

EVA ASHWOOD



EMPIRE OF RUIN

— ♦ —
DIRTY BROKEN
SAVAGES

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DIRTY BROKEN SAVAGES #4

EVA ASHWOOD

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Author's Note: This is a dark romance and includes themes that may be triggering for some. Please read at your own discretion.

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For all the badass bitches who make their own happily-ever-afters.

PROLOGUE

RIVER

I BLINK, staring at the tall man I've only seen a couple of times. I know Alec Beckham as a billionaire, the man who hosted the party Julian wanted to go schmooze at, a man at the top of the pack when it comes to the wealthy players in Detroit.

But what the fuck is he doing here?

A second later, it becomes abundantly clear that he wasn't lying. He has a bunch of men with him, and they emerge from the shadows to surround me and the guys, boxing us in on the corner of the wide wooden dock as water laps at the piles below us.

There's no need to even wonder if they're all armed, since their guns are drawn and pointed right at us. I can feel the Kings shifting their weight on all sides of me, tense and angry, not sure what to make of this.

Yeah. Me neither.

Alec glances down at Carter's crumpled body and shakes his head before nudging him with his foot. The FBI agent's body is as limp and lifeless as a sack of rocks, and my stomach churns at the way Alec gazes down at it like a piece of trash.

Then Alec looks back up at me, smiling calmly. Something in me shrinks away from that smile. There's no joy in it, no actual happiness. It's too smooth, too cool. Utterly calm and controlled.

"You know, for a long time, I thought you must have been acting on someone else's orders when you killed Ivan St. James," he tells me. "I thought you were just a pawn, following commands, though admittedly good at it. I didn't realize you were the queen on the board."

My heart is racing and my mouth feels dry. Everything in me is screaming at me to run, to fight, to do something, but I can't. We're trapped, surrounded, and Alec Beckham clearly isn't fucking around. He just had his men shoot and kill an FBI agent, so he wouldn't think twice about murdering all of us.

I'm rooted to the spot, trying to process all of this as fast as I can.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I snap, my fear manifesting as anger like it often does.

Alec just keeps smiling, unhurried and unbothered.

"I was the one who pulled Ivan's body from the river and put it out on display," he says. "I knew there was a rat in my organization, a traitor who was no longer playing by the rules. Someone trying to leave the Kyrion Society, to get out. I thought Ivan's death was related to that, and I was trying to smoke out whoever it was."

Hearing that is like a punch to the gut. All this time, we thought Ivan's body being dredged up and laid out on that art piece at the gala was about us. But it went deeper than that. Deeper than we ever could have imagined.

"I didn't realize it was Carter until now," Alec continues. He glances down at the man's body again as he speaks and then sighs. "It's a shame. He was useful."

He looks up at me again, and there's something gleaming in his dark gray eyes. A new kind of interest, directed at me.

"You could be useful too, I think. I kept tabs on everything you did to Julian Maduro. How thoroughly you dismantled his life. There were parts that were a little sloppy, of course, but your talent for playing these kinds of games is impressive."

It doesn't feel like praise, and I barely hold myself back from shuddering at the way he's looking at me. Like I'm a toy he wants to play with or something. A toy he wants to break.

"What do you want?" I ask, my voice strained.

My mind is working overtime, trying to look for a way out of this. All I can think is that he's going to kill me and the guys. I can't understand what else he would be after. He doesn't seem pissed about Julian's death, so it's not like he wants revenge, but he has to know that Carter already told us about the Kyrion Society.

We know too much now.

He can't let us live.

“Julian wanted to join our society,” Alec tells me. “He found out about it, and he knew we had an empty seat to fill. He wanted in. But he didn’t have the qualities we were looking for. He was too eager, too full of himself with nothing to back it up, and he wouldn’t have added anything to our ranks. But he knew too much to be allowed to live, so he needed to die.” He smiles again, and it makes my skin crawl. “And you took care of that for me so beautifully.”

Something shifts in his expression, and he leans in closer to me, cocking his head a little as he examines me.

The feeling of his eyes raking over my face makes me want to take a giant step back from him, but I stay put, afraid to do anything else.

One wrong move, and he might have us all killed on the spot.

“I didn’t realize who you were at first,” Alec says casually. His voice is eerily calm and detached, like he’s talking about the weather or his stock growth or some shit. “Even after I realized you’d killed Ivan on your own, not on orders from anyone else, I didn’t put it together right away. It didn’t occur to me that a poor little abused lamb would grow teeth and claws and come back to rip the throats out of her onetime captors.”

My stomach clenches into a hard knot as Alec speaks, my breath catching as my throat goes tight.

He’s talking about the time Hannah and I were held captive.

Talking about it like he was a part of it somehow, or at least knows all about it.

Behind me, I hear a low growl from one of the guys. Knox.

“How do you...” My mouth is dry, and I have to force the words out. “How do you know about that?”

My heart is racing, thrumming so fast that I can feel the flutter of my pulse in my throat. Gray spots tinge the edges of my vision, but I shove back the memories that try to resurface at the reminder of my time held captive with Hannah. I can’t afford to get lost in that darkness right now.

I need to keep my wits about me, to stay sharp and calm.

Alec waves a hand, shrugging smoothly. “Over the years, I’ve orchestrated hundreds of deals like that. Little sheep, innocent girls, taken as debts owed or transgressions that need to be atoned for. It’s one of the ways the Kyrio society helps maintain order in Detroit. A very effective tactic, I’ve found.”

He narrows his eyes, squinting at me as he talks, like he's still trying to figure me out. It's the only emotion he's showing in all of this—his sick fascination with me.

"In all that time," he continues. "I've never seen any of them do what you did. Rise above it all and become something sharper, stronger. Most of them simply... crack under the pressure of it all."

My heart almost stops as I process his words.

Orchestrated hundreds of deals...

Oh. Fuck.

He was the one who's responsible for me being taken as punishment for my dad's sins. He's the reason Hannah and I were snatched up and used and abused by six violent, cruel men. He might not have been there, torturing and hurting us, but he's as complicit as Ivan, Lorenzo, and the rest were. And what's worse is that he clearly doesn't give a shit about anything he's done, talking about setting young girls up to be held captive without a care in the world for how it affects them.

He ripped my life away from me.

He ripped Hannah away from me.

For a split second, all I can feel is rage. Just pure, all-consuming anger. It's like the grudge I held against those six men and Julian combined, flaring up in me and making me want to claw this fucker's heart out with my bare hands.

I can hear my own breathing, harsh in my ears, and my heart races with the adrenaline that's surging through my veins.

But as if he can see that I'm about to throw myself in the path of a dozen bullets just to get my hands around his throat, Alec smiles again, holding up a hand.

"Relax. I have a deal for you," he says, his voice as cool and even as ever—as if he hasn't just turned my world upside down with one confession. "Everything in the past can be water under the bridge between us. You'll forgive and let go of the part where I orchestrated your captivity, and I'll give you a chance to join the most influential organization in Detroit. Or, I can kill you. All of you."

My stomach rolls.

The way he says it makes it clear he doesn't really care one way or another. He has his sick interest in me, but he wouldn't hesitate to shoot me right here and drop my body in the water along with Carter's.

Gage, Priest, Ash, and Knox wouldn't let that happen without a fight, and they'd all end up dead too.

It would be just another night for Alec Beckham, I bet.

I don't want to have to make this choice, but I don't see any other option. He's not going to let us walk away without agreeing to his deal, and I want to get out of here alive.

I want all of us to get out of here alive.

Licking my lips, I drag in a deep breath. It feels like I'm choking on glass, but I get ready to force out the words to agree to his bargain. To give him what he wants.

But I should've known that would be too fucking easy.

Alec speaks again before I can say anything.

"Of course, I'll need proof that you're prepared to be loyal to the society," he says. "A toll must be paid before you can join. You have to prove yourself."

I don't know what more he could possibly want from me. I hate this man and everything he stands for, and the idea of forgetting about what he put into motion for me and my sister is almost impossible. I'm always going to hate him, even if I do agree to join his society. Killing Julian should have been enough to prove I can do whatever needs to be done, but apparently, he wants more.

I lift my chin, staring at him almost defiantly, waiting for him to tell me what the fuck he wants.

Alec's condescending smile doesn't waver, and he shifts his gaze away from me for just a second, taking in the sight of the four men flanking me.

"You need to shoot one of these men," he says finally. "One of your Kings of Chaos. To kill, of course."

What the fuck?

My blood runs cold with horror. Of all the things he could have asked for, I was not expecting that. There's no way I can do it.

I shake my head, feeling numb and desperate.

"Are you fucking crazy? No. I can't—I can't do that," I tell him, the words stumbling off my tongue, jerky and staccato. "No."

There has to be another way out of this, but my rattled mind isn't coming up with anything. Nothing that doesn't end with us dead, anyway. Even if I could somehow manage to take out Alec, his men have us

surrounded. There's no fucking way we could get away from them all without one or more of us getting shot dead.

Finally, the disconcerting smile drops from Alec's face, but it's replaced by angry disappointment. He shakes his head, making a tsking noise like I'm a naughty child that he caught with her hands in the cookie jar.

"Saying no isn't really an option here, little lamb," he says. "If you say no, then I'll kill them all anyway. Including you. Think about this before you do something you won't live to regret."

I turn to look at the four men who flank me, searching their faces—hoping one of them has some idea, some plan that we can use to get away from all of this.

But there's nothing.

I come up with nothing over and over again, and judging from the strained looks on all of their faces, they don't have anything either.

Then Gage steps toward me. One of Alec's men makes a move when Gage moves, but he doesn't attack.

"River," Gage murmurs, his voice soft. "It's okay. It'll be okay."

I frown, trying to figure out what fucking part of this is okay. We're trapped in a sick game with a man who holds all the cards. A man who just killed someone, and who had no qualms about sending me and my sister into the lion's den years ago. I have no doubt that Alec could shoot each one of us between the eyes and sleep soundly tonight, so I can't see how we can talk our way out of this or fight our way out.

I don't see any way out without someone dying.

Gage's gun is still in his hand, hanging by his side, and I know the only reason he hasn't used it to try to get us out of this is the fact that Alec has us so fucking outnumbered. We really are trapped, and thinking about that makes me really start to panic. For a second, I feel like that helpless child again, like the little lamb Alec keeps calling me.

The reality of the situation hits me all at once, all of it crashing down on me—the impossible choice that's staring me in the face.

I have to kill one of them.

But I can't.

And how the fuck would I even choose? How would I be able to live with myself after that?

"No," I tell Gage, shaking my head. "No. I can't do this. I can't lose anyone else. Not after losing Hannah twice! No."

My voice breaks on Hannah's name, and I feel sick to my stomach.

So much loss. So much death.

I can't bear any more. I can't.

Gage's face softens a little and he shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, River," he murmurs. "I really am."

"Why?" I mumble back. "For what?"

"I truly am a selfish bastard. Because I'd rather die than live in a world without you in it."

He holds his gun out, handing it to me, but I just stare at it, mute and in shock. When I don't take it, Gage grabs my hand and wraps my fingers around the barrel, holding them in place with his own hand.

He shifts my grip and my aim so that the gun is pointed right at him, and I hear the other Kings shift around me, shock radiating from them as they realize what Gage is about to do at the same time I do.

But he doesn't give them time to stop him. With a sad little smile, he leans in and kisses me lightly, just a brush of his lips, like saying goodbye.

Then he presses his finger against mine, pulling the trigger for me.

A loud bang cuts through the night.

And as Gage falls, my own heart stops.

RIVER

THE GUNSHOT RINGS in my ears like a crack of thunder. Gage's body crumples to the dock, blood blooming outward across his shirt where he was shot through the stomach.

By me.

Time seems to stop moving forward as I stare down in horrified shock at his still form.

I'm not breathing.

I can't feel my heart beating.

I can't feel *anything* but the cool metal of the gun in my hand. It could have been seconds since the gun went off, since I felt the kickback as the bullet was propelled into Gage's body, or it could have been hours. Days. Weeks. I have no idea. I'm rooted to the spot, the coppery taste of bile crawling up the back of my throat.

He doesn't move, and the blood keeps pooling. Disbelief and agony tear at my heart.

No. Not him. Not Gage.

I wasn't supposed to lose anyone else. And especially not like this.

Around me, the rest of the Kings of Chaos seem just as stunned as I am. I can feel their shock, the way they're reeling from what just happened. What Gage just did.

He's their leader. The one they look to for guidance and a plan, and now he's just...

Lying there.

Because of me.

It was Gage's choice, yeah, but it was because of me.

Alec makes a tsking sound, and I jerk slightly in surprise because I almost forgot he was even there. I tear my gaze away from Gage and look at the bastard standing in front of me, feeling raw and ragged inside. His men are still gathered around us, weapons drawn and trained on me and my men.

“That’s a bit of a cheat, isn’t it?” Alec asks, sounding like he’s scolding a kid he has some sick, indulgent fondness for. Not mad, just disappointed. “*You* were supposed to kill one of your men, but instead, he basically did it for you himself.” He shakes his head and then puts an impassive smile back on. It doesn’t reach his eyes. “But then again, you’re able to inspire this kind of loyalty in those around you, and that counts for something. That’s the kind of power that brought you to my attention in the first place.”

If he’s expecting me to have something to say to him, he’s barking up the wrong fucking tree, but he carries on like he doesn’t care one way or the other. Glancing down at the other body sprawled on the dock—the corpse of Agent Carter—Alec makes a pleased sound in his throat. In the dim light, his dark gray eyes look almost black, and the shadows cast on his face make his blandly handsome features look sharper than usual.

“Actually, this is perfect. We have two bodies here, so their deaths will be easy to link. When the bodies are discovered, it will look like your man and Agent Carter had a little fight. It won’t matter why. There was a shootout. Your man killed an FBI agent, and then went down himself. I won’t even have to worry about hiding Carter’s body. It will all check out to the cops.”

He makes a face and then gestures to one of his men. His goon steps forward and kicks both bodies into the water, one right after the other. They go down with two sickening splashes that sound so fucking final.

Dusting his hands off as if that settles the matter, Alec looks to me again. He’s got a slimy, self-satisfied look on his face that makes me want to rip his throat out with my bare hands, and he gives me a small nod.

“Congratulations, River Simone,” he says. “You have just become the newest member of the Kyrio Society, a very elite club of powerful individuals. Despite the fact that you didn’t pass your test in quite the way I intended, you *did* pass.” One side of his lips tugs up a little higher, as if we’re sharing a private joke. “That’s something Julian Maduro never managed to accomplish, so you should be proud of yourself.”

My stomach tightens into such a tight knot that it sends a bolt of pain shooting through me. Violent emotions are churning in my chest, making it

hard to breathe, hard to think clearly... but not one of those emotions is anything close to *pride*.

A fresh wave of fury and grief rises up in me, and as Alec continues speaking, his voice sounds muffled and indistinct. I have to work hard to make the words register in my mind when everything in me wants to shut them out. But I manage to process what he's saying well enough to note that he's giving me a place and a time—two days from now—and telling me to meet him there to find out more about my induction into his fucking society.

My heart is in my throat, a painful lump that aches every time I swallow. A sick feeling of dread is building inside me as the seconds tick by.

With every second, Gage's body is sinking deeper into the river.

No. No. No. I can't let him go down like that. I have to get him. I have to find him.

I need Alec Beckham to get the fuck out of here. I need him to leave so I can dive into the icy water and search for Gage.

But he's still. Fucking. Talking.

I clench my jaw to keep from screaming. My entire body is shaking by the time Alec finally jerks his head to another one of his men. The guy steps forward and pries the gun out of my grip. Then all of Alec's guards surround him in a phalanx, keeping their weapons trained on me and the Kings as he gives me one last nod and then turns and walks away down the dock, heading back toward shore.

None of us move, watching them until they're out of sight. I can hear the distant sound of their cars starting, and I dig my fingernails into my palms as I stay frozen, forcing myself to wait until I'm positive they're gone.

If he sees me jump into the water, he'll come back and kill us all, I know he will. Or he'll kill another one of my men, or make me do it, and I can't fucking let that happen.

My racing heart marks the time, and the pit of anxiety in my stomach grows and grows. We keep waiting, just to be sure. Five beats. Ten. Twenty.

That has to be enough. The docks are quiet except for the sound of the waves lapping at the wood.

Please, let it be enough.

Unable to hold myself still for a second longer, I pivot and lurch toward the edge of the dock, leaping gracelessly into the water.

“Riv—”

One of the men calls my name behind me, but I don’t hear anything else as I plunge beneath the surface. The cold river water hits me like a full body punch, and my lungs seize at the shock of it.

I momentarily resurface, my heaving lungs sucking in a desperate gasp of air as strands of silver hair cling to my face and neck. I blink stinging water out of my eyes and am about to go back down when I hear a low noise to my left. My adrenaline spikes, and my limbs tread water wildly as I turn in that direction, half afraid that one of Alec’s goons has somehow been hiding under the dock.

But it’s not one of Alec’s bodyguards.

As my eyes struggle to distinguish shapes in the near blackness, my heart lurches, thudding heavily against my ribs.

It’s Gage.

His head is barely above water, hardly more than his forehead, eyes, and nose still above the surface. He’s clinging to one of the pillars beneath the dock that hold the whole thing up, and as I watch, he loses his grip on it and sinks below the surface.

Shit. *Shit!*

Water splashes behind me, and I know at least one or two of the other men have jumped into the water with me.

“There!” I choke out breathlessly. “He’s there!”

Without waiting for a response, I pike my body and dive downward, swimming toward where I saw Gage go down. The murky water burns my eyes, but I force them open anyway.

Not that it matters. It was dark above the surface, and it’s fucking pitch black down here, impossible to see anything. I nearly plow headfirst into one of the pillars, adjusting my course slightly when I feel it. I think it’s the one Gage was holding on to, which means he should be close.

I keep swimming downward, kicking my feet against the buoyancy of the water, fear gripping me in a chokehold as I chant *please, please, please*, over and over again in my head.

I have to find him.

He has to be okay.

Panic claws at me the longer it takes, though. My hands brush slimy clumps of underwater vegetation and something else that moves, but it's too cold and clammy to be anything still alive. I tell myself it's not Gage. It can't be Gage.

Please.

Please, not him too.

My lungs burn with the need for air, but I know if I go up to the surface, when I come back down, he'll be even farther away. It'll be impossible to find him until daylight, and by then it will be much, much too late. He already doesn't have that much time, and the longer it takes me to find him, the more time slips away.

Finally, my hands find an arm, solid and cool to the touch. I wrap my fingers around the wrist and pull, grabbing onto the body. I can't even see well enough down here to visually confirm that it's him, but he and Carter were wearing different styles of clothes, and I don't think this is Carter.

Relief crashes into the fear and guilt, making my stomach churn from the fucking tidal wave of emotion, but I don't stop.

I kick harder, hauling Gage up toward the surface. A second later, more hands join me, helping me pull him upward faster. As we break the surface, each of us gasping and coughing, I see that Knox and Priest are the ones beside me. Ash must've stayed on the dock to keep a lookout and help us get back out of the water.

"Fuck," Ash breathes, squatting down at the edge of the wide dock as we paddle closer. "Jesus Christ."

He rakes a hand through his brown hair, knocking his glasses a little askew, then reaches down to haul Gage up as we lift him out of the water. Knox gives me a boost, and then he and Priest scramble up onto the dock as well. All four of us gather around Gage, and the worried nausea that's been churning in my stomach gets worse.

Gage's eyes are closed, dark shadows visible beneath them. He's soaking wet, his dark hair shining and slicked close to his head, and the puddle of water around him looks dark enough in the low light that it could be blood. I feel sick just looking at it.

How much blood has he already lost?

The gunshot clearly didn't kill him right away. He managed to cling to the beam below the dock to keep himself from sinking down and drowning while Alec Beckham ran his fucking mouth. But how much blood did he

lose in the process? How close to death was he when he went into the water?

Knox drops to his knees beside Gage and puts an ear to his friend's mouth. He looks stricken, panic and rage and grief warring on his strong features. He licks his lips and glances up at the rest of us, shaking his head.

“He’s not breathing.”

RIVER

No.

Time stretches and expands again as Knox's words hit my ears. I stare down at Gage for a heartbeat, trying to make sense of anything that's happened tonight.

He's not breathing.

That single sentence bounces around in my head over and over, crashing against the inside of my skull like a wrecking ball.

No. He can't be dead. He fucking can't be.

I flash back to just a few hours ago, when we were in his car, talking about the future. When we were dancing at the club and Gage pulled me in close, letting go for the first time in who knows how long.

He can't just be... gone.

I feel almost like I'm outside my body in this moment. Like I'm watching everything play out from behind a glass wall or something. Panic grips me, and my head is in a daze. I drop to my knees on the other side of Gage, putting my hands on his chest to do chest compressions.

I remember learning how to do CPR once, and I follow the motions the way I was taught, counting out the compressions to his chest and then putting my mouth on his, trying to breathe life back into him.

His lips are cold and clammy, lifeless and unresponsive, and I hate it. I fucking hate it.

Across from me, Knox presses a hand to the gunshot wound in Gage's stomach, putting pressure on it to try to slow the bleeding.

I can't tell if it's helping or not. I can't tell if *any* of this is helping, but I just keep doing CPR, my hands trembling.

“Get the car,” I hear Priest say in a low voice to Ash. “We’re going to have to take him somewhere.”

I don’t hear if Ash replies, and I don’t really even register him leaving. But he must, because after a while he comes back, and Priest puts a hand on my shoulder.

“We have to move him, River,” the blond man says. His voice is tight, somewhere between grief and that carefully neutral blankness he had cultivated so well when I first met him. “We can’t save him on this dock.”

I nod shakily and step back enough that Priest and Knox can lift Gage and hustle him down the dock to the car, which is parked as close as possible.

They load him inside, and I crawl in after him, resuming CPR as soon as I’m beside him again.

The rest of the men all pile into the car too, creating a claustrophobic, tense atmosphere in the vehicle. Priest gets behind the wheel and Ash slides into the passenger seat, leaving Knox and me in the back with Gage’s... with Gage.

There’s not as much room to work, but I don’t let up. I don’t care that my arms are cramping or that I can barely breathe without trembling. I keep doing chest compressions. I keep trying to make Gage come back.

I can’t think of anything else to do, and counting out the compressions and the seconds until I breathe into Gage’s mouth again drowns out the voice in my head that’s screaming in horror—a little bit, at least, and I’ll take that. I’ll take whatever I can get at this point.

“River,” Knox says after a while, his voice low and rough. I don’t look up at him. Don’t stop what I’m doing. “Let me do it.”

“No,” I snap, but it comes out as barely more than a croak. “No, I can do it.”

“You’re shaking,” he murmurs. “I can put more pressure on him. You’re getting tired.”

“I don’t care.” The words tear out of me, sounding as ragged as I feel. “I don’t fucking care, Knox. I have to—” I choke off at the end of the word and end up shaking my head, forcing myself to keep going.

Keep counting.

Keep breathing.

Keep trying.

Knox watches for another few seconds, and then moves to drag me away from Gage. He's stronger than I am, and I don't have a lot of fight left. It feels like my heart is breaking as I'm pulled away from Gage, but Knox is gentle about it, at least.

He shifts us so that he can take over, and Ash turns around from the front seat. He looks exhausted and scared, and his amber eyes glint behind his glasses in the passing streetlights.

"It's better for Gage if Knox does it," he tells me quietly. "We're all trying to save him, River."

That takes care of whatever fight was left in me. I want to do what's best for Gage. Whatever will keep him alive. Knox takes over the compressions, and I put my hand on the wound in Gage's stomach, pressing down hard, trying to stem the flow of the blood that's still seeping sluggishly out of him.

I have no idea how long it's been since he was shot. I have no idea how much blood he's lost. All I know is I can't lose him.

Numbness creeps over my skin as I watch Knox literally breathing life into his friend. His leader.

His brother in everything but actual blood.

All those demons that live inside me, the ones that were going dormant because things seemed to be looking up, start roaring to the surface again. I start seeing Hannah in my mind, watching her go down in that alley, shot because of me. It mixes with the memory of Gage just a little bit ago, crumpling like a sack of fucking bricks. Shot because of me.

My entire body feels cold, and I'm numb to everything happening outside me, but inside, I'm a mess of emotion and fear and guilt. It's all so much, a roaring tsunami of pain, and it feels like it might break me.

I can't lose him.

I just fucking can't.

Priest steps on the gas, whipping around a corner, and we speed through the night. I have no idea where we are or where we're going, and the buildings and streetlights that whip past could be any part of Detroit.

Something wet and salty runs over my lips, and I realize I'm weeping. Tears are streaming down my face, and I didn't even realize it.

"Is it clear?" I hear Priest say. He's right in front of me, but it feels like he's far away. Like his voice is coming from a distance.

“Yeah,” Ash replies. “I can’t see anyone following us. I don’t think Alec left anyone behind to watch us when he and his goons left.”

That makes sense, I guess. After all, why would Alec have us followed? He got the upper hand over us on the dock, and he’s so confident in his power. That much was evident in the way he carried himself, the way he talked like he owns the world and is just letting us all live in it. He thinks he’s fucking unstoppable.

Just thinking about Alec Beckham makes the storm inside me whip even faster, and I stare out the window, not even taking my hands away from Gage’s stomach to wipe the tears from my eyes.

A few minutes later, we pull up to a place I don’t recognize. From the outside, it’s impossible to tell what it is. Or what it used to be. It looks like an empty storefront or something.

I have no idea why we’re here, but the guys start moving quickly, piling out of the car and opening the doors to the backseat to get Gage out and bring him inside.

Once we’re in, I realize why they brought him here.

We pass through a space piled with boxes and crates and then walk into what looks like a fully equipped surgical suite located in the back of the building.

A tall, shaggy looking older man comes into the room, and from the way he greets my men with nothing but a grunt and a nod, I get the sense they all know each other. They must’ve called him or texted him to alert him that we were coming, because he doesn’t seem surprised to see us.

“What the hell happened?” he asks, narrowing his eyes as he takes us in. His face is deeply lined, as if he’s spent most of his life scowling or frowning.

I can only imagine what we look like right now. Knox and Priest are holding Gage up between them, all of them still wet from their dip in the river, and Knox and I are both covered in streaks of blood.

“He got shot in the gut,” Knox says shortly, his voice tight. “Fix him.”

The man lifts an eyebrow and ushers Knox and Priest to put Gage on the large metal table in the middle of the room.

“I’m gonna need more than that,” he says, pressing a gloved hand against the wound on Gage’s stomach.

“What the fuck do you want me to say, Trask?” Knox barks, moving in to start doing CPR again. His dark brown eyes flash as he glances over at

the man between heavy pumps against Gage's chest. "He got shot. He's bleeding the fuck out."

The man named Trask looks to the rest of us, and Priest steps up, speaking quickly as he gives him a more detailed version of events. He leaves out the stuff about Alec and the secret society, though, and the fact that *I* was the one with the gun in my hand.

Trask frowns and mutters something under his breath. He asks for Gage's blood type, and I freeze up for a second, because I don't know. But Ash and Priest both answer quickly, and Trask nods, then glances up as another man enters the room. I tense immediately, ready to fight whoever it is with my bare hands if I have to and half expecting it to be one of Alec's goons—or Alec himself.

It's not, though. It's a guy I don't recognize, and judging by the way no one else has gone on alert, he's supposed to be here.

"There you are," Trask grunts, gesturing the man over. The newcomer is a bit younger than the shaggy looking man, and he's got a light scruff on his face. "Let's get to work."

The new guy takes one look at Gage laid out on the table and leaps into action, and the makeshift surgical suite becomes a blur of activity within seconds. Trask elbows Knox out of the way as his assistant wheels over a crash cart and charges the paddles as Trask starts to cut away Gage's shirt.

Knox's jaw clenches, his eyes flashing with fury, but he steps back and gives them room. I know how he feels. It's just how I felt in the car when he took over compressions. He knows Trask can help Gage more than he can right now, but stepping away from his friend as he lies dying on a table has to be one of the hardest things he's ever done.

"You four," Trask barks as he tears open Gage's shirt, glancing over at the rest of us as Knox moves over to join us. "Get out. I don't need you hovering over us."

No. I have to see. I have to know.

My feet don't want to move, and I can practically feel the reluctance radiating from the rest of the Kings. But whatever their relationship with Trask is, they must trust him, because they don't push back against his order. Priest puts a hand on the small of my back and guides me out of the room and into the open area we passed through when we came in.

A few flickering fluorescent lights are on overhead now, and the crates make a sort of makeshift waiting area, but no one sits down.

Knox starts pacing, all nervous energy the way he usually is. There's nothing to hit right now, and no one he can lash out at. It's not like he can go find Alec and take him down tonight, so all he can do is wear a path in the floor as he moves restlessly.

Priest leans against the wall, staring blankly ahead. His face is impossible to read, and I don't know if he's just got that emotionless mask dialed up to an eleven, or if I'm just too out of it to interpret his expression well.

Ash is closest to me, and when I glance over at him, he's got a pen in his hand, twirling it aimlessly between his fingers as he gazes into the middle distance.

We're all wrecked.

Worry hovers above us like a cloud of poisonous gas, making the space feel too small. I want to get out of here, to burst back into the surgical suite and see what's happening with my own eyes. But I can't afford to piss Trask off or distract him. He's the only thing still standing between Gage and death.

There's nothing any of the rest of us can do. We're stuck out here while Gage is in there, fighting for his life.

My mind goes through so many horrible thoughts as I stare at the closed doors of the surgical room.

What if Gage dies? What if Trask can't save him?

I can just picture him coming out, shaking his head and saying he's sorry, but there wasn't anything he could do. Gage was too far gone, had lost too much blood, whatever.

My heart feels like it's going to shatter just thinking about that. It's hard to remember the time when I thought of Gage as my enemy. Now, it feels like if I lose him, I'm going to die too.

I feel a wave of grief from that thought, and right on its heels is a rush of anger. How the fuck could he do this to me? How could he stand there, holding that gun, and look me in the eye, knowing what he was going to do? Going to make *me* do?

He said he'd rather die than live in a world without me in it, but where does that leave me? Will I have to live in a world without him in it, guilt eating away at me like acid every day?

Ash is speaking, I realize. I've been so lost in my tumultuous thoughts that I missed the beginning of what he said, but I snap my mind back into

focus for long enough to listen. He's talking to Knox, who's flexing and clenching his fingers as he paces.

"Trask can do this," Ash murmurs, his voice strained. "He's always come through for us before. He knows his shit, and he's one of the best out there. You know he is."

"This is different," Knox shoots back, running a hand over his wild dark hair. "This is more than just a matter of a few stitches."

"Do you come to him a lot?" I ask, trying to focus on something other than the crushing weight of my emotions. "This Trask guy?"

Priest nods. "Yeah. He's been our go-to guy for a while. We come to him whenever there's something we can't patch up ourselves. An injury too big for us to deal with at home. He gives us shit, but he gets the job done."

"He's good," Ash insists. "Really fucking good." He looks over at me, still twirling the pen between his fingers. It's practically a blur as it whirls through the air, an outward representation of the adrenaline that's probably pouring through him. "He lost his medical license a while back because of some stupid bullshit, so he works under the table now. But he's great at what he does. It'll be okay."

I try to take comfort from his words, and from the way he sounds so sure. They trust this man and have history with him. They wouldn't have brought Gage here if they thought Trask couldn't help him, so I have to believe that the man inside the surgical suite has the skills to bring Gage back from the brink.

Maybe it'll all be alright, like Ash says.

But even though I try to cling to that small shred of hope, all I can really think about is Gage putting the gun in my hand. The way his finger pressed against mine on the trigger, making me fire the bullet into his body.

It's as if those few seconds of my life have been imprinted into my muscle memory. I don't just recall it in my mind's eye. I can *feel* it in my body. I can still feel the way his body jerked from the force of the shot, the way the gun kicked back in my hand. I can see all that blood blooming, see the way he fell to the dock like dead weight.

And no amount of reassurances from Ash will ever be able to chase those images out of my mind.

RIVER

ALL WE CAN DO IS WAIT, so that's what we do.

We wait.

And wait.

And wait.

Time still feels a little fucked up for me, so I have no idea how long it actually takes, but it feels like forever. The minutes just keep stretching, and my eyes keep going to the door that separates us from the surgery room and whatever's happening to Gage in there. It's almost like I'm trying to will the door open with my mind, but the fucking thing stays shut.

Knox is still pacing, and the longer it takes for us to get any word from Trask, the more restless he seems. He has a wild look in his dark eyes, the one that says he really wants to kill someone. Maim someone. Torture someone.

But there's no one to go after, and even if there were, I know he wants to be here, not out hunting some person down. None of us are doing anything particularly useful in this little space, but it still feels like we all need to be here. As if somehow our collective desire for Gage to make it through will filter into the other room and force death to release its grip on him. So he's just struggling with it.

Priest seems to be alternating between being blank and being flooded with fear and heavy emotions. Sometimes I look at him and his hands are clenched so tightly together that I imagine his bones are aching. I want to do something to ease his inner turmoil, but I don't know what. There's not much I can do for any of them in the state I'm in now, just as fucked up about this as they all are.

Gage is their friend. Their brother. Losing him would be like cutting a limb off.

For Ash's part, he's the one doing the most to try to take care of everyone. He can't cook a meal like he'd probably do if we were back at the house, so he's just... hovering. He comes over and strokes a hand down my back, and although I'm aware of the gesture, I barely feel it.

I don't lean into his touch like I normally would, and I don't jerk away from him either. I just stand there, feeling like my body is slowly turning into stone, heavy and numb.

"It's going to be okay," he murmurs again, putting feeling behind it. I can't tell if he's trying to convince me or himself, but either way, I don't respond. I don't know what to say.

I just keep staring at the door, waiting and hoping and trying not to let the demons clawing at the back of my mind take over entirely.

"Tonight was fucked up," Knox growls out of nowhere after a bit. "We walked right into that shit. We just—" He breaks off, shaking his head as he clenches his inked hands into fists.

There's not much more to say than that, really. We did walk right into it.

Agent Carter did too I guess, and I spare a second to think about the onetime FBI agent, who's definitely dead in the water.

"It's—" Priest's voice is low and raspy, and he only gets the one word out before he stops talking, shaking his head too.

There's a lot to unpack about the shit that went down tonight. A lot that we need to figure out. But we can't have that conversation now. It's too tense. Too raw. None of us can really talk about it, at least not beyond the fact that Gage's life is hanging in the balance. Nothing else matters until we know that Gage is going to be okay.

None of the other shit is going to go away until we deal with it, but that's just going to have to wait.

Knox curses under his breath and kicks at a crate. Luckily it's empty, and it cracks down the middle as it goes skidding across the concrete floor.

"Knox," Ash says, giving him a firm look.

It's the kind of look Gage would have given him, telling him to stand down and not cause trouble, but it doesn't work as well from Ash. His handsome features don't have the same hard edge to them that Gage's do, so he can't quite muster up the same expression.

Knox just grunts under his breath and goes back to his pacing.

“Knox.” It’s Priest this time, and he’s not any closer to how Gage would have said it, but he has more authority in a way. Plus, he gives Knox a look that conveys a lot in a single flash of his light blue eyes, and that makes Knox sigh, the exhale messy and rough.

“Whatever,” Knox mumbles under his breath. He shoves his hands into his still damp pockets, and I can see that they’re shaking slightly.

None of us are okay right now. We’re all dangling by a thread, clinging on to the hope that this might not end in tragedy, that we might all get to go home together and we won’t have to bury someone who means so fucking much to all of us.

I swallow hard against the bile that burns the back of my throat. I’ve lost too much lately. After getting Hannah back and then having her die in my arms, I can’t even think about adding Gage to that list.

Finally, after what feels like hours, the door to the surgery room opens. Light spills out into the waiting area, and we all immediately straighten up, our heads whipping toward the door. Trask comes out a second later, wiping his hands on a towel.

My heart is in my throat, and it feels like it’s strangling me, making it impossible to draw in a breath. Time slows down to an even more agonizing crawl, and everything feels like it’s happening in slow motion.

The weathered older man looks around at us, and there’s a second where I just know if this man tells me Gage is dead, I’m going to kill him. I don’t care that he’s worked with the guys for however long, and I don’t care that he’s on our side. I’ll kill him, just for breaking my fucking heart.

Judging from the look on Knox’s face, he’d be right there with me, and that makes me feel a little better, at least.

Trask has to know that giving bad news to people like us, with hair trigger tempers and a fierce sense of justice when it comes to the people we care about, is a dangerous game, but he doesn’t even bat an eye. He doesn’t seem intimidated at all, so he clearly works with criminals and those kinds of types a lot.

“Well?” Ash demands, speaking for all of us.

“He’s going to make it,” Trask says, getting right to the point. “It was hairy as fuck there for a bit, and he lost a lot of blood. But we gave him a transfusion, and that should help. The bullet went right into his abdomen, but luckily, it missed the major organs and his spine. There’s some internal

damage, and he's not going to be running around with you for a while, but he won't be paralyzed."

Trask's words wash over me, and it takes me a second to process them. But as I do, I feel like muscles I didn't even know I had unknot. My shoulders slump with relief, and I can feel the shared emotion sweeping through all of us. Priest relaxes, his chiseled features turning a little less stony and blank. Ash sighs out loud and puts a hand over his face, like he's about to break down into tears of relief. Knox stops looking so hunched and haunted and ready to break someone's neck.

And me... I listen to what Trask is saying, trying absorb it all.

It's good news. Gage is alive, and he's going to be okay. The worst thing didn't happen, and even the things that would have been less bad, but still pretty fucking devastating, didn't happen either.

He's going to be okay.

But still.

My mind keeps flashing back to my finger on the trigger of that gun. The way it felt when it fired right into Gage's body. Shooting him. Almost killing him.

Guilt and anger roil inside me, making me feel sick with it. It's a nasty cocktail, sour and bitter at the same time, and I have to swallow down the coppery taste that coats the back of my throat.

"Can we see him?" Knox asks, and he sounds more vulnerable than I think I've ever heard him sound before.

Trask nods. "He's awake, but out of it. No roughhousing." He gives Knox a stern look like it's something he's had to say to him before. It wouldn't surprise me if it is.

Knox just makes a noise like a grunt, and we all head into the little room.

It's a lot brighter than it was in the waiting area, and it smells sterile, like antiseptic and rubbing alcohol.

Gage is lying on the operating table where we left him, with Trask's assistant standing nearby. His shirt is gone, and there's a large bandage wrapped around his midsection. His skin is pale and he looks like shit, but the gentle beeping of the machine at his side proves that he's alive.

So does the rising and falling of his chest when I look at him.

My heart pounds heavily against my ribs, a stark contrast to the gentle beep that times Gage's heartbeat. I have to swallow hard, again and again,

and I don't really know what I'm feeling.

We stand there in silence for a few moments, then Gage slowly opens his eyes. Their usual sharp, vivid green color is dulled by whatever Trask gave him to get him through the surgery.

He looks worn down and exhausted, like he's been fighting for his life, and that just makes me feel even worse.

The others don't waste any time, snapping into motion the second they see their brother's eyes open. Ash and Knox make their way over to the bed as soon as they realize that Gage is awake, and Priest is right behind them.

He's holding himself all tightly again, his face completely impassive, like he doesn't want Gage to see how worried he was.

"You're an asshole," Knox says by way of greeting, cocking his brows as he looks down at the man on the table. "What the fuck were you thinking, you son of a bitch?"

The wide, relieved grin on his face takes some of the sting out of his words, and he reaches out to tap the back of Gage's hand, being careful of the IV taped to the back of it.

"What he means to say is, we're glad you're okay," Ash follows up, rolling his eyes.

Priest nods and lets out a shaky sigh. "Yes. We are."

Gage just nods, too out of it and tired to keep up with the banter, probably.

I didn't move when the others did, so I'm still standing near the doorway, watching this all play out. My limbs still feel heavy and sluggish, and the emotions roiling in my chest are... I don't even know.

I want to rush into Gage's arms and hold him. I want to kiss every inch of his face and make sure he knows that I'm so fucking glad he's alive. But all of a sudden, I *can't*. I feel stuck to the spot, unable to move toward the bed.

I feel stiff and cold, like I've been dunked in a tub of ice water or something, and my limbs won't respond to what I want to do.

Trask is standing near me, so I look to him instead. That's easier than staring at Gage laid out on the table.

"You said he won't be running around after the others for a while," I begin. "But he will recover fully, right? He'll be able to live a normal life?"

"Assuming he doesn't do anything stupid like get himself shot again," Trask mutters, grimacing slightly. He sounds a bit resigned, as if he knows

there's a chance Gage or one of the others will end up right back here in the future, and it makes me wonder what kinds of things he's seen in his line of work. "He should be fine. But he'll need to rest. *Actually* rest, not drive getaway cars or whatever else he might be inclined to do."

"What can we do to help him recover?"

"If this were an actual hospital, I'd be keeping him here for a few days so I can monitor everything. But this being what it is, a lot of the aftercare will fall to all of you. Like I said, he needs rest. He'll need fluids and he'll need to eat, but in small doses. Make sure the wound doesn't get infected. The dressings will need to be changed, and the wound will need to be looked at every day. If something seems off about it, bring him back to me. You know what signs of infection look like?"

I nod. I have enough experience patching myself up to be able to tell that much.

Trask looks me over, like he's judging whether or not to believe me. In the end, he just nods back. "Good. Keep an eye on it, then."

I take in everything he's saying, not looking at Gage. I can't look at him.

"That's all I can do for you," Trask continues.

"It's enough," Priest says. He steps away from Gage's side and gives Trask a nod. "Thank you."

"It's what I do." Trask shrugs, seeming to mean those words. I have no idea what he did that made him lose his medical license, but it's clear that this is his true calling—whether he's performing surgeries on patients in a hospital or criminals in the back room of an abandoned building.

"We'll pay cash like always," Priest tells him. "And we'll pay extra for complete confidentiality. None of this gets out to anyone. *Anyone.*"

Trask frowns, his craggy face creasing as he purses his lips. "Complete confidentiality is a guarantee with every job I do. You know that, Priest. I wouldn't still be in business if it wasn't. You don't have to buy my silence."

He sounds almost offended by the implication that it would be otherwise, and that makes me believe his words even more. Whatever code this man lives by, I believe he'll keep our visit here a secret.

He and Priest speak for a moment, making arrangements for the payment. We didn't bring the kind of money that this visit will cost with us tonight, since we only expected to be meeting with Agent Carter for a quick info exchange at the docks.

Once they've sorted that out, Trask nods and turns his attention back to Gage. "You can go. But take it easy. I mean it."

"We'll make sure he doesn't try to do cartwheels down the stairs," Ash says, some of his usual teasing demeanor returning. It sounds a bit forced and awkward, but it's better than the ragged strain I heard in his voice earlier.

"I'm so reassured," the doctor deadpans back.

Stepping back toward the operating table, he joins his assistant in unhooking Gage from the machines and the IV. He repeats what he already told me about Gage's care to the rest of the guys and then steps back, declaring Gage officially discharged.

Knox moves in to help Gage up, and the combination of the drugs and the exhaustion mean that Knox is half carrying the other man as we head back to the car.

Ash keeps up a stream of low chatter the whole way home, even though Gage is mostly too out of it to hear him. It's his way of showing how relieved he is that all of us made it out of Trask's building alive, I know that, but I still check out from the sound, unable to focus on any of it.

I have no idea what part of Detroit Trask's operation is located in, but I feel like I blink and we're back home. We pull into the garage and pile out of the car, and Knox basically carries Gage inside and up the stairs to his room. He helps Gage into clothes that aren't cut up and soaked through with blood and grimy water, and the three able-bodied Kings move as a team to get their friend into bed and settled.

Watching Gage get cleaned up reminds me that I'm covered in blood myself. My clothes are stiff with dried blood and from drying on my body after I plunged into the river after Gage. I feel cold and filthy, and suddenly I need to be clean more than anything else in the world.

"I'm going to shower," I mutter to the room at large, not waiting for one of them to respond before I slip away.

I go into my room and shut the door, peeling off my clothes as I make my way to the bathroom and kicking them away from me. I crank the shower water as hot as I can stand it and then get in, letting the spray pound against my skin.

Alone for the first time since all of this went down, I stand in the small, steamy space, trying to breathe through it all. Even over the sound of the

shower, my breaths sound loud, echoing around me, reverberating back into my ears and ratcheting up the emotions that crash through me.

I keep replaying the scene in my head, over and over again, until I feel like I'm choking on the guilt.

We were backed into a corner, desperate and out of options, but still.

Still.

When I open my eyes, I can see the bright red splashes of Gage's blood washing off my body as the water pours over me and swirling down the drain.

Looking at it makes me feel sick to my stomach, and my breath hitches in my chest. I lift my hands to grab for the bottle of body wash so I can scrub at my skin, and they're shaking so badly that I almost drop the bottle and have to scramble to catch it.

I gasp for breath for a second, dark spots crawling around the edges of my vision. It feels like I'm about to tip over into a panic attack, giving into the hurricane of emotions swirling through me.

I curl one hand into a fist, making my nails bite into my palm until it hurts. Through sheer force of will, I shove it all down and away, refusing to crumble right now. Not like this.

I drag in several deep breaths, getting control of myself.

Numbness washes back over me, and I let that win instead.

ASH

WITH GAGE SETTLED in bed and as comfortable as we can make him, the rest of us split up to go get cleaned up too. We're all splattered with blood, sweaty and exhausted and drained from the way this night took a fucking turn.

It feels like forever ago that we called a friend to come keep an eye on Cody so we could go meet Gage and River to talk to Agent Cater, and I double back to the room we put the little boy in to make sure everything is okay.

Shit got supremely out of hand tonight, but there's still a little kid in our house, depending on us.

"You can head out now," I tell Brooke, the woman we called, giving her the most charming smile I can muster. I'm pretty sure it looks more like a grimace, but whatever. It's the best I can do. "We're all home for the night."

She gets up from the chair at Cody's bedside and gives me a nod as I slip her several bills. "Okay."

Her gaze drops briefly to my bloodstained, dirty clothes, but she doesn't ask questions or even comment on it, which doesn't surprise me. She knows better than to dig into other people's business, even ours.

Brooke has been in our circle for years, and we trust her, but I'm still glad she didn't see us bring Gage into the house. River was supposed to have killed him tonight, and it will be in all of our best interests to make sure Alec Beckham keeps believing that.

"Have a good night," she says softly, then slips from the room. I hear her padding down the hallway toward the stairs, a few moments later, I pick up the distant sound of the front door closing as she leaves.

Cody is still sleeping, curled up and clutching a stuffed animal, oblivious to everything going on the way only kids get to be. If they're lucky, I guess.

But that's one less thing to worry about, so I'll take it as a win for tonight.

I close the door to his room, head downstairs to lock up after Brooke, then go back up to my own room to put on some clean clothes.

It's a relief to be at home, all of us, and to be able to change and smoke a damn cigarette. It's not like Gage is completely out of the woods yet, but he's alive, and that's so much fucking better than things could've gone.

It was a rough night.

Well, I guess *last* night was a rough night, since it's technically morning by now, and has been for a while. It's creeping toward four in the fucking morning according to the time on my phone.

That explains the bone deep exhaustion pulling at me, making me move slower as I blow smoke out the window and clean myself up.

Knox and River got the worst of the blood on them from doing CPR on Gage after they got him out of the water, but we're all a mess after everything that's happened.

As my thoughts turn to the beautiful silver-haired woman, my stomach clenches. I can tell something's off with her. She didn't go up to Gage back at Trask's place. The rest of us couldn't wait to be able to talk to him and see for ourselves that he was alright, but River hung back and barely looked at him.

She basically fled the room like it was on fire once we got back home too.

I don't know what the deal is with that, but I'm worried.

She's been through a lot lately, and it seems like the hits just keep on coming. First her sister died, then there was all that shit with Julian Maduro taking Priest hostage and torturing him just a few days ago. Now this. Agent Carter getting taken out right in front of us was bad enough, but Gage is one of ours. And we almost lost him tonight.

I can only imagine what that's doing to River.

Is she going to try to pull away from all of us now? Buckling under the weight of everything? I guess I can understand the impulse to just shut down after almost losing Gage. The night her sister died, it was like River wasn't even there anymore. Just her body, an empty shell, with no light or

life in it at all. She takes losing people hard, especially when she feels like she has some responsibility for it.

But it's too fucking late for her to turn her back and pull away from the four of us at this point. She can't walk away from us. We need her, and she's a part of us.

That's just how it is.

How it *always* fucking will be.

I stub out the last remnants of my cigarette and reach for the coin that I keep on the nightstand next to my ash tray. It's always nice to have it there to fiddle with when I feel like I need to keep my hands moving.

And right now, I need the soothing motion of playing with something before I head back to Gage's room.

I gaze at the coin as I flip it back and forth over my knuckles for a few minutes, letting the almost hypnotic way the light glints off of it as it moves soothe me. Then I roll my shoulders and step back out into the hallway.

River is in the corridor too. I pass by her as I head toward Gage's room, and I catch her arm before she can walk past me. She stops, but her eyes don't lift from the floor to look at me. She's clean and changed, but she doesn't look that much better than she did when we were at Trask's. She still seems pale and drawn, like she's going through the motions, but not really here.

"River." I say her name, and she glances up and then away almost immediately. "What's up? Is everything okay?"

Her throat bobs as she swallows hard and then nods.

"Yeah," she says, but her voice sounds raspy and a little hollow. "Yeah, it's fine. I just... I want to figure out what the fuck to do from here. How to deal with Alec and the fact that I've got no choice now but to join his fucking secret society. I hate that I have to be part of anything he does, when *he's* the one who orchestrated me and Hannah being taken by those fuckers who held us captive in the first place."

I nod and let out a rough sigh. I fucking despise Alec. Not just for the position he put River in tonight, forcing her to either shoot to kill one of us or watch *all* of us be taken out by his men, but also for what he did to her before we even knew her. That's some sick, twisted shit, and just being reminded of it makes me want to find him and make sure he knows pain exactly like the kind he put River and Hannah through.

I can understand how Knox feels most of the time now. I've never been as into torture as he is, but when it comes to Alec, I could get pretty creative in the ways I'd like to make him suffer.

But at the same time, I know that being forced to join the Kyrio Society isn't the full story of what's bothering River. As fucked up as she is about knowing Alec's role in her past trauma, this is more than that.

This is about River and Gage.

It's too late—or early, I guess—to press harder right now. It's been a long fucking night, and we're all tired.

So I just give her arm a squeeze, trying to convey a lot of things with that little gesture. Then we continue down the hall and join everyone else as we gather again in Gage's room.

As soon as we step inside, it's the same thing as before. River barely glances at the bed, and the couple of times she does, she seems to flinch and draw away even more, retreating a safe distance away.

There's something haunted about the way she looks, the way she's almost hunched in on herself one second, and then blank and detached the next.

Gage is conscious, but it's clear that he's still hazy from the drugs Trask gave him. He blinks slowly, looking around at all of us as we gather in the room.

"Knox," he says, managing to get the word out without slurring it too badly. "Help me sit up."

Knox goes to do so, but Priest puts a hand out.

"You shouldn't be moving around too much," he warns.

Gage huffs an irritated breath, and in this moment, he seems so much like his usual self that it's almost possible to forget that he almost died tonight.

"I can sit up, Priest," he mumbles. "It's not that fucking strenuous."

"You can talk lying down too," Priest fires back.

Knox looks between them for a second and then steps back, grinning at Gage. "I guess he's right. You look like shit anyway, so you shouldn't be straining yourself. If anybody needs their beauty rest right now, it's you."

We all laugh at that, even though it's not the funniest thing that's ever been said. We're clearing the air, banishing some of the thick tension that's hovered over us all night. Even Gage manages a smile as he rolls his eyes

lightly, but River looks like she's barely paying attention to the conversation. If she is, she doesn't take part in it.

"All that aside," Priest says, his expression turning serious as he crosses his arms. "Tonight was a shit show from start to finish."

"We couldn't have known what was going to go down," I put in. "We've had dealings with Agent Carter before, and we had no reason to suspect he was into the shady shit he was involved with. And Alec Beckham. Shit, I didn't see that coming."

Knox cracks his knuckles, baring his teeth. "I would've snapped that fucker's neck at his own goddamn party that night if I'd known."

"He's been pulling the strings this whole time," I point out. "Maybe he would have seen you coming. Besides that, he's obviously incredibly well protected. He's rich enough that he can afford a massive security force, and it's clear he has one."

"That's the part that gets me," Priest says. He shakes his head, causing a small lock of blond hair to fall over his forehead. "The way he's been pulling strings. He's been behind so much of this shit from day one. We spent all that time trying to figure out who put Ivan's body on display at the gala all those weeks ago, and it was *Alec* the whole time."

"He had eyes on Ivan," Gage murmurs roughly. I can tell it's taking him effort to speak, but I don't say anything. "He was watching him closely because he thought he was the rat in the Kyrio Society."

"That's another fucking thing!" Knox bursts out loudly. I shoot him a look because there's still a kid asleep down the hall, and he makes a face but lowers his voice. "Agent Carter was trying to use us to help him get out of the society, and he just fucked us instead. I knew there was something shitty about that asshole."

This is usually the part where River would pipe up about how Knox just didn't like Carter because the FBI agent always seemed too interested in her, setting off Knox's possessive instincts. But she doesn't say anything. When I look at her, she just shrugs a shoulder and then shifts her gaze back down at the floor.

It's not like her, and it's a sign of just how out of it she really is. But I'm happy to bring it up in her stead.

"To be fair, you were totally wrong about everything to do with Carter. Sure, you didn't like him, and you were right not to. But you had no idea he was in this secret society and trying to get out."

“I wasn’t totally wrong,” Knox says back. “He *was* interested in River.”

“Yeah, but not to fuck her or anything. He just wanted her to help him. That’s different.”

“Either way,” Priest cuts in, raising his voice a little over ours. “Alec was keeping tabs on us. He was keeping tabs on River and Carter and Julian. He knew too much. He saw River’s plan to take Julian down, and he was impressed with what she was able to accomplish. Apparently, the things he saw her do to Julian convinced him she’d be a perfect member of his secret society.”

“I don’t want to be in the fucking society,” River snaps. We all look at her, and her jaw is clenched, just like her hands at her sides. “I don’t want any part of that shit. I didn’t want—”

She glances over at Gage, then immediately looks away again.

I reach over and put a hand on her shoulder, and although she tenses, she doesn’t jerk away.

“No one’s blaming you for what happened tonight,” I tell her. “We were *all* backed into a corner. It’s not like we had options or time to come up with a plan or anything.”

Priest nods at that. “It’s not your fault. But at the same time, there’s not really a choice here. You’re in the society now, and if you back out and decline his invitation, then Alec will just kill you. He clearly doesn’t like loose ends, so he’ll probably come after the rest of us too.”

It’s a heavy point, and I can tell it hits home when River flinches. We know too much now to be left alive if Alec can’t get what he wants. And he clearly wants River as the newest addition to his little group.

“Speaking of...” Knox chews on his lower lip, looking thoughtful. “We should make absolutely *sure* Alec thinks Gage is dead. That was the deal, right? One of us had to die for her to join? So if he finds out that one of us didn’t die, then he might take back the deal. Then we’re all walking corpses.”

“Yeah. You’re right about that. We need a plan,” Gage says, looking around at us.

Knox grins at him. “Don’t worry about it. This part, I actually do have a plan for. This is my area of expertise. I’ll find a substitute body and dump it in the river, so the cops will find two bodies just like Alec is expecting them to. They’ll probably come to the exact conclusion that he wanted them to, especially if he’s got people in his pocket on the force who can nudge the

investigation in a certain way. So if he decides to follow up at all by checking police reports, he'll think he's in the clear."

"But they'll ID the bodies, right?" I ask. "And one of them won't be Gage's. You got a plan for that?"

"Of course I do." Knox presses a hand to his chest as if he's offended by the question. Then he waggles his eyebrows. "A lot can happen to a body once it gets dumped in a river that might make it impossible to identify. I'll just make sure 'Gage's' body has been through enough shit that no one will be able to tell who it belongs to."

I make a face. "Good. Gross, but good."

Gage nods, grimacing as he reaches up to rub at his forehead. He looks like he's about to pass out any moment, and I know we need to wrap this little meeting up soon. There's no way we'll solve all of this tonight, but whether he likes it or not, he's gonna have to rest before long.

"Alright. We'll get a substitute body," he says. "You don't think Alec has any idea that I survived?"

"I don't think so," Priest replies, speaking slowly as if thinking while he talks. "His entire security force left with him, and we waited until they were gone to pull you from the river. We kept an eye out for a tail, and I contacted Harv to have him wipe any traffic or security cameras that might've picked us up on the way to Trask's place. As long as two bodies are discovered by the cops, I think we'll have covered our bases pretty well on that."

"Alright." Gage nods, shifting his gaze to Knox. "Do whatever you need to do, then."

"We need to get Cody away from all of this," River says, speaking up suddenly. "I don't want him to get caught in the cross fire. I *can't* let him get hurt in all of this. He has to go someplace safe until we can deal with Alec."

I think back to when we were at that cabin up in the Ouachita Mountains, talking about how once the Julian mess was dealt with, we could all go on vacation or something.

It feels like that happened a long-ass time ago, and maybe to someone else entirely. Now there's another fucked up, dangerous thing we have to deal with, so the promise of vacation and time off to relax isn't any closer to being a reality.

But that's life, I guess. *Our* lives, especially.

We have to come up with a plan for dealing with Alec, and we still need to decide what's going to happen long term with Cody, but for now, this is a start. And that's going to have to be good enough.

"Knox," Gage says, and it's clear that he's starting to get too tired to keep talking. But he's still trying to be in charge, because that's just how he is.

Knox nods, understanding what Gage wants without him having to say more than his name. "I know. I gotta move quick if this is going to work. I'll go now."

No one asks Knox where he's going to get the body from. I don't know, and honestly, I don't want to know. There are some parts of Knox's skill set and expertise that are just better left unknown and unsaid.

River slips out of the room as quickly as she can once the impromptu meeting wraps up, heading down the hall to her own room before anyone can stop her. Priest stays behind to make sure Gage has everything he needs, and I follow Knox downstairs.

"This is..." I start, not quite sure how to phrase what I'm trying to say.

"Fucked," Knox supplies. "Really fucking fucked."

I nod because yeah, that actually covers it pretty well. "We've gotten into a lot of messes before, but this feels bigger than any of that. This isn't some small-time drug dealer or even someone like Julian Maduro. This is one of the most wealthy and influential men in the city, and he has his eye on us. Gage almost died tonight, and honestly, it feels like there's a good chance none of us will make it out of this one alive."

It's another heavy thing to say, and I can feel the exhaustion and fear and frustration of everything that's happened weighing on me.

"I know." Knox scrubs a hand over the back of his neck and tilts his head to one side, making the tattoos that creep up from the neckline of his shirt contort a little. "It's big. Bigger than anything we've ever tackled probably. We don't know what Alec knows or what he's got at his disposal. We don't know what he wants with River, ultimately. It's big and it's fucked."

"Excellent pep talk, Knox," I deadpan. "You should be a motivational speaker."

"Fuck off, I wasn't done. The point is, would you change where we stand if you could? Would you change anything that's happened between us and River? Before she came into our lives, we didn't have to deal with this

much shit, right? So if you could go back, knowing all of this was coming, would you let her walk out of our lives that morning when she tried to escape the basement?"

It's a big question, but I don't even really have to think about it. Because she's worth it. She's worth this and so much more.

She's worth every-fucking-thing.

"No," I tell Knox. "I wouldn't change it."

He grins and reaches out to lightly punch me in the arm. "Me either. So we'll deal with it."

With that, he leaves, heading out to do his part in all of this.

Standing in the living room, I watch him as he backs his car out of the driveway, worry churning in my gut.

I wouldn't change a thing. I meant that.

But that doesn't mean we're not all hurtling toward ruin.

RIVER

GAGE HAS his arms around me, holding me close for a moment. He smells so familiar, and he feels so warm, his familiar scent tickling my nostrils. I let myself relax, sinking into his body.

He's strong and sure against me, and it calms the frantic galloping of my heart just to be here with him like this.

I look up into his face, but he's not smiling the way I expect him to be. Instead, he looks grim.

He looks determined.

He looks... sad.

His full lips curve downward slightly, and there's something pinched and tight at the corners of his forest green eyes.

I open my mouth to ask what's wrong, what happened, but before I can get any words out, he's taking my hand and squeezing it. He mouths something, but I can't make it out.

I feel cold metal, and when I look down, Gage is wrapping my hand around a gun. Something shudders through me, a feeling of revulsion and fear, and I try to pull away, desperate to not let him curl my finger around the trigger.

But he does. He presses the barrel of the gun to his stomach and he looks me right in the eyes. He smiles one last time, and then I feel my finger moving, pulling the trigger, shooting him.

The gunshot is loud, and it echoes around us. In the moments before this, it was like we were standing in darkness, but now I can make out a warehouse around us—the same one where Julian held Priest.

Gage hits the floor with a thud, and blood seeps from his wound, spreading quickly and staining the concrete.

I stagger backward, horrified, dropping the gun like it burned me.

Another gunshot rings out, and I whip around to see Julian Maduro standing at the entrance to the warehouse, his features twisted into a mask of anger and hate.

The look on his face—and everything about this moment—is familiar.

Too fucking familiar.

I whip my head around in time to see Hannah dropping to the ground too, her hand trembling as she reaches for me.

Julian laughs, and when I tear my gaze away from my dying sister to look back up at him, it's not Julian anymore. He's lying dead on the ground instead, and a polished loafer kicks him away.

In the place where he was standing is Alec Beckham. The devil come to life. He shakes his head, disappointment passing over his features as he gives me a half smile.

“Did you truly think that was enough, River?” he asks, sounding the way someone would if they were scolding a wayward child. “Did you think you’d sacrificed enough?” His expression hardens, his voice growing cold. “Again.”

No. Please, fuck, no.

I can't get my mouth to move or form words, but I watch in horror as Priest, Knox, and Ash line up in front of me. They all have that same look on their faces that Gage did. Grim determination and sadness.

The warehouse shifts around us, and we're on the darkened dock again, water lapping gently at the supports beneath us. Gage is right there on the edge, his blood staining the wood now instead of the warehouse floor.

“Do it,” Alec demands, his voice cutting through the night air. “Do it or they'll die anyway. You can't save them now. Any of them.”

My arm feels like it's moving of its own volition, my muscles ignoring the commands my mind is screaming at them. I can't stop myself, no matter how hard I try. Looking each of my men in the eye, I raise the gun that's somehow back in my hand.

I aim for the heart and pull the trigger again and again and again.

None of them try to stop me. None of them curse at me or tell me I'm a failure for not finding another way out. None of them tell me they wish they'd never met me, or that I should be the one to die instead. They just

hold my gaze as I kill them... and then they don't see anything else, falling one by one.

Their crumpled forms lie on the dock, shadowy shapes sprawled out next to Gage's body.

Still wearing that smile that doesn't reach his eyes, Alec walks over and kicks their bodies one by one into the water. I hear the splashes as they fall, and each one sounds so final. There's an accusation in them, somehow, like even the damn water knows it's my fault all of this has happened.

I raise my arm, the gun still in my hand. My whole body is trembling, shaking from what I've had to do and what I've seen. I feel the weight of it crushing down on me, making it hard to breathe, but I drag in air anyway, needing to steady myself for one last shot.

I pull the trigger, aiming right for Alec...

But the gun just clicks uselessly.

Empty.

I used my last bullet on someone I cared about, and now there are no more left for my enemy.

Alec just smiles smugly, shaking his head.

"Looks like you ran out of bullets, little lamb," he says, and the mockery in his voice cuts right to my core.

I throw the gun to the side because I don't fucking need it. I can kill this fucker with my bare hands if I have to. Rage and desperation build even higher inside me, and I launch myself at Alec, ready to claw at him and bash his fucking head in.

He doesn't run away like I half expect him to. Instead, he grapples me, meeting me head on. He grabs my wrists, twisting them away from his face, and no matter how hard I struggle, I can't get purchase or shake him off.

He smirks, his dark gray eyes glowing with smug satisfaction in the dim light. It makes me want to kill him even more, but I feel almost paralyzed in his hold.

Alec wrestles me away from him and then shoves me backward. I didn't realize how close we were to the edge of the dock, but there's nothing to catch me as I wheel back, losing my balance. Just empty air and the cold, dark churning of the water below.

I go down in what feels like slow motion, arms pinwheeling, trying to regain my balance so I can save myself. But there's nothing to hold on to,

nothing to steady myself, and I land hard, slamming into the water with another final splash before sinking beneath the surface.

It's so dark.

So dark and so cold.

My chest burns, my lungs screaming out for air. My limbs feel almost too heavy to move, but I know if I give in, I'll die down here.

Something cold and slimy touches my arm, and I yank away from it, whirling in the murky water, trying to see what it is.

At first, I can't make it out, but then I recognize a face, and my heart lurches.

Knox.

His strong features are pale and almost ghostly, floating right next to me. He's dead for sure, just bobbing there under the water, moving closer with each surge of the water we're in.

I try to get away, but my path is blocked by another body, floating up from the dark depths below.

Priest.

Before I know it, I'm surrounded by bodies. My men, my sister. They float around me, eerie and terrifying, the only thing I can see in the dark water.

The darkness distorts their features, making them shadowy and horrifying. It almost looks like their faces were bashed in, or like the darkness that shadows them is blood, running over their faces and reminding me that it's my fault they're in here in the first place. My fault they're dead.

I open my mouth, either to scream or to take in water so I can join them. But before the cold, harsh water can rush into my mouth—

I jolt awake, sitting upright in my bed.

It takes a second for my eyes to adjust to the darkness in my room, and I glance around, my gaze darting over the shadows of my dresser and the bathroom door like they're hiding bodies that might lurch out and try to surround me again.

My heart is racing a mile a minute, and I'm covered in sweat and struggling to breathe. I feel like my windpipe is the size of a straw, and there's a faint rasping noise as I suck in small sips of air.

By the time I'm finally able to draw in a full breath, my pulse has started to settle a bit, and I can separate what's real from what's not more

easily.

It was just a nightmare.

That thought sinks into my bones, chasing away some of the dread from the dream.

But not all of it.

I wipe sweat from my face, and movement in the bed beside me alerts me that I'm not alone. When I look down, Priest is there, blinking groggily and very much alive, thank fuck. I was alone when I went to sleep, so he must have come in some time in the night.

"River," he murmurs. His voice is thick with sleep, and he reaches out for me. "Come here."

For a split second, I think about shrugging him off. My instinct when I feel as fucked up as I do right now is to shove everyone away, to harden the walls around my heart and retreat into myself. But then I have a flash of what his face looked like in the water, how pale and still he was as he hit the dock after I shot him in the dream, and I crumple, letting him pull me back down.

He strokes my hair lightly, and that's soothing enough that it pulls my mind away from the horrors that I saw in my sleep.

"You're okay," he whispers. "It was just a nightmare. I know how fucked up those can be, but whatever it was, it can't touch you now. You're fine. Everyone's fine."

I almost want to laugh at that, but it would come out strangled and bitter. Priest doesn't even have to ask to know that I was dreaming about the people I love dying, because that's just how things go with my nightmares these days. For as long as I can remember, honestly. My dreams have never been peaceful or easy, not since my sister and I were handed over to six monstrous men as payment for a debt that wasn't even ours.

It's also laughable because everyone's *not* fine. Gage is down the hall, sleeping off the worst of the meds Trask gave him because he almost died last night.

Just thinking about that makes me swallow past a lump in my throat, and I let out a messy sigh.

It's early morning, and the gray light of pre-dawn is starting to creep into the room. It was pretty late when we finally all went to bed, so I wasn't asleep for long at all.

Lying here with Priest makes it easier to shake off the worst of the nightmare, but I don't feel better. My body feels antsy, restless. Not right. I feel like I might crawl out of my skin, and every second that I stay still, it just gets worse.

So I end up wiggling out of Priest's hold and getting out of bed.

"River," he says again, half sitting up. "It's still basically the middle of the night. And I know what time you fell asleep. You need to get some rest."

He's right. I know that logically. Exhaustion is crawling through my limbs, making them feel like they weigh a ton, and fogging up my mind. But I also know that as soon as I close my eyes again, I'm just going to be right back in some horrible dream where something horrible is happening to someone I love, and I can't deal with that.

So I shake my head and grab a shirt, pulling it on. "I'm okay. And I'm up now, so it's fine."

It's a lie, and we probably both know that. But he doesn't stop me from easing the door open and stepping out into the hall. I can feel his gaze on me as I go, but he doesn't say anything, so I let my feet carry me down the hallway to Gage's room.

Last night, I could barely even bring myself to look at him, but now I have this burning need to make sure he's okay. To see that he's really alive, that him surviving the gunshot wasn't just some fucked up dream or something I hallucinated to cope with the horribleness of what really happened.

I open his bedroom door quietly, trying not to wake him up if he's sleeping. He's there in the room, right where we left him. One arm is bent over his stomach, resting probably right over the wound from the bullet, like he's trying to protect the places where he's most vulnerable, even while he's asleep.

I squint through the gray darkness until I'm sure I can make out the rising and falling of his chest, the proof that he's alive and breathing.

Relief crashes through me as my gaze tracks the small motion, and I step farther into the room. Those feelings that I've been holding back since we got the news that Gage was going to survive are right there, clawing at me and demanding to be felt.

There are so many of them, and they're all tangled up together. Relief and guilt and worry and sadness and anger and too many other things that I

can't even name. It's so fucking overwhelming, and I let a little of it come through, since it's quiet and Gage is asleep.

Rage at Alec for putting us in that position.

Relief that Gage survived.

Worry for the future and what this means for us.

My heart is beating faster than usual, and I don't know if it's from anger or fear, but I press a hand to my chest and imagine feeling Gage's own heartbeat like a lifeline. The proof that he's going to pull through this. That we're still in this together.

He stirs on the bed, and I freeze, waiting for him to go still again and sink back into sleep. But then his eyes open, and he blinks blearily at the ceiling for a second before turning his head on the pillow to look right at me.

Our eyes meet, and I slam the door on all those feelings churning in my chest almost immediately.

I just... I can't.

I can't.

Gage's eyes are cloudy with pain and sleep, but I know he's not so out of it that he hasn't registered that I'm here. He looks at me for a moment, not saying anything, and before he can open his mouth, I back out of the room and close the door behind me.

I lean against the heavy wood for a moment, keenly aware that it's the only thing separating me and Gage. He's so close, lying in the bed on the other side of this door. But even though he's only feet away from me, it feels like so much more than that. It feels like there's a chasm between us, and even though I'm the one who put it there, I don't know how to get across it.

Almost losing him fucked me up so badly. My emotions all feel dull and muted, and part of me knows that it's because if I allowed myself to feel them fully right now, they'd tear me apart like a hurricane shredding a house.

Going back to bed isn't an option. There's no fucking way I can fall asleep again right now, and even if I could, I wouldn't want to. So I press away from the door and head down the hall toward Cody's room. There's so much shit going on right now, so much that needs our attention, but there's still this little boy, my sister's son, who needs me.

I can't let him down just because I feel like I'm falling apart inside.

When I step into Cody's bedroom, he's already starting to wake up. He blinks at me and then looks around the room, like he's trying to get his bearings and figure out where he is. It must be hard for him, still adjusting to a new place. Both of his parents are dead, and Julian made it pretty damn clear that he didn't really want Cody around by sending him to that boarding school even though he's just a little kid.

"Hey," I say to him, my voice coming out raspy and low. I clear my throat and try to force a smile. "You're at our house. Remember? You've been staying with me and the guys. Ash, Priest, Knox... Gage."

Cody nods and sits up, still clutching at the stuffed animal we got him to sleep with.

"Morning, River," he mumbles and then looks around the room. "Is it morning?"

"Yeah, it is. Early, but that's okay."

He's kind of adorable when he's like this. His hair is messy from sleep, and he looks so young and innocent. He's been touched by so much death in his short life, whether he realizes it or not, but you'd never really know that to look at him.

There's a fierce part of me that wants to protect that innocence I see in him. Kids this young shouldn't have to know what loss and death feel like. They should be focused on playing and growing up, not dealing with pain and suffering.

So I know I have to put on a brave face for him. I can't let him see the way I feel like I'm crumbling inside. Right now, I'm all he has, after losing everything else, and I have to be strong for him so that he has some goddamn stability from somewhere. I owe it to Hannah to do right by Cody the best I can, so I focus on that goal and not on the demons clawing at the back of my mind.

I go sit on the bed, and for a few moments, neither of us says anything. I don't really know how to talk to kids, not even this one I'm related to, but he's staring up at me, looking to me to know what to do, so I take a deep breath.

"Hey," I say again. "I know this has all been... the worst. I'm so sorry about that. None of it is fair, and none of it is your fault. Sometimes people are just bad, and people who don't deserve it get caught in the crossfire."

I can feel the little boy staring at me, his eyes wide. I don't know if he understands any of what I'm saying.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him again, letting out a sigh. “I... I’m going to take you somewhere safe, okay? Somewhere where you won’t get hurt. Just for now. Just until things are safe.”

Cody nods, something passing over his face as he scoots closer to me on the bed.

“Okay,” he mumbles, then leans over and presses his forehead to my arm.

For a horrible moment, I think he’s crying, but then I realize that he’s just... leaning against me. Maybe because he just wants to be close to someone. He seems to trust me, even though he doesn’t really know me at all, and that’s weird. I’ve never thought of myself as someone kids would trust, but Cody doesn’t seem to pick up on any of the bad shit about me.

Maybe he sees Hannah in me.

Kind of like I see Hannah in him.

There’s a brief moment where I don’t really know what to do or how to react, and then I surprise myself by wrapping my arms around the kid, hugging him close.

“I’ll look out for you, okay?” I murmur. “You’re not alone anymore. I’m going to make sure you’re taken care of.”

He nods against me, and when he looks up, his eyes are very big and a little afraid.

“Will you come back?” he whispers. “When things are safe?”

There’s so much vulnerability in his tone, and it’s definitely a question asked by someone who has lost every adult who’s ever promised to take care of him. I remember how fiercely Hannah protected her son, and I can only imagine how adrift he must feel now, without her.

That makes two of us, I guess.

“I’ll always come back for you,” I tell him, putting a promise into it. “Always.”

He looks at me for a bit longer and then nods, seeming soothed by that. Julian and Natalie probably never promised him anything like that, but I bet Hannah promised him every day that she’d be there for him.

It’s up to me to do that in her stead.

The room gets lighter around us as the sun rises for real. Kids need breakfast to grow or something like that, so I let go of Cody and get up, helping him get dressed so we can head downstairs and find something for him to eat.

He goes to the door and then stops, turning around to hold a hand out to me. The first couple of days he was here, he clung to that stuffed animal everywhere he went, but now it's been left on the bed.

Instead, he's holding a hand out to me, like he wants something, and it takes me a solid few seconds to realize what it is.

"Oh. Uh. Okay." I take his hand, and he wraps his small fingers around mine, pulling me into the hall and clinging on tightly.

It feels... weird. That's the only way I can really describe it. It doesn't feel natural to be holding the hand of someone so small and so dependent on me. Like I might hurt him just by bringing him into my orbit.

But he seems to be happier with me here, and comfortable enough to leave the stuffed animal behind, so that's something, I guess.

We go down to the kitchen, and I move to the freezer to find the frozen waffles we bought the other day. It's strange to think that just a couple of days ago, we were grocery shopping and doing normal shit, thinking our lives were about to get more stable or something. My fingers shake when I grab the box, but I take a deep breath and make myself focus again.

Cody deserves someone who can get through making fucking toaster waffles without having a goddamn breakdown.

I glance over to the kid, and he's kneeling down on the kitchen floor, holding his hand out for Harley to sniff.

It's kind of cute, the way he's so careful and cautious with the dog, like he wants to respect the mutt's feelings, even though it's pretty clear Harley fucking loves Cody.

He barks happily, tail thumping as he comes out from under the kitchen table and starts licking Cody's hand.

"Hi, Harley," Cody says softly, and he looks very serious as he pets the dog's head, scratching behind his ears, which makes Harley do the doggy face of bliss.

I focus on that cute shit and pop the waffles in the toaster, grabbing the syrup and butter to go with them. After a second, I add an apple to the mix, slicing it up and putting it on a little plate, because serving a little kid a lot of butter and sugar for breakfast is probably frowned upon or some shit.

"Hey, kid," Knox says as he comes into the kitchen. He scrubs a hand through his shaggy hair and then bends down to pet Cody and the dog. Both of them seem to enjoy it, so maybe kids and dogs are suckers for attention of any kind.

Priest comes in right behind Knox, and his eyes go to me immediately. I can tell he's trying to see if I'm okay after my nightmare—and probably after everything else too. I give him a tight smile and then keep myself busy putting together Cody's breakfast, trying to channel some of Priest's energy to make myself seem in control.

"Wash your hands and come eat," I tell Cody, pouring him some orange juice and setting his breakfast out.

We don't have a stool for him yet or anything, so I help him with the hand washing. Then he clambers onto the chair I pull out for him and digs into his breakfast, his little legs swinging because they don't reach the floor.

I chew on the waffle I've spread butter on for myself, and Knox and Priest both glance over at me as they make their coffee.

"He can't stay here," I remind them, inclining my head toward Cody.

It's not safe enough. Not with Alec digging around in our business and wanting me to be a member of his stupid fucking society. Shit is too dangerous right now, and the last thing I want is for that asshole to think he has some right to Cody, or to try to use him as leverage or something.

"No," Priest agrees. He leans against the opposite counter with his coffee. "What do you suggest?"

"I have an idea where we can take him."

"Yeah?" Knox asks. "Where?"

I explain the idea that's been percolating in my head since last night, when I realized we have to find a safe place for Cody to lie low until we work this out. It may not be the most ideal solution, but *nothing* is ideal right now. And given that, I think it's the best option we have.

When I finish speaking in a low voice, both Priest and Knox nod.

"I'll go with you," Knox says. "Give you a little backup. None of us should be heading out alone right now."

I don't point out that he went out alone last night to dump a body in the river, just nod my agreement to that. It will make me feel better to have him at my back, and I think it'll make him feel better too.

"After breakfast," I tell him.

Cody wolfs down his waffles and apple slices, and when he's done, I take him upstairs to get his stuff together before I get dressed myself. He seems nervous, even a little sad, but he doesn't argue as he grabs his things, and a few minutes later, we troop downstairs to join Knox and head for the car.

Ash and Priest are standing in the doorway to the kitchen, and I look at both of them as we pass by.

“Be careful,” Ash says, holding my gaze.

“Yeah, I will. I’ll keep Cody safe.”

“Good.” Behind his glasses, his amber flecked eyes are more serious than usual, his expression somber. “But keep yourself safe too, River. We want you back in one piece.”

I nod quickly and then glance back at the stairs that lead to the second floor and Gage’s room.

“Look out for him. Make sure...”

I don’t even know what I want to say. It’s like my throat closes up and my mind and emotions shut down whenever I even try to think about Gage right now. Everything is still so fucked up.

“Just keep him safe,” I manage to get out, the words scraping against my vocal cords like sand paper.

Priest’s eyes narrow slightly. He looks at me like he wants to ask something, but then he just nods.

“We will,” he promises.

“Yeah. We’ll protect him—both from any intruders, and from the moment when he inevitably tries to get out of bed and start doing shit,” Ash adds, shooting me a lopsided smile.

I nod and turn to leave, going outside to join Knox and Cody where they wait by the car.

RIVER

KNOX IS in the driver's seat, one hand resting lightly on the wheel as he follows my directions on where to go. Cody's in the back, strapped in and holding onto the stuffed bear he asked to bring with him. He looks out the window, watching the trees and buildings and other cars flash by as we drive down the highway.

"How did it go last night?" I ask Knox from the passenger seat. I keep my voice low, and I also make sure to keep my words vague so that Cody won't get freaked out.

