



SLASH'S

Love

AN ARCHANGEL'S WARRIORS MC NOVEL

CIARA ST. JAMES

Slash's Dove

*Hunters Creek Archangel's Warriors MC #
11*

Ciara St James

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Blurb

Slash has no idea that riding to rescue one of his club brother's women will have him risking his life and coming face-to-face with the woman he knows will be his. Only the horror she has lived through for the past year-and-a-half is unimaginable. He knows if he is ever to have a chance with her, he has to let her heal, and trust has to be built. He's willing to give her the time for that to happen.

Only Aria doesn't trust easily. She has demons that are trying to eat her alive in her head, as well as real live ones still at large. How can she move on with her life when she feels she has nothing to live for? Slash and his club are trying desperately to prove she has, but her mind may make that impossible. Her battle not to be lost to her mind forever rages on.

As Slash and Aria battle her many demons, she keeps slipping into darkness. As she teeters on the edge of breaking forever, Slash is fighting to prove he is her sword and shield. That he will always be there along with his club to protect and love her. That he's the man she can build a future and family with. That not all motorcycle clubs are the same.

The fight to locate the ones who hurt her and the one who set it all in motion isn't over in a matter of days. As the months go by, Slash and Aria work to forge a new future, one together. All it takes is him slaying her demons and making sure she knows she will always be Slash's Dove.

Warning

This book is intended for adult readers. It contains foul language and adult situations and contains dark themes such as sexual assault, torture, suicide, and murder that may trigger some readers. Sex scenes are graphic. If these themes aren't what you like to read or you find them upsetting, this book isn't for you. There is no cheating or cliffhangers, and it has a HEA.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who fight every day to overcome their pain and the horrendous things that may have happened to them. There's always hope. Never give up the fight. Your bright spot, or special someone is just waiting to be discovered.

Hunters Creek Members/ Old Ladies

Nicholas Williams (Bull) President w/ Jocelyn
Jenson Davis (Tank) Vice President w/ Brynlee
Wilder Breslin (Payne) Enforcer w/ Jayla
Kellan Knight (Ajax) w/ Jessica
Brooks O'Connor (Player) Secretary w/ TBD
Donovan Wood (Bear) Treasurer/Chaplain w/ Ilara
Luca Moretti (Demon) w/ Zara
Kai Blakely (Slash) w/ Aria
Aaron Fairbanks (Joker) w/ Raina
Ronan Alexander (Rebel) Road Captain w/ Madisen
Bryson Snyder (Ace) w/ Devyn
Slone Taylor (Maverick) w/ Rylan
Damian Cavallo (Outlaw) w/ Tarin
Jake Newman (Iceman) w/ TBD
Tate Da Silva (Renegade) w/ TBD
Alex Lane (Loki) w/ TBD
Bryce Kincaid (Vex) w/ TBD

Reading Order

For Dublin Falls Archangel's Warriors MC (DFAW), Hunters Creek Archangel's Warriors MC (HCAW), Iron Punishers MC (IPMC), Dark Patriots (DP), & Pagan Souls of Cherokee MC (PSCMC):

Terror's Temptress DFAW 1

Savage's Princess DFAW 2

Steel & Hammer's Hellcat DFAW 3

Menace's Siren DFAW 4

Ranger's Enchantress DFAW 5

Ghost's Beauty DFAW 6

Viper's Vixen DFAW 7

Devil Dog's Precious DFAW 8

Blaze's Spitfire DFAW 9

Smoke's Tigress DFAW 10

Hawk's Huntress DFAW 11

Bull's Duchess HCAW 1

Storm's Flame DFAW 12

Rebel's Firecracker HCAW 2

Ajax's Nymph HCAW 3

Razor's Wildcat DFAW 13

Capone's Wild Thing DFAW 14

Falcon's She Devil DFAW 15

Demon's Hellion HCAW 4

Torch's Tornado DFAW 16

Voodoo's Sorceress DFAW 17

Reaper's Banshee IPMC 1

Bear's Beloved HCAW 5
Outlaw's Jewel HVAW 6
Undertaker's Resurrection DP 1
Agony's Medicine Woman PSCMC 1
Ink's Whirlwind IP 2
Payne's Goddess HCAW 7
Maverick's Kitten HCAW 8
Tiger & Thorn's Tempest DFAW 18
Dare's Doll PSC 2
Maniac's Imp IP 3
Tank's Treasure HCAW 9
Blade's Boo DFAW 19
Law's Valkyrie DFAW 20
Gabriel's Retaliation DP 2
Knight's Bright Eyes PSC 3
Joker's Queen HCAW 10
Bandit & Coyote's Passion DFAW 21
Sniper's Dynamo & Gunner's Diamond DFAW 22
Slash's Dove HCAW 11
For Ares Infidels MC:
Sin's Enticement AIMC 1
Executioner's Enthrallment AIMC 2
Pitbull's Enslavement AIMC 3
Omen's Entrapment AIMC 4
Cuffs' Enchainment AIMC 5
Rampage's Enchantment AIMC 6
Wrecker's Ensnarement AIMC 7
Trident's Enjoyment AIMC 8

Fang's Enlightenment AIMC 9

Talon's Enamorment AIMC 10

Ares Infidels in NY AIMC 11

Phantom's Emblazonment AIMC 12

Saint's Enrapturement AIMC 13

Phalanx & Bullet's Entwinement AIMC 14

For O'Sheerans Mafia:

Darragh's Dilemma

Cian's Complication

Aidan's Ardor

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Slash: Prologue

I couldn't believe we were, yet again, out tracking down monsters. I swear, it didn't matter who was brought into the club as an old lady or into the clubs of our Dublin Falls brothers and our friends. There was always someone needing to be put down like rabid animals. If it wasn't us protecting the women and children, we were protecting other innocents.

You'd think after all these years with the Warriors, I'd be used to it or at least numb, but I wasn't. It was probably a good thing I wasn't. If that ever happened, it would be time to walk away because I didn't want to end up being a monster like the ones we hunted. I'd been a member of the club for twelve years. Sometimes, it seemed much longer than that, and other times, it seemed like a year. My six years in the Army as an explosives expert seemed to be a hundred years ago, though. I'd gone in a stupid eighteen-year-old and came out a slightly less stupid twenty-four-year-old. I was at loose ends when I got out, trying to figure out what to do next when I met a few of the Warriors one night.

They'd been out on a run outside of Hunters Creek. They ended up in a bar, having a few drinks and a bite to eat. It should've been a simple thing, but there was another club that thought they would throw a beatdown on Bull and his guys for the hell of it. The Warriors hadn't been as big of a club then as we are now. Seeing it wasn't a fair fight and being bored, I stepped in to help them out. I always fought for the underdog.

After the fight, which we won, we got to talking, and the next thing I knew, I'd been invited to come back to their clubhouse to party and hang out. I thought, why the hell not? I didn't have anywhere I had to be, so I went. A weekend turned into a week, and the next thing I knew, I never left. I found myself prospecting for them within the month.

The camaraderie really drew me to them at first. It reminded me of the good parts of being in the Army. It helped

that several of them had served, including Bull, that chapter's president, their enforcer—Payne, Bear—another of the original founders along with Bull, plus Demon, Maverick, and Rebel. I worked my ass off for a year to earn my road name of Slash and my cut. To this day, I would defend my colors, my brothers, and their families to the death.

It helped that, from time to time, I could still use my explosive skills to blow shit up. I loved it when I got the chance to do that, although it wasn't as often as I wanted. When the urge really came over me, I'd go out to where there was no one around to complain, and I'd practice. Sometimes, some of the guys would go with me to watch. Today was one of those days where we weren't out for a pleasure ride to take in some scenery or were hanging out at the clubhouse relaxing and partying. No, we were going after an enemy who had come out of the past and brought what was looking like a possible war to our doorstep.

I hadn't been in the club fifteen years ago when the Warriors had issues with a club called the Devil's Cannibals. Bear, Bull, and a couple of the others remembered them, and it wasn't with affection. They were the ones we were going after. They'd come after our brother Joker's woman, Raina, and her daughter, Belle.

Joker had been going insane trying to find who took his woman and child and where we could find them. Imagine our shock when Belle was dropped off at the front gate by a man who'd found her and brought her home. It took some work until the blanks were filled in by another man, Diego, who was the one who told us we were dealing with the Cannibals. He was responsible for freeing Belle. He was also one of the Cannibals' prospects who wanted nothing to do with them. He explained why he had been able to help Belle escape but not Raina.

It was his intelligence that led us to what we hoped was the final location where we'd be able to rescue Raina and end them. All of us knew if we didn't bring her home safely, Joker would go insane, and the world had better watch out. Most of the time, he was a guy quick to laugh and joke around, but not

when it came to this. There was nothing remotely funny about what was happening to our club and how it was centered around his woman.

It had taken Joker over ten years to be reunited with the only woman he'd ever felt love for. He'd never pursued it because it would've been wrong at the time. She was underage, pregnant, and married to his cousin. Joker had too much honor to break up a man and his wife. Years ago, shit went down, which resulted in her leaving and his cousin going to prison. Fast forward to now. Raina was back in Hunters Creek, and he went all in to win her this time.

I didn't blame him. If I was in his shoes and I found a woman I was head over heels crazy about, I'd do everything in my goddamn power to make her mine. The only way it wouldn't happen was if she didn't want me back. But if she gave any indication that there was a chance, I'd pull out all the stops to win her heart.

Yeah, most people hearing a biker think like this must mean he was a pussy didn't know real men. We might be rough, swear, fight, ride motorcycles, live by a different code, and sometimes kill people, but many of us wanted to have someone special and, in many cases, a family of our own. Our Dublin Falls chapter, except for a couple of prospects, had all finally settled down over the past nine years. It was mind-blowing and awe-inspiring when you thought about it.

Our chapter now had just over half of the members settled down. We were on our way to becoming Dublin Falls. I was one of the ones who hadn't gotten lucky yet. As I crept closer to forty—I was thirty-seven—I wondered if I would ever have that or if I would be the exception. Wouldn't it blow if everyone in our chapters and our friends' clubs all settled down, and I was left single?

Fuck, that was depressing. *Forget that shit, Kai. Concentrate on getting to Raina,* I lectured myself as we rolled down the highway toward where we prayed she was. It was the Archangel's Warriors to the rescue. Although the whole club offered to come, it wasn't feasible. Four guys had to make a run to a prison to pick up a human package, while

seven others stayed at the compound to protect the women and children. I was one of the lucky ones to get to go with Joker to get Raina. Along for the ride were Bull, Bear, Ajax, Demon, Iceman, Predator, Stalker, and one prospect, Walker.

Coming around a turn on the secondary road we were traveling to get to the supposed clubhouse of the Cannibals, I couldn't believe my eyes. Up ahead, running out of the thick trees alongside the road, was a figure. As we got closer, I was astonished to see it was Raina, and she was now out in the middle of the road, waving us down. *What the hell?*

We all slowed down until we came to a stop. Joker rolled his bike right up to her and jumped off. He didn't waste time shutting it off and had barely put down his kickstand to prevent it from dropping to the ground. He grabbed her and was holding her tight. We stayed back far enough to give them some privacy, although I swore before he turned away from us I saw him crying.

They kissed a bit before Bull interrupted them. The next few minutes were confusing as we were told to hide our bikes in case the others came back. We realized this takedown wasn't going to be possible in one swoop. It seemed that part of the Cannibals had ridden off about an hour ago. She had no idea how many left, where they went, or when they might be back. We could wait and try to take them all out at once when they return, or we could get who we could now and then deal with the rest later. We quickly talked it over and then voted. It passed by one vote to get the ones we could then figure out the others later. We didn't want to risk losing the ones who were so nearby.

We argued about Raina needing to stay behind while we either snuck through the woods or continued by road. We decided the woods were the best way. Raina convinced Joker that somehow it was better to take her at least most of the way with us. She argued it was so she could help us find the place. As we maneuvered toward the unknown, I couldn't help but wonder what this fluttering sense of awareness or whatever it was that was happening in my gut meant. Something was

about to happen. I only prayed we'd all come out of it alive. Whatever it was, it would change lives.

Finally, a house and garage came into view after we broke through the trees. It was really quiet, with only the faintest sounds of voices coming from inside the house. We stopped to decide how to proceed. Bull, as usual, issued the commands. Ajax and I were dispatched to check out the garage to make sure there weren't any Cannibals in there. The others were going to hit the house. We hoped to get at least one prisoner, but if it was between one of us and them, Bull told us to kill them. I was thankful that we were all wearing Kevlar vests. All we needed now was piss-poor shooters on the other team. A vest wouldn't protect our heads. We'd left our tactical helmets at home.

As they busted into the house while we checked the garage, we could hear the yelling and screaming along with shots. Ajax and I hurried to clear our assigned area so we could join them. There was no one there. It was merely where they housed their bikes. Once we verified it was empty, we ran for the house to help the rest of our club. I prayed no one on our side had been hurt or would be.

Aria:

The shouting and the gunfire from upstairs made me cringe. As much as I hoped it was the ones that Raina had spoken of coming to wipe out the Cannibals, I wasn't getting my hopes up. If I'd learned nothing else over the past year-and-a-half, it was that I had no luck. My life was one big ball of misery. The only way I could guarantee that I escaped this hell I was stuck in was to take advantage of the chaos and end this in a way where there was no chance they'd ever be able to bring me back again.

Huddling against the wall, in the same spot I'd been in since I helped Raina to escape, I flicked the flint wheel on the lighter in my hands. I'd stolen it after I'd seen Ox leave it upstairs. He'd been distracted by them dividing up to go after that Parker guy they were supposed to pick up and bring back from the prison. Bastard, Ox, Freak, Freight, Brute, and DoDo, along with the prospects—Camel and Duckie—had gone to do that. The others—Mouse, Punk, Sicko, Jekyll, Lunatic, and Gravel had stayed behind.

There was no way I would take the chance that any of them survived. Hopefully, this way, if there were any of those monsters left alive above, they'd be killed in the fire or from the smoke along with me. Staring at the flame, which I found mesmerizing, I stared at it for a few more seconds before lowering it to the pile of paper I'd found in an old box, and I lit it. It was situated right next to the mattress. It would all go up fast.

I was right. It did go up fast. As the smoke began to fill the room, I heard the muffled sounds of voices above. They sounded less frantic. There were no more gunshots. So far, no one had ventured down here. Did it mean the voices belonged to Cannibals or the other guys? Not that it would make a difference. Despite what Raina had said, I wouldn't put my life in the hands of another MC. They'd just turn out to be a bunch of murdering, abusive rapists like the Cannibals. I was supposed to be protected. See where that lie got me?

As the smoke worsened and the flames grew, I couldn't help myself. I had to let out my fury and my fear. I opened my mouth and let out scream after scream in between the hacking coughs. It felt almost cathartic to let it out. My rage and despair over how my life had ended up poured out of me. As my screams faded, I swore I heard shouts from outside the cellar doors across from me. The doors were chained shut from the inside. I couldn't catch my breath. My lungs hurt as I dragged another breath in. Hopefully, it wouldn't be long now and I'd be dead and free.

Suddenly, I heard the thunder of what sounded like boots. It was coming from the direction of the stairs, which led from the basement to the first floor. I curled up in a tighter ball. It was so hazy in here already I could barely see the steps. A deep man's voice, one I didn't recognize, yelled. "Where are you? Call out so I can find you."

I kept quiet. I wasn't about to give away my position. *Please, give up, leave, and let me go*, I prayed. I was so tired. All I wanted to do was to rest. No more fear, pain, despair, or any of those other horrible emotions. It would be heaven. My eyes were getting harder to keep open. My chest burned. I coughed again. Then I let out an involuntary scream as the sound of several bullets being fired, one right after the other, rang out. Those came from the outer cellar doors. *What were they doing?*

Darkness descended, and my eyelids slid shut. I was suffocating. I tried not to fight it. Right before everything went black, I heard the man in the basement with me swear and speak again. "Goddamn it, I'm not going to let you die." As those words sank in, something grabbed my arm hard. I tried to shout for him to leave, but it was too late. It all went black and quiet.

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The first thing I remembered was coughing like I was trying to bring up a lung. That was jumbled with the sensations of fresh, clean air flowing around me and my body floating through the air. Tight bands were around me. Those sensations were followed by the murmur of men's voices, then

a woman's, followed by more floating sensations and voices. I was having a hard time making the words out. I couldn't open my eyes. Was this what death felt like? Weird.

Another weird part of being dead was I kept coughing. My chest hurt like someone had torched it. I was shaken and jiggled along, but it was too much effort to open my eyes. I didn't need to look to know where I was. If I'd gone to heaven, I wouldn't be hurting at all. This could only mean one thing. I was in hell, and if I looked, I'd see the demons whom those voices belonged, and my next round of torture would begin.

I had no idea how long it lasted before I screwed up my courage. I eased my eyes open and realized I was lying in the back of a van. There was a man driving, and Raina was in the front seat. Abruptly, the van stopped, and the man driving opened his door. At about the same time, the door next to Raina was opened, and she was helped out by a big man. The other doors swung open in the back, and I was the center of attention for numerous pairs of eyes. I looked around, trying to see if there was a way to escape. I was beginning to comprehend that I wasn't dead after all. A sea of faces attached to big men with tattoos and cuts stared back at me.

Oh my God, I'd escaped one MC to fall into the hands of another. I wanted to scream. I jumped when an older man with silvering hair spoke loudly to the chattering masses. There were women there too, in particular, one who was trying to examine several people. The older man said my name, then Raina's, along with three men and another woman's names. He was talking about the one woman checking me out as well as the other four. He said more, but I tuned it out. The thought of someone touching me in any way filled me with terror and revulsion. I let out a squeak of fear when a tall man scooped me up in his arms and carried me out of the van and then into a large building. He swiftly took me through what looked like an open room with a bar in it, then down a hallway to a room.

Inside, it looked sort of like a medical examination room you'd find in a clinic. He carefully laid me down on a table. "Aria, my name is Slash. This is Zara. She's a doctor.

She's going to check us out to make sure we don't need to go to the hospital. Just try to relax. You're safe."

His voice was deep and familiar. It took my jumbled mind a few moments to recognize where I'd heard it before. He was the one who came into the basement and prevented me from dying. I wanted to yell at him, but I didn't. I was at their mercy, and no matter what he said, I knew I wasn't safe.

It wasn't long before Zara examined me. She tried to ask me several questions, but I wouldn't answer her. In the end, she used her stethoscope and other equipment to listen to my lungs and heart. She even had one of those oxygen things they put on your finger. She told those in the room she didn't believe I needed to go to the hospital. Yeah, like I'd go even if she did think I needed it.

The man called Slash kept staring at me. I thought I saw concern on his face, but that didn't make sense. Why would he be concerned about me? Unless he was worried I'd keel over and they wouldn't be able to use me. I had no clue what they were going to do with me. Would they sell me back to the Cannibals or to a brothel or maybe to a human trafficker? Or would I be kept here as a sex or a sex slash domestic slave? Images flashed through my mind as I thought about the possibilities. Panic rose.

Before I could scream and try to make a run for it, he was reassured by Raina, who was smiling at me, that I'd be comfortable while he and the other men went to take care of a visitor. I shivered. By the looks on their faces, their "visitor" wasn't going to enjoy the conversation at all. Was I next to be treated to one of their conversations? Right after that, they all left. I sat there, trying to fade away.

"Aria, I know this must be scary to you, but please, you have to believe me. You have nothing to worry about. You're safe here. No one will hurt you. Joker and the others had to take care of something, but they'll be back soon. Can we get you something to drink or eat? Or how about a shower? You're covered in soot and smell like smoke. Why don't we do that? I'll help you if you want," Raina offered.

She was so nice, and there was something about her that put me at ease when I knew I shouldn't be. After several minutes of silence, I answered her. "I'd like that. If I could have some water to drink and a shower, it would be wonderful."

She smiled, and in a matter of a few minutes, I had a set of clean clothes and was shown into a bathroom. It was off of a bedroom she led me to. I knew what this room was. It was a crash room where the bikers would sleep or take women to fuck them. I shivered. I almost refused to go inside, but the lure of a shower was too much.

While I showered, Raina stood outside the door in case I needed her. I was shaky but determined to do it on my own. I needed to get my energy back fast. Maybe the hot water, which felt heavenly, would wash the cobwebs in my head away so I could think and plan. I had to figure out how to get out of here.

When I was done and dressed, she led me out into the common room. I had to admit, theirs was way cleaner and nicer than the Cannibals' clubhouse ever was. That place had been a pigsty. I sat down at one of the tables to sip the water I was given. As I sat there, conversations buzzed around me. I wasn't really paying any attention to them until I saw a man who I recognized. He was a prospect for the Cannibals. I stiffened. What was he doing here?

My fear must've shown on my face because Raina was quick to say, "Aria, don't be afraid. Diego helped my daughter get away from Bastard and the other Cannibals. He came to get the Warriors so they could rescue me. He didn't know you helped me get away. He's not with them anymore."

I didn't quite know what to believe, so all I did was nod and stay quiet. It wasn't until they began to talk about the "visitor" the men were talking to and I heard them say the name Parker did I begin to pay attention. Hearing them talk, I became agitated. I had to ask, "Did this Parker just get out of prison?"

“Yes, in fact, he just got out today. Some of the men went to get him. Why?” Raina asked.

“I don’t know what they want from him, but they can’t trust him. He’s got a deal with the Cannibals. They went to get him today, too. They’re going to help him get revenge.”

“Revenge? What kind of revenge? How do you know that?” a man I didn’t know asked harshly.

“I overheard them talking about it. Raina, he has to be the one who put them up to kidnapping you and your daughter. You have to tell Joker not to trust him!” I said urgently.

It took me a couple of times to get her to believe there was a connection. Once I did, she replied with, “Okay, let me call Joker. We’ll get them back here. I want you to tell them what you know. This doesn’t make sense. Hang on.”

As she took out her phone and called, I sat there rocking myself. The nightmare was getting worse. What had I gotten myself into? I should’ve kept quiet and stayed unnoticed. It was less than ten minutes before the front door opened, and a big crowd of men strolled back in. I tried not to shrink away from them, but it was impossible. I had been standing when they came in. I backed up. Raina caught my arm.

“Not one of them will hurt you, Aria. Just tell them what you know. Anything is helpful. All they want to do is help. They’ll help you.”

“Why would they do that? They don’t know me. What will they want in exchange for help? I fell for that once, and I’m not going to do it again. I’ll tell them what I know. Then I’m out of here.”

“They won’t ask for anything in exchange. What do you mean, you fell for it once? Where will you go? Do you have any family you can go to who will help you? Keep you safe?”

I couldn’t hold back a snort. She was really naïve, wasn’t she? I’d been like her once. “Family is what got me into this hell. I don’t know where I’ll go, but as long as it’s far

away from the Cannibals, I'll be fine. Hopefully, I can disappear, and none of them will ever find me. If they do, I'm dead. Maybe it would've been better to leave me in that house and let the fire have me."

I jumped and cowered back toward the wall when Slash snapped out angrily with a fierce scowl on his face, "Like hell, it would be! What kind of talk is that? I don't want to hear you say that again."

"Slash, you're scaring her," Raina warned him as I shifted further away from him.

He visibly tried to make himself appear calm and in control. "Darlin', I didn't mean to scare you. I'm sorry. Please don't look at me like that. I just hate the idea you think it's better to be dead. Why don't you sit down and tell us your story? Joker said you have something to tell us about Parker and the Cannibals."

"I'll tell you my story. Once I'm done, I want to leave here. Can I do that?"

The older man from before spoke to me. Honestly, I was so terrified and was so desperate to get out of there and find a place to hide from the Cannibals. It was hard to follow along with what he said. After that, questions were fired at me left and right. I answered them the best I could.

I verified that I hadn't been with the Cannibals because I wanted to be. From there, I told them what I'd overheard about them and Parker. How the club was going to work with him when he got out on parole to get revenge on another MC that did him wrong. I had to explain why they went from not bothering Raina and her daughter to kidnapping them.

"Bastard, the Cannibals' president, had information from inside that Parker might not be trustworthy. In order to make sure he didn't welch on the agreement, they wanted insurance, so they decided to take her early. None of them said anything about taking the little girl, so I think that was just bad luck."

This led to them asking where the inside information came from. I didn't want to talk about it, but I knew they wouldn't be satisfied until I told them. I clenched my fists as I told them Josiah's name. I explained he was Parker's cellmate and was a Cannibal. The mention of Josiah's name made Bull and several others swear and give each other disbelieving looks.

When they were asked who Josiah was by those who didn't know him, I was surprised to find out he'd been a prospect with the Warriors. A guy named Bear said, "Josiah was a goddamn prospect with us about fifteen or so years ago. He was worse than Parker, and we soon kicked his ass out of the club. The last I heard, he had left town, and no one knew where he went or what happened to him. Good riddance."

"I-I don't know how long he's been with them. I got the impression it's been a long time. He's been in prison thirteen years. He was found guilty of second-degree murder while distributing cocaine. He killed one of the dealers, and it happened to be that the police were doing a sting operation on the dealer at the time. He got twenty years for it." I thought things were going pretty well. I was beginning to relax a bit.

"How do you know all this, Aria? About Josiah and the rest? Raina said you claimed not to be an old lady or bunny. Why the hell would they talk freely around you? Why did you help her escape?" Joker asked. He sounded suspicious. The others were giving me dubious looks like they didn't know if they should trust me or not. I began to feel sick as the tension grew.

"I'm not an old lady or a bunny. I'd never go near them if I had a choice. I helped her because no one deserved to be held at their mercy. I knew whatever they had planned would be awful. When she told me she had a daughter, I knew I had to help her, even if it did sign my death warrant. They talked freely because they didn't see me as a threat. I wasn't gonna tell anyone."

"Why didn't they worry you'd take off and tell someone? Maybe go to the police?" Slash asked me abruptly. I

didn't know how to explain it without telling them things I didn't want to share.

Suddenly, a guy they called Payne slammed his fist on the table and said, "Answer us, damn it." His voice wasn't that loud, but it went through me like a knife. I flashed back to Ox doing that to me right before he'd hurt me.

I was out of my chair, running for the door. I was caught before I made it. I fought like hell. As I kicked and clawed, I realized it was Slash who'd caught me. He easily carried me back to my chair and sat me down in it. When I tried to get up, he held me down by my shoulders. "Calm the hell down. Just answer the questions," he murmured softly.

I wasn't fooled anymore. They weren't nice, and they weren't my friends or my saviors. Something snapped inside of me. I was tired of being scared. Let them kill me. "Fuck you. Do you think you can hurt me more or do anything to me that they haven't done already? Do your worst? I knew you were just like them. All clubs are murdering, raping, lying goddamn animals. You need to get your daughter and run," I hissed in warning to Raina.

Bull tried to tell me they weren't like the Cannibals, and he was sorry Payne scared me. That he was only trying to protect the club since he was their enforcer. I knew what an enforcer did. Ox was one. Then he asked a ridiculous question. "Were you there because they took you as insurance against someone else? How long have you been with them?"

"I was taken for my supposed protection. What a crock of shit. I've been anything but protected, so excuse me if I don't believe in MC protection. It's an excuse for you to hold someone against their will while you do whatever the hell you want to a person, to make someone's life not worth living."

"Did they make your life not worth living? Did they rape you?" Slash asked me.

I glared at him as I replied, "What they did is none of your business!"

Slash went to say something else, but Joker beat him to it. “Do you know where the others went today? The ones who left before you helped Raina escape. Thank you, by the way.”

I just wanted this farce to be over. I answered him. I warned them they should’ve waited until all the Cannibals were back before they hit their clubhouse. This led to questions about whether they had another clubhouse, how long they’d been in Soddy Daisy, and how long I’d been with them. Then they wanted to know who asked them to protect me, where that person was, and if they could get a hold of them.

I barked out an ugly laugh. “You think giving me to the person who asked for their help is helping me? God, that’s rich. The person who asked them to protect me is the same one who told them to keep me at their clubhouse, no matter what they had to do. That as long as I kept breathing, that’s all he cared about. You can’t give me to him because he’s still serving twenty years in prison.”

That stunned them. They couldn’t seem to believe Josiah was behind it. I took perverse satisfaction in telling them how the Cannibals came in the middle of the night and kidnapped me. The Warriors couldn’t figure out why. When he went to prison, I’d have only been ten. He wasn’t old enough to be my dad, they told me. That’s when I had to admit one of the most humiliating things. That my own flesh and blood had done this to me.

Who wanted it known that Josiah was my long-lost half-brother? When our convict father was dying, he confessed about me and asked Josiah to swear he’d look out for me. My dear fucked-up brother’s solution was to get his club to kidnap me and hold me prisoner until he got out of prison. Just thinking about it made me want to puke.

“You’re his damn sister, and he let them do whatever they wanted to you?” Slash practically yelled as he bounded to his feet.

“You think I’m weak, don’t you? That I should’ve fought and found a way to escape like Raina did. Well, I tried. Each time I did, they caught me, brought me back, and I was

punished. The last time, they decided to slow me down, so I couldn't run, or at least not as fast," I snarled back.

How dare they judge me? I heard Raina mention my leg in a whisper. Fuck it. I pulled up my left pant leg and let them get a good look at my fucked-up leg. There were sounds of outrage from them.

"What the hell did they do?" Slash asked.

"When I ran, they caught me and brought me back. Ox, as the enforcer, decided he had a good way to reinforce the idea of me not running while inflicting pain. He had the prospects tie me down on the ground using stakes, and then he ran over my leg a couple of times with his bike. I don't really know how many times since I ended up passing out from the excruciating pain. When I woke up, my leg was crushed. They sure didn't take me to have it fixed, so it healed like this. He got his wish. The pain and the inability to run kept me from trying again. After I helped Raina escape, I knew what my fate was, but I decided I'd steal their pleasure in killing me."

"You're the one who started the fire in the basement. You did it so you'd die," Bull said softly. His look of compassion made me want to cry.

"I did. When I heard the fight upstairs, I hoped that someone was finally taking them out, but I couldn't be sure. It was my dream that whoever wasn't shot and killed would somehow burn up with me. Now, you've put me in the spot of not knowing where to go to find safety. As long as any of them or Josiah are alive, I'll never be safe. I don't want to live like that. You should've left me to die."

Slash yelled, "Fuck," as he kicked over a chair. I watched him charge out the door, slamming it shut behind him.

"Sweetheart, you don't know how much we wish we had known about you and could've saved you sooner. However, I swear to God that you won't be left to them. You will be protected. I hate to leave you like this, but I need to talk to my men and Parker. I want you to stay with Raina. If

you need anything, let her or Walker and Gavin, our prospects, know. They'll be here for your protection," Bull told me.

"You mean my jailers."

"I hope you won't think like that, but they won't let you leave. It won't be safe until we deal with the rest of the Cannibals and your brother. While we're gone, write down the names of the men who got away and everything you know about them. We'll need it to find them since they have no clubhouse to go back to. We'll be back as soon as we can," he added.

I sat there numbly, watching them talk for a couple more minutes, and then they left me with Raina and the others. I closed my eyes. Maybe I could will myself to die, but I knew it wouldn't work. I'd tried it a million times already, and it never happened.

Slash: Chapter 1

It was almost impossible to leave her at the clubhouse and go question Parker. The things she said were terrible enough, but I could guess what she hadn't told us. Those bastards not only held her against her will, beat her, and crippled her, but they raped her. I knew. My brothers and the old ladies knew it, too. God, no wonder she had been terrified to try to run again, yet she'd gotten enough strength to help a stranger.

I knew I was reacting to what she'd gone through for the last year and a half. And it wasn't just the horror of it either. Hell, we knew a lot of women who'd gone through similar things, unfortunately. The world was an evil place at times, which was why we worked so hard to keep it away from our club, our families, and our town. If everyone gave up, the world would be consumed by it.

The bigger thing I realized I was reacting to was the physical response I was having to her. It started as soon as I lifted her in my arms in that smoke-filled basement. It was like a jolt of awareness sizzled through my body. As I carried her out, helped along by Joker yanking my ass out the cellar door, the jolt stayed with me. When we were free of the smoke, and I laid her on the ground and looked at her for the first time, that awareness grew. Don't ask me how I knew it, but as I stood there and Joker breathed for her, I knew she was going to be special to me. She was the woman I could make a life with and spend the rest of my days with.

Sounded crazy I knew, but it didn't change the fact that was how I felt. After all these years of seeing so many of my brothers and friends find the woman who was meant to be their one and only, I knew the signs. All of them had tried to explain it to us single guys, but we couldn't understand it. Not really. We only understood when our time came, and we were hit with that same jolt of what felt like a bolt of lightning. Whatever it was, it had struck me.

Some might argue I was reacting to her physical appearance. And yes, it was part of it, but not the first impact nor the biggest one. Even covered in soot and dressed in ragged clothes, I knew she was beautiful. Everything about her appealed to me. She was of average height. I estimated after I saw her standing for the first time that she was about five foot five, maybe six at the most. She had long blond hair. The kind of blond that looked almost white with subtle streaks of gold in it. It made me think it was the color of an angel's hair. Not that I'd ever seen an angel, but it was what my mental image said one looked like.

Even in her ratty shorts and tank top, it was more than obvious she had a killer body. She had curves in all the right places. Some men wanted women who were rail thin. Others preferred them with extra padding everywhere. None of them were wrong. There was beauty in every size of woman, in my opinion. I'd been with plenty of all sizes, but as I looked at her, I realized my preference was her. A woman with hips, toned thighs, a lush ass, and breasts that snagged your attention, and you could rest your head on for hours. Her legs looked so long in those shorts that I wanted to kiss my way up her whole damn body, which would've gotten me punched by her and knocked on my ass by my brothers.

At that moment, and in these circumstances, it wasn't the place to show her I was attracted to her. She had just escaped hell. She was traumatized, and after what happened to her, there was no doubt in my mind she would want nothing to do with a man. It would be my job to prove to her not all men were monsters and that *I* could be gentle, loving, and be her protector. I would stand between her and anything or anyone who wanted to harm her.

Watching her gorgeous greenish-gray eyes full of fear almost gutted me on the spot when she finally opened her eyes. Those eyes could haunt a man. They were the most unusual color I'd ever seen. Those, combined with the rest of her, made a huge impact. Add to it what she ended up revealing about what happened to her. It had driven the final spike home in my heart. She would end up happy and loved even if it was the last thing I did on this earth. The first step to

fulfilling this promise—that she didn't even know I'd made yet—was to question the piece of shit in front of us.

I glared at Parker. We were leaving it up to Joker to question him. He earned the right not only as a club brother but since this was a direct attack against his woman and daughter. Plus, this was his prior sponsored prospect and cousin. I was enjoying the fact that Payne had just sliced a chunk out of Parker's arm for lying to Joker about not promising Josiah and the Cannibals something in exchange for their help in taking us out and kidnapping Belle and Raina when the time came to do it.

I might not know this Josiah like a few of the others did, but there was no doubt the Cannibals wouldn't be the kind to do something without a reward of some kind. Revenge wasn't enough to motivate them. Parker yelled out in pain as he answered, "Stop! Stop, I'll tell you. I made him think that I had money hidden from the heists I did before going to prison. I promised him half of it."

Bear was the one to say something first. "You lied to him. There's no money. What were you going to do when he asked for his share?"

I wanted to know the answer to that. We all did. We waited for him to tell us, not making a sound. From a prior conversation, we knew that Parker's stealing hadn't left him with a huge money stash or anything much, even if his parents had lied to Raina's parents, saying there was.

"I was gonna figure that out later. If nothing else, my parents would get me the money. I just needed the Cannibals' help, and he wouldn't do it for nothing. He would've gone after you, but not her."

Hearing that made me roll my eyes. What an idiot. They would've killed him for that. He honestly hadn't gotten wiser in prison. That was for damn sure. I'd been a new member when he tried to prospect with us, and he had never impressed me. Some things never changed, I guess.

"What was your plan for Raina and Belle? To kill them?" Joker snarled.

“No, not kill them. I was going to send them somewhere else. Where they had no family or friends,” he babbled. It was impossible to think he honestly believed what was coming out of his mouth.

“You mean you were going to sell them. Isn’t that what you mean?” Payne hissed.

Anger rose higher inside me. The guilt was written all over his face as he shook his head no, denying it. We all knew he was lying. I think he was trying to deny it to himself as much as he was to us. There was a lot of shit in the world, which pissed us off. However, anything to do with harming women and kids was at the top of the list. Human trafficking and forced prostitution were hot buttons for us.

Joker let out a roar that made us jerk. It was satisfying to watch him wrap his big hands around Parker’s throat and squeeze. Watching Parker turn red, then purple, as he gagged and tried to force air into his lungs filled me with happiness. Yeah, I might be a sick bastard in my own ways, but not like him and the Cannibals and their ilk. Those people deserved to be exterminated.

I hated to see Player, Bear, and Payne drag him off Parker before he finished the job, but I knew why they did. Joker stood there with hatred in his eyes as he stared at Parker and panted. Somehow he growled out, “Finish it. Tell us the rest before I kill you.”

“That’s it. I didn’t have plans after that. I thought with you guys gone, the Cannibals would let me join them. I have no idea what they had planned other than to destroy the club for kicking Josiah out,” Parker said hoarsely.

Without a conscious thought, I spoke. The need to know overrode my control to leave this all up to Joker. “What about his sister, Aria? What were his plans for her? He had his club hold her hostage. Why?” I snarled. I tensed in anticipation of what his answer would be.

“He didn’t say. All he kept on about was she would pay off big when he got out. Something about his dad. He told them to keep her there no matter what.”

“And beating, raping, and crippling her was fine by him,” I snarled. I ached to wrap my hands around his fucking throat, but it was nothing compared to what I wanted to do to the Cannibals and Josiah for what they did to her. It was hard to tell myself I’d get the chance and to save my hatred for them, for Josiah. I made a silent vow in that instant that he would die by my hand.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there for his conversations with them when they came. He never told me that part. When I asked, he said it wasn’t my concern.”

“Do you know where they went when they left Tennessee years ago? When did they come back here?” Bull asked.

“It was somewhere in Kansas... around Topeka, I think. They moved back a couple of years ago.”

After that, I tuned him out as they asked him a few more questions because he didn’t give us any new information. Just to make sure he wasn’t holding back, Payne got to have a little bit of fun. That put a smile of satisfaction on his face. I loved Payne as a brother, but I would never want to be on the receiving end of his hate or sense of duty as our enforcer. He more than earned his road name. Pain brought that man joy. Sometimes, I had to wonder how his sweet woman Jayla could handle him, but she did. They loved each other and their son Storm to death. That and his love of his club and friends was what kept Payne from being a total sadistic monster.

Catching Joker’s signal, I came to attention. It was time to end this shit and move on. Parker was now a waste of time. We had real work to do. I think we all wondered how Joker would choose to end his life. When he wrapped his hands back around his throat, I nodded. It seemed appropriate. He never blinked as he stared his cousin in the eyes and watched him turn colors, watched the blood vessels in his face and eyes burst as he fought to breathe. Suddenly, Parker gasped, then there was nothing. He was gone. Joker let go and stepped away from him.

We got the crematory oven hot. Throwing the body in there, we let him burn while Joker and Payne washed up. Who knew all those years ago, when Bull bought this property, that we'd have a use for this? On second thought, I knew Bull probably chose this place for this very reason. Once the body was reduced to ashes, those would be taken and scattered to kingdom come. No one would ever find Parker. As far as the rest of the world would know, he'd become a fugitive and was probably living in Mexico or somewhere like that.

As we rode back to the clubhouse, I started to go over in my mind the steps we'd have to take in order to find the rest of the Cannibals and eliminate them. On top of this, we'd have to find a way to get to Josiah. With him in prison, it would make it hard to kill him, but not because we didn't have connections. We did. We could order a hit on him, but that wasn't what I wanted. It had to be me, and he had to suffer before he died. This was going to be the hard part. Add to all that the hardest part of all, which was finding a way to keep Aria here while we kept her safe and to win her heart so she wouldn't walk away when it was over. Whatever it took, I was doing it. The Warriors and our friends would soon know Slash had found his woman. Slash's woman... I loved the sound of that.

Aria:

Seven days, and I still couldn't relax or trust anyone. It wasn't because they weren't trying to build trust with me. They were. Everyone had been super nice and constantly checked to see if I needed or wanted anything. I'd met all the old ladies and some of their kids. I didn't know how they could be so happy. Surely, they didn't think being used by their men was a good life. So far, I hadn't seen the men abuse, share or pimp them out, but it was only a matter of time.

They had given me my own space, which had surprised me. At first, I was offered a room at the president, Bull's, house as well as at Joker and Raina's house. Both were beautiful but I couldn't accept them. Thankfully, there was another option other than to stay in one of the crash rooms at the clubhouse, which I would've slept outside first before I did that. No way was I going to make it easy for these men to use me.

Instead, they put me up in one of the townhomes they had for guests. Those were wonderful, too. Looking around this place the last couple of days showed me their club made a lot of money, which scared me even more. That meant they were into something that paid a lot, and the things that came to mind were drugs, guns, and people. The last one was the one that terrified me and was the reason why I was going to make a run for it. Tonight was the night. All I had to do was get out of the gate after the prospect went inside for the night, and I would be free. I had no idea where to go or how I was getting there, but it didn't matter.

I'd sleep outside, work for cash, whatever it took to get far away, so hopefully, the Cannibals and the Warriors couldn't find me. I had to find somewhere that didn't have an MC nearby. As distasteful as it was, I'd even sell my body to get where I needed to go. What difference would it make if I did? At least this time, it would be my choice and be a benefit to me. Besides, I was trash and dirty anyway. Nothing would ever wash that away. They used me and made me into a

whore. I might as well accept it and use it if I had to. I'd puke afterward, but it was the only choice I might have.

I knew I couldn't go back home. It would be the first place they'd looked for me. I knew my apartment and all my belongings were long gone. My landlord probably sold them or threw them away when I up and disappeared without a word. My old boss wouldn't give me a chance again. I mean, what did I expect? That people would believe I'd been taken by bikers and held for the past year-and-a-half as their slave? It sounded like fiction or delusions. Besides, it wasn't like I had family or close friends there.

The only reason I was there was because it was the place I ended up last before my mom died. That was three years ago. When she passed, I was in school and working. I had decided it was as good as anywhere to live, so I stayed. Sometimes, I wondered if I'd moved after she died, then my sperm contributor wouldn't have known where I was, and that would've saved me from the Cannibals. Thinking like that was a sure way to drive yourself crazy, so I tried not to play the what-if game.

Checking the clock, I saw it was almost midnight. It was almost time. I'd timed the comings and goings of their prospects since I got here. I would sneak out when it was dark and watch the gate. Every single night, they would come inside at midnight, and the gate would be unguarded until the next morning. If I left right after they did, it would give me hours to get away. I planned to get to someplace I could flag down a car and get a ride before they discovered I was gone.

I wasn't stupid. I knew it could be dangerous, which was why I'd found myself a weapon. I wished it was a gun, but there weren't any of those lying around. The best I could do was swipe a knife from the kitchen. I'd smuggled it to my bedroom on day two. For some reason, they were lax and didn't keep me under guard at all times. They allowed me to have knives.

The only other things I planned to take were a few outfits that I could stuff into a bag I'd been given with clothes in it. The ladies had gone together and collected a variety of

clothes they had that would fit me. I was appreciative of them doing it, and I thanked them. I hated to repay them by leaving most of them behind and running, but I had to protect myself. I couldn't stay here waiting for the men to show their true colors and be raped and used.

I'd tried numerous times to escape the Cannibals, and they always found me. I thought I knew better ways this time. Fear and pain held me back after the incident with my leg, but I wasn't about to let that keep me here. They'd learned early not to leave anything around I could use as a weapon against them. No knives or items to use as a club. Honestly, until the end, when I decided to die in the fire, I'd never gotten to the point of killing myself. That had been desperation. I wasn't feeling it right now. Maybe I would again, who knew, but for now, I was out to save myself.

I doubted I'd ever truly be happy, but I would be free. I sure wouldn't have a husband and kids like I'd always imagined one day having. For one, I wouldn't be able to let a man touch me sexually. Even if not all men were animals, I didn't think I could do it. Secondly, I didn't want to lie about my past to a man I wanted enough to marry. He'd have to be told what happened to me. Once that happened, I'd lose him. No man wanted a woman who'd been used by multiple men over and over. I would be a whore in his mind, even though it wasn't my fault. Just like the Warriors asking me why I didn't tell anyone about the Cannibals, a man would want to know why I didn't fight them harder.

Thinking about having a man brought Slash to mind. I didn't want to think about him because he confused and scared me. He made me feel things I didn't want to feel. How could I go through what I did but still wonder what it would be like to be with him? It made no sense. Because it didn't, I tried to stay as far away from him as possible since that first day, but it was hard. He seemed to pop up wherever I was all the time.

If I didn't know better, I would've thought he was spying on me. Every time he looked at me, tingles would fill my body. Maybe it would make more sense if I had a point of reference when it came to men other than the Cannibals. It was

embarrassing to admit that until they took me, I'd been something of a shy, nerdy woman. I hadn't had a real boyfriend in my life. I'd been too busy with work and school to date. Having your first time be rape by more than one man was a nightmare.

I could be objective enough to look at the men around here and acknowledge they were attractive. If that was the only requirement, then most women would've thought they died and went to heaven. This club was full of sexy, attractive, tattooed alpha bikers. However, Slash was on a level of his own in my mind. There was something about his tall, lean, muscular body and his face that attracted me more than the others. His dark blond, almost light brown hair was closely cropped. He had a faint beard and mustache that matched his hair color and gave his masculine face more of an edgy look. His eyes were to die for—a light blue which reminded me of crystals. Add to all those things the tattoos that I could see on his arms. It made him a very appealing package. It was too bad I couldn't forget what lurked under the surface of men and bikers specifically.

Getting up, I made one more tour through the townhouse. I'd only been in the bathroom, one bedroom, and the kitchen, so I only had to check them. I had my clothes, the knife, and a small amount of bottled water and snacks I planned to take with me. I wished I had some cash, but I didn't, and there was no way to ask for some without raising questions. It was a warm night, so I didn't need to worry about a jacket or anything to keep me warm. I'd found some matches at the clubhouse, too.

Once I was sure I had everything, I glanced at the clock again. It was twelve-thirty. It was time. Taking a deep breath, I shut off all the lights. Slowly opening the door, I peeked outside and scanned the area around me. Not seeing anyone, I slipped out. I stayed close to the building and crouched low when I had to cross open ground. I used anything between me and the gate to hide behind and wait to see if an alarm was raised. It felt like it took forever to reach the gate.

I'd observed the mechanics of it, and I'd learned that instead of opening the big gate, you could exit out a small regular door that was next to it. I'd hidden the other day and watched Gavin, one of the prospects, use it. He hadn't paid attention to if anyone was close by, and I easily saw the code he had entered. I crept to the keypad and entered the number. I sagged in relief when it unlocked, and I was able to squeeze out. Shutting it securely behind me, I turned left.

I wasn't sure which way the town was, but the ones I'd seen coming and going mainly went right, so that was why I was headed in the opposite direction. I'd stick to the woods and move at night for a few days. Hopefully, this would help me get far enough away to find a town and a ride. From there, who knows where I'd go. As long as it was away from danger, I didn't care.

Walking along, I tried not to jump at the rustling sounds in the woods or the call of animals. I racked my brain to think if there were animals like wolves, coyotes, or bears in Tennessee. Damn it, if only I had access to a phone or a computer these last few days, I'd have checked. Oh well, it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Better to be killed by a four-legged animal than a two-legged one.

Slash: Chapter 2

The hot water felt good. God, I needed this shower to wake me up. It had been another restless night last night—a night of waking up from dreams of Aria. Dreams where I pictured either what the Cannibals had done to her and was enraged by them or dreams where I was aching so badly from the sexual nature of my desires that I had to relieve the ache to get back to sleep.

Jesus, I felt like scum. I should be thinking of only helping her to trust us and heal from her horrible ordeal, not perverting on her and imagining what it would be like to have sex with her. I tried not to notice how beautiful and sexy she was, but it was no use. I wasn't the only one who noticed, much to my annoyance.

I'd caught Gavin and Walker checking her out. I glared at them when they did. They'd lowered their eyes, but I didn't know if it would be enough to warn them off. As for my single brothers, they were courteous, but they'd have to be blind not to notice her. I prayed none would think to make a move. I'd even thought about mentioning in church on Saturday that I was working to get her to the point where I'd be able to claim her one day. I'd held back because I didn't want them to think I was being creepy.

Diego, from the Cannibals, had stayed away from her. I wondered that first day if he'd been one of the men to rape her. Knowing she wouldn't be comfortable talking to me about it, I pulled Raina aside and asked her to find out. If he was, then he was a dead man. Much to my relief, Raina came back and assured me that Aria emphatically denied he'd ever raped her. Instead, she told her he was the only one who hadn't touched her. In addition, she'd revealed he'd tried to find ways to make her life less terrible and even helped her to escape once. Lucky for him, the Cannibals had no idea he'd done it.

At least it answered that question, but then it raised more. Did he stay away from her because he didn't want to

remind her of what happened to her? Or did he do it because he had an attraction and feelings for her, which he knew or feared she wouldn't reciprocate? The fear it was the latter made me watch him closer. I didn't want him or anyone else to win her heart. I needed it to be mine.

