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TALON

UNDERGROUND VENGEANCE MC

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LIV BRYWOOD

Talon

An Underground Vengeance MC
Romance, Montana Chapter

Liv Brywood

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“If you have been brutally broken but still have the courage to be gentle to others then you deserve a love deeper than the ocean itself.”

Nikita Gill

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Chapter 1: Talon

Wind whips through my hair as I rev the engine of my Harley-Davidson Breakout 117. I just bought this beauty in Baja Orange, and I'm glad I paid extra for the color. It's flashy as hell, and women love it. They're always trying to flag me down for a ride, but I've never found one I want on the back of my bike for more than one ride. It would take one hell of a chick to tie me down. I don't see that happening anytime soon.

As I roar through the center of a small town in Montana, the sleek chrome catches several women's eyes. It's the middle of summer, so they're all wearing sexy, flowy dresses to fight the heat. I'd stop and pick one up, but I'm on a mission. My brothers, all members of Underground Vengeance MC, ride in formation with me. Scar, the club president, is at the front of the pack, followed by Nitro, Matrix, Reaper, and me. We're heading toward a tiny spec on the map where a woman named Trina is waiting for us to rescue her from her abusive husband, Hugo. I can't wait to fuck this guy up.

Trina's best friend contacted us for help over a month ago. Just leaving wasn't an option because her husband has cameras all over their remote property. The second we arrive, he'll know it. Scar hopes we can get in and out without a problem. Personally, I can't wait to bash Hugo's face in. By the time I'm done with him, he'll look worse than the photos we got of Trina's last beating. He won't be putting his hands on her ever again. If I run into this piece of shit today, it'll be the last time he touches anyone.

I tighten my grip on the handlebars as Trina's ramshackle farmhouse comes into view. A thunderstorm looms on the horizon. The air crackles with anticipation as we pull up to the house. Our bikes form a protective circle around the front porch. We're a force to be reckoned with, ready to face whatever awaits us. This isn't our first rodeo, but we're smart enough not to get cocky.

My head's on a swivel as I turn off my bike. Hugo should be at work, but you never know. Men like him are unpredictable. The weight of Trina's plight rests heavily on

my shoulders, driving me forward. She's endured enough suffering. It's time to put an end to it.

I dismount, scanning the area with a keen eye. My brothers fan out, their presence a testament to our unwavering unity. We're a ride-or-die band of outlaws, ready to kill anyone who dares to fuck with us or what's ours. It's been this way since we were kids. Since we've done this before, we know the drill. Nitro and Matrix walk around back while Scar and I take point. Reaper's at the rear of the pack, watching our backs.

Silently, we advance toward the entrance. I pull my 9mm from my cut and grip it tightly. A cloud passes in front of the sun, casting shadows across our faces. Scar glances back at us before stepping onto the porch. It creaks under his weight. The rest of us climb the steps, too.

Scar reaches for the doorknob. Before he can open it, a blood-curdling scream echoes through the humid air. It's coming from inside the house. The need for stealth is over. It's time to unleash the storm.

The front door bursts open, revealing Hugo, his face twisted into a mask of rage. He's clutching a glinting pistol, a tool of his tyranny. Our eyes lock, two adversaries poised for a life-or-death confrontation. I don't flinch from the danger. I live for this shit.

Without warning, Hugo opens fire. Bullets tear through the air, barely missing my head. Adrenaline surges through my veins. I dive over the porch and take cover behind a huge lilac bush. It won't do shit to stop a bullet, so I move immediately, running toward the edge of the house. I almost slam into Nitro, who doubled back to see what's up.

"Get down!" I shove him back a split second before a bullet chips away at the wood siding.

"Hugo?" Nitro asks, peeking around the corner.

"Yeah. Fucking prick."

"He's supposed to be at work."

"Right, but are they ever where they're supposed to be?"

“Never.”

Scar pops up from behind his bike and gets two shots off before ducking. Reaper’s by his side and fires several bullets. Hugo cries out. One must have hit its mark.

“He’s inside,” Scar shouts before coming out of his defensive position.

“I’m on it,” I yell.

Normally, I’d let Scar lead us, but he’s too far away. We don’t have time to worry about rank. This fucker needs to die before he can hurt his wife. She’s in danger as long as this dude’s alive.

The front door slams shut in my face. I kick it open and sweep my gun from side to side, searching for movement. A long staircase to the right leads to the second floor. I catch a glimpse of Hugo as he clears the upstairs landing. Fuck!

Taking the wooden steps two at a time, I reach the top. A door closes on my right. Boot steps pound on the stairs. I glance back to confirm it’s Nitro and Scar. Reaper’s probably still outside in case Hugo doubles back.

“Find Trina,” I whisper.

Scar and Nitro nod before moving toward the other bedrooms. Moving in unison, they storm the first room. Confident they’ll find her, I head toward the closed door. Every muscle in my body has been honed for this moment. My hand grips the weight of my trusty pistol. The familiar feel of it grounds me as I move forward with deadly intent. Unfortunately, the old wooden floor creaks with every step. I won’t have the element of surprise on my side unless I try a new approach. I can’t just kick down the door because he’ll know I’m coming.

Slipping into the open room beside the one he’s holed up in, I head toward the window. I try to open it with one hand, but it’s no use. It’s sealed so tight I’ll need both hands. I quickly shove my gun into my cut. Using as much force as I can, I push up on the window. It creeps up enough for me to slide my body through the opening. I test the rickety balcony

before setting my full weight on it. I lean over the edge and spot Reaper looking up at me. I give him a grim nod. He returns the gesture.

I glance at the window that leads to the room where Hugo's hiding. It's open, which is going to make this a lot easier. I climb onto the railing, praying it will hold my weight. I pull my gun out and hold it at the ready.

Clenching my thighs, I launch myself at the window, breaking through the screen and rolling into the bedroom. Hugo yells and jumps back. His eyes widen with a mix of surprise and fear. I'm sure his wife has had that look on her face many, many times before. Never again.

I'm on my feet faster than a cat, springing up and running toward him. He jerks his gun, firing wildly. Bullets whiz past me as I close the distance. I'm too focused on my target to give a fuck about anything else. He's such a bad shot he'll never hit me, even at this close range. It's laughably pathetic.

Realizing his reign of terror is about to come to an end, Hugo takes aim at the center of my chest. Time seems to stretch as I squeeze the trigger. Each shot is a calculated act of retribution, and they all hit their mark. Hugo dances back as a barrage of bullets slice through his torso. His weapon slips from his grasp, hitting the ground before sliding under the bed. He falls to the carpet with the heavy thud. Taking zero chances, I put two more bullets in his heart.

"Piece of shit," I growl over his corpse. "No one will ever fear you again."

The door bursts open. I whip my gun toward it, but then lower my gun as Scar crosses the threshold.

"Nitro's found Trina hiding in a closet. She's safe." Scar glances at the body, then at the blood all over the wall. "What a fucking mess."

"It was the only way."

"Always is."

Reaper appears at the threshold. "Clear?"

“Yeah.” Scar squats to check for a pulse. “Check the garage for a shovel.”

“We burying him here?” Reaper raises a brow because that’s not how we usually do things.

“Fuck no. This can’t come back to bite her in the ass. Roll this asshole up into that rug and bury him somewhere in the hills. The storm’s about to hit. No one will notice if he’s dripping blood off the back of your bike.” Scar heads for the door. “Meet us back at the clubhouse when it’s done.”

“Shit! Come back here!” Nitro yells from downstairs.

Scar and Reaper pull their guns and point them at the door. A disheveled Trina rushes toward the opening, but Scar catches her around the waist. “You don’t want to see that.”

“Is he dead?” she asks softly.

“Yes.”

“Then I need to see him. I have to know the nightmare’s finally over.” She lifts her chin and gives Scar a determined grimace.

“You’ll never get it out of your head,” Scar warns.

“There’s a lot of stuff I’ll never forget. But this, this I want to remember.”

“Go ahead.”

As he releases her, she steps around him. She takes tiny steps as she approaches the man who caused her decades of pain. When she’s finally standing over Hugo, she kicks his shoulder, as if making sure he’s really gone.

“I hate you!” She kicks him again and again, screaming the same refrain until she’s hoarse. We don’t intervene. Most survivors never get the chance to fight back without fear of retaliation. She needs this, and I’m not about to stop her.

After one last, well-aimed kick, she breaks down sobbing. Scar and Reaper look at me. I sigh before pulling her into a comforting hug. She’s old enough to be my mother, so there’s nothing weird about it. The moment makes me think about my

mom. I can't even remember what she looks like anymore. The last time I saw her, I was six years old. It's been twenty-four years, and I still don't know what happened to her. One day, I'm going to figure that shit out.

"You guys saved my life," she whispers before releasing me.

"Your friend did that for you when she reached out," Scar says. "No one can ever find out about what happened today. Are we clear on that?"

"Yes. Of course." She pulls herself together and wipes tears from her cheeks.

"We'll take care of getting rid of the body. Here's what we need you to do: Wait until well after dark before you report him missing, but call the sheriff today. You don't want him asking questions about why you waited more than a few hours before you called the cops."

"Okay." She nods.

"Tell them your husband never skips out on dinner—"

"That's true."

"—and that you got worried when he didn't come home."

"I will."

"He'll become a missing person. It takes seven years to be declared dead. I know that sounds like a long time, but it will be over before you know it."

"It doesn't matter. He's gone. I'm finally free." A slight smile crosses her lips before it disappears, as if she's out of practice, as if the muscles have atrophied. In time, I hope the stress lines on her face are replaced by laugh lines. There's no telling how long it will take, but I want that for her. She deserves happiness. Everyone does.

"We're going to clean this up, then head out," Scar says.

"Do you have buckets and sponges?" Nitro gestures toward the blood dripping down the wall.

"Yes. In the kitchen. I can show you where."

After she leaves with Nitro, Scar turns to Reaper and me. “When you’re done, meet us at the clubhouse. We’re partying tonight.”

“Fuck yeah,” Reaper says, coming as close to a smile as he ever gets. “Can’t wait to nail something.”

“You want to fuck women twenty-four-seven.” I chuckle.

“Only after I kill,” he growls.

“Well, you don’t get credit for this dude. That notch is going on my bedpost, not yours. Grab his feet. Put him in the middle of the rug, so he’ll be easier to wrap.”

Reaper grunts before helping me reposition the stiff. The guy probably weighs close to three hundred pounds, but that’s nothing for us. After we’ve got him wrapped up, Scar nods and leaves the room.

“Heads or tails?” Reaper asks.

“Heads.”

“You got that last time.”

“Because it’s easier.” I smirk before picking up the side of the carpet where the dead guy’s head sits.

“Pansy-ass.”

“Shithead.”

Reaper grunts out a laugh before lifting the end with the corpse’s legs. “Hurry up. I want first choice between all the chicks tonight.”

“Only one?” I tease him since he’s been known to entertain more than one lady at a time.

“Yeah, I don’t want to work that hard.”

“Good point.” Two women at once is great, but it’s also double the work to make sure they leave with a good story about the hot biker who railed them all night. Sometimes, it’s not worth the added effort, especially on days where I’ve got to dig a grave. I don’t blame him for only wanting one tonight.

By the time we get the body loaded onto the back of my bike, I'm sweating. I blame the summer heat and coming storm. As I head back inside, the skies burst open, and torrential rain pours sheets of water across the hills. At least it will make digging easier. The ground will be softer.

"We're leaving!" I yell into the house.

"Ride safe!" Trina hollers back.

"See you at the clubhouse," Scar calls.

"Later!" Nitro screams from upstairs.

"Let's roll," I tell Reaper.

"Right behind you."

We get on our bikes. It takes a second to balance the added weight, but once I've got it, we leave the house. I plan on putting at least twenty miles between us and Trina's place. The farther away, the better, but we don't have all day. The last thing I need is for the body to fall off the back of my bike. We tied him down with twine, but I've learned never to trust it. Shit can snap when you least expect it. Almost lost a body on the highway once. I won't make that mistake again.

After thirty minutes of riding, I find a dirt road that leads deep into the hills. It doesn't look like it goes anywhere. There aren't any no-trespassing signs or mailboxes to indicate anyone lives at the end of it, so it seems like a good location to dump a body. Just to be sure, I follow the road until it dead ends at the edge of the forest.

Turning off my bike, I set the kickstand. Behind me, Reaper does the same. The body shifts, disrupting my bike's balance. I hold the bike with one hand while I pull a knife from my cut with the other. After sawing through the twine, the body tumbles into the mud.

"I'll find a place to break ground," Reaper says before disappearing into the forest.

Rain pelts my head, saturating my hair and matting it to my face. I'm glad I cut it off for the summer. Usually, I keep it long, but I was sick of how it would poke me in the fucking

eye every time the wind kicked up. It made riding a real bitch. I'll grow it out again in a few months when fall starts.

"Found a spot. Want to check it out?" Reaper asks, emerging from the dense bush.

"Nah. You know your shit."

"Damn right." A ghost of a smile lights his eyes before they return to their normal darkness. "I want heads this time."

"Have at it." I gesture toward the rug.

We carry the body into the woods to a great spot. A wild thicket of thorny bushes forms the perfect barrier to anyone who might be nosing around. It's far enough away from the road that I doubt anyone would stumble across it. And even if his body were found, no one could pin the murder on Trina.

I pick up the shovel from where Reaper set it down. The earth gives way easily. All the rain we've been getting helps in these cases. I love the summertime. Hiding bodies is so much harder in winter when the ground's too frozen to dig.

Halfway to the six feet we need, I hand the shovel off to Reaper. He finishes the grave and steps back.

"Should we keep the rug?" I ask.

"Let's burn it."

"Can't. Too wet outside."

Reaper grunts in agreement.

"We can find somewhere else to ditch it," I suggest.

"Yeah."

While he finishes burying the dead guy, I carry the carpet back to my bike. We end up tossing it from an overpass into the raging river below. Even if someone finds it, and even if it's still stained, no one will ever connect it to this murder because we're a hundred miles from the scene of the crime. Sure, it's a bit sloppy for my taste, but everything can't be perfect all the time.

"Ready to party?" I ask Reaper.

“Fuck yeah!” He revs his bike but waits until I’m on mine before taking off.

The ride back to the clubhouse feels so much shorter than the drive to Trina’s house. I’m always filled with anticipation when we’re on a mission to save someone. Afterward, I guess I crash a little. I’m not like Reaper. He’s ready to fuck anything with a pussy and a pulse. I just want a beer and a good ball game on TV. But knowing my brothers, it’s going to be one hell of a party at the clubhouse, so I can’t wait to get home.

Chapter 2: Jessica

The neon sign of The Rusty Tap flickers in the twilight as I nudge the door open. Sienna, my best friend, follows closely behind. I just finished another long day of asking for donations for the animal shelter. A drink with my bestie is the perfect way to end the day.

“God, I need this,” Sienna sighs as we settle into our usual booth. The worn leather creaks as we slide across the seats. She runs her fingers through her fiery red hair before reaching for the menu. “What are you having?”

“Same as always—whiskey sour.” I flash her a tired grin. I’m already savoring the tangy bite of the cocktail. The first sip will be glorious.

“Ah, yes, the classic Jessica drink.” Sienna chuckles, signaling the waitress to come over. We place our orders and lean back, taking a moment to enjoy the familiar atmosphere of the bar.

“Speaking of classics, did I tell you about my latest date disaster?” I grin.

“Oh God, not another one!” Sienna’s bright green eyes widen with anticipation. “Do tell.”

“So, I met this guy online, right? His profile seemed decent enough: He’s a veterinarian, loves animals, yada yada ... Anyway, we agreed to meet up at that new sushi place down the street. Everything was going great until he started sharing his conspiracy theories about how the government is using cats as spies.”

Sienna bursts out laughing, almost knocking over her newly arrived Moscow mule. “You’re kidding me!”

“Dead serious.” I take a sip of my drink. “He even had diagrams on his phone to prove it. I felt like I was in some sort of twisted spy movie.”

“Wow, your dating life is like a never-ending parade of weirdos,” Sienna teases, wiping tears from her eyes. “But, hey,

at least it's entertaining!"

"Entertaining?" I snort. "How about your date with the guy who doesn't believe in deodorant because it 'blocked his natural pheromones'?"

"Ugh, don't remind me," Sienna groans, her nose crinkling at the memory. "I swear I can still smell him."

We dissolve into laughter, our previous exhaustion momentarily forgotten as we trade stories of our disastrous love lives. As the clink of glasses and low hum of conversation surround us, the air-conditioning kicks on, a welcome respite from the heat outside. Summer in Montana is notoriously unpredictable. The day could start out freezing, but by mid-afternoon, it could end up hot enough to melt ice cream faster than you can eat it.

"I thought things would get easier after breaking up with my ex Andy, but dating is even worse than I remember. Sometimes, I wonder why we even bother," I admit, swirling the ice in my glass.

"Because we're hopeless romantics." Sienna raises her glass in a mock toast. "And one day, we'll find someone who's just as crazy about animals, fundraising galas, and Russian culture as we are."

"Cheers to that," I laugh, clinking my glass against hers.

As our laughter begins to subside, an uneasy sensation creeps over me. The small hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It feels almost as if someone's scrutinizing my every move. I glance around, trying to identify the source of my discomfort.

"Jess? Is everything okay?" Sienna asks, her brow furrowing with concern.

"Yeah, I just ... I don't know," I mutter, scanning the faces of the other patrons in search of anything out of place. I lean forward and whisper, "This is going to sound crazy, but I feel like someone's watching me."

"Maybe it's one of your exes," she jokes, but her eyes sweep the room, too, suddenly alert.

“Ha, right.” I force a smile, but my gaze keeps wandering, drawn to the windows that look out onto the street. And then I see him.

Across the street, beneath the glow of a flickering streetlight, a man stands with his hands tucked into the pockets of his leather jacket. He seems familiar, but I can’t quite place him. Is he from work? Or maybe one of the many fundraising galas I’ve attended? His features are obscured by the shadows, but I can sense his eyes locked on mine.

“Sienna, look,” I whisper urgently, nodding toward the figure across the street. “Do you recognize him?”

“Where?” She squints, trying to follow my line of sight. But as we both stare, the man turns and disappears into the darkness, swallowed by the night.

“Damn it, he’s gone,” I sigh, rubbing my temples. “Maybe I’m just being paranoid.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” Sienna says, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “If he shows up again, we’ll deal with it.”

“Thanks, Sienna.” I force a smile, but unease remains coiled within me.

A chill runs down my spine as I continue to stare at the empty space where the man had been. The laughter and clinking of glasses around us seem to fade away, leaving me with a sense of isolation despite being surrounded by people.

“Jessica?” Sienna’s voice breaks through my thoughts, pulling me back to the present. “You okay?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, trying to shake off the apprehension. “I just ... I feel like something’s off.”

“Tell you what,” she says before taking a sip of her drink. “Let’s finish these and call it a night. You’re probably just tired from working so much.”

“Maybe.” I force myself to take a sip of my drink. It does little to calm my nerves. As the minutes tick by, the weight of

the stranger's gaze still hangs in the air, making it difficult for me to concentrate on our conversation.

"Hey, Jess," Sienna says after we finish our drinks. "Why don't I walk you to your car? Just in case."

"Thanks," I reply, grateful for her concern. We gather our things and head toward the door. Every step seems to echo across the room, and I swear everyone's watching us. I'm starting to feel just as paranoid as that guy I dated.

Stepping out into the cool night, I scan the street for any sign of the mysterious man. But the shadows remain empty, offering no answers.

"Stay safe," Sienna whispers as she hugs me goodbye. "And if you need anything, don't hesitate to call me. Okay?"

"Okay," I promise, hugging her back tightly. "Take care."

"Always do," she replies with a wink before walking back into the bar.

I watch her go before turning to my car, steeling myself for the journey home. With a heavy heart, I climb into my car and begin the drive home, but the feeling of being watched never quite leaves me.

The winding mountain road stretches out before me, while the moon casts eerie shadows across the asphalt. I grip the steering wheel tightly as I navigate the twists and turns, my headlights cutting through the darkness. The familiar route should be comforting, but tonight, it only serves to heighten my sense of unease.

"Get a grip, Jessica," I mutter to myself. My heart hammers, each beat echoing like a drum in my ears. "You're letting your imagination run wild."

Just as I round another bend, I catch sight of headlights in my rearview mirror. I squint at the reflection, the bright lights momentarily blinding me. It's impossible to make out the driver, but their vehicle stays uncomfortably close, practically riding my bumper.

“Hey, back off!” I shout, even though they can’t hear me. My palms are slick with sweat, my knuckles white from gripping the steering wheel so hard. The car behind me seems intent on tailgating me. I wonder if it’s the same man from earlier. Is he following me? Trying to intimidate me?

“All right, buddy. Two can play this game.” I press down on the gas pedal, hoping to outrun him or at least put some distance between us. But no matter how fast I go, the car remains right on my tail, relentless in its pursuit.

“Leave me alone!” I scream as panic sets in. My hands tremble as I struggle to maintain control of the vehicle. Every curve in the road ratchets up my fear. The car behind me seems hell-bent on running me off the road, and I can’t understand why. Who would do something like this?

“Please, just let this be a coincidence,” I pray silently, though deep down, I know better. This isn’t a random act of road rage—it’s targeted, and it’s personal. And if I don’t figure out a way to escape, I might not make it home alive.

“Think, Jessica,” I urge myself as I glance back at the relentless headlights. “What would Mom do?” The memory of my mother’s strength and determination gives me a momentary surge of courage. She was always a fighter, a woman who refused to back down in the face of danger. And although she’s gone now, her legacy lives on within me.

With renewed determination, I steer my car off the main road, taking a shortcut through a densely wooded area. It’s risky, but I don’t have any other choice—I have to lose this man. As I barrel down the narrow path, branches scrape against my car. I can only hope my instincts are right.

“Come on, Jessica,” I whisper, my voice barely audible over the sound of my racing heart. “You can do this. You’re stronger than you think.”

The darkness of the mountain road swallows my headlights, but I refuse to slow down. My knuckles turn white as I grip the steering wheel, desperate to maintain control. The man behind me is relentless. My pulse races with every curve.

“This can’t be happening,” I mutter, trying to keep my focus on the winding path ahead.

And then, without warning, a sickening bang echoes through the night. My car lurches violently to one side, and I realize instantly what happened—my tire blew out. Panic surges through me. I can’t afford to lose control now. Not when I’m being hunted like prey.

“Mom, please watch over me,” I whisper, fighting to hold back tears. I’d always admired her courage in the face of adversity, and now, I need to channel that same resolve. There’s no time for fear or self-pity; I have to act, fast.

“Come on, Jessica,” I urge myself, scanning the dark landscape for any sign of salvation. “Think!”

That’s when I see it: A well-lit bar and grill nestled among the trees, just off the highway. I’ve never been there, but it’s owned by a bunch of bikers. I read an article about it a few weeks ago. Apparently, the guys are rough and scary, but this place is my only hope.

Praying my luck will change, I steer my crippled vehicle toward the motorcycle club’s bar. As I pull into the parking lot, the sound of laughter and music reaches my ears, momentarily drowning out my fear. I hesitate, unsure if this is the right place to seek refuge. But as the man’s headlights bear down on me once more, I have no other choice.

“Here goes nothing,” I whisper.

Before I can second-guess myself, I park behind a line of motorcycles. I fling open the car door and run toward the wooden porch. Desperation has led me to this unlikely sanctuary. Now, all I can do is hope it will be enough to save me from the danger at my heels.

As soon as I enter the bar, a cacophony of sounds and smells overwhelms me. The thick, smoky air stings my eyes, while the raucous laughter and the clinking of glassware makes it nearly impossible to think. For a moment, I stand there, frozen, unsure if I’ve just traded one danger for another.

“Need a drink?” A gruff voice cuts through the noise, snapping me back to reality.

I turn to see a burly bartender with a tattooed arm wiping down the counter. His gaze is questioning but not unkind.

“Uh, sure,” I stammer, taking a seat at the bar. “Whiskey, neat.”

As he pours my drink, I eye the parking lot through the windows, searching for any sign of the man who’s been tailing me.

“Here you go,” the bartender says, sliding the glass toward me.

I nod my thanks, cradling the amber liquid in my hands as if it can somehow shield me from the unknown threat lurking outside.

“Bad night?” the bartender asks, sensing my unease. His voice is quieter now, more sympathetic.

“Something like that.” I take a small sip of whiskey. It burns my throat, but I welcome the temporary distraction. What’s going on? Who is this man, and why is he following me?

“Hey,” the bartender says gently, his expression softening. “Whatever’s going on, you’re safe here. Nobody messes with our patrons.”

“Thanks.” I attempt a weak smile. Despite his reassuring words, something in my gut is telling me this isn’t over yet. My mother always taught me to be cautious, but I can’t wait here indefinitely, nursing a drink and hoping for the best. Sienna will know what to do.

As I dial Sienna’s number, my fingers tremble. If anyone can help me figure out what to do next, it’s her. But as the phone rings once, twice, three times, I wonder if I’ll truly be able to escape the danger that seems to be closing in on me.

“Come on, Sienna,” I whisper, praying she’ll pick up. “Please.”

When she finally answers, I slump down on the barstool. “Sienna, I don’t know what to do,” I whisper into the phone as my eyes remained glued to the parking lot outside. The oppressive darkness makes it hard to breathe. I can’t see anything or anyone clearly.

“Why? What’s happening?” Sienna asks.

“That guy. He’s following me. And my tire blew out. I’m at that biker bar just off the highway.”

“What? The same guy from earlier?”

“I think so.”

“I’m going to come get you, okay? Just stay put.”

“Hurry, please,” I say before ending the call.

“Excuse me, miss?” A rough, sexy-as-hell voice startles me.

I turn to find a stunning man standing next to me. He’s about five million percent hotter than any man has a right to be. He’s so scorching hot I’m pretty sure he can melt panties off with a single look. In addition to being well over six feet tall, he’s got that sexy redneck vibe that’s super dirty, yet down-home good ol’ country-boy at the same time. He’s wearing cutoff jeans and a white tank top under his motorcycle club vest. A patch displays his unusual name. *Talon*. But the most intriguing thing about him is his eyes. They’re green with flecks of gold, and they’re absolutely mesmerizing.

“Are you okay?” he asks, sounding genuinely concerned.

“Um ...” My mind races as I struggle to form a coherent response. This man stands out like a beacon of hope amid the chaos swirling around me. But can I trust him?

“Sorry,” I finally manage, averting my gaze in an attempt to regain my composure. “I just ... my tire blew out and I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you have a spare?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe?” I admit, hating how helpless and terrified I sound. My mother always taught me to stand on my

own two feet, to be strong and independent. But right now, all I want is for someone—anyone—to save me from this nightmare.

“I can take a look at it if you’d like. I’m good with my hands.” His slightly wicked grin sends butterflies flitting through my belly.

“If you don’t mind ...” My voice trails off as I struggle to break eye contact with him. The intensity of his gaze warms me from the inside out. Thinking about this man’s hands and how good they might feel against my skin is the last thing I need to be doing right now.

“Come on. Let’s see what we’ve got.” He gently grasps my hand in his before tugging me out of my seat.

“Thank you,” I whisper, looking up into his irresistible eyes once more. I search them for any hint of malice, but all I see is a man who wants to help me. I’m not entirely sure why, but I trust him. There’s a sincerity in his gaze that gives me hope. For the first time tonight, I feel safe because I have him by my side.

As I follow Talon through the dimly lit bar, I wonder if fate has brought us together for a reason. Or maybe I’m completely wrong about him, and this is yet another cruel twist in a night that’s been filled with terror.

Chapter 3: Talon

Jessica looks like a princess who stepped into the wrong fairy tale. Everything about her screams wealth, from her designer clothing to the expensive purse hanging off her shoulder. She's completely out of place in a biker bar, yet that's exactly why I find her so intriguing. I want to find out more about her. She's so different from the usual crowd, not just because of her undeniable beauty, but because people who come from money don't slum around with guys like me. She's sexy as hell, but there's more than that drawing me to her. Something feels off, and I want to find out what's really going on.

As we step out of the bar and into the dark parking lot, I glance around, making sure we're alone. Even though I'm used to being out here, I can't shake the feeling that we're being watched. But is it because of her, or am I just being paranoid?

"Where's your car?" I ask, redirecting my focus to the task at hand.

"Over there." She points to a silver Range Rover SUV parked behind a row of bikes. Its shiny exterior stands out like a sore thumb among the beat-up trucks and motorcycles surrounding it.

"Nice ride," I say, trying to make small talk as we approach it. "So, what do you do for a living?"

"Thanks," she smiles, clearly proud of her car. "I'm a fundraising specialist for a non-profit animal shelter."

"Really? That's pretty cool." However, it doesn't make any sense. Non-profits never pay very well—unless they're a front for money laundering. Even so, it's not often I meet someone with such a selfless job, especially around here.

"I really love what I do," Jessica says, beaming with pride.

As we reach her car, a strange sense of foreboding overcomes me. This whole encounter is just too odd. I can't

shake the feeling that something isn't right. But for now, all I can do is escort this misplaced princess back to her world and hope that whatever brought her here doesn't follow her home.

As I walk around her vehicle while looking for the blown tire, I admire her taste in cars. I'll always prefer my bike to any other mode of transportation, but when it gets icy outside, I'd love to have something like this as my ride.

After checking the two front tires, I head toward the back on the driver's side. That's when I spot it. The rear tire is completely flat. I crouch down to take a closer look and see what appears to be a deliberate cut along the sidewall.

"You didn't happen to run over anything sharp, did you?" I try to keep the concern out of my voice, but it's not easy.

"No, I didn't. I drove to work and then to a different bar after work. I was meeting a friend. It was fine until I got on the highway to go home." She frowns.

I'm dying to ask her about her friend, but I table my curiosity. "It looks like someone slashed it." I point to the gash in the rubber. "Do you have any enemies who would do something like this to your car?"

"Enemies? No, I don't think so ... at least, none that I'm aware of." She's clearly taken aback by the implication. She takes a nervous step away from the car. Clutching her designer purse against her chest, her gaze flits around the parking lot.

"Are you sure? This wasn't an accident."

"Positive," she insists, shaking her head. "I don't know why anyone would want to do this to me."

My gut tells me there's more to this story than she's letting on, but I don't want to push her too hard. Instead, I focus on the immediate problem.

"We need to get this tire changed before you can go anywhere," I say, rising to my feet. "Do you have a spare?"

"I don't know."

What is it with women and cars? "Pop the trunk and I'll check."

“Okay.” A moment later, she opens the driver’s side door. When she bends down to hit the release latch, I get a great view of her perfect ass. Damn, she’s fucking hot. Maybe I should just offer to give her a ride home instead of messing with her tire. I could have her car towed back to her place and then go check up on her tomorrow.

“Down boy,” I grumble, ignoring the heat pooling in my cock.

“What was that?” she asks, returning to my side.

“Looks like you’ve got a spare,” I say, trying to hide my disappointment. I’ll have to come up with another way to stay in contact with her.

As I retrieve the spare tire and begin the process of swapping it out, I keep thinking about the fact that it’s been tampered with. Something about this whole thing isn’t right, and it’s not just the slashed tire. I need to get to the bottom of this before something worse happens.

“Listen,” I say, trying to sound as casual as possible while tightening the lug nuts on the spare. “I don’t want to scare you or anything, but maybe you should be a little more cautious for a while. This could be an isolated incident, but it could also be a sign someone’s got it in for you.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. I’ll try to be more careful.” Jessica bites her lip, looking more worried than before.

“Good,” I say, finishing up with the tire. “Just promise me you’ll be cautious.”

“I will; I promise,” she says, her voice trembling slightly.

After I get the spare securely in place, I stand up and dust off my hands. Jessica’s head is on a swivel. Her shoulders are so tense I’m afraid she’s going to get a headache. She’s on edge, and I can’t blame her. If someone messed with my ride I’d be worried, too.

“Hey,” I say gently. “Are you sure everything’s okay?”

Jessica looks at me, then quickly glances away. Her voice trembles as she speaks. “I don’t know. Earlier tonight, I felt

like someone was following me. Like someone's been watching me. I thought I saw someone when I was at the other bar with my friend, but I don't know. I thought he followed me here, but he was gone when I turned around."

My stomach drops. Now, we're getting somewhere. I knew there was more to this than she was telling me. A slashed tire is one thing, but now, it sounds like she might be dealing with a bigger problem. Possibly a stalker. It's not something I can ignore, especially when it's in my nature to protect someone who's clearly in trouble.

"Tell me more about what's been going on," I urge. "Have you seen anyone suspicious? Anyone hanging around your work or home?"

She hesitates for a moment before shaking her head. "No, not really. But I've just had this ... this creeping sense of unease. Like I'm being watched."

I nod, understanding how unsettling that must feel. My mind races through possible scenarios, trying to piece together what could be going on. My gut churns as I study Jessica's frightened expression.

"Has anything else strange happened recently?" Despite my growing concern, I manage to keep my voice steady.

Jessica cocks her head to one side and frowns slightly. "Well, sometimes I feel like someone might be following me to work."

"What makes you say that?"

"Sometimes, I swear a car is trailing behind me, but it's never the same kind of car. One day it will be a black SUV. Another day it will be a blue compact. I thought I was being paranoid."

"Where's your office located?"

"We're in the industrial area by the train tracks."

"I know it." I leave out the fact that I'm well aware of that area because I helped burn down one of Blackstone's warehouses there last year. The prick had it coming. "There

aren't many people who work in that area, but it also doesn't sound like it's the same car every time. It could be a coincidence. Aside from that, have you noticed anything unusual at home? Anything that makes you feel like someone's watching you there, too?"

Her eyes widen as if she's just realized something important. "Yes! I used to always leave my curtains open, even when it got dark. But lately, I've been closing them earlier and earlier. It almost feels like someone's peering in at me. It's hard to explain."

"Have you seen anyone suspicious lurking around your house or workplace?"

"No, not that I can recall," Jessica replies, shaking her head. "But then again, I never really thought much about it until now."

As we talk, I can see the fear building in her eyes. Whoever is stalking Jessica has already made their presence known by slashing her tire. It's only a matter of time before they escalate to something worse.

"Listen." I gently clasp her hands in mine. "We're going to get to the bottom of this, all right? For now, let's get you home, and I'll do everything I can to figure out who's doing this."

"Thank you."

"Of course. I won't let anyone hurt you. That's a promise."

Her phone suddenly rings. She jumps before riffling through her purse to fish it out. She answers with a shaky, "Hello?"

Her face pales.

"Hello?" she asks again. "Hello?"

She pulls the phone away from her ear and stares at it. "This is getting spooky weird. No one was there."

"Does that happen often?"

“Only recently. In the last few weeks. I didn’t even realize it until now, but yeah, it happens almost every day. I just chalked it to up overzealous telemarketers.”

“Do you leave your ringer on at work?”

“No. I always turn it off, so I’m not interrupted.”

“Can I see your call log?”

“Sure.” She hands the phone to me.

“It looks like you have dozens of missed calls every day during typical working hours.” I stop scrolling and study her. “You didn’t realize this was happening?”

“No. I never look at missed calls. If someone doesn’t leave a voicemail, then it can’t be that important. Besides, those telemarketing companies constantly call anyway, so even if I’d noticed, I would have assumed it’s them. But you don’t think it is?”

“No. They’re all coming in from a blocked number. Marketing companies use a lot of different phone numbers, but I don’t think they’re legally allowed to block the numbers from displaying on your phone,” I make a mental note to check with Matrix on that.

“I can’t believe I didn’t notice. I’m just so busy all the time. Between work, seeing friends, and taking care of my puppy, I don’t really pay much attention to my phone.”

“Normally, I’d say that’s a good thing, but not in this case. Has anyone else in your life noticed anything strange? Has anyone made any weird comments?”

“No.”

“Really? Not one?” I narrow my gaze.

“I can’t think of any.”

“You mentioned spending time with your friends and your dog. What about a boyfriend?”

“I’m single right now.” She flushes slightly and looks away.

I do my best not to celebrate the fact that she's not taken by anyone. This is the best news I've heard all day. She's fair game, but I've got to stay focused. My dick's trying to take over, which won't help her situation.

"What about an ex-boyfriend? Did anything happen that could have set him off?" I go out on a limb and assume she's got at least one ex. As stunning as she is, I'm honestly shocked she's single. I wonder why. Maybe she's got a few screws loose. But then again, the crazy ones are little firecrackers in bed.

"Andy?"

"Is that your ex?"

"Yeah, but he's harmless, other than being an idiot."

"What do you mean by that?"

"He thought I posted sexy photos of myself online." She rolls her eyes.

"But you didn't?"

"No!" She throws me an indignant glare. "I'd never do that."

"Could he have taken the photos without you knowing?"

"It wasn't even me. The girl in the photos had tattoos. I don't have any."

"Sounds like you don't like them."

"They're not for me. But I don't care if someone else has them," she adds quickly. "You probably have some."

"Because I'm a biker?" I flash an amused grin.

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm right, aren't I?"

"Maybe." For once, I'm glad I'm wearing sleeves. Although she claims she doesn't mind, I don't think she'd like my tat. "Anyway, back to the boyfriend. Who broke up with who?"

"I dumped his stupid ass."

“Because he didn’t believe you?”

“Yeah. I changed my passwords and deleted the pics.”

“Any idea who the girl was?”

“Not a clue.”

“What about any previous boyfriends?”

“They were all jerks, but not psychos.”

“Okay.” For now, I’ll have to take her word for it. In most stalker cases, the victim knows the perpetrator. She might know who this guy is without realizing it.

“Thank you so much for helping me, but I should go home. I need to check on Loki, my dog, and I have to find a place to fix the tire in the morning. I don’t want to be late to work.”

“Call Roger at Tires and More. Tell him I sent you and he’ll make sure you get a good deal.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“Listen, I don’t like the idea of you driving home alone right now. Let me follow you. I’ll make sure nothing happens.”

She studies me carefully before replying, “That would be good. Just in case another tire blows out or something.”

“I checked the last one and it looked okay. But yeah, let me grab my bike and we can head out right away.”

“Okay. Let me call my friend and let her know not to come and get me.”

As I head toward my bike, I watch her start her car. Her hands grip the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles turn white. She’s obviously terrified. I’d hate to think of what might have happened if she hadn’t made it into my bar tonight.

My motorcycle roars to life beneath me. As I strap on my helmet, I make a silent vow that I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her safe.

On the drive to her house, I can't shake the tension in my body. I'm constantly scanning the surroundings for any sign of danger. Each time a car passes by or a shadow flits across the road, my heart skips a beat. I'm ready to spring into action if needed, but we reach her house without incident. It's a single-story bungalow in the oldest neighborhood in town. Trees and bushes crowd the sidewalk, partially blocking the view from the street. I don't like it. A clear line of sight is a lot safer. She needs to cut these back so she can see who might be lurking outside.

As Jessica parks her car in the driveway, I pull up beside her and kill the engine on my bike. We walk up to her front door, and that's when we see it. A voodoo doll, its grotesque form twisted and contorted, is nailed to the wooden door. A red, viscous liquid—which looks a hell of a lot like blood—drips onto the light green welcome mat beneath it.

“Oh, God!” She covers her mouth with her hand.

“Fucking hell,” I mutter.

I glance at Jessica to gauge her reaction. Her eyes are wide, and her breath's coming in short, shallow gasps as she takes in the horrifying sight. I quickly go to her side and wrap an arm around her waist. Pulling her close, I hold her against my chest.

She wraps her arms around my torso then looks up at me with tears in her eyes. “Who would do this? Why would anyone try to scare me like this?”

“I don't know,” I whisper, tucking her head under my chin. “But we're going to figure it out. You're not alone. I'm here, and I'm not leaving you until I know you're safe.”

I study the dark corners of the yard, searching for the perpetrator. We appear to be alone, but I'm not completely convinced that's true. A creepy-crawly sensation tiptoes down my spine, setting me on edge. Now, I fully understand what she means about feeling watched because I feel it, too. Someone's out there ... watching ... waiting.

Chapter 4: Jessica

I stare at the voodoo doll nailed to my front door. My heart pounds and I'm suddenly lightheaded. If Talon wasn't holding me up right now, I don't know if I could stand properly. When I left work today, I never expected to end up in a big, burly man's arms, but here I am. I'm grateful I'm not going through this alone, but I'm still shocked to the core. I've never been the kind of person who had enemies. But clearly, someone's out to get me. If only I knew who ...

The voodoo doll is a terrifying sight. Its eerie resemblance to me is undeniable. It has the same violet-colored eyes as mine. Its long, honey-blond hair is cut into face-framing layers, just like mine. Even its skin color matches mine. During the summer, my skin turns a deep tan from all the hiking I do. The doll's fabric has been dyed to match perfectly. It's an awful little doppelgänger.

My stomach churns as I notice dried blood staining the cloth, along with strange symbols scribbled all over it. I've never seen that type of writing before. I'm not even sure if it's a real language. I didn't study religious symbolism while getting my business degree. Now, I wish I'd taken one of those esoteric classes. Knowing something about voodoo might be useful now. It could help me understand why someone would nail this to my door.

"Jessica, are you okay?" Talon's voice is filled with concern.

"Y-yeah," I stammer, unable to tear my eyes away from the horrific creation. "I just ... I don't understand what any of these symbols mean. Should we call the cops?"

"We could, but then they'd take the doll, and we wouldn't have anything to go on."

"Maybe the cops will figure it out. I have to report this anyway, right?"

"I'm not going to stop you if you really want to make that call, but I doubt they'll be able to help you. I work with a lot

of domestic violence and stalking cases, and let's just say the police are less than helpful, especially when you haven't been hurt yet."

"This isn't enough?" I point at the doll.

"Unfortunately, no. All they can do is take a report and lock up the only direct evidence we have that someone's stalking you." Talon steps closer, studying the doll for a moment before pulling out his phone. He snaps a quick picture, then looks back at me. "There's another chapter of the Underground Vengeance MC in New Orleans. One of the guys there goes by Bones. He's a voodoo priest. Maybe he can tell us something about this."

"Bones? Really?"

"Yep." He types a message into his phone.

"Okay." I'm surprised by his admission. The fact that someone within Talon's club knows stuff about voodoo is unnerving. How can I be sure he's not involved somehow?

"Let me send this photo to him and see if he can give us any insight," Talon says, hitting send. "He's a bit of a night owl, so I don't know if he'll get back to us right away."

His words bring a small measure of comfort, but the fear lingers, gnawing at the edges of my soul. I can only hope Bones has some answers for us because I can't come up with one person who'd want to harm me. What if it's nobody I know? It could be a complete stranger.

"Jessica," Talon interrupts my thoughts. "I promise we'll figure this out. You're not alone."

His gaze is steady and reassuring, but I still feel a twinge of doubt. "Why should I trust you?"

"For starters, you stumbled into my bar. I didn't go looking for you. And second, I've got no reason to hurt you."

His words make sense, but the fear in my gut doesn't dissipate completely. Despite my wariness, I'm grateful for his support. It's true; I sought him out, not the other way around.

“Look, I understand your hesitation,” he continues, “but right now, we’re on the same side, trying to figure out who’s doing this to you.”

Talon’s phone chimes. He glances down at it before looking back up at me. “Bones is working on deciphering those symbols. We’ll know more soon.”

“Thanks,” I say softly, finding some comfort in his determination. He doesn’t have to help me, but he’s doing it anyway. He could have let me drive home on my own, but he didn’t. I get the sense I can trust him, and I do.

“Tell me again about your ex-boyfriend Andy,” Talon says, shifting the focus. “You don’t think he could be behind this, do you?”

“Absolutely not,” I reply firmly. “He would never stoop to something like this. He always considered himself above all things ... supernatural. And besides, he’s dating someone else now. I doubt he ever thinks about me anymore.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Not at all. We weren’t a good match. Honestly, I should have dumped him way before the photo situation happened.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I guess I just didn’t want to deal with the fallout. Ending a relationship is hard.”

“And you’re sure he wasn’t angry at you because you broke it off?”

“No. He wasn’t the kind of guy to hold a grudge.”

“Sometimes people surprise you,” Talon says, his tone darkening. “No matter how well you think you know them.”

I frown, considering his words. Could Andy really be capable of something so twisted? The idea seems ludicrous, but as I’ve learned today, nothing is impossible.

“Maybe it’s possible,” I concede. “But it’s not likely. And if it’s not him, then who’s behind this?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.” Talon offers a small, determined smile. “Together.”

