



# SCAR

UNDERGROUND VENGEANCE MC

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Scar

An Underground Vengeance MC  
Romance, Montana Chapter

Liv Brywood

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*“From every wound, there is a scar, and every scar tells a story. A story that says, I survived.”*

~ Craig Scott

# Chapter 1: Scar

My Harley rumbles beneath me as I roar down a twisted mountain road, skirting that thrilling line between freedom and death. I hug the white stripe dividing the lanes, leaning hard, daring fate to come for me. I've been riding for hours, but I've got to get back to the clubhouse. Church starts at three p.m. every Friday afternoon, and there's hell to pay if you're late. It's my own damn rule, so I can't violate it.

As president of the Underground Vengeance Motorcycle Club, Montana Chapter, I have a duty to set expectations. Being late is completely unacceptable. It's something I just don't do. And I never make exceptions, not even for myself. Especially not for myself. I don't deserve a break. Not after what I've done.

I roll the throttle back, pushing past 100 mph. It's just plain stupid to take turns at this speed, but I lean into the controlled chaos anyway, trusting the physics of friction with my life. See, I'm not afraid of death. It's going to come for me one way or another. And it's tried before. Believe me. It's always right behind me, licking at my heels, blowing its hot, sulfurous breath across the back of my neck. Death can be so seductive. It would be so easy to leave this place. To run toward the only surefire way to escape my pain.

And Death *wants* me.

It's already tried to claim me a thousand times. The first time it came for me, I was young and defenseless. But I'm smarter now. Wiser. And I'm not ready to let it take me. Not yet, anyway. A switchback road isn't powerful enough to end my life. I've survived worse. Much worse.

When I was too little to understand true evil, a monster took me in. A perverse psychopath. A man who wore two faces. In public, Jonathan Blackstone was a wealthy Silicon Valley mogul who adopted underprivileged orphans, lifting them out of poverty and into a life of luxury. But in private, he became a demented monster, preying on us and feasting on our innocence until he destroyed it. And he wasn't alone. He had

dozens of equally deviant friends who liked little boys. And the things they did to us ...

A shiver of revulsion trembles through my belly. My vision blurs as my heart pounds. My hands sweat into my leather gloves. I count my heartbeats, letting their rhythmic sense of order bring me back into the present. I can't lose focus and die on this road. I want to live long enough to kill every last one of them. Slowly. Painfully. One by one. Until I get to Blackstone, the biggest monster of them all. He deserves a special form of vengeance, and I intend to give it to him.

Despite everything that happened, despite all those years in hell, I'm still breathing. Back then, there were times I wasn't sure if I'd live to see morning. Times I wasn't sure if I'd have enough strength to take one more breath. Hell, there were times I wanted to give up. Times I didn't think I could keep going. Times I just wanted to end it all. But I didn't. I survived. I lived ... If you can call this a life.

I'm scarred beyond belief, both inside and out. And so are my club brothers. We suffered at the hands of that twisted psychopath, Jonathan Blackstone. We were just children. But he didn't care. Neither did his friends. They didn't have a single ounce of compassion. Blackstone and his friends spent years ripping our souls out of our bodies. We survived torture, degradation, and pain beyond anything a normal person could ever comprehend.

We did it because we had to.

We did it for each other.

We lived long enough to escape, but not all of us made it out alive. I'll never forget the ones who never left that damp dungeon. The little souls left wrecked and ruined on the floor, scooped up like trash to be disposed of. Forgotten by everyone. But not me. I'll never forget. For them, I keep going. I keep fighting. And one day, I'm going to make Blackstone pay for what he did to us. All of us. By the time I'm done with him, he'll be begging me to kill him.

I'm spaced the fuck out, sucked down into the pit of tormented memories, when I almost miss the cut-off to the bar

and clubhouse. After a slight skid, I pull off the highway into the large, dirt parking lot outside the bar. Several bikes are parked in a row along the wooden porch. None of them belong to my club's members. We park out back by the clubhouse.

As I ride past the bar, two men wearing colors from another club step out. I don't mind having patrons from friendly clubs, but there's one club we don't want around. Blackstone's club. The Demon Riders. He funds them. Matrix, our club's Secretary and resident hacker, found evidence that their club runs drugs and guns, and they might be helping Blackstone to traffic kids. Matrix is still digging into their financials to see what he can find out.

I park next to the large, ranch-style home we live in and use as our clubhouse. It's painted country white, something I insisted on. Colors have power, and I want the house to be as peaceful and serene as possible. I don't deserve it, but the others do.

After swinging my leg over the bike, I pull my helmet off and carry it inside. I've only got two minutes to spare, so I hurry through the large living room, past the pool table, and down the hall to the meeting room. This is where we hold Church, our weekly meeting.

The guys are already gathered around the table Talon made from old barn wood he found on the property. I sit at the head of the table. A large, antique clock hangs high on the wall opposite where I'm seated. It strikes three. I grab the gavel off the table, then slam it down.

"Church is in session. Let's start by going over what happened with Amber and Charlie during last night's run."

"What a shit show," Matrix grumbles, washing his hand down his face.

Nitro bounces in his chair. He's probably hopped up on enough sugar and caffeine to kill a small elephant. "I sent two prospects over to keep an eye on them. No sign of her ex-husband since the shootout."

"Who's watching his workplace?" I ask.

“One of the other prospects. He’s been sitting on the machine shop since midnight in case Rick shows up there. No sign of him yet,” Matrix says. “I should have thrown a tracker on his truck when he showed up at his ex-wife’s place.”

“Everything went tits up so fucking fast; you couldn’t have,” Talon says, crossing his beefy arms over his chest. His leather vest stretches to accommodate his massive size.

“Thanks,” Matrix says, giving Talon a brief nod.

“How’s the kid doing?” I ask.

“I called Amber a few minutes ago to get an update. She’s still freaked out, of course. Charlie’s not doing much better. She says he hasn’t said a word since his father tried to abduct him,” Nitro says.

“Okay, I want one of you on their house with one of the prospects until the hearing.” I open my phone to check the date. “It’s next week. Judge actually put a rush on it after what happened.”

“Too bad the cops couldn’t catch Rick either,” Nitro says.

“Assuming they even tried.” I shake my head. Around here, law enforcement seems more interested in protecting an abuser’s “good name” than the innocent kids they abuse. The more money one of these dirtbags has, the more likely they are to get off with a slap on the wrist. Something needs to change. These kids need someone to protect them, and we’re the only ones willing to do it. We’ll find a way to destroy the corrupt system and get justice for the victims. It’s our mission. We will not fail.

“Send me,” Reaper’s gravelly voice rumbles through the room. He’s sitting away from the others toward the opposite end of the table. He doesn’t say another word, but his fists clench. He’s not much for talking, so when he does speak, the rest of us listen.

“I want to send you, but a couple of sheriff’s deputies came by this morning asking if we knew anything about the Hamilton murder. We don’t know anything about that, do we?” I ask pointedly.



“Hum,” Reaper growls. His black eyes dart from one face to the next. I don’t know what he’s looking for, but he doesn’t find it.

“Marc Hamilton is a piece of shit wife beater who got what he deserved,” Talon says.

“If we’re going to operate the way we do, we don’t need any heat. Next time, make sure there’s no body.” I skewer Reaper with a look.

“Hum,” he growls, but I can see I made my point.

“Okay, what’s next?” I glance across the table at Nitro. “Where are we on the shooting range ride? After last night, some of you need more practice shooting from your bikes.”

“I talked to Nina. She says we can use the back pasture as long as we stay in the dirt and don’t tear up the grass. She’s moving the cattle in two weeks. Also, she said it’s May now, and the sun’s been shining, so as long as there’s no snow on Sunday, she wants family dinner to be a BBQ,” Talon says.

“Call the butcher and get some—”

“Done and done. Ribs, T-bones, sausage, and brisket. She finally gave me the recipe for her secret marinade. She was impressed with how I smoked her sausage last Sunday.” Talon grins wickedly.

“Watch your fucking mouth,” Nitro snarls. “She’s old enough to be our grandmother. Hell, she’s like the grandmother we never had.”

“You know I didn’t mean no disrespect, but she’s a fine-looking older woman. You have to admit, she wears her leathers well,” Talon says. “Down South where I grew up, a hot older woman like that would still get her fair share of eyes on her in any roadhouse.”

“I’ll tell her you said that,” Matrix teases.

“The hell you will!” Talon jumps out of his chair. “You know I respect that woman more than, well, anyone. I’m just messin’ around.”

“Sit your ass down,” I snap.

Talon glares at Matrix but takes his seat.

“What’s the update on Blackstone?” I ask Matrix.

“Charity gala tomorrow night. Nothing new this week. He’s still in Palo Alto for now. I’ve been keeping tabs on his ranch. Drove past it yesterday. Nothing going on other than the standard number of guards. No guests. No kids. No trucks going in or out. Just the weekly delivery of groceries and supplies. Nothing unusual.”

“We still don’t think anyone’s there other than staff, right?”

“Right.” Matrix nods while typing away at his laptop. He turns it around so we can all see the screen. There’s a live feed of the road leading up to Blackstone’s compound. A guard patrols the road, but otherwise, it’s empty. “I had to replace one of the external surveillance cameras on Wednesday because a bear used it as leverage to get up a tree, but it’s working now.”

“Did we miss anything while it was down?” I ask.

“No.” He turns the laptop back around. “I’ve got cameras covering the whole place. A small area wasn’t in view, but I could see enough from the other feeds. And I got out there right away.”

“Good. I wish we could get eyes inside the ranch, but every time we try to get within a mile of the place, we end up with guns in our faces.” I frown.

“Yeah, it’s a no-go for now. But I’m watching everyone coming and going. If anything changes, you’ll be the first to know,” Matrix says.

“Sounds good. Does anyone have anything they need to bring to the table?” I ask, looking around the room to make sure everyone’s had a chance to speak.

Frantic footsteps pound down the hall. I’m on my feet with my gun in my hand before the runner reaches the door. I yank it open. Holly, one of the cocktail waitresses, comes barreling in.

“There’s a guy in the bar, and he’s got a gun, and he’s screaming that he wants to talk to you, and he’s going to kill everyone if you don’t hurry up.” She’s talking so fast she’s tripping over her words.

“Calm down. What guy?” I demand as I start down the hall with her scurrying behind me.

“He’s big. Like three hundred pounds. And he’s got crazy eyes.”

“Stringy black hair and a snake tattoo on his neck?” I ask.

“Yeah.” She stops walking. “How did you—”

“Stay in the clubhouse. I don’t want you getting hurt. Talon, Reaper, back door. Nitro and Matrix, we’re going in the front.” I’m down the porch steps and running toward the bar with the others right behind me. They’ve got my back, and I’ve got theirs. We’re brothers. Maybe not by blood, but in every way that matters.

“I can’t believe that son of a bitch came here,” Nitro says, shaking his head.

“Rick’s got shit for brains,” I say as we split up.

“At least this time, his family’s not around,” Matrix says, flanking me.

“Good. They shouldn’t have to see what I’m about to do to him.”

I can’t wait to get my hands on the bastard. I saw his son Charlie’s medical file. His mom gave us access when we agreed to protect her and the kid. The boy’s only seven, but he’s seen enough shit to fuck him up for life. The last thing I’m going to do is let his asshole father escape justice again. This time he’s going to be the one with broken bones and bruises all over his body. He won’t get another chance to terrorize his son because after I’m done with him, he’ll be lucky to be alive.

## Chapter 2: Julia

I know something's terribly wrong the minute Max drags his feet into my office. As an elementary school nurse, I see all kinds of issues, from simple things like skinned knees to emergencies like ruptured appendixes. I can tell just by looking at this first-grader that he's terrified. I've been able to see energy fields around people for as long as I can remember. A murky, crimson aura shimmers around Max's body, and sparks of black flicker throughout it. This isn't the first time I've seen him like this.

"Max, come in, honey." I gesture to the chair next to the exam table. He eyes it but doesn't move toward it. Faint bruises encircle his wrists. They've faded to a mottled yellow and look much better than last week. I stamp down the sudden rush of anger. I need to stay calm, or he won't talk to me.

When he finally sits in the chair, I squat down, so I'm at eye level with him. "Are you feeling sick?"

His small legs dangle over the edge of the chair, and he swings them back and forth while averting his eyes. We've done this before, so I wait. Eventually, he'll open up to me.

I glance at the clock on the wall. School will be over in ten minutes. Summer break starts tomorrow. I can't wait to spend two months in my cabin by the river. After the year I've had, I need two years off, but I can't afford to lose this job.

Max stares at the clock.

"If you're not feeling well, you need to tell me. Remember what I said before? You can always tell me if something hurts." *Or if someone is hurting you*, I silently add. Not that I was of much help the other times he came to see me. I did everything I was supposed to do as a mandated reporter. The system failed him. I feel like I failed him, too.

"Can I come live with you?" he asks in a tiny voice.

"Why would you want to come live with me?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

“I have to go to my dad’s for summer vacation.” Tears well in his eyes, and he trembles hard enough to scrape the chair against the wall.

“I know. And I’m so sorry the judge didn’t put him in jail.”

“He’s a bad man.” Max’s face drops.

My heart breaks for him. Earlier in the school year, Max came into the office with bruises all over his arms. I reported it, but Max’s father, Lyle Curtis, is the County Sheriff. Lyle and the judge went to the same prep school together. By the time Max’s case came before the judge, Lyle had scared Max into telling the judge he’d lied about being hurt by his father. Never mind the medical reports or any of the other physical evidence. The judge threw out the case, and life went on for everyone except for Max. He still lives in terror, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

“I wish I could help,” I say.

“I want to come live with you instead.” His bottom lip trembles. “Dad’s going to hurt me bad if I go with him.”

He’s right. After five years of being a nurse, I’ve seen the pattern happen repeatedly. The abuse only gets worse until the abuser is finally thrown in prison, they kill their victim, or someone kills the abuser. Sometimes the darkest part of my soul wishes Max’s father would suffer the same fate, but I could never do anything like that. However, that doesn’t stop me from having evil fantasies about his father being shot by a criminal or driving over a cliff or getting struck by lightning. Sometimes I get more creative, and he gets eaten by a bear. If only I could somehow make that happen.

“You know I can’t take you home with me. It’s against the law,” I say.

“But you told me you’d keep me safe.”

“I tried. But your dad ...” I struggle with how to phrase this in a way a seven-year-old will understand. “He has very powerful friends.”

It's a terrible response, but I don't have anything else to give him.

"We can try calling your mom," I say.

"She's gone."

"What do you mean she's gone?" I still.

"She's going on an airplane to Paris for the summer. She packed all her stuff last night. She already went to the airport."

I sit at the computer and pull up his emergency contact file. I call his mother's number. Her voicemail picks up.

"Bonjour! I'm going to be in France for the summer. I'll be back on August twenty-fifth. I won't be checking voicemail, but you can email me at ..."

She rattles off her email address before the tone beeps.

"Ms. Curtis, this is Julia Brant. We met at the trial. I'm the nurse at your son's school. I need you to call me right away. I have an important matter to discuss with you." I hang up before sending an email to the address she provided in her voicemail. I CC her email address on file, too, in case she checks that email first.

"I guess she's really gone," I mutter.

Max sags against the wall before sliding off the chair and standing. His head hangs for several seconds before he raises his face to mine. The sorrow in his eyes shatters my heart.

"At least you tried before," he mutters before heading toward the door.

"Wait!" When he turns back toward me, there's so much hope in his eyes that I start talking without thinking. "You can't stay with me forever, but ... Just give me a minute to think."

As I pace back and forth, trying to come up with a plan, Max returns to the chair and sits. He's patient. Silent. And for the first time since he walked into the room, the black sparks are gone. His aura still burns red, but its vibration is less frantic.

The school bell rings, and kids scamper past the closed door like a herd of wild animals. The sound usually brings a smile to my face, but not today. I can't let him go to his father's house for the summer. But I can't kidnap him either. I don't have anywhere I can take him. He can't stay in my tiny apartment. The cabin's too rustic. It has well water, and it's solar powered, barely. I don't dare take him to my parent's house.

"We need to leave before someone comes looking for you," I say.

I still don't have a plan, but I need to get off the school grounds. I'm not abandoning Max. I can't do it. It's not who I am. I hate this fact about myself because it usually gets me into trouble. He's not my responsibility. Yet, I'm the only one willing to stand up for him. I spoke on his behalf in front of the judge, but his father's lawyer argued that my medical findings could have been mistaken for roughhousing, something he claimed kids did all the time. It was total bullshit, but it was enough for the judge. The whole trial was a sham.

"I'm going to get my car and bring it around to the side of the playground. Wait two minutes, then come out. Make sure you turn off the light and shut this door behind you. Okay?"

"I'm coming home with you?" His grin reveals a recently lost baby tooth. It's adorable and only solidifies my resolve. This boy is too sweet and innocent to spend months with a monster who'll only hurt him.

"Just for a little bit until I figure something out," I tell him. "Don't open the door to anyone. Wait two minutes, then go. Okay?"

"Two times around the clock." His aura brightens to a pastel red. The black sparks are completely gone, along with the tension in his body.

"I'm going to get my car. Two minutes," I remind him.

As I leave the office, I hope I can pull this off. Sneaking off school grounds with a student is a massive no-no. I could

end up in jail for doing this, but what choice do I have? The law couldn't protect him, so there's no point in calling them. His mother's out of the country. As far as I know, he doesn't have any other relatives. I'm all he's got, so I have to help him.

I force myself to walk slowly down the hall when all I want to do is run. I pass the principal's office. She's not there. Usually, she waits outside with the kids near the school busses. My car is on the other side of the parking lot.

When I get outside, I veer off, avoiding the kids lined up to get on the bus. The principal waves. I wave back and force a smile, and she turns away without a second glance. She probably doesn't suspect a thing. I've been a nurse long enough that she trusts me completely. Betraying her trust gives me a moment of pause, but saving Max is more important than my reputation. Besides, as long as I don't get caught, I'll be fine.

I know I'm doing mental cartwheels to justify my completely insane behavior, but I don't care. I'm at my car and inside before I can rethink this plan.

As I pull out of the lot, one of the teachers waves. I return the gesture, so I won't look suspicious. I feel like I have a huge neon sign over my head that reads: Kidnapper! Which is ridiculous. I haven't done anything yet, so there's nothing to suspect.

I pull onto the side road and circle to the back of the playground. I don't see Max. I check my watch. He should be out here already. Does he even know how to read a clock? Most first graders learn it at some point, but some kids take longer than others. I may have made a huge strategic error already.

My breath catches. A full minute passes. I can't stay in this spot much longer without drawing attention. I'm about to drive away when I finally spot Max. He's running across the grass with his little backpack in his hands. The sight kills me. He's so little and vulnerable. What kind of monster would hurt a kid? I'm not naïve. I know evil exists in the world. But



there's something terribly wrong with people who hurt children.

I reach across the car and throw the passenger door open. "Get in."

Max hops in and struggles to pull the door closed. He finally manages it.

"Put your seatbelt on." I glance in the rearview mirror. Another car is coming down the road toward us. I've got to get us out of here.

The second Max clicks his seatbelt into place, I'm off. My eyes are glued to the speedometer. Sheriff's deputies tend to hide in the neighborhood around the school, waiting to catch someone speeding or running a stop sign. I obey every law, well, except for the kidnapping one.

I bite back a hysterical laugh. This is complete insanity. I've never done anything so reckless before. However, I'm smart. I'm resourceful. And I'll figure out a way to save him. I just need time. And I need to get as far away from the school as possible.

When we reach the outskirts of town, I pull onto the highway. The miles tick past, and I still don't have a clue about where I'm going.

"Can I have a snack?" Max asks.

"Are you hungry?"

"I always get a snack after school. Even my dad gives me a snack sometimes."

"I could go for something, too." It's probably the nerves, but I'm suddenly famished.

A wooden sign catches my attention. "Big Hog's Bar and Grill." I jerk the wheel and drive off the highway into the parking lot, where I park behind a row of motorcycles. The place doesn't seem too busy. The porch is empty, but people are sitting inside near the windows. It looks like a biker bar. I consider leaving, but I spot a boy about Max's age sipping a

milkshake. If there's another kid inside, then it must be family-friendly.

"Okay, Max, before we go in, if anyone asks, I'm your aunt."

"But you're the nurse."

"I know, but we can't tell anyone that. Okay?"

"I have to lie? Mom said I can't ever lie about anything, or monsters will come and get me."

I bite back what I want to say about his mother. She was completely useless during the trial. It was almost as if she didn't want to deal with her son or her abusive ex. I still can't understand it. If I were a mother, I'd kill anyone who laid a hand on my child.

"Monsters won't come. I promise." I might be making promises I can't keep, but I don't know what else to do.

"Okay."

"Who am I?" I ask, checking to be sure he understands.

"My auntie."

"Right! Perfect! Okay, let's go get a milkshake. How does that sound?"

"Awesome!" He perks back up and smiles.

I haven't had a milkshake in years, but I'm going to need one to get through the rest of the day. I thought it would be an easy day, the last one before summer break. Boy, was I wrong.

Inside, a wooden sign on a post directs us to pick any open seat, and I find a booth away from the windows. Once seated, I grab a regular menu for myself and a kid's paper menu for Max. A box of six crayons sits next to the menus. When Max flips over his menu to look for more food options, he finds a picture of a bear to color.

"Pick what you want to eat first, then you can color."

"O-kay," he says slowly, watching me carefully. "I want a cheeseburger, french fries, and a strawberry milkshake." He's

holding his breath as if I'm about to tell him he can't have any of it.

"That sounds great. I'm going to get the same thing, but a chocolate milkshake instead." I close the menu.

A petite blonde waitress sashays across the room and stops at our table. I note her name tag, which reads Holly.

"What can I get you folks?" Holly asks.

I tell her the order, impressed that she doesn't have to write any of it down. I could never have been a waitress. I'd forget anything other than the simplest orders. Granted, ours is relatively easy to remember, but still.

"Got it. I'll bring you a couple of waters, too," she says before walking away.

Max colors the bear while we wait for our food. We left the school less than an hour ago, and I'm still struggling to figure out a plan. I can't kidnap him to protect him. I have no idea what I'm going to do, but I know I can't take him to his father's house. That's not going to happen. It has to be something else.

"Wow! That guy is huge!" Max's eyes saucer as a man who must be over six feet tall and three hundred plus pounds barrels into the bar. A snake tattoo slithering up his neck is partially hidden by stringy black hair. His scarlet aura vibrates with rage.

"Where's Scar?" the man bellows.

Several men playing poker near the far wall look up. They don't move, but they're watching the loud newcomer.

"I want to talk to him!" the man yells.

"He's not here," Holly said.

"Get him here. I'm not leaving until I talk to him. I'll kill every damn person in this place until someone gets him down here. Got it?"

"I'll get him," Holly squeaks.

Two men playing pool stand side by side, pool sticks in hand. Their auras change from a playful orange to a deep crimson. I hold my breath. Thick, humid tension fills the air. The bartender moves so slowly that I almost don't notice. But he's definitely moving. He might be going for a gun.

Trying not to panic, I look around for the exits. The crazy man is standing in the perfect spot to block all exits. I'd have to pass too close to him to escape. I can't risk it.

"Is he going to hurt us?" Max whispers.

"I don't know." Wouldn't that be it? I kidnap a child and then get him killed in a biker bar shootout. I'm starting to wonder if my judgment is lacking. Maybe I should have called the sheriff's office again. It didn't help last time, but maybe this time, someone will listen.

The front door to the bar bangs open, and my breath gusts out of my lungs when I see the man who kicked it in. He's at least six feet two inches, according to the height stickers alongside the door. It's the same kind of sticker liquor stores use to provide descriptions of robbery suspects.

He's wearing black boots, tight jeans that show off his perfect ass, and a leather vest over a black tank top. Rage fills his steel gray eyes. Everyone in the bar shrinks back from him, but I find myself leaning toward him. His aura shimmers, a halo of silver around deep indigo. It's almost black, but not quite. I've never seen anything like it. I can't look away.

His black hair is longer on top and trimmed to less than a quarter of an inch on the sides. His trimmed mustache and beard match the darker color of his hair. His full, sensual lips purse. An image of us locked in a passionate kiss pops into my mind. His head whips toward me as if he can read my thoughts. My face burns, but I can't tear my gaze free of his. A slight smirk curls the edge of his top lip. Then it's gone, and he's back to being completely focused on the belligerent man.

The mystery man's vest has several patches, one of which reads, Scar. This must be the guy that the other man wanted to talk to. Hopefully, they take whatever the issue is outside before someone gets—

Scar swings his massive fist without warning. It smashes into the other man's face, shattering his nose. Blood spurts everywhere. Max screams and hides under the table. I want to hide with him, but I can't look away as Scar beats the man unconscious. Scar's aura doesn't change. It's still that same indigo with a silver lining. It doesn't even ripple.

When he finally stops pummeling the man, he raises his gaze. It locks with mine, stealing my breath. My heart thunders, and blood surges through my body, settling in all the places I want him to touch me with those deadly hands. I feel completely out of control as if I've literally been enchanted. But that's impossible. Whatever's happening between us can't possibly be real. It must be a stress response or something. Still, my entire body burns for him.

"Reaper, take out the trash," he commands.

"Gladly, pres." Another man, also wearing the same kind of vest Scar's wearing, bends down and grabs the unconscious man by his greasy hair. He drags the guy toward the back of the bar into what I assume is the kitchen.

When I turn back to look at Scar, he's coming toward me. Stalking me like a predator. I'm powerless to move, even when he stops right next to our booth.

"Sorry you had to see that. Is your boy okay?" Scar's voice is liquid velvet over steel. A deadly caress. As if he's reached out and touched me despite standing just out of reach. My fingers tingle with the desire to do exactly that, reach for this dark, brooding, dangerous man who lights my body on fire with a single look.

Who is the hell is this guy?

## Chapter 3: Scar

The naughty librarian sitting in the booth hasn't stopped eye-fucking me since I walked into the bar. Thick, black-rimmed glasses do nothing to obscure her luminous green eyes. Her long, chestnut-colored hair is tamed in a bun at the base of her head, just above her slender neck. Her charcoal-gray pencil skirt and light pink cardigan complete the fantasy. Even sitting down, I can tell she's got curves for days.

I want her on her knees. I want to shove my rapidly hardening cock between those pale pink lips and fuck away all that innocence. But she's not innocent, is she? She looks guilty as hell, and it has something to do with the kid hiding under the table.

Holly walks over with two milkshakes and sets them on the table. She's not nearly as pale as when she burst in on Church. What a mess. I never did adjourn the meeting. I'll have to fix that oversight later. I can't stand unfinished business, but it had to wait so I could deal with Rick.

"I'll take a bowl of Sugar Bear cereal," I tell Holly as I slide into the booth, taking a seat across from the mystery woman.

"Right away. Anything else?" She glances at the librarian. "Your food order is up. I just have to run and grab it."

"I'm fine," the librarian says.

"What's your name?" I ask after Holly leaves.

"Julia."

"Julia ..." I wait for her to supply a last name, but she doesn't. "Your son seems scared."

"Um ... he's ... my nephew."

Interesting. She's lying. But why?

"Max, come sit on the bench," she says to the boy, who definitely isn't her nephew.

The boy complies, silently crawling out from under the table and taking a seat next to me. He shoves the straw in his mouth and starts slurping down the strawberry milkshake like someone's going to take it away from him. He's keeping an eye on me, but he seems more curious than scared.

I turn my attention back to Julia. I'm not leaving until she tells me exactly what the hell is going on. This is my bar. I'll put up with a few scumbags here and there, but if this kid's in trouble, she's going to be in some serious shit. The fact that she's a woman doesn't change anything. Jonathan had female friends who were just as bad as he was. Maybe worse because they made me feel like I could trust them. Only I couldn't. And I didn't realize it until it was too late.

Julia's suddenly obsessed with her chocolate milkshake. She's pretending I don't exist, but I'm sure she's fully aware of the fact that I haven't left. The longer I study her, the harder she blushes. I wonder if she's blushing everywhere. My gaze slides down to where her breasts press against the buttons on her cardigan. I look away before I become mesmerized.

"Who is he really?" I ask casually.

"That's none of your business." She sits straight and folds her arms under her chest, pushing her breasts higher and enticing me even more.

*Focus.* This isn't about me. It's about making sure the boy's safe. She might look prim and proper, but predators are masters of deception. She could be human trafficking the kid. Or she could be doing something equally despicable. I need to know her plans for him.

Drawing inward, I tap into the darkest part of my mind. I open myself to her energy and search her mind, looking for her plan. I can't see everyone's thoughts, but I can see most people's plans. If she's plotting something nefarious, I'll be able to see it. Well, I'm able to most of the time. My gift isn't foolproof, but it's saved my ass more than once.

Her mind is chaotic. I can't seem to grasp even the slightest thread of a plan. Usually, looking into someone's mind isn't this hard. It's rare that someone can block my

ability, so I don't think that's what's happening. It would take a very skillful telepath to be able to stop me from seeing what they're plotting. She doesn't have that vibe. If anything, she seems scared.

I redouble my effort. Most people have plans. Even the simplest plan, like what they're having for dinner. But I can't find anything. Maybe it's because she doesn't have a plan.

"Don't make me ask Max," I warn.

"It's complicated, and we're leaving as soon as he eats his burger." She nods toward Holly, who's carrying our food on a large tray.

After Holly leaves, I dig into my bowl of Sugar Bear. This cereal is exactly what I need right now. I've been in a mood all day, and having to deal with Rick only made it worse. Now, this chick thinks she's getting out of here without telling me what's going on. Well, that's not going to happen.

Reaper walks in from the kitchen, his boots clanking against the wood-planked floor and leaving a trail of mud behind him. His expressionless face turns toward mine. He nods slightly before walking over.

"Is it done?" I ask.

"All the way."

"And you took care of it better than last time?" I ask, referring to the Hamilton fuck up.

"Not a trace."

"Good."

"Need anything else?" Reaper asks.

"No. But stay close." I glance at the woman, so Reaper knows who to keep an eye on.

"Hum," he grunts before crossing to the bar. He takes the last stool closest to me. Although he's facing the mirror behind the bar, I know he's got eyes on us. At the first sign of trouble, he'll have my back.



Speaking of trouble ... Two sheriff's deputies pull into the parking lot. When they get out of their trucks, Julia jerks back against the booth. She pales and starts to tremble. Something's terribly wrong.

"What is it?" I demand.

"You can't let them find us," she whispers.

"Why not?"

"Because ... just, please help us."

"Give me a reason to protect you. Right fucking now." When she doesn't immediately respond, I get out of the booth and stand, blocking the deputies' view. "Last chance."

"It's too hard to explain, but I'm trying to help Max." She glances past me before hunching down in the booth. Her green eyes widen. "If you protect us, I'll tell you everything. I don't know what else to do."

I only take a second to assess things. Maybe she's in trouble with the law. Maybe she kidnapped this kid—or worse. But I'm not about to turn her over to them without hearing her out first. I trust the cops less than I trust complete strangers, which is why I'm inclined to help her.

"Get up. Don't look at anyone. Follow Reaper and me into the kitchen."

Reaper's already standing behind me. We move into position to block Julia and Max from view. To the kid's credit, he follows my directions without complaint. But maybe that's what he's used to, being ordered around.

We make it to the kitchen doors without being seen. I glance back to find Talon and Nitro distracting the deputies. Everyone knows the score. We just don't know why we're protecting these people yet. But she needs to talk. Now.

I lead Julia and Max out the backdoor, then across the dirt path to the clubhouse. Once we're safely inside, Reaper stands guard just inside the door. He checks his gun's magazine before clicking it into place and chambering a bullet. It's habit. Doesn't matter if he checked it ten minutes ago. He's too

much of a killing machine. It's in his nature to keep a loaded gun on him at all times. We're all packing, but with Reaper, it's not just a habit. It's an obsession.

I show Julia and Max into the kitchen. Max only took one bite of his burger before the deputies showed up, so he's probably still hungry. I open the fridge and pull out a loaf of Nina's freshly baked bread and a slab of cheddar cheese.

"Do you like grilled cheese sandwiches?" I ask Max.

"Can I have my hamburger?" When he blinks up at me, it kills me to deny him anything.

"I don't have any here, but if you can eat a grilled cheese now, you can have your burger later for dinner." I don't even know if they're going to be here by dinner time. I hope they're gone by then, but who the hell knows?

After making a grilled cheese and getting Max settled at the long, farmhouse-style table, I turn to Julia. "Let's talk in the living room. We can keep an eye on him from there."

She nods and follows me into the room. I turn on several lamps to brighten the space. The shades are always drawn so people can't see in. I don't want anyone knowing our business, especially not the cops.

"Tell me exactly what's going on. And if you lie to me, I'll make sure no one ever finds your body." I'm deadly serious. I can tell she believes me.

"I'm an elementary school nurse ..." she begins before telling me about Max's horrific father and terrible predicament.

I listen without interrupting, getting more and more livid as she reveals the details about his situation. She's got herself into a hell of a mess, but I agree with her. I wouldn't have been able to let Max spend the summer with his father either. And once again, the law failed him. I'm not surprised at all, but I am impressed she has the balls to help him. Most people would have looked the other way, but not her.

"So, what's your next step?" I ask.

“I honestly don’t know what to do.”

“Did you come to the club for help?”

“Club?” She tilts her head slightly.

“Underground Vengeance.” I turn my back to her briefly so she can see the patch on the back of my vest.

“You’re part of a motorcycle club?” She takes a step back, and her hand flutters to her throat.

“Yeah, but we don’t run drugs or guns ...” I glance toward Max. “Or kids.”

“What do you do?”

“We help the people who the law can’t, or won’t, help.”

“People like Max?” Hope springs into her eyes. It’s a gut punch, sending blood rushing south. What is it about this woman? She’s scared and vulnerable, but she’s looking right at me. Unafraid. Strong. And damn, her strength is sexy as fuck.

“Yeah, kids like him.” I clear my throat and try to get a handle on my emotions. Even if I want to bend her over the back of the couch, shove that prim little skirt over her ass, and tear her panties off, now isn’t the time. I’ll have to save that shit for later.

“Can you help us? I can’t pay you very much. I don’t make a lot as a school nurse. But I’ll give you everything I have saved up.”

“That’s not how this works.” I’m offended she’s offering me money, then remind myself she doesn’t know anything about me or how the club operates. “We don’t need money.”

It’s an understatement. We’re filthy rich. But we keep that information under wraps. The more we can fly under the radar, the better. Matrix has the money stashed away in various offshore accounts that can’t be traced back to the club, but the five of us have access. Nina’s got access, too. After all, it was her old man’s money.

The front door opens, and Nitro walks in. He nods at Reaper, who’s been so silent I almost forgot he was there. He’s

like a ghost.

“The cops are looking for her kid,” Nitro says. “Of course, no one in the bar saw the boy, so they left.”

“Good.”

“But they could come back,” Nitro says, bouncing on his heels.

“True. But why would they look here in the first place?” I ask Julia.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been here before. Max, have you been to this restaurant before?”

“No.” He pulls apart his sandwich, marveling at the way the cheese stretches.

“Do you have a cell phone?” I ask Max.

“Yeah.” He shoves the piece he’s been playing with into his mouth.

“Can I see it?”

“Okay.” He digs it out of his backpack and hands it over.

I scroll through his apps, looking for tracking apps. Years ago, Matrix taught us how to check for trackers on our phones. We do it daily.

The app’s on the last page. I delete it before dropping the phone to the floor and crushing it under my boot.

“That’s my phone!” Max’s bottom lip quivers.

“I’ll get you a new one.” I turn to Julia. “It had a tracker app. It could have hardware monitoring his GPS location, too.”

“I understand.” Her gaze is riveted on the shattered pieces.

“We can’t stay here. If the cops come back and want to search the clubhouse for some reason, first, they’ll need a fucking warrant. But second, we can’t be here.”

“You taking them to Nina’s?” Nitro asks as if reading my mind.

“It’s the only safe place,” I say.

“Who’s Nina?” Julia asks.

“She’s like ... our grandmother.” That’s the easiest way to explain our relationship without revealing too much.

“More like a fairy godmother,” Nitro says.

“Basically,” I agree.

“I’ll call and tell her you’re on your way,” Nitro says.

“We’ll take the rig.”

“It’s gassed up in the garage.”

“As soon as he’s done with his sandwich.” I jerk my head toward where Max is sitting. He seems to have gotten over the phone situation quickly, which is good. He’s resilient. A good quality to have when you’re dealing with a hellish situation.

“Want me to ride with you?” Nitro asks, still bouncing.

“Yeah. Grab Talon, too.” When Matrix walks into the room, I turn to him. “I need you to find out everything you can on a ... What’s Max’s dad’s name?”

“Lyle Curtis,” Julia says.

“Get the fuck out of here!” Nitro stops bouncing. “He’s the sheriff’s son?”

“Yep,” Julia says softly. “See why it’s an impossible situation?”

“Fuck.” I rub my beard while considering our options. “Okay, it really doesn’t change anything for now. We still need to get Max and Julia to Nina’s. We’ll figure out our next step after that.”

The guys leave to get their bikes, and I walk over to Max.

“Hey, bud. I’m going to take you to my grandma’s house.”

“Wow. She must be really old!”

I laugh. Only a kid could get away with indirectly insulting me like that. I’m thirty-one, far from old. Maybe he

didn't mean it like that, but I'm pretty sure he did because he's flushed and trembling.

"She's older, but don't let her hear you say that," I playfully warn.

Nina would think it was hilarious coming from a boy, but she'd bitch-slap any man who dared to call her old. I caught a glimpse of her driver's license by accident once. She's fifty-five but carries herself like a woman half her age. She can still kick anyone's ass. Hell, maybe even mine if she caught me off-guard.

"Is Nina used to having children around?" Julia asks.

"Yeah. She's kind of a halfway house for the people we rescue. Kids love her. You'll see."

"Okay." She glances from me to Max, then back. She's obviously wary, but she doesn't have a choice, and she knows it.

"Bike's in the garage. Let's go." I start walking toward the door to the garage.

"As in a motorcycle?" Julia asks.

"Yeah."

"We can't ride on a motorcycle to her house."

"Why the hell not? It's got a side car. Max can sit in that. It will be fun."

"Oh! I've never been on a motorcycle before!" Max grins, revealing a missing tooth. Hopefully, it's gone because it's a baby tooth and not because someone was smacking him around recently. I didn't miss the bruises on his wrists. They're older. But recent enough to make me want to kill his father for hurting him.

"We need helmets," Julia says, grasping for any reason not to get on the bike.

"We've got extra, including some Max's size."

She sighs and follows me into the garage.

After getting Max into the sidecar and securing his helmet, I turn to her. She's blushing again, and it's distracting as hell. Our hands brush when I pass a helmet to her. An image pops into my mind. It's her. Kissing me. With tongue. And she's naked.

I glance down at her. She's beet red. I wonder if she knows I can see her plans for me. A smirk spreads across my lips. I'm not about to warn her about my gift. I like where her dirty little mind is headed. If her plan is to get naked and stick that adorable pink tongue down my throat, then I'm all for it.

As I help her secure her helmet, she's holding her breath. She releases it as I step back to put my helmet on. I like her like this, breathless and off-balance. It makes her sexy librarian look even more enticing.

"Climb on behind me," I say, swinging my leg over the bike.

She hesitates for a second before getting on. At first, she's sitting as far back as she can manage. But as we pull out of the garage, she slides forward, wrapping her arms tightly around my waist and pressing those luscious breasts against my back.

My cock strains against my zipper. She has no idea what she's doing to me, but I'm going to make sure she realizes it later. I don't know when or how I'm going to get her naked, but it's happening. It's only a matter of time. Because she's mine now. She doesn't know it yet. But she belongs to me.

## Chapter 4: Julia

The rumble of the bike between my legs has me wet and needy well before we make it to Nina's ranch. Being wrapped around Scar is a huge distraction. During the trip, I forget about what's happened and fixate on his powerful body. He radiates strength and confidence. He's in complete control of an out-of-control situation, and it's sexy as hell. He's sexy as hell. And he makes me want to do something completely reckless, like kiss him.

I shake away the thought. I can't risk getting caught up with a man like him. He's not the kind of guy I'd ever consider dating. He's too rough. Too dangerous. He's in a motorcycle club, and even if he's telling the truth and all they do is protect people, being around him is too risky.

I can't imagine having him pick me up from school. What would everyone think, seeing me with someone like him? He's too intense. And that aura. I don't understand what's going on with him. I've never seen anything like it. I want to know more, but I also want to run away. There's something wicked about how he moves, and all I can think about is what it would be like to be possessed by someone so ... so ... *savage*.

After exiting the highway, we follow a single-lane, paved road for several miles. We weave in and out of the surrounding forest before finally arriving at an imposing wrought iron gate. A ten-foot-tall river rock wall stretches out from either side, and I try to figure out how far it goes, but it's impossible to tell. There's an intercom at the gate, but Scar doesn't need it. He turns his face up toward one of the cameras perched along the wall. The gate slowly slides back to allow us to pass, closing behind us with a clang.

I tense. I'm trusting this scary beast of a man with my life, with Max's life. I don't even know him. He could be leading us into an even worse situation. Maybe this was a huge mistake. My judgment is usually pretty good, but today, I've been totally irrational. I could lose everything because of the



decisions I've made. My career, my reputation, and maybe even my life.

Before I can descend into a complete meltdown, Scar stops the bike outside a large, lemon-yellow farmhouse. I don't know what I expected, but this looks like someone's grandmother's house. Flower boxes hang from the wrap-around porch. Cascading bunches of magenta petunias dangle from them, brushing the ground. Hanging baskets of wildflowers in every color of the rainbow sway in the breeze. Six white Adirondack chairs rock gently in the breeze. It's the kind of porch you could spend an afternoon on, sipping tea and watching the clouds float by.

The front door swings open, and a woman steps out. My jaw drops. This can't possibly be Scar's grandmother. She's petite but carries herself as if she were ten feet tall. Jet black hair with streaks of gray hangs down to her waist. Her black leather boots lace up to her knees. She's wearing black yoga pants that show off her killer figure. Her black and red floral t-shirt seems out of place under her fitted, black leather jacket, which is buttoned once at the waist to further highlight her hourglass shape. Her six-inch-long turquoise and silver cross necklace also doesn't fit the image of a grandmother, at least none I've ever known. Her smile is more of a smirk as she comes to greet us.

"Hey, honey." She holds her arms wide. Scar lets her fold him into an embrace. "Are you hungry? I've got all your favorites."

"I didn't get to finish my bowl of Sugar Bear earlier." Scar steps back. "I'd like you to meet Julia and Max."

"Yes, the nurse and," Nina bends down, so she's eye-level with Max, "an adorable kid. Are you hungry, Max?"

"I just gave him a grilled cheese," Scar says.

"Growing boys need to eat," she admonishes. "Come inside. I'll show you the snack pantry."

"Snack pantry?" I whisper while casting a sideways glance at Scar.

“Wait until you see it. It’s every kid’s idea of heaven.” Scar’s smile lights up his face and makes him look ten years younger. I’m guessing he’s around thirty years old, slightly older than my twenty-seven years. However, right now, he looks much younger. Seeing this child-like side of him makes me relax slightly. A true monster would never smile like that.

As I step into the ranch house, I’m instantly transported into a state of total relaxation. I feel completely safe. I don’t know if it’s the pale gray overstuffed chairs and sofa, the stone fireplace, or the silver mist blue color of the walls. It’s as if everything in the living room has been designed to bring peace and comfort. All I want to do is lay on the sofa and take a long nap with Nina’s white, fringed chenille throw draped over my body.

“Can I get you anything to eat?” Nina asks me as she continues toward the kitchen.

“No. Thank you.” I try not to gawk at her butt, but she’s got to be hardcore into yoga or something for it to be that firm at her age. I’m not jealous. I’m inspired.

“I’ll fix afternoon tea,” Nina says.

“It’s almost dinner time,” Scar points out.

“There’s always time for tea.” Nina raises a perfectly arched brow. “Show Max the snack pantry.”

“Come on. It’s awesome,” Scar says to Max. He takes Max’s little hand in his, and they head for a door marked “Pantry.”

I tense slightly. They’ll only be out of sight for a minute. Can I trust Scar with him? I search my gut and realize I can. I don’t really understand why, but I know he’s not going to hurt Max. Besides, I’m only a few feet away. If Max is in trouble, he can scream and run back into the kitchen.

“Grab a seat, hon,” Nina says.

She walks around the biggest kitchen island I’ve ever seen. There are four stools on each of the three sides. The fourth side faces the gas stove and contains a farmhouse sink.

A vase filled with pink wildflowers adds color to the otherwise white space.

I sit on a barstool across the island from where Nina's working, adding water to a copper teakettle and setting it on the stove. After riffling through a cupboard, she chooses several wooden boxes filled with tea bags and presents them as if she's offering the selection to a queen.

"Chamomile, please." I pluck a packet out and hand it to her.

"Talon caught me up on what's been happening." She grabs two white mugs from another cupboard and sets them on the counter. She drops the teabag into one before choosing peppermint for her cup. "This is a brave thing you're doing."

"I don't know about that. It's totally illegal. I basically kidnapped him."

"Laws are only good if they're used to protect innocent people. Unfortunately, that's not always the case."

"True."

When she hands me a steaming mug, I take it and set it on a cork coaster in front of me. The scent of chamomile curls into my nose, and my body releases any remaining tension. I can see why Scar brought us here. It's far more inviting than being in his clubhouse. Not that his house wasn't nice. It just didn't have any feminine touches, so while it felt comfortable, it didn't have the same softness as Nina's place.

"Don't worry too much. We'll figure something out." She sits in a chair diagonally from where I'm seated.

"How long have you known Scar?" I ask.

"Sixteen years. Since he was fifteen." She takes a sip of her tea, leaving behind a smudge of red lip gloss.

"How did you meet him? And why is he named 'Scar'?" I didn't see any scars on him, but maybe they're under his clothes. Heat floods my cheeks. I really need to stop thinking about what he might be hiding in those jeans.

“That’s a story for him to tell.” She stares into space for a moment before returning her attention to me. “I’m not surprised Max’s father is getting away with what he did. The sheriff’s department is corrupt as hell in this county.”

“I never realized it until the trial.”

“Someone needs to clean up this mess, but the corruption goes all the way up to the highest levels of office. The old boys’ club sticks together. Trust me, when my old man was alive, he did everything he could to weed out corruption. But snakes are slippery little bastards.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your ...”

“Husband,” she supplies. “He died in a motorcycle accident.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.” She gets a far-off look in her eyes before shaking her head and directing her attention back to her tea.

As we sip in silence, I soften my gaze and study Nina’s aura. It sparkles like faceted rose quartz, with hints of violet, which usually indicates some kind of psychic power. I wonder what she’s capable of and suspect it has something to do with making people feel safe. I’ve felt completely sheltered and protected since the moment I walked into her house. Maybe she’s gifted with the ability to soothe emotions. It would be a very handy skill to have.

Scar and Max walk out of the pantry carrying so much junk food my teeth hurt. Max’s aura is bright yellow and filled with joy. He follows Scar to a long dining room table near windows overlooking the back garden. He dumps his loot onto the table.

“Um, I don’t think he should be eating that much sugar this late in the day,” I say. Kids tend to lose their minds if given enough sugar. The day after Halloween is always a nightmare at school. They’re so hopped up on candy that trying to get them under any kind of control is almost impossible.

“Stop being a spoilsport,” Scar says. He sits beside Max and starts dividing the candy into two piles. Scar’s is markedly larger.

“If he’s up all night, you’re going to have to stay up, too,” I warn.

“Not a problem. I don’t sleep much anyway.” Scar’s brow furrows.

I wonder what that’s about.

“I’ll make dinner in an hour,” Nina says. “I’m assuming you’ll be staying the night?”

“Yes,” Scar says.

“No,” I say.

We frown at each other. We never discussed staying here for any length of time. Granted, I don’t have any other option. I can’t exactly take Max home with me. If he’s been reported missing, which I assume is the case since the deputies showed up at the bar, then they’ll start talking to school employees. Someone had to have seen him come to my office, so I’m sure I’ll be on their list.

“What exactly is the plan?” Nina asks. “Are we going to put him somewhere safe, permanently?”

I don’t like the sound of that.

“He should stay here until we figure something out. I don’t know if going the underground route is the right thing to do yet,” Scar says.

“What’s the underground route?” I ask.

“We’d get him into our system of people who help kids like Max. No one knows each other. They only know two links in the chain, the link between where the kid came from and where he’s going next. We do that so people can truly disappear into a better life.”

“How do you know the kids will reach their final destination? What *is* their final destination?”

“We have clubs all over the country,” Nina explains. “My old man set them up when he was president of Underground Vengeance. Scar took over after he died. We have connections with clubs across the U.S., from Louisiana to North Dakota to New Mexico. We’re everywhere, which is why it’s easy to rescue people and get them to a safe, new life.”

“Would he live with other people from one of the clubs?” I ask.

“Sometimes a club brother and his old lady will take a kid in. If we’re rescuing a family, like a mother with her children, then we’ll get her set up with a job, usually something related to the club’s various businesses. She’ll be supported and protected by the local club as long as her abuser is still alive,” Scar says.

“Does that happen a lot? That you ‘disappear’ people?” I ask.

“It depends on the population near the club. In places like California or New York, the clubs are bigger. They can help more people, which is good because the higher the population in an area, the more people come to us for help. Usually women and children, but we’ve helped men, too. Not all abusers are men,” Scar says with a hint of bitterness.

“I don’t think we can make that decision for Max right now,” I say.

“I want to stay here!” Max’s face is covered in chocolate, and Scar hands him a paper napkin.

“We’re not going anywhere yet,” I say. “Can we stay here for a few days, at least until we come up with a plan to keep him safe?”

“Of course,” Nina says. “Does Max have any other relatives? We like to place kids with non-abusive relatives whenever possible.”

“His mother’s in France for the summer. Based on what I know, he doesn’t have aunts or uncles or any living grandparents. He’s all alone.”

Scar gives me a sharp look, then slides his gaze to Max before skewering me with another look. We shouldn't be talking about this in front of him. I nod, letting him know I got the message.

"Let's see what we've got for dinner," Nina says, changing the subject. She opens the fridge, then the freezer. After riffling through the contents of both, she turns and beams at us. "How about spaghetti with garlic bread?"

"I love spaghetti!" Max exclaims.

"Me, too," Scar says.

The camaraderie between them warms my heart. Despite being taken in by relative strangers, Max seems completely at ease with them. Although, considering the alternative, being stuck with his father, Max would probably feel comfortable with anyone who wasn't threatening to hurt him.

As I watch Nina and Scar work together to make dinner, I can't stop wondering about Scar's story. He was taken in by Nina when he was fifteen. Was he in a situation similar to Max's? I'm dying to know everything about him, which is crazy. I should be focused on figuring out how to help Max, which I am, to a certain degree, but I also can't help but be curious about Scar. And not just because he's hotter than sin.

After dinner, Nina gives us a tour of the rest of the house. There are fourteen bedrooms, not including the owner's suite, where Nina sleeps. She opens the doors to show us inside each room. None are currently occupied, but they're done up in a variety of styles, from boy's rooms with superhero and airplane motifs to girl's rooms filled with frothy pink bedspreads and curtains. Several rooms are clearly for adults because they're devoid of toys. They each have a theme based on color, so there's a blue room, a purple room, a cream room, etc. The colors are muted, and there are enough white and cream accents throughout to keep the rooms from feeling too overwhelmed with color.

Nina directs Scar to the blue room, which is actually mostly white with blue accent pillows. The king-sized bed has a white velvet tufted headboard. An overstuffed chair with a

matching ottoman sits to one side of the room, and a small table covered with several paperback books is beside it. A lamp hangs over the reading space to give it more light.

“This is my favorite room,” Scar says before leaning to kiss Nina on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“You’re always welcome to stay here. You know that,” Nina scoffs while smiling. “Max, would you like to stay in a pirate ship tonight?”

“A pirate ship? With real pirates?” Max doesn’t look too excited.

“Not real ones. But if you’d prefer, there’s a race car room instead. It’s right next to my room, so if you need anything in the middle of the night, you can find me,” Nina says.

“That sounds better,” Max says, relaxing.

After showing him the room and getting his enthusiastic approval, we leave him to play with various toy race cars. We head back down the hall to the room next to Scar’s. When she pushes open the door, I gasp. It’s gorgeous.

Styled as if we were in the French countryside, pale pink wallpaper covers every wall, yet somehow, it’s not gaudy. The texture, as well as the lightness of the color, softens the look. A four-poster bed sits in the center of the room. A cream-colored duvet covers matching satin sheets. It’s so inviting and luxurious that all I want to do is crawl under the covers and forget about everything that happened today.

“I love it!”

“It’s right next to Scar’s room, and I’m at the other end of the hall. If you need anything, either of us can get it for you. It’s been a long day. I’ll make sure Max brushes his teeth and takes a bath before bed.” Nina smiles at me. “Consider anything in the house yours to use, eat, or drink. The only thing I ask is that you don’t go outside once I set the alarm.”

“The house has an alarm?”



“Yes. We have a lot of enemies, so we can’t ever be too careful,” she says. “Goodnight.”

As she walks back to Max’s room, I turn to Scar. “Should I be worried?”