I was working out the best course of action to take in order for that to happen. Time, I knew, would be a huge factor. I was prepared to take months if not years to show her she had nothing to fear from me and that no one would ever protect, care, or love her more. I knew I wasn't in love with her, but I could see it happening quickly. Her courage alone was amazing to me. Most women in her shoes would've gone insane or killed themselves a long time ago. She feared us, but she was still standing.

The old ladies, in particular, were doing a great job in welcoming her and working to make her feel comfortable and want to stay. Right now, we'd left it with her as there was no way we'd let her leave and be unprotected. The rest of the Cannibals were out there and we had to find them. We knew that due to Outlaw's sleuthing, they'd returned to the house and found it burned to the ground.

We'd gone back hours later to see if they were there and to set up surveillance. We tried to get there earlier, but we had to deal with Parker and Aria first. Since then, no one had returned. We knew they'd been there before us due to the tire tracks all over the place that weren't there the first time. They were running scared. Neither Diego nor Aria knew if they had another hideout or clubhouse. We had everyone on high alert here, and none of us, not even the men, were leaving the compound alone. We went in pairs, and the women and kids, if they had to leave the compound, were escorted by one of the men.

The rumor about the Cannibals being around Topeka, Kansas, all those years Bull and the others thought their club was disbanded was being checked into. We hoped there might still be a chapter there or someone who knew them and could help us find them. Outlaw had his hands full, and I knew he was using Smoke and Everly over in Dublin Falls to help.

Shutting off the water, I got out and dried off, then finished getting ready for the day. I had to go into the store today. There was work that only I could do. Running an outdoor supply store, I found it fun and interesting. Growing up, I loved to camp and be outdoors. My time in the Army had me as one of the ones who liked when we were out in the field. Warriors' Excursions was the perfect place for me.

The sun was just coming up. I was up early since I couldn't sleep. Shutting and locking the door to my room, I wandered through the common room to the kitchen to find something to eat. I nodded at Iceman and Loki, who were up and sipping coffee at the bar. It was only six in the morning.

"There are pastries in there. Rebel brought them a couple of minutes ago. Said they were baked last night, so they're fresh. Madisen said to tell us to enjoy them," Iceman told me as I passed him.

"Have I said lately how much I love that woman and Jessica? They bake at work all day and then come home and do more. They never forget us. Damn, I can't wait to taste whatever she made. What's got you two up so early?" I paused to talk to them.

"Just couldn't sleep. I don't need much sleep, so I came looking for coffee and found the éclairs and the peach tartlets with apricot glaze. Damn, I'm gonna need to work out twice as much tonight," Iceman said with a grin.

"Pig, you had both? Did you leave any for the rest of us?" I asked as I shoved him. He laughed as he rocked on the barstool.

"Nope. You snooze, you lose," was his wise-ass reply.

"Don't worry, he's definitely a pig, but Madisen knows that, and she made sure everyone had at least one of each with some leftovers. If she hadn't fallen for Reb as soon as they met, I would've married the woman just for her baking," Loki joked as he assured me there was some left.

"And that's why when you disappear, no one will have to guess why. Lusting after my woman is a guaranteed death

wish,” the growly voice of Rebel said from the doorway. Loki didn’t appear to be concerned when he turned his head to look at him.

“Rebel, if you can’t handle men wanting your woman for her baking and her sexy self, then you shouldn’t get out of bed in the morning. I can promise you, if it isn’t me lusting after her baked goodies, there are a ton of men who are. That bakery has almost as many men coming in as women. I know they like the scenery. They check out her and Jessica. Maybe you and Ajax need to sit your asses there all day, every day, and run them off with death threats,” Loki told him with a grin.

“Fucker, give me a cup of coffee. That’s your penance for wanting my woman,” Rebel joked as he sat down on the stool next to Loki. Sighing deeply, like it was a big effort, Loki stood and hung over the bar to grab a coffee cup and the pot of coffee sitting there. I was about to ask him to hand me one, too, when the front door came slamming open, and Outlaw rushed in. He scanned the room, and then his eyes met mine. We instantly went on alert. His face told me something was up, and it wasn’t good. He headed straight for me.

“What?” I asked as I stood up.

“Aria is gone.”

Fear stabbed through me. “What do you mean she’s gone? How? When? What the fuck?” I practically shouted.

“Sit, Bull and the officers are on their way. I already sent out the text. I knew you’d be in your room, so I wanted to tell you myself.”

“I can’t sit. Tell me. How do you know she’s gone? It’s barely after six. Maybe she didn’t answer her door because she’s asleep.”

“She’s not inside. I checked.”

Before I could ask him more, the door opened again and in came Bull. Right behind him was Tank, our VP, and then the rest were behind him. Payne, Player, and Bear rounded out the officers. Rebel was sometimes considered one

as our road captain, but it wasn't the case today. He looked just as surprised as me, Loki, and Iceman. They were frowning.

“Church now,” Bull said to me. “Loki, I need you to send out a text to the rest of the guys and tell them I need their asses here pronto. We'll explain once we're done. Have them stick around the clubhouse. No one goes to work until I say so,” Bull ordered.

“Sure thing, Bull,” Loki responded as he took out his phone.

I followed them into church. I could barely stand to sit. I wanted to run to her house and check for myself. If she wasn't there, I'd get on my bike and ride out to find her.

“I know you're about to lose it, Slash, but just listen. Outlaw, bring everyone up to date on why we're here.”

“Like the text said, Aria is missing. Walker came to me earlier. He was concerned. He said when he went to the gate to start his shift. He noticed there were footprints in the dirt right in front of the small door that goes outside the walls. There was no reason for anyone to be there, and they weren't there yesterday. He called and asked Gavin if he had been messing around there last night with a woman. He said no. When Walker opened it and went outside, he saw a piece of paper on the ground. It was a list. It had water, snacks, a knife, clothes, and a few other things on it. It worried him, so he called me to see if I'd check out the camera feed from last night after Gavin had gotten off duty at the gate. It didn't take long to see it was Aria. She left here around twelve thirty last night. Walked right out the door. She knew the code, so it didn't alert me that it had been opened. If she'd tried to force it without the code, then I would've known.”

“Fuck! She's been gone for six hours. She's made it to town and probably in some stranger's car headed to God knows where by now!” I half-shouted as I hit the table with my fist.

“Hang on, I don't know if that's true or not. The cameras outside on the outer walls showed she headed in the opposite direction. She didn't go toward Hunters Creek. It's

true she'll eventually make it to a town, or someone will come along. If she's hitchhiking, she'll get a ride. What we have to do is find her and get her back before that happens. We've been so busy trying to protect her from what we're doing to catch the Cannibals, no one bothered to tell her what we've found and what's going on."

"It's no wonder she doesn't trust us. After what they did, she probably thinks every man, especially a biker, is a raping monster. You don't think she ran because someone scared her, do you?" Tank asked worriedly.

"I don't know. As far as I know, no one has approached her or said anything to her. I mean, we all know Slash is gone on her, but he wouldn't be dumb enough to scare her. Would you?" Payne asked.

"What do you mean I'm gone on her?" I tried to play it off.

"Man, don't try that. We know you. We see the way you look at her. We saw how you acted when she told us about the Cannibals and when we questioned Parker. We all hate what happened to her and want them to pay, but it's a deeper thirst for revenge that you have. It's the thirst a man whose woman or one he cares for would exhibit," Bull said quietly.

Recognizing I wasn't fooling them, I gave up. Let them think I was a creep. "Fine, yeah, I'm attracted to her like crazy. I know it's fucked up with what she's been through, but I can't help it. However, I swear I haven't said or done anything. I wouldn't. All I've tried to do is show her through my actions and words that she's safe here and she can trust us. Obviously, I fucking failed. We have to find her and bring her back. It's not safe for her to be out there."

Panic at the thought of the Cannibals or someone as equally dangerous and evil as them finding her was making me sick. We were wasting time sitting here talking. I went to get up. Payne's hand on my arm stopped me.

"I know you want to go find her. We do, too. But we have to get the others to help us. If she's smart, she'll stay off the road. I bet she'll hide. If I was her, I'd stick to the trees and

travel at night if I could. She's not familiar with this area at all. I don't think she's ever been to Tennessee. Hell, did anyone ask her where she came from? She said the Cannibals broke in and kidnapped her. Where was that?"

"She's lived all over since she was a kid, but the last few years, before she was taken, she lived in Columbia, South Carolina. She lived there with her mom, who died three years ago. Her name was Natalie Vickerman. She raised Aria alone. They moved around a lot. I figure she stayed after her mom died since she had a job and was in college," Outlaw said.

"Did she tell one of the women that or did you find it out from your sleuthing?" Player asked.

"I found it out. It wasn't hard once I had her name. I doubt she'd head back there, though. It would be the first place they'd look for her, and she's smart enough to know that."

"She might have friends there. If she can get to them or find a way to call them, they could help her," I mused.

"Or an old boyfriend," Bear said as he cautiously looked at me.

I didn't want to think of her having someone special before this happened, but it was a distinct possibility. She was beautiful. Men would fall at her feet. "Or a current boyfriend," I uttered through gritted teeth.

"If she did, she hid it well. There is nothing I've found so far to indicate she was dating anyone. She was attending the University of South Carolina, majoring in psychology. She was six months away from her bachelor's degree when they took her," Outlaw added. He had his tablet out, reading it.

"Shit, how old is she anyway? I know she's in her twenties, but if she was in college, did she attend straight out of high school, or did she go later?" Bull asked.

I hadn't thought about her age. I didn't care what her age was. However, if she was younger than her late twenties, and she looked like she could be now that I thought about it, she might think I was too old for her. Shit.

“She’s twenty-three. She’ll be twenty-four next month on the twenty-first,” Outlaw added.

“Goddamn, you’re a baby chaser, Slash. You’re what, forty?” Player said with a grin. I knew he was trying to lighten the mood. I gave him the finger.

“I’m thirty-seven, asshole. That’s only thirteen years.”

“Yeah, thirteen is nothing. You wait until you meet your woman. She’s probably eighteen and thinks anyone over twenty-five is ancient,” Bull said. I knew he’d be on my side. He was more than thirteen years older than Jocelyn.

“I’m never settling down, so it doesn’t matter,” Player said. None of us believed him. He might be a ladies’ man, but if the right woman came along, he’d be her willing slave. Pushing age out of my mind, I got back to what was important.

“Is there anything else, Outlaw? If not, can we get the rest of the guys in here so we can figure out the plan and go after her? The longer we take, the better chance she has of finding a ride. If she gets in a car with the wrong person, we all know what could happen,” I reminded them. That wiped all the smiles off their faces.

“Slash is right. Player, go call the others in here. I want us out there looking for her within the next half hour,” Bull said.

As Player went to fetch the others, I sat there bouncing my leg in agitation. It was killing me to sit here and wait. I need to be out there looking for her. As I waited, I sent up a prayer, asking God to protect her and keep her safe until I found her. Once I did, she’d be brought back here, and I’d make sure she never ran again. I knew without a doubt she was more than safe here.

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Knowing which direction she went when she left the compound was one thing. Knowing where she’d gone was a totally different one. There was a lot of open country with trees and secondary dirt roads, which led to homes and dead ends. We could literally spend days searching for her, and she

could be ten miles or less away. Or she'd stumbled across someone, and they gave her a lift, and she was already out of Tennessee.

If she was still walking, then we had no idea how fast she walked or if she was only walking at night and hiding during the day. She might be so desperate to get away she'd walk until she dropped. It ate at me like an ulcer that she was that afraid she'd go out into the unknown alone and without resources to escape us. It made me feel like the devil. What could we've done or said to make her see and believe we meant her no harm? That we wanted to be her friends and for her to lean on us and let us help. To give me time to win her and prove that I could be her shield and sword in this world. After all, they called me Slash for a reason.

I loved to make things go boom, which would lead most people to ask why my road name wasn't Boomer or something similar. The reason was that as much as I loved blowing shit up, I had a rather unique skill if you wanted to call it that. I was good with knives, but I was an expert with a sword. It was something my dad had shown me how to use growing up. We loved those old swashbuckler films with Errol Flynn. I'd been fascinated with them, so I perfected sword fighting. When I prospected, it became known. So when they patched me in, they decided to call me Slash. I loved it.

I still had my sword, and I practiced with it often. I even competed from time to time. I was considered a sword master of all things. Not very modern, but it was cool. I often thought I was born in the wrong time period. Sure, I used guns more often than anything, but never doubt I could kill someone with my sword easily. That's how I could be both a shield and a sword for her. Just like I would be the same for my club and our friends.

We'd been out searching for hours. It was getting closer to nightfall, and it had been a hot one. September in Tennessee was still hot and humid. We carried water with us and sipped as we rode. The heat made me worry about her. Did she have water with her, and if so, was it enough? There

were streams all over the place, but you couldn't trust if they were clean.

We were hunting blind since this area had no real businesses or very few, and there weren't any cameras that Outlaw could tap into with a little magic. I hated being blind. I should've anticipated she might do this and had her injected with the tracker the rest of us and our women had. However, if she refused it, I wouldn't have forced her to get it. Or maybe I would have since it was for safety. I didn't see myself being one of those men who would allow his woman or children to do things that risked their health or safety.

It would be a fine edge I'd have to walk every day. How to not be a domineering man yet a protective one. I didn't want to dictate. I wanted to be partners. But if it came to what I knew, which was safety, then she would need to follow my lead. Bull and some of the others, like Bear and Ajax, were better at balancing those aspects in themselves. I felt like I was more like Payne or Demon. Maybe lessons with Bear and Bull and a few others would be in order.

I looked at the sun. It would be going down in a few hours. When it did, it would make it harder for us to search. The chances of missing her would be greater. *Jesus Christ, where are you, Aria? You're safe with us. Just come out and let me take you home.* I sent out into the universe. I'd prayed to God, and now I was just putting it out there for any power to hear and grant. We were supposed to meet back at the compound at eight o'clock. We'd regroup and figure out our next step. I didn't care what anyone said. As soon as we were done, I was going out to keep looking. I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway.

I glanced over at Renegade. Even though we were searching, we still had to maintain our own safety. Bull ordered us to search in pairs. Renegade had joined me. Usually, it was him with Iceman, but not today. He was scanning the right side of the road, the trees, and the fields as intently as I was the left. We were looking for anything that looked like it would make a good hiding place or appeared out of place.

Coming around a turn, something caught my eye in the field on my side. I slowed down and signaled him to circle back and follow me. I didn't know who owned the property. I hoped they wouldn't mind us riding out into their field to check it out. If they did, they'd probably keep their mouths shut. No one seemed to want to tangle with the Warriors, even if we were considered a decent club.

We had to ride slowly since the ground was bumpy. No way did we want to wreck our bikes. As we got closer to what caught my attention, I realized it was the wrapper of a protein bar. It was silver and shiny on the inside and outside of the wrapper. The sun hitting it had been what I'd seen shining. I got off my bike and picked it up. I recognized the brand. It was the same kind we stocked at the clubhouse. Of course, we weren't the only ones in the world to eat them, but it was the only possible clue we'd found.

"Look at this, Slash," Renegade said off to the right. He was maybe twenty feet away. Going over, I glanced at where he was pointing on the ground. There, in a bare patch, were footprints in the dirt. They were small and the size of a woman's foot. It looked like it was from a tennis shoe. I tried to think back and remember if the old ladies had given her a pair of them or not. I knew she'd worn flip-flops. Taking out my phone, I placed a call. Might as well ask.

On the third ring, it was answered. "Hi, Slash. Did you find anything?" Jocelyn asked anxiously.

I'd called her because she was the acknowledged queen of the club. Bull was the president and king. Jocelyn made sure everyone who lived or visited the compound was welcomed and looked after, no matter what they needed. She had been the one to organize the women getting things together for Aria. We joked she was the mother hen, even if she was younger than some of us. She would laugh and agree. She was a perfect match for Bull. He'd been damn lucky to find her. He freely admitted that he loved his first wife, Harlow's mom, Kelly, but Jocelyn was his ever-after love rather than his first love.

At first, Harlow had resented Jocelyn and thought she was after Bull for his money. When Jocelyn tried to walk away rather than coming between daughter and father, Bull made his stance clear. She would be in his life, and Harlow would have to learn to deal or not be a part of his life. Now, they were close and loved each other. She called Jocelyn's daughter, Devyn, her little sister. Their twins, Caeden and Corinne, were Harlow's baby brother and sister. They were great friends with her kids—Hunter, Emmie, and Justice, which was funny.

“We found a wrapper from a protein bar in a field. There are tracks. Did any of you give her a pair of tennis shoes by any chance? It looks like maybe a size seven or eight?” I tried not to hold my breath as I asked, then waited for her answer.

“Yes, there was. I picked up a pair in town. They were on sale, and they were a size seven-and-a-half.”

My heart sped up just a tiny bit at the news. “Where are you? Could you go to the townhouse and see if she left those there? I didn't pay attention to what she didn't take when we looked this morning.”

“I can do that. Give me a few minutes. I'll call you back.”

“Thanks, Joc.”

“Hang in there,” she said before she hung up.

Renegade was wandering along, staring down at the ground. I headed over to him. “She said yes, and she's gonna check to see if they're still at the townhouse. What're you doing?”

“I'm following those prints. Or what I think are prints. See how the grass is knocked down along here. It came right off the bare spot back there. It's headed back toward the trees up ahead. I think we found her trail. I'm not sure what it's like in the trees, but I think we should head in there. See?” He was pointing at the crushed grass.

“Hell yeah. Let me call Bull and tell him what we found. We might need to get more guys over here to help. As

far as we know, no one else has a lead.”

He gave me a nod. It only took me a couple of minutes to update Bull about the print, Jocelyn, and the trail. He knew where we were by our trackers. He promised he'd get more of the guys to us ASAP. He knew better than to tell me to wait for them. Just before he hung up, Jocelyn popped on and told me the shoes were gone. Thanking them both, I quickly hung up.

Renegade had heard my end of it, so he knew we were getting reinforcements, and the shoes were gone. “Okay, let's go find her. You got a flashlight?”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the small tactical one I always carried. You never knew when you might need one. Although it was small, it had a good bright light and would last around four hours with continuous use. Hopefully, we'd find her before it died. If not, I'd get us more. Now that there were signs of a trail, I was going to follow it to wherever it ended. I'd either find her or a dead end.

Before we took off, we went back and moved our bikes into the trees so they were hidden and grabbed some water. Once that was done, it was back to tracking duty. I could see what Renegade was following, but he seemed to have an instinct of where to look when it would fade away. The man could follow a trail.

“What the hell? I knew you could track, but damn, I think you're half hound dog, man,” I told him in awe as he found the trail yet again. We'd been walking for twenty minutes or more. In the distance, I could hear the faint roar of a few bikes. Those had to be ours.

He grinned at me. “Yeah, that's me. All those years of learning to hunt and track with my granddad, dad, and uncles paid off. I'll expect a nice big juicy steak after this.”

“Man, if you find her, I'll buy you one of those every month for a year. I appreciate you sticking with me all day.”

“Hey, it's what you do for your family. Listen, do you hear that? Some of the guys are here. I can hear them coming from over there.” He pointed to the right. I could faintly hear

them, too. As we stood waiting for them to find us, I wondered if Aria was close enough to hear them. If she was, she would hide harder. She had no way of knowing who it was or that we were only coming to help her. Shit, we had to get her back and to trust us. I wouldn't be able to stand doing this every week.

Aria: Chapter 3

Fear. It was a living being inside of me. I thought I'd lived with it for so long that it couldn't get worse. I might be wrong. My heart felt like it was about to beat out of my chest as I lay in the dense thicket of downed limbs. I was lying on my side, curled up to make myself as tiny as possible on the ground. I could hear them getting closer.

I had been walking and making what I thought was decent time when I heard the sound of motorcycles. I strained to listen. When they seemed to come to a stop to the east, I knew they were coming after me. That was the only explanation. I thought about running, but there was no way I could outrun them, especially if they used their bikes. My only chance was to hide and hope they passed by me. I'd stay hidden until it was fully dark, and I was sure they were gone and not doubling back. Then I'd go. Instead of walking, it would be flat-out running this time. I should've gone to the road and tried to flag down a car today instead of staying hidden in the woods. I thought it was safer, but I was wrong.

The bigger question was, was it the Warriors or the Cannibals? As much as I couldn't trust them, I found myself hoping it was the Warriors. That seemed more likely. I had to still be in their territory or close to it. Having a rival club this close wouldn't be a good or smart thing for the Cannibals to do. The Warriors were out for blood. I shivered at the thought of how ugly and deadly a confrontation between them would be. As I huddled there, I imagined that I knew what escaped convicts felt like. The only thing was I didn't need to worry about them bringing out the dogs to find me. Or at least I didn't think I did. What if they had tracking dogs?

A snapping noise came from the left. I held my breath and kept scanning the area for a glimpse. *Please, please God, let them pass right by me.* The soft sound of a footstep was next. Squinting and straining, it was almost a minute before I caught a glimpse. As I stared, the figure became clearer, and more forms joined it.

Now, I could hear them talking in hushed tones to each other. I wasn't able to make out what they were saying. They were scanning the whole area around them. I noticed they even looked up into the trees. Good thing I'd decided not to climb one. It had been my first thought then I reconsidered it due to my leg.

It was dusk, and they had flashlights. In the lead, I could see Slash. My breath got choppy for a whole other reason. *Damn it, stop reacting to him, Aria. You're an idiot. These men are here to drag your ass back to their compound. They're gonna, for sure, take off their masks and kid gloves. When they do, they'll show you what they're really like. Slash won't look so attractive once he rapes you a few times,* I chided myself. It was time to stop fantasizing about him being a man I could be with. It was ridiculous.

Renegade was beside him. They were intently staring down at the ground. They didn't bother to look up or ahead. What were they seeing? As they came closer to my hiding spot, I realized what it was. They were tracking my trail! I'd tried not to leave prints behind and stuck to the grass and rocks. I'd even waded through a couple of streams. However, even as light as I was, the grass got smashed a little. It had to be what they were following. Based on the direction they were headed, it would lead them right to me.

I had to make a quick decision. Did I stay and let them drag me out of there kicking and screaming, or did I wiggle out as fast and quietly as I could and try for the stand of trees to my right? They were even thicker, and I might be able to lose them in there. As soon as I thought of those options, my brain chose and screamed, *run!*

Wiggling like a worm on a hook, I backed myself out of the limbs and came to my knees. Risking one more look in their direction, I crab-crawled backward. The whole time, I kept repeating over and over silently, *don't see me, don't see me.* I was several yards away and about to come up to a low crouch and take off when I heard a shout. Snapping my head up and around, I saw one of the guys pointing in my direction.

I didn't waste any more time. I came to my feet and took off running.

There were more shouts followed by the thunder of boots. I ran as hard as I could. One voice in particular stood out and registered. "Aria, stop! Sweetheart, there's no reason for you to run. We're not here to hurt you. I swear. We just want to help you. It's not safe for you out here. Please, stop and talk to me."

I should've kept my mouth shut, but I couldn't. "Fuck you! I'm not gonna be another club's slave again. I'll die first," I screamed.

If I had kept going and not tried to look back to see if they were gaining on me, I might've made it. I might've made it through the woods to the road and lucked onto a car. I might've found a spot to hide in the encroaching darkness and they would've missed me. All those might've happened, but that's not what did happen. Instead, I was so busy looking back I didn't see that the field I was running across abruptly ended in a deep slope that ran down several yards, nor did I see the broken branch lying in my path.

As my foot hooked it and I began to tumble, I screamed, then threw out my hands to try to break my fall. I hit the ground hard, knocking the air out of me, and then I was rolling head over heels down the slope. Rocks, sticks, and everything else jabbed and poked at me. Fiery spots sprung up all over my body. I tried to stop, but I couldn't. I screamed harder. Suddenly, a huge tree loomed up ahead of me. I tried again to stop, but it was no use. I plowed into it hard and headfirst. The impact sound was all I remembered before utter darkness.

Slash:

I watched in what seemed like slow motion as Aria tripped and fell. I put on a burst of speed to get to her. She rolled down the hill, screaming. I was running down the slope so fast I almost fell. My brothers weren't far behind me. I yelled, "Watch out," when I saw her headed for a tree. There was a sickening crunch sound when her head hit the tree.

It took me a few seconds to reach her. She was lying completely still. I dropped to my knees. She was face down. I put my hands on her shoulders to turn her, but I hesitated. What if she had a neck or spinal injury? Moving her would make it worse, so instead, I slid my fingers along her neck and felt for a pulse. I sagged in relief when I found it.

"Is she okay?" Renegade panted as he got to us.

"She has a pulse." I moved my hand up to her nose. I could feel air moving in and out. "She's breathing, but I don't know if she's okay. Her head hit the tree, Renegade. There's no way to know if she injured her spine or neck. I don't want to move her and risk injuring her more or, worse, killing her. Shit, what do we do?"

"We call in the professionals. Zara can get a life flight out here. It's the quickest way. We can't wait to help her out ourselves, and an ambulance can't get back here easily. Just stay with her in case she wakes up. If she does, keep her still," Demon ordered as he took out his phone.

As he talked, I focused all my attention on her. She was still out. The guys were staying back. I leaned down to get close to her ear. "Baby, I need you to listen. You have nothing to fear from us. No one plans to make you our slave. We're not like those bastards, the Cannibals. We killed half of them, remember? We're gonna take out the rest and your fucking evil half-brother too. I can't let you go. You're not safe and even if you were, I don't want you to go. If you just give me a chance and some trust, I can show you that we can have a beautiful life together. I'll never hurt you. You'll be loved,

honored, protected, and treated like the great gem you are. Just stay breathing. I can't lose you."

I lost track of how long I kneeled beside her, just talking to her and waiting for her to open her eyes. It was scaring the shit out of me that she wasn't regaining consciousness. The longer she was out, the surer I was that her injury was serious, maybe even life-threatening. That panic I'd felt earlier came back. I was about to scream when Demon joined me.

"You need to stay calm for her sake. I know you want to lose it, but don't. We're getting her help. It won't take them any time to get her to the hospital once she's on the helicopter."

"What if they're too late? Or she never regains consciousness or does and is brain-damaged or paralyzed? She was running from us, Demon. We're the ones who caused this. I did because I was closest and made her run," I told him in agony.

"Like hell, you caused it. Yes, she was running, but this is all on the goddamn Cannibals. They took her and hurt her. They made her unable to trust clubs. They're why she was hiding out here and ran. You have to just pray she's alright. I don't think God would be cruel enough to let you find her then take her away."

"What if she can't do that? We know they raped her repeatedly, and lord knows what else. How can a woman trust any man or club after what happened to her? I can't blame her. I don't want to force her to stay with us. You know, after she gets to the hospital, if she wakes up and recovers, she'll insist on going somewhere else. She'll have the cops on our asses so fast our heads will spin. I know Chief Scarelli likes us and is buddies with Bull, but not even he would overlook someone's plea for protection."

"There's always that chance, yes, but all we can do is be there. Show her that she can rely on us to do what we say we will. We'll guard her at the hospital. She'll never be left alone. Anything she needs or wants, she gets, except us to

leave. We'll keep hunting for the Cannibals so we can eliminate them. That will have to make her feel safer. We'll take care of her worthless excuse for a brother. Prison isn't gonna protect him. We get her a counselor or talk to some of the old ladies here and in Dublin Falls. We give her the tools to heal, and hopefully, that will lead to trust and love."

His words began to calm me. As I took deep breaths and listened, the sound of helicopter blades registered. I'd ridden in plenty of those in the Army. Lights lit up the field. I had no idea how they found us, but I was relieved. In no time, they landed, and men ran over to us. I had to let them do their thing and watch helplessly. I didn't know how long it was before she was loaded on a stretcher in a full neck brace and strapped down to a backboard, and they were carrying her to the helicopter. Demon and I helped them even though she didn't weigh that much. They swiftly loaded her.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to follow us. There's no room for passengers," one of them said.

"We have a ride for you. We'll take you, Slash. You're taking her to Vanderbilt in Nashville?" Bull asked, coming up to us. The others had stayed back while they worked on her.

"Yeah, it's the closest level-one trauma hospital. We should have her there in half an hour. Now we gotta go," he said.

We stood back and watched him shut the door. The rotors threw up dirt, and we had to squint as they rose in the air. I didn't wait for them to get out of sight. I turned to Bull. "Where's my ride?"

"Follow us."

I didn't hesitate. I had to get my ass to Nashville. By road, it was at least an hour, maybe more. As we hurried through the trees to what I assumed was the road, I sent out prayers again. What a nightmare.

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The club insisted I ride in a vehicle rather than my bike when we left the scene. The ride to Nashville seemed to take

forever, even though we made it in an hour. Speeding was involved. Thankfully, we were able to avoid the highway patrol. I'd never been to Vandy as it was commonly known, but Bull had been there a few times over the years. He knew exactly where to take us to find the ER entrance.

I only took a few of my brothers with me. The compound still needed to be guarded since we had no idea where the remaining Cannibals were, and the women and children had to be protected. I'd tried just to take Renegade, but it was shot down. I'd been told there was no way in hell they'd let me go with only one guy. Besides, there would need to be a few to rotate guard duty. I had no idea how long she'd be there, but she would be guarded at all times.

Walking into the waiting area of the ER, I was struck by how big and busy it was. There were people everywhere of all ages. The noise level was high from so many talking, complaining, or demanding something. Instantly, I was stressed, although the noise did quiet down significantly after we walked in. It felt like all eyes were on us, and they didn't know what to make of us. Some were curious. Others acted as if they were wary or outright scared of us. I ignored them and went straight to the desk. Bull went with me.

The woman behind it gave me one of those wary looks. I swear if she had been wearing pearls, she would've clutched them. Any other time, I would've found it funny, but not today. "H-how may I help you?" she stuttered nervously.

"Not long ago, you had a helicopter bring in a woman. Her name is Aria Vickerman. I'm here to see her."

She tapped on her keyboard. After about a minute, she raised her eyes. "Yes, she was brought in. They're examining her now. If you take a seat, someone should be out to speak to you when they're done."

"That's not gonna work. See, she's not to be left alone. She has to have a guard with her at all times." I threw it out there to see what she'd say or do.

Her expression told me she didn't know what to do. She thought for several seconds. "I'm sorry, but only the

immediate family can be in the back with a patient, not guards,” she said with a slight smile on her face.

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing that I’m both. I’m her fiancé,” I said with what I hoped passed as a smile. What I wanted to do was tell her to show me where she was, or I’d go find her my fucking self.

She was again struck speechless. Finally, right before I lost my cool, Bull stepped up next to me. “Listen, my brother here is really concerned about his woman. She was unconscious when he last saw her. I suggest you go in the back and find whoever runs this ER and tell them he’s coming back. If he or she has a problem with it, they need to come see us. We’re not trying to cause problems, but if we’re kept out when you’re letting others go back...” he pointed to a man being escorted into the back by a nurse, “then we’re not gonna take that well.” He gave her one of his smiles which usually worked on people. She stumbled to her feet and beat a hasty retreat into the back.

“Give her a few minutes. If she doesn’t come back, we’ll go find her ourselves,” he muttered.

“Hell yeah, I will. Thanks.”

“I get it. Been here and done this shit several times. It never gets easier. They’re probably running tests to figure out why she hasn’t woken up.”

“Do you think she’s still out of it?”

“It’s possible. Don’t read anything—”

He was cut off by a yell coming from the back. It went through me like an arrow. I recognized the voice filled with panic and fear. “Get away from me! Don’t touch me!” Aria screamed.

I didn’t wait to hear more. I rushed to the door that went in the back. I pounded on it. Somehow, luck was on my side because right after I did, the door swung open. There stood a nurse or orderly or whatever he was. He gave me a stern look. I glared at him. He took several steps back as alarm appeared on his face.

“Out of my way. That’s my woman screaming,” I growled as I pushed past him.

I raced down the long open area. Off to both sides were curtained-off areas. Some were open, and I could see the empty beds. The screams were coming from further down. As I got closer, I figured out which cubicle it was coming out of based on the number of people crowding around it.

“No, no, don’t! Let me go. Stop, I don’t want to be tied down,” she wailed.

Shoving people out of my way left and right, I tore inside. She was white as a sheet. Her eyes were wide with terror as she slapped at the hands of the two big men trying to restrain her arms.

“Get the fuck away from her!” I roared. I grabbed the first one and shoved him away from her. I discovered Bull had followed me. In fact, all of my brothers had. Bull yanked the other man away from her.

“You can’t be back here! If you don’t leave, I’ll call security,” some short pipsqueak man in a white coat told us.

“I dare you to try it. Can’t you see she’s scared to death? She doesn’t like to be touched and she sure as fuck doesn’t want to be tied down. Why’re you doing that?” I snarled.

“She’s agitated. It’s for her own safety. She’s trying to get out of the bed and leave,” the doctor told me snidely. I could read his nametag now. It read *Dr. H. Hedges*.

“And you thought tying her down was the best way to calm her down? Back off and let her breathe. Let me talk to her.”

I could see he was about to argue. However, he thought better of it. The wall of leather-wearing badasses behind me might have convinced him and the two men who tried restraining her to back away. Those behind us stood there staring. I turned to glare at them. They scurried off like timid mice. I wondered how long it would be before security came to kick us out.

I cautiously approached her bed. She was still wide-eyed, and I could see she was shaking. I lowered my voice as much as I could. I made sure not to touch her, even though I longed to do so. My gut was tight, seeing her so afraid.

“Dove, shh, everything is alright. No one is going to hurt you. I won’t let them tie you down. Try to relax. I’ll stay right here. We’ll leave as soon as they say you’re alright. You took a very long fall and hit that tree with your head. You were unconscious. You scared me to death.”

She stared at me but didn’t respond. Her gaze jumped to Bull when he cleared his throat and came closer. She shrank back against the pillow. I saw her fists curl around the rail on the bed. “Aria, sweetheart, I know you’re scared. We hate that you are. I know that’s why you ran, but I swear on everything—my club, kids, wife, and my life, and so will every man in my club, that you have nothing to worry about with us. We only want to keep you safe and help.”

“What if I want to leave? Will you let me?” Her voice sounded a bit hoarse. An ache gripped my heart. She really wanted to get away from us. I tried not to feel hurt, but it was making me want to scream. God, was there nothing I could do to prove nothing would happen to her and that one day, when she was ready, I’d love nothing more than to be her man?

Bull sighed. “If that is truly what you want, then yes, we’ll let you go but think hard about it. Where will you go? Do you have anyone who can help you get back on your feet? What if the Cannibals come for you again? Until they’re taken care of, you’ll have to look over your shoulder for the rest of your life. What do you fear the most about staying with us? Has anyone done or said anything to you that frightened you?”

He knew there was no way any of our brothers would do or say anything, not even the single ones. They might have been misunderstood; however, it didn’t clear the prospects or Diego. Hell, Zev, the cop who Raina knew from work, had been around a few times since she came to be with us. Had he said or done something to upset her? I doubted he would’ve done it on purpose.

“Hey, if it makes you feel more at ease, we’ll go back to the waiting room,” Renegade said out of nowhere.

I watched her gather her courage like it was a coat or something around her. You could tell by how she straightened her spine and firmed her mouth up in a straight line. “No, no one has said or done anything yet, but I know it’s just a matter of time. I refuse to be used again. I know that I’m now a whore in everyone’s eyes, but I won’t act or be treated like one. Nothing is ever free. You’re giving me clothes, a place to sleep, and food to eat. When the bill comes due, I won’t pay it on my back or my knees. Even dirty whores should have the right to say no. If you’re not gonna use me for yourselves, then I’ll be sold. Just let me go. I’ll never tell anyone, and you’ll never see me again. You can’t use me as a bargaining chip with Josiah.”

Our outraged inhalations were loud. I heard one of the guys mutter, “Fuck!”

Another said, “Jesus fucking Christ.”

Bull’s face filled with disbelief and anger. She swallowed hard and inched back further into the pillows. Her eyes darted from face to face. When they landed on mine, she froze. The utter rage inside of me was boiling to the top. I didn’t want to frighten her, but I had to shut this line of thinking down immediately. I glanced over my shoulder. “I need to speak to her alone.”

They all gave me understanding looks and then silently walked off. As Bull passed me, he gave my shoulder a comforting squeeze. Once they were gone, I faced her again. She was shaking again. I sat down on the chair beside her bed. Maybe if I wasn’t lurking over top of her, it would help.

“Aria, I need you to listen very carefully to this. No one in my club thinks you’re a goddamn whore or that you’re dirty. No one. If I ever hear anyone say that about you, I’ll beat them until they can’t walk. You might not be used to anyone helping and not expecting anything in exchange, but that’s because you’ve obviously not been around the right people, good people. We’re not angels, but we’re sure not

monsters, abusers, or soulless bastards either. There's no damn way you're paying us back on your back or knees, like you said. We don't expect you to have sex with us or to use you in any other way. As for selling you, Dove, we eliminate human traffickers when we find them. More than one woman we know has been raped or been a victim of people like them. Lastly, you will never be used as a bargaining chip with Josiah or anyone else. We want you safe and free. I want you to stay more than anything in the world."

She didn't say anything for a minute or more. I maintained eye contact with her. Finally, she said something. "You really mean that? How can I be sure? Motorcycle clubs are filled with men who cheat, steal, hurt and kill. I've seen more than just the Cannibals. What makes your club different? Why do you want me to stay so badly if you don't plan to use me, sell me, or bargain with me?"

"What other clubs have you been around?" This was news to me.

"They had this other club they were trying to get in good with. They came to party with them a few times. They were just as bad."

"They raped you too," I said. She nodded her head. I couldn't hold back my growl. She jumped. "It's okay. Sorry. It just pisses me off so much. All I want to do is track every one of them down and slowly kill them with my bare hands. What was the name of this other club? Do you know where they were from?"

"They're the Underworld Heathens of Athens, Georgia, according to their cuts. They were gonna work together to move merchandise, as they called it."

"What kind of merchandise?"

"Women. They tried to convince the Cannibals to give me to them to sell. They told them they couldn't because of Josiah, but that didn't mean they couldn't have fun." Her voice got super soft as she said it.

“God, baby, I can’t tell you how fucking much I wish I could take all the horror you went through away and that you never had to go through that hell. Since I can’t, the next best thing I can promise you is they’ll all pay. Those Heathens are now added to the list. As for why I want you to stay so badly, well, I have a confession to make. I didn’t plan to mention it for a while, not until you got comfortable with us, but since you asked...” I paused.

“Yes?”

“I know you don’t want anything to do with a man right now, but one day you will. When that day comes, I fucking hope you’ll see me as the man you want to be with.”

She gasped then began to shake her head no. “I can’t. I can never be with a man, to be his plaything.”

“I’m not looking for some plaything that I sleep with then move on. If that’s the case, I can get it from a bunch of women. I’m talking about a serious, permanent relationship kind of thing. An old lady type of thing.”

She appeared stunned. “Slash, why? If you really want someone like that, you can have your pick of women and not just for sex. You’re a very attractive man. You can find someone who’s clean and without my baggage. You don’t need a woman whose only sexual experience is rape. If you want kids, you don’t want someone unclean like me. You would want a woman you and your kids could be proud of. Plus, I doubt I could ever have sex.”

I couldn’t stop myself. I came up out of the chair and leaned over the rail, putting my face close to hers. She yelped. “Never let me hear you refer to yourself like that again. You’re not unclean, a whore, unworthy of me or any other man. I’d be proud as hell to have you as mine and to have you give me kids if you want them. I do but only if my woman does. As for never being able to have sex, you can do anything. You’re strong and you won’t let those evil fuckers defeat you. Give me and my club a chance to prove you can count on us and that you’re safe with us. Give me a chance to one day prove that you can more than meet my desires and needs. Say you’ll

come back to Hunters Creek with us when they say you're good to go."

As I waited for her answer, I was thinking about her slip-up. She'd been a virgin when they took her. One more thing to add to the list of grievances when the time came. I'd extract pain and blood for every tiny thing they did to her. It would be my pleasure and honor.

Aria: Chapter 4

Two weeks. It had been two weeks since I was discharged from the hospital with a clean bill of health and agreed, against my better judgment maybe, to come back to the Warriors' compound. There were times I thought I needed to have my head examined. Not because of them doing things to me that I didn't want, but because I was confused and didn't know what to do.

It was all Slash's fault. The man had me so off-kilter, sometimes I didn't think I knew which way was up. The things he told me that day in the hospital were forever looping around and around in my head. What made it harder, I think, was the fact that much of what he said, I saw happening. I found myself scared when I caught myself believing him.

One of the biggest was his assurance the club wanted only to protect me, not to hurt me or use me in any way. One big way they were proving it was with how they treated their old ladies and children. They were loving, protective and utterly committed to them. None of the Cannibals had old ladies, but some of the Heathens who came to party with them had. They brought their women with them, and they were treated like dirt.

Their women had to wait on the men like they were their servants. It was nothing to see them hit one of the women if they angered them. They passed around their old ladies to the Cannibals too. Those poor things were expected to have sex with whoever they told them to fuck. It was their men's way of cementing the business deal they were planning. The looks of utter despair on their faces made me sick. At least I didn't belong to one man and then was disillusioned when he pimped me out. I had no idea if any of them had kids. If they did, they at least didn't bring them along to see the horror. Thank God for small miracles. The thought of children seeing and experiencing their perversions made me sick. I wondered at what age did they start pimping out their daughters and possibly sons.

The Warriors were the exact opposite, I was finding. They looked for ways to serve their old ladies, who I found out were not just their old ladies but their wives, too. They opened doors, pulled out chairs, and fetched things for them. It was nothing to hear them asking if their women were alright or if they needed anything. They constantly touched and kissed them, too. It was never in a degrading way, either. You could feel the love oozing out of them, and it went both ways. The ladies adored their men. Even the single guys were respectful toward the women and would show affection and manners around them. That's not to say they couldn't be a little crude or didn't swear. They did, but there were no derogatory remarks made to the women, and none of them touched a woman in a sexual manner who wasn't his.

As if all this wasn't enough, the way they all treated the babies and kids stunned me. They laughed and played with them. They would look out for them to be sure they didn't get hurt or get into something they shouldn't. Again, even the single guys did it. If one was misbehaving, whoever was closest would address the issue, but it was done in a kind way. I hadn't seen anyone beat a child. There'd been a few swats on the butt, but it was far from abuse. This was even more illustrated by the fact that one of the Warriors, Maverick, and his old lady, Rylan, gave birth to their second daughter during those two weeks. Her name was Autumn, and she joined big sis Amiah. The way Maverick looked at her and his family was incredible.

I thought initially, maybe they were only this way with their old ladies and kids, but outsiders would be treated differently. They proved me wrong again. None of the men touched me or looked at me in a way that made me uncomfortable or afraid they were about to rape me. They'd joke and laugh. Sometimes, they'd be a tad flirty, but not in a disgusting way. None of them were dragging me off and forcing me to have sex with them or a group of their brothers. They didn't have strangers coming to party with them and giving me to them as a bargaining chip.

You would think that by experiencing all these things, I'd be in heaven and happy as could be. Well, I wasn't

completely because I kept waiting for the other shoe to fall. I was so scared to believe it was real. That Slash was real. He has been a gentleman. He never touched me inappropriately. I could see desire on his face, but he didn't force himself on me. When he wasn't working, he liked to spend his free time with me. Mainly, it was in the common room of the clubhouse. I never went to his room or allowed him to come to the townhouse.

What worried me about this more and more was I knew it couldn't last forever. He'd get tired of waiting around for me to sleep with him, and he'd either force me or he'd go back to hooking up with other women. Hell, maybe he was still sleeping with them. I wasn't in the clubhouse all the time. He could easily be sleeping with the women who came to party and sleep with the men after I went to bed. Whenever I saw those women walk in, I'd leave. The sight of them made me sick, just like the thought of him being with another woman did.

I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that those women were there willingly and enjoyed sleeping with any of the men who wanted them. They didn't see themselves as being whores or used. They felt liberated and like they were free women. I knew this because the old ladies had explained them to me. It seemed they couldn't understand the attraction to sleeping with the guys and having no connection or relationship with them other than for sex. There'd been women like them with the Cannibals, but not many because of the way they were cruel to them. I'd often wondered if the ones who did come were there due to past abuse or a shitty home life. Did they honestly have no self-esteem, or did they think they didn't deserve better?

What astonished me the most was even as afraid as I was of being touched and forced by a man, I desired Slash. Thinking of him or seeing him turned me on. I worked hard not to show it, but it was there. How could I even contemplate what it would be like to give myself to him when the thought of having sex terrified me? It was like I didn't want any man to touch me, but if it was him, I might be able to do it. It was crazy.

Maybe if I'd had sexual experience before this whole ordeal, I'd be able to cope better or at least understand myself. Did my desire for him despite the trauma mean I was now programmed to be a slut? But if I was, why wasn't I attracted to the other Warriors? I could acknowledge they were good-looking, attractive men, but they didn't cause my heart to beat faster, or to become breathless, or make my nipples hard and my panties damp. I was having very sexual dreams about the two of us. They were waking me up at night, and the only way to go back to sleep was to touch myself. My efforts weren't the best. Many times, I was left more frustrated. I'd thought about getting a sex toy to help, but I didn't know what to get, nor did I have money to buy one.

Not having money was a big factor for me. I was used to working and being busy before the Cannibals had taken me. I missed earning money and taking care of myself. I wasn't looking to have anyone take care of me. I wanted, no I needed, to be independent. I couldn't ever rely totally on a man or a group of people. I'd learned the hard way that you can be hurt in so many ways when you're at someone's total mercy.

I knew why the Warriors were keeping me inside the compound, but I was feeling claustrophobic. Surely, none of the remaining Cannibals would be stupid enough to come to Hunters Creek. I figured they had run back to wherever they came from and hid. I'd asked Slash if anyone had gone to Topeka to check out their old place that I'd heard about, and he told me they had, but there were none of them there. The Warriors were trying to figure out if they had other chapters or places they could hole up.

As much as I worried about the Cannibals, I was more worried about Josiah. He had to know by now that I'd been rescued, and half his club was dead. I wanted to know, but I was too afraid to ask if there was a way the Warriors could find out. It seemed like they could find out just about anything. His being in prison wasn't likely to stop them.

Looking out the window of the townhouse, I came to a decision. I'd been repeatedly told if there was anything I needed to let them know. I hadn't asked for anything, but I was

in need of a few things from the store. Feminine items that I didn't want to ask Slash or a prospect to get. He'd given me money that I so far had refused to use. He said it was for me to use if I needed something when he was at work, and others were going out. I was going to find out if a trip was planned, but rather than send someone else to get it, I would go. Hopefully, they would let me.

Slipping on my shoes and grabbing the money he had left me, I headed to the clubhouse. It was the most likely place to find someone. I'd showered and brushed my hair and stuff when I got up. There was no need to put makeup on even though I had some courtesy of the ladies. When I walked in, I found there were a few people in there. Player, Gavin, and Diego were sitting at the bar. When I came in, they all looked at me. Player and Gavin smiled and nodded at me. Diego swiftly dropped his head.

I knew seeing me made him uncomfortable. He'd seen what the others had done to me. I hated to face him, knowing he knew, but there was nothing I could do about it. The one good thing was he'd never touched me. He'd been unable to stop the rapes and other abuse, but he did small things like sneak me food and stuff. Sometimes, he'd distract them from beating me as much or interrupted one of them raping me. That was all before he finally got the courage to try and help me escape. When I was caught and returned, I could tell he was terrified I'd tell them what he did, but I didn't. After that, he was more careful around me, and there were no more attempts to help me. I couldn't blame him. He was trying to protect himself. They would've killed him if they found out what he had done.

I think this was part of why he was so uncomfortable around me. He was reminded that he failed. I tried a couple of times to get him alone so we could talk about it, but he made sure it never happened. Player got up and came ambling over to me. "Do you need something, Aria?" he asked with a smile on his face.

"Yes, I hope you can help me. I need to run into town and pick up a few things. I was wondering if anyone was

planning to go who I could hitch a ride with.”

His smile became a slight frown. “Well, sweetheart, I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Why don’t you tell me what you need, and I can get it?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s things I need to pick out. It’s too hard to tell you what to get. If it’s not today, I can wait and go tomorrow or the next day.”

“It’s not a matter of no one being able to take you. It’s just we don’t want you out in public. We’re trying to protect you. Besides, Slash isn’t here, and he won’t like it.”

“It’s none of Slash’s business what I do. Surely, I’m allowed to get a few things. If it’s a matter of money, I have some, and I’ll find a way to pay it back.”

He sighed. “You know that’s not true about Slash. He doesn’t want you to get hurt. It’s not because he wants to control you, either. Why don’t you wait until he gets back from work and then ask him to take you to town if it’s something you really feel you have to do rather than let one of us?”

It was rude, and I knew it, but I did it anyway. I turned my back on him and walked away. “Hey, Aria, come back. Don’t be that way,” he said with a slight pleading tone in his voice. I ignored him and kept going right out the door.

I wondered if he’d come after me, but he didn’t. Filled with anger, I knew I couldn’t stand to go back to the house and sit there like a good little prisoner. So, instead, I took off walking. I’d explored the compound all around the clubhouse and the houses, but there was more land I could see that lay on the backside of the houses and common areas that I hadn’t seen. I felt funny going back there like I was snooping, so I hadn’t gone. Well, today was the day I was going to do it. Fuck it. Maybe I’d find another way out of this damn place. So much for me not being a prisoner. It really was that I was free only when they were willing to allow it.