“Sounds good.” I give him a half-hearted smile.

My heart feels heavy as I try to take in the reality of my situation. Who can I trust? Where can I turn for help? The voodoo doll’s presence continues to haunt me, making it impossible for me to feel safe in my own home.

“I can’t sleep here tonight,” I say.

“Can you stay with family?”

I shake my head. “No, my dad just remarried. They’re away on their honeymoon.”

“What about your mom?”

“She ... she died almost a year ago,” I reply, my voice cracking.

She was a well-known philanthropist, always active in the community and dedicated to helping others. Over a hundred people attended her funeral. I barely remember it because I was so broken that day. Crying my eyes out wasn’t enough to express the pain burning inside me. She was my best friend. Losing her nearly destroyed me. I couldn’t get out of bed for weeks after we buried her. Dad wasn’t much better. Eventually, he moved on. I don’t think I ever did.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Talon says quietly, his eyes full of sympathy.

“Thanks,” I murmur, grateful for his understanding. Suddenly, an idea comes to me. “I could stay with my best friend Sienna. She’s like a sister to me.”

“Good idea. Does she live close?”

“A few miles away. Let me call her and see if she can pick me up. I don’t want to drive the car, and Loki can’t ride on your motorcycle.”

Talon looks at me, then frowns and glances at his bike. “Yeah, I can’t put a dog on there unless you can hold it. But that’s not really safe.”

“I’ll call her.” I pull out my phone and dial Sienna’s number. As soon as she answers, I launch into an explanation of what’s happened with the creepy voodoo doll. Her shock is palpable through the phone.

“Jess, that’s insane! Of course, you can stay here tonight. I’ll come pick you up, okay?”

“Sienna, you’re a lifesaver,” I say gratefully.

“Give me twenty minutes. I’ll be there soon,” she replies before hanging up.

“Sienna’s on her way.”

“Good.” Talon gives me a warm, reassuring smile. “Let’s go inside. I’ll take a look around and make sure there’s nothing else in there. Then you can pack an overnight bag.”

“Do you think someone could be inside?” I whisper.

“I doubt it because your dog would be barking like crazy. Unless ...” He averts his gaze.

“Unless what?” Fear slides icy fingers down my spine. If anything happened to Loki, I wouldn’t be able to handle it.

“Give me your key.”

I hand him my key ring and point out the house key.

“Stand back.”

He unlocks the door and cautiously pushes it open. Loki jumps up from his bed where he was sleeping. His nails scrape across the wooden floor as he scrambles toward us, his tail wagging furiously. Surprisingly, he goes straight to Talon, sniffing and licking his hand as if they’ve been friends for years.

“Good boy,” Talon says in the tone of voice usually reserved for children and pets. “Who’s a good doggie?”

“Woof!” Loki flops over on his side for belly rubs.

As Talon vigorously scratches his tummy, Loki makes chuffing sounds.

“Wow, that’s odd,” I mutter, watching their interaction. “Loki usually doesn’t like anyone. Normally, he’d try to bite your hand off.”

“Maybe he senses I’m here to help,” Talon says, scratching Loki behind the ears. The dog’s eyes close in contentment, and I can’t deny the warmth spreading through my chest at seeing them together. It’s almost like they’ve been best friends forever. It’s super strange.

“Perhaps,” I admit hesitantly, feeling strangely comforted by the idea.

“I’ll take a quick look around. Stay here.” He walks down the hall, popping in and out of rooms until he’s done searching. “There’s no one else here.”

“Thank God.”

As Talon follows me into my bedroom, my gaze drops to my bed. Thoughts of tangled sheets and sweaty bodies twisted up in ecstasy flood my mind. I blush, turning my face away so he can’t see it.

“I need work clothes and something to wear to bed.” God, why did I say that? I don’t want him thinking about what I wear to sleep. Or do I? I release a nervous giggle.

“Something funny?” he asks, arching a brow.

“Nope.”

I hastily throw clothes and essentials into a small, carry-on suitcase. My bathroom is connected to my room, so I go in there to grab everything I need.

After getting toothpaste, a toothbrush, and my favorite face cream, I head back into the bedroom, where I stop in my tracks. Talon’s sitting cross-legged on my bed, holding a worn-out tennis ball in one hand. Loki’s seated next to him, eager and alert, his eyes fixed intently on the toy.

“Okay, I’ll throw it again, but no wild jumping on the bed this time, all right?” Talon asks, as if Loki can actually understand him.

Loki's tail thumps on the bedspread, a short bark echoing his excitement.

“Ready ... catch!”

With a gentle toss, Talon sends the tennis ball through the air just a short distance away. Loki, with perfect timing, grabs it without making much of a commotion.

“That's a good boy!”

Loki, proudly parading the ball between his teeth, prances over and deposits it onto Talon's lap, nudging it for another round.

“One more, but let's be careful of the bedside lamp.” Talon's grin matches Loki's.

I watch silently as the game of catch continues for several minutes. Normally, Loki barks at strangers. He seems to adore Talon. It's amazing.

“Your friend should be here soon.” Talon glances at his watch.

As if on cue, headlights bounce off the curtains, signaling Sienna's arrival.

“I'll call you tomorrow morning to let you know how I'm doing.”

“You'd better. Give me your bag. I'll carry it out.”

“Loki, come on, baby,” I coo.

My dog looks at Talon with huge, puppy eyes. Loki almost looks like he's about to cry. He can't possibly have separation anxiety. He just met Talon. I don't know what's gotten into my dog, but with how things have been going tonight, I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

When we get to the front porch, Talon sets my suitcase down. “We shouldn't leave this doll here. Do you mind if I take it? I have some friends with connections who can check it out, see if the blood is real.”

“Let me get a bag.” I run inside and grab a Ziploc bag. Back on the porch, I hand it to him. “Thanks for taking care of

this.”

“Of course. I’ll let you know what I find out. When you call me.”

“I’ll call.” I smile.

“Uh, I guess this is goodbye for now.”

“For now,” I say coyly. I don’t know what’s come over me, but I don’t want him to leave.

“Take care of yourself, Jess.” He hunches down until he’s eye level with Loki. “Watch out for your mom. Bite anyone who tries to get near her.”

“Woof!”

With one last glance, Talon heads to his bike. A moment later, it roars to life. He gives me a devastating smile before riding off into the night.

I sigh and grab my suitcase.

“Who the hell was that hot guy?” Sienna blurts as soon as she gets out of her car. “And why didn’t you just go to his place?”

“That was Talon,” I explain, a blush creeping up my cheeks. “He’s helping me figure out the voodoo doll thing. And going to his place didn’t seem like the best idea.”

“Whatever you say,” she replies, half-joking but clearly impressed by Talon’s appearance. “Is that all you’re bringing?”

“Yeah. Hopefully, this is just for tonight.”

“Where’s the doll?”

“Talon took it. He has friends who can find out more about it.”

“That’s so weird.”

“I know. Today’s been crazy.”

“Come on. We’ll go back to my place and you can tell me all the details. I have a feeling I only got the short version on the phone.”

“Definitely the abbreviated one.”

“Come on, Lokes,” Sienna says. “Back seat for you, buddy. I brought you a special towel, so you don’t get fur all over.”

“Thanks for letting me bring him.”

“Absolutely. You know I love my fluffy buddy.”

Once we’re all settled with my luggage in the truck, Sienna starts the car. Its engine purrs softly as we pull away from my house. The glow of the streetlights cast deep shadows across Sienna’s face. I feel a pang of guilt for dragging her into this mess, but she’d never forgive me if I tried to face it alone.

“Are you interested in him?” Sienna asks suddenly, breaking the silence.

“Who, Talon?” My face gets unbelievably hot. “No, he’s not really my type.”

“Liar.”

“No, really. He’s too big and scary and outlawey.”

“Outlawey?”

“Yeah. He’s probably a criminal. He’s part of that Underground Vengeance MC. The one that’s always on the news.”

“Don’t they help people?”

“Do they? I don’t know. I hear mixed things about them. Also, they have a voodoo priest.”

“No shit! In Montana?”

“No, in their New Orleans chapter.”

“Wow. That’s super cool.”

“Or creepy.”

“Whatever. Maybe having Talon around is a good thing,” she says with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “If someone’s trying to scare you, then having a big, burly motorcycle club guy watching your back is exactly what you need.”

I try to ignore the warmth spreading through my chest at the thought of Talon watching over me. Instead, I focus on the familiar streets outside, counting the houses as they pass by. But there's no denying the truth in Sienna's words.

"Maybe," I admit quietly. But deep down, I know I'm lying to myself. There's something about Talon that draws me to him, and it's more than just his rugged good looks or the fact that he might be able to protect me. He's so different from any other man I've ever known. There's something mysterious about him. I want to get to know him better, and now, I can. He expects me to call him tomorrow, and I will. I almost can't wait to talk to him again.

"Jess," Sienna says, interrupting my thoughts. "Just promise me you'll be careful, okay? I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I will." I reach over to give her hand a reassuring squeeze. "Thank you for picking me up."

"Of course." She smiles. "What are friends for?"

As we continue our drive, my mind drifts back to Talon and the voodoo doll he's helping me decipher. Despite my initial hesitation, knowing he's on my side is oddly comforting. Maybe Sienna's right. Maybe having Talon around is a good idea after all.

Chapter 5: Talon

I can't shake the image of the blood-soaked voodoo doll from my mind. The thought of leaving Jessica and Sienna alone after finding something so chilling makes my stomach churn. I should head home, get some rest, but I can't bring myself to do it. Not when their safety is on the line.

"I'll just make sure they get home safely. Then I'll go," I mutter as I follow their car at a safe distance.

Sienna's house comes into view, an old Victorian nestled behind a wrought-iron fence. I park down the street, far enough away that Jessica and Sienna won't see me, but close enough to keep an eye on things. It's not like I'm stalking them; I'm just being cautious. That's what I tell myself, anyway.

For hours, I watch the house, trying to ignore the growing exhaustion weighing on me. The shadows cast by the moonlight give the facade an eerie feeling, like ghosts are hiding in every nook and cranny. I remind myself why I'm here. It's for their own good. I want to make sure they're safe, so I push away the creeping sense of guilt. If I'm careful, they'll never know I was here.

"Nothing's going to happen," I whisper, trying to convince myself more than anything else. After all, I made sure no one followed them from Jessica's house. There's probably no threat at this point. The stalker couldn't possibly know Jessica's here, yet I can't bring myself to leave.

Minutes tick by, then hours. Eventually, my eyelids grow heavy. My head droops forward, then snaps back up, startling me awake. If I can't stay focused, there's no point in being here. I should take this doll home and get some sleep so I can deal with it in the morning. But as the night goes on, doubt creeps in. What if I'm wrong? What if the stalker appears?

"Get a grip, man. You're just tired. Everything's fine."

But as I sit on my bike, watching the shadows dance on Sienna's house, I can't shake the nagging feeling that

something is about to go terribly wrong. So, I wait and wait, and still, nothing happens.

“This is stupid. Go home.”

I scan the area in front of the house, but nothing seems out of place. However, just as I’m about to start the bike and leave, something catches my eye. A figure is lurking in the darkness behind one of the bushes. It’s a man, tall and broad-shouldered, trying to stay hidden from view. My heart races. In an instant, adrenaline replaces my exhaustion.

“Damn it,” I mutter, watching as the man moves along the side of the house. He’s pushing on windows, searching for a way in. My instincts scream at me to act, to protect Jessica and Sienna, but I need to be smart about this. If I just charge in, I could put them in even more danger.

I slip off the bike. Approaching the house with caution, I’m careful not to make a sound. The man doesn’t seem to notice me. He’s too focused on finding a point of entry. I take advantage of his distraction and move closer, staying low and using the darkness to my advantage.

“Who are you?” I demand, my voice booming through the night.

The man jumps, startled by my appearance. He whirls around, eyes wide with fear, but then narrows them into a glare. “None of your business.”

He tries to dart past me, but I’m quicker. My hand shoots out to grab him by the collar of his jacket. He struggles, attempting to break free, but I refuse to let him go.

“Answer me!” I growl. Anger and concern for Jessica and Sienna fuels my strength. “What do you want with them?”

The man’s face twists into a sneer, and he spits out, “You’re in over your head, pal.” With that, he shoves me forcefully, breaking my grip and sending me stumbling backwards.

“Hey!” I yell, regaining my balance and sprinting after him as he runs down the street. There’s no way I’m letting this man get away. He’s mine now.

Running at top speed, I manage to catch up to him. Lunging forward, my fingers brush the man's collar. I grab it, tightening my grip before yanking him back and spinning him to face me. Anger courses through my veins, sharpening my senses and fueling my determination to protect Jessica and her friend. The man's eyes flash with a mix of fear and rage. He wasn't expecting to be caught.

"Let me go!" he snarls, struggling against my grip. The desperation in his voice only makes me hold on tighter. I need answers, and this man has them.

"Start talking," I demand, my voice low and menacing. "What do you want with Jessica and Sienna?"

"Like I'd tell you anything," he spits, glaring at me with pure hatred. He claws at my wrists, trying to pry my fingers loose, but I refuse to budge. I don't back down from threats, and if he doesn't start talking, I'm going to beat him until he does.

"Wrong answer." We're locked in a fierce battle, neither willing to yield. "Start talking."

"You'll back off if you know what's good for you. This is bigger than you could ever imagine." The man's face suddenly contorts into a cunning smirk. Before I can react, he slams his knee into my stomach.

"Ugh!" I gasp, momentarily winded by the blow.

In that split second, the man twists free of my grip and bolts down the street. I catch up and manage to grab his ankles, tackling him to the asphalt. Tiny rocks gouge at my knees, but I ignore the pain. He kicks back hard, connecting with my shoulder. I involuntarily release my hold, and he scrambles to his feet.

Jumping to mine, I hold my fists at face level.

The man grins menacingly. "You want answers? Come and get them, tough guy."

With a low growl, I lunge forward and throw a right cross, connecting with his jaw. His head jerks back, and he

stumbles before regaining his footing. He retaliates with a swift punch to my gut that sends me backwards.

“You’re not so tough after all,” he taunts, circling me with ease. “You’re just a little boy playing at being a hero.”

I grit my teeth, anger boiling in my veins. This man has no idea who he’s dealing with. With a roar, I charge forward, throwing punch after punch in rapid succession. He dodges most of them, but a few connect, leaving bruises and cuts on his face.

He lands a blow to my eye, and for a moment, everything goes black. When my vision clears, he’s standing over me, a cruel sneer on his face. “My turn.”

He brings his foot down towards my face, but I roll out of the way at the last moment. I kick his other foot out from under him. He falls hard to the ground. Before he can recover, I’m on top of him, punching him with all my might. I don’t know who this guy is, but he’s here to hurt Jessica, and for that, he has to pay.

“Damn it!” the man yells as he shoves me to the side. “You’re really starting to piss me off!”

With a growl, he throws a punch that connects with my cheek. Then, he’s on top of me, pummeling me with his fists. Blow after blow lands on my face and my arms as he takes out all his aggression on me. I curl up into a ball, trying to protect my face from the onslaught. I’m not going to let the man beat me, but I need an opening.

I gather my strength. With a burst of energy, I push him off me and roll to my feet. He tries to grab me, but I sidestep him and land a powerful kick to his ribs. He grunts in pain, but quickly recovers and lunges forward, grabbing me by the neck. I gasp for air as he tightens his grip, cutting off my oxygen supply.

“You think you’re so tough, don’t you?” he sneers, his face contorted with rage. “Well, let’s see how tough you are without air.”

I struggle against his grip, clawing at his hands in a desperate attempt to free myself. But he's too strong, and I'm starting to feel dizzy from lack of oxygen. I go slack, pretending to pass out. The idiot buys it, relaxing his hold just enough for me to break free. I jab my fist into his sternum. The man grunts and looks up in surprise. But instead of trying to fight me, he turns and runs, disappearing into the night.

My heart pounds as I try to catch my breath, cursing myself for letting him escape. If I weren't so oxygen deprived, I would have had him.

"Damn it!" I can't chase him down now. He's too far gone. But this isn't over, not by a long shot.

I turn back toward Sienna's house, my mind racing with questions and concern. A dangerous game is being played here, and I need to find out who's pulling the strings. For Jessica and Sienna's sake, I won't let this threat go unanswered.

Returning to the front porch, I try to slow my pounding heart. Something on the doormat catches my attention. It's a plain white envelope without anything written on the front. I bend to pick it up. I'm about to open it when the front door swings open.

"Who's there?" Sienna's voice rings out, sharp with fear. She points a shotgun at me, its barrel just inches from my chest. I raise my hands slowly, praying she recognizes me before pulling the trigger.

"Sienna, wait! It's me, Talon!"

Her eyes widen slightly as she lowers the gun, relief mingling with shock.

"What are you doing here? You scared the hell out of us," Jessica says as she appears behind Sienna. They both stare at me with wide-eyed concern.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to," I reply, lowering my hands, still clutching the unopened letter in one. "I couldn't leave you two alone tonight. I had a bad feeling about it, and I was right.

Someone was trying to break into your house. I saw him lurking around and chased him, but he got away.”

“Are you okay?” Jessica asks, her voice trembling slightly as she looks me over.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“What’s that?” Jessica asks, nodding toward the letter in my hand.

“Found it on the doormat. I was about to open it when you came out.”

“Let’s go inside and see what it says.” Sienna’s voice is tight with apprehension.

“Good idea,” Jessica says.

We step into the house and Sienna closes the door behind us. Loki runs up to greet me. I bend down to rub his ears before redirecting my attention to the letter.

“Let’s see what’s inside.” I slide my fingernail under the seam.

“Wait! What if there’s something bad inside it, like, I don’t know ... anthrax or something?” Sienna’s gaze is firmly fixated on the envelope.

“Why would anyone put that on your porch?” Jessica asks. “Just open it.”

“Okay.”

They exchange wary glances as I open it. There’s a single, folded piece of paper inside. I unfold it, slowly revealing the contents. It’s comprised of cut-out letters from newspapers, and they form the chilling words: I’m coming for you.

Jessica’s eyes widen in horror, and her breath hitches as she reads it aloud. “I’m coming for you.” The color drains from her face, leaving her looking ghostly pale.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Sienna demands.

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it,” I respond.

“Jess, hey, don’t cry. We’re here for you,” Sienna reassures her friend, stepping closer and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. Sienna’s trying to keep her own fear under control, but I can see the tension in her jaw. She’s just as frightened as Jessica, and I don’t blame her. This isn’t good at all.

“Who could be doing this?” Jessica whispers, her voice cracking with despair. “Why won’t they just leave me alone?”

“Hey, come here.” I gently pull her into my arms. “We’ll figure this out, okay? We’re not going to let anyone hurt you.”

“What if you can’t stop them? We don’t even know who’s after me.” Her voice is small and nearly broken.

“We will. I won’t give up until I figure out who’s behind this. Okay? Look at me.” I wait until her gorgeous violet eyes meet mine. “Trust me.”

“Thank you, Talon.” She manages to give me a weak smile.

“Let’s make sure all the doors and windows are locked,” Sienna suggests, her tone practical but laced with underlying worry. “Then we can plan our next move.”

“I’ll help you check downstairs. You look upstairs,” I say.

“Upstairs?” Sienna arches a brow.

“Someone could climb the porch or the vines on the wall.”

“Shit.” The stairs creak as she heads up to check the windows.

“Stay with me. We’ll make sure it’s sealed up down here.” I take Jessica’s hand and lead her from room to room, checking for any unlocked windows. They’re all sealed tight. The doors are all secure, too.

When Sienna returns, I take control of the situation. “You two can’t stay here tonight. Do you have any other options?”

“I could stay with my parents,” Sienna says. “But they hate dogs. Mom claims she’s allergic, but she just says that so

people won't argue with her."

"What about you, Jess? Is there anyone else you could stay with?"

"Not really. Dad's out of town and I don't have anyone else I'd be comfortable calling in the middle of the night."

"Well, that only leaves one option then."

"What?"

"You're staying with me tonight."

There's no way in hell I'm going to let her argue with me about this, but I'm ready for a fight. She's not leaving this place unless it's with me. There's no room for debate here. Until we find out who's stalking her, she's not leaving my side.

Chapter 6: Jessica

I cross my arms and study Talon. He's nuts if he thinks I'm just going to jump on the back of his bike and ride off into the night. That's not going to happen. I'm still not even sure he's not somehow involved in this. I doubt he is, but how do I know for sure?

"I barely know you," I argue, my voice tense with suspicion. "And I didn't see anyone outside. We don't even know for sure someone was trying to break in."

"Yeah," Sienna says, taking my side.

Talon's expression remains calm, though he shifts uncomfortably under my gaze. I note the scratches and bruises on his arms and face—maybe he's telling the truth. But why should I trust him? My heart races as I grapple with the uncertainty.

"The stalker escaped, but I promise you'll be safe with me. You don't have to worry." His voice is firm but gentle.

"You're a part of one of the most notorious outlaw gangs in Montana. How do I know you aren't setting me up to ... I don't know, kidnap me or something?"

"Kidnap you?" He chuckles. "Babe, if I wanted to throw you over my shoulder like a caveman and carry you off, you wouldn't be able to stop me."

His comments should terrify me, but instead, the thought of being manhandled by a man as big and sexy as Talon makes me hot in all the right places. But being turned on isn't a good reason to believe someone.

"I promise not to hurt a single hair on your head." He grins and holds out his little finger. "Pinky promise."

"Seriously?" I laugh.

Talon takes a step closer. His eyes search mine with an intensity that makes me quiver. "I understand your concern, but you need protection, and I'm offering it. You're in danger, whether you saw anyone outside or not. That letter proves it. I

didn't make that. I'd never terrorize a woman. Weak men do shit like that, and I'm not a coward."

My intuition tells me Talon is being honest, but fear has its grip on me. The thought of staying with him, a man I hardly know, is terrifying. But what choice do I have?

"I don't think he's part of this," Sienna says, breaking the silence. "You should go with him. He clearly got his ass kicked by someone, so I believe him. Besides, he called the voodoo priest, right? Maybe that guy will call back and give you a clue about who's behind this."

With a deep breath, I decide to take the leap and trust Talon, praying that my instincts are right. "Okay. I'll go with you. But if anything happens, I'm out of there."

"Understood," Talon nods, relief flooding his features. "You won't regret it."

"She'd better not. My father's a Russian diplomat. I'll have him poison your ass if you hurt her. You'll never see it coming." Sienna gives him a pointed look.

"Jesus." He holds up his hands in surrender. "Don't worry, Ms. Mafia. I'll keep your friend safe."

"Good. You'd better. If I don't hear from her by noon tomorrow, I'm telling my dad about you," Sienna says.

"I'll contact you before then," I reassure her. She may be my bestie, but she gets downright scary sometimes. I have no doubt she'd send the entire mob after the club if Talon did anything to hurt me.

"What about Loki?" Sienna asks.

"Can he come, too?" I glance down at my dog, who hasn't left Talon's side since he arrived.

"If you're that worried about Loki, there are twenty-four-hour doggie daycares around," Sienna suggests.

"No, I can't just leave him with people I don't know," I reply, shaking my head. The thought of leaving my beloved dog with strangers is unbearable, especially considering everything else that's happening. As if sensing my distress,

Loki trots over and nuzzles his head against my leg, looking up at me with those big, trusting eyes.

“Hey, buddy. You want to come home with me?” Talon asks, squatting down and holding out his hand for Loki to sniff. Loki doesn’t hesitate. He eagerly sniffs Talon’s hand before licking it affectionately. Talon scratches behind Loki’s ears, and a smile spreads across his face as my dog leans into the touch.

“He seems to really like you,” I say, unable to keep the surprise out of my voice. Loki has always been a good judge of character and seeing him so comfortable with Talon makes me question my hesitation. If Talon weren’t a good guy, Loki would know. My dog has warned me in the past when someone wasn’t trustworthy. I’m confident he’s a good judge of character. Dogs have instincts we don’t understand, but that doesn’t make them wrong.

“Animals have a way of knowing who they can trust,” Talon says, as if he can read my thoughts. “If it helps you feel better, I promise to look after him, too.”

Watching them interact, I can’t deny the connection between Talon and Loki. It’s clear my dog trusts him, and maybe that’s enough for me to do the same. After all, if I’m going to stay with Talon for my protection, I should try to believe in him.

“Okay,” I say quietly. “I’ll trust you ... for now.”

“Good. That’s settled.”

“Where are we going? Where do you live?”

“In the MC’s clubhouse. Don’t worry, you’ll have your own room there.”

“Who else lives there?” I ask, trying to picture what kind of people I might be surrounded by. Are they all as protective as Talon, or will they see me as an unwanted guest?

“Reaper has a room there, too. He’s the club’s Enforcer,” he says, as if that should mean something to me. “We also have some prospects staying there.”

“What’s an Enforcer do?” I ask.

“He makes sure everyone in the club follows the rules.”

“You have rules?”

“Absolutely. Without them, we’d have chaos, which is something we can’t stand.”

“That’s interesting. And the Prospects, who are they?” The term is unfamiliar, but I can guess what it means. They’re probably recruiting new members or something like that.

“New guys hoping to earn their place in the club,” he explains. “They have to prove themselves, do whatever tasks are asked of them by the full members. If they’re dedicated and loyal, they’ll eventually be voted in as a full member. Once they find out what’s going on, they’ll work to protect you, too. We’re a brotherhood, and if one of us is in trouble, we all band together to make shit right.”

Us. The word resonates in my chest. They sound like a family, which is something I really miss. Ever since my mom died, I haven’t felt as close to my dad. I think it’s because of his new relationship, but I couldn’t expect him to stay single forever. Getting remarried was inevitable. Still, I feel like we’ve lost something in the process, something I really want to recapture.

“Jessica, I realize this is all new to you,” Talon says, his voice softening. “But I promise, you’ll be safe with us. You won’t have to face this alone. We’ll protect you, no matter what. That’s what we do. We take care of our own.”

The sincerity in his eyes is impossible to ignore. And deep down, I know I can’t face this stalker alone. I need help, even if it means leaving my comfort zone and placing my trust in a motorcycle club.

“All right,” I say finally, my voice barely above a whisper. “How do we get Loki there?”

“I’ll call Reaper. We’ll handle it.”

“I should get going,” Sienna says. “I have an early meeting tomorrow morning, and if I don’t get some sleep, I’m

going to blow it. This could be a huge account for me.”

“What do you do?” Talon asks.

“Interior design.”

“Huh.” He looks at her thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asks defensively.

“I don’t know. I thought maybe you ran guns for the Bratva or something.”

“We don’t have ties to the Mafia.” Sienna rolls her eyes.

“You brought it up, not me.” He smirks.

“Tell your parents hi from me,” I interrupt to stop a potential argument. Sienna’s very touchy about what her father does for the government. I don’t even know exactly what he does as a diplomat. “I promise I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Be careful.” As Sienna pulls me into a tight hug, I can feel the tension beneath her poised exterior. This situation frightens her as much as it does me. She whispers so only I can hear her, “If something feels off about this guy, run.”

“I will.”

“Take care of yourself,” she says before leaving. I go to the window and watch her get into her car and drive off. My gaze darts around to various points in the yard. I don’t feel like someone’s looking in at me, but I don’t know what to think anymore. I keep searching for any sign of someone lurking outside, but I don’t see anything.

Talon pulls out his phone and dials a number. “Reaper, we need a cage at my location. I’ll send you the address ... Yeah, now. Good. See you soon.”

“Is the cage for Loki?” I ask hesitantly.

“Oh, no. It’s not that kind of cage. In the club, we refer to cars as cages because we don’t feel free when we have to ride in one. We prefer our bikes, but we don’t have any dog seats, so Loki will have to ride in the car with us.”

“Wait, there are dog seats for motorcycles?” I ask, surprised by the revelation.

“Of course,” he chuckles. “We’ve got a few guys in the club with dogs. They wouldn’t dream of leaving their pets behind, so they make sure their bikes are equipped for them.”

A small smile tugs at my lips, despite the situation. The image of tough bikers riding with their dogs somehow softens the intimidating aura surrounding Talon and his club.

“Reaper should be here soon. Stay away from the window for now.”

“Do you think the guy stalking me is still out there?” I drop the curtains and they fall back into place.

“He could be. I would be.”

“What?”

“I try to get inside the minds of criminals to figure out what they’d do next. If I were stalking you, I’d be hiding outside, ready to follow you again. I don’t know how he found you here. I trailed behind you guys all the way from your house to here.”

“You did? I didn’t see you.”

“Because I’m careful. The club protects people in trouble who have nowhere else to turn. We’re used to this stuff. That’s why I’ve got to get into this guy’s mind. Eventually, I’ll be one step ahead of him, and that’s how I’m going to catch him.”

Lights cuts through the darkness, splashing light across the curtains. I peel one edge back as a sleek black SUV pulls into the driveway. As the driver-side door opens, I take an involuntary step back. A mountain of a man emerges. His intimidating stature and heavily tattooed arms make me instinctively reach for Loki’s leash.

“That’s Reaper.” Talon opens the door and greets him with a nod.

“Hey, brother.” His voice is rough and scratchy, almost hoarse, as if he rarely uses it. “I’ll follow you two back to the

clubhouse.”

Loki, seemingly unaware of Reaper’s fearsome appearance, bounds toward him with his tail wagging furiously. The huge man kneels to allow my dog to nuzzle into his chest and lick his face.

“Hey there, little buddy,” Reaper coos, scratching Loki behind the ears. “You ready for a new adventure?”

“Woof!” Loki’s tongue hangs out as he looks at me with wide, happy eyes. I’ve never seen him take to anyone like this before. He seems completely at ease with both men. Usually, he hates guys, but not these two.

Despite my initial apprehension, I find myself trusting Reaper simply because Loki seems to adore him. If my fiercely protective companion can sense this man is kind-hearted, then who am I to disagree?

“Thanks for bringing the cage.” Talon tosses his keys to Reaper, who catches them midair. “Don’t scratch my bike.”

Reaper grunts before heading outside. He starts the motorcycle but waits as we file out. Talon holds open the passenger door for me as I slide into the car.

“Come on, Loki,” I call, watching as he obediently leaps into the backseat. He circles once before settling down and resting his head on my shoulder.

“Let’s get going.” As he starts the engine, a low rumble vibrates through the SUV’s frame. I get the sense this vehicle has a lot more horsepower than most. I wonder if they modified it somehow.

As we drive, a strange mix of anxiety and relief comes over me. On the one hand, I’m terrified of what lies ahead, particularly the thought of staying at the motorcycle club’s clubhouse. On the other hand, I’m comforted by the knowledge that Talon and Reaper are doing everything in their power to protect Loki and me.

“You’re still worried, aren’t you?” Talon asks, drawing me out of my thoughts. “I promise you’ll be safe at the

clubhouse. We've got security measures in place, and everyone there will have your back."

"It's hard to relax when you don't know who's out to get you."

"True," he says, meeting my eyes for a brief moment before returning his gaze to the road. "Hopefully, Bones will get back to us tomorrow with more information about the doll."

As we approach the large, white, farmhouse-style clubhouse, I find myself clinging to the idea of family and the hope that no matter what danger lurks in the shadows, I won't have to face it alone.

Chapter 7: Talon

Scar's stern voice cuts through the air like a knife, calling all members of the motorcycle club into the room in the clubhouse where we hold Church. I'm on edge as I step inside, knowing that what happened with Jessica last night has to be shared and discussed. I take the Ziploc-bagged voodoo doll out of my pocket and place it on the long wooden table we're all gathered around. Nitro, Matrix, and Scar lean forward to get a better look.

"What the hell is that?" Nitro asks.

"A huge fucking problem," I say.

"Church is in order." Scar slams the gavel down. "Talon had a crazy night and he's here to tell us about it. Go ahead."

I nod and clear my throat. Everyone's eyes are on me as I begin the story. "Last night, I met a girl at the bar. Someone slashed one of her tires. When it blew out on the road, she pulled into our parking lot."

"What the fuck?" Matrix frowns. "Does she know who did it?"

"No." I shake my head. "I fixed it and followed her back to her house, where we found this." I slide the doll over to him, so he can get a better look.

"Did you call Bones yet?" Scar asks.

"I texted him a pic. He's looking into it."

"We should call him," Nitro says, bouncing in his chair. I swear that guy can't ever sit still.

"But it gets worse," I say.

"Go ahead," Scar urges.

"Jessica called her friend Sienna and they decided to go over to her house for the night. I followed them but didn't exactly tell them I was doing it."

"Stalker." Reaper smirks.

“I think she’s got one, but it’s not me. After waiting around for a few hours, I was about to leave when a man showed up. I almost had him, but he got away.”

“Bastard,” Matrix mutters.

“He left a threatening note.” As the gravity of the situation dawns on the members’ faces, I pull the note out of my pocket. Matrix slides it across the table to get a better look. “We need to figure out who’s doing this and put a stop to it.”

“Did you ask her about ex-boyfriends? Anyone who would want to hurt her?” Scar asks.

“Yeah, but she can’t think of any.”

“Maybe you haven’t asked her the right questions,” Nitro says.

“I didn’t interrogate her, but we went over possible suspects, and nothing seemed to fit. This guy’s organized. He’s cunning. Somehow, he followed the girls to Sienna’s house without me noticing.”

“If he’s been stalking her for a while, he probably already knew where Jessica would go if she was in trouble,” Matrix says.

“That’s what I figured, too,” I say.

“We’ve got two clues to work with,” Scar says. “The doll and the note.”

“Did you call the cops?” Reaper asks.

“They’d just take the evidence and lock it up. I talked her out of it so we could keep it.”

“Good. What else is going on with her?” Scar asks.

“Lots of phone calls where no one responds after she picks up. Feeling like she’s being watched. Typical stalker shit.”

“But she didn’t do anything about it?” Nitro asks.

“Like what?” A defensive note enters my tone. I don’t know why I want to protect her so much, but I do. There’s just

something about her that makes me want to keep her safe from everything and everyone. Nitro's not implying anything bad. He's just asking questions, but it's pissing me off anyway. "You know the cops won't do shit about stalkers. They can't do anything until someone gets attacked."

"Matrix, get Bones from the NOLA chapter on video conference. We need his expertise," Scar commands.

"Can we bring Jessica in here, too?" I ask, knowing she deserves to be involved in this discussion.

"Into Church?" Reaper raises a brow.

"Absolutely not. She's not a member, and this is club business now," Scar says. "The minute you brought Reaper into this, it became our problem. We're going to handle it, but she doesn't need to be here for this discussion. We don't let outsiders into our meetings, especially when other chapters are involved."

"But she's at the center of all this. She might be able to help us piece things together. She deserves to know what's being said about her case," I argue, frustration rising in my chest.

Matrix announces, "Bones is ready."

Bones appears on the screen, his Louisiana drawl instantly recognizable. "Let the girl come in. She might figure out who's stalking her once she hears what I have to say. We won't bring up anything else while she's in the room."

"I guess that would work," Scar says.

"Back in a minute." I push back from the chair.

"How are things in NOLA?" Scar asks Bones as I leave the room.

"Well, we've got a new problem down here ..."

As I walk down the hall, I miss the end of what he's saying. I'll have to ask Scar about it later. The NOLA chapter's been up to their eyeballs in bullshit recently. We're always ready to lend a hand if they need it, but so far, they haven't asked.

The door to Jessica's room is slightly ajar. She's sitting on the bed, twisting a strand of her honey-blonde hair around her finger. A slight frown furrows her brow.

"Jess?" I call softly, knocking lightly on the doorframe. She jolts. Surprise and curiosity flicker across her gorgeous face.

"Hey there. What's going on?"

"Did you sleep okay?"

"As well as I could, considering everything. Thanks for letting me stay here last night."

"You and Loki can stay as long as you want. I sent a prospect out to get more dog food. He should be back with a whole setup soon."

"Oh, but I'm not staying."

"What?" I cock my head. "You sure as hell can't leave."

"Why not? I've got to get to work."

"We'll talk about that later. Right now, I need you to come with me. Normally, non-club members aren't allowed in our meeting room, but Scar's making an exception for you. Bones has some information about the voodoo doll that could help us crack this case."

Her eyes widen with excitement and a hint of fear. "Really? That's amazing."

"Come on." I gesture for her to follow me. "I'll introduce you to the other guys."

As we walk back to the conference room, I can sense her growing anxiety. We probably look like a bunch of scary bikers to her, which is partially true, but we're also here to help her. Hopefully, meeting the others will put her at ease.

When we enter the room, all eyes turn to Jessica. I stand tall beside her, offering my support, so she won't be intimidated by everyone.

"Guys, this is Jessica," I announce, locking eyes with each member in turn.

“Welcome,” Scar says, standing to shake her hand.

“Scar’s our club president. That’s Nitro, our vice president.” I point him out. “Matrix, our secretary and computer expert.”

“Nice to meet you,” Matrix says.

“And you already know Reaper.”

“Yes.” She gives him a tight smile.

“Good to see you again,” Reaper says.

“We pulled a chair in for you,” Scar says, gesturing toward the open seat beside mine. “Please, sit.” After we’re settled, he turns his attention to the screen. “Bones, fill us in on what you know about the doll.”

I sense the room fill with anticipation. Jessica slides her hand into mine. I give it a soft squeeze and look deep into her violet eyes. Warmth floods my chest because she doesn’t look away. It’s a clear sign of trust.

“Voodoo dolls are used to bring illness, suffering, and death to a specific person.” Bones pauses for a moment, allowing the weight of his words to sink in. “They’re usually made by tying two sticks in a cross shape to form a human body, but yours is much more elaborate. Now that I can see Jessica in person, the resemblance is clear. It’s shockingly accurate.”

“Yeah,” I mutter.

“It is,” Nitro agrees.

“Fuckin’ freaky,” Reaper says.

Jessica shudders. I tighten my grip on her hand, trying to offer some comfort.

“Decorations like sparkles and lace aren’t necessary, but the dolls are usually stabbed by pins,” Bones continues. “The pins create pain and sickness in someone. Have you been ill recently?”

“No,” she whispers.

“That’s good. It means it’s not working.”

“This one doesn’t have any pins,” I point out.

“Which leads me to believe you’re not dealing with an actual voodoo practitioner,” Bones says.

“What about the symbols?” Scar asks. “Any idea what they mean?”

“They’re called veves. The one on the doll you found is associated with Baron Samedi, the god of death.”

The room goes silent. The news hits us like a punch in the gut, and Jessica’s eyes widen in horror. I want to pull her into my lap and hold her, but we’re in the middle of Church. This isn’t the right time or place for that. What I need to focus on is the fact that someone wants to scare her, and we have no idea who it could be.

“Who would do this?” Jessica whispers. “Why?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Scar says. “Anything else, Bones?”

“That’s about it. I don’t think the person actually practices voodoo, but they did get the symbols right. However, you can easily find those online, so it wouldn’t take a genius to fake a doll.”

“So, it’s a fake?” Nitro asks.

“I’d say so. Have you tested the blood yet?” Bones asks.

“Not yet. We need to get it to Daisy’s friends at the lab,” Scar says.

“When you get the results, call me. If it’s animal blood, it might be helpful information.”

“Thanks, brother. We’ll keep you updated.”

“Stay safe, brothers,” Bones replies before the screen goes dark.

“If the doll’s not real, then we’re back to square one.” Scar strokes his beard before turning to Jessica. “Were any of

your ex-boyfriends into voodoo or any alternative religious practices?”

“None that I know of. I can’t think of anyone in my life who practices unusual religions.”

“Have any of your exes ever exhibited typical stalker behavior or shown controlling tendencies?” Matrix asks, his tone serious.

“Like what?”

“Did any of them complain about how much time you spent with friends or family?”

“No.”

“None of the guys ever tried to keep you away from other people?”

“I would have dumped them if they did. I’m not stupid,” she snaps.

“Not saying you are. I didn’t mean to imply that at all. It’s just that sometimes people don’t see the signs until it’s too late.” Matrix studies her before asking his next question. “Did any of them have substance abuse problems? Too much drinking or drugs?”

“I’d never date a drug user. They didn’t drink any more than normal.” She shrugs.

“What about self-absorbed guys? Narcissists. Men too wrapped up in themselves to care about your feelings?”

“Nope. Nothing like that.”

“Did any of them get jealous when other men talked to you?” Scar asks, taking over the questioning.

“I don’t remember anything like that.”

“Were any of them loners who didn’t have other friends?”

“No. I didn’t date that many people. I only had two real boyfriends.” She flushes slightly.

“What about guys you briefly dated?” I ask.

“I went out on some pretty bad dates.” She gives me a chagrined look.

“Did any of them pursue you after you broke things off?” Matrix asks.

“A couple of them tried to get me to go out on more dates, but I didn’t respond.”

“That’s the best way to get them to fuck off,” Reaper says.

“Yeah, they’ll find someone else to obsess about if you don’t reply.” Nitro nods.

“Usually, but not always. Some of them don’t get the message,” Scar says.

“None of that seems to apply to my exes or any of the guys I dated.” As she chews on her plump lower lip, the urge to kiss her is all I can think about. She’s so beautiful, but she doesn’t even seem to realize it. I can see how a man would become obsessed with her.

Frustration gnaws at me because we’re no closer to finding out who’s behind this than we were last night. The voodoo doll, which had seemed like a vital clue, is now essentially useless. I’m still going to give it to Daisy, so she can get her contacts to run the blood, but I have a bad feeling that won’t be helpful either.

“We’re going to have to wait and see if the stalker tries anything else. We’ve got nothing to go on right now,” Scar says.

“I’ve got to get to work. I’m already late. I texted my boss to tell her I was running behind, but I can’t take the day off.” She straightens her spine, and her tone is firm, but there’s no way I’m letting her go into the office today.

“Absolutely not,” I say.

“I agree. You shouldn’t leave the clubhouse.” Nitro shakes his head.

Reaper and Matrix both chime in with their disapproval as well, but Jessica’s stubborn and doesn’t want to give up.

“Listen,” she pleads, looking around the room. “I appreciate everything you’re doing for me, but I won’t let someone stop me from living my life. I need to go to work. It’s important.” Her voice wavers slightly, betraying her fear, but her resolve doesn’t falter.

“Dammit, Jess.” I sigh, running a hand through my hair. I want to wrap her up in my arms and keep her safely hidden away from whatever threat is looming over her, but I also understand her need for normalcy.

“We can send prospects to keep an eye on her,” Scar suggests.

“I’ll go.” Even though I trust the prospects, I’m not going to rely on other men to keep her safe. That’s my job now.

“We’re coming with you,” Scar says. “We’ll make sure Jessica gets there safely, and then we’ll keep an eye on her throughout the day. You’ll be safe throughout your shift.”

“Thank you,” she flashes a grateful smile.

“We’ll have two guys tailing you at all times. One in front to clear the way and another behind, ready to step in if anything happens,” Scar says.

“I’ll keep an eye on the security cameras surrounding your workplace. If anyone suspicious shows up or tries to get close, we’ll know about it,” Matrix says.

“Sounds good. We’ll do everything we can to ensure Jessica’s safety. This meeting is adjourned.” Scar slams the gavel before setting it aside. He gestures toward me. “A word.”

“Sure, Pres.” I follow him out onto the back porch. It overlooks the stream that runs through our property. We lean on the wooden railing and stare down at it. “What’s up?”

“When you texted the club last night, you mentioned running into the stalker.”

“I almost had that fuck, but he got away.”

“Okay. I don’t like the fact that we don’t have a single clue about who’s behind this. Usually, it’s someone the girl

knows, but what if it's not?"

"We could be dealing with a complete stranger."

"If you saw him again, would you recognize him?"

"I don't know. It was dark, so maybe."

"In which case, we're going to have to wait for him to approach her again. It's dangerous."

"I'm not using her as bait."

"That's not what I'm suggesting. But we're going to have to keep her on our radar until we catch this guy. What's your interest in her?"

"What do you mean?"

"You seem pretty invested."

"She's in trouble."

"Is that all?"

"Um, hmm." I dance around what he's getting at because I'm not ready to reveal the mixed feelings I have about her. She's too much of a princess for a guy like me, but I'm not ready to give her up either. We haven't even known each other for twenty-four hours, but I want to get to know her better. It's not just because she's drop dead gorgeous. There's more to it. I'm not exactly sure what, but she's in my life for a reason. Fate brought her to me and I'm going to keep her by my side for as long as it takes to figure out why.

