any more games and I'll let Rage loose on you." Hawk's words are almost lost in the haze engulfing me.

I need to get out of here. I need air. Everything feels too close, too stuffy.

I leave him to collect the money as I stumble out the club and onto the street. Bent over double, I try to breathe through the encroaching panic.

A hand presses onto my back and I flinch, ready to swing, until I hear Hawk's voice.

"You are a shitty fuckin' liar," he mutters. "You're fine? Bullshit."

I don't say anything because what the fuck can I say to that? I'm not fine, and truthfully, I don't know if I'll ever be fine again. My life is once again out of control, and I don't know how to stabilise it.

He waits with me as I regain my composure, and only then do I get into the van. Hawk drives, though he glances at me periodically, checking I'm okay, but I'm not.

I'm spiralling.

I had control. I was learning to keep my calm, until she came. Now, I don't know if I can keep my rage under wraps or if it will explode without warning.

Skye calmed me, but in that room, with Hawk, I didn't know what way I was going to go, and that fucking scares me. I don't want to go back to the Rage I was. I can't do that and have Skye and this baby in my life.

Neither of us speaks as we head back to the clubhouse. When Hawk stops the van in a space out the front of the building, I get out before he can say anything and head inside.

I don't know why, but the need to see Skye is suddenly overwhelming. It's been too long, too much, and I need her right now.

I blow past the common room, heading down the corridor to the room where Skye is being kept. If Hawk calls after me, I don't hear him.

Before I can consider my actions, I drag the bolt back and shove the door open. Skye is lying on the floor, and she sits up quickly as I enter. I don't know what my face shows, but her eyes turn wary as she scrambles to stand up.

“What's wrong?”

I don't know how to answer that. All I can focus on is the intensity of the feeling swirling through me as I close the space between us. I should walk away. I should beg Howler to let her go and get as far away from here as she can, but I can't.

I won't give her up.

I won't let her be out there alone, risking capture by her father.

Skye backs away until her spine hits the wall. I should stop. I need to because the fear in her face disgusts me. I'm terrifying her, and I don't want to be that kind of man, but I'm not in control of myself anymore.

Trapping her between the wall and my body, I let my gaze roam over her face. Fuck, she's beautiful, more so than she has a right to be. My cock remembers how it felt to be sheathed inside her, and I want to repeat it.

I grab her face, and without invitation, I slam my mouth against hers.

CHAPTER 7

SKYE

I don't know what to do as his mouth presses against mine in a punishing kiss. It's so forceful, so demanding, as his tongue pushes inside that I grant him access without a fight—mostly because I'm so stunned, I fail to react.

What is happening?

Why is he kissing me?

We're not together, and I didn't think he wanted to be, but the passion as his fingers tangle in my hair suggests otherwise.

I've never been kissed like this in my life—not that I've been kissed a whole lot of times to compare it to—but it feels like he wants to devour me.

I moan against his lips as his grip on my hair intensifies, creating a bite of pain that tingles along my scalp in a delicious way. I didn't know I liked this, but the way Rage does it has my pussy throbbing with need.

And I do need him. My insides beg to be filled, and I try to rub against him, creating any amount of friction I can to soothe the building ache between my legs.

He gives me partly what I need as his body molds against mine, pressing me harder into the wall. The whimper I let out doesn't sound human, but it's primal desire to be taken by this man.

“Rage...” I manage to gasp out his name before he deepens the slant of his mouth against mine.

I'm not ashamed to admit my legs go wobbly and I have to grip his biceps to keep from losing my feet. My body feels

electrified, and my skin is flaming hot as he scorches my mouth with his.

I'm dismayed when he eventually pulls back, his chest heaving as he sucks in air. Mine is too, and I feel a little light-headed from the momentary oxygen deprivation.

His eyes lock to mine, those dark orbs a swirling storm that I know is dangerous but I can't look away. I'm drawn to him like a moth to a flame. I know I'll get burned, but I can't stop myself from wanting him.

"Did something happen?" I don't know why I ask this, but it's the first thing that comes out of my mouth.

Rage's eyes close for a brief second before he rests his forehead to mine. "I shouldn't have done that."

He steps back, and I feel the space between us like a chasm. My chest hurts, aching as if I've been struck. The sting of rejection surprises me. It's a physical ache that I shouldn't be feeling for a man I've fucked only once. Despite this, my words are harsh and bitter when I spit them out. "Then why did you?"

The conflict within him is evident, but I don't feel bad for him. He didn't have to walk into this room and kiss me like I'm his reason for breathing. He chose to do that and create this looming tension between us.

"I just... I needed you," he admits, and I don't know what to make of that.

"You don't need me," I snap back, hurt by his actions and lashing out because of that. "You just want to own me, like everyone else in my life." I push off the wall, stepping around him and the bed, putting it between us as a barrier. It won't stop him if he chooses to come for me, but it makes me feel better. "I'm not a fucking toy, Rage. I'm a human being with feelings. You don't get to play with me whenever you want to."

The tightness of his jaw tells me he's pissed with what I'm saying, but he doesn't defend himself either. "I'm sorry."

The apology pisses me off. “Why would you come in here and kiss me if you didn’t want more?”

“I was...” He breaks off, stopping whatever he was about to admit to me from spilling off his tongue. It frustrates me that he isn’t being honest. We don’t know each other well enough for these games to be played.

“Just stay the hell away from me.” I don’t allow him to give me an excuse for his actions. It doesn’t matter what his reason was anyway. The fact is he doesn’t want to repeat it and that’s all I need to know.

I sink onto the edge of the bed, my back to him, and try to hold back the tears that desperately want to fall. I should have known better. No one has ever wanted me. Not my dad, not Tommy, not Scarlett. Not even Jack, despite him taking something valuable from me.

Why did I expect Rage to be any different?

He’s not my boyfriend. He’s the man I get to co-parent with, if I live long enough to have my baby.

“I’m just confused, okay? This situation is a fucking mess, and I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to jump into something until—”

“Until you know if I’m the enemy?”

His fingers rake his hair back, and I get drawn to his eyes once more. This time, I don’t see the darkness in them but pain. I don’t know if I’m causing it or if it’s something else, but I want desperately to fix it.

“I don’t think you’re the enemy, Skye.”

“Then what *do* you think? Why am I still locked in this room? Why are avoiding me? You’re messing with my head,” I accuse, standing so I can face him. “I don’t want to play games. I’m scared out of my mind, and I can’t be worrying about your mood changes giving me whiplash too.”

He flinches as if I’ve hit him, and I’m not proud to admit it, but I get a little satisfaction from his suffering. It doesn’t fix my own, but it helps.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats as if that fixes everything.

“It’s fine,” I say, even though it’s not. “We don’t have to be a couple, Rage. We can raise our baby together and be separate. I think that’s probably the best thing for us to do.”

The look on his face tells me he does not agree. “I don’t think we need to be apart, Skye, but maybe we just take things slower.”

“I wasn’t the one who kissed you,” I remind him. “Why did you do it if you were just going to pull away?”

His chin lowers to his chest, his eyes locked on the floor, and for a moment, he doesn’t look like a dangerous biker. He’s just a lost boy, and I don’t know how to help him.

“Rage? What happened?”

“I... you make me lose control,” he blurts out.

His words hit me like a wrecking ball to the chest. What does that even mean?

“I don’t... I don’t mean to.”

He tears his fingers through his hair again, something I notice he does when he’s stressed. This time, he couples it with pacing the room like a caged beast. “It ain’t your fault.” His words are shaky, and I hold my breath, uncertain what to do or say. I’m so out of my depth right now. “I was dealing with my anger. Hawk and the others were helping me. Then you turned up, and now, I feel like a powder keg waiting to explode. I can’t let go of the rage inside me and protect you and my child. But I’m terrified if I let it control me again, I might hurt you both.”

The lump in my throat is hard to breathe around. He’s laying himself bare to me. “Rage...” I whisper his name, unsure what else to say.

“I can’t do it. I won’t become him, Skye. I won’t allow it.”

Become who?

My brows knit together as he continues to rant and pace. “I’ve got used to having that anger contained. For months, I’ve

been in command of it, and now, it's slipping again, and it's because of you and the baby. I can't let it take over. I do stupid shit when I'm angry."

I don't remember rounding the bed, but suddenly, I'm in front of him, my hands cupping his face. His eyes scan mine, and I hate the turmoil I see warring within them.

"I'm not afraid of you."

He swallows hard. "You should be."

I risk stroking my fingers over his cheeks, the coarse hair of his beard rough against my skin. He doesn't pull away or try to leave the room, which I take as a good sign.

"Is this why you're avoiding me? You think I'm some big catalyst for your anger?"

"You are," he says. "I feel this constant tightness in my chest and a nonstop feeling of panic since you came here."

I snort at this. "I have that too. It's impending parenthood. I'm terrified, but I'm not scared of you."

"I've killed. I've beaten men to death in fits of anger."

He's trying to shock me, and he does, but not enough to turn me away from him. I've spent my entire life surrounded by murderers and bad men. Rage doesn't scare me.

"Join the club," I say. "I ran a man over after beating my best friend with a fucking tray."

"Ain't the same. You did what you needed to in order to save yourself. There's an evil in me, one that I can't stop. What if I lose it and kill you or our kid?"

Cold spreads through my belly at the thought, and it should give me pause, but I refuse to believe him capable of that. "You won't."

"You don't know that." His words bite, and I sense his frustration. "This anger inside me, I can't contain it."

"Why are you so angry?"

His breath is shaky as he tries to calm himself down. I take his hands and press them against my stomach. It's as if I've poured water over a fire. Instantly, he starts to relax, and his breath is less ragged as he stares into my eyes. I keep our joined hands in place, willing him to see what I see.

"I didn't have a good life, Skye. My mum disappeared when I was three years old and left me with my father. He was convinced I was possessed by evil and he..." His voice cracks, forcing his words to halt. I tighten my grip on his hands, letting him know I'm here for him. It seems to give him enough strength to keep talking. "He did everything he could to beat the devil out of me."

The horror I feel at his words is impossible to mask. Visions of Rage as a toddler fill my mind and they turn my stomach. How could any parent hurt their baby that way? Mine isn't even born yet and I feel so protective over her.

"He would burn me, hit me, cut me, anything to release the spirits he thought were possessing me. For days at a time, he would lock me in a room with no window, no light. I would sit in the dark, praying to die."

"I'm sorry. You shouldn't have gone through that. Parents are supposed to protect their children." I don't want to cry, but tears brim in my eyes and I can't stop them from falling. All I can think about is how scared he must have been as a little boy listening to that shit from his father.

Rage frees one of his hands from mine to catch the tears as they slide down my cheeks. "Don't cry for me, Skye. I don't deserve your tears. My father was sick. He needed help, and rather than getting that for him, I left him to die. The flat was burning, and I locked him in that room where he kept me for years. I secured the front door and tossed the keys. I didn't call for help or tell anyone. I just left him there to burn."

I try not to flinch, but I can't stop my body from reacting. It's such a visceral image he's painting.

"And that's why we can't be together," he continues in a flat tone. "Because my father was right about me. I am evil. I could have saved him, but I left him to die horribly, and I don't

feel a second of remorse about that. I wish I'd hurt him more before he died. I wish I'd inflicted the same pain I felt all those years. I wasn't a monster before him. He put this anger inside me."

I close my eyes briefly, trying to ground myself in this moment. When I open them, he's studying me as if he knows I'm going to run, but that's not what I want to do. I want to gather him in my arms and make all that hurt and pain he felt as a little boy disappear.

"You did what you had to, and whoever you are now is not your fault, Rage. You were shaped into the man you are."

"A monster," he confirms. "One that will hurt you."

"I don't care," I say, pressing his hand harder against my stomach. There's a small curvature there, barely noticeable to anyone else, but I know my body well enough to know it's the start of my pregnancy beginning to show. Rage hesitates for a moment, as if he's uncertain if he should step away, but then his fingers splay over my abdomen in a move that feels possessive.

"We need you," I tell him. "I need you."

He doesn't look at me, but instead focuses on his hand on my stomach. I don't know what he's thinking or how he's feeling, but I wish he would talk to me. I understand a little better who the man is now and why, but there is so much more to Rage that I want to discover.

"I'll be there for you both," he promises, "but I don't know if I can be what you want."

Those bands around my chest tighten. One step forwards, two steps back. Coming here was my greatest chance at survival.

"I don't want you to be anything but who you are."

He shakes his head. "You don't mean that."

"Yeah, I do."

His free hand goes to the back of my neck, so he can pull me closer and press his mouth to mine. This kiss isn't

punishing, but it's firm and heated.

"You think this is what you want, Skye, but you don't understand how dangerous I am."

"You're not the only one who is dangerous," I say.

He snorts. "My girl fights when she needs to, but she ain't a fighter."

My girl.

I like the sound of that more than I should. Flutters beat against the inside of my stomach. How can this dangerous man who I hardly know give me butterflies?

"For our baby, I am a fighter, Rage."

His eyes crawl over my face, taking in every inch of me with a torturous slowness. I've never felt so undressed while standing fully clothed in front of someone.

"I see that," he murmurs, and my gaze tracks the movement of his lips, wishing they were pressed against mine.

He grants me that, and I grip him as he kisses me again. I want to get lost in his scorching heat, but his phone beeps and he freezes.

"Fuck."

He huffs out a breath as he pulls back and tugs it free from his jeans pocket. I don't know what he reads on his screen, but that relaxed look he just had vanishes in an instant. His mouth, which was moments ago delivering soft kisses to me, is suddenly pulled into a snarl.

"I have to go," he says abruptly, pulling away from me.

"Go where?"

I follow him to the door, not sure if I intend to stop him or attempt to go with him. He turns back to me, and I can see how much he's struggling to keep his composure. "Stay here."

"What's going on?"

"Nothing for you to worry about. I'll have the prospect run out and get you something to eat. Just tell him whatever you

want.”

“You’re just leaving me here?”

I don’t know why I’m so surprised. I’ve been trapped in this room for a week with no sign of gaining my freedom, but for some reason, I’m panicked by the idea of being locked away again.

“I have to go.” It’s not an apology, but it is laced with regret.

“Rage, what’s going on?”

He winces, as if he is warring with himself to tell me the truth, but ultimately, I’ve not earned the right to that loyalty yet. “I’ll be back soon,” he assures me and leaves the room.

I stare at the door as he locks it from the other side, and once again, I’m alone.

CHAPTER 8

RAGE

It takes everything I have to walk away from that room and Skye. My heart is pounding so fast, I can hardly breathe as I make my way through the clubhouse and into the common room.

Blackjack is waiting at the bar, and as soon as he notices me, he crooks two fingers, signalling I should come to him.

I cross the room, ignoring Heidi and Pia, who are sitting together with Sophia. I also ignore the other brothers who call for me to join them in a game of pool. My only focus is on Blackjack, and as soon as I'm close enough, I blurt out, "What does he know?"

Blackjack gives nothing away, but even so, I can read the tension in his shoulders that he hasn't quite managed to hide.

"Not here," he says and walks in the direction of the room the officers use for church.

Ain't sure about going in there again. It's not a place for a regular patch to be, but I follow my VP like an obedient dog because I need answers. His message has my stomach in a knot of fear that I've never experienced before.

I empty the contents of my pockets into the box outside the room, and as we step inside, I see Howler sitting in the seat at the head of the table. He signals for me to take the chair Terror used the last time I was here, and although it feels wrong, I do as I'm told.

Blackjack shuts the doors and sits opposite me.

“We knew this could happen,” Howler says before I can speak. I don’t know why he’s trying to calm me down because there’s nothing he can say that will do that. My heart is racing a mile a second.

“Does he know she’s here?”

“Hard to say,” he admits. “What I’m hearing from my contacts is he’s put a reward out for any news on his daughter. It’s going through some discrete channels, so it ain’t completely public knowledge, which tells me he’s been careful about who knows, but he’s still askin’ this question, which ain’t good.”

Cold spreads through my veins. I wasn’t sure Richardson would give a fuck about Skye. I had convinced myself that he would just accept her disappearance and move on, but clearly, I underestimated him.

I should have listened to Skye.

She said he wouldn’t let her go, that he would hunt her for what she did. I guess she was right.

“What kind of reward?”

“A substantial amount of money for any information on her whereabouts.”

Shit.

The ice pick buried in my heart digs a little deeper until I feel like I’m suffocating.

I wasn’t keen on the idea of being a father—truthfully, I’m still not sure I am—but that doesn’t mean I’m going to let the mother of my kid go into a situation where she might get hurt, or worse, dead.

I don’t know why the fuck I kissed her back in that room, but it had felt like the right thing to do in that moment. The way she felt in my grasp was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced with another woman, and that scares me even as it thrills me. I don’t know what I want from her. I’m so conflicted. Every time I feel like I’m coming around to the

idea of being a father, something happens that derails me and gives me a dose of reality.

Whether I like it or not, Skye is the enemy. She may not have blood on her hands or be involved in her father's empire, but her name is a problem. She is a Richardson, and nothing can change that. The club doesn't trust her, and I don't know how to fix that so we can be a family here.

"We ain't giving her back." I snap out the words, ready to fight if I need to. As confused as I am, I'm sure of that. She's mine to protect—her and that baby.

"No, we're not," Howler agrees, which helps to alleviate some of the stress I'm feeling. "She's having your baby, Rage. She doesn't leave your side."

I try not to let my relief show, even though it thrums through every cell in my body. "Then what's the plan?"

"Right now, we watch and we see. We didn't take her, so there's not going to be evidence of that. Richardson might suspect our involvement, but without proof, he ain't gonna do shit."

I don't like this plan. I would rather take out the Pioneers and remove the threat to Skye completely, but that ain't possible. We've been fighting the Pioneers for so long now, and we've barely scratched the surface of their forces, even with Trick's killing sprees. It's going to take a hell of a battle to put them down and a lot of casualties. No one wants more deaths.

"The question I have is why has Richardson done this at all," Blackjack says. "It makes him look weak to admit his daughter's been taken, so there has to be a good reason for him to do that."

There does, and I can't come up with a single one that isn't bad for Skye.

"Skye killed two people in her attempt to escape. She said her father would want her punished for that," I explain.

"Or he's simply a worried father," Howler counters. "I'm trying to imagine the scene from his point of view. He thinks

his daughter is safe at home, then he finds out her guard and another member of the household are dead and she's gone. I don't know that he's going to see foul play here."

"So, he thinks she's out there alone, running?" I question.

"I don't know. Maybe. He's put this shit out to some of the lowest scum walking the streets. He clearly thinks she's in a position where she's having to stay in questionable places that they might see her in."

"He's left her wide open to danger," I growl. "They're gonna do whatever it takes to collect that reward money. Doesn't he see that?"

"Unless he doesn't care about getting her back in one piece."

Howler's matter-of-fact statement turns my stomach.

"You think her own father would risk her life like that?"

"I think Richardson is a piece of shit," Howler says. "I wouldn't put it past him."

"Does he suspect we have her?"

"I don't think so." Howler scratches at his cheek as he leans back in his seat. He seems relaxed, which eases some of my own tension. "If he knew, he'd be here knocking on the door in force."

That's a good point, and one I can't argue, but it doesn't solve the issue. "So, what do we do?"

"Nothing. We keep our heads down and keep Skye hidden. Coming at us directly is a risk, and I don't know he's going to be willing to take it without proof. At the moment, his beef is with us and partly Birmingham, but none of the other UK chapters are involved. He won't want to rock that boat."

The risk to the club is monumental. I don't want to be out there alone trying to protect us both, but I can't put all these lives in danger either. "We'll leave. We'll go into hiding."

"No," Howler says.

“Us staying here puts everyone in this club in a difficult situation.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, “it does, but you’re part of this club too, Rage. You’re one of my men, and I don’t turn my back on my family when they need me. No one else in this chapter is gonna do that either.”

My throat is tight as I take in his emphatic statement. I didn’t think anyone fucking liked me here let alone would be willing to stand beside me. “It would be the best and safest way.”

“For us, yeah, but you? No. You’ll be out there alone and fuckin’ defenceless. Ain’t doing it.”

“Prez—”

“It ain’t up for negotiation, Rage. You both stay.”

I glance at Blackjack, who shifts his shoulders. “Don’t look at me, kid. I’m on his side.”

“Okay, so we stay, but Skye’s gonna need things, at some point a hospital, unless any of you know how to deliver a baby.”

I don’t know the first fucking thing about childbirth, and I’m not looking to play midwife with my own kid. Skye needs to be around professionals who can bring our child safely into this world.

“Yeah, but that’s not a problem for now. We have a doctor who can do visits here for the time being.”

I shake my head. “Not that fuckin’ prick. He ain’t getting near Skye again.”

Howler’s brows draw together. “You don’t like the guy touching your girl?”

Your girl... yeah, she is mine, but that’s not the problem I have with that fuck.

“I have a problem with him trying to convince Skye to leave with him.”

“What the fuck?”

“He said he had a duty of care to his patient and he was worried about her.”

A look passes between the two men, and I don't know what it means, but I'm hoping it prevents that fucker from getting near Skye again.

“I'll deal with it,” Howler assures me.

“She needs out of that room too. I know she can't leave the clubhouse, but she's gonna lose her mind staring at those four walls. It's fucking cruel to keep her locked up like this.”

Howler isn't quick to answer, which isn't a good sign. I trust Skye, but he has no reason to. In fairness, I have no reason to either, but I don't think her motives for coming here were bad.

“You believe her story?”

“Yeah,” I say, “I do.”

Howler sighs, leaning forwards and interlacing his fingers on the table. “Why?”

“I'm good at reading people, Prez, and she has this innocence when it comes to the life. She ain't a hardened criminal who's been mentored by her father for years. She's the girl waking up in cold sweats after killing two people. She ain't done this before. She ain't out there being a ruthless gang member. I don't think she'd even know how to handle a gun or knife for that matter. Skye's the girl who rode ponies around her million-pound estate while her dad was adding more deaths to his tally. I just... I know bad people, Howler, and she ain't giving me that vibe. All she cares about is our kid and keeping that baby safe, even from her own family.”

I believe every word that comes out my mouth. Skye ain't some mastermind playing double agent. She's a scared girl who is desperate to be protected. She's a mother who wants to be with her child. I don't buy her being in this life in the same way as every man in this room is.

“I trust you,” Howler says, which leaves a warm feeling spreading through me. I didn't know I'd done enough to earn

that yet. “But I don’t know her, and I’ve gotta think about the women and the kids who come here.”

Disappointment floods me, and I don’t like the way it feels to have that rejection from someone I respect as much as him.

“Understandable,” I agree, keeping my voice level so I don’t let him know my true feelings.

Howler taps his fingers on the tabletop, his eyes unfocused as he mulls over the issue.

“She can use the common room and the back terrace. That’s it. And only under your supervision until we’re sure about her.”

It’s a start, but I’ll take it. Trust has to be earned, and Skye will have to do that herself. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet. You need to promise me if she tries anything, you’re gonna do your duty to the patch and take care of those under Untamed Sons protection. It comes to her or an old lady, I need to know you’re gonna take her down.”

The thought of hurting her sits in my gut like rotten food, but it’s an easy promise to give because I’m never going to need to choose. Skye ain’t in cahoots with her father.

“I’ll do whatever is needed,” I assure him. “I’m loyal to the patch.”

“I trust you, Rage, and that’s the only reason I’m letting this happen.”

I feel choked by his assurance in me. No one has ever put this kind of faith in me. “I know. I won’t let you down.”

He dismisses me with a nod, and I push up from my seat, heading for the door. I close it behind me, locking my Prez and VP inside as I gather my shit out the box, stuffing it back in my pockets before I make my way back to Skye’s room.

I pause at the door, leaning my forehead against it, and just take a second to collect myself. I’m in deep here, more so than I intended to be, and I don’t know which way to turn. I swing between wanting her and wanting to push her away, but I can’t deny how protective I feel over her either.

The confusing mess in my brain is hard to wade through. I have so many conflicting thoughts as I unlock the door and push it open.

I expect to see Skye lying on the bed or maybe on the floor—a position she seems to favour—but my stomach drops when I realise she's not in the room at all.

I'm about to go into full panic mode when I hear retching from the bathroom. I don't think. I cross the room, making my way into the small space. Skye's kneeling on the cold tiled floor, her head over the toilet as she heaves. The smell of puke fills the air, but I don't care about that.

I move to her back, skimming her hair off her shoulders and holding it out of her way as she continues to throw up. My hand rubs over her spine until she's unable to bring anything else up.

Sinking back on her heels, her chest heaves as she tries to reclaim control of her body.

"I'd say I'm sorry you keep seeing me like this, but since you did this to me, you're just going to have to deal with it."

Her lips quirk at the corners, taking some of the sting out of her words.

I flush the toilet and crouch down in front of her. "You think you're finished?"

"For now."

"You think some fresh air would help?"

Her eyes, which had started to drift closed, snap open. I see wariness and perhaps a little fear. "I'm not allowed to leave the room. Are you kicking me out?"

"No." I straighten and hold a hand to her. "Up you come."

She takes it, her soft skin sliding across my rougher palm as I pull her to her feet.

"I need to brush my teeth first."

I let go of her and watch from the doorway as she grabs her toothbrush and the toothpaste. Watching her in the mirror

doing something as mundane as brushing her teeth has my cock stirring in my jeans. Fuck, she's beautiful. I was drawn to her in that bar for a reason, and I want desperately to fuck her again, but it will just complicate an already complicated situation. I need to focus on the important things here—keeping Skye safe, keeping my club safe, and taking care of my child. I don't know where that leaves Skye and me, but for now, I can't worry about that.

She lifts her lashes and her eyes lock to mine in the mirror. The heated look in her gaze is unmistakable, though she tries to hide it quickly.

“Rage?”

I clear my throat, but I don't break contact with her. I can't. I'm magnetised to her.

“Yeah?”

“What's your real name?”

That's not what I was expecting her to ask, and perhaps she catches me at a weak moment because I spill it before I realise what I've done.

“It's Beau.”

“Beau...” She says it as if she's testing it on her tongue.

“Why do you need to know that?”

“Because you aren't Rage. You never have been. You're a kid who suffered through something horrible, and I don't want to call you a name associated with the man your father created.”

Fuck. My. Life.

What the fuck do I say to that? “I hate my name,” I tell her.

“You hate it because it represents who you were in your past, right?” I nod. “So, claim it back, Beau.”

She makes it sound so easy, and maybe it is, but I can't stop from cringing when she says it. “Skye.” The warning cracks in that one word, but she doesn't heed it. She steps up

to me, the scent of the mint toothpaste she just used filling my senses.

“We both have names that tie us to our pasts, but that doesn’t mean they have to be our future too. I don’t know about you, but I’m done being defined by it. I’m not a Richardson, and you’re not weak because of your name either. Let’s just be who we want to be.”

I stare at her, wondering who the fuck this girl is. She’s like no one I’ve ever met. She’s standing in a room she’s been locked in for a whole week, telling me to be free.

I know I shouldn’t do it, especially after my whole speech before, but I kiss her anyway. She grips my biceps, leaning up on her toes as I take her mouth with more passion than I have any right to deliver.

I keep it short, even though I want nothing more than to push her onto the mattress and sink into her wet heat. I meant what I said about slowing things down. Being reckless and impulsive created this entire situation, and despite what Hawk and my other brothers think, I do learn.

I kiss her forehead, a gesture that makes her close her eyes as I do, and fuck, I want her and it kills me to hold back.

CHAPTER 9

SKYE

I don't think I've been so excited by the prospect of leaving a room in my entire life. As Rage reaches for the door handle, he pauses, and my stomach bottoms out.

"What's wrong?"

He doesn't turn to face me. His focus on the door in front of him, and I can't miss how tight his shoulders seem.

"Hey, talk to me," I push, my fingers wrapping around his arm.

"Your father knows you're missing. He's put out a reward for your return."

That bottoming feeling becomes a heavy anvil in my gut. Oh, shit. I mean, I knew he'd find out—the guards changed regularly—but knowing he's actively looking for me causes a full body tremble. My hands are shaking so badly, I have to clasp them together.

"Hey, you're okay." Rage's voice penetrates barely through the fog shrouding me, but I feel him guide me over to the sofa and push me onto it. "Breathe, Skye."

It seems like such an easy instruction. I've been breathing fine on my own for eighteen fucking years, but my body doesn't remember how to function through my fear.

"He'll kill me," I mumble. "He's never going to let me get away with what I did, and even if he forgives that, I'm carrying the baby of his enemy. He's going to kill us both." I'm rambling, everything slurring together in my panic. "I

have to run, Rage. It's not safe for me to be here, or for your club either. There are kids here."

My mind is racing, my pulse too. I can't seem to get air into my lungs no matter how hard I try.

"Skye, you need to calm down."

"I... I c-can't."

"You're gonna pass out if you don't."

He's not wrong. My vision is hazy and rolling. I grip the edge of the mattress with my fingers, as if it can keep me centred.

"You're safe here. I promise. Nothing's gonna happen to you."

"Y-you c-c-can't... know that."

He takes my face in his hands, his expression serious as he scans my face. "I do know that, Skye, because I'm not gonna let your father fucking touch you." I close my eyes, trying to calm the swirling in my vision. "Look at me." The snapped words are enough to force my lids apart. He's not angry, not with me, but he's not letting this slide either. "I promise I'll always protect you."

I grip his leather vest in my fingers, a reminder of why we're in this mess. "He murdered your friend, despite her being pregnant. You think he won't do the same to me when he realises I'm carrying your baby? My father would rather have a dead daughter than a grandchild bound to the Sons."

I try to calm the palpitations crushing my chest. The nonstop fluttering in my throat makes me feel like I'm drowning on the lack of air.

"I know you're scared. I was too when I first heard he was looking for you, but right now, Richardson doesn't know you're here. We keep you hidden, and we let my Prez handle it. Howler knows what he's doing."

My chest loosens a little, allowing me to take a full breath. I gulp it greedily, drawing oxygen into my starved body. "I'm terrified."

I hate to admit it, but it's the truth. I know my father can be unbelievably cruel, and while I want to think he will never hurt me, I can't. He had me under guard in my own bedroom, leaving Scarlett to torment me for weeks, and that was just for running away.

"I didn't tell you this to scare you," he says.

"Then why did you?"

"Because secrets ain't good, Skye." He rubs my back. "You need to be aware and alert of danger."

I appreciate the heads up, though I already am alert and aware of everything because I have to be.

"Thank you for telling me."

"Maybe I shouldn't have, considering your reaction."

"No." I take his hand in mine. "I'm grateful you trusted me with this information. Forewarned is forearmed, right?"

His brows come together. "I don't know what that means."

I laugh, and it feels good to do it. "It means having the information gives me an advantage."

"Right." He shakes his head. "You getting out of this room is a big step for Howler to take. Means he's trustin' us both."

"I don't plan on doing anything stupid," I assure him.

"I hope that's true. I'm putting a lot of faith in you too. I put my reputation on the line for you here."

"Even if I leave, where would I go? My father has eyes everywhere. He'll find me given enough time. I'm safe, and I want to be here. I came to you for a reason, Beau."

He flinches slightly at my use of his name, but he doesn't ask me to stop using it either. I take that as a win.

For a moment, he says nothing, but I can see him thinking over my words before he stands and holds his hands out to me. I take them, letting him pull me up. "I want to show you the terrace."

"The terrace?"

He keeps his hand locked around mine as we head for the door. “It’s the patio area, but it’s pretty nice. Pia does a lot of gardening. Ain’t into flowers and shit, but even I can admit it looks good.”

As the door opens, my pulse skips several beats. It feels forbidden to leave the room, even if I’m with Rage. He leads me along the corridor, and I take in as much as I can as we pass rooms and photographs on the walls.

When he pushes through a door, we end up in a bar area. There’s a counter running the length of one wall and tables scattered around. A group of women are seated together. One is holding a small baby dressed in a lemon baby grow. Her chubby legs kick out, and my stomach twists. I tear my gaze away, not wanting to see the child my father orphaned.

I can’t hide from the looks directed at me. I feel the weight of the stares pinning me as Rage walks me through the room and to a half-glazed door that looks out over a garden area.

I don’t let go of his hand, nor do I look up until we’re out of the bar area and onto the terrace. I don’t breathe either until I’m drawing in the cooler fresh air.

Rage didn’t lie—it is pretty out here. There are pots filled with brightly coloured blooms, a couple of benches overlooking the area, and a wooden pergola covered in climbing plants with big pink flowers.

It looks like it follows the edge of the building, opening out to the street out front. I appreciate the risk he’s taking letting me out here, so I keep my grip on his hand tight as he leads me over to one of the benches.

I don’t want to leave, and I need him to know that. I sink onto the bench with him, my gaze going up to the sky. It’s bright blue with a few fluffy white clouds and beautiful. I close my eyes, letting the sun heat my skin.

“Thank you for bringing me out here.”

“I don’t want you to be a prisoner, Skye. I want you to be a part of this club too.” I want this as well, but I don’t dare voice my desires. “You still feeling sick?”

“I’m a little queasy still, but I always feel better after puking.”

“How long’s that gonna last?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “Hopefully not long. It’s not much fun.”

“Yeah, I can imagine it’s not.” His gaze goes out over the garden, and I wonder what he’s thinking.

“Did you have any thoughts on names?” I don’t know why I ask this. It’s way too soon, and we’re not in that place either. I curse myself for allowing the question to come out, but Rage doesn’t react how I expect—not that I know what to expect from him.

“Ain’t thought about anything beyond tomorrow,” he says.

“Right. Yeah. Stupid question.”

I avert my gaze, trying to ignore the colour rising in my cheeks. What the fuck was I thinking? He’s barely okay with the fact I’m pregnant. I don’t think he’s picking baby names when we’re not together.

“I don’t care what you call him or her as long as it ain’t something dumb.”

I turn to face him, a smile creeping across my face. “And what do you deem to be dumb?”

“I don’t know.”

It’s a mundane conversation, or so it would seem to outsiders, but my heart is soaring. I didn’t expect him to want any involvement beyond keeping us safe. That he’s willing to talk about it floods me with a happiness I can’t describe.

I nudge his shoulder with mine, a playful smile twitching at my lips. “Well, you can’t just say that and then not back it up with something. I mean how bad are we talking?”

He uses his free hand, the one not clutching mine, to scrub over his jaw. “You pick and I’ll veto if I don’t like it.”

“That’s a copout.”

“Babe, trust me, you don’t want me namin’ our kid.”

I laugh. “You do get some say, considering she’s half yours.”

“Not the better half.”

I frown, but before I can counter his words a female voice snaps out from behind us.

“What’s she doing here?”

Rage twists at the same time as I do to see a dark blonde-haired woman standing there. Her hair is piled on top of her head in a sloppy knot that she somehow makes look good.

It takes me less than a second to realise she was the woman holding the baby when we walked through the room—the baby that is no longer in her arms.

I don’t know who she is, but her words clearly agitate Rage.

“Ain’t fuck all to do with you,” Rage growls at her, his eyes blazing.

I squeeze his hand, trying to calm him. I don’t think he’ll attack her—he doesn’t strike me as the kind of man who would take a hand to a woman—but that doesn’t mean I let my guard down. She’s poking a hornet’s nest, and she has no idea how much danger she’s getting herself into.

“Isn’t it?” She glares at me as if I’m scum, giving a slow look up and down my body. I resist the urge to cover myself. The leggings I’m wearing were given to me by the club, and the sweater I’ve pulled on is two sizes too big, but I like it because it’s comfortable. I don’t look put together, with my face free of makeup and my hair loose around my shoulders.

“No,” Rage snarls, “it ain’t.”

The woman’s eyes flash anger, and I see the danger she possesses. I’ll need to watch my back with her for sure.

“This bitch’s family killed my old man and Mara, not to mention a whole list of others.”

My stomach twists into a knot at her words. I know what my father did—Rage told me—but it doesn't hurt any less hearing it again. The pain is still just as raw.

But I didn't do anything wrong, and I refuse to blame myself for the actions of others. My father is a piece of shit, and I knew that before he locked me away, but it doesn't change anything. I'm not him.

I don't want to spend all my time apologising for his actions.

"I'm sorry for what they did," I say, "but I didn't have anything to do with that."

"You fucking cunt," she snarls, stepping towards me as if she intends to inflict damage.

I brace, preparing to fight. As tired and worn down as I am, I will defend myself.

I don't need to worry, though. Rage pulls me behind him, blocking her from me with his body.

"Back off, Heidi." Rage's warning would be enough to scare most people, but Heidi doesn't even flinch. She does stop though, her jaw locking.

"You're really fine with having Richardson's fucking daughter here?"

"I don't give a fuck who her dad is, and you keep speaking like that, we're gonna have a fuckin' problem."

This situation is getting out of hand, and it needs to be diffused quickly to avoid anything worse happening.

"Rage, it's okay," I assure him, rubbing his arm and trying to calm him.

"No, it's not," he says, keeping me firmly behind him as if he expects Heidi to attack me at any moment. "You're here because the club wants you here. She doesn't get to have a vote on that, and if she has a problem, she needs to take it up with Howler."

“Mara died because of her cunt father. That little baby in there is fucking parentless because losing her mother drove her father to insanity. You want me to pretend I’m okay with Sophia breathing the same fucking air as her? I won’t. She’s a fucking bit—”

“That’s enough.” Another voice joins, and I twist to see a long-haired man standing off to one side. Like Rage, he’s wearing a vest, and he’s huge... scary huge. Rage called him Hawk. I’ve seen him before, but I’ve not dealt with him. In truth, I’ve only really spoke to Rage and a couple of young guys who wear prospect patches on their vests.

“You’re really okay with this?” Heidi demands of him, disbelief lacing her words.

“Ain’t my place to question it, and it sure as fuck ain’t yours.”

The air is statically charged as those words hang between us. I don’t want to cause issues, but I’m also not going to allow this woman to push me out. I need to be here. I don’t have anywhere else to go.

But this is not my fight to get into, so I say nothing and let them talk it out between them.