My anger made me walk fast, and in no time, I was past the houses and headed into the woods and the unknown.

As I wandered, I realized how peaceful it was back here. There were no voices or prying eyes as long as you ignored the critters, which I didn't mind. I didn't have to worry about what they were thinking of me or if they were judging me. It wasn't long until I found a stream. I walked along its edge. The sound of the water running was so soothing that after a while, I found a nice tree to sit under on the bank. I sat down to listen to it.

As I sat there, the rustling of the leaves, the babbling of the water, and the tiny calls of birds made me relax. My eyes grew heavy. I didn't sleep well again last night. Nightmares and thoughts of Slash had kept waking me up. I had to find a way to sleep soon, or I'd lose my mind. Sleep deprivation did crazy things to our brains and bodies. I knew it from my studies in school.

Remembering my classes, I wanted to cry. How would I ever go back to finish my degree and do what I had wanted to do for years? Without a job, a place to live, and the guarantee that I was safe, it would be impossible. *God, let me just sit here and wake up in a hundred years. Everything should be good by then,* I thought. I blinked again, my eyelids drooped, and that's the last I remembered as I lost the battle with exhaustion.

Slash:

Pulling to a stop in front of the clubhouse, I glanced at the townhomes. Maybe I should've ridden straight over there, but I wanted to talk to Player first. His text said he'd upset Aria, and I might want to help soothe her ruffled feathers. His text made me leave work early and come home. I wondered what the hell he said to upset her. If it was bad enough, we might need to take a trip behind the proverbial woodshed.

She was still trying her hardest to relax and trust us. I knew it was hard on her, and everyone had been doing their best to help me with it. I saw things that proved it was happening. It wasn't as fast as I would have liked, but then again, having her accept my club and me in every way I wanted wouldn't be fast enough even if it happened this second. However, I was glad to see that she was willing to spend most of her free time with me. We were getting to know each other.

Our time spent together, I wouldn't trade for anything. It only made me fall for her harder and to show me she was the one for me. She wasn't there yet with me, but I knew she was attracted to me. The way her pupils would dilate or the way her breathing would change told me she was. I ached to know if there were more sexual reactions I couldn't see. Did her nipples ever get hard, or did her pussy get wet? Did she ever dream of me like I did her?

My dreams were a killer. I was always hard for her, and when the dreams happened, I had no choice but to jerk off until I got relief. Many times it took more than once to get the damn thing to stay down so I could sleep. My dreams were erotic as hell, and I burned to be making love to her for real and not just in my mind, but I refused to push her. If I did and it made her start back at the beginning, or worse, made her say she wouldn't be with me ever, it would be the death of me.

Our time spent together was usually around other people or close to them. I understood her being leery of being

alone with me, even though I wanted it more than I could say. She avoided my room at the clubhouse and never asked me over to her place. The other thing I noticed that I wanted to ask her about was how she left as soon as she caught sight of a hang around or bunny coming through the door of the clubhouse. It hadn't often happened since she tended to go to her little haven before things got crazy, but I'd seen it.

I wondered if they reminded her of things she saw at the Cannibals clubhouse or what was done to her. I doubted they treated bunnies or hang arounds if they had them better than they had her. I wanted to tell her she didn't need to worry about that here. My single brothers might not be shy and would fuck a woman out in the open, as long as there were no kids around, but they wouldn't get rough with them or do anything they didn't consent to.

I always headed to my room as soon as she left and those women came in. I didn't want them rubbing up against me or touching me while they made their suggestions on how they could help me relax or put a smile on my face. I was the most sexually frustrated I'd ever been in my life, but no way would I use them to get relief, not even a hand job or a blow job. First of all, the thought of them touching me turned me off. Secondly, even if it didn't turn me off, it would feel like cheating. Aria and I might not be having sex or calling each other boyfriend and girlfriend, but she was my girlfriend in my heart and mind. I would never do something like that for temporary relief and lose her. My hand did just fine.

Shutting off my bike and putting down my kickstand, I stripped off my gloves and helmet. I left the helmet on the bike and put my gloves in the side compartment. Striding to the door, I threw it open and walked inside. Player would either be in his room or the common room. Looking around, I saw a few people were around. Some were old ladies with their kids. I nodded or waved at them as they greeted me with smiles, waves, or even hellos. I didn't see Player anywhere, so I headed for his room.

At his door, I knocked hard. I could hear music from inside. Shit, I hoped he wasn't in there fucking one of the

bunnies. It was early, but if a brother wanted sex, he would call one of them to come to his room during the day. Sometimes, they might ask a woman from town to visit if they wanted a repeat performance. I was about to leave and go talk to Aria when he answered it.

He was shirtless and his jeans were unbuttoned. His hair was a mess. Shit! I didn't look past him to see who he was with. I didn't care. "Sorry for the interruption. I'll come back later. I was just gonna see what went down with Aria. Let me go talk to her, and we can talk later," I told him quickly as I was backing away from his door.

"Whoa, come on in. You're not interrupting anything. Come on," he said as he backed into his room and waved for me to come in.

I slowly followed him. Was he done and going to kick the woman out so we could talk? As I got inside, I was surprised to see his bed was empty, the bathroom door was open, and it was dark in there. He shook his head.

"You thought I had a woman in here, didn't you? Damn, not in the middle of the day. I can barely stand them at night anymore. All the bullshit they carry on about that I have no interest in, or it's just plain stupid. I've been leaving them and their shit alone, man."

"Since when? You love women. I've never known you to pass up sex," I said in surprise as I sat down on the edge of the small desk he had along the wall. He sat on the bed.

"It's been coming on for a while, I guess. It's just old, but forget about me. You want to talk about what I said to upset Aria, right?"

"I do. Your text didn't say what it was about, only that you talked to her, and she got upset. I assume she's at the house."

"Yeah, she should be unless she's over at one of the houses with one of the old ladies now. She left here in a huff. I didn't go after her at first so she could settle down. She was

mad at me. When I went to apologize and try to explain better, she wouldn't come to the door."

"What the hell did you say to her?" I asked with a warning tone in my voice.

"It wasn't anything bad. Not like you're thinking and wanting to beat my ass for. I'd never do anything to make her uncomfortable or fear for her safety. You know me better than that. I might be called Player, but I'm not a cretin. She came looking to see if anyone was going into town. She wanted to go with them to get some stuff. It was Gavin, Diego, and me in the common room. I told her to just give me a list, and I'd get someone to do it. She said she wanted to do it herself. That what she wanted was too hard to tell someone, and if she couldn't go today, could she in the next day or two."

"And you said what to her?"

"I told her it wasn't about not having someone able to take her. It was because we didn't want her in public since we were trying to protect her. That you weren't here and wouldn't like it. That's when she said it was none of your business what she did, and if it was about money, she had some and would find a way to pay it back."

I groaned, imagining how he had made her feel. The fact she thought she had to pay the goddamn money back frustrated me.

"I reminded her it wasn't true, that it wasn't any of your business, and you don't want her to get hurt. It's not because you're trying to control her. Then I suggested she wait until you got home to ask you if you'd take her if it was something she really felt she had to get rather than us. That's when she turned her back to me and walked out. I called for her to come back, but she kept going. I almost went after her, but then Gavin said maybe I should let her settle and think about what I said, so that's what I did. About ten minutes later, I went to the house, and you know what happened. I texted you so you wouldn't walk into anything blind when you got home and in case you might want to come home to talk to her."

I groaned. “Damn, I bet she’s over there pacing and ready to battle when she sees me. Did she say what it was she needed?”

“Nope. Hey, I didn’t mean to upset her. I just know if anything were to happen to her, you’d lose your mind. We all know you’re gone on her. Have you two talked about how you feel about her? She seems to be spending a lot of time with you.”

“We are spending a lot of time together, and she knows. I had to tell her what I hoped for in the future when she was in the hospital. It was the only way to get her to agree not to call the cops on us and to come back here and let us protect her. It feels like we’ve been making some progress, but I still have a long way to go.”

“Fuck, then this didn’t make it better. Hey, let me go with you and apologize. She can tear a strip off me rather than you. Give me a minute to put on my shirt and cut.”

Nodding to acknowledge it was fine with me, I waited as he did just that. As soon as he was done, we left his room and headed down the hall then out the back door to cut across to the townhomes. Arriving at her door, I was the one to knock while he stood there waiting with his hands in his pockets. There was no answer. I knocked again.

When she didn’t answer a second time, I pounded on it and yelled loudly. “Aria, open the door! There’s no reason to be this upset over nothing. Let me and Player in. He wants to apologize for upsetting you. Come on, open the door. If you still want to go, I’ll take you now.”

I waited a minute. Still nothing. I began to worry. Was she alright? Had she hurt herself either accidentally or on purpose? I didn’t want to think about the latter, but it was a possibility. She appeared lost and depressed at times, and after what she’d gone through, it preyed on her mind. Reaching out, I tried the door handle on the off chance she had forgotten to lock it. I was surprised when it turned in my hand, and the door opened.

Hurrying inside, I went to the first bedroom. To get there, we had to pass the living room and kitchen. They were empty. At the first bedroom, the door was open, and it was empty. "Aria, where are you?" I shouted. Still no answer. My heart rate picked up. Player took the next bedroom while I went to the last one. It only took us a couple of minutes to determine she was nowhere in the house.

"Where the fuck could she be? She didn't leave, did she?" I thought about the night a couple of weeks ago when she ran as I asked him.

"How could she? Walker was at the gate. He wouldn't have let her leave," he said with a frown.

"Let's go ask him if he took a break. You know, sometimes they do if it's not busy. Or he could've been called away to do something for someone."

Player didn't argue. Like the good friend and brother he was, he followed me outside, closing the door behind us. I didn't waste time getting my ass across the way to the gate. Walker was sitting there playing something on his phone. When he saw us, he stood up. "What's wrong?" he asked as he scanned my face.

"Did you see Aria today? Did she come to the gate? Have you taken a break or left to do anything else since you took over for Gavin at noon?" Player asked him.

He shook his head no. "No, I didn't take any kind of break, and I haven't seen her. Why?"

"She's not in the clubhouse or her place, and she was upset about something. I need you to stay here. If you see her, call me, and don't let her go anywhere. Do you understand me? She might try to say she needs to leave, but you don't let her," I told him sternly.

"Sure, no problem. Did you check to see if she might be at someone's house? A few of the ladies were home all day. She's gone to their houses before during the day. I bet she went there and lost track of time," he said, trying to be reassuring.

“Thanks, and no, we haven’t gone to check yet. I’m gonna send a group text. That way, we don’t have to go door-to-door knocking and asking,” I told him.

As we started back toward the clubhouse, I wondered if it would take me a long time to get her not to be upset at us, at Player. It was totally out of concern for her that he refused to take her off the compound. Back inside, I went to the bar and sent out the text, but only after I asked those inside if they’d seen her in the past hour or so. Every single one of them shook their heads or said no.

I was impatiently waiting to hear back from everyone when the first responses came rolling in. As I read each one and saw their answers were no and most of them were still at work or otherwise busy somewhere, my stomach started to clench tighter and tighter. By the time the last brother had responded, and so had the old ladies, I was dizzy and in a panic. It was like she’d vanished again. I slammed my fist down on the bar. Player grabbed my shoulder. My head was whirling with thoughts of everything that could’ve happened to her.

“Hey, I don’t think there’s anything to worry about. She didn’t leave. Not unless she hiked her ass over a twelve-foot wall and razor wire. Although I could see her having the guts to do it if she really had to, I don’t think she would’ve done it for this. Maybe she took a walk and either lost track of time, or she’s sitting somewhere chillin’,” Player offered.

I took a deep breath and worked not to snap at him. He was right. Why would she do something that drastic over wanting to go to town? I wondered what it was she wanted to get that she felt no one else could or should get for her. “You’re right. I’m gonna go look for her.”

“I’ll help. Let’s see who else can help us,” he said just as the door opened and some of the club brothers strolled in. He waved them over, and that’s how a search party was formed within minutes. We divided up to go looking for my upset woman.

Aria: Chapter 5

It was the sound of voices yelling my name which woke me up. As I stretched, I became cognizant that I was leaning up against a tree with rough bark rubbing against my back, and the hard ground was making my ass hurt. Yawning, I tried to get my sleep-addled brain to think why people would be calling for me and to figure out where the hell I was.

It took a few seconds for the fog to begin to clear and the memory of where I was and why to come back to me. I admit, I was still a tad miffed I couldn't leave. I understood keeping someone safe, but this was ridiculous. Right on the heels of this thought came the uneasiness again that they were more than protecting me. Were they doing it for another reason, and if so, what would it mean for me down the road? I wasn't about to be anyone's hostage or slave again.

Standing up, I staggered a bit. I'd sat too long, and my legs were stiff. I had to grab the tree trunk to keep from falling. Once I felt like I could walk and not fall on my ass or face, I faced toward the direction I was pretty sure my temporary home was and started heading that way. The sun was further down in the sky, so I knew I'd been sleeping for a while.

I hated to leave the stream behind. It was such a peaceful place to relax and think. I'd have to remember how to get here. Although, maybe it was time to start thinking of the future and how I was going to live and take care of myself away from the Warriors. Yes, the Cannibals were still out there, and I'd have to be super careful, but hiding behind these walls wasn't any way to live. The club had no idea when they'd find the rest of them so they could be eliminated. Hell, it could be years or maybe never. I'd go nuts.

Reluctantly, I trudged toward civilization, if you could call it that. I was still not in the mood to see or talk to anyone, but from the sound of my name being called, I'd been gone too long, in their opinion. What difference did it make? I'd stayed

in the walls of the compound. No one could get to me here, so what was the big deal? I heard my name shouted again.

I wanted to keep quiet and see how long it would take for one of them to find me, but I knew that was childish. I yelled back, "I'm here. I'm fine. No need to shout down the world." I wasn't sure whose voice it was other than one of the guys. It wasn't Slash's. I knew that for a fact.

A few minutes later, out of the woods, came Stalker. He was frowning and didn't waste time getting to me. I pasted what I thought was a pleasant smile on my face. "Hi, Stalker, why are you yelling?"

He gave me an incredulous look. "Why am I yelling? How about because you have Slash losing his mind because he thinks you either ran off again, were somehow kidnapped from under our noses, or you're hurt? Personally, I think you're just sulking like a brat. What the hell is your problem? All we're trying to do is protect you, and you have to make it hard as hell to do. Can't you just be thankful and stop the bullshit running off? Or do you get some kind of thrill from causing worry and trouble?" he snapped.

Stalker had always been polite to me. Hearing what he truly thought of me hurt. It made me want to lash out. I stopped smiling. "I'm going back to the house," was all I said to him as I passed him.

"That's all you've got to say? Jesus, woman, I know you had some crap go down, but don't treat those helping you like shit."

Rage hit me like a hammer. I swung around to confront him. "You don't know a fucking thing about the shit I had done to me. You think you do, but you don't. Have you ever had your body used any way someone else wanted against your will? More than one at the same time? Have you been raped? Sodomized? Forced to beg for food and have to pay for it with your body? How many times has Bull bartered your fucking body to gain a favor or seal a deal? Were you chased down and dragged back over and over when you tried to escape or have yourself crippled because of it? How many

times have you thought of just ending it to get away from the pain, shame, and utter humiliation, Stalker? Come on, tell me!” I screamed.

I was breaking apart, and it was the last thing I wanted to do. They didn’t get to see me like this. His face was no longer frowning. He now looked horrified and contrite. “Fuck, Aria, I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t mean it like it sounded. I don’t know what any of that is like. I hate that you went through that.”

I turned my back on him. The tears were about to fall, and I wouldn’t do it in front of him. Crying didn’t get you anything but more humiliation and abuse. I’d learned that the hard way. I’d taken a few steps when suddenly a hand shackled my wrist and tugged on me, turning me around. Instantly, I was no longer at the Warriors’ compound. I was trapped with Cannibals, and it was Ox again, grabbing me to hurt me. He was the worst. He enjoyed causing as much pain as he could, the sadistic bastard. I wasn’t even aware that I let out a blood-curdling scream and swung at him. In my mind, I was going after Ox. No matter what, I wouldn’t go peacefully with him. I hated him and I would fight him every time, no matter the cost.

A voice was yelling at me. I heard Ox’s voice. Hands were gripping my arms and shaking me. It was Ox capturing me to force me to be hurt and degraded again. I screamed harder and kicked, squirmed, and tried to head-butt him. I couldn’t punch him or scratch since he had a hold of my wrists, but I could bite. I went for the arm closest to me. It was snatched away before I could get a chunk. This freed up one arm, and I was able to start punching.

Slash:

Coming up on your woman fighting like she was trying to save her life and seeing her fighting against one of your brothers was the last sight I ever thought I'd see. Her screams were so loud they made my ears hurt. She was swearing, screaming in terror, and begging. As for Stalker, he was yelling at her while holding her arms and trying to subdue her and avoid her kicks and punches. Without a thought, I ran up to them and shoved him away from her.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I screamed at him as he fell back. I wrapped my arms around her thrashing body, which did nothing to make her stop.

He gave me a shocked look. “Nothing. She just went insane. I'm trying to calm her the hell down, but she's not hearing me. I think she's having a flashback,” he yelled back.

Feeling like an idiot for shoving him, I nodded. “Shit, sorry,” I shouted back.

The whole time we were yelling, she was still fighting. I gave her my full attention as Stalker backed off. Her eyes were wild, and she looked terrified. “Baby, listen, it's Slash. Aria, my Dove, it's me. Please calm down. You're gonna hurt yourself. I'm here. No one's gonna hurt you,” I yelled over her wailing.

Vaguely, I noticed others had joined us and were keeping their distance as she fought her nightmare in broad daylight for all to see. It tore out my heart and made me sick to see her like this. It made me understand even more what it had been like for her, although there was no way I could ever understand it fully. I was terrified she wouldn't come out of it. She'd suffered for so long. Was this the end? Would her mind finally break?

She was not only punching and trying to kick and bite me to get away, but she was scratching her nails down her own arms. Her words pierced me like a knife. “No, not again. Don't do that. It hurts. Oh God, no, please stop. I don't want you to

touch me. Not them, I can't do it, there's too many. Please, kill me." Hearing this, I found she wasn't the only one with tears running down her face.

Finally, I crushed her to me and held her as tight as I could. She still struggled, but I was too strong for her. Her sobs and pleas kept coming. I have no idea how long we were like that before I became aware that Zara was there. She came up to us with Demon. She was crying, too.

"Slash, we have to get her to calm down. She's going to hurt herself or you. Let me give her a shot to help her relax. It won't hurt her, I promise. She's too far gone to do it on her own."

I hated the idea of doing something to her without her consent, but Zara was right. As a doctor, she'd know. Nodding my head yes, I wrapped Aria tighter. Demon came up behind her.

"We don't want her to break that needle off inside her arm. I'll help hold her just for a minute. I hate to touch her because I know it'll trigger her more, but we have to, Slash."

I knew he was asking for my understanding. Again, all I could do was nod. My throat had a lump in it, making it impossible to talk at the moment. When he enclosed her in his arms, she screamed louder and tried to fight even harder. Luckily, she seemed to be wearing down some, so we were able to hold her long enough for Zara to inject her. As soon as she was done, Demon backed off quickly. I was left trying to soothe my woman and bring her back to me.

It was several minutes before she began to sag, and then her eyes drooped. Her screaming lessened, and she wasn't fighting as much. I took a chance and picked her up. Someone, probably Bull, had Walker bring an SUV out. I walked over to it and slid into the passenger seat with her in my arms. Walker got behind the wheel to take us back. The others started walking or, in some cases, they had ridden their bikes. She was sobbing now. I rocked her and murmured words of comfort. I didn't know what else to do. I had no idea what triggered this.

I'd ask Stalker later to tell me exactly what was said. Right now, she had to be taken care of.

“Slash, where do you want her? The clubhouse or the townhouse?” Walker asked.

“Take us to her place.”

“We'll be there in a few. Do you know what happened?” he asked softly.

“No. All I know is she went off on Stalker for some reason. Believe me, I'm gonna find out and make sure it doesn't happen again.”

“It makes me sick to think what she went through. Diego has told us a little about how bad it was there. He saw the shit she went through. He feels guilty that he didn't get her free. He tried. They caught her when he did.”

I hadn't talked to Diego about it. I think I didn't want to know what he had seen or done to her, even though she swore he hadn't raped her like the others. Hearing Walker talking about it made me push my fear aside. I needed to know it all in order to help her.

“What did he say specifically?”

“Slash, I think you should ask him. He didn't give us details, only the outline. It was beyond fucked up. He's fucked up to be honest. Have you noticed he stays away from her? He feels guilty and thinks she hates him. He doesn't want to cause her more pain. He's been talking about leaving so she doesn't have to be reminded every day.”

A part of me thought it was a good idea, but the rest thought it would be a mistake. I didn't know him well, but what I did know made me think he was a good guy. It wouldn't be fair to have him leave and be at the mercy of the Cannibals if they found him. He was young and had made a stupid mistake. He thought they were good and found out too late that they were evil. He'd tried to rectify his mistake by helping Belle escape and wanting to help Raina. He'd come to us afterward to tell us where Raina was. He attempted to make things right.

“You’re right. I’ll talk to him.”

He looked relieved. It was a few minutes later when he stopped right in front of the townhomes and got out to come around to open the door for me. I eased out. She was limp in my arms. Her eyes were closed, and ragged whimpers, along with full-body shuddering breaths, randomly ran through her body.

“Thanks, Walker,” I told him as I walked off.

“You’re welcome. If you need anything else, just text me. I’ll be in the clubhouse. Do you need anything now?”

“No, I think we’re good. I’ll let you know. Later.”

He nodded in acknowledgment as he got back into the SUV. I went into the house. I gently closed the door so it wouldn’t disturb her. She had drifted off to sleep. I took her into the main bedroom. When we searched for her earlier, I’d noted which room she was using. I lay her down on the bed after jerking the cover and top sheet to the foot of it. She curled into a fetal position. I took off her shoes.

Knowing I wasn’t going anywhere for a while, I took off my boots and then my cut. I put our shoes in the closet and hung my cut over the back of a chair near the bed. I didn’t know if I should leave her alone or if I should hold her. Deciding to see what she would do, I crawled on the bed and slowly put my hand on her. She instantly tensed.

“Aria, baby, it’s Slash. I just want to hold you, Dove. Relax. You’re safe,” I whispered. Her body slowly relaxed.

Taking it slow, I spooned her and wrapped an arm around her middle. She buried her face in my chest. I inhaled her scent and the smell of the fresh air which clung to her. Rubbing my hand up and down her ribs and hip, I whispered to her.

“Sweetheart, I don’t know what caused you to do this, but whatever it was, you’re safe. Nothing, and no one will hurt you here. My whole club and I will make sure of that. We think the world of you. We’re your family. All we want is to make you safe.”

Sleepily, as if she was talking in her sleep, she answered me. Her eyes never opened. “Stalker doesn’t. He hates me because I upset you. He thinks I’m a brat and should be thankful instead of running off. He said I get a thrill out of it and treat you all like shit. I don’t get a thrill, and I don’t want to treat you badly. I hate it. I don’t want to remember. God, I just want to die. That’ll make it go away. Why did you have to save me from the fire? You should’ve let it have me.” She barely whispered the last.

As she fell back to sleep, I filled up with rage and horror. I was so angry that if Stalker was in front of me, I’d tear his goddamn head off. What the fuck did he say to her? Why was I horrified? It was due to her wanting to die. She needed help now. I had to find someone to help her see that killing herself wasn’t the answer and that she could get past this and be happy. I planned to make it my life’s mission.

A gentle knock on the bedroom door jerked my attention away from her and my thoughts. I was picturing beating the shit out of Stalker. Glancing over, I saw Bull, Zara, and Demon. I could hear more people in the hall and probably downstairs. The worried expressions on their faces told me how concerned and upset they were.

“How’s she doing, Slash?” Bull softly asked as I gave them a chin lift. They came into the room and stood a couple of feet away from the bed. She didn’t move.

“Bull, we’ve got to find her help soon. She’s about to take her own life, I think. She mumbled something about Stalker and him going off on her. I want his ass brought to me. Then she said she’d be better off dead and asked me why I didn’t let her die in that fire. I don’t need to tell you I can’t live without her. I need her. Please, tell me what to do,” I pleaded.

He was my president, my brother, my friend, and, at times, my substitute father. We all looked to him to fix things. It was what a parent and leader did. His and Demon’s frowns grew worse. Zara appeared to be shocked.

“You must be mistaken. I can’t see Stalker doing anything like that. She’s confused. The medicine I gave her

can confuse people. I agree, she needs help. I know someone I can call. She'll be able to help and we can trust her to keep what she hears to herself. Right now, we need to let Aria rest and not leave her alone. After what she's endured, suicide is a possibility, I hate to say."

Hearing it from Zara, as a doctor, made me more anxious. I knew it was a probability, but I'd pushed it to the back of my mind. I told myself she was too strong to ever do it; however, we all had our limits. If she was going to get better, I had work to do. Besides taking out the Cannibals and her half-brother, Josiah, I had to know what they did to her and find her a mental health counselor. I needed to know what my club brother said or did to trigger her and make her think he hated her. I had a feeling it would lead to me whipping his ass.

"Zara, please get to work on your contact. She should come to see her as soon as possible. Demon, go find Stalker. I want to talk to him and find out what the hell he did. Slash, you can stay here with her. Keep her calm and let her feel you love her," Bull ordered. He automatically slid into taking-charge mode.

"I can do that. I'll be back as soon as I can. She's going to sleep for a while. I'll be back to check on her before it wears off. Text me if she changes," Zara said before she gave Demon a swift kiss and then left the room.

"I'll go find Stalker. I want to know what that stupid asshole did," Demon growled.

"We'll talk to him together," Bull said.

"No, I want to talk to him. Do you think Jocelyn or one of the other ladies would come sit with her while I do it? I won't leave the house. It's my job to find out what happened between them. I want to talk to Diego, too. Walker suggested I should. I need to understand exactly what she suffered. He knows, and he feels guilty about it and the fact he couldn't save her."

"You don't need to worry about Stalker right now. We can handle him. As for Diego, it might help. I know he avoids her, but I'm not sure why," Bull said.

“Bull, I appreciate you wanting to speak to Stalker. I do. But it needs to be me. Stalker triggered this. I want to know why and how. It’ll help us avoid doing it again. Will you go get him, Demon? I can wait until after I talk to Stalker to talk to Diego. I’ll come down to the kitchen after one of the ladies gets here.”

Recognizing I wouldn’t change my mind, they both nodded. Bull took out his phone and sent a text. I assumed it was to ask Jocelyn to come here. Demon, on the other hand, left the room. When Bull was done, he excused himself to go wait on her. He promised he’d bring her right up.

I have no idea how long it was before he was back with her in tow. I’d closed my eyes and held Aria, semi-drifting asleep along with her. When Jocelyn came into the room, she wasn’t alone. She had Rylan with her. I knew instantly why. Out of all the old ladies here, she would be the one most able to sympathize and understand being raped. Her stepbrother had done it to her a couple of years ago. I should’ve asked her to talk to Aria as soon as we brought her here. They came to the bed.

“Go do what you need to do. We’ll stay with her. If she wakes up or anything changes, we’ll text you right away,” Jocelyn said.

Easing out of bed, I tucked the pillow up against her so she’d feel like she was still being held. She moaned but didn’t wake up. “Thanks, Joc, Rylan. I hope it won’t take long.”

“Take your time. We’ve got the kids covered. Dev has Joc’s, and Maverick is with ours,” Rylan said with a smile.

Giving each of them a kiss on the cheek, I went and put on my boots and cut, then followed Bull downstairs. I would’ve felt naked without my cut. When we entered the kitchen, Stalker was standing there. He looked upset and worried. Several of the brothers were with him. Demon was standing there looking pissed off.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Slash. I didn’t know that I’d set her off. I just wanted her to realize that what she was doing

was causing you to worry and the rest of us to do the same. I shouldn't have been so hard on her.”

I didn't stop to think. I just crowded him and stared into his eyes. “She said that you hate her and you think she's a brat and gets some kind of thrill out of making me worry. I want you to tell me exactly what you said to her and why,” I snarled.

“Shit, okay, this is what happened.” I listened as he quickly ran me through finding her, having her ask him why he was yelling for her, and then her walking off. He said it had ticked him off after searching for her and being worried, so he'd blasted her. As he explained, the urge to bury my fist in his face grew. I must've moved closer or done something that clued the others into what I was thinking because they moved closer and edged a bit between us. When he was done telling me what had happened, I was livid, but I wanted to know what she had said to him.

“You said she flipped out. How? What did she do or say? I know she was fighting you when I came up to you. What happened before that?”

He hung his head. “She lost it and started yelling about the stuff that happened to her. She said I didn't know anything about the things the Cannibals did to her. That I might think I know, but I didn't. She asked me if I'd ever had my body used any way someone else wanted to use it and against my will. If I'd been raped repeatedly and had more than one person rape me at the same time. How many times had Bull bartered using my body to seal a deal or gain a favor.”

He paused, looking sick. I felt like puking. However, I had to know it all. I gestured for him to continue. “She asked if I'd ever been chased and dragged back several times when I tried to escape or had myself crippled because of it? Then she asked how many times I had thought of ending it to get away from the shame, pain, and humiliation. It was like something broke in her. She started fighting and screaming. I didn't know what to do. I was afraid she would hurt herself, so I tried to subdue her.”

I had to give him credit. He stood there and didn't attempt to block the fist I threw at his head. He took the hit to the jaw and the one to his gut. I went to hit him a third time, but that's when our brothers got between us and broke it up. I fought to get to him. My rage was so bad I wanted to hurt him.

“You cocksucker! How could you say those stupid things to her? Jesus Christ! She's upstairs, and I don't fucking know if she'll be alright or not. What if she doesn't come back to me? She told me killing herself would be better than living and asked me why I didn't let her die in that fire!” I screamed at him.

My arms were grabbed. I was yanked away from him. I fought to get loose so I could punch him again, but they held me tight. I didn't bother to look and see who was holding me. Brothers fought from time to time, but we usually got over it quickly. Sometimes, we'd get in the ring together and work it out, then have a beer. That wasn't happening tonight. If he'd set her back, then this wouldn't be over just because I punched him. Worse, if he caused irreparable damage to her recovery, I wouldn't be able to forgive him.

He was giving me a regretful look. “Slash, I'm so goddamn sorry, man.”

“Like that's supposed to fix it,” I snapped back.

“Slash, what's going on here? Why're you fighting with Stalker?” a soft puzzled voice asked.

I shook off my brothers and whipped around to find Aria standing there looking sleepy and confused like she had no idea what was wrong. The room got eerily quiet as we all stared at her. Jocelyn and Rylan were behind her, giving me apologetic looks.

Aria: Chapter 6

Two days had passed since I came downstairs to angry voices in the townhouse and found almost the whole club in my kitchen slash living room. I woke up to Rylan and Jocelyn at my bedside. When I asked for Slash and what happened, they seemed unable to tell me. I'd gotten up and, despite their protests that I stay in bed, I headed downstairs to find him. I found several of the guys were holding onto Slash's arms. He was yelling at Stalker about fixing something. When I interrupted and asked why he was fighting with Stalker, the looks of disbelief I got made me want to turn around and go back to my room and lock the door. It still made me feel funny remembering it.

Suddenly, I was conscious that I was standing there, probably looking like a mess in front of a bunch of people, especially men. What surprised me was other than worrying about how much of a wreck I must look, I wasn't scared of them. Why wasn't I, popped into my head? The fact I wasn't was what made me take a step back up the stairs.

Slash shook himself, and they let go of him. He approached me slowly like he was walking up on a wild animal that might bite him at any moment. "Aria, baby, are you okay? What're you doing awake?"

"Shouldn't I be awake? What time is it? Why is everyone here? You're all staring at me funny. What's wrong?" Panic began to rise. I rubbed my head. I had a splitting headache.

He reached me and hesitantly reached out to touch my arm. The touch of his skin on mine, instead of making me uncomfortable, made me tingle. He drew me to him then down the last few steps. The others were staring, but they backed up.

"Honey, how do you feel? Tell me what the last thing is you remember?"

"Why are you asking me that and acting all weird? You're all staring at me like I have two heads."

“Aria, I’d like to examine you, hon,” Zara said as she came up to us.

“Why?”

“Tell us what you last remember,” she said, just like Slash had.

I glanced at the others. They were still watching. I eased back a step. “I want to go to bed. Sorry, I’m not up to company,” I mumbled before turning and racing up the steps at a trot.

“Babe, wait,” I heard Slash call out, but I kept going. I pushed past Jocelyn and Rylan.

When I reached the bedroom, I slammed the door shut, locking it. I flung myself on the bed and drew the covers up over me. I shivered. I was quivering inside, and I had no idea why. It wasn’t because of the number of men in the house, which was a shock. It was due to the fact they were acting like something happened that I had no idea about but should. I racked my brain, trying to figure out why.

Things were very hazy. The last thing I could recall was being upset that I couldn’t leave the compound. I’d gone and taken a walk. I’d sat down underneath a tree by a stream, and it was so peaceful I got sleepy. I remembered closing my eyes. It was daylight then. A glance out the window showed it was now dark. How had I gotten home and in bed? Panic grew inside of me.

A knock on the door made me jump. I’d been so in my head the rumble of voices fading away downstairs hadn’t registered until now. I wanted to stay quiet, but I knew it wouldn’t do any good. It was most likely Slash, and he knew I was in here and not asleep.

“What?” I called out.

“Babe, it’s me. Open the door and let me in. It’s just me and Zara. We’ll answer your questions, but we need to be able to see you when we do. She wants to make sure you’re alright.” His gentleness made me feel warm inside.

“I think I need to sleep. We can talk in the morning,” I said back. Maybe by then, I’d remember what the hell had happened over the past several hours.

“We can’t do that. Open up. It’s alright,” Zara said sweetly.

I didn’t respond. Her voice sounded like what doctors and nurses sounded like when they were trying to calm a hysterical person down or were about to give you bad news. I rubbed my forehead hard to tame the headache and to see if it would help me recall something. Faint, rattling sounds came from the other side of the door. I was about to ask what they were doing when the door swung open, and Zara and Slash walked in. I sat up.

“How did you do that? I said I’ll talk tomorrow,” I told them a bit angrily.

Slash came straight to the bed and sat down next to me. He took my hand even though I tried to yank it away from him. He rubbed his thumb over the back of it. He was staring me in the eyes. I saw concern. Zara came up to my other side. She was concerned, but it was overlaid with an assessing look.

“We can’t do that. Baby, tell me what the last thing you remember was before you came downstairs,” Slash asked softly.

Knowing he wouldn’t leave until I did, I sighed. “I tried to get someone to take me to town to the store, and Player said no. He said I should talk to you. I was upset, so I took a walk. I don’t know how long I walked, but eventually, I sat down under a tree by a stream. It was so relaxing. I remember getting sleepy and closing my eyes. After that, the next thing was me waking up and hearing a bunch of loud, angry voices downstairs, so I came to investigate.”

He exchanged a worried look with Zara.

“Why’re you looking at Zara like that? How did I get here? Why don’t I remember?”

My voice rose higher with each question. I knew I was climbing toward hysteria. My insides were a mass of sickness,

and I was beginning to feel like I couldn't catch my breath. Zara put her hand on my shoulder, which made me jump and move away from her. That pushed me up against Slash. His arm came up to encircle my shoulders. He hugged me. I wiggled to get away, but he didn't let me.

"Relax, I want to check your eyes. Did you happen to hit your head today?" Zara asked. She reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out a small light. She leaned toward me and touched my face. I stiffened, but I let her hold my eyes open as she shined the light into one and then the other.

"No, I don't think so. I have a headache that's killing me, but I can't remember hitting my head."

After she checked my eyes, she put the light away and felt all over my head. Her touch was light. When she was done, she shook her head as she glanced at Slash. "Her pupils are fine. There are no obvious bumps on her head. I don't think she has a concussion."

"Tell me what the hell is going on!" I insisted loudly.

"Aria, look at me," Slash said firmly.

I found myself doing it. He had that worried look still on his handsome face. He rubbed his thumb along my jaw. I fought not to shiver. The feel of him touching any part of me made me ache and want more. Damn it, this wasn't the time for these kinds of thoughts or feelings. I was confused enough as it was. Lusting after him when I should be running in terror made no sense.

"Babe, while you slept for a while, we were all searching for you when we couldn't find you. Player told me what happened. Stalker found you. You and he got into an argument." He paused.

"You need to tell her all of it," Zara said gently.

"The two of you argued. He said some things he shouldn't have, and you apparently went off on him. You were screaming and got physical. He tried to calm you and keep you from hurting yourself. You were struggling to get away from him when I found the two of you. I ended up shoving him, not

knowing what was going on. You wouldn't calm down no matter what I said, and we were afraid you'd hurt yourself. Zara showed up with some of the others and gave you a shot. It calmed you down, and then I brought you here. You were out. I got Stalker to come over to explain what exactly happened. The rest of the club came too. You walked in on me, objecting to how he treated you. Fuck, babe, I was scared you wouldn't be okay. He was harsh. I'm sorry."

I strained to recall any of what he was telling me. It was blank. It was like someone came along and wiped my mind with an eraser. The sick feeling grew. Panic climbed up my insides. "I don't remember any of that. Oh my God, Zara, what's wrong with me? Why can't I remember? Am I crazy?" I clutched my head as my headache intensified.

"You're not crazy. I think you have a type of amnesia called dissociative. I can't say for sure since I'm not a psychiatrist, but from what I remember from medical school, you seem to present like that. Dissociative amnesia is due to trauma or emotional shock. What you experienced with the Cannibals definitely meets that criterion. Something about the encounter with Stalker pushed you to forget. Your mind shut down to protect you."

I burst into tears. Slash swore and gathered me tighter against him. He rocked me as he kissed my face and hair. "I am crazy," I wailed.

"No, you're not. Come on, you fucking went through hell. Your brain needs to heal, and it's doing its job to protect you," he murmured.

"He's right. I know this might not feel like it's the right time, but I think you should see a therapist as soon as possible. I know someone who can help you. She's wonderful. I met her through work. She works with a psychiatrist and they're great. You need someone to talk to, and I was waiting to suggest it. Do you ever recall blacking out or forgetting anything like this before?" Zara asked.

As I cried and sniffed, a memory came to mind. It was after Ox had brought me back and crushed my leg. The

Cannibals all told me that I'd gone nuts on them, and they had to tie me down. Tying me down wasn't new, but forgetting it was. Of course, they hadn't just tied me down, the bastards. I moaned at the memory.

"Babe?" Slash whispered.

"There was a time with the Cannibals. They said I went nuts on them, but I didn't remember it at all. I just figured they were lying and took advantage of me losing consciousness."

"Why did you lose consciousness?" she asked.

"It was after I was caught and brought back. The time Ox ran over my leg with his bike to cripple me. The pain was so bad I blacked out. When I woke up, they said stuff happened. I didn't remember any of it."

"What stuff happened?" Slash asked.

My stomach tightened. I didn't want to talk about it. "I don't wanna talk about it," I mumbled.

"Babe, you need to. Bottling this up isn't good. I think it's causing you more problems. You have nothing to be scared of, and you sure as fuck don't have a damn thing to be ashamed about," he growled.

As I stared up at him, I saw he was telling the truth. The only expressions on his face were compassion tinged with anger. I instinctively knew the anger wasn't directed at me. He didn't say anything else. He just held me as they waited. Finally, after I don't know how long, I gave in. I intellectually knew what they were saying was right. I needed to talk about it, even if it wasn't with a professional. Besides, Slash deserved to know what he was potentially getting himself into by pursuing a relationship with me. He should see how fucked up I was and how it might be impossible for him and me to have a relationship.

"According to what they said, after Ox was done running my leg over and I passed out, I woke up later. They said that I began screaming at them and trying to walk on my busted leg. They laughed at me. I supposedly attacked Ox. I

jumped on him and punched him over and over with my fists, even though he was twice my size. That wasn't all I did. I was biting and threatening to kill every one of them. Of course, he didn't appreciate me touching him, so he beat the hell out of me and...”

“And what?” Slash asked tightly.

“They tied me to the bed and took turns raping me. I didn't recall any of it, but after I woke up or whatever, I was in pain for days, and they continued to teach me a lesson for the next two days. Honestly, I was in so much pain that part is hazy.”

Slash was so tense he was practically vibrating. How would he be able to handle knowing all the gory details if this affected him this much? I shifted. His arms tightened. “Don't. I hate what they did to you, and I can't stop myself from wanting to kill them all slowly, then resurrecting them again and again to do it all over. However, it doesn't mean you hold that shit inside. Let me take this burden and carry it, baby. I want to be your man, and along with that comes certain things. One of those is carrying things when they're too much for you. I can handle it. If we want to have a real relationship with all it entails, I need to know what they did so I know what I can't do. I don't want to trigger you,” he whispered, so only I could hear him.

The expression on his face made me think of love. I knew it was too soon for him to feel anything like that, but that's what it reminded me of. I relaxed and felt safe for the first time in forever. “Okay,” I whispered back.

“I think I'll leave you two alone, but first, how's your headache? I can leave you a few pills to help with that. They're in my bag.” Zara pointed to a black bag sitting on the dresser. I had forgotten about her and hadn't noticed it before.

“It still hurts, but you don't need to give me anything,”

“Yes, she does. You don't need to be in pain when she has something to help with it. Give them to me. I'll make sure she takes them. How often can she have one?” he asked in that

bossy tone of his. Even though it made me want to argue, there was a part of me that liked it.

“She can take one every six hours. If she’s not better by morning, text me. Do you think you can sleep tonight, or do you want something to help you?”

“No sleeping pills. I don’t react well to those.”

“I’ll be here to make sure she sleeps. If she doesn’t, I’ll let you know so we can see what to do. Thanks, Zara. You get home to Demon and the little demon,” he told her with a chuckle. I laughed. Alex was a cutie but you could already tell he was going to take after his dad.

A few minutes later, she was gone after giving me the pills and telling us again to text if we needed her. I’d tried to argue and tell him that he could go back to the clubhouse. The bullheaded man refused. That’s how I ended up spending the night with him. He didn’t just stay in the house, either. No, he stayed in the room with me. Each time I woke up from a nightmare, he was there to soothe me. It was close to three in the morning before he climbed into bed to hold me after a fresh nightmare made me cry. I fell asleep and slept until ten.

Today was Sunday. The whole club was home from work. Yesterday, they’d mainly stayed away and let me rest. This wasn’t to say they hadn’t texted to check up on me. They’d constantly been checking with Slash to see if I was okay or if I needed anything. A few, like Bull and Jocelyn, had stopped by to check in person. Zara had come back to check on me after I woke up. She gave me the name and phone number of her therapist friend.

If I thought I’d be left alone after I got up, I was wrong. Other than to get some personal things from his room, Slash stayed at my side the whole day and again last night. I could fib and say it irritated me, but I’d be lying to myself. The way he was caring for me made me feel special and loved. He refused to let me do anything, not even cook dinner for us. I told him I was over the headache and feeling fine, but he wouldn’t listen. Instead, he cooked. I was shocked to discover he was a good cook.

However, today, I was putting my foot down. He surely had things that needed his attention. Tomorrow was a workday for him. I wasn't okay with sucking all his free time away. Facing off with him in the kitchen, I told him to go.

“Slash, it's Sunday. Go relax or do something. I know you've got better things to do than sit around here babysitting me. I told you, my headache is gone, and I'm fine. I'm gonna sit back and read or something. Don't waste what's left of your weekend on me.”

“I'm not wasting anything on you. I'm where I want to be. Spending time with you, even if all we do is watch TV, is better than anything else I can think of doing. What we should do is get out of the house. If you're feeling up to it, why don't we go into town? You wanted to go get things on Friday. I assume you still want them. Let's get ready and go.”

I was tempted. There were things I still needed to get. I knew it was unlikely I'd be allowed to go without him and trying to find someone this week to take me would be impossible. No one seemed to be willing to go against what he wanted. Despite knowing this, I had to push a little.

“There's no need. I can go into town with someone this week. I'm sure at least one of the ladies or prospects will go one day.”

He stalked across the kitchen to me. I didn't back away or get scared. I knew he wouldn't hurt me. I stood my ground. When he reached me, he wrapped his arms around me and lowered his head.

“Dove, there's no damn reason to have someone else take my woman to town. If you need something, then we'll go together to get it, or you tell me what you want, and I'll pick it up. I would prefer it if we went together, but it's your call. However, the one thing you won't be doing is going with anyone else. No one can keep an eye on you as well as I can.”

“Oh, and why can't they?” I asked with a raise of my left brow.

“Because no one feels about you the way I do. A man like me doesn’t let others take care of the woman he’s falling in love with. That’s my job,” he whispered right before he kissed me.

It was the first real kiss he’d given me. The ones to my face and hair didn’t count. It was the first one I’d had in ages. My captors hadn’t kissed me, and I wouldn’t have wanted them to. His lips were firm and took control. There was no tentative exploring. He laid his lips on mine like he meant it. He pressed them to mine again and again, then caught my bottom lip between his teeth to tug on it. I gasped at the sensations that bite caused to flow through my body.

I guess this was what he was waiting for because his tongue wiggled between my lips and inside my mouth. Once there, it tasted the inside of my mouth and wrestled with my exploring tongue. The kiss was wet, hot, and intense. I couldn’t help the moan that broke free. He increased the intensity of it. His hands had come up to bury themselves in my hair, and then he was angling my head to the position he wanted. His mouth grew more frantic as he kissed me like a desperate man.

Both of us were kissing while we moaned and groaned. Slight pants were slipping out of us both. My nipples were hard, and my panties were growing damp. I was secretly thrilled that I was able to let him do this and enjoy it. Hell, it was more than enjoyable. I loved it. I didn’t want him to stop. I didn’t know how long we were lost in our kiss before he broke it. I chased his lips with mine, not wanting him to stop. He chuckled. I gave him a frowning look. There was no reason to laugh at me.

“Don’t look at me like that. I don’t wanna stop, but your sexy mouth is making me so goddamn hot I’m about to erupt. I don’t wanna do anything that’ll scare you or make you afraid to give me more kisses like that, Dove. Damn, you can kiss, woman.”

Hearing him say that mollified me a bit, but I still wanted to taste more of him. “I’m not the only one who can kiss. If you don’t want women kissing you and wanting more,

you shouldn't kiss the way you just did. And what's up with this dove thing? I've been meaning to ask you."

"Thank you for the compliment on my kissing. For the record, you're the only woman I've ever wanted, no, needed, to kiss like that. There's no other woman I'll be kissing. All of mine are yours now and forever. As for the dove thing, when I look at you, you give me such a feeling of peace. Well, you do when you're not tying me in knots and making me ache, that is. A dove is considered the bird of peace, so there it is. Sounds dumb, doesn't it? I'll stop calling you it if you want."

I shook my head as tears pricked my eyes. "No, it's not dumb at all. It's wonderful. I love it. You can call me Dove anytime you want. Now, I'll have to come up with a nickname for you. I feel like sometimes I should call you something other than Slash. I just don't know what."

His eyes grew darker. "Do you mean that? You want to call me something else? If so, I have an idea."

"Oh, what?"

"Why don't you call me Kai?"

"Kai?"

"Yeah, Kai is my real name, and no one uses it. It's usually only someone special who's given permission to use a biker's real name. Typically, it's his old lady. You know what I want. I'm not asking for more right now, but I'd love it if you'd call me that when we're alone. I guess I should officially introduce myself now that I think about it. Hello, I'm Kai Blakely. It's damn wonderful to meet you," he said with a grin and a wink.

I couldn't help but burst out laughing. "Hello, Kai Blakely. I love your name, and if you're sure, I'd love to call you Kai," I told him.

That's what led to our second kiss and it was as intense and enjoyable as the first one. I let myself go. I don't know how long we would've kept going if he hadn't slipped his hand up and cupped my breast. It was over the top of my clothes, but I wasn't prepared for it. That made me stiffen and

jump. Immediately, he let go and lifted his mouth away from mine.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I think it’s time we do something else and relax. We don’t want to push it.”

“Kai, it’s okay. You just startled me, that’s all.”

“No, that’s enough for today. Why don’t you pick out a movie while I make us some popcorn and grab drinks? After we watch it, we’ll go into town to get what you need.”

He stood up without waiting for my answer and headed to the kitchen. I could see he was hard. My heart sank. Would my reactions always be like that, and if so, would he always back off even if I told him not to? If that was the case, how long would it take for him to get tired of trying and give up on me? If he wasn’t sleeping with other women now, he would be. I felt sick for a whole different reason.

Slash: Chapter 7

Six weeks. It was the longest six weeks of my life. That's how long since we'd rescued Raina and found Aria. Who knew it only took that long to fall so deeply in love with a woman you couldn't ever see yourself loving anyone else? All those women I'd slept with over the years were forgotten. I couldn't recall what they looked like or their names.

It was also the longest month-and-a-half for a couple of other reasons. One was the fact we'd gotten no closer to finding the Cannibals so we could take the rest of that goddamn deviant club out for good. Wherever they went to ground, they weren't showing themselves. Outlaw was frustrated as hell. He wasn't used to it taking this long to find someone. All possible leads kept ending in dead ends. Bull and Bear kept saying there was no way they were pulling off this disappearance without help. They claimed the Cannibals were never that smart.