“No. The others are stationed around the property tonight. We have prospects watching the highway in case anyone turns off onto our road.”

“Prospects?”

“Guys we trust who want to join the club. They have to stay prospects for at least a year and pass every background check Matrix could possibly run. And he can get into any database to check their histories. After the year is up, the patched members vote. If the prospect is worthy of the club and our mission, then he’s in, and he gets his own patches for his cut. Until then, his cut is marked with a ‘Prospect’ patch.”

“Your world is so interesting,” I blurt.

“And dangerous. Nina’s not kidding. If you leave the house tonight, alarms will go off, and the guys will come running.”

“I have no intention of going anywhere. I’m too tired even to think right now.”

“Get some rest.” He flashes one of his rare yet completely disarming smiles. I melt under his gaze and hope he can’t sense the sudden rush of desire flooding my body.

“Well, goodnight,” I murmur.

I walk backward toward the door to my room, then lock myself inside. I take a breath and let it out slowly. I’m safe. Max’s safe. I need to sleep, so I can think more clearly. It’s been one hell of a day.

As I shower, I wonder if Scar’s doing the same thing. Is he standing under the same style of rainfall shower head? Is water sluicing down his washboard abs and across his perfect ass? And what about the rest of him?

I shiver despite the warm water. I have to be careful not to become too obsessed with this guy. He could hurt me in a

thousand different ways. As soon as I figure out what we're going to do with Max, I need to be ready to walk away from Scar. We're from totally different worlds, and while I respect what he does, I couldn't be a part of such a dangerous organization.

I pass out on the cloud-like bed, only to be awakened by a scream. A male scream. It's coming from Scar's room.

## Chapter 5: Scar

*I shiver in the icy dungeon. The thin blanket wrapped around my body is the only thing between me and the frigid concrete floor. One of the other boys tried to escape this morning, so we're all being punished. Earlier, Jonathan's guards came into the basement below his massive ranch compound and stole every last bit of comfort. I managed to salvage the blanket by stuffing it in the darkest corner of the room. I tried to give it to Reaper, but he hasn't moved from the catatonic state they left him in earlier.*

*Cat-a-ton-ic. I learned that word from the dictionary in Jonathan's library. Sometimes, when I don't fight back, he rewards me with an hour in the only safe room in the house. One day, I hope I'll learn something that will help me escape this hellhole. Some of the others have given up. Some just want to die. But I can't die. I'm already dead. And all I can think about is freedom.*

*The metal lock scrapes against the steel door at the top of the wooden staircase. The other boys whimper. One sobs.*

*"Somebody's coming," Nitro whispers.*

*I shudder and curl into myself, trying to appear as small as possible. Maybe they won't see me. Maybe I can hide. Maybe I'm not the one they want.*

*Please, God. Please don't let it be me this time.*

*"Let's go, Jimmy," one of the guards says to me.*

*I open my mouth, but I can't speak. My whole body quakes so hard I'm afraid I'm going to break my teeth.*

*"Are you going to piss yourself again?" the other guard taunts. "We'll have to take you outside and hose you off. What is it? Twenty-five degrees right now?"*

*The guard glances at the tiny window high on the wall. It frosted over three days ago and hasn't thawed since. Winter is coming. It will be my fifth winter here. I don't know if I can survive another. I'm only nine.*

*Rough hands tear the blanket away. Someone's screaming. I think it's me.*

*They drag me by my thin arms. I'm powerless to fight back. I haven't eaten in two days. Holding my head up is hard enough. Trying to break free is impossible.*

*My heels scrape against the concrete, rubbing them raw, leaving a trail of blood in their wake. We don't get to wear shoes. Not down here. We only get those when Jonathan wants to take us to a charity gala. I haven't been to one since summertime.*

*When they drag me up the stairs, I go limp. I can't help it. I know what's waiting for me at the top of those stairs, and I'll do anything to avoid it.*

*Summoning what little strength I have left, I kick and punch and fight. It's useless. They're too strong. Too big. And I'm just a little boy.*

*Bright light assaults my senses. My eyes hurt. I blink rapidly as the hallway comes into view. Jonathan's standing at the end of it. A depraved smile spreads across his filthy mouth.*

*I scream and scream and scream ...*

Kicking and fighting, I'm totally disoriented. I'm in a dark bedroom. Not mine. A shadowy figure is walking toward me. He looms over the bed. I can't make out his features.

Them! It's one of them! It's one of the guards!

I lunge off the mattress and tackle the guard. He drops to the floor with a thud, but he's fighting back, swinging his fists, trying to punch me. He lands one good hit and rolls to his feet. I grab his ankle. He goes down. I scramble to climb up his back, but he's too fast. He crawls quicker than a crab, but I catch him. Wrestling for dominance, I almost have him pinned when he knees me in the nuts.

"Fuck!" I double over from the pain.

The shadow scrambles to his feet, then runs toward the door. I can't let him get away. I catch up, grab him by the waist, and throw him onto the bed. He's small but fights like a

monster. I jump on top of him and trap his legs under my thighs. Why's he so goddamn little?

Jonathan! It's him. He's back. I can't let him get me on my knees again. I can't let him get control of my body. I can't let him make me do those things to him.

My hands find his neck. It's smaller than expected, making it easier to grip. I squeeze. He's not going to win this time. I don't belong to him anymore. He can't use me or hurt me or torture me anymore. He's going to die. Tonight!

I clench my fingers tighter, reveling in how he struggles for breath. He deserves to die like this. He deserves far worse, but now that I've got my hands around his throat, I'm not stopping until he's dead.

Fingernails claw at my hands. One cuts deep into my skin. Pain. So much pain. My grip relaxes for a second.

"Scar! Stop!" a woman's strangled voice cuts through the darkness.

What the fuck? Where did the man go?

The fog lifts. The person underneath me is soft, warm, and curvy. Not Jonathan. Not a guard. Not even a man. Her scent hits me hard. Cinnamony, like my favorite cereal, but sweeter because it's *her*. It's Julia, and I nearly killed her.

"What the fuck are you doing in my room?" I snarl, releasing her neck. "I could have killed you."

She tries to shove me off her, but I'm livid. I grab her wrists and pin them over her head. She's breathing hard, and her breasts press against my chest with every inhale. She squirms beneath me, trying to push me off with her hips. Each little wiggling attempt to break free only makes me more aware of her plush body and all those curves. Dangerously sexy curves.

I rear back, sitting on my heels. What the hell just happened?

"Scar, it's okay. You were just having a nightmare." She sits up slowly, watching me warily. "Are you okay?"

“Fine.” I run my fingers through my hair.

I’m not fine. Not even close.

“You’re safe now. Come here.” She wraps her arms around my shoulders and tries to pull me into an embrace. She’s totally oblivious to how close she just came to being killed. Why is she even in my room? It doesn’t matter. I need her to be gone.

“Get out!” I shove her off the bed. She rolls onto the floor and lands on all fours like a cat. Seeing her on her hands and knees sends a rush of need straight to my cock. Confusion furrows my brow. How could I possibly be aroused after one of my nightmares? That never happens. I can’t seem to keep my thoughts in order. It’s all a jumbled mess.

“Scar,” she whispers. She slowly stands next to the bed. “Talk to me.”

“Go away!” I need a second to think, but she’s already climbing back onto the bed.

“No. I’m not leaving you alone.”

Moonlight streams through the sheer curtains. I’m naked. I always sleep naked because clothing can catch on my scars. It’s uncomfortable at best, painful at worst. And I’m on display for her. She can see all my scars, a complete index of all the ways Blackstone tortured me. I don’t let anyone see me like this. I don’t want her to see any of it, but she’s seeing everything.

“Go back to bed.” The tightness in my throat makes it hard to speak. She’s wearing nothing more than a tiny pink tank top and virginal white panties. I can’t stop staring, no matter how much I know I should look away.

“I just want to make sure you’re okay,” she says.

“I’m fine.” I flop back against the mattress and drape my arm over my eyes. There, now I can’t see her. She can’t tempt me with all that luscious sweetness. Now I just need to keep them shut until she’s gone.

After a minute, I crack one eye open. She's still standing there, watching me, inching closer. I wish she would just leave. Why is she still here?

"It's just that your back ... those scars ... and you were screaming ..." She lays beside me and slowly slides her arms around my shoulders. I tense, but I can't resist her warmth. Her comforting touch is exactly what I need right now. Somehow, she knows it. It's as if she can sense my emotions. It's strange and disconcerting, but I can't bring myself to move away from her. I want to be closer, so I pull her into my arms and hold her just as tightly as she's holding me. I can't speak. But I also feel like I don't have to. She's not asking me for anything. She's simply giving me refuge, and I'm taking it. I bury my face in her silky hair, and my whole body shudders when I think about how close I came to snapping her neck.

"What happened to you?" she whispers, brushing her lips against my throat.

When? Now? Then? I don't know how to answer her, so I roll her onto her back and bury my face in the soft valley between her breasts. She cradles my head before sliding her delicate hand down to the nape of my neck. She massages the tension in those muscles slowly, gently. One by one, the muscles along my spine relax.

No one's ever touched me like this. Women grab me like I'm a piece of meat. They take what they want. They ride my cock until they're done with me. Then they leave. It's always the same. But she's holding me, no, she's *cuddling* me, and cracks are starting to form in the hard shell around my heart. If I'm not careful, she's going to break me open in a way no other woman ever could. Not that any of them ever tried too hard. They used me just as much as I used them. That's the way it's always been. It's the way it always will be.

Her hands travel down my back, stroking and caressing my broken flesh. She doesn't seem to mind the scars. If anything, she's fascinated by them because she keeps tracing the edges of the deeper ones. Usually, women ask too many questions about them, so I keep them covered. I don't let women see me naked. Letting them see my pain is too

intimate, and I never let them get that close. I don't know why I'm allowing her to touch me like this.

“Just let me hold you,” she murmurs.

This little, delicate creature is stronger than any woman I've ever known, except for Nina. Julia should run screaming from the room, but she doesn't. She hasn't stopped holding me and caressing me. I'm unsure how to respond, so I simply let her rock me while I shiver uncontrollably.

A strange, soft energy radiates from her, enveloping me in a cloak of warmth. If her energy were a color, it would be pink, like the sky during sunset. She's so sweet and comforting. Being around her is so soothing. It's been like this from the moment we met. I need this right now, but I have no idea how to take it from her without giving something up in return. Everyone always wants something from me. Especially women. They see a big, strong guy who can do all kinds of dirty things to them to make them come, but they never see me. Not really. Not who I really am. But somehow, I sense she's different. She might be able to see right through me, and that's terrifying. I can't let that happen.

“What do you really want?” I ask gruffly. “Why did you come into my room tonight?”

I trap her legs beneath my thighs, fully prepared to show her the beast inside me. She has no idea who I really am. I'm a monster. Feral. I take what I want when I want it. Women are always willing to jump into bed with me. And she's no different. She's just like all the others. She wants to be in my bed, nothing more. Well, if that's all she wants, then she'll get it—*hard*.

I press her down into the tangled sheets. The comforter is balled up against the headboard, and the sheets are a mess, but I don't care. I need to forget the past, and there's only one way I know how to do that. The monster inside me roars to life. It only wants one thing right now. *Her*.

I knee her thighs open and press my rapidly hardening cock against her panties. Her heat burns through the thin fabric to scorch my skin. Desire courses fast and hot through my



veins. I want to fuck her. I need to be inside her. I'm going to die if I can't feel her velvet sheath wrapped around my cock. She's making me lose my goddamn mind.

She gasps and writhes against me as if she's trying to escape. "Scar, what are you doing?"

"Giving you what you want."

She stops struggling. A hint of pale moonlight glistens in her eyes. Her eyelids lower as she flicks her tongue out to wet her lips. She doesn't even have to say a word; I know she wants this as much as I do. She needs me to fuck her deep and hard, but she has no idea what she's asking me to do. She has no clue there's a monster inside me just waiting to destroy her sweet little pussy.

"I know what you need," I growl, rolling my hips against hers.

"Scar, wait!" She presses her hands against my chest as if she could hold me back. "This isn't why I came here."

"The fuck it isn't." I grab her wrists and pin her to the bed. Her chest rises and falls rapidly, thrusting her breasts up with every intake of breath. I'm on the verge of losing my fucking mind. I'm overwhelmed with the need to rip her little white panties off and taste her. I should try to stop myself, but I can't. Besides, it's better she sees me like this. That she sees me for what I am.

She slaps me so hard I see stars.

"Fuck!" My hand flies up to cover my stinging cheek.

"I only came in here to see if you were okay." She shoves my chest, pushing me back onto my heels. "But since you've decided to be a complete asshole—fuck you!"

"You came into my room," I snarl through clenched teeth. I grab her and wrestle her back into submission.

"Only because you were screaming." Her nostrils flare.

"Fuck!" I grind my hips against hers one last time before releasing her wrists. "Get the hell out of my room."

“Asshole!” She slams the door on the way out.

“Shit.” I smash my fist into the bed. “Goddamn fucking women!”

I’m furious, but not at her. I’m mad at myself. I almost killed her, and even worse, I almost lost control and fucked her brains out. She has no idea who she’s dealing with. She’s playing with hellfire. If she hadn’t gotten out when she did, I would have destroyed her hot, wet, tight—

“Fuck!”

I jump off the bed. My cock’s so hard I can hardly walk to the bathroom. This is ridiculous. I never lose control like this. She shouldn’t have been in my room. It’s a rule everyone follows. No one dares come in unless I invite them in. She should have known better. I mean, sure, she didn’t know about the rule, but that’s not my fault. How could I have known she’d take it upon herself to be Miss Goody Two-Shoes, wandering around the halls at night just waiting to rescue someone else? Isn’t Max enough to deal with? Does she really want to save me, too? If that’s the case, she has no idea what she’s getting herself into.

I slam the bathroom door behind me. The scent of my sweat curdles my stomach, and I splash water on my face, but it’s not enough. I’m hot and sticky and drowning in lust. *This is all her fault.*

A shower. I need a shower.

I turn the hot water all the way up, and it doesn’t take long before steam fogs the glass doors. I step into the scaling water and let pain rush through me. My cock’s still rock-hard. I don’t understand why I’m so out of control when I’m around Julia. It’s ridiculous. I’m not a teenager anymore. Those days are long gone. So why am I horny as fuck whenever she’s near me?

I scrub my skin hard, washing away the sweat and trying like hell to stop thinking about Julia laid out on my bed. Instead, I focus on what happened right before she barged into my room. Another nightmare. Sometimes I’ll go several days

without one. Sometimes it happens every day for months. I can't stop them, no matter what I do. I've tried everything from getting blackout drunk to underground cage fights. Nothing works. I've given up on trying anything else. There's no point. The only thing that helps temporarily is banging a hot chick. There's plenty of pussy to go around when you're the pres of a motorcycle club, so that's never a problem. But I don't keep any of them for more than one night. Maybe two if they don't have a gag reflex. Good deepthroat is worth the clingy bullshit that happens when I give them more than one ride on my dick.

My cock jerks as I picture Julia on her hands and knees beside the bed. Her cute little ass pointed up in the air had almost shattered me. If she ever put that little pink mouth on my dick, I'd blow a load so hard she'd choke on it. I can picture it so clearly. I can't help but wrap my fingers around my cock, barely able to cover it. I wonder what it would look like in her tiny hands or her delicate little mouth. One day, I hope I'll find out exactly how much she can take.

My knees go weak. I brace my other hand against the wall, so I don't fall over. I stroke my cock in time with her filthy mouth as it slides up and down my shaft. Her tongue flicks out to swirl around the tip before she licks the length of me. She sucks on my balls while looking me right in the eye.

*She's so fucking hot.*

I tighten my grip and stroke faster. Her lips form a perfect "O" as they kiss the tip of my cock. Her hot, velvety mouth stretches wide to accommodate my girth. She doesn't miss a beat, sucking hard and letting me plunder every inch of her delicate throat. She slurps and sucks and pulls me into her wicked mouth. My knees tremble. My back arches. The tingling in my balls coils up my spine. With each thrust of my hips, pressure builds and builds. Blood thunders through my ears.

*I'm so fucking close.*

Thrusting my cock between her luscious lips, I grab the back of her head, fisting her hair and dragging her mouth up

and down my dick. I moan and try to hold back for as long as I can. I savor the razor's edge between pleasure and pain. Then she looks at me with those big, doe eyes and sucks me deeper.

I explode, thrusting hard against my hand, strangling my cock, wringing out every last drop of pleasure, and all the while, she's watching me while I ravage her beautiful face. Those eyes. God, I'm ruined.

With a sharp cry, I drop to my knees as pulsing waves of heat burst from my body. I'm on my hands and knees; my cock's still jerking hard. I don't know how long I'm like this, only that my fantasy has wrecked me. This should have helped me stop thinking about her, but it only worsened things. Now I need her more than I need my next breath.

But I can't have her. Not tonight. Not tomorrow. Not ever.

The water's cold by the time I have enough strength to get back on my feet. I towel off quickly, then slip into a pair of black silk pajama pants and a ribbed, black tank top. If she's stupid enough to wander in again, at least my scars will be covered. Part of me hopes she'll be that reckless, but another part just wants her to leave me alone. She's trouble in a petite little package. I can't let her get under my skin.

I fix the sheets before climbing into bed. She's probably sleeping now. I should be sleeping too, but I can't risk it. I don't want to get sucked back into the same nightmare. None of them are worth reliving, but some are far more traumatizing than others. The one she woke me up from is among the worst. But it doesn't matter which nightmare is tormenting me. If I wake up from it and then try to go back to sleep, the same nightmare always comes back. It starts up right where it left off. I can't escape the horror. I can't find peace.

There's no point in trying to sleep. Morning will be here soon. I just have to hold out long enough to see daylight. Tomorrow, we'll figure out how to help Max. I can't do anything about my past, but I can do something about his future. That's what I need to focus on. Not on Julia and all the filthy things I want to do to her, but on Max and how to save him.

And so, I do. I spend the rest of the night trying not to think about her while trying to figure out how to help the boy she rescued.

## Chapter 6: Julia

I'm shaking so hard I can't even walk. I lean against the wall outside Scar's bedroom door and try to catch my breath. What the hell just happened? He almost ... I almost ... We almost ...

"Oh, God," I whimper.

All I wanted to do was find out why he was screaming. I thought he was in trouble, so I ran in to help. He *was* in trouble, just not the kind of trouble I expected, and now I'm in all kinds of trouble, too. I should be terrified, and I am, but also, I'm so damn wet it's crazy. I can't believe what just happened. Maybe I'm dreaming; only I know I'm not. My body wouldn't be this inflamed if it were only a dream. I wouldn't be feeling this reckless and out of control.

My painfully hard nipples poke against my camisole, reminding me of what almost happened on his bed. When he pinned me down, I was frightened, but I also burned with desire. I'm still on fire. My panties cling to my scorching hot center, and I'm dripping with lust. All I can think about is how his hips pressed mine down into the bed. The pressure. The weight of him. It was so much, too much. And the crazy part is I'm tempted to go back in and let him finish what he started. Which is just insane. I'm clearly losing my mind. It's all those tattoos. And those muscles. And that cock! I only caught a glimpse, but it's ... it's ... monstrous. And I want it. I want him. Oh, God, I want him so much.

I try to pull myself together, but it's impossible. I can't stand here all night. I have to get back to my room before someone sees me or before I do something incredibly stupid, like walk back into his room and throw myself at him. I have to stop thinking about his hot, naked, wildly captivating body and start thinking about how much I enjoy being alive instead. He almost killed me. If he hadn't snapped out of it when he did, I'd be dead right now. I'm sure of it.

I'm halfway to my room when I realize Nina is standing at the door to her room. She takes one look at me and clucks

her tongue.

“Well, you stepped right into it, didn’t you?” she asks wryly, closing her bedroom door behind her.

“I just wanted some, uh, water?”

“Your teeth are chattering so hard I can hear them from here.” When she reaches my side, she grasps my upper arm and leads me toward the kitchen. “You look like you could use a drink—”

“Oh, I was just going back to—”

“—and we need to talk.”

“Okay.” I don’t know what else to say. I think I’m still in shock, and now, I’m mortified that she caught me. Not that I was doing anything wrong. I was only trying to help him.

Nina gets me settled at the island before grabbing two whiskey glasses from an upper shelf. She pours amber liquid into both, filling them to the brim. As she shoves one drink toward me, a trickle sloshes over the edge. I’m tempted to lick it off the counter because I’ll need every drop to get through this conversation. I’m sure she’s about to yell at me because I’m wandering the halls at night and going into rooms I don’t belong in. Rooms that should be forbidden and totally off limits. Dangerous rooms filled with sexy monsters.

“I should have stayed in my room,” I mutter.

Normally, I never touch liquor, but today, I’ll make an exception. I don’t particularly like the flavor of whiskey, so I shoot the entire glass. It sears my throat and instantly warms my belly. Maybe it will help calm my nerves, too.

“Impressive. Don’t let Scar know you don’t have a gag reflex,” she teases.

My face burns, but not because of the alcohol.

“Another?” she asks.

I nod, and she pours. I don’t know if I should tell her about what happened with Scar or not. I don’t usually lie, even by omission, but for some reason, what took place between us

feels very personal, like it's a secret that needs to be kept. I don't want to betray his confidence, so I decide not to say anything unless she specifically asks me why I'm awake.

"I saw you coming out of Scar's room," Nina says.

Crap, now I have to tell her something.

"I woke up in the middle of the night. I heard someone scream." I twist the glass between my fingers.

"Scar?"

"Yeah."

"The nightmares are back."

"You know about them?" I look up sharply.

"He's had them since ... for a long time." Nina sips her drink.

"Do you know why he has them?" I ask carefully. I feel like I'm treading on sacred ground. Like I shouldn't be talking about this, but I'm too curious to hold my tongue.

"Yes."

"Why?" I ask.

"That's Scar's story to tell. It's not for me to say."

"Oh, I didn't mean ... I wasn't trying to ..."

"It's all right. He's just very quiet about the time before he came to live with Winchester and me."

"Was that your husband?"

"Yes. God rest his soul." Her eyes glisten.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." Her hand quivers as she refills her glass.

"So, something bad happened to Scar before he moved in?"

"Very bad. A horrible man got a hold of him and did terrible things to him." Her gaze narrows slightly. She cocks her head, studying me. "Are you interested in him?"



“What? No!” I inspect the contents of my glass as if I’m trying to divine the future. “I’m actually a little afraid of him.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No. Not really.” I brush my hand across my neck and wonder if he left any marks.

“What does that mean?” she demands.

“He was out of it when I went to see if he was okay. He thought I was, well, I don’t know what he was thinking, but he sort of pinned me to the bed and tried to strangle me.”

“What? Oh, Julia, I’m so sorry. I should have warned you about him. I would never share his secrets without his permission, but you should know that he and his brothers suffered terrible abuse. Even I don’t know all the details. But the guys can be unpredictable and very violent. During the day, you’re safe. But if you catch one of them off guard or in the middle of a nightmare, then they’re capable of anything. They don’t know what they’re doing. They turn into animals fighting for their lives.”

“Animals?”

“Like I said, they went through something horrible before they came to live with me. I know bits and pieces, things they’ve let slip over the years, but I have a feeling the truth is far worse than anything I can imagine.”

“Poor Scar.” My heart aches for him, but I need to think about Max’s and my safety.

“Scar’s a complicated man. He needs someone who is patient. Someone filled with compassion and love. Someone who can handle his moods. And believe me, his moods are no joke.” Nina tosses back the rest of her drink.

I caught a glimpse of his “moods” earlier when he went from aggressive and angry to hurt and in need of comfort, and then back to feral and enraged in the span of a few minutes. He’s definitely messed up. I should run far, far away as fast as I can, but for some reason, I can’t bring myself to leave him. However, I’m not the only one who’ll be in danger if I stay. Max is counting on me to protect him.

“Maybe I should leave,” I say softly. “I don’t want Max to get hurt.”

“Scar would never hurt a child,” she says vehemently.

“How can you know that for sure?”

“I know him. He’d rather die. He’d never hurt a kid, especially not another little boy. I don’t know exactly what happened between you and Scar tonight, but you both need to put whatever it was aside, at least until we can find a way to help Max.”

“I don’t feel safe here anymore,” I whisper.

“Because of Scar?”

I nod.

“Where else would you go?” Nina asks.

“I don’t know.”

A shrill alert blares from a phone sitting on the counter. Nina picks it up and glances at the screen. “Well, I don’t think you have a choice now.”

“What is it? What happened?”

“Amber Alert. Everyone in the county is looking for him.”

“Crap.”

“You can’t leave now.”

“I know.”

“You have to think about what’s best for Max. I know you’re scared, but you’re safe with us. I promise you that.” She looks at me thoughtfully before adding, “Just be careful with him.”

She’s not talking about Max.

I finish the last drop of liquor, then flee Nina’s watchful gaze. She can see much more than she’s letting on, but how much more? The vibrant indigo in her aura means she’s using her psychic ability, but what’s her ability, and how does she use it? I want to ask her about it, but now isn’t the right time.

As soon as I return to my room, I close and lock the door. I consider leaving with Max. We could escape tonight and be far away from these people before they realize we're gone. But with the Amber Alert out, we might not get far. Maybe staying really is the best option.

I sit on the bed with my back against the headboard. My gaze lands on the doorknob, and I'm staring at it so hard I swear it's turning, but I know it's not. I'm just imagining things. I wonder if I imagined everything that happened tonight, but I know it wasn't a delusion because my panties still cling to me, and I can't stop thinking about the man down the hall. I want to go to him, but Nina's warning keeps me from doing something incredibly foolish. I need to think about Max and what's best for him. I'm already dealing with one monster, Max's father. I don't need to entice another into my life.

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Sunlight streams through the window, warming my body. I stir, reaching for Scar, only to find an empty bed. I glance at the clock on the nightstand, then startle awake. It's after ten a.m. I never sleep this late. And why the hell did I expect to find Scar in my bed? That's the last thing I need right now. But ... I can't stop thinking about him. About his hands and his lips and his tattoos and his scars ...

I shiver.

Scar's such a strong, powerful man. I don't understand how such terrible nightmares could plague him. What happened to him? Who put those terrible marks on his skin? Nina mentioned a "bad man," but who is he? And why was Scar with him? I desperately want to know Scar's story, which frightens me. I'm already trying to save Max. Do I really need to get tangled up with Scar, too?

I have a bad habit of trying to rescue people, and I fall in love way too fast. I can't let that happen with him. He's obviously messed up, which should scare me away, but if anything, I'm more intrigued. He's a mysterious puzzle, and I want to put all the pieces of his past together to get a complete

picture of who he is. He's not just the president of a motorcycle club, and he doesn't just provide refuge to people who need his help; he's hiding so much more. Last night, he unwittingly showed me a hint of who he really is, and now, I want to peel back all his layers. He's becoming an addiction, and I don't know how to stop it.

Laughter carries from somewhere down the hall. It's Max, who sounds like he's having a blast, but I don't want to leave him alone with them for too long. I trust Nina, but I don't trust Scar. I don't know if I can ever trust him again after he almost killed me last night.

"Breakfast is ready. Come join us when you're showered and dressed," Nina calls through my door.

"Coming!"

After a fast, intentionally cold shower in the adjoining bathroom, I open my closet door. Last night, Nina said I could choose anything I wanted from the closet. I told her she was being far too generous, but she assured me she could afford it. I don't want to take anything from her since she's already being so hospitable by allowing us to stay with her, but I can't exactly walk around in yesterday's dirty clothes.

Everything in the closet is brand new, with the tags still on. I'm shocked by the prices and hope she got them on sale. I couldn't possibly take any of this with me. I'll have to be sure to return everything—after I wash it, of course.

I choose a pair of designer jeans with rhinestones decorating the backside. I've never worn anything so flashy, but it's fun, like playing dress-up. After tossing the pants on the bed, I choose a crushed red velvet, long-sleeved, V-neck shirt. Maybe it's too sexy, but I don't care. Maybe I want Scar to think I'm sexier than I really am. I don't know why I want that. I should be running away from him. He's clearly broken in more ways than one. No one has nightmares as intense as his unless something really terrible happened. I have a feeling that whatever he went through might be more than I could bear to hear. Still, I want to get to know him better. And if I'm

being honest, I want him to yearn for me as much as I yearn for him.

I lay the shirt next to the jeans before heading to the dresser. It's full of high-end lingerie, stuff I'd never be able to afford. None of the silky, satiny, lacy bras and panties have price tags, thank God. This stuff probably costs more than I make in a month. It's too much. Nina's far too generous. I'm definitely bringing everything back. Well, maybe I'll keep the lingerie.

It takes me forever to choose, but I finally settle on a powder pink silk bra with ivory lace. The matching panties are skimpier than anything I normally wear. I don't have anyone in my life who would appreciate seeing me in sexy underwear, so there's no point in spending what little money I have on things I can't afford. I typically get my bras and panties in six-packs at Walmart. This lingerie set is positively decadent in comparison, and I feel like I should be on stage at the Moulin Rouge.

I slip into the lingerie, then remember that Max's mom is in Paris. I check my phone. No calls or emails yet. I hope she gets in touch soon. The most obvious solution is to reunite Max with his mother. Even though she seemed spaced out during the trial, I know she cares about him. Maybe she's still too jetlagged to get back to me. I'll have to keep an eye on my phone, so I don't miss her call.

After one last look in the mirror, I finish getting dressed. Something about knowing I'm wearing sexy undergarments puts an extra spring in my step. Maybe, after all of this is over, I'll splurge on a fancy bra and panty set. I could always get a part-time job over the summer to pay for it.

I find Max, Scar, and Nina in the kitchen. Max smiles at me from the kitchen table while Scar completely ignores me and Nina busies herself at the stove.

"Check out the pancakes Grandma made!" Max cries.

"Oh, you shouldn't call her that," I say softly.

"She said I could," he protests.

“All the kids call me ‘Grandma.’ I’m not worried about someone thinking I’m old. I may be fifty-five, but I’ve earned every one of those years, and I’m damn proud of them. Besides, I’m the only ‘grandma’ I know who still has the ass of a teenager.” Nina smirks and half-twists to show off her backside. I blush and look away. She’s not wrong.

The doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it,” Scar says.

As he heads toward the door, I peek at his perfect butt. I want to kiss whoever invented jeans. He’s so damn sexy I can’t look away. All I can think about is the feral look in his eyes when he pinned me to the bed. He looked like he was going to eat me, but in the best way possible. I’m burning up with desire until he glances over his shoulder and glares at me.

*Damn!* I quickly avert my gaze.

“What can I get you for breakfast?” Nina asks, saving me from my lecherous thoughts.

“I don’t usually eat breakfast.” I sit on a stool by the island. Since she’s acting like nothing happened last night, I follow her lead. For Max’s sake, it’s better if we pretend everything’s fine. He doesn’t need to be exposed to any more stress. His pastel pink aura indicates happiness, and I want him to stay that way for as long as possible.

“It’s almost lunchtime, so consider this brunch. I have leftover pancake batter, eggs, toast, bacon, sausage, and let’s see ...” Nina opens the fridge.

“Just toast and coffee if you have it.”

“Oh, sweetie, allow me to indulge your wildest coffee fantasies.” She pulls a cupboard door open to reveal bags of organic, fair trade, single-origin coffee. I recognize several brands I could never afford. This really is a coffee lover’s fantasy.

“I might take my chances and permanently move in,” I say wistfully, not realizing exactly what I said until Nina arches a brow at me.

“Permanently?” She cocks her head to one side.

“Um, I haven’t had caffeine yet. I don’t know what I’m saying,” I mumble, feeling like a complete idiot.

“I’ve been dying to break into a new bag of Black Ivory,” she says, still watching me.

“*The* Black Ivory? From Thailand?” I try to change the subject as quickly as possible.

“You know your beans.” She lets my earlier snafu go and retrieves a hand-grinder from another cupboard before pouring whole beans into it.

“It’s over a thousand dollars per pound.”

“At least,” Nina agrees. “I don’t mind paying for the best of everything. We all deserve a little pleasure now and again.”

To avoid thinking about Scar, I try to guess how much one cup of brewed Black Ivory would cost. The number is staggering. Even the most overpriced coffee chain doesn’t charge that much per cup.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly—”

“Stop!” She uses her stern voice on me, the one she probably saves for misbehaving children, and I feel properly chastised on several levels.

“Thank you,” I say, making a mental note to keep my damn mouth shut. I need to learn how to accept what she’s offering without making a big deal. She clearly enjoys spoiling people. It must bring her a lot of joy, so I’d better not ruin it for her.

As Nina prepares the coffee, I can’t help but wonder how she has so much money. If she doesn’t spare any expense, won’t she go broke eventually? Was her husband rich? Were they into illegal stuff before he died? Is Scar’s motorcycle club into illegal stuff, too? There are so many questions I want to ask, but I don’t want to be rude, so I stay silent.

Scar strolls back into the kitchen carrying a huge cardboard box filled with groceries. He sets it on the counter and then begins to remove the contents. He doesn’t even

glance my way. It's unnerving. I can't stand being ignored. I want to talk about what happened last night, but I can't do it in front of Nina and Max. That conversation will have to wait until we're alone.

"Let me help you put that away." I get up and grab a box of cereal, but he snatches it away from me.

"No. Everything has its place, and you don't know where it all goes. I do," he says.

"He's very particular about these things," Nina says.

"O-kay." I return to my seat.

As he unpacks the groceries, he carefully places each item just so in its designated spot. He turns all the labels forward and spaces duplicate cereal boxes directly behind the currently open boxes. I swear he's about to whip out a tape measure to make sure they're all exactly an inch apart. It's super weird. No wonder he didn't want me to help.

"I'm going to the clubhouse," Scar says before walking down the hall to his bedroom. He closes the door behind him.

"Do you like butter and jam on your toast?" Nina asks.

"Sure." I'm still staring down the hall. He's such a mystery.

"May I be excused?" Max asks.

"Absolutely! I'll put cartoons on for you in the living room," Nina says. After she gets Max situated, she comes back and pours two mugs of coffee. She hands one to me. "How did you sleep last night?"

"Not that great," I admit.

"Are you going to stay, or are you leaving with Max today?"

"I ... I haven't really thought about it yet." I finish the coffee and set the mug in the sink. "I think I need to talk to Scar first."

"Julia." Nina grabs my arm as I try to pass her. "Don't push him."



“I just have to be sure that Max will be safe here.”

“He will be.”

“I need to hear that from Scar.” I tug my arm out of her grip, then walk away, making sure Max is doing okay before heading toward Scar’s bedroom. My stomach flutters, and my nerves fray. I take a second to catch my breath before knocking on his door.

“Come in!”

“Hey.” I walk in and close the door behind me.

“What’s up? Is Max okay?” His brow furrows as he makes the bed, tucking the corners of the sheets in with military precision. He still isn’t looking at me.

“He’s good. He’s watching cartoons.”

“Then why are you here?” he asks. He smooths every wrinkle from the comforter before pulling one edge to make it even on both sides.

“I wanted to see how you were doing,” I say softly.

“I’m fine.” He grabs a pillow and violently fluffs it. His jaw is set in a hard line as he tosses it onto the bed.

“Do you ... I mean ... If you want to talk about it ...”

“About what?” He finishes fiddling with the bed, then heads to the closet, where he starts spacing out the hangers. He arranges each one perfectly equidistant from the next.

“The nightmares.”

His hands still, but he doesn’t turn toward me. He pulls his shoulders back, and his posture goes rigid. I immediately regret bringing it up. This is stupid. I should mind my own business. I should do what he’s doing and pretend last night didn’t happen.

The shrill ringtone on his phone breaks the uncomfortable silence.

“What?” he answers gruffly. He pauses for several seconds, listening to the person on the other end. “You’ve got

to be fucking—Are they there already? Yeah, stall them until I get there ... Do the best you can. Make something up if you have to ... Okay. I'll be there soon.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Cops. They’re at the clubhouse with a warrant.”

“For Max?”

“Yeah.” He grabs my shoulders so suddenly that I yelp. “Don’t worry. I’m going to protect you and Max. Stay here with Nina. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Okay.”

I can’t catch my breath because his hands are still on me. His eyes blaze molten silver. I can’t tell if he’s angry or feeling something else entirely. When his gaze drops to my mouth, it only adds to my confusion. What is he—

He seizes fistfuls of my hair, dragging me toward him before crushing his mouth against mine. He brands me with his lips, searing me with a kiss so erotic, I’m sure he’s trying to steal my soul. I gasp as molten heat floods my core. My entire body comes alive, and I’m helpless to resist his erotic assault. Flames lick at every nerve ending, sending tendrils of sweet torture to curl around my sex. It’s like he’s touching me everywhere at once, but somehow, it’s not enough. I want more. I want everything. I want *him*.

I moan and melt against his rock-hard body, expecting him to deepen the kiss, but he doesn’t. He abruptly pulls away, cursing under his breath before stomping out of the room.

He’s gone.

I have no idea what just happened, but I’m slowly unraveling inside. There’s no way I can walk away from him. There’s something between us, some indelible connection I’m dying to explore, and now, I know he feels it, too. He can’t deny it, not after that kiss.

I’ve never met anyone like him before. It’s not just his mysterious past or his ability to kiss me senseless. There’s more to it. I’m drawn to his aura, his strength, his dark

sensuality, his tattoos, his scars, and more, so much more. I want to know everything about him, every last detail. But how will I get him to open up to me? And will he do it before he walks out of my life forever?

## Chapter 7: Scar

I couldn't wait to get away from Julia. Having her back in my bedroom was a temptation I almost couldn't resist. I don't know what the fuck I was thinking, kissing her like that. I can't deal with that right now, but I can sure as fuck handle the sheriff and his men. They won't find a scrap of evidence that Max was ever in the clubhouse. I had Matrix and Talon double-check to be sure the kid didn't leave anything behind. The place is clean. Those cops won't find shit.

As I roar down the road on my bike, I can't help but think about how good it felt to have Julia underneath me last night. She's so soft and warm and ... Fuck! I have to stop thinking about her. She's a distraction I don't need. I've never kept any woman around for longer than a night, and I'm not about to start that shit now. But damn, when she walked into the kitchen in those skin-tight jeans and that red shirt, I went so fucking hard I thought I'd bust my zipper. Elementary school nurses shouldn't be that hot. It's not right. It's like she walked right out of a porno, only she's so much sweeter than one of those girls. I hate how much I want her. I thought that maybe if I had a little taste, I wouldn't need her anymore. I thought one kiss would be enough.

I was wrong.

As I ride through the mountains toward the clubhouse, I curse under my breath. Kissing her was so fucking stupid. Why the hell did I think that would fix anything? Okay, honestly, I thought maybe I wouldn't like kissing her. I get sick of other women after one night. Why would she be any different? Although ... we didn't really *do* anything. It wasn't a night filled with mind-numbing pleasure. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe fucking her brains out will do the trick, and I'll be able to think clearly again. That's something I need to consider. Later.

When I arrive at the clubhouse, I drive past three sheriff's deputy trucks. Six deputies stand on the porch, Matrix and Talon facing off with them. My brothers have their arms

crossed over their chests, and they aren't budging an inch. Warrant or not, they're not letting those fucks in until I say so.

I park, then swing my leg over my bike. I make a show of taking off my helmet just to piss off Sheriff Curtis. He's red-faced and steaming by the time I meander up the steps.

"What's this about?" I snatch the warrant from his hand. I glance at it to see exactly where they're allowed to search and for what. They're trying to find Max. They're also looking for children's items in the house, garage, and bar.

"My son's missing," Curtis growls. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Nope." I hand the paperwork back.

"Your men will have to stay outside while we search."

"Not a fucking chance. I don't want you planting evidence in my house." He'll have to arrest my ass if he wants me out of the way. "We don't have your boy."

"Really? Because I talked to some of your regulars who remember seeing him with a nurse from his school yesterday. You remember this woman?" He pulls a picture of Julia out and holds it in front of my face.

"Can't say that I have," I respond casually. "Hot, though. If you find her, send her my way."

Matrix snickers while Talon snorts.

"Who else is in the house?" Curtis asks, putting the photo away.

"No one," I say, truthfully. Reaper, Nitro, and the prospects are watching Nina's place. "Why do you think we have your kid? What did you tell the judge to get the warrant?"

"The last place his phone pinged was this house," Curtis says.

"Bullshit," Matrix says before spitting on the ground. "GPS isn't that accurate. You might be able to narrow it down

to maybe twenty meters, but anyone passing by on the highway could have pinged the local cell tower.”

“It pinged here, and then it went out. I know you have him. You boys like to think you’re above the law. You’ve gotten away with shit in the past, but if I find out you have my son, I’ll make sure you all get a lethal injection.”

“For kidnapping? That’s overkill, don’t ya think?” Talon asks sarcastically.

“It’s not even legal,” Matrix says.

“We don’t have your kid,” I say.

“You three stay out here,” Curtis says while pulling on a pair of gloves. “I don’t want to have to arrest you for obstruction.”

“Are you threatening me?” I get right in his face, toe to toe. I’m so close that I know he ate a cheeseburger for lunch.

An image pops into my mind. Curtis is dragging Max by his arm into a truck marked “Sheriff’s Department.” Max screams and cries, begging for someone to save him, but his father simply smiles. It’s a cold, evil look. It reminds me so much of Blackstone that I’m instantly nauseous. There’s no fucking way I’m letting Curtis’ plan come true. I’ll put a bullet in his head before I let him touch his kid again.

“Get the fuck out of my face.” Curtis slams his shoulder into mine as he passes me.

I’m about to lunge for him when Matrix shakes his head slightly. He’s right. I shouldn’t do anything more to inflame the situation, but I want to kick this motherfucker’s ass. When he gets his hands on his kid, he’s planning on beating the shit out of him. I feel it in my soul. There’s no fucking way I’m going to let that happen. I’m more determined than ever to do whatever it takes to keep Max safe.

The rest of the deputies filter inside, leaving Talon, Matrix, and me alone on the porch.

“This is bullshit. I don’t know how they got the judge to sign a warrant,” Matrix says.

“They all stick together,” I say bitterly.

“They won’t find anything,” Talon mutters. “I took care of everything.”

He’s talking about the guns. We’re always armed, but we also hide an armory in the basement. It’s behind a false wall, so unless someone knows where to look, they won’t see it. These cops are too stupid to find them. At least we have that going for us.

“How’d everything go last night?” Matrix whispers.

I hesitate because I don’t know how to answer. Everything went great with Max. He seemed more relaxed and happier, especially at breakfast this morning. But as far as Julia? That’s a much bigger question, one I’m not ready to answer.

“Fine,” I finally say.

“Sounds like it.” Talon smirks.

Nothing gets past him, but he’s also not nosey enough to pry. He knows I’ll talk about things when I’m ready. That’s the great thing about the guys. We don’t dig into each other’s business unless we think the other is in some kind of trouble. They don’t realize it yet, but I might be in a world of trouble. Not because of the cops or the kid, but because of the woman. As soon as the guys figure that out, they’ll be on me asking fifty million questions. I’m not ready to deal with that shit yet.

The cops take their time tossing stuff out of drawers and moving furniture. I watch them as best as I can through the open door. I don’t know why they think throwing silverware all over the floor will help. They’re probably doing it to spite us. Fuckers.

Anger simmers in my belly, but I’m smart enough to know we need to lay low. Let the sheriff look all he wants. He won’t find anything. And he won’t have any reason to look at us again. If we can get through this search, we’ll be free and clear. Then we can figure out what to do about Max.

Hours pass before the sheriff finally wanders out. He’s scowling, which brings a smile to my face. *Fuck this guy.*

“Find anything?” I ask sweetly.

“Nothing.”

“Because we don’t have your kid. Good luck finding him.” I put my hands on my hips and glare until he and his deputies leave, and I don’t relax until they’re all on the highway, heading back toward town.

“Get the prospects down here to clean this place up,” I say.

“Are you going back to Nina’s?” Talon asks.

“No. Not yet.”

Talon and Matrix share a look, and I don’t dare meet their eyes. They’re like me. They see too much, and I’m not ready to tell them anything else. What could I tell them anyway when I don’t know what the hell’s going on with me? I’ve nothing to say because I can’t untangle these crazy jumbled feelings she’s making me have. It’s a mess, and it’s all her fault. I should stay away from her. At least for a while. At least until I can get my head on straight.

As soon as they leave, I shift my focus to cleaning up the place. It’s a total disaster. My heart thumps wildly as I load the dishwasher with everything those pigs tossed on the floor. They broke a few dishes. Now we’ll have to get a new set. I can’t stand mismatched shit. I don’t know how people can live like that, with all different colors and sizes. It’s madness.

Three prospects arrive thirty minutes later.

“How are things at Nina’s?” I ask.

“Good,” one of them responds. “Although ...”

“What?”

“I saw a bunch of sheriff’s deputy trucks headed that way.”

“When?”

“A few minutes after we left. If they were going to Nina’s, they’d be there right about—” My phone buzzes. “Now.”



“Yeah?” I answer the call.

“Cops are here,” Matrix says.

“They have a warrant?”

“Not this time. They’re not getting past the gate unless Nina wants to fuck with them.”

“She’d better not risk it. Where are Julia and Max?”

“Inside the house somewhere, I’d imagine. But I don’t have eyes on them.”

“Get in there and make sure they’re safe. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” I end the call. “Fuck!”

“More trouble?” a prospect asks.

“I want this place spotless,” I snap.

I’m on my bike and on the highway before I can think. I strapped my helmet on so fast that it’s not tight enough, and it keeps bouncing against my forehead.

“Fuck!” I yell into the wind.

I might not know how to deal with Julia and what happened between us last night, but I know I need to protect her and Max. She’s already risked her career for the boy. The fact that the sheriff knows she’s with him is a huge problem. She can’t go home now. She’ll have to stay with us until we figure out how to help Max. Until then, I’m not letting her or Max out of my sight.

I don’t usually feel so protective of the people we help. I mean, I definitely care about their safety. But this? This is something else. They’re special. Different. I’m going to make sure the sheriff doesn’t get his hands on them. As long as I’m protecting them, they’ll be safe. And keeping them safe has nothing to do with how much I want Julia in my bed.

Nothing at all.

## Chapter 8: Julia

I'm still reeling from the kiss and trying not to show it when Nina strolls into the living room carrying a tray of cookies and a pitcher of pink lemonade. She sets it on the glass coffee table before sitting beside me on the sofa. After pouring Max a glass of fruity sweetness, she offers him a selection of treats. He grabs a cookie in each hand, then returns his attention to the cartoon rabbit on the television.

"It's probably going to ruin Max's lunch, but I like spoiling the new kids." Nina grabs a chocolate chip cookie. She takes a generous bite out of it, then brushes crumbs off her fitted black sweater. She's wearing jeans, too, but hers are devoid of rhinestones today.

"How many children have you rescued?" I ask, choosing a sugar cookie.

"Too many to count."

"That's great that you can help them, but it's sad that so many kids needed it." I bite into the sweet yet tangy treat. "Wow, this is great."

"I baked those last night."

"After I went to sleep?" I lower my voice. Even though Max doesn't seem to be paying attention to us, kids have a way of listening to everything adults say around them. I don't want him to overhear anything about what happened last night.

"I thought the insomnia would go away after menopause, but it's here to stay. I get a lot done in the middle of the night when everyone else is asleep. I actually enjoy the quiet time. Usually, days are reserved for taking care of the club. Nights are just for me."

"How often do the guys come over?" I ask.

"At least one comes over every day. If they didn't visit, I'd worry about them. They take good care of each other, but they still need me to talk some sense into them from time to time. You know how men are." She flashes a grin, then

casually leans toward me. “So, do you have anyone waiting for you at home?”

“No. The last guy I dated was a total control freak. He wanted to know where I was and who I was with at all times. If I ever deviated from my schedule, he’d demand to know why. It got to the point where I’d have to sit through an interrogation whenever I saw him. It was weird. He’d start showing up in the most unexpected places, especially when I was out with friends. Random shops, like the nail salon.” I cringe, remembering all the times he appeared out of nowhere.

“It sounds like he was stalking you.”

“I guess technically he was, but I never even considered that possibility until it was over. It just seemed like he was being caring. That he was interested in my life.”

“How did things end between you?”

“When he tried to tell me who I could or couldn’t spend time with, I knew it was over.”

“Smart girl.”

“I probably let it go on for longer than I should have, but he was so attentive in the beginning. He’d bring me all kinds of extravagant presents, and he told me he loved me on our second date. I guess that should have been a red flag. He hardly knew me, but he was professing his undying love.” I shake my head, wondering how I could ever have been that stupid.

“He was love bombing you.”

“Is that a real thing?” I ask, incredulous because I’ve never heard that term before.

“Absolutely. It’s something abusers do in the beginning. It makes leaving them so much harder because they were so sweet and good to you, at least at first. But as time goes on, they can’t hide who they really are. The sad thing is that sometimes women don’t realize what’s happening to them until it’s too late.”

The sadness in her tone makes me wonder if she went through something similar. I'm about to ask her about it when her phone alarm sounds. She grabs it from her pocket and taps the screen. Four images appear. It looks like surveillance images from cameras. I suspected there were more than just the cameras at the gate, and this confirms it.

"Shit. Cops." Nina's on her feet in an instant. "Max, would you like to see something really cool?"

"Why are there cops here?" he asks, missing nothing. He wraps his arms around his knees and begins to rock. "Are they looking for me? Is my dad out there?"

"I'm sure they just want to talk to me about donating to their police charity." Nina slides me a glance, asking for backup. I give her a quick nod.

"I want to see something cool." I grab Max's hand to help him to his feet.

"Come with me," Nina says.

She takes off down the hall. When she reaches the last door on the right, she opens it and walks into a strawberry-themed bedroom. It looks like a little girl's room. However, it's hiding a secret, which Nina reveals when she taps along the wall. A secret panel retracts, revealing a hidden steel door. She presses her finger against a pad next to a small keyboard. The door hisses open as if it's been vacuum sealed.

"This is where I like to go when we play hide and seek," Nina says to Max. "There are a bunch of video cameras around the house. You can see what's going on, so if someone's coming, you'll know it."

"Come inside," I say, leading Max into the room.

Three walls are covered with flat screen monitors. Security feeds from all over the property appear on the screens. Sheriff's department vehicles block the front gate, and a man at the call box glares into one camera. It's Max's father.

"Stay here while I find out what they want," Nina says. "The room is soundproof. It can't be opened without a designated fingerprint or password. You'll be safe here."

“Be careful,” I tell her as she leaves.

The door clicks closed behind her. The silence inside the vault is overwhelming.

“What does this button do?” Max asks as he presses one.

“Don’t touch—”

Audio fills the room. It’s coming from the box at the gate.

“This is Sheriff Curtis. Open up, Nina.”

Max’s eyes go wide, and he grabs my hand. I wrap an arm around his shoulder to reassure him he’s safe. I’m not going to let his father find him.

“Hold your horses,” Nina responds. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

On another screen, the front door to the house opens. Nina, now wearing her leather jacket, steps out. I follow her progression down the long driveway across several monitors. While I wait for her to reach the gate, I take stock of the other camera locations. The only ones inside the house are in the common areas, thank God. It would be super weird if there were any in the bedrooms or bathrooms. Fortunately, there aren’t.

“Good afternoon, Sheriff,” Nina says when she reaches the gate. “What brings you onto *my* property today?”

“We’re looking for a boy. My son. Max Curtis. We have reason to believe you’re hiding him.”

“I’m so sorry your boy’s missing,” Nina says, seeming sincere. “What does he look like?”

As Curtis describes him, Max wraps his arms around my leg. He’s shivering so hard I’m afraid he’s going to pass out.

“Don’t let him get me. Don’t make me go with him,” Max wails.

“You’re not going anywhere with him.” I hug the trembling child as anger tightens my chest. No child should ever be afraid of his father. This man is a monster. He doesn’t deserve to have children, not if he’s going to treat them like

this. I've seen the bruises. I know what he's capable of, and remembering that renews my resolve. He's not going to get his hands on Max. Not while I'm around to stop him.

"I haven't seen your son," Nina lies.

"Do you mind if we come in and have a look around?" Curtis asks.

"Not at all. In fact, I was just enjoying some lemonade and cookies. Would you like a glass?" she asks sweetly.

"Sure."

Nina punches something into her phone. The gate slowly rolls open to allow the deputies through. They drive past Nina toward the house, and she waits until they're all inside before tapping once on her phone. The gate closes, locking them in.

Max's eyes dart from one screen to the next as he follows his father's image. I want to reassure Max that we're perfectly safe in the panic room, but I don't know how far his father is willing to go to get him back. He's obviously capable of great cruelty, but is he smart enough to realize his son is in the house?

I quickly find the cameras hidden in various locations in the living room. I try to remember what was sitting on the mantle that could have hidden that camera. For the life of me, I can't recall anything out of the ordinary, which means they're well hidden.

The sheriff and his deputies fan out into the living room. Some sit on chairs while others mill about, presumably looking for evidence that Max is on the premises. I quickly check the coffee table, looking for the plates Max and I used for the cookies. They're gone. Nina must have moved them before letting the men into the house.

"As you can see, I'm alone at the moment," Nina says. "Please, enjoy as many cookies as you like."

Only one deputy takes a cookie. The others ignore her invitation.