Knox shrugs a shoulder. "Same old. I grabbed some—" He pauses and looks in the rearview mirror at the little boy in the backseat. "I grabbed some, uh, product from an area where no one would miss it."

"You're sure?" The last thing we need is some missing person's report being traced back to us or something.

"Yeah, I'm sure. This is what I do, little fox." He flashes me a grin. "Everyone's gotta be good at something."

"I know. I'm just—"

Once again, it's like my throat closes up, and I can't put words to how I feel. I don't even know if there *are* any words.

Knox reaches over and puts a hand on my knee, squeezing it firmly. I know if we didn't have a kid in the backseat, he probably wouldn't stop there, and it says a lot about Knox that he can curb his instincts when he has a reason to.

"Don't worry about it," he assures me. "I handled it. The package got dropped where it needed to, and the cops will find it. We're in the clear."

In the clear... for now.

That thought pops into my head before I can squelch it, but I don't say anything. I just let Knox keep driving.

We head out of the city proper and to the house where I dropped Avalon off that night, after she helped me get my hands on Ivan St. James.

"Pull in here," I tell Knox after a few more minutes, and he does, going up the driveway of a nondescript looking house and stopping the car.

"I'll be right back," I say to the boys. I give Knox a significant look that tells him to keep an eye on Cody.

He flashes a smile at me and then turns around in his seat so he can talk to Cody. "You wanna know something cool about bears?" he asks.

Cody glances up at Knox, his eyes widening with interest, and I find myself marveling all over again that he's not afraid of someone so big and rough around the edges. From the moment the little boy came to stay with us, he and Knox have gotten along well, and now he nods, leaning closer toward the front of the car like he's about to hear an amazing secret.

"They live in the woods, right? Stealing food from campers and whoever else gets in their way. But did you know they sleep all winter?"

"*All* winter?" Cody's mouth drops open, his eyes going even wider. "That's a really long nap."

"Right?" Knox says back, laughing. "They eat a ton of food before then, to put on weight and keep themselves fed while they sleep."

Cody makes a face like he's thinking, his nose scrunched up in a gesture that makes him look so much like a younger Hannah that it makes my heart ache for a second.

"Hmm. I'd get bored," he declares. "If I slept that much."

Knox laughs again. "You and me both, kid. I like to be doing shit. Uh, stuff. Whatever. I couldn't sleep that long."

Knox's swearing makes Cody giggle, and he pokes Knox's tattooed arm where he can reach it. "That's a bad word."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I say a lot of bad words." The burly man leans down a little, dropping his voice to a fake whisper as he shoots a glance at me out of the corner of his eye. "Don't tell River, okay? I'm supposed to be setting a good example or some shit."

"Yeah. You're doing a great job of that," I say with an arched brow as I get out of the car, giving Knox a look.

He just winks at me, and then the two of them burst into laughter together.

Despite the cursing, which I honestly don't care about, I know Cody is in good hands. So I focus on the reason why we're here, squaring my shoulders and heading up the driveway to the front door. I knock a couple times before rocking back on my heels to wait. After a few seconds, a woman comes to the door, opening it slowly. I recognize her as Avalon's cousin, the woman who took her in that night when I dropped her off.

"Can I help you?" she asks. Her voice is polite but cool, and as she looks me over, I can see confusion and a hint of suspicion in her expression. I know she's probably taking in my silver hair and tattoos and wondering who the fuck I am and why I'm at her house.

"I hope so," I tell her. "I'm looking for Avalon."

Immediately, something shuts down in the woman's face, and she goes from being a little suspicious to a lot suspicious.

"Who are you?" she asks. "Why are you asking about Avalon?"

"She and I were..." I trail off, biting my lip. I can't really say we were friends. I didn't know Avalon well at all, even though I liked her. "We helped each other. She did something for me, and I helped her get out of town a while ago."

The woman narrows her eyes at me like she's debating whether she should believe me or not. I don't say anything, just hold her gaze steadily as she works through whatever thought process she's got going on in her head. Her lips twist a little as she thinks, and a moment later, she nods and steps back.

"I remember Avalon told me someone was helping her," she murmurs. "All right. Come in."

I follow her inside, and she shuts the front door and leads me to a neat little sitting room off to one side. There's still some hesitancy in her demeanor, but she offers me a seat and then sits down across from me.

"So you're River, then?" she asks. She's probably in her thirties, but something about her bearing makes her seem much older than that. She has the same delicate features as her cousin, although her hair is darker than Avalon's warm brown locks. "Avalon didn't want to tell me your name, but I told her I needed more to go on than 'some random woman.'"

"Yeah, that's me."

"I'm Diane," she tells me. "And I guess I owe you a thank you."

"For what?"

She sighs, shaking her head.

“For helping Avalon get off the streets. I never wanted that for her. No one who knew her wanted that for her. She’s a sweet girl. A good person. The kind of person who would give you anything you needed if it was in her power. She just got mixed up in some shitty stuff and couldn’t find her way out of it. I just... I worried about what could happen to her out there night after night. You hear those stories about girls going missing, and I always prayed to god that it would never be her. So, thank you for helping her.”

I swallow hard because Diane is definitely right. Girls go missing all the time, caught up in bullshit schemes and plots run by men in power with no sense of decency.

“I get it,” I tell her, my voice stiff. “Sometimes the shitty stuff just finds you, and you can’t get out without help.”

And sometimes you don’t get out at all, but I don’t mention that part. Those words wouldn’t be helpful right now, and I’m sure we both know that truth without me saying it out loud.

“Why are you looking for Avalon?” Diane wants to know, worry crossing her face again. “Are you trying to bring her back here?”

I shake my head. “No, of course not. I just want to check in on her and make sure she’s safe. She helped me in a big way, and I feel like I owe her that.”

It’s not strictly the truth, but the fewer people who get caught up in this mess the better. All Diane will know is that I helped Avalon get away and that I know where she is. She won’t have any other information than that, and that’s for the best. I have no idea if Alec would try to drag Cody into this fight, but I won’t make it easy for him to track down the little boy—or for him to hurt more innocent people in the crossfire either.

Diane takes another long breath and then nods. “Okay. She told me... she told me that I shouldn’t tell anyone where she is, just in case, but I have a feeling she’d want to hear from you. To thank you herself. So I’ll tell you. She went to Defiance, Ohio. Probably the last place anyone from her old life would think to look for her.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

She nods and scribbles an address down on a piece of paper before passing it to me. “She’s not going to be in any trouble, right?” Diane asks again.

“I promise she won’t. I won’t tell anyone where she is.”

The woman nods again, then stands up, and I let her show me to the door.

Defiance, Ohio.

The city name is kind of fitting in a way, since Avalon was helping me in defiance of a lot of things. And standing in defiance of all the men who wanted to push her around. She's building a new life for herself there, and that's not something a lot of women in her situation get the chance to do.

I get back to the car and let myself into the passenger seat in time to hear Cody laughing hysterically as Knox holds up an empty hand.

"River!" Cody exclaims, bouncing up and down on the seat. "Did you know Knox can do magic?"

I glance over at the broad-shouldered man and shake my head. "Really? I thought Ash was the only one who knew how to do tricks."

"Pfft," Knox scoffs. "That's just what he wants you to think. I can do anything he can do, a hundred times better."

"Sure you can."

"It's true!" He grins, but the levity fades from his expression as he turns to face me and pins me with a searching look. "You find out where we're headed?"

"Yeah. Defiance, Ohio."

He snorts. "Fitting."

"That's what I thought too."

Knox cranks the key in the ignition and backs out of Diane's driveway. From the front of the house, I catch sight of movement, and I watch as Diane watches us leave through the blinds of her front window.

I wonder if she's second-guessing her decision to tell me where Avalon is, but I meant it when I promised her that I won't share that information with anyone who could use it against her cousin.

Ohio isn't too far away, and I zone out for most of the drive. There's so much in my head. So many thoughts and regrets and raw, tender things that I don't even want to poke at. Every time I think too hard about what happened with Alec on that dock, it gets hard to breathe. I wonder if the sight of Gage falling or the feeling of his body jerking from the impact of the gunshot will ever leave my mind. It doesn't seem likely.

Oblivious to my dark thoughts, Knox and Cody start playing the "I Spy" game, and the sound of them talking is enough to keep me afloat. Cody's laugh and the way he catches on so quickly to the clues Knox gives keep

the darkness away. Enough that I don't feel like I'm going to drown under it all.

"Is this the place?" Knox asks a while later, and I blink and look around, realizing I definitely zoned the fuck out for a while.

We're idling in front of an apartment building, and it takes me a second to get my bearings and check the address against what Avalon's cousin gave me.

"Yeah. I think so," I tell him.

Knox kills the engine and helps Cody out of the car with his stuff, and I get out with them, stretching my stiff muscles and trying to get my head back on straight. If I want to take care of Cody and make sure he's safe, I have to keep my shit together.

The apartment building is pretty nice, all things considered. Somewhere between high class and low end, with a little garden out front that's brimming with blooming flowers. It looks a lot less depressing than the place I was renting before I moved in with the guys, and it makes me happy that Avalon found a new home for herself that's not a shit hole.

She deserves that.

Knox looks at me, holding Cody's hand, and I nod and lead the way to the outside stairs, climbing to the second floor where Avalon's apartment should be.

There are two doors off the landing, and 234, the one Avalon is renting, is on the left, with a bright green welcome mat out front. Something about it makes me smile.

I knock on the door, and I can hear the sound of a chair scraping against the floor and muffled footsteps inside before the door swings open and Avalon's face comes into view. The politely curious expression on her face melts into surprise and then worry when she sees me, and her eyes are wide as she looks past me to Knox and Cody.

"River," she says. "I... what? Is everything okay? Is everything—"

She cranes her neck, like she's trying to see if someone else is with me, but I guess Knox being so tall and intimidating is enough to make anyone worry when he comes to the door. Even if he is currently holding the hand of a little kid and carrying a backpack that's about ten sizes too small for him and covered in cartoon animals.

"It's okay," I tell Avalon quickly, not wanting her to start freaking out. "Nothing's wrong. No one knows where you are. Except us, I guess. I

just... need a favor.”

I can see the hesitation playing over her features, and she looks just like her cousin did for a second, unsure whether she wants to get involved.

Truthfully, I can't blame her for that. She's probably been living a nice, quiet life out here, minding her own business, away from any drama, and here I am on her doorstep. Drama personified. The last time I asked her for a favor, she had to run for her life to make sure she wouldn't be dragged into the mess, and I can bet she doesn't want to have to upend her life again, even if the last time did work out in her favor.

I have no idea what thoughts tumble around in her head as she stares at us all for several seconds, but finally, she nods and steps back a little.

“Okay,” she says. “Come in.”

We step inside, and I glance around, taking in the interior of the apartment. It's just as pleasant and unassuming as the rest of the building. It's small and sparsely decorated, since Avalon hasn't been here very long, I guess, but it feels homey.

There's a savory scent wafting through the place, like she was cooking something before we came knocking, and it seems like a home, rather than a hideout. That's perfect, honestly, for what I want.

“What do you need, River?” Avalon asks once she's shut and locked the door again, drawing my attention back to the matter at hand. She fidgets a little, looking a bit uncomfortable. “I don't have any of my old connections or anything anymore. I don't talk to those people now.”

“I figured,” I tell her, trying to keep my voice calm and even. “It's nothing like that. I need someone to watch my... nephew for a while.”

I almost stumble over the word, mostly because I'm still wrapping my mind around the fact that this kid is my family. My sister's son.

Avalon looks toward Cody, who's clinging to Knox's hand and glancing around the unfamiliar place with wide eyes.

“Your nephew?” Her tone doesn't sound skeptical, just surprised.

“Yeah. His name is Cody. He's... he's my responsibility now, and I just need to make sure he's safe and out of the way for a while. This was the only place I could think to bring him.”

Avalon glances back up at me as I finish speaking, and I can tell there's a lot going through her head. It's a lot to ask, considering she already helped me so much before, but there's not much else I can do.

“What’s going on?” she wants to know. Her pixie-like features twist into a grimace as her brows draw together. “It sounds like you’re in trouble again.”

I snort, and the sound comes out raw and a little exhausted. “When am I not?” My voice sounds exhausted too.

Knox puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes it firmly, and I let out a sigh before continuing.

“It’s a long story, Avalon, and you’re better off not knowing. There’s... a lot at stake, and the more you know, the more danger you could potentially be in.”

The petite woman sets her mouth in a stubborn line and folds her arms over her chest. “I’m not a child. I can handle myself. If you want me to watch your nephew for an undisclosed amount of time, I think I deserve to know why.”

There’s something about the determination and backbone that Avalon shows sometimes that I really like. She reminds me more of Hannah when she’s like that, sweet and kind, but not willing to let anyone push her around.

And she’s right. If she’s going to watch Cody, then she probably needs to know what’s going on. At least the shape of it, if not the whole stupid story.

So I nod and pull her to one side, lowering my voice so Cody won’t hear too much of what I’m saying.

Taking a deep breath, I tell her an abbreviated version of the story. I leave out some of the grislier bits, not wanting to scare her, and there are some parts I’m just not ready to talk about yet. I also stay away from mentioning the Kyrio Society or Alec Beckham by name, since having that knowledge could definitely put a target on Avalon’s back if Alec ever finds out I told her about any of this.

But I make it clear that we’re up against a bad man, far worse than Ivan St. James.

“He’ll do anything to get what he wants,” I tell her. “And I don’t think he’d stop at involving a kid if it meant he had more leverage. So I want Cody away from Detroit until I can figure out how to deal with it. I don’t want him in the crossfire of all this shit.”

I barely looked at Avalon while I told her the story, just getting it out and trying not to drown under the emotions that talking about it dragged up.

But when I glance up at her face, that spark of determination in her eyes is back. There's also something else there. Not quite pity, but maybe sympathy. Maybe worry. Either way, I can tell she's affected by what I told her, and she reaches out and puts a hand on my shoulder.

"You care about him, don't you?" she asks softly. "Cody?"

"He's the only family I have left," I reply, swallowing hard as I shrug. "And I made a promise to my sister. She loved him more than anything."

Avalon nods, her expression somber. She considers for another second, and then nods again. "All right. I'll do it. I'll take care of him."

Relief hits me in a rush, and I realize how fucking tense I was up until this moment. If Avalon had said no to watching Cody, then I didn't have a backup plan. Hearing her agree takes a massive weight off my shoulders, and I manage to find a smile back for her.

"Thank you. I can give you money to cover all of the expenses and everything. This is... this helps a lot."

"I'm glad," she replies, grimacing slightly. "Because no offense, but you look like you could use the help right now."

That startles a laugh out of me, and I can't even say she's wrong. So much shit has happened in the last day or so, and I have no idea where to even start with most of it. I probably look like I got hit by a fucking truck and didn't get out of the way in time before it backed up and ran over me again.

Knox looks over at me and raises an eyebrow, and I flash a little thumbs up, letting him know we're good to go. Then I turn back to Avalon and motion for her to come over with me so I can introduce her to Cody.

He looks up shyly as we near him, making a movement like he wants to hide behind Knox again, and I can't help the smile that tugs at my lips. It's amusing that the kid would feel more comfortable with Knox, who's a brutal-looking, tattooed dude, than with someone who seems as approachable as Avalon.

But hey, those are good instincts when it comes down to it, because sometimes the people who look charming and non-threatening are the ones you need to watch out for the most.

"Cody, I want you to meet a friend of mine," I tell him, dropping into a crouch so that I'm on his level. "She's really nice, and she's going to take care of you for a while."

His eyes are wide, and for a second, he looks so much like a young Hannah that it makes my heart twist in my chest. I reach for his hand, and he hesitates for a second before putting his little hand in mine.

Cody lets me draw him forward, away from Knox, and I stand up so I can turn and let Avalon step in. She's wearing a warm smile, and her hazel eyes are kind as she leans down and holds her hand out too.

"Hi, Cody," she greets him. "My name is Avalon. It's really nice to meet you."

"That's a pretty name," Cody mumbles, glancing up at her for a quick look and then training his gaze back down on the floor.

Avalon grins and takes her hand back. "Thank you. I like your name too. Do you like mac and cheese?"

"Yeah." Cody nods and this time when he looks up, he holds her gaze for even longer. "With hot dogs in it."

"Oh, interesting." Avalon purses her lips like she's considering that. "I've never tried mac and cheese with hot dogs in it, but that sounds really good."

"Sometimes... sometimes when Dad would go on business, Mommy would make that for me. With crunchies on the top."

I blink in surprise because it's the first time since we got him that Cody has talked about Hannah and Julian. It's fucking weird to hear him call Julian 'Dad,' and a grim reminder that he is the child of a Maduro. But the expression on his face is all Hannah, and the mac and cheese with hot dogs in it is something she would have teased me for trying to eat when we were kids, but she would have made it for me anyway.

There's a pang of longing in my chest, just thinking about how Hannah kept so much of who she was, even after everything she went through. She never lost her innate kindness, and I can only hope she instilled a good bit of it into her son, even in the short time she was with him.

"What other things do you like?" Avalon is asking Cody, and he comes out of his shell gradually as he answers her. He shows her the stuffed bear and then dutifully starts telling her the bear facts that Knox told him just a couple of hours ago.

Avalon makes all the right noises, gasping in surprise and asking follow-up questions to keep Cody engaged, and even more of the tension bleeds out of me while I watch them interact.

It's going to be okay. Avalon really was the right choice for this, and Cody will be fine.

As if he can sense the direction of my thoughts, Knox puts a hand on my shoulder, and I lean back into him, letting myself take comfort in his presence for just a second. Just long enough that I can close my eyes and take in a deep breath.

But I can't fall to pieces now. Not now, and probably not for a while. I have to be strong for Cody, so that he can take comfort in my strength.

Even though he's talking to Avalon now, I can tell he's still freaked out about everything that's going on. Every so often, he glances over at me and Knox, like he's afraid that we'll have disappeared by the time he looks again.

But it's also clear that he seems to gravitate to people who are kind to him. Avalon talks to him with her calm, even voice, and everything about her is open and accepting, so it's easy for Cody to feel safe. Even with me and Knox, we treat him nicely and with open affection in our own ways, and Cody seems to blossom even more with that.

It makes it pretty clear that he never got a wide range of affection before he came to stay with us. Hannah loved him so completely, that much was clear as day, but Julian and Natalie were definitely not the touchy-feely types. Neither are Knox and I, but at least we can fucking try for a little kid who needs us.

Julian Maduro really was a piece of shit. May he *not* rest in peace.

I turn to look at Knox while Cody and Avalon talk about their favorite kinds of ice cream, and he raises an eyebrow at me.

"I want to stay a bit longer," I tell him in a quiet voice. "Just until Cody is settled."

He nods and gives me a grin. "No problem. It's important."

"Thank you."

My chest aches as I feel a rush of warmth for this big, intimidating man, who has somehow already bonded with the kid that I threw into our lives.

Avalon serves up dishes of piping hot mac and cheese a bit later, and she even finds some hot dogs in her freezer and cooks them up so Cody can mix them all together. We eat, and I mostly listen to Cody chatter with Avalon and Knox, barely tasting the food as I chew it.

Once he's fed, Avalon shows us to the small second bedroom that will be Cody's room while he's staying, and then excuses herself to go get an

extra pillow from the hall closet.

Cody stands in the middle of the room, turning in a slow circle, before digging in the bag he packed with my help back in Detroit. He pulls out the nightlight that Priest gave him and hands it to me with a clear request on his face.

“Got it.” I plug the nightlight in next to the bed, and it glows dimly, casting just enough light that Cody will be able to see and won’t be in the dark in a strange place. Again.

“Better?” I ask him.

He just nods and goes to sit on the bed, bouncing a little like he’s testing the springs in the mattress or something.

“Avalon’s nice, right? She’ll take care of you until we can come back. Until it’s safe.”

“I like her,” Cody says quietly. “She makes good mac and cheese. Not as good as Mommy’s, but it was good.”

That makes me smile. “I don’t think anyone does anything as good as your mom did, kiddo. But being close is good.”

It’s so weird, talking about Hannah with this kid. It’s weird to be standing in a little bedroom, settling Cody in, doing something so domestic after the horror of last night. While Gage is lying in bed recovering from a gunshot wound, and less than twenty-four hours ago, I was doing chest compressions to keep him alive.

But Cody doesn’t know any of that. And neither does Avalon, since I spared her from the worst parts of the story. I have to keep it together long enough to make sure this all works out and that Cody will be safe.

Avalon comes back with more pillows, and together, she and Cody get the bed arranged the way he wants it.

“My room is right down the hall,” she says to him, her tone soft. “If you need anything, you can come knock on the door, okay? And I’ll see what I can do.”

“Okay,” Cody mumbles. He glances at me, and there’s a look in his eyes that says he knows we’re about to leave him here. Something twists in my gut, and I blink away the burning feeling at the backs of my eyes.

“As soon as it’s safe,” I promise him, trying to keep the roughness out of my voice. “We’ll come back and get you. We’ll come bring you home.”

“Promise?” he asks. His voice shakes a little, like he’s holding back tears and trying to be strong.

Fuck. This is so much harder than I thought it would be.

“Pinky swear,” I say fiercely, holding out my hand, pinky extended.

Cody mimics the gesture, and we hook pinkies and hold on for a few seconds. Then I take a deep breath and step back.

“Be good, okay?” I murmur.

He nods. “I will.”

“Drive safe,” Avalon tells us as she leads us out of the room and back toward the front door. She opens it for us, then pauses. “I’ll look after him. I promise.”

“Thank you,” I tell her again before glancing down at the bag full of cash that Knox grabbed from the car while I was with Cody earlier. “That should be enough to cover everything, even if... even if this takes longer than I hope it will.”

She nods, and when she closes the door after us, I take in one deep breath after another. It’s early evening by now, and the sun is casting its last rays of light in the sky as the streetlamps along the street flicker on.

Now that the distraction of settling Cody in is gone, the memories from before start to rise again. The images of Gage hitting the dock and then rolling into the water are overlaid with flashes of my nightmare from last night.

Priest, Ash, and Knox also being shot, lying in pools of their own blood. Hannah’s body jerking as the bullet hit her, the pain in her face as she reached for me.

I promised Cody I would protect him and that I’d come back for him.

But it feels like everyone I get close to is doomed to die.

KNOX

RIVER WALKS down the stairs from Avalon's place and back to the car like she's on autopilot. Her face is blank, but the dark shadows swirling in the depths of her blue eyes tell me all I need to know about how her mood is tanking.

She put on a brave face for the kid, making sure he didn't have to be exposed to the worst of what we're dealing with, but that doesn't mean it's not all still bothering her.

We get back in the car, and I crank the key and get us heading back for Detroit and home, glancing over at River every now and then.

It's like I can see her slipping into her own mind, and when an expression does flash over her face, it's one of anguish and guilt and pain.

The demons are rising up, trying to drag her down with them, and she's clearly struggling.

I reach over and put a hand on her thigh, rubbing my thumb in slow circles and digging my fingers into her skin a little, trying to give her something else to focus on.

"Cody's a good kid," I tell her. "Sorry about all the cuss words he probably learned from me."

River swallows hard and shrugs a shoulder, not even looking over at me. "It's fine," she says, and she sounds far away. "I'm sure he's heard worse."

"Probably. And anyway, knowing a few swear words is good for a kid. It means if any bullies or whatever try to fuck with him, he'll already know what to tell them."

"Yeah," she mumbles.

“Avalon makes a damn good mac and cheese, too. I’m gonna have to try that hot dog thing at home,” I continue. “I know Gage is gonna be all ‘this isn’t healthy, Knox,’ but whatever. It tastes good. I’ll throw some fucking broccoli on the side if it’ll make him chill out.”

This time River just nods absently, but it’s like she doesn’t even really hear me. She’s too deep in her own head.

“River?” I say her name, looking over at her.

She doesn’t respond at first, just staring out the window as the trees and other cars whip by.

Then all of a sudden, she turns and looks over at me. Our eyes meet for a split second, and then River is moving, unbuckling her seatbelt and climbing over the center console.

She manages to get between me and the steering wheel, ending up in my lap, straddling me. Her hips move, and she grinds down on me, making heat shoot through my body. When her lips find my neck, I groan, my fingers going tight on the steering wheel while I try to keep us from crashing into the guardrail.

“Fuck,” I growl out, my hips bucking up as much as they can to meet River’s while she grinds against me.

I keep my eyes on the road, trying to focus on driving, but my body is reacting to the woman on my lap like it always does. My cock starts getting hard, and desire is raging through me, hot and fast like a forest fire.

There’s a part of me that fucking loves this. The adrenaline that starts beating with a frantic pace through my body, coming from having River grinding her hot pussy against my cock like this while we’re speeding down the highway. It calls to that part of me that loves the thrill and the exhilaration of doing dangerous shit that could kill someone who was less good at what they do.

“Fuck, River,” I groan again, pushing up against her while she keeps kissing and biting at my neck. “You’re going to make us crash.”

There’s a wet heat as she drags her tongue along my pulse point, not responding any other way.

I pull one hand off the steering wheel and fist it into her hair, dragging her head back and away from my neck enough that I can meet her eyes for a second. Just a second to look at her.

My eyes narrow at what I see in her expression.

“You kinda hope we do, huh?” I ask her, my voice low.

There's no answer, but the look in her eyes tells me all I need to know. It's a dead look, like there's nothing there, no fight left in her, and I know she's been kicked back into her worst, darkest places. The demons inside her are winning.

A crazy mix of sensations and emotions crash through me. I'm worried about her, worried that she looks like she's losing this fight—and even worse, giving up the will to keep trying. But at the same time, my dick is rock hard, and she's turning me the fuck on.

She still doesn't say anything, just lunges back in, burying her face in the crook of my neck. Her mouth is hot and wet and insistent, and she kisses from my ear down my throat, leaving a burning trail that seems to go straight to my cock.

Her hands get into the mix, sliding down my chest, brushing over my nipples through my shirt, until she finds my fly.

I hum a warning, but it doesn't stop her. If anything, it just seems to make her more determined to get what she wants. She undoes my pants and slides her hand in, finding my cock, hot and throbbing in my boxers.

The touch of her soft hand through the fabric is enough to make me groan, and my hips jerk up again, seeking out more of that amazing heat and friction. At the same time, I blank out from driving, and the wheel jerks to the left, almost sending us into the other lane of traffic.

Someone lays on their horn, and the sound cuts through the haze of arousal enough for me to focus.

"Goddammit," I curse and jerk the wheel back to the right, sending us cruising off to the shoulder so I can bring the car to a stop with a screech and kill the engine.

I'm not giving River her way. Not this time. We're not going to die in a car crash like idiots.

I shove the car door open and push my way out, River still clinging to me like she doesn't want to let go. I pull her into my arms and carry her around to the side of the car that's facing away from the highway. Then I yank the door to the backseat open, pushing her inside so I can lay her down on the seat as I loom over her.

My jaw clenches as I glare down at her, and I'm sure my eyes are heated and intense compared to the dead look in River's.

"I'm not gonna let you kill yourself," I tell her in a hard voice. "You can't do it, and I'm not gonna let it happen. Not today, not ever. But if you

need to be reminded of what it's like to be alive? I can do that."

There's still no response from her, but she's looking at me, at any rate, her cobalt blue eyes locked with mine. I can work with that.

The heat in my veins from what River was doing while I was driving is still there, waiting to be stoked into something white hot and raging, and I lean in and kiss her, pouring the intensity of everything I'm feeling into it.

She gasps against my mouth, clutching at my shoulders, and at least she kisses back. That's a good sign. There's a part of her still in there that wants to chase the pleasure I can make her feel, and I just have to call to that part until it can take over all the rest.

"Yeah," I mumble against her lips. "I know what you like. I know how to make you feel good, little fox. Just let me remind you that there's more than pain."

More than the bad kind of pain, anyway. We both know that *good* pain can be helpful at times, and if that's what River needs to give her something to cling to, then I'm more than willing to make sure she gets it.

I drag my hands down her body, groping at her tits, taking savage pleasure in the way she arches her back and moans for me.

Her nipples are already hard, pert little nubs against my palms, pressing against the fabric of her shirt like they're straining to get free. I think about the rings I put through them and my mouth waters a little bit, but I know what I need to do.

I stay on target, dragging my hands down, down, down, until I find the fly of her jeans. It's quick work to get the zipper open and start working her pants down and over her hips, and River lifts up to help me.

"Good girl," I tell her.

I get her pants down far enough that I can take each thigh in a hand and wrench her legs open as much as possible in the tight squeeze of the backseat. It's enough that I can get at what I want, and I kneel on the seat between her spread legs, ripping away River's panties in a sharp movement to bare her pussy to me.

The smell of her arousal hits my nostrils, and it drives me fucking crazy, making me want her even more than I already did. My cock is throbbing, and my mouth is watering, anticipating what she's going to taste like.

There's no fucking need to take this slow. I know what I want, and more than that, I know what River *needs*. So I dive right in.

She's wet and slick, and I spread her folds with my fingers before working my tongue into her, not wasting any time. There's no build up, no wasted time, just me fucking feasting on her like she's the most delicious thing I've ever tasted.

With the tart, sweet taste of her on my tongue, she just might be.

River squirms on the seat, her breath coming faster and harder, and I press one hand to her pelvis, keeping her pinned in place, not letting her get away.

I'm on a mission, and I don't plan to let up until I'm done.

She works open so easy for me, her body giving in where her mind might have struggled against the idea of relaxing. Once I can shove my tongue into her hot, sweet hole with ease, I replace it with two fingers, pumping them into her with a wet squish.

"Ah!" River cries, arching against the hand that's keeping her pinned down. It's the first thing she's said since she started blanking out, so I'm on the right track.

Good. Because I don't plan to ease up on her until I get through to her.

My tongue keeps lapping at her pussy, moving from her slit all the way up to that bundle of nerves that makes her shake. I circle it, teasing her by not giving her what she wants, while I fuck her hole with my fingers, working them in and out of her, savoring the wet sound it makes every time.

She squirms harder on the seat, bucking against my face, and I finally give in and start sucking on her clit, letting my teeth graze against it while I add another finger, slamming all three into her with enough force that it rocks the car and her with it.

All I can hear is the wet noise it makes when I fuck her with my fingers, and the harsh breathing and broken moans that River makes in response. I can tell she's close, right on the edge, so I give her the push she needs to fall apart completely, sucking hard on her clit and curling my fingers to find the spot inside of her that always makes her fall apart in the most beautiful way.

That does the trick, and River comes hard, shaking and whimpering as she gushes on my face.

I lick up all of it and bite at her inner thigh for good measure before lifting my head to look her in the eyes.

There's a tiny spark of life in them again, chasing away the dull, dead look that was there before. But it's not good enough. I want more. I want to

drag her back from that fucking abyss, and I won't stop until I know she's far away from that ledge.

A dangerous, wicked smile spreads over my face, and I reach up and grab River's chin hard, forcing her to keep looking at me.

"That shit you just pulled? That was dangerous as hell. Safety first, baby. You should always use your seat belt."

Before she can respond, I flip her over onto her stomach and grab her wrists, wrenching them behind her back firmly.

"Knox..."

She grunts, struggling a little, but it's not like she's strong enough to break my grip. I pull the seatbelt for the middle seat out from under her and start using it to tie her up, winding it around her wrists so she can't get away.

Fuck her demons. They won't take her from me.

RIVER

A GASP FALLS from my lips, my heart lurching a little at the feeling of Knox looming behind me.

My mind is still fucked up, still foggy with a hundred different dark thoughts, but I'm not so out of it that I can't react to his presence, big and imposing as he fills the space behind me in the car. His hands are calloused and insistent as he grabs my wrists and starts binding them with the rough material of the seatbelts, hacking away at the belts with the knife he keeps on him when they don't move the way he wants them to.

When he finally gets them wrapped around my wrists just how he likes, he sits back a little. I pull against the bindings, just instinctively, but there's no give. When Knox wants someone to stay put, that's what they do, and I can't help the way it makes my pussy throb to know that I'm not going anywhere. Not until he lets me.

"That's right," Knox says, sounding amused. "You're stuck here until I let you go. You're not going anywhere, baby."

He slaps my ass hard, and the pain radiates through me, making my heart race and my pussy drip. There's not much room for me to spread my legs in the backseat of the car, but I start to try—until Knox remedies the urge to do it in the first place, grabbing both of my ankles and binding those too.

I'm trussed up, unable to do anything as he grabs my hips and forces my ass up into the air, one large hand on my back, shoving my chest down to the seat. I can hear the muffled sound of cars passing by outside, but it's dark enough by now that I don't think they can see what's going on inside our car.

Not that I give a fuck if they can. Knox probably wouldn't stop even if a state trooper pulled over and knocked on the window, and I wouldn't want him to.

Because what he's doing right now?

I need this.

"Fuck," I gasp out, breathing hard. My face is pressed to the upholstery of the seat, cool and smooth under my cheek. Every part of my body is humming, vibrating with the remnants of the first orgasm and the impending climb of the second.

Even with my mind clouded and partially numb, it's impossible not to react to this. Knox always knows how to play my body. How to make me writhe and scream for him, and the forcefulness on display breaks through more and more of the darkness that was threatening to drown me before.

His hand comes down hard on my ass again, and I cry out, squirming like I don't know whether I want to get away or move closer to him.

"You love this, don't you?" He slides his palm over my ass, rubbing the sore spot where he just slapped it. "You love being tied up and fucked right here on the side of the road. Like a perfect little slut."

All I can do is moan for him, rubbing my legs together in an attempt to get some friction going between them. My pussy feels like it's on fire, craving touch or something shoved into it, but Knox seems to be determined to draw this out, making me wait until he's good and ready to fuck me.

"Say it," he demands, spanking me again. The sound rings out in the small space of the car, skin on skin, sharp and intense.

"Knox," I manage to force out, his name hoarse from the desperate need rampaging through me. "Please."

"I asked you a question, River." His voice is raspy and deep, and he rains slaps down on my ass, alternating sides, sending that burning ache spreading through me. "Say it. Tell me you love it. Tell me you love being my slut."

I open my mouth, but a gasping, choked off half sob is all that comes out. My hips push back into each blow, seeking more of the pain, more of the barbed pleasure that comes from it. I'm clinging to it like a lifeline. Like it's all that's keeping me tethered, and without it I might go spinning off into the darkness of the abyss.

“Come on,” Knox coaxes, rubbing the right side of my ass. He presses down against the hot, stinging patches of skin, making me ache inside even more. “Let me hear you. Tell me how much you love it.”

“I...”

The words feel stuck in my throat, but it’s not from shame or anything like that. It’s hard to say I love anything right now, with the pain of all the shit that’s happened so fresh. It’s hard to feel positive or good about anything, but Knox doesn’t give me a chance to wallow in that.

He keeps slapping my ass, really putting his back into it, making me take every single bit of the pain and pleasure that he wants me to take.

Every fresh burst of sensation tears through me like a shock of electricity, and I’m so close. My pussy is so fucking wet that I can feel the stickiness of it dripping down my thighs. I know Knox can tell. With my ass in the air like this, he can see everything. He doesn’t touch me where I want him, though, except for one time when the flat of his hand smacks right against my bare pussy, and that finally releases the words that were trapped behind my lips.

A scream tears from my throat, and words follow after it, raspy and breathless.

“I love it!” I shout. “Fuck, Knox, please! Please.”

His breathing is harsh and ragged, and I know he’s just as worked up as I am. I can feel it in the way he grips my hip with one hand, his fingers digging into my flesh and leaving bruises behind.

Behind me, I can hear him fumbling to get his cock out, his fly still open from when I had my hand in his pants while he was driving.

I can picture it in my head, thick and hard, flushed at the tip. Probably a bead or two of precum gathering right where the piercing sits at the head of his cock.

My mouth waters and my pussy clenches, both suddenly so damn needy for him.

“Please,” I gasp out again, and I barely make it through the word before I feel the blunt head of his dick right at my entrance.

It’s so thick, but after coming once and the way he’s got me worked up, I’m wet enough that there’s no resistance at all. Knox slams his cock right into me in one smooth motion, and he bottoms out with a grunt, hitting just the right spot.

In this position, with my legs tied together and Knox so fucking deep inside me, I can feel his piercing even more. I can feel *everything*, and that's enough to send me over the edge, making me cry out in pleasure as I come for the second time tonight.

My body trembles, pleasure pooling white hot and molten in my belly. But of course, the brutally beautiful man behind me doesn't stop there. He's only really just getting started, and now that I've already come again, it's like he's using me for his own pleasure.

That keeps the fire of arousal flickering inside me, and Knox drives into me in deep, long strokes, making sure I feel the entire length of his cock thrusting in and out of my tight hole.

"You feel so fucking good," he pants. "So fucking wet. So tight no matter how many times we fuck you. Shit. *Goddammit*, River." His fingers dig into my hips tighter, and he puts one hand on my head, pressing my face down more firmly into the seat. "I'd do this all the time with you if I could. Just keep you tied up and open for my cock. Pour my cum into you until you're dripping with it. Until you're blissed out and sated from being used so much."

Between his filthy words and the way he's fucking me with no mercy, it's like every nerve ending in my body is flickering back to life. There's nothing the darkness or the demons can do to compete with this, and it's as if the light and heat of it all are burning away everything that was keeping me numb before.

Knox said that he wasn't going to let me kill myself, and clearly this is what it means to be alive. To be on fire with the feelings that come with being tied down and fucked in a car on the side of the road.

But nothing outside the car matters right now. I can't even hear the sounds of the highway anymore, not over the ragged noise of our breathing and the loud sounds of Knox's hips slapping against my ass, and it's not like I have the focus to think about it anyway. The only thing that matters is the way Knox's cock slams into me again and again, and the harsh, almost punishing rhythm he sets as he fucks me.

I climb higher and higher, my body riding the waves of the two orgasms I already had to move toward a third. I struggle against the seatbelts holding me, just to feel how unyielding they are. Just to feel that resistance. Between them and the way Knox is covering my body with his own, I'm

held down and filled up, so desperate for more that I'm almost drooling against the car seat.

"Fuck, River," Knox groans behind me. "You don't know what you fucking do to me. You don't know how damn good you feel."

All I can do is moan back, my body going tight as the waves of my third orgasm rise up and threaten to break over me.

Knox's hand moves from my hair down to my neck, and he wraps his fingers around my throat, cutting off my air just lightly. Just enough to make my head spin when I try to drag in a gulp of air.

That just adds fuel to the fire.

I open my mouth on a silent scream as pleasure rips its way through my body. My pussy goes tight around Knox's cock, the warning signs that I'm about to come undone in a big way.

"Fuck," he grunts, his hips still thrusting hard and fast. "Goddammit. You choke my dick so good, baby."

He slams into me hard one more time, and then I can feel him falling apart, pumping my pussy full of his cum as my muscles spasm and ripple, trying to milk him of everything he has.

The third orgasm hits me like a ton of bricks, slamming into me with enough force that it takes my breath away and leaves me struggling to remember how to fill my lungs again. I feel dizzy and lightheaded with it, but it feels good. It feels like something. Something other than the numb darkness that was threatening to drag me down before.

Leave it to Knox to know how to pull me back from that brink, I guess.

It takes some time for my head to clear from the last orgasm, and if it weren't for Knox and the seatbelts holding me in place, I'd probably be a puddle in the seat already.

The car rings out with the sound of our harsh breathing, both of us panting and coming down from the intensity of the sex we just had. Neither of us are all the way undressed, just missing whatever we needed to make this possible, and when he unwraps his fingers from my neck, it's almost funny to look over my shoulder and see Knox dragging a hand through his hair with his softening cock hanging out of his pants.

He grins at me when he catches me looking and then starts untying me, working the seatbelts out of the knots he wound them into to keep me tied down.

My wrists sting a bit, rubbed raw in places from tugging at the rough material of the seatbelt while Knox fucked me, and he touches those places with that surprising gentleness, lifting one wrist and then the other to press his lips to the raw spots.

“You okay?” he asks, and his voice is rough and low.

If I hadn’t just come three times in a row, it might be enough to get me going again, hearing him sound like that. It’s a good sign that I really am coming back to myself, and I nod in answer to his question.

“Yeah,” I add. “I’m okay.” I pull my wrists closer so that I can examine the red, shiny skin left behind by the bondage. “The restraints weren’t too tight, I just pulled at them too hard. I wanted to feel them.” I lift my gaze to meet his. “Don’t worry about it. I like being marked by you and the rest of the guys. I’ve got a lot of scars, but these are the only ones I like.”

The wild, feral grin stretches across his face even more, lighting up his eyes, and he drags me in so that he can kiss me hard. His mouth feels steady and firm against mine, and I sink into his kiss, putting a hand on his chest and fisting my fingers into his shirt for just a second—just keeping him there, warm against me so that I can take comfort in how good that feels.

When the kiss breaks, we both collapse, ending up side by side in the backseat. My heart is slowly returning to its usual rhythm, and Knox tucks his cock away and attempts to stretch out a bit, which is funny to see because he’s so big that he barely has room to maneuver in the first place in the tight squeeze of the backseat.

He glances over at me, dragging his eyes up and down my body. My panties were shredded and tossed away somewhere, and my pants are still bunched up around my ankles. I haven’t even bothered to pull them up yet, and the heat in Knox’s eyes says he likes that. He reaches over and touches my swollen pussy, dragging his fingers through the mess he left there as it seeps from me.

I lick my lips, spreading my legs a little wider, giving him more access, but my action isn’t really about wanting him to fuck me again. I’m oversensitive and worn out, and I don’t know if I have another round in me right now. But it feels good to have him touch me like this, just idly fondling my pussy like it belongs to him.

Like it’s his.

Like *I’m* his.

“So...” He drags the words out, glancing over to look me in the eye. “You wanna talk about it?”

“No,” I reply immediately. Then I sigh and slump down on the seat a little. “I guess. I don’t know.”

“Take your time.”

I reach up and push sweaty silver hair out of my face. Even just remembering the horror of the dream I had last night feels like a punch in the stomach, and it makes the edges of that darkness want to start creeping in all over again. But the warmth of Knox’s body next to mine keeps me tethered to the moment, and the steady brush of his fingers against the place where I’m the most sensitive is enough to distract me from the shittiness of it all. Enough to tell him about it, at least.

“I had a stupid nightmare,” I begin with another sigh. “After we got Gage settled last night. It was... fucked up. We were back on that dock, and Alec was there. Only this time, he wasn’t happy enough with me just shooting one of you, I guess. I had to kill all of you. And... I did it. I watched all four of you die, and *I* was the one who killed you. You were all dead because of me.”

Just saying it makes my chest hurt, and I look away from Knox and out the window for a second, watching headlights cut through the darkness as cars keep speeding down the highway past us, oblivious to what’s happening inside this little microcosm of space.

Knox doesn’t say anything for a bit, but I can tell it’s not because he’s mad about what I just told him. Or at least, I don’t think it is. His fingers keep moving, fondling me gently, and when he speaks, it’s with that same low rumble as before.

“There was a job we did a while back,” he says. “When we were still making a name for ourselves in Detroit. It was one of those high risk, high reward kind of things, you know? Stupid risky, but the payoff was big enough that it seemed worth it. Even Gage thought so. We all knew going into it that it was going to be dangerous, but we had a plan. We always have a plan. Shit went sideways, though, the way it does sometimes, and Gage, Priest, and Ash almost got killed. I remember watching it all go to hell, seeing them fighting for their lives. I remember how fucking scared I was that I was going to lose them. It’s terrifying and fucked up beyond belief to watch people you care about be in danger. I know that from experience.”

I turn my head to face him more fully, caught up in his story. “What happened? How did you guys get out of it?”

Knox grins again, and this time it’s the unhinged one that makes him look more than a little feral. “That was the day I got my nickname. The Butcher of Seven Mile.”

Anyone else might be disturbed hearing that, considering the implication that’s clear in his words, but it makes me smile a little too. I feel a bit more like myself now, sitting there with Knox. He brings that out in me all the time, reminding me that I’m a fighter.

“Shit happens all the time,” he continues, giving my pussy a little smack that makes me moan softly. “But you just gotta kick its ass and keep going. Get ready for the next pile of shit that life is gonna dump on you.”

“That sounds exhausting,” I tell him, scrunching up my face.

He shrugs. “It is. But that’s life too. If you’re lucky, you get to have fun while it happens.”

His dark eyes gleam as he pulls his fingers away from my sopping pussy and licks them clean, and I know he’s considering what we just did as a part of the ‘fun’ he means. He’s not wrong.

He smacks my pussy one more time and then leans down to rummage around on the floor of the car. A second later, he straightens, brandishing my torn panties. He shoots me a wicked grin as he closes his fist around the delicate scraps of fabric.

“I’d offer you these to clean up with, but instead, I’m gonna keep ’em in my pocket as a little reminder of how loud you screamed my name. Maybe I’ll even jerk off with them later, thinking about how fucking good you felt, tied up and begging for more of my cock.”

I can’t help the shiver of arousal that works its way down my spine at the heated promise in his voice. Despite the fact that we’ve got a million shitty things on our collective plate, I have no doubt that Knox will find the time to do exactly what he’s promised.

If I’m really lucky, maybe he’ll let me be there to watch.

“Keep them,” I tell him in a low voice, grinning a little. “You earned them.” Then I purse my lips, glancing around the back of the car. “But what am I gonna use to clean up with, then?”

“Nothing.” Possessiveness gleams in Knox’s eyes as he looks down hungrily at the apex of my thighs. “You did almost get us in a car wreck. So

as punishment for that, you'll sit with my cum inside you the rest of the drive home."

My clit throbs softly, my inner walls clenching as if they're trying to drag his cum deeper inside.

"I don't think that counts as a punishment," I breathe huskily.

"*Fuck.*" He catches my chin between his thumb and forefinger, dipping his head to kiss me hard before he draws back. Then he jerks his head toward the road. "Let's get the hell out of here, yeah?"

"Yeah," I reply, reaching down to pull up my pants again so we can get on our way.

PRIEST

IT'S GETTING dark in the piano room as I sit on the bench, watching the shadows grow as late afternoon turns into evening. My fingers are still poised above the keys of the piano, and I've been playing off and on, but it's hard to focus.

Almost by instinct, I move into the opening notes of the song River and I made together, but after a few bars, I know it doesn't sound right without her there to play her part. It sounds like half a song, incomplete. Which I guess makes sense, because I feel like half a person without her here.

When we moved into this house, we all divided up into our own spaces. Knox immediately claimed the basement, staking out his territory with that bright, almost terrifying look in his eyes, and we all knew what he would turn it into. Although we all share the kitchen, it's really Ash's domain, the place where he's most at home—whether playing with knives, practicing card tricks, or cooking food. Gage got his library, filling it with shelves and old books and comfortable places to sit.

Me? I decided to buy a piano.

I practiced a lot, learning to make music that sounded more like... well, like *music* rather than just a bunch of noise. But it wasn't really about the music at all when it came down to it. It was more about giving my hands something to do, giving my mind something to focus on besides Jade and how fucking hollow I felt without her.

There was always this disconnect between me and the music, just like there was between me and my emotions. As if I was standing on the other side of a thick, glass wall. Able to see and experience things, but from a

distance, as nothing but an observer of things happening to me and around me.

But with River around, I feel like I can actually hear the notes of the songs I play. It feels like music, instead of just notes strung together.

Even though River isn't here right now, it feels like I can feel her pain from wherever she is. I know things are fucked up between her and Gage right now, and I understand that. It's just fear, when it comes down to it. That's what it usually is that makes things go sideways between people. For River, it's the fear of losing Gage that's making her afraid to be close to him right now.

I know that, because I feel the same thing.

I'm in love with River.

Obsessed with her, really. Dedicated to her, heart and soul.

I didn't mean for it to happen, and when she first got here, I fought against any kind of attachment to her, putting all my energy into keeping her at arm's length and then some. But it happened anyway, and now I'm afraid that if I lose her, it would kill me. It would destroy me from the inside out.

Already, nothing feels right when she's not around. I feel wrong, like I'm missing a limb or something. Something that should be here and isn't, and I'm hyper aware of her absence.

I think of the moments we've had at this piano, and when I close my eyes, I can envision her here. I can picture her down to the last eyelash. I know every line of her face and body so well. Every stroke of her tattoos, the way the dark lines decorate her body. Every scar on her arms, her stomach, her thighs—both the ones she gave herself and the ones she got from others. Every little mole and freckle. I can picture the way her silver hair cascades over her shoulders and down her back, and the look in her dark blue eyes when she's being too tempting for her own good.

My cock stirs a little just from the thought of her, and that leads me to think about the time I threw her down on the couch in this room and made her come with my hand wrapped around her throat.

The look on her face, the way she sounded, struggling for air and wrapped up in the pleasure of it all...

Fuck.

She broke through the walls I kept around myself, and now I want her that close all the time.

The dog starts barking in the foyer, the sound breaking into my thoughts, and my head pops up. He never barks like that unless he's greeting someone arriving at the house, so that's all the signal I need. I get up and head for the front door, meeting Ash in the hall, on his way to do the same thing.

I can tell he's just as eager to see her as I am.

It's easy to hear Knox laughing outside before the two of them even reach the front door, and Harley starts freaking out, running in circles and barking as joyfully as a dog can.

"I swear to god, if he pisses on the floor, I'm not cleaning it up," Ash mutters under his breath right when the door opens.

Harley makes a beeline for River before anyone else can move, and she smiles a little, kneeling down to scratch behind his ears and let him lick her face excitedly.

"You're disgusting," she chides him, but there's no heat in it. She's happy to see him too.

Ash moves in and tugs River up and away from the dog.

"Stop hogging the pretty girl," he says, scowling playfully at Harley before pulling River into his arms. He grins and kisses her, and she sinks into his hold a bit, looking a little less on edge than she did when we last saw her.

I wait my turn, but it can't really be described as patiently. Everything in me is clamoring to touch her and hold her and keep her close, so when Ash moves away, I'm right there instantly, folding her into my arms.

She melts against me, and I can smell sex on her as I kiss her cheeks and then her lips. It doesn't make me jealous to know that she clearly fucked Knox before they got home, but it does make me kiss her harder, putting more feeling into it. Like I want to leave my mark on her too.

After a long moment of that, I let her go, and she steps back.

"How did it go?" Ash asks, sliding a hand through his brown hair. "Is the kid safe?"

River nods. "Yeah. We dropped him off with Avalon, and he'll be safe there until we can go back for him."

"You trust her?" I ask. We already discussed her plan this morning, but I want to be sure she's still happy with it.

"Yeah." She nods, her expression serious. "She helped me out when I needed it, and she's glad to be off the streets. It was the best plan for what

we needed. It's safer than it would be here, at the very least."

"So with the kid out of the way, we need to make a plan," Knox says, leaning casually against the wall with his arms folded. "We've got a secret society and the fucking asshole at the head of it to deal with. What do we do about that?"

The room goes silent, which doesn't surprise me. Because that's the hard question, isn't it?

This is bigger than anything we've ever taken on before, with or without River. She's taken down some of the most powerful people in Detroit's underworld, but none of them were at the very top of the pile. They all had some weak link she was able to find and exploit—a gap in their security, a blind spot, or people they'd pissed off in the past who wanted them dead.

Alec Beckham is bigger than all of that.

He's important in every corner of Detroit. He has his fingers in both legitimate business and the criminal underworld, and it's impossible to know how far his reach extends.

Judging from the look on River's face, she's thinking the same thing I am. I'm about to comment on that fact, but before I can, River's entire body jerks. I watch as her face goes hard, and she stares over my shoulder, anger clouding her expression.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?" she snaps.

I turn to look where her attention is focused and catch sight of what upset her immediately.

Gage is coming down the stairs, one hand gripping the railing while the other is pressed over his stomach where his wound is.

His face is pale, and his eyes are bright with pain, but he's got a determined look on his face that I recognize, like he's forcing himself down the stairs by sheer willpower.

RIVER

WHAT THE FUCK?

The sheer, blind panic that rises up in me is so strong that it feels like a physical blow.

Maybe I should be happy to see Gage standing on his own after what happened to him last night, but all I can picture is him injuring himself worse. Him tearing his sutures or opening up some internal wound and bleeding out.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I repeat loudly, striding toward the stairs. “What part of resting in bed and not doing anything stupid did you miss? Trask *told* you. He told all of us!”

“It’s fine,” Gage insists, but he sounds winded, and his voice is tight with strain.

There’s something about him putting himself in danger so soon after we just got him home that makes a sharp ache shoot through my chest. I can see his face twisted with pain, and something cracks inside me at the sight.

My feet keep moving, and I stomp up the stairs to meet him, cutting him off partway to keep him from going any farther down.

“It’s not fucking fine!” I growl, getting right in his face even though I’m one step below him. I raise a shaking finger to point up toward the second floor. “Go the fuck back to bed where you belong.”

Something flashes through Gage’s expression, edging out the pain for just a second, and I recognize it as irritation. He doesn’t like being told what to do, and I know him well enough to know he never has.

“You’re not my mother, River,” he grits out. “I can handle walking down the stairs.”

The way he says it grates on me, making my skin prickle. My emotions are in a riot, rising and falling and swirling around in my chest, making it even harder to back down. I ride the fury, not moving away from where I'm blocking Gage's path.

"Do you think this is a fucking joke?" I hiss. "Are you *trying* to get yourself killed? Like it doesn't matter? Like no one would miss you if you d—"

I can't say the word. I can barely even think it. The backs of my eyes sting, and my cheeks feel hot and flushed.

Maybe it's not fair for me to yell at Gage about this when Knox was right—there was a part of me that was deliberately toying with death when I crawled into his lap in that car. But that's not the point right now.

I lift my chin even higher, my teeth bared as I bite out each word. "Get. The fuck. Back. In. Bed."

"That's not your call," he says coolly.

He might as well have just dropped a lit match into a barrel of oil. His words hit my ears, and everything inside me explodes. All the emotions that I've been keeping locked up in a little box since we hauled Gage out of that murky water come rushing forward, refusing to be silently ignored anymore.

"How can do you this?" I demand, my voice going hoarse as my throat tries to close up. I suck in a raspy breath and keep going, the words pouring out of me in a torrent. "How can you keep fucking putting yourself in danger? Why doesn't it matter to you? Goddammit, Gage! You shouldn't have fucking done it! You shouldn't have made me shoot you. How the hell is that not *my* call to make? You fucking forced me to almost *kill* you. And for what? For what, you son of a bitch?"

"To save you," he shoots back.

His voice is hard and clipped, despite the strain in it. It's just like it's always been since the moment I arrived in this house, the two of us squaring off with each other, our tempers clashing as we wait for the other one to back down and submit.

But this time, there's something else beneath it too. Something that fills the air around us with so much tension that I swear I can feel the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. There's more than just stubbornness fueling this fight, and whatever it is, it makes my heart beat against my chest like a fist knocking at a door.

“I didn’t ask you to save me!” I shout, my voice raw with emotion. “Not at the cost of your fucking *life*!”

His jaw clenches, and I can tell from the way he’s looking at me that he’s not going to give way.

But neither am I.

I’m practically vibrating with the force of everything churning inside me, and I clench my hands into fists, my chest rising and falling as my breath comes faster.

“Say you won’t do it again,” I hiss. “Tell me, Gage. Fucking *promise* me. Promise me that you will never. Do. That. Again.”

He just shakes his head, his green eyes glittering as he narrows them. “No. I’ll never make that promise, and you know it. What happened last night? I’d do it all over again exactly the same if I could go back and choose. I’d do it a million more times if I had to.”

Anger surges inside me like a tsunami, and I step closer to him, getting right in his face.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” I snarl. “You say all this shit about how you want me, and how you want to keep me safe, but what good are you to me if you’re dead? If you let Alec Beckham or some other asshole take you out? I thought you were supposed to be the one with the brains in this group. I thought—”

I’m spewing random words at this point, so desperate to break through his hard exterior, but he cuts me off by reaching out and grabbing a handful of my hair. Even though he’s weak and in pain, his grip is still fierce and dominant, and he pulls my head back, forcing me to meet his eyes.

My heart skips a beat, and my words dry up in my mouth. I would never say it out loud, but this small show of dominance from him makes me feel a bit less fucked up. It’s so *Gage*, so perfectly him that it makes me feel less on edge and off balance.

He’s hurt, but he’s still here.

He’s still himself.

“Listen to me, River,” Gage growls softly, dropping his head a little so that our noses are only inches apart. “You don’t get to decide how I feel about you. You don’t get to decide whether I’m willing to put myself in front of a bullet to save you. You don’t get to decide if I’d rather lose my own life than risk yours.”

He tightens his fingers in my hair, yanking a little harder in a way that makes me breathless for a second.

“None of that is up to you,” he continues. “I’ll do anything it takes to protect you. Do you understand? *Anything*. As many times as I have to. And that will never, ever change.”

There’s something undeniable in his green eyes, bright and unyielding. It reminds me of that night on the side of the road, when he demanded that I admit that he and the others weren’t nothing to me. When he made me tell them that they mattered.

I hold his gaze, and it’s only then that I realize the other three men have followed me up the stairs and are standing at my back.

“He’s right,” Priest says, and while his voice isn’t as hard as Gage’s, there’s just as much conviction in it. “There’s nothing we wouldn’t do to keep you safe, River.”

Ash and Knox murmur in agreement, and the sound of their low voices adding their assent makes tears burn the backs of my eyes for the second time today. I breathe out a small, shaky sigh, my knees wobbling a little. Some of the fight drains out of me, the anger rushing out as quickly as it came on.

Part of accepting these men—part of being with them and knowing they care about me and want to keep me safe—is clearly accepting *all* of what that means. That their care means they’ll protect me, just like I want to protect them.

It’s one of those things that I know and understand in theory, but every time I have to face the truth of it, it just feels too big. Too overwhelming. It makes something burn in my chest, hot and vulnerable, and I’m still getting used to the way it makes me feel.

“I hate all of you,” I mutter, but there’s no real bite to my voice.

Gage grins, but it’s half a grimace. “I’m not so sure that’s true,” he says, still sounding like a smug asshole about it.

I flip him off, and he chuckles under his breath, then hauls me in to kiss me hard.

His mouth is firm and insistent against mine, and even though it hasn’t really been that long since we last kissed—even if it does feel like ages ago with everything that’s happened—kissing him now feels a bit like coming home. Like something sliding into place after being wrong and jagged for a little while.

When he finally lets go of my hair, I pull back and lick my lips, enjoying the taste of him there. I run my gaze over Gage, and I can tell that he's fighting to stay upright. Standing here on the stairs, our little confrontation? It's causing him pain, and it brings me back to the fact that he's not supposed to be up and about at all.

"Go back to bed," I tell him again. My voice is just as firm as before, but my tone is gentler this time. Less of a demand and more of a request—maybe even a plea.

I reach out and wrap an arm around him, and this time, he doesn't fight me.

"Fine," he huffs. "I'll go back to bed like some kind of damn invalid."

He doesn't sound happy about it, but he goes, letting me help him back up the stairs and to his room.

He lets out a soft groan when he sits down on the bed, and his handsome, angular face is a little pale in the dim light. Sweat beads on his brow, and he's breathing more heavily than usual, one hand still pressed to his stomach. It was stupid of him to move around so much, but I bite my tongue to keep from pointing that out again, instead helping him lie back down on the mattress.

For a minute, I stand beside the bed, watching as he shifts around, trying to get comfortable. The pained look eases after a bit, and suddenly everything that was keeping me away from him seems to melt away. At least enough that I give in to the impulse to be close to him and crawl onto the bed with him.

Gently, I tuck myself against his side, savoring the warmth of his body and the fact that he's solid and real and alive. His heartbeat slows, and the steady thump of it is soothing as it reverberates where I can hear and feel it.

"Is this okay?" I murmur. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

Gage snorts and reaches up to thread his fingers through my hair.

"It's good," he says softly. "And even if it hurt, I wouldn't want you to move."

I roll my eyes, but the response is so classically Gage that even his stubbornness is kind of a relief. No matter what happens to him, he's always like this. Always determined and insistent. Always steady.

From the doorway, I hear a soft chuckle. When I glance over, Ash is there, leaning in to check on us. He prods his tongue against the inside of his cheek, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips.

“Mmm. You two look cozy. You know...” He cocks his head, gesturing to me curled up against Gage’s side as he waggles his eyebrows in that over the top way he does. “Maybe I need to get shot too if this is what the recovery looks like.”

Gage just lifts one hand and flips him off.

“Don’t you have something else to do, Ash?” he asks, but I can hear tired amusement in his tone.

“Nah. Not really,” Ash replies with a shrug. Then the teasing smile slips from his face as he adds, “But I’m glad you two are getting along again. Especially since River has to meet with Alec tomorrow. We’ve got too much shit to deal with to be fighting right now.”

That reminder is like being dumped in a bucket of ice water and jabbed with rusty nails, but I curl a little closer against Gage, refusing to let my fear of what the future will bring break this moment. I’ve been wanting to do this ever since last night, but all of my messed up emotions were holding me back. Now that Gage and I have come back together, I just want to lie here with him for a while.

Maybe he can see that, because Ash’s eyes warm. He raps on the doorframe with his knuckles as he backs away, giving me a little smile. Then he turns and heads down the hall toward his room.

For a long moment, Gage and I lie in silence, nothing but our quiet breathing filling the space. Then I shift a little so that I can look up at him more easily. His features are still a little too gaunt and pale, making the small scar on his upper lip stand out more than usual, and his usually bright eyes dulled a bit by the painkillers Trask gave him. But when our gazes meet, I can see that he’s here with me.

“What do you...” I swallow. “What do you remember about last night? After... after I shot you.”

He blows out a slow breath, thinking it over. “I remember squeezing your finger against the trigger, and then... I don’t know. I remember pain, but it was so much and so intense that it hardly even registered. It was like my mind couldn’t process it. I remember hitting the dock and hearing voices above me, but everything was fuzzy, and then it all turned into blackness.”

My stomach turns over on itself as I remember standing over his collapsed body, the gun still held in my shaking hand. Part of me doesn’t want to hear this and doesn’t know why the hell I asked, but I *need* to know.

I pushed Gage away, opening up that chasm between us, because I was overcome with guilt and fear. Maybe this is my way of trying to bridge the last of that divide, to lance the wound in my heart so that the infected parts can be cleaned away and it can heal.

“I thought you were dead then,” I admit in a whisper. “You weren’t moving. I couldn’t tell if you were breathing. But I hoped maybe you were still alive. Then Alec had one of his goons kick you and Agent Carter into the water, and I realized that if the gunshot hadn’t already killed you, the river would. He kept talking, telling me where to meet him and what to do next, and it felt like every second was a knife in my chest. Every second that he lingered was one more second when I couldn’t get to you, couldn’t try to find you. By the time I jumped into the water, I was sure it was too late.”

Tears leak from my eyes as I speak, and I don’t bother trying to wipe them away. They trickle down my cheeks, burning pathways over my skin, and Gage reaches up to drag his thumb over their tracks.

“The cold shocked me awake,” he murmurs. “I remember hitting the water, because it felt like my whole body had been hit by a truck. I *did* go down for a few seconds. I just couldn’t get my limbs to move me through the water. But then my hand brushed up against that post, and I was able to use that to crawl back to the surface. I kept going in and out of consciousness, and every time I would fade, I’d start to lose my grip. But I just kept holding on, clinging to life as much as I was clinging to the post.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, the tears flowing more freely. “I’m so fucking sorry, Gage.”

“Baby girl...” His thumb brushes my cheek again as he shakes his head. “You have nothing to apologize for. You said it yourself. I *made* you do it.”

“Yeah, but it was still my finger on the trigger. I could’ve killed you.”

He turns toward me a little so that he can press a kiss to my hair, his lips lingering for a second.

“But you didn’t,” he whispers. “You saved my life.”

RIVER

MY EYES SNAP open as I wake from the dream, and my jaw aches. It feels like I've been clenching it tightly, grinding my teeth together, and the back of my throat tastes sour, like something was building back there, desperate to get out.

Bile maybe, or a scream.

At the edges of my brain, there's the lingering terror and grief from whatever nightmare I was having, but as sleep falls away, the threads of the dream go with it, leaving me with just a vague feeling of dread.

An arm wraps around my waist, fingers splaying over my stomach.

"I'm here," a voice murmurs in my ear, warm and soothing. "I'm right here, River."

It's Gage's voice, and it chases away the last of the nightmare, planting me firmly in reality.

I couldn't bring myself to leave his side last night, not even when he started to fall asleep, the painkillers pulling him back down into unconsciousness. I've never been clingy, but after having it out with him and breaking the tension between us, all of my emotions were too strong for me to leave him and go back to my room.

All I wanted was to be close to him, to feel him breathing next to me so I could remind myself that he's fine.

I roll over in the bed to face him, propping myself up on one elbow so I can look him over. He's still pale, and there are shadows under his eyes that aren't from lack of sleep at all, but he looks a bit stronger.

Makes sense that it would take more than a bullet wound to the gut to keep Gage down for long, but it was still a close thing. Too fucking close

for comfort.

Gage reaches up and brushes his fingers through my hair, trailing them down to tuck a few silver strands behind my ear. His fingertips dance over the shell of my ear and then to my cheek, and I lean into his touch, letting my eyes drift closed for a second while I just focus on breathing.

It's still early, and for just this second, we're the only two people in the world who matter. There's nothing outside this room, no pressing business, no horrible shit that needs to be done. The tips of Gage's fingers send shivers over my skin, and I lean into it, taking comfort in his touch.

But that can't last, of course. Shit like that never lasts, and when I open my eyes, Gage is looking at me with a grave expression on his darkly handsome face.

"Today's the day," he says in a low voice.

My stomach tightens. "I know."

It's the day Alec Beckham is expecting me. The day I have to meet with him and look him in the face, knowing everything he's done. Everything he's taken and tried to take from me.

"Are you ready?" Gage asks.

I snort, shaking my head. "No. Not even fucking close. But that doesn't really matter. I'll have to be, won't I?"

Before we all went to sleep last night, Knox, Priest, and Ash joined us in Gage's room to hash out a rough plan for how to move forward.

It didn't feel like enough then, and it still doesn't now, as I talk it over again with Gage.

"You *will* be ready," he agrees with a solemn nod. "There's no way around it."

That's what we keep coming back to, no matter how many times we go over it. There's no way out of joining Alec's fucking society. No way to decline the forced invitation and tell him to go fuck himself on top of it. Not without condemning us all to be killed in whatever way Alec decides is most fitting.

So I have to go along with it. I have to do what he wants.

"It's the best way, probably," Gage continues. "You'll be inside, and even if he doesn't trust you, you've impressed him. He probably won't shuffle you into a corner somewhere. He'll give you a position that means something, and you can use what you learn to try to take him down."

"Get in to get out," I murmur, nodding. "I know. I just..."

I trail off with a heavy sigh.

Gage cups my cheek with his hand, stroking my skin lightly with his thumb. "What is it?"

"I really fucking hate him," I say, even though it's not like that's news to anyone. Not after everything that's happened. "I know what the plan is, and I know it's the only thing we can do, but *fuck*. Just the thought of joining his fucking society makes me sick."

That feeling of maybe bile or maybe a scream claws at my throat again, hot and burning like acid. I have to swallow a few times to push it back down because now is definitely not the fucking time to give in to that.

"I wish I could go with you," Gage says, his mouth twisting into a grimace. "I hate that we're sending you in there alone."

"That's what you get for making me shoot you," I remind him, narrowing my eyes a little.

Things are better between us than they were in the immediate aftermath, but it still hurts to think about it. At least it's not the huge, gaping dark patch in my soul that it was yesterday. I can say those words without feeling like the bottom is about to drop out of my world.

Rather than answering me, Gage exhales a little breath, worry burning in his eyes. His fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me down so he can kiss me.

I go easily, my mouth meeting his the way it always does these days. Like we fit together perfectly. Like we were made for this. Neither of us pull away, and the kiss builds and grows, turning from something soft and tender to something heated. There's the undercurrent of want, the way we crave each other and the hot sexual tension that neither of us has ever been able to deny. But there's something else there too—something so intense and big and bright that it could burn both of us alive.

He drags a thumb over my cheek when we finally have to part for air, and even with my eyes closed, I can feel his gaze sweeping over my face.

"You're a warrior, River," he reminds me softly. "You're strong as all hell, and no one can break you. Not even Alec fucking Beckham."

I nod once, letting that settle over me. Gage kisses me again, and then I get up to head downstairs to get some breakfast.

The rest of the guys are there, going through their morning routines. Priest presses a cup of coffee into my hands, and Ash delivers some food to Gage upstairs and then comes down and hands me a plate of toast. They

both look on edge, and I can tell they're doting on me now because they're nervous about me meeting with Alec today.

Knox sits at the table with his usual pile of breakfast, but he's not eating it. Instead he cracks the knuckles on one hand and then switches to the other, glaring off into the distance. I know it bothers him a lot, to be all but useless for this. He can't kill anyone, can't torture Alec for what he's done. All he can do is sit and wait, and neither of us has ever been good at that.

"Eat your food," I tell him. "It's getting cold."

That startles him out of glaring at the wall, and he huffs but starts digging in, shoveling eggs into his mouth.

I manage to eat my toast and drink my coffee, and then I head up to my room to get ready. I jump in the shower, washing my body and my hair. It feels different from the last time I stood here, letting Gage's blood swirl down the drain and trying to keep a hold on myself so I didn't spin out of control.

Once I'm clean and out of the shower, I light a cigarette and crack a window, blowing smoke out after a drag. I pick my outfit carefully, wanting to look powerful and intimidating, not like some little girl cowering in front of a powerful man.

That will never be me again.

After I'm dressed, I rummage through my bottles of nail polish, trying to find a color that feels right. I skip over black and settle on a dark purple with a metallic sheen. Not black for death, but dark for the mood. It's good.

I'm putting my shoes on when the door opens and Ash walks in, shaking his head.

"What is it?" I want to know.

"Gage." He snorts, rolling his eyes. "He's pissy that we're leaving him here by himself. Well, he's pissy that he can't come with us. I told him that even if he wasn't recovering from a bullet wound, he's still supposed to be 'dead.'" He makes air quotes with his fingers. "So he definitely can't show his face in front of Alec."

I nod, running my fingers through my silver hair, which is mostly dry by now. "Yeah, I could tell he was frustrated when we talked about it this morning. He's not good about having to sit on the sidelines."

"Tell me about it," Ash responds, making a face. "I told him he did this to himself, and he told me to get out of his room."

"I told him the same thing earlier. He didn't kick me out, though."

“What obvious favoritism,” Ash grumbles playfully. “It’s just rude. Anyway, the rest of us are going. We don’t like the idea of you going in alone, so we’ll have your back.”

There was definitely a time when I would have insisted on doing this on my own, saying that I didn’t need them or anyone else to look after me. But now I accept it easily. Having them there will make me feel at least a little bit better.

“I’m nervous about this,” I admit, running my thumb over my bottom lip. “There’s a part of me that’s so sure this is a trap, somehow. That he’s luring me to him to do... I don’t know what. Something terrible.” I bite my lip and then let out a sigh. “But he could have already killed me if he wanted to, and he didn’t. So I guess that means he probably won’t. At least not right now. He probably meant it when he said he wants me in the Kyrio Society. He must think I’m useful somehow.”

“You’re probably right,” Ash agrees. He wrinkles his nose, his amber eyes glinting behind his glasses. “Although the idea that he thinks you’re useful is gross, and I hate it. I hate thinking about him trying to use you.”

“That makes two of us. But there’s no way around it.”

Ash nods, his jaw tightening. We’ve already talked through our limited options enough times that there’s no point in rehashing them. The truth is, I have no choice but to play Alec’s game. So there’s no point in stalling.

We troop downstairs, and the four of us head out to the location Alec gave me for this meet up. It’s a large building, not quite as large as the office buildings that make up the skyline in the heart of Detroit, but close enough. Alec probably owns it, the way he probably owns a bunch of shit in the city. It’s impossible to know how far his influence and money stretches, so it’s probably easier to just assume everything is his.

There’s no receptionist at the front desk when we’re let in. Instead, a group of burly, clearly armed men wait in the lobby area, talking to each other and keeping an eye on things.

When we step in, they go on immediate alert, hands going to their holstered weapons before one of them recognizes me.

“I’ve got a meeting with Alec Beckham,” I say, trying to sound more confident than I feel. “He’s expecting me.”

It sounds more like a goddamn business meeting than me being summoned here by the man responsible for ruining my life, but I guess sometimes those are the same thing.

“Yeah, he’s waiting,” one of the goons says. He jerks his head toward a bank of elevators off to the side. “Fifth floor.”

We all start walking forward, but two of the guards move in to intercept us.

“Just her,” one of them says, holding up a hand. “The rest of you weren’t invited.”

Knox grinds his teeth, his jaw working like he wants to say something or start some shit, but he keeps his cool. Priest looks neutral and blank, but when his ice-blue eyes flick to me, I can see the concern there. The warning to be careful. Ash makes a show of going to sit down in one of the seats against the wall, kicking his feet out and leaning back.

“You guys don’t have magazines or anything to read, do you? Aren’t waiting rooms supposed to come with entertainment?”

One of the guards shoots him a hard look and then steps away, gesturing for me to follow. He takes me to the elevator and leads me inside, then punches in a code, making it start to rise toward the fifth floor.

He doesn’t speak to me until the doors open again, and then it’s just to gruffly grunt that Alec’s office is straight ahead.

I step off the elevator and the doors close behind me, leaving me alone in a carpeted hallway with glass doors and windows all around. I can see the city skyline through the windows, and I stare at it for a long second before getting my feet to move, following the hall to another glass door, which is swung wide open.

There’s a desk inside, and Alec Beckham is behind it, his back to a large picture window as he types something on a laptop. The room is empty other than him, and I blink in surprise as I glance around.

I expected other society members to be there, but it’s just Alec.

He’s dressed in an expensive looking business suit, and his light brown hair is perfectly styled, not a strand out of place. To look at him, you wouldn’t know what a piece of shit he is, but I guess that’s how these things usually go. The ones who suck the most are the ones who can blend into society, and they’re usually the ones sitting at the top of it. Easier to pull strings when you can look down on everybody else, I suppose.

I stand there for a few seconds, trying not to get more pissed off while Alec finishes whatever he’s doing. He’s probably just keeping me waiting because he can. Because he’s an asshole.

Finally, he looks up at me, and that smile I hate so much already curves his mouth. It doesn't reach his eyes, and he oozes smug confidence, like a king on a throne.

"Ah, River," he says, steepling his fingers and sitting back in the chair. "Right on time."

"Where's everyone else?" I ask. "I thought this was a secret society meeting or something."

Alec chuckles and shakes his head. "You haven't earned the right to come to our meetings just yet," he informs me. "Those are for full members."

"Then what the hell am I?"

"You're more of a... provisional member. Pending a probationary period."

I have to bite my tongue hard to keep from cussing him out right here and now. On the dock the other night, he made it seem like I was in, and now he wants me to jump through more bullshit hoops?

"I passed your test," I tell him, fighting to keep my voice even. "You saw me do it."

"You passed *a* test," Alec corrects me. "And barely, at that. Like I said, your man did most of the work. Anyway, that was more like your first initiation. Something to demonstrate that you were even worth the time. You still have to prove yourself before I can allow you into the society. Every other member has shown themselves to be valuable and worthy. You'll have to do the same."

My heart slams wildly against my ribs, only this time, it's not from lingering fear, but rage. Hearing him talk so nonchalantly about what happened with Gage on the dock pisses me off, because for all he knows, Gage is dead. And he says it like it was some easy, nothing little thing I did that doesn't even fucking matter. On top of that, he wants me to do *more* shit for him, to prove I deserve to be in an organization I don't even want to be a part of.

It's fucking bullshit, and if this man didn't hold my life and the lives of people I care about in his hands, I'd tell him where he can shove his tests.

But the rest of the guys are downstairs, and even though I know they can handle themselves, none of us know how many of Alec's goons are in this building. They're definitely outnumbered, and I don't want them to get hurt or killed because I lost my temper.

No matter how much Alec deserves to have someone rip off his head and make him suck his own goddamn dick.

Wrestling my emotions under control, I bite back my anger and swallow past that lump in my throat.

“Okay,” I say in a tight voice once I’ve calmed down a bit. “What do you want me to do?”

Alec just smiles, and it’s even more smug and condescending than his first one. It’s the smile of someone who knew he was going to get his way in the end, one way or another.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, and the way he says it makes me want to kill him. He pulls open a drawer in the desk and hauls a briefcase out of it, setting it on the shiny surface of the desk before pushing it in my direction. “What I want you to do is meet with a man named Luther Calhoun. He’ll give you an envelope, and you’ll pay him with the contents of this briefcase. Sound easy enough?”

For a second, I just blink at him. “What’s in the envelope?” I ask.

“Just something I want. Something that will allow me to gain the upper hand against someone who assumed they were untouchable. That part isn’t important. You get the envelope from Luther, you give Luther the money. That’s all I want you to do. Understand?”

He says it like he’s talking to a slow child, and I grit my teeth even harder, trying to keep from flying off the fucking handle at him. What he wants me to do is basically be a glorified errand runner, picking up shit for him like a delivery person.

To distract myself from the fury clawing at my insides, I step forward and pop the briefcase open, taking a look at the rows and rows of bills inside. It’s a lot of money, more than I’ve ever seen in one place in cash like this.

I glance up at Alec, who’s watching me intently. “How do you know I won’t take the money and run off with it?”

His smile grows a little, twisting into something almost sinisterly pleasant.

“Because you’re not stupid. You wouldn’t have gotten this far if you were. And I know you don’t need the money anymore. You got yourself a pretty little nest egg when you cleaned Julian Maduro out and killed him. You stole the wealth of his empire and leveled yourself up. And now you need to start learning how things work at this level. It’s not about money

anymore, River. It's about power. Influence. Information. You can't get that running around on the streets and dealing with smalltime dealers and users. Those are the things you'll have access to once you're a part of the society."

Before I can say anything else, he flashes one more pompous smile, flicks his fingers in the direction of the door, then looks back down to his computer.

"Run along now. Come back to me when you've done the job."

And just like that, I've been dismissed.

GAGE

WAITING HAS NEVER BEEN one of my strengths. I can admit that. Just like how playing nice isn't one of Knox's strengths, and how Ash struggles to stay still and always has to be fiddling with something. We all have things we're good at and things we're absolute shit at, and sitting around the house while the people I care about are off doing dangerous things is something that definitely falls into the latter category for me.

It doesn't help that I'm fucking confined to the bed either. Waiting is one thing, but not even being able to move around the way I want to is killing me.

Ash and Knox helped prop me up in bed before they left, but now lying here, even half sitting up, is driving me fucking insane. It's like an itch under my skin, leaving me restless and irritable.

"Fuck this," I mutter, giving in to the urge to move, to get up and do something.

I put one hand on the bed, using it to lever myself forward a bit. That puts pressure on the wound in my stomach, and a sickening wave of pain washes over me. The painkillers Trask sent with us are on the bedside table, but I don't want to take more of them. I want to be awake and in my right mind when River and the others get back.

So I breathe through the pain, gritting my teeth and clenching one hand into a fist as I swing my legs out from under the covers and get my feet on the floor.

Just doing that has me winded, and I take a little break, leaning back on my hands. It was hard as fuck to get down the stairs yesterday, but I forced myself to take one step at a time and get as far as I could.

Hearing River come home last night, hearing the others downstairs talking to her... there was no way I could just lie here and not do anything.

River would be pissed to see me moving around now, just like she was last night. I know she'd tell me I'm being a fucking idiot, putting myself at risk again, but I refuse to stay down. I refuse to relax while all this shit is going down.

I meant what I said about protecting her, and how I'd do anything to make sure she's safe. But even though my actions protected her on the docks, now I'm down for the count, and I hate that I can't be with her to protect her now.

Priest, Knox, and Ash are more than capable of keeping her safe, and I trust them to do it, but I want to do it myself too. I want to be there with her, to see it with my own eyes, instead of waiting here at home like the damn dog.

There's a little bark from the hallway outside my room, as if my thinking about him summoned Harley. The furry little mutt pokes his head into the room and then whines softly when he sees me sitting on the edge of the bed.