Maybe they'd gotten smarter members, or maybe they did have help. All I knew was they were keeping my woman from truly living. She tried to hide it, but I could tell it was worrying her. One night, she told me she was waiting for them to take her back one day. She said despite the safety of the compound and the guards who went with her the few times she left the compound. She felt that they would get their hands on her again. I got upset that she thought I couldn't protect her. We ended up arguing about it, and I spent the night sleeping in one of the other bedrooms. Not my most mature move, especially since I'd been sleeping with her every night since the whole flip-out session and loving it. I apologized the next morning, but she'd been a little remote since. I was working to get us back to where we were.

The other reason for it seeming to be the longest six weeks was the sexual frustration. God, I'd never been this horny in my life. I walked around with a constant hard-on. She and I still had kissing sessions that were the hottest I'd ever

had in my life. They only made it worse. I could tell she got turned on, too, but I was careful to keep it to kisses only.

After the accidental touching of her breast and her tensing up and jumping, I made sure not to touch anywhere on her body that would make her uncomfortable. She tried to tell me more than a few times I didn't have to be so careful, but I was afraid to death of doing something that would cause her to have one of those amnesia moments or cause her to break down completely. I wanted her with every breath I took, but not if it would do that. I could wait. She had to heal mentally.

One really good thing was she had connected with the therapist Zara had recommended. Her name was Jade, and she was nice enough to come to the compound to see her rather than have her come to town. Apparently, Zara had explained that Aria had members of another club who hurt her out there, and we didn't want to take chances. I would've thought that would cause Jade to either run in the opposite direction or insist we go to the cops, but she didn't say a word about it.

I didn't know what Jade's background was, but she didn't seem to be surprised by anything so far about MC life. I know Aria liked her and was seeing her three times a week. After those sessions, she would be exhausted, which worried me after the first one. As the days went by, I could see she was smiling more and relaxing around my brothers.

Even she and Stalker were getting along. She didn't recall the freakout, but he did. He'd tried avoiding her and tiptoeing around afterward. Some of it was no doubt because of me. She noticed, called him out on it, and told him that he had no reason to be acting like that. I disagreed but kept my mouth shut. I was pretty sure he'd learned from his mistake. The things he said were out of line, and he knew it. I could tell he felt like shit about it. Since their talk, he'd relaxed more but was still cautious with her.

It was because of her response to Jade's sessions and how she approached Stalker herself, that I asked Jade if she thought it would be okay to have a party at the compound. We hadn't had one in a while. Oh, we gathered and had drinks, played pool or darts or whatever, and the single guys would

later hook up with bunnies or hang arounds from town, but those weren't parties.

The reason I asked was I wanted to celebrate Aria's birthday. She was turning twenty-four. I thought she needed to have a special day. From what I'd learned about her life growing up with her single mom, there wasn't much celebrating. Money had always been tight, so Christmas and birthdays weren't a big deal. Well, her birth was a big deal to me, and it needed to be celebrated. I planned to shower her with love and attention for the rest of her life. Along with those, she had to prepare for me to give her gifts, not just on those two occasions.

Also, I wanted to introduce her to our sister chapter, Dublin Falls. Ideally, I would've invited all the clubs we were close to, but that would be too many people. Jade told me to keep it to one chapter and make sure to keep an eye on Aria to see how she handled it. She agreed it was time to expose Aria to more people. Using our friends was better than taking her into town and around a group of strangers none of us really knew. Concerned that it could end up being too much caused me to ask Jade to come, not just as her therapist but as a friend. The two of them were getting close. Thankfully, she agreed.

Today was the big day. I hadn't told Aria the party was to celebrate her birthday. If I had, she would've hidden in the house. I made it out to be that we hadn't had any of our friends over in a long time. I neglected to mention that they and the others would be here probably next month after Tank and Brynlee had their baby boy. Births usually led to whichever club gained the baby to celebrate with everyone. We hadn't had a big celebration for Autumn's birth yet with everything happening, so it would be a combo one. This would be a good way to ease her into being prepared to meet a horde of them later.

I hoped while Dublin Falls was here, she'd get to know the ladies from there. I knew there were a few of them who would be able to relate to her and what happened. Brielle, Wren, and Bryony had gone through hell and came out on the

other side. They were living great lives. Maybe they'd talk to her and help her see that she could have the same. I was praying when it happened. She'd be able to see I was the man to give that to her.

The kisses we exchanged told me she was attracted to me, but it wasn't enough. I needed her to love me. I felt like we had a friendship, and she was building trust in me along with attraction. I had to be patient and work to move it to love.

Despite me keeping the celebration part to myself and swearing the rest of the club to secrecy, she was nervous. She'd been fluttering around, trying to help the others prepare while worrying about what she should wear and what if they didn't like her. She tried to convince me it would be better if she stayed at the house. She argued she wasn't a part of either club and it should be club-only people. I quickly shot her down.

I wished she would be wearing a property cut that read *Property of Slash* and had my ring on her finger for this, but it was too soon for any of those things. I had the cut already, and I knew the ring I wanted to buy her. However, I knew doing that would freak her out. I'd explained what property meant in our club versus the travesty it was in the Cannibals. Intellectually, she knew it was nothing like theirs, and she saw it with the old ladies, but it did little to dispel those deep-rooted fears. A few weeks with us versus a year-and-a-half with them was hard to erase fast.

My efforts to calm her down about her clothing were a bust. I knew no matter what she wore, she'd be beautiful. That wasn't a good answer. She'd rolled her gorgeous eyes and gone to talk to some of the other ladies. I offered to take her clothes shopping, but she turned me down. Instead, she went out with the old ladies. I went along to provide protection along with several of my brothers, but we were relegated to stay outside and not watch what they tried on or bought. When we got back home, she hid the bag in the closet and refused to let me see what she purchased. She said it was a surprise.

She was over getting ready with Raina, Devyn, and a few others at Devyn and Ace's house. I couldn't wait to see

what she would be wearing. I tried to picture what it would look like. I knew what I wanted to see her in. I ached to see her dressed up like a biker's woman in tight jeans that showed off her lush ass and those hips of hers. On top, a tight blouse or other top with plenty of cleavage showing, although not her whole breasts, would make it complete. I had so many dreams about her ass and breasts in addition to the ones about her mouth and pussy. I knew what I'd do to all of them if I had the chance.

Goddamn, just thinking about it had him rising to the occasion. I swear my damn cock didn't have an off switch anymore. If I died right now, they'd bury me with a stiffy. Wouldn't that be a shock at the funeral? Me all laid out in my casket with a tent in my pants. All my brothers and friends would take pictures of it, and I'd hear their crude jokes wherever I ended up. Thinking of it, I chuckled.

"What're you chuckling about, Slash?" Loki asked from behind me.

I turned to face him. "Just trying to imagine what Aria will be dressed like. She's over with a few of the ladies getting ready. She's nervous about what she'll look like and if the Dublin Falls crew will like her."

He shook his head and smirked. "What is it with women and worrying about shit like that? Don't they ever look in the damn mirror? Or if they do, they focus on imaginary imperfections. I know Aria has been through hell, but damn, she's beautiful."

"And she's mine," I said as a reminder. I couldn't help it.

"Listen, I know that. I have eyes, though, and so do other men. She has nothing to worry about. Now, it's your job to show her that."

"How the hell do you know so much about women? You don't have an old lady," I teased him.

"No, but I have brains, and I'm ready. You let the one for me walk in the door, and I'll be all over her, nailing her ass

down as soon as I can. I won't chance someone else getting her first. I'll fight for her if I have to."

"Shit, if that's the case, I wanna watch."

"Oh, you'll see it. If I need backup, your ass, along with the rest of our brothers, will be enlisted."

I chuckled at the fierce look on his face. It eased, and then he responded. "Okay, all joking aside. How's she doing? She seems to be better the past few weeks."

"I think she is. The counseling is helping. The nightmares have been less, for sure. She told me that. She doesn't wake me up like she did at first."

"Soooo, that means you and she are..."

"We share a bed, that's it. She's not ready for more. I give her comfort and help her to relax so she can sleep."

"Well, it's progress. After what she went through, allowing a man in the same house as her would be progress, let alone in her bed. Just keep it up."

"I plan to. She's it for me. I'll take as much time as she needs. I want a cut and ring on her, Loki. I wish she had both today, but it's too soon."

"I can imagine you do. Hang in there and let us know if we can do anything. Hey, I'll see you in a bit. I need to go help with chairs or something. I see Jessica looking over here. Later," he said right before he took off. That reminded me I needed to check to see what else I could help with. I headed over to where Jocelyn was standing. She was the organizer of these things.

"Okay, where do you need me?"

"Let me see... I think we have enough people to make sure we have enough tables and chairs. Thank goodness the weather is so nice. We can be outside for a chunk of the day and even tonight. Oh, I know. Will you make sure the firepits are set up with wood and we have plenty of extra ready to go if we need it? It's supposed to be nippy tonight. I bet a lot of us will want to sit outside around a nice fire. I sent Walker,

Diego, and Gavin into town to pick up some last-minute supplies and to get the food we had made there. I'm not sure if they got it all done before they left."

"I can do that. I'll find you afterward to see if you thought of anything else."

"I don't think I will. I suggest you spend time with Aria when you get done with the firepits. She's nervous and will need you today to stick to her. If you can't, let one of us know so we can do it."

"Never fear. I plan to stick to her like glue. She's nervous about meeting everyone. Worrying if they'll like her, if she'll embarrass me, and what she's wearing. I tried to tell her she has nothing to worry about, but you know."

"Some of it is being a woman, I'm afraid. I was the same way when I met all of you and then the other clubs. In her case, we know she has even more reason. Bull warned Terror so he could warn his club to take it easy with her. They'll be on their best behavior. How could they not like her? She's a sweetheart. I haven't gotten a chance to tell you this, but I think she's perfect for you, Slash, and I'm so happy for you."

Hearing this from Jocelyn was high praise and made me feel wonderful. She was our queen and ruled alongside Bull, just in a different way. Reaching out, I pulled her to me and hugged her with one arm. She laughed and patted my chest.

"What's this? My wife and my brother are hugging. Should I kill Slash right now?" Bull growled.

We had to laugh. He looked like he was about to kill me, but I knew that he was playing with us. Not that he wouldn't do it if I was really making a move on her. She was the love of his life, and along with his kids and grandkids, she was his whole world. We'd been so happy when he met her. She not only brought him happiness and a second chance at love, but she brought Devyn to our brother Ace.

I held onto her just to mess with him. “Hey, you know how it is. It’s your fault for marrying such a beautiful, sweet, and smart woman. We keep asking her what she sees in a growly beast like you.”

“I know what she sees in me. I adore her, treat her like a queen, and I have a big cock and know how to use it,” he said without cracking a smile.

“Bull! Hush. If Caeden or Corinne come to me asking what a cock is, I’m gonna have to hurt you.”

“Babe, tell me how you’d hurt me,” he said with a smirk.

“I’ll cut you off.” She smirked back.

“Like hell, you will. Slash, go find your woman and leave me to handle mine. She needs to be reminded she can’t live without me and my big cock,” he said as he tugged her into his arms and then hoisted her over his shoulder. As they walked off, she was laughing and telling him to put her down. He responded with a swat to her ass. Those around us laughed along with me.

“I see Bull likes to behave like a caveman sometimes. I think she rather liked that swat on the butt he just gave her,” the voice of my own sweet woman said from behind me. I swung around with a smile on my face and my mouth open to give her a smart-ass response. Nothing came out because I was stunned into silence.

I ran my eyes up and down her body. She was standing there with a questioning, barely there smile on her face. I could tell she was nervous about how I’d react to her appearance. Without a thought, I stepped up to her and bent down. As I did, I hoisted her up over my shoulder and walked off with her like Bull had with Jocelyn.

The whistles coming from all sides of us didn’t register. The only thing was her gasp. We were close to the side of the clubhouse. I took her around the corner to where there should be no one. As I made it there, it dawned on me what I did. Hastily, I set her down on her feet. Anxiety filled

me. Had I scared her? As I looked at her face, I was pleased there wasn't fear on her face, but what was there stunned me a bit. I could swear it was desire.

"Shit, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. I didn't mean to scare you," I said in a hurry.

"You surprised me, but you didn't scare me. In fact, I was waiting to see if I got the smack to my ass like Jocelyn did," she said with a smirk.

Taking a chance, I smirked back. "Well, Dove, all you have to do if you want me to spank your sweet ass, which would be a pleasure, is ask me."

She moved closer to me and licked her lips before she blew my mind. "Well then, Kai, I'd like you to spank my ass. I've wondered what it would feel like if done in a sensual way versus the spankings I got as a kid from my mom. Those I didn't like one bit."

"God, babe, don't mess with me. I know I can make it feel a whole lot better than those did. Given time and privacy, I can make you beg me for more." My pants were tightening where my cock was growing from its semi-hard state to a full-on rager.

"What can you show me right now, right here? Anything else will have to wait until later. Our first guests are arriving soon," she said softly.

"Are you sure?" I asked as I glanced around. There were a couple of concrete blocks sitting close to the wall. They were leftover ones that hadn't been hauled away or used somewhere else. Taking her by the hand, I led her to them. I sat down and waited to see what she'd say or do.

"Do you want me across your lap, or how do we do this?" she asked shyly but without fear, just nervousness.

Excitement coursed through me. She was really about to allow me to spank her. Of course, it wouldn't be as full-on as we could do in private and naked, but it was still something I wanted. My zipper was biting into my cock. I knew she

could see my erection. I patted my thigh. “Lie down across my legs.”

She hesitated only for a moment before she crouched down and laid herself across my thighs. Her head hung down one side and her legs the other. Her plush breasts were pressed into one leg. Her ass was right where I needed it. To get her used to my touch and give her a chance to say no, I slowly rubbed my hand on one cheek and then the other. She shivered, and her ass squirmed.

The feel of her plump cheeks under my hand made me ache to spank her then take her to the house and strip her naked. I knew that wouldn't happen, but I could fantasize. I gave one cheek a squeeze. She was breathing heavily.

“Ready?” I asked.

She nodded her head.

“I need the words, baby,” I told her.

“Yes, I'm ready, Kai.”

Before she could get too worked up, I took my hand off her ass and paused, then brought it down on the left cheek. I tapped her twice, then switched to the other one, hitting it twice. It wasn't as hard as it could be, but I wanted her to get the idea. She jumped, and I heard her cry out, and then it abruptly was cut off. I rubbed her cheeks to take any sting out of them.

“Are you alright? How did it feel?” I asked anxiously.

“Do it again. Make it harder,” she panted.

Fuck, she liked it. I could hear it in her voice. Spanking was turning her on. Damn, if only I could do it the right way. This time, I didn't ask again, nor did I warn her. I spanked her three times on each cheek, and I made them harder. She muffled a cry and moaned softly. I saw her put her fist in her mouth.

“Aria, are you okay?” As I asked her this time, I hooked her under the arms and lifted her up and around.

She had no choice but to straddle my legs and look at me. I groaned when I saw her face. She was definitely turned on. Her eyes told the story. She was breathing hard, and her breasts were rising and falling, which caught my eye. God, I wanted to touch them so badly.

Suddenly, she was kissing me like she was dying, and her pussy was rubbing back and forth across my cock. I groaned into her mouth. My hands automatically grabbed her ass and squeezed as I ground her down on my cock. I captured her moan in my mouth. Our tongues were going insane, tangling together. Now, her breasts were rubbing against my chest. I savored it for maybe a minute, and then I broke the kiss. I let go of her ass and moved my hands to her hips.

“Fuck, we have to stop, babe. That was so damn hot, I’m ready to blow. I guess we know one thing for sure. You do like to be spanked. It can be much harder than this and I could use other things rather than my hand. Just so you know, there are degrees to it.”

“I want you to show me. I want it with other things and harder,” she moaned.

“Aria, baby, you need to calm down. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Yes, I do. I may be excited, but I know. Don’t you want to spank me more?”

“Hell yeah, I do, but we’re going slow, remember?” I hated myself for saying it. My cock was screaming at me to shut up.

“Fuck slow. Later, after everyone leaves, I want you to take me to the house and show me. Will you do that?”

I studied her for several seconds before I answered her. “If you still want to do it after you’ve calmed down, then tell me when we get to the house, and we’ll do it. But if you change your mind, don’t be afraid to tell me. I won’t be mad. The last thing I want to do is scare you or hurt you.”

I hissed as she reached down and ran her palm over my cock. “I won’t change my mind, and I won’t get scared enough

to say no. It's more apprehension since I've never done it. I'm excited to try it. As for the pace we've been going at, I love that you worry about me so much, but it needs to speed up. I want more, Kai. Kissing isn't enough."

I threw back my head and moaned as she worked her hand over me several times. By the time she stopped and stood up, I was so hard I couldn't move.

She gave me a quick kiss, then smiled. She walked off, saying, "Come find me when you can walk. I want to know what you think of my outfit and how I look before everyone gets here. I'll be inside the clubhouse."

I watched that tease walk off, mesmerized by her ass and dazed by what had just happened and what I heard come from her mouth. Jesus, was I hallucinating, or was she green-lighting that we could go further tonight? I sure hoped so because this had revved my motor even more. I knew full-on sex wouldn't be on the table, but maybe skin-to-skin contact. My hands on her bare ass or breasts would be wonderful. If I was really lucky, she might let me get her off with my hand or mouth. I groaned since the thought made my erection worse. I switched to thoughts of work and stocking up on supplies to calm down. It took a while to get myself back to a manageable state to go find my tempting woman.

When I came around the clubhouse, Payne caught me. He was grinning. "Hey, I heard things are going well with you and Aria. Make sure you build her up and if you need any toys, let me know."

"Shit, who else heard us?" I groaned.

"No one but me. I didn't see anyone. No worries, I won't say anything."

"I don't know what to do, Payne. She liked it, and she was the one to ask me to do it, but now she wants more later. What if she's not ready? What if she freaks out on me? I don't want to move this along only to lose her in the process."

"You're doing it right. You're moving at her pace and doing what she says she wants. Just keep asking her to make

sure she's still on board. Have you talked to her therapist? She's gonna be here today, right?"

"Yeah, she said she'd come. No, I haven't talked to her. She's Aria's therapist. I asked if the party was a good idea, not anything else."

"And you're Aria's man, or at least you want to be. In order to do it right, I suggest you and her therapist talk often."

"Thanks, I'll do that. Now, I hate to run after such sound advice, but I have to find my woman and tell her how damn hot she looks," I told him with a grin. He laughed and waved me off. I took off to find where my dove had gone.

Aria: Chapter 8

I did it. I'd told Slash what I wanted even though I was scared to do it, and he did it. Now, I want more. My whole body tingled from the sensation of having his hand on my ass and the kiss we shared afterward. I was shocked that I'd been bold enough to tell him to spank me but even more that I had touched his erection. Sure, it was through his jeans, but still, it was progress in my book.

Jade and I had been talking a lot in my sessions, not just about what the Cannibals did to me and how it made me feel, but also about Slash and how he treated me and made me feel. When I told her I was attracted to him but thought it was too soon and wrong because of the abuse I'd suffered, she set me straight.

“Aria, the only person who can tell you how soon to do something is you. It doesn't matter what other people might think or say. It's not their business. Yes, for some people, the thought of allowing a man to touch them after being raped like you have might take years. Others might need months or days. Only you know what's best for you. I can tell by the way you talk about him that he's nothing like those animals. I advise you to take it a day at a time. Don't push if you're not sure. Communicate with him every step of the way. Will you run into instances where you'll try something and then react with panic or even a flashback? Yes. However, that's gonna happen no matter how long you wait or stay in therapy. This is a lifelong process you'll have to deal with. If he's the man for you, then he will stick with you.”

Today was an example of me putting her advice into practice. Those kissing sessions were wonderful but I wanted more. When I saw Bull haul Jocelyn off and spank her, I was instantly filled with the desire to know what it would feel like. Before the Cannibals had taken me, I might've been a virgin, but I had a lot of curiosity about sex and the different kinds of things people did. I'd read a lot of books and even watched some porn. I wanted to be prepared when I finally did have it.

Only none of what I'd learned had prepared me for what happened. Now, I was going about it in a different way.

If it was any other man than Slash, I don't think I could do it. I'd gotten better about being around his club brothers, but other men still made me want to hide. The few times I'd gone to town had been a test of my courage. I will be testing it again today when the Dublin Falls club gets here. Even knowing almost all of them were married didn't help much. What helped was knowing Slash and his brothers would be here. I wasn't alone in facing them.

As I waited for him to join me, I looked down at myself. I was nervous about how I was dressed. It wasn't anything too risqué, but to me, it was sexy, and that made me worry it was too much. The old ladies had helped me pick it out the other day, along with a few other outfits. I hadn't wanted to buy more than one since it wasn't my money, but they insisted. If it was left up to me, I would've bought sweatpants and baggy t-shirts and sweatshirts, except it wasn't.

The jeans we'd found molded my shape. I'd always hated that I had hips, ass, and breasts. Those had come along when I was fifteen, and no matter how much I exercised or dieted, they wouldn't go away. The Cannibals hadn't fed me much, so I lost weight. Since being with the Warriors, I'd regained it. It went to those three spots. I tried to watch what I was eating and stick to salads and stuff, but that didn't go over well with Slash. He would put the other food on my plate and stare at me until I'd eaten it. More than once, he'd growled that no one wanted a pencil for his woman. Every time he said it, I was filled with warmth.

The jeans showed off the junk I had in the trunk and my wide hips. No one would see me from behind and mistake me for a boy. Luckily, I had a smaller waist and my thighs, while toned, weren't too big. The top I was wearing was one which showed my girls off to an advantage, I was assured by the ladies. It was black with long sleeves, but the shoulders were cut out, so it was called a cold shoulder top. The top zipped up the front, and it had ruching all the way up, so it

clung to my ribs and breasts. If it would've zipped up farther, I'd have done it.

It showcased my breasts without being too slutty, I was assured. I hoped Slash felt the same. I knew he liked it when his eyes had gotten heated when he first saw me. However, I wanted to hear the words. He would know if it was too much for other men to see me in. My hair I'd left down long in beachy waves. As for makeup, I'd put on a bit of liner, mascara, and a lip stain. Anything more would've been too much, in my opinion. I'd worn more in the past, but only when I really dressed up to go somewhere. Devyn had loaned me a pretty pair of earrings and a necklace to complete the look. On my feet were a pair of cute boots we'd found when we were shopping.

An arm sliding around my waist made me jump, and I let out a startled yelp. Luckily, it wasn't too loud because when I was swung around, I found myself staring up at Slash. "I'm sorry, baby, I thought you heard me say your name. I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's alright. I was daydreaming and didn't hear you. I see you got yourself under control," I said with a smirk.

He groaned. "Yeah, for the moment. You're gonna kill me, woman. Don't talk about it, or I'll be back in the same predicament. Let me have a look at you again." He gently pushed me away from him. His eyes devoured me as he scanned me from head to toe and back again. He licked his lips when he was done, which made my core temperature jump. There was heat in his gaze.

"You look so damn beautiful and sexy, Dove. I love it, but I'm not sure you should wear it."

"Why? What's wrong with it?" I asked nervously and self-consciously.

"There's no way I can stay in control looking at you all day in this. Plus, there are a few single guys in the other club. If they look at you, I'm gonna have to beat their asses."

“I’m sure you won’t have to do that. As for how you’ll act, well, I’m willing to take my chances.”

He let out a growl then drew me against him and settled that mouth of his on mine. I kissed him as eagerly as he kissed me. I’m not sure how long we would’ve stood there kissing, but it wasn’t long this time due to the roar of bikes. Slowly, he let go and wrapped his arm around me, turning me toward the gate. We were joined by the others, and we all stood there waiting for the bikes to get closer and the gate to open. When it did, several bikes, along with other vehicles and what looked like a minibus, came in. When I saw it, I gave Slash a puzzled look. He grinned.

“What can I say? The Warriors are a prolific bunch. You think we have a bunch of kids here? You haven’t seen anything yet. Here comes the invasion. Run for it if you have to,” he joked.

I watched in awe as men, women, and children began to fill the parking lot. The men were like the ones I was now used to—tall, muscular, handsome with tattoos for days, and dressed in the standard biker uniform. They looked to be from their forties to their mid to late twenties. The women were a little younger, and all of them were beautiful, although different in looks, size, and height. The kids ranged from a girl in her early teens to babies. I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of them. If this was one club, what would it be like if their friends’ clubs had come too?

“You alright, babe?” he whispered in my ear.

“I think so. There’s just so many of them. I had no idea. And the kids, lord, I can’t believe there’s that many.”

“I know. They’re something to see. Hard to believe that it all started with Terror. He met Harlow, Bull’s daughter, and that was it. He was hooked. He got her to Dublin Falls a few days after meeting her and never let her go. She was claimed as his old lady in no time, and they had Hunter within a year. That’s him over there, and that’s Harlow on Terror’s arm.” He pointed to an imposing man who was standing there looking

intimidating as hell. I should've guessed he was the club president just by the vibe he was giving off.

He was close to six-and-a-half feet tall with long black hair streaked with silver. He had a beard flecked with silver and a scar that ran down his right cheek to his jaw. I couldn't tell what color his eyes were, but they were intense. The woman with him was taller than my five foot five by three or four inches. She had long, gorgeous auburn hair. She had curves and seemed to be comfortable in her skin.

"Harlow was a Marine sniper before she met Terror. He did time as an Army Ranger before he got out and became one of us," he added. My mouth fell open in shock. That gorgeous woman had been a Marine and a sniper to boot. I could see Terror being in the military, easily, but she looked too feminine to have been.

"Come on, I want to introduce you to them first, and then we'll take our time taking you around to meet the rest."

I had no choice but to go with him or be dragged along behind him since he was walking toward them and had a hold of my hand. I was nervous as we reached them. Harlow had a big smile on her face when she saw us. She tugged away from Terror and threw her arms around Slash, who had to let go of me to return her hug.

"It's so good to see you, Slash," she said.

"It's good to see you too, Harley, but it hasn't been that long."

"Woman, what have I told you about hugging other men?" Terror's low, gruff voice said. He wasn't smiling as he said it. My heart jumped.

She swung around and gave him a sassy smile. "I'll hug anyone I want, Terror. You've been trying to tell me for almost ten years not to, and it hasn't stopped me yet. When will you give up trying? Besides, Slash is one of my brothers. I can hug my family."

"He may be your brother, but I'm stingy. I want all your hugs and kisses, Temptress. Slash, why don't you stop

hugging my wife and introduce the beautiful woman you have with you?"

I gulped. I could see what Terror's eye color was now. It was a deep blue color, which made his dark lashes and eyebrows pop. His gorgeous tattoos all down his arms caught my notice, too. Harlow's eyes were the most unusual color I'd ever seen. Never had I seen someone with violet eyes.

Slash let go of Harlow and put his arm back around me. "Terror, Harley, this is my Aria. Aria, this is Terror, the president of our Dublin Falls chapter and his old lady, Harlow. She's Bull's daughter and you'll hear most of us call her Harley. They have three rugrats around here somewhere."

I was surprised when Harlow came up and gave me a hug. "Hello, Aria, it's so good to meet you. Welcome to the Warriors' family."

I mumbled a thank you. When she let go of me, Terror stepped closer. I couldn't control my involuntary step back. He froze. I felt stupid doing it. It wasn't like he was going to hurt me in front of all these people and Slash. He held out his hand. I saw understanding in his gaze. Oh God, did he know what happened to me? Did they all? Before I could panic over the thought, he spoke to me.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Aria. Don't let my gruffness scare you. I have to keep this wife of mine from knowing she rules me," he said with a wink and a slight smile. It transformed his face, making me relax. I shook his hand.

"Hello, it's good to meet both of you as well. Sorry if I acted scared. I have a problem with people touching me, especially if I don't know them. It's not personal."

"I understand," he said.

"I'm sorry. I'll try to remember that. I'm a hugger. Why don't you let us come along, and we'll help Slash introduce you to our crazy crew? They're harmless, but they can be a lot to take," Harlow added.

And that's how I was introduced to them and then led on to be introduced to the remainder of the Dublin Falls group.

The names and relationships made my head hurt. I knew I wouldn't remember all of them. The men were easy because of their cuts. The kids were all a blur, and I couldn't keep straight who belonged to whom. The women had on cuts, too, but those had their nicknames on them. Harlow's said *Temptress* like what Terror called her. I thought it was so cool. I worked hard to put their real names to their faces when they were introduced. When we were done, it had taken over an hour to meet them all. I was exhausted and ready to sit down. Slash must've noticed and was excusing us to go sit down when the gate opened, and in came a car I did recognize. It was Jade. I eagerly hurried over to where she pulled in. She was used to coming here now and knew where to park. As she got out of her car, I couldn't help but think how beautiful she looked, which wasn't new. She was a gorgeous woman. She was smiling as I hugged her. Slash greeted her with a warm smile and nod.

"Wow, it's so crowded. I thought you said it was only one chapter coming to the party?" she asked as she gazed around the parking lot. Some people were wandering around while the rest were behind the clubhouse, where the play area and barbeque area were along with their pool.

"It is only one. I know. They amazed me, too. You have to come and let us introduce you to them as well as the other ones from here you don't know. How was your morning? I was worried you wouldn't make it," I said.

"It was close, but I got what I had to do done. I can't wait to relax. It's been an intense week. I'd love to meet everyone, but first, tell me where to put this stuff I have in the backseat."

She opened the rear door. I saw there were foil-covered containers. "You didn't need to bring anything," I protested. I knew I'd told her not to.

"I know but I was raised never to come empty-handed. It's rude. It's a couple of berry cobblers I made. It's nothing. I had a ton of frozen berries that needed to be used up."

“We’ll get one of the prospects to get them. Just leave your car unlocked,” Slash told her.

Nodding her head, she shut the door. We headed for the first group of people. As it happened, Walker was with them, and Slash sent him to get the cobblers. As Jade was introduced, everyone was very nice and friendly to her. She was introduced as my friend by Slash. I wasn’t ashamed she was my therapist and would’ve been fine if she was introduced like that, but in the last couple of weeks, she’d already grown to be more than just my therapist.

She’d only met a few of the Hunters Creek Warriors since she came straight to the house to meet with me and then left. A few of the married ones had met her because they happened to stop by the house while she was there. As she was introduced to the other guys in Slash’s club, I realized how the single ones were checking her out. There was definite interest there. I didn’t know how I felt about that. Yes, I did. I didn’t want any of them to see her as a hookup. She was worth more than a night of sex and then passed up. If one of them were to have serious intentions toward her and she returned it, then I’d be all for it. My protective guard went up. I tugged Slash aside.

“What’s wrong, babe? You need to take a break?” he asked with concern. He’d told me before this started to let him know when I needed to take a breather.

“No, I’m doing okay right now. It’s Jade.”

“What about her?”

“Your single brothers are giving her looks I don’t like. She’s not one of those bunnies or hang arounds they’re used to sleeping with and then walking away from after they have sex. She’s my friend, Slash. I don’t want one of them getting her attention to do that to her. She’s not that kind of woman.”

“Babe, she’s a woman who can’t help but catch the eyes of men. My brothers aren’t blind. However, I will make sure to tell them she’s not the kind you play with. Although, I think they should be able to tell that for themselves. I promise I won’t let them or anyone else play fast and loose with her. I

like her, and I don't want to see her hurt either. But if she decides she wants to purely hook up with any of them, it's her business, and I won't tell them not to," he warned me.

It was better than nothing, so I nodded. "Okay, I can live with that, although something tells me she's not like those women."

"I assume since you're saying that, she's single?"

"She is. I asked her one day. She said she hasn't had much luck in the men department. I got the feeling there was more to it, but I didn't pry. She'll tell me if she wants. I did let her know that I'm here if she needs someone to talk to."

"I love how comfortable you are with her. I've seen a difference in you since you started seeing her."

"She's easy to talk to and helps me sort out my jumbled-up thoughts and feelings."

"Good. That's what I want." He smiled at me and then lowered his head to kiss me. Like always, I instantly got lost in his taste and touch. The sensations he brought alive in me were intense and made my body buzz. He groaned as I pressed against him. I could feel his hardness pressing into me. I gripped the back of his hair to hold him tight so he couldn't get away from me.

It was laughter and someone whistling, which finally made me let go, and we broke away from each other. Both of us were breathing a bit heavily. I knew my face was flushed because I could feel the warmth of it. His eyes were dark with need. "God, we can't keep doing that, or I'm gonna combust, Dove. Your kisses are like nectar from the gods. I can't get enough."

"The same here. I disagree that we shouldn't keep kissing, but maybe we'll avoid it for now. Later, we have a discussion to have, remember? I think more kissing will be a definite part of it," I whispered.

The look of hunger mixed with hope made me giggle. I couldn't tell you the last time I'd giggled. He gave a slight growl, then smacked me lightly on the ass before taking my

arm and leading me over to where we'd left Jade. She gave me a smile and a chin lift when we got there. She'd seen our kiss and must agree with it. Happiness filled me. This was turning out to be a great day.

It was late afternoon when the food was ready. We all gathered to grab plates and fill them. With so many of us, it was served like a buffet with a line down each side of the long tables. The amount of food seemed endless and way too much even for this many people, but after I saw how the men ate, I worried it might not be enough. Of course, Slash made sure I ate more than rabbit food, as he called it. I have to admit, every bite was delicious. He warned me to leave room for dessert. I didn't know how I could possibly do it.

As people got toward the end of the meal, Bull got up and announced that everyone needed to stick around for a surprise dessert. I wondered what it was. There was a table laden with all kinds of them. Which one was special and why?

We were outside eating with a bunch of the others. Some were eating inside. It was wherever you could find a spot. I finished my food and was leaning against Slash, groaning. He laughed at me. I elbowed him in the ribs. Suddenly, he gave me a peck on the lips.

"I'll be right back, baby. I need to go grab something."

"Slash, if you're going for more food, you'll explode," I warned him. All he did was grin and blow me a kiss. God, where was he putting it all? He had to have two hollow legs.

I sat there relaxing and soaking up the last of the sun's rays. I felt content and happy. Jade was sitting next to me, chatting with Ilara, who was on her left. I was brought back to the moment by a loud, piercing whistle. Glancing up and around, I saw Bull standing up again, and beside him was Slash.

"Can I have your attention, everyone? I told you to hold on that there was a special dessert today. Well, here it is. A Madisen and Jessica special cake," Bull said as he pointed to a massive cake that had so many layers, it looked like a

wedding cake. It was covered in white icing and intricately piped flowers in purple, pink, and teal.

I was busy admiring it from afar when Slash called out my name. “Aria, babe, I need you to come up here, please.”

I gave him a puzzled look that made him just smile and gesture to me to come to him. Deciding to do as he asked, I stood up and made my way to him. As I got closer, I looked over at the cake again. It was too lovely not to. That’s when I saw the writing on it. There, in flowing teal script, were the words, *Happy Birthday, Aria*. I froze. He had to tug me the last foot or so. He wrapped me in his arms and in a booming voice, he started to sing a rendition of Happy Birthday I didn’t recognize. Immediately, the others joined him.

Happy Birthday Warrior’s woman,

Happy Birthday Warrior’s woman,

Happy Birthday, beautiful Aria,

Happy Birthday, we love you.

By the end of the song, I was crying. Everyone was cheering. Slash gathered me in his arms, kissed me, and then wiped the tears off my cheeks. “In case you haven’t guessed yet, today isn’t just so we can see our sister club. It’s really about allowing them to meet the woman who’s stolen my heart and to celebrate your birthday. I know it’s still a couple of days away, but I wanted to surprise you. I know you grew up without them being a big deal, just like Christmas. Well, Dove, I’m here to tell you those days are gone. I’ll always celebrate the day you were born, Christmas, and a whole lot more.”

His speech made me cry more. It took some time for me to get it under control enough to cut the cake and eat a piece. It was the best cake I’d ever tasted in my life. It was filled with layers of cream, berry jam, and cake, as well as a crunchy layer of something. I glowed with happiness and floated through the rest of the evening on cloud nine. The cake wasn’t the only thing they did. To my utter shock, there were more gifts than I’d ever seen in my life. Clothes of every type and color. There were gift cards so I could get more things. It

was all overwhelming. I tried to tell them I didn't need those, but they refused to take them back.

Among the gifts were several pieces of sexy lingerie some of the ladies bought me. My face heated up when I opened them. There was one box that came from Payne and Jayla. They told us to open it later when we were alone. I was dying to know what was in it. Nothing could bring me down. I enjoyed getting to know everyone, and I was nervously looking forward to later when we could be alone. The party and cake had sealed the deal. I wasn't about to let nerves stop me from asking Slash to move our relationship along.

Slash: Chapter 9

Aria's reaction to the cake and gifts was what I wished for. She was totally surprised, and even though she was overwhelmed by the gifts everyone had given her, she was glowing with happiness. My club—both chapters—had pulled off a great surprise with me. She couldn't help but see that she had people in her corner who cared about her. We were her family. All she had to do was accept us. Ultimately, I wanted her to fully accept that I was the man for her.

The weeks since we'd rescued her had seen us grow closer. We shared a lot of things about ourselves. There was a lot more to discover, but that was what the rest of our lives were for. If you waited until you knew everything about someone, you'd never get married. And marriage was where I wanted this to go. Like my brothers, I'd found the woman meant for me, and I wanted it all—property cut, ring, marriage, and children.

We might not have had the best examples growing up of how to raise kids, but we had wonderful examples all around us now. My parents had been decent to me, but they were never the loving kind who gave kisses or hugs. I couldn't remember them ever telling me they loved me, although they kept me clothed and fed, and I wasn't abused or deprived. Aria's mom couldn't afford much, so she had grown up without a lot of things. Sometimes, food was scarce, or they struggled to keep a cheap apartment so they weren't living in a car.

Aria had told me how she had promised herself when she was young not to live like that when she grew up. She'd get an education, and when the time came to get married and have a family, she'd work along with her husband to give their kids what they needed and to show them they were loved. Her mom always gave off the vibe that she resented her.

I was here to make sure it happened. She'd been in college studying psychology when the Cannibals took her. She

hadn't been sure what she wanted to do with it, but when she talked about it, you could hear in her voice how much she loved it. It was exciting to her. She didn't know it yet, but when this shit with the Cannibals was over, I was going to make sure she went back to school to finish her degree or degrees to become whatever she wanted.

All that could wait because as the evening got later, I was impatiently waiting for her to be ready to call it a night. I was desperate to find out if she was still in the mood to explore the spanking I'd teased her with earlier in the day. She'd been giving me heated looks on and off since, and I prayed it meant she was planning to ask for more. My hope was I'd at least get my hands on her bare skin, whether it was her breasts or her ass. I refused to hope for more. That would be pushing it. The box Payne and Jayla gave her had me itching to see if it held anything we could use for her spanking demo. Knowing Payne, I'd bet money it did.

It was after ten. The kids had been sent to bed in the children's room we had in the clubhouse, as well as at various houses. Jade had left a little bit ago, saying she had to get up early to go do something. We'd planned ahead and had asked the Fuller siblings—Emma, Elizabeth, and Elias, along with their cousins, Ellen and Elsa, to babysit so the parents could have fun and relax. Terror had brought some of the ladies who babysat for them in Dublin Falls along for the same reason. During the day, they'd hung out with us and had fun until it was time to go to work. They had their hands full with over sixty kids combined.

The music coming from the speakers was loud. This time, we didn't have a band. We just had playlists playing our favorite music over the speaker system hooked up inside and outside the clubhouse. The fires were going. People were drinking, dancing, and laughing. Since it wasn't terribly cold, most of us were outside.

Glancing over to watch Aria dancing with a group of the women, I had to smile. She was laughing and having fun. That's what I wanted for her. A bump to my elbow had me turning my head. There stood Viper, grinning at me. His

woman, Harper, was up dancing with Aria. “She looks like she’s having a great time. It’s good to see. Terror told us what happened to her. He wanted us to be prepared if she was leery of us. She’s doing way better than I thought. Also, he told us that you’d made an unofficial claim on her.”

“I knew as soon as I saw her, she was special. I don’t know all the details because she hasn’t shared them, but what I do know is that she went through hell with those bastards. When we find them, they’re gonna suffer.”

“No doubt. You know you have everyone in Dublin Falls behind you. They’re lying low, and it doesn’t seem possible they could do that and not leave a hint as to where they are.”

“I agree. I think they have someone really smart either in the club or helping them. Bull knew the old club and said there was no one like that back then, but things can change.”

“We’ll get them. Don’t worry. Now, no more talk about that. We’re supposed to be having fun and relaxing. Since it looks like our women are gonna dance a while longer, I wanted to ask if you’d take me to see that new gun you got. I heard it’s a great hunting rifle. You get all the good ones at Warriors’ Excursions.”

He was talking my language. I did enjoy all the aspects of the outdoor supplies we sold, but the guns and crossbows were my favorite, along with the knives. It went back to the hunting I did growing up and still did. There were several of us who enjoyed hunting and brought in deer every year. Venison was delicious meat and far leaner and healthier for you than beef, which a lot of people didn’t know. Those who claimed it was gamey tasting weren’t preparing it right.

One last check to be sure Aria was doing alright, and then we took off inside the clubhouse. I had it in the gun safe in my room. One day, when I got a house built, which I thought I should start doing soon, I planned to have a whole room dedicated to my weapons that could double as a safe room for my family. I had the plans all sketched out.

When I took my latest acquisition out of the safe, Viper whistled. I went into salesman mode without thinking about it. “This is a Mossberg with the Patrol FLEX system. It has a toolless system which makes it easy to change the stocks, grips, and forearms depending on what you want to use it for—tactical, competition, hunting, or home defense. There are extra barrels so you can shift from shooting turkeys to waterfowl to slug hunting. It’s a great gun for deer hunting, which I’ll be doing in a few months. This one shoots a 7.62 mm NATO bullet.”

“It’s a beauty. I’ve never been hunting, but I know some of the others have. I’d like to do it one day. Did you always love the outdoors, or is this only since you took over Excursions?” he asked after he got done admiring it and handed it back so I could put it away.

I made sure the safe was secure before leaving the room. As we headed back down the hallway, I answered him. “My dad always hunted and took me camping and stuff. I grew up loving to do this. In the Army, I liked it when we’d be out in nature, although a lot of the guys and women I was with didn’t. I think that’s why Bull suggested I manage Excursions. If you ever want to learn, I’d be more than happy to take you out hunting. Just let me know when.”

“Thanks, I might just do that.”

We hit the common room. The noise level had significantly increased from when we passed through here to go to my room a few minutes ago. What the hell? It hadn’t been that long since we were here. As I looked around, it dawned on me why. Apparently, with the kiddies gone, the adult entertainment had arrived. I’d been so into watching Aria have fun I forgot they would be coming. I’d planned to have her back to the house before they showed up. I didn’t want them to upset her.

Skimpy-clad women were scattered around the room. Some were flaunting their assets while others were already getting naked. I couldn’t begrudge my single brothers their fun. They’d done as instructed and made sure none of the women came before the kids were in bed, and the old ladies

who didn't want to be around them had settled for the night. Some of our guests were staying here in empty rooms and the extra bedrooms at the various houses as well as the other townhomes. Others had brought fifth-wheel campers and parked them. I think a few had decided to stay in town.

I saw a woman on her knees between Iceman's legs. He was sitting in a chair, relaxed back, as she undid his zipper. Shit, I needed to find Aria and get her out of here right now! I turned to tell Viper I was going to find her and we'd talk tomorrow. I didn't get a chance before I felt hands running up my back, and a grating voice said my name. I swore as I whipped around.

Standing there, giving me a predatory look, was a hang around. She'd partied here in the past. I'd made the mistake, months ago, of hooking up with her one time. That was more than enough. As soon as I did it, I knew I'd made a mistake. She wanted to stay in my bed, which I never let a woman do after sex. We'd go at it, and then, when we were done, the woman would leave. I told her to leave, and she pouted. Started talking shit about how she'd make me the perfect old lady. It had taken me threatening to have her banned to get her to leave.

Since that night, she'd shown up a few times, trying the same thing, and I sent her packing. The last time, which was right before we rescued Aria, I'd had her banned. I didn't know how the hell she got in tonight, but her ass was leaving. I shook her hands off me like a dog trying to shake off fleas. I gave her my best snarling look. "Annamarie, what the fuck are you doing here? You were told never to step foot on our property again."

"Oh, come on, honey, you can't still be pretending to be mad at me. I've missed you, and I know you've missed me. When I heard you were having a party, I had to come. No more games, Slash. You know I can make you feel things no other woman can. It's time to tell everyone the truth. I'm your old lady. I've waited, like you wanted, to tell everyone our secret, but it's time. They need to know I'm yours, and I have the ring to prove it." She held up her hand. On her left fourth

finger, an engagement ring shined. I was momentarily speechless at the audacity of her. Or maybe it was insanity. Did she truly think I had claimed her and gave her that ring?

I opened my mouth to tell her off and to wake her up to the truth when I heard a gasp and then a whimper of pain. With my gut clenching, I looked up and around. Standing not far from us was Aria. The look of devastation on her face gutted me. She looked like she'd been slapped and her heart torn out at the same time. I took a step toward her, and she backed up. I saw she was gonna run.

I pushed Annamarie out of my way and rushed toward Aria. She turned to run, but there were people in the way. We'd drawn a crowd. Someone had lowered the music. She tried to push between Loki and Vex, but they weren't letting her past them. "Move," she shouted at them.

"We can't do that, little sister. You need to talk to your man," Vex said.

I wrapped my arms around her from behind. She kicked back and scraped the heel of her boot down my shin. It hurt, but I took it. No way was I letting her go. She would hear what I had to say.

I bent down and whispered in her ear, "Baby, she's not my old lady. I never gave her a fucking ring. She's a hang around that I made a mistake and slept with one time, months ago. I knew I made a mistake as soon as it happened. I don't know how she got in here, but she's leaving."

She turned in my arms to face me. Through her hurt, I saw fire in her eyes. "Don't send her away. You'll need someone to sleep with tonight. I know how much you like that. Since you won't be sleeping with me, better not let her go. Although, I guess, there's plenty more to take our place. After all, all women are interchangeable, aren't we?" she snapped.

"No, you fucking are not! The only woman I'm sleeping with tonight and every night afterward is you. If you kick my ass out of your bed, then I'll sleep alone on the damn porch, but I won't be sleeping with another woman. That bitch is delusional. I never talked to her about being my old lady or

that we had to keep an engagement secret. I don't want her. I love you, and you're the only woman I want to be my old lady, wife, and the mother of my children. Don't let her lie ruin us," I whispered back fiercely.

She stood there staring into my eyes for a long time. Everyone around us was dead silent. My heart pounded so hard I thought it would beat out of my chest. *Please, God, don't let this bitch make Aria leave me. I won't be able to survive that.*

She opened her mouth to respond, but before she could do so, a shrill voice interrupted us. "Slash, who is this woman? Have you been cheating on me? You said you wouldn't do that even though I had to be gone for a while. I want her thrown out. You're mine. We have so much to talk about and the wedding to plan. We have to get married before I get too fat with our baby," she said with a smirk as she touched her flat stomach.

Aria gasped again. She was trying, once more, to get away from me. I held her tighter. "Annamarie, stop with the bullshit lies. I repeat, I never asked you to be my old lady or wife. I never gave you a damn ring. I made a mistake and slept with you six months ago, so if you're pregnant, which I doubt, it's not mine. I wore a goddamn condom to make sure I didn't knock you up. I was stupid to sleep with you, and I regret it more than I can say. As for me kicking Aria out, that's never happening. She's the woman I love. She's the one getting my property cut and ring. I'm just waiting for the right time to ask her. She's the one who'll be carrying my babies."

As Annamarie's face filled with disbelief, Aria turned around in my arms again to stare up at me. There was wonder and disbelief on her face. "Do you really mean all that? You love me and want me to be your wife and have your babies?"

"I swear it on my cut and here in front of my club that's the God's honest truth. If you say yes right now, I'll get the cut and the ring, and we'll go see the Justice of the Peace in the morning."

She smiled up at me and reached up to cup my face. I was lowering my head to kiss her when I heard a shriek, and then one of the guys swore. Aria cried out and jerked back in my arms. Annamarie had grabbed her by the back of her long hair. Her face was twisted up in an ugly snarl.

“He’s mine, bitch!” she screamed.

I let go of Aria to go after Annamarie, but I never made it. Neither did any of my brothers who were coming up behind her. Instead, Aria dropped down, turned, and stood up almost in one motion. Annamarie cried out as the move snapped her wrist hard. She had to let go of Aria’s hair. Once she did, Aria came at her swinging. She wasn’t doing any of that slapping or hair-pulling crap either. She was using her fists, and she knew how to punch. Her first one hit Annamarie in the eye, the next one hit her nose, and the third one hit her stomach.

As much as I loved seeing her defend herself, there was no need for her to waste her energy on this woman. Right before I wrapped her back in my arms, she grabbed Annamarie’s head and yanked it down as she brought up her knee. Everyone nearby heard Annamarie’s nose break. She screamed. I tucked Aria back against my chest.