“Max was last seen with a nurse from his school. Julia Brant. Have you seen this woman?” The sheriff holds up a photo I recognize from last year’s yearbook. I remember hating how puffy my hair looked that day, but now it’s so inconsequential I want to laugh. Suddenly, things that seemed important aren’t anymore. Not in comparison to being hunted by the police.

“This matter was referred to the FBI this morning,” he says.

“The FBI?” Nina takes the photo from him and pretends to study it.

“Ms. Brant’s a wanted fugitive. Since it’s a child kidnapping, the FBI got involved. There’s a warrant out for her arrest. Anyone caught aiding and abetting her will face federal criminal charges. So, if you know where she is, now would be the time to tell me.” Curtis leans into Nina’s personal space, but she doesn’t move away. She looks up at him with mock innocence.

“I’ll give your office a call if I see her around town.”

“Mind if my men look around the rest of the house?”

“Feel free. I have nothing to hide.” She waits until the sheriff and three of his men head down the hall before turning to the man they left behind. “Can I get you a glass of lemonade?”

Her sweet, innocent demeanor is so contrary to what little I know about her that I can’t help but wonder, how well do I know this woman? Can I trust her? I feel like I can. After all, she’s done nothing but protect us. But still, she’s essentially a stranger.

When the deputy turns his back on her to grab a cookie, Nina winks. I startle. She knows I’m watching. I should find it disconcerting, but I have no reason not to trust her. If anything, I’m the one who should feel guilty about being here. I’m putting her and her “boys,” as she calls them, in danger. The cops wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t fled with the sheriff’s son. Yet, even though I’m the one causing the police’s scrutiny,

she's still protecting us. She could give us up right now to avoid going to jail, but she's not. She's risking her freedom for us. I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay her.

Guilt eats at my heart. Nina and Scar seem to be good people, and I'm putting them in danger. I'm wanted by the FBI for kidnapping! I can't believe this is my life right now. I can't continue to stay with them. I don't want them to be arrested for helping me. I need to figure out something else, at least until I can get a hold of Max's mom. She needs to step up and help her son. I'm sure she will once she finds out what's happening and realizes how terrified he is.

The cops search the house, disappearing into bedroom after bedroom. At one point, they walk through the doorway in the hall into the strawberry-themed room. I glance at the door to the panic room and listen intently. It's truly soundproof because I can't hear anything on the other side. As they leave the room, their expressions don't change. They have no idea how close they came to finding Max. I hope I can get far, far away from here before they realize their mistake.

The thought of walking away from Scar gnaws at my chest. I just started getting to know him. I've barely scratched the surface of who he is, and it's not enough. I want to know everything about him, but I can't stay. It's impossible. Hiding out at Nina's will only put everyone in danger. I'm not that selfish. Leaving is the only way I can be sure the cops won't suspect Nina and Scar anymore. The sooner I can get out of here, the better.

After almost an hour of searching, the sheriff and his deputies rejoin Nina in the living room. She's wearing the same placid smile as before, but if anyone looked closer, they'd see tightness at the corners of her mouth. She's furious even though she's not showing it.

"Well, gentlemen, find anything?" she asks.

"Nothing. But don't think we won't keep our eyes on you. Underground Vengeance has never respected the law. Your old man hated us. I'm sure you do, too." He glares at her.



“Next time, come back with a warrant.” Nina stands and gestures toward the front door. “I’m sure you know the way out.”

The sheriff grunts and signals to his men to follow him. Nina doesn’t move from the living room until they’ve gone through the front gate, which firmly closes behind them. Only then does she relax her shoulders.

“I’ll come to get you out,” she says to the camera over the fireplace.

“Thanks,” I murmur, unsure whether she can hear me. I don’t know what security cameras are capable of these days. I never had any because I never thought I needed them. I’m starting to question that choice. Right now, it really doesn’t matter. There’s no way I can go home until this is over, but as soon as Max is somewhere safe with his mom, I’m definitely getting a system installed at home.

The door to the panic room hisses open, and Nina enters, smiling at me before dropping her gaze to Max. “Well, that was exciting. How about some lunch?”

“Is my dad gone?”

“Yes, and he’s not going to bother us anymore. Scar will make sure of it.”

“I’m not hungry,” Max mumbles, clutching his stomach as if it hurts. It probably does from the stress of seeing his father again.

“That’s okay. Let’s watch cartoons until Scar gets back. He texted that he’s on his way. He should be here any minute,” she says, more for my benefit than for Max’s.

My heart flutters at the thought of seeing Scar again. Then the guilt kicks in. Every second I stay here, I’m putting him and Nina in danger. I need to leave as soon as possible. I should go before he gets back. Seeing him again will only make it even harder to leave. It’s difficult enough as it is.

“Nina, can I talk to you in the kitchen?”

“Of course.” She gets Max situated in front of the television before joining me in the kitchen. “What’s up?”

“I’m a wanted fugitive.”

“Pft.” She waves a hand through the air. “Even if you’re wanted by the FBI, they can’t prove anything. They can’t pin kidnapping on you unless they catch you with Max. As long as you’re here, you’ll both be safe.”

“But you won’t.” I shove my hands into my pockets.

“What do you mean?”

“The cops went to the clubhouse earlier, and then they came here. They’ll be back, and if they find him here, they’ll arrest you as an accomplice to kidnapping.”

“Even if they come back with a warrant, they won’t find anything.” Nina shrugs as if being served with a warrant happens to her every day. Maybe it’s not unusual for her, but I don’t even have a parking ticket. I’ve never been arrested. If the cops questioned me about Max, I’d crack under the pressure and be hauled off to prison.

“We need to leave. I can’t risk putting you in danger.” I walk around the island to get Max, but Nina catches me, grabbing my upper arm with a firm hand.

“Stop!” She lowers her voice. “Max is counting on you to keep him safe. If you run now, what’s your plan?”

“I don’t know. I just can’t stay here.”

“We’ve dealt with much bigger, meaner enemies in the past,” Nina says.

“You have?”

“You’re not the first woman we’ve helped. Hell, you’re probably not even the hundredth. We’ve never lost a single kid. Never. I’d die to protect Max. I know you don’t understand why I’m willing to put my life on the line for him, but trust me, this is what I do. I protect kids who don’t have anyone else. You do, too. I see it in you. Max isn’t the first kid you’ve helped, is he?”

“I’ve never kidnapped anyone before, but yes, I’ve helped other kids. Usually, the system doesn’t fail them the way it failed Max. At first, I couldn’t understand it, but I’m sure it has something to do with his father being the sheriff.”

“He thinks he’s above the law.”

“Isn’t he? Max’s case went to court, but it was thrown out. The sheriff *is* above the law.”

“If that’s true, then how are you going to keep the boy safe?” Nina asks.

“I—” I struggle to come up with a plan, but I’ve got nothing. Nina’s right. I can’t do this on my own, but I also can’t risk putting her or Scar in jeopardy for us. “I appreciate everything you’ve done for Max and me, but we’re leaving.”

“The hell you are,” a gruff voice startles me.

Scar moves into view, scowling at me. I should be terrified, but I’m too busy trying not to melt into a puddle of wanton need. He’s even more handsome when he’s angry. There’s something almost feral in his eyes. It makes me want to wrap myself around all that hard, unyielding muscle.

When Nina arches a brow at me, I blush furiously. I’m sure she can see desire written all over my face. It’s embarrassing as hell, but I can’t seem to control myself when I’m around him. He’s like a drug, and I’m dying for a fix.

“My room. Now!” Scar stomps down the hall.

“You heard the man,” Nina says, smirking. She knows I’m in all kinds of trouble and seems to find the whole situation amusing. *Unbelievable.*

I slowly walk down the hall. I have no idea what I’m in for. Scar’s clearly furious at me. Is it because of the trouble I brought to his doorstep, or does it have something to do with that kiss earlier? I hope it’s related to the cops and not that soul-rending kiss. Either way, I need to make it clear to him that this, whatever *this* is, is over and that I’m leaving. I refuse to be why he’s arrested and thrown in jail ... or worse.

As I cross the threshold into his room, the expression on his face is murderous. I'm too scared to close the door, so he does it for me. He's standing so close I can feel his breath on the back of my neck. I tense, waiting for him to put his big, scary, sexy-as-hell hands around my throat. He could strangle me for bringing the law to his house, and no one would ever know it because nobody knows I'm here. The thought should scare the shit out of me, but instead, it excites me. I want his rough, dangerous hands all over my body. I need him to punish me for being bad and breaking the law. I need him inside me, plunging into my hot, wet, throbbing pussy until I'm screaming his name.

By the time he tears his gaze away from mine, I'm trembling with desire. There's something seriously fucked up in my head right now. All I can think about are all the dirty, wild, terrible things I want him to do to me on that bed. I should be telling him that I'm leaving. Instead, I'm fantasizing about all the ways he could punish me if I stayed.

## Chapter 9: Scar

The depravity of her fantasy catches me off guard. She looks so sweet and innocent until I glimpse her plans for the future. Plans that include a whole lot of naked flesh and very little space between us. I could get into that if I weren't so fucking furious right now. What the hell was she going on about in the kitchen? Does she actually think she can leave me? I mean, leave us—Nina and the club and me. We're willing to put our necks out for her, and this is the gratitude we get. What the fuck?

"You're not leaving," I growl.

"Scar, I have to. I can't let you risk your life and your safety. You and Nina have been so kind to us. Staying isn't the right thing to do."

"Kind?" I smirk because last night I was anything but that. Violent? *Definitely*. Rabid? *Hell yeah*. But kind? *Not a chance*.

"You know what I mean." Her cheeks turn scarlet, making her even more beautiful and irresistible. Tossing her down on the bed is one way I could keep her here. I'd make sure she came so hard she wouldn't dream of leaving me. I mean, us. *Fuck*.

She takes a step back. "Scar, you're ... don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" I back her into a corner and brace my hands on either side of her gorgeous face. I lean in slowly, fighting the urge to kiss her. She's so submissive and vulnerable right now that the desire to drag her off to bed nearly overwhelms me. I want to consume every inch of her. I want to own her delicious little body and do filthy things to it.

"I appreciate everything you've done for Max and me." She slips under my arm and scurries toward the door. "But we can't stay. The sheriff won't give up so easily. I see it in his eyes. If he realizes Max is here, he's going to tear this place apart looking for him. I can't do that to you or Nina."

I push off the wall and turn around, leaning my back against it and studying her. She's not bluffing. She wants to leave, but I can't let her go. Not only is she totally ill-equipped to deal with someone like the sheriff, but she's tempting as hell, and I'm not ready to set her free. I want her in my bed. I want her moaning and crying out my name. I want her on her knees with her face smashed into the pillow while I take her from behind—but I'm not a fucking savage. It's taking every last ounce of self-control to stay on this side of the room, but I'm managing it. So far.

“Have you tried calling his mom today?” I ask, trying to ignore how her breasts press against that sinfully sexy shirt. Her chestnut hair is piled high on her head in another disheveled bun, just waiting for me to run my fingers through it. I want to mess it up so badly, but touching her would be a huge mistake. I hurt her last night. Hell, I almost strangled her to death. I need to keep my hands to myself. Maybe running away is exactly what she needs to do.

“She's still not answering,” Julia says.

It takes me a second to remember who she's talking about. Max's mom. *Jesus, focus!* “Do you have any idea where she's staying?”

“No.”

“Maybe Max knows.” I need to get the hell out of my bedroom before I throw her down and fuck her brains out. I leave before she can protest. She'll be much safer when there are other people around. I'll be much less likely to bend her ass over the couch if there are witnesses. And I'd never do something so filthy in front of a kid. I'm not that depraved.

Max looks up from where he's sitting on the floor in front of the TV. His eyes brighten, and he jumps up. “Scar! My dad tried to get me. Nina took us to her hide-and-seek room with all the TVs. He didn't find me.”

“Good.” I tousle his hair. “He's not going to get his hands on you again. We've been trying to call your mom, but we haven't been able to get a hold of her yet. Do you know if your

mom was going to France to see anyone? Do you remember any names?”

“She went for work.”

“What does your mom do for work?”

“She makes clothes.”

“Fashion design?”

“Yeah. A con ... a con ...” Max frowns as he struggles to find the right word.

“A convention?”

“Yeah, that.” Max grins.

“Did she say the name of the convention she was attending?” I pull my phone out of my cut so I can text Matrix. If Max can’t recall the details, Matrix will figure it out.

“I don’t know.” Max scrunches his eyebrows together. His gaze slides up and to the left. He’s trying so hard to remember the name, but he clearly can’t recall it.

“That’s okay. Remember my friend Matrix?”

“Yeah,” Max says.

“I’m going to have him find your mom.”

“Do you think she’ll take me with her?”

So much hope fills the boy’s eyes that I’m not about to crush it. “I’m sure she will.”

We still don’t know where his mother stands when it comes to Max. What kind of mother would leave her child with an abuser for the summer? I mean, it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve encountered one, but it still shocks me. Some people should never become parents. Hopefully, his mother steps the fuck up and takes responsibility for keeping her son safe, but we won’t know what she intends to do until we locate her.

I finish texting Matrix what little we know about Max’s mom. Matrix should be able to find flight itineraries, which will give us the timeframe for her trip. From there, he can narrow it down and get a list of possible locations. Hopefully,

he'll find her quickly, but as he likes to remind me, these things take time. We managed to keep the sheriff at bay so far, but he'll be back. I have no doubt about that.

Max returns his attention to the show he's been watching, making it easy for me to slip away. I find Nina and Julia huddled together in the kitchen, whispering.

"I've got Matrix looking into the mom's whereabouts," I say.

"Good. Once he locates her, we can tell her what's going on," Nina says.

Julia won't meet my gaze, and it pisses me off. She can't possibly still be thinking of leaving, can she? Apparently, Nina couldn't talk any sense into her, so it's up to me.

"I need to talk to you—alone," I tell her.

Julia glances at Nina for help, but Nina ignores her silent plea.

"Great! That gives me time to work on lunch. Although no one seems hungry, so maybe I'll make an early dinner instead. Will the other boys be here again tonight?" Nina asks.

"I'm leaving two prospects to keep an eye on the bar and clubhouse. The rest of the guys will be bunking here tonight."

"Oh, I love being able to see all my boys together." Nina's glowing. I love seeing her so happy. She saved our lives, and I want to do everything in my power to put a smile on her face as often as possible. I know we're not the easiest guys to deal with, so she deserves as much happiness as we can give her. She'll be pissed if I let Julia and Max leave. I can't let that happen.

Against my better judgment, I return to my room so Julia and I can speak privately. The minute I close my door, the air seems to get sucked out of my chest. Julia's sitting on the edge of my bed, and all I can think about is laying her down and kissing her until she can't remember who the hell she is, let alone think about leaving me. *Us. Fuck.*



I take a step toward the bed. She tenses. Damn, she's probably still afraid of me. After last night, I don't blame her. She won't stay if she's still terrified of me, so I need to fix that before I convince her that she's safer with me than out there alone in the world.

"I'm sorry about what happened last night." I sit on the bed beside her but not close enough to make physical contact. I still don't trust myself. I want to touch her far too much. It's all I've been able to think about since I got out of bed this morning.

"You had a nightmare. You were scared. It's understandable." She raises her head and meets my eyes. My belly drops as blood rushes south. She's so damn beautiful. She doesn't deserve to be in the position she's in, and she shouldn't have to live in fear. I know what that's like. It's hell on earth.

"I need you to know that I'd never hurt you. Not intentionally. I should have warned you about the nightmares, but I didn't think you'd end up in my room. It's been a while since I've had a nightmare that bad." I tear my gaze away. Looking into her soft, comforting green eyes is more than I can bear. She sees too much, and I hate talking about the past. It's too painful.

"I understand," she whispers.

"You have to promise you'll stay away from me when I'm like that. I'd never hurt you intentionally, but when I'm not in my right mind, I could be too fucked up to see reason. I could kill you. If I ever lose it like that again, you have to fight back as if your life depends on it. Because it will. If I could stop the nightmares from happening, I would. But I can't. And because of them, I'm dangerous. Too dangerous. I'd rather die than ever hurt you again, but you have to be careful. Next time, you might not be able to stop me."

"I know you'd never hurt me intentionally. That's not who you are," she says in that gentle, melodic tone that soothes my soul and makes me feel safe. It's the same tone she

used last night to help me calm down. “But, Scar, you need to deal with whatever’s causing those nightmares.”

She has no idea what she’s asking me to do. I can’t talk about the past. I’ve never talked about what happened at Blackstone’s. Even Nina doesn’t know the details. I’ve never let anyone get close enough even to consider talking about it. However, a small part of me wants to tell Julia everything. It’s the strangest feeling. I haven’t felt safe enough before, but there’s something about Julia that makes me want to confess everything. I don’t know what to make of it.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Julia asks softly.

I shake my head no.

“That’s okay. Just ... talk to someone. Okay?”

“You’re a good person. Max is lucky to have you watching out for him.” My voice is barely a whisper because I’m too busy trying to control my racing heart. Fear keeps me from opening up about my past. The fear of what she’ll think when she learns the truth about what Blackstone did to me. That’s what’s keeping me from spilling my guts. I don’t discuss my past with anyone. I’ve avoided talking about it for years. Why start now?

When she inches closer, I give her a warning look, but she ignores it. She moves so that her thigh presses against mine. Any closer, she’d be in my lap, which is exactly where I want her. It’s all I can do to stop myself from reaching for her and dragging her onto my cock. Fucking is the best way to blot out the pain. If she knew that, she’d stay far, far away from me.

“I became a nurse because I wanted to help people, especially kids. They can’t always protect themselves. They need advocates,” Julia murmurs.

“I wish I’d had someone like you in my life back when —” I clamp my lips together.

“You can talk to me,” she whispers.

She raises her hand, hesitating for a second before resting it gently on my back. After letting out a shaky breath, she rubs

slow circles across my scars. For some reason, it doesn't hurt. It feels ... good. Comforting. Like she truly cares. Which I think she does. She has the heart of an angel. Otherwise, she wouldn't risk her career for Max. She's far too good for someone like me.

"If you want to tell me about your nightmares, I'm a great listener," she says softly.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"It's ... too much."

"Talking to someone can make it easier. I promise I won't repeat anything you tell me." Her eyes are mesmerizing. I can't look away. She's compelling me to open up to her, and I can't stop myself from falling under her spell.

"Before I tell you anything, I need you to promise me something," I say.

"What?"

"Promise me you won't leave." I take her hands in mine and hold them tightly. "I can protect you. I want to protect you. I need to do this. You're the only person willing to stand up for Max. No one else stepped up, but you did. If I'd had someone like that in my life when I was younger, it would have changed everything for me. Everything. You can't even begin to understand how much I need you to stay. I have to protect you and Max, and you have to let me do it."

"Oh, Scar." She wraps her arms around my shoulders and pulls me down to her. I sink into her embrace and bury my face in her hair. "I won't leave."

I nod but can't speak. My throat is so swollen I can hardly swallow. I don't know what it is about this woman, but I feel so safe with her. Safe enough to tell her every horrifying, dark secret. But how can I when I don't know where to start? How can I explain it to someone who wasn't there? How can I describe the pain, the fear, the terror? I don't know if I have the words to do it. And even if I did, would I be able to live with the knowledge that someone else knows everything about

my twisted past? I swore I'd never talk about it with anyone, so why the hell am I considering telling her the whole, ugly truth?

She traces her fingers over the unblemished skin on my forearms before slowly sliding her fingers under my shirt. She finds the edge of a scar, and her hand stills.

“How did this happen?” she asks softly.

I part my lips, but I can't get a single word out. She wants to open Pandora's box, but I don't know if she can handle it—if she can handle me. All of me. Every dark corner of my heart. Because I want to expose it all, but I'm afraid she'll never look at me the same way once she hears my story. It's beyond what most people can handle.

“It's okay if you don't want to tell me,” she murmurs.

“I ...”

“Shh. It's all right.” She holds me close, pressing a gentle kiss to the nape of my neck. A shiver of pleasure ripples through my body. It would be so much easier to push her into the sheets and silence her questions with passionate kisses. So much easier. But she deserves to know the truth about me.

“I've never told anyone before,” I confess.

“About what happened to you?” she asks.

“Yeah. Never.”

“Not even Nina?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Reliving it is too painful.”

“I don't want to push you if you're not ready, but I've helped many kids through traumatic situations. Parents getting divorced. Kids' homes burning down. The death of a sibling. Things like that. Some people find it helpful to talk about the bad stuff that happened to them. If you're ready to talk about it, I'd like to hear your story.”

“It’s more fucked up than anything you could imagine,” I warn.

“I can handle it.”

“After you hear what happened, you won’t see me the same way.”

“I won’t judge you. You can tell me anything.”

The soft melodic tone of her voice lowers my inhibitions. Before I can stop myself, my lips part, and my mouth begins to move. “My mom died when I was four. A monster adopted me.”

My jaw clenches as memories come rushing back. I feel like I’m four years old again, helpless and overwhelmed with fear. I don’t know if I can do this. I can barely string together a sentence. My breath is shallow and rough. It’s hard to take in enough air, and I start to panic.

“I’m so sorry that happened,” she whispers while stroking my back. “If it’s too hard to talk about it, you don’t have to. We can just sit here like this.”

There’s no pity in her tone. No revulsion. Granted, I haven’t really told her anything yet, but I want to. God help me, I want to. But I’m afraid to tell her about Blackstone. So instead of spilling my guts, I pull her onto the bed, roll her onto her side, and curl up behind her, spooning her. I wrap one arm around her waist while I rest my head in the crook of the other. She pushes back against me, unintentionally brushing her ass against my cock. The contact is too much. I can’t stand being this close to her without being inside her. It’s driving me crazy.

I roll her onto her back and hover over her soft, warm body. Her eyes darken with hunger, and it’s all the permission I need to keep going. I lower myself against her, reveling in every voluptuous curve, pinning her beneath me. She slides her hands up my back, pulling my shirt over my head before tossing it onto the floor. Her hands splay against my chest, not to push me away but to roam over my muscles. Her touch is

more than I can stand. I'm burning up inside. I've needed her since the moment we met, and now I'm going to have her.

As I brush my lips across hers, she whimpers, tangling her fingers in my hair and tugging me down. I deepen the kiss, pressing my advantage until her lips part. When she gasps, I sweep my tongue across hers, savoring her sweetness. She tastes like wild strawberries and honey, intoxicating and ripe with desire.

"Scar," she murmurs.

I plunge my tongue between her lips, silencing her. She groans and arches her hips, tormenting me with the promise of oblivion. I press against her hot center, silently cursing all the clothing between us. I don't want anything between us, so I push her shirt up. She moves her arms over her head, making it easier to remove. I want to be skin to skin with her, but I pause for a moment to take in the sight of her pink satin lingerie. If her panties are as sexy as her bra, I'm a dead man. I don't know how I'll be able to take the sight of her, but I'm determined to strip her regardless.

I sit back on my heels and tug at the buttons on her jeans. Peeling her pants off is pure torture, but I'm rewarded with a glimpse of the matching panties. My cock twitches, stretching and growing painfully hard against my zipper. I yank her pants off and throw them aside. She slides her hands across her barely covered breasts. Her nipples strain against the silky fabric. My mouth waters, and I don't waste time searching for the clasp. With trembling hands, I push her bra up. As her breasts spill into my waiting palms, I curl my fingers around her petal-pink nipples, giving them a little pinch. She gasps and tilts her head back, exposing her neck. I'm about to nibble on that tender flesh when someone knocks on the door.

"Goddammit!" I kiss her neck, just below her earlobe, before getting off the bed. "This better be fucking good."

Behind me, Julia scrambles to gather her clothing. She races across the room into the adjoining bathroom. I wait until she closes the door before opening mine.

"What?"

“Busy?” Matrix leans past me to inspect the room.

“What is it?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“I’ve got an update on the mom, but if you’re occupied by something else ...” A wicked grin spreads across his face. I want to slap it right the fuck off. Why didn’t he wait for me with the others? I can hear them laughing and talking in the living room. Why the hell did he feel the need to interrupt me at the worst possible moment?

The bathroom door opens. Julia walks out with a sheepish smile. “Hey, Matrix.”

“Sorry if I interrupted something.” As his gaze sweeps down her body, I step into his line of sight, blocking his view. He’d better back the fuck off before I pound him into the floor.

“We were just ... uh, talking?” Julia’s voice pitches up.

“I didn’t mean to disturb your *conversation*.” Matrix smirks. “I have information you might find interesting, but if you’re too busy ...”

I give him a murderous glare. He backs up several steps, but that devious smile doesn’t leave his face. *Jackass*.

“We’ll be right out,” Julia says.

As I close the door in Matrix’s face, Julia’s girlish giggle fills the room. I turn to find her doubled over, laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I demand. My cock doesn’t find any humor in this at all. It’s still throbbing and desperate to slide into her hot, wet, tight little body.

“Just ... the timing.” She chuckles.

“It’s not funny.” I reach down to adjust my dick. She sobers and walks over to where I’m standing.

“We can talk more later, okay?” She blinks up at me with those gorgeous green eyes, and I’m ready to agree to anything.

“Right. Talk.” That’s the last thing I want to do. Until I’m buried balls deep inside her, I won’t be able to think about anything else. I don’t know how the hell I’m going to be able to walk to the living room without busting my zipper. I need a

minute. “Can you go out and wait for me? There’s something I need to take care of first.”

“Anything in particular?” Her sly smile and glance at the bulge in my pants tell me she knows exactly what I need to deal with before I can face the others. But to her credit, she doesn’t continue teasing me about my painful predicament.

“Go. Please.” I force a smile.

“We’ll talk again later tonight. Okay?”

“Yeah. Sure.” I look away. The temptation to rip off her clothes and finish what we started is overwhelming, but I want to take my time with her. She’s not the kind of woman you throw up against the wall and fuck like a dog. No. She’s better than that. When I finally take her, I’m going to make sure we’re not rushed.

She kisses my cheek before leaving, and as soon as she’s in the hall, I close the door with one hand while tearing down my zipper with the other. I fish out my cock, then wrap my fingers around my shaft, jerking my fist back and forth. There’s no time for long, drawn-out fantasies. This is nothing more than white-hot lust that needs to be sated immediately.

I’m so consumed by passion that it only takes a few seconds to jerk myself into oblivion. I nut so hard I cry out. Hot spurts jut from my cock, again and again, draining my lust. My eyes roll back, and I don’t care if the whole world hears me moan. She did this to me, and she wasn’t even in the room. I can’t even begin to imagine how good it’ll feel when I come deep inside her velvety heat. I was so close to making her mine before Matrix fucked it all up. *Damn him.*

I collapse onto the bed, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling until rational thought returns. Ultimately, I know I should have stopped things before I got her partially naked. All she wanted to do was talk, but I couldn’t handle it. If I’m being honest with myself, I need to admit I was using sex to avoid talking about my past. I get it. I just don’t know how to talk to her about what happened. It’s too overwhelming. Maybe I shouldn’t say anything. Maybe I need to keep my demons to myself.



I don't know why I feel so compelled to open up to this woman. But this feeling? It's dangerous. She's dangerous. She could get me to confess to everything that happened. But if I do, if I tell her every filthy detail, she'll never look at me the same way. She'll look at me with horror and disgust. She'll be repulsed if she knew my entire story. So, I don't know if I can tell her anything. The dark secrets hidden deep within my heart need to stay stuffed down where no one can see them. I can't say another word. I've already told her too much.

From now on, I need to keep my mouth shut. The only way I know how to do that is to use it to do other things. I still want her. I just have to figure out how I can have her without giving up part of my soul in the process.

## Chapter 10: Julia

I'm in the kitchen helping Nina make a huge batch of potato salad when Scar strolls in. Our gazes lock for a moment before he looks away. My heart does a little flip as I return my attention to the food. My body aches for him to finish what he started. I'm still wet and needy, and if he bent me over the kitchen island in front of Nina, I don't think I'd protest. I'd give anything to feel his huge, rough hands against my skin right now. Maybe I should have stayed behind to tempt him into keeping me captive in his bed. I know he wants it just as much as I do.

"Where are the others?" Scar asks.

"Talon's outside getting the barbecue ready. Nitro is giving Max piggyback rides. I warned him not to get too boisterous, but you know how he can be. You should probably check on them," Nina suggests.

"I will. Is Reaper here?" Scar asks.

"He's floating around here somewhere. I'm sure he'll appear as soon as food's ready. We're almost done with the salads."

"Do you need any help?" Scar's eyes meet mine. A rush of raging heat coils in my sex. I'm wound so tight I'm afraid I'm going to break. I definitely need help, but it's not the kind he's offering.

"If you could grab drinks from the fridge, I have the ice chest outside," Nina says.

"On it." His searing gaze rakes down my body as he walks to the fridge. When he finally tears his eyes away, I wilt under the loss of his attention. I'm acutely aware of every move he makes. I don't even have to look at him, and I know where he is in the room. I try to focus on measuring the correct amount of mayonnaise, but I can't remember how much I've added already.

“I think that’s enough.” Nina smiles as if she can read my thoughts. Her aura shimmers lavender, and I wonder if her ability is making me an open book. Maybe she knows everything I’m thinking. That would be incredibly embarrassing.

I blush and avert my eyes. I grab a mixing spoon, then begin stirring the potato salad as if my life depends on it. I don’t stop until Scar leaves the room.

“Your conversation with Scar seems to have gone well. I take it you’re not leaving anymore?” Nina lines up several cucumbers and begins slicing them.

“We’re waiting to see what Max’s mom has to say. Scar thinks—I think—we’re safest here. If that’s still all right.”

“Of course. I was planning on stopping you if Scar didn’t talk some sense into you.”

“He did that for sure.” Not with words, but with his irresistible lips.

My face burns as warmth pools low and tight in the apex of my thighs. I want him so much I can hardly stand it. It’s the worst possible time to be feeling like this, but I can’t help it. There’s just something about the growly wounded man I find completely captivating. Even if I wanted to leave right now, no way could I turn my back on him. I think he needs me as much as Max needs us. Scar’s just as hurt, but his wounds are much older than Max’s, so they’ll take longer to heal.

“The potato salad is ready to go,” Nina says, nodding toward the bowl I’m holding. “Can you carry it out? I’ll be right behind you. I just need to toss the cucumbers in some vinaigrette dressing.”

“Of course.”

Grateful to escape her scrutiny, I grab the bowl and head onto the back porch. The wooden patio overlooks her vast back yard. The grass closest to the house has been mowed, but the rest of the land is filled with swaying hay and wildflowers. The property seems to stretch on for miles. I can’t tell where

the huge wall around it ends, and I can't help but wonder how she acquired so much land.

Having all this protected space is freeing. I don't have to worry about being ambushed by the police during dinner. Although I can't see them, I'm sure prospects are posted outside, keeping an eye out for the sheriff. We're perfectly safe here.

For the first time since Max walked into my office, I relax. I set the potato salad in an ice-filled tray on the picnic table that serves as the buffet. Talon and Matrix are huddled over the smoking barbecue discussing the merits of dry rub versus wet mopping. Both are wearing leather vests with Underground Vengeance patches, jeans, and white tank tops. It must be the club uniform since I haven't seen them in anything else.

"You want it all wet and sloppy." Talon slathers a thick, reddish-brown sauce onto a row of chicken thighs. "Otherwise, where's the fun in it? You can't lick dry rub off your fingers. I mean, you *can*, but who the hell wants it dry?"

"You might want it all moist and splashy, but I like my meat more refined." Matrix sprinkles a huge shaker filled with spices over several steaks.

"I'd like to see you refine one of my hand-stuffed sausages." Talon laughs at his own joke before taking a swig of beer from one of the bottles sitting on the table next to the barbecue.

"I have zero interest in touching your sausage. I don't know if I want to eat any of it, either. Who knows where your nasty-ass hands have been?" Matrix smirks.

"All over a bunch of club pussy."

"Not surprising." Matrix rolls his eyes.

Talon laughs. "But really, who gives a shit? Cooking over an open flame will kill anything that needs to be killed."

"Killed?" Reaper's dark tone scares the crap out of me. I jump back a step, nearly crashing into him. How the hell is he so silent?

“Nothing to kill here, bud,” Talon says. “But since you’re here, can you grab another couple of brewskies for us?”

Reaper grunts before walking into the house. I hope he’s not going to come back with a gun or a knife or something equally deadly. He’s scary as hell. I wonder what his story is, but there’s no way in hell I’d ever have the guts to ask him about it. Nina mentioned all the guys were together when they were kids. Did they all go through the same trauma? Maybe they did, and that’s why he carries this ominous energy with him. Maybe he picked it up from someone else. I’ve seen that happen to kids with violent, alcoholic fathers. Some children seem to take on that energy as if it belongs to them, even though it doesn’t.

He’s fascinating in an is-he-going-to-kill-me-in-my-sleep kind of way. His aura also contains violet hues, but they’re darker and more dangerous than Nina or Scar’s. I’m going to stay as far away from this guy as I can. The others might trust him, but I don’t.

Scar and Nitro run through the grass below the patio, with Max chasing after them and wearing the biggest grin on his face. This is the happiest he’s been in months. I love seeing it.

“Oh, no! He’s going to catch us,” Scar says, winking at me as he flies past the patio.

“We’re dead men!” Nitro hollers.

“Rawr!” Max forms his little fingers into claws and races after the guys. “I’m going to eat you!”

“He’s a dinosaur,” Matrix explains.

“A T-rex,” Talon adds.

“Is this a game you guys play a lot?” I ask.

“The kids love it. It’s our go-to when we need them to work off any extra energy. Max has been cooped up in the house all day. Boys his age need to run, or they can’t sleep,” Matrix says.

“Do you have trouble sleeping?” I ask.

“Sometimes.” He glances at Talon before returning his attention to the meat.

“It’s a good idea not to roam around the house at night. Some of us have been known to sleepwalk,” Talon says.

“I wish I’d known that last night,” I mutter.

Talon looks up sharply. His gaze bores into me. “Did something happen?”

“Um ...”

The sliding door opens, and Nina walks out. She’s balancing the cucumber salad, a tray of condiments, and a jar of pickles. She’s about to drop everything, so I rush to help her, grateful for the interruption. I don’t want to talk about last night anymore. Scar apologized, and I don’t want to dwell on what happened. He didn’t mean to try to kill me. He was just scared.

Scar and Nitro run back into view. They glance over their shoulders, and both slow enough to allow Max to catch them.

“Rawr!” Max jumps on Scar’s back. Scar falls to the ground and lets Max pin him. “I got you!”

“Oh, no! I’m going to get eaten,” Scar says.

He’s grinning, but Max can’t see his face. I can, and what I witness melts my heart. Scar’s so good with kids. I wonder if he wants any of his own or if he’s just content to save other people’s children. I know I shouldn’t be thinking about what he wants since this situation is temporary, but I can’t help it. I can’t stop thinking about him. The more I try to control my thoughts, the worse it gets. He’s constantly on my mind. I need to make sure he doesn’t sneak into my heart, too.

“I’m going to get you!” Nitro grabs Max around the waist, hoisting him off Scar and pulling Max up onto his shoulders. “Now we’re a super T-rex!”

Scar scrambles to his feet and takes off running. Nitro races after him. Max squeals with delight and grabs Nitro’s head, partially blocking his view. Nitro trips over a rock, and Max goes flying through the air. The whole thing happens in

slow motion. I scream and run down the steps, sprinting toward them. It only takes a second for an accident to happen. What if he's hurt?

Max rolls into a ball when he lands. The movement absorbs most of the impact, but he's left gasping for breath.

"Are you okay?" I hover over him.

Max sucks in several breaths before responding. "That was awesome! Can we do it again?"

"Nah, little man. It's time for dinner," Scar says. He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me up against his hard body. He presses his lips against my ear, sending a shiver through me. "He's okay."

"You guys were playing too rough," I say.

"It's what boys do," he responds. "Max is fine, right, bud?"

"Yeah! What's for dinner?" Max grabs Nitro's hand. They walk up the steps to join the others on the patio.

"You okay?" Scar asks.

"I'm fine, but I don't think you should be running around like that. What if he cracked his head open?" I move out of his arms and face him.

"He's a tough kid. I'd never even consider doing anything that could hurt him. I thought you trusted me to take care of him?" Scar frowns.

"I do. I guess I'm just too wound up." I wrap my arms across my chest.

"Come here." He opens his arms, and I walk into them, letting him pull me close. "There's only one thing I regret right now."

"What's that?" I ask.

"Letting you leave my room before we could finish what we started."

I laugh softly, nestling into his chest. I wish he'd take me back there right now, but there's no way we can leave the barbecue without everyone noticing. I don't have to look at them to know they're watching us. I can feel it.

"All that running around made me hungry." He tilts my face up so he can look down at me. He looks hungry as hell—for me.

"Scar," I whisper. "Everyone's watching."

"Let them." He lowers his face toward mine and brushes a soft kiss across my lips. "You're mine. They already know it. Do you?"

My jaw drops. His? What is he talking about? We barely know each other. Sure, a lot has happened in the last twenty-four hours, but how can he claim me when he doesn't really know me? I don't know how to respond to him, so I don't.

"You'll get used to the idea." He grins before brushing a lock of hair from my face. "Let's go eat."

I let him take my hand, and we join the others. They're all laughing and talking about the games they play with the kids they protect, but I can't focus on any of it. All I can think about is how Scar's lips felt against mine. Every time he touches me, little sparks of pleasure rush through me. I can't get enough of him, and it worries me. I can't fall for this guy. He's too intense. I don't know much about him or his club. Until I find out more, I can't let my heart get caught up in the magnetic pull between us.

As I scoop various salads onto my plate, Scar selects pieces of meat from a huge, steaming pile on a platter in the center of the table. Once his plate is covered with food, he turns to me.

"What can I get you?"

"Chicken and maybe a small piece of steak. Not too much."

"That won't be enough." He forks several pieces onto my plate. "You need to keep your energy up." His mesmerizing steel gray eyes sparkle mischievously.



“Okay,” I murmur, entranced.

I swear he’s looking into my soul, but maybe I’m just horny as hell. I haven’t been with anyone in a long time. Usually, I’m cautious about who I share myself with, but there’s just something about him ... I want him constantly. It’s distracting as hell. I can hardly focus on anything else when he’s around. Maybe if I give into the pull, all this yearning will go away.

“So, Julia, Scar tells us you’re a nurse at Max’s school. What made you decide to become one?” Talon asks.

“I’ve always liked helping people. I like taking care of people who are in pain. If I can give them a little relief and put them back together again, then it makes me happy. I love my job.”

“We could use a nurse around here,” Matrix says.

Scar glances at him before turning his attention to me. “How long have you been a nurse?”

“Five years.”

“You must be good at it,” Reaper says. Everyone goes silent and looks at him. I forgot he was even at the table.

“I am,” I respond softly.

“Matrix’s right. We could use you,” Reaper says.

“That may be true, but after this is over, I’m returning to my job.” I bite into a piece of chicken to keep from having to talk about myself anymore. I don’t know where they’re going with this line of questioning, but I’m not going to give up my job unless absolutely necessary. Ever since I was a young girl, I’ve wanted to be a nurse. No one gets to take that away from me. I don’t care how desirable Scar makes me feel. I’ll never give up my job for a man.

Max polishes off all the food on his plate. “Can I have more?”

“You’ve already had a lot, big guy. Don’t forget to save room for dessert,” Nitro says.

“Dessert? Oh, wow. I never get dessert at home unless it’s Christmas or my birthday.” Max’s grin threatens to split his face. I’ve never seen him so excited.

“We’re making s’mores in the fire pit,” Talon says. “Nitro, want to get that started?”

“You know it.”

“He’s the resident pyro,” Talon says to me.

“I don’t want Max too close to the fire,” I say.

“We’ll keep a close eye on him. Don’t worry. We do this with other kids all the time. Nina did it the first night we stayed here, and it’s been a tradition ever since.” Talon smiles at Nina. She returns his smile before patting his hand, and there’s a motherly tenderness to the moment. I don’t know his story either, but it’s clear he loves Nina like a mother. They all do, which makes me trust her with Max.

“Come on, sweetie.” Nina gets up and gestures for Max to go with her. “Let’s help Nitro get the firepit going while these guys talk.”

As soon as they’re out of sight, Matrix leans in. “I’ve got an update on Max’s mom. Here’s what I found out so far. She got custody of the kid during the divorce, but dad gets vacation custody, which includes the entire summer. She was scheduled to attend the Paris Fashion Summer Showcase this week, so I called the conference organizers to see if they could locate her. They told me she never picked up her badge.”

“That’s strange,” Scar says.

“Now, here’s the weird part, I checked flight records, and she never got on the plane. As far as I can tell, she’s still here in Montana.”

“If she didn’t leave, then where the hell is she?” Scar demands.

“I don’t know yet. I’m trying to figure that out,” Matrix says. “I’ve got a few irons in the fire, but it’ll take some time.”

“How much time?” I ask.

“It depends. I tried tracking her phone, but it’s turned off. If she doesn’t turn it back on, I won’t be able to use it to find her.”

“What about something else? Her car’s GPS?”

“It’s parked in the garage at her house. We’ve already checked, and she’s not there. There’s no indication she’s been home recently, but her luggage was missing.”

“Do we have any other options for tracking her down?” I ask.

“If she’s wearing any kind of GPS device, then I’ll find her. I can triangulate the signal and see where it leads. I asked Max if his mom wears a fitness watch. He said she wears a watch, but he doesn’t know if it’s a smart device or not, so I’m searching databases to see what I can come up with.” Matrix sits back.

“How long will that take?” I ask.

“It could take anywhere from a few hours to a few days, but it’s my top priority.”

“Stay on that until you find her,” Scar says. “This isn’t good. I don’t like the fact that she’s missing. Why would she skip out on a conference and not tell anyone about it?”

“Maybe she’s dead,” Reaper says.

“Why would you say that?” I ask.

“People who go missing either don’t want to be found or they’re dead.” Reaper shrugs his massive shoulders.

My shoulders tense. If she’s dead, Max won’t have any family who can take him in. It’s the worst-case scenario. “What’s going to happen to Max?”

“We can’t make any plans until we can track his mom down,” Scar says. “We need to know where she’s at. If she’s alive and just doesn’t want to deal with her kid anymore, we can get him into the underground system. If she’s dead, he’ll have to go into the underground system anyways. But if she’s alive and in hiding somewhere, she has a decision to make. We

need to wait until we talk to her before we do anything with her son. She's still his mom until she gives up custody."

The other men nod in agreement.

"Let me know the second you get anything," Scar says to Matrix.

"Will do, pres."

"Let's go get some s'mores," Scar says.

While the others gather the paper plates and other trash and clean up, Scar and I take the leftover salads into the kitchen. After putting everything away, I turn to Scar.

"Thank you for everything you're doing for Max and me."

"It's what we do." He slowly moves toward me, sliding his hands up from my waist to cup my cheeks. He lowers his lips to mine and gives me a sultry kiss. My lips open to his, and he sweeps his tongue across mine. I want to drag him into the bedroom, but the others are waiting, so I reluctantly pull away. He smiles down at me. "It's dangerous to keep a woman from her chocolate. Let's go get some dessert."

The kind of dessert I want right now is tucked away in his pants, but that's off the menu. I don't know how this night will end, but I hope it's in his bed. Wanting him this much is madness. I'm slowly going insane. If I don't get his big, rough hands on me soon, I'm going to burn up faster than a marshmallow over an open flame.

We join the others and spend the next hour lighting marshmallows on fire before mashing them against a piece of chocolate and pressing the whole, gooey mess between graham crackers. My hands are sticky, and I'm pretty sure marshmallows in my hair, but this is the most fun I've had in years. I can't remember the last time I sat under a starry midnight sky.

In a weird way, I wonder if I was destined to be here right now with Scar and Max. Maybe everything in my life was leading up to this exact moment ... or maybe I'm just on a

massive sugar high and endorphins are rushing through my blood.

I laugh softly.

“What’s so funny?” Scar whispers.

“I haven’t been this happy in a long time.”

“I like seeing you like this. You have a beautiful smile.”

“Thank you.” My cheeks burn, but I don’t think he can see me blushing in the darkness.

“I’m getting tired.” Nina stands and stretches like a cat. “Nitro, please make sure the fire is completely out before you leave it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We should get Max to bed, too,” I say.

“I’ll help you,” Scar says.

“But I’m not sleepy!” Max protests.

“Too much sugar too late,” Reaper grumbles.

“Maybe so, but it’s time to turn in. Come on, Max. I’ll read you a bedtime story,” Scar says.

We take Max into his room, and after making sure he’s cleaned up and has brushed his teeth, Scar tucks him into bed. We sit on the end of the bed beside each other. Scar holds a children’s book in his lap and reads most of the book out loud before Max finally falls asleep. Then he puts his finger over his lips and takes my hand. We turn on a nightlight before leaving the room.

Once we’re alone in the hall, my heartbeat increases. Scar looks at me like he wants to devour me, but there’s also hesitation in his eyes. I’m tempted to grab his hand and take him into my bedroom, but I linger too long, and the moment passes.

“Goodnight, Julia.” His gaze drops to my lips. I wait for him to kiss me, but it doesn’t happen. I think he wants to kiss me, and I definitely want him to, but neither of us makes a

move. I don't know if we don't want it enough or if we want it too much.

“Goodnight, Scar.”

I turn and start to walk away. He grabs my arm and spins me toward him. He slides his hands into my hair and pulls me close. When our lips meet, I moan. He wraps an arm around my waist and tugs me against him. He's hard in all the right places. I kiss him back with abandon, tangling my tongue with his, savoring the sweet taste of sugar and chocolate.

We slowly walk back toward his bedroom door, but the moment his back hits it, he stops. He gives me one last soft kiss before gazing down at me. “I want you in my bed, Julia. But being with me at night is dangerous. I don't want to risk hurting you again.”

“I want to be with you.”

“You don't know what you're getting yourself into,” he warns.

“We could just talk.” I'm grasping at straws, willing to do anything to get him to take me to bed with him.

“We could.” His gaze rakes down my body. “But will we?”

“No.” I give him a sexy smile.

“Exactly. Get some sleep. We can talk tomorrow.” He kisses my forehead before turning me away from him and patting my ass to get me moving.

As I walk away, I glance over my shoulder. He's watching me so intently that I'm tempted to run back and throw myself into his arms. But he's probably right. If he has another nightmare, then there's a good chance he'll hurt me, and I can't take any risks right now. The fact that I'm even considering risking my life to be with him is insane. But that's how messed up I am. He's making me crazy. I've never wanted anyone like this, and I'm willing to do almost anything to be with him. It's so unlike me. I don't understand what's going on between us, but maybe things will be clearer in the morning.

Sleep doesn't come easily. I toss and turn, waiting for the fire he started to die down, but it's useless. I get out of bed and throw on a robe, wrapping the ties tightly around my waist before heading into the hall. I know I shouldn't be wandering around, especially with all the men in the house, but I can't sleep. Maybe some tea will help.

As I approach Scar's door, it swings open. I gasp. He's standing in a low-slung pair of silky pajama pants and nothing else. His chest is magnificent. Hard lines carve out six-pack abs. A deep V inverts from his hipbones toward his cock. Desire flares, and all I can think about is wrapping my hands around his rigid length.

"Get in here." He grabs my arm and pulls me into his room, closing the door and locking it behind him. When his smoldering gaze lands on me, everything inside me turns molten. He stalks toward me, stealing my breath with his unmasked desire. He hasn't even touched me, but he's completely stripped me of my resolve to stay away from him. I can't believe I ever thought I could. And now, I know I'm in all kinds of trouble.

## Chapter 11: Scar

Torrid images of our entwined bodies come fast and hot into my mind. Julia's dirty fantasies overwhelm my senses. All I want to do is throw her on the bed and bury my cock in her sweet little pussy. Monstrous urges threaten to steal what little control I have over my raging desire for her. She has no idea how much I need to be inside her, but she's going to figure it out quickly.

"I just wanted—"

"I know exactly what you want," I cut her off and back her into the nearest wall. "And I'm going to give it to you."

She gasps as I press her against the wall. Her pupils dilate and darken with carnal need. We come together like fire and ice. She melts into me while I burn with salacious heat. I grab her ass and lift her, and she wraps her legs around my waist, grinding her pussy against my cock. Her wet, hot center melts against the thin pants I'm wearing. Every delicious curve molds to my hard places. We're as close as we can get with all these damn clothes on.

I hold her against the wall with my hips, then use my hands to pull her robe open. I shove the fabric out of the way and capture one turgid nipple between my teeth. I bite lightly, loving the way she cries out.

"Everyone will hear you," I murmur against her nipple.

"I don't care," comes her breathy response.

She tosses her head back, banging it into the wall. I chuckle before lavishing kisses across her other nipple. She clings to me with her arms and legs, wrapping them around me as much as she can. She's so petite I barely feel her weight. I could pin her to this wall all night and never stop to rest. That's how much I've been looking forward to getting her alone and naked. She's hungry for my cock. It's written all over her face. Her lashes flutter in time with my kisses. Her breath hitches every time I move my lips away for even a



moment. She coils against me tighter and tighter as I torment her full, sexy-as-fuck tits.

I'd bury myself in her right now if I didn't care about her pleasure, but I do. I care far, far too much. I fuck club pussy all the time and don't give a shit if they come or not. They always do anyway. But with Julia, I want to wring every last drop of pleasure from her trembling body. I need her to understand she's not like the others. She's special. She's the only woman I've ever wanted like this. If she doesn't realize it yet, then after tonight, she'll be fully aware. I'm going to brand her soul and make it impossible for her even to consider running away from me. Once I'm through with her tonight, she'll be mine forever.

"Scar, I want you." She shoves her fingers between us and rips at the ties on my pants. I grab her hands, lace my fingers through hers, and pin them over her head against the wall.

"Shh ... There'll be plenty of time for you to play with my cock. But not until after you come for me."

"Oh, God," she whimpers.

I carry her across the room and toss her onto the bed. Somewhere along the way, her robe fell off, but she's still wearing panties and a silky tank top. All of it needs to go. I want to see every inch of her perfect, curvy body.

"Take off your clothes."

Her eyes widen, and she sits enough to pull her shirt off before tossing it across the room. I get a perverse pleasure in watching her follow my command. She might think she's in control, but I own her. She belongs to me. She just doesn't know it yet.

When she reaches for her panties, I change my mind. I want to taste all that wet silk, so I move her hands to her sides. "Don't take your hands off the bed until I tell you to."

She nods.

I slide between her soft thighs and line up my lips with her sweet pussy. The pink silk clings to her damp folds like her

hot little box is trying to suck her panties inside. It's the most erotic thing I've ever seen. I want to grab my phone and snap a photo, but I'd never do that without her permission. I don't want to risk fucking this up by slowing things down, so I forge ahead, sliding my fingers under the elastic edge and pulling it to one side.

"Fucking hell," I mutter.

She's trimmed, which makes it so easy to see everything. Her puffy rose-hued lips glisten in the darkness. My mouth waters, and I almost can't believe I get to taste her. As I brush my mouth against her swollen flesh, she shivers and runs her fingers through my hair before grabbing a fistful and pulling me hard against her.

"So greedy," I whisper into her sweetness.

"Scar, don't tease me."

I laugh wickedly. I wasn't planning on torturing her with my tongue, but her desperation brings out my sadistic nature. I may not show her the totality of the monster inside me, but she's about to get a little glimpse of the darkness in my soul.

I spread her thighs with the palms of my hands, and she bucks her hips, trying to make contact with my tongue. I sit back on my heels and smile at her.

"If you're not going to behave, I'm going to send you to your room," I warn.

"Please, don't make me wait."

"Maybe I should tie you up and leave you like this for the night."

"You wouldn't!"

"I could."

She sits up, but I push her back down, caging her between my arms. I hover over her, lowering myself just enough to nudge her waiting sex. She arches her back and tries to slide her legs free, but I've got her trapped between my thighs. She's not going anywhere.

“Are you going to be a good girl for me?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Scar.”

“That’s better.”

“I’m going to get you back for this.”

“Promise?” I can’t wait to see what she has in mind. She may look like a sweet, innocent librarian, but she’s exquisitely sexy. I doubt she has any idea how wild she can drive a man, so I intend to show her exactly that.

“Touch me,” she begs.

I return to my second favorite position between a woman’s thighs. Her little nub winks at me from between her folds. I’m going to suck that tiny bundle of pleasure until I break her wide open.

With slow, sensual caresses, I begin kissing her delicate lips. She tastes like wild honey and smells like cinnamon. My delectable treat writhes beneath my mouth, alternating between rising to meet my tongue and retreating into the mattress. I palm her hips and hold her still. She can’t get away from me now. I lap at her sweetness and soak up her cries of pleasure. The sound of her heavy breathing fills my ears. It’s all I can hear, but I want so much more. I want her screaming my name and pleading with me to make her come. Until I get that, I’m not stopping.

Her damn panties are in the way, so I tear them off. She gasps and lifts her head to look at me. I smirk, holding her gaze as I glide my thumb over her slit. Her eyes close, and she falls back against the bed. Soft little moans spill from her lips. I devour every one of them, coaxing out even more passionate cries with my tongue.

When I swirl my tongue over her clit, she bucks, pressing hard against me. I pull back until she relents and eases her hips down. I’m not going to let her off that easily. Keeping my

hands off her has been sheer torture. It's about time she got a little taste of the agonizing state she's kept me in.

"Scar, please. I need you inside me."

"We're not even close to that ... yet."

"But I want you," she whines.