I roll my eyes at him. "Fucking hell. I don't need it from you too," I grumble. "River gives me enough shit about moving around too much. Did she appoint you to be her stand-in while she's gone?"

Harley just cocks his head at me and then comes farther into the room, whining again.

"Goddammit." I rub a hand over my face, and even moving that much makes my whole midsection ripple with pain.

So maybe the dog has a point.

Jesus. I can't believe I'm even acknowledging that.

"Fine," I growl, baring my teeth in frustration. "Fine. I'll get back in bed. Are you happy now, you son of a bitch?"

It hurts just as much to get back in bed as it did to sit up, and by the time I'm lying down again, there's sweat beaded on my forehead and my heart is pounding. I let out a long, slow breath and try not to let it get to me.

The jingle of the dog tags is my only warning before Harley jumps up onto the bed and turns around in two circles before making himself comfortable, tucked against my legs.

"Yeah, yeah," I murmur gruffly, reaching down to scratch his ears. "It's easy for you, you dumb mutt. You like lying around doing jack shit. This

isn't what I want to be doing."

Not that I have a lot of choice in the matter.

I have no problem going head to head with River when I know I'm right—but in this case, the silver-haired spitfire is the one who holds that honor. She and the others have a list of instructions from Trask on how to make sure I heal up well, and *rest* is the first damn item on the list.

And to be honest, seeing tears pour from River's eyes last night as she tried to come to terms with what happened on the dock really did a number on me. I meant it when I told her I don't blame her, and I also meant it when I said I'd do it all over again if I had to.

My impulse to protect her is so strong that it's almost an obsession... but there are more ways she can be hurt than just physically. Even though I saved her life on the docks, I left a wound on her heart, and I'm determined never to do that again if I can help it.

So I'll do my best to heal up, for her and for my brothers, no matter how much it fucking eats at me.

I scroll on my phone for a bit, doing some business for the club while I wait, trying not to watch the clock too closely. Luckily, it doesn't take long for the sound of a car pulling into the driveway to announce that River and my brothers are back.

I hear them clatter into the house and manage to get myself sitting up, propped up on a pile of pillows by the time they come up the stairs.

River is the last in, and I let my eyes scan her, making sure she's okay. Other than looking pissed off, she seems like she's in one piece, so I'll take that as a win for the moment.

"What happened?" I ask, glancing from her to the others.

"Alec's a fucking bastard," River snaps, and I lift one eyebrow.

"We already knew that." I wouldn't be on bedrest if he wasn't, but I don't point that out because it'll just set River off even more. "What did he do?"

River sighs, pacing the floor in front of the bed a little. "Apparently what we—what *you* did on that dock wasn't enough for him, and he's not just going to let me into the society. He wants me to prove myself with some kind of initiation."

My eyebrows draw together in a frown. "That's bullshit," I growl out. "What else can he ask you to do?"

“That’s what I was thinking,” River replies. “It’s fucking stupid. He knows what that night cost me. Cost *us*. Or at least he thinks he does, and he still claims it’s not enough.”

“Okay, but tell Gage what the fucker wants you to do now,” Knox chimes in, looking just as pissed off as she is. “That’s the best part.”

I look between them, waiting, and River just seems to get angrier.

“Oh, I’m an errand girl now,” she snaps. “Reduced to basically picking up his mail.”

“What?”

She explains that Alec has a contact who’s gathered probable blackmail material on someone, and River has to pick it up, pay the contact, and deliver it.

It sounds absurd. He made such a big point on the dock of how impressed he was with how she handed Julian his ass and how he wants her in the society, only to make her jump through all these hoops now. I want to say I can’t believe the nerve of him, but I absolutely can. That’s exactly the kind of thing an asshole like Alec Beckham would do, to try to prove how much better he is than the rest of us. We don’t have another choice but to give him what he wants, unless we want to make an enemy of him, and we can’t afford that right now.

“Goddammit,” I mutter, dragging a hand down my face.

“Yeah,” River echoes. “That was my thought too.”

Priest leans against the wall, his arms folded. “So far, it sounds like an easy job.”

“Easy?” River demands.

“Demeaning, sure,” he allows, inclining his head slightly. “But it’s not like it’s going to cost you anything but time and a little pride in the long run. He’s starting you off gentle.”

“You think he might escalate?” I ask him, the wheels in my head turning.

Priest shrugs. “In his position, I don’t see why not. He knows River has essentially no other choice, and now he wants to see how far she’s willing to go. That’s why he had her shoot you in the first place. I’m sure that to be in his fucked up society, the members have to be willing to jump when he says jump and do what he thinks is best. So before he allows her in, he has to know that she’s going to follow his orders, whatever they may be.”

He sounds detached as he says it, less emotion in his voice than I heard from River and Knox. I can see the anger behind his eyes, though. He's just as pissed about Alec doing this to River as the rest of us are.

But Alec holds all the cards, and he knows it.

He has every possible exit covered.

River sighs, slumping where she stands. "Priest is right. There's nothing we can really do about it. If I try to bail on his shitty initiation, he'll just kill me. And probably you guys too. If I run away, he'll hunt me down. I know too much now. We all do. He has money, power, resources... the only way out is to go through."

I nod, and she looks at me, clearly remembering what we were talking about this morning.

"I have to get close to him," she mutters. "And that means I have to stick it out. I have to jump through his hoops and join his society. It's the only way."

It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, and judging from the expressions on my brothers' faces, they feel the same. None of us like the idea of River being put in this position, but we can't get her out of it by brute force. All we can do is have her back as she navigates this maze of danger and intrigue.

"Okay," I say, switching gears. "So if we're moving forward, then we have to be smart about it. What do you know about this drop?"

"Not much. I'm supposed to pick up an envelope and drop the cash. The contact's name is Luther Calhoun. That's all Alec gave me. That and the location where I'm supposed to meet him."

I turn that over in my head, trying to think about it from whatever angle Alec would have. Priest said it was easy. Demeaning, but easy. It seems too convenient for it to be as simple as that, though.

"I don't buy it," I say out loud.

"Buy what?"

"This drop. What's his goal here? What's the point of him sending *you* specifically on this particular errand?"

Ash is nodding, and Knox looks like he's on the same page too. Priest meets my gaze and frowns.

"You think there's more to it," he murmurs. It's not a question.

I shake my head, wincing as the small movement sends a jab of pain shooting through my stomach. "I'm just suspicious. It could be some kind

of a trap. Or it could be a test. It could be something bigger than he's telling River, to see how she reacts under pressure or something. Or maybe he really does want to prove that she's nothing but a peon he can order around when he wants to."

"There's too many fucking angles," Knox grunts, and he looks like he wants to punch something again. "I hate twisty bastards like him."

"That makes two of us," River mutters. "I don't want to go in there blind, but it's not like I can call Alec up and demand that he give me more information or anything."

"Then you can't go alone," Priest says. "We're not risking that. We'll have to have eyes on the situation, so we can get you out if something goes wrong."

"Don't think Alec's going to take kindly to that," Ash points out, grimacing.

"He doesn't have to know," Knox puts in. "We can do shit all stealthy-like. We're getting better at that. We just need to have River's back."

The three of them start discussing ways that they could be there with her without pissing Alec off, tossing ideas back and forth. As I listen to them, I can feel the anger rising in me, boiling and bubbling in my gut.

Because they're right. Whatever Alec's plan with this drop is, it's too dangerous to send River in there on her own. But no matter what plan they choose, I can't go with them. I'm wounded, and I'm supposed to be dead.

I fucking hate that. I hate that I can't be a part of it. That no matter what gets decided, I'm going to be here, bedridden. I can't even do anything to support them from here because I can barely get up and take a piss without needing help.

The more they talk, the more irritated I get, but I keep my calm, nodding along with their suggestions and adding my input when it's needed. It's not their fault I'm stuck here. Like River said, it was my choice, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat, so I only have myself to blame. Not that it makes me feel any better about this.

But River needs the support. This isn't about me.

"I'm fucking tired," River grumbles eventually. "And starving."

"Pizza?" Ash suggests, looking hopeful. "Post evil villain meeting pizza?"

River laughs, and she sounds tired but fond as she shoots him a grin. "Sure. Why not?"

They file out of the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Even the dog gets up and follows them out, the damn traitor.

Gritting my teeth, I swing my legs out from under the covers, not stopping this time until my feet touch the floor. I feel just as tired as I did the last time I tried this, but I don't let that hold me back. I take a deep breath and then push myself into a standing position, breathing through the wave of nausea that sweeps through me from the pain.

Standing up fucking hurts, and I feel weaker than I ever have before.

"*Goddammit*," I mutter under my breath. "Fucking—"

The anger threatens to explode inside me, and I ball my hand up into a fist, reaching out and punching the wall to let some of it out.

That just makes a fresh burst of pain flare inside me, and I hunch over a little, clutching my gut and breathing hard.

"River was right, you know," Priest says from behind me, and I turn slowly to see him standing in the doorway. He doesn't look like he's here to lecture me, and his expression is calmly neutral as usual, even though I know there are emotions lurking under the surface. "You need to take it easy if you're going to heal."

I growl in frustration, shaking my head even as sweat trickles down the back of my neck. "Would you be able to take it easy if it were you laid up while River was still in danger?"

Priest shakes his head, not even hesitating.

"No," he says, simple honesty in his tone. "I couldn't. It would drive me crazy."

"It is driving me crazy," I admit, exhaling sharply. "The only reason I didn't force myself out of bed to go with you guys today—injuries and Alec needing to believe I'm dead be damned—is because I knew the rest of you were with her. But I thought about it. I thought about saying 'fuck it all' and going anyway."

"Oh, we all knew you were thinking about it," Priest says. He tips his head to one side, looking thoughtful. "Maybe this is why we all share her, though. Why it worked out this way. I wasn't sure it would even work at first, but it has. And now we can watch out for her for each other. We can work as a team to keep her safe. So even if you can't be there, you can rest knowing she's at least not fighting any of these battles alone."

I take a deep breath then blow it out, a little less roughly this time.

At the heart of it, Priest is right. She doesn't have to do anything alone because there are four of us watching out for her, making sure she's safe. It's something of a comfort, even if I still wish I could be there to see to it personally. But maybe one day one of the others will be down for the count, and I'll have to stand in for them.

It seems likely, given the amount of danger that's been thrown our way lately, and the thought makes me chuckle dryly.

"You know, no one but River could get into so much shit that it takes four men working together to keep her safe."

Priest huffs a soft laugh and nods. "She has a way of attracting trouble. Maybe that's why she found us in the first place. But at the same time... no one but River could fit with each of us the way she does."

His words stick in my mind, because he's right. He often is when he decides to start dropping truths, but this feels like something bigger. Something deeper than the usual shit we end up talking about.

There's no one else in the world like River. No one as bright and vibrant. As hellbent on causing trouble for her enemies. As fiery and determined to right the wrongs that were dealt to her. From the moment we met, we were butting heads, clashing against each other because we're so damn similar. Because we're so perfect for each other.

But she's not just perfect for me. She's perfect for my brothers too, fitting with each of them in her own unique way.

Why else would we all be so insistent on keeping her safe? Why else would we make sure that no one else is ever allowed to touch her?

Because she's ours.

She *belongs* with us.

My head is full of thoughts of River as Priest helps me back into bed, and as I sink onto the mattress, it hits me in a rush that almost knocks the breath out of me.

I'm fucking in love with her.

RIVER

THE NEXT NIGHT is the night of the drop.

The night of my first task to prove my loyalty to an asshole I hate.

I send Avalon a quick text on the burner phone Knox set up for me to make sure Cody is doing okay, and her reply comes back quickly.

A: He's good. Currently watching some bizarre kids' show and eating a hamburger.

That makes me smile, imagining his face as he watches whatever show it is. I'm glad he's having a good night, at least.

I set the phone back on the nightstand and head downstairs, dressed and ready. Knox, Priest, and Ash are all making their preparations as well.

After our discussion yesterday, they settled on the fact that Alec didn't say I have to go alone, so all of them have insisted on going with me. And just like when I went to my meeting with him, I'm grateful for their backup, because we really do have no way of knowing what Alec is up to with this shit.

I can practically feel the waves of frustration and anger radiating down from upstairs as we get ready to head out. Despite things being better between Gage and me now, it's been tense all day. He's already given me the lecture to be careful and to keep my eyes and ears open, so now he's just sulking. I know he hates not being able to come with me, and the truth is... I hate it too.

For so long, I tried not to rely on anyone. I told myself the only person I could trust to get things done right was me. I kept people at more than arm's length, and I did what I had to do to survive. But now there are four men

who feel like a part of me. Like they act as an extension of myself. Missing one of them feels like it throws the entire thing out of balance.

“He’ll be fine,” Priest says. “He’s going to have to get used to it, since there’s no alternative.”

I nod, because he’s right. Gage is supposed to be dead as far as Alec is concerned. That means even when he gets better, he’s going to have to be careful and not be seen by anyone. At least until after we manage to take Alec out.

Harley comes padding up to me, looking all sad the way he does when he knows we’re leaving. I kneel down to give him a scratch behind the ears and then nudge him in the direction of the stairs.

“Go keep Gage company,” I murmur to him.

When I look up, Ash is watching me with a teasing grin on his face. He tips his head down, peering at me over the tops of his glasses. “I saw that, you big softie.”

“Shut up,” I tell him, rolling my eyes. “I’m a badass bitch and you know it.”

“Well, that’s undeniable.” He plants a kiss on my cheek as I stand up, nuzzling my ear with his nose. “No reason you can’t be both.”

I turn my head in a sharp movement, catching his mouth with my own in a kiss before nipping at his bottom lip—just to prove that I absolutely *can* be both soft and hard.

Once I finish shooing Harley upstairs, the four of us head out. The location Alec gave me for the drop is one of about a million sketchy bars in a rough neighborhood in Detroit. It looks like a total shit-hole from the outside when we pull up, run down and grungy, and there are several sketchy looking people hanging around outside of it.

It’s the kind of place that prostitutes and druggies frequent, looking for their next fix of whatever kind without having to worry about prying eyes.

“Wow. Fancy,” Ash comments dryly from beside me in the back seat.

“Yeah, right?”

We get out of the car and walk inside together, all of us on high alert.

This is definitely the kind of place where trouble goes down, even if you’re not looking for it. Sometimes *especially* if you’re not looking for it. I can feel that the guys are on edge, all three of them tense as they flank me, letting me take the lead.

I'm just as tense as they are, and I try to relax my shoulders a little as I scan the room, looking for the guy Alec described to me.

We don't have to wait long before we find him. He's all the way in the back, sitting in a shitty little booth with a girl beside him. He's clearly some lowlife Alec found to do his dirty work, and I wonder if he's working for Alec because he wants to or because he has to.

I walk over and sit down at the table across from the guy, and Knox slides in beside me, leaving Ash and Priest to stand and keep an eye on our surroundings.

"Luther?" I ask the man, watching his face. He's got a scruff on his cheeks and jaw that goes all the way down his neck, making him look unkempt and rough.

His eyes dart around for a second, like he's half expecting someone to jump out at him if he confirms who he is, but then when nothing happens, he leans back in the booth seat and grins at me, flashing yellow teeth.

"That's me sweetheart," he says, licking chapped lips. He looks me up and down slowly, and I bite back the urge to punch him in his face.

The girl next to him barely seems to notice what's going on. Her eyes are vacant for the most part, but every so often there's a flash of fear in them, like she realizes where she is and doesn't want to be here anymore. She looks exhausted, the bags under her eyes heavy and dark, and she's bouncing her leg under the table and absently rubbing her arm in a way that makes her seem strung out.

I'm supposed to be focusing on Luther and this drop, but I can't stop looking back to this girl. She's so young. Too fucking young to be with a creep like this, that's for damn sure.

"You got something for me?" Luther asks, drawing my attention back to him.

"Yeah," I say. Knox hands me the briefcase, and I let it slide to the floor. "You got something for me?"

Luther grins again, and he rattles the envelope under the table.

I stick my hand under it, and he pushes the manilla envelope into my waiting fingers. Before I can kick the briefcase in his direction, the girl next to Luther shudders hard, jostling the table for a second. She blinks and then looks scared again, and Luther rounds on her, his eyes narrowing.

"What did I tell you when we got here?" he demands in a low voice, getting in her face. "Huh? What's your only job tonight? Say it."

“T-to sit here and look pretty,” she whispers, shrinking away from him.

“Right. And that means not making a scene while I’m doing business. Goddammit. You can’t do anything right.”

The girl just nods and seems to collapse even more into herself, as if she’s wishing she could become invisible or wink out of existence entirely.

Luther looks back to me, and I scowl at him. “You need to chill the fuck out,” I tell him. “She’s not causing a problem.”

“Mind your own fucking business, girlie,” he snaps back, but he gets back to business, basically ignoring the girl.

I nudge the briefcase over to Luther’s side of the table with my foot, and he snatches it up, glee in his expression.

The exchange is done, and I take what I came for and get up to leave, ready to be done with this fucking place. Even as I’m going, though, I can’t stop looking at that girl. I don’t know what her story is, but it’s clear she’s not enthusiastic about being with this fucking guy.

I don’t blame her.

“Well, that was easy enough,” Ash mutters, although he keeps scanning our surroundings as we make our way toward the door.

“Which still leaves the question of why Alec thought River would be the best person for this job,” Priest comments.

“I’m telling you, man, it’s a power trip. He’s trying to prove she ain’t shit, making himself seem like the big bad boss and her seem like his little peon.”

“Or this was a bigger drop than he made it out to be,” Knox murmurs as we step outside into the slightly less dank night air. “You know how it goes. Sometimes the shittiest informants happen to get the best intel. Could’ve been this Luther guy lucked into something big.”

He’s got a good point. We have no idea what information or blackmail material is contained in the envelope Luther gave me. This could actually be a drop that means a lot to Alec.

That thought makes my skin crawl.

I hate the idea that I’m helping him in any way.

The four of us turn to head down the sidewalk toward our car, but my footsteps slow as something catches my eye. In the alley off to the side of the bar, there’s a flash of blonde hair, and I turn in time to see someone being shoved against the wall. I stop walking, my heart skipping a beat as I realize it’s Luther and the girl.

He's got her pinned against the side of the building, pushing her head against the wall with force.

"You stupid bitch," he snarls. "I told you what happens if you don't fucking behave. Didn't I? Didn't I?"

Luther yanks her forward to face him and then slaps her hard enough across the face that the sound rings out in the alley.

"You're such a fucking embarrassment. You can't even keep your shit together for ten fucking minutes so I can do my work. What the fuck good are you? Huh?"

The girl doesn't seem to have any answers to his questions, and she's not even really crying. She looks so blank and dejected, and I realize with a pang that it's the blank stare of someone who is more than used to this kind of treatment. Sometimes it's just easier to shut down than fight back. Especially when it seems like fighting back is useless.

My blood boils, my pulse quickening as I hear the way he talks to her. Fury ignites in me, and before I can even stop to think about what I'm doing, I stride into the alley and grab Luther, shoving him away from the girl.

It's my weak point, I can admit that. Seeing assholes like this abuse women brings all my demons to the surface, and I can't just watch it happen and do nothing.

"What the fuck?" Luther snaps. His chapped lips pull back from his crooked teeth as he narrows his eyes at me. "Who the fuck do you think you are, you cunt?"

With more dexterity than I would've given him credit for, he lashes out and grabs my wrist, wrenching it back and sending pain flaring up my arm. He's quick to capitalize on his momentary advantage, shoving me up against the wall and pinning me with his bulky form.

"Looks like you really need to learn a lesson about minding your own business, girlie," he whispers, and his hot, nasty breath fans over my face, turning my stomach. "I can teach you. I can teach you a lot of things. Maybe you'll even learn to like it."

Luther wedges a hand between the wall and my stomach, sliding it down toward my crotch, but he doesn't even make it two inches before he's forcibly yanked away.

"No you fuckin' don't," a voice I recognize as Knox's growls.

He, Priest, and Ash have stepped into the alley with us, and all three of them look fucking pissed. It appears that Knox was the one who pulled Luther off me, but Priest and Ash each have hands on him now too.

Luther fights against their hold, thrashing and spitting and snarling as he tries to get away from them.

“Do you know who I am?” he spits, his scruffy face contorting. “You fuckers don’t know who you’re dealing with.”

Knox rolls his eyes. “Some lowlife criminal who’s not even worth the time it would take to snap his neck?”

His tone sounds pleasant enough, but there’s a violent edge to his smile and murder in his eyes.

They push Luther away, and for a second, I think that’s going to be it.

But maybe the skeezy motherfucker is on something, because instead of doing the smart thing by tucking his tail between his legs and fleeing the alley, he goes crazy, launching himself at Knox. He manages to get one hit in, just because none of them expected him to do something so stupid, but then it turns ugly.

“Fuck!”

Priest grabs the guy, pulling him away from Knox, but that just turns Luther’s fury toward Priest. He reaches around like he’s going to pull out a weapon from the back of his waistband, and Ash tackles him around the middle, bringing him down to the ground. They both land hard, and Luther lets out a grunt.

He reaches out a hand for the gun that went flying when they fell, but Knox is there instead. I can imagine the savage delight he feels when he lifts his foot and stomps down on Luther’s hand, and the cracking of the bones rings out in the alley.

Luther howls with pain, but it doesn’t stop him.

He goes for the gun again, managing to get away from Ash for long enough to close the fingers of his good hand around it. But before he can aim the weapon, Knox hits him in the face so hard we all hear the snap that comes from it.

Luther’s body goes limp, and he collapses in a heap on the dirty ground of the alley, as if he’s suddenly lost all the bones in his body.

He doesn’t move again, and none of us even have to check to know that he’s dead.

In the silence that follows the end of the fight, I hear a little snuffle from beside me, and the sound draws my attention back to the girl. She's on the ground with her back pressed up against the brick wall of the building, having scooted as far away from us as possible. Her eyes are wide and terrified, silent tears tracking down her face. Her cheek is swollen where Luther hit her, and now that I can see more of her, I notice that there are other bruises and badly healed cuts on her arms and legs.

Jesus.

The same anger that made me march into the alley without even stopping to think about it rushes through me again as I take in the state of this poor girl. I have no idea what her story is or why she was with Luther, but it's clear as fucking day that he's been abusing her. What happened in the bar and in the alley weren't just one-time things.

The briefcase full of money is right where Luther must have dropped it when he came out here to beat the shit out of her, and I pick it up and shove it into the girl's hands.

"Take this and get the fuck out of here," I tell her in a low voice. "Run."

Her eyes go wide, fear still dancing in their depths. But she pulls herself together enough to nod and clamber to her feet. Her arms wrap around the briefcase like she's holding on for dear life, and she takes off, pelting past my three men and out of the alley as fast as she can.

That just leaves the four of us. Or rather, the four of us and Luther's dead body.

"Well, fuck," I mutter under my breath.

"Yeah," Ash replies, wiping dirt from his face before pulling off his glasses to make sure they're not damaged. "That about sums it up."

"I'll take care of it," Knox says, glancing down at the crumpled corpse. He shrugs, not looking all that bothered by the way things went down. "It could be worse. You got the thing Alec wanted, so you did the job you came to do."

"I'll bring the car closer," Priest says, and he goes to get it so we won't have to drag a dead body out onto the street.

No one from the bar emerged during the fight, and when Priest pulls the car around, there's no one hanging around outside the bar anymore either. I don't hear the sound of sirens in the air, which doesn't surprise me one bit. This is the kind of place where when people hear shit going down, they just turn their heads the other way and ignore it. It's not worth sticking their

necks out to try to help anyone, and it's not like any of the patrons of the bar want the cops to come poking around. They've all probably got shit to hide.

I'm suddenly very glad that either Luther or Alec picked this place for the drop. I wasn't expecting shit to turn out this way, but now that it has, it's better that we're in one of the sketchier parts of Detroit.

Working quickly and quietly, we load the body into the trunk and head home. Knox and Priest drop me and Ash off at the front door and then head off to deal with what's left of Luther.

"You know, one day we're going to do a job, and it's going to go nice and simple," Ash says, sighing. "Everything will play out just how we hoped it would, and we'll finish up early and go home and have an orgy to celebrate. I dream of that day."

"Keep dreaming," I mutter, rubbing a hand over my face.

I want to go to my room and shower this night off my skin, but I know Gage is in his bed, driving himself crazy lying there thinking of what could have happened. So I go up to see him first, rapping my fingers against the doorframe as I walk in.

He looks up immediately, his jaw dusted with dark stubble and his green eyes intent. "How did it go?"

"Fine," I answer, shrugging. "I did what Alec wanted me to do."

Except for the first word, which is a bit iffy, my answer isn't technically a lie. I *did* get the info Alec wanted, and the fact that his contact ended up dying in the process doesn't change that.

Gage must hear something in my tone, or maybe he just knows me too well by now, because he sweeps his gaze over my body and then narrows his eyes.

"So nothing out of the ordinary happened? No trouble at all?" I open my mouth to reply, but before I can, he points to my cheek. "Because the flecks of blood on your face seem to say otherwise."

I grimace. *Fuck*. I knew I should have showered first, but knowing Gage, he would have found a way to get suspicious about that too.

He's obviously not going to buy any of my bullshit answers, so I sigh and give up the lie. "Okay, so it wasn't as smooth as it could have been."

"What the hell happened?" he demands, his tone turning hard.

"The contact is dead. It's pretty much his fault for being a fucking asshole and not knowing how to treat a woman as anything but garbage." I

clench my jaw at the memory of the way he shoved the girl against the wall, using the brute force of his body against her. “Whatever. I picked up the blackmail material like Alec wanted me to, so I got the job done. We’re dealing with the rest of it.”

Gage lets out a frustrated sigh, raking his hand through his hair even as the movement makes him wince. “I knew something was going to happen,” he growls. “I fucking knew it.”

“It’s fine,” I try to reassure him, stepping into the room and moving closer to the bed. “Like I said, we’re handling it.”

When he looks at me again, there’s something fierce burning in his eyes. Moving faster than I would’ve expected for someone still recovering from a gunshot wound, he reaches out and grabs my arm, pulling me half onto the bed with him. He kisses me hard, biting at my lips, tangling his free hand into my hair and giving it a firm yank to keep me in place.

It’s a bruising kiss, almost like he wants to punish me for putting myself in danger.

I can sure as fuck relate to that, so I kiss him back the same way, biting down on his lower lip hard enough that he groans into it.

When he lets me go, he’s breathing hard, and if he’s in pain from what we just did, he doesn’t show it.

“You’re okay?” he asks, looking me over again as if checking for anything else I might be hiding.

“Yeah,” I breathe back, nodding as my pulse thrums in my throat. “I’m okay. That’s the truth. The guys were there, and they made sure nothing bad happened. To me, anyway.”

Gage nods and leans back after a moment, letting out a sigh. “Good. That’s all that matters. Anything else, we can handle.”

I nod back and hold his gaze for a second, and it feels like something passes between us. I can’t quite give it a name—or maybe I’m just too scared to—but it stays with me as I leave his room and head to my own to get cleaned up.

ASH

I DON'T THINK anyone can claim that tonight went the way it was supposed to, but I just can't really find it in me to care all that much.

I change out of the clothes I wore to the meetup, swapping out the dark jeans and shirt for sweats and an old t-shirt while I light a cigarette.

Even thinking about it now makes my body hum with arousal. The job might have been messier than it was supposed to be, but damn...

Watching River go after that skeezy son of a bitch was just too fucking good.

Seeing the fire in her eyes, the determination and purpose in the way she walked right into that alley and made him stop beating on that girl? It was hot as hell. I like how much she cares. It's so different from the way people *pretend* to care. Usually just in words, and only until it starts to inconvenience them.

But River cares so fucking much, all the way down to her bones.

I teased her earlier, calling her a softie for sending the dog up to cuddle with Gage, but she isn't, really. She's hard as nails. She's the toughest woman I've ever known. The toughest *person* I've ever known. But at the same time, she has this incredible capacity to care. And somehow, it's survived through all the shit she's been through. People have used her and treated her like shit, and she's lost so much, but she hasn't lost the part of her that cares so much. She doesn't even always see it in herself, and I'm pretty sure if I pointed it out, she'd argue with me about it.

I know her well enough to know that there's no way she's gone to sleep yet after the shit that went down, so I take one last drag and then stub out my cigarette before walking down the hall to her room.

The door is open, and I can tell she just took a shower. The scent of her shampoo and a hint of steam emanate from the attached bathroom as she pads across the bedroom floor wearing nothing but a towel.

Fuck, she's gorgeous.

There's a gracefulness about the way she moves—not like a dancer, but like a predator, almost. Like someone whose confidence comes from so deep within that even in moments when she doubts herself, she still radiates an unstoppable power.

She drops the towel from around her and starts slipping into a tank top and a pair of shorts, and I linger in the doorway, not even trying to stop myself from watching her.

I know her body so well by now that I could draw every line and curve of it in my fucking sleep, but I'll never turn down a chance to look at her like this. Naked and comfortable and relaxed.

"You know, leaving your door open like this is a great way to invite people to ogle you," I tell her after a moment, letting her know I'm here.

She turns around as she starts pulling the shirt over her head, showing off the piercings in her nipples before the shirt goes over them.

"Pretty sure you never needed an invitation," she points out, and I laugh and stride into the room.

"Touché."

She lets the hem of her shirt settle around her waist, glancing at the open bathroom door. "I just wanted to wash that asshole's blood off me. I needed to be clean after having his hands on me."

I nod. "Yeah, I get that. It got ugly back there."

"That's a fucking understatement," she says with a sigh. "It was my fault it went bad too. I didn't mean for it to go down like that, I just... I couldn't watch him beating her up like that. Not without stepping in."

She says it like she's worried I'm going to call her out for being reckless, and I guess it was a reckless thing to do. We were there to do a job, and once it was done, the smart thing would have been to just leave and ignore whatever else was going on.

But that's not who River is. That's not what she does, and from the moment she chose to walk into that alley and show that slimy asshole that he couldn't just abuse other people to make himself feel bigger, I was on her side.

“I’m not going to lecture you, killer,” I say, meandering around the room as I take in the way she’s made the place her own over the past weeks.

She has her nail polish collection lined up on the top of the dresser, the little multicolored bottles forming an interesting rainbow of vibrant colors and shimmers and metallics. In all the time she’s been here, I don’t think I’ve seen her use the same color twice. Except for maybe the black and the red that she brings out for certain occasions. Usually grisly occasions.

“I’m not Gage,” I add, shooting her a grin over my shoulder. “I’m sure he already gave you an earful about it, and I don’t blame him for being worried. But we were right there with you. And sure, it went a little off the rails, but that’s what we signed on for when we agreed to back you up.” I chuckle. “Plus, and I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but shit always tends to go off the rails with us.”

She snorts, finally losing some of the defensive tension in her shoulders. “Yeah, you’ve got a point there.”

I pick a bottle of polish in a shimmery green and roll it around in my hand. With a grin, I walk over to River and steer her toward the bed, pushing her back gently to sit down on it.

She gives me a puzzled look, but I just smile at her, kneeling on the floor in front of her and taking one of her hands in mine. She’s already taken off her old polish, which makes this a lot easier. I shake the bottle and unscrew it and drag the little brush out, focusing intently as I wipe the excess off and start painting her nails with smooth, even strokes.

“Oh,” River breathes. She sounds surprised at first, and then gradually, more and more of the tension bleeds out of her body, and she starts to melt into this little act of care.

I like that a lot.

“You know,” I say after a moment, picking up the conversation again, “we should have expected it, honestly. It’s not like we don’t know you.”

Her brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

“You hate seeing people abuse their power. Especially when it comes to shitty guys acting like they own the world and pushing women around. We’ve all noticed that about you. Luther treating that girl like a toy he could break just because he wanted to was never going to be something you could ignore.”

River sighs and looks away for a second before shrugging. Her nose wrinkles. “It just pisses me off. It shouldn’t be as common as it is, and

people shouldn't just... ignore it. How many other people saw that girl getting yelled at and abused and just let it happen? That's bullshit."

"I agree," I tell her. "It's fucked up, and I know how it feels."

My eyes are focused on the work I'm doing, wiping a little excess polish off the side of her middle finger with my thumb. We've talked about it once before, what happened to me with my mom, and it's usually something I don't like to bring up. But with River, it's different. I know she understands feeling betrayed, and that she knows the pain of being treated like you have no value or autonomy. So it's easier for me to keep talking now.

"My mom, she had the power when I was younger. She was the adult, she made the rules. We needed money, and she saw an opening. And no one questioned it. Not a single one of the older women who paid for my services stopped and said, 'wait, this is kinda fucked up, isn't it?'. Because they didn't give a shit as long as they got theirs. To them, I was as good as a sex toy. Just warmer and more talented."

I look up and give her a wink at that, and she huffs out a breath that's almost a laugh, although her lips turn down in a frown.

"Your mom sucked," River says. "So did all those women."

I nod in agreement, my mind drifting back to a period of my life I usually do my best not to think about.

"Yeah, they did. Probably still do. But the thing is, there are some people out there who get off on treating someone else like an object. There's power in it, and that's what they want. To them, you may as well not have feelings at all because they don't give a shit one way or another. That's the kind of person Luther is. Was."

I can feel the intensity of River's stare as she watches me move from one hand to the next. She's not really staring *at* me so much as *through* me, thinking about what I said, and I let her roll it around in her mind.

When she speaks, she sounds tired. "Why is it like that? Why are people so... fucking gross?"

"Beats me. I never understood it. I'd say it's a money thing, but it's not like my mom had any. Maybe it was how badly she *wanted* money that clouded her mind and turned her into a raging bitch. Who knows? The way I see it, some people are so fucking small that the only way for them to feel big is to try to take away someone else's humanity. Those women my mom pimped me out to could've gotten sex from someone else. They were pretty

much all married, and they were attractive and rich enough that they could've had anyone they wanted, probably. But they wanted it from someone they had power over. It was about control as much as sex."

"They were miserable with their own lives, so they had to try to control someone else," River murmurs.

"Probably. I don't need to tell you how their husbands probably treated them. You know how men like that are."

River nods, and I know she gets the point.

I chuckle a bit, letting go of her hands and moving on to paint her toes, lifting one delicate foot and cradling it in my palm while I apply the polish.

"You know, that's why I started teaching myself sleight-of-hand stuff," I add, tilting my head a bit to glance up at her. "It was something that was just mine. Something those women I fucked didn't give a shit about. It was just for me."

"Is this where you make a joke about how it taught you to be good with your hands?" River cocks a brow, her lips quirking up on one side.

I laugh at that, shaking my head. "Nah, baby, that's natural talent. But it did help when it came to stealing little things from those women. My mom kept all the money they paid for my 'services,' so I would take little trophies from them. Earrings, rings, cash, just shit they left lying around."

"I wish I could have met your mom," River says, her voice taking on a hard edge. "So I could've punched that bitch in the face."

She says it like she means it, and I know she does, which makes me grin up at her. "Goddamn, killer. When you say stuff like that, it makes it impossible to resist you, you know."

Her foot is still in my hand, the polish drying now, and I kiss the top of it softly, working my way up to her ankle. I can feel it when she shivers from the touch of my lips on that sensitive bit of skin, and it makes me keep going. I kiss the inside of her ankle and then up her leg, leaving a trail over her calf and working toward her thigh.

"Ash," she breathes, and when I look up at her, her blue eyes are dark with want.

They mirror the desire I'm feeling right now too, and I scoot her back onto the middle of the mattress and then move to crawl up over her on the bed, finally kissing her on the mouth. The moment our lips touch, I make a hungry noise, sliding my tongue deeper to seek out more of her heat.

Her tongue is right there to meet mine, and she makes a movement like she's about to wrap her arms around me, but I laugh and pull back a bit.

"Hang on a minute. Your polish is still drying," I tell her, giving her a serious look. "You don't want to ruin all my hard work, do you?"

She blinks, as if she forgot all about the nail polish in the heat of the moment. "No, I guess not."

"Good girl." I take her wrists and spread her arms out on the bed, then do the same with her legs, until she's spread eagled across it, open and beautiful. "Stay like that so it can dry. It's very important."

"Oh, I'm sure you're so worried about the polish," she says, rolling her eyes, but I can tell from the flush on her face that she's enjoying the challenge already.

"I am," I insist. "I put a lot of work into it. Now I'm going to put a lot of work into you, and you can just lie there and take it."

She huffs with what I'm sure is supposed to be exasperation, but it's not very convincing. So I just grin at her and continue on, kissing her again, feeling her strain against the urge to touch me. Every time she makes a move like she's going to reach for me, I stop kissing her, waiting until she settles back down to continue.

I make my way from her mouth to her neck, kissing right over her pulse point and then letting her feel a hint of teeth against her neck as well. That makes her gasp and arch up against me a bit, and I huff a laugh against her neck and keep going.

"Ash," she moans. "Fuck, you're such a goddamn tease."

"I'm not teasing," I say, sounding mock-wounded. "I'm savoring. I'm taking my time with you to show you the appreciation you deserve."

I lick her neck after I say that, dragging my tongue over her skin in a slow, deliberate line. River makes a noise that sounds like she's being tortured, but in a sexy way, and I grin and keep going.

From her neck, I move down to her collarbones, just accessible around the collar of her tank top. I spend some time there, making River tremble, and then I push her tank top up, exposing her tits.

They're gorgeous as always, perky and pert, and her nipples are already hard. I can't resist spending some time there, kissing the mounds of her tits and then taking her pierced nipples into my mouth, sucking and kissing at them.

River writhes under me, straining to hold herself still. She moans my name, twisting in place as I suck one nipple and then pinch and roll the other one between my fingers.

“You’re so hot like this,” I tease her, lifting my head to speak as I smirk at her with amusement. “So worked up, so needy.”

“I’m needy because you won’t give me what I want,” she snaps back, but it comes out breathless and turned on, lacking any heat at all.

I just smirk and tug at the piercing through one of her nipples, making her gasp sharply.

“Did you want that?” I ask, letting her hear the husky rasp of my voice.

“Fuuuuck. Yes,” she groans, arching beneath me. “Do it again.”

I press her back down again and bite her nipple hard enough that I know it’ll sting. Then I kiss my way down her chest to her stomach, feeling the way the muscles there flex and ripple as she breathes and moans. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see her fingers curling partway and then uncurling, as if she wants to fist her hands into the covers of the bed but keeps remembering that she’s not supposed to be fucking up her polish.

I grin as I lick and nibble her stomach around the waist band of her shorts, making her huff a little breath of laughter from the way it probably tickles slightly. Hooking my fingers in the waistband, I wiggle her shorts off and down her legs, careful not to fuck up the nail polish on her toes as I go.

As always when River is naked, I just have to take a second to admire how fucking beautiful she is. All those scars and tattoos, the story of a life lived on her skin.

“One day,” I tell her, beginning to kiss my way lower down her body. “I’m going to catalogue every little bit of you. Every scar, every birthmark, every little freckle, even. Just because I want to know every part of you. Everything there is to see and touch and kiss on your body.”

Her cheeks flare pink, and I smile before spreading her legs wider with my hands. Her pussy is already wet, and I can smell the arousal on her as soon as I get close. It makes my mouth water, and I move in, kissing and licking her right there.

“Ash,” she groans, arching against me. She goes to reach for me, probably wanting to thread her fingers into my hair, but I pull back before she can touch me, wagging a finger at her.

“Remember the rules, killer,” I admonish.

She scowls and puts her hands back down on the bed, and I go back to what I was doing, dragging my tongue along her folds and savoring every drop of her sweetness that I get in my mouth.

I circle her clit with the tip of my tongue, humming with pleasure as she shivers. I love pulling those reactions out of her, seeing and feeling the way she comes undone at certain things. It's so clear that she wants me, wants more of this, but I keep her on the edge, pulling back whenever she moves to touch me or starts to get too close to coming. I want her to really feel it before I let her have what she wants.

Plus, torturing her like this is fun.

When her breathing is ragged, intermixed with little whimpers, and it seems like she's close to losing it, I pull away from her pussy, kissing my way back up to her chest to tease at her nipples again.

"You're a bastard," she pants, glaring daggers at me.

"And yet you're fucking dripping for me, so what does that make you?" I shoot back, winking at her. "I'll give you what you want if you can behave."

Instead of promising that she'll be good to get what she wants, River just growls at me, which is so her that it makes me laugh immediately and lean up to kiss her. She can probably taste herself in my mouth, and when she surges up to get more, I press her back down to the bed, making a tscking sound against her lips.

"Asshole," she mutters.

"You love it," I murmur back, biting at her lower lip and then going back to my tease.

I take my time, kissing my way back down her body until River is practically crying with need. It's clear how turned on she is, and when I get back to her pussy, it's dripping wet, the sticky arousal smearing over her thighs.

But I bypass her pussy for now, instead teasing at her ass with my fingers, making her gasp in surprise when that sensitive hole is touched.

"I bet I could fuck your ass with just your own arousal for lube," I mused. "With how soaked your pussy is right now, I could get this little hole so slick and wet. Slick enough to take my cock. I bet you'd love that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," she groans. "Fuck, Ash, just do *something*. Please."

"Well, since you asked so nicely..."

Instead of putting a finger in her ass, as tempting as it is, I press a kiss to her pussy and then get up so I can push off my pants. My cock is rock hard and throbbing, and even though I wasn't the one being edged and teased, I'm definitely still feeling the effect of it. I'm fucking desperate to be inside her.

River is staring right at me, her deep blue eyes trained on my cock, and I let her look her fill, stroking myself slowly and biting my lip at the surge of pleasure. I reach down and press her thighs open even farther, and then finally, I give her what she wants.

Or at least, *most* of what she wants.

I slide into her, but instead of thrusting home in one hard stroke, I keep my pace slow and teasing, making sure that she feels every single inch of my cock. It's torture for me too, because with how wet she is and the way her pussy is gripping my cock, all I want to do is slam into her hard and fast and make her take everything I have to give her.

River practically thrashes under me, pupils so dark and blown wide with lust that her eyes look almost black. There's a wild look about her, like she's right on the edge, and with another savage growl, she finally snaps.

Her patience with being teased and holding still is gone, and she wraps her arms and legs around me, drawing me in and urging me to drive into her as she drags me down for a messy, hard kiss.

"Fuck me," she hisses against my lips.

The teasing was hot, but this is hotter, if I'm being honest.

The way she's done with waiting and has decided to just take what she wants is such a fucking turn-on. Especially considering I'm on the other end of that, being the thing that she wants.

It's easy to give up any hope of teasing her any longer and to lean into the pleasure she wants, fucking into her hard and fast. Her body responds, and her pussy is a wet, hot sheath as I drive my cock into her again and again, savoring the way she feels around me.

"Fuck," I curse, already breathless and overwhelmed by the feel of her. "You're so fucking good, River. You feel so good."

"Give it to me," she urges, snapping her hips up in a way that pushes me even deeper into her pussy. "More, Ash. *More.*"

And I do what she begs me to.

Of course I do.

There was never any other option, really.

Despite all of my teasing, it was always going to end up this way, and I don't have any issue with that. Not when I'm balls deep inside River, and she's clutching at me, nails digging into my shoulders and her legs wrapped tight around my hips.

We're both breathing hard, and when we kiss, it's messy and rough. Constant clashes of lips and teeth and tongues, sharp and intense around harsh gasps of air.

River drags her nails down my back, and I slam into her even harder, spurred on by the hot pleasure crawling up my spine.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," River chants, and when she digs her nails in harder, it feels like she might have broken the skin, but there's no one single part of me that gives a shit about that right now. Not when she's under me, spread around my cock and taking it so good.

With a burst of energy, she rolls us over, and I end up on my back, staring up at her.

She looks even better like this, her hands on my chest, and the tank top still pushed up over her tits. My cock is still buried in her, and she doesn't miss a beat, starting to ride me hard and fast.

Her tits bounce as she works her hips, the piercings catching the light, and I reach up to cup each breast in a hand, thumbing at her nipples and squeezing lightly while she rides me. River tips her head back, eyes closed, and her lips are parted as she fights for breath and keeps moving.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I murmur. "The way you lose yourself like this. Ride my cock, killer. I want you to fucking soak my dick with your sweetness."

"Ash..." My name is a whimper.

I want to touch her everywhere, and I let go of one of her tits to grab on to her hip instead, pulling her in and in and in, so that our hips meet with no space between them.

She leans down to kiss me again, and I roll us one more time, getting River on her back again. She gasps and stares up at me, and I grin, kissing her harder, pressing my tongue into her mouth to sweep through and lay my claim for the moment.

Her body trembles and arches against mine, and I don't try to keep her down or make her be still this time. Instead, I push her knees up toward her shoulders, bending her in half.

River takes it like a champ, like I fucking knew she would, and she cries out when I drive into her so hard the bed rocks beneath us.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I grunt. “You like that, don’t you?”

The angle makes it deep as fuck, and I can feel it when I bottom out inside her, hitting the spot that makes her nearly shriek with pleasure over and over again.

The combination of her cries and the way her pussy grips my cock so tight every time I hit that spot has my head spinning. Her walls are velvety and wet, and when they rub against me, it sends shivers of heat and electric pleasure down my spine.

“You’re in my fucking soul, killer,” I rasp out. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to get enough of you.”

“Keep trying,” she groans, her eyelids fluttering as her mouth drops open.

I don’t know if she’s talking about the way I try to get my cock a little deeper each time I drive into her, or if she means something bigger than that—like the way it feels as if we’re trying to exchange atoms as we fuck, so that even when we separate, we’ll each still have a piece of the other.

Fuck, I want that. That’s what I need. A piece of this woman imprinted on my damn soul.

After a few more hard thrusts, I pull out of her, and she groans, opening her eyes to look at me. They’re hazy and heat-filled, making her seem drunk on pleasure and a little out of it from how good it all feels. I grin and kiss her again before flipping her over so she’s lying on her stomach on the bed.

Before she can push up to her hands and knees, I grab her ass and pull it toward me, leaving her upper body pressed against the rumpled sheets. This is the other position we talked about that first night I visited her in this room, and I’d be lying if I said she doesn’t look hot as fuck like this.

I’m so hard, and she’s so wet that it’s easy to press right back into her, and when I hit that same spot again, River moans so deep that I can feel it all throughout my body.

It feels fucking good.

She feels fucking good.

Leaning over her, I reach for her hands, threading our fingers together before pinning them over her head. River doesn’t fight it, squeezing my

hands as I fuck into her, reaching the end of my stamina because there's no way I'm not going to burst from this.

She's right there with me, and as we move together, the pleasure builds higher and higher. We're both chasing it, breathless and needy for more, and we rut together almost frantically, both of us so close.

When River finally comes, it's with a sharp cry, and she goes tight as a vise around my cock like she's trying to milk me for all I have. I bite down on her shoulder, pumping into her a few more times before I groan my own release and fill her up with it.

"So... fucking... good," I pant out with each spasm of my cock.

Our sweaty skin sticks together, and it takes a while before either of us can move or speak or even get a full breath. As the pounding of my heart finally starts to slow a bit and I let go of River's hands, I can tell that her polish is definitely smudged.

I roll off of her and huff a laugh.

"So much for a neat job," I tell her as I turn to look at her, shaking my head in mock disappointment. "You were just too insatiable to hold still."

"Oh, that is *definitely* your fault," she shoots back. "If you weren't such a tease, then I wouldn't have had to move."

There's something I like a lot about being at fault for her not being able to stay still, and I gaze at her for a moment with heated pride.

"I'll redo it," I promise. "It's the least I can do."

River just laughs and leans over to kiss me, hot and sweaty.

RIVER

THE NEXT DAY, I have to go take the envelope to Alec.

I'm dreading it for more reasons than not wanting to see his smug ass, but there's nothing to be done about that.

We say goodbye to Gage, who gives us the usual warning to be careful and make sure we don't do anything stupid, and then we get in the car to head over to Alec's stupid empty office building.

"You think he's going to start some shit?" Knox asks as he slams the car door behind him.

"No way to know until we get there," Priest replies, settling in behind the wheel. "If he does, then..."

"Then what?" Ash wants to know. "I'm pretty sure the goon squad Alec keeps on the payroll isn't going to let us just waltz up there and keep him from doing whatever he's going to do about his little rat getting killed."

I wrinkle my nose at the memory of Luther, already in a sour mood because I'm still playing the role of Alec's errand girl.

"It's not surprising he had someone like Luther working for him," I mutter. "Alec is pure evil, so of course he does business with the scum of Detroit."

"Just keep your cool," Knox tells me, although the look he shoots me lets me know he's aware of how ironic those words sound coming from him. "I dumped the body out of town, so unless someone was looking for it specifically, they're not gonna find it. It's not like Alec has to know that we were the ones who killed the fucker."

It's a good point. Alec wasn't there, and judging from the way Luther carried himself and the place he was hanging out, anyone could have been

responsible for his death. No need to incriminate myself or the guys without a good reason.

“That’s a good point,” I muse. “I’ll be sure not to mention anything about Luther beyond the logistics of the drop and how that went. I don’t know what kinds of tabs Alec keeps on the people who work for him, but he might not even find out Luther is dead until he has another job for him.”

We reach the building several minutes later and park outside, then make our way into the imposing structure.

There are guards in the lobby again. They look different from the ones we dealt with the first time I was here, but they seem to know the drill just like the original guys did. They wave me toward the elevator, one of them following me to ride up with me, and they keep the guys behind, making them wait.

I’d feel better with the Kings of Chaos at my back, but I know I have to do this alone, so I keep my cool the way Knox suggested and head up to the floor where Alec’s office is. Just like last time, it’s empty and seems too big for one man and his henchmen or whatever they’re called to just be doing business. But I guess when you’re the richest man in the city, you can do whatever you want, including buying up an entire building and only using one office in it.

Alec is behind the desk again, typing away on his computer. This time, he glances up as soon as I walk in, giving me a cool look.

“How did it go?” he asks.

I pull out the envelope I’ve got stashed inside my jacket and toss it onto his desk.

He holds my gaze for a second and then reaches for it, opening it to rifle through the contents. His dark gray eyes narrow slightly as he examines whatever is inside, and then he nods in satisfaction.

“Well done,” he says, giving me that smug, soulless smile of his. “It’s all here.”

“Great,” I reply, my tone clipped. It seems like that’s going to be all, and I get ready to ask if I can go, but then Alec gets up and comes around the desk.

“Walk with me for a bit, will you?” he asks.

It’s phrased as a request, but I know that refusing isn’t actually an option. Not with someone like him. Anxiety curls in my gut, but I try to shove it away, giving him a nod and letting him lead me out of the office.

We head down the long hallway and past the elevator to the stairs. Alec pushes the door to the stairwell open and then gestures for me to go ahead of him. I do, the back of my neck prickling with unease at having him behind me.

Every part of me is screaming out that it's not safe to be in a small space with this man, but I swallow down the feeling and just keep walking.

"I heard something interesting about Luther," Alec says as we go down one set of stairs and then another. "He's dead, it would seem. Did you forget to mention that when I asked you how the job went last night?"

I swallow again, even though my mouth and throat are suddenly so dry it's almost painful. I'm grateful Alec can't see my face, since I have to work to get my features back into a neutral expression.

"He died? I didn't know that. He was very much alive when he gave me the envelope and took the briefcase," I say, going for ignorance just like I planned to if he brought this up. "But he seemed like a dirtbag, from our interaction. So maybe someone finally gave him what he deserved."

"Hah," Alec says, but there is no humor behind it at all. "That isn't often how the world works," he continues. Then he holds up a hand. "Stop here."

He gestures for me to go through a door that takes us into another hallway. We're on a different floor, but it all looks almost identical to the one we were just on, where his office is located, and I'm confused about why we're here at all.

"There are a few other interesting details I learned about Luther," Alec says, stepping around me so he can lead the way down this hall. "For example, I know there's a young woman who's been in his company lately. And I know that she got away after he was killed."

My stomach works itself into a knot. *Fuck*. He knows an awful lot for someone who wasn't even there.

I try to keep my cool, keeping my face impassive, even though Alec isn't facing me. I can't afford to give anything away now, and it's hard to judge how Alec is even feeling about all these things he's saying, since his voice and expression have maintained the same cool smugness that they always have.

Is he fishing for a confession? Is he just flexing the reach of his knowledge?

It's impossible to say, but the hairs on the back of my neck are still standing on end, and I know that nothing good is going to come from this conversation. I can feel it all the way down to my toes.

"Yeah... I saw the girl he had with him," I admit, because lying about that much is pointless. Alec clearly knows the girl was there at the bar, and he knows I was there too. I don't give any more than that, though, not sure what else is safe to say.

Even the fact that Alec knows about the girl at all makes my skin crawl, considering what he saw fit to put me and my sister through. I hate thinking about all the reasons that girl could have been there with Luther.

Was she payment for a previous job? A human being traded for blackmail material instead of a suitcase full of cash?

Fucking hell.

"Here," Alec says, finally coming to a stop and opening a door. It's not one of the glass-doored offices, but something that seems like it might be a storage room. He flicks a light on, and the first thing I see are shelves, lining the walls from floor to ceiling. They're all empty, another sure sign that there aren't a bunch of people working in this building.

The second thing I see is a flash of blonde hair, just like last night in that alley.

Only this time, there's no sound and no movement. Just a blonde head of hair, attached to the same girl who was with Luther.

Lying dead on the floor.

She's even paler than she was when I last saw her, and her face is bloody. Blood is drying on her clothes, and her eyes are open, staring sightlessly at the ceiling of the room.

Horror surges through me, so strong and intense that bile rises up into my throat. It burns like acid, and I have to swallow it down and breathe through my nose to avoid throwing up right here on the spot.

"She didn't do it," I choke out, unable to look away from the girl on the floor. My voice is raspy, and the words feel like they shred my vocal cords. "She's not the one who killed your man. Why did you...? She didn't deserve this."

Alec makes a dismissive gesture that I see out of the corner of my eye.

"She was a loose end," he says, his voice cool. "And I don't like loose ends."

He doesn't have to make the threat more overt than that for me to hear it, and it chills my skin. Alec Beckham doesn't pull a single punch, and he clearly doesn't care who he has to kill to get his point across.

But then he smiles, the sociopath's smile that makes me sick to see.

"In the end, it all worked out well anyway. You see, she had the briefcase of money that was supposed to be Luther's payment." He cocks his head, shrugging lightly, his gaze still burning into me. "She must have taken it from him when he died. So now I have my money back *and* the information I wanted from Luther. A win-win, the way I see it. For me, anyway."

I stare down at the girl's body, cold numbness flooding my veins.

Yeah.

It was a win for *him*.

And it was definitely a loss for everyone involved who isn't Alec Beckham.

The man beside me keeps talking, but for a second, I barely hear him. I can't rip my focus away from the dead girl on the floor, everything else but her lifeless form seeming to fade into a murky haze. I keep thinking about how scared she was. How she ran for her life when I gave her that money.

But she could never have run fast enough to escape a man like Alec.

"You'll have to do another test, of course," Alec says coolly, and those words jerk me out of my stupor. I whip my head around, focusing on him again.

"What?"

"This one was too messy," he says. "I won't say you failed, exactly, since you did bring me the envelope. But you certainly didn't earn a right to become part of the Kyrio Society. Not with the sloppy execution of what should've been a simple task."

Anger rises in me, and I clench my jaw as it roils in my gut. That's fucking bullshit, but it's clear that Alec is just going to keep changing the rules of the game to suit himself. He's holding all the cards here, and he wants to make sure I know it.

"Fine," I bite out.

At this point, I don't want to argue. I just want to get out of this little airless room and away from the dead body on the floor.

I'm looking right at Alec, watching his mouth move as he gives me my next assignment. I hear what he's saying, and I nod, but it's a struggle to

process it and make myself remember the details. My mind is full of static, full of the images of that girl's scared, strung out expression while she was in the booth with Luther. While she was in the alley, watching Priest, Knox, and Ash kill him.

It shouldn't have ended up like this.

But somehow, it always fucking does.

As he continues laying out the details of my new assignment, Alec reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small device.

"Take this," he says, pressing it into my hand.

I do, nodding again and slipping it into my own pocket.

My heart is racing, and I feel clammy and sick. The bile that I swallowed down before burns its way back up my throat, and I know there are only so many times I'm going to be able to push it back before it comes up for good. I'm just hoping it waits until this meeting from hell is over.

Eventually, Alec is done listening to himself talk. He nods to me, giving a clear dismissal. Thank fuck for that.

I want to run, to sprint out of this room and all the way to the elevators. To leave this fucking place behind and never look back. But I've dealt with enough predatory men that I know better than to make myself look like prey in front of Alec. So I force myself to walk at a normal speed, getting into the elevator and taking it back down to the lobby where the guys are waiting.

Ash takes one look at my face and takes a half step toward me, opening his mouth to say something, but I shake my head, just wanting to get out of here.

"Are you okay?" he murmurs as I join them.

I give a small, tight shake of my head as the men all form a tight knot around me.

No. No, I'm fucking not.

We step out of the building and start heading back to the car. I make it halfway there before the nausea takes over, the contents of my stomach forcing themselves upward in a violent rush. I stop in my tracks, pushing past Knox to bend over and hurl in the bushes.

"What the hell happened up there?" Priest asks, and I can hear worry in his normally calm tone. His hands smooth my hair back from my face as I heave.

"He..."

I have to swallow and swallow again before I can get any more words out. Fuck, I wish I had water to rinse my mouth out. No, scratch that. I wish I had a fifth of whiskey to wash the memories away, even if that would only be temporary.

“That girl from the drop,” I manage to tell them, my voice raspy and halting. “He killed her.”

“*Fuck.*” Knox curses, exhaling hard. “Does he know? That we...”

He glances around, like it’s not safe to say anything this close to the building.

Hell, it’s probably not.

“Yeah. Probably. I mean, he pretty much implied that he knows everything that happened. I just...”

My throat feels like it’s closing up, cutting off whatever I was going to say. I feel horrible and fucked up, shaky and sick. I can’t believe Alec did that. Just killed that girl for no real reason. Just because he could.

Did I get her killed by giving her that briefcase?

I was trying to do something good, to give her a chance to get away and start a new life like Avalon did. That money was supposed to be Luther’s, and he was dead, so it seemed like poetic justice to give it to the girl he’d been so happily abusing until he died.

But if I hadn’t interfered, if I hadn’t stepped in to get Luther away from her, maybe she would still be alive. Miserable and trapped in an abusive and fucked up situation, but not dead and sprawled across a fucking storage room floor like trash.

Why does everyone I try to help end up dead?

“Hey,” Ash says, his voice soft.

I finally straighten a little, and he rests his palms on my cheeks, gazing into my eyes with sympathy burning in his. His hands feel cool on my heated face, and he tucks my silver hair behind my ears, his fingers gentle.

“He’s just trying to mess with you,” he murmurs. “He’s trying to get in your head. Don’t let him.”

I nod, but that’s a hell of a lot easier said than done.

RIVER

IT TAKES a few deep breaths before I can pull myself back together, but I manage to do it... a little, at least. Enough that I can make it the rest of the way back to the car. I want to get farther away from here—I don't like feeling vulnerable this close to where I met with Alec. It feels like at any second, he could look out of one of those hundreds of windows and see me having a breakdown right outside. I hate that thought.

So we head back to the car, pile inside quickly, and start driving for home.

I'm in the backseat, staring blankly out the window, and I'm still shaking. A sour taste still sits in my mouth, the aftertaste of vomit and the acidic tang of fear. I can still see that girl on the floor, lifeless and caked with blood. Just a pile of meat and bones, all her hopes and idiosyncrasies and thoughts snuffed out because a powerful man decided it should be so. Eventually, the image of her starts to blend with the memories of my sister, lying dead in that alley, and then Gage, lying on the dock, unmoving and bloody.

There's just so much death. So much fucking pain.

And it all comes back to one man. Alec fucking Beckham. He sits in his office, pulling strings, giving orders, ruining people's lives. Because he can. Because he has the power and the money to do whatever the fuck he wants, no matter who it hurts. No matter who suffers and dies for it.

My hands clench into fists in my lap, and when my cheeks start to ache, I realize I'm clenching my jaw too, so hard that my teeth are grinding together.

I have to take a deep breath and then another, in through my nose and out through my mouth, trying to shake off this terrible feeling.

Knox is driving this time, and he looks at me in the rearview mirror as I finally clear my head enough to blink back at him.

“So what else happened?” he wants to know. “Are you in the super-secret club now?”

“No,” I mutter. “Not yet. Alec gave me another task. He said I still need to prove myself, since the first job didn’t go how it was supposed to.”

“Ugh,” Ash groans. “Great. Another fetch quest?”

I lick my lips and think back to what Alec told me as I attempted to keep myself from spiraling into a full-blown panic attack. It was hard to latch on to his words, but I’m glad I forced myself to try to focus, because I’m able to recall it more clearly now.

“He wants me to get something off of this guy’s laptop. Some guy named Michael Yates. He gave me—” I dig in my pocket and pull out the little device that he handed to me. “This thing. I plug it in to the man’s laptop, and it’ll do the work, I guess. It’ll hack into the computer if I can get access to it.”

I turn the small device around in my fingers, as I speak, glancing down at it. It just looks like a regular thumb drive, but Alec clearly has access to more advanced tech than that. It’s legit spy gear or some shit, probably.

“He keeps changing the fucking rules,” Knox growls, thumping his hand on the center console.

Priest gives him a look, but he sounds pissed as well when he speaks. “How many more of these little tasks is he going to give you?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “He said the first one doesn’t count because it got ‘too messy.’” The air quotes I make are vicious with frustration. “He can just keep changing the goal post as many times as he fucking wants, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

That’s the part that burns me up the most. The only real choice I have is to play his game. No matter how much I don’t want to.

“I want to know what his angle is,” Ash says, frowning. “The first task felt like he was just fucking with you, or testing you to see what you’d do. This one feels like he almost wants you to fail.”

I wouldn’t put it past Alec to try to set me up for failure. He’s fucked with my life so goddamn much, all the way back to when I was a just a

teenager trying to keep my head above water, trapped in the clutches of men who took vicious pleasure in hurting me.

He probably *would* like to see me fail, but I make up my mind right here and now that it's not going to happen. I won't fail this test, and I'm not going to let him fuck with my life like that. Not again.

The rest of the drive home passes in a blur. I'm barely paying attention to anything, too caught up in my own head and my own thoughts. I've got that fucked up, too full feeling, like there's too much going on inside me, stretching me past the point where I can keep it all in. I think about the razor blades in my drawer, and my skin starts to itch with the urge to drag one down my arm or my thigh, to let the pain ground me.

We pull up to the house, and Ash is the first one out of the car. He looks at Knox, who hasn't gotten out from behind the wheel, and just nods. Knox nods back, as if some kind of silent communication has passed between them.

I don't have the headspace to try to figure out what's going on with that, so I push my door open to start to get out of the car too. But Priest catches my arm from where he sits beside me, shaking his head.

"We're taking you somewhere," Knox says.

"I'll make sure Gage is good," Ash tells us from outside the car, shooting me a wink as he adds, "I'll wrestle him back into bed if I have to."

"Okay," I say slowly, shutting the door again.

Where the hell are they taking me?

RIVER

I HAVE no fucking clue what's going on as Knox pulls away from the house, but I don't object. I don't really have the energy to put up a fuss, and I trust the guys enough that even though I don't know what's going on, I'm not worried.

We drive out of the city, and I rummage around in the middle console compartment until I find a little container of breath mints, which goes a long way toward getting rid of the coppery taste in my mouth. Then I settle back and watch the buildings and traffic turn into smaller residential streets and then a little dirt road surrounded by lots of trees.

We head into a patch of woods not far outside of Detroit, and as we drive deeper into the forest, I gaze out at our surroundings, even more confused than I was before.

"Come on," Knox says. He stops the car at the end of the road and gets out, and Priest and I follow him as he walks around to the trunk and rifles around inside. When he straightens, he passes a handgun over to Priest, then gives one to me.

"What's going on?" I ask him, accepting the weapon but staring down at it with my brows pulled together. "What are we doing out here? I need to get to work on this next task for Alec, I don't have time to fuck around."

Knox just shakes his head, grinning that slightly feral grin of his. He crosses his tattooed arms over his chest, making his muscles bunch and flex.

"We'll get to that fucking assignment Alec gave you," he says. "But right now, I know you need to blow off some steam. So we're gonna shoot some shit."

He gives me a knowing look, and I remember that time when he walked in on me cutting myself. All of the guys are aware of my cutting habit, since I never made much effort to hide my emotionally damaged side from them. But none of them have ever judged me for it, and I think this is their way of trying to give me another outlet for all the pain and fucked up feelings to escape.

It still feels stupid to be doing something like this when I have so much else on my plate, but they're not wrong. I need to ease the pressure inside my chest and in my head if I'm going to be able to focus on the task ahead of me.

"Okay," I relent, letting out a shaky breath. "Fine."

Knox grins again and starts walking deeper into the woods, leaving Priest and me to follow him.

He has a bag slung over his shoulder, and he leads us about a half mile into the trees before stopping at a little clearing. Whistling a tune, he starts hanging up targets on the trees, just simple bullseyes for us to aim at.

"There we go." Knox waggles his eyebrows as he turns and heads back over to me. "You know what to do from here."

And he's right. I do. So I take the gun he gave me and heft it in my hand before lining up my shot with the target.

In my mind, it's not just a bullseye. It's Alec's face. He's smiling that creepy fucking smile that doesn't reach his eyes, and there's a smug twist to it. He thinks he owns the world and can treat the people in it like playthings, and he's so fucking wealthy and connected that he's probably never once had to face the consequences of his actions.

Letting hatred for Alec burn through me like a bolt of lightning, I fire my first shot, putting a bullet right in the center of the target as I imagine blowing his head off.

Again and again, I shoot, picturing Alec's face every time. I think about killing him, shooting him, sending a bullet tearing through his heart. Or his face.

I don't stop until I run out of ammo, and when I do, Priest hands me his gun so that I can keep going. I was skeptical about this little outing at first, but it really does do a lot of the same things that cutting does. It gives me focus, helping to take me out of the agitation and pain in my head and my heart. It's almost like meditation. Almost Zen.

I'm breathing hard by the time someone touches me on the shoulder, breaking me out of the zone I've slipped into. I do feel better, so that's something.

Knox wraps his arms around me from behind, nuzzling at my neck a little.

"It's fucking hot watching you shoot like this," he murmurs into my ear, and his deep voice sends a shiver through me. "But you're too good of a shot, little fox. You need a challenge."

"What kind of challenge?"

"Hmm. I think you need more distractions while you shoot."

I open my mouth to ask him what he has in mind, but his hand is already moving before I can get the words out. He stays behind me, one arm looped around my waist while the other hand unbuttons my pants and tugs down the zipper. Then his hand delves down the front of my pants, his fingers slipping beneath the waistband of my panties.

"Keep shooting," he tells me as he starts rubbing my clit.

I take a breath but do as he says, trying to keep my aim locked and my shots precise. It's a lot harder when there are jolts of pleasure zapping through me, and I can feel how big Knox's hand is, pressed against the front of my pussy.

The next shot I take hits the side of the target, and I make a face. Knox slips a finger into me, and I'm already starting to get wet, so it's easy for him to slide inside.

"Knox," I moan, licking my lips.

"Keep shooting," he tells me again, his voice a low rumble in my ear. "Keep that focus. If you can."

There's a teasing tone to his words, and I narrow my eyes, trying to get my aim back. My arm is still straight, and I fire off a couple of good shots, but then Knox adds another finger, and I shoot wide again, bucking against his hand as he starts to fuck me with two thick fingers.

"Fuck," I breathe out.

It's hard not to start arching against Knox, more focused on how good he's making me feel than the targets in front of me. I drag in one shaky breath and then another, trying to keep my attention on the targets, to keep hitting the bullseyes. But it's definitely harder when Knox's thick fingers are working in and out of me, his rough palm pressed to my clit.

Heat burns through me, rising higher and higher, making it even harder to concentrate. I can feel the pleasure building even as I squeeze the trigger, and it takes my breath away, leaving me panting after every shot.

Before, I was hitting the center of the target dead on basically every time, but now the target is speckled with random holes from the shots landing all over the place.

Knox doesn't let up, fucking me harder and faster with his fingers. I can hear them going deep into my soaking wet pussy, and every time he brushes that spot inside me, it makes me see stars.

My fingers clench around the gun in my hand, and it only takes another few seconds before that pleasure is reaching its peak, sending me spiraling over the edge with a sharp cry.

"Fuck! Oh, fuck!"

I shoot one more time, and it barely hits the tree at all, grazing the bark and going wider than any of the other ones. I laugh breathlessly, still shaking as I come down from my orgasm.

"You cheated," I tell Knox, squirming against him.

He chuckles in my ear, his voice warm and husky. "There are no rules to this game, River. We can play it however we like."

He curls his fingers inside me, teasing my g-spot, then drags them out of my pussy slowly, making me gasp.

Priest has been standing close by this whole time, watching his cousin finger me so effectively that all the hours I've spent doing target practice over the years basically went out the window. He steps closer to us as Knox drags his wet fingers over the skin of my lower belly, and when our gazes meet, his blue eyes are hungry and intent.

"Did Knox get you ready for me?" He drops to his knees in front me as he speaks, looking like he wants to devour me whole. "Are you wet enough for me to lap you up?"

He works my pants open a little more, tugging them down over my hips along with my underwear until they're bunched up around my thighs. The way the fabric gathers around my legs makes it hard to spread them open, but he doesn't seem to mind that one bit. His fingers graze over the tender skin of my upper thighs, drifting toward my still throbbing pussy.

"Priest—"

I barely get his name out before he dives in. His touch turns from barely there to rough and demanding, and he uses his fingers to spread my pussy

lips open with his fingers so he can start to eat me out.

I'm still sensitive from the orgasm Knox gave me, and that makes the feeling of Priest's tongue on my clit feel amplified by ten. I drop the gun I've been holding, forgetting about shooting and the targets and all of that shit. I'm losing myself to the feeling of Priest lapping at my pussy, licking up all the wetness of my arousal and my orgasm.

He spent a good period of time trying to hate me, trying to be numb to anything I made him feel, and I did the same to him. But the moment those walls between us crumbled, and I felt the true force of his desire for me, I knew I would never be the same.

Every time he touches me, I feel it. And I fucking love it.

If it wasn't for Knox supporting me from behind, I probably would have gone weak-kneed already. My eyelids droop as I drag in a few breaths, trying to keep myself upright.

"Fuck, River," Knox groans in my ear. His voice has that rough, turned on quality to it that makes me shiver even more. "Look what you do to him. You've got my cousin on his knees, eating your pussy like he's starving. You turn him on so damn much. You make him want you so bad. You make *me* want you so bad."

I look down at Priest, my breath coming in short gasps. I can tell he's hard in his pants from the way his cock is pressing against the front of them. He keeps licking my pussy, alternating between teasing my clit and working his tongue inside me.

My heart is racing, and I can feel a new kind of pleasure building inside me, the kind that can only come from a hot, wet tongue against my most sensitive parts. I'm getting worked up, and it would be easy to grind against Priest's face and let myself fall into another orgasm. But instead of leaning into it, I pull away, moving out from between them. My fingers only shake a bit when I pull my pants back up and do my fly up again.

Knox looks at me, head tipped to one side with curiosity. "You okay, little fox? Why'd you stop?" he asks, a note of concern in his voice.

"Oh, I'm good. But you said there needed to be a challenge," I tell him with a smirk. My gaze flits between him and Priest as the blond-haired man rises to his feet. I lick my lips, my pulse already kicking into high gear as I say, "Whoever can catch me first can have me first."

I don't wait to watch those words sink in. Instead, I just turn and take off, running deeper into the woods.

It still only takes a few seconds before I hear a roar of laughter from Knox. Then two sets of footsteps come crashing through the trees behind me—the sounds of Knox and Priest giving in to the chase and taking off after me.

I don't know if they've ever done anything like this before, but they don't seem to have any problem indulging my fantasy right now. I'm sure Knox is turned on as fuck by it—the idea of the hunt, of chasing me down to get what they want.

And I love it too. I feel primal and free, focused on nothing but the thrill of the chase and the heat pounding inside of me.

I don't know this area, so I can't run full-out. I have to watch out for tree limbs and roots and patches of leaves and pine needles that are deceptively slippery. But I manage to not fall, even as Priest and Knox get closer and closer, their longer legs eating up the space between us.

From my left, Priest comes racing toward me, bursting out of the trees to try to catch me. His ice-blue eyes glint as he puts on an extra surge of speed, and there's nothing neutral about his expression when I glance over at him. But just before he reaches me, Knox comes out of nowhere, plowing into him and bowling him over.

Priest goes down hard, landing with a low grunt, and Knox scrambles back up to try to get at me. Before he can, Priest is grabbing his ankle, knocking him off balance and sending him sprawling face down into the leaves on the ground.

"Fuck," Knox grunts, kicking to get away from Priest. "Fuck off."

"You fuck off," Priest snaps back. He lunges for Knox, and the two of them wrestle in the dirt, trying to get the upper hand.

I can tell they're not really angry at each other, just caught up in the energy of the chase as they try to get to me to claim what they want.

I use their tussle as a distraction and take off running again, laughing when I hear Knox curse as they realize I'm gone. But the head start is only temporary, and soon enough, I feel a hand close around my arm, yanking me back hard against a warm body.

It's Priest, breathing hard and sweaty, and I tip my head back to look at him.

"I caught you," he says, and even out of breath, the hungry promise in his tone makes me shiver.

“For now,” I retort, just as breathless as he is. I twist my way out of his grasp, trying to dart away again.

But he’s not going to let me go so easily. I don’t have time to get more than a couple paces away before he’s tackling me down to the ground and rolling me over to pin me down.

My heart races from the exertion and from having Priest on top of me, and my body is still thrumming with heat and need. The chase was enough to make adrenaline rush through my veins, but I don’t want to run anymore, now that he has me.

I want him to give us what we both need.

Licking my lips, I gaze up at him, meeting his eyes in the dappled sunlight of the woods.

“Fuck me,” I whisper raggedly. “Fuck me into the dirt.”

Possessive heat flashes in Priest’s expression, and he makes a sound almost like a growl.

“Fuck, yes,” he hisses back. Keeping me pinned, he reaches down between us and shoves his pants down, freeing his cock, which is already hard and flushed with need.

He shoves my pants down too, dragging them and my panties down to my ankles with rough, jerky movements.

There’s no time wasted, no teasing, no foreplay. The foreplay was them chasing me through the woods, fighting each other to get to me, crashing through the trees like animals. Priest can’t wait anymore, and he drives his cock into me immediately. He fills me up in one stroke, so hard and so deep that I can barely remember the time when this man had trouble keeping it up.

It’s definitely not a problem now, and he fucks me with hard, almost brutal strokes, bottoming out with the loud slap of skin on skin that rings out around us in the woods.

It sets me on fire in the best way, and all I can do is moan and shake, squirming under him while he takes what he wants from me.

There’s the sound of rustling above us, and I blink against the sunlight filtering down to see Knox standing there, streaked with dirt, one hand wrapped around his cock as he watches.

That same ravenous hunger I saw in Priest’s expression is in his cousin’s dark eyes, and it makes me swallow hard to see it. I know he wants

to be a part of this, and he's enjoying every second of it, even if Priest is the one actually fucking me at the moment.

But Priest doesn't let him be left out for long.

He pulls out of me and then flips me over so fast it makes my head spin. "Get on your hands and knees," he rasps out.

I hurry to obey, pressing up onto all fours as dirt and leaves cling to my shirt and hair. I'm facing Knox now, and Priest leans over me, nipping at my earlobe before he speaks.

"Suck him off. Suck his cock while I fuck you."

Oh, shit. Goosebumps break out over my skin, my toes curling inside my shoes.

Hearing Priest give that order is sexy enough, but the thought of having them both share me in the middle of the woods like this is enough to have me panting. They were right that the target practice helped ease my stress, but if I'm being honest...

This is everything I really needed.

I nod wordlessly, and my pussy throbs, wanting Priest to shove himself back inside and fill up the empty space he left behind.

As if he can read my mind, he does just that, driving right back into me in a brutal thrust. I cry out at the sudden sensation, and that's the only opening Knox needs to shove his cock into my mouth.

"There you go, baby. Open up for me."

He grabs a handful of my hair in his hand, fisting his fingers tight around the strands, and drags me in even more, sliding more of his cock down my throat.

I choke a little, gagging on the sudden intrusion, but he doesn't pull back. He doesn't let up. He keeps fucking my mouth, using me in the way he knows I like, pushing me right up to the edge of what I can take in a way that lights my blood on fire.

Meanwhile, Priest's fingers are digging into my hips, and he snaps his hips forward, burying himself inside me again and again.

I can barely think like this. Hell, I can barely breathe. I'm covered in leaves and dirt, pinned between the two of them with nowhere to go...

And I love it.

Everything about it is dirty and primal, raw and unrestrained. And I can't fucking get enough.

I moan around Knox's cock in my mouth, and he shoves into my throat at the same time that Priest hits a deep spot inside me with the head of his cock. He fucks me in brutal strokes, hammering his cock into me until stars dance at the edges of my vision.

My mouthful of cock muffles the low, deep moan I let out as I fall apart, trembling and trying to stay upright as the orgasm rips through me.

Wave after wave of pleasure pours through my limbs, and it doesn't let up, because they keep going. I'm so fucking sensitive, and every time Priest fucks into me, it just cranks it all up another notch.

"That's it," Knox groans, using his hold on my hair to yank me in harder. "Fucking take it. You look so good like this. Blissed out and drunk on our cocks. I love how fucking responsive you are."

"So beautiful," Priest murmurs, gripping my hip with one hand while he drags his fingers over the letters carved into my back with the other. "No one else can make us feel like this. No one else *owns* us like you do. Our perfect, filthy angel."

They don't let up on me, and the combination of the sensations rushing through me and the sound of their deep voices murmuring words of praise is enough to have me climbing toward another orgasm already. It feels too good to hold back, and I come in a rush, dripping all over Priest's cock as he keeps fucking me.

"Shit," he grunts, his thrusts turning choppy. "You're so tight right now. I'm close—"

My pussy clenches around him again, and when he loses it, I swear I can feel every single pump of his cum inside me.

Knox isn't far behind. He stops thrusting into my mouth, instead using his hold on my hair to keep me still as he pushes all the way into my throat and holds there, coming in hot bursts down my throat.

I gag a little, and when he pulls out, strings of sticky drool and cum connect my lips to his cock. Craning my neck a little and leaning forward, I drag my tongue over his shaft, cleaning up the last remnants of his orgasm. I lap at him like a cat, still dazed and cock drunk, just like Knox said.

Slowly, my breathing slows down and my heart stops crashing against my ribs. I take one last swipe at Knox's dick with my tongue before he pulls me away, tilting my head up as he looks down at me.

"You okay?" he asks, his voice gentler than I've heard it in a long time. I know he's not just asking about the sex, making sure they weren't too

rough with me. He's asking about... everything.

"Yeah," I whisper.

Maybe I'm still not great, or even *good*, but I feel so much better than I did.

"That's our girl."

Knox lets go of my hair, and Priest wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me up so that I'm kneeling in the dirt, his cock still inside me. He presses us together so that my back is flush with his front, and then Knox drops to his knees and moves in to complete the sandwich, his bulk offering warmth and strength as they hold me between them.

I let myself float for a bit, tethered between their muscled bodies and feeling so much better than I would've thought possible just an hour or so ago.

"How did you know I needed that?" I ask quietly. "Not just the target practice. All of it."

Knox chuckles. "Of course we knew, little fox. Because we know you."

RIVER

WE STAY like that for a little while, the three of us locked together in a messy, warm embrace that makes me feel better than anything has all day. It's getting late in the day though, and eventually we start to separate and fix our clothes so we can get out of here and head back home.

Before I can get my pants back on, Priest reaches out and scoops his sticky cum up on his fingers, pushing it back into my pussy firmly. It's been leaking out steadily ever since he pulled out, and there's something possessive about the way he pushes it back in before I tug my panties back up.

Arousal shoots through me all over again, making my clit throb a bit as I finish getting dressed. Even after what we just did, stuff like that still gets me going.