“That’s enough, champ,” I told her. My brothers chuckled. Annamarie wailed and held her nose. Blood leaked out between her fingers. She was staring at me in disbelief.

“Slash, you can’t mean it. Why would you let her hit me? She punched me in the stomach. What if I lose the baby?” Annamarie cried out.

I rolled my eyes. “That’s your problem. This is the last time, Annamarie. Leave and don’t bother coming back here again. You won’t be admitted. If I find out you’re going around town, lying about me getting you pregnant and wanting to marry you, you won’t like what I do,” I warned her.

I was relieved when Vex and Predator got a hold of each of her arms and dragged her out. She fought them the whole time. She screamed profanities and swore that I would regret it and would come back to her one day. As the drama died down, I leaned over to whisper in Aria’s ear. “Are you

ready to go to the house? I think I've had enough for the night. We need to talk, and you promised me something earlier."

She looked over her shoulder and raised a brow at me. "Oh, and you think you're still gonna get it after that show?"

"I'm willing to beg for it if I have to. Just give me a minute, then we can go."

Looking up, I spotted Viper was still there. "Watch her for me, will ya? I need to get some stuff from my room."

"Sure. I'll make sure no more psychos come looking for you. Aria, tell me where you learned to punch like that, slugger?"

As I left them, I heard her explaining how she learned to fight when she was with the Cannibals. It made me sick to think how she had learned and why she did. Entering my room, I grabbed a duffle bag and quickly loaded it with the items I needed. The other stuff, like the box from Payne and Jayla, had been taken to the house earlier. Locking the door, I headed back to her as fast as I could. I found her in a deep conversation with Viper. She laughed at something he said as I walked up. "Thanks, man. I'll see you in the morning," I told him.

"Sure thing. Have a good night," he said with a wink. As we left, others shouted out goodnight. I eagerly hustled her to the house. We had things to iron out. I wasn't going to sleep without clearing them up. There was no going to sleep mad again in this relationship.

As we entered the house, I could tell she was beginning to feel nervous. She was tense, and the smile that she had on her face had faded. I took my time taking off my cut and hanging it by the front door, then taking off my boots. She took off her boots and the jacket I'd gotten for her earlier when it turned cooler outside.

"Is there anything you want or need from the kitchen?" I asked.

"No, I'm fine. Let's sit over here and talk." She pointed to the couch in the living room.

I shook my head. “No, we’re gonna do this where we can be comfortable. Let’s go to the bedroom. In fact, why don’t you take your bath, and I’ll shower in the other bathroom?”

“We can talk first.”

“No, we both need to relax. After that shitshow, I know I do,” I confessed.

It was this confession that got her to agree. Even though I would’ve loved to share the shower with her, I knew it wasn’t happening. Despite my bold talk, I doubted she’d want to continue our spanking session. I was disappointed, but I understood. All I wanted was to clear this up and make sure she knew that she was the only woman for me.

As I showered, it was hard not to imagine her doing the same thing. As a result, my cock was semi-hard when I finished. I had on a pair of loose lounge pants. They did nothing to hide my arousal, but then again, she should be used to seeing me hard. I entered the bedroom, expecting to have to wait for her, but she was already in bed, under the covers. She gave me a tentative smile. I lay down beside her on top of the covers. “Did the bath help?”

“It did. Good idea. So, what do you want to talk about? I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions with that woman. I shouldn’t have. I guess, for me, it’s all about my insecurities.”

“Why’re you insecure? You have to see how beautiful you are. Even if you didn’t know I love you, you know I care for you. I thought I showed that every day.”

“You do, and I know you think I’m beautiful. It’s just...” she stopped.

“Just what? Don’t stop now. We have to be able to talk to each other, baby. It doesn’t matter what it’s about.”

“I don’t understand why you love me and think I’m beautiful. I know that woman was a hang around or a bunny. They came through the gate like a wave all at once. I couldn’t find you and, for a second, I thought you might be with one of them. I went to find you to tell you I was ready to come to the

house after I pushed that thought away. I told myself I was being an idiot. Coming in and seeing her with you and hearing what she said was a shock. It made me think my initial thought was right.”

“Why? Because I had sex with her? Because if that’s it, I hate to tell you, there are more women that I’ve slept with you might run into around here. I wasn’t celibate. I’m thirty-seven years old. With that said, I don’t expect them to come up and say shit to you, but if they do, I’ll set their asses straight.”

“I know you’re not a virgin, and I can’t hold your past against you, but it’s hard. There are all these gorgeous, sexy, experienced women out there who you know intimately. I’m not like them, Kai. My only sexual experiences are rape. Sure, I read a lot, but that’s not the same. What if you discover you miss sex with them? What if there’s stuff you want that I can’t give you? I’d rather we stop whatever we have going on here now than face heartbreak down the road. Lord forbid if we were to ever get married and have kids, then you decide that you don’t want me. I saw the kind of women you guys have available tonight. Some of them could be models. I’ll never look like them in a million years.”

She looked so dejected it made my heart hurt. She’d lowered her chin and was staring down at her hands clasped together in her lap. I moved closer and lifted her chin up with my finger. She avoided my gaze. “Look at me,” I ordered.

At first she didn’t, but I didn’t let go. After several seconds, she did. “I don’t see any other women but you. They could be models standing there naked in front of me, and I’d pass them by without a glance to get to you. You’re beautiful, sexy, and smart. You might not think your body is perfect, but I do. I love that you have hips, an ass, and those breasts. You don’t know how badly I want to be able to touch them and see them bare. I try to imagine what they look like naked. Look, this is what you do to me just thinking about you.” I pointed to my erection, pressing to explode out of my pants.

Her hand crept over to my lap, and she caressed along my bulge. It jumped under her fingers. I groaned. She did it again, then cupped the whole thing and gently squeezed it

before beginning to stroke up and down. I threw back my head and moaned. “Fuck, that feels so good, baby. You better stop before I can’t think, and I beg you to get naked.”

She wiggled closer and put her mouth on mine. She nipped my lower lip with her teeth. It made me forget everything other than the driving need to taste her and to make her mine. Growling, I rolled her on her back. I hovered over her as I attacked her mouth. There were lots of tongues, teeth, and lips devouring each other. It made my cock harden even more.

Aching to touch her, I slid my hand up to cup her breast through the sheet. I knew she’d have her pajamas underneath it, but I didn’t care. Her taut nipples pressed against the sheet, begging for attention. As I did, I noticed she felt different. Other than the sheet, I didn’t feel any other cloth between us. Barely daring to hope, I reached for the top edge of the sheet. I pushed it down. She let it go. As I pushed it down, my palm slid against her skin. I thought I’d meet the edge of her nightgown, except I didn’t. Instead, a bare breast filled my hand. I groaned, then tore my mouth away to look.

Her pert, full breast was totally naked and filling my hand to overflowing. I lifted my hand so I could look at the beauty of it. The other side of the sheet slipped down, and both breasts were exposed. Her nipples were tight beads and a dark, rosy pink. Moaning, I asked her hoarsely, “Dove, can I have a taste?”

“Yes, please,” she moaned.

I didn’t wait to be told twice. I licked around her areola a few times, then slowly curled inward until I was at her hard nub. I flicked it back and forth with the tip of my tongue. She moaned and gripped the back of my head, pulling me closer. Chuckling, I sucked it slowly into my mouth. As I sucked and teased her with my tongue, my hand kneaded her breasts. Occasionally, I’d tug on her distended nipple on the other breast. The way she moaned and wiggled, I could tell she was enjoying the hell out of it.

Through the haze of lust that was building in my mind, I wondered if she had just left her top off or was she completely naked underneath this thin sheet. God, the desire to find out was overwhelming, but I held myself back. My cock ached. I felt myself expanding. I knew if we kept this up for long, I'd explode. I didn't want to stop. I continued to lave her breasts and tease them with my mouth and hand until she gave a scream and shook. Fuck, she came just from breast play. I wondered if the rest of her body was that sensitive.

As she settled, I reluctantly pulled away. Her dazed eyes landed on my face. "What's wrong?" she asked hoarsely.

"Nothing's wrong. We just need to stop before things go too far. Baby, you have beautiful breasts. I could play all day with those beauties."

She didn't say anything. I was worried that now she was thinking clearer and she might regret letting me do that much. "Babe, I'm—"

"What if I want to go farther? What if this isn't enough for me?" she asked.

I had a momentary brain glitch as what she said sank in. I was afraid to say anything in case it was a dream. I stared at her, not daring to hope. She took a deep breath and then reached down to her waist, where the sheet had landed. She grabbed it and jerked it away, exposing the rest of her very naked body. I was speechless.

Aria: Chapter 10

I was so nervous that I felt lightheaded, and my heart pounded. I couldn't believe I'd just yanked down the sheet so Slash could see my whole body. While I was in the shower, I'd warred with myself about whether I should be naked when he came back. My desire for him won out. What he'd said about that woman had only reinforced my need. He looked like he was sincere. I had to let myself believe he meant what he said. I had to take the risk and pray he wouldn't hurt me later.

I'd talked briefly with Jade when we had a private moment together. I told her about the spanking incident and how it made me feel, as well as what I'd said to him about later. She was encouraging and told me not to overthink it. If it felt right, to do it. She did warn me that I'd be nervous but to think about it when I was in the moment. Was it nerves or fear? If it was fear, then stop. But if it was just nerves, then take it a step at a time.

All day and evening, being with him had only ramped me up. I was looking forward to getting him alone. When that woman showed up, I had a momentary lapse into panic and insecurity. I tried to run. It wasn't fair. I had to keep telling myself the Warriors were nothing like the Cannibals. I didn't need to run whenever things overwhelmed me or scared me.

The heat in his gaze as he looked up and down my body made my body temp go up. I was still a little uncertain about my body, even after what he said about me being beautiful, when I pulled down the sheet. The expression on his face and the heat assured me I had nothing to worry about.

“Jesus, Aria, you're so damn beautiful, baby. I don't know where to start. Are you sure you want us to do more than what we just did?”

“Yeah, I'm sure, Kai. I want to feel your hands on the rest of me.”

“Okay, but promise me if I go too fast, or do something you don't like, or if you want to stop, you tell me. The last

thing I want to do is scare you or make you do something you're not ready for. I can wait until you're absolutely sure."

"I promise. I'm nervous, but I'm not afraid. What you've done so far feels so good. I want to know what it's like to be with someone I want. To have a man care about me and not hurt me."

"Dove, I will never knowingly do anything that will hurt you. I have to rely on you to tell me if I'm getting too rough. I won't lie. I like to play, and I like my sex hard and fast, but that doesn't mean slow and easy can't be good. I would love it if we get to the point where we can explore all of those together, but if we don't, then we don't."

"But if that's what you prefer and I can't give it to you, it's not fair. You'll want it," I told him, starting to feel panic welling up.

"I want you more. I need you more than I need that. I won't ever go looking for it from someone else. I meant what I said in the clubhouse. I love you. I'm hoping one day you'll love me too."

As he lowered his mouth to kiss me, I whispered right before his lips met mine, "I already love you."

He let out a growling sound and then claimed my mouth. I could tell by the way he kissed me until my toes curled and my whole body was on fire that he liked hearing me say it. I worked hard to kiss him back with just as much passion. When we eventually took a break, he was smiling. "Say it again," he ordered.

"Say what?" I teased him.

He rolled my bottom half toward him which exposed one of my ass cheeks. He landed a smack on it. I jumped at the sting, but it made fire shoot to my pussy. I moaned. "Say it," he growled.

"What?" I asked again, wanting him to spank me again. This time, he flipped me onto my stomach and swatted both cheeks. It was harder than the other times. Even though it

stung, it made my body heat up, and I could feel the slickness between my legs increasing.

“Woman, don’t make me paddle this ass until you can’t sit down. If you do, there won’t be any more fun tonight,” he warned me.

“Fine, I guess you want me to tell you that I love you, right? Well, I do. I don’t know how it happened this fast, but I do. I’m falling more every day,” I confessed.

“Thank God because I feel the same way. I knew as soon as I saw you that you were the one for me.”

“Really? Even though I was covered in soot, smelled like smoke, and looked like hell?”

“Even though you smelled like smoke and were covered in soot. You never looked like hell to me.”

“I think you need to get your eyes checked,” I teased.

“Well, let me do an eye exam right now. I bet this will prove I can see just fine,” he gruffly said before he lowered his mouth.

Only this time, it wasn’t to my mouth. Instead, he began to kiss a trail from my chin to my breasts. When he got to them, he paused long enough to suck on each nipple and then flick them with his tongue before he moved to my stomach. There, he spent time teasing my belly button and kissing along my ribs. There were a few faint scars on my stomach from my captivity. I hoped they wouldn’t turn him off. This thought made me tense up as I thought of my leg.

It wasn’t the prettiest sight. The scarring was extensive. I used to like my legs, but not anymore. I didn’t have a choice when I was with my tormentors, but now I knew I wouldn’t wear shorts. My tension must’ve been communicated to him because he rose. “What’s wrong, baby?”

I didn’t want to draw attention to my scars. I didn’t know what to say. He rubbed his fingers lightly along the ones on my stomach. “Is it these?”

“A little bit, yeah. I hate them. They’re ugly, but they’re nothing compared to my leg. I don’t want you to look at it.” I tried to sit up to grab the sheet which was at my knees. He beat me to it and wouldn’t let me yank it up.

“There’s nothing wrong with these scars. They show what a fighter you are. You’re a warrior. I don’t want you to ever hide your scars from me or anyone else. I have scars, too.” He pointed to one on his shoulder that looked like a bullet wound. Down lower on his side was another that was a long line like a knife cut.

“Yeah, but don’t you know, guys with scars are hot. Women aren’t.”

“I never heard that about men, but yours are sexy because of how strong they show you are. Let me see your leg. I got a glimpse the day of the fire, but I was too busy staring at your gorgeous self. Come on. You show me the rest of yours, and I’ll show you mine,” he said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes at his teasing. “Fine, but it’s not pretty, so be ready.” I let go of the sheet and let him pull it down to the foot of the bed. His fingers tenderly traced the scarring. They hadn’t had time to fade to silver yet. That would take a few years. I was lucky I could walk at all. My leg ached often, especially when it rained or was cold. The limp was always there. I couldn’t wear high-heeled shoes anymore.

Suddenly, his lips were tracing the scars. He placed baby kisses all over them as he rubbed my calf. “How do you get your skin so soft? It’s like silk. The only thing I hate about these scars is I think about the pain you went through when it happened. I hate the idea of the pain you still live with. Believe me, I will make sure every Cannibal who ever hurt you dies. Ox will suffer the most for doing this.”

“Don’t talk about them. I don’t want them in our bed with us. I just want your lips and hands touching me. As for my skin being soft, it’s the bodywash I’ve been using since I got here.”

“Mmm, well, make sure to never stop using it,” he murmured before kissing the rest of the way down my leg.

Once he got to my feet, he switched sides and kissed up the opposite leg. As he got close to my pussy, I held my breath, wondering what he would do. I was desperate to have him touch me there. Despite the fact that any touching there in the past had always ended in pain, something told me his touch wouldn't. Jade had assured me that with a man who focused on bringing me pleasure, it wouldn't hurt.

He paused and glanced up at me. I gave him what I hoped was an encouraging smile. It must've been because he gently pressed my thighs apart and then arranged himself between my legs. I squirmed with embarrassment. He was right there, staring intently at my pussy. It was wet, and I knew he could see it. On top of that, I wondered what I smelled like and if he liked it. He inhaled before he lowered his head and slowly ran his tongue from my entrance to my clit. There he stopped and sucked it into his mouth. I let out a scream. Oh my God, that was amazing!

He was encouraged by my scream because right after I did it, he licked me again. Soon, I was in a haze of bliss as he licked, sucked and fingered my folds and clit. I was edging closer to an orgasm, something I'd only ever had by my own hand and when he'd played with my breasts. Suddenly, he thrust a finger inside me. I tensed up, but it was from surprise, not pain. He stopped and gave me a questioning look. I didn't want him to have to stop every time I tensed or made a noise he thought indicated I was in pain. I nodded my head.

He pulled back, then thrust again. As he did so, I moaned. Another finger slipped inside. Soon, he was pushing me right to the edge. His fingers curling inside me were rubbing against a spot I thought was a myth. I guess I was wrong, and women did have a G-spot. As he latched down on my clit and sucked it hard, he thrust in and out, dragging across that magical spot. That was the end of it. I came crying out his name. I could feel the wetness soaking my thighs. He hummed, which sent vibrations up my pussy, causing me to come harder and longer. It was a while before I came down and regained my senses. When I did, I felt like a limp rag.

He kissed his way up my body until he reached my mouth. He gave me a kiss that let me taste myself. I didn't care. I wanted his lips on mine. When he eventually broke the kiss, I was filled with contentment. However, as he rolled over on his back beside me, I saw him grimace. Glancing down, I could see why.

His cock was a monster, pressing against the fabric of his pants. I reached out and ran a finger over it. He hissed and grabbed my hand. "Babe, don't. I'm close. If you touch me, I'm gonna come."

"You should. I don't want to be selfish. I don't expect you to give me everything, and you get nothing. I wanna see you, Kai. Take your pants off."

"You don't have to give me anything in return. When you're ready, we'll do it," he assured me.

"I'm ready now," I told him as I grabbed the waist and began to tug his pants down.

He gave me a look that asked, *are you sure?* I nodded. He helped me by lifting his ass off the bed. As his pants slipped down, I gulped as I caught my first glimpse of his cock. Oh my God, it was a monster! I'd never seen one that big. It was long, thick and a dark reddish color. Veins ran the length of it. The mushroom-shaped head was covered in precum. I stared in shock. I'd never thought a man's cock was beautiful, but his cock was.

"Do you want to reconsider, baby?" he asked me softly.

I didn't. Even if he was intimidating as hell, I still wanted to touch him and get him off. "No, I don't. Is it alright if I touch it?"

"You can do anything you want. Just be warned, I'll come if you handle it too much."

Nodding so he knew I understood, I grasped it in my hand. My hand didn't go all the way around it. It jumped in my grip, and he groaned. I tentatively stroked up and down his long length. I did it a couple of times before his hand came up

to surround mine. “You can hold me tighter. Fuck, your hand feels so damn good, Dove,” he panted.

I let him tighten my hand with his. Once it was as tight as he liked it, he let go, and I went back to working him. His hips jumped. I loved seeing how sensitive he was, but it wasn't enough. I wanted to taste him. I'd been forced to give the Cannibals blow jobs, and I hated it. I didn't think that would be the case with Slash. Leaning over him, he jumped when my long hair touched his hip. He watched me through narrowed eyes as I stuck out my tongue and took a swipe along his glistening head.

I was pleasantly surprised. I'd been prepared to taste him even if he didn't taste that good because I wanted to give him pleasure like he gave me. Only in his case, his cum wasn't terrible at all. It was slightly salty and had a tiny bit of a sweet taste to it. I quickly took another swipe. I hummed as I tasted it.

“Jesus, don't hum like that, or I'll have my cock down your throat. Fuck! Touch my balls. Play with them,” he moaned.

His wish was my command. I cupped his balls and gently rolled them around in the palm of my hand. As he groaned, I sucked the head of his cock into my mouth. He half sat up and shouted, “Fuck me,” as I did. It was hard to swirl my tongue around him with his cock inside my mouth. He filled my mouth and stretched it as wide as it could go. I lifted up and then sank down on him again, taking him a bit deeper.

I looked up to find him watching me with his eyes half closed. The expression of lust on his face spurred me to take him deeper every time I went down on him. As I did, I fluttered my tongue when I could and teased the head when I pulled back. At the same time, I massaged his balls and tugged gently on his sac. When he hit the back of my throat, I gagged. He tried to move back, but I wouldn't let him. I felt his hand lightly stroke my head. Reaching up, I trapped his hand to my head and pressed down on it.

“Babe, are you sure?” he asked gutturally.

“Mmm-hmm,” I hummed. Slowly, he applied pressure to my head, pushing me to take more of him. When he made me gag again, I shook my head so he wouldn’t pull back. I fought to relax and see if I could take more of him. I was thrilled when he slipped a tad deeper. I couldn’t breathe, but it made me feel like a million bucks when I heard the way he groaned.

“Yeah, fuck, that’s it. Suck me harder. Goddamn, that feels so good. Babe, I’m close. I’ll tap your cheek when it’s time so you can move.”

I thought it was sweet that he was planning not to shoot his load in my mouth. I’d never had that option before, and with him, I wanted to taste it all. I wasn’t an expert, but he seemed to love what I was doing. I sucked him maybe another minute or so before he tapped my cheek and hissed, “I’m coming.”

I latched onto him as tight as I could and pumped the base as I bobbed my mouth up and down on him. He stiffened, started to shake, and yelled, “Jesus Christ,” before he let go. His sweet, salty cum filled my mouth so fast it was hard to swallow it fast enough, but I did my best. He seemed to come for a long time. By the time he relaxed, I had to let go. My jaws hurt from being stretched so long and far. I slowly let him slip free. As his cock dropped on his thigh, I placed a kiss on the tip.

He shivered. “Aria, baby, you didn’t have to do that, but God, it was fucking amazing. If you never want to swallow again, that’s fine. Once was more than I ever thought I’d get. Your mouth should be insured.”

I laughed. “You’re the one with the mouth that should be insured. I’m glad you liked it. As for swallowing, I like the way you taste. I have no problem swallowing your cum, honey. Although, I might have to practice stretching my jaw. You’re a mouthful,” I told him with a smirk.

He grabbed me, hoisted me up to him, and laid a kiss on me, which made me grow slick again. He kissed me until I was ready to scream, then he let go. “Let’s go get cleaned up.”

I let him help me out of bed. I happily followed him into the bathroom. When we were done, we fell into bed, and he curled me into his arms like he'd been doing for weeks. I yawned and closed my eyes. I planned to tell him that once he recovered, we could play more, but I fell asleep instead.

Slash:

Two freaking days since I'd had the best blow job of my life and my first taste of Aria. I had to admit, she'd shocked me when she'd let me do that much, but it really stunned me when she reciprocated and actually swallowed my cum. I didn't know what to think. She'd seemed alright afterward, but just to be sure we hadn't gone too far too fast, I'd kept my hands off her last night. It had been hell to have her press that ass into my groin in her sleep. Fuck, I'd almost come in my pants more than once.

Today, I was walking around Excursions with my head sort of in the clouds. I couldn't stop thinking of her. Yesterday, we'd spent time in the morning with Terror's bunch before they headed back to Dublin Falls. I'd been happy to see her in deep conversation with Brielle before she left. I hoped it meant they had connected over their common history, but I didn't ask. If she wanted to tell me, she would.

That didn't mean I didn't still want to know more about what happened to her so that when we got more intimate, I could hopefully prevent triggering her. I hadn't had a talk with Diego yet. The club had talked, and we were considering whether to offer him a chance to hang around after we took care of the Cannibals. Before that happened, I had to be sure I trusted him. So far, he had done nothing to make us think he wasn't on the up and up, but you couldn't be too careful, especially when he spent months with the Cannibals. I understood his fear, but was that really the reason? There was always the chance he was a plant, which we'd discussed too. A close eye was kept on him at all times.

In order to get him somewhere, I didn't need to worry about Aria seeing us talking. I'd asked him to come to the store today and help out. One of the employees had called in sick. I had him unloading trucks and stocking the stockroom and the shelves out on the floor. He'd been working steadily and I didn't have a single complaint about his work so far. The

other staff were saying he was polite and easy to get along with.

When it was lunchtime, I ordered lunch for everyone. Pizza was always in demand with this bunch. As the first half of us gathered to get our food, I caught him. “Hey, Diego, grab your food and come to my office. I want to chat with you.”

He got a slightly uneasy look on his face that he quickly wiped off his face. “Sure, I’ll be right there,” he said calmly.

He was true to his word. It wasn’t more than a minute later that he knocked on my office door. I waved him inside. “Shut the door, will ya?” I said, making sure to smile.

He shut it and then took a seat at the small table I had in there. I was sitting at it, too. I had gestured for him to sit in one of the other chairs. He didn’t say anything, nor did he start eating. He gave me an expectant look.

“Better eat it while it’s hot, or at least warm. I don’t know about you, but I hate cold pizza,” I said. He slowly picked up a piece as I took another bite of mine. I kept talking in between bites. “You’re doing a good job. Thanks for coming in and helping out. This is one of the things I like about my club. We all help wherever we’re needed. Things like this happen more than we’d like. You can’t keep people from getting sick. That I can understand. It’s the rare ones who just don’t wanna work and call off that piss me off. They never last long with us.”

“It’s interesting here. I don’t mind helping, and this is kind of my sorta place. I grew up camping a lot, so this is mostly familiar stuff for me. Well, other than some of the high-end stuff. We never had money for things like that.”

“Yeah, I grew up hunting and camping all the time with my dad. It’s why Bull and the others decided I should be the one to manage this place for the club. I never imagined this is what I’d end up doing. Of course, years ago, this wouldn’t have been something the club had.”

“Were you in the club when they were into the other stuff?”

“You mean when they were muscle, selling guns and shit?”

He nodded his head yes.

“Nah, they got out of the last of that shit a few years before I patched in. I’ve been a member for twelve years. I did time in the Army first, then found them when I got out and liked what I saw. Luckily, even when they were into illegal stuff, it was never drugs, prostitution, or human trafficking. The Warriors never believed in hurting women or kids.”

He laid down the last half of his final slice. He took a drink of his soda and then looked me in the eyes. “Unlike the Cannibals, you mean?”

“Well, yeah, that’s one of the bigger differences between us, although I don’t doubt there’s more. If any of them had old ladies or kids, I doubt they treated them well.”

“They didn’t have any. At first, when I started, they didn’t have me around when they had parties. I was kept away from it. I was a damn idiot. I never investigated them closely before I asked to prospect, although no one really knew them around Soddy Daisy it seemed, so it probably wouldn’t have helped. As soon as I saw how they acted and then started to hear about the things they did, I wanted the hell out, but it was made very clear they didn’t let people walk away. There was a guy months ahead of me who left. The rumor was they killed him.”

“When did you discover they had Aria held as a hostage?”

He sighed heavily. “Listen, I know what you want to know. You want me to tell you why I didn’t help her or go to the cops and tell them. The answer is I did try to help her. I helped her escape once early on after I found out she was there. She didn’t get far before they caught her and brought her back fighting. They beat her almost to death, and... well, it was bad. Somehow, they didn’t guess she had help, so they

never found out about me. She never squealed. I wanted to try again, but she refused to get me involved. She said if they figured out I did help, they'd kill me.

“As for going to the cops. Do you think any of them would've believed me? I figured they'd take one look at me, think I was involved and would throw my ass in jail and throw away the key. I'm not fucking proud of that. It ate at me, and it still does. That's why when I found out about Belle and Raina, I knew I had to do something. I couldn't get Raina out, but Belle, at least, I hoped I could get her out, and she would be able to bring help. It wasn't until after she got away that I talked to Raina more and knew I had to come find your club. I couldn't watch another woman go through what Aria was.”

“And you expect me to believe that you never laid a hand on her? I mean, there she was, a beautiful woman who was essentially a sex slave.”

The utter look of disgust that appeared on his face convinced me ninety-nine percent he hadn't ever raped her. “That's fucking disgusting! Hell no, I never touched her—not to rape or beat her. She can tell you that. Ask her. Shit, if you thought I did, why the hell have you let me stay with your club? Why not put a goddamn bullet in my head and get it over with? That's what I'd do if I found a man who raped the woman I was interested in. Or any woman, for that matter. If you don't believe her or me, then I'll take a damn lie detector test.” The disgust was evident in his voice, too.

“Why do you avoid her then if you never touched her?” I fired back.

“Jesus Christ, so she isn't reminded of what happened to her every second of every day! If I had a place I could go where they couldn't find me, I'd leave. I know I have to make her relive that shit every time she sees me. You know what, it doesn't matter if they do find me. Killing my ass, it seems, is what I deserve for not getting her out of there. I'll pack my shit and be gone by nightfall,” he said, standing up to leave.

“Sit your ass down,” I growled.

He stared hard at me, then must've realized testing me wasn't the smart thing to do because he sat down. We stared at each other for a couple of minutes before I said anything else.

“I won't disagree that you have penance to pay for not stepping up to the plate again to find her help. We're thankful you got Belle away from them and came to us to help get Raina free. A big step toward forgiveness is helping us find them by thinking of any place you have ever heard them mention that you haven't already told us. The other way is to tell me why her brother, Josiah, had his club kidnap her and keep her hostage?”

“I've been trying to remember if any of them said anything about another place, but they didn't. As for why her brother had them do that, the only thing I ever heard was he needed her kept where he could find her when he needed her, and she was to be kept alive. Otherwise, he didn't seem to care what was done to her. How a fucking brother could do that to his sister, I have no clue. He's like the rest of them. No wonder he and Ox were such buddies,” he said in revulsion.

“He and Ox were close?”

“That's what I heard. Ox liked to talk about him and how he couldn't wait for him to get out of prison. Ox is the one she fears and hates the most.”

“Because of what he did to her leg.”

“That and he was the one who, shit, I hate saying this to you. I know you have a thing for her. Look, he's the one who raped and beat her the most. He's a sadistic bastard, and he, more than all the others combined, was the one to make her life hell.”

I slammed my fist down on the table, knocking over our soda cans, but I didn't give a fuck. The bike incident and the fact he'd touched her earned him death, but to find out he'd been the one to abuse her the most and he was her brother's best friend, that would earn the fucker extra torture when we found him. I had something painful in mind for them.

He watched me closely until I calmed down. When I did, I dismissed him. “That’s all I needed to know. If you think of anything else, let me know. Don’t go running off. You don’t want them to find you. Once we take care of them, you can leave and know you’ll be safe, regardless of where you go. I believe you. No lie detector needed.”

He looked relieved when he stood up. He picked up both our cans. Thankfully, they were almost empty. Only a small amount had spilled out. He looked around my office. I waved him off. “Don’t worry about it. I got this. Go. Finish up, and when you’re done, let me know. We’ll head to the compound.”

He nodded, then left. I went to the bathroom and got some wet paper towels. After cleaning up the spill, I got back to work on payroll. I was almost done with it. Once I was, then I could leave for the day if I wanted.

It was an hour or so later when Diego came looking for me. I was finished, and we were able to call it a day. After saying goodbye to the staff, we headed home. We rode with our heads on swivels. It wouldn’t do to get caught by the Cannibals in case they were stalking us. If they knew what was good for them, they’d stay in whatever hole they crawled into. However, that wouldn’t keep them safe forever. Eventually, we’d find them and end their depraved lives. I couldn’t wait.

Aria: Chapter 11

Slash was acting odd, and I didn't want to face why. I'd thought everything was good between us after the party Saturday night. We pleasured each other and although we'd fallen asleep afterward, I thought for sure he and I would take things to the final step the next night. Only that wasn't what happened. Sure, he slept with me and cuddled me, but he made no attempt to be intimate, and I was too nervous to say anything or try it on my own.

That wasn't the only thing, though that I felt was off. When he came home from work on Monday, he'd been unusually quiet. He hadn't wanted to chat, and he stayed out until after I went to bed at the clubhouse. He told me he needed to spend time with his brothers. I might've accepted that if he hadn't done the same thing last night. And he hadn't even come to bed with me last night. His side of the bed was still made when I woke up this morning. When I went looking for him, I was told he'd stayed in his room at the clubhouse and had already left for the day.

I was sick. All that was going through my head was he regretted what we did and he didn't want to tell me. That his declaration of love and wanting me as his old lady, wife, and mother of his kids had been something he said in the heat of the moment. The reason for him to go to the clubhouse two nights in a row and to stay one of them in his room was glaringly obvious. I wasn't stupid. He'd stayed to sleep with one of the bunnies, or maybe Annamarie had come back, and they had made up.

I was so upset I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stay cooped up here today. I needed to get away and clear my head. If this was the way things were ending between us, I couldn't stay here. To be ignored by him would hurt, but to watch him with other women would destroy me. I knew I'd have to find a place to stay, and for that, I needed to go looking for one and a job. I wouldn't stay in Hunters Creek. I couldn't risk seeing him in town. No, I'd go to Cookeville or maybe Nashville. It

would be harder for the Cannibals to find me in a big city. As long as I got work that paid under the table and I could maybe rent a room from someone, then I could stay off the radar.

I knew none of the old ladies, Walker, or Gavin would take me, so I waited until I caught Diego alone. When he saw me coming, I swear he had a panicked look on his face. I cornered him. He gave me an uneasy look.

“I need a favor, Diego.”

“Okay, what do you need?”

“I need you to take me into town. Actually, I need you to take me somewhere further than that.”

“Aria, you’re not allowed to leave the compound without at least a few guys with you. No way will Slash want me taking you anywhere.”

“I don’t give a damn what Slash likes. This isn’t any of his business. I need help. Will you do it, or do I need to find my own way off this goddamn place and hitch a ride with someone along the road?”

I could tell he didn’t like that idea. After a couple of minutes of silent contemplation, he sighed. “Fine, I’ll take you, but we have to be back before Slash gets home. I don’t care if you don’t think it’s his business. He will. How do we get you out of here?”

“When do you get done here at the gate?”

“At noon, why?”

“They’ve let you use the club’s SUV a couple of times to run errands, right?”

He nodded yes.

“Good, bring one to the townhouse. I’ll get in the back and lie down. No one will question it. If they ask why you were at the house, say you had to stop and get a shopping list from me. Please, I need to get away from here,” I pleaded.

“Okay, I’ll meet you there. I hope to hell you don’t get me killed, but I owe you.”

As I walked off, I hated making him think he really did owe me. He didn't. He'd tried to help. It wasn't his fault the Cannibals caught me.

By ten 'to twelve, I was at the door, ready to go. He pulled up front at five after. I ran out, looking to be sure no one saw me as I climbed into the back seat. He gave me a concerned look. I lay down. I was nervous when we got to the gate, but he only stopped for a few moments then we were off. He didn't even have to talk to anyone. I waited until we cleared it, then sat up.

"Where to?" he asked tensely.

"Cookeville. There are a couple of places I need to check out. I'll give you the first address." I rattled off the address. He put it into his navigation app. The whole way there, the silence stretched uncomfortably between us. He kept glancing in the rearview mirror to look at me. I pretended not to notice. When we pulled up at the first address, he parked and then swung around to stare at me.

"What the hell do you need here?"

"What does it look like? I need a place to stay. There's a studio here for rent. I want to see what it's like. I don't need much. It shouldn't take me long." I opened my door. The next thing I knew, he was out and glued to my hip.

"I can't let you go by yourself. What the hell, Aria? Why do you need a place to stay?"

"It's time I get my independence back. I've relied on the Warriors long enough."

"What about Slash? I thought you two were a couple."

"We're not. If you're coming with me, let's go. Stop talking about Slash," I warned him.

He gave me a puzzled look but he did what I asked. It was the first of three apartments that I looked at. When we were done with those, he tried to get me to return to the compound, but I wasn't done. Instead, I stopped at a diner and a restaurant in town. I waited tables in the past, so I could do it again. It was how I made money while in college. I put in

applications at both of them and was assured someone would call me. By the time I was done, I was dragging, and it was almost four. I still didn't feel like going back. I don't know how I did it, but I talked him into getting dinner at the last place I put in an application. He was nervous while we sat there.

“Relax, you didn't do anything wrong. As soon as we're done, we'll go back. Just don't mention where we went or why to anyone. I'll let them know once I have something official.”

“Why are you leaving? Don't tell me that it's time or that Slash has nothing to do with it. What's going on?”

“Slash and I aren't gonna work out. I prefer not to stay there. It'll be awkward. I don't think I have to worry about the Cannibals. They're too busy hiding from the Warriors. Besides, they only found me last time because my so-called brother got the address from our dad.”

“God, I hope Slash doesn't find out I took you. We should be back before he is, at least,” he groaned.

“He won't. I'll lie down again. You can drop me off behind the townhomes. I'll walk back and sneak inside so no one knows you took me. I really appreciate you doing this, Diego.”

“Yeah, well, remember that when you're putting flowers on my grave after Slash kills me,” he mumbled. I pretended like I didn't hear him.

We finished dinner and then headed back. We pulled through the gate of the compound much sooner than I wanted. I was lying down. I heard Diego groan miserably. “What's wrong?” I asked.

“Well, I'd say by the way people are running around and the looks I'm getting, they know you're gone. Oh fuck, here they come. I'm a dead man.”

I wasn't gonna let him take the blame, so I sat up. As soon as the SUV stopped, I jumped out. I shut the door and started to walk toward the house. The voices got quiet. I

pretended not to notice as I kept walking. Behind me, I heard someone, I thought it might be Loki, say, “Where the fuck have you been with her? Slash lost his shit when he got home and found her gone. What the fuck?”

I swung around. “Don’t blame him. I asked him to take me to run some errands. He didn’t want me to walk, so he helped me. We were fine, as you can see.”

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I heard Slash yell from behind me. I whipped around to face him. He looked furious as he charged toward me. I stood my ground. It was time to let them know I could take care of myself.

“That’s none of your damn business!” I snapped back. He came to an abrupt halt. His eyes widened.

Ignoring him after that, I went to stomp past him. He reached out to grab my arm. I jumped away from him. “Don’t touch me,” I warned him.

“Baby, what the hell has gotten into you? Why did you leave without telling anyone or taking a proper guard detail? I’ve been losing my mind. We just got done searching the compound and were about to head out to find you.”

“My name is Aria, not baby. As for where I went, that’s none of your business, like I said. I had things to do, and Diego was available. I was perfectly safe with him. He was armed. I’m back, so everyone can stop worrying. What’re you doing back so early? It’s not even six yet.”

“I came home to see you,” he said.

“Oh, now you wanna see me. That’s rich. Well, I’m not in the mood to see you. I’m going to the house. Don’t bother coming there. You can stay in the clubhouse with your friends. All of them,” I said snidely.

He stood there staring at me in confusion as I stomped off. It was satisfying to slam the front door behind me. I made sure to lock it. I headed straight for my bedroom. I needed a bath and then maybe something to read. If I was lucky, I might drift off to sleep early tonight. I felt bone tired, and I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes and go to sleep.

I didn't waste time making my way to my bedroom and taking off my clothes. I stepped into the bathroom and turned on the water to get it hot. While it did, I grabbed clean underwear and a nightgown. When I got back, I slid into the water even though it still had a bit to go to be full. I sighed as the heat hit my tired, achy muscles. I leaned back my head and closed my eyes. I fought to let myself drift and relax. It was hard with images of Slash popping into my head. I groaned and shook my head. *Stop it. Go away. I don't want to see or think about you.*

A loud crashing sound made me gasp and sit up in fear. As my eyes flew open, I realized Slash had kicked in the bathroom door, and he was standing there staring at me. There was fire in his eyes. I crossed my arms over my breasts and hissed at him, "Get the hell out! How did you get in here? I locked the bedroom door," I shouted. His answer was to stalk to the tub. My temperature rose, and I wasn't sure it had anything to do with the heat of the water or my anger.

Slash:

I was so damn mad and scared that I could barely contain myself. I came home, unable to wait to see her, only to find she was nowhere to be found. After calling all those at the compound together to do another search for her, I'd been frantic, only to figure out she was gone. Seeing her get out of that SUV and see Diego looking at me with trepidation had pissed me off more.

Her attitude and words had surprised and confused me. What the hell had gotten into her? Having her walk off and tell me I wasn't welcome had been the last straw. I waited long enough to tell my brothers not to let Diego leave. Then I'd come after her, only to find she'd locked me out. Lucky for me, I had a spare key to the bedroom door. Busting into the bathroom had been purely to vent my anger. I'd have a prospect fix it tomorrow. Finding her naked in the tub made my anger start to be replaced with arousal. I hadn't seen her naked in days. I'd been dying to see her and touch her. I forced those thoughts to the back of my mind and tried to focus on my anger. Her shout to get the hell out only fueled my rage.

“Like hell, I will. You're not walking off like that after scaring the fuck out of me and everyone else on this compound. We've been running around looking for you, Aria. You know you're not to leave the compound, and if you do, I need to know it, and you need an escort.”

“You don't tell me what to do anymore, Slash. I don't have to tell you shit. You don't need to worry about me leaving your precious compound or having an escort, either. I'll be gone soon enough.”

Her response sent daggers of fear through me. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means I'm a free woman. My days of being held against my will are over. I'm leaving, and I won't be back.”

That's what today was about. I was getting things in place. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to finish my bath. Shut the door when you leave," she said, then closed her eyes.

"No, we're not done, and I'm not leaving," I growled as I bent down and hauled her out of the water. Her squirming wet body made my cock stiffen even though I tried not to get aroused. We were fighting, not having sex right now, although my cock didn't care. I was dying to be with her in all ways, and this only made it worse.

She screamed and tried to squirm out of my hands and kick me. I hugged her close to prevent myself from dropping her. I didn't give a damn if I was getting soaked or not. I marched out of the bathroom and over to the bed. I laid her down. Before she could scramble off it and get away, I laid myself down over top of her, trapping her. I held her arms and straddled her.

"Calm the fuck down and talk to me. What the hell is going on here, Aria? Why're you acting like this?"

"Get off me! I hate you! You're just like all men—a lying, cheating son of a bitch! I'm done with you, this club, and this town. I'm. Leaving!" she screamed.

She tried to fight me, but I held her down. Anger had been totally replaced with fear. She couldn't mean it. Surely, she wouldn't leave me. She knew I loved her. I wanted her as my old lady, my wife. What the hell had gone wrong since Saturday? She was out of control. Why would she say I was a liar and cheater? I let go of her arms and grasped her face to hold her head still, so she had to focus on me. The anger and hurt on her face gutted me.

"Dove, please, I don't understand why you're acting like this. When did I lie? As for cheating, I haven't."

She laughed, but it wasn't one filled with humor. It was a deep, ugly one full of disbelief and disgust. "There you go again. I was a fool to think you or any man would be able to be with one woman and not be an absolute liar and animal. I'm getting out while I can. I'm not waiting for the rest to start. I'm sure your club can find the Cannibals without me. In fact, I bet

the only reason you've been pretending to help me is because you plan to use me as a bargaining chip with them. I'll fucking kill myself before I ever let anyone do that to me again," she said with a growl.

Jesus Christ, she was back to talking about killing herself. I laid my forehead on hers despite the fact she was pummeling my chest and arms with her fists. "Baby, please, stop. You're killing me. I didn't cheat. I didn't lie. No one plans to trade you or use you. You have to stop threatening to hurt yourself. Do you know what it would do to me if you did that? It would kill me to lose you. I love you. You said you loved me. I don't know what happened since Saturday to change this."

"You happened. Don't lie and tell me you wouldn't cheat. You haven't touched me since that night, and the last few evenings, you stayed away until after I fell asleep. Hell, last night, you didn't bother to come to my bed at all. I know what goes on in the clubhouse. Remember, I had to watch it and live it. I had to be the entertainment. So, you can go back to your club and tell them the gig is up. You're not fooling me anymore. No need to pretend you want me or love me. No need to go through with this farce of protecting me. I'm done, and I'm leaving. If you try to stop me, then I will take the only route you've left me. I won't be used again. Now, get off me. Your touch makes me sick," she hissed.

I got off the bed. She grabbed the covers and threw them over herself. I paced the room, pulling on my hair. How could she think that? I tried to calm my mind so I could address her accusations. She scooted up to the head of the bed, on the side farthest away from me, and curled into a ball. She watched me with untrusting eyes.

"Aria, I will swear on everything I know—my cut, my club, my very life, that I haven't cheated on you. Yes, I've been at the clubhouse until late, and I didn't come back here last night, but it's not for the reasons you think. I haven't been with other women. I talked with my brothers, and last night it got really late. I was a little drunk, and I didn't want to come here and scare you, so I crashed in my room alone. I got up

and had to be at work early. I came home early to be with you. We can work this out. I don't want you to leave. Besides the fact you're not safe out there, I love you. Tell me how I can prove this to you, please," I pleaded.

Instead of saying anything, even yelling at me, she closed her eyes and began to sob. As she got louder, I couldn't stay away from her. I had to hold her. I crawled onto the bed and put my arms around her. This only made her cry harder. After a couple of minutes of it, I had to ask. "Shh, what's with all these tears?" I whispered.

Instantly, she went insane. She started hitting me, screaming, and fighting to get away. As I tried to prevent her from hurting both of us, I noticed while her eyes were open, she wasn't focused on me. The terror in them made no sense.

"Aria, baby, stop! It's alright. I'm not hurting you." I yelled to be heard over her. It didn't work. With a pounding heart, I fumbled to get to my phone. I needed help. She was fighting me so hard that I had no choice but to ease away from her. I hit Bull's number. He answered almost immediately.

"Is everything okay?" he asked before he stopped. He had to be hearing her screams in the background.

"No, it's not! I need help. She's going nuts and won't stop. I'm afraid she's gonna hurt herself. She's talking crazy stuff, Bull. Please, send Zara or someone."

"Fuck, stay with her. We're coming," was all he said before hanging up.

As I put my phone away, she started to tear at her arms with her nails. Instantly, a ragged line opened up on her right arm. Blood oozed out. I ran back to her and restrained her hands, which made her worse. No matter what I said, she wouldn't calm down. She got close to the headboard and tried to bang her head on it. I eventually got her wrapped up in the blanket and my body so she could only squirm. The wailing noises she made were pitiful. I rocked her and tried to make soothing noises. I didn't know what else to do at this point.

It felt like an eternity before I heard a knock, and in came Zara, Bull, Jocelyn, and Demon. They all had concerned looks on their faces. Aria was still wailing and had her eyes closed. I saw Zara had her medical bag with her. Thank God.

“Oh my God, what’s wrong with her?” Jocelyn asked in concern.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“Let me see her,” Zara said. She set down her bag and then came over to the bed. She softly talked as she reached out to her. “Aria, it’s Zara, honey. I’m gonna touch your face. I need to see your eyes. You’re safe, I promise,” she cooed. When she got to her, she lifted her eyelids. She didn’t keep them open long before letting go. Aria had mostly settled down fighting me, but she was still crying, moaning, and now was shivering.

“Zara, what’s wrong with her?” I asked.

“Slash, I’m gonna give her something to calm her down, and that will help her sleep. We need to talk about this, and I will, but let me give her the shot first.”

I nodded. In no time, she had a needle filled and injected Aria in the hip with it. We waited agonizing minutes until her crying slowed and her body began to relax. Once she did, Zara motioned for me to come out in the hall. I didn’t want to leave Aria.

“She’ll be fine. She’s out, and we’ll be right outside the door,” Zara assured me.

Easing out of that bed and leaving her alone in it, looking like a lost child, killed me. Once we were outside, I rounded on Zara. “What is it?”

“She’s having an emotional break, Slash. I looked into her eyes. She’s not there. She’s caught in her past. I think she’s reliving her abuse. She doesn’t really know it’s you or any of us or where she’s at. This isn’t my area of expertise. I suggest we call Jade and get her over here. Aria might need to be hospitalized.”

As what she said soaked in and she made the call to Jade, I stood there frozen. What the hell had I done to cause this? Had staying away so I wouldn't touch her caused this? What if she never snapped out of it? I was interrupted from those thoughts by Bull, Demon, and Jocelyn coming out of the room.

"What caused her to go off like this?" Bull asked me.

I quickly explained the various things she said to me to them. When I was done, I shook my head. "She was upset and crying while I held her. She tore her arm open with her nails. She fucking believes this has been a lie and that I've been with other women these past few nights."

"Why were you at the clubhouse so late and drinking, if you don't mind me asking?" Jocelyn asked.

"Because I didn't want to push her for sex. God, I can't believe I'm telling you this. We got to third base Saturday night. It went really well, but I was afraid to push for more. I didn't want to trigger her, so I stayed away the past few nights, especially after I talked to Diego about what happened at the Cannibals compound. He and I talked on Monday. I didn't trust myself. I guess to her, it seemed like I was sleeping with other women since I wasn't sleeping with her."

Bull and Demon both groaned in understanding. The ladies rolled their eyes. "Why didn't you just tell her you were worried about it and talk it out? What did Diego say to make you back off even more?" Zara asked.

"Obviously, I thought I was being a gentleman and don't know shit about women, that's why. As for Diego, it was confirmation of some of what we knew and some of what we didn't." I told them what he said about Ox and Josiah, the attempt he made to help her, and why he didn't try again. By the time I was done, they all looked upset.

"That's it. We'll get your woman fixed up or at least on the road to it. In the meantime, it's time to see how we can get our hands on Josiah. It's past time for him to be made to hurt and to answer some goddamn questions. I'll place a call tonight to the Patriots and see if they have a way to help us do

that. I was hoping we'd take care of the Cannibals first and then deal with him, but that's not the case now. We need to prove to her we're not lying and we're here to help her, not harm her. You need to talk to her about this shit once Jade says it's okay. If she needs to have an inpatient stay for a time, we'll get her that help," Bull said firmly.

"I'll pay for it. She doesn't have insurance, but I'll make sure she gets the best," I told them.

Bull shook his head. "No, the club will. This is our fault. We should've made sure years ago they were gone, not just somewhere else."

Before I could argue with him, we heard a knocking at the front door. Demon ran down to answer it. I hoped it was Jade. When he came back, I was relieved to see it was her. We greeted her, and then, between Zara and me, we told her what had happened. When we were done, she was nodding her head.