"We'll see."

I lash my tongue against her pussy. She cries out and twists her hips, but I hold her still. With long, languid strokes, I nudge her closer and closer to ecstasy. I read her so well I can tell when she's on the verge of exploding. When I feel her reaching that delicious apex, I back off, letting her drift down a bit before dragging my tongue across her sex and forcing her back to the precipice.

This game amuses me far more than it should. But her little whimpers are too good not to savor. I'm drunk on them. I could torture her with my lips and teeth and tongue all night, and I'm tempted to do exactly that, but my cock's so fucking hard I'm afraid it's going to burst.

"Don't wake everyone up," I warn.

She grabs a pillow and presses it over her face. I laugh before slipping two fingers into her tight channel. She hisses so loudly that the pillow barely muffles the sound. So much for not waking the entire household. But who the fuck cares if they hear us? At least now they'll know for sure that she's mine. The others will stay the fuck away from her after they hear her screaming my name.

I pump my fingers in and out, bringing her close once more. She moans and squeezes the pillow so tightly that I'm afraid she'll suffocate herself. I could keep her like this for hours, but my cock's desperate to take the place of my hands and tongue. I want to feel all that velvety heat deep inside her, and my fingers can only go so far.

As I lift her against my mouth, I lap at her clit. My fingers plunge in again and again, sensing the subtle tightening of her flesh. I'm going out of my mind with want, so I give her exactly what she needs.

With an expert flick of my tongue, I stroke her pussy in just the right spot. She stops breathing. I've got her right where I want her, so I vibrate my tongue against her, pushing her so hard she can't do anything but keel. She's moaning and thrashing, but I don't let up. I know she's impossibly close, and it will only take one long drag of my tongue to destroy her completely.

I do exactly that, invading her with my tongue before sucking her clit between my lips. She screams so loud I'm sure she's woken the dead. Even Reaper couldn't have slept through all that yelling.

Her hips undulate against my mouth while her pussy sucks greedily at my fingers. She's coiled so damn tight I can hardly pull my fingers free. She jerks away from my mouth, twisting onto her side and sobbing as her body quakes from an all-consuming orgasm. Every inch of her shakes as she's wracked by convulsions.

By the time she comes down, I've got her on her back again. Her glassy eyes meet mine, and she spreads her thighs, giving me all the invitation I need. I push my thick cock into her still-throbbing pussy. She squeezes my dick like a vise, wrapping it in so much heat I think I'm going to die. I moan, burying myself so deep I'm afraid I'll come out of her throat.

Pure instinct takes over. I drive into her, unable to slow my hips. Taking my time is impossible. I want to flood her with my desire and make her realize how much she's affected me. I could try to ease up, but why? She's so tight and hot and wet and ... Fuck, if I don't get my shit together, I'm going to come so fucking fast.

I slow my tempo just enough to lessen the friction. My balls hang heavy, slapping against her plump ass. I want to fuck her from behind. I want her on top. I want her on her side. I want her in every way ever invented by man or beast. The monster inside me wants to fuck her until she's just as broken and twisted inside as I am.

“Scar, choke me.”

“What?” I stop mid-thrust. I couldn’t have heard her right. How can I with the way blood is rushing through my ears?

“Put your hands around my neck.” She pries one of my wrists up from where I’m bracing myself and rests it on her delicate throat.

“Julia, no.” I yank my hand away.

“Yes. I ... please.” She blushes so hard I almost lose myself and come in her drenched pussy.

When she grabs my hand again, I growl and wrap it around her throat, squeezing just enough to show her I’ll do it. If she’s testing me, she’s about to be in serious trouble because the minute my hand covers her delicate neck, all I want to do is tighten my grip.

“Yes ...” She grinds up, sucking my cock into her hungry cunt. “Harder.”

I slam my hips against hers, clenching my fingers, choking her a little more. She fucks me back even harder, slamming her hips against mine until the slap, slap, slap of our bodies fills the room. I’m so fucking turned on that I squeeze harder. Her face pales, and her eyes roll back. She’s fucking me from below, taking every rough thrust and demanding even more. She wants it harder, faster, deeper. I’m pounding into her so violently I’m sure we’re going to break the bed, but I don’t give a fuck. All I want is to feel her velvet cunt tighten more and more, milking, squeezing, coiling, pulling the darkness inside me to the surface. She wants to see the monster. I can feel it.

The second I wrap my other hand around her throat, her eyes go wide. Fear flashes for a second before the darkness inside her takes over. I’m strangling her, cutting off her air supply, and stealing her life second by second. Still, she jerks against me, using me for her own pleasure just as wantonly as I use her for mine.

My cock thickens beyond anything I thought possible. My asshole clenches as my balls tighten. I’m not going to last

much longer, but she needs to come on my dick one more time before I can truly be free.

With a subtle shift of my hips, I grind my shaft against her clit. I twist my hands around her throat and let the demon inside me destroy her pussy. She can't scream, but she suddenly goes rigid. Her eyes fly open. She claws at my hands. Her pussy convulses, sending rapid pulses up my cock and into my spine.

My eyes roll back. I roar as thick, hot spurts blast from my cock to fill her. A million little mouths suck along the length of my shaft, drinking every last drop, leaving me utterly devastated. I'm sure I've never come this hard in my entire life.

I crash against her. Breathing hard, I release her neck. She inhales a shaky breath and lets out a tiny whimper. I'm so fucking gone. The only thing that registers is that I didn't kill her. It's a goddamn miracle she's not dead. But she's not. Her pussy's still pulsating in time with my cock. It seems to last forever, and I wonder if this is how we'll die, entwined on my bed with my cock buried deep inside her. I'm oddly okay with the idea.

Minutes pass, but neither of us speaks. I doubt this is why she was out in the hall, but I was leaving my room to get her for this exact purpose. She just saved me a trip. I couldn't stop thinking about her all night. Every time I skewered a marshmallow, I pictured my dick sliding into her creamy pussy. When I smashed the burnt treat between two graham crackers, I fantasized about licking up all her cream. The reality of it was so much better than the damn fantasy.

"Scar," she whispers. "You're kind of crushing me."

"Oh, shit, baby." I prop myself on my elbows, but I'm reluctant to pull my cock free. Being buried inside her is pure heaven. I already want her again, but she might need a minute. I don't know if she's used to taking it this rough. The thought of her with another guy enrages me. I want to know everything about her past, including who I need to kill to make sure she stays mine. I don't know why I want her so fucking much, but

I do. I want to keep her, and it's terrifying. I've never wanted anyone like this before. I don't know what it means, and I'm afraid to even think about it.

Eventually, I reluctantly ease my cock out of her. She's still so tight I groan when she's no longer wrapped around me. I roll onto my side and pull her into my arms. She rests her cheek against my forearm and sighs before curling against me.

"Are you okay?" I ask softly.

"I think I might have died."

"In a good way, I hope."

"In the best way."

"Can I get you anything?" I ask.

"No. This is perfect."

"Good, because I don't think I can walk right now." I laugh.

"Me either. That was ... I just ..."

"Shh." I caress her back slowly, tracing lines through her damp skin. "Just relax."

She does, snuggling into me and letting her muscles go lax. I keep stroking her, enjoying her closeness. It's so odd to want her in my arms. Normally, I get women out of my room as fast as possible. But with Julia, I don't want her to leave. Not now. Not ever. It's disconcerting, but it's how I feel. I don't know what to make of it.

"Tell me about the sugar bear on your arm," she whispers.

I tense. She's talking about my favorite tattoo, a cartoon bear on my shoulder. I never let anyone see it. I always fuck women in the dark so they can't see my scars or tattoos, especially this one. It's deeply personal. I never talk about it with anyone because I don't want to have to pound anyone into the ground for mocking me. I know it's ridiculous to have a cartoon bear on my arm, but it reminds me of my mom, and I never want to forget her.



“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it,” she says.

“I do ... It’s just ... usually no one asks.”

“How can anyone ask when you keep it hidden?” She tilts her head to look up at me. The gentle compassion in her eyes makes it easier for me to talk about it.

“I got it because ... it reminds me of my mom.”

“Really?” A soft smile spreads across her face. She’s not mocking me at all. She seems genuinely interested.

“My mom was a drug addict.” Might as well get the worst of it out of the way.

“Oh, Scar. I’m so sorry.” She strokes my chest.

“She was a good mom. A single mom who did the best she could. I never knew my dad because he left before I was born. He never called or wrote or anything. Just ... disappeared.” I shake my head slightly. Only a loser would abandon a woman carrying his child. I wonder if that’s why she was so fucked up in the end. She had too much to deal with and no one to help her. “My mom was a good person. She just couldn’t stop the drugs.”

“Some people really struggle with addiction.”

“Yeah.” I go silent as memories flood back. “She never seemed to have time to cook much. She was a waitress and had two different jobs. But she loved cereal. We used to eat Sugar Bear cereal almost every night for dinner.”

“I bet you loved it.”

“All that sugar? No doubt.” I smile. “We didn’t have much, but we had each other. I think she tried to get off the drugs several times. She even took me with her to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting once. They let me sit in the circle and play with plastic coffee cups. I made a castle.”

She’s gazing at me with those gorgeous green eyes, wanting more of the story, so I continue. “She used to leave me with the neighbor lady when she went to work. One day, she didn’t pick me up on time. She was always there early, so it was odd. Hours went by. Then cops came to the door.”

My throat closes up. Julia lays me back against the pillow and gives me the softest, sweetest kiss. I pull her down and savor the weight of her body on top of mine.

“They said she O.D.’d in an alley behind the restaurant. She was shooting up, and it was laced with something else. I’m not really clear about the details. I was four, but I knew enough to understand she wasn’t coming home. She wouldn’t be picking me up that night. I’d never see her again because she was dead.”

She brushes moisture from my cheek. I don’t even realize my eyes are wet until she kisses my tears away. I can’t talk about this anymore. It makes my heart hurt so much that I don’t think I can stand it. I hold her close and bury my face in her hair. This is why I refuse to talk about my past. The pain is too much. It’s unbearable. She wants to know my history, but I don’t know if I can give it to her. The wounds are too deep, and even telling her this much has sapped my strength. I can’t talk about it anymore. Not tonight. All I want to do is hold her and forget about everything but how she feels in my arms.

## Chapter 12: Julia

Hearing Scar's story hurts my heart. I can't imagine what it was like to lose the only person he could count on at such a young age. It's unfathomable and makes me grateful for my parents. They're both still alive. I wonder what they'd think about what I've done the last two days. They'd probably be horrified. They raised me to know right from wrong, but the situation with Max is far from black and white. It's a million shades of gray, and even though what I'm doing is illegal, I think I'm doing the right thing.

"Tell me about you," Scar says, rolling me onto my back. He lays beside me, slowly caressing the curve of my hip. "I didn't see any tattoos."

"I don't have any." I smile.

"What about boyfriends?"

"None of those either. Not recently, at least." None that I want to talk about, anyway.

"But there have been some in the past?" His brow furrows.

"I had a steady boyfriend in high school, but we lost track of each other when we went to college. I haven't heard from him in years." I leave out the part about him cheating on me. I hate talking about it.

"Did you ever try to contact him?"

"No."

"Good."

I can't help but smile at his response. I try not to think about past relationships, especially the ones that ended badly. Back then, I wasn't looking for anything in particular. I still don't know what I want. I've never been one of those girls who couldn't wait to get married and have kids. After high school, I focused on finishing college. When I accomplished that, I focused on getting a job. After that, the day-to-day

problems of being a nurse overtook my life. I haven't thought about dating or romance for a long time, but it's clearly on Scar's mind.

"What about you?" I ask. "I'm assuming you don't have a girlfriend since I'm naked in your bed right now, but that's a dangerous assumption these days."

"True, but no. I don't have a girlfriend."

"Ever have one?" I ask.

"Not really. There's club pussy, but that's about it."

"Club what?" I scrunch my nose at the distasteful way he referred to women.

"Some women are drawn to bad boys in leather vests who ride bikes. They're like rockstar groupies with less self-esteem. They just want to fuck and drink and have a good time."

"Oh, brother." I roll my eyes. "If your opinion of them is so low, why keep them around?"

"I don't keep them. Once I'm done with them, I get them out of my bed as fast as possible. Hell, most of the time, we never even make it to bed. I'll bang them against the wall, fuck them on the floor, screw them over the back of the couch —"

"Ugh!"

"You asked. I'm just being honest." His devilish grin takes the sting away.

"True." I guess I did bring it on myself. "So, why haven't you picked one of them to be your girlfriend?"

"None of them interest me."

"They interest you enough to sleep with them."

"They know the score. Most of them just want what I want—fast and dirty sex. They don't intend to stick around. They move on to the next guy as soon as they can get their claws into one."

“So you don’t feel anything, and they don’t feel anything. That’s convenient if you’re not looking for a real relationship.” I try to keep the judgment out of my tone, but it’s impossible. I can’t understand how people can sleep together without caring about each other at least a little bit. It doesn’t make any sense.

He shrugs. “A man has certain needs. If these women want to throw themselves at me, I’m not going to say no.”

“Don’t you want something more? Don’t you want love?”

“Love?” His laugh is so bitter I freeze.

“You don’t believe in love?”

“People are cruel. They only use each other to get what they want. Some women want to fuck guys in motorcycle clubs, but they don’t want to commit to anyone. They don’t want to be anyone’s old lady.”

“Are any of the guys married?”

“Nope.” This time his laughter carries a hint of amusement. “They know better than to get trapped by a woman.”

“You think marriage is a trap?”

“I don’t know what to think about it. My mom was never married. Nina was, but then her old man died.”

“Her old man?” A smile spreads across my face. “So, if we were to end up in a relationship together, would you be my old man?”

He cocks his head to one side, studying me until I’m uncomfortable. I hope I didn’t cross a line. I don’t even know why I said what I said. I’m definitely not looking for love, especially not with the dangerous president of a motorcycle club. I still don’t know if they operate like a gang or not. I don’t know enough about the club yet, and my ignorance could cost me.

“What happened after your mom died?” I ask, attempting to get the conversation back on track. I’m trying to find out more about his mysterious past and the man who hurt him so much that he still has nightmares. I shouldn’t be thinking

about romance or commitment or love when I don't really know him.

"I didn't have any other family. After my mom died, I was put into foster care." He shuts down again and gets a faraway look in his eyes. I can tell he's not with me anymore. He's trapped in the past.

"Then you were adopted?" I prompt.

"Yeah. By Jonathan Blackstone."

"The billionaire?" Confusion furrows my brow. "Isn't he the guy who adopts all the kids? He takes them to charity events and treats them like little princes."

"That's a lie!" He pulls away from me, sitting ramrod straight while giving me a deadly look. A tremor ripples through me. He looks angry enough to kill.

"I'm ... I'm sorry." I gently rest my hand on his knee. He scoots farther back, so I can't reach him.

"You have no idea what I went through with him," he growls.

"I don't," I agree softly. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He scowls. A muscle in his jaw twitches, and his entire aura shifts from light purple to black with red sparks. Rage and fear roll off him in waves. I can't stand seeing him so upset. He has so much anger trapped inside him. He's holding it all in, and it's probably slowly killing him. He needs to talk about it.

"Tell me about the day you were adopted." I know pushing him is risky, but I think he needs to tell someone what happened. I know he hasn't told anyone the details, but I hope he trusts me enough to share his story.

Silence stretches between us. I slide a little closer and lightly brush my fingers over his hand. He looks at me, really studies me, as if trying to figure out whether I'm trustworthy. I don't buckle under the scrutiny. I sit up and try to project an aura of calm. Although I don't seem to have any control over

it, I can send calming energy to other people when I sense they need it. He desperately needs it.

“After they took me away from my neighbor, they dropped me off at a big house full of other foster kids. I don’t remember much about that place since I was only there for a few weeks.” He unclasps his hands and reaches for mine. He holds one of my hands while wiping his other palm against the sheets. “God, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Just take your time. We’ve got all night.” I gently squeeze his fingers, trying to offer comfort. He holds mine as if I’m his lifeline.

“Blackstone showed up with a full camera crew from the local news station. He made a big show of being philanthropic, especially when it came to ‘his’ kids. He still does that. It’s disgusting.”

I stop breathing. I suspect where this is going, and I don’t like it. But I need to hear it. I need to know what happened, so I’ll know how to help him.

“At first, everything was great. He took me out of that foster home, which was a war zone. The older kids were monsters, picking on the younger kids and tormenting them whenever the adults had their backs turned.”

“Kids can be so cruel. I see that at school sometimes. We try to intervene, but we can’t always be there.”

“I know. Most of the kids came from drug-addicted parents. Some of the kids were addicts themselves. They’d score drugs at school. High school, junior high, hell, even kids in elementary school had access to drugs. There were plenty of dealers looking for customers, and those kids were easy targets. They just wanted to forget everything they’d been through. In a way, I can see why they didn’t fight their addiction. Numbing the pain was the only way to survive.”

I shake my head. Those poor children had enough to handle already. They didn’t need predators circling them, too.

“After we left the house, Blackstone took me shopping for new clothes. We went to the mall and bought so much stuff

he had to have extra people around to help carry the bags. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. But it was hell, Julia. I just didn't know it yet."

I'm afraid of what he's going to tell me next, but I keep my mouth shut. I don't want to say anything that'll make him stop talking. This is the most he's told me about his past, and I need to know everything.

"Jonathan Blackstone is the devil in disguise. He fools everyone with his PR campaigns about helping children. He doesn't help them. He destroys them in the worst way possible. If I'd known then what I know now, I would have thrown myself out of his limo and gladly died on the highway. I had no idea what he had in store for me. Not a clue."

"When did you realize he wasn't who he claimed to be?" I ask.

"The moment the cameras turned off. He didn't say a word to me after we left the mall. We sat in the back of his limo, alone. He kept trying to get me to sit closer to him, but suddenly, I had a weird feeling about him. Something didn't seem right. I didn't understand it at the time, but I think we all have an innate instinct toward danger. I felt sick to my stomach. I told him I didn't want to go with him anymore and that I wanted to go back to the foster home."

"Because at least when you were there, you knew what to expect from the other kids."

"Exactly. Better the devil you know," he quips.

I rub my thumb across the back of his hand.

"When we got to the ranch, huge iron gates opened to let the limo in. We pulled up in front of a huge mansion. It was in the middle of nowhere. Blackstone owns an enormous property, which is patrolled by heavily armed guards. I thought they were there to keep people out. They weren't. They wanted to keep us in."

"There were other kids at the mansion?"

"Yes. At least ten others. Sometimes more. Sometimes less. Some didn't last longer than a few days. Others survived



years.”

“Survived? Wait, what do you mean they didn’t last longer than a few days?”

“He tortured and killed them. Then he’d claim they ran away.”

“Holy shit.” I’m suddenly lightheaded. There’s no reason for Scar to lie about this, but it’s so overwhelming my mind struggles to believe it.

“I never found out for sure, but I suspected the kids who were murdered were buried somewhere on his property.”

“How could he get away with this? Didn’t anyone say anything? People working there had to know what was going on. Kids don’t just vanish!”

“Thousands of kids go missing every year. And that’s just in the U.S. I don’t even want to think about how many vanish internationally. I don’t think all the kids were from here. Some barely spoke English.”

I have a million questions and don’t even know where to start. “What did Blackstone tell the police? Someone had to realize the kids were missing.”

“He told anyone who asked that the children ran away. He cried big crocodile tears about it whenever there were cameras. But the minute the cops or the media left, he’d take his rage out on us.”

Scar’s trembling, but I don’t think he realizes it. I pull him into my arms and kiss his temple. He’s rigid at first but gradually relaxes into my arms. He closes his eyes and sighs.

“That first night, after everyone left, he showed me who he really was. He took me into a bedroom. I thought it was mine until he opened the closet. It was filled with ... with ...” He jerks his head up to meet my gaze. I look into his haunted gray eyes and send him all the compassion in my heart. He lets out a shaky breath before laying his head on my chest. “I don’t want to talk anymore.”

“That’s okay,” I murmur, stroking his back. He’s already revealed far more than I ever expected. It’s enough for now, and he obviously needs a break. His story is too horrifying to comprehend. I can’t imagine what he went through. Now I know why he refuses to talk about it.

He doesn’t move or speak for several minutes, but I sense a war inside him. He wants to tell me more, but he’s struggling. I don’t know if it’s shame or if he just can’t figure out how to tell me what happened. Either way, he needs time, and I won’t push him. He’s already told me enough to explain the nightmares. I’m afraid to hear any more details. My mind is conjuring up all manner of horrors, and they might be nothing compared to what he suffered.

“When he finished using me, he threw me in the dungeon,” Scar whispers.

“Dungeon?”

“Below the mansion. Down some old wooden steps. It was so cold, especially in the winter. All stone. And rats. I didn’t sleep that night because I thought one would chew off my toes.”

Tears trickle down my face. He was just a little kid. He had no idea what was happening to him and had no one to help him. I feel as if my heart has been ripped in two. I want to find Blackstone and kill him with my bare hands. How could this monster have gotten away with this for years? Years!

“Eventually, I learned to ignore the rats and sleep. I still have all my toes.” The slight hint of humor in his tone surprises me.

“It’s horrifying,” I mutter.

“I know. But I had to get through it. I wasn’t going to die down there.” Determination enters his tone. I wonder if he was always so strong or if it was a trait he had to develop over time.

“How long did you live there?”

“Eleven years.”

“Oh, my God.”

“I’m not a good man. I’m all messed up. That’s why I don’t date. That’s why I’m not married. Those things are for normal people. I’m so dark and twisted inside you have no idea. If you knew me, you’d run. You’d run so fucking fast, and you’d never look back. And I wouldn’t blame you one bit. Most days, I can’t even look in the mirror because, unlike you, I know what I’ve done.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. What Blackstone did to you ... *that* was wrong. You were just a kid.”

“Right.” His dismissive tone worries me. He’s shutting down, but I don’t blame him. He’s revealed more to me tonight than he’s ever told anyone else. He doesn’t know how I’m going to respond to things once I’ve had time to really think about them, and he probably thinks I’m going to run screaming from the house, but he’s wrong. He’s exactly the kind of man I need in my life right now.

After surviving the unthinkable, he must have skills he can use to help Max. Scar battled a predator and won. I want to know how he eventually escaped, but Scar’s struggling to keep his eyes open. He’s probably emotionally exhausted, so I want to give him time to recover. I need to know the rest of his story, but that will have to come later. Right now, I want him to know that he’s safe and that I care for him deeply.

I caress the edge of his jaw before tipping his chin up. I press a soft kiss against his lips. He sighs and holds me against his scarred body. There are stories associated with every one of those scars, but I’m patient. I can wait until he’s ready to talk about Blackstone again. Until then, I’m going to give him all the pleasure he deserves after enduring years of torment.

## Chapter 13: Scar

I'm suddenly so tired all I can do is curl into a ball while she slowly strokes her fingers down my arm. The repetitive motion is rhythmic and soothing, and it makes me fall under her spell. I still can't sleep, but I don't have to. I have this brave, gentle, sweet woman by my side, and somehow, she's exactly what I need right now. I've never wanted to talk about what happened at the mansion with anyone. Until now.

I gave her a hint of what had happened, and she didn't crumble. She didn't try to console me for something that was inconsolable. She could handle hearing about some of the darkness I lived through for eleven long years. She listened and asked questions but didn't try to make me reveal more than I wanted to say. Because of that, I want to tell her more. I'm tempted to tell her everything. Talking about it was never an option before I met her. Now, I can share some of my demons with her, and she won't run from me. I never felt this comfortable with anyone else, but I feel it with her. Maybe that's why I can tell her things I've never told another soul.

Her warm breath brushes across the back of my neck. Goosebumps rise, and I resist the urge to slide between her silky thighs. It would be so easy to lose myself in her softness, but she needs to rest. Tomorrow will be a long day. We need to make progress on Max's situation before we can even think about what's happening between us.

I still can't believe she hasn't run from me. Other women have. They couldn't handle the nightmares. But Julia's not like other women. She's special. Unique. And baffling. I haven't quite figured her out yet, but I want to know everything about her.

She's the bravest woman I've ever met, standing up for Max how she did. I wish someone had stood up for me like that. I hoped and prayed someone would come and save me, save us, but no one ever did. We finally had to save ourselves. So many people knew what Blackstone was, what he was capable of, and yet they did nothing to stop him. No one dared

to cross him. Not then. Not now. I'm going to take him down. It's just a matter of time. The club has been working on it. We have him under constant surveillance. He just needs to slip up once, and we'll destroy him the way he destroyed us. My need for vengeance sparks rage deep in my soul. Every muscle in my body tenses. I'll make him pay for what he did.

Julia shifts in her sleep. Her lips brush against my earlobe, sending tendrils of desire through my body. My toes curl, and I press against her. My fingers glide down from the edge of her neck, across her collarbone, then up to her shoulder. All I want to do is be inside her. This attempt at self-control is killing me, but she needs a break after hearing my story. I need to relax too, but sleep is elusive, as always.

I move my hands off her and take a shuddery breath. Wanting her like this will drive me insane. I'm obsessed with her curves, with her scent, with the way she sighs in her sleep. I could watch her all night but being so close is making my dick too hard and my self-control too soft. If I don't get my shit together, I'm going to fuck her until she's worn out and ruined for all other men. I can't even think about her with another guy without becoming enraged. I just hope the rest of my story doesn't scare her away.

Morning comes too soon. I've only managed to get a couple of hours of sleep, but that will have to be enough. Julia's still curled up under the sheets. Her round ass pokes out to tease me, but I reluctantly pull the edge of the blanket up to cover it. If I wake her up with my cock in her ass, she'll leave me for sure. She's a good girl who probably has no idea how depraved a man can get. I don't want to scare her away, so for now, I'm going to leave her perky little butt alone. Soon, though. Soon, I want every inch of her open and available to me. Soon she'll be begging me to fuck her in every way possible. Soon ...

A text pings on my phone. I'm reading the details when she stirs. Her lashes flutter as she opens her gorgeous emerald eyes.

“Morning, Scar.”

“Morning, gorgeous. I just got a text from Matrix. He got a list of Bonnie’s friends from her social media. We’re going to pay her best friend a visit later today.” I brush her hair from her cheek and caress my thumb over her rosy skin. When her lips part, I can’t help but swipe my thumb into her mouth. Her eyes darken as she sucks it between her lips. My cock jerks hard. There isn’t enough time for me to do everything I want to do to her right now, so I pull my hand away. “Get dressed. I’ll see you in the kitchen.”

I get out of bed before I can lose my last thread of self-control. All I want to do is tie her to the bed and fuck her all day. These impulses scare me. Some women don’t care what I do to them, so I fuck them like animals. But these dark desires don’t feel right with Julia. She’s too innocent. Too pure. I could break her. I could ruin her forever. I can’t take that chance.

After throwing on a black t-shirt and jeans, I grab my leather jacket off the back of the chair I threw it across last night. I glance at Julia. She stretches like a cat, letting the sheet slide down to reveal her full, luscious breasts. A sly smile spreads across her lips. She knows exactly what she’s doing. My cock is thick and heavy against my zipper. The little minx.

“Later,” I promise before leaving the room. Later, she’s going to fucking get it. But right now, we need to ride over to Bonnie’s friend’s place and find out what she knows about her best friend’s whereabouts.

Several minutes later, Julia joins me in the kitchen. She’s wearing a white lace floral spaghetti strap shirt that’s so see-through her tits are on display. I can’t decide if I love it or hate it. I love that I get to see her in it. I hate that other guys will, too. I’m tempted to send her back to her room, but then I remember all the times Blackstone dictated what we could and couldn’t wear, and I keep my mouth shut. I’ll just have to make sure she stays close to me. If another guy so much as looks at her, I’ll kill him.

She stands on her tiptoes and reaches up to get a bowl from the cupboard, giving me a glimpse of her rhinestone-

studded jeans. The way they hug her curves makes my mouth water. I want to lick every inch of her body. I walk up behind her, grab her hips, and pull her hard against my cock.

“Are you trying to kill me, woman?” I growl into her ear.

“I’m just trying to get some cereal bowls,” she says far too innocently.

“You keep shaking your ass like that, and you’re going to be in big trouble,” I warn.

“What kind of trouble?” She grinds her ass into my dick, making me so hard I’m ready to spread her wide and ruin Nina’s pristine countertops.

“Good morning!” Nina calls, strolling into the kitchen as if nothing’s out of the ordinary. “I’m making quiche for breakfast. It’s going to take a few minutes, so if you two need to go fuck away your issues, you’ve got time.”

I thrust my hips against Julia’s ass one more time before backing away. I scowl at her back while I retreat to the other side of the kitchen island. She knows exactly what she’s doing to me. Maybe this is payback for not fucking her again this morning, but we can’t spend all day in bed. We’ve got Max to worry about.

“Where’s Max?” I ask.

“Still sleeping,” Nina says.

“We’re going to visit his mom’s best friend today.” I slide onto a stool while discretely adjusting my dick. I’m hard as fuck, but I can’t do anything about it until later.

“I hope her friend knows where she’s at,” Nina says.

“Me, too,” Julia says before turning to me. “Do we have time for quiche?”

“Not right now. Matrix called the friend, Claudine Nunez. She’s waiting for us. She thinks Bonnie’s in trouble, so we need to get moving.”

“I saw some granola bars in the snack pantry. I’ll grab one of those, and we can go,” Julia says.

“We have enough time for cereal.” I beat her to the pantry and grab several boxes, lining the island with them.

“I’d like to try the Sugar Bear cereal,” Julia says.

“It’s the best one.” I smile and pour a big bowl of it for her. “Try it dry before you add milk.”

“Okay.” She sits on the stool next to mine, then grabs a piece of Sugar Bear cereal. She pops it into her mouth and crunches on it. “Mm ... so cinnamony. I love it.”

“Have you ever had it before?” I pour milk into my bowl before handing the carton to her.

“Never. I always considered it junk food.”

“Cereal is junk food,” Nina says. “But it was the only thing I could get the boys to eat when they came to live with us.”

“I can’t imagine picking this over your cooking,” Julia says graciously.

“Well, they had their reasons.” Nina returns her attention to the quiche recipe.

Julia glances at me. She knows a little bit about my past, but I can tell she wants to know more. Later. After I wring every last drop of pleasure from her body, I’ll tell her more.

We finish breakfast, then head out to the garage, where I hand her a helmet before strapping on my own. She waits for me to get on before sliding in behind me. Her hot pussy’s pressed against my ass, and it’s all I can think about as I drive through the mountains. She’s the best kind of distraction, but I need to focus so I don’t miss the turnoff. Claudine lives off a dirt road in the middle of nowhere.

Based on Matrix’s directions, I find the small cabin nestled in a grove of quaking aspen. A multi-colored Tibetan prayer flag flutters above the wooden porch. A deeply bronzed, impossibly thin woman sits in a rocking chair that creaks as she moves. Her wary gaze follows us as I park and help Julia undo her helmet.

“You the one who called me?” the woman asks.



“No. That was my brother, Matrix. I’m Scar.”

“He said you and Max’s school nurse might be coming by.”

“Ms. Nunez—” I begin.

“Call me Claudine.” She gets out of the chair and beckons us into the house.

The interior log cabin is covered with paintings of elderly Mexican women holding various herbs and flowers in their hands. An altar sits on one wall. Burning sage swirls through the air. The ceiling is covered in red velvet, giving the room a womb-like quality. A life-sized statue of the Virgin de Guadalupe rests in one corner. It’s surrounded by magical items such as stones, colorful candles, and hand-crafted poppets. White and red roses frame the space.

Claudine grabs a smoldering bundle of sage. “I read the cards before you came. I know your intentions are pure. May I sage you to get rid of any spirits?”

“Sure.” I don’t believe in magic, but I’ve seen enough that I know there’s more to this world than we can see.

After fanning sage over me, she repeats the process with Julia. Then she asks us to sit on the couch while she pulls over a chair for herself.

“Your brother told me Bonnie never made it to France,” Claudine says.

“That’s right. She never got on the plane.”

“She’s in grave danger.” Claudine leans forward and turns her piercing gaze on me. “I fear she’s no longer with the living.”

“Why do you think that?” Julia asks softly.

“The spirits speak to me. They whisper of a terrible darkness overtaking the mountain. A man. El Diablo.”

“The Devil,” Julia whispers.

“Blackstone.” My jaw clenches.

“Or the sheriff,” Julia says.

“Whatever happened to her is related to her ex-husband,” Claudine says.

“How do you know her ex is involved? How do you know it’s not a new boyfriend or someone else?” Julia asks.

“She wasn’t seeing anyone new. She was too afraid of men after her ex tried to kill her.”

“What?” Julia glances at me.

“One night, he tried to drown her in the bathtub. When she fought back, he lied and said he was just playing around. But she was too smart to fall for his lies. She filed for divorce the next day. You must find her. Quickly. Her son is in great danger, too.”

“How can we find her?” Julia asks. “Have the spirits told you anything?”

“They speak in riddles.” She shakes her head.

“Matrix was trying to find out if she wears any kind of GPS devices, like a smart watch or a step tracker,” I say. “He’s been searching through databases but hasn’t come up with anything yet.”

“A watch?” Claudine cocks her head to the side before responding. “She counts her steps on her watch. It’s a WalkSmarter.”

“No wonder Matrix didn’t find it. That isn’t one of the larger companies.”

“Will knowing that help?” Claudine asks.

“If she’s still wearing it and the battery isn’t dead, we can triangulate the towers it’s pinging off and get an approximate location,” I say.

“Let me know what you find. I worry for my friend. And her son, how is he?” Claudine asks.

“Safe. He’s with my grandmother.”

“Good.” She studies me before nodding. “You have darkness inside you, but your light will keep it from claiming your soul. Stay with the light. She will help guide you.” She points at Julia.

“Thank you for seeing us,” Julia says. “We’ll let you know what we find out.”

“Be careful. El Diablo’s power grows.”

“We will,” I assure her.

When we get outside, I call Matrix and relay the information.

“Let me run it right now,” Matrix says.

“He’s doing the search,” I tell Julia.

When Matrix comes back on the line, he’s excited. “I found the device, but it’s not on right now. It’s dead, or she turned it off. However, I was able to triangulate the last place it pinged, and the location is weird as hell. It’s in the middle of nowhere in the mountains.”

“Send the coordinates to my phone.”

“Done. Also, I sent Talon and Reaper the text. They’ll meet you at the location.”

“Good. Stay by the computer in case we need more help.”

“Sure, pres.”

I hang up. Julia overheard everything, so we get back on the bike and follow the GPS coordinates. The location is even more remote than Claudine’s house. We’re high up in the mountains when the road ends. I park and hold out my phone.

“We’re still several hundred feet from the triangulation point. We’ll wait for Talon and Reaper before going in.” I glance at the forest. Pine trees tower over us, shading us from the noon sunlight. Shadows stretch into the bushes, obscuring the view.

“It’s beautiful, but why would she be all the way up here?” Julia asks. “I don’t see any hiking trails or camping spots.”

This would be the perfect dumping ground, but I don't want to tell her my suspicions. She probably suspects the same thing anyway.

The rumble of motorcycles is faint at first but grows louder as the guys approach. Talon and Reaper park in line with my bike. They get off and join us.

"Let's start at the triangulation spot and move out from there," I say.

"I'll see if I can get some help," Talon says, looking to the skies. He has an affinity for animals. He's asked them for help in the past, and they've come through for us. Talon's skills helped us escape our hellish prison, and for that, I will be forever grateful to him.

We use a special GPS system Matrix sent with Talon to find the central point. From there, we decide to fan out and search for Bonnie's watch. Hopefully, we'll find her alive and well, but I doubt it.

Julia stays by my side, helping me search. I use the compass app on my phone to head west. We climb over fallen logs and search through the underbrush. We haven't found anything so far, but I'm not stopping until I've searched every inch of this forest. The kid needs his mom. It's up to us to find her.

A hawk screeches overhead. I hear an answering call and know Talon has found us an ally. I get a text from him ten minutes later, asking us to meet him at the starting location.

"He found something," I tell Julia. "Come on."

When we rejoin the others, the look on Talon and Reaper's faces says it all. "She's dead."

"There's a shallow grave about twenty yards south of here," Talon says.

"It smells like death," Reaper adds.

"Did you touch anything?" I ask.

"No," Talon says, while Reaper shakes his head.

“Good. We need to call it in. Not the local cops, though. If it’s Bonnie, I’m sure the sheriff has something to do with this.”

“It’s her,” Reaper says.

“How do you know?” Julia asks.

“She told me.”

“But she’s ...” Julia’s voice trails off. She steps closer to me, so I put a reassuring arm around her waist. I’m sure she’s afraid of Reaper. Everyone who doesn’t really know him feels that darkness inside him. She doesn’t realize that he’d protect her with his life because he knows she means something to me. I don’t even have to tell him. He just knows, the same way I know how he’s feeling. We’re connected in a way I can’t fathom. It has something to do with surviving hell together. Beyond that, I can’t explain it.

“We’ve got to be smart about this,” I say. “We can’t just call it in. We can’t be the guys who found her body. That would make us the prime suspects. Sheriff Curtis would pin the whole thing on us. We can’t take that kind of heat. The suspicion needs to be directed at one man and one man only—the sheriff. That’s the only way this can go down.”

“Call the FBI hotline. Leave an anonymous tip,” Talon says.

“Good idea. If we tell them she’s the mother of a missing child, they’ll take over the case immediately, and the sheriff won’t be able to stop them. We won’t be involved at all,” I say.

I check to make sure the anonymizing software Matrix installed in my phone is working before making the call. The agent who answers tries to pry more information out of me, but I only give him the basics. That should be enough to get them out here.

I call Matrix and catch him up. “Can you monitor the area to make sure they show up?”

“I can’t get cameras there fast enough, but I can hack the local cell tower and listen to calls.”

“Great. We’re getting out of here before they catch us. We’ll meet up at the clubhouse.”

“See you soon.”

I end the call and turn to find a huge hawk on Talon’s shoulder.

“He helped,” Talon explains.

“Thank you.” I don’t know if the bird actually understands me, but he dips his head before flying off. Julia gives me a quizzical look but doesn’t say anything.

“Want us to find a place to hide until the feds get here?” Reaper asks.

“No. We don’t want to be anywhere near this place when her body’s found. Let’s ride to the clubhouse and see what happens.” Before I get back on my bike, I turn to Julia. “You okay?”

“If it’s really her, I’m worried about Max. What are we going to do?” she asks.

“I don’t know yet, but we’ll figure it out. Trust me.”

“I do.” Her luminous green eyes meet mine, and my heart pounds furiously. She trusts me. No one has ever said that to me before. It’s implied with the guys in the club, but no one else has ever had that much faith in me. I hope to God she’s not wrong. I meant what I said, but now I need to follow through and make good on that promise. I’d protect that boy with my life, and I might have to if the sheriff comes after us again. We won’t know until the FBI takes over the case. If I could handle it myself, I would. But this woman needs justice, and the best way to give it to her is to make sure everyone knows she was murdered by the sheriff.

## Chapter 14: Julia

We're at the clubhouse when a breaking news alert scrolls across the television. I can't look away as a reporter on the twenty-four-hour news channel gushes about Bonnie's murder. The fact that the reporter is almost gleeful disgusts me, but I ignore my simmering rage and focus on the facts. Not only did the FBI find Bonnie Curtis' body, but they have conclusive evidence she was murdered. A gunshot wound to the back of her head made that abundantly clear. Now, the feds are looking for Max, too. We haven't decided what to do with him yet. Scar wants to get him into the underground system as soon as possible, but I'm still not sure that's the best option. For now, he's staying at Nina's place, where he'll be safe.

The newscaster excitedly announces that the FBI will make a statement on live TV. I scoot forward until I'm on the edge of the couch. Scar's sitting beside me. He rubs my back in slow circles to ease the tension in my body.

A man with gray hair walks up to a stand covered in microphones from various news stations. "I'm Special Agent William Taft. Yesterday afternoon, the FBI received an anonymous tip that led us to the body of Bonnie Curtis."

I glance at Scar. He was right to leave Max with Nina. Talon took Max horseback riding to distract him, but we can't keep him in the dark much longer. We haven't figured out how to tell him his mother is dead. It's going to break his little heart, so until we decide what to do with him, we're going to keep that information a secret.

"Ms. Curtis was murdered," Agent Taft continues. "A preliminary autopsy indicates she was shot with a nine-millimeter handgun. Her son Max has been missing for several days. He was last seen in the company of Julia Brant, a nurse at his elementary school."

"They're still looking for you," Scar says as if I need another reminder. I'm probably not going to have a job when this is all over, but I can't even begin to think about that right now. We have too many other problems to worry about.

“We have been speaking with her ex-husband, Sheriff Lyle Curtis. He has been cooperating fully with the investigation,” Agent Taft says.

“There’s a surprise,” Scar says.

“No, it makes sense. He wants to appear to be worried, so they won’t suspect him,” I respond.

“He must think the feds are idiots.”

“I won’t be taking any questions, but Sheriff Curtis would like to make a statement,” Agent Taft says.

The cameras pan to the side as Sheriff Curtis moves to stand in front of the microphones. Bags hang under his eyes. His beard is scruffier than usual. He looks like hell but projects an aura of stoic desperation. He’s an excellent actor, portraying the grieving ex to perfection.

“My wife—ex-wife, I mean—was supposed to be attending a conference in Paris. For some unknown reason, she never left town. Some terrible person walked her into the woods and shot her execution style. There’s a monster out there who needs to be caught.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “This animal also has my son. I know who he is. I know who’s behind this.”

The reporters go nuts screaming questions at him. It’s total chaos until the sheriff holds up a hand to quiet everyone down. A slight smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth as if he’s trying to stop grinning but can’t help it. He’s eating up all the attention and loving every second of it. It’s so obvious that I can’t understand how the FBI agents standing next to him don’t see it.

“There’s an outlaw motorcycle gang in this county. I’ve tried to stop them from running drugs and weapons, but they’re devious and sneaky. I have reason to believe they’re involved in human trafficking, but I haven’t been able to get enough evidence to put them behind bars forever.”

Another chorus of shouted questions cuts him off. He waits again until the screaming reaches a low rumble.



“The gang in question is Underground Vengeance. But they’re only part of the problem. Their leader, who goes by the name ‘Scar’, is the man holding my son prisoner.”

“Fuck!” Scar jumps off the couch and starts pacing.

“I’m in close contact with another club, the Demon Riders, that’s going to help bring my wife’s killers to justice,” Sheriff Curtis says.

“Who are the Demon Riders?” I ask.

“A rival club funded by Blackstone. We’ve had run-ins with them in the past.”

“What kind of run-ins?”

“Drive-by shootings at the bar. Their members stalking ours, trying to infiltrate our club. Shit like that.”

“How do you know Blackstone’s funding them?”

“Matrix followed the money trail. Blackstone’s too good to make it easy for just anyone to find his secret accounts, but Matrix knows how to get into places others can’t access, even law enforcement.”

“Have you told anyone about this?” I ask.

“Who would I tell? The sheriff?” he scoffs.

“Don’t snap at me. I’m just trying to understand how this impacts us right now.” I scowl at him.

“Sorry.” Scar runs a hand over his head. “This is so fucked.”

“What can we do?”

“I don’t know. I need to call—” His phone rings. The screen flashes with Nitro’s name across it. “Yeah? Yeah, we saw it, too ... I know ... Are you still at the bar? Good. Get the prospects into position outside. Make sure we’ve got two guys on the inside, too. Where’s Reaper? Find him and tell him to ride to Nina’s place. Talon’s watching Max, but I don’t know if they saw the news ... Yeah, I’m leaving right—You found Reaper? Good. Yeah, send them, too ... Okay. Keep me posted.”

“What did he say?”

“He’s got a surveillance team heading to the Demon Rider’s Clubhouse. We know who all the current patched-in members are, but they could send prospects out to do their dirty work. I’ve got to text Talon and Nina. Hang on.” He quickly types a message and sends it. “We don’t know how or when they’ll strike, so we have to be ready for anything.”

“Do you think they’ll come after Max?”

“They might, but they could also attack anyone in Underground Vengeance or anyone associated with the club. We need to be on alert until the FBI realizes the sheriff is behind the murder.” He clicks off the television and grabs his jacket off the back of a chair. “Let’s go.”

“We’re speculating it was the sheriff, but what if it wasn’t? What if it was someone else?” I ask as I follow him out to the row of bikes.

“He’s the most likely suspect, given his past. Claudine seemed sure it was him.” He hands me a helmet, then secures his own.

“She can’t be sure it was,” I say as I strap mine on tightly. He’s going to ride like the devil himself is on our tail. I’m both terrified and excited.

“True, but until we have other evidence, my money’s on him.” He gets on the bike. I slide on behind him. We fit as if we belong together. The fleeting thought vanishes as the bike roars to life.

“The grieving father act will only get him so far. Eventually, they’ll find evidence of his involvement,” I yell above the rumble.

“Until they do, we can’t take any chances. Hold on tight.”

He doesn’t have to ask me twice. I wrap my arms around his waist and press my body against all that muscle. I shouldn’t be thinking about how he feels between my thighs, but I can’t help it. All I want is to be back in his bed where life feels safer and less complicated. I can’t believe I’m thinking about how good he felt inside me while we’re in the middle of

a crisis, but I can't help it. He's pure magic, dark magic, to be sure, but still, I feel a strange connection with him. A part of me wonders if we're fated to be together. I hate that we met under these circumstances, but I'm grateful we met at all.

I'm lost in thought, oblivious to everything except the warmth of his body and the wind whipping through my hair, when suddenly, the bike swerves hard to the right. I scream and clutch Scar's waist. He yells something I can't hear.

Something whizzes by my ear. I glance over my shoulder. Another motorcycle roars up behind us. The guy riding it points something at us. Sunlight glints off metal a second before he shoots.

"Gun!" I frantically scream, hoping I'm loud enough for Scar to hear me. He does, swerving side to side to avoid additional bullets. One slams into the asphalt below my foot. I yelp and jerk my legs up, then wrap them around his waist.

He makes a hard turn off the highway onto the road leading to Nina's house. The other motorcycle follows us. Bullets fly, but fortunately, this asshole can't aim worth a shit while he's riding.

Right before we reach the front gate, the other bike skids into a U-turn and races back down the road toward the highway. Scar parks just outside the gate and glances over his shoulder. I move out of the way so he can see the road. It's clear behind us. The gate swings open just enough to let us pass. After we drive through, it closes behind us.

I'm shaking so hard I can hardly hold onto Scar. We almost died. We could have died. Oh, my God!

When we get to Nina's house, she comes running out. "Are you hit? Are you okay? I was watching the cameras."

"I'm good," Scar says after viciously yanking off his helmet. "Julia? You okay?"

"Y-yes."

"Where's Max?" Scar asks Nina.

"In the safe room with Talon."

“Okay. Reaper’s on his way with backup. I only caught a glimpse of the guy’s colors, but I’m sure it was someone from Demon Riders. They’ve been looking for any excuse to attack my club, and now, they have it. Fuck the sheriff. This is war!”

I get off the bike and stand on shaky legs. Scar takes one look at me and wraps an arm around my waist. He pulls me close and holds me while I tremble.

“It’s okay, baby. I’ll protect you. As long as you’re with me, you’re safe.”

“We almost died.”

“Yeah, but that jackass was a bad shot. I actually can’t believe we didn’t get hit. He was right behind us. Fucking losers.”

“Take her inside. As long as we’re outside, we’re targets.” Nina opens the door, and we go into the house.

“How could they hit us on the porch? Isn’t the edge of the property too far away for rifles?” I ask.

“Yeah, but they could use drones,” Scar says.

“Drones can shoot guns?” I’m stunned.

“The military’s had them for years. Anyone with at least some mechanical engineering knowledge could rig one up. Matrix has a few,” Scar says.

“We should get them in the air and put them on patrol,” Nina says.

“Can you text him for me?” Scar asks.

“On it.” Nina walks into the kitchen while furiously tapping on her phone. “Can I get you a drink? Something stronger than iced tea?”

“No, thank you. Can I see Max?” I ask. I just need to know he’s safe.

“I’ll take her,” Scar says.

We find Max playing with Legos in the safe room. He’s grinning, totally oblivious to the danger he’s in. I feel terrible

for keeping things from him, but he's just a boy. Telling him wouldn't help anything. It would only scare him, which is the last thing I want to do.

"What are you making?" Scar asks, squatting down to inspect Max's creation.

"A fortress!"

"Super cool." Scar glances at Talon, who's watching the monitors. "Do you want to finish working on it in the living room?"

"Is that safe?" I whisper to Scar.

"As long as he stays away from the windows, he'll be fine. We can't keep him in here. The space is too small. He's safe with us. Just like you are." Scar gives me the warmest smile I've ever seen. I melt against him, holding him tightly while Talon helps Max gather his toys. "Trust me, babe."

When Scar kisses my forehead, it's not enough. I move to seal my lips to his, soaking up his confidence. I don't feel courageous at all. Without Scar, I wouldn't be able to keep Max safe. I'm so damn lucky to have found him.

Talon and Max close the door behind them, leaving Scar and me alone in the soundproof room.

"Everything's going to be okay," Scar whispers.

His hands slide down from my waist to grab my ass, and I whimper, pressing against him, letting him know I need him as much as he needs me. He backs me into a wall. I wait until he has me pinned before wrapping my legs around his waist.

He devours me with merciless kisses until I'm breathless. He grabs my bottom lip between his teeth and bites it. I moan and scrape my nails down the back of his neck. Growling, he reaches between us to shove my shirt over my head. The flowy lace top flutters to the ground. My breasts heave as he deftly unhooks my bra, which lands on my discarded shirt, exposing me. But not for long.

As he sucks one nipple between his rough lips, I lose myself to him. He's overwhelming and intoxicating. No one

has ever touched me like this. His tongue brands my nipples, searing each one before swirling around the edge of my breasts. Fire streaks through my body, awakening every nerve end while I cry out for more. I can't get enough of him.

He gives me a lurid smirk before hauling me over to the only table in the room. It's small and covered with papers. He holds me up with one arm while shoving the papers out of the way with the other.

As he lays me down, his gaze locks with mine. My pussy clenches, eager for him. I need him now more than I needed him last night. The feral look in his eyes inflames my desire. All this wanting will kill me if I can't have him.

He tears off my jeans before ripping off my panties. Then he's fumbling with his belt buckle, but it's taking way too long, so I slap his hands away. I can't look away from his stormy gray eyes, but somehow, I manage to get his pants down to his knees.

"Make it rough," I growl in his ear.

"Count on it."

He thrusts into my wet heat so hard that I have to grab the table to keep from falling off it. His huge hands grip my thighs, and he hauls me closer, grinding his thick cock into me again and again, making me his with each rough stroke. I can't breathe. He's so powerful and insanely sexy when he's this aggressive. I can't imagine sex with him any other way. I never knew I needed it to be this ruthless, but he's teaching me new paths to ecstasy with every violent jerk of his hips.

The table bangs against the wall. Thank God no one else in the house will be able to hear us because there's no way I'd tell him to stop. I want more, so I slap his ass hard.

"Fuck!" He grunts as his predatory instincts kick in. He grabs a fistful of my hair and pulls my mouth to his, thrusting his tongue between my lips and tasting me. Savoring me. Consuming me.

My pulse thrums through my body. Heat coils in my pussy until I'm sure I'll die if he doesn't make me come soon.

But he's not about that at all. He's prolonging the ecstasy, sending me into a weird trance where our auras fuse together, bright red with lust and longing and unchecked desire, sparking with passion and riddled with bursts of pleasure. I'm so overwhelmed by the intensity of our connection that I can't do anything but cling to him in gluttonous bliss.

He changes the angle of his hips ever so slightly, grinding against my clit, pushing me harder and faster until I'm sure I'll explode. We almost died on that bike, and I need this. Somehow Scar knew exactly how to comfort me, and he didn't do it with simpering platitudes. He's showing me precisely who he is and what kind of life I can have if I dare to stay in his world. At this moment, I can't imagine ever leaving it.

Rapturous ecstasy claims me. My body clamps down hard around his, drawing him in, trying to suck every bit of him deeper. I break our kiss to scream his name. Pleasure wracks my body. I shudder as flames lick up my spine and surround me in an inferno. I succumb to the roughest, hottest orgasm of my life.

He plunges over the edge, holding me so close I can't tell where he ends and I begin. Thick jets of molten heat fill me from within. I clutch him, refusing to let go until he finally collapses against me.

"I'll never let anyone hurt you," he promises.

"I love you," I blurt.

The minute the words leave my mouth, I want to shove them back in. Scar's eyes meet mine and burn into my soul. He parts his lips, then presses them back together. He drops his chin and rests his forehead against mine.

"My world is too dangerous," he finally says.

"I don't care."

"You're too good for it." He pulls away, leaving me sweaty and shaking. He grabs his clothes and gets dressed before I can think of what to say to stop him. Then he's gone.

I sit on the edge of the table and wonder how I could have fucked up so badly. It was the intensity between us that drove

me to confess my love. I don't even know if I really do love him. But I think I do. And that scares the hell out of me. I've never been in love before. Is this really what it feels like? Like a tornado ripping through my life, trying to destroy me? Because if this is love, then Scar's right. It's dangerous. And dark. And sinfully irresistible. And I want it. All of it. With him.