Heidi’s expression is murderous as she glances between me and Hawk.

“Her father killed Jade.”

Hawk flinches as if she struck him, and I see his pain before he manages to hide it again. “Don’t go there,” he hisses.

“The truth won’t go away just because Rage is fucking her.”

Rage steps towards her, and I tighten my hold on his arm, stopping him. Surprisingly, he lets me, but he doesn’t let it go at that. “Shut your fucking mouth.”

“Go inside, Heidi,” Hawk orders.

She huffs out a breath, shaking her head. “You’re all deluded. She’s a Richardson. Stay away from Sophia or I’ll

kill you myself.”

She gives one final glare at me before she turns around, storming to the door and slamming it behind her as she goes inside. The windows rattle with the force, and Hawk grits his teeth as he stares after her.

“You okay?” Rage asks me, but I’m stuck on the fact Heidi thinks I’m capable of hurting a baby.

“Oh, I’m fine,” I say. “As usual, my father’s reputation causes me nothing but trouble.” I turn to Hawk. “I’m sorry about your friend. If there’s anything I can do…”

He shakes his head, dropping his hands to his hips. “You didn’t kill her, Skye. She died because I took my eye off her and didn’t do my job to keep her safe.”

I don’t believe that for a second, but I don’t argue with him. Hawk doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who appreciates being pushed. “I’m still sorry. It’s hard losing someone.”

I know that first-hand. I lost my mother, and although Tommy isn’t dead, he might as well be. He’s so far outside my reach now, and I worry that his need for revenge is going to end with him taking a bullet from a gun fired by one of the men in this club.

“I’m gonna go talk to Heidi, try to calm shit down.”

Hawk heads inside, and Rage waits until he’s gone before he sits back down on the bench, tugging me with him.

“You don’t deserve that.”

Don’t I? My father has destroyed all these lives. Killing men in the life is different to murdering innocents. The people the Sons have lost should not have died.

“I didn’t expect to be welcomed with open arms.”

I don’t need to know him to understand how pissed he is. He’s not very good at hiding his emotions. “They’re gonna have to deal with it. You ain’t leaving, and their feelings on the matter ain’t gonna change that.”

I rub my thumb over the back of his hand, trying to soothe him. “Give it time, Beau. It’s a lot to expect them to be friendly considering who I am.”

He lifts his chin to meet my gaze. “You just told me that we’re not defined by our names.”

My smile is a little sad as I trail my fingers over his cheek. “We’re not, and in time, they’ll see I’m not a threat to them, but for now, they can’t see past my blood. I don’t even blame them for that. I’m a threat to their life here, to their men and their families. They’re right to be angry and suspicious.”

“They’ll come around in time,” he says, though I’m not sure if that’s for my benefit or his.

I want to believe it, but hurt and anger are deep rivers to navigate.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. They don’t have to be your friend, Skye, but they do need to respect the mother of my fuckin’ kid.”

I lift his hand and kiss his knuckles. He watches me do it with an unreadable look on his face. “Don’t worry about me,” I tell him. “I’ve weathered worse.”

“I’m sure you have, but ain’t having that shit. Howler wants you here, and that’s all that fuckin’ matters.”

Howler... he wants me here. I don’t have the guts to ask Rage if he wants me here too, but it’s a question I’m dying to have an answer to.

I don’t know what I feel for Rage, nor he for me, but the little things he does for me, the way he protects me, has my emotions in a tailspin. I shouldn’t like it or want him to defend me, so why does my stomach fill with butterflies every time he does?

CHAPTER 10

RAGE

Murder is a messy business. The blood caked under my fingernails doesn't come away easily, despite the flow of water and soap on my hands. I've never really considered the severity of what I do, but watching the pink flow as I sluice my skin clean unsettles me in a way it never has.

I don't remember the faces of the men I kill or hurt. I'm usually in a haze, focused on the anger surging through me, but this time was different. I didn't feel that disconnect. I watched the light in that fuck's eyes dim before his glassy gaze was staring into the abyss, and I don't have the first clue why it bothered me so much.

The guy was a Pioneer, the same scum who has been attacking my club and my brothers. The same scum who will take Skye from me if they discover her location.

I shouldn't feel shit, but for the first time since I started killing, the blood coating me isn't just physical—it's embedded in me. I feel the weight of that kill more than all the others combined.

I don't know what's changed, but it fuckin' scares me. I'm only useful to the club because of what I can do and the ruthlessness in which I get it done.

I shake myself as I twist my hands under the water, which is running clear now, but I don't stop scrubbing. I can still feel the warm stickiness coating my skin, despite the fact my skin is clean.

“Kid.”

Hawk's voice makes me jolt. I didn't hear the brother come up behind me, but when I lift my eyes to the mirror hanging over the sink, he's leaning against the door jamb. The serious expression on his face isn't unusual, but for some reason, it makes my spine snap straight.

"What's wrong?"

I turn the faucet off, ignoring the need to keep cleaning my hands, and reach for the hand towel hanging at the side of the basin.

"I'm worried about you," he admits.

I frown at him, shoving the towel back onto the ring. That was the last thing I expected him to say. "Well, you don't need to be. I'm fine."

Pushing around him, I walk along the dimly lit corridor of the clubhouse. It's quiet, barely any noise coming from within the bowels of the building despite the late hour. This place doesn't sleep, but there has been a sombre mood shrouding the club for the past week. The news that Richardson is searching for his daughter has everyone on edge, especially me. We're just waiting for the inevitable attack to come, despite Howler's assurances he doesn't know she's here.

"Rage, hold up."

Hawk rushes after me, his long stride eating up the space I've managed to create. I feel twitchy, my skin prickling as if there are a hundred ants walking over me.

I don't want to talk, but he's not going to let this go, so I stop and wait for him to come around the front of me.

"I'm tired, Hawk." It's a lie. I'm more wired than I've ever been. My blood pumps so furiously through my body, I can hear it thumping in my ears. There's a growing need to release the mounting pressure within me, but the way I usually do that ain't gonna work.

Hawk scrubs a hand over his face. "I can't even believe I'm gonna say this, but you weren't your usual psychotic self tonight. Are you okay?"

Sensing a change in myself is one thing, but my brothers noticing it too ain't good. I thought I'd locked my shit down tighter than that. "I was in control. Weren't you the one telling me I needed to do that?"

"You were controlled before..." He breaks off what he was going to say, but he doesn't need to finish his sentence. I know the name that was about to spill from his mouth.

Before Skye.

I can't even be pissed at him for saying it because it's true. She consumes my every waking thought, more so in the past week since I've been guarding her out of the room. Every hour we spend together makes my need for her grow stronger.

Now, with the adrenaline pumping through me, I'm itching to go to her. It's an all-consuming need that I've never experienced before.

I don't know what fucking spell she's put on me, but I've never cared about another person in my entire fucking life. Honestly, it scares the shit out of me the hold she's starting to have on me.

I should create distance, put a stop to whatever is blossoming between us, but those little smiles she gives me when we talk are hard to ignore. I'm fuckin' falling for her, and I don't know how to soothe this ache within me without crossing lines that would change everything for us.

"I'm still controlled," I fire back at Hawk.

"Ain't the same and you know it."

I grit my teeth, wishing he'd go the fuck away. Skye is just a few metres from where we're standing, and as if I'm tethered to her by an imaginary rope, I feel myself being tugged in that direction.

"If you're worried about my ability to do my job, take it up with Howler."

I step around him, but Hawk grabs my arm, pulling me back. "I don't give a fuck about your damn job, Rage. I'm worried about *you*."

That's enough to momentarily break through my Skye fog. I've never felt cared about by anyone in my entire life, so I don't know what to do with Hawk's concern.

"I care about my job," I mutter back. "I want to stay here."

"We ain't made it clear enough that you're one of us yet?" When I don't answer, he continues to speak. "Kid, you ain't goin' anywhere. You're a Sons, through and through. Manchester is your home for as long as you want it to be."

"But?" I ask, sensing the unspoken word hanging between us.

"No but. I'm just checking you're okay. You've got a lot going on. No one would blame you for feeling off-kilter."

That's the understatement of the century. I've been introducing Skye slowly to the club over the past week, taking her into the common room to mingle with the brothers and old ladies. The response to her has been a wide spectrum. Pia and Hope have been kind to her, but the others have been a little more wary. Heidi remains completely hostile, while most of the brothers ignore her beyond a brief hello if they pass her.

I didn't expect them to roll out the red fucking carpet, and I don't have any right to be pissed at the disrespect. Skye ain't my old lady or even my girlfriend—at least not officially, and there's zero chance of me getting a vote through to make her mine that way. It would put the club in an impossible situation, a dangerous one too. They would have no choice but to fight to keep her safe, and with things how they are, it's too much to ask.

"Appreciate you caring, but I don't need your sympathy, Hawk."

"Good thing I ain't giving you sympathy then, ain't it? I'm just asking a fucking question. If it helps, I like the girl."

My chest tightens. It helps more than he knows to hear that. I don't know what my future with Skye looks like, but I want her and our kid to be a part of the club. Having my brothers on my side is important to me. I was on the outside looking in the entire time I was in London, and coming to

Manchester changed everything. I was starting to fit in, make connections, feel like a team player—until I got Skye pregnant.

“She ain’t a bad person,” I say. “She’s a victim of her father as much as anyone else.”

Hawk nods. “Yeah, and most of us see that, but that ain’t why I like her.”

My brows come together. “Then why?”

“Because she makes you a better man.”

I roll my eyes despite the warmth spreading through my chest. I didn’t realise until this moment how much I wanted to hear that, but I’m not about to show Hawk how it’s affected me. Instead, I make light of it, throwing in a stupid joke.

“You want to braid each other’s hair while we talk about girls?”

He punches me in the shoulder hard enough to make me go back a step. Fucker. The burn starts to turn into numbness after a moment, but I don’t let on that it hurt. I still have some pride left.

“Shut up, dickface. I’m trying to be nice here.”

I snort, trying not to rub at my shoulder. “Was the hitting part the nice bit?”

My sarcasm gains me a scowl, one that I’m getting used to from him. I get the impression I infuriate Hawk. “Go to fuckin’ bed.”

I raise my brows. “Now, you’re sending me to bed like I’m fifteen?”

He shoves me in the direction of the rooms. “You were fifteen four years ago. Get out of here.”

I wave him off as I walk towards the rooms. Fucking dick. How does he make me want to punch him while giving me warm, fuzzy feelings at the same fucking time?

I slow my pace, waiting until he disappears into the common room. Despite what I told him, I don’t want to go to

bed, at least not alone.

My cock aches with the need to fuck this shit out of me, but the only woman in this building I want to be with is Skye, and that's a box that can't be closed once it's opened.

So far, I've resisted every instinct in my body to take her how I want. She's pregnant and she's sick most of the day. When she ain't vomiting, she's sleeping, so my need to fuck her senseless has been pushed aside. I might be an animal, but I'm not about to force my pregnant girl to take me.

But those thoughts have been building all week behind a dam that is in danger of bursting. I should do what I told Hawk I was going to do.

Go to bed.

As I pass Skye's room, my feet turn into concrete blocks, and I can't take another step.

Fuck.

What am I doing?

If I go into her room, things are going to happen that can't be undone, and I have to be prepared for that.

But I knew the moment I came back to the clubhouse tonight that I was going to end up in her bed. I always like to fuck after I've committed violence, and my fucking conscience won't allow me to go there with a club bunny, which means Skye is my only option.

In truth, there hasn't been another woman in my awareness since I first fucked Skye in that dirty bar. Memories of that night flood my brain, and I can see it unfolding like a movie behind my eyes.

The way she felt around my cock as her tight channel squeezed me. The little moans and whimpers she made as I fucked her with raw abandon. The first time had been quick, a fumble in a dirty room, but now, I want to take my time. I want to taste every inch of her body.

I move to the door, ignoring the warning lights flashing in my mind. My need to dip my tongue into her sweet cunt

overrides everything, and before I can stop myself, I fumble over the lock and draw it back.

Skye *has* changed me, Hawk is right about that, but she's also ruined me. I have always been impulsive, I don't deny that, but she is the perfect storm to make that behaviour worse.

I'm a little breathless as I peel the door open and step inside, ignoring my judgment. The room is dark other than a slither of light coming from the ensuite bathroom, which casts a glow over the bed.

Skye is facing me, her legs tangled in the covers and her hand resting under her pillow. Despite the position, she doesn't look restful. I can see the furrowed lines on her forehead as some nightmare stalks her sleep. I hate that she feels guilt for what she did to survive. Those fucks deserved everything they got and worse.

I move closer to the bed, my cock heavy and my balls aching as I peer down at her. In the light, I can see her dark lashes framing her closed eyes, and as she twitches, whimpering, I grit my teeth.

If those cunts were still alive, I'd hunt them down and end them, but there's no one to take that fury out on, so I do the only thing I can—I attempt to bury it, but that's not easy. Not with her lying in front of me so vulnerable.

Was she scared?

They hurt her to keep her in place, but my girl fought for her freedom, only to be imprisoned here. I can't think about what she's suffered. It only drives my anger to alarming levels.

I flex my fists at my sides, trying to calm myself. Skye doesn't deserve any of this, and yet we're pawns in this game between my club and her family. I hate not knowing the next move on the board.

I push all of that aside, instead taking a moment to study her. Her tits look amazing in the little vest top she's wearing, the voluptuous globes bursting out the top of the material. I don't know if it's the way she's lying on her side that has made them look even bigger than usual or if it's her pregnancy, but I

want to take a handful and roll her nipple between my fingers until she groans my name.

I take a steadying breath, resisting the urge to shove her legs open and push inside her. I have grown, because the old Rage would've done that. I'm far more tempered now, so instead, I palm myself through my jeans, trying to ease the pain as my body begs for release.

Skye Richardson might share blood with that fucking prick, but she's perfection. The lines of her body are art, and I want to see more, so I untangle her from the covers, exposing more of her to me.

She shifts in her sleep, moving a little as if trying to work out where the blankets went, but she doesn't wake. My gaze is drawn to her full mouth, parted slightly as she takes slow and steady breaths. I want to kiss her, but not there. I have another destination in mind for that.

I roll her onto her back, sucking in a breath as I take in the tiny fucking sleep shorts she's wearing. I don't know who the fuck gave them to her, but I almost come in my jeans. They fit snug around her thighs, barely covering her pussy and exposing a lot of skin.

I trail my fingers along her leg, just above her knee and up her thigh, stopping at the apex before her pussy. She stirs again, but her eyes remain shut, a contented little sigh escaping her lips.

She's making this fucking hard to resist, and I'm done trying to be a decent human. I want to give her something good, and the only thing I have is my body.

I skim my fingers over the waistband of the shorts, the silky feel of them under my pads satisfying. They're some kind of stretchy material that sits high on her stomach, protectively encasing the area where our child is growing. Without thinking, I splay my fingers over her stomach.

She's around eight weeks along now, and although there's no obvious bump there to the untrained eye, I can see where she's started to fill out around her hips and her middle. Skye

was slim before she got pregnant, so even the smallest amount of added weight gives her a curve that could be mistaken for bloat.

I close my eyes, trying to imagine what she's going to feel like and look like when she's five, six, even nine months along. I'm already hard as a rock knowing I put a baby in her without seeing the evidence of it in her body.

My hand wanders a little lower, feeling the slit of her pussy through her shorts. I apply a little pressure there, circling around where I think her clit is. I know when I have the right spot because her thighs shift together and she lets out a moan in her sleep.

I press harder, circling faster, and feeling her wetness seeping through the material. Her breath starts to rip out of her, but it's not enough. I need to taste her.

Pulling my fingers away, I smirk as she lets out a frustrated sound, and then I pull out my pocket knife and flick it open. My gaze splits as I slip the blade under the fabric and carefully slice it open. The material remains around her body, but I cut enough to give me the access I desire.

To my satisfaction, Skye ain't wearing underwear, so as soon as I peel the stretchy material back, I'm looking at her glistening pussy as well as a patch of dark, neatly trimmed hair above her folds.

I shut the blade and put my knife away before I dip my finger into her wetness, and she is wet. Even in sleep, her body reacted to my stimulation. She's soaked, and I want to taste her sweetness.

There's a voice in my head that tells me to stop, that this is wrong, but I block it out. I want her, and I'm going to have her.

I grip the top of her thighs, spreading her legs wide enough for me to get my face between them. Holding them apart, I drag my tongue from the bottom of her cunt to the top. The first taste of her makes me groan. Fuck, she is perfection, and

all my anxiety and tension is ready to be released inside her, but not yet. I want to explore her body first.

I lick her again, swirling and stabbing my tongue into her pussy. Skye's breath catches as she writhes on the sheets. I keep going, bringing one hand to grip her just above her clit. I part her folds and see her swollen bud before I press my thumb against it.

Instantly, her hips lift off the mattress and she whimpers, gasping for breath as I apply more pressure and hold her in place as best I can.

I flatten my tongue along her slit, dancing through her folds as I try to bring her to climax.

"What are... what are you doing?" Her voice is drowsy as she comes out of her sleepy state.

I don't answer her. I grip her hip and lower abdomen, holding her still as I continue to lick her out and circle her clit with my thumb.

"Rage?" I don't answer. I'm too busy tasting her. "Beau." She tries to get my attention again, leaning up on her elbows, but I don't allow her any room to move. "Beau, what..." Whatever she was going to say gets swallowed by a breathless moan.

I can't hide how much I fucking like hearing that sound from her, and I like it even better as it continues to build to crescendo. I don't focus on anything but continuing to eat her pussy like she's my last meal. I use every trick I've learned over the years to make her come apart beneath me, and when her hand slips over mine, I'm not sure if she's trying to make me apply more pressure or pull me away.

Her thighs squeeze together, nearly crushing my head between them as her orgasm shatters through her. Her pants become frantic as her body twitches under my mouth.

"Fuck..."

I give her a final lick and one more circle of her clit before I pull my face out of her pussy and lock my gaze to hers. Even

in the small slither of light from the bathroom, I can see how flushed her cheeks are as she stares at me.

“What... what are you doing?” Her voice is small and breathless still as she tries to cover herself .

I get off my knees and reach for my belt. “I’m fucking you. If you have objections, now is the time to say. Otherwise, buckle up for the ride, sweetheart.”

CHAPTER 11

SKYE

The after-tremors of my orgasm still rock through me as Rage undoes his belt and shoves his jeans down to his mid-thigh. The bulge in his boxers catches my attention instantly. I don't remember his dick being so big when he fucked me last time, but it strains against the loose material of his underwear, making my pussy contract.

“Tell me to leave, Skye.” His voice is hoarse, and his heated eyes chase away the last remnants of my sleep as I realise none of this is a dream. He *is* standing in front of me, ready to fuck me, and he did wake me with his tongue pressed to my core.

I peer down my body, aware of how naked my bottom half is. The shorts that I'd been gifted by the club are in tatters around my thighs and hips. How the hell did he do that without waking me?

You didn't wake right away when he had his mouth around your clit either.

My face burns, and I know I should reach for the blankets to cover myself, but I'm so disorientated, I can't think straight or tear my gaze from him.

“Last chance,” he continues when I don't say anything, toeing off his boots and stepping out of his jeans as if he knows this is a done deal.

Do I want him to fuck me?

My pussy throbs in response. I didn't think I'd ever have sex again after this mess, and certainly not with the man half-

responsible for it.

“Beau... I...”

I *what*?

Want him to do it?

Want him to leave?

I didn't think we had a chance to be more than just co-parents, but I can't deny we've become closer since I came here, especially over the past week, when he's been forced into the role of my guard.

I don't answer fast enough for his liking, and his gaze hardens. “Ain't playing games, Skye. You want this or you don't, but this is the last chance I'm giving you to make me leave.”

I open then close my mouth, the words lodging in my throat. I'm still trembling with shockwaves of what he just did to me. I've never had a man go down on me while I'm asleep. The first—and only time—we were together was not like this. Rage had fucked me hard and fast. There was no foreplay, and certainly no orgasms while I was asleep.

This is different, and I want to see what he's offering.

His chest rises and falls as he tries and fails to control his breathing. We're standing at a crossroads, and I'm scared of taking a step in any direction. What if I make things worse? What if he wants nothing to do with our baby because of me?

What if it works out though?

Heat pools in my belly as I stare at him. He's so handsome, it makes my stomach ache. His dark hair drips into his eyes, somehow making him look wild and vulnerable at the same time. I don't know what our future holds, but I'm done planning ahead. These past few months have taught me that no matter what I do, my life isn't always in my own hands.

Live in the moment.

Seize every opportunity as it comes because tomorrow isn't guaranteed.

I lick my suddenly dry lips and take a breath.

“I don’t want you to go.”

He doesn’t move, his expression remaining unreadable.
“You’re sure?”

I nod. “I want you.”

His mouth tugs into a smirk. “You have me.”

As he speaks these words, he shrugs out of his leather vest and drops it onto the sofa to the side of us.

His eyes remain locked to mine as he drags his T-shirt over his head in a motion that shouldn’t be hot as hell but is. My thighs widen in anticipation, ready and willing to take him, and my nerves tingle. I wasn’t scared the first time we had sex, but lying here like this, my body shivers.

Rage steps up to the bed in just boxer shorts, his gaze roaming over my body in a way that makes me squirm. I hold my breath as he kneels on the mattress, moving up the bed until his knees are either side of mine.

Tantalisingly, he pushes my top up over my breasts, slowly revealing my nipples. The little smirk he gives me suggests he’s pleased by my lack of bra, but he doesn’t give me a chance to dwell on it as he dips his head and latches his mouth around my breast.

I gasp the moment his tongue connects with my nipple. My clit seems to throb as his hot, wet mouth attaches to me. I’ve never had sensitive breasts, but I’m pretty sure I’m about to come from his mouth alone.

The electric jolt that zaps through my body has my back arching off the bed as I let out a strangled gasp. “Fuck.”

It’s both too much yet not enough at the same time, and I grip his hair, unsure if I want to pull him away or force him to stay in place. My body is singing, and all I can do is try to breathe through it.

Rage moves between both sides, licking and sucking. He’s a little clumsy, a little unsure perhaps, but I don’t care. What he’s doing feels so good.

I close my eyes, trying to suck air into lungs that feel static. My past experiences have never been like this, even with Rage. Jack didn't care about me when he took my virginity, and in that back room in Embers, neither did Rage.

So, when he moves down my body, pausing over my belly to press a line of kisses there, I can't stop the tears from leaking out. "I'm gonna take care of you both," he promises in a raw voice.

I can't answer him because of the lump in my throat.

He doesn't need my response, nor does he wait for it before he sucks my clit between his lips. I nearly shoot off the bed. The sensations working through me are so overwhelming, I feel like I'm in another dimension. Everything feels hypersensitive in a way it never has before. The way his mouth moves over my clit has my thighs shaking. "Oh, I'm gonna... I'm gonna..."

I throw my head back as my orgasm crashes through me. The noises I'm making don't sound human as I writhe around the mattress, sparks flying through my body. My lungs are no longer functioning, and I feel like I'm suffocating as I cling to the sheets.

I'm still coming when he drags his fingers through my folds, collecting my wetness before he slides two digits inside me. My pussy contracts around the intrusion, and I can't prevent the startled breath that escapes me as he pumps in and out with a fervour that makes me try to twist away.

He doesn't allow me to move, his free hand clamping over my belly to keep me still.

Is it possible to die from an orgasm?

If I wasn't floating above my body in some kind of trance, I would dissect that more, but all I can focus on is how everything feels so heightened. "It's too much," I gasp as another orgasm rolls through me. "Beau—" My words are swallowed by a guttural groan as my pussy contracts savagely.

I'm no longer in control of myself or my actions. I grab his wrist, trying to pull him away. He allows me to, but it's a trick.

He uses the distraction to push his boxers down his legs, setting free his thick length. My dizzied gaze drops to it, taking in the veiny lines and bulbous head as he grabs his shaft in his hand, pulling up and down his large erection.

I don't think I can take any more, but he steps to the bed and rolls me onto my side, taking that choice from me. It's a testament to how stunned I am that I don't fight or try to stop him as the mattress behind me depresses with his weight.

Without invitation, he lifts my leg a little to give him the access he needs. One swipe of his cock, then two, through my wetness before he shoves into me from behind. Startled, my entire body clenches, which makes him groan.

“Oh, *shit...*” I don't even know what the noises I'm making are anymore and I don't care.

All I'm thinking about is the girth spearing me to the bed. My pussy stretches around him, trying to accommodate the sudden intrusion.

Was he this thick before?

I suck in air through my teeth, the bite of pain almost unbearable for a second. He needs to move, to do something, but he remains frozen, buried inside me and stretching my walls.

“Move...” I gasp.

He doesn't do as I demand. Instead, his fingers trail over my hip bone, a gentle caress that lulls me into a false sense of security before his grip tightens on my flesh hard enough to bruise.

Then, without warning, he drags his cock back so just the tip is inside me. The loss of him deep within my tight channel is a physical ache, but he doesn't leave me for more than a few seconds before he surges forwards. I feel his pelvis flush against my backside as he bottoms out inside me.

I let out a strangled moan, my eyes rolling in my head as he rinses and repeats the motion, starting slow before picking up pace.

I draw my knees closer to my chest, my position fetal as he hammers into me. It allows him to gain even more depth, and the sensations inside me are unlike anything I've ever felt.

This is the same ferocity with which he had taken me in Embers, but everything about this feels different. This isn't a quick fumble and meaningless fuck. This is a connection that I've never experienced before. I feel him everywhere. It's like he's trying to lose himself in me.

I dig my nails into the mattress as he pistons his hips, each thrust taking him deeper into my body. I wish I could see his face, see what he's thinking and feeling, but I can't lift my head to turn in his direction. I can't do anything but lie here and receive everything he's giving to me.

I take his punishing pace, biting my bottom lip so hard, I taste blood. I'm floating, the sensations and emotions rolling through me almost too much to handle.

Rage's hips stutter and his breathing becomes choppy as he spills warm cum into my pussy. My skin feels like it's on fire, and I'm sure my cheeks are flushed as he twitches within my pulsing walls.

There's a quietness that descends over the room, the only sounds our laboured breaths. I'm dizzy, my vision wobbly as the first tear leaks down my cheek. I'm too exhausted, too spent to reach up and wipe them away. I don't move from my position as he slips free of my body, but I do whimper at the loss of him.

Then he's back, his mouth pressing a line of kisses along my shoulder. He stops abruptly. "Did I hurt you?" His voice cracks as he asks this, guilt lacing his tone.

"No," I assure him. Between my legs burns, but I relish the pain in a way I shouldn't.

"Fuck. The baby..."

At his tone, I roll to face him—a monumental effort considering how jellied my body feels. The look on his face makes my stomach twist. "You didn't hurt me or the baby." I don't know how I manage it, but somehow, I make myself sit

up and hold my hands out to him. He comes to me, standing in front of me so his cock is nearly in my face. “I get the feeling that was about more than just having sex. Are you okay?”

He closes his eyes and shakes his head in a rare show of honesty.

“Talk to me, Beau.”

His stormy orbs lock onto mine as he prises his lids open. “I’m scared of who I am.”

I try not to react to his words, uncertain whether he would shut down if I do. “What do you mean?”

“This anger within me... it’s always been the thing that saved me when shit got bad, but now... I’m worried it might be the thing that destroys everything.”

“Beau, you’re not going to be destroyed.”

His lips form a line as he shakes his head, averting his gaze from me. “You don’t understand. Before you, everything made sense. I knew who I was, what I was.”

Pain lances through my chest, a pickaxe to my heart. I don’t really understand what he’s saying, so I don’t know if this is positive or not.

“I don’t care who you were or what.” I grip his hands tight. “I care about who you are now.”

“I came in this room because I was so pumped up after killing a man that I needed to find my release in you.”

I swallow hard, unsure how to deal with what he’s telling me. “I’m always here for you,” I assure him.

He shakes his head. “I lost control, Skye. I could’ve hurt you. Don’t you see, I’m a fuckin’ danger, and the best thing you could do is fuckin’ leave.”

My chest caves in at this. I don’t want to leave. I want to stay with him. I want our child to have both its parents, and even if I do leave, I’ll never make it out there alone. My father has a bounty on me.

I stand, putting myself on his level though nowhere close to his height. “I don’t want to go. I want you, Beau. However you come. I know this is early days between us, but tell me you don’t sense this connection we have.”

“I sense it,” he admits, loosening some of the tension knotting the back of my neck.

I grab his face, forcing him to look at me. “You’re not going to hurt me. You didn’t scare me tonight. You made me feel, and it’s been a really long time since anyone did that.”

I roll to my toes, pressing my lips to his. He doesn’t respond right away, but after a moment, he kisses me back. When we break apart, his forehead rests against mine. “I was half mad when I came in here.”

“Then I’m glad I was able to help you with that.”

“No, you don’t get it, Skye. Killing... it does something to me, and usually, I’d lose myself in some random cunt.”

I jolt at his words. It’s a blow I don’t expect, but when I try to move away, he grabs my wrists, holding me in place. “I don’t... I didn’t want to do that this time,” he says. “All I wanted was you.”

Releasing one of my wrists, he reaches out and strokes my cheek. He keeps hold of the other as if he’s scared to let go of me. “I fuckin’ need you, and that shit scares me, because all this anger and rage inside me... it’s gonna boil over if I don’t have you.”

It feels like the air in the room is suddenly thin and there’s no oxygen. “You have me. I’m right here.”

His eyes crawl over my face, as if trying to ascertain the truth of that. “Yeah, I have you now, but you saw a little of the monster within me tonight. I hurt you. You can deny it, but I saw your tears, Skye, and if I was any kind of man, I’d let you walk away. But I’m gonna be honest here. I can’t let you go, and if your dad or any of the Pioneers try to take you from me, they’re gonna find out how I earned my fuckin’ name.”

CHAPTER 12

RAGE

I wake with Skye draped over my chest, her leg tangled around mine and her soft breaths tickling my skin. I don't move for fear of disturbing her, instead watching her lips part with every exhale she takes.

I'm in deeper than I should have allowed myself to get, and in truth, I don't want to pull back from it. Having her in my arms like this unlocks some of that anger inside me. I don't know how she's done it, but this woman is bewitching me.

Last night, I didn't fuck her—I lost myself in her. She consumed me completely until all that adrenaline and rage within me was doused, but I hurt her in the process.

She says I didn't, but I saw her tears. I'd been too rough, too heavy-handed. That can't happen again. I can't use her an outlet for my anger.

Guilt—another emotion I'm not used to feeling—gnaws at my gut. She doesn't deserve my shit. I'm broken beyond repair, and all I bring with me is darkness and violence.

I wrap my arms around her slender body, encasing her in my hold. I'm scared she might wake this morning and realise she needs to get away from me. I wouldn't blame her for that either. I'm not the kind of man anyone wants in their life.

For now, I imagine she's mine to keep and that she wants to be here willingly. She hadn't asked me to leave after I cleaned my cum from her. Instead, she'd laid down next to me, her arm wrapped around my stomach as she fell asleep.

I close my eyes, breathing her in. This ain't gonna last. This shit never does with me, though I want it to.

I told her last night that I can't let her go. In the moment, I'd said it with panic, afraid she might see the monster in me and run. But in the stark light of day, I understand my words had been the truth.

When she first came here, she was a problem to me, something standing in my way with the club, but the more time that passes, the more I get to know her, the more I want to keep her.

But Skye is complicated.

Her family and mine are at war, one that shows no sign of stopping any time soon. Too much has happened, too much hurt and pain to gloss over it. I don't know where that leaves us in the club. Heidi is already aggressively against Skye being here. Do the others feel the same?

What do I do if they won't accept her?

The club is all I've ever wanted. I've fought so hard to earn my place here, but looking down at her, I'm not sure what I'll do if I'm forced to choose between Skye and the Sons.

I hope to fuck it doesn't come to that.

My thoughts scatter as she makes a low sound in the back of her throat, pulling my attention as she starts to come around. Her pretty eyes flutter before they open. She takes a second to work out where she is, relaxing as she peers up my chest to lock eyes with me.

“Hey,” she says, her voice a little unsure.

I don't blame her for that, but I don't like that she's giving that vibe. I squeeze her tighter in my arms, kissing the top of her head. “How are you feeling?”

Do I want to know the answer to that?

I'd fucked her so hard, I'd made her cry. What kind of fucking animal does that?

To my relief, she doesn't try to pull away from me, and that loosens the knot in my chest. "I'm okay. A little nauseous, but nothing I can't handle."

"That's good," I say, avoiding the subject I actually want to address with her.

Skye must sense my mood because she pulls out of my grasp just enough to come up on a hand so she can look at me. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Beau, please don't shut me out. You're the only person I have here who doesn't hate me or want me to leave."

That statement is a knife to my gut. "That's not true."

She comes to a sitting position and her tits, which had been crushed against my chest, are now on full display. I want to touch her, rub my fingers over her nipples, and hear those beautiful moans she gave me last night, but I don't know if she wants me near her and I'm scared to push her.

"Heidi hates my guts. I think she'd put knife in my back if she could."

I growl, unable to stop the visceral reaction I have to those words. The thought of anyone touching her fucking inflames me. "And she'll die if she tries."

Skye's brows come together in confusion, and I understand it because I don't know why I'm reacting like this either. I meant what I told her last night. I will kill anyone who tries to take her from me—even if they are club.

"What... what happened last night?"

I wince internally, not wanting to delve into my behaviour. I can't explain it because I don't get it either. "We fucked."

She flinches at the crassness of my words, her cheeks staining a pretty pink as she blushes. "That's not what I meant, and you know it. You were... upset."

That's a fucking understatement. I was rabid, consumed with the need to release all the tension within me. Whether I

want to admit it or not, I lost control last night. I let my emotions direct my actions, and while I wouldn't give two fucks about pounding into some random club whore or hangaround, my insides turn at doing that to Skye.

It's too much.

The air feels thin and my head throbs in time with my racing heart.

I swing my legs out of the bed, suddenly needing distance, even though moments ago, I didn't want to let go of her.

"Nothing happened. I was fine." I snag my boxers off the floor and drag them on without looking at her, because if I do, I'm going to lay myself bare again. She drags those things out of me without even trying.

She grabs hold of my arm, and I freeze in place.

"Beau, you fucked me like you were possessed and then you were saying all this crazy stuff. I didn't think you wanted me like that, and now, I'm... I'm just confused."

Her vulnerability is a kick to the gut because I caused it and she deserves the same back, but I can't give it to her.

"Don't overthink it," I say, standing so I can button my jeans.

I don't know where the fuck my T-shirt went, but I can see her clothes pooled on the carpet and my cock twitches with the need to be inside her again.

"Don't do that!"

The anger vibrates from her, and it makes me turn to her. I don't miss the way her eyes skim over my bare chest and the artwork decorating my skin.

"Do what?"

"Pretend like you didn't do that shit to me, Beau. You told me you couldn't be without me, and now, you're pushing me away." She clamours off the bed, walking towards me naked. Blood rushes to my cock as she stops in front of me. "I know you're scared... I am too, but I want this. I want you."

She takes my hand, and I let her guide me between her legs. Her slick wetness coats my skin as I hook a finger between her folds. It soothes me to touch her like this.

“I hurt you,” I say, even as I continue to stroke her.

“You didn’t hurt me at all. Yes, the sex was rough, but I wasn’t crying because of any pain you caused. I was overstimulated. My body was on fire, and everything felt so incredible.”

“You were crying because it was so good?” I clarify, unable to keep the smugness from my tone.

Her eyes roll. “Of course, that’s what you got from what I said.” I push two fingers inside her waiting cunt, and her mouth drops open, a whimper escaping as she clings to my arms. “That’s not fair.”

“What gave you the impression I play fair?”

She sure as hell ain’t playing fair with me. I’m entranced by her. Her body was made for me.

Her grip digs into my arms so hard, she’s got to be leaving bruises. I don’t care. The bite of pain is a balm to my turbulent thoughts.

“Beau, I need you. *Please.*”

Fuck, how do I deny her when she’s asking so sweetly for something I can give her easily?

“I can’t change who I am, Skye. I’m not always in control of myself.”

I piston my fingers inside her, enjoying the way she bends into me, as if her legs are weak. I add pressure to her clit with my thumb, wrenching a moan from her.

“I don’t want you to be,” she grinds out between her pants.

Skye’s wetness tells me I’m doing exactly what she needs, but I still feel the fear in my gut.

“I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to become him.”

She grabs my wrist, stopping me from finishing her. The concern in her eyes has my throat tightening. “You’re nothing like him. You would never torture a child. You would never harm someone innocent.”

Each sentence is a blow to my chest, and I want to believe she genuinely sees this much goodness in me. “You don’t know me, Skye.”

My fingers still inside her cunt, she rolls to her toes and presses a kiss to my mouth. “I know enough. Now, stop talking and fuck me.”

I don’t need to be asked twice. My body is all too eager to fulfil her demands. I pull my fingers free from her heat and turn her, pushing her against the wall behind us. I unbutton my jeans quickly and press my length into her slickness.

Skye’s head tilts back, her hair tickling my chest as she flattens her palms against the wall. That little bit of pushback forces me deeper inside her body, making us both gasp.

I splay my fingers on the wall above her head, my other hand gripping her leg and lifting it off the floor, so I can drive harder into her.

She feels amazing, her tight channel strangling my shaft as I make lazy strokes into her. This is nothing like last night. There’s desperation to have her, but there’s also a quietness in my mind I didn’t know I could find. I want to reach around her front and play with her tits, but I’m so close to coming, and from the pulsation of her walls around me, she is too, so I just keep the momentum of my thrusts going.

I don’t want to think about what happened last night, and I don’t want to dwell on the shit storm surrounding us. I just want to get lost in Skye and pretend for a moment that we’re a normal couple.

She bends over, her back almost flat as she sags down the wall. I let out a strangled gasp as it pushes her farther onto my cock.