It's so caveman like, and it reminds me of the way he stuffed his cum into me that night when they all fucked me on the hood of the car in the rain. He might not have technically fucked me that night the way his brothers did, but he was right there with them, showing me how he felt about me just like they did.

It's a good memory, and maybe it's weird to say this, but being stuffed full of Priest's cum is a good feeling.

Once we're all put back together, we make our way back to where we started, gathering our gear and weapons and packing them away so we can head to the car.

As we hit the road to return to Detroit proper, I do my best to get my head on straight. Because of Knox and Priest and our little field trip into the woods, I feel more clearheaded, and I fight hard to keep that feeling. I try to

keep my demons down and focus on the fact that I might be overwhelmed and outgunned, but the one thing I'm *not* anymore is alone.

I have Gage, who literally took a bullet to save my life and protect his brothers. I have Ash, who's always taking care of me, whether that be through food, sex, or a perfectly timed joke. And I have these two in the car with me, willing to chase me down through the woods to give me what I need.

"I can't believe you tackled me," Priest is saying as I emerge from my thoughts. He glances over at Knox, who's driving.

Knox snorts, shoving his fingers through his dark hair. "Like you wouldn't have done the same shit. You basically elbowed me in the face to try to get to River. Don't give me that."

"You started it," Priest points out.

"*River* started it. I just played to win. Like I always do."

Priest shakes his head, but there's a smile playing around his mouth. Tiny and faint, but still there. "You're a menace."

Knox just shrugs, unbothered. "Always have been," he fires back. "And yet you guys keep me around. Must mean you don't mind that much."

"Well, we're related. It means I kind of have to keep you around."

They both chuckle at that, and I know it's because they each know first-hand that being related doesn't actually mean shit. Family can betray you just as easily as a stranger could. Probably *more* easily, because you don't expect it from family.

Listening to them banter feels good, and I make myself comfortable in the back, letting their voices wash over me.

They're so different. Where Knox is brash and hot-headed, Priest is more calculated and quiet. At the beginning, it was hard to imagine them working together at all, let alone being related and being so close on top of it.

They obviously love each other, though, and their familial bond shows through in the way they tease each other. It feels nice to be a part of that. To be someone they don't mind being this relaxed and open around.

We get back to the house after a little while and walk inside to find Ash in the kitchen, twirling a spatula in one hand while he sautés veggies in a wok with the other.

He smiles when he looks up and sees us. Then he does a double take, making a show of giving all three of us a slow once-over.

“Wow,” he drawls. “Where the hell have you all been? I can’t imagine what you’ve been doing that has you coming home looking like you’ve been dragged through a forest.”

I wrinkle my nose, because if I look anything like Priest and Knox do right now, then we definitely all look a mess. Streaked with dirt, sticks and leaves in our hair. Priest is still recovering from the injuries Julian Maduro gave him when he captured him, so he looks the most disheveled out of all of us.

It’s pretty obvious what we’ve been up to, and Ash is delighting in teasing us about it, in true Ash fashion.

He sniffs the air around us, leaning in close to get a good whiff before tapping his finger against his chin. “What is that scent? I just can’t place it. I know I’ve smelled it before. It’s on the tip of my tongue, don’t tell me...”

“Your vegetables are burning,” Priest deadpans, lifting one brow slightly.

“Yeah, yeah.” Ash grins and goes back to the stove, leaving the rest of us to head upstairs to see Gage.

He’s propped up in bed again, and he looks us over in much the same way Ash did when we came in. Ash must’ve been right behind us, because he steps into the room a second later with a plate perched on a tray in his hands, which he sets on Gage’s lap.

“Can you believe it?” he asks Gage, pressing a hand over his heart after he sets the food down. “I’ve been here all afternoon, slaving over a hot stove, and those three have been off fucking in the woods. The very nerve.”

I roll my eyes, but there’s a smile tugging at my lips. I like being around the guys and their banter. I like that they don’t seem to be jealous of each other when it comes to me.

Gage isn’t upset that he wasn’t there for the fucking in the woods part at all, just that he couldn’t be there to protect me for the stuff that happened before it. And Ash just wants to make jokes, which is him all over.

“Ash told me what happened with Alec,” Gage says, ignoring the food for the moment as he turns his attention toward me.

That throws a bucket of cold water over the warm fuzzies in my stomach, but I guess we really do need to get back to the matter at hand.

“All of it?” I ask, glancing between the two of them.

“Yeah,” Ash replies, nodding. “How Alec keeps changing the rules, the task you have to do, and... the rest of it.”

I'm grateful he doesn't say it explicitly, even if that makes me feel a little bit like a coward. But I don't want to be thrown back into a dark spiral right now, not when Knox and Priest worked so hard to get me out of it in the first place.

"I agree with Ash on this one, I think," Gage says, picking up his fork and pushing food absently around on his plate. "It does seem like Alec is setting you up to fail. From a simple drop to something that requires a lot more stealth and planning. Either he wants to really test you, or he doesn't think you can do it."

"I can't fail," I tell him. "So we have to come up with something."

"Where are you even supposed to find this guy?" Knox wants to know.

"Alec said he's from out of town, but he'll be in Detroit in a few days. He's staying at a hotel downtown."

"Accessible, at least," Priest murmurs. "Assuming he's not the type to just hole up in his room while he's here."

"There are ways around that though," Gage points out. "There are plenty of different things we can do to get her in there."

He says the 'we' so easily, but then there's a tightening of his lips when it hits him that he won't actually be doing much of anything to help at all. He sighs to himself, and the others keep talking.

"Maybe you could pose as housekeeping," Ash throws in. "If he leaves the laptop in his room while he's out doing whatever, then it's easy enough to get access to his room and do it then."

"She'd have to find out his room number first," Priest says. "And not get caught going through things. This has so many ways it could go wrong. Worse than last time."

"And last time went about as wrong as it could," Ash agrees.

Gage is still scowling down at his plate, clearly feeling crabby about being left out again. This time, instead of pointing out that it's his fault, I crawl up onto the bed to sit beside him as the others continue talking.

"Eat your dinner," I murmur, scooping up a piece of the stir-fried chicken with my fingers and holding it out for him to eat.

He leans in and takes the bite, licking and sucking the spicy sweet sauce off my fingertips. He drags his teeth against the pads of my fingers, and then grabs my chin so he can pull me in and kiss me hard.

It leaves me breathless and a little dazed, and I can taste the food on his lips along with his own unique taste.

When we break apart, Gage reaches up and pulls something out of my hair, holding it up for me to see with a cocked brow. It's a leaf, leftover from my romp in the woods with Priest and Knox.

I just grin at him, and tuck myself into his side while we keep discussing potential ways to get this thing done.

A FEW DAYS LATER, it's time to move on our plan.

As early evening rolls around, I head up to my room to get dressed. Once I've slipped into my chosen outfit, I eye myself in the mirror, taking in the whole ensemble. I went for a sexy, sophisticated looking dress that comes to my mid-thigh, and I like the way it looks on me.

It makes me look like a boss, sexy and edgy with the elegant dress contrasting with my tattoos and silver hair.

I smoke a cigarette as I put on some makeup, then stub it out and slip on a pair of shoes. They aren't my favorites, because I don't want to waste any of my best ones on a night like tonight. Also, I need shoes I can move easily in if it comes to that.

Hopefully shit won't go sideways tonight, but better safe than sorry.

When I head downstairs, Gage is resting on the couch. He's a little more mobile now than he was before, since he's healing well, and I assume one of the other guys watched him to make sure he didn't hurt himself in his goal to get to the couch.

He looks comfortable and glad to be out of bed, and when I walk into the living room, he and the other men all look at me immediately. There's heat in their gazes as they ogle me, and I can feel it warming my skin like sunlight.

I love the way that feels, all their attention on me.

Gage gets up to stand with the others, and even though my stomach tightens a little with worry, I like seeing him on his feet. He looks stronger, more like himself, and that's good.

"We'll be back soon," I tell him, walking up to him.

"Be good," he says back, pinning me with an intent look. "I mean that."

"You be good," I fire back. "I mean that too. No wild parties while we're gone."

He snorts and leans in to kiss me, careful not to smudge my makeup, but putting some heat into it that tingles all the way down to my toes.

I can feel his gaze on us as we walk out the door to the car, and I know he's going to worry the whole time we're gone. All the more reason to make sure this goes down much more smoothly than the mission before.

We drive to the hotel where our target, Michael Yates, is staying and case the place for a bit.

I can tell the rest of the guys are just as worried as Gage was before we left. Knox is cracking his knuckles, one after the other, and then starting back on the other hand again. He's agitated, and I can feel it like a restlessness under my own skin.

"I hate this," he growls out.

"I know," I tell him.

"It's the best plan we have," Priest says, being diplomatic about it, but I can tell he hates it too. Ash doesn't look happy about it either, and I sigh. They're right. It's not ideal, but it's what we've got.

"Don't worry," I say. "I'll do what I have to do to get what I need from this guy, but there are only four men in the entire fucking world that I want. And three of them are in this car."

Knox heaves a sigh. He doesn't seem reassured, even though there's a spark of heat in his eyes from hearing me say that. Ash just grins and leans in to kiss my cheek.

"If this fucker gets out of line, I'll kill him," Knox mutters, and it's hard to tell if he's reassuring me or himself with that one.

The plan is the best we could come up with, and if things go well, it shouldn't end with anyone dead or hurt. We all have earpieces so that we'll be able to hear each other while we carry this out.

With a final check to make sure we all know what we're doing and have everything we need, we get out of the van and head to our positions.

The hotel is fancy as fuck and shaped like a giant U. Knox is going to a room on one side of the U to use a scope to spy on the room where Michael is staying.

Ash and Priest have rented the room next to Michael's, and they'll be stationed in there, ready to step in if things break bad and I need backup.

The two of them go ahead to check into their room, and I hang back a bit, then saunter into the hotel a bit later, spying the man who is our target at the hotel bar. I take a deep breath and let myself get into the right headspace

before heading over, making sure to put a little extra sway into my hips, carrying myself like I know I'm the hottest thing in the room.

I reach the gleaming cherry wood bar and lean over it, giving the bartender and anyone else paying attention a good view of my cleavage in the dress.

"Can I get a gin and tonic?" I ask, giving the bartender a little smile.

He winks at me and makes a show of making the drink, sliding it across the bar to me with a flourish. I laugh and thank him, lifting the drink to my lips and then humming at the taste.

It's not even the best gin I've ever had, but I play the role, acting like it's fucking delicious.

I can feel someone's gaze on me as I let my tongue dart out to subtly lick a droplet of liquid that clings to the rim of the glass. I know it's Michael, shamelessly checking me out. He looks at my chest, my hips, and my ass, but I don't give him any attention, ignoring him as I take another sip of my cocktail.

This is a lesson I learned over my many years of trying to extract information and get into places I shouldn't be allowed as I carried out vengeance against the six men who tortured me and my sister.

When you're setting a honey trap, never go to your target.

Let them come to you.

It's almost like I can do the countdown in my head, timing it down to the second before Michael finally gets sick of just looking and decides to strike up a conversation.

Four... three... two... one.

"Hello," the masculine voice says from somewhere near my left shoulder.

"Oh," I startle just slightly, glancing over as if I only just noticed he was there at all. I allow my gaze to run briefly up and down his body, and then I smile, as if pleased by what I've seen. "Hello."

"I hope you don't mind if I join you." He gives me what I'm sure is supposed to be a winning smile. "I saw a beautiful lady sitting alone and thought to myself, 'what a crime.' So I figured I'd come over and join you. I'm Michael, by the way."

"Jennifer." I hold out my hand, and he shakes it before settling on the seat next to mine.

"Are you staying in the hotel?" he asks.

“Yes.” I brush my silver hair over my shoulder, leaning toward him a little. “Are you?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a nice room upstairs. I’m here on business.”

Although Michael talks like he’s some kind of smooth operator, he doesn’t even try to hide the fact that he’s checking me out, ogling my tits and staring at my mouth every time I drink from my glass. He has one of those stares that sits heavy on my skin, and I don’t have to know anything else about this guy to know that he’s a bit of a creep.

“What kind of business?” I ask him, dragging my bottom lip through my teeth. I play it off as if I’m making flirtatious conversation, interested in what he does but not smart enough to really understand it. In my experience, that’s the kind of women these types of douchebags like.

Usually because they’re easier to control.

“I’m in acquisitions,” Michael says, and my mind immediately blanks out because that sounds boring as fuck.

He clearly doesn’t think so though, because he launches into a detailed explanation of all the important things his job entails. I nod and smile, pretending to be enraptured by all of it, because the truth is, this conversation isn’t really about the words. It’s about our body language, and everything that’s being said that way.

After bragging about several big acquisitions he managed, Michael flags down the bartender and orders me a drink, not checking to see if I want it or if I want the same thing I’m already drinking. He orders a whiskey, something top shelf, probably just to show off the fact that he can afford it, and tells the bartender to put it on his tab.

“Parker’s Heritage Rye. One of the best whiskeys I’ve ever had. Have you ever tried this before?” he asks, obviously expecting me to say no.

I actually haven’t, although I do appreciate a good whiskey. But I know I won’t be able to actually enjoy it, not in a context like this.

Honestly, no matter how good this Parker’s Rye is, it could never compare to the whiskey Knox gave me before he poured a shot of it down the front of my body and lapped it up. Because there’s more to a good whiskey than just the cost of the bottle—it’s also in *how* you drink it.

A flush of arousal spreads through me at the memory, and I cross my legs, squeezing my thighs together. Then I focus up, returning my attention to Michael.

He launches into another story about how he loves to travel and how he stays in hotels like this and much nicer than this all the time. It's all self-important bullshit, him sucking his own dick to try to make me want to be the next in line. I'm sure it works for some women, but to me he just sounds like an idiot trying to get his cock wet.

But the whole point of this plan is to make him think that's what's going to happen, so I run with it, pretending to be so enthralled by his stories and asking enough questions to keep him going. I laugh and lean into him, restraining myself from grabbing his hand and breaking his fingers when he starts stroking my thigh, his hand creeping farther and farther up my leg until his fingers are teasing the hem of my dress.

The tension between us is definitely building just the way I meant for it to, and I sway a little in my seat and then laugh, acting like the alcohol is affecting me much more than it is.

"Steady there," he says, gripping my thigh a little harder and finally letting his fingers slide under my dress. "Are you okay?"

"I'm good." I bite my lip again, tilting my head to one side to expose the line of my neck as I press a hand to my cheek, leaning into his touch on my leg. "Just feeling a little warm. Do you ever feel like you're wearing too many layers, even though there's not much left that you can take off?"

That gets his attention, and his eyes zero in on my tits again.

"Sometimes," he says, then chuckles as he drags his focus back up to my face. "But you've still got a layer or two to go."

I give a throaty laugh, then ask him what other kinds of drinks he likes, just so he can show off and order more. I take little sips of the first drink he got me, watching him down his fancy whiskey after he explains some bullshit about the notes and the aging and all that.

It's nothing I give a shit about, but he needs to feel important enough to get bold and play into my hands.

"Are you still too warm?" he asks me after several more minutes.

"A little," I admit, letting my breath hitch as I hold his gaze.

"You could come up to my room. Maybe we can do something about that."

Bingo.

I giggle and lean into him, walking my fingers up his chest. "I thought you'd never ask."

KNOX

THROUGH THE EARPiece, I can hear this fucking slimeball invite River up to his room.

I can't see them from this position, but every time his voice gets louder, I just picture him leaning into River, trying to touch her, and it pisses me off.

He's got a skeezy tone, all lecherous and ready to pounce, and I crack my tattooed knuckles, wishing I could wring his neck for even thinking about touching her.

I've got the scope out, set up to look out my hotel room window and into the window across the way, where this fucker is staying. I can't see Ash and Priest in their room next door to his because they have the curtains pulled, but I can hear them through my earpiece, going over their preparations but not talking too much otherwise.

We're trying to keep the chatter to a minimum like we discussed, so we don't distract River and give her away or make it harder for her to play her part.

I've got my sniper rifle out as well, and a clean shot lined up to the room, just in case. It shouldn't come to that, but all of us are ready to have River's back in whatever way we have to if she does end up needing us.

For a while, I'm just looking into an empty room. It's fancy like the rest of the hotel, over decorated to make the people who stay there feel like they're important. I can hear River speaking in a low voice, stroking this dude's ego as they ride the elevator up to the sixth floor where he's staying.

The door to the room opens, and I see them come inside. The mark makes a big flourish of opening the door for her, gesturing her in, and River

walks inside, looking around and playing it like she's so impressed. Michael is right behind her, clearly checking out her ass, and I breathe out hard through my nose.

As soon as the door is closed behind them, he reaches out and touches her, groping her ass and saying something too low for me to hear.

I growl in my throat as my finger itches toward the trigger of the sniper rifle. It's a clean shot. I could take him out so fucking easily.

But I force myself to stand down.

River plays her part well. She laughs when he touches her and then steps away, wagging a finger playfully at him.

"You said I could come up here to cool down," she says in a teasing tone. "And I think I need another drink first. Then maybe you can help me decide what to take off."

"You really are my kind of woman," Michael says, following her over to the mini bar. "One who can hold her liquor and who knows how to have a little fun."

"I'm always up for a good time," she tells him, her voice dropping low on the last couple words. "Especially with a man like you."

She's flirting hard, and it's a tone I've never heard her use before. It's not the way she talks to me or any of the others when she's flirting with us, and it's so clear that this is fake. Clear to *me*, anyway. I prefer the real River. The one who's sexy and strong and vicious and determined. The one who murdered the six men who hurt her and her sister and then came after the man who killed her sister, taking him out and tearing down his empire in the process.

She's a fucking queen, and that's who I like.

Not this role she's playing now.

Through the scope, I can see River opening the drinks, and when Michael isn't looking, she slips a vial from her cleavage and doses one of them with the drug we got to knock Michael out.

It won't kill him or even hurt him, just leave him passed out for a few hours, and when he wakes up, he'll feel like he has a bad hangover.

Easy.

River hands him the dosed glass, making a show of curling his fingers around it and smiling. He grins back at her and then raises the glass.

"To new friends," he says. "Hopefully close friends."

They toast, and Michael knocks the drink back like a pro, swallowing everything. Then he puts the glass down on the TV stand and finally makes his move on River.

He reaches for her, pulling her into his arms. His hands are everywhere, groping at her hips and her ass, dragging her in closer so he can grind against her.

He leans in like he's whispering something in her ear, and I can barely make it out, since he's talking in the ear without the ear piece in it, thank fuck.

His voice is low and horned up though, and that makes me narrow my eyes, watching with gritted teeth as he gropes at her and kisses her neck.

"You're so fucking hot," he says, breathless and low. "I'm going to show you what it feels like to be fucked on sheets so expensive they'd make you come just from the price."

River giggles at that, rubbing against him, and Michael leans up and in, like he wants to kiss her on the lips.

Just in time, she ducks her head away, subtly evading his lips and moving to kiss his neck instead, making him moan.

Fury fills me, even more than it did before.

"If that fucker kisses you on the lips even once," I murmur in a quiet, hard voice, "I'm going to fucking kill him. I don't give a shit if it jacks up this mission. He's dead."

River's eyes flick away from our mark to the window, and I know she heard me. I'm sure she can't see me, but she glances toward where she knows I'm camped out, and I almost feel like her eyes find mine through the scope.

Luckily, it only takes another few seconds for Michael to go down like a sack of bricks. He stumbles a little, slurring out a few words before his knees buckle entirely. River catches him before he can hit the floor, dragging him over to the bed.

He doesn't stir as she gets him situated, and she only sounds a little out of breath when she murmurs, "He's out. Finally."

"Find the laptop," comes Priest's voice over the ear piece, and River nods.

She goes over to the desk, and the idiot has left his laptop right there, so she doesn't even have to go digging through his shit to find it. I can make

her movements out as she plugs the device Alec gave her into the side, waiting for it to do its thing.

“I can’t believe that motherfucker thought you were really into him,” I say, figuring it’s fine to talk a little shit now that River’s not focused on playing a role anymore. “Fucking moron. He touched her, you know.” I say that part for Priest and Ash’s benefit, since they couldn’t see what was going on. “Fucking grinding all over her like a goddamn dog. I bet the only way he gets pussy is by paying for it. Or scamming girls into thinking he’s hot shit.”

River snorts but keeps her attention on the laptop. The thumb drive thing that Alec gave her takes a while to get whatever shit it was programmed to search for off of Michael’s computer, and I tap my fingers in agitation as she waits. Our mark is still passed out on the bed, thank fuck, but I still don’t like her being in the same damn room as him. Breathing the same air. Even *that* is too good for the fucker.

Finally, she makes a pleased little sound in her throat. “It’s done. And it looks like it worked.”

“Great,” I mutter. “Now get out of there.”

I don’t have to tell her twice. She springs into motion, grabbing the device and tucking it back into her cleavage, then putting the laptop back in its place and closing it.

Then she goes to the bed and strips the guy, working him out of his clothes and tossing them around the room. When he wakes up, he’ll feel plenty hungover, and he won’t remember much of anything after they got back to his room. He’ll think he met a sexy-ass woman at the bar and brought her up to his room for sex, but was too drunk to remember it.

“Pfft,” I snort as River pulls off his pants. “What the fuck did he think he was gonna do with that thing?”

“What thing?” Ash asks, concern tightening his voice. “Does he have a weapon?”

“Knox is making fun of his dick,” River says, sounding amused. “It’s not what you’d call big. Or even average.”

Ash laughs, and I keep it going, talking more shit about him as River shimmies her panties off and leaves them on the floor with the guy’s clothes.

Possessiveness rises in me even more now. He’s out cold and not actively groping her anymore, but I’m still pissed he ever tried to touch her

in the first fucking place. Doesn't matter that she was actively seducing him so we could pull off this job. It still makes fury boil under my skin.

Once she's got the room arranged how she wants it, clothes tossed around to give the impression they were hurriedly tugged off and discarded, River goes back to the mini bar. She grabs two handfuls of bottles and opens them all, unscrewing the caps before taking them into the bathroom to pour out the booze.

She brings the empty bottles back into the room and scatters them around on various surfaces, which will definitely help sell the illusion that Michael drank too much last night. It'll also rack up a hefty bill from the hotel, which gives me a surge of savage satisfaction. If I had passed this guy on the street a week ago, I wouldn't have had any beef with him, but now he's on my list of fuckers who better hope they never run into me in a dark alley. He definitely wouldn't survive.

"I'll just leave a note, and then I'm out of here," River murmurs, scribbling something down on the hotel notepad.

She straightens when she's done, checks the room again quickly to make sure everything is how she wants it, then slips out the door, closing it behind her.

Ash and Priest meet up with her in the hallway. I can hear their low voice as they greet her, the three of them heading toward the elevator that will take them back to the ground floor. I know this is the part of the plan where we're all supposed to head back to the car and get the fuck out of here... but something holds me back.

With my eye still trained on the scope, I do a sweep of the room. I find Michael's bare ass in the scope, and a growl vibrates in my chest. I'm so fucking tempted to shoot him just for putting his hands on River.

My finger massages the trigger of my sniper rifle gently, and just for a second, I imagine leaving him in a pool of blood on his fancy hotel sheets. It would be satisfying, knowing he could never touch River or anyone else ever again.

But that's not the plan.

"You live for now, fucker," I mutter, even though there's no way he can hear me. "But maybe I'll pay you a visit one day. And next time, you won't be so lucky."

With a sigh, I pack up my gear and leave the room.

RIVER

THE TEMPERATURE HAS DROPPED a bit since we went inside the hotel, but the cool breeze feels nice on my exposed legs and arms as Priest, Ash, and I wait for Knox by the car. The broad-shouldered man emerges from the hotel a few minutes later with his gear in tow, making his way toward us with long, confident strides.

As soon as he sees me, heat flashes through his eyes, joining the possessive anger that's already burning in the depths of his dark brown irises. He gives a low growl, grabbing the back of my neck the moment he reaches us and dragging me into a hot, hard kiss.

It takes my breath away, and before I can even really react, he's biting down on my bottom lip and then pulling away.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" I ask, narrowing my eyes a little.

"No." Something almost like a pout tugs at his full lips, and it's both sexy, adorable, and slightly terrifying at the same time, knowing that he's pouting because he didn't get to murder a man. "I fucking thought about it, but no. He's still alive."

I kiss him again, going up on my toes to press my lips to his. I'm glad he didn't pull the trigger on his sniper rifle, because the last thing I need is to have to go back to Alec and explain why *another* job he gave me ended with the guy dead. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't also glad that he considered it.

I like how possessive he is of me.

When Knox and I break apart, we all get in the car and head out, driving back home.

There's a slightly tense vibe in the car, and I know it's because all of the guys hated seeing me with some other man, even if it was just for a job and I made sure never to let him kiss me on the mouth. Priest and Ash weren't even in a position to actually see it, but I'm sure they can imagine what happened, and Knox mocking the guy over the ear pieces filled them in on the rest.

The truth is, I hated it too.

I used to do shit like this all the time, back when I was working on taking out the six names on my list. I'd hook up with guys, or make them think I was going to hook up with them, doing whatever it took to get close enough to them to get what I needed.

But now, there really is no one I want but these four men. Not because of what they can do for me, but because of who they are.

Touching someone else, letting him kiss my neck and grope me... it just felt *wrong*. Even flirting with him under a fake persona felt weirder than it ever has before, and it's because things are so different for me now.

I'm no longer a lone wolf. I've found a pack, a place where I belong.

And I never want to fucking lose that.

By the time we get home, I'm ready to take off the dress I wore to the hotel and scrub the whole evening off my body. It didn't go sideways like the last task Alec gave me did, but I'm still eager to move on from it.

When we climb out of the car and make our way inside, we find Gage on the couch in the living room, reading. He seems happier to not be confined to the bed any more than he has to be. Harley starts barking, running in circles before dashing over to greet me, his tail wagging hard enough that it thumps heavily against the floor.

"I need a fucking drink," Knox growls, clearly still pissed off as he stomps off to get the whiskey.

"How did it go?" Gage asks, shifting his focus from watching Knox stalk away to looking at me.

I pull the little device out from my cleavage and waggle my eyebrows. "It was a success. Whatever the fuck Alec wanted off that guy's computer, it's on this thing now."

"Good."

He motions for me to come closer, and I do. I bend down to kiss him, but he stops me, catching my jaw in one hand.

"You smell like that fucker," he says, his tone dark and displeased.

I wince, remembering how eager I was to change out of this dress during the car ride home. “Ugh. I’ll go shower. He had on too much cologne, I’m sure it soaked into my clothes.”

Before I can move away though, Gage stops me again, grabbing my wrist and pulling me back down.

“No.” His voice is firm, and he shakes his head.

“What?” I look down at him, confused. Why the hell wouldn’t he want me to rinse off the lingering scent of our mark’s cologne?

Gage’s green eyes glint as he looks at me, a charged expression on his face. He runs his thumb over the delicate skin at the inside of my wrist, sending a shiver up my arm.

“You don’t need a shower,” he tells me in a low voice. “What you need is for my brothers and me to erase that scent from your body. Mark you so thoroughly that you’ll never forget who you belong to.”

My blood heats in the space of a single heartbeat, burning through my veins as arousal pools in my stomach. There’s a promise in his words, and although I don’t know the specifics of what he’s promising, I know I want it.

I want everything these men can give me.

I start to move toward him, my gaze dropping to his full lips as I lean in to kiss him again. But then I stop, a modicum of good sense overriding my desire for a moment.

“Gage...” His name comes out a little raspy, and I have to clear my throat and try again. “I’m not sure if that’s a good idea. Your wounds haven’t—”

“River.” He cuts me off with a hard look. “Some other man had his hands on you this evening. I would fuck you tonight even if it killed me.”

Part of me knows I should probably tell him it’s too dangerous to do this and he shouldn’t be risking hurting himself or setting his progress back just for sex, but an even bigger part of me is deeply affected by the fact that he wants me this badly. That no amount of pain or injury would stop him from taking what he wants from me.

From *claiming* me.

He drags me into another kiss as if to prove his words, and I don’t resist, parting my lips for him, letting him sweep his tongue through my mouth and lay a claim there that sends heat searing through me.

Behind me, I can feel Knox, Ash, and Priest gazing at us. From the low sounds I can pick up, I'm pretty sure they're passing the whiskey bottle around, taking swigs as they watch this all go down.

I'm breathless when Gage finally lets me up for air, my lips tingling from the kiss and my heart racing with need. His eyes burn like twin stars, and he stares at me like he can see directly into my soul.

Maybe he can. I've stopped trying to hide anything from him, and he's always been able to see through the masks I've tried to wear anyway. Maybe he can see all the way down to my soul, to the very heart of who I am. Just like I can see him.

He's still hurt, nowhere close to being healed all the way, but there's strength in the way he commands my body, palming the back of my head as he licks into my mouth. So I let him take charge, although I make a silent vow to myself that I won't let him do anything too risky.

Gage slides his hand down, gripping the back of my neck as he leans up to whisper in my ear, his breath hot against my skin. "Remember when you sat in my lap, riding my dick while Ash watched?"

I nod, my clit throbbing at the memory. *Fuck, yes. I could never forget that.*

"I want all of my brothers to watch this time," Gage continues in a rough voice. "I want them to see you fall apart for me."

I nod again, already so wet and so needy for this.

He releases me, allowing me to straighten up again. Quickly I shimmy out of my dress, leaving it in a heap on the floor. I'm already not wearing any underwear since I left them at the hotel room, and that makes it easier for me to climb right onto Gage's lap and start getting his pants open enough to fetch his cock out.

He's already hard, and his veiny shaft pulses in my hand as I stroke it slowly, watching Gage's face the whole time.

He groans and tries to buck up into my grip, but it's not with the usual force he'd use, hampered by his injury.

"Don't worry," I murmur, leaning in to kiss him one more time. "And don't hurt yourself. I can do all the work."

"Good girl," Gage groans, palming my ass with one hand. "But turn around so they can all see you. So they can see how much you love having my cock in you."

My heart kicks up at the way he says that. I don't think there's a single one of the Kings who has any doubts about how much I want them at this point. They've all got me fucking dickmatized, and they have since long before I was willing to admit it. But the thought of riding Gage while they watch just makes me even wetter. So I stand up and adjust my position as I settle back onto his lap, reorienting myself so I'm facing the room and the other three men.

Priest has the bottle to his lips, taking a long drink of amber liquid while he stares at me. His eyes are so pale, his features sharp and harsh, and he watches me with an intense focus that tells me he's memorizing every detail of this moment. He's turned on by the sight of me like this, I can tell. So are Knox and Ash, both of them staring like they don't want to look away.

Holding their gazes, I rise up enough to let the head of Gage's cock brush my bare pussy, moaning softly at the little surge of need that comes with the feeling of that hard heat touching my core right where I want it.

I sink down slowly at first, taking him in inch by inch, knowing that they're all watching as my body stretches around his fat cock.

But eventually, I can't hold back. It feels too fucking good. I drop down the rest of the way in one movement, seating his entire length inside me and tipping my head back to moan at how good it feels to be full of him.

Gage slaps my ass hard, the sound cutting through the loaded quiet in the room.

"Move," he commands. "Show them how much you want it."

That's all I need to hear. I can't stop myself from obeying, riding Gage's cock with fast movements that have me bouncing up and down. My tits follow the movement, piercings flashing in the light as I close my eyes and let myself sink into how fucking good it is.

Gage's cock has me filled up, and I'm wet enough that the sound is loud and distinct, filling the room with filthy noises.

I can hear his harsh breathing behind me, even though I'm doing all the work and being careful not to jostle him too much or allow him to strain himself. I'm sure it's making the wound in his stomach hurt worse than it was when he was just sitting here reading, but the way he's holding on to me makes it clear he doesn't want me to stop. His fingers grip my hips, digging into the flesh there.

"Fuck, yes," he groans. "Just like that, baby girl. You're so good for me. So good for us."

The praise goes to my head and makes me work harder, bouncing faster on his cock, chasing the pleasure that starts to flow through me like molten lava, hot and slow. It's been a while since we've fucked, and I can feel all the pent up need between us. All the times Gage has had to stay home when he wanted to be with me. All the times I wanted him there when he wasn't. Even more than that, I can feel all the emotions, too. The anger, the frustration, the care and concern. All the things that have existed between us since I shot him on the docks.

Neither of us try to hide from any of it. We let it build, let it grow between us. We let it feed into the pleasure and desire, making it burn brighter and hotter, consuming us both.

"You're ours," Gage growls, gripping my hair to tilt my head back and then biting down on the side of my neck, making me cry out in pleasure. "You belong to *us*, and only us. I don't care who else thinks they can put their hands on you. You're ours. Say it."

I open my mouth, but it's hard to make words come out when I'm rolling my hips to ride his dick hard and fast, caught up in a whirlwind of pleasure and need.

"Say it," Gage says again, harder this time. He slaps my ass with his free hand before digging his fingers into the meat of it. The pain mingles with the pleasure, and my pussy throbs and spasms, pushing me even closer to the edge.

"I'm yours!" I cry out, my pussy clenching around him like a vise, my body humming at a fever pitch as I chase the need to come apart.

Gage tightens his grip on my hair, giving a sharp tug that makes my drooping eyelids flare wide. When I open my eyes, I'm looking right at Ash, Priest, and Knox. All of them are hard in their pants, barely paying attention to the booze they were sharing as they watch this unfold.

"Tell them," Gage pants. He's out of breath, but there's still so much authority in his voice. "Tell them who you belong to."

"You," I choke out. It's harder than it should be to get the word out. I feel like my brain is melting out of my ears, my entire body about to go boneless. I'm so fucking close. "All of you."

"Good girl," Gage growls. He reaches down with his free hand, keeping that hold on my hair, not letting me look away from the others. His finds my clit and massages it, the wetness seeping from my pussy making it a slick slide as he works me up.

I open my mouth again, and it's almost a silent scream as my orgasm hits me like a ton of bricks. Gage's cock in me and his fingers on my clit are enough to send me spiraling out of control, climaxing with a deep shudder that I can feel all throughout my body.

Gage is right behind me, forced into his own climax by my pussy gripping his cock as I come. He grunts my name, his cock pulsing inside me over and over again before we both fall still, breathing hard.

In the aftermath, he doesn't release me. Using his tight grip on my hair, he turns my head to one side so that I can look at him. Beads of sweat dot his forehead, and pain pinches the corners of his eyes, but his expression is one of possessive satisfaction.

He kisses me hard again, leaning forward just a bit to claim my mouth.

"We're not done yet," he murmurs when the kiss breaks, biting down on my lower lip. He turns my head the other way, making me face the others again. "Look at how turned on they are. How much they want you."

I just came so hard that my clit is still pulsing dully with aftershocks. Hell, Gage's cock is still buried inside me, a little bit of his cum slowly starting to leak out between us. But the sight of the three other Kings watching us, raw desire written over every line of their faces, makes me feel just as hungry and desperate as I did before I crawled onto Gage's lap.

"They're yours, you know," Gage whispers, his nose brushing the shell of my ear. "Just as much as you belong to us, we fucking belong to you. Those three men? They're yours. So go take them."

With that, he lets me go, releasing his grip on my hair and making tingles spread across my scalp. His words echo in my mind, making butterflies flap wildly in my stomach as I climb off his lap.

More of his cum spills from me, dripping slowly down my thigh as I stand up and face the others, anticipation running through me.

RIVER

THE HEAT in me didn't die when I came, it just sort of became banked, like a bed of embers waiting for a spark to flare up again.

And seeing the way Knox, Priest, and Ash are looking at me is all the spark I need. They're all settled around the living room, and they clearly enjoyed the show Gage and I just put on for them.

I catch Priest's eye, and I can tell he's feeling a lot right now, just from the look on his face.

We've come a long way, the two of us. He hated me more than anyone at first, would have killed me if he was given the chance, just to keep me from fucking with his family and getting inside his head. Then he realized he wanted me, but he wouldn't act on it. He's spent so long trying to stay in control of himself, but I love it most when he lets go of that tight grip he keeps on himself and his feelings and loses control.

I make my way toward him first, standing naked in front of him with Gage's warm cum sliding down the inside of my thigh.

"What do you want?" I ask him, my voice husky.

His pale eyes burn. We both know the answer to that question. *Me*. But more than that, I'm asking what he wants in this moment. Giving him the chance to take charge just like Gage just did. There's not a single thing he could ask of me that I wouldn't give him right now, and from the way his nostrils flare slightly, his fingers tightening on the arm of the chair, I think he knows it.

"Lie down," he tells me.

I nod and do as he says, lying down on the floor near the small coffee table.

Priest rises in a fluid motion and comes closer, the half empty whiskey bottle gripped in his hand. When he reaches me, he kneels down beside me, taking another sip from the bottle. He closes his eyes for a moment as he savors it, and I let my gaze follow the movement of his throat as he swallows. He's not as big or burly as his cousin, but there's something eminently masculine about him anyway. It's in the hard angles of his face and the power he radiates.

He's so fucking beautiful. Still broken in some ways, maybe, just like I am, but beautiful *because* of that, not in spite of it.

And he's mine.

He's all mine.

I lick my lips as Priest's eyelids open again, his icy blue eyes focusing on me immediately. Holding my gaze, he reaches out to hold the bottle above me. Then he tips it, pouring a thin stream of the dark liquid along the hollow of my tits, letting it pool on my stomach.

He follows the line of whiskey as it spreads over my body, lapping it up from my skin. The contrast of the cool liquid and the heat of his tongue makes me shiver, and I whimper softly, squirming under him.

"You taste so fucking good," he murmurs, and when he looks up at me, his eyes are hazy with lust. "Better than whiskey. Better than anything. You're the only thing I crave."

"Oh god..." I moan, trapping my lower lip between my teeth.

"I want to fuck you every day," he growls, half under his breath, reaching up to palm my tits once all the whiskey has been licked off my body. He tweaks my nipples hard, and I arch for him, crying out. His jaw tightens, his breathing growing more harsh. "I want to see you stuffed with our cocks, begging for more. Cum in your mouth, in your pussy, in your ass. Used and perfect, just for us."

"Priest, please," I beg, so turned on by now that it almost hurts. My pussy is throbbing harder, and every place where he's not touching me feels bereft. "Please, I need you."

"Say it again," he growls.

"I need you! *Please*."

"Push your tits together," he orders, and his tone makes me do it immediately, pressing them together.

I watch as he strips in a few quick movements. As he shucks his pants and boxers, his cock springs free, hard and flushed and wet at the tip from

the beads of precum that have seeped from the slit. He seems so confident, not worried at all about not being able to keep it up, and he kneels over me, reaching down to drag his hand between my legs, slicking his fingers with my wetness and the remnants of Gage's orgasm.

He uses that to lube up his cock, and it's such a filthy and beautiful sight that my mouth drops open on a low groan. Bracing his knees on either side of my torso, Priest shoves his slippery cock between my tits, fucking them with long, slow strokes.

My breath catches, a hundred different emotions and sensations hitting me at once. It reminds me of our first time together, when he fucked me with the handle of that knife sharpener because he couldn't use his dick but was so desperate to put something inside me. To claim me for his own in whatever way he could. After he made me come like that, he rose up over me just like he is now, fully hard for the first time in who knows how long, and fucked my tits.

It felt like such a huge moment then, and it feels the same now, just in a different way.

Because this time, there's no hesitation at all, no doubt, no struggle.

Nothing holding him back.

It's just him and me, the two of us taking and giving, leaning into all the things we feel for each other.

I keep my tits pressed tightly together, watching the head of his cock whenever it pushes through the valley of my cleavage. It feels amazing, letting him use my body like this, watching the way the pleasure changes the angles and sharp lines of his face into something savagely beautiful.

He stares down at me, and I can see so much in his eyes. So much feeling, so much need. When he moans my name, it's low and almost shattered sounding, and when his hips stutter on his next thrust, I can tell he's close.

"Fuck," he groans roughly, and his thrusts speed up for a bit before he stops and pulls away.

I'm just about to ask why he stopped when he moves down my body and rams his cock right into my pussy.

All I can do then is scream as pleasure slams into me the same way his cock does, forcing me to take it, sending heat racing up my spine.

"F-fuck," I manage to get out, the sound shaky and breathless.

“You were made for this,” Priest grinds out, punching his hips against mine hard and fast. “You were made to take our cocks. To be a dripping wet mess for us. Take it.”

“Priest!”

His name pours from my lips as each hard, almost punishing thrust sends me closer and closer to the edge.

Priest grabs one of my legs and shoves it upward, pushing my knee toward my chest. That changes the angle of penetration, making it even more intense every time he bottoms out inside me.

The scream that comes from me is strangled and high pitched this time. I’m right at the edge of falling apart, my fingers scrabbling against the floor, trying to find something to hold on to as Priest drives me out of my mind.

He’s given himself over to his basest needs now, chasing the pleasure and sensation, and I love being fucked by him like this. Hard and fast, without hesitation or mercy.

After a few more seconds, he lets my leg go, and I keep it there without him even having to tell me to do it. Still pounding into me, he reaches down and grabs my face with one large hand, his thumb and fingers digging into my cheeks. Our gazes lock, and a feral look passes over his face as he forces my lips to part.

Then he leans back a little and spits right into my open mouth.

It’s almost like being slapped, but in a good way—a way that makes heat erupt through me unexpectedly. It’s filthy and raw and possessive, and the fact that it’s *Priest* doing it sends an electric spike of arousal surging through me.

I cry out, my entire body jerking, writhing in pleasure as my orgasm slams into me, and Priest loses whatever last shreds of control he was holding on to. He pistons into me a few more times, then adds his load to Gage’s inside my pussy. His cock swells and throbs as he empties himself, and he collapses on top of me, pressing my bent leg even tighter against my chest.

For a long moment, all I can do is stare at the ceiling, trying to remember how to breathe, how to *think*. Then Priest lifts his head slowly. He blinks at me, almost like he’s coming out of a daze. His hand is still on my face, and he tilts my chin up a little as he leans down and kisses me.

His lips are soft and gentle, and they move against mine with an exploratory slowness. It’s such a sweet, tender gesture. The other side of the

coin, all of his adoration for me pouring into the kiss.

I manage to move enough to wrap my arms around him, and he presses his forehead to mine for a minute, just breathing me in.

“I like when you fuck my tits,” I whisper, smiling a little.

“I like fucking every part of you.”

Slowly, Priest peels himself away from my body. I’m sticky with various fluids, the remnants of the whiskey he poured on me, and a sheen of sweat. I’m sure my hair is a disheveled mess and my makeup is probably smudged, but when I glance around the room, all four of the men are looking at me with the same awed expression they wore when I came downstairs in my nice dress.

If anything, they seem to like the way I look *now* even more than the way I looked then, and I bite back a smile at that thought.

Priest steps away, still breathing hard, and I sit up enough to look at Ash and Knox.

They both look like they’re about to burst, Knox gripping the arm of the chair he’s sitting in hard enough that it makes the wood creak, and Ash is massaging his stiff cock through his pants.

My pussy is full of cum and my heart is still racing from everything that’s happened already, but I’m not done. There are times when I like having each one of my men on their own, just the two of us.

But these moments when they share me, working together as a group, letting each other see everything they do to me?

It feels fucking *transcendent*.

“Are you finished, baby girl?” Gage asks from his spot on the couch, as if he’s read my mind. I turn to look at him as he lifts an eyebrow. “Will you ever be finished with us?”

He means in this moment, but I know he also means so much more than that. It’s like that night on the side of the road, when I was freaking out about the things the Kings were willing to do for me, and Gage made me say it.

It’s easier now, easier to admit what my answer is.

I shake my head, looking him right in the eye. “No. Never.”

Knox gives a satisfied grunt, and Ash groans softly. As I shift my focus back to them, they both stand up at the same time and come join me on the floor. I drop back down to my elbows, gazing up at them, and even though

neither of them are touching me yet, it's like I can feel them with every part of my body.

"They're going to fuck you at the same time," Gage says.

Some of the strain from the earlier exertion has left his tone, but I can tell how turned on he is by the way his voice still sounds like gravel.

I let out a small whimper, very into the idea of what he's suggesting. I was just fucked by both Gage and Priest, but I wasn't lying at all when I said I would never be done with these men. Of course I want more. Every part of me wants more, and the idea of each of them taking a hole as they sandwich me between them makes my heart race.

Gage smirks, as if he's plucked the thoughts right out of my head again.

"They're going to take your pussy, baby girl," he says. "Both of them."

My eyes go wide, and I turn my head sharply to look at the man on the couch, my heart skipping a beat. My stomach flips over itself, a burst of adrenaline shooting through me, and I can't tell if it's fear or excitement.

Knox's cock alone fills me up completely, making me stretch to fit him, but adding Ash's dick too? The idea freaks me out a little bit, but as Gage's words settle into my brain, a heavy ache of arousal fills my lower belly.

"Don't worry," Ash murmurs, dipping his head to kiss my neck. "We won't break you."

"Not more than you *want* to be broken, anyway," Knox adds, reaching out to pinch and twist one of my nipples. "We'll make it hurt so good, baby."

I half laugh and half gasp as I arch into their touch. I've never hidden the fact that I like a bit of a pain mixed with my pleasure, especially not from Knox. Hell, the first time he fucked me, he also dragged the tip of a knife down my back, creating a small cut and sending a firestorm of sensations tearing through me that had me convulsing around his cock.

He knows what I like. He knows how to find that perfect balance between the two types of sensations. And Ash has always taken care of me. I trust them to do this.

Throwing myself into the way they're already making me feel so good, I pull Ash into a kiss before breaking away from him and seeking out Knox's firm lips. They work together just like they've always done so well, taking turns kissing me and running their hands all over my body. I get lost in the haze of it, heat and desire and a little bit of nervousness washing over me, keeping me on edge.

They take their time, and after a while, Knox kneels between my legs and starts fingering my pussy, going right in with two fingers. I'm wet enough from my own arousal and the cum inside me that he doesn't have to work hard to get me open even more, and then he adds a third finger, fucking me hard with them.

Ash keeps playing with my tits, thumbing the nipples, pinching and rolling them with his nimble, talented fingers.

"Let us hear you," he says, his voice low and husky with his own need. "Let us hear how much you want this. Moan for us, killer."

My next moan comes out almost like a fucking wail because Knox shoves his fingers into me so deep at the exact same moment. They hit a spot that makes me arch and squirm, and Ash presses me back down to the floor, slapping the side of my tit hard enough to make me gasp.

"Good girl," he murmurs with a teasing grin. "You look so fucking sexy right now. Like a goddamn goddess. Are you ready to take both of us? To have us so deep inside you that you can barely breathe?"

I nod. They've teased me and drawn it all out long enough that my body is trembling from head to toe, desperate for more. "Yes. Fuck, yes."

Between my legs, Knox shifts his hand, working a fourth finger into me and driving almost his whole damn hand into my pussy, making cum and my own slick arousal spill out.

"You're gonna be so tight," he pants, and when I look down my body at him, his eyes are so dark they're almost completely black. "You're gonna be such a good girl and take both of us, aren't you?"

I nod again, almost frantic with need. It's going to be a lot. It's going to be so much, but I want it.

I fucking need it.

"I think she's ready for us," Knox says, looking at Ash, who nods.

Between the two of them, they get me into position. They pull me up onto my hands and knees, and Knox lies under me, his cock poised right at my entrance.

Ash kneels behind me, and he strokes a soothing hand down my back. I tremble between them, already overloaded just from the thought of what they're about to do.

It starts slowly, at least.

Knox pushes in first, and while he's usually a tight fit, between being fucked twice already and him working me open with his hand, he slides in

easily. He thrusts up a few times, letting me get used to the feel of him, and I close my eyes, breathing through my nose, letting the heat in my veins build up again.

“Tell me when you’re ready,” Ash rasps. He sounds almost tortured, like it’s taking all his self-control to hold back.

The two of them watched me get fucked by Gage and Priest already, so I know they’re probably so close to the edge themselves. It makes me appreciate how slow they’re going even more.

“O-okay,” I stammer, taking a breath. “Do it.”

Ash leans over my body and presses a kiss between my shoulder blades before he slowly, carefully starts pressing himself into me alongside Knox.

It hurts at first, and I whimper at the intrusion. It feels like my body isn’t meant to stretch that way, but Ash takes it slow, using how wet I am to slick his way in as he presses the head of his cock inside me.

“That’s it, killer,” he croons, pausing right there, with just the tip of his dick wedged inside my pussy alongside Knox’s. “Just like that. Fuuuuck, that’s hot.”

Oh god. Oh my fucking god.

I feel wetness on my face, and realize I’m almost sobbing, overwhelmed and overfull but doing my best to handle it. I take shuddering gasps of air, swallowing around a lump in my throat as my body tries to accommodate more than it ever has before.

Every nerve ending in my body is firing, riding the knife’s edge between pain and pleasure so closely that I can’t even distinguish between them anymore. All I know is that I *feel*. I feel so fucking much.

“Look at me,” Gage says, and his voice seems far away, even though I know he’s right there on the couch beside me. “River. Look at me, baby girl.”

I glance up, and it feels like it takes a lot of strength to do even that. I meet his intense green eyes, holding his gaze.

“You’re doing so well, baby,” he tells me.

His deep voice is soothing, even though it carries the same dominant weight as always. He’s sitting on the couch, presiding over this the way he presides over everything else, and I choke out a gasp as Ash pushes a little deeper in, dropping the eye contact in favor of closing my eyes and trying not to collapse on top of Knox.

“You can do this,” Gage continues, his words pouring into my ears even though I can no longer see him. “You can do this for us. Can’t you? You want them inside you. You want them to take you the way no one else ever has before. We’re the only ones who can do this to you. Aren’t we?”

I nod, delirious with more pain and pleasure than I’ve ever felt, feeling like I’m about to tremble out of my own skin.

“O-only you,” I stutter out, and it sounds wrecked and breathless. “I—I don’t know—”

“You can,” he says again, firmer this time. “You can do anything. You’re a warrior, and you’re our little slut. You can take this.”

A hand works its way between my legs, and I’m too worked up and out of my mind to even recognize whose it is. It touches the place where I’m impaled on Knox’s cock and half of Ash’s, and I choke out another broken sound, not sure whether to push into the feeling or pull away from it.

Strong fingers find my clit, rubbing it in slow circles, and it’s easier to sink into that pleasure, letting it soothe me a bit.

“That’s it,” Knox grunts from underneath me. “Let him in, River. It’s gonna feel so good.”

“Trying,” I gasp. And it’s not like there’s much I can do. I’m as open as I can be, and I wouldn’t even have the strength left in me to resist if I wanted to.

I don’t want to resist though. It’s a lot, but I want to do this.

For them. For me. For *us*.

I want to know what it feels like to have had all of them, to have Knox and Ash in me at the same time, and it pushes me to breathe through the pain as the man behind me keeps working himself in.

“Shit,” Ash curses, and it sounds like the word is punched out of his chest. “Fuck, you’re so tight. Goddamn.”

His fingers tighten on my hips, digging in to the point where I know I’m going to have bruises left behind.

“You feel so fucking good,” Knox adds, his voice rumbling beneath me. “So fucking perfect.”

All I can do is nod and try to breathe, and when Ash finally slides all the way in, it feels like something inside me explodes.

In a good way, I think.

It feels *right*. It feels complete.

It's like my mind is floating somewhere outside my body, leaving me hazy and almost high from the sheer amount of pleasure pumping through me.

Some of it is satisfaction at getting this far, but most of it is just pure sensation from the feeling of having them both so deep inside me. So deep they're all I can feel.

Judging from the way they're both breathing, it's not going to take long before they fall apart. And it's the same for me. My body hums with it, overwhelmed, like every nerve ending I have is on fire.

Knox and Ash move, and I know they're probably moving separately, but it feels like they work together, one huge, thick cock inside me, rubbing at my insides and threatening to drag me over the edge into pure pleasure.

There's a high pitched whining sound echoing around us, and it takes me a bit to realize that it's *me* making that sound. Keening with each movement.

They don't have much room to maneuver, wedged in as tight as they are, but that doesn't seem to matter. By the time the heat that's been steadily building is ready to explode in me, they're right there too, gasping and panting, holding me tight.

"I—I'm gonna—"

That's all I get out before my third orgasm takes me, sending me shattering into a million pieces and completely switching off my brain. I can't scream, can't even breathe, and my body goes impossibly tighter around them, locked up and tense as I shake through the climax.

That's enough to get Knox and Ash too. I hear them cursing and moaning my name, and it almost sounds like it's coming from underwater as blood rushes loudly in my ears. Their cocks throb inside me, and I can feel each of them pulsing against my inner walls as first one man and then the other empties his load inside me.

"You did so well for us, baby girl," Gage murmurs, and all three of the men echo his praise, their deep voices sending a little shiver up my spine.

After a long moment, Knox and Ash pull out of me slowly, taking their time and being careful not to hurt me. When they're both out, I feel empty and sore, and their cum drips out of me.

One of them—I'm too out of it to tell who—reaches down and gathers some of the mixture of all of their cum on his hand, smearing it over my stomach when I flop onto my back.

I look down at the mess on my body, sweaty and exhausted.
Gage was right. Every trace of that asshole from the hotel is gone.
I feel used up and marked, but in the very best way.

RIVER

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up next to Gage in his bed. The others are all in the room too, but the bed isn't big enough for us all. Ash is tucked in against my back, and Knox and Priest are slumped in chairs that have been dragged close to the bed.

It would really be nice if we had one huge bed. I don't like having to pick where to sleep at night, and I want to wake up with all of them.

At my front, Gage stirs awake, yawning and stretching with a wince. I look at him, checking his face for signs of pain from his wound, but he looks content, his features smooth. So I lean up and kiss him, letting it linger.

"Did you sleep alright?" he asks me, his voice rough from having just woken up.

I cock an eyebrow at him, letting my lips tilt into a grin. "Are you kidding? After what you guys put me through last night, I was completely out. Dead to the world. I barely remember getting upstairs."

He hums softly, reaching up to brush silver hair back from my face. "You were so fucking beautiful, baby girl. I've never seen anything as sexy as that. I should have recorded it."

"Perv," I tease him. "You'd just use it to get off."

"I have *you* for that." He smirks. "But think about it. Don't you want to know what you look like when you come apart for us like that?"

I shiver at the thought of it because, yeah, it is kinda hot when he puts it that way. I have no idea what it all looked like last night, but it might be interesting to try taping ourselves one of these times. I'm not sure how I feel about watching the playback of *myself*, but the idea of watching the

men fuck me from an outside angle, getting to see all of them gathered around me and appreciate little details that I'm usually too lost in the moment to catch? Yeah, I'm definitely interested in that.

"You might have a point," I murmur, and he huffs a laugh.

"I usually do."

I make a face. "Okay. Don't let it go to your head."

He grins, and it makes me want to kiss him all over again, the handsome bastard. "Too late for that."

Ash stirs at my back, one hand sliding over my hip and down to my stomach. Knox and Priest start waking up too, yawning and stretching, working out the kinks from sleeping in chairs all night.

It would be nice to lie in bed all day, just soaking up the warmth and good feelings that these men inspire in me, but there's shit to do, like there always is, so I force myself to get up with a sigh.

As soon as I start moving, the soreness from last night intensifies, and I wince when my feet hit the floor.

Gage sees it, because of course he does, and he gives me a look of concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I reassure him, nodding. "I'm fine. Just feeling it from last night, but it's good."

Ash snorts and props himself up on one elbow, reaching for his glasses on the nightstand. "You're both total worrywarts for each other, aren't you? One of you gets a paper cut, and the other one has a fit."

Gage rolls his eyes. "River is a magnet for disaster," he shoots back. "Of course I worry about her."

All four of them chuckle at his words, the way you do when you hear a joke that's funny because it's true, and I wince internally. I can't really argue with what he said. Because of me and the trouble I've been getting into, the guys have barely been able to live their normal lives lately. They haven't been to their club in the last few days, and their every waking minute is now consumed by a dangerous man and his stupid fucking secret society.

I swallow hard, guilt spreading through my chest like thick tar. I hate that I've put them in this situation.

"I know things have been... rough," I say slowly. That doesn't even really scratch the surface of what's been going on, but I'm not sure what other word to use. "And you haven't been able to really live your lives or do

the things that you need to do for the club because you're so busy dealing with this shit with me. I'm—"

"No," Gage interrupts, his voice cutting over mine. "None of that. Come here."

He reaches out and pulls me back onto the bed, wrapping his arms around me the moment I tumble onto the mattress with him.

"Do you know what we always said to each other when we opened Sin and Salvation?" he murmurs. "We said that if shit went bad, we could walk away from the club at a moment's notice, but we would never walk away from each other. The business has always just been a means to an end, River. And that end is taking care of each other."

"But—"

He shakes his head. "No buts. None of us have families that we care to spend any time with, but we are a family. And family is there for each other when it's easy, sure, but especially when it's hard. The club could burn to the fucking ground tomorrow, and I wouldn't give a shit, as long as the five people in this room were safe. We could start over, build a new club or something completely different, as long as we're all together. That's the only thing that matters."

He says it with the same kind of conviction he had when he said he'd risk his life for me again if need be, and when he told me I'm strong and not broken.

There's nothing but raw honesty in his voice, and it hits me right in the chest.

And it's a good point. The club is just a *thing*. Just a means to an end, like he said. The people in this room are what matter.

"He's right," Priest puts in, and I turn to take in the serious expression on his angular features. "If the choice is between taking care of each other, making sure we're all safe, and dealing with the club, then the club loses every time."

"Every fucking time," Knox echoes, nodding.

"Plus... I mean, it's kinda nice not having to deal with work for a while," Ash adds with a shrug, giving a lopsided grin. "It's like a little vacation."

That makes me snort with amusement, even as my heart swells.

"I don't know if any sane person would call this a vacation," I point out dryly. "But... I understand. And thank you."

I kiss Gage, since he's the closest, and then make my way around the room, kissing each of them and lingering for a moment so that they'll understand how much this means to me.

Then, still walking a little gingerly, I head off to go shower and get ready for the day.

After a quick breakfast, it's time to go give Alec the device and whatever proprietary information it pulled from Michael's computer. I'm half tempted to try to find out what exactly I stole for Alec, but I worry that if I plug the device into another computer, Alec will know. And I don't want to give him any excuse to call this mission a failure—or any reason to kill me or my men.

Priest, Ash, and Knox come with me as always, and Gage gives me the same stern “be careful” that he always does when he has to stay behind.

The drive over is uneventful, but I'm still jittery by the time we arrive. I'm really starting to hate this fucking office building of Alec's, and while I ride up in the elevator with the goon of the day, I shudder, remembering what I saw on one of the floors below Alec's office.

Hopefully he's gotten rid of that girl's body by now, but the memory is forever burned into my brain.

Just like the last two times, Alec is in place behind his desk when I enter, typing away. I have no idea if this building is where he normally does work, or if it's one of many office spaces he has around the city where he conducts business. My guess is the latter, especially since I know he can afford it. Maybe this building is reserved for some of the sketchier parts of his business.

He looks up immediately as I pass through the doorway, his features calmly impassive, and hatred toward him curls in my stomach, hot and sour.

I entertain a little mental fantasy of punching him in his smug face, or throwing him out the window to smash on the concrete below, but I keep all of that out of my expression. I don't need to give him any reason to want to lash out at me right now.

“Was the job done?” Alec asks, steepling his fingers as he looks at me. “I'd hate to hear that another task I gave you turned into something sloppy.”

I dig the little device out of my pocket and toss it onto the desk. “It's done,” I tell him bluntly. “And nothing happened to the guy either.”

Alec holds my gaze for a long, uncomfortable moment. He looks like he's trying to see into me, to catch me in a lie or make me admit something

by staring me down. I just keep my face neutral and wait.

Eventually, he gives up on whatever intimidation tactic he was going for and picks up the device, turning it over in his fingers.

“Well done,” he says, pursing his lips a little as he nods thoughtfully. “This is exactly what I wanted. But a bit too simple to really count for an initiation, wouldn’t you say?”

What the fuck?

“Bullshit,” I snap. “There was nothing simple about it. I’ve done everything you asked me to do, but you keep moving the target. Making it impossible for me to ever be done. I’m not your bitch, Beckham. I’m not going to keep running goddamn errands for you. You either want me in the society, or you don’t.”

One of Alec’s eyebrows lifts as my little tirade ends. He gives me that look again, considering and searching, and for a second, I’m afraid that I’ve gone too far and he’s going to kill me right here and now.

The moment stretches out for what feels like an eternity. I can hear my heart pounding in my ears so loud that Alec can probably hear it too. I hate it. I hate that he can probably tell I’m afraid, but there’s not much I can do about it.

After several more agonizing seconds, he dips his chin once and then leans back in his chair.

“Alright,” he says. “You have a point. You’ve done your tasks, and you’ve done them well enough. You’ll be admitted to the Kyrio Society. As a full member.”

The tension floods out of my body in a shaky rush, and I give an internal sigh of relief. It’s kind of a mind fuck that I’m relieved about this in the first place, considering I don’t want to join his damn society at all.

But it’s better than the alternative: me and my men buried in a shallow grave.

I do have to wonder if Alec has just been testing me this whole time, though. Would he have just kept making me do shit forever if I hadn’t pushed back and called him out on it? Was he waiting for me to stand up to him? It’s a little odd to think of, because I doubt he allows members of his society to disobey or defy him—but at the same time, he probably wants to know they’re all people who won’t fold under pressure.

“There will be a ceremony to induct you into the society formally,” Alec says, and I drag my attention back to his blandly handsome face, my

hackles rising.

“What will that entail?” I ask, narrowing my eyes.

“Nothing too daunting, I promise. I won’t make you kill another one of your men, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He smiles, and it’s so smug and self-satisfied that it makes me want to kill him on the spot. He’s so confident, so certain that he holds all the cards and pulls all the strings. He thinks he made me murder someone close to me, and he’s sitting there making fucking jokes about it.

On the plus side, I guess at least he really does think Gage is dead. So that part of our plan is working. It’s something to hold on to, even if it fills me with a staticky rage just hearing him talk about Gage’s supposed death.

I clasp my hands behind my back as Alec tells me where to go for the induction ceremony and when to be there, and when he finishes, he gives a jerk of his chin that’s almost a nod.

“That will be all.”

He doesn’t even wave me away, just drops his gaze back down to his desk and gets back to work as if I ceased to exist the moment he dismissed me. It’s a fucking asshole move, but I don’t push back against it. I’m only too happy to leave his office, making my way quickly back to the elevator. I head down to the first floor, and the guys meet me right away, gathering around me as we stride out of the building together.

“So?” Priest asks on the drive home. “What’s the verdict?”

“I’m in,” I tell him. “I’ll be made a full member of the Kyrio Society. And there’s going to be an induction ceremony.”

Knox rolls his eyes. “Oh good, more chances to rub elbows with the rich and morally corrupt. My favorite.”

“It’s what we wanted though,” I tell him. “Or what we *needed*, considering the fucking shit storm we’re stuck in. I’m in the society, which means he won’t kill me for failing to earn a spot. And I’ll also be able to get closer to Alec. I can figure out any weaknesses he has and find a way to take him down.”

Priest nods. “We’ll need a plan. We have to play this very carefully. This won’t be the same as taking down Julian Maduro. Alec is better connected, smarter, and much more dangerous.”

He’s right. It’s definitely not going to be as simple as things were before—which wasn’t all that fucking simple to begin with. We have no idea how

deep Alec's influence goes in this city, or how many people he has in his pocket, so we'll have to tread carefully.

Because one single misstep could get us all killed.

RIVER

“HE WENT to the park the other day,” Avalon tells me through the phone, laughing at the memory of it. “We fed the ducks, and he was just so happy to be outside, I think. He was running around in the grass, begging me to push him on the swings. It was very cute.”

“That’s great,” I reply. “I’m glad he’s finally getting to do some normal kid shit.”

It’s been a few days since my meeting with Alec, and I’m wrapped in a towel, sitting on my bed chatting with Avalon on the phone.

We’ve been talking a lot lately. At first, my calls were mostly just to check in on Cody and make sure he knows I didn’t abandon him, but now it’s more than that.

Now we’re becoming... friends, I guess. It’s a weird thing for me to admit. I’m not used to having friends. Not real ones that I actually give a shit about beyond how they can be useful to my goals anyway.

Even though this is a burner phone, Avalon knows I can’t talk about the stuff I’ve got going on over this line, so instead, we talk about regular life stuff. Stuff that most people would probably find super boring.

“Oh, did I tell you I got that job?” Avalon says. “It’s not anything fancy, just a small boutique close by, but it’s the first time I’ve had a job that’s even close to what I really want to do.”

“What do you really want to do?” I ask, smiling a little at the excitement in her voice.

“I want to get into fashion design. I’ve always wanted to, ever since I was in middle school, but then, well... things went down a rough path and...”

I nod, even though she can't see me. "And you got stuck in some bad shit."

"Yeah. But now that I have a second chance to do something different with my life, I think it could be fun to try to go for it."

"You should," I tell her, trying to sound encouraging. "People don't usually get second chances, so you should definitely take the opportunity while you can."

"You're right," Avalon replies. "I'm just nervous, I guess. That now that I have the chance to do something I've wanted to do for a while, I won't be any good at it. You want to hear something cute, though?"

I get off my bed and go over to the nail polishes I keep lined up in a row, choosing a color for tonight. It's the night of my induction into the Kyrio Society, and talking to Avalon has been a great distraction from the way my stomach seems determined to tie itself into knots.

"Tell me," I say, settling back down to paint my nails.

"I told Cody about the new job, just kind of explaining it and everything. Then I had to explain what a fashion designer does, and he spent the rest of the night drawing his own designs for clothes."

That makes me huff a laugh. I can only imagine what a little kid's clothing designs look like. "Sounds like he had fun with it. Fuck, I'm so glad he's doing okay."

"He really is," Avalon promises. "He's been through a lot, I can tell that much. Sometimes he gets really quiet and sad, and I have to coax him into telling me what's wrong, but I think he's just glad to not be alone."

"I'm glad he has you. While I can't be there."

"He asks about you all time. I think he wants to make sure you know he hasn't forgotten about you either."

Something about that warms my heart, and I let out a sigh, heavy with the nerves I'm feeling and the regret that Cody has to be so far away from his last remaining family just to keep him safe.

Part of me wishes I could tell Avalon everything. About what's happening tonight, about how anxious I am about it. There's nothing she can do to fix it, but maybe just getting it off my chest to someone who isn't involved in this shit would help.

But I can't really drag her into it any more than she already is, and there's no telling what would happen if I gave in and said something about it over the phone.

“Are you okay?” Avalon asks into the silence, as if she has a sixth sense for what’s going on in my head. Either that, or I’m being really obvious today.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “I’m fine. Just a lot on my mind.”

She probably knows that’s not the whole story, and also knows I can’t tell her the whole story, so she hums softly.

“Well, whatever it is, remember that you’re a badass, okay? You can do anything.”

I smile at the seriousness of her tone. “Thanks, Avalon. I better go finish getting ready. Tell Cody goodnight for me.”

“I will,” she says. “Good luck.”

We end the call, and I stand up with a sigh, blowing on my nails to make sure they’re dry. I need to finish getting dressed, and I choose an outfit that makes me feel like what Avalon called me—a badass.

Normally, I’d go for a dress for something like this, but instead I choose pants. They’re bold and red and tight and made of a soft material that hugs my legs, hips, and thighs in an appealing way. I pair that with a matching blazer style jacket with three-quarter sleeves, and a black shirt under it that dips down low enough to show off some cleavage.

I pull out a pair of heels that will go well with the whole outfit, and just putting it on makes me feel powerful. With my tattoos and silver hair, I look like I’m ready to kick ass and take names, and that’s the effect I was going for.

The door to my room opens as I lift the heels, the straps dangling from my fingers, and Priest walks in.

“Hey. I’m just about ready,” I say, turning to face him.

He nods. “Good. We’re good to go on our end.”

His gaze flicks over me, and I can see approval burning in his eyes. Then he shifts his focus to the shoes in my hands. He crosses the room toward me and drops down to one knee, grabbing the shoes from where I’ve got the straps hooked over my fingers.

Tilting his head, he looks up at me for a split second and then lifts one of my feet, kissing the top of it before sliding my high heel on with careful gentleness. He repeats the process on the other side, pressing a kiss to the sensitive skin on the top of my foot and then helping me put on the shoe.

It makes my heart skip a beat with surprise and affection at the same time. I bite my lip as I watch him, caught up in how tender and sensual the

action is. It's almost *worshipful*, and it makes my chest ache in a way that feels really good.

"Now you're ready," he says once he's finished with the last strap, quirking his mouth in a little smile.

"Priest..."

I swallow, my voice dying out. I don't even know how to respond to what he just did, too full of those warm feelings to really know how to articulate any of them. My mind keeps coming back to how far we've come, and how good he is to me always.

Priest stands up in a smooth movement, coming to stand behind me as I face the mirror. I can see both of us in the reflection, standing tall and firm together.

"You look beautiful," he murmurs, smoothing my hair over one shoulder and then dipping his head again to press kisses along the line of my neck.

My eyes flutter closed for a second, and I let myself take comfort in that gesture and his closeness. I drag in a deep breath and then turn around, putting my arms around his neck and leaning up to kiss him.

We have somewhere to be, but the kiss is slow and unhurried, just a soft affirmation of what we have with each other and how we feel.

"You know, I don't remember much about my mom," I murmur to him when I pull away finally. "But one of the last things I remember is her wearing a dress in this color red. I remember her twirling in the living room in it, looking so happy and beautiful. I don't know how happy she really was all the time with an asshole like my father as a husband, but she always seemed to try to make things good for me and Hannah. I always thought that maybe... maybe if she'd lived, she would have protected me and Hannah. She would have made sure we were safe and never would've let us get taken and hurt."

I take a deep breath, trying to center myself. "So today, I'm wearing this color as a way to call on her memory, and to say that I'll do what I wish my mom could have done. I'll protect myself just like she would have."

Pride and something warm and soft shine in Priest's blue eyes as he looks down at me. He lifts a hand and cups my cheek, stroking his thumb over my face.

"We've all got your back," he promises. "You're not in this alone."

"Thank you."

The words aren't really adequate for the enormity of what the Kings have taken on for me, but I also know that all four of the men would say they're unnecessary. They're not helping me because they feel like they need to. They're doing it because they want to, just like I'd do for them.

I thread my fingers through Priest's, giving his hand a little squeeze before we leave the room and head downstairs.

True to form, Gage is pissed again.

He's healing up more and more every day, walking stiffly and still with lingering pain, but he's on his feet more than he was before.

He's waiting for us in the living room, and the tension he's carrying could be seen from a mile away. I hate to see it. I hate the way he seems so angry at himself for not being able to go.

"Hey," I say, stepping close enough that he can reach out and touch me, letting him draw me into his arms with rough possessiveness. "This isn't on you. This is all on Alec."

I lean up and kiss him, trying to put the truth of my words into it, so that maybe he'll believe them more.

"We have to kill him as soon as fucking possible," Gage growls against my lips.

"No argument from me," I reply. I rest my forehead against his for a moment, and he holds me close, our breaths intermingling in the space between our lips.

Finally, when I can't put it off any longer, I step away from him and turn to the others. "We'd better go."

Gage looks at his brothers, who have all gathered by the front door, ready to head out. "Bring her back in one piece," he instructs, his voice gruff.

Knox and Ash both roll their eyes, but Priest nods solemnly. Harley whines a little as we leave, and I hear Gage calling him over as the door closes behind us and we head for the car.

Alec gave us a location where my first real society meeting will be held, and we drive there, making our way through the dark city.

The place he told me to go is pretty out of the way, and I'm expecting some kind of lavish building or mansion or something... but when we arrive, there's nothing there but empty space.

"What the fuck?" Knox asks, looking around when we get out of the car. "I swear, if this is some kind of trick..."

Goddammit. Is this another test? Some unexpected challenge or task Alec is going to make me do?

We're all tense and on edge, trying to figure out what kind of game Alec is playing, waiting for someone to come walking out of the shadows to fuck with us or something.

Ash turns to say something to me, but before he can speak, he's cut off by a loud sound in the distance.

"What the hell? Is that... a helicopter?" he asks, and we all look up in time to see that yeah, it is.

The sound of the blades gets louder and louder, and we move back as dust is whipped up around us as the helicopter touches down to the ground.

A man in a black suit hops out and eyes us, no real expression on his face.

"Get in," he grunts.

We all exchange glances, and I see wariness on each of my men's faces. None of us are sure if we should trust this, but it's kind of classic Alec in a way. Some flashy, over the top shit like having a helicopter meet us to take us to wherever the fuck we're going for this meeting.

Without another plan, we all just do as the guy says, getting into the helicopter. There are two more men in dark suits inside, and they pat us down, then blindfold us once we're settled in our seats, something Knox complains about loudly.

I grit my teeth, hating the feeling of helplessness at being stuck in a helicopter with a bunch of Alec's minions, being taken to an unknown location without even being able to see what's going on around me.

Maybe it's just Alec's way of making sure that the location of the society meetings remains secret and protected, but I'm sure part of it is a power trip as well, just one more way for him to make sure that others know they have less sway here than he does.

My ears are full of the roaring noise of the helicopter, and my mind churns with growing anxiety over this meeting and induction. I have no idea what to expect, and that makes it hard to relax.

Eventually, the helicopter lands and turns off. The sudden silence makes it feel like we've been sucked into a black hole or something, silent and still. We're helped out of the chopper by strong hands and herded away from it to stand in a close huddle. All of a sudden, the platform we were

standing on starts to move, going down like an elevator, and I clench my hands into fists, forcing myself to breathe normally.

Knox grumbles behind me, and the sound of his deep voice makes it easier to focus on something other than my nerves.

Once we come to a stop, someone removes the blindfold that's been wrapped around my eyes, and I'm left blinking in the light of a small, well-decorated room.

"Come with me," the man who took my blindfold off says, his tone just as impassive as the first man's as he motions for us to follow him.

Priest, Knox, and Ash have also had their blindfolds removed, and we follow our guide down a long corridor, deeper into whatever building this is.

All I can tell about it is that it's old and beautiful. There's dark wood everywhere, accented with cream and gold. Vases and ornate marble busts line the hallway, set on pedestals and clearly expensive as fuck.

The whole place drips with a kind of wealth I've never seen before. The kind of wealth that doesn't happen in one lifetime, but is passed down through generations.

Old money.

Finally, we're led out into a huge ballroom area. It's massive, with a shiny marble floor and sweeping chandeliers that dangle and sparkle from the ceiling. The walls are hung with portraits and tapestries, and it almost looks like something out of a Victorian novel or some shit.

Or it *would*, if not for the people milling around in their modern clothes, probably security and staff for the other society members.

My heart races even faster because I know this is it. This is the end of the line, the last bit of this journey my men will be able to go on with me.

"You have to wait here with the others," our guide says, looking at the three Kings of Chaos who flank me.

They all tense, and I see Priest's jaw clench like he's gritting his teeth. But that's the only facial expression he makes. The only sign that he's displeased.

"Fine," Knox grits out, sounding antagonistic and pissed off.

Ash gives me a look, full of feeling and promise. They'll be here waiting for me when I'm done with whatever this induction ceremony involves.

I nod back. We all knew this was coming.

The guide doesn't acknowledge my men at all after addressing them. He just keeps walking, and I follow him, my heels clacking across the polished floor as I hurry to keep up.

We pass through the ballroom and into another hallway, going even deeper into the massive building. After several more minutes, we reach a room with a set of ornate double doors carved out of the same dark wood as the rest of the furnishings here.

Two men stand outside it, either guarding what's inside or keeping people from getting in. They're clearly armed, and they eye me as I come to a stop in front of them.

The guy on the left gives me an assessing glance, then nods. Pushing one of the doors open, he ushers me inside.

Into the fucking lion's den.

RIVER

MY MOUTH IS DRY, and my heart is doing its best to crawl up into my throat as I step into the room.

There's a large table in the center of it, and there are five people gathered around the table. Alec is at the head, and he looks up and smiles at me when I come in, sending a chill up my spine.

I've been following the nearly silent guard since my men and I got here, just focusing on putting one foot in front of the other, but now it hits me what's about to happen. I'm about to enter a society with Alec and people like him. With the man who orchestrated the worst thing that ever happened to me and sent my life into a tailspin.

My fingers itch to wrap around a weapon, even though I'm not carrying one. But fuck, I wish I had a gun on me, or a knife. Something. *Anything*, at this point. I'd take a pair of goddamn brass knuckles if that was the best I could get. I could do enough damage with those.

I want to kill him.

I want to shoot him in the face or knife him in the gut or beat him into an unrecognizable pulp.

I want him gone from this world so he can never hurt me or anyone else ever again.

But I can't do any of that. If I even flinch in his direction the wrong way, I have no doubt that he'll have the guard who led me here put me down like a dog. I have to play the long game here. I've done it before, and I can do it again.

Even if I really don't want to.

Anger, revulsion, and sour anxiety churn in my gut, and I have to talk myself down so that I can keep my cool.

These are just people, River, I remind myself. No matter how powerful and rich they are, no matter how well connected, they would bleed just the same as anyone else.

Usually, people say you should imagine everyone naked when you're nervous in front of a crowd, but instead, I just imagine all five of the people seated around the table dying. I imagine the life bleeding from their eyes, their bodies crumpling to the ground. Just harmless lumps of blood and bone.

And actually, it does help.

I square my shoulders and lift my head, striding toward the table. I have a role to play here, and I can do that, projecting confidence as I move closer.

There are two empty seats at the table, and Alec gestures to one of them.

"That's your seat now," he says. "Considering that you're Ivan's replacement. We still have to find one for our poor departed Agent Carter."

I clench my jaw, remembering that night on the docks. How freaked out and desperate Carter seemed to be as he asked me to help him get out of the society, and then the suddenness of him getting shot and killed, right there in front of me.

I don't say anything in response to Alec's pointed words. I just take the seat, sinking down a little into the plush, velvet cushion on the high-backed chair.

"Now that you're here, I believe a round of introductions are in order," Alec continues.

He starts at the other end of the table, pointing out a young woman, who seems to be close to my age. She has long, straight dark hair, braided back from her face, showing off sharp cheekbones and pale eyes.

"This is Tatum Damaris," he says.

Next to her is a man that I recognize as a congressman, and that's less surprising than it probably should be. He's introduced as Henry Levine, and I decide right away that he's nothing special. Just a run of the mill middle-aged man with his fingers in criminal shit.

Alec skips himself and moves on to the next person. I don't recognize this guy, but just from looking at him, I can tell he's a creep. He's got that

dark look to him, like he gets up to some fucked up shit, and he drums his fingers on the table, meeting my eyes with a chilling look.

“Preston Salinger,” Alec says.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Preston says in a soft voice, inclining his head slightly as he greets me.

Holding his gaze is difficult. There’s something *too* penetrating about it, as if he’s somehow using the eye contact to slip inside my mind like a thief and steal secrets that don’t belong to him. I’m grateful when Alec moves on to the next person at the table. It’s a relief to have an excuse to look away from Preston.

The last man at the table is clearly Russian, and he has a dark, brutal look to him. Whereas Knox is sort of cheerfully unhinged in his brutality, this guy looks like he hasn’t smiled in years.

“Nikolai Petrov,” Alec says, and then he gestures to himself, smiling smugly. “And you already know me, of course.”

The hatred I feel for him burns even hotter. The way he taunts me is clearly deliberate, and I hate how he rubs it in my face that we have a history. As if he’s proud of the role he’s played in my life so far. Proud of making me who I am.

The fucker.

I glance around at everyone, taking them all in. They all look like the kind of people I’d expect to be here, pulling the strings and ruining people’s lives. Maybe with the exception of Tatum, but she’s hard to read. I’d say it’s odd for someone so young to be involved in this, but I’m here, so I know it’s not always that simple.

And of course the society has been skewed heavily male, because there always seem to be shitty men behind this kind of crap.

“Damn, it’s a real sausage fest in here,” I drawl into the silence, calling them out for it. “Only one woman until I joined, and now only two?”