"I agree. It does sound like she had a break. She's sedated right now, you said. I need to see her once it wears off. I can better determine what frame of mind she's in and if she needs to go inpatient. Once Zara and I know what state she's in, we'll talk to Dr. O'Herron. He'll know if she needs just medication or actual inpatient help. I know it has to be awful to see that, but it's going to be a good thing in the long term."

"How the hell is it good?" I snapped, pointing to the closed door.

"It means she's not repressing things. She's starting to let them go. It's awful that it had to manifest like this, but it's a start. She's been talking in our sessions, but not much about the actual abuse."

"What if she's never able to come out of this? I could fucking lose her forever to her mind!" I snarled.

"I don't see it happening, Slash. She loves you. That tells me if she can feel those emotions for you, then she's going to get there. She will always have triggers, and you'll learn what those are and how to cope with them when they

happen. Even with treatment, those will be a reality. What happened to her is one of the most horrific things anyone can go through. The fact she made it a year-and-a-half and wasn't catatonic shows how strong she is."

"She talked about hurting herself again, Jade. She started that fire to kill herself," I reminded her.

"I know, but talking about it is different from doing it. She hasn't done anything since the fire to hurt herself. The fire was her low point. She saw no rescue as being possible. She has all of you and me now. Just hang in there. Don't give up on her."

"I'll never give up on her. She's got me no matter what. Are you ready to go see her? I know she's out of it, but I don't like being away from her for this long. She could wake up and be disoriented, afraid, or hurt herself." I walked to the bedroom door.

Jade nodded. The others besides Zara indicated they would be downstairs if we needed anything. I entered the room with the two of them on my heels. I made a promise that I would do everything in my power to make her whole and feel safe again.

Aria: Chapter 12

My head was pounding, and my body felt like I'd been beaten again. I listened to make sure no one was close by. If they knew I was awake, they'd start my torment again. I didn't think I could take it right now, not the way I felt. Hearing no voices or movement, I cracked my eyes open. The light made me blink and groan softly.

Immediately, I heard movement. I let out a moan and tried to move before the first fist or foot could make contact. I rolled so fast that I screamed as I fell. I noticed I must've been on a bed. Although why, I have no idea. They didn't let me have one of those. Hands wrapped around my arms. I screamed and struck out even though I knew I would be punished for doing it. I was being lifted, then found myself against a hard chest, and a voice was murmuring in my ear, not yelling. As I calmed down a bit when there were no hits or kicks, the words started to make sense.

"Aria, Dove, it's alright. It's me, Kai. Baby, you're safe. I have you. No one is hurting you, not as long as my club and I are alive. Do you hear me? It's Kai. I love you. Open those beautiful eyes and look at me. I need to know you're seeing me," he whispered brokenly. I could hear the sorrow in his voice.

I dragged my eyes open and looked up. Above me was Slash's handsome face. He was staring at me intently, and he had a worried look on his face. As I took him in, I began to notice how tired and disheveled he was. His hair was a mess. He had dark circles underneath his eyes. As I stared at him slowly, scenes started to play in my mind, getting faster and faster. I recalled the day out yesterday and why I'd done it. How he'd been acting since our night together Saturday. The fight we'd had when he came into the bathroom, and then it was blank after that. I had no idea how I'd gotten into bed with him. I tried to move away from him, but he held me tightly.

"No, don't move. I need to know what you remember."

I debated whether to answer then thought, why not? I had no idea what game he was playing, but I'd play it for now. "I went out today and had Diego take me around to look for a job and to find a place to live. When I got back, you and I argued. You came barging into the bathroom, and we fought. You acted like you didn't know what's been going on for the past several days, but you do."

"I know what you think has been going on. You told me. Do you remember me taking you out of the tub and us arguing? Do you remember you started hitting me?"

"I did no such thing!" I told him, aghast.

"Oh yes, you did. You were screaming and fighting. Look at your arm. You even hurt yourself, baby. I had to call Zara, and she sedated you, and then Jade came over. That was last evening. It's now ten in the morning on Thursday. You've been out for sixteen hours. You scared me to death."

I glanced at my arm. There was a bandage wrapped around it. Looking around the room, I saw that the way the sun was coming through the blinds was in the wrong position to be the evening sun. I began to shake my head. "There's no way. I wouldn't forget us fighting. What's going on? Where's Zara, Jade? Let me speak to them!" My voice got higher and higher as I spoke. My insides were beginning to churn, and I felt sick. Surely, he was lying.

"Baby, I'll get them, but I swear, I'm not lying. You and I need to talk, but first, I want them to check you out. They're at the clubhouse, I think. Give me a second, and I'll text them." He picked up his cell phone off the nightstand and sent a text. As he did, I tried to scoot away from him. His arm tightened. "Where are you going?"

"I need to use the bathroom."

"Okay, I'll take you." Before I could protest, he was up with me in his arms, headed there.

After he entered and sat me down, I waved at him. "I don't need an audience. I can do this on my own."

“Aria, there’s no way in hell I’m leaving you alone. You could fall or have another memory lapse. God forbid you get upset again and try to hurt yourself. I’ve seen you naked. Now, either sit and do your business, or do you want me to pull your panties down?”

I wanted to argue with his highhanded tone, but I had to pee too badly. I felt like I was about to wet myself. That would be embarrassing, so as I glared at him, I tugged down my underwear. When I did, I realized I was in those and a sleep shirt. The last thing I remembered was that I was naked in the tub.

“Who put me in these clothes?”

“I did. I figured you’d feel better covered rather than letting anyone who checked on you to see you naked. Besides, I don’t like anyone seeing your body but me. Bull and some of the other guys have been in and out checking on us.”

“They what? This is ridiculous, Slash. I have no idea what you’re trying to prove or convince me of, but it’s not gonna work.” I finished peeing and then wiped while keeping myself covered.

As I stood to pull up my panties, he gripped me under my elbow and tugged them up. The feel of his fingers skimming over my skin made me want to moan. It felt good. Goosebumps broke out. I held in the moan and fought my shiver. The way he was smirking told me he knew it. I glared at him and yanked on my arm. He wouldn’t let me go. Instead, he took me to the sink to wash my hands.

Looking in the mirror, I saw what a wreck I was. I groaned. “I need a shower.”

“As soon as Zara and Jade say it’s okay, I’ll help you get one, I promise, babe. It’ll make you feel better.”

He swung me back up in his arms and carried me to the bed. He sat down with me on his lap. I wiggled to get off him. He held me. “I don’t need you carrying me everywhere. I don’t need to sit on your lap, and I don’t need you to help me shower,” I snapped.

“You do need it, and arguing isn’t stopping me from doing it. If you don’t stop wiggling that luscious ass all over my cock, we’ll have another problem to solve. Settle down, and let me take care of you. It’s my job as your man.”

“You’re not my man,” I snarled back.

His teeth nipped my earlobe, causing me to jump and yelp. “Oh yes, I am, and I’ll prove it as soon as I can,” he growled softly in my ear before planting a kiss on the pulse point on the side of my neck. I opened my mouth to smart off but was prevented by a knock at the bedroom door. Slash called out, “Come in.”

The door opened, and Jade and Zara came in. I sagged in relief. Finally, surely, they would tell me the truth. They came straight to me. They smiled at me, but there was underlying worry on their faces.

“I’m so glad you two are here. I need to talk to you. Slash, you can leave.”

“Dove, I’ll stand in the hall for a few minutes, but don’t think this is your way of getting rid of me. That’s not happening. I’ll be back. Ladies, don’t let her get up without me. She’s shaky. I don’t want her to fall. If she tries to head for the bathroom to shower, you call me. You, behave yourself.”

My mouth dropped open at his audacity, but all he did was kiss me. His tongue thrust into my mouth, and he didn’t seem to care that I hadn’t brushed my teeth or anything. He kissed me thoroughly before he eased me off his lap and stood up. As he walked off, I watched him adjust the lump in the front of his pants. He didn’t even try to hide it. As soon as the door closed, I dove in.

“I need to know what day it is and what happened. Slash is trying to convince me I blacked out. He says we had a big fight, and you had to sedate me, Zara. Please tell me the truth. I don’t care what he told you to tell me.”

They both gave me hesitant looks, which made my heart hitch and then they proceeded to tell me everything I didn’t want to hear. It matched what little Slash had told me.

By the time they were done, I was sitting with my arms around my bent-up legs, rocking. Jade sat on the edge of the bed with her hand on my arm.

“Aria, honey, talk to us. We’re here to help. You’ve had an emotional break. You blocked out your fight with Slash. I think that fight triggered a flashback for you. He’s not lying, and neither are we. Now that you’re awake and we’re talking, I want to call Dr. O’Herron and see what he thinks, but first, I need to ask you some questions. Can you answer them for me?”

I numbly nodded. For the next I don’t know how many minutes, they asked me a ton of questions. Several were about the last things I remembered about yesterday. Others were about my history and things like my name, birth date, and where I grew up. I knew it was to see how oriented I was. By the time they stopped, tears ran down my face.

“Hey, there’s no need for that,” Zara said as she patted my arm.

“Yes, there is. You’re calling Dr. O’Herron so he can put me away in the nuthouse, and I can’t blame you. I’m crazy. I need to be where no one will get hurt. Go ahead, call him. I’ll get dressed. Just send Slash away. I don’t want to see him or anyone else,” I sobbed.

“Oh no, that’s not what we’re doing,” Jade said hurriedly.

I curled up and closed my eyes, not wanting to see them or hear their false assurances. I knew what it meant to have an emotional break. It meant I had a mental breakdown. People had to go to psych wards when that happened. Things like electroshock therapy and being restrained and sedated happened in those places. I could never stand that, especially the restraining. Sometimes, they never came out. As fear of that and never being free consumed me, I cried harder. Suddenly, hard arms were around me, picking me up, and I was back on Slash’s lap. I didn’t have the energy to fight him. I lay there with my eyes shut, crying. Why did my life have to be such shit?

“What the fuck did you say to her?” I heard Slash snarl.

“We told her what happened. She’s scared that we’re calling Dr. O’Herron to have her put in the nuthouse, as she calls it. She says she’ll go so she doesn’t hurt anyone, but she doesn’t want to see you or anyone else,” Zara informed him.

He swore. “Jesus Christ, if you’re done, go do whatever you need to do. Let me talk to her. Do you think she needs another shot to calm her down?”

I jerked upright and shook my head hard. “No! No, please, not that. I’m alright. I’ll stop. Don’t do that. I can’t be unconscious like that again. I can’t protect myself when I am,” I said. I knew I sounded hysterical.

“We won’t do it. You’re not out of control like yesterday. Try to calm down. We’ll be back. We don’t want you to be alone, so Slash will stay here. Listen to him, Aria. He’s only trying to help and he’s not lying,” Zara said with a faint smile. I watched them walk out. I couldn’t bring myself to look at him.

“Baby, I need you to look at me. Come on, you can do it. We need to talk about things and figure out what set you off. I need to know so I don’t ever do that again. I swear, you scared me so much.”

Taking a deep breath, I did look up at him. “You don’t need to worry about triggering me again. I won’t be here for it to happen. You heard them. They’re going to call Dr. O’Herron. He’ll want me hospitalized. It’s the best thing for me. If I keep blacking out, then that’s not safe for people.”

“It’s not safe for you. And I do need to worry about triggers since there’s no way he’s gonna lock you away in some hospital. Even if you do have to go for a little while, I’ll be there to visit all the time, every day, if they’ll let me. Hell, so will everyone else. It’ll only take as long as he needs to get you on medicine that can help you.”

“Slash, just stop, please. Just say what you want to say. This is your last chance.”

“Why is it my last chance?”

“Because either way, if he puts me away or not, you and I won’t be seeing each other again. I’m leaving, one way or the other.”

Suddenly, I was on my back, and he was hovering over me. His hand cupped my face, and he had a fierce look on his face. “Over my dead body, will I let that happen. And stop calling me Slash. We’re alone. My name is Kai. I know you think I cheated and lied to you, but I didn’t. There’s a reason I acted the way I did and stayed away. I want to explain, but I’m not sure now is the right time. I just need you to give me a chance to explain.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve figured something out.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not one of those people meant to have a nice or happy life. Pain and misery are my lot. I need to accept it. I’m tired of fighting it. I just want the pain to go away.”

“You’d better not be talking about killing yourself again because if you are, I’ll paddle your ass, woman. I’m not gonna let you do that. If you take you away from me, no matter if it’s death or by leaving me, I won’t be able to fucking stand it. I’ll follow you. That includes following you to the other goddamn side if that’s what it takes. I don’t believe for a minute you’re not meant to be happy, and all your lot in life is pain and misery. If you let me love you, and you love me, we can have it all, Dove.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t getting my hopes up. He sighed. “Fine, as soon as those two get back, we’ll see what they say. Then I’ll tell you why I did what I did. If they want you to go to the hospital, I’m not letting you go without knowing that. Make no mistake, I will tell them to watch you to be sure you don’t harm yourself. I’m not losing you, Aria,” he hissed. He cut off my breath by kissing me again. My whole body went up in flames. My nipples tightened, and my panties were instantly damp.

We were interrupted by a knock at the door. Pulling apart, he yelled for them to come in. It was Jade who entered. I briefly wondered where Zara was. “I spoke to Dr. O’Herron. He did suggest an inpatient stay, but I convinced him I thought that might do more harm than good. He’s willing to let you remain outpatient, but only if you stay here where Zara, me, and Slash can watch over you. You and I will be having daily therapy sessions. He’s calling in a prescription he thinks will work, and we’ll have you start that. If I think you would be better off there or if you try to leave or harm yourself, it’s inpatient you’ll go. I don’t want to do that, Aria. I think you’ll do better surrounded by the club and Slash, but you have to listen and do what we say.”

I took a minute to think it over. I was determined to leave, but if this was the only way to stay out of the hospital, I’d take it. Finally, I nodded. “Okay, I’ll stay here. I appreciate you coming to do the sessions daily. I swear, I’ll find a way to pay you for them. I’m looking for a job. As soon as I get one, I can start paying you.”

“I’m paying her, and you’re not getting a goddamn job. You’ll focus on getting better. Later, once you are, if you want to work and the Cannibals have been taken care of, then you can. Jade, thank you. I hate to cut this short, but I promised Aria I’d explain some things. Do you think that’ll be okay?”

“I don’t think it can hurt at this point, so go ahead. I’ll leave you two alone. Aria, you have my number. Call me if you need me, even if it’s only to talk. Slash, you do the same. We’ll get started tomorrow. I’ll be here at ten. I’ll bring your medicine with me. We’ll get you started on it. Goodbye. Try to rest today.”

I gave her a tiny smile, and she waved before leaving. I waited for her to get out of the house before I rounded on him. “You’re not my boss. I can work if I want.”

“When it comes to your health and safety, I am your boss. Arguing won’t do you any good. No one will take you to town, and we have it, so you can’t sneak off. You’re here with me, and I will make sure you get better. Now, let’s work on this notion you have that I’ve been lying and cheating on you.”

I crossed my arms and glared at him. I couldn't wait to hear his spin on it. How would he explain going from sleeping with me, eager to have sex, to not touching me at all and spending his time at the clubhouse?

Slash:

My gut was in one big knot and I felt sick. Every moment since she woke up had made me worry more and more. She was determined not to believe me. To hear what she thought life had in store for her and that she was thinking she'd be locked away forever killed me. She wasn't crazy. She just needed help to heal from the atrocities that happened to her. I was praying that she'd hear my explanation and believe me. I thought it would be a step in the right direction. I moved us around until we were side-by-side, facing each other. I took a hold of her hands.

“You're right. I did back away from you after Saturday night, but not for the reason you think. Saturday was amazing. I loved every damn second of it that I spent with you. I never thought you and I would get to that point this soon, to be honest. Afterward, you don't know how much I wanted to take it all the way with you. However, I was afraid it was still too soon, and to do it would push you into regretting it or worse, causing you to have a flashback or something. That's the reason I didn't try anything after Saturday night.”

“If that's true, why did you suddenly not want to be even near me at all?”

“Because it was fucking hard not to touch you. I didn't trust my control. Also, I had spoken to Diego. He told me a little more about what it was like for you. It made me even more determined not to rush you, so I thought spending time away until you fell asleep would help me stay in control. I didn't think that you'd jump to the conclusion I was cheating on you. I swear, all I did was talk to my brothers, play a few games of pool, and drink. It's true: Tuesday night, I drank a bit too much. I thought coming to you smelling like that would be a bad memory. I crashed in my room, but I was alone. There have been no women since I set eyes on you, Aria. There won't be. I don't cheat.”

She was no longer looking at me. Instead, she was staring down at her hands.

“Baby, look at me. Talk to me. Tell me that you believe me,” I practically begged.

She shook her head. “I can’t. Why did you ask Diego about me? What did he tell you?” came her whispered reply.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to him anyway. I had to be sure he didn’t actually participate in the stuff done to you. He told me how he tried to help you escape and then he got scared. He regrets it more than you know. He stays away from you because he knows he makes you remember it. He said Ox was the worst and the one to hurt you the most. Also, he said Ox and Josiah are supposedly good friends.”

“So that’s why you won’t touch me. Don’t lie. He told you all the dirty, disgusting, degrading things done to me and what I was forced to do. I understand. No one wants to have a disgusting cum dumpster for a woman.”

Before I could react, she was off the bed and running into the bathroom. She slammed the door shut, and then I heard the lock click. How I wish I hadn’t had it repaired. I ran to it and knocked on the door. “Aria, that’s not true! Baby, I will never think of you like that! What happened to you isn’t your fault. It doesn’t change who you are.”

As I listened, all I could hear was her sobs. I grew more scared. There were things in there she could use to hurt herself. I wasn’t about to let her do that over this. Standing back, I raised my foot and kicked in the door again. It split down the middle, and one-half fell to the floor while the other hung off the hinges. That was it. The goddamn door would stay off. She screamed and backed up to the edge of the tub. I walked through and right up to her. I wrapped her in my arms, picked her up, then walked her back to the bed. This time, when we sat down, I kept her on my lap. She tried to get away, but it was weak at best. Nothing like yesterday.

She was still crying softly. I kissed all over her face before kissing her lips. I had to. It was tearing out my heart to see her like this. They were tender kisses, unlike my typical

passion-filled ones. When I was done, I raised my head and lifted her chin so she had to look at me. I saw shame on her face.

“Wipe that look off your face. You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. Even if you had slept with all of them willingly, do you think it makes you any less than me? Hell, I’ve been with a bunch of women for no other reason than sex. Yeah, they were willing, but if you’re a cum dumpster, then I’m a dirty cum nozzle. I guess you could call it that.”

This made her giggle. She still had tears running down her face, but her sobs had quieted. “A cum nozzle? Really, Slash, that’s disgusting.”

“No more than cum dumpster, which you are not. He didn’t tell me the exact details of what they did. He just said Ox was the worst. That he did more than all the rest combined. Ox enjoyed hurting you.”

“He did. It was like he was getting revenge for something, but I don’t know what. None of them cared if they hurt me, but he went out of his way to make sure he did. After a while, the others left me alone, and I was his unless he decided to teach me a lesson and give me away to someone visiting. If you’re serious about wanting me and you haven’t been with other women, you need to know things before you decide you want me.”

“I don’t need to know anything other than what you hate, so I will never go there with you. And I’ll bring every damn person on this compound in here to swear that I’m not lying. Believe me, they wouldn’t lie. Even if I haven’t officially claimed you, they know you’re mine. If I cheated, the guys would’ve already beat my ass and I’d probably be out on my ass. My club doesn’t believe in cheating on our old ladies. If I had doubts about us or wanted other women, then I wouldn’t be claiming you. I have zero doubts you were born to be mine, Dove.”

She lay there staring intently at me for so long before she said anything. I was about to puke. “I believe you. I think

maybe somewhere deep down, I always did, but it seems too good to be true. That a man like you would want me. As you can now see, I'm damaged goods. I'm never gonna be normal. I'll always have to worry about overreacting. What if I keep blacking out or flipping out on you? After a while, you'll get tired of it and look for someone less complicated. I can't handle that. That's why I need to leave. It'll hurt enough as it is, but if you and I split later, it'll be the end of me."

"You're not leaving me. If you do, I'll come after you and bring you back. I love you, and you love me. We can weather anything that comes our way as long as we're together. Having you leave me now would be the end of me. Tell me the worst, then. Tell me what you think will make me leave you. Let's find out once and for all if it will."

She stared at me for a long minute. Then the words came pouring out for the next thirty minutes or more as she told me of the horrible things done to her. I knew they beat her and raped her. I didn't know how badly or about the humiliation. They had chained her at one point like a dog. She wasn't allowed to walk upright. She had to crawl on all fours, eat, and drink from bowls like a dog. She wasn't given clothes. She was kicked and starved. They pulled trains on her that left her so hurt she couldn't move for days, but that didn't stop them from continuing to rape her. She had been raped in every way possible. Forced to perform oral sex on them. She was often restrained, so she couldn't fight back. Ox enjoyed doing all those to her, plus psychological torture along with using an electrical shock on her over and over until she would pass out.

The list went on until I was ready to puke. The rage it brought up inside of me was worse than any I'd ever experienced. All I could see was red and thirst to have their lives in my hands, especially Ox. I made another silent vow to end his life as painfully as possible. When she was done, we were both quivering messes. Tears ran down my face just like they were hers. We held each other and cried until we had no more tears.

Once we were done, we lay there holding each other. I murmured words of comfort or what I hoped was comfort to

her and rubbed her back. I told her how much I loved her and what our life was going to be like once we rid the world of the Cannibals and her brother. She talked about what she wanted to do one day. She wanted to go to school, finish her degree, and help other people. How she wanted a home and kids. I promised her she'd have all it. Finally, we both fell into an exhausted sleep, although I think it was a healing one.

Slash: Chapter 13

It had been over a week since Aria's emotional break then our subsequent talk. We kept talking every day. She was having sessions with Jade five days a week. She'd been to see Dr. O'Herron. It was too early to know if the medication he gave her was helping, but I thought it was. She hadn't talked about harming herself again. I spent every night holding her in our bed. During the day, when she wasn't with Jade or doing something she wanted to do that was part of her self-care, we spent it together. I took off work and had my employees covering for me. In reality, they could do it without me.

This morning, she agreed to come to the clubhouse to see some of the ladies while we were in church. She'd been reluctant to do it since her outburst. She was embarrassed about how she acted. I told her no one was holding it against her. I think all of them had been to see her at least once to check on how she was doing. She was trying not to be stiff with them, but it was hard. I knew it would take time, but she would eventually see that they really didn't hold it against her.

I left her sitting with Jocelyn and Zara. She seemed the most at ease with them. Taking my seat in church, I was anxious to see if Bull had any good news for me. I was tired of waiting. It was time to start taking out the monsters. Josiah was first on the list since we couldn't seem to find the Cannibals. It still amazed me they could just disappear like they had without a trace.

Bull called our meeting to order. I watched him intently. I knew we'd go through the normal agenda first. Things needing extra discussion or planning were always the last on the list. It was the first of the month, so we didn't have the prior month's financials yet for all the businesses, thank God. I wasn't sure if I could stand to listen to those. There were a few decisions to be made on the businesses, which we did rather quickly and unanimously. Once we were done with those, Bull brought up something I wasn't expecting.

“I know it’s not quite two months yet, but I wanted to get a feel for what you guys thought of Diego. How do you think he’s been doing? Does anyone get any weird vibes from him? Anything that makes you think he’s not trustworthy or here to spy on us?”

This caused murmurs around the room. He let us until he had enough, and then he called us to attention. “Okay, enough mumbling. I want to hear words.”

“Bull, I’ve watched him as closely as anyone. I haven’t had any unusual or suspicious interactions or seen him do anything out of the ordinary,” Tank said. As our VP, his words carried a lot of weight.

“I agree. He does whatever we ask without hesitation or back talk. He does it well, and he never complains, no matter how menial or dirty it is,” Bear added.

Around the room, the others all chimed in one after the other, all saying basically the same thing. They thought he was a good guy who got caught in a bad situation and didn’t know how to get out of it without getting his ass killed. Finally, Bull came to me.

“Slash, this affects you the most, brother. Your woman is the one who he didn’t help and who has him as a reminder of what happened to her right here. What about you?”

“I talked to Diego about what happened and why he never got her out of there. I hate that he didn’t, but I understand the issues he faced. He feels guilty as fuck that he didn’t and has offered to leave even if the Cannibals will kill him if they find him. Other than the decision to take her job and apartment hunting that one day, he hasn’t stepped a toe out of line. I agree with what my brothers have said. He’s young, and he was dumb. He got in over his head and had no one to help him. I don’t think he’s here to spy on us.”

Bull nodded. “Good, that’s what I think too. Now that we’ve all talked about him and his character, I’d like to put something out there for you all to consider. What would you think if we were to offer him the chance to prospect for us? Would you be for this? Slash, would you, and especially Aria,

be able to stand that? I don't need an answer right now. Think about it. Ask questions if you need to, but I'd like to decide on it by the end of this month. My hope is we'll have this Cannibal shit cleaned up by then. He'll be looking to leave soon after. We need to know if we want to allow him to or if we want to offer him this."

My immediate thought was it wouldn't be something Aria would want, but then I stopped and realized I should ask her. Personally, yes, it would remind me of what she went through to see him, but then again, so would other things. It wasn't like I'd ever forget. I tried not to like him, but he was a likable guy. He was very helpful and respectful.

"I don't have a problem thinking about it. I do believe we should ask the old ladies what they think of him and if they've had any issues or concerns about him that they might not have mentioned. I'll talk to Aria. I'll be honest. If she says she can't stand to have him here, I'll have to say no."

"If that's the case, we won't ask him or hold it against him. We will never make her uncomfortable on purpose. She's showing progress. We'll never do anything to jeopardize it. Okay then, we'll talk about this at the end of the month. Is there anything anyone has to bring up before I talk about the last thing on my agenda?" Bull asked.

I nodded. He gestured to me that the floor was mine. I looked around at my brothers. "It should come as no surprise to any of you that I love Aria. She's the woman I see myself spending the rest of my life with." I paused and watched them all nod their heads in agreement. "So, I'd like to have the official vote to make her my old lady. I know I kind of jumped the gun and had a property cut made already, but I couldn't wait. In fact, if this recent shit hadn't happened, I'd have already presented it to her. However, if anyone thinks she isn't right to be my old lady, I need to know it so I can make plans."

"What kind of plans would those be?" Ace asked.

"I'll answer that after you all vote."

"I vote yes," Bull said without hesitation. Around the room, it went very quickly. None of them hesitated, and all of

them said yes. My gut settled once I got the final one. I hadn't thought they would say no, but you never knew.

"Now, what were the plans you were gonna have to make if any of us said no?" Ace asked again.

"Where to move to and find a job," I stated bluntly. This caused a huge murmur of disbelief around the room. I saw shocked looks on my single brothers' faces but understanding on the married ones.

"You'd leave your goddamn club for her?" Stalker asked in shock and disbelief.

"I love this club and my family here, but she's my soul. If that's what I have to do to have her, then yes. It would hurt like a son of a bitch not to be a Warrior anymore and not to be a part of all of this, but for her and our future kids, yeah, I would."

"He's right. I'd do the same thing for Ilara," Bear said.

"Me too," Bull said. The other married men all sounded off in agreement with me.

"Wow, I guess I can't relate. There's no woman I've ever met who would even come close to making me give up my club for her. I guess if I ever feel like I could, I've met the one for me," Iceman said.

"I don't think there's a woman out there who could make me feel like that, but if it's how you feel, then I have to respect it. Luckily, you don't have to make that choice. When will you give her the cut?" Predator asked.

"I'd like to do it as soon as possible and in front of all of you."

"Think we can do it tomorrow? I bet we could get the ladies to whip something up. You know how they love to plan parties," Demon suggested.

"I'd love it, but I think that's asking a bit much from the ladies. Next weekend will be fine," I suggested.

"No, tomorrow is best. It'll be better, and I don't want to wait," Bull said. This brought us all to attention. There was

something in his voice that said he had something important to tell us.

“What’s up, Bull?” I asked.

“I want her to be officially protected as your old lady before we make a move on the Cannibals or Josiah. Anyone helping us needs to know she’s yours and, by extension, ours, even though I’ve told them that. I spoke to Gabe, Sean, Griffin, and Undertaker this morning. They think they might have a way to get our hands on Josiah ready to go within the week. If they do, we have to be ready to move, and I want her to have your name on her.”

This caused excitement. All of us were talking at once. He had to pound on the table to get us to quiet down. “I know you’re anxious to get this over with. So am I.”

“What’s their plan?” I asked.

“They’ll fill us in once they have it all in place. They didn’t want to say until they knew for sure they could carry it off. Once they know, they’ll walk us through it step-by-step. One of them will be going with us while the others provide support on the back end. I know that we all would love to go, but I get the feeling this will be a small team. Besides, we can’t leave the compound and the others without protection. The Cannibals are still out there and could be planning to strike at any time. It goes without saying Slash will go, but I’ll choose others after we know the details. It may require certain skill sets to pull this off.”

Excitement filled me at the prospect along with impatience. I wanted to leave right now but I knew that wasn’t possible. So instead, to take my mind off it, we talked about the party to claim Aria. Bull and the other married brothers were sure the ladies could pull it off tomorrow, so we planned for the afternoon. That would give us time to relax and celebrate afterward without it going too late. People had to work the next morning. With it planned and the news of what was coming, I left church in high spirits. I couldn’t wait until tomorrow.

I think Aria was suspicious. I tried not to let my excitement and nerves show the remainder of yesterday and this morning, but it was hard. On one hand, I was so ready to ask her to be my old lady. On the other hand, I was scared that she might say no. I thought we had been doing well since the blowup, but maybe I was wrong. Or maybe she wasn't ready to fully commit to me. If she said no, I'd probably die, but I wanted to do it in front of my family. I wanted them there to celebrate with me if she said yes. I'd said more prayers in the last twenty-some hours than I'd said in years.

I had to keep her away from the clubhouse today so they had time to do what they needed to get ready. That meant keeping her away from the windows and inside so she wouldn't see them coming and going and wonder why or, worse, want to join them. By the time we were walking over there, supposedly to just check out who was there and what they were doing, I was beyond ready and at the end of my wits.

Walking through the door, the loud chatter of voices hit us. Everyone was there, including the kids. Aria gave me a surprised look. I shrugged like I had no clue why they were there or why no one told us. Scanning the room, I found the table where Zara, Jocelyn, and Jade were. I'd called Jade yesterday and told her what I had planned and asked if she'd be here. I knew Aria was coming to see her as more than her therapist, but she might need the support. Jade said she would be happy to come. I saw Aria's surprise when she saw her. As we joined them, she immediately asked Jade, "Jade, what're you doing here? What's going on?" She took a seat.

"Baby, I'm gonna go talk to Bull about something for a couple of minutes. I'll be back soon. Do you want anything to drink?"

"No, I'm fine. Thanks," she said. I gave her a brief kiss before hurrying off.

I knew Jade planned to tell her that she had decided to stop by and see how things were going. She saw everyone was at the clubhouse, so she decided to chat for a few minutes.

Hopefully, Aria would buy it. When I got to Bull, who was standing with Bear, Demon, and Player, they grinned at me.

“All set?” Bull asked.

“Yeah, as I’ll ever be. I swear we need to get this over with before I have a heart attack. What if she says no?”

“She won’t. Trust us,” Demon said.

“Do you have it?” I asked Player, although he’d told me he had it weeks ago. He was our secretary and had ordered the cut for me. He nodded and pointed to a gift box hidden under the table.

“How do you want to do this? Do you want to get up and get everyone’s attention and then call her up? Or do you want me to get everyone to settle and then call the two of you up? If you want to do it now rather than wait, let’s do it. We’d hate to have to send you out of here in an ambulance,” Bull teased.

“Tell me you bastards weren’t scared before you asked Jocelyn, Ilara, and Zara,” I groused.

“Shitless,” Bear said as the other two nodded in agreement.

“Let’s do it now. That way, if she says no, you have time to bury my ass in the woods when I die of a broken heart.” I said only half-jokingly. They chuckled. “Bull, I think I would like you to get everyone’s attention and then ask us both to come up.”

“Okay, take a minute to catch your breath, and then I’ll call you. Go stand with your woman,” he said, lightly pushing me toward her.

I joined the ladies. I got winks from Zara and Jocelyn when Aria was busy saying something to Jade. I nodded. I stood behind her chair with my hand on her shoulder. She reached up to put her hand on mine. That helped to settle my stomach. A minute or so later, a loud whistle cut through the conversations, bringing everyone’s eyes and attention to Bull. He was smiling at us all.

“I swear it gets harder and harder to get through the noise these days. There are a lot more people than there were a few years ago. I may need to get a bullhorn soon,” he joked. This got laughs out of people. “Okay, all jokes aside, I need all your attention for a few minutes. First, I would like Slash and Aria to come up here, please.”

I felt her jerk in surprise. I pulled out her chair and helped her to her feet. As we slowly walked toward him, I whispered in her ear, “Don’t worry. Bull would never do something to upset us. We’re not in trouble.” The tension lessened in her body. When we got to him, I turned her toward the room and slightly facing Bull. He gave her an encouraging smile as he reached out and took one of her hands in his.

“Aria, sweetheart, I hope you know how happy we are that you’ve become a part of our family here. I know the way it happened wasn’t ideal, but I believe God led us to find not only Raina but you, too. I can’t tell you how much it means to us to see the way you’ve made our brother Slash’s life better in such a short time. I know there have been difficulties, but those come with any relationship. It’s obvious to all of us how much you two cares for each other, how much you love each other. It’s because of that that we’re all here today. Slash,” he said before kissing her cheek and letting go of her hand to step back and give me the floor. My belly was full of butterflies. There was so much riding on this, even more than my brothers knew.

She was now looking at me, puzzled. I took her hands in mine and faced her. I smiled down at her. “Baby, my Dove, you know how much I love you. I’ve told you, and you’ve told me that you love me. We’ve worked through so much already, and I know we’ll continue to do it. However, I can’t wait any longer. You’re my old lady in my soul, Aria. Everyone can see that, but it’s not official until my club brothers vote.” She glanced out at the crowd with a worried look on her face. Like she expected the vote to happen right then. I tugged on her hands to get her to look back at me.

I saw panic enter her eyes. “They voted yesterday, and it’s unanimous. Everyone said yes to you being my old lady.

All I need now is for you to agree. Will you be my ride-and-die lady for the rest of my days?"

It had gotten very quiet. Even the kids and babies were quiet, which was a miracle. She stared at me for several seconds, which made my heart race. Suddenly, she smiled at me and nodded. "I would love nothing more than to be your ride-and-die lady, Slash. Yes, I'll be your old lady if you're positive it's what you want."

I couldn't hold in my shout of joy. She jumped and then laughed as I picked her up and swung her around. After stopping and holding her to me for a long, passionate kiss, I reluctantly pulled away. This wasn't over yet. When I glanced up, Player was there with the box. I took it and held it out to her. While I held it, she undid the ribbon and opened the lid. She had a huge smile on her face as she took out the cut. I handed the box to someone beside us. I didn't look to see who. I took it out of her hands and held it up for her and the others to see. On the back were the traditional rockers with the club's name and the one that said *Property of Slash*. It made my heart sing. On the front, in script writing over her heart, was her nickname. I couldn't call her anything other than *Dove*.

She gasped then held out her arms so I could help her put it on. Everyone cheered and clapped. There were whistles and congratulatory shouts coming from all over the room. She raised up on her toes and gave me a kiss that made me instantly want to be alone with her and naked. When she was done, I whispered to her, "Still glad you said yes?"

"Yes, I'm still glad I said yes. I love you. I never want to be apart from you, Kai," she whispered back. I saw the love written all over her face.

Taking a deep breath, I said more. "Well, if that's the case, and since we have everyone here, what would you say if I asked you to be my wife, too?"

The shock that came over her expression was priceless, but I was more worried about what she'd say. She finally stuttered, "A-are you serious?"

“As serious as a heart attack, Dove. I told you before that I want you to be my old lady, my wife, and the mother of my children. I mean it. If you don’t want to do it right this moment, tell me. I’ll wait.” We were still whispering as those around us were celebrating.

I waited. A few moments later, she nodded her head. “I do want to be your wife so much.”

Hearing those words, I fell to my knees. The noise faded away as the others noticed what I was doing. Reaching into my cut, I took out the ring box. I’d found the ring weeks ago, and I knew it was the one for her the instant I saw it. I’d bought it and hidden it in my room here in the clubhouse. I opened the lid so she could see it. She gasped.

Inside was what I considered a non-traditional engagement ring. It was one that was made of two tones of gold—white and rose. It had a large center stone, which was a blue diamond. Scattered around it along the edge and down the sides of the band were smaller blue diamonds. The white gold was around the center stone and the middle of the band. The rose gold was on the edges. In all, it was just under two-and-a-half carats. It had cost a pretty penny, but nothing was too good for her. I took it out of the box and lifted her left hand with my other one. Her hand shook as I slid it on. I breathed a sigh of relief when it fit. I had a heck of a time guessing what size to get her. The jeweler had assured me if it was the wrong size, he could fix it. I stood up.

Everyone was back to cheering again. Right before I kissed her, she whispered, “It’s too much, Kai.”

“No, it’s not. It’s perfect for you,” I said, and then I kissed her.

Sooner than I liked, we were forced to stop kissing and accept congratulations from our family as well as show off her cut and ring. It was a hectic but amazing time. I proudly watched her talking animatedly to the ladies. Jade came up to me.

“That was well done, Slash. I think it was what she needed. She needs to know that you love her and will no

matter what happens or what you discover about her. In most instances, I would've said no to getting engaged this soon into someone's treatment, but in her case, I think it's best."

Jade had been the only one who knew what I wanted to do. I asked to be sure she thought it wouldn't set Aria back in her recovery. She'd assured me she thought it wouldn't. "Thanks, Jade. I wouldn't have done it yet, no matter that I've been dying to if you had said no. I can't thank you enough for not only helping her as a therapist but for being her friend, our friend." I gave her a side hug, which she returned with a smile before pushing me away.

"Now, get over there and talk to your brothers. I need a closer look at that ring. You did good, Slash," she said before she sauntered off. I was engulfed by my brothers and was slapped on the back so many times it was sore. They told me I'd shocked them with that ring. I laughed.

As the afternoon wore on and it became nighttime, we continued to celebrate. Someone put on music, and we danced. There was a huge feast for everyone. I don't know how the women pulled that off with only a day to prepare, but they did. We stayed until after nine before I broke and insisted I needed time alone with my fiancée. This got us a lot of winks and knowing looks. I led a blushing Aria outside and to the house. Even though she was claimed, and as much as I wanted to fully claim her tonight, I knew it was too soon. I just wanted to hold her and enjoy time alone with her in our bed.

After we got in the house and shed our cuts and shoes, I locked up for the night while she took a bath. I went to the other bathroom to take a quick shower while she was bathing. The hot water helped to soothe some of the tension out of me. I worked to push all sexual thoughts out of my head. I wasn't going to walk in there with a hard-on and scare her to death, thinking I meant to consummate the engagement.

It took me switching to cool water to get my cock to settle. It wasn't long after it happened that I got out, dried off, and went in search of her. In the bedroom, I could hear her still in the bathroom. I got under the covers to wait for her. I closed my eyes and worked to stay calm and not picture her naked

just feet away from me. I heard a noise which made me open my eyes. When I saw her, I was stunned and speechless.

Aria: Chapter 14

I was so nervous as I stepped out of the bathroom to face Slash. After the day we'd had, I felt that this was the right time for this, but I was still worried. What if something triggered me? What if I freaked out again on him? I wanted to be with him in the worst way, but the way things had been going lately, there were no guarantees.

He'd blown me away today when he not only presented me with a property cut but asked me to marry him. Glancing down at the gorgeous ring he gave me, I still couldn't believe he'd done it. He'd spent too much on the ring, but I loved it. I'd never seen anything like it. The ladies had all exclaimed over it. I wore it with pride and wondered how I'd gotten so lucky to get a man like him. Despite the terrible way I'd acted over a week ago, he never said it was too much and walked away. He stood by me and told me over and over how much he loved me and wanted to help me. No matter how much I tried to push him away, he stuck with me.

The absolutely stunned look on his face told me I'd done the right thing. Rather than wearing my usual t-shirt and panties or shorts, I had not a stitch on. I thought about wearing some of the lingerie I got for my birthday, but I didn't want to hide behind it. Maybe one day I could wow him with something sexy. He stared at me as I stood there. It took me a few moments to get enough courage to walk to the bed. Even though he'd seen me naked before, it was still scary to do it. This time, I was determined that we'd go all the way. I wanted to know what it was like to have a man make love to me, not rape me, and not just any man, but my man.

As I reached the edge, he slowly reached out his hand. "Come here, my beautiful, sexy Dove," he whispered hoarsely.

I let him help me onto the bed after he threw back the covers. As soon as I was beside him, he rolled over and kissed me. Instantly, I was lost in a world of heat and arousal. His teeth and tongue teasing mine made my temperature rise, my

nipples harden to peaks, and my pussy began to get wet. I hungrily kissed him back, just as eager to taste him. His hands sank into my hair. He held me tightly against him as I sank mine into his. He groaned when I nipped his bottom lip with my teeth.

I moaned moments later when his hand slid out of my hair and down to my breast, where he gently kneaded it and plucked at my hard nub. I shuddered at the sensation it caused to shoot straight to my clit. When he heard it, he pulled away from me and placed a few quick pecks on my lips before beginning to nuzzle and kiss down my neck. When he stopped to suck and scrape his teeth against the pulse in my neck, I couldn't help but moan louder.

He chuckled. "Does my sweet Dove like that? Would you like me to do more?"

"Please," I said huskily.

"Gladly, just promise if I do something you don't like, tell me. Or if you start to feel scared, stop me."

"I promise."

He resumed nibbling and kissing from my pulse down across my upper chest until he came to my left breast. He kissed all around my nipple and kneaded my breast, but he didn't touch my hard bud. I wanted him to suck it. I pushed against his mouth. He lifted his head and smirked at me. "Yes, is there something you want?" he asked.

"Yes, I want you to put your mouth on my nipple. I want to feel it down to my toes," I growled.

He chuckled darkly, then slowly lowered his head. He swiped lightly across the tip, then went back to kissing around it. I grew more frustrated as he ignored it again. Finally, I couldn't take it, so I pulled away. I didn't get far before he tugged me back and sucked my nub into his hot mouth, where he sucked hard and flicked it with his tongue as he squeezed it tighter. As I stiffened and gasped at the electrical shock running to my pussy, he bit down on it and sent me orbiting. I let out a tiny scream, and my pussy gushed with more wetness.

I ached down there so much I had to squeeze my thighs together. I was hoping it would give me some relief from the aching.

He took his time with that breast before switching to the other. I was moaning over and over and squirming. Suddenly, a hand slid down my tummy and between my thighs. He pushed between, making me widen them. As soon as I did, his fingers found my folds. He rubbed slowly up and down my slit. I moaned louder and shuddered. I could feel myself building to an orgasm just like that. I knew from the last time when he used his mouth on me it would be a phenomenal release. I was eager for it.

I was slightly embarrassed at how quickly I was edging toward an orgasm and how wet it sounded as he played with my pussy. As my awareness grew, I tried to close my legs, but he growled and pushed them harder before he rose and scooted down in the bed. He turned me on my back, and then he was between my legs with me spread wide. His eyes were glued to my pussy. He was intently watching as he thrust his fingers in and out of me. My back arched at the pleasure running through my body.

“That’s it. Come for me, baby. I want to see you gush for me, and then I’m gonna clean it up with my mouth and make you come again. I want all your sweet honey on my tongue, my face, and covering my fingers. Come for me, baby. Give Daddy your sugar,” he said gutturally.

I could hear the need in his voice, and hearing him call himself Daddy, which I never thought would turn me on, made me catch on fire. I flung back my head and screamed as I came, shaking. He let out a growl, then his fingers sped up, thrusting, and his mouth attacked my pussy. He licked and lapped up my cum like it was honey. The whole time he did, he moaned in pleasure and kept muttering.

“Fuck, you taste so good, baby. That’s it. Give me more. Give Daddy all your honey. God, you smell like heaven, too. I could eat your beautiful pussy all day. More,” he growled.

Even when I was done and coming back down, he never let up. He kept pushing me toward another one. “Kai, God, it’s too much. I can’t,” I whined as I felt myself starting to climb again.

He raised his head to look at me. The heat and lust burning in his eyes made me gasp. He looked wild. “No, it’s not too much. You’re gonna come again and again for me, Aria. Your body is mine to play with. Just like mine is yours. Are you in pain?”

I shook my head no. Then he asked, “Are you scared or having a bad memory?”

“No, I’m not. It’s just so intense.”

“That’s the way it should be. I’m showing you how much I love you, and I want you. Relax and let me. Fuck,” he said, then he lowered his mouth to me again. After that, I got lost in the whirling sensations he was creating inside my body. He worked me up to another orgasm within no time. He lapped up my juices and kept going. I was gripping the sheets for dear life. If he made me come again, I might lose my mind.

“Kai, I’m gonna die if you make me come again. Or maybe go crazy. It feels too good.”

He answered me by biting lightly down on my clit and humming. As he did, his fingers thrust in and out of my pussy. I jumped, tensing as another wet finger wiggled against my asshole and pushed the tip inside. My experience with anal had been horrifying. However, as I thought about what he was doing, I realized it was nothing like this. Yes, it burned a bit, but he wasn’t cramming all his fingers or anything else into me without lubrication or working me up to it. I fought to relax. When I did, he eased in more.

His thrusts in and out of both holes, along with what he was doing to my clit pushed me to a third orgasm. This one was even bigger than the first two. I screamed long and hard and gushed down my legs. He eased me down by lightly licking and petting me. As my body relaxed into a limp mess, he sat up on his heels. His face was shiny with my cum. He licked his fingers clean as he gazed at me. I looked down to

find his cock had tented his pants. I wanted to see him. I reached out and tugged at the waistband.

“Aria, Dove, if I take off these pants, I’m gonna be inside your pussy in a second. I’m right there. I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything. Are you ready for that?”

Inhaling my courage, I said, “Yes, I’m ready. I want to feel your cock inside of me, Daddy,” I whispered.

The growl he let out sounded like a wild beast. I watched as he stripped off his pants and fisted his massive cock. It looked even bigger than the other time I saw it. It was dark red, almost purple, and the veins were standing up. The head was covered in sticky cum. He pumped up and down a couple of times, then he lifted my thighs and pushed them toward my armpits. He notched himself at my entrance. I wiggled to push myself down on him. I was mindless with need.

Slowly, he pressed inside of me. I moaned at how full I felt as he stretched me to what I felt were my limits. He groaned as he worked himself inside. He was thrusting back and forth. Each time he thrust forward, he sank deeper. “Son of a bitch! You’re so goddamn tight. I’ve never felt anything like this. You’re so wet, scalding hot, and tight. I won’t last as long as I want, but I’ll make sure you get off. Are you doing okay, Dove?”

I moaned and nodded my head. “Yes, you’re so big. You’re filling me so full. God, hurry. I want you to fuck me, Daddy. Make me come all over your big cock,” I muttered. I was so caught up in how he was making me feel I really didn’t know what I was saying. All I knew was I wanted more.

He let out a roar and then gave a big thrust, burying himself inside me. I screamed and bucked. He drew back and powered back inside me. He set a wicked pace, which didn’t hurt. It just pushed me up toward another release like a freight train. I wrapped my legs around his waist and clawed at his chest. He hissed and snarled as he hammered my pussy harder and faster. This was nothing like the horror I’d been subjected

to before. It was heaven, and I wanted him to take me again and again.

One second, I was building and the next, I was going over and screaming. I clawed at his chest as I came. He thrust a few more times then froze and grunted over and over as he jerked inside of me. I could feel the warmth of his seed filling me. I squeezed reflexively around him, which made him moan. I yelled, “Yes, Daddy, yes!” He groaned and kissed me. I tasted myself on him.

When we were both done coming, he fell over me. Luckily, he used his elbows to keep himself from crushing me. Our loud pants filled the room. He rested his forehead on mine and stared into my eyes. “That was the most amazing fucking experience of my life, Aria. Thank you, Dove. I didn’t hurt you, did I? Was I too rough?”

I could hear the worry in his tone. He went to withdraw, but I held him inside me. “No, you weren’t too rough, and you didn’t hurt me. That was incredible, Kai. Although there was one thing I didn’t expect.”

“What’s that?”

“That you liked women to call you Daddy,” I said with a grin.

He laughed and shook his head. “Fuck, babe, I’ve never asked a woman to call me that, nor have I ever called myself that until you. I don’t know where it came from, but it did something to me. I guess I’m kinkier than I knew.”

I laughed, too. His cock was softening. I hated to let him go, but I had to. I unwrapped my legs, and he pulled out. I could feel the cum running down to my ass. I gave him a terrified look. He instantly grew concerned.

“What’s wrong?”

“We didn’t use a condom. Oh my God, I’m not on birth control. The implant I had ran out a couple of months ago. I never thought about getting it renewed after I got here. I made sure I was tested for everything, but I didn’t want to deal with that. It was the one thing I was thankful for when I was taken.

I'd been on it for over a year to balance my hormones. It protected me from getting pregnant with, well, you know, but it's only supposed to last three years. I'm sorry. I didn't even think of it. I should've," I said anxiously as my worry grew.