Chapter 8: Jessica

I kneel to say goodbye to Loki. He looks up at me with his big, brown eyes, wagging his tail despite the impending separation. Loki knows I'm going to work; however, he's not whining or barking like he usually does when I leave. It's surprising. He must really like Tucker, the prospect Talon assigned to dog duty. I'm grateful for the help. I don't like taking Loki with me to the shelter because he gets massive anxiety. He thinks I'm going to leave him there, which I would never do, but he doesn't know that. I rescued him from the shelter, and I'll never give him away. I give Loki one last hug before standing up.

"Be a good boy, okay? Tucker's going to take care of you." I scratch behind his ears. Loki seems to understand. He gives Tucker an approving sniff before sitting at his feet.

"Hey there, buddy," Tucker says, bending down to greet Loki with a friendly pat on the head. "We're gonna have a blast together."

"Ready to go?" Talon asks.

I nod, feeling a mix of nerves and excitement. I smile as he tells me we'll be riding his motorcycle today. I've never ridden one before, but I've always wondered what it would be like.

As we walk toward his bike, I admire Talon's strong, sexy body beneath his leather jacket. It's hard not to feel a stirring of attraction, especially knowing I'll be wrapping my arms around him during our ride.

"Here, put this on," he says, handing me a helmet. I take it, appreciating his concern for my safety. As I secure the straps, I catch a glimpse of his piercing green eyes. My heart skips a beat.

"It's buckled," I murmur, trying to hide my flushed cheeks as I swing my leg over the back of the motorcycle. Once settled, I wrap my arms around his waist, feeling the heat

of his body against mine. I push aside my desire for him, focusing on the road ahead.

“Ready?” he asks over his shoulder.

“Yep!”

The rumble of the motorcycle’s engine fills my ears. Tucker’s playing with Loki in the yard. I give him a thumbs up as Talon and I speed off toward my workplace.

As the wind rushes past us, I’m grateful for Talon’s protective presence. The thought of someone stalking me is terrifying, but with him by my side, I’ll be safe. And as we ride together, the world around us blurring into a whirlwind of colors and sounds, I allow myself to forget my fears, if only for a moment.

When we reach the non-profit’s office building, I reluctantly let go of Talon’s waist. The warmth of his body leaves a lingering sensation on my fingertips, making it hard to focus on anything else.

“That was fun,” I say, trying to sound casual as I remove my helmet and hand it to him.

“Maybe I can take you for another ride later.” His voice is low and smooth like honey, and I wonder exactly what kind of ride he’s talking about.

“I’d like that,” I murmur.

“Remember, I’ll be close by, keeping an eye out for anyone who seems out of place.”

“Thank you,” I say sincerely. I’m touched by his dedication to my safety. Even though we barely know each other, he’s completely disrupting his life for me. He’s a different kind of man, that’s for sure.

Talon watches me closely as I walk toward the entrance of the building. He doesn’t turn away until I make it in safely.

Stepping inside, I glance at the security cameras in the lobby, hoping they’ll capture any suspicious activity while I’m at work. My gaze lands on Ginny, the receptionist, whose mean streak has always made her difficult to deal with. I try to

slip past her unnoticed, but she catches sight of me and calls out.

“Hey, Jessica! Rough morning?” she asks, her eyes raking over my less-than-classy outfit with obvious disdain. Normally, I wear a suit to work. Today, I’m dressed in a pair of tight jeans and a crimson, V-neck t-shirt. It was the only thing they had at the clubhouse. In our haste, I completely forgot to grab my bag when we left Sienna’s house. Talon said he’s sending a prospect to get it, but he won’t be back until later.

“Something like that,” I admit, trying to brush off her judgment. “I’m staying with a friend for a bit.”

“Ah, a friend. The classic walk of shame,” Ginny smirks, clearly enjoying my discomfort.

“Hardly,” I retort, determined not to let her get under my skin. “He’s just a friend.”

“I’m sure.” She rolls her eyes.

Ignoring her bitchy comment, I turn away and head toward my office. As I walk, I’m overcome with gratitude for Talon’s support amid all this chaos. If nothing else, knowing he’s watching out for me gives me the courage to face whatever comes my way, including Ginny.

I settle into my office chair, trying to focus on the stack of papers in front of me. My thoughts keep drifting back to Talon and the mysterious stalker, but I need to get some work done. It’s difficult to concentrate with the uncertainty hanging over me like a dark cloud.

“Hey, Jessica,” comes a voice from my doorway, making me jump. It’s Rex, one of my coworkers. He’s always been a bit too friendly for my taste. “How’s your day going?”

“Fine, Rex,” I reply tersely, hoping my tone will deter him from lingering. I’m in no mood for his usual flirtatious banter.

“Really? You seem a little ... distracted,” he says, leaning against the doorframe, his eyes raking over me with an unsettling intensity.

“Just have a lot on my plate right now,” I admit, trying to keep my voice steady. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

“Suit yourself,” he smirks, clearly not buying it. “If you say so.” With that, he saunters away, leaving me feeling even more anxious than before.

Later that day, Rex reappears at my door again. I make a mental note to close it after he leaves; I just wish I’d thought of that earlier.

“This package was left for you at the front desk. Ginny wasn’t up there when it arrived, but she asked me to give it to you, so I grabbed it.” He drops a medium-sized cardboard box on my desk with a thud. “It doesn’t have a return address, but it’s got your name on it in big letters. See?”

My heart starts racing as I stare at the package. Who would leave something for me without waiting for the receptionist? Swallowing my fear, I call Ginny into my office. After taking her sweet damn time, she saunters in a full minute later.

“Do you know who dropped this off?” I demand.

She shakes her head, her expression sour. “No idea. I went to grab a doughnut and coffee, and when I came back, it was just sitting there.”

Fear twists my belly into a series of knots. I wonder if this package is another message from my stalker. The thought sends chills throughout my entire body. I need to tread carefully. Whatever’s inside that box, it’s clear I can’t let my guard down for a moment.

My fingers tremble as I dial Talon’s number. I need him; I need his support and protection now more than ever.

“Hey, Jess,” he answers almost immediately. “What’s going on?”

“Someone left a package for me at the front desk,” I whisper, glancing toward my door, hoping no one overhears our conversation. “I don’t know who left it. Ginny doesn’t either.”

“Who’s Ginny?”

“Our receptionist.”

“Stay right there. I’m coming over,” he says firmly.

Within minutes, Talon bursts through my office door, Ginny’s on his heels.

“Sir, you have to check in with me,” she whines.

“It’s okay. This is Talon. He’s my ... uh, friend.”

“Oh. Right.” Ginny smirks before turning on her heel and leaving.

I notice several of my coworkers eyeing us with suspicion. They’re probably curious about Talon. It’s not like I have huge, scary dudes coming to visit me all the time. I don’t blame them for wondering who he is and why he’s here.

“That’s it,” I point to the package.

As he inspects it without touching it, I back away slowly. He bends to put his ear next to the box, as if he’s trying to listen for something.

“I don’t like this. Let’s call the cops.”

“Now you want to get them involved?”

“Yes.” His eyes lock onto the mysterious package. “It could be a bomb or something dangerous. They’ve got equipment they can use to check it.”

“Okay.” I nod as I reach for the phone on my desk.

As I relay the information to the dispatcher, I sense the atmosphere in the office shifting. My coworkers exchange whispers and glances, clearly wondering what on earth could be going on.

“They want us to evacuate the building,” I whisper to Talon.

“All right, everyone. We need to leave. Go out to the parking lot and wait,” his voice booms through the office. When no one moves, he adds. “Let’s go! This could be a bomb!”

Panic ensues. Everyone runs toward the exits, streaming out into the parking lot. Talon takes my hand and leads me through the chaos outside.

Sirens signal the arrival of the police. The bomb squad arrives shortly after. After Talon explains the situation to the officer in charge, a man dressed in a heavy suit enters the building. He returns several minutes later with the package clutched in his hands.

As he carries it to the edge of the parking lot, the tension in the air ratchets up a notch. He leaves it on the asphalt, then walks back to join the rest of his team. A robot is sent to scan the package. I hold my breath, praying everything will be okay.

Everyone's dead silent as we wait.

"Listen up, folks," says the officer in charge, addressing the small crowd that has gathered to watch the spectacle. "The package contains a stuffed animal. We've inspected it, and there's nothing creepy or dangerous about it. It just looks like a gift."

A wave of relief washes over me, though it's quickly replaced by frustration. Why would someone send me a stuffed animal with no note attached? What kind of twisted game is my stalker playing?

"Thank you, officers," I say, doing my best to sound appreciative despite the questions swirling in my mind. "I'm sorry it was a false alarm."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Talon says, coming to my side.

The cop in charge scowls at me, clearly unimpressed. "Next time, try not to overreact, okay? You've wasted our time and resources."

"I'm sorry, but someone left a voodoo doll on my doorstep last night. They slashed my tire. They followed me to my friend's house—"

"Did you report any of this?" the officer asks gruffly.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“She hasn’t had a chance yet,” Talon says, saving me from further explanation.

“Bring the tire and the doll to the station. We’ll file a report if you’re that concerned about it,” the cop says dismissively before heading back to the bomb squad truck with his team.

As they drive away, Talon wraps an arm around my waist, offering support. I lean into him, snuggling against his warmth. I don’t know what I’d do without him right now. I’d be at a complete loss, trying to figure out what to do next.

“You should file the report,” he suggests gently. “But I’ll be honest with you, the cops can’t do much about stalking cases unless there’s clear evidence someone intends to harm you. So far, all we have is a bloody doll, a stuffed animal, and a tire.”

“What about the note?” I ask.

“It just says, ‘I’m coming for you’. That’s too vague. It’s not exactly a direct threat.”

“You’re right, but what are we going to do?”

“These situations tend to escalate, so until we figure out who’s behind this, you’re going to have to stay close to me. Do those security cameras work?” He points at the one near the front door.

“They should.”

“We need to check those.” He pulls his phone out and makes a call. “Matrix, can you grab Daisy and come down to Jessica’s office? We had another incident, but we may have caught the guy on camera ... Okay. See you soon.”

“Who’s Daisy?” I ask.

“Matrix’s old lady. She’s ex-FBI, and she’s great with computer forensics. Between the two of them, if that guy’s anywhere in the footage, they’ll find him.”

Less than an hour later, Matrix and Daisy walk into my office. Their presence is a reminder of the motorcycle club's unwavering support. I can't believe they dropped whatever they were doing to come help me. The club really is like a family.

"Hi, I'm Daisy." She resembles a farmer's daughter with her long, brown hair tied on each side with ribbons that match her shirt. Her emerald-green eyes are friendly and welcoming. She's wearing jeans and a casual t-shirt. She's beautiful in a girl-next-door kind of way.

"Jessica. Nice to meet you." I reach to shake her hand, but she surprises me by pulling me into a hug. I glance at Talon, who doesn't seem to notice her overly affectionate greeting.

"Let's head to the security office," he says as soon as Daisy releases me.

"It's in the basement." I lead the group downstairs.

When we get to Thomas' office, he stands to welcome us. He's our security guard. He's older, with a bushy mustache and a warm smile. In a way, he reminds me of my late grandfather.

"I've got the footage ready for you. Fair warning, though, our security system is pretty cheap, so the images aren't exactly high definition."

"Let's see what you've got," Matrix says.

We gather around the monitor, watching as Matrix scrubs through the images. The tension in the room is almost unbearable. There's so much riding on this. We might finally see the face of the man stalking me. I don't know if I'm ready for this, but I want this nightmare to end, so I brace myself for whatever we find.

"There!" Matrix points at the screen, freezing the frame. "That's the guy who brought the box into the building."

"He's got the same build as the man who attacked me last night," Talon says.

The guy's face is obscured by shadows, making it impossible to discern any distinguishing features. He has a baseball hat pulled low across his face, and he's wearing a high-collared shirt. There's nothing familiar about him.

"Damn it," I mutter, frustration mounting. "Why can't we get a clear look at his face?"

Daisy leans in to study the footage. "This guy knows what he's doing. He avoids all the cameras, never giving us a straight shot of his face. It's like he's been inside the building before because he knows how to avoid the cameras."

Matrix nods in agreement, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I'm going to need a copy of the security tapes for the past month. Maybe we can find instances where delivery people came in more than once. They could be suspects."

"Good idea," Daisy says, her eyes still locked on the grainy image of the man. "If he's been inside before, we might be able to find a pattern."

As Matrix discusses getting the security footage with the guard, I'm overwhelmed by the lengths Talon and his club are going to in order to protect me. My thoughts race, trying to piece together how this unknown person could have infiltrated my life.

"Whoever this guy is," I whisper to Talon, "he must know a lot about me. He knows who my friends are. He knows where I work."

"We'll figure this out, Jess." His eyes are dark and serious as he pulls me closer. Despite the mounting danger, I believe him.

"Take another look at the guy. Could he be one of your coworkers?" Daisy asks.

I study the grainy figure on the screen once more. "I-I can't be sure. It's just too hard to tell."

"Matrix and Daisy, can you run background checks on everyone Jessica works with, starting with the men?"

"Absolutely," Daisy says.

“We’re not taking any chances.” Matrix gives me a quick nod.

“You’re all doing so much for me,” I whisper, feeling a mixture of gratitude and anxiety.

“Hey, we’ve got your back,” Talon reassures me, his eyes softening as he places a comforting hand on my shoulder.

Overwhelmed by their support, I throw my arms around Talon, burying my face in his chest. He hesitates for a split second before wrapping his arms around me and holding me tightly against him. As we cling to each other, I can feel our mutual need for comfort and safety, but also something deeper, something I’m not ready to explore yet.

When we finally break away, it feels like we’ve been caught in an intimate moment that neither of us had intended. Matrix and Daisy study us intently before glancing at each other. A smile spreads across their faces. I want to ask about it, but I stay quiet so I won’t betray the tangle of emotions in my heart.

“Let’s head back to the clubhouse,” Talon suggests, avoiding my eyes. “Dinner’s waiting for us.”

“Okay,” I agree, my cheeks flushed.

For now, I’ll focus on the task at hand. I need to find out who’s stalking me and why. I shouldn’t be thinking about how good it feels when Talon touches me, but I can’t help it. I’d be lying to myself if I ignored the spark of heat between us. But with everything going on, I can’t afford to let this thing between us ignite and become a blazing, passionate fire.

Chapter 9: Jessica

The wind whips through my honey-blonde hair as I cling tightly to Talon's waist. The motorcycle vibrates beneath me, its power surging with every twist of the throttle. My heart races in time with the engine, a rush of adrenaline and desire coursing through me. I imagine wrapping my thighs around Talon and feeling that same surge of power. The stress of being stalked must be catching up to me. I've never felt the desire to be utterly reckless before today.

As we pull into the clubhouse, the rumbling of the bike is replaced by the chatter and laughter of the club members. Some are gathered in the garage looking at one of the prospect's new bikes. I slide off Talon's bike, then try to shake off the lingering thrill of the ride. My body's still humming with desire, and all I can think about is having Talon nestled between my thighs.

"Everyone, this is Jessica," Talon announces, causing various conversations to pause as all eyes turn toward us.

"Hey!"

"New club girl?" one of the guys wearing a prospect's vest asks.

"No," Talon snaps. "She's mine."

"No problem, brother." The guy holds up his hands. "Didn't mean anything by it."

"Good." Talon glares at him until the other guy looks away and swallows uncomfortably.

"What does that mean?" I ask softly.

"It means they won't fuck with you because I claimed you."

"Claimed me?"

"I'll explain it later. Let's go inside before I have to bash heads. I don't want them looking at you like you're fresh meat."

As we head inside, more prospects and club members are milling about the kitchen. Several are sitting in the living room watching a ball game.

“You must be Jessica!” A petite woman with jet black hair streaked with gray approaches me. She’s wearing a turquoise and silver cross necklace that sways with each step. Her smile is warm and inviting as she extends a hand to me. “I’m Nina.”

“Nice to meet you.” I take her hand, instantly sensing the strength behind her small frame. Her leather boots, laced up to her knees, and fitted leather jacket give her an air of authority. But her floral tank top softens her look just enough to keep her from being scary.

“Are you Talon’s old lady?” Nina asks.

I glance at him, unsure about how I should respond since I don’t know what she’s asking. I’m twenty-five, so I wouldn’t consider myself that old.

“Knock it off, Nina.” Talon smirks, rolling his eyes. Clearly, he’s used to having her ask questions he doesn’t want to answer.

Nina chuckles, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Good for you, sweetheart. We can always use more strong women around here.” She pats my arm gently before walking away, leaving me to wonder what’s going on.

“Hey, Talon?” I ask, pulling him aside before we join the others at the dinner table. “What exactly does ‘old lady’ mean?”

He chuckles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “An ‘old lady’ is a term used for a woman who’s in a committed relationship with a member of the club. She’s respected and protected by the club, just like any member.”

“But ... we’re not in a relationship.”

“Nope.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask him if he wants to be in one with me, but I’m afraid I might not like the answer, so I

stay silent.

As we sit down to eat, I observe the various members of the motorcycle club. They all seem like one big, happy family, with kids running around, laughter filling the air, and a sense of camaraderie that's both heartwarming and intriguing.

"Scar," I address the heavily tattooed man sitting across from me, "I'm curious about this club. What do you all do? It seems like there's a lot more going on here than just riding motorcycles."

Scar leans back in his chair, his eyes meeting mine as he considers my question. "You're right. We're not just a bunch of bikers who get together to ride. Our club was founded with a mission: To rescue people who need help, whether it's getting out of a bad situation or providing support when they have nowhere else to turn."

"Kinda like a modern-day Robin Hood," I muse, impressed by their dedication to helping others.

"Something like that." His lips curve into a slight smile. "We've got each other's backs, and we extend that loyalty and protection to those who need it most."

I glance around the table, taking in the faces of the men and women who've found a home within this club. Their loyalty and sense of purpose are remarkable, and I find myself drawn to their world. Maybe it's my own history of working with a non-profit, or perhaps it's the way they've welcomed me into their midst, but I feel a sense of connection to these people.

As dinner continues, I find myself listening more intently, soaking up their stories and experiences. They are some of the funniest people I've ever met, and they clearly care for each other deeply, like a true family.

"Nitro, you've been hinting at some story all evening. Spill it." Scar leans back, lacing his fingers behind his head.

"Remember when we had that ride to the countryside last month?" Nitro asks.

"This is a good one," Reaper says with a snort.

“The one where Talon got lost and ended up at a kid’s birthday party?” Nina asks.

“Hey! It was a wrong turn, and those kids now think I’m some sort of superhero.”

“Haha, yeah, that one. But this isn’t about Talon’s detour. So, we were riding, remember? And we saw that farm?” Nitro asks.

“The one with the mad farmer chasing away trespassers?” Nina giggles. “I heard about that.”

“Yes! Exactly! That one! So, here’s something y’all don’t know. After the ride, I realized I’d dropped my wallet. Figured it might be near that farm,” Nitro says.

“Why do you ever let him leave the house?” Scar asks Holly, Nitro’s wife.

“I don’t,” she quips. “He does that all by himself.”

Everyone laughs.

“You went back to that psycho’s place?” Scar asks, wiping tears from his eyes. “I thought that guy was going to blow a hole in every one of us when we got lost and rode onto his property.”

“I had to go back. I had some important stuff in there. But I had a plan. I wasn’t going in as a biker. I went in disguise.” Nitro gives everyone a smug look.

“Oh, no ... What did you do?” Nina asks.

“I found an old chicken suit in the garage. You know the one Reaper made that prospect wear at our last Halloween party? Figured if I wore it, I’d just blend in.”

Reaper nearly spits out his drink before finally choking it down.

“You ... dressed up as a chicken to get your wallet?” Matrix raises a brow.

“Exactly. It was fucking brilliant. So, there I am, waddling around this guy’s property, clucking and looking for

my stuff. I felt ridiculous, but it was working. No one noticed me.”

“Until?” Scar prompts.

“Until the real chickens decided I was intruding. I’ve never been chased by so many angry hens in my life! I was doing the chicken dance for real. And the rooster? That fucker has some real issues. Had to ditch the suit and make a run for it in my undies!”

“You did NOT!” Julia, Scar’s wife, slaps the table.

“I wish I hadn’t. The farmer saw a half-naked man sprinting away from his chicken coop. I heard him yell, ‘First bikers, now chicken thieves?’”

“Did you get your wallet?” Reaper asks over the din of laughter.

“Yep, it was by the roadside, nowhere near the farm. All that chicken dance for nothing!”

“I’d pay good money to have seen that,” Daisy says.

“Next time, just call me and I’ll get you a new wallet,” Nina says, smirking.

Nitro raises his drink. “To the adventures that never make the headlines.”

“Cheers to that,” Scar says, lifting his glass and clicking it against mine.

Several other guys go on to tell equally embarrassing stories that have me clutching my belly. Their adventures are hilarious and occasionally terrifying, but they clearly enjoy their lives.

The warm aroma of a home-cooked meal lingers in the air as I help clear the plates from the table. My fingers brush against Talon’s as we both reach for the same plate, sending a jolt of electricity up my arm. I look up to find his eyes fixed on mine, and I quickly pull my hand away.

“Sorry,” I mumble, feeling my cheeks heat.

He just grins at me before gathering the rest of the dishes. The other guys in the club help clean up. In no time, we're done.

"Hey, Jess," he says casually, "want to join me on the back porch? The view of the stream is amazing."

"Sure," I reply, more than happy to be alone with him again.

As we walk through the bustling kitchen, our arms brush against each other occasionally. Every time we touch, a fresh wave of desire rolls through me. It's impossible to ignore the electricity between us.

Outside, a wooden deck overlooks a gently babbling stream. As the sun dips below the mountain top, soft shadows flicker across the water. The peace and serenity of this place is unbelievable.

We sit side by side in Adirondack chairs. The gentle sound of the stream fills the silence between us. I could get used to visiting a place like this. It reminds me of when I was a child, and my parents would take me on fishing trips. I always loved playing along the riverbank.

I glance over at Talon, who seems lost in thought. The faint glow of the rising moon illuminates his strong profile. Everything about him screams power, but there's no control to it. There's a wild side of him simmering underneath the surface, and it makes me want to understand what that's about.

"Tell me more about your family," he finally says, turning his dark gaze to meet mine.

"Well," I start hesitantly, unsure of where to begin. "My mom ... She passed away after a long battle with breast cancer. She was a well-known philanthropist, always giving her time and energy to help others. After doing so much good in the world, it wasn't enough to save her life. And believe me, we tried everything. But eventually, we lost her."

"She sounds like she was an incredible woman." He slides his hand into mine and holds it gently.

“She was,” I whisper, touched by his empathy. “My dad is all I have left now. He recently remarried, but ... I don’t really get along with his new wife, Allison. I can’t put my finger on why, but she’s never warmed up to me.”

Talon’s thumb gently rubs circles on the back of my hand as he considers this. “No one likes being reminded of previous relationships.”

“Maybe,” I concede, my heart aching at the thought of my mom being replaced so easily. “I just wish things were different. I wish Mom was still here.”

“Hey,” he says softly. He tilts my chin up with his other hand, forcing me to look into his eyes. “Something like cancer is completely out of your control. It sounds like your mom did everything possible to fight it. I know how hard it is to move forward, but that doesn’t mean you have to forget her. You and your dad aren’t replacing her. Your mom’s memory will always be with you, but this new woman in your dad’s life, she deserves a chance, too.”

“I suppose. It would be helpful if Allison would make the slightest effort to get to know me.”

“It does go both ways. Maybe you can extend an olive branch and see how she reacts. Fortunately, or unfortunately, she’s family now. You may not like the fact that your dad remarried, but you can’t expect him to mourn forever. How long has it been since your mom passed?”

“Almost a year.”

“Hum. I can see why you’d be upset, but maybe your dad doesn’t like being alone. Some guys can’t deal with it, especially if they were married for a long time.”

“Twenty-five years.”

His low whistle fills the air. “Lucky guy.”

“Do you want to get married?”

“Maybe. I’d have to find someone who could put up with me.” He chuckles.

“You never know who you’ll meet.”

“I met you.”

“Yeah,” I whisper. Somehow, despite only knowing him for such a short time, I feel a connection with him that I can’t quite explain. Curiosity gets the better of me, and I decide to ask about his past. “What about your family? Can you tell me about them?”

His eyes darken momentarily, but then he surprises me by opening up. “I don’t know much about my biological parents. They left me when I was six years old. Said they were going to the store, but they never came back.”

“That must have been so hard.” My heart aches for him.

“Yeah, it was rough.” He gives a half-shrug. “But eventually, someone found me eating garbage behind a gas station quickie-mart. After that, I was put into the foster system.”

“Oh, Talon.”

“It’s all in the past now.” He waves a hand as if it doesn’t matter, but it does. Being abandoned at such a young age had to have a profound impact on him.

“Did anyone ever adopt you?” I ask, intertwining my fingers with his.

“Jonathan Blackstone did.” He averts his gaze, avoiding my surprised look.

“Blackstone? As in Governor Blackstone? The governor of Montana?” I’m intrigued by the connection. He’s one of the most powerful men in the state, maybe even in the country. There are rumors he’s going to run for president, but he hasn’t made an official announcement yet.

“Bedtime,” Talon abruptly interrupts, standing up and offering me his hand.

The sudden change in topic leaves me flustered. Instead of asking for details about how Talon ended up in Montana with Governor Blackstone, I can’t stop thinking about Talon. In bed. Specifically, my bed.

“Are you blushing?” he teases, a playful smirk on his lips.

“You must be hallucinating,” I lie quickly, hoping to deflect his attention from my embarrassment.

“Must be.” The glint in his eye tells me he doesn’t quite believe me.

I still have so many questions about Jonathan Blackstone, but for now, I push them aside. Instead, I focus on the warmth of Talon’s hand in mine and the knowledge that, even in the darkest moments of our lives, we’ve both managed to find a sense of family, and maybe something more.

The moment we step inside the clubhouse, I’m struck by the contrast between the warm, chaotic atmosphere of the common areas and the hushed quiet that fills the hallway. Talon guides me to my room, his hand still wrapped around mine. When we reach my door, he lets go of my hand and leans against the wall.

“Goodnight, Jess,” he murmurs. There’s a hint of hesitation in his voice, making me wonder if he has more on his mind.

“Goodnight, Talon,” I reply softly, my heart pounding as I study his face. The dim light casts shadows across his chiseled features, emphasizing the intensity in his dazzling green eyes.

For a moment, it feels like time is suspended. What would happen if he leaned in to kiss me? Would I respond? My body seems to answer for me, trembling with anticipation, even though my mind is clouded with uncertainty.

He doesn’t move closer, though. Instead, he pushes off the wall and offers me a small smile. “Sleep well.”

“You, too,” I sigh, trying to hide my disappointment.

As I close the door behind me, I lean back against it, feeling the weight of my current situation sink in. I can’t believe I’m living with a motorcycle club. My dad would be furious if he knew. It dawns on me that I haven’t heard from him since he left for his honeymoon with Allison. I remember they’re supposed to return soon, and a pang of anxiety twists

in my gut. We'll have to talk eventually, and I'm not sure how to explain everything.

Deciding to call him in the morning, I force myself to focus on getting ready for bed. But even as I slip between the cool sheets, my thoughts are consumed by images of Talon. His strong arms. His vulnerable past. The undeniable pull between us. It's all part of a strange puzzle, but I'm going to figure out what's going on between us eventually, and I wonder what tomorrow will bring.

Chapter 10: Talon

Shadows twist and bend as I run through an unfamiliar house. Each hallway leads deeper into the labyrinth. Walls close in around me as if the very structure is conspiring against my escape. Panic gnaws at my chest. The urgency to flee overwhelms me, but I can't find a way out. And the monster ... it's right behind me, clawing at my tattered shirt, blowing its hot breath down my neck, mocking me with laughter so familiar I'm sure I've heard it before.

A sense of impending doom hangs heavy in the air. For a moment, the monster falls behind. My little legs race as fast as I dare because it's still back there. I'm being pursued by something sinister, something I'm too terrified to face. It's stalking me, watching from the shadows, reveling in my terror.

The echo of my frantic footsteps reverberates through the empty corridors. Behind me, the sound of ominous footfalls grows louder. He's getting close. I don't dare look back because I know, deep in my soul, that it's him. The demon.

His malevolent presence raises the hair on the back of my neck. He's been chasing me for years, and no matter how fast or far I run, it's never enough. He always catches me. He always drags me into a room from which I can't escape. He always does terrible, wicked things to me while I cry. I can't let him grab me again. Not tonight. Not ever.

As I sprint through the darkened house, the atmosphere grows colder. Every time I exhale, clouds form in the air. An eerie silence descends. My heartbeat pounds in my ears. My eyes dart from one dark doorway to another, searching for a way out, a window, a door that leads outside—anything to escape the clutches of this nightmarish pursuit.

I stumble into rooms that shift and change with doors leading to nowhere, hallways that wrap around themselves, returning me to the place where I started. The house mocks my attempts to flee. It feeds on my fear, drawing sustenance from my terror.

The monster's back. Right behind me. But it's different now. Its icy breath slithers down the back of my neck. Its claws are gone, replaced by hands that seem human but aren't. I risk a single glance over my shoulder, and what I see stops me in my tracks. It's Blackstone.

Adrenaline surges through my veins, pushing me to run faster, to keep going despite my exhaustion. If Blackstone catches me, he's going to drag me into his room where he hides disgusting toys no boy should ever be forced to play with.

Finally, a glimmer of hope appears before me—a faint light at the end of a hallway. I push myself forward, my lungs burning with each gasping breath. The light grows brighter, beckoning me toward it like a beacon of salvation. It's coming from a door, radiating from it. All I have to do is open it.

I grasp the knob and pull. The door swings open. Brilliant light blinds me momentarily. I bring my arm up to block the glare ... and that's what I see him. Blackstone. I'm not free. I'll never be free. And now, he's got me cornered, and I know there's no escape.

With a gasp, I wake up from the nightmare that has plagued me since we escaped Blackstone's dungeon. My heart races until I realize I'm safe. He's not here. I'm not trapped in his house anymore. I'm okay.

Overwhelmed with relief, my shoulders sag. I'm not a scared kid anymore, but the dream leaves me shaken. The fear and adrenaline from the chase linger even as I try to ground myself in the familiarity of my room in the clubhouse. Although it was just a dream, the haunting sensation of being pursued clings to me, a persistent reminder of the horror I'd endured all those years ago. A nightmare that won't end until Blackstone's dead.

I glance at the clock on the nightstand. It's after two a.m. Even though I was only asleep for a few minutes, it felt like hours.

After sliding out of bed, I pad across the room into my bathroom. Splashing water on my face, I don't dare look in the

mirror. I'll see fear looking back at me, and I can't deal with that right now. For some reason, a part of me is still terrified of Blackstone. I'm a man now, not a boy. I shouldn't be afraid of him, but there's a primal dread trapped in my body that I can't seem to shake. It's always with me. It never goes away, and I'm sure it will be a part of me until the day I die. I've learned to live with it, but I hate it.

Slipping out of my room, I silently pad to Jessica's bedroom door. I slowly open it so I can check on her. She looks so beautiful, even when she sleeps. Her honey-blond hair fans out across her pillow, forming a perfect halo. She's wearing a t-shirt Nina brought over earlier, along with the skimpiest pair of panties I've ever seen. I shouldn't be standing here drooling, but it's hard not to. She's so perfect, far too perfect for a man like me.

Loki raises his head up from where he's sleeping. I give him a quick nod and silently tell him to go back to sleep. He lays back down and shuts his eyes.

With a sigh, I close the door softly so I won't wake her. The last thing she needs is more stress. Finding me hovering over her like a pervert would be a disaster. I wasn't trying to creep on her anyway. I simply wanted to make sure she was okay.

The cool night air soothes my heated skin as I step outside. Wrapping my arms around myself, I walk down the steps at the front of the clubhouse. The night is still; I can't shake the sense of foreboding that's got its hold on me. Usually, nocturnal animals will come to greet me, but not tonight. Even they sense something's wrong.

A branch cracks near the river. My hand immediately goes to my cut, and I pull my gun out. I didn't have it at Sienna's house, and that's a mistake I won't be making again.

Holding it tightly, I creep around the edge of the house toward the sound. The moment I spot the shadow, I relax. I'd know that mountain of a man anywhere.

"Hey, brother," Reaper says.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” I ask, falling into step beside him.

“Bad dream. Felt like a premonition.”

“Blackstone?” I guess, remembering my own nightmare.

“Who else?” He spits onto the ground, his expression darkening. “I had this strange feeling, almost as if he was surrounding us. Just watching. Waiting for the right moment to strike. So, I came out here to check shit out.”

“You think it could be real?” My heart races at the thought of that man infiltrating our lives again. As far as I know, Reaper hasn’t had premonitions before, but our powers seem to shift over time. Maybe it’s a recent skill he’s acquired.

“Didn’t want to scare anyone ... But it’s been eating away at me. I can’t shake it.”

“Is there something we should be doing?” My mind’s already racing with possibilities.

“Yeah. I didn’t want to piss everyone off, so I didn’t say anything. But I’ve been sneaking onto Blackstone’s property, trying to see how far I can get before the guards stop me.”

“Shit, man.” I run a hand through my hair, both impressed by his boldness and pissed off because he didn’t include me. “What happened the last time?”

“Almost made it into the house. His security is tight, but I found a gap in their patrol schedule. If I’d had just a few more seconds, I could’ve slipped inside.”

“Are you insane? You could’ve been caught! You could’ve been killed! If Scar finds out about this—”

“Scar’s not going to hear about it. Right?” Reaper gets in my face.

“Why shouldn’t I tell him?”

“Because he’d make me stop, and I can’t do that. We need to know what Blackstone’s planning. He’s up to something. First the run for governor, and now, those rumors about a presidential bid. If that happens, we’re fucked. He’d be

the most powerful man in America. We can't let him have the upper hand again."

"Maybe you're right," I concede, my chest tightening with anxiety. "But we have to be careful. We can't afford any mistakes. If Blackstone ever catches you—"

"He won't. You've got to trust me." His eyes glint with conviction. "But it wouldn't hurt to have you with me. Having someone watch my back would be a good thing."

"Let me know when you want to go. I'll ride with you."

"Go with me tonight. We can infiltrate his ranch together." Moonlight flashes off Reaper's black eyes.

"I can't leave Jessica here alone."

"She wouldn't be. Tucker's here, and we've got five other prospects staying the night."

"Yeah, but would you trust them with your ..." It's on the tip of my tongue to call her my woman, but that's not true. No matter how much I want it to be, she's nothing more than a woman I'm trying to protect.

"Nothing's going to happen to her at the clubhouse," Reaper counters, frustration seeping into his voice. "We need to do this. We need to find out what he's up to. You know he's not sitting back twiddling his thumbs. He's planning something. I'd stake my life on it."

"You're that sure?"

"Yeah."

I grit my teeth, torn between my loyalty to my brothers and my desire to keep Jessica safe. Reaper's right. We can't let Blackstone have the upper hand again. The idea of putting her at risk makes my heart race with anxiety, but if Blackstone's planning something, then we need to stop him.

"Fine," I relent, knowing deep down that Reaper won't give up until I agree. "But we need to make sure the clubhouse is secure. Let's wake up Tucker and some of the other prospects and set up a patrol pattern for tonight."

“Deal,” Reaper agrees, relief washing over his face.

Back inside, we walk through the dimly lit house. The sound of our bootsteps echoes off the walls as we search for one of the prospects, Tucker. He’s proven himself to be both loyal and capable, making him the perfect choice for this assignment. I spot him lounging on a couch in the living room.

“Hey, Tucker,” I whisper, shaking him awake.

“What’s up?” He stands, instantly alert, and ready to spring into action. He’s going to make a good member of the club.

“I need you to round up three of our best prospects,” I instruct, getting straight to the point. “You’re in charge of security tonight. Make sure everyone patrols around the clubhouse. Reaper and I need to go do something. We’ll be back in a few hours. Call us if anything goes down.”

“Of course, brother.” Tucker nods.

“Good. Keep an eye on things, especially on Jessica.”

“Understood. I’m on it.” He disappears down the hallway, ready to carry out his assignment.

“We’ll make this quick,” Reaper says in a low tone. “Once you see how far I can get, you’ll be surprised.”

“Let’s just hope we can get in and out without any trouble.”

Reaper and I make our way to the garage. The smell of oil and gasoline fills my nostrils as we approach our motorcycles. They glisten under the fluorescent lights like sleek predators waiting to be unleashed. That’s exactly what we’ll be tonight, predators.

“Check your gear,” Reaper says. “We need to be ready for anything.”

“Yep.”

I reach into my cut and my fingers close around the cold metal of my gun. It’s a reassuring weight in my hand, though I hope I won’t have to use it tonight. After making sure it’s

loaded, I slide it back into my cut. I throw my leg over my bike.

“Let’s ride,” I say, gripping the handlebars tightly.

Reaper nods. As we kick-start our engines, their roar echoes through the garage. I hope it doesn’t wake Jessica, but there’s not much I can do about it now. I trust Tucker. She’s in good hands. With any luck, she won’t realize I was gone for part of the night.

After driving past the bar, we pull out onto the highway. The wind whips past us as we speed toward Blackstone’s ranch. Fueled by a mixture of adrenaline and fear, I’m on high alert. Every time I think about this place, it makes me physically ill. I hate getting anywhere near it, but Reaper never overreacts to stuff. If he thinks there’s some merit to his premonition, then I believe him.

As we approach the sprawling property, Reaper pulls off onto the dirt road we use to spy on Blackstone’s ranch. Reaper signals for us to stop.

“There’s a blind spot near the southwest corner. We’ll sneak in from there.”

I nod, trusting Reaper’s knowledge of the guards’ schedules and patrol routes. We kill the engines and coast the last stretch, careful not to draw any attention. As we park our bikes, the night is dark and still. The moon slips behind an incoming storm, giving the clouds an eerie glow.

As we slip through the gate and onto Blackstone’s property, we stick to the shadows.

“Stay close,” Reaper whispers, leading the way past Blackstone’s meticulously maintained garden.

I doubt Blackstone’s pulled a single weed in his entire life. He’s got an army of staff to do all his dirty work for him. He also keeps a team of guards at the ready. That’s who we’ve got to watch out for.

Tension radiates off Reaper, every muscle coiled tight like a spring ready to snap. He hated being here just as much as I do. We never wanted to come back. Since the day we

escaped this place, I've never been so close to the main house. It's unnerving. The fear and suffering I experienced at this place will never leave me, but I can't let it consume me. I'm not trapped anymore. I'm free. And I'm ready to find a way to bring Blackstone down for good.

We crouch behind a row of tall hedges as a pair of guards stroll past, chatting casually. Reaper knows their routine by heart. The moment they round the corner, we make our move, darting across the open space toward the cover of the garage.

"Almost there," Reaper murmurs, his eyes locked on the main house.

But just as we're about to make our final dash, the doors to the garage burst open. A team of guards pour out in a tight formation. They're aiming their guns right at us.

"Shit!" I reach for my own weapon. The element of surprise is gone, replaced by the terrifying realization that we've walked right into a trap.

"Get down!" I shout, pushing Reaper to the side as a hail of bullets flies past.

We find cover behind a low, stone wall. Bullets ricochet off the rocks. Chunks of debris rain down on us. The guards seem intent on killing us. There's no time for negotiation or escape. It's now or never.

"Reaper, go left!" I order, deciding it's best we split up to handle the overwhelming threat.

I leap up and spray a line of bullets at the guards, forcing them to retreat. It gives Reaper the few seconds he needs to get out of our pinned down situation. He takes cover behind a tree. Almost immediately, his arm swings out and he shoots at the guards.

Running for my life, I almost make it to the garden when someone tackles me from behind. I scramble to get out from underneath him and slam my boot into his face. It's one of the guards. He's on his feet in an instant, lunging toward me with a vicious snarl.

Raising his gun, he's ready to shoot. I sidestep him before he can get off a shot. Wrestling the weapon from his grip, I manage to disarm him. Instinctively, I toss the gun away. I'm better off relying on my brute strength and agility, so I don't even bother to try to go for my weapon.

"Come on," I growl, putting up my fists.

Years of biker brawls fuel my confidence. I may have lost that fight at Sienna's, but that's not happening ever again. The guard charges, and we exchange a series of heavy blows. Each punch sends pain shooting through my knuckles, but the thrill of combat keeps me focused.

Meanwhile, Reaper engages another guard. Their fight is taking him further away from me, but I can't worry about that. I've got enough to deal with right now. Sweat beads on my brow as I concentrate on my own battle, but I worry about my brother-in-arms.

"Is that all you've got?" I taunt my opponent, dodging a wild swing and landing a solid hit to his midsection. He doubles over, gasping for breath. I take advantage of his vulnerability to knee him in the face. He crumbles to the ground, unconscious.

"Reaper!" I call, scanning the area for any sign of him.

My heart leaps into my throat when I spot him struggling against his attacker, who has him pinned to the ground. The guard raises his gun, aiming it straight at Reaper's head. There's no time to waste.

"Get off him!" I roar, charging forward.

The guard hesitates just long enough for me to tackle him, freeing Reaper from his grasp. Together, we overpower the man as another guard rushes in to join the fray.

"Run!" Reaper shouts as he snaps that guard's neck. He slams the other guard's head into the stone wall with brutal force.

We sprint away from the carnage. My heart's pounding, and my ears are ringing from the gunfire that continues to echo

across the estate. We're almost out of range, but bullets slam into the ground directly behind us.

Reaper and I race into the thick forest that surrounds Blackstone's ranch. Our boots crush leaves and snap twigs as we sprint toward the clearing where we left our motorcycles. Adrenaline surges through my veins. I feel alive despite the near-death experience.

"Let's get the fuck out of here!" Reaper yells as we reach our bikes.

We waste no time in mounting them. Their engines roar to life beneath us. Reaper takes off first, kicking up a cloud of dirt in his wake. I follow closely behind, trying not to cough on the dust.

The winding mountain highway stretches out ahead. We skid onto it, leaving a trail of burned rubber behind. Speeding off into the night, I risk a glance over my shoulder. For a moment, it feels like we've left the danger behind, but that illusion is shattered by the sudden crack of gunfire. Two men on motorcycles emerge from the shadows, hot on our trail.

"Shit!" I curse, swerving to avoid the bullets whizzing past me. I pull up beside Reaper.

"Take the one on the left. I'll get the right!" Reaper shouts, pulling out his gun and firing back at our pursuers.

I aim, lining up my shot as much as I can before pulling the trigger. A surge of satisfaction courses through me as the man chasing me goes down. His bike skids across the asphalt, tossing him off. His body rolls several times before coming to a stop. He doesn't make a move to get up. I doubt he'll be leaving in anything but a body bag.

"Got him!" I yell.

I glance over to see Reaper finishing off the second attacker. The man's body jerks back before he falls off his bike. He lands face down. There's no way he's getting back up.

Reaper and I exchange grim nods before continuing our ride back to the clubhouse. As soon as we pull into the garage,

I release a huge breath.

“That was too close,” Reaper mutters, removing his helmet before running a hand through his dark hair. “We almost didn’t make it out of there.”

“Blackstone’s guards were relentless, but we’re still here. We’ll get another chance. We just have to wait a bit. He’s going to order extra protection as soon as he hears about this.”

“We should’ve gotten inside his house tonight! We can’t keep letting him slip through our fingers!” Reaper slams his fist onto the shop table. Various wrenches and screws rattle from the vibration.

“Brother,” I place a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugs it off. “We may not have succeeded this time, but we’re still alive and kicking. We’ll regroup, plan better, and hit him again. I’m not giving up, and I know you aren’t either. Tonight was a setback, but I like where your head’s at. Eventually, we’re going to bring Blackstone down.”

Reaper looks at me and nods. “You’re right. It’s only a matter of time before we get justice. Also, you look like shit.”

“You do, too.”

“Let’s get cleaned up before everyone figures out what we were up to. Scar’s going to be furious if he finds out.”

“I’m not saying a fucking word.”

“Me either.” Reaper grins, and I smirk. “Come on, this calls for a beer.”

“Or a whole six pack.”

“We earned it.”

“Damn right, we did.”

I ignore my disappointment and head inside with Reaper. We didn’t fail tonight. Instead, we managed to get more information about Blackstone’s defenses. It could come in handy in the future. I haven’t given up hope, and I never will. Blackstone will pay for what he did to us.