I snort a soft laugh, but Tatum doesn’t even crack a smile at my comment. Her pretty face is stony, and her eyes are cold.

“That’s the way the world works,” Alec replies, still smiling that smug, unflappable smile of his. “But now, on to business. As the remaining members of the Kyrio Society, we’ll put your induction to a vote.” He looks around the table at everyone else. “River Simone has passed the tests I set for her, so this is the last step before she will become one of us. A simple ‘aye’ will do if you agree. Nikolai?”

The dark-haired Russian man looks me over, and there's something chilling in his blank, hard expression. I can't tell what he's thinking as he considers me, but it's probably not anything good.

Finally, he dips his head and looks back at Alec.

"Aye," he says, accent thick and deep.

"Good. Preston?"

Preston hesitates, and when he looks at me again, it makes my skin crawl. It's just as difficult to read him as it was to read Nikolai, but I'm almost grateful for that. I don't think I want to know what's going on in his mind. He narrows his eyes, tapping his long fingers together like he's not sure which way he's going to vote, but then shrugs.

"Aye." His light brown eyes glitter as a smile tugs at his lips. "She's got a point. We could use another female member."

Alec moves on to Henry Levine, the congressman. Henry is seated at Alec's right-hand side, and I can't help but wonder if his place at the table means anything significant. Is he closer to Alec than the others? And if so, does he hold more power than the other society members, or does he act as Alec's second in command?

Whatever their relationship and the power dynamic is, Henry clearly defers to Alec on decisions. Although there's an expression of distaste on his face as he gazes at me, the senator doesn't hesitate as he gives a curt nod.

"Aye."

Tatum is the last one, and when Alec calls on her, she looks at me like I'm no more than shit under her shoe. Her whole attitude is chilly, and she studies me from head to toe for a long moment that seems to stretch on and on.

Finally, she huffs and tosses her hair, dismissing me with a glance. "Aye," she says, her voice tight and irritated.

"And I'm an aye as well," Alec states. "The ayes have it, and we'll move forward with the induction ceremony. Will you take the oath?"

It's not like I have much of a choice, but I don't say that, nodding instead.

"River Simone, do you swear to uphold the laws of the society? Do you swear to devote to it your strength, your power, and your influence, such as they are? And above all, do you swear to keep the secrets of the society and

its members, knowing that if you speak out of turn, you will be punished severely?”

Again, I think about Agent Carter lying dead on the dock. I have a pretty good idea of what Alec means when he says ‘punished severely.’

“I swear,” I murmur. The words feel like ash in my mouth.

Alec smiles, and I can’t tell if it’s because he knows how unhappy I am about this, or if he’s just getting off on the control of it all. Probably some mixture of both, knowing how fucked up and vicious he is.

“Very good.” He nods, then gestures to a small bronze sculpture that sits in the center of the table. “The next part is the blood oath. You have sworn your allegiance to our society. Now seal it in blood.”

I want to roll my eyes at the melodrama of it, but I restrain myself. These aren’t the kinds of people who would take mocking their rituals lightly.

And honestly, after the other tests Alec has put me through to “earn” my spot at this table, I should be glad the only thing that’s left is to draw a little of my own blood.

Alec passes a knife across the table and explains that he wants me to cut my palm and smear the blood on the sculpture. I take the knife in one hand and open my other one, looking at the scar from when I cut my palm on the razor with Knox that time. It’s a nice memory, and the sight of the scar there grounds me, reminding me of my men. They might not be in the room with me, but they’re always with me in spirit.

I’m not alone in this.

Taking a deep breath, I complete Alec’s fucked up little ritual, slicing into my palm and then smearing the blood over the sculpture.

Alec watches the whole thing with rapt attention, looking more like a goddamn cult leader than ever, and when it’s done, he sits back in his seat with a satisfied smile.

“Then it’s done. Welcome to the most elite society in Detroit, River.”

RIVER

“NOW THAT THAT’S DONE, we can get down to business,” Alec declares, taking the knife back and giving me a small white handkerchief that I press to my palm. He moves smoothly into business mode, talking like he’s leading a board meeting and not welcoming me into a society of murderers and sociopaths.

“Like any worthwhile group, everyone here brings something to the table. Something that helps us be stronger as a whole.” He nods toward me. “You, River, bring your newly acquired wealth and your penchant for doing what needs to be done—your willingness to get your hands dirty for a good cause. I’m interested to see how this will all play out.”

He smiles at me again and then shifts his focus down the table to Nikolai. The Russian man is hunched over the table, his dark eyes intense as he stares back at Alec.

It’s so obvious that none of these people trust each other or even seem to like each other at all. But they’re working together to further their power. For the greed of it, I guess.

“Nikolai, when we last spoke, you told me you were going to handle that little problem we discussed,” Alec says.

“He’s been dealt with,” Nikolai grunts back in his accented voice.

What Nikolai brings to the table is a skill with killing, obviously, since I’m pretty sure they’re talking about taking someone out. Whoever Nikolai took out must’ve been someone difficult to kill, or Alec probably would have just done it himself.

“Excellent.” Alec smiles pleasantly. “I love it when a job is well done.”

Nikolai doesn't react to the praise at all. He looks more like he's hungry to have someone else to kill than satisfied that he already got to take someone out.

"Now, I'm going to be launching my new charity organization soon," Alec continues.

He explains it briefly, more for my benefit than anyone else's, I'm sure. From the sounds of it, everyone at the table has had a hand in creating this new organization behind the scenes, but Alec is going to be the face of it. They'll all funnel money through the charity, using it to further their illegal shit.

As he talks, I pay close attention, hanging on to every word. This is the reason I needed to join this fucked up society in the first place—so that I can learn more about Alec and his dealings and find a way to use it against him.

But I need more than this.

Alec Beckham is definitely not the kind of guy who can be taken down by alerting the feds to his illegal dealings. Even though Agent Carter is dead, I'm sure he's still got cops and agents in his pockets. He's got so much money and power at this point that he's basically untouchable.

"I'll be making a large donation, of course," Henry says, nodding. "The optics of that will be spectacular, especially with my re-election campaign coming up."

Alec smiles, lacing his fingers together on the table. "Always thinking of the people, Henry."

Henry smiles the way I imagine a snake would, and I have to work hard to keep myself from snorting. Of course the crooked politician would love to take advantage of this whole thing. He gets to look good by making a donation, but it really just benefits him and whatever shit he has his fingers in.

Preston and Tatum don't seem to have too much to add. Alec mentions a couple of tasks offhand to them, but they seem like minor things. Checking on "packages" and making sure the cash flow is tight.

None of it is anything I can act on.

By the time the business concludes for the night, it's pretty clear that I'm not going to get anything this evening. I've been brought into the fold, and it doesn't seem like any of them were holding back or hiding anything,

but none of what I learned about their dealings is actionable in my goal of taking Alec down.

It was probably too much to hope for that I'd dig up something good during my first meeting, but the thought of having to sit through more of this shit makes my skin crawl.

"That's all for tonight," Alec says after about an hour, wrapping things up. "Now it's time to celebrate and welcome our newest member."

He gets up, and everyone else follows suit, so I do as well. We file out of the back room, and the same guards from before hold the doors open for us as we make our way out into the ballroom.

This is clearly meant to be the celebration Alec referenced, but the atmosphere in the ballroom isn't exactly festive as the other society members break away to mingle, talking to each other and to their entourages—the ones who came with them but weren't allowed into the back, just like my men. The chandeliers glitter dimly, casting the room in a low, warm light, and food and drinks and drugs are on offer for anyone who wants to partake. Trays are being carried around by topless women, and more than a few of them get groped as they offer drinks.

I see Priest, Knox, and Ash standing off to one side, and I make a beeline for them, relief filling me just at the sight of them. None of them are even paying attention to the topless women walking around, and they only have eyes for me as I come over.

Knox looks me over from head to toe—not like he's checking me out, but more like he's checking to make sure I'm okay.

"Did it go smoothly?" Priest asks, keeping his voice low and using neutral terms since we have no idea who could be listening in this crowd.

I nod, letting them know I'm okay. We can't talk much here at all.

I want to leave so badly. My legs itch to run out of this place and figure out some way to get home. But that wouldn't be smart. I need to stay. To show power, and to start working my way deeper into this mysterious organization.

The only real way to do that is to mingle and try to figure out all I can.

Even as I have that thought, Alec comes striding over, looking charming and confident as he always does. He's the host here, in his element, but that's always the case whenever I see him. He has all the power, all the control, and the rest of us are just dancing for his twisted amusement.

“I do hope you’ll enjoy the party, River,” he says. I hate the way he says my name. I hate hearing it in his voice at all. “Relax and enjoy yourself. You’ve earned it. And you’ll continue to earn it.”

His smile is the same as always, but I hear the threat in those words. If I want to stay in this society, I’ll have to pay my dues. No matter what that means or what he demands of me.

I don’t respond to his veiled threat, but Alec doesn’t seem to need me to.

He turns his attention to my men instead, and I tense up just watching him interact with them.

“I wondered if you three would be trouble, but I suppose you’re something of a package deal, aren’t you?” he looks at the three of them in turn.

“We go where she goes,” Ash says, grinning back at him, although there’s a sharp edge to it. He’s the best one out of the three Kings to talk to Alec, probably. The least likely to fly off the handle, even if he’s just as pissed as the others are.

Alec looks at him like he’s barely worth noticing, but then nods. “I think you can be useful to me too. Your club does good business, and you have a reputation in the city. That will be beneficial when I need it.”

Prickly protectiveness rises in me—of the guys, and of their business. They built that. They worked hard for it, and it’s bullshit that Alec thinks he can just use it when he sees fit.

That fucking asshole from the Diamond Devils motorcycle club tried to go behind their back to make a deal to smuggle weapons through the club, and they sent him back in rough shape to deliver a message. But if Alec wants to do the same thing, how will they be able to stop him?

“That wasn’t part of the deal,” I snap, unable to control the sudden burst of anger. “They aren’t a part of this, and neither is their club.”

Alec doesn’t even seem bothered by the outburst. He’s still smiling, and he looks at me like I’m a child throwing a tantrum.

“You must not have heard me. I just stated that you and your men seem like a package deal, and they agreed,” he says. “Which means that they very much are a part of this. And every person whom a society member brings into this space is bound by the same oath the member is by association. No one is allowed this deep into our inner circle unless they’re an asset to our organization in some way.”

He basically means that any part of my life is fair game to exploit—anything or anyone in it, just by virtue of an association with me, but especially the guys—and I have to bite my tongue to keep from lashing out at him.

My fingers curl into fists, and Alec doesn't miss the gesture. I know he knows I'm angry, but it's obvious he doesn't give a shit. He just lets a smirk settle across his face then walks off, moving through the crowd like a god, as untouchable as ever.

As far as he's concerned, there's nothing any of us can do to stop him anyway, so why should he care?

The motherfucker.

Before I can say anything to the guys about that interaction, Tatum comes walking up to me. I turn to face her as she approaches, trying again to get a read on her. Honestly, of all of the members of the society, she's the one I want to talk to the most. She seemed chilly toward me during the meeting earlier, but she's close to my age, and she's the only other woman.

Maybe she was roped into this against her will, just like I was. Maybe she's tired of Alec's shit.

Maybe there's something I can do to turn her into an ally in all this.

But as she nears me and comes to a stop, her pale eyes are icy and unfeeling. There's a sneer tucked into the corner of her mouth, barely noticeable, but there.

"I know what you're trying to do," she hisses. "And it won't fucking work."

My heart skips what feels like three beats in a row, a chill rushing over my skin. Does she know I plan to betray Alec? That I only accepted his invitation to join the society so I could get close enough to him to get him out of my life for good?

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"Making your little joke about too many sausages in the room. Trying to make it seem like you and I are the same." She shakes her head, disdain dripping from every word. "But we are *not* the same. And I've worked too hard to get where I am to let you come in and drag me down."

"I'm not trying to ruin anything," I insist, holding up my hands. It's a lie, but she doesn't have to know that.

"Then stay out of my way. Don't try to relate to me or get me on your side. There are no *sides* here, and if there were, I would never be on yours."

Her eyes narrow. “Do you know how I got my seat at that table?”

I shrug. “The same way the rest of us did, I’m guessing. A personal invite from Alec?”

“No.” She scoffs, her voice hard. “No. My father died years ago, and he left me behind. He never had a son, so *I* was the one who inherited his business empire and his spot in the society. I had to take over all of it, and I had to prove I was worthy. So I don’t know whose dick you sucked to—”

“Excuse me?” I cut in, tense and irritated. “That’s bullshit. I worked to get here, just like everyone else did.”

Tatum laughs, but there’s nothing even approaching humor in it. It’s cold and cruel, and she stares at me like she’s wishing her gaze alone could cut me like glass.

“You don’t know the first thing about *working* for your place,” she says coolly. “Since day one, I’ve done whatever it takes to be given my due and respected by the others. To be taken seriously and not just seen as a weak little girl who got her seat because of her father.”

“Good for you.” I cross my arms. “That doesn’t mean I didn’t work just as hard.”

Her lips press together into a thin line, her nostrils flaring. “It *means* you don’t know anything about what it takes to be a woman in this society. If you think they’re going to respect you because you’re Alec’s new fascination, then you’re wrong. And if you think you can use me to help you get ahead here, then you’re stupid on top of being wrong. Don’t talk to me. Don’t even look at me, and we’ll get along fine. Understand?”

She doesn’t wait for me to answer, just turns and stalks off through the crowd of people.

I suck in a deep breath and let it out through my nose, trying to shake off the irritation and unease from my encounter with her.

So much for her being a potential ally.

“Something crawled up her ass and died, I guess,” Ash mutters, leaning in closer to me to avoid being overheard.

“I understand where she’s coming from, in a way,” I admit grudgingly. “I can’t really see men like Alec and the rest respecting her all that much.”

“Yeah, except her beef doesn’t seem to be that she doesn’t want to be here,” Knox points out. “It’s more that she’s just pissy she doesn’t have more power at the table. That makes her as bad as them, in my book.”

It's not really safe to speculate about it more here, so we drop the subject and move through the crowd, deciding it's time to at least attempt to mingle and see what we can see. We take note of who's been invited to this party and who belongs to each member's entourage, gathering any scraps of info we can in case they might be useful later.

A little ways away, Preston takes a glass from one of the topless women, and he lifts it to me in a toast when he catches my eye. I just sort of nod in response, and he smiles at me, creepy and intense. It makes my skin crawl, so I look away and keep moving, not wanting to get drawn into a conversation with that guy right now. Not with the Kings with me, because something tells me they won't get along.

Off to one side of the room, I see Henry and Alec sitting on a low couch, deep in conversation. Alec isn't smiling, just nodding intently at whatever Henry is saying, so whatever they're talking about seems serious. There's something about the way they sit together, close, with open body language, that makes me think my suspicion back in the meeting room was right. The two of them must be friends beyond just being in the society. That would probably make them the only ones, since everyone else seems fairly standoffish toward the other members.

I'm too far away to hear anything the two men are saying, but I watch them for a bit longer, trying to see if there's anything I can pick up. I wish I could hear better over the hum of other conversations and the clinking of glasses, but getting closer is probably not a good idea. So I just steal a few surreptitious looks at them, hoping I can at least pick up a hint of what they're discussing.

As I peer over at them from the corner of my eye, Henry reaches out and grabs a passing serving woman, taking advantage of the fact that she doesn't have a tray at the moment to pull her closer.

At first, I think he's going to ask her to go get him something, demanding that she bring him a drink like she's his personal slave or some shit. But what he actually does is so much worse. Barely even glancing at her, he drags her down onto her knees, pressing her head in the direction of his crotch.

The woman already seems to know what to do here, and she doesn't fight it at all. She just gets his cock out and puts her mouth on it, sucking him off while he keeps talking to Alec.

For his part, Alec doesn't even react to any of it. He barely seems to notice what's happening, continuing the conversation like the girl on her knees doesn't even exist.

It's fucking disgusting. As Alec speaks, Henry puts a hand on the girl's head, forcing her to take more of him, holding her down until she must be bursting with the need to breathe. But she doesn't fight it or complain, just lets him use her mouth however he wants.

In the end, he pulls out and strokes himself off a couple times, coming in a rush on the girl's face, right there in front of everyone. She doesn't flinch away, just closes her eyes a little as jets of his white spunk hit her in the face, dripping down her cheek and nose.

Still not looking at her, he grabs her arm and hauls her to her feet. But before she can turn to go, he catches her wrist again and stops her. He turns away from his conversation with Alec for a second, pulling her closer so that he can murmur something in her ear.

Then he slaps her ass and sends her on her way, resting one ankle over his knee as he turns back to Alec to resume their discussion.

Disgust and hatred burn in my gut, from the sight of what just happened and from the fact that no one in the room seemed to think it was a problem. To my surprise, the girl walks away from Henry and makes a beeline toward me. When she's close enough, I can see the bruises on her delicate face and the fear in her eyes.

She still has cum running down her cheeks and clinging to her eyelashes, like she's been told not to wipe it off until she's given permission.

"Henry... has a message," she murmurs, and her voice is rough and hoarse from having the fucker's cock down her throat. "He says that you better... you better remember your place. Remember where you came from. Because that's who you are and who you'll always be."

My stomach twists itself into a tight knot as her quiet words wash over me. Knox, Ash, and Priest all tense, and I know they've picked up on the implication here too. Henry could have come and made that little comment himself, but instead he sent the woman he was just using like a sex toy over to say it.

To remind me of my past.

To remind me that *I* was once used like that, and to make it clear that no matter what his vote was in the meeting room, he doesn't believe I belong

in this society.

RIVER

THE GIRL with the dull eyes and cum on her face watches me for a moment after delivering her message, and when my hands curl into angry fists, she flinches backward a little.

That just makes me more mad, but I can feel myself shaking with it as she turns away and scurries off, her head down and her gaze on the floor as if she's trying to make herself invisible.

My rage and frustration are rising, threatening to boil and bubble over in a way I can't control. All of this decadence around me is a fucking lie. It's nothing but ugliness, and the gilded paintings and tapestries and all that shit are no better than the grimy room my sister and I were kept in years ago.

These people, mingling and laughing, acting like they're the top of the top, the best of the best? They're nothing more than animals dressed in fancy outfits.

Demons.

Monsters.

I hate them. I hate them so fucking much.

I hate the way they act, and the fact that they think they're better than everyone else, putting themselves up on pedestals even as they sink to the lowest depths. Just because they *can*. Just because no one's ever been able to stop them before.

The rest of the party passes in a haze for me. As much as I want to bolt for the door, throw myself back in that helicopter and never come here again, I know I can't.

I'm playing a game, and I *have* to play it well. Any signs of weakness could get me killed. But my facade is cracking. I hate everything about this

place, and every second I spend here scratches at the raw wounds in my soul.

“I think we’ve been here long enough,” Priest tells me after a couple of hours have passed. He leans down, murmuring it into my ear so no one else can hear.

I know he’s probably clued into my mood, and Knox and Ash also understand how much I fucking hate all of this. They’ve been on edge since that girl came over to deliver Henry’s fucked up message.

Does Alec know what he whispered to the girl? Does Alec have any idea that Henry disagrees with his decision to invite me into the society?

Tatum called me “Alec’s fascination,” so maybe Henry is worried that my presence here will upset the balance of power and lose him his apparent spot as Alec’s right-hand man.

“You think so?” I whisper to Priest, trying to keep the hope out of my voice. I don’t want to be here, but I don’t want to make things harder for us later.

He nods. “Yeah. You’ve mingled, you’ve put in the time. We can get out of here.”

Relief hits me hard and fast. He wouldn’t say it if it weren’t true, so it must be good enough. That means we can get the fuck out of here, finally.

I nod to Knox and Ash, and they both look relieved as well. I know it can’t be easy for them to just stand here, watching it all happen, knowing they can’t react or lash out if something breaks bad.

“Now we just gotta figure out how the fuck to get home,” Knox mutters under his breath, grimacing as he rolls his shoulders.

The guys all dressed in nice suits tonight as well, and although Knox can really wear a fucking suit, he looks uncomfortable in it tonight. He’d probably rather be wearing tactical gear and splitting his knuckles open smashing in some faces.

We start heading for the exit that will take us out of this ballroom and all the hedonistic shit going on inside it, and I’m hoping that no one will stop me to talk or really notice us leaving at all.

Of course, I don’t get that wish.

Alec must’ve been keeping closer tabs on me all night than I thought, because as soon as we make a move to leave, he strides over, intercepting us before we can reach the door.

“Leaving so soon?” he asks, tipping his head to one side. It’s clear it’s not a question he actually expects me to answer when he keeps talking before I can even get a word in. “Welcome to the society again, River. I know you’ll be an asset to us. I expect great things from you.” He pauses, smiling as if at some private joke. “Especially now that I know where you came from.”

Something glitters in his eyes as he says those words, and it’s hard to place it. It’s smug, but not the usual smugness he’s always giving off. It’s something else this time.

I blink at him, not sure what to make of that. His words are vague, but they fill me with a kind of dread that I can’t put a name to. Like waking up from a nightmare and being so sure that it was real.

“What do you mean?” I ask, even though every fiber of my being is screaming that I don’t want to know the answer.

His smile widens, and it’s twisted and filled with a sadistic kind of pleasure.

My stomach clenches, and I have to shove down the urge to physically shrink away from him. I won’t give him the fucking satisfaction of seeing me cower, but clearly I played right into his hands by asking that question, opening up the door for him to toy with me some more.

“Surely you didn’t think the infraction your father committed that got you and your poor sister taken away was the first time he crossed powerful people,” Alec says calmly.

My brows knit together. In all honesty, I never really considered it. What happened back then was bad enough that I hardly even cared how my father fit into it, other than being the one responsible for what happened to me and Hannah.

Alec’s grin widens, and I know he can read the confusion on my face. He’s taking pleasure in it, the sick fuck, stringing me along.

“There was one other time when he had to be shown his place,” he continues, his gray eyes glinting. “When another thing he cared about had to be taken from him.”

Tension ripples around us, and I can feel the men behind me shifting closer, protective and angry. Something cold washes over me, chilling my blood and making me feel numb all over. Alec’s meaning clicks into my mind after a second or two where my mind just can’t process it, and I feel sick all over again.

“My mother.”

The words are a rough whisper, and I’m barely aware of my lips moving as I speak them.

Alec nods, pursing his lips thoughtfully. “It’s a pity when people like your father have to make things hard for people like you. Like your sister... and your mother. If he had just stayed in his place, then it wouldn’t have had to happen. But he didn’t. He betrayed people smarter and more powerful than him, hoping they wouldn’t notice. But they did. *I* did. So I took the person he cared about most in the world. I took her, and I used her. Much like you and your sister were used by Ivan and his friends.”

He says all that with the same inflection someone might use when they discuss the weather. Like it doesn’t matter. Like it’s inconsequential.

But there’s pleasure in his eyes, dark and amused, and I know it’s because he’s having fun fucking with me. Reminding me once again that he has the upper hand, and that apparently, he always has.

My knees wobble, my legs threatening to buckle beneath me. My stomach churns with nausea, and I’m seconds away from being sick all over the shiny marble floor.

Just thinking about this man—this snake—with his hands on my mother, hurting her, forcing her—

I jerk away from that thought, not wanting any part of it, but something else hits me then. At the beginning of this conversation, Alec said he knows now where I came from.

I don’t want to ask, but something in me has to know, so I force the question out.

“How long ago? How long ago did you...?”

I can’t say it, but he doesn’t need me to.

“A little over twenty years ago now. Twenty-three, give or take a few months,” he says, his gaze never leaving my face as he speaks.

And I’m twenty-two. Which would mean...

My eyes go wide, and I can feel the blood drain from my cheeks. I can tell the moment Alec sees that I’ve figured it out, because he chuckles.

“I was surprised too, I’ll admit. But when I had my people run a DNA test on the blood you gave me, that confirmed it.”

The blood.

The *blood*.

The cut in my palm isn't deep, and I'd nearly forgotten about it with everything else going on since my little induction ceremony, but now it throbs viciously, reminding me that earlier tonight, I cut my hand and smeared my blood over that fucking bronze statue.

I gave Alec Beckham my blood... and he used it to prove that he's my biological father.

The world feels like it's narrowing to a point around me, leaving me dizzy and weak-limbed. Acid sloshes in my gut, and the urge to be sick is stronger than ever. My heartbeat pounds in my ears, and I feel lightheaded, like I might pass out right where I stand.

I always thought my father was a piece of shit who let me be taken by bad men. But it turns out it's so much worse than that. My father—my real father—is a fucking monster, who *arranged* for me to be taken. To be used and abused.

My chest constricts so tightly that I almost can't breathe. I'm barely holding it together, my hands clenched at my sides. I try to focus on dragging in one small sip of oxygen and then another, but it's like I'm choking on the air itself, making my head spin.

"I knew you were special," Alec says, something in his smile changing as he tilts his head to one side. "I knew it."

I don't know how he can be smiling right now. I don't know how he's just... standing there, talking about this with no regret or remorse at all. He doesn't seem to care what he did to my mother or what he did to me. How he *broke* me.

"I was so impressed by how you handled Julian," he continues, "and now I know why you're so exceptional."

He sounds like a proud parent, like he's over the fucking moon with pride at having his own flesh and blood in his goddamn organization.

"You—"

My throat closes up before I can get any more words out. I can barely speak. Dimly, I'm aware of the guys taking my arms, holding me up and offering me their silent support. I definitely need it, because I feel like a fucking shell right now.

"We're leaving," I rasp. "Get out of my way."

Maybe it's a stupid, reckless way to talk to someone as dangerous as Alec, but I don't care. I need to get out of this room before I explode.

Fortunately, Alec doesn't seem angry. He almost looks pleased by my response as he nods and steps to one side.

"Goodnight, River. I'll see you soon," he murmurs, and the promise in his voice makes my skin crawl.

My head is spinning as the guys help me walk away from him, and I can feel his gaze on me as he watches us go. I'm hardly aware of walking out of the ballroom and down the long hallway. I feel sick and disoriented, full of a whole new kind of pain and rage.

The black suited man from before is waiting when we get to the place where we came in, and he doesn't say anything about me being supported by Knox and Ash, just gestures for us to get in the helicopter. In the back of my mind, I wonder if this is something he sees all the time, women walking out of this fucking evil place, looking like their worlds have collapsed.

The helicopter ride back is quiet except for the roar of the blades overhead, and it goes by in a blur. I stare out the window at the city below, the horror and shock of what I've just learned playing itself out over and over again in my head.

We get back to the car, and the helicopter takes off again, leaving us alone in the middle of nowhere, Detroit. Now that there's finally no one from Alec's staff or whatever watching me, it feels like my emotions finally reach their boiling point.

They explode like contents under pressure, and I tip my head back and scream out a loud, agonized, "*Fuck!*"

It's not enough. There's still so much inside me, so much struggling to get out.

"Fuck!" I shout again, tears burning my eyes. "Fuck! Goddammit! That fucking—*bastard!*"

I whirl around, lashing out, my hand balled into a fist, ready to punch the thing closest to me, which just so happens to be the car.

Before I can make contact and probably break my hand, Knox catches the blow in his palm. He opens the car door and grabs a knife that's stashed inside, handing it to me and ushering me into the car.

I don't want to hurt any of the guys, but I need to do something. *Anything* to get this terrible, poisonous energy out of me.

I start slashing at the back of the front passenger seat, shredding it with the knife, stabbing at it again and again. I imagine it's Alec, and I just let go, so full of fury that I can't hold it in.

None of the guys try to stop me or complain about me fucking up the car.

Tears stream down my face as I go at it until my arm is sore, and I gasp for breath, finally feeling a little bit more under control.

“Better?” Knox asks, holding his hand out for the knife. He, Priest, and Ash are gathered around the car, looking down at me with shadowed gazes.

I hand it back to him and shake my head.

“No. I don’t know. I’m just—I had no idea. My dad—the man I thought was my dad—I didn’t know he wasn’t—” I swallow hard, trying to make the words and thoughts make sense. “My mom died when I was pretty young, and I always thought she got sick or something, but now I think I understand why. What she went through... what Alec fucking put her through... she always tried to put on a good face for us, but she must’ve been wrecked inside. So fucking wrecked. I can’t—”

Ash slides into the car beside me and puts a hand on my thigh, squeezing it lightly.

“Breathe,” he murmurs. “Take it slow.”

I gulp in air, my mind churning through a dozen different thoughts like a meat grinder. More than anything, I wish that my mom could have taken me and Hannah away, but I don’t know what she was dealing with. I don’t know the reasons she had that made her feel like she had to stay.

Or maybe she was planning to leave with us, but she died before she could.

I have no idea, and now I’ll never know.

“I feel like my whole life was a lie,” I tell them, sounding broken and wrecked. “The only thing I had that wasn’t a lie was Hannah, and she’s gone.”

“You still did have her though,” Ash offers. “Your memories of her, the things you did together? All of that is real.”

“And all the things you’ve done,” Priest puts in, climbing into the shredded front passenger seat. “Marking off your list, taking down Ivan and Julian. None of that was a lie.”

They’re trying to comfort me, to make me feel better, but I can see the shock and disgust in their eyes. It’s not aimed at me, but there’s not really any other reaction to what we just learned than being horrified and disgusted.

“Look at it this way,” Knox settles in the driver’s seat and sticks the key in the ignition before turning around in his seat to look at me. “You were saddled with this shit, but that never stopped you.”

“Because I didn’t know,” I mutter thickly.

“Yeah, so it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter whose kid you were, because you were going to kick ass and take names regardless. All of that is true. Everything you’ve done, you did on your own power. Maybe with help from us for some of it, but it was all real and true. Alec fucking Beckham can’t take that away.”

He’s right. I know he is. Maybe my childhood was a lie, and the worst thing that ever happened to me was more twisted and horrific than I ever could have imagined it was, but everything else? That’s all real.

It’s a comforting thought, but it barely does anything to shake the sick feeling in my gut.

I look up at all of them, watching me with concerned expressions. They’ll go to the ends of the earth for me if they have to, but with everything I just learned, I’m not even sure if anything we’ve been hoping for will work out.

Nothing seems certain. Everything feels shaky and off kilter.

“I don’t know if this plan is going to work,” I tell them, my voice ragged. “I’m just... I wanted to get into the society so I could get close to Alec and find a way to get him out of my life. But all I’m doing right now is becoming a part of everything I hate. I’m *helping* him. He sees me as some fucked up part of his shitty legacy, as if I’m going to carry on the family empire.”

I think about what Tatum said about people thinking she got into the society just because of who her father was, and the acidic taste of bile starts climbing up my throat again.

“I’m part of an organization that does the same thing that happened to me and my sister to other women. Alec might ask me to set something like that up, and I wouldn’t be able to say no. What the fuck am I doing?”

It comes out almost hysterical as the reality of it all crashes into me. Before this, I’ve just been going, moving from one task to the next, trying to do whatever I had to do to get where I needed to be so I could try to take Alec out.

But now it all seems so disgusting. Now it just seems like Alec is going to use me and twist me until I become something like him, and the only

way I'll escape that fate is through death.

"River," Priest says firmly. "That's not what's happening. That's not who you are."

Ash takes my hand and squeezes it. "We talked about this, remember? About how much you care. How much you genuinely care. There's nothing Alec Beckham could do to twist you or corrupt that. That's who you are deep down, and he can't touch it."

"Plus, you're not alone. We're going to help you find a way out, no matter what it takes," Knox promises.

Hearing how serious they sound, how sure they seem of themselves and of me, helps to calm me down a bit. But I still feel wretched. That sinking sensation in my stomach feels like it's never going to leave, and every time I think about what Alec told me tonight, I feel even more overwhelmed and sick about all of this.

But sitting here in this empty lot isn't going to fix anything, so we drive home.

It's a relief to step inside the house when we get back, but I still feel wrong. Harley jumps up as soon as we walk in the door, putting his paws up on my legs. On another night, I might have scolded him for getting my clothes dirty, but now I just appreciate the comfort, bending down to scratch behind his ears.

Gage is right on Harley's heels, moving gingerly across the foyer with one hand pressed to his stomach. He takes one look at my face, and whatever he was going to ask about the initiation ceremony falls away.

"Fuck, baby girl," he murmurs. "Come here."

He pulls me into his arms, holding me close, and I melt into his embrace.

Something about how he smells so familiar, and how warm and comforting his arms are, makes tears sting in my eyes. I pinch them tightly closed, not wanting to fall apart in the middle of the goddamn entryway.

"What happened?" Gage asks, his tone gentle.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I can't get myself to speak, so I just shake my head, burying my face against his chest.

"Alec," I hear Priest say. He gives Gage the short version of the explanation, and I try to tune it out, not wanting to hear it all over again.

If Gage is shocked or pissed off by what Priest says, he doesn't show it, for once in his life. He doesn't grill me or say he can fix it. Instead, he just

holds me tighter, like he's afraid I'll shatter into pieces if he lets go.

Maybe I will.

I lose track of how long we stand there like that, Gage holding me while the other Kings gather around us in silent support, but eventually, I pull away gently.

"I need a shower," I say, my voice ragged. "I just want to get this night off me."

"Okay," Gage murmurs back. He reaches up and tucks a lock of silver hair behind my ear. "We'll be here. Anything you need."

I nod numbly, then trudge upstairs.

Before I get in the shower, I grab the burner phone from the nightstand and pull up Avalon's contact. It's late, but I call her anyway.

"River?" Her voice sounds sleepy when she picks up, and there's an edge of concern to it. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I just... wanted to say hi. I needed to hear from a friend."

As I say the word, I realize that it feels true. Avalon is my friend. We've both helped each other, exchanging favors, but there's a lot more to it than that now. I like talking to her. I like hearing about her day and hearing about what she and Cody have been doing. Her voice is always soft and gentle, and there's something about the innate kindness that radiates from her that makes me feel as if maybe the world isn't always a horrible place.

Like maybe there's some light in the darkness after all.

"Were you a badass tonight?" Avalon asks, and I recall her words from the conversation we had earlier. It seems like it happened to someone else in another lifetime.

I laugh, the sound tinged with bitterness. "No. Not really."

"Hm. Well, that's okay," she murmurs. "Did... did something bad happen?"

"Kind of. I can't really talk about it."

"Okay. I can talk instead, if you want."

I nod, and then realize she can't see that. "Please."

"Cody and I ordered pizza tonight. He's been sleeping a lot better lately, and I wanted to get him a treat to celebrate that. So we got a large pizza with everything on it."

"How did he like it?"

Avalon laughs. "He loved it. Although I've figured out he doesn't like olives or mushrooms. But loves anchovies, apparently. He's an interesting

kid. But he's doing well. We both are."

Hearing that soothes me. They're both doing well, having pizza and going to the park. Avalon is following her dreams. I have to make sure to keep them both out of the hands of men like Alec. They deserve so much more than that, and I want Avalon and Cody to be okay.

"Knox will be happy to hear that Cody is on his side in the mushroom debate," I say, smiling wanly. "He hates them. I'm glad you guys had a good night."

"I'm sorry you had a bad one," she replies. "But you'll get through it. You're stronger than anything that could try to keep you down."

"Thanks. I'll let you go. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, River."

We hang up, and I press the heels of my hands against my eyes until little spots dance behind my eyelids. The beginnings of tears make my eyes sting painfully, but I keep my hands pressed tightly against them until the feeling goes away. Then I press up to my feet tiredly and head to the bathroom to shower. I peel off my clothes, kicking the outfit I was so proud of earlier into a corner. I don't even want to look at it now.

With the heat cranked up, I scrub my skin hard, as if I'm angry at every cell in my body for sharing DNA with Alec Beckham. As if I could somehow hurt him by hurting myself.

While I'm washing up, the cut on my palm from the ceremony opens up again, and pinkish red streaks of blood swirl with the water and suds to run down the drain.

"Fuck," I hiss, cradling my hand.

I turn off the water and get out of the shower, watching more blood well up in my palm. It's a deeper cut than I thought.

I try to hold it over the sink to keep blood from splattering all over the place like a crime scene as I hunt for something to wrap it with. I come up with some gauze, but it's awkward and clumsy trying to wrap it with one hand.

The door to my bedroom opens a moment later, and Priest comes in, stepping into the bathroom. He takes one look at me and immediately takes over, ignoring the fact that I'm naked as he tugs the gauze from my grip.

He undoes the shitty job I did of wrapping it one-handed, then begins to carefully rewrap it. His hands are familiar and comforting, and I watch as he secures the bandage around the cut, putting pressure on it.

“Do you know the one thing that pops up the most in my nightmares about Jade’s death?” he asks me all of a sudden.

I glance up at his face and then shake my head.

“The laughter. The guy who killed her just laughed. All his gang members stood around and laughed too. She was screaming for help, screaming as she burned, and they all just laughed at her pain and at my helplessness in that moment.”

Just hearing about it puts a sour taste in my mouth, my heart breaking for him. Priest didn’t deserve that. I never even met Jade, but I know she didn’t deserve it either. No one Priest loved could ever deserve something like that.

“My brothers and I would never hesitate to kill someone,” he continues. “We called ourselves the Kings of Chaos for a reason. Our hands aren’t clean, and we don’t pretend otherwise. But there are people out there in the world who take joy in hurting the innocent. And that’s not any of us.”

“I know it isn’t,” I whisper. “You may be monsters, but you’re the most beautiful monsters I’ve ever met.”

PRIEST

I GAZE DOWN AT RIVER, her hand still held lightly in mine. She looks so lovely that it almost hurts to look at her.

Her luminous silver hair, her full lips and large blue eyes, her tattoos, the scars that litter her body. Everything about her forms a perfect picture, almost too beautiful to touch.

Except I *can* touch her. So I do.

Reaching out, I brush my thumbs over her cheeks, tracing the places where tears spilled down earlier as she shredded the seat of the car with Knox's knife. I run my fingers along the soft, unmarked skin of her neck, letting my fingertips dance over her pulse point. She shivers at the touch, looking up to meet my eyes.

There's a spark between us, something building and growing as we look at each other. River puts her hand on my chest, and I thread our fingers together there, squeezing tightly for a moment, trying to ground her against me.

But it's not enough. I don't think I could ever have enough of this woman, and right now, something is driving me to be as close to her as possible.

"Come here," I murmur, grabbing her by the hips and lifting her up to set her down on the edge of the sink.

Her legs spread almost automatically, leaving the perfect little space for me to step between them.

"Priest," she whispers, soft and low.

My name sounds so fucking good when she says it like that. I can't help but lean down and kiss her, pressing my mouth against hers.

River arches up against me, fisting her hands in my shirt to drag me in for more. Our tongues dance and tangle together, like we're both trying to memorize the taste of each other, even though we've kissed like this a hundred times by now.

"I want to tell you about a dream I had last night," I say, dropping soft kisses to her lips between words. "It was different from the nightmares I've been having for so long."

"Tell me," River murmurs. She breaks our kiss, her lips moving downward to trail over the skin of my neck.

I swallow hard, dragging my hands down her sides to settle in the hollows of her hips. "It started like my other nightmares always do. Flames and terror. Death and violence. The scent of smoke and blood in the air. But then, just as the flames were rising higher and higher, *you* walked out of them. Stepping out of the burning curtain like a phoenix. Bringing life out of death."

I feel her intake of breath, and there's a little tremor in the way her hands hold on to the fabric of my shirt. I keep going, wanting her to know the rest of it.

"That's what you did to me, River. I was dead inside when we met, and you brought me back to life. That's what you do everywhere you go. You've been through hell, but you managed to come out on the other side more full of life than anyone else I know. And that won't change just because of who your father is. Alec may share DNA with you, but your heart and soul are your own."

I pull back enough that I can see her face, letting my gaze track over the familiar lines and curves of her features.

"You're beautiful," I add. "And your scars only make you more beautiful—the ones on the inside, and the ones on the outside. You told me once that not all broken things need to be fixed, and you were right. Because you're perfect just the way you are."

Her eyes go a little glassy with tears, and she takes a shuddering breath. She unfists her hands from my shirt and reaches for my hands, resting them on her breasts.

They're warm and soft, and I can feel the piercings Knox gave her, a contrast to her skin and her hardening nipples. They're marks given to her by Knox, but somehow, they feel like they belong to all of us.

"I..."

Whatever she wants to say seems to get stuck in her throat, and she shakes her head, pulling me down into another kiss.

This one is more tender than the first, more like River trying to say with her mouth and her tongue the things that she can't put into words. But I understand the meaning, and I kiss her back, tightening my fingers on her tits and savoring the way she shivers against me when I do.

When we pull back, there's heat in those dark blue eyes of hers, and she grinds herself against me, pressing the wet heat of her pussy against the hardness of my cock.

I can feel her through my pants, and it makes me curse under my breath. Suddenly, these pants are way too fucking tight. The only thing I want to feel against my cock is her body, wet and inviting.

River seems to get the message without me having to say anything, and she reaches down and gets my cock out, stroking it slowly at first.

"Fuck," I groan. "You have no idea what you do to me. How you make me feel."

"Show me," she replies, looking up to meet my gaze. She wraps her legs around my waist, dragging me in even more.

The feeling of her pussy, so wet against me, has me rock hard. She guides my cock right to her entrance, tilting her hips forward until I slide inside her.

I tip my head back, groaning at the amazing feeling of her walls clenching around me and the way she envelops me completely in her tight heat. I push forward, needing to be all the way inside of her, and we both gasp at the feeling. For a second, I look down at the place where our bodies are joined, transfixed by the sight.

"Fuck. I love the way your gorgeous pussy looks when it's impaled on my cock like this," I groan.

I push the last couple inches into her, bottoming out with a hissed curse, and River sucks in a breath, trembling against me.

"I love you," she gasps out, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

The words slam into my chest so hard they almost knock me backward, and we both freeze. My eyes snap up to hers, which are wide and glassy in the light of the bathroom. I grip her chin, forcing her to keep looking at me.

"Say that again," I demand, my voice low and tight.

Her tongue darts out to wet her pink lips, and her throat moves as she swallows.

“I love you,” she repeats, whispering it this time.

I thrust deeper into her, almost involuntarily, an innate reaction to hearing those words on her lips.

“I love you,” River whispers again, like a call and response, and I thrust into her even harder, rocking her body on the sink.

“Fuck, River.” It sounds like the words are being punched out of me, and it kind of feels that way too. I’m consumed by her, and I can’t hold myself back.

I thrust into her harder, deeper, and she takes it fucking beautifully, tipping her head back, exposing the column of her perfect neck.

Her hands are on my shoulders, digging into the flesh there, probably leaving little marks from her nails, but I don’t care. Hell, I want more of it. I want marks from her all over my body, not even so anyone else will see them, but just so that she can. So she can see them and know that I’m hers through and through.

The only thing that matters in this moment is the way she feels and the way she clings to me. The way our bodies fit together as I fuck her hard and deep.

“Daire!” she gasps out, her heels digging into my ass as she wraps her legs around me.

It’s almost a shock to hear my real name coming from her. I haven’t used it in so long. But it feels right to hear River say it, to hear it come spilling from her lips on the heels of her confession that she loves me.

“Yes,” I grunt, grabbing the flesh of her ass and dragging her into my thrusts. “Fuck yes. I’ve got you.”

She whines softly, and we move together at an almost breakneck pace. Every time our bodies join, the sound of skin on skin fills the bathroom, cutting over our sharp, ragged breaths. River clings to me, shaking with pleasure, and I keep moving, chasing the sensations building up in me.

“Close,” she whimpers, sounding as wrecked as I feel. “Fuck, I’m so close.”

“That’s it.” The words punch out of me on harsh breaths. “Come for me, River. Show me you’re mine. Let me fucking have you.”

Her pussy goes tight around my cock, and I curse under my breath. I can barely move with how tight she’s gripping me, and I grind against her, angling for the spot I know drives her crazy.

That's all it takes to have her shaking and crying out, moaning my name again as she falls apart in my arms.

Her pussy spasms around me, and I feel the sudden rush of wetness soak my cock as she trembles and fights for breath. She's so fucking beautiful like this, flushed and undone, and it doesn't take much longer for me to follow her, slamming into her one more time.

My cock pulses inside her over and over again, and as the last jets of my cum fill her up, I whisper, "I love you too."

River buries her face against my neck, her breaths warming my skin as we cling to each other, our heartbeats thundering in a counterpoint to each other.

We stay like that for a while, and I don't feel any urgency to move at all. But finally, I withdraw from her slowly and grab a washcloth to clean her up. She shivers when I use the damp cloth to wipe between her legs, and I smile, kissing her cheek.

Then I scoop her up, carrying her to her bedroom and laying her down in bed.

"Are you staying?" she asks, looking up at me hopefully.

I can't help the chuckle that falls from my lips as I reach down to smooth her damp silver hair back from her face.

"It would take a hell of a lot to make me leave your side right now," I say, crawling up onto the bed to lie with her. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

She seems a little dazed, like she can't believe what just happened. I feel the same way, honestly.

After Jade, I never thought I'd want to hear those words from anyone else. I never thought I'd be saying them to anyone else.

But then River came along and changed everything.

"I... I kind of can't believe I said that," she murmurs. "I've never said it before. Not like that."

"I'm glad you did," I tell her.

"I haven't said it to the others yet. But..."

"But you do," I finish for her. "You love them too."

She nods. She looks so sweet and almost innocent as she looks up at me, and it makes me love her even more.

River's been through so much shit, and she's jaded in so many ways. But when it comes to love? To offering up her heart unreservedly, trusting

others enough to allow herself to be vulnerable?

With all of that, she's in new territory.

She seems a little lost and a little afraid, but she's not hiding from it, which makes her braver than a lot of people. And maybe it's selfish, but I like knowing that my brothers and I are the first men she's ever loved.

The only men she *will* ever love.

RIVER

I LIE in bed with Priest, floating in and out of a light doze. We fell asleep in my bed after he carried me here, and when I wake up for real, it's still night.

Once again, I'm reminded of the fact that I want a bigger bed. I want to be able to fall asleep in a big pile with all of my men, and considering how big some of them are, it's going to have to be a pretty damn massive bed.

I tilt my head to gaze over at Priest in the darkness, watching him sleep. He looks peaceful, some of the sharp, angular lines of his face smoothed out. Warm emotions rise up in me, just from watching him breathe in and breathe out.

It's love.

I told him I loved him. I didn't even mean to say it, it just slipped out in the moment. I've thought it for a long time now, knowing I've fallen for these men, but I was too scared to say the words out loud.

Saying it, putting a tangible expression on it, makes it real. And once it's real, it can't be taken back.

But now that I've told Priest the truth about how I feel, I want to tell the others. I want to shout it from the fucking rooftops, even if the thought of saying it still scares me.

Priest shifts a little in his sleep, and a patch of moonlight falls over his face, lighting up his cheekbones and the fan of his lashes. He's so fucking beautiful in the moonlight, pale and perfect. I want to see this every night. I want to wake up to all of them every morning. Thinking about forever used to seem pointless because all I wanted was to finish my list. I didn't give a shit if it killed me, as long as I made it through long enough to kill all of them first.

But now that I have these four beautiful, dangerous men in my life... I can't help but think about what it might be like to have them forever.

It would be good, I bet. They'd treat me right. We'd fuck and bicker and tease. And then fuck some more. It would be *real*, and no one could take it from us.

They'd die if they tried.

My stomach growls, reminding me that I didn't eat anything at Alec's stupid party, and my last meal was several hours before that. I'm fucking starving. I get up, careful not to wake Priest and not bothering to throw on clothes as I tiptoe out of the room.

I head down the stairs in the darkness, stifling a yawn with the back of my hand. But as I'm walking toward the kitchen from the stairs, I hear a tiny yip from the living room.

Harley.

I'm surprised he's up this late, since he usually wanders into one of the guys' rooms and curls up near the bed when they go to sleep. Maybe he could feel the restless energy in the house and wasn't able to settle down.

I poke my head into the living room, expecting to see that his favorite chew toy is under the couch again or something.

"Hey, buddy. What are you—"

My voice breaks off, a shocked yelp bursting from me as my eyes pick out the shape of a figure in the dim light.

Preston fucking Salinger is sitting on the couch.

He must've broken in somehow without triggering any of the alarms or security systems the guys have on their house, and now he's sitting there like he owns the damn place, his long fingers wrapped around Harley's collar. He has the furry mutt pulled close so that the dog's head is on Preston's knee, and he scratches behind Harley's ears casually.

For a second, I just stand locked in place, shock ricocheting through me. Then Preston's shadowy gaze rakes over me, and I remember that I didn't bother to get dressed before coming down the stairs, so I'm standing here naked as fuck.

Preston doesn't even try to be subtle about checking me out, and I fight off a shudder of disgust as he finally lifts his focus back to my face and smiles that creepy, too knowing smile of his.

"You're an interesting person, River Simone," he murmurs, his tone conversational. "I can see why Alec is so obsessed with you. I have to

admit, I didn't understand his insistence on letting you have a place at the table with us. But now? Now I know why."

Does he know about the paternity test Alec ran? I got the impression Alec hadn't shared that information with the other society members—not even Henry, who seems to be his closest friend among the group of them. So how the fuck did Preston find out about it?

I take a step forward, anger lighting in my blood at the fact that this creepy fucker is inside the Kings' house. I don't have a weapon or anything, but there's plenty of shit I can find in here to bash Preston's head in if I need to.

I barely have the thought before Preston speaks again, continuing to pet Harley with one hand while he holds his collar with the other.

"It would be so easy to snap his little neck," he muses, sounding contemplative. "Animals are so fragile, you know? They look to you for food and shelter and love, but you could break one into pieces with just the right amount of pressure."

As he speaks, Preston's fingers tighten on Harley's collar. Harley whines, shaking his head slightly and trying to pull out of the man's grip, but Preston keeps a tight hold on him. He squeezes the collar a little tighter before he loosens his grip and then smiles at me again.

I freeze, worry for my dog making my limbs feel cold and my skin prickle all over.

Something tells me Preston Salinger is the kind of man who wouldn't hesitate to hurt anyone if he wanted to. Even a sweet, defenseless animal.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I demand in a low voice, clenching my hands into fists. "Did Alec send you?"

Preston chuckles, shaking his head. "No. Alec controls a great deal, both in this entire city and in our little society, but he doesn't control everything. He doesn't *know* everything."

There's something about the way he says those words that makes unease curl in my gut. I knew the various society members don't exactly like or trust each other, but it seemed to me that they were united under Alec's leadership. But the way Preston is talking, it makes it sound like that's not quite the case. Like things within the society might be rockier and more dangerous than I first assumed.

Preston tips his head to one side, studying me with his light brown eyes the same way someone would look at a painting in a museum or something.

As if he's trying to figure me out. To pick me apart into pieces and see what makes me tick.

"I know you hate him," he says after a moment. "Alec. I don't even blame you, really, after everything he did to you."

My heart rate speeds up, the hairs on the back of my neck rising. So he knows about my past too, not just about the paternity test. Henry knows about my past too, but I don't know if everyone else in the society is aware of it.

And I have no idea what game Preston is playing here. I've been so focused on Alec that I haven't really thought about what the other members might be doing and how that would affect me. Or the people—and dogs—close to me.

But Preston is a creepy motherfucker, and I'm more unnerved by him than I've ever been by anyone, except maybe Alec himself. He's so calm, almost *charming* as he sits there, but it's different than Alec's charm. Alec is smug, boastful, completely untouchable and determined to make sure you know it. Preston is like a spider in the shape of a man, eerily still and frighteningly *normal* looking.

His eyes give him away, though. There's something twisted and dark in their depths, and the emotion in his eyes never matches the one on his face.

He's a psychopath, through and through.

Goosebumps pop out over my skin, and I have a strong urge to wrap my arms around myself—not just for warmth, but as some kind of shield between this spider of a man and me.

When I don't respond to his comment right away, Preston just lets the silence stretch between us. He keeps his hold on Harley the whole time, and every time he adjusts his grip or pets him in a different spot, my stomach clenches.

He really could break the dog's neck without thinking twice. He'd probably enjoy it too.

"What's your point?" I ask him finally, my whispered words cutting through the quiet. I want Preston out of this house, but more than that, I need to know why the fuck he's here at all.

"It must be even harder to handle everything he had done to you, now that you know he's your father," Preston says.

I clench my jaw, a surge of nausea churning in my stomach at hearing that word come from his lips. It was bad enough hearing it in my own head,

or hearing Priest say it as he explained things to Gage last night. But hearing Preston say it, in that falsely pleasant voice of his?

I fucking hate it.

“Don’t play stupid now, River,” Preston admonishes when I don’t respond to his words “I know he told you. I don’t think the other members know, but that’s because they’re all so caught up in their own lives that they don’t pay attention the way I do. I make it a point to keep tabs on everything that happens in and out of the society. In case it ever becomes... useful. So I know that Alec is your father, and I know that you don’t like him very much.”

Outwardly, I try to keep calm, but it’s almost impossible to keep my face impassive. Preston is poking at a raw, poisonous wound, and it takes everything in me not to lose my shit and lunge toward him, claws bared.

I have to be careful here. I still don’t know what the fuck Preston wants. He says he’s not here on Alec’s orders, but that doesn’t mean that whatever gets said between us in this darkened living room won’t make it back to Alec’s ears. I can’t trust *any* of these fuckers, especially since it’s clear that they’re all playing for themselves—especially Preston.

That means I have to walk a thin line, avoiding saying anything I shouldn’t while also trying to figure out why the fuck Preston is in my house.

“What he did to me was fucked up,” I answer stiffly, not denying that I don’t like Alec, but not agreeing with the statement either. Anyone could agree that having two teenage girls kidnapped and abused is a fucked up thing to do.

Preston nods. “He made an example of your father—well, the man you thought was your father—by using you. It’s a classic strategy in our line of work. You didn’t matter. It wasn’t about *your* pain. It was about the pain that hurting you would cause someone else. Someone Alec wanted to punish.”

The way he says it makes my skin crawl, as if torturing innocent children is a totally legitimate tactic or some shit. As if him telling me that it wasn’t about my pain will erase the gaping wound in my soul.

Preston settles a little more comfortably on the couch, stroking my dog’s head and ignoring the soft whine of fear that Harley lets out. The damn dog is such a fucking sweetheart that he likes everybody, but even *he*

has figured out that Preston is a psychotic menace who gives off serious serial killer vibes.

“But that’s the thing about Alec,” Preston continues, not waiting for me to respond this time. “He’s a powerful man, but power always comes at a cost. You understand that, don’t you? For every piece of the pie you carve out for yourself, you gain a new enemy or two. The target on your back gets bigger and bigger the higher you get to the top of the food chain.”

He taps his fingers lightly over the top of Harley’s head as he speaks, and the gesture is so fucking spider like that a shiver runs down my spine.

“Now, when you’re so high up on the criminal food chain, very few people would have the means or the courage to try to take you out. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t fear it. He projects confidence in all things, but I know that our friend Alec Beckham is deeply paranoid.”

Preston makes a clicking sound with his mouth, shifting his focus from Harley to me. His eyes gleam eerily in the darkness, catching the small bit of light filtering in through the window in a way that almost makes them seem to glow.

“That’s why he worked so hard to root out the rat in our society and kill him,” he goes on. “The idea of someone revealing our secrets kept him up at night.”

“How did he find out that Carter was a rat?” I ask, unable to help myself.

Preston grins, flashing rows of even white teeth.

“I told him.” He chuckles. “Most of the other members are too busy with their own schemes and plots to be as observant as I am. Now, I have my own schemes and plots, but I never let that blind me to what’s going on around me. I’ve learned a lot about the others. I’ve watched and picked up on things that no one else knows.”

He tilts his head to one side slightly as he says that, and I wonder if he’s waiting for me to take the bait. To ask what he’s learned and give myself away as wanting information.

I *do* want information. That’s the whole fucking reason I was able to make some modicum of peace with joining the Kyrion Society—to get enough information on Alec Beckham to bring him down. But asking for insider info from Preston Salinger doesn’t seem like a good idea. He’s playing whatever this is for himself and for his own amusement, probably,

so there's no telling what he'd do if he knew how interested I am in finding out more about Alec.

Luckily for me, Preston doesn't require any prompting. He keeps talking, his voice pitched low and quiet.

"Alec has three separate safe houses," he says. "Three places for him to run away and hide, where his security team will protect him in case anything happens. He has a code for his private security force to let them know where to go in the event of an emergency."

My shoulders tense a little, my body fighting the impulse to lean toward him. He had my full attention the moment he started spilling Alec's secrets, but I don't want to look too interested.

"Yeah, lots of rich people have safe houses," I murmur with a shrug. "Alec obviously likes to do everything bigger and better than other people, so of course he has three. That doesn't mean anything to me."

Preston's grin turns into something more like a smirk, as if he can see right through my feigned indifference. "It might mean something to you if you knew where they were though, wouldn't it? The first one is an underground shelter just outside of Detroit. The code for that one is 'cellar.' The second is just an ordinary house in an ordinary neighborhood. Near a school and a church. The last place you'd look for someone like him. That one he calls 'the manor.' And the last one is in on a lake. An old cabin that no one wants to vacation at. For that one, he tells them to head to 'paradise.'"

I blink, my mind racing as I take all of that in. I'm stunned, honestly. Part of me thought he was just baiting me earlier, teasing me with the promise of information that he didn't really have. But if what he said is true, it's fucking huge.

And I have no idea why Preston is telling me all this.

"What—" I manage to get out, but before I can finish, Preston shifts the conversation again, the change so abrupt that it catches me flat-footed.

"You know, I had a dog like this when I was a kid," he comments mildly, glancing down at Harley. "We went everywhere together for a little while."

My jaw clenches. There's nothing threatening in his tone, but I still want to march over and rip Harley out of his grasp.

"What happened to it?" I ask. "Your dog."

Preston makes a little cooing noise as he scratches behind Harley's ears. Usually, Harley would be over the fucking moon to have this much attention on him, but he's smart enough to sniff out the danger in the room, so his ears are lowered and his tail is between his legs.

"He died," Preston tells me with a little shrug, still scratching Harley's ears. "It really was too bad."

My blood turns to ice, and I shift my weight a little, convinced this fucking sociopath is about to murder my dog right in front of me. I don't know whether I should rush him or stay put, because seated like he is, I can't tell if he has a weapon on him or not. With someone like this asshole, it's probably better to assume he's always armed with something.

I'm rooted to the spot, grappling with my fear and anger, and I hate feeling helpless and unsure. Preston drops his threats so casually, like he doesn't care what happens one way or the other, and it leaves me off balance and afraid.

He makes a move, and my entire body flinches—but instead of hurting Harley, he releases his collar, letting him go.

Preston stands up, tall and oddly elegant in the middle of the fucking living room.

"Welcome to our little club, River," he says, dipping his head in a sort of half bow.

Then he strides into the entryway and toward the front door, his footsteps nearly silent as he opens it and slips out of the house like a shadow.

For a long, suspended moment, I just stare after him.

The entire atmosphere of the house seems to change now that he's gone, as if someone had sucked out all the oxygen in the room and it's suddenly rushing back in. I let out a shaky breath and sink to the floor, my knees giving out beneath me.

"Come here, Harley," I call softly to the dog, and he trots over and buries his face in my neck.

Usually, I'd push him away before he can start huffing his hot, wet doggy breath all over me, but now I hug him close, terrified and freaked out.

And mad as hell under all of it.

Preston likes to know things, and he's made it clear that he knows where I live and can get in whenever the fuck he wants to. I hate that. Every

part of me hates that.

“River?”

I look up at the sound of my name and see Knox at the top of the stairs, shirtless and peering down. “I thought I heard voices. What the fuck is going on?”

My jaw clenches, and I press up to my feet, ignoring the way my stomach still grumbles and my limbs wobble.

“Come, Harley,” I command.

Then I lock the front door before marching my way up the stairs.

KNOX

RIVER COMES STOMPING up the stairs, completely naked and as fucking gorgeous as ever. It's easy to get distracted by how she looks—the fall of her silver hair, the curves of her hips, the metal glinting in her nipples from the piercings I gave her—but I can tell from her face that something is wrong, and that keeps me focused.

She walks past me down the hall, not even looking over her shoulder when she speaks. “Preston was here,” she says.

I blink after her for a second, shaking my head as I run a hand through my hair. “Who the fuck?”

“Preston Salinger,” she explains, her voice hard. “He’s one of the members of the Kyrion Society. The creepy fucker who was standing sort of separate from the party, watching everyone all night.”

That gets my attention, and it makes my hackles rise immediately. It’s bad enough that someone was in our fucking house, talking to River in the middle of the fucking night, but I remember River pointing out Preston in the ballroom last night. He was definitely a creepy motherfucker, and he smiled at her like he wanted to eat her.

Anger rises in me, hot and intense, and my lips pull back from my teeth in a snarl. I want to pull River close and keep her safe, even though that asshole is clearly already gone. If he wasn’t, she wouldn’t be up here, she’d still be downstairs dealing with him.

“What the fuck?” I demand. “What happened?”

But she’s already off down the hall, knocking on Ash’s door and waking him and Priest up so we can all gather in Gage’s room. I follow after her,

grunting at Ash in greeting as he shoves his glasses on his face and falls into step beside me and Priest.

Gage is still half asleep, but the four of us tromping into his room fixes that pretty quick.

He blinks blearily, sitting up and clicking on the lamp on his bedside table. He's been avoiding taking his painkillers as much as possible, so the grogginess in his expression is more from pain and from being woken up than because of anything else in his system.

Which is good, because I have a feeling we're all gonna need to be sharp for whatever River is about to tell us.

"What's going on?" Gage mutters, scowling in irritation. But he takes one look at River's face and the fact that she's buck naked, and his expression shifts to one of concern in the space of a heartbeat.

"We're having a meeting," Ash says, stifling a yawn. "At ass o'clock in the morning, apparently."

"Preston Salinger was in our house," River says as she rifles through Gage's dresser and grabs out one of his shirts, pulling it on. It barely covers the luscious swell of her ass, and once again, it would be a struggle to stay on topic—if it weren't for the fact that the topic at hand is how some fucker broke into our house without any of us knowing about it.

Ash's jaw snaps shut, his head whipping toward River as he absorbs what she just said.

"What?" Gage growls, looking as pissed as I feel. "When?"

"Just now. I woke up hungry and went downstairs to get a snack, and he was sitting in the living room with Harley like he owned the fucking place." Her painted fingernails flash in the lamplight as she curls her fingers, her nostrils flaring. She's practically spitting from how mad she is, but there's more than that too. She's scared. Whatever that Salinger motherfucker said to her, it shook her.

That thought makes me want to find this walking piece of shit and destroy him even more.

"That shouldn't be possible," Priest says, frowning. "It's not like someone can just walk in here if they don't belong. We have security on the house. *Good* security."

"Well, apparently that didn't matter," River says, twisting a few locks of silver hair around her fingers with sharp movements. "Because he was here, and none of us heard anything."

Priest goes quiet, his features falling into a blank mask, and I can tell he's going through all of our security measures in his head, trying to find the weak spot. I know that's what he's doing, because I did the same thing. And the worst fucking part is, I don't see it. I don't see the hole, and that's more dangerous than if it were obvious.

It means that Preston Salinger is good. It means that he's got both money and skill, and that's a combination I don't like one bit.

Somehow, this slimy bag of dicks got into our house without tripping a single one of our alarms. Just so he could *talk* to River. But the truth that makes me fucking feral is that he could have done a lot worse than just talk to her if he'd wanted to.

Gage's jaw tightens, and I can see his face hardening into an expression I recognize. He's always taken it on himself to make sure the rest of us are safe—that's why he made River put a bullet through his gut—and feeling like he failed to protect her from Preston has to piss him off something fierce. *All* of us hate it, and the fact that River could have been in danger makes it worse.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" Ash asks, scanning River from head to toe—and for maybe the first time ever, it's not because he's trying to check her out.

She shakes her head, licking her lips as her gaze darts over to the dog, who's jumped up onto the bed beside Gage. "No, he didn't touch me. He threatened Harley, saying all this creepy shit about how easy it would be to break his neck, and how he once had a dog that 'mysteriously' died. But that's it. He mostly just... talked."

"What did he say?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

"That's the weirdest fucking part." She blows out a breath, scrubbing her hands over her face as she seems to organize her thoughts. "I couldn't figure out what his angle was, and I still don't get it, but I don't think he was here on Alec's orders, or on any of the other society members' orders either. He came on his own, and he told me stuff about Alec."

She gives us a rundown of their conversation, and I can feel my eyebrows practically joining in the center of my forehead as she lays it all out. She said she couldn't figure out Preston's angle, and I can't either. But it doesn't make me feel any better to know that he keeps such close tabs on his fellow society members.

“Who the fuck is this Preston guy?” I say, asking the question we’re probably all thinking. “What’s his deal?”

“I don’t know,” River admits. “I didn’t even know he existed until I met him last night. And we’ve been so fucking focused on Alec that I didn’t even think about the other society members I would be involved with once I became a full member. I know their names, but not much more than that.”

“We need more information,” Gage murmurs. “We need to know more about them. We should’ve started doing that research as soon as you got home last night. We *would* have, except—”

He breaks off, and River grimaces. I know what they’re both thinking. Whatever else we would’ve done last night got a little derailed by the bombshell fucking revelation that Alec is River’s biological father. She was so fucked in the head trying to process that little piece of trivia that none of us really focused on anything else after we got back from the party.

But that puts us behind the eight ball, and that’s not a good place to be when you’re dealing with wealthy lowlifes who would happily stab you in the back—or shoot you in the face.

“Ooh, time for a little online stalking?” Ash asks, cocking a brow and grinning, although he still looks unsettled. He digs his phone out and starts typing on it with one hand, rolling a coin over his knuckles in the other. He makes it look effortless, which it probably is by now. “Let’s start with our uninvited guest.”

“Yes,” Gage agrees vehemently. “Start with that fucker.”

“There’s not a lot here,” Ash tells us after a minute, pursing his lips. “He’s super rich, which tracks. Known for a love of art. Oh, here we go... if I put the pieces together, it seems like there are quite a few instances of people he knew or associated with dying under ‘mysterious circumstances.’” He makes air quotes with his free hand and then goes back to playing with the coin, his gaze still locked on the phone as he shakes his head. “He’s never been charged with anything, but...”

“But he probably killed those people.” River crosses her arms over her chest like she’s trying to ward off a chill. “The way he talked... Jesus, he sounded like a fucking psychopath. Like he could kill Harley or me or anyone just for the fun of it.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, cracking the knuckles on one hand and then the other.

Hearing that little tidbit of information makes me hate the idea of him being alone downstairs with River even more. The urge to break all the

bones in Preston's body with my bare hands is high, and if that makes me a psychopath too, then I don't really give a shit. I'd snap the fucker in half before I'd let him touch a hair on River's head.

"Who's next?" Ash asks, looking to River.

She considers for a second, like she's going through a mental roster of the people she met last night, then tells him, "Tatum Damaris."

He nods and types out the name on his phone. He mutters to himself for a couple minutes as he reads from the screen, and then he shrugs.

"Basically what we already knew," he says, glancing around at the rest of us as we watch him. "She's running her father's business, like she said at the thing. I'm sure we won't be able to get any info on her illegal dealings from a basic search on the internet, just like we couldn't with Preston. We'll have to have our contacts dig into it and see what they can turn up. But she's old money. It seems like everyone in her family was rich as fuck, going back for generations."

"Yeah, that tracks. She had the attitude to prove it," I mutter under my breath. "Entitled and rotten, just like every rich bitch I've ever met."

Ash looks up Henry Levine next, and it's pretty much what we expected. He's a congressman, so there's a bunch of publicly available info about his political affiliations and all that shit. His reputation is squeaky clean on the surface, and he won his last election in a landslide.

"Not even a sex scandal or anything," Ash says with a note of disappointment in his voice, shaking his head. "He's 'a man of the people.' Charitable and upstanding, blah, blah, blah."

"That's a load of bullshit," River snarls, anger flaring on her face. "He was getting his dick sucked by a woman who's clearly been trafficked last night. He's the worst of humanity. He's fucking scum."

I reach out and pull her into my arms, nuzzling at her neck to try to calm her down.

"No arguments there, little fox. He's a piece of shit," I agree. "And we'll make him pay for it. We'll take him down to the basement and fuck him up real good for all the people he's hurt, okay?"

She inhales sharply and then lets the breath out on a messy exhale, sinking into my arms a little.

"Okay," she mumbles back.

"Good girl." I drag my nose through her hair, inhaling her scent.

“But you better show me some of your *really* good tools for the job,” she adds, fury still clear in her tone. “I want to make him scream.”

“Oh, he will. Don’t you worry about that.”

I know the situation we’re in is serious, but I can’t help the way my dick twitches at the thought of the two of us taking Henry Levine down into my basement and doing a number on him. I pull her a little closer, loving the way she lets me fit her right up against my body.

She might not be naked anymore, but I like her like this too—in a shirt that’s a little too big for her, which barely hides anything. I slide one hand under the shirt she borrowed from Gage, feeling her up a little as the others continue talking, and she doesn’t stop me.

I know she likes it when I touch her like this. It grounds her.

“Okay, that Russian guy last,” Ash is saying, doing his thing as he types dexterously on his phone with one hand and flips the coin over and over his knuckles with the other. Then he stops, the coin going still as it balances between his second and third knuckle. His brows pull together as he stares down at his cell. “Huh.”

“What?” River asks, her body tensing in my embrace as she notices his reaction. “What did you find?”

“Nothing. He... doesn’t exist.”

“What the fuck?” River demands. “How is that possible?”

Ash shrugs. “As far as the internet is concerned, Nikolai Petrov doesn’t exist. There’s nothing I can find about him that’s public knowledge. He’s like a fucking ghost.”

River lets out another breath, and I can feel the small tremor that works its way through her body. “He and Alec were talking at the meeting about him taking care of a problem. It sounded like Nikolai had killed someone. He seemed like the type.”

“If Alec had him taking care of those kinds of loose ends, then he’s probably good at killing,” Gage murmurs. “Otherwise, Alec would have just handled it himself. Especially if he’s as paranoid as Preston says he is.”

“That’s what I thought too,” River agrees.

“So then Nikolai might be ex Russian mafia or something,” Priest guesses. “But it’s hard to say for sure.”

“So we don’t know anything about him?” I ask.

“We know he’s fucking dangerous,” River grits out. “They all are.”

“That brings us to Alec,” Ash puts in, flipping the coin into the air before catching it smoothly without even looking. “We already know about him. Squeaky clean public reputation. Connected with all the biggest players in Detroit—both legit and criminal. Too much money for his own good.”

“Responsible for the worst shit that happens in this goddamn city,” Gage finishes.

River wriggles in my arms, clearly agitated and restless. “I don’t know what the hell Preston was doing here or why he told me all that stuff. It’s like... like he wants me to take Alec out or something. Is he trying to get rid of Alec so he can take over the society?”

Gage sighs, running fingers through his hair as he thinks. “It’s possible,” he says. “And he wants to use you to do his dirty work.”

Priest shakes his head, running a hand over his blond hair. “There’s too much going on below the surface with these fuckers. Machinations and schemes that go deeper than the things they do in cooperation as part of the society.”

“Yeah,” Ash agrees. “It’s like you got thrown into a nest of poisonous fucking spiders or something.”

River snorts. “It’s not funny at all, but you’re exactly right. That was the closest thing I could think of while I was talking to Preston downstairs. That he was like a spider in the form of a man. I hate Alec so fucking much, and he scares the hell out of me, but Preston? He’s almost as terrifying. Maybe more so. All of them are, in their own ways. It really is a nest of spiders.”

She breaks off suddenly, going completely still in my hold. I can’t see her face, so I don’t know what’s responsible for the change in her, but I can feel the tension in her body.

I crane my neck a little, tilting her chin up with one hand to meet my gaze. “Hey. What is it, little fox?”

“I was wrong,” she mutters softly. “From the very beginning, I was wrong about this.”

“About what?”

She swallows. For a second, her gaze goes out of focus as if she’s lost in a dozen different thoughts, and then her eyes lock on mine again as her jaw clenches.

“I thought all I had to do was find some way to take Alec out to get free from the Kyrio Society. But we all saw what happened to Carter. Even if I take out Alec, someone else will just rise up and take his place. If I really want to get out, if I really want to be free of this shit, I’ll need to kill all of them.”

RIVER

THE ROOM GOES silent in the wake of my declaration. All four of the Kings just stare at me for a moment, taking in what I just said.

But I'm right. I know I'm right.

My skin is buzzing, adrenaline surging through me at the enormity of what we face—and how astronomically high the odds are stacked against us.

This is so different from my list with six names on it. That was a list of men who knew each other, but were only truly connected by a few underhanded deals and the fact that they had once tortured me and my sister.

The Kyrio Society?

It's a many-headed beast that I have to take out all at once. I won't be able to do it one by one. I'll have to take them all out at the same time. To burn the whole thing to the ground in one fell swoop. Because if I move too slowly, if any of them get an idea of what I'm planning before I do it, they'll kill me... and my men too.

It's dangerous as fuck, but there's no other option. Not if I don't want to be shackled with these monsters forever, forced to call myself one of them for the rest of my life.

My words hang in the air for another moment, and then Ash, true to form, breaks the silence.

He flips his coin in the air and does a little flourish, making the coin seem to disappear before he even catches it. He taps his other hand and opens it, and the coin is there in his palm.

“Sure,” he says, flashing me a grin and a wink. “Why not? We’ve pulled off crazy shit before.”

I know it’s not that simple, and I can tell he does too. But I smile at him gratefully, glad to have him on my side anyway. Stepping out of Knox’s embrace, I sweep my gaze around the room to take in the others.

“You’ve all had my back through so much shit,” I say quietly, feeling more exposed than I did earlier when I wasn’t wearing a single stitch of clothing. “And it took me a long time to accept that. To accept that I was part of a group. A *family*. But if we’re really supposed to have each other’s backs, then I won’t do this unless all of you are on board too. It’s probably a fucking suicide mission, and I can’t ask you to throw yourselves on a train bound for hell just because I leapt onto it. You can say no, and we can try to find another way.”

Knox huffs a breath through his nostrils like a bull getting ready to charge. He rolls his shoulders and then his neck, working out the kinks in his thick muscles. He seems ready to go, the way he always does when the promise of death and violence is on the table. I know he wants to fuck Preston up after what happened tonight, and the rest of the society members too.

“Knox?” I ask, raising a brow in question.

He nods, giving me his sexiest unhinged grin. “You know I’m in, baby.”

“It won’t be easy,” Priest warns, shaking his head. “This won’t be like going after Julian. These people are better protected and better connected.”

“I know,” I tell him, holding my breath as I wait for him to make the call.

He sighs. “But you’re right. There isn’t another choice. We’ll do it.”

The knots in my stomach unkink themselves a little, and I turn to face the man lying on the bed—the man who’s already almost lost his life once in our fight against Alec and his society.

Gage is the last one to speak, and he looks at me with fire seeming to light his green eyes from within. Knowing him the way I do by now, I’m sure his mind is already working overtime, coming up with possible plans and discarding them just as quickly.

The truth is, I know he’s not going to say no. He’s not going to tell me that this plan is too risky and that we shouldn’t go through with it. He won’t tell me that—even though part of me wishes he would.

Part of me hopes he'll tell me I'm insane, because I must be. Right? What we're talking about trying to pull off is the literal definition of insanity. Of reckless disregard for our own lives and safety. I don't know how many years the Kyrio Society has been in existence, but I know that the five other members who make up the society are dangerous, cunning, and completely ruthless.

And I'm no longer just talking about taking out one of them.

I'm talking about taking out *all* of them.

Gage's eyes lock with mine, and like I so often do when he looks at me, I feel like he can read the gist of my thoughts. I track the subtle changes in his expression as several emotions seem to filter through him—worry, anger, frustration, resolve—and then he nods.

"Alright," he says finally. He blows out a breath, running a hand through his dark brown hair, which is tousled from sleep. Then he fixes me with a hard gaze. "But after this? You need to stay out of goddamn trouble."

The growl in his voice tells me he means it, but I can't resist teasing him a little as the tension in the air breaks.

"Okay, Daddy," I say with a little pout, giving him an innocent look. "I'll do my best."

"Don't call me Daddy unless you want me to throw you over my knee and spank you the next time you misbehave," he warns.

It's a testament to the attraction that always simmers between us that he makes my clit throb with just his words at a time when I'm so stressed and unsettled that nothing in the world should be able to turn me on. I squeeze my legs together, making a mental note to call him Daddy again in the future when he'll have the opportunity to make good on his threat.

Then I nod, my face falling into a more serious expression. "No more trouble after this. I promise."

And I mean that, with every fiber of my being.

Once, I didn't really care what happened to me in my quest for vengeance. But now I've found something worth living for. A life I could be so happy in if I ever had a fucking minute where I wasn't strategizing or worrying about getting killed.

And I'll fight for that—for the future I never knew I wanted.

I'll fight for it tooth and nail, to my very last breath.

Because even though happily-ever-afters aren't supposed to exist for girls like me, I'm going to make one for myself anyway.

WITH MY MEN and I all agreed on what we need to do, I wish like hell that we could go in guns blazing and get it done already.

But of course, we can't.

We'll only get one shot at this, so we're going to need to play it carefully and be smart about what moves we make. We need to use the opportunity to get more info about each of the members of the society so we can find a weakness in their defenses.

Gage takes point the way he always does, keeping track of everything we already know about the members and adding new bullet points every time we learn something new.

We have some things to go on, but it's not even close to enough. We still need a lot more. After an extremely heated discussion, it's decided that the guys won't use any of their regular contacts or informants to try to gather information. It's too risky, especially since we know that Alec was able to get wind of at least some of what I did to Julian when I was systematically dismantling his life.

That means we have to assume that every person we recruited for help in that little project could be on Alec's radar, making it too dangerous for us to involve them in this mission as well. If he's still got eyes on them, he could discover that we're moving against him, and we can't let that happen.

The only exception to that rule is Harv, the hacker who helped us steal all the money in Julian's offshore accounts. That's partly because Harv is good at covering his tracks and partly because, as Ash puts it, "No one else can do what he does."

He's the best hacker in the business, and we need him on our side.

While Gage and Priest work on gathering and compiling information about our enemies, Knox and Ash take point on securing the house, doing everything they can to make sure that Preston won't be able to break in again—at least, not without us knowing.

Although they improve the security system a lot and patch up the weak spot that they think allowed him to get in, it doesn't do a lot to settle my nerves. The house that once felt like a prison and then became a haven doesn't feel as safe as it once did, and I know the others feel the same way.

About a week after my encounter with Preston in the living room, I come upstairs one day to find Knox stuffing knives and other weaponry into

various hiding places in my bedroom.

“Are you putting together a treasure hunt or something?” I ask dryly, leaning against the doorframe as I cross my arms.

Knox glances at me over his shoulder as he slips a small sheathed knife into my underwear drawer.

“Yeah. A treasure hunt for anyone who tries to fuck with you. It’s called ‘how many ways can you get murdered by River?’ And the answer is gonna be ‘a lot.’” He keeps speaking as he turns his focus back to what he’s doing. “I’m gonna give you a gun to put under your pillow too. Just in case.”

I haven’t even slept in this room in days. Lately, I’ve been ending up in one of the guys’ rooms every night, either with just one man or more of them all piled into the bed. But I get what Knox is trying to do, and I appreciate the sentiment behind it as much as the gesture itself.

He’s not really the type to buy a girl flowers, but he *is* the type to arm the woman he cares about with every type of weapon under the sun and make sure she knows how to use them all. And honestly, with the way shit is going in my life these days, I’ll take the knife over the flowers.

I cross the room and wrap my arms around him, resting my forehead against his broad back as my hands splay over his muscular chest.

“Thank you,” I murmur. I grin, breathing in his familiar scent. “How did you know I fantasize about putting a knife between Preston Salinger’s ribs?”

Knox chuckles, and I feel the vibrations of it in my whole body.

“Just a good guess.” Then he closes the drawer and turns around suddenly, pulling me closer and pinning me against him. He drops his head toward mine, brushing his nose over my temple. “That better not be *all* you fantasize about, little fox.”