"Are you worried because you don't want a baby right now, or is it for some other reason?" he asked calmly.

"We're not in a position to have a baby, Kai. We have all this shit with the Cannibals to deal with. What if they got their hands on me and I was pregnant? I'd die if I had to have a baby around them. And even if that didn't happen, this is something we should talk about and decide together. I guess I could take the morning-after pill," I said, trying to hide my distaste. I didn't believe in that except in situations like rape.

"And if I said there was no chance they'll get their hands on you, this will soon be over, and that I want a baby right now, what would you say?"

I didn't respond right away because I was studying him. His expression was serious, and he looked calm. Finally, I answered him. "If those were all true, then I'd say let's see what happens."

"Then I guess you have your answer unless you don't want a baby right now. I'm marrying you as soon as I can get you down the aisle. If you happen to be pregnant already, so be it. I want you as my babies' mother. If you want to wait, I'll do that. I should've thought to ask before I came inside of you, but I was too lost in what you made me feel to think about it. A first, I might add. I've never forgotten a condom in my life."

Excitement as well as nervousness filled me as I thought about what he'd said. He watched me, not saying a word. After several moments, I answered him. "I say that if we were to be blessed with a baby now, then that's God's will. I don't want to prevent it if you're sure you're ready."

"I'm sure," he said.

I gasped as he lowered his head and kissed me passionately. I let myself go and just enjoyed the moment. When he finally let me resurface, and I gathered my scattered

thoughts, I felt the mess getting worse between my legs.
“Would you mind if I got up to clean up?”

“Babe, of course not, but I want to be the one to clean you up. Come on, let me take care of my Dove,” he said with a tender smile.

I let him help me off the bed and lead me to the bathroom. I thought he might get a washcloth wet for me. Boy, I was wrong. He started running water into the tub. It was a big one that you could fill up to immerse your whole body in. I loved it, to be honest, and soaked in it as much as I could. He rummaged under the sink and came up with a container I hadn't known was there. It had bath salts in it. When they hit the water, a clean citrus smell filled the room. I hurried to bundle up my hair so it wouldn't get wet. I wasn't in the mood to fool with it tonight.

When the tub was about half full, he hooked an arm around me and used the other to sweep my feet off the floor. He sat me down in it like I was a child. I gasped when he scooted me forward and stepped in behind me. He settled, his legs on either side of me. He tugged me to lie back against his broad chest. He turned off the water with his toes, which I thought was talented. I couldn't do it. The water was only a few inches below the top of the tub with us both in it. He reached over and grabbed my bath sponge and the bottle of bodywash I had used since coming here. He lathered it up and then moved toward my left arm. I lifted it for him.

“No, you sit back and let me care for you, Aria. That means I do it all. It's my right and privilege to take care of you.”

I didn't say anything until he lifted my arm and held it up with one hand while using the other to wash my arm gently, sensually, in my opinion, slowly up and down. He took his time and rubbed every inch. When he was done, he didn't drop it and go to the other. He laid the sponge down and used his hands to massage my arm. It felt amazing. I had to groan. That made me speak.

“How is it possible you’re still single? I mean, doing this to the women you’ve been with in the past had to have them dying to be your old lady, Kai.”

He kissed the side of my neck, on the pulse point that drove me wild, before answering me. “Dove, I’ve never bathed a woman before in my life. Those women and I shared sex, period. There was no true intimacy or feelings behind it other than the need to get off. I know it sounds crude, but it’s the truth. With you, you’re mine. You allow me to touch and make love to you and allow me to claim you. That’s the ultimate gift. I have to show you how much that means to me, and not just in words. Hell, I don’t know what it is, really, but I feel driven to give you this kind of care. So be warned, it will probably happen a lot and in a bunch of different ways.”

I thought about his answer and weighed it in my mind before I asked what was now burning in my mind. This care of his and the whole Daddy thing made me ask. “Kai, are you a Daddy Dom?”

“A what?”

“You know, do you live the BDSM lifestyle?”

“I know what BDSM means, and I guess there are some things I like in the bedroom that would qualify as that, but I don’t know what a Daddy Dom does. How do you know about them?” He turned me partially sideways so we could see each other’s faces. I blushed.

“I always read a lot before the whole Cannibals thing. I loved to read romance books, and I loved reading a bunch of different genres. Some of them were what some people called kink books, mommy porn, or BDSM. I don’t know if there’s a better way to describe them. Some talked about Daddy Doms. They’re men, usually older, but they don’t have to be, who acts almost like a caring fatherly figure to their younger submissive, male or female. The submissive or sub relies on the Dom as a child would a daddy.”

“You think I want to be your dad?” he asked, sounding outraged.

“No! Honey, no, I don’t think you have daddy feelings like you mean. A Daddy is someone who wants to nurture, teach, protect, and even possibly discipline me. It’s that dynamic that partially or wholly provides emotional and sexual gratification for you and, by extension, me. It’s role-playing but consensual.”

“You think I want to discipline you? You mean beat you? What the hell, Aria?”

He was getting upset. I didn’t want that, but I had to know. “Not the way you mean. Listen, have you ever spanked a woman or wanted to do that to someone other than what you did to me? How about tying one up? Controlling when and how she gets her pleasure and withholding it if she doesn’t act a certain way or do certain things. Do you like telling a woman what to do in the bedroom and having her do it willingly?”

His frown eased a little, which I was happy to see. “You’re getting more into Payne’s world. He knows the ins and outs of that. Yes, I like to be in control in the bedroom. Have I ever spanked a woman or tied her up? The answer is yes. As for the rest, no, I haven’t, but thinking about it, I do see how I would like it with you, but only if you want it, too. I never want to do anything against your will, or that will hurt or scare you. That won’t make me happy. Are you telling me you’re into those things?”

“I’ve never experienced it personally, obviously, but I have been thinking about it more since I met you and wondering. I could see myself letting you spank me and maybe tie me up as long as I could get loose. When you called yourself Daddy, that turned me on so much, and I don’t know why. When you told me what to do, the same thing happened. My sexual experiences have all been terrible until you. I want to learn how to please you and me. I love it when you tell me what to do. God, the more I think about it, the more I think I might be a sub, Kai. What do you think? Is that something you might be willing to explore with me? If you’re not, please tell me. I don’t have to have it,” I rushed to add.

“Fuck, talking about it has made me hard again. The idea you’d give me control over you is hot. I wouldn’t do

anything you didn't want, of course. We'd have to talk about it, but yeah. The more I think about it, I would love to do that. I've never put a label on it. I know things intrigue me from stuff Payne has said, but I never really wanted to do them all to the women I was with. Like I said, they weren't mine. However, taking you and, with your consent, doing those things and more would be fucking hot and sexy as hell," he growled right before he turned my head to the side and kissed me.

I was instantly totally lost in our kiss. He hungrily kissed me over and over. Tongues and teeth were clashing while our hands were touching all over each other where we could reach. Suddenly, he grabbed my waist and somehow twisted me around so I was facing him while straddling his lap. As I wiggled closer to his chest, his hard cock pressed into my stomach. He wasn't kidding. Our talk had turned him on. I lowered my hand under the water and slid it up and down his long length. He tore his mouth away from mine to moan and throw back his head.

When he lowered it to look at me again, the heat was scorching in his eyes. "Daddy wants you to lift up this ass," he growled as he gripped my ass cheeks in both hands and squeezed. "Lower yourself down on my cock. I can't wait. I've gotta be inside your tight, sweet snatch again, Dove. I need you to ride me until we both come. Come on, do what Daddy says."

I felt my cum flood my pussy at his calling himself Daddy and telling me what to do. Oh God, I was a sub, and it sounded like he was a natural Dom. Excitement filled me as I raised up to do what he ordered. I'd do anything to make him happy and to feel the pleasure I had earlier.

Slash: Chapter 15

All this talk about being a Daddy Dom after I figured out what she meant had turned me the hell on. I couldn't deny the thought of doing things like she mentioned, and more to her made me hard and excited. That's why my cock was ready to go again. It was aching like I hadn't come in weeks. Deciding to see if ordering her around really got her off, I issued my first order. The dreamy look it put on her face and how quickly she rose and positioned herself over top of me told me it was turning her on, too.

I gripped her hips tightly. "Go slow. I want to see how tight and hot you are as you slowly engulf my cock, baby. Here, I'll help you."

I let her notch the head at her entrance, but when she tried to sink down, I held her there. She made a frustrated noise. I smirked as she looked at me. She circled her hips, rubbing across the head. It felt good, but I hadn't said she could do that. Damn, this play might just be fun. I'd see what she would agree to this time. Then, I needed to talk to Payne and get more guidance on how to go about this. I slapped her ass cheek, although it didn't hurt because I couldn't get a good swing behind it under the water. She jumped.

"I didn't say you could do that, did I, baby?"

She shook her head. "No, you didn't, Daddy," she said as she gave me a sad look. Along with her calling me Daddy, that look made me pull down on her hips so just the head was inside of her. Jesus Christ, she was scorching hot and gripping the tip like I was in a vise. I couldn't hold in the groan it caused. She smiled.

"Oh, you like to hear me do that. All because of this pussy that feels like a glove. God, you're fucking amazing, Aria. Go ahead. Circle your hips. Let me feel what you got," I taunted her.

Boy, did she. She not only circled her hips, but she clenched her inner pussy muscles, making the tightness almost

too much. I groaned louder and thrust up, driving another inch of my eight-and-a-half inches inside this heaven. This caused both of us to moan. She threw back her head, exposing her long, sexy neck. I jerked her to my chest and sucked on her pulse before I bit it. She jerked, causing more pleasure to race through me. I lowered my head as I pushed her away just a little.

“Feed me one of your beauties, babe. I need to suck,” I told her.

She immediately lifted her left breast to my mouth. I sucked slowly but hard. As her nipple slid inside, I lashed it with my tongue and then bit down. I made sure I didn't break the skin, but I wanted to see how much pain she liked. She jerked, which made her push down on my cock. As I sucked harder, I pulled down on her hips again, sinking her down more. It was hell for her to go slow, I could tell, but it was hell for me too. What I wanted was to slam my cock inside of her and then fuck her harder and faster than the first time. I just wasn't sure how she'd react to that. Would it scare her?

Letting go, I gave her another command, “I'm gonna let go of your hips. You can work yourself down on me, but take it slow. If you don't, I'll have to take over. If you really don't listen, I'll have to stop altogether,” I told her. It would probably kill me to quit, but I was trying to see what she would do.

“I won't do that. I'll be good. Tell me if I'm going too fast,” she panted.

She was so wet and hot from being turned on that it was amazing. Her face was flushed, and it wasn't due to the heat of the water. She placed her hands on my shoulders and inched down, then stopped. I went back to her breasts. This time, I paid attention to the opposite one, sucking, biting, and lashing it with my tongue. She whimpered, and her hips jerked, but she didn't sink lower. I tapped her hip. She knew what I wanted, thankfully, and sank down more.

It was a test of strength but when she finally had all of me inside of her, I was so damn proud of her but also turned

on more than ever in my life. I let go of her breast and raised her up by holding her waist. Then I thrust my hips off the bottom of the tub, and at the same time, I tugged her down hard. The moans that filled the bathroom were out of this world. Looking at her, I told her, “Ride me, my Dove. Fuck yourself with my cock. I want you to ride until you feel you’re almost there, then stop.”

“God, Kai, I can’t do that. Please, that’ll be torture,” she pleaded.

“Do what I say. You wanted to know if this is for you, for us, well, we’re exploring. And when I’m inside of you, what’s my name?”

“Daddy,” she sighed as she slid up and down on me.

“That’s it. Do it again.”

As she began to fuck herself, using my cock like it was her personal toy, fire ran through my body. I wanted to pound her until we both came screaming, but I held back. Something told me if I did, then when we did come, it would be phenomenal. As she worked herself up and down on me, I spent time playing with those breasts of hers. I had ideas for her ass, too.

It wasn’t long before she was going faster and faster. I knew she was getting close to coming by the way her pussy kept clamping down on me and the fluttering of her insides. She got to the point she was riding me fast, and so damn hard, I was almost about to come. The way her breath hitched, I knew she was right there. She didn’t stop moving, so as much as I didn’t want to, I made her. She cried out in frustration. “No!”

“Remember what I said. Bad little girls who don’t listen have to be punished,” I reminded her with a smirk.

I swear she growled at me. I lifted her off me. I needed a break before I ruined this whole experiment and came. My cock hated me as I slid out of her. I lifted her so she would stand up. I got up and stepped out of the tub, then helped her out. I wanted to finish this in bed. I gently dried her off and

then myself, taking my time. She was practically whimpering, especially because I kept touching her to stimulate her, but not enough to allow her to come. I teased her nipples. I teased her folds along with her clit with my fingers. I ran a slick finger over her asshole. All of it kept her primed and me ready for more.

Once I had us dried off, I picked her up and carried her back to our bed. I laid her down and then issued my next order. “Roll over on your stomach and show me that ass. I want your legs off the side of the bed. Now.”

She did as I asked, but she did look over her shoulder and asked me, “What’re you gonna do?”

I spanked her left cheek, making her jump and cry out. “Whatever I want. Is this okay?” I wanted to be sure our play didn’t go past what she could handle. I had to be sure I always kept that in mind. I would hate to scare her or make her hate something we did together.

“Yes, that’s okay. I’m not sure how hard I can stand it, but if it gets to be too much, I’ll tell you.”

I knew enough from Payne that I knew how to fix that. “Do you know what the stoplight system means in the BDSM world, baby?”

“Yes. Green means yes, yellow means slow down, and red means stop.”

“That’s right. We can use those same colors, too. If you need me to stop for any reason, say red. I promise I’ll stop. Yellow, I’ll slow it down, and we can talk. Alright?”

“Alright.”

With her consent, I went back to playing. I landed a harder slap on her cheek. She jumped. I rubbed her firm cheeks and squeezed them. “Damn, I wonder how these would look all pink. Do you think you’d like that, Dove? Having Daddy spank you for being bad?”

She moaned and wiggled her ass. I took that to mean yes. Massaging her ass, I slipped down to tease her soaking wet slit. Then I ran my finger back up the crack of her ass.

When I stopped to stroke over her asshole, she shivered and jerked. Her ass cheeks tensed.

“Aria, look at me,” I ordered. She turned her head and did. I saw some fear there. “I know I put my finger in here a bit ago. If you don’t like that, tell me now. If you don’t tell me, then I’m gonna play with your ass more.”

She hesitated. I didn’t push inside, but I left my finger there. I needed words. After maybe a minute, she answered me. “I did like what you did earlier, although I thought I wouldn’t. Not to ruin the mood, but you have to know, they did things there too, and it was never sexy or pleasurable. It was painful. I honestly don’t know if I can stand more, Kai.”

“If I take it slow, do you want to try? If not, that’s okay. I won’t be mad. I know for some, it adds to the pleasure. That’s all I wanted to find out for you.”

“Do you like doing it? Do you like anal sex?”

“I’ve enjoyed anal sex in the past, yes. As for playing with your ass, I think I’d love it, but only if you do. It’s totally your call. We can revisit this another time,” I said as I moved my finger.

She shook her head. “Don’t. I wanna see. Can we go slow and see what happens?”

“Absolutely. Stay right here. I have an idea.” I left her there and went to the bathroom. I hadn’t thought to bring lube to the house, but there was a bottle of body oil in the bathroom. It would do the trick. I grabbed it and took it back out with me. She was where I left her.

I set down the bottle, then leaned down to kiss her neck and her ear as I whispered, “Good girl. You stayed right where I put you. Daddy is gonna reward you,” I finished, nipping her ear with my teeth. She moaned, and that led me to kissing and nipping all over her back and ass. I rubbed my aching cock all over her ass, leaving a trail of my cum behind that I rubbed into her skin.

As she relaxed and got more and more into it, I covered a finger in my cum and some of the oil when she

wasn't paying attention. I teased it over her backdoor. She tried not to stiffen, but she did a little. I reached down and circled her clit, getting the other hand wet, then thrust my finger into her pussy. As she cried out and begged for more, I breached her ass with the cum-and-oil-covered finger. She moaned and tensed, but I didn't stop because she thrust her ass back, taking more inside on her own.

In no time, I had fingers in both holes, fucking her in tandem. She was ramping up fast. I didn't have the control to stop and start over again this time, so when I knew I couldn't do it anymore, I slipped out my fingers, which made her protest. I spread those cheeks so I could see her entrance then I thrust my cock inside in one big thrust. She screamed as I moaned. Fuck, she was tight, and it was beyond amazing. As I began to thrust in and out, riding her hard and fast, she began to chant, "Please, oh God, please. Make me come, Daddy. I wanna come all over your cock," she moaned.

I thrust hard again then ground myself inside of her as I leaned over her back and growled, "Good, because Daddy wants to fill his little Dove's tight pussy full of cum. Are you ready, baby? Can you take Daddy's load? Do you want me to fuck you until you explode and scream while I pump you full of my seed? Or do you want me to come all over your ass?"

I was wild to come and either image had me right on the edge of blowing. She tightened around me and screamed, "Inside," just as she detonated. She wrung my cock like a fist. I came, practically screaming. Ropes of cum filled her. I think it was more than my first time. When we finally stopped orgasming, I fell over top of her and laid there trying to catch my breath. She was panting, too.

Eventually, I could move, so I stood up and reluctantly withdrew. I held her down when she tried to get up. "Stay right there."

I went to the bathroom and got a washcloth warm with water, then came back and carefully wiped her clean before I cleaned myself off. I tossed the rag toward the laundry basket in the corner. I crawled into bed. I took her with me so she was

curled up in my arms. I gave her a tender kiss. “I love you. Thank you, Aria.”

“No, thank you, Kai. That was wonderful, and I think we can for sure say, I’m submissive, and you’re a Dom. We can play like that anytime. I loved it. I love you.”

I chuckled and nodded before I closed my eyes. Damn, I was tired. I’d have to make sure to eat my Wheaties to keep up with her. Sex had never been like this with anyone else. It was sublime, and I knew it would only get better the longer we were together and as we learned what each other liked and loved in the bedroom. I was discovering things already that I had no idea about.

If anyone else had said I was a Daddy Dom, I wouldn’t have listened to them explain. I would’ve denied it and that was it. However, since I did listen to her, I’d found out something about myself that I really didn’t know. It would give us so much to explore together on top of finding out what she wanted and could handle in the bedroom. I knew just because this went well, it didn’t mean it would always be like that. I was prepared to deal with whatever I had to. As long as, in the end, I still had her beside me. She was already so much a part of me that I couldn’t imagine not having her in my life.

Her breathing evened out, signaling to me she was asleep. I lay there thinking about our future. We had shit to still handle with the Cannibals and Josiah, but that wasn’t what I was thinking about. No, I was imagining our wedding and building a house for our future family. A family we might’ve started tonight for all we knew. That was a reminder to talk to Tank about getting a house on the schedule. Our construction company would make the time to do it. Warriors’ homes took priority no matter what else they were building. If they had to bring in extra people, then they would. I briefly wondered what style of house she would want. We needed to talk more about kids, and how many we might want so we could choose how many bedrooms to have in our house.

Reaching over, I picked up my cell phone. In the notes app, I typed in a reminder to myself to talk to Tank about it in the morning. Along with that, I added to ask her about kids. I

was excited to find out what she had in mind. Laying down my phone, I snuggled her closer and closed my eyes.

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We slept in after our exciting celebration and then our late night. It was going on ten o'clock in the morning before we got up. I insisted on making us brunch. I planned to spend time with her until Tank got home this evening, and then I'd ask him about the house. However, since she and I had time, I'd ask her about what she liked and the question I had about kids.

Was I going too fast? Maybe in some people's worlds, yes, but not in the Warrior world. We seemed to always do things at light speed. Hell, if we took more time, some might think we were unsure of our decision or were sick. After brunch, I took her for a walk around the compound. It wasn't the same as being able to go free into town, but the weather was great for a November day. The sun was out, and the temperature was in the fifties.

I walked her all around the various houses, pointing out the things I liked about each one and listening to what she said she liked about them. I wished I could take her to see the ones in Dublin Falls. They had way more than we did, and all of them were different. Who knows, maybe if Tank and his crew needed time before they could start on our house, this mess with the Cannibals and Josiah would be over, and I could take her out there to see them.

"So, baby, what do you think?" I asked after we'd seen all of them.

"Think about what, Kai?"

"About the houses. Is there a certain style you like more than the others?"

"They're all lovely in their own way. I don't love one more than another. I can only imagine what they look like inside. I've seen Raina and Joker's and Bull and Jocelyn's inside. They are amazing. Why are you asking me this?" She had a puzzled look on her face. She truly had no idea what I was getting at.

“I want to know what style you like so we can work on finding the house for us. It takes time sometimes to get the right plan or if we can’t find one already made, we’ll have to ask an architect to draw one up. Our friend, Dare, is part of the Pagan Souls in Cherokee, North Carolina. His old lady, Joli, is an architect. She can draw us something amazing, I bet.”

She came to a stop and turned to stare up at me with her mouth hanging open. I grinned as I pushed her jaw up with my finger. “You’ll catch flies like that,” I teased.

“Flies! You’re talking about flies after dropping that bomb on me about a house? Kai, are you nuts? A house is something huge. It takes years to afford one, and the cost to build a custom one has to be way too much. Don’t you think we’re getting ahead of ourselves? Does the club need us out of the townhouse? If they do, I can stay in your room with you at the clubhouse, or we can find a small apartment in town. I haven’t even found a job yet. Why don’t we wait and talk about this after I have one and have had time to save some money?”

“Babe, there’s no saving money, bullshit. The club owns its own construction company. Tank manages it. We have the manpower to build whatever we want. As a member, we can get it cheaper than anyone else. As to whether I’m nuts, well, that’s probably debatable, but not because of the house. We’re not getting ahead of ourselves. You said you’d marry me. I want that to happen as soon as humanly possible, with the stipulation that you get the kind of wedding you’ve always dreamed of. Just please, don’t make me wait a year or more. That will kill me. The club doesn’t need the townhouse, but you never know if that might change, and I don’t want you living in the clubhouse. It’s cramped. We wouldn’t have enough privacy. Plus, it’s gonna get even more crowded if you get pregnant and we have a baby in my room. You don’t need a job for us to build a house. I have money. I’ve saved most of my life. I work and make good money off our various businesses, and our money has been wisely invested by Bear.”

She was speechless for several minutes. She had resumed walking. I followed beside her, waiting to hear what

she would say. I prayed it wouldn't be an outright no. If it was, I'd have to work on getting her to say yes. If she had other concerns or needed more information, I would work with her. Finally, she halted and looked at me.

“I want to be able to contribute to our home and family whenever that happens. I'm not someone who can sit around doing nothing and let you do all the work. I've always had to work. I had my first job at fifteen. My mom was a single parent. If I wanted extra things, I had to work for them.”

“I don't mean to make you think I dismiss that as not important. I told you. I want you to do whatever makes you happy. We talked about you going back to school to get your degree. I totally support that and work.”

“I know you said that before, which means I'll need money to pay for school. We should wait until I finish it and establish a job before paying for a house to be built. If we should have a baby and the club needs the house, we can get an apartment in town.”

I shook my head. “There's one thing I won't do. That's living away from the safety of the compound. I want you and our kids to be safe. The safest place is here, behind these walls, with my brothers around us. As for your schooling, we have several options on how to do it. That's not a biggie. The whole kid thing we might be faced with sooner than you think based on what we did last night. That brings up the question of how many kids you want. We'll need to keep it in mind when we build.”

“Slow down, please! I can't think. You're not listening to me. I want to contribute. I need to be a partner, not a kept woman,” she argued.

“You won't be a kept woman. Do you see any of the women around here doing nothing? Most work outside the home, but even those who don't, I assure you they more than work. Raising kids is hard work. Taking care of your family is work. They do things for each other and all the club members. They help with charity events and whatever comes up. I'm not a man who's gonna keep some damn tally of who contributed

what and whether it was in the form of money or something else. If you want to stay home and raise our babies and help do the million other things that are needed at any given time, then go for it. I'm not making you account for every penny you spend, either. It's not me, nor is that a true partnership."

"But we wouldn't be equal partners if I stayed home."

"Like hell, you wouldn't be. Even if you did stay home with the kids, I don't expect you to do all the cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing. I will be a hands-on dad. Bull and the others, along with our brothers in Dublin Falls, have been great examples of the kind of dad I plan to be. My old man wasn't really like that, but I will be. Now, forget the money aspect. Leave it up to me to say whether the cost is out of our range. What I want you to focus on is what kind of house you love and what you'd want in it as far as amenities. I have my list of those. Plus, we need to figure out how many kids we want. Or at least a ballpark figure. Five or less, six to ten, ten or more?" I said with a grin.

That made her laugh. She shoved me, though I didn't move. "Oh my God, get away from me. You are nuts if you think I'm having five or more kids, Kai Blakely! Four is my maximum, and that might be pushing it. How many were you thinking?"

I pretended to think, then said, "Hmmm, I was hoping for seven, but since you said no, I guess four is it."

Her mouth fell open again. "Are you serious?" she cried.

I tried not to laugh to keep the lie going, but the look on her face was too much. I burst out laughing. That set her off. She tried to push me away again, but I wouldn't let her. Instead, I grabbed her and crushed her against me. "I'm joking, baby. Four is good with me. As long as you give me one little girl who is just like her momma in looks and attitude."

"Beware of what you wish for," she warned me. I laughed Before I gave her a kiss. As soon as our lips touched, we both lit up like a bonfire. She moaned as I deepened our

kiss, and my cock began to harden. It took extreme effort to break off and get some control. When I did, I took her hand.

“Let’s head back to the house. I’d like to show you a few plans of houses I think are really nice. We can go online and search for more and talk about the kinds of things we want in it. Come on. When Tank gets home from work, I’ll find out what his building schedule looks like and how long it’ll take to get us on it and for them to build one. Usually, it’s around six months or less, but we never know. They build for businesses and residential owners all over town and the outlying areas.”

She let me take her hand and began walking back. As we walked, she stayed deep in thought. I didn’t interrupt. I was prepared to counter any and all of her objections when she brought them up. There was no way she was going to win this. I wanted my family to have a house as soon as possible. Knowing how easily the Warriors’ women got pregnant, something in the water many claimed, I wouldn’t be surprised to find out she was pregnant within the next month or two. For me, it wouldn’t be a problem.

Hell, maybe we’d be like Bear and Bull and have twins. Out in Dublin Falls, Razor and Talia had triplets. She might kill me if I reminded her of that. I’d take them one or two at a time. Three might be a bit much. As we walked, the silence was easy. As she thought about what I said, I thought about not only the babies and the house but our wedding. I wanted it to be soon. I had to remember to mention to her that she and the other old ladies, along with those out in Dublin Falls, should get to work on it. Those women knew how to pull one together in no time and make it beautiful, too.

We often told them they should start a wedding planning business. Their response was they’d never make any money because all they got done was planning weddings for the club. None of us could argue that. Maybe one day, after most of us were married. Wouldn’t that be something for people to talk about? Hiring a motorcycle club to plan their wedding.

Aria: Chapter 16

Things were moving along at a stunning rate with Slash and me. It wasn't just the whole sex thing. It was his insistence that we should start having a house built right away and the push to get started on the wedding. I figured out he was serious about the house when he dragged me over to Tank's house as soon as he got home the other day from work, so we could talk about the building schedule and how soon Tank needed a house plan to get started. As it turned out, they couldn't start for over a month, so we had a while to find the plan.

My head whirled after our visit, as well as over the number of plans Slash had me look at over the days since. It wasn't that I couldn't find any I liked or even loved. It was that there were too many that met my criteria. The houses he kept finding were beautiful, more than I ever dreamed of having one day. They were also really big, in my opinion. I grew up in tiny two-bedroom apartments all my life. A house with four or five spacious bedrooms, more than one bathroom, and a huge kitchen and living room with an office space made my head whirl. Every time I tried to whittle down the size, he'd say we needed the space.

This alone would've been enough, but he was determined to get our wedding planned. That meant he called the old ladies together the next night in the clubhouse and told them they had three months max to get our wedding planned and for me to become his wife. If they couldn't do it that fast, then he was planning to go to the Justice of the Peace and then have a second big wedding afterward.

The ladies had all been excited and apparently had been starting to pull ideas together even before he asked. In fact, they said once they knew he was serious about me, even before he gave me the cut and ring, they had been chatting. They assured him they could easily do it. All they wanted was to get the dress first, since it usually took the longest. The past few days since, I'd been kept busy sitting with this one or that

one, talking out details. Colors, food preferences, cake decor and flavors, and so on it went. Don't get me wrong, I loved them for wanting to do it because if it was left to me, I'd say the hell with it, let's go to the Justice of the Peace and be done with it. But that wasn't good enough for my man. When I tried to suggest we do that, he gave me a look and then took me to bed and made me beg for release for what seemed like hours.

The man was coming into his own as a Daddy Dom really fast. I couldn't believe he hadn't known that about himself. He was so serious about it, like so many other things, that he'd gone and talked to his brother Payne. That's when I discovered Payne got his name for more than the fact he was the club's enforcer, and he inflicted it on their enemies. The man liked to inflict it during sex. I was totally shocked, and when I looked at sweet Jayla, I couldn't imagine her being into pain, but the smile on her face told me she must love it. And the way Payne looked at her told me he loved her to death.

As for me, I was finding out I responded really well to taking directions in bed. It made me feel safe and able to relax. It wasn't anything like the things the Cannibals had done when they ordered me around. They had been all about my pain and degradation and their pleasure. That wasn't what Slash wanted. He would withhold getting his own release to ensure I had mine first. Those books I loved to read years ago had nothing on him. Although, I'd laughed when he brought home an e-reader for me and said it was set up so I could buy and read as many books as I wanted. He'd winked and said maybe I could find other ones to teach him things.

I'd just finished reading one, which had given me ideas. I was taking a break to clean the house. Slash was at work and wouldn't be home for a while. It was Friday, so we'd have the whole weekend together. Humming as I scrubbed the kitchen sink and counters, I was surprised to hear the roar of more than one motorcycle coming onto the compound. I glanced at the clock to be sure time hadn't slipped away, but it was only a quarter after two in the afternoon. People didn't usually start getting home until about five-thirty or later. Dropping the scrubber I had in my hand, I walked to the front door to look out the window.

The front door had windows on either side of it. The door faced in the direction of the clubhouse, which wasn't too far away. I saw bike after bike come sliding to a stop in front of the clubhouse and the guys maneuvering them into their designated spots. I looked to see if Slash was with them. It didn't take long for me to spot him. As they parked and got off their bikes, I waited for him to come to the house so I could find out why they were back early. I was disappointed when he went straight into the clubhouse without coming to at least tell me he was home. All the guys were going in there rather than going home. What the hell was up?

Slipping on a pair of shoes, I grabbed my jacket and hurried outside and across to the clubhouse. I had to see what this was all about. As I opened the door, I was blocked by Renegade. He shook his head. "Aria, sweetheart, you need to go back to the house. The clubhouse is off-limits right now. Slash will come find you as soon as he can."

"What's going on? Why're you all home? Is everything alright?" I asked anxiously. I could hear their raised voices, although not what they were saying. Faces looked tense.

"Club business. Go home. Don't come back until you're told it's okay," he abruptly said before he pushed me gently back out the door and slammed it. When I tried to open it again, it was locked.

Fury filled me. What the hell was so damn secret that I couldn't even say hello to my man? Or that I had to be treated like a witless piece of fluff? As anger filled me, I looked around. There had to be someone who knew what the hell was happening. Spotting Bull's house, I headed there. I wasn't sure if Jocelyn was home or not. If she wasn't, I'd go see if Raina was.

After pounding on Jocelyn's door and getting no answer, I went to Joker and Raina's house. There, I met with success. She opened the door and ushered me inside. "Aria, it's so good to see you. Come in, come in. Can I get you something to drink?" she asked as she escorted me to their kitchen.

“No, but you can tell me what the hell is going on around here. All the guys are coming home early and gathering in the clubhouse. I went to see what was up and Renegade kicked me out and told me to go home and wait like a good little girl.”

She gasped. “No, he didn’t!”

“Not those exact words, but essentially, yes, he did. He said it was club business and to wait until I was told it was okay to come back and that Slash would find me when it was. He might have just as well patted me on the head like a dog. What the hell? Do they do this? What does club business even mean?”

She sighed. “It means that it’s something they think pertains to the actual club’s work, and we’re not always privy to knowing what it is.” She pulled down a couple of glasses that she filled with ice cubes and then poured iced tea over them.

“Why can’t we know what it is?”

“Because most of the time when it happens, they don’t want us to worry, or they want to protect us from being what they call implicated or forced to witness against them. It’s supposed to be for our own protection.”

“Our protection? Knowing the facts is what protects you! Doing this bullshit makes me worry more. What do you think it’s about?”

We sat down at the kitchen counter. She gave me an intense look. “I think it’s about the Cannibals and your brother, if I’m honest. I don’t know what else it would be unless something new just came up.”

“And that doesn’t make it my business?” I came to my feet. I began to pace. My upset and anger needed to be burned off in some way. Short of going back and punching Renegade in the face, this was all I had at the moment.

“Try to relax,” she said.

“I can’t relax! This is about me. Do they do this often?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been here long. Years ago, I wasn’t around the club much when Parker was trying to patch in. Tell you what, why don’t I send a text to the other women and see who is home and can come over? Maybe they can answer your questions better than I can. Hang on,” she said as she took her phone out of her jeans pocket and tapped away. Watching her made me yearn to have a phone again. I had lost mine when I was taken. I hadn’t felt like it was needed after I was rescued with everything else happening. I didn’t want to ask Slash to pay for another one. It was one of those things I planned to get once I was back to work.

I don’t know how long I paced, and she tried to divert my attention with other things, like chatting about the wedding, before there was a knock at the door. When she opened it, Devyn came in with her son, Hayden. Right after her were Jessica, Rylan, Tarin, and Ilara. All of them had their kids, too. None of them were school-age yet.

Once they were all here, had something to drink, and the kids set up to entertain themselves, we got down to talking. I found out this happened whenever the guys had something going on, usually something that involved the newest woman joining the club since none of us came without trouble, it seemed. They would go into alpha protector mode and spout off that they were protecting us. The other ladies didn’t like it either, although some were more used to it than others. I was livid.

“It has to be about the Cannibals. I should be in there hearing this. Maybe I could help them with something. I lived with those animals for over a year, for God’s sake. How is this protecting me? Is this what I have to live with for the rest of my life? Being treated like I’m too fragile or dumb to be told important stuff? If the cops came asking, I know better than to tell them anything,” I ranted.

“We know, Aria, we know. I don’t like it either. Some men tell their women more than others. I get why Renegade made you mad. Surely, he could’ve fetched Slash long enough to speak to you for a minute. You have to remember, he doesn’t have an old lady. He’s clueless,” Rylan said.

“Oh, why would he do that? After all, all I am is a receptacle for Slash’s cock whenever he wants to have sex and someone to keep his laundry clean. I’m good enough and smart enough to cook, screw, and clean but not to help with anything more,” I snapped.

They exchanged uneasy looks, but I was too upset to care. I was pacing faster than before. “Why don’t we sit, talk, and wait together? You know Slash doesn’t think of you like that. Hopefully, it won’t be long before we hear something,” Ilara suggested.

Suddenly, being inside, surrounded by people, was too much for me. I needed to be alone. I shook my head. “No, you can do that. I need to be alone. I’m heading back to the house.” I headed for the door, but Raina beat me to it.

“Aria, don’t go off half-cocked. Promise me, if you won’t stay here with us, that you won’t go off wandering the compound or trying to find a way to leave again. Please. It’s not safe.”

“I’m not going to wander, and I won’t try to leave, at least not yet. First, I need to have a discussion with Slash. I need answers. I need to know if this is what my life’s going to look like. I have a lot to consider. Thank you all for coming. I do appreciate it. Goodbye,” I said to the others before I opened the door and left. I saw they all had worried looks on their faces. I didn’t have the energy to reassure them.

Back at the house, I went to the bedroom. I didn’t lie down. Instead, I pulled all my clothes out of the closet and dresser. I laid them on the bed. I wasn’t sure why, but it felt like the thing to do. As I did it and paced more, my mind whirled with thoughts as my emotions grew more and more agitated. I was having a hard time catching my breath. I knew it meant I was headed for an anxiety attack. I went to find my pills, and I took one. As I waited for it to start working, my panic increased rather than decreased. I found myself sitting in the corner of the bedroom against the wall, on the floor, with my face buried in my knees, rocking as I chanted over and over, “You’re okay, you’re safe. Calm down, Aria. Slash will be here soon.”

It didn't help. In fact, it made me even more anxious and flipped my mind away from Slash and to the Cannibals. That led me down into darkness as I fell back into my memories and the horrors they contained. I fought to get free, but I couldn't. I was lost. Screams surrounded me, but I couldn't tell if they were in my head or if I was screaming out loud.

Slash:

We had all been called back to the clubhouse by Bull. He said he had information on Josiah and didn't want to wait until we got off work. We would have church tomorrow but this was too important to wait until then. As we gathered, we didn't bother to go into church. We just stayed in the common room.

It didn't take long to get us all here. I thought about going to the house and letting Aria know I was home, but this was important. I'd wait and be able to fill her in on the details rather than telling her and then leaving her there to wonder while I came back to find out. Once we were all here, Bull called us to attention.

"Thanks for getting here so quickly. I know this isn't our usual church day, but it won't take long. I wanted us back and getting ready. I heard from the Dark Patriots. They figured out a way to get our hands on Josiah." He glanced at me.

"Does that mean I get to go in and kill the bastard in prison and have a way out so I don't stay there for the rest of my life?" I asked eagerly.

"It does. Although Gabe said Undertaker, I mean, Mark has come up with the plan. It entails more than just sneaking us in and out like they've done in the past. He didn't give me all the details, even over a secure line. They plan to be here tomorrow morning and will sit in on church with us. They'll go over the plan then. They want us prepared to move at a moment's notice since they have to wait for something to happen. When it does, we have to move right away. Again, he didn't say what."

Voices groaned all over the room, along with mine. He held up his hands to silence us. "I know, it's not much, but it's all I have. I could've waited until you all got home tonight and told you, but I knew Slash would've probably killed me if I did that." He grinned at me. "What I want you to do is use tonight to prepare. Get your supplies together and ready to go.

Slash, I don't know if you'll have a chance to use your explosives or not, but I bet you'll wanna take some, just in case. I didn't tell all of you this in a text for obvious reasons. No matter how secure we think our phones and computers are, we can never be too safe."

"Did they say when they thought we might make our move? Is it in the next week or month?" I asked.

"They said it's likely within the week, but they couldn't promise it. That's why they want us ready to go at the drop of a hat and have everything ready when they green-light us. I want us to discuss now who's going with you, Slash."

This caused a heated debate. All of my brothers were eager to go and kept vying for the option to be included. In the end, after several minutes of arguing back and forth, Bull was the one to choose. Besides me, it would be Ajax, Payne, Demon, Loki, and Maverick. The others groaned when they heard but they took it good-naturedly. I didn't know what it said about us that we were all eager to go and risk our asses, but whatever. I was just thankful they were there to back me up. The rest would stay behind at the compound. We couldn't forget that the Cannibals were still out there and could decide to attack us at any time. We had to protect ourselves and our families.

As soon as we decided who was going to go with me, we started to chat about what we were thinking of bringing with us. Some would depend on how we were to get in. There might not be a way to get everything inside the prison. In fact, it was doubtful we could take all our instruments of torture with us. How I wish there was a way to get him away from the prison so I could take my time making him pay for what he put Aria through. The bastard deserved to suffer, not be handed a quick death, because we had to be sure not to get caught.

We were still talking while the others were debating what they'd get to do as soon as we got our hands on the Cannibals when there was a loud pounding on the door of the clubhouse. I looked at it, wondering why anyone was knocking. I got my answer when Renegade went to it and unlocked the door. When it swung open, Devyn and Tarin

shoved past him. He stepped back in surprise. They looked pissed when they entered and looked around the room.

“What’s wrong?” Ace asked Devyn. Outlaw walked toward Tarin with a concerned look on his face.

“What’s wrong? You dumbasses are in here with the doors locked. Telling women to go home like good little children and wait for you big men to come and tell us whatever you think we should know,” Devyn snapped.

“What? No one locked you out. I don’t know why the door was locked,” Ace protested.

“Oh, why don’t you ask Renegade the numbskull why? Ask him what he told Aria when he sent her home a bit ago. Enough is enough. She’s pissed and upset. You need to get out of your powwow and go talk to her. She’s cycling hard, and we’re afraid she’ll have another episode,” Tarin added.

“What do you mean, he sent her home, and she’s upset? What did you say to her?” I snapped at Renegade, who looked slightly pale. Thoughts of her doing what she did before scared me.

“I just said she had to wait at home and couldn’t be in here. We were talking about club business.”

The married guys groaned along with me. I was about to blast him before heading home when Raina came running into the room. She looked panicked. My gut instantly clenched. I knew she was about to tell me Aria had left again.

“Slash, we need you at home. Aria is freaking out, and we can’t get her to snap out of it. All she’s doing is screaming. Hurry!” she shouted.

I didn’t waste time asking questions and took off running. I blew by everyone else and raced to the house. When I got to the front door, I could hear her screams. I burst in and raced up the steps to our bedroom. Inside, the sight that met my eyes made me want to cry. Jessica was trying to talk to Aria over her screams. Aria was huddled in the corner on the floor, curled up with her face buried in her legs. She was screaming, rocking, and shaking. I pushed past Jessica.

“I got this. Call Zara or Jade. Go,” I said as I hit my knees. I tentatively touched Aria’s arm, which only made her tense and rock harder.

“Baby, it’s me. It’s Kai. Aria, Dove, my love, lift your head and look at me. You’re alright. No one is hurting you. They won’t. You’re safe at the Warriors’ compound.”

No matter what I said, nothing would make her lift her head and look at me. She was too far gone. Finally, deciding the hell with it, I couldn’t fix it this way. I picked her up and held her struggling body against mine as I took her to the bed. Her clothes were spread out all over it, so I just shoved them to the floor. I sat down with her on my lap and held her close. I rocked her as I sang to her. I wasn’t paying attention to what it was I sang, as long as it was soothing.

I had no idea how long I was singing before the screaming lessened, and she began to listen to me. It was several minutes after that before she lifted her face and opened her eyes. I was relieved to see what looked like recognition in them. She blinked and looked confused as she looked at me.

“There you are. Are you with me, baby? Do you know who I am? Who are you, and where you are?” I asked softly with a smile.

“I-I’m Aria. You’re Slash. We’re in our bedroom. Why’re we on the bed, and why am I on your lap?” she asked as she glanced around the room.

“You had an attack and were screaming. I couldn’t get you to snap out of it, so I picked you up and brought you up here with me.”

“You were singing to me.”

“Yes, I was. It seemed to be the one thing I found that helped. How do you feel?”

“Like someone beat me up. I’m thirsty, and my head hurts.”

“Do you remember what happened to cause this? You were in a flashback, I’m almost positive.”

She frowned as she thought about it. While she did, I saw movement by the door. It was Jade and Zara. They both smiled and gave me a thumbs-up signal before stepping out of the room. I had no idea how long they had been here.

All of a sudden, Aria stiffened. She pushed on my chest. When I glanced at her face, she was no longer looking confused. She was mad. “You fuckers had Renegade kick me out of the clubhouse and tell me to go home like a child. What the fuck, Slash? I thought we were partners. I know you had to be talking about the Cannibals. I deserve to be a part of it. The old ladies informed me how you like to label shit club business and then exclude them, all because you say it’s to protect us. Bullshit,” she hissed as she tried to wiggle off my lap. I held her there.

“Hey, don’t get all pissed and upset again. That’s not what happened, or at least not the way you think. I’ll explain, but first, I want you to tell me why you let it get this bad. You should’ve called me when you began to feel like you were losing control or getting too anxious.”

“And how was I to do that? I don’t have a cell phone, and there’s no phone in the house. I sure wasn’t gonna go to the clubhouse and beg at the door, even if someone would’ve answered it. Renegade locked it after he kicked me out. I tried to calm myself down. I took an anxiety pill, but it didn’t work. Next thing I knew, I was in hell again.”

It made me sick to my stomach that she’d been left alone to deal with it. I’d deal with Renegade, but first, I had to deal with myself. I’d messed up. I groaned. “Shit, I didn’t think of the fact you have no phone. Goddamn it, why didn’t I think of that? You should’ve reminded me, baby. It just totally slipped by me. You’re right. You have no way other than to go to the person yourself. I swear, you won’t ever have that problem again. You’ll have a damn phone by tomorrow. As for not coming to the clubhouse because of Renegade, I’ll deal with him. He should’ve told me you came looking for me earlier. He didn’t think. He doesn’t have an old lady. I know that’s not a good excuse, but it’s the truth.”

“Is this how it’ll be, Kai? Every time the club is going through something, I’ll be kept in the dark like I’m not smart enough or trusted enough to keep my mouth shut if someone asks about it?”

“Dove, no one thinks you’re dumb or untrustworthy. There are things we keep back to give you ladies deniability in case shit blows up and we have to deal with the law. It’s to protect you, not exclude you.”

“You can tell yourself that, but it’s not how I see it. I doubt the other old ladies do either. I don’t know how they do it in their relationships, but if a huge piece of your life is closed off to me, we can’t be partners. I’m not saying you have to tell me every little detail, but stuff that can impact us or the family we talked about having that I have to know. If you can’t do that, then I can’t be your old lady or marry you. I can’t.” she said unhappily.

Her eyes dropped to her hand and the ring I had put on it. She brought her other hand up, and her fingers closed around my ring. My heart stopped. I grabbed her hand and held onto it so she couldn’t remove the ring.

“Dove, don’t. I love you, and I can’t live without you. Please listen. We’ll work together to find what is doable for us. I can’t promise to tell you everything. There may be good reasons to hold some things back, but I can promise I will tell you whenever it has a possible impact on our safety or our family. I need you to be able to live with that. This is my club, and there are times it really is club business,” I pleaded.

If she left me over this, she might as well gut me with a knife. As I waited for her to answer me, I tried not to have a panic attack of my own. My heart pounded. What if she said it wasn’t? It seemed to take forever for her to say something.

“We have to decide together on what is acceptable, not just you. If we do and then you renege on it, then I will take off this ring and give it and your cut back. I love you, but I can’t live in a relationship where I have no say or control. I can’t. Maybe until we see if we can actually make it work, we should hold off on getting married, and we should start using

condoms. I'd hate to make it messier by having us go through a divorce or have to remove children from a parent."

I squeezed her against my chest as I shook my head. "No, we won't do that. I swear I can make it work for both of us. If I think I can't, I'll fucking walk with you before I let you and our kids leave me. Do you hear me? I love my club, but I love you more. It's that simple."

She stared at me as if she couldn't believe what I was saying. I meant every word. As much as I loved my club and this life, she was it for me. I'd make whatever sacrifice I had to in order to ensure she stayed a part of my life. I never understood how one of the guys who had an old lady could think to walk away from our club until now.

Eventually, she nodded. "Okay, tell me what you talked about and what it means. We'll work on this together as a team. I don't want to take you away from your club. They're your family, too." Hearing her say that only elicited one response. I had to kiss her.

Slash: Chapter 17

We were gathered around the table, talking to the Patriots. I thought one or two of them might come, but we had all the main partners—Griffin, Gabe, Sean, and Undertaker. Gabe, Sean, and Undertaker had brought their wives so they could spend time with our women while we talked. Sean and Cassidy had their son Noah with them. Undertaker and his wife Sloan had their son Caleb. Gabe and Gemma, who we met for the first time, had just gotten together this past summer. She was pregnant with their first baby.

We left their women in the common room with our women and kids. Seeing them with their kids just added to my desire to see Aria and me with a few. Although that would have to wait until we got this whole nightmare resolved. I was listening intently to what the Patriots had to say. I reared forward in my chair. “You can do what?” I asked, trying to verify I hadn’t imagined them saying something they hadn’t.

Undertaker grinned at me. “I said I have a way to get our hands on Josiah Canedo, and you never have to step a toe inside that prison. You’ll not only be able to take care of him in whichever manner you wish, but you can take your time and really make him pay. Does that sound like something you might be interested in?” he asked as he smirked at me.

We didn’t know him as well as the others since he’d only returned, supposedly from the dead, not quite two years ago. We’d known the others for five years or more. “Hell yeah, I’m interested. Tell me, how in the hell can you pull that kind of magic off?” I asked.

“We’ll stage a prison break,” he said with a chuckle.

“Just how the fuck do you do that? There’s no guarantee we’ll be able to get him out and not get caught ourselves,” I argued.

“There is if we do it when he’s being transported from one prison to another. It just so happens that a request for a transfer came through in their system. It’s ordering him to be

moved from his current location to a prison two hundred miles away. During that transport, we hijack the van moving him and take his ass. Make it look like he had help from his friends to do it. Once we're clear, you can bring him back here or wherever you plan to work on him. As far as anyone ever knows, he is a fugitive who never gets caught," Sean added with a wink.

"What about the driver and the guards with him? They could get hurt during the fight. We don't want that," Tank said.