## Chapter 15: Scar

I can't get the fuck out of the safe room fast enough. Love? She loves me? Me? She doesn't even know half the hell I went through. She doesn't know what Blackstone made me do to him and his friends. She'd be disgusted if she heard even one of my horrific stories. She'd run if she realized how fucked up I am inside. Oh, hell no! She can't love me.

My bedroom is a welcome refuge for about five minutes. But with nothing to distract me, all I can do is suffer through flashbacks of all the disgusting things I had to do to Blackstone to stay alive. This isn't going to work. Maybe a shower. Yeah, that's it.

When that doesn't help either, I get dressed and join the others in the living room. Julia's missing, but Nitro and Nina are sitting on the floor with Max, helping him assemble his fortress of Legos. Over the years, Nina's collected thousands of pieces. They're strewn across the floor in an epic jumble of colors and sizes. It's a total disaster.

I can't stand the chaos, so I gather all the empty plastic containers around the room and set them in a neat line on the coffee table. Nina glances at me, then looks at Nitro, who shrugs. Max smiles at me with the wary knowledge of someone who has seen adults behaving strangely. I hate that he has to see me like this, but I can't leave the house. It's too risky. They don't know why I need to do this, and frankly, I don't either, but when I'm upset, I can't handle disorganized shit.

Everything else in the house is already clean, so I don't have any other options. The snack cupboard and all the dishes are exactly where they need to be. Nina keeps her house spotless, so the only thing left for me to rearrange are the Legos.

After rummaging through the mess, I start collecting yellow Legos first. They remind me of the sunshine I never got to see when I was locked in Blackstone's basement dungeon. Almost every time he took me upstairs to use me, it

was dark outside. After years of abuse, I wondered if sunlight could protect me. I wondered if that was why he didn't bring us upstairs during the day. But that idiotic notion dissolved a week later when, on a hot summer day, Blackstone chained all the boys to fenceposts in the garden. He held a party for his most depraved friends, and they ruined us while the blazing sun burned our pale bodies. I couldn't sit for a week after that twisted celebration. I never did find out why Blackstone threw that party, other than to use us. I guess it doesn't really matter. He would have used any excuse to hurt us.

Green is the next color to capture my attention. Green represented all the grass we never got to play in. I'd always wondered what lived in the tall grass around the mansion. Some of the boys worried about snakes, but we never got to run through it the way normal kids could. The only serpents in our midst were Blackstone and his accomplices. That was enough for me.

I throw a handful of green blocks into their container with violent force and ignore Nina and Nitro's worried glances.

"Scar, maybe you should clean up later when Max is eating dinner," Nina suggests softly.

"It's a disaster in here. I'm doing it now."

"It can wait." A new firmness enters her tone, so I look up. Max is watching me with those same haunted eyes I saw during my time at Blackstone's. He looks just like the other boys, but that doesn't make me stop. If anything, the compulsion is stronger than ever.

"Let's take a walk, pres," Nitro says.

"Take Max. He needs a break from building stuff." I give Nitro a look he can't argue with, and he glances at Nina for help.

"Max can't go outside until after dark. We can't risk his safety," she says.

"Fine. Whatever." I go back to collecting Legos and ignore their frustrated stares. I hope they leave me alone because I don't want to lose my shit in front of Max. Nitro and

Nina should know better than to stop me when I get like this. I know they're just trying to protect the kid but leaving me alone is the best way to do that right now.

"Is Julia okay?" Nina asks.

"How the hell should I know?" I snap.

Fuck! I throw more Legos into their containers. Maybe I should have stayed in my room and just endured the flashbacks.

"I'll go check on her," Nina says before disappearing down the hall.

"Don't you have anything else to do?" I ask Nitro.

"Bro, I'm not leaving you alone with the kid."

"Why the hell not?" I rock back on my heels and clench my fists. "Just what the fuck are you implying?"

"Nothing like what you're thinking," Nitro says with disgust. "You need to get control of yourself before you do or say something you can't undo."

"I'm fine. If you would just leave me alone, I'll be fine. I need to clean up this mess. If it weren't such a fucking disaster in here, I wouldn't have to do it."

"I'm sorry," Max mumbles.

"See, I told you this would happen," Nitro says to me.

"Max, I didn't ... This doesn't have anything to do with you," I tell him. His bottom lip trembles, and my self-hatred grows. Nitro's right. I need to get the hell out of here, but I can't do it. I can't leave the Lego mess alone.

"Can I have a snack?" Max asks Nitro.

"Sure, bud." Nitro glares at me before taking Max into the snack pantry.

I ignore everyone. Julia's fine because Nina's with her. They can talk about girl shit or whatever. Max is fine because Nitro's giving him all the options we never had at Blackstone's. If we got more than a few pieces of stale bread

with our daily ration of water, we were doing good. This kid doesn't know how lucky he is right now.

I never understood why Blackstone starved us when he had plenty of money. The bacchanal buffets at his parties were unlike anything I'd ever seen before or since. He could have given us caviar and Champagne every night. Instead, he gave us scraps to fight over. Sometimes I would wonder if he had surveillance we couldn't see in that dungeon. I wonder if he watched us argue and battle over every morsel. I doubt it, but I wouldn't have put it past him. But if there were cameras, they would have overheard our plans to escape. I guess there could have been cameras but no microphones.

Determined to forget the past, I grab three purple blocks. They're brighter than the color of the bruises we all had, but not by much. Over time, even the brightest purple bruises would fade to a sickly yellow. Sometimes it took weeks before they morphed into that color. Sometimes it only took a few days. It depended entirely on who delivered the blows. Women didn't hit nearly as hard as men, so they couldn't do as much damage. But in some ways, they were far worse because they'd make you feel things. Good things. They'd make our bodies betray us. In a way, I hated them the most.

I scoop every one of the bricks in that hated color and dump them into a bin before turning my attention to the red ones. Red was the color of blood and pain and suffering. The first time he violated me, I bled all night. I thought I would die. Later, I hated myself for not dying that night. Some of the others didn't survive their first nights. I did. And I hated myself for being strong enough to endure the torture, yet not strong enough to escape.

My breath comes in short gasps. I can't do this. Every color is a new nightmare. I can't deal with blue or orange or pink Legos. But the white, those are the worst. Even dirtied by the fingers of dozens of rescued kids, these blocks embody the essence of purity. That's something I'll never have. And it's exactly the thing Julia needs in a man. She needs someone who hasn't had their heart blackened by hate. She deserves someone filled with love, the kind of love that flows so fully

that the man in possession of all that love can give it freely. I'm not that kind of man. I never will be. I'm permanently ruined. I'll never be good enough for her.

I'm on my knees when all this hits me at once. I try to hold back a cry of rage, but it's impossible. I can't be around anyone right now. When I get this way, I'm far too destructive. I need to ride. It's the only thing that'll help.

"I'm going out," I tell Nitro as I walk through the kitchen.

"Where?" Nitro asks.

"I don't know."

"Now's not a good time to be outside."

"Now's the best time." I turn my attention to Max. He's sitting at the island with a huge bowl of Sugar Bear cereal. It's quickly becoming his favorite, too. "I'd like to see your fortress when I get back. Will you finish it for me?"

"You're not mad at me?"

His question hurts my heart. I'm an asshole. Max should feel safe with me, but my bullshit is making me say and do things I don't mean. I need to make this right before I leave.

"He's not mad," Nitro answers for me. "He's just having a hard time right now."

"My dad has hard times, too," Max says.

"Not like that. He'd never do anything to hurt you," Nitro assures him.

"Never," I say vehemently. Max won't meet my gaze, so I move to stand right in front of him. "Look at me, Max."

"Yeah?" He lifts his little head and gives me the bravest look I've ever seen.

"I shouldn't have yelled. I was being a jerk, and I'm sorry. I want you to know you're safe here. I won't let anyone hurt you, especially not me. I'm nothing like your dad. I can't stand men like him. I keep other kids safe from guys like that, and I'm going to keep you safe, too. I promise."

“Okay.” Max nods slowly as if he’s still trying to process what I’m telling him. I don’t know if he fully believes me or not, and that cuts straight through my heart. I need to get my shit together, but I can’t do it in front of other people. I need to be alone.

When Max turns his attention to his cereal, I step away to give him some space. “I’m going out.”

“Be careful. Matrix texted the club. A group of Demon Riders left the clubhouse an hour ago. They could be lined up anywhere on the road, ready to ambush us. I know you’re going through some stuff, but don’t do anything that’ll get you killed. You’re useless to us if you’re dead,” Nitro says.

“I’m not going to die.” Not a fucking chance. Not until I kill Blackstone first.

“Be careful, pres.”

I hear Julia and Nina’s voices carry from down the hall. I can’t make out what they’re saying, but the temptation to go back to Julia and warn her to run as far away from me as she can get is overwhelming. But I can’t do it. I can’t make her leave. Not until we get Max into the underground system that we’ve set up for kids who need to disappear. Once he’s gone, I can get rid of Julia, too. Then I’ll be free to focus on making Blackstone pay for what he did to us.

When I open the garage door, sunlight chases away the darkness. In the past, if organizing some stuff didn’t work, I’d ride instead. That always did the trick.

The minute I get on my bike, I feel the first hints of freedom. It’s just me, the bike, and the open road. If I’m lucky, I’ll run into one of those Demon Rider fucks. They started a war when they took shots at Julia and me. As far as I’m concerned, anyone wearing their colors is fair game. I’d like to put a bullet into every one of their warped brains. They’re aligned with Blackstone, so they’re either already twisted beyond repair or they’re on that path. Either way, they’re dangerous to everyone who gets in their way. It’s my job to destroy them.

After leaving Nina's property, I pull onto the highway. I'm about a mile away when I glance in my mirror and spot another bike trailing behind me. It's all black. At first, I can't make out any details, but when we take a sharp curve, I spot the white reaper painted on the fuel tank. I should have known he'd follow me. I'm tempted to call him off, but he doesn't always listen to orders. It's a problem.

I'm on high alert since the road is lined with plenty of places to pull off. Demon Riders could be hiding in any of the alcoves or up in the rocks overhanging the road. I pay particularly close attention to places where the road narrows. Perfect ambush spots.

But nothing happens.

When I left, I didn't have a destination in mind, but I'm not surprised when I end up a mile away from Blackstone's place. I pull off onto an old forest service road that isn't maintained anymore. I park near one of Matrix's surveillance cameras and hike in the rest of the way. I stand under the camera and look toward the mansion. It's over a mile away, but I may as well be trapped inside it again. I'm haunted by that hellhole. If I were sure there weren't any kids trapped inside, I'd try to blow it up. But I don't know that with one hundred percent certainty. Until I do, I can't burn that hellish place to the ground.

The only indication I get that Reaper's standing behind me is the faint scent of death. I don't know what the hell he killed today, or who, but I don't ask questions. That's his business. As long as club business gets done, I don't care what he does on his own time. He's got the same demons, but his are different. Maybe worse. I don't know. I don't want to ever get that deep into his head. I try like hell to avoid seeing his plans, but sometimes those images pop into my mind, and I can't avoid them.

"What's going on?" Reaper asks in that low rumble that sounds like distant thunder.

"Just needed to get away."

“You never run. What are you running from?” He moves to stand beside me.

“That woman is ... she’s ... It’s just that ...” I punch the nearest tree because I don’t know how to explain this shit. It’s pissing me off. “She thinks she loves me.”

“Well, that’s fucked.”

“Right?” I stare at the splinters in my knuckles. Well, that was fucking stupid. Just one more dumbass thing she made me do. This really is all her fault.

“Fuckin’ women.” Reaper’s low chuckle breaks the tension.

I laugh. He may be filled with darkness, but he does have a way of making me laugh from time to time. It’s rare, but it happens.

“She doesn’t know anything about me. I mean, I told her a little bit.”

“About that?” Reaper stabs a finger toward the mansion.

“Yeah.”

“How much does she know?”

“I told her about the day Blackstone took me to his house. A bit about that night. But no real details.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” I look at him like he’s nuts. “You know what we went through. If I tell her all that stuff, she’ll run for sure.”

“If you don’t want her around, why not give her the whole story?”

“Have you told anyone about it other than us?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s mine. No one needs to know.” Reaper’s face darkens.



“Exactly. Why the fuck would I tell her any more than I already have?” I ask.

“You like her.”

“What? No!” I want to stop my foot like the four-year-old kid I was when I first got to Blackstone’s.

“If you didn’t like her, you’d get rid of her.”

“I wouldn’t kill her.”

“Not what I meant.” He shakes his head at me as if I’m an idiot.

He’s not wrong. When it comes to Julia, I’m at a total loss for how to deal with her. I’ve never encountered anyone like her before. I’ve never felt like this before. I don’t know what the hell to do with all these feelings, these *urges* coming from my heart.

“Have you ever wanted to keep one of your women?” I ask.

“Keep?” He cocks his head to one side as if this is a completely foreign concept.

“Like, I don’t know, maybe make one of them your old lady?”

“No,” he says.

“Yeah, me either.” *Until now.*

Our phones ping. I grab mine and look at the message from Matrix. He knows we’re here because of the cameras. He wants us to reposition one on the other side of Blackstone’s mansion. Apparently, a wild animal knocked it out of alignment. I text back and let him know we’re on it.

“Should we hike over or ride?” Reaper asks.

“Hike. Less chance of being noticed.”

We’re silent as we trek through the woods surrounding Blackstone’s property. It only takes half an hour to get to the camera that needs repositioning. Reaper keeps a lookout while

I fiddle with the equipment. I text Matrix to make sure it's pointed at the correct angle. He confirms it is.

A second later, Reaper snaps his fingers softly enough that I can hear it but not loud enough for the sound to carry past us. I turn toward him to see what the problem is. Movement near the back of the mansion catches my eye. A biker rolls out from one of a dozen garage doors. He's wearing Demon Riders colors.

"Not a surprise," I whisper to Reaper.

"Yeah, but look at what's inside."

I squint against the sunlight. I wish I had binoculars, but it only takes a minute for my eyes to adjust enough to make out details. Several pallets of long-term food supplies are stacked inside the garage. They shouldn't be there. How the hell did they get that much food without us knowing about the deliveries? And why do they have it?

"I'm going in for a closer look," I tell Reaper.

"Same."

We quietly stalk through the woods, careful not to set off the outer perimeter alarms. We've made this hike many times before to test security measures. I know exactly how close we can get without triggering an aggressive response.

I stop just outside the motion-detection-based security zone. Any closer and we'd end up in a firefight with a bunch of Blackstone's guards. We don't need any more heat than we already have. This is as close as we're getting.

"There's enough food for a hundred people," Reaper says.

"Unless he's planning a party and it's all caviar and Champagne, he's up to something else."

"Yeah." Reaper nods.

"I don't see anyone." As soon as I say this, the garage door begins lowering. "Text Matrix and find out if Blackstone has made any announcements on social media about returning to Montana."

“On it, pres.”

While Reaper types away on his phone, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I count back from ten to try to calm my racing heart. Blackstone hasn't been in the state all year. When he's here, I can't breathe. I can barely think. I'm paralyzed by rage so deeply embedded in me that I'm sure it's been zippered into my DNA. If he's coming here, we don't just have the Demon Riders to contend with. We have to deal with him, too.

This is a disaster. I need to get back to Nina's and warn the others. I've got a duty to protect my men. Between keeping surveillance on the Demon Riders and on Blackstone's place, I won't have time to deal with any more bullshit. Letting my dick and stupid, useless *feelings* go unchecked will only distract me. I can't let Julia get in my head. I've got to push all that crap away and focus on what's important—keeping everyone safe. We're at war, and I'm not going to lose any of my guys to anyone, especially not to Blackstone.

## Chapter 16: Julia

Scar didn't come home last night. I'm sure it's because I blurted out my love for him like an idiot. I don't know what I was thinking. I wish I could travel back in time and stop myself from being so stupid. My stomach was so knotted up that I had to skip dinner. Nina and I helped put Max to bed, and then I spent the rest of the night tossing and turning.

I'm still in bed and don't want to leave it. However, Nina's cooking smells amazing. She's making something sugary sweet with a hint of maple. It's probably pancakes or waffles or maybe French toast. Regardless, it's going to be tasty.

My stomach growls. I need to get out of bed and get dressed, but I'm so exhausted I can hardly keep my eyes open. I couldn't stop thinking about Scar all night, so I didn't pass out until just before sunrise. I'm about six hours short of what I need to function, but I can't hide in my room all day.

Now that it's morning, I know what I need to do. I need to talk to him. I love him. There's no denying it. At first, I thought maybe the amazing sex fried my brain, but that's not it. I see how he looks at me. He cares about me, too, even if he refuses to admit it. Maybe he doesn't love me yet, but you don't kiss someone how he kissed me without there being some kind of emotion behind it. He'd holding back for some reason. Something's obviously wrong, and we need to talk about it. I'm not going to let him walk away from me until he tells me what he's really feeling. I don't buy his bullshit about me being too good for his world. What does that even mean?

I crawl out of bed, groaning as my muscles protest. Hopefully, Nina has a pot of very strong coffee and an IV drip that I can jam directly into my veins.

If I'm going to face him and demand he tell me how he really feels, then I want to look amazing. I need the kind of confidence you can only get from a killer outfit.

After rummaging through the closet, I choose a black bodysuit with cut-off denim shorts. I find a pair of badass lace-up suede boots with two silver buckles around the ankles. A red leather jacket with an asymmetrical zip fastener, waist belt adjustment, silver-tone metal studs, wide lapel, and zipper pockets is exactly what I need to complete the look. If he can manage to keep his hands off me when he sees me in this, then I'm doomed because I look awesome.

With my head held high, I walk out into the kitchen like a runway model. Maybe it's a bit over the top, but I'm trying to hide how much his rejection hurt me. And I'm trying to ignore the little voice in my head telling me I'm not good enough for him.

"Love the ensemble." Nina waves a spatula toward me. "I'm making pancakes. Want some?"

"Sure."

"You probably need a double helping since you didn't eat last night." She stacks several pancakes on a plate and then hands it to me. "The maple syrup's on the warming plate on the table."

"Thank you. Where's Max?" I glance toward the living room, but it's empty.

"Nitro was a little wired this morning, so I loaded Max up with sugar and told Nitro to watch him. Since they can't go outside, they're in the garage playing with God knows what."

"Um, is it safe to leave them alone?" I don't know Nitro that well, but his behavior seems to be a bit erratic.

"Nitro may be a complete spazz, but he loves kids. Max will be fine. Hopefully, he'll wear Nitro out, and he'll calm down." She grabs her plate of pancakes and heads toward the kitchen table. "Join me."

I sit across from her as she pours so much syrup over her pancakes they're swimming in it. I'm not as liberal with my serving size because this jacket is already snug. It's super cute, but I'm curvy and don't have an inch to spare in the arms.

"Have you seen Scar?" I ask casually.

“Not since last night.”

“He came home?” My head snaps up.

“For a minute. He didn’t want to wake anyone, so we went into the safe room to talk.”

I blush as I remember what happened the last time Scar and I were in that room.

“Something’s happening at Blackstone’s ranch,” Nina says.

“The one here? In Montana?”

“Yeah. He hasn’t been here since last year. Scar came back to warn me, but he left shortly after to meet Matrix at the clubhouse. All their surveillance for Blackstone’s property is stored there.”

“What’s going on at Blackstone’s place?”

“He got several food shipments while Matrix was away from his keyboard. They didn’t realize it until Scar and Reaper noticed cases in Blackstone’s garage.”

“They were on his property?” I drop my fork. It clangs against the plate. “When?”

“After Scar left yesterday afternoon. He drove over to check on the place.”

“Why?” My belly clenches. It was probably because I told him I loved him. But why would that send him running to Blackstone’s place?

“He didn’t say. It’s a good thing he went over there. Now we know Blackstone’s up to something.”

“What’s he doing?”

“We don’t know yet.” Scar’s voice scares the hell out of me. I jump in my chair and turn to look at him. Dark circles hang under his eyes. His clothing is rumpled, and I suspect he slept in it. He won’t meet my questioning look. It hurts like hell that he refuses to meet my gaze.

“Anything new?” Nina asks.

“Not yet. Matrix is on it.”

He’s still ignoring me, which is extremely frustrating.

“What’s the plan?” Nina asks.

“Watch the place. Make sure they aren’t shipping kids in.” Scar’s jaw twitches.

“Okay. What’s going on with the Demon Riders?” Nina pushes her plate aside.

“Their clubhouse is quiet, but most of them are there. A couple of patched guys haven’t been accounted for, but I’ve got prospects out searching for them. I’ve been up all night. I’ll be in my room if anything happens.” He leaves without acknowledging my existence.

I’m furious and shove my chair back from the table.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Nina. She gives me a curious glance before turning her attention back to her pancakes.

When I get to Scar’s bedroom door, I don’t bother knocking. I don’t want to give him another chance to avoid me, so I walk in as if I own the place. I close the door behind me and lock it. Anyone who needs him can knock.

“What do you want?” He’s shirtless, wearing only a pair of boxers. His scars and tattoos are on full display. I almost forget why I came in, but I’m on a mission, and all that hot, naked skin just waiting to be kissed will have to wait. That is, if he ever lets me touch him again.

“We need to talk,” I say.

“I’m too busy to talk.”

He goes into the bathroom and shuts the door. The sound of the shower turning on pisses me off. I march to the door, fully expecting it to be locked, but it isn’t. I yank it open and step inside just as he’s getting into the shower. A glimpse of his perfect ass is enough to renew my faltering determination. I deserve this man, and he deserves me. I just need to make him admit it.

Scar shakes his head and mumbles something before closing the glass door behind him. It's clear and hides nothing. Water sluices across his abs and channels down his Adonis belt. I want to lick up every last drop. I'm tempted to open the door and get in with him, but I don't just want him for sex. I want more. I want to understand him. I need him to talk to me, or I'll never figure out why he's hot one minute and cold the next.

"I want to talk to you about what you said last night after I told you ... what I told you."

"Julia, I'm busy right now. I don't have time to deal with you."

He grabs a bar of bourbon-colored soap and begins to scrub his body with it. The scent of bergamot and citrus floats on a woody base. It's the same subtle smell that drives me wild with longing.

"I'm not leaving until you tell me what's going on between us," I say.

"Nothing's going on."

"I don't believe you," I counter.

"I already told you how I feel."

"No, you didn't. You only told me that your world is too dangerous and I'm too good for it. What does that even mean?"

"Look, I really don't have time for this crap. I've got the entire sheriff's department, the Demon Riders, and the FBI on my ass." He shuts off the water and shoves the door open. I can't breathe as I take in every inch—*every inch*—of his perfection.

"I know." I swallow the sudden lump in my throat.

"So this," he grabs a towel and shakes it at me, "isn't a high priority."

"Scar!" I frown at how quickly he dismisses me.



“You know what?” He wraps the towel around his waist, cutting off my view. “You shouldn’t be here anymore.”

“You’re kicking me out?” I whisper.

“No. But you can’t be here when I’m here.” He nods as if he’s convincing himself he’s doing the right thing. “Where’s Max?”

“With Nitro.”

“Nina can watch him.”

“Why can he stay, but I can’t?” Panic claws at my chest. I can’t let him send me away.

“Because.” He pulls on a pair of jeans before leaving his bedroom and walking down the hall to the kitchen. I quickly follow him. Nina’s at the sink washing dishes. “Julia’s leaving. She needs to go someplace safer than here. Nitro can take her.”

“You can’t send me away,” I protest.

“She’s right,” Nina says. “Besides, there’s nowhere safer than this house.”

“The clubhouse is safe.” He averts his eyes, refusing to meet my stunned gaze.

“She can’t stay there,” Nina says.

“Look, it’s just for the day. She can come back tonight when I’m gone,” Scar snaps. “End of discussion!”

“What’s his problem?” Nina asks as he stomps toward the garage.

“He doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“Obviously. Why?”

“Because I—”

Scar returns with Nitro and Max. “Take Julia to the clubhouse and see how things are going with Matrix and the others.”

“Why do I have to babysit all the time?” Nitro asks, clearly pissed off. He’s bouncing on the balls of his feet, reminding me of a racehorse at the starting line.

“Do what I’m telling you to do!” Scar yells.

“Fine. Come on.” Nitro jerks his head toward the garage door.

“You’re being unreasonable,” I call as Scar disappears down the hall. “Ugh! Asshole!”

“He can be one, that’s for sure,” Nitro says. “Fuck him. We’ll go have some fun.”

“I like the sound of that.” I’m so enraged by Scar’s refusal to talk to me that I’m up for anything.

Nitro leads me to his bike.

“Where’s your helmet?” I ask.

“Don’t need it.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to ride without one?” I ask as he hands me one. I don’t understand why he doesn’t wear one.

“I fucking live for danger.” His grin holds a hint of madness, but I’m too pissed off to take it as a warning sign. If Scar trusts him, then I’ll have to trust him, too. Besides, I doubt Nina would let me leave with a crazy person.

“Done.” I wrap my knuckles around my helmet.

“If I’ve got to babysit a chick, then I’m going to have fun with her.”

“Sounds good to me.” I need to blow off some steam, too, so if he wants to show me a good time, I’m not going to say no. He’s one of Scar’s brothers. Maybe he’ll be able to tell me something useful so I can get to know Scar better.

Nitro’s bike is a Harley-Davidson Street Bob 114 in fire engine red. He climbs on, and I slide in behind him. I grab his waist, but not as tightly as I hold onto Scar’s. It feels weird being on another guy’s bike, but Scar’s the one who made this happen. It’s not like it’s my choice.

As Nitro starts the engine, the troubling thoughts I’ve tried to keep at bay return. I’m still confused about what Scar meant when he said I was too good for him. I’m not perfect. I mean, sure, I went to school, got a degree, and I’m helping

kids now. But I still have problems I struggle to deal with. Doesn't everyone?

Something else is going on with him, but I don't know what it is ... or maybe I'm totally delusional, and he really doesn't want anything but sex. I hate to consider that possibility, but it could be the truth. Maybe he just doesn't have the same feelings for me that I have for him. If that's the case, and I was totally wrong, then I'm an idiot for confessing my feelings. But if I'm right, and he does care about me, then I need him to admit it. I don't know what I need to do to win him back, and honestly, I'm not sure I want to if he's going to be a total asshole. It's demeaning. I've never chased after a man before. But then again, I've never wanted anyone the way I want him. This is such a mess.

The ride down the driveway and out the front gate is what I expect. But when we get onto the open road, Nitro revs the bike. Hard. We tear up the road, roaring down it while the hot afternoon sun blazes overhead.

As the yellow stripe down the middle of the highway flickers past us, all my fears vanish. I love riding, and I'm giddy at first, but Nitro's driving becomes reckless. He's taking curves way too fast, and the bike's vibrations don't feel right.

"Slow down!" I yell into the wind.

He doesn't. If anything, he goes even faster. I don't think he heard me, so I squeeze his waist to try to convey my anxiety. He doesn't seem to get it, or he doesn't care, because he accelerates.

"Nitro!"

I cling to him as my life flashes before my eyes. What the hell is wrong with him? Why is he doing this?

I'm tempted to jump off because there's no way we'll survive the next series of switchbacks. We're going to fly off the mountainside and die.

A siren cuts through the rushing wind. Thank God! I've never been so happy to be pulled over by the police in my life.

The FBI has me on their most-wanted list for kidnapping, so I'm sure I'll be in deep shit when they figure out who I am, but at least I'll be alive.

Nitro brings the bike to a stop on the side of the road. We get off and wait for the deputy to get out of his patrol car. He's with the sheriff's office, which has me instantly on high alert. I don't know if Sheriff Curtis gave his deputies orders to kill us on sight or what. Maybe getting pulled over wasn't such a good thing after all.

"Do you have any idea how fast you were driving?" the deputy demands.

"One-twenty-ish?" Nitro grins.

"You're under arrest for reckless driving."

"Get the fuck out of here." Nitro glares at the cop.

"Walk to my car and put your hands on the hood." The cop pulls a gun and points it at Nitro.

"Oh, my God, do what he says," I plead.

"You, too," the cop says to me.

"Me? I wasn't even driving." It's a feeble attempt to avoid being arrested, but it's all I've got. Maybe I'll get lucky, and the cop will let me go.

"Doesn't matter. I'm taking you both in."

I glance at Nitro, who's fuming, but his eyes haven't left the barrel of the gun. He may be reckless, but he's not stupid.

"Scar's going to be pissed," Nitro mutters.

I should be freaking the fuck out right now, but all I can think about is Scar. Nitro seems convinced Scar will come and bail us out, but will bail even be an option for me as soon as they realize who I am? And even if they did let me out for some reason, will Scar come for us? Or will his need to get rid of me keep us in jail for longer than necessary?

The deputy reads us our rights and handcuffs us before shoving us into the back of his patrol car. My shoulders ache

from being stretched so far back, but I can't do anything about it. I glare at Nitro, but he's not even looking at me.

"What about my bike?" Nitro asks the cop.

"We'll send impound to get it." He slams the door, locking us in the back of his patrol car.

"Fuck!" Nitro's jaw twitches as he gazes out the window. "I'm so fucked when Scar hears about this."

"He'll come to get us, though, right?" When he doesn't immediately respond, I jam my shoulder against his. "Right?"

"Probably ... maybe ... I don't know. Depends on how mad he is at us. Besides, that doesn't matter. He can't pick you up if they won't let you out. You've got bigger problems."

He gives me a look but doesn't say anything else because the cop's listening to every word. The minute they run my prints, it's over. I'll be trapped in jail until I convince them I don't know anything about Max's whereabouts. Maybe I could lie about my identity, and they won't realize it until after they release me. I realize I'm grasping at straws, but it's the only way I can avoid having a total meltdown right now.

"Scar's going to be pissed off. He was already mad at you, so if he doesn't bail us out, it's as much your fault as it is mine," Nitro says.

"You were the one driving like an asshole!"

"Yeah, but I was only doing it because I had to babysit you. I'm not your nanny."

"Would Scar really leave us in jail because of me?" I ask, horrified by the implication. If he leaves me in jail, how will I get out? I don't have anyone I can call other than my parents, but there's no way I'm dragging them into this mess. And, even worse, if he doesn't come for me, then he definitely doesn't care about me at all. That would be the clearest indication of how he really feels. I'd be devastated—and trapped in jail.

Tears prickle in my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I'm not going to break down until I know how Scar's going to

respond to this situation.

“How the hell should I know why Scar does the shit he does? You two clearly have something going on. He didn’t put me on babysitting duty for the hell of it. He’s always got a reason for the crap he does.”

I stay silent. I don’t want to tell Nitro about the drama between Scar and me because I don’t know if Scar wants anyone else in the club to know. Maybe I’m a secret he wants to keep. It’s probably wishful thinking, but it’s all I’ve got.

When we get to jail, we’re separated. As expected, they run my prints and immediately realize who I am. The sheriff’s deputies turn me over to the FBI agent in charge of the murder/kidnapping investigation. He takes me into an interrogation room and sits me down.

“Ms. Brant, you were a hard woman to find,” Agent Taft says.

I stay silent. There’s no way I’m confessing my involvement in the case.

“I know you were just trying to help Max, but I need you to tell me where he is. I need to know he’s somewhere safe.”

I avert my gaze and press my lips together.

“Your cooperation will go a long way toward lightening your sentence.”

I see what he’s doing and refuse to play along. If I admit to knowing where Max is, I’ll be booked on kidnapping charges. I’ll spend years in prison. That’s not going to happen.

“I want a lawyer,” I say.

“Legally, I need to stop questioning you now. However, if you change your mind and decide you’re going to cooperate, then just ask one of the officers to get me.”

Agent Taft leads me back to the booking area. Nitro’s standing near the wall where they take photos of criminals against a height chart. He glances at me but doesn’t say a word. I hope he also invoked his rights.

We're booked. Nitro for reckless driving and me for suspicion of kidnapping. When we get our one phone call, Nitro calls Scar. He doesn't pick up, so Nitro leaves a voicemail explaining the situation.

"Now, we wait," he says.

I'm being taken back to the women's section of the jail when a team of FBI agents swarms the station. The agent I just spoke to is leading the charge.

"I've got a warrant to search Sheriff Curtis' office," Agent Taft says.

"On what grounds?" A deputy grabs the warrant.

"Suspicion of murder."

"That's ridiculous. His wife's dead, and his son's missing. You already have his kidnapper in custody. Why aren't you interrogating her?" He points at me.

"There's no proof she took the boy. We're investigating her based on an eyewitness who is friends with the sheriff. The witness' statement can't be corroborated by anyone else. For now, if Ms. Brant posts bail, we're going to let her go."

"This is bullshit! She's got the kid!"

"She's innocent until proven guilty. Right now, the only one who looks good for either crime is the sheriff."

"You should be looking for the real killer," the deputy snarls.

"Sheriff Curtis should have made sure his timeline matched ours," Taft says.

"Timeline?"

"His alibi doesn't check out. He's got a history of domestic violence, and he went on trial last year for hurting his kid. He's our prime suspect. Now, get out of the way, or I'll have my team remove everyone from this building." Taft pushes past him and walks toward an office door marked "Sheriff Curtis."

My eyes go wide. The FBI suspects the sheriff? This is great news! Maybe they'll let me go after all. I can't wait to tell Scar. I hope he doesn't leave us here to punish me or Nitro. I don't think he'll abandon us. However, he was so angry when he left me with Nitro that I don't know what he's going to do.

When I get to my cell, I sit on a lumpy cot. I'm alone, thank God. But my heart doesn't slow. The longer I wait, the more I worry.

"Please come," I whisper.

I sit against the cinderblock wall and pull my legs to my chest. Despite my exhaustion, there's no way I'm going to fall asleep in this place. I stay vigilant for hours. Finally, Scar appears outside my cell—and he looks furious.



## Chapter 17: Scar

“Yeah, that’s her.” I scribble my signature on a clipboard before handing it back to the deputy. The man unlocks the door to free Julia. She hurls herself into my arms and clings to me. I instantly cave and press my nose into her cinnamon-scented hair. I inhale deeply before remembering how fucking pissed off I am. I untangle her arms from around my waist and step back. Oh, no. She’s not going to get off that easily. One hug won’t make up for the stress she’s putting me through.

“Scar, I—”

“Don’t say a fucking word. I’m not in the mood.” I turn to the guard. “Where’s Nitro?”

“In the men’s section on the other side.”

“Let’s go!” I glare at him to get moving. He’s slow as shit but fast enough that Julia struggles to keep up. She’s got dark circles under her eyes and looks like she didn’t sleep a wink all night. I don’t blame her. In a place like this, you don’t sleep unless you want to get shanked. A sliver of pity stabs my heart, but I quickly pluck it out. I can’t afford to go soft right now. There’s way too much at stake.

When we get to Nitro’s cell, he springs off the cot, which creaks in protest. Standing at the bars, he holds onto them while the guard unlocks the door.

“Jesus, took you long enough,” Nitro says.

“Shut the fuck up unless you want me to leave your ass in here,” I snap. “You’re lucky I’m getting you out. I’m sure this wasn’t Julia’s fault. Not entirely, at least.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” she says.

“It was mine,” Nitro admits.

“Not another word.” I shut him up, partially so I won’t put my fist through his face, but also because I don’t want him incriminating himself in front of the law.

I was lucky I could get our lawyer to meet me first thing this morning at the courthouse. She did a good job, as always, pleading a solid case for bail and pointing out that Nitro wasn't a flight risk. Since no one in the club has any assets on paper, we look poor to anyone not smart enough to dig deeper. The judge bought it, which was surprising because I figured he'd look for any reason to keep one of my guys in jail. Apparently, not everyone in this county can be bought.

The situation with Julia was shockingly easy to navigate. The FBI revoked the charges against her and dropped her from their suspect list, which is suspicious as fuck. I don't know what angle they're trying to play, but they've got eyes on us. When I left Nina's earlier, I passed a couple of unmarked cars. I'm sure more will trail us when we leave.

When we get to the parking lot, I hand Julia a helmet. She takes it while eyeing me warily. I can almost see the accusation in her eyes. If I hadn't sent her off with Nitro, she wouldn't have ended up in jail overnight. In a way, it's sort of my fault, but I didn't know Nitro would be so fucking reckless with her on the back of his bike. I should never have let her ride with him.

"Hey, pres, hold up. Before we get back to the clubhouse —" Nitro starts.

"Didn't you hear me earlier?" I drop my helmet onto my bike and turn to face him. I've been looking for any excuse to kick his ass for putting Julia in danger. This is enough.

"Yeah, but we overheard—"

I swing my fist right into his nose. It lands with a crack. Blood spurts everywhere. Nitro roars and rushes me, slamming into me and knocking me to the ground. Gravel digs into my back as I roll to get away from his lightning-fast fists. He manages to get in one good punch to my shoulder before I kick him off me.

Nitro falls backward, then tucks into a roll and slides across the parking lot. He's nimble on his feet, but I'm irate. I jump to my feet and run across the pavement. He scrambles to get up, but he's not fast enough. I kick him hard in the ribs. He

grunts and doubles over before falling to the ground. Even though he's lying there writhing in pain, I don't give a shit. He's got this coming.

All the frustration from the last few days comes to a head. I haven't done a damn thing to let off steam other than fuck Julia senseless, and I'm primed for a fight. Nitro doesn't stand a chance. Brother or not, he's about to get his ass kicked. But I'm going to give him a chance to get up before I finish him. It's no fun when your opponent isn't strong enough to get off the ground.

"Get up!" I yell.

"Scar, what the fuck?" Nitro grunts.

"Don't you think I have enough shit to deal with right now? I gave you one fucking job, and you couldn't even manage that!"

"I'm not a job," Julia grumbles.

I spin and stalk toward her. I should be horrified by the rush of fear into her eyes, but I'm so consumed by rage I can hardly see straight.

"And you! You have been nothing but trouble since the minute you walked into my bar. I could be floating the river with a couple of beers right now. But no! I can't because you decided to bring trouble to my doorstep. I swear to God—"

"What?" She jumps off my bike and swings her helmet for emphasis. "You could have turned me away, and you didn't. I know you're mad, but you have no right to take it out on me. I didn't do anything but ask for your help. If you don't want to give it to Max or me anymore, then just say the word. I'll pack our stuff and be gone within the hour. There are women's shelters that can help us."

"You're not going to a shelter." There's no way I'm going to trust someone else with her safety. I couldn't even trust one of my own guys. Why would I trust complete strangers?

"Maybe she's right," Nitro says.

“Stay out of it,” I snap. “You’ve done enough. Get the fuck out of my sight.”

“Gladly.” Nitro gets onto the spare bike I had Reaper and Talon drop off for him. I sent them to the impound yard to get Nitro’s bike back. As furious as I am, I hope they’re successful. A man never deserves to lose his ride, even if he is a dumbass.

Nitro starts the bike and throttles it several times before fishtailing out of the lot. If he wants to ride like a maniac, fine. I’ve never been able to stop his self-destructive streak. I don’t understand it at all. It’s almost like he’s got a death wish. After everything we survived, why does he still seem hellbent on dying? I know we’ve all got demons eating away at us, but at a certain point, we need to get past that shit.

Julia stands beside my bike, glaring at me. I want to wipe that look off her face in the worst way, but I don’t trust myself enough to touch her right now. I’m still all riled up, and although I’d never hit a woman, there are times I have to walk away to avoid it.

I get on the bike and wait for her to slide in behind me. She sits close but doesn’t wrap herself around me the way she usually does. I hate the tension between us, but maybe it’s for the best. I’m trapped between wanting to send her away and wanting to keep her forever. It’s completely fucking up my head, and I haven’t had a minute to think clearly since she told me how she felt about me. Too much is happening. Doesn’t she get that?

The choice between going to the clubhouse and Nina’s is far easier than choosing whether to keep Julia for longer than a few more days. I can’t make that decision until the rest of this business between the Demon Riders, Blackstone, the FBI investigation, Max’s mom’s murder, and everything else is cleared up. This bullshit situation with Nitro is exactly the kind of crap I don’t need right now. If he hadn’t put Julia’s life in danger, too, then I wouldn’t have cared as much. But he did, so I’m going to stay mad until I have a reason not to.

On the way to Nina's, I spot at least one tail. They're good, but I'm better. I didn't buy the FBI's excuse for cutting her loose at all. They claimed they had an unreliable witness. What they're actually doing is giving us a false sense of security. They're waiting for us to slip up. If they find Max at Nina's, then we're all going down for it. They don't just want Julia to pay. They want the whole club locked up. That's their angle.

By the time we get to Nina's, Julia is snuggled against me. Her warmth soothes some of my anger, but I'm still not ready to talk to her. I'll say something I'll regret. I know I will. It's better if we don't say anything to each other right now. As I told her before, I'm too busy for this relationship bullshit. It'll have to wait.

I park in the garage and close the door behind us. She's standing by the door to the house, waiting.

"Go to your room, and stay there. I can't deal with you right now." I attempt to walk past her, but she grabs my arm.

"Scar, I have to tell you something." She pushed her black-rimmed glasses up her nose, giving me a glimpse of her luminous green eyes. My cock jerks as blood rushes south. When her pink lips begin moving again, I can't even hear what she's saying because all I want to do is shove my cock between those luscious lips. I want to pull that prim bun loose and use her hair like reins as I fuck her from behind. I want to hear her screaming my name.

She sucks in a soft breath, then whispers, "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" The darkness inside me rises, and all I can think about are all the ways I want to corrupt her perfect little mouth.

"Like you want to ..."

"Yes?" I arch a brow, enjoying her discomfort.

"I'm going inside. When you can talk to me like an adult, come find me in my room." She turns on her heels and hurries inside.

I'm left with an impossibly hard cock and just enough anger that I can't control my instincts. I follow her into the house, ignoring Nina's questions about how things went at the jail and where Nitro is. None of that matters. The only thing that matters is making Julia come on my dick so hard she can't see straight for a week.

She's about to close her bedroom door when I slap my palm against the wood. She gasps and steps back, and I push into the room, slamming the door behind me. She backs up several feet before stopping. We stand there, staring at each other until she's breathing just as hard as I am.

The spark ignites. We surge together, meeting in the middle of the room. My lips crush hers. She jumps into my arms and wraps her legs around my waist. I'm kissing her so hard that a metallic taste glides across my tongue. I pull back to see the damage I've done and see her lip bleeding where I bit it. But when my gaze travels up to her eyes, all I see is the darkness inside her inviting me to unleash my depravity.

She tears my shirt off before crushing my right nipple between her teeth. Lightning streaks from that brutalized peak straight to my cock. I roar, knowing the whole house will hear me but not caring. If Nina's smart, and she usually is, she'll turn up the TV and keep everyone else distracted. I don't give a shit what they do as long as no one dares to interrupt me.

Julia turns into something feral. She scratches her nails down my belly, carving her marks into each ab until she gets to my jeans. I reach for my belt, but her hands are already there, clawing at the buckle. She rips it free, then tosses it across the room. My jeans don't stand a chance. She's got them around my ankles and is literally shredding my boxers before I can stop her. For the record, I don't want to stop her. She's the hottest fucking woman I've ever seen. I've never experienced this side of her before, but I like it. I might even love it.

I shove that idiotic thought away. This isn't the time to think about shit like love. I've got to get control of this situation, so I push her down on the bed. I struggle to get my boots off, then get rid of my jeans and boxers. My cock

glistens with pre-cum and bobs obscenely as I walk toward her.

“Get on your knees,” I command.

She does, sliding to the floor before crawling toward me. She’s like a panther, slinky and hot as hell. But she’d be even sexier if she were naked.

“Take off your clothes,” I order next.

She leans back and begins the sexiest strip tease I’ve ever seen, and that’s saying a lot since I’ve been to plenty of those kinds of clubs. First, her shirt goes, then her pants. Her insanely provocative lingerie is so seductive I almost tell her to keep it on. But I don’t want anything between us, not one fucking scrap of clothing. Nothing.

By the time she slides her panties down to her knees, I’m so turned on my vision’s getting blurry. Everything comes into focus the minute her mouth wraps around my dick. I groan as my ass clenches. Her big, innocent eyes lock with mine, enslaving me. I grab the bun at the back of her head and unwrap it, letting her luxurious hair flow freely down her back. I gather it into a ponytail and fist it at the base of her head. I’m still pissed about the situation with Nitro, and the only thing that will make me feel better is to watch her choking on my cock.

Her nostrils flare, and fire blazes in her eyes. It’s as if she knows what’s coming and is challenging me to do my worst. If she gives me any hint that she doesn’t like it, I’ll stop because I’m not a total asshole, but I plan on taking her right to the edge over and over until she sucks me dry.

I thrust my hips, filling her mouth with my cock. She moans, sucking me in so deep my balls rest on her chin. A trickle of saliva slides out of the edge of her mouth, and I have to look away. She’s too goddamn good at this. But how much can she really take?

With perverse curiosity, I push deeper, sinking the last few inches of my cock into her throat. Her eyes go wide, but she doesn’t falter. I grab her hair tighter and hold her there,

watching as she starts to lose the battle of wills. When she pushes her hand against my thigh, I pull back just enough to let her take a breath. She gags slightly. Watching her valiant struggle is so fucking hot. I never want it to stop.

As much as I like watching her choke on it, I enjoy the friction of fucking her face too much to give that up. I find a punishing rhythm, giving her several shallow strokes before plunging deep and filling her throat. She tries to keep up but eventually gives me a pleading look that makes me realize she's almost had too much. Almost.

With renewed vigor, I pump my dick into her mouth over and over, filling her, holding her hair at just the right angle to give me maximum pleasure. My balls tighten with each ravaging thrust. She struggles to keep up. Her jaw has to be aching, so when her teeth graze my cock, I don't correct her. I'm so close it doesn't matter, and that little bit of pain only adds to my excitement.

I'm riding the razor's edge between pain and pleasure. She needs to gulp down every drop, so I grab her hair with both hands and hold her still. With one final plunge, I go balls-deep. Her pupils enlarge. Her cheeks suck in. Her mouth is a vise on my swollen cock. But the thing that fucking kills me is that her eyes never leave mine. Not when the first hot blast of cum rockets down her throat. Not when I shove deeper, gagging her with more of my molten heat. Not even when I grunt out the last drop.

She's still gazing up at me as I start to pull free, and she licks her tongue along the underside of my shaft, never missing a drop. I'm devastated by her skills. She's a goddess. I don't deserve her. She's wrecked me in the best way possible. Ruined me. And I don't care. I can't even move, but I don't need to. She keeps lapping at my cock, giving it little kisses until it's so sensitive I can't stand it.

"Get on the bed." My voice trembles, but I can't help it. I can hardly move, let alone project any kind of strength.

She lays on the bed and spreads her legs wide, giving me an erotic view of her glistening pussy. Sucking my cock turned



her on. Big time. She's so wet there's no way I'm going to let that primed pussy go to waste.

"Touch yourself," I tell her.

She gives me a shy, questioning look before slipping her fingers into her slick folds. I'm so jealous of her hand, but I need time to recover. Watching her stroke her sex will have to be good enough for now.

"Play with your clit," I command.

She moans and flicks her fingers over the apex of her hot little slit before swirling that tiny pearl between her thumb and forefinger and pushing two fingers into her greedy cunt. Even while touching herself, she's teasing me. A wicked smile plays across her lips as I reach down to stroke my cock. Tipping her head back, she arches her back and thrusts her tits up. Then she grabs one breast, kneading it before letting her knees come together.

"Spread!"

"Yes, Scar." She's toying with me but does what I tell her to do. Splayed wide open, she's waiting for me to pound her into the bed.

"I want to see you come," I growl.

"I don't know if I can—"

"Do it!"

"Okay. But only for you, Scar." She gives me a salacious smile before strumming her clit with deft fingers. She caresses and stretches her pussy, sliding one finger in, then two, then three. Her nipples go from pink to red. Her breath comes in short gasps. She's grinding her hips up, fucking her hand, making me wish I was inside her.

"Oh, God," she whimpers.

"Yes, baby. Come for me."

"Scar, I can't."

"Yes, you can. I'm going to watch your hot little pussy twitch when you do."

“Oh, please!”

She rolls onto her stomach and raises her ass into the air. Her hand hasn't left her pussy. I've got the best goddamn view I could ever want, but she hasn't come yet. I may be getting harder by the second, but I won't be satisfied until she lets loose in front of me.

She curls three of her fingers into her cunt, while using her other hand on her clit. Her ass rocks back and forth as she moans, and obscenities spill from her lips. She's never had such a dirty mouth before. I can't help but wonder if taking my cock down her throat has something to do with it.

When she glances back at me, I give her a sardonic grin. She's clearly never done this with anyone before because she's shy as hell. I love being her first. But I can't wait forever. I need to see her pussy clenching hard.

“Come on, baby. Make that pussy come.” I slide between her legs and put my face right there for a better view.

“Scar, I can't.”

“Why not?”

“It's embarrassing.”

“It's beautiful,” I counter.

“Please, don't make me.”

Well, that was the wrong thing to say because now I'm definitely going to make her do it. I know I'm being a total asshole, but something about my power over her is heady. I can't have it if she doesn't give it to me, so in a way, this is a test. I won't know how much she trusts me until she comes all over her delicate little fingers.

“Think about how much you want my cock in your ass.”

“Scar!” Her whole body flushes.

“If you thought deepthroating me was hard, wait until I'm shoving my cock into your tight little—”

“Oh, fuck!” She screams as her pussy convulses around her fingers. I give her my full attention, shutting the hell up so

I can watch the show from start to finish.

She's grinding her entire body against the bed, shoving her fingers knuckles deep and rubbing harder and harder. She turns her head to one side. Her eyes roll back, giving her that look of possession. Her pleasure goes on and on. Her body quakes for so long I'm sure she'll never stop coming.

My fist closes around my dick. I'm not sure when I stopped stroking it but seeing her devastated by her orgasm is so goddamn erotic that I need to be inside her.

Without waiting for her to recover, I wrap my arm around her waist and haul her to her knees. She groans and moves her hand away from her pussy, so she can support her upper body. I take the opportunity to thrust my cock deep into her still-quivering pussy. She screams, and another series of quakes rock her body. Her pussy squeezes my dick so hard I'm afraid I'm going to come. There's no fucking way that's happening, so I pull out until only the tip is inside.

"Scar, fuck me!"

Her demands can't be ignored, so I plow her hard, pushing her to come again and again until she's so limp that I can't hold her up anymore. I let her crash against the bed but don't stop fucking her tight, wet, hot pussy. Her velvety cunt milks my cock, begging to be drenched in sticky sweetness. I'll give it to her when I'm damn well good and ready. On my terms. Not hers.

I bite my lip and pound her pussy until she starts keening. Her cries slither down my spine, coiling around the vibrations sliding up my cock. When they merge, I scream, losing control. My cock jerks so hard that I almost blackout. Hot jets of fire blast from my cock to mix with her wetness. The slippery, slapping sound of my cock slamming into her pussy fills the room. I can hardly hear it over the roaring in my head. This is exactly what I needed. It's everything I ever wanted, and she's giving it to me.

When the last spurt leaves my body, I'm half-dead. I collapse on top of her and lay there, crushing her for a second

before pulling myself free. She curls into a ball in my arms, and I kiss her forehead.

“What am I going to do with you?” I murmur against her hair.

“Whatever you want,” she says.

Which begs the question: what do I want? I don't have enough cognitive function left right now to figure that shit out, so I don't even bother trying. That can come later. For now, she's exactly where she needs to be.

## Chapter 18: Scar

Even though the sex was incredible, my frustration returns quickly. I can't stop thinking about having to bail her and Nitro out of jail. The sheriff could have gotten to them there. Easily. They were in a ton of danger but were too clueless to realize it. If she's staying around, she needs to be strong enough to stand up to anyone who could put her at risk, even my club brothers. I'm still going to find a way to make Nitro pay for what he did. He got off lightly with a few punches, but that isn't enough. He needs to stop his self-destructive bullshit before he gets someone killed.

I shift in the bed and move away from Julia. It's too hard to think with her curled up against me.

"Scar," she whispers.

"Hum?"

"There's something I need to tell you about." She sits and pulls the sheets up to cover her breasts. Normally, I'd yank the sheet right the fuck off her, but that would lead to more sex, and we'd be wrecked for the rest of the day.

"What?" I roll onto my side and prop my head on my hand.

"When we were in jail, the FBI came in."

"To talk to you?"

"Yes, but after that, they served a warrant for Sheriff Curtis' office. He's their prime suspect now."

"He is?" I sit and give her my complete attention.

"The agent in charge said something about a timeline not matching up. It sounded like his alibi didn't check out."

"No shit." This is great news! "Did they say what they were looking for?"

"No, just that they had a warrant to search the office."

"I wish we had someone on the inside."

“Good thing we got arrested.” She gives me a sheepish smile.

“No! It’s not good at all. You should never have been put in that position. I’m going to make sure Nitro knows not to pull a stunt like that again. You could have been hurt. Shit, the sheriff could have had you killed. It’s not safe.” I get out of bed because I’m too agitated to sit still. As I pull on my clothes, I continue, “This is exactly what I was talking about. You shouldn’t be here. You’re too good for this.”

“What do you mean?” Her smile drops, but I don’t back down.

“Just what I said.”

“Explain it. Explain why I’m too good. I’m not some innocent little princess who needs rescuing! I’m not an idiotic damsel in distress!”

She gets off the bed while yelling at me. I try to ignore the sway of her breasts, but it’s impossible. She’s the worst possible distraction. I let this go too far. My dick keeps getting in the way. I need to drop her before something terrible happens to her.