A pleasant shiver runs down my spine, and I grin, even though he can’t see it. “Oh, it’s not. I have other fantasies that are much more pleasant. Although some of them do involve a knife. And you. And me...”

“Fuck.”

He drags his tongue over my skin lightly, hissing out a breath, and I feel him harden against me. My fingers dig into his back, and I grind against him a little, but the moment is broken when my phone vibrates in my back pocket.

I sigh and step out of Knox’s embrace, pulling out my cell phone to see that I have a message. Before I even read it, I’m certain I know what it’ll

say, but my stomach twists itself into a knot anyway as I scan the text and confirm that I'm right.

It's deliberately vague, and I'm sure it's been sent in such a way that no one could trace it back to its origins. But I know exactly who sent it, and I know what it means.

"It's from Alec," I tell Knox. "There's another meeting in two days."

RIVER

AT LEAST THE helicopter ride is less unnerving this time around.

The trip to whatever secret location the society meetings are held at is about the same as the first trip there, but this time, we all know what to expect.

I still hate being patted down and then blindfolded, hate the unnerving feeling of being lifted into the air by the helicopter without being able to see any of my surroundings. But I'm prepared for it this time. Last time I was summoned by Alec, I had no idea what I was walking into and only the vague shadow of a plan, but today, I know exactly what I need to do.

I need to take a page out of Preston Salinger's book and *observe*.

We've been doing as much information gathering as possible from the outside, while making sure to keep our fingerprints off any of it. It wouldn't do to have Nikolai or Tatum or any of them figure out that we're poking into their lives, turning over rocks and trying to uncover slimy things.

And to that end, it's also important for me to use this time where I'm face to face with them to try to gather any bits of random information that might be useful to know about them—everything from which other criminals they do business with in Detroit to whether they're nearsighted or farsighted, right or left-handed.

Every little detail, no matter how small it is, needs to be noted.

We're trying to find cracks in the armor of five of the most dangerous and powerful people in the city, so we need to look everywhere, and from every angle.

And that still doesn't guarantee we'll find anything, I think grimly as the helicopter touches down and the hum of the blades dies out.

I shove that thought away. My men and I are all very aware of how difficult this is going to be, but I'm trying not to dwell on it. Worrying about all the shit that could go wrong takes up valuable brain space that I could use for something else—something like figuring out the best way to remove Alec Beckham's head from his body.

"I'm surprised he didn't have us brought here by submarine this time or something," Ash mutters as we're ushered off the helicopter and the platform we're on starts to sink downward, just like last time. "Sending a helicopter *again*? Isn't that sort of a rich person faux pas, like wearing the same outfit to two different black tie events?"

I chuckle, letting his stupid joke ease the tension in my shoulders a little. "Yeah, he'll probably be really embarrassed when I tell him you noticed that. Maybe he doesn't even have a submarine. Commoner."

Ash snorts, and Priest shoots us both a quelling look as the silent men in black suits remove our blindfolds. The two of us stop talking as we're led through the ornately decorated building.

Just like last time, my men have to wait while I'm brought back into the room where the six society members will meet. There are other people gathered around the space, the protective details and entourages of the other members, and I share a significant look with Knox as I'm led away.

While I'm doing recon on the society members, my guys will do recon on those who are waiting outside with them, seeing if there are any actionable bits of intel they can glean by eavesdropping or spying on the others.

I'm not the last one to arrive this time. As I step into the room with the table in the middle, I notice that the seat where Nikolai was sitting last time is empty.

The others are all gathered around the table, seated in what I'm sure are their designated spots, so I take the same chair I had last time. Henry and Alec are talking in low voices, and as I try to pick up a few words of what they're saying, I pay close attention to every other interaction going on around the table as well. Every facial expression, every small shift of someone's weight.

Preston's expression is about the same as it was the first time I was here, almost unreadable but creepy as hell, and when our gazes meet, his face stays impassive. There's nothing in his demeanor to give away the fact that he snuck into the Kings' house in the middle of the night a few days ago,

and I do my best to keep my own features carefully blank as I shift my focus away from him.

I didn't like him before, and I fucking hate him now. I still get the unsettling feeling that he can peer right into my mind when our eyes lock, and after everything he told me about how he likes to keep tabs on his fellow society members, I have to be extra careful to play things close to the vest.

After another minute or so, the doors open and Nikolai strides in. There's something heavy and powerful about the way he walks, but he also manages to do it without making a sound. It's disconcerting, and it cements my theory that he must be a trained killer of some kind. An assassin or an enforcer for some mafia organization, maybe.

"You're late," Alec comments as we all watch him take his seat at the table.

Nikolai just grunts quietly in response, not bothering to give any sort of excuse. Alec holds his gaze for one more second before looking away and calling the meeting to order.

Running a hand over his neatly styled hair, he launches into discussion about the charity organization that's been in the works, asking questions of a few members and handing out assignments for things that will need to happen behind the scenes before the new organization is unveiled to the public.

I'm half afraid that he's going to rope the guys and their club into his shady dealings already, but he doesn't give me anything to do with the charity yet, thank fuck.

As he speaks, it becomes clear that although the charity organization will be run by Alec and his company on the surface, it will benefit all the society members behind the scenes, serving as a massive money laundering operation that will allow them each to expand their illegal businesses.

And of course, it will elevate Alec to an even higher status among the elites of Detroit, allowing him to show off his vast wealth and gain access to even more powerful socialites and politicians.

"Henry will be working with me very closely on curating the guest list for the grand opening of the Dream Foundation," he tells everyone, glancing over at the man on his right as Henry dips his head. It looks partially like a nod of agreement and partly like a gesture of obeisance, making it clear that although they're friends, it's an uneven dynamic.

Henry still answers to Alec at the end of the day.

It's probably why he sent that girl over to me to deliver his message privately rather than speaking out against me when Alec asked for the other members to vote on my admission into the society. He didn't want to openly defy Alec, despite the fact that he hates having me here.

It's a confirmation that I was right about needing to take out the entire society at once.

Because the truth is, as much as I hate him, Alec's protection of me and sick fascination with me is the only thing keeping the other members from coming after me already. If he were out of the picture, I'd be a dead woman walking with a giant red target on my back.

That's why they've all got to go, I tell myself grimly. *In one fell swoop.*

"Now, on to other matters," Alec says, his tone shifting as he glances around the table. "Work on the Dream Foundation has been going smoothly, but I've discovered an issue that needs to be dealt with."

His words and even his tone are mild, but everyone around the table tenses. I do too, because Alec has made it pretty clear how he feels about "issues" when it comes to his businesses.

"With what?" Tatum asks.

I'm surprised she's the one who spoke up first. If I didn't already hate her so much, I'd be a little impressed at the way she holds her own in a room full of deadly and powerful men.

"One of our suppliers tried to swindle us. We were given a bad shipment of merchandise," Alec says coolly.

He looks toward the door as two of his armed guards come in, dragging a hooded man between them. The man struggles, but he's clearly been either beaten or drugged. His wrists are bound behind his back, and his movements are a bit feeble. I can hear him breathing raggedly under the hood.

"This is the supplier," Alec continues, sounding calm enough, even though his eyes are hard. "And unfortunately, his sins extend beyond just delivery of poor product. He stole from us, skimming off the top and attempting to sell our merchandise on his own, replacing it with trash. And he didn't think we would notice. Didn't think we would find out."

There's a murmur around the table, and I glance around subtly, taking note of how everyone is reacting. Preston, Henry, and Tatum don't seem all that worried, watching the hooded man with varying levels of anger or

disgust on their faces. As usual, there's no real expression on Nikolai's harsh features, but his eyes dart quickly from Alec to the hooded man and back, a subtle sign that he's nervous about something. And I don't have to wonder why for long.

"Nikolai," Alec says. Even though he doesn't raise his voice, it still snaps out like a whip, breaking the silence. "You were the one who vouched for this man, weren't you?"

Nikolai stares at Alec for a tense moment, his dark eyes burning with something I can't quite make out. Alec doesn't flinch away from Nikolai's gaze though. He stares right back, as if daring the Russian man to contradict him or get angry.

"I did," Nikolai finally says, giving a curt nod. "But if he has betrayed us, he is no friend to me now."

"I see."

Alec nods thoughtfully. Glancing over at his men, he lifts his chin slightly. One of the guards tears off the hood covering the man's head, and the guy blinks as he tries to clear his vision. My breath hitches as I get a look at his features, and my shoulders stiffen.

Because... I recognize him.

It's Michael Yates, the man I seduced and drugged and left naked on the bed in a fancy hotel.

What the fuck?

Clearly, he's either not in acquisitions or he's got a little side gig set up to support the extravagant lifestyle he seems to love so much. I had no fucking idea this man worked for Alec or did business with the Kyrion Society when Alec told me to get that information off his laptop, but it all makes sense now. Alec must've suspected Michael of dirty dealing, so he sent me in to get confirmation, and I delivered it right to him.

Michael's gaze darts around the room as the guards hold him pinned between them, and I can tell from his expression that he must've been doing business with the society anonymously. Whatever he's been supplying them with, I don't think he's ever met any of them in person, except maybe Nikolai, because fear fills his face as he likely recognizes a few faces from the public eye. He must realize that it doesn't bode well for him that they're allowing him to see who they are.

His throat works as he swallows, and there's none of the skeezy self-assurance he had at the hotel in his expression now. He looks disheveled,

sweaty, and terrified, like a man who just realized how deep in over his head he really is.

Michael's gaze darts past Preston and lands on me, and his eyes flare wide with sudden recognition.

"You—" he starts to say, but then cuts himself off, as if he's unsure whether admitting he knows who I am will make things better or worse for him.

I don't say anything either, and after a moment of heavy silence, Alec inclines his head toward Nikolai.

"Since he was your contact, I'll let you be the one to decide how to handle him," Alec offers, his tone mild.

Nikolai rises from the table in a fluid, graceful motion. His body is tall and imposing, and even though he's not the only one standing, he seems to tower over everyone in the room.

"Thank you. I assure you, I knew nothing about his betrayal."

Alec's lips twitch into an almost-smile. "Oh, I know that. I've looked into it, and if you *had*, this conversation would have been very different."

"I should never have vouched for him. Thank you for allowing me to correct my mistakes."

Nikolai rolls up his sleeves as he speaks, his gaze locked with Alec's, and I catch a flash of a dark tattoo inked on his forearm.

Then, without another word, he strides over to Michael and grabs him by the throat, lifting him up off the floor. The smaller man's legs kick uselessly as he struggles, gasping for breath. I can see him trying to yank at the binds on his wrists, trying to free his hands so that he can scrabble at Nikolai's fingers—but of course, the restraints don't give.

Michael twists and kicks, his face turning red and then purple, his eyes bugging out as his mouth opens in small gaping movements like a fish. But Nikolai doesn't even move. It's like the man in his grip doesn't weigh anything to him, and the Russian brute just holds him there, fingers tightening so viciously around his throat that I'm not sure whether he's trying to choke Michael or snap his neck.

My heart thuds heavily in my chest as I watch. The room is deathly quiet, the silence broken only by the muffled sounds of Michael trying to fight off the inevitable as he struggles in Nikolai's grasp.

But it's no use. After what feels like several minutes, he stops thrashing, only his feet still twitching. His eyelids droop closed, and his head lolls a

little. And then he goes entirely slack in Nikolai's hold.

He's clearly dead, and Nikolai drops him to the floor with little ceremony, turning to look at Alec and inclining his head.

"He will not have a chance to betray the Kyrio Society again," he murmurs.

It's a show of loyalty, clearly, a sign that he would never side with Michael over Alec, even if he once vouched for the man.

Alec holds his gaze for a second more and then nods, seeming satisfied.

Nikolai rolls his sleeves back down and settles back in his seat as the guards who brought Michael into the room pick up his body, hefting it silently between them. No one in the room spares the corpse a second glance as Alec's guards haul it from the room.

"Good. Now that that's been taken care of, we can move on," Alec says, his voice as cool and businesslike as ever. I blink, shifting my focus back to him. "Tatum and River, you two will go evaluate the merchandise. See what's worth salvaging and what's not."

Fuck. I glance over at Tatum, who shifts her piercing gaze my way. Her face is hard and impassive, her expression so cold that it may as well be carved out of ice. Clearly, this woman hates me.

Well, the feeling is fucking mutual at this point.

"Understood," she says in a clipped voice, nodding to Alec.

"Yeah, okay," I add, the words sticking on my tongue.

As much as I hate it, neither of us can say no to him, and although I dread the thought of spending any more time with Tatum, it could be a good chance to feel her out a bit more. Not to see if she could become a potential ally, but to see if I can find out what her weaknesses are.

The meeting wraps up after several more minutes, and everyone is dismissed.

Henry and Alec rise from the table at the same time, speaking to each other in low voices as they do, and I'm tempted to linger to try to eavesdrop. But I'm not sure how subtle I could be about it, and Tatum is already heading for the door. If I'm supposed to go inspect this "merchandise" with her, I need to make a plan for that.

So I get up and follow her out, rolling my eyes at the way she has her nose practically stuck up into the air as she walks, her heels tapping out a staccato rhythm on the gleaming floor.

"Hey, Tatum," I call out after her.

We get a good way down the hall before she can even be fucked to acknowledge me, but she finally turns around, looking me over with an expression of disdain on her face.

“Meet me tonight,” she says, her tone clipped and annoyed as she gives me an address for our rendezvous point. “And come alone. I know you’re incapable of going anywhere without your fucking harem, but leave them at home.”

I bristle at that, hating the way she makes it sound. She calls the Kings of Chaos a ‘harem’ like it’s a bad word and they’re just my fuckboys or something.

I curl my hands into fists to keep myself from lashing out at her, and she sniffs and strides away, her heels clicking on the polished floors.

“Bitch,” I mutter under my breath once she’s gone, and then go find the guys so we can get the fuck out of here.

RIVER

WE TAKE the helicopter away from the meeting place and then get back in our car to head home. Once we're all settled comfortably in the car, I fill them in on everything I learned and saw in the meeting.

"I had no idea Michael was in business with the Kyrrio Society," I say when I get to the part about him being brought into the room. "I figured the information Alec wanted me to get was something that would benefit the corporate side of his dealings more than the illegal side. But clearly, this guy had shit going on that we didn't know about. And whatever information I got off his computer was enough to convince Alec that Michael was swindling them."

"So they killed him." Ash purses his lips in a low whistle.

"Yeah. Well, Nikolai did. With his bare fucking hands."

"Dammit." Knox scowls, leaning back in his seat. "That's bullshit. I wanted to kill him. I had a fucking bead on him, and I didn't even pull the trigger."

I choke out a laugh, because only Knox could hear all of this and be pissed that he wasn't the one who got to kill the guy.

Still, I kind of get where he's coming from. I don't know all the details of what Michael did for the society or what kind of merchandise he supplied them with, but the fact that he dealt with them at all tells me a lot about what kind of person he was—and none of it is good.

"Sorry, Knox," I mutter, shaking my head. "But somehow, I have a feeling there will be plenty more chances for death and mayhem before this is all over."

He looks a little gleeful at the prospect, although his expression turns more serious as I continue my report of everything I learned in the meeting.

I joined the society at a time when it feels like it's making a big push to expand its reach. Alec already has a shitload of money, but he wants more influence and power. This charity organization that he's starting, the Dream Foundation, seems to be wrapped up in that.

It will be a front, a way to improve his public persona while expanding the wealth and power of his secret organization.

Once we get home, we spend the rest of the day strategizing, adding new notes to Gage's list of things we know and trying to come up with a way to end this as soon as possible. There's a lot to consider and a lot we still don't know, but the day passes quickly as we all throw ideas out and then debate them to see if they hold weight.

Well before I'm ready for it, evening rolls around, and I have to head out to meet Tatum.

"I don't know who she thinks she is, telling you that you have to come alone," Knox grumbles, his tattooed arms folded and a scowl on his darkly handsome face. "Fucking bitch doesn't make the rules."

"We could show up anyway," Ash suggests, tugging at his bottom lip. "I mean, what is she really going to do to about it?"

I know none of them are wild about the idea of me being alone and going into a situation like this, especially when it involves a society member who clearly hates my guts. It's not my favorite thing either, but my earlier thought that I might be able to learn more about her still stands—and I'm sure she'll be a lot less likely to slip up and reveal something if all of my men are there with us. She definitely has a pretty low opinion of me, so if it's just the two of us, maybe she'll let her guard down a little more, not seeing me as a real threat.

"She's definitely a bitch," I tell Knox, grimacing. Then I turn to Ash. "But it'll be okay. She can't hurt me, for the exact same reason that I have to take out the whole society at once. We're not allowed to act against each other, even if we really, really don't like each other. If she attacked me outright, the other society members would probably consider it an attack against all of them. Even the others who seem to hate me too would be pissed at her for violating her oath. So she won't try to kill me or anything."

Gage huffs. "You're right. Fuck. But *be careful*."

"I'm always careful," I quip back, giving him a winning grin.

He doesn't smile back, but kisses me on the forehead anyway, fisting my hair the way he knows I like. When I step away to go get ready to leave, he smacks my ass—hard.

I hiss out a breath and turn back to him, and he just gives me a deadpan look.

"There's more where that came from if you do anything stupid," he promises.

Judging from the way arousal slicks my panties as my ass cheek stings, I'm pretty sure we both know that's not quite the threat he's pretending it is. But I just bite back a smile and head upstairs to grab my car keys.

My shitty old beater of a car is still sitting in the driveway, and I hop in and do the tricks I've learned that make it start every time... mostly. It takes two tries since I haven't driven it in a while, but after a minute, I pull out of the driveway and head toward the spot we agreed to meet at.

Tatum is already there when I arrive, even though I'm not late. I roll my eyes at what an uptight control freak she is as I pull to a stop and tug my key out of the ignition. She's leaning against a gleaming silver Ferrari, and she's alone too, her entourage gone.

I step out of my car, and Tatum sniffs, looking like I've offended her somehow.

"What the fuck is that?" she demands as she stares at my car. "Don't you have money?"

I look back at my little beater and shrug. "Yeah. And...? What's your point? I like my car just fine."

Her lips curl. "We are not taking that... thing to where we're going. I might catch something just from touching it."

"Jesus. *Fine*," I agree, not really wanting to argue with her about it right now.

Of course, her car is super nice and fancy, polished and sleek with a leather interior. I slide into the passenger seat, and as I do, I have to admit—privately, to myself—that this car is sexy as fuck. Not that I'd ever tell her that out loud. I refuse to give her the satisfaction, or to give her any more reasons to act like she's better than everyone else.

Still, I can't stop myself from running my hand over the smooth leather seat appreciatively.

Hmm. Maybe when this is all over, I'll spend some of the money I stole from Julian on a nice car for myself.

Even though we're seated just a couple feet apart, Tatum pays no attention to me as she turns the car on and revs the engine, pulling away from the curb. She navigates like a machine through the dusky streets of Detroit, fast and controlled, her face expressionless. She drives like the speed limits don't apply to her, and maybe they don't considering I bet there's not a cop in the city who would give her a ticket for speeding.

After about twenty minutes of tense silence, we roll to a stop outside a beat up building on the outskirts of the city.

"We're here," she says bluntly, as if I'm too stupid to have figured that out.

"Great," I mutter.

Let's get this over with.

A man dressed in nondescript street clothes stands outside the building, smoking a cigarette. If someone happened to pass by, they probably wouldn't give him a second glance, but since I know what we're here for and that some kind of illegal goods are hidden inside the building, I recognize him for what he is: a guard.

He tenses slightly as we walk up, but then seems to recognize Tatum.

"We're here on business," Tatum says coolly. "We need to inspect the merchandise."

"Got it. We've been expecting you." He nods to her, shoots me a quick glance, and then lets us in without any hassle.

Another guard takes us through the building, which seems to be a large warehouse of some kind.

"This shipment was a real piece of shit," he mutters, speaking to Tatum as he leads us deeper inside. "It's... well, you'll see."

Tatum makes a noise in her throat, not bothering to respond in any other way, and a moment later, the guard ushers us into a large, dimly lit space.

I'm expecting to see boxes or crates of drugs, guns, or other weapons, but my footsteps falter as I take in the "merchandise" around us. There are cages lining the walls, almost like at an animal shelter or something.

But instead of stray dogs, there are girls inside the cages.

All of them are in rough shape, skinny, sickly looking, and bruised.

My stomach clenches. For a second, I think I might be sick, and I put a hand over my mouth as if that will stop the vomit that threatens to rush up. The room is filled with the sound of the girls sniffing or coughing, shifting

around in the cages like animals that have been locked up for too long without being taken care of.

And the worst part is, none of them call out for help or really react at all as Tatum and I enter the space. I try to catch the gazes of a few of them as we walk by, but they won't look at me. They stare vacantly off into the distance or down at the floor of the cages, shivering and blank.

Tatum just strides through the space, her head held high as she glances into several of the cages. Her heels make a *click, click, click* sound on the concrete floor, and I notice that a couple of the prisoners flinch away from it, like it reminds them of something unpleasant.

I don't even want to think about that.

She examines them all with a cool, detached eye, moving from one cage to the next, taking in everything.

Then she turns to the guard who escorted us through the building, crossing her arms over her chest.

"This shipment is useless," she says, her tone icy and cutting. "None of them are worth selling to high bidders. There's no quality here."

"So what should we do with them?" he asks.

"Unload them for as much as you can on the street. We'll start over again with a new supplier."

The guard nods, and Tatum turns on her heel without another word, marching right back out the way we came. I scramble to follow her, feeling like I'm in a daze until we get back outside into the fresh air.

I gulp in a few grateful breaths before we get back in the car, but it doesn't really help all that much. I still feel sick, horror and fury rising in me as images from inside the warehouse flash through my mind.

Tatum starts her car, the engine purring to life, and we drive away from the nondescript building that's essentially serving as a prison for the women locked inside. A prison that will spit them out before long onto the streets of Detroit, selling them to men like Luther to use and abuse however they please.

Because of Alec.

Because of Tatum.

Because of *me*.

The sky is fully dark now, and the streetlamps flicker past as we drive. I stare out the window, trying to let the rhythmic flashes of light distract me from the storm brewing in my heart, but it doesn't work.

Finally, I can't bite back my angry words any longer, and I turn to look at Tatum.

"How the fuck can you be a part of this?" I demand. "How can you live with yourself as a part of the Kyrio Society, knowing what kind of shit they do?"

Her head doesn't move at all, although her eyes cut toward me before shifting back to the road.

"You should be careful what you say," she says coolly. "You may be Alec's little pet, but he doesn't like anyone speaking ill of his organization. Thoughts lead to deeds, he always says."

"Oh yeah?" My eyes narrow. "Is that why you've made it such a point to ingratiate yourself with him? To make it clear you're more than willing to do whatever the fuck he asks of you, even if it means selling your soul?"

Tatum's face doesn't change at all. She doesn't soften or even sneer at me. Instead, she holds out her wrist, twisting it so that I can see a huge, shiny scar on it. I peer at it in the low light from the passing streetlights and notice it's more of a blotch than a line. Not a cut, but more like a burn scar.

"When I was eight years old, my father held my arm over an open flame to teach me to withstand pain," she says impassively. "He taught me that only the strongest survive, and he showed me how to do that, no matter what it took." She pauses, and when she speaks again, her voice is even colder. "Those women back there weren't strong enough."

My jaw tightens and I dig my fingers into my legs to keep them from trying to gouge out Tatum's eyes.

That's such fucking bullshit.

She makes it sound like everyone back at that warehouse, everyone who has bad shit happen to them, *deserves* it because they weren't strong enough to force some other outcome. But that's a lie. It's the lie people like her tell themselves to justify stepping on other people to get what they want. It's the lie she tells herself so that she can pretend that she could never become like those girls.

Like me.

"Well, I'm glad you've got it all figured out," I mutter bitterly. "You live in your massive penthouse or whatever, safe and secure, while all the poor fucks who aren't 'strong enough' suffer and die on the streets."

"You don't know anything about me." Tatum's fingers grip the wheel more tightly as she scoffs under her breath. "My address isn't publicly

known, but I still have bulletproof glass on the windows. I didn't just inherit my father's money or his position in the society. I inherited his enemies too, and every one of them would be happy to see me dead."

She finally turns to look at me, and I shiver at the hard gleam in her eye.

"Do you think any one of those girls back there wouldn't have fucked the others over to improve her own situation just a little bit. That they wouldn't have killed you or me and gladly taken our places if they were given the chance? You act like I'm a monster for doing what I've done, but the truth is, it's all a twisted game. We're all trying to win, and anyone who claims differently is a fucking liar."

She falls silent, her jaw clenched tight as she shifts her focus back to the road.

We don't speak for the rest of the drive, and she drops me off at my car before peeling out.

I watch her go, and a few moments later, I watch Knox's car creep out of an alley nearby and follow her. He won't attack her or anything, not tonight, but hopefully he'll be able to find out where she lives or any other places she frequents often. Since we're all brought to the society meetings by helicopter from various points in the city, I haven't been able to tail anyone after our meetings or find out more about them that way.

This was too good of an opportunity to miss, and it gives me a bit of petty pleasure to know that even though Tatum told me not to bring my 'harem,' one of the Kings came with me in secret anyway.

She's right, in a way. This does all feel like some sort of twisted game.

And I'm more determined than ever to win.

RIVER

“FUCK,” Ash curses, taking off his glasses and scrubbing a hand over his face. “That won’t work either.”

“I know.” I sigh, blowing out a breath. “There are at least two society members unaccounted for in that scenario.”

It’s been a few days since my horrible field trip with Tatum, and the guys and I are all at home. We’ve been going over our half-formulated plan again, because that’s all we ever really seem to do these days. All of us are anxious for this to be over.

We’ve been going over a possible option for how to take out all the society members at the same time, now that we’ve filled in more of the gaps in our knowledge about each of them. But we keep running into the same issue: we can’t physically be in enough places at once to make this happen. Especially since we don’t want to spread ourselves too thin and risk not having enough backup if shit hits the fan.

Because let’s be honest, it probably will.

“This is like playing the worst, least fun game of Tetris ever,” Ash groans, sliding his glasses back on and picking up his knife again.

He’s graduated from coins to weaponry as a way to dispel his excess energy, and he starts tossing a knife in the air, catching it with three fingers by the blade each time. A clear sign that he’s agitated about all of this.

Knox has the table covered in little Lego pieces and odds and ends, the way he likes to do when he needs to visualize scenarios for stuff like this.

“Yeah. Fuck me with a rusty knife, you’re right. Okay, little guys. Back you go.” He sighs and sets the pieces up again, making them do little dances and high-pitched voices as he puts them in their places.

Gage leans back in his chair, eyeing the table as he scrubs a hand over his jaw. He's freshly shaven, which I take as another good sign that he's healing up well. In the first couple weeks after his injury, he didn't bother to shave, growing a thick, dark scruff. But now he looks more like his old self, right down to the sharp, determined gleam in his emerald eyes.

"Taking them out from afar is the easiest option," he says. "Keeps us out of danger, and it has the highest chance of success."

Knox moves his little token to the top of a stack of checkers. "I can snipe one of them, no problem," he says, making his piece do a little victory dance that sends the stack wobbling dangerously.

"Yeah, the only issue is that no one else is as good a shot as you are," Priest points out. "River is good, but it's too risky, especially since the target needs to be out in the open for it to work. So we can probably only take out one person by sniper, if that. We need other options."

Ash shakes his head, catching the knife again. "We just can't be in that many places at once. We've gone over this a hundred times, incorporating every weakness and gap in security we've been able to find. And besides the fact that they're all heavily protected, with very few gaps to be found, there aren't enough of us to make this work. There's no configuration where we can take them all out at the exact same time. It's impossible."

I stare at the board, thinking all of it through. We have to take out a lot of people, all at the same moment—or as close to it as possible. They're all powerful, connected, paranoid, and savvy.

And if we fuck it up, we're all dead.

Maybe this really is insane.

"Okay, what about this?" Gage offers. Leaning forward, he starts moving pieces around. "Knox takes a shot here, taking out Henry. Then Priest and Ash go to find Nikolai."

"Oh, sure," Ash says, rolling his eyes. "Send us after the big bad Russian with no past. That'll go great. Knox should be the one to take him out."

"Okay, fine," Gage snaps. "But then that means you have to get through Henry's security detail, and he has a lot of them."

They go around and around in circles, arguing about this new plan, and I tune them out a little as I stare down at the assortment of objects laid out on the table.

There are too many of them and not enough of us.

Right on the heels of that thought, another one pops into my head, and I suck in a breath. My heart stutters, and I look up suddenly, cutting into the argument.

“Ash is right. As it stands right now, it’s not possible. If we want to do this right... we’re going to need help.”

That makes all of the men pause. They fall silent, looking at me with raised eyebrows.

“Help?” Gage asks, shaking his head as he considers it. “That’s risky, bringing someone else in.”

“It is,” I admit. “But it’s the only option I can see. And it wouldn’t be just anyone. I have a person in mind.”

“Who?” Priest wants to know.

I grin as the idea starts to take a more solid shape in my mind. It’s definitely risky, and possibly crazy. But so is this entire mission we’ve set for ourselves. And this just might work.

“Someone who owes me a favor.”

IT TAKES a bit more convincing and several more rounds of fiddling with the Lego pieces on the table—trying to come up with better options and failing over and over again—before the guys finally get on board with my idea.

“I’ll have to go to Fairview Heights,” I tell them. “This can’t be a phone call. And I don’t have her number anyway.”

“We’re going with you,” Knox offers immediately.

“All of us,” Gage puts in, a stubborn look passing over his face.

I grimace. “You can’t. You know that.”

“There’s no fucking way I’m staying behind,” he insists, folding his arms. “Not this time.”

The look in his eyes says he’s not going to let me argue with him about it. We’ve butted heads several times over the course of his recovery, arguing over how much he should do, and he’s surprised me by backing down and taking it easy at my insistence on a number of occasions.

But I can tell this isn’t going to be one of those times.

“Fine,” I sigh after a long moment. “But we need to be careful. You’re still supposed to be dead, so we can’t let you be seen by anyone in Detroit.”

To be honest, I don’t get the impression that Alec often thinks of Gage anymore, not even to taunt me about his death. As far as the leader of the Kyrio Society is concerned, Gage was a pawn, a tool to get a point across to me and to test my willingness to obey Alec’s orders. Alec never really saw him as a person, so as soon as he went into the water, it was like he ceased to exist.

But if Alec were to get wind of the fact that Gage isn’t dead? All of that would change in a heartbeat.

So we have to keep our facade up.

Catching my gaze, Gage nods somberly. “No one will find out, River. I promise.”

I’m still a bit tempted to try to convince him to stay home, but the truth is, I feel stronger with all of my men beside me. And once we get out of Detroit, I won’t worry as much about him being seen.

So the five of us get ready to head out, leaving the dog behind. I give Harley some pets and scratches before we go, a prickle of unease stirring in my gut. The guys have upped their security around the house a lot, and Preston hasn’t broken in again since the night of my induction into the society, but I still worry that he might.

“Bite the bad man if he comes,” I tell Harley.

He gives me a doggy grin and lolls his tongue out, wagging his tail.

I roll my eyes, snorting under my breath as I scratch behind his ear. “Clearly, I raised you wrong. You’re way too damn trusting.”

We troop into the garage and pile into the car. I sit in the back with Gage and Ash while Knox drives and Priest rides shotgun.

“You need to put your head down until we get out of the city,” I tell Gage. “Just in case.”

He shoots me a look like he thinks that’s going a bit overboard, but he does it, shifting on the seat and laying his head on my lap. He takes advantage of that position, nuzzling my pussy through my pants as Knox drives. His breath is warm as it ghosts over my clit, and I squirm in place, glaring down at him while shivers dance up my spine.

“You’re not helping, you know,” I point out.

He grins up at me, amusement glinting in his eyes. “Hey, this was your idea.”

The trip takes a couple hours, and as we reach Fairview Heights and make our way down streets that I recognize, several memories spring to my mind.

I spent months hunting one of Hannah's and my captors around this city, but he was powerful and protected, and I didn't have the backup and support of four dangerous men like I do now. It was hard for me to even get close to him, although I tried and failed several times.

So in the end, I ended up finding someone who hated him almost as much as I did, and helping her kill him. Giving her the information she needed to take him down.

It worked out well for both of us.

I guide Knox to the house where Mercy DeLeon was living last time I saw her, praying that she hasn't moved since then. We don't really have time to comb through Fairview Heights looking for her.

The large house is on a quiet residential street, pretty much the same as the Kings' house is, and we park on the street out front and get out, heading up the walkway to the front door.

I take a deep breath as I lift my hand to ring the doorbell, praying to Hannah's memory that this reckless idea of mine will pay off.

Please, still be here. Please be willing to help.

After several heartbeats that seem to drag on forever, the door opens. My pulse quickens as a woman with familiar dark hair and jade green eyes takes a half step back, her eyebrows shooting up.

She looks like she's seen a ghost—which is fitting, I guess, since that's what I told her to call me that last time we spoke.

I never thought I would see her again, and judging by the shock in her expression, she never expected to see me either.

"Ghost?" she asks, her voice low.

I open my mouth to speak, but before I can, three burly men fill the doorway behind Mercy. All three of them tense up, and I can feel the four Kings behind me tensing up too, their hands moving toward their concealed weapons as they get ready to protect me if need be.

Mercy seems to pick up on the standoff happening between our men just like I have, and she huffs, rolling her eyes.

"Alright, alright. Everyone can put their dicks away now," she says. "It's fine."

None of the men seem to believe her—neither my guys nor hers. They don't move a muscle, staring at each other over Mercy's and my heads.

"Sloan," she says firmly. "Rory, Levi, it's *fine*."

The blond one takes a deep breath and rolls his shoulders, although he doesn't take his gaze off us. Mercy's other two men relax, but only slightly, and the Kings of Chaos still seem on edge.

"It's fine," I reiterate to them, and the thick tension hanging over us goes down a small notch.

"Come in," Mercy says, glancing around quickly. "Before the neighbors notice and think something weird is happening."

That's something. I have no idea if she'll help us, but at least she hasn't slammed the door in our faces, and the fact that she's letting us into their house means she must trust me a little. I'll take that as a start.

"Thanks." I nod gratefully.

The guys flanking Mercy back up a little, giving her room to step back and open the door wider. We make our way inside, and she closes the door behind us before turning and cocking an eyebrow at me.

"What the hell is going on?" Her gaze moves over my shoulder to where the Kings have gathered around me in a protective knot. "And who the hell are these guys?"

RIVER

IF I THOUGHT we left all that tension outside the house when we came in, I was dead wrong. It followed us inside, and it's filling the room, making the air feel a little thin.

I can tell the three men who live here have Mercy's back completely. But I also know if it came down to it, my guys would do their best to put those men in the ground if they threatened me.

Mercy was living with these same three gang members when I gave her the info she needed to take out their enemy all those months ago. I did enough research on her before I approached her in that boutique to know that she was romantically involved with all of them, but it didn't occur to me until just now how closely my own situation mirrors hers.

It's strange, and it makes me wish we were visiting under different circumstances. I'd love to find out what it's been like for her and compare notes on how to handle being in a relationship with multiple guys at once.

But this isn't the time to chat about that, and besides, it's not like I can really have girl talk with Mercy when we have all the guys in the same room, ready to throw down if they have to.

So I shake off those thoughts and get back to the point. I glance between Mercy and her guys, then gesture to the men who came with me.

"This is Knox, Priest, Gage, and Ash. And I'm... my name isn't Ghost. It's River."

My stomach curls into a tight knot as I speak. Although we're the ones who came to her—no one forced us to be here—part of me still rebels at handing over any personal information to her.

But I have to.

It was one thing to maintain anonymity with her before, but what we've come to ask her for will require a level of trust that we don't quite have yet. I need to establish that, and the best way to do it is to offer up something personal.

I need to be the first one to take the leap, and I'll just have to hope like hell that I didn't misjudge her.

Mercy's eyebrows rise again, and I can tell she grasps the significance of me telling her my real name.

"Okay," she says. Her expression is thoughtful, as if she's trying to put together a puzzle in her head. Then she holds out a hand, gesturing to one side. "Let's go into the living room. Whatever you want to talk about, we can do it in there."

She leads us through the house and into a large living room, and I hang back with my guys as she takes a seat in a plush easy chair. Her men settle in around her, two of them perching on either arm of the chair while the third stands behind her, his arms folded over his broad chest and a hard look in his eyes.

The Kings and I take the couch, which is large enough that it's not really a tight fit—although they sit so close to me that Knox's large thigh presses up against mine on one side, and Gage's does the same on the other. At home, Gage sometimes still walks with a small limp in his gait, especially at the end of a long day when his healing wound starts aching a little, but I noticed that his stride was long and even as we made our way in here, and he sits straight and tall, giving no indication that he's not at one hundred percent.

It just drives home for me how delicate and tenuous this situation is.

These people aren't our enemies, but we're not sure they're our friends yet either, and that has all of us on edge.

"So?" Mercy tilts her head, her dark hair gleaming in the sunlight that comes through the window. "What is this about? I haven't seen you or even heard a whisper of your name in Fairview Heights since that night at the hotel. It was like you fucking vanished."

"I did," I murmur. "Well, I left town, at any rate. I headed back to Detroit, and that's where I've been. I had a... a mission that I needed to accomplish."

She purses her lips. "And did you accomplish it?"

"Yes."

I think of Ivan's body, hacked to pieces on the floor of Knox's basement room. The last name on my list.

That seems like a long-ass time ago now, and as I consider the series of events that followed Ivan's death, I'm hit by a sudden rush of weariness. This all *should* have ended that night, but it didn't. Instead, I fell deeper and deeper into a rabbit hole, and now I'm trapped like Alice in some sort of bloody, twisted Wonderland.

"I did accomplish what I set out to do," I repeat, licking my lips. "But it got complicated. And now we need help."

I can feel the gazes of Mercy's men on me as I speak, but I keep my focus on her. She's the one I need to convince, not just because I have a feeling her guys will go along with it if I can get her on board, but because she's the one I have history with. And although I don't know her whole story, I think she's the one who's most likely to understand mine.

"We're up against some dangerous people in Detroit," I continue, "and I know that the Black Roses have been doing well in Fairview Heights. You've gained a lot of power since I last saw you. The info I gave you helped that happen."

"And we're grateful for that help," the blond one—Sloan, I remember he's called—cuts in. His gray eyes glint like steel as he shakes his head. "But we don't owe you anything. That was never part of the deal."

"Yeah. It wasn't a tit for tat," says the one with golden brown hair. *Rory*. "You offered up that intel all on your own, and from what Mercy has said, you had your own reasons for doing it. So I agree with Sloan. We don't owe you for that."

"Hang on," says the one named Levi, holding up a hand. He seems a bit like the peacekeeper of the group, although I can't be sure about that. "Shouldn't we at least hear her out?"

"No." Sloan glares at us, his jaw muscles popping as he grits his teeth. He looks like he'd rather just throw us all out of the house than deal with whatever we're asking for.

"Well, she's here to talk to me," Mercy points out, tilting her head a little to look up at him. "And I want to hear what she has to say."

"Oof." Rory sucks in a breath, nudging Sloan. "She's got you there, dude."

Sloan doesn't respond, and his expression doesn't change. I wonder if he goes along with the banter more easily when he's alone with Mercy and

the other two men than when they have guests. Because right now, he just seems standoffish and unyielding, almost as hard-edged as Gage can be when he gets all stubborn and protective.

It's interesting though, seeing their dynamic. Clearly, they're all comfortable together, settled into a rhythm that works for them.

Mercy clears her throat, cutting into Rory and Levi's quiet discussion as they talk in low voices.

"What exactly do you need?" she asks, pinning me with a look.

Curiosity and wariness gleam in her eyes, and I hesitate for just a second before I answer. I'm tempted to talk around it for a while longer, to drag this out and try to find some easier way to ask her for the favor I need. But there's really no easy way to do it, so I decide on bluntness in the end.

"We need you to kill someone," I tell her. "Henry Levine."

Once again, all the oxygen seems to get sucked out of the room. I know that my guys are no strangers to death and killing, and I have a feeling that Mercy and her men have a good amount of firsthand experience with it too.

But this isn't just about that. It's about *who* they would need to kill.

There's a moment of silence as they process what I just said. Then Levi speaks up. "Henry Levine? You mean the senator?"

"Who?" Rory asks.

Levi shoots him a look. "He's a US senator, Rory. He's on TV waving and smiling every other night. Always talking about family first and all that shit. You've seen him."

Rory just shrugs, looking like he has no idea what Levi is talking about, and it's hard to tell if it's an act or if he's serious.

"Can we get back to the point?" Sloan cuts in. "That's too big of an ask. Do you know how hard it would be to kill a senator? He'd be protected. Well protected."

"True," Rory says, rubbing his chin. "Government security at the very least, and he probably has other guys, assuming he's into some crooked shit. Most politicians are these days."

Levi tips his head thoughtfully. "It is a lot to ask. It would be dangerous."

"Are you saying you can't handle it?" Ash quips, adjusting his glasses. "Because that's all you have to say if you don't think you can."

"No one said that," Sloan growls. "It's not a matter of what we can handle. It's about whether it's worth it for us. And this isn't."

Ash looks at Knox and shrugs. “That’s a lot of words just to say they can’t handle it.”

“Ash,” Gage bites out sharply.

“What?”

I drop my head with a sigh, because this isn’t getting us anywhere. When I look up, Mercy is gazing at me with a thoughtful expression on her face. She leans forward a little, resting her elbows on her knees as the room falls silent again.

“Let me ask you this. Does Henry Levine deserve to die?” she murmurs.

I think back to the party Alec threw for my initiation. To the woman on her knees, sucking his dick. The bruises and cum on her face. I think about the girls in those cages, being sold on the street because they weren’t “high quality” enough to be sold to high bidders—not that it would’ve been much better for them in the end if they were.

That choking feeling of disgust rises up in me, and I nod, my expression hard.

“Yes,” I tell her simply. “He does.”

She considers my answer for a moment, studying me with a somber look in her eyes. She seems more grown up than the last time I saw her, more settled into who she is. Confident in both herself and her place in the world.

No one speaks for a long moment as Mercy and I hold each other’s gazes. Then she breaks the silence, nodding once.

“Okay. We’ll do it.”

“Mercy...” Sloan growls in a low voice.

Despite the hard edge to his words, I can see concern in his gaze when he looks at her. I’m sure he’s apprehensive about getting his little family embroiled in something with so many possible downsides and so few upsides, and the other two men look just as worried as he does. Even Rory, who’s been joking around since we got here. It’s clear how protective of Mercy they all are. They don’t want to see her put herself in danger for a bunch of strangers.

I get that. Maybe I wouldn’t have once upon a time, but I do now. I understand the impulse to protect the people you love with everything in you.

“Listen,” Mercy says, turning in her seat so that she can look at all three of her men. “I know it’s dangerous. I know we don’t *have* to do it. But

Ghost—I mean, River—is right that she once helped us out of a really bad spot. Even if it benefited her at the time, she still did it. I owe her for that. And if Henry Levine deserves to die and we can do it, then why shouldn't we help?"

"Because it's not our fight," Levi offers.

"No, it's not. But sometimes you have to step into a fight anyway, even if it wasn't yours to begin with. And it's not like taking out a crooked senator will be the hardest thing we've ever done."

None of the men look convinced. All three of them are clearly resistant to getting involved, but Mercy doesn't back down. She argues passionately, and there's respect in their eyes as they look at her and listen to what she has to say.

They gravitate toward her, and her words have weight with them. They seem to trust her to make the right call, and it's so clear that they're all deeply in love.

Finally, Sloan inhales and lets the breath out in a messy rush.

"Fine," he agrees, sounding so much like Gage that I have to bite back a smile. "We'll help you."

Mercy tilts her head to look up at him again, and he reaches down, gripping her hand as she raises it. He brings her fingers to his lips and kisses them, then turns his attention back to us.

"Thank you," I tell all of them. "It will need to be a covert op, obviously. And we're coordinating an attack on a few different fronts, so we'll let you know when we need you to make your move. It won't be for a little while yet."

"Okay. What can you tell us about Levine that will help?" Levi wants to know. "I don't like the idea of running in there blind."

I nod, then fill them in on what we've learned about Henry in the time we've spent doing recon on him. I also pass along a few little pieces of information I've picked up from watching him at society meetings. Priest and Gage chime in, adding a few things about potential weak spots we found in his security and ideas we've batted around for the best way to take him out.

Mercy and her men listen carefully, absorbing all of it, even though I'm sure they'll do plenty of recon on their own. I know what they did with the information I gave them last time, so even though this will be a difficult job, I trust that they'll be able to take care of it.

Once we've told them everything we can, Gage pulls out a burner phone and hands it over to Rory.

"We'll use that to be in touch with you," he says. "Don't expect to hear from us often. The less we communicate about this, the better. But we'll let you know when it's time to move against Henry."

"Alright." Rory takes the phone and pockets it.

"Thank you," I repeat as my men and I all rise from the couch.

Mercy shoots me a small smile. Sloan, Rory, and Levi still seem tense, but Sloan gives me a grudging nod. The three of them seem eager to get my guys out of their house, ushering them out of the living room and leaving me alone with Mercy for a moment.

"It seems like you've got a lot on your plate," she says.

I huff a laugh. "Kind of an understatement. And the usual way shit goes."

"Yeah, I can understand that." She leads me into the entryway and looks out the open door, where her three men are watching as my four wait by the car, unwavering and protective. "At least you're not in it alone. That makes all the difference."

RIVER

AS WE PULL AWAY from Mercy's house, Ash seems much more optimistic than before, whistling a tune in the backseat and spinning a pen between his fingers.

"That went better than I expected it to," he comments.

"Yeah, I was half thinking we were gonna have a fight on our hands for a second there," Knox chimes in. "At least their girlfriend talked some sense into them."

"Always listen to the women," Ash replies, nodding sagely. "Unless they're bitchy or otherwise batshit insane. Anyway, having the Black Rose gang's help changes our plan in a big way. The real question is, now that we've accepted the fact that we need help, do we need more?"

"Who would we even ask?" Knox grunts. "I mean, it's not like we can trust this kind of shit to just anyone. River vouched for Mercy and her dudes, but it's not like we've got a list of people who owe us favors." He stops and thinks for a second, cocking his head to one side. "Well, okay, we do. But you know what I mean."

Ash chuckles. "Yeah. Most of the people who owe us favors aren't the types I'd trust with something like this."

Their conversation moves on, but I lose the thread of it, gazing out the window as Knox takes the ramp onto the highway that will lead us back to Detroit. My mind keeps going back to what Mercy said when I was getting ready to leave.

At least you're not alone.

She's right. I'm not alone.

I have four men who have stood with me through everything. Who have risked their lives for me. Who have *changed* their lives for me, without me even really needing to ask. Even when I told them they shouldn't, they did it anyway, and they've vowed that they'll always make the same choice.

It's such a big thing, and I turn it over and over in my mind, staying quiet the whole ride back home.

Gage ducks his head again once we get closer to Detroit proper, and the scenery outside grows more and more familiar as we near the guys' neighborhood and finally pull up their driveway and into the garage.

We all climb out of the car, stretching after the long drive.

"Fuck, I'm starving," Knox comments, lifting his arms over his head and cracking his back. "Is it too late to order pizza? What the hell time is it anyway?"

Gage rolls his eyes and unlocks the door that leads to the house. As soon as it swings open, Harley is on him in a second, barking and wagging his tail joyfully. The mutt jumps around, greeting all four of them, and I hang back a little as Ash lets the dog out to do his business and then calls him back inside again, taking in the scene. Looking at this house, which has become my home.

When I first got here, it felt more like a prison. They were keeping me here against my will, and even though I was free to come and go so that I could work on taking out Ivan St. James, I still didn't want to be here. It was just... a means to an end. A consequence of me using them to help me reach my goal at the time.

Now I can't imagine calling anywhere else home. I can't imagine being anywhere else but with them.

Ash stands up from scratching Harley's belly and glances over at me, frowning a little.

"You okay, killer?" he asks. "You've got a weird look on your face. What's up? Oh fuck, don't tell me you forgot something back in Fairview Heights. There's no way I'm getting back in the car right n—"

"I love you."

Ash breaks off as my words cut over his. He blinks for a second, surprise spreading over his features, and then he smiles broadly. Before he can respond, I look at Gage next, my pulse fluttering rapidly in my neck.

"I love you," I whisper.

His nostrils flare, his entire body tensing as powerful emotions flow through his features.

Then I turn to Knox. So big and loud and intense. So much smarter and more clever than people usually give him credit for. He's done so much for me.

"I love you," I breathe, watching the way his pupils dilate in response to my words.

That just leaves Priest. The only one I've already said those words to. He's smiling when I shift my gaze to him, a smile like I've never seen before. His eyes are bright, and his whole face lights up with it, turning his usually sharp features into something softer and so beautiful it makes my chest ache.

He already knows it, but I whisper, "I love you," to him too.

My words hover in the air, and no one says anything or moves or even seems to breathe for a second. Then Knox curses under his breath and strides toward me. He grabs me up, practically lifting me off my feet as he kisses me, deep and hard.

It steals my breath away, but I have no complaints about that. I lean into it, kissing him back until I'm breathless.

When our lips finally separate, Knox trails kisses over my jawline to my ear. He bites down on the lobe, tugging a little before releasing it.

"I love you, little fox," he murmurs in my ear, and I shiver from his voice and the words themselves. "More than anything."

Knox puts me down, and Ash is there. He murmurs words of love and praise as he takes my face between his hands and kisses me over and over, starting with my cheeks and then making his way to my mouth. It's as sweet and enthusiastic and hungry as ever, and I'm laughing by the time we break apart.

Gage steps in on my other side, and he grips my jaw, turning me to face him. He kisses me fiercely, putting every ounce of his passion and determination into it—all the stubbornness that drives me crazy about him, but that makes me love him too.

"It's about fucking time you realized it," he growls.

Before I can roll my eyes at him, Priest pulls me into his arms. He kisses me, so deep that I almost drown in it. It's such a contrast from our first interactions, and I let myself get swept away in it, losing myself to the feeling of his lips on mine.

“I love you,” he murmurs. “We love you.”

He emphasizes the “we,” and it hits me hard to hear it.

Because I’m not just loved by four men—I’m loved by a *brotherhood*. By these men who love each other just as much as they love me. Enough to kill and die for each other if it came to that, and to do the same for me if they had to.

I’m a part of something so much bigger than I ever dreamt of. How could I have even conceived of something like this, when I used to be so intent on working alone and doing everything myself?

They move like a unit, orbiting around me, but I can pick out individual hands and mouths as they worship me. The rough palms are Knox’s, calloused from holding weapons and torture devices. The grin pressed against my mouth is Ash, always ready with a joke tucked somewhere to lighten the mood. The tender strokes to my hair are from Priest, finding his footing in something as new to him as it is to me, determined to show me how precious I am to him. And the hands gripping my waist, turning me this way and that, are Gage’s. Always in control, always taking the lead to make sure we’re all doing our best.

My heart races as I lose myself in all four of them. In the way they feel, the way they touch me and make my body sing with pleasure and need. It’s almost like drowning, but in the best way possible. Drowning in something I don’t ever want to be free of.

It’s hard to force myself to break away from them, but I manage it, pulling free of their touches and kisses and standing a few feet in front of them. I take a step toward the stairs and then glance over my shoulder at them.

“You all love me?” I ask, arching an eyebrow.

“Fuck yes,” Knox rasps, speaking for everyone.

“Then you’d better fuck me like you love me.” I grin at them, meeting each of their eyes in turn. “Like I’m *yours*.”

Then I turn and dart up the stairs, leaving them to chase after me.

Unlike during our little field trip to the woods, this chase doesn’t last long at all. It takes about ten seconds for them to catch up to me, and I’m not even at the top of the stairs yet when they do. Strong arms catch me around the middle, and I feel like I’m going to fall for a split second—but of course, these men would never let that happen. Before I can overbalance, I find myself lifted up into the air.

Knox tosses me easily over his shoulder, laughing as he slaps my ass hard.

“You better be ready for what you just asked for,” he growls, his fingers digging into the meat of my ass.

“Oh, I’m ready,” I shoot back. “I just hope you all can keep up.”

“Fucking hell.”

The low tone of his voice makes heat flare in the pit of my stomach. He’s not going to hold back, and I don’t want him to. I don’t want any of them to.

They bring me to the room that’s been mine since I got here, what feels like forever ago. Knox dumps me on the bed, and I bounce a little, laughing at the sudden jostle. Before I can even move, he’s on me, flicking the knife he keeps on him out of its sheath and starting to cut away my clothes.

I don’t even protest, because it’s fucking hot to watch him cut with so much precision, and when the blade nicks my skin, I know it’s because he wanted it to. Because he knows the pain and pleasure of it turns me on.

He cuts up the length of my shirt, and the knife nicks my stomach, making me hiss and arch just a bit. Just enough to press the cold metal of the blade against my skin a little more.

It’s as if the bite of pain went straight to my pussy, and my clit throbs with need.

“Yesss,” I hiss.

The others get involved too, not leaving Knox to do all the work. He does the cutting and then they take the ends of the fabric, yanking and pulling it between them, ripping my clothes to shreds.

All I can do is lie there in the middle of it, taking it all in as they strip me naked as a team.

Gage smirks, taking strips of my shirt in one hand and then reaching down to grab my wrists in his other hand.

“We don’t want you going anywhere, do we, baby girl?” he says, and he yanks my arms up, making quick work of tying my wrists to the headboard of the bed with the remnants of my shirt.

“Fuck.” I groan as heat pulses through me like a roaring fire. I twist my wrists a little, struggling just for the hell of it, but I can’t go anywhere. Gage is too good with a knot, something that doesn’t surprise me one bit.

Priest and Ash each grab one of my ankles, and they follow suit, using scraps of my clothes to carefully tie each one to a corner of the bed, leaving

me spread open and exposed for them.

I twist and wriggle on the mattress, but I can't go anywhere. I'm caught, tied down and spread out for them to do whatever they want with.

Knox leans down and catches my chin in his hand, turning me to face him.

"Do you want this?" he asks, searching my face. "You want us to make you come apart? To worship every inch of you?"

"Fuck, yes," I breathe, my voice husky and low.

It's like saying the magic words. Something in all of the men seems to shift, and they all converge on me again. Hands roam over my chest, pinching and twisting my nipples, tugging at the little rings through them and making me cry out with pleasure.

Another pair of fingers find their way into my mouth, and I suck on them greedily, lapping at the digits while still more hands roam down my stomach to my pussy, fingers pressing their way inside.

My head is already spinning. Having all four of them on me at the same time is so overwhelming, but in the best way. I can barely keep track of who's touching where, and when the bed dips and teeth bite into my inner thigh, and I peer down the line of my body in a haze.

Priest is on the bed, his head between my legs, and he looks up at me before he dives in, lapping at my clit with firm strokes of his tongue.

Ash follows his lead and gets his mouth involved too, closing his lips around one of my nipples before sucking and nipping at the sensitive bud. Pleasure rolls through me like a wave, hot and insistent. I open my mouth, struggling to breathe, not sure whose name to moan or what to say as they take me apart.

Knox leans down and kisses me, swallowing my moans and then plunging his tongue into my mouth, laying his claim there. He fists one hand into my hair, holding me in place, and I shake and tremble as an orgasm starts to creep up on me.

Between the mouth between my legs and the one alternating between my nipples, I feel like I'm losing my mind. I'm caught up in the sensations, and all I can do is hold on for dear life.

It's probably a good thing that they tied me down, making me take this, otherwise I'd be writhing all over the place as the pleasure slams into me, tipping me over into a hot climax.

I practically scream into Knox's mouth, and he kisses me through that too, his fingers tightening in my hair, giving me enough pain that it acts as a perfect counterpoint to the pleasure.

When he pulls away, I'm left panting for breath, my chest heaving as my body trembles.

But of course, they don't stop.

"That was just the beginning, little fox," Knox promises, dragging his tongue over the line of my jaw.

Priest is still licking me, savoring every bit of my arousal, and Ash is at my side, pinching one nipple as Gage's hot mouth closes around the other one. Fingers slide inside my pussy, and I'm still so sensitive that my walls clamp down tightly around the intrusion.

I still haven't even come down from the first orgasm as they start working me up to a second one, playing my body between them like an instrument.

"You sound so fucking good when you scream for us," Ash whispers. "Do it again."

When the second orgasm hits, I do. This one is even more intense than the first one, and it rolls into a third a minute or so later. The men keep going, trading positions around me as if they're playing a weirdly sexy game of musical chairs, taking turns eating me out, touching me, and kissing me.

Fingers press into my mouth again, and this time, I taste myself on them. I suck them clean, swallowing every drop of my arousal and then craning my neck for more. Even as overwhelmed and blissed out as I feel, it's never enough.

I need more of them.

All of them.

Gage kisses me, and then he reaches up to undo the knots that were holding me to the bed. "Come here, baby girl."

Between the four of them, they release me, rubbing the marks left from the restraints on my wrists and ankles. Lips and fingers move over the red patches of skin, and I moan at the feel of their tender touches after being tied up.

I feel completely enveloped by the Kings, and as they move me how they want me on the bed, I don't resist. Because whatever they're setting me up for is going to be so fucking good, I already know it. Every touch

and kiss sends electric pleasure coursing through me, and none of them have even fucked me yet.

But I want them to.

I want them to feel as much pleasure as I do right now. I want them inside me, working me up, claiming me. Proving how much they love me by fucking me until I can't think of anything else.

"Lift her up a little," Gage murmurs. "Just like that."

They maneuver our positioning so that I'm kneeling on the bed near one edge of the mattress. Gage ends up under me, and I can feel his cock brushing against my pussy every time I shift.

Knox kneels too, huge and imposing behind me, and I can feel so much of him as he presses in close—the heat of his body, the way his hands ghost over my back and my sides.

"Sometimes I can't decide what I like more," he says gruffly. "Fucking your tight little pussy, or watching my brothers fuck you, seeing the way you writhe on their cocks. You have no idea how sexy you are, little fox."

As Knox speaks, Gage thrusts up into my pussy. His cock is hard and thick, and I tip my head back, moaning deeply as he rams home inside me.

I'm straddling his lap, but Gage doesn't let me start riding him. He holds me in place with those strong hands on my hips and drives up into me instead, making me take every single inch of his shaft in smooth, hard strokes.

"Fuck!" I cry out, biting down on my lip and whimpering at the rush of sensation. "Oh god."

"That's it," Gage grunts. His eyes are dark, heat swirling in their green depths. He stares up at me, not letting me look away from him. "Let me hear you. Tell us how good it is."

"It's so good," I moan. "Please."

"Please what, baby girl?" he asks, fucking up into me even harder.

Knox slaps my ass before I can respond, and I feel him slicking up his fingers with the arousal that seeps from me before probing them around my ass. My mouth falls open as soon as one finger breaches my hole, and I can barely get any words out. The sensations are so overwhelming, it's like they're shutting down my brain.

Gage brings my focus back to him by reaching up and pinching one of my nipples hard. It startles a gasp from me, and I look back down at him, my head spinning.

“I asked you a question.” He pinches my nipple again. “What do you want?”

“I want Knox to fuck my ass,” I gasp out. “With you inside my pussy. Just like that morning at the bar, when you brought me back to life. Fuck, *please*. I need it. I need *you*.”

Knox groans breathlessly behind me and adds another finger to my ass, working them in and out in time with Gage’s thrusts in my pussy.

“Don’t have to ask me twice,” he mutters. “I’m gonna fill your pretty ass up.”

“Please, please, please.”

I chant the words, not even caring how desperate I sound. I don’t care if the fucking world knows. I need these men, and that doesn’t make me weak.

Because *they* don’t make me weak. They make me stronger.

“You’re so tight around my fingers,” Knox groans. “Bet you’ll be even tighter around my cock. Bet you’ll fucking gush all over Gage, won’t you?”

He works me open as quickly as he can, but he’s so big that even with the stretching, when he finally starts pressing his cock into my ass, it takes a bit for my body to accommodate him. It’s not as hard as when he and Ash both were inside my pussy at the same time, but I have to breathe through it and remind myself to relax.

“You’re doing so good, killer. Fucking look at you.”

At one side of the bed, Ash comes over and takes my chin in his hand, turning my head to face him. His face is flushed with desire, his hair a bit mussed from when I got my hands into it, and his eyes are bright as he pulls me in and kisses me.

That goes a long way toward making me relax more, and Gage keeps fucking me while Ash slides his tongue into my mouth, working me up in a whole new way.

I moan into our kiss, and when Knox goes back to pressing his cock into me, I melt into it, letting him in.

He’s so fucking big and thick, and I feel stretched and full by the time he’s fully seated inside. Gage pauses his thrusts, letting Knox get used to being inside me, and for a long moment, we stay suspended like that—me straddling Gage, impaled on two cocks that throb deep inside me.

“Fuck, River,” Knox hisses. “You’re so tight. You feel so goddamn good.”

He grinds against me, and it sends his cock just that little bit deeper into me. It's like I can feel them everywhere. My whole body is on fire, and I squirm where I'm perched, needy and so turned on I might die.

"Please!" I cry out, tearing my mouth away from Ash's kiss to speak. "Fuck me. Move. Please."

Gage chuckles darkly, but he doesn't give in. Not yet.

"You hear that, Knox?" he pants. "She wants us to fuck her. Baby girl still thinks she's in charge of how this goes down. But I think she needs to beg a little first."

"Hell yes." Knox drags a hand up my back and then grabs a handful of my hair, yanking my head back so he can look me in the eye. "You want us to fuck you, little fox? You want us to fuck you so hard you forget everything except who you belong to?"

"Please," I moan, and it comes out sounding so wrecked and needy that I almost don't recognize it as my own voice. "Please, I need you. I love you. Fuck me."

"Holy shit," he bites out, sounding just as wrecked as I am. "Can't say no when you put it like that. Could never deny you any-fucking-thing."

He pistons his hips, driving his cock deep into my ass, and I almost scream at how good it feels.

Knox moving makes Gage move, and they stop teasing me and start fucking me, hard and fast. I'm caught between them, my body pressed between the push and pull of them sliding in and out of each hole. Every time one of them bottoms out, the other one pulls back. It's constant motion, constant friction and sensation, building and building until it threatens to drive me fucking insane with it.

It's like when they found me in that sketchy bar, so fucked up and out of it from drinking too much, reeling from the loss of my sister. The two of them filled me up and brought me back, and feeling them now reminds me of that moment.

Even if I get lost, they'll always bring me home.

"River."

Gage's voice has a commanding edge as he says my name, and I look down at him. He reaches up and puts a hand at the nape of my neck, pulling me down and into a messy kiss. It's all teeth and tongue, the two of us sharing harsh breaths as we keep moving.

“You’re ours,” he pants against my lips, driving deeper into me. “We’ll never let you go. You hear me?”

“Yeah,” I gasp, nodding. “I hear you.”

“Good. Because I love you, and I have for so fucking long.”

It’s overwhelming to hear it, especially like this. I feel overly sensitive, like every movement and every word they say lands directly in my heart and then travels to my clit. Hearing Gage talk about how much he loves me makes me squeeze tight around him, as if my pussy is trying to drag him in and never let him go.

He responds to that by fucking into me harder, and it’s a good thing he and Knox have me stuck between them, or else I would’ve already collapsed onto the bed.

Ash and Priest are still standing by one side of the bed, watching with lust blown eyes as Gage and Knox fuck me. They’re naked now, and I don’t remember them taking their clothes off, but that doesn’t really matter. Ash has one hand wrapped around his cock, stroking it slowly as he watches us.

“You see this?” he squeezes his shaft, milking a few drops of clear precum from the tip. “This is all yours. Only yours. The only pussy I’ll ever want. The only woman I’ll ever love.”

“Yes. Fuck.” I reach out to touch him, trading his hand for mine, feeling how hot and hard he is.

With my other hand, I do the same to Priest, until I’m working all four of their cocks with my body. The two of them wrap their hands over mine, guiding my movements and helping steady me as I jerk them off.

I feel totally encased, and as they all worship my body, all of them close around me, I realize that they love me for every broken piece of me, not in spite of them.

They’ve seen me at my best and at my worst. They’ve seen me broken down and beaten and they’ve lifted me back up, helping me get through the hardest shit when I didn’t think I could make it on my own.

They love me completely, just like I love them.

The four of them are damaged and fucked up in their own ways. They’ve all got scars and demons and skeletons in their closets. But I love them for every dark corner of their souls. Every demon that haunts them.

I choose them, and I’ll keep choosing them for the rest of my life.

“That’s it,” Knox grunts, and he slaps my ass hard enough that I know there’s going to be a handprint left behind. “Fucking take it. You’re so

perfect for this, fuck.”

“One day, when all of this shit is over,” Gage pants. “We’re going to keep you like this all day. In bed, stuffed with our cocks. Air tight. Two in your pussy, one in your ass, one in your mouth. You’ll belong to us so fucking completely.”

“Fuck yes,” Ash groans, thrusting into my hand. “You’ll be so fucking beautiful like that. Dripping cum, wrecked out of your mind.”

All I can do is moan at the picture they’re painting, filthy images cascading through my mind. I can feel another orgasm building as they keep thrusting and fucking into me, and judging from how Knox and Gage’s thrusts start to get more erratic, they’re close too.

Knox digs his fingers into my hips hard as Gage bucks up into me, our bodies slapping together again and again as we chase our bliss.

“Right there,” I choke out. “Right. Fucking. There!”

When my orgasm hits me, it takes my breath away. It’s so big and intense that for a second I almost black out. I can’t scream—not enough air for that—and my body trembles and shakes through it, going tight around both of the cocks splitting me open.

It feels like it won’t ever end, each wave sparking a new shower of pleasure that keeps me teetering on that knife sharp edge for long minutes, gasping for breath as the pleasure goes on and on.

I feel the warm rush as Gage comes inside me, and Knox is right behind him, pumping me full of his cum as he roars out his release. Priest and Ash use my hands to jerk off, and they’re not far behind either, coming undone after a few more seconds.

Aftershocks of pleasure keep shooting through me, and as they finally fade I collapse in a sweaty, cum soaked heap. I’m breathing hard, my head spinning, as Gage and Knox slowly pull out of me. Someone moves me so that the others can flop onto the bed with us, and all I’m really aware of is warm, sweaty bodies and a feeling of deep contentment settling over me.

“This is a tight squeeze,” Ash murmurs after several quiet moments. “And not in the sexy way. We’re going to need a bigger fucking bed.”

“Ha,” Knox snorts. “A *fucking* bed.”

I roll my eyes at his dumb joke, but the exhausted smile on my face doesn’t waver.

“Yeah,” I admit. “I’ve been thinking that for a while.”

GAGE

MY EYES OPEN SLOWLY, adjusting to the dim light in the bedroom as I wake up. It's sometime late enough or early enough that the sky is still fully dark outside, a bit of light from the distant streetlamps casting River's bedroom in shadows.

My stomach throbs dully, but the pain isn't as bad as I expected it might be, which is a good sign for how my healing has been progressing. Last time we fucked, I let River do most of the work, but there was no way in hell I wasn't going to claim her in exactly the way I wanted to last night. Not after she looked at all of us with those luminous blue eyes and told us she loved us.

Fucking hell.

My cock twitches again at the thought of it, and I let myself get lost in memories of claiming her. My only concession to Trask's orders that I take it easy for a while was that Knox and I fucked her on the bed instead of holding her up between us this time. But still, feeling the way she stretched around me, her pussy made so much tighter by Knox filling her ass? It was better than anything I've ever felt.

Someone shifts beside me, making the mattress dip a little. We're all still piled in one bed, River sandwiched messily between all four of us. I roll my eyes, snorting under my breath a little at the thought of how we've ended up. I'm close with the three men I call brothers, but I never exactly imagined cuddling with them.

But with River at the center of us, it doesn't really feel all that strange at all. *Nothing* feels strange as long as she's at the center of it.

I don't even know when it happened, exactly, but she's become my true north. The keeper of my heart. When we first met, she got under my skin so fucking much. Everything she did seemed designed to piss me off, and that was probably exactly what she wanted. We butted heads about everything, and we couldn't go a day without getting into an argument.

Well, to be fair, we still butt heads and argue all the time. But it feels different now, and the way we come together afterward, reconnecting and igniting the spark that always burns between us, makes it all worth it.

I can't stop myself from smiling as I think about how far we've come.

As if she's been summoned from sleep by my thoughts of her, River stirs and then yawns, opening her eyes slowly as she wakes up. Her brows furrow when she sees me looking at her, and before she can say anything, I lean in and kiss her.

I love the way she melts against me, bringing one hand up to press against my chest.

I love her fight, and I'll always love how fucking strong she is. But I also love that she finally knows that with me and my brothers, she doesn't have to fight.

For the first time in fucking *years* she can let her guard down, because no matter what happens, we won't let her fall.

"Hey. Come with me," I whisper to her. I pull back from our kiss and make my way gingerly over the bodies sprawled out beside us, starting to get out of bed.

She gives me a curious look, her brows drawing together as her eyes glint in the dim light, but she doesn't object. She just crawls out of bed after me and picks up Knox's discarded shirt from the floor while I tug on my pants.

She looks sexy as fuck wearing nothing but his oversized shirt, and I can't resist pulling her into my arms and kissing her again, sliding my hands possessively under her shirt to grope her a little—just because I can.

When I finally release her and step back, I love the way her body leans into mine as if it's chasing more.

More, more, *more*.

It's the word I always come back to with this woman, because no matter how much I try, I know I'll never get enough of her.

"Where did you want to take me?" she murmurs, her eyes bouncing between mine.

“I’ll show you. Come on.”

I take her hand, linking my fingers with hers as I lead her from the bedroom. Harley is sleeping near the foot of the bed, eager to be close to all of us as always, and he looks up sleepily as we leave the room before putting his head back down on his paws.

The house is quiet as I lead River downstairs to my library and switch on a small lamp, flooding the room with warm, dim light.

She snorts as she steps farther into the room, glancing around.

“You want me to stick some more pages together?” she teases. She looks down at herself, arching a brow. “I think all the cum on me is dried up by now.”

I huff a laugh, recalling how fucking furious I was when I found those books with their pages stiff and bound together. When I confronted her about it, she looked so damn pleased with herself that even through my anger, it was impossible for me not to be a little turned on. I was ready to throw her over my lap and spank her, and I probably would have if she hadn’t gotten the call that it was time to move in on St. James.

“I’m sure we could find a way to get you messy again, baby girl,” I tell her, a low rasp in my voice as I catch her chin between my thumb and forefinger and nip at her bottom lip. “But no. Believe it or not, that’s actually *not* what I brought you down here for.”

Stepping away from her, I pull a book down from one of the shelves, letting my fingers trail over the cover of it.

It’s one of the ones I’ve read several times before, the spine broken in, the margins of the book full of my cramped handwriting. Most of the books in this little library are the same.

“What’s this about, then?” River asks, tipping her head to the side quizzically.

Instead of answering, I just open the book to a section I know well and hand it over to her, letting her read the passage of text and what I wrote in the margins.

She scans the page, and I watch her, my gaze locked on her face as her dark blue eyes glisten with tears. I don’t have to read over her shoulder. I know what the page says nearly by heart.

It’s about a man who doesn’t deserve love. A man fated to be alone, to never know what it’s like to find his soul’s match.

And in the margins, I know what River is reading too. The confirmation that I was certain I was never going to find anyone. Not anyone who could ever know and love the real me, at least. My inner thoughts as I read those passages are scrawled on the page, my conviction that I was just like the man in the book.

Destined to be alone.

Always.

River takes her time reading it, and when she looks back up at me, her eyes are shining.

“My dad was a piece of shit,” I murmur, my voice gruff. “He made me believe I wasn’t worthy of love, and even though I walked out and left as much of that bullshit behind as I could, I carried some of it with me for a long time. Too much, for too long. All the shit my dad said? It stuck in my heart. On top of that, I knew whose son I was. Part of me always felt like maybe he was right, and I wasn’t capable of love, just like he hadn’t been.”

I shake my head, banishing thoughts of the past and of the man I hated more than almost anyone: my father. Another thing River and I have in common, I guess.

“I’ve always had my brothers,” I continue. “The family I created for myself. And I convinced myself that it was enough. More than I deserved, even. I wasn’t alone, not really. I didn’t have to face shit on my own, and that was good enough. Then this silver-haired vixen crashed into our lives and changed everything.”

River laughs softly, trapping her plush bottom lip between her teeth.

“This woman? This force of nature? She smashed my heart open like a brick through a fucking window.” I chuckle, and River bites back a smile, her eyes shining. “I was so unnerved by the shit she made me feel that I tried to hate her at first. I tried really fucking hard. But even then, it was never truly hate. Not really. It was just love I didn’t know how to recognize yet. I love you, River.”

Her face softens, and she puts the book down, stepping into my arms. She leans up and kisses me, slow and soft and sensual.

A kiss for the sake of kissing.

A way to express the things that even words can’t quite convey.

RIVER

IN THE MORNING, I sit at the kitchen table having breakfast, feeling lighter than I have in a long-ass time. Last night feels like a fucking dream, almost. Like it's something too good to have happened to someone like me. But it's real. My body is sore and wrung out in the best way, and I've still got Knox's handprint on my ass and hickeys on my breasts and neck—proof of everything that happened.

The guys are all sitting around the table too, having breakfast with me, and I can tell they feel the same way. Ash is spinning coins on the table, getting as many going at one time as he can, and I catch Priest sneaking bacon to Harley more than once.

Knox is being touchy, letting his hands slide over my shoulders and arms and down to my thighs, groping me possessively just because he feels like it.

I grin like an idiot about the whole thing, unable to contain it.

Gage puts his coffee down with a dull thud, grunting under his breath. “For fuck’s sake. You’re all acting like this is the happily ever after, but we still have to deal with the whole issue of River being stuck in a secret society with a bunch of evil assholes. Can we focus on that, please?”

I roll my eyes, catching Ash’s gaze as we share a small, secret grin. Gage wouldn’t be *Gage* if he wasn’t uptight as fuck sometimes, and now that I know him better, I know that this is how he shows love. He worries about the people he cares for, and he works his ass off to protect them.

Plus, he had his moment of being sappy and soft with me in the library last night. He shared a part of himself with me in that dark, quiet room that

I don't think many people in the entire world have seen, and it meant so much to me.

So he's allowed to put on his "grumpy leader" hat today and whip us all back into shape. Because he's right. We do need to buckle down and keep pushing ahead.

We have all this happiness right now, but it won't mean shit if we let the Kyrio Society and Alec Beckham keep controlling our lives.

When I look at Gage, he's gazing right back at me, and I nod, getting serious.

"So let's go over where we stand, then," I say, joining him in trying to steer everyone's focus back on track. "We've been able to gather a decent amount of info about Tatum, Preston, Henry, and Alec. There are still gaps in our knowledge, but we're filling it in slowly."

It took a lot of research to find out what we know so far, but in the end, it helped that most of them are public figures in one way or another. Not all of them are on the level of Henry Levine, but Tatum heads up a large company that does legitimate business in the steel industry, Preston is filthy rich and turns up at exhibits and charity functions all the time, and Alec is... well, he's Alec fucking Beckham. Whenever there's a major fundraiser or a black-tie gala, he'll be there.

The biggest issue we have right now is that...

"Nikolai is still too much of a wild card," Priest says, tapping his fingers across the top of the table in a way that reminds me of how he plays piano. Unfortunately, we've all been so distracted and busy with all the shit going on lately that he hasn't gotten the chance to disappear into his music room often, and I get the feeling he misses it.

"Yeah." Ash groans. "We still have no idea what the fuck is up with him, or what his weaknesses are."

"He's going to be the hardest to get to," Gage agrees. "And one of the most dangerous to try to take out, aside from Alec. What do we have on him?"

"He's Russian," I say, listing off the points we've all been over a million times already as I tick them off on my fingers. "He's got experience as an assassin. I overheard him mention a whorehouse on the east side that he's visited at least once, and he's not connected to any of the other Russian criminals in Detroit that we know of. He's strong as fuck. He killed Michael with his bare hands—just lifted him off the fucking floor like he was a rag

doll. He's left handed. He obeys Alec just like everyone else, but he seems like a bit of a wildcard too. Oh, and he has a tattoo on his forearm. It looked like a clock."

I throw that last part out there off-handedly, wracking my brain for any little details about him that we haven't covered yet.

"What does it look like?" Gage asks. "The tattoo?"

Blowing out a breath, I close my eyes, trying to call the image up in my memory. I only got a brief glance of it when he rolled his sleeves up before murdering Michael, but it was fairly distinctive.

"It was all black," I murmur. "Mostly line work. It was a clock surrounded by skulls and roses."

A chair scrapes against the floor, and I feel Knox tense beside me. Harley gives a little bark, his heels tapping across the hardwood as if someone startled him. My eyes pop open, and I glance around at the guys, who are all staring at me.

"What?" I ask, my pulse kicking up a notch. "Why are you all looking at me like that? Does that mean something?"

Knox grins. He shakes his head, scrubbing a hand through his shaggy dark hair. "Hell yeah, it means something, little fox. It means we might have found a way to take Nikolai out."

I frown, not understanding how a tattoo could help us eliminate a deadly assassin. "How?"

"We'll use the same strategy that you did with Mercy back in the day. Find someone who hates Nikolai as much as we do, and let *them* deal with him."

My eyebrows shoot upward at that. "Who?"

The guys all share a look between them, communicating silently in a way I've seen them do before. Usually, I love seeing that, especially since it's a skill that's come in handy before when we've been in rough situations. But right now, it just makes me antsy, anxious to be let in on whatever they're all thinking.

"Ash," Gage says, dragging out the words thoughtfully. "Do you still have a way to get in touch with the Voronin brothers?"

Ash adjusts his glasses higher on his nose, grinning just like Knox is. "Yeah, I know where to find them."

"Um, can someone fill me in please?" I demand, looking around at all of them. "Who the hell are the Voronin brothers?"

“We’ve dealt with them a couple times before,” Priest tells me. “We don’t know them well, so there’s a risk in that. But...”

“But they’ve been after a guy who has a tattoo just like the one you described,” Knox finishes. “They were asking around all over a few years ago, trying to track him down. They never found him.”

Ash steals a piece of bacon off Priest’s plate before pushing his chair back from the table and standing up.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been in touch with them, but if they still hang out at their old haunts, I should be able to track them down.” He looks down at me, jerking his chin toward the door. “You wanna come with me, killer? I’ll explain more on the way.”

“Okay,” I agree. I’m curious to meet these brothers, and I want Ash to have backup.

I chug the remainder of my coffee, hissing out a breath as it burns down my throat, then run upstairs to get dressed before returning to meet Ash by the door. Then the two of us head out, taking his car across the city. It’s not an area I’m super familiar with, but Ash seems to know where he’s going.

As he drives, he rests a hand on my thigh, stroking it lightly through my jeans.

“So, the Voronin brothers operate a chop shop in a part of Detroit we don’t fuck with very much,” he explains. “But when we were first coming up, we did a few deals with them.”

“Are they actually brothers, or do they just call themselves that like you and the other Kings do?”

Ash laughs, shaking his head. “Nah, they’re real brothers. Their dad was Russian, I think. Maybe their mom too, I don’t know. But they’re all tough motherfuckers. And they’re super close.”

“Why do they hate Nikolai so much?” I ask.

If the guys think the Voronin brothers’ grudge against Nikolai is strong enough to make them viable candidates to help take him out, then I trust their judgement. But I’ll feel better if I know what makes them think that.

“He killed their mom a long time ago,” Ash tells me, his tone turning serious. “They never knew who did it, but they knew he had a tattoo like the one you mentioned. A clock surrounded by skulls and roses. They came to us asking for leads, and that was the only thing they had to go on at the time—they’d been able to track down one bystander who saw the whole thing

go down, and he mentioned the tattoo. But it was never enough for them to find him.”

“Until now,” I murmur.