Chapter 11: Jessica

I bolt upright in bed, my heart pounding as voices coming from the living room filter through the walls. Quickly, I throw off the covers and pad barefoot across the floor. Standing next to my door, I place my ear against the woodgrain. I recognize several voices, including Talon's. However, I can't make out what they're saying.

Glancing at the clock on the nightstand, I frown. It's almost five a.m., but they didn't get up this early last night. What are they doing? Although it doesn't sound like they're arguing, their voices are raised enough to be alarming. I need to know what's going on. What if the stalker showed up at some point during the night?

I can't go out there in a t-shirt and panties, so I pull on pants before leaving my room. As I reach the living room, I find four men gathered. Talon, Reaper, Tucker, and another prospect stop talking and turn to greet me.

"What are you doing out of bed?" Talon asks.

As he steps into the light, I gasp. He has lacerations all over his face. Blood covers his knuckles. Something terrible must have happened tonight.

"What's going on? Did the stalker come to the clubhouse?"

"No."

"Then who hurt you?"

"You should see the other guys," Reaper says, smirking. "I'll be in my room."

"Later," Talon says. "Tucker, take your men outside until sunrise. After that, we just need one or two guys. The rest of you can get some sleep."

"Will do," Tucker says. He and the other prospect leave through the front door.

"We need to clean that blood off you and see if you need any stitches," I say once we're alone.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not. Come with me.” My tone is forceful enough that he complies and follows me down the hall.

“My room,” he says.

“Okay.” Since each room comes with its own bathroom, it makes sense to use his. After all, he’s the one bleeding all over.

As I flick on the light in his bathroom, I can see the cuts more clearly. Fortunately, they’re not deep, but they look painful, nonetheless.

“Sit down,” I instruct him, gesturing to the edge of the bathtub.

He obeys without a word, watching me as I rummage through the medicine cabinet for supplies. I can’t say I’m surprised it’s so well stocked. Men in motorcycle clubs must get into all kinds of trouble. This might be typical for him, but it’s not for me. I can’t even remember the last time I was anywhere near a fist fight, well, other than last night. Not that I saw that one, but I believe Talon’s account of what went down, so maybe that counts. Either way, he lives in a world completely different from mine.

“Hold out your hands so I can disinfect them.”

“Sure.” He holds his hands steady, barely flinching as I pour the liquid over the cuts.

“I’ll have to be more careful with your face.” I pluck several cotton balls out of a container on the counter. Blotting them with disinfectant, I move to touch his face. This time, he jerks away.

“Fuck, that stings.”

“I’m sorry, but we have to do this.”

“Yeah. I know,” he grumbles.

My fingers gently trace the outline of the lacerations on his face, feeling their raw edges. He winces but doesn’t pull away. His gaze softens as it drops to my mouth. My lips tingle

in response. Being this close to him is exciting but also unnerving.

He looks away, breaking the spell.

“What happened?” I ask, concern filling my voice as I reach for a tube of antibiotic cream.

“Club business,” he replies gruffly, avoiding my gaze. “I can’t tell you about it.”

“Why not? I can keep a secret.”

“Even if you can, it doesn’t matter. We don’t talk about club business with non-members. I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. It’s you I’m concerned about. How did you sleep last night?”

“Good.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Despite his insistence that he’s okay, I worry about him. I spend my days working as a fundraising specialist for a non-profit animal shelter, while he faces danger and has to deal with violence. We’re nothing alike, so I can’t understand why I’m so drawn to him. Maybe if I get to know him better, it will make more sense.

“Did the fight happen here at the clubhouse?” I ask.

“Jess, I told you. Let it go.”

“But I just want to—”

He grabs my waist and pulls me to him. Sealing his lips against mine, he drowns me in a searing kiss, effectively silencing my protests. My mind goes blank as I’m consumed by the intensity of his touch. The press of his lips against mine makes every concern I have about him irrelevant. For a moment, nothing matters but the raw connection between us.

His lips are wild and savage against mine. My heart races as his fingers grip the back of my neck. He holds me close, trapping my legs between his powerful thighs. When his tongue presses between my lips, I sigh into the kiss. He glides his tongue across mine, tangling them in a passionate dance of

desire. But just as suddenly as it started, the kiss ends, leaving me breathless and wanting more.

“Do you want to go to work today?” he asks gruffly, catching me completely off guard. “I don’t think it’s safe, but it’s up to you.”

“Work?” I struggle to understand what he’s asking because I’m still buzzing from the intensity of his kiss. I can’t think about anything but what just happened. Why the hell is he talking about work?

“Yes. Yesterday, I tried to stop you from going, but you went anyway. Look what happened.”

“The stalker left a stuffed animal, not a bomb. My work with the shelter is very important. If I’m not actively trying to get funding, there’s a chance they could shut down by the end of the year. I’m not going to let that happen. Stalker or not, I’m going to do my job.”

“I understand you take pride in your work, but what you’re dealing with makes going to work dangerous.”

“True, but I’m not letting some jerk ruin my life. A dozen people work in my office. Even if the stalker wanted to attack me there, he’d have a hard time getting past everyone else to get to me.”

“Unless he’s employed there, too. He could be someone you trust.”

“If that’s the case, he could approach me anywhere, and I wouldn’t have my guard up. None of my coworkers seem like stalkers.”

“You never know about a person. Some of the most upstanding people in the world are disgusting criminals behind closed doors.”

“I understand your concern—”

“Then take it seriously.”

“I am. But I need to go to work. I’ll be fine, and I promise to call you if anything happens.”

He hesitates for a moment, clearly torn between his instinct to protect me and his desire to respect my independence. Finally, he lets out a sigh. “I guess I can live with that, but I’m driving you to work.”

“Deal.” I’m relieved when he finally relents.

“We’ll take my bike. Say goodbye to Loki and meet me in the garage when you’re ready.”

“Talon, it’s five-thirty a.m.”

“What time do you usually go in?”

“Eight.”

“Okay. We’ll leave at seven thirty. I’m dead tired. I’ll meet you in two hours. That’ll give me enough time for a quick nap.” He leaves the bathroom and walks to his bedroom door. He opens it and steps back, clearly trying to get rid of me.

“See you then.” I brush past him, annoyed that he’s being so grumpy and dismissive. I still don’t know what happened last night, but he obviously doesn’t want to tell me about it. Even though I shouldn’t be bothered, I am. How am I supposed to get to know the man protecting me when he won’t talk about himself?

Two hours later, I meet him in the garage. We put on our helmets in silence. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I lean against his back. He shifts slightly in his seat before taking off.

As we speed through the streets on his motorcycle, I replay the memory of his kiss in my mind. The way his lips felt against mine, the urgency of his touch ... I want nothing more than to experience it again, but I don’t know if he feels the same way. Part of me wonders if he kissed me just to stop me from asking more questions. That’s the feeling I get, but there were other ways he could have shut down that conversation. He didn’t have to kiss me, but he did.

When we arrive at my workplace, he parks the motorcycle and turns to me. “Remember, Jess, call me if anything unusual happens.”

“I will.”

When his gaze lingers on my lips, hope surges through me. I’m sure he’s going to kiss me again. But just before our lips meet, he pulls away, leaving me disappointed and confused.

I get off the bike and stand beside it. Unsure of what to say, I settle on giving him a soft smile. He clenches his jaw, then revs the engine of his motorcycle and speeds away, leaving me standing there, alone.

My heart’s still thundering from the near kiss as I walk toward the building. What stopped him from kissing me? Did he change his mind? Or is there something more going on that I don’t know about? Either way, I’m left with a burning desire for answers—and for his touch.

As I step into the building, Ginny’s waiting for me with that smug smile she always wears.

“Surprised to see you here.”

“Good morning to you, too.”

“Why were you so worried about a stuffed animal? Seems a bit dramatic, don’t you think?” she asks, her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“As I told everyone yesterday, someone’s stalking me.” I try to keep my voice level, but I want to scream in frustration. Ginny is such a bitch. I’m sure she’s already started all kinds of rumors about me.

“Sure, Jess. Anything for attention, huh?” Ginny snorts, clearly not believing me.

Anger flares inside me. I force myself to take a moment before responding. Wringing her neck isn’t an option, so I decide to take the high road.

“Mind your own business,” I say through gritted teeth.

I walk past her, heading to my desk, but the tension between us lingers in the air for the rest of the day. I don’t know why she hates me so much. She’s never liked me, but I’ve never done anything to make her mad. I’ve seen her being

bitchy with other people, too, so maybe she's just like that. She's probably miserable inside, and she just likes to take it out on other people. I can't be bothered by her moods. After all, they have nothing to do with me.

As the day goes on, I can't shake the feeling of being watched. My skin prickles as if invisible eyes are following me. I catch myself glancing over my shoulder every few minutes, searching for any sign of danger. I keep returning to the memory of Talon's scorching hot kiss this morning. Being this distracted isn't typical for me, and I can tell my work is suffering. Talon was probably right in that I should have stayed at the clubhouse. Maybe tomorrow I'll just work remotely. I don't like doing that, but in this case, I may not have an option.

During lunch, Hank, one of my male coworkers, does something that sets off alarm bells in my head. He stops by my desk, as casual and friendly as ever, but there's an intensity in his gaze that makes me uneasy.

"Hey, Jess, how's your day going?" He leans against the edge of my desk, waiting for a response.

Although he's not crowding me, a sense of unease creeps through me. He stops by a lot. I never realized how much until now. But does it mean anything?

"Fine," I reply, forcing a smile.

I watch him closely. Could he be the one stalking me? Maybe I'm just being paranoid, but I can't shake the feeling that something's off.

"After that crazy bomb squad stuff yesterday, I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"I'm good. It was just a false alarm."

"You seemed pretty freaked out."

"Maybe I was overreacting." I try to keep my voice light, but it vibrates with nervous energy.

"Well, let me know if you need a ride home. I saw that guy on the motorcycle drop you off. It's not safe to ride on one

of those things. People die every day on them.” His eyes lock with mine. I try not to look away because that would betray my fear, but it’s impossible to hold his gaze.

“I’m fine. But thank you,” I hastily add. If he’s the one stalking me, I don’t want to do anything to make him angry.

As I turn back to my work, I glance at him one more time. Suspicion gnaws at the back of my mind. I replay our recent conversations through my head, but nothing stands out. I hate being so paranoid, but what choice do I have?

The rest of the day is an exhausting blur of paranoia and second-guessing everyone around me. Every unexpected sound makes me jump. Every shadow seems to conceal a hidden threat. Every interaction leaves me questioning the motives of my coworkers.

By the time I leave the office, I’m emotionally and physically drained, desperate for the safety and comfort of Talon’s arms. But I also know that getting too close could be dangerous—both for my heart and for the investigation into my stalker.

As I walk out of the building, I inhale the fresh, mountain air. Talon’s waiting for me on his bike.

“How’d it go today?” he asks.

“Okay.” I slide in behind him and wrap my arms around his waist. Laying my head against his shoulder, I fight back tears of relief. When I’m with him, I feel so safe. I could get used to this.

As we ride home, I replay the day’s events in my mind. The suspicion and fear gnawing at me make it hard to focus on anything else. I’m still consumed by my thoughts when we pull up to the clubhouse. He parks, then helps me off the bike.

“Can we take a walk?” I ask softly.

“Sure. What’s going on?” He leads me out to a trail that parallels the stream.

“I don’t know if this means anything, but something strange happened at work today.”

“What do you mean?” He stops to look at me.

“It’s about Hank, one of my coworkers.” I pause, trying to steady my nerves. “I noticed him acting suspiciously. At first, I thought he was just being friendly, but now, I’m not so sure.”

“Tell me more,” he urges, his eyes searching mine.

“Well, he often asks me where I’m going and who I’m spending time with. It never seemed odd before, but today ... I don’t know. Maybe I’m just paranoid because of everything that’s been happening, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right.”

Talon’s gaze narrows. “It’s possible he’s just being nosy or overly friendly, but we can’t afford to overlook anything. Let me make a call.”

“Sure.”

He pulls out his phone and puts it on speakerphone, so I can hear the conversation. “Matrix, I need you to look into someone for me. Hank, a coworker of Jessica’s. I’ll text you his info. Put him at the top of the suspects list and let me know what you find.”

“Got it. I’ll start digging and get back to you as soon as I have something.”

“Thanks, brother.” Talon ends the call and turns back to me. “Matrix is good at what he does. If there’s anything to find on Hank, he’ll uncover it.”

“I don’t know if it’s anything to worry about, but you told me to tell you if anyone seemed suspicious ...”

“You did good. Stay open to all possibilities. Trust no one. Stalkers are good at hiding their intentions. We don’t know what’s motivating this guy yet, but we’ll figure it out.”

A mix of relief and anxiety washes over me. Finally, we have a lead—however small—that might help us figure out who’s stalking me. But if it turns out to be someone I know and trust, like Hank ... The thought makes my stomach churn.

“Hey,” Talon says softly, pulling me closer. “Try not to worry too much. I promise I’ll keep you safe.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Don’t even think about that. I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

As I lean into his embrace, the warmth of his body and the steady beat of his heart provide a source of comfort that’s beyond words. I realize just how much I don’t want to lose him. He doesn’t seem to want to let me go either, so that’s a huge relief. For now, I’ll just have to see how things unfold and hope for the best.

I tilt my face up to look at him. Dim moonlight casts shadows across his strong jawline, making him look even more rugged and dangerous than he already does. My fingers itch to trace the curves of his tattoos, and my body recalls the heat of his touch all too well. I desperately want to kiss him again, but the butterflies in my belly won’t calm down enough for me to take the risk.

“Jess?” His voice breaks through my thoughts, and I realize I haven’t been paying attention to what he was saying.

“Sorry, I just ...” I trail off, unable to find the right words.

The truth is, I’m completely distracted by the man in front of me. I’m intrigued by his smoldering gaze and the scars that map his skin. But then, I remember why getting involved with someone like him is a bad idea. He’s a rough, scary motorcycle club member, and I know next to nothing about his world. As much as I’m drawn to him, I don’t belong with a man like him.

“Hey! Lovebirds!” Nina’s voice cuts through the darkness. “Who wants to come and help me with dinner? The other guys are too busy playing with Loki to chip in. Cute dog, by the way.”

“I can help,” I say, grateful for the distraction. Hopefully, putting some distance between us will prevent me from doing something stupid, like kissing him again.

“I’ll be in soon. Let me just talk to my guys real quick.” Talon gives me a quick hug before heading off to join the other guys.

When I get inside, Nina’s standing in the kitchen. Several bags of groceries sit on the counter, waiting to be unloaded.

“Thanks for helping,” Nina says as I begin to unpack one of the bags.

“Of course.”

As I focus on putting away the groceries, I try not to think about the magnetic pull Talon has on me. It’s going to take all my strength to resist him, but for now, helping Nina make dinner is a welcome reprieve.

The warmth of the kitchen envelops me as I chop vegetables alongside Nina. The hum of the exhaust fan above us drowns out most of the sound from outside. Through the window, I see all the guys in the motorcycle club playing with Loki. Their laughter is barely audible through the glass, but I hear it, nonetheless. The sight should bring a smile to my face, but instead, the weight of unease settles into my chest. What if the stalker comes here? What if he hurts these guys, even though the person he really wants is me?

“So,” Nina says, breaking the silence between us. She places her knife down on the cutting board and gives me a playful look. “How are things going between you and Talon?”

“Things? What things?” I reply, feigning ignorance. My cheeks flush under her scrutinizing gaze.

“You know what I’m talking about. The sparks flying between you two.” She leans against the counter, crossing her arms in front of her. “It’s beyond obvious to anyone with eyes. But the real question is, how do you feel about him?”

I hesitate for a moment, trying to gather my thoughts.

“I appreciate everything he’s doing to help find out who’s stalking me,” I say truthfully. “But that’s all there is to it. Nothing else is going on between us.”

Nina studies me for a moment before speaking. “He’s a good man, Jessica. He’s been through a lot, and he deserves happiness. You’d better not break his heart.”

Her words hit me like a slap in the face. I can’t believe she sees right through me. Yes, I like Talon—more than I care to admit—but I’m not ready to confess that to anyone, especially not myself.

“I don’t intend to hurt him,” I assure her. “I just ... I need time to figure things out.”

She nods slowly, her expression softening. “Take your time, but remember, life is short. Sometimes we have to take risks to find happiness.”

As she returns to chopping vegetables, her words echo in my mind. Maybe she’s right; maybe I should take a risk with Talon. Just because we’re completely different people doesn’t mean we don’t have anything in common. There must be a reason why she thinks we’d be good together. I just need to find out what that is.

But for now, I keep my focus on preparing dinner and pushing thoughts of him to the back of my mind. If nothing else, I’m a patient person. I’m sure I’ll have plenty of time to figure out what to do about the pull of attraction between us. Until then, I’ve got a bigger problem to worry about. As long as my stalker’s still out there, my desire for Talon will have to wait. It sucks, but I can’t let myself get distracted by him. There’s too much that could go wrong if I lose my focus. I could lose my life.

Chapter 12: Talon

I'm standing in the kitchen, watching Nina and Jessica cook dinner. The aroma of spices fills the air as they chatter and laugh with each other. My eyes are drawn to Jessica. Her golden hair cascades down her back as she stirs the sauce on the stove. Every move she makes is as graceful as a ballerina. What it would be like to dance with her or make love to her?

The thought of getting closer to her, of taking her into my room and having some alone time with her, keeps tugging at me. But I know I can't let that happen. My job is to protect her, not take her to bed, no matter how much I might want to do just that.

Instead of sticking around to be tortured by her luscious curves, I decide to talk to Matrix. At least then I'll be doing something useful instead of drooling over her like a pathetic loser.

As I walk toward the hall, Tucker waves me into the living room. I take a seat in a large, overstuffed chair across from where he's sitting on the couch. Tucker clicks the remote to turn the television off.

"You want me on guard duty tonight?" Tucker asks, scratching his beard.

"Anything suspicious happen today?"

"Nah, everything seemed normal. Well, except for this hot chick who came into the bar. Legs for days. An ass you could bounce a quarter off. Smokin' hot."

"You get her number?"

"Damn right." Tucker grins.

"Nice."

"Are you going to need me tonight? I was going to call her, but the club comes first."

"We're going to have to keep watch again."

"On it. I can always call her later."

“Yeah. But don’t wait too long. You can’t let that girl get away.”

“Not planning on it.”

“Since you’re good with pulling guard duty again, why don’t you choose some other prospects for tonight. I trust your judgment.”

“Will do, brother.”

“You keep doing right by the club and you’ll earn your patch.”

I’m confident Tucker will make a great addition to the club. Most of the other guys are on board, too. But we’re also cautious. New members must be vetted for at least a year before they even have a shot at getting patched in.

Tucker’s not new around here, but he’s not a full member. We’ve still got our eyes on him, and everything is a test. Everything. One fuck up and he’s out. He hasn’t messed up yet, and I hope he won’t because I like the kid. He’s got balls and a good soul. That’s all you can ask for in a club brother.

After leaving Tucker to watch the news, I continue down the hall to Matrix’s office. Reaper materializes seemingly out of nowhere. I don’t startle because I’m used to it at this point. But this ability of his to be a ghost is fucking weird.

“You down to try to breach Blackstone’s ranch again tonight?” Reaper asks.

“After that close call last night? No way. We need to lay low for a few days.”

He clenches his jaw, clearly not happy with my decision. “I got that bad feeling still. Blackstone’s planning something big.”

“Any idea what?”

“Not a clue.”

“So, it’s still just a gut feeling?”

“Yeah.”

“I believe you, but we can’t go back right away. If he’s smart, and we know he is, then he’ll be doubling down on the number of guards he’s got on staff for at least a few weeks. Let’s wait. Matrix is keeping an eye on everyone coming and going from the ranch. If something changes, we can reassess shit. Cool?”

“Fine. But if anything changes ...”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

Reaper grunts an acknowledgement.

“In the meantime, don’t go there without backup.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

I stare him down because I don’t entirely believe him. But I can’t call him out on a hunch. If he wants to go do something stupid like get caught, then I won’t be able to stop him. Hopefully, he’ll remember what Blackstone does to people he doesn’t like. I don’t doubt for a second that Blackstone would torture Reaper before killing him if Blackstone ever got his hands on him.

“Don’t do it,” I warn.

“Got it.”

“Now, go enjoy dinner or something. Tucker said he saw a hottie in the bar. Maybe you need to go recruit some new club girls for us.”

“Not interested in pussy right now.”

“Me, either.”

“Bullshit.” Reaper flashes one of his rare smiles. “We all know you want to bang Jessica. Go for it. If she looked at me that way, I’d want to screw her, too.”

“What way?” I put my hands on my hips.

“You know.” He smirks before brushing past me.

“She’s mine,” I growl.

“We know.”

“Asshole,” I mutter.

Even if he's right, I don't want to admit it. There's no point when I can't have her the way I want her, which is every way a man could want a woman. It drives me fucking crazy. Kissing her made it ten times worse because now that's all I can think about. Her lips. Her scent. Her silky hair in my hands.

I want to touch her so much it hurts. My dick basically hates me for making it wait. But she's not the type of girl who falls into a guy's bed for a one-night stand. She's a long-term kind of girl, and I'm not the type of man she'd go. I'm not delusional enough to think that princesses and swamp rats belong together. That's the kind of shit that only happens in fairy tales, and I'm definitely not living in one of those.

I push open the door to Matrix's office and find him hunched over his computer, scanning through data. He glances up and nods that it's okay to come in. I take a seat in one of the large, wingback chairs in front of his desk.

"How's that investigation into Jessica's coworker Hank Cartright going?" I ask, trying to keep my voice casual.

"Take a look at this," Matrix says, swiveling the computer screen toward me. He points to a list of suspicious incidents in Hank's past. "Looks like he had some defaults on his credit. He's broke and in a massive amount of debt."

"So?"

"So, maybe he's cracking under the stress and that turned his crush on Jessica into an obsession?"

"That seems farfetched."

"We've seen worse in the past."

"True."

"Check out this other thing I found. At his previous job, one of the men in his department filed a sexual harassment complaint."

"Wait. A man?"

"Yeah, maybe he's an equal opportunity perv."

“I don’t know. Feels off.”

“There’s more. Apparently, he has an old Peeping Tom charge on his record. He was eighteen and the girl was sixteen. They went to the same high school. The girl didn’t want to press charges, but her dad insisted.”

“What happened with the case?” I ask.

“Hank got probation for two years.”

“Did he try to contact the girl after his time was up?”

“Don’t know, but she’s happily married and living in New Hampshire now.”

“Huh. So, one guy and one girl. Anything else?”

“Nothing yet, but I’m still digging.”

“I don’t like it.” My gut clenches at the thought of someone like that being close to Jessica.

“Me, either.”

“I want surveillance on Hank’s house,” I say firmly.

Matrix grins and holds up a remote. “Already one step ahead of you, brother. I went to Hank’s neighbor’s house earlier, posing as a utility worker. After I gained access to their back yard, with their permission, I set up cameras on the utility poles.”

“Nice.”

He clicks a button, and a live video feed of Hank’s house appears on the screen. “I’ll keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn’t leave the house tonight. If he does, I’ll text you right away.”

“Good. What about background checks on Jessica’s other coworkers?”

“Still working on it,” Matrix replies, his eyes never leaving the screen.

“Work faster,” I snap, surprising myself with my outburst.

“Someone’s panties are in a bunch because of a certain blonde bombshell.” He chuckles.

“Shut up,” I mutter, heat rising to my cheeks.

“How are things going with Jessica, you know, romantically speaking?” he presses, clearly enjoying my discomfort.

“She’s hot, but she’s way out of my league.” I rub the back of my neck. The truth stings more than I care to admit. “I could never end up marrying a woman like her. She’s a princess, and I’m just ... a swamp rat.”

“Hey,” Matrix says, his expression softening. “You never know what life has in store for you. Don’t sell yourself short.”

I shake my head, unwilling to entertain the idea of a future with Jessica. Right now, my priority is keeping her safe, and that’s all that matters.

“Y’know,” Matrix says, leaning back in his chair and clasping his hands behind his head. “I never thought I’d end up with an ex-FBI agent, but look at me now.”

“Are things still going well with Daisy?” I ask, trying to shift the focus away from my own love life or, rather, lack thereof.

“Man, you wouldn’t believe the stuff she does. Just the other day, she accidentally triggered the house alarm while practicing her kickboxing moves. She lost her balance, fell over, and accidentally hit the panic button.”

“Oh, shit.”

“So, the cops show up, lights, sirens, guns out. The works.”

“You’re lucky they didn’t use it as an excuse to shoot you.”

“Exactly. My asshole was puckered for sure.”

“How’d you get rid of them?” I ask.

“It took us hours to convince the police there was no break-in. We ended up on a first-name basis by the end of the night. Daisy charmed the hell out of them, so I don’t think they’ll be a problem.”

“Don’t trust them. You never know who’s in Blackstone’s back pocket.”

“True. But after the fact, it was funny as hell. My woman makes me laugh every day.” A goofy smile spreads across his face. “I hope you find an old lady like her one day.”

“Sounds like you two are a perfect match,” I say, avoiding his last comment. He’s found something special in Daisy, and I envy their connection. He’s a lucky guy.

“Look,” Matrix says, his tone serious once more. “Just keep an open mind. Love shows up at the weirdest times.”

“Love?” I snort, shaking my head. “I don’t have time to think about love. My job is to protect Jessica, not fall for her.”

“Of course, brother. But remember, the club will protect Jessica like we protect everyone else we help. You don’t have to carry the weight all by yourself. It’s not just on you. It’s on all of us. Old lady or not, we know she’s someone special. I just hope you pull your head out of your ass and make a move before we solve this case. You’re always telling everyone else not to let a good thing slip through their fingers. It’s time you take your own advice.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” I say quietly, grateful for his support.

“Good. Now, let’s focus on the task at hand and make sure Jessica stays safe. If anything else pops up in these background checks, you’ll be the first to know.”

Leaving Matrix’s office, I make my way down the hallway to my bedroom. As I open the door, I find Loki, Jessica’s dog, sprawled out on my bed. The sight of the grinning puppy brings a smile to my face.

“Hey, buddy,” I say, chuckling. “What are you doing in here? Who let you in?”

Loki blinks up at me with his huge, expressive eyes. I stare back, getting sucked into them the way I do when a special connection forms between an animal and me. The first time I had a telepathic conversation with a bird, I thought I

was losing my mind. Now, it's such a normal experience that it doesn't even faze me.

"I'm going to protect your mom," I tell Loki, using my telepathy.

"You good man," Loki replies in my mind. "You keep Mom safe."

"I will, brother." I'm touched by his loyalty. "We'll take care of Jessica as a team."

"Woof!" His happy bark fills the room.

For a few minutes, I play with Loki, enjoying the simple comfort of his presence. It's easy to see why Jessica loves this dog so much. He's protective and loyal, qualities that resonate deeply within me.

Before long, there's a knock on my door, and Jessica's voice filters through it. "Talon, dinner's ready."

"Coming," I call, giving Loki one last pat before we both head out of the room.

As I follow Loki and Jessica to the dining area, I wonder if I'm being a fool. I've been trying to keep my heart safe, but it's starting to feel like an impossible task. The more I'm around her, the more I want her. And it's not just physical. She's a very strong woman. She's not breaking down, despite everything that's happened to her. Anyone else would be a mess, but not her. She's unbreakable, and that's the sexiest damn thing in the world.

When I step into the bustling kitchen, Nina flashes me a shit-eating grin. She can see right through me, and she knows I'm fucked. I'm already half in love with this girl, and I can't do a damn thing to stop it.

Loki sits under the table while Jessica gathers plates and silverware for dinner. The aroma of grilled chicken and sautéed vegetables fills the air, making my stomach rumble in anticipation. All the other guys are gathered around the table, laughing and joking, completely oblivious to the war going on in my head.

“Hey, let me get Loki’s food,” I offer, grabbing his kibble from a nearby cabinet. As I fill a bowl for him, Jessica watches with a hint of surprise in her eyes.

“It’s so weird.”

“What?”

“Loki really likes you,” she remarks, her voice soft but genuine. “Usually, he doesn’t enjoy being around so many people.”

“Maybe he knows I’m on his side.” Before I can even set the bowl down, Loki is face first in it, chomping away. “Besides, he’s got nothing to worry about here.”

“Neither do I,” she murmurs softly.

“As long as you and Loki are at the clubhouse, you’ll both be safe.”

Her smile is warm and grateful, but it only serves to heighten the turmoil within me. My heart races, and I wonder if I’m about to lose it to her. Hell, I might already be in love with her. It’s a realization that leaves me at a loss for what to do next, other than protect her.

Matrix thinks I should make a move, but I don’t know. Sometimes, I think she’s ready for another kiss, but then she seems to pull back. I’m not used to being so unsure of myself. Usually, I just go for it when it comes to women. But in this case, it feels like there’s so much more riding on every choice I make. I don’t want to fuck this up.

“I feel safer knowing you’re here,” she murmurs, sliding into the seat beside me.

“Of course,” I respond, trying to sound casual despite the chaos inside me. “It’s my job to protect you.”

Silence settles between us, punctuated by the clinking of silverware and the occasional scrape of a spatula. Everyone else in the room is carrying on with their normal, boisterous conversations. Fortunately, no one’s listening to us.

I’m acutely aware of every little movement she makes. The magnetic pull she has on me is unnerving. The struggle to

maintain the image of a calm, collected protector is starting to get to me. The need to pull her into the safety of my arms is all I can think about. I want her so much it's slowly driving me insane.

“Did you ever think about what it would be like to have a normal life?” she asks softly, her voice hesitant.

“Normal's overrated,” I reply with a slight chuckle, trying to lighten the mood. “Besides, that's not in the cards for me. Never was.”

“Maybe not now, but perhaps someday you'll find someone worth sharing your life with, someone who will make you want to leave club life behind.”

“I'll never leave Underground Vengeance. They're my family and I won't let anyone take that away from me.”

“I see.” She drops her gaze to her plate and pushes her food around.

“Do you?” I ask, annoyed.

“Yeah.” She doesn't meet my gaze. Instead, she picks up her half-eaten meal and carries it into the kitchen.

“Dammit,” I mutter.

If I ever have to choose between a woman and the club, my brothers will always win. Scar, Nitro, and Matrix may have gotten lucky when they found their old ladies, but that doesn't mean I will. Jessica will never fit into club life. She's too sweet and innocent for this place. I know it. She knows it. I just haven't accepted it yet. Part of me still thinks I can make this work, but I don't see how.

If I'm not careful, I'm going to fuck up the only place I've ever been able to call home. I can't let that happen. I care about this girl a lot, but not enough to leave my brothers behind. That's not an option, which makes any relationship with Jessica a dead end. The sooner I can get that through my thick skull, the better. As soon as we catch her stalker, it's over. I'll have to move on. Until then, guarding my heart is my only option. There's no other way to make this work.

Chapter 13: Talon

After dinner, I help Reaper and Scar clean the kitchen. We've got a deal with Nina that if she cooks, we clean. It seems like a very fair trade. I don't know what we would have done if Nina hadn't saved us after we escaped Blackstone's.

"What are you kids up to tonight?" Nina asks. She's still sitting at the kitchen table, sipping tea while watching us work.

"I don't know." I glance at Reaper.

"Got stuff to do," he grunts.

"Here or at the ranch?" I ask.

"The ranch?" Nina's head snaps up. She skewers Reaper with a piercing look. "Which ranch?"

"His," Reaper says, glancing at Jessica. She's completely oblivious to the conversation. She's too busy playing with Loki in the living room.

"You went there again?" Nina asks.

"Yeah. But I won't go tonight," Reaper says.

"Better not," I warn.

"I got other shit to do instead."

"What about you, Talon?" Nina asks.

"I don't know. I guess just hang out in my room."

"We could watch a movie," Jessica calls from where she's sitting on the floor. Loki's in her lap, soaking up her love in the form of belly rubs.

"Yeah. In your room. You could sit on your bed." Reaper smirks, clearly enjoying my discomfort.

Despite her earlier comments, I definitely want her in my bed, but not to watch a movie.

"Have fun, guys," Scar says. "I'm heading home. Call me if anything comes up."

“I’ll text if I get any more hits on surveillance,” Matrix says, joining Scar.

“Later.” Nitro waves before leaving with the other guys who don’t live at the clubhouse anymore.

“I’ve got to get home and finish this new tea blend I’m working on.” Nina gets up and dumps what’s left in her mug into the sink. “Tomorrow night’s pizza night. I have a new one for you.”

“Yum.” Reaper rubs his belly before leaning down to kiss Nina on the cheek. “Can’t wait for tomorrow.”

“You’ll love it.”

“Give me a hint.”

“Thai.”

“Thai pizza? I’m in.” Reaper cracks a smile before walking down the hall, leaving Jessica and me alone with Nina.

“Have a good night. And don’t forget to use a condom,” Nina says in her “mom voice” before heading out to her bike.

“Oh, boy. She’s ...”

“Something.” Jessica laughs. “Don’t worry. I won’t take advantage of you.”

“Bummer.” I grin. “So ... movie night. Should we make popcorn?”

“Only if you want some. I’m stuffed.”

“You barely ate.”

“Nerves, I guess.”

“Well, if you get hungry, I’ll make you something later. Just let me know.”

“Okay. Can Loki come, too?”

“Sure. What does he like to watch?” I turn off the lights as we head to my bedroom.

“Mostly dog food commercials.” She flashes a stunning smile that makes my blood flow south. “But I prefer thrillers or romcoms.”

“Wait a minute.” I push my bedroom door open and let her and Loki pass before closing it behind us. “You like to watch either serial killers or women who fall in love after tripping over their own feet and landing in their best friend’s arms? The guy also happens to be their coworker, too. Usually.”

“Sounds like you’ve seen a few.”

“A couple. When one of the guy’s old ladies gets to pick the movie. Anyway, that’s quite the contrast.”

“Hey!” she protests, laughing. “A girl can have varied interests, you know. So, what are you into?”

“Action and adventure. Movies where shit blows up.”

“That isn’t all that different from thrillers. It still keeps you on the edge of your seat.”

“True, but at least action movies don’t give me nightmares,” I tease, raising an eyebrow.

“Nightmares?” she asks playfully, smirking. “Are you implying you’re afraid of a little thriller?”

“Of course not,” I scoff, feigning offense. “But I’d rather watch something that gets my adrenaline pumping rather than my paranoia.”

“All right, then, Mr. Adrenaline Junkie,” Jessica says with a grin before grabbing a pillow and whacking me with it. “How about a pillow fight, and whoever wins gets to pick?”

“Game on!” I snatch up a pillow of my own and swing it back at her with a laugh.

As our impromptu pillow fight ensues, Loki jumps into the fray, barking happily and trying to catch the flying pillows with his teeth. Between dodging pillow strikes from Jessica and playing with the rambunctious pup, I’m having more fun than I’ve had in a long time.

Amid our laughter and playful chaos, I manage to pin Jessica to the bed, one hand holding her wrists above her head while the other grips my trusty pillow. Our eyes lock, and the room seems to fall silent. Time stands still as I take in the sight of her flushed cheeks, her honey-blonde hair disheveled from our battle, and the way her chest rises and falls with each breath.

“Gotcha,” I whisper.

The corners of her lips curl into a small smile, and the intensity in her gaze sends blood rushing south. I should let her up, but I can’t seem to tear myself away from this moment, caught in the spell she’s cast over me.

In that instant, I can’t resist any longer. I lean in and press my lips against hers, letting my passion for her take over. Her response is immediate and equally intense, her lips parting to deepen the kiss. The taste of her fills me with a desire I’ve never felt before. I slide my tongue across hers, loving the way she moans in response.

She writhes beneath me, making me so hard I don’t think I’ll be able to stand it much longer. My hands slide under the hem of her t-shirt, fingers grazing the warm, soft skin of her lower back. I want to do so much more, but I sense her hesitation, so I pull away.

“Wow,” she murmurs as we finally break apart.

“Yeah. Jessica, I—”

Suddenly, Loki leaps onto the bed, breaking the tension and causing us both to burst into laughter. As I release Jessica and sit back, I wonder what might have happened if her loyal pup hadn’t interrupted.

“You little brat!” She playfully ruffles Loki’s fur before turning her gorgeous violet eyes toward me.

“Sorry,” I murmur, though truthfully, I’m not. “I just ... couldn’t help myself.”

“It’s okay,” she says softly, her smile reassuring. Our faces are still close. The heat of her breath on my skin is an

erotic indulgence unlike anything I've experienced. "Should we start the movie?"

"Which one?"

"You pick. I want to see what you like."

The only action I want right now involves the two of us tangled up in these sheets. However, I don't say it out loud. I don't want to push her too far. Instead, I nod and hit "Play" on the remote, starting the movie.

As the opening credits roll, I find it impossible to focus on the screen. My mind is filled with images of her—the curve of her neck, the way her hips sway when she walks, and her laughter that sounds like music to my ears. And her scent—a mix of vanilla and something uniquely her—is intoxicating.

I wonder if she feels the same attraction, the same magnetic pull that draws me toward her. Kissing her again is all I can think about. I need to feel her body pressed against mine once more, but I know it's not the right time. It might never be.

"Are you enjoying the movie?" She turns to me, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"Uh, yeah," I lie, forcing my gaze back to the screen. "It's great."

"Good," she says, snuggling closer to me on the bed. The warmth of her body only fuels my desire. I force myself to focus on the movie. For now, this will have to be enough.

The movie's volume increases along with the action, but all I hear is the pounding of my heart. I'm struggling with my feelings for Jessica. It's not like me to fall so hard so fast. But she's just so ... perfect. Her wit, her smile, and her kindness are a magnetic force that pulls me in.

"Hey," she says, pausing the film and turning to face me. "You seem a little out of it. Is everything okay?"

"Uh, yeah. Everything's fine." I try to sound convincing, but I'm sure I'm failing miserably.

“Are you sure? You know you can talk to me about anything.”

“I guess there’s just been a lot on my mind lately.” I offer her a weak smile.

“Anything you want to share?” She tilts her head, waiting patiently for an answer.

“Nope.” I hit play on the movie, hoping she’ll let things go.

As the film continues, I lose all focus and my imagination takes over. I picture us standing in front of our friends and my club family, exchanging vows of love and commitment. I see her walking down the aisle toward me, radiant in a beautiful white dress, her eyes glistening with tears of joy. I envision our future, filled with laughter, adventure, and endless love.

The fantasy is so vivid, so real, that it steals my breath. But it’s dangerous—I know I shouldn’t let myself get carried away like this. The stakes are too high, and falling in love could put both of us at risk.

The movie’s end credits roll, but I barely register it’s over. I’m too absorbed with the vivid images that have plagued me throughout the film. Thoughts of making her my wife are just insane. I don’t know why I’m having them. She said earlier she’s not a fan of club life, and I’ll never leave the club, so trying to make a life together will be impossible.

“Wow, it’s late.” She stretches her arms above her head. The movement pulls her t-shirt up enough to reveal a sliver of her sexy stomach. “I should get to bed.”

“Bed. Right,” I mumble, trying to shake off the lustful haze clouding my thoughts.

As she stands, I follow suit, extending my arms to give her a goodnight hug.

“Goodnight, Talon,” she whispers, brushing her lips against my ear.

I wrap my arms around her, holding her close to my chest, reveling in the feel of her body pressed against mine.

“Goodnight, Jess.” My voice comes out much rougher than I wanted, betraying my torment.

As the seconds pass and our embrace lingers, my body swells with the need to be inside her. Every inch of me is screaming that I should toss her back onto the bed and take her. My lips tingle with the need to kiss every inch of her sensual curves. My fingers tingle at the memory of her soft skin. My cock doesn't give a damn about anything other than burying itself as deep as she can take it.

“Thanks for tonight,” she murmurs, pulling away just enough to look into my eyes.

Her gaze is so tender and so trusting. I can't let my impulses take over. If I seduce her tonight, she'll hate me tomorrow. She's in a vulnerable position, relying on me to protect her. If I use this to my advantage, then I'm no better than the assholes who trick women into bed. Fuck that. I'm not that kind of man.

“Anytime.” I force a tight smile before finally releasing her.

She gives me one last smile before retreating to her bedroom, Loki trotting happily behind her.

Once I hear the soft click of her door closing, I collapse onto the bed. My body aches with unfulfilled longing. Images of Jessica spread naked across my sheets fill my mind. I get up and make sure my door's locked before I let my desire take over.

I unbutton my jeans, sliding them down along with my boxers, freeing my throbbing cock. As I grip it tightly in my hand, my thoughts are consumed by the fantasies of what could be, of a world where she's mine and nothing comes between us.

“Jess,” I moan.

Stroking faster, I picture her arching beneath me. Her passion-filled cries echo through my mind as her lips part and her eyes flutter closed. My fantasy version of her is so erotic, I can't draw things out like I usually do. The pleasure

intensifies, spurring me on, but deep down, I know this can never compare to the real thing. My body yearns for her touch, for the intimacy that binds two souls together. But for now, I must settle for this fleeting moment of ecstasy.

As I reach my climax, my body shudders violently. I cry out my release and hope to hell she doesn't hear it.

When the waves of pleasure finally pass, I lie in bed, staring up at the ceiling. Does she feel the same undeniable pull toward me? And if she does, how long can we resist each other before our desire consumes us completely?

Chapter 14: Jessica

As I sit across from Talon in the kitchen, the scent of freshly brewed coffee fills the crisp morning air. I'm enjoying my breakfast with him, and I can't stop thinking about how great the last week has been. Moments like these make me feel safe despite everything that's happened recently. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't met Talon in the bar that night. He saved my life.

"So, Jess," Talon says between bites of scrambled eggs. "It's Saturday, and you've got the day off. What do you want to do today?"

I pause, fork halfway to my mouth, as I contemplate the question. It's been over a week since I moved into the clubhouse. Nothing out of the ordinary has happened since the stuffed animal incident. I've almost convinced myself that the nightmare is over and my stalker is gone for good. Leaving the clubhouse isn't an option yet, but I really miss seeing my bestie.

"I'd like to meet up with Sienna for coffee," I say hesitantly, gauging Talon's reaction. "I haven't spent any time with her since all this started, and I miss her."

Talon's expression shifts from relaxed to concerned, his eyes narrowing slightly. "I don't know if that's a good idea. It might not be safe for you to go out alone."

"Come on," I argue, frustration bubbling up inside me. "My stalker hasn't shown up since he dropped off that stuffed animal at my work. Maybe he gave up. Besides, I just want some downtime with my best friend."

I can see the wheels turning in Talon's head as he weighs the pros and cons. He's always been protective, but it's getting a bit suffocating.

"Fine," he finally relents, though I can tell he's still worried. "But I'm coming with you."

"Really?" I sigh, my shoulders slumping in defeat. "I appreciate your concern, but I need some space. Sienna and I

haven't had proper girl time in ages."

"I understand that, but you know how dangerous this situation is. I'm just trying to keep you safe."

"And I appreciate it, I really do. But we haven't heard a peep from the guy. He probably gave up after he saw all the guys from the club watching over me. Only a stupid person would try to stalk me while I'm being protected by you and the other guys."

"Or an obsessed one."

"If he were still fixated on me, he would have done something else by now. Please, let me have this one afternoon with Sienna."

Tension hangs in the air between us. I meet his frustrated gaze with a steady one, refusing to back down. The guy stalking me has already done enough to disrupt my life. I'm not letting him destroy it. I can tell Talon's not convinced, so I try another approach.

"I've been doing everything you told me to do, including taking different routes to and from work. I watch to make sure no one's following me. If anything seems strange, I call you and let you know."

"You've been very good about that," he concedes.

"Exactly, and I get why we had to do that, but I can't stay cooped up in the clubhouse all the time. I miss girl time with Sienna. There's such a thing as too much testosterone in one house."

"It's just Reaper and me now."

"That's enough." I laugh. "Have you seen the guy? He's like a walking steroid."

"He's never touched that stuff in his entire life."

"Doesn't need to. He's basically a solid wall of testosterone-induced muscle. Anyway, it's not just that. I also want to bring Loki with me. The coffee shop has a patio outside and they allow dogs. Loki's been stuck inside for over a week, poor thing. He needs some fresh air and exercise, too."

“I play with him in the yard every day.” Talon crosses his arms over his chest.