“... I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing it for years,” she finishes.

“You’re not the kind of girl who can handle the shit I have to deal with.” I grit my teeth because I know she won’t give up easily.

“What kind of girl am I, then, huh? Why don’t you start telling me the fucking truth about how you feel about me instead of trying to pretend this is about me being a good girl! I’m not a good girl, Scar. You should know that by now!”

“What the fuck is wrong with you? What’s it going to take for you to back off?” I march forward and get right in her face.

“The truth! Tell me the fucking truth!”

“What do you want me to say? That I love you? That I can take care of you?”

“If that’s the truth, then yes.”

“I can’t love you. I don’t love. I’m full of hate. It’s all I feel. I’m a fucking monster. Don’t you get it?”

“What are you talking about? Everyone’s capable of love.”

“Not me.” I laugh bitterly.

“Why not?”

“I spent eleven years in hell. Whatever love I had is gone. It’s not coming back. You don’t have the first fucking clue about what happened to me. Whatever twisted, sick shit you’ve imagined is nothing compared to the truth.”

“Then tell me the truth. Talk to me. Tell me what happened.”

“Fine. You want to know what he did to me?”

“Yes,” she says softly. “I need to understand why you think you can’t love me.”

“Goddammit.” I run my hand through my hair and pace across the room. Where the hell do I even start? Maybe I’ll just jump to the worst day. That will be enough. Once she hears about it, she won’t think she’s in love with me anymore. No one could love me after what happened.

“Scar, come sit by me.”

“No.” I can’t. If I get anywhere near her while I’m trying to tell her about that night, I won’t be able to finish. If she so much as touches me, I’m done. She’s staring at me so intently that I don’t know if I can do this. But I have to. I need her to stop loving me because I’ll never be able to love her in return. She deserves better. She deserves a man who can love her so completely that she never doubts his love for her.

“We spent most of our time in the basement dungeon. We never knew what to expect, so whenever the door at the top of the stairs opened, we panicked. I’ll never understand why that day was different, but when that door opened, images started flashing into my mind.”

“What kind of images?”

“Plans.” I manage to spit the word out before my throat closes.

“Plans for what?”

“For me.”

She’s silent for a second, but I can tell she understands where this is going when her eyes fill with tears. My chest aches. I don’t want to hurt her, but I can’t hide who I am anymore.

“Blackstone always had elaborate plans for torturing us, but I didn’t realize it until after.”

“After? After he hurt you?”

“Yeah. When they dragged me upstairs, I had all these horrifying images in my head. I thought I was making the bad things happen to me because Blackstone did exactly what I’d pictured. Exactly.” My stomach rolls, and I’m afraid I’m going to be sick. I need a minute, so I go into the bathroom and close the door. I grab a glass off the counter and fill it with water. I gulp it down before returning to the bedroom.

“None of it was your fault,” she murmurs.

“I know that now, but I didn’t then. I thought I was causing my own torture. When I saw what he was going to do to the others, I thought I was projecting some sick, twisted fantasies onto him.”

“Did you ever have fantasies like that before?”

“No! Never! The things I saw ...” I try to avoid thinking about them, but it all comes rushing back. My skin is clammy, and my mouth feels like it’s stuffed with cotton.

“It wasn’t you. It was him,” she says softly.

“It was so confusing. I didn’t know what to do with those visions. Then it happened again, but this time it wasn’t Blackstone.”

“Who was it?”



“Another kid. He had a plan to escape. I saw the whole thing in his mind. In my mind. It’s hard to explain.”

“I understand what you mean.”

“Back then, I wasn’t sure if I was projecting my own desires onto the other kid. Was it his plan or mine? I didn’t know.”

“It sounds like you were in a confusing situation on every level.”

“The next day, the other kid told me his plan. He wanted me to go with him. But I was afraid. If we got caught, Blackstone would kill us. Maybe that would have been a better fate, but I wasn’t willing to die. Unlike Nitro, I’ve never had a death wish.”

“He has one?”

“Would he ride the way he does without one?” I ask.

“I suppose not.”

“Exactly. Well, the kid ran. I didn’t go. He almost made it. Almost. But ... he didn’t.”

“What happened?”

“They caught him. They murdered him in the dungeon, right in front of us, so we’d never think about escaping.” I keep the details to myself because I don’t want those images in her head.

“Oh, my God.” Her hand covers her mouth. This is exactly what she needs to know about me. Once she hears the rest, she’ll forget about her supposed love for me.

“After that, I felt so fucking guilty. I thought I’d made the kid do what he did. I thought I was using my mind to control him. I know that doesn’t make any sense, but at the time, you have to remember, we hardly ever ate. We were freezing in the winter and dying of heat stroke in the summer. Every day was a battle just to survive. Thinking straight was a luxury we didn’t have.”

“I’m so sorry, Scar.” She reaches for me, but I step away. I can’t handle her comfort right now. I shouldn’t get used to it either because she’s going to leave me anyway.

“After that kid died, I wanted to die, too. It was the only time I ever thought about ending my life. Matrix knew something was up. He cornered me and made me tell him why I refused to eat that day.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him about the visions. He asked me a million questions. Good ones, too. He’s smart as hell. He realized what was happening before I did. He told me I was seeing other people’s plans. They weren’t my own. They belonged to the others. I didn’t believe him at first, but eventually, he convinced me.”

“I’m so glad he was with you. I can’t imagine the mental anguish you were in.”

“You’ll never be able to understand it. You’ll never be able to understand who I am. That’s why I can’t let you do this.”

“Do what?”

“Love me.”

“Scar, this doesn’t change anything. I still feel the way I feel. I can’t help it. I care about you more than I’ve ever—”

“Stop. Just don’t.”

She sighs heavily before looking away. “Then tell me something else. Tell me how you escaped.”

“Matrix recognized the usefulness of my ability. Since I could see other people’s plans, I could use the visions to gather information about the people at the compound. It took time, but I was able to figure out the guards’ schedules. I saw images of the area around the compound. I knew how fast we’d have to run to get to the forest for cover. I learned a lot. But ultimately, I stumbled upon the most important information of all because I could see Blackstone’s plans.”

“What did you see?” she asks in a hushed tone.

“We always assumed Blackstone was upstairs dreaming up new ways to hurt us, but he wasn’t always there. I saw his upcoming plans for a charity gala in San Francisco. He’d be gone for several days, along with most of his guards. It was the first time I realized we had a real chance at escaping. But we had to be smart about it.”

“How did you come up with your escape plan?” she asks.

“The other guys have certain abilities, too. We combined all the intel we could get and strategized for weeks. Thankfully, Blackstone had been looking forward to that gala for a while, so we had enough time to really think through our escape route.”

“Did it work?”

“It had to. We had no choice. If we messed up even one part of the plan, we were dead. I wasn’t going to die. My need for revenge kept me alive for years. I never stopped fueling it with memories. That’s why I’m telling you all of this. It’s so you’ll understand. I’ve got nothing but hatred inside me. There’s no room for love.”

“That’s not true,” she murmurs.

“It is. Any love I had is gone, and it’s not coming back. Nothing you can do will change that.”

“No. The love is still there. When we’re born, we’re given an enormous capacity to love. We’re filled with so much love, and we want to give it to the people who are supposed to love us back. Our tiny little hearts are bursting with love. But then something happens. In your case, your mom died. Suddenly, you have all this love trapped inside your heart, but you can’t give it to anyone, so all that love gets locked inside you.”

I don’t know how the hell she knows that about me, but it’s true. I sit on the edge of the bed, still out of reach but closer to her than before.

“And there’s this need, this *compulsion*, to let all that love out. And you might try sometimes, but it only takes one person to reject it, just one heartless bastard, and all that love gets

suppressed again. I hate Blackstone for what he did to you. He made you hide all that love inside you.”

I start trembling because she’s right. I’ve never admitted that to anyone before, but she understands me. I can’t believe it. I don’t know what to do with this, so I move closer and let her take me into her arms. I bury my face against her chest. I don’t want her to see that she’s tugging on that lock around my heart. She’s working it free, bit by bit, and I’m powerless to stop her.

She holds me close and doesn’t say anything for several minutes. “When you can’t do the thing you were born to do, it hurts like hell.”

“What thing?” I ask in a voice I don’t recognize. There’s too much anguish in it to be mine. I don’t dare say another word. I don’t want her to see me like this, but she’s doing it anyway, seeing right through me. She’s seeing my blackened, shattered heart, and she’s not running. She’s here, tearing that cage around my heart wide open. I don’t know what I’ll do if she unleashes all that longing and desire to be loved. I don’t think I’ll be able to stand it. No one has ever understood that side of me before, not even my brothers. I have no idea how to deal with it. None.

“You were born to love, Scar. To give all that love in your heart away to people who deserve it. Your mom deserved it. From what you’ve told me, she was a good mother.”

“She had her demons.”

“We all have those. I’m so sorry you lost her when you did. And that a sadist got a hold of you instead.”

I hear what she’s not saying: it’s too bad you’re a broken monster of a man because you could have been so much more. She doesn’t know it, but that’s the thought I have in the darkest part of the night when I can’t sleep and the demons of my past are circling, waiting to steal my sanity. I’m too ruined to be good enough for someone as pure as she is.

I don’t know what to do about her. She’s slowly peeling back all the scars, looking for the man underneath them. I’m

afraid of what she'll find. I've pushed some things so far down that even I don't know what's hidden in the depths of my heart. She could unleash hell beyond anything I've ever felt before. She could make me hope for more than what I have.

I can't deal with that. Hope is the most dangerous feeling in the world. I know how easily it can be destroyed. I used to have hopes and dreams. I hoped someone would see what Blackstone was doing to us. I dreamed someone would rescue us. But nobody ever came. I clung to hope for years until I realized what a treacherous feeling it could be. So, I locked that up, too. I put hope in a little box inside my heart, along with all that love she seems to know so much about.

"How do you know all this?" I ask.

"What happened to me is nothing compared to what you went through," she says.

"Did someone hurt you?" I ball my fists, ready to hunt down anyone who dared to make her suffer.

"Just a jerk boyfriend. He betrayed me. He cheated on me. I found it hard to trust anyone after that, so I stopped dating." She shrugs as if it's nothing, but to me, it's everything. She needs to know there are good men out there waiting for someone like her.

"Not everyone's an asshole," I say.

"True, but once you've had your heart broken, it's hard to put it back out there. I don't want to get hurt again."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Then don't. Just tell me the truth. Talk to me. We can work through anything as long as we're honest with each other."

"I'm too twisted inside," I remind her.

"No. Blackstone made you do terrible things, but you're not a bad man. You had no choice. He tried to break you. If you refuse to love again, then you're letting him win. Don't let him win. He doesn't deserve a place in your head, and he certainly doesn't deserve to keep your heart caged forever."

“Hum,” I mumble noncommittally.

“Just think about it. Okay?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

She’s given me so much to consider, but I’m exhausted. Today was a total shit show. Maybe she’s right, and I’m letting Blackstone win. But opening my heart to someone isn’t something I’ve ever wanted to do before. I don’t know if I have any love left inside me. If I do, then it’s so hidden I might not be able to find it.

I lay down and hold her against me. She’s breathing softly, but I know she’s still awake. She’s waiting for me to say something to affirm my love for her, but I can’t. I just can’t. Not yet. Maybe never. But her perspective about love is something I’ve never thought about before. Maybe she’s right. Maybe allowing myself to love her is worth the risk of having my heart broken all over again.

Either way, it’s something I need to think about for longer than just a few minutes. She can’t expect me to heal a lifetime of pain with one conversation. Real life doesn’t work like that. I can’t just flip a switch and be normal. I’ll never be normal. Is that something she can live with?

## Chapter 19: Julia

Nina's been giving me questioning glances all morning. I can see why she's curious about Scar's sudden shift in behavior. He hasn't scowled all morning. In fact, he's the opposite of mopey. He's running around like a kid, chasing after Max. The two were giggling like mad and were getting so rambunctious that Nina had to warn them to be careful around the furniture. Seeing this side of him helps to calm my nerves. Our conversation last night was so intense that I wasn't sure how he'd feel this morning. Fortunately, it seems like a huge weight has been lifted from his shoulders. I hope it's true and that this new version of Scar lasts longer than a few hours.

"We're going to get blankets to make forts!" Max yells as he runs past the kitchen and down the hall.

"You can join us if you want," Scar says to Nina and me as he walks by.

"Thanks, but no thanks. We're working on rainbow cupcakes with unicorn frosting," Nina says.

"We are?" I raise a brow, realizing I'm being roped into her baking scheme.

"That's too girly," Reaper says.

I jump and turn to where he's lurking near the sliding door in the living room. I don't know how he's able to appear and disappear like a ghost. It's so strange that I can't help but wonder if that's his special power. Scar mentioned the other guys have unusual abilities, too, but he didn't go into specifics. We had too many other things to talk about, but now, I'm intrigued.

"Rainbow cupcakes are pure joy." Nina's tone is subtly scolding.

"Hum," he grunts.

When I glance up, he's gone.

“Can he just, um, disappear or something? Like a phantom?” I ask Nina.

“No. He’s just really good at blending into the background. You get used to him showing up suddenly and then leaving just as quickly. It was very disconcerting when he first came to live with us. I wouldn’t say I’m used to it now, but I’m definitely not surprised when he appears. He’s a good man. He’s just different from the others.”

“Different how?”

She studies me for several seconds before saying, “He’s connected to the other side in a way that’s hard to explain or understand.”

“The other side?”

“Death.”

“Oh.”

I don’t know if she’s being cagy because she really can’t explain his abilities or if she just doesn’t want to reveal his powers. Either way, the whole conversation is making my heart heavy again, and I don’t want to go there right now. This morning has been perfect. Why ruin it by prying into someone else’s life?

As we work to make the colorful treats, Scar and Max bring load after load of blankets, sheets, and pillows into the living room. At first, it’s a complete mess, but over time, the fort’s structure begins to emerge.

“My dad never made forts with me,” Max says. “Did your dad play with you?”

“I didn’t have a dad.”

“Why not? Doesn’t everyone have one?”

“Mine went away, and I never met him.” Scar glances at me. There’s a hint of pain in his eyes, but he blinks it away before giving me a soft smile.

“I wish mine died!” Max throws a pillow across the room, knocking a lamp over.



“Whoa!” Scar grabs the lamp before it can hit the floor.  
“We don’t throw things when we’re mad.”

“I hate him!” Max folds his arms over his chest and plops down on his butt in the middle of the floor.

“He’s not a nice person,” Scar says.

“He’s mean, and he hurts me bad.”

“I know.”

“Is he going to come and take me away?” Max asks.

“No.”

“I know my mom’s dead. Dad killed her.” His voice is so flat it takes me a second to register what he said. How the hell does he know? Did one of the guys tell him? Did Scar tell him?

“Who told you that?” I ask.

“I saw it on TV.”

“When?”

“I was trying to find cartoons this morning. There was some guy from the FBI talking about my mom. There was a picture of us. He said she’s dead and they’re trying to find me. You can’t tell them I’m here!” Desperation enters his voice, and he looks at us as if his life depends on our response. In a way, it does, but we’re going to protect him with our lives. He needs to know that.

“We’re not giving you back to your dad. We’re going to keep you safe until we can find a new home for you. Would you like that?” Nina asks.

“Maybe.” He glances from her to me before pinning Scar with his wary gaze. “Will I have another dad?”

“You’ll have a mom and a dad, but your new dad won’t be mean to you,” Scar says. “We make sure our foster families have been through background checks before we even consider giving them one of the kids we rescue.”

“Would I get to meet them first?” Max asks.

“Of course. If you don’t like them, you’ll be able to tell someone who’s part of the local motorcycle club. He’ll be your big brother while you’re getting used to your new family,” Scar says.

“I’ve never had a big brother before.” Max’s eyes widen, and the tension in his face relaxes.

“It will be really fun,” Scar says. “He’ll take you out riding on his bike—”

“His motorcycle?” Max jumps to his feet, grinning.

“Yep. And he’ll take you to club meet-ups so you can make friends with the other kids,” Nina says.

“Cool!”

“You’ll have friends to play with and a new family to take care of you. How does that sound?” Scar asks casually, but I can see he’s anxious about Max’s response. He really cares for the boy, which makes me wonder why he hasn’t considered keeping him. He could live here with Nina and the rest of the club. Why send him away?

“What if the dad is mean?” Max asks.

“Then we’ll find you somewhere else to live. But I promise you, he’ll be the best dad ever.” Scar says it with such confidence I believe him. He’d never make a promise like that to a child unless he were one hundred percent sure the man would be a good father.

They go back to building their fort and playing while Nina and I finish the cupcake batter. The one thing bugging me about the conversation we just had with Max is that he didn’t react to his mother’s death other than to worry about being sent back to his father. His reaction didn’t seem normal. Shouldn’t he be grieving? I want to ask Nina about it because she has far more experience with cases like this than I do, and I get the opportunity when we go into the baking pantry together to get food coloring for the frosting.

“He didn’t seem upset about his mom,” I whisper.

“It could be shock or a delayed reaction. Some kids shut down and just go through the motions when we’re moving them to a new home. They can’t handle all the stress, so they turn off their emotions,” she says softly.

“That can’t be good.”

“It’s not. They inevitably break down, but we’re ready for it. Our foster families are trained to help kids process their emotions. We also have child psychologists on call in every city we operate. This is just one chapter of Underground Vengeance. It’s a network of clubs that help kids like Max.”

“How did the club get started?” I ask.

“My old man started the founding chapter thirty years ago, here in Montana.” Nina beams with pride. “He saw a need for it when one of his biker friends tried to protect his son from his ex-wife’s abusive new husband. He tried every legal route first, but nothing worked. The cops didn’t want to take the kid away from his mom, despite overwhelming evidence that he wasn’t safe in that house. We finally had to take matters into our own hands.”

“What happened?” I ask, riveted.

“Winchester, my old man, got a group of guys together. They all rode together on the weekends. It was an unofficial brotherhood that became official on August 1, 1992. They knew they had to protect the kid. The club’s mission was clear. We’re dedicated to protecting the innocent when the law won’t step in and do what’s right. We’re not above the law, but if they don’t do their job, it becomes our job.” Nina’s chest puffs with pride.

“What happened to the kid? The first one?”

“Trainwreck was seven at the time. He’s thirty-seven now and the president of the Louisiana chapter.”

“Trainwreck?” I can’t help but laugh.

“That’s his club name.” Nina smirks.

“Please tell me there’s a story behind it.”

“Oh, yeah. When we were smuggling him out of Montana and down to Louisiana, Winchester thought it would be best to go via train. Once we took the boy, we knew they’d be looking for us. They’d be expecting us to be on bikes, so Winchester thought up the train idea. There weren’t any passenger trains going through the area, so they hopped on a freight train.”

“Wild!”

“Yeah. They made it as far as Kansas when the train they were on hit a tanker truck that stalled on the tracks. Poof!” She makes an exploding motion with her hands. “Giant fireball. They were lucky they were at the end of the train because that fireball killed several nearby motorists.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Very sad.” She nods in agreement. “They had to jump off in Kansas and wait until the accident was cleared before they could get on another train. It took days. The whole place was a crime scene, so they had to lay low. But eventually, the trains started running again, and they made it to Dallas.”

“But not Louisiana?”

“Not yet. In Dallas, the train derailed because of faulty tracks that hadn’t been repaired correctly.”

“Two trainwrecks back to back is almost impossible,” I say.

“Which is why we named Michael ‘Trainwreck.’ Trust me, the nickname is perfect. His relationships are just one disaster after another. One day I hope he settles down with a good girl. Someone like you.”

“I don’t know why everyone seems to think I’m a good girl,” I mutter.

“Because you are.” Nina grins. “Now, help me get all the colors of the rainbow.”

After gathering the correct dyes, we return to the kitchen and begin mixing multiple bowls of frosting to keep the colors separated. Max and Scar are going nuts in the blanket fort, playing and laughing and having so much fun I want to join

them. But I don't. Max needs to see that not all men are jerks like his father.

The more I watch Scar with Max, the more I wonder what Scar wants in the future. Does he want a family? Does he want kids of his own? I haven't thought much about having a family, but being with Scar is changing me in subtle ways. It's got me thinking about what I want in the long term, and if I do want a family, do I want one with Scar?

The cupcakes are so pretty when they're finished that it seems almost criminal to eat them. I snap a photo with my phone before handing one to Max, who shoves it into his mouth without pause. Scar does the same.

"You guys! Nina and I worked hard on those!"

"And they're tasty," Scar says with his mouth full. It would be completely disgusting if he weren't being so damn cute. I love seeing this younger, playful side of him.

"Can I have another one?" Max asks while attempting to swallow the first one whole.

"Chew! You're going to choke," I tell him.

"Don't be jealous of our skills," Scar whispers in my ear. "If you need some more practice, I'll be happy to give it to you later."

My entire body flushes under his seductive gaze. I can't believe what he does to me. All it takes is one little look, and I'm burning up with desire. He's being so evil. He's getting me all hot and needy even though he knows we can't run off to his bedroom to put out the flames.

As he watches me, his wicked grin widens. He's enjoying my torment. Ugh! So not cool, but damn, if this isn't the best foreplay I've ever had. Well, he's in for it now because two can play at this game.

I grab a cupcake and swipe my finger through the rainbow frosting. Once I have a glob of it on the tip of my finger, I slowly lift it to my mouth and wrap my lips around it, closing my eyes and moaning just loud enough for him to hear. When I let my lids flutter open, he's watching me with a slack

jaw. His cupcake sits in his hand, forgotten. He's completely fixated on me, and now, it's time to finish my payback. I swirl my tongue around the rim of the cupcake before flattening it and licking across the top of the sweet treat. He groans, and his eyes darken with lust and longing.

"Julia," he growls.

"What?" I ask innocently.

"You know what."

"To be fair, you started it."

"Did not!"

"Kids!" Nina smirks. "Do you two need a time out in your room?"

"Oh, yeah." Scar grabs my arm and practically drags me down the hall to his room. As soon as he shuts the door, he takes my cupcake away and sets it on the dresser with his. "Bad girls get spankings, and you are a very, very bad girl."

As he sits on the bed, the throbbing between my thighs intensifies. I want to climb into his lap and ride his cock so hard right now. But when I try to do just that, he manhandles me over his knee. Holding my torso down with one hand, he unbuttons my jeans with the other, pulling my pants down to my thighs and yanking my thong up until it's rubbing against my clit. I shiver, eager for whatever he's about to do to me.

When his hand slaps my ass, I yelp.

"Don't make me gag you with my cock," he growls.

"Promises. Promises."

"Dirty girl." He spans my ass harder. "You like this, don't you?"

"No," I lie.

He knows I'm lying because my pussy's drenched. My wetness seeps into his jeans, darkening the fabric with the evidence of my arousal.

I think he's playing around, but the more he spanks me, the more my ass burns. Pain and pleasure mingle together in a confusing, intoxicating cocktail. I'm drunk on his need to punish me. It's so hot and forbidden and exciting. Who the hell does this? Who spanks their partner as foreplay? Scar, that's who. And he's damn good at it, too.

After enduring way too many smacks, I'm squirming and ready for more. Scar senses my need and plucks my thong out of my pussy. He replaces it with two fingers, stroking me like I'm his pet. I moan, wriggling against his cock, so he'll be just as needy as I am.

His shaft stretches and grows, pressing hard against his jeans. When he finally gives in, he gives me one last hard, ass-heating slap before lifting me off his lap. He tosses me on the bed, strips faster than humanly possible, and is on me before I'm able to process what's happening.

"You're mine, Julia," he whispers before entering me with one hard stroke.

"Oh, Scar!" I arch my back and spread wider, willing him to fill me completely.

He does, claiming me. But he's not rough or fast or aggressive. He holds himself still, looking down at me with so much love in his eyes I can't breathe. Though he hasn't admitted it yet, it's all over his face.

"Make love to me," I whisper.

He kisses me softly. His lips brush across mine in a feathery kiss so unlike the other times we've been together that I can't help but think something has changed, and his hips move in slow, excruciatingly sexy thrusts designed to bring my pleasure to a low simmer. There's nothing rushed about how he's moving inside me. He's gentle and sweet and so close.

His lips leave mine and trail down my throat. Rolling my head to one side, I give him access to everything he wants. I don't hold anything back, and neither does he. When he's had his fill of nibbling and sucking on my neck, he lifts his head

and locks eyes with me. He's looking straight into my heart, and in return, I'm seeing straight into his. I can see all the love he's been holding back because it's not locked up anymore. It's mine. He's mine. This scarred, broken, brave, honorable man is all mine.

We luxuriate in our loving bond for as long as we can, but eventually, the fire burning between us ignites into something more. His thrusts deepen. His breath catches in his throat. He closes his eyes, pushing into me again and again as if he's after something only I can give him.

I clench my inner muscles, gripping him hard, making him growl with pleasure. The extra tension makes it harder for him to pull back. The friction increases until I can't hold out any longer. I want to flip him onto his back and ride him, but he wants me exactly where I am. He hooks his arms under my knees and pulls them over his shoulders. He's so deep it's almost painful, but the sensation is right on that edge, bringing me closer to the brink.

"Scar, please," I groan.

His smile is one of pure, masculine satisfaction. He loves giving me pleasure. It's all over his face, mixed with all the love he's finally letting out of his heart. He might not realize it yet, but that lock he had around his heart is gone. I broke it open. I let all that love out. And now it's mine to keep. Forever.

I wrap myself around him, urging him to join me as I fall into ecstasy. He does, merging his pleasure with mine until we're bound together in a frenzy of erotic delirium. We explode at the same time, heaving and moaning and crying out as we unleash the pure joy of being together.

Later, when I can breathe again and he's stopped murmuring sweet nothings, I hold him close. He buries his face between my breasts and sighs as I stroke his hair. His fingers roam across my waist and hips as if he still can't believe I'm real and that I'm with him.

"Scar," I whisper.



“Hum?”

“Have you ever thought about having kids?” I ask.

“Of my own?” He tilts his head to look at me.

“Yeah. Not the ones you rescue. Your own. Your own family.”

“Sometimes,” he admits.

I stay silent because I know it’s the best way to get him to open up to me.

“I really loved my mom,” he finally says. “She was so good to me. Even drugged up, she always did the best she could. If she hadn’t been an addict, life would have been so different. I’ve thought about it. About kids and a wife. But I always thought I was too damaged.”

“Do you still feel that way?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t think you are. I think you’re a good, kind, caring man.”

“Hum.” He drops his gaze and rubs his head across my belly.

I sigh. I don’t know how much more I need to do to convince him he’s perfect how he is, but I know not to push him. If I do, he’ll pull away and shut down. I’ll drop it for now. It’s enough that he’s at least willing to consider having a family. I think he’d be an excellent father, but I know he’s still grappling with demons. I can try to understand what he’s going through, but since I didn’t endure what he did, I’ll never really know how to heal him. He’s going to have to do that for himself—and he will. It’s just going to take time. I must hold onto my faith in him because the alternative is unthinkable. I can’t imagine losing the man I love.

However, a small part of me can’t help but wonder if he’s been telling me the truth all along. Maybe his heart really is too broken. Maybe he can’t love me because his heart *is* too full of hatred for Blackstone. I hope to God that’s not true, but what if it is? What if loving him will only end up hurting me?

## Chapter 20: Scar

Julia's talk about having a family tore me apart last night. She doesn't understand why I can't deal with it right now. My life's on hold until Blackstone's dead. Nothing matters to me but vengeance. And I still need to deal with the sheriff. He needs to pay for what he did to Max. She's right about one thing, though, and it's absolutely terrifying to admit it, but I love her. I do. And I wish I could see a path forward for us, but every time I think about it, I see Blackstone's face. I see him leering at me in the dark. I feel his hands on me. I smell his sweat. He's a demon I haven't banished from this earth, and he'll continue to haunt me until he's dead.

As long as Blackstone is alive, I can't love her. I can't love anyone. I can't get past all the hatred in my heart long enough to allow myself to feel anything else. She doesn't truly understand why my need for revenge is keeping us apart. She might think she gets it, but she doesn't. She wasn't the one who spent eleven years in hell. She didn't watch her friends die. She was never forced to leave anyone behind.

I lied to her. The other night when I told her about escaping Blackstone's, I held something back. I kept it from her because if she knew everything, she'd hate me. I didn't tell her about the kids we left to die. The rats. We couldn't tell them about our plan because they would have snitched. Blackstone would have discovered our plot, and then we all would have died. Making that terrible choice saved our lives, and if I had to do it again, I'd make the same decision. But if she knew I left those kids behind to be murdered, how could she still love me?

I roll away from her. She's sleeping by my side, oblivious to the war inside me. She's taken over as much of my heart as she can, and I hope it's enough for now because it's all I can give her. It's only a little piece of who I am, and she deserves more. I wish I could trust her with my entire heart, but I can't. The darkness inside me keeps me from trusting anyone other

than my brothers. If I let her in ... if I told her everything ... I don't know how she'd ever be able to forgive me.

My phone pings in the darkness. It's a message from Matrix, who's been at the clubhouse monitoring Blackstone's place as well as the police scanners. When I see his text, I bolt upright. I glance at Julia, then try to get out of bed without waking her, but she stirs and opens her eyes.

"Where are you going?" she asks in a sleepy tone.

"Matrix texted. He saw a breaking news story. The sheriff is wanted by the FBI for murdering his ex-wife. There's a manhunt in progress. The FBI and several local agencies are looking for him." I pull on my jeans and a black t-shirt. I grab my cut and head for the door.

"Wait! You're leaving?" She frowns.

"Of course. I need to get in on this. After everything he did to Max, he needs to be brought to justice."

"But the FBI can do that. Why do you have to get involved? It's not safe."

"My whole life isn't safe. As long as men like him are out there, no one's safe. Max won't be safe until the sheriff's either in jail or dead."

"You want to kill him," she says flatly.

"If that's what it takes to stop him, then yes."

"That's vigilante justice." The condemnation in her voice pisses me off.

"Julia, this is exactly why we can't be together. You don't get it. I need vengeance. It's a living, breathing monster in my soul. I can't get to Blackstone. Not yet. But I can get to the sheriff. Maybe it's not the same, but it's close enough. You will never understand why I can't sit around while men like him get away with things worse than murder."

"Scar, please don't go." Her bottom lip trembles, and she gives me the biggest puppy dog eyes I've ever seen. She's not playing fair right now, and she knows it. I'm tempted to give in to her plea, but if I do, what kind of man would I be? I can't

let the sheriff escape justice. It's not who I am. Hanging out and twiddling my thumbs while others do my job isn't what I do. I want in on this action more than anything else right now. Even her.

"We can talk about this when I get back." I leave the room and slam the door behind me.

"Saw the text," Reaper says, appearing in the hall near the kitchen.

"Let's meet up at the clubhouse."

"We should leave a couple of guys here. We don't know if the sheriff's going to try to come here or run. He might attempt to grab his kid first."

"Maybe. But he'd be an idiot to try to breach our security. Besides, isn't the FBI still outside watching this place?" I ask.

"Yeah. Matrix just double-checked. The feds have three teams around the property. They didn't leave after the BOLO went out."

"Okay. I don't want to leave them totally defenseless. You and Talon stay back and guard Julia and Max. Have you heard from Nitro? I haven't seen his stupid ass since I bailed him out of jail."

"Nah. Nothing yet. He turned his phone off, too, so Matrix couldn't track him."

"Jackass. I should kick him out of the club for this bullshit. We need him, and he's not here."

"Heard you bashed his face in pretty good." Reaper gives me a disapproving look.

"He had that coming after putting himself and Julia in danger. I won't tolerate that shit."

"Even so, we're brothers. We have to stick together."

"Well, he must have missed that line in the club handbook."

"What handbook?" Reaper scowls.

I laugh and head for the garage to get my bike. I grab a couple of pistols from the gun safe in the garage and shove them into my cut. I'm about to climb onto my bike when the door from the kitchen opens, and Reaper pokes his head out.

"Are you sure you want to go out there? I'm all for going after this fuck, but I've got a bad feeling about this," he says.

"A premonition or just a feeling?" As far as I know, he's never had premonitions, but maybe he's developing a new skill.

"A feeling. It's not good. Death is in the air. I can smell it."

"What you're smelling is the sheriff's death. If I can get a clean shot, I'm taking him out."

"It's the only way." Reaper gives me a smile born of darkness that chills me. No matter how many times I've seen that exact look in his eyes, it's still terrifying. I know the demons in his soul are nothing like mine. Still hellish but infused with the stench of death.

I shake away the icy fingers skittering down my spine and strap on my helmet. Unlike Nitro, I don't want to die. I've got to live long enough to kill Blackstone. Anyone who gets between me and that goal is in for a world of hurt, and right now, that guy is the sheriff.

As I race off into the night, I can't help but think about what Reaper said. Death is coming. I just hope it's not mine. Now that I've found Julia, I'm not ready to die. She's given me something I thought I'd never have again. *Hope*. She's given me a reason to live that has nothing to do with Blackstone. I don't know what it all means yet, but I know I'm not ready to let her go. I want to make her mine, but I can't do that until I've sent all my demons straight to hell, where they belong.

I ride as fast as I dare toward the clubhouse. Treachery lurks on the dark roads. It's a moonless night, the worst time to ride at this speed. A deer. A Demon Rider. Anything could be lying in wait to take me out. But I don't care. Vengeance

surges through my veins. It breathes down my neck and slithers through my soul. It's going to be mine tonight.

When I reach the clubhouse, I find Matrix glued to his monitors. I stopped here first because if anyone has a line on where the sheriff might be, it's him.

"What do you have so far?" I ask.

"Can't find him. His cell's off. No chatter on the scanners. I tapped into the FBI's communications center, and there's nothing about his current location. He's in the wind." Matrix sits back and laces his fingers over his head. His long-sleeved shirt slides down to reveal three fresh parallel cuts above his right wrist.

"I thought that shit was over." I point at his arm.

"Yeah, well, it's been a rough week." He stares back, challenging me to an argument.

"You need help."

"Right. When you get a shrink, you let me know. Maybe I'll consider it." Matrix smirks because he knows I'd never let anyone get that deep into my head. Julia's as far in as anyone outside the club has ever been, and look where that got her.

"I'm going out to look for him." I take two steps toward the door, then stop. "Anything on Nitro yet?"

"No. He knows all my tricks. He's untraceable right now. Until he turns his phone on, he's also MIA. I can't blame him. If you'd broken my nose, I'd be pissed, too."

"How do you know I broke his nose?" My gaze narrows.

"Hospital records."

"He went to the ER?"

"Probably wanted it set right, so he wouldn't end up looking like Quasimodo." Matrix smirks.

"It would be an improvement."

"Can you say that again, louder for the microphones this time?" Matrix opens his hands in a grand display.

“This place isn’t mic’d up, you asshole.” I laugh because he’s so full of shit that it’s comical.

“Yeah, but it could be.” He arches a brow, warning me not to challenge him.

“If you even think about getting mics installed, I’ll know it.”

“You stay the fuck out of my head.” He’s on his feet and surging toward me.

“Back the fuck off.” I shove him.

“You’ve become a real fucking asshole since this chick showed up. Reaper thinks you’re in love with her. I’m guessing he’s right. Are you going to claim her or what?”

“Fuck off.” I head for the door. “If you get a line on the sheriff, text me.”

“Okay, *pres.*” His sarcasm almost stalls me, but kicking his ass isn’t on the agenda right now. Besides, he’s obviously dealing with some personal shit if he’s cutting himself again. That’s the only reason I decide to give him a pass this time.

Back on the road, I drive past the sheriff’s department. Most of the vehicles are gone, but a few are left behind in the parking lot. There’s no way he’d come back here. Even his own guys would be obligated to arrest him. If they didn’t, they’d be facing jail time for aiding and abetting. So, if he’s not here, then where else would he go?

I park a half mile down the street and consider my options. His house is the next obvious spot, but wouldn’t the FBI already be staked out there? Still, it’s worth a shot.

Checking that off the list was easier than expected because the place is lit up like a Christmas tree with FBI staging lights. The house is surrounded, but there’s no indication they’re trying to talk to anyone inside, so I highly doubt he’s in there.

I park several blocks over in the same neighborhood and text Matrix to get Julia’s address. It’s a long shot, but the sheriff could have gone there to look for her. Matrix sends it

back right away, and I'm off. I arrive ten minutes later at a cute little banana-colored bungalow with little white shutters. Somehow, it's exactly how I imagined her house would be.

Parking down the street, I walk back through a series of shadows. When I get to her yard, I scout the area to look for signs of a trespasser. The only one trespassing is me, and I hop the fence into the back yard. One of her back windows is unlocked, so I slide it up and hoist myself into a bedroom. It's sparse. A single, tall dresser sits opposite a white, queen-sized bed. The closet is empty, so I'm guessing it's a guest room.

A tiny sliver of guilt slices through me. I shouldn't be snooping around her house under the guise of looking for the sheriff, but who am I kidding? Besides, she'll never know. I might be able to find out things about her she hasn't told me. She could have skeletons in her closet, too. Although, I doubt it.

Her living room and kitchen are painted a soft blue. It's comforting and makes me feel welcome, which is a funny thing to feel while searching her place. She's going to be mad when she finds out I went through her stuff. I should probably go, but only a few rooms are left.

When I step into her bedroom, her cinnamony scent is everywhere. I grab a pillow off her neatly made bed and press it to my nose, inhaling until my cock starts to get hard. There's no time for this. Besides, I'm not about to jerk off in her bedroom. That's just wrong.

However, I do riffle through her underwear drawer like a total creeper. I wish I hadn't because she's got this alien-green vibrating beast of a fake-cock that nearly scares the shit out of me when I turn it on to see what it does. I guess she wasn't lying when she told me she's been single for a while. It's a wonder she even wants a man when she's got a mechanical boyfriend at the ready. This thing needs to go, so I shove it into my back pocket. I'll get rid of it as soon as I leave.

I need to get the hell out of here before I find anything else I'll have to toss out. Maybe looking around wasn't such a great idea after all. She's going to be mad when she finds out I



was here without her. Maybe even furious when she finds out what I did with her toy.

To be thorough, I check the closet to make sure the sheriff isn't hiding behind her clothes. I'm tempted to grab a few things for her, but she's been wearing a bunch of stuff Nina picked out, and it looks great on her. Leathers are just as sexy on her as the prim and proper librarian-chic outfits in her closet. It's just a different brand of sexy.

When I get back to my bike, my dick's telling me to return to Nina's so I can show Julia that my cock is a thousand times better than her fake dick. However, I can't listen to that horny-as-fuck voice right now. I need to focus on finding the sheriff. Then I can go home and fuck her brains out.

I check my phone to make sure there aren't any more updates. There's nothing new, so I decide to head back to the clubhouse to check in. Matrix might have some other ideas about where to look.

It takes me a few extra minutes to get there because I have to stop at the dumpster behind the twenty-four-hour mini-mart to get rid of her mechanical boyfriend. She won't be needing *that* anymore.

Back at the clubhouse, Matrix is clicking away at his keyboard when I walk in.

"Anything?" he asks without looking up.

"Nothing."

"What were you doing at her house?"

"Looking for the sheriff."

"Right." He looks up, and I can tell he doesn't believe me. "So check this out. Every law enforcement department in the country is becoming more and more militarized."

"And?" I ask impatiently.

"*And* someone just broke into the tactical vehicle yard at the sheriff's department. The alarm went off about an hour ago, but the alert just went out on the scanners."

“An hour ago? Why the hell did it take so long for someone to report it?”

“Someone cut the electricity to the alarms.”

“The sheriff.”

“Yeah, who the hell else would it be? The timing’s too perfect.”

“What’s he going to do with a tactical vehicle?”

“It’s armored, so if he thinks he’s going to be shot at, then it’s the best place to be.”

“True.”

“But that’s not the only reason they’re used,” Matrix adds.

“What else?”

“They’re for breaching buildings.”

A cold dread fills my heart.

“Or brick walls,” Matrix says.

“Fuck! Nina’s! Call the guys. Fuck, call the prospects! Call everyone!”

“On it!”

I’m running faster than I’ve ever run in my life. Julia was right. I should have stayed at Nina’s. I shouldn’t have gone off half-cocked on a mission for revenge. I left her and Max with the others, and they’re probably safe, but I should be there. I’ve got to get there right fucking now. If that son of a bitch so much as lays a finger on her or Max, I’ll rip his goddamn face off. By the time I’m done with him, he’ll be begging me to kill him.

## Chapter 21: Julia

I'm so mad at Scar for leaving me that I can't sleep. I get out of bed and get dressed in what's left of my clothes. He really needs to stop ripping them. I can't afford to replace everything he's destroyed. If I'm not careful, he's going to ruin me, too. I'm completely, helplessly in love with him, but all he cares about is vengeance. I want to understand him, but I can't. Maybe it's because I've never been hurt enough to hate the way he does.

Nina's in the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of whiskey. When she sees me, she grabs a second glass for me, fills it, then slides it across the island.

"I warned you it wouldn't be easy with him," she says.

"Is this your version of 'I told you so'?" I ask.

"Nah, I don't like to shove other people's noses in it when I'm right. I mean, I do love it, but I try not to do it. There's no point." She shrugs.

"Was your old man anything like Scar?" I ask.

"Hardheaded and too stubborn for his own good? Hell yeah." She laughs. "They aren't easy to love, and believe me, I tried not to fall for him, but it was impossible. From the moment we met, it was electric. I felt like I'd been struck by lightning, and that feeling never went away, even after he died."

"Did you ever try to find another man to love?" I ask.

"No one could ever hold a candle to him. I went on a few dates, but when you're in love with a dead man, it's hard to see anyone else as anything but second best. Besides, it felt like cheating when I'd go out with another guy. I hated it, so I stopped." Tears brim in her eyes, but she sniffs them as she kicks back another swig of her drink. With a shaky hand, she refills her glass. "Want more?"

"Maybe after I finish this. I'm still not much of a drinker."

“That’s a good thing. I keep trying to get Nitro to stop, but that man is hellbent on being one reckless son of a bitch.”

“Why?”

“Same reasons Scar has for how he is. When we first started rescuing kids, I read up on trauma and how to help them. But you can’t really do anything other than supporting them. No one else can heal them. They have to do it for themselves. It’s hard to do. We’ll never understand what those kids went through. I still think of them as kids, even all these years later, because, in a way, they stopped growing the minute they started being abused. It takes a hell of a lot of work and love to get past that.”

“I wish I could help him.”

“The only thing you can do is love him. Scar’s a survivor. He’s been to hell and back, but he’s still here fighting to save other kids. He deserves all the love we can give him. The way I love him is different from how you do, of course. I’ve taken care of him as much as I can, but now it’s up to you to take over and give him what I can’t.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Patience. Compassion. The kind of love that’s shared between partners. You have to have faith that what you share is worth fighting for. I see how you look at each other. It’s real. There’s nothing fake about your connection. If I didn’t think you had a shot at making it work, I would have gotten rid of you a long time ago.” She goes into a fierce, momma bear stance with her arms over her chest. “You’re the one for him. Never doubt that.”

“I wish I had your confidence,” I say. “But I couldn’t even keep him from running off tonight.”

“He had to. I know it’s hard to sit back while the guys take care of club business—”

“But this isn’t club business,” I protest.

“The minute they took you and Max in, everything about you became club business. Catching Max’s father is one of the most important priorities of the club right now.”

“And the other one is Blackstone,” I say numbly because even if they capture the sheriff, Scar still won’t be mine. He’ll still want to kill the man who broke him.

“They won’t rest until Blackstone’s dead. However, I don’t think that will stop any of the guys from finding love. But here’s the thing you have to understand, they won’t give up that fight. They’ve been tracking that bastard for years. If they could have taken him out already, they would have. He’s a slippery monster who’s almost impossible to pin down. He’s got friends at every level of government and other predators who are more than happy to cover up his crimes. He’s the head of the snake, but there’s a whole team standing behind him just waiting to clean up his mess. Taking him down won’t be easy.”

“Is it even possible?” I ask.

“Yes. But the timing will have to be perfect.”

A sudden, explosive crash sounds from somewhere outside. I duck under the island as Nina crouches. She meets my frightened gaze.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask.

“Armored personnel carrier,” Reaper says.

“Jesus!” I jump as his boots and legs appear next to me. The counter is blocking the rest of his massive body.

“I got Max in the safe room. Matrix texted a second ago, but I didn’t have time to get you, too. You’ve got to get in there with Max.” He squats to fix me with a piercing gaze. I shudder and look away.

“Okay.” I’m shocked when he holds out a hand to help me up. I shouldn’t be surprised. After all, he’s one of Scar’s club brothers. But I expected him to feel like death, and he doesn’t. He’s warm and friendly, and not what I anticipated. I silently chide myself for judging him before getting to know him. Scar wouldn’t have left Reaper behind if he didn’t trust the man to keep us safe. If Scar trusts him, then so do I.

“Nina, you, too,” Reaper says in a tone that leaves no room for negotiation.

“Yeah,” she says.

Reaper puts one palm on my back and the other on Nina’s as he rushes us toward the safe room. When we get to the door, he tries to open it with his fingerprint. Nothing happens, so he uses his password. It’s still locked.

“Why isn’t the sensor working?” I ask.

“Max must have hit the panic button inside. It seals the door until three club members enter their codes,” Nina says.

“Or Max unlocks it for us.” Reaper pounds on the door. “Let us in!”

“You’ll scare him,” I warn.

“You two are fucked if I don’t get you in there,” Reaper says with a snarl. “Open the goddamn door!”

An intercom buzzes. I didn’t notice it before because it’s so well hidden.

“My dad’s here,” Max’s voice quivers. “He’s going to get me if I open the door.”

“No. He won’t,” Reaper says through clenched teeth. “He’s still outside. You have to let Nina and Julia in right now, so they can be safe, too.”

“Open the door, honey,” Nina says in a strained but soft tone. She glances at me with fear in her eyes.

“I can’t,” Max whispers. “He’s already in the house.”

“He must see his dad on the monitors,” Nina mutters.

“If he’s inside, we need to get out of here.” I don’t dare raise my voice above a whisper, and neither does Reaper.

“We can go out the back. Follow me.” Reaper seems to glide as he moves soundlessly across the room. His stealth never ceases to shock me, and I don’t think I’ll ever get used to it.

Reaper peeks into the hall. “Clear.”

We follow him out, hurrying toward the back of the house. I don’t know where the other exits are, but I trust

Reaper to protect us. He may be scary as hell, but he's part of Underground Vengeance, and they've proven they protect their own. Max and I are safe as long as we do what they tell us. These men know how to stay alive. If they were all at Blackstone's house as kids and survived, then they're more prepared than anyone to face someone like the sheriff.

"Max!" the sheriff calls from the living room. "Daddy's here to take you home."

His voice sends chills down my spine. We're about to enter Nina's bedroom when a gunshot whizzes past our heads.

"Get down!" Reaper crouches and spins, pulling a pistol from his cut and firing back. "Go!"

As we run into her room, she motions for me to go into her walk-in closet. After shoving several dresses out of the way, she pulls a ring up from the carpet, revealing a trap door. A set of flashlights hang on the wall at the top of the stairs. I grab one before descending into the darkness. Nina's right behind me.

As soon as she closes the door and slides a barricade across it to prevent anyone from following us, we flick on our lights and climb down the rest of the stairs. Freezing air sits stagnant in the passageway. Water drips down the side of one wall. Damp earth squishes beneath our feet. Just outside the circle of illumination from our flashlights, an animal scurries away. When I walk right into a cobweb, I stifle a cry.

"I guess I should have dusted more often," Nina murmurs wryly.

"I'm just glad there was another way out," I whisper. "Do you think Reaper's okay?"

"He can take care of himself. He's better off now that he doesn't have to watch over us, too. I hope he kills that bastard. The sheriff broke into my house, so it would be self-defense. No question about it."

"Hopefully, Reaper can either capture or kill him. I just want Max's nightmare to be over."

We continue slinking along the passageway in silence. The tunnel curves so much that when I look back, I can't see where it started. I'm guessing we're about a hundred yards from the house when I see another ladder ahead.

"Where does it lead?" I ask.

"Into the forest behind the house. We should be safe as long as we stay hidden."

"In here or out there?"

"For now, let's stay here until we've got a good reason to leave. The sheriff can't know about this place because it's not on the house plans. My old man dug it out by hand after the place was built. We figured it would come in handy at some point, and it has."

"When was the last time you used it?" I whisper.

"A few years ago, when we were smuggling a high-profile woman out to the first waypoint in the underground railroad. Her husband was hunting around the property, and we couldn't wait any longer to move her."

"Did she get out safely?"

"Yeah. We don't fuck up." Nina's chest swells with pride.

"I trust you."

"Good. We'll stay here until we're sure it's safe to come out." She leans against the wall, then must think better of it because she begins pacing near the bottom of the stairs.

A gunshot sounds at the other end of the passageway. My heart hurls into my throat. For several seconds, I can't hear anything but ringing in my ears.

"Shit," Nina hisses.

"Is it Reaper?" I ask.

"I don't know." She glances at the stairs.

"Should we leave?"

"Fuck!" She looks back toward the end of the black tunnel, then up at the stairs. Footsteps pound in the earth. "Up!"



Go now!”

I scramble up the ladder and try to shove the door at the top open. It doesn't budge.

“Why won't it open?”

“Hit it harder. It's not locked.”

I ram my shoulder into it. A sharp pain shoots down my arm, but the door budes. It's just swollen shut from the moisture. I push as hard as I can, and eventually, it bursts open. I fall out onto the forest floor. Nina climbs past me and helps me to my feet. We're about to take off running when footsteps come crashing through the forest.

“Get down,” Reaper commands as he emerges from behind a tree.

I dive to the floor. At the same moment, a gunshot cracks somewhere behind me. I crab-walk away as fast as I can and hide behind a tree.

“All I want is my fucking kid!” The sheriff pokes his head out of the passageway. He rises enough to point his gun outside. He sweeps from left to right, looking for us in the gloomy night. “Give me my son, and I'll leave the rest of you fucks alone.”

Reaper whips out from behind a fallen tree stump and gets a shot off, but the sheriff ducks back into the passage. His arm pops up a second later, and he returns fire but misses.

I spot the whites of Nina's eyes in the darkness. She jerks her head to one side. I can't figure out what she's trying to tell me, so I stay put.

An eerie silence descends. Danger infuses the air with a static quality that reminds me of the sky before a thunderstorm. I'm afraid to breathe because I don't want to give my position away. Nina hasn't left her spot either. As far as I can tell, Reaper's still behind the log, but with how quietly he moves, I wouldn't know if he managed to sneak off. This is the only time I'm grateful that he has the ability to blend into the shadows.

“Turn yourself over, and you have a chance at living.” Reaper’s voice comes from another part of the forest. I can’t tell if he’s moving closer or farther away.

“Give me my boy, and I won’t kill every one of you,” the sheriff counters.

“Not going to happen.” Reaper’s deadly tone slices through the air.

“Then you’re a dead man.”

The sheriff bursts out of the passageway, gun blazing. He manages to get off half a dozen shots while racing behind a group of thick trees. A branch snaps, then the forest is still once more.

Staying in one place doesn’t seem like such a good idea anymore. Nina must agree because she motions for me to try to get back to the house. She starts a circuitous path through the trees, but only manages to make a little progress when the gunshots start again. This time, they’re closer.

I drop down behind a massive pine. My whole body quakes as I listen for any sign of where the sheriff might be. I lost track of his location, but I think I’m moving away from him. If I can get back to the house, I can get to a vehicle and go for help.

I don’t know where the hell Scar is or if he has any idea how much danger we’re in. He should never have left us. I wouldn’t be fighting for my life if he hadn’t abandoned me. His obsession with vengeance will get me killed. If I didn’t love him so damn much, I’d be furious, but right now, all I can think about is seeing him again. Where is he?

A hush settles over the forest. I don’t dare move until there’s enough sound to cover me. I try to stop my knees from trembling, but it’s impossible. I’ve never been so scared in my entire life. One wrong move, and I’m dead. I want to flee, but which way should I go? And when will it be safe enough to take that risk?

Behind me, a branch snaps. An arm slithers around my throat and pulls me back, strangling me. I manage to scream

before my windpipe is crushed beneath the sheriff's strength. I know it's him because the stench of rage envelops him.

"I've got the nurse bitch," he yells. "Bring me my fucking kid, or I'll kill her."

Reaper appears about ten feet away. He holds up his hands and takes a step forward, showing he's unarmed. I don't know where he hid his gun or if he threw it away. He was my only hope, and now, that's gone, too.

"Let her go. You can have me instead," Reaper says.

The sheriff raises his free arm and shoots Reaper in the chest. I scream. Reaper clutches his chest with both hands and falls to the ground. When he doesn't get up, I lose it. I jerk out of the sheriff's grasp and try to run to Reaper. The sheriff grabs me by my hair and drags me toward the house.

"No! You have to call an ambulance!" I scream.

"He had that coming. And you're next if you don't give me my fucking kid."

"Max is safe. I'm not telling you where he is. You're a monster. You should be locked up for what you did to him."

He releases my hair, tossing me to the ground. When I try to stand, he backhands me so hard my vision goes hazy. I try to recover enough to run, but he grabs my arm and hauls me toward the house. When we get inside, he shoves me against the wall and wraps his hand around my throat.