“Yup. Until now. It sounds like Nikolai is the man who killed their mother, and it makes sense that they had a hard time finding him before this, given how much of a ghost he is. But if we tell them we’ve found the guy they’ve been searching for all this time, they’ll want to take care of him personally.”

“Yeah.” My voice is tight. “I know how that is.”

My stomach clenches as I consider everything that Ash just told me. I never liked Nikolai from the moment I laid eyes on him, but this makes me hate him even more. And if the Voronin brothers have been searching for him for years, desperate to get vengeance for their dead mother, Ash and the other Kings are absolutely right.

They’ll be the perfect people to help us take out Nikolai.

Ash keeps talking as we drive, filling me in on what else he knows about the brothers. We try two possible locations where he hopes to find them, and after striking out at both, I start to get nervous that maybe they left Detroit or something.

But after several more minutes of driving, Ash makes a pleased noise in his throat. “Ah. There.”

We pull over at the curb next to an old, run-down basketball court. There are three men playing, passing the ball to each other and taking shots, I blink in surprise at how fucking gorgeous all three of them are.

I’m not interested in anyone but my four Kings, but damn. These three men are definitely striking.

And *dangerous*—that’s just as obvious as their attractiveness. They move like predators across the court, with strength and confidence and a sort of violent grace that I’m sure they’ve put to use more than once before.

“Let me do the talking at first,” Ash cautions as he opens the driver’s side door. “They’re not bad guys, but their circle of trust is pretty small, and they’re suspicious of people they don’t know.”

“So, kind of like you and the other Kings when I first met you,” I point out, arching a brow as I open my door too.

He chuckles. “Yeah. Like that.”

We get out of the car and approach the men, and as we do, I get a better look at the three of them.

All of them have tattoos, which just makes them look even more imposing. Two have dark hair, and one has hair that's a lighter brown, and as we walk up, they stop playing. Their gazes snap toward us, and they stand together to face us, the dark-haired man in front palming the basketball.

Ash takes the lead just like he said he would, and it's clear that although they recognize him, they're surprised to see him here. They tense up a bit, which makes me tense in response, my defensive instincts kicking in. I shove back the urge to reach for a weapon, hanging back and letting Ash speak first.

"Hey," the one holding the basketball says, eyeing Ash.

His dark hair gleams in the sunlight, shoved roughly back from his face, and his dark gray eyes look like storm clouds right before they unleash a torrent of rain. From what I can tell, he has almost as many tattoos as Knox, and the pieces of ink range from rough and basic to detailed and refined.

The expression on his face reminds me of the way a feral animal might look at someone getting too close to them. Judging whether or not to lash out and strike first.

They clearly don't fully trust Ash, even though they've done business with him before.

"Hey, Malice," Ash replies, nodding in greeting.

"Surprised to see you here," the man grunts in a deep voice. "Heard you and the others built a club for yourselves downtown."

"We did." Ash nods again. "But I'm not here to talk business. This is more of a personal visit. We came across some information recently that I think will be important to you."

The Voronin brothers share a look, and the one who seems like he might be the youngest raises a pierced brow. "What kind of information?"

"I know who killed your mother."

Ash drops that out there like a dead fish, and the three men in front of us all react instantly, their heads perking up like they've scented fresh blood. A chill runs down my spine at the sight of it.

"Tell us," the one called Malice demands. "Tell us everything."

"I will." Ash holds up a hand. "But there's one condition."

"What the fuck do you mean, there's a condition?" The one with the eyebrow ring curls his hands into fists, anger flashing in his blue-green eyes.

Malice shakes his head, although he looks pissed off too. “Stand down, Ransom.”

All three of the brothers narrow their eyes at Ash as if they’re silently counting down in their heads how many seconds he has left to live, but they wait, hearing him out. For his part, Ash keeps his expression carefully neutral as he goes on.

“I’ll tell you what you want to know, but you can’t do anything to the man until I give you the go-ahead,” he says. “I’ll tell you when you’re free to kill him.”

The brothers glance at each other, seeming to communicate silently the way I’ve seen the Kings do often. I’m sure they’re weighing the costs and benefits of following Ash’s condition versus maybe not finding out who’s responsible for their mother’s death at all.

In the end, the eerily quiet dark-haired one whose name I don’t know nods. “Deal.”

“Good.”

Ash takes a half step back and turns to me, silently telling me it’s my turn to speak. I take a deep breath, meeting their eyes.

“His name is Nikolai Petrov,” I tell the brothers, before listing every single thing we know about the Russian assassin. It’s not as much intel as I would like, but the three imposing men listen carefully, absorbing the information in silence. From the way their gazes bore into me as I speak, I’m sure they’re committing every detail to memory.

When I finish speaking, the man who’s barely said a word flicks a glance toward Malice. The two of them actually have similar appearances, making it quite obvious that they’re brothers, but their demeanors are so different that I don’t think anyone could ever get them confused with each other. One radiates a brutal, manic sort of energy, while the other is so quiet and watchful that he might as well be a ghost.

“That all checks out,” the quiet one says slowly. “It’s him. And I’ve got enough to go on now. With what they gave us, I can find him.”

“Alright.” Malice nods, crossing his muscled arms over his chest and making the sleeves of his shirt strain around his inked biceps. He pins Ash with a hard gaze. “How long do we have to wait before we can move on this fucker?”

“Not long. We’ll let you know when the time is right,” Ash reiterates.

He makes arrangements for how we'll get in touch with them to alert them when it's time, and then the two of us turn and head back to the car.

I glance back over my shoulder at the three brothers as we go, taking them in for a second before nudging Ash with my shoulder.

"Do you think they'll be able to do it? To kill Nikolai?"

"Yeah." He hums under his breath. "I wouldn't want to be on the Voronin brothers' bad side, and they've carried this grudge for years. When we give the order, Nikolai will be as good as dead."

God, I hope you're right.

RIVER

SEVERAL DAYS after Ash's and my little chat with the Voronin brothers, I get a coded message from Alec summoning me to another meeting of the Kyrion Society.

I go, because I don't really have any other choice, but I feel anxious about it. Every time I meet with the society, I feel more nervous.

Has anyone started to suspect what my men and I are planning?

If they do, they'll kill me and all four of the Kings. And that sits heavy on my chest every time I have to go to that hidden building and deal with these vicious, power hungry monsters.

I know it's important that we don't rush this. We're going to be making a play against five of the most dangerous people in Detroit. Even just taking *one* of them out would be a daunting prospect, but we need to eliminate all of them nearly simultaneously.

We need to be cautious and smart about this whole thing, but it's also starting to feel like we need to move. There's an urgency building inside me, a voice in my head shouting at me to just fucking do it, and it's getting louder and louder with every passing day.

After leaving my men behind with the security personnel and entourages of the other society members as usual, I follow the guard who leads me down the corridor toward the meeting room. I hate that this is starting to feel familiar, that I know which way he's going to lead me and exactly who will be sitting where when I walk into the room.

This won't become your life, I promise myself. It'll be over soon.

Alec Beckham seems to think that just because he raped my mother and shares DNA with me, he can force me to join the legacy of his fucked up

empire, blindly obeying his orders as he uses this society to amass more power.

Fuck that. And fuck you, Dad.

I hold on to that thought and the anger that rises with it as the guards at the door swing them open to allow me inside the room. Just as expected, everyone is sitting in their designated seats, and all eyes fall on me as I enter.

My skin prickles, goosebumps breaking out along my arms, but I don't let any of that show in my expression.

"Ah, there you are. Welcome, River."

Alec smiles at me, and even creepier than when there used to be nothing in his eyes as he smiled, now there's a kind of warmth in their gray depths that turns my stomach. It's as if the confirmation that I really am his daughter has turned me into a real person in his eyes, where I was just a cardboard cutout for him to manipulate and move around before. Not that he's stopped trying to manipulate me or use me, but it's almost like he thinks there's some connection between us now.

I nod curtly at him, not trusting myself to speak. If I do, I'm not all that certain that I could keep myself from screaming obscenities at him, so it's better not to risk it.

As I take my seat at the table, Nikolai gazes at me with dark, glittering eyes. I can't read his expression, and just the fact that he's looking at me makes me so fucking uncomfortable. He terrifies me, and I'm not ashamed to admit it.

I shift my gaze away from him and end up looking down the table at Henry, who's gazing at me with a lascivious, condescending look.

That doesn't make me feel much better.

Tatum's face is hard as always, icy and stern, and Preston just smiles at me, unreadable and smug.

Fuck.

My stomach twists with nerves, and I have to clamp down on the urge to push back from the table and bolt from the room. I need to get the fuck out of here.

"Tatum. River." Alec starts the meeting by glancing at the two of us. "The merchandise that our unfortunate friend Mr. Yates tried to pawn off on us has been dealt with?"

“Yes,” Tatum answers, speaking before I can. “They’ve been sold. We didn’t get nearly what we were expecting to from this shipment, but we were able to offload them all fairly quickly, and a few went for a higher price. So it wasn’t a total loss.”

Anger burns through me at the emotionless way she speaks. Maybe it’s not fair to expect the only other woman in the society to have more sympathy for those girls we saw in cages than the men do, but especially knowing that she had an abusive father, I don’t know how the fuck she can sit there and speak so calmly about destroying helpless young women’s lives.

“Good.” Alec turns to me, his gaze assessing. “Anything to add?”

There’s something almost like a challenge in his voice, like he’s waiting for me to give in to my impulse to scream at him and call him a monster. He has to know how I feel about this, given what he knows about my past and the way I tried to help that girl Luther had with him at the drop.

It feels like another test of my character, and my throat burns with anger and guilt as I shake my head. “No. Nothing.”

Alec nods, looking satisfied.

I passed his test.

And failed my own.

Beneath the table, I dig my fingers into the arm of the chair, pressing my fingernails into the expensive leather and imagining that I’m dragging a blade over my skin in neat, even lines. I know I didn’t have any other choice but to say what I did, but it’s like I can *feel* my soul rotting inside my body.

How many times will I have to go through the motions of pretending to be who Alec wants me to be before the pretense becomes real? How many more times can I play along before it stops feeling like a lie?

Is that what happened to Tatum? Did she once hate this just as much as I do, until over time, her determination to play the role her father forced her into turned her into a monster just like him?

The meeting continues, turning once again to the charity organization and how the plans are progressing for that.

“The official unveiling ceremony for the Dream Foundation will be two weeks from now,” Alec says. “It will be a black tie event, and the guest list has been carefully curated. Although Henry will be one of the charity’s largest donors, we’ve decided not to draw attention to his involvement just

yet, so he won't be attending the gala. It may be politically expedient to highlight his donations later, but for the time being, we'll keep it quiet."

He glances around the table. "As for the rest of you, you won't be needed at the unveiling gala either. Your involvement will come once the charity is up and running, when we're ready to start funneling money through it. At that point, it will become an asset for all of us, a joint venture behind the scenes that will benefit all society members equally."

"Equal to their contributions," Preston says, speaking up suddenly.

Alec turns toward him, a small line appearing between his brows. "What?"

"You said that the charity will benefit every society member equally. But the benefit will be equal to the value they add to it, isn't that correct?"

"Yes, of course." Alec smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes as he stares Preston down. "But since every society member is meant to be a contributing member of our little organization, I didn't think it needed to be said. If someone can't pull their weight, they don't belong here. Is that clear enough for you?"

Preston hesitates for a moment, and I get the sense that there's a silent battle of wills going on. His gaze flicks to me for a half second, and I wonder briefly if he's going to reveal to the rest of the society members that I'm Alec's daughter.

But he just nods after a long beat, his expression as bland as dry toast. "Perfectly clear. Thank you."

The atmosphere in the room is a little tense as the meeting continues on, and I do my best to quell the churning of my stomach. Every day since I joined the Kyrio Society has felt like tiptoeing through a minefield, and I'm constantly on edge, unsure of the shifting dynamics of this group. I swear there are muscles in my shoulders that will never unclench.

"That's all for today," Alec says finally, and I have to stop myself from breathing a huge sigh of relief.

I get up, ready to file out with everyone else, but before I can go, Alec crooks a finger at me, beckoning me to stay. My feet drag a little as I approach him, everything in me rebelling at getting any closer to him. At least it's no secret to Alec that I hate him, so I don't have to force a false smile onto my face as I come to stand in front of him.

"Once the charity is up and running, you'll have a chance to prove your usefulness to the society," he tells me. It's an ominous promise, coming

from him.

“I’m sure I will,” I mutter, doing my best to hide my revulsion at that prospect.

“I have no doubt.” Alec smiles confidently, cocking his head a little as he studies my face. “You’re like me, River. I saw it in you even before I knew why. That’s why I wanted you in the society in the first place. I’ve seen that you’ll do whatever it takes to reach your goals, no matter how unsavory it is. And that’s what it takes to succeed in the world.” He leans in a bit closer, lowering his voice like he’s sharing a secret. “You crave power the same way I do. That’s why you’ll do whatever I demand of you.”

I clench my jaw, barely keeping a hold on my anger.

I’m nothing like you, you fucking asshole.

No matter what he says, I have to believe he’s wrong about that. Sure, I’ve done some bad shit. I’ve hurt and killed people. I’ve stolen stuff and ruined lives. But never for my own selfish greed. Never just because I could. That’s the difference between us.

I have to remember that.

Still, knowing this man is my father makes my stomach twist. Knowing I share DNA with him makes me feel dirty, like I need to scrub myself clean from the inside out.

“Whatever you say,” I tell him in a clipped, cold tone. “Can I go now?”

He just smiles, seeming almost amused by my obvious anger, and turns his attention away from me as he steps toward Henry, who’s waiting near the door. It’s a clear dismissal, and I couldn’t be more glad. I stride away from the table and the room, trying to wrestle myself back under control.

As I make my way down the corridor toward where my men are waiting, I take a few deep breaths and clear my head, thinking back over everything that was said during the meeting. And as Alec’s voice echoes in my head, a slow smile spreads across my face.

The charity gala will be in two weeks.

Good. It’s perfect.

No more fucking waiting.

I meet up with the guys, who are waiting for me as usual, and we head out. The helicopter ride seems to take forever, and I bounce my leg impatiently as the chopper blades roar overhead. I’m so anxious to tell my men what’s on my mind that it’s a struggle to keep the words in, but I wait until we’re dropped back off at our car and I’m sure we’re alone.

As we all climb into the car, I glance from Priest to Ash to Knox.

“I’ve got an idea for when we should carry out our attack,” I tell the three of them, explaining what Alec said about the charity unveiling. “In two weeks, on a Friday night, we’ll know exactly where he’ll be all evening. From what he said, it’s going to be a huge event, with a large and exclusive guest list. The whole charity organization is going to be a front, but the prestige and fanfare of it still matter to Alec. It’ll increase his reach and standing in the legit circles he operates in, so I’m sure he’s going to go big with it. While he’s focused on that, that’s when we should make our move.”

Priest nods, sharing a look with Knox. “That sounds like a solid plan. As long as we’re careful not to let anyone pick up a hint of what we’re planning, that should be the perfect distraction on the night when we pull off the attack.”

Ash bounces slightly on the seat next to me, looking almost like a little kid. I can practically feel the energy radiating from him, a mirror of my own, and when he catches my gaze, he grins.

“The countdown is on, killer. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

RIVER

ASH IS RIGHT. There's a fuck ton of work to be done.

Now that we've narrowed down the timing of our move against the Kyrio Society, we can start planning out our individual attacks on each member. Nikolai and Henry will be taken care of by the two groups of people we've recruited to help us, and I just have to hope like hell that the Black Roses and the Voronin brothers will come through. At least I have proof that Mercy and her guys can get shit done when they want to, and although I don't know as much about the Voronin brothers, I do know what a good motivator vengeance can be.

They'll do whatever it takes to put a bullet in Nikolai's head. I'm sure of it.

So that just leaves Tatum, Preston, and Alec for us.

"Fucking Tatum and her fucking bulletproof windows," Knox groans, tipping his head back on the couch as he glares up at the ceiling.

As soon as the four of us got home, we filled Gage in on everything, and we all got to work on laying out our plans. But that little tidbit Tatum told me about having bulletproof windows in her penthouse is throwing a wrench in our plans. Based on what we know of her daily schedule, she'll be at home when the gala takes place—which means it will be impossible for Knox to snipe her.

"Yeah." I rest my elbows on my knees, my legs brushing up against Gage and Knox where they sandwich me on the couch. "We need to find another way to get to her, then. But I don't know how."

"What if you tell her you need to meet with her or something that night?" Ash offers, looking hopeful. "Draw her out that way?"

“Too risky.” I shake my head. “I don’t want to give any of the society members any reason to think something is up. If she gets spooked, it could spook the others, and then everything will be shot to hell.”

“Okay.” He puffs out his cheeks, exhaling a loud breath. “So we need to take her out inside her penthouse somehow, without shooting through the windows. Anybody know how to scale a building?”

He snorts a laugh at his own joke, but Priest turns to him, looking thoughtful. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea.”

“What?” I scrunch up my face. “What do you mean?”

Priest’s ice-blue eyes find mine, and a smile plays around the corners of his mouth. “I might have an idea of how to take her out from the outside. But it won’t be a one-person job.”

“That’s okay. We can divide forces unevenly if we have to.” I lean forward, nodding encouragingly. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Whatever it is, we can make it work. We have to.

Speaking in his usual measured, careful tone, Priest lays out his idea. I purse my lips and nod along as I listen, and by the time he’s done, Ash is practically pumping his fist in excitement.

“Yes! Fuck yes!” He glances around at the rest of us, nodding enthusiastically. “That can totally work.”

“You just want an excuse to play with your toys,” Gage points out, and Ash doesn’t even bother to deny it. He just looks to me and Knox, and when we both nod our agreement, he looks even more thrilled.

“Okay,” I say, letting out a breath. “We’ll try that. Now, moving on...”

THE NEXT WEEK and a half is a fucking whirlwind, and I don’t sleep very much. Neither do the guys.

There are a million details to take care of, extra recon to do, and gear that needs to be prepped. The day of the charity gala keeps inching closer, and making the final preparations is nerve wracking. It’s like trying to plan the fake attack on the wedding, when we were going to attempt to get Hannah and Cody free, except a hundred times more complicated.

I can’t stop thinking about that plan, and how everything went wrong. How we missed *one* thing, and that was enough to fuck us in the worst

possible way.

This is the biggest thing we've ever done, with a lot more moving pieces, so one little mistake could mean we're all dead.

What are we missing this time?

What am I not seeing?

Have we accounted for everything?

I hope like fuck we have, or it'll mean all of our asses.

On the day before the charity unveiling, I'm pacing in the living room as I let it all play out in my head. I need to keep moving or I'll go insane—and honestly, I'm *still* practically pulling my hair out with nerves. Knox comes in from the kitchen and stops when he sees me.

"You look like a mad scientist," he says with a chuckle, gesturing to my hair. It's probably all staticky and tousled from having my fingers run through it so many times, and I sigh and smooth it down a little.

"I'm just... running it again," I tell him with a sigh.

"Well then, come here." He takes my hand and pulls me over to the coffee table where the little makeshift pieces are laid out on the board. "Use this. I didn't set it up for my health, you know."

"No, just for your entertainment," I joke.

He chuckles and then picks up a few pieces, moving them around the board.

"These are Mercy's guys here," he says. "This is the big blond one, and he's very grumpy." He makes the little chess piece do a low, grumpy voice, like a cartoon character, and it makes me chuckle a little.

"This one is Ash. You can tell because it's all sparkly." He holds up a little pom-pom dusted with glitter that I have no idea where he got. "It's here to flip coins and show off, and it's all out of coins."

That makes me laugh outright, but the worry in my gut doesn't go away. It's still there, gnawing away like acid.

"What if we forgot something?" I ask him. "What if it all goes wrong?"

Knox sets the pieces down and tips his head to one side. He's silent for a long moment, then he sighs.

"Fuck. I wish I could lie to you and tell you I know it'll all work out. The truth is, though, we can't be sure nothing will go wrong. But I can promise you one thing."

"What's that?"

“I’ll have your back no matter what. And if I die, then my brothers will have your back. You won’t be in it alone.”

My heart clenches in my chest. I know he means that to be comforting, but thinking about him dying just makes me feel sick inside.

“What if we all die?” I ask in a low voice, as if saying it too loud might make it come true.

He laughs at that and shrugs his broad shoulders. “Then we’ll fuck up the afterlife together, I guess.”

“I’m serious, Knox.”

His smile drops away at my words, something flashing in his dark eyes. He pulls me into his arms, wrapping me up tightly and holding me close, his massive arms like iron bands around me. My cheek presses to his chest, and when he speaks again, the deep rumble of his voice is right up against my ear.

“I *am* serious, River. No matter what happens, I’ll never stop loving you. I’ll never stop trying to protect you. Not in this life, not in the next.”

I kiss him, because that’s the only response I can think of to that. I kiss him so hard that it makes my lip bleed a little, a desperate clash of teeth and tongues. Knox licks the blood away from my lower lip, and as he does, I’m hit with a sudden memory of him licking blood off my face the first time we met in the basement of his house.

As if he can read my mind, or he’s thinking of that moment too, he smiles down at me, drawing back a little to gaze down at my face.

“I knew you were a fighter from the first moment I saw you, little fox. And you’ve proved me right every single fucking day since.”

RIVER

ALEC'S CHARITY gala is scheduled to take place on a Friday evening, and the day of the event feels like the longest day of my goddamn life.

Every minute seems to tick by at an agonizingly slow pace, and Harley is beside himself as he picks up on all the nervous energy radiating from the five humans he's grown so attached to. The sound of his nails on the floor are a constant background noise as he trots over to Priest and nudges his leg, then makes his way over to Ash and butts his head against Ash's hand for some pets. He even hops up on the couch with me to lick my face like he's trying to soothe me, and it's a testament to how distracted Gage is that he doesn't even comment on how disgusting it is.

There's nothing left to do. Our plans are all laid out. The Voronin brothers and the Black Rose gang have been put on standby, ready to act as soon as we tell them.

So now we just... wait.

When noon rolls around, Ash forces us all to eat a big lunch. We all bitch about it, but I know he's just trying to take care of us. And he's got a good point. I know that the closer it gets to being evening, the less likely it will be that my churning stomach will be able to keep anything down.

The afternoon drags by at a snail's pace, and finally, I head upstairs to get into my outfit for the night—dark tactical gear. There's no illusion tonight, no dressing up in fancy clothes to play the part of society member.

Tonight, I'm dressed like an assassin, because that's what I have to be.

Once I've checked and double checked that I'm ready, I go downstairs to meet my men. They're in the living room already, geared up to go just like I am, and they all turn to look at me when I walk in.

I laugh, despite the nerves curling in my stomach.

They're all ogling me the same way they do when I have to wear a fancy dress, and I put my hands on my hips, arching a brow at them.

"You're checking me out like I'm dressed to impress tonight," I tell them. "I'm not even wearing a dress, I'm just in my gear."

Priest's eyes burn, and Knox comes over and tugs me roughly into his arms.

"That's because you look just as fucking sexy in this as you do in a dress that hugs all your curves," he says, his voice low as he dips his head to nuzzle at my neck. "Sexier even, because you're ready to go fuck shit up like this. When we're done with this mission and all those fuckers are dead, I'm gonna rip these clothes off your body."

I grin, taking heart and confidence from the way he says that like it's a promise.

"You fucking better," I whisper back breathlessly. "I'll hold you to that."

Gage steps up, his face set in determined lines. "Kill for you, live for you, die for you," he murmurs, calling back the words my sister and I always said to each other.

The last words she ever said to me at all.

They hover in the air, almost like a vow, and I take a deep breath and nod.

"Kill for you, live for you, die for you," I repeat, saying it to all of them.

There's so much more I want to say, but I'm afraid if I drag this moment out too much longer, it will start feeling like a goodbye. And I can't even think about that being true. So we split up, taking different cars so that we can head to different places.

Ash, Priest, and I climb into an unmarked van that I bought from a guy on a farm just outside of Detroit three days ago. I paid him four grand in cash for it, which is honestly probably more than it's worth. It's kind of ironic that I was planning on buying a nicer car after seeing Tatum's Ferrari, and I ended up buying a fucking van instead.

But in this situation, it was necessary.

Knox gets in his car, and Gage stands in the doorway of the garage, watching all of us leave with a somber expression.

As we back down the driveway and turn onto the street, I can't help craning my neck a little to get one last glimpse of Knox's car and of Gage

inside the garage. I watch them until they both disappear from view, my heart clenching in my chest.

If this all goes wrong, that could be the last I ever see of them.

Priest reaches over from where he sits behind the wheel and squeezes my hand, threading our fingers together.

“It’ll be okay,” he murmurs. “We’ve got this.”

But I can tell he’s tense, and so is Ash, who’s crouched in the back with all of our gear. The seats have been removed, so there’s a lot of space back there, and he braces himself a little as Priest makes a turn. When I glance over my shoulder to look at him, his amber eyes look darker than usual behind his glasses. I know he can feel the weight that’s settled over all of us just like I can.

There’s no time to dwell on our fears or worries, though. We have to focus and get our heads in the game.

The sun begins to set as we drive across the city and park in the underground garage of the building across from the one Tatum lives in. She owns the entire building, and from what we’ve been able to scope out, she’s the only one that lives there. It’s six stories tall, and her main living space is on the very top floor. Since Knox tailed her home that night, we’ve staked out her building occasionally, learning more about the security systems she has in place, as well as her habits and usual routines.

Once Priest pulls the van into a parking spot in a quiet corner of the underground structure, Ash gathers up the gear we’ll need from the back, hefting a large duffel bag over his shoulder and handing another one to me as I climb out of the passenger seat.

“You know, some people do this shit for fun,” he says with a grin, lifting one shoulder to indicate the contents of the duffel.

I snort. “Yeah, but I don’t think they do exactly what we’re about to, Ash.”

“Okay, okay.” He chuckles as Priest locks up the van and we head toward the stairs. “Not quite the same, but close. If you think of it as just a fun game, maybe it’ll be a little less nerve-wracking.”

I huff a laugh. “Alright. I’ll try that.”

The three of us climb up to the roof, taking the stairs since we’re less likely to run into anyone there. My legs burn as we make our way toward the top, but having my pulse pound from exertion rather than just nerves

actually feels good. It helps clear my head, and by the time we emerge onto the rooftop, I feel more grounded and focused.

Ducking low so that we'll be hidden from view by the low wall that surrounds the rooftop, we make our way across the flat slate toward the side of the building that face's Tatum's penthouse. As we get into position, leaning up against the wall, the phone in my pocket vibrates softly. We're all using burners tonight, just to make it that much harder for anyone to track what we're doing.

I tug it out and check the screen, relieved to see that it's Knox.

Right on time.

So far, so good.

"Hey. You good?" I ask as soon as I answer, not bothering with pleasantries. Knox isn't really the type to need them anyway.

"Yup. I'm in position outside his house," he says, his voice deep in my ear. "Ready and waiting for when he gets home."

He's got the task of sniping Preston Salinger, since he's the best shot out of all of us. If we timed this right, Preston should be arriving at his large, art filled mansion soon.

"Good. We're in place too," I tell Knox.

"Fuck, I can't wait to put a bullet in this guy's head," he mutters, an edge to his voice. Ever since Preston broke into our house, the guys have held a particular grudge against him. "I wish you could be here to see it."

"Knowing it's done will be good enough for me," I reply. "I don't ever want to see that slimy fucker again."

He chuckles, and the sound of it is comforting. "If we weren't on a time crunch, I'd make sure he knew it was me. I'd take him home, and we could fuck him up nice and slow together. See what we could get him to confess to if we lean on him hard enough. Maybe he'd finally admit that he's been behind the death of every person in his circle who died under 'mysterious circumstances.' The creepy fucker probably has their bodies buried in his backyard or something."

A shiver runs down my spine. It wouldn't surprise me, honestly. Each of the society members is terrifying in their own ways, but Preston definitely gives off a serial killer vibe. He's got the energy of someone who can keep just enough of a mask over his psychotic tendencies to function in regular society without getting caught—and the boatloads of money he can afford to pay his team of lawyers probably helps with that too.

“Quick and clean is better,” I tell Knox, keeping the phone pressed tight to my ear. “He probably deserves worse, but the most important thing is for you to get in and out of there fast and take him out without him seeing you coming.”

“Yeah. I guess so.” The disappointment in his voice is so clear that I have to fight back a smile. But I’m glad he seems to mean it.

“Be safe, okay?”

“Always. You know me, little fox,” he replies, and I can hear the grin in his voice before he hangs up.

Ash pulls out his own burner phone and makes the call to the Voronin brothers, letting them know it’s go time. He keeps it short, but knowing what I do about them, that’s all they need. They’ve been putting together their own plan to go after Nikolai since the day we informed them that he was the one who killed their mother.

With my back still pressed to the wall, I watch Ash closely as he speaks, and he catches my gaze and nods as he hangs up.

“They’re on the move,” he tells me.

I drag in a deep breath and let it out. “Good. That’s three, then.”

Nikolai, Preston, and Tatum.

“Speaking of which, let’s get this show on the road.” Ash unzips one of the duffel bags as he speaks, pulling out a small drone.

Priest grabs the other bag, unloading several drones from it as well. As the bag starts to empty out, he hands me a small camera, a monitor, and a detonator.

“Keep an eye on her,” he says.

I nod, reaching up to carefully place the camera on the edge of the wall. I switch on the monitor, zooming in a little as the camera gives me a view of Tatum’s floor to ceiling windows and the interior of her massive penthouse. She’s home just like we thought she would be, pacing the floor of her living room with slow steps as she talks to someone on the phone.

“You’re good,” I tell the guys in a whisper. “She’s on the phone. Living room. Just stay away from those windows for now.”

“Got it.”

Ash picks up the controller for one of the drones, sending it zipping low over the top of the roof. It disappears off the edge of the building on the side farthest away from Tatum’s apartment, and I know he’s going to circle around so that she won’t have any chance of catching sight of the little

thing. Priest picks up a controller and does the same, and I turn my attention back to watching the monitor as they work.

We've got eight drones, each loaded up with explosives, and hopefully that will be enough if the guys place them at key points around the outside of the building.

"She's moving to the kitchen," I report, watching the monitor as Tatum hangs up the phone and strides toward the large open-plan kitchen. Her face is just as impassive and hard as it always is. Apparently, she doesn't even smile when she's at home by herself.

"Great. I'll place my next one near the living room in case she heads that way soon," Ash murmurs, his tone distracted as he concentrates on flying the drone. "Come on, come on, come on... there!"

"How many more left?" I ask.

"Just two. We're close."

"Okay. Hurry up."

Inside the penthouse, Tatum opens up a small glass-fronted fridge that looks like it was made just for wine. She pulls out a bottle with a fancy looking label and opens it, then grabs a delicate, long-stemmed glass and pours herself some wine.

She takes a sip, glaring down at her phone on the counter as if she's waiting for it to ring. I have no idea who she was just talking to, but if I had to guess, I'd say the conversation didn't go well. She seems pissy and agitated—even more than usual, which is saying something.

"Done! Last one is in place." Ash turns to me, pressing the detonator into my hand. "You're up. She's still in there, right?"

"Yeah." I wrap my fingers around the detonator, flipping the top open and brushing my thumb over the large button.

My gaze stays locked on the monitor, and as Tatum lifts the wine glass to her lips again, I catch a glimpse of the pale, gnarled skin of the scar on her wrist. I remember her telling me about how her father held her arm over an open flame when she was eight years old to toughen her up, and a sudden rush of doubt fills me.

Should I have tried harder to get her on my side?

But what else could I have done? She made it clear from day fucking one that she hated me, and it's not like she's innocent in all of this. I was thrown to the fucking wolves at a young age, and I didn't come out of it a

monster. At least not one willing to step on and abuse those who are weaker than me just to gain more power for myself.

All the things Tatum has been complicit in stack up high against her.

There's so much innocent blood on her hands.

Just as I have that thought, Tatum pauses, setting her glass down. Her head snaps up as she looks up across the street, right toward me, Ash, and Priest—and even though I know she can't see us, I'm suddenly certain that she knows we're here.

My heart skips a beat in my chest, adrenaline surging through me in a cold rush. I slam my thumb down on the button of the detonator, setting off the charges in the sequence we programmed. A series of small explosions rises up from across the street, building on each other in quick succession until it sounds like one massive boom.

Unable to resist, I twist around and peer over the wall of the rooftop, watching as the support beams of the upper floor of Tatum's penthouse give way. The entire top story collapses, caving in on itself as chunks of debris rain down. The weight of it falling collapses the floor below it too, and it takes several more long moments before the rumbling stops.

The top two floors of Tatum's building basically don't exist anymore, and the floor below them is partially collapsed as well. A plume of dusty smoke rises up from the building, dark and murky in the fading light of the evening, and the silence that fills the air seems deafening.

"One down," Ash murmurs from behind me, "but there are still more to go."

He's right. We can't stop now.

There's something hypnotic about the smoke billowing away from the partially destroyed building, but we can't afford to stand here watching for too long. The cops and fire crews will come eventually, and we need to be gone before then.

"Let's go," Priest says. "We need to keep moving."

"Hey, remember when I wanted to get drones, and you all told me it was a stupid idea and that no one but kids played with them?" Ash comments as we stride across the roof. "Looks like you were wrong on that one."

Priest snorts. "Fine. I'll mark it down as the one and only time we told you something was a stupid idea and were wrong."

"Doesn't matter if it's the only one. Still counts."

I shake my head as I listen to their exchange. I wasn't around for that particular conversation, but I know all four of the men well enough by now that I can picture exactly how it probably played out. I'm a few steps ahead of them both, and as we near the door I heft the duffel bag higher on my shoulder, already dreading all those steps back down to the parking garage in the basement.

But before I can reach for the door to pull it open, it swings outward. I miss a step, stumbling back a little as the sudden movement catches me off guard.

Preston Salinger steps through, a gun pointed right at my head.

PRIEST

RIVER LETS OUT A STARTLED GASP, falling backward a step as Preston Salinger steps through the access door, letting it close with a dull thud behind him.

Ash freezes in place immediately, and I do the same. All three of us are armed, but with Preston pointing his gun directly between River's eyes, neither me nor Ash would dare to try to take a shot. He probably knows that, which is why he looks so calm and unbothered as he takes a step toward us, his arm held steady.

What the fuck is he doing here? How did he know we were here?

"Toss your weapons aside," Preston says smoothly. We all hesitate, and he raises an eyebrow, letting his finger caress the trigger of his gun. "Or if you'd like, I can kill her right here and now, and you can keep them. It's up to you."

Ash and I toss our weapons away. It fucking burns in me to do it, but I can't risk River getting hurt. Not like this.

"You too," Preston adds, jerking his chin at River. "I know you're armed. Get rid of it."

River bares her teeth in a grimace, but she drops her gun as well, kicking it off to the side away from her.

"Very good," Preston says pleasantly. Then his smile drops away, and he shakes his head. "You didn't do what you were supposed to do, my dear. You've played this all wrong."

"What the fuck do you mean?" River bites out. I can only see her profile in my periphery since my gaze is locked on Preston, but I can hear the anger in her voice and picture her eyes flashing.

Preston presses his lips together, disappointment filling his expression.

"I gave you everything you needed," he tells her. "I handed you the information you would need to get rid of Alec. I didn't even tell him that your fourth little boyfriend is still alive, even though I figured that out too. I cleared the way for you to take him out, just like I knew you wanted to. And with him no longer at its head, we could've restructured the society. We could've redistributed power, no longer having to serve at his whims."

Little lines bracket his mouth as he frowns.

"But that wasn't enough for you, was it? Imagine my surprise when I learned recently that you were making plans to do far more than just eliminate Alec. You wanted to take down the entire society. To kill them all. To kill *me*." He tsks softly. "That's not very nice."

River's shoulders tense, and I can feel my own hands curling into fists.

Fuck. *Fuck*. We've been so careful. And apparently, all our failsafes and precautions and security measures were almost enough—but not quite. Because somehow, Preston Salinger found out about our plans.

The lanky man looks over at the smoldering wreckage of the top couple of floors of Tatum's building, his eyes gleaming in the dim light. Then he shrugs and looks back at River.

"Tatum dying isn't a big loss. Her heart was never in this. She just wanted to play at the boys' table, always so afraid of being the weakest one in the room." He rolls his eyes. "It made her easy enough to manipulate, but I can't say I'll miss her. Still, though, I can't let you destabilize things too much. If you eliminate Alec, I could still step in and take power, but I need the society to remain in existence."

He pauses as if he's waiting for River to say something back, to argue with him or apologize for ruining his grand designs. But she just glares at him with her jaw clenched tightly, saying nothing.

Preston clicks his tongue and shakes his head, like he's dealing with a disobedient child. "I'm very disappointed, River. And I'm going to have to do something to make myself feel better."

My stomach tightens at that. He hasn't changed his inflection at all, but I know his type. 'Something to make himself feel better' means he wants to hurt someone. Kill someone.

I shift my weight forward involuntarily, an impulse to protect River rising inside me. Preston catches the small movement and glances over at

me, looking me up and down with a speculative gaze even as his weapon stays trained on River.

“You’re an interesting one,” he tells me. “Fascinating, really. Is it true that a woman you loved was burned alive in front of you? And yet here you stand.”

He says it like it’s just some interesting piece of trivia he’s picked up, but I know he chose his words more carefully than that. He’s making sure we all know that he’s done his research. Just like River told us after the night he broke into our house, he’s done what he always does.

Observe.

Gather information.

Ferret out secrets that don’t belong to him.

His words are designed to cut as deeply and precisely as a razor. And it works, because just hearing him say it, just thinking about that night, about Jade’s screams and my helplessness, makes my heart stop for a second. I drag in a sharp breath, and my hands shake, rage and helpless panic rushing through me.

Just like I did that night, I’m standing frozen, watching someone I love be threatened by a man who has the power to end her life.

It sucks the wind out of me, making it hard to breathe, and I clench my jaw so tightly that it hurts, trying to pull myself back together.

Preston tips his head to one side, watching me struggle with the memories of my past as they overlap with what’s happening now. He seems fascinated by it all—this situation, the way we’re all reacting to it. It’s as if he’s watching a grand show play out, and it’s entertaining for him to poke at our wounds and see what makes us flinch.

“This must be hard for you,” he murmurs, his tone almost sympathetic as his gaze moves back to River. “Watching me point a gun at her head. I bet it’s bringing back all sorts of memories. Of course, it’s not quite the same, because I’m only threatening to shoot River, not to burn her alive. Does that make a difference? Is it easier to think of watching a bullet pierce her skull than to imagine flames consuming her body?”

“You’re sick,” River chokes out, her voice rough. “Stop it, Preston. Just fucking stop.”

“No, I don’t think I will.” Preston’s false sympathy falls away, his eyes narrowing a little as he glares at her. “You didn’t plan to stop, did you? You

planned to kill me tonight, and now that the tables are turned, I don't see any reason to show any of you mercy."

"It was *my* plan." River shakes her head, her silver hair shining in the low light. "My idea. I was the one who decided we needed to end the Kyrio Society. Not Ash or Priest. So leave them out of this, Preston. I'm the one responsible, not them."

Ice seizes my chest, freezing my lungs and forcing all the air out of me. *Fuck, River, what are you doing?*

But I know what she's doing. Of course I do. She's doing the same thing Gage did on the docks all those weeks ago. She's trying to save the people she loves by offering herself up instead.

My muscles shake with fury and anguish, and I shake my head. "No!" I rasp. "That's not true. River, you can't—"

"Save it," Preston bites out, his tone turning hard. "She's right. She's the one who deserves my anger. The one who deserves to suffer most." He pauses, and then a slow, vicious smile spreads across his face. "Well, maybe I'll leave that for you to decide."

"What do you mean?" I ask, numbness spreading through my limbs.

"I mean River is going to die tonight. But I'll let you decide how. A bullet or fire."

"What?" The word is almost punched out of me, harsh and raw.

Preston just keeps on smiling, a grotesque spread of his lips that makes him look almost inhuman.

"I want you to burn her alive," he says, gesturing to River with the gun. "I want to see if you can do it. I already know what it will do to her—I've seen a charred body before—but I want to see what it will do to you."

"No." I shake my head, my chest burning with rage and despair. "No, fuck you."

Preston shrugs. "Is that your choice, then? I could always just put a bullet in her head instead. Would you prefer that?"

My head is spinning as the horror of this situation washes over me. I feel like I'm going mad with it. A fucking psychopath with a gun wants me to choose the way River dies. Wants me to be a fucking part of it. And I have no idea how to save her.

"Priest..." River chokes out, but I don't turn to look at her. I don't want to see the expression on her face right now, because I know it will be full of fear—not for herself, but for *me*. For Ash. And I can't bear to see it. Not

when Preston has just thrust her life into my hands and told me to squeeze until it breaks.

“No,” I repeat, a wash of red filling my vision. “No.”

Bile rises in my throat, threatening to choke me.

“Make a choice,” Preston barks. “Now!”

A flash of movement catches my attention from one side as Ash leaps into motion, rushing forward to try to tackle Preston. But he’s not fast enough. The other moves like lightning, shifting the arm holding the gun and firing a shot at Ash before pointing the weapon back at River again.

Ash grunts, falling back and gripping his shoulder. His features contort with pain, his face paling as blood coats his fingers.

“Don’t try that again,” Preston warns mildly. Then he shifts his attention back to me. “I’m not kidding. Your time is up. You’re going to have to make a choice.”

“Jesus, you’re a fucking lunatic,” Ash bites out, but Preston doesn’t even seem to hear him. His eyes are locked on me, clearly waiting to see what I’m going to do.

“Come on,” he murmurs, his tone turning soft and cajoling again. “Do you want her to go out like this? Taken down by someone she hates? Impersonal and cold, like a bullet. Shooting someone is the most boring way to kill them, you know. There’s nothing to it. You pull a trigger, and they’re dead. It’s too fast, and you don’t even really get to feel them die. But if *you* do it, then that makes it compelling. She loves you. She trusts you. She probably wouldn’t even fight back. And in the end, all you’ll be left with is ashes. Will that break you? I want to find out.”

He talks like it’s some kind of social experiment, and maybe to him, that’s all it is. He just wants to toy with us, to watch us crumble, and to punish River for not doing things his way.

He’ll kill her if I don’t do something.

My heartbeat roars through my ears, and my breathing seems too loud. My chest is so tight it feels like my ribs are collapsing in on themselves, and my blunt fingernails dig into my palms. I feel like my soul is crumbling. My past and my present are colliding, forcing me to face the possibility of watching the only other woman I’ve ever loved die horribly.

I keep seeing Jade in the flickering flames of the destroyed building across the street. I keep hearing her voice, screaming out for me, begging

me to help her. I hear my own desperate, frantic cries in my mind, and I feel that same helplessness now.

I can't do it.

There's no fucking way. I can't burn River. But I can't just stand there and let her be shot either. No matter what I choose, it's going to be on me. I'm going to have to live with it.

"Priest."

River calls my name, and my eyes dart to her. She's standing there, body tense and frozen, at the other end of Preston's aim.

"It's okay," she whispers. "It'll be alright. Whatever happens."

She says that, but there's so much fear in her voice. I can hear it in the way it shakes. It's not going to be fucking alright, and she knows it.

"Is this what love is?" Preston glances between the two of us, shaking his head as if he's fascinated by it all. "Being unable to make a single decision because you can't live with either possible consequence?"

My jaw clenches as his words hit me like a slap in the face. I have to do *something*. If I charge him like Ash did, I'm sure he won't just fire a warning shot. He'll kill me. But maybe it will give Ash and River enough time to attack and disarm him.

It will give them a chance to live.

"I'm going to count to three," Preston intones. "One..."

My muscles tense.

"Two..."

I start to launch myself forward, and he swings the gun my way as if he's been expecting it.

But before he can fire, his body jerks hard, as if he's been punched by an invisible fist. Without another word, he crumples to the ground in a heap.

I don't know what hit him, and I don't care. I don't stop my forward momentum, racing forward and kicking the gun out of his hand, running on the pure adrenaline that's been building inside me since Preston stepped through the door.

"Knox!" Ash's voice pierces the fog in my mind. "Thank fuck."

I whip my head to one side and realize that Knox is on the rooftop of the building next to us, his sniper rifle out. Relief floods through me like a tidal wave, but on its heels comes something else. Something just as powerful and overwhelming.

Fury.

I stand over Preston's body, watching him bleed. He's not dead yet, but judging from the way his breath rattles and he's not getting up to fight back, he's close enough to it.

"Not so smug now, are you, fucker?" I spit, rage pouring through me. "I'd ask what this will do to the people who love you, but there's no one who could love a twisted, sadistic fuck like you. You're going to die, and no one's going to give a shit."

With a savage growl, I lift my foot and bring it down hard, stomping on his neck and listening to the crunch of bones as it snaps, killing him.

But it's not enough. He hasn't paid enough for what he tried to do. The fury searing my veins doesn't burn away just because he's dead, so I kick him in the face, breaking his nose and making it bleed. Again and again, I kick him, slamming my foot into his stomach, his chest, his face.

The monster that lives inside me, the one that was born the day Jade died, rears up with a feral roar, unleashing years of pent up wrath. I don't stop, lashing out until his face is a bloody ruin, no trace of that smug, charming smile anywhere to be seen.

My shoe is splattered with blood, but all I see is red anyway.

I lose myself in it, in a flood of pure fury and raw emotion, letting it surge through me. Nothing else exists.

But then a hand falls on my arm, a soft voice calling to me through the haze of blinding fury.

"Priest. Daire, you have to stop."

"No," I snarl. "He deserves this. He was going to—"

"I *know*," River says, and more of her voice filters in through the desperate anger. "I know. But it's over now. It's done. He's dead, and he can't hurt me or you or anyone again. We have to keep moving."

She's right.

She's right, and her voice slowly breaks through the cloud of rage that I've been in, at least enough that I can see her and hear her clearly. She's standing beside me, alive and whole, and that matters so much more than making sure a dead man pays for putting us through hell.

I reach out, grabbing her hard and yanking her close to me. River doesn't resist, stepping into my arms with a grateful sound, and when I pull her into a kiss, she's right there to meet it.

Our mouths and hearts crash together again and again, and I never want to let her go.

RIVER

I CLING TO PRIEST, breathing him in, holding on to him like he's my anchor. Like I'll die if I let go.

His forehead presses against mine, and he grips the sides of my face so hard it hurts. But I don't care. I learned a long time ago that some kinds of pain are a good kind, and this is one of those. His mouth finds mine again and again, our faces practically smashed together as we kiss desperately.

My cheeks are wet, and his are too, our tears combining as I sob against his lips.

"I love you," he whispers hoarsely. "I can't live without you, River. I fucking *won't*."

The same words fall from my lips, an echo of his, and it feels like our souls are winding around each other, wrapping themselves tighter and refusing to let go.

I don't know what I'd do without Priest. Without any of them.

It hits me like a freight train that if he dies, I'll die. I can't live without him—without any of these men. I love them with so much of my soul that I can't exist without them anymore. Losing one of them would create a hole that could never be properly mended.

Priest and I separate after another moment. The faint sound of sirens in the distance fills the air, and worry falls over his chiseled features as he glances around.

"Fuck. Is Ash okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Ash groans from where he sits on the rooftop nearby. "River checked on me while you were, uh, rearranging Preston's face. And body."

Priest's shoulders slump with relief, and he crouches down beside Ash to check his wounds as well. The bullet only went through the fleshy part of his shoulder, and although it's still seeping blood, he's been able to stanch the flow.

"We need to go," Ash points out, grimacing as he holds out a hand. "Like, yesterday. Help me up. The cops will be here soon, and we need to be gone before then."

Priest shoulders both duffel bags as I help Ash to his feet, offering him a bit of support as we make our way quickly down the stairs.

There aren't any more surprises as we leave the roof and head back to where the van is parked in the underground garage, but every time I hear a sound, I jump, half expecting it to be another society member who's caught onto us. Just because Preston is dead doesn't mean we've won yet.

When someone steps out of the shadows near the van, I reach for my gun, but it's just Knox, hands raised and a grin on his face.

"Fuck." I let out a harsh breath. Then I run over to him, throwing myself into his arms. "If you hadn't shown up..."

I don't finish that sentence. I don't have the fucking emotional strength to consider it right now.

"I didn't see Preston at his house," Knox explains, pinning me to his body in a tight embrace. "So I figured something had gone wrong. And then I called you, and you didn't answer, so I knew something was definitely up. Didn't take much more than that to get me to race my ass over here and see what was up."

Thank fuck I put my phone on silent for this. I can only imagine how Preston would have reacted if I'd gotten a phone call in the middle of his little show.

Knox releases me as Priest comes over. The blond man holds out a hand to Knox, and the two of them clasp hands and pull each other into a hug, leaning their foreheads together. Neither of them says a word, but I don't think they have to. They've had each other's backs since they were kids, and I'm sure they always will.

The sirens outside are getting louder, and we emerge cautiously from the underground garage and then speed away, leaving Tatum's destroyed building and Preston's mangled corpse for the cops to discover.

As we head to the rendezvous point where we arranged to meet with Mercy and her guys, Knox digs out a first aid kit from the back of the van

and stitches Ash up, then bandages the wound quickly. It's rough, and it'll need more attention later, but it'll do for now.

We're running a bit behind schedule because of the shit with Preston, but when we get to the rendezvous point, no one is waiting for us.

"Fuck. You think they left?" Knox asks, glancing around as he wipes the remnants of Ash's blood from his hands.

I shake my head. "No, they wouldn't have done that. They know this is important."

"Important to us," Priest murmurs. "Maybe not that important to them."

"We can afford to wait a bit," I say, biting my lower lip. "They'll be here."

We settle in, and several tense minutes drag by before a car drives up. I recognize the big blond guy from Mercy's house—Sloan—behind the wheel, and I breathe out a sigh of relief. Despite my words, I couldn't help but worry that Mercy and her guys might not have followed through.

The car rolls to a stop, and I catch a glimpse of Mercy's long dark hair as she gets out, followed closely by the rest of her guys.

"It's done," Mercy says as we step up to meet them, nodding to the trunk of the car. "We ran him off the road and took him and his security team out."

Sloan pops the trunk of the car they're driving—an unmarked vehicle with no license plate—and we all peer inside.

Henry Levine is stuffed awkwardly into the small compartment, his limbs bent at odd angles and a trickle of blood trailing from his nose. Very much dead.

"Thank fuck," Ash mutters beside me.

I know how he feels. That's three members down, with the promise of another one soon enough, assuming the Voronin brothers make good on their plan to take out Nikolai.

Knox and Priest work with Sloan and Levi to get the body out of their trunk and into our van, and as they do, I turn toward Mercy, giving her a grateful look.

"Thank you."

"Yeah. We're square after this," she says. "I owed you for the help you gave me months ago, and now we're even." Then she grins wryly. "No offense, but I hope to not ever hear from you again."

I laugh, not offended at all by her blunt words. "Same."

The truth is, she probably won't. That makes me a little sad, because I've started to get the feeling we could be good friends if we ever got the chance. But maybe that means that both of our lives will settle into something peaceful after this.

Once the transfer of the body is complete, Sloan rounds up his friends and Mercy and gets them back in the car.

"We're done here," he says, shooting me a glance as he opens the driver's side door. Our gazes meet, and he nods. "Good luck with the rest of your fight."

They peel out a second later, leaving us with the body and the van.

We get back inside the big vehicle, and as Priest drives, Knox gets to work doing what he does best. He starts dismembering the body, just like we did after I killed Ivan St. James. It's a bit gross, the way Knox hacks at Henry's limbs and blood spatters the windowless interior of the van, but there's a part of me that's viciously glad to see it.

I know what kind of man Henry is. *Was.*

Seeing all that's left of him now feels a little bit like justice for that girl at the party, with cum on her face and fear in her eyes.

The next step in the plan is to head to the venue where Alec is celebrating the grand opening of his charity, and I do my best to steady my nerves as Priest drives us there. Not everything has gone to plan tonight, but we're still here. We're still fighting. We're so close to the end, I can almost taste it.

When we're about halfway there, Ash pulls his phone out of his pocket. He squints down at the screen, and I turn in my seat to look at him.

"What is it?"

"They did it," he reports, still reading the message on his phone. "The Voronin brothers took out Nikolai. They got him at that whorehouse you heard him mention. He's dead."

I let out a shaky breath, letting that news bolster me and give me hope. One more member down. Only one last person to go.

It doesn't matter that Alec is the one who's orchestrated my worst nightmares. It doesn't matter that he's more powerful than the other members, the one with the most to lose and the most closely protected. The others fell. And he will too.

Please. Please. Let this fucking work.

Ash reaches over and squeezes my hand with his good one from where he's crouched by the front seat, shooting me a look as the van echoes with the heavy thud of body parts hitting the floor.

"Pretty fun date night, huh?" he says with a wink, drawing a choked laugh out of me. He grins. "Okay, okay. Next time, we'll just do dinner and a movie."

Several minutes later, we park nearby the venue where the gala is being held, pulling into an alley and cutting the engine. I hand out ski masks, and we all tug them over our faces as Knox wipes more blood off his hands and then digs out his phone.

He punches in a number and then lifts the cell phone to his ear. "Hey, Harv. You're up, man. We need you to start looping the security feed at the venue." There's a pause, and then, "Yeah, that's what we figured. You think you can get eyes on them well enough to guide us inside? Okay. Great."

He pulls the phone away from his ear for a second, glancing around at us.

"Harv says he's already hacked into the security feed and has been scoping things out. Apparently, the place is crawling with Alec's security team, but he can help us get where we need to go without being seen. Everyone ready?"

Ash nods, then winces a little at the movement. "Yeah, let's go. Even with our holdup, we should still be on time to get everything into position."

All four of us pile silently out of the van, carrying parts of Henry Levine's body in large black trash bags. We make our way toward the back of the large venue, hugging the wall of the alley and moving quickly. When we reach a set of metal doors that lead into the building, Knox holds his hand up, signaling for us to wait. About a minute goes by, then he nods.

Ash pulls a set of lock picks from his pocket and gets to work. I can tell he's having a bit more trouble than usual because the pain in his arm and shoulder is affecting his use of that hand, so I crouch down beside him.

"Can I help?" I whisper.

"Yeah. Thanks." He indicates a thin piece of metal sticking out from the lock. "Grab that. Press down when I tell you to."

"Got it."

We work together as the other two men take point as lookouts, and a few moments later, Ash lets out a triumphant breath. I tug on the door, and it opens smoothly as he pockets his lock picks.

“Okay, we’re in,” I hear Knox whisper to Harv.

As soon as we slip inside, my heart rate picks up, a surge of adrenaline rushing through me. The access hallway we’re in is dark, clearly not in use at the moment, and I glance around quickly to get my bearings.

“That way.” Knox points to our left. “That will lead to the backstage area.”

The venue is one of those places that can be set up for all kind of events. Political rallies have been hosted here, as well as awards ceremonies and galas. The back is all kitchens and store rooms and places for people to change and prep to give speeches, and the front is set up kind of like an auditorium, with a large stage overlooking an empty space that can be filled with seats or left empty for people to stand, depending on what the person renting the space wants.

We make our way down the wide, dark corridor as silently as we can, trash bags thrown over our shoulders. After several yards, Knox gestures for us to duck into a small side room, and we do it immediately, allowing the guard that Harv spotted on the security feed to pass us by.

The back hallways of the event venue feel like a maze, and it’s only exacerbated by the fact that we have to take a circuitous route to our destination, doubling back or hiding from guards as they patrol the back of the building. Although Harv has looped the feed that’s being sent to the security office, he still has access to the actual real-time footage the cameras are recording, and he’s able to use that to guide us through without being seen.

We get close to the backstage area, but as we make our way past a rack of huge lights and thick dark curtains, we run into two event staffers. They must be stagehands, because they’re dressed all in black like we are—maybe that’s why Harv missed them on the cameras.

“Shit,” Ash hisses, dropping his bag.

The two staffers blink at us for a second, as if they’re trying to figure out if we’re supposed to be here. Then one of them opens his mouth. I have no idea if he’s planning to call for help or tell us to get back to work, but it doesn’t matter. He never gets a chance to do either.

Priest and Ash dart forward, each of them grabbing one of the stagehands and clapping a chloroform soaked rag over their noses and mouths before they can do anything. The two staffers struggle a bit, but then their movements slow and their heads loll. Ash and Priest drag their

bodies out of the way and leave them in a dark corner hidden by more black curtains.

Leaving bodies in our wake isn't ideal, but hopefully we'll be long gone before anyone finds them passed out.

"We're still good," Knox reports, jerking his chin forward. "Keep going."

We're close enough to the stage now that we can hear the sound of Alec's voice as he stands at the front of the crowd addressing the guests.

"The basis of any good community is how willing they are to take care of each other," he says, and I can hear the distant sound of applause.

He's in the middle of a speech, which means our timing is perfect. Moving even more carefully now that we're so close, we make our way into the darkened wings of the auditorium.

Alec is on the stage, of fucking course, commanding the spotlight. He stands in front of the curtain that hides the back part of the stage from the audience, and I can just make out a tiny glimpse of him through a crack between the curtain and the wall.

For a second, I'm tempted to try to shoot him right now. We've made it past his security and gotten close enough that I can see his back from where we're hiding backstage. I could try to end this here and now.

But I know it won't work.

I don't really have a clean shot, and even if I did, killing him so publicly would bring his entire security team down on us. None of us would make it out of this building alive.

So we have to stick to the plan. We have to play this out just like we planned and hope like hell it will work.

"Okay." I nod, my voice barely more than a breath. "Let's do it. Quick."

The reason the curtain behind Alec is still closed is because it's hiding the large sculpture that will become the symbol of the Dream Foundation. He told us about it in one of our meetings, describing how he would unveil it at the gala before having it installed in the building that will house the foundation's headquarters.

The sculpture has been made in the shape of a large pair of hands, cupped and outstretched as if they're offering something to the public.

But tonight, the hands will be offering something only to Alec.

Knox and Priest move in and start unloading the chopped up parts of Henry's body from the bags, laying them out in the hands. Even

dismembered like this, it's easy to tell who it is, and as much as I don't want to look at it, there's still some grim satisfaction to it all.

It's a grisly reminder of the gala we all attended, what feels like forever ago, when Ivan's body was found chopped up and laid out.

But that's the point of all this.

To send a message, just like Alec did with Ivan's body.

My heart is in my throat as they lay out the pieces, and the second they're done, all four of us slip out of the backstage area as quickly as possible, Knox guiding us again with the phone pressed to his ear. A little of the tension fades from my body as we cut through a door and head down another hallway, making our way toward the main part of the building where the audience is all seated at expensive tables.

We tug off our masks and toss them in the trash as we go, then step into the large room, blending in with the crowd of donors who are standing at the edges of the room rather than seated at tables, all listening to Alec's speech.

No one pays much attention to us, although I catch a glimpse of one or two women side-eyeing me as if judging my choice of outfit for this event.

"I looked around this city of ours, and I saw a need," Alec is saying, an expression of earnestness on his face as he addresses the crowd. "A need that wasn't being filled by the various institutions already in place. So many of them are just out to make a profit, thinking of their own gain, and that's not what the city of Detroit needs. We need community. We need action. We need people willing to step up and help others."

It's disgusting the way he can stand there and lie through his teeth, promising to help while he does everything possible behind the scenes to make sure the most vulnerable people in the city keep getting preyed on by people like him. But the donors are eating it up, clapping every time he says something that makes for a good sound bite.

Once the applause dies down, Alec looks out over the crowd, and he doesn't seem to see me or the guys yet. He holds his hands out, mimicking the hidden sculpture behind him as he stretches them out toward the crowd.

"This is a symbol of giving," he says. "It's me, coming to you all with my hands outstretched, asking for you to give so that we can make this city stronger, better. I'm just one man, and I will do all that I can to make sure this venture thrives, but it will be a team effort. Your generosity will be the proof of how strong we are together, and this gesture..." He lifts his cupped

hands higher. “Will be the symbol of it. I’ve had it immortalized in a sculpture commissioned by the incredible artist, Winston Kaiser, and after tonight, the sculpture will sit outside the headquarters of the Dream Foundation to remind everyone of the spirit of giving. Tonight, I offer you an early glimpse of this symbol.”

He claps his hands, and the curtain rises, revealing the sculpture.

The framing of it really is perfect. Alec stands in the center of the stage at his podium, and the giving hands are just to his right, tipped down low enough that everyone in the crowd can see what’s being offered to them tonight.

As soon as the curtain goes up, the crowd gasps. Someone near where we’re standing shrieks, and another woman claps a hand to her chest as if she might faint.

I squeeze Ash’s hand where he stands next to me, watching closely as Alec frowns. He was expecting thunderous applause, no doubt, and there’s confusion on his face. Then he turns around and sees the body laid out in pieces.

For the first time since I’ve known him, he has a genuine reaction. His eyes go wide, and he takes a horrified step back from the sculpture, but he can’t seem to look away from the pieces of his friend and fellow society member, dead in those hands.

For one long, suspended moment, he stares at it. And then he whips around, his eyes scanning the crowd. I can feel it the instant his gaze lands on me, and my stomach clenches.

This is it.

The endgame.

ASH

THE SOUNDS of pandemonium increase around us as shock ripples through the crowd. People are screaming and yelling, asking each other, “Is that Henry Levine?” and confirming that yeah, it is.

Alec stares at River over all of it, and River just stares back, her head held high like a fucking queen of death.

He’s not so smug now, and it feels good to watch him scramble. I can practically hear the gears turning in his head as he tries to figure out what the fuck is going on. Maybe he’s wondering if any of the other society members have been hit tonight, trying to calculate his next move on a board where he suddenly doesn’t have control over all the pieces.

Immediately, several members of his security team surround him, and the four of us move quickly, slipping through a side door into the hallway and moving toward the exit, leaving the chaos behind us. It was a calculated risk that his security team would focus more on getting him out than on coming after us, but it seems to have paid off. River said that Preston told her Alec is paranoid above all else, and seeing the pieces of a friend and fellow society member, someone guilty of a lot of the same crimes he is, definitely spooked him.

He knows River has a score to settle with him, and when it looked like she might have finally gotten an advantage, he ran.

Because at the end of the day, Alec is a coward who doesn’t like to play any game that’s not rigged in his favor.

We burst out of the building and sprint toward the van, and I do my best to keep up with the others, pumping my arms despite the pain that shoots through my shoulder. We pile inside, and a few seconds later, Alec is

hustled from the building, surrounded entirely by his armed guards. Several black SUVs pull up, screeching to a stop as Alec is shoved into one. Three of his men get into the car with Alec, and the rest of the team jump into the other two cars. Then the SUVs all peel out in different directions.

That makes sense.

They're trying to make it harder for us to follow Alec.

"You saw which one Alec got in?" River asks Knox, who's settled into place behind the wheel.

"Yeah, I got it," he grunts. "Hang on."

He pulls out onto the street, whipping the van in a sharp turn as he takes off after the SUV with Alec inside. Knox is the best for these high speed, high stakes chases, and he floors it, taking us away from the venue and through the darkened streets of Detroit.

The SUVs cross paths a few times, speeding down side streets and hopping curbs as they make tight turns. It's like playing the fucking shell game, but with massive vehicles instead of cups. I try to keep track of which car Alec is in, but when the SUVs split up again at an intersection—one going straight, one going left, and one going right—I'm not sure anymore which one contains our target.

"Come on, Harv," Knox mutters, barreling through a yellow light as he decides to keep going straight. "Where the fuck are we headed?"

I glance over at River, catching sight of her wide blue eyes as street lights flash by at high speed.

"He'll let us know," I promise. "This will work."

Several more moments go by, and the tension in the car ratchets up as Knox keeps driving. Then River's breath hitches. She pulls out her phone, which is vibrating gently in her hand, and checks the screen. A look of relief passes over her face in the dull glow emanating from the phone.

"We're heading to the suburbs," she says. "Harv picked up the security team's transmission and intercepted it. They're taking Alec to the safe house called 'the manor.'"

"Got it." Knox changes direction slightly, heading toward our new destination.

Priest nods, then grabs his own phone and types out a quick message.

I grin, blowing out a breath as I grip the back of the driver's seat with my good hand and brace as Knox makes another turn and speeds up.

“See?” I tell River. “I told you it would work. Harv always comes through for us when it matters.”

This is like classic sleight-of-hand stuff. Classic misdirection. Make someone look at one hand while you do the real trick with the other.

The whole thing at the charity event, putting Henry Levine’s body on display like that, was meant to flush Alec out. Meant to put him on the defensive so that we can trap him exactly where we want him—away from his massive security team.

A few seconds pass, then River’s phone lights up again, vibrating with another text. She glances down at it and nods.

“Harv sent the rest of the security team a code for ‘the cellar,’” she reports. “So assuming they all head there, he shouldn’t have any backup except the guards in the car with him now.”

“Good. Let’s go get that motherfucker.”

Knox steps on the gas, flying onto the highway and whipping around slower cars.

“You know,” I say, sliding across the blood-slicked floor a little as Knox changes lanes. “Preston was a real piece of shit, but I guess we do have to be grateful to him for this info. We wouldn’t be in as good of a position without it.”

Priest growls under his breath, clearly not ready to see anything good or useful about Preston Salinger just yet. And that’s fair, after what he put Priest through. I’ve never seen Priest go nuts like that, and I hope eviscerating Preston’s dead body helped unload some of the pain in his soul.

River reaches over and puts her hand on his leg, squeezing lightly. “He’s dead, and he deserves everything he fucking got. But it’s a good thing we know exactly where Alec is going to be holing up. It’s our chance to end this thing, once and for all.”

Knox doesn’t say a word, too focused on navigating the freeway at breakneck speed. Several minutes later, he whips the car onto an off-ramp, racing toward the safe house where Alec is being taken.

As he does, I catch sight of a black SUV up ahead and point to it.

“Looks like we caught up to him. Nice driving, Knox.”

He just grunts, laying on the gas a little harder and bringing us even closer to Alec’s car.

“Run and hide, motherfuckers,” he mutters to himself. “Go on.”

It doesn't take us much longer to reach the safe house. It's isolated, sitting on the edge of a quaint little neighborhood, all the way at the end of the road. The closest neighbors are probably a good mile or two away, meaning that it'll be nice and quiet for what we have planned.

The SUV pulls to a stop in the driveway of the house—which looks like any other suburban home, although I'm sure it's tricked out with all sorts of protections and alarm systems.

The van screeches to a stop as Knox stomps on the brakes, and River is already opening the van's side door, her gun drawn. She fires toward the SUV, loud pops cutting through the night air, and one of the guards fires back as the other two hustle Alec out of the car.

A bullet hits the side of the van with a ping and River ducks her head.

"Careful," Priest bites out, his own weapon drawn.

"We need to keep him on the run," River insists, her eyes wild as she leaps out of the car.

The guards shout to each other, one of them hanging back to give cover as the other two surround their boss on either side and dash toward the door.

But before they can reach it, a dark figure steps out from the shadows beside the front door.

Gage.

He doesn't hesitate, raising his gun and firing off three shots, taking out each of the guards with quick precision. *Pop, pop, pop.*

Alec skids to a stop as the guards beside him go down, staggering a little as their hands drop away from where they were holding his arms.

Gage levels the gun right at Alec's head, and the man blinks. He's breathing hard from the exertion of the chase, and there's fury in his eyes as he stares at Gage like he can't believe what he's seeing.

"You're..." Alec bares his teeth, shaking his head. His perfectly styled hair is messy, and there are streaks of dirt and bloodstains on his expensive suit. "You're supposed to be dead."

"Surprise, fucker," Gage deadpans, his aim not wavering for a second.

Alec's shock at seeing someone he was so sure he had made River kill is pretty obvious, but as he drags in a breath, I can see him trying to rally, trying to regain the upper hand. He sneers at Gage, his gaze shifting to the rest of us as we approach, his eyes wild. It's the first real emotion, other than smug satisfaction, that I think I've ever seen on his face.

“I’m not sure what the fuck you think you’re doing,” he spits. “But you really should have thought this through. My security team will fucking destroy you.”

I can’t help it. I start laughing at that, right there in the driveway of his fucking safe house.

“What the fuck is so funny?” Alec snaps, rage building in his expression.

A smirk curves my lips. “Oh, I’m just laughing because you still think you have backup coming. You really don’t. And that’s what you get for having three separate safe houses, you cocksucker. Lots of room for there to be a mix-up about which one the team is supposed to be at. It was bound to happen someday.” I shrug, pulling a sympathetic face. “It looks like all your men went to the wrong place.”

Alec stares at me for a long second as he processes my words. He looks down the road as if even after everything I said, he’s expecting to see the full force of his massive security team come roaring up, ready to defend him.

But of course, they don’t.

Slowly, it seems to dawn on him exactly the position he’s in. There’s a flash of panic on his face, and I wonder how it has to feel to be out-manuevered and never see it coming, especially when Alec is someone so obsessed with being in control.

Then he lunges forward.

Gage fires off a shot, but Alec’s sudden movement is quick enough that the bullet only grazes his shoulder. He manages to land a hit on Gage, right in his stomach. Normally, that’s something my brother could shake off easily—he’s been in a hundred fights harder than this one, and he’s tougher than that. But Alec goes right for the place where he knows Gage must still be wounded, and it makes the blow land harder than it usually would.

Gage grunts, stumbling back a step, and as Knox fires at him, Alec ducks low and throws himself toward the front door of the safe house.

Adrenaline surges through me. *Fuck it all, if he gets inside, we’ll lose him.*

“Hold fire!” I shout to Knox, darting forward as Alec unlocks the door and slips inside.

I manage to wedge my foot into it before Alec can slam it shut, throwing my shoulder against it too. He curses, and I shove the door open,

giving us all space to spill into the house.

It's probably a beautiful place, old and majestic, but none of us see it. I don't give a shit about anything besides Alec as he tries to run for the stairs.

Knox grabs him before he can, throwing him back into the center of the main room. Alec wriggles free like a fucking worm, losing his tailored suit jacket in the struggle and then turning to flee to another room. But this time, Priest is there, blocking the way, gun aimed at his head.

He ducks again before Priest can fire, scrambling across the floor. But every time he tries to find an escape, one of us cuts him off, and it becomes pretty clear that Alec Beckham is a man who's forgotten how to fight his own battles. He's been sitting on his fucking throne for too long, sending his puppets out to do his dirty work.

He tries to hit me in the face, but I grab his arm, twisting it and making him howl in pain. I can't get a solid grip on him with my own arm still jacked up, so I shove him back into the center of the room, and all of us move to box him in.

Alec spins around helplessly, his gaze darting from side to side, searching for some way to escape. His eyes are wild, his hair messy, and his clothes are rumpled from being manhandled. That nice, expensive suit he was wearing for the unveiling is stained with sweat and torn in places from getting shoved around.

His chest heaves, and he tries one more time to make a break for it, choosing to try to dodge past Knox, like that's going to work.

Knox's fist slams into his face, and Alec stumbles back.

Gage steps forward then, his jaw clenched. If he's still hurting from the punch to the gut, he doesn't show it as he raises his gun and looks Alec right in the eye.

"You're in the presence of a queen," he growls. "Kneel."

Then he shoots Alec in both kneecaps, making his legs buckle beneath him.

RIVER

ALEC'S SCREAM of pain as he hits the floor sounds almost animalistic. Gage told him to kneel, but he can't even do that, collapsing onto his back with his legs bent at odd angles.

His scream tapers off to a low groan, and I half expect Gage to cut off the sound by putting a bullet between his eyes. But he doesn't. Instead, Gage turns to me, flipping his grip on the weapon and offering it to me silently.

None of the other Kings say a word as I step forward and take the gun from Gage, then stand in front of Alec, looking down at him.

For the first time since I've known him, there's no smugness on the man's face. His eyes aren't cold and calculating, and no smirk curves his lips.

He looks broken, fear and pain contorting his features as sweat beads his brow.

His chest heaves, his eyes are wild, and every breath comes out on a little half sob from the pain of the bullets Gage put in his knees.

For the first time, he doesn't look untouchable. He doesn't look strong or above it all. All his power and money can't help him now.

Now he's just a man, alone and terrified in a room.

About to die.

I remember calming myself down at that first society meeting by reminding myself that all of the other members gathered in that room were just people. People who could bleed and die the same as any other.

This is definitely proof of that, and it feels so fucking good to be vindicated after everything this man has put me through. Everything he did

to me, to my sister, and to my mother. Everything he planned to use me for in the future.

I can feel it when the Kings gather around me, ready to have my back, offering their silent support as I face down the man responsible for the worst torments of my life.

Alec is still conscious, but he's clearly in pain. It's there on his face as he looks up at me, sweat and streaks of blood shining on his forehead, breathing hard.

Quiet settles over the house as I lean down just a bit, looking him right in the eye.

"You may be my father by blood, but I am nothing like you," I tell him, my voice low and steady. "I'm not as awful as you are. I'm not a cruel, twisted monster who takes pleasure in other people's suffering. Unlike you, I know mercy. So if you beg me, I'll let you live."

He hesitates for a moment, grunting as he shifts on the floor a bit. Despite the pain and fear in his eyes, I can see pride burning in their gray depths too. Even now, some part of him can't admit that he lost. Some part of him can't stand the idea of someone like me beating him. As pleased as he seemed to be by the discovery that I'm his biological daughter, he always thought he was better than me—and he still thinks so.

He saw the way I couldn't shoot Gage until Gage basically pulled the trigger for me, so maybe he thinks I won't do it.

Maybe he still thinks I'm weak.

Gritting my teeth, I lift the gun, aiming it for his head. My finger slides over the trigger, and as Alec catches sight of the movement, the fear in his eyes flares brighter, finally overriding the pride.

"P-please," he stammers out, and it's a far cry from the smooth, practiced way he was lying to the crowd of donors just an hour or so ago. "Please, don't kill me."

"Why shouldn't I?" I ask, tilting my head to one side. "Remember when we were on the docks that night, and you told me I had to kill one of my men if I wanted any of us to walk away in one piece? You didn't listen when I told you no. You could have asked for anything else, but you insisted on that. You didn't change your mind then, so why should I listen to you now?"

Sweat stands out on his forehead, and his eyes are wet with unshed tears. It's almost comical that a man like this is still capable of crying

genuinely, but I guess being confronted with the stark prospect of your own death will do that to a person.

“You... you don’t have to do this,” he begs, staring up at me. “I can give you anything you want. Money, power, all my connections. We can form a new society, and you can be at the head of it. *Please*. I’ll be at your disposal. Whatever you want to do, we’ll do it. No questions asked. I’ll turn the charity over to you, put everything in your name. Please, just don’t do this. Don’t kill me. Not like this. Please.”

He’s babbling, offering things that probably anyone else would take. He could offer me the whole fucking city at this point, and he thinks that’s some kind of leverage. He thinks that will do something to absolve him of the shit he’s done to me. That it will make me forget.

It just goes to show that he really doesn’t know me at all.

I let the sound of his panicked begging wash over me, absorbing every one of his words.

Then I lift the gun again and shoot him in the chest.

Alec’s body jerks from the force of it, blood splattering on the polished floor. He chokes out a wheezing breath, dying, but not dead yet. I step forward again and lean down over him, so close that all I have to do is whisper for him to hear me.

“I lied,” I say softly.

The panic and pain in his expression turns to hate. It burns in his eyes, but at this point, he can’t do more than just glare weakly at me. He can’t do anything to me anymore. He can’t hurt me.

All he can do is lie in a puddle of his own blood, dying like so many of his victims have.

I straighten up and look down at him, my gun still aimed right at his body.

“Why are you so surprised?” I ask, shaking my head as I hold his gaze. “You did this. You *made* me. You were so proud of that fact, weren’t you? You bragged about how putting me through the worst shit that’s ever happened to me turned me into a fighter, and then you planned to use me after you tried to ruin me. You lit the flames that forged me into this. You sent me to hell, and you expected it to break me, but it didn’t. I’m not ruined. And now I don’t fear the demons anymore. They fear me.”

I take aim and shoot him again, between the eyes this time.

The gunshot rings out, the bullet slams home, and Alec Beckham breathes his last breath.

RIVER

I STARE DOWN at the monster who's haunted me since before I even knew who he was.

He was the one who gave me and my sister to those six men. The one responsible for us being locked in a room, tortured and abused, used like trash and thrown away just as easily. He was the one who set in motion the chain of events that led to Hannah dying for real.

To someone like Alec Beckham, I was nothing. He gave me to those awful fucking men because he could. Because he wanted to punish someone else, and Hannah and I were acceptable collateral in his fucked up deal. He probably never thought about me again until he realized that I was the one who'd killed Ivan St. James.

That put me back on his radar, and he thought he could force me to become his protégé, that he could control me. Just like he thought he could do with everyone.

My fingers are still wrapped tightly around the gun, and I can hear my own breathing, harsh and fast, over the beat of my heart.

There's a hand on my shoulder, and I look up to see Priest standing there. There's understanding in his icy eyes, and he nods his head once, turning me away from Alec's body.

"We need to get out of here," Gage says gruffly.

He's right.

This house is isolated and set apart from the others around it, so I doubt anyone nearby heard the sounds of our fight, but it'll only be a matter of time before the rest of the security team find out that they were sent to the wrong place and come tearing up the road to try to rescue their shitty boss.

We walk outside the house to the van, and Knox grins, heat and electric excitement in his eyes. This is the kind of shit he lives for. He's the one who loaded the propane tank into the back of the van in the first place, never one to shy away from the idea of burning a place to the ground to cover up what we did there.

"Stand back," he instructs the rest of us. "I'll get this baby all set to go and then join you."

We stand back and watch as he hops in the van and starts it up. He leaves the driver's side door open, so I can see him jam the gas pedal down with a plank of wood before releasing the clutch. The van lurches forward, and he bails out, landing in a practiced roll on the grassy lawn. He surges to his feet and races to join us where we're taking cover just as the van crashes into the safe house.

It only takes another heartbeat for it to explode, the propane tank igniting and sending the whole thing up in flames.

"Fuck yeah." Knox stares at it, the firelight making his dark brown eyes look amber, just like Ash's. "Damn. I love when we get to blow shit up. Fucking beautiful."

"Pyromaniac," Ash teases, but he sounds like he's in high spirits.

I'm sure Knox would be happy to stay and watch the fire all night—hell, he probably has marshmallows stashed away somewhere, just in case. But after only a few more moments, Gage prods at him, urging us all to get moving.

The van is toast, but Gage parked his car just a little way down the street, so we all head in that direction and climb inside. Knox drives, and I end up in the back seat with Gage and Ash. Once we're moving, I turn toward Ash, conscious of the fact that he got shot earlier and anxious to double-check his wound.

"How's your shoulder holding up?" I ask him, trying to pull aside the collar of his black shirt so I can see the rushed patch job Knox did in the back of the van.

"It's fine," Ash says. Instead of letting me get a look for myself, he grabs me, hauling me the rest of the way into his lap.

He searches my face for a split second, and I don't have time to tell him that I'm fine too before he's dragging me into a hard kiss. It's all teeth and tongues, him nipping at my bottom lip hard enough that it makes me suck in a sharp breath.

By the time we pull away, I'm panting hard, and Ash is grinning sinfully.

"I love you, killer," he says, reaching up to smooth my hair back. "Do you have any idea how fucking hot it was to see you standing there over Alec, getting your vengeance? When you made him beg and then shot him anyway? Fuck."

He drags me into another kiss, and I can feel that he's hard underneath me.

It's an interesting reminder that even though I always think of Knox as the one who gets off on violence and destruction, he's not the only one of the Kings who's got a bit of a psycho side. Knox is more overt with it than the others, but they all live in a world of violence.

And tonight, every bit of violence that we doled out was *earned*.

The world might never be a good place, but it's a better one without those five people in it.

The satisfaction of having Alec dead twists with the feeling of warmth and pleasure at being kissed so thoroughly by Ash, and I whimper against his lips. He presses his tongue into my mouth, and I tangle mine with his, kissing him back just as deeply.

Before I know it, his hips are bucking up into me, and I grind against him, seeking out more heat and friction.