“Oh, fuck. That’s it,” she urges, and my legs and hips burn as I slam into her over and over. “Don’t stop.”

I stare at her spine, bent over, exposed to me, and I have the urge to mark her there, to let the world know she's mine.

I said a lot of shit last night in the heat of the moment, but that had been the truth. Skye Richardson is my woman, and I will kill anyone who tries to take her from me. I will tear Desmond Richardson apart with my bare hands if he so much as touches a hair on her head.

The possessiveness that engulfs me feels righteous and fills that hole where my anger lived. It doesn't douse it completely, because I now feel something else, something equally terrifying.

Panic that she could be hurt or worse.

"Beau, keep going," she urges, and I realise my strokes had slowed while I got lost in my thoughts.

I resume my pace, taking my hand off the wall so I can caress her back. This might have all been down to chance, but I do believe things happen the way they're meant to. I was supposed to be in that bar that night. I was supposed to fuck Skye in that dirty room, because she was always destined to end up here, pressed against the wall, my cock buried in her heat.

Skye's head dips so low, her chin must be touching her chest as comes. Her body sags even more, her spine rounding as her legs seem to lose traction. I grab her arms to keep her on her feet even as my balls tighten to painful levels before I find my release. I squeeze my eyes shut, the muscles in my throat cording as I spill inside her.

Sweat beads on my forehead and on the back of my neck as her contracting walls milk every last drop of cum from me. Fuck me, that was something else. Trying to calm my breathing, I slowly pull out of her body. I want to stay buried there, but her legs are going, and I don't want her to hurt herself.

As soon as I'm free, I keep one hand locked around her bicep while I struggle to pull my jeans back up, tucking my cock away but not fastening them.

I make her stand straight and turn her around, pressing her back into the wall. Her hair sticks to her forehead, and her eyes are glassy as she tries to focus.

“I like you like this. Thoroughly fucked.” My mouth moves along her cheek and down her neck, layering kisses as I go while my fingers latch around her breast, kneading the soft flesh.

“You look just as thoroughly fucked,” she counters, tipping her head to the side so I can cover more of her throat.

I smirk at her sass and move to her mouth, pulling her bottom lip between my teeth before I slide my tongue inside. She kisses me back, her arms winding around my neck, molding her frame against mine. Everything about her seems so fragile, including the baby she’s carrying. It scares me how easily she could be harmed.

“You’re doing it again,” she murmurs between kisses.

“Doing what?”

“Overthinking.”

I pull back a little from her, just enough that I can feel her breath on my face and see her eyes. “That’s not gonna stop happening, Skye.”

“I know.” She blows out a breath. “I’m making a mess.”

I glance between our bodies, seeing my cum on her thighs, dripping out of her. She’s right, she is making a mess, but I don’t care because, holy fuck, that’s hot. I like knowing she’s covered in me, and I use my thumb to push my seed back into her waiting pussy.

“What are you doing?” she asks, a little breathless. I don’t know what I’m doing any more than she does, but my brain and hands aren’t connected.

“I want it inside you.” Saying this feels cheesy as fuck, but the way her cheeks pinken tells me she doesn’t agree.

“Oh.” She closes her eyes as I push it back into her channel. “This feels... strange.”

For me too. I've never experienced the sight of my cum dripping out of a girl before.

"I've never fucked bare," I admit, and I know it's the right thing to do when she seems pleased at my admission.

"You haven't?"

I shake my head. "Never wanted to risk it."

Her brows lift. "Well, it's not like you can get me any more pregnant than I already am."

My cock twitches even in its semi-flaccid state. I wish it was hard again, so I could plunge inside her cum-covered cunt. Instead, I pull my thumb from inside her and wipe our combined fluids across her stomach, marking her as mine.

Her eyes don't leave my face as I do it, and I wonder what the fuck she's thinking. I've never done anything like this before, but I feel the need to show her in every way that we're one.

As my fingers trail over her belly, it rumbles beneath my pads.

"Sorry. I guess that kind of ruins the mood."

I shake my head. "Not at all. Are you hungry?"

"Permanently."

I dip my head, pressing a kiss to her mouth before I pull back. "Let's get you something to eat."

"After I shower, right? I'm not going out there with your cum painting my skin."

I snort. "After you shower," I agree, though I wouldn't mind it staying on her skin.

She slips around me, and I grab her wrist, stopping her. Her eyes are questioning when she looks back at me. I don't know what I want to say to her. There are a hundred things rolling through my mind right now. My fear for her safety, my terror at becoming a father, my anxiety of losing the club...

How do I articulate any of it?

Skye steps back to me, not freeing herself from my hold, and trails her fingers over my cheek. “We’ll be okay, Beau.”

She says it with such certainty that I want desperately to believe her and stay in this bubble we’re building, but sooner or later, the real world is going to come knocking. I have to be ready when it does.

CHAPTER 13

SKYE

I watch Rage from the bed as I towel dry my hair. Getting showered together had ended with him inside me again. Honestly, if I wasn't already pregnant, I'd think he was doing everything to get me that way.

He shrugs his leather vest onto his back before readjusting his jeans in place. He's hot as hell naked, but there's something about the way he fills out his jeans that makes my pulse flutter wildly.

As if he's aware of my gaze on him, Rage lifts his head, and our eyes lock together. I should look away, drag my attention somewhere else, but I'm pinned by the intensity between us.

"You okay?" He sounds worried, and I suddenly feel bad. I don't want him to be concerned when I'm more than okay.

What he did to me last night was... amazing. There's a delicious ache in my pussy and a weariness from being sated by him. I don't know what's wrong with me. When he was touching me, it felt as if I was electrified. Since I became pregnant, my clit is so sensitive, I could come from one touch.

This thing between us is nothing like what it started out as. Rage certainly has made up for our first time together, which hadn't been horrible, but it didn't leave me satisfied in the way I am now. That night had been about us both getting our happy ending. It was fucking and nothing more.

What we did last night—and this morning—is so far from that evening, it's unreal.

There is an undeniable connection between us. That was always there on some level—I mean, we fucked without even knowing each other’s names—but this is different.

My heart thuds every time he looks at me and my stomach dips. I want to mount him even now, despite only coming ten minutes ago, and that makes heat rise in my cheeks.

I do avert my gaze now, because I don’t know that I can keep looking at him without begging him to release some of the growing pressure within me.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I assure him, shuffling off the bed and going into the bathroom.

I take longer than I should to hang the towel over the radiator, my heart thudding with every passing second. This feels like a fever dream. I’ve had love, but not like this. I’ve had the love of my mother and, although it pains to admit it, the love of Tommy too.

But none of that was the same heat I feel from Rage.

He wants me.

Not because he sees me as a sister figure or family. When he looks at me, I’m consumed by him and I don’t understand why, especially right now.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror over the basin and frown. How the hell does he find this attractive? I look awful. There are sweeping shadows under my eyes and my skin, which is usually dewy and glowing, is washed out. My hair is clean, but it’s hanging around my face in damp waves. I don’t look put-together. Not to mention the way I’m dressed, in a clean pair of leggings and a T-shirt that hangs off my frame.

It’s not the most attractive outfit, and as I look at myself, my confidence, which is something I’ve never struggled with, starts to slip.

What if when I start to get bigger, he moves on to someone else? What happens to me then? I’m always going to be at the mercy of other people—first my father, then Scarlett, and now Rage.

I hate it.

I'm annoyed at the tear that rolls down my cheek. I'm so emotional, and I hate that too.

"Skye? You okay in there?"

I jolt at Rage's question, but I realise I've been staring at my reflection for longer than I should have.

"I'm fine." I force out the words. What the hell is wrong with me?

I'm weirdly self-conscious as I force myself to walk back into the room. I don't want to look in his direction and risk seeing disappointment as he takes in the girl he's saddled with because of one shitty broken condom. My throat is so tight, I can hardly breathe as I move over to the bed.

"Skye?"

I risk raising my lashes to look at him. "Sorry. I was just deciding whether I needed to barf or not."

Why the hell did I say that?

His concern grows. "You feelin' sick again?"

Oh, fuck. The last thing I want is to have him worry about me. "False alarm," I assure him.

"Good. I was worried I might have pushed you too hard this morning."

I glance in his direction, unable to stop the delicious heat from pooling in my stomach. Rage's gaze seems magnetised to me as his eyes lift to examine my body from toe to head. He takes his time, slowly skimming up my frame until he pauses for a long time on my face. From his expression, it's clear he likes what he's seeing, and that confuses me more.

"Don't do that," I blurt the words before I can stop them, and I don't blame the confusion that crosses his face.

"Don't do what?"

"Look at me."

"Okay... why not?"

I'm starting to feel like I'm losing my mind. I can't control the surge of emotions rolling through me. I want him to wrap himself around me even as I want him to leave me the hell alone.

"Because."

"Because of what? Skye..."

I don't know what to say to him, but my tongue moves before my brain engages. "I look like shit."

He recoils as if I've slapped him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"And in a few months, when I'm putting weight on and eating chocolate spread from the jar, you're going to look elsewhere."

I know I'm being irrational. We're barely a couple. In fact, I don't even know if we are, but I can't stop the flood of words spilling out of me. "I'm not going to be able to bend over like I did in that shower. You're going to get fed up with me, and I don't want to be alone."

He scrubs a hand over his bearded jaw, his eyes troubled. "Skye..." That's all he says, just my name, but it's enough to make me burst into tears.

As if he needs to be in my space, he crosses the carpet, coming to stand in front of me. His hands rest on my hips as his head dips so he's closer to my eyeline.

"The thought of your belly getting bigger, growing our son or daughter, doesn't make me want to find someone else. It makes me hard as fuck. It makes me want to sink into your sweet pussy and put more babies in you."

I don't look at him, though my heart squeezes at his statement. I don't think he's the kind of man who would say these things usually, and Rage doesn't strike me as someone who says shit he doesn't mean, but my stupid hormones refuse to believe him.

"You say that now." I sniffle, swiping at my wet cheeks. I have no idea why I'm so upset, but I can't stop crying.

“Darlin’, look at me.” When I don’t, he places a finger under my chin, lifting my head until I’m peering into his dark eyes. “Know this thing between us is new, but I didn’t fuck you last night and this morning like that because I wanted to get laid.”

I get his meaning straight away and I choke back my sob. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for.” His hands move to the globes of my bottom, the thin material of my leggings providing little barrier between my skin and the heat of his palms. “You’re beautiful, and we need to leave this room before I get you naked again.” Heat pools in my belly and my pussy contracts at the thought of him doing those things to me again. It must show on my face because he shakes his head. “No. You need to eat.”

He’s not wrong. If I don’t eat regularly, it makes my morning sickness worse—and it’s already bad enough. “I’m sorry, Beau. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I feel like a mess.”

The pad of his thumb catches a stray tear as it rolls down my cheek. “You’ve been through hell, Skye, and you’re growing a person. I don’t know fucking shit about pregnancy, but I know the old ladies in my old chapter used to cry all the time in the early days. They said it was hormones or some shit.”

That makes me feel a little better and not quite so neurotic. “I’m sorry,” I repeat, which earns me a kiss so gentle, it makes my tears flow faster.

“No more apologies. Come on, you’ll feel better after eating.”

He lets go of me, though I can see it costs him to do it. I grab a tie from the bedside table and scrape my damp hair into a messy knot before shoving my feet into my running shoes.

Rage waits for me at the door, and we head out the room together. This walk to the common room has become an intrinsic part of my daily routine. I know these people don’t

trust me yet, but having some freedom to sit out on the terrace or even in the bar area is a relief.

As we enter the common room, it's busy. Most of the old ladies—as Rage calls them—are sitting in the corner. They've pulled two tables together to give them more room, and some of the younger kids are running around. Elyse has her son, Max, in her arms, and Pia is drinking the biggest mug of coffee I've ever seen. Hope and Ophelia are deep in conversation about something that's making them both smile, while Wren is sitting back, her eyes closed as if she hasn't slept in a week.

I get smiles from them all as they notice me with Rage, and it thaws some of the ice in my veins. They don't trust me completely, and I know that will take time, but they don't hate me either. With time, I think I can become friends with these women.

All except for Heidi, who has baby Sophia in her arms and is shooting daggers in my direction. I ignore her. She's made it abundantly clear she hates my guts.

Hope smiles in my direction as she says, "Hey, Skye." She's pregnant too, though she looks a lot better than I do. Her skin glows and she doesn't have enormous bags under her eyes.

"Hey," I say back, giving a little wave to the table.

This is about as friendly as the girls usually get with me, not that I expect more. They don't trust me because of my father's crimes, and I don't blame them for that. I understand they see me as a risk to their kids and their men.

Rage slips his hand into mine, his rough palm warm against my skin, and guides me towards the kitchen. It sits off the main bar area, on the opposite side of the room from where the men disappear for what they call 'church'.

The Formica countertops are old and a little rough around the edges, but the large double-fronted fridge is always well stocked.

Rage leans back against one of the counters and watches while I pull together my breakfast of choice, fruit and Greek yoghurt, though sometimes the latter isn't great when I feel nauseous.

"Do you want anything?" I ask him, but he shakes his head. He never eats breakfast, at least he hasn't since he's been escorting me around the clubhouse.

As I busy making up my bowl, I find the question slipping out of my mouth. "Why do you call them old ladies? I mean, not one of them is old."

"I don't know. I've never asked. That's just what they're called. It ain't an insult to them. It's a respect thing."

I do believe that is true. All the men in this club treat the women who are in relationships with a great deal of it. I want to know if I'm Rage's old lady, but I don't want to push either. We're coming to a good place, and I'm starting to think I could have a life here.

"Oh. So, is there like an exam or initiation they had to pass to become old ladies?"

He snorts, finding this amusing. "No. They're just claimed."

I lift my head, stopping mid-cut of the banana I'm planning to put in my bowl. "Claimed?"

"Yeah, darlin', claimed. The brother who wants an old lady agrees to take responsibility for her actions. Everything she does reflects on the brother she's with. That's why claimin' ain't just done on a whim. You can date whoever you want, but getting that status is a big deal."

I return my attention to cutting my fruit, unable to stop the furrow lining my brow. "So, all those women in there were voted in?"

"Don't know how Howler runs his chapter on that front, but yeah, that's how it's done in London."

I don't reply. I can date Rage, but the chance of his club ever accepting me as his old lady is slim to none. I don't know

why that bothers me so much. It's not like he's saying we can't be together. Obviously, we're together in *whatever* this is.

"You think having that title changes anything?" He steps up behind me, his hands wrapping around my stomach as his chin rests on the top of my head. "Babe, it doesn't mean shit to me. You and our baby belong to me—old lady or not."

I turn in his arms, my hands resting against his chest as he holds my hips. "I don't need a title or approval from anyone but you."

"They're comin' around. I see it every day how they're warming to you," he says.

"I know, and they have every right not to trust me, Beau."

"No, they don't. You ain't your father any more than I'm mine."

The fierceness in which he says that makes me smile. He's so worried about becoming the man who tortured him as little boy that it's good to hear him understand this. "No, you're not," I agree with him, pressing my body against his chest.

His arms wrap around me. I want to hug all that pain and suffering he went through out of him, but there's nothing that can fix what he's been through, and as much as we want it, we can't change who we are either.

"I wish things had been different, Beau. I wish I was just a normal girl with a normal dad and we could just exist together without all this baggage."

He doesn't say he wishes it too, but I'm sure he does. Things would be so much easier if that was the case.

"Come on, grab your food. You can eat it on the terrace, get some air."

I get my bowl and a spoon from the drawer before I follow him back into the common room. As we step inside, Socket—who I've learned is Pia's father—approaches.

"Howler's lookin' for you," he says to Rage.

There's a moment of indecision and I understand instantly why. Rage isn't meant to leave me unsupervised, but I get the impression it's not because I'm his job that he doesn't want to leave me.

"I'll keep an eye on things," Socket assures him.

Rage glances at me, and I can tell he doesn't want to go, but I give him a smile. "I'll be fine. Go and speak to Howler."

"If anything happens to her—"

Socket holds up his hands. "I'll keep her safe."

Rage blows out a breath but walks away, glancing back at me before stepping through the door and disappearing.

My heart thuds, but I force a smile. I move to an empty table, slipping my bowl onto it and trying not to focus on how alone I am. Socket stays close, but he doesn't sit with me.

I've always been an outsider. At school, I was avoided by anyone not in the life, but I didn't care because I had Scarlett and Tommy. I had friends. Here, I'm an outcast.

Pia leaves her table, walking over to her dad. She gives him a hug, and he kisses her head like she's everything to him. I ignore the pang of jealousy that makes me feel. My father would never show such a public display of affection. He probably wouldn't even acknowledge my presence outside the privacy of our home.

His home.

It's not mine any longer. The life I had is gone, and I don't fit here either. That realisation makes me feel adrift.

"Hey, kid. You doing okay?" Socket asks Pia.

I sit down and dig my spoon into the yoghurt, so I don't have to look at them, but I can't block out their words.

"You know, same old. Jake wants us to move into a bigger house and is giving me a headache about it."

"He mentioned you're trying for a baby."

Her nose wrinkles. “I like our place though. I don’t want to move.”

“Ain’t exactly family-friendly, is it?”

“It has two bedrooms,” she argues.

I try to block out their conversation, knowing I’ll never truly fit in here. No one has been openly hostile apart from Heidi, whose eyes I feel glaring at me from across the room, but that doesn’t mean they want to be friends either.

Maybe coming here was a mistake. I don’t need to be a part of this club to raise my baby. Rage and I can still co-parent, right?

My stomach roils, and I put my spoon down, breathing through the wave of nausea. The last thing I need right now is to vomit, but my body has other ideas.

Covering my mouth as my stomach contracts and bile rushes up my throat, I push up from the table and rush across the room. There’s a small bathroom across the hall, and I collide with the door, forcing my way inside before I drop to my knees in front of the toilet.

I retch, my body trying to expel the two mouthfuls of yoghurt I consumed, but nothing comes up. Over and over, the contractions continue as I dry heave. I’m weakened, shaking too, but I don’t move until it passes fully.

Even then, it takes me a moment to move, and I only get so far as reaching up to grab some toilet tissue so I can wipe my mouth.

Little baby, I love you, but seriously, give me a break.

Struggling to catch my breath, I use the wall to steady myself as I get to my feet. There is a rock in my gut as I toss the tissue into the bowl and flush the toilet.

I move to the small sink, turning on the faucet and thoroughly washing my hands. The club and my definition of cleanliness are poles apart.

When I’m done, I dry my hands on the paper towels left on the counter and clean up after myself.

Socket is waiting outside the door, but he says nothing as I pass him and head back into the common room. Really, I want to go back to bed, but I don't want to worry Rage.

I slide back into my seat, swallowing down the taste of acid coating my throat, and push my bowl away from me. The smell of the yoghurt is turning my stomach.

A figure approaches and I glance up, instantly on alert. I relax a little as I realise it's Hope and not Heidi coming over to give me her latest bout of vitriol.

"Morning sickness?" She takes the seat opposite me without invitation.

"Yeah."

"Mine hasn't been too bad, which is good because Kayden would be an overbearing nightmare if it was."

"How long does it last?" I have no idea what to expect from this pregnancy, and no one has given me any means to find out for myself.

"Depends. With Maisie, I was sick right up until the end." My dismay must show on my face. "Oh, but that's not the case for everyone, and every pregnancy is different."

"I don't know what to expect," I admit, and I hate that I have to. What kind of person doesn't know what's happening inside their own body?

"With your pregnancy?"

"Yeah."

"I have a ton of books at home." She pulls out her phone. "I'll ask Ralph to drop by the house and pick them up."

My mouth instantly dries. It's such a small gesture, but it means so much to me. "Thank you."

"Skye, you need to understand what's happening with you. Rage should've got you this stuff."

My defences flare. It isn't bad what she said, but it also pisses me off. "He's trying his best."

Her head snaps up from her phone. “Oh, I didn’t mean to imply he wasn’t. You two are young, and this is scary enough to go through when you’re as old as I am.”

I’m not sure she’s even thirty, but I appreciate her trying to make me feel better.

I watch as she sends the message. We’re being watched, not only by Socket, who remains close by, but also by my favourite person—Heidi.

She hates me with a fury I’ve never experienced before.

“The first trimester is rough,” Hope says, putting her phone away. “There’s a lot of changes happening and the, uh... the horniness.”

I blink. “The what?”

“I can’t get enough of Kayden. I want him to fuck me all the time, and when he’s not there, I’m like a dog in heat.”

She whispers the last part conspiratorially.

“Is that a pregnancy thing?”

“Yeah. Something to do with increased blood flow down there and hormones, I think.”

“That explains a lot,” I say.

Hope laughs. “You and Rage been at it like rabbits?”

“You could say that. Will it... will it hurt the baby? We’re not exactly gentle.”

Her expression softens. “No, your baby is protected inside you. They can withstand a lot.” I hear the sadness in her words, and I know we’re no longer talking about me but about something else.

I don’t know why, but I reach out and grab her hand, squeezing it gently in mine. “Thank you for telling me this. I feel so in the dark, and I’m scared of what’s coming.”

Hope places her other hand on top of our joined ones. “You’ll be fine. It’s not the most pleasant experience, giving

birth, but when you're holding your baby, you won't give it a second thought."

Somehow, I doubt that's true, but I don't want to counter her words. I want to grip onto the fantasy that this will be a magical, mystical thing.

"How many weeks are you?"

Her hand goes to her stomach. "Ten weeks."

"Two more than me."

"Maybe our babies will be friends."

I smile, though I feel choked. "I'd like that."

Hope opens her mouth to respond, but a loud bang draws both of our attention. I snap my gaze around and see a tall man standing in the doorway. The noise was the door hitting the plasterwork as he shoved it open.

His gaze roams the room before it locks on me, and my stomach sinks. I've been around dangerous men my entire life, and although they've never inflicted their violence upon me—not until recently anyway—some primal instinct urges me to my feet.

Hope does the same, standing as he rushes across the room like he's possessed by evil.

"Trick! Stop!" she yells.

The other women are on their feet too, and Socket tries to stop him with an arm around his chest. The man must be strong because as big as Socket is, he can do nothing as the man—Trick—shoves him aside and throws a punch at him.

Pia shouts as her dad hits the floor, rushing to him, but all I'm focused on is the huge man barreling towards me. Hope tries to stand in front of me as if she expects him to stop, but I'm not so sure.

I try to pull her away. She's pregnant too, and I don't want anyone else getting hurt because of me or my family.

"Move out of the fucking way, Hope," he snarls, and my pulse roars in my ears.

Where the hell is Rage?

There are men in the room, but no one tries to defend either of us from him, and Socket is bleeding profusely from his face, though he does try to get up.

“I’m not moving,” she says, licking her lips.

He doesn’t like this answer. His face contorts into a furious mask. “You’d protect this bitch? Mara died—”

“Not because of her,” she interrupts. “Skye didn’t pull that trigger, Trick.”

“I don’t care. She’s got that fucker’s blood running through her.”

He rounds the table the opposite way, bypassing Hope and coming right at me. I scramble back, hitting chairs and tables, knocking something over too, but I don’t see what. My eyes remain glued to him as he grabs my throat, squeezing all the air from my windpipe.

I was afraid when I ran from the house, but this fear is like nothing I’ve ever experienced. Terror explodes through my body, rendering my legs weak. It’s only the thought of my baby that gives me the strength to fight back.

I claw at his face, raking my nails down his cheek. Blood bubbles from the scratches, but he either doesn’t feel it or he doesn’t care. I can see the pain and anguish in his gaze, buried deep beneath the uncontrollable anger he has for me.

I hate my father for putting it there, but any guilt or remorse I might feel disappears as he tries to hurt me.

“Stop,” I beg him, my voice hoarse as I try to speak around his grip.

“Your father killed my wife. He took the only thing I ever gave a fuck about from me, so I’m gonna take you from him. Let him feel this agony.” In the small gap between us, he thumps his free fist against his chest. It reminds me of a silverback gorilla, ready to fight.

The nausea that rolls through me has nothing to do with the baby nestled inside my belly and everything to do with the

absolute fear I'm experiencing.

I hear shouting. The shock seems to have lifted and the women are trying to pull him back from me. Pia has hold of his arm, trying to release his grip on my throat, but they're no match for him, and I'm not either. He towers over me, and his strength is iron.

I'm sorry, little baby... I can't stop this.

Just as I'm about to give up hope, movement catches my attention and a thick, tattooed arm wraps around Trick's neck, dragging him back as if he's nothing.

I'm tugged forwards a few steps before I'm released. I collapse against a table, holding my bruised throat as I gasp for air, but my eyes don't leave the scene in front of me as I'm shown exactly why Beau earned the name Rage.

CHAPTER 14

RAGE

“H e’s increased the reward money for Skye’s return.”

Howler’s words don’t surprise me, not in the slightest. I knew Richardson would keep hunting his daughter, and not because he loves her but because of his pride. No man in his position wants to admit they can’t keep control of their own house.

“Are there any bites?” I drum my fingers on my knee under the table, needing to do something so I don’t release all the tension growing inside me.

“A few have come forwards, trying to claim the money, but as far as I know, Richardson has no idea Skye’s here.”

I glance around the table, looking at my club brothers and wondering if they’re wishing I’d never transferred to Manchester. When the Pioneers’ king discovers where his daughter has been all this time, he’s going to unleash hell on the club.

“Maybe we can head this off,” Brewer muses.

“How?” Hawk sounds annoyed, and I’m not sure if it’s because of the situation or because he’s in this room.

He’s not an officer, yet like me, he’s getting more invitations to the table than he probably would like. Sitting here comes with a whole host of expectations, and although he patched into the chapter, those nomad roots are hard to pull up when they’ve dug in.

“There’s an easy way to end all of this. Kill Richardson.” This answer comes from Terror, who speaks as if it’s the most

obvious answer.

Of course, he would choose the most dramatic way to end this, but I'm glad his thoughts align with mine. It means I at least have one person on my side in this room.

"I was thinking more about laying a false trail for Skye, get Richardson looking in a different direction, but killing him works too." Brewer glances up the table in Howler's direction, as if seeking approval from this man.

Maybe Terror isn't the only one on my side after all.

I wait with bated breath, wondering what course of action Howler will decide to take. He is deep in thought as he rubs his finger over his lip, his gaze unfocused. "Richardson is a problem that doesn't seem to be going away, but he has resources, and numbers too. We have to handle this carefully."

I'm sick of being careful. I want my girl and my kid safe, and I know for a fact not one man in this room would stand by while their woman was in danger.

"Fuck that," I growl out, unable to hold my tongue any longer.

Howler's gaze snaps in my direction, his granite eyes pinning me to my seat. If I had any sense, I'd back down and apologise, but I don't.

"You got something to say?"

I plant my hands on the table and push to my feet. "Yeah, I've got fucking plenty to say. Richardson is a threat to my woman and my kid. Ain't sitting around waiting for him to take her, to hurt her. I'm starting to think Trick's method of dealing with these cunts ain't the wrong one."

"Yeah, because his homicidal rampage has really calmed things down." No one misses the sarcasm that drips from Blackjack's words.

"I don't care about calming things down. I care about keeping Skye safe."

Howler sighs. "At the moment, everyone is safe."

“But for how long?” Hawk siding with me has my head snapping in his direction. I didn’t expect that. “I don’t like the idea of bringin’ danger here. There’re kids and old ladies, family, people who rely on our protection, but this shit is never gonna end unless we stop it. I say we kill the fucker. Cut the head off the snake and watch the rest of his shitty organisation fold.”

“And if we fail?”

Silence descends around the room before Terror breaks it. “We die.”

I narrow my eyes at his candid words. We dance with death every damn day. It ain’t something I fear, or I hadn’t until Skye came into my life. Now, there’s an uneasy pain in my stomach at the thought of leaving her to fend for herself.

“Then we don’t fail,” Brewer says with a shrug.

“She ain’t an old lady.” Howler’s words make my gut hurt for a different reason.

“She’s pregnant with my kid.” I can’t mask the anger in my tone.

“Yeah, and we’ll protect her because of that, but she ain’t an old lady, Rage, and that makes it harder for us to act.”

“You want me to claim her? I’ll do it right now.”

Howler doesn’t say anything. He stares at me, as if weighing me up. “Ain’t that simple.”

“You need a vote? So, do it,” I urge, ready to have this done.

“Even if every man around this table agrees to bring her in officially, I won’t.”

My eyes narrow, and I dig my fingers into my thighs so I don’t scramble across the table to smack him. “Why?”

“You know why.”

I do, but I don’t care about the complications she brings. “If you ain’t gonna stand by us, then what the fuck point is there in us stayin’ here?”

“He ain’t leavin’.” It’s Hawk this comes from. His eyes are down, staring at his clasped hands on the table, the white of his knuckles showing as the skin stretches tight across the bones. “He walks, I’m gonna have to go with him, and I got a wife and four fuckin’ kids. I don’t want to trail them around the fucking country.”

I hold my breath, not sure where the fuck this is going, but when Brewer comes to his feet, I’m braced for anything. “You’re not leaving with my fucking sister,” he snaps, leaning across the table to get into Hawk’s face. “And Rage isn’t going anywhere anyway. This is his home.”

The warmth spreading through my chest threatens to burn me alive. This shit would never have happened in London. Those brothers are good men, but they would have let me go. This loyalty, it makes me feel like I’ve have found my place, and Skye is a part of that.

Howler’s mouth pulls into smirk. “The rest of you feel the same?”

Blackjack shifts his shoulders. “He’s a pain in the arse, but he’s our pain in the arse.”

“I could take or leave him,” Terror says in a bored tone.

I don’t react to him. Terror’s a fucking prick sometimes. “So, what do we—”

All eyes turn to the door as loud thumping sounds off the wood. “Open up! Please!”

The panicked voice belongs to Ophelia. Brewer stands so fast, his chair topples over behind him as he rushes around the end of the table to shove the door open.

Old ladies know better than to interrupt church, so the fact she has is fucking terrifying. Everyone is on their feet as Brewer reaches for her, his own panic evident.

“Trick’s here. He’s lost his mind. He’s...” She licks her lips, her eyes darting in my direction.

I don’t wait for her to say more. The look Ophelia gives me tells me everything I need to know. I shove up out of my

seat and out the room. My heart is in my throat as I step into the common room and see the scene in front of me.

The girls—Hope and Pia—are trying to drag Trick back, but he's got height and weight on them. As he shifts to the side, I see why they're fighting him.

He has Skye by the throat and is walking her back through the throng of tables. Her eyes are wide and fearful as she fights against his grip.

I thought I'd been angry in the past, but the wave of fury that rolls through me is like nothing I've ever experienced. My body is hot and cold at the same time, and there's a ringing in my ears as I see red. Literal red.

I'm not aware of anything as I rush across the room towards him. The only thought in my mind is I'm going to tear his fucking head off and beat him until he can't breathe near her again.

My blood feels like it's hurtling through my veins like a bullet train, and that ringing in my ears is getting louder.

Skye notices me a split second before I wrap my arm around Trick's thick neck and drag him back. I'm vibrating with fury as I tear him off my pregnant girl.

I'm going to eviscerate him. Brother or not, he's a dead man. There's lights flashing behind my eyes as he tries to fight me, but I keep him pulled against my chest, my hold choking him.

He slams his elbow back, catching my stomach, and pain spirals through my abdomen as the women scatter back out of the way.

Releasing him, I let him twist around to face me before I run at him, crashing into his body with enough force to take us both down. My body is jarred as I hit the edge of a table before going the rest of the way down. I try to stop my momentum, throwing out my hands to break my fall, then sharp pain spears through my palms.

Glass, I realise a beat too late. We must have knocked over a table full of bottles or glasses. I don't give a fuck about the

pain slicing through me, nor the blood dripping from my hands.

I push up, roaring as I kick my foot into Trick's gut. It's not enough. I grab his shirt and pull him close enough to slam my fist into his face.

The satisfaction I feel when his nose explodes is electrifying. Blood sprays into the air like an aerosol and mine combines with his, leaving smears on his clothes and throat as I hit him again and again, blind rage making my punches heavy. I'm not holding back. I'm hitting with nineteen years of pure undulating anger. I want to kill him. I want to tear his throat out and rip his heart from his chest.

I want him to feel the same terror I felt seeing his hands on my girl.

That shit broke something inside me that I don't know if I can ever fix. The volcano is erupting within me, and I can't stop the red-hot feelings swamping me.

I gnash my teeth together, pulling him inches from my face. He shoves his palm upwards, intending to hit my nose, but I'm faster. I'm driven by something far darker than he is. I bend his hand back, feeling the bone snap. To his credit, he only screams a little, but it doesn't soothe the raging beast inside me.

Hands grapple at me, but I attack them too, shoving someone away so hard, I hear screams and shit breaking behind me. I block it all out, focusing on Trick.

I get him in a position where he's in front of me, his back pressed to my chest, my arm tight around his neck. I squeeze so hard, he chokes beneath my force. If I was in the right mind, I would've noticed he stopped fighting me. His hands hang limply at his sides, not reaching to stop me from crushing his windpipe.

I don't know what I'm doing. My attack is uncoordinated and aggressive. I would keep going until his final breath, but hands grab at me. I fight them off, resuming my attack,

slamming my elbow into someone's gut before I get Trick on his back.

No one touches what's mine.

No one harms my girl and is allowed to keep fucking breathing.

I don't give a fuck if he wears the patch.

I fully intend to end his miserable prick life, and the way he's choking on his own fluids tells me I'm getting there.

His face is a bloody mess, one eye completely swollen shut, and he's no longer fighting back. His gaze is just locked on mine, as if he's waiting for me to finish this. As if he wants me to kill him.

A thick arm wraps around my neck in the same way I'd grabbed Trick. A second joins and then a third as I'm dragged back under their intense weight.

I fight like a demon, but I'm pushed down onto the floor, heavy knees pressing into my spine as I breathe in the smell of stale beer and whatever the fuck else is on the dirty carpet beneath my nose.

"Get off me!" I roar like I'm possessed.

My body reverberates with the need to keep attacking, but the amount of pressure on my back and legs keeps me in place.

"Easy," Hawk's voice snaps out. "Calm the fuck down."

I'm not ready to. I still want to beat Trick to death.

"Let him finish me." Trick's weak voice penetrates through the pounding in my ears.

It inflames the fire burning through me, and I thrash against the men sitting on my body. I'm all too eager to oblige the cunt.

"Gladly."

"You shut your fuckin' mouth." Howler's words are curt, and I'm not sure if they're directed at Trick or at me.

The knee in my back makes me grunt as it presses deeper against something that hurts. I can't fight the combined forces on top of me, though I can see one of the brothers holding me down is Terror. His eyes are locked on Trick, his mouth as tight as his jaw. He's pissed too, and I remember his pregnant old lady was in the middle of that shit storm too.

Glancing along the length of the carpet, I try to raise my head to find Skye, but someone has hold of the back of my neck. "Where is she?" I grind out, trying to push up and getting nowhere.

Heavy fuckers.

"Skye!" I yell her name, needing to see her.

She steps into my line of sight and my stomach knots. Her eyes are wild, wide, and terrified as her hand wraps around her throat, hiding whatever damage Trick has done to her.

Her other hand is pressed against her belly, protecting what I should have—our kid.

"I'm okay," she assures me, but the rasp of her voice does nothing to alleviate my fear. Her usual sweet tone is choked and wrong because of that fucker.

"Get him out of here," Howler orders, and I can do nothing but watch as a bleeding Socket and Blackjack drag Trick to his feet. His legs don't seem to work, and he leans heavily on them as they remove him from my eyeline.

"I want him dead," I growl, breathing like an angry bull.

"Yeah, we got that message loud and fuckin' clear," Hawk mutters.

"I think we should let him go," Terror says.

"You don't get a vote," Hawk snaps at him, "and quit pouring oil on the fuckin' fire."

"Get him up," Howler orders, and I'm dragged to my feet. It's then I realise the other person who was sitting on my spine is Brewer. As my president steps into my space, I force my body to calm. "Put him in a room until he's calm."

Hell no, that ain't happening. "I want to see Skye first."

"Ain't sure I trust you around anyone right now," Howler says, getting in my face.

"I'm not the fucking threat here, Howler. I would never put my hands on *any* woman, let alone the women in this room." I lock onto his gaze, refusing to be cowed or bow down as he grimaces at me.

"He'll be dealt with for that," he promises.

"I want his head," I hiss. These guys have personal relationships with Trick, and I ain't trusting them to deal justice.

"You already got enough from him."

"Not even close. If it was your old lady he had his hands wrapped around, would you be so fuckin' forgiving?"

The way Howler doesn't answer tells me he wouldn't. "Put him in room three," he says to the guys.

I struggle, trying to locate Skye as I'm dragged towards the doors.

"I want to go with him," I hear her say.

"Sweetheart, I can't let you. He's fuckin' wild right now," Howler tells her, making me growl. I need her with me. I need to make sure she's okay.

"He won't hurt me." The assured way she says this makes my heart thud beneath my ribs. I don't deserve her trust or her support, but I'm grateful she gives it. "Please, Howler. I can..."

I lose whatever else she says as I'm pulled out into the corridor. I try to fight against the hold on me, trying to get back to her, but Hawk has pulled my arms behind me and somehow locked them in place, making it easier for him to direct me where he wants me to go.

"Let me go."

"Not a chance," Hawk says, which makes Terror snort. "You're not helping."

“Ain’t tryin’ to,” Terror grumbles. “That prick put my old lady in danger of gettin’ hurt. My sympathy for his situation ended there.”

I agree with him wholeheartedly.

“Trick’s... complicated,” Hawk says as Brewer opens the door to room three. Even he looks back at Hawk with disbelief.

“The guy’s used all his fucking lives up,” Brewer counters. “This is game over. I don’t know how he comes back from this, Hawk. He was already pushing shit with Howler, but he put hands on Rage’s girl. He risked hurting the other women because he’s a fucking dickhead. I felt for the guy, I really did. We all loved Mara, but I’m done making excuses for his shit.”