"Where is he?" he demands, squeezing my neck, making it harder and harder to breathe.

"I'll ... never ... tell ... you."

"Bitch!" He punches my jaw so hard I'm afraid it's broken. My whole face throbs with pain, unlike anything I've ever felt. I crumble to the ground, unable to do anything but curl into a ball.

"Where is he?" he bellows before kicking me in the ribs.

Something cracks, and suddenly, it's hard to breathe again. I gasp for air, but a sickening, wheezing sound fills the

room. I'm going to die. I know it. No one is going to save me. I'm not telling this bastard where to find Max. I'd rather die than ever let this freak get his hands on his son again.

“Where?” he yells.

His foot is poised to kick me again when the front door slams open, and Scar walks in. He's pointing a gun at the sheriff and looks ready to kill until he spots me. He hesitates for a split second, and that's all the time the sheriff needs to drag me up and use me as a human shield. Scar can't shoot him without hitting me. It's impossible. And now we're both going to die.

## Chapter 22: Scar

My arm shakes with a mixture of rage and fear. Sheriff Curtis is holding her in front of him, so I don't have a clear shot. I can't risk hurting Julia any worse than she already is. Her right eye is swollen shut. Her jaw is turning a lurid shade of purple. She's gasping for breath and trying to grab her ribs with her hands, but he's holding her too tightly. I'm going to fucking kill him.

"Let her go, and I'll make your death quick," I snarl.

"You think you're above the law." He smirks. "You're not. I'm the fucking law around here, and I want my fucking kid. Bring him to me right now, or I'll shoot your bitch."

When my muscles go rigid, he narrows his gaze at me.

"I know all about you and this whore. Didn't peg her as the type to spread her legs for a thug, but you never know about bitches these days. Nina's like that, too. I'd love to get my hands on that cunt and show her what a real man can do. She should have come to me for justice when her old man died, but instead she—"

"Justice?" I tighten my grip on the gun. "Winchester died in a bike accident ... Unless it wasn't an accident."

"Wouldn't know." Curtis sneers, and a sick feeling sends my stomach plunging through the floor. Rage coils in my gut. It takes every ounce of my self-control not to rush him.

"Who did it?" I demand. "Who wanted him dead?"

"Who didn't? He made a lot of very powerful people mad."

Julia whimpers, interrupting him.

"Shut the fuck up. I just want my son. You could have given him to me, and I wouldn't have had to hurt you. But you're one stubborn bitch."

"Let her go."

“Not a fucking chance. I can’t believe you actually care about someone other than yourself. But I can see it. It’s in your eyes. Blackstone told me you didn’t have a soul anymore. He said he broke you, and I believed him. Now I can see that’s not true.”

“Blackstone?” I step forward, unable to contain the rage that rises every time I hear his name. When he shoves the gun against Julia’s temple, I freeze.

“I know all about what he did to you boys.”

“And you didn’t do anything to stop him?”

“Why would I? You were all trash anyway.”

The sheriff lets his gaze slither down my body. His smirk ignites explosive rage from deep within my soul, and I shake with uncontrollable fury. The impulse to put a bullet through his head rushes over me. My finger tightens on the trigger. Killing him would be the first real chance I’ve had at getting justice for my brothers and me. If they were here, they’d take the shot. But at the last second, my eyes meet Julia’s, and I can’t do it. I can’t take that risk. I need to find another way to get vengeance.

“A real man doesn’t hide behind a woman,” I say in a low, deadly tone. “Let her go, and I’ll take you to your son.”

“No.” Julia’s whisper is so faint I almost don’t hear it.

“She’s coming with us until I have my kid.” Curtis waves his gun at me. “Start walking. Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” I say, honestly. I have a guess as to where he might be, but I’m stalling, looking for an opening. And where the hell are Reaper and Talon? They should have been guarding Julia. Instead, she’s in the hands of a madman.

“Start looking,” Curtis says.

“I’m not turning my back on you,” I warn.

“I won’t kill you if you give me my kid. You have my word.”

“Bullshit,” I mutter.

“You know, we could have been partners. The Demon Riders have come in handy many times. I’ve used them to move shipments of things the media doesn’t need to know about.”

“Like the food you’ve stockpiled at Blackstone’s?” I can’t help myself. I’m not exactly trying to trigger him because that would be too dangerous for Julia. I’m attempting to shift his attention from her to himself. If I can get him talking long enough to lose focus on her, she might be able to get away. She’s no fainting violet. Her eyes haven’t left mine, and she’s looking for an opportunity to escape. I just need to give it to her.

“You know about that?” Curtis scowls.

“All about it.”

“How?”

“You aren’t the only one with eyes and ears in unexpected places.” I doubt he realizes we’ve had Blackstone’s mansion under surveillance for years. Matrix is a pro. I hope to God that he’s monitoring the cameras inside Nina’s and called upon every Underground Vengeance prospect in the state to get their asses over here. I don’t know how much longer I can keep Curtis talking.

“Well, that little secret will die with you.” Curtis shrugs before jamming his gun against Julia’s temple. “Now, move!”

I can’t do anything to stop him yet, so I slowly circle past him through the living room toward the hall. I’m sure Max is in the safe room, but I’m tempted to keep stalling by searching every room. Either it will piss Curtis off enough that he’ll finally fuck up and give us the opening we need, or he’ll shoot Julia, then turn the gun on me. If Julia’s life weren’t on the line, I’d risk mine to save Max’s, but I can’t fuck around while he’s got that gun trained on her.

As I back down the hall, I keep my gun pointed at his head. Julia’s still blocking the shot, so I can’t take it. The fear in her eyes kills me. I should never have left her alone. She’s never going to forgive me for this.

When I get to the room with the secret door, I stop just inside the threshold, faced with an impossible choice. There's no way in hell I'm turning Max over to his psychopathic father, but if I don't, Curtis will kill Julia. I'm fucked either way.

"The room's empty," Curtis snaps.

"No. There's a secret door to a safe room on that wall." I point, hoping he'll walk over to it.

"Open it."

"He can't," Julia whispers. One of her eyes is swollen shut now, while the other is turning black. Every time she moves her mouth, tears trickle down her face. I don't know what he did to her, but she's in a ton of pain. I can't help her until he's dead, so this motherfucker needs to die soon.

"He can't what?" Curtis demands.

"Panic button," she moans.

"Fuck!" I run my free hand through my hair. "Even if I wanted to open it, I can't."

"Why the hell not?" Curtis asks.

"Because there's a failsafe. Three people from Underground Vengeance need to be here to override the system. We need to get Reaper and—"

"Reaper's dead," Curtis interrupts.

"What?" My chest implodes as my heartbeat slows. "What the fuck did you just say?"

"I shot him in the heart. He's dead."

My vision goes black with rage, I lunge toward him, and the next few seconds play out in slow motion. His gun goes off. Julia screams. Blood seeps from her shoulder. The only eye she can open widens in horror. A crimson stain blooms through her shirt. She falls against the wall, then slides down it, leaving a trail of blood in her wake.

I roar, slamming into Curtis. He drops the gun, which goes off. I can't tell if the bullet hit anything because I'm too



busy pounding my fist into Curtis' face. I pummel him until he manages to get in a punch. His fist slams into my eyebrow, cutting it open. Blood streams into my eye, partially blinding me.

Falling back, I swing wide, missing him. I can't see shit out of one eye. A disadvantage that will cost me, so I quickly try to wipe the blood away. That split second is all he needs. He knots his fists and throws them with the force of his entire body. One blow sends shooting pain down my shoulder. The other catches me low in the gut. I heave a breath before using Curtis' lack of balance against him. I bring up my knee and catch him in the balls. Fighting fair is out of the question after what he knew about Blackstone, after what he did to his son, after what he did to my woman.

I use every minute advantage to get the upper hand, using my hardened hands to inflict maximum damage. My right hand forms a rigid, lethal plane, but when I karate-chop his neck, he twists to the side, only suffering a glancing blow. He lands a lucky strike on my ribs. I grunt under the impact.

He kicks low, smashing into my knee. It buckles but doesn't break. Everything I've ever suffered rages to the surface, and time stops. Suddenly, I see his plan. Every movement. Every incoming strike. A complete roadmap of his fighting skills and strategy. It's so clear I almost laugh out loud, and for once, I'm grateful for the gift of precognition.

When Curtis tries to complete a roundhouse kick to my chest, I grab his foot and throw him off center. He attempts to sweep my leg, but I already know his next move. I jump at exactly the right moment to avoid him. My mind unravels his plans, and second by second, I'm one step ahead of him. The ability I've always cursed evolves and grows, giving me the ultimate advantage. I know what he thinks before he thinks it. I sense what he feels before he feels it. I'm so far ahead of him that frenzied laughter spills from my lips.

“You're a dead man, Sheriff,” I snarl.

“Arg!”

His savage cry is cut short when my fists slam into his throat, crushing his windpipe. He falls to the carpet and rolls onto his back. I grind my boot against his hands, where he clutches his throat. His eyes bulge, but I don't see him. I see Max and Matrix and Reaper and Talon and Nitro and all the other boys who suffered at the hands of men who shouldn't be allowed to take another breath.

And that's exactly what I do. My monster comes alive to exact revenge. My weight shifts until the full force of my body presses down on his neck, snapping it. Curtis' eyes glaze over, but it barely registers as I grind his spine into a pulp.

"Scar!" Nina runs into the room. "Oh, God! Julia! I'm calling an ambulance!" She drops to her knees beside Julia's fallen body and fumbles with her phone.

A red haze of rage fills my head, and as I turn toward the bedroom door, I'm sure I see a ghost. It's Reaper. Is he dead? Am I dead? What the fuck is going on? Nothing seems real. It's like walking through water. Through a disjointed dream. A nightmare.

Reaper's yelling something, but I can't hear him. Nina's screaming, too, but her words don't make it to my ears. I stand there, mute, as the horror of seeing Julia's broken body rips apart my heart. I drop to my knees and pull her into my arms. I killed her. My inability to protect her killed her. She's dead because of me.

"No!" My screams vibrate off the walls. I can't stop, even when Nina and Reaper try to console me. They can't save me from this nightmare. No one can. My woman is dead, and now, nothing will ever be right in this world again.

Suddenly, paramedics rush into the room. I don't know how much time has passed, but Reaper has to pull me off Julia, so they can work on her. They listen for her breath, then feel for a pulse.

"She's still alive," one of the medics says.

"What?" My heart stops. "What?"

“Get a line started. We’re lifting on three, two, one,” the medic says, ignoring me.

Two men lift her onto a stretcher while a woman starts an IV. Reaper’s still holding me back, but I shove him away and race after them.

Outside, red and blue lights flash from a fleet of law enforcement vehicles. The ambulance doors open. An officer tries to get between Julia and me, but I shove him to the floor.

“Sir, you need to stay and answer questions about—”

I cold-cock the cop and climb into the back of the emergency vehicle with Julia. The paramedics glance at each other, but no one moves to stop me. They close the doors and immediately turn on the sirens.

As we roar down the mountain road, the paramedics check her vitals and try to get her to regain consciousness. I want to hold her in my arms, but I stay the hell out of their way. I can’t save her. They can.

“What’s her name?” the bigger, burly medic asks.

“Julia.”

“What happened?” the woman medic asks.

“The sheriff. He did this. He beat her. I don’t know what happened.” I ball my fists, wanting to punch anything and everything right now.

“Call it in as a gunshot wound, possible concussion, and broken ribs. His jaw could be broken too.” The burly medic rattles off a list of other issues, but I can’t hear past the first few. This is all my fault. I wasn’t there to protect her.

“I should have been there,” I growl in disgust.

The second we get to the hospital, the back doors open. Nurses and doctors rush forward. I try to go with them, but a huge male nurse blocks my path. “Sir, she’s going to X-ray and probably needs other tests, so we know what we’re dealing with. You need to stay in the waiting area. We’ll update you when we can.”

“Fuck!” I punch the wall, putting my fist through the plaster and leaving a gaping hole. It’s nothing compared to the hole I’ll have in my heart if she dies.

I pace the waiting room like a caged beast until Reaper appears with Talon.

“Nina’s parking,” Talon says.

“Where the fuck were you?” I swing a right hook at Talon’s face, but he dodges it.

“Hey, what the fuck!” Talon shoves me into the wall and braces his forearm across my throat. “Calm the fuck down!”

“She’s going to die!” I scream.

“What?” Reaper steps forward.

“And you?” I push Talon away from me and redirect my rage at Reaper. “You’re supposed to be dead. He said you were dead. You’re not dead.”

“Yeah. Well, I would have been, but ...” Reaper raises his shirt to show me a bulletproof vest. “I grabbed this at the last second before I went after him.”

“He’s probably got one hell of a bruise under that thing,” Talon says.

“You need to get checked out,” I tell him.

“Nope. I don’t want those doctors poking around me. I’ll be fine.” Reaper’s glare keeps me from arguing with him. There’s no point. He does whatever he wants anyway. Besides, he’s probably right about a few bruised ribs but no lasting damage.

“How’s Julia?” Nina asks as she joins us.

“I don’t know. They took her back and said they won’t know what’s wrong until they do a bunch of tests.” I slump into a nearby chair. All the adrenaline is wearing off. I’m starting to feel every one of the hits the sheriff managed to get in before I killed him.

“You should get checked out,” Nina says.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine, pres.” Talon studies me.

“I said, I’m fine! Now leave me the fuck alone!” I can’t sit, so I begin pacing from one wall to the other until something occurs to me. “Wait a fucking minute, where’s Max?”

“He’s with Matrix,” Nina whispers. “We got him out while the cops were trying to put together what happened.”

“You’re so goddamn good at hiding people. I don’t know what the hell we’d do without you,” I tell her.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere, so don’t worry about it.” Nina wraps her arms around me. Her motherly touch is so comforting I can’t help but hug her back. She’s shorter than me, so I tuck her head under my chin.

“She’s in good hands. She’s going to be okay. Just be patient,” Nina murmurs.

I laugh bitterly. Patience has never been one of my virtues unless it’s necessary for vengeance. The man who hurt my woman is dead, so there’s nowhere to direct my wrath. My default would be to rage at Blackstone, but I can’t think about him right now. I’m too worried about Julia to let that scumbag get inside my head. He’s part of the reason Julia’s in this mess. He’s the head of the local band of corrupt perverts. The sheriff was just one of his minions. I’ll deal with Blackstone later. It’s only a matter of time before he pays for what he did to me.

I let thirty minutes pass before I can’t wait another second. I march up to the nurses’ station and slam my palms on the desk.

“Julia Brant. How is she?”

“Are you a relative?” The nurse scowls.

“She’s my fiancée.” The lie spills from my lips as if I’ve said it a thousand times, which is probably why the nurse doesn’t question it. She taps away at her computer, then looks up.

“Ms. Brant is on her way to CT right now. I won’t have an update on her condition for at least another hour. If you’d like to leave a phone number where we can contact you—”

“I’ll be over there.” I stab my finger toward the waiting area.

“Okay. As soon as I get an update, I’ll let you know.” The phone rings, so she turns her attention away from me to answer it.

I stalk back to where Reaper, Talon, and Nina wait and sit in the empty chair beside Reaper. They all watch me warily. If any of them opens their mouth to try to placate me, I’m going to fucking lose my shit. I think they know it, so everyone stays silent.

An hour later, a doctor in a white coat comes into the room. “Is the family of Ms. Brant here?”

“Right here!” I jump to my feet.

“Let’s go somewhere we can speak privately,” he says.

“Is she dead?” I feel like I’m leaving my body—like I’m totally disconnected from reality.

“No. But we really should go somewhere quiet to talk.”

“They’re her family, too.” I point at the others.

“They can come with us.” The doctor leads us to a private room with a small, round table. We gather around it. Everyone sits except for me. I stand with my arms crossed over my chest.

“Julia has serious injuries. In addition to the gunshot wound to her shoulder, she has bleeding in her brain, broken ribs, a punctured lung, a broken jaw, not to mention bruises and contusions all over her body.” He glances at me, but I’m too stunned to talk, so he continues. “She was lucky that the bullet went clean through her shoulder. That’s actually one of the more treatable issues. However, we had to put her into a medically induced coma because of the swelling in her brain. The next few hours will be vital to her survival.”

The blood drains from my face. Lightheaded, I slump down into the closest, vacant chair. This can't be happening.

"Is she going to make it?" Nina asks softly.

"I have to be honest with you; it's not looking good. She suffered a lot before the paramedics were able to stabilize her. Her blood pressure is dangerously low, and she's on oxygen. We had to put a chest tube in through her ribs to help drain the liquid from around her lungs, and we're going to need to leave that in place for several days until her chest expands normally."

"And the swelling in her brain, will she have any brain damage?" Talon asks.

"It's hard to say. Some people make a full recovery. Others don't," the doctor says in a grave tone.

"What are her chances?" I ask.

"Not good. If you're praying people, pray. She's going to need all the help she can get."

"I need to see her," I say.

"We're still running more tests, and she's hooked up to a bunch of machines. You won't be able to see her until tomorrow at the earliest." He gives me a sympathetic look, and I want to smash his face in.

"I need to see her now." I stand and get in his face, but he doesn't back down.

"Sir, I understand you're upset, so I'm going to ignore your hostility. We're doing everything we can for her. That's the best I can give you."

"Well, it's not good enough!" I glare at him as he leaves the room. "Fuck!"

"Scar, calm down," Talon says.

"Shut the fuck up!" I snap.

"Let's give him a few minutes alone," Nina says. She ushers the others out of the room before closing the door.

As soon as it's shut, I flip the table. I roar as I smash the chairs against the wall and break everything I can get my hands on. I destroy the room, but it does nothing to lessen the terror in my heart. She can't die. She can't. Not after everything we've been through. If she dies, I don't know how I'll ever be able to live with myself.

I should have been there.

I should have protected her.

But I wasn't there.

I didn't protect her.

I failed her.

And now, I'm going to lose her.



## Chapter 23: Scar

Her condition worsens as the night drags on. I haven't left the waiting room. I had to get in the head nurse's face more than once before she agreed to give me hourly updates. She doesn't get that this isn't just a matter of Julia's life or death. Mine hangs in the balance, too. I can't live without her. She broke my heart wide open and stole it. I'll never get it back, but I don't want it back. I want her to have it. To hold it and cherish it and protect it the way she promised she would. Maybe not in so many words, but in her actions, in how she held me through my darkest nights and kissed away my demons. No other woman could ever compare to her. She's the other half of my heart. My soulmate. She's my everything. She can't die.

I wish I could resurrect the sheriff and kill him again. Murderous thoughts overcome me, but I can't do anything with them because he's dead. I can't make him pay for what he did to her more than I already have. There's no more vengeance to be had. I've already put that bastard in his grave. Now, I don't have anyone to blame for her condition but myself. I wasn't there, so I'm carrying just as much blame. Sure, I wasn't the one throwing punches into her delicate body, but I wasn't there to stop him either.

Below my seething anger, love thunders through my heart. I love her with everything I am. I've never felt like this with anyone. If I lose her, I won't have a reason to go on living. She's the person I've been waiting for my entire life. I never even knew I wanted to be with a woman like her, but I do. I want her forever. It's the only thing I want, and I'd do anything—*anything*—to make it happen.

The realization stuns me into silence. All my life, I've lived for vengeance. Now she's given me something else to live for. I can't let her die because she's what I live for now. She's managed to get through my defenses and unlock my blackened heart. She's seen all the wreckage in there, and she hasn't run from me. She cares about me despite my horrific

past. I never told her all the graphic details about what Blackstone did to me, but I didn't need to. She's smart enough to know that rehashing every violation would only rip apart my soul. Instead of that, she used her love to make me trust again. I trust her with all my heart. I should have listened when she warned me against giving in to my need for vengeance. That choice was the biggest mistake of my life. I hope I won't regret it forever.

I stand and begin pacing again. Nina and the others left hours ago. She wanted to take Max back to her house for dinner and to get some rest. She and Reaper promised not to let him out of their sight. I know they'll keep that promise because that's what we do. The club will always protect kids like Max. The situation with the sheriff won't change that. I still need to get Max into the underground railroad system, but I want Julia to have a chance to say goodbye first.

My eyes droop from exhaustion. My eyelids become scratchy sandpaper. I struggle to keep them open, but after the hellish day I've had, I'm fighting a losing battle.

When I wake up hours later, there's a hospital blanket draped across me. The head nurse is gone, but her replacement watches me from the nurses' station. She comes around the counter with a plastic cup of water.

"Do you need anything?" she asks.

"Any news on Julia Brant? Thank you," I say, taking the cup. I drink the cool refreshing liquid. I didn't realize how dehydrated I'd become after not eating or drinking anything all night. I could drink a whole gallon and still want more.

"Ms. Brant is still in a medically induced coma. She's in the ICU under constant care. If you need to go home to get some rest, we can call you with an update."

"I'm not leaving until she's awake." I toss the cup into a nearby trashcan.

"The cafeteria's open if you'd like to get something to eat. I could also bring you a patient meal, but it's not going to taste as good." She gives me a sweet smile.

“Yeah, maybe I’ll do that.”

I run my palms over my face and try to brush away any lingering exhaustion. The muscles in my neck ache from being stuck in an awkward position all night. I stretch to one side, then the other, until a crack relieves some of the tension. I stand and lace my fingers together and reach high above my head. My shirt lifts slightly, revealing my scarred belly. A woman across the room stares until I glare at her. She quickly looks away. I hate the pity in her eyes. Julia never looks at me like that.

The cafeteria is surprisingly good. They don’t have any Sugar Bear cereal, so I grab bacon, eggs, sausage, toast, and hash browns. I add a coffee and a huge container of orange juice to the pile.

After checking out, I consider staying in the dining area to eat, but I don’t want to be away from Julia longer than necessary. When I get back to the ICU waiting room, several families have arrived. One couple stands at the nurses’ station.

“We’re here about our daughter,” the man says.

“Julia Brant,” the woman says.

My head snaps up. They have to be her parents. Her mom looks exactly like her, and she has her father’s nose. It’s uncanny how much she resembles them.

The nurse glances my way, but I shake my head, hoping she’ll realize I don’t want to talk to them. How could I possibly speak to them after all the trouble I caused their daughter? After what I did, do I even have the right to be here? I failed her. Maybe she’s better off without me.

I toss the food in the trash and slip outside. My stomach churns with regret. If only I could turn back time and make things right.

My bike is sitting in the first row of the parking lot. The guys must have dropped it off during the night. I get on and head toward Nina’s. As much as I want to stay here to get an update on Julia’s condition, I can’t. I need to make sure Max is okay.

When I arrive at Nina's, she's standing on the porch with Agent Taft, the FBI agent in charge of the kidnapping-murder investigation. He fixes me with a stare as I join them.

"I was just telling Nina that we're ready to close the murder case. We found plenty of evidence against the sheriff once we were able to hack into his computers. For a member of law enforcement, he was sloppy as hell with his digital footprint. His browser history was a play by play of how to get away with murder. It sure as hell didn't help him," he says.

"He was a menace to his family. I'm glad he's dead," I respond.

"You're in the clear for killing him. It was an obvious case of self-defense. We can wrap it up as soon as we get your official statement. When can you come down to the field office?"

"Later." I don't commit to a day or time because I'll go when I feel like it. I hate formalities.

"That said, we still have the kidnapping to deal with. We know you have the kid hidden somewhere on the property. We also realize you were just trying to protect him, and you did, but now's the time to hand him over. We'll place him in foster care until he can be moved into a good home."

"A good home." My jaw clenches as images of the hellish foster care home I was stuck in come rushing back. "We don't know where he is."

"Right. Did you know the FBI has a file on Underground Vengeance?" he asks far too casually.

"Nope." I don't know where he's going with this, but I don't like it.

"We know you protect people who can't protect themselves. In some cases, the law failed the kids. In others, you went ahead with your own brand of vigilante justice."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I lie.

"Regardless, we'll never stop looking for Max Curtis. It would be in your best interest to hand him over. We'll look the

other way on the outstanding cases we know you're involved in, but you have to give him to us."

"He's not here." I stare the agent down, unflinching.

"Here's my card. I recommend you find him before the end of the day, or your file will move to the top of my priority list."

"Are you threatening me?" I get right in his face, but he doesn't back down.

"I don't threaten. I promise." His smile radiates the smug confidence common with FBI agents. I want to punch it right off his face but shove my clenched fists into my pockets instead. Now isn't the time to fight. Max's safety is still my top priority.

As soon as the agent leaves, I turn to Nina. "Where is Max?"

"In the safe room with Reaper and Talon."

"We're not turning him over to the feds."

"Obviously." Nina rolls her eyes. "How's Julia?"

"The same."

"I'm surprised you left her side."

"Her parents showed up."

"Did you talk to them?"

"No." I rub the back of my neck.

"Why not?"

"What would I tell them? Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Brant. I almost got your fucking daughter killed. Oh, and I'm fucking her, too."

"Is that all you're doing?" Nina asks wryly.

"No." I look away from her intelligent gaze.

"Are you okay?"

"No." Lying to her is pointless. She can read my moods better than anyone.

“I’m making breakfast. Come in and talk to me.”

She opens the front door, and we go inside. I sit at the kitchen island while she starts working on a massive breakfast. We don’t say anything at first. I hate talking about shit like my *feelings*, so I keep my mouth shut and wait for her to start the conversation.

“You know you did everything you could, right?” Nina asks.

“She could die because of me.”

“The sheriff is at fault for what happened to her. You can’t take responsibility for his psychotic behavior.” She drops several slices of bacon into the sizzling skillet. The scent hits the air and sends my stomach into turmoil. I’m hungry as fuck, after all.

“Smells good,” I mutter.

“Don’t try to change the topic,” Nina warns. “I barely got any sleep last night, and I’m not in the mood.”

“Fine. Yes, the sheriff is mostly to blame, but I shouldn’t have left her and Max alone.”

“They weren’t alone. Talon, Reaper, and I were here. Not that it did much good.” She shakes her head.

“I let vengeance cloud my judgment. I went after him when there wasn’t a need to do it.”

“Maybe so, but that’s just who you are. You want justice, and you will do anything to get it.”

“Even put people I love in danger?” I ask bitterly.

“So you do love her,” Nina says.

“Of course, I fucking love her.” I can’t sit still, so I push off the stool and join her to help whip the pancake ingredients together. They’re going to be fluffy as fuck because I’m beating the shit out of the batter.

“But you came home instead of staying with her? Why?” Nina asks.

“Because I don’t deserve her. She’s too ... perfect. She’s the perfect woman, and I’m just an angry fucker with a need for revenge. She deserves more. She deserves better.”

“You must be tired. I’ve never heard so much *poor-me* self-pitying bullshit coming out of your mouth before. You’re an idiot if you don’t see she’s perfect for you and you’re perfect for her. She looks at you the way Winchester used to look at me. She loves you with everything in her heart. If you can’t see that, then you’re beyond help.” Nina cracks the eggs far more violently than necessary before beating them relentlessly in the mixing bowl.

“I won’t stop going after Blackstone. She could end up in danger again because of me.” I measure six pancakes onto the griddle, then grab a spatula and wait.

“She understands the risks.”

“Does she?” I ask.

“After what happened to her, she must get it.”

“What if she doesn’t wake up?” I turn my attention away from the pancakes. I need Nina to reassure me Julia’s not going to die. I can’t handle the thought of losing her, even if I can’t have her.

“She will. She’s a tough girl. When you first brought her here, she had that wide-eyed innocence that made me question how she’d fit in. But she’s strong. A fighter. She’ll wake up. And when she does, you’d better be there. Also, you’re burning the pancakes.” She waves her spatula at me.

“Fuck!” I quickly flip them. They’re slightly charred, but Reaper likes overcooked stuff, so he’ll eat them.

“Eat first. Then you can go back to the hospital,” she says.

“What about Max?”

“We need to move him as soon as possible.”

“Julia will be mad if we don’t let her say goodbye to him first,” I warn.

“When she’s feeling better, and she’s ready to see him, we can arrange a meeting.”

“That’s against protocol,” I point out.

“Sure, but this is one time I think we can make an exception. His abuser is dead. The risk is low. Even if the feds are watching us, we’ll be able to outsmart them. We’ll have them running around like chickens with their heads cut off trying to find us. In the meantime, Julia will get to say goodbye.” Nina’s confidence is contagious.

“You’re right. Fuck those guys.” I sit down and dig into the plate Nina made for me. “Thank you for this. For everything.”

“I love you like I would my own kids if I’d ever had any.”

“Do you regret not having any with Winchester?” I ask between bites.

“No. We agreed early on that we wanted to put all our energy into helping the kids who didn’t have anyone on their side. That was enough for us then, and it’s still enough for me now. Hell, it’s more than enough. I love my life. I wouldn’t change a single thing about it. Although, I wouldn’t mind having another woman around to talk to.” She gives me a mischievous grin.

“I know what you’re doing, but I don’t know if Julia will ever forgive me. I abandoned her.”

“I can see why you did what you did, but it was a dick move.”

“Thanks,” I grumble.

“At least I never lie to you.”

“True.”

“So, are you going back to the hospital now?” she asks.

“Not yet. Let’s get Max situated, and then I’ll check on her. Did you contact our associates at the first underground checkpoint?” I ask.



“They’re ready for him. We just need to get him to Billings by tomorrow morning. The rendezvous crew will be passing through, and they can pick him up.”

“Shit. Then there really isn’t a lot of time to wait for Julia to get better.”

“Not really.”

“Okay. We’ll leave at sundown. If Julia wakes up before then, maybe we can sneak him in to see her.”

“It’s going to be tight, but we’ll do what we can.”

“I’ll let the others know.”

I finish my food, and after rinsing my plate and putting it in the dishwasher, I look for Reaper and Talon. I find them with Max in his bedroom.

“What’s up, little man?” I ask. “How are you doing?”

“Scar!” He rushes toward me and wraps his little arms around my legs.

“Hey.” I lean down to hug him.

“Thank you for making my dad go away so he can’t hurt me anymore.” Max’s eyes glisten with unshed tears.

I glance at Reaper and Talon. I’m pretty sure Max knows his dad is dead, but I want to confirm it with them. They nod in silent confirmation. I guess this is just Max’s way of dealing with his father’s death. We’ll make sure he gets the counseling he needs when he gets to his forever home.

“Remember how I told you we’d eventually move you to a new house with a new family?” I ask.

He nods, and his eyes widen.

“We’re going to take you to meet some other guys in the club tomorrow. They’re going to drive you to your new house.”

“With my big brother?” Max asks.

“Yeah.” I relax slightly. “He’s going to take you to your new place.”

“Can I say bye to Julia before we go?” Max asks.

“Julia ...” I hesitate, looking to Reaper and Talon for help, but they’ve got nothing. “She’s ... she’s in the hospital trying to get better. When she wakes up, we’ll arrange a meeting so you can see her. Does that sound all right?”

“I guess.” His smile droops. “She’s not going to go away like my mom did, is she?”

“The doctors are doing everything they can to make sure that doesn’t happen.” It’s the best answer I can give him. I’m not going to make up a bunch of bullshit to keep him in the dark. Things are dicey as fuck with Julia, but I also don’t want to freak Max out. I need to keep him focused on what we need to do to get him to safety.

“When do we leave?” Max asks.

“Tonight. But first, pancakes!”

“Yum!” Max jumps up and runs down the hall toward the kitchen. I can hear his faint chatter with Nina.

“How’s Julia?” Talon asks.

“Not good. They didn’t have any more of an update today than they did last night when you guys left.” My shoulders slump.

“She’ll pull through,” Reaper says.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“I can’t promise anything, but we’ve helped women like her before. They’ve all made it.”

“True.”

“Have faith. In the meantime, food.” Reaper leaves me with Talon.

“She’s going to be fine. Focus on the kid. Then go back and wait for her to wake up. She’s not going to die on you. Not after the shit you both went through to keep this kid safe.” Talon slaps my shoulder before heading off to breakfast.

I hope they're right. But until she wakes up, I won't be able to breathe. All I can do is wait and pray that fate is on my side. She needs to pull through. She has to recover. Because even if she hates me forever, at least she'll be alive.

## Chapter 24: Scar

The sun sets in my mirrors as I ride across the county line. Max didn't release the death grip he had on my waist until after we got out of the mountains. From here to Billings is almost a straight, flat shot. There are a few mountain passes, but nothing too crazy. I've done this ride hundreds of times, but this one seems bittersweet. Max really started to grow on me. I thought about what it might mean to keep him but ultimately decided club life wasn't right for a kid. There's no way I can devote all my attention to him when other children need the club's—and my—help. Maybe one day I'll settle down and have a son of my own, but today's not that day.

Reaper and Talon are right behind me. We still haven't heard from Nitro, and I'm ninety percent furious he disappeared but ten percent worried. With everything going on with the Demon Riders, I hope he's not in trouble. But if that's the case and he's safe, I'm going to have to kick his ass again the next time I see him. He shouldn't be MIA when the club needs him.

We stop in Big Timber to get gas and check on Max. After a quick bathroom break, I meet up with the guys at our bikes. Max is strapping on his helmet while I talk to the guys.

"See anything?" I ask. They've been on the lookout to make sure we're not being followed.

"Nothing but empty highway and semis," Talon says.

Reaper grunts in agreement.

"Okay. Keep your eyes open. Just because the sheriff is gone doesn't mean his guys won't be after us. We don't know who else might be part of the conspiracy that kept his corrupt ass in power."

"Will do, pres," Talon says while Reaper nods in agreement.

Max watches us intently, missing nothing. He knows we're exposed while riding, but he's so excited about getting a

new family that he's willing to risk it. Though he's only seven years old, he's more than capable of making his own decisions. Anyone who went through the shit he suffered deserves to decide who they want to live with. I told him he can change his mind at any time, and I'll take him right back to Nina's, but he's determined to move on. He's resilient. In time, I'm sure he'll be okay.

"You ready to go, big guy?" I ask as I check to make sure his helmet is secure.

"Can we have pizza when we get there?" he asks.

"Pizza? We had burgers and fries before we left."

"But I'm hungry again." He rubs his belly for emphasis.

"Tell you what, let's meet your new family and your big brother first. If you're still hungry, then we'll get a pizza. Deal?"

"Deal."

Max's grin makes my heart hurt. Kids should be protected by everyone around them. I know that's not the reality of life, but it kills me that this little guy had to suffer. I'm glad we could help him.

We pull into Billings a few minutes before ten p.m. and meet the guys at a dive bar owned by a retired member of the club. Cleaver rode with Winchester for decades. His grizzled face and bald head are a stark contrast to who he is inside. He's a damn teddy bear, especially when it comes to helping the kids. He even looks like one, with a furry white beard long enough to touch his chest and that paunch old guys get after too many beers. He meets us in the parking lot outside the bar.

"Scar, good to see you, brother." He gives me a bear hug, then claps me on the back.

"Good to see you, too. Thanks for meeting up with us on such short notice. How's your old lady?"

"You mean the dragon lady?" His belly laugh rumbles through the air. "She's on me about taking all this bullshit medication the doc wants me on. Beta-blocker this and

cholesterol that. Fuck all that. When it's my time, it's my time."

"Just don't let her cut your balls off and turn them into soup." I chuckle before turning to Max. "This is Max."

"Hey, bud." Cleaver squats down. "How was the ride?"

"Super fun, but I still want pizza." Max looks at me, then back to Cleaver.

"I'll get the cook on it." He grabs his phone out of his cut and types a message. "Should be ready in twenty minutes. You need anything else? Bathroom? A soda?"

"Coke?" Max asks.

"Yeah, let's go inside. We can hang out in the office."

Cleaver leads the way. His office is surprisingly tidy, with a couple of well-worn wooden chairs facing his desk. I sit in one while Cleaver grabs a Coke from a small fridge. He hands it to Max, then sits in a high-back chair behind the desk.

"Have you heard from Joker yet?" I ask.

"He got caught in construction traffic, but he's almost here. Max, are you excited to meet your big brother?" Cleaver asks.

"I've never had a brother before," Max says.

"We're all your brothers now. Everyone who's a part of Underground Vengeance is your family. If you ever get into trouble or need any help, you can always call us. Scar, did you get the phone set up with our numbers?"

"Matrix put it together." I pull the phone from my cut and hand it to Max. "You can call any number on this phone at any time if you need anything. Even if it's just to talk. And I hope you'll keep in touch with me. I want to know how you're doing."

"Are you sure about keeping in contact?" Cleaver asks me softly.

"I know it's not protocol, but this is a special case."

“Got it, pres.” The door opens, and a waitress walks in carrying two pizzas. “Put it on the desk, babe.”

“Sure thing.” She winks at Cleaver before leaving.

“Sidepiece?” I ask.

“Nah. But fun to flirt with. Dragon lady would have my nuts in a vise if I ever even thought about cheating. And I don’t. I love that woman, and damn, does she keep me satisfied.” Cleaver grins.

“As any old lady should.” I smirk.

“What about you? I heard your nurse friend is in a coma. How’s she doing?”

Max digs into the pizza, but I know he’s listening intently.

“She’s still resting, but I’m hoping we’ll get another update today.”

“Keep me posted.”

Someone knocks at the door.

“Come in,” Cleaver calls.

Joker walks into the room. He’s six foot three and bulkier than a linebacker. It’s all muscle, and I hope his size doesn’t intimidate Max. Joker’s a good guy, though he’s a bit of a prankster. I don’t know what he has in store for Max, but he’s got enough sense not to do anything to scare the kid. After they’re comfortable with each other, I’m sure Joker will be up to his usual hijinks.

“Oh, shit, pizza party? Damn construction bullshit made me late.” Joker grabs my hand, and we bro-hug, slapping each other’s backs. “Been a while.”

“Too long. Next time we barbecue, you have to join us,” I say.

“Better do it before summer’s over. I hate driving my car in the winter. It’s too claustrophobic.”

“How are things in the North Dakota chapter?” I ask.

“Same shit, different day. There’s a rival club trying to form and poach our members, but that’s never going to happen.” Joker grabs a slice of pizza and shoves most of it into his mouth before biting off the crust.

“You need any help, call me. We’ve always got your back,” I say.

“Will do.” He wipes his mouth, then sits on the edge of the desk. “You must be Max.”

“Are you my big brother?” Max’s eyes are huge. They’ve been that way since the minute Joker walked into the room.

“Yep. I’m going to take you the rest of the way to your new family. I live in the same city, so if you ever need me, call, and I’ll be right over.” His gaze turns to me and asks, “You gave him the phone, right?”

“Yeah. Untraceable and permanently prepaid. He just needs to make sure it’s charged at all times. The FBI’s still interested.”

I don’t say anything more because I don’t want Max to worry. I don’t think the feds have enough time or manpower to look for the boy longer than a few weeks. We’ll be giving Max a new identity, which will help keep him off their radar. Joker will explain the details later. This isn’t his first rodeo.

“Got it,” Joker says.

“Want any more pizza?” Cleaver asks.

“I’m stuffed from burgers earlier,” I tell him.

“My tummy’s full,” Max says. He pats his stomach, then looks at Joker. “Are we going to play catch together?”

“Sure,” Joker says. “I’ll play any game you want. We barbecue all the time. You’ll get to meet the other kids in my chapter this Saturday.”

“I never had friends before,” Max says softly. His gaze drops, and he fidgets in his chair.

“Well, you’ve got some now. Scar’s your friend, and so is Cleaver. I’m your big brother now, so we’ll be friends



forever.” Joker’s face softens. He really does love kids. One day I’m sure he’ll have some of his own, but he’s still single, like most of the guys in his club.

“Forever?” Max asks.

“Forever. Come here, little bro.” Joker hugs him, lifting off his feet and swinging him around. Max accidentally kicks over a lamp, but Cleaver just laughs.

“You guys should get going before you destroy his office,” I say.

“Sounds like a plan.” Joker sets Max down. “Ready to meet your new family?”

“Right now?” Max grabs Joker’s hand.

“We’ve got a long ride to get there, but yeah. You’ll get to meet them tomorrow. Tonight, we’re riding for a few hours. Then we’ll stop and get some rest.” Joker tells him the plan we ironed out. It was already a long ride to get to Billings. We didn’t want Max to get too tired, so we made arrangements for them to stay with a friend of the club in Miles City.

“Come on, bring it in.” I hold open my arms. Max rushes into them and gives me a big hug.

“Thanks for saving me,” he whispers.

What he doesn’t know is he saved me, too. Every time I rescue another kid, a little part of me heals. It’s a drop of hope in an ocean of pain, but it’s the only thing I live for. Well, that and getting vengeance against Blackstone.

After we say our goodbyes, I stop to talk to Reaper and Talon. They’ve been keeping watch outside. Since there’s no sign of trouble, we get on our bikes and ride back to our clubhouse.

Matrix greets us as soon as we get there. He’s got a six-pack dangling from his fingers. He peels one off and hands them out as we walk in. We grab seats in the living room. The television’s tuned into the local news station, but the volume’s off.

“Anything from Nitro yet?” I ask.

“Not a peep. Phone’s still off. Maybe I shouldn’t have told you guys how to disable the tracking.” Matrix grimaces.

“Nah, we needed to know. If you hear anything, let me know right away.”

“You got it, pres.” Matrix cracks open his beer and takes a long swig. “How was the ride?”

“Good. No trouble.”

“And Max?”

“He liked Joker.”

“Thank God,” Talon says. “He’s a cool dude but a little crazy. Hopefully, he doesn’t fuck this up.”

“He won’t,” I say confidently. “Some people get it; some don’t. He gets it. He’s good with the kids. We’ve worked with him a lot in the past, and he’s a good asset. I told him if his club ever needs us, we’re there for them.”

“Of course. Any other chapters can call on us, and we’ll ride out immediately,” Matrix says.

Reaper grunts in agreement.

I pop the top on my beer and have it halfway to my lips when a face I’ll never forget appears on the TV.

“Turn it up,” I command.

Matrix grabs the remote and flicks up the volume.

Blackstone stands next to his supermodel wife, who has the current governor of Montana by her side. A bank of microphones sits on a podium, and when Blackstone approaches them, my stomach drops. My hands start shaking, so I set the unopened beer on the coffee table.

“Today, I’m announcing my bid for governor of the great state of Montana.” The smug look on his face sends my stomach into complete turmoil. The burger and fries from hours ago threaten to erupt from my belly.

“What the fuck?” Reaper says in a low, dark tone.

“He can’t do that.” Matrix slides his gaze to me. I can’t do anything but stare at the television.

“Scar? You okay, brother?” Talon asks with a frown.

My vision narrows to a pinprick. If I weren’t already sitting on the couch, I’d fall over. I can’t seem to catch my breath, and my heart is about to explode from my chest. This has to be a nightmare. This can’t be real.

“My primary goal as governor will be to ensure the safety of all our families. Every child in Montana deserves to feel like they can walk the streets without being accosted. I’ll make sure our northern borders are safe. I’ll ensure that every police force in the state has the weapons they need to protect us.” Blackstone pauses for dramatic effect before staring right into the camera. “I’m cleaning up Montana. We, Governor Adams and I, have a plan to lock up the criminals riding through our streets. Governor Adams will be starting the program today. I’ll be continuing it when I become the new governor, with his blessing, of course.”

Adams smiles and slaps Blackstone on the back. Blackstone gives him a saccharine smile before returning his attention to the cameras. He looks directly into them. It’s almost as if he’s looking at me as he finishes his speech. “Together, we’ll get every last one of them. And when that happens, vengeance will be mine.”

“Holy fuck,” Talon says. “Holy fuck. He just called us out. Right? You all heard that, right? He’s coming for us.”

“Let him,” Reaper growls.

“This is bad.” Matrix is whiter than I’ve ever seen him. Perspiration settles in the dent above his lips.

The phone rings. Assuming it’s Nina, I don’t bother looking at the caller ID. “What?”

“Is, uh, someone named Scar there?” a timid female voice asks.

“You got me.” I grip the phone impatiently.

“This is nurse Jasmine Chen from the hospital. I was calling to let you know your fiancée is awake.”

“My what?” It takes a second for me to remember the lie I told the other nurse. “Right. Fiancée. She’s conscious?”

“Yes, and she can have visitors now. Her parents were here earlier. They didn’t seem to know about you.”

“It’s ... They don’t ... Okay, thanks.” I hang up before I incriminate myself. My relief at knowing Julia’s awake is overshadowed by the shock of Blackstone’s announcement. Mixed emotions tangle into a mess. I can’t think straight. I can’t think at all.

“Was that the hospital?” Talon asks.

“Yeah.”

“Is she okay?” Matrix asks.

“Yeah.”

“Well? What the fuck are you waiting for? Go!” Reaper scowls.

“But Blackstone,” I murmur. “We can’t let him become governor. It will be impossible to take him out if he’s got even more people guarding him. We need to get that bastard right now. Right now!” I grab my jacket and head for the door.

“Stop!” Reaper moves like lightning to block my path.

“Get the fuck out of my way. If you guys aren’t willing to get this fucker, I will.” I try to push past him, but he shoves my shoulders so hard I fall back a step.

“Blackstone can wait,” Matrix says. “You need to go see your woman. She’s waiting for you.”

“If Blackstone isn’t stopped—” My jaw clenches so hard the muscle starts spasming. “I have to end this.”

“*You* have to end it?” Reaper arches a brow and gives me his best death glare. “You’re not the only one he fucked up. We’ll all in this together, *brother*.”

“He’s right, pres,” Matrix says. “You make it sound like you’re the only one who can bring Blackstone to justice, but that’s bullshit. We were all locked up in that basement. We all nearly died. We all want vengeance. This isn’t just on you. It’s on *us*. That’s why we’re all together. That’s why we rescue other kids, so they don’t have to suffer as we did.”

“We all want revenge,” Reaper growls.

Talon’s been silent, but he’s watching us intently. “You can’t let her go.”

“I can. It’s safer for her ...” But even I don’t sound convinced.

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. The club has two missions. One, help other kids. Two, take Blackstone down. The club. Not you. Not me. Not Reaper. Not Talon. Not—”

The front door opens, and Nitro walks in. He’s wearing the same clothes he wore at the police station. Leaves stick out of his dirty blond hair. His eyes are wild, like an animal’s. They dart from Reaper to Talon to Matrix before landing on me. He drops his head for a second before meeting my gaze directly.

“I shouldn’t have left you guys.” His voice is so defeated I’m tempted to forgive him.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I shove my palms into his chest, but he doesn’t fight back. He nearly falls over before catching himself.

“Nothing’s wrong with me. What the fuck’s wrong with you?”

“Me?” He gets right in my face, so I square off with him.

“You were a total asshole about the cop thing. I couldn’t deal with your bullshit, so I left.” Nitro bounces on his heels but doesn’t back down.

“Are you high right now?” I ask.

“What are we doing about Blackstone?” He takes a step back while pretending to ignore me. Something’s up with him,

but I don't have time to fight it out. We've got bigger problems to deal with.

"Scar's not doing anything right now but going to the hospital," Talon says.

"Why? What's wrong with you?" Nitro gives me an appraising look. "You don't look hurt."

"It's Julia. The sheriff shot her after he beat the shit out of her," Matrix says.

"He *what*? Why the fuck are we standing around? Let's get him, too," Nitro says.

"He's dead. You'd know that if you bothered to stick around." I get right in his face. "Where the fuck were you when we needed you? If you'd been there, she might not be in the hospital fighting for her life."

"She's awake now," Talon says.

"She's okay?" Nitro asks, still bouncing.

"Just woke up," Matrix says.

"Aren't you going to go see her?" Nitro asks.

"I can't. Blackstone." I look away from his accusatory eyes. Fuck him. He wasn't here for us. I don't know if I can let that slide, even if he does have a point about me being a dick at the police station.

"We all want Blackstone dead. It's not your job to kill him. It's ours. The whole club," Nitro says.

"Already told him that," Reaper grumbles.

"If you let that woman walk out of your life, you'll regret it forever," Talon says. "She belongs to you, and you belong to her. I see how you are when you're around her. You're different. Calmer. She's good for you."

I know he's right, but my need for vengeance isn't making this easy. I don't think I can have both. I can't keep her and go after Blackstone.

“Look...” Nitro approaches me carefully. “I fucked up. I should have been here when shit went down with the sheriff. If you want to kick me out, I get it.”

“No one’s kicking you out,” Talon says, skewering me with a look. “Right, pres?”

“You’re on shit duty until I say so,” I snap.

“Shit duty?” Reaper cocks his head.

“Yeah, whatever menial shit that needs to get done is Nitro’s fucking job until I say so. Shit I’d normally make the prospects do,” I say.

“I guess I deserve that. But you have to admit you were a fucking jackass after I got arrested,” Nitro says.

“Fine. I was a dick. But you put my woman in danger.”

“Which I shouldn’t have done. I’m truly sorry for that.” Nitro looks away.

“Then I’m sorry about punching you in the face.”

“Aw, are you guys going to kiss and make up?” Matrix teases.

“You’re still my brother,” Nitro says. “Even if you’re a fucking asshole.”

“Fuck you, too.”

I hug him, and he squeezes hard enough to make it hurt. I squeeze back until we’re like two boa constrictors fighting it out. It’s always a competition in this club. My brothers are my family. We might fight and want to tear each other’s eyes out from time to time, but we’ll never stop having each other’s backs. They have my back. They’re just as obsessed with vengeance as I am, but something’s changed. I’ve changed. I have everything I want. I have my brothers, and I have a woman who has managed to heal my fucked-up heart. The giant, gaping hole Blackstone left inside me isn’t there anymore, and it’s all because of her. She had the courage to stay with me, even knowing how fucked up I am. It didn’t scare her away. It only made her fight harder for our love. She fought for us. Now it’s time I fight for her.

They're right. I need to go to her. I don't know if she'll even want me after what we went through, but I need to know. Holding onto my need for revenge almost got her killed. I still want vengeance against Blackstone, but I can't do it alone. My brothers are right. The price of vengeance is too high. One man can't carry the whole burden on his own. I tried to do it, and I almost lost Julia because of it. I don't ever want to put her in that position again. She has to come first. I'll always love my brothers, and we'll never give up our mission, but from now on, she's my number one priority. I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make her happy if she'll let me.

"I need to go," I say.

"To the hospital?" Nitro asks.

"Yeah."

"I'll ride with you if that's cool."

"Me, too," the others chime in.

"Okay, we ride together. But first, I need to stop at a shop."

"Why?" Reaper asks.

"Because there's something I need to do before I see her."

I keep my plan a secret because I don't want any of them to try to talk me out of it. It's kind of crazy, but that's how she makes me feel. She dredged up every emotion I tried to suppress and made me feel it all. For that, I'll be forever grateful. But in return, I need to do something to show her that I'm fully committed now. I want her to be my old lady forever.



## Chapter 25: Julia

I crack one eye open and find myself in a dark room. The incessant beep of machines combined with the acrid scent of cleaning solutions reminds me of a hospital. Am I in one? What am I doing here? I struggle to sit, but the effort is too much. My eyes close, and I sink back into the bed. The temptation to surrender to the darkness is so strong it's almost impossible to ignore, but I can't let go until I figure out what happened to me.

In an instant, it all comes flooding back. The sheriff beating me and demanding to see his son. Gunshots. Pain. The sheriff falling—dying. The last thing I remember is the anguish on Scar's face. He saved my life, but he's not here. Where is he?

“Scar?”

I'm alone in the room. I try to sit, but exhaustion drags me back into a restless slumber. Nightmares plague me. Images of faceless monsters chase me through my dreams. Scar's trying to fight them, but they're winning. He's never stopped battling them, and he never will. In one horrifying instance, a demonic creature sinks its claws into Scar's chest and rips him apart.

I wake up screaming. A nurse rushes into the room.

“Julia, it's okay. You're safe now. You're in a hospital. My name's Jasmine. I'm your nurse. Are you in pain? I can adjust your pain meds if you need more.” Her soft, melodic voice soothes my fear.

I want to ask her why Scar isn't by my side, but I'm too afraid to hear the truth. If he really loves me, he'd be here. But he's not. I should have known our love didn't mean enough to him. He's too consumed by his need for vengeance to let love into his life. I tried to save him, but all I did was hurt myself. I rushed into our relationship with blinders on, and look at where it's gotten me. Nowhere. I'm alone, and now that Max is safe, Scar doesn't have any reason to be with me.

Tears fill my eyes. I turn away before the nurse can see them. "I'm fine."

"I'll call your parents and your fiancé to let them know you're awake."

"My fiancé?" What the heck is she talking about? Maybe I'm still dreaming.

"Scar. At least that's the name he gave us. I'm guessing it's a nickname?" She smiles before making notes on the computer hooked up to the various monitors.

"He said he's my fiancé?"

"The night shift nurse didn't believe him, but she didn't want to argue with him because, in her words, 'he was one scary motherfucker'." She grins. "Based on her description of him, if he is your fiancé, you're one lucky girl. But if he's not, let me know so I can alert security. Based on what she told me, it will take three guys to take him down."

"At least," I mutter. "But I don't think you have to worry about that. He's not going to come. If he loved me, he wouldn't have left me alone."

"Some guys get freaked out by hospitals. Jasmine said he looked like he'd been in a fight, too, so maybe he just went home to rest. Regardless, I'll try calling him unless you don't want me to."

I debate telling her not to call him but decide to let her do it. In a way, it's a test. If he doesn't come, then I'll know he doesn't actually care about me. I need to know where I stand, but I'm afraid to find out. I can't lay here in silence without losing my mind with worry. When I spot the television on the wall, I turn and ask the nurse, "Can I watch TV?"