“It’s not the same as being able to explore and meet new people. Loki’s a huge people-watcher. He loves sitting on the sidewalk watching everyone go by.”

Talon’s face softens as he glances over at Loki, who’s currently rolling around on the floor, chasing his own tail. Loki senses we’re looking at him, so he stops spinning. Grinning up at us, he releases a happy bark.

“I guess he does need to get out for a bit.” Talon exhales, his shoulders dropping as he relents. “You can go. But promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I’ll be extra cautious.” I’m genuinely touched by his willingness to compromise, so I give him a quick peck on the cheek. He flushes and looks away.

With a plan in place, I finish my breakfast. I’m excited, yet a bit nervous. I choose to believe that everything will be okay, but I also hope I’m not making a big mistake.

I call Sienna to make sure she’s free. She’s thrilled that we can finally plan something and agrees to meet me in an hour.

As I gather my things and put Loki’s leash on him, Talon watches us. Concern is etched into the lines of his face, but it’s more than that. There’s a warmth there, too, a genuine care for both Loki and me that makes my heart swell.

The sun warms my face as I step outside. I’m holding Loki’s leash firmly in one hand while clutching my car keys in the other. The excitement radiating from Loki is contagious, making me feel lighter and more carefree than I have in days. Talon follows closely behind, with his motorcycle helmet tucked under his arm.

“I’ll follow you on my bike. And don’t worry, I won’t interfere with your visit to Sienna, but I’ll be nearby if you need me.”

“Got it.” I flash him a bright smile.

As I climb into my car, I can't help but admire Talon's protective nature. Sure, it can be a bit overwhelming at times, but there's no denying he genuinely cares about my safety. And if I'm honest with myself, I've started to develop feelings for him, too. With each passing day, my desire to be with him is getting stronger, and I'm not sure what to do about it. I can't wait to talk to Sienna and see what she thinks.

"Ready to go, Loki?" I ask, buckling him into his doggy seat. "We're going to the coffee shop you like. Sienna will be there, too."

Loki barks happily, wagging his tail with enthusiasm.

Talon straddles his motorcycle, revving the engine before pulling up behind my car. When he gives me a thumbs up, I start driving. Downtown Bozeman isn't too far away, so we'll definitely get there in time.

As we roll through the picturesque town, my thoughts drift back to Talon. I get the sense he's just as interested in our budding relationship as I am, and yet, he's holding back. I don't know why, but I'm curious as hell. He obviously likes kissing me. By now, he must realize I like it, too, or I wouldn't let him do it. So, why hasn't he taken things to the next level?

"Why are men so hard to figure out?" I ask Loki. He looks up at me while wagging his tail excitedly in the passenger seat. "I wish my mom were still here, so I could talk to her. Although, she'd probably tell me to run far, far away from anyone associated with a biker gang."

As we approach Main Street, the hustle and bustle of people enjoying their Saturday morning fills the air. Couples stroll hand in hand, families laugh together, and the sweet smell of pastries from a nearby bakery fills my nostrils. For a moment, I can almost forget that a dangerous stalker has turned my life upside down. I'm excited to be out, but I also need to stay alert.

"Let's find a parking spot," I mutter, scanning the crowded street for an empty space. Apparently, everyone decided to come downtown today. There isn't a single vacancy in sight.

“Guess we’ll have to try the parking garage,” I say to Loki, who barks in agreement.

As I turn into the multi-level structure, I glance back at my rearview mirror again, searching for Talon’s familiar figure. To my surprise, he’s nowhere to be seen. My heart skips a beat, anxiety bubbling up inside me.

“Where did he go?” I ask myself, trying to quell my rising panic. “Maybe he found a spot on Main Street ...”

I shake off my unease, focusing on finding a spot for my car instead. After ascending a couple of levels, I finally locate an open space, nestled between two hulking SUVs. I pull in cautiously, taking extra care not to scratch either vehicle.

“Come on, buddy,” I say to Loki, patting his head affectionately. “Let’s go see Sienna.”

As I gather my purse and Loki’s leash, I glance around the garage one more time, hoping to catch a glimpse of Talon’s motorcycle. There’s no sign of him.

The parking garage is eerily quiet, the only sounds echoing around me the distant hum of vehicles. Something doesn’t feel right, but I’m probably just being overly paranoid considering everything that happened last week.

“You’ll be fine. Just stay sharp.” I grip the car key tightly in my hand like a makeshift weapon.

I take a deep breath, trying to shake off the anxiety that has settled in my chest. Talon must be close by. He promised he’d keep an eye on me, and he’s a man of his word.

“Everything’s going to be fine,” I mutter, as if saying it aloud will make it true.

Pushing the door open, I step out of the car. Before I can register what’s happening, a flash of darkness rushes toward me. A huge, male body slams into me, pushing me to the floor while simultaneously slamming the door on Loki, trapping him inside my car.

“Going somewhere?” A sinister voice behind me shatters any illusion of safety. Panic surges through me as I whirl

around, my heart pounding in my ears. I crawl backward, trying to escape.

“Who are you?” I demand, my voice trembling despite my best efforts to sound strong.

The man stalking me smirks. As he walks toward me, his cold eyes cut into me like a knife. Before I can react, he lunges forward and grabs my ankle, dragging me toward him. I scream, kicking with all my might in an attempt to break free.

My poor pup barks and frantically scratches at the windows. I wish I’d taught him how to use the handle to get out. I could use his sharp teeth right now.

“Shut the fuck up!” The man releases my leg for a second before pounding on the window. Loki’s incensed, barking like crazy and clawing at the door.

“Leave him alone!” I scream, fury boiling within me and momentarily overpowering my terror.

“Should’ve thought about that before—” The stalker doesn’t get to finish his sentence because I swing my purse at his head with all the strength I can muster. It connects with a satisfying thud, but he recovers quickly, grabbing my arm and twisting it painfully behind my back.

“Feisty, aren’t you? I like that,” he sneers, dragging me toward a black truck parked nearby.

Tears sting my eyes as I struggle against his iron grip, my hope rapidly fading. I don’t think I’m going to escape this time. He’s going to kidnap me, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I’m completely screwed.

“Let her go!” Talon’s roar slices through the air like a gunshot, igniting a spark of hope within me. The stalker’s eyes widen in surprise, but he doesn’t release me.

“Who the hell are you?” the man growls.

“Your worst nightmare,” Talon replies, his voice laced with danger. With lightning speed, he charges toward the man, landing a powerful punch that sends him stumbling back.

“Jessica, run!” Talon shouts, engaging in a fierce fistfight with my attacker.

I scramble to my feet. As the two men exchange blows, my heart feels as if it’s trying to escape my chest. Talon swings at the man’s face, but the guy ducks and kicks Talon’s legs out from under him. After a swift blow to Talon’s head, the stalker sprints away, disappearing into the shadows of the garage.

“Oh my God. Are you okay?” I drop to my knees beside him.

“I’m fine.” He groans, clutching his head. “What about you? Did he hurt you?”

“A few scrapes, but nothing too bad. Thank God you came.”

“I was right behind you, and then a bunch of people walking across the street stopped me. By the time they got to the other side, I’d lost you. I figured maybe you came in here to look for a spot.”

“I did.” I hold out my hand to help him up. “He hit you really hard. Maybe we should call an ambulance.”

“No. I’m fine. It’s you I’m worried about.” He pulls me into a tight embrace. I hold him back just as hard, trembling in the aftermath of the attack.

“I’m okay,” I whisper shakily into his strong chest. The warmth of his body envelops me like a protective shield, calming my frantic thoughts. I know I’m safe in his arms.

“Let me check on Loki,” Talon says gently, releasing me from his comforting hold.

He moves quickly to the car, pulling open the door to free my trapped puppy. Loki’s barks are filled with relief as he leaps out, bounding over to Talon, wagging his tail furiously. Loki licks Talon’s hands before running over to do the same to mine. I give my baby a big hug.

“Hey, buddy,” Talon murmurs, kneeling to examine Loki for any injuries. It’s as if he can sense how important my

puppy is to me. To my immense relief, it seems like Loki escaped any serious harm. In a way, it's probably good he got trapped in the car.

Loki's eyes lock onto Talon's. Something seems to pass between them because suddenly Loki licks Talon's face affectionately. I smile through my lingering fear. They really seem to love each other.

"Stay with her," Talon instructs Loki, his voice firm yet tender. "I'm going to get some evidence before we leave."

I nod, understanding the importance of gathering information to help identify my stalker. The fact that we've got his truck now is huge. This could be the break we needed to blow the case wide open.

Talon walks over to inspect the large, black truck. He takes out his phone and snaps several pictures, capturing every angle he can. He taps away at his screen, sending the images to Matrix, who I know will work tirelessly to trace the vehicle's owner.

"Matrix will update us as soon as possible," Talon informs me, slipping his phone back into his cut. "This is a huge lead. If we can find out who owns this, we might finally figure out who's stalking you."

"Talon," I say, my voice thick with emotion. "I don't know what I would've done without you. He almost got me to his truck. If he'd taken me someplace else ..."

"Hey, baby ..." Talon cups my face in his hands. "We're a team, remember? You don't have to face this alone."

"I know that now."

"You're only now realizing this?" He smiles before his expression becomes serious once more. "What I don't get is how he found you. No one followed us. I made sure of it. We need to check your car again. The stalker might've put a tracker on it."

"But Matrix has been checking my car every day before I leave for work and then again when I get home."

“He could have missed it.”

When we get back to my car, Talon crouches to examine the undercarriage. A moment later, he pulls out a small, black device. His jaw clenches as he shakes his head.

“Damn it!” He holds up the tracker. “How the hell did the stalker get close enough to put it on?”

My stomach churns, and my hands won’t stop shaking. Talon notices and gives me a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder before pulling out his phone to text Matrix.

“We need to leave your car here. Matrix will take it back to the clubhouse. We’ll leave the tracker on, so the stalker thinks you’re back there.”

“If I won’t be at the clubhouse, where will I be?” I fold my arms across my belly, trying to calm the uneasy fluttering within it.

“We need to go somewhere safe. Somewhere he can’t get to you.”

“Okay.” I agree, my voice barely above a whisper. “Let me just text Sienna to cancel our coffee meeting.”

I send the message. Sienna immediately responds with a bunch of exclamation points. She asks me if I want her to get my dad involved, but I tell her no. Talon’s going to handle it. She tells me to call her if I need anything.

As I’m texting her, Talon’s securing something on the back of his motorcycle. By the time I put my phone away, he’s got Loki sitting on the back of the bike.

“What on earth?” I frown.

“Dog carrier. The post office finally dropped it off yesterday. Overnight shipping my ass.”

“You got this for Loki?”

“Yeah. Just in case we needed to take him somewhere on my bike.”

“What’s all that?” I point at a pile of various black leather items.

“Well, he needs goggles so he won’t get stuff in his eyes.” Talon secures them on Loki’s face, tightening the straps and making sure they’re settled into the right spot.

“And a helmet?” I pick it up and study it.

“We can decorate it later.”

“With what?” My brows raise.

“Stickers. Whatever you want. Some guys put places they’ve been. Others like to put their favorite sports teams or beers.”

“That’s adorable.”

“Wait till you see the jacket.” Talon holds a small, leather jacket up. “This will cut down on wind chill.”

“He’s never going to wear that. I tried to get him to wear a—” I abruptly stop because Loki doesn’t fight back when Talon slides the arms over Loki’s paws. In fact, Loki sits perfectly still while Talon dresses him.

“And we can’t forget earmuffs.” Talon holds up a pair before placing them over Loki’s ears. “There. He’s all set to ride.”

“Wow ... you really thought of everything,” I murmur, impressed by his thoroughness. It’s obvious Talon cares deeply for animals, but the question that haunts me is whether he feels the same way about me.

“Jess, you’re not the only one I’m going to keep safe.” Talon looks at me intently. “I’m starting to really like having this little dude around. I want him to be happy when he’s on my bike.”

“I’m sure he will be,” I say softly.

“I got you something, too.” He holds out a medium-sized helmet until I take it. “Let me help you put it on. It should be the right size, but you never know.”

“They come in different sizes?”

“Of course.” He looks at me like I’m not very bright.

“I don’t know. All this motorcycle stuff is new to me.”

“Eventually, you’ll be a pro. You’ll know everything there is to know about riding safely and comfortably. Maybe one day, I can teach you how to drive one of these.” Talon pats his bike. “Until then, you’re riding bitch.”

“What?”

“It’s an expression. Riding bitch means you’re the person in the back on a bike.”

“Oh, that’s good. For a second, I thought I’d have to slap you.”

“Only if you want to, baby.” Talon grins before climbing onto his bike. He waits for me to get settled in behind him before revving it and tearing out of the parking structure.

As we ride away from town, I wonder where he’s taking me. Not just physically, but emotionally, too. I’m falling for this man, slowly but surely, and as much as I want to deny it, I can’t. He’s everything I never knew I wanted, and nothing like the type of man I thought I’d marry. I still don’t know what to make of his world, but the longer I stay in it, the harder it will be to leave. If I’m not careful, I’m going to get trapped in a fairytale gone wild with a man who could steal my heart away for good.

Chapter 15: Jessica

The landscape changes as Talon drives us deeper into the woods. I have no idea where we're going, but there's something about his strong presence that makes me trust him implicitly. The roar of the motorcycle's engine soothes me. I don't really understand why, but I feel like a baby being rocked to sleep.

"Almost there!" Talon's voice carries through the speakers in my helmet.

When we finally stop in front of a small cabin nestled among the trees, I feel a sense of relief. It's secluded and peaceful, the perfect hideaway. Talon hops off the bike and extends a hand to help me dismount.

"Welcome to our little sanctuary," he says with a smile. "The motorcycle club owns this place. It's perfect for times like these."

"It's tiny, but cute." The small, wooden structure looks like a classic small cabin. There's nothing distinct or special about it.

"Let me get Loki situated."

While I wait for Talon to unbuckle Loki, I turn in a slow circle. We're completely surrounded by woods, and it's so silent I can hear small animals moving through the bushes.

As we walk inside, Talon points out a panic button on the wall next to the security keypad. "If anything happens, just press this. Matrix will send help right away."

I nod, taking in the simple but cozy interior. Loki sniffs around, inspecting the well-worn couch before settling down in front of the fireplace. Talon rolls up his sleeves and begins building a fire, expertly arranging the logs and kindling.

"Even though it's summertime, it's going to get chilly once the sun sets," he explains.

I'm fascinated by the precision of his movements, his strong hands deftly manipulating the materials. This isn't the

first time he's done this. I wonder how much time he spends here.

Once the fire is crackling, Talon straightens up and looks out the window. "I want to gather some more firewood before nightfall. You'll be okay here?"

"Uh, sure."

I rub my forearms as he steps outside. Staying at the cabin alone, with only Loki to protect me, doesn't sound like a good idea after what just happened in the parking garage. I decide to join Talon outside. The closer I am to him, the safer I feel.

"Do you need any help with the firewood?" I ask as I step into the cool evening breeze.

"Sure," he grins, looking far too at ease wielding an axe. "Grab a pair of gloves from the kitchen, so you don't hurt your hands."

I glance down at my manicured nails. Normally, they're pristine and chip-free. Not anymore. We cancelled my weekly appointment because Talon didn't think it would be a good idea. He was right. The one time I decided to do anything other than go to work, the stalker managed to find me. He almost kidnapped me, too. I can't believe how close he came to pulling it off.

After pulling on a pair of gloves, I head outside, ready for action. We work in companionable silence, gathering branches and fallen logs until we have a large pile.

"That should be enough. Stand back while I cut them into smaller pieces." Talon swings the axe with precision, slicing through a log like a knife through butter.

I force myself to close my mouth because it's hanging open in the most ridiculous way. As much as I try to look away, I can't. My gaze keeps drifting back to him. It doesn't take long before sweat starts glistening on his skin, causing his shirt to cling to his muscular torso. His biceps flex with every powerful chop, and the more he swings that axe, the wetter I'm getting.

Finally, he pauses and pulls off his shirt, revealing a broad chest sculpted with sinewy muscles. I try not to stare, but it's impossible not to appreciate the view. My pulse goes wild when I consider what he could do to my body with his big, strong hands.

“Are you okay?” he asks, snapping me back to reality.

I quickly shake off my daydreams and force a smile.

“Yes. Just a bit tired,” I lie, trying to sound casual.

He nods, seemingly satisfied with my answer, and continues chopping wood. It's a sight I'll never forget. By the time he's done, I'm ready to jump him, but I keep my wanton desires to myself.

Once we have enough firewood, Talon carries it inside while I head to the kitchen to find something for dinner. I riffle through the cabinets, discovering an odd assortment of ingredients. Determined to make the best of what we have, I get creative, mixing spices and flavors that shouldn't work but somehow do. Using pasta as a base, I add a jar of pesto, a can of drained edamame, then I top it off with crushed walnuts.

As I cook, the scent of the meal fills the cabin, blending with the earthy aroma of the burning wood. It's cozy and comforting in a way I never imagined possible, considering the circumstances.

“Smells great,” Talon remarks as he enters the kitchen. His shirt's back on, but it's still damp with sweat. “Can't wait to try it.”

“Let's hope it tastes as good as it smells,” I say with a nervous laugh, secretly hoping my culinary experiment is a success.

The gentle clatter of plates and utensils fills the small cabin as we settle down to eat dinner. I dump a can of dog food into a bowl for Loki.

“I'm surprised I found this in the cupboard.”

“We keep it there for emergencies.”

“Do you have a lot of those involving dogs?”

“Some people fleeing abusive relationships have pets. They come, too. We’re not about to leave them behind with an abuser. Pets don’t fare well in those situations.” His eyes go dark for a second while his fists clench.

“Do you save a lot of people?” I ask softly.

“Yeah. But there are always more. The world’s full of assholes.”

“That’s depressing.”

“I used to think that, too, but there’s no point in getting upset about it. Taking action is the only way to make things right. You can’t get rid of evil, but you can fight it.”

“You’re a good man, Talon.” I finish setting our plates of food on the small table, then take a seat.

“I hope so.” He sits beside me and gives me a soft smile.

Outside, a rumble of thunder announces the arrival of a storm. As we take our first bites, a sudden flash of lightning illuminates the room, followed by a deafening boom. The lights flicker and go out, plunging us into almost total darkness. The meager light from the fireplace doesn’t do enough to light the space.

“Damn,” he mutters.

“The wind probably knocked down a power line.”

“We’ve been meaning to get a backup generator down here, but we kept putting it off.” He fumbles for his phone, checking for service. “No luck with the phones either.”

I swallow hard, trying not to let my anxiety show. Without communication and lights, I feel even more vulnerable.

“Well, I’ve never had dinner by candlelight in a cabin before.” It’s a feeble attempt to ease the tension, but it works.

“Unexpected romance.” He chuckles softly.

“Yeah.” My breathy response fills the silence.

“I know we’ve got candles around here somewhere.” He searches the room, finds a few candles, and quickly lights them. Flickering shadows dance across the walls. As we resume eating, he asks me, “Have you ever been camping? This is kind of like that, but with walls.”

“No, never. My parents always took me to nice hotels when we traveled. We went to many countries in Europe, but I’ve never really experienced the great outdoors. I don’t know if my mom would have liked it. I doubt it. She hated to get dirty.”

“What about you? Do you like it?”

“I don’t know.” I’m glad it’s so dark that he can barely see me because my cheeks are on fire. “I’ve never tried it before.”

He doesn’t reply for so long I’m sure he’s going to shove the plates off the table and throw me down on it. Or maybe that’s just my fantasies working overtime.

He stabs at the pasta with his fork before leaning to slurp the spaghetti from the plate. His table manners are atrocious, but there’s something endearing about it. If no one ever taught him how to eat properly, then he couldn’t possibly know the right way to eat it. Finishing school taught me how to swirl my pasta around a fork. I could teach Talon how to do it, but then he’d lose part of his charm. His lack of culture is refreshing. Instead of being uptight and ridged about everything, he eats with gusto and joy. I envy that freedom.

“Tell me about Europe. I’ve never been,” he prompts between slurps.

A smile plays on my lips as I recall a particularly memorable trip. “One time, we were in Paris, and my dad insisted on taking us to this fancy restaurant. My mom wore this beautiful red dress she bought just for the occasion. But when we got there, it turned out they didn’t have our reservation! My dad was so frustrated, but my mom just laughed it off and suggested we get street crepes instead. It ended up being one of the most fun nights of the trip.”

“Nina makes killer crepes.”

“How did you meet her? I know she cooks for you guys, but I don’t quite understand your relationship to her.”

“We’re not blood related. She ... took us in when we were younger.”

“Before you lived with Governor Blackstone?”

“After.”

“After? How old were you when you met her?”

“Fourteen.”

“So, you lived with Blackstone until then?”

“Yeah. Hey, I don’t really like talking about this too much. It wasn’t a good time.” His jaw clenches as he looks away.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s fine.” He takes a deep breath before asking, “Have you ever traveled anywhere outside of Europe?”

I decide to stop talking about Governor Blackstone. Something about him seems to upset Talon, so I probably shouldn’t go there. Maybe he’ll tell me more about that part of his life later. For now, I’m not going to pry, no matter how curious I might be.

“Where would you go if you could travel anywhere?” I inquire, eager to learn more about his dreams and desires.

He leans back in his chair, staring thoughtfully at the ceiling. “I’ve always wanted to visit Japan. The culture, the history, the food ... it all just seems so fascinating.”

“I went there once with my parents. I was too little to remember much, but the food was amazing. It would be fun to visit again.”

As the storm rages outside, intimacy blooms between us. Despite our vastly different backgrounds, we have several things in common. We both love animals and good food.

His affection for Loki is more than evident in the way he interacts with my puppy. Talon doesn't know I've seen him talking to the squirrels around the clubhouse, but I have. He makes it seem like they're listening and that they can understand him. Normally, I'd think he was crazy, but I've seen him speaking to Loki, too, and there's something strange about it. Loki seems to understand him. I don't know how that's possible, but I could swear they're able to communicate.

Aside from that weirdness, Talon and I both enjoy good food. I'm glad I was able to whip up something tasty tonight. After he saved my life—again—it was the least I could do. I owe him so much more, but I don't have anything else to give him.

As we finish cleaning up after dinner, the last flicker of candlelight casts a warm glow against the walls. Loki yawns and stretches out on the floor, his eyelids already drooping.

“So ... where's everyone going to sleep?” I ask, trying to sound casual, but my heart races at the thought of our sleeping arrangements.

“Ah, well, there's only one bed in the cabin.” Talon scratches the back of his neck, avoiding eye contact. “You can take the bedroom. I'll crash on the couch.”

My cheeks flush, and I'm suddenly aware of a tingling sensation deep within me. The idea of sharing a bed with him pebbles my nipples, but his gentlemanly response leaves me disappointed.

“Okay,” I say, attempting to hide my true feelings.

“Of course.” He nods and offers a small smile. “Sleep well, Jess.”

“You, too. Loki, come on, boy.”

I head into the tiny bedroom, which consists of a small bed and an equally tiny dresser. Loki follows me into the bedroom. He sniffs around for a moment before settling in a cozy spot on the rug beside the bed. I check the closet, but it's empty. Since I have nothing to change into, I slide out of my

pants and slip my bra off, leaving me dressed in panties and a t-shirt.

As I slip under the covers, my mind starts racing. Every unexpected noise makes me jump. My gaze lands on the lock on the door. Should I lock it to keep the stalker out? It seems like the right thing to do, but then it hits me—if my stalker somehow finds this cabin, a locked door won't stop him. And what if Talon needs to come in and rescue me?

“Who am I kidding?” I whisper to myself, leaving the door unlocked.

Deep down, I know I'm not just worried about the stalker. A part of me secretly hopes Talon will join me in bed. With each passing day, my resolve to keep my hands to myself is weakening. I wish I'd been able to talk to Sienna today. She'd be able to help me sort out my feelings about Talon. Love and lust are two different things. I'm just not sure which one's got a stranglehold on my emotions.

Outside, the thunderstorm rages on. The weight of vulnerability keeps me awake deep into the night. In this little wooden sanctuary, with Loki by my side and Talon not far away, I try to push aside the fear I have of my stalker ... and the longing I have for Talon.

Chapter 16: Talon

The flames quivering in the hearth cast a warm glow over my rigid body. I'm lying on my back on the threadbare couch, trying not to think about Jessica. Usually, the sound of crackling, burning wood soothes me. But tonight, it's useless against the storm of doubt raging inside me.

Jessica's asleep in the bedroom. I'd be lying if I said I didn't wish I was in there with her, but I can't be. I'm supposed to be guarding her, protecting her, but I'm failing at my job. I let her down earlier today. Allowing her to go to the coffee shop alone to meet her friend was stupid. It was a huge mistake. And I almost lost her. I should've been there to keep her safe, but instead, her stalker nearly kidnapped her.

"Damn it." I run my hand through my hair.

Am I becoming too emotionally involved with her? I've never felt like this about someone I was protecting before. The club has rescued some very beautiful women in the past, but I never cared about any of them. I could admire their attractive qualities without wanting to act on them. This is different. All I can think about is running my hands all over her luscious curves. At night, I dream about sinking in the sweetness of her body, and I wake up in a sweat. It's happened more times than I can count.

My thoughts drift to Reaper. He's completely emotionless, like a machine. I've never even seen him look at the women we watch over, let alone touch one of them. Maybe he'd do a better job of protecting her because he wouldn't be plagued by thoughts of crawling into bed with her.

"He might be the better option," I grumble. The words taste sour in my mouth, but the truth isn't always palatable.

I debate whether I should continue trying to protect Jessica or if I should trust another member of the club with her safety. The decision weighs heavily on me. I struggle with the need to protect her and the knowledge that my emotions might be clouding my judgment.

“Can I be objective, or are my feelings getting in the way?” I stare into the flames as they dance and twist before me. I wish I had the power of divination. Knowing the future would make everything much easier.

As I think back on everything I’ve overcome, my resolve returns. I escaped Blackstone’s dungeon and helped the club become what it is today. Countless men, women, and children have made it to freedom because of me. I’ve singlehandedly taken out more assholes than almost anyone else in the club, except for Reaper, of course. I can do this. I just have to man the fuck up and stop being a pussy.

“Get a grip,” I say, my voice firm and resolute. “Backing out is something a weaker man would do, and I’m not that kind of guy.”

If I can’t keep Jessica safe, then what kind of motorcycle club member am I? I’ve never lost a person I was protecting, and I’m not about to start now. It’s up to me, and no one else, to keep her out of harm’s way. I’m the best man for this job, and I won’t let my dick control me. Hot or not, she deserves better than a horny piece of shit panting after her like a dog. I have to have my head right. No more fantasizing about all the delicious places I could lick her. No more dreaming about making love to her all night long. That’s all got to stop. Now.

My brain immediately takes this as a challenge. As my thoughts drift toward Jessica, asleep in the bedroom, my heart races and my cock goes rock hard. It’s impossible to shake the image of her lying in bed, her body all warm and inviting. I want her—bad. I keep telling myself it’s just a physical thing, that it’ll pass, but damn, if it isn’t hard to keep my hands off her. If we hadn’t kissed, maybe I wouldn’t be so obsessed with her. But we did, and now, I know just how warm and sexy her lips are. I got a small taste, and I want more.

“Stop that shit,” I mutter, trying to regain my focus. “She’s counting on you.”

But my mind refuses to let go of those tantalizing thoughts. I know it’s dangerous to let my emotions rule me

like this, but the more I try to resist them, the stronger they become.

“Shit,” I hiss, clenching my fists in frustration.

This isn't me. I've always been able to keep a level head, to separate my personal feelings from my duty. But with Jessica ... it's different. I hate feeling so powerless.

“Focus,” I command.

I need to stay vigilant and not let my desire get the better of me. I force myself to think of something else, anything else, to clear my head.

Blackstone immediately comes to mind. Icy fingers slide down my back as I remember what Reaper said. If Reaper senses something's not right, then I believe him. We haven't been able to find a way to stop Blackstone yet, but one day, we will. Someday, Blackstone's going to pay for the torture he put us through. I'm going to make sure he burns in hell, where he belongs.

As images of the torment we endured flicker through my mind, I push them away. Getting off the couch, I walk to each window. Looking out, I search for any sign of her stalker. The night is still in the wake of the storm, but in my gut, I know another one's coming. Maybe not tonight, but soon.

We need to find a way to go on the offensive. So far, we've been running and hiding. Fighting back would be a much better option, but we don't know who we're battling against. Until we gather more information, we won't know.

I check my phone. Service is still out, so I can't call Matrix. By now, he's probably got intel on the owner of the black truck. That information could be very useful. I can't wait to follow up with him tomorrow. We might have to go back into town to get through to him, but it's a risk I'm willing to take.

As I wander through the cabin, I'm drawn to Jessica's bedroom door. It's like a magnetic force is pulling me toward it, but I know I shouldn't give in. I clench my jaw as my self-control wavers.

“Cut that shit out,” I mutter as I walk over to the door.

I press my hand against the wooden surface. The desire to go inside and comfort her—or maybe do something more—is almost overwhelming. But I can’t. I have a job to do, one that doesn’t involve crossing the one line we’ve got left. I already fucked up by kissing her. Sleeping with her would be the ultimate disaster. I can’t do it ...

Only, that’s all I can think about. Her curves, her lips, her

The door swings open and she jumps back, startled.

“Talon!” She covers her heart with her hand. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry. I was just, uh ...” I look away because I don’t have a good excuse for lurking around like a total creeper.

When my gaze drifts back to her face, I’m shocked by the look in her eyes. Pure, unadulterated desire radiates from them. She’s staring at me like I’m a steak and she’s a hungry lioness. It’s so hot that I involuntarily take a step closer. We’re only a few inches away from each other, but it’s not close enough. I rest my hands on her hips and pull her closer. She tilts her head back and parts her lips as if expecting me to kiss her.

“Couldn’t sleep?” I ask, trying not to undress her with my eyes, but failing miserably.

“No. You?”

“No.”

My brain shuts down completely as lust takes over. I’ve wanted her from the moment we met. Until now, I’ve tried like hell to keep my distance, but why? If she wasn’t interested, she wouldn’t be parading around in her panties and t-shirt. She would have locked the door. I didn’t hear a lock click before she opened it, so she wasn’t trying to keep me out. But ... does she want me to come in?

“Jess,” I murmur in a husky voice.

“I can’t stop thinking about you.” Her confession sends blood rushing south. “I don’t know if you—”

I silence her with my lips, capturing her uncertainty and destroying it. Her lips open to my tongue. As I glide it across hers, I drink in her sighs of pleasure. Her arms encircle my neck, and her breasts press hard against my chest. The softness of her body is unlike anything I’ve ever felt. She’s pure passion and so innocently seductive that I never stood a chance. I don’t know why I waited this long, but I’m not letting another second pass without showing her what she means to me.

As I back her toward the bed, Loki nearly trips us. I grab Jessica tighter to keep her from falling. She laughs and pulls out of my embrace.

“Out you go, buddy.” Jessica points toward the door.

Loki cocks his head to one side, unwilling to leave. He glanced from her to me and back. Softly whining, he’s trying to convince her to let him stay. I love the little guy, but there’s no way I’m letting him watch this. It’s just wrong.

“I need some private time with your mom,” I say while silently communicating with him. He’s not thrilled about leaving her alone, but he trusts me enough to let me close the door.

“We don’t need an audience,” she whispers, as the light from a single candle flickers across her skin.

“He’ll be fine out. The fireplace is still going. It’s warm, and his food and water are in the kitchen anyway.”

“Come here.” She holds out her arms until I walk into them. “Make me forget about the man who’s stalking me. I don’t want to think about him anymore. Sleeping is pointless. Every noise makes me wonder if he’s out there, and I can’t handle it.”

“It that all you want, a few hours of sex?”

“Hours?” She grins while avoiding my question.

“If you let me stay, we’re not getting out of that bed until after sunrise.” I glide my hands from her shoulders down to her waist. “And even then, there’s no guarantee I’m ever letting you go.”

“Then don’t.” She grabs the hem of her shirt and pulls it over her head. “Touch me.”

I groan and cup her full breasts in my palms. She’s so unbelievably sexy and she doesn’t even know it. Her ability to take control of this situation is hot as fuck. She’s not a shrinking violet, incapable of telling a man what she wants. No. Instead, she’s demanding it with a brazenness that takes my breath away. This is the kind of woman I’ve always wanted, someone who can be assertive while retaining her femininity.

All the doubts I had earlier vanish the second I wrap my lips around one plump nipple. She moans, arching into my mouth and sliding her hands through my hair. The feel of her fingernails against my scalp only makes me harder. My cock strains against my jeans, desperate to be free.

I lick and suck her delicious breasts until she reaches for my belt. Reluctantly letting her nipple go with a pop, I watch her through hooded eyes. She bites her bottom lip as she unbuckles my belt. Pulling it free, she tosses it against the wall. Her delicate fingers work on my pants, unbuttoning them before sliding the zipper down. She pushes them past my hips. They pool on top of my boots.

“Those have to go, too.” Her seductive tone heightens my anticipation.

I sit on the edge of the bed and yank my boots off. She pushes me onto my back and straddles my hips. Rocking slightly, she slides her panty-covered pussy over my erection.

“We still have way too many clothes on.” She pushes my cut off my shoulders. I wriggle out of it, but before she can throw it across the room, I pull a six-pack of condoms out of one pocket.

“Six, huh?” She smirks.

“I like to be prepared.”

“So, I’m not the only one who’s been holding back.”

“Nope.” I toss the condoms on the nightstand, then pull my shirt off.

“Let me,” she whispers, reaching for my boxers.

When her fingers brush my lower belly, I tense. I haven’t been this hard, well, maybe ever, and I don’t want to embarrass myself by coming like an inexperienced virgin.

“Lie back,” I say, wanting to get her just as naked as I am.

She crawls onto the bed, giving me a great view of her ass before turning to lie down. With a seductive smile, she slowly spreads her thighs, revealing the damp spot on her pink lace panties.

“You’re already wet,” I whisper.

“Come see how much I want you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As I join her on the bed, the springs creak under our weight. I slowly cover her with my body before lowering my lips to her neck. Trailing soft kisses across her skin, I meander lower until I reach her breasts. Her nipples taste like candy. I don’t know if she’s wearing any lotion or if this is just her. Either way, I don’t care. She’s tastier than an ice cream sundae, and that’s all that matters.

“Oh, Talon,” she murmurs as she strokes my cheek.

I press my face against her hand, loving the way she’s cradling my face. She’s not just the sexiest woman I’ve ever seen; she’s the most nurturing. With a single touch, she’s able to take away all my trepidation. Before tonight, I wasn’t sure if I should be touching her, but it’s clear now. We were always going to end up in bed. It was just a matter of time.

Licking a path lower, I slide down, spreading her thighs with my hands, revealing her tiny pearl. It glistens in the low light, just begging to be worshiped. And so, I do, gently

caressing it with the tip of my tongue before capturing it between my lips.

She arches off the bed, moaning and whimpering as I lavish her with erotic kisses. Her soft cries of pleasure fill the room, spurring me on. I could spend hours tasting her sweetness, but I want to watch her fall apart.

I find the rhythm and pace that has her clutching at the sheets. Her legs tremble and her breath comes in shaky gasps. Tension coils tight in her body. She closes her thighs around my face, nearly smothering me, but I love every second of it.

“Oh, Talon. Oh, God!”

Lashing her with my tongue, I drive her toward the edge of ecstasy. With one last, well-placed lick, she comes undone. Writhing and trying to push my face away, she screams. Her entire body quakes uncontrollably. Her eyes scrunch closed, and her mouth forms an “O” as she rides waves of pleasure.

By the time she finally comes down, I’m not sure if I’ll last much longer. I quickly sheath myself, then crawl up between her thighs. Her eyes flutter open to reveal a new level of want. She runs her hands across my back before settling them on my ass.

Pulling me in, she looks deep into my eyes. I sink into her warm, wet center and groan. White-hot pleasure rushes through me. I have to stop, so I don’t lose control.

“Fuck,” I moan.

“Yes.” She kisses the side of my neck softly before sucking it. “Now, please.”

I know exactly what she wants, so I roll my hips back and give it to her. Hard. Deep. Over and over. Thrusting, plunging, and overwhelming her with my desire. I can’t stop pounding into her hot pussy. She’s clutching my cock in her perfect little vise, and I know I’m not going to last much longer.

Gritting my teeth, I close my eyes and will my dick to behave. I can’t give into the crushing need to come deep inside her. I want this to last because I don’t know if this will be the only time I’ll get to make love to her. Not that this is love. No,

it's pure, animalistic sex, and it's what we both need right now.

"Harder!" She digs her heels into my thighs and claws at my back. The scrape of her nails sends shockwaves of pain and pleasure throughout my entire body. Hot tendrils of lust snake out to wrap around my cock. I lose my fucking mind, punishing her with rough, wild thrusts.

Wild with the need to come, I reach between us to rub her exactly where she needs it. She screams, exploding all around me and milking my cock with her tight pussy.

"Fuck!" I scream as I drive one last thrust into her.

Molten waves of release undulate through me as I collapse. Grabbing her in my arms, I roll onto my back, so I won't smooch her. She lays her head on my chest and presses her ear against the skin above my heart. I'm sure she can hear it pounding uncontrollably. If she wasn't sure what she did to me before, now, she knows.

She's completely broken my resolve to stay away. After this, after tonight, after making love to her, I won't be able to stop. It's not where I thought we'd end up when I brought us to the cabin, but it's where we belong. At least for now.

"That was amazing," she whispers against my skin. "Stay with me tonight."

"I will." I maneuver us underneath the blankets before holding her tight once more. "Get some sleep. I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere."

"Night, babe." She yawns before resting her head in the crook of my arm.

I look down at her, loving the way the candlelight kisses her perfect features. For a long time, I wondered if I'd ever find someone to love. Now, I'm afraid I have. The thought of losing her doesn't sit right with me. I've got to find a way to keep her after this stalker bullshit is over. She belongs with me, and I'm going to make her mine.

My eyes fly open at the sound of Loki's barking. I must have drifted off at some point, but now, I'm wide awake. Loki

never acts like this without a damn good reason. And I've got a very bad feeling I know why he's so upset.

"What's going on?" Jessica asks in a sleepy tone.

"Not sure. Stay here."

"Be careful." She sits up and pulls the blanket up to cover her breasts.

"I will," I promise as I quickly dress and check my gun. "Don't come out. I'll be back soon."

The terror in her eyes breaks my heart. She shouldn't have to be so afraid. If her stalker's out there, then I'm going to end this, once and for all. I give her a reassuring smile before reaching for the doorknob. Bracing myself, I prepare myself for war.

Chapter 17: Talon

I open the bedroom door just wide enough to slip out. Closing it behind me, I stand perfectly still, listening for any movement in the cabin. Loki's standing at the front door barking his head off.

"Loki, quiet!" I whisper. He immediately goes silent.

I grab Loki's collar and try to pull him toward the bedroom. He growls and struggles to break free.

"Stop that! Stay!" I point at the floor in front of the bedroom door.

He glares but sits. His eyes bore into my back as I slowly move toward the front of the cabin. I know he's mad, but I don't want him to get hurt. He'll be safer if he stays inside.

I crack open the front door and peer out. Loki scrambles over and rushes through the small opening before I can catch him. He bolts into the forest, disappearing into the trees.

"Loki! Fuck!"

"What's going on?" Jessica's voice catches me off-guard. She's standing at the bedroom door, wearing her t-shirt.

"Loki ran outside. I'll find him."

"Let me put my shoes on."

"No. Get back inside and lock the door," I order in a tone that leaves no room for interpretation.

I step outside, sweeping the area with my gun. The forest is eerily quiet. No birds chirping. No rustling leaves. It's as if the forest itself is holding its breath. I cautiously step forward, keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of danger.

As I move deeper into the forest, I hear footsteps crunching on dead leaves. Someone is out here. I raise my gun, ready to defend myself. But as the figure comes into view, I lower it in surprise.

It's Loki.

He's standing at the edge of a clearing with his ears pinned back. A low growl rumbles from his throat.

A flash of color catches my attention. A red jacket. A man.

I sprint toward the man, but he's got too much of a lead. He races through the pines, going in circles and doubling back until I'm completely lost. Then everything goes silent again.

"Fuck," I murmur.

Loki trots out from beneath a bush. His ears are back up, and his tail's wagging, as if the danger's gone. I want to trust him, but he's a dog.

"Did you see where the man went?" I psychically communicate to him.

"Nope. Gone."

"Good boy." I rub his head.

Trust, but verify. That's always been my motto.

After searching the woods, I find a trail back to the cabin. I'm relieved to find Jessica hiding in the bedroom. Loki runs into the room and jumps on the bed. She pulls him into her arms.

"Was it the stalker?" she asks.

"Probably, but I don't know for sure. I didn't get a good look."

"How did he find us?"

"I don't know. Maybe he looked up property records and found the cabin. The club owns it, so it wouldn't be that hard to find. I should have Matrix put it under a shell company just in case. We probably should have done that years ago, but we don't use it that often."

"Now what? He seems to be able to find me everywhere."

"Now we go back to the clubhouse. At least there we've got strength in numbers and lots of eyes to watch out for us."

"Okay." Her shoulders slump and she hangs her head.

“Babe, don’t do that. Don’t get discouraged. We’ll figure this out.”

I sit on the edge of the bed and hold her close while my jaw twitches. Rage builds within me. When I get my hands on the fucker tormenting her, I’m going to kill him. No one deserves to be put through something like this, especially not someone as selfless as Jessica. I’m going to protect her, even if it takes every damn resource we’ve got. By the time I’m through with him, he’s going to wish he’d never laid eyes on her.

“Pack your stuff. We’re going home.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

The rumble of my motorcycle echoes on the pavement as I pull into the clubhouse with Jessica clinging to me. The tension in her grip is palpable, and I know she’s frustrated by her situation. All she wants is answers, and I’m determined to give them to her.

“Let’s get you settled,” I say, guiding her off the bike and toward the clubhouse. As we walk down the hallway, I can feel her anxiety growing with each step. “I know you didn’t get enough sleep last night. Try to take a nap. I’m going to talk to the guys about what happened.”

“I don’t want to just sit around, waiting for this guy to strike again. I’m sick of this.”

“Believe me, I’m done with this shit, too.” I gently squeeze her shoulder. “I’m going to figure this out. I promise.”

With a nod, she gives me a small smile. I leave her and Loki alone in the room and head toward the room where we hold Church. I called Scar earlier and brought him up to speed on what happened at the cabin. He’s just as angry as I am. Nobody fucks with us without paying a deadly price.

“Meeting time, boys!” Scar’s voice booms through the clubhouse.

I head into the room, joining the other men of the MC. Scar, Reaper, Nitro, and Matrix are all present, their faces hardened with determination. Scar must have explained the situation.

“Okay, so what do we have on the black truck?” Scar asks, looking at Matrix expectantly.

“It took some digging, but I found the registration,” Matrix says, projecting the registration form onto the screen on the wall. “It belongs to a guy named Leonard Knight.”

“Leonard Knight?” I try to connect him to Jessica, but no one by that name comes to mind. At least we’ve got a name now.

“Who is he?” Scar asks, leaning forward in his chair.

“Still working on that. Give me some time and I’ll find out everything there is to know about him,” Matrix promises.

“We don’t have time to fuck around,” I snap.

“Talon, we need to be cautious with this one,” Scar says, his gaze meeting mine. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with yet.”

“I’m tired of sitting around. This guy’s always able to find her, and I want to know why. Also, how the hell is he locating her so easily? And how did we miss that tracker on her car? This Leonard Knight guy could be her stalker.”

“Easy, Talon,” Scar cautions. “Matrix hasn’t been able to dig up much about this guy. Not even a driver’s license. We can’t just go charging in without knowing anything about him.”

“He’s right,” Matrix adds, frustration evident in his tone. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. It’s like the guy doesn’t exist.”

“Fine, but I’m not waiting around any longer. I’m going after him, with or without your support.” I push back from the table and stand.

“Sit your ass down. We have other shit to deal with before you go off half-cocked.” Scar points at my chair until I

sit. He looks over at Reaper and Nitro, who have been quietly discussing something. “What’s the situation?”

“We got a call from a young mother with two kids. She’s in trouble and she needs our help. Today’s the only day we can get her and the kids out,” Nitro says.