I feel him getting harder beneath me, and that just makes me wish there were fewer layers of clothing between us. I want to feel the heat of his body against mine, to celebrate that we're finally done with the fucking society by—well, by fucking.

Ash slides his hands under my shirt, dragging them up my bare back and then raking his nails downward, sending a shiver up my spine. We're basically humping each other in the backseat at this point, the two of us grinding against each other, kissing again and again in a breathless rush.

"Shit," Knox curses from the front seat, craning his neck to watch us in the rearview mirror when he can afford to take his eyes off the road. "What is it with you and sex in moving vehicles?" he asks me.

The reminder of that day when Knox fucked me in the back seat sends heat down my spine, and I grin, not even looking away from Ash when I respond. "That's a very good idea."

"I'll say," Ash pants.

I half stand so that I can shimmy my pants off, which isn't easy in the back seat of a car, but I manage it. Then I settle back down on Ash's lap, and it's so much hotter now that I can feel the heat of his body without a layer of clothes against my skin.

Ash's pants are all that stands in the way, and I can feel Priest and Gage both watching us intently as I reach down to work his fly open and drag his cock out.

"Fuck," Ash groans. "You're so hot when you take down evil masterminds. It turns you on, doesn't it, killer?"

"Yes," I breathe.

I stroke him slowly for a bit, enjoying the way he pulses against my palm. But the adrenaline surging through me makes it hard to wait. Hard to go slow. I don't need *sweet* right now. I need Ash to bury himself inside me and remind us both that we're alive. So I adjust my grip on his shaft, angling his cock to meet my pussy as I rise up and then sink back down onto him.

"Oh god," I moan. It feels so fucking good. His cock is hard and thick, and it fills me up perfectly. After everything we just did, and everything we've been through, this is exactly what I need.

"That's right. Come on," Ash groans, gripping my hips. "Let's give them a show."

I laugh breathlessly, starting to move on his lap. I bounce up and down, taking him up to the tip and then slamming my body back down with a snap, burying him inside my pussy. I can't help the noises that spill out of me as I move, my grunts and whimpers echoing around the car.

"Everything's a show with you," I pant, moving my hips in a circle so that my clit rubs against the base of his cock.

He chuckles. "Well, when you're as good looking as—"

His bragging is cut off when I go tight around him, and he lets out a choked grunt instead.

"Finally," Priest mutters from the passenger seat. "A way to shut Ash up."

Knox bellows a laugh, and even Ash huffs a chuckle against my lips as we keep moving together, chasing the pleasure that builds and spreads between us.

He pulls me down into another messy kiss, and I melt against him, biting his bottom lip and chasing his tongue back into his mouth with my

own. When I feel a hand moving between us, I look over to see that Gage has scooted closer on the seat. His face is determined, a possessive gleam in his vivid green eyes as he works his hand between our bodies and finds my clit.

The little nub is practically throbbing, slick and needy, and he works me up, massaging it in slow circles while I keep bouncing on Ash's cock.

It's so much, having both of them touching me like this, having everyone's eyes on me. I can feel myself inching closer and closer to the edge, and while Gage touches me, I lean over and kiss him too.

"You're a fucking warrior," he murmurs against my lips. "You're a goddamn queen."

I trade off back and forth, kissing one of them and then the other, and Priest groans from up front, his eyes locked on the sight we make as he watches us over his shoulder. One of his arms moves as if he's stroking himself lightly, and I know he's probably hard as fuck in his pants.

"Fuck, River," Ash groans. "You're so damn perfect, did you know that? Everything about you. Your face, your body—*fuck*."

"The way you take it," Gage adds, pinching my clit and making me wail with pleasure. "You're so good at this, baby girl. Like you were made for it."

And maybe I was.

Maybe I was made for them, just like they were made for me.

Between the two of them, Ash and Gage push me higher and higher, using everything they've learned about my body by now to drag me right to the edge. It's only a matter of time before I'm screaming my release, coming hard on Ash's cock and Gage's fingers. Ash is right behind me, pumping me full of his cum with short, deep thrusts.

My head is spinning, my heart thudding unevenly against my ribs. It takes me a bit to come down from the high, and when I do, I realize that the car isn't moving anymore. We're in the garage at home, and Knox and Priest have both turned around in their seats to watch us.

"You almost made me crash the car again, little fox," Knox tells me in a voice that's hoarse with desire. "You know what that means, don't you?"

Fuck, yes.

I clamber awkwardly off of Ash's lap, and there's movement in the front seat too. As soon as I open the car door and move to get out, Knox is already there.

He grabs me, pulling me right into a hot, deep kiss. Like everything with Knox, I can feel all of his wild emotions right there on the surface, and it makes me crave him even more. Being with him is like holding on to a live wire, and although some people might shrink away from the sheer force of it, I fucking love it.

“You drive me so fucking crazy,” he groans against my lips. “Gonna fuck you so hard I’ll split you open. Gonna make you feel me everywhere.”

He doesn’t even bother pulling off my shirt. He just grabs the hem of it and shreds, tearing it down the middle and yanking the sleeves off my arms before unhooking my bra and tossing it aside. Then he spins me around and bends me over so that my upper body is inside the car, braced on the seat, with my bare feet on the cold garage floor.

He grinds against me, and I look over my shoulder to see that he’s leaving bloody fingerprints on my ass and hips. He’s got blood on his face too, and he looks feral and so fucking beautiful.

“You want this?” he asks, pressing the heat of his clothed erection against my ass.

“Yes,” I groan. “Please.

“Say it again,” he growls. “Tell me how bad you want it, little fox.”

“Knox, please. Fuck me! I need your fat cock inside me, please!”

“Yeah, you do.”

The words are a feral grunt as he undoes his pants and shoves them down, and the second his cock springs free, he lines himself up and slams into me. I cry out from the feeling of being so suddenly full and the rough way he’s handling me. But I love it. I love every spark of pain as he fucks into me almost brutally.

Priest is still sitting in the front passenger seat, the car door open, and the way I’m bent over puts my face almost level with his crotch.

“Give him what he wants, River,” Gage murmurs. He’s still sitting in the back seat, watching all of this play out. “You know what it is.”

“Let me suck your cock,” I whisper to Priest, bending a little lower so that my breath ghosts over him as I speak. “I want to make you feel good.”

“Fuck,” the blond man rasps. He reaches up and smooths my hair back with one hand, then undoes his belt and fly with the other, getting his cock out. He gathers my hair into a tight knot around his fist and uses it to pull me forward until the head of his cock is right there against my lips.

“Take me,” he says thickly, his whole body tensing up. “Put your mouth on me.”

I wrap my lips around him, letting saliva drip down to slick the way as I start to bob my head. He groans, using the hold on my hair to pull my head up and down, making me take as much as he wants.

Behind me, Knox keeps slamming into my pussy, almost hard enough to make the car rock and shake, and every deep, punishing thrust makes me pant around Priest’s cock. Arousal and cum drip down my thighs, cooling against my heated skin.

“Shit,” Priest pants, and I can tell from how tight his voice is that he’s close. “River, I can’t—you’re gonna make me—”

“That’s it,” Knox grunts from behind me. “Suck his cock while I fuck you. Show my cousin how good you can be.”

It’s not hard to do what he says. All I can focus on is the thought of how many times I almost lost these men tonight—and on too many nights before this. I suck Priest’s cock like I’m trying to draw out a piece of his soul, and he shudders beneath me, the hand gripping my hair shaking slightly. I hollow my cheeks in response, swirling my tongue around his shaft while pleasure burns inside me like an inferno.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuuu—”

Priest pulls me up, and I can tell he’s trying to hold back before he comes, but it’s too late. He spills into my mouth in a hot, salty rush, and I moan, taking all of it.

“Don’t swallow until I tell you to,” he says, his voice full of the kind of raw possessiveness that makes my chest ache in the best way. “Just hold it there.”

Fuck, that’s hot.

I close my lips, nodding to show that I understand what he wants me to do. He tilts my face up a little, holding my gaze while Knox keeps fucking me.

Behind me, Knox slaps my ass, and I moan again around the mouthful of cum, my body throbbing with pleasure and already so close to falling apart.

“Touch yourself,” Knox grunts. “Rub your clit until you come.”

I do what he says. With Priest’s cum sitting on my tongue, I brace myself on one hand and slide the other downward, finding the firm, sensitive nub of my clit. My head starts to droop as pleasure overwhelms

me, but Priest catches my chin again, holding it up so that I can't look away from him.

He sees it all.

He sees the way my nostrils flare, my lips pressing together as I suck in air through my nose.

He sees the way my back bows, my entire body going taut as the orgasm rips through me.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, his blue eyes gleaming like ice.

Coming makes me go tight around Knox's dick, and it's more than he can take. I can feel his piercing dragging against my inner walls as his hips piston over and over again. His fingers dig into my ass as he pumps himself into me, his cum filling me in hot spurts. I can't scream since my mouth is full, and my eyes almost water from the intense pleasure.

"You did so well," Priest murmurs when Knox finally stills, stroking my hair almost worshipfully. "Swallow for me."

I do, gratefully, and he uses his grip on my chin to pull me up into a soft kiss.

Knox draws out of me and slaps my ass again, making me hiss. The sting against my ass cheek is a delicious contrast to the softness of Priest's lips against mine.

Moving as a unit, the two cousins help me straighten up and step back, and the moment they let go of me, Gage is right there. He pulls me toward the front of the car and presses me up against the hood, the metal of it cold on my skin. He leans in and kisses me once, then pulls back and lets his eyes rake appreciatively over my body. He looks down to where Knox and Ash's spunk is leaking out of me, then slips his fingers inside me, stuffing their cum back into my pussy.

"That night on the side of the road," he says, his voice low and deep. "I knew it was the beginning of something that would fucking change my life."

He breaks off, and I reach up and cup his face, rolling my hips against his fingers, fucking myself deeper on them.

"I think I did too. You have no idea how terrified I was of that. But... I'm glad you made me admit how I felt."

"I'll never let you hide from me, baby girl," he promises. "I'll never let you run from this."

Gage shoves his pants down as he speaks, and I help him peel off his shirt. He grabs me under my ass, hissing out a breath as he deposits me on the hood of the car. After everything he's gone through tonight, I have a moment of worry that he shouldn't be exerting himself more, but as if he can sense my hesitation, he catches my gaze.

"I'm good, baby. If Alec Beckham couldn't take me down, this won't either."

I let out a sound that's half laugh and half sob as my legs go around his waist, and he doesn't wait a second longer. He just slides home, bottoming out inside me. His fingers dig into my skin as I tighten my legs around him, dragging him even closer.

"You feel so good," he groans. "You always feel so fucking good."

"For you all," I whisper. "Only for you."

That spurs him to fuck into me even harder, and now we are rocking the car with the force of it. I meet him in the middle for a hot, sweaty kiss, and he keeps moving, his hips snapping forward, burying himself to the hilt again and again.

After being fucked twice already, my pussy is so sensitive, and I can feel the flames of my third orgasm being fanned, the rippling remnants of pleasure from the first two still lingering. Gage seems like he's close too, and I gasp for breath, burying my face against his neck.

"Come for me," he whispers, and for once, it sounds less like a command and more like a plea. "Come *with* me."

I couldn't stop it if I tried. My arms lock around his shoulders as my thighs squeeze his lean, muscled waist, and my whole body goes rigid as I give him what he asked for. He shoves his cock deeper inside me as I come hard around him, following me over the edge with throbbing pulses of his dick.

We stay like that for several long minutes, getting our breath back. My body feels like it's been wrung out, exhausted beyond what I thought was possible, but there's something else there too. Something warm and happy that burns in my chest like an ember that will never go out.

When I finally look up, the other three men are gathered around us. The only one of us who got all the way undressed is me, and they're all tucking themselves away and zipping up their pants. They all look about as beat up and disheveled as I feel, but they have wide grins on their faces despite the bruises.

“We should probably go get cleaned up,” Ash comments, wincing a little as he moves his arm. “As much fun as it is to make a mess in the garage, I’m about ready to face-plant on a real fucking bed.”

Gage lets me down onto wobbly legs, and I prove Ash’s point about how we’ve made a mess when cum gushes out of me to trickle down my thighs.

Knox scoops me up and throws me over his shoulder, and I laugh, not resisting as he carries me inside the house and upstairs to my room. I find myself wishing that I had a giant shower so we could all pile in together and get clean, but we end up having to split up.

It doesn’t matter, though. As if by some unspoken agreement, all of the men make their way back to my room once they’ve showered the night off them, and my grin widens as each one of them crawls into bed with me.

Beside me, Gage reaches over and tangles his fingers into my hair, kissing me sleepily.

“You’re free,” he murmurs.

And I know he’s right.

RIVER

IT'S A WARM, sunny day, and I'm sitting in the tree in the park that I used to climb with Hannah all those years ago. There's a feeling of warmth and longing in my chest, and I pull in a deep breath, savoring the feeling of fresh air in my lungs.

Somehow, I know I'm dreaming, but that doesn't make it any less nice. I haven't been back in this dream for a long time.

For weeks, it's been all death and pain and Alec fucking Beckham laughing and telling me to call him Dad. But now there's a blue sky and a warm breeze, and when I look to my left, Hannah is there.

Her fingers are wrapped around the bark of the tree, and the breeze rustles her hair, sending it flying into her face a bit. She seems content, and when she looks over at me, she smiles.

I can't help but smile back, and it comes so naturally here in this place. I feel lighter than I have in years, and I don't know if that's just in the dream or if it's how I'll feel in real life too.

"It's over," I tell Hannah, hugging the branch a little tighter. "I got my vengeance. I killed Julian and Natalie Maduro, stole everything from them. And then I took down Alec and the other society members too. None of them can hurt anyone else ever again."

Hannah looks happy, her blue eyes shining. She reaches out, resting a hand on my shoulder. There's a spike of anxiety in my gut when she lets go of the tree, as if I'm worried she might fall, but I guess that's not a problem here in a dream.

"I'm glad," she says. "But you know this is about more than that, right?"

I frown, not sure what she means. “More than what? They were the biggest things in my life. Alec was responsible for everything terrible that happened to us. If it weren’t for him, you’d probably still be—”

The rest of that sentence is hard to say, but I know she understands.

She nods. “I get that. But it’s always been about more than just taking them down. It’s about protecting people. You protecting Cody, protecting your guys, protecting all the people who won’t have their lives destroyed by the Kyrio Society anymore.”

I drag in a deep breath as I consider her words, the reality of them hitting me as we look out over the city from our high vantage point the way we did when we were young. It’s a city that won’t have to deal with a megalomaniac motherfucker pulling the strings anymore, and that’s a very good thing.

“You know, it’s not as big as it seemed when we were littler,” Hannah says. “It’s not as daunting. You were always scrappy, and it was always kind of you against the world back then, but now that’s all changed, hasn’t it?”

“I guess it has.”

“It has. You’re a big fish now, a big player in all of this.” She waves her hand at the spread of the city. “You’re not just trying to survive anymore. You can do so much more than that now.”

My heart swells to hear her say that, and I reach for her hand, threading our fingers together.

“I love you,” I tell her, a strange blend of happiness and longing swelling in my chest. “I always will.”

“I love you too,” Hannah says back. She squeezes my hand and then turns to look back out over it all, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Even if you did spit apple juice all over me that one time.”

“What? That was an accident!” I insist, laughing. “There was something funny on TV.”

“So funny that you had to spray your juice all over me. That shirt I was wearing was never the same.”

“Oh, please. A good wash, and it was fine. I took care of it.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Yeah, you took care of everything. Or you tried to. Remember that time when you...”

She launches into another story, and I cling to the trunk of the tree and listen to her talk, watching the way her face lights up animatedly. Talking

*about these happy memories feels so good, and even though I know this is only a dream, it's like having my sister here with me again.
Just for a little while.*

HANNAH'S LAUGH carries on the wind, and when my eyes snap open and I wake up, I swear I can still hear it.

It's been a few days since we made our move against Alec and the Kyrio Society, and we've been in cleanup mode ever since then, making sure nothing that happened that night can be traced back to us.

So far, it hasn't been, and as the days pass, I get more and more confident that it won't. We took care of all the loose threads in one go, taking out everyone in the society at once. We covered our tracks well enough, and there's no one left to turn on us.

There's no feeling of crushing anxiety or pressure in my chest when I wake up, for once, and so I just lie and stare up at the ceiling. I stay that way for a while, letting my thoughts wander, until Ash stirs beside me. He rolls over to face me, tracing his fingers down my arm.

"Bad dream?" he whispers, his voice roughened by sleep.

I shake my head almost bemusedly. "No. It wasn't a bad dream."

It's funny, lying here with him like this. I think back to that moment when Ash snuck into my room the first night I stayed in this house. He joked then about making my dreams sweeter, and I thought to myself that my dreams were never sweet.

They weren't back then, but maybe that's not true anymore.

Maybe things have changed.

"How's your shoulder?" I ask him, leaning up on one elbow so I can get a better look at it. The day after everything went down, I insisted on taking him to Trask to get it checked out, but it was never too bad of a wound. It never slowed him down.

"Eh, it's fine. It's probably a good thing I got shot," he muses. He took his glasses off to sleep, and flecks of gold glint in his amber eyes. "I was falling behind the others in number of scars. I mean, Gage has that badass one on his stomach now, and Knox has so many you can't even count them. This helps me get caught up. I gotta maintain my street cred, you know?"

I roll my eyes just as Priest lets out a quiet yawn on my other side.

“Scars won’t make you a badass, Ash,” he comments, having caught the tail end of our discussion. “I don’t think anything will do that.”

“Excuse me,” Ash fires back, looking put out. “Which one of us can throw knives with deadly accuracy? That’s pretty badass if I do say so myself.”

“Yes, you definitely say so yourself,” Priest replies. “Thinking of running off to join the circus sometime soon? I think that’s the main career option for knife throwers.”

They have me caught between them, and their hands wander as they banter, touching my skin, stroking my hair, groping me a little.

I fucking love it, honestly. I love how easy and comfortable it all feels. Being with them like this every morning is more than I could have ever asked for, and I lean into those touches, closing my eyes and enjoying it.

“It’s too early for all this goddamn bickering,” Gage mumbles as he wakes up. “What does a man have to do to get some fucking sleep in this house?”

“Sleep alone, probably,” Ash says with a shrug. “Sorry, I don’t make the rules.”

“But you do make the most noise,” Priest deadpans, which prompts a snort from the messy bedhead that is Knox waking up too.

“A-fucking-men to that. I was having a good dream, and you ruined it,” Knox grumbles.

Ash rolls his eyes. “Sorry to pull you out of a dream about dismembering someone.”

“It was Preston Salinger,” Knox says. “So it was pretty damn good.”

“Ugh.” I make a face. “Don’t talk about him in bed. Don’t talk about any of those fuckers in bed.”

“Not even about me hacking him into little bitty pieces and feeding him to my pet fish?” Knox asks, lifting his head a little to grin at me.

“Knox...” Gage drawls warningly. “You don’t have a pet fish. And before you even ask, we’re not getting one.”

“What? But hear me out. It could be great for—”

It’s such an oddly peaceful moment, the four of them joking and teasing each other as they come fully awake, with me in the middle of it. It feels domestic as fuck to start a day this way, and I could definitely get used to more mornings like this.

“Alright,” Gage says after a few minutes, sighing. “That’s enough lying around. Everybody up.”

“Sir, yes, sir.” Ash gives him a mock salute.

We all climb out of bed to start the day, and I stretch my arms over my head, enjoying the way Knox openly ogles my pierced nipples. I’m still a bit sore from the fight with Alec and everything that came before it, but the kinks in my muscles and the bruises on my skin pale in comparison to the lightness in my chest.

Just like Gage said, I feel free.

We all get dressed and go downstairs to have breakfast, moving around the kitchen in the coordinated dance we’ve gotten down to a science by now. No one steps on anyone else’s toes, and we pass jam and toast and coffee and eggs, everybody getting what they want before settling at the table to eat.

Once we’re all sitting down, I take a sip of my coffee and lean back in my chair. “There’s something I need to do today,” I tell them.

Gage frowns. “What is it?”

“I’m going to go pick up Cody. I want to bring him back here. I promised him that I’d always come back for him, and I want to keep that promise now that it’s safe.”

Part of me is a bit nervous, to be honest. I know it’s a huge thing to ask the guys, having Cody stay here permanently. I’m not even sure how it will work. Or *if* it will. I don’t know if I have it in me to raise a kid, and I’m kind of terrified that I’ll be awful at it and end up fucking up Hannah’s child.

But after all the shit I’ve been through, I’ve learned that you never let go of the people you care about. And I’ve definitely come to care about Cody, far beyond the fact that he’s my only link left to my sister.

I wait, trying not to hold my breath, to see what the men are going to say.

Knox moves first, pulling me into his arms. “Good. Bring him back where he belongs,” he murmurs, nuzzling my neck. Then he adds, “I can’t wait to teach that kid everything I know.”

I roll my eyes, humming in my throat. “Uh, you’re not going to be teaching my sister’s kid to torture and kill people, Knox.”

He just chuckles, the sound warm in my ear. “We’ll see.”

“You should go get him,” Gage agrees, nodding. “I know you explained to him why he had to go, but now that we don’t have to worry about Alec trying to drag him into the fight to use against you, there’s no reason for him not to be in Detroit.”

Priest nods too. “We’ll make sure the room is ready for him.”

“It’ll be nice to have another kid around,” Ash throws in, grinning.

“Yeah. You’ve been the only one for so long,” Gage shoots back at him, and that makes the grin drop immediately.

“You stole my fucking joke. I was going to say it was Knox,” Ash groans, making a face as he gets up to pour himself more coffee.

My heart swells, and I drag my bottom lip between my teeth to hide my wide grin. These men might be broken and dark and twisted, but they’re more than that too. They may be villains to everyone else, but they’re so fucking good to the people they love. And that includes Cody. It includes *me*.

I’m still nervous that I won’t be cut out for this, and that it might all blow up in my face, but I won’t be alone in trying to figure it out.

The guys promise to make sure Cody’s room is ready, and also that there aren’t guns and shit lying around the house by the time I get back.

“Want one of us to go with you?” Ash offers.

I shake my head. “Thanks, but no. I think this is something I need to do on my own.”

“I get that.” He leans in to peck me on the cheek. “We’ll be here when you get back.”

After breakfast, I go upstairs and put on a fresh coat of nail polish—a sparkly blue that matches my mood perfectly—before shooting Avalon a quick text. Then I head out to the garage, grinning at the sight of my fancy as fuck new Lambo.

It’s all mine, fresh off the lot. Sleek and black and fast with a buttery leather interior. I only bought it yesterday, so I haven’t really had much of a chance to drive it, and I swear I almost orgasm on the spot when I turn it on and feel the engine purr. I never liked Tatum, but she might’ve been on to something with her taste in fast, expensive cars.

The interior still has that new car smell, so I roll down the windows a little as I hit the road, speeding down the highway toward Defiance, Ohio.

I blast music on the drive, singing along loudly and mostly off key, and after a couple hours, I pull over in front of Avalon’s apartment building. It

looks about the same as the last time I was there, nondescript but homey, and I take a second to gather myself before I get out of the car.

My stomach tightens itself into knots as I head up to her unit and knock on the door, a new worry surfacing in my mind.

What if Avalon has given Cody such a good life here that he doesn't want to come with me?

The door opens, and Avalon smiles at me slowly from the doorway. "Hey, River. We've been expecting you. Thanks for the text."

"Yeah, of course." I smile at her in greeting, trying to push my nerves aside. "I figured I'd give you a heads up I was on my way."

"Cody!" she calls over her shoulder. "Come see who's at the door."

There's a moment of silence and then the sound of little feet padding down the hall. Cody comes to peek shyly around Avalon's legs, and when he sees me, his eyes, so much like Hannah's, light up immediately.

"River!" he cries, launching himself at my legs. He squeezes them tight, and I stroke the top of his head, feeling relief course through me.

Part of me was afraid he might have forgotten all about me, but this is pretty solid proof that he hasn't.

"Are you coming in?" he asks, craning his neck to look up at me. "Are you staying? Do you want some hamburgers?"

He blurts every one of his questions out in that rapid fire way that kids do, and Avalon laughs, opening the door wider.

"Let her have a second to come in first. She needs her legs for that."

Cody nods and lets me go, but he keeps smiling as Avalon ushers me inside.

It's such a change from the way he was before I dropped him off. Knox could usually get him to smile, or Ash, when he would do little magic tricks to distract him from bad dreams or bad days. But he was usually just quiet and a little distant. Sad and adrift because he'd lost so much.

It feels good to see him smiling and laughing so much more now. He'll never get rid of the scars he carries, I know that from experience. But this makes me hopeful that he'll learn to find joy and happiness in life even with those scars on his heart.

"He's young," Avalon murmurs to me, as if she can sense the direction of my thoughts. "He's been through a lot, I can tell that much, but little kids are so resilient. All they need is someone to be kind to them, and it can make such a difference. I tried to do that."

She looks a little shy as she smiles at me, and I smile back at her, unguarded for probably the first time since we met.

“You did great,” I tell her. “Better than great. He never smiled this much before. He was never this happy, except when he was with his mom. Thank you.”

Her smile grows. “You’re welcome. You helped me out, you know? More than you probably know.”

“To be fair, you helped me first. I would never have gotten to Ivan without you.”

“Maybe. But I mean more than that. You gave me a second chance, River. I don’t know if you know how rare that is. In my former line of work, there would always be some guy who’d come along and he’d say that he could get the girls off the street. He’d promise all this shit, tell us that we just had to be his, and our whole lives would change. It happened like clockwork. And at first, if you were new and it was the first time, you’d maybe believe him. It happens in movies, right? So maybe it could happen for real. But it never does. Once you’re out there, on the streets, it’s so fucking hard to get out of that life. Everything seems designed to keep you there, to make sure you feel like you don’t have any other choices. But then you came along, and you gave me another choice. It changed everything.”

She talks candidly about it all, and that’s one of the things I’ve always admired about her. When she feels comfortable, she can be incredibly open about things.

And something about what she tells me stirs a familiar feeling in my chest. Because I understand it, in a way.

So I nod, giving her a little smile. “I get it. It’s not exactly the same for me, of course, but I understand what you mean. When I was younger, something terrible happened to me, and I felt like I was going to be trapped in that cycle forever. Everything I did was to try to get revenge for it, and everything I felt was anger. I think I finally broke that cycle. And I never really imagined I’d be helping people on the way.”

Avalon beams at me, and she reaches out to take my hand. I’ve thought before that she reminds me of Hannah a bit, and it echoes the moment in my dream where Hannah did the same thing. I know they’re not the same, but having a friend who understands my world while being a bit outside of it is probably a good thing for me.

“I’m glad,” she says. “I’m glad I met you. Glad I trusted you. Glad you trusted me. Any time you need something, you only have to call.”

“Same here,” I tell her. “I’ve got your back.”

“Are we going back to Detroit?” Cody asks, breaking into the moment. He looks back and forth between us, and there’s a hopeful look on his face that banishes the last vestiges of my worry that he wouldn’t want to come back with me.

“If you want to come, yeah,” I tell him. “All the guys missed you. Ash has so many new tricks to show you, and Priest and Gage are getting your room set up right now.”

“Oh, I bet Knox has new stories!” Cody exclaims, his eyes lighting up.

I don’t even want to think about what kinds of stories Knox has been telling this kid, so instead of pursuing that subject, I just help him pack up his things.

When we’re ready to go, Cody hugs Avalon, getting a little teary. It’s cute to see how much they’ve bonded, and I promise them both that we’ll visit.

Avalon pulls me into a hug too, and I hug her back, relaxing into it. It’s weird that I don’t remember the last person who hugged me who wasn’t one of the guys or my sister before she died, and it feels nice. It’s something new for me, having a friend, and I kind of really like it.

“Take care of yourself,” Avalon murmurs before she pulls back, and I nod.

“I’ll do my best.”

And for the first time in a fucking long time, it actually seems like it might be possible.

Cody and I head back to the car, and I get him settled in. The first bit of the drive back is quiet. I’m not sure how to handle being alone with a kid in a car, but then I remember how Knox played car games with him and decide that’s definitely worth a shot.

“You know a lot of words, right?” I ask Cody, glancing over at him.

He blinks and then seems to think about it. “Avalon taught me some more. I know at least twenty words.”

I laugh, because he definitely knows more than twenty, but to a little kid, that’s probably a million.

“Alright,” I say. “I’m going to say a letter, and you have to tell me a word that starts with that letter. Bonus points if it’s something you can see

from out your window.”

“Okay!” He says back, sitting up straighter in the seat. “I’m ready.”

“First letter is... F.”

He looks around for a bit, his little face all scrunched up as he thinks. Finally, he points out the window at a shiny red truck that speeds by. “Fire truck.”

“Nice, that’s a good one. Do you want to give me a letter?”

“Um... W.”

“Ooh, that’s hard, let me think...”

I look over at him as I contemplate my answer, taking in how comfortable and happy he looks, and a strange feeling fills my chest.

It feels a little like *hope*.

RIVER

Three Months Later

“OKAY,” Ash says. He has a coin in one hand, holding it so Cody can see it. “Now watch my hands. I’ll do it slow so you can see the trick.”

It’s early evening, and Ash is teaching Cody sleight-of-hand tricks, dazzling him with his quick fingers and the way he’s so damn good at misdirection.

I shake my head in amusement at them, but it’s definitely better than Knox teaching him how to dismember a man or something, which is still one hundred percent off the table.

I know Cody isn’t going to grow up like other kids. He’s already been through a lot at such a young age, and he’s not going to be raised in a cute little house in the suburbs with regular parents. But he won’t be forced to carry on the Maduro family name, at least. All the things Julian had planned for him died with the man himself, so Cody will be able to forge his own path in life once he’s old enough to decide what he wants to do.

In the kitchen, Priest and Knox are going over plans for some renovations to the house, and I join them in there, grabbing a glass of water while they talk it out.

The house seemed big and grand when I first showed up here, but at this point, we need to expand. We need a bigger bedroom, for one thing, so that we can get a huge bed for all of us.

We just need more space for this strange, perfect family we’ve built.

“Cody should probably get his own bathroom,” Priest is saying. “So there’s no danger of him walking into anything he shouldn’t if he needs to

use one of ours.”

Knox nods, and I lean over to look at the floor plans he’s scribbling on.

“All I’m saying,” I tell them, poking into the conversation, “is that if we had a huge shower, that could be interesting. For... reasons.”

Priest chuckles and Knox’s eyes flare with heat. He palms the back of my head and pulls me into a rough kiss, letting me know exactly how he feels about that idea.

Seems like a pretty good chance I might get my way on that point.

“I’m heading out,” I tell them breathlessly once Knox releases me. “Gage has been working too hard for the past few days, and someone has to bring him back home and remind him he has a bed here, and that dinner is a thing.”

Priest looks at me with warmth in his eyes, and he pulls me down into a kiss. “Go get him.”

I hum under my breath as I leave them in the kitchen and head out to the garage.

Goosebumps spread over my skin as I slide into my sleek black car and start to drive toward Sin and Salvation. I still love this car, and I’ve even found time to christen it with each of my men, which makes me love it even more. The Lambo and the renovations to the house are the two big things I did for myself with the money we stole from Julian. The rest has been re-invested into the Kings’ and my business dealings, both legal and illegal.

The club is hopping as usual when I get there.

Over the last three months, it’s been getting more attention from the guys, since they have less other shit on their plates and more time to devote to it. And just like Gage once suggested, I’ve been finding a place for myself here too, integrating myself into their business.

I make my way through the crowded dance floor, nodding to the bartenders as I go. They all know me well by now, and no one stops me as I head straight for the back room where I know Gage will be holed up, hard at work.

I swing the door open and strike a sexy pose in the doorway, hip cocked out, one arm overhead.

“Hey, handsome. I missed you,” I purr, putting on a low, seductive voice. “So I decided to come get you myself.”

Gage looks up from the laptop he was typing on, and his eyes heat appreciatively.

“Well, don’t I feel special?” he says, grinning.

I walk into the room, closing the door behind me as I drop the sex kitten act. “Actually, I came to help you finish up whatever all this is so you can come home.”

We’ve all been busy lately as the guys refocus on their main business, both the legal and illegal sides of it. I’ve been helping as much as I can, learning the ins and outs of it all, but Gage is the one who’s been putting in the most hours.

“There *is* something you can help me with,” he tells me. Leaning back, he pushes his chair away from his desk a bit. “Come here.”

His voice drops into that commanding, dominant tone I love so much, and even though I really did come to help him get some shit done, I’m not complaining one bit if he’d rather play than work. He could use the break.

I do as he says, coming to stand between him and the desk.

“Like this?” I ask, biting my lip as I look at him over my shoulder.

“Just like that. Very good. Now bend over,” he says gruffly. “Show me that pretty pussy of yours.”

My heart races, and for once, I don’t even tease him or try to act bratty. I just undo my button and fly and then work my pants and underwear down over my hips, baring my pussy to him while I bend over the desk.

“Beautiful,” Gage murmurs.

He drags a hand down my back and over my ass, massaging my flesh with his calloused fingers. I expect him to go lower and slip a finger or two into my pussy, but he doesn’t. He keeps groping my ass, adding a second hand so that he can spread my cheeks apart and get a view of my furled back hole.

“I want you to touch yourself,” he tells me. “Play with yourself while I watch.”

“*Fuck.*” I groan, already swept up in this little game.

The music from the club is muffled back here, but I can still hear the beat of the bass bumping over the speakers, and the dull roar of the patrons dancing and drinking out on the floor. It just adds to the heat coursing through me, knowing there are at least a hundred people out there, grinding against each other while I’m in here, following Gage’s orders.

Resting one forearm on the desk, I slide my free hand down, and as soon as my fingers touch my pussy, pleasure shoots up my spine. I’m no stranger to getting myself off, so I know what I like, but it’s not the power

of my touch that's doing it for me right now. It's the way Gage is watching me, his gaze so hungry that I can feel it like a brand on my skin.

"Feels good," I murmur under my breath, half talking to Gage and half to myself. I grind my hips back, humping my own hand as I work my clit harder.

I can't see the gorgeous man behind me, but I can hear it when he starts to undo his own pants. He hisses out a breath, and the sounds of him stroking his cock join the whimpers and moans falling from my lips. I don't stop moving, circling my clit, pressing two fingers into my hole, chasing the pleasure that builds and builds.

"I love seeing you like this," Gage pants, already breathless. "Soaking wet and needy. My perfect little slut."

"Oh god," I whimper, and he growls.

My toes curl in my shoes as he presses his cock right up against my asshole, still jerking himself hard and fast. I can feel the wetness of his precum spreading against my skin, and I let out little mewling groans, desperate for him to fill me up.

"Which hole do you want me in, baby girl?" he demands roughly. "You want me in this perfect, tight little ass or in your pussy?"

"I don't... fuck, I..."

He chuckles. "This is why you need all four of us, isn't it? Me and my brothers. Because your cunt and your ass and your sweet little mouth are all so greedy."

"Yes," I groan, the sound ripped out of me as my clit throbs beneath my fingertips.

I'm on the verge of flying apart, but just before I tip over the edge, Gage surges to his feet, sending his chair careening backward as he tucks his body in tight behind me. He grabs my wrist, pulling my hand away from my pussy.

"That's enough, baby girl," he growls. "My turn now."

As if to make sure I don't even think about disobeying him, he folds my arm at the small of my back, grabbing the other one to do the same thing.

His grasp is tight like iron, and I struggle a little, just to give him a reason to tighten his grip. He does, his fingers wrapping hard around my wrists as he keeps my upper body pressed down onto the desk. My lacy bra scratches against my peaked nipples as my tits smash against the solid

surface, and I cry out when Gage shoves his cock into my pussy, fucking me hard and fast.

“Gage... oh, fuck!”

I moan his name desperately, and he goes right for the spot that makes me tremble and see stars. He batters against it with his cock, grinding in as deeply as he can, making me feel it everywhere.

“Tell me how it feels,” he demands, as hungry for my words as ever. “Tell me how much you love it.”

“I love it so much,” I answer immediately. “Shit, it’s so good. Fuck me harder. I need more. *Please.*”

He gives in, slamming into me, fucking me hard enough that the heavy desk squeaks and shudders beneath me.

He holds my wrists, keeping me pinned down, fucking into me, and it doesn’t take long before I’m crying out as the pleasure reaches a fever pitch, sparking my orgasm.

I moan his name, writhing in place, bucking back against him, and Gage thrusts in even deeper, filling me up with his own release as I come apart for him.

It takes a few long minutes for me to get my breath back, and when I do, Gage lets me up, his cock slipping out of me. He turns me around, pulling me into his arms and kissing my forehead and then my lips, lingering a bit.

“I really did come to help,” I insist breathlessly.

“I know you did, baby girl.” He chuckles. “But the rest of the work can wait until tomorrow. Let’s go home.”

I grin, loving the way that sounds.

After Gage helps me clean up, we head out, walking through the club and dodging patrons who are drunk or on their way to it. Gage moves with practiced ease, a king in his element, and I feel like a fucking queen as I stride beside him.

“I’ll drive,” he says when we reach the door and step outside.

“Pfft, you wish,” I shoot back. “You always get to drive. It’s my turn.”

“Someone gets a fancy new car, and now they think they’re in charge,” Gage retorts. He digs a coin from his pocket. “I’ll flip you for it.”

“Who are you, Ash?” I tease. “Heads.”

Gage flips the coin, and it lands on heads. He narrows his eyes in a way that makes me certain I’ll pay for this later in a very enjoyable way, but then

he gestures for me to go ahead of him, leading the way to my car. I rev the engine once we're settled inside, and Gage leans back in the passenger seat.

"I am glad you got a new car," he admits, glancing over at me as I pull out onto the street. "And even more glad that you got rid of that piece of shit you used to drive."

"Excuse me, there was nothing wrong with my car." I shoot him an incensed look.

"It only started when it felt like it. There are rust stains from it in our driveway that we're going to have to pay someone to come remove."

I roll my eyes. "Snob. It was a fine car. It got me where I needed to go."

"And wheezed like a ninety-two-year-old asthmatic the entire way there."

Even if he is talking shit about my baby, it's really nice to see this more lighthearted side to Gage. A side that can argue about stupid shit like my beater of a car, and not about battle plans or strategies for taking down our enemies. He can relax—as much as possible for a person like him, anyway—because he knows his family is safe.

We get home just as Ash and Priest are putting Cody to bed. I pop my head in to say goodnight, and he waves his little hand at me to come in.

"What's up, kid?" I ask, squatting down to be on eye level with him in the bed.

"Can you check and make sure there's nothing in the closet?" he whispers, his eyes darting to the cracked closet door. "Just in case."

I grin and reach up to smooth his messy hair back. "Don't worry. We're all scarier than anything that could be living in the closet. No monsters would dare come in this house while we're here. And even if they tried, the Kings wouldn't let them get you."

"Promise?"

"Pinky swear."

We link pinkies, and I hold on as his eyes get heavy. When he's most of the way asleep, I release his hand and pull the covers up around him. Then I leave the room, easing the door closed and heading back downstairs.

All the guys are gathered in the living room, relaxing like we usually do at the end of the day. Ash pulls me into his lap as I move to join them, spreading my legs over his and casually slipping a hand down between my legs. His hands always have to be moving when he's talking, and although coins and knives are all well and good, he likes to play with *me* the most.

“Good job getting the workaholic to come home,” he murmurs in my ear. “I’ll have to give you a good reward for that. Anything in particular you want?”

He teases my clit with his fingertips through my pants, and I squirm against him.

It’s just... kind of perfect. We’re all relaxed and comfortable. The table isn’t covered with plans and random Lego pieces representing vicious secret society members. There’s nothing looming over our heads, no threat lingering on the horizon.

The movie playing on TV is something familiar, although I don’t remember the name of it. There are a lot of action sequences though, and I let the sound of intense music, shouts, and the squealing of car tires wash over me as I doze on Ash’s lap, grinding against his hand occasionally as a low, steady pleasure thrums through my veins.

I’m almost all the way asleep when my phone rings, startling me back to the present.

With a groan, I slide off Ash’s lap, digging it out of my pocket to answer. The number isn’t one I recognize, and my brows furrow as I lift the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

It’s quiet on the other end of the line for a moment, and then I hear a female voice that’s shockingly familiar.

“Hello, River.”

Tatum.

My stomach drops, and I immediately go tense, my entire body slamming into fight-or-flight mode so fast that I feel like I got whiplash. All the guys sit up straighter around me, tuned into my mood and probably the look on my face.

“You... *how?*” I choke out. “How the fuck did you make it out of that building? We saw your entire floor collapse.”

My mind is suddenly full of visions of the war starting up again. The constant need to watch our backs, the scheming and planning, the eye for an eye. Just when I thought it was over. Just when I thought we were free.

“What the fuck?” Knox asks, sitting upright in his seat as his eyes go wide. “Is that Tatum?”

I nod frantically at him and then put the phone on speaker so that they can all hear this.

“The *how* isn’t important,” Tatum says crisply. She sounds just the same as ever, her voice cool and detached. “Just like you did for so long, I survived. But you don’t need to worry. The other members of the society really are dead. I checked into it myself.”

That’s a small relief, although it’s hard to feel anything but a creeping sense of dread. Even *one* surviving member of this mess is too much.

“What do you want?” I ask her, my jaw clenching as my free hand curls around my knee.

There’s a beat of silence before she replies. And this time, her voice is different than before. There’s something softer in it, tired sounding and a little hesitant.

“You were right. I didn’t want to be a part of the Kyrio Society. I did what I had to do to survive, the way I always have. The way I was *raised* to. But...” She trails off, and I hear a sigh filter through the phone’s speaker. “But I wanted out. And what you did freed me, even if it almost killed me. So as far as I’m concerned, we’re even.”

“Even,” I repeat, almost in disbelief.

“Yes,” Tatum snaps, her tone turning just as cold and clipped as ever. “We’re even. I’ve left Detroit, and this is the last time you’ll ever hear from me. I won’t come after you for trying to kill me, as long as you don’t ever try to do it again. We can each walk away. We can let this end.”

I open my mouth, but I have no idea what to say to that. I don’t know if I should trust her offer.

If I should trust *her*.

What if she has a change of heart and decides she needs to take me down? What if it’s all just a lie?

“How do I know I can believe you?” I ask after a long moment. “That you’ll keep your word?”

“You don’t.” Her voice is still hard, but there’s something like weariness in it. “I can’t make you believe me, and I wouldn’t expect you to trust me. You can spend all your time trying to hunt me down if you want, but I’m telling you now that I won’t be doing the same. I’m done.”

Her words wash over me as I glance up at my men, finding them all gazing back at me. Gage looks suspicious as fuck, but Priest looks contemplative, and Ash’s expression is almost hopeful. Knox cracks his knuckles, like he’s ready to throw down with Tatum right here and now.

Except... she’s not here, is she?

She didn't bring a fight to our doorstep. She hasn't attacked us. And if she really wanted to get revenge on me for attempting to take her out, I don't think she would've let me know that she's still alive. If she had kept up the pretense of being dead, she could've let us fall into a false sense of security and then picked us off one by one.

But she didn't. She called me.

"Okay," I say quietly. Gage's eyebrows shoot up, but I shake my head and continue, speaking both to the woman on the phone and to my men. "I don't want another fight. Hell, I never wanted the last one. I did what I had to do to get out of the society, and if you had admitted to yourself and to me that you wanted out too, maybe we could've been allies. I wouldn't have gone after you, and maybe you could've helped us. But if what you say is true, and you're really done? If you've left Detroit and never plan to come back? Then, no, we won't hunt you down."

"Good," she says, and I think I pick up a note of relief in her tone. She hesitates, then speaks slowly, as if the words are a little hard to get out. "For the record, I've wondered what would've happened if I had accepted you as an ally. If I had—" She lets out a breath. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. It's over now. I have things to atone for, but that's on me."

My eyebrows shoot up. Her last words were quiet, and I'm not sure they were meant for me or if she was just speaking to herself. But it solidifies my gut feeling that Tatum is telling the truth.

She really does want this to be over.

"Then we'll call it a truce," I say evenly. "And leave it at that."

"Thank you." There's a moment of silence where I think she might say more, but then she just adds, "Oh, and turn on the news. You'll probably want to see this."

With that, she hangs up.

The guys and I all stare at each other as I hold my now silent phone between us, shock resonating through our little group like ripples on a pond.

"Holy shit," Ash breathes, shaking his head. "I did not see that coming. What the fuck?"

"We can't trust her," Gage says immediately.

I shove my phone back into my pocket as I settle deeper into the couch cushions again, squishing myself in between Ash and Gage. I take Gage's hand, threading my fingers through his. "You're probably right about that. We can't trust her. But I *do* believe her."

“Yeah.” Priest rubs his chin. “I do too.”

“Same here,” Ash says, wrinkling his nose. “I wouldn’t say I like her, but I can’t think of any other reason for her to have called and revealed that she’s still alive. I think she’s serious.”

Knox and Gage share a look, and some of the tension eases from their shoulders.

“Fine.” Gage nods. “We won’t go after her. As long as she doesn’t try to hurt River, she can live.”

“Turn on the news,” Knox says, jerking his chin toward the TV. “I want to know what she was talking about.”

Gage grabs the remote, switching the channel to the local news.

“More details have emerged about the shocking death of well-known philanthropist Alec Beckham,” the news anchor is saying. “In an attempt to piece together the details of his death, some shocking revelations have come to light about his dealings.”

She goes on to name a laundry list of criminal activity, including smuggling, human trafficking, thievery, money laundering, extortion, and a boatload of others.

My stomach churns as the news channel displays a picture of Alec beside the anchor as she goes into more details about the ongoing investigation. But even though I still have a visceral reaction to seeing his face, he doesn’t look so terrifying now. Not when I can contrast the picture I’m seeing on screen with the last image I have of him—weak and powerless, begging for his life the way he had probably seen so many people beg before.

On the outside, Alec Beckham curated the persona of a good, benevolent man. Wealthy and always willing to help others. A philanthropist. But now everyone will know the truth. They’ll know that he was a monster, a two-faced snake who was behind some of the worst crimes in the city.

The news anchor moves on to another story after a few more minutes, and Priest switches the channel back to the show we were watching earlier, making the image of Alec disappear from the screen. I crawl back onto Ash’s lap, settling in against him as I keep my fingers laced with Gage’s. I stare at the TV, not really seeing it as I think about the call from Tatum.

I never liked her, and even now, it’s hard to think well of her. She made it pretty clear from the minute I was inducted into the society that she didn’t

see me as an ally, and that she was there to solidify and build up her power just like everyone else was. But maybe that was just a persona she learned to wear, the same way Alec put on the persona of a selfless philanthropist to fool the public.

I never learned her full story. Maybe there was more to her than I knew.

So if she's willing to let shit go, then I am too. There's no need to hunt her down and try to take out the last surviving member of the Kyrio Society when there's no society left anyway.

I let out a sigh, leaning against Ash, feeling the warmth of Gage and Priest on either side of me. Knox has his feet on the coffee table, and I can do a mental countdown of how many seconds he's got left before Gage will tell him to stop putting his shoes on the furniture.

It's comfortable and familiar.

It's fucking perfect.

And if Tatum ever *does* try to start shit with us, then I know I have four men who will have my back.

Always.

EPILOGUE

RIVER

Several More Months Later

“Wow,” Avalon says when I open the door to let her in. “Look at you, all fancy.”

She grins, taking in my outfit as she steps into the house.

“Thanks,” I tell her, doing a little spin to show off the dress I’m wearing. “I have no idea where we’re going tonight, but the guys told me to get dressed up, so here I am.”

“I’d say you completed the assignment and then some,” Avalon replies with a chuckle, giving me a little wolf whistle for good measure.

She pulls me into a hug in greeting, and I hug her back. I’m still not the most touchy-feely person, especially with people who aren’t my four men, but I’ve decided there are some people worth making the exception for.

Avalon is definitely on that list.

In the months since I went to pick up Cody from her place, we’ve stayed in good touch, talking on the phone once or twice a week, and Cody and I have even gone out to visit her a few times so that they could hang out and go feed ducks at the park she used to take him to when he lived with her.

“Avalon!”

Cody comes running up when he sees who’s here, and Harley is right behind him. Both of them jockey for her attention, and Avalon laughs.

She squats down and hugs Cody first, and then gives Harley some head pets. It’s cute to see how Cody and Avalon have bonded, and it makes me happy to know there’s someone else out there looking out for the kid.

Avalon ruffles Cody's hair, and stands up, resting her hands on her hips. "And what have you been up to, little mister?" she asks him, still grinning.

"Ash has been showing me how to do magic!" he says, grinning back. "Do you want to see a trick?"

"Sure, I'd love to."

"Okay, I need a quarter."

Avalon gives me a look but digs a quarter out of her purse. "Is this how you guys are teaching him to hustle people for money?" she teases. "Because that's kind of genius."

"Don't say that too loud," I warn her. "Ash or Knox would be way too into that idea."

Cody takes the quarter and shows her the trick, making the coin disappear in one hand and then reappear in the other. It's taken him a couple of months to get it down smoothly, without dropping the coin or losing the thread of the trick halfway through, and Ash is very proud of the progress he's made on it.

Avalon claps excitedly when he completes the trick, and Cody beams.

He's still a quiet kid for the most part, still a little shy when it comes to new people, but he gets more and more open by the day as he recovers from the trauma of what he's been through and the terror of growing up under Julian Maduro's roof.

Cody hands the quarter back to Avalon and takes her hand just as the men walk into the foyer, all dressed to the nines.

They look sexy as fuck, each of them wearing a dark suit with slightly different colored shirts on underneath.

"Wow." Avalon's brows rise, and she whistles again. "You all look amazing."

"Thank you," Gage replies, adjusting his tie. His gaze drops to Cody, and a fond smile tugs at his lips, breaking his serious facade. "Thanks for looking after this guy for the night."

"No problem," she says, shrugging one shoulder. "I'm always happy to spend time with him."

I squat down to Cody's level and pull him into a hug. "Be good for Avalon, okay? Don't let Harley trick her into giving him too many treats."

"Okay," he says, nodding seriously.

"We'll be back later. Promise." I hold out my pinky, and Cody links his with mine.

It's become our thing in the months since he's been here. Having so many people die and leave him alone has to weigh on him, so whenever I leave, I always promise to come back, sealing it with a pinky swear.

"Take care of the house, Cody," Gage says.

He sounds almost like he's talking to an adult, but that's how he always is with the kid. Cody seems to like it, because he always draws himself up like he's proudly shouldering the responsibility of whatever Gage asks him to do.

"Have fun, kid," Knox adds, ruffling the little boy's hair and ruining the effect.

Ash holds out his hand for a high five, and Cody stretches to give it to him, and they both grin at each other.

The most interesting dynamic to see has been the one Priest has developed with Cody. I would have thought Priest would have the hardest time warming up to this new little member of our family, and maybe the old Priest would have, but the two of them have bonded well together. So when Cody lets go of Avalon's hand to go in for a hug, Priest accepts it easily, hugging him back.

He puts a hand on top of Cody's tousled hair and smiles. "Be good."

"I will," Cody replies, nodding.

I love seeing it. How they've all bonded with him and how Cody has come to love each of them in unique ways. They've never treated him like a burden, and that goes a long way. Despite how gruff and unhinged they can all be, how dangerous when the situation calls for it, they're great with him.

"Alright," Gage says. "We should get going."

"And you're really not going to tell me where we're off to?" I ask him.

He just grins and shakes his head, leading the way to the car.

"The surprise of it is more fun anyway," Ash insists as we pile in and head off.

"Maybe I don't like surprises," I fire back.

"You'll like this," he says. "Trust me."

And I do trust him. Of course I do. I trust all of them with my life and my heart and everything in between. So I settle in, letting go of the need to know and just enjoying the feeling of being sandwiched between two of my men as the car makes its way smoothly down the streets of Detroit.

Several minutes later, we pull up to a tall building near the riverfront. As we make our way inside, I'm still trying to guess what this could

possibly be. An elevator takes us up to the top floor, and when we step out, I glance around.

“Oh, wow,” I breathe.

There’s a very fancy looking restaurant that seems to take up the entire penthouse. It’s the kind of place I could never have even dreamed of getting into before, but we walk in with no issues, greeted by a well-dressed host who gestures for us to follow him.

The place is oddly empty, and as we’re led to a table near the windows, I realize that the guys must have bought the whole place out for the night. As far as I can tell, there’s no one here but us and a few members of the staff.

I grin, pleased and surprised. Their business is doing really well. They managed to capitalize on Alec’s death and the re-organization of power in the aftermath to gain even more of a foothold in the underground of Detroit. Plus, I still have a good chunk of the money I stole from Julian, so we’re in great shape.

But still, this must have been expensive, and it’s a very big gesture.

“This is amazing,” I say, smiling at each of them.

“See?” Ash winks. “Told you you’d like it.”

Knox pulls a chair out for me at the only table with place settings laid, and he makes a grand gesture of a bow, sweeping one arm out behind him.

“My lady,” he drawls. “Your chair.”

I laugh and roll my eyes, but sit down and let him scoot the chair up to the table. They all sit down too, and a single server comes out with some tasting plates on a large tray, laying them out in front of us.

Everything looks and smells delicious, and there’s shit here I’ve never even seen before, let alone tasted. A creamy seafood soup that tastes fresh and a little spicy. Little dumplings with an odd green dipping sauce that turns out to be fucking delicious. There’s also a pile of raw beef that Gage explains is beef tartare. I’m a little unsure about that, but once Knox goads me into trying it, I find that it’s actually really good.

At some point, the server comes back and leaves a bottle of my favorite whiskey on the table, and Priest pours us all some.

“You have to drink this with your pinky out,” Ash says, lifting his glass to demonstrate. “That’s how you know we’re having a fancy date night.”

Gage rolls his eyes, but before he can say anything, everyone else at the table is doing the same thing as Ash. He groans, but then gives a deep

chuckle and sticks his pinky out as well.

“Damn, look at that. Who knew all it took was some fancy food to pull the stick out of Gage’s ass?” Knox teases, grinning.

“It’ll only happen once, so enjoy it while you can, I guess,” Gage shoots back.

The meal goes on like that, all of us trying new things and bantering back and forth. The whiskey leaves a pleasant warmth burning in my belly, and the sound of their deep voices makes me smile. Even without the fancy food and gorgeous view, it would still be a great night.

After bringing us a few rounds of plates, the kitchen staff and the servers head out. I frown as I watch them leave, wondering if they’re going on a break or if they’re done for the night.

Shit. Is it that late already?

I fish my phone out of my purse to check and make sure there aren’t any messages from Avalon, and I hear the soft sound of chairs scraping across the floor around me. There are no messages on my phone, so I look back up—and freeze.

While I was distracted, all the guys have gotten up and are now moving to kneel around me, two on each side.

“What...” My heart lurches slightly, even though I’m not quite sure why. “What’s going on?”

Gage smiles softly, looking up at me. “Do you remember what I said to you in the bathroom of that shitty dive bar? When I told you that you have four men willing to get on their knees for you. Forever.”

My heart stutters again before picking up its pace, crashing against my ribs wildly as my eyes go wide.

“Are you... are you asking me to marry you?” I ask in a rush.

Knox grins. “Yeah. I mean, technically, we can’t all marry you. But you know my feelings on that. Marriage is just a piece of paper. So fuck what anyone else thinks, we’re asking you to be ours.”

The skin on my lower back prickles as I think of the word he carved into my back on the same morning that Gage just referenced, when they found me on the brink of losing myself and pulled me back from the edge. I nod, my head bobbing up and down as emotions overwhelm me.

“I’ll marry you,” I say, swallowing past the lump in my throat. “I don’t care if it’s not real in the eyes of the rest of the world. I’ll be yours. Forever.”

Ash grins and gives Priest a nudge. Priest pulls out a box, and inside of it is a set of what look like brass knuckles, only made of silver. When I look closer, I can see that they're made of four silver rings, thick and heavy.

"We each wanted to get you a ring," Ash explains. "But we decided this was more fitting. They're all linked together, like we are in our love for you, and they'll help you take out anyone who wants to start shit."

I laugh, helplessly in love with them and so touched by the gesture. I reach out and take the brass knuckles, slipping the rings onto my fingers and holding my hand up.

"It's beautiful," I tell them, my voice shaking a little.

I'm sure it's not what most girls would find romantic. But then again, I'm not most girls. If they'd gotten me a delicate diamond ring, I wouldn't have known what to do with it. But *this*? It fits. It's perfect for me.

I look back at the guys, about to say something else, but Gage holds up a hand before I can speak.

"We got something else for you too," he tells me.

His expression is serious and intense, and there's so much love burning in his eyes that I swear I could catch fire under his gaze. He nods to the others, and one by one, they all unbutton their shirts to show that they each have new, matching tattoos. Knox had to fit his in among the many others already inked on his body, but he's worked it into the tattoos he already has in a beautiful way.

The words stand out immediately, and I suck in a breath as I read them.

In neat, elegant black letters, they all have the words '*Kill for you, live for you, die for you*' marked on their skin.

For a second, I just stare. Seeing that motto—my sister's last words—etched in ink on their skin makes emotion swell in my chest, pressing against my ribs until they ache as they try to contain it all.

This means so much to me. Even more than the rings.

This means *everything*.

I make a strangled noise, but no words come from my mouth, as hard as I try. So instead, I just lean down and kiss Gage, then the others, one by one.

Knox is last, and he lifts me out of the chair and puts me on my feet as his mouth moves against mine. The others get to their feet as well, surrounding me as they pass me around between them.

The kisses turn a little deeper, a little hotter, and I make a soft, needy noise into the one I'm sharing with Priest while hands roam over my skin.

Ash reaches under my dress, bunching the fabric up around my hips. His hand slides into my panties, and he pushes those dexterous fingers right into me, feeling how wet I am. When he pulls them out and finds them soaked, he grins.

"You're so easy," he teases me. "Already all worked up."

"What did you expect?" I ask him. "When you're all on me like this."

"Oh, I'm not complaining." He grabs my panties, tearing them off me in one quick motion. Then he takes my wrists in one hand and uses the ripped fabric of my panties to tie my wrists together, holding them tight.

That sends a pulse of heat through me, and I whimper. "Fuck, Ash."

Hands grab my hips and lift me up, putting me on the table. Someone shoves away the food dishes and glasses, making room for me to lie down, spread out like a buffet.

"Hmm. I didn't know this was on the menu," Ash murmurs, licking his lips. "This really is a five-star restaurant."

Priest rolls his eyes with a groan. But his teasing expression is replaced by a hungry look soon enough as the four of them move in around me and begin to touch me, running their hands over my arms, my legs, my thighs, my face.

I arch into every touch, moaning softly for them. It feels incredible to be the center of their attention—to know there's so much love in every touch from them.

Strong hands pull down the top of my dress, and my tits spill out, fair game for the teasing and groping going on. Fingers pluck at my nipples, and my head spins with the growing pleasure.

Ash settles between my spread legs, and he grabs my hips and pulls me down the table a little, so it's easier for him to get his mouth where he wants it.

It's where I want it too, and as soon as he touches his tongue to my sensitive folds, I cry out for him, spreading my legs wider.

"Fuck yes, killer," he rasps. "Scream for me."

He works me up, lapping at my clit and then plunging his stiffened tongue deep inside me, fucking me with it.

I want to tangle my fingers in his hair, but someone has a hold on my bound wrists, keeping me in place. So all I can do is writhe and shake for

him, humping against his face as I try to urge him to shove his tongue in deeper.

I could easily come from just this, but Ash pulls away after a bit. He stands up and unzips his pants, fetching his cock out, letting me see how hard and flushed it is, precum already welling at the tip.

“Gonna fuck you. Gonna marry you. Gonna keep you forever.”

Gripping my thighs, he lines himself up and drives into my pussy. With how wet I am and the way he already worked me open with his tongue, it’s easy for him to bottom out in one smooth stroke, and I close my eyes for a second, breathing through the rush of pleasure as he starts to move.

The others are all clustered around, watching Ash fuck me, and I swear I can *feel* them. I can tell from the way they’re breathing that they’re all just as turned on as I am, and I let my eyes drift closed, imagining the sight they’re seeing right now.

“Open your eyes,” Ash grunts, slamming into me. “Look at them. Look at how much they want you.”

I do what he says, forcing my drooping eyelids open so I can gaze around the table. Gage and Priest are closest, and both of them have large bulges in their pants from where their cocks are pressed up against the fabric, clearly hard and ready. Knox is already massaging himself through his pants, his hips bucking a little bit as he palms himself.

Ash slams into me with a hard thrust, making me gasp with the force of it, and he grins when I shift my focus back to him.

“Look at *me* now, killer,” he murmurs. “Look down and see how perfectly you stretch around my cock, the way you swallow me up. Your pussy is so fucking tight, baby. Every time I pull out, she tries to drag me back in.”

He grips my thighs, his fingers digging into the flesh there, and I feel pleasure burning brighter and brighter inside me. I know it’s not going to be long before I fall apart right here on this table, and Ash clearly wants to make that happen.

He fucks me harder and faster, working his cock in as deep as it will go, his hips slapping against me over and over again.

From his own ragged breathing, I can tell he’s close too, and I clench hard around him, trying to drag him over the edge with me.

“*Fuck,*” he groans. “You damn minx. I feel that.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Because we’re in this together,” I pant back, and he leans down to kiss me hard before finally shoving in once more and grinding his hips against mine.

That’s enough to spark my climax too, and I moan into his mouth, his name on my lips as I come for him.

Our kiss turns slower and sweeter as he pulses gently inside me, emptying himself completely. He trails his lips over my jaw and neck and then pulls back, brushing a few wild strands of silver hair away from my face before pulling out.

“Damn right, we’re in this together,” he murmurs. “You’re the best fucking thing that ever happened to us, killer.”

Like he can’t help himself, he leans down and kisses me again, and I smile against his lips, loving every second of it.

Knox moves in as Ash steps back, but instead of fucking me on the table, he lifts me up and carries me over to the huge windows that overlook the city from the penthouse.

After setting me on my feet, he tugs my dress the rest of the way off, leaving me naked and staring down at Detroit as the city stretches out below us. He pulls the panties away from my wrists and braces my hands on the glass, bending me over so I’m hinged at the waist.

“Fucking gorgeous,” he mutters.

Just like Ash before him, he doesn’t waste any time teasing me. He just lines up and slams his pierced cock home, filling me up in one go. His cock is a little bigger than Ash’s, and there’s a stretch as my body works to accommodate him, but it feels good, making me push back against him, wanting more.

He sets a hard pace, fucking into me deep and fast. The sound echoes out in the restaurant, and I stare down at the city below as my palms slide over the glass a little with each thrust. We’re so high up that I doubt anyone could see us, but still, the feeling of being exposed like this turns me on.

Maybe someone in a nearby building will look up and see me bent over, getting fucked by a man who loves me.

Knox gropes me as he slams into me over and over, pawing at my tits with one hand, twisting and pinching at my nipples.

“Where else should I pierce you, baby?” he whispers, tugging hard at the metal rings. “Where else should I mark you up?”

“Anywhere,” I breathe roughly. “*Everywhere.*”

He releases my tits and slides one hand along my arm, stopping around the middle of my bicep and feeling the place where I have my birth control implant just under the skin. I've had an implant like that ever since I was released from captivity by the men who abused me and Hannah, never wanting to risk getting knocked up or having to worry about taking a pill.

The guys all know it's there, and Knox's fingers rub over the spot roughly for a moment before he drops his lips to my ear, nipping at my earlobe.

"I think it's about time for this to come out," he murmurs.

A jolt travels through me as I realize what he means—a rush of fear and excitement and arousal filling me as I process all the implications of his words. My heart races in my chest, and my knees shudder as he drives into me again.

"Take it out," I moan hoarsely. "Right now."

Knox goes still, buried to the hilt inside my pussy. His breath is ragged in my ear, and I can feel his cock pulse against my inner walls. "What did you say?"

"Take it out. Fuck, do it. *Now.*"

"Fucking hell."

My stomach flutters as he grabs a handful of my hair, turning my head so he can kiss me deeply. He slams into me one more time and then straightens, the warmth of his breath disappearing from where it ghosted over the shell of my ear. One arm loops around my waist, his palm flat against my stomach, holding me steady as he reaches into his pocket and grabs the small switchblade he always keeps on him.

I expect him to go right for the small bump on my arm where the implant sits, but instead, he drags the tip of the blade along one side of my spine. He's not pressing hard enough to break the skin, but I shiver at the feeling anyway—especially when I realize what he's doing.

"This is the first cut I ever gave you," he murmurs in a voice roughened with lust. "You took it so fucking well, little fox. You bled so beautifully. And when you screamed and clamped down around my dick like you fucking owned it? Shit. I was a goner, all the way back then."

My palms slide against the glass a little, my knees wobbling as he trails the knife a little lower. He drags it over a spot on my lower back, and I can feel him tracing the letters that are carved there.

O-U-R-S.

My eyelids droop as he finishes going over the letters. He trails the knife tip over a fresh patch of skin, pressing a little harder with the blade, drawing just a droplet of blood and making me hiss out a breath.

Knox's cock throbs inside me again, and he grinds his hips against my ass as if it's taking all his self-control not to fuck me hard and fast right now. Then the knife leaves my skin for a moment before I feel the cool, sharp blade press against the arm where my birth control implant sits just beneath my skin.

"Of all the marks I've ever made on you, I think this one is gonna be my favorite," he muses. "Because I'll always know what it means. You ready for this, little fox?"

"Yes." I nod wildly, already anticipating the sting of pain that will come when he digs out the implant.

"Touch her," Knox says to one of the other Kings. "Make her feel good while I do this."

Priest steps up immediately, his hand sliding down between my legs to find my slick, swollen clit. He works his fingertips over it in steady circles until I'm breathing harder, and as heat begins to radiate from my core, Knox digs the point of his knife into my skin.

The pain of the knife in my flesh mixes with the pleasure of Priest working my clit, and as Knox expertly cuts out the little implant, the rush of sensations sends me crashing over the edge. I scream out my release, my body overwhelmed with it all.

Knox drops the knife with a clatter, grabbing my hips in a bruising grip as Priest moves out of the way. He pounds into me with brutal thrusts, finishing inside me with a grunt that sounds like it was torn from the bottom of his soul. He drapes his upper body over mine, nuzzling at my hair as he breathes heavily.

One large hand moves down to the place where we're connected, and as he slides out of me, his fingers are already catching his cum, stuffing it back inside me. Then he pulls me up to stand straight and turns me around, kissing me fiercely.

"I can't wait to put a baby in you," he murmurs, his dark eyes glinting.

When Knox steps back, Priest is already waiting, as if working me up for his cousin made him desperate to be inside me too. Neither Knox nor Ash bothered to undress more than necessary to free their cocks and fuck me, but Priest unbuttons his shirt, taking it off and tossing it aside while I

watch. I grin, my gaze roving hungrily over his chest. I love seeing him bared before me, how he holds nothing back now.

“Come here,” I whisper. “I want you so much, Daire.”

He undoes his pants and shoves them down to hang off his hips, looking harshly beautiful as ever. Then he steps forward and lifts me into his arms, pressing my back against the huge floor to ceiling window.

Just like the other two men, he slides right into me, and he fits like a glove. Like we were made for this, made to come together in just this way.

I fucking love that, more than words can express.

I love how easy it is. How he lets himself worship me, nothing held back and nothing hidden anymore.

Every thrust of his cock is deep and intense, and we stare into each other’s eyes, feelings bouncing between us. I can see them all on his face, every emotion that swells in him and every jolt of pleasure that goes through him. It’s hard to believe this is the same man who was so closed off before. Who kept a thick glass wall between him and his emotions, never letting anyone see anything or even letting himself *feel* anything.

Now it’s all there, laid bare for me.

And it’s beautiful.

Just like the rest of him.

“River,” he moans, and my name sounds so good on his lips. “River, River, River.”

He says it over and over again, almost like a prayer, and I choke out a little whimper. “I’m right here. I’m here.”

It’s impossible to hold back the tide of sensation and pleasure as it surges inside me once more. An orgasm wracks my body, tearing through my already exhausted muscles, and I wrap my arms and legs around Priest as I come, clinging to him tightly as I feel him shudder and empty himself deep inside me with heavy pulses of his cock.

He drags me into another kiss, and it goes on for a minute or so before he finally pulls back, letting me down to my feet as his slick shaft slides out of me. My thighs are a mess of cum and my own arousal, and my limbs feel so much like jelly that I lean against the window for support.

Gage steps closer, and the look in his eyes could not be more different. Where Priest was loving and full of intense emotion, Gage’s gaze is pure heat and desire.

His hand shoots out as he comes to stand in front of me, and he winds my hair around his fingers, yanking me closer. He looks me over, and I shiver under the force of that stare, feeling even more stripped bare than I already am.

“You look so fucking good like this,” he murmurs gruffly. “Wearing our rings. Fucked by all three of my brothers. I want you to suck me off like this. With their cum sliding down your thighs.”

I smirk and nod as much as I can with his tight grip on my hair, turned on by his filthy words. Slowly, I sink to my knees in front of him, holding his gaze the entire time as I undo his pants and shove them down along with his boxer briefs.

But instead of going right for his cock, I unbutton his shirt too, then stretch up a little higher and press a kiss to his flat, muscled stomach. The scar from where I shot him is still pink and shiny, and I run my fingertips over it, making him shudder. His cock throbs against me, and as I look up at him through my lashes, our gazes lock.

“Thank you for living,” I whisper. “Thank you for coming back to me.”

“I always will, baby girl.”

There’s a promise in his voice, and I can see it reflected in his eyes too. I grin, moving downward from his scar until I reach the curly hairs above his cock, and finally drag my tongue over his shaft. He doesn’t let go of my hair, but he does let me move at my own pace at first, and I suck him slowly, warming up my jaw and my throat as I moan around his cock, enjoying the way he shudders in response.

“Deeper,” he grunts, using the grip on my hair to pull me in harder. “I know you fucking can.”

I choke a little when the head of his cock hits the back of my throat, and tears leak from the edges of my eyes, but my clit throbs greedily. I hum around him, my hands sliding around to grip his firm ass.

“Fuck, yes. That’s so good, baby girl.”

His hips don’t stay still for long, and he ends up fucking into my mouth, setting his own pace after a bit. He’s not gentle, but I don’t need him to be. I don’t *want* him to be.

Because Gage isn’t a gentle person. He loves hard, with his whole soul, unapologetically and almost brutally sometimes.

And I feel like the luckiest fucking girl in the world to be the object of that kind of love.

“You look so damn good like this,” he pants. “Mouth full, pussy messy. Mascara running down your cheeks. Even the blood on your arm is sexy as fuck. You look savage and used and so fucking gorgeous.”

He drags me down onto his cock and uses his hold on my hair to make me stay in place. I dig my fingers harder into his ass as he grinds impossibly deeper, cursing under his breath. I’m almost lightheaded from the lack of air, and I gasp when he lets me up, strings of saliva stretching between my lips and his cock.

Gage gives me a second and then pulls me back in, fucking into my mouth with deep, hard strokes.

My head is spinning with heat and pleasure, the enormity of this entire evening mixing with his dirty talk until I’m so turned on that I feel like I’m floating. Unable to resist, I reach down and touch myself, rubbing my clit and grinding against my own hand while he uses my mouth.

“Perfect,” he growls. “Get yourself off just like that.”

He doesn’t need to tell me twice.

He works his cock against my tongue and then pushes into my throat again, holding there until I’m writhing and drooling around his dick.

My fingers fly over my clit, chasing that burning heat until it builds to a fever pitch, sending me slamming into my fourth orgasm of the night. If my mouth wasn’t full already, I’d be screaming with it, but as it is, all I can do is gurgle a little around Gage’s cock, shaking as he keeps fucking my mouth.

His shaft swells in a way that I know means he’s about to come, and he pulls back, his chest rising and falling fast.

“Open your mouth,” he orders, and my jaw drops open immediately.

Gage strokes his cock, using the drool from my mouth to slick the glide, and he grunts as he finishes, shooting his release all over my lips and tongue and spilling some down my chin.

My gaze stays locked with his, and even though I’m the one on my knees for him this time, I feel as powerful as a goddess as he watches me close my mouth around his cum and swallow it down. I lick my lips, savoring the taste of him before using my finger to catch the bit that dribbled down my chin.

It’s the same finger I was just using to touch myself, and when I slide it inside my mouth, I swear I can taste the unique flavors of each of them on

my tongue. My arm throbs dully, seeming to echo the pounding of my heart and the pulsing of my clit.

“Holy shit,” I murmur, my voice a little hoarse. I glance over at the table with the dishes and silverware in disarray, and the trail of discarded clothes we’ve left on the floor of the restaurant. “That was the best dinner I’ve ever had.”

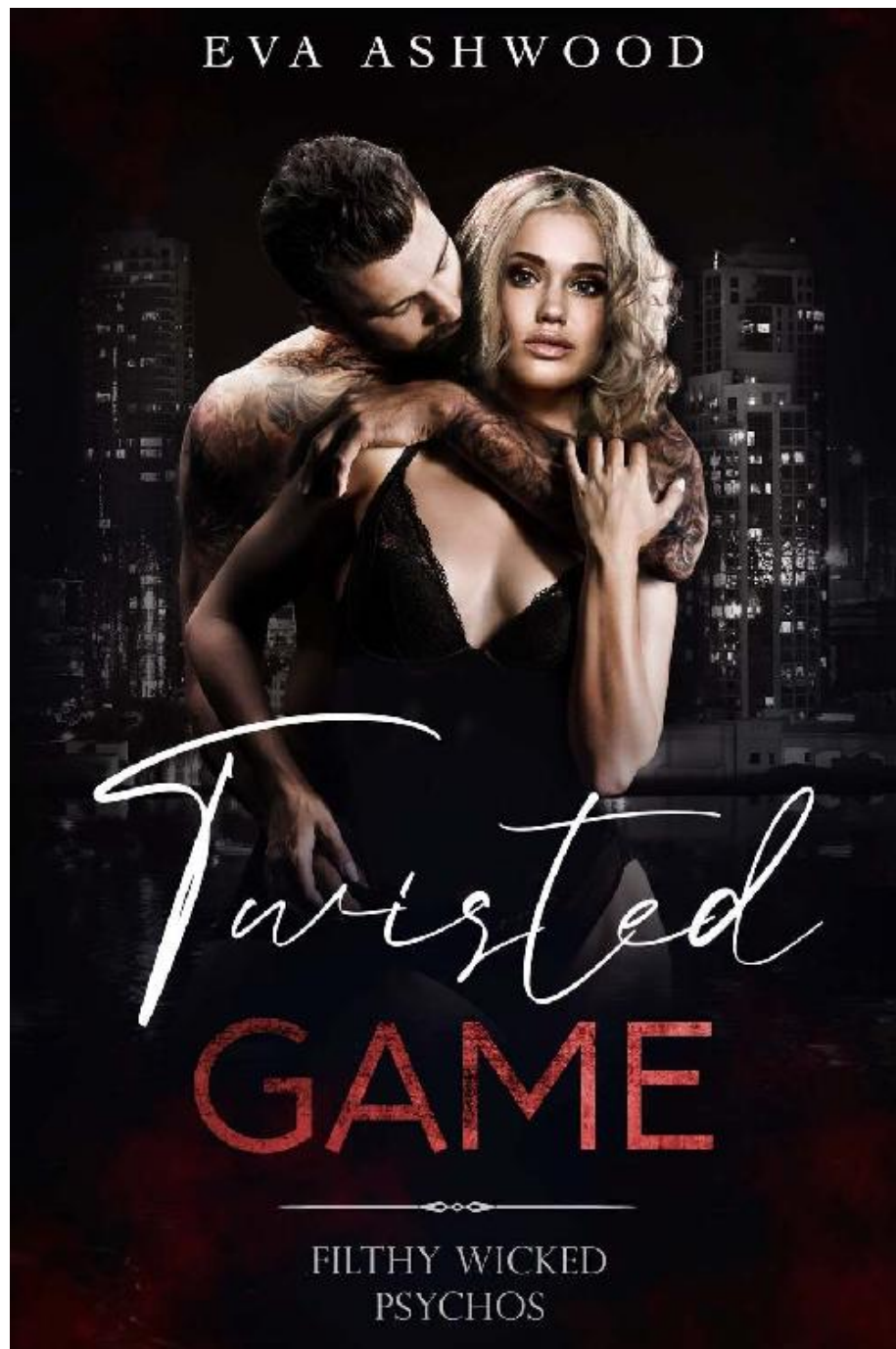
Gage’s eyes burn. He pulls me to my feet as the others step in around us, encasing me between four strong bodies.

“It was the best *yet*,” he corrects me. “We plan to spend the rest of our lives trying to top it. After all, baby girl... we have forever.”

Thank you so much for reading the *Dirty Broken Savages* series!!!
I know baby epilogues aren’t everyone’s cup of tea, but I couldn’t resist writing that part of River and her Kings’ future. If you’d like to read it, click [HERE](#) to join my newsletter and claim your free bonus scene, or copy and paste this link into your browser:

<https://BookHip.com/BQKVSVH>

And if you were intrigued by those dark and dangerous Voronin brothers, don’t worry. You’ll have a chance to see a lot more of them soon in [Filthy Wicked Psychos](#)!



I was the girl no one looked at twice. Until *they* saw me.

My whole life, no one has had my back. My parents are dead, my adoptive mother is a drug addict, and the mean girls on campus mock me for my scars.

So when I end up desperate for money and out of options, I agree to sell the one thing I have left: my innocence.

On the night I'm meant to give my body to a brutal Russian mobster, three men storm into the room like dark shadows and kill him before he can claim me. When they drag me from the blood-soaked bed, I'm certain they're going to kill me too.

They don't... but they don't forget about me, either.

These three dangerous brothers will do anything to make sure I keep my mouth shut about what I saw, even if it means stalking my every movement. I'm a loose thread to them—but somehow, I'm becoming *more* than that too.

I'm becoming an obsession.

A temptation.

A craving.

And no matter how much I try to deny the terrifying attraction that pulses between us, I know if I don't find a way out of this tangled web soon...

Their darkness will swallow me up.

[Find it on Amazon HERE.](#)

A NOTE FROM EVA

Finishing a series is always so bittersweet for me. It's exciting to wrap up a project, and I love being able to tell people that they can binge the whole series without having to worry about falling too hard off the cliffs, lol. But after spending almost a year with River and her Kings in my head all the time, it's sad to say goodbye to them.

But that's where amazing readers like you come in! Even after I finish writing a series, I never truly have to say goodbye to the characters, because every time someone picks up one of the books, the characters come to life all over again.

So as River, Gage, Ash, Knox, and Priest run around causing havoc the way they like to do, I'm excited to let new characters start talking to me! And trust me when I say that the characters from my next series have a *lot* to say.

The Voronin brothers and Willow are pure fire, and I can't wait to introduce you to their twisted, fucked up, obsessive love story.

While you're waiting for that hotness to hit your e-reader, come hang out in my [Facebook reader group](#)! It's an incredible group of people who love romance, and we'd be so happy to have you join us!

Thank you again for going on the rollercoaster ride that was this series. I hope you remembered to keep your arms and legs inside the ride at all

times. You can pick up your commemorative photo at the kiosk by the snow cone stand. ;-)

Until next time!

xoxo,

Eva

BOOKS BY EVA ASHWOOD

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[Who Breaks First](#)

[Who Laughs Last](#)

[Who Falls Hardest](#)

The Dark Elite **(dark mafia romance)**

[Vicious Kings](#)

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Sinners of Hawthorne University **(dark new adult romance)**

[When Sinners Play](#)

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Fight Dirty.
Play Rough
Wreak Havoc
Love Hard

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Kings of Chaos
Queen of Anarchy.
Reign of Wrath
Empire of Ruin

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Twisted Game
Beautiful Devils
Corrupt Vow
Savage Hearts

(contemporary romance standalone)

Say Yes

Magic Blessed Academy
(paranormal academy series)

Gift of the Gods
Secret of the Gods
Wrath of the Gods