"Sure. You have a private room, so feel free to watch whatever you want. But remember to rest. You're stable now, but you were in a medically induced coma. Your body still needs to heal. It's going to take time. If you need anything, here's the button for the nurses' station." She hands me a remote with a bright red button on it. "Press that if you need me. Otherwise, this also controls the TV."

“Thank you.”

After she leaves, I turn it on and start flipping through channels. The usual suspects are all accounted for: home renovation shows, daytime soap operas, and several news channels. I’m clicking through, looking for anything that might capture my interest, when I spot the one face I hoped I’d never see again. Blackstone. That monster doesn’t deserve to live after what he did to Scar and his brothers.

I turn the volume up and listen to his speech. When I realize what he’s doing, shock sends the machines into a frenzy.

“He’s running for Governor of Montana?” I gasp.

Nurse Jasmine rushes into the room. “What happened? Are you feeling faint?”

“I was just watching the news,” I whisper.

“Maybe we should turn that off for now so you can get some sleep. Watching the news isn’t good for you, especially right now. It’s better to stay away from any extra stress until you’re completely healed.”

“Usually, I don’t watch the news. I was trying to find something, and Blackstone was there and—”

“Scumbag,” Jasmine mutters.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t make my political feelings known. It’s not professional.”

“You’re right, though. He’s a piece of shit masquerading as a good person. Someone needs to stop him before he becomes governor.”

“Isn’t that the truth.” She scowls at the TV before turning her attention back to me. “Let’s turn it off. There’s nothing you can do about him right now. The best thing you can do is vote. It’s the only way to stop people like him.”

I nod in agreement.

“Get some rest.”

“Did you call Scar?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

When she averts her eyes, I know it’s not going to be good news, but I ask anyway. “Is he coming to see me?”

“I don’t know, sweetie. But I did tell him you’re awake.” She pats my hand gently. “If you need anything, hit the red button.”

After she leaves, I try to control my racing heart so I won’t set off the monitors again. Minutes pass. Then an hour. He’s still not here. With every passing second, the hope in my heart starts to die slowly. If he loved me, he would have been here already. He’s not coming, so all I can do is cry myself to sleep. Which is exactly what I do.

I wake to the sound of boots clomping down the hallway. Disoriented, it takes me a moment to remember I’m in the hospital. The aches and pains come rushing back. I groan and try to find a more comfortable position.

“Which room is Julia Brant in?”

When I hear Scar’s voice, I sit up too fast, and a wave of dizziness overcomes me. My vision goes black before slowly returning. I blink, then open my eyes to find Scar’s gorgeous, soulful steel gray eyes gazing down at me. He’s standing beside the bed, holding a huge bouquet of red roses.

“I would have been here sooner, but I got caught up with some stuff,” he says apologetically. “How are you doing, babe?”

“Everything aches.” A million questions dance on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t seem to ask any of them.

“Are you in pain? I’ll get a nurse.” He starts to leave my bedside, but I grab his hand. He sets the roses on the table by my bed before taking both my hands in his. The one with the IV sticking out of it hurts a little when I move, but it’s not enough to complain about.

“I’m okay.” I’m definitely not okay, but until I know why he’s here, I refuse to confess my fears about our relationship.

“Where’s Max?”

“I drove him to Billings last night. His big brother, Joker from the North Dakota chapter, met us there. I would have waited until you were awake to let you say goodbye, but the feds are sniffing around looking for him. I didn’t want to risk it. If they get their hands on him, he’ll be sucked into the same system that failed my brothers and me. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“Joker? Seriously?”

“It’s his road name. He’s a bit of a prankster but great with kids. He’ll make sure Max stays safe. Everyone in Underground Vengeance shares the same mission. We all want to do what’s best for the children we rescue.”

“I understand, but I wish I could have said goodbye. Max is such a sweet kid. I hope he’s able to recover from everything and go on to live a good life. Who will he be staying with?” I ask.

“Another family in the club. For security reasons, I don’t know who they are, but Joker does. Once you’re feeling up to it, we can ride out and see Max. Usually, we don’t ever make contact with someone we rescued, but we’re going to make an exception in this case.”

“This case ...” My voice trails off. Is that all I am to him? Just another case?

Scar pulls a chair over to my bedside and sits, gently wrapping his huge hand around mine. I’ve never gotten over his size. He’s so big he makes me feel like a petite little thing, and I’m anything but that. I wish he’d crawl into bed beside me and hold me. I want to ask him to do just that, but I keep my mouth shut. He still hasn’t said anything about us. There might not even be an *us*.

“I need to tell you something.” The strain in his voice sends my heart into a freefall.

“Is it about Reaper? Is he dead?”

“No. He’s fine. He was wearing a bullet proof vest.”

“Thank God.”

“It’s something else…” His voice trails off.

“If it’s not good news, I don’t want to hear it.” I turn my face away, unable to look at him. I can’t gaze into his eyes as he breaks my heart.

“Julia, sweetheart, look at me.” He gently grasps my chin with his fingers and turns my face toward his. “We’ve been through a lot together. This whole situation with Max and the sheriff was fucked, and we barely got through it, but we survived. *You* survived. But, babe, I know I fucked up. I shouldn’t have left you. I’ll never forgive myself for leaving you alone at Nina’s.”

“You didn’t leave me alone. Reaper and Talon were there. Nina, too. Wait, how’s she doing?” I ask.

“She’s fine. A few bumps and scrapes, but she almost beat me over the head with a rolling pin when I suggested she get checked by a doctor.” His lopsided grin makes my heart do a little flip. “She’s at home baking like a maniac. We’re going to have to buy another deep freeze for the garage to store all the cinnamon rolls she’s baking. I doubt we’ll run out all winter.”

He keeps saying “we,” but does that include me, or is he talking about his brothers?

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say is, I fucked up.” Scar drops his gaze. “Leaving you behind was the biggest mistake of my life. I’ve made a lot of mistakes in the last few weeks. I let vengeance cloud my judgment. I ran off by myself to try to stop the sheriff and didn’t bother to try to bring my brothers with me. I abandoned them, and I abandoned you.”

When he lets out a huge sigh, I squeeze his hand. “Scar, you did what you thought was right at the moment.”

“No. That’s the thing. I knew right from wrong. I should have protected what was mine instead of getting sucked into my need for revenge. I was focused on the wrong thing. But I get it now.” His gray eyes meet mine, and all the pain he’s been holding back is reflected in his gaze. He’s still haunted

by his past and may never find peace. If I want to be with him, I have to accept that fact, but I don't know if I can. "I should have put you first. My priorities weren't right, but they are now. I know exactly what I want. You."

"Me?" I swallow the lump in my throat as he strokes the pad of his thumb across my palm. Shivers of desire slide through my entire body, and suddenly, all I can think about is dragging him into this bed with me. It's ridiculous because I'm in no condition to make love to him, even if that's exactly what I want to do.

"I've wanted you from the moment I met you," he continues. "When I thought I'd lost you, something inside me died. My need for vengeance above all else died. I can't live without you. Believe me, in the beginning, I tried to keep my heart locked up. I tried not to fall in love with you, but that was impossible. You're the sweetest, most caring, most compassionate woman I've ever known."

"Don't let Nina hear you say that," I tease because the tension is too much to bear. I hear what he's saying, but do I believe him?

"You were right about my obsession with revenge. It consumes me. Everything I do is about getting vengeance. It's what kept me alive all those years, so I hung onto it like a vise. I couldn't let go. Until now. I'm willing to sacrifice my need for vengeance because I love you."

"You do?" My eyes go wide.

"No one has ever made me feel the way you do. No one has ever looked through the steel bars around my heart to see the love trapped inside that cage. You did. You loved me when no one else could." My stunned silence is enough to make him hesitate. "At least I think you love me ..."

"I do, Scar. I've loved you since that first day when you protected Max and me. You didn't ask a bunch of questions. You just sprung into action. You took control and saved us. You're so much stronger than you think you are—and I don't mean all those muscles." I reach up to squeeze his biceps. "God, you're hot."

His low, rumbling laugh sends heat pooling into my center. I need this man the way I need my next breath. I can't live without him. But before I can tell him any of this, I have to be sure he won't run away from me ever again.

"I saw the news earlier," I whisper.

"Blackstone." His jaw clenches. That familiar look of rage flickers in his eyes for a moment before vanishing. His face relaxes slightly. "Yeah, I saw it, too."

"What are you going to do about it?" I ask.

"I don't know yet."

Disappointment courses through me. I rest my hands over my belly and will the butterflies to stop flapping so furiously.

"But whatever happens, it's not all on me," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"I was at the clubhouse when the news came out. At first, I thought I'd have to take care of Blackstone by myself. But my brothers, well, they got in my face and told me to stop being an idiot. We're all in this together. We're a brotherhood. They have just as much at stake as I do when it comes to Blackstone. They made me realize that if I went after him alone, I'd be taking something away from them. They deserve justice just as much as I do."

"What does that mean, exactly?" I ask.

"It means we're still going to work to take down Blackstone, but together, as a team, as brothers. It won't just be my mission or Talon's or Reaper's or Matrix's or Nitro's—"

"Is he back?"

"Yeah. He apologized for running away."

"And I hope you apologized for being a total dick to him."

"I did," he says. "We're brothers for life. We stick together no matter what, and nothing will tear us apart."



“And what about me? Where do I fit into that?” I whisper.

“You’re my woman. You’ll always come first. There might be times I need to take care of club business, but not at the expense of our relationship. We’re not going to stop rescuing kids, but you’ll always be my main priority.”

“Even over getting revenge on Blackstone?”

“Yes. Even then. I never want to come close to losing you again. You’ve got my heart now, and if you die, I’ll die, too. I can’t live without you.”

“Oh, Scar.” I reach up my arms, and he gently pulls me into a hug.

“Baby, I love you. I’ll always love you. And if you can forgive me for what happened with the sheriff, I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you.” His lips brush my temple, then trail down my jawline. I turn ever so slightly to meet his lips, and he claims me with a kiss so passionate that the damn alarms on the machines go nuts again.

When nurse Jasmine runs into the room and sees him kissing me, a huge grin spreads across her face. “So I guess he’s your fiancé after all.”

“Well, I haven’t officially asked her.” Scar grins. When he stands, his black t-shirt rides up, and I catch a glimpse of a bandage covering his upper arm.

“Are you hurt?” I ask.

“Do you need me to look at that?” Jasmine asks, moving closer to him. I want to growl at her to back off, but she’s controlling my pain meds, so I keep my mouth shut.

“I’m not hurt,” he assures us. “Can I have a few minutes alone with my woman?”

“Sure.” Jasmine gives me a look that says I’m a lucky woman. I agree.

As soon as she shuts the door, he pulls off his cut and shirt. Seeing all his tattoos on display takes my breath away, but the one I love the most is covered by a bandage.

“What happened to your sugar bear?” I ask.

“I added to it.”

“But it was already perfect.” I frown until he peels the bandage off. In the center of the bear’s belly, written in swirly script, is my name. “Oh, Scar!”

“I want you to know how much you mean to me. I love you, Julia. You’re my sugar bear. I can’t wait another minute to know if you’ll be mine or not. I’m not good at speeches and shit, but I thought maybe if you saw—”

“Yes! I’ll be your sugar bear forever!” I ignore the tug on my IV as I half-fall out of bed and into his arms.

“Babe, you’re going to rip something out.”

“I don’t care. I love you so much, and I want you to know something. I understand your need to go after Blackstone. I’ll support you as much as I can, but your brothers are right. It’s not all on you. So as long as you really, truly understand that, then I’m yours, and you’re mine.”

“Forever,” he whispers.

He lays me back on the bed before walking to the end of it. Then he gives me a wickedly sexy grin before disappearing under the sheets. His fingers brush the waistband on my hospital pants before he tugs them down. A slight breeze blows across my pussy, and I realize I don’t have any panties on.

“Scar, what are you—Oh God!”

His lips brush across my sex, and pure pleasure replaces any pain I might have been in. He claims me with his tongue and lips before sliding his fingers between my slick folds.

“The nurse will come in,” I gasp as the monitors beep wildly.

“Good, maybe she’ll shut that shit off,” he growls from between my thighs.

The nurse pops her head into the room, sees the lump under the sheets, and rolls her eyes. “I’ll turn them off for ten

minutes. Then they're going back on. Try not to rip out any stitches."

My face flushes as she leaves the room. This has to be the most embarrassing moment of my life, at least until Scar finds my clit. Then I'm lost in sensation as I fall into pure ecstasy. He coaxes me higher and higher until there's no way I can hold back another second.

I muffle my cries of pleasure with a pillow over my face. My entire body tenses and contracts as spasms wrack my body. He locks his lips onto my pussy and drinks my essence until I'm spent. I try to push his head away, but he chuckles and kisses me one last time before crawling up to lie next to me.

"They're *so* going to kick me out of this place," I mutter.

"Worth it." He grins.

"You're so bad."

"I thought I was actually pretty good." He waggles his eyebrows at me until I start laughing. "Just wait until I get you home, and we can do this the right way."

"What if I only want it the wrong way?" I tease.

"That can be arranged." His eyes darken with desire, but he doesn't try anything else. "You'd better hurry up and get well because I'm going to do things to you so wrong that you'll never want it the right way again."

"Promises, promises."

"I can't wait to get you home."

"Home? Nina's house?"

"Well, now that you mention it, maybe I need to reconsider the living arrangements. I was living at the clubhouse, but that might have to change. We'll figure it out later. For now, rest up so I can be back inside your sweet little pussy as soon as possible. Blue balls are not my thing." He scowls until I laugh.

“You’ll survive a week without sex.” I snuggle against his hard chest.

“A week?” He growls.

“At least.” I smirk, needling him.

Knowing how much he wants me puts the biggest smile on my face. We’ve been down a tough road together, but I have no doubt we’re good together. I can’t imagine being with anyone but him. He deserves all the love I can give him, and in return, he’s willing to give up his obsession with revenge. I know how much it means to him, so I’ll never take his love for granted. I’m going to be the best old lady he could ever want.

## Chapter 26: Scar

It's been a month since the shooting. Julia and I have been staying at the clubhouse while we look for a new home. We could have stayed in her house, but she wanted to get to know the guys better, so we're hanging out here instead. I want something in the mountains, not too far from the clubhouse but not close enough that they'll be able to hear her screams of pleasure. It took a whole hell of a lot of self-control not to make love to her as soon as I brought her home from the hospital. Blue balls are no joke, but I managed to handle my shit until she got her stitches out.

The guys have been giving me non-stop shit about how no one can sleep with her screaming like a banshee at night. Hey, it's not my fault I can lick that sweet pussy until she's a screeching, orgasmic mess. They're just jealous they have to settle for boring-as-fuck club pussy. Maybe they'll wise up like I did and find women of their own. I hope they do because real love is so much more intense than lust. It's not even close.

Today we're riding to see a house in a narrow valley halfway up the mountain. The Gallatin River runs alongside part of the property, so we can go fishing and floating, and the house is on a hill overlooking it to avoid any flood danger. But most importantly, it's got five bedrooms, which we want to fill with our kids. We're getting married next month. I don't want to jump the gun on putting a kid in my woman, but we'll be ready when I do.

My woman wraps her arms tighter around my waist as we exit the highway. I follow the winding road, taking note of how much fun it will be to ride this route to the clubhouse. Just because I'm getting hitched doesn't mean I'm going to abandon my brothers. Julia understands this and is completely on board. I'll remain the club's president until I decide to step down. I don't see that happening any time soon, but it's something she and I have talked about.

When I pull up to the house, it's better than I imagined. The exterior is all-natural wood and stone. It's log-cabin-style

outside but all state of the art inside. A famous builder constructed it as a passion project, but no one has actually lived in it yet. It's essentially brand new. When I mentioned the exorbitant price to Nina, she laughed and said we'd recoup the millions it would take to buy it in a matter of months, and she's right. The price tag doesn't matter. However, I need to be sure Julia likes it before I pull the trigger.

I park my bike at the bottom of the steps, which lead to a wide, wrap-around porch. I already checked to make sure we could fit a huge grill on the porch since we have to be able to host club barbecues. That was one of the requirements I gave the agent. She really came through, because this place is perfect. I hope my woman loves it.

"Oh, Scar, this is amazing!" Julia climbs off the bike and sets her helmet on the seat beside mine.

"It's ten acres. There are places we can pick wild huckleberries for pies and stuff."

"You're kidding." She grins as she turns in a circle, taking in the view.

"I wouldn't joke about huckleberries." It's her favorite fruit, and it only grows in certain conditions. Farmers have tried growing them, but so far, it's impossible. They can only be wild-harvested, and their location is a closely guarded secret. I almost couldn't believe it when the agent showed me pictures of the huckleberry bushes. She really nailed it with this place.

"I've got the security code. The agent couldn't meet us today, but if we like it, she said we should get in touch right away," I say.

"It's perfect. I love it." Julia jumps into my arms, wrapping her legs around my waist and grinding her pussy against my cock.

"Babe, unless you want splinters in your ass from me fucking you on the porch, you'd better stop that shit."

"But I want you," she says seductively.

“Dammit, woman! It’s house time, not fucking time.” Even as I growl this at her, I’m pulling her dress up and yanking off her panties. I can’t decide if I want to taste her or fuck her first. She’s my addiction, and I can’t ever get enough.

“Do me on the bike,” she whispers.

“Hell yeah.” I’ve been dreaming about fucking her on my bike since I laid eyes on her. I carry her to the bike and knock the helmets to the ground. I’ll deal with them after I finish making my woman scream.

I strip naked and climb on, then sit on the front seat facing backward and use one foot to hold the bike steady. Julia climbs onto the back seat, facing forward. I lean back onto the bike’s fuel tank. My cock’s hard as steel and ready for her to ride, but she doesn’t jump on right away. Instead, she grins at me while slowly lowering her lips to my cock.

I groan and almost lose control of the bike. My legs shake as she sucks along the length of my shaft. When she wraps her luscious lips around the head and slowly lowers her mouth down me, I’m halfway to heaven. She works her gorgeous mouth up and down my cock, licking and sucking everywhere. Even my balls get the attention they deserve. Sometimes I wonder how the hell I landed this amazing woman, but I try not to question it too hard.

She’s working me into a frenzy. I’m ready to blow my load down her throat, but that’s not how I want this to end. I want her on me, riding me, fucking me like the little vixen she is.

“Ride my cock,” I growl.

“Yes, Scar,” she says in that innocent, sing-song voice that drives me fucking nuts.

As she slowly lowers her hot, tight, wet little pussy onto my dick, I moan. She’s so perfect, and she’s mine forever. I can’t believe how goddamn lucky I am.

She rocks her hips in a slow, luxurious rhythm. Her lips part, and her eyes flutter closed.

“Baby, you feel so good,” I moan.

“Make love to me, Scar.”

I grab her hips and guide her into a slightly faster rhythm. She’s milking my cock and stealing my soul at the same time. She could ask for anything she wanted right now, and I’d give it to her. Sometimes I feel like my heart can’t contain all the love I have for her. She’s everything to me. My life. My heart. My soul.

“Oh, Scar, faster,” she whimpers.

I hold her hips tighter and grind her pussy on my cock. She doesn’t even have to move because I’m doing all the work for us. Just listening to her sighs and moans is enough to push me to the edge. I hang on for as long as I can because I want her pussy clamped down on me when we come.

I know exactly how to get her there, so I slide my hand between us and brush my thumb over her clit. Her breath hitches. Her stunning green eyes fly open to meet mine. I get lost in the love I find in them. She broke my heart wide open, and I love her more every day for it. It’s what I’m going to do for the rest of my life.

She rocks back against me, urging me on. I sink into her again and again. The tingling at the base of my spine starts, and my balls tighten. I’m so fucking close, but I’m not going without her. I caress her clit, swirling my finger around and around, stroking it, teasing it, rubbing it until she stops breathing. Her neck arches, and her mouth falls open. Her eyes roll back, and that’s all the warning I get before her pussy squeezes my dick in rapid pulses. I grunt and bury myself deep, following her into total ecstasy. I fill her with everything I have.

After my cock twitches for the last time, I stay inside her. When I’m here, I’m home. All I need is her. I don’t really care where we live as long as we’re together. But hopefully, she loves this house as much as I do, because I want to make love to her all over it. On the porch on a blanket. In the grass by the river. On the giant kitchen island. In front of the great stone fireplace in the living room. I want her everywhere, and I’ll



have the rest of our lives to make all those fantasies come true. But first, I need to know if she likes the house.

I help her off the bike, and she stands on shaky legs while trying to redress. I help her, then pull my clothes on. Now that we're not blinded by desire, we can give this place a real look.

We tour the house, noting the number of seats available at the island. There are twelve, which is enough for all the brothers as well as any children Julia and I will have. Eventually, if the brothers get married, we might have to add onto the kitchen, but we don't have to worry about that right now.

"Let's check out the bedrooms," she says with a twinkle in her eye.

"Babe, we just had sex. I'm not a machine."

"Could have fooled me last night. You came three times."

"Didn't know you were keeping score."

"I was." She smirks. "I came five."

"Only five?" I slide my hands around her waist and draw her closer. "If that's all, then I'm clearly not doing my job."

"You can make it up to me later." She winks.

"Woman!"

She giggles and runs into the owner's bedroom. When she sees the four-poster bed, she squeals and jumps onto it. Fortunately, all the furniture comes with the house, so if we happen to break the bed, it's not a big deal.

"Oh, there's a bathroom in here, too." She rolls off the other side of the bed before I can catch her, and walks into the ensuite. A large marble tub sits under a huge window overlooking the river. Pine trees and quaking aspen add to the view without obscuring it. "I'm going to be so clean."

"Hopefully not too clean, my dirty girl." I wrap my arms around her waist and brush my lips against her earlobe. She shivers against me. "I love this place."

“Me, too.” I turn her around and kiss her softly, pouring all the love I have for her into it.

“Can we live here?” she asks.

“It’s yours.” I pull my phone out and text the agent to let her know we’ll take it.

“When can we move in?” Julia asks.

“I’ll have Matrix wire the money. As soon as they get it, the place is ours. Let’s get your stuff. Then we’ll stop at the clubhouse and get mine.”

“Baby, I love you.” She wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me down for a kiss that starts sweet but turns sultry in an instant. I already want her again. I can’t seem to get enough. She’s turned me into an insatiable beast, but I’m not complaining, and neither is she.

The ride back to her house doesn’t take long. Matrix, Talon, and Nitro meet us there with a big truck and more boxes than we need. Reaper’s watching over the bar while we’re gone. The guys set up the boxes and start packing everything in the kitchen and living room. I told her we could buy all new stuff for the house, but she insisted on bringing everything with us. I don’t care. As long as she’s with me, she can bring whatever she wants.

We’re halfway through packing her dishes when she comes out of her bedroom. Confusion furrows her brow as she stands at the end of the hall with her hands on her hips.

“What’s wrong, babe?” I’m instantly on my feet, walking toward her.

“I’m just looking for something I can’t find.”

“What is it? I’ll help you look.”

“Oh, um ... I’m sure it’s around here somewhere. I’ll keep looking.” She heads into the guest room and starts pulling open drawers.

“I’d be happy to help if you tell me what you’re looking for,” I say.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. Forget I said anything.” She flushes bright pink, and now, I’m really curious.

I walk into the room and close the door behind me. I pull her into a hug and kiss her temple before stepping back. “Babe, why do I feel like you’re keeping something from me?”

“I’m not... it’s just ... it’s ... ugh!” She slaps her hands on her thighs. “Never mind. I can buy another one later.”

“Another what?” I lean against the wall and cross my arms over my chest. It was cute at first, but now, I’m getting annoyed. I can give her anything she wants. She just has to tell me what’s missing, and I’ll buy another one.

“Scar, seriously. It’s fine.”

Oh shit. I know it’s not fine. Any time a woman says that word, a man’s about to get in trouble. That man is me because I have a sudden, sneaking suspicion that I know what she’s looking for, and she’s not going to be happy when she finds out where it is.

“Would this item be something sort of small and battery operated?” I ask with as much innocence as I can muster.

“Scar ...” She narrows her gaze, and now, I’m second guessing whether I should have closed the door. She might kill me when she finds out what I did.

“Yeah, so, here’s what happened ...” I rub the back of my neck. I’m a dead man. “I came here looking for the sheriff.”

“Why the hell would he be at my house?” she asks.

“We couldn’t find him anywhere else, so we thought maybe he came here.”

“When was this?” she asks.

“The night everything went down with the sheriff.”

“You were in my house?” She looks around the room before skewering me with a look. “What did you touch?”

“I didn’t jerk off in your panties if that’s what you’re implying.” I hold up my hands in surrender.

“Of course, you didn’t. You’re not a creeper.”

She laughs so hard I relax slightly. Maybe she won’t kill me after all. I decide to take advantage of the moment.

“I might have taken something with me, though. But not for jerking-off purposes,” I quickly add.

“You stole it, didn’t you?” Her hands rest on her hips as she stalks toward me. “Confess!”

“Fuck,” I mutter, running my hand through my hair. “Fine. I took that vibrating alien monster thing.”

“Alien monster?”

“It was green!”

“My vibrator? You took my vibrator?” She arches a brow. “Why the hell did you do that? Do you have any idea how much that particular model cost?”

“No, and I don’t care. You don’t need it. You have me.”

“You don’t vibrate.” She smirks.

“Maybe not, but my bike does.” I smirk back.

“What did you do with it after you *stole* it?”

“I got rid of it.”

“I can’t believe this. Where is it?”

“Probably in a landfill by now. I threw it in a dumpster behind the quick mart.”

“Why?”

“Why did I throw it away there? Well, I didn’t want the guys to see it and think it was mine or something.”

“No, I mean, why did you steal it and throw it away?” The confusion in her tone is real. She genuinely doesn’t get it. Then her expression changes. “Oh my God. Were you jealous?” She bursts into laughter. “Were you seriously jealous of an inanimate object?”

“It looked pretty animated to me,” I grumble, feeling like an idiot.

“Well, you owe me another one.”

“What? Why?”

“Because sometimes a girl has needs, and you won’t always be around. What if you’re gone on club business?” She can hardly keep a straight face. Laughter tugs at the corners of her mouth. I have half a mind to bend her over my lap and give her one hell of a spanking for putting me on the spot like this.

“You’ll be totally satisfied before I leave on any club runs.” I puff out my chest. My woman had better not doubt my ability to keep her sweet little pussy happy.

“Okay. But I’m still getting one.”

“The hell you are,” I bark, chasing after her into the hall.

“What’s up, pres?” Matrix asks, frowning at Julia’s sashaying ass as she walks back to her bedroom. She closes the door, leaving Matrix and me alone.

“If you tell the others about this, I swear I’ll tie your nuts in a knot and make sure they have to be surgically removed to get untied. Got it?” I stab his chest with my finger.

“Jesus, man. What the hell?” Matrix’s horrified face is almost comical, but he needs to understand the severity of what I’m asking him to do.

“Promise you won’t say anything to the guys,” I demand.

“Okay fine. Promise. What’s up?”

“I need you to find a green—alien green—vibrator thing that’s about yea big.” I hold my hands a few inches apart, then spread them a bit wider for accuracy.

“Like a chick vibrator? For Julia? That color seems oddly specific.” He snickers but quickly covers his mouth with his hand. “Sorry, pres.”

“You know what? Forget it.” I stomp down the hall and head into the kitchen to help Talon and Nitro pack.

“I found the alien dick on my phone,” Matrix yells before walking in and waving his phone around. Sure enough, he

found it. Leave it up to him to locate anything online.

“What the fuck is that?” Talon jumps up and grabs the phone to get a better look.

“Lemme see.” Nitro grabs it from him. “Holy shit, what in all the fuck?”

“What’s going on out here?” Julia walks into the kitchen just as Nitro shoves Matrix’s phone in his cut.

“Nothing,” I say.

“Not a thing,” Matrix says while trying not to laugh.

“Zilch,” Nitro says.

“Nada.” Talon can’t look her in the eye.

“You told them, didn’t you?” She turns her accusatory gaze on me.

I can’t hold back another second. I burst out laughing. Nitro, Matrix, and Talon do the same.

“If you hadn’t tossed it out, this wouldn’t be happening,” she hollers.

“Yeah, but it’s fucking hilarious,” Matrix says, wiping tears from his eyes. “Scar was jealous.”

“Well, obviously.” She rolls her eyes at me before turning to Matrix. “Make sure they ship it to our new address, please.”

“Sure thing.” Matrix can’t stop laughing as Nitro hands him the phone. Matrix puts in the order.

“You are *so* going to pay for this later,” she warns me.

“I sure hope so.” I grin at my woman.

She’ll forget all about her mechanical boyfriend after we move in together. I fully expect to find it abandoned and gathering dust in her drawer next year. Until then, I’ll just have to make sure she’s too sexed-up even to consider using the damn thing. There’s no fucking way I’ll be one-upped by a machine. That shit’s not happening. I’ll make sure she’s so worn out she won’t be able to walk to the dresser to get the little fucker. I’m already hard as granite thinking about all the

ways I'm going to make her forget everything but me. It's going to be fun as hell.

## Chapter 27: Julia

I sit on the front porch sipping coffee, enjoying the calm before the storm. Scar and I are hosting our first barbecue at the house since we moved in last month. The air is crisp, but it hasn't started snowing yet. Fall in Montana can be very unpredictable, so I'm glad we threw this party together.

Nina's the first to arrive. She pulls up on her bike and parks it alongside Scar's. Tugging off her helmet, she shakes out her long, jet-black hair. She's wearing her signature tight leather pants and her old man's jacket. She looks every bit like the first momma bear of the MC, and I'm so glad we became friends.

"Hey, hon. Where should I put the huckleberry pies?" she asks.

"In the kitchen. Here, let me help." I get out of the rocking chair and grab a pie in each hand. "Jeeze, how many did you bring? The boys love to eat, but we're only hosting our club, right?"

"The boys might be hungry." She flashes a mischievous smile, and now, I know she's up to something.

"What's going on?" I ask as Scar opens the front door for us.

"You're early," Scar says before kissing Nina on the cheek. "What else can I grab?"

"Just the rest of the pies. They're strapped to the back of the bike."

"Seriously, what's going on?" I ask.

"Nothing," Scar and Nina say simultaneously. They give each other a look, and now, I'm curious as hell. What are they up to?

After getting the pies into the fridge, we meander onto the back porch. I slept in this morning, so I didn't see Scar assembling the burgers. There's enough food here to feed an



army. I thought we were just hosting the guys from the club, but this is way too much for them, even if they eat like every meal could be their last.

The rumble of Harleys fills the air. Nitro pulls up, followed by Matrix, Talon, and Reaper. There's a woman on the back of Nitro's bike, which surprises the hell out of me. He never rides with anyone. He's always alone.

When she removes her helmet, I'm shocked. It's Holly, one of the cocktail waitresses at the bar. Normally, the guys don't mix bar business with club business, so I'm dying to know why she's here.

"Your house is gorgeous," Holly gushes, hugging me.

"Thank you." I slide my gaze to Nitro, who's scanning the tree line like he's looking for something. I don't know what the hell that's about, but if I don't find out myself, I'm going to ask Scar later.

"Holly, hon. Can you come in and help me slice tomatoes and onions for the burgers?" Nina yells from the kitchen window.

"Right away, ma'am." Holly heads inside, leaving me alone with the other guys.

"So ... what's that about?" I ask Nitro.

"Just doing her a favor today."

I have no idea what that means, but Talon and Reaper join us, so I don't ask. I try not to pry too much. Maybe her being here has something to do with club business. Scar explained that he wouldn't tell me about club business unless there's a damn good reason to do so. He says it's safer for me not to know any details about what they're working on. I made him promise that he'd tell me if he thought either of us was in danger, which he agreed to do, and I trust him. If something were going on with the club, he would have warned me. So, for now, I'm not going to worry about why she's here. Instead, I'm grateful to have another woman around to help us.

As we work on getting the fixings for burgers set up, I happen to glance at Holly in just the right light. She's done her

best to cover it up, but she's got one heck of a bruise under her right eye.

"Oh my gosh, what happened?" I ask her.

"Nothing." She drops her gaze to the lettuce she's washing in the sink and avoids looking at me.

"Nitro's taking care of it," Nina says.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"She's going through some stuff and needs a day off from it all." Nina hands me a pile of hamburger buns on a tray. "Can you take this outside?"

I take the tray from her and glance at Holly, who won't meet my gaze. As I leave the room, I hear Nina whispering to her, but I can't make out what she's saying. Maybe Scar knows what's happening.

The guys are gathered around the grill outside, watching the burgers sizzle over the flames. Scar takes the tray from me before kissing my cheek. "Thanks, babe."

"Are you making hot dogs, too?" I ask.

"Yep. And I'm going to grill some chicken later." He flips several burgers before adding thick slices of cheddar cheese on top.

"Who's going to tell me what's going on?" I put my hands on my hips.

The rumble of more motorcycles fills the air.

"I've got a surprise for you," Scar says. He hands the spatula to Reaper, who takes control of the grill.

"What kind of surprise? Does it vibrate?" I ask in a teasing tone.

"Woman!" Scar narrows his gaze.

"You could have paid for rush delivery," I needle, knowing he's going to get huffy about my replacement toy.

"You're going to get a spanking for that later," he growls in my ear. I back my ass against his crotch and grind against

his cock. “*Woman*, if you don’t want me to bend you over one of those picnic tables, you’d better stop that shit right now.”

I laugh before heading around the side of the house to see who’s out front. Since none of the other guys went on alert, I’m assuming they’re expecting company.

When I get to the front porch, I frown. I don’t recognize

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“Oh my God, Scar!” I slap my hand over my mouth as Max slides out from behind the biggest biker in the group. Max runs full speed toward me.

“Nurse Julia!” Max flings his arms around my waist and mashes his face into my belly.

“I can’t believe you’re here!” I blink furiously to hold back tears of joy. My gaze meets Scar’s, and I mouth, “Thank you.” He smiles back with so much love it steals my breath away.

“My big brother came, too,” Max says excitedly.

The huge guy Max rode with steps forward. The patch on the front of his cut reads *Vice President*. One of the guys he’s with has his back turned as he’s fiddling with his bike. His cut reads *Underground Vengeance North Dakota*. They must all be from that club.

“I’m Joker.” He takes my hand and kisses the back of it.

“Keep your lips off my woman,” Scar says as he joins us and puts a possessive arm around my shoulders, pulling me hard against him. I love it when he gets all growly like this.

“Lucky man.” Joker and Scar bro-hug and slap each other on the back. “I’d like you to meet the rest of my club,” he says to me before turning toward his men. “This is Venom, Grinder, Crank, and Dutch.”

“It’s nice to meet you all,” I say.

They’re all huge with the most ridiculous muscles, but none of them can compare to my man. Any other woman would be lucky to snag one of them. I wonder if they have old ladies at home or if they’re all single like the rest of our club.

“Food’s out back,” Scar says.

“We brought beer,” Venom says.

“And soda for the kids,” Joker says.

“The only kid here is Max,” I say.

“Oh good, more for us,” Crank says with a grin.

As we head into the back yard, I find Max sitting on the steps, looking out at the river. I stop and sit beside him.

“How’s everything going?” I ask.

“Good! My new family is awesome. We have pizza night every Friday, and my mom helps me with homework. And I have a little brother. And my big brother, Joker.” He beams.

“I’m so glad you’re happy,” I say.

“I can’t wait until Christmas! They said it snows there just like in Montana, and we can go sledding and make snowmen and ...”

As Max gushes about all the fun he’s going to have this winter, my gaze meets Scar’s. I know what he’s thinking. He wants a son. One day, we’re going to have one. Until then, I’m going to have a great time trying to get pregnant. Scar knows what I’m thinking because he smiles softly and mouths, “I love you.” I mouth the same to him.

I never thought I could be this happy. When I met Scar, I was working at the school, going through the motions of life without actually being alive. He brought me to life. He saved Max’s life, too. He did right by Max, getting him into a family with the North Dakota chapter, and Max seems happy, which is all I ever wanted for him. I’m so glad he’s settling in with his new family so well. If it weren’t for Scar, Max and I would probably be in a terrible situation right now. Scar has no idea how many people he’s touched with his kindness and fierce protectiveness.

“Burgers are ready,” Scar calls.

Everyone lines up, Max first, then Nina, me and Holly, and then the guys. We pile our plates high with hamburgers,

hot dogs, potato salad, corn on the cob, and thick slices of watermelon. We carry our food over to the row of picnic tables in the back yard near the river. I guess I should have known something was up when Scar and the boys were dragging all the tables out earlier. I was too busy looking at my man's ass to wonder why they needed so many tables. I grin and take a seat next to Scar.

As we eat, we chat with Max about his new life. He seems to be enjoying school. Some kids were giving him trouble at first, but Joker showed up one day on his bike and set the bullies straight. I'm glad Max has Joker to watch over him. The guy really is good with kids. I see how he's joking around and playing with Max, and there's real joy behind it. He's a good guy. Max is lucky to have him.

Night falls, and we trade our plates for skewers to make s'mores. Reaper tends the fire while Nina, Holly, and I set up the s'mores bar on one of the tables. Joker helps Max gather everything he's going to need to put him on the ultimate sugar high. I feel bad for whoever has to stay up with him tonight. There's no way he's going to sleep after all that chocolate.

"What are you thinking about?" Scar whispers as he draws me into his lap. He and the others have been sitting around the campfire drinking for the last hour.

"I'm just so happy." I sigh, snuggling into his arms.

"Me, too."

"Really?"

"There's only one thing that could make me happier."

"What's that?" I ask with a grin, knowing he's about to make some completely inappropriate comment.

"Putting a baby in your belly."

"You're terrible." I swat at him playfully.

"I can't wait until everyone's bunked down for the night, and we can enjoy that big bed of ours." He brushes his lips against my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

“Oh yeah, what are you going to do in that big ol’ bed?” I grind my ass against his growing erection.

“Put a baby in you.”

“Promises. Promises.” I smile at him until he claims my lips. I sigh into the kiss and wrap my arms around his neck. When he parts my lips with his tongue, I moan.

“Whoa! There are kids present,” Joker says while covering Max’s eyes and ears with his hands.

“Yeah, get a room,” Nitro hollers.

Everyone else laughs, but I don’t miss the blush creeping up Holly’s cheeks. Her gaze has been flitting over to Nitro all day. She’s crushing on him hard, and I’m pretty sure he knows it. I wonder what’s going on between them, but now isn’t the time to ask. I’ll find out later. Right now, the only thing I need to accomplish is getting Scar up to our bedroom, so I can get him naked.

## Chapter 28: Scar

*9 months later ...*

I know something's up with Julia when she won't stop pacing back and forth on the porch. She's been antsy all day, but when I ask her if everything's okay, she tells me it's fine. I hate it when she says that because I know it's not fine. Every time she rubs her palm across her huge belly, I wonder if the baby's okay. She'd tell me if something was wrong, but I can't help but worry. She's not due for another week, but what if she's early?

I'm tempted to call Nina to get her ass down here to talk some sense into my woman. It's late spring, but there's still snow on the ground. She's going to freeze her ass off if she doesn't get back inside soon.

"Julia, baby. Come inside," I coax.

"I just need to—ooh!" She grabs her stomach and heaves a few rapid breaths.

"What's going on? Do we need to go to the hospital?"

"No, I'm sure they're not real contractions. My water didn't break, and it's too soon anyway. It's Braxton Hicks contractions. They aren't getting closer together."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me this earlier? You need to go to the doctor right now. I'll get the car." I pull the keys out of my cut.

"No, I just need—"

I freeze as the front of Julia's tan leggings turns a darker shade of brown. Wetness soaks the fabric.

"I think my water just broke," she whispers.

"Oh, shit!" I run down the steps to get the car. Normally, I wouldn't be caught dead in a cage, but I'm not putting our baby on the back of a bike until he's old enough. Or she. It might be a girl. We still don't know. Whenever someone asks

me if I want a boy or a girl, I tell them I don't care. I just want a healthy baby.

I pull the car up to the porch and park but leave the engine running. I turn the heaters to full power before jumping out to help my woman down the steps. She's got her brave face on, but she's got to be freaking out just as much as I am. We're about to become parents. I'm about to become a dad.

After getting her settled in the car, I run inside and grab our go bag. I've had it packed for months, ever since I got the list of items to bring from the well-baby class we took at the hospital. It contains comfortable clothes, a fluffy robe, snacks, and lotion I can rub on her feet if things take a while, which they might. It's her first baby, so she could be in labor for hours. I've also got stuff for the baby in there, like a go-home outfit. The car seat's already in the trunk. We've got everything ready. We're ready.

"Let's do this," I say as I toss the bag into the back seat.

"You sound like Rambo," she teases.

"Babe, what you're about to do is Rambo-level stuff. You're about to bring a whole new human into the world. A baby. Our baby. You're a goddamn goddess."

"I'll remind you of that that later when I'm screaming at you and cursing through the pain."

"You can still do an epidural. It's your choice. Anything that happens today is your choice. I'll fuck up anyone who says otherwise." I glance at her for a second, so she knows I'm serious.

"Should I text the guys?" she asks.

"I'll handle it after we get there."

It takes every ounce of self-control I have to drive normally. I want to get to the hospital as quickly as possible, but I also need to drive safely. After waiting a lifetime for a family, I'm about to start my own. My brothers will always be my family, but it's not the same as your own flesh and blood. I don't understand how anyone could hurt their own kid. It's



unfathomable. What kind of monster do you have to be to do something like that?

I shake away the dark thoughts. I'm not going down that road. Today isn't about my past. It's about my future. Our future. Julia, our baby, and me. Today's going to be the best damn day of my life.

When we get to the hospital, I don't bother to park. I pull up to the door leading to the hospital's maternity section. A nurse meets us at the car with a wheelchair for Julia.

"I can walk," Julia says in her annoyed voice.

"You can walk all you want once we get you into maternity. For now, your chariot awaits." The nurse smiles, but I can tell she's tough as nails and not to be fucked with.

"Okay," Julia says.

"I'll be right back." I accidentally drive over the edge of the curb as I pull into the closest parking spot. But I'm fine. I'm not nervous. I'm perfectly calm.

I lift my hands from the steering wheel. They're trembling, but that's just from excitement. I'm not freaking out at all. Nope. Not me.

When I get back, Julia's settled, and the nurse is ready to roll her back. Now's the perfect time to let the guys know what's up. I pull my phone out of my cut and send a group text, letting everyone know it's go-time. After I send the text, I take a deep breath and blow it out slowly. My woman needs me, so I can't lose my shit. I've got to keep it together.

The maternity rooms are larger than the other hospital rooms. They're cozier, too. There's plenty of room for Julia to walk around the room, but the nurse also said we could walk through the halls in the maternity section. She did caution us not to leave the area because it's locked down for safety reasons. Besides that, it's better Julia stays close to the doctors and nurses since this is her first pregnancy.

The first couple of hours pass with us joking around. We've been tossing silly baby names back and forth.

“Preston Scar’sson the Third,” Julia says with a hoity-toity flick of her pinky.

“If it’s a girl, then *’Murica,*” I say dramatically.

“Oh God, don’t let Talon hear that one.” Julia laughs before her face scrunches up. She whooshes out a breath and grabs the edge of the table near her bed. “Oh, fuck, that was a bad one.”

“Cuss all you want, baby. I wish I could do this for you.”

“You’re only saying that because it’s impossible.” She scowls. “You’re not the one who has to push a bowling ball out of your vagina.”

“You’re going to be okay,” I tell her. “Women do this every day. You’re going to do great, hon.”

“What if my pussy turns into a giant gaping hole?” She sobs.

I know it’s just the pain talking, so I keep my mouth shut. I don’t want to blurt out something I’ll regret accidentally. Now’s not the time to joke around with her. She’s in too much pain. Fuck, I hate not being able to help her.

“I’m going to have a drive-thru pussy,” she shrieks.

“Babe, that’s not going to happen. And even if it did, I’d still love you.”

She half-sobs, half-laughs until another contraction takes over her body. It kills me to see her in so much pain, but she insists on doing this naturally. Why? Because my woman’s a badass, and this is what she wants. I’m already in awe of her, and we’re nowhere near the end of this process.

“You’re not sticking your dick in me for at least a year,” she growls between contractions.

She’s probably going to get even more grumpy and pissed off as the contractions get closer together. I’m ready for this. I don’t care what she says. I’m here to support her in any way I can. Besides, I know she won’t be able to hold out for a whole year. She loves my cock too much.

“Breathe, baby.” I stand behind her and gently rub her back.

“Fuck, Scar! This fucking hurts.”

“I know.”

“You don’t know. Let me kick you in the balls, and then you’ll know,” she snaps.

“I don’t think we need to go that far.” I chuckle.

A nurse strolls in. “How’s everything going in here?”

“She’s going to cut off my balls, but other than that, I think this is normal?” I give the nurse a chagrined smile.

“If that’s all she’s threatened so far, you’re doing better than most men.” The nurse laughs before snapping on a pair of gloves. “Can I take a look?”

“Fine.” Julia lays back on the bed. Part of me wants to look, but part of me is afraid of what I’ll see. I may also be a badass, but I know my limits.

“You’re doing great, sweetie. Can I get you anything?” the nurse asks after completing the exam.

“A castration kit!”

“Oh, we’re fresh out of those,” the nurse says, grinning. “How about you, dad? Are you doing all right? Feeling faint at all? Lightheaded? Blurry vision?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, if you need anything, let me know. That’s what I’m here for,” she says before leaving the room.

My phone chimes, letting me know the guys are in the waiting room. They’re planning on staying there until the baby comes. Hopefully, someone brought a six-pack just for me because I’m going to need it by the time this is over.

The next several hours pass slowly. Then everything seems to happen at once. The nurse comes back to check on her, and when she finishes the exam, she gives me a look.

“Julia, your baby’s almost here. I’m going to get a doctor,” the nurse says.

“I’m not ready,” Julia says tearfully as soon as we’re alone.

“Honey, you’re an amazing, powerful, awesome, badass woman. You’re going to be a great mother. You’ve got this. It’s going to fucking suck for a few minutes, but after that, you’ll get to hold our baby.” My eyes well up, and I have to stop so I can get my emotions under control. “I love you, babe. Just hold my hand. I’m here for you. Squeeze as hard as you want.” I stand near her head and hold onto her hand.

“I love you, tooooooo,” she ends with a scream.

The door opens, and a doctor rushes in. “Let’s see what we’re working with.” She takes a look at my woman, then glances at me. “Help her breathe through this.”

“Yep.” All the training we went through comes rushing back. Julia’s in a hell of a lot of pain, so it’s up to me to support her. “Come on, babe. Pursed lips. Deep breaths.”

“Fuck!”

“Okay, we’re ready to push,” the doctor says. “Push. Push. Push.”

Julia’s grip crushes my hand, but I don’t say a fucking word. I can’t do anything but stand in awe as my woman brings our baby into the world. Julia’s the most magical, amazing creature on this planet, and she’s all mine. I can’t believe how lucky I am to be married to this woman.

A baby’s cry fills the room, snapping me out of my thoughts. I lean forward to get my first look at our child.

“Congratulations. It’s a boy,” the doctor says. “Would you like to cut the umbilical cord?”

“Fuck yeah, I would.”

Julia laugh-sobs as she releases my hands. I walk around the bed and take the sterile scissors from the nurse. She shows me where to cut. I make the snip and set the scissors aside. The nurse takes my boy to get him cleaned up, then brings him

back wrapped in a blue blanket. I can't stop staring as she hands him to me. He's got my eyes but Julia's smile.

"He's perfect," I whisper as I lean down to give him to Julia.

"His name's Eli, after your mom, Elizabeth," Julia says, cradling our son to her chest.

"Eli," I repeat, instantly falling in love with the name. "Babe, it's perfect. You're perfect. I love you so fucking much."

"I love you, too."

She looks up at me with so much love I think my heart's going to burst. When she first walked into my life, I was a broken, scarred shell of a man. She's changed me in so many ways and gave me so much more to live for. I don't live for vengeance anymore; I live for her, for us, for our son.

The nurse returns a few minutes later to show Julia how to breastfeed. As much as I want to stay and watch, I've got to tell my guys.

"Go," Julia says with a chuckle. "Tell them Eli's here."

"I love you, babe." I lean to give her a kiss before kissing my son's tiny little hand. "I love you, too, little man."

When I open the door to the maternity ward's waiting room, everyone's there. Nitro, Matrix, Talon, Reaper, Nina, and even Holly. They're all anxiously looking at me, so I get right to the point.

"I have a son."

"Hell yeah!" the guys scream, pounding their fists on every available surface and surprising the hell out of everyone else in the waiting room.

"What's his name?" Nina asks after the commotion dies down.

"Eli, after my mom, Elizabeth."

"Good name," Talon says.

“Strong name,” Nitro says.

“Badass name,” Matrix says.

Reaper grunts in agreement.

“Want to meet him?” I ask.

“Hell yeah!”

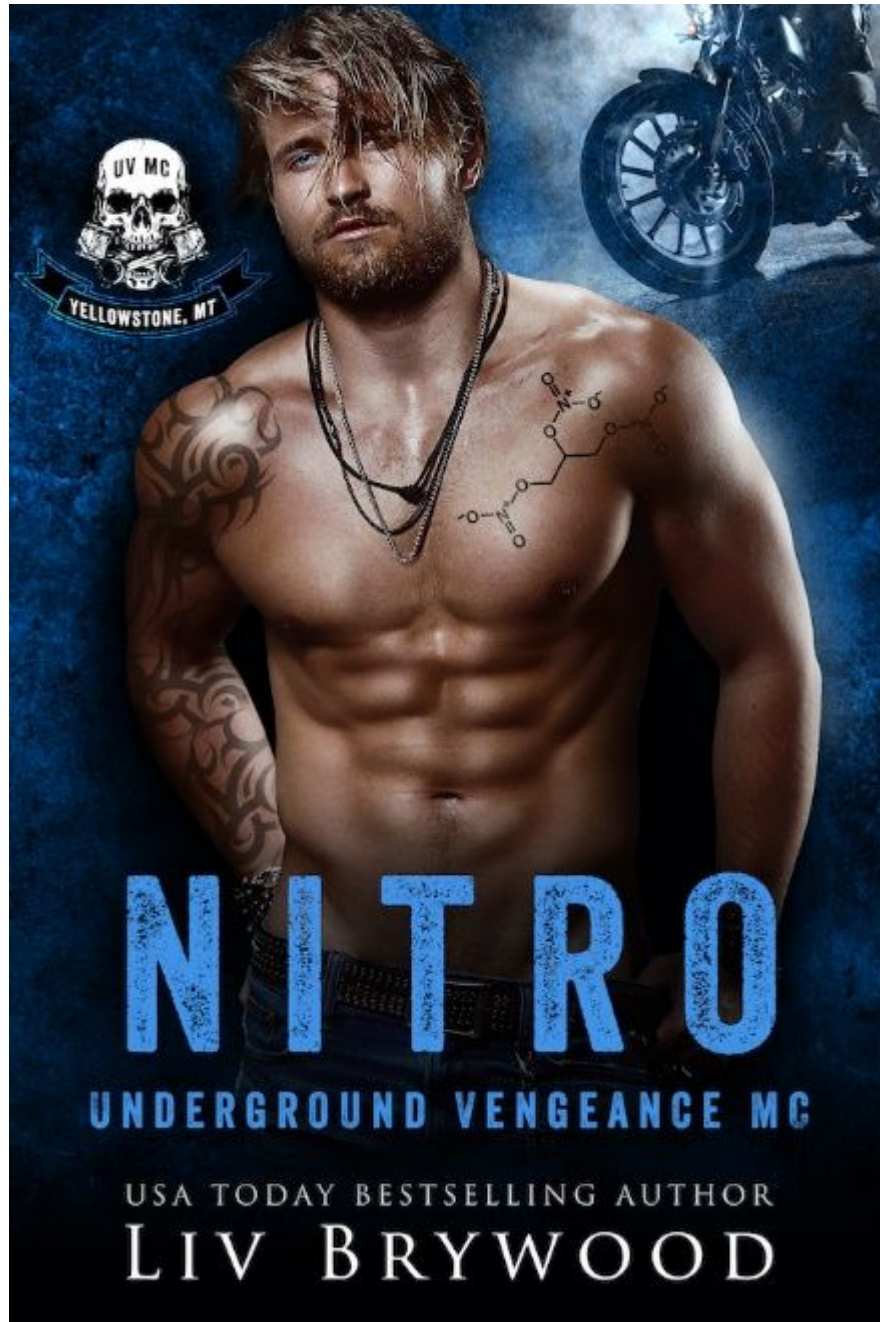
I check with Julia to make sure she’s ready before ushering everyone into the room. The whole club’s there, everyone I care about. Everyone I love. This is un-fucking-real. My heart’s about to burst right out of my chest. I couldn’t be happier in this moment because, right now, I have everything I’ve always wanted. I’m surrounded by love and happiness. I’m surrounded by my family. Life can’t get any better than this.

\*\*\*

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USA Today bestselling author Liv Brywood writes contemporary and paranormal romance. Her scorching heroes love curvy women and aren't afraid to show it. They're loyal, brave, honorable, and above all — sexy. Liv's stories are filled with passion, hope, and everlasting love.

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