“He’s gonna come back to us,” Hawk mutters, shoving me into the room and stepping in behind me so I can’t get past him. “We don’t give up on family.” His eyes come to me. “Never.”

I know he’s making a dig at me. He never gave up on bringing me into this brotherhood, not once, and he’s asking for that same leniency for Trick, but I can’t. He crossed a line I don’t know how to let him come back from.

“How much is too much?” I demand. “He’s fuckin’ lost, Hawk, and after what just happened, I ain’t too bothered about helping him find his way back. Ain’t ever gonna trust that cunt around my girl or my child.”

Hawk closes his eyes. I don’t know if he’s asking for patience with me or if he’s just tired. “Just... sit your arse down,” he says finally, not addressing my words.

I don’t want to comply, but Terror arches his brow at me, as if daring me to try something. He’d take a lot of pleasure in putting his fist into my face, I’m sure.

I move over to the bed, sinking onto it. I’m twitchy, needing Skye in front of me. I want to make sure she’s okay. “You make sure Skye sees a doctor.”

“I don’t need a doctor.” Her voice has my head snapping up.

She slips around Hawk, and he grabs her arm, stopping her from coming to me. I rise to my feet, intending to swing for him, but Terror and Brewer step into my space, and the smallness of the room stops me from attacking. I don't want Skye in the firing line of my anger.

Instead, I nearly break my jaw grinding my teeth together as she glances up at him. "Please let go of me."

Hawk blows out a breath. "Sweetheart, you shouldn't be here."

Her eyes lock to mine and my chest tightens until I feel like I'm being crushed by the weight of her stare. Is she scared of me? She'd seen the full force of my anger in there. I'd unleashed without holding back. I hadn't quite blacked out, which is growth on my part. Last time I'd gone off the deep end, Hawk had to knock me out.

Is this where she walks away?

She'd be smart to. Trick had done something monstrous, and I'd reacted to that with violence. That need to destroy beats inside me too.

I hold my breath until I feel like I'm drowning.

Then her mouth curves into a sad smile and she says the sweetest fucking words that I didn't know I needed to hear. "I want to be here."

She closes the space between us, and I get a split second to brace before she throws herself into my arms.

CHAPTER 15

SKYE

I'm relieved as Rage pulls me tight against him, crushing me to his chest as if he's scared to let me go. I sink into his embrace, showing him without words that I'm here and I'm not afraid.

The violence I witnessed leaves me trembling, but not because of what Rage did. The man who came at me wanted to hurt me, and if Rage hadn't attacked him, he might've done worse than he did.

My throat burns and swallowing is painful, but I'm still breathing, which didn't feel like a sure thing moments ago. I cling to him like a life raft tossed into turbulent waters, trying to control the tremors wracking my body.

"You're safe," he soothes, and I don't know if he's saying this to me or to assure himself. I feel his heart thumping against the side of my cheek, and I sense his fear at what just unfolded.

"You calm?" The question comes from Hawk, and I lift my head slightly from Rage's chest to look at him before I tighten my grip around him.

I'm scared they might pull me out this room and away from him.

"If it was Wren or Lillia he had his hands on, would you be fuckin' calm?" Rage enquires, his tone biting.

I press my fingers into his spine, letting him know I'm here and I'm okay.

“No,” he admits, not bothering to sugar-coat it. “I’d have done exactly what you did. Probably worse.”

Terror slaps a hand into Hawk’s chest hard enough that a thud reverberates through him. The big man lets out a grunt, firing a glare at him.

“Let’s go. We’re gonna be needed with Trick.”

I’ve never been so grateful for someone intervening. I want to talk to Rage about what happened, but I can’t do that with all these people in here.

Hawk glances at us, his gaze moving between us before he shakes his head. “You need us, call.”

As the three men head for the door, Terror pauses and turns back to us. “You were reserved. If he’d touched Hope like that, I wouldn’t let anyone stop me from killing him.”

I scowl at him. There does not need to be more accelerant added to this fire. Rage is already on the ceiling. Terror glances between us before he leaves the room, shutting the door behind him. The scraping of the lock tells me we’re imprisoned, but for the first time, I don’t mind being trapped.

Rage relaxes against me the second we’re alone, his fingers sifting into my hair at the back of my neck before he grips my nape. “You sure you don’t need a doctor?”

“I’m fine.” I’m not, but I’m not going to fall apart either, and I don’t want him to worry. “That’s the guy whose wife was murdered?”

Rage blows out a breath, his chest vibrating against my cheek. “Yeah, that’s Trick.”

My chest feels like it’s been speared with a harpoon. That little girl lost her mother and then her dad. Trick is breathing, but that anger inside him is a cancer that will eat away at everything he is. I don’t know anything about him, but I can’t help but think maybe he should be kept away from his daughter. He’s clearly deranged.

“You protected me,” I say, pulling back so I can peer up at Rage. His brows are heavy, the tension making his shoulders

tight, but his eyes soften at my words.

“I’ll always protect you.”

A shiver runs up my spine that has nothing to do with what happened. I like how that sounds. Rage makes me feel safe, which is weird considering he just beat a man to a bloody mess in front of me.

There was no hesitation from him.

The moment Rage saw I was in danger, he was there, pulling that man away and defending me. He wanted to kill him for touching me, and I can tell he still does, even if he has calmed a little. I’ve never had anyone willing to go that far for me. Not my dad... not even Tommy.

“I know,” I tell him, sincerely meaning it. I trust that Rage will do everything to keep me and our child safe.

He takes my hands in his, holding them as they shake uncontrollably. The adrenaline is still thundering through my system, and I feel weak, exhausted too.

“Did I scare you?” He doesn’t look at me as he asks this, shame lining his expression. I hate that it’s there. He didn’t do anything wrong.

I shake my head. “I’ve never been scared of you, Beau.”

“I never want you to be.”

I know he’s thinking about the man he’s terrified of becoming, but time and time again, he proves to himself and to me that he is nothing like his father. Rage had fought to keep me protected. He didn’t throw punches to make me afraid. He would never hit me or hurt me. Despite how little I really know about him, I’m certain of that.

I grab his face between my hands, wanting desperately to assure him that he’s not that man, that the violence inside him is not the same, but I don’t know how to put that into words.

“I couldn’t bear it if you were afraid of me,” he admits.

“How can I be scared of someone who throws himself into danger to keep me from harm?”

His hand slides between our bodies, spanning over my stomach as he drops his forehead to rest against mine. “I don’t know what’s gonna happen now. I was on borrowed time with the club before this, but now...” His expression is pained, and I instinctively want to comfort him.

“Whatever happens, we’ll deal with it, okay?”

“I need the club, Skye.”

“I know.”

And I do. I can see how much this place means to him. It’s the same obsession Jack and the other men in my father’s organisation displayed. But the club has something the Pioneers never did—brotherhood. The way Hawk looks after Rage is something I’ve never seen from my father’s soldiers. This is a family, bound by bonds greater than blood.

“I mean, I need it. I can’t protect you both alone, and there’s gonna be repercussions for what I did. They might take my kutte.”

“Howler isn’t going to do that,” I assure him, even though I have no idea what the Sons’ President is capable of.

His expression suggests he doesn’t believe me, so I do the only thing I know will soothe him—I give him my body. Rolling to my toes, I press my mouth to his, slowly teasing my tongue along the seam of his lips.

He lets me inside without a fight, his tongue clashing with mine as his fingers tighten on my nape. I let him direct my head back, so he can deepen our kiss. Warm and fierce, he takes me like I’m all he needs, and it’s a heady feeling knowing that.

I sink against him, melting into his touch as he devours me, kiss by kiss. My legs feel weak, and I cling to him for a different reason now.

When we break apart, it’s only because we need to suck in air. “I’m sorry he touched you,” he says, his voice cracking with emotion. “I promised you’d be safe here.”

“You didn’t know that was going to happen, and I’m fine.”

His fingers trail over my neck, and I have to hold in my wince. I'm sore, and undoubtedly there will be bruises tomorrow. "I wanna kill him."

"I know, but you can't. We need you here and not in jail."

"What makes you think I'll go to jail?" There's a darkness in his tone.

"Let your president handle it. I need you focused on us." He gives me that attention, albeit grudgingly. "I love that you want to be the man who defeats all my monsters, but I don't want that from you. I just need you."

He kisses me again. "Say you're mine."

I don't have to think about it. I'm so caught up in the moment, in the intensity between us, that I blurt the words. "I'm yours."

He walks me back to the bed and comes down on top of me, his mouth fused to mine. My pussy throbs in anticipation, but when he's had his fill of me, he goes onto his back, pulling me against him so I'm half lying on his chest. His arm wraps around me, keeping me in place.

My disappointment fades as I soak into him, relaxing my body against his warmth and listening to his steady breaths.

"What was your life like growing up?"

The question surprises me, coming out of nowhere. I don't move, uncertain what he's looking for in this answer.

"Ain't a trick, Skye. I want to know about you."

That eases some of my tension. "Um... I don't know. Kind of militant, I guess. When my mum was alive, things were better. She was... she was a good mother. She and I would read stories together. Well, she'd read, I'd listen. We had a big library in the house, with nice comfy sofas. It's one of my favourite memories—cold, wintery days under blankets and drinking hot chocolate with her. As I got a little older, she'd lie on my bed, showing me the music she liked." My smile is sad and my heart aches for her. It's been years, but her death still is fresh.

“What happened to her?” He traces lazy circles on the top of my arm, keeping me close still.

“A brain haemorrhage. She fell while riding. She was bruised, but she got right back up, laughing about it. When we went back to the house, she complained of a headache and went to lie down. Dad found her that evening. She’d slipped away in her bed.” The memories of that day assault me, making my eyes swim. “Dad was hard before, but after she passed, he became worse. He spent more time away, threw himself completely into his work, coming home only for brief periods. I was raised by the staff until I was old enough to take care of myself. I spent a lot of my time with Tommy and Scarlett.”

“Who the fuck is Tommy?” His brashness has my head lifting off his chest.

“A friend... or he was.” Rage’s jaw ticks. “Are you okay?”

“You and him?”

“Oh, hell no. He and I were close, but not like that, Beau. I never wanted Tommy in that way. He was like my brother. I loved him, but I wasn’t in love with him.”

His fingers tighten on my arm. “You ever been in love before?”

He’s jealous, and I’m not sure why that makes me feel so happy. “No. I’m not a saint, Beau. I didn’t come to you a virgin, but I’ve never had a relationship before. I don’t really know what I’m doing.”

He snorts, but his body eases beneath me. My answer must please him. “You think I know any better?”

“We’re doing okay,” I assure him. “I think my father loves me in his own way, but there was always a sense he wished I was a son, someone to carry on his legacy.”

“Why didn’t he marry again?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know that much about my father.”

We lapse into an easy silence, and I let my mind wander to those weeks before Tommy left to join the Pioneers. Jack was

still alive then, Scarlett too. Life had been good. I spent my days riding and shopping. I didn't have two deaths staining my soul, and I wasn't pregnant to a man who my father will want to kill.

“When's your birthday?”

“You going to buy me a present?” I tease.

He snorts. “Maybe.”

“It's the thirtieth of December. When's yours?”

“Fifteenth of January.”

“Figures we're both Capricorns.”

“I don't know what that means.”

My laugh is easy for the first time in what feels like months. “It means we're both sensitive overachievers.”

“You believe that shit?”

“I don't know,” I admit. “Maybe we should have a joint birthday party this year, though I'm still going to be pregnant, so you'll have drink for both of us.”

His chest rumbles with his laugh. “Darlin', that ain't gonna be a problem.”

My belly flutters at the endearment. “You like drinking?”

“Ain't a party guy, if that's what you're asking, but sure, I like a pint or two. The club's pretty social and drinkin' is kinda part of that. Once a month, we have this family day thing where we all get together, brothers, old ladies, family. Ain't happened since I've been at Manchester, but shit's been difficult. We did it all the time in London.”

“That's where you were based in the past?”

He blows out a breath. “Yeah. I grew up a stone's throw from the London chapter's clubhouse. After I was put into foster care, I was bounced around different boroughs. Didn't care much for being in the system. I was seventeen when I went AWOL from the boys' home where I was living. I found my way to the clubhouse and started hanging around. Made

myself useful. Did odd jobs, shit the brothers weren't interested in. It got me noticed, and Nox sponsored me as a prospect."

I can hear the pride in his voice. "How long were you a prospect?"

"Not long enough. Ravage, the President there, patched me in fast. I was so fucking happy the day I became a full brother."

That pride has turned to something else, and I press my palm against his chest, needing to be closer to him. "How did you end up here?"

"I fucked up. Repeatedly. My anger was always an issue. I'd throw myself into fights just to feel something. Rav wanted a certain kind of man in his ranks, and I fit that mostly, but my temper... fuck. I got locked up for fighting, and Rav was fuming. It was come here or lose my kutte, so I came to Manchester. I didn't expect to fit in or like it here, but..."

"But you do?" I finish for him.

"Yeah, I do. I mean, Hawk treats me like I'm his kid, but he cares, and it's been a long time since I've had that. Howler embraces my craziness, even though he shouldn't. I feel like this is home, and I've never had that before either."

This admission makes my eyes prick with tears. The thought of him out there, never belonging, stabs me in the heart. Had Rage been raised with parents who loved him, his life would have been so different.

I realise in this moment how important it is for us to remain with the club. Rage needs this place, and I need him. "I like it here, too," I admit.

"Ain't an easy life, bein' an old lady. There are things that a brother can't tell his woman. There's shit that comes up last minute that has to be dealt with. Runs that last weeks sometimes."

All of that should worry me, but it doesn't. "Okay."

"Okay?"

“Yeah. I mean, that’s the life, right?”

He stares at me, as if trying to fathom if I’m talking shit. “You wouldn’t care about that stuff?”

I shake my head. “As long as when you come home, you come to me, no, I don’t. Those women in that room might be older than me and maybe they know a lot more, but not one of them seem unhappy.” Except for Heidi.

He nibbles on his bottom lip, his eyes unfocused, and I wonder what he’s thinking. “Old lady... it ain’t just a title, Skye. It means something within these walls.”

“Okay,” I say, not sure what he’s driving at. I thought it just meant wife or girlfriend of a member, but the way he’s looking at me makes me pay attention. “What’s it mean?”

“An old lady is an extension of a brother. He’s responsible for her actions, but with that comes the protection of the club and a respect from our members.”

I want to ask him if I’m considered an old lady, but I’m too scared to voice it. He pushes my hair off my face, his eyes crawling mine. “What happened in that room shouldn’t have happened, and if you were an old lady, the consequences of what that cunt did would be worse.”

“So, he gets a shittier punishment because I don’t have that title?”

“Old ladies are off-limits.”

I sit up, pushing my hair off my face and turn to him. “I don’t know what you’re trying to say, Beau.”

His jaw ticks for a second before he seems to compose himself. “I don’t know what’s coming, but I do know the danger here ain’t passed. Your dad is still lookin’ for you, and at some point, he’s gonna find out we have you. If you ain’t mine, I can’t protect you.”

I frown at him, still not understanding. “I am yours.”

“Not officially.” He reaches out, grasping my hand as if he needs to be touching me. “I want to make us official, Skye.”

“Like, we’re dating official?”

His lips quirk at the corners. “I was inside you for hours yesterday. I think we’re past dating.”

My cheeks heat at his crassness. “Don’t say it like that.”

I’m pulled onto his chest, my breasts pressed against his pecs. His heat sears me, the leather of his vest soft against the patches of skin that touch it. “Would you rather I said made love to you?”

Oh. I swallow, trying not to react to the fluttering in my chest. “Is that what we did?”

His eyes crawl over my face, drinking me in, and I like how it makes me feel. “Yeah, darlin’, that’s exactly what we did.” He kisses me, soft and tender in a way I didn’t know he could be. I feel like a puddle in his arms. When he pulls back, there’s a cheeky smirk on his lips. “Be my old lady?”

I still don’t entirely know what it means, but I’m eager to please him, so I nod. “You have me however you want me, Beau. I’m yours completely.”

CHAPTER 16

TERROR

I stare at the man who has been a constant in our club since I became a member. Trick's head is bowed, his chin touching his chest, which moves up and down as he swallows frantic breaths. He's not bound to the chair he's sitting in, though given his behaviour, I would have been inclined to secure him. Howler doesn't seem worried about our homicidal little friend trying to escape or attack us, even though he's racked up a bigger body count in the short time he's been running around alone than he did in his whole time with the club.

There's a part of me that's impressed by the level of vengeance my brother has delivered on the fuckers who killed his wife. His creativity was interesting, if a little clumsy, but I can't fault his actions. If it had been Hope's brains splattered in my car, I would've done worse.

I curl my fingers into fists, my thoughts taking a dark turn despite the fact I know my wife is safe and well. She and I will have a conversation about her putting herself in harm's way though. Trick is lucky I allowed him to remain breathing after I saw my beautiful Hope trying to pull him off the Richardson girl. Her pregnancy has made me more possessive, more protective than ever.

Howler and Blackjack exchange a glance, one that I read instantly. They're about to play dirty, and I'm curious to see what our president does here. By rights, he could strip Trick of his colours, kick him out the club... maybe even end his life. But Trick ain't some shitty prospect or hangaround. He's blood, and Howler ain't the kind of man to give up on family.

He also ain't the kind of man to subject a broken brother to public humiliation, which is why only the three of us are in the room with Trick.

“What the fuck, Trick?” Howler asks, coming to stand in front of him. “You wanna explain what the hell just happened in there? You could've hurt any of the girls, including Pia. You did hurt Skye. We don't touch women or fuckin' kids. I'm getting tired of trying to defend you.”

Trick's fingers clutch the edge of the seat beneath him so hard, his skin stretches over his knuckles, but he doesn't raise his head. “Is the girl okay?” His voice is hoarse, and the way he says ‘girl’ is not kind.

“You wrapped your fucking hand around her neck,” Blackjack snaps at him. “What the fuck do you think?”

Trick's jaw tightens even as his shoulders slump. “I... I heard she was here. Richardson's daughter. I wanted... I needed...” He breaks off, his face contorting in what I assume is pain.

“To what? Take your anger out on a pregnant teenager?”

His head snaps up so fast, it must leave him dizzy. The bloodshot whites of his eyes dart between Howler and Blackjack. “She's fuckin' pregnant?”

A myriad of emotions crosses his face—confusion, dismay, anger, and a deep-rooted sadness. I don't know what the fuck to make of any of it.

“It's Rage's kid. That's why he beat the fuck out of you.” Blackjack sounds more pissed than I've ever heard him.

There's a twitch in his cheek as he takes that information in. “He fucked the daughter of the man who killed Mara?”

Howler scrubs a hand over his chin, his jaw tight. Ain't sure this is going the way he wants, but I know my president. I've been with this chapter long enough to recognise his ticks and emotions. He's trying to hold his temper at bay, but unleashing it would be better. Trick needs a fuckin' wakeup call.

“You don’t get to take the moral high ground here.”

Trick comes to his feet in a sweeping motion, fury radiating off him. I push off the wall where I’m standing, ready to defend Howler.

I don’t need to do shit, though. Howler slams his fist into Trick’s face, knocking him back into the chair, which topples back and tips him onto the concrete. The space is unpleasant, and it’s designed to be that way. “Sit the fuck down,” Howler growls. “I’m done with this bullshit. The lines you’ve crossed... fuck, I don’t know how you come back from them, Trick. You’ve done shit that can’t be fixed. This war with the Pioneers—”

“I didn’t start that,” he defends.

“No, you didn’t, but you sure as hell fanned the flames of it.” Howler takes a steadying breath, his body vibrating with anger.

“They killed my wife.” The broken way he says this hits me in the gut like a fucking punch. I’m not immune to his pain. I know what it feels like to have loved and lost someone.

I handed Hope over to another, certain she would have a better life with him than with me. I was wrong, and my girl suffered for a long time before I was able to pull her out of that shit storm. But I got Hope back.

There’s no chance of that for Trick. Mara’s gone, and she’s never coming back. I don’t know how I would stay sane in that situation, and the fact we all understand his breakdown is the only reason he’s still part of this club.

“I know,” Howler tells him, going down on his haunches in front of the chair as Trick starts to unravel in front of our eyes.

He leans forwards, burying his head in his hands. “I can’t sleep. I can’t eat. I can’t breathe without her.” He gasps for breath as if he’s drowning, and my stomach clenches. “They need to die. All of them.”

“Not her,” Blackjack says, his tone hard. I know the VP ain’t immune to what he’s seeing. He and Trick have been

friends for a long time, so this has to be ripping him apart.

Trick raises his head from his hands. “Why’d he have to be with Richardson’s fucking bitch?”

Blackjack grimaces, and I can tell his resolve is wavering.

“It wasn’t planned,” he says. “It was a one-night stand in a bar. Neither of them knew who the other was.”

“Her father—”

“Ain’t her,” Howler snaps. “This fuckin’ crusade you’re on is only gonna end one way, Trick... with you dead.”

“Good.” He holds his arms out at his sides. “Bring it the fuck on.”

For some reason, that is the thing that unhinges me completely. I don’t know if it’s because I’ve watched Maisie over the past few months, loving her like she’s my own kid, or if it’s because I’m facing fatherhood again, and although I’ve yet to meet the baby Hope is carrying, I already love it with everything I have.

I cross the room, shoving around Howler. He tries to stop me, but I’m far bigger than my president, and I’m fuelled by a need to hurt Trick.

I grab his dirty shirt, tearing him out of his seat and dragging him upright. He wobbles, and I can smell the alcohol on his breath. It’s so strong, it makes my head swim.

“You selfish fuckin’ cunt,” I hiss in his face. “You don’t get to check out. You have a kid. Did you forget about that? You’re lucky you have people willing to give up their time and their life to take care of that child, you arrogant dick. Fuck, you should be glad Mara’s dead.” His face contorts into a mask of rage, but I hold him in place, ignoring the way he swipes at me. “If she could see the worthless piece of shit you’ve become, she’d kill you her fuckin’ self.”

Trick’s whole face crumbles, and I know I’ve hit him where it hurts. No physical pain could be worse than the blow I’ve just delivered.

“Terror...”

Howler's voice behind me barely penetrates as I shove Trick back, watching him fall over his own feet and collapse in a heap on the floor. He doesn't try to get up or wipe the blood off his face from Howler's punch earlier.

He paints a truly pathetic picture, and despite my anger, despite my disgust, I can't help the twist of my stomach and the pity I feel for him.

He's lost everything, but he's also gained everything too. He could have buried them both that day, but the docs were able to save his baby. He has a perfectly healthy child still breathing that he hasn't even asked about.

"I can't do this." Trick brings his knees to his chest, and I watch as he falls apart even more in front of my eyes. "I don't know who I am anymore. I'm fuckin' dying without her. And Sophia... fuck, how am I meant to look her in the eye knowing her mother died because of me, because of my life?" He tears his fingers through his hair savagely. "They took her from me. I had to wash her brains off me after..." He chokes on whatever he was going to say.

Fuck, this ain't nice. I've imagined many times wrapping my hands around Trick's neck and throttling him for the danger he's brought to the club, to all of us, but this isn't the vengeance I envisaged. He was less shattered in those dreams.

"I'm tired of askin' you to come in," Howler says. "Now, I'm telling you. This ain't a choice anymore. You either come home or you're out, Trick. Ain't playin' these games anymore. Ain't turning a blind eye to the shit you're doing. You want to leave this clubhouse, fine. Go. But I'll hand you over to Richardson myself."

Blackjack's spine steels, but he doesn't argue with Howler. He's a loyal right-hand man, just as I am. I'd follow Howler through the gates of hell if he asked it, and I'll follow him wherever this road takes us.

Trick stares defiantly at him. "Then you'd better do it, because I'm not gonna stop killing Pioneers."

“Would you listen to yourself?” Blackjack’s quiet words draw all eyes to him. “I don’t even recognise you anymore. The Trick I knew would never put hands on a woman. He would never leave his daughter in the care of someone else. And he sure as fuck wouldn’t endanger the entire club—not just our chapter, but all the Sons—for his own vendetta.”

“Lose Elyse and then see if you feel the fuckin’ same,” he snaps back.

Blackjack looks as if he’s considering hitting him. “No one is unsympathetic to what happened. We all loved Mara too, but what you’ve done... Howler’s right. I don’t know how you come back from it. I don’t know if there’s even a place for you to come back to.”

That seems to penetrate through some of the dark fog surrounding Trick. “I didn’t mean to hurt the girl.”

“You had your hand wrapped around her throat,” I counter. “You get off on that? You like hurting little girls?”

Trick flinches. “You know I don’t.”

“You still did it, though. What the fuck were you intending to do once you got her out of here? Hit her? Rape her?”

He tries to get to his feet, his intention clear. He wants to knock my teeth down my throat.

“Fuck you! I’m not a rapist!”

“Up until ten minutes ago, you weren’t a piece of shit either. I’m supposed to trust you around my daughter, around my old lady? These guys are meant to trust you too?” I shake my head. “Fuck that. I’d rather kill you than let you anywhere near another woman.”

“I’m not... I didn’t... I just lost control. I wanna hurt Richardson, and when I found out his daughter was here...”

“You what? Thought you’d punish her for her father’s sins?” I continue. “Just to play a little scenario here... Sophia’s fifteen. She’s walking home from school, and she’s grabbed by a bunch of masked men who drag her into a van. Terrified, she’s driven to an abandoned house and told she has to die

because her father killed theirs fifteen years ago. You think that's right? You think my kid should be on the hook for the shit I've done? Blackjack's son?"

He flinches with every word I deliver. "Fuck."

"She's not your enemy. Desmond fucking Richardson is. You took your anger out on someone who ain't deserving of it."

Howler lets out a frustrated breath. "I'll give you an hour to decide what you want to do."

I follow Howler and Blackjack out the room, waiting as Howler locks the door behind him. Blackjack paces the corridor, his shoulders drawn high as he tries to calm himself. "You think we got through to him?"

Howler doesn't answer immediately. "I don't know."

"Fuck. I don't want to lose him again."

"No, but this is his choice to make, Matt." He uses Blackjack's real name, something I've rarely heard him do.

"This ain't right. He's one of us."

"He was. Now, I'm not so sure."

"If his daughter can't bring him back, then there's no way in hell we can," I say. "The guy's fucked-up."

"Wouldn't you be?" Blackjack snaps at me. I don't answer that because I would be, and he knows anything I say to the contrary would be a lie. "What do we do now?" This question is aimed at Howler.

"We wait."

"For what?"

Howler's mouth pulls into a grimace. "For him to realise he's truly about to lose everything."

CHAPTER 17

SKYE

The bed is empty when I wake. I feel around for Rage, but the sheets are cool where he was lying when I closed my eyes. It's not unusual for him to disappear like this, but for some reason, I feel the loss of him this morning.

The light coming in through a gap in the curtains is enough to allow me to get out of bed without needing the light. I toss the covers back and sit on the edge of the bed, letting my head settle for a moment before I move into the adjacent bathroom.

We've been staying in what I've come to think of as my room for the past week. I suspect that's because it's farther away from where they're keeping Trick.

Rage's anger hasn't faded, even though the bruises to my neck have. They're no longer a purple smattering across my pale skin, but a green-yellow staining instead. The doctor had been called, despite my protests. I was grateful it wasn't the same man I saw last time but a different, younger guy with an easy demeanour that instantly soothed my fears. He didn't have one of those portable ultrasounds with him, but he warned me to watch for bleeding or cramping.

I step into the bathroom, sinking onto the toilet and doing my business. It's weird how much I miss Rage when he's not here, but I know his club keeps him busy.

Finishing up, I stand and flush the chain before moving to the sink. As I do every time I'm in front of a mirror, I turn my neck to examine the damage to my throat. It's not as bad as it had been, but it's still there, a reminder of that day.

I avert my gaze, turning the taps on and focusing on washing my hands so I don't have to look any more.

I'm nine and a half weeks today. My nausea and vomiting is still pretty consistent, and my stomach has grown more. It's a noticeable curve when I have my clothes off, and I'm as obsessed with touching my changing body as Rage is.

After I've washed my hands, I brush my teeth and clean my face before I get dressed and open the door.

Ralph comes up instantly from the floor where he was sitting, and I feel a pang of pity that the poor guy has to sit outside my door like a dog.

"Morning," I say brightly as he comes to his full height.

He's a lot bigger than me, but that's not unusual. Most of the men in this club are like trees.

He mutters back a response, like always, and follows as I head towards the common room. My stomach churns as I get closer, but I don't let that slide onto my face as I step inside the room.

It's early, so there are only a handful of people here. I don't see any old ladies, which shouldn't relieve me as much as it does. Most of them are being nice to me now, but I still feel uncomfortable around them. Maybe I can eat and get back to the room before anyone turns up.

Ralph trails me into the kitchen, watching as I make my breakfast. My stomach grumbles the entire time, and I don't know how I can be so hungry all the time. Rage got up at three a.m. to bring me a piece of toast, yet my belly feels as if it never ate that.

I grab my full bowl and walk out into the common room, my mind wandering to Rage. It's weird how much I miss him when he's gone from my side.

I claim a table near the door, away from the few people in the room, and eat. Ralph hovers close by but gives me at least the illusion of privacy. Howler and Rage both tell me I'm not a prisoner here, but the constant presence of a guard at my side suggests otherwise. If I'm out of that room, someone is with

me. I don't mind Ralph. He's one of the more decent prospects. The others don't like me at all, and they're not afraid to show me. Ralph's indifference is far more welcome.

My solitary breakfast is not to be, though. Howler walks into the room, his old lady tucked under his arm draped across her shoulder. Pia is pretty, and the way she lights up for him makes me smile. I wonder if that's what they see when I'm with Rage.

He stops close to my table, pulling her against him and kissing her as if she is the air that he needs to survive. It makes me miss Rage, something I never thought would happen.

For the past almost month, we've been in each other's pockets, and I've come to rely on him. The girls aren't hostile to me, except for Heidi, but they aren't my friends either. Hope has talked to me about pregnancy, and she got me the books she promised, so I can do my own reading, and Ophelia has been kind to me. Even Elyse has made an effort, but I suspect it's for Rage's benefit, not mine.

It's for that reason that I try to blend in, making myself small as Pia pulls away from her husband. He rubs a hand over her bottom before he walks away in the direction I now know leads to his office.

What the hell does an MC president need an office for?

I've wanted to ask Rage that all week, but these people already think I'm a spy for my father and I don't want to give them reason to continue suspecting that. Asking questions about Howler and the club isn't smart.

To my dismay, Pia heads straight for me after saying goodbye to Howler. I wonder if I can shovel my food in faster and make an excuse to leave, but she's sitting opposite me before I can do anything.

“No Rage today?”

I shake my head, concentrating on eating. “He's on a run.”

I've also learned a run is what the club calls a job. “Listen to you. You sound like a real old lady.”

I try not to react to that. After Rage talked about what it meant, I've wanted desperately to become his old lady. In my head, I call him my boyfriend, but I'm not sure that word fits what we are. He makes love to me every opportunity he gets, and he's told me I'm his, but I'm still a prisoner here, kept behind locked doors only to be brought out when they allow it.

At first, I was happy to play along with whatever they demanded, but after I was attacked, I've had a lot more insecurities about my place here. Will I need to be escorted around the building with a newborn baby in my arms? Will they allow me out of that locked room if my child needs something?

I've started worrying about other things too. Where are we going to live? I was facing the streets, so the room is an improvement, but I don't want to raise my child in the clubhouse. I want a nursery with a rocking chair I can sit on to feed my baby. I don't want to worry about music vibrating the floors on a weekend when the guys party. I also don't want to think about the number of strangers who come through this building, from out-of-town members to random people Rage calls hangarounds. Not to mention the fact that the man who tried to kill me is still in this building somewhere, leaving me with a sense of unease every time I move through the corridors.

"I'm not an old lady, and I'll never be one." I push the cereal around my bowl, my appetite fleeing.

"Are you joking?"

I lift my gaze to hers, her expression surprised.

"I don't know the ins and outs of how it works, but I do know there's a vote. You really see me winning that vote?" I arch my brow, which makes hers furrow.

"Everyone knows you're not here on behalf of your father."

I can't stop the flinch at the mention of him. Desmond Richardson controls my life even when he's not in it.

He's still looking for me, the bounty he put out increasing each week. Rage won't tell me what price my father has put on my head, despite me asking, but I get the feeling it's a lot of money.

Wrapped in our little bubble, it has been easy to forget the world exists beyond the walls of the clubhouse. As much as I don't want to think about him, Tommy has been on my mind the past few days. Is he still alive? Has his need for vengeance finally caught up with him?

I don't know where the guys go every day, but I can guess. They're hunting Pioneers, the men who were once a part of my life, including Tommy, my father, and some of his high-ranking lieutenants.

I close my eyes, breathing through my nose as a wave of nausea washes through me.

"You okay?"

I nod in response to Pia's question, unable to look at her. What would she think if she knew my mind is on the men trying to kill her husband and her friends' husbands?

"Just nauseous."

I don't have to have my eyes open to know she's giving me a sympathetic look. "Jake wants to have a baby."

I snap my eyes open, unsure what to expect, but her expression is a mix of uncertainty and serenity.

"Do you want a baby?"

That choice had been taken from me, snatched away by Scarlett's actions, but I don't regret the fact I'm pregnant. The baby growing inside me was the only thing keeping me going in the darker days, and I have something else to live for now. *I have him*. Even if I doubt every other person in this building, I do not have a niggles of uncertainty about Rage.

"I don't know. I have... things in my past. Demons." Her mouth curves down, her eyes tight as she says this.

This admission surprises me. She seems so happy all the time, so content. I would never have guessed she was dealing

with something traumatic. I'm also not sure why she's telling me this. Surely, one of the old ladies would be better for her to discuss this with.

"We all have demons."

"Yeah, some worse than others." Her eyes trail over my throat. "You don't deserve the hate you're getting. Everything happening here is not your doing. It's unfair that you're being held responsible for the actions of other people. What Trick did to you..."

I can tell she doesn't know how to put into words what she's feeling on this matter. I don't either. I empathise with his anger, and I can even understand it, but I'm also pissed that all this vitriol and rage for my father is being directed at me.

"It's done. And I'm fine."

"I can see you're fine. I'm going to ask Jake to give you more freedom. You came here for help, and we've locked you up like you've done something wrong. It's not right. We should have helped more when he had his hands on you."

Her words surprise me. Then again, if I push aside my hurt, my own prejudices, I would remember that the girls had tried to protect me when Trick attacked. They hadn't sat by passively and watched while I was hurt. Hope had jumped in, trying to pull him back. Pia too.

"I don't expect anyone to get hurt helping me."

"I know, but you're one of us now, and us girls have to stick together." Her smile is warm and genuine, and I find myself mirroring it.

"I didn't want my baby when I first found out I was pregnant," I admit. I've never told anyone other than Rage that, but it feels poignant to admit it to her. "I knew the condom broke after we... you know? My intention was to find an all-night pharmacy and get the morning after pill. My father discovered where I was and sent his men after me. I'd run away, intending to start my own life away from the chaos of this world."

I take a steadying breath, needing strength to rehash this part of my past. “I realised the people I thought I could trust were not on my side. My friend, she wanted me to have this baby to punish me.” I place a hand on my abdomen. “But it’s never felt like punishment.”

Pia’s gaze becomes unfocused as she stares at the table in front of her. “I don’t think I’m ready.”

“Then tell him that. Howler isn’t going to force you. You have options, choices.”

She reaches across the table, gripping my hand in hers. “I’m sorry yours were taken from you.”

“It was the right thing to happen. I want my baby. I already love her... or him,” I add around smile. I tease Rage by telling him our baby is a girl, but in truth, neither of us knows for certain what we are having. “When the time is right, you’ll want yours too.”

She bites her bottom lip, deep in thought, before her gaze lifts to mine. Just as she’s about to say something, the door opens and two men step into the room flanked by prospects. I don’t miss the way Ralph comes to his feet, placing himself between us and the men.

On the surface, they don’t seem threatening. Dark suits that look expensive fit each of their large frames perfectly, and their shoes shine as if they have been polished excessively. They each share similar features—the same slant to their noses, similar jaw lines, and piercing eyes—though where one has dark hair, the other has blond. I don’t need to be told to know they are brothers.

They’re followed by another man in a suit that is less well-fitted and looks cheaper. The way his eyes scan the room makes me think he is here to protect the men.

The dark-haired man peers around the room, taking in the mismatched furniture, the stained floor, and the battered sofas with a clear look of disdain on his face.

“I hate bikers,” he mutters.

He gives off waves of danger as his dark eyes focus on readjusting his cufflinks, as if being in this room is somehow sullyng him.

Pia grabs my hand and pulls me out my seat, dragging us both back from them.

The dark-haired man watches with amusement while his brother seems agitated.

“Where is your... president, is it?” There’s a little derision in his words, and I can tell it pisses Pia off.

“Busy,” Pia says, her words hard. “I’m guessing you don’t have an appointment.”

The dark-haired man steps towards us and, suddenly, three guns are pointing in his direction. He doesn’t so much as flinch. In fact, his mouth pulls into a maniacal grin. “Been a while since anyone dared pull a gun on me. It makes me tingly.”

He sounds demented, which adds to my fear. The tension in the room is suffocating, even though nothing has really happened.

The blond-haired man shoves the other aside, his attention locking on me and Pia. He does a double take, his eyes narrowing on me, and I feel the weight of his gaze as he takes me in.

I don’t dare to breathe, unsure why I’m the focus of this man’s attention. He scrubs the hand over his jaw, his eyes softening. “Fuck, you look just like her.”

“Like who?”

“Why the fuck are you invading my clubhouse, Kane?” Howler’s words snap.

He’s not holding a weapon, but he doesn’t need to. These men do not seem to be a threat, and Howler clearly knows them.

“Didn’t my brother call ahead to tell you we were coming?”

“Nope.”