“Shit,” Scar mutters, rubbing his chin. “You, Reaper, and me will take care of that. Talon and Matrix, go check out Leonard Knight’s place once you have more information. But be careful. We can’t afford any mistakes.”

“Understood,” I nod, eager for the chance to get my hands on that Knight bastard.

“Good. Let’s get to work,” Scar orders, slamming the gavel.

As he, Reaper, and Nitro head out to help the woman and her kids, I’m left with Matrix.

“Don’t stop digging until you find something. You’ve got ten minutes, then we’re leaving.”

“I might need longer,” Matrix says.

“Ten. After that, we’re leaving. We can figure out who he is after I put my fists through his fucking face.”

“We don’t know if he’s our guy.”

“It was his truck. He’s the one.”

I pace back and forth, obsessively checking my watch while Matrix types away on his computer. “Time’s up.”

“Still can’t find shit on him.”

“We’ll beat it out of him, instead. Let’s go.” I heard toward the garage, glancing back once to make sure he’s behind me. He is. If nothing else, we’ll always have each other’s backs. That’s something I can count on.

The roar of our engines cuts through the cool evening air as Matrix and I make our way to Leonard Knight’s house. I can’t shake the nagging feeling in my gut that we’re racing against time to find Jessica’s stalker, and this guy might be our best shot.

“Stay sharp,” Matrix reminds me as we turn onto Knight’s street. “We don’t know what we’re walking into here.”

“Trust me, I’m ready for anything.”

As we pull up to the modest suburban home, there’s no sign of the black truck—or any other vehicles, for that matter. The front door seems too obvious, so we decide to circle around the back instead, threading our way through a maze of neatly trimmed hedges and perfectly manicured lawns.

“Right behind you,” Matrix murmurs as I test the back door, finding it unlocked. With a slow push, we slip inside.

The dimly lit interior reveals a living room straight out of a 1950s sitcom. The burnt orange couch looks like it’s seen better days. A large recliner with doilies draped over the arms sits unused to one side. An old man, probably in his late seventies, is sitting on the couch with a TV dinner balanced on his lap. Confusion and anger control his features as he tries to make sense of our unexpected intrusion.

“Who the hell still watches game shows?” I mutter.

The tinny sound of applause and laughter fills the room. I take in the walker near the couch and the slippers on the man’s feet. With a sinking feeling, I’m starting to wonder if this is even our suspect. The man I fought outside Sienna’s house was taller and heavier. If this is Leonard, he’s too thin and much smaller than Jessica’s stalker.

“Hey!” the man shouts, nearly dropping his meal. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Is this your house?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady despite the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

“Damn right it is! Now, get the hell out before I call the cops!”

“Easy, Leonard. It is Leonard, right?” Matrix asks, stepping forward.

“Yeah, what’s it to ya?”

“We just need to know if you own a black truck,” I say.

Leonard hesitates for a moment, his eyes darting between the two of us. “Yeah ... I do. But it’s gone missing. I was gonna report it stolen, but”—he chuckles half-heartedly—“forgot to call the cops. I guess I’m not as sharp as I used to be.”

“Missing, huh?” Matrix glances at me.

My mind races, trying to piece together the puzzle. Could Leonard be telling the truth? Or is he just playing dumb? Even if he isn’t the stalker, the person could be someone he knows. Leonard could have let someone else borrow his truck.

I study his face, searching for any signs of deception. The lines etched into the corners of his eyes and the faint creases in his forehead tell a story of a man who’s seen many years pass by. He doesn’t seem like he’d be involved in stalking a young woman, but you never know anymore.

I decide to press further.

“Does anyone else live here with you?” I ask, keeping my tone neutral.

“Been alone since my wife passed away two years ago,” he replies, an unmistakable sadness in his voice. “Never had any children ... Wish we did, though. Might have someone to look after me in my old age. I don’t get around as good as I used to. The old legs ain’t worth much these days.”

I glance at Matrix, whose expression is unreadable. He’s been doing this longer than I have, and I trust his instincts. With a quick jerk of my head, I motion for him to follow me as I step away from Leonard.

“What do you think?” I ask him in a hushed tone. “Is he telling the truth?”

Matrix sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I believe him. Between the walker and the Bengay, I don’t think he’s Jessica’s stalker.”

“Yeah, it’s not him. Fuck! If the truck was stolen, then who the hell took it?”

“I have no idea.”

As I stand there, my boots sinking slightly into the worn carpet of Leonard's living room, a mix of frustration and disappointment churns in my belly. My gut tells me this man isn't Jessica's stalker, though leaving without answers doesn't sit right with me.

"Hey Leonard, do you have any other people that come by your house regularly? Maybe a gardener or housekeeper?" I ask.

Leonard scoffs, his eyes narrowing. "I don't need people pokin' around my home. I can take care of my own damn cleaning and yard work. No need for strangers in my business."

"Does the name Jessica Collins mean anything to you?" I watch him carefully, looking for any flicker of recognition. There isn't any.

"Nope. Should it? What's this about?"

"A friend of ours is being stalked."

"And you think I'm involved?" Leonard laughs until he starts coughing uncontrollably. I quickly grab his water and hold the straw out, so he can take a drink. "That's the funniest thing I've ever heard. I'm no stalker."

"Yeah, I don't think you're involved." I sigh.

"I'm not."

"We towed your truck to our place. We'll bring it back to you."

"I'd appreciate it. I don't know who took it, but I'm glad to get it back."

"What's that?" Matrix points at a patch on the wall.

"My old man's club patch. He rode bikes for years."

"No shit?" I rub the back of my neck as I step closer to get a better look.

"Club Pres until the day he died. God rest his soul." Leonard makes the sign of the cross before kissing his thumb and raising his eyes toward the heavens.

“Sorry to hear about your father.”

“It was a long time ago,” Leonard says, despite the tears in his eyes.

“If you ever need anything, give us a call.” Matrix reaches into his pocket and pulls out a business card, handing it over to Leonard. “We’re from Underground Vengeance Motorcycle Club. We’re always happy to help out.”

Leonard takes the card, studying it for a moment before looking up at us. “You know, I never believed those news stories about your club. Back in the day, my old man got up to some stuff, but nothing all that bad. I’ll keep this card and give you boys a call if I need anything.”

“Sounds good, Leonard. Take care of yourself,” I say, giving him a nod as Matrix and I turn to leave.

The cool night air hits me as Matrix and I straddle our bikes. I clench my fists around the handlebars, frustration seeping into my veins. Another dead end.

“That was fucking pointless,” I grumble, glancing over at him.

“We can cross him off the list.”

“What list? The only other person who’s even a suspect is Jessica’s coworker, Hank.”

Matrix hesitates for a moment before speaking. “While you and Jessica were at the cabin, Hank tried calling her a dozen times. Since service was down, he never got through.”

“Did you tap her phone?” I raise a brow because he’s never mentioned this before. He should have told me if he was conducting extra surveillance on her.

“Yeah. I’ve been checking her incoming and outgoing calls. I wanted to make sure she was telling us everything.”

“Did you think she was holding something back?” I try to keep my frustration in check, but it’s hard not to be angry. It feels like he’s hiding things from me, and I don’t like it one bit.

“Not on purpose. But you never know. We’ve had people contact their abusers while they were in our custody. I guess I’m paranoid about it now.” He shrugs.

“Okay, I guess that makes sense,” I grumble. “When Hank called, did he leave any messages?”

“No, nothing.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

“Thought the info on the truck was more important,” he admits, avoiding my gaze.

“Enough is enough,” I declare, anger boiling within me. “It’s time to pay Hank a visit.”

“Wait!” Matrix grabs one of my handlebars. “We don’t have any evidence against him. We can’t just go barging in there like we did with Leonard.”

“The fuck we can’t. I don’t give a shit anymore,” I snap back, my blood running hot. “I’ll beat the truth out of everyone in Jess’s life until someone talks. Are you coming with me or not?”

“God dammit, Talon.” Matrix types a message into his phone. Mine pings in response. “There’s his address. Don’t shoot the fucker. We don’t have shit on him.”

“Oh, I’m not going to shoot him. But I am going to ask him a few questions. If he doesn’t talk, that’s on him.” I rev my engine and pull away from the curb.

As we approach Hank’s place, adrenaline courses through my veins. We should have brought this guy back to the clubhouse days ago. It’s amazing how fast we can clear shit up when we bring someone in for a little chat.

While I wait for Matrix to catch up, I type a message to the group chat, telling the others to meet us in the basement after they’re done helping that woman and her kids. Until they get back to the clubhouse, I’ll have to keep Hank entertained with my fists. Maybe he’s not the guy, but maybe he is. Either way, I’m finding out tonight.

Chapter 18: Jessica

The sizzle of onions and peppers fills the air as I chop vegetables at the kitchen counter. Nina moves around me with practiced ease, stirring a pot on the stove. The warmth of the clubhouse envelops me, but my heart is heavy with the weight of fear. Last night I felt so safe in Talon's arms, but today, I'm right back to where I started. We're no closer to finding the stalker, and my patience is wearing thin.

"Damn it!" I slam my knife down. "I'm so sick of running and hiding from this stalker. I just want my life back."

Nina looks up from the pot and meets my eyes with sympathy. "I know, but you're safe here with us. You can stay for as long as it takes to find out who's stalking you. We'll protect you."

"Thanks, but I can't live like this forever," I say, wiping away a tear. "I love this place, but it's not home."

Nina gives me a reassuring smile. "The guys are working on it. Trust them. You're not the first girl who's come to us in trouble, and you won't be the last. I know it's a lot to ask, but please, have faith in Talon. He's doing his best to help you."

"Exactly what are the guys doing right now?" I ask, frustration seeping into my voice. "You're all so secretive. It's like I'm living with a bunch of spies. They wouldn't tell me where they were going when they left. That was hours ago."

"Secrecy is necessary. We have to protect the people we're rescuing, and sometimes, that means keeping things hidden."

"Even from the people you're protecting?" I challenge, crossing my arms.

"Especially from them," she replies. "Sometimes innocent people can become unwitting accomplices to crime if they know too much."

"Are these men criminals, then?"

Nina hesitates, her gaze dropping to the floor. “Not ... exactly. They’ve done some questionable things in the past, but they’ve also done a lot of good. And they’re fiercely loyal to each other and those they help. Sometimes, the right thing to do isn’t legal, but it’s the only way to handle a problem.”

I sigh and lean against the counter, trying to process her words. My heart aches for the life I had before all this chaos, but I can’t deny that these men have taken me in without hesitation. I may not understand their world, but they’ve given me shelter when I needed it most. I need to trust Talon and the others. Whatever they’re up to, at least they’re trying to find out who’s behind this.

“I’ll try to be more understanding, but it’s hard.” I pick up my knife again.

“I know it is, honey.” Nina gives me a big hug. “Hang in there. It may feel like this isn’t ever going to end, but it will. Believe me, they’ll find a way.”

I take a deep breath and hug her back. I can’t let my anger and frustration consume me. There’s still so much I don’t understand about this place and the people in it. I probably haven’t asked the right questions, but I’ve also been a little bit afraid of what they might tell me. Now, I need to know more. If I’m going to trust in and believe in the club, then I want to find out how it all started. A person doesn’t just wake up one day and decide they’re going to put their life on the line for other people. There has to be a reason why they do this.

“Nina,” I begin, turning to face her, “how did you end up here at the club?”

Nina sets down the knife she’s been using to chop vegetables and leans back against the counter. “Well, that’s a long story, but I’ll give you the short version. My old man, Winchester, founded Underground Vengeance MC. Started it thirty years ago.”

“Wow, so it’s been around that long?”

“Yep. One of Winchester’s friends, Grant, had a problem with his ex. Grant’s ex-wife had custody of their son because she was a liar. Her new husband was bad news.”

“How so?”

“He was a sex offender.”

“She let a man like that be around her child?” I ask, appalled.

“Yeah. She was a real piece of shit mother.”

“What happened?”

“Grant tried to get custody through legal means. Tried showing the judge his son was being neglected, but back then, courts almost always sided with the mother.”

“That’s terrible.” I brace myself for the rest of the story.

“The judge refused to grant Grant custody, even after we gave him overwhelming evidence that he wasn’t safe there. The fucker wouldn’t listen. So, we decided to do things another way.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, that’s one of those things you’re better off not knowing. But suffice to say, she wasn’t a problem anymore.”

“And her husband?”

“He’s gone, too. Winchester and Grant took care of everything.”

“Where are they now?” I ask.

“In Louisiana. Grant calls me every Christmas to catch up.” She smiles. “Anyway, that’s how we got started. We saw a need to protect people who couldn’t get help from law enforcement. That was decades ago, and we’re still here. Still helping any way we can.”

“How is ...” My voice trails off because I don’t know if I should ask her this question.

“What is it, hon? You’re almost family now, so if you want to know something, shoot.”

“Almost family?”

“Well, if Talon gets his way.”

My face burns. I don't know how close he is to Nina, but I hope he didn't tell her about last night. What Talon and I do behind closed doors is no one else's business. “Um, I was going to ask, how do you pay for all of this?”

“Winchester had a lot of money. He left it to me when he died. I make sure the club has everything they need.”

“What do they give you in return?” Nobody gives money away for free. The world doesn't work like that.

“Love. They treat me like I'm their mom, and I get to have the kids I always wanted.”

“Did you adopt them?”

“In a way. Not officially, of course.”

“I'm assuming this was after Talon lived with Jonathan Blackstone?”

“He told you about that?” Nina asks, almost cautiously.

“Yes.”

“I guess I'm not surprised. All the other guys told their old ladies about what happened there. I suppose it's only right that you know. Still, talking about the hell they went through had to be hard.”

“Hell?”

“Yeah.” Nina picks up the knife and resumes chopping vegetables. “I can't imagine spending years with that man. He's a monster. Talon and the others are lucky they survived.”

I have no idea what she's talking about, but I'm deeply intrigued. Talon doesn't say much about his past, but something bad happened. Maybe Nina will give me more details if I play along. She seems to think I already know details about what happened between Talon and Blackstone, but I don't.

“The others were at Blackstone’s, too, right?” I pick up a knife and slice through a bunch of celery.

“Yep. For many years before they were able to escape.”

The knife slips and I cut my finger. “Ouch!”

“Oh, no. Let me get a bandage. You sit down at the table while I finish up.” Nina pulls a first aid kit out from underneath the sink. She sits beside me at the table and works on cleaning and bandaging the cut.

“How old were they when they escaped? I can’t remember what he told me,” I lie.

“Let’s see, they were all teenagers. Scar was fifteen, so Talon was fourteen.”

“How did they end up with you?”

“One winter, I found them living in my barn. Winchester wanted to drag them into the house so they’d be warm, but I had a feeling that would spook the boys. Matrix and Nitro were more open to coming in, but Scar wouldn’t allow it. Even back then, he was their leader.”

“And Reaper?” I ask, trying to get a handle on who was in the group.

“Always the quiet one. Even now, he doesn’t talk much. He lets the others do the talking while he sits back and observes.”

“He kinda scares me,” I admit.

“Honestly?” She looks me right in the eye, sending a chill down my spine. “He scares me, too, sometimes. I hope he can find someone who loves him for who he is, but he can be terrifying.”

“After they moved in with you and Winchester, what happened?”

“They grew up. Joined the club. And here we are.” She smiles brightly.

“Where’s Winchester?”

“He died a few years ago.” Her smile fades as she places her hand over her chest. “But I still have him here, in my heart.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I say. It’s such a lame sentiment, but it’s all I’ve got.

“He’s still watching over me.” Her eyes drift toward the ceiling. “He’s waiting for me, and one day, we’ll be reunited.”

I don’t know what to say, so I stay silent. Eventually, she gets up and finishes dinner. While she’s working, I listen for the door. I don’t know where Talon is, but hopefully, he’ll be home for dinner. None of the other guys are here, either. They left two prospects behind to keep an eye on the clubhouse, but the rest of them left without telling me where they were going. I can’t help but be nervous.

After talking with Nina, I have so many more questions. I want to ask Talon exactly what happened with Blackstone. Whatever it was doesn’t sound good. If he felt the need to run away during the winter, it had to be bad.

The door to the kitchen swings open, and Scar, Nitro, and Reaper stride in. They’re an intimidating sight, even though I’ve been around them for a while now.

“Hey, Nina,” Scar says, his voice gravelly. “We just got a text from Talon. He wants us to meet him in the basement. Can you keep dinner in the oven for a bit? We’ll be up after we’re done dealing with this.”

“The basement?” My curiosity is piqued despite my unease. “What’s down there?”

“That’s where we have our little ‘chats’ with people who aren’t too willing to cooperate,” Reaper says.

“Chats?” I press, suddenly feeling very cold. “What do you mean by that?”

“Let’s just say it’s not a place you want to find yourself,” he replies cryptically before turning away, effectively ending the conversation.

“We won’t be long,” Scar says before leading the others out through the front door.

“I didn’t even know you had a basement here,” I say, turning to Nina.

“Yep.”

“What do they do down there?” I drop my gaze to the floor.

“Stuff you don’t need to worry about. Do you want a snack to hold you over until they’re ready for dinner?”

“No.” I press my hand against my churning belly. Food is the last thing on my mind right now.

My heart pounds as I try to process what Reaper just said. Are they torturing people down there? I glance at Nina, but she doesn’t seem surprised or upset at all. She’s acting like this is just a normal day, and maybe it is—for her.

“I should go down there,” I say softly.

“Nope. Not a good idea. I’ll make us some tea.”

“I want to know what they’re doing.”

“Jessica, you really don’t. Trust me on that.”

A scream pierces the air. It’s coming from beneath the floorboards.

“What was that?” I jump to my feet and stare at the tile.

“Reaper really needs to soundproof that room.” Nina rolls her eyes.

“I’m going to find out what’s going on.” As I try to walk past her, she grabs my arm roughly.

“You should go to your room and wait for Talon to come get you.”

“Fine.” I yank my hand away. “But he’s going to have to answer a lot of questions when he gets back up here.”

I stomp away, not waiting for a response. When I get into my bedroom, I close the door. Pacing back and forth, I wrack my brain, trying to remember if I saw a door to the basement

anywhere in the clubhouse. There wasn't one inside, but maybe the entrance is outside. If it's an old root cellar, the access point could be behind the house. I haven't been back there yet, so I don't know if there's a door or not.

Sitting in my room waiting for him to show up isn't going to work for me. I can't let them torture someone. It's not right.

I walk to the bedroom window and unlock it. Pushing up on the frame, I move it until it stops. After popping out the screen and setting it down on the floor, I drag a chair over. It only takes a few seconds for me to slip through. I drop to the ground, landing on my feet. Thank God it's a single-story house.

As I circle the corner, I spot a door I've never seen before. It's closed, but as I get right up beside it, I hear voices coming through the wood.

"Hank! Stop fucking crying like a little bitch and tell us the truth. Why are you stalking Jessica?"

"I'm not. I swear," Hank bellows.

"Oh, my God." I blurt out, shocked and appalled.

Bootsteps pound from inside until the door swings open. Talon's standing on the other side, scowling. "I told you to stay in the house."

"You kidnapped my coworker?"

"Let's just say we convinced him to come with us."

"Convinced him?" I snap, anger bubbling up inside me. "By what, threatening to break his legs?"

"Jessica," Talon says softly, looking me directly in the eyes. "We did what we had to do to keep you safe. We're not going to hurt him if he cooperates."

"Cooperates?" I echo, my mind racing with images of Hank tied up and terrified in that basement. "What do you mean? What are you doing to him? I heard screaming."

"Look, we just need some answers," Nitro interjects, appearing behind Talon. "We won't do anything more than

necessary.”

“And what’s necessary, exactly?” I demand.

“You don’t want to know,” Reaper says ominously. I can’t see him because Talon’s blocking the door, but I know he’s down there, too.

“Trust us, Jessica. Trust me. We’re going to get answers.” Talon’s gaze lingers on mine for a moment before he pulls the door closed, leaving me with a chilling sense of helplessness and fear.

My chest tightens with horror as the reality of what they’ve done sinks in. Kidnapping? That’s insane! I can’t believe Talon would go to such extremes. I have to stop him before he does something crazy.

Ignoring the fear clawing at my chest, I slowly pull open the door. A long set of concrete stairs descends before taking a sharp turn. I can’t see anything beyond the steps.

“This is so stupid,” I whisper.

I’m tempted to slam the door shut and retreat to my room, but a scream of agony fills the air. Hank’s sobbing, begging them to let him go. I can’t leave him down there. He’s not my favorite coworker, but I don’t think he’s my stalker.

Steeling my spine, I make my way down the stairs. The air grows colder and heavier as I descend, and the screams become clearer, sharper. My stomach churns with each haunting cry, but I refuse to let fear stop me.

At the bottom of the steps, another door looms in front of me. It’s the only barrier between me and whatever horrors lie beyond it. With trembling hands, I grasp the doorknob and push it open, bracing myself for the gruesome scene that awaits.

I’m instantly assaulted by the nauseating stench of sweat, urine, and blood. The dimly lit room resembles every serial killer’s dungeon from every true crime show I’ve ever seen. The walls are lined with an array of menacing tools, and in the center of the room sits Hank, tied to a chair with thick ropes digging into his flesh.

“Stop!” I scream, my voice echoing through the vile space.

All eyes turn to me. They’re surprised and angered by my intrusion. But I don’t care if they’re mad; I can’t stand by while they hurt an innocent man.

“What did I just say?” Talon growls, his eyes dark and dangerous.

The other men—Scar, Nitro, Matrix, and Reaper—shift uncomfortably, their expressions a mix of annoyance and concern.

“Untie him!” I demand, my gaze locked on Hank’s bruised and battered face. “This has gone far enough. Let him go, or I swear I won’t stay here any longer. I’ll leave and never look back.”

“Jessica ...” Talon growls.

“Choose,” I say, my voice unwavering. “Either you let him go, or I’m gone.”

The tension in the room ratchets up another notch with each passing second. I don’t think Talon’s going to listen to me, but I’ve got to try. Even if Hank’s the man stalking me, they shouldn’t be torturing him. They should take him to the police. Talon’s being completely unreasonable, and I’m starting to wonder how much I really know him. Maybe he’s not the man I thought he was.

Chapter 19: Talon

The pounding in my chest is deafening as I stand there, ignoring Jessica's pleas. She's desperate, her eyes wide and scared, but I can't let go of my suspicions about Hank. I remember her words, asking me to help protect her, to go on the offensive against whoever was tormenting her. That's exactly what I plan to do.

"Jess," my voice is low and dangerous, "you told me you wanted this to end. That's what I'm doing."

"By kidnapping and torturing my coworker?" she snaps, not backing down. "I didn't mean for you to do this!"

"Then what did you mean?" I demand, keeping my gaze locked on Hank, who's bound to the chair. Sweat glistens on his forehead, fear evident in his eyes. "He called you dozens of times while we were at the cabin. Why?"

"I just wanted to make sure she was okay," Hank whines.

"I don't believe him."

"Because he was worried about me!" She glares at me.

"I-It's true," Hank says, his voice quivering. "I-I'm not stalking her. I-I was just ... worried. She's been very quiet at work ever since the incident with the stuffed animal. I thought something might have happened to her."

I narrow my eyes at him, not buying it for a second. There's something off about Hank, something that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. "You're lying," I accuse, leaning in closer to him. "You're secretly in love with her, aren't you?"

"Wha— No! That's not true!" he yells, pure panic in his voice.

But as I look into his eyes, searching for any hint of deception, I find myself doubting my own convictions. What if I'm wrong? What if Hank is telling the truth, and all I've done is hurt an innocent man? The weight of that possibility

threatens to crush me, but I can't let it. Not yet. There's still too much at stake.

"Prove it," I demand.

Hank's eyes widen, and he swallows hard, struggling to find the words. My heart drops as I silently pray I haven't made a terrible mistake.

Hank's face turns a deep shade of red as he blurts out, "I'm gay. I don't even like women. I mean, I do like them, but as friends, not in a romantic way. I have a boyfriend."

"Really? And who might that be?" I ask skeptically, my arms crossed over my chest.

"His name's Roger. Call him. He'll tell you that I spent last night at his place. I was there until this morning. I'd only been home a few hours when you showed up."

I glance over at Jessica. She wants me to believe Hank, I see it in her eyes.

"Give me his phone." I hold out my hand. Reaper grabs it from the table where we put Hank's belongings before we tied him up. After Reaper hands it to me, I use Hank's thumb to unlock it. I pull up the contacts list and search for Roger. Tapping the number, I wait, putting it on speaker so everyone can hear.

"Hello?" the voice on the other end answers.

"Roger?" I ask, keeping my tone firm.

"Yeah, who's this? Why are you calling me from Hank's phone?"

"I've got your boyfriend, Hank, here with me. He says he was with you all night last night. Can you confirm that?"

There's a brief pause before Roger speaks up. "Yeah, he was here. Why? What's going on? Who are you?"

"No one. It's nothing you need to worry about," I reply, trying to keep my voice steady. "Just making sure." I hang up before he can ask any more questions.

"See. He's innocent," Jessica says, exasperated.

Turning back to Hank, I nod. “I believe you now. But I’m concerned you’ll go to the police about this little ... incident.”

“No, I won’t. I promise.” Hank swallows hard, sweat dotting his brow.

I study his face, searching for any sign he might be lying but finding none. All I see is fear and desperation. In that moment, I realize how far I’ve gone in my quest to protect Jessica. I’ve hurt an innocent man and terrified him into submission. It had to be done, but I hate that I was wrong about him.

“What if he goes to the cops?” Reaper asks.

“That’s a problem,” Scar says.

“He’s not going to do that,” Nitro says, while Matrix nods in agreement.

The room feels colder than it should as Hank fidgets in his seat, the ropes digging into his wrists. His eyes dart between Jessica and me.

“I won’t go to the police, I swear. I know all about your club, and I don’t want any trouble. All I wanted to do was check on her. That’s the last time I’ll call her. I swear.”

“Is that so?” I can’t risk anyone exposing us, but the fear in his eyes is genuine. I believe him. He’s too scared to talk.

“Yes. As long as she’s safe, I’ll leave her alone. You are okay, right?” Hank’s concern for her is evident, even in his current state.

She looks at him, her eyes filled with a mixture of anger and sorrow. “Yes, Hank, I’m okay. They’re trying to protect me, but I don’t approve of their methods.” Her gaze shifts back to me, and I can feel the weight of her disappointment. “I’m so sorry this happened to you, Hank. I promise I’ll make sure it never happens again.”

“It’s not your fault,” Hank reassures her, his shoulders sagging with relief. “They did this, not you.”

“Untie him,” Jessica says firmly, her eyes locked on mine. “Now!”

“Fine.”

I untie Hank from the chair. His wrists are red and raw from straining against the rope. He stands up unsteadily, giving her a long, concerned look before turning to leave. The sound of his hurried footsteps echoes through the basement as he flees.

“Everyone out,” I command, my voice tight with frustration.

I need to speak to her alone, and I’m struggling to keep my emotions in check. One by one, the members of my club file out, their eyes lingering on me as they go. Scar hesitates for a moment, clearly wanting to say something but deciding against it. With a nod, he leaves us alone in the basement.

“Jessica, I—”

“Before you say anything,” she interrupts, her voice sharp, “I just want to know one thing. Was that really necessary?”

“Kidnapping him? No, in this case, I guess it wasn’t. I could have called his boyfriend when we were at Hank’s house. I didn’t have to bring him here.”

“But you did. You tortured an innocent man.”

“Look, I’m not happy about how this turned out, but we’re trying to figure out who’s behind all this.” I sigh heavily, my heart aching at the thought of losing her trust. “I thought he was our guy. Who the hell calls someone a dozen times without leaving a message?”

“Apparently, Hank does. What now?” The disappointment in her voice cuts me to the core. After all this, we’re right back where we started.

“Scar was right. At least we can cross Hank off our list of suspects. That’s one less person we need to worry about.” I rub the back of my neck, trying to relax my muscles.

The tension between us is a thick, suffocating cloud as Jessica and I ascend the stairs from the basement. Her slender hand grips the railing tightly, knuckles turning white with each

step. She doesn't say a word, but anger radiates off her like heat from a wildfire.

Once we reach my bedroom, Jessica closes the door behind us with a resounding slam that echoes through the house. She whirls around to face me, her honey-blond hair framing her flushed face like a halo of fire. "I don't know if I can trust you anymore."

"No! What? You have to. You're not safe out there alone." My hands clench into fists at my sides, nails digging into my palms. "Usually, we only bring criminals down there."

"Really?" Her eyes narrow. "Not only were you wrong, but you also seemed like you were going to lose control during that interrogation."

I wince at the memory—how my rage had nearly gotten the better of me.

"What's that about?" she asks.

I sigh, feeling the weight of my past suddenly press down on my shoulders. "The club ... there's so much you don't know about us."

"Obviously. I need to know that I can trust you again because, right now, I don't. Not at all." She leans against the wall and folds her hands under her breasts. "Start talking, or I'm leaving."

"I don't know where to start," I admit.

"Nina told me about Jonathan Blackstone," she says quietly. His name scratches across my soul like nails on a chalkboard. "What happened when you lived with him?"

"What did she say?"

"Not much. But I know it wasn't good, whatever it was."

"That's an understatement," I mutter, slumping down on the edge of the bed. I lean forward and put my face in my hands, trying to block out the flood of horrifying memories.

"If whatever happened with him will help explain why you kidnapped and tortured an innocent man, then I deserve an

explanation. Why did you flee Blackstone's ranch? Nina said you left in the dead of winter. Why?"

My throat tightens at her question. The memories are like a pack of wolves, snarling and snapping at the edges of my mind, threatening to tear me apart. But I know I owe her the truth.

"Blackstone ..." My voice is barely a whisper. "He was a monster. He took me in when I was young, vulnerable, and he ... broke me." The words come out choked as if I'm struggling to breathe. And I am. Every time I think about him, my chest clenches and my lungs seize up.

"We're talking about the same man, right? Governor Blackstone?"

"Yes."

"You told me he adopted you."

"He did."

"And?" she prompts, clearly annoyed with how much I'm dragging this out.

If only she knew the truth. I never wanted to tell her about him, but I have to. It's the only way she'll trust me again. If she understands why I'm this way, she'll get why I kidnapped Hank. It will all make sense after she hears my story.

"Blackstone adopted me when I was seven. This was after they found me behind the quick-mart dumpster looking around for food."

"After your parents abandoned you?"

"Yes."

"Go on," she says. There's sympathy in her eyes, but also fear—the uncertainty of whether she can trust me is still there. It's a good question. I ask myself the same thing every day.

"Blackstone is a sadist and a pedophile. He gets off on causing pain, both physical and emotional. When we lived with him, he kept us locked up in his basement."

“We?”

“Scar, Nitro, Matrix, and Reaper. That’s where we met.” I shudder involuntarily at the memory of that cold, dark hell. The scent of mold and dampness still haunts me to this day.

“How old was everyone else? Were you all kids?”

“Yes. We were around the same age, plus or minus a year or two.”

“What happened in the basement?” she asks softly, uncrossing her arms and coming to sit by my side.

“He controlled every aspect of our lives. What we ate, when we slept ... even how long we were allowed to breathe.” My hands clench into fists, feeling the chains that once held me captive.

“Oh, Talon.” Tears fill her eyes until they’re glistening in the late afternoon light.

“Every day was filled with torture, both mental and physical ... and other stuff.” I’ll never tell her details about the other things he did to us. Disgusting, perverted, revolting things that still make me feel like I can never get clean.

“Blackstone would beat me until I couldn’t stand, then laugh as he watched me struggle to rise again.” Anger simmers in my belly, but I force myself to keep it contained—for her sake.

Her eyes widen and the first tear spills down her cheek. “That’s awful. How did you survive?”

“Survival wasn’t a choice,” I admit, looking down at my hands. “It was instinct. And eventually ... I learned to fight back.”

“Is that how you escaped?” she asks, her voice soft and gentle—an unexpected balm on my frayed nerves.

“No,” I shake my head. “We had to outsmart him. Fighting back wasn’t an option. Each of us developed certain skills. We used them to come up with an escape plan.”

“What kind of skills?”

“Well ...” I study the sincerity in her eyes, and for the first time in my life, I feel safe telling someone outside the brotherhood about my powers. “I can talk to animals.”

“Really? How?”

“With my mind.”

“That’s amazing.” She cocks her head while processing this information. “Is that why Loki likes you so much?”

“Yeah. I told him I’m here to protect you. That’s all I’ve wanted to do since we met. I know I haven’t done the best job, and I really fucked up with Hank, but you must believe me when I say I thought I was doing the right thing. I don’t kidnap innocent people. It’s not who I am. Please believe me. Please trust me. I can’t lose you. I care too much about you, especially now. I realize I made a mistake, and for that, I’m sorry, but I don’t know what else to say. Please, Jess ...”

As I wait for her response, my heart skips several beats. I can’t lose her. Not now. Not when I’m so invested in protecting her. I may have ruined what we started last night in the cabin, but I hope to God I can at least regain her trust. If she leaves now, she’ll be all alone in the world, unprotected. It’s my worst nightmare. She needs to believe me. Because if she doesn’t, she’s as good as dead, and I can’t let that happen. Not on my watch.

Chapter 20: Jessica

I lace my fingers through Talon's and lean against him. I almost can't believe what he just told me, but I don't think he's lying. Who would lie about something like that? And Nina told me that Talon had been through a terrible ordeal with Blackstone. She seems like a shrewd woman. If she believes him, then I do, too. The details of his story are too specific. The more he tells me, the more horrified I get, but I want to hear more. I need to know exactly what he went through so I can better understand him.

"Go back to the part where you started talking to animals. You said all the other guys have powers, too? What can they do?"

"Normally, I'd never share this," he says hesitantly. "But I guess it's okay. As long as you promise not to tell anyone else."

"I won't." I give his hand a reassuring squeeze.

"It started when I was six, right after my parents abandoned me. I stayed home for two days waiting for them. Eventually, I was too hungry. We never had much in the house, and I was too short to reach the shelves where they kept what little food we did have."

"That's so sad. I can't imagine how scared you were. Only six, too," I whisper.

"Yeah. So, I left to go find food. The quick mart was two blocks away from my house. My dad had taken me there many times before, so I knew how to walk there."

"And nobody stopped to ask why you were out by yourself?"

"Nobody cared. In that neighborhood, it wasn't unusual for kids to be left alone for hours. A lot of the parents worked more than one job. It was a poor neighborhood, and there was enough illegal stuff going on there that people looked the other way."

“I’m so sorry you had to grow up in a place like that.”

“Wouldn’t say I grew up there. No, I didn’t do that until that first night at Blackstone’s. That’s when I learned that there’s true evil in the world. But before that, I learned to talk to the animals who also ate out of the dumpster.”

“How did you get into the dumpster? If you were six, you couldn’t have reached it.”

“Imagine my disappointment the day I figured that out.” He laughs bitterly. “But that’s when my animal friends showed up to save me.”

“Is that why you have a bald eagle tattoo on your arm?”

“Yeah, and a nutria swamp rat on my back.” He raises his shirt so I can see. I couldn’t make out much in the candlelight last night, so I didn’t get a good look at his tattoos. “The eagle’s my favorite.”

I trace my finger over the eagle tattoo on his upper arm. It’s kind of silly in a way because it’s wearing aviator sunglasses and an American flag doo rag on its head, but somehow, it fits him.

“Why does it say ‘Murika’ under the eagle?” I ask.

“Because I believe in America. It’s kind of tongue-in-cheek, but I’m proud of my Southern heritage. I’ll always consider the south my first true home, but my family here at the club is more important than anything. I stay here in this god-awful cold because I can’t leave the others. We all lived through hell, and none of us would be alive right now if we hadn’t come together to escape that dungeon.”

“You said animals helped you?”

“Yes. I learned to talk to them when I desperately needed food. The rats would climb into the dumpster to retrieve whatever they could. Then they’d share with me.”

“That seems pretty altruistic for a rat.”

“They felt bad for me.” He shrugs. “We were all starving and hungry. Don’t get me wrong, they ate their fill first, but then they’d bring me any leftovers. It was enough to get by. I

didn't starve to death, which was a definite possibility back then. I got used to being hungry, so when Blackstone kept us for days without food, I was able to tell the others how to deal with the pain."

"Oh, sweetie." I pull him into my arms and hold him tight. "You went through so much."

"Yeah." He wraps his arms around me and pulls me into his lap. "That's why you have to believe me when I say I'm just doing the best I can."

"I do believe you."

"That means everything to me," he whispers, lowering his lips to mine. When they meet, I melt into his kiss. Last night, we shared passion beyond my wildest dreams, but this is more than just passion, it's something deeper, and I don't want to lose it.

"Tell me how you ended up with Blackstone," I whisper after he breaks the kiss.

"Child protective services got a call from the quick mart owner. They found me hanging out with the rats behind the building. The animals tried to protect me, but the guys who came for me kicked them out of the way. They had guns, and I was afraid they were going to shoot my friends, so I went with them. I never saw the rats after that, but I still think about them sometimes. Up until Nina found us, those rats were the closest thing I ever had to a friend."

"Now, you have her, as well as the others."

"Yes. I met Scar my first night in the basement. After CPS picked me up, they put me into a series of group homes. Each one seemed worse than the last, so I kept running away. I hated being in those crowded houses, sharing a room with three or four other kids."

"That doesn't seem legal."

"Believe me, it is."

"That sucks," I mutter.

“Not as much as that basement sucked. If I’d known where I was headed, I would have gladly shared a room with twenty other children instead of a dozen in Blackstone’s basement.”

“A dozen? What the fuck? What happened to the rest of the kids? Did you all escape at the same time?”

“Sadly, no. We tried to get all of them to come with us, but some were too scared. In the end, it was just Scar, Nitro, Matrix, Reaper, and me. We came up with a plan to get free. I would have brought anyone else we could trust, but you have to understand—Blackstone rewarded spies. Most kids would have done anything to receive an extra piece of bread, even sell out their supposed friends. That’s how bad things were.”

“So, you have issues trusting people.”

“Yeah. That’s for sure.” He laughs bitterly. “Which is why I didn’t trust Hank. I don’t trust anyone.”

“Not even Scar and the others?”

“I do trust them, and Nina. But that’s it.”

“What about me?” I ask softly.

“I-I care about you so much. Before you came along, I never spent this much time with a woman. I had a few casual things in the past, but nothing like this. You’re so different from any woman I’ve ever known before. You’re special.”

“You’re pretty special, too.”

“Can you forgive me for Hank?”

“Yes. I do. But I want to hear the rest of your story. It’s helping me to understand where you’re coming from.”

“Okay. Well, as you can imagine, Blackstone had a dozen kids locked up in his basement, and it wasn’t to keep us safe. He’d take us out, one by one, and use us in various ways.” His face drops, and he can’t meet my eyes. I’m sure he’s referring to sexual abuse, based on how he called Blackstone a pedophile. It’s clear he’s still ashamed of what happened, even though it wasn’t his fault.

“It’s okay, honey.” I rub his back in slow circles. “I don’t need to know everything.”

“Can I just skip to where we escaped?”

“Yes.”

He lets out a shuddery sigh before continuing, “Scar came up with the idea. It took a few years, but eventually, I started trusting Scar. He brought in others, Nitro, then Matrix, and finally, Reaper. We became each other’s protectors. See, we didn’t just have to fight Blackstone, we had to deal with the other kids, too. It was kill or be killed down there. The guards weren’t our only enemies.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yeah.” His jaw clenches as he rubs his palms along his thighs. “Scar has the ability to see what people are planning.”

“That had to be horrifying.”

“It sucked. He knew what Blackstone was going to do to him every time he pulled Scar out of the basement.”

My stomach turns when I think about what they must have endured. I’m glad he’s not telling me everything. I don’t know if I could listen without throwing up.

“Scar discovered Blackstone would be at a charity gala in California for several days. Most of his guards were going with him, which left minimal security at the ranch. We knew it was our only chance to escape.”

“What’s Nitro’s talent?” I ask, curious about the others.

“He’s a medical intuitive. If you’re ever sick, he’ll know it before you do.”

“And Matrix?”

“Astral projection. He can leave his body at will.”

“Wow, that’s wild. What about Reaper?”

Talon hesitates before turning to me. “His is ... God, how do I explain it ... Reaper can control death. Well, not really control it. He can bring things back from the dead.”

“What?”

“I saw it once. When we were in the basement.”

“What happened?”

“My favorite rat had eaten some poison. Blackstone had the guards put poisoned traps around the ranch to kill my friends. He didn’t know I could talk to them, but he knew I liked them, so he tried to kill them all.”

“Bastard.”

“One managed to get to me before he died. He told me what happened, and then he just fell over and went stiff. I screamed, and Reaper came over. He looked at the rat, then at me. Then he held his hands over it. At first, nothing happened, but then its whiskers twitched. A paw moved. And then the rat woke up.”

“Holy shit.”

“He can also speak to the recently deceased.”

“Like a medium?”

“Exactly. But his powers are limited. He’s not exactly sure how long he’s got before he can’t bring them back. We know for sure that his power won’t work on anything that’s been dead longer than a day. But if it’s only been an hour or two, he can bring them back.”

“Do they come back the same, or are they like zombies?”

“Fortunately, they return completely intact. Confused, but they’re still who they were when they died. My rat friend, the one Reaper brought back, helped us escape. He lived in Nina’s barn until he died a year later.”

“I’m sorry you lost him.”

“I cried a lot, but he lived longer than most rats. Their lifespan is usually only about two years.”

“Still, it’s sad to lose a pet.”

“He wasn’t a pet. He was more like a friend. And he helped save our lives. He was one of the lookouts the night we

escaped.”

“After you got out, how did you end up in Nina’s barn?”

“We wandered around for a while, but then it started snowing. Winter was coming, and we knew we had to find shelter. Her barn was huge, and we figured she wouldn’t notice us if we were careful. But she did.”

“Thank God for that.”

“I do. Every day. She was the angel who saved us after we escaped the devil.”

“She’s a good person. I can tell.”

“Winchester was, too. He was a decent man who always did right by us until the day he died.”

“You’ve been through so much in your life.”

“I have, but I don’t let it get to me. There are so many people out there suffering who need our help. When we found out what Winchester did with the club, we begged him to let us join. He wouldn’t let us until we got old enough to prospect. We didn’t get any special treatment. Had to earn our dues like everyone else. But we made it and got patched in.”

“Did Scar take over as president after Winchester died?”

“He did. By then, everyone else looked up to Scar. Many of the older guys who rode with Winchester retired after he died. They knew we could take over and continue their legacy. And we have.”

“How many people have you rescued?”

“No idea. We don’t keep count.”

“How does it work? I know you don’t work with law enforcement ... but what do you do?”

“First, we help them escape immediate danger. We assist them in leaving their homes, and we protect them during the process. That’s the most dangerous part of getting out of an abusive situation. Second, we keep them safe either at the clubhouse or at Nina’s place. It depends on who the abuser is.

Some have more power than others, and the clubhouse isn't safe enough for some of the victims."

"How is Nina's place safer?"

"More security. A huge wall. There are other things about her place that make it easier to hide people. Maybe one day, I'll take you over there, and I'll show you."

"If it's a secret, you don't have to tell me. I know you're just trying to protect people. I see why you do it. As much as I don't like what you did to Hank, I guess it makes sense now."

"Yeah. Everything that happened made me into who I am. It shaped me into the man you see before you—for better or worse."

"Sometimes, our past experiences make us stronger. They show us what we're capable of overcoming."

"Maybe," he gives me a tight smile. "But I need to be better than this. For you and those I care about."

"Then let's work on that." I rest my hand on his forearm. "We can face whatever comes next, side by side."

"You forgive me, then?" His glittering green eyes sparkle with hope and something else, something I'm afraid to name.

"I do. Just ... don't do anything like that again. Okay?"

"You know I can't make that promise. Ninety-nine percent of the time, if a man ends up in our basement, he belongs there."

"I understand, but in my case, since we don't know who's after me, you can't just round up everyone I know and torture them."

"No?" His lips twitch into a mischievous smile.

"No!" I playfully slap him.

He grabs my hand and pulls it to his chest. I splay my fingers over his heart and feel it beat with all the passion he has for me. It's more than just protecting me. After the way he made love to me last night, I know it's more. But I also realize we're not ready to talk about that yet.

“Talon—”

“All I want right now is you,” he whispers before laying me back on the bed. “I’ve been through so much pain, but you’ve given me pleasure beyond my wildest dreams. I need you, Jess.”