"They won't. See, we'll make sure the guards assigned to transport him are ones who owe favors to the Patriots or our friends, although they have no clue who we really are. They'll make it look good, but they won't put up a real fight. No one gets hurt. They'll pay back favors and be assured that they are helping to keep a monster off the streets. If they don't help, it's only a matter of time until he makes parole. They know he'll go back out on the street and do more of the same shit he did to land him there in the first place and worse. Plus, they know if they try to burn us, their lives will implode. They think this is a black-ops government-sanctioned operation," Gabe added.

I could see the astonishment on my brothers' faces, which I knew matched mine. None of us knew what to say. Sure, we were used to working and pulling off things, but nothing like this. It went to show how far out of our league they were in some ways. I looked at Bull. There was something I had to ask. "Did you talk to Smoke about this?"

Smoke was our computer god in Dublin Falls. Smoke had ties of his own to the Patriots and the US government. He still did work for the government just like his old lady Everly did. I wanted to hear what he thought of this plan. Not that I didn't trust Gabe and the guys. I just needed more reassurance.

Bull nodded. "I did. I talked to him last night. He's all on board to help remotely. He says it will work, and he's confident with the setup. He already ran through it with the Patriots."

I looked at the guys, waiting for our answer. I needed to assure them of something. "It's not that I don't believe or

trust you guys. It's just hard to wrap my brain around, and I know if any of us forgets something, Smoke and Everly won't."

"We get it. We've asked them more than a few times to be our backup eyes, ears, and brains on things. You're not insulting us by doing the same. We'll run through the scenario as many times as you want. All we have to do is be ready to roll on Tuesday. We got word this morning on our way here that's when they plan to move him. If that's not enough time, we'll have to find a reason to stall it in the system but don't take too long. We don't want anyone to get suspicious and start digging around to find out why he was being moved," Griffin warned us.

I was ready to say hell yeah, we'd be ready, but it wasn't just me going. I looked around the table at the others. All of them going with me, along with Bull and the other officers, all nodded yes. I looked back at Griffin. "Hell yeah, let's do this. Tell us what you've worked out so far."

My agreement triggered the next few hours as we remained shut up in church, going over the plan and contingencies if things went wrong. Who would be the backup in case we needed it? How would we get from there back to here without being noticed? I had to admit, when we were done, I was impressed as hell at what they had done and the resources they were planning to provide us.

"I don't know what to say. Thank you isn't enough. To remove him because of what he set in motion with Aria is one thing, but I believe this will be what leads us to find the rest of the Cannibals and eradicate them. They're like cancer. They need to be cut out and destroyed before they can spread and cause more damage," I told them.

"Hey, anything for our friends and prior brothers-in-arms," Undertaker said. He, like me and several others, plus Gabe, Sean, and Griffin, had been in the military. The four of them had been SEALs. That brotherhood didn't end just because you were no longer on active duty. Shouts went up around the room.

After the shouts of comradery, we streamed out to join the women and kids. It was time to socialize a bit before getting down to business. I wanted to check and see how Aria was doing. She'd seemed okay after yesterday's meltdown when I left her, but I could never be too sure. She tried to be strong all the time, and then when she broke, it was ugly. We'd talked for a long time about what our relationship as a Warriors' couple would look like. I might end up telling her more than some of my brothers told their women, but that was on them. I'd asked Bull about it. He told me what I absolutely couldn't tell her. She agreed to it.

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The big day was here, and I was kind of disappointed, which was stupid to say. I didn't want anyone to get hurt breaking Josiah out, but it went so smoothly. It wasn't much to get excited about. Like clockwork, we waited at the point we'd set up in advance through the Patriots to ambush the van. The driver and guards meekly pulled off the road and parked it.

They laid down their guns, got out of the van, and walked away to allow us time to do what we needed to do. They'd start their walk to find a place to call it in after we were gone. They would claim a large party of masked men forced them off the road and knocked out their comms with some kind of device. If tests were run on their phones and radios, it would show that did happen. Lucky for us, we had a handheld EMP, an electromagnetic pulse device, which killed all things nearby that ran on electronics. Unfortunately for them, it meant they had to walk for a while to get somewhere to call because it would kill the van, too. That would give us plenty of time to get away.

After sweeping up their guns, we went to the back of the van. As we hauled Josiah out of the back, he was sputtering and asking questions. "W-who are you? What do you want? Do you know who I am?" he shouted. He was pretending to be brave and trying to act tough, but I could tell he was scared. He should be. When I was done with this motherfucker, he'd wish he was never born. I cuffed him up the side of his head hard. He staggered.

“I know who the fuck you are. You’re Josiah Canedo. A piece of worthless shit who it’s gonna be our absolute pleasure to hurt in every way possible,” I snarled as I shoved him toward the nondescript vehicle we brought. He shuffled along because he couldn’t walk very well with his ankles shackled together like his wrists were.

Maverick had the sliding door open. I shoved Josiah inside on his face. The rest of us piled into the van and the truck we’d brought. To anyone passing us, we would look like two unrelated vehicles. We left all our bikes at home. Our cuts were there as well. All of us had on hats. We were dressed in nondescript jeans and shirts. Some wore sweatshirts, and others button-up long-sleeved shirts. Sunglasses were a must. Between the hats shading our faces and the sunglasses, it would be hard for anyone to identify us. To further disguise ourselves, the sleeves would keep our tattoos from showing.

As we passed the guards, they waved at us and kept walking. The nearest town was five miles away. As we headed toward our rendezvous point, which was about thirty minutes away, we made sure to obey every traffic law to the T. We couldn’t afford to have a cop pull us over. When we reached our rally point, a group was waiting to take the van and truck. We got on board the helo, which would take us back to the compound. It was courtesy of the Patriots. I enjoyed riding in one again. Some of the others, probably not as much.

We were back home in just over two hours after we drove away from the prison transport van. The helicopter landed on the compound, let us out, then flew off. The men manning it hadn’t said more than ten words to us. They knew their jobs. We didn’t waste time getting him out to the Cellar, which was the name for the building we used to torture people and cremate their bodies when we were done.

By now, Josiah knew he was in big trouble and he was scared to death. When we marched him inside, he grew even paler when he saw the embalming table and the various tools we had hanging on the walls. Those were mainly ones used in the trade when this had been owned by a family who ran the local funeral home. This building was where they embalmed

and cremated bodies. The cabinets along the walls hid the rest of our fun tools.

“Listen, you don’t want to hurt me. If you let me go, I can promise you a fortune. I have friends and money. I can give you whatever you want.”

The door opened. Bull and the rest of the guys came in. When he saw Bull and Bear, Josiah swallowed hard. He knew there was no getting out of this now. They handed us our cuts. He hadn’t gotten a look at where we took him until we got him inside the Cellar because we blindfolded him in the van, only taking it off when we brought him inside. We slid them on. Bull walked up to him.

“It’s been a long time, Josiah. I’d like to say it’s good to see you, but that would be a lie. You should’ve gone away and found a good way to live your life. Only you didn’t, did you? No, you had to go join the Cannibals. I heard you’ve been vowing to take us out once and for all. I’ve got to admit, your pathetic little club tried to do it when they took Parker’s ex-wife and daughter. Too bad for you. We don’t stand for shit like that. I’d like to introduce you to Joker. His old lady is Parker’s ex-wife. Joker, why don’t you say hello to Josiah?”

Joker stepped to the front of the group and, without saying a single word, drove his fist into Josiah’s gut. When he hunched over in pain from the blow, Joker grabbed the back of his head and drove his face down on his uplifted knee. The blood flew as Josiah’s nose broke. The rest of us all cheered. Joker grabbed his hair and stood him back up.

“Fucker, you’re gonna pay. I have my own payback for you, but it’s nothing compared to what my brother, Slash, here has in store for you,” Joker said with glee.

“I didn’t tell my old club to steal Parker’s wife. They did that on their own. When I found out, I told them they were stupid to have done it. I don’t want any trouble with the Warriors. Whatever you’ve heard that says otherwise is a lie,” he mumbled.

“Like hell it is. Even if it were true, you’ve earned your place in hell from Slash,” Bull said with a sneer.

“I don’t know this Slash. I haven’t done anything to him,” he yelled.

I moved up to stand in front of him. He eyed me up and down. He could see my name on my cut. “Man, I don’t know you,” he said.

With a snap of my arm, I hit him in the mouth with the brass knuckles I’d slipped on and the full force of my muscular arm behind it. I felt his teeth give away. He screamed as the blood began to stream out of his mouth. He spit more blood along with his front teeth out.

“You might not know me, but I know you. I know someone you definitely know. Does the name Aria ring any bells?”

His eyes widened in shock, and then I saw understanding and fear enter them. He tried to step away from me, but Iceman was behind him. He shoved him back toward me. Seeing he had nowhere to go, he tried to bluff his way out of it. “Aria? I don’t know anyone named that.”

“Aria, your sister. Does that help?” I asked.

“I don’t have a sister. I’m an only child. There’s no Aria Canedo. You can check it out. Whoever told you I had a sister or that I did something to her is lying out their asses,” he tried to bluff.

“You’re right. There is no Aria Canedo. Her name is Aria Vickerman. She’s your half-sister,” I added.

“I don’t have a half-sister. If I do, no one ever told me.”

“Don’t fucking lie to us. We know all about how your daddy, on his deathbed, told you about her and asked you to look out for her. Bet he had no idea you’d have your club kidnap her and hold her hostage for a goddamn year-and-a-half. Or that you’d tell them they could do anything they wanted to her as long as they kept her alive until you got out,” I snarled.

The desire to beat him until he was nothing but a bloody pulp was overwhelming, but I couldn’t do it yet. First,

I had to see what information I could get out of him. If that didn't work, then the beating and torture would commence. Holding myself in check was so goddamn hard.

“I never told them to do any such thing. Okay, yes, I have a sister, but she was given a home with my old club. The guys promised they would look out for her. I didn't want her to get hurt. I might not have known her, but I wanted to get to know her. If they didn't do that, then they lied to me. I was told she agreed to live with them and was doing great. That she wouldn't come to see me because the idea of seeing me in prison hurt too much, but she's waiting for me to get out.”

“You're a motherfucking liar,” I snapped as I punched him again. This time, it was in the gut. It was solid but not rock solid. I guess he should've been working out more in prison. He bent over and heaved until he puked all over the floor. He gasped and wheezed until he cleared his throat, and then he slowly stood back up.

“Where is she? How do you know about her?” He kept up the pretense.

“Surely, your best buddy, Ox, told you what happened. I mean, it was on his watch while he was out trying to bring Parker back to your club that half your club died, and Parker's ex-wife and daughter disappeared along with Aria. Don't tell me he hasn't been in contact over the past two months or so. Surely, he told you that the money Parker promised you was a lie, and they lost Aria, Raina, and Belle. Or did he tell you she died in the fire? Your club is down by half, and they're hiding like rats. They're too scared to come out and fight like real men. They're pieces of shit just like you are,” I said in disgust. My brothers all muttered the same sentiments.

“I haven't heard anything from Ox or any of the others in months. I had no idea anything happened to her or the rest of them,” he said with a look of horror and what might be pain on his face.

I had to admit, to most, he would sound like he was sincere. He could pull it off well, but he had a few tiny tells that if you were versed in micro-expression language like most

of us were, you knew. He was lying. He knew they were dead, and she was gone. Which meant he knew where the rest of the Cannibals were. Bingo. I knew it.

It was going to be a pleasure to extract the information from him. I'd make him ride the pain edge until he told us what we wanted and needed to know. Once he did, he'd be left to suffer and beg for mercy while we brought the rest of them in. I had plans for the lot of them, and they needed to be together to truly enjoy it. Psychological torture could be worse than physical. I had both planned.

As much as I wanted to do all the torturing and questioning myself, I couldn't deny my club their fun, especially Joker, after what Raina and Belle went through. For the next few hours, we made sure to make him suffer and kept leaving him with a glimmer of hope that if he would just tell us enough, he might survive. It was a lie, but he didn't seem to know it. Everyone got in a few licks, but it was mainly me, Joker, and Payne who handed out the pain. We couldn't deny Payne his favorite sport.

Since I hadn't known Josiah in the past, I had no idea how much he could take before he broke. We were questioning him about the Cannibals and where they were hiding. The others and I took a brief break to chat outside his hearing. It was to Bear and Bull that I directed my questions.

"What do you think? Is he gonna break soon and tell us where they are? Or will we be at this all night? If the latter, then I'd like to check on Aria. She must be feeling crazy by now. I want to reassure her and see how she's holding up." I was worried the stress of waiting and knowing he was here could trigger her. Also, she had to be curious to see him and know what he was like. He was one of the demons in her nightmares. She had never put a face to him or anything. In a way, I think that made it worse.

"He's close. He just needs a push," Bear said.

"I agree, and I think I know what that push needs to be, but you're not gonna like it," Bull said.

“What?” I began to tense up. I thought I knew what he was about to say. He was right. I didn’t like it. In fact, I hated the idea.

He stared hard at me with a grim look on his face. “You know what it is. He needs to see Aria.”

Immediately, I swore and denied it. “Fuck no, she doesn’t need to see that man. He’s the one who destroyed her life, Bull! You can’t make her do that.”

“I’m not making her do it, but I do believe we should talk to her and give her the option. This may be what she needs to really start to process and put this horrible ordeal behind her, Slash. You know, I wouldn’t suggest this unless I thought it would help on both ends.”

“Bull, how the hell can I even suggest it to her? This man, who is her blood, is the reason she was kidnapped, raped, abused, and tortured for God’s sake.”

“I know. And we want to know why. Maybe the shock of meeting her will loosen his tongue. Sure, I know eventually we’ll get him to talk, but this might make it sooner. Who knows what else he might let slip? Let’s just take a break, and you go check on her. Ask her what she thinks. If she says no, I won’t mention it again.”

I paced outside the building as I thought it over. As much as I detested the idea, there was truth to what he said. It could make Josiah talk and reveal things he wouldn’t otherwise tell us. It might get her to start to let go of the rage I knew was inside of her. It ate at her. I didn’t want it to consume her. The others didn’t say a word. They merely watched me with concerned expressions on their faces. After several minutes, hell, I don’t know how long, I stopped pacing and faced them.

“Fine, I’ll do it. While I’m gone, feel free to work on him. My only request is don’t kill him. He has way more suffering before he gets his final release.”

“Don’t worry, I know how to keep him alive. If nothing else, I’ll put an IV in him and perk his ass back up,” Payne

replied with a grim smirk.

The others all nodded. I started walking toward the clubhouse which was a good distance away. “Hey, take my cart,” Bull yelled.

As I turned toward him, he threw me the keys to his golf cart. I caught them. We’d teased the hell out of him when he first got it, but it did come in handy. More of the guys were thinking about getting one. I still preferred my bike or my own two feet, but it might come in handy, especially with Aria. Once she was pregnant, I wouldn’t be putting her on my bike, and after we had the first kid, it would be impossible to take him or her on the bike with us. It would be a good way to get around the compound. It stretched for miles.

“Thanks,” I told him as I got in the driver’s seat. In less time than I wanted, I was back to the main part of the compound. I wasn’t sure if she was at the townhouse, the clubhouse, or maybe with one of the women at their house. Taking a chance, I went to the townhouse first. As I walked inside, I called out her name.

“I’m upstairs,” came her soft, stressed-sounding voice. I bound up the stairs and into our bedroom. She was sitting in the middle of the bed with her arms wrapped around her raised knees. She was pale and rocking slightly. I rushed over to sit down and take her into my arms. She was stiff. I rubbed her back as I placed a gentle kiss on her trembling mouth before speaking.

“Dove, don’t let this stress you so much. I know that’s easier said than done, but I hate to see you like this. It’s not good for you. I don’t want you to have another episode.”

“I can’t help it, Kai. I’m sitting here, wondering what he’s telling you. Is it useful? Will it help you find the others? Then I jump to thinking, what does he look like? What’s he like? Does he feel any remorse for what he did to me? I want to ask him how he did that to me and why. Plus, there’s a part of me that wants to inflict pain on him. I’m terrible, aren’t I?”

“No, you sound normal to me. No one could begrudge you those thoughts or desires. I’m out there torturing him,

although not at the level he'll eventually experience. I want him broken and begging. He needs to suffer and pay for what he did to you."

"How's it going?"

"Alright," I said. I couldn't bring myself to ask her to face him.

"Kai, what's wrong? I can tell there's something on your mind. Just spit it out."

I cuddled her closer. "I don't know how to say it. I'm conflicted. As your man, all I want to do is protect you. Make you feel safe. If I ask this, it's like I'm doing the opposite. Forget it. I came to see how you're holding up. I'm not sure how much longer I'll be out there. If you need me or anything, just text me. Maybe it would be better if you weren't alone and went to spend time with some of the other women." I'd made sure to get her a cell phone, just as I promised.

"First of all, I tried hanging with the others. It made me tenser. They kept trying not to stare at me but couldn't help it. Then they tried to get my mind off it by talking about the house and the wedding. It was sweet of them, but not things I can focus on right now. I was stressing them, I think, so I came here. Now, stop stalling and ask me what you came here to ask. Leaving me in suspense will only stress me out more."

Taking a deep breath to fortify myself, I said, "Bull thought it might loosen Josiah's tongue if he were to see you in person. That it might make him talk. Also, he thinks you could benefit from confronting him. To put a face to your demon, so to speak. And you could ask any questions you might have. There's no guarantee he'll answer them. I told Bull asking you to do this would be too much. He insisted I ask, at least. He even said you could get a bit of justice by inflicting pain on him yourself."

She didn't say anything for a minute or more when I was done, but I could feel her body get stiffer, and then she seemed to vibrate. I knew this was a mistake. I placed a kiss on her mouth. I opened my mouth to tell her to forget I said anything. She cut me off before I could say anything.

“I’d like that. I think it’s a good idea. I’ve often wondered what he looks like and why he truly did this to me. He doesn’t know me, so how could he hate me this much? Is he without feelings, or is he just cruel? I’ve wondered if we look alike.”

“Baby, I can tell you that you look nothing like him and you’re not alike at all. I think he’s cruel, and something inside of him is broken. He’s probably a sociopath or a psychopath. I don’t want you to see him. He shouldn’t breathe the same air as you do.”

She wiggled on my lap until she was facing me more. She reached up and took my face between her hands. I saw love on her face. “Kai, I love you so much for wanting to protect me. It means more than you know. But the more I think about it, the more I believe I need to do this. If I don’t, he’ll always be the vague boogeyman in my nightmares. I need to see that he’s human and can be hurt and destroyed just like anyone else. Plus, I want to help. However, I can find the Cannibals and eliminate those monsters. He’s the one link we have to them. I know he has to know where they’re hiding. Please, I want to do this. I need you to support me in this. Take me to him. If it becomes too much to bear, I’ll tell you. Please,” she pleaded.

I took her mouth almost savagely. She responded back with just as much intensity. We ravaged each other’s mouths until we had to break off to breathe. When we did, I nodded. “Okay, I’ll take you. But the second I think it’s becoming too much, I’m dragging your ass outta there, even if you don’t want me to. You have to let me have that right, or I can’t do it.”

“I agree. Let’s go. The sooner we do this, the sooner we might know where the Cannibals are. I want this over with so we can get married and not have this hanging over us. I don’t want to risk getting pregnant and having those animals still out there. Oh, and when this is done, I want you to tell me how the prison break went, too.”

Her quick one-eighty made me laugh. I grinned and nodded as I eased her off my lap so I could stand up. I held out

my hand. She took it. In no time, we were in the cart heading to the Cellar. When we pulled up, she scanned it with interest. I explained to her what it was in the past and what it was now on the way over. Her curiosity was piqued. Holding her hand, I took her inside. I prayed I wouldn't regret doing this.

Aria: Chapter 18

I was nervous and trying not to show it as Slash took me inside their torture room, building, whatever you wanted to call it. Actually, building was a better description. When we got inside, the others were gathered around the huge main center room. Vaguely, I saw there were some rooms off it. I couldn't concentrate on those or the tools hanging on the walls because all I could do was look at the man strapped to a metal table.

As we got closer, I recognized what he was lying on. It was like the autopsy tables you saw on crime shows. The ones where they could dissect dead bodies and let the blood drain into a sink area that then directed the blood down into drains set in the floor. Immediately, I was thinking of my favorite crime show set in Las Vegas.

I ran my gaze from his feet up to his face. When I got there, I saw he was staring at me. He was nothing like what I expected. I guess deep down, since I felt like he was a demon, he'd have horns and look ugly and disfigured. That wasn't the case. He looked like a regular man. He was even handsome. I could see how he would easily attract women and get men to follow him. I waited to see what he'd say or do.

After a minute of mutually studying each other, his upper lip slightly curled up, and then he spoke. "Who the hell is this? Did you bring me a whore? It has been too long. Thank you. Why don't you strip and let me see what you have under those clothes, bitch? It's been years since I've had a taste of pussy."

Slash let out a deafening roar and lurched toward him. I grabbed his arm and tugged on him to stop him as I said, "Don't do it. It's what he wants. He wants to make you mad enough to kill him. He's afraid," I said with a tiny twist of my mouth, which I hoped resembled a smile. Slash reluctantly halted.

“I’m not afraid of shit, bitch. You should be the one afraid. Let me loose, and I’ll tear that pussy, mouth, and ass up. Fuck, I’m hard already,” he said with a chuckle and a leer.

His words made me sick to my stomach. The thought of him touching me was sickening, especially when I thought of the fact he was my half-brother. I had to check, and I was even more sickened to find he was somewhat hard. That told me if he’d been with the Cannibals when I was taken, he wouldn’t have had any problem raping me too.

“Shut your fucking mouth before I shut it for you,” Slash snarled.

I patted his arm like I wasn’t at all affected. “Babe, don’t worry, he doesn’t bother me. He’s obviously a sick individual who doesn’t know the meaning of family, loyalty, or decency. He’s scared so much I bet he’ll shit himself any second now. Good thing he’s on that table. Easy clean up,” I said with a smile.

Before being taken, I’d been fascinated with the mind. Not just how it affects us when it comes to things like depression, anxiety, and those things, but what the truly criminal and deviant mind was like. Serial killers had been fascinating. I’d read extensively about how they thought. In my mind, Josiah was one of those people, which meant I thought I knew ways to make him trigger and say more than he wanted. I just had to be able to hang in there long enough to do it. I had not only my own feelings to deal with, but I had to make sure my man didn’t kill him. Leaning into Slash, I whispered so only he could hear me, “Go with it. Trust me.”

He studied me for a few moments, then gave me a tiny chin lift. I looked back at Josiah. He was doing well to hide his unease and worry, but it was there. I circled the table. His head turned to follow me. “Whoever came up with this autopsy table idea, it’s great.”

“That was me,” Payne said with a smile and a wink.

I smiled back. “I should’ve known. It’s so you. I can see that you started the fun without me. Too bad, I would’ve

loved to hear his cries and all the pleading he did to be spared and left alone.”

“Shut up, you whore! I’ve never cried or begged anyone for anything. I’m not a pussy. I’m a real man. Let me show you what a real man is like. Undo these cuffs,” he said as he shook his arms and legs.

I laughed. He glared at me. When I stopped, I pretended to wipe a tear away. “Oh God, he’s so funny. Look at him pretending to be a real man. Yeah, he’s like the rest of the Cannibals. They thought they were real men too. They ranted and stomped around. They made threats and thought by beating and raping me. They could control and intimidate me. I was the one controlling them. They’re all pathetic. No wonder they went into hiding after you killed the others. They, like my supposedly dear brother here, are pathetic,” I said with derision.

Josiah let out an ear-splitting scream of frustration. He jerked at his restraints over and over as he screamed profanities at me. I stood there watching him with what I hoped was an impassive expression. When he began to settle down, I went on the attack again.

“Your so-called friends told me all about why you wanted them to hold me. All because of what you needed from me. Guess what? You failed. They failed. You’re never getting it. You did this all for nothing, and you’ll die knowing what a fucked-up failure you are. I bet our daddy was so ashamed of you. Did he even tell people in prison you were his son? Or did he take that to his grave? I didn’t ever get to meet him, but I bet he wished I was his son,” I jeered.

“Fuck you, cunt! He was proud of me. He loved how I ran the Cannibals. He wanted me to have everything. Why else do you think he told me about you and the money you’re gonna get when you turn twenty-five? His parents thought they pulled a fast one by cutting him and me out of the will, but the joke is on them,” he snarled.

I was stunned to hear this was apparently about money. An inheritance from my paternal grandparents, whom I’d

never met in my life. Why would they leave money to me? How did they know about me? I had to fight not to show my surprise. I had to continue to make him believe I knew about it.

“I can’t believe you thought I’d give it to you. When Ox and the others told me why, they laughed at how stupid you were to believe it. They tried to get me to cut them in on the money and leave you to rot. If they hadn’t been such assholes, I might’ve done it. Instead, I’ll share it all with Slash and the Warriors. After all, they’re real men,” I pretended to gloat.

“Like hell they are! We can wipe the floor with them any day of the week. Did they tell you how I was too strong for them, and they were scared of me, so they kicked me out years ago? That’s when I went and found my real family with the Cannibals. They were men I could be proud to call brothers.”

The guys all began to laugh. I smiled at them and shook my head as I rolled my eyes. “He really is stupid or maybe just delusional, isn’t he? Yeah, they told me all about what a pussy you were as a prospect. How you couldn’t cut it, so they cut you loose. How you whined and begged them to keep you. How you went away like a beat dog. Joining the Cannibals was because they were weak dogs like yourself. No wonder they’re hiding at the bottom of a dark hole somewhere. They’re too cowardly and ashamed to show their faces. If they were real men, they would’ve come out of hiding and attacked the Warriors already,” I taunted.

“Don’t worry, bitch. They’ll be coming soon for all your asses. They’ll kill all of you. They’ll take pleasure in raping and selling your women and children. When they get here from Tupelo, you’ll wish you’d never met me,” he snarled.

The mention of a town, wherever it was, electrified the Warriors. I watched as Outlaw broke away from them to leave the room. He went into one of the others. I wondered if he was trying to track down which state Tupelo was in. Likely, there

was more than one in the whole country. I wondered if I might be able to narrow it down.

“Tupelo? Who the hell would live in a town called that? What does that mean? God, no one worth a shit could ever live or be from Tupelo,” I said with derision.

I was impressed at how the Warriors let me take the lead as they stayed in the background. For alpha men like them, it had to be pure torture. When I said that about Tupelo, they all laughed. It set Josiah off again.

“Laugh all you want, cocksuckers. All that sweet money comes from there. I bet it doesn’t seem so shitty now, does it?”

I saw Bull nod to Slash. Suddenly, I was hauled into his arms. “That’s enough. He’s given us what we need to find them. I’m taking you back to the clubhouse. Great job, Dove.” He gave me one of his soul-searing kisses, which I couldn’t help but get lost in. When he let go, I was dizzy and on fire.

His brothers were all cheering us on. I glanced at Josiah. He was livid. Hate was pouring out of his eyes as he stared at me. While holding his stare, I said to Slash, “Babe, I have one more thing to do before I go.”

“What is it?”

I moved away from him and walked over to Payne. “Give me something that can break bones.”

“I have the perfect thing,” was all he said.

The others watched in silence as he went to one of the cabinets and came back with a heavy hammer. It was so heavy that when he handed it to me, it was hard to lift with two hands. “Don’t worry, Aria, if you can’t get it to break with one hit, keep going until you do. If you get tired, I’ll be happy to take over, if your old man doesn’t.”

They watched as I approached my so-called brother. What a joke to call him that. He was a monster, plain and simple. Now that we’d gotten information and likely the location of the Cannibals out of him, I could let my hate and terror out. When I got to him, it was like something took over

my body. I raised that hammer over my head, which was a struggle, and then I brought it down over and over. His screams barely registered as I beat him. Even when I felt the bones give, I continued. It was Slash taking the hammer out of my hands that made me snap out of it. He took the hammer away and handed it to Payne then took me in his arms. I collapsed.

He swung me up in his arms. "I'm taking her back to the house. Don't end him yet. Tell me when we have a location. She needs me."

I was sobbing against his chest. Through tear-filled eyes, my last glimpse was of their concerned faces and of Josiah lying there, mostly unconscious, his lower legs pulverized. It made my bad leg throb to see it. That was the least he deserved. The rest would have to be up to my man and his brothers. I could live with that.

Slash:

The last two days have been game-changers for us. Not only did Aria get Josiah to spill the information we needed, but she'd also been able to exorcise some of her inner hate away. I had been worried as hell that seeing him and what she did would, in some way, send her spiraling into a dark place. Her breakdowns so far had been bad enough. I feared what this would do. My fear was all for nothing because she seemed to be doing just fine. Yeah, she still needed my support and to stay near me, but she was hanging in there.

It was the need to be near her yet get to the Cannibals where we could not just kill them but take as many as possible captive, which led to the plan we were now putting into play. Our hopes were it would go off as easily as the prison break had. Like that one, it wouldn't be possible without our good friends, the Patriots' help. They had been more than willing to help us again.

It took more torture to get Josiah to tell us how he was communicating with Ox. It appeared he used an innocuous website that wouldn't raise any flags when he had his hour-a-week computer time at the prison. He would post in the site's chat group. It was way too ingenious for me to believe he came up with the idea on his own. He was crying as he told Outlaw the name of the website and not only his chat name but Ox's, too. As soon as we had those, Outlaw set the trap.

He sent a chat instructing Ox that the time was now to make the move he wanted. The new neighbors wouldn't be expecting him yet. He said that he had gotten rid of his old house and would meet them there. It was too far to come to them first. We had him do this because we saw the message Ox had sent asking where he was. Obviously, they'd found out about his prison break and wondered why he hadn't contacted them or shown up.

It hadn't taken a lot, armed with the name Tupelo, for Outlaw to figure out which one. There was one in Arkansas,

one in Oklahoma, and one in Mississippi. It was the Mississippi one. That was where their father's parents had lived and died. More research found they had property there even though they had died. Aria was stunned to find out it had been left to her in their will. No one knew where to find her, so it was being held in a trust at the moment. It, along with a very substantial money inheritance, was waiting for her to claim it. It was one she wasn't able to access until she was twenty-five. In total, her assets now totaled a million dollars in all. No wonder Josiah had wanted it.

Yeah, we'd questioned him after we found that out. It took more pain, but he finally confessed why he had her taken. It seemed his paternal grandparents hated how bad their son had turned out, so they disinherited him. They had thought their grandson would be a better person, only to find out he was as bad as his father when he landed in prison, too. They'd despaired of what to do with their worldly possessions when they died other than to give it to charity. That was until their son told them they had a granddaughter.

The way Josiah explained it, his dad had hoped that by telling them about Aria, his parents would see how good she was and decide to give him his inheritance. Instead, they decided to give it all to her. He told his son about his sister so he could find a way to get in good with her and convince her to share half of the inheritance with him. Only Josiah was greedy and wanted it all. He asked the Cannibals to kidnap and keep her alive until he got out. His plan was to force her to sign it all over to him. He figured if she feared him and his club, it would work in his favor, hence the beatings and rapes.

When he confessed all this, I had to take a shower to get the blood off before I returned to the house. I enjoyed every second of his pain. I did allow Joker and Payne to get some licks in, along with a few of the others, but I carried out the bulk of his punishment. I was a sick individual because I'd gone home, was able to make love to Aria, and then slept like a baby.

The Patriots had volunteered to not only have people set up at random checkpoints along the most direct route the

Cannibals were likely to take to get here so they could warn us, but they were doing the final cleanup as well. Instead of us cremating and getting rid of the ashes, they promised they had a way to get rid of the bodies where no one would find them. It was an offer we couldn't say no to.

Earlier this morning, we'd received word the first lookout had seen the Cannibals. They were on the move, headed our way. It was less than five hours between there and here. This put them arriving here in the early afternoon. It would be foolish to strike in broad daylight, so we figured they'd hide somewhere close by and wait until it was dark when they thought we were in bed for the night.

That was what they did. We went about our day like we didn't have a worry in our heads. We made it seem that when it got dark, a few were hanging out in the clubhouse, where the music was loud, and the voices were yelling from time to time. The others went to their houses and had the lights on until they began to turn them off, starting around eleven.

To an outsider, it looked normal. In reality, we'd had those in the clubhouse sneak out the back. The music playing was supplemented with a recording Outlaw made of random voices that would shout and laugh to make it sound more realistic. Also, he'd set up this projector thing, which flickered so it looked like people walking past lights and casting shadows. At the houses, the same thing happened. We got everyone out via the back doors and snuck far back on the compound, where the women and children were taken by the Patriots to a safe location.

The men took up positions around the compound to wait for the fun to begin. We'd made our own hideouts in plain sight. All those years in the service made many of us experts at building a blind. Others had experience hunting. Once we were all in place, all we had to do was wait. The lights that went off in the houses were on timers. We had Walker, who was on gate duty, go inside the clubhouse at midnight, which was the usual time we had a prospect leave the gate.

Time seemed to inch by super slowly, but we held our positions. We wouldn't be the ones to expose the ruse. It was

one a.m. when we got the message on our phones that the Cannibals were on the move. They had been holed up at some farm about fifteen miles away from us. We didn't know who it belonged to or why they had access to it. That was something to figure out later. It only took them twenty minutes to reach us. They came in quietly without their bikes, which was smart.

We wondered how they planned to get inside. The gate was reinforced so ramming it wouldn't break it down. The wall was too high and without handholds. Even if they could get to the top, razor wire ran along it. You could get over it if you wanted, but would they? They had to. How else would they get inside? That was answered rather quickly. They backed the trucks they came in up to the wall and then raised ladders. When they got to the top and the razor wire, they threw big pieces of cowhide over the wire. This allowed them to climb over it without cutting themselves to shreds.

We let them come and didn't move. We wanted them all inside before we let them know the game was up. As they swarmed over the front wall, we waited to get the all-clear from the Patriots. They would send it once all the Cannibals were noted to be on our side of the wall. It was almost ten minutes from the time they pulled up to when we got it. Counting bodies, I saw there were a dozen of them. They'd been recruiting, it looked like. In the faint moonlight, we saw they were carrying assault-style rifles and were creeping toward the clubhouse. We didn't want to give them a chance to shoot it all to hell, so we came out of hiding like ghosts.

It was an intense battle as some fought hand-to-hand while others fired their guns on both sides. We wore Kevlar vests and tactical helmets. Short of a shot to the face, we should be able to survive being shot. They weren't so lucky. As much as we might want to kill them all, my desire to make at least a few suffer like Josiah, Ox in particular, was in the back of everyone's minds. We incapacitated the ones we could. My brothers knew if it was possible to do without getting killed or seriously hurt not to kill Ox.

I wasn't sure how long the battle raged, but when it was over, we had four alive, and the others were dead or

dying. I smiled a feral smile when I saw Ox was one of the men taken alive. Anticipation flooded my veins. That fucker was gonna suffer. I marched up to him. He had his hands tied behind his back. He was scowling at all of us.

“You’re mine, cocksucker,” I hissed as I punched him in the mouth, then grabbed his arms which were behind his back, and frog marched him to the truck nearby. We would use it to take him along with the other three to the Cellar to join their buddy, Josiah. It was shaping up to be a long night.

It didn’t take us long to get them back to join Josiah or Pawn, as his club knew him. At first they all stared at each other. You could tell they were shocked to have been caught and to be our prisoners. I looked over the motley crew. There was Ox, their enforcer. Bastard, their president, Freak and Brute, rounded them out. Based on the names Aria had given us, that meant among the dead were Freight, DoDo, and their two prospects, Duckie and Camel, plus the new ones they must’ve picked up over the past two months.

We had Josiah bound to a chair. Quickly, we got the other four tied up the same way. Our new prisoners were eyeing Josiah and how bad he looked. His eyes were black and swollen, almost shut. His mouth was busted, and his teeth were missing. His shirt was gone, and you could see bruises, cuts, and lacerations all over his chest and ribs. His legs were a mangled mess and were infected. You could smell it. We’d kept the stuff we did to him to those categories. The really awful stuff would begin now that we had the rest of his group.

“What the fuck is going on here, Pawn?” Bastard growled at him.

“He’s not allowed to speak. That’s our job. Besides, his mouth hurts too much to talk. That’s what happens when you have your teeth knocked out,” Bull said. He stood toe to toe with Bastard. We had talked about this earlier and decided to let Bull do the talking at first since he was our president.

“Fuck you,” Bastard said.

Now, Bull might be in his fifties, although he looked younger despite his gray hair, but he was a strong man who

could more than pack a wallop. He didn't say a word to Bastard. He just let loose and punched him in the mouth. Bastard howled as his mouth busted, and he lost a couple of teeth, which he spit out on the floor.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" Bull asked with a smile. The other president didn't say a word. Bull paced back and forth in front of them, looking them over from head to toe. When he was done, he looked at the rest of us. "Damn, I thought I'd seen it all, but this bunch really is the most pathetic excuse for a biker club that I've ever seen."

This set them off. They yelled profanities and spit at him. Bull calmly waved. Several of my brothers stepped up and let loose. They didn't spare them. When they were done, the Cannibals were bleeding and looked like they wished they'd kept their mouths shut.

"Now, we could spend all day talking and shit, but we're tired. All we want is to get this over with so we can bring our families back home. I want to crawl in bed with my wife. You're standing between me, my sleep, and my lovin', so here is how this will go. We're going to ask you questions. The faster and more honestly you answer those, the sooner your pain ends. Brothers, let's get started," Bull said to us.

Much to our delight, in some ways, they didn't answer us, and we were able to inflict all manner of pain to get those answers. The questions pertained to whether they had other men somewhere. Were there more Cannibal chapters? What kind of illegal dealings were they involved in? Although we thought we knew all of those from Aria.

They tried to resist, but the reality was they weren't that strong. They were a bunch of bullies who got off on intimidating others. When they were on the receiving end, they crumbled like a card tower in the wind. We found out there had been talk of creating another chapter, but they hadn't done anything about it. They planned to wait until after they got rid of us and then go after our other chapters. We all laughed when they said that. As if they could defeat any of the Warriors' chapters or any of our friends' clubs.

They had been foolish enough to bring every single man they had with them, including their prospects. This meant we had them all in one way or another. There were no surprises as far as what activities they were involved in to earn money. Small-time drug dealing, prostitution, and muscle, although they had been trying to get into the trafficking business. This news filled us with disgust. We'd dealt with too many instances of that shit. People who sold others were less than vermin in our minds.

Now that they had been warmed up, my brothers all stepped back and gestured to me. It was my show. I was raring to go. As I watched them and thought of what they'd done to Aria, I barely controlled myself. I wanted to rip their guts open and watch them spill across the floor. I wanted to bash their goddamn brains in and so much more. It was hard to decide what to do, but I'd had time to think, and there was something I wanted to try. It would be excruciatingly painful, although it wouldn't kill them right away. They would linger, which would allow me and the others time to keep dishing out their well-earned punishments.

The idea had come to me while I was talking to Tank about building houses and doing repairs. When he told me about it, the idea just clicked in my head and stayed with me. In preparation for catching them, I'd gone out and bought more of a supply than I needed, but it wasn't as if this stuff would go to waste.

I turned to my brothers. "String them up, and I want their clothes off. Leave nothing at all on them, not even their boots."

They had no idea what I had planned but they didn't hesitate to do as I asked. Two of them grabbed each man and then wrapped chains through their cuffs before they hooked them over a hook hung from the ceiling. Once that was done, they cut off their clothes. They weren't careful about whether or not they nicked or sliced their skin as they did it.

They hung them up in a line. The Cannibals were watching me. I went and grabbed the cardboard box I'd brought here yesterday. I opened the top and began to set out

can after can of my secret weapon. My brothers crowded around the table I was setting them out on. They picked up the cans and then looked at me.

“What the hell are you planning to do with this, Slash?” Stalker asked.

I saw a devilish grin start to spread over Payne’s face. He held out his fist so I could bump his fist with mine. “That is wicked. I have to remember this one,” he said, smirking.

“What are we missing?” Ace asked.

“Stand back and learn with me. I’m working on a theory right now. Time will tell if it works the way I hope,” I said as I set out the last item I thought I would need. It was a metal circular piece that looked sort of like a tiny stand with two metal supports that went up. Screwed across between them were two pieces of L-shaped metal. I hadn’t known what this was, but after doing research that I never imagined doing, I found this. It would make my job easier and cause them more pain.

Payne burst out, chuckling when he saw it. “Oh God, you and I need to talk, brother. You have a much eviler mind than I thought.”

We exchanged grins. The others still looked confused. Our prisoners were worried, which was what I wanted. I walked up to them. “You’re about to experience hell, unlike anything you’ve ever felt before. Know you deserve it and more. Know that we don’t feel a bit of pity for it. Know this is because of what you did by kidnapping Raina and Belle, but especially for all the heinous things you did to Aria, my old lady,” I hissed.

Their eyes filled with horror when they heard me say Aria was mine. They might be the poorest excuses for bikers on the planet, but even they know what it means when you touch another man’s old lady. The yelling and begging started before I even touched them. As they carried on, I slipped on the vinyl gloves.

“Payne, since you obviously recognize this apparatus, mind helping me out here? Would you do the honors?”

“I would abso-fucking-lutely love to assist you, brother,” he said with a huge grin and a twinkle in his eyes. He put on a pair of gloves then picked up the metal apparatus. He looked over at our brothers. “Ajax, Reb, come hold this one’s legs wide open. Don’t let him kick or move. Or better yet, let him do it a little. That way, it’ll hurt even more.”

As Reb and Ajax took their spots in front of Freak, he froze in fear. That frozenness lasted until Payne slid the apparatus down over his shriveled cock and inserted the sharp ends of the two L-shaped parts into the head of it, and began to screw them back. This handy device was called a urethral spreader. Why the hell anyone would want to have it done to them, I don’t know. It wasn’t my kink, but to each their own. As it spread the urethra open wider and wider and he screamed in agony, I attached one of the cans to the plastic nozzle I bought, then I rammed the nozzle up his penis and began to release the expanding foam inside. It was the kind you used to seal up all manner of things and places. His screams got so bad they made my ears hurt until, eventually, he passed out.

The others, seeing this, were filled with terror and loudly begging and promising anything. When I felt he was full, I withdrew and replaced the bottle with a new one. This time, Payne helped me spread Freak’s ass cheeks, and I filled his ass up too. As I did, I started to explain. Even our brothers were looking horrified and sick.

“This is so you can imagine what Aria felt all those times you raped her in both holes. She has flashbacks to what you animals did. Although, in her case, she’ll get better and go on to live a happy and loving life. You sick bastards won’t. Guys, get Brute ready next.”

Brute fought as much as he could in his restraints, but he was no match for them, even if he hadn’t been restrained. After filling him up, it was Josiah’s turn, followed by Bastard’s. All of them screamed bloody murder. I saved Ox for last. When I was finished with him, I leaned close. They were all crying out in pain and watching me with terror on their

faces. “For you, I have something special. I know you were the one to torture and abuse her the most. I believe in payback.” The scream he let out was filled with agony and horror, just like I wanted.

A good man would’ve ended them soon after. I never claimed to be a completely good man. They hung there in agony as the foam kept expanding. We let them suffer while taking turns beating, burning, and cutting them. This lasted for hours and hours. By late morning, they appeared barely alive. I didn’t want to risk any of them dying before I was ready. I knew Payne could give them IVs and keep them alive for days, but suddenly, I wanted this over with. I wanted to be done with them and back with my woman.

Quickly, I explained to my brothers what I wanted to do. I made sure to do it where the five men couldn’t hear us. They all agreed with my ideas. Me, Joker, Payne, Bull, and Tank all lined up in front of them. I was in front of Ox. We all held up our arms and aimed our handguns at their hearts. I saw relief flash for a moment across their faces. At the count of three, the guns fired. Four men hung dead. Ox looked around in shock. I gave him a cold smile.

“You’re not getting off that easily, Ox. I have something else I want to show you. Let’s go outside.” With help from several others, we got him down and then outside. Once there, he was spread out on the ground and staked down spread-eagle. While that was being done, I got my equipment. When I came back, understanding dawned on his face.

“No, please, no, just kill me,” he begged hoarsely.

“Did you stop when she begged? No, you didn’t,” I responded.

I revved the engine of my motorcycle before hitting the gas. I ran over his legs once, then turned around and did it again. On the second pass, I stopped and spun out on them. I made five passes before I stopped. By then, his legs were pulverized, and he was out. The shock had taken him. I revived him with cold water, but I knew he was almost done. Not wasting time, I got my last item. As I pulled it from its

scabbard, I felt at peace. Standing over him as he looked up at me in agony, I placed the tip over his heart and put my weight behind it, driving my sword through his black heart. He died with agony and horror on his face.

“Remind us not to fuck with you. That was gruesome. I have no idea how you thought of all that,” Iceman said.

“It was Tank’s fault,” I said.

This set them to asking questions and talking about how awful it was. It wasn’t long before the Patriots came to pick up the refuse and take it away. Walker, Diego, and Gavin were left to clean up the mess that remained behind. Suddenly, I was exhausted. All I wanted to do was go back and hold Aria. I needed my dove. We all slowly made our way back to the clubhouse. When we neared it, the door opened, and the women and kids came pouring out. Aria was in the lead. She ran straight to me. I closed my eyes and inhaled as I held her. God, it was so damn good to hold her, knowing she was safe.

Aria: Epilogue: Two Months Later

What a difference two months made. Looking around, you wouldn't know what we'd gone through just a few months ago. Josiah and the other Cannibals were gone for good. My biggest monster was no more. Ox was burning in hell in agony right now. Slash wouldn't share all the details of what happened to them, but he did tell me about Ox's legs and something about expanding foam. God, it sounded terrible. I loved it.

After their deaths, the club had another group to pay back. Slash refused to rest until the Underworld Heathens were found and made to pay for what they did to me during their visit. They ended up dying in a mysterious explosion at their clubhouse. Slash not only got to torture them some first, but he got to play with his explosives, which made him very happy.

As if those two things weren't enough reason to celebrate, the club had another. Two days after their deaths, Tank and Brynlee welcomed another son to their family. Ethan Taylor was born. His parents and whole club loved him, but nothing like his older brother Easton did. He would barely let him out of his sight.

After talking it over with me, the club made another decision, one I wholeheartedly supported. They asked Diego if he would like to prospect with them. He'd been stunned but delighted and, of course, said yes. He was busy learning the ins and outs of being a prospect for a real club.

As for Slash and me, well, we were doing better than I had even expected. He was there every step of the way as I navigated my therapy. On top of that, our house has been started. It took a lot of back-and-forth before I agreed to allow them to build the house I loved. It was because I thought it was too big. In the end, Slash vetoed my argument. I say he won by unfair means. He took me to bed and melted my brain to get me to agree. Sneaky bastard. It should be ready by the

end of May. Although he didn't know it, I planned to use some of the money I inherited, which Outlaw and the club's lawyer, along with Jocelyn, had been able to arrange for me to receive from my grandparents to help pay for it. A part of me wished I could've known them.

I was keeping busy preparing for our wedding and taking a college class online. Slash wanted me to concentrate on finishing my schooling rather than working. I'd decided to add to my degree so I could be a counselor like Jade. I believed I could really help people who'd been in my shoes. After next month, which was when the wedding was, then I'd have more time to devote to my classes.

As exciting as it all was, nothing was as exciting as tonight. We were all gathered at the clubhouse like we did so many nights. It was loud, crazy, and fun. Kids and babies were everywhere. Our whole Warrior family, or at least the most immediate one, was here. We'd been hanging out for over an hour when Bull got up to address the crowd. He let out a sharp whistle to get everyone's attention.

"I need your attention, you degenerates," he hollered. Everyone laughed. "I need Slash and Aria to come up here and join me."

Slash had a puzzled look on his face as we went up together, holding hands. I worked to keep my face looking just as puzzled. When we reached him, Bull continued, "We've had a lot to celebrate, along with a lot of work these past several months. It's been worth it. However, there's one thing more than all the rest that tells me it's worth it." Bull stopped talking and reached behind him.

He pulled out a small, wrapped box. He handed it to me as he nodded. I took it and instantly handed it to Slash. "You should open it."

"But he gave it to you," he protested.

I shook my head. "No, I'd feel better if you would do it."

Shrugging, he removed the bow and then lifted the lid. He stood there staring down into the box, not saying a word. “What the hell is it?” Player yelled impatiently.

Slash reached in and picked up the object inside as he let the box fall to the floor. He held it up to face the room. In his hands was a tiny onesie that read *Future Little Warrior*. I anxiously waited to hear what he would say or do. He’d said all along he wanted a baby. Well, now it was time to see if it was true. Suddenly, a loud whooping sound came tearing out of him before he picked me up. He held me against his chest, making sure not to squeeze too tightly, as he kissed the hell out of me. I had no idea how long our kiss lasted before he let me go. When he did, the joy on his face was plain to see.

“You just made me so fucking happy, Dove. What do you say we stay and accept their congratulations for a half hour before you and I go home? Daddy has something to show his Dove,” he said with a wicked smirk. Heat flashed throughout my body.

“There’s nothing I’d love more, Daddy than to have you show me why I’m Slash’s Dove.”

As the congrats echoed around us, we kissed again. I could’ve never anticipated that on the day I thought my life was to end, a tall, handsome stranger would come to my rescue and give me a happily ever after and so much to love and live for.

The End Until Player’s Juno HCAW Book 12