“That explains the hostile reaction,” Kane says, turning to the other man. “And everyone says Zeke is the most reliable of us.”

The blond gives a lopsided smile, pulling his gaze from me, which allows me to breathe for the first time since they walked into the room. Pia tightens her grasp on my hand, and I squeeze back, letting her know we are in this together.

“I apologise for the... *invasion*. We’ll keep this brief. You have something that belongs to us, and we want it back.”

Howler folds his arms over his broad chest, refusing to back down. “Considering I don’t deal with London mob bosses, I highly doubt that.”

The blond’s eyes snap back to mine. “Hello, Skye.”

My forehead furrows, my mouth dropping open in surprise. How the hell does he know my name? I don’t know any London mob bosses called Kane, or whoever this is. It’s not like my father speaks to me about these people.

Ice fills my veins even as my heart clenches in my chest. My instincts are on overdrive, my body urging me to run, but I cling to Pia’s hand instead, terrified to let go. “How do you know who I am? And who are you?”

His mouth pulls into a smile, and I have to admit the man is attractive in a dark, brooding, yet well put together way. He doesn’t have any of the wildness Beau has, and I’m not sure I like this clean, suited look.

“Apologies. My name is Lucas Fraser, and this is my brother, Kane. We’ve been looking for you for a while.”

My heart skips a beat, then another, before it remembers how to pump. Are these associates of my father? Has he finally found me? Unconsciously, I step back, as if it will help.

Shaking my head, I feel the sweat on the back of my neck. I have never seen either of these men, and there’s no way in hell I’m letting them take me.

“Why?” Howler demands through gritted teeth.

Lucas pulls his eyes from me, giving Howler his attention instead. “That’s not important. All you need to know is we are not leaving without her.” He pulls the sleeves of his suit jacket down and then delivers a blow that nearly drives me to my knees.

“You think you can come into my house and demand to take someone under my protection?”

Lucas’s eyes narrow. “Is she under your protection?”

Howler steps towards him, his fists clenched as the sound of guns cocking fills the air. I don’t dare breathe, leaning into Pia’s comfort as we both try to shrink back from the imminent danger.

“Try and take her and you’ll find out.”

Lucas’s mouth pulls into a smirk, but before anyone can move, the door opens again and a small blonde woman rushes in. Lucas’s demeanour changes immediately, then he grabs the woman around the waist, pulling her against him. “Didn’t I tell you to wait in the car?” His tone is irritated, a bite of anger in his words.

She doesn’t seem frightened of him, but I’m not focused on that. I’m studying every inch of her face because it’s almost like I’m looking in a mirror. She looks just like me, though there are differences. She’s blonde to my brunette, and her nose is a slightly different shape, but there is no denying she and I look alike.

“You did tell me to wait, but I was worried you’d start a gunfight.”

“How lowly you think of me, little dove,” he says in a soft voice.

Neither of them seems aware of the guns pointing in their direction as he brushes her hair away from her face. The soft looks they give each other are at odds with the situation.

The woman peers up at him, a burning desire in her eyes.

“I couldn’t have you accidentally kill my sister, could I?”

Sister? The fuck? I glance at Pia expectantly, but she looks just as confused as I am. Who the hell is her sister?

I turn back to the blonde girl, whose eyes are now locked to mine as a warm smile infuses her face. “It’s wonderful to finally meet you, Skye.”

What. The. Fuck?

CHAPTER 18

SKYE

As soon as the words leave her mouth, my instinct is to run. I don't have a sister, and although I cannot deny the similarities in our appearances, she is not my blood.

This is a trick, something designed to remove me from the clubhouse so my father can deal his version of justice to me. I'm not falling for it. The days of me being naïve and stupid, trusting people I shouldn't, are long gone. I've been burned too many times, and my walls are now ten foot high around me.

I shake my head, muttering the word 'no' under my breath as I stumble back. I don't take my eyes off the three of them, not even when I bump into the table behind me, making it teeter on its wobbly legs.

Lucas Fraser... I've never heard the name, but he does look every inch a London mob boss. I don't need to know who they are. The suits, the overabundance of confidence, and the darkness swirling around them tells me everything I need to know. These men run in the same circles as my father and probably the club.

They clearly have some relationship with the Sons, and my mind jumps to a terrible conclusion. Is this an elaborate plan to remove me from the clubhouse without firing a single bullet? My thoughts swirl, confusion and fear heightening every scenario as they race through my brain. Each one becomes crazier than the last, but I would not put it past my father to do anything. He has shown me over the years his lack of morals when it comes to getting his way, and I know he wants me back. He's offering money for my return, and although Rage

won't tell me how much, I'm smart enough to know it's most likely more than most people can imagine in their lifetime.

"Do you have a fucking death wish?" Howler demands, stepping towards the two men. He doesn't show any fear, despite being unarmed.

"Come on now," Kane says, tilting his head slightly to the side. "We *are* family, and it's far too early in the day to spill blood."

"Your brother being married to Nox's sister doesn't mean we're fuckin' family."

I slide my gaze towards Howler, my pulse quickening at his words. It's another shot to the gut. Howler is more connected to these people than I originally thought. These men are not enemies of the club, and now, I'm starting to doubt whether I'm safe and under protection here. Was I locked in that room just waiting for this moment?

I feel eyes on me, and when I lift my lashes, I see the blonde woman is watching me carefully. The depth of her gaze is so penetrating, it's as if she's stealing all the thoughts from my head.

"Kane, stop. You're scaring her." She takes a step towards me, and I mirror her movements, reclaiming the distance between us. The way her brows draw together tells me she didn't expect my reluctance. "I'm sorry. We didn't come here to frighten you."

"No, you came here to take me away," I snarl, wrapping my arms around my stomach.

There is a small, nearly imperceptible narrowing of her brows as she steps towards me. Lucas snags her wrist, stopping her, as if I'm the dangerous one he needs to protect her from. She glances up at him and something unspoken passes between them. When she looks back at me, she doesn't try to come closer.

"I've been trying to reach you for a long time, Skye, but I could never get close without risking an all-out war with Desmond. Then we heard you were missing, that there's a

reward for your return, and I started looking for you.” I can’t tell if her smile is genuine or an act to make me trust her. “I didn’t expect to find you somewhere we had reach.”

“You’re not my sister,” I snap. “I don’t have a sister.”

She smiles, a hint of sadness behind the expression. “I didn’t know about you either, not right away, but I promise you, we are sisters. We share a father.”

I shake my head, refusing to believe her. Oh, I’m more than sure that my father slept around, even when he was with my mother. The amount of time he spent away from home would make it easy for him to have relationships outside of his marriage, but that doesn’t mean she and I share DNA.

Even as I think it, doubts niggle me. I can’t deny we look alike, but there are plenty of people who look similar yet are not related in anyway. I don’t believe her, and even if I did, it changes nothing. I don’t know her, and I sure as fuck don’t trust her.

She’s still speaking, though I realise I’ve missed some of the conversation as I tune back in. “...into him, I discovered your existence. I wanted to take you out of that house as soon as I did, but we couldn’t, not without serious repercussions.” When I don’t respond, she turns to Howler and continues talking. “Thank you for keeping my sister safe, but we’ll take it from here.”

The tension in the room grows even heavier, and I slide my gaze in Howler’s direction, wondering how he will handle this. “I can’t let you take her.”

His words do alleviate a little of my doubts, but not enough. I know how useful I am to his club, to him.

The woman claiming to be my sister pulls her mouth into a tight line as her entire body becomes steel. “I don’t need your permission, and neither does she. She’s not a prisoner here, right?”

Howler grinds his jaw because he, like I, knows the truth. I am a prisoner, though I have been too blind to see that. My

throat clogs as tears burn my eyes. I don't know who is on my side, and the only person I trust right now is myself.

“That bloodshed you don't want is a hair trigger from happening,” Howler warns, addressing Kane even though his eyes remain locked on the woman.

Her eyes turn to mine, softening as she implores me. “You don't have to stay here. If they're keeping you against your will—”

“Don't get in the middle of this,” Howler says, but he doesn't deny that I'm being kept here with no choice.

I was happy to follow their rules, but what would have happened if I had tried to leave? Would they have dragged me back into the clubhouse? From the moment I came here, I have been locked in a room, only allowed out with an escort. I *am* a prisoner, despite the fact I've not allowed myself to believe this. Somehow, I convinced myself this was okay, that it was my dues I had to pay because of my father, but all my freedoms have been taken from me since the moment I arrived. I was so scared, so grateful for the help, that I didn't challenge this.

What a naïve little idiot I am.

My heart pounds as every single detail of the past three weeks collides through my brain, challenging my perception of everything. It all begins to feel sinister, and I can hardly breathe as I realise whatever I've opened myself up to. I am the daughter of an extremely powerful man and I willingly put myself in the hands of his enemies. Of course, they locked me up—I'm the perfect leverage.

I stumble back, using the nearest table to steady myself. It feels as if there is a hand wrapped around my throat, choking the life out of me. I wanted to believe so desperately that I had finally found my place. I wanted to believe that in a world where I was just a pawn, I had found people who cared about me.

Then I had found love in Rage

Every word, every action made within these walls is a double-edged sword. I am a lamb, and they have led me to the slaughter. Like an empty-headed fool, I've lined up, waiting my turn to have my throat slit.

Is Rage possessive because he wants me and our child, or because I help his club get one over on my father?

Pain spears through me and I hug my stomach tighter, not to protect my baby but because it churns like violent waves at sea.

Everything is a lie.

All of this has been one elaborate game that I've played without knowing the rules. My father kept me in the dark, allowed me to become someone who could be manipulated so easily. I hate him most of all for that. He protected me from nothing and left me open to everything.

I pull my hand free of Pia's, ignoring the confusion on her face as I step back from her too. She's not my friend either. She's Howler's wife, and her loyalties lie with him.

A sob bubbles up my throat and I have to swallow it down before I suffocate on it. When I look around the room, all I see is jailers, people who want to keep me in my place.

You're acting crazy...

I ignore that voice. It has lied to me so many times, I no longer believe it.

Rage wants you...

I lick my lips, whimpering at the thought of how he made love to me last night. He had been tender and sweet, a change from his usual need to take me hard, but in the morning, he was gone. No note. He didn't even bother to wake me to tell me he was leaving.

Because he doesn't care. If he cared, he would have woke me before sneaking out of the bed like I'm nothing more than a booty call to him.

He needed me to believe he wants me, so I didn't fight against being locked in that room.

My thoughts are coming thick and fast, and I want to fist my hands over my ears to block them out. Is any of this real?

Rage doesn't love me, and he doesn't care about me or our child.

I know that's not true even as I think it, but it swamps me, leaving a dark ugliness in its wake.

Like my father, like Tommy, Rage's first and only loyalty is to this dark underworld he thrives to be a part of. If he truly cared, he would never have allowed me to be treated this way.

Sweat collects on the back of my neck and my pulse pounds in my ears as the foundations of everything I thought I was building crumble around me.

What were these men doing behind the scenes while I was tucked up with Rage, believing I was starting something good?

Selling you to London mob bosses...

Creating fake sisters so I would willingly leave the sanctuary I had built.

The thought floats through my mind, and the moment it does, I cannot scrape it off. Every instinct in my body urges me to run, but a sea of unfriendly faces is between me and the door. The only place to go is onto the terrace.

"Skye, you don't have anything to fear anymore." The woman pretending to be my sister holds her hands up as if she's not a threat to me. I don't miss the fact everyone in the room is inching closer to me.

"Stay fucking back!" I yell, my voice cracking but unwavering as emotion overwhelms me.

The blonde steps closer, forcing Lucas to either move with her or let her go. "I didn't intend to ever meet our father after I discovered his affair with my mother a year ago. But then I learned about you, Skye, and I was scared for you. This world is not kind to women, and I wanted to be sure you're safe."

I see the sincerity in her eyes as she says these words, but I have had plenty of people look me in the eyes as they lied to

my face. “I don’t believe you. I don’t even know your name, and you come here pretending to be my sister, pretending to care about me. I know how my father works and the things he is capable of. You can go back to him and tell him I’m not stupid. I’m not falling for his lies anymore.”

I back up a little farther, inching towards the door that leads to the terrace. I doubt I will be able to outrun all these people, but I have to try. I won’t be cornered or caged again.

“Sorry, I should have told you my name. I’m Sariah, and I’m not working with Desmond. I’ve never even met him. I grew up for years believing my father was Declan Easton, but our parents had an affair before you were born.”

As much as I want to deny she is my sister, the evidence is staring me in the face. We look too similar for it to be coincidence, but I have no idea if this woman is friend or foe, and I’m not risking my life to discover that.

“Fuck you,” I hiss before I bolt for the door.

I push around the tables, taking the most direct route to the terrace that avoids anyone getting close. Adrenaline pounds through my veins, giving me strength and speed I wouldn’t usually possess.

My heart soars as I slam through the door and out into the fresh air. The place I would come to sit in the mornings, letting the sun heat my face, is no longer comforting. It’s merely an extension of the shackles these people have chained me in.

Voices behind me tell me I’m not going to get far, but I have to try. I have to survive for both of us.

I dart around the edge of the terrace, doubling back on myself in the direction of the gate I know leads to the street. I’ve never tried to open it. Escape was not in my mind until this moment, so when I lift the latch and the metal creaks as it swings open, all I feel is relief.

“Skye! Stop!”

Voices call to me, but I ignore everything as I burst out onto the street. Bikes line the kerbs either side of the road, and

the bustle of traffic can be heard through the narrow walkway that connects the cul-de-sac to the main road.

I head in that direction, my lungs burning and my stomach churning as I hear heavy footfalls behind me. I don't dare to look around, to see how close my pursuers are, and as the edge of the narrow walkway opens out, I'm facing a busy road.

I don't have time to wait for a gap in the traffic, so I step off the kerb. As I do, an arm hooks around my front, tugging me back. I scream. I don't mean to, but the sound rips out of me in desperation as I'm taken back towards the walkway.

The tattooed arm around me is familiar, and I know it's Howler's chest my back is pressed against. I try to fight, to claw and scratch at his skin, but his hold is iron, and I can do nothing as I'm dragged back towards the clubhouse. "Easy," he says in my ear. "We ain't the enemy."

But he's wrong. Everyone is my enemy. I'm a piece on a chessboard, being used to win the game, and I am so stupid for not seeing that.

Rage is loyal to his club, to his friends, and I start to doubt every interaction we have had. Did he want me to believe he loved me? Was it all an act to make me trust him, so they could hand me over to these men?

I know I'm not thinking straight, that my thoughts are muddled and jumbled, but now that the seed of doubt has been planted in my mind, I can't shake it off.

"Let go of me!" I scream like a banshee, kicking out as he holds me in place.

I don't care that I'm causing a scene. I don't care that I'm clawing at his skin either. My only focus is on getting away. If those men take me away, I'll be at their mercy. I may be naïve in a lot of ways, but I know what happens to women in our world when they are abducted.

"Fuck, stop fighting me!"

As I'm dragged back into the building, my heart sinks into my stomach. Any chance of survival is gone, and I'm at the mercy of others once again.

“Take your fucking hands off her!” Sariah tries to launch at Howler, but Lucas wraps a hand around her chest, pulling her back against him.

“Calm down, little dove.” His words are quiet, but there is a crack of authority lacing his tone that makes her sag in his arms.

My legs are water as Howler pushes me into a chair. Immediately, I try to get back up, but his hand presses my shoulder, forcing me back into the seat.

“Stop fighting me. I don’t want to hurt you,” he says, and despite the bite in his words, his hands are gentle as he holds me in place.

It’s that which makes me stop thrashing. He doesn’t seem to want to hurt me, but it doesn’t change my desire to leave.

“Please let me go.” I hate how scared I sound.

“I can’t do that,” he says. “I promised to protect you, Skye. I promised Rage you would be safe here, and I keep my word.”

At the mention of Rage, I flinch, my doubts still building within me. I glance up at Howler, trying to see the lies in his words, but his face gives away nothing.

“I want to leave.”

He winces, and I can see the unease working through him. “I can’t let you do that either.”

My mouth pulls into a line. “So, I am a prisoner here.”

Howler scrubs a hand over his mouth. “No, you’re not. You’re family, and within these walls, that means something.”

“Skye, you don’t have to stay,” Sariah tells me, pushing around the two men flanking her. “We can leave right now. I promise I will take care of you.”

The prospects step forwards, intending to block her path, which makes Lucas grab the nearest man by the front of his leather vest. “Take another step and I’ll end you.”

“Everybody take a breath,” Howler orders.

“I’ll take a breath when my sister is safe from you,” Sariah bites out.

“I’m not the bad guy here.”

I can barely understand what they’re talking about. *All* I hear is my laboured breathing loud in my ears. I block them all out, closing my eyes and trying to breathe through the looming panic, but the tightness in my chest refuses to loosen as I understand I’ve lost control of everything once again.

CHAPTER 19

RAGE

I peer up at the building, my mouth curving down at the corners. I hate coming to this fucking place. The sign over the door is usually lit up, but the midmorning sun highlights the name anyway. *Entice*. Fuck, what a stupid name for a strip club.

I take a breath before we head through the door, Brewer going ahead of me. He ain't any more happy than I am to be doing this shit, but he doesn't complain either. There's no point.

As we pass the small area where entrance tickets are purchased, I already smell pussy and booze. It only gets worse as we step into the main room.

There's a stage on the far side of the room, two metal poles running vertically from floor to ceiling, and a couple of platforms used by the girls who dance here night after night.

A bar runs the full length of the back wall, stocking everything from lager to mid-range whiskeys. There are small round tables crammed into the available space in between. The walls are painted black, red upholstery adorns the chairs scattered around the room, and hanging from the ceiling is a row of lights used to illuminate whoever is shaking their arse on the stage.

I don't have a problem with women taking their clothes off for money, but the girls who work here are desperate to hook their manicured nails into a brother. Being an old lady is better than being leered at by dirty old fucks and these women know that.

“Fuck, this place is a shit hole,” Brewer mutters.

It might be a shit hole, but it’s also a substantial portion of the cut we each get every month. These girls might be desperate to escape this lifestyle, but they sure as fuck bring in a lot of money.

“Remind me how the fuck we came to own this place.” I don’t expect an answer, but when Brewer flinches, my curiosity is piqued.

“That’s a long story.”

“So, tell it quick,” I say, grabbing his arm before he steps through the ‘staff only’ door. “Tell me.”

Brewer rubs at the back of his neck, his face pulling into an uncomfortable wince. “It’s not my story to tell, but Hope used to work here, at least until Terror pulled her out. And I’ve already said more than I should, so if you have any other questions, ask him.”

I snort, because we both know there is no way in hell I’m asking Terror about his old lady working in strip club. “I seem suicidal to you?”

He rests his hand against the door, his eyes narrowing as he takes me in. “No, but considering the shit you’re dealing with...”

I shake my head, folding my arms over my chest. “I’m dealing with my shit just fine, but thanks for the concern.”

It’s a lie. I’m not dealing with anything. Skye has me in a tangled knot, one that I don’t know how to undo. I’ve always lived and breathed this club. From the moment I understood I wanted to be a brother, it consumed my every waking moment... until her.

I get this constant tightness in my chest when I’m away from her. It had taken all my willpower this morning to leave the bed, to leave her sleeping knowing she would wake up without me.

“How do you do it?” The question slips out of my mouth before I can think or stop it.

“Do what?”

“Leave Ophelia behind.”

Brewer blows out a breath, and I expect him to take the piss out of me, call me a soft bastard or something, but he doesn't. “It gets easier. I know that sounds weird, but you have to learn to trust they'll be okay. After all that shit with Ophelia, I didn't think I'd ever leave her side again, but these old ladies are hard as nails.”

I can't argue with him on that.

“Right. It doesn't feel like that's going to happen, so what do I do to make it?”

He makes a deep chuckle in the back of his throat that has me glaring at him. “You can't make it. Our life is dangerous, Rage. The girls, they know that. Every single one of them understands they could be taken for collateral, that they could be caught up in a gunfight or a knife fight. They also know they might end up burying us. That's what makes them a special breed. There's not many women who would put up with this bullshit.”

He shoves through the door, ending the conversation, and I follow after him, heading towards the office. This is our last collection of the day, and I'm itching to get back to the clubhouse, to get back to Skye. I can't explain it, but I've had an uneasy feeling in my stomach all morning.

A door opens to the left of us and Keeley steps out from what looks like a storeroom, carrying a crate of lager bottles. I'm surprised to see her, but I shouldn't be. The doors open for the lunchtime crowd in just a few hours.

I like Keeley. She is the only good thing about this place. She gives us a broad smile as she readjusts her hold on the crate. Her bubble-gum pink hair has blue and green streaks through the underneath of it, making her look like a piece of candy. Thick, winged eyeliner is rimmed with dark green eyeshadow that matches the tight tank top and tiny shorts the bar staff are required to wear.

“Good to see, boys. You here to see Sam, because he’s not here yet?”

She’s like sunshine in a stormy sky. I don’t know how she ended up in a place like this, but Keeley is a good draw for punters. As far as I know, she’s never been on stage, but she has a knack for selling booze.

“Just here to collect something,” Brewer says, smiling at her.

“His office should be unlocked, but if you need anything, I’ll be stocking the bar.”

“Thanks, darlin’,” I say, which earns me another smile from her.

She carries on walking, using her back to push through the door, and as soon as she’s gone, we go into the office. It’s a fucking mess in here. There’s paper strewn across the top of the desk, a half-full coffee mug, and something rotting in the bin that stinks.

Brewer moves to the safe, crouching in front of it as he plugs in the combination.

“You seen Trick?”

The slight tension in his shoulders is the only indication he gives me that he doesn’t want to answer the question. I can’t see his face, but I don’t need to. Trick is a sensitive subject for everyone.

The last time I saw him was a week ago, after he tried to hurt Skye. No one will tell me anything about where he is now or what’s happening, even though out of everyone in the clubhouse, I have the most right to know. It was my woman he left bruises on, after all.

“You just love to torture yourself, don’t you?”

“Ain’t about torturing myself. Just doesn’t sit right with me, him being in the same building as Skye, considering what he did.”

Brewer grabs a couple of bags out of the safe and stands. I see a flash of banknotes and hear the sound of coins clinking

together as he places them on the desk.

“I know. It doesn’t sit right with a lot of us, but Trick has history with the club, one that can’t just be scrubbed clean.” I don’t like the look that passes over his face as he leans his palms on top of the desk. “Howler and Blackjack brought in some fancy fucking doctor to talk to him.”

“What kind of doctor?”

“The kind they think will be able to put all of Humpty Dumpty’s pieces back together again.” He smirks to himself, as if he liked that joke.

“So, he has a bit of therapy and gets to come back like nothing happened?”

Brewer’s eyes flare. “Oh, he’s not going to come back like nothing happened. He’ll pay his dues for what he’s done. Trust me.”

I don’t get an opportunity to ask what that means because his phone rings, and I don’t miss the relief on his face at having this conversation interrupted as he puts it to his ear.

“Hey.”

I don’t know who he’s speaking to, but the conversation seems one-sided. After a moment, his eyes slide towards me as he makes clipped ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers that put me on alert. I see the change in his body language and feel the heaviness surrounding us as he talks to whoever is on the other end of the line.

A ripple of unease works through me as I wait for the conversation to end. When he finally finishes the call, he doesn’t meet my eyes, and that unease multiplies by a thousand.

Has something happened back at the clubhouse?

Have the Pioneers attacked?

Is Skye hurt?

The questions collide through my mind so fast, it’s dizzying.

“What’s going on?” I demand, even though I have no right to that answer.

Brewer’s mouth pulls into a tight line as he rubs the back of his neck. “That was Howler. You need to get back to the clubhouse—”

I don’t let him finish before turning and sprinting back down the corridor we just walked through. It’s Skye. I feel it in my gut, every instinct in my body urging me to get back to her.

Emotions like I have never felt, not even in that room when my father was beating the devil out of me, assault me as I shove through the door that leads back into the main room.

I ignore Brewer calling after me, and I barely give Keeley a second glance as I blow out the front doors and into the cool air.

Rushing over to my bike, I quickly drag on my helmet, barely settling it in place as I turn the engine over. The rumble of the pipes is loud, as usual, but I don’t notice it as I kick up the stand and peel out of the parking area.

The ride back to the clubhouse feels as if it takes an eternity, and I drive recklessly, sweeping through the traffic without a care for my own safety.

Richardson has her...

It’s the thought that gnaws at me as I break every speed limit to get back to the clubhouse. I should’ve called Howler before I left, got the details of what happened, but I didn’t want to waste even a second.

As the building comes into view, the pressure on my chest intensifies. I don’t like not knowing what I’m walking into, and as soon as I’m off the bike, I pull my pocketknife from my back pocket, just in case.

The building is quiet as I step inside, which adds to the heightened sense of unease growing within me. I expected gunfire, shouting, anything.

I barely breathe as I push the door to the common room open and step through it.

I see Skye first, her head bowed, her shoulders heaving as if she's sucking in huge gulps of air. I can feel her panic and terror from where I'm standing, and it makes my skin burn.

Pia is crouched in front of her, speaking in a low voice that doesn't travel across the space, but whatever she's saying is having no impact.

The only thing that stops me from freaking the fuck out is that I don't see any blood on her or any other injury.

Knowing she's okay for the moment, I take in the two suits sitting at a table across from Skye. My whole body jolts when I realise I fucking know them.

Kane and Luke Fraser. The blonde woman with them is, I'm fairly certain, Lucas's wife. Her name escapes me at the moment, but I don't give a fuck about that.

Why the fuck are they here?

Their brother, Zeke, is Nox's brother-in-law. He's also part of the Fraser crime syndicate, which Kane is head of. I've dealt with all three brothers multiple times over the years, but London is a long way from Manchester, and as far as I know, the Frasers don't have business or ties here.

My gaze snaps to my president, looking for some kind of instruction. He gives me a slight shake of his head, which does nothing to calm the throbbing in my own head.

"I heard you got transferred out of London," Kane says, leaning back in his chair as if he doesn't have a care in the world. "Small world, isn't it?"

"Someone want to explain what's going on?"

At the sound of my voice, Skye lifts her head to seek me out. There is a dazed look in her eyes. I expect her to come to me, but she stares at me instead, and I don't like the look on her face.

What the fuck have they done to her?

"We're taking Skye home with us," Lucas's wife says.

“Sariah.” There is a bite of warning in Lucas’s tone, but all I’m focused on is what she said.

“Like fuck you are,” I snap. If they think they’re taking her out of this building without a fight, they are mistaken. “Skye ain’t going anywhere with you. She ain’t going anywhere she doesn’t want to, period.”

I glance at my woman, watching her bottom lip wobble. When I kissed her before we fell asleep, she looked at me as if I was her everything. All I see now is hurt and suspicion, and I don’t fucking like it.

“Do you think I’m going to leave her here?” Sariah scoffs. “Over my dead body.”

Is she for real? “You try to take her, that’s exactly what you’ll be,” I snarl.

Those words have Lucas Fraser coming out of his seat, the easy-going demeanour he had only moments ago disappearing. “I will knock your fucking teeth out and feed them to you.” The brittle thread of anger vibrates through his words.

I don’t doubt he will do it, as he’s not a man to make empty threats, but I have more at stake here than he understands.

And I’m willing to fight for it.

“She’s mine.” I step towards him, sizing him up as I do.

The Frasers run underground fight clubs in the city, but I’ve never seen this prick throw a punch. He ain’t exactly scrawny, and I’m not sure what experience he has fighting, but I will destroy him to keep my girl safe.

“Yours?” Sariah seems stunned by this, and her eyes slide towards Skye. “Did he force you into a relationship with him?”

The accusation has me upending the nearest table, which I figure is better than unleashing the fury exploding through me on her. Both brothers are on their feet now, guns in their hands pointed at me.

The two prospects I hadn't noticed initially are pointing weapons back at them.

Skye screams, a sound that seems to come from deep within her, as she launches out of her chair and throws herself in front of me. "Don't shoot!"

Is she fucking crazy?

I grab her arm, and I'm not gentle as I drag her behind me, shielding her with my body. It feels good to have my hands on her, and it goes a little way to calming the red filming my vision.

"Nobody is going to shoot." Howler raises his hands out, his stance defensive. "You don't come into my clubhouse and point guns at my men." He says this last part to the Frasers.

Kane doesn't take his eyes off me. "Then call your dog to heel."

Motherfucker.

He's lucky I have Skye trembling against my back.

"This isn't how this was meant to go down," Sariah says, reaching out to her husband and gently pushing his wrist down.

He stares at her for a beat before he lowers the gun, holstering it under his suit jacket. "Little dove, you may well be the death of us all," he says, taking her hand and brushing his mouth over her knuckles before he turns to Kane. His older brother says nothing, but he does shift to shoulders up before putting his gun on the tabletop and sitting down again.

"I think we need to start from the beginning," Sariah says. "Desmond Richardson is my father, which makes Skye my half-sister."

What the fuck?

"Skye's never mentioned you," I say, suspicion making my tone sharp.

"She didn't know about me. I discovered last year that my mother had an affair with Desmond in the early part of her

marriage to the man I thought was my father. I knew about Skye, but there was never a chance to get close without Desmond finding out who I am, and I couldn't risk that."

Skye presses closer against my back, and I wish I could wrap my arms around her. "So, why are you risking it now?"

Sariah glances at Lucas, who nods. "We heard about the bounty. I was worried. When I found out she was here, all I thought about was coming to save her."

Fucking bitch. "She doesn't need saving."

Sariah turns her head to the side, and I see the hardness flash her eyes. "From what I've seen, that's exactly what she needs. I'm tired of men thinking they can control us. Skye deserves choices. She's not a pawn in your fucking game."

"No, she's not," I agree. "She's the mother of my fucking kid, and I fucking love her. If you try to take her from me, I will kill you before you so much as twitch in her direction."

Kane reaches for his gun, but Lucas stops him as Skye moves in front of me. Her lashes are wet, and her expression is a mix of fear and deep-seated hurt that I want to instantly soothe.

"You love me?"

I brush her hair back from her face, soaking in everything she is. "I do," I say without any fancy words. None are needed, just the facts. I do love her. She has fast become everything to me.

"I thought..." Her breath hitches, and I wipe away the tear working down her cheek.

"What?"

Her forehead scrunches up. "I feel like I'm losing my mind. I don't know who to trust. Everyone wants a piece of me."

Her voice raises an octave with each word she speaks, but I silence her by pressing my mouth to hers. When I'm done, I pull back and rest my forehead to hers. "Trust *me*."

She peers up at me, her lips trembling as she does, and I hold my breath, knowing her next words have the ability to either elate me or destroy me.

CHAPTER 20

SKYE

Trust me.

My mind is a tangled maze as I try to make sense of those words.

Trust.

I have none left. Rage loves me, and I don't doubt it. I can see it in every line on his face, but what if this is just another lie designed to control me?

What if all of this is a lie?

My chest aches fiercely as I stumble back from him, trying not to focus on the hurt that flashes in his eyes. I don't know how to make sense of anything anymore.

"Skye?"

Just that one word is enough to unhinge me.

Shaking my head, I turn, taking in everyone in the room before I bring my gaze back to him. "Don't." I gasp the word as if it chokes me.

"I'm on your side." He steps towards me, and the need to protect myself has me mirroring his movements. "What..."

"I want to be free."

His tongue dips out to wet his bottom lip. "You are."

I shake my head, wrapping my arms around my stomach as a deep ache fills me. "A locked door is not free, Beau."

"I fucking knew it," Sariah hisses.

Before anyone can stop her, she grabs the gun off the table and points it at Rage. I suck in a breath as his jaw locks.

“If you’re gonna point that thing, you better know how to shoot it.”

“Oh, she knows,” Lucas says.

“You’re letting her go,” Sariah warns him. “She’s not yours to keep.”

He moves so fast, I don’t register it until he’s standing in front of her. Rage grabs the barrel of the gun and presses it to his forehead. My hands fly to my mouth as bile coats my throat.

“You want to take the only thing I’ve ever given a fuck about from me, then you better pull this trigger because there is nothing for me without *her*.”

Lucas tries to shove him back, but Rage keeps hold of the gun. If this unsettles my sister, she doesn’t show it. Her finger moves instead, hovering over the trigger.

“Don’t,” I whisper, my words clogged in my throat. “Please.”

My conflicting feelings about staying here don’t include watching Rage get his brains splattered all over the room.

It’s Kane who grabs the gun and pulls it away from both of them. “As much as I love a good bloodbath, let’s not start a war.” He slips the gun back into his holster.

Sariah lifts her gaze to meet mine. “Can we just... can we talk privately, just for a moment?”

“So you can fill her head with crap?” Rage snaps. “I don’t know what you did to her, but I ain’t lettin’ you do worse, and I ain’t standing by while you take her from me.”

“That’s not your choice.”

“No,” I say. “It’s mine.” I feel the weight of the room pressing down on my shoulders as my eyes lock on Rage. This man says he loves me, and if I’m being honest with myself, I love him too. “Can we talk alone?”

Rage glances at Howler, who doesn't move or say a word. After a second, Rage holds his hand out to me, and I slip mine into his. He leads me into the kitchen, careful to avoid getting too close to the Frasers.

As soon as we're inside, the door shut behind us, I regret asking for this. He doesn't speak as he studies me so intently, my knees want to buckle.

"I'm sorry." I don't know why I say this, only that I am and it seems the right thing to tell him.

"What happened?"

I shift my shoulders. "I woke and you were gone. Then she turned up, claiming to be my sister, and all I could think was, am I being played again? Everyone I trust turns against me."

The sob that bubbles up my chest and escapes my mouth is guttural and ugly. It suffocates me as my tears flow unchecked. Everything that has happened in the past nine weeks, and even before that, assaults me, threatening to loosen the traction in my legs.

I turn away from him as I try to calm myself down, but now that I've started crying, I can't seem to stop. "I can't do this anymore. I don't want to do this anymore."

When his arms wrap around me from behind, pinning me between his front and the counter, I shove back, needing my space. He doesn't let me go, no matter how much I claw and dig my nails into his arms. His hold becomes more secure, tighter as he hugs me against him while I completely lose my shit.

"It's okay."

My fighting becomes less, my energy depleted as exhaustion takes hold. I sag against him, my hands covering my face as I weep.

"Fuck, you're breaking my heart here, Skye."

He turns me around in his arms, and although I try to resist, I find myself pressed against his solid chest. "Baby, you

need to calm down. It's not good for you or the kid to be this upset."

I know he's right, but I can't put the dam back in place now that the water is flowing free. "I can't take any more lies, any more betrayal. Where does it end? What am I in this game you're all playing?"

He grabs my face between his hands, forcing my attention to his. "I'm not playing games. This, for me, is real. I know we didn't exactly start out the way either of us would've planned, but I'm all in. We shouldn't have kept you locked up the way we did. I should've stopped that, and I swear to you, Skye, that ain't happening again. You're mine. Mine to protect, mine to speak up for, mine to love."

He kisses me, the brush of his lips so gentle, it makes me cry harder as I kiss him back. My fingers wrap around his wrists, holding his hands in place as they cup my face.

"I need you to trust me," he says, his voice barely more than a whisper.

I open my eyes, dizzied from the kiss, and study his face. All I see is sincerity and concern. I think about the mornings we laid in bed after he made love to me. I think about the nights he held me against him, his hand resting over my stomach as if protecting us both. I think about the passion when he calls me his, and I think about how much I like it when he does.

"I do, but everything is so overwhelming right now."

His fingers trail over my cheeks and down my throat before he collars the back of my neck. "You've been through a lot, and on top of that, you're growing our baby. I'd be surprised if you weren't overwhelmed."

"I feel crazy."

He kisses the side of my face, showing me with his actions how much he cares. "You're not crazy. I handled all of this badly, but everything I did had just one purpose, Skye. Protecting you and our child. Right now, that is all I care about. You and this baby are my priority."

I lean into his touch, needing desperately to feel connected to him. “Please, don’t let me down. I can take that from everyone but you.”

He pulls me against him again, holding me so tight, I can only take shallow breaths. “I promise, I won’t.”

He loosens his hold a little as I put some space between us so I can peer up at him. “Everything needs to change. I can’t be locked in that room any longer.”

“You won’t be.”

“And I want to see a doctor. Not some random person the club knows. I want to see a proper obstetric specialist. I want to make sure my baby is okay after everything. The last doctor said about a transvaginal scan. I want one of those.”

“I’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

“And I want to know...” I trail off, unsure how to put this into words without backing him into a corner, but maybe he needs this wake-up call. “I want to know where we’re raising our baby. And don’t tell me in that fucking room. I want a nursery. I want a space that’s quiet and peaceful for her.”

“I’ll talk to some estate agents,” he assures me, pressing a trail of kisses down my throat.

I didn’t expect him to be so accommodating, which steals some of my anger. “And... and I want you to fuck me.”

His nose nuzzles against me as he fumbles with his belt. “Anytime you want.”

I shove my leggings down as far as my knees as he frees his cock. He doesn’t bother to push his jeans down past his arse, and I’m glad because I’m impatient to get him inside me.

He turns me, so my stomach is pressed against the counter, and pushes me forward. My boobs smashed against the top. I turn my head slightly to glance over my shoulder as he stabs into me from behind without any preamble.

I gasp, my pussy burning at the sudden intrusion, stretching around his thick girth as he fills me completely.

Pinned to the counter, I can do nothing but breathe as he drags himself out of me before driving back in.

Gripping the counter, I push back, forcing him deeper inside my body as his thrusts intensify, bruising my hips. I want this. I want him, and the longer he pulses in out of my body, the more the chaotic fog that was shrouding me starts to lift.

I start to see clearly again, and I know deep in my heart that Rage is on my side. In fact, he might be the only one who is.

“You’re mine,” he says, as if he needs to remind me of this fact. “Say it.”

“I’m yours.”

His fingers trail over the base of my spine, causing a tremble to run through me.