As he slowly strips me, I sigh and sink into the bed. His hands are magic against my skin. Instead of being violent and terrifying, they’re soft and gentle. The man touching me right now isn’t the same one who beat Hank up in the basement. I have nothing to fear from this side of Talon, and now, I understand why he has two sides. Because of everything that happened in his life, it was necessary for him to become like this. It all makes sense now.

“I need to be inside you,” he murmurs, kissing his way across my throat.

“Mm,” I murmur as he parts my thighs.

When he surges into me, he fills me so completely I’m ready to die from the pleasure. He’s everything I’ve ever wanted. Maybe not in the nice, neat package I’d imagined, but he’s perfect, and he wants me just as much as I want him. I never believed in destiny before, but now, I do.

As he rocks his hips, I wrap my legs around his thighs. I grab the firm muscles on his ass and hold on for dear life. He pushes deep, rubbing against my clit and making me tremble. I arch my back, pressing my breasts to his greedy mouth. He sucks and licks my nipples until I’m moaning his name.

“Oh, Talon, yes.”

He growls, plunging into me over and over. We move as one, urging each other on until I can’t tell where he ends and I begin. Fused together, we rush toward our climax. I reach it a second before him, but he falls into ecstasy a moment later.

As I curl up by his side, I press a kiss against his eagle tattoo. He’s so strong and so amazing. A normal person would never have survived everything he went through. I don’t think he knows how amazing he is, but I do. It doesn’t matter that we haven’t caught my stalker yet. I’m confident we’ll figure it

out eventually. But in the meantime, I'll cherish every second I have with him because I'll never know if it's going to be my last.

Chapter 21: Talon

Sunlight slips through the curtains to caress Jessica's naked body. She's pure temptation, all curvy and sexy. I made love to her all night, but it wasn't enough. Getting my fill of her is impossible. The more I have her, the more I want. I'm slowly losing my ability to think of this as a job anymore. It's not. I'm falling for her, and I can't do a damn thing to stop it.

As I stir, the weight of Jessica's thigh presses against mine. This moment feels perfect, like it was meant to be. She's the only woman I've ever wanted like this. No one else has ever come close. I can't bear the thought of losing her. I want to hold on tight and never let go. After what happened yesterday, I'm lucky she still wants to be with me.

From now on, I'll have to be more careful about how much she's exposed to club life. In my haste to try to find out if Hank was her stalker, I kind of lost my mind. Grabbing an innocent man and bringing him to the dungeon isn't a normal occurrence for me. I can't even think of the last time that happened. Usually, Reaper's the one who flies off the handle and kidnaps the wrong guy. Not me.

She snuggles closer, draping her arm across my chest. I caress her soft skin and sigh. My heart swells with emotions I can't quite comprehend, and it's overwhelming. I know I'm not her type; after all, she comes from a world of philanthropy and charity, while I live on the darker edge of society. But maybe, just maybe, I can find a way to make this work.

"Good morning, sexy," she murmurs. She opens her eyes, revealing their stunning violet hue. My breath catches in my throat as I take her in. Her beauty never ceases to amaze me.

"Morning, beautiful," I reply, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. Our lips meet in a tender kiss that seems to last forever. The gentle glide of her tongue across mine sends tendrils of desire straight to my cock. All I want to do is roll her over and spread her thick thighs so I can take her again and again.

We break away to catch our breath. I study her face, memorizing every detail. Last night, after she fell asleep, I stayed up for hours just watching her sleep. She's like an angel, and I'm not entirely sure I deserve her. But that won't stop me from claiming her if she lets me. It's probably too soon to bring it up, but eventually, I'm going to make her my old lady.

"I could get used to waking up like this," she whispers, tracing the edge of my pecs with her finger.

"Me, too." I snuggle closer to her.

She lays her head on my chest, listening to my heartbeat. "You know, for a big, scary motorcycle club guy, you have a soft heart."

"Hey, don't go spreading that around," I tease, wrapping my arms around her protectively. "I've got an image to uphold."

"Your secret is safe with me," she promises.

Her fingers trace lazy circles across my skin. My cock swells with the need to possess her once more. I try to will it back to sleep, but that's not happening. Instead, I ignore the persistent little beast so I can enjoy this time with her. I don't want it to always be about sex because it isn't. This is so much more than simply lust.

We lay there, wrapped up in each other, until a knock sounds on the door.

"Who is it?" I call.

"Are you two still in bed? It's almost noon!" Nina yells through the door.

"Do you need help with lunch?" Jessica asks.

"No. It's almost done, but if you don't come out here soon, I'm going to eat all of it. I don't think my pants can take it if I do. I made lasagna, and that tends to go straight to my ass."

"Your ass is fine!" I yell.

“Talon!” Jessica slaps me on the arm.

“I don’t mean it like that.” I chuckle. “She knows what I mean.”

“I already had to unbutton my jeans. Come quick before I have to unzip them, too.” Nina laughs as she walks away.

“Time to get up, I guess,” I sigh, reluctantly disentangling our limbs.

“Unfortunately,” Jessica agrees, stretching her arms above her head like a cat waking from a nap. “But I’m looking forward to seeing what today brings. And I’m ready to eat a horse, I’m so hungry.”

“I don’t know about that.” I grin. “But maybe half a tray of lasagna.”

“You have to save some for Reaper.”

“I’m sure he already ate.”

“Probably.”

“And besides, Nina always makes extra.”

“She’s so good to you guys.”

“She really is an amazing person.”

“Um, I don’t want to get out of bed,” Jessica moans. “Do you think she’ll throw the leftovers in the fridge for later if we don’t go out there right away?”

“Most likely.” I nod.

“Good. Then come here.” She reaches for me. “I’m not ready to let you go yet.”

The warmth between us intensifies, and I can’t resist the urge to taste her lips again. Our mouths meet in a passionate kiss, while our hands explore each other’s bodies as if it’s the first time. The connection between us is electric; it pulses through every nerve, setting me on fire.

“Jess,” I murmur against her neck. “I want you so much.”

“Then take me,” she whispers, her eyes blazing with desire.

I don't hesitate for a second. Sliding between her thighs, I claim her body with a fierce passion that leaves us both breathless. Pumping in and out of her tight, hot center, I gaze deep into her eyes. She stares back at me with so much emotion, I wish I could hear her thoughts. I wonder what she thinks about this, about us. Is this simply a way for her to relieve her stress, or is it something more?

As we move as one, the love and trust between us grow stronger. I can't believe how lucky I am to have this incredible woman in my life. I ache to protect her, not just from physical dangers but from emotional pain as well. Yesterday, I scared her. I never want to do that again. Instead, I'm going to do everything in my power to ensure her happiness.

"Oh, God. Talon, yes," she moans.

"Come for me, baby," I whisper, grazing my lips across the shell of her ear.

She arches her back while wrapping her ankles around my thighs. Her cries of pleasure become erratic and shaky. When her nails scrape over my shoulders, my entire body clenches. My toes curl, and the tension in my balls ratchets up ten notches. At this rate, there's no way I'm going to survive much longer.

"Harder," she whimpers.

I drive deep, pounding her with almost violent thrusts, exactly the way she likes it. I never expected her to enjoy how rough I can get, but she loves it. She clings to me, urging me on with her hips, coiling around me like a snake, constricting tighter and tighter until she finally explodes.

She tries to muffle her scream by biting my shoulder. I growl and thrust into her quivering pussy one last time before spilling my seed. A rush of ecstasy floods me with pure joy. This is more than just a sensual release; it's more meaningful than that. I'm falling in love with her, and when we make love, I hope she feels it, too.

Afterwards, we lie tangled together, sweat-slicked and sated. As I gently stroke her hair, her expression grows

pensive, her brow furrowing slightly.

“What’s wrong?” I ask softly, concerned about the sudden shift in her mood.

“It’s just ... This is super awkward. Never mind.”

“What, baby? You can tell me anything.”

“Um, let’s get showered and dressed first. Talking about this while we’re naked is going to be super weird. Trust me.”

“Okay.”

After a quick shower, we pull on our clothes. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I grab her waist and pull her between my legs. She stands with her hands resting on my shoulders.

“I’m worried about something.” She nibbles on her bottom lip.

“What is it?”

“I haven’t heard from my dad since he left for his honeymoon. He was supposed to be back days ago, but he hasn’t tried to contact me. It’s not like him at all. Usually, he calls me at least once a week.”

“Maybe he’s just having too much fun to remember to call,” I suggest, trying to lighten the mood.

“I hope so,” she murmurs, but the doubt in her voice is clear. “I just can’t shake this feeling that something’s wrong.”

“Hey,” I say, cupping her face in my hands and forcing her to look at me. “Whatever it is, we’ll figure it out, okay? You’re not alone anymore. I’m here for you. We’re a team, right?”

“A team?” Her vibrant smile calms the tension in my belly.

“If you want to be.”

“I do.” She hugs me. “Oh, Talon, I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Let’s not find out.” I grin, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead.

In that moment, all my doubts about whether I'm the right man for her vanish. It doesn't matter if I'm not her usual type. What matters is that we care about each other. If she's worried about her dad, I'm going to help her figure out what's going on.

"How about we go check on your dad? Just to make sure everything's all right."

"Are you sure you have time? You're not busy with club stuff?"

"Nope. You're my top priority. The others understand. Besides, if you're worried about him, then I am, too."

"You don't know how much this means to me."

"Family's important. If something's going on with your dad, we'll get to the bottom of it. He's probably just having fun with his new wife, but we can go see him if you want. You said they'd be back from their honeymoon by now, right?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm sure they're just hiding out in their love nest at home." Jess makes a disgusted face. "You don't like his new wife, do you?"

"She's really bitchy. She's been trying to keep us apart ever since she met my father. We've never liked each other, and I don't see that changing any time soon. I just want to make sure my dad's okay, then we can leave. We don't have to stay for lunch or anything. In fact, we should eat here before we go. I don't want Nina to think we're ungrateful."

"Okay. Lunch, then we'll go to your dad's place. Don't worry too much. I'm sure he'll have an explanation for why he hasn't called you. Sometimes love makes a person forget about the other people in their life. It's not a good thing, but it happens."

"Do you think he's forgotten about me?" Her face falls.

"No. God, I love putting my foot in my mouth, don't I? I meant that he's probably just caught up in being a newlywed

man again. We'll go and make sure he's fine, and then maybe you can find a day to meet him for dinner."

"That's a good idea."

"When I don't have my head up my ass, I have a lot of good ideas." I grin, raking my gaze down her body.

"I bet you do." She blushes.

"Let's go. The sooner we can check on him, the sooner we can get back in bed."

"You're so horny." She playfully swats my chest.

"It only happens when you're around. I swear." I hold my hand over my heart and smile at her. She melts against me, kissing me with so much passion I wish we didn't have to leave the clubhouse. But we've got to go. I know she won't really be into it until she knows her dad's okay. I want to get that handled before I think about taking her back to bed again. He's probably fine, but she'll feel better after she knows for sure. This shouldn't take long. We'll be back in bed, naked and ready for more soon enough.

Chapter 22: Jessica

As Talon revs the engine of his motorcycle, I wrap my arms around his waist and rest my head against his back. The wind whips through my hair as we ride toward my dad's house, and that feeling of freedom I always get when we go riding hits me hard. I wonder what it would be like to go on a cross-country road trip with him. Just the two of us, exploring new places and experiencing life together.

Maybe we could go back to New Orleans, and he could show me his old neighborhood. I don't know if the memories would be too rough, but I'd like to see where he came from. His past is helping me to understand who he is now. He endured so much, but he's still trying to do the right thing. Even now, I know he'd rather be back in bed, and yet he's here, doing this for me because he knows how much it means to me.

When we pull into the affluent neighborhood where my dad lives, I feel a familiar mix of awe and discomfort. These enormous mansions seem so far removed from Talon's world. He's nothing like my father. I don't know what my dad's going to think when he meets Talon, or how I'm going to explain our relationship to him, but I don't have time to worry about that now. I'm more concerned with why my dad hasn't called me since his honeymoon. The lack of contact doesn't make any sense.

As Talon parks in front of the grandiose house, he looks up at it and whistles softly. "Damn. I've never seen a place this big before."

"Yeah, it's pretty impressive," I admit, feeling a hint of pride mixed with embarrassment. "My dad's done well for himself."

Talon removes his helmet and runs a hand through his tousled hair. "What does your father do for work?"

"He owns several businesses. My mom used to say he was married to his job because he was always working. He missed a lot of my school activities when I was growing up. I

know he tried his best to get to my dance recitals, but he couldn't always make it."

"That's tough. I'm sorry you missed out on having him there."

"I don't fault him for it. He was busy trying to provide a good life for us. I understand why now, but back then, I was a little hurt by it. After Mom died, he went out of his way to make up for all the times he missed. Then Allison came into our lives. Everything changed after that."

"How so?"

"It's hard to explain, but it became harder and harder for my dad to find time to see me. I think she was behind it. She was jealous of how close my dad and I were. I never really liked her, and she felt the same about me. We were oil and water. We never mixed."

"Some people are like that."

"Yeah." I sigh and get off the bike.

"Maybe he's been too busy with work. That could be why he hasn't called," he says, securing our helmets to the seat.

I shake my head, concern furrowing my brow. "Even with how busy he gets, he'd still make time to call me. Something doesn't feel right."

"Then it's a good thing we came."

"Hopefully, he'll tell me what's going on." I walk up the steps to the front door. Taking a deep breath, I use the brass knocker to pound on it.

"They might not be home," Talon says, frowning at the door. He places his hands next to his eyes and tries to peer in through the frosted glass windows that flank the entrance.

"Let me try one more time."

I'm about to lift the knocker when the door swings open to reveal Allison, my stepmother. Her blonde bombshell beauty contrasts sharply with the malevolence that seems to

radiate from her like a dark aura. She narrows her eyes as she takes in Talon and me.

“Jessica,” she says coldly. “What brings you here?”

“I came to see Dad. Where is he?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady. “He hasn’t called since he returned from your honeymoon.”

“Randolph isn’t home,” she replies dismissively. “And I don’t know when he’ll be back.”

“Can we come in for a few minutes? You could tell us about the honeymoon while we wait for him.”

“Absolutely not. You can’t just barge in whenever you please.” Her angry gaze snaps from me to Talon and back. Her refusal only heightens my suspicion. What is she hiding? My frustration boils over, and I clench my fists.

“Listen, this is my family’s house. I have every right to go inside. I’m going to wait for my dad, and if you don’t like it, that’s your problem.”

“You’re an entitled little brat, aren’t you?” she scoffs, crossing her arms. “You think you can just waltz in here whenever you want, don’t you? Grow up, Jessica.”

“Are you trying to keep me and my dad apart?” I accuse, anger flaring in my chest. “Just because you’re married to him now doesn’t mean you can control our relationship!”

“Wow, paranoid much?” she sneers, her eyes glinting with malice. “I’m not keeping you two apart. Your father’s just busy, that’s all.”

“Busy enough not to call his own daughter? That doesn’t sound like the dad I know.”

“Maybe you don’t know him as well as you think.”

As I stand there, fuming at her evasiveness and feeling increasingly desperate for answers, a thought crosses my mind: Dad would never leave me in the dark like this. Something is definitely wrong. I’m determined to find out what’s going on, and Allison isn’t going to stop me.

“Fine,” I say, gritting my teeth. “If you won’t let us in, we’ll just wait here until my father comes home.”

“Suit yourself,” she snaps, slamming the door in our faces.

“Bitch,” I mutter.

Talon looks around, his brow furrowing. “Wait a second, today’s Sunday. Your dad doesn’t work on the weekend, does he?”

“Sometimes, but never on Sunday. He goes to church, and then he comes home. It was always his rest day. He loves watching football, so maybe he’s doing that and doesn’t want to be interrupted.”

“There aren’t any games on today.”

“Really?”

“It’s the off season.”

“Oh. I never did follow sports.”

“It’s practically a religion to some of the prospects. They’d all be at the clubhouse if there was a game on today.”

“So, if he’s not at work, and if he’s not avoiding us so he can watch football in peace, then where is he?” I ask.

“Your stepmother has to have some idea of where he went. Let’s find out what she knows.” He raises his hand to knock on the door again.

Allison opens it, her eyes narrowing as soon as she realizes we’re still on the porch. “Now, what?”

“You must know where he went today.” I put my hands on my hips and glare right back at her.

“I don’t.”

“Then we’re staying,” Talon says, placing his boot on the threshold so she can’t close the door on us again.

“Who are you?” she snaps, looking him up and down with disdain. “I’m not letting some motorcycle club gang member into my house.”

“Excuse me? Talon’s nothing like that. You’re judging him based on his appearance, and that’s just wrong.”

“Look at him! He’s filthy and scruffy. I won’t let a homeless person into my house,” she huffs, crossing her arms over her chest. “If you don’t take your scumbag boyfriend and leave, I’m calling the police.”

“Go ahead!” I challenge, knowing that we haven’t done anything wrong. “But we’re not leaving until you tell us where my father is.”

“Fine!” Allison spits. “He’s here, but he’s sick. He can’t have visitors right now.”

My chest tightens with a mixture of anger and fear. “Why didn’t you tell me my dad was sick? You could have called me!”

“I tried going to your house to let you know, but you haven’t been home. And you’re always so busy with work that I didn’t think you’d care.”

“That’s no excuse. You could’ve left a message or texted me.” I’m not buying her explanation one bit. She’s lying. And why would she drive all the way to my house instead of simply calling me? It doesn’t make any sense.

“Whatever.” She waves a dismissive hand. “Your father is sick, and he doesn’t need any additional stress from you barging in here. You need to leave before he hears you.”

“Let me see him,” I say firmly. “I have a right to see my own father.”

Allison looks like she wants to protest, but Talon takes a step toward her. I can tell his presence intimidates her because she immediately takes a step back.

“We’re going in. Call the cops if you want, but Jessica has every right to be here.” He pushes past her, making a path for me. I hurry behind him, ignoring Allison’s enraged blubbing.

As we make our way upstairs to my father’s bedroom, my thoughts race. What if something terrible has happened to

him? What if it's too late to help him? I can't lose him, too. Not after what happened with my mom.

Entering the room, I gasp at the sight before me. My father, once strong and vibrant, lies in bed, looking gaunt and barely alive. His face is pale, his breathing shallow, and he seems only half conscious. The sight of him brings tears to my eyes.

"We need to get him to the hospital," I whisper, fighting to keep my emotions in check. "He can't stay here."

"Let's call an ambulance. They'll know what to do," Talon says.

"Jess?" My dad cracks a single eye open. "Help me."

"Hang on, Daddy. We're going to get help." I reach for the phone, determined to call 911, but Allison moves quickly, blocking my path and grabbing the landline phone before I can take hold of it.

"No," she snarls. "He's fine."

"Give me the damn phone! You can't just let him suffer like this. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"You're overreacting," she snaps back, gripping the phone tightly. "He just needs rest, not a hospital."

"Are you serious?" I can't believe what I'm hearing. My father's life hangs in the balance, and she's playing games with his health. With a surge of adrenaline, I lunge at her, trying to wrestle the phone from her grasp.

"Let go, you crazy bitch!" she screeches as we struggle.

I refuse to let go of the phone. The thought of losing my father fuels my determination, and finally, I manage to rip it out of her hands.

"Stop wasting time!" Talon shouts, stepping between us to prevent further conflict. I nod gratefully at him, then dial 911 with shaking fingers.

"My father's very ill. Please send an ambulance right away," I plead to the operator before giving them our address.

Allison continues to yell at me, insisting I'm blowing things out of proportion, but I ignore her. She's already proven she can't be trusted when it comes to my father's wellbeing.

It seems like an eternity passes before the paramedics finally arrive. After checking his vitals, one of the paramedics gives me a strange look. They load my father onto a gurney, working quickly and efficiently.

"What's wrong?" I demand.

One of them turns to me, concern etched on his face. "Your father's very sick. Does he take any drugs or medications?"

Before I can answer, Allison interjects, "Randolph doesn't take anything like that."

"He has all the signs of an overdose. We need to get him to the hospital immediately."

"I want to ride with him," she says.

"No. I'm going with him. You knew how sick he was, yet you did nothing. You don't deserve to go with them." I glare at her.

"Fine. We'll both go." She smirks triumphantly.

"Only one person can ride with him," the paramedic tells us.

Realizing we're wasting precious time, I relent, allowing Allison to accompany my father while Talon and I agree to follow behind.

As the ambulance leaves, I climb onto the back of Talon's motorcycle. My heart pounds as fear and anger course through my veins. How could Allison have let things get this bad? And why didn't she ask for help sooner?

He revs the engine, and we take off, following closely behind the ambulance carrying my father. The wind tugs at my hair, but I barely notice it as my mind races, trying to make sense of everything that just happened.

“Jess, are you all right?” Talon asks me through the speakers in our helmets.

“I can’t believe she didn’t call for help earlier. What the hell is she hiding?”

“We’ll get to the bottom of this, I promise.” His grip on the handlebars tightens, turning his knuckles white.

As we weave through traffic, the ambulance’s lights flash and sirens wail, cutting a path for us through the busy streets. My thoughts circle back to Allison—her cold demeanor, her refusal to let me see my own father, and now, her insistence that he wasn’t on any medication. Something doesn’t add up, and I’m determined to find out what it is.

“Hey,” Talon calls out again, snapping me back to the present. “When we get to the hospital, just focus on your dad, okay? We’ll deal with Allison later.”

“Right,” I mutter, taking a deep breath and trying to steady myself. If Talon hadn’t been with me, I never would have gotten past Allison. He probably saved my dad’s life.

As we approach the hospital, the pit in my stomach grows. I’m terrified of what we might uncover. I’m positive Allison lied to the paramedics, but why? What’s she up to? Does she have something to do with why my dad’s so sick?

Talon parks in the closest spot he can find to the Emergency Room entrance. As we run toward the door, I cling to his hand, trusting him to keep me grounded while we try to find out what’s really going on. Whatever it is, it’s not good. My father’s never been this sick before. The thought of losing him guts me. I wouldn’t be able to take it if something happened to him. He has to be okay. He has to. Because if he dies, I don’t think my heart will be able to survive losing him, too.

Chapter 23: Talon

I lean against the sterile hospital wall, my eyes fixed on the door to Randolph's room. She's in there, talking to the doctors. I strain to catch snippets of their conversation through the wall.

"Drug overdose?" Jessica's voice is a mix of disbelief and frustration. "My father never touched drugs in his life. Your information must be wrong."

"Miss, we're just trying to figure out what happened," the male doctor replies defensively. "Given his symptoms, it's a possibility that can't be ignored."

"Run more tests, then," she demands, her tone firm but desperate. "My father never gets sick. Something isn't right here."

There's a pause before the doctor asks, "Do you think your father could have been poisoned?"

"It's possible," she admits.

"We'll run a more detailed tox screen and see what comes up."

"Okay."

Jessica glances at me through the small window in the door. Her eyes are filled with uncertainty and fear. I give her a gentle smile, trying to encourage her. She's a strong woman. She wanted to talk to the doctors by herself, and I know she can do it. If she gives me any sign that she wants me to come in, I will. Until then, I'll stay out here to keep an eye on things.

I glance down the hall, looking for Jessica's stepmother. She's nowhere to be seen, which is odd, considering her husband is gravely ill. She vanished thirty minutes ago and hasn't been back since. Her behavior hasn't sat right with me since the moment Jessica and I arrived at the hospital. The way Allison avoided eye contact, her nervous demeanor—it all seemed off. I pull out my phone and dial Matrix's number.

“Meet me at the hospital. Something’s going on with Jessica’s dad.” I keep my voice low, not wanting to draw attention from the hospital staff. “While you’re at it, run a background check on Allison, Jessica’s stepmom. And bring some prospects from the club with you.”

“Got it. We’re in town running errands anyway, so we’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Thanks, brother.”

I end the call and shove my phone back into my pocket. Maybe I’m being paranoid, but I’d rather be safe than sorry when it comes to Jessica’s well-being. The thought of someone harming her or her father makes my blood boil. I want to know everything about Allison and her past. Matrix will be able to get that info quickly.

As I wait for Matrix and the prospects to arrive, I think about how strong Jessica has been through all of this. But even the strongest people have their limits. She must be terrified. Her father looked horrible when we found him. He doesn’t look any better now. In fact, he appears to be getting worse. If the hospital staff don’t do something soon, I’m afraid we’re going to lose him. I can’t let that happen to her.

The clock ticks slowly. Each second feels like an eternity as I stand guard outside the hospital room. When Matrix and the prospects finally arrive, we’ll be one step closer to uncovering the truth. Hopefully, he’s got something useful to share about Allison.

As I glance down the hallway, Matrix and several prospects from the club approach. The grim expression on Matrix’s face doesn’t bode well.

“What did you find?” I ask as soon as they’re within earshot.

“Man, it’s not good. Allison’s previous husband died under mysterious circumstances. The police were never able to prove she was involved, but they’ve been suspicious of her for years.”

“Damn,” I mutter, clenching my fists. “So, it’s possible she poisoned Randolph.”

“Definitely. According to the ME who did the autopsy, there was no discernible cause of death. He suspected poisoning, but nothing came back when they ran the labs.”

“How’d you get a hold of him so fast?” I ask, impressed.

“I’ve got my ways.” Matrix smirks. “But check this out, there’s more ...”

“What?”

“I found Randolph’s will. If he dies, everything goes to Jessica. But if Jessica dies before him, Allison gets it all.”

“How much are we talking?”

“Between his businesses and his real estate? Millions. And that’s not even counting the life insurance.”

“That gives Allison plenty of motive to want her dead.” I grit my teeth and glance over my shoulder, keeping an eye out for Allison. “She could be the one who hired someone to stalk Jessica.”

“Why stalk her? Why not just kill her?” Matrix asks, clearly puzzled by the situation.

“I don’t know,” I admit, my mind racing as I try to connect the pieces. “But I’m going to find out.”

“I’ll help in any way I can. I’ve got your back.”

“We all do,” one of the prospects says.

I give him a nod, acknowledging his loyalty. This group of prospects is everything we need to keep the club going for years. I’m confident they’ll all get patched in if they keep doing what they’ve been doing.

“What’s our next move?” Matrix asks.

“First, we’ve got to keep an eye on Allison. She wandered off a while ago and hasn’t been back. I don’t like it.”

“I’ll text her driver’s license pic to the guys.” After tapping his phone, the prospect’s phones ding in response.

“We’re on it,” one of the prospects says. He and two others branch off to search the hospital.

“The rest of you,” I nod toward the others. “I need you to guard Randolph’s room. We need to protect him until we can gather enough evidence to confront Allison.”

“Got it,” Matrix replies, signaling to the prospects to take their positions.

As they disperse, the weight of responsibility presses on my shoulders. It’s not just about justice for Jessica and her father anymore; it’s about protecting our entire community from this dangerous woman. If she’s killed before, then she can do it again. I’m not going to let another family suffer. I’m going to end her reign of terror before she can destroy another family.

After the doctors leave the room, I glance at Matrix. “I’m going to check on Jess.”

“We’ll be right here.”

As I step into Randolph’s hospital room, Jessica looks up from her father’s bedside. Her face is pale and filled with fear.

“I need to speak to Allison. Did she say where she was going?” I ask.

“She went to the cafeteria. She said she was hungry.”

“Stay here with Matrix,” I say, nodding toward him. “I’m going to have a little chat with your stepmom.”

“Be careful,” she whispers.

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle this.” I give her a reassuring kiss on the cheek before leaving the room.

As I stalk through the sterile halls of the hospital, my mind races with everything Matrix revealed about Allison. She has motive and opportunity, but I need more than that to confront her.

My gut churns as I push open the door to the cafeteria. The sterile smell of bland hospital food assaults my senses. Several people look up. A couple of younger nurses whisper something before giggling. Their eyes widen as they take in my club gear. I'm wearing my cut over a shirt, along with jeans and motorcycle boots. I guess they're not used to seeing guys like me in places like this.

I scan the room, my eyes darting from table to table, but there's no sign of Allison. A knot forms in my stomach, growing tighter with each passing second. Something isn't right. I scour the rest of the hospital, checking every corner and crevice, but it's like she vanished into thin air.

"Damn it," I mutter. I pull my phone out of my cut and dial Scar's number. "Pres, we've got a problem. Matrix brought you up to speed, right?"

"Yeah. What's the problem?"

"Allison's gone. She's not in the hospital anymore. I looked all over, and she's not here. She's in the wind."

"Shit," Scar grumbles. "What about Randolph?"

"The docs are doing a tox screen to see if he was poisoned. I left Matrix and a few prospects outside his door. They're not letting anyone in unless they show a hospital badge."

"Nitro, Reaper, and I will meet you there in less than an hour. Sit tight."

"Thanks, Pres," I say, ending the call and feeling a flicker of relief knowing more of my club family will be here soon.

My mind races with questions: Why did Allison leave so suddenly? Is she back at the house hiding evidence? Or worse, is she planning her next move?

I pull my phone back out and hit redial. "Scar, can you swing by Randolph's place and make sure Allison didn't circle back to get rid of evidence?"

"Will do."

After hanging up, I walk back to Randolph's room. Matrix and the prospects are standing guard.

"Any sign of Allison?" I ask.

"Nothing yet."

"I don't like this."

"Me either," Matrix says.

When I walk into the room, Jessica looks up from her father's bedside. She's holding his hand and gently stroking her fingers over his. My heart breaks for her. I can't imagine how scared she is right now.

"Did you find Allison?"

"No. But there's something else you need to know. Matrix found your dad's will."

"And?" She raises an eyebrow.

"Everything goes to you if your dad dies. But if you die before him ..." I hesitate, hating to say the words out loud. "It all goes to Allison."

"I always knew she was a bad person, but I never thought she'd be willing to kill for money." Her face drops. "Dad is going to be devastated when he finds out."

"Until we find her, you need to stick close to me."

"Of course." She glances down at her father, still unconscious on the hospital bed. "I want to stay with him, though. I can't leave him alone."

"I don't think you're safe here. There are too many places for Allison to hide. We've got prospects searching for her, but you'll be safer at the clubhouse. Your dad is safe. The club has guards posted outside his door. You don't have to worry about him."

"If he's safe, then why can't I just stay here, too?"

"Babe, the doctors might have to take him to other parts of the hospital for more tests. They won't let you go with them. I don't want you wandering around this place. When the

doctors have an update, they'll call us. In the meantime, I want you home. We've got a security system and plenty of prospects on patrol. You will be more secure there. I know you don't want to go, but you have to trust me on this. I promise we'll come back as soon as the doctors have news."

"Are you sure?" she asks, her voice wavering.

"Positive. Once we're back at the clubhouse, we can regroup and figure out our next move."

"All right," she concedes, taking one last look at her dad. "I just need to use the bathroom first. I'll be right back."

"I'll come with you."

"It's just down the hall. Stay here with my dad. I'm more worried about him right now."

"Make it fast."

"Can you hold my purse?" she asks, handing it over to me.

"Go ahead. I'll be here when you get back," I say, taking her purse.

As she disappears down the hallway, I step into the doorway, so I can keep an eye on her. She turns and gives me a soft smile before heading into the bathroom. I smile back, despite my trepidation. Until we know where Allison's hiding, Jessica and her dad won't be safe.

"Hey Matrix, we need more on Allison so we'll know where to start looking."

"Already on it. I haven't found anything yet, but I'll call you the second I get something."

My phone rings. It's Scar.

"Nothing at the house," he says. "We're en route to the hospital."

"Damn. But at least we can check it off the list."

"No sign of her yet?" Scar asks.

"Nothing."

“We’ll put every man we’ve got on this. You just take care of your woman and I’ll handle the rest.”

“Thanks, Pres.”

After ending the call, I lean against the wall. Jessica’s purse hangs from my arm, but it’s getting heavier by the second. My eyes are glued to the bathroom door. With each passing minute, the queasy sensation in my gut increases. Something feels off.

“Come on, Jess,” I mutter, realizing she’s been gone for far too long.

Unable to bear it any longer, I push off the wall and head toward the women’s bathroom. I shove the door open. It slams into the wall. The sound echoes off the tile floor. Then silence fills the room.

“Jess?” I call out tentatively, scanning the empty room.

When there’s no response, panic surges through me. I rush from stall to stall, but they’re all empty. I rip open what looks like a storage closet door, but instead of finding cleaning supplies and extra paper products, I discover another door.

“What the fuck?” I rattle the doorknob, but it seems like it’s locked.

Taking a step back, I pull up my foot and kick in the door. The frame shatters, splintering wood all over the floor. A concrete hallway extends into darkness. I reach along the wall and find a light switch. Old lights, the kind they used in the fifties, flicker to life.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I groan.

Moving quickly but cautiously, I head down the hall. The passageway appears to be linked to the oldest part of the hospital. Old steam pipes run across the ceiling, while barely insulated electrical wires line the walls.

Suddenly, the lights go out. I freeze.

A heavy silence descends. Distant sounds, possibly from a boiler room or the laundry, filter through the damp air. I didn’t realize how musty it was until now. I’d been too

focused on looking for any sign of life to worry about the conditions in the hallway. Without light, it's claustrophobic as hell.

Reaching out, I use the back of my hand to test for heat. The metal is cool, not hot at all. I gently graze the pipe with my fingers and use it to navigate farther down the passage. Eventually, I've got to hit another door. I can't turn back now. This is the only other possible way out of the bathroom, so Jessica had to have come this way.

When I finally reach another door, the tension in my body coils tighter. I don't know what I'm going to find on the other side of it, but I'm ready for anything.

Raising one fist, I use my other hand to fumble along the wood until I touch the doorknob. I twist it, expecting it to be locked, but it isn't.

The door swings open, revealing an actual storage room this time. Old mops and buckets that have seen better days are lined up on shelves. Industrial sized bottles of cleaner, mostly empty, sit like sentinels along the floor.

I quickly walk through the room toward the door on the other side. It opens into yet another older hallway. Doors branch off in every direction. If I had to guess, I'd say this was an older part of the hospital that's not in use anymore. It's going to take forever to check every door.

“Fuck!”

Where could she be?

“Damn it!” I curse, racking my brain for ideas. “There has to be a way to speed this up.”

A soft, scampering noise catches my attention. A small rat scurries toward me. When it gets within a few feet of me, it pulls up short. Cocking its head to one side, it studies me, trying to assess whether I'm a predator.

“Hey, buddy,” I say softly, crouching down. “I need your help. Can you find someone for me?”

The rat twitches its whiskers several times as it tries to make sense of me. Instead of speaking to it audibly, because I know that's useless, I force a telepathic link with its mind.

"I need your help to find a friend. It's very important. Will you help me?" I ask it.

"Why?" the rat asks.

"I'll give you ..." I search for the thing it would most want. "A nice place to live and as much food as you could possibly want."

"Food?"

"Yes. I have a lot of it at my house."

"Big house?"

"Yes. Huge. Bigger than this house," I say, referring to the hospital.

"I'll help."

"Thank God," I mutter.

"Who friend?" the rat asks.

"It's a woman. This is her purse. Can you pick up her scent and follow it?"

"Yes."

I squat and open the bag. The rat jumps inside and rolls around, sniffing the air before leaping out onto the floor. Without hesitation, the rat takes off down the hall. I follow closely behind, unwilling to let it get too far ahead.

As we approach a stairwell, the rat comes to an abrupt halt. The stairwell is dimly lit, casting eerie shadows on the walls. My heart hammers in my chest as I descend the stairs, praying I'll find Jessica safe and sound. Every fiber of my being screams that something terrible has happened, but I push those thoughts away. I need to focus. She's depending on me, and I can't let her down.

Chapter 24: Jessica

As I wash my hands in the hospital bathroom, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. I look like hell. Dark gray bags hang underneath my eyes. My pale skin lacks its usual glow. The weight of everything that's happened in the last few weeks is finally getting to me. I don't know how much more of this I can take.

I duck my head to finish washing the soap off my hands. Talon's probably right about going back to the clubhouse, but I really don't want to leave my dad here. Hopefully, Dad will wake up soon. If Talon and I end up leaving, I'm sure Talon will bring me back to see Dad when he regains consciousness.

"Jessica," a voice hisses behind me.

I stiffen as I recognize it—Allison, my cold-hearted stepmother. Before I can react, she grabs my arm with an iron grip, yanking me away from the sink. She slaps her other hand over my mouth, muffling my screams.

"Shut up!"

Allison is stronger than she looks. She drags me to a storage closet door and throws it open. It's empty except for another door on the other side of the small space. She pulls me in before opening the second door.

A dark, musty hallway stretches out before me. My heart races as fear sets in, my mind racing to understand what's happening.

"What's wrong with you?" I demand. "Why are you doing this?"

"Shut up and keep moving," she snaps, refusing to answer my question. Her eyes are filled with rage. I know better than to argue with someone who is clearly deranged.

She leads me through a series of old hallways, taking me deeper into the hospital. It's an old section, one that looks like it hasn't been used in years. The farther down we go, the

colder it gets. A shiver runs through my body as I wrap my free arm across my chest.

Dim light from a few scattered bulbs casts eerie shadows on the walls. I tremble, both from the temperature and from the dread building inside me.

“Where are we going?” I ask, my voice trembling.

Allison doesn't respond. Instead, she pulls me deeper into the darkness. I glance around, looking for anything that might help me escape, but there's only endless rows of dusty storage shelves and locked doors.

My mind races as I try to come up with a plan. People are counting on me at my job at the non-profit animal shelter. All the animals I care about need me, including Loki. I can't let Allison take me away from them. And then there's Talon. Now that I know about his past, he's just as wounded as the animals I help. He needs me, too. I've got to get away from this lunatic before she does something crazy. I have to fight back.

In a burst of adrenaline, I plant my feet and yank my arm, trying to wrench myself free. Allison's grip is unyielding. She only pulls me harder, dragging me deeper into the depths of the basement.

“Please,” I beg while trying to pull free. “Let me go.”

“Keep dreaming,” she snaps.

As her voice echoes through the darkness, I feel like I'm trapped in a nightmare. Talon doesn't know where I am. He won't realize I've been taken until it's too late. I can't wait for him to save me. I've got to escape her clutches, but how? She's much stronger than she looks.

Allison stops walking and pushes me against the cold steel of a door marked “Restricted.” Its rusted edges and peeling paint only add to the foreboding atmosphere. What horrors lie behind this door? We're back in the modern part of the hospital, but there doesn't seem to be anyone else around. No one alive, anyway.

“Someone’s coming to unlock it,” Allison informs me, her grip on my arm still unrelenting.

My heart races, and I rack my brain for any way out of this nightmare.

“Why?” I ask, attempting to keep my voice steady, hoping she’ll actually answer me this time. “Why are you doing this?”

“Some women get everything handed to them on a silver platter. They live their lives without a care in the world, while others suffer.” Allison’s bitterness is obvious. I know she’s talking about me. But there’s more to it than that, and I need to find out what.

“Like whom?” I press, trying to keep her talking. My mind races, searching for an escape route, a weakness in her plan.

“Like me,” she snarls, confirming my suspicions. “You’ve had it all—your mother’s connections, a cushy job at that animal shelter, and now, even my husband’s attention.”

“He was my father long before he became your spouse,” I fire back.

“You’re so ungrateful. He works so hard so you can take his money and then play around saving little animals. It’s pathetic.”

“He pays for half of my house, but that’s it. And that comes out of the trust fund my mother left for me. It’s not even his money, not directly.”

“Whatever. Most people can’t live the way you do while working at a non-profit. You get to live like a princess while the rest of us fight for every dollar. Well, not anymore. I’m going to make sure you never use your conniving ways to take another penny from your father.”

“What are you talking about? I never asked for any of this,” I protest, my fear momentarily eclipsed by indignation. How could she be so blind to the truth? “My mother left me that money. It has nothing to do with my father. I live a

perfectly normal life. There's nothing royal about it. I'm not a spoiled princess. You are so wrong about me."

"Ha! A normal life, really? Can't you see how your very existence has made mine miserable?" Her voice drips with venom, while her eyes bore into mine. She's not just unhinged; she's dangerous.

"Maybe if you tried to understand my life," I suggest, praying this might buy me more time, "you'd see that we're not so different."

"Understand you?" she scoffs, her grip on my arm tightening. "You've had everything I ever wanted, and you think I should try to understand you? No, Jessica, it's time for you to suffer like I have."

My heart pounds as the gravity of the situation sinks in. I need to find a way out—and fast. But with Allison watching my every move, I'll need to be smarter than her if I want to survive.

The sound of heavy footsteps echoes in the distance. My heart races faster with each step. Whoever's coming might be here to rescue me, or at least distract Allison enough so I can escape. Her fingers dig into my skin, gripping my arm tighter than a vise. She's not letting me go any time soon.

"Here he comes," she whispers, a sinister smile spreading across her face.

The man approaching us is huge. He's tall and broad-shouldered, and he'd normally be considered handsome, except for one thing—his dark eyes are filled with menacing evil. I swallow hard because he's not here to help me.

"Unlock it," Allison orders.

The man produces a key from his pocket before turning it in the lock. It opens with a heavy clunk. As the door creaks open, it reveals a dimly lit room beyond it. I barely catch a glimpse before Allison drags me inside.

As I take in my surroundings, my legs wobble beneath me. It's the morgue. Cold. Sterile. And lined with rows of metal drawers. The unmistakable scent of disinfectant and

decay fills my nostrils, making me gag. Am I going to end up just as dead as the other people in this room?

“Get her on the table,” Allison commands, her voice stiff and devoid of emotion.

My stomach churns at the thought of what might happen next. I still don’t understand what she was ranting about earlier. I’m not a fairytale princess, but she’s turning into the epitome of an evil stepmother.

The man easily lifts me off my feet and slams me onto one of the autopsy tables. I yelp as air gets knocked out of my chest. Struggling to take another breath, I’m putty in his big, rough hands.

“Hold still,” he growls, his breath hot and fetid against my face.

I try to squirm away, but his grip is unrelenting. He and Allison work to tie me down. Their movements are so precise and practiced that I have a sick feeling they’ve done this before.

Despite my best efforts to break free, the restraints hold me fast. Allison and the man watch me struggle, both smirking at my useless attempts to get away.

“Please,” I beg, my voice cracking under the weight of my terror, “you don’t have to do this.”

“Shut up, Jessica,” Allison sneers. “No one’s coming to save you.”

My heartbeat echoes in my ears as I struggle against the restraints binding me to the cold metal table. Every fiber of my being screams for escape, but I know that won’t happen without understanding Allison’s motives.

“What do you want?” I force the words out through gritted teeth, trying to sound braver than I feel.

Allison smirks, her eyes glinting with animosity. “I want you dead. Once you’re out of the way, Randolph’s money will be mine. Millions. Enough so I never have to work or rely on a man again.”

The man by her side glances at her.

“Don’t worry, Kyle. You know it’s for us. We’ve been planning it for years, and now, it’s finally happening.” She gives him the huge, pageant-sized smile I’ve seen her flash my dad so many times. It’s just as fake now as it was then, but Kyle’s too stupid to see it. To be fair, my dad never noticed her lies, either, so I guess I can’t blame this guy for being just as gullible as my father.

“I wasn’t concerned,” Kyle says. “We’ll have plenty of money once the old man dies.”

“Money?” I gasp, disbelief and horror warring inside me. How could someone be so callous? My father loved her, and all she ever wanted was his wealth?

Allison leans in closer, her voice dripping with venom. “I should have killed you months ago. As soon as you started causing trouble, Kyle said we should get rid of you. I didn’t listen to him, but he was right. Your father almost didn’t go through with the wedding. We had a huge fight the night before. Because of you.”

“What are you talking about? My father didn’t say anything about that to me.”

“I’m talking about your pathetic attempts to stop the wedding,” she sneers. “Randolph is my richest husband yet. The others were worth a few hundred thousand at most. But him ... He’s worth millions. Marrying him and then killing him for his money was supposed to be easy, until you got in the way.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. So, my suspicions about her true intentions were right all along. I should’ve done more to protect my father from this manipulative monster. But it’s not too late; I can still try to save us both.

“Even if you kill me,” I warn her, “you won’t get away with it. People will find out.”

“By then, I’ll be long gone,” Allison replies dismissively, her confidence unshakable. “Nobody will be able to touch

me.”