I press my cheek against the cold countertop as he hammers his hips against mine. Shuffling my feet a little, I try to spread my thighs wider, but my leggings are a vice around my legs, making my pussy tight around him.

There is nothing I can do but take everything he offers. I’m too exhausted, too drained to participate, but he does the work for both of us, and as my orgasm rushes through me, I can’t stop the sob that rips from me.

His fierce grunts die down before his hips stutter and he spills inside me.

The walls of my pussy spasm and contract, milking every drop from his steel shaft. The sweat on my face and the back of my neck makes me shiver as a draught whispers through the room.

Calmness spreads through me as he slips from my body. I feel his warm cum on my thighs and between my legs, mixing with my own wetness.

He steps away, his warmth disappearing with him, and I hear him moving around the kitchen behind me before he returns and presses what I think is a kitchen towel against my

core. I don't move as he cleans me up as best he can, the gesture seeming more intimate than what we'd just done.

When he's finished, he peels me off the counter and gently pulls my underwear and leggings up, settling the waistline over my stomach. I don't turn to face him, instead keeping my back to his front as he treats me with such kindness, it makes my throat tight.

As he steps up behind me, plastering my back to his chest, I find myself melting against him.

His hands move under my sweater, over my stomach, and into the cups of my bra. I suck in a breath as his fingers knead my breasts while he kisses every inch of the side of my face that he can reach in this position.

"I meant what I said. I do love you, Skye. I don't need you to say it back, but I do want you to know how I feel. You consume me. I never thought anyone could love me, or that I could love anyone back, but you've changed that."

He rolls my nipples between his fingers before I turn in his arms, needing to see his face. "I love you too."

He pulls me against him, his hand pressing against the back of my neck to hold me closer, and I feel truly loved by him.

"We should probably get back. I know Sariah Fraser. We keep her waiting too long, she's going burst in here and try to drag you out."

I bury my head into his chest, my fingers gripping the edges of his leather vest. "Oh, do you think they heard us?" My cheeks are on fire at the thought of someone listening to us having sex.

"Baby, I think the whole of Manchester heard you."

I make a noise like a wounded cat, and he guides me away from his chest, forcing my gaze to his.

For a moment, I get lost in his eyes, wishing we could just leave all this behind. It's a foolish dream. My father is still

looking for me, and if Sariah was able to find me, it's only a matter of time before he does too.

As much as I hate to admit it, we are safer with the club.

"She says she's my sister." He makes a noise in the back of his throat that sounds like an agreement. "I don't... I don't know what to do with that."

"You do whatever you want. There's no pressure for you to get to know her if you don't want to."

Growing up was kind of lonely. I had Scarlett and Tommy, but they had their own homes, their own families. When they left and I was alone in the house, I often found myself wishing I had a sister or brother to talk to.

Even when my mother was alive, she, like my father, spent a lot of her time out of the house.

"You think she really is my sister?"

"She looks exactly like you."

I let this information sink in, knowing what he's saying is plausible. "I'm scared."

"There's no need to be. I won't let anything happen to you. If you want to meet your sister, then let's do that."

"I want to meet my sister," I confirm.

He slips his fingers through mine, raising our joined hands so he can press a kiss to the back of my knuckles. When he leads me into the common room, I follow willingly, unsure what we are about to walk back into.

On the surface, everything seems calm, like a duck pond, but I feel the ripples of the tension beneath it. Sariah is sitting with Kane and Lucas flanking either side of her. Howler waits on the other side of the room with the prospects, but I notice Pia is gone.

Obviously, Howler is expecting trouble, and when Sariah comes to her feet, her eyes blazing, I understand why.

"I'm going to kill you," she hisses at Rage. "If you've hurt her—"

I cut her off before she starts ranting. “He’s never laid a finger on me. I know you mean well, and I can’t put into words how happy it makes me that there is someone out there who genuinely seems to care about me, but I’m staying.”

“They’ve got into your head. You don’t need to do anything you don’t want to.”

I bury myself against Rage’s side, my arms wrapping around his waist. “I want to do this. I love him, and he loves me. That’s all I need to know.”

She stares at me, as if weighing up the validity of my words. “If you change your mind, you will always, always have a place in my home. You understand?”

“Thank you.”

“We do have a bigger issue to worry about,” Kane says, drawing everyone’s attention to him. “Your daddy is pulling out all the stops to find you, and as hidden as you are here, you’re not invisible. It’s only a matter of time before he finds you.”

Goosebumps raise my skin at his words. I was already worried about this, but hearing him say that makes my stomach turn.

“Kane, stop it,” Sariah says.

“I’m not trying to scare her, but this is the reality of the situation.”

“We’ll deal with Richardson,” Howler says.

“Because that seems to be going so well for you,” Kane mocks.

I feel the vibration of Rage’s growl deep in his chest. “This ain’t your problem.”

“Wrong,” Lucas interjects. “All of this affects my wife directly. Richardson is her father too, and his reputation is not inflated. The man is a lunatic managing a bunch of lunatics. He’s a threat, and one I intend to put down. It would be helpful to both our causes if we were on the same side with this.”

I hold my breath as Howler takes this in without a flicker of emotion sliding onto his face. “Why would you get involved in a war you don’t need to on the off-chance Richardson might one day discover he has another child out there?”

Sariah glances at Lucas and something passes between them, some silent conversation that we’re not privy to. “Because we have a child, and my wife is pregnant again. You’ll understand my need to ensure my family’s safety.” His eyes slide towards me. “And that now includes Skye.”

“Why don’t we talk about this in my office?” Howler suggests. “It’ll give the girls some time together.”

Lucas doesn’t seem to like this idea, but my sister squeezes his hand. “I’d like that.”

He bends down, pressing a kiss to her head before he straightens. “Anything happens to my wife—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’ll rain down hell. I got it. Shall we?”

Kane and Lucas follow Howler out of the room, and when Sariah pats the chair next to her, I pull free of Rage’s grasp. He is reluctant to let me go, but he does, taking a chair that’s close enough to intervene if he needs to but far enough away to give us privacy.

I sit opposite her, unable to stop looking at her face. Clearly, we both got a lot of our father in our genes.

“I’m so happy to finally meet you.”

“Likewise,” I say.

“I’m sorry everything played out the way it did. I was so scared when I found out you were here. Are you sure they’re treating you well? You can tell me. I can have you out of here lickety-split.”

I smile at her. “They were suspicious when I first came, and rightfully so. Our father’s reputation hasn’t made him a lot of friends.”

“I can believe that.”

“What about you? I mean, you’re married to a man who is kind of scary.”

She laughs. “Lucas is good to me and our daughter. I had to fight him to come here today. He wasn’t so keen on his pregnant wife getting in the middle of all this.”

I lower my head, unable to stop the smile from spreading across my face. “We have that in common.”

“Overprotective husbands?”

“No, the pregnant part.”

Her eyes flare. “You’re pregnant too?”

I nod, instinctively touching my stomach as I think about my child. “Nine weeks. It’s a hell of a story how it happened.”

Sariah leans back in her chair, folding her arms over her chest. “They’ll be in that room for hours. Tell me everything.”

CHAPTER 21

RAGE

THREE WEEKS LATER...

My hands interlaced behind my head, I watch Skye from the bed as she moves around the room dressed only in her underwear. Fuck, she's stunning. They're just plain cotton, but the way they sit on her hips, the small but noticeable curve of her stomach protruding over the top, has my cock solid under the covers. The bra needs replacing, her swollen tits straining against the lacy cups.

Completely oblivious to my staring, she pulls open the top drawer of the dresser and rummages around.

"Have you seen my pink leggings?"

I lick my lips, readjusting myself under the covers, wondering if we have time for me to fuck her before we have to leave.

My lack of answer has her turning to face me. "Are you listening?"

"Come here," I order.

Her eyes narrow and her hands drop to her hips, which just draws my eyes back to her breasts. "No. We have an appointment, and we can't be late."

My lips tip up at the corners at her protest. She's trying to be strong, resilient, but I don't miss the slight breathlessness in her voice.

It's been three weeks since her sister crashed the clubhouse, and true to her word, Sariah has spoken to Skye every day on the phone. I think it helps her having someone to talk to about what her body is going through and to ask questions about whether what she's experiencing is normal. She has the old ladies, but there's still a bit of mistrust there, especially for Skye.

"Ain't gonna ask again." The crack of demand in my voice has her rolling her eyes, but she crosses the carpet, coming to

stand at the edge of the bed as I swing my legs out so I'm sitting on the mattress.

I trail my hand up her thigh, enjoying leaving goosebumps behind. At the apex between her thighs, I tease along the hem of her underwear, watching her tremble with anticipation as I do.

"Beau... we have to leave soon." Her protest dies on her lips as I stroke two fingers over her pussy, her wetness soaking through the material.

"I'll get us there in time. Don't worry."

"It took three weeks to get this appointment. I don't want to miss it."

"You won't."

I trail my fingers over her stomach, obsessed with the way her body has begun to soften and fill out in just a few short weeks. The morning sickness hasn't completely gone, but it's not as frequent as it had been in those early weeks. And although she looks tired, there is a now dewy glow to her skin.

She doesn't pull away as I slide my fingers under the waistband of her underwear and push them down her legs. Gripping her bottom, I pull her to me before I bend and part her folds. The first swipe of my tongue over her clit has her pushing her hips forwards. Her fingers tangle in my hair, holding me in place as I lick her over and over.

Those little whimpers turn into full-blown moans of pleasure as her orgasm builds. "Beau... *fuck!*"

She throws her head back, letting out the most beautiful sound as she comes.

Her juices still on my tongue, I press kisses along the underside of her stomach, showing her without words what she and our baby mean to me.

"Finish getting dressed," I tell her.

"What about you?"

“I’m not the one who’s going to have some random guy touching me. This way, I know you’ll be thinking about me all through that appointment.”

Her lips part, a stunned look on her face. “For a start, he’s not some random guy. He’s a sonographer, and he’s only doing the ultrasound. The examination will be done by the midwife, who is female.”

I kiss her hipbones before pulling her underwear back into place. “I don’t want other people touching you.”

She rolls her eyes as she pulls out of my grip and wanders towards the bathroom. “You are literally crazy.”

She’s not wrong. I am crazy when it comes to her. Too many threats still loom over her, and while I hate the idea of us leaving the clubhouse, this has to be done. I can’t expect Skye to go her entire pregnancy without any medical intervention whatsoever.

While she’s in the bathroom, I climb out of bed and search the drawers for the leggings she was hunting for. I find them tucked under one of her sweaters, and I place them on the edge of the bed, ready for her when she re-emerges.

I moved Skye into my bedroom while we look for a house or apartment close to the clubhouse. I didn’t want to keep her in that room that had become her prison any longer.

I don’t know shit about buying property, but Hawk and Blackjack have been talking me through the process, and most of the club has rallied together to help us with the financial side. Even so, it ain’t something that can be done fast, which actually is something of a relief.

I don’t like the idea of us being out there, exposed, while her father is still looking for her, but the clubhouse ain’t the right environment for a newborn.

My hope is that by the time she’s ready to have a child, all this crap with her dad will be sorted.

When she emerges from the bathroom, she’s discarded her underwear, giving me a full view of her pussy. “Don’t get any ideas. We’ll be late if we don’t leave soon.”

She grabs her leggings off the bed, murmuring her thanks as she sits to pull them on. I watch her for a moment before I take a shower.

When I emerge from the bathroom, she's fully dressed, her hair loose around her shoulders. I pull on my jeans and a hoodie before shrugging into my kutte.

I lead Skye out of the clubhouse, tension suddenly settling around my shoulders as I glance up then down the street. There's no indication that Desmond Richardson knows his daughter is with us. We have both club intel and now also the added bonus of Kane Fraser's contacts.

Even so, I still feel a tendril of nerves work through me.

As if sensing my anxiety, Skye squeezes my hand and gives me a reassuring smile. "Let's go see our baby."

She climbs in the passenger side while I get in the driver's seat and start the engine. The two prospects Howler insisted on sending with us are already waiting in the back seat.

I want to ask if they're armed, but I don't want to scare Skye. This should be a day for her to remember, and for the right reasons.

I check she's buckled in before I guide the car out the parking space.

The drive over to the hospital has me coming out of my skin. There's a feeling of dread sitting in my gut, even when we're safely inside the maternity unit.

I flick my gaze around the waiting room filled with expectant parents, wondering if any of them are a threat.

Skye squeezes my leg, bringing my attention to her. "Would you relax?"

I force calm into my body. "Sorry."

She leans her head against my shoulder, her touch on my thigh slowing the pounding of my heart. "You might have to wake me up if we have to wait any longer."

When her name is called, it takes us both a moment to realise. We're using my surname in case her father is monitoring the hospital somehow.

I get to my feet, offering her my hands as I pull her out of the seat. My stomach is churning the entire walk along the corridor to the examination room. The nurse chatters the entire time, asking Skye questions about her pregnancy.

I step into the room first, holding Skye's hand in a way that keeps her behind me so I can scope out the room. There is an examination table, a few trays on wheels, and a desk with a computer. A woman wearing pink scrubs. her dark hair streaked with grey, smiles warmly at us.

"You must be Skye," she says, gesturing for us to take the two empty seats at the side of the desk. "And is this dad or a friend?"

"Dad," I bite out. I don't want any confusion about my role in this.

"So, from the telephone consultation one of my nurses had with you, I believe you're..." She flicks through the papers on her desk. "Twelve weeks along?"

Skye nods.

"And how sure are we on these dates? It can be tricky sometimes to work out conception."

"Pretty sure."

She doesn't mention that we can pinpoint her pregnancy to the hour it happened. The midwife asks more questions, and as she does, she takes Skye's blood pressure as well as some bloods. She then does an examination that involves putting Skye's legs in stirrups so she can examine her cervix.

I hold Skye's hand throughout, trying not to lose my temper when she sucks in a breath through her teeth at whatever she's doing down there.

When she's finished, she gives Skye a bunch of leaflets and tells us to wait just outside the room for the ultrasound. My heart is thudding in my ears at the prospect of seeing our

baby. I know Skye is pregnant, and I've watched her body change over the past month or so, but the idea of a baby being inside her is so abstract that it still doesn't feel entirely real.

I try not to let my feelings seep out as we're called into the room. It's dark, other than a dim light on the wall casting an ambient glow that is just enough to be able to navigate the space without risk of falling over.

The sonographer asks Skye to lie on the bed and pull down her pants. She folds her leggings down to just above where I know her pubic hair starts, but she has to remove her top, leaving her lying there just in her bra.

If I see the tech look at her tits, I swear I'll rearrange his face.

As if sensing where my mind has gone, Skye grabs my hand, pulling me towards her head. She looks so vulnerable lying on the bed, and when the technician squirts a clear jellylike liquid on her belly, I hold my breath.

There are so many conflicting thoughts running through my mind, so many emotions, but when he presses that probe against her belly and the whooshing sound of a heartbeat fills the room, my world stills.

Skye squeezes my hand so tight, it feels like she's going to break my fingers. Indescribable joy floods my body, sending happy signals through my brain.

"That's our baby," I murmur, hardly believing what I'm hearing.

A tear falls down Skye's cheek, and I can only imagine the relief she's feeling at hearing our baby's heart thumping away. So much has happened to her in the past twelve weeks, so much that must have left her wondering and worrying about the baby nestled deep within her.

"And here is your baby," the technician says as he turns the screen towards us. The sonogram image moves and flickers as he presses the probe to different spots until a little shape appears.

There're no words for the feelings I experience as I stare at that image. I scrub my free hand over my jaw before I lift our joined hands and kiss Skye's knuckles. She doesn't realise it, but she gave me the ultimate gift with this baby. She made me believe I could break the chains of my past. She made me believe that I could be better than my parents.

The guy does some shit on the screen, measuring the length of the baby, as I lean down and run my hand over Skye's hair, completely overwhelmed and overcome.

"It's really real now," she says, not moving to wipe her tears.

If we were alone, I'd mount this bed and sink my cock into her warm heat. The need to be inside her is consuming as I press a kiss to her mouth.

The rest of the appointment passes in a blur. When the technician is done, he must get the vibe that I don't want him to touch Skye because he hands me a stack of paper towels so I can clean the jelly off her stomach.

I help her into her sweater and guide her off the bed. Her legs are wobbly, and mine are too. There's not much in this life that has rendered me speechless, but seeing our baby does that.

As we head out into the waiting room, the two prospects follow us, keeping a distance behind to give us some privacy.

"I wish we could have found out the sex," she says, swinging our joined hands back and forth as we walk.

"Thought you knew it was a girl."

She smiles. "Well, I have a fifty-fifty chance of being right."

"Do you care either way?"

She shakes her head. "Boy or girl, it doesn't matter to me, but I do feel like she's a girl."

As we reach the car, I unlock the doors with the fob and wait while she gets inside before moving around the bonnet and getting in the driver seat.

The two prospects climb in the back again, and Skye twists in her seat to turn to them. “Do you want to see the sonogram?”

She doesn't wait for their answer, handing Ralph the printout. “That thing's a baby?” He turns the image on the side, as if trying to see where it is.

I glance in the rearview mirror. “Yeah, it's a fucking baby. You need your eyes tested?”

Skye glares at me, and I force my gaze back to the road as I pull out the hospital entrance, merging with the traffic. My heart thumps continuously in my chest, drowning out whatever she says to the guys in the back.

I turn down a side street, wanting to avoid the traffic building around the main route we have to take back to the clubhouse. Sitting in traffic doesn't seem like a good idea. The last thing we want to be is sitting ducks.

As we pass a side street, movement catches my attention, but my brain doesn't register what it is until a car slams into the side of us.

My whole body is thrown forwards with the impact as the screech of metal screams in my ears. Pain explodes through my skull as I bounce off the steering wheel, the taste of blood filling my mouth.

It's over just as fast as it happened, and in the silence of the car, all I can hear is ringing in my ears. I blink, but everything remains hazy around me. I can't focus on anything but my own laboured breathing. Something drips into my eyes, and when I lift my hand, which feels detached and weird, to push it away, my fingers come away bloody.

“Skye?”

She doesn't respond, and I turn my head to look in her direction, my neck cracking as I do. I nearly black out from the pain, but the thought of her injured forces me to keep moving.

She slumped forwards, the seatbelt across her chest the only thing keeping her in position. Her eyes are open but

dazed.

“Skye? Talk to me? You hurt?”

My skin feels clammy, a fear like I have never experienced in my entire life, not even at the hands my father, claiming me. All I can think about is if she or the baby are okay.

“Is anyone dead?”

Her question takes me by surprise, but I glance in the rearview mirror anyway. Ralph’s head is tipped back, blood pouring down his face. I can see the other prospect, but he ain’t talking or moving, so I take that as a bad sign.

“Can you move?” I ask, not answering her.

“I think so.” I lean over and unbuckle her, bracing in case she flops forwards, but she holds on, which fills me with so much relief. “What happened?” She sounds confused, and I don’t blame her, because I don’t have the first clue what the fuck happened.

“Car hit us.”

Ralph stirs in the back, grunting. “Everyone okay?” he asks.

I glance out the window, trying to see what hit us, and my stomach twists savagely. The front of a black 4x4 is dented but otherwise undamaged. The doors open and men in dark clothes pile out. We’re fucked.

“Ralph,” I say his name, nothing more, but I know when he sees them coming for us.

I fumble with my phone, but my hands are bloody and I can’t unlock the screen. I give up on the phone and reach into my pocket for the knife I always carry. It won’t do much in a gunfight, but I’m not fuelled by rational thought right now. All I can think about is fucking these guys up enough to give her the chance to get away.

“Get out,” I say to Skye. I don’t look at her as I say it... I can’t.

“What?”

“Run.”

“Not without you,” she says, her voice trembling.

All I need to know is that she and our baby are safe.

I reach over her, ignoring the pull on my sore body, and grab the handle, opening the door. The movement nearly drives me into a dizzying spiral. “Fucking run!” I yell at her.

Her eyes fill with tears, but she stumbles out of the car as I undo my seatbelt and open my door.

I do what I’ve avoided from the moment Skye came into my life and I let that red film consume me. I’m injured and outnumbered, but as the first man gets close, I lash out with my knife, catching him in the arm.

The others pile on me, punches and kicks hitting me from every angle. The air is pushed from my lungs as a hit slams into my chest. No matter how much I fight, I know I’m losing. Sharp pain catches me in the side of my head, making my entire body contour away from it. As I try to swing my arm back, I realise I’m no longer holding my knife.

Where the hell did that go?

That moment costs me as I’m wrestled onto the ground, my arms tugged behind my back. The tarmac beneath my cheek embeds in my skin, but the knee in my spine keeps me from moving.

Dizziness swamps me, and I blink, trying to clear the descending fog in my eyes. It’s not working. My head is throbbing, and nausea churns my gut as I try to get my feet. My limbs don’t cooperate, and everything feels heavy as darkness starts to descend over me.

One of the men stands out to me. He is waiting by the car, his hands tucked in the pockets of his long dark coat. He doesn’t look like the others, and he sure as fuck is not getting his hands dirty in this.

I hear a scream, and I know instantly it belongs to Skye. I try to move, to go to her, but my vision is fading fast and the darkness is closing in around me. The last thing I see before I

completely black out is Skye's terrified face as she's hauled across the street and shoved in the back of a car.

CHAPTER 22

SKYE

I know I'm in trouble the moment I'm grabbed. Strong arms wrap around me from behind, tugging me against a solid chest. I fight, kicking my legs out and attacking like a wildcat to gain my freedom.

Fear for Rage and the two prospects has my heart pounding like a drum. I can't even think about the life growing inside me. If I do, I'll fall apart, and there is no time for that.

"Quit struggling," the man holding me hisses in my ear.

Ignoring him, I try to make my body a deadweight to lift his grip from me, but he's strong, and I remain his captive as I'm dragged across the street.

As we round the back of a car, there's a group of men holding down another. It takes my muddled brain a moment to realise it's Rage on the ground. He doesn't look in a good way, blood on his face and his eyes glazed as they lift to meet mine. I swear I see apology in them before they flutter shut.

Terror coils inside me, my legs turning to lead and buckling beneath me. Is he dead?

My eyes dart up at a commotion behind where Rage is lying. Ralph is trying to get out the car, but three men jump on him, the glint of their knives flickering as they slam the blades into his body over and over. They do the same to the other prospect, even though he's still unconscious, possibly already dead.

The scream bubbles up my throat, erupting in a terrified, broken wail. I need to save them, to help them, but I'm being

dragged as if I weigh nothing towards another car.

Through my swimming eyes, I see a familiar figure, and there is a moment of relief before understanding dawns on me that he's not here to help.

Tommy looks different. His dark hair is slicked back, and he's wearing a long dark coat, like the kind my father wears. Gone are his usual hoodies and T-shirts, replaced with a dark button-up shirt open at the collar.

I'm not sure what he's trying to project with this look. Professionalism? Wealth? Fuck with me and find out?

"Tommy... they need help. Tell him to let me go." There is no mistaking the hysteria lacing my words. I want to lie in the road and sob. My entire world is falling apart in front of my eyes.

Tommy stares at me, his gaze travelling from my feet all the way up my body until it stops on my face. I'm suddenly grateful that I chose to wear a loose-fitting sweater today. It hides my small bump beneath it.

"Put her in the car," he says to the man holding me.

I haven't seen him in months, and the coldness of his words is a dagger to the chest.

"Please! Don't do this," I plead, but he ignores me as if we were never friends. "Please, let me check he's okay."

I'm shoved into the back of the car, the huge man who was holding me forcing me to slide across to the middle seat as another hulking guy gets in on the other side.

Tommy gets into the passenger seat as the driver starts the engine. I scramble to sit forward, trying to glimpse Beau, but I'm pushed roughly back against the seat, a vice-like grip wrapped around my throat to hold me in place. Tommy says nothing, doesn't order them to stop, though his eyes lift to the rearview mirror to watch.

I freeze, terrified this man might kill me, and Tommy, the boy I thought would be my best friend for life, doesn't intervene. I'm not sure if it's because I don't fight, but the man

releases his hold on me, allowing me to suck in a lungful of air.

“Tommy, what are you doing?”

He doesn't answer, and the man sitting on the other side of me reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a length of rope. I know instantly what he is intending to do with it.

There's nowhere for me to go, but I fight anyway as between my two guards, my hands are forced in front of me and tied together. The binding is so tight, my hands start to tingle after a couple seconds.

I close my eyes, trying to breathe through the encroaching panic that's threatening to swamp me. The only person in my life who gives a shit about me is probably dead, and as much as I have settled into club life, no one is going to rescue me. I'm still the daughter of their enemy, and those ties have yet to be broken completely.

I listen to the engine rumbling, the vibrations shaking my legs, or maybe they're just shaking anyway. When the car stops, I pop my lids open and let my gaze dart around.

In front of us is what looks like an old mill. It's at least three stories high, with those large, latticed windows that are so common around the city. The canal runs along the back of it, but the bushes either side make it unfriendly for walkers. I don't see anything else out here, and that frightens me. The remote location doesn't suggest anything good.

Tommy gets out of the car first, then the man on the right of me climbs out, ordering me to follow. I'm so terrified, I don't move, so he reaches in and drags me across the seat by my sweater. It's enough to make me comply, and as my feet hit the ground, my legs want to buckle. The grip on my bicep is so tight, it keeps me upright, which is just as well as I'm pulled into the building.

I try to twist my head over my shoulder, looking for Tommy, hoping he still has some feelings towards me. I'm praying he will stop whatever is planned for me here.

I can't see him though, and the pace set by the man dragging me forces my gaze forwards so I don't fall.

The building is cold inside, the musty smell of damp so strong, it makes my stomach churn. If there was once flooring in place, it's been taken up, leaving bare concrete behind. The open space is huge, but whatever industry existed here has long since been stripped out. These are the kind of buildings that modern developers turn into flats and apartments, but it doesn't look as if anyone has done any upkeep for a long time.

We pass through a door and into a smaller space, and my legs turn to water. There is a hook hanging from the ceiling, and I know it's intended for me, but that's not what scares me.

It's the sickly maniacal smirk on the face of someone I thought was dead. How the hell is she alive? I beat her with that tray.

You never confirmed she was actually dead.

I didn't. I was too busy running for my life, too scared to find out if I had actually killed her. As much as I hate her for what she did to me, I didn't want to kill her.

Seeing Scarlett alive in front of me, the hate radiating off her, I wish I had ended her life because she is going to make mine hell.

“You look surprised to see me, Skye. Well, you see, you didn't kill me, but the head injury you gave me when you beat me with that tray rattled my brain. I live with daily headaches and the worst brain fog. When Tommy told me he found you, I knew I had to be here. There was no way I was passing up an opportunity to see my friend again.”

Her words might sound friendly on the surface, but I know Scarlett. She is seething mad, and I don't blame her. I left her for dead, and clearly, I've caused damage to her.

“It's not possible,” I say on a rush of air.

“All the horror films we've watched over the years, and you didn't learn anything. You always check to make sure the bad guy is dead.”

She steps towards me, and I try to move back, but there's nowhere for me to go. I'm flanked by the two men from the car. Instead, I brace, holding my bound hands in front of my stomach. It is the only protection I can give myself, but she doesn't hit me or touch me.

With just inches between us, she tilts her head to the side. "You look glowing, Skye."

I realise a beat too late that her words are double-edged. I try to stop her as she reaches for the hem of my sweater, but she pulls it up, and I can do nothing to hide the swell of my stomach underneath.

"Your little problem still remains," she says, her eyes locked there.

Using my bound hands, I shove her away. "Don't fucking touch me," I hiss at her.

A hand collars the back of my neck, squeezing my nape so tight, I cry out.

"Watch your tongue," Tommy's voice snarls close to my ear.

I don't like the way Scarlett is looking at him all doe-eyed. She made no secret of her feelings for Tommy, but I find myself wondering if something has grown between them in the time I've been gone.

"You can still stop this." I direct my words at Tommy, but he releases his grasp on my neck to grab my hands.

With no care for me, he marches me over to the hook, lifting my hands over my head to secure the metal between the rope. The strain on my shoulders and my chest is immediate, and my body screams for a reprieve. I balance on my tiptoes, trying to take some pressure off both, but it does nothing. Fire licks between my shoulder blades.

The blurry smudge in my vision doesn't mask the way Scarlett steps into Tommy's arms, or the way he kisses her so forcefully, she groans against his mouth.

The dryness of my throat makes it hard to swallow as I watch them, fear tickling my insides. They are working together, and not only that, they're clearly having some sort of relationship.

“Does my father know you have me?”

They break apart, the hate in Tommy's eyes leaving sticky dampness on the back of my neck. “Your father's weak.”

“Meaning what?”

Tommy steps into my space, grabbing my cheeks between his fingers. His entire face becomes an angry mask as his lips pull into a snarl. “My brother died. Countless others have died at the hands of that dirty little fucking club, and yet your father prefers to hide in his bars, drinking and whoring his way around the city. It's men like me who are putting our lives on the line. Men like Jack.” He flinches as he says his brother's name. The pain within him is still so fresh, and he is so tormented by his loss.

“We all loved Jack,” I say, searching for any way to calm him down. “The life, the world you live in, it's dangerous, Tommy. That's why I never wanted you to be a part of it. It isn't too late. We can leave, start a new life somewhere else —”

He tightens his grip on my face, my words lost to a whimper I can't hold back. “How can we start a new life when you've been defiled by the enemy?”

He releases me with a shove, and I teeter on my tiptoes, struggling to keep my balance as the hook sways back and forth. My sweater has risen up, revealing the high waist of my pink leggings that seemed so important to find this morning. Tommy reaches for the waistband, and an ugly feeling spreads through me as he shoves them down to my pubic bone.

“Don't.” My voice cracks as I spit out my plea.

I can't reconcile the man in front of me with the boy who was once everything to me. I don't recognise him at all. There is an undercurrent of anger and hate burning in his eyes and an

uncertainty with it. I no longer know what Tommy is capable of.

“Are you worried I’m going to rape you, Skye-bug?” The softness of his words almost hides the sinister meaning behind them. His fingers trail over my stomach, between the bottom of my bump and just above where my pubic hair starts.

My chest heaves, pushing through the pain of each inhalation as fear clutches me. “Should I be?”

“He wouldn’t touch you,” Scarlett snaps. “Not while you carry that disgusting spawn in your belly. If I’d known that night the man you fucked was a fucking biker, I would’ve slit your throat.”

I flinch at the vitriol she spews towards an innocent baby that isn’t even born yet. How did I not see who she truly is, how evil she is?

Tommy’s moves to cup the bottom of my bump. His large hands span across most of my stomach.

Acid fills my mouth as he touches me, and I’m powerless to stop him.

“Why him? If you’d wanted a baby, I would have given you one.”

Scarlett makes an irritated sound. “Why would you want a baby with her? She betrayed us.”

Tommy ignores her, his eyes locked onto mine. “I would have given you anything, Skye.”

Despite how terrified I am, I lift my chin and meet his gaze with defiance. “I want you to let me go.”

He pulls his hand away as if I’ve burned him or left dirt on his skin. “You were always meant to be mine.”

I suck in a breath as he fists his fingers in my hair, dragging my head back so far, I feel like my neck is going to snap. My feet shift around, trying to keep from losing my balance. “Tell me he forced you. Tell me he raped you and forced you to have his child.” He buries his head against the side of my neck, his breath hot against my skin.

My brain short-circuits for a moment at being touched like this by someone who isn't Rage.

I should tell Tommy I was forced. That's what he wants to hear, and it might make him more likely to let me go, but everything I have had with Rage was born from our feelings for each other. I can't deny that, and I won't. I love him and I'll never allow anyone to think this baby isn't wanted.

"He didn't rape me." I lick my dry lips, my gaze locked on the ceiling above me. "He would never."

Tommy releases me, his anger palpable as he steps back. He clenches and unclenches his fists, his body coiled tight as a spring. "That's worse. At least if he had raped you, there would be a reason for this. Knowing you let him fuck you after what he did to Jack..."

"What he did to Jack? You have any idea what you all have done to those people? The Pioneers killed a pregnant woman. Her baby had to be cut out of her as she died. And then there was a young girl. She was—"

Scarlett slaps my face so hard, my ears ring. Stunned, I keep my head turned away from her, my cheek burning. "Don't you dare talk to us about their suffering. We have buried more men than I can count in the past few months. Is that all it takes for you to break your loyalty to your family? Biker cock?"

I don't answer her. I know whatever I say won't appease her, and I don't want to get hit again. I'm already treading a fine line, and I have to protect my child.

"Answer me!" she screams, but when she steps towards me, her arm raised, Tommy grabs her wrist. The death glare she gives him should concern him, but Tommy seems unfazed.

"Wait outside."

She looks as if she's going to argue with him, but she holds her tongue, instead grabbing the back of his neck so she can kiss him. I know she's doing it for my benefit, to show me Tommy belongs to her. It's wasted on me because I don't want anything to do with either of them.

Giving me a dirty look, Scarlett leaves the room with the two guards, and I am finally alone with Tommy.

His eyes, which once held so much warmth, are cold as he roams his gaze over me. “There are some things in life, Skye, that cannot be forgiven.”

“You need to stop this, Tommy.”

“I can’t even look at you knowing that thing is inside you. Do you have any idea how it feels knowing you’ll have a child with one of them?”

“I didn’t plan it.” I don’t know why I tell him this because it’s not going to make any difference. “He was a stranger, some man I met in a bar. I wouldn’t have gone near him if I’d known he was part of the MC, but I’m not sorry for how everything has played out either. I already love my baby. I don’t care who her parents are, or about some stupid fucking war between you and them. This child has done nothing. I’ve done nothing.”

He flinches with every word I speak, as if I’ve stabbed him in the heart with a blade. “That’s where you’re wrong. You have done *everything*. I thought Jack dying was the worst thing I could ever experience, until I discovered you were with the Untamed Sons.”

“Who told you? How did you find out?”

“Do you think there is anything that goes on with that club that I’m not aware of? I knew that was where you ran to from day one.”

“How?”

“The car. We were able to find it using registration plate recognition. Once you entered the city, it was even easier. CCTV may be the bane of our existence, but in this instance, it served its purpose. I wanted to go in straight away and pull you out of there, but I had to bide my time. We’ve been watching the clubhouse, waiting for the moment you would stick your head out. Granted, I didn’t expect to wait as long as we did, but I’ve always been a patient man. We followed you

to the hospital, waited for you to come out, and then we trailed you to that quiet little side street.”

While we were in that exam room, watching our baby on the screen, experiencing an incredible battery of emotions, our fate had been sealed.

Two prospects dead, and Beau...

I don't want to think about it, but in my heart, I know he's gone. "If you ever cared for me, I'm begging you, please let me go."

He stares at me for so long that I begin to wonder if he has lost his mind. Then he presses a kiss to my cheek. It's so soft, so gentle, and completely at odds with our situation.

"I can't let you go. I'm never ever letting you go again, and once I've taken care of this problem," he gestures towards my stomach, "I'll give you a baby. One that has my blood in its veins."

When he steps back, my vision warps at the edges, fear and panic clouding everything. "What do you mean take care of this problem?"

He presses his hand against my stomach, but there is nothing warm about how he does it. "I can't allow you to have that cunt's baby. And I know what I have to do may break you, but I swear, I'll put you back together again, Skye-bug. You will be one of us again."

What the fuck does that mean?

A new fear engulfs me as dark thoughts swirl around my brain. What is he going to do to me and my baby?

He steps back, his gaze locked to mine.

"One of you how?" When he doesn't answer, I rattle the hook, ignoring the burn in my shoulders. "Tommy!"

He presses his hand harder into my gut, and I suck in a breath at how uncomfortable it feels. "I don't want you to worry. As always, I'll take care of everything."

He walks away, the door clanging as it shuts behind him. For a moment, all I can focus on is trying to get oxygen into my lungs, and once I've done that, I start to scream.

CHAPTER 23

SKYE

There is a deep-seated ache in my stomach as time crawls by. I have no idea how long I've been hanging from this hook, but every inch of my chest, neck, shoulders, and arms has become numb. At first, I was grateful the pain was dampened down, but now, I'm starting to think it might not be a good sign.

I shiver against the cold, the frigid air seeping into my bones, battling past the defences of my clothes. No one has come into the room since Tommy left, and the fear that they've gone and I'm alone terrifies me almost as much as them coming back.

Exhaustion causes my eyes to slide shut for a brief second. The sensation of falling has them snapping open again as I jolt against my bindings. I can't sleep, not yet. I have to find a way out of this, even though part of me wants to give up.

Hopelessness settled over me once the anger and desperation left. No one is coming to save me. Beau is dead—I have convinced myself of that fact—and Tommy has clearly split from my father. The way he was talking suggests there is some kind of internal war happening within the Pioneers and that Tommy and my father are on opposite sides.

I wonder if that's why my father never came for me. *How long has Tommy been against him?*

I let go of those thoughts. I don't care about the politics between them, but once again, I find myself a pawn in a game I'm not playing.

I think about my child, wondering what they will look like. Wondering if I will ever see them. Scarlett wants me dead, she makes no secret of it, but I wonder if she realises she hasn't won this game.

Tommy kissed her. He held her as if they were together, but the more that scene plays in my head, the more I see he is using her. I'm not sure why, but his desire to give me his baby instead does not sound like the words of a man in love with someone else. The way he had stopped her from hitting me again, I have to believe he cares about me.

And that gives me renewed hope. If he still cares, there is a chance to reach him. There is a chance I can save us both.

I roll my head towards the windows. There's so much dirt covering them, it occludes the light from fully streaming in. They are fitted into the frames, with no way to open them.

No way out.

The door is my only option, but first, I have to get off this fucking hook. I try to roll onto the very tip of my toes, giving myself a little extra height, but I can't lift my tied hands off it.

I knew this because I'd already tried. As soon as Tommy left the room, I attempted to get free, but I'm too short and my body is too weakened from my position to lift myself as I need to.

I start to hum under my breath, needing something to focus on, and it sounds eerie as it bounces around the walls and high ceiling.

When the door opens, I don't stop, continuing to hum even as my stomach sinks as she walks in. Scarlett is alone, and without Tommy as a buffer, I feel far more vulnerable.

She stops in front of me, her eyes dropping to where Tommy pulled down my leggings. She reaches towards me, and I move back on the balls of my feet, putting some space between us so she can't touch me.

This seems to amuse her, and that dark smile painted on her face makes me wonder if any part of our friendship was

ever real. “I did wonder if I would ever see you again,” she says, thankfully keeping a little distance between us.

“I thought we were friends.”

“How could we ever be friends? I was only there to take care of daddy’s little precious princess.”

Tears clog the back of my throat, mixing with my anger. “We *were* friends. Everything on my side was real.”

“Do you have any idea what it was like living in the shadow of Skye Richardson, the prodigal daughter? You could do no wrong. Everybody adored Skye. No one ever noticed the things I sacrificed, the things I had to do for you. But I have everything now. Tommy is mine, and he’s going to make you feel the same pain I did when you left me bleeding and dying on the fucking floor of your bedroom.” She gets in my face and spits these words out through gritted teeth.

“And why did I do that? You took away all my choices. You made it so I only had one option.”

The smirk on her face pisses me off. I throw myself in her direction, roaring my frustration when the hook stops me, rocking back. I lose my traction, swinging freely for a moment. Pain tears through my shoulders and wrists, and I can’t stop the scream from erupting out of my mouth.

“I wish I’d fucking killed you!” The words are ragged, agonised, and not just because of what she has done. I manage to regain my balance on the balls of my feet, taking some of the pressure off my abused body.

“Finally, some truth. Tommy thinks you are this perfect angel, but when it comes down to it, you’re just as bloodthirsty as the rest of us. Face it, Skye, you enjoy hurting others just as much as we do.”

My eyes scan hers, seeing the excitement there as she talks. She’s insane. How did I never notice how evil she is?

“I don’t enjoy it. There was nothing that made me feel good about hurting you, but I did what I had to do to survive.”

“Too bad you don’t enjoy it, because I’m gonna enjoy what’s going to happen to you.”

A shiver climbs up my spine. “Which is what?”

Her gaze drops to my stomach, and I wish my hands were free so I can cover it. “Tommy can’t stand the idea of that baby inside you.” I can see that pisses her off, that he cares about me. “There’s a doctor on the way. He’s going to give you an abortion.”

My heart sinks into my stomach. I shake my head, unwilling to believe Tommy could do this to me. “No. I don’t... I don’t want an abortion.”

Sweat trickles between my shoulder blades, rolling down to the small of my back. I was scared before at the prospect of dying, but this is a thousand times worse.

“Funny, considering I seem to recall you begging me to get you the morning after pill. You sure as hell wanted to abort that thing when you first learned about it. Be careful what you wish for, Skye. The universe doesn’t care if you changed your mind.”

I rattle the hook, desperation careening through me. Trying to reason with her is pointless. She’s too wrapped up in her anger to listen, so I try to appeal to her, hoping it will break through somehow. I’m losing control here, not that I ever had it, and the panic churning my gut is intensifying. “Please don’t do this. You can still help me. I’ll disappear. You’ll never see me again.” She scoffs at this, folding her arms over her chest. “I don’t want Tommy, Scarlett. You can have him. He’s all yours. But I want my baby. Please, if you have ever cared for me at any point over the years, please do this for me.”

By the last word, I’m sobbing. I don’t see any way out of this situation, and that terrifies me. I can handle us both dying together. It’s not the best outcome, but considering the options, it is the only one I can deal with. I don’t want to live in a world where my baby does not.

But this...

What Tommy is planning to do...

This is pure evil.

“Oh, Skye. What happens to you isn’t down to me. This is all Tommy’s decision.”

She sticks that knife in, twisting it a little deeper. “He doesn’t care about you. He never has.”

I glare at her through watery eyes. “So, if he doesn’t care, explain to me why he wants to replace my dead baby with his own?”

There is an imperceptible curl of her lip, but I see it. I feel the jealousy washing through her. I want to hurt her as much as I can, and since the only weapon I have is my words, I wield them.

“You see, Scarlett, the one thing you have never understood is that although I don’t want Tommy, he’s always wanted me. You’re just something to pass the time until he can have me back.” Her face contorts, anger blazing in her eyes. I should heed the warning, but fear makes my tongue bold. “And when he has given me the gift of his child, what do you think will happen to you? Poor little Scarlett, on the outside once again. He’ll never love you. No matter what you do, he’ll never want you.”

“You fucking cunt.” Her breath rips out of her in angry pants as she steps towards me. The look in her eyes terrifies me, and for a moment, I’m afraid she might kill me.

“Scarlett.”

Tommy’s voice snaps through the air, making her pause. I lift my gaze over her head to see him standing near the door. We’d been so engrossed in each other that neither of us noticed him enter the room.

She glares at me under heavy brows. “Fuck you, Skye.”

Tommy steps up behind her, his large frame looming over her as he pulls her away from me. “I told you not to come back in here.”

“I must have misunderstood your instructions,” she simpers, sounding like an emptyheaded bimbo when she is

anything but. Scarlett is the most devious person I have ever met. She gives me a dark look before she turns and walks out the room.

He waits until she leaves before he turns back to me. "I'm gonna get you down. Don't try to run."

I don't speak as he grabs me around the middle and lifts me off the hook with such ease, it makes me want to smack him in his stupid face.

As he lowers me to the ground, my legs fold beneath me as soon as they touch the concrete. He grips me against him, keeping me in position until my knees are able to lock. My arms are a different story. I can't lower them, so he has to push them down for me. Pins and needles erupt in my hands, biceps, and shoulders, the nerves firing muddled signals to each other.

I hate doing it, but I lean against him, allowing him to take all my weight. "Why are you taking me down?" I murmur against him as his arms wrap around me tightly.

He doesn't answer, and Scarlett's words ring through my brain. I try to pull away, but his arms are like iron bands around me, locking me against him.

"I will kill you if you try to harm my baby," I threaten, even though we both know my words are empty. There is nothing I can do to him.

He pulls my head against his chest, his fingers stroking over my hair. "I don't want to hurt you, Skye. This is for your own good. We can start again, put the past behind us."

I can't even stand to have him in my space. I never thought I would associate disgust with him. Tommy was everything to me, but now, he's the monster threatening to take my baby from me.

I shove my bound hands against his chest with every ounce of strength I have, needing him to stop touching me, even if it is only for a second. It's enough to gain my freedom from him, and I stumble back, my breath tearing out of me.

“I don’t want to put the past behind us, and if you do this, I will never forgive you. I will spend the rest of my life trying to end yours.”

His jaw ticks. I guess he expected this situation to play out differently than it is. “You bonded with that thing. I understand it’s painful what has to happen, but we’ll be stronger for it. Just think, Skye, we can have everything we ever dreamed of. Once I take control from your father and become the head of the Pioneers, you’ll never want for anything.”

He’s lost his mind. This is insanity. My father didn’t get to where he is through luck. He has support, men, money, and means. Tommy has none of those things, and he’s barely even an adult. When I think about the older men in the organisation, I don’t envision them taking orders from someone less than half their age.

“That’s your plan, to become boss?” I laugh, unable to keep the derision out of it. “No one will ever take you seriously, Tommy. You’re just a stupid kid, and I wouldn’t want to stand at your side while you ruin your life.”

His jaw twitches before his hand wraps around my throat, and the maniacal look in his eyes makes my heart race. My legs are weak, and the front I’m trying to deliver crumbles.

He scans my face, his expression weirdly calm as he takes me in.

“Are you scared, Skye?” He rubs the pad of his thumb over my pulse.

“Yes,” I admit.

“Despite your obvious disdain for me, all I have done is love you. And I still do.”

He presses his mouth to mine and my toes curl inside my running shoes, disgust skittering up my spine. I try to shove him away, but he holds my nape so tight, I whimper against his lips. When he finally lets me go, I stumble back, trying to wipe my mouth of his taste.

“Don’t you ever do that again.” I continue to wipe my mouth, feeling violated.

He grabs my arm, his fingers bruising as his brows draw together. “You seem to be under the illusion that you’re able to refuse me.”

I’m under no illusions about anything, but my thoughts are chaotic, my emotions too. I want to unleash my anger on him even as I want to curl into a ball and sob.

I wince as he drags me towards the door, his movements brutal, and I feel the anger in them. “And what about Scarlett? Where the hell does she fit into this?”

He stops, and I bump into his side as he turns to face me. “Scarlett is irrelevant.”

The triumph I feel knowing I was right is short lived. “Then why the charade? Why pretend to want her?”

He pulls me close against him. So close, I feel his breath on my face. “Because I need her family.”

Oh. This is all about him gaining support, numbers. I stare into his eyes, only seeing shadows and darkness there.

“What the hell happened to you? I don’t even recognise you anymore.”

The mood sinks even lower, and the tension is unbearable, but when he speaks, I’m shocked by how glacial his tone is. “Your biker friends killed my brother. That’s what happened to me.”

He continues dragging me towards the door, and I dig my heels in, trying to fight against him. It’s useless, though. How did I never know how strong Tommy is?

My eyes are everywhere as we step out the room and into a corridor. I remember the entrance to the building lies to the left, but he tugs me right, deeper inside.

I stumble over my feet, trying to keep up while simultaneously trying to fight him, but he pushes me into a room. A quick scan of the space is enough to send my fear through the stratosphere.

There is an iron bed frame against one wall with a thin mattress on it. Slotted under the mattress are two devices that I

know instantly are stirrups, like the ones used in the hospital this morning during my appointment. There are chains bolted into the wall above the head of the bed and leather straps hanging down to the floor along the middle.

I turn to run, every primal instinct in my body urging me to flee, but Tommy bands his arm around me and drags me over to the bed.

I fight like a demon as another man appears, dragging my arms over my head and securing my rope-bound wrists in the chains that are bolted into the wall. My legs are raised into the stirrups, and white leather straps are fastened around my thighs, holding me in place.

Tommy buckles the remaining leather straps around my body, one just above my breasts and another just below. I'm breathing so hard, I feel dizzy, and the bile coating my throat is in danger of coming out of my mouth.

I try to calm my racing heart, and although I know it's pointless, I try to reason with him once more. "Tommy, we can just pretend this child is yours. No one ever has to know."

He straightens, his perfectly slicked-back hair now flopping into his face, making him look like the boy I remember. "I'll know." He readjusts his shirt before breaking a hand through his hair to put it back in place. "I know you think I'm being cruel doing this, but it's the only way. There can be no doubts about the parentage of my son."

He's crazy. He's lost his fucking mind. I test my bonds, but they don't move.

The door opens and Scarlett steps inside. I don't miss the flush of pleasure in her face as she takes in my predicament. "The doctor's here."

"Good. Bring our other guest in first."

I frown at his words and raise my head as much as I can off the bed to see who he's talking about. The door opens again and two guards drag a man between them.

His legs scrape along the concrete, not even attempting to hold him up, and the way his head bobs between his shoulders,

his chin nearly on his chest, suggests he is unconscious.

The thundering of my heart must be audible to everyone in the room as they move him to a chair positioned in front of a support column. I watch helplessly as they bind him to the seat then wrap a rope around his chest and the column. I see the trail of blood coating the side of his face, and his dark lashes are stark against his pale skin.

Tommy moves to stand in front of him and fists a handful of his hair, dragging his head up.

The relief I feel knowing Rage is alive lasts only a heartbeat as Tommy slaps his face so hard, I don't know how he doesn't knock teeth out.

Rage groans, shaking his head as if trying to clear it, and I hold my breath as his lids flutter open. He seems disorientated, unsure of where he is, but I can tell the second he understands the situation.

His eyes meet mine, and I can only imagine how I must look with my legs spread in the air, bound and tied to the dirty bed. "Skye..." My name is barely a whisper between his parted lips before he thrashes against his bindings.

The roar of pure fury that explodes from him is terrifying. I've seen him lose control before, but this is another level. He screams like a madman, and I lower my head, so he can't see the tears running down my cheeks.

"I'm going to fucking cut your heart out!" Rage bellows.

When Tommy speaks, his voice is quiet and calm, but it carries across the room. "I was going to kill you after the crash, but then your people have tortured so many of mine, it only seemed fair for you to witness what I'm about to do. The child is yours, right?"

I stare at the ceiling above me, unable to look at him and the scene unfolding before me.

"If you touch either of them, there will be no place for you to hide that will be safe from me or the Sons." Rage's defence of us makes tears sting my eyes. There is no way any of us are

surviving this, and he must know this, yet he threatens harm to Tommy anyway.

“Don’t worry, you’ll only live long enough to watch your child die before you meet your own end.”

I hear footsteps before Tommy steps to the side of the bed. Tommy is an attractive man. He’d always had this boyish charm about him, but as I glare at him, trying to convey all the anger and hatred I feel, I see the ugliness in him.

Oblivious to my thoughts, he reaches down, brushing a piece of hair from my face. It makes me want to vomit, so I tear away from his touch.

He laughs under his breath before he turns to Scarlett. “Show the doctor in.” I hear the door open before it closes again, but I don’t tear my gaze from his. “I know you don’t believe me, but I am sorry I have to do this. I’ll try to ensure it is as pain-free as possible,” he says, his voice gentle and at odds with what he’s planning to do to me. “This will be over soon, and once it is, you and I will start our life together.”

CHAPTER 24

RAGE

My head is throbbing in time with the slow pulsing of my heart, and I ache all over, but it's nothing compared to the fear suffocating me as I stare at Skye's small frame strapped to that disgusting bed. Her legs are trapped in those same devices they'd used in the hospital to examine her internally, but her thighs are strapped down, stopping her from moving. From the position I'm in, I have a full view between her legs, as does the rest of the room, and I'm thankful she still has on those fucking pink leggings. Seeing she is still dressed eases some of the panic blooming through my chest, especially as I take in her hands chained over her head.

I don't know who this man is, but he seems to know her. And when his fingers reach out to brush her hair off her face, I can't stop the growl that sounds deep in my throat.

I thrash against my bindings, trying to loosen them, but the rope is tight around my wrists, my feet, and also my chest. The movement makes my vision splinter briefly, pain slicing through my skull.

I suck in breath through my teeth, trying to stave off the wave of dizziness that leaves me feeling like the floor is moving beneath me.

I need to snap out of it. If I'm going to save us, I need to be alert, but my surroundings are fuzzy, like paint that has dripped down a canvas. I shake my head, trying to clear my vision, as the door opens and a woman about my age steps in with an older man.

He seems nervous, clutching a dark holdall to him like a lifeline. His eyes dart around, taking in both me and Skye, and his brows draw together.

“How long will it take?” the man asks him.

“Um...” The older man’s looks towards Skye before coming back to him. “I wasn’t aware of the circumstances of this procedure.”

“Tommy, don’t do this.” I hear the fear in Skye’s voice, and it twists my insides.

The older man backs up just a step, but the other guy, who I assume is Tommy, grabs him by the front of his shirt. “No backing out, doc. We had a deal. All your shit goes away once you do this.”

The doctor licks his lips, sweat beading on his forehead and beneath his nose. “I thought this was a consensual procedure.”

The girl rolls her eyes. “It is.”

“But... the patient is tied down. It’s unethical.”

Tommy grabs his face, squeezing so hard, he makes his lips form a pout between his fingers. “You’re not here to think or worry about ethics. Do the fucking procedure. I don’t want any sign of that fucking thing left in her.”

He shoves the doctor towards the bed, and he stumbles over his feet but doesn’t move to do anything.

“If you touch her, I’ll rip your heart out.” I level the threat at the doctor, though he’s not the person I should be saying this to. He is as much a victim in this as we are.

The doctor’s face blanches, and I see the realisation dawning that he has put himself in the middle of something he has no chance of winning.

Tommy gets bored of waiting and shoves the doctor onto a stack of crates positioned at the foot of the bed between Skye’s open legs.

I tug on my ropes again, ignoring the burn as they rub my skin so hard, blood trickles down my wrists.

I want to lose my shit, let that dark monster out of the box that I have tried so hard to keep locked, but that is not how I save us. I need to think logically, rationally, and formulate a plan. There will be time to live up to my name once Skye is back in my arms, protected.

There have been times in my life when I've felt completely helpless and alone. Since joining the club, those moments have become less frequent. My brothers are always at my side, watching my back. The feelings I have in this moment are completely foreign. There's no help coming. There's only me standing between Skye and whatever the fuck is about to happen.

And I can't move.

"How long will it take?" Tommy repeats the question he asked moments ago.

"I don't think—"

The punch is so hard, the doctor nearly falls off the crate. The sound of flesh meeting flesh reverberates around the room, and I almost feel sorry for the poor fucker. He doesn't want to be here any more than we do.

"How far along are you?" The doctor directs this question at Skye.

"I don't want to lose my baby. Please don't do this."

She sobs as she says the words, and my chest feels like it's cracking open. I tip my head back, roaring my rage as I fight to get free.

The girl who brought the doctor in steps to me and slaps me so hard, my teeth push against the soft tissue in my cheek. I taste blood as my vision splinters again.

Fucking cunt.

I lift my head, eyeballing her, and a hundred scenarios run through my head of how I'm going to end her fucking life.

“I’m going to kill you first,” I promise, and it’s one I fully intend to keep.

She laughs, folding her arms over her chest as if she doesn’t believe a word I say. She’s not the first person to underestimate me, and I don’t care what it takes, I’m getting out of this fucking chair.

“You wouldn’t be the first to try.” She grabs my chin, forcing me to look at what is happening to Skye. “Pay attention. You wouldn’t want to miss anything.”

Talking to this psychotic bitch, I miss half of what is said between the doctor and Skye, just catching the tail end of the conversation. “...stage she’s at, we would normally do a vacuum aspiration.”

The doctor’s words are slow as he speaks, and I hear the horror in them.

“Stop this. Please, Tommy, if you ever loved me, don’t do this. I want my baby. I’ll do anything. Please don’t take her from me.” Her words are hard to understand as she sobs big, ugly heaves, and it breaks me.

“I thought I was doing an abortion on someone who wanted one.” The doctor sounds disturbed. “I can’t do it to someone who is unwilling—”

He stops talking as the little psycho bitch presses a knife against his throat. I tug at my wrist bindings, feeling them loosen slightly but not enough to free my hands.

“You understand who you’re saying no to?” She trails the knife along his carotid and across the other side, pressing just hard enough to leave a thin line of blood behind. “If you don’t do it, you become surplus to requirements, and you know what happens to things that are no longer needed?”

He lets out a shaky breath, and I have to hand it to him. There is real bravery in him as he says, “The environment isn’t sterile enough. Infection could kill her.”

“Then you better make sure it doesn’t, because if she dies, you die, and I won’t make it pleasant for you.”

The girl pulls the knife away, gesturing with it towards the crate. "Hurry up."

I see his hands tremble as he sits and opens his bag. There's a small table at the side of him that he lays out his equipment on. I nearly have my left hand free, the ropes cutting deeply into my skin, but I can't think or even register the pain in this moment.

"She needs to pull her pants down," the doctor says, clearing his throat.

The girl moves to do it, almost gleefully, but Tommy stops her with a hand on her chest. She glares up at him, but she does step aside and lets him move to the bed.

I don't bother with threats, instead focusing on working my wrist free. Even if I get it out, I still won't be up to move from the chair immediately. I shove that thought away.

One problem at a time.

Tommy leans down, his fingers reaching for her as I get my hand free. Blood rolls down my wrist, dripping off the tips of my fingers, but I don't care. Already I'm toying with the knot securing my other wrist, ignoring everything else in the room. If I look up and see what is happening, I'll lose my shit, and I need to focus so I can move quickly.

It's hard to block out Skye's cries, and I beg her in my mind to hold on.

A crashing sound splinters my attention. I snap my head up to see the table on its side, all the equipment strewn across the concrete. The good old doctor has moved back and is gripping a scalpel in his hand.

"This is insanity," he wails, thrusting it in the woman's direction when she tries to step towards him. She stops, holding her hands up, but her expression suggests she is mocking him. "I'm not doing it. You people are animals."

I keep working on the knots, even as my gaze slides towards Skye. She's still dressed, which renews my need to move quicker.

I glance down for a second, just to check where the knot needs to be pulled from, but that's all it takes.

The woman jumps forwards, slamming the doctor against the wall. Her arm moves back and forth at her side in quick successive motions, and when she steps back, I see the knife in her hand.

The doctor's eyes widen, his mouth parted in shock as blood seeps through his shirt. His legs give out, and he slides down the wall onto his bottom with a gasp.

Tommy grabs her around the throat, shoving her backwards. "You demented fucking bitch. We needed him." He grips her wrist, the one holding the knife, and her face morphs into a mask of pain before she's forced to release her grip.

She cries out as the knife clatters to the floor, bouncing off the concrete before settling.

"He was never going to do it. You brought a doctor with fucking morals to perform a backroom abortion on someone unwilling."

He raises his hand, and I know what he's going to do before it happens. Tommy hits her with a closed fist, hard enough to send her sprawling. She hits the ground with a cry that would bother me if she was anyone else, but I don't feel sorry for her at all.

"Tommy..." Skye whispers his name, clearly shocked by his actions, but he isn't listening to her.

He stalks towards the woman, grabbing a fistful of her hair and tugging her head back so she's forced to look at him. For the first time since she entered this room, that cocky demeanour wavers. She's scared of him.

"That fucking mouth of yours will get you killed one day, Scarlett." He shoves her away, making her whimper as she crawls back against the wall, tugging her knees up to her chest. There is a red mark on her face, and her lip is bleeding.

He steps away, moving towards the bed, his hands interlacing at the back of his head as he screams out, "Fuck!"

I keep my eyes locked on him as the knot at my other hand comes loose enough for me to slip out.

Tommy seems oblivious to my presence in the room, which I'm fucking grateful for. His preoccupation with Skye and the doctor keeps me off his radar.

He stares down at Skye before turning his gaze to the doctor. "Walk me through what to do."

The doctor lifts his eyes as if it takes monumental effort. She stabbed him low in the gut, and although he's trying to keep pressure on the wound, blood spills between his fingers, staining his hands. "Fuck you," he snarls at him.

Tommy's lips curl down, and he steps towards the doctor, but the sound of gunfire from somewhere deep in the building stops him. "What now?" he growls.

He steps towards the door, pulling a gun from under his coat.

"Try not to stab anyone else." He directs this warning at the woman, Scarlett.

She doesn't look up, her face still hidden in her knees as he disappears from the room.

My gaze falls on the knife lying on the floor, but I shift my attention to the doctor. There is sweat on his top lip, and his skin is ashen and clammy. His eyes meet mine, and I look towards the knife, hoping he will understand what I mean.

He must, because his eyes lift towards Scarlett, who still has her head buried in her knees.

He shakes his head, and I see the fear in his eyes, but if we're going to get out of here, he has to get his shit together.

I gesture back towards the knife, trying again to free my hand, but this knot is too tight for me to get my fingers under.

His head tips back against the wall, his breathing laboured, but he stretches out his leg, and I'm elated when he gets a toe to the handle.

His gaze splits between what he's doing and the girl as the gunfire continues to reverberate throughout the building.

Inch by inch, he pulls it closer, careful not to make noise. When it's within reaching distance, I hold my breath as he keeps a hand pressed against his side, swallowing his scream of pain as he leans forwards and grabs it.

I hold my free hand out, flashing my fingers at him in a 'give it to me' motion. He shuffles on his bottom, moving close enough that I'm able to stretch and grab it from him.

Scarlett chooses that moment to lift her head. Carefully, I conceal the knife against the outside of my thigh, hiding it from her view, but it's not me she's focused on. The look on her face sends a tendril of anxiety through me.

My eyes locked on her, I carefully saw through the rope around my middle as she stalks towards the fallen table and equipment.

Her movements are stiff, and I see how affected she is by the violence she just experienced. But she bends down and starts to sift through the stuff.

"I know what you're thinking," Scarlett says, and it takes me a moment to realise she's talking to Skye.

"You don't have the first clue what I'm thinking," Skye fires back.

I wish I could see her face, reassure her that I'm almost free.

Scarlett stands, picking something up that I can't make out as she pulls it up her sleeve.

"You're thinking I deserved that. Maybe you're right, maybe I do, but Tommy is a passionate man, and I know he'd love me more if you weren't fucking with his head."

Ice settles in my belly as she steps up to the side of the bed and I realise what she grabbed off the floor. It's the knife the doctor threatened them with. She glances down at Skye, her eyes locked on her stomach.

“He wants your baby gone, and if I deliver that, he’ll be sorry for what he did.”

Skye lifts her head as Scarlett holds her hand against her chest and cuts into her belly.

The scream Skye releases will haunt me for the rest of my days. I’ve heard men wail and yell, and I’ve tortured and killed my share, but their cries never bothered me.

My blood runs cold as I hack faster at the ropes, my eyes locked on the macabre scene in front of me. I’m relieved when the bindings around my chest finally fall free, allowing me to bend forwards. Hacking through the ones around my legs, my pulse hammers in my ears.

Scarlett lifts the blade away, turning her head to the side as blood trickles down Skye’s stomach.

“I’m not sure you’re going to survive this,” she mumbles, her gaze unfocused.

She leans down to cut again just as I saw through the last rope keeping me in place.

I launch myself from the chair, and although she turns as I rush at her, I’m quicker. I slam the scalpel into her neck with enough pressure that the tip of it sticks out the other side.

Her eyes flare, shock making her dazed as I pull it out, blood spraying as I do. I grab the front of her shirt and run the knife into her over and over again, releasing all the tension and frustration I had to bury within me to get us out of this mess.

When I release my hold on her, she slides bonelessly to the ground, her body twitching in the last throes of panic before she stills.

I wipe the blood on my jeans, rushing over to the bed. Trembles rack Skye’s body as her eyes slide to mine. The cut Scarlett made in her stomach doesn’t look deep, though it is bleeding. Seeing it makes me want to stab the fucking bitch again, but my only focus is on Skye and getting us out of here before Tommy comes back.

The gunfight sounds as if it's getting closer, and I hold out hope that it belongs to friendlies and we're not about to go into a situation even worse than this one.

I undo the buckles keeping her thighs in place, then the ones over her chest and stomach. I don't focus on how out of it she seems or the tears staining her cheeks. There will be time to deal with all this later, but for now, our focus has to be on surviving.

The chains around her wrists are the last things I remove, and my heart leaps as my fingers skim over her skin to take them off.

"You need to sit up," I say. There's no time to ask if she can—we have to get out of here.

I help her up, hating the noise she makes as she comes up right. She holds her sweater up near her breasts to look at the damage to her stomach, all the while making soft hiccupping sounds.

"I'm bleeding," she says, placing her hands either side of the cut spanning from her left hip round to her belly button.

I grab the doctor's bag, rummaging through it until I find something that looks like wound dressing. Quickly, I open it and press it over the wound. Skye gasps, whimpering at my not so gentle touch, but there isn't time for that. I layer as many as I need to cover the wound before I pull her sweater down over it.

I know I should wait, that there isn't time for this, but when I stand her up, I tug her against me, my hand resting on the back of her head as I soak her in. I can't believe how close I came to losing them both, though we're still not out of the woods.

I don't want to let her go, but I have to. I grab the knife off the edge of the bed where I placed it so I could unchain her and take hold of her hand with the other.

Tugging her towards the door, she digs her heels in suddenly, making me stop. Her eyes slide towards the doctor, but his chin rests on his chest, his mouth slack. "He's gone," I

say, trying to keep my voice gentle, but there's an urgency in my words.

She stumbles behind me as I reach for the door handle, and without warning, it's kicked open.

I stagger back, keeping her behind me, ready to fight, until I realise who it is standing in front of me.

Hawk roams his eyes over my face, his jaw hard. There's blood spattered up his neck and pieces of his hair have fallen free from the tie at his nape. The relief I feel seeing the gun in his hand almost loosens my leg muscles.

"Good to see you, kid," he says before a familiar figure steps in behind him.

Kane Fraser is an imposing man, and he somehow manages to make the space feel even smaller than it is. He glances at us both before his gaze slides around the room.

"Time to go," he says before stepping back out of the room.

Hawk peers at me for a moment, as if trying to work out if I'm able to get us out of here. I give him a nod as I tuck Skye against my side, her small body trembling against me.

I hug her close, pressing a kiss to her clammy forehead. "You're okay," I tell her.

"Tommy... we need to find him."

Kane stops and looks over his shoulder at us. "Don't worry, sweetheart, no one is getting out of here alive."

I expect her to flinch at those words, but her eyes are dark, and I know what happened in this room will affect her for years to come. This is not the kind of trauma that will go away on its own.

She leans her head against me. "Good," she says. "They all need to die."

On that, we both agree.

"What do you want us to do with the survivors?" I know exactly what Hawk is asking. Do I want him to wait for me to

get Skye settled so I can torture the fuckers to death, especially Tommy.

Before Skye I would have taken so much pleasure in cutting him into shreds. As I look at my terrified, pregnant woman, I realise the only place I need to be is with her. The way she clings to me I can tell she's going to unravel the moment we're out of here and I'm not letting her do that alone.

Fuck. I've never not dealt out vengeance, but Tommy dying at my hand won't change anything. Dead is dead.

I blow out a breath before I press a kiss into Skye's hair. "Just make it hurt," I say, trusting my brothers to ensure that fucker suffers.

Hawk stares at me for a beat, then he shifts his shoulders. "Whatever you need, kid."

CHAPTER 25

SKYE

I keep my body pressed against Rage's side, too scared to let go in case something happens. As we move through the corridors, more familiar faces join us, but all I can focus on is putting one foot in front of the other.

My legs feel like jelly, the adrenaline that had surged through my body only minutes earlier seeping out of every cell, leaving me weak. There is a sharp burn on the left side of my stomach where the knife had dragged across my skin, and I try not to think about whether my baby was hurt during Scarlett's vicious attack.

If Rage hadn't got free when he did, she would have cut deeper.

I can't stop the full body shiver that works through me at that thought, which makes Rage hug me tight against him.

As we step into a big room, we're surrounded by people. Most of the club is here, as well as Lucas Fraser and a bunch of soldiers I guess belong to the Frasers.

I tune everything out, focusing only on trying to calm my racing heartbeat. We nearly died. All three of us. The doctor who saved us did die.

There are voices and movement, and I don't realise we're outside until the cold starts to seep into my bones. My trembles become full body shivers, my teeth smacking together.

Rage helps me into the back of a car before he gets in next to me. As soon as he's settled, he urges me back into his arms.

I lie down along the back seat, my head in his lap, my feet tucked up in a way that makes the wound to my stomach feel even worse. I don't move, though, letting the pain ground me.

He reaches behind us, dragging a blanket off the parcel shelf and settling it over me.

"I fucking love you." His voice cracks as he says it, and I feel the emotion beneath his words.

I grip his thigh, staring at the blood on his jeans. "I love you too," I murmur, my body feeling detached from my brain.

This all feels like a fever dream, and I'm wondering if I will wake in my own bed, this nightmare a figment of my imagination. But I know I couldn't conjure the pain I'm feeling. That is very real.

"The guys are just tidying up things," he says, turning a little in his seat so he can look through the side window. "As soon as we get back to the clubhouse, we'll sort out someone to come and make sure the baby is okay."

The baby... what if she's not? I don't know what damage may have been done, so I close my eyes, asking the universe for just one more favour.

Please let my baby be okay.

As if sensing the dark turmoil rolling through my mind, Rage laces his fingers with mine, giving me something else to cling onto. I turn his hand, studying the wounds to his wrists. There are deep burns to the skin, ugly grazes that I know must be painful. "How did these happen?"

"It doesn't matter."

I lift my head slightly to look up at him. "The ropes."

His thumb strokes over my hand, his grip intensifying, as if he's never going to let me go. "I'm fine."

I resettle my head against his legs, knowing he is but also needing to acknowledge what he did in that room. "You saved us."

"I'd fucking die for you."

I let those words comfort me, understanding for the first time in my life the meaning of being loved. Howler and Hawk get into the front seats, and the rumble of the engine vibrates beneath me.

We survived.

Against all the odds, we're still here.

Howler turns to say something to Rage, and our eyes meet. There is a range of emotion that flickers through him—anger, pity, remorse maybe. I give him a smile, trying to convey my gratitude that they came for us. Howler clears his throat, shifting his attention back to Rage.

“You guys need anything?”

Rage shakes his head. “How did you find us?”

“Ralph. He got a message out saying you'd been hit. We found the wreckage, but it was already crawling with coppers. Kane Fraser is a good man to be on the right side of. I don't know what contacts that crazy fucker has, but he knew where you were in less than three hours.”

My brows draw together. As for being found, being able to save ourselves had only been possible because of my sister's family, a sister I didn't know existed until recently.

“What happened to Tommy?” The question slips from my lips before I can stop it.

The feelings of love and affection that I always had for him are buried deep beneath my hate and anger. I had no idea I had such a vengeful streak, but every inch of my body vibrates with the need to destroy him completely for what he did.

“No one survived,” Hawk says, and it scares me how relieved I am to hear this. I never believed I could be capable of wishing Tommy dead, but my loyalties no longer lie with him. Him breathing is a threat to me, to the man I love, and to my child.

“Good,” I say, letting my eyes drift shut.

My body feels boneless, rung out, and there's nothing I can do to stop the exhaustion pulling me under.

The movement is what wakes me. I blink my eyes open, realising I'm no longer in the car but being laid down in our bed back in the clubhouse.

Rage bends down to press a kiss to my hair before he straightens again. "The doc is on his way." The way he looks at me, as if he's scared to take his eyes off me in case something happens, makes my pulse flutter.

"Thank you." I snuggle down into the pillows, still bone tired.

"I know you don't feel like it, but we need to shower." He takes my hands in his, turning them over to look at the blood staining my palms. I'm not sure if it's mine or his.

I let him help me off the bed and into the bathroom, where he undresses me like I'm a child before stripping naked himself. Once the water temperature is all right, he pushes us both under the stream. I close my eyes as the spray heats my cold body, and I do as I'm instructed while Rage sluices the blood from my skin and his own.

When we're done, he wraps me in a towel and leads me back into the bedroom. He dries every inch of me and helps me dress in pair of sleep shorts and one of his T-shirts.

I settle onto the bed, watching him as he dries himself and dresses in a pair of jogging bottoms and a T-shirt. When he's finished, he climbs into the bed next to me, pulling me against his chest. I press my ear over his heart, listening to the frantic beats as he holds me.

He kisses my temple, as if he needs to have his lips on my skin as much as possible. I let him do whatever he needs in order to feel okay with everything that transpired. I can't imagine how terrified, how helpless he must've felt tied to that chair, unable to move. Tommy wanted to torture him, and he knew exactly how to do it. He didn't need to raise a hand. As we discovered in that room, there are worse things than being hit or hurt. The threat of losing someone who means everything to you is the worst punishment anyone can endure.

“We’re okay,” I assure him, but I’m not sure how true that is. What happened in that room will stay with us both for a long time.

I don’t know how long we lie in each other’s arms, but eventually, there’s a knock on the door. Rage slides out from under me, and I notice he grabs a knife from his bedside table before going to the door. I sit up, pushing my hair out of my face as he opens the door.

When he realises it’s the doctor who came to see me after Trick’s attack, he relaxes and steps back to allow him entrance. The doctor glances at the knife before lifting his eyes to look at Rage then over to me.

If he has any opinion on this, he keeps it to himself as he comes to the edge of the bed. “Who am I looking at first?”

“Her,” Rage says before I can get a word out.

I don’t argue with him, knowing it would be pointless, and I’m eager to get this over with, so I can reclaim my place back in Rage’s arms.

The doctor carefully peels the dressings off my stomach, a job made easier by the shower loosening the adhesive, and I watch as a trickle of blood escapes from one part of the cut. The rest seems to have clotted beneath the dressing, which loosens the fist around my heart a little.

“I don’t think you’ll need stitches, but this will need to be cleaned a few times a week. The weapon that did it... was it clean?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I’ll prescribe a course of antibiotics as well, just in case.”

“We were in a car accident before...” Rage trails off, not wanting to explain what ‘before’ alludes to.

The doctor quizzes me, asking endless questions about any pain I might have, but in truth, only the back of my neck and shoulders hurt from being flung forwards.

He then asks me to roll down my shorts and pulls out a portable ultrasound device. He rambles on about how it’s not

as good as what they use in the hospital, but technology has come far enough for it to be a useful tool.

I stare at the ceiling overhead, blocking his voice out as he squirts the cold jelly on my stomach and then presses the probe into my abdomen. I can't stop the hiss of pain from the cut, which makes Rage growl at him, but his anger is muted as the whooshing sound of our baby's heartbeat spills out from the machine.

I cover my face with my hands and sob uncontrollably. I hadn't dared to hope, but hearing that sound, strong and resilient, undoes me.

Rage comes around the bed, sinking down next to me, and presses his mouth to mine. "That's the best sound I've ever heard."

I nod my agreement, swiping at my tears. "She's okay."

"Everything looks as I would expect," the doctor confirms.

After he's finished with me, he cleans the gash on Rage's head and wraps his wrists. He suggests a brain scan, just to ensure he has nothing worse than a concussion, but Rage dismisses this.

I'm glad when he's done and it's just Rage and me once again. He climbs back into the bed with me, and I immediately position myself on his chest.

His fingers trail over my back and arm, comforting me and reducing the anxiety gnawing at me.

When I wake again, Rage is gone, but Sariah is sitting on the sofa. She puts down her phone, her smile genuine as she steps over to the bed.

"Where's Beau?"

"He went to make you something to eat. I said I'd sit with you until he gets back."

She sits on the edge of the bed, in the small space between my legs and the mattress. "I'm so sorry this happened to you."

I shift my shoulders, not comfortable being a victim in this. “Just another day in my father’s world. *Our* father’s,” I amend.

“My husband and yours are steaming mad about all this. Luke is worried dear old dad might decide to target me as well.” It wouldn’t surprise me. Truthfully, I don’t think there is any line my father will not cross.

“This wasn’t Dad. This was Tommy, one of his soldiers,” I clarify when she looks confused. It hurts to refer to him in such a detached way, but I can’t see him as anything but a stranger anymore. “There was some kind of power struggle going on between them, and he had this crazy idea that using me could help cement his status as head of the Pioneers.”

Sariah raises her brow. “I didn’t think they did arranged marriages in the Pioneers.”

“They don’t.” I rest my head back against the headboard. “I agree with you, though. Our father is a danger to us and to those that we care about. He is never going to stop trying to hurt the people I care about.”

Sariah sits forwards, interlacing her fingers in her lap. “I hate to say it, Skye, but the only thing to do with a threat is to eliminate it.”

This would mean losing my father, becoming an orphan. I want to believe my father loves me in his own way, but his actions speak louder than words. He left me under the control of Scarlett, who used that power to torment me and force me to keep this baby, though I don’t regret that last part. Not once during that time did he reach out to me or come to see me.

“I know,” I say quietly. “He has friends in high places. It won’t be an easy thing to...” I can’t say the word ‘kill’, as much as I know that’s what we’re talking about.

Sariah reaches out and grabs my hand in hers. “We’re just getting to know each other, and I know I have to earn some trust with you, but I spent years under the control of Declan Easton. I know how these men work and about the ruthless edges they have in order to maintain the empires they build. I

won't have you become cannon fodder in this war he has with the bikers. I only just found you, and I really want to get to know you better.”

I squeeze her fingers in mine. A sister was never something I expected, but when I talk to Sariah, I feel this kindred connection between us. From what she's said, I know she has also suffered hell at the hands of those around her. It's time to put a stop to that, to protect ourselves from people who would use us.

“Tell me what to do.”

Sariah gives me a small smile. “We're not going to do anything. My husband and the club will.”

CHAPTER 26

RAGE

TWO WEEKS LATER...

Running my fingers over the curve of Skye's stomach has become a non-negotiable part of our morning routine. She lies against me, one arm draped over my chest, as I obsessively touch her.

It still doesn't seem real that there's life beneath my hand, even though I have seen our baby on a screen and heard its heartbeat. I haven't done a lot of things right in my life. I know I'm not a good person, that there is darkness inside me—an evil, as my father told me—but this child gives me hope I can do at least one thing good in my life.

I know the odds are stacked against him or her. With a father like me, what chance does this baby have? But Skye gives me hope I can break the chains of the past.

“What are you thinking about?” The question doesn't surprise me. Skye is empathetic when it comes to people she cares about.

Her muscles quiver under my fingers, and I pause my movement. “How much I love you both.”

She makes a happy little noise at the back of her throat, snuggling closer to my side. “We love you too.” I don't need her to tell me this, but I can't lie and say it doesn't make me feel some kind of way.

My whole life, I felt adrift, like a rowing boat tossed about on rough seas. The club gave me my first direction, but I never really fit in London, though in truth, I didn't try. I still had a giant chip on my shoulder. It was only when I came to Manchester that things turned around for me. I owe a lot of that to Howler, Blackjack, and Hawk. They never gave up on me, though there were times they definitely should have.

Skye coming into my life had at the time felt like an inconvenience, something that was going to ruin my position in the club, one that was tenuous to start with.

But she saved me, more so than the club had. She handed me oars while she steered the boat.

With a gentleness I never possessed before her, I pull her on top of me, waiting while she gets herself comfortable to straddle me. The dusky tips of her nipples beg to be in my mouth, but I settle on taking a handful of her breast in my hand, working my thumb over the hard bud.

She tilts her head back, her hair cascading down her spine like some sort of fucking goddess. “Feels good,” she mumbles, her eyes closed as she pushes against my palm.

“Beautiful.”

She lowers her head, her heated gaze locking onto mine as she reaches between us. The moment Skye’s fingers brush over my shaft, my hips twitch. That brief touch is enough to send heat rushing to my cock.

This girl... no, this woman... is embedded in every part of me in a way I never thought anyone could be. I place my hands behind my head, watching her face as she rubs the tip of my shaft through her wet folds.

I want to surge into her, force my cock deep into her waiting channel, but part of me also likes this side of her, the one where she takes control. I get the impression Skye has never had control of anything, not even whether she was going to have this child. That fucking psycho bitch, Scarlett, took that choice from her, and while I’m grateful our child will be born, Skye didn’t deserve what happened to her.

So, I don’t move, even though my balls ache and my self-control is hanging on by a frayed thread. I don’t look away from her as she positions the head of my cock at her entrance and slowly lowers herself onto me.

She drags in a breath as the tip slips inside her, leaning forwards on her palms to control the depth as she stretches around my girth.

It is pure torture the way she slides inch by inch down onto me, and as much as I want to give her control, mine slips.

She's barely halfway when I thrust my hips up, burying myself in her slick heat.

The gasps she makes are delicious, and she sags farther forwards onto her hands, as if her body has become liquid. I drag my hips back the few inches I have between her body and the mattress then slam back into her.

My thighs are going to burn if I keep this up, but she puts her hands on my chest and starts to ride me. I let my body relax, let her set the pace as she swirls her hips, forcing me impossibly deep inside her.

I let out a guttural groan while she whimpers, her nails digging into my chest, but she doesn't stop her movement.

I am completely enthralled by her, obsessed. I never understood how my club brothers could be so turned around by their women, but I get it now. I understand completely because there are no lines I won't cross when it comes to her. She has nightmares about what happened in that room, and so do I, but I would have chewed my own arm down to the bone to escape those ropes if I'd needed to. There is no world in which I'm willing to live without Skye.

My gaze drifts of its own accord to the line across the left side of her stomach, where Scarlett had tried to cut out our child. I hate that she was able to get that close, to mark her at all, but it's a reminder that I will never fail again. I'll do whatever it takes to protect her from everyone, including her fucking father.

The Frasers are helping us try to find Desmond Richardson, but that hasn't been an easy task. That cunt is as slippery as a fucking eel. When I catch up to him, I'm going to gut him. Every little thing that has happened to Skye is his fault. He should've been a better father. He should've been the one to protect her from psycho Scarlett.

Skye's movements slow before they stop completely, and her brows come together. "What's wrong?"

I guess the dark turn my thoughts took must have played out on my face. I grab her hips, urging her to continue. "Don't

stop,” I order.

Her eyes narrow slightly, but she circles her hips again, and I close my eyes as my balls start to tighten. All thoughts disappear from my mind. There is nothing but the feel of her and the sensations building inside me.

I focus on breathing, steady inhalations followed by ragged exhales, and the sound of her whimpers and moans drags me closer to the edge.

Pulling one hand from her hip, I press it against her clit, circling and rubbing at the sensitive nub in a way I have come to know she likes.

She throws her head back as her cunt squeezes me so tight, I see stars. The orgasm ripples through her, making her fall forwards onto her hands, choked breaths struggling to get through her corded throat.

It’s enough to send me over the edge with her. With a strangled groan, I spill my load inside her, her pussy dragging every last drop from me.

I blink at the ceiling, dizzy and elated all at the same time. I’m pretty sure if I tried to stand up, my legs would fold, so I drag her against my chest.

I lose her heat as my cock slips free of her wetness, but the sensation of her breasts and stomach against me is reward enough.

Skye’s hands rest against me, her cheek pressed to my skin just above my heart. This moment here, this is the one I lock into my memories. I never want to forget it or lose it.

I never want to lose her.

“You’re everything to me,” I tell her, and as she lifts her head to look at me, I take the opportunity to kiss her.

“As long as you know you’re everything to me,” she says when we break apart.

We take our time getting up, showering together before getting dressed. She’s pulled on a cute skater kind of dress that fits tight under her tits but flares above her stomach, hiding her

pregnancy from those who don't know. She couples it with a pair of tights and ankle boots that make my cock solid in my jeans.

Hand-in-hand, we make our way down to the common room, and when we step inside, I get the instant feeling something is wrong.

The room being busy isn't unusual, not even for this time of day, but there is a frantic tension in the air. I tighten my grip on Skye's hand as I spot Hawk talking with Socket.

He notices me and immediately walks towards me, pushing through the crowd of brothers. There are no old ladies here, and I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing.

"What's going on?" I don't give him a chance to say anything before I ask the question. The unease swirling through my stomach is eroding the happiness I felt only moments ago.

Hawk winces, as if this question pains him. His gaze slides from me to Skye in a way that makes me want to punch the answer out of him.

"I'll make myself scarce if you need to talk," Skye says, and I love her so much for understanding our world without any hint of anger.

"No need to, sweetheart. This'll be public knowledge by the end of the day. We had church this morning. Trick..."

I feel Skye stiffen, her fingers flexing in mine unintentionally. Even hearing that cunt's name is enough to fan the flames of my anger. I still want to kill the fucker for putting his hands on my woman, but where he's been is a secret no one wants to share.

"What about him?" I demand gruffly.

"Beau." Skye says my name softly, dousing some of my anger.

"Howler sent him to London. He's been having therapy sessions with some big shrink down there that the club knows."

“I don’t give a fuck what he’s doing. You keep him away from me and away from Skye. If I see him again, I’ll fucking kill him.”

I truly mean that. Skye wore bruises around her neck for a week after he attacked her in this very fucking room. I feel my anger bubbling within me, and it’s only Skye’s hold on my hand that stops it from erupting out of me.

“The table voted. He’s coming home.”

It takes everything I have not to grab him by the front of his kutte. “What the fuck do you mean he’s coming home? He tried to kill my woman. You think I want him near Skye and my baby?”

Hawk raises his hands, his stance defensive, but I’m ready to attack. “Just calm down for a second. I understand that you’re pissed—”

“You have no idea what I want to do to that fucker.”

“Believe me, kid, I do.”

“I’m going to give you guys a moment,” Skye says, slipping free of my hand. I try to grab her again, suddenly needing her right at my side. “I’m just going to grab some breakfast. I won’t go far.”

The fact she understands where my brain has gone and knows how to reassure me would usually warm me, but the fire burning in my gut has nothing to do with her.

“Come straight back to me when you’re done.” I don’t mean to sound brusque, but if he is already here, I need her at my side.

She nods and slips away, moving through the crowd towards the kitchen. Every fibre of my body urges me to follow her, but instead, I turn back to Hawk. “How the hell can he be allowed to come back after what he did?”

From the look on his face, I’m not going to like his answer. “She ain’t an old lady.”

My eyes flare wide. “He’s allowed to come back on a technicality? You really want him around Wren? Around your

girls?”

“He’s trying to make amends.”

I scoff at him, my fingers flexing at my sides. “Is that a fucking joke? He wrapped his hand around Skye’s neck. He would have killed her if I hadn’t dragged him off.”

“I don’t like this either, but rules are rules. Technically, he didn’t break any of them. Skye isn’t officially claimed, and he’s still a brother.”

I scrub a hand over my face, needing something to do so I don’t unleash on him. “She’s mine, and everyone in this fucking club knows it.”

Hawk peers at me with sympathy in his eyes. I see he’s not happy with this decision either, but he’s not an officer. Like me, he doesn’t get a say at the table.

“If I’d been in a position to, I would’ve voted against him coming back.”

I spot Howler across the room talking with the VP, and ignoring whatever Hawk says next, I make a beeline for him. As if sensing my approach, his gaze slides towards me and he watches as I get closer, not an ounce of fear in his eyes.

“I need a word.”

Howler slides his glass onto the top of the bar without a word and turns towards his office. I trail after him, trying to control my emotions.

As we step inside, I shut the door behind us and calm goes out the window. “I’m claiming Skye.”

Howler rounds the desk, sinking into his chair. “You know about Trick,” he correctly surmises.

“We ain’t staying here unless she has protection from that animal.”

Howler steepled his fingers, bringing the points to his mouth. “You’ve had weeks to claim the girl. Why haven’t you yet?”

Because I’m fucking stupid.

Because Skye and I have been living in our own bubble since we got back.

Because I didn't think I needed to make official how I feel about my woman.

"I didn't realise that anyone could disrespect the person I love in this club just because she doesn't have a property patch on her back. Is that what the Sons is about?"

Anger ripples across his face. "Be careful."

I clamp my jaw together, holding what I want to say behind my teeth.

"I'm not gonna sit here and argue with you about the merits of the man coming back or staying gone. The decision was made. He's coming back." The fucker. Before I can speak and let out more volatile words, Howler continues. "I know you're pissed. I would be too. We already voted in church to make Skye yours officially. They give her full protection of the club, although I don't think she'll need it. Trick wants to make amends. What he did to Skye opened his eyes to how far he'd fallen."

"I'm so happy him trying to kill my girl snapped the crazy out of him," I mutter sarcastically.

Howler glares at me, and I wonder if he's thinking about smacking the shit out of me. "You missed the important part in what I just said. We officially made Skye an old lady this morning."

I did miss that part. It deflates some of my righteous rage. "I need assurances. He tried to kill her. He hates Richardson, and Skye, for better or worse, is his daughter. I promise you if he so much as breathes in her direction, I will kill him. I'm done playing games with her safety."

"Understood."

I shake my head, dropping my hands onto my hips as I try to make sense of this. "I got in a few fights, pissed a few people off, and I got exiled to another location. He stokes this war, killing countless people, tries to kill my girl, completely

ignores his fucking kid, and he gets to come back like nothing happened? How the fuck is that fair?"

"He ain't coming back like nothing happened," Howler says. "He's lost his seat at the table. His position as road captain, too. The only way he gets to stay is if he accepts being bumped back down to prospect status. He's gonna have to earn his place back in this club."

That helps a little, but it doesn't change the history. "You keep him away from my old lady," I say, liking how that sounds.

Because she is mine, and the lengths I will go to keep her safe scare me. There are no lines I won't cross, there is nowhere on earth I won't go to find her if she's taken from me again, and while the anger inside me has been lessened by her presence, all it would take is something happening to her to obliterate any progress I've made.

"The way you feel about Skye is how he felt about Mara. Ain't excusing his behaviour but also ain't saying I wouldn't do the same if I was in his shoes. Hearing you talk, ain't sure you wouldn't either."

That assessment is enough to shut me up. Because as much as I fucking hate that prick, I also know in his situation, I would've lost my mind as well.

"Just keep him away from me."

I leave the room, resisting the urge to slam the door behind me. No matter the circumstances, I won't disrespect my president like that. When I get back into the common room, I instantly scan through the crowd for Skye.

She's sitting at a table with Hawk, as if he's watching over her, and I'm grateful for that.

As I approach, Hawk lifts his eyes to me, and I see the question in them.

Is everything okay?

I give him a slight nod before taking the chair next to Skye. She's making her way through a piece of toast with

sliced tomatoes and what looks like sugar or salt.

Hawk stands, clamping a hand on my shoulder before he walks away, leaving me with Skye.

“You okay?” Skye sounds worried.

I give her a tight nod, not sure that’s the word I would use to describe how I feel right now. “What are you eating?”

“Probably best you don’t know.” She smiles, but it quickly fades. “So, he’s coming back?”

I blow out a breath, hating how tense she is about this. “You don’t have to worry. He won’t lay a finger on you again. Not now that I’ve officially claimed you.”

Her eyes lift to meet mine. “You’ve claimed me?”

I wrap a hand around her nape, drawing her head forwards so our mouths are inches from each other. “I claimed you the moment you walked into that fucking bar. You’ve always been mine. I don’t need to put a patch on your back to know that, but it legitimises you in the eyes of the club. There are serious repercussions for touching an old lady. It will offer some protection.”

Her mouth curves into a small smile. “Thank you for always taking care of me.”

She kisses me, and I didn’t realise until this second how much I needed to feel close to her. I slide my tongue through the seam of her mouth, the taste of tomato mixing with—

I pull back, unable to stop from spluttering as my tastebuds are infused. “You put salt on your toast?”

She winces. “Don’t look at me like that. This is partly your fault. Your baby, for some reason, needs salt and tomatoes.” She shoves me away, picking her toast back up and taking a sassy bite.

“Babe, that’s fucking disgusting. How are you eating that?”

“It tastes fine to me.”

I take the toast from her, placing it back on the plate and ignoring the salt covering her tongue, then I kiss her like she's the air I need in my lungs to breathe.

EPILOGUE

TRICK

There's a ticking noise in my head, a clock endlessly counting down the seconds that have passed since I lost my wife. Time is supposed to make grief lessen, to heal all wounds, but it has only deepened the pain inside me.

Mara fills my head, vying for space among the demons created the day she was murdered. The ache I have for her is constant and unrelenting. My guts are a solid ball inside me, and my thoughts are chaotic as I try to find just one moment of peace.

I watched her life drain out of her between one beat of my heart and the next. Hers never beat again. She was frozen in that second, lost to me in a place I can't follow her to. I would give anything to see one of her smiles, or to hold her against my chest, her head notching under my chin in the way I liked.

I close my eyes, hoping to drag her image from my memory banks, but holding onto Mara is becoming harder with every passing day. I can barely see her anymore. I don't remember what her eyes looked like, and I can't hear her voice.

There is a raw agony that tears through me, knowing soon she will be nothing more than smoke in the air, that her body is in the ground, breaking down day by day. I'll never see or touch my wife again, and that knowledge pushes me to the edge of my sanity.

“You ready?”

I glance up at Blackjack. He's leaning against the door jamb, his heavy-set frame blocking out the light behind it. The

small bedsit I've been living in the past few months while I got my head together is not a gift. It's a reminder that I'm not trusted enough to be in the clubhouse full-time.

But that changes today.

Today, I have to face my past, and I can only hope I'm strong enough to do it.

I'm not the same man I was, and I'm not sure I'll ever be. For a long time, spilling blood has been the only thing that appeases the darkness that encapsulates me. Murder allowed me to briefly step into the light and soak in its warmth. It allowed me to cling a little tighter to those memories of my wife.

I'm not sure how I'm meant to bury those feelings without the violence, but I have to try.

The image of that young girl flashes in front of my eyes. I would've killed her, and I fully intended to. All I saw was Richardson's daughter, living, breathing, and sitting in the room where my wife used to. Shame slithers through me. I'm not oblivious to the fact Mara would hate who I have become. She would never forgive me for putting hands on a woman.

I don't either.

That's not who I am. That's never been who I am.

Blackjack steps into the room and places something on the bed next to me.

For a moment, I can't bring my eyes to move, but then I slowly slide them across, taking in the leather and patches. I worked so hard to gain my colours, to prove to my president that I was worthy of wearing it. When I became Road Captain, I couldn't hide the pride I felt to be trusted with such an important role.

I've broken every link in the chain that tethered me to my brothers, and because of that, I haven't worn it since the first murder. I'm no longer worthy of the patch, of the protection of my club. The things I've done, the evil I've committed, and the risk I've placed on my brothers and their families is unforgiveable.

How can I ever put it back on?

“I don’t deserve to wear that,” I mutter, turning away from it.

“No,” he says, “you don’t, not right now, but you can earn it again.”

He picks it up and thrusts it in my direction, giving me no choice but to take it from him. As I open it out, I see some of my patches have been removed, including the ‘Road Captain’ one and my bottom rocker. It’s a kick in the gut, even though it’s far more than I deserve.

“You’re gonna have to start from the bottom up again, prove to everyone in the building that you can be trusted.”

I rub my fingers over the leather, a heaviness settling in the pit of my stomach.

There’s no way to go back to the life I had when Mara was alive.

“I’ll do whatever it takes.” I swallow down the lump in my throat as I slip my arms into the garment. It doesn’t fit quite as snugly as it did before. My frame is smaller, my bulk too.

“Come on.”

I hate the chasm between us. Blackjack and I have always been good friends, but I see the mistrust in his eyes now. I can’t blame him for that. I broke everyone’s trust.

Including my daughter’s.

I’m unable to breathe when I think about her. I ache to be with Sophia, to be the kind of father who tucks her in at bedtime and loves on her unapologetically, but how can I be around someone so pure, so innocent, knowing the things I’ve done? I’m a monster, a vile, evil man. I’ve killed so many men in the name of vengeance that I can no longer breathe when I think about any of those fucking cunts.

There is an emptiness within me that scares me half to death. I’ve done things I didn’t think possible, and worst still, I liked it. I’m covered in the sins of my actions, and I’m

dripping in the blood of the men I've killed. But that was my choice, and now, I must live with those consequences.

I grab my holdall from the side of the pull-out couch, heaving it over my shoulder. These are the only possessions I've had in the weeks since I came back to the club.

Following Blackjack out of the building, I see his bike is parked up next to mine. I secure the bag to the back of my hog before I climb on, pulling my helmet over my head.

The rumble of our engines is a soothing sound, so familiar to me, it calms the pounding in my chest. I would be a liar if I said I'm not nervous. I haven't seen Sophia since she was born other than glimpses when I'd come to the clubhouse between killing sprees. And I know it's long past time for me to be around her, but there is still part of me that wants to protect her from the monster I've become.

But that is no longer a choice I have. Part of making amends includes Sophia.

As we get closer to the house, my insides twist. I haven't been back to the house since Mara died, and when we pull onto the street, it takes everything I have not to ride away.

It looks the same. The big front bay window overlooking a small lawn area filled with flowerbeds. The redbrick frontage offsetting the dark wood frames of the windows and doors.

I swallow down the emotions clogging my throat. The last time I saw Mara alive and well was in the hospital with Brewer. I cling to those memories, imagining that she's just at work, that she'll be home later, full of stories about what happened in her day.

I park in the driveway behind a small car I know is Heidi's. She's been living here, raising my daughter in mine and Mara's home, and I'm grateful that she gave up so much of her time to take care of something that should've been my responsibility.

A hand on my shoulder has me turning to look at the man I once considered closer than family. "You okay?"

I nod, even though I'm not. "It's time for me to rebuild the bridges I burned."

Blackjack studies me for a moment, and I wish I could read his expression. I used to be able to, but he's a closed book to me now. "Yeah, it is."

He gives me a nudge towards the front door, and the walk up the driveway feels as difficult as climbing up a mountain face.

I pause for the briefest of moments, collecting myself before I push the handle down and step into the hallway.

Everything looks the same, but it feels different. This place had always been warm, and coming home was the best part of my day, but the cold seeps into my bones as I move towards the living room.

As I round the door, I glimpse Heidi sitting on the sofa, her feet tucked under her in the same way Mara used to. It sends a sharp pain through my chest, stealing my breath momentarily, but a babbling sound snares my attention.

Sophia is sitting on the floor, a colourful play mat beneath her and toys scattered around her. It feels as if a pickaxe is being driven into my chest as I take her in. She's no longer a tiny infant, and I can see a little of my wife in her features as she locks her bright blue eyes on me.

Time stands still as I stare at the child we made. Fear mixes in my blood vessels, making my heart beat faster. Sophia glances away, dismissing me in favour of picking up a plastic ring, which finds its way into her mouth.

There is no recognition that I'm her father, and why would there be? I haven't been anything to her in these long months since she was born.

Before I can move or do anything, Heidi comes to her feet, stepping between me and my daughter. "Okay, he's seen her. He can go now." These words are aimed at Blackjack, who's standing behind me.

"He's her father."

“No, I am the only person Sophia knows. You don’t get to check back in after nearly a year to play parent now. I’m the one who put her to bed every night. I’m the one who soothed her when she had a fever or couldn’t sleep. I’ve been with her for every feed, every nappy change, every milestone. I’m the one who named her. I’m not going to let you take her from me.”

Blackjack steps around me, the tension in the air thick enough that Sophia turns to look.

I lift my arm, blocking his way. “You’re right. I don’t deserve a second chance. What I’ve done is unforgivable, but I’m asking for one anyway. I want to know my daughter. I want to be a good father. And I can never thank you enough for everything you have done for Sophia. My intention isn’t to push you out, Heidi, or take you from my daughter. You’re all she’s ever known. But I will be a part of her life.”

Her mouth sets tight as I step towards my child. Slowly, I bend down onto my haunches in front of her. The storm inside me continues to swirl, threatening to unhinge me as I gently run my fingers over her soft hair. She’s perfect in every way.

My daughter lifts dark lashes to look at me, and my walls topple. I need her in my arms, so I carefully lift her, standing as I do. I expect the baby to fuss at being picked up by a stranger, but she doesn’t.

There are only a few times in my life when I’ve cried, so I’m surprised when tears clog the back of my throat. She feels so small, so vulnerable, and it terrifies me knowing the darkness that exists out there. There are so many things that can hurt her, destroy her.

Hugging her to me, my hand pressed against her tiny back, I breathe in her smell. “Hey, baby. I’m your dad, and I’ve been a really shitty one, but I promise I’m going to do better.”

And I have to, not just for Sophia but because it’s the only way to honour the memory of my wife.

The story continues in Trick’s book.

*Read Trick's story book 8, the next and final instalment in the
Untamed Sons MC - Manchester Chapter.*

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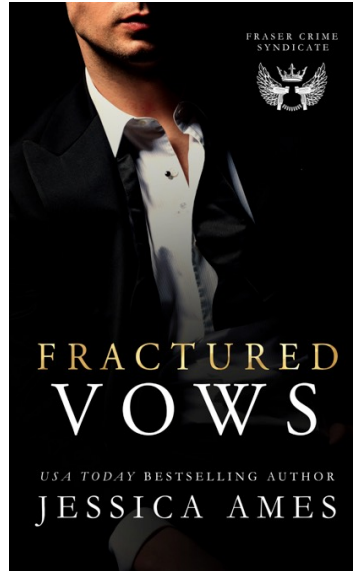
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FRACTURED VOWS

FRASER CRIME SYNDICATE

BOOK 1



Sariah

4 weeks, 28 days, 672 hours—that’s all I have left until my fate is sealed.

I am promised to a monster. A man twice my age. He plans to keep me like a pretty doll, making me move to whatever whims he has.

Trapped, all my choices are taken away apart from one.

A handsome stranger. He tells me his name is Lucas and for one night I’m able to leave my cursed future behind. The pull to Lucas is unexplainable and undeniable. One thing is certain—I have to find a way out of this arranged marriage. I have to claim my life back. And Lucas might be the key.

Lucas

Sariah has secrets. I can see it in her eyes. There’s a sadness that swirls within them, a fear of what we’re doing. I want to know who put that look on her face and protect her from it. I will burn the world to ashes to keep her safe.

But when the truth is revealed, and I learn she is being forced to wed a man who has a reputation darker than my own, I

realise how much danger Sariah is in. I'm not sure the might of the Fraser crime family will be enough to save her life.

Or mine.

Chapter One

Sariah

(TW: SA)

For as long as I can remember I've dreamed of Death.

He's not dressed in black, and he doesn't have a scythe either, but Death haunts my steps, following me like a rabid dog that needs to be put out of its misery. I know why Death is constantly on my mind.

Because of her.

Because of what *he* did.

Because of what I allowed.

I stare down at my hands, expecting to see red. They are clean, but I can feel the blood coating them. I kept my silence all these years and hid the truth from the world. I should have spoken up, but I was scared. That cowardice pains me more than the thought of dying.

“You say she's eighteen?”

The question breaks me from my morbid thoughts. I zone in on the man standing in front of me.

Jeremiah Wood.

Head of the Wood Syndicate.

And the man my father is forcing me to marry.

He's older, in his fifties and not unattractive, but as his rough hand runs over my cheek I have to swallow back the bile.

“Recently turned,” my father says in a detached tone.

Barely a week ago.

My birthday wasn't a celebration. There was no cake and no banners. No presents either. My father only acknowledged the day with a callous reminder that I am old enough to be married. He didn't waste any time calling this meeting to start the process of joining me to a man they call "the Butcher."

I watch as Jeremiah circles me, a vulture waiting to swoop in and devour his prey. That's what I am: a possession. An object.

Soulless.

I lost my soul when my mother was murdered. My heart still beats but I'm not alive. I haven't been from the moment my mother was murdered.

She would never have allowed him to treat me like a business deal.

She would have fought my father every step of the way.

My stomach twists as I meet my father's gaze. There's not a hint of remorse or sadness for what he's forcing me into. Whatever feelings he may have had for me in the past no longer exist and haven't since the night my mother spilt her secrets.

My father's steely eyes meet mine, unrepentant.

He doesn't care that he's selling me to a man who is old enough to be my grandfather.

He doesn't care that my body will be used and abused at Jeremiah's whims.

He doesn't care that I will be deeply unhappy.

This is the way of our world.

London is run by a number of crime families, gangs, and motorcycle clubs. There are three main families: the Eastons, the Frasers, and the Adams.

The Farleys and Blackwoods are gone, both taken out by the Untamed Sons Motorcycle Club—the former with the help of the Frasers.

My father doesn't tell me the ins and outs of his empire, the sticky, dirty secrets that weave through the complex webs they create, but I hear things. I've learnt it pays to be one step ahead and to know what's coming before it hits you between the eyes.

The only thing that matters is building alliances.

That's all I am—a bargaining chip. Giving me to Jeremiah will ensure strong ties between the Easton and the Wood syndicates. It will secure both families' futures while in turn destroying mine. I will become the ashes of the fire they light. Caught in the crossfire of whatever war they are cooking up.

Jeremiah's greedy gaze roams over my body, as if he already owns it. He's imagining the ways he's going to rip my virginity from me, I'm sure. The thought makes panic cling to my veins.

I resist the urge to recoil, knowing it will anger him and inflame my father. My clothes hide the evidence of the last beating he gave me, but the ache in my chest reminds me he has the power to hurt with more than words.

Jeremiah cups my face, turning my head this way and that, trying to get a good look at his purchase. He may not have bought me with money, but he owns me nevertheless, and I can't ever forget that. My life is not mine. I belonged first to my father, and now to Jeremiah.

I keep my expression neutral even as I scream internally. Every inch of my body feels like it's burning.

I want to retch.

Instead, I steel my spine, lift my chin a little higher and try to disappear into my head. I try to find sanctuary in the memories of my mother, of the days when my father wasn't a monster—to me at least. On some level he's always been the devil in a suit and tie, but his cruelty towards me only started when our dirty little secret was exposed. One my mother carried with her for years.

I'm not his daughter.

Declan Easton could deal with almost anything, but knowing his progeny didn't have a drop of his own blood within her shredded the last piece of humanity he had left.

He's hated me every moment since.

This is a secret he will take to the grave. No one will ever know the truth. It would weaken him if people knew he is not my father. It would make his crown slip off his head a little. How can a man rule if he can't even keep his wife in his bed?

So we perpetuate this lie. Him, to save face. Me, because it's safer to be under his care than outside of it.

"She will do," Jeremiah says finally, as if he's passing judgement on an ornament and not a person. He dips his head and presses his lips to mine.

It takes everything I have not to push him away. I endure the act without protest, but I don't reciprocate it. I'm frozen in terror that things could go further and that my father would not stop it.

Jeremiah collars the back of my neck possessively, his fingers digging into my nape so hard it makes me wince. He's claiming ownership, letting me know I am his and there is nothing I can do about it.

He deepens the kiss, his tongue sliding along the seam of my mouth, pushing, demanding entry. I don't want to give it. It's more than I can stand. I pull away, ripping my lips from his and turning my head to the side.

I feel violated.

Dirty.

And this was only a kiss.

My father moves towards us, his expression conciliatory. "She's just shy," he tells Jeremiah even as he grabs my wrist and squeezes it so hard tears want to form in my eyes. It feels like he's trying to shatter the bone. Shatter me. "Give her a little time, and she'll warm up. The girl hasn't been around men much."

The anger clouding Jeremiah's face dissipates a little at my father's assurance that I'm not defective and that I am pure. That I do want him. Another hard squeeze to my wrist has me forcing a smile. It's a mask I hide behind. I feel the bars of the cage surrounding me, fencing me in as Jeremiah returns his attention to me. He grabs my chin, his grip bruising.

"You will be the perfect wife. I don't like to be embarrassed." I hear the unspoken threat clearly.

Be good. Toe the line or face the consequences.

I lower my eyes and nod. I hate myself for doing it. I hate the weakness I'm showing, but this is not a situation I can survive without being submissive.

Jeremiah leans into me, his mouth going to the shell of my ear as his hand cups me between my legs. My dress does nothing to protect me from his touch, and I can't stop from drawing in a breath as his fingers stroke me through my underwear. I want to shove him away. I want to make this intrusion stop, but I freeze, my brain unable to compute the violation taking place, unable to believe my father is standing there allowing this to happen.

He's not my father...

He may make you call him that, but Declan Easton is nothing to you, and you are nothing to him.

Jeremiah tears through my thoughts as he speaks into my ear. His breath is heated against my skin and it makes me tremble with terror. "Your pussy belongs to me. I'm going to enjoy being the first man in your cunt." He rubs me harder and a thousand thoughts collide in my brain. Nausea climbs up my throat and I feel rooted to the ground. This is a dream. A bad dream.

But I'm not waking up.

My heart is pounding in time with the roaring in my ears. I want to fight. I want to stop this, but I'm no match for two grown men who will put a bullet in me if I don't do as I'm told.

I know this because my father ended my mother's life for her betrayal. He killed her and he covered it up. Men like him get away with murder and there's nothing anyone can do. Justice is an elusive concept in my world. There's only blood and destruction. There are only winners and losers. People like me don't come out on top. We fall with the rest of the pawns on the chessboard while the kings watch safely from their towers built of ivory.

My father denies he killed her, of course he does, but I know the truth. He loved my mother before her indiscretion. Loved her like she was his reason for breathing. That he was so easily able to steal her life tells me he would have no issue doing the same to me.

Because Declan Easton—the only father I've ever known—does not love me.

Maybe he did once, and it's that hope I hold on to. I'm still the little girl in the pale pink dress trying to get her father's attention, even though I know he will never give it to me. In reality I am a dirty secret. I don't know why he didn't kill me too.

Some days I wish he had.

Jeremiah pulls back a little and scans my eyes. The dark storm clouds that swirl in his gaze terrify me. They hint at the monster he is and at the horror my life is about to become. Life with my father has been difficult, but Jeremiah means to own me body and soul.

“The wedding will take place in four weeks' time,” he tells me. “I wanted sooner, but that's the quickest it can be done.” A shiver runs up my spine, icy claws clutching at my heart. It takes everything in me not to pull away as he takes his hand from between my legs and brushes my hair off my face, as if he didn't just violate me.

Four weeks.

That's the only reprieve I get.

“You really are very beautiful, Sariah.” He leans forward and I steel myself, thinking he's about to kiss me again. He

does, but this time he brushes his lips over my cheek. I shudder internally.

“Until we meet again,” he says.

He pulls back and I stand frozen to the spot as he goes to my father. They talk for a moment, though I have no idea what they say. My mind is locked on what happened. My skin slithers with disgust. I feel like a thousand ants are climbing over me.

I barely register the door opening and then closing again. I remain transfixed in the spot Jeremiah left me in.

My soon-to-be husband.

My mouth tastes like ash.

Without warning my father slams his hand around my throat. He pushes me back so my spine hits the plasterwork behind me. My feet scramble to keep upright and it's only his hold on me that keeps me from falling on my face.

He tightens his grip on my neck, and with nowhere to go, I do the only thing I can to relieve the pressure. I lift my head, which exposes the soft underside of my throat even more.

“Do you enjoy embarrassing me?” he demands. “He owns you! Every part of you, Sariah. You have no right to pull away from him!”

He will have expected me to bow and scrape to Jeremiah, act like the dutiful wife-to-be. His eyes blaze as he takes me in, spittle collecting at the sides of his mouth. I've seen him angry more times than I can count over the years. His rage is quick to blow and slow to die down. Like a volcano, his temper is explosive.

He's glaring at me like wants to squeeze the life out of me. I should feel terror at that, but I'm not afraid to die. Living is more terrifying than any end my father could give me.

His fingers are like vices, crushing my windpipe. My survival instinct kicks in, a desperate need to live, even if my head wants to be put out of its misery. I jolt back, trying to move his hand. When that doesn't work, I claw at his hand.

My nails rake over his skin and his blood bubbles up. He doesn't even register my attempts to free myself. My eyes find his and all I see reflected back at me is pure hate.

He slams his fist into my side hard enough that white spots dance across my vision even as the edges are starting to darken. My ribs protest, pain radiating out like an atomic blast from the site of impact. He releases his hold on my throat so that I can suck in a breath.

Turning me, he shoves me against the wall, pressing my face into the plaster, his chest to my back. His weight constricts my lungs, stopping my chest from moving to draw in air. "You will marry Jeremiah Wood. You will protect this family's name, and you will be a dutiful fucking wife. You owe me this much."

Fear keeps my words lodged in my throat. My father is a killer and I'm in his hands. He releases me and storms from the room. I stay locked in position, listening to his retreating footsteps before the door opens and slams shut. I don't let the tears fall, even though they want to.

Carefully, I push away from the wall and move over to the sofa. Bruised and shattered, I sink gingerly onto it, holding my aching ribs, my heart racing in my chest.

I will marry Jeremiah. I will walk down that aisle in front of the hundreds of people and I will plaster a fake smile on my face, because what other choice is there? If I refuse my father will kill me, and while I dream of death, I'm not sure I covet it. I want freedom, not an end to my life. I want to live without the cage keeping me captive. I want to travel. I want to see the world. I want to experience things other normal teenagers do.

I want my decisions to be my own.

Jeremiah thinks he will be the first man between my legs?

No.

If that monster thinks he's getting my virginity, he's wrong. It seems like such a small thing to care about, but I have to fight the battles I can. This is something I can control. I would rather let a stranger fuck me than suffer the indignity

of my first time with a man I despise. At least it will be on my terms then. At least I will have the ability to choose.

I just have to find someone.

And fast.

Because in four weeks' time, my life will be controlled completely by Jeremiah Wood, and I get the feeling he is a worst beast than my father.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Ames is a dark romance author who lives in a small market town in the Midlands, England. She lives with her dog and when she's not writing, she's thinking about writing or reading other people's writing.

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