“Money can’t buy you happiness, Allison,” I say, trying to appeal to any shred of humanity left in her. “You’ll always be running, looking over your shoulder. Talon won’t ever stop looking for you. If you kill me, everyone in Underground Vengeance will make it their mission to hunt you down.”

“You think they’ll care once you’re dead? You’re just a little fuck-toy for that biker. The minute they toss dirt on your grave, he’s going to forget all about you.”

“No. That’s not true. He loves me, which is something you will never understand. You don’t know what love is. You’ve never had it, and you never will. Someone like you is too selfish to truly love another person.” I glance at Kyle to see if any of this is getting through to him. His gaze slides to Allison, but his expression doesn’t change.

Allison’s eyes narrow, but she doesn’t respond. Instead, she turns to the hulking man beside her and nods. My heart races even faster, knowing my time is quickly running out. But I refuse to give up without a fight. I’m not going to die down here. Now that I have Talon, I have so much to live for. There’s no way I’m giving up. Not until I take my last breath.

I glare at Allison, a fire igniting within me as I muster all my courage. “You know, from the day I met you, I knew something wasn’t right. I had this feeling you didn’t really love my father. I didn’t know you were just after his money, but it make sense now. I should have been on the lookout for gold diggers like you.”

Allison’s eyes narrow, but she doesn’t deny it. Instead, she laughs—a deep, sinister laugh that chills my soul.

“Congratulations, detective. You’ve uncovered the truth,” she mocks, her eyes gleaming with malice. “But you’re too late. Yes, I’m a fraud, a thief, and a killer. And you? You’re just another obstacle in my way.”

“Obstacle?” I retort, anger boiling inside me. “Is that all your victims are to you? Just obstacles? My father loved you, and you planned to kill him for his money!”

“Love is for fools,” she sneers, taking a step closer to me. “And your father was the biggest fool of them all. But it will all be over soon. He won’t suffer anymore. And with any luck, he won’t even wake up long enough to hear of your untimely death.”

Desperate to buy myself some time, I ask, “What about the person stalking me? What was that all about? Was that you, too?”

She grins wickedly, revealing the twisted depths of her cruelty. “Oh, that was just for fun,” she admits, glancing at Kyle. “My lover here has been stalking you. He pinned the voodoo doll to your front door, and then he tried to run you off the road ... It was quite entertaining, until you met Talon. After that, everything went downhill.”

“You stalked me?” I gasp, staring at the man who’s been tormenting me for weeks. If I’d met him on the street, I would have walked right past him, never the wiser.

“Surprise,” Kyle smirks.

“Your little whirlwind romance with that biker ruined our plans. But don’t worry, we’ll make sure you and your precious boyfriend both pay for it,” Allison taunts, her eyes filled with hatred.

I clench my fists, trying to suppress the terror threatening to overwhelm me. I have to find a way out of this, not just for myself, but for my father and Talon, too. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from all this, it’s that love may be a weakness, but it can also be our greatest strength. I can’t die now, not after finding the love of my life. I’m going to escape. Somehow.

“Once we get rid of you, we’ll just have to wait a few days before taking care of your dear old dad. Then, all that money will be ours, and we can finally live the life we deserve.”

“We should kill the biker, too,” Kyle says.

“Yes, of course.” Her eyes light up with greedy anticipation. “Imagine it, Kyle—lying on a tropical beach,

sipping cocktails, not a care in the world ... Just you, me, and our millions.”

“Sounds perfect,” he grins, his gaze flicking back to me with unsettling hunger.

“Enough talk,” Allison snaps, her impatience getting the better of her. “Kill her. Do it now.”

My heart hammers as Kyle approaches me. His hands stretch toward my neck, ready to strangle me. Desperation courses through my veins, but there’s nothing I can do—I’m completely at their mercy. As he leans in close, I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing myself for the end.

Suddenly, the door to the morgue bursts open with a deafening bang, and a familiar figure comes barreling into the room. It’s Talon. His face is a mask of rage as he charges toward us.

“Get away from her!” he shouts, his voice echoing through the chamber like a thunderclap.

Our eyes meet, and a promise passes between us. No matter what happens, we’re getting out of this alive.

Chapter 25: Talon

I glare at the man standing over Jessica. Rage surges down my arms to pool in my fists. Without a doubt, this is the guy I fought outside Sienna's house. He's the same height and build as the bastard who put Jessica through hell. It has to be him. I need to end this now before he has a chance to hurt her any further. My muscles tense, and I lunge toward him.

"Kyle, look out!" Allison screams.

Instead of trying to get away from me, Kyle skirts the autopsy table and rushes forward.

"Stay the hell away from her!" I shout.

I slam my fist into his jaw, but he quickly recovers. We trade blows, each one landing heavily on the other's body. We're evenly matched in strength, but I've got something he doesn't have—love. I'll protect Jessica at any cost. If that means dying for her, so be it.

Reaching for the gun in my cut, I manage to pull it free, but before I can point it at him, Kyle anticipates my move. He swats my arm, sending the weapon skidding across the floor. It disappears under an autopsy table, leaving me cursing internally.

"Without your gun, you don't stand a fucking chance," Kyle taunts, a sick grin plastered across his face.

"I don't need a gun to take you down. I'm more of a hands-on guy anyway." I raise my fists to cover my face.

Ducking and weaving, I land a solid kick to his ribs. He grunts and briefly hunches forward before quickly recovering. Retaliating with a punch to my face, he sends me staggering backward. I knock over a tray of dissection instruments. They clatter to the floor, spreading out in every direction. They'll be a trip hazard for one of us. Hopefully, it won't be me.

"Is that all you got?" I spit, wiping blood from my mouth.

"Hardly," he sneers, launching himself at me once again.

I dodge his attack and counter with a blow to his gut. For a moment, I think I've got him, but then he manages to grab hold of me, throwing me off balance. My back slams against the tile floor, knocking the wind out of me.

"Thought you'd win, didn't you?" he snarls, pinning me down by my wrists and pressing his knee into my chest. "If you knew who I was, you wouldn't be so fucking cocky. I get paid to deal with assholes like you."

"Get off me, you bastard!" I struggle to break free from his grip.

Kyle isn't letting up. He releases my wrists only to grab my neck instead. Strangling me, he glares at me with so much hatred he reminds me of Blackstone. The look in Kyle's eyes tells me everything I need to know. He won't stop until one of us is defeated, and with Jessica's life on the line, I can't afford to lose.

"See you in hell," he growls, tightening his grip around my throat.

I summon every ounce of strength I have left. Tightening my core, I pull my legs up and hook my boot through his legs. I push him off balance, tossing him onto the floor beside me. His sudden change in position forces him to let go of my throat.

Gasping, I buck my hips, throwing him off me. He rolls away while I scramble to get to my feet. Backing up, I stumble over the instruments on the tile floor. I swoop down and grab a scalpel. It's not much, but it's the only weapon within reach. Slashing forward, I stalk toward Kyle.

From across the room, the sound of Jessica's scream breaks my concentration. I glance over to find her grappling with Allison. Jessica was just tied to the table. How the hell did she get free? The bindings must have been too loose. I want to help her, but my lapse in attention is all Kyle needs to reengage. He takes advantage of my momentary distraction, rushing me like a linebacker and tackling me to the floor. This time, I manage to get out from underneath him while throwing an elbow to his face, stunning him.

I jump up and turn toward the women.

“Let go!” Jessica snarls at Allison, landing a solid blow to her stepmother’s face. Allison staggers, then crumbles to the ground, unconscious. Jessica’s eyes meet mine for a split second before shifting their focus to Kyle. “Watch out!”

I duck in time to miss Kyle’s fist. I deliver a swift knee to his groin, catching him exactly where it hurts the most. He howls in pain and releases me. Bent forward, he staggers and bangs his shoulder into the steel table.

Seizing the opportunity, I search for anything I can use to my advantage. I don’t have much time before he recovers. Spotting a nearby fire extinguisher, I grab it and swing it at Kyle’s head, knocking him to the ground. But just as I’m about to deliver the final blow, Kyle suddenly flips our positions and slams me to the ground. My head smacks against the cold tile floor, stars exploding behind my eyes. I struggle beneath him, but he’s got me pinned down with an iron grip.

“Thought you had me, didn’t you?” he sneers. “You know, I was going to make her death fast, but now, I’m thinking I might take my time.”

My heart races as panic sets in. I can’t let him win. I know exactly what a man like him could do to a woman. Jessica doesn’t deserve that fate. No one does.

“Get ... off ... me!” I snarl.

“No. I’m going to enjoy watching you die!” He moves his knee over my sternum and presses down, stealing my oxygen.

“Jessica, run!” I whisper, hoping she’ll be able to hear me. If I can buy her some time, maybe she can get help.

“Like hell,” Kyle snarls. His gaze briefly shifts toward Jessica before returning to me. That split second is enough for me to free one hand and punch him directly in the jaw.

“Argh!” Momentarily stunned by the blow, he gives me the chance to break free. I don’t waste any time getting back to my feet and facing him.

“Stay the hell away from her!”

Kyle wipes blood from his lips and glares at me with murderous intent.

“Is that all you got?” I taunt, even as I struggle to catch my breath. “You’re looking a little tired.”

“Shut up!” he snarls, but his voice lacks its earlier confidence. He’s weakening, too.

“Jessica means everything to me,” I say, my voice low and fierce. “I won’t let you lay another finger on her.”

“It’s not my fingers you should be worried about.” He leers at her before attacking me.

We clash again, trading blows like two soldiers locked in battle. But I’m fighting smarter now, using Kyle’s own momentum against him. He’s getting sloppier. I seize the opportunity to land a solid hit to his ribs.

“Argh!” he grunts.

As I move in to finish him off, he kicks out with one leg, sweeping my feet out from under me. I crash to the cold floor, momentarily stunned by the impact.

“Finish him!” Allison screams, suddenly awake and gripping a scalpel against Jessica’s throat. My heart lurches at the sight. How the fuck did Allison get up without me noticing?

“Get away from her!” I shout, attempting to get back on my feet.

Kyle straddles my chest, pinning my shoulders with his knees. He drives his fist into my face until my vision runs red.

“Give up,” he hisses, bloodlust in his eyes. “You’re both going to die today. There’s no point in fighting it.”

“I’ll fight you until my last breath,” I gasp.

“Then it’s time to make that happen,” he sneers, readying himself for a final blow.

Suddenly, a rustling sound echoes through the morgue. The air vents above us tremble, and with a loud crash, a swarm

of rats pours out. They descend upon Allison and Kyle, their fur bristling and teeth bared.

“Get them off me!” Allison shrieks in horror, releasing her grip on Jessica’s throat as she tries to fend off the rodents.

Kyle leaps to his feet, his murderous intent forgotten as he swats at the rats biting and clawing at him.

I crawl across the floor to Jessica. She’s on her hands and knees moving toward me as fast as she can, despite the sea of rats. Her eyes are wide with fear, but the rats aren’t attacking her. They know who to kill, and it’s not us.

“You okay?” I ask quickly, my voice tight with concern.

“Y-yeah,” she stammers, still shaken. “What’s happening?”

“Justice,” I reply grimly, focusing on the rats that have come to our aid. It was probably a combination of the noise from our fight and my psychic ability that called them here. It’s a skill I rarely use, but one that may have saved us today. As much as I want to see Allison and Kyle dead, we need them alive in case the doctors can’t figure out what kind of poison they used on Randolph.

“Enough!” I reach out with my mind to find their leader.

He psychically responds, acknowledging my command. Their attack ceases almost instantly. Hundreds of beady eyes turn toward me in understanding. With a final nip at their prey, they scamper away, disappearing into the vents.

The heavy metal door to the morgue bursts open, revealing a squad of armed officers, their guns drawn and pointed at us. The officer in charge steps forward, his gaze sweeping over the chaotic scene before him.

“Stand down!” he barks, his eyes meeting mine. “We saw everything on the security cameras.”

“Thank God.” I glance at Jessica, who looks shell-shocked, but relieved.

“Arrest them both,” the officer orders, motioning toward Allison and Kyle, who are still reeling from the rat attack.

They don't put up any resistance as the handcuffs click around their wrists and they're led away, leaving us alone with the police.

"Are you okay?" I ask Jessica again, my eyes scanning her body for injuries. She's got some bruises forming on her arms and neck, but nothing seems broken or too severe.

"I think so," she murmurs. "Just a little bruised."

"Let me take a closer look at your neck." I gently take her chin in my hand, examining her throat where Allison had held the scalpel. There's a faint red line, but it doesn't look deep enough to need stitches.

"You saved my life," she whispers, her eyes shining with gratitude.

"I'll always protect you. Always."

As the police finish securing the scene, I wrap my arm around Jessica, pulling her close to me. Our eyes meet, and in that moment, we share a silent understanding that we've survived yet another ordeal.

"I want to see my dad."

"We'll go back to his room as soon as the cops are done with us."

"We're aware of the situation with your father. We got a call from his doctor, which is why we happened to be here when security called in the attack. You two got very lucky. They just installed those cameras a couple of weeks ago."

"Do you need us to make a statement?" Jessica asks.

"Yes, but you don't have to do it right now. We have enough video evidence to lock them up. Come down to the station tomorrow, and we'll finish up our report."

"We will," Jessica says.

"Let's go see your father." I take her hand in mine and lead her out of the morgue.

The sterile smell of the hospital fills my nostrils as we leave the chaos behind and make our way to Randolph's room.

My heart races, but it's not from the fight anymore. It's from the anticipation of what we'll find when we get there. The officer didn't say anything about her father's condition, which has me worried.

When we get to her dad's hospital room, Matrix whistles. "The fuck happened to you guys?"

"Allison and her ... I don't know what that guy was to her," Jessica says.

"Probably her lover. They were too cozy for it to be a simple hitman and employer relationship."

"They were talking about leaving the US after they got my father's money." Jessica shakes her head in disgust.

"That's not going to happen," I say.

"Here comes the doc. He was looking for you earlier," Matrix says.

"I'm Dr. Andrews. I'm taking over for the day crew." His solemn gaze sweeps across our faces. "Are you the daughter?"

"Yes. He's my dad."

"We found traces of a rare poison in your father's system. But the good news is we have an antidote. It should counteract the effects within a few days."

"He'll be okay?" Tears fill her eyes.

"I can't make any promises, but we'll know more once he wakes up. Typically, the drug doesn't have lasting effects, especially since we caught it fairly early."

"Thank God." Relief washes over me. I squeeze Jessica's hand, sharing in her joy.

"She must have waited until they got back from their honeymoon," Jessica says.

"Probably easier than trying to transport drugs internationally," I reply.

"Definitely." She nods.

“I’ll let you know how his tests look tomorrow morning. We’ll run them again around six a.m. He’s in a coma. I don’t expect him to wake up for at least another twenty-four hours. If you can, go home and get some rest.”

“Can you call me with the test results if we’re not here?” Jessica asks.

“Of course. It looks like you’ve had quite the day.” Dr. Andrews turns to me. “Do you need me to look at your face? You have some lacerations along your jaw.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll call my doc and have him check it out.”

“Very well. I’ll be in touch.” Dr. Andrews walks to the nurse’s station, where he stops to converse with the head nurse.

“Would you like to stay here with your father?” It’s clear she’s exhausted, but I don’t want to take her home until she’s ready.

“Just for a few minutes. I want him to know I’m here, even if he can’t really hear me.”

“He’ll know,” a nurse says as she passes us to go into Randolph’s room. “Just hold his hand and he’ll know it’s you.”

“I will.”

As she follows the nurse in, I hang back to talk to Matrix and the prospects. “I’m pretty sure the only people involved were Allison and her accomplice, a guy named Kyle. Neither mentioned anyone else, so Randolph should be safe tonight. However, I don’t want to take any chances.”

“I’ll stay,” one of the prospects says.

“Me, too,” another adds.

“We all will,” Matrix says.

“Thanks, brother.” I slap him on the back before nodding at the others. “I know I can trust you guys to keep an eye on him until we’re back.”

When I walk into the room, Jessica gives her father's hand a soft squeeze. "We'll be back first thing tomorrow, Daddy. Talon's friends are going to stay with you to keep you safe. But Allison's going to jail, and she's never going to be able to hurt you again."

She stands and wraps her arms around my waist. "Let's go back to the clubhouse. I need some time away from all this before I fall apart."

"Of course. Anything you need, babe."

And I mean it. From now on, I'm going to take care of her and her father. The threat may be over, but there's no way I'm going to let her walk out of my life. She means everything to me. I'm going to tell her that I want her by my side forever, but now isn't the right time. So, I'll just have to keep being patient. I've waited my whole life to find a woman like her. I can be patient for a few more days.

Chapter 26: Jessica

Nestled in Talon's strong arms, a sense of calm and safety settles over me. The soft sheets beneath us offer the perfect contrast to his roughness. His body is a living testament to the battles he's fought, both inside and out. Our breathing synchronizes as he holds me closer, and I let out a contented sigh. Skin to skin with nothing between us is exactly where I want to be right now.

"I'm glad Allison and Kyle are finally behind bars. When I was trapped in the morgue with them, I was sure I was about to die. The thought of never seeing you again ..." I snuggle against his side.

"They won't be able to terrorize you from prison. I'll make sure they're thrown in solitary confinement if they ever try anything. We've got people on the inside who can take care of that if it becomes an issue." He brushes his hand across my hip before cupping my ass.

"I couldn't have done it without you," I murmur.

"You're one hell of a fighter, babe. I'm glad I got to see you in action, but I hope you never have to deal with anyone like them for the rest of your life."

"I can't imagine anyone hating me the way Allison did. I'm still shocked by what she did, not just to me, but to Dad, too."

"Women can be just as evil as men. Some people are just born bad." He presses a tender kiss to my forehead, his beard brushing against my skin. "But others are born to stop those kinds of people."

"Like you?"

"Yeah." His smile sends warmth spreading through my body. Although we were exhausted when we got to the clubhouse last night, we still found the energy to make love. I already want him again. The insatiable hunger I have for him is just as strong as the night we met, maybe stronger now that I

know exactly what he can do with his lips and his devilish tongue.

My life has changed so much since meeting Talon and getting entangled with his world. I've grown stronger and braver, all because of him. But now that the danger has passed, what does that mean for our relationship? He kept telling me he only wanted to protect me, but is that all? Are we ... over?

"Maybe I should move back into my house," I suggest hesitantly, gauging his reaction.

His hold on me tightens for a moment before he carefully pulls away, his eyes searching mine. There's a certain stoicism in his gaze, making it difficult to read his emotions. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows and looks away.

"Of course. If that's what you want, Jess, I'll help you move your things."

I bite my lip while my heart sinks. Why didn't he ask me to stay with him? Doesn't he feel the connection between us? I thought it was undeniable, but maybe I'm wrong. However, I can't bear the thought of leaving him and returning to my old life. I need to know what he thinks about our relationship, about us. My heart races as I gather the courage to ask him.

"Talon ... how do you feel about me?" My voice quivers, despite my attempt to keep it steady.

He takes a deep breath before speaking. "Jess, I told you everything about me, so you know I'm just a swamp rat. I don't have anything to offer you that you don't already have. I can't give you a lavish lifestyle or guarantee your safety."

His words pierce my heart like a dagger. The pressure in my chest makes it hard to breathe. I'm losing him, and I don't know how to make it stop.

"My life in the club is dangerous. You deserve to be happy, and I'm not sure I can make that happen without changing who I am," he admits, his gaze finally meeting mine again.

Tears threaten to spill down my cheeks, but I blink them back. He's right. His life is dangerous, but that doesn't change

how I feel about him. It doesn't alter the fact that he's been there for me when I needed him most.

"I understand all of that." I take one of his hands in mine. "But I want you to know I don't care about fancy things or a safe life. What I care about is you."

"Jess—"

"Please, let me finish," I plead, squeezing his hand gently. "You've shown me what it means to be strong, brave, and fiercely loyal. Your life may be dangerous, but it's also filled with love and purpose. And I want to be a part of that."

A tear slips down Talon's cheek. He quickly brushes it away, looking almost embarrassed. But his eyes never leave mine, as if searching for any sign of doubt. I can see the conflict in his eyes. He's struggling between wanting to believe me and fearing I'll change my mind once the club becomes a bigger part of my life.

"You could have any life you want, you know that, right? Any man you want." His jaw clenches.

"Any man? Why would I want anyone else?" A small smile tugs at the corner of my lips.

"You could find someone else, a rich man, someone who could—"

"Stop. Just stop. I've never cared about having a lot of money or living a fancy lifestyle. If I did, would I be working for a non-profit animal shelter making very little money? I made that choice because it's where my heart is, just like your heart is with the club and helping others. Living a meaningful life surrounded by people I love and who love me back is the only thing that matters to me. With you, I feel alive and truly happy. That's more important than any amount of money or material possessions."

He reaches up to gently brush a strand of hair behind my ear. "You're an incredible woman. I just hope I can be enough for you."

"You already are. You're more than enough," I assure him, intertwining my fingers with his. He strokes his thumb

over my knuckles before pressing a kiss to each one.

“I need you, babe,” he whispers, rolling me onto my back.

As I lie back and spread for him, Loki jumps up onto the bed. He nuzzles against Talon, wagging his tail with pure joy. Loki’s tongue hangs out before he uses it to give Talon sloppy doggie kisses.

“Not right now, Loki,” Talon says, wiping his mouth.

“See?” I prop up on my elbows, grinning at Loki’s affectionate display. “Loki loves you, too. We both do. Don’t we, puppy? Yes, we do.” I ruffle Loki’s fur.

Talon’s laughter fills me with hope. He tackles Loki, and they roughhouse on the bed for a minute, nearly knocking me off it. My cheeks hurt from smiling so much. Talon has been through so much in his life. I understand his hesitation. It’s just fear. But we’ll be able to get past it. He just needs time to get used to having someone love him.

“Okay, bud. Time to go out,” Talon says, gently grasping Loki’s collar and leading him out into the hall. Loki drops his head and gives Talon the big, puppy dog eyes look. “I’m not falling for that. I need to talk to your mom, alone. We’ll play with you soon, I promise.”

“Woof!”

“Yes, I love you, too.” Talon grins at Loki.

“Woof!”

After closing the bedroom door, Talon crawls back into bed with me. “He’s going to be a handful.”

“No worse than me,” I tease.

“I love you, Jess. So much.” His voice is thick with emotion. “I didn’t think I’d ever find love, and then you came along. After what happened to me at Blackstone’s, I didn’t think anyone would want me. But you did. I told you most of what happened, but that wasn’t all of it.”

“If you want to tell me more, I’m here to listen. Always.”

“Not right now. I don’t want to ruin today. But soon, I’ll tell you everything. There’s something you have to understand, something I don’t think I’ve been explicit about yet.”

“What?”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Blackstone?”

“Yes.”

“How? Do you have a plan?” My belly clenches with fear. Going up against a man as powerful as Jonathan Blackstone will be one of the most dangerous things Talon has ever done. I don’t like it.

“Not yet. But if we’re going to make it as a couple, you have to know this about me.”

“You still want revenge,” I guess.

“Yes. We all do. I’m not going to let my brothers down just because I’ve got an old lady now.”

“Is that what I am?” I sit up and smile. “Am I yours?”

“You’ve been mine since the day you walked into the bar. I took one look at you, and all I wanted was to hold you and protect you and keep you safe. That’s what I’m going to do. But Blackstone’s a monster who needs to be destroyed. The club won’t stop until we make him pay for everything he did to us.”

“After what you told me about him, I understand why you feel that way. I don’t like it, but I get it. Talon, I’ll support you in this. I just ask for one thing.”

“What?”

“Do everything you can to stay safe. Based on what you told me, Blackstone has the capability to do true evil. He has even more resources now than he did back when he held you and the others captive. I worry about the outcome of what might happen if you go against him.”

“I do, too. But that won’t stop me. That’s what I need you to understand. Nothing will stop me. I have to do this.”

“Then I’ll help you any way I can.”

“That’s why I love you,” he whispers. “Because you get it.”

My heart races as his lips find mine. Our breaths mingle as we share a searing kiss that seems to ignite every inch of my body. Warmth pools between my thighs as he uses his strong arms to pull me even closer. We’re free now. Free to love each other with all the passion we’ve kept restrained.

“I want you so much,” he moans, his voice ragged with desire.

“Then take me. Now. Please,” I whimper.

As our bodies entwine, each touch is more electrifying than the last. We surrender to the magnetic pull drawing us together. His hands roam over my skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake. I cling to him, savoring the feeling of our connection deepening with each passing moment. This is more than just physical; it’s an unspoken promise of devotion and trust. This is what true love feels like—passionate, intense, and all-consuming. In his embrace, I finally understand what it means to be truly alive.

He parts my thighs and slides his throbbing cock deep inside me. I wrap my legs around his back and hook my feet, so they won’t come apart. His soft thrusts fill me with all the love and passion he’s held back until now. Everything about the way he’s making love to me is different than before. He’s not just trying to bring me to new heights of ecstasy, he’s trying to bind my soul to his. And I want him to do it.

Raw desperation courses through my veins. I flip him onto his back and ride him shamelessly. His eyes darken with need as I rock back and forth, loving the way his thick cock strokes my most sensitive flesh.

“Come for me, babe,” he urges.

“Not yet,” I whisper, leaning to capture his lips with mine.

His tongue slides over mine, sparking a new wave of desire from deep within me. I've never wanted anyone like this. I'm surrounded by him and his love for me. It's everything I dreamed about and more. And ... he's all mine!

"Jess, please," he moans.

I surrender to the ache inside and fly over the edge. Hot, wet flashes of ecstasy envelop me, pulling me into a vortex of absolute bliss. Talon follows me in, grabbing my hips and burying himself before releasing all his pent-up passion. His entire body goes rigid as he floods me with his love. I cling to him, reveling in the way he pulses inside me.

When we finally float down from the clouds, the shrill tone of my phone cuts through the hazy joy that surrounds us. Reluctantly, I disentangle myself from Talon, reaching for the device with trembling fingers.

"Hello?" I answer, my breath still coming in heavy pants.

"Jessica, this is Dr. Andrews," says the familiar voice on the other end. "I have some good news for you. Your father is coming out of his coma."

"What?" I gasp, my eyes widening in shock. A whirlwind of emotions threatens to overwhelm me, but I manage to steady my voice. "That's incredible news. I'm on my way to the hospital right now."

"We'll see you soon. Drive safe."

"We will."

"Was that about your dad?" The tenderness in his voice makes my heart ache with love.

"Yes," I reply, tears of joy threatening to spill. "He's finally waking up."

"Let's get cleaned up, and we'll go see him."

Instead of lingering in the shower like we usually do, we're efficiently in and out in record time. As I slip on my clothes, my mind races. The doctor said my father was awake, but he didn't mention anything about my dad's mental capacity.

“What’s wrong?” Talon asks, sensing my distress.

“I just hope he can talk. What if something happened to his brain?”

“Hey,” he says softly while buckling his belt. “No matter what happens, remember you’re not alone anymore. You’ve got me, and the whole club behind you.”

His words anchor me, reminding me that I am no longer the girl who must face her fears alone. I have him now. Forever.

“Ready?” he asks, extending his hand toward me.

“Ready,” I reply, intertwining our fingers.

As we make our way through the clubhouse, we’re greeted by familiar faces and well-wishes from the other club members. Their genuine concern for my father touches me deeply, reinforcing my belief that these men are more than just bikers—they’re a family, bound by loyalty and a shared sense of justice.

“Take care,” Nitro says, patting me on the shoulder. “Give your dad our best.”

“I will,” I promise.

“Call us if you need anything,” Nina calls from the kitchen.

“We will.” Talon gives her a quick hug before leading me into the garage.

With one final wave at the prospects hanging out on the front porch, Talon and I roar away from the clubhouse. Everything about this feels right. I am exactly where I’m meant to be. I’ve got the love and support of a man who would kill for me, and I’m confident he’s meant to be by my side for the rest of our lives.

Chapter 27: Talon

It's been several days since Randolph woke up from his coma. Jessica and I have been at the hospital for hours every day, but today, we're finally going to take him home. As I pull into the hospital parking lot in the car Nina insisted we take, I glance over at Jessica. Her honey-blond hair frames her face as she excitedly chats about finally taking her dad home. Her tan skin glows in the afternoon light, and all I can think about is getting her naked later. No matter how many times I make love to her, it's never enough.

"Ready?" I ask, taking her hand in mine. She nods eagerly, and we head into the hospital for what we hope will be the last time.

As we enter Randolph's room, a cute, older female nurse is helping him change out of his hospital gown into his clothes. The atmosphere is lighter than it has been for days, and it feels like a weight has been lifted off all our shoulders.

"Hey, Randolph," I tease after the nurse leaves. "Did you get that lovely lady's phone number?"

He laughs, a genuine chuckle that fills the room. "No. I think I'll take some time off before I try to date anyone again."

"Well, Dad, you definitely have a fan club here. I'm sure any one of the nurses would be happy to go out with you. But I understand wanting to wait. I did, and look what I got for being patient." She beams up at me.

"Patience is a virtue," I say, grinning.

I can tell Randolph is grateful for the laughter. I'm sure he wants to put the past behind him as much as we do. Besides, he needs to focus on healing. The doctors don't think there will be any lasting damage from the poison, but they warned him to take things easy for a while.

After saying goodbye to all the nurses and doctors, I wheel Randolph down the hall to the elevators. Jessica glances at the women's bathroom where she was abducted and shudders. I give her a reassuring smile. She doesn't have to

worry about anything since the police's interrogation of Allison and Kyle. They both confirmed no one else was involved in the plot to stalk and eventually kill Jessica. Allison sold Kyle out to try to get a reduced sentence, but the DA wasn't having it. They're both going to be behind bars for decades.

As we exit the hospital, I feel a sense of relief. Taking him home is going to bring Jessica one step closer to getting things back to normal. I want that for her, so much. It's such a gorgeous day that if Randolph was feeling better, I'd offer to take him to the park. But he needs to rest. Doctor's orders.

I walk around to open the passenger door for Randolph. He tries to get out of the chair himself but sits back down almost immediately. A look of annoyance crosses his face. I doubt he's used to being this helpless. I can't imagine how hard it must be for him.

"Here, let me give you a hand," I say gently, offering my arm for support. Randolph flashes a grateful smile.

"I guess I'm not as strong as I thought I was," he says, steadying himself as I help him into the car.

"You'll get your strength back," I assure him. "That nerve toxin really messed up your system. Doc says you'll get a little better each day. You'll be good as new soon enough."

Once he's settled and buckled in, Jessica kisses me on the cheek. "I love how sweet you're being to my dad."

"Family takes care of family," I respond, stealing a quick kiss before getting behind the wheel.

The drive to Randolph's house is filled with light conversation and laughter. Jessica keeps teasing him about having to wear a bib to eat. Randolph's being a good sport about it, laughing along with her. I haven't known him for long, but I can see where Jessica gets her sense of humor.

As we pull up to the house, I glance at Randolph. His eyes glisten in the afternoon sunlight. "Everything going to be different now. I'll have to get rid of her stuff."

"I can send some prospects over to help," I offer.

“And we’ll come, too,” Jessica asks.

“Of course.” I nod.

“That would probably be good. I don’t think I could do it alone. I’ve never been so wrong about someone before. How did I miss all the signs?”

“Monsters like Allison are master manipulators,” I say. “Normal, good people fall for their lies. Don’t fault yourself for being trusting. Most people are trustworthy. We only have to watch out for a few evil ones. They’re out there, but it’s rare you’ll encounter them.”

“Unless that’s your job,” Jessica says, giving me a knowing look.

“Right.” I get out to pull open Randolph’s door. “Jess, come help me get him up these steps.”

“Maybe we should have brought the wheelchair with us,” she says.

“If we need one, I can get it sent over today. I just need to call Nina. She can get her hands on stuff like that fast.”

“Who’s Nina?” Randolph asks.

“She’s sort of like a badass older sister, but kind of like a mom, too.” I cock my head to one side. “Right, Jess?”

“Wait until you meet her.” Jessica giggles. “You’re going to either love her or be afraid of her. I’m a little bit of both. Well, not really scared, more like intimidated. She’s the strongest woman I’ve ever met, aside from Mom, of course.”

“I’d like to meet her. She sounds interesting.” Randolph’s eyes sparkle mischievously.

“She’s about your age, too.” Jessica winks at me.

“Now, don’t go playing matchmaker,” he warns.

“I won’t.”

“Keep an eye on her,” he says to me.

“Yes, sir.”

We manage to get him up the steps to the front door without incident. I guide him up the grand staircase toward his bedroom.

“Let’s get you settled in.” I help him sit down on the bed.

“Actually,” his expression turns serious. “I’d like to talk to you privately for a moment, if that’s okay with my daughter.”

Jessica looks worried, but I reassure her with a smile.

“Don’t worry, babe. Your dad and I are just going to have a little chat. I’m sure it’s nothing to be concerned about.” I lie through my teeth because, frankly, I’m terrified. I have no idea what he wants to talk about, but hopefully, he’s not going to demand I leave his daughter alone.

“Why don’t you start making something for dinner?” Randolph tells her.

“Okay,” she agrees hesitantly before heading for the kitchen.

As we sit facing each other, the faint smell of disinfectant from the hospital fills the quiet room. He needs a shower, but the home health nurse won’t be by for a couple of hours. Until then, we can’t do much about the scent that still clings to him.

I wait for Randolph to speak, wondering what could be on his mind. He seems to gather his thoughts before looking me straight in the eye.

“First off, I want to thank you for saving my daughter’s life. And mine. You went above and beyond, putting yourself in danger to save us. Words can’t express how grateful I am.”

The sincerity in his voice touches me deeply. Warmth spreads through my chest. “I appreciate that, but you don’t have to thank me. I’d do anything for Jessica, and now, for you, too.”

“Even so,” he continues, “if there’s ever anything I can do to repay you, just name it.”

I take a deep breath and try to calm my racing heart. This is it. The moment I’ve been waiting for. It’s now or never.

“Actually, there is something. I want to marry your daughter.”

A moment of silence hangs between us as Randolph absorbs my words. Then, he leans forward, studying me with his piercing blue eyes.

“Can you provide for her?” he asks seriously.

“Look, I’m not rich,” I admit, holding his gaze steadily. “But I’ve got the club, and we’ve got a lot of resources. We take care of our own. I want Jessica to be a part of our family. She’s everything to me, and honestly, I can’t imagine my life without her.”

I hold my breath as I wait for his response. If he doesn’t agree to let me marry her, I don’t know what I’ll do. Family means everything to me, and I’d hate to have to defy her father if he won’t give us his blessing. However, it’s a price I’m willing to pay if it comes to that.

“I’m usually pretty good at reading people, but after Allison ...”

“You can trust me. I love her more than anyone in the world. I want to take care of her for the rest of our lives.”

“In that case, yes. I’m glad she found someone who can truly cherish her.” Randolph finally nods his approval.

“You won’t regret this, I swear.” Relief washes over me.

“There’s just one more thing.” His eyes soften, and a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. “If you want to marry my daughter, then I’m going to want to call you my son.”

“That sounds good to me.” I grin like an idiot. I extend my hand to shake his, but he surprises me by pulling me into a hug instead. It’s a warm, fatherly embrace, and it feels right—like we’re family already.

“Hey, uh, Randolph?” I ask hesitantly, pulling back just enough to look him in the eye. “Would it be okay if I called you ‘Dad’?”

The corners of his eyes crinkle as he smiles warmly. “I’d be honored, son.”

The sound of laughter fills the clubhouse as Randolph mingles with the guys. It's hard to believe that just a few days ago, he was lying in a hospital bed. Now, he's surrounded by his new family—the Underground Vengeance MC.

Despite our differences, he's fitting in nicely. Everyone seems to like him, and he hasn't stopped smiling since he walked through our door. It's a relief to see everyone getting along so well.

“Hey, Talon,” Scar calls out. “You're up next for charades. You ready?”

I glance over at Jessica and Nina, who are setting down trays of snacks on the coffee table. Jessica's smile lights up the room, and my heart swells with love for her. There's something I need to do before I join the game, something important.

“Actually, guys, can I have everyone's attention for a moment?” I stand up from the worn leather couch. The chatter dies down as all eyes turn to me.

“Go ahead, brother,” Matrix encourages, giving me a nod.

“Okay. Here we go ...” I take a deep breath and lock my gaze on Jessica. “You all know my story. You know about my past and my parents. For a long time, I never thought I'd ever be more than just a swamp rat—”

“Get out of here. A mouse maybe, but you're not big enough to be a rat,” Nitro teases.

“Asshole,” Scar says, laughing.

“But I am,” I continue, ignoring everyone but Jessica. “I went to hell and back, but I've got a mission now. I'll never stop fighting for people who need the club's protection.”

I pause, remembering the horrors Blackstone put me through. The prospects haven't been let in on that secret, so I keep the details to myself. The guys and Jessica know, and they're the ones who matter.

“Those dark days forged me into a warrior. For a long time, I thought that’s all I was. That it was my destiny. But there’s more to it. Jessica,” I cross the room to take her hand in mine. “You taught me how to truly love again. I thought I’d lost that when I lost my parents. You resurrected that part of me that I thought was dead. It wasn’t.”

“Damn right it wasn’t,” Reaper says in his low, gravelly tone.

A hush falls over the room.

“Earlier this morning, Matrix told me what happened to my parents. They died in a car accident. That’s why they never came back for me. But I’ve got a new family now. All of you.”

“Hell, yeah, brother.” Matrix slaps my back.

“Jessica, I want you to be a part of my family, too. I’m going to protect you and love you forever.” My voice trembles slightly as I reach into my pocket and pull out a small, velvet box. I let go of her hand and get down on one knee. “Babe, I love you. Today. Tomorrow. A hundred years from now. Forever. You’re mine, and I’m yours. Jess, will you marry me?”

Her eyes glisten with tears as she nods. She’s speechless as I slide the glittering diamond ring onto her finger.

“Yes,” she finally whispers, her voice full of emotion. “Yes, Talon, I’ll marry you.”

The room bursts into cheers and applause. Love from our family radiates around us. But before I can get swept up in the celebration, I remember the little surprise I’ve prepared for Jessica—or rather, her puppy, Loki.

“Wait, I have something else for you.” I grin and grab a colorful gift bag from behind the couch, where Nina hid it earlier. I pull out a tiny leather jacket. “Well, it’s not exactly for you. It’s for Loki.”

I present the Underground Vengeance MC leather jacket to Jessica, complete with “Loki” embroidered on the back of it. Hearing his name, Loki jumps out of Daisy’s lap and scampers over. “It’s for you, buddy.”

“It’s adorable,” Jessica says, laughing. “Loki’s officially a member of the club now, too!”

I slip the jacket onto our puppy. He proudly prances around the room while all the members of the club welcome him in as a patched member.

“Don’t think we’ve ever patched in a dog before,” Nina says, grinning while shaking her head.

As we share this lighthearted moment, Matrix’s phone beeps loudly, cutting through the laughter and chatter. He glances at the screen and instantly turns pale, his eyes widening in shock. A sinking feeling develops in my gut as I watch his reaction.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Guys, you won’t believe this,” he mutters, swallowing hard. “Jonathan Blackstone just announced he’s running for president of the United States.”

The room falls silent, a weighty tension settling over all of us. That man has caused so much pain in our lives, and now, he’s attempting to grab even more power? It’s a sickening thought.

“Blackstone can’t become president.” I clench my fists. “We’ve got to stop him.”

Scar’s voice cuts through the tense silence that has enveloped the room. “We’ll deal with Blackstone’s announcement later. Right now, we have something to celebrate.” He raises a glass and signals for everyone else to do the same. “To Talon and Jessica, and to our newest club member, Loki!”

“Here, here!” the others echo, clinking their glasses together.

Immediately, the atmosphere in the room shifts. Music starts playing, people begin laughing and talking again, and the party truly begins. My body relaxes as I wrap an arm around Jessica’s waist, pulling her close.

“Thank you,” she whispers in my ear, the warmth of her breath caressing my neck. “For everything.”

“I can’t wait to get you naked later,” I whisper in her ear before pressing a soft kiss to her temple.

As the party picks up momentum, I watch Nina chatting animatedly with some of the guys. Randolph, who’s sitting nearby, occasionally glances over at her with a hint of admiration in his eyes. He warned us not to play matchmaker, but I don’t think it would hurt anyone if the two of them spent some time together. I bet Scar and I could arrange that.

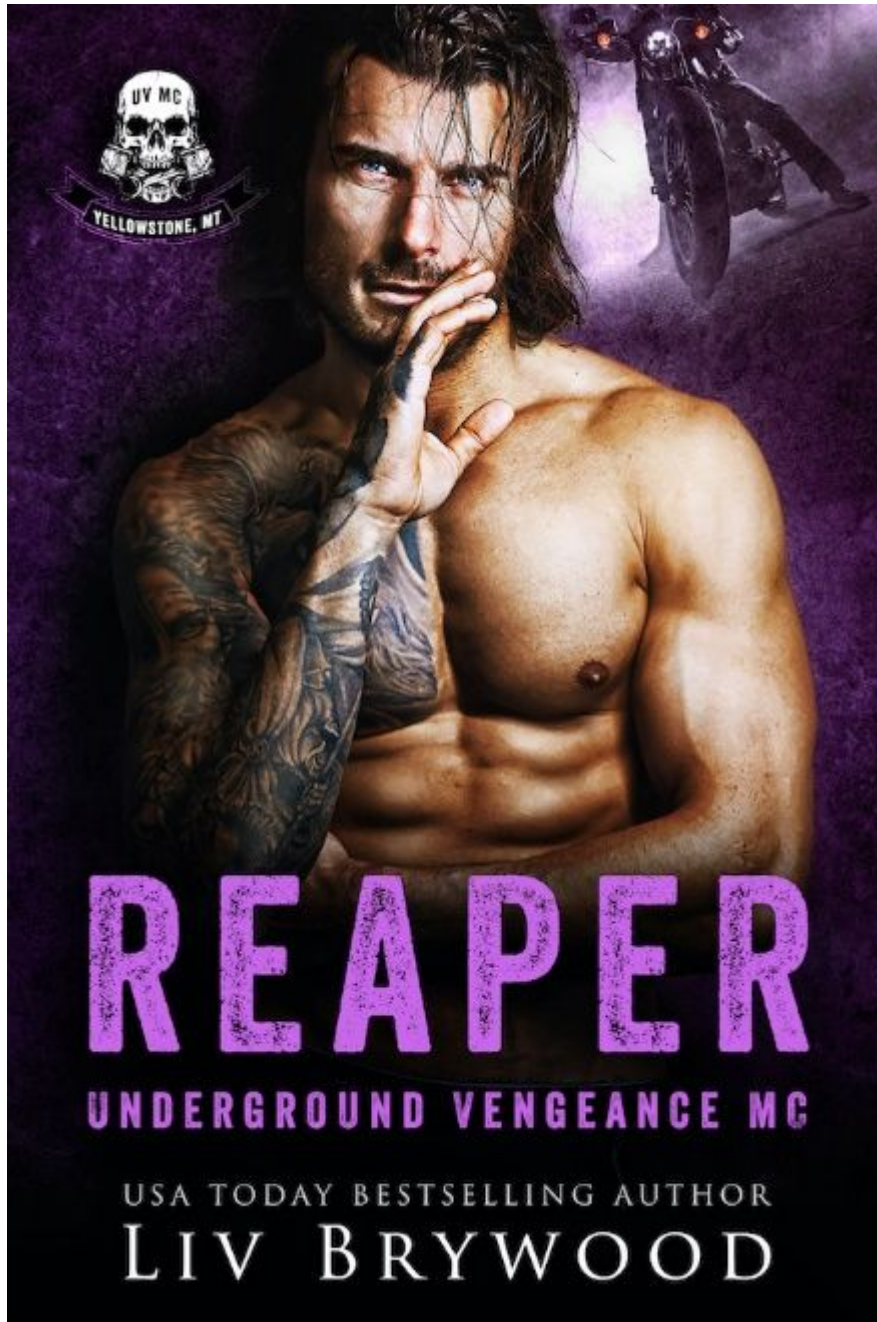
“I love you, babe,” Jessica murmurs, wrapping her arms tightly around me.

“I love you, too.”

As I look around the room one more time, taking in the laughter and camaraderie of those I care about most, I allow myself to truly feel content for the first time in my life. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I’m going to have an amazing life with Jessica by my side, and I can’t wait to marry her. But for now, we celebrate—together, as a family.